

Scene 3

Desdemona's song

Desdemona says:

My mother had a maid call'd Barbary,
She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad
And did forsake her; she had a song of 'willow',
An old thing 'twas; but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it; that song to-night
Will not go from my mind ... I have much to do,
But to go hang my head all at one side
And sing it like poor Barbary: ...

- Explore together the possible significance of this quotation, for example is it important that this is the first mention of her mother? What about the references to death and madness? Why do you think she expresses herself in song?

Critic Ato Quayson talks about Desdemona's song. He says,

Towards the end when she is preparing herself for what is, of course, her deathbed, she does not speak, she sings. That collapse of language and reaching for a non-verbal form of expression is something Shakespeare captures extremely well. There are moments when language fails, when the person senses the tragic mood and reaches for song.

- Talk about your response to this comment.

Emilia's role

In this scene Emilia speaks alone to each of the other main characters: Iago, Othello and Desdemona. Each of these characters wants something from her.

- Choose four people to play the parts of Emilia, Iago, Othello and Desdemona. As you watch the scene being played, anyone in the class can stop the action to suggest ways in which the character should act, or to take over the part.
- Talk about the role Emilia plays with each character, how she behaves and what they want from her.

Changes in Desdemona

You have already investigated the way the changes in Othello's character are revealed by, and reflected in changes in his use of language. You are now going to do the same for Desdemona.

- Read through the extracts included on pages 65-66. Annotate each extract with the impression they give about Desdemona's character (for example does she seem to be confident, naïve or upset?).
- Focus on each extract in turn and identify what it is that she says and how she says it which gives this impression. You should also find the extract in your copy of the play in order to see how it appears in context, for example how the other characters react to what she says.

The work you did on conversation analysis on Act 3 Scene 3 will help you.

1

Act 1 Scene 3 I.248

Desdemona: That I did love the Moor, to live with him,
My downright violence, and scorn of fortunes
May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued
Even to the utmost pleasure 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:
So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support,
By his dear absence; let me go with him.

*Imperative, not
question gives the
impression of an
assertive character.*

2

Act 2 Scene 1 I.61

Cassio: Most fortunately, he hath achiev'd a maid
That paragons description, and wild fame:
One that excels the quirks and blazoning pens,
And in the essential vesture of creation
Does bear all excellency: ...

3

Act 2 Scene 1 I.131

Desdemona: Well prais'd! How if she be black and witty?

Iago: If she be black, and thereto have a wit,
She'll find a white, that shall her blackness hit.

Desdemona: Worse and worse.

Emilia: How if fair and foolish?

Iago: She never yet was foolish, that was fair,
For even her folly help'd her, to an heir.

Desdemona: These are old paradoxes to make fools laugh i'the
alehouse; what miserable praise hast thou for her that's foul and
foolish?

Iago: There's none so foul, and foolish thereunto,
But does foul pranks, which fair and wise ones do.

Desdemona: O heavy ignorance, that praises the worst best: but
what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed? one
that in the authority of her merits did justly put on the vouch of very
malice itself?

4

Act 3 Scene 3 l.19

Desdemona: Do not doubt that: before Emilia here
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 every thing he does
With Cassio's suit; therefore be merry, Cassio,
For thy solicitor shall rather die
Than give thy cause away.

5

Act 3 Scene 4 l.77

Desdemona: Why do you speak so startlingly and rash?
Othello: Is't lost? is't gone? speak, is't out o'the way?
Desdemona: Heaven bless us!
Othello: Say you?
Desdemona: It is not lost, but what an if it were?
Othello: Ha!
Desdemona: I say it is not lost.
Othello: Fetch't, let me see't.
Desdemona: Why, so I can sir, but I will not now.
This is a trick, to put me from my suit.
I pray let Cassio be receiv'd again.
Othello: Fetch me that handkerchief, my mind misgives.
Desdemona: Come, come,
You'll never meet a more sufficient man.
Othello: The handkerchief!
Desdemona: I pray, talk me of Cassio.
Othello: The handkerchief!
Desdemona: A man that all his time
Hath founded his good fortunes on your love,
Shar'd dangers with you, –

6

Act 4 Scene 2 l.104

Desdemona: ... do not talk to me, Emilia,
I cannot weep, nor answer have I none,
But what should go by water: prithee, to-night
Lay on my bed our wedding sheets; remember,
And call thy husband hither.
Emilia: Here's a change indeed! (*Exit.*)
Desdemona: 'Tis meet I should be us'd so, very well;
How have I been behav'd, that he might stick
The smallest opinion, on my greatest abuse?