

Study Questions for “Desdemona” (*Othello*)
from chris wind’s *Soliloquies: the lady doth indeed protest*

Desdemona

Accused of *infidelity*:

I pray thee, what is infidelity?

A lack, a lack of 'faithfulness', of 'loyalty'

A lack of 'strict conformity to truth or fact'–

Pray tell, what fact?

Why, the fact of our marriage

Of our marital contract–

You accuse me of a breach of contract, then?

(And for a breach of contract,

You sentence me to death?)

'Tis true, I did make certain agreements–

To *love* you alone?

Or to express love *physically* to you alone?

Aye, to *have sex* with you alone?

You alone

This is important, this singleness, this monogamy

For it enrages you to see me 'for others' use';

Perhaps this ownership is indeed legal–

but is it truth or fact?

(Other's *use*? Think me a *thing*?)

Would you have me agree to love no other?

Then 'tis a cold heart you want.

And am I to please none but you?

Alas, to be so unkind–

To find pleasure in none other?

But this is a lie!

(Is it a wound too?)

Perhaps you have the child in mind

And rage like Hermione's husband,

'I'll not rear another's issue!

But where is the comraderie

You feel with other men?
Is it false, that love for your fellow-in-arms?
A child is no more a possession than a woman,
And every child needs nurturance—
Why should you withhold what is yours to give?

Do you think, like Imogen's husband,
That if I am unfaithful, I am worthless?
That all of my value is in my sex?
Surely you did not marry without regard for other virtues.
Is it because I am of worth
Only to the extent I am of worth to you?
Come, did I marry one so self-centered?
If I am unfaithful 'then all men are bastards'!
Only if you believe legitimacy resides with (legal) paternity.
Only if you believe in *il*legitimacy:
Surely all children are legitimate!
Thus 'tis not my infidelity makes you bastard,
But your belief!
(It also makes you stupid:
Why would you make *your* legitimacy
Depend on *my* faithfulness?
Surely to allow me this power
Confounds your drive for dominance—)

Accused of infidelity:
I care for Cassio, 'tis true,
And am therefore affectionate with him—
But must all touch between male and female be sexual?
I think not. Thus I have been accused without cause,
That is, no cause but your jealousy
(Which is your ego which is your fear
—And they say *we* are the ones ruled by emotion)
And the words of your friend.

We too have words, Emilia and I and all of the others,
We also speak:
But either you don't believe us
And so we are killed,
Or you do believe us
—and so we are killed.

1. Explain Desdemona's criticisms of the expectation of monogamy. To what extent do you agree with each one?
2. To what does the last stanza refer?

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Study Questions are also available for "Juliet", "Ophelia", "Lady MacBeth", "Portia", "Kate", and "Miranda".