

# THE INEVITABLE DEATH OF DESDEMONA: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WILL AND REASON

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One of the main elements needed to deambiguate the relationships established between the different characters in *Othello* is the analysis of *Desdemona's behaviour*. Only through the study of her attitudes and relations to other characters we will be able to understand the essential meaning of the play. This study should try to describe Desdemona's behaviour through both her speeches and her significative silences, isolating the characters with which she is connected and clarifying the connotations of these links. In our opinion, this is essential in order to realize the inevitability of Desdemona's death and the importance of Othello's concept of honour, what should be the matter of another paper. Here we are going to focus on the behaviour of Desdemona towards four characters of the play: Brabantio, Cassio, Othello and Iago.

*Brabantio* appears only in the first act of the play, but he is present in all three scenes of this act. Obviously, his presence in these scenes introduces an important linking element in the act. Later in the play he will be mentioned by Gratiano (V, ii), and that is the whole of his activity. But it seems reasonably clear that, being Desdemona's father, the relationship that we can establish between them may serve us to analyse and understand her personality. First of all we should point out the fact that it is on honour and its dramatic possibilities that *Othello* may well be considered to be built. Apart from *marital honour* (the most dealt with) and *professional honour* (of Iago's professional status versus that of Cassio), it is *parental*

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*honour*, its dramatization, what greatly explains the kind of ties that link Desdemona to her father.

The play opens, from the first scene, with a *treason*. Desdemona has not only accepted Othello's courtship but she has also decided to marry him without letting Brabantio know a word about it. It is at least significant that Brabantio is completely unaware of Desdemona's affair with Othello. In spite of this, Brabantio, who calls Iago "villain" in line 119, only some forty lines later is completely convinced of his daughter's guilt:

It is too true an evil. Gone she is,  
And what's to come of my despis'd time  
Is naught but bitterness. (I, i, 161-3)<sup>1</sup>

This opening presents the reader with a character, Desdemona, who is able to deceive, with amazing efficiency, her father, who completely ignores her engagement to Othello, and also (and this is even more important) Iago; the latter was certainly interested in Desdemona's sentimental life but he was cheated by her behaviour. In just one scene the reader is made aware of Desdemona's lack of innocence and ability to deceive everyone when she is interested in it. Amazingly enough, a great part of the critics have failed to see this second or inner nature of Brabantio's daughter. Brabantio not only feels himself betrayed, as he explicitly states, "O, she deceives me!" but he also predicts Othello a future disgrace. Brabantio's "despis'd time" will be, later, Othello's dishonour:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.  
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

The reader must be aware of the fact that a father whose daughter married without his permission would be regarded as dishonoured. This is essential to understand the importance of Desdemona's action, which can only be considered as a complete *lack of loyalty* to her father, a sin almost unforgivable in the society of the time. According to professor Marienstrass: "... treachery and infidelity still have such profound symbolic meaning in the sixteenth century: they reveal that man's

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are taken from the 1968 edition of *Othello* by Kenneth Muir (Penguin Books, London, 1968).

obligation towards God may be broken, that it is not necessarily the basis of existence.”<sup>1</sup>

Brabantio’s love for Desdemona is, obviously, that of a father to a daughter, but this is stressed by means of some other elements; first of all Brabantio is, apparently, a widower, and he doesn’t seem to have anyone to share his grief with; this appears to be a dramatic resource to reinforce the effect of Desdemona’s treason to Brabantio, being his closest person. Secondly, Desdemona is Brabantio’s only child; this, that can be inferred from his speeches, becomes clear when it is later stated by Brabantio himself:

For your sake, jewel,  
I am glad at soul I have no other child,  
For thy scape would teach me tyranny. (I, iii, 193-5)

Brabantio, not without reason, feels that Desdemona has deceived him, escaped and, thus, stricken mortally his honour. This seems enough to show how far she is of being someone incapable of doing any harm, as many have tried to present her, simplifying her tragic stature. But Shakespeare goes further still in this direction: in a world where “to mourn a mischief that is past and gone/ Is the next way to draw new mischief on” (I, iii, 202-3), Brabantio is unable to overcome his grief for his lost honour and his solitude. The complex essence of his love for Desdemona cannot be treated here in any full detail, but the moral and ethical quality of Desdemona can only be totally appreciated by means of Shakespeare’s last reference to Brabantio at the end of the play:

Poor Desdemona, I am glad thy father’s dead:  
Thy match was mortal to him, and poor grief  
Shore his old thread in twain. (V, ii, 202-5)

All the elements that we have been studying up to here, lead to the recognition of the lack of loyalty inherent in the character of Othello’s wife, exemplified by her treason to her father; and consequently it also leads to the affirmation of Desdemona as the *deceiver*, a role that will be

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<sup>1</sup> Marienstrass, Richard, “Othello, or the husband from afar” in *New Perspectives in the Shakespearean World*. C.U.P. 1985• (Originally published in French as *Le Proche et le Lointain* by Les Editions de Minuit, 1981).

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played by other characters (Iago mainly) with relation to other characters, but now defining Desdemona's attitude towards Brabantio.

In the first act Desdemona clearly knows what she is doing; she didn't have a single doubt when she left her father, substituting Othello for him and degrading his reputation; but with other characters further in the play she will show quite a different capacity. *Michael Cassio*, the Florentine, has acted as a go-between in Desdemona and Othello's love affair, as we are informed in the third act; the exact importance of Cassio in this matter lies beyond the time scope of the play, but Desdemona, by reminding Othello, allows the readers to know it:

What! Michael Cassio,  
That came a-wooing with you? And so many a time-  
When I have spoke of you dispraisingly-  
Hath taken your part, to have so much to do  
To bring him in? (III, iii, 70-4)

Leaving aside the fact that this may probably turn against her, now that Othello is jealous, it states the affection that exists between both of them. This is not the moment to analyze the part played by Iago in Othello's reaction against his wife, but we should remember, at least, that it was his encouragement of Cassio to ask for help what makes possible the tragedy. Iago convinces Cassio that he should ask Desdemona the favour of begging for him, and assures him that she won't deny this,

For 'tis most easy  
The inclining Desdemona to subdue  
In any honest suit (II, iii, 329-31)

To our concern, what matters here, apart from Iago's statement on Desdemona's nature, is the existence of one powerful reason that almost obliges Desdemona to act. If Cassio, as we said before helped Othello and Desdemona in their relations,<sup>1</sup> then Desdemona cannot but say yes to Cassio's petition; thus, what we have is a *reversal of the role of the go-between*. The triangle is closed again in this way, and Desdemona falls in

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<sup>1</sup> We mustn't forget that Cassio could find easier than Othello, who was a Moor, to enter Desdemona's house, as G. K. Hunter suggests in *Othello & Colour Prejudice* (Reprinted from *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition*, 1978).

Iago's spider's web. It is difficult to state to what extent we can blame Othello's wife for this, of course it is clearly the way through which Iago achieves his purposes, but neither Desdemona nor anyone in the play will realize this ; we know that she is "as fruitful as the free elements" (II, iii, 331-2), and Iago takes good advantage of this, proving too quick for everyone including Cassio. But Desdemona will accept Cassio's proposition without thinking in her position or her husband's; if she shouldn't be blamed for being fooled by Iago, she certainly could have tried to analyze Cassio's attitude. It was not at all orthodox in that time, and we would dare say it isn't in ours, the situation by which a soldier should ask for the wife of his Captain's intercession to regain his lost position. Desdemona doesn't understand this and she won't understand it till the end of the play. She doesn't seem to perceive that Cassio is putting her in a difficult situation, asking her to place her *desire* (that is, to help her friend) before her *duty* (as the General's wife). On top of this, she doesn't distinguish between Cassio's genuine pain for an old friendship now broken, and his personal interest in his political status in Othello's army. In this sense, it is interesting to see how he stresses the importance of being reconciled with Othello as soon as possible so as not to lose his place:

Cassio- That policy may either last so long  
That I being absent and my place supplied  
My General will forget my service.  
Desdem- Do not doubt that, before Emilia here  
I give thee warrant of thy place. (III, iii, 14-20)

Othello's wife blindly accepts Cassio's request and this will start a series of reactions of terrible consequences still unknown to her. With her acceptance, she will prove how little she knows her husband, Cassio and Iago, and she will also show a strange readiness to fulfil what could reasonably be considered as an *interference in state affairs*.

Once that she accepts Cassio's request, it may be worth considering how she tries to work out the problem. Immediately after she has spoken with Cassio, she will assault her husband. Her promptitude to introduce the matter to Othello is only explicable if we keep in mind her love for Cassio and the fact that she doesn't know Othello's concept of honour and the second reading that this concept may give to her actions. This *promptitude* we speak about is perfectly visible in the following lines:

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How now, my lord?  
I have been talking with a suitor here,  
A man that languishes in your displeasure. (III, iii, 41-3)

And even more conspicuous is her *insistence*: she repeats her petition seven times, acquiring the greater degree of desperation from line 56 to line 63 of this third scene of the third act:

Desdem.- But shall't be shortly?  
Othello.- The sooner, sweet, for you  
Desdem.- Shall't be tonight, at supper?  
Othello.- No, not tonight.  
Desdem.- Tomorrow dinner then?  
Othello.- I shall not dine at home.  
I meet the Captains at the citadel.  
Desdem.- Why, then, tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn,  
On Tuesday noon, or night; on Wednesday morn  
I prithee name the time, but let it not  
Exceed three days. (III, iii, 56-63)

*Promptitude* and *insistence* are, then, the two main characteristics of Desdemona's intercession on Cassio's behalf. But they can only be understood, or explained, if we accept that she ignores Iago and Cassio's intentions, and almost completely Othello's nature. Only if the reader is aware of this *lack of insight*, it will be able to understand how can Desdemona behave in this way before Othello and an audience:

Lodov.- He did not call: he's busy in the paper.  
Is there division 'twixt my lord and Cassio?  
Desdem.- A most unhappy one; I would do much  
T'atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio.  
(IV, i, 228-231)

Thus, if we explained Desdemona's behaviour towards Brabantio by means of an extreme *lack of loyalty*, in this case we will have to speak of an *extreme sense of loyalty* to Cassio, a loyalty that takes her to forget, or ignore, all the bonds of position, rank or appearances. In this sense, it is the same Desdemona that abandoned her father without minding the consequences, or, at least, placing her own good before that of Brabantio.

But on the other hand, if we spoke above of Desdemona as the *deceiver* in the relation with her father, now we will have to speak of *Desdemona deceived*, for she is deceived by her own pseudo-knowledge of her husband, by Iago's apparent honesty (as we will see later) and by Cassio's false pretensions and abuse of their friendship.

It may seem beyond any reasonable doubt that Desdemona is passionately in love with *Othello*: it can be argued that she really doesn't know him or it can be questioned the nature of this love, but in any case the reader must be aware of her fidelity and passion, which are expressed, in the first place, by her desire not to be separated from him:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind  
And to his honours and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind  
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,  
The rites for which I love him are bereft me  
And I a heavy interim shall support  
By his dear absence let me go with him. (I, iii, 250-6)

From this quotation, which is in the first act, till the fifth, when she, just before dying, doesn't accuse him of being her murderer, we can find quite a few instances of Desdemona's fidelity; even when she can't understand the reason of his coldness, she still justifies him and accepts his strange behaviour.

Emilia.- I would you had never seen him.  
Desdem.- So would not I: my love doth so approve him  
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns  
Prithee, unpin me- have grace and favour in them.  
(V, iii, 17-20)

The touch of domesticity introduced by Shakespeare with " ... unpin me ... " prevents us from taking this assertion too seriously: their union is but a few days old and so we cannot be sure about the health of their relationship. Regardless of the role played by Iago as the "malefactor", it is not difficult to perceive the racial problem existing in the play; and it is precisely concerning Desdemona that modern criticism has tended to

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overlook this problem, ignoring the more than probable prejudices that, even subconsciously, a Venetian lady of the aristocracy could have. Of course, the main element that can help us to note this is the apparition of the word *Moor*, which is systematically used by all the characters in the play, and when we say *all* we include Desdemona as well. R. Marienstras says:

The expression denotes his ethnic origins, origins with overtones that were by no means neutral. In the literature of the period a Moor was sometimes a magic, malevolent being.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, we are not unaware of the problems existing to clarify the exact connotations of this word and its possible pejorative meaning; we can not carry out here a thorough study on the use of this term, but it is at least significative that it is used when Othello is not present, he being addressed as *General* or using his real name.<sup>2</sup> And it is not less significative that even Desdemona, as we pointed out above, uses this term “ ... and but my noble Moor ... ” (III, iv, 26). If we consider this problem in detail, it shouldn't surprise us that Desdemona, like all the characters in the play, is aware of the ethnic difference between Othello and all the rest. Othello belongs to a different race and this fact is explicitly stated in the play and has a very specific purpose; we will only be able to understand everything that Desdemona says or does as long as we keep in mind that Desdemona also considers Othello a *Moor*. We are not dealing now with racism, interesting as it may be, but with the existence of an obvious difference, cultural and racial, between Desdemona and Othello that, at least partially, explains the different codes, and even languages, that they use. Desdemona's ignorance of Othello's real nature is only paralleled with Iago's perfect knowledge of both; in this sense, it may be relevant the following comparison between Iago and Desdemona's opinions on Othello.

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<sup>1</sup> Marienstras, Richard, op. cit. p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> *Othello*, Instituto Shakespeare, Cátedra, Madrid, 1985, p. 86. It is essential for the correct understanding of the play an analysis of the language used and its variations along it. Of course, such an analysis would include *names*, and in this sense the way in which Othello is referred to by other characters is enormously important. As a proof, we can point out the fact that he is called *Moor* eight times before he is identified as Othello in the first act of the play; the ethnic implications of this shouldn't be studied separately because of their great significance.



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The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so. (I, iii, 393-4)

Desdemona is unable to understand that *appearances* are, more with Othello, as important as the essence, as *reality*. She is only worried about her real intentions and behaviour and not about what her behaviour may appear to be;

Desdem.- And, but my noble Moor  
Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness  
As jealous creatures are, it were enough  
To put him to ill think  
Emilia.- Is he not jealous?  
Desdem.- Who? He? I think the sun were he was born,  
Drew all such humours from him. (III, iv, 26-31)

But experience proves Desdemona wrong and she starts, gradually, to consider that Othello might be a *jealous creature*:

Emilia.- Pray heaven it be state matters, as you think  
And no conception nor no jealous toy  
Concerning you.  
Desdem.- Alas the day, I never gave him cause.  
Emilia.- But jealous souls will not be answered so;  
They are not ever jealous for the cause,  
But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster  
Begot upon itself, born on itself.  
Desdem.- Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind.<sup>1</sup>  
(III, iv, 151-9)

Eventually, Desdemona begins to understand what's going on into Othello's mind. In act IV, scene iii, both Emilia ("I would you had never seen him", line 17) and Desdemona seem to suspect which Othello's intentions may be. In this sense, it is essential to appreciate the enormous dramatic significance of the *willow song* in the play.

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<sup>1</sup> Is Emilia thinking of Iago?; in any case, Desdemona applies this to Othello, who behaves in a new and strange manner to her, and so she begins to see what is happening.

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My mother had a maid called Barbary:  
She was in love : and he she loved proved mad  
And did forsake her. She had a song of willow;  
An old thing 'twas; but it expressed her fortune,  
And she died singing it. That song, tonight  
Will not go from my mind: I have much to do  
But to go hang my head all at one side,  
And sing it like poor Barbary - ( ... ) (IV, iii, 25-32)

It is through this introduction to the song, and of course through the song itself, that we learn that Desdemona is very possibly aware of Othello's ideas:

Prithee hie thee; he'll come anon  
(she sings)  
Sing all a green willow must be my garland.  
Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve-  
(she speaks)  
Nay, that's not next. Hark, who is't that knocks?  
(IV, iii, 47-50)

In this sense, the song fulfils the function of unveiling the truth: the song - fiction- fuses with reality -Desdemona's reality-, which, at the same time, is fiction for us; thus, fiction within fiction yields truth, copying reality; Ann Barton says " ... art may acquire a temporary and unpredictable dominion over life ; ( ... ) dramatic fictions can comment upon the situations in which individual members of the audience find themselves in ways far more complex and disturbing than any mere exemplary tale".<sup>1</sup> By not trying to escape or explain anything Desdemona implicitly shows that she ignores what she had been doing or how her actions had been decodified through Iago's filter by Othello's concept of honour, what asked for her inevitable death.

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<sup>1</sup> Barton, Anne "Introduction" to *Hamlet*, Penguin, London, 1980, p. 30. This same device was used by Shakespeare in his previous play, *Hamlet* (1602), with even greater significance: the *play within the play*. Both in *Hamlet* and in *Othello* it is connected with one of Shakespeare's favourite themes: *appearances and reality*.

Othello kills Desdemona in act V, scene II and it is only then that she realizes what has happened. We can decompose Desdemona's last apparition in five different stages or moments; her *suspicion*, her defense ("No, by my life and soul! Send for the man and ask him" -V, ii, 49-50), the *confirmation* ("Alas, He's betrayed and I undone" -V, ii, 77), *desperation* ("Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight" -V, ii, 81) and, eventually, her *forgiveness* expressed by her willing attempt to take any responsibility from Othello's head. In connection with this we can analyze Desdemona's last words from different points of view; is she blindly trying to save Othello? Or is she, at last, half realizing what she has done, realizing her thoughtless behaviour, whose consequences are her own death?

Emilia.- O, who hath done this deed?  
Desdem.- Nobody -I myself- farewell.  
Commend me to my kind lord - O farewell.  
(V, ii, 124-6)

Desdemona's relation to *Iago* culminates this process of false assumptions and bewildered behaviours that shape the play. Iago's success lies, in a great part, in his ability to cheat everyone and be thanked for it. Desdemona is, of course, far to suspect that Iago is the filter through which all her actions are re-interpreted so as to fit into his plan, composing a frame that will be filled by Othello's suppositions. As Alan Sinfield suggests: "Iago is the great story-maker. His whole strategy is to make things happen by telling stories; rediscibing, and hence reorienting even what has just happened";<sup>1</sup> but although she cannot know this, we would like to stress her, at least, unorthodox behaviour with this character; in connection with this, it is very interesting the first scene of the second act. Desdemona's attitude with Iago, having into account that they are not even alone, her procacity and the nature of their conversation suits better Iago's opinion on Venetian ladies that the emblem of purity she has been too frequently taken for:

Iago.- Come on, come on: you are pictures out of doors  
Bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints  
Injuries, devils being offended, players in your

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<sup>1</sup> Sinfield, Alan "Othello and the Politics of Character" in *In Mortal Shakespeare*  
p. 56

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House-wifery, and house-wives in your beds.  
Desdem.- O, fie upon thee, slanderer!  
Iago.- Nie, it is true, or else I am a Turk:  
You rise to play and go to bed to work. (II, i, 108-114)

Desdemona's next line is certainly daring:

What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?  
(II, i, 115)

But even more daring is Iago's allusion to foolish husbands and handsome lovers, with its more than probable obscene connotations:

She that in wisdom never was so frail  
To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail.  
(II, i, 131-2)

Desdemona's lack of knowledge of Iago shouldn't, on the other hand, surprise us if we consider two elements: (a) she has proved how she can be deceived about her impressions on reality and her concept of loyalty and (b) Iago cheats everybody in the play (with the possible exception of Roderigo just at the end). There is explicit evidence of this in the play, showing how her *confidence* in the Ancient leads her to a degree of intimacy that she never reaches with her husband. This can be seen in Act III, scene iii, and in the following quotation from the next act:

( ... ) Prithce tonight,  
Lay on my bed my wedding sheets, remember,  
And call thy husband hither. (IV, ii, 103-5)

Just some lines later Desdemona tells of her worries to Iago as if he were a close friend, showing a greater degree of companionship to him than to Othello,

Desdem.- Am I that name, Iago?  
Iago.- What name, fair lady?  
Desdem.- Such as she said my lord did say I was.  
(IV, ii, 117-8)

In our opinion, all the elements that we have analysed in the previous lines, point towards one and the same direction. Desdemona's behaviour reflects the complex personality of a character in an increasing conflict. Obviously, this is what provides her with a tragic stature, and it adds an element of interest to a play in which woman's attitude is of an extreme importance, since it completes the net of relations created by *honour*. Desdemona's *conflict*, and we think that this idea has permeated this essay, is one established between *will* and *reason*.<sup>1</sup> It is her will which from the beginning imposes its laws over her reason when she decides to leave her father, breaking the bonds of duty (obedience to her father) and of education and class (by marrying a Moor). It is also her will that leads her to help Cassio beyond any reasonable limits, ignoring the necessity to act with prudence, as her reason should have ordered her. *Desdemona's sin* is that she trivializes a serious matter, a state affair, for the sake of her will to help her friend, sacrificing her marriage and her life; the fact that her will ignores her reason for too long will be of fatal consequences to both, Othello and herself.

The consequences of this situation will be not only tragical but *inevitable*. Desdemona has ignored Othello's concept of honour and Iago's "wife for wife" mentality, she hasn't been able to understand any of them, and she ultimately pays for it. Desdemona will die to redeem herself for her transgression of certain rules, for having married a Moor, for dishonouring her father, for being incapable of acquiring a reasonable degree of communication with her husband and, finally, for dismissing reason for the sake of will. Othello's concept of honour and Iago's use and perversion of this will be the means that will lead to Desdemona's atonement, her terrible death, which in a sense, only she brought about:

Emilia.- O, who hath done this deed?

Desdem.- Nobody -I myself -farewell. (V, ii, 24-5)

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<sup>1</sup> These terms were suggested to me by Dr. Dañobeitia during one of our many conversations on this subject.