How Desdemona Learned to Die: Failed Resistance in Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*

By Dr Jennifer Flaherty, Georgia College and State University, USA

Abstract:
Paula Vogel's dark comedy *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* is similarly probing, examining the isolation of women past and present through her reinvention of the characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather than creating a heroic Desdemona who defies her fate, Vogel chooses to depict an environment in which such a character would be impossible. Instead, Vogel creates a silly, spoiled, and promiscuous Desdemona who attempts to subvert the patriarchy that controls her. Vogel uses displacement to demonstrate the painful limitations of female agency, inviting audiences to see female resistance and oppression through Shakespeare's women. Her revised *Othello* does not 'correct' the darker plots of Shakespeare's play by 'saving' Desdemona and glorifying the female characters. Desdemona cannot triumph in Vogel's play, and the hope that the three female characters might rewrite the story in a positive way is futile. Although the women of Vogel's *Desdemona* are each doomed to fail at their respective attempts to escape the situations that control them, the text still maintains a feminist perspective. The feminism of *Desdemona* does not demonstrate empowerment, enlightenment, or equality—these positive elements are replaced with a kind of negative empathy. Referring to her play *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel argues that a play is not have to make audiences "feel good" to take a feminist stance—"It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life" (qtd in Holmberg). Vogel's *Desdemona* is not a prescriptive, utopian image of what the world should be like for women. Similarly, the women themselves are not positive, successful heroes. Vogel asks her audiences to say 'no' to constraints on female agency and 'no' to female complicity and isolation. By not saving Desdemona, Vogel invites her audiences to save themselves.

1 Analyzing women and authority in Shakespeare, Juliet Dusinberre notes that Shakespeare's plays offer "consistent probing of the reactions of women to isolation in a society which has never allowed them independence from men either physically or spiritually" (92). Paula Vogel's dark comedy *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* (1994) is similarly probing, examining the isolation of women past and present through her reinvention of the characters in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Rather than creating a heroic Desdemona who defies her fate, Vogel chooses to depict an environment in which such a character would be impossible. Vogel creates a silly, spoiled, and promiscuous Desdemona who attempts to subvert the patriarchy that controls her. By exploring Shakespeare's female characters in their relationships with men and each other, Vogel uses *Desdemona* to interpret *Othello* in the same way that her later play *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) reworks Nabokov's *Lolita*. In *Desdemona*, Vogel demonstrates failed resistance instead of progressive achievement by creating a flawed heroine who attempts to defy an even more flawed

patriarchy. Relying on her audience's expected familiarity with the plot and characters of *Othello,* Vogel alters key aspects of the text to call attention to the limitations and pressures that define the lives of women, not only in early modern literature and culture, but also in her own time.

2 After examining historical and textual female agency in response to slander in "Why Should He Call Her Whore? Defamation and Desdemona's Case," Lisa Jardine concludes:

> In history, agency is a dynamic, in relation to women and to men (both men and women have acted, have been acted upon). It is this historical agency which I have been concerned to retrieve, in theory as well as in practice. In my exploration of *Othello,* I have not been able to give back to Desdemona power to accompany her activity. (34)

Like Jardine, Vogel uses the character of Desdemona to explore the possibility of female agency (both on the stage and off). As a playwright who adapts Shakespeare's plays, however, Vogel has a power that Jardine does not. As a critic, Jardine is limited to the text of *Othello*; she can only analyze Desdemona's actions (or lack thereof) and compare them with the actions of carefully selected historical figures. While Jardine is able to make a strong case for the historical agency of women in early modern England, the textual agency of Desdemona's character remains problematic. In her examination of Desdemona's agency, she cannot re-write the actions of a literary character, and she must acknowledge that "in spite of her private protestations of innocence, Desdemona does nothing formally to restore her now 'actually' impugned reputation" (31). By appropriating Desdemona from Shakespeare's text, Vogel can "give back to Desdemona power to accompany her activity" (34) if she so chooses. But instead of rewriting the plot of *Othello* to give Desdemona additional agency (or even a stronger voice), Vogel chooses to emphasize the social limitations that keep Desdemona from exercising her agency.

3 In an interview with Arthur Holmberg about her 1998 play *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel explains that "for me, being a feminist does not mean showing a positive image of women" (qtd. in Holmberg 1). Vogel's approach counters the emphasis on positive models that characterizes another revision of Othello, Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet).* Sharon Friedman explains that the positive female 'selves' in *Goodnight Desdemona* offer women readers a chance to identify with Shakespeare's female characters as selves rather than others:

> MacDonald's play challenges the institutional power of the theater to reproduce stereotypical roles for women, and the authority of the academy to perpetuate and naturalize these roles with interpretive strategies that preclude personally and politically engaged readings. (Friedman 122)

Friedman's enthusiasm for "personally and politically engaged readings" is tied to the idea that reinterpreting female characters as positive rather than "stereotypical" allows contemporary women to identify with them (122). This instinct leads critics to identify with or advocate for particular characters, such as when Carol Neely names herself an "Emilia critic" in *The Woman's Part* (213). In her study of the word "whore" in Shakespeare's canon, Kay Stanton asks her readers to consider how "women should own the term whore," offering a selection of Shakespearean characters to choose from: "Should we like Desdemona consider the word to be so foreign to our lived experience that we can barely speak it? Should we like Emilia not be intimidated from saying the word?" (99). Stanton rejects those characters in favor of Bianca, who treats the word "as a stance of male-constructed female representation that travesties the majesty of our sexual power" (100). Friedman, Neely, and Stanton reinforce the idea of a prescriptive approach to altering Shakespeare by building positive role models out of Shakespeare's heroines. Vogel's approach is conversely negative and descriptive. Although Vogel's Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca resist the cruel behavior of Othello, Iago, and Cassio, they are not painted as paragons of virtue. Instead of demonstrating heroic behavior that defies their circumstances, they fall into destructive behavior that serves as a reflection of their environment; it is impossible for them to act otherwise. Vogel's versions of the Shakespearean characters are selfish, violent, lustful, and insecure.

4 Vogel's pessimism undercuts the optimism that characterizes studies of *Othello*'s female characters by authors such as Neely and Stanton. Rather than depicting Emilia and Bianca as strong women that take steps to overcome the misogyny generated by characters such as Iago, Vogel's text argues that they are just as ineffectual as Desdemona because they too are trapped in a society dominated by male power. The pessimism of Vogel's play does not make it anti-feminist. Like many feminist critics, she turns a critical eye on subjects such as female agency and autonomy, male and female sexual objectification, and patriarchal oppression. The darker spin that she gives these issues in her play is more of a comment on women's position in society than it is a comment on women's characters. Vogel explains that, for her "being a feminist means looking at things that disturb me, looking at things that hurt me as a woman. We live in a misogynist world, and I want to see why" (qtd. in Holmberg 1). By transforming the female characters of *Othello*, Vogel draws attention to the darkest impulses of men and women, real and fictional, past and present.

5 As Vogel's play moves towards the inevitable conclusion of Shakespeare's tragedy (the death of Desdemona), it invites the audience to explore its own complicity in

Desdemona's death. In each production of *Othello*, the audience is asked to sympathize with a character who murders his own innocent wife, to find him a tragic hero rather than a villain. At the heart of this is what Marvin Rosenberg calls "the problem of Othello." Rosenberg asks, "How can he be both noble and a murderer? What kind of sympathy, what empathy, can he evoke?" (5). In an interview with Simi Horowtiz, Vogel acknowledges her own willingness to overlook Othello's actions: "I empathize with Othello more than Desdemona. I am crying for a man who killed his wife because he believes he was cuckolded. How can I, as a woman, possibly understand that? But I do" (qtd in Horowitz 3). Vogel's plays challenge preconceptions of audience empathy, asking audiences to see characters such as Lolita or Desdemona as subjects. Vogel describes being drawn to *Othello* and *Lolita* "as a young feminist, an ardent feminist, so drawn in and wrapped up in empathy for Othello and Humbert Humbert" and wondering "How would a woman writer do this? Could a woman writer write something where our empathy would be evenly located?" (qtd in Clay 1). In *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel gives a retelling of a Lolita-esque story that encourages the audience to empathize with both the Lolita figure (Li'l Bit) and the Humbert figure (Uncle Peck). Vogel struggles similarly with the issue of equal empathy in *Desdemona*, asking her audience to respond to both the Desdemona character and the absent Othello by acknowledging the different degrees of fault and victimization in *Othello.*

6 Vogel's text demands that audiences reconsider their own preconceptions about the culpability or innocence of Shakespeare's characters. Desdemona's guiltless chastity is crucial to the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The determination with which Othello investigates Iago's claims, demanding "ocular proof," gives credulity to the idea that Othello is justified in ending Desdemona's life if she is proved guilty (3.3.376). As he watches Desdemona sleep, just before he ends her life, he rationalizes that "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). Othello justifies his actions by arguing that he is preventing future crimes, not avenging past wrongs. He only expresses remorse for his actions when he realizes that Desdemona is guiltless. Vogel's *Desdemona* dramatically alters this crucial element by presenting a heroine who is anything but chaste. In Shakespeare's play, Othello declares "I had been happy if the general camp…had tasted her sweet body, so had I nothing known" (3.3.344). In Vogel's adaptation, Othello gets his wish.

7 Vogel's Desdemona spends Tuesday nights in Bianca's brothel, where she has slept with most of the garrison (everyone but Cassio, the one man Othello suspects). While Vogel's Othello is actually the "cuckhold" (4.1.191) that Shakespeare's Othello believes himself to be, the play clearly states that Cassio is "the only one" (Vogel 14) that Desdemona

has not betrayed her husband with. Although Vogel's Desdemona might be guilty of countless charges of adultery, Othello still kills her for the one act she has not committed. By not giving Othello the justification of discovering his wife's activities, Vogel emphasizes that innocence and chastity are not necessarily the same thing—while Desdemona has violated her marriage vows, she is still innocent of the charges that Othello and Iago bring against her. Desdemona's unique combination of guilt and innocence forces the audience to confront their own biases. As Marianne Novy points out, "the play asks, among other things: 'Do we feel different about a husband killing a wife who is really unfaithful? Should we? In what ways should we feel the same?" (73). By giving the audience "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity, Vogel puts the audience in Othello's position, challenging them to consider their own complicity in Desdemona's death.

8 Vogel presents Desdemona's aggressive sexuality as an act of resistance, albeit unsuccessful. Feeling frustrated by her life, her marriage, and her position in society, Desdemona rebels in the only way that she can—through her body. She feels liberated by her sexual adventures, as though she can achieve her dreams of travel and adventure through sex with men who have traveled and fought. In an attempt to explain this feeling to Emilia, Desdemona describes it as a way to satisfy her "desire to know the world" (Vogel 20). She achieves this vicarious travel as:

> They spill their seed into me, Emilia—seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me; I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh, how I travel! (Vogel 20)

Because sex is the only power that Desdemona holds, she has no qualms about using it as a means of escape from her physical and mental environment. In both her visits to the brothel and her marriage to Othello, Desdemona tries to use her body to break free of the limitations that Venetian society has imposed on her. She describes her reaction to Othello's skin as hopeful that "If I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind—I can escape and see other worlds" (20). She is disappointed, however, to learn that "under that exotic façade was a porcelain-white Venetian" (20). Sexual desire, for Vogel's Desdemona, is tied with the idea of escape. She uses men to escape Venice, both literally and figuratively. But her attempts are always unsuccessful. Othello's exoticism is only skin-deep, and the men she sleeps with in Bianca's brothel don't come from "a thousand lands"—they are Venetian soldiers, including Iago.

9 Marianne Novy argues that "the relationships that [*Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*] scrutinizes are those between women" (Novy 70). But to disregard the influence that the male characters have on the women of the play is to leave many of their most fundamental motivations unexplored. While it is true that the male characters never actually appear on stage, their influence resonates in every aspect of the women's behavior. The majority of the play's action is driven by the male characters, from the opening scene (in which Emilia steals the handkerchief for Iago) to the closing scene (in which Desdemona prepares for bed on the night of her death). Vogel's women define themselves through their relationships to the men in their lives. Desdemona is a "daughter of a senator" (17), a wife, and a victim, but she never establishes an identity of her own. Emilia is a servant and wife who longs for the day that Iago makes her "a lieutenant's widow" (14). Bianca, the only female character to survive Shakespeare's play, wants to trade her identity of 'whore' for that of 'wife' and live with Cassio in a "cottage by th' sea, wif winder-boxes an' all them kinds of fings" (38). Shifting the focus to Shakespeare's female characters only serves to emphasize the restrictions on female agency in *Othello*.

10 In *The Woman's Part*, Carole McKewin explains that "with no family or friends, Desdemona and Emilia are alone in a military camp, where masculine conceptions of honor define what a woman is" (128). Vogel's play echoes the idea of female isolation in an environment that is controlled by men. When Vogel's Emilia tries to convince Desdemona that men use women like they might use inanimate objects, she is reflecting the Shakespearean Emilia's statement that men "are all but stomachs, and we are all but food;/ They eat us hungrily, and when they are full,/ They belch us" (3.4.98-100). The male characters in *Othello* frequently attempt to use the women for their own benefit. Iago uses Desdemona's life as a tool in his own complex game of vengeance and manipulation, which is only possible because he uses his wife to steal Desdemona's handkerchief. Cassio uses Desdemona as a means of recovering his position. Othello uses Emilia to find out information about Desdemona, and when she does not respond as he expects her to, he refers to her as a "bawd" (4.2.20). Immediately following this scene, Emilia attempts to make sense of the confusion of jealousy and adultery by asserting:

> Let husbands know their wives have sense like them…
> And have not we affections
> Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
> Then let them use us well: else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3.91-101)

This ties together the theme of use and abuse that runs throughout the play, and the eye-for-an-eye pragmatism that characterizes Emila's speech is in keeping with the practicality that Emilia expresses when she states that she would "make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch" (4.3.70). *Othello* presents men as subjects who evaluate the current situations and react to them, while women are often viewed as prizes, temptations, pawns, and other objects.

11 Vogel's play ironically inverts the typical representation of a female sexual object that is admired and desired by the men; instead, women are the admirers or critics who view men as objects. Where Desdemona herself is compared to inanimate treasures such as "monumental alabaster" (5.2.5) in Shakespeare's play, Vogel presents a playfully bawdy Desdemona who fondles a hoof-pick and quips that a man of that size "could pluck out my stone" (9). She teasingly asks Emilia if her "husband Iago [has] a hoof-pick to match?" and laughs when Emilia replies that "the wee-est pup of th' litter comes a'bornin' in the world with as much" (Vogel 9-10). Similarly, Desdemona delights in "demurely" mentioning to Bianca that "Emilia must constantly mend" Othello's undergarments because "he's constantly tearing his crotch-hole somehow" (29). In Vogel's Cyprus, the men are as objectified as the women are, and Desdemona delights in her sexuality, believing that she is using the men more than they are using her.

12 On the surface, the sexual gaze that Desdemona directs at Othello seems to represent the shift in female desire that critics such as Hélène Cixous call for—a "multileveled libidinal energy shaped by female bodily drives that find their way into the style of feminist writings" (qtd. in Freedman 115). Vogel's Desdemona demonstrates a desire for sex and a visual appreciation of the male form; her behavior attempts to reverse the objectification that Shakespeare's Desdemona is subject to. But her gaze, which she uses to turn men into objects of lust or mockery, lacks the "potency...the omnipotence of gazing, knowing" that characterizes the male gaze as described by Luce Irigaray (Warhol and Herndl 430). Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca can observe men, discuss them, even desire them, but they do not have the social power to control them. While Ann-Marie MacDonald gives Desdemona both the envy/desire of Othello's gaze *and* Othello's power to act on it, Vogel's Desdemona expresses desires, but she lacks the power to effect real change. She tries to escape Venice by marrying Othello, to escape the confines of her marriage by cuckolding him, and to escape Othello's jealousy by planning to leave with Ludovico. But despite these repeated attempts, Vogel's Desdemona cannot escape the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

13 Just as Othello, Cassio, and Iago control the action of Vogel's play without appearing onstage, Desdemona's impending death is crucial to Vogel's dramatic structure, although the

audience never sees her murder. Vogel relies on the audience's knowledge of *Othello* to establish a strong sense of dramatic irony in many of her characters' lines. When Emilia refers to Othello's questions about the handkerchief as "just a passing whim" (Vogel 7), the audience understands that Othello's jealousy is strong enough to drive him to murder. As Desdemona giggles about the barbarity of displaying bloodied bridal sheets for "half the garrison" (Vogel 8), it is hard to avoid thinking of the "tragic loading of this bed" from Shakespeare's *Othello* (5.2.363). Emilia warns Desdemona that Othello will kill her if he finds out about the time that she has spent in Bianca's brothel, but Desdemona pays little attention to the prediction. Her flippant protest that "nothing will happen to me. I'm the sort that will die in bed" is meant to assuage Emilia's fears (Vogel 12). Instead, it serves as a reminder to the audience that Othello will murder Desdemona "in bed" (Vogel 12) that very evening. Like John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* and Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters*, Vogel's *Desdemona* hinges on the audience's knowledge of *Othello* to emphasize the tragedy to come.

14 When Emilia pleads "M'lady, don't go to your husband's bed tonight. Lie apart—stay in my chamber" (Vogel 44), the danger resonates with Desdemona as well as the audience. Her naïve plan is to feign sleep when her husband comes to her room that night, and then leave the next morning for Venice. Her hope that "surely he'll not harm a sleeping woman" (Vogel 45) serves as a reminder that Othello wakes Desdemona with a kiss and asks her "Have you prayed tonight?" (5.2.26) before he kills her. As Desdemona prepares for bed, the audience cannot help but realize how close she is to her own death. As the curtain falls, Emilia asks if Desdemona would like her to "brush your hair tonight? A hundred strokes?" (Vogel 46). This ritual of brushing Desdemona's hair serves as a countdown until the moment when Desdemona must exit to her chamber. As Emilia reaches the ninety-ninth stroke, the play ends in an abrupt blackout, which implies that, as the theater puts out the lights, Othello will "put out the light" (5.2.8). The inevitability of tragedy is clear, despite the many changes that Vogel makes to the character of Desdemona. Vogel's Desdemona is acutely aware of the danger she is in, and she has a plan to escape Cyprus—yet she still suffers the same fate as Shakespeare's Desdemona.

15 The failure of Vogel's Desdemona to break free of the tragic pull of the plot of *Othello* can be attributed as much to the women in the play as the men. Vogel's Emilia states that "women don't figure into [men's] heads…that's the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes" (Vogel 43). But the female characters in Desdemona are similarly guilty of overlooking the feminine sphere in favor of the masculine. Vogel's Desdemona might have

been saved if she had embraced a true friendship with Emilia or Bianca. As Marianne Novy argues:

> Hiding out in Bianca's brothel until she can leave Cyprus would actually provide the best opportunity for Desdemona to survive, but she doesn't understand the need for this until too late, since Emilia doesn't give her enough information until after Bianca has left in a rage over Desdemona's supposed affair with Cassio. (75)

Even if Desdemona could be saved by information from Emilia, as Novy argues, Desdemona's behavior has already alienated her before the play's opening scene. Unlike Shakespeare's Desdemona, who does nothing to deserve the theft of her handkerchief, Vogel's Desdemona delights in mocking and annoying Emilia. She strings her along with false promises of promotions and occasional gifts of discarded clothing, and she demands Emilia's "confidence" in return (14). Desdemona's brief acknowledgement of Emilia's honesty and value when she gives Emilia an expensive ring comes across as too little, too late. By the time the two women form a true bond, the chain of events leading to their deaths has already been set in motion.

16 Vogel's play does not make the argument that Desdemona is the only female character incapable of developing successful friendships with other women. The antipathy between Bianca and Emilia that is briefly explored by Shakespeare is revisited and expanded in Vogel's drama. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the only encounter between Emilia and Bianca occurs just after Cassio's death, when Emilia cries out "O fie upon thee strumpet," and Bianca replies that she is "no strumpet, but of life as honest/As you that thus abuse me" (5.1.121-3). In Vogel's play, Emilia dismisses Bianca as "a small town floozy with small town slang" (Vogel 25). Vogel's Bianca echoes Shakespeare's by initially defending herself to Emilia by claiming "Aw'm as 'onest a woman as yerself!" (26). The antipathy between the two characters continues throughout the play, with each woman claiming to know more about Desdemona, Cyprus, even religion. Similarly, Bianca begins the play with a genuine affection and respect for Desdemona. When Emilia attempts to shame Bianca into leaving the palace, Bianca responds:

> Aw likes yer lady, whefer you think so or not. She can see me as Aw am, and not ask for bowin' or scrapin'—and she don't have to be nobby, 'cause she's got breedin', and she don't mind liking me for me own self—wifout the nobby airs of yer Venetian washerwomen! (Vogel 26)

But Bianca's initial friendship with Desdemona is not strong enough for Bianca to trust her when Bianca (like Othello) begins to suspect that Desdemona is sleeping with Cassio. Rather than serving as an example of a friendship that transcends class barriers, Desdemona and

Bianca's relationship devolves into a brawl in which they attack each other with a hoof-pick and a broken wine bottle. All of the women in *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* are just as doomed by their failure to form honest and loving relationships with each other as they are by their relationships with men. The differences between Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca are such that Desdemona is unable to truly connect with either of the women, and the others feel nothing but resentment towards each other. Paula Vogel explains that "*Desdemona* shows how women participate in a social system that does not allow them to bond. We bond with our husbands and our class structure rather than with each other" (qtd in Holmberg 1). There is no indication that these women could ever form a supportive female community, and their interaction provides no defense against tragedy.

17 While Shakespeare's Desdemona and Emilia have a closer relationship than Vogel's, giving *Othello* at least one genuine female friendship, they are unable to use that friendship to avert Shakespeare's tragic ending. Carole McKewin argues that the conversation between Desdemona and Emilia in 4.3 "reflects the texture of...oppression. Their language is imbued with frustration and evasion" (128). This conversation is the one scene in Shakespeare's text that Vogel adapts directly, and the scene in *Desdemona* that most directly contradicts the characterizations of *Othello*. At this point in the text, Desdemona, who has been pondering the adultery that her husband has accused her of, asks Emilia if she would "do such a deed for all the world" (4.3.66). Emilia, ever pragmatic, answers that "the world's a huge thing: it is a great price for a small vice" (4.3.67). Instead of portraying the contrast between the innocent and devoted Desdemona and the practical Emilia, as Shakespeare does, Vogel reverses their opinions on the issue of adultery and explores the implications that these changes have for each of the characters. In Vogel's version, Emilia is the one who argues that she would not commit adultery "for all the world," and it is Desdemona who states that "the world's a huge thing for so small a vice" (Vogel 19). Shakespeare's Emilia justifies her answer by describing the benefits that her husband could receive in return for her unfaithfulness. Vogel's Desdemona, however, does not speak of gaining "the world" for her cuckolded husband—she wants it for herself. Vogel's Desdemona longs to travel to "other worlds—worlds that we married women never get to see" (19) and break free of the limitations that society has imposed upon her.

18 Vogel's Emilia, by contrast, has little use for travel, sex, or even her husband. Her marital fidelity comes not out of love or loyalty to Iago, but out of concern for the rules laid out by the "Holy Fathers and the Sacraments of the Church" (18). As the play progresses, however, these rules become increasingly blurred in Emilia's mind. After learning that Iago

has been visiting Bianca's brothel, Emilia gives up any pretense that she might have had about the sanctity of the bond between Iago and herself and fully commits to her decision to leave him. Desdemona explains Emilia's unhappiness by blaming her relationship with Iago, stating that "he's been spilling his vinegar into her for fourteen years of marriage, until he's corroded her womb from the inside out" (28). There is an element of truth to these charges, for Emilia describes her sexual experiences with Iago as cold and lonely, a battle of wills in which she vows "not to be there for him" (43). The play makes it clear that, although Emilia hates her husband, she devotes most of her time to begging for Desdemona to secure small promotions for him from Othello, and Desdemona sometimes consents. These requests, however, do not serve as an example of the love and loyalty that Emilia feels for her husband. They are the result of Emilia's cold determination to become "a lieutenant's widow" and help herself to "what's left, saved and earned, under the mattress" (14) instead of leaving it for Iago to keep after her death. Emilia's resistance is less obvious than Desdemona's blatant infidelity, but it is present in the character's fervent desire to outlive or escape her husband. The futility of Emilia's dream is made apparent by Vogel's use of dramatic irony—the audience understands that Emilia will escape Iago only through her death later that evening, when he kills her for defending Desdemona against his charges. While resistance is possible in Vogel's depiction of Cyprus, success and triumph are not.

19 Vogel uses displacement to demonstrate the painful limitations of female agency, inviting audiences to see female resistance and oppression through Shakespeare's women. Her revised *Othello* does not 'correct' the darker plots of Shakespeare's play by 'saving' Desdemona and glorifying the female characters. Desdemona cannot triumph in Vogel's play, and the hope that the three female characters might rewrite the story in a positive way is futile. Although the women of Vogel's *Desdemona* are each doomed to fail at their respective attempts to escape the situations that control them, the text still maintains a feminist perspective. The feminism of *Desdemona* does not demonstrate empowerment, enlightenment, or equality—these positive elements are replaced with a kind of negative empathy. Referring to her play *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel argues that a play is not have to make audiences "feel good" to take a feminist stance—"It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life" (qtd in Holmberg). Vogel's *Desdemona* is not a prescriptive, utopian image of what the world should be like for women. Similarly, the women themselves are not positive, successful heroes. Vogel asks her audiences to say 'no' to constraints on female

agency and 'no' to female complicity and isolation. By not saving Desdemona, Vogel invites her audiences to save themselves.

Works Cited

Dusinberre, Juliet. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women (2nd Edition*). London:Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1996. Print.

Freedman, Barbara. *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. Print.

Friedman, Sharon. *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2008.Print.

Greene, Gayle, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, and Carol Thomas Neely, ed. *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 1983. Print.

Holmberg, Arthur. "Through the Eyes of Lolita." Interview with Paula Vogel. americanrepertorytheater.org. 18 September, 1998. Web.

Horwitz, Simi. "Paula Vogel: Not Pulitzer Winner, But Playwright Getting Out of the Way." *BackStage*. Friday, May 1 1998. Web.

Jardine, Lisa. *Reading Shakespeare Historically*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.

MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 1990. Print.

Novy, Marianne, ed. *Transforming Shakespeare*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Print.

Rosenberg, Marvin, ed. *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Authors and Critics*. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1961. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. 5th ed. Bevington, David, ed. New York: Pearson, 2004. Print.

Stanton, Kay. "'Made to write 'whore' upon?' Male and Female Use of the Word 'Whore' in Shakespeare's Canon." *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Ed. Dympna Callaghan. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000. Print.

Vogel, Paula. *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief*. New York: Dramatists, 1994. Print.
---. *How I Learned to Drive*. New York: Dramatists, 1997. Print.

Warhol, Robyn R. and Diane Price Herndl. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997. Web.