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『オセロー』におけるデスデモーナの悲劇的役割

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Desdemona: The Tragic Role-player in *Othello*

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
(*As You Like It,* II. iii. 139-40)

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By convention Desdemona, the tragic heroine of Shakespeare's *Othello,* is often considered as a perfect specimen of the ideal Elizabethan woman; but she is not so simple. It is true that Desdemona is a good woman. Because she is good, she successfully performs some relevant roles, particularly in the early part of the play, to embody the positive womanly values of courage, healthy sensuality, sympathy, generosity, and love. But after the temptation scene in Act III, in which her husband Othello starts to suspect that she is lost in lustful sin, she is gradually unable to represent such positive values. Although she desperately seeks a way to secure harmonious relationship with Othello, she fails to do so. In the end, Desdemona fails to save her husband, and even herself, from his obsessive sexual jealousy and dies a "guiltless death."

The central purpose of this paper is to show how Desdemona's play-acting of different roles is related to the essential meaning of the play in which both love and jealousy serve as destructive elements.

Through Othello's lyrical description of their courtsthip Shakespeare gives us a vivid image of Desdemona who yearns for the romantic world of high adventures. We learn that she was deeply infatuated with Othello's

exciting stories of strange adventures and incredible dangers, and she thus fell in love with him for the "dangers" he had passed and he loved her because she did "pity them"(I. iii. 167-68).[1] But she is more than a young girl greatly attracted with Othello's romantic past. It is likely that Desdemona assigned herself to play the part of a responsive audience to "devour up" his tales with "a greedy ear"(I . iii. 159, 140). "Desdemona," according to Marrianne Novy, "resourceflly found a way to initiate courtship while seeming to Othello merely to be hinting."[2]

> she thanked me,
> And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story,
> And that would woo her. (I . iii. 163-66)

Here we not only find her playing the role of the responsive audience, who gives her hero "a world of sighs" for his "pains"(159), but also notice that she is skillfully directing Othello to take the part of a lover to woo her. Thus she is a passionate girl who seeks her own fortune, following her love as a guide in a problematic situation where she initiates marriage proposal to a middle-aged black man.

It is then probable that Desdemona consciously played the role of a well-behaved daughter at home in order to control her problematic condition; otherwise her marriage with Othello would have been absolutely impossible. Around the middle of Act I, Brabantio, Desdemona's aged father, greatly shocked by his daughter's unexpected elopement wiht Othello, gives us a counter view of Desdemona, describing her as "a maid so tender, fair, and happy"(I . ii . 66). He then accuses Othello of having "abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals/That weaken motion"(74-75). Later in the senate scene, Brabantio again describes Desdemona as "a maiden never bold;/Of spirit so still and quiet that her mouth/Blushed at herself"(I . iii.

94-95). But this view is too naive and partial. Desdemona is neither completely shy nor docile, and she is not "abused, and stol'n"(I . iii. 60) from Brabantio. In G. B. Harrison's words, Desdemona "knew what she wanted and she won it in her own way, as it is clear from Othello's account of their courtship." [3] Brabantio seems to be blind to the fact that Desdemona displayed her strength of mind by rejecting "the curled darlings"(I . ii . 68) for an older, stronger man. As Carol Thomas Neely suggests, Desdemona's pose of docility and indifference worked as a sort of disguise that concealed her passion from her father and even from Othello.[4]

In contrast to Brabantio's limited and sentimental view of her, Desdemona shows plenty of self-assertiveness, stating her case boldly before the Venetian senetors. Earlier in the same act, Desdemona's image as a strong, passionate girl is emphasized by Iago and Roderigo's critical views of her elopement with Othello. Iago relates the elopement to Brabantio in his own smutty language: "You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse"(I . i . 111-12). Roderigo, a foolish young Venenian who is infatuated with Desdemona, describes her elopement as "a gross revolt"(135). Desdemona also knows that she has violated convention by her secret marriage with Othello, and she does not deny the fact that her "downright violence and storm of fortunes, /May trumpet to the world"(I . iii. 250-51). Desdemona is well aware of what her choice has meant. It will entail hardship and perhaps bitter social criticism. "Desdemona," as Neely has pointed out, "has viewd love as risk and challenge," and she is fully aware of her responsibility for the love she bears in Othello.[5] Desdemona then not only refuses to give up her husband and return to her father but also courageously declares her love for Othello:

my heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord:
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (I. iii. 251-55)

Desdemona here gives an effective impression of a spirited, full-blooded, courageous bride who knows her own mind, who is deeply in love.

Desdemona next boldly begs the Duke to permit her to accompany Othello to Cyprus, openly expressing her healthy, casual confirmation of sexuality by refusing to postpone consumation of "the rites"(257) for which she loves her husband. She confirms, though not overforwardly, her need for sexual side of marriage by her refusal to be left behind as "a moth of peace"(257) rather than denigrates this expression of marital love.

At the beginning of Act II, on the seashore of Cyprus, Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, describes to Montano, the Moor's predecessor in the government of Cyprus, "The divine Desdemona"(II. i. 73) as the "great captain's captain"(74) and as "The riches of the ship"(83). And when Desdemona herself appears with her attendants, Cassio kneels and hails her as "the grace of heaven"(85). But Desdemona is rather indifferent to his idealized description of her, paying little attention to his highly courtly and extravagant language. "Cassio's lines," as S. N. Garner puts it, "in fact comment more on his character than on Desdemona's."[6] Desdemona is in fact too worried about Othello to respond to Cassio's idealized description of her. She is trying to conceal her anxiety about Othello's safety endangered by the violently raging storm: "I am not merry, but I do beguile/ The thing I am by seeming otherwise"(123-24). Her great need for such pretense well illustrates her courage and strength in a time of anxiety as well as her devotion and love for Othello. We thus understand that Desdemona is quite capable of acting out a "merry" mistress under the

pressure of the violent storm. Although she is deeply concerned about Othello, Desdemona never loses self-control and she never becomes hysteric. Instead she then carries on a bantering conversation with Iago.

In the next bantering scene, Desdemona successfully plays the role of a witty yet reserved Venetian lady as well as the role of a director, assigning Iago to take the part of a witty soldier without reserve. While Iago makes witty but somewhat coarse remarks about the behavior of women, Desdemona, in a witty yet reserved tone, parries his suggestive paradoxes and advises Emilia, Iago's wife, not to take notice of her husband's remarks because he is "a most profane and liberal counsellor"(II. i. 64). Although only the surface of her mind is engaged in the playful conversation, she clearly shows a sort of sophistication suitable for a well-cultured Venetian lady. Desdemona then demands Iago to praise her in a rather playful tone, "But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman, one that, in the authority of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?"(146 - 48). In response to her request, Iago replies:

> She that was ever fair and never proud,
> Had tongue at will and yet was never loud,
> Never lack'd gold and yet went never gay,
> Fled from her wish and yet said 'Now I may,'
> She that being anger'd her revenge being nigh,
> Bade her wrong stay and her displeasure fly,
> She that in wisdom never was so frail
> To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail,
> She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind,
> See suitors following and not look behind.... (II. i. 149-58)

Although Desdemona laughs away Iago's "lame and impotent conclusion" (162) that his "deserving woman" is only to "suckle fools and chronicle small beer"(161), his praises do not offend her and serve her well enough as a pastime until Othello arrives. Desdemona is a well-cultured lady capable of

taking a part in witty, sensual banter with Iago without losing her dignity and delicacy.

Moreover, it is interesting to notice that how well the heroine fits to Iago's "deserving woman" in its bastc context. On one level, Iago's "deserving woman" is exemplified in Desdemona herself. For example, Desdemona is "fair and never proud." As she has "tongue at will," she could openly confirm her love for Othello in public without becoming "too loud." In Brabantio's eyes, she appeared "a maiden never bold" who "fled from wish," yet she was a nimble girl who could say "Now I may" when she found a proper man for her husband. By refusing the Duke's rather capricious proposal that she should stay at her father's house during her husband's absence, Desdemona at least tried not to "displease" her father more. She did not, in "wisdom never so frail," choose Roderigo (the cod's head) but did choose instead Othello (the salmon's tail), ignoring at the time other "suitors." She also "could think" and "ne'er disclose her mind" even to her father, until she became convinced that her love would win in a conflicting situation, sandwiched between her love for Othello and her duty for her father. Thus while Shakespeare makes Desdemona engage in a verbal game with Iago to pass the time, he gives Iago a chance to describe his mistress through the ensign's picture of "the deserving woman." Indeed, she is much closer to the image of "the deserving woman" than his ealier description of her as "a super-subtle Venetian"(I. iii. 365).

In the next scene, Iago tells Cassio that Desdemona is "sport for Jove," "full of game"(II. iii. 18, 20), suggesting that she has something of a slut in her. By contrast, Cassio remarks that Desdemona is "a most exquisite lady" (19), "a most fresh and delicate creature"(21), and finally that she has "an inviting eye" which is "yet right modest"(23). Cassio's favorable view of Desdemona certainly reinforces her image as a "deserving woman" whereas Iago's contrasting view only reveals us his own cynical nature.

In order to underscore the heroine's image as "a deserving woman," Shakespeare gives Othello opportunities to reveal the hunband's view of his wife. The Moor remarks that his wife is "fair, feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well"(III. iii. 184-85). Furthermore, Desdemona is, in Othello's own words, "so delicate with her needle," an "admirable musician" who will "sing the savageness out of a bear" and she is "of so high and plenteous wit and invention"(IV. i. 198-201). Thus both Cassio and Othello describe Desdemona as a lively, accomplished Venetian lady who possesses womanly virtues that the Elizabethans thought admirable in a woman of breeding. But this view is incomplete because both men seem to see what they only want to see in Desdemona. They both fail to discern her as she is because they idealize her. I will discuss this matter in detail later.

When Othello and his wife are reunited joyfully after the storm, the Moor is so full of happiness and contentment that he feels no greater joy can come to him: "If it were now to die, /'Twere now to be most happy"(II. i. 191-92). By contrast, Desdemona, whom Othello greets as a "fair worrior," is young, and looks towards the future: "The heavens forbid/But that our loves and comforts should increase, /Even as our days do grow!"(195-97). Othello's young wife is full of hope and confidence for an even happier future.

Next, Desdemona not only performs hopefully the role of a loving, devoted wife for Othello but also takes the part of a generous, devout solicitor for Cassio's cause after the lieutenant loses his position. In the last scene of the same act, Cassio, trapped by Iago's diabolic scheme, loses his position because of his shameful behavior during drunken brawling in which he injures Montano. Iago, under the disguise of friendship, suggests that Cassio beg Desdemona to intercede in his own behalf. This is the very first step Iago takes in order to assign Cassio to play the part of Desdemona's

supposed lover. Cassio, accordingly, at the start of Act III, enlists Desdemona's help on his behalf in order to try to win back Othello's favor. Desdemona is, as Iago says, "of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested"(II. iii. 325-28). She assures, as Iago expects her to, Cassio that she will do all she can on his behalf, vowing to press for his reinstatement on every possible occasion: "Before Emilia here, /I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee, /If I vow a friendship, I'll perform it/To the last article: my lord shall never rest; I'll watch him tame and talk to him out of patience" (III. iii. 19-23).

Desdemona then actually performs the role of Cassio's devout solicitor as she assured him. She, in somewhat nagging way, unceasingly begs Othello to fix a time within the next three days when he will see Cassio himself, "I prithee, name the time, but let it not/Exceed three days: in faith, he's penitent"(62-63). She then easily persuades Othello to allow Cassio to plead his own cause. When pleading on Cassio's cause, she becomes most talkative. On one level, her actions in this respect are motivated only by sympathy and kindness. But it seems to me that her insistence on Cassio's cause is excessive. In a sense, she is a little too confident on Cassio's cause. Her behavior on this matter is not wholly without fault since she is too preoccupied with her role as Cassio's solicitor to obey Othello's suggestion that they discuss the matter some other time. In other words, she is likely to deviate from society's norm of a good woman by willfully assigning Othello the part of an uxorious husband.

At one point immediately following the temptation scene, Desdemona summons Othello to dinner and she instantly notices that something is wrong with him. In answer to her question "Why do you speak so faintly? Are you not well?"(III. iii. 283). Othello answers, "I have a pain upon my forehead here"(284). It is probable that his answer indicates that his pain is

caused by fear of cuckoldry. Desdemona, entirely lacking in suspicion of any base passion in Othello's heart, then tenderly offers to bind his forehead with her handkerchief, Othello's first gift to her during their courtship; but Othello puts it asidè, saying that it is too small. "I am very sorry," she tells him, "that you are not well"(289). Her words here vividly demonstrates her full-concern for her husband's pain, giving the offstage audience an impression of a domestic, solicitous wife. Also we do not fail to notice the spiritual gulf between Othello and his wife because Othello conceals the real meaning of the pain on his forehead from his wife.

In the final scene of the same act, Desdemona is quite sure that she has persuaded Othello to forgive Cassio. When Othello enters, she tells him that she has sent for Cassio to speak with her husbaud. But Othello just ignores what she has said, pretending that he has "a salt and sorry rheum"(III. iv. 51). To raise the question of the crucial handkerchief, Othello then tells his wife that he needs a handkerchief and asks for hers--the "strawberry-spotted" one which he now believes she has given to Cassio. He obviously confronts Desdemona with his desperate need in order to find out whether she will confess the loss of her handkerchief. His evident excitement about the handkerchief surely disturbs Desdemona. Frightened and dismayed by his sudden anger, she tells him a lie: "It is not lost, but what an if it were?" (83). But this lie makes herself appear guilty. And it is unwise of her to challenge Othello by adding the line "but what an if it were?" to her lie under the present circumstances. But she is more concerned with Cassio's case than the loss of the handkerchief. She then accuses Othello of bringing up the handkerchief question to distract her mind from her plea for Cassio, little realizing that to Othello, by this time, the mention of Cassio's name is brazen and shameless impudence. She then persistently pleads for Cassio, "Come on, come on; /You'll never meet a more sufficient man"(90-91), never realizing that each exhortion strengthens her husband's belief that she is

Cassio's mistress. Thus with her lie on the handkerchief (surely a form of acting) and her persistent plea for Cassio's cause (another form of acting), Desdemona unwittingly makes her situation worse. In this sense, she is in part reponsible for her death.

Close to the end of the same act, Desdemona is dismayed and confused by her husband's strange and hysterical behavior over the handkerchief. She then tries to assume the role of a sympathetic audience for Othello, but her very innocence seems to blind her the fact that Othello is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. After othello has left in anger, Emilia quite reasonably suspects that he is jealous for some unknown reason, whereas Desdemona is too perplexed to know whether Emilia's suspicion is reasonable or not, attributing Othello's rage to the handkerchief: "I ne'er saw this before. /Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief"(100-101). She then deflects her mind from the handkerchief, failing to think what is really behind her husband's hysteric excitement over the handkerchief. When Cassio joins the ladies with Iago, Desdemona says to him, "My lord is not my lord"(124). She next tries to understand her husband's unkindness, but she, in a rather irrational way, attributes it to some matters of state, reproaching herself for lack of sympathy for Othello's troubles and calling herself an "unhandsome worrior"(151). Little realizing her husband's obsessive sexual jealousy, Desdemona then prays for him to be free from the base passion, expressed in Emilia'a words, "a monster/Begot upon itself, born on itself"(161-62): "Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind" (163). A little earlier, she asks Emilia to "beshrew"(150) her much, and Emilia seems to respond to her request in a matter-of-fact way. But Desdemona fails to be beshrewed, instead she only prays for Othello in an innocent manner.

In Act IV, scene i, Desdemona's exceeding devotion to Cassio's cause makes her continue to play the role of his solicitor. Also her love for Othello

makes her function as a mediator between him and Cassio. But her efforts fail to bring any good results, instead they seem to form a means of her misery. In the scene Lodovico, who is accompanied by Desdemona, brings Othello a letter from Venice ordering him to return there, leaving Cassio in command in Cyprus. He is Desdemona's kinsman. As Othello reads, Desdemona tells Lodovico of Cassio's fall from grace and pleads with Lodovico to try to mend the "unkind breach"(237) between Othello and Cassio. As Othello hears his wife speak of her high regard for Cassio. "I would do much/To atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio"(243-44), the Moor, interpreting her word "love" as a "lustful passion," mutters ambiguious remarks, "Fire and brimstone!"(245). The more Desdemona busies her mind as Cassio's solicitor, the more Othello views her with mistrust, jealousy, and hatred. Othello then suddenly strikes Desdemona in a complete intolerance, calling her "Devil"(251). Insulted and crushed, she only says, "I have not deserved this"(252). Begged by Lodovico to call Desdemona back, Othello then takes the opportunity to insult his wife more. He calls her back, but only to make her act of obedience an occasion for further insult, describing her tears as the result of the "well-painted passion" (268). As Othello's vision of evil in his wife becomes obsessive and destructive, Desdemona's obedience and innocence fail to assure security and stability in her marital life. Desdemona's insistent commitment to Cassio's cause makes her situation worse, but she is completely in the dark as to the reason for her misery and suffering. In the center of her heart, she must be feeling a strong sense of failure in her role-playing as Cassio's solicitor and a mediator for Othello and Cassio. She then leaves the scene, concealing her feelings from the others.

In a following "brothel scene," a smutty play within the play, Desdemona's innocence again seems to function as a blinder which excludes her from learning the simple yet crucial fact that Othello is obsessed with

sexual fancy in the extreme. In the scene, Othello, assuming the roles of a cuckold and a customer in a brothel, treats the room as a brothel and Emilia as its keeper, casting his wife in the role of a prostitute. By taking on the part of a "procreant"(IV. ii. 28), Othello, in an angry manner, subjects Desdemona to an inquisition in order to gain a proof of her infidelity. But Desdemona is completely at a loss as to the reason for his anger,"I understand a fury in your words, /But not the words"(32-33). In spite of Desdemona's weeping protestations of innocence and fidelity, Othello then, in outright condemnation, denounces her as "weed"(67), "public commoner" (73), "impudent strumpet" (81), and finally as a "cunning whore of Venice/ That married with Othello"(89-90). From his use of smutty language, it is evident that Othello is preoccupied with the passion of sexual jealousy. But Desdemona merely fails to recognize this simple fact. Instead, when Othello weeps in despair, Desdemona misinterprets that his grief perhaps comes from his unexpected recall from Cyprus, and that he blames her father for the order. But her making a guess at Othello's grief is entirely lacks logical reasoning. Othello here neither mentions his return to Venice nor says anything about Brabantio. As Othello fails to turn his wife into a whore, Desdemona fails to understand what his anger and grief really mean. As a result, the spiritual gulf between them widens.

After Othello has left Desdemona and Emilia, Desdemona is stunned by Othello's brutal treatment. To Emilia's question, "what's the matter with my lord?"(IV. ii. 98), Desdemona dazedly answers, "I have none"(102). And her remark reveals to the audience how helpless, powerless she has become. Almost at once she then begins to look for ways out of her despair. Directing Emilia to put her wedding sheets on her bed, Desdemona hopes to create a small area of certainty where love and innocence can still have meaning. By re-staging her nuptial night, she hopes to return in time and recover the brief happiness and harmony she and Othello shared when they

were newly married. Her dependence on the wedding sheets seems to illustrate her desperate need for love, stability, and security in a joyless, loveless, and nightmarish world in which she is confined. She rather wants to create an impractical fantasy in which she is to re-act the part of a newly married girl lying on her wedding sheets than to confront forcefully the grim reality of her marriage life. Thus we here cannot fail to notice the fact that Desdemona is likely to play-act the role of a bride in her own world of impractical fantasy.

Next, Desdemona asks Emilia to bring Iago. When Iago comes, Desdemona implores him, of all people, to intercede for her. She tells him of Othello's cruel treatment of her and then reveals her discomfort in an innocent tone:

> Those that do teach young babe
> Do it with gentle means and easy tasks:
> He might have chid me so; for, in good face,
> I am a child to chiding. (IV. ii. 111-13)

Her words here demonstrate her strong need for guidance and protection which she had expected her older husband to offer. She is, on one level, performing the role of a girl-wife, certainly another form of retreat from reality, only wishing her older husband to guide her rather than to condemn her, to correct her rather than to accuse. Emilia, deeply sympathetic with Desdemona's misery, then criticizes Othello in an indignant tone:

> Hath she forsook so many noble matches,
> Her father and her country and her friends,
> To be call'd whore? would it not make one weep? (125-27)

In contrast to Emilia's severe yet sound criticism of Othello's brutal treatment of his wife, Desdemona does not try to blame Othello, attributing

her misery to her "wretched fortune"(128). Her statement, if not a form of self-deception, at least indicates her inability to find words to express her deepest feelings. And it is likely that she is playing the innocent wife in an immature and passive way, rejecting to be forced into a situation where she must ponder and speculate.

Despite the worsening crisis, Desdemona seems to have no feeling of resentment against Othello and seems to be confident of her love for him, "Unkindness may do much; / And his unkindness may defeat my life, /But never taint my love"(159-61). I here only find a non-thinking woman's desperate commitment to her love for her husband, and to add a few more words, her love is not unlike a sort of naive self-complacency of a helpless defeatist.

Later, in the willow scene, as Emilia helps her mistress to undress, Desdemona continues to dwell on her love for Othello--even "his cheeks, his frowns ...have grace and favour in them"(IV. iii. 20-21). But her grief confuses her thoughts, which go back to her childhood and recall her mother's maid Barbary, who died of a broken heart when her mad lover deserted her. Desdemona also recalls Barbary's willow song, singing the sad tune while Emilia helps her to undress. The song concerns a false lover who forsakes his mistress who is weeping and sighing at a river edge near a sycamore tree. In her rather confused mood, Desdemona seems to be identifying herself with the poor barbary and the wretched heroine of the song and Othello with the mad lover who deserted Barbary and the false lover of the song. In her confused mind, Desdemona seems to be setting a stage where she can play a part identical with parts of Barbary and the protagonist of the song. Identification is, of course, a form of role-playing suitable for an escapist who, in crisis, prefers to evade rather than confront unpleasantness. Desdemona is not unlike an escapist who rather evades than strives to find a way to mend a problematic situation. It should not be

forgotten that Desdemona has also strengthened her own image as an escapist by her request to Emilia, "If I do die before thee, prithee, shroud me/In one of those sheets"(24-25).

Next, Desdemona abruptly changes the subject from Barbary to Lodovico, admiring him as "a proper man" and as one who "speaks well" (38, 36), identifying those qualities that Othello now lacks. Since the man she has loved, married, and risked her social position for has turned into chaos, a barbarian, and a beast, Desdemona seems to be calling her love for Othello question, at least for the moment, longing for a man like Lodovico in an wavering way. However, as soon as she slightly suspects that her love for Othello starts to waver, Desdemona strives to find a way to be confident of her love. "Let nobody blame him," she sings Barbary's song, "his scorn I approve"(52). She soon notices that she has chosen the wrong words for the tune, but the words surely express her resolution to forgive and tolerate her husband rather than to blame and accuse him. She prefers to reproach herself rather than blame her husband. She is a Vanetian, and she can easily sppeal to Lodovico and the state of Venice to protect her from the "cruel Moor,"(249) but Desdemona makes no such move, advances no such claims. Instead, she blames herself, deciding to forgive her husband. One might suspect that she no longer cares even to learn of what she is accused. Also she fails to explain the reason why she does "approve his scorn." By deciding to take on the role of a tolerant wife, she seems to be withdrawn into a peculair world of self-deception.

In an innocent tone, Desdemona then asks Emilia if there really were who whuld cuckold their husbands: "O these men, these men. / Dost thou in conscience think .../ That there be women do abuse their husbands/ In such gross kind?" (60-63). In response, Emilia, practical and matter-of-fact, assures her that there are "some such, no question"(63). Desdemona cannot understand it. Emilia, who has no illusions, says that she would do the same

if the payment were great enough, shrewdly asking "who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?"(75-76). Desdemona finally says that she does not think "there is any such woman" who would(88), being suspected by Emilia of "playing--if not overplaying--the innocent wife".[7] Desdemona's innocence is contrasted in every way with Emilia's sophisitication. And her insistence on innocence makes her decide not to alter her naive view of the nature of woman, never allowing herself to be instructed by Emilia. Desdemona here displays her inability to use Emilia's worldly sophistication as a guide to comprehend her worsening situation. Thus she is certainly to blame for letting herself stay too long salf-deceived in her own innocence which will gradually contribute to her undoing.

In the murder scene of Act V where Othello puts his wife to death, Shakespeare continues to assign Desemona the role of a misunderstood wife, whose insistent protestation of her fidelity and desperate pleading for her life both contribute to her doom. When Othello, convincing himself that he is performing the role of an excutioner of his "unfaithful" wife, enters Desdemona's bedchamber, she is asleep, lying in her wedding sheets. As Desdemona awakes, Othello, not unlike a priest performing a ritual, gives her an opportunity to pray and perform contrition before she dies. Desdemona becomes afraid of him-- "Talk you of killing?... And yet I fear you; for you are fatal/When your eyes roll so: why I should fear I know not, / Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear"(V. ii. 33, 36-38). While Othello believes that he is performing an act of justice, Desdemona is only terrified at his act of terror. Othello, however, will not explain why she should die, and only repeats "Think on thy sins"(39). Desdemona then protests her innocence and love for her husband: "They are loves I bear to you"(41). But her words only lead Othello to respond, "Aye, and for that thou diest"(41). Ignoring her protestaion-- "That death's unnatural that kills for loving"--Othello at last declares that Cassio now has the hand-

kerchief he gave her and that Cassio has publicly admitted adultery with her. Desdemona desperately protests his false accusation:

> I never did
> Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio
> But with such general warranty of heaven
> As I might love; I never gave him token. (58-61)

In response to Othello's words, "By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand"(62), Desdemona strongly demands Othello to bring Cassio in, "send for him hither, / Let him confess a truth"(67-68). But Othello only replies that Cassio cannot now be summoned since "honest Iago" has killd him. Thus the more Desdemona insists on her fidelity and innocence, the more Othello becomes inflamed. She, therefore, lacks the wisdom to know that if Othello becomes obsessed with sexual jealousy, she cannot convince him of her fidelity by insisting on it. Moreover, she merely asserts her innocence rather than blames Othello. On one level, she seems to be trying to find a way out to mend the disastrous situation, by summong up her strength and courage. But in reality, she is only making her situation worse by her insistence on her innocence and chastity.

Next, Desdemona laments at the news of Cassio's death, "Alas, he is betrayed, and I am undone!"(76). She is grieved to learn that Cassio cannot tell Othello the truth and clear her good name. But her lamentation is interpreted by her husband as only additional evidence of lustful guilt, "Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?"(77). With the lamentation for Cassio's untimely death as a turning point, Desdemona's positive resouces start to desert her. Desdemona then, in desperate yet somewhat girlish ways, pleads with Othello for the mercy of a little delay--"kill me to-morrow: let me live to-night!"--and later "but half an hour" and finally "But while I say one prayer!"(80, 82, 84). But Othello, ignoring her desperate pleas in a

complete intolerance, proceeds to stifle his wife. Desdemona then seems to have no strength or will to resist the groundless murder or even to cry out for help, dying in her wedding sheets which are now to shroud her.

When Emilia rushes in and reports to Othello Roderigo's death and Cassio's injuries, Desdemona in her final death throes protests that she has been "falsely murdered"(117) and later "A guiltless death I die"(122). And to Emila's asking who has "done this deed"(123), Desdemona says her last words, "Nobody : I myself. Farewell: / Commend me to my kind lord: O, farewell!"(123-24) Her statement here, on one level, seems to display her efforts to forgive and tolerate her husband. And this statement can also be interpreted as her generous act to shield and protect her husband from the crime as many critics suggest. But it is difficult, at least for me, to understand what her implied self-recrimination and forgiveness really mean. Her use of the phrase "my kind lord" is, if not entirely absurd, at least beyond my comprehension. To me her last statement is no more than another form of self-deception to conceal her real feelings and emotions lodged deep in her. Also it should be noted that her phrase "Nobody; I myself" is certainly drawn from the words she uttered when she sang the plaintive tune of Barbary: "Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve"(IV. iii. 52). For this reason, she is here identifying herself with Barbary, who died of a broken heart when her mad lover deserted her, rather than trying to express her love for Othello. Even if some critics argue that her last statement is an genuine expression of marital love, I only claim that Desdemona's last words are merely adressed to her own romanticized Othello, not to the real Othello in the final act who is neither "kind" nor affectionate. Thus Desdemona fails to save herself in the end. On the surface, her last words seem to illustrate her desire to shield and exonerate her husband but the words are entirely misunderstood by her husdand, who interprets them merely as additional evdence of his wife's infidelity, "She's

like a liar, gone to burning hell: / 'Twas I that kill'd her... she turn'd to folly, and she was a whore"(128-29,132). Finally but too late, Othello learns that his wife was not "false" but "true and loyal," and Iago was not "honest" at all but a malignant pretender to virtue.

Shakespeare's Desdemona is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly evil, but a mixture of both. She is neither a "whore" as Othello believed her to be, nor a goddess as Cassio had proclaimed, but she is instead a good wonan who possesses some noble traits suitable for an ideal Renaissance woman. Because she is good, she has the capacity to perform relevant roles --especially in the early part of the play--that embody the positive womanly values of sympathy, self-assertiveness, courage, healthy sensuality, and love. But after Othello unknowingly commits a tragic error, believing under the unceasing influence of Iago's cynical manupilation that his wife is unfaithfull, all Desdemona's resouces start to desert her. Although she despearately tries to seek a way out to secure harmonious relationship with Othello, she fails to do so due to her own weaknesses. She has weaknesses of her own which are gradually revealed as her situation moves from bad to worse. Her exceeding commitment to her role-playing as Cassio's solicitor, her excessively unsuspecting attitude toward a husband obsessed with sexual jealousy, her repeated self-deceptions which blind her from seeing Othello as he is, her desperate need to maintain her own romanticized view of her husband, her persistent refusal to be instructed by shrewd Emilia, and her lack of the wisdom to realize the impossibility of convincing Othello of her fidelity by merely insisting on her chastity, all these attitudes and actions only contribute to make her situation more disastrous and hopeless. In the end, Desdemona fails to save herself and even her husband from his obsessive sexual jealousy, and dies a "guiltless death." *Othello* is a tragedy of a man who misperceives his wife and a tragedy of a woman who is overly tolerant of her husband's failings. In the

play, both Othello's obsessive sexual jealousy and Desdemona's presistent commitment to her innocence and her love for her husband turn out disastrously for each of them.

Notes

[1]William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* ed. Hardin Craig (Glenview: Scot, Foresman and Co., 1961). All quotations from Shakespeare are from this edition.

[2]Marrianne Novy, "Shakespeare's Female Charaters as Actors and Audience," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare,* ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: Universety of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 258.

[3]G. B. Harrison, Introd. to *Othello* in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1948), p. 1051.

[4]Carol Thomas Neely, "Women and Men in *Othello:* 'What should such a fool/ Do with so good a woman?'," in *The Woman's Part*, p. 219.

[5]Neely, p. 227.

[6]S. N. Garner, "Shakespeare's Desdemona," in *Shakespeare Studies* ,9 (1976), p. 239.

[7]Harley Graville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (1948; rpt. London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1972). p. 125.

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論文要約

『オセロー』におけるデスデモーナの悲劇的役割

吉　村　　清

『オセロー』の前半部では、デスデモーナは概して好結果を生みだすようなポジティヴな役割を果たしている。例えば、黒人将軍オセローとの結婚によって自らの運命を切り拓いてゆく娘、いい意味での官能性に溢れた花嫁、従順で貞潔な妻、機知と気品を備えたヴェニスの貴婦人、またキャシオーの復職のため尽力する懇願者などの評価に値する役割を彼女は果たしている。

しかし、夫がイアーゴーの奸計に操られ、その結果嫉妬妄想にかられ乱心し彼女に残酷な対応をするようになると、彼女はその善良さ従順さゆえに、夫の脅威の前に防御的になってしまう。また状況が悪化するにつれて彼女の性格上の欠点も徐々に顕在化してくる。例えば、嫉妬に狂う夫の前で自己の貞潔と潔白を主張することに固執することの無意味さに彼女が気づくことはない。

デズデモーナはルネサンスの理想的女性の一典型としての良質な面も有してはいるが、反面、彼女特有の欠点も有している。終局的には、彼女は自らをも救えないし、夫を嫉妬妄想から解放することもできない。『オセロー』は妻を過少評価する男と夫に対して寛大すぎる女の共作悲劇である。