

She's come undone:
did Desdemona's
determination dictate
her death?

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Shakespeare is often recognized for contributing to the canon in a way that causes the adage "there is nothing new under the sun" to ring true. His talent for developing old literary and mythic plots and themes in order to address contemporary British issues such as monarchy, religion, war, race, and the role of women in society is most often termed by literary critics 'marvelous' and 'magnificent'. To the feminist critic, it is quite interesting to examine the treatment of women by writers of Elizabethan England, precisely because they are composing their works within a particularly unique historical context, the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Although female Elizabethan and Jacobean characters were not necessarily allegories to Elizabeth's reign, the impact of 'Mother' England's "iconic persona upon her subjects" is likely to be evident to some degree in contemporary courtly writers' work. Shakespeare especially was "not averse to creating strong women dramatic characters" as is reflected in the independent nature of Desdemona in her determination to become Othello's bride. In Shakespeare's work, whenever something in the natural world is in disorder so too is the supernatural realm a pervasive entity, a literary technique which serves to foreshadow or provide an allegory to the actual chaos at hand. In Othello as well as The Tempest, it is the storms the ships experience that signify a greater problem within the grand societal structure. In the case of King Lear, first a magician and then a storm foreshadow danger and an overturning of hierarchy. Yet, problems have already arisen in Othello before the storm occurs revealing that the warning signs are too late, something has already gone amiss. In this case then, the virulence of the storm may foreshadow Desdemona's future: Because she has chosen to leave the

security of her father's home and her homeland, she is subjected to life-threatening incidents beyond the realm of her influence. The freedom she has been granted by the senate is in opposition to societal expectations of a woman. The expectation of a wife is that she will remain in the homeland and maintain the homestead in addition to preserving her chastity and refraining from acts that could potentially dishonor her husband's name. The modern audience commonly perceives Shakespeare's Desdemona as particularly innocent, faithful, loyal, and fair in both her character and color. Yet upon our first introduction to her, she is neither faithful nor loyal to her father who disapproves of the man whom she chooses to marry.

Interestingly, John Quincy Adams felt she was depicted much differently than our modern audiences, " Who can sympathize with Desdemona? She falls in love and makes a runaway match with a blackamoor ... She not only violates her duties to her father, her family, her sex, and her country, but she makes the first advances." We see that his observations add texture and depth to a character who is often simplified on the stage. While this perspective allows the modern reader to see Desdemona as an active and independent force, condemned by Adams but considered to demonstrate positive attributes in our day, it also serves to indicate the climate that existed prior to our post modern worldview. A perspective more contemporaneous to women and travel in the age of Shakespeare is unfortunately scarcely extant in the record. This would imply that either woman's travel did not take place, or that there was nothing remarkable in its occurrence. That being too broad a context to be helpful; in scouring fictional accounts of travel, one can find a few female characters available that, based upon literary comparison, allow

for further examination of the taboos surrounding a female traveller. One such text, *The Unfortunate Traveller*, provides a strong implication that women do not have a place in travel unless their intention or purpose is inherently negative. Nashe's protagonist, Jack Wilton, experiences Europe as if examining the dark side of the aristocratic 'coming of age' known as the Grand Tour. He describes his encounters with many different women, Geraldine, Tabitha and Diamante to name a few. Originally his description of these women is very sexual. "Tabitha the temptress," may in fact run a bordello and be called a wench, but she could "put a civil face" upon anyone, and keeps her house like that of a saint. She is bright witted, or as Nashe refers to her, a "crafty quean," who persuades Wilton's servant to murder his master in order to gain Wilton's riches for herself. The extent to which she travels is minimal, she stays within her city, and only leaves her residence in order to ensure and hasten the plot. Another character, "Stately Geraldine" is considered a "statue or a shrine" who bewitches all the wise men of England. She "commands" her lover to represent her beauty in her birthplace Venice and he heeds this command "prenticelike". That is, Geraldine places the responsibility of her physical representation in his trip to her homeland, equivocating any obligation she would have to be present if such a judgment were to be declared. The character who does seem remarkable within this spectrum then is the "good loving soul," Diamante. She is falsely accused of cuckolding her husband, who sends her to prison. Described as "too melancholy chaste," after time, and attempts from his master the Earl of Surrey, Wilton 'catches the bird' and Diamante, assumingly in all her chasteness, accepts Wilton's preferment of his "

enlargement” and becomes pregnant. Because her honor will be discredited if her pregnancy is discovered, she decrees that Wilton must accompany her “ to travel withersoever [he] would conduct her.” Simply, the method she uses in order to avoid the shame and dishonor associated with cuckolding and illegitimate pregnancy, is evasion. For her, this seems the best solution to an already sullied reputation, she leaves her home in Venice in order to travel throughout Italy with her lover. The implications of this are that a woman travels only for the purpose to prevent disgrace, or in more positive terms, to maintain pride. In that case, the argument for Desdemona’s leave from the same city is entirely similar. Desdemona’s father denies that his daughter is able to love Othello, and demands to know “ where most” she owes “ obedience. She replies:” My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. To you I am bound for life and education: My life and education both do learn meHow to respect you; you are the lord of duty, I am hitherto your daughter but here’s my husband: And so much duty as my mother showedTo you, preferring you before her father, So much I challenge that I may professDue to the Moor my lord. This demonstrates her commitment to and contentment with her decision. It is her husband to whom she feels dutiful and for whom she is disowned. Her father, Brabantio, pointedly responds, “ God bye I’ve done ... I had rather adopt a child than get it ... I have done my lord.” He effectively ends his relationship with her and the Duke points out that this rash action is similar to robbing oneself. Brabantio sees the situation differently. Desdemona pleads with the senators to allow her to go with Othello rather than being “ left behind” as a moth without its light, a woman whose rites of love and rights of privilege would perhaps untimely be

taken from her. Interestingly, this desire is eliminated from the public spectrum by the Duke's command that it shall be "privately determine[d]" by her husband whether she is to stay or go. Barbantio is extremely unsettled by the events which have occurred before the senate, specifically the usurpation of patriarchal rule to a much more egalitarian ideal. This becomes apparent when he warns Othello, "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" imbuing Othello with his first inclinations toward doubt of Desdemona's genuine intentions in their marriage. Although Act I Scene iii intones that Desdemona's decision to travel with Othello is a private matter, men in the line of duty did not travel with their wives, as is evident from Thomas More's own life, Thomas Nashe's literary account of *The Unfortunate Traveller* mentioned above, and Thomas Palmer's arguments in *An essay of the meanes how to make our travailes more profitable*. This early 'how to' guide, published in 1606, suggests that "some people should not be permitted to travel," specifically lawyers and women, warning that they may fall prey to the "seductive dangers of Italy." These are just a few of the social contexts that help explain the unusual nature of a woman's decision to travel, and its break from the expectations of the patriarchal society.> From the first moments that Desdemona demonstrated disloyalty to her father, doubt of her nature of her character is instilled in both Othello and the audience. Is she duplicitous or undeserving of this reputation? Upon her arrival to the island of Cyprus, she is manipulated by her "male surroundings" and does very little manipulating on her own. The question asked of her then, as to whether she is trustworthy, "is a peculiarly patriarchal question to ask," and she is

enveloped in a particularly patriarchal scheme which excludes her voice as well. She becomes the object of Iago's plan of destruction:" In Venice they let heaven see the pranksThey dare not show their husbands; their best consciences not to leave 't undone, but keep 't unknown. In causing Othello to believe that his wife has cuckolded him with Cassio, the language Iago uses implies that an act was committed in secrecy, but that the act was certainly done. Consequently, Othello exhibits suspicion and never attains enough information, and finally approaches Desdemona intent on bringing her to her death. It is in this final confrontation between the two, In her bedchamber in the castle where Desdemona declares to Othello " Alas! he is betray'd and I undone" and after a brief interaction, where Othello expresses his rage at her tears over Cassio's death and she her desire to have but half an hour to prove herself, retorts " Being done, there is no pause. " Fated to die at the hands of a false accusation, she has been " undone," and though the causality can primarily be identified as the results Iago's plot against Othello, one which develops out of and thrives upon miscommunication and deception, Shakespeare's underlying motives are not that straightforward. Unlike many other female Shakespearean characters such as Volumnia and Goneril and Regan, Desdemona hasn't failed as a woman by acting in a particularly evil manner. Nonetheless, in her betrayal of her father's wishes, and moreover in her disregard for accepting normative societal demands associating a wife with the homestead, for all intents and purposes she committed a violation of accepted archetypal structures which sealed her own dreary fate. BibliographyAdams, John Quincy. The Character of Desdemona. 19th Century. Hadfield, Andrew ed. Amazons Savages and

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