

## Desdemona, a twofold character in the Elizabethan society

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**Abstract:** In this paper I propose to analyze one of Shakespeare's characters: Desdemona, from the tragedy *Othello*. She is a rich character full of ambiguity, living at a period going through many political, religious and social changes. The idea is to compare Desdemona's behavior with the role of women from the Elizabethan era, through a historical bias. First I will propose a brief study of the historic events of that time and then explain how Desdemona's behavior goes along with the aptitudes of the Elizabethan women. Therefore understanding that the role women play in a society is greatly influenced by the past history and the society itself where she lives in.

**Key words:** Tragedy; Elizabethan era; Othello

**Resumo:** Neste artigo proponho analisar um dos personagens de Shakespeare: Desdêmona, da tragédia *Otelo*. Ela é uma personagem rica e cheia de ambiguidades, vivendo em um tempo que passa por muitas mudanças políticas, religiosas e sociais. A ideia é comparar o comportamento de Desdêmona com o modelo de mulher da era elisabetana através de um viés histórico. Primeiramente proponho um breve estudo dos eventos históricos daquele tempo e então vou elucidar como o comportamento de Desdêmona acompanha as atitudes das mulheres elisabetanas. Desta forma compreendendo que o papel da mulher numa sociedade é grandemente influenciado pela história que a precede e pela própria sociedade em que vive.

**Palavras-chave:** Tragédia; Era Elisabetana; Otelo

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Although Elizabethan society followed a patriarchal model, England was for the second time governed by a woman, Elizabeth I (1558-1603). She reestablished the government of her father Henry VIII and was able to consolidate the Anglicanism. She also worked real firm as to establish the English conquest through the seas. It was in the reign of Elizabeth I that the colonization of North America started. Elizabethan England in 1588 was also able to destroy Philip II's Invincible Armada.

Many changes were happening in the world at that time of Renaissance. The phenomenon started in Italy, where the visual arts had a great impact; by the time it reached England, literature had to play its part, and it was enormous.

William Shakespeare had Queen Elizabeth I as a lover of his plays. England was having years of peace. Therefore, art had its stage. Since all the changes related to scientific discoveries and political uprisings, it was expectable to see such contradictions

like a patriarchal country governed by a woman and consequently this dual reality reflected in Shakespeare's work. According to Wright,

The women of Shakespeare's plays exemplify both the traditional role of the women of the Middle Ages and the changing role of the women of Elizabethan age of Renaissance England. This duality in the personalities of the women in the plays mirrors the changing role of women in the times in which Shakespeare lived as they struggled with their strengths, weaknesses, and the expectations of their societies (1993, p. 7).

In a sense, women had a queen and that could be something that at times inspired them on taking some actions on controlling their own lives, but even if they did, they were still under the authority of men. The character chosen to illustrate what has been said so far is Desdemona, from *Othello*.

The play evolves with the villain Iago fabricating a strategy to destroy Othello, whom he envies impressively. He spites Othello and sets up a chain of suspicious in Othello's mind to trap and ruin him. Othello, a noble man, in all his greatness, has a flaw. He is insecure about his relationship with Desdemona. Iago perceives that and uses it against Othello. The honorable husband, driven mad by Iago's plot ends up murdering his loyal and most loving wife.

The first climax of the drama is the disobedience of Desdemona. She left her house in the middle of the night to marry a man without her father's consent, not to mention that Brabantio, her father, was not even aware of her daughter's engagement. Desdemona's personality shows essence and aptitude. On her first speech, in the Council Chamber, right after her father reminds her that she owes him obedience, she says, "I do perceive here a divided duty" (I.3, 183). This line shows also strength: she knows how to argue with the right words. Her point here is to prove that she is not mistaken. She goes along to state her point of view:

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,  
And so much duty as my mother showed  
To you, preferring you before her father,  
So much I challenge that I may profess  
Due to the Moor my lord.

(I. 3, 187-191)

Desdemona states that she is following the natural order of things. A woman will leave her father and then, follow her husband. Except in this case a woman did it without first asking for her father's consent or waiting for him himself to arrange her marriage. What is even more surprising is that she went through the whole process without her father being aware of it. She has fallen in love, accepted a man's courtship and finally gotten married. It took her courage, another sign of her unique personality.

Desdemona also showed honesty and truth. She knew that her act as a 17th

century Venetian woman, living in a patriarchal society was against a hierarchy. Consequently she says:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
 My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
 (I. 3, 249-250)

Also in the Elizabethan society women were to follow a hierarchy and they were greatly influenced by religion. At first they were influenced by the Catholic Church and then by the Reformation beliefs, but both religions stated that women were to obey their men as it is still said in the Scriptures. Disobedience was not only a terrible sin but also a moral mistake, the worst of them. By the words "violence" and "storm", Desdemona expresses how wild her act was, especially the word "storm": it implies that something was disturbed. A certain chaos was established by a violent act of disobedience.

Brabantio was astonished by her daughter's attitude. He had never portrayed her as stormy and violent:

A maiden never bold;  
 Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion  
 Blushed at herself; and she, in spite of nature,  
 Of years, of country, credit, everything.  
 (I. 3, 96-98)

But yet she shows humbleness and delicacy when she asks the Duke to accompany Othello in war:

To my unfolding lend your prosperous ear,  
 And let me find a charter in your voice,  
 T' assist my simpleness.  
 (I. 3, 245-247)

It is possible to see at this point a woman who is not completely in contradiction with a hierarchy, but she shows some control of the situation in asking for and then getting what she wants. The Duke had suggested that she should stay at her father's house until Othello is back from Cyprus. But she does not want to go back to her father's house. "I would not there reside" (I. 3, 242) she says.

Brabantio sees Desdemona as a threat to male authority. He then, conveys to Othello,

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.  
 She has deceived her father, and may thee.  
 (I. 3, 293-294)

Othello at first does not believe his father-in-law, but later on, it will be one of the calls to lead him on killing his wife. Nevertheless as Bloom affirms, what Othello should fear the greatest is not Desdemona but himself:

In some respects, Othello is Shakespeare's most wounding representation of male vanity and fear of female sexuality, and so of the male equation that makes the fear of cuckoldry and the fear of mortality into a single dread (BLOOM, 1998, p. 448).

Desdemona was brave enough to break a hierarchy when she chose her husband, but her personality also shows how fragile the women of that time were. Among her strengths she has her flaws. She is a dual character, just like the Elizabethan society. Contradictory as she is, it may be her innocence what prevents her from escaping her death. Men judged that women were not canny enough for big decisions. Desdemona is naïve, and she is unable to see the evil in Iago and in her own husband, Othello.

In her choice of Othello, she is looking for freedom and venture but what she finds is a mortal destiny. Desdemona grieves not being born a man. Just so she could have lived all the adventures told her by Othello.

She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished  
That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me  
(I. 3, 164-165)

Desdemona is additionally most generous, which at first can sound like a quality, but ended up being a flaw. When she accepts Cassio's requests to help him acquire back his post, she gives Othello another call of her false guiltiness. Desdemona is determined to help Cassio, no matter what. She is truly loyal: "If I do vow a friendship I'll perform it" (III. 3, 21), she says. Therefore, a grave fault, because while she remembers Cassio's cause she is completely unaware of her own. At this point in the play Iago has already poisoned Othello and as much as she talks about Cassio, it will only get her into her misfortune.

Desdemona goes on: she is active and determined to fight for Cassio's cause. But when Othello shows violence slapping her, she is most subservient. She cries and bounds her head. The courageous determined woman is no longer in this scene. What it has is a lady victim of misunderstanding, violence and a tragic destiny.

The strongest mark in Desdemona's personality and what makes her nature dual is how submissive she is. Her blind love and loyalty will take her step by step into Iago's trap. Desdemona's last chance to prove her innocence is by showing Othello that she is immaculate from any sin. She tries, first with words and then, planning their first nuptial night together.

When Othello accuses her of "strumpet" she says,

No, as I am a Christian.

If to preserve this vessel for my lord  
From any other foul unlawful touch  
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

(IV. 2, 85-88)

Later on in act IV, scene II, Desdemona inquires Emilia to prepare her bed with the “wedding sheets”. At this very night Desdemona will be killed by her husband, pure and clean on her nuptial sheets. As if she knew it even though trying to avoid the tragic destiny, she says “It is my wretched fortune” (IV.2, 134). Desdemona sees the tragic consequence of her mistake, her disobedience, although not being able to change it. Describing Desdemona with Bradley’s words:

Desdemona, the “eternal womanly” in its most lovely and adorable form, simple and innocent as a child, ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint, radiant with that heavenly purity of heart [...] (1981, p. 164).

Desdemona in her twofold character represents well the women of the Elizabethan society. It was a period of many changes including the role of women. Women were expected to be submissive and obedient, but yet in Shakespeare’s plays, they wanted to choose who they were going to love and wed. After all England had a queen.

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