

# A strong and willful lady

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That the character Desdemona in Shakespeare's play Othello holds on to her dignified manner until the very end, when she is murdered by her jealous husband, is indicative not only of her chaste mind, but also of her willful determination. Given that women of the time were largely seen as second-class citizens and mostly one of two extremes – either virtuous or licentious – some readers will understandably view her as weak and passive.

Desdemona's strengths, however, are clearly illustrated in three pivotal scenes in Shakespeare's play: in her resolute plan to assist Cassio back into her husband's good graces; in her poise when confronted with her husband's crumbling gentlemanly facade; and finally, perhaps most dramatically, in the dignified way she faces her own demise head-on, feeble on protestations, yet overflowing with grace.

In Act 3, Scene 3, readers find Desdemona not sitting idly by like somebody's lapdog, but rather taking it upon herself to formulate a plan to help Lieutenant Cassio, who has been demoted at Othello's instruction. Her intention is to get her husband, Othello, to see how loyal a servant Cassio has been. We can presume that here loyalty begets forgiveness, for only after Cassio had a drunken mishap, albeit at the instigation of the underhanded Iago, does Cassio earn Othello's contempt and subsequent demotion. Desdemona reminds the audience of Cassio's devotion to Othello, remarking to Cassio, " You do love my lord" (57, line 9).

We read, on pages 57-58, not of a shrinking violet who formulates this plan, but of a proactive, calculating Desdemona, who promises Cassio:

I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee,

If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it

To the last article. My lord shall never rest;

I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;

His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;

I'll intermingle everything he does

With Cassio's suit. Therefore be merry, Cassio,

For thy solicitor shall rather die

Than give thy cause away (lines 20-28).

Even as her husband, Othello, enters and is mistakenly led to believe something is amiss between his wife and Cassio, Desdemona sticks to her resolution. Of course, she knows not what insidious thoughts Iago has planted in Othello's head, and she stands up for Cassio as she has assured him she would. She tells Othello of Cassio's unwavering dedication, and boldly requests that her husband meet with Cassio to discuss "a man [Cassio] that languishes in your displeasure" (58, line 43). Othello dismisses her request several times, and still she persists. She does not feebly submit to her husband's resistance, but stubbornly repeats her request, asking him: "Why then, tomorrow night, on Tuesday / morn, / On Tuesday noon, or night, on Wednesday morn. / I prithee name the time, but let it not / Exceed three days" (59, lines 59-63). She further tells her husband, "In faith, he's [Cassio

is] penitent” (59, line 63). Would not a passive woman meekly acquiesce to her husband’s opposition and simply drop the matter?

Next, during Act 4, Scene 2, Desdemona proves herself a lady in her discussion with the evil Iago, who, unbeknownst to her, is the cause of her chagrin. She laments that Othello has called her a whore, yet she herself does not stoop to ad hominem insults. Proudly, she declares, “ Unkindness may do much” and, in a moment of chilling foreshadowing, adds “ And his [Othello’s] unkindness may defeat my life” (100, lines 158-59).

This is a woman who is arguably virtuous to a fault, such class does she exhibit here. She states, “ I cannot even say ‘ whore.’ / It does abhor me now I speak the word; / To do the act that might the addition earn / Not the world’s mass of vanity could make me” (100, lines 160-63).

Finally, in Act 5, Scene 2, during the tragic conclusion of the play, when Othello smothers his beloved Desdemona in the mistaken belief of her infidelity, she nonetheless leaves the play with dignity. She does not wail or behave like a coward. Instead, she merely states: “ O, falsely, falsely murdered!” (119, line 116). Readers are left to wonder if she is referring to herself or to Cassio; regardless, these words are simply matter-of-fact and are not the emotion-driven cries one would normally expect from a person facing her own execution.

As to her dying breath, Desdemona states plainly, “ A guiltless death I die” (119, line 121). Her mistress Emilia, obviously overcome with emotion, can scarcely believe her [Emilia’s] ears. She beseeches Desdemona to name the

killer, wailing, “ Help! Help, ho! Help! O lady, speak again!” (119, line 119) and “ O, who hath done this deed?” (119, line 122).

With a quiet composure not many would be able to muster on their deathbed, no less a murder victim killed by a beloved spouse, Desdemona cryptically tells Emilia, “ Nobody—I myself. Farewell” (119, line 123).

And therein this shocking climactic scene is the end of Desdemona. Was she a self-loving character who had the ability to love others unconditionally? Or was she a fool who accepted what was then largely seen as the female’s lot in life in the mistaken belief that, by doing so, she was being righteous?

Othello seems a far weaker character to allow himself to slay his beloved due to his own misguided vanity and jealousy, than does Desdemona in meeting her own demise with dignity. Her characterizations in the above examples establish that she surrendered not to her husband, but rather to her own ideals of what it means to be unsullied.

Readers are well-advised to recall that this is a woman who publicly defied her father in order to marry the man she loved – a man who, ultimately, was her undoing. In the end, Desdemona proved herself to be not a fragile, frail example of a naïve young woman, but rather the epitome of a strong, willful lady.