SEL 36 (1996)
ISSN 0039-3657

Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire

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Chaste, silent, shamefast, and obedient—these have become the buzz words in feminist discussions of early modern women: the dictates of an anxious patriarchal network, intent on regulating inevitably unruly female voices and bodies; the signs that women, continually accosted by sermons, marriage tracts, conduct books, communal rituals, and laws espousing these terms, really could not have had a renaissance.[1] Renaissance women seem to have known it too. Why is it that Queen Elizabeth, visibly the most powerful woman in England from the mid-sixteenth to early seventeenth century, "speak[s] a discourse of apparent abjection," alternately abjuring her femaleness and acknowledging its weaknesses?[2] Why is it that "Jane Anger" (probably a pseudonym for an English gentlewoman) begins her proto-feminist "Protection for Women" (1589) with a letter to "the Gentlewomen of England" "crav[ing] pardon" for speaking out "rashly"?[3] Why is it that Aemilia Lanyer introduces her bold poetic defense of women, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), by critiquing the "powers of ill speaking" exhibited "unadvisedly" by "some women"?[4] Why is it, that is, that even the most outspoken women of the early modern period reiterate the terms that would prevent women from "inhabiting their own subjectivity"?[5]

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The easy—and recently, automatic—answer is, of course, containment, brought into currency not only by New Historicists, whose preoccupation with power marginalized the subject of women, but also by feminists themselves. The necessary project of exposing the long-ignored but long-standing oppression of women has almost destined us, when we focus on women, to focus on their circumscription. Couple that to a tradition of representation in which rebellious, outspoken, or desiring women habitually end up married, muted, or dead, and there seems to be no escape, even for those subjects who show remarkable autonomy before they go. Yet women such as Lanyer and Anger (literally) were making names for themselves. And if we continue to read their acts of compliance as signs of limitation, we ourselves put serious limits on their agency, subjectivity, and voice.

Part of the problem is our hesitancy to think of early modern women—who, after all, had no place on the stage—as actors. Recent work has begun to uncover multiplicity and conflict within established positions of those in and out of power, but we still tend to take women's voices, whether represented or real, at face value.[6] Men get to play all the parts, to fashion states, society, selves, and even femininity.[7] Since, in this period, self-making is an activity of the public sphere, we do not expect women (other than the queen) to do it—at least not with the same self-consciousness, manipulativeness, and control. They fill, rather than construct, roles. By and large, we recognize only the most exceptional or "unruly" figures as exceptions—figures such as *As You Like It*'s Rosalind (1599–1600) or Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's "roaring girl" (1608–10?), who mastermind strategic, self-serving if not self-affirming, fictions, albeit through male voices and bodies and sometimes in male drag.[8] Even then, we allow more license to fictive characters than to "real" disorderly women, and we privilege punishments over "crimes" which sometimes evidence impressive autonomy.[9] In any case, these stories predestine us to see female agency only in and as resistance, itself delimited (whether contained or not) by the challenged terms.

Indeed, when these or other women play by the rules, into obedience, chastity, shamefastness, and silence, we routinely assume them either constrained or restrained, despite histories that suggest otherwise.[10] When aggressively outspoken women such as Jane Anger apologize for their rashness, we have read their gestures as a sign that they "accepted silence as a feminine ideal" or, at best, "felt constrained" to comply with it.[11] Less consistently aggressive figures fare even worse. Although

Desdemona has the audacity to elope with a Moor and follow him to Cyprus, that she is "so good a wife" (V.ii.234) makes us lose faith in her daring.[12] She becomes "the perfect wife," who "remains perfectly submissive to the end" and whose "very self consists in not being a self, not being even a body, but a bodiless obedient silence."[13]

Wives, like Desdemona, are particularly susceptible to this kind of critical circumscription, perhaps because they were among the most (if they were not themselves the most) vigorously regulated of early modern women. Yet, as historians have shown, across the classes they had substantial power within their households.[14] Consider, for example, the case of Margaret Ferneseede, a one-time prostitute and bawd, who apparently "'barred'" her husband "'of the possession and command'" of their (legally his) home, who lived prosperously (probably with her lover) on her own, and who, upon her husband's death, openly mocked him, saying she scarcely expected to "hear so well of him."[15] Margaret was ultimately condemned for murdering her husband, largely on the grounds that she showed such "slight regard" for him in life and such "careless sorrow" at his death (p. 355). As her case suggests, what wives lacked was not power, but authority, terms which Constance Jordan has usefully separated.[16] At home wives could take charge, make decisions, and act on them. But in the world at large, that power gave them no authority, no means to legitimate their capacities or agendas outside those compatible with a patriarchal scheme. With power and not authority, Margaret Ferneseede was surely doomed.

According to Jordan, contemporary defenses of women (most authored by men) offered a wife only two strategies for validating her worth: either she could "*reaffirm* the value of her duties as her husband's subordinate," or she could "*reject* the grounds upon which she ha[d] been assigned her role and discover others that provide[d] her with greater scope."[17] The cost in each case is self-sacrifice: either the wife remains fully subordinate (though she elevates the value of her subordinate part), or she risks incrimination (as a scold or worse) for options that, if legal, may have been only theoretically available.

There is, however, a middle ground that proffers the safety of the first option with the radicality of the second and allows women to be actors: to speak out through, rather than against, established postures and make room for self-expression within self-suppressing roles. Under the cover of male authority, women could modify its terms and sanction their moves without direct resistance. They could be good wives *and* desiring subjects, obedient *and* self-assertive, silent *and* outspoken. In *Julius Caesar*

(1599), Portia is unable to gain her husband's confidence by appealing to "the right and virtue of [her] place" (II.i.269) as wife and trying to give that place a "greater scope." But when she recasts herself as subordinate—when she kneels before Brutus, "grant[s]" that she is an implicitly inferior "woman" (II.i.292), and gives herself value in terms of men, as a woman nobly "father'd" and "husbanded" (II.i.297)—she gets what she wants, Brutus's promise to disclose to her "the secrets of [his] heart" (II.i.306).

Portia's role and desires become subordinated as the action moves back to its hyper-male spheres, but elsewhere on the stage, where only men had the chance to act out modes of self-presentation, women's capacity to perform and construct strategic selves emerges as a central subject. Importantly, what figures there as a key device for radical self-expression is the posture of obedience. I want to look here at two examples, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*, whose female leads seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum of behavior: the one (the duchess) a willful and defiant actor, and the other (Desdemona) a self-effacing and compliant victim. Yet the stories they tell are similar. For in each, gestures of submission paradoxically enable the expression of desire, showing female figures who inhabit their subjectivities, who are able to seem as well as be and, consequently, be as well as seem.

The *Duchess of Malfi* is ostensibly a story of resistance of a willful widow who actively defies her brothers' wishes and refuses to be constrained by (male) authority. While her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, "would not have her marry again" (I.i.265), she immediately sets out to do so, declaring: "If all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I'ld make them my low foot-steps" (I.i.348–50).[18] When she does marry (soon after), she not only marries in secret, she also marries out of class, choosing Antonio Bologna, her household steward. Before we know it, she has also had several children—provocative signs to her brothers (who have little room to talk) of a sexuality gone wild. Her actions peg her as a woman willing and eager to fight back, to prevent anyone (even her new husband, who is already her subordinate) from taking charge of her body and desires.[19] She does have grounds for asserting such authority. She is, after all, an aristocratic widow with claims on a duchy and with autonomy so legitimate that her brothers must use clandestine means to restrain her.[20] Yet at stake in the play is not merely the question (or problem) of a widow's unique rights, independence, and power and how they can or cannot be contained by male authority. At issue too is the prospect of

female self-fashioning and the kind of voice and agency it carries. Though in part *The Duchess of Malfi* dramatizes what men can do to women, at its core is rather what women can do to men.

That the duchess will act on her will comes as no surprise, given her initial asides. What is puzzling, and revealing, however (especially since she seems to have married as much to exhibit her autonomy as to satisfy herself), is that she does so through submission. On the one hand, she dares "old wives" to report that she "winked, and chose a husband" (I.i.355–6). On the other, she keeps her move into marriage and sexuality under close cover. When the "deadly air" (III.i.56) of a "scandalous report" (III.i.47) actually approaches her, her honor, and her brothers, she proclaims her innocence. In the face of the suspecting Ferdinand, she denies the truth and assures him that she will marry only "for [his] honor" (III.i.44). Pretending to be deeply troubled by rumors "touching [her] honor" (III.i.48) and helpless to intervene, she leaves the remedy in his hands. It is only later, when he overhears her speaking of her closeted sex life (she thinks to Antonio), that she confesses to her marriage. Yet when she does, she strategically hides her husband's identity and his problematic social standing and underplays the implications of all her secrecy, insisting: "I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world, or custom" (III.ii.111–2).

To some degree, the duchess's posture of "innocency" (III.i.55) is a matter of survival, forced upon her by a family and society intent on keeping the widow under wraps. At the end of the play, when her secret is out, her time to live is up. Importantly, however, hers is not a simple case of co-optation, a forced relinquishing of her desires. Instead, her ostensible compliance marks a move *into* will and desire, giving her significant leverage to do as she pleases, to have her cake and eat it too in a society that would have no more cakes and ale.[21]

Her gains are truly extraordinary, at least for a female character on the early modern stage, and the play amplifies their significance by underscoring the pressures that surround her. By the end of act II, the duchess's reputation is under siege and her life threatened. Ferdinand, an early modern Wolfman, vilifies her as "a notorious strumpet" and is ready to "purge" her "infected blood" (II.iv.26) and, even to the Cardinal's horror, "[hew] her to pieces" (II.iv.31). At the beginning of act III, her infamy has spread to the "common rabble," who, according to Antonio, "do directly say / She is a strumpet" (III.i.25–6). Yet in the meantime, during a leap of two children and several years, this "excellent /

Feeder of pedigrees" (III.i.5–6) is living and producing heirs at liberty. And her brothers, the representatives of church and state, have not said a word, at least not one that stops her. To some degree, the play smooths over this gap in time and plot, unprecedented in Jacobean tragedy, by having characters talk about it, about how time and children fly. Nonetheless, it remains so jarring that critics have questioned the text's authority and coherence. But whatever its textual origins, the break works dramatically to underscore the duchess's unprecedented freedom, to highlight the remarkable, though invisible, license that comes with visible compliance. Secretly autonomous, she is overtly submissive to her brothers' constraints; overtly submissive, she seems at once untouched and untouchable. Under the cover of patriarchal authority, she can act on her will.

In the end, of course, the duchess is caught, confined, tormented by madmen, and turned into "a box of worm seed" (IV.ii.124) at the murderous hands of Bosola, Ferdinand's right-hand man. Yet tellingly, when her subjugation becomes reality, a matter of force rather than choice, she no longer complies. When there is nothing left to gain from submission, she asserts her will directly, making clear the uncompromised and uncompromising nature of her voice. As long as there is hope for release, as long as Ferdinand (as Bosola pretends) will entertain reconciliation, the duchess displays "a behavior so noble / As gives a majesty to adversity" (IV.i.5–6), and asks for her brother's pardon, still (if Bosola is right) "passionately apprehend[ing] / Those pleasures she's kept from" (IV.i.14–5). But once Ferdinand himself gives up his guise of innocence and betrays his undaunted aggression, so also does she. When he brings her the hand of (he pretends) Antonio and denounces her children as "bastards" (IV.i.36), she lambastes him for denying the legitimacy of her marriage and "violat[ing] a sacrament o' th' Church" (IV.i.39)—once again invoking a patriarchal authority to authorize herself, but this time openly against him. It is then that she "account[s] this world a tedious theater" where she "play[s] a part . . . 'gainst [her] will" (IV.i.83–4), and then that she refuses to play it. It is also then that she resists Bosola's efforts to dominate and destroy her, and then that she declares herself "Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.ii.142).

In locating this, her signal moment of self-assertion, in the midst of her confinement and immediately before her death, Webster may be underscoring the vacuity of such expression in an era only beginning to come to terms with interiority, as some have argued.[22] But he may also be dramatizing what he has been showing throughout—the possibility of self-assertion within

circumscription. Even if the self in question is not yet fully interiorized, articulated, or defined, the duchess's claim is neither vacuous nor defeating. For it is she who ultimately gets the last word.[23] After her death, her voice reverberates from the grave, echoing warnings to Antonio that could (if this were not Jacobean tragedy) save his life. And at the end of the play, we hear that one of her and Antonio's sons will inherit the duchy—importantly, through his "mother's right" (V.v.113). She *is* "Duchess of Malfi still."

Significantly, it is from a position as wife and not widow, the ruled rather than the unruly, that the duchess has established her "right"; through marriage and not widowhood that she has acted on her desires. In Elizabethan drama, when marriage figures as a means to power, it is predominantly as a means to male power—a means for men to safeguard (male) society from oversexed and overactive women, to manipulate, appropriate, traffic in, and otherwise dominate women. Yet in *The Duchess of Malfi* and plays emerging in the surrounding decades, when the debate about women is also in full and vigorous swing, the illusion (probably always an illusion) that women could be contained through marriage is seriously challenged.[24] Indeed, in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (ca. 1620), Isabella (who has pledged herself to the doltish Ward in order to have an incestuous affair with her uncle) celebrates marriage as "the only veil wit can devise / To keep our [illicit] acts hid from sin-piercing eyes" (II.i.237–8)—a veil for her use, protection, and pleasure.[25]

In the cases of Isabella and the duchess of Malfi, of female figures who let us in on their secrets and come out fighting from the start, it is easier to see compliance for the strategy that it, in these cases, is. But what about wives or would-be wives who do not talk to us? who are less transgressive at the beginning and less assertive at the end? What about "so good a wife" as Desdemona?

Although Desdemona seems much less a player than the duchess of Malfi, she is, in some ways, more—so much so that she has continually eluded our critical grasp. Desdemona gives us, in effect, two selves to choose from: the one, a fully sexual "woman capable of 'downright violence'" (I.iii.249); and the other, "'A maiden, never bold'" (I.iii.94), as Peter Stallybrass has argued.[26] The first escapes her father's "guardage" (I.ii.70) to elope with a Moor and insists on accompanying her husband to Cyprus—a military outpost in the play and the locus of Venus and "very wanton" women in classical and other contemporary accounts—a dangerous place for a new wife to be on both counts.[27] Too, this first self notices, while undressing, that "Lodovico is a proper man" (IV.iii.35). The second, that "perfect

wife" and "bodiless obedient silence" mentioned above, emerges primarily in the play's second half and stands passively by as her husband destroys her reputation and her life. She then takes responsibility for the deed and clears his name.

When Hamlet, the prince of players, moves in and out of madness, inertia, and love, we readily entertain the possibility that he indeed knows "seems," that he is a man of many masks (if not of all mask and no interior). When Desdemona, the good wife, shows two ostensibly incompatible sides, our tendency has been to treat them as a dramatic or characterological disruption, as something that impedes rather than enables her emergence as a subject. Attempting to resolve the problem of these dueling personas, critics have either argued for one at the expense of the other or located a gap within the characterization, a moment (in the middle of act III) when type A Desdemona becomes type B.[28] Or they have displaced the conflict onto culture: Desdemona becomes a site of ideological production and supports the normative "sex/race system" even as she "deviate[s]" from its "norms," or unwittingly threatens it just by being sexual and female.[29] As astute as many of these readings are, what they occlude is the possibility that Shakespeare creates a Desdemona who, like her male or more rebellious female counterparts, stages different selves.

It is clear from the start that Desdemona is an actor, as adept as Iago, Othello's second wife, at manipulating the system from within. When Othello wants to exonerate himself from charges of bewitching Desdemona, he writes her into his narrative of exoticism, portraying her as a vicarious adventurer, hungry to hear of his "disastrous chances" (I.iii.134) and frustrated by "house affairs" (I.iii.147). When Desdemona herself testifies, she—to the contrary and better advantage of both—stresses her conventionality and cloaks her unprecedented marital choices in social and familial precedent. Paying due respect to her "noble father" (I.iii.180), she acknowledges that she is "bound" to him "for life and education" (I.iii.182), that he is "the lord of duty" (I.iii.184), and that she is "hitherto [his] daughter" (I.iii.185). She then insists that her marriage fulfills her "duty" to turn from father to husband, as daughters must and as her mother did, "preferring [Brabantio] before her father" (I.iii.187). Significantly, in aligning herself with her mother, she strategically glosses over two factors that make her own marriage radically different and socially taboo: that she has eloped and eloped with a Moor. She further deflects attention from the incriminating specifics of her case by finding fault with society for assigning women an impossible "divided duty"

(I.iii.181) to both fathers and husbands. In her hands, acts of filial disobedience and miscegenation (brilliantly) become not only acceptable but also expected behavior. Brabantio, the one protesting against those acts, has no choice but to give up and in, as indeed he does.

Similarly, when Desdemona seeks permission from the duke to go to Cyprus rather than, as he suggests, stay with Brabantio, she presents her plan as better for her father, whom she would otherwise put "in impatient thoughts / By being in his eye" (I.iii.242–3), and then humbly begs assistance for her "simpleness" (I.iii.246). Not surprisingly, one scene later, she is in Cyprus, welcoming her "dear Othello" to the shore (II.i.182).[30]

In these instances, Desdemona's interventions do not markedly disturb the political system, since what she wants (to be in Cyprus as Othello's wife) does not alter what the Venetian court wants (to have Othello there, wife or no wife). Yet on the domestic front, as critics have argued, her desires do go beyond Othello's, who is determined to keep Cupid's "light-wing'd toys" from blunting his "speculative and offic'd [instruments]" (I.iii.268, 270) and housewives from making "a skillet of [his] helm" (I.iii.272). When she acts on those desires, albeit to enhance rather than subvert her marital relations, she, in effect, counters the terms of those relations. In these cases, the stakes in her staging of submission are higher. For through it she not only gets what she wants; she also challenges the very system that makes what she wants taboo.[31]

Desdemona's most blatant expression of her desires comes as she mediates for Cassio, under the patriarchally sanctioned authority of his voice.[32] She (and Shakespeare) make clear from the outset that, while the agenda is Cassio's, at issue is her will and her right to voice it. When agreeing to intercede, she promises (in the space of less than thirty lines):

> Be thou assur'd, good Cassio, I will do
> All my abilities in thy behalf.
>
> (III.iii.1–2)

> Do not doubt, Cassio,
> But I will have my lord and you again
> As friendly as you were.
>
> (III.iii.5–7)

> Do not doubt . . .
> I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee,

> If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
> To the last article.
>
> (III.iii.19–22)

And perform she does, in ways that license her self-expression and desire at the expense of male authority.

Her performance exploits and collapses the two male fantasies that most define early modern wives: the one, negative, of the shrew, and the other, the ideal of the submissive subordinate. Lest we believe the stereotypes and think Desdemona truly shrewish, she announces that she will play the shrew—that she will "talk [Othello] out of patience" (III.iii.23), "intermingle every thing he does / With Cassio's suit" (III.iii.25–6), make his bed "a school" and "his board a shrift" (III.iii.24), and assault him verbally at every turn until he again embraces the lieutenant. True and alert to form she does so, hounding Othello to meet with Cassio "shortly," "to-night at supper," "To-morrow dinner," "to-morrow night," and so on (III.iii.56–60). Othello responds as if she were indeed a shrew, overstepping the proper bounds of female speech. Although he insists "I will deny thee nothing" (III.iii.76), his acquiescence serves to cut her off at the pass. In response, Desdemona outdoes his own illusory submission and rewrites her outspokenness as part of, and not subversive to, her duty as wife, as a gesture that neither threatens his position nor advances hers. "Why, this is not a boon," she tells him:

> 'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,
> Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,
> Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit
> To your own person.
>
> (III.iii.76–80)

When Othello misses the point, again asserts "I will deny thee nothing" (III.iii.83), and asks to be left "but a little to myself" (III.iii.85), Desdemona reiterates the submissiveness of her pose. "Shall I deny you?" she asks, echoing Othello's own denial of denial, and answers with a firm "No" (III.iii.86). She then assures him, "Be as your fancies teach you; / What e'er you be, I am obedient" (III.iii.88–9)—presenting an assertive "I am" boldly in line with obedience.

In merging the postures of good wife and shrew, Desdemona indirectly challenges the presumption of their difference enforced in marriage handbooks, homilies, church courts, misogynist pamphlets, and the like. Her performance highlights

what that discourse masks: that to be a shrew is, in fact, to follow the rules, to be obediently disobedient, to fill a role created by (male) authorities who needed shrews in order to contain, by criminalizing, female speech. Conversely, Desdemona also places outspokenness within the perimeters of appropriate wifely behavior, insisting that to speak out against her husband (and his refusal to see Cassio) is to "do a peculiar profit to" him.

While Othello uses acquiescence to repress, Desdemona uses it to assert herself, to sanction the expression of her own desires.[33] After declaring that what she seeks is "not a boon," she warns Othello that someday she may seek one:

> when I have a suit
> Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,
> It shall be full of poise and difficult weight,
> And fearful to be granted.
>
> (III.iii.80–3)

Although she only promises here to make "fearful" and "difficult" personal demands in the future (notably a "when" and not an "if"), she claims the right to do so now, to be a desiring subject, to command Othello's love, and to "mean." It is no wonder that Othello tries to curtail their interchange or that, immediately after (and not before), he begins to pick up on Iago's incriminating hints that Desdemona has been untrue. For Desdemona's message comes through loudly and clearly; her "meaning has a meaning" that is decidedly her own.[34]

What then are we to do in the play's second half when, as the going gets rough, Desdemona seems to fall apart at the seams and slide into a fatal passivity, the woman capable of "downright violence" subsumed by the "maiden never bold" whom she has staged? What happens to the space Desdemona and Shakespeare have opened for her voice? We still see hints that Desdemona will stand her ground under the cover of obedience. When Othello strikes her in public, for example, she both protests that she has "not deserv'd this" (IV.i.241) and then withdraws, as Lodovico notes, like an "obedient lady" (IV.i.248). Later, in the face of Othello's mistrust, she declares that she is "honest" (IV.ii.65) while addressing herself to his "will" and "pleasure" (IV.ii.24–5). Like the duchess of Malfi, she also calls on heaven—on the fact that she is a Christian and "shall be sav'd" (IV.ii.86)—to support her stance, using male authority to dispute Othello's. Yet by and large, in the last acts of the play, Desdemona's interactions with her husband show her to be increasingly silent and submissive and her desires increasingly

at bay. Although she promises to mediate further for Cassio, she gives up speaking for herself, admitting that, for his case, "What I can do, I will; and more I will / Than for myself I dare" (III.iv.130–1). Presenting herself as "a child to chiding" (IV.ii.114) who cannot negotiate for herself, who "cannot tell" how it is with her (IV.ii.111) or whether or not she is "that name," whore, that Othello has called her (IV.ii.118), she enlists Iago to help her "win my lord again" (IV.ii.149).

Yet in her case as in the duchess's, what has changed is not Desdemona but the circumstances which surround her—circumstances that force her, not to give up her voice, but to redirect it. Once Othello decides that she is a whore, her gestures of obedience cease to have any meaning and any power to safeguard her speech. Desdemona, of course, does not know the whole story, does not know, that is, what drives Othello's "strange unquietness" (III.iv.133). Even after he has accused her repeatedly of being false, she continues to ask "What's the matter?" (V.ii.47). But she is aware that she has a husband she "nev'r saw . . . before" (III.iv.100), one whose erratic responses give her no readable text to play into. And two things more are clear: outspokenness may hurt her and obedience will not help her. In the face of Othello's distraction, Desdemona senses that her "advocation is not now in tune" (III.iv.123) and admits for the first time that she has "stood within the blank of [Othello's] displeasure / For [her] free speech" (III.iv.128–9). She twice evokes the possibility that she could be "beshrewed"—telling Emilia, at one point, to "beshrew me much" (III.iv.150) for "arraigning [Othello's] unkindness with my soul" (III.iv.152) and, at another, to "beshrew" her if she were ever to be unfaithful (IV.iii.78)—as if she now understands speech as dangerous. Othello also makes all too clear to her that submissiveness is no antidote. After Lodovico has praised her obedience, Othello harshly mocks it, retorting (to Lodovico):

> Ay, you did wish that I would make her turn.
> Sir, she can turn, and turn; and yet go on
> And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;
> And she's obedient, as you say, obedient;
> Very obedient.—Proceed you in your tears.—
> Concerning this, sir—O well-painted passion!—
>
> (IV.i.252–7)

Obedience, the very thing that has made her self-assertions safe, now leaves them and her defenseless, blurring into her tears as a "well-painted passion."

Importantly, though, while Desdemona does become less willing to assert her desires in Othello's presence, she continues to define herself as a desiring subject and to set the terms in which she is to mean. While she seems, to feminists' dismay, to defend Othello to the end (and even after) at her own expense, she actually exonerates herself and implicates him. She presents herself as a loyal wife, willing to sacrifice herself for love. But registered within her narrative of self-sacrifice is what we have been waiting desperately for her to produce—testimony of her fidelity and Othello's error. She vows in front of Emilia and Iago: "Unkindness may do much, / And his [Othello's] unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love" (IV.ii.159–61). She uses the story of her love to render his "unkindness" questionable. As she prepares herself for the bed that (as she too anticipates) will be her deathbed, she recounts the tragedy of her mother's maid Barbary and, through it, sets herself in the context of other women who suffered or died wrongly at the hands of their lovers. Recent interest in issues of race has brought the seemingly digressive tale into currency for its evocation of Africa. As significant as that context is in a play about a Moor, that Barbary is a woman, and a woman wronged in love, is, I think, more significant still, at least as far as the representation of Desdemona is concerned. For Barbary's story and song provide a crucial model for Desdemona's own self-fashioning and a critical key for our interpretation of it.[35]

The story itself is simple: Barbary "was in love" with one who "prov'd mad / And did forsake her"; as a result, she died, singing "a song of 'Willow,'" "an old thing" that "express'd her fortune" (IV.iii.27–9). That song (which Desdemona admittedly cannot get out of her mind and so sings) tells of a woman, "I," who "sat [sighing] by a sycamore tree" (IV.iii.40), mourning a lover, and declaring: "'Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve'" (IV.iii.52). Her approval, however, seems more strategic than sincere. When Desdemona reaches this final line, she notices that "that's not next" (IV.iii.53) and inserts what should have preceded, what explains the speaker's acquiescence—the possibility that she herself will be slandered:

> I call'd my love false love; but what said he then?
> Sing willow, willow, willow;
> If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men.—
> (IV.iii.55–7)

In refusing to blame her lover, the speaker (followed by Barbary) keeps blame from herself. For as the male voice within the

ballad threatens, her incriminations of him will only lead to his recriminations against her: if she accuses him for courting more women, then he will accuse her of "couching" with more men. Admittedly, by loyally "approving" his scorn, she seems to be subdued by her husband. But by exposing the circumstances that surround her submission, she exposes also the falseness and vacuity of his position.

And so it is with Desdemona. When direct attempts to modify the system promise only recrimination, she turns to indirection and tells, rather than acts out, her story. Yet even though at the end she is forced to play defense rather than offense, she continues to play, to creative a submissive counter-narrative that challenges and changes the order of things. In the final act, when she speaks after death, she breaks through the code of silence expected of the dead as of women and not only declares her death "guiltless" (V.ii.122) and herself "Oh falsely, falsely murder'd" (V.ii.117), but also, enigmatically, insists that "Nobody; I myself" (V.ii.124) killed her. Her "nobody" points suggestively back to the Willow Song, to the speaker's directive that "nobody" blame her lover, and reiterates the loyalty that has defined the speaker, Barbary, and Desdemona. Although critics have routinely heard the "nobody" rather than the "I" and turned her into a "bodiless obedient silence," Desdemona has both voice and body here. Given the dramatic context surrounding her assertion, and her characterization throughout, the real enigma here is that we take her answer, literally the lie direct, at face value, her performance as passivity.

In fact, the onstage audience hears her. And her dying voice destabilizes the master narrative that has defamed her and puts incriminating words in Othello's mouth. Ironically, in order to prove her a liar (which is, to him, a whore) and to usurp the claim to truth, Othello confesses to the crime, insisting "'Twas I that kill'd her" (V.ii.130), undoing himself in order to undo her. Her voice also licenses Emilia's revolt against Iago. It is only after Desdemona has spoken that Emilia questions her husband's honesty, vows to "ne'er go home" (V.ii.197), and dies testifying against him. Tellingly, as Emilia "speak[s] as liberal as the north" (V.ii.220) before she too dies at her husband's hand, she reinvokes the Willow Song and, as she says, "die[s] in music" (V.ii.248) like her lady—music that is the food not just of love but also of female affirmation.

Desdemona, Emilia, Barbary, and the ballad's anonymous speaker all submit and die, but not before speaking out through a male-authored narrative that would otherwise occlude their voices. Each, in effect, tells her own story, registering desires not

suitable for women through postures of obedience that are. Singing "willow" under a sycamore tree, they turn "nobody" into "I." There are reasons that lead Othello to cry whore and Ferdinand to cry wolf—reasons that caution us against taking conventional postures, in general, and conventional female postures, in particular, as authentic rather than posed. Shakespeare, Webster, Jane Anger, and Aemilia Lanyer may have different reasons for staging female compliance. But however their representations promote, remodel, resist, or otherwise respond to the possibility of such performance, together they testify to a prominent cultural awareness that all the world was indeed a stage, and its men and women players.[36]

NOTES

[1]The signal essay is Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?", in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), pp. 137–64. Other important studies include: Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990); Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1984); the introductory material in Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 3–130; and Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino CA: Huntington Library, 1982), pp. 1–143. See also Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).

[2]Barbara Hodgdon, "The Making of Virgins and Mothers: Sexual Signs, Substitute Scenes, and Doubled Presences in *All's Well that Ends Well*," *PQ* 66, 1 (Winter 1987): 47–71, 66. For full discussion of Elizabeth's self-representations, see Mary Thomas Crane, "'Video et Taceo': Elizabeth I and the Rhetoric of Counsel," *SEL* 28, 1 (Winter 1988): 1–15, and John M. King, "Queen Elizabeth I: Representations of the Virgin Queen," *RenQ* 43, 1 (Spring 1990): 30–74.

[3]"Jane Anger, Her Protection for Women" (London, 1589), in Henderson and McManus, pp. 172–88, 173.

[4]From Aemelia Lanyer's letter "To the Vertuous Reader" prefacing *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (London, 1611). See also Hull, pp. 98–9.

[5]Maureen Quilligan, "Staging Gender: William Shakespeare and Elizabeth Cary," in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), p. 208. Quilligan is discussing Gayle Rubin's important essay, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review, 1975), pp. 156–210.

[6]See, for example, *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

[7]Ironically, Karen Newman's interesting study *Fashioning Femininity and*

English Renaissance Drama (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991) focuses primarily on the ways men "fashion femininity."

[8]Unruly women were also doing remarkable things in the street literature of the period. For a useful survey of it, see Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1992).

[9]See the case of Margaret Ferneseede, discussed below.

[10]One notable exception is Michael C. Schoenfeldt's intriguing essay on "Gender and Conduct in *Paradise Lost*," in Turner, pp. 310–38. Schoenfeldt sees in Eve's "artful expression of blind obedience," not "the intellectual and ontological inferiority it ostensibly declares," but "impressive verbal dexterity" (p. 325). "Gestures of submission in Milton," he argues, "are at once static and dynamic, unquestioned declarations of one's place in a hierarchy and the necessary condition for rising," and *Paradise Lost* "uses the constrictions of courtesy literature to construct a space—albeit limited, and only sporadically inhabited—for the conception of active female virtue" (p. 336).

[11]Henderson and McManus, p. 54.

[12]All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

[13]Michael D. Bristol, "Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*," in *True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age*, ed. Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 75–97, 92; Quilligan, p. 229.

[14]Two central studies are Susan D. Amussen, "Gender, Family, and the Social Order, 1560–1725," in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 196–217; and Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1982), esp. pp. 89–104.

[15]"The Arraignment and Burning of Margaret Ferneseede" (1608), in Henderson and MacManus, pp. 351-9, 358, 354. Subsequent page references appear in the text.

[16]Jordan, pp. 3–5.

[17]Jordan, p. 13.

[18]All quotations from the play come from *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976).

[19]Compare Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 206–7, who reads the marriage as an expression of romantic love.

[20]See Lisa Jardine on how the duchess's widowhood affects her place (*Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* [1983; rprt. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989], pp. 78–93).

[21]Compare Jardine, who sees the duchess as a flagrant "strong woman," who "must be systematically taught the error of her ways" (pp. 68–102, 98).

[22]See, for example, Belsey, pp. 35–41.

[23]Compare Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1989), p. 145, who argues that the duchess is overcome by her brothers' power. See also McLuskie, "Drama and sexual politics: the case of Webster's Duchess," in *Drama and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 77–91.

[24]Because of the prominence of this challenge, I would argue against the assumption that "misogyny is generally on the rise in the drama of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean years," reiterated most recently in Steven Mullaney,

"Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy,* and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600–1607," *SQ* 45, 2 (Summer 1994): 139–62, 144.

[25]Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women,* in *Jacobean and Caroline Tragedies,* ed. Robert G. Lawrence (London: J. M. Dent, 1974).

[26]Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe,* ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy Vickers (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 123–42, 141.

[27]The information about Cyprus comes from James F. Gaines and Josephine A. Roberts, "The geography of love in seventeenth-century women's fiction," in Turner, p. 292.

[28]See Bristol, Quilligan, and Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories." For an excellent alternative, see also Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello,*" *SQ* 40, 4 (Winter 1989): 383–412.

[29]Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello,*" in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology,* ed. Jean F. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 142–62, 153; see also Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 222–54.

[30]See also II.i., where Desdemona points to her role-playing, her plan to "beguile / The thing [she is] by seeming otherwise" (II.i.122–3).

[31]For a powerful essay on the discourses that surround Desdemona, see Valerie Wayne, "Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello,*" in *The Matter of Difference,* ed. Wayne, pp. 153–79.

[32]I have sketched out the beginnings of this argument in "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *SQ* 41, 4 (Winter 1990): 433–54, esp. 452–4.

[33]Related is the instance of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew,* which, if Quilligan is right, seems "to grant Kate the exercise of her own biologically gendered sexual desire at the moment of her most freely chosen obedience" (p. 223).

[34]*The Jew of Malta,* IV.iv.106, from Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays,* ed. J. B. Steane (London: Penguin Books, 1969).

[35]Compare Stallybrass, who argues that as a "single" but doubly resonant "signifier," Barbary "slides between male and female" ("Transvestism and the 'body beneath': Speculating on the Boy Actor," in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage,* ed. Susan Zimmerman [New York: Routledge, 1992], pp. 64–83, 73).

[36]I have presented versions of this paper at the Shakespeare Association of America Convention, Kansas City, April 1992, and to the Columbia Shakespeare Seminar, Columbia University, October 1992, and am indebted to the participants in both, especially to Rob Watson, Maurice Charney, and Jean Howard, as well as to the reader at *SEL.* Finally, very special thanks to Jim Siemon, whose comments and encouragement have been vital.

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