

Female Struggle and Triumph: The Cases of Antigone, Desdemona, and Erminia

Ibrahim Alhiyari

English Department, College of Arts and Sciences

Gulf University for Science and Technology

Meshref, Kuwait

Abstract

The history of misogyny and varied abuse of females throughout humankind's history is well known, as this essay's discussion of the iconic figures of Antigone and Desdemona attempts to selectively chronicle. The exceptional abuse they are subjected to by their supposed benefactors is counterpoised by the debuting of Behn's Erminia as a reformist, benevolent, and angelic tour-de-force at the commencement of the Restoration. The historic example of Erminia, the representative of a new generation of young, liberated women is in remarkable contrast to her immediate historical analog, Desdemona, who is demeaned and treated as a beast as she "turn[s]" and grovels before her proprietor. Erminia's horrifically abused precedent helps to put into perspective the Restoration's perceptible progress in women's rights inasmuch as it highlights the egregious miscarriage of justice prior to the age through history. The uniqueness of the trio is clearly observed as Erminia boldly takes to the stage to reform, enchant, and restrain the savage, beastly instinct of man, and successfully rehabilitates Alcippus, while the rhetorical supremacy and ethical purpose of Antigone and Desdemona overshadow their catalyst companions, Ismene, the chorus, and Emilia. Through juxtaposing these female icons who belong to widely diverse epochs, this essay aims at analyzing their interactive dialectic in addition to scrutinizing the shifting dynamics of their socio-political and cultural milieu in order to arrive at a better understanding of the historic transition the female quest for recognition has undergone.

Keywords: Antigone, Desdemona, Erminia, gender, misogyny, patriarchal, restoration

Cites as: Alhiyari, I. (2019). Female Struggle and Triumph: The Cases of Antigone, Desdemona, and Erminia. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies*, 3 (1) 35-52. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol3no1.3>

Introduction

To trace the history of female, incipient struggle against male tyranny is a daunting feat given the intrinsic likelihood of not doing justice to iconic heroines who ought not be reduced to generalized, cursory surveying that will inevitably truncate the typological minutiae of their characters and render their personae divested of individualized allure and captivating moments. Embarking on an analysis of Sophocles' Antigone, Shakespeare's Desdemona, and Behn's Erminia will help us grasp the various historical stakes they grappled with and the shifting dynamics of their patriarchal societies. In their own ways, the trio copes with endemic, socio-political and religious challenges while confronting phallogocentric power, challenges that structure the long-standing, female struggle for recognition and parity against the resilient, masculine enterprise.

Antigone and Desdemona are denied life through the denial of convincing opportunities to vindicate their stances from the alleged offenses their persecutors, who cannot bear to listen to them due to their gender inferiority, accuse them of. Antigone cannot dispute or discuss Creon's contention regarding her brother's burial because as Creon makes amply clear, she is a woman, while Desdemona is similarly denied the chance to defend herself and explain that the relationship she has with Cassio is a normal friendship. Although both women are able to impart to the audience their innocence and virtue, their punishers in whose hands their lives rest are not convinced. Driven by their brashness and misogyny, the inane disinclination of their bullies to listen to their defenses lead to Antigone's and Desdemona's summary, unjust execution and bring on their superfluous, anachronistic deaths. Their lives could have been quite easily saved had the despotic patriarchs that controlled their lives been less terrifically chauvinistic. In any event, soon after they commit their crimes, Creon and Othello become deeply contrite and suicidal, a tragic denouement that adds to the play's pessimism and imparts a negative message concerning the societal mayhem of patriarchal power.

Erminia, on the other hand, uses her privileged status as an early restoration, semi-liberated, noble, young lady with wondrous beauty to tame and acculturate the wild, masculine spirit that is habitually prone to destruction. Although her efforts are rewarded by the complete, slave-like surrender of Prince Philander, she and her other female cast members meet qualified success, as they win the husbands of their choices, but have to submit to the only accepted method of happiness that marriage symbolizes.

A unifying circumstance all three women experience is the deliberate absenting from any discussion on intrinsic female concerns. Hence, whereas Antigone and Desdemona are thoroughly stonewalled from displaying their gender-specific idiosyncrasies, rendering their arguments saliently inauthentic and void of "maternal drives" (Clifford, 1995, p. 7), Erminia and her other female catalysts in TFM are given a small room of expression, only adequate enough to fit in their amatory confessions to their appropriate husbands. In general, the denial of female self-expression offers a clear vista into the limitedness of their roles while simultaneously foreshadowing men's celebrated entitlement and prodigious "hubris" (Lansky, 2015, p. 49).

Desdemona is sequestered and silently killed without credible evidence and without the opportunity to exonerate herself over a *hypothetical* accusation that in contemporary society is regarded as a normal affair--to fall in and out of love and marry and divorce. She is obstructed from speaking, from bringing forth a witness such as Othello's lieutenant, Cassio, or her maid, Erminia, to vouch for her, from exposing Iago's depravity, from seeking help before Othello has ample chance to kill her, and even ampler time to double-check on her being fast dead. The Moor seals the fate of his wife, objectified and chattel-like, with an ironic kiss, a kiss of death that seems to mark man's mute, material possession in a wife. The saving of Desdemona's life, not unlike Antigone's, could not have been more easily achievable, but out of dramatic necessity and routine dispensability, she dies a needless, mistimed death. As Johnston (2006) argues, women's death is "justified by the public needs of men" due to the invaluable, posthumous service they provide "defending [men's] homeland," or providing a release for their troubled egos (2006, p. 7).

In a promising, historic change for the British island in the wake of the victory of the liberal, royalist forces over the anti-art, women-oppressive puritans, king and subjects coalesced during a peaceful era that foresaw the restoration of Charles II to make London's theatrical resurgence as grandiloquent as it once was during the Golden Epoch of Elizabeth. Charles' court, which was strongly inclined to festivities, plays, as well as sumptuous food and drink, was precisely what the war-weary, early Restoration generation sought, especially women who longed to manifest their own feelings for the first time in the history of the English stage. In such euphoria of revelry and triumph Behn's dramaturgical skill blossomed, and her TFM women, Erminia, Gallatea, and Aminta, reflected her progressive authorial views, as seen in their recalcitrance towards any compromise on their personal preferences, especially over their future spouses.

This essay is divided into three parts. The first discusses the hostile and rigid ambience to which Sophocles' Antigone is subjected. As a young, betrothed maiden who is vanquished overnight by the deaths of her two remaining male siblings, Eteocles and Polyneices, and as an orphaned daughter who had already lost her parents, Oedipus and Jocaste, she is cast headlong into a confrontation with patriarchal hegemony on her own without prior experience or diplomatic skill to fend for herself. In the second section, I analyze the innocent and quaint character of *Othello's* Desdemona, Shakespeare's anomalous, paradoxical creation, whose sappy, docile capacity to put up with and still remain obsessed by Othello despite his unbearable insolence and sadistic abuse defies logic. Finally, I discuss Erminia, Behn's semi-liberated, uncommonly beautiful character, who is so irresistible that nearly all male characters desire her. Her idolization by Prince Philander is expressed through his protracted, repeated kneeling at her feet to reveal his sincere devotion.

I. Sophocles' Antigone

A probe into the history of women's subjugation would certainly be remiss if it overlooked Antigone, the dazzling maiden, incestuous issue, elusive riddle, feminist champion, ethics extremist--among a short list of telling characterizations. She is the inchoate lynchpin of Western ontological studies, for she is a muse, a warrior, a goddess, a magnet to idolaters and skeptics alike. For generations, her confounding legend attracted countless admirers, lay and scholarly, for three overarching motifs: inter-gender war and its breeding of misogyny; the dichotomy between statism

and individualism; and kinship obligations with its necessary sacrificial ramifications. Among her lured victims are pundits, names of high esteem that hail from all ethnicities and backgrounds, old and new, academic and otherwise: from Anouilh who glorifies her steadfast resolve during troubled times in France, to Hegel who “exorbitantly... love[s] her” in his own way (Söderbäck, 2010, p. 2), to Lacan who idolizes her propriety and moral correctness (Lacan, 1986), and Heidegger who applauds her phenomenological authenticity in being undismayed to die for disrupting the harmony and social order of the reverent *polis*. Among well-known feminists, Kristeva, Butler, Elshtain, who are enthralled by this anchored legend of Western thought, have also contributed to the massive body of knowledge about her from their respective, feminist “waves” of reference.

Women of classical times up to the end of the Renaissance had hardly a voice, as is observed firsthand from their absence as authors. They were regarded throughout this history as mere perishable goods whose integrity, welfare, and even lives were of little value, especially if their paths crossed those of men. Whenever men fell, they fell along and partook in men’s bruises unidimensionally, suffered quietly, offstage, for the mere purpose of exalting man’s empyrean feelings. They also operated in the risky, often terminal, role of giving vent to man’s “loftier,” emotional vicissitudes. For instance, in *Antigone*, Creon’s wife Euridyce’s stabbing of herself is a theatrical necessity, even if her husband does not chart for himself the same tragic route. Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* gives himself a lighter, albeit bloody, punishment that enables him to spare his life; however, Eurydice, is not as fortunate. In Virgil, Aeneas unscrupulously abandons Queen Dido, his mating convenience and erstwhile love, leaving her to fend on her own, victim to her subjects’ lashing tongues, without the decency of taking proper leave or feeling compunction for her sorry state. As becomes royalty, her expected demise takes place by leaping into the immense pyre she tricks others into believing is made to dispose of Aeneas’ paraphernalia. Similarly, during the Renaissance, characters such as Webster’s Vittoria and Isabella as well as Shakespeare’s Gertrude, Ophelia, and Desdemona, all meet the same nonessential deaths, though foreseen as dramatic needs, either to bear the blame for men’s misconduct and suffer death consequently, or to die quietly offstage in order to facilitate reaching a climactic point in the broad, masculine scheme of the plot.

Yet part of Antigone’s mystique is her adverseness to complacently nestle into the chiasmatic web of any particular abstraction, past or present. Invariably considering her universal iconology, scores of commentators attempt to thrust upon her philosophically incongruent, anachronistic ideologies that her elusive legend spurns. To demonstrate her evasive spurning, Söderbäck contends that old-school, “traditional” philosophers such as Hegel, Freud, and Heidegger were notably subjective and monolithic in their reductive assessments, and deems their surmising incompatible with the “social metaphysics of gender complementarity” (Söderbäck, 2010, p. 112). Hegel, Söderbäck resumes, appropriates Antigone to gloat over what becomes of an ungovernable vixen, in order to maintain a universe whose patriarchal apex is gifted to rule without the insecurity of a competitor from a less endowed gender.

Although some critics such as Strauss, who sees in her sacrificial demise a necessary condition for creating the “mythical origin” of Thebes (2013, p. 2), hurl her as a guardian of family values and an existentialist saboteur wrecking the state’s law into the dialectic of individual subjectivity and public commonwealth, the core of her personality and the mandate of her mission are quite simple, for she is foremost a genderless and desexualized person who prioritizes her idealism and righteousness over her fleshly whims, quotidian welfare, even entire life--and in that she is “not a woman”(Josette, 1978, p. 2), womanly, nor even a normal person with susceptibility to common human arousals and menaces. By transcending her temporal and corporeal needs, and by remaining a stubbornly unconsummated, platonically loved fiancée, she evades the apprehension of her patriarchal enterprise, beginning with her despotic uncle, down to Hegel and others. Had she been typical, she would have, for instance, solicited the assistance of her betrothed Haemon, who loved her dearly, to negotiate a middle course with her uncle. She may have also appealed to Creon’s kinship sentiment or could have been more femininely coaxing, but her glorious atypicality repels her opposite a coquette, a lackey, or a conventional, stereotypical maid since all these archetypes would not avail her mission in disdaining a debasing compromise over an inalienable right.

Antigone’s legend is appealing for principally four main attributes: her sincerity, reason, courage, and dutifulness to her kindred. She has no ulterior, ephemeral motive, unlike most other characters, due to which she corrals our eulogy and empathetic inspiration. Her consistent, thorough preoccupation with the central idea of her brother’s burial offers deep insight into her idolized soul.

Her sincerity overarches that of all other characters and is the reason that leads her to shun her only sister, who prefers to be a subservient survivalist. As Antigone asks Ismene for her assistance in Polyneices’ burial, she is piqued by her unconscionable answer, which is steeped in the mortal fear to “die far worse than all the rest [her brothers],” and obsessively paranoid by the grave error of testing the relationship with those who “are much more powerful” (Johnston, 2007, p. 8). Antigone’s furious repartee is preemptive, as she briefly overlooks her sororal bond with Ismene and counters: “I wouldn’t urge you to. No. Not even/if you were keen to act. Doing this with you/would bring me no joy.” As Ismene finally quits her badgering to put Antigone off her mission, she asks her to at least refrain from announcing her burial plans, but truculent Antigone, who reads in Ismene’s advice a disagreeable, mundane priority for self-preservation flummoxed with intimidation, rejoins with characteristic courage:

Ismene: Make sure you don’t reveal to anyone
what you intend. Keep it closely hidden.
I’ll do the same.
Antigone. No, no. Announce the fact—
If you don’t let everybody know,
I’ll despise your silence even more. (Johnston, 2007, p. 9)

Concerning her incisive rhetoric and sharp wit, Antigone engenders menacing discomposure in Creon, and, apart from their direct interlocation, is loathe to address him directly throughout her

speech, preferring to vent her tragic plight to the (choral) audience instead. Her penetrating, occasionally offensive, discourse on religious and ethical metaphysics bespeaks her adroitness as an astute debater who is in control of her rhetorical grounds, specifically insofar as her carefully measured words affect an audible resonance on the chorus of Thebans. The first polemical stratagem she resorts to is to publicly vet out the probity underlying Creon's decree, such that as he interrogates her about whether she heard of his edict, she counters by casting doubt on the concurrence of the gods, an issue she repeatedly reverts to in order to gain the spectators' support: "Zeus did not announce those laws to me./And Justice living with the gods below/sent no such laws up for men" (Johnston, 2007, p. 24). She further compares the foolhardiness of Creon's command against the sagacity of the respected Theban elders in order to sow seeds of discord between the two parties and gain the chorus' implicit, moral support: "However, for wise people I was right/to honour you" (Johnston, 2007, p. 46). On another occasion, she plaintively implores the chorus to ponder the conception of ethics and their need to find consecration in a religious matrix: "Which one [deity] can I invoke/to bring me help, when for my reverence/they charge me with impiety?" (Johnston, 2007, p. 47).

Antigone adeptly seconds the notion of seeking relational affinity between ethics and religion by stirring up the issue of patriotism. As she announces her personal pride in her city's "splendid chariots," she simultaneously announces her pride in her communal belonging to "my own city" (Johnston, 2007, p. 44), and to her fellow citizens: "Look at me, my native citizens,/as I go on my final journey" (Johnston, 2007, p. 42). She persists in her attempts to reinvoke patriotism in her choral confidantes, regarding them as members of her wider family circle who must tolerate one another and who do not take offense at each other's occasional verbal outbursts. The chorus, who consider her one of their own fold and refer to her as "child" (Johnston, 2007, p. 44), heartily like her and stand in her defence, as when they uncharacteristically urge Creon to rush after Antigone to save her at the end of the play: "Go now and get this done. Don't give the work/to other men to do" (Johnston, 2007, p. 56).

As for her bravery, Antigone never wanes in the face of adversity nor does she get intimidated by the waging of threats. To Creon's surprise, he realizes, though belatedly, that she is atypical, unlike other "furnow-" based (Wyckoff, 1977, p. 201), reticent women, and extreme in that she cannot be subdued with the typical menaces that usually produce tangible results. Ignorant of her mettle, as he strives to implement his failed tactic of initiating elephant-like, verbal mock-charges in order to instill fear in her, to his shock, she emerges out of the duel triumphant, brandishing her fanatical courage and rhetorical prowess, an occurrence that also indicates that their relationship is not a straightforward, antithetical one, as Segal (1986) claims.

Despite her defenselessness towards Creon's despotic, male agency, right from the commencement of her interlocution, her preemptive and terminal extremeness is glaringly conspicuous, indirectly abetting his plan to put an end to her life, as she unequivocally states: "Take me and kill me—what more do you want?" (Johnston, 2007, p. 26). When she is brought to his court, she waxes fearless and proud, as demonstrated by her stoic, insouciant admission about burying Polyneices, "I admit I did it, I won't deny that," which marks an unchangeable tone

through all her future verbal exchanges with Creon (Johnston, 2007, p. 23). In regard to his question on whether she had heard of his edict banning all Thebans from burying Polyneices' corpse, she stomps him by saying "I'd heard of it./How could I not? It was public knowledge" (Johnston, 2007, p. 24), leaving thenceforth little room for compromise. As the discussion takes a theological twist regarding the right of burial for the dead, her argument, unlike his, certainly emerges as warranted, triggering in time Creon's discursive rant, and underpinning the conflict as a gendered one: "Well, in this case,/if she gets her way and goes unpunished,/then she's the man here, not me" (Johnston, 2007, p. 25).

A close reading of *Antigone's* text reveals that the heroine's chief priority is to do the honor and "duty" her brother deserves, yet the challenges in achieving this sole obsession are numerous, including scholars who find in her burial quest a diversionary tactic for her suicidal tendency or for her incestuous desire for Polyneices. Although Antigone's allegation ruminating a subconscious death-wish certainly has corroboration in her own words, as Butler strongly advocates (2000, p. 2-3), yet it is only in this statement that she unequivocally expresses her suicidal wish: "When someone has to live the way I do,/surrounded by so many evil things,/how can she fail to find a benefit/in death?" (p. 24); however, the suicidality issue remains peripheral, not mainstream, as her sole, persistent preoccupation remains Polyneices' burial. Her awe-striking mettle reveals itself as she pursues her mission even against the mysterious, adversarial intent of certain (unknown) gods, impartial Thebans, her recalcitrant uncle, her treacherous sister, in addition to the added psychological pressure associated with the likely imperilment of the lives of persons she cares about such as Haemon, Ismene, and her would-have-been mother-in-law, Jocaste.

Although Antigone engages the chorus in heated, albeit dignified, tirades, she quickly pacifies their anger by appealing to the semi-sire, semi-kinship rapport she feels they share. At a climactic moment in the plot, the visual impact of her shrunk figure roughed, manhandled, and squeezed on all sides by chauvinistically complicit, physically superior *male* guards eager to drag her out of Creon's court en route to the sepulcher, is emotionally disturbing, as she tearfully remonstrates the travesty of justice. Her performatively suggestive appearance here draws warranted attention to the conflict being predicated on Antigone's femaleness, as Griffith remarks "[g]ender lies at the root of the problems of *Antigone*" (1999, p. 51). With moving emotions, purposeful performativity, and synchronized histrionics, she implores her Theban compatriots with a cry that exploits well their empathy, a cry that touches even the heart of Creon himself, who not long afterward, recants and runs after her in a belated attempt to save her, along with his son:

O city of my fathers
in this land of Thebes—
and my ancestral gods,
I am being led away.
No more delaying for me.
Look on me, you lords of Thebes,
the last survivor of your royal house,

see what I have to undergo,
the kind of men who do this to me,
for paying reverence to true piety. (Johnston, 2007, p. 48)

Even as she informs the audience of her apolitical, humanitarian mandate, respected scholars still mistake Antigone's as the aberrant actions of a distraught maniac who disrupts the quiet of an otherwise well-functioning city. Kirkwood, for instance, equates victim and victimizer and doubts the "goodness" of both Antigone and Creon (1991, p. 108). He further defends Creon's stance as a patriotic ruler whose decree was "politically acceptable" to the Greeks. But even as Antigone herself cautions against the hazard of falling into Creon's digressive trap by emphasizing the personal nature of his edict and that the law of the state is in its core his own, "he's no right to keep me from what's mine" (Johnston, 2007, p. 7), yet some scholars such as Dietz, for instance, prefer to envision the play principally as the showdown between a citizen and the state, a maverick citizen against the content public: "through her speech and her actions, she transforms a matter of private concern into a public issue" (1985, p. 29).

To exclude making an oversight, the suggestive, popular Freudian metaphysics that the play is the battleground of wills among two metaphorical patriarchs, one with a phallus and one castrated, are, like other notions that have no clear textual corroboration, an "inadequate model," too abstracted and somehow unbecoming to Antigone (Sojholm, 2004, p. xi). Irigary, for instance, supports the unorthodox view that Antigone is a "desexualized representative of the other of the same sex" (1993, p. 111), which in certain respects she is, and further expounds that Antigone is an inauthentic patriarch, the figment of the imagination of a chauvinistically minded, male author. Whether she is a castrated male vying for his territorial turf in disguise, whether she is egotistically out to "shame" her adversary (Lansky, 2015, p. 51), whether she is aware of her own physiological penile deficiency and the incapacitating impact such a shortcoming imposes on her (Josette, 1978, p. 3), or whether she is in pursuit of posthumous glory as the chorus contends (Johnston, 2007, p. 43), a rehistoricizing of her argument and her Greek paradigm reveal that she is solely keen on performing a simple, honorable deed towards her fallen brother.

Nor is she interested in shaming her uncle because as a woman she knows she cannot entertain an ambition, or have a credible opportunity, to assume the throne of Thebes (Lansky, p. 49). Had she had even a minor chance, she might have cast aspersions on Creon's absolutist claim to the throne, but she never does, keeping in mind that prior to Creon's edict and its subsequent rejection, there is no hint of a rift among the two sides, especially as one considers that Creon "was nurturing" his nieces in his household as child and adolescent dependents out of respect for his deceased sister (Johnston, 2007, p. 28), their mother Jocaste. Moreover, Antigone is least interested in mundane goals such as attaining posthumous glory because of her parents infamous history and due to her uncertainty on how the gods, who have a poor record with Labdacus' royal house, regard her and her sister, as she intimates to her sister: "do you have any sense of all the troubles Zeus keeps bringing on the two of us...?" (Johnston, 2007, p. 5).

The end of the tragedy where Creon is beheld forlorn and debilitated, unfit to rule after the demise of his wife and son didactically suggests the disastrous consequences of masculine autocracy. Indeed, the future of the city of Thebes is left uncertain after the unjust persecution of one of its innocent female citizens offers the audience an insight into the consequences of the miscarriage of justice. Like any person in a position of authority, Creon's flaws are compounded and bear a far-reaching impact, rendering him directly responsible for multiple deaths. His scandalous defeat is a classical-era defeat for all like-minded tyrants and a vivid reminder of the intended and unintended detriment of the misogynistic, male agency.

Antigone is a timeless, prominent exemplar of the justness of women's ceaseless struggle to gain selfhood and independence. As her tragic saga exemplifies, her dispute is chiefly structured on her identity as a woman. Realizing the enormously woeful predicament women were subject to amid his Greek community, the visionary Sophocles reverses in *Antigone* the traditional role of the disfranchised and dispossessed female by morally empowering her on theater so as to overcome man's hegemony, however minutely and imperfectly. Antigone's slaying allows her to be extolled as an immaculately innocent, young woman, condemned for implementing her religious conviction and private choice. *Antigone's* central idea hinges upon the unimpeded practice of a woman's intrinsic discretion over what ought to be a private, familial realm, not a public, state-controlled one (Dietz, 1985, p. 31). Although her legends' death is certainly a defeat for her own state as a mortal, it is a dramaturgical crux, for it is precisely due to her ultimate sacrifice that she shores up unconditional commiseration and enduring awe.

II. Shakespeare's Desdemona

Antigone's restless soul yearning for equality hovers over generations, but the dated, insipid struggle for freedom proceeds with more fallen heroines, victims to man's abuse, rage, and homicide. Her similar quest for recognition and justice carries through from Classical and Medieval times into the Renaissance where Shakespeare's Desdemona bears Antigone's torch to pursue womanhood's honorable battle for self-expression and social recognition.

Even after the passage of nearly two millennia after the Greek staging of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the similarities among the circumstances of the two iconic characters are remarkable. Languishing under the same patriarchal hegemony of a supposed chauvinistic protector, *Othello's* madame Desdemona similarly suffers the duress of muted existence, injustice, and misogyny. Both enjoy merits such as unspotted virtue, selfless sacrifice, and tested sincerity and do not betray any weakness in their resolve to carry out their missions, regardless of the adversity and handicap they encounter. Desdemona is a spiritual warrior whose crusade is to endure, temper, and reform the human weaknesses in her spouse's personality, albeit meeting no success in this undertaking.

As Christianity's foothold in England has been long established, religious dogma was manifested in everyday practice during Elizabethan England, keeping in mind life's precariousness under disease, violence, and religious strife. Shakespeare attempts to make Desdemona's behavior promote a religiously committed image of a married woman who is obedient, passive, and virtuous. The term "chattel" codified female bondage to male bravado, and, as it were, thralldom became a

holy lifestyle. The impact of Christian slavish dogma on indoctrinated Desdemona is apparent throughout her casting. Even in her first appearance on the stage, she reveals foremost to the audience her committed puritanical identity as she resolutely announces a significant development concerning the transfer of her custody from one patriarch to another, from father to husband: “here's my husband,/And so much duty as my mother show'd.../So much I challenge that I may profess/Due to the Moor my lord” (1.3.533-37).

With her incredulous, rock-bottom disesteem and thoroughgoing ego erasure, Desdemona certainly emblemizes Shakespeare’s archetypal preference for a married, Christian women whose slavery normative and self-effacement becoming. In this vein, she acquiesces to be dehumanized and to grovel on the floor before her master, in full view of statesmen and dignitaries. In response to Lodovico’s entreaty, her kinsman dispatched by the Duke from Venice to check on her welfare in Cyprus, to Othello to “call her back” after the latter slaps her and likely knocks her down on the floor, not only does Othello abstain from doing so but condescendingly gloats over Desdemona’s prostrate figure. In utter, sadistic contempt, he proclaims his gross dominance over his wifely slave as he martially orders her to “turn,” as though she were a puppet and he a ventriloquist: “And turn again; and she can weep, sir [to Lodovico], weep;/And she's obedient, as you say, obedient,/Very obedient. Proceed you in your tears [to Desdemona]” (4.1.273-77).

In appraisal of Desdemona’s persona, considering the devout nature of Elizabethans, she is in some measure, a true-life representation of the typical housewife, despite her slapping, abandonment, and excessive bullying by demented Othello, which is purposefully overstated for theatrical purposes. Her persona’s role as a Christian “warrior” is to help her husband shew off his demons and overcome his military and psychological insecurities, a calling she retains right to her last whispers: “Commend me to my lord. O, Farewell” (5.2.126), and beyond as she tries to take her last breaths. As Emilia queries her about who attempted to murder her, the half-conscious Desdemona remaining true to Christ’s forgiving idealism and to her husband’s honor by absolving him of her crime, she answers “Nobody; I myself. Farewell” (5.2.12).

Even after public humiliation, a range of physical and mental abuse, implicit threats on her life, dispersions to her honor, unwitting Desdemona remains passionately in love with Othello, as she confides to Emilia: “So would not I my love doth so approve him,/That even his stubbornness, his cheques, his frowns--/Prithee, unpin me,--have grace and favour in them” (4.3.20-2). Railing at the verisimilitude of her traditional Venetian “agency,” Boling points out this obvious fetishized weakness in her argument and harps on the connotation of “check”: “Is ‘check’ quite the word for being struck in the face and dashed to the ground before assembled dignitaries?” (2008, p. 3).

Desdemona’s religious puritanism and paradigmatic esotericism become clearer as she is juxtaposed with Emilia, where the schism between their worldviews is set at polar opposites. Desdemona reveals in their amicable chatter her religious drive, excessive idealism, and spotless virtue, while opportunistic Emilia gives herself off as harboring the same prerogative as Iago, her ambitiously villainous, expressly licentious husband. As the two discuss the daring issue of spousal infidelity, the discrepancy in their perspectives is colossal. In answer to Desdemona’s query on

whether Emilia would “abuse [her] husband” by “couching” with other men in secret, she jestingly quips: “EMILIA. Why, would not you?/DESDEMONA. No, by this heavenly light!/EMILIA. Nor I neither by this heavenly light;/I might do't as well i' the dark” (4.4.68-71).

In contrast to Emilia’s obvious wantonness, trusting Desdemona characteristically does measure up to her strait-laced, push-over image as she refrains from reciprocating Othello’s offenses and remains problematically docile in her beastly obedience. Well-bred not to “speak evil,” she cannot bring herself, though only initially, to even utter the word “bewhored,” which Emilia employs in reference to Othello’s treatment of her mistress (4.2.140). Desdemona also dismisses Othello’s persistent series of abuses against her honor and relegates them to some “unhatched,” state news from Venice that has befuddled his “clear spirit” (3.4.156, 159). Her trusting nature is further augmented in her reaction to Othello’s request to dismiss Emilia for the night and lie in her boudoir on her own, to which she and Emilia react remarkably differently: “Emilia. I would you had never seen him/Desdemona. So would not I my love so doth approve of him” (4.3.19-20). Although one should certainly be mindful of her immature, upper-class circumstance and her strong crush on Othello, one begins to clearly identify Desdemona’s overtrusting naivete as she disregards Othello’s eerie request. Instead of questioning his intent, she fulfills it and seems to awkwardly prognosticate her demise as she recites Barbara’s anecdote, her mother’s maid who dies broken-hearted after loving a demented man (4.3.27-34).

As a creation of Shakespeare’s dramaturgy, Desdemona’s docile and slavish character is fashioned so as to be an open target that accommodates the most abject abuse possible. Whether she is a true-life representation of a wide segment of Renaissance housewives or the product of her author’s overstated fancy, she does offer invaluable evidence regarding the intensity of Renaissance misogyny. As authorially conceived, her obsequy to her lord-husband leaves her prey to his sadism and abet his neurosis so much so that he escalates his abuse until it culminates in her murder. As she continually ignores Othello’s earlier inklings regarding his murderous designs, she fulfills Shakespeare’s conception of her as an honest, virtuous, and dull wife who dies a martyr’s death while trying to perform her religious duty in loving, honoring, and aiding her husband. It is precisely for her physical surrender, emotional immaturity, and psychological plainness that Desdemona is inspiring for being staunchly committed to her matrimonial cause, even as she suffers death for it.

III. Behn’s Erminia

Shifting from the Renaissance to the Restoration, extant literature informs of women lacking freedom of expression and denial of fundamental rights. Wretched and wronged stock characters with a heavy heart and disaffected existence such as that of Antigone with her lonesome outcry, “Without lament, without a friend,/and with no marriage song, I’m being led/in this miserable state, along my final road” (Johnston, 2007, p. 45), and that of Desdemona with her spirit-stifled, hapless deportment pining on her willow tree, dying innocent and guiltless, are replicated throughout the literary canon until the advent of the Restoration with its newly found freedoms.

Behn's iconic role as the first commercially successful, female playwright living in Renaissance England chronicles a key milestone in woman enfranchisement. For the first time in the history of England, female authors and actresses were allowed a vista for self-expression and self-determination in the wake of perhaps the most politically unstable period in British history which saw the execution of a king, the country transformed into a republic, and the reinstatement of the monarchy in 1660. The Royal Proclamation in 1662 banning men from acting in women's roles heralded a turning point for female expression and immensely aided Behn's cause. The novelty of Behn's young actresses appearing on the English stage voicing their concerns from their own feminine perspective enhanced the credibility of their plaint. No longer were female issues performed through proxy. Instead, women, possibly for the first time in history, did vent their emotions to the audience directly, without intermediaries.

Irrespective of the notoriety in Behn's personal approach to life and her political expediency which most critics often tout, one ought not lose track of her pioneering achievement in changing the public perception of women as authors, actresses, partners, etc. Lamentably, Behn's canon is replete with opprobrious criticism related to sexual opportunism and political expediency in her personal approach. In reference to *TFM*, for instance, both Gallagher and Hayden agree on Behn's masked prologue-woman representing a prostitute. While Gallagher identifies Behn with her character as an "author-whore" (Gallagher, 1998, p. 24), Hayden seconds this view arguing that she "associate[s] herself with the prostitute in the prologue" (Hayden, 2010, p. 59). Gallagher goes on to claim that Behn's legacy is a negative one, and that it had haunted rather than inspired generations of female authors. However, even though Virginia Woolf is similarly censorious of Behn's private-life choices, she credits her with being one of "those solitary great ladies who wrote without audience or criticism, for their own delight alone" (Woolf, 1984, p. 61).

Aside from the unfavorable canonical perceptions of Behn's prologue woman, there is no textual evidence that expressly supports the idea that she is a bona fide prostitute, keeping in mind that the play was Behn's first, produced in 1670, in which she exercises utmost conservatism, even monotonous circumspection, lest she offend audience sensibilities. Her precautionary vigilance is especially felt when *TFM* is compared, for instance, to *The Feign'd Curtizan* (1669), whose daring title is suggestive of conventionalizing the career of prostitutes, but is nine years older in maturity--and in evolving boldness--or *The Rover* (1667), which dwells on women's sexual equality and sexual liberty for both genders.

Upon close scrutiny of the epilogue of *The Forc'd Marriage*, an impartial reader notices that the text begs to be read otherwise, for its own art's sake, because even though Hayden is persuasive in pointing out the possible sexual metaphor implied in the words of the woman "The trial though, will recompense the pain,/It having wisely taught us how to reign" (Epilog, 5-6), such implicitness, if caught, does not in essence constitute obscene injury to public decency. In point of fact, the prologue-woman articulately counterpoises these allegedly condemning words by demonstrating that her chief preoccupation in her terse speech is gender parity and interchangeable respect based on appreciation of women's "beauty" and men's "wit." She concludes by stating that if there are

mishaps, both genders are culpable, since such wrongdoing had been didactically instructed by indulgent men.

It is by you that we possess that Throne,
Where had we Victors been, w'...d reign'd alone.
And we have promis'd what we could not ...o,
A fault, methinks, might be forgiven too,
Since 'tis but what we learne of some of you.
But we are upon equal treatment y...,
For neither Conquer, since we both submit;
You, to our *Beauty*, bow; We to your Wit. (10-16)

Erminia, Behn's ungovernable and sublime *TFM* lady protagonist, sets the tone for the new generation of Restoration women to follow. She is a natural, for without any conscious effort on her part she commands men's respect and is freely dispensed abundant esteem, enough to kneel a crown Prince and regent whose succession to the throne, as his father makes known, is imminent (1.1.64-66). Behn privileges Erminia with special attributes such as, for instance, bewitching prince Philander into complete surrender by kneeling to her twice.

The first time the Prince kneels is when he develops an excessive desire to convince Erminia of his sincere love, so as the curtain of Act 4, sc. 4 opens, he "falls at her feet on his knees," and stays clinging on to them. Erminia makes a half-hearted attempt to alert him to his unbecoming posture, but as he is ensconced in his erotic squat, which is reminiscent of a Freudian infant heaped at the feet of its maternal figure, expressing its Oedipal attachment, he ignores her tepid remonstrance, and begs her instead to stay a while longer, until he tests her patience: "Er. Rise Sir, this posture would become me better./Phi. Permit me dear *Erminia*—to remain thus./'Tis only by these signs I can express/What my confusion will not let me utter" (4.4.4-7). The second time the prince kneels he is cut short from making it as drawn-out through Alcander's intervening knock without the "gallery" (4.9.38). (Interestingly, there are a total of nine genuflections by both genders in the play and a mention of twelve.) Undoubtedly, Behn's socio-political message behind the prince's kneeling to Restoration audiences is to communicate that this female-endearing, romantic gesture is successful in winning the heart of her lady protagonist and is appealing to all women in society.

Among Erminia's other giftedness, as bestowed upon her by Behn, is the power to alter destiny and defy mortality. Putting into practice this supernatural trait, Erminia, unlike star-crossed Desdemona, is resurrected to life in order to rectify-through-gentle-haunting the ways of men, after many characters visibly ascertain that she is fast dead on her marriage bed. When Alcippus slays her, he feels confident that she is "so still and tame," so does Pisaro who notices that she is "dead, and pale," and Falatio who confirms to Philander that she is "in a gay humor; but stone dead, and cold" (4.4.77; 4.6.89; 4.7.18); however, miraculously she is given another lease on life in order to achieve her corrective, disciplinary mission. Viewed as such, Erminia is romanticized, so that at one time she appears fairy-like with her "exceeding beauty" and at another angelic and winged as

she “glides” past the awestruck prince who is under the assumption that it is her dead spirit (4.9.48). Only a dotting man amorously hanging on her every word or deed is fortunate enough to lure her to rest in his nest. In this context, Aminta’s words articulate best what coy Erminia cannot: “It will not take with me, I love a man,/Can kneel, and swear, and cry, and look submiss,/As if he meant indeed to die my slave (2.2.43-6).

Erminia’s other celestial, transformative function relates to her redemptive and rehabilitative impact. Fitted in “thin Tiffany [possibly of white, transparent gauz]” (4.8.13), and “drest like an Angel with wings” (5.2.1), she threatens Alcippus in “a tone like a spirit” not to “disobey,” under the fear of remaining “in endless torments” (5.2.42; 5.2.63; 5.2.64; 5.2.65). After a protracted, epiphanic episode that is punctuated by various personified gods making appearance and climaxed by Fortune and Cupid, who usually “ne’re agree” becoming friends, Erminia advises Alcippus that the gods are in agreement and have decided that she “never could have been thy wife” (5.2.109). As the attention-grabbing, airborne Gallatea “goes over the Stage as a spirit” (5.2.97), lovely for Alcippus to ogle, Erminia half-menacingly, half-coaxingly advises him to reciprocate Gallatea’s passion because “tis she you must possess,/Tis she must make your happiness” (5.2.99-100). She further exhorts that he needs to accept his destiny, and to “obey what they [the gods] command” (5.2.132).

For his part, Alcippus who believes he is in a dream deems the winged, angel-like image of Erminia before him a “deified” version of the wife he had murdered (5.2.71). Due to the fact that he already had been in a contrite, teary-eyed state, enough to “swell a little tide” over his (attempted) murder (5.1.4), and due to Erminia’s reminder that his other alternative should he refuse the gods’ will is to be in a “grave,” he does not pose any resistance (5.2.120). Her haunting and counseling leads him to reflect on his crime, to realize that he has performed “unheard of injuries” (5.5.143), and to discern that his matrimonial future lies with Princess Gallatea; hence, his reformation is comprehensively undertaken. As Prince Philander later forgives him and offers him his sister in marriage, Alcippus confides that Erminia was never meant to be his wife: “But *I* protest before the Gods and you,/Did she still live, and *I* might still possess her,/I would refuse it” (5.5.160-2). In a symbolic, conclusive gesture in which penitent Alcippus acknowledges women’s privileged role towards the end of the play, he kneels to Erminia and refuses to get up until she had forgiven him. Imperially and grandiloquently, the unofficial, new queen proclaims Alcippus forgiven with the royal cliché “rise,” giving affirmation to her new, queenly image as a young, Restoration first lady with a peace-promoting, ruling agenda (5.5.189).

With her timely intervention, Emilia has a peace-embracing, blood-preserving function that she performs. As Alcippus suddenly returns to his residence in Act 2, Sc. 8, he discovers the prince embracing his wife. In a mixed pall of stupefaction, shock at the hypothetical infidelity that the scene engenders, after a brief, fiery exchange, they charge upon one another: as Alcippus is wounded and thrown to the ground, Erminia steps in and pleads to her lover-prince not to kill her unconsummated, contractual husband. As Philander heeds her request, he submissively utters: “Life of my soul, retire,/I cannot hear that voice and disobey” (2.7.68-9).

Cocksure and uncompromising, Behn's women reveal a deep sense of self-worth as though they are endowed with a magical wand that alters everything in its path, creating a utopian abode that espouses a proclivity for peacefulness (as opposed to the hitherto, man-based, Puritan-secularist war legacy), reciprocal love, mutual respect, and, more significantly, gender equality. Her women are defiantly uncompromising over choosing charming spouses who are ready to make compromises under love's auspices as equal partners, not as chauvinistic "lords" whose lifelong objective is to have their well-domesticated chattel serve and slave. Just as Erminia has the power to enchant, haunt, redeem, and rule, domineering Aminta similarly teases and taunts Alcander into acceding to be her "slave," while Princess Gallatea openly reveals her crush on Alcippus and presses to utilize the assistance of intermediaries until she is granted what she desires and is married to Alcippus. Behn, consequently builds her egalitarian, feminine haven in *TFM* where the archetypal image of a gentlemanly, courteous suitor is rewarded with being a companionate spouse.

Despite the immense progress in women's rights taking place during the Restoration, Behn's young women did not live in an egalitarian haven of financial prosperity and social and legal parity. For one, the acceptance of a heterosexual marriage mantra as the only condoned form for human cohabitation is a reductive generalization of the multifarious human spirit and its varying preferences. Moreover, the fallacious, classical concept of the chain of beings where the King, the symbolic personage privy to commence and end the play, towers at the summit is a trivial, masculine invention that aims for the continued empowerment of man. Even though the quest for recognition and parity with men during the Restoration is significantly better than the murder-based, disaster-associated consequences of earlier eras, yet the same fundamental quest for parity remains in place, even for present-day women.

IV. Conclusion

Antigone, Desdemona, and Erminia, three memorable, young women living in culturally, religiously, and socially divergent historical epochs, take on the arduous task of altering the stereotypical image their societies place on them with various degrees of success, a success that is not merely gauged by the extent to which they are able to make a transformation in their perception of their chauvinistic societies, but by their ability to maintain their own souls, with their virtue and ethics intact. As their misogynistic patriarchs succeed in ending their lives, their voices are not muted. Their succumbing to a guiltless death serves to underscore the cruel barbarism of the masculine agency as well as buttress their struggle for self-recognition and public appreciation with an enormous boost. Despite their selfless, chivalric deeds, their spectacles negotiating their rights to survive, whether vicariously through the audience as in Antigone's case, or directly as Desdemona pleads with Othello to let her live are stubbornly dismissed. Their final emotionally-intense moments as Antigone is dwarfed and shoved around among several giant male guards surrounding her on all sides and as Desdemona is helplessly cornered and suffocated by Othello, the mighty war legend, are histrionically and masterfully illustrated on the stage in order to give manifestation to man's sadism and depravity. The absolute abjectness and misery the heroines were subjected to, despite the expansive historical eras that separate them, serve as a reminder of the enduring history of misogyny.

Antigone's and Desdemona's unique virtues are further brought to prominence as one compares them to their companions. The difference in Antigone's ethical frame of reference and worldview, for instance, could not be at further remove from Ismene's. As the paradigmatic chasm between them rapidly widens, Antigone develops an aversion towards her sister so powerful that in a fit of anger she suspends her sororal bond as she discerns Ismene's narcissism, cowardice, and withdrawal from the familial obligation of burying their fallen brother. Consequent to her rant, Antigone ventures alone in the dark and in stormy weather to where her brother's corpse is littered, shews off the wild beasts that are devouring it and buries him. In doing so, Antigone's mythological iconicity triumphs, overshadowing all other extraneous accusations waged against her. Likewise, Desdemona's Christian upbringing and ideological backdrop compel her to follow a different moral code and spiritual framework from those of her maid and confidante, Emilia. Desdemona, who cannot even bring herself to think like Emilia does, let alone use the same terminology that Emilia uses as she shudders, though only initially, at the mention of "bewhored" is vastly different. Her virtue, innocence, and inability to envision evil scheming make her imperceptive of Emilia's venal lifestyle, Othello's diabolic plotting and the reason for this prompting, and even Iago's villainy against her family.

Finally, the qualified success of Erminia as she prevents bloodshed between her husband and her lover, Alcippus and Philander, reforms and counsels her contractual husband into falling in love with Gallatea, and assumes the most prestigious, royal seat in the country as a would-be queen through her imminent marriage with Prince Philander are an appropriate Restoration reward, according to Behn, for womankind after having waited through history for such empowerment. But it is a qualified success since Erminia, along with all other women in the play, has no room to question her choice of matrimonial bondage to men. Similarly, other women in the play such as Princess Gallatea who in certain respects is iconoclastic for publicly revealing her passion towards Alcippus and for vigorously and unabashedly pursuing it until she wins his love back. Aminta, the most outspoken and critical of all women in TFM, sets her list of demands for Alcander including ending his relationships with other women before she agrees to his marriage proposal. Her bossy, domineering nature, which clearly indicates that she has the upper hand in their relationship, keeps her only mildly satisfied with her suitor who kneels and accedes to being her slave.

While Erminia is made glorious for one dramatic moment that is a shy, inchoate half-step in women's historical endeavor to achieve some semblance of parity within the monolithic, masculine agency, as a minority group, Antigone, Desdemona, and Erminia remind us of the continued campaign for gender equality, personal choice, and social recognition. They carve out an indelible niche in our public psyche for the iconic roles they emblemize and the daunting tasks they assume.

About the author

Ibrahim Alhiyari earned his Ph.D. from Texas Tech University, Texas, USA, in Spring 2006. His Research interests include Renaissance and Classical literatures, with special focus on Thomas Watson's biography. Currently teaching at Gulf University for Science and Technology, Meshref, Kuwait. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7960-395X>

References

- Behn, A. (2003). *The forc'd marriage or the jealous bridegroom, A tragi-comedy, as it is acted at his highnesse the duke of Yorks theater*. Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership. doi. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A27294.0001.001>.
- Boling, R. J. (2008). Desdemona's Venetian agency. *Philological Review*, (34)1, 3.
- Butler, J. (2000). *Antigone's claim: Kinship between life and death*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Clifford, D. (1995). The Abject: Kristeva and the Antigone. *Paroles Gelees*, 13(1), 7.
- Dietz, M. G. (1985). Citizenship with a feminist Face: The problem with maternal thinking. *Political Theory*, 13(1).
- Gallagher, K. (1998). Who was that masked woman? The prostitute and the playwright in the comedies of Aphra Behn. *Women's Studies*, 15, 23-42.
- Griffith, M. (1999). *Sophocles, Antigone*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hayden, J. A. (2010). *Of love and war: The political voice in the early plays of Aphra Behn*. Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V.
- Heidegger, M. (1959). *An introduction to metaphysics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Holmer, J. O. (2005). Desdemona, woman warrior: "O these men, these men!" *Medieval Land Renaissance Drama in England*, 17, 132-170.
- Irigary, L. (1993). *Sexes and genealogies*. Gill, G. C., trans. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Johnston, I. (2007). *Sophocles: Antigone*. Arlington: Richer Resources Publications. Doi: <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/sophocles/antigonertf.rtf>
- Johnston, S. I. (2006). Antigone's other choice. *Helios*, 33.
- Josette, F., Jardin, A. & Gora, T. (1978). [Review of *Antigone or the Irony of the Tribe*]. *Diacritics*, 8(3), 2-14.
- Kirkwood, G. M. (1991). Order and disorder in Sophocles' *Antigone*. *Illinois Classical Studies*, 1/2(16).
- Lacan, J. (1992). The seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*. Jacques-Alain Miller, editor, Dennis Porter, trans. Travestock: Routledge Norton.
- Lansky, M. R. (2015). The escalation of conflict in Sophocles' *Antigone*. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 35(1).
- Segal, C. (1986). *Interpreting Greek tragedy: Myth, poetry, text*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1997). *The Arden Shakespeare: Othello*. Honigman, E. A. J., editor London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

- Söderbäck, F. (2010). [Introduction]. In *Feminist readings of Antigone. Series in Gender Theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sojholm, C. (2004). [Introduction]. In *The Antigone complex: Ethics of the invention of feminine desire. Cultural Memory in the Present*, Bal, M. and de Vries, H., editors. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Strauss, J. (2013). *Private lives, public deaths: Antigone and the invention of individuality*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Woolf, V. (1984). *A room of one's own and three guineas*, London: Chatto and Windus, 61.
- Wyckoff, E. (1977). Antigone. *The complete Greek tragedies*. David Grene and David Lattimore, eds. Pennsylvania State University: Pocket Books, 161-209.