Introduction

This play was written around 1604, after Shakespeare had been writing professionally for about 12 – 14 years. It came at a time when he was at the height of his powers as a dramatist. He had written the great romantic comedies, like Much Ado about Nothing and Twelfth Night; he had finished his ground-breaking tragedies of Julius Caesar and Hamlet. He was writing these plays for his own acting company, The King’s Men, in which he was a major partner; he was performing these plays in his own playhouse, the Globe. We know this play was written specifically for his partner, Burbage, to play the leading part of either Othello or Iago; he knew exactly who would play which part as he composed the plays.

There were some events taking place Shakespeare’s society at that time that had some effect on the composition, including the death of Queen Elizabeth the previous year. King James of Scotland came south to assume the throne. He began his reign with great promise. He was an intellectual, an author of books on government and witchcraft. He had a family with heirs who promised a change from the problems of succession which had plagued the Tudors’ dynasty. And he was a fresh presence on the throne after Elizabeth’s long control of the state. James would turn out to be something of a disappointment, lacking Elizabeth’s flair and political smarts. However, this play was written early in his reign while Shakespeare and his partners were still seeking royal approval after having just been named the King’s Men, the official acting company of the court. Italy at this time was a collection of often hostile and competing city states, and that political conflict was a factor in the composition of the play.

We know the play was a great success in Shakespeare’s time, since it was published as a separate edition in quarto format, a sign that there was sufficient interest in the play with the general public to male its publication financially feasible. Over the centuries the play has remained consistently popular and is considered one of the top three Shakespearean tragedies, along with Hamlet and King Lear. Professional actors have always been attracted by the roles of the hero, Othello, or the arch-villain, Iago. Both are fascinating challenges of characters. In our time Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir Anthony Hopkins have both starred in film versions, and Kenneth Branagh, another Shakespearean heavy-weight, played Iago in a recent film of the play. The play is one of Shakespeare’s most intense tragedies; the action is very focused on the single plot line, unlike both Lear and Hamlet which have substantial sub-plots. Secondly there is very little in the way of comic relief; in a tragedy like Macbeth there are places where Shakespeare deliberately lowers the emotional tension with comic interludes. Here there is no place for the audience to step back and recharge their emotional batteries. Third, there are so few principal characters; in a tragedy like Anthony and Cleopatra there are about 40 different characters, but here we have all this tragic intensity focused primarily on Othello, Iago and Desdemona. A fourth aspect which sets it apart from other tragedies is that it has been referred to as Shakespeare’s “domestic tragedy.” It is one of only two tragedies that do not operate at a very high social or political level; this is not a play about the fate of kings and queens but rather the lives of a husband and wife and a business associate. It is about the lives of people who are like us. We have all suffered from jealousy and petty manipulation; in some sense we could find ourselves in the same situation as Othello or Desdemona. Fifth, the evil of Iago is made up of a lot of small, ordinary badness; we have acted like Iago at one time or another. Probably we have not been as spectacularly evil as Iago is, but we can understand how he accomplishes what he does.

There is a story about Iago’s evil in performance during the 19th Century that illustrates how we relate to it. In a mining camp during the Gold Rush a touring company performed the play. During the performance, one miner became more and more agitated by the events of the play, calling out to Othello not to trust that “polecat Iago.” Finally the miner could take it no longer and pulled out a six-shooter and shot Iago. I like to think that the actor died with a sense of satisfaction having performed the ultimately believable Iago. This story is an illustration of how people have been moved by the play.

The tragedy is also powerful because it follows the classical unities of ancient Greek drama. According to Aristotle, Greek tragedy was characterized by a unity of action, which I’ve already explained in the focus on a single plot line. It had a unity of place; Othello begins in Venice, but once the action gets going in the last four acts, everything takes place in the same locale in Cyprus. Finally it has a unity of time; Greek tragedy supposedly took place in a 24-hour period, something that Othello comes close to doing. We can see how close this tragedy comes to those unities by contrast with Shakespeare’s other dramas, such as Antony and Cleopatra, which skips all over the ancient world, or The Winter’s Tale, which takes place over a 16 year period.

Shakespeare’s audience had some very strong beliefs about Italian society and culture, and the play is based on a number of assumptions about these perceptions. It was a place of both attraction and revulsion. It was associated with the greatest achievements in art, music and literature in the Renaissance, the culturally dominant country in Europe. At the same time, with its long history of conflict and violence throughout this period, Italy was associated with the worst excesses of humankind. When English folks thought of Italian political leaders, they thought of the Borgias, a wonderful family whose patriarch bought the Papacy for himself and celebrated with an orgy for daughter and guests, after which they watched the public execution of prisoners for entertainment. The English would conjure up Machiavelli, the first modern political scientist, who advised leaders to be absolutely amoral in gaining and holding power. The De Medici family represented both the achievement of greatness in encouraging art and the excesses of political intrigue. To the English much of the violence of Italy was wrapped up in subterfuge and betrayal; Machiavelli catalogued successful coups where winners had used plots and violence to seize power. Englishmen associated Italy with poison; in fact, an essay written around this time warned that if readers had any enemies, they should avoid seeing a doctor trained in Italy, lest they end up dying suddenly under mysterious circumstances, done in by one of the ingenious Italian poisons administered in a particularly fiendish manner. Italians were believed to be prone to emotional excesses; it was a place of hot summers, so that Romeo and Juliet, who allowed their passions to get out of control, were seen as typical teenagers of that country. Italy meant violence, emotional excess and subterfuge. Nevertheless, English audiences were endlessly fascinated with Italy, and so it’s no accident that almost half of Shakespeare’s plays are set in ancient or contemporary Italy.

Venice occupied a special place in the image of Italy. It was considered a “hot spot,’ an intellectual center; at the same time Shakespeare was writing his plays, Galileo, one of the first modern scientific thinkers, was doing some of his early work in Venice. Venice was a cosmopolitan center, attracting different peoples from the Mediterranean area; a major Jewish settlement was located in Venice on the island called ghetto. Black Africans and Arab traders and Turkish envoys would have been common sights in Venice. To the English who lived provincial lives on a little island on the fringes of Europe, Venice’s cultural diversity must have been both fascinating as well as scary. It may have been like someone from Des Moines, Iowa contemplating San Francisco or New York as a vacation destination. Venice was a business capital. There was no nation of Italy, only a number of competing city states, of which Venice had the most extensive trade routes, especially with Asia Minor and North Africa, with trading outposts throughout the area. It competed with the Turks for control of trade. Finally, as an exciting intellectual and commercial center, Venice was associated with blatant sexuality. It was the New York of the Italian peninsula as well as the Las Vegas. An account published in England at this time referred to a population of some “20,000 courtesans,” and that didn’t include all the cheap streetwalkers. Even allowing for exaggeration, that 20,000 figure represents a significant portion of the population of the city at that time. At least that was the popular perception.

Another aspect of Italian culture that you need to understand to make sense of this play was the tradition of the courtly gentleman. I discuss this cultural phenomenon in almost all the plays I cover. Throughout the Renaissance, beginning in Italy and spreading to France, Spain, Germany and England, a code of idealized behavior for gentlemen and gentlewomen spread. It was behavior first associated with people at the court, surrounding the monarch. It’s easier to understand this code of behavior by considering how conditions changed from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. In the Middle Ages all a local ruler needed was a bunch of men skilled at various weapons and military strategy; most of the relations among kingdoms were based on war. In the Renaissance, as the modern state began to take shape and relations among countries became more complex, a good ruler needed more than just soldiers; he needed someone skilled at Latin, which had become a kind of universal language. He needed a good diplomat or governmental administrator to head up fledgling bureaucracies. He also needed people around him who looked good in social situations, who were pleasant dinner companions, could dance or play a musical instrument, and could charm visitors. These skills extended to the upper reaches of the church hierarchy, where you needed more than just holiness to be successful in the religious arena. Out of this need for a multi-skilled “Renaissance Man” (we still use this phrase to identify a well-rounded individual) grew the code of the courtly gentleman or courtier. This person internalized this code of idealized behavior so that whoever he served, he would have the necessary skills. This code was generalized out to include all people who considered themselves gentlemen or gentlewomen. The code expressed itself most obviously in external behavior – etiquette and manners and social ritual – but was based on more intangible attitudes and values. The Italian writer Castiglione in The Book of the Courtier defined these skills and talked about the problems of fallible humans living up to an ideal. Originally being a “gentleman” was confined to members of the nobility, the root word of gentle referring to the lower nobility or gentry. Such people were said to have gentility, what we today would refer to as being genteel. You were a gentleman because of your birth, but also because of how you had been educated. In the play As You Like It a character is born in the right social class but does not know how to act as a gentleman because he has not been trained. There were two absolute requirements for all gentlemen and gentle ladies. 1.) Your skills were judged by others in your ability to play at the game of love, regardless of your age. You had to be able to engage in flirtation, to be skilled at banter and being pleasing to members of the opposite sex – a social ease that went back to the days of the cult of courtly love in the medieval nobility. 2.) Your personal honor was the most important possession which you had and it had to be protected at all costs. The code of the courtly gentlemen was absolutely rigid when it came to personal honor, so the fallible humans who tried to live up to the ideal were always finding themselves in situations where their personal honor had to be satisfied, sometimes by a duel to the death.

A fourth assumption that lies behind the play has to do with the fact that Othello is a black man in a society of white people. Elizabethans had a very curious attitude toward people from Africa. In our view Africa below the Sahara Desert was a land long isolated from the rest of the world, until the age of exploration. We assume that Europeans and Africans had had no contact until the Portuguese sailed down the coast of Africa trying to reach the Indies. Actually there had been prolonged contact going back at least to the time of Hannibal who attacked ancient Rome with elephants that came from below the Sahara. There had been a flourishing trade across the desert in gold and ivory for centuries. Then with the rise of Islam, there was a religious connection between the peoples of Africa on both sides of the Sahara up into Europe. (One of the ruling houses of Spain had come originally from Dakar in West Africa.) In the play Othello is referred to as a “Moor.” There has been a lot of speculation about what that meant, but it is clear from references to his color and other physical characteristics that he is a man from below the Sahara who has come a long way to work for a city state in northern Italy. There were black Africans in Italy and even a few in England at the time this play was written.

Englishmen had had little or no direct contact with black people until the first trade expeditions sailed south along the coast of West Africa in the 1540’s, about 60 years before the play was written. Throughout the 1500’s the isolated English suffer extreme cultural shock as their expeditions came in contact with people very different from themselves – first in the New World, then Africa and then the Far East. When the English explorers came in contact with these strangers, they tended to emphasize their physical and cultural differences. At one point in the play Othello even acknowledges the way Europeans are fascinated by the strange sights and customs they assume exist elsewhere in the world. These perceived differences, however, would form the basis for prejudice and hatred. (Much of this background comes from the work of a noted American historian, Winthrop Jordan, who wrote in the 1960’s an important work of intellectual history called White Over Black, a study of the development of racial attitudes among the English-speaking peoples of the world.) When the first Englishman saw the first black African, he was predisposed to view this stranger negatively because of his color. Englishmen, indeed most Europeans, inherited a suspicion about “black” because the Devil and all his legions of demons were pictured for centuries as being black and associated with the night. The Englishmen naturally referred to these Africans, just as they had the Natives Americans they met 50 years earlier, as “devils.” This simple moral equation was understandable, given the limitations of the people who were on those first expeditions; they were hardly scientists or anthropologists. One of the ironies is that among the people of West Africa “white” was a color associated with bones and death, so they saw these pale-skinned strangers as figures of death.

This physical difference was emphasized by another noticeable difference – these were people of a very different religion. For an Englishman at that time, his religion was an essential part of his existence. He had never come in contact with people who worshipped so many different gods in so many different ways. Jordan points out that Englishmen for the first century after contact habitually referred to these new peoples of Africa and the New World as “heathens,” emphasizing that religious differences were the most important thing about them. They were devils, not just because of the dark skins, but because of their bizarre religious beliefs.

Another thing that emphasized difference was the fact that people in equatorial Africa wore fewer clothes than the European explorers. Naturally, if you lived in the tropics you would not go around bundled up as Northern Europeans did. The Africans had very different attitudes toward nudity and sexual activities, and the explorers, who were hardly sophisticated observers, reacted to these differences and what they implied about these strange people. The English assumed that these black, naked people had sex all the time and with anyone or anything.

At the same time the English discovered dark people, they also discovered the great apes, the orangutans of the Southeast Asia, the chimpanzees and the gorillas of Africa. These primates were obviously humanlike in many respects, and the early travelers made the assumption that these creatures must have been the result of sex between those horny black people and the animals, primarily monkeys, which surrounded them. This strange piece of folklore did not stand up to scrutiny, but it does help explain why in the minds of some Englishmen, there was the possibility that Africans engaged in bestiality, the sexual union of humans and animals.

Another piece of folklore which grew up was that people who lived around the equator were dark because they lived close to the sun. If they were transported to Northern Europe, they would soon lose their skin color. When this did not prove to be the case, another piece of mythology was busted. These physical differences were accepted if not fully understood, but the cultural differences continued to perplex Europeans. For example, Winthrop Jordan shows that for the first century of slavery in the English colonies, slaves were routinely referred to as heathens, suggesting that the religious differences loomed large. Because the slaves were identified as being non-Christians, the first missionary efforts among the people of African descent caused great consternation. Was it possible for people who were practicing Christians to continue to be held as slaves?

Othello tells us that at one point he had been held as a slave, among his many adventures. In this period slavery was common in Africa and parts of Europe, where prisoners of war or poor people who had sold themselves into servitude were held as slaves. However, there was no assumption that black people were destined to be held as slaves for ever; the first slave ship from Africa did not reach the Jamestown colony in Virginia until 1617, more than 10 years after this play was written. In that regard this play is an important historical document, helping us see something about attitudes before the institution of racial slavery. These attitudes would be reinforced by slavery and come to form the basis for what we call racism. All the negative folklore and prejudices referred to thus far – emphasis on color differences; blackness associated with the devil; sexual promiscuity; bestiality – are all expressed by Iago in the play!

While the question of Othello’s race tends to dominate the attention of modern audiences, there are a number of other issues which the play raises. Shakespeare took the story of Othello’s love for Desdemona, his jealousy of her and his eventual murder of his wife from a story written around 1550 by an Italian writer named Cinthio. Shakespeare found it a pretty ordinary story of human lust and crime. In the original Iago had sought to seduce the wife of General Othello and she rejected him but did not tell her husband about his subordinate’s inappropriate behavior. Enraged that she has rebuffed him, Iago vows revenge by plotting her murder with her husband’s unwitting complicity. Iago casts suspicion on a newly advanced officer, Othello’s best friend, and uses Othello’s natural jealousy to bring about Desdemona’s murder. In the end Iago and Othello beat her to death with a sock filled with sand and then pull down part of the house on her body to try and cover up the murder. The crime is discovered, and Othello, after being found guilty of his wife’s murder, is killed by her relatives. In Cintho’s original, it is a straight-forward story of jealousy and revenge, and Iago’s motives are understandable. In his work Shakespeare changes Iago’s motivation subtly but significantly. The first problem of the play is this: What makes Iago undertake the destruction of five other people, not counting his own self-destruction? He will destroy Cassio, Desdemona, Roderigo, his wife Emilia and Othello. In an age of serial killers and mindless video violence, this may not seem like much, but we really feel this violence first hand in the play. People throughout the centuries have been fascinated by this question of what drives Iago. In one of the first essays of modern literary criticism, Samuel Coleridge said Iago had a “motiveless malignity.” For me it is not a lack of motive but rather a number of different motives which seem to change all the time. At first Iago is angry over not getting a promotion. Then we have the more telling motive that Iago believes Othello had sex with his wife. Then he thinks Cassio had sex with his wife. Later he says that Cassio may reveal his plot to Othello, plus he has “a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly.” Finally he seems to commit evil acts for sheer enjoyment. Given what he sets out to do, why does the murder of Desdemona become so important to Iago? The fate of Desdemona is not part of Iago’s original plan, but as the intrigue grows, her death at the hands of her husband becomes the centerpiece of what he accomplishes.

The second question posed by the play is what causes Othello’s fall? Why does he succumb to Iago’s manipulation? The simple-minded explanation is that Othello is the epitome of the jealous husband, like the dupe in Cintho’s story. But this is not entirely the case. Othello resists Iago’s initial efforts to make him jealous and is not easily won over. Another explanation that is offered is that Othello is not very bright and is easily tricked. But this ignores the reality that everyone in the play is at one time or another fooled by Iago, regardless of their social standing or education: he is Desdemona’s advisor, helps Cassio with his professional problems and fools his wife, Emilia; even the authorities from Venice seek out Iago for his opinion. Everyone sees him as an honest, plain-spoken man. Othello is not the only one who is duped by his clever, vicious play-acting. However, once he is hooked, we see the terrible destructive power of jealousy which will transform this once heroic man.

Rather than Othello’s gullibility, I believe the reason for his fall can be found in the fact that he is a stranger to the society in which he finds himself. He and Iago are both outsiders, looking in at a closed social system. Othello is a cultural outsider, having been born in a foreign country. Although he serves as Venice’s military leader, he is really not familiar with Venetian society. Iago is able to take advantage of the general’s lack of experience. Othello, because of his color, is also a man scorned by many in that society; Brabantio, his father-in-law, invited him into his home, asked him to share all his adventures, but when Brabantio’s daughter fell in love with this black military hero, her father reacted with disbelief, disgust and violence. Othello is aware that his acceptance in Venice is based primarily on the use that society makes of him. Iago is an outsider in a social sense. He is cut off from the rarefied world of the gentleman and lady, observing the behavior of people like Desdemona and Cassio knowing that he can never be part of that society as an officer and gentleman. He is motivated by jealousy and a desire for revenge against his betters because of his social inferiority.

Reading the play poses some serious challenges in believability. We are asked to believe that Othello is convinced his wife has been unfaithful to him, repeatedly, in a long-time affair with his lieutenant, Cassio. The problem is that they are married for a total of about 40 hours, almost all of which they spend together or on separate ships sailing to Cyprus. There is no time or opportunity for the adultery to have taken place. On the surface the story is laughably improbable. However, on the stage the play works dramatically and psychologically, convincing audiences over the last 400 years of Othello’s and Desdemona’s tragedy. Shakespeare is able to pull this off by a sophisticated manipulation of time in the play. In Cinthio’s original story the actions take place over a period of months, and it is several years before Iago and Othello are brought to justice. We can see how one man could subtly manipulate another over that period of time to convince him of his wife’s betrayal. Shakespeare has deliberately shortened the time and intensified the action, compacting the events of the original story into a few days. This creates a sense that events are happening so quickly they are beyond anyone’s control. Iago’s plot is so very complicated and involves several different people at the same time the only way it can work is if it takes place quickly. If anyone involved had ever stopped and thought, started comparing notes with others, thinking about consequences, the whole house of cards would have fallen. Iago’s plot requires that events be rushed. At the end of the play, as Othello is about to smother his wife, even as Emilia is coming with news which may save her life, Desdemona pleads with her husband to be allowed to live for just half an hour more. He replies, “It is too late!” and kills her. We can understand why he feels compelled to act at that moment because everything has happened up to this point without any pause. While Shakespeare is speeding up the events, he is presenting the characters in their psychological make-up as if they have been involved in long-term relationships. Othello and Desdemona have known each other for only a brief time, but there is a quality in their love that suggests they have been together for a lot longer. Iago befriends Cassio so thoroughly that the lieutenant turns to him for advice at a critical moment. To summarize, Shakespeare rushes events dramatically, so fast that if we examine the play logically it does not seem to hold together. At the same time he is presenting attitudes and character development which feel as if they have taken place in a much longer time frame. We end up accepting the rush of events in the play because psychologically the characters feel right.

Here are some things to look for in the secondary characters:

Brabantio: A senator of Venice, he is interested in Othello as a military man who has had many adventures and invites him into his home. However, when his intelligent and independent daughter falls in love with the exotic stranger, Brabantio reacts as many modern fathers would – she couldn’t have done this to me unless she had been drugged. His bitterness over the marriage helps reinforce Iago’s poisonous attack on Desdemona’s character.

Roderigo: In the list of characters this dupe of Iago’s is referred to as a “gulled gentleman.” (“Gulled” is the root word for “gullible.”) He is a genteel fool. Because of his rather pathetic lust for Desdemona, he has allowed himself to be convinced that this lower-class character, Iago, has control over the love life of a fine lady like Desdemona. If only Roderigo supplies enough money for jewels, Iago will set up a date with the object of his affection. Roderigo is the example of the limitations of the courtly gentleman. In the first scene we see him interacting with Brabantio, who initially had rejected him as a suitor for his daughter, but when it appears that Desdemona has run off with Othello, the father is sorry he had not consented to her marrying the fool. Roderigo talks the talk, but despite all his elegant manners and flowery speech, he is a buffoon. The great irony is that the foolish fop is the first person in the play to discover Iago’s true nature. The master villain tells him throughout the play that he is deceiving others, but poor Roderigo doesn’t realize that he too is a dupe until it is too late.

Emilia: She is Iago’s wife. Modern audiences often wonder how it would be possible for a woman to live with someone like Iago and have no idea of his true nature. It is Emilia who finally does uncover her husband’s dark secret and reveals it to the world, paying with her life when her husband kills her to shut her up. Emilia is often portrayed as a good-hearted woman with genuine affection for Desdemona. She craves the love and approval of her husband, so that when he asks her to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief, she does it without question, simply to win his approval. She commits the sin of omission when she knows the truth about the missing linen and says nothing about it, blaming Othello’s upset on men’s irrational jealousy. She is as blinded as everyone else is by her husband’s performance.

Cassio: A genuine courtly gentleman, as opposed to Roderigo, Cassio has been promoted to Othello’s second-in-command. We can see some of the qualities which earned him that promotion: he is very well-spoken; he is loyal to his superior; he makes a good appearance, whether it is at the court of Venice or in greeting the citizens of Cyprus. His social skills and courtly speech make him worthy as an officer and a gentleman. Despite his attempts to measure up to an idealized code of behavior, he is all too human. He lives in a society in which drinking is one of the major avenues of social intercourse, and he cannot hold his liquor. He makes a drunken fool of himself because he is caught between two imperatives – he must show his sociability and yet he must behave at all times above reproach. Another unattractive aspect of this gentleman is that for all his talk about the sacredness of love, he is involved with a prostitute. Even though he has this sordid life, he does not behave with discretion and openly talks about his dishonorable love with Iago.

There are two places where Cassio’s behavior is questionable. When he lands in Cyprus, he really plays the gentleman, especially with Desdemona, in an exaggerated social ritual that would be appropriate for the salons of fashionable Venice but is out of place in a rough military outpost. It is that courtly excess which gives an opening to Iago. The second questionable action is that when Cassio loses his job, he allows Iago to talk him into going behind Othello’s back to get Desdemona to plead for him getting his job back. It’s generally not a good idea to try to use your boss’ wife to influence personnel issues.

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Act I, Scene 1

This scene, like many in the play, begins in the middle of a conversation, so that we are at first confused as to what is happening. In the first 60 lines in the scene Roderigo is angry with Iago about something; it will only become apparent near the end of the scene what has happened and what they are arguing about. Why does Shakespeare use this technique of beginning in the middle of any ongoing action? In the scene Iago reveals to Roderigo what his feeling are toward his superior, Othello. Why does he feel this way? What does he suggest he will do about his feelings toward the general?

RODERIGO: Tush! Never tell me? I take it much unkindly

That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse

As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

IAGO: 'Sblood, but you will not hear me! If ever I did dream

Of such a matter, abhor me.

RODERIGO: Thou told'st me

Thou didst hold him in thy hate.

IAGO: Despise me,

If I do not. Three great ones of the city,

In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,

Off-capped [took their caps off, a sign of respect] to him; and, by the faith of man,

I know my price; I am worth no worse a place.

But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,

Evades them with a bombast circumstance [fancy, indirect speech],

Horribly stuffed with epithets of war [military jargon];

Nonsuits [denies] my mediators. For, “Certes,” says he,

“I have already chose my officer.” And what was he?

Forsooth, a great arithmetician [theoretical strategist],

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,

(A fellow almost damned in a fair wife)

That never set a squadron in the field,

Nor the division of a battle knows

More than a spinster; unless the bookish theoric [armchair soldier],

Wherein the tongued consuls [speech-making senators] can propose

As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice

Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had the election:

And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof

At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds

Christian and heathen, must be belee'd and calmed

By debitor and creditor. This counter-caster [terms for accountant],

He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,

And I -- God bless the mark! -- his Moorship's ancient [lesser officer].

RODERIGO: By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman.

IAGO: Why, there's no remedy. ‘Tis the curse of service:

Preferment goes by letter and affection [recommendation and preference],

And not by old gradation [seniority], where each second

Stood heir to the first. Now, sir, be judge yourself,

Whether I in any just term am affined [bound]

To love the Moor.

RODERIGO: I would not follow him then.

`IAGO: O, sir, content you.

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.

We cannot all be masters, nor all masters

Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark

Many a duteous and knee-crooking [bowing] knave

That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,

Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,

For nought but provender [hay]; and when he's old, cashiered.

Whip me such honest knaves! Others there are

Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,

Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,

And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,

Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined their coats,

Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul;

And such a one do I profess myself. For, sir,

It is as sure as you are Roderigo,

Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.

In following him, I follow but myself.

Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,

But seeming so, for my peculiar [personal] end;

For when my outward action doth demonstrate

The native [innate] act and figure of my heart

In compliment extern [outward appearance], 'tis not long after

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve

For daws [crows, carrion birds] to peck at; I am not what I am.

This opening scene is packed with information and conflict and sets the tone for what is to follow. Roderigo is upset because he just found out that Othello and Desdemona have eloped and married. That probably means she’s not available for a date on Friday night! He is doubly upset because he has been giving money to Iago – hast had my purse/ As if the strings were thine – to fix him up with the divine Desdemona. You have to wonder how smart this guy is. Iago denies forcefully at line 4 that he knew anything about Othello’s plan, and to do so he uses ‘Sblood, a shortened form of the phrase God’s blood, considered to be one of the most powerful taboo or “dirty” words in English at that time. (Shakespeare’s audience considered blasphemy, taking God’s name in vain, rather than sexual references to be the ultimate profanity.) He uses the word to show the emotional strength of his denial; he wouldn’t use such a powerful word unless he knew nothing of the marriage. The rest of this speech is taken up with Iago’s objections to his boss Othello, in regards to a job that he didn’t get. (Don’t get confused by the military titles: Othello is a general; his second in command is a lieutenant; Iago is called either an ancient or an ensign, sort of a master sergeant.)

You begin to see why Iago didn’t get the job. It was important in those days that the officer also be a gentleman, that he be able to do more than fight well. He had to present himself in a genteel fashion in polite society, which probably meant that you didn’t go around using ‘sblood in public. Iago could hardly have presented himself as a gentleman. At line 7 Iago says three great men of the city off-capped to him, that is took their hats off as a sign of respect to Othello and pleaded with him to give Iago the job. At line 11 Iago accuses Othello of putting his own pride foremost rather than the justice of giving Iago the job he deserved. At line 12, Othello was not simple and direct in his response to the great ones’ request; he used bombast or fancy military jargon to put them off. Instead he gave the job to Cassio. The first problem is that he is a foreigner, from the rival city of Florence rather than Venice. Secondly he has little practical experience in the field; Iago calls him an arithmetician, someone who has studied war in the classroom. (You could change the names a little, but the same objections might be heard in a personnel office in a modern business.) Third, at line 18, a fellow almost damned in a fair wife seems to mean that either Shakespeare started out making Cassio a married man but then forgot, or else simply suggests that Cassio is a lady-killer, destined to get in trouble because of it. At line 28 Iago gives us the fourth and most devastating attack on Cassio, he is a counter-caster, an accountant who lacks the experience or passion for being a soldier. At lines 26 – 28 Iago argues that he should have gotten the job because Othello had seen him in many different battles, against both Christian and heathen enemies. But instead he is now, like a sailing ship that loses its wind, belee’d and calmed by the guy with the adding machine. Iago says he must remain his Moorship’s ancient. This is a kind of putdown: normally Iago would have said “His Lordship,” but he makes Othello’s ethnic background, as a Moor, the most important thing about him. At line 32 Iago blames the whole system of advancement in the army which has replaced seniority, old gradation, with a personal preference, affection, or who you know. Of course, Iago has used the same argument to further his case, in getting the three great ones of the city to plead for him. (Once again we see how this employment issue is not that different from what we experience today.) Iago makes a pretty compelling case that he had reasonable expectations to get the advancement.

When Roderigo challenges Iago to explain why he continues to serve under Othello, at line 37, he responds with a detailed explanation of his plot to get revenge and advance himself. It recalls that theme of Italian duplicity that I described back in the introduction. In this speech at lines 38 – 62 Iago prepares us for a number of later developments in the play. When he says at line 39 that he follows Othello to serve my turn upon him, this is not a good thing. At lines at 41 following he describes the “good” servant, a duteous and knee-crooking knave. Someone who is always bowing and bending his knees is said to dote on his own obsequious bondage, slaves who are in love with their own slavery. They are compared to their masters’ beasts of burden who work for nothing but provender, and when they are old and worn out, they are fired, cashiered. (That’s something that a number of large corporations have been accused of doing nowadays, firing long-time employees just before they qualify for their retirement pensions.) At line 46 Iago begins to outline an alternative vision of service. Smart employees keep their hearts attending on themselves, look out for number one. They go through the motions, but when they have lined their coats, that is, made enough money to afford to get fancier coats with linings, do themselves homage. They drop the act of being dutiful employees and live it up and act like upper class people. At line 53 Iago issues a warning that should have alerted Roderigo: “Just as you are Roderigo, I, Iago, am playing a part dictated by the social position I am forced to occupy. If I were the Moor, that is, if I were in charge as the general, I would not act as I do now. My ‘Iago’ as a loyal, self-effacing servant is just an act.” This bold-faced declaration, playing on the difference between appearance and reality, should have been made Roderigo think twice about trusting anything that Iago said from that point on. He continues his confession and at line 57 describes his behavior as seeming, pretending for his own ends. Finally he tells us that if he ever reveals his true feelings in his outward appearance, complement extern, it will be as if he wears my heart upon my sleeve, for daws to peck at. You’ve undoubtedly heard that phrase before, “to wear your heart upon your sleeve,” as a way of describing someone who shows his feelings. Now you know the original context for the phrase – a grotesque image of scavenger birds pecking at the organ of human affection a person was foolish enough to reveal. For Iago revealing your true feeling is the worst thing you can do. He sums up his message I am not what I am, again a warning about mistaking appearance for reality. Why is not Roderigo more concerned?

In the next sequence, lines 63 -- 156, see if you can determine Iago’s specific plan to be revenged on Othello and to disrupt his marriage. This is important because in performance how we perceive Iago depends on how much power we see him exerting in the situation. Does he have a diabolical master plan in mind? Iago’s first step is to tell Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, about the elopement and to energize him to use his power to ruin Othello’s marriage. What “hot button” words does Iago use to upset Desdemona’s father?

RODERIGO: What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe [own]

If he can carry't thus [get away with it]!

IAGO: Call up her father,

Rouse him. Make after him, poison his delight,

Proclaim him in the streets; incense her kinsmen,

And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,

Plague him with flies; though that his joy be joy,

Yet throw such changes of vexation on 't,

As it may lose some color.

RODERIGO: Here is her father's house; I'll call aloud.

IAGO: Do, with like timorous [frightening] accent and dire yell

As when, by night and negligence, the fire

Is spied in populous cities.

RODERIGO: What, ho, Brabantio! Signior Brabantio, ho!

IAGO: Awake! what, ho, Brabantio! thieves! thieves! thieves!

Look to your house, your daughter and your bags [moneybags]!

Thieves! thieves! [BRABANTIO appears above, at a window]

BRABANTIO: What is the reason of this terrible summons?

What is the matter there?

RODERIGO: Signior, is all your family within?

IAGO: Are your doors locked?

BRABANTIO: Why, wherefore ask you this?

IAGO: 'Zounds [God’s wounds], sir, y're robbed! For shame. Put on your gown!

Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul.

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram

Is tupping [mating with] your white ewe. Arise, arise!

Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,

Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.

Arise, I say!

BRABANTIO: What, have you lost your wits?

RODERIGO: Most reverend signior, do you know my voice?

BRABANTIO: Not I. What are you?

RODERIGO: My name is Roderigo.

BRABANTIO: The worser welcome!

I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors.

In honest plainness thou hast heard me say

My daughter is not for thee; and now, in madness,

Being full of supper and distemp’ring draughts [too much liquor],

Upon malicious knavery dost thou come

To start [disrupt] my quiet.

RODERIGO: Sir, sir, sir,--

BRABANTIO: But thou must needs be sure

My spirit and my place [social position] have in them power

To make this bitter to thee.

RODERIGO: Patience, good sir.

BRABANTIO: What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice;

My house is not a grange [isolated farmhouse].

RODERIGO: Most grave Brabantio,

In simple and pure soul I come to you.

IAGO: 'Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not

serve God, if the devil bid you. Because we come

to do you service and you think we are ruffians,

you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary [North African]

horse; you'll have your nephews [grandsons] neigh to you;

you'll have coursers for cousins [relatives] and gennets for

germans [Spanish horses for kin].

BRABANTIO: What profane wretch art thou?

IAGO: I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter

and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.

BRABANTIO: Thou art a villain.

IAGO: You are--a senator.

BRABANTIO: This thou shalt answer; I know thee, Roderigo.

RODERIGO: Sir, I will answer any thing. But, I beseech you,

If 't be your pleasure and most wise consent,

As partly I find it is, that your fair daughter,

At this odd-even [early morning] and dull watch o' the night,

Transported, with no worse nor better guard

But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,

To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor --

If this be known to you, and your allowance,

We then have done you bold and saucy wrongs;

But if you know not this, my manners tell me

We have your wrong rebuke. Do not believe

That from the sense of all civility [gentility]

I thus would play and trifle with your reverence.

Your daughter, if you have not given her leave,

I say again, hath made a gross revolt,

Tying her duty, beauty, wit and fortunes

In an extravagant and wheeling stranger [wandering foreigner]

Of here and everywhere. Straight satisfy yourself:

If she be in her chamber, or your house,

Let loose on me the justice of the state

For thus deluding you.

BRABANTIO: Strike on the tinder, ho!

Give me a taper! Call up all my people!

This accident [event] is not unlike my dream.

Belief of it oppresses me already.

Light, I say! Light! [Exit above]

IAGO: Farewell; for I must leave you:

It seems not meet, nor wholesome to my place,

To be produced -- as, if I stay, I shall --

Against the Moor. For, I do know, the State,

However this may gall him with some check [restraint],

Cannot with safety cast [fire] him, for he's embarked

With such loud [important] reason to the Cyprus wars,

Which even now stand in act [are about to happen], that for their souls,

Another of his fathom [ability] they have none

To lead their business; in which regard,

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains,

Yet, for necessity of present life,

I must show out a flag and sign of love,

Which is indeed but sign. That you shall surely find him,

Lead to the Sagittary [sign of an inn] the raised search;

And there will I be with him. So farewell.

At line 63 Roderigo calls Othello thick-lips, emphasizing a physical feature found among black people from West Africa below the Sahara. This, in turn, helps establish that Othello is black, the kind of person who was the target of those outrageous prejudices I described in the Introduction.

Do you see any long-range plan on Iago’s part? I don’t think the language here can give us a definitive answer. Iago is sometimes played as a diabolical mastermind, like a villain from a James Bond movie, who has all the moves figured out before they happen. He gives the impression that he knows exactly how everyone is going to react and that each thing that happens is part of his masterful plot. The alternative way to play Iago is as a trouble-maker who has no clear idea what he is going to do but just causes trouble until he sees any opening. Here, for instance, he tells Roderigo to call up her father; rouse him, hoping to ruin Othello’s wedding night. At line 67 he says though he in a fertile climate dwell, plague him with flies. This is the first of a number places where Iago uses animal (or insect) images to describe a person’s state of mind, or more frequently the sexual act. Othello and Desdemona may be in seventh heaven in their room at the Motel Six, but Iago, with Brabantio’s help, is going to cut a hole in the window screen and let the mosquitoes in. Iago tells Roderigo to wake up Desdemona’s father, just like shouting fire in a crowded theater. Iago adds his special touch when at line 76 he shouts Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags. To Iago Desdemona is nothing more than a commodity (moneybags) to be sold in marriage. When Brabantio sticks his head out of the window, Roderigo tries to address him politely – Signior, is all your family within? –

while Iago is his customary obscene self – Zounds, sir, y’are robbed! “Zounds” was a shortened form of “God’s wounds,” a taboo word as obscene as “Sblood.” It’s bad enough to use this word out in the middle of the street, but Iago is using it to upset a senator, a man who is used to being treated with respect. Iago continues to use inflammatory language at line 85: Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. That is so bad in so many ways. Shakespeare makes Iago a walking compendium of sexual perversion; he gives him dysfunctions that wouldn’t even have a name until a German doctor in the late 19th Century started cataloguing kinky sexual practices. First we have the image of Brabantio’s daughter as a white sheep having sex with an old black ram. We get that suggestion of bestiality which was associated with Africans. Even the word tupping was a word for mating among sheep, further dehumanizing Desdemona and Othello. (The word gives a whole new meaning to “Tupperware Party.”) Finally we get a very odd thing in that Iago suggests that at that very moment the coupling is taking place. It’s one of several places in the play where you realize that Iago has a voyeuristic interest; he likes to think about and picture other people having sex. Every time Othello is intimate with his wife, Iago visualizes the act for us. At one point he even proposes trying to watch Cassio and Desdemona making love. Then at line 88 we get another reminder of that strange folklore of prejudice that I discussed in the Introduction: the devil will make a grandsire of you. Othello, as a black man, is a demonic force about to impregnate your innocent daughter, making you a grandfather of Satan’s spawn, like Rosemary’s Baby.

When Brabantio realizes that one of the people who have awakened him is Roderigo, we can see the contempt he has for the foolish gentleman. At line 91 he asks, What are you? and then at line 93 he says, I have charged thee not to haunt about my door. When he learns it is Roderigo he shifts his pronoun from the formal “you” to the informal “thee” as a deliberate social insult. It is apparent that Roderigo had come to court Desdemona before and had been rejected out of hand; apparently there is a restraining order to keep him away from the house! Brabantio rejects the idea that he is being robbed; after all, this is civilized Venice – my house is not a grange or farmhouse out in the boondocks. The suggestion here is that crime does not exist in a place of civilization, an idea that Shakespeare will emphasize in the contrast between the virtuous city and the amoral frontier on Cyprus.

At line 105 Iago deliberately inflames Brabantio with the taboo word Zounds again. (By the way Iago shifts from verse, which is what he has been using almost entirely up to this point, to prose, which is more in keeping with his lower-class persona here.) Then at line 108 he again evokes the idea of bestiality with the image of Desdemona covered by a Barbary horse and the resultant animal offspring that will neigh to their grandfather.

Iago carries this bestiality theme further at line 114 when he describes Othello and Desdemona having sex as making the beast with two backs, a particularly picturesque image. Stung by this outrage Brabantio calls Iago at villain at line 115. Iago responds, You are [pause] a senator. Given the legal problems of some of our elected officials, it’s a remark worthy of Jon Stewart on Comedy Central. Iago can be wonderfully funny and quick-witted.

Roderigo now steps in to retrieve the situation, and in a long speech, lines 117 – 137, he provides a coherent explanation to Brabantio, in courtly, genteel language, of what his daughter has done. He emphasizes that Desdemona has seriously broken social conventions. At line 120 she has gone out late at night. She has no proper chaperone to accompany her, only a gondolier. (That’s the Venetian equivalent of letting your young daughter go off with just a cab driver.) At line 123 she has gone off to the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor, an image calculated to picture Othello as that over-sexed African native the English explorers had pictured in their imaginations. At line 128 Roderigo emphasizes how serious these charges are by saying that he would hardly have violated all sense of civility to awaken the senator in the middle of the night if they were not true. At line 133 he makes his most serious charge: Desdemona has tied herself to an extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere. This is an appeal to a kind of distrust of foreigners, xenophobia, which was rampant in Shakespeare’s England where the average person never went further than about 30 miles from where he was born. Othello and his exotic background represented a real psychological threat to provincial people. It’s not just that he is black; he was not born in Venice; he was not raised a Christian. Brabantio now admits that he has had a premonition that his daughter would do something like this, and he goes in to check on her.

Iago, beginning at line 141, sets forth the double role he will play as he goes off to pretend to be on Othello’s side in the coming confrontation. He is sure Othello will not be arrested for running off with Desdemona; he is too important to the State as the top military leader. The war with the Turks is about to start up again, we are told. He reminds Roderigo that, despite how he will act around Othello, he really hates him. Iago directs him to bring Brabantio and his kinsmen to an inn called Sagittary, probably for the zodiac sign “Sagittarius,” where he knows Othello is staying.

In the last lines of this scene, 157 -- 180, how does Brabantio change his mind about Roderigo? What explanation does he come up with for his daughter’s unconventional behavior?

BRABANTIO: It is too true an evil. Gone she is;

And what's to come of my despised time

Is nought but bitterness. Now, Roderigo,

Where didst thou see her? -- O unhappy girl! --

With the Moor, say'st thou? -- Who would be a father! --

How didst thou know 'twas she? -- O she deceives me

Past thought! -- What said she to you? Get more tapers!

Raise all my kindred! -- Are they married, think you?

RODERIGO: Truly, I think they are.

BRABANTIO: O heaven! How got she out? O treason of the blood!

Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds

By what you see them act. Is there not charms

By which the property [true nature] of youth and maidhood

May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,

Of some such thing?

RODERIGO: Yes, sir, I have indeed.

BRABANTIO: Call up my brother. -- O, would you had had her! --

Some one way, some another. -- Do you know

Where we may apprehend her and the Moor?

RODERIGO: I think I can discover him, if you please,

To get good guard and go along with me.

BRABANTIO: Pray you, lead on. At every house I'll call;

I may command at most. -- Get weapons, ho!

And raise some special officers of night [night patrol].

On, good Roderigo; I'll deserve your pains [reward you].

We can see from the fractured and frantic way Brabantio speaks in this sequence how emotionally overwrought he is. Notice the number of dashes in his first speech, indicating sudden changes of thought. He certainly does a flip-flop about Roderigo. Before he had insulted his daughter’s erstwhile suitor; now at line 172 he wishes Roderigo had married her. Brabantio has a reaction to his daughter’s elopement that reminds us of the latest television admonition to talk to our kids. If she does something he can’t understand, it must be because she is on drugs -- either that, or she has been enchanted. At line 170 he wonders if something was done to abuse her; “abuse” meant to be put under some kind of magic spell.

Go to Menu

Act I, Scene 2

We are introduced to Othello. Once again, we begin in the middle of a conversation. Who is Iago talking about in the first ten lines of the scene? We have heard a lot about Othello in the opening scene, almost all of it negative. It’s interesting how Shakespeare sets up the play so we see the hero first through others’ eyes. How does Othello come across in this moment of crisis as Brabantio comes looking for him with an armed band?

IAGO: Though in the trade of war I have slain men,

Yet do I hold it very stuff [essence] o' the conscience

To do no contrived murder. I lack iniquity

Sometimes to do me service. Nine or ten times

I had thought to have yerked [stabbed] him here under the ribs.

OTHELLO: 'Tis better as it is.

IAGO: Nay, but he prated,

And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms

Against your honor that, with the little godliness I have

I did full hard forbear him. But, I pray you, sir,

Are you fast married? Be assured of this,

That the magnifico [nobleman] is much beloved,

And hath in his effect a voice potential

As double as the duke's. He will divorce you;

Or put upon you what restraint and grievance

The law, with all his might to enforce it on,

Will give him cable [scope].

OTHELLO: Let him do his spite.

My services which I have done the Signiory [rulers of Venice]

Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know [as yet unknown]

-- Which, when I know that boasting is an honor,

I shall promulgate [make public]--I fetch my life and being

From men of royal siege [rank], and my demerits [flaws]

May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune

As this that I have reached. For know, Iago,

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,

I would not my unhoused [unconfined] free condition

Put into circumscription and confine

For the sea's worth. But, look, what lights come yond?

IAGO: Those are the raised father and his friends.

You were best go in.

OTHELLO: Not I. I must be found.

My parts, my title and my perfect soul [unblemished conscience]

Shall manifest me rightly. Is it they?

IAGO: By Janus, I think no. [Enter CASSIO and Officers with torches]

OTHELLO: The servants of the duke? And my lieutenant?

The goodness of the night upon you, friends!

What is the news?

CASSIO: The duke does greet you, general;

And he requires your haste-post-haste appearance,

Even on the instant.

OTHELLO: What is the matter, think you?

CASSIO: Something from Cyprus as I may divine.

It is a business of some heat. The galleys

Have sent a dozen sequent [successive] messengers

This very night at one another's heels,

And many of the consuls, raised and met,

Are at the Duke's already. You have been hotly called for.

When, being not at your lodging to be found,

The Senate hath sent about three several [separate] quests

To search you out.

OTHELLO: 'Tis well I am found by you.

I will but spend a word here in the house,

And go with you. [Exit]

CASSIO: Ancient, what makes he here?

IAGO: 'Faith, he to-night hath boarded a land carack [treasure ship]

If it prove lawful prize, he's made for ever.

CASSIO: I do not understand.

IAGO: He's married.

CASSIO: To who? [Re-enter OTHELLO]

IAGO: Marry, to -- Come, captain, will you go?

OTHELLO: Have with you.

CASSIO: Here comes another troop to seek for you.

IAGO: It is Brabantio. General, be advised.

He comes to bad intent.

Once again we begin in the middle of a conversation. Why? In the opening lines here Iago is probably talking about Roderigo, the same guy he had inflamed. Now he runs to Othello to warn him about the coming trouble and to describe how he wanted to kill Roderigo for talking trash about the general. Iago presents himself as a good soldier, a decent, loyal subordinate. At line 3 he says he is too moral for his own good, lacking iniquity to do me service. Iago’s use of the yerked for “stabbed” at line 5 reveals a lower-class, barroom brawler who uses slang for a knife stroke, If you yerk someone, you don’t just stick the knife in; you jam it under the victim’s ribs and pull up on it to increase the damage. Iago’s startling word choices sometimes reveal a man attracted to inflicting maximum physical pain.

Iago tries to rattle Othello about the coming confrontation with Brabantio, but at line 16 Othello laughs off any threat. Othello comes across here as someone with supreme self-confidence, probably older and not about to be frightened by anything. He doesn’t brag about his military service; he simply acknowledges that he is vital to the State. Everyone in Venice considers the marriage a real social triumph for Othello, but at line 18 he tells us that he comes from royal blood, that she is the lucky one. He won’t publicize his superior heritage, because he does not believe in boasting, but if he finds it is socially acceptable, he will publish his royal connections. He would never have married, but he loves the gentle Desdemona; that is the only reason he has put his free condition into circumscription and confine, that is married. The word gentle here, as it is throughout the play, is a social comment – she is of a superior social standing.

When a group of men approach, Iago once again tries to rattle Othello, telling him he needs to get inside and hide. The general refuses to be concerned, arguing that he must be found. He explains, without a touch of irony or self-deprecation, my parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly. He is a superior human being with an unblemished conscience, and that will be enough to meet and overcome any angry father. That is evidence of his supreme self-confidence. At line 32 Iago swears appropriately by Janus, the Roman god who had two faces, the patron of deception.

Cassio brings the message from the Duke that Othello is desperately needed at the palace. Important events are unfolding overseas, and the general is vital to the State. Othello goes into the Sagittary for just a second, and he has no sooner left than Iago and Cassio start talking about him behind his back, from line 48 – 52. Iago characterizes the secret marriage as the general having taken a land carack, which your notes tell you was a treasure ship. If you found an abandoned ship floating around, you could claim it as a lawful prize, even if it had someone else’s treasure on it. Forget about love and social class and royal blood -- in Iago’s view, Desdemona means only one thing – money. Cassio doesn’t understand the metaphor, and when Iago starts to tell him that Othello is married, the general suddenly returns and the ancient quickly changes the subject at line 52. Now this is a small thing, but it is characteristic of the way Iago works throughout the whole play with everybody, talking about them about behind their backs. We all have this small vice, and like Iago quickly change the subject when the person we’re gossiping about walks through the door. Iago’s monstrous evil is made up of little acts of badness, ordinary lapses we are all guilty of, but exaggerated in him because he apparently has no conscience. Many people see Iago as this Satanic force, the arch villain. But I believe his evil is more scary because it is so ordinary, both in terms of what it attempts and the mechanisms it uses. We are all capable of being like Iago, at certain times and in small doses.

In the next sequence, lines 55 – 94, we have a disaster in the making – many men armed with sharp swords, emotionally upset, in a narrow street at night, illuminated only by torches they carry. Should a fight break out, people will be hurt. Who keeps that from happening? How? As the fight shapes up, Iago singles out Roderigo and challenges him to fight. Why? Remember the “hot button” words which Iago used to arouse Brabantio in the previous scene? What “hot button” words does Brabantio use on Othello? What effect do they have?

OTHELLO: Holla! Stand there!

RODERIGO: Signior, it is the Moor.

BRABANTIO: Down with him, thief! [They all draw]

IAGO : You, Roderigo! Come, sir, I am for you.

OTHELLO: Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

Good signior, you shall more command with years

Than with your weapons.

BRABANTIO: O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?

Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!

For I'll refer me to all things of sense [rational thought],

If she in chains of magic were not bound,

Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,

So opposite to marriage that she shunned

The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation,

Would ever have, to incur a general mock [public shame],

Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom

Of such a thing as thou -- to fear, not to delight.

Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense [obvious]

That thou hast practiced on [tricked] her with foul charms,

Abused [enchanted] her delicate youth with drugs or minerals

That weaken motion [thought]: I'll have 't disputed on;

'Tis probable and palpable to thinking.

I therefore apprehend and do attach [arrest] thee

For an abuser of the world, a practicer

Of arts inhibited and out of warrant [illegal and banned].

Lay hold upon him. If he do resist,

Subdue him at his peril.

OTHELLO: Hold your hands,

Both you of my inclining, and the rest.

Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it

Without a prompter. Where will you that I go

To answer this your charge?

BRABANTIO: To prison, till fit time

Of law and course of direct session [trial]

Call thee to answer.

OTHELLO: What if I do obey?

How may the Duke be therewith satisfied,

Whose messengers are here about my side,

Upon some present [immediate] business of the state

To bring me to him?

First Officer: 'Tis true, most worthy signior.

The duke's in council and your noble self

I am sure is sent for.

BRABANTIO: How? The duke in council?

In this time of the night? Bring him away.

Mine's not an idle cause. The Duke himself,

Or any of my brothers of the state [fellow senators],

Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own;

For if such actions may have passage free,

Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.

We can tell from the dialogue at the beginning of this sequence how close things are to exploding. Brabantio has been worked over by an expert and comes in filled with rage, his imagination filled with obscene images of what Othello has been doing to his daughter. In any fight, Iago wants to stay safe while giving the appearance of fighting Othello’s principal slanderer, Roderigo. So he calls out the foolish gentleman by name so he can go through the motions of a swordfight while the rest of the fools fight each other in all seriousness. Maybe if he is lucky Othello will kill Desdemona’s father, which would tend to put a damper on the honeymoon. The only thing that keeps violence from erupting is the calm and commanding presence of Othello, despite the powerful provocations of his father-in-law.

Here are some of those provocative, hot button words and phrases:

l. 61 thief

l. 62 damned as thou art [because you are black like the devil]

l. 64 chains of magic [practicing magic was a capital offense]

l. 68 incur a general mock [marrying you is a public humiliation]

l. 69 sooty bosom

l. 70 such a thing as thou

l. 70 to fear, not to delight

l. 72 practiced on her with foul charms

l. 73 abused her delicate youth

l. 77 a practicer of arts inhibited

l. 98 bondslaves and pagans

At lines 65 – 70 Brabantio argues that his daughter must have been enchanted or drugged since she had shown no previous interest in marriage and had shunned the wealthy, curled darlings of our nation. Who could he be referring to? Roderigo? As we get to know Roderigo better, we can understand why the idea of marrying him might not have appealed to Desdemona – he is one of the biggest schmucks in all of Shakespeare. By marrying Othello she has committed a terrible social misstep. Calling Othello a thing is perhaps the strongest of the provocations.

Othello does not react to these provocations as Brabantio had. At line 58 he has a wonderfully poetic line to defuse the situation: Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them. He takes a violent action, pulling a sword, and turns it into minor inconvenience. Othello is a man who has nothing to prove; therefore he refuses to be baited into fighting. He treats Brabantio with respect, telling him he shall more command with years than with his weapons. He lets Brabantio go through his whole rant, and at line 80 he orders: Hold your hands, both you of my inclining and the rest. Were it my cue to fight, I would have known it without a prompter. He makes it sound as if any fight would be a joke, something phony, enacted on the stage. Rather than denying Brabantio’s charges, he deflects them by bringing up the pressing business of the State, which even Brabantio must realize take precedence. The angry father thinks his private grievance will move all his fellow senators; he is about to learn a lesson in the nature of power and statecraft. Throughout this scene Shakespeare wants us to see Othello as a man of supreme self-confidence, the innate authority to command others and to take charge of any situation and a man who is very much at home with who he is. We cannot see how Iago will be able to defeat him.

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Act I, Scene 3

Again the scene starts in the middle of an action. It takes us a while in the first 50 lines to figure out that there have been a number of earlier reports coming in from the eastern Mediterranean trying to determine the target of the Turkish fleet. Venice, as an important trading power, had outposts and colonies throughout the area, two of the most important being the islands of Cyprus and Rhodes. Its principal competitors are referred to variously as “Turks” and “Ottomanites,” from the Ottoman Empire as Turkey was then called. We see the intelligent leaders of Venice looking at a series of contradictory reports coming in from the field: there are one or two Turkish fleets; one is headed for Cyprus, one for Rhodes; no, the fleets have joined. Finally the Venetians discern that the real threat is to Cyprus. They are able to figure out the deception of their enemy. At the same time there is a second threat, a private “invasion,” represented by Iago and his petty but deadly plot, which none of the smart people in command are able to discern. Iago works below the radar. In this scene, the most important public action in the play, where Othello interacts with his employers and lays plans to save the State, Iago is almost invisible. He does not open his mouth. He is not one of the players. It’s only after all the important people leave that he comes out from under his rock.

In this next sequence, lines 48 – 126, what are Brabantio’s specific charges against Othello? How do the Duke and other senators react to the charges? How effective is Othello’s defense?

DUKE: Valiant Othello, we must straight [immediately] employ you

Against the general enemy Ottoman. [To BRABANTIO]

I did not see you. Welcome, gentle signior.

We lacked your counsel and your help tonight.

BRABANTIO: So did I yours. Good your grace, pardon me.

Neither my place, nor aught I heard of business,

Hath raised me from my bed; nor doth the general care

Take hold on me; for my particular grief

Is of so floodgate and o'erbearing nature

That it engluts and swallows other sorrows,

And it is still itself.

DUKE: Why, what's the matter?

BRABANTIO: My daughter! O, my daughter!

ALL: Dead?

BRABANTIO: Ay, to me.

She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted

By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;

For nature so prepost’rously to err,

Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,

Sans [without] witchcraft could not.

DUKE: Whoe'er he be that in this foul proceeding

Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself,

And you of her, the bloody book of law

You shall yourself read in the bitter letter

After your own sense; yea, though our proper [own] son

Stood in your action [were accused in your charge].

BRABANTIO: Humbly I thank your grace.

Here is the man -- this Moor, whom now, it seems,

Your special mandate for the state affairs

Hath hither brought.

ALL: We are very sorry for 't.

DUKE: [To OTHELLO] What, in your own part, can you say to this?

BRABANTIO: Nothing, but this is so.

OTHELLO: Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,

My very noble and approved [proven by past deeds] good masters,

That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,

It is most true; true I have married her.

The very head and front [full extent] of my offending

Hath this extent, no more. Rude am I in my speech,

And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,

For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith [strength],

Till now some nine moons wasted [past], they have used

Their dearest [most important] action in the tented field;

And little of this great world can I speak

More than pertains to feats of broil and battle;

And therefore little shall I grace my cause

In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,

I will a round [blunt] unvarnished tale deliver

Of my whole course of love -- what drugs, what charms,

What conjuration, and what mighty magic,

For such proceeding I am charged withal,

I won his daughter --

BRABANTIO: A maiden never bold,

Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion

Blushed at herself [she blushed easily]; and she, in spite of nature,

Of years, of country, credit, every thing,

To fall in love with what she feared to look on!

It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect

That will confess perfection so could err

Against all rules of nature, and must be driven

To find out practices of cunning hell

Why this should be. I therefore vouch [assert] again

That with some mixtures powerful o'er the blood,

Or with some dram, conjured to this effect,

He wrought upon her.

DUKE: To vouch this is no proof,

Without more wider and more overt test

Than these thin habits [appearances] and poor likelihoods

Of modern [trivial] seeming do prefer against him.

SENATOR: But, Othello, speak.

Did you by indirect and forced courses

Subdue and poison this young maid's affections?

Or came it by request and such fair question [discussion]

As soul to soul affordeth?

OTHELLO: I do beseech you,

Send for the lady to the Sagittary

And let her speak of me before her father.

If you do find me foul in her report,

The trust, the office, I do hold of you,

Not only take away, but let your sentence

Even fall upon my life.

DUKE: Fetch Desdemona hither.

OTHELLO: Ancient, conduct them; you best know the place.

[Exeunt IAGO and Attendants]

And till she come, as truly as to heaven

I do confess the vices of my blood,

So justly to your grave ears I'll present

How I did thrive in this fair lady's love,

And she in mine.

In the time that it has taken to walk to the council chamber, Brabantio has embellished his charges against Othello. At line 62 he asserts that just the fact that she has done something so unnatural, nature so preposterously to err, is proof that it must have been drugs or witchcraft. He makes the same argument again at around line 95 following where he concludes that for her to fall in love with what she fear to look upon must have been the result of practices of cunning hell. The Duke is so eager to accommodate Brabantio at line 69 that he offers the aggrieved father the power to pronounce sentence on the offender himself, even if the guilty party was the Duke’s proper son. Well, maybe the Duke is willing to sacrifice his kid, but when he and the senators hear that Othello, their main military savior, is responsible, their reaction at line 73 is We are very sorry for it. There is a double sense to this: they are sorry for Brabantio’s pain, but they are also sorry that their heroic general is the one accused.

How effective is Othello’s rebuttal of the charges? His main statement of defense is at lines 76 – 94. It is not so much what he says but how he says it. He starts calling the Duke and members of the Council most potent, grave and reverend signoirs, my very noble and approved good masters. If another person gave this flowery introduction, we might think it was “brown-nosing.” But Othello is just acknowledging that whatever power he has, it is the result of his service to the State. Throughout the play he will remind us that he exists utterly as a soldier of Venice; even his dying words will reconfirm this identity. Then he admits Brabantio’s charge – that I have taken away this old man’s daughter, it is most true; true, I have married her. And that’s the key distinction; he has done the respectable thing by marrying her. All the other charges about drugs and charms are beside the point of his love and honorable marriage. At line 81 he apologizes because rude am I in my speech and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace. Othello really does see himself as inarticulate and limited in his speaking ability; the reality is far different, since he is one of Shakespeare’s most poetic heroes. He sees his limitation because he has been engaged in the business of war from the time he was a little boy until now, when he is in his middle age. Look at the way he expresses this span of time – since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith till now some nine moons wasted. He speaks of his youth as if he were a tree that grows for seven years, adding a ring to the core, or pith, with each year’s growth. (I don’t think he means he was literally just seven years old, but he was young.) Now he is in his middle years, and if his life were thought of as a single year, he would be in the ninth month. This language is highly poetic in its own unique way, not like the formal rhetoric of gentlemen like Roderigo. He has spent his life dealing with military matters and feels ill-equipped to discuss life outside the army. It is this perceived cultural deprivation and lack of sophistication that Iago will take advantage of. Despite his linguistic limitations he promises to deliver a round unvarnished tale. In this speech we see the same qualities that Othello demonstrated in the previous scene. He is in charge; he does not allow the provocations of Brabantio bother him; he is honest about what he has done; and he is honorable in his dealings. Othello really does believe that he is not a good speaker, but in reality Shakespeare has given him an eloquence that hints at someone who is not a native speaker of English, who is using a language he has learned as an adult. He will use words in an unusual way that catches our ear and imagination. (For example, Joseph Conrad, one of the greatest novelists in English, did not learn that language until he was in his twenties and yet had a style all his own,) Notice that Othello at line 120 turns to his trusty ancient, “honest” Iago, to bring his wife to the council chamber.

In the next sequence, lines 127 – 295, what do we learn how the relationship developed between Othello and Desdemona? What makes his explanation of why she fell in love with him so effective? When Desdemona comes in and is confronted by her father and asked to whom she most owes allegiance, why is her response so effective? What argument does Desdemona make to be allowed to go with her husband to Cyprus?

DUKE: Say it, Othello.

OTHELLO: Her father loved me; oft invited me;

Still [always] questioned me the story of my life

From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes,

That I have passed.

I ran it through, even from my boyish days

To the very moment that he bade me tell it.

Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,

Of moving accidents by flood and field,

Of hairbreadth scapes i' the imminent [threatening] deadly breach,

Of being taken by the insolent foe

And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence

And portance [conduct] in my travels' history,

Wherein of anters [caverns] vast and deserts idle empty],

Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch heaven

It was my hint to speak. Such was the process.

And of the Cannibals that each other eat,

The Anthropophagi [man-eaters], and men whose heads

Do grow beneath their shoulders. These things to hear

Would Desdemona seriously incline;

But still the house affairs would draw her thence;

Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,

She'd come again, and with a greedy ear

Devour up my discourse. Which I observing,

Took once a pliant hour, and found good means

To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart

That I would all my pilgrimage dilate [tell in full],

Whereof by parcels she had something heard,

But not intentively [in sequence and in full]. I did consent,

And often did beguile her of her tears

When I did speak of some distressful stroke

That my youth suffered. My story being done,

She gave me for my pains a world of kisses.

She swore, in faith, ‘twas strange, 'twas passing [surpassing] strange,

'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.

She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished

That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,

And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,

I should but teach him how to tell my story,

And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,

And I loved her that she did pity them.

This only is the witchcraft I have used.

Here comes the lady. Let her witness it. [Enter DESDEMONA and IAGO]

DUKE: I think this tale would win my daughter too.

Good Brabantio, take up this mangled matter at the best [make the best use of this disaster].

Men do their broken weapons rather use

Than their bare hands.

BRABANTIO: I pray you, hear her speak.

If she confess that she was half the wooer,

Destruction on my head, if my bad blame

Light on the man. Come hither, gentle mistress:

Do you perceive in all this noble company

Where most you owe obedience?

DESDEMONA: My noble father,

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education;

My life and education both do learn me

How to respect you. You are the lord of duty,

I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband,

And so much duty as my mother showed

To you, preferring you before her father,

So much I challenge that I may profess

Due to the Moor my lord.

BRABANTIO: God be with you. I have done.

Please it your Grace, on to the state affairs.

I had rather to adopt a child than get [beget] it.

Come hither, Moor.

I here do give thee that with all my heart

Which, but thou hast already, with all my heart

I would keep from thee. For your sake, jewel,

I am glad at soul I have no other child,

For thy escape would teach me tyranny,

To hang clogs on them. I have done, my lord.

DUKE; Let me speak like yourself and lay a sentence [provide a maxim]

Which, as a grise [step] or step, may help these lovers.

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended

By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended [until now looked like it would end better].

To mourn a mischief that is past and gone

Is the next [surest] way to draw new mischief on.

What cannot be preserved when fortune takes,

Patience her injury a mockery makes.

The robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief;

He robs himself that spends a bootless [futile] grief.

BRABANTIO: So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile:

We lose it not, so long as we can smile.

He bears the sentence well that nothing bears

But the free comfort which from thence he hears;

But he bears both the sentence and the sorrow

That, to pay grief, must of poor patience borrow.

These sentences, to sugar, or to gall,

Being strong on both sides, are equivocal.

But words are words. I never yet did hear

That the bruised heart was pierced [lanced] through the ear.

I humbly beseech you, proceed to the affairs of state.

DUKE: The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes

for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is

best known to you; and though we have there a

substitute [viceroy] of most allowed sufficiency [ability], yet

opinion, a sovereign mistress of effects, throws a

more safer voice on you. You must therefore be content to

slubber [besmear] the gloss of your new fortunes

with this more stubborn and boisterous [rough and violent] expedition.

OTHELLO: The tyrant custom, most grave senators,

Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war

My thrice-driven [softest] bed of down: I do agnise [admit]

A natural and prompt alacrity

I find in hardness, and do undertake

These present wars against the Ottomites.

Most humbly, therefore, bending to your state,

I crave fit disposition for my wife,

Due reference of place and exhibition [financial support],

With such accommodation and besort

As levels with [is appropriate for] her breeding.

DUKE: Why, at her father's.

BRABANTIO: I'll not have it so.

OTHELLO: Nor I.

DESDEMONA: Nor I; I would not there reside,

To put my father in impatient thoughts

By being in his eye. Most gracious duke,

To my unfolding [explanation] lend your prosperous ear;

And let me find a charter [permission] in your voice,

To assist my simpleness.

DUKE: What would you, Desdemona?

DESDEMONA: That I did love the Moor to live with him,

My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,

May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued

Even to the very quality of my lord [I have become one with my husband].

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,

And to his honor and his valiant parts

Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,

A moth of peace, and he go to the war,

The rites [spiritual reasons] for which I love him are bereft me,

And I a heavy interim shall support

By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

OTHELLO: Let her have your voices [approvals].

Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not,

To please the palate of my appetite,

Nor to comply with heat [lust] – the young affects [passions]

In me defunct – and proper satisfaction [consummation of my marriage],

But to be free and bounteous to her mind;

And heaven defend [forbid] your good souls, that you think

I will your serious and great business scant

For she is with me. No, when light-wing'd toys

Of feathered Cupid seel [blindfold] with wanton dullness

My speculative and officed instruments [sight and mind],

That my disports corrupt and taint my business,

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,

And all indign [unworthy] and base adversities

Make head [attack] against my estimation [reputation]!

DUKE: Be it as you shall privately determine,

Either for her stay or going. The affair cries haste,

And speed must answer it.

SENATOR: You must away to-night.

OTHELLO: With all my heart.

DUKE: At nine i' the morning here we'll meet again.

Othello, leave some officer behind,

And he shall our commission bring to you;

With such things else of quality and respect

As doth import you.

OTHELLO: So please your grace, my ancient;

A man he is of honest and trust.

To his conveyance I assign my wife,

With what else needful your good grace shall think

To be sent after me.

DUKE: Let it be so.

Good night to every one. [To BRABANTIO] And, noble signior,

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,

Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

SENATOR: Adieu, brave Moor. Use Desdemona well.

BRABANTIO: Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.

She has deceived her father, and may thee.

[Exeunt DUKE OF VENICE, Senators, Officers]

OTHELLO: My life upon her faith! Honest Iago,

My Desdemona must I leave to thee.

I prithee, let thy wife attend on her,

And bring them after in the best advantage [first opportunity].

Come, Desdemona. I have but an hour

Of love, of worldly matters and direction

To spend with thee. We must obey the time.

You notice that Othello entrusts his wife to “honest” Iago, supporting the perception that everyone has of his trustworthiness. In Othello’s long speech of explanation, lines 127 – 165, without the baseless charges of drugs or magic, we see how Othello won Desdemona’s love. It is a model of eloquence and power, so much so that the Duke at the conclusion says, I think this tale would win my daughter too. Notice that Brabantio invited Othello to his house to tell all his adventures; he is widely traveled to exotic places. Othello tells all his trials and tribulations, his battles and even a stint as a slave. He tells of exotic places and people that must have fascinated the provincial Venetians. We get a reminder of the popularity of travel books in Shakespeare’s time, books that offered the story of strange people in foreign climes, tales that were not always accurate. We get references to the Cannibals at line 142, with their Latin name in the next line. Then we get a reference to a mythical figure, a man whose head grew beneath his shoulders. Othello notices Desdemona’s interest in his story, which she asks him to tell her all over again. He is moved by her sympathy for his suffering. At line 162 we see that Desdemona made the first move in this improbable romance: She thanked me and bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, I should but teach him how to tell my story and that would woo her. Is the implication of her remark here too subtle? Clearly she’s interested and lets him know.

The long speech is unusual in a number of ways. First it creates a voice for Othello unique to this play, using words in a way not like anyone else. It’s a voice of someone with imagination and an ear for the language he has come to later in his life – a fortuitous eloquence:

1.) Patterns of repetition in words and phrases. Look at line 159: She swore in faith ‘twas strange, ‘twas passing strange; ‘twas pitiful, ‘twas wondrous pitiful. We get the repetition of individual words, such as ‘twas and strange and pitiful. At line 161 we get repetition of sentence structures: She wished she had not heard it; yet she wished that heaven had made her such a man. Then we get the repetition of individual sounds, for example at line 140: Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven, it was my hint to speak. Here we have two words beginning with an “r” sound and four with “h.” This repetition of an initial consonant is called alliteration. This is just the most notable example of alliteration in the speech.

2.) Unusual word order. At line 139 he is describing some of the unusual geographical features he has seen, specifically large caverns, anters, and empty or idle deserts. A normal English speaker would have said vast anters and idle deserts because we normally put the adjective in front of the noun it modifies. Othello reverses the normal order and in doing so helps to emphasize the unusual qualities; an anter vast just sounds more foreboding.

Remember that this is a speech being given by a man who sees himself as a flawed speaker. He really does see himself at a disadvantage because of his inability to speak like native, cultured people such as Cassio and Roderigo. We can see how wrong he is in his self-assessment.

After this impressive speech Desdemona enters and her father asks her who she owes the most allegiance to. Her answer, at lines 179 – 187, is very effective as she uses her father’s experience with her mother to parallel her current situation, caught between her love and respect for both her father and her new husband. Notice how at line 187 even Desdemona refers to Othello by his ethnic identity, calling him the Moor, as if that were his name. As you see more of Desdemona, does she seem to you someone who could be drugged or enchanted and easily taken advantage of?

After hearing the truth from his daughter, Brabantio has to back down, but he is hardly gracious and says some very unpleasant things. At line 194 he says he is glad he has no other child, because Desdemona’s betrayal would make him more cruel. The Duke jumps in and tries to patch things up, arguing that the situation is negative only if Brabantio insists on perceiving it in that manner. “You haven’t lost a daughter; you’ve gained a middle-aged black general as a son-in-law.” You shouldn’t feel the way you do. Brabantio’s response at lines 207 –217 is filled with sarcasm. If all it takes to get rid of sorrows is to wear a smile, then we shouldn’t worry about losing Cyprus to the Turks. At line 216 he describes emotional upset metaphorically as if it were an infected boil; you can’t pierce the bruised heart through the ear. Throughout his plays Shakespeare shows little patience with people telling others not to feel the way they feel.

When Othello is ordered to Cyprus, his first concern is making arrangements for his wife during his absence. At line 236 the Duke once again showing a real lack of understanding suggests she stay with her father while her husband is at the front. Everyone turns that suggestion down. At lines 243 -- 254 Desdemona offers her suggestion on where she should be bestowed while her husband is on assignment: She has a real sense of her own worth and is comfortable speaking up before the Duke and other senators. (We see something similar in the beginning of A Midsummer Night’s Dream when Hermia argued her fate before Duke Theseus.) Desdemona begins by admitting that her marriage to the Moor has been controversial, downright violence and storm of fortunes. She explains that what attracted her to this black man was his mind, not necessarily his outward appearance: I saw Othello’s visage in his mind. What she has done is to make a kind of religious commitment in marrying: to his honors and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. Both soul and consecrate are words with powerful religious connotations. The attraction between these two people, according to Desdemona, is at a spiritual or mental level. She goes on to argue that if she is left behind when he goes to war, the rites for why I love him are bereft me, again a word with powerful religious connotation. It is as if she argues that for the free exercise of her religion she has to be allowed to accompany him to war.

Othello at lines 255 – 269 makes a similar argument. He begins by assuring the Duke and the council that he doesn’t want to take his wife with him for sexual gratification, not to comply with heat, but rather to be free and bounteous to her mind. He goes on to vow that he will not allow his emotional attachment to Desdemona to get in the way of his performing his job. He implies that he is along in years and therefore not vulnerable to erotic impulses. If he ever allows the light-winged toys of feathered Cupid to seel [blind] his military focus or distract from his job, he vows to allow housewives to make a skillet of my helm or helmet. Even worse, he says may his reputation, his estimation, be destroyed by his enemies, people like Brabantio, if he ever scants his business. This is one of the many examples in Shakespeare’s plays of people saying they will never do something only to discover in a few scenes that they do exactly that. Othello will allow thoughts of erotic love to undermine his profession when Iago works him over. For Othello his identity as a soldier is the most important thing he has. When he loses that, he will be in serious trouble. We will see him asserting that identity throughout the play, right up to his dying breath.

At line 279 Iago is once again put in a position of trust, bringing messages from the Duke and escorting the women to Cyprus. He has not said a word at all in this scene of big public action; he is a functionary lurking in the background. As the meeting breaks up the Duke offers a rather left-handed compliment to Othello, telling Brabantio at line 284, If virtue no delighted beauty lack,/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black. He’s saying that Othello doesn’t act like a black person. He means well, contrasting the Moor’s virtuous behavior with the darkness of his skin that implies that he is a bad person. At line 286 one of the senators tells Othello to use Desdemona well. It’s a rather odd thing to say at a marriage celebration, implying that the groom needs to be reminded about not abusing his wife. Finally an angry Brabantio at line 287 warns Othello that since his daughter had betrayed him, she may do the same to her husband. Iago will remind Othello of this warning later. Othello’s response at line 289 is to reaffirm his belief in his wife’s honesty, my life upon her faith, followed immediately by acknowledging honest Iago, the man who will destroy that faith. This is a conscious juxtaposition on Shakespeare’s part.

The attraction between Othello and Desdemona is very unusual. In the Renaissance there was a movement called neo-Platonism, based on the old Platonic dichotomy between the ideal and the human. This search for the ideal often focused on human relationships, whether friendship, allegiance or love. In the Renaissance people did believe that it was possible to achieve love between humans which was not tainted by the corruption of the flesh. Othello and Desdemona, at least at this point, seem to have such a relationship where the attraction is not physical but spiritual. We’ll examine this relationship in more detail as the play progresses.

In the final portion of this scene, lines 296 – 395, after all the important public people leave the stage, the underworld emerges. The real threat becomes apparent with Iago. What is the relationship between Roderigo and Iago? What is the “real” reason for Iago’s hatred of Othello? How does the form of the language in these 100 lines change and why?

RODERIGO: Iago?

IAGO: What say'st thou, noble heart?

RODERIGO: What will I do, thinkest thou?

IAGO: Why, go to bed, and sleep.

RODERIGO: I will incontinently [immediately] drown myself.

IAGO: If thou dost, I shall never love thee after. Why,

thou silly gentleman!

RODERIGO: It is silliness to live when to live is torment;

and then have we a prescription to die when death is

our physician.

IAGO: O villainous! I have looked upon the world for

four times seven years; and since I could distinguish

betwixt a benefit and an injury, I never found man

that knew how to love himself. Ere I would say I

would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen,

I would change my humanity with a baboon.

RODERIGO: What should I do? I confess it is my shame to be so

fond; but it is not in my virtue [[strength of character] to amend it.

IAGO: Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus

or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which

our wills are gardeners: so that if we will plant

nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up

thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs, or

distract [vary] it with many -- either to have it sterile

with idleness, or manured with industry -- why, the

power and corrigible [corrective] authority of this lies in our

wills. If the balance of our lives had not one

scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the

blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us

to most preposterous conclusions [ends]. But we have

reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal

stings, our unbitted [uncontrolled] lusts, whereof I take this that

you call love to be a sect or scion [offspring].

RODERIGO: It cannot be.

IAGO: It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of

the will. Come, be a man! Drown thyself! Drown

cats and blind puppies. I have professed me thy

friend and I confess me knit to thy deserving with

cables of perdurable toughness; I could never

better stead [serve] thee than now. Put money in thy

purse. Follow thou the wars; defeat thy favor [disguise your face] with

an usurped [fake] beard. I say, put money in thy purse. It

cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her

love to the Moor. Put money in thy purse. Nor he

his to her. It was a violent commencement, and thou

shalt see an answerable sequestration [similar conclusion].Put but

money in thy purse. These Moors are changeable in

their wills. Fill thy purse with money. The food

that to him now is as luscious as locusts [carobs], shall be

to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida [bitter apple]. She must

change for youth; when she is sated with his body,

she will find the error of her choice. Therefore put money in

thy purse. If thou wilt needs damn thyself, do it a

more delicate way than drowning. Make all the money

thou canst. If sanctimony [solemnity] and a frail vow betwixt

an erring [wandering] barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian not

too hard for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou

shalt enjoy her. Therefore make money. A pox of

drowning thyself! It is clean out of the way. Seek

thou rather to be hanged in compassing [achieving] thy joy than

to be drowned and go without her.

RODERIGO: Wilt thou be fast to my hopes, if I depend on

the issue?

IAGO: Thou art sure of me. Go, make money. I have told

thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I

hate the Moor. My cause is hearted [deep-seated]. Thine hath no

less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our revenge

against him. If thou canst cuckold him, thou dost

thyself a pleasure, me a sport. There are many

events in the womb of time which will be delivered.

Traverse, go, provide thy money. We will have more

of this to-morrow. Adieu.

RODERIGO: Where shall we meet i' the morning?

IAGO: At my lodging.

RODERIGO: I'll be with thee betimes.

IAGO: Go to; farewell. Do you hear, Roderigo?

RODERIGO: What say you?

IAGO: No more of drowning, do you hear?

RODERIGO: I am changed. I'll go sell all my land. [Exit]

IAGO: Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:

For I mine own gained [practical] knowledge should profane,

If I would time expend with such a snipe.

But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor:

And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets

He has done my office: I know not if 't be true;

But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,

Will do, as if for surety. He holds me well;

The better shall my purpose work on him.

Cassio's a proper [handsome] man. Let me see now:

To get his place and to plume up my will [gratify my ego]

In double knavery. How? How? Let's see.

After some time, to abuse Othello's ear

That he is too familiar with his wife.

He hath a person and a smooth dispose [manner]

To be suspected, framed to make women false.

The Moor is of a free and open nature,

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,

And will as tenderly be led by the nose

As asses are.

I have 't! It is engendered! Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

Iago’s plotting is what makes this more than just a very powerful love story, makes it one of the greatest pieces of literature ever created. Our search for Iago’s motive for doing what he does is endlessly fascinating. Iago’s relationship with Roderigo is clearly a one-way street. As he says at line 372, Thus do I ever make my fool my purse. At about line 301 we see Iago’s open sarcasm directed at Roderigo, who simply doesn’t get it. When the foolish gentleman says he will kill himself since Desdemona is no longer single, Iago warns if he does, I shall never love thee afterwards. The language in this sequence, around line 296, switches from verse to prose. Verse was used for important public intercourse; prose for private small talk, especially among lower-class villains. The real surprise comes at the very end of the speech, around line 371, when Iago switches from prose back to verse. It’s this shift that reminds us that what Iago tells the audience is close to his real feelings.

If Iago has nothing but contempt for Roderigo, what does he think of Othello and Desdemona? In a series of arguments beginning at around line 338 he tries to convince the gulled gentleman that this marriage cannot last; It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love for the Moor….Nor he his to her. At line 342 he blames this on the Moor’s changeable will, the “will” being a code word for sexual drive. Her sexual favors will soon become bitter to him, as if she had gone from being a locust to a coloquinida. (Your footnotes explain the change.) The same kind of argument can be made about her choice at line 346: She must change for youth. On the second or third day of honeymoon, she’s going to wake up and take a look at this old guy in the bed with her and find the error of her choice. It sounds like a line from a Country-Western ballad. (There’s that suggestion again that Othello is a “little long in the tooth.”) At line 350 Iago declares that all he has to do is to break a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian. Despite all his eloquence, his authority and his service to the State, Othello remains just another “barbarian,” an uncivilized savage. Desdemona is not a superior, independent woman but a “supersubtle Venetian,” meaning an overly promiscuous slut. At line 364 he explains that because he hates Othello so much, if he can help Roderigo cuckold him by sleeping with Desdemona, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport.

Throughout the speech it’s difficult to miss the constant repetition of the line Put money in thy purse. Iago repeats the idea of Roderigo making money at least 10 times in different ways. It’s going to be very expensive for him to play this game of love. The drumbeat of this message is a blatant technique, a lot like really obnoxious commercials on TV. He’s programming the gullible fool.

The final soliloquy at line 371 is very revealing. (Remember, a soliloquy is a speech that only the audience hears where characters reveal their innermost feelings and motives.) The change in the form from prose to verse emphasizes that it is a serious statement. Up to this point all we’ve been told is that he didn’t get the job as Othello’s lieutenant and so wants revenge in a nasty practical joke. At line 376 he calls Roderigo a snipe, a particularly stupid bird. (When I was growing up one of the rituals of becoming a teenager was being taken on a “snipe hunt,” a practical joke for the naïve where you were left in the forest with a flashlight and an empty paper bag.) Iago, at line 378, reveals a bombshell: it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets he hath done my office. Behind the euphemisms he’s saying that people believe Othello slept with Emilia, Iago’s wife! Iago is a cuckold! There’s no preparation for this charge. No one else in the play ever says anything about it, except Emilia, and Iago admits that he doesn’t know for sure if it’s true: But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do for surety; it’s enough for me to just suspect it. If this is how he really feels, we can see why he is so angry with the Moor.

Iago then gives us an assessment of Cassio, and since he is speaking in verse and only to the audience, we must assume this is his honest feeling. He calls him a proper man… He hath a person and a smooth dispose to be suspected – framed to make women false. Cassio is a ladies’ man, the kind of person who would seduce any woman, even his boss’ wife, and she would welcome it! And so we see Iago get the idea of putting his two grievances together at line 386, double knavery – he will accuse Cassio of having an affair with Desdemona. What we see is that Iago had no great master plan of evil. He just gets the idea of destroying Othello’s faith in his wife at this point, as he is about to sail off to Cyprus. Iago also has an assessment of Othello, the man he just called a changeable barbarian. Now he tells us at line 390 The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are. He really sees Othello’s positive qualities, but he will take these very qualities, his openness and trust, and use them against the Moor. Throughout this soliloquy we have seen Iago reveal a different set of motives from the commonplace upset over not getting a promotion. Now we realize the depth of his rage stemming from his suspicion about Othello and his wife and his fear that others see him as a cuckold. In this play about the effects of jealousy on the noble Moor, almost all the agonies he will feel, Iago has experienced first. Iago knows all about the irrationality of jealousy because he felt it in himself.

Shakespeare faced a technical problem with his audience: Iago has put on a series of different roles or persona; he has been the loyal sidekick to the mighty soldier; he has been cynical plotter with Roderigo; he has announced that he is telling his accomplice the low down; now he reveals an angry, conflicted man. Not everyone in Shakespeare’s audience may have followed all these changes successfully. So in the last two lines of Iago’s soliloquy, he has a rhymed couplet, normally used to signal the end of a scene. This couplet does a double duty. Iago here states directly and without pretense that he is a bad man. In reality villains hardly ever announce that they are wicked. They have their own justifications for what they do. But Shakespeare has his villain act as Snively Whiplash, the comic bad guy of the old Rocky and Bullwinkle Show so that even the “groundlings” in the audience, the illiterate masses who paid a penny and stood throughout the play and who didn’t always pay attention, even they got it! When Iago says, I have it! It is engendered! Hell and night must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light, everyone knows he’s up to no good.

Let us go back and look at a very important piece of information that Iago imparts between lines 306 and 331. Roderigo has just threatened to kill himself, claiming that humans have a license to commit suicide if our suffering becomes too great. Iago responds angrily O villainous! I have looked upon the world for four times seven years [he is apparently 28 years old] and since I could distinguish betwixt a benefit and an injury, I never found man that knew how to love himself. Someone like Roderigo, who loves a woman so much he wants to kill himself if he cannot have her, seems ludicrous to Iago. What you need to do is learn to love yourself. Then he puts himself in Roderigo’s position: Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen [for Iago a woman like Desdemona is nothing more than an exotic barnyard fowl of little use] I would change my humanity with a baboon. Once again Iago equates the opposite sex and physical love with animals. It’s that hint of bestiality that Iago seems to evoke with anyone associated with Othello.

Poor Roderigo confesses that he is powerless to change his nature (virtue) at line 312. Roderigo implies that our behavior is something we have no control over. Some higher power (God, Fortune, Nature, etc.) controls what we can or cannot do. Iago lights into him again: Virtue? A fig! ‘Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. Iago will extend this elaborate comparison or conceit to articulate a very modern view of human behavior. He will argue that we are what we choose to make ourselves, a conscious choice made by our wills. He will go on to list the gardening choices our wills might make, planting weeds, such as nettles, or useful vegetables, such as lettuce. Iago will touch on different philosophies of gardening at that time: whether to cultivate just one kind of plant, one gender of herbs, or to do as many different kinds of plants as possible, distract it with many. The difference between people, just as the difference between gardens -- some sterile with idleness, some manured with industry – depends on our wills.

As Iago proceeds with his comparison we can see an interesting parallel with Freud’s concepts of the ego, superego and id. (If there is any validity to these psychological constructs, they existed before Freud came along and gave them names in the late 19th Century.) Shakespeare is making the same kind of division of human life. At line 321 Iago tells us

If the balance of our lives had not one

scale of reason [the superego] to poise another of sensuality [the ego], the

blood and baseness of our natures [the id] would conduct us

to most preposterous conclusions.

Iago sees, as did Freud, the idea of a balance in our lives between raging impulses that lead to self-destructive behavior and a kind of control mechanism in the form of what he calls “reason.” What Roderigo calls “love” is simply a sect or scion of one of those impulses of our baseness, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts. “Unbitted” refers to an untamed horse, not used to the bit; “sect or scion” means a subdivision or an offshoot. Now for a courtly gentleman who built an entire way of life upon the Renaissance glorification of love, this is heresy. It means that all his noble impulses and creative achievements are no more than the reflexive response to an itch. Iago repeats his assertion at line 330: It is a lust of the blood and permission of the will. Suicide by drowning? Take your mind off it! Try one of the things that must have amused Iago over the years: Drown cats and blinds puppies! It’s revealing what Iago offers as an alternative to languishing for love.

I suggested that Iago’s philosophy of the “garden” resembled the ideas of Freud. Shakespeare’s audience would have seen the similarities to the concepts of Machiavelli, the great Italian political scientist. Machiavelli had written The Prince in the early 1500’s in an effort to impress one of the powerful de Medici rulers. He had described the means of amassing and holding on to power in an unsentimental and totally cynical manner. The book argued that the successful political leader or prince cannot afford to view human behavior as anything other than the exercise of the will. He chooses how he will act; it is not directed by any higher power. This freedom of action gave the leader a real advantage in a society where everyone else continued to believe that events were the will of God or predestined by forces beyond the understanding of men. The prince would remain in power as long as he did not fall into this supernatural trap and could manipulate the superstitions of others. To us Machiavelli seems to be a very modern thinker; in Shakespeare’s time he was seen as dangerously subversive of the moral order. It’s no wonder that Shakespeare’s great villains, such as Richard III or Edmund in King Lear, are associated with the ideas of Machiavelli.

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Act II, Scene 1

The opening lines of this scene are taken up with the arrival of a series of sailing ships at Cyprus, interspersed with news of the destruction of the Turkish fleet. First, in Shakespeare’s limited theater, these ships have to arrive off-stage. Second, these ships arrive in a very rapid fashion. In reality the arrival of a sailing ship would probably take hours for the ship to approach and be maneuvered into position and then tied fast to the dock. What we get is three ships arriving in a matter of minutes – first Cassio, then Iago with Desdemona and his wife Emilia and finally Othello. Everyone is anxious for the arrival of the general, and so until he comes in, there is an exchange of pleasantries. Desdemona is naturally worried about the safety of her husband. Cassio is a caring and courtly companion. Iago emerges as a kind of low-class comedian. Beneath the surface there is a subtext. See if you can spot what motivates Cassio in this sequence and what Iago reveals, especially in his asides. [Act I, scene 1, line 1 – 179]

MONTANO: What from the cape can you discern at sea?

GENTLEMAN 1: Nothing at all: it is a high-wrought flood.

I cannot, 'twixt the heaven and the main,

Descry a sail.

MONTANO: Methinks the wind hath spoke aloud at land;

A fuller blast ne'er shook our battlements.

If it hath ruffianed [raged] so upon the sea,

What ribs of oak, when mountains melt on them,

Can hold the mortise? What shall we hear of this?

GENTLEMAN 2: A segregation [separation] of the Turkish fleet.

For do but stand upon the foaming shore,

The chidden billow seems to pelt the clouds;

The wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous main [ocean],

Seems to cast water on the burning Bear [constellation of Ursa Major],

And quench the guards of the ever-fixed pole [stars around the Pole Star or Polaris].

I never did like molestation [disturbance] view

On the enchafed flood.

MONTANO: If that the Turkish fleet

Be not ensheltered and embay'e, they are drowned:

It is impossible they bear it out. [Enter a Gentleman]

GENTLEMAN 3: News, lads! our wars are done.

The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks,

That their designment halts. A noble ship of Venice

Hath seen a grievous wreck and sufferance [damage]

On most part of their fleet.

MONTANO: How? Is this true?

GENTLEMAN 3 : The ship is here put in,

A Veronesa [a kind of ship]; Michael Cassio,

Lieutenant to the warlike Moor Othello,

Is come on shore; the Moor himself at sea,

And is in full commission here for Cyprus.

MONTANO: I am glad on't. 'Tis a worthy governor.

GENTLEMAN 3: But this same Cassio, though he speak of comfort

Touching the Turkish loss, yet he looks sadly,

And prays the Moor be safe, for they were parted

With foul and violent tempest.

MONTANO: Pray heavens he be;

For I have served him, and the man commands

Like a full soldier. Let's to the seaside, ho!

As well to see the vessel that's come in

As to throw out our eyes for brave Othello,

Even till we make the main and the aerial blue

An indistinct regard [sea and sky indistinguishable].

GENTLEMAN 3: Come, let's do so;

For every minute is expectancy

Of more arrivance [arrivals]. [Enter CASSIO]

CASSIO: Thanks, you the valiant of this warlike isle,

That so approve [honor] the Moor. O, let the heavens

Give him defense against the elements,

For I have lost us him on a dangerous sea.

MONTANO: Is he well shipped?

CASSIO: His bark is stoutly timbered, his pilot

Of very expert and approved allowance [known and tested];

Therefore my hopes, not surfeited to death [not in danger of dying],

Stand in bold cure [have hopes of being restored].

[A cry within 'A sail, a sail, a sail!' Enter GENTLEMAN 4]

CASSIO: What noise?

GENTLEMAN 4: The town is empty; on the brow o' the sea

Stand ranks of people, and they cry 'A sail!'

CASSIO: My hopes do shape him for the governor. [Guns heard]

GENTLEMAN 2: They do discharge their shot of courtesy:

Our friends at least.

CASSIO: I pray you, sir, go forth,

And give us truth who 'tis that is arrived.

GENTLEMAN 2: I shall. [Exit]

MONTANO: But, good lieutenant, is your general wived?

CASSIO: Most fortunately. He hath achieved a maid

That paragons [exceeds] description and wild fame [extravagant report];

One that excels the quirks [ingenuities] of blazoning pens,

And in the essential vesture of creation [essential human nature bestowed in Creation]

Does tire the ingener [outdoes imagination].

[Re-enter GENTLEMAN 2]

How now? who has put in?

GENTLEMAN 2: 'Tis one Iago, ancient to the general.

CASSIO: H’as had most favorable and happy speed.

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,

The guttered [jagged] rocks and congregated [gathered] sands,

Traitors ensteeped [sunken] to enclog the guiltless keel,

As having sense [awareness] of beauty, do omit

Their mortal [deadly] natures, letting go safely by

The divine Desdemona.

MONTANO: What is she?

CASSIO: She that I spake of, our great captain's captain,

Left in the conduct of the bold Iago,

Whose footing [landing] here anticipates our thoughts

A se'nnight's [week’s] speed. Great Jove, Othello guard,

And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,

That he may bless this bay with his tall [brave] ship,

Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms,

Give renewed fire to our extincted spirits

[Enter DESDEMONA, EMILIA, IAGO, RODERIGO, and Attendants]

O, behold! The riches of the ship is come on shore!

You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees. [Kneeling]

Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,

Before, behind thee, and on every hand,

Enwheel thee round!

DESDEMONA: I thank you, valiant Cassio.

What tidings can you tell me of my lord?

CASSIO: He is not yet arrived, nor know I aught

But that he's well and will be shortly here.

DESDEMONA: O, but I fear. How lost you company?

CASSIO: The great contention of the sea and skies

Parted our fellowship— [Within 'A sail, a sail!' Guns heard]

But, hark. A sail!

GENTLEMAN 2: They give their greeting to the citadel;

This likewise is a friend.

CASSIO: See for the news. [Exit Gentleman]

Good ancient, you are welcome. [To EMILIA] Welcome, mistress.

Let it not gall your patience, good Iago,

That I extend [stretch] my manners. 'Tis my breeding [training as a gentleman]

That gives me this bold show of courtesy. [Kissing her]

IAGO: Sir, would she give you so much of her lips

As of her tongue she oft bestows on me,

You'll have enough.

DESDEMONA: Alas, she has no speech.

IAGO: In faith, too much;

I find it still, when I have leave to sleep [when she allows me to sleep].

Marry, before your ladyship [in your presence], I grant,

She puts her tongue a little in her heart,

And chides with thinking.

EMILIA: You have little cause to say so.

IAGO: Come on, come on; you are pictures [models of good]out of doors,

Bells [noisy] in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens,

Saints m your injuries [revenges], devils being offended,

Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds.

DESDEMONA: O, fie upon thee, slanderer!

IAGO: Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk:

You rise to play and go to bed to work.

EMILIA: You shall not write my praise.

IAGO: No, let me not.

DESDEMONA: What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?

IAGO: O gentle lady, do not put me to 't;

For I am nothing, if not critical.

DESDEMONA: Come on, assay. There's one gone to the harbor?

IAGO: Ay, madam.

DESDEMONA [Aside]: I am not merry; but I do beguile

The thing I am, by seeming otherwise.

Come, how wouldst thou praise me?

IAGO: I am about it; but indeed my invention

Comes from my pate as birdlime [sticky stuff] does from frieze [rough cloth] --

It plucks out brains and all. But my Muse labors,

And thus she is delivered:

If she be fair [light-complexioned] and wise: fairness and wit,

The one's for use, the other useth it.

DESDEMONA: Well praised! How if she be black and witty?

IAGO: If she be black [brunette] and thereto have a wit,

She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.

DESDEMONA: Worse and worse!

EMILIA: How if fair and foolish?

IAGO: She never yet was foolish that was fair,

For even her folly helped her to an heir.

DESDEMONA: These are old fond paradoxes [foolish riddles] to make fools

laugh i' the alehouse. What miserable praise

hast thou for her that's foul and foolish?

IAGO: There's none so foul and foolish thereunto,

But does foul pranks which fair and wise ones do.

DESDEMONA: O heavy ignorance! Thou praisest the worst

best. But what praise couldst thou bestow on

a deserving woman indeed, one that, in the authority

of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very

malice itself [a woman truly honest and deserving that even Malice would have to approve of]

IAGO: She that was ever fair and never proud;

Had tongue at will and yet was never loud;

Never lacked gold and yet went never gay [overdressed];

Fled from her wish and yet said 'Now I may,'

She that being angered, her revenge being nigh,

Bade her wrong stay and her displeasure fly;

She that in wisdom never was so frail

To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail [to trade something worthless for something valuable];

She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind,

See suitors following and not look behind,

She was a wight [person] ( if ever such wight were) --

DESDEMONA: To do what?

IAGO: To suckle fools and chronicle small beer [keep household accounts of trivia].

DESDEMONA: O most lame and impotent conclusion!

Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband.

How say you, Cassio? is he not a most profane?

and liberal [licentious] counselor?

CASSIO: He speaks home [bluntly], madam: You may relish

him more in the soldier than in the scholar. [Takes her hand]

IAGO: [Aside] He takes her by the palm: ay, well said,

whisper. With as little a web as this will I ensnare

as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do! I

will gyve [entangle] thee in thine own courtship. -- You say

true; 'tis so, indeed! -- If such tricks as these strip

you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you

had not kissed your three fingers so oft -- which now

again you are most apt to play the sir [courtly gentleman] in. Very good! Well kissed! An excellent curtesy [bow] 'Tis so,

indeed. Yet again your fingers to your lips? Would

they were clyster-pipes [enema tubes] for your sake!

[Trumpet within]

The Moor! I know his trumpet.

CASSIO: 'Tis truly so.

DESDEMONA: Let's meet him and receive him.

CASSIO: Lo, where he comes!

This sequence was the equivalent of George Lucas’ special effects spectacular on Shakespeare’s stage. We have the raging storm, the destruction of the Turkish fleet, the excitement of the arriving ships, all described in vivid detail and punctuated by cannons and trumpets signaling off-stage action. At line 21 the looming public menace, the invasion by the Turks, is declared over; now Iago’s private menace has more room to work. The suspense throughout the entire sequence is Othello’s safety. Cassio arrives first at line 43, even though he was the second one to set sail from Venice, several hours after the general. Then Iago with the women arrives at line 82 even though they had departed a day after Othello. The Moor finally gets there at line 179. Such were the vagaries of traveling by sail, dependent upon wind and tide, as well as the ever-present danger of not showing up at all!

Cassio’s landing first gives him a chance to shine as the quintessential courtly gentleman. He is Othello’s loyal subordinate, but he enjoys being the center of attention. At line 43 he thanks the people of Cyprus for their approval of his boss, Othello. At line 77 he conducts a prayer for Othello’s safety to Jove. (It was illegal to use God’s name on stage, being considered an act of blasphemy.) It is in Cassio’s behavior as a courtly gentleman that he plays his most important role. At lines 61 – 64 he describes Desdemona with an extravagant courtly vocabulary: paragons description and wild fame; excels the quirks of blazoning pens; essential vesture of creation. Desdemona is beyond the ability of mere humans to describe her, having a supernatural divinity to her beauty. The love of Desdemona and Othello is blessed by Jove himself. When her ship arrives, Cassio really overdoes his courtly routine at line 67, telling the onlookers that her ship escaped the dangers of rocks, winds, tides and sands because of her divine beauty. At line 80 he implies that the success of the military mission is dependent upon Othello and Desdemona’s loving embrace once he arrives. As she enters, at line 82, followed by Emilia and Iago (probably carrying all the luggage), Cassio really lays it on thick:

O, behold! The riches of the ship is come on shore!

Ye men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.

Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,

Before, behind thee, and on every hand,

Enwheel thee round!

In performance this action really stands out. We have a remote military outpost, surrounded by desperate enemies, in the middle of a storm with everything wet and muddy, and here is Cassio insisting that all the soldiers kneel as if welcoming a goddess or saint. His blessing here is one of the most poetic passages of its kind in all the plays, but the gesture in this situation is excessive. Desdemona’s reaction reminds everyone of what should be most important – What tidings can you tell me of my lord? Despite his assurances, she worries about Othello. With the sound of the cannon at line 92 they know a third ship has arrived. Finally, Cassio welcomes Iago at line 95 and then next he welcomes Iago’s wife, whom we see for the first time. He does so by apologizing to her husband for kissing her, just as he probably had Desdemona: Let it not gall your patience, good Iago, that I extend my manners. ‘Tis my breeding that gives me this bold show of courtesy. What he is saying here is that Emilia is of the lower class, but he extends his manners to treat her as if she too were the worthy recipient of his courtesy. In effect, he is such a gentleman he can’t help himself. (The public kiss was one of the hallmarks of the courtly class.) Like the kneeling this is probably an excessive gesture under these circumstances.

Iago’s response at line 102 is very revealing – he attacks his wife, ridiculing her, calling her names, as if she had done something wrong. When Emilia is speechless, Iago turns that into a joke at line 103: In faith, too much. I find it still when I have leave to sleep. She scolds me when we’re alone, even when I try to sleep. Now that we’re in public, she has to hold her tongue but she chides with thinking. At line 108 he generalizes from his wife to all women, whom he accuses of being pictures out of doors, pretending to be well-behaved out in public, but at home in private their real nature comes out. They are bells in your parlors, always clanging noisily; wildcats in your kitchens, fighting their foes viciously; saint in your injuries, religious in their dedication for revenge; devils being offended, satanic when someone wrongs them; players in your housewifery, actors or deceivers in pretending to be economical and efficient taking care of the home; housewives in your beds, that is they parcel out their sexual favors to get what they want. Given Iago’s earlier dehumanization of Othello and Desdemona, it comes as no surprise that he thinks of women as animals, saints or devils. At this point Desdemona subtly interposes herself between Iago and Emilia, answering his slanders and challenging him to turn his comic attack on her. This is the kind of thing we would expect of the general’s wife, a gentlewoman, trying to ease a socially awkward moment. At line 115 she invites Iago to comment upon her.

Iago has this persona or mask as the plain-spoken, politically-incorrect professional soldier with a heart of gold. He uses this mask effectively here to hide his genuine disdain for all women. He’s like the “lovable” bigot Archie Bunker on the old All In the Family sitcom; he pretends to be tough and nasty, but underneath it all, he really loves his long-suffering wife and daughter and even Meathead, his son-in-law. Iago pretends as if he is were just playing around while he catalogues all the different kinds of women he can think of, being a lovable male chauvinist, but in reality he reveals to us a real loathing for all women, especially a superior woman like Desdemona. At line 127 he starts with a woman who is fair and wise, that is physically attractive and smart. Such a woman, he says, knows enough to use her beauty to get what she wants. Desdemona asks how he would praise a woman black and witty, “black” in the sense of being unattractive according to the blonde standards of feminine beauty of those days. Iago answers with a rhymed couple that says she will still find someone to take advantage of. And so Iago covers each of the possibilities of womanly charm in a series of couplets that he tells us he is making up as he goes along. Finally at line 143 Desdemona challenges him to describe a really deserving woman, and so at line 146 Iago begins his longest response, a series of six couplets to talk about a woman who is fair, but not overly proud as a result; who was well-spoken but not excessively loud or garrulous; who had gold but did not overdress just because she had the money; who had self-control; who could control her desire to seek revenge for slights; who had enough sense to tell the difference between the useful and the useless; who could think without blabbing her every thought and who could avoid being distracted by others’ reactions. If such as superior woman ever existed (which Iago implies probably will never happen) – and he makes Desdemona wait for his payoff line at 157 so that she asks, To do what? – she is worth no more than to suckle fools and chronicle small beer. The best woman in the world is good for no more than to have fools as children (or even worse, “fools” in the sense of illegitimate children) and to keep household accounts of insignificant items like “small beer.”

While Iago’s behavior here probably gets laughs from the uncouth soldiers hanging around, it offends Cassio, who thinks of women as divine. When Desdemona laughing tells Emilia not pay attention and calls him a most profane and liberal counselor (a nice way of saying he is foul-mouthed), Cassio says, He speaks home, madam. He is blunt, but also with the sense of being countrified or uneducated. Cassio reinforces this sense when he adds, You may relish him more in the soldier than the scholar. He’s only a common soldier from whom you cannot expect courtly manners. He takes Desdemona’s hand and leads her away, some distance from the contamination of the uneducated. The two of them will whisper and ignore the others, treating them as social inferiors. This physical separation reminds everyone of the social gulf between the groups on stage. We’ve all had this happen to us, whether it was teachers talking as if their students were not present or supervisors on the job. This physical isolation sets up a barrier. Cassio and Desdemona are both members of the gentle class, with common values and language.

Shakespeare shows us this isolation through Iago’s observations beginning at line 165. He speaks to them, as if they could hear, but he’s really commenting on their behavior for us: He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper! Whispering is intimate, sharing a secret. Iago tells us With as little a web as this will I ensnare a fly as great as Cassio. He sees in their physical actions which proclaim their exclusivity the basis of his plot against them with Othello. Now when Cassio smiles upon Desdemona, Iago exults, I will gyve thee in thy own courtship. He is indeed “practicing” his courtship, not in the sense of wooing Desdemona but in playing the courtly gentleman. At line 168 he interrupts his train of thought to compliment Cassio on something cleverly he apparently just said. The he tells us, If tricks such as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kissed your three fingers so oft – which now again you are most apt to play the sir in. One of the more affected gestures of courtly gentleman was to kiss their three fingers as a sign of approval, as well as their own superiority. To Iago this is just one more example of a phony gentleman pretending to be someone important, playing the sir. To Iago there is no difference between the two of them – they are both playing a part. Cassio kisses his fingers again, which Iago calls a curtsy, a self-conscious act of courtesy. And when Cassio kisses his fingers a third time, Iago reveals the depth of his class hatred: Would they were clyster pipes for thy sake! He wishes Cassio were kissing the tubes of an enema bag! Boy, that is some image and shows us how much he despises Cassio and all those who lord it over him. It is this social dimension, this social superiority which underlies his desire to destroy not just Cassio but Desdemona as well, Late in the play he will tell us Cassio has a beauty in his daily life that makes me ugly, another aspect of this class hatred.

In the final sequence we get the arrival of Othello and the reaffirmation of their love in the face of danger. Then in the final hundred lines we will get a heart-to-heart talk between Iago and Roderigo. Notice how this scene ends in a way very similar to the way the previous scene, Act I, scene 3, ended. [Act II, scene 1, lines 179 – 312]

OTHELLO: O my fair warrior!

DESDEMONA: My dear Othello!

OTHELLO: It gives me wonder great as my content

To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!

If after every tempest come such calms,

May the winds blow till they have wakened death.

And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas

Olympus-high, and duck again as low

As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die,

'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear,

My soul hath her content so absolute

That not another comfort like to this

Succeeds in unknown fate.

DESDEMONA: The heavens forbid

But that our loves and comforts should increase,

Even as our days do grow.

OTHELLO: Amen to that, sweet powers!

I cannot speak enough of this content;

It stops me here [touches his heart]; it is too much of joy.

And this, and this, the greatest discords be [They kiss]

That e'er our hearts shall make!

IAGO: [Aside] O, you are well tuned now!

But I'll set down the pegs [loosen the pegs on an instrument to create discord] that make this music,

As honest as I am.

OTHELLO: Come, let us to the castle.

News, friends! Our wars are done; the Turks re drowned.

How does my old acquaintance of this isle?

Honey, you shall be well desired in Cyprus;

I have found great love amongst them. O my sweet,

I prattle out of fashion, and I dote

In mine own comforts. I prithee, good Iago,

Go to the bay and disembark my coffers.

Bring thou the master to the citadel;

He is a good one, and his worthiness

Does challenge [require] much respect. Come, Desdemona,

Once more, well met at Cyprus.

[Exeunt OTHELLO, DESDEMONA, and Attendants]

IAGO: [To ATTENDANT] Do thou meet me presently

at the harbor. [To RODERIGO] Come hither. If thou

be'st valiant (as, they say, base men being in love

have then a nobility in their natures more than is

native to them), list me. The lieutenant tonight

watches on the court of guard [guardhouse]. First, I must tell thee this: Desdemona is directly in love with him.

RODERIGO: With him? Why, 'tis not possible.

IAGO: Lay thy finger thus [to his lips],

and let thy soul be instructed. Mark me with

what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging

and telling her fantastical lies. And will she love him still for prating? Let not thy discreet heart think it. Her

eye must be fed. And what delight shall she have to

look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with

the game of sport, there should be, again to inflame it

and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in

favor [appearance], sympathy [nearness] in years, manners and beauties;

all which the Moor is defective in. Now, for want of

these required conveniences [advantages], her delicate tenderness

will find itself abused, begin to heave the

gorge [vomit], disrelish and abhor the Moor; very nature

will instruct her in it and compel her to some second

choice. Now, sir, this granted--as it is a most

pregnant [likely] and unforced position--who stands so

eminent in the degree of this fortune as Cassio does?

A knave very voluble; no further conscionable [having no more conscience]

than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane [polite] seeming, for the better compassing of his salt [lecherous]

and most hidden loose affection? Why, none! Why,

none! A slipper [slippery] and subtle knave, a finder of

occasion, that has an eye can stamp and counterfeit

advantages, though true advantage never present

itself. A devilish knave. Besides, the knave is handsome,

young, and hath all those requisites in him

that folly and green minds look after. A pestilent

complete knave, and the woman hath found him already.

RODERIGO: I cannot believe that in her; she's full of most

blessed condition.

IAGO: Blessed fig's-end! The wine she drinks is made of

grapes. If she had been blessed, she would never

have loved the Moor. Blessed pudding! Didst thou

not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Didst

not mark that?

RODERIGO: Yes, that I did; but that was but courtesy.

IAGO: Lechery, by this hand! [He extends his index finger]

An index [pointer] and obscure prologue to the history

of lust and foul thoughts. They met so near with their

lips that their breaths embraced together. Villainous

thoughts, Roderigo! when these mutualities so

marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and

main exercise, the incorporate [carnal] conclusion, Pish!

But, sir, be you ruled by me. I have brought you

from Venice. Watch you to-night; for the command,

I'll lay 't upon you. Cassio knows you not. I'll not be

far from you. Do you find some occasion to anger

Cassio, either by speaking too loud, or tainting his

discipline; or from what other course you please,

which the time shall more favorably minister.

RODERIGO: Well.

IAGO: Sir, he is rash and very sudden in choler, and

haply may strike at you. Provoke him, that he may;

for even out of that will I cause these of Cyprus to

mutiny, whose qualification [appeasement] shall come into no true

taste again but by the displanting [firing] of Cassio. So

shall you have a shorter journey to your desires by

the means I shall then have to prefer them; and the

impediment most profitably removed, without the

which there were no expectation of our prosperity.

RODERIGO: I will do this, if I can bring it to any opportunity.

IAGO: I warrant thee. Meet me by and by at the citadel.

I must fetch his necessaries ashore. Farewell.

RODERIGO: Adieu. [Exit]

IAGO : That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it;

That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.

The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,

Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,

And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona

A most dear husband. Now, I do love her too;

Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure

I stand accountant for as great a sin,

But partly led to diet [feed] my revenge,

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor

Hath leaped into my seat; the thought whereof

Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;

And nothing can or shall content my soul

Till I am evened with him, wife for wife,

Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor

At least into a jealousy so strong

That judgment cannot cure. Which thing to do,

If this poor trash of Venice, whom I trace [use]

For his quick hunting, stand the putting on,

I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,

Abuse him to the Moor in the right garb [proper fashion]

(For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too)

Make the Moor thank me, love me and reward me.

For making him egregiously an ass

And practicing upon [plotting to destroy] his peace and quiet

Even to madness. 'Tis here, but yet confused.

Knavery's plain face is never seen till used.

In this sequence we have an extreme range of emotional responses. When Othello arrives and sees Desdemona, his joy is transcendent. If she was worried about him until his ship put in, he must have been frantic with worry about her in the storm. He calls her My fair warrior. Remember that she told us it was Othello’s identity as a soldier that attracted her, an identity she will seek to share: She wished heaven had made her such a man. For Othello her desire to share his experience makes his soldiering that much more the core of his being. At line 182 he calls her my soul’s joy. Again we see the spiritual aspect of their love. Othello then goes into a hyperbole on his relief at her safety and the love he feels, saying that to experience such calms, he would wish the winds to blow till they have wakened death. This is putting his love on a metaphysical level! He would wish the laboring bark climb hills of seas Olympus-high, and duck again as low as hell’s from heaven. Othello’s expression of love encompasses the cosmos and is expressed in the same pattern of repeated sounds we saw back in Act I, scene 3: notice the repeated “h” sounds in the line above – hills, high, hell’s, heaven. Traveling by ship in these days was a very dangerous proposition, and when passengers all survive the storm and arrive safely, they have every reason to feel lucky. Othello concludes his hyperbole of joy at line 187 declaring If it were now to die, ‘Twere now to be most happy. If he had to die at this instant, he would be at his most joyful moment. He goes on to explain; for I fear my soul hath her content so absolute that not another comfort like to this succeeds in unknown fate. In other words, this is the happiest he will ever be in his life. In a very real sense he is absolutely correct: from this point on Othello and Desdemona’s happiness will be corrupted by Iago. Othello’s wild statement here is almost like provoking the gods – I’ll never have it this good again! – and Desdemona quickly tries to qualify her husband’s joy: The heavens forbid but that our loves and comforts should increase even as our days do grow. Of course, our lives will get better and better! Othello announces the news again about the destruction of the Turkish fleet and sends Iago to get the luggage off his ship and to bring the ship captain to the castle to be rewarded. He and Desdemona hurry off to be alone.

Switching from verse to prose Iago begins once again to manipulate Roderigo. First, he has to convince the gullible gentleman that Cassio and Desdemona lust for each other. You can see how Iago’s mind works as he puts the worst possible interpretation on what passed between the two of them in the brief moments before Othello arrived, the courtly ritual that Roderigo and we in the audience undoubtedly saw as innocent exchange. Oh, no, says Iago, they were holding hands, they were whispering, they were laughing – all sure signs of lust! Othello and Desdemona have just been married for a few hours -- if you don’t count the time for the trip to Cyprus – and the marriage is already in trouble! He seeks to convince Roderigo of this unbelievable development. At line 221 he reminds him with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastic lies. So much for Desdemona and Othello’s spiritual kinship. And to love him still for prating? You can’t fool a guy like Iago. A beautiful woman falls for a guy’s line for a one-night stand, but for the rest of her life? I don’t think so! She has to have visual delight, and what delight shall she have to look on the devil. We get another reminder of that old satanic prejudice we saw back in the first scene. At line 229 Iago reminds Roderigo that Othello is deficient in loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners and beauties. Once again we get the idea of the age difference between the two as well as the cultural gap between the sophisticated gentle lady and the rough professional soldier. Because of these differences she will regret her choice, actually heave the gorge, vomit, not a good sign in any marriage. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to a second choice. If you accept his premise, then it’s only a question of time before she’ll start looking around for a new guy. And who better than Cassio? A knave very voluble [smooth-tongued], no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compass of his salt and most hidden loose affection. This is Iago’s view of the courtly gentleman: he is a fast talker without a conscience who will do anything to get what he wants. All his talk about honor and cultural superiority is just play-acting to get girls into bed. He asserts that Cassio is a master at this con and at line 241 calls him a slipper and subtle knave, a finder of occasion. “Subtle” is a not a good word; it implies deceit and trickery. Besides, he is handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after. Not only does he look the part, but apparently Desdemona, like all women, is foolish and immature, “green.” And she has already got her eye on him.

At this point, line 249, poor Roderigo is appalled! He can’t believe this about Desdemona, who he says is full of blessed condition. She’s too good to start an adulterous affair with Cassio. Now remember, Roderigo has followed her to Cyprus and spent all his money and is wandering around in a fake beard precisely because he does hope Desdemona will start an adulterous affair – with him. But when Iago says she is promiscuous, Roderigo is not prepared to accept the news. Unclear on concept!

Iago catalogues the physical evidence beginning at line 253. She was paddling with the palm of his hand, and their breaths embraced together. These signs were an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts. Iago’s description of the possible sexual attraction is curiously formal and detached. At line 261 he observes,

When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, the incorporate conclusion. It’s hardly sexually arousing language, especially from the man who described “making the beast with two backs” back in the opening scene. But he is talking with Roderigo, who fancies himself a gentleman, and this is the kind of high-faulting language we’ve heard Cassio and Roderigo use in the past. Iago uses language to fit his victim and his purpose: Brabantio got provocative language to make him lose his temper; Roderigo gets indirect language to ease him into the idea that Desdemona is in lust with someone else. He then gets into the details of the plot he has in mind for Cassio: make him mad and then use that to cause a mutiny among the men of Cyprus and get Cassio fired. With him out of the way, Roderigo will have a better chance at the horny Desdemona. Roderigo cheerfully agrees to the plan.

The way this scene is organized is very much like the preceding scene with the long passage of public interaction, highlighted by Othello and Desdemona declaring their love. Then Iago and Roderigo plot together as the ancient manipulates the gullible gentleman, all in prose. Finally, Iago, in a soliloquy in verse, reveals his innermost feelings and his real motives. This similarity in structure is deliberate, because Shakespeare wants us to see the way Iago’s mind works. What is left unsaid in this soliloquy is as important as what is said.

At line 286 he tells us That Cassio loves her, I do well believe it. That she loves him, ‘tis apt and of great credit. What we may have thought was just a line to fool Roderigo, that Cassio has the hots for Desdemona, Iago really believes. That Desdemona reciprocates his passion, “It could happen,” says Iago. Then he gives us his assessment of Othello’s love: The Moor, howbeit I endure him not, is of a constant, loving, noble nature, and I dare think he’ll prove to Desdemona a most dear husband. Here is Othello’s arch enemy praising him; when that happens in a Shakespearean play, you know the hero is a super good guy. While Othello will be true to his marriage vow, neither of the gentle folks, Cassio or Desdemona, will be.

At line 291 Iago makes a remarkable admission: Now, I do love her too; not out of absolute lust, though peradventure I stand accountant for as great a sin. Iago does not use the word “love” that often in the play, and when he does it is not in the sense that we normally use the word.. In Cinthio’s story on which Shakespeare based the play Iago lusted after Desdemona, and her rejection triggered his murderous plot. In this play, however, Iago never seems interested in any women, except as a means of manipulating men. So when he says he “loves” Desdemona it feels very creepy. like a sexual pervert lusting after a woman he intends to cause great pain. Even this declaration he qualifies at line 294:

But partly led to diet my revenge,

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor

Hath leaped into my seat; the thought whereof

Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;

And nothing can or shall content my soul

Till I am evened with him, wife for wife,

Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor

At least into a jealousy so strong

That judgment cannot cure.

Iago “loves” Desdemona in order to be revenged upon Othello. It is interesting that Iago never speaks of inflicting pain on his wife, Emilia. Perhaps he thinks women are predisposed to be false, so he cannot derive pleasure from her suffering. Iago uses euphemisms to describe what he thinks Othello has done to him. In the previous scene it was “’twixt my sheets he has done my office.” Here it is that Othello “leaped into my seat.” We can see how Iago is affected by this idea – the thought “gnaws my inwards.” All the pain that Othello is about to undergo Iago has already suffered. (A similar theme of men committing adultery to be revenged on other men is explored in the comedy Tin Men about two siding salesmen in Baltimore.) Iago will exact his revenge using Roderigo who at line 393 he refers to as a hunting dog by getting at Othello’s lieutenant, Cassio, whom Iago at line 307 reveals he also suspects of sleeping with his wife: I fear Cassio with my nightcap too. Where did this come from? It’s the only time it’s mentioned in the play. Iago didn’t say anything about it in the last scene. What has happened to bring this accusation up? The only thing that passed between Emilia and Cassio was that awkward kiss for which Cassio apologized even before he kissed her, claiming it was his “breeding.” Apparently that one little kiss was enough for Iago to add Cassio to his special enemies list. So he will be revenged upon Cassio by getting his job and by making the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me for making him egregiously an ass and practicing up his peace and quiet. With Iago it’s not enough to destroy Othello’s love for Desdemona; he has to deceive the Moor as to his motives. Iago gets a big kick out of deceiving people. Just as in the previous scene, the soliloquy ends with a “Snively Whiplash moment” where our consummate villain lets everyone know he’s up to no good: ‘Tis here, but yet confused: knavery’s plain face is never seen till used. Yes. Iago is in total control. He knows exactly what he is doing -- except now we’re not so sure. If Cassio gets put on the “hit list” just because he was nice to Emilia, maybe Iago isn’t in control after all. Maybe what is happening in the words of Iago’s philosophical statement back in Act I, scene 3, is that the blood and baseness of our natures conducts us to most preposterous conclusions. This is the key to understanding Iago in this play: he presents himself as this all-powerful, all-knowing control freak. But beneath the veneer of self-control Iago acts in ways that are self-destructive. There is no rational reason why he should suspect Cassio, but he does and it will help destroy him.

Go to Menu

Act II, Scene 2

This is a short scene where a herald comes out and reads a proclamation about the destruction of the Turkish fleet and the end of the public threat to the island. It is almost always cut in production.

Go to Menu

Act II, Scene 3

Now Iago’s private attack takes shape. While Othello and Desdemona go off to spend the night together, finally, Iago will present still another persona or mask in the opening lines of this scene as he interacts with Cassio. [Act II, scene 3, lines 1 – 134]

OTHELLO: Good Michael, look you to the guard to-night.

Let's teach ourselves that honorable stop,

Not to outsport discretion.

CASSIO: Iago hath direction what to do;

But, notwithstanding, with my personal eye

Will I look to't.

OTHELLO: Iago is most honest.

Michael, good night. To-morrow with your earliest

Let me have speech with you. [To DESDEMONA]

Come, my dear love,

The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;

That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.

Good night. [Exit OTHELLO and DESDEMONA]

[Enter IAGO]

CASSIO: Welcome, Iago. We must to the watch.

IAGO: Not this hour, lieutenant; 'tis not yet ten o' the

clock. Our general cast [dismissed]us thus early for the love

of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame.

He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and

she is sport for Jove.

CASSIO: She's a most exquisite lady.

IAGO: And, I'll warrant her, fun of game.

CASSIO: Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.

IAGO: What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley of

provocation.

CASSIO: An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

IAGO: And when she speaks, is it not an alarum [call to action]to love?

CASSIO: She is indeed perfection.

IAGO: Well, happiness to their sheets! Come, lieutenant,

I have a stoup [tankard] of wine; and here without are a

brace [pair of] of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a

measure to the health of black Othello.

CASSIO: Not to-night, good Iago: I have very poor and

unhappy brains for drinking; I could well wish

courtesy would invent some other custom of

entertainment.

IAGO: O, they are our friends; but one cup. I'll drink for

you.

CASSIO: I have drunk but one cup to-night, and that was

craftily qualified [diluted] too, and, behold, what innovation

it makes here. I am unfortunate in the infirmity,

and dare not task my weakness with any more.

IAGO: What, man! 'tis a night of revels. The gallants

desire it.

CASSIO: Where are they?

IAGO: Here at the door; I pray you, call them in.

CASSIO: I'll do't, but it dislikes me. [Exit]

IAGO: If I can fasten but one cup upon him,

With that which he hath drunk to-night already,

He'll be as full of quarrel and offence

As my young mistress' dog. Now, my sick fool Roderigo,

Whom love hath turned almost the wrong side out,

To Desdemona hath to-night caroused

Potations pottle-deep [to the cup’s bottom]; and he's to watch.

Three lads of Cyprus, noble swelling spirits,

That hold their honors in a wary distance [anxious to uphold their honors],

The very elements of this warlike isle,

Have I tonight flustered with flowing cups,

And they watch too. Now, 'mongst this flock of drunkards,

Am I to put our Cassio in some action

That may offend the isle. But here they come. [Enter CASSIO and MONTANO and Gentlemen]

If consequence do but approve my dream,

My boat sails freely, both with wind and stream.

CASSIO: 'Fore God, they have given me a rouse already.

MONTANO: Good faith, a little one; not past a pint, as I

am a soldier.

IAGO: Some wine, ho! [Sings]

And let me the canakin [little can] clink, clink;

And let me the canakin clink

A soldier's a man;

O man’s life's but a span;

Why, then, let a soldier drink.

Some wine, boys!

CASSIO: 'Fore God, an excellent song.

IAGO: I learned it in England, where, indeed, they are

most potent in potting. Your Dane, your German,

and your swag-bellied Hollander--Drink, ho!—

are nothing to your English.

CASSIO: Is your Englishman so expert in his drinking?

IAGO: Why, he drinks you, with facility, your Dane dead

drunk; he sweats not to overthrow your Almain; he

gives your Hollander a vomit, ere the next pottle

can be filled.

CASSIO: To the health of our general!

MONTANO: I am for it, lieutenant; and I'll do you justice.

IAGO: O sweet England!

King Stephen was a worthy peer,

His breeches cost him but a crown;

He held them sixpence all too dear,

With that he called the tailor lown [lout].

He was a wight of high renown,

And thou art but of low degree.

'Tis pride that pulls the country down;

Then take thine auld cloak about thee.

Some wine, ho!

CASSIO: Why, this is a more exquisite song than the other.

IAGO: Will you hear 't again?

CASSIO: No; for I hold him to be unworthy of his place that

does those things. Well, God's above all; and there

be souls must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved.

IAGO: It's true, good lieutenant.

CASSIO: For mine own part -- no offence to the general, nor

any man of quality -- I hope to be saved.

IAGO: And so do I too, lieutenant.

CASSIO: Ay, but, by your leave, not before me. The

lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient. Let's

have no more of this; let's to our affairs.--Forgive

us our sins!--Gentlemen, let's look to our business.

Do not think, gentlemen. I am drunk. This is my

ancient; this is my right hand, and this is my left.

I am not drunk now; I can stand well enough, and

speak well enough.

ALL: Excellent well!

CASSIO: Why, very well then; you must not think then

that I am drunk. [Exit]

MONTANO: To the platform, masters; come, let's set

the watch.

IAGO: You see this fellow that is gone before.

He is a soldier fit to stand by Caesar

And give direction; and do but see his vice.

'Tis to his virtue a just equinox [exact balance]

The one as long as the other. 'Tis pity of him.

I fear the trust Othello puts him in.

On some odd time of his infirmity,

Will shake this island.

MONTANO: But is he often thus?

IAGO: 'Tis evermore the prologue to his sleep.

He'll watch the horologe a double set [clock go around twice],

If drink rock not his cradle.

MONTANO: It were well

The general were put in mind of it.

Perhaps he sees it not; or his good nature

Prizes the virtue that appears in Cassio,

And looks not on his evils. Is not this true? [Enter RODERIGO]

IAGO: [Aside to him] How now, Roderigo!

I pray you, after the lieutenant; go. [Exit RODERIGO]

What we see here is a brand new Iago – Iago the party animal – singing and joking his way into your heart! All this while off-stage Othello and Desdemona are making love! Shakespeare did this sometimes in his plays. After preparing for a romantic climax, he will leave the lovers their privacy while he shows us some action which will eventually affect them. At the beginning of the scene Cassio acknowledges that he will take personal command of the guard duty, even as Othello warns him specifically not to outsport discretion, that is to keep a lid on the celebrating. At line 12 Iago enters and Cassio is all business, telling him that they must to the watch.

At lines 13 – 27 Iago does something at once creepy and very manipulative: he tries to get Cassio to join him in talking suggestively about Desdemona. He begins by stating the obvious, Othello has left them so he can make wanton the night with his wife, who he says is sport for Jove. (The chief god of the ancient Romans was always spotting very attractive mortal woman and taking some shape like a bull or a swan and getting them pregnant.) We had seen Iago talking about Othello’s love life back in Act I, scene 2. That is bad enough, but the way Iago is talking here is just on the edge of being disrespectful. First he is articulating what Cassio and the audience already know, that Othello and Desdemona are probably making love at this moment, something that is normally impolite to say. Then he speaks provocatively about Desdemona’s sexuality, her “sport” rating. Cassio responds in a positive way, but he is careful to maintain the level of respectability: She’s a most exquisite lady. What Iago is trying to do is to get Cassio to reveal that he is interested in the general’s wife in an ungentlemanlike way. He will try three more times to get Cassio to tip his hand: she is full of game; her eye is a parley to provocation; and when she speaks it is an alarum to love. Each time Cassio agrees but is careful to remain respectful. You can see Iago’s mind working here – if he can get Cassio to reveal his passion, to “talk dirty,” he might be able to use it, to manipulate the lieutenant as he does Roderigo. At least it gives him an advantage in information.

Having failed to get Cassio to compromise himself verbally, Iago suddenly shifts gears at line 27 and urges him to have a drink with some gallants of Cyprus. Cassio turns out to be incapable of handling alcohol; he’s a bad drunk. Maybe it’s a chemical imbalance or a problem with his metabolism, but he is aware that he has to stay away from drink. The difficulty is that then as now social situations, especially among men, required you to drink. As Cassio says at line 32, I could well wish courtesy would invent some other custom of entertainment. (There’s that imperative of courtly gentlemen, “courtesy,” again!) This is the opening that Iago has been looking for. O, they are our friends. But one cup! I’ll drink for you. “It’s just one cup – it won’t hurt,” and, of course Cassio, who’s already had a cup of wine diluted with water, gives in to be sociable, complaining at line 45, it dislikes me. At line 46, after Cassio leaves momentarily, Iago switches to verse in a soliloquy to tell us that this is exactly what he has planned. If he can get Cassio to drink just one more cup, with what he has already had, he will be as quarrelsome as my young mistress’ dog, suggesting that he will be eager to fight but not much of a threat if he does. Iago has already gotten Roderigo drunk by toasting the idea of his getting Desdemona. And he has been busy getting the gallants of Cyprus intoxicated, knowing that they are very prickly about their honors and easily insulted. As he says at line 57 ‘mongst this flock of drunkards he should be able to get an argument going that will offend the isle, that is will upset everyone on Cyprus.

To expedite his plan, at line 65 when Cassio comes back in with Montano and the other gallants, Iago turns on the charm, singing a drinking song for soldiers that is almost guaranteed to get the wine flowing. (In my wild days as a college student, the song that did it for us was the “Whiffenpoof Song” about the “gentlemen scholars, out on a spree, doomed from here to eternity.”) Cassio gets drunk very quickly, announcing at line 72 that “The Cannakin Song” is an excellent song! Actually it isn’t, but it sounds good when you’re smashed out of your skull! Then Iago tells how he learned this drinking song in England, where, he assures his audience, they really know how to drink. Shakespeare’s plays often have passages which compare how people of different countries handle alcohol, especially the Germans, the Danes, the Dutch and the English. This passage must have gotten a big laugh about how the English are so potent in their potting. Iago tops the joke off with a funny nonsense song about the legendary King Stephen and his cheap pants, which leads to more drinking.

We now see Cassio at his most unattractive as a nasty, priggish drunk. In the passage at lines 95 – 115 Shakespeare really catches the verbal mannerisms of someone who has had too much to drink. Cassio begins by praising the King Stephen song as even more exquisite than the other, which it hardly is. But when Iago offers to sing it again, Cassio, trying to reassert his authority, takes umbrage at the song he just praised: I hold him unworthy pf his place that does those things, apparently objecting to King Stephen’s behavior. Having put a damper on the party, he suddenly moralizes there be souls must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved. Drunks often take statements of the obvious and endow them with great profundity. When Iago says he hopes to have his soul saved, we see another ugly aspect of Cassio as a drunk at line 106: Ay, but by your leave, not before me. The lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient. I’m sure the Almighty, on Judgment Day, will be observing the strict protocols of military rank! At line 110 Cassio, realizing that he is making a fool of himself, begins insisting that he is not drunk, another characteristic of the alcohol-impaired. He will do so three times in five lines , even as he fumbles over which is his left hand and which his right.

As soon as Cassio stumbles out to take care of business, Iago stays behind and sets the lieutenant up with the gallants of Cyprus, telling them that this behavior (which Iago had forced upon Cassio) was a nightly occurrence. He has to get drunk before he can go to sleep. This is classic Iago manipulation. First he praises Cassio, a soldier fit to stand by Caesar, the greatest military leader. Then he slanders his character, but in such a way that it will look as if someone else is raising the question about his behavior: I fear the trust Othello puts him in, on some odd time of his infirmity, will shake the island. He’s primed to cause trouble. So Montano takes the bait and says, It were well the general were put in mind of it, which is exactly what he will do after the fight with Cassio that is about to happen. Roderigo appears at the side of the stage at this point and is sent off to find the drunken lieutenant.

In the next sequence we have to envision how the action looks on stage. Roderigo comes in, having tangled off-stage with Cassio and probably gotten his nose bloody. When Cassio charges on stage after him, the gallants of Cyprus will jump in to try and restrain him. Iago, meanwhile, is playing a subtle dual role, “trying” to keep the peace even as he is stirring up more confusion. Once Othello comes out to see what the trouble is, we will see that same sense of authority he exhibited in the confrontation with Brabantio. But now he is angry at what is happening in these circumstances. Notice how he expresses his rage; he can use the same qualities that helped him keep the peace before to threaten when he loses his temper. Finally notice how Iago tailors his message to Cassio after he has lost his job to move his plot along. He’s very clever in his verbal manipulation. [Act II, scene 3, lines 135 – 389]

MONTANO: And 'tis great pity that the noble Moor

Should hazard such a place as his own second

With one of an ingraft [ingrained] infirmity.

It were an honest action to say so

To the Moor.

IAGO: Not I, for this fair island!

I do love Cassio well; and would do much

To cure him of this evil. [Cry within: 'Help! help!']

But, hark! what noise?

[Re-enter CASSIO, driving in RODERIGO]

CASSIO: Zounds, you rogue! You rascal!

MONTANO: What's the matter, lieutenant?

CASSIO: A knave teach me my duty!

I'll beat the knave into a twiggen [wicker-covered] bottle.

RODERIGO: Beat me?

CASSIO: Dost thou prate, rogue? [Striking RODERIGO]

MONTANO: Nay, good lieutenant! [Staying him]

I pray you, sir, hold your hand.

CASSIO: Let me go, sir, or I'll knock you o'er the

mazzard [head].

MONTANO: Come, come, you're drunk.

CASSIO: Drunk! [They fight]

IAGO: [Aside to RODERIGO] Away, I say; go out, and cry a mutiny.

[Exit RODERIGO]

Nay, good lieutenant. God’s will, gentlemen!

Help, ho! Lieutenant. Sir. Montano.

Help, masters! Here's a goodly watch indeed! [Bell rings]

Who's that which rings the bell? Diablo, ho!

The town will rise. God's will, lieutenant, hold!

You will be shamed for ever.

[Re-enter OTHELLO and Attendants]

OTHELLO: What is the matter here?

MONTANO: 'Zounds, I bleed still. I am hurt to the death.

He dies. [They fight again]

OTHELLO: Hold, for your lives!

IAGO: Hold, ho! Lieutenant. Sir. Montano. Gentlemen!

Have you forgot all sense of place and duty?

Hold! The general speaks to you. Hold, hold, for shame!

OTHELLO: Why, how now, ho? From whence ariseth this?

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that

Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?

For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl:

He that stirs next to carve for his own rage

Holds his soul light [doesn’t value his life], he dies upon his motion.

Silence that dreadful bell. It frights the isle

From her propriety [order]. What is the matter, masters?

Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving,

Speak. Who began this? On thy love, I charge thee.

IAGO: I do not know. Friends all, but now, even now,

In quarter [on duty] and in terms like bride and groom

Devesting them for bed; and then, but now--

As if some planet had unwitted men--

Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast

In opposition bloody. I cannot speak

Any beginning to this peevish odds,

And would in action glorious I had lost

Those legs that brought me to a part of it!

OTHELLO: How comes it, Michael, you are thus forgot?

CASSIO: I pray you, pardon me; I cannot speak.

OTHELLO: Worthy Montano, you were wont be civil;

The gravity and stillness of your youth

The world hath noted, and your name is great

In mouths of wisest censure [judgment]. What's the matter,

That you unlace [risk] your reputation thus

And spend your rich opinion [reputation] for the name

Of a night-brawler? Give me answer to it.

MONTANO: Worthy Othello, I am hurt to danger:

Your officer, Iago, can inform you,

While I spare speech, which something now offends me,

Of all that I do know; nor know I aught

By me that's said or done amiss this night;

Unless self-charity be sometimes a vice,

And to defend ourselves it be a sin

When violence assails us.

OTHELLO: Now, by heaven,

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,

And passion, having my best judgment collied [clouded],

Assays to lead the way. If I once stir

Or do but lift this arm, the best of you

Shall sink in my rebuke. Give me to know

How this foul rout began, who set it on;

And he that is approved in this offence,

Though he had twinned with me, both at a birth,

Shall lose me. What? In a town of war,

Yet wild, the people's hearts brimful of fear,

To manage private and domestic quarrel,

In night, and on the court and guard of safety?

'Tis monstrous. Iago, who began’t?

MONTANO: If partially affined, or leagued in office [If you are partial because you are friend or a brother soldier],

Thou dost deliver more or less than truth,

Thou art no soldier.

IAGO: Touch me not so near.

I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth

Than it should do offence to Michael Cassio.

Yet, I persuade myself, to speak the truth

Shall nothing wrong him. This it is, general.

Montano and myself being in speech,

There comes a fellow crying out for help,

And Cassio following him with determined sword,

To execute upon him. Sir, this gentleman

Steps in to Cassio and entreats his pause.

Myself the crying fellow did pursue,

Lest by his clamor--as it so fell out--

The town might fall in fright. He, swift of foot,

Outran my purpose; and I returned the rather

For that I heard the clink and fall of swords,

And Cassio high in oath; which till tonight

I ne'er might say before. When I came back--

For this was brief--I found them close together

At blow and thrust, even as again they were

When you yourself did part them.

More of this matter cannot I report;

But men are men; the best sometimes forget.

Though Cassio did some little wrong to him,

As men in rage strike those that wish them best,

Yet surely Cassio, I believe, received

From him that fled some strange indignity,

Which patience could not pass [tolerate].

OTHELLO: I know, Iago,

Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,

Making it light to Cassio. Cassio, I love thee;

But never more be officer of mine. [Enter DESDEMONA]

Look, if my gentle love be not raised up.

I'll make thee an example.

DESDEMONA: What's the matter?

OTHELLO: All's well now, sweeting; come away to bed.

[To MONTANO] Sir, for your hurts, myself will be your surgeon:

Lead him off. [MONTANO is led off]

Iago, look with care about the town,

And silence those whom this vile brawl distracted.

Come, Desdemona. 'tis the soldiers' life

To have their balmy slumbers waked with strife.

[Exeunt all but IAGO and CASSIO]

IAGO: What, are you hurt, lieutenant?

CASSIO: Ay, past all surgery.

IAGO: Marry, heaven forbid!

CASSIO: Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost

my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of

myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation,

Iago, my reputation!

IAGO: As I am an honest man, I thought you had received

some bodily wound. There is more sense in that than

in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false

imposition, oft got without merit, and lost without

deserving. You have lost no reputation at all,

unless you repute yourself such a loser. What, man,

there are ways to recover the general again. You

are but now cast in his mood [dismissed because of his anger] -- a punishment more in policy [politics] than in malice,

even so as one would beat his offenseless dog to affright

an imperious lion. Sue to him again, and he's yours.

CASSIO: I will rather sue to be despised than to deceive so

good a commander with so slight, so drunken, and so

indiscreet an officer. Drunk! And speak parrot [gabble]!

And squabble! Swagger! Swear! And discourse

fustian [nonsense] with one's own shadow! O thou invisible

spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by,

let us call thee devil!

IAGO: What was he that you followed with your sword? What

had he done to you?

CASSIO: I know not.

IAGO: Is’t possible?

CASSIO: I remember a mass of things, but nothing distinctly:

a quarrel, but nothing wherefore. O God, that men

should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away

their brains! that we should, with joy, pleasance

revel and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!

IAGO: Why, but you are now well enough. How came

you thus recovered?

CASSIO: It hath pleased the devil drunkenness to give

place to the devil wrath. One unperfectness shows

me another, to make me frankly despise myself.

IAGO: Come, you are too severe a moraler. As the time,

the place, and the condition of this country stands,

I could heartily wish this had not befallen; but, since

it is as it is, mend it for your own good.

CASSIO: I will ask him for my place again: he shall tell me

I am a drunkard! Had I as many mouths as Hydra,

such an answer would stop them all. To be now a

sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a

beast! O strange! Every inordinate cup is

unblessed and the ingredient is a devil.

IAGO: Come, come, good wine is a good familiar

creature, if it be well used: exclaim no more against it.

And, good lieutenant, I think you think I love you.

CASSIO: I have well approved it, sir. I drunk?

IAGO: You or any man living may be drunk at a time, man.

I'll tell you what you shall do. Our general's wife

is now the general. I may say so in this respect, for

that he hath devoted and given up himself to the

contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts [devotion to her qualities]

and graces. Confess yourself freely to her; importune

her help to put you in your place again. She is of

so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition,

she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more

than she is requested. This broken joint between

you and her husband entreat her to splinter [splint]; and, my

fortunes against any lay [bet] worth naming, this

crack of your love shall grow stronger than it was before.

CASSIO: You advise me well.

IAGO: I protest, in the sincerity of love and honest kindness.

CASSIO: I think it freely; and betimes in the morning I will

beseech the virtuous Desdemona to undertake for me:

I am desperate of my fortunes if they check [repulse] me here.

IAGO: You are in the right. Good night, lieutenant. I

must to the watch.

CASSIO: Good night, honest Iago. [Exit]

IAGO: And what's he then that says I play the villain,

When this advice is free I give and honest,

Probal to [provable by] thinking and indeed the course

To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy

The inclining [helpful] Desdemona to subdue

In any honest suit. She's framed as fruitful [is as generous]

As the free elements. And then for her

To win the Moor – were 't to renounce his baptism,

All seals and symbols of redeemed sin --

His soul is so enfettered to her love,

That she may make, unmake, do what she list,

Even as her appetite [desire] shall play the god

With his weak function [thought]. How am I then a villain

To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,

Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on [advance],

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,

As I do now. For whiles this honest fool

Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes

And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,

I'll pour this pestilence into his ear,

That she repeals [pleads for] him for her body's lust;

And by how much she strives to do him good,

She shall undo her credit with the Moor.

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,

And out of her own goodness make the net

That shall enmesh them all. [enter RODERIGO]

How now, Roderigo!

RODERIGO: I do follow here in the chase, not like a hound that

hunts, but one that fills up the cry [makes one of the pack]. My money is almost spent; I have been to-night exceedingly well

cudgeled [beaten]; and I think the issue will be, I shall

have so much experience for my pains, and so, with

no money at all and a little more wit, return again to Venice.

IAGO: How poor are they that have not patience!

What wound did ever heal but by degrees?

Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft;

And wit depends on dilatory time.

Does’t not go well? Cassio hath beaten thee.

And thou, by that small hurt, hast cashiered Cassio.

Though other things grow fair against the sun,

Yet fruits that blossom first will first be ripe:

Content thyself awhile. By the mass, 'tis morning!

Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.

Retire thee; go where thou art billeted:

Away, I say; thou shalt know more hereafter:

Nay, get thee gone! [Exit RODERIGO] Two things are to be done:

My wife must move [plead] for Cassio to her mistress;

I'll set her on;

Myself the while to draw the Moor apart,

And bring him jump [exact moment] when he may Cassio find

Soliciting his wife. Ay, that's the way!

Dull not device by coldness and delay!

As we see in this passage, Iago is the kind of person with whom, if he says he supports you 100%, you need to hide your money and prepare for the worst. After having poisoned the minds of gallants about Cassio’s “vice,” Iago refuses at line 139 to tell Othello: Not I, for this island! I do love Cassio well and would do much to cure him of this evil. So he’ll do an intervention, tell him where a Twelve-Step program meets, but he won’t rat him out to Othello; he’ll just set it up so someone else will do his dirty work for him. Cassio comes in at line 142, chasing Roderigo, cursing with one of those taboo words we know signal emotional turmoil: Zounds! We don’t know exactly what Roderigo said to provoke Cassio, but it does the trick and Cassio hits him at line 147, prompting Montano to intervene. When Cassio threatens him, Montano at line 152 dismisses the threat with Come, come, you’re drunk! We know from back at line 110 that Cassio doesn’t want anyone to say that, and so they fight. Iago quietly sends Roderigo off to cry mutiny, yell fire, whatever, to awaken the town and cause turmoil and immediately turns around and goes through the motions of trying to separate the combatants. When Roderigo apparently succeeds in his mission and someone off-stage begins to ring an alarm bell, Iago, at line 159 feigns surprise, Diablo ho! The town will rise. Well, he certainly hopes so. Now Othello enters, probably in Shakespeare theater on the upper stage, as if he were on a balcony off his sleeping quarters where he had been with Desdemona. He tries to assert his authority over the unruly crowd, even as Montano, shouting Zounds! I bleed still, tries to kill Cassio. Now Iago cannot do enough to stop the riot, warning The general speaks to you. Hold, for shame!

We saw Othello use his authority to command the situation with Brabantio in Act I, scene 2 at the Sagittary before any blows were exchanged. Now he arrives too late to prevent the violence, but he exerts his control even more forcibly at line 169:

Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that

Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites?

For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl!

He that stirs next to carve for his own rage

Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion.

Silence that dreadful bell: it frights the isle

From her propriety. What is the matter, masters?

Othello has more than a booming voice and powerful vocabulary; he backs it up. If you don’t stop fighting, I’ll kill you. He orders the bell to be silenced and starts to unravel what has happened. Who does he turn to explain what set this fight off? Who else, but Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving. Apparently Iago’s just really upset about the fight that he has engineered. Of course we know he has the reputation for being absolutely honest and plain-spoken, so that naturally Othello will ask him for information.

In his response at line 178 to the question who began this, Iago demonstrates subtle manipulation:

I do not know. Friends all, but now, even now,

In quarter, and in terms like bride and groom

Devesting them for bed; and then, but now--

As if some planet had unwitted men--

Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast,

In opposition bloody.

He has no idea what caused these friends to lose their wits and start fighting. Perhaps it was some planetary influence, a mysterious force that many in Shakespeare’s audience believed in firmly. Maybe Mars was too close! Where the manipulation comes in is with the metaphor Iago uses to describe the pre-fight situation: like a newly married couple undressing for bed. Why would Iago use that phrase? Of course, Othello and Desdemona were devesting them for bed. Othello has probably suffered “coitus interruptus” because of the fight breaking out and is not in a very good mood, and Iago’s little homey comparison just serves to remind him and stir the anger a little more. There is one more revealing thing here, Iago’s emphasis on now, even now. We saw this same thing back in the opening scene when Iago told Brabantio Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. In both cases, Othello and Desdemona were probably making love, and Iago has been thinking about it. He is obsessed with other people’s sexual activity, especially Othello’s. This voyeurism, this desire to watch or imagine others making love, is just one of Iago’s many sexual dysfunctions.

Because Iago can offer no explanation for what started the fight, Othello asks Cassio who at line 187 can say nothing. Next he asks Montano who, he tells us, has a reputation for gravity and stillness why he has risked his good name by unlacing, that is unloosening his doublet in preparation for a brawl. Montano says he cannot answer because he is too badly hurt but that Iago can tell him. Now at line 202 we see Othello’s anger suddenly surface:

Now, by heaven,

My blood begins my safer guides to rule;

And passion, having my best judgment collied,

Assays to lead the way. If I once stir,

Or do but lift this arm, the best of you

Shall sink in my rebuke.

Othello here reveals that if he is not given an answer immediately, he will hurt those present. He is in control in confrontations as with Brabantio, but if he loses his temper he will lose control. This is an important insight into his character because it will help explain his actions later with Desdemona when he is driven to murder her without hesitation. Othello goes on to talk about how dangerous it was to start a drunken private fight at a time of high public tension. He once again asks Iago who began the fight. Montano at line 217 challenges the ancient “to tell the truth,” which is exactly what Iago had manipulated him to do.

Iago’s response at line 219 is a defense of his good friend Cassio that has the effect of condemning the lieutenant. This is really backing your friend: Touch me not so near. /

I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth/ Than it should do offense to Michael Cassio. So even as he protests his loyalty to Cassio, he is undercutting him. He goes on to seek an excuse for Cassio’s bizarre behavior by claiming that the stranger Cassio had hit had offended the lieutenant in some unacceptable way. He offers further mitigation at line 240: But men are men; the best sometimes forget. Iago’s spirited defense has the desire effect because, claiming that the good-hearted ancient’s honesty and love doth mince this matter (Iago is too good a friend and tries to protect Cassio), Othello fires Cassio on the spot: Cassio, I love thee; but never more be officer of mine. In other circumstances the commander might set up an investigation, take statements and convene a board of inquiry. But Othello as a soldier is used to making immediate decisions, and he doesn’t waste time agonizing over what to do. He does not have that luxury. When he acts, the Moor does not waste time or words. When Desdemona comes out to find out what the problem is, that just makes Othello angrier and he threatens to make Cassio an example, that is his dismissal will serve as a warning to others to behave.

Now Iago is left alone with Cassio and begins to manipulate him. Just as in previous scenes he switches to prose and works on somebody to do something that will advance his overall plan. Following his manipulation, he will switch back to verse in a soliloquy that will tell us what he is doing. He begins by asking Cassio why he so upset. At line 261 Cassio tells us his reaction to what has happened:

Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost

my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of

myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation,

Iago, my reputation!

For a courtly gentleman his reputation was his most important possession; his every action was governed by how he could protect and build his reputation or honor. It really is his immortal part. Iago laughs at this passionate outpouring at line 265:

As I am an honest man, I thought you had received

some bodily wound. There is more sense in that than

in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false

imposition, oft got without merit, and lost without

deserving. You have lost no reputation at all,

unless you repute yourself such a loser.

Reputation is a fantasy; you get it or lose it for reasons that have nothing to do with reality. You have not lost your reputation unless you accept the false premise. This argument that Cassio should not feel the way he feels is very similar to the argument the Duke had made to Brabantio back in Act I, scene 3 when it became clear that Desdemona had willingly chosen Othello. Iago proceeds to assure Cassio that Othello fired him just for the sake of policy, that is the politics of public relations. Iago compares it to trying to impress an angry lion (Cyprus) by beating an innocent dog (Cassio) He must try to get his job back.

Cassio is too embarrassed by his behavior to go along easily with Iago’s plan. He says of his offense that he was slight, drunk and indiscreet. He describes himself as speaking, parrot, that is babbling on mindlessly, discourse fustian to one’s own shadow, that is talking nonsense. And he blames the wine, substance abuse, an excuse we have heard before. Remember, Desdemona ran off with Othello because she had been drugged? Except Cassio accepts personal responsibility. When Iago asks him about the confrontation with Roderigo, he can remember nothing. He laments at line 288, God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains! that we should, with joy, pleasance revel, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts! You can feel his self-loathing, to make me frankly despise myself. Iago defends the moderate use of wine and urges Cassio to take steps to mend his fortunes. When Cassio responds that he could not face Othello again to beg for his job, Iago springs his trap at line 312: Our general’s wife is now the general. He explains that he is not saying Desdemona is the boss but, using the very same kind of language of spiritual attraction that Othello and Desdemona had used, declares, he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and grace. Earlier Iago had scoffed at Roderigo and told him Desdemona would never love Othello for long simply for prating and telling her fantastic lies. Iago is able to change what he says diametrically depending on the occasion. Here he rejects the idea that reputation is of any importance; in a few scenes he will tell Othello it is the most important thing a person owns. So Iago tells Cassio, since he can’t face Othello, to appeal to Desdemona at line 318:

Confess yourself freely to her; importune

her help to put you in your place again. She is of

so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition,

she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more

than she is requested. This broken joint between

you and her husband entreat her to splinter; and, my

fortunes against any lay worth naming, this

crack of your love shall grow stronger than it was before.

Now Iago’s advice here does make sense. Desdemona is primed to take on a greater role in helping Othello succeed as a soldier. It’s one of the reasons she says she came with him to Cyprus. He calls her his fair warrior, and we can see how she would want to smooth things between her husband and his chosen assistant. Cassio accepts this advice wholeheartedly. We know better. We know Iago plans to poison Othello’s mind about Cassio’s relationship with his wife. Under these circumstances, this is the worst thing that Cassio could do, to appeal to Desdemona. Iago promises to do everything in his power to get Cassio his job back, and the lieutenant leaves with his spirits renewed and a plan of action: work behind Othello’s back to get reinstated.

As we have seen in Act I, scene 3 and Act II, scene 1, the manipulation in prose is followed by Iago’s soliloquy in verse. Iago addresses the audience directly, as he has done throughout the play, in effect making us his co-conspirators. He confides all his secrets in us. He begins here at line 336 by challenging the audience:

And what's he then that says I play the villain,

When this advice is free I give and honest,

Probal to thinking, and indeed the course

To win the Moor again?

I saw this play performed at the National Theater in London some years ago, and the actor who play Iago sat on the front of the stage and literally challenged us to answer. How could any of us say he is playing a villain? When no one answered him, he laughed sardonically and went on pointing out how his advice was exactly the way for Cassio to get his job back. Desdemona will jump at the chance to help, she's framed as fruitful

as the free elements; she is generous and anxious to be of service. Othello is so in love with her:

And then for her

To win the Moor—were 't to renounce his baptism,

All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,

His soul is so enfetter'd to her love,

That she may make, unmake, do what she list,

Even as her appetite shall play the god

With his weak function.

She could make her husband do anything, and he tries to think of the most challenging thing she could get him to do. He comes up with the idea that for her he would give up his baptism. In the introductory remarks about this play I talked about how Englishmen were intrigued by the religious differences between themselves and the exotic strangers with whom they came in contact. One of the things about Othello that Shakespeare’s audience would note is that he must have been converted to Christianity as an adult, something that made him stand out from nearly everyone around them who was born into their faiths. These converts had been consciously redeemed from sin. So Iago measures Desdemona’s power over her husband by her ability to make him give up that faith. This suggests that his conversion must have been very important to him. He loves her so much she could get him to do anything, as if her will or appetite were to play the god to his weakness. Iago sees their relationship as unequal; she has all the power over him.

At line 348 he comes back to this ironic idea that he is not playing the villain, but of course he is, and in a Snively Whiplash moment reminds everyone, including the groundlings in the audience, that he is bad, despite his protests to the contrary: Divinity of hell! When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows, as I do now. I do not think Iago believes himself to be demonic or controlled by Satan. As we have seen he thinks he has a legitimate grievance against Othello and Cassio. He will have to destroy Roderigo to cover up his previous larceny. Iago’s evil is composed of ordinary badness, but done at such a level of intensity that it transforms the events of the play. He is Shakespeare’s greatest villain. And so at lines 353 – 362 Iago spells out the details of the plot he has put together: the harder Cassio pleads for his job back, the worse Desdemona’s efforts on his behalf will appear to Othello, after Iago has worked on him.

Poor Roderigo with a bloody head stumbles back in and announces he is going home. If only he had acted on that impulse! Instead he allows Iago to once again draw him back into his web. Iago laughs at his complaint about his injury and points out it has led to Cassio losing his job. At line 378 Iago realizes suddenly what time it is: By the mass, 'tis morning; pleasure and action make the hours seem short. There’s nothing like a good night’s work spent ruining someone’s life to make the time just fly by! Iago sends Roderigo back to where he has been billeted and adds the final touches to his plot: he will get his wife to work on Desdemona about helping get Cassio his job back; he will arrange to bring Othello in just as Cassio is pleading with Desdemona. The key, Iago tells us at the end of the scene, is to act quickly: Dull not device by coldness and delay.

Iago’s motivation has grown in complexity up to this point. There is the public reason for his hatred of Othello: he didn’t get the job. There is his very private reason; Othello may have slept with Emilia. Then we have another very private motive; he thinks Cassio has had sex with his wife. Now we have a fourth motivating factor; he just plain enjoys manipulating many people at once and revels in his creation, as if he were the consummate artist.

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Act III, Scene 1 and 2

These short scenes open with Cassio stationing some musicians at Othello’s lodging to try and assuage the Moor’s anger. A clown comes in and does some puns in bad taste about wind instruments. This is an effort at comic relief, a lowering of the emotional tension before the next big build-up. It is one of the less successful examples of comic relief in all of the plays and is almost always cut from modern productions. Iago comes in and tells Cassio he will send his wife out to speak with him about getting in to see Desdemona. Cassio observes to us that Iago is more kind and honest than anyone he knows from his own home city. When Emilia comes in, we learn that Desdemona has already been speaking on his behalf to her husband. Emilia agrees that she will arrange for the lieutenant to speak privately to her mistress.

The next scene is very short as Othello sends Iago to deliver some letters for the Senate to the pilot who will be heading back to Venice. Then the general goes off to inspect the fortifications, this establishing his whereabouts when Cassio comes in to meet with Desdemona. The purpose of these short scenes is to establish the circumstances for the big dramatic core of the play, Act III, scene 3. It also helps vary the pace of the play between long, intense dramatic scenes.

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Act III, Scene 3

This is one of the longest scenes in all of Shakespeare’s plays, 476 lines. What is most important is what happens in those lines, the emotional distance that is traveled. At the beginning of the scene Othello is completely in love with his wife; at the end of the scene he says about Desdemona, I’ll tear her all to pieces. He will begin to plot her death with Iago. Four hundred and seventy-six lines take quite some time to perform, but in terms of the emotional changes in the scene, events happen very quickly. Throughout the scene Iago will use his subtle and not-so-subtle psychological tricks to push Othello to make the fateful decision to suspect his wife. I do not believe that Iago’s ultimate aim in this scene is the death of Desdemona. I don’t think it had even occurred to him. He was only shooting for Othello and Cassio.

In the opening 90 lines of this scene, we will watch Cassio’s efforts to get Desdemona to become his advocate. Then we’ll see how she approaches her husband on Cassio’s behalf. In several subtle ways she will make Iago’s task a little easier. Iago takes the first steps in his plot. [Act III, scene 3, lines 1 – 92]

DESDEMONA: Be thou assured, good Cassio, I will do

All my abilities in thy behalf.

EMILIA: Good madam, do. I warrant it grieves my husband,

As if the case were his.

DESDEMONA: O, that's an honest fellow. Do not doubt, Cassio,

But I will have my lord and you again

As friendly as you were.

CASSIO: Bounteous madam,

Whatever shall become of Michael Cassio,

He's never any thing but your true servant.

DESDEMONA: I know’t; I thank you. You do love my lord.

You have known him long; and be you well assured

He shall in strangeness stand no further off

Than in a politic distance [what the political situation requires]

CASSIO: Ay, but, lady,

That policy may either last so long,

Or feed upon such nice [trivial] and waterish diet,

Or breed itself so out of circumstance [be affected by minor factors]

That, I being absent and my place supplied,

My general will forget my love and service.

DESDEMONA: Do not doubt that [don’t worry]; before Emilia here

I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee,

If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it

To the last article. My lord shall never rest;

I'll watch him tame [control him by observation] and talk him out of patience;

His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift [his table a confessional].

I'll intermingle every thing he does

With Cassio's suit. Therefore be merry, Cassio;

For thy solicitor shall rather die

Than give thy cause away. [OTHELLO, IAGO enter]

EMILIA: Madam, here comes my lord.

CASSIO: Madam, I'll take my leave.

DESDEMONA: Why, stay, and hear me speak.

CASSIO: Madam, not now. I am very ill at ease,

Unfit for mine own purposes.

DESDEMONA: Well, do your discretion. [Exit CASSIO]

IAGO: Ha! I like not that.

OTHELLO: What dost thou say?

IAGO: Nothing, my lord: or if -- I know not what.

OTHELLO: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

IAGO: Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it,

That he would steal away so guilty-like,

Seeing you coming.

OTHELLO: I do believe 'twas he.

DESDEMONA: How now, my lord!

I have been talking with a suitor here,

A man that languishes in your displeasure.

OTHELLO: Who is’t you mean?

DESDEMONA: Why, your lieutenant, Cassio. Good my lord,

If I have any grace or power to move you,

His present [immediate] reconciliation take;

For if he be not one that truly loves you,

That errs in ignorance and not in cunning,

I have no judgment in an honest face:

I prithee, call him back.

OTHELLO: Went he hence now?

DESDEMONA: I’, sooth; so humbled

That he hath left part of his grief with me,

To suffer with him. Good love, call him back.

OTHELLO: Not now, sweet Desdemona; some other time.

DESDEMONA: But shall’t be shortly?

OTHELLO: The sooner, sweet, for you.

DESDEMONA: Shall’t be to-night at supper?

OTHELLO: No, not tonight.

DESDEMONA: Tomorrow dinner, then?

OTHELLO: I shall not dine at home;

I meet the captains at the citadel.

DESDEMONA: Why, then, tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn;

On Tuesday noon, or night, on Wednesday morn.

I prithee, name the time, but let it not

Exceed three days. In faith, he's penitent;

And yet his trespass, in our common reason

(Save that, they say, the wars must make examples

Out of their best), is not almost a fault

To incur a private check [is almost so minor as not to get a private rebuke, let alone a public reprimand]. When shall he come?

Tell me, Othello. I wonder in my soul,

What you would ask me, that I should deny,

Or stand so mammering [hesitating] on. What? Michael Cassio,

That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time,

When I have spoke of you dispraisingly,

Hath taken your part -- to have so much to do

To bring him in? Trust me, I could do much --

OTHELLO: Prithee, no more. Let him come when he will!

I will deny thee nothing.

DESDEMONA; Why, this is not a boon;

'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,

Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,

Or sue to you to do a peculiar [personal] profit

To your own person. Nay, when I have a suit

Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,

It shall be full of poise [size] and difficult weight

And fearful to be granted.

OTHELLO: I will deny thee nothing:

Whereon, I do beseech thee, grant me this,

To leave me but a little to myself.

DESDEMONA: Shall I deny you? No. Farewell, my lord.

OTHELLO: Farewell, my Desdemona. I'll come to thee straight.

DESDEMONA: Emilia, come. Be as your fancies teach you;

Whate'er you be, I am obedient. [Exit DESDEMONA and EMILIA]

OTHELLO: Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,

But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,

Chaos is come again.

The overriding issue of this scene is how Iago moves Othello from a loving husband at the beginning to a raving maniac at the end, vowing to murder his wife. Iago’s manipulation begins in this sequence with his skillful use of language, plus what he does not say but seems to imply. The other factor which will move Othello ironically comes from his wife and friends. At line 3 Emilia assures Cassio and Desdemona that Iago grieves about the lieutenant’s firing. It never occurs to anyone, even his own wife, that Iago might be pleased that Cassio lost his job. At line 5 Desdemona adds the obligatory honest Iago note, which everyone in the play says at one time or another. Cassio keeps pushing Desdemona to push her husband about the firing; he’s worried that if too much time passes, the position will be given to someone else. At line 21 she assures him If I do vow a friendship, I’ll perform it to the last article. She goes on to catalogue what she plans to do to win Cassio’s cause:

My lord shall never rest;

I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;

His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;

I'll intermingle every thing he does

With Cassio's suit.

This is exactly what Iago anticipated she would do. Why does Desdemona go to such extremes to resolve this personnel issue in her husband’s business? At line 26 she says, therefore be merry, Cassio; for thy solicitor shall rather die than give thy cause away. Ironically that is exactly what she does. So what is it that motivates her? When she described what attracted her to him in Act I, scene 3, she talked about his military accomplishments, his fame, the adventures he had had. More than just interesting aspects of her future husband, he represented for her a chance to escape the confines of her life as a high class Venetian woman. She had told him at one point, She wished heaven had made her such a man. The next best thing was to become an integral part of his military life. We see something very similar with another very independent and assertive heroine, Beatrice in Much Ado about Nothing who complains that she wishes she were a man so she could punish the jerk who humiliated her cousin by eating his heart in the marketplace. Othello has acceded to his wife’s desires to be a helpmate in every aspect of his life including being a soldier, calling her my fair warrior. This is her first chance to help her husband with a problem, using all the fervor and commitment she can muster. So ironically the very qualities she brings to her task are the things that Iago will use to make her look guilty.

Othello comes in with Iago at line 29, some distance away. Cassio immediately excuses himself, saying he is ill at ease. Of course, he’s uncomfortable: Othello comes in and catches him going behind his boss’ back to ask his boss’ wife to help him get his job back. It just looks bad. At line 35 we get the first Iago manipulation, very subtle: he simply says, Ha, I like not that. He doesn’t say what or why, just he doesn’t like it, leaving it to Othello to guess what he doesn’t like. He increases the tension by refusing to tell Othello what bothered him, but dropping a hint that it’s right on the tip of his tongue: Nothing, my lord; or if – I know not what. Remember Iago is skillful in what he doesn’t say – clearly here he is pretending to withhold the key information, making it seem that much worse. When Othello recognizes Cassio as departing the scene, Iago drops a more substantial hint: Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like, seeing you coming. This is hardly subtle, and of course Othello confirms that it was Cassio. Othello does not react in any way suggesting jealousy, even when Desdemona soon after confirms that it was Cassio who was just there. At line 42 she uses an unfortunate choice of words: I have been talking with a suitor here, a man that languishes in your displeasure. She could have called Cassio many things: a petitioner, a requester, a fired employee, but she uses a word that has the connotation of a sexual pursuer.

When Desdemona asks for Cassio’s job back, she asks in very personal terms. At line 46 she says, If I have any grace or power to move you, his present reconciliation take, so that Cassio’s getting his job back becomes a test of his love for her. She adds if Cassio is not truly repentant and is not loyal to Othello, I have no judgment in an honest face. That is ironic since no one has the correct judgment of Iago’s honest face.

When Othello married Desdemona he probably thought that they were psychologically and spiritually compatible. He accepted that his wife wanted to be involved in every aspect of his life, including soldiering. However, he has just disciplined Cassio for a gross breach of military order, and here just a few hours later his wife is all over him about reversing his decision. Perhaps she is coming on too strong, making him uncomfortable. He responds by putting her off, telling her he’ll think about it later. She persists, demanding that he set a specific time. She runs through a number of possible times and ends up at line 62 asking let it not exceed three days. This time period will become important later in the scene. She touches lightly on his trespass, saying at line 66 that it is a minor infraction, something that under normal circumstances would hardly have been worthy of a private reprimand, let alone a public repudiation. It’s expected behavior from a soldier. At line 68 as she continues to push, asserting that if Othello ever asked her to do something, she would not hesitate, stand so mamm’ring on. She now provides us with an possible insight into their courtship at line 70:

What? Michael Cassio,

That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time,

When I have spoke of you dispraisingly,

Hath ta'en your part; to have so much to do

To bring him in!

This passage tells us that Othello brought Cassio with him when he was seeking to win Desdemona’s love. We can imagine such a thing. Othello would hardly have brought Iago with him in such a circumstance. However, Desdemona now adds that she had spoke of you dispraisingly. Given the nature of their love, it is difficult to believe that she ever said a negative thing about her future husband; she was totally in love with him from the very beginning. But Cassio has been a part of their relationship. She concludes with a slight reprimand of her husband: to have so much to do to bring him in. Why is he being so obstinate about this request? And then at line 74 she reveals that powerful drive that she feels to be a part of Othello’s military identity: By’r Lady, I could do much – she swears by the Virgin Mary that she is just getting started. In her eagerness to be of help she shows us that she intends to be the best advisor her husband could ever have. She will be the Hillary to Othello’s Bill Clinton.

Othello realizes it is hopeless to try and fob her off, and he agrees at line 75 to allow Cassio to come back, saying I will deny thee nothing. This was their first little tiff as a married couple, and he backed down. Desdemona had asked Othello to do this one thing for her, but now she tries to explain that what she asks is based on what’s best for her husband:

Why, this is not a boon;

'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,

Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,

Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit

To your own person.

Getting Cassio his job back is no different from other helpful things that wives tell their husbands to do, things that are usually good for them. “Don’t think you’re doing this simply because I asked you to.” At line 80 she laughingly warns him:

Nay, when I have a suit

Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,

It shall be full of poise and difficult weight

And fearful to be granted.

Desdemona tries to show her husband that her request does not touch the core of their love; it is not a really important thing in their relationship.

If only Othello could hear what his wife is saying and understand its import. But instead at line 83 he says once again I will deny thee nothing, as if Cassio getting his job back were a test of their love. He has not heard her explanation. Now he asks one small favor, that she leave him alone for awhile. He probably needs time to sort out his emotions about having his wife suddenly taking an active role in what had been his exclusive domain. She responds in a slightly comic tone, Shall I deny you, trying to suggest that her granting this small favor is the equivalent of his taking Cassio back. She assures him, Whate'er you be, I am obedient. She will continue to play the obedient wife, when she isn’t busy running headquarters!

The passage ends with Othello watching his wife leaving and probably thinking, “That was a little unexpected but we got through it. I can understand where her passion and commitment come from. She really is trying to be of help, even though it made me feel uncomfortable, especially in front of my subordinates. Regardless of that, she is my whole life.” He says to us and to Iago, Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,

But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, Chaos is come again. “Perdition” is hell, a state of damnation. “Chaos” is used by Shakespeare in a religious sense, a state before God imposed order on the world, referred to in the opening chapter of the Christian Bible. Its use here is part of the vocabulary of faith that he uses throughout to describe their love; e.g. “soul,” “rites” “consecrate,” etc. This is a heavy duty concept that Othello uses here. If something should happen to his love for his wife, somehow he will lose his religious faith as well.

The next sequence, lines 93 – 176, is the intensification of Iago’s manipulation. Watch for the following: What does Iago imply as opposed to what he says? Othello uses repetition in his eloquent speeches; here Iago will use repetition, but of a different kind and for a different purpose. Othello will demand Iago tell him what he is thinking. Count how many times Othello demands and Iago denies? [Act III, scene 3, lines

93 – 176]

IAGO: My noble lord--

OTHELLO: What dost thou say, Iago?

IAGO: Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,

Know of your love?

OTHELLO: He did, from first to last: why dost thou ask?

IAGO: But for a satisfaction of my thought;

No further harm.

OTHELLO: Why of thy thought, Iago?

IAGO: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

OTHELLO: O, yes; and went between us very oft.

IAGO: Indeed?

OTHELLO: Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou aught in that?

Is he not honest?

IAGO: Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO : Honest? Ay, honest!

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think, my lord?

OTHELLO: Think, my lord?

By heaven, he echoes me,

As if there were some monster in his thought

Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something:

I heard thee say even now, thou lik’st not that,

When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?

And when I told thee he was of my counsel [in my confidence]

In my whole course of wooing, thou cried’st “Indeed!”

And didst contract and purse thy brow together,

As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain

Some horrible conceit [thought]. If thou dost love me,

Show me thy thought.

IAGO: My lord, you know I love you.

OTHELLO: I think thou dost;

And, for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty,

And weigh'st thy words before thou givest them breath,

Therefore these stops [interruptions] of thine fright me the more;

For such things in a false disloyal knave

Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just

They are close delations [hidden thoughts], working from the heart

That passion cannot rule.

IAGO: For Michael Cassio,

I dare be sworn I think that he is honest.

OTHELLO: I think so too.

IAGO: Men should be what they seem;

Or those that be not, would they might seem none!

OTHELLO: Certain, men should be what they seem.

IAGO: Why, then, I think Cassio's an honest man.

OTHELLO: Nay, yet there's more in this?

I prithee, speak to me as to thy thinkings,

As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts

The worst of words.

IAGO: Good my lord, pardon me:

Though I am bound to every act of duty,

I am not bound to that all slaves are free to.

Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false;

As where's that palace whereinto foul things

Sometimes intrude not? who has a breast so pure,

But some uncleanly apprehensions

Keep leets and law-days [local courts] and in session sit

With meditations lawful?

OTHELLO: Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago,

If thou but think'st him wronged and mak’st his ear

A stranger to thy thoughts.

IAGO: I do beseech you--

Though I perchance am vicious in my guess,

(As, I confess, it is my nature's plague

To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy

Shapes faults that are not) that your wisdom

From one that so imperfectly conceits,

Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble

Out of his scattering and unsure observance.

It were not for your quiet nor your good,

Nor for my manhood, honesty, or wisdom,

To let you know my thoughts.

OTHELLO: What dost thou mean?

IAGO: Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,

Is the immediate jewel of their souls.

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;

'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands.

But he that filches from me my good name

Robs me of that which not enriches him

And makes me poor indeed.

OTHELLO: By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts!

IAGO: You cannot, if my heart were in your hand;

Nor shall not, whilst 'tis in my custody.

OTHELLO: Ha!

IAGO: O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock

The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;

But, O, what damned minutes tells [counts] he o'er

Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet fondly [foolishly] loves!

OTHELLO: O misery!

IAGO: Poor and content is rich, and rich enough;

But riches fineless [infinite] is as poor as winter

To him that ever fears he shall be poor.

Good heaven, the souls of all my tribe defend

From jealousy!

Throughout this sequence Iago is thinking at several different levels ay once: how will Othello react when I say this? How will he react if I don’t say that? Can I cover myself if my whole construct of lies is uncovered? He needs an escape hatch if things go wrong. He starts out here asking a simple question: did Cassio know about Othello’s courtship of Desdemona? When Othello says he did and asks the purpose of Iago’s question, that becomes the first opportunity to refuse to answer in a provocative manner, as if he had some horrible thought he cannot reveal. At line 99 after Othello pushes him, he answers that he did not know Cassio had been acquainted with Desdemona, making this connection sound sinister somehow, as if they had hidden their relationship. When Othello laughs and says that Cassio often was a go-between during the courtship, Iago’s response is Indeed? It will become the first example of a pattern of repetition meant to imply that Iago has much more he wishes to say but feels constrained. At line 102 Othello picks up on the word and presses to discover its significance: Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou aught in that? Othello here is harping on the reason Iago uses that word. For the first time Othello asks Iago to reveals his thoughts. Then we get that same pattern of repetition on the word honest.

OTHELLO: Is he not honest?

IAGO: Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO: Honest? ay, honest!

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

By the time Iago gets finished playing this repetition game, his final line here is hardly a ringing endorsement of Cassio’s honesty. In fact, by the simple device of repeating Othello’s question, he has implied just the opposite. Othello is not a dummy; he understands immediately that Iago is implying something. At line 104 he asks for the second time specifically what it is:

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think, my lord?

OTHELLO: Think, my lord?

By heaven, he echoes me,

As if there were some monster in his thought

Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something

Othello identifies what Iago is doing and tells us the significance of this verbal device. What is the monster in Iago’s mind? He is getting angrier that he has not been allowed to know. Iago knows his victim well; he knows that if Othello is frustrated, as he had been back in Act II, scene 3, he quickly loses his temper and control of his emotions. Beginning at line 106 Othello catalogues all that Iago has done to imply the presence of the monster in his thoughts:

I heard thee say even now, thou likedst not that,

When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?

And when I told thee he was of my counsel

In my whole course of wooing, thou cried’st “Indeed?”

And didst contract and purse thy brow together,

As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain

Some horrible conceit. If thou dost love me,

Show me thy thought.

Othello is not a dupe. He heard Iago’s first remark back at line 35 and simply chose to ignore it at that time. And he understood that Iago’s “Indeed?” at line 101 meant something. Othello even describes Iago’s facial expression here, something important in a theater with over 2,000 in the audience, and you want to make sure even those in the farthest row know the significance of the look on an actor’s face So now for the third time he demands, tell me what you are thinking.

Rather than answering the question, Iago shifts the ground at line 117 and Othello reveals to us the assumptions he makes about his ancient:

IAGO: My lord, you know I love you.

OTHELLO: I think thou dost;

And, for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty,

And weigh'st thy words before thou giv’st them breath;

Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more;

For such things in a false disloyal knave

Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just

They are close delations, working from the heart

That passion cannot rule.

Othello responds to Iago’s declaration of love with a note of subtle sarcasm. If Iago can play with the word “think,” so can Othello. He goes on to tell us why he takes Iago’s act so seriously. If he were a false disloyal knave, he might be playing a game; but because Iago is known to be honest, then these interruptions, stops, must be close delations, hidden thoughts, that Iago’s inner conflict cannot hide. Iago has apparently spent years cultivating this image as the honest, plain-spoken sidekick, so that even his own wife accepts it without question.

At line 124 Iago reasserts his belief in Cassio’s honesty, but in such a way that obviously denies it at the same time: For Michael Cassio, I dare be sworn I think that he is honest. By this point in the dialogue of the two men, “think” has taken on a decidedly negative connotation. When Othello agrees I think so too, Iago launches his next innuendo at line 126:

IAGO: Men should be what they seem;

Or those that be not, would they might seem none!

OTHELLO: Certain, men should be what they seem.

IAGO: Why, then, I think Cassio's an honest man.

What Iago does here is to imply that Cassio is a man who appears, seems, to be one thing but is not. It is as if the concept of deception is foreign to Othello. To accept the appearance one presents to the world is to think he is honest. The implication is hard to miss, and Othello asks at line 130 for the fourth time what Iago is thinking:

Nay, yet there's more in this.

I prithee, speak to me as to thy thinkings,

As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts

The worst of words.

Undoubtedly what Iago is thinking is something bad, and Othello urges him to verbalize it, no matter how bad.

Now what Iago does is another clever manipulation; he shifts the argument and makes the issue whether or not he is required to speak his thoughts. At line 133 he argues that he does not have to utter his thoughts:

Good my lord, pardon me.

Though I am bound to every act of duty,

I am not bound to that all slaves are free to.

Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false,

As where's that palace whereinto foul things

Sometimes intrude not? Who has a breast so pure,

But some uncleanly apprehensions

Keep leets and law-days and in session sit

With meditations lawful?

Iago asserts his right to keep his thoughts private, and he creates a possible problem with coming clean: his thoughts may be vile and false. He amplifies on this idea with two interesting metaphors. Bad things have a way of intruding even into a palace; even virtuous people sometimes have dirty thoughts which control their actions, much as a village or parish court controls the behavior of people in its jurisdiction. Now what we see Iago doing here is giving himself an escape hatch. If Cassio is able to prove that he is innocent, Iago can say to Othello, “Wait a minutes, I told you I could be wrong. Furthermore, I didn’t want to tell you my suspicions anyway. You made me tell.”

Othello tries an appeal to friendship at line 142: Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago, if thou but think’st him wrong'd and mak’st his ear a stranger to thy thoughts. If you really were my friend as you claim to be, you would tell me. This is the fifth times Othello has asked. In response Iago expands on his earlier argument that even virtuous people have occasional dirty thoughts. In his case, he is hardly virtuous, and he admits that he sees vile things that aren’t always there:

I do beseech you--

Though I perchance am vicious in my guess

(As, I confess, it is my nature's plague

To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy

Shapes faults that are not) that your wisdom

From one that so imperfectly conceits

Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble

Out of his scattering and unsure observance.

It were not for your quiet nor your good,

Nor for my manhood, honesty, or wisdom,

To let you know my thoughts.

This is a disclaimer that he blames on his jealousy, without specifying what he is jealous of. But he is warning Othello that jealousy can make us see things that aren’t there, ironically the very condition Othello is about to experience. He concludes by saying that he has decided it would be better if Othello did not know his thoughts. To someone like Othello who is used to absolute command, this kind of patronizing is simply unacceptable. And so at line 154 he demands for the sixth time, What dost thou mean?

Iago at line 155 suddenly shoots off in an unanticipated direction, talking about reputation. There is nothing in the dialogue up to this point that prepares us for this apparent change of subject. Furthermore, his statement here about the value of reputation is diametrically opposed to what he told Cassio just a few scenes before.

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,

Is the immediate jewel of their souls.

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;

'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;

But he that filches from me my good name

Robs me of that which not enriches him

And makes me poor indeed.

Othello had demanded, What dost thou mean and Iago tells him his reputation is the most important thing he has. If someone steals your money, it really doesn’t hurt you. But if they take your good name, they take the immediate jewel of your soul. We know from what Othello had said back in the first act that reputation is indeed important to him. Now at line 162 he demands again, angrily, By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts! the seventh demand. Iago shoots back his denial: You cannot, if my heart were in your hand;

nor shall not, whilst 'tis in my custody. This has become a contest of wills, something that Othello is not used to dealing with and which frustrates him so that he responds simply Ha! at line 165.

Iago now goes off on another apparent tangent, not responding to Othello’s demand but instead warning about the dangers of jealousy: O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on. The image here suggests a cat that plays with a mouse, obsessing on it, before eating it. Shakespeare’s phrase has become so well-known that now the emotion of jealousy is routinely referred to as “the green-eyed monster.” Nothing that Othello has said up to this point suggests that he is thinking about jealousy in any way. Iago has interjected the idea of jealousy into the conversation without giving any specific reason for or object of this emotional extreme. Look at Iago’s manipulation so far in this scene:

1.) When Cassio is seen talking with Desdemona, he says ominously, “I like not that.”

2.) He asks if Cassio knew about Othello’s love for Desdemona, and when he’s told Cassio went between the two; he won’t say why he asked.

3.) He won’t tell Othello what he is thinking. When pressured to do so, he responds by saying that he may be spying abuses that aren’t real.

4.) When further pressed to reveal his thoughts, he tells Othello that his good name is his most important possession. Then he warns Othello rather vaguely about the dangers of jealousy.

At line 167 Iago gives us a rather jaundiced view of jealousy for the cuckold, the man whose wife has betrayed him:

That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;

But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er

Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!

No one has mentioned the possibility of betrayal within marriage up to this point. Once again the message is in the implication. For Iago the best a husband can hope for is to know for sure that his wife is sleeping with another man so that he loves not his wronger. The worst state is to be uncertain of a woman’s fidelity. Without once mentioning Desdemona, Iago has suggested that she has cuckolded Othello with Cassio. At the same time he warns again at line 175 not to give in to jealousy: Good heaven, the souls of all my tribe defend from jealousy! The effect of this warning is, of course, a form of reverse psychology: I hope you won’t give way to the emotion I have planted in your psyche by telling you not to think about it! And remember, Iago knows better than anyone else in the play what the effects of doubt and jealousy are on a suspicious husband.

In next sequence, lines 176 – 257, an interesting movement takes place. Othello begins by denying with great conviction that he is capable of feeling jealousy. Iago may have been defeated! So he shifts the grounds of his attack, telling Othello his wife and Cassio’s behavior is common among the gentle folks of Venice. But Othello is a stranger to that culture, and so he has no idea what’s going on. Rather than repudiating this slander, Othello buys into it; maybe there are things about the goings-on among the upper classes that I am ignorant of. Iago brings up the parting curse of her father to use against her. Then he will tell Othello repeatedly that he is upset, another way of making someone feel what you wish to project on them, Then Iago will return that double ironic play on the word “think.” Finally at one point Othello’s attitude toward his wife changes profoundly. It is not a big, elaborate speech, just a single line. The whole play turns on this one line. See if you can spot it. What is it in Othello’s character that allows him to buy into Iago’s poisonous plot? Iago concludes this sequence by urging Othello not to think about what he has instilled in his mind; and we know from earlier in the play how helpful it is to tell someone not to feel something or not to think about it. [Act III, scene 3, lines 176 – 257]

OTHELLO: Why? Why is this?

Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy,

To follow still [to continually alter] the changes of the moon

With fresh suspicions? No! To be once in doubt

Is once to be resolved. Exchange me for a goat,

When I shall turn the business of my soul

To such exsufflicate and blown [exaggerated and fly- blown] surmises,

Matching thy inference. 'Tis not to make me jealous

To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,

Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well;

Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw

The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt;

For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago;

I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;

And on the proof, there is no more but this:

Away at once with love or jealousy!

IAGO: I am glad of this; for now I shall have reason

To show the love and duty that I bear you

With franker spirit. Therefore, as I am bound,

Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof.

Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio;

Wear your eye thus: not jealous nor secure:

I would not have your free and noble nature,

Out of self-bounty [innate kindness] be abused. Look to 't!

I know our country disposition well:

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave 't undone, but keep 't unknown [They don’t frown upon adultery, just on making it known publicly].

OTHELLO: Dost thou say so?

IAGO: She did deceive her father, marrying you;

And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,

She loved them most.

OTHELLO: And so she did.

IAGO: Why, go to then!

She that, so young, could give out such a seeming,

To seal [hoodwink] her father's eyes up close as oak--

He thought 'twas witchcraft. But I am much to blame.

I humbly do beseech you of your pardon

For too much loving you.

OTHELLO: I am bound to thee for ever.

IAGO: I see this hath a little dashed your spirits.

OTHELLO: Not a jot, not a jot.

IAGO: Trust me, I fear it has.

I hope you will consider what is spoke

Comes from my love. But I do see you're moved:

I am to pray you not to strain [enlarge the implication] my speech

To grosser issues nor to larger reach [meaning]

Than to suspicion.

OTHELLO: I will not.

IAGO: Should you do so, my lord,

My speech should fall into such vile success

As my thoughts aim not at. Cassio's my worthy friend--

My lord, I see you're moved.

OTHELLO: No, not much moved:

I do not think but Desdemona's honest.

IAGO: Long live she so! And long live you to think so!

OTHELLO: And yet, how nature erring from itself --

IAGO: Ay, there's the point, as (to be bold with you)

Not to affect many proposed matches

Of her own clime, complexion, and degree [social rank]

Whereto we see in all things nature tends [in nature all things are attracted to their like]

Foh! one may smell in such a will [sexual appetite] most rank,

Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.

But pardon me, I do not in position [in general argument]

Distinctly [specifically] speak of her; though I may fear

Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,

May fall to match [happen to compare] you with her country forms [appearance of her countrymen]

And happily [perhaps] repent.

OTHELLO: Farewell, farewell:

If more thou dost perceive, let me know more.

Set on thy wife to observe. Leave me, Iago:

IAGO: [Going] My lord, I take my leave.

OTHELLO: Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless

Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds.

IAGO: [Returning] My lord, I would I might entreat your honor

To scan this thing no further. Leave it to time.

Though it be fit that Cassio have his place,

For sure, he fills it up with great ability,

Yet, if you please to hold him off awhile;

You shall by that perceive him and his means.

Note, if your lady strain his entertainment [argues strenuously for his reinstatement]

With any strong or vehement importunity;

Much will be seen in that. In the meantime,

Let me be thought too busy in my fears

(As worthy cause I have to fear I am)

And hold her free, I do beseech your honor.

OTHELLO: Fear not my government [self-control].

IAGO: I once more take my leave.

This skillful manipulation is the heart of the play. Iago is operating at a number of different levels all at once, and they finally have the desired effect of pushing Othello over the brink and into a doubt about his wife’s fidelity. In terms of the set-up of the play, if we discount the time spent on the voyage when all the principals were separated, this is only the second day of Othello’s marriage. In terms of this presentation of time, it seems impossible that Othello could doubt his wife. This is part of that effect of double time that I spoke of back in the introduction to the play. One kind of time is the deliberate speeding up of all the events, so that no one, especially Othello, has an opportunity to stop, consider and carefully evaluate what is happening. At the same time there is this psychological passage of time that we see here, where we observe Othello move from point to point in his misperceptions

In the beginning of this sequence at line 176 Othello sounds as if he will deny the premise of Iago’s plot: Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy, to follow still [to continually alter] the changes of the moon with fresh suspicions? He is not some emotional fragile wimp like Roderigo who would fall apart because he is always unsure of his wife’s affection, changing as often as the moon. He gives us then at line 179 his philosophy about uncertainty: To be once in doubt is once to be resolved. When you encounter uncertainty, you immediately do what you must to learn the truth. Certainly for a military leader this is a principle that is absolutely essential. Are the Turks headed for Rhodes or Cyprus? We have to discover the answer right now and make a life-or-death decision. (That’s why Shakespeare’s other great tragic hero, Hamlet, would have made such a lousy soldier – he would have kept second-guessing himself!) At line 180 he uses a metaphor to show us how disgusting he finds the idea of living in ambiguity:

Exchange me for a goat,

When I shall turn the business of my soul

To such exsufflicate and blown [exaggerated and fly-blown] surmises,

Matching thy inference.

He really doesn’t like Iago’s suggestion that he would give way to jealousy. But look at that use of the animal image “goat,” a particularly sexually active kind of livestock. Who else have we heard use animals to talk about human relationships? That’s right, Iago, who has already shown what I called his bestiality obsession with rams and horses and baboons. One of the signs that Othello is giving way to Iago’s manipulation is to look for signs of creeping Iagoism. Even as Othello assures that he will never give way to this kind of weakness, the language he uses suggests that he is.

At line 183 Othello gives us a clear-eyed appraisal of Desdemona’s accomplishments that a gentle woman was expected to show the world:

'Tis not to make me jealous

To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,

Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well;

Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw

The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt;

For she had eyes, and chose me.

The seven virtues listed in the first three lines here are the essence of the courtly woman, and they all, in one way or another, involve interaction with others, especially men. (“Feeds well” means she uses table manners at dinner.) Because she does these things does not mean she is promiscuous but rather is accounted an accomplished and virtuous lady. Furthermore, he will not admit any doubt because, as he forcibly points out, she had eyes and she chose me. Othello should emblazon this on his soul, because it is at the heart of their love. He concludes his defense of his wife with a restatement of his belief that he can tolerate no doubt or ambiguity: No, Iago; I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; and on the proof, there is no more but this: Away at once with love or jealousy! This uncertainty that Othello rejects is exactly what Iago is trying to instill in his mind. If he can keep Othello in a state of anxiety and doubt, he has a chance to win.

Now at line 193 Iago changes the ground of his argument one more time. Othello had asked him seven times to reveal what was in his thoughts; now, since Othello is so sure of his wife’s love, Iago will finally reveal the dreaded secret:

I am glad of this; for now I shall have reason

To show the love and duty that I bear you

With franker spirit. Therefore, as I am bound,

Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof.

Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio;

Wear your eye thus: not jealous nor secure:

I would not have your free and noble nature,

Out of self-bounty [innate kindness] be abused. Look to 't!

I know our country disposition well:

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave 't undone, but keep 't unknown [They don’t frown upon adultery, just on making it known publicly].

Iago builds on Othello’s statement of faith in his wife; if he’s sure of her, Iago can proceed, and at line 195 he makes his first clear accusation involving Casio and Desdemona. Except that he cannot offer proof! It has only taken about half the scene to arrive at this point. Othello must remain in doubt, not jealous nor secure, what he just told us he could not do. Iago adds that he is concerned about the Moor’s reputation, that out of a misplaced trust or self-bounty his wife’s infidelity is making him look bad, be abused. Now he adds what turns out to be the clinching argument at line 201 where he plays upon Othello’s sense of isolation and alienation from the very society he is fighting to protect – the Venice of the courtly upper classes. Gentle women from this civilized metropolis, says Iago, are all promiscuous and routinely betray their husbands, seeking only to keep their affairs from public view. Othello has been overseas most of his career, defending the Venetian state in places like Cyprus and Rhodes, and so he doesn’t know what goes on in what Brabantio called the heart of civilization. Rather than dismissing this generalized slander against an entire society, Othello uncritically says, Dost thou say so? He is accepting the possibility here. We see something similar in our own society in the public attitude toward and reputation of Las Vegas. We can imagine some farm boy from North Dakota accepting the suggestion that all women from Sin City must be morally loose. Iago quickly brings in a specific piece of evidence at line 206: She did deceive her father, marrying you; and when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, she loved them most. This is an extraordinary charge: the very action by which Desdemona proved her love for Othello, deceiving her father to be with the Moor, Iago uses to condemn her. The correct response should have been for Othello to whack Iago for gross insult, but instead the shaken husband simply agrees, And so she did. Iago pushes harder, pointing out that her deception, seeming, fooled even her father: She that, so young, could give out such a seeming, to seal [hoodwink] her father's eyes up close as oak -- He thought 'twas witchcraft. He laughs at the idea that her deception was the result of witchcraft – it’s just the natural trickery of upper-class women of Venice. Having insulted Othello and his wife, Iago now apologizes and claims his disturbing remarks come from his love for his friend. Othello at line 213 utters a prophetic line: I am bound to thee forever. Now he means he is grateful for Iago’s insight, but the comment can also be seen as a statement that the two men are from this point on tied together. They have entered into a symbiotic relationship. Othello will increasingly view the world through the warped lens of Iago’s perverted vision; but Iago will be a captive of the role he has created with Othello, so much so that it will lead inevitably to his death.

At line 214 Iago shifts to another manipulation technique, telling Othello that he is upset. How many times in the next ten lines does Iago do this? As he uses this device, he also urges Othello not strain my speech to grosser issues. It’s a little too late for that! Othello’s mind is whirling with grosser images. And although Iago reassures us Cassio’s his good friend and hopes Othello doesn’t jump to any conclusion, just remains suspicious, we can sense that Othello has already condemned Desdemona. So it is at line 225 he declares I do not think but Desdemona’s honest, and Iago sarcastically agrees, Long live she so. And long live you to think so. There is the old ironic “think” again. Iago is telling Othello that he can continue to delude himself by “thinking” his wife is faithful, but they both know better.

I had asked you to look for the one line where the whole play turns, and I think it is line 227: And yet, how nature erring from itself – Here are four reasons this is a key line.

1.) Othello now obviously accepts the possibility of Desdemona’s guilt.

2.) Iago’s poisoning has taken over to such an extent that now Othello begins to look for evidence on his own that she is corrupt.

3.) She is beautiful, kind and accomplished, but he is saying this is not enough to protect her. Her very nature will lead her to err from itself.

4.) What evidence is there that Desdemona’s nature has erred? The fact that she fell in love with him! Othello suddenly falls prey to all those negative images that Brabantio had burdened him with, devil, thing, and animal. “Something must be wrong with her if she would fall in love with somebody like me!” This is the depth of self-loathing.

Iago picks up on this remarkable admission and tries to reinforce it at line 228:

Ay, there's the point, as (to be bold with you)

Not to affect many proposed matches

Of her own clime, complexion, and degree [social rank]

Whereto we see in all things nature tends [in nature all things are attracted to their like]

Foh! one may smell in such a will [sexual appetite] most rank,

Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.

What kind of woman is Desdemona? She passed up the chance to marry men like Roderigo who are in her social class and ethnic group. Something must be wrong with her if she would so go against nature and marry a black man. It must mean that she has a will most rank, foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. The key phrase in Iago’s description is will most rank. Will can mean sexual appetite as well as undisciplined behavior. The word rank meant smelly, corrupt and also referred to an animal in sexual heat. If she gets turned on by a black man and marries him, she is a slut with something seriously wrong with her judgment. Iago is insulting Othello to his face, and at line 234 he catches himself and offers a kind of apology, which he immediately takes back:

But pardon me, I do not in position [in general argument]

Distinctly [specifically] speak of her; though I may fear

Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,

May fall to match [happen to compare] you with her country forms [appearance of her countrymen]

And happily [perhaps] repent.

Iago claims he is not talking about Desdemona specifically, but of course he is. He doesn’t mean to say she is a slut who lacks good judgment, but he does worry that she will wake up in a day or two and realize she has made a terrible mistake.

Iago succeeds beyond his wildest dreams in destroying Othello’s peace of mind. He does so by using the very love between Desdemona and Othello as evidence that she is corrupt, and Othello accepts it without challenge. At line 238 he has had enough and orders Iago to leave him alone so he can think about what has just happened. He tells Iago to set on your wife to observe, that is get Emilia to spy on her. It’s another example of creeping Iagoism, using others to collect information. Othello agonizes, wonders to himself, Why did I marry? He is sure that Iago, this honest creature, knows a lot more that he is not sharing. Iago has not left the stage, and he comes back to Othello and pleads with the Moor not to think about it anymore, which we know has exactly the opposite effect. Then he offers a practical course of action to determine her honesty. Don’t give Cassio his job back right away. Watch and see what she does, if she pleads for him with any special fervor. This will prove that the two of them are involved. At 253 Iago once again establishes a possible escape hatch: In the meantime, let me be thought too busy in my fears (as worthy cause I have to fear I am) and hold her free, I do beseech your honor. Always remember, I may be completely wrong in my suspicions. Please don’t let my words affect the way you feel about your wife. If the whole plot blew up this point, he could honestly say, “I told you not to accept my version too readily.” Othello sends him off again, telling him not to fear his government, or self-control.

The next sequence, lines 257 -- 317, falls into three parts. In the first part Othello has a soliloquy about his feelings. It is his first such speech in the play. Up to this point all the soliloquies have come from Iago. Now we see him wrestling with emotions which are new to him. Then there is a brief exchange between Othello and his wife in which a handkerchief is introduced because Othello has a headache. (In the folklore of cuckoldry the betrayed husband grew horns which everyone else could see but which he could sense only because he had headaches.) The third short section is an exchange between Emilia and Iago and also involves the handkerchief. [Act III, scene 3, lines 257 – 317]

OTHELLO: This fellow's of exceeding honesty,

And knows all qualities [types], with a learned spirit,

Of human dealings. If I do prove her haggard [a hunting bird that could not be trained]

Though that her jesses [straps] were my dear heartstrings,

I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind [I’d release her and let her fly free]

To prey at fortune. Haply [perhaps], for I am black

And have not those soft parts of conversation [gentle speech and manners]

That chamberers [courtly gentlemen] have, or for I am declined

Into the vale of years,--yet that's not much--

She's gone. I am abused; and my relief

Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,

That we can call these delicate creatures ours,

And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,

And live upon the vapor of a dungeon,

Than keep a corner in the thing I love

For others' uses. Yet, 'tis the plague of great ones;

Prerogatived are they less than the base.

'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.

Even then this forked plague [cuckold’s horns] is fated to us

When we do quicken [are born]. Desdemona comes:

[Enter DESDEMONA and EMILIA]

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself!

I'll not believe 't.

DESDEMONA: How now, my dear Othello?

Your dinner, and the generous islanders

By you invited, do attend [wait upon] your presence.

OTHELLO: I am to blame.

DESDEMONA: Why do you speak so faintly?

Are you not well?

OTHELLO: I have a pain upon my forehead here.

DESDEMONA: 'Faith, that's with watching; 'twill away again:

Let me but bind it hard, within this hour

It will be well.

OTHELLO: Your napkin [elaborate handkerchief] is too little:

[He pushes the handkerchief away and it falls]

Let it alone. Come, I'll go in with you.

DESDEMONA: I am very sorry that you are not well.

[Exit OTHELLO and DESDEMONA]

EMILIA: I am glad I have found this napkin.

This was her first remembrance from the Moor.

My wayward husband hath a hundred times

Wooed me to steal it; but she so loves the token,

For he conjured her she should ever keep it,

That she reserves it evermore about her

To kiss and talk to. I'll have the work ta'en out [copied],

And give 't Iago. What he will do with it

Heaven knows, not I;

I nothing [I wish nothing] but to please his fantasy [whim];

[Re-enter Iago]

IAGO: How now? What do you here alone?

EMILIA: Do not you chide; I have a thing for you.

IAGO: A thing for me? It is a common thing--

EMILIA: Ha!

IAGO: To have a foolish wife.

EMILIA: O, is that all? What will you give me now

For the same handkerchief?

IAGO: What handkerchief?

EMILIA: What handkerchief?

Why, that the Moor first gave to Desdemona;

That which so often you did bid me steal.

IAGO: Hast stol'n it from her?

EMILIA: No, 'faith; she let it drop by negligence.

And, to the advantage [taking advantage], I, being here, took't up.

Look, here it is.

IAGO: A good wench. Give it me.

EMILIA: What will you do with 't, that you have been so earnest

To have me filch it?

IAGO: [Snatching it] Why, what's that to you?

EMILIA: If it be not for some purpose of import [importance],

Give 't me again. Poor lady, she'll run mad

When she shall lack [miss] it.

IAGO: Be not acknown on 't [forget you ever saw it]; I have use for it.

Go, leave me.

Othello’s soliloquy here gives us some important clues as to his transformation. First, Iago is of exceeding honesty, at line 257, and knows a lot more than Othello about all qualities of human dealings. As a soldier Othello knows about tactics and weapons and body counts, but he relies upon his friend Iago to help him understand the world of the civilians. What options does Othello have if his wife is disloyal? At line 259 he uses a metaphor from the popular sport of falconry, Desdemona being a haggard or bird of prey that cannot be trained to return to the falconer. You held a hunting bird by jesses or straps, but if Desdemona will not return to her husband, he will turn her loose to prey at fortune. He’ll throw her out. There is no suggestion that he wants to kill her. Then he begins to wonder why she would betray him. Perhaps it is because he is black, so he has begun to succumb to the color prejudice of Brabantio and Roderigo. Or maybe it is because he cannot speak and behave as a courtly gentleman, like Cassio, And have not those soft parts of conversation [gentle speech and manners] that chamberers [courtly gentlemen] have. Remember how in Act I, scene 3 before the Duke, Othello had insisted Rude am I in my speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace. He was not kidding; he really sees himself as being verbally and socially awkward, despite what we know is his natural eloquence. The third possible reason for his wife’s straying might be his age, for I am declined into the vale of years, but no sooner has he said this than like most men he quickly qualifies it: but that’s not much! Whatever the reason, She's gone. I am abused; and my relief must be to loathe her. At line 267 he generalizes from his experience to conclude that all husbands face the same dilemma, being unable to control their wives’ appetites, sexual desires. We get another example of creeping Iagoism at lines 269 as Othello describes his relationship in animal terms, in an especially disgusting comparison:

I had rather be a toad,

And live upon the vapor of a dungeon,

Than keep a corner in the thing I love

For others' uses.

Othello sees his sexual identity in terms of a toad, living in a unhealthy hole where prisoners are kept, rather than sharing his wife’s body, a corner in the thing I love, with another man. At line 272 Othello offers a fourth possible reason for Desdemona’s adultery, an intriguing explanation:

Yet, 'tis the plague of great ones;

Prerogatived are they less than the base.

'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.

Even then this forked plague [cuckold’s horns] is fated to us

When we do quicken [are born].

There was a long tradition, going back to the Middle Ages, that the wives of great men were more liable to commit adultery. (Think of King Arthur, his wife Guinevere and Lancelot in the legend.) This may well have been the result of marriages which were based on financial or social considerations rather than love. Like almost all of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes Othello generalizes about all humankind based on his own experience, and so here he says that as a great man, he was destined to have a wife who betrayed him. It was a fate he could not escape, unlike ordinary men who, he imagines, could marry women who might be able to stay faithful.

When Desdemona enters at line 277, all Othello’s belief in her faithfulness is restored: If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe 't. He begins a curious conversation with Desdemona. She asks why he has not come to join the people he has invited for dinner; he is not very forthcoming. At line 281 he says, I am to blame, as if he were finding the excuse for her infidelity in his own failings. At line 283 when she asks if he is unwell, he tells her he has a headache. Probably for the first time in his life, Othello is speaking deceptively, using a kind of ironic code. Remember that the cuckolded husband did not see his horns and only sensed they were on his head by the discomfort he felt. Desdemona misses the subtle reference. If it were Emilia, she would have responded angrily by denying the implication. Desdemona jumps right in and offers to tie her handkerchief around his head to help the pain, but he impatiently pushes it away and it drops to the floor. They leave.

Emilia eagerly pounces on the discarded linen at line 289, telling us My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it. It has apparently never occurred to her to find out what Iago’s fixation is with her employer’s handkerchief. At line 295 she says she will have the work taken out, that is, have the embroidery copied. Then she seems to abdicate any further responsibility: What he will do with it Heaven knows, not I;

I nothing [I wish nothing] but to please his fantasy [whim].

In the brief exchange that follows we see how much Iago values his helpmate, which is not at all. He greets her with suspicion: What do you here alone? When she teases him by saying she has a thing for him, he almost turns it into an obscenity:

EMILIA: I have a thing for you.

IAGO: A thing for me? It is a common thing--

EMILIA: Ha!

IAGO: To have a foolish wife.

EMILIA: O, is that all?

Iago is saying sarcastically that Emilia’s thing is common, as in vulgar, over-used. When she objects he turns it into an ordinary insult. She seems relieved it was not something worse. Emilia offers him the handkerchief and at line 308 he asks if she stole it, as he had asked her to. (We get another example of the double time in which this play was written. They had just landed the night before, and yet we’re told Iago has asked his wife a hundred times to steal the linen.) He wants to know if she did steal it, that need Iago has demonstrated throughout to “get the goods” on everyone, even his own wife. In a film version of this play, starring Laurence Olivier, the Iago character was shown frequently surreptiously stealing all kinds of small things when people weren’t looking. At line 312 she asks what he will do with it, and he tells her it’s none of her business. Emilia anticipates that Desdemona will run mad, which is exactly what happens. Emilia is often a challenging character to play. She seems so dense. Often she is played as a woman with a lot of issues, for whom marriage has not been a fulfilling experience. In one memorable production, she was played as a drunk. In the Laurence Fishburne/ Kenneth Branagh film version, Iago uses sexual favors to control his wife.

In the next sequence, lines 318 – 423, Iago exalts in his control over Othello, who will be unable to ever sleep peacefully again. Othello comes back and tells us that his wife’s betrayal has destroyed his pleasure in being a soldier, the very essence of his character. This change is probably more than Iago had anticipated. Othello then begins to blame Iago, starts to suspect that he has done this deliberately, and threatens bodily harm. Othello cannot tolerate the ambiguity and demands to be satisfied. Iago responds by offering “proof” that Desdemona is guilty. [Act III, scene 3, line 318 – 406]

IAGO: I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin,

And let him find it. Trifles light as air

Are to the jealous confirmations strong

As proofs of Holy Writ. This may do something.

The Moor already changes with my poison:

Dangerous conceits are, in their natures, poisons.

Which at the first are scarce found to distaste [scarcely tasted],

But with a little [shortly] act upon the blood.

Burn like the mines of sulphur. I did say so. [Enter OTHELLO]

Look, where he comes! Not poppy, nor mandragora,

Nor all the drowsy syrups [sleeping potions] of the world,

Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep

Which thou owedst [possessed] yesterday.

OTHELLO: Ha! ha! False to me?

IAGO: Why, how now, general? No more of that.

OTHELLO: Avaunt! be gone! Thou hast set me on the rack.

I swear 'tis better to be much abused

Than but to know 't a little.

IAGO: How now, my lord!

OTHELLO: What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?

I saw 't not, thought it not, it harmed not me.

I slept the next night well, was free and merry;

I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips.

He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n,

Let him not know 't, and he's not robbed at all.

IAGO: I am sorry to hear this.

OTHELLO: I had been happy, if the general camp,

Pioners [manual laborers] and all, had tasted her sweet body,

So I had nothing known. O now, forever

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!

Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,

That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!

Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,

The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,

The royal banner, and all quality,

Pride, pomp and circumstance [pageantry] of glorious war!

And, O you mortal engines [cannons], whose rude throats

The immortal Jove's dead clamors [thunder] counterfeit,

Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!

IAGO: Is 't possible, my lord?

OTHELLO: Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!

Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof;

Or by the worth of man's eternal soul,

Thou hadst been better have been born a dog

Than answer my waked wrath!

IAGO: Is 't come to this?

OTHELLO: Make me to see 't; or, at the least, so prove it

That the probation [proof] bear no hinge nor loop

To hang a doubt on -- or woe upon thy life!

IAGO: My noble lord --

OTHELLO: If thou dost slander her and torture me,

Never pray more; abandon all remorse;

On horror's head horrors accumulate;

Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed;

For nothing canst thou to damnation add

Greater than that.

IAGO: O grace! O heaven forgive me!

Are you a man? Have you a soul or sense?

God be wi' you! Take mine office. O wretched fool,

That lov’st to make thine honesty a vice!

O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O world,

To be direct and honest is not safe.

I thank you for this profit, and from hence

I'll love no friend, sith [since] love breeds such offense.

OTHELLO: Nay, stay. Thou shouldst be honest.

IAGO: I should be wise, for honesty's a fool

And loses that it works for.

OTHELLO: By the world,

I think my wife be honest and think she is not;

I think that thou art just and think thou art not.

I'll have some proof. My name, that was as fresh

As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black

As mine own face. If there be cords, or knives,

Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,

I'll not endure it. Would I were satisfied!

IAGO: I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion.

I do repent me that I put it to you.

You would be satisfied?

OTHELLO: Would? Nay, and I will.

IAGO: And may; but, how? How satisfied, my lord?

Would you, the supervisor [onlooker] grossly gape on?

Behold her topped?

OTHELLO: Death and damnation! O!

IAGO: It were a tedious [laborious] difficulty, I think,

To bring them to that prospect [viewing]. Damn them then,

If ever mortal eyes do see them bolster [in bed]

More than their own! What then? How then?

What shall I say? Where's satisfaction?

It is impossible you should see this,

Were they as prime [lustful] as goats, as hot as monkeys,

As salt [aroused] as wolves in pride [heat], and fools as gross

As ignorance made drunk. But yet, I say,

If imputation and strong circumstances

Which lead directly to the door of truth

Will give you satisfaction, you may have 't.

OTHELLO: Give me a living reason she's disloyal.

Iago at the beginning reminds us that he has no carefully worked out master plot. As he says of the handkerchief at line 319, Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmations strong as proofs of Holy Writ. This may do something. He doesn’t know exactly how the linen will figure in the proceedings; he’s just going to put it into play. Othello is already beginning to change. If Iago were to speculate on the outcome at this point, he would probably say that he hopes Cassio loses his job and that Othello comes to despise his wife as much as Iago does Emilia. But events are about to take a different direction. At line 328 when Othello comes back in, Iago cruelly laughs at the powerful change he has wrought in the Moor. He predicts that he will never be able to sleep peacefully again, an affliction many of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes suffer. Othello declares at line 333, Thou hast set me on the rack. I swear 'tis better to be much abused than but to know 't a little. Iago appreciates the idea he has caused Othello pain. The rack was one of the common instruments of torture used in those days. However, he is surprised by Othello’s assertion here that it is better not to know the truth. Remember that Iago operated on the assumption the best course was to assume the worst, to be the cuckold who did not love his wronger. Othello at line 335 explains why ignorance may be bliss:

What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?

I saw 't not, thought it not, it harmed not me.

I slept the next night well, was free and merry;

I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips.

He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n,

Let him not know 't, and he's not robbed at all.

Perhaps Othello feels his loss of his wife more keenly than Iago did his because Othello truly loved Desdemona, whereas Iago only loves himself. The Moor is reluctant to give up his love, even if he sharing it with another man. Unfortunately people discover “ignorance is bliss” only after they have found the unpleasant truth. Iago is appalled at this sentiment, as he tells us at line 341: I am very sorry to hear this. Othello’s change from Iago’s intended reaction goes even further: I had been happy, if the general camp,

pioners [manual laborers] and all, had tasted her sweet body, so I had nothing known.

Rather than obsessing about one lieutenant doing him wrong, Othello would have been willing for everyone, even the grunts who did the digging of trenches, the pioneers, had had their way with Desdemona, as long as he didn’t have to know about it. This is diametrically opposed to what Iago wants. But it gets worse at line 344!

O now, forever

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!

Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,

That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!

Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,

The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,

The royal banner, and all quality,

Pride, pomp and circumstance [pageantry] of glorious war!

And, O you mortal engines [cannons], whose rude throats

The immortal Jove's dead clamors [thunder] counterfeit,

Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!

Iago is glad to hear that Othello’s content and tranquil mind are gone, because he has lost them as well. But the rest must come as a shock! If Othello no longer has the love of Desdemona, then all that had made him great, his identity as a soldier, is lost as well. We can see in the images he calls forth here why the military appealed to him: plumed troop, neighing steed, shrill trump [the trumpet used to sound the call to battle], spirit-stirring drum, ear-piercing fife, royal banner and especially the mortal engines or cannon that sounded like the thunder of the gods. All these stirring things represent a human endeavor which allows personal ambition to become a virtue. This is a very interesting insight, something that links Othello with great military leaders from Julius Caesar to George Patton. But it is all gone. Now if you are Iago and your ambition is to get a job in middle management in this whole enterprise, and the man you are counting on to give you that promotion suddenly announces that he is retiring to write a book on the futility of it all, it puts a crimp in your plans. The other important thing about this passage is the passion that lies behind it. If he is willing to give it all up, what else will his emotional turmoil lead him to do?

We see the direction his feelings take him at line 356:

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!

Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof;

Or by the worth of man's eternal soul,

Thou hadst been better have been born a dog

Than answer my waked wrath!

Iago has tapped into something very explosive and dangerous. All that rage gets directed at him for 15 lines in a challenge: prove that Desdemona is a whore or face the wrath his accusation has aroused. Othello raises the possibility that Iago has done this deliberately, to slander her and torture me. If he has he will die a horrible death. Othello will not tolerate uncertainty.

This development shocks and frightens Iago. He certainly never reacted with this level of violence to his own jealousy. He never talks about killing anyone because Emilia has been unfaithful. He responds to the threat at line 370:

O grace! O heaven forgive me!

Are you a man? Have you a soul or sense?

God be wi' you! Take mine office. O wretched fool,

That lov’st to make thine honesty a vice!

O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O world,

To be direct and honest is not safe.

I thank you for this profit, and from hence

I'll love no friend, sith [since] love breeds such offense.

Iago counters Othello’s rage by pretending to be self-righteously angry. For one of the few times in the play, Iago uses the language of religious, moral man: grace, heaven, soul, God, and love. Othello’s reaction has taught him never to help anyone again! Take mine office. The note of wounded honesty has the desired effect.

Thrown off by Iago’s response, Othello comes back to his intolerable ambiguity at line 380: By the world, I think my wife be honest and think she is not; I think that thou art just and think thou art not. As a man of action he cannot stand not knowing the truth and he demands proof. At line 383 he describes how his sense of himself has changed: My name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face. Some editors think this passage should read Her name…. referring to Desdemona. (Diana was the Roman goddess of chastity.) However, it may be another sign of creeping Iagoism that Othello now uses his own color as a negative to describe how his reputation has been ruined by his wife’s adultery. Othello cannot live with the tension of uncertainty, and at line 385 he strikes out at the situation with a kind of generalized threat: If there be cords, or knives, poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, I'll not endure it. Would I were satisfied! Here he is employing the threat of physical injury and death by means of these five different forms of violence in order to be resolved. He doesn’t say who will be the object of his violence; he may not have any one person in mind, just striking out in his frustration. Iago is probably frightened again by the possibility of being the victim, but he fastens on Othello’s use of the word satisfied. (Notice how often he uses the word in some form in this sequence.) Once again he expresses regret for having aroused the general’s emotion and asks, You would be satisfied? Iago begins talking about satisfaction, the kind of perverted satisfaction that he himself might appreciate: How satisfied, my lord? Would you, the supervisor [onlooker] grossly gape on? Behold her topped? “Do you want to watch?” asks Iago who we know is a voyeur. And in his best expression of creeping Iagoism, he describes the sexual coupling of Desdemona and Cassio in terms of his fascination with bestiality beginning at line 399:

It is impossible you should see this,

Were they as prime [lustful] as goats, as hot as monkeys,

As salt [aroused] as wolves in pride [heat], and fools as gross

As ignorance made drunk.

In his warped imagination he imagines goats, monkeys and wolves getting it on, animals with reputations for unrestrained sexual activity, but he does so at the same time he denies that Othello will be able to watch, much as he might like to. Even if the adulterous couple were a pair of drunken idiots, they will remain unseen. Throughout this passage Iago goes on as if this were just a matter of logistics. He acts as if there were nothing out of the ordinary with a man foaming at the mouth. Just the suggestion of Othello watching his wife being topped, especially with the colorful animal comparisons, drives Othello further into a blind rage: Death and damnation!

Iago has been challenged to come up with something concrete that will convince Othello his wife is little better than a goat. And so he comes up with an incredible story that succeeds beyond his expectations. Where does Iago come up with the details of his “dream”? How do you account for Othello’s reaction? Secondly, who comes up with the idea of doing violence to Desdemona? How does Iago use the idea of the handkerchief as evidence? Notice how by the end of the scene Othello and Iago have become bound together and cannot escape from the consequences. [Act III, scene 3, lines 408 – 476]

IAGO: I do not like the office [task].

But, sith I am entered in this cause so far,

Pricked [spurred] to 't by foolish honesty and love,

I will go on. I lay with Cassio lately;

And, being troubled with a raging tooth,

I could not sleep.

There are a kind of men so loose of soul,

That in their sleeps will mutter their affairs.

One of this kind is Cassio.

In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona,

Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!”

And then, sir, would he gripe [seize] and wring my hand,

Cry “O sweet creature!” and then kiss me hard,

As if he plucked up kisses by the roots

That grew upon my lips. Then laid his leg

Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed; and then

Cried “Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!”

OTHELLO: O monstrous! monstrous!

IAGO: Nay, this was but his dream.

OTHELLO: But this denoted a foregone conclusion [consummated fact].

'Tis a shrewd doubt [revealing clue], though it be but a dream.

IAGO: And this may help to thicken other proofs

That do demonstrate thinly [appear weak].

OTHELLO: I'll tear her all to pieces.

IAGO: Nay, but be wise. Yet we see nothing done;

She may be honest yet! Tell me but this:

Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief

Spotted with strawberries in your wife's hand?

OTHELLO: I gave her such a one; 'twas my first gift.

IAGO: I know not that; but such a handkerchief --

I am sure it was your wife's -- did I today

See Cassio wipe his beard with.

OTHELLO: If it be that--

IAGO: If it be that, or any that was hers,

It speaks against her with the other proofs.

OTHELLO: O, that the slave had forty thousand lives!

One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.

Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago:

All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.

'Tis gone.

Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow hell!

Yield up, O Love, thy crown and hearted [seated] throne

To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught [load],

For 'tis of aspics' [asps’] tongues!

IAGO: Yet be content [patient].

OTHELLO: O, blood, blood, blood!

IAGO: Patience, I say; your mind perhaps may change.

OTHELLO: Never, Iago! Like to the Pontic sea [Black Sea],

Whose icy current and compulsive course

Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on

To the Propontic and the Hellespont,

Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,

Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,

Till that a capable and wide [thorough-going] revenge

Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven, [He kneels]

In the due reverence of a sacred vow

I here engage my words.

IAGO: Do not rise yet. [He kneels]

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,

You elements that clip [surround] us round about,

Witness that here Iago doth give up

The execution [workings] of his wit, hands, heart,

To wronged Othello's service. Let him command,

And to obey shall be in me remorse [pity],

What bloody business ever. [They rise]

OTHELLO: I greet thy love,

Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous,

And will upon the instant put thee to 't [the work you have vowed].

Within these three days let me hear thee say

That Cassio's not alive.

IAGO: My friend is dead. 'Tis done at your request.

But let her live.

OTHELLO: Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her!

Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw,

To furnish me with some swift means of death

For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

IAGO: I am your own for ever.

Othello wanted satisfaction. Iago gives him satisfaction, so much so that it pushes him right over the edge. Iago’s dream is a masterpiece of spontaneous creation. He has no master plot, so when Othello turned violent and demanded some kind of ocular proof, Iago had to come up with something that Othello could envision. So Iago makes up this story. He and Cassio are sharing a sleeping arrangement, maybe in a pup tent out on military maneuvers, and Iago couldn’t sleep because of a toothache. He hears Cassio talking in his sleep, something he attributes to men so loose of soul will mutter their affairs. He hears Cassio cry out “Sweet Desdemona, let us be wary, let us hide our loves!’ This is one level of evidence, if you accept it. Talking in his sleep would indicate that he is dreaming about her. The evidence trail goes on. Othello wanted ocular proof, in Iago’s terms, watch her topped. Iago now offers an imaginative re-enactment of what Cassio did to Desdemona, using his own body in place of Othello’s wife. This warped sexual fantasy gets played out at line 418 with Cassio assaulting Iago as if he were the woman using very concrete images of body parts for the first time in the whole scene:

And then, sir, would he gripe [seize] and wring my hand,

Cry “O sweet creature!” and then kiss me hard,

As if he plucked up kisses by the roots

That grew upon my lips. Then laid his leg

Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed; and then

Cried “Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!”

This entire scene has been charged with sexual tension, and yet the language has been non-specific. Now we get hand, kiss, lips, leg and thigh, forcing Othello to see what happened. At one level Iago satisfies Othello about the existence of the adultery and at the same time, with this little role-playing, makes it sound even more depraved. Freud would have had a field day with this passage! The combination of the apparent proof of the affair, coupled with the suggestion that the leering Iago had been the body double for Desdemona in a homoerotic fantasy is more than Othello can stand. At line 424 he howls, O monstrous! monstrous!

Iago in a example of reverse psychology immediately appears to backpedal from Line 424 on:

IAGO: Nay, this was but his dream.

OTHELLO: But this denoted a foregone conclusion [consummated fact].

'Tis a shrewd doubt [revealing clue], though it be but a dream.

IAGO: And this may help to thicken other proofs

That do demonstrate thinly [appear weak].

OTHELLO: I'll tear her all to pieces.

IAGO: Nay, but be wise. Yet we see nothing done;

She may be honest yet!

The roles are now reversed: it is Othello who insists on the worst possible interpretation and Iago who holds open the possibility that she may be innocent. Once he gets up to the point of convincing Othello, why does Iago seem to pull back? The more Iago tries to argue against the very implications he has planted, the more convinced Othello becomes. At line 431 Iago drops the second bombshell, the handkerchief. He pretends that he does not know its significance, when Othello tells him it was his first gift to her: I know not that; but such a handkerchief -- I am sure it was your wife's -- did I today see Cassio wipe his beard with. We see here another perfect example of Iago’s insidious power over Othello. The handkerchief is a symbol of Othello’s love for Desdemona, and not only has she given it to Cassio, but he values it so little that he wipes his beard with it, something that shows his disdain.

What has been Othello’s response to this latest revelation? That unfocused threat and violence we sensed around line 385 has gotten very focused by line 428: I’ll tear her all to pieces! Desdemona is the target. And at line 439 he includes Cassio in his violent revenge: O, that the slave had forty thousand lives! One is too poor, too weak for my revenge. Once he is convinced, his first action at line 441 is to announce the end of his love: Look here, Iago: All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. 'Tis gone. What he does is to blow to heaven what he felt for his wife. In a memorable production Sir Laurence Olivier, playing Othello, pulled off the crucifix around his neck as though he were renouncing God along with Desdemona. What follows in the text reinforces the idea that Othello is having a religious crisis as well as an interpersonal one:

Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow hell!

Yield up, O Love, thy crown and hearted [seated] throne

To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught [load],

For 'tis of aspics' [asps’] tongues!

If he has rejected heaven, Othello now turns to hell. He is replacing the Christian concept of love and forgiveness with non-Christian qualities of hatred and revenge in the form of poison from animals. He chants O, blood, blood, blood! Iago’s reaction is interesting. At line 447 he urges, Yet be content! or quiet, and at line 449 he cautions, Patience, I say. Your mind may change. Iago may still be using reverse psychology, but in one production I saw, he really is concerned with the vehemence of Othello’s rage and is appalled that Othello wants to kill his wife, something Iago had never contemplated with Emilia. I think Iago may feel out of his depth, tapping onto something more violent and with permanent consequences he is unsure of. He may really want Othello to think about it before acting. At line 450 Othello declares that he will never change his mind:

Never, Iago! Like to the Pontic sea [Black Sea],

Whose icy current and compulsive course

Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on

To the Propontic and the Hellespont,

Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,

Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,

Till that a capable and wide [thorough-going] revenge

Swallow them up.

The comparison here is one of the most unusual in the play. The only outlet for the Black Sea, what Shakespeare calls the Pontic Sea, is through the straits of the Bosporus and the Dardanelles (Propontic and the Hellespont) in northwest Turkey, emptying into the Aegean Sea. Because the Black Sea is higher than the Aegean, the current flow is constant. Othello’s commitment to a capable and wide revenge will not falter. To dramatize his commitment and make it a formal vow, Othello kneels at line 457:

Now, by yond marble heaven, in the due reverence of a sacred vow I here engage my words. In the place of the softness of love, Othello makes his vows to the marble heaven, and rather than a vow of marriage, he takes a sacred vow of vengeance. In a Shakespearean play if a character kneels, it is almost always for some dramatic reason. Here Othello wants to emphasize the seriousness of his vow, giving it a kind of religious significance. However, consider how it looks to Iago. The great man has been humbled, literally brought to his knees, the slave kneels before the master. Iago pauses for a moment, savoring his triumph, and says, Do not rise yet. Now Iago will take a “solemn vow,” but notice what he swears to at line 460:

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,

You elements that clip [surround] us round about,

Witness that here Iago doth give up

The execution [workings] of his wit, hands, heart,

To wronged Othello's service. Let him command,

And to obey shall be in me remorse [pity],

What bloody business ever.

Iago does not offer a vow to any Christian Jehovah, but instead, matching Othello’s return to a pagan faith, he swears to the ever-burning lights above, you elements that clip us round about, the sun, moon and stars. It is a deliberate effort to reinforce Othello’s blowing his fond love to heaven. He dedicates his wit, hands, heart to wronged Othello’s service. And then he adds, he will do whatever Othello commands, what bloody business ever. This footnote is hardly subtle; obviously he is encouraging Othello to take his revenge on Cassio. It makes sense for Iago: punish the lieutenant for his suspected affair with Emilia, and give the ancient another shot at the position.

Othello hardly needs a reminder of his hatred. He thanks Iago for his commitment and orders him at line 469, Within these three days let me hear thee say that Cassio's not alive. Do you remember where we heard three days offered as the time limit to accomplish something? If you have forgotten, check Act III, Scene 3, line 62. We have come full circle in this scene.

Iago accepts the charge: My friend is dead. 'Tis done at your request. But let her live. Notice how he phrases this, not “your betrayer” or “the lieutenant,” but my friend. Iago still maintains the fiction that he really likes Cassio and that what Othello is asking him to do is doubly difficult because of that friendship. Once again we see Iago leaving himself an escape hatch in case something goes wrong. (“I objected to killing my friend, but you insisted!”) And what can Othello possibly offer as a reward to a man willing to kill his good friend? Also notice the final appeal not to harm Desdemona. It could be simply reverse psychology as we’ve seen him use throughout this scene; it could be Iago genuinely seeking to limit the fallout from his plot; or it could be Iago now fascinated by the prospect of bringing off something truly spectacular. What if you had so much power over another human being you could get him to kill what he loves most? Wouldn’t that be a demonstration of your total power? Whatever Iago’s motivation, Othello makes his intentions abundantly clear at line 472:

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her!

Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw,

To furnish me with some swift means of death

For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

A lewd minx is a promiscuous trouble-making girl. Othello is past the point of weighing whether or not to kill his wife; he is already working on how he will do it. And he uses an interesting self-contradictory phrase, an oxymoron, to describe Desdemona: fair devil. It is ironic that Othello, whom others had called a black devil, now uses the same terminology with a difference in color to apply to his wife. It’s one more example of creeping Iagoism. And Iago gets his reward, what he told us back in the opening scene he most wanted – Lieutenant Iago, an officer and a gentleman! Iago’s last line in the scene is filled with significance: I am your own forever. At one level this is just saying, “”Thanks for the job. I’m indebted to you.” At a much deeper level it is a reminder that these two men are now bound in a symbiosis of evil. Iago can no more escape the consequences of what will happen than Othello can. Iago cannot control all the different pieces of information that he has passed out. Ultimately his plot will be exposed and he will pay with his life, but not before four other people pay with their lives.

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Act III, Scene 4

The plot against Desdemona unfolds. In this scene we see Othello interacting with his wife, now that he has vowed to tear her all to pieces. At one point in this scene he declares, O, hardness to dissemble. Why is he having trouble deceiving his wife? What does he say is so important about the handkerchief? Is he telling the truth? We will skip the first 22 lines of this scene which are a lame comic relief exchange between Desdemona and a Clown who enjoys puns on the word lie. [Act III, scene 4, lines 23 – 106]

DESDEMONA: Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?

EMILIA: I know not, madam.

DESDEMONA: Believe me, I had rather have lost my purse

Full of crusadoes [gold coins]. And but my noble Moor

Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness

As jealous creatures are, it were enough

To put him to ill thinking.

EMILIA: Is he not jealous?

DESDEMONA: Who? He? I think the sun where he was born

Drew all such humors [personality traits] from him.

EMILIA: Look, where he comes. [Enter OTHELLO]

DESDEMONA: I will not leave him now till Cassio

Be called to him. How is 't with you, my lord?

OTHELLO: Well, my good lady. [Aside] O, hardness to dissemble!--

How do you, Desdemona?

DESDEMONA: Well, my good lord.

OTHELLO: Give me your hand. This hand is moist [sign of lust] my lady.

DESDEMONA: It yet hath felt no age nor known no sorrow.

OTHELLO: This argues fruitfulness and liberal [warm but also promiscuous] heart.

Hot, hot, and moist. This hand of yours requires

A sequester [separation] from liberty, fasting and prayer;

Much castigation; exercise devout;

For here's a young and sweating devil here,

That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,

A frank one.

DESDEMONA: You may, indeed, say so;

For 'twas that hand that gave away my heart.

OTHELLO: A liberal hand! The hearts of old gave hands,

But our new heraldry [symbols of social rank] is hands, not hearts.

DESDEMONA: I cannot speak of this. Come now, your promise.

OTHELLO: What promise, chuck?

DESDEMONA: I have sent to bid Cassio come speak with you.

OTHELLO: I have a salt and sorry rheum [bad cold] offends me;

Lend me thy handkerchief.

DESDEMONA: Here, my lord.

OTHELLO: That which I gave you.

DESDEMONA: I have it not about me.

OTHELLO: Not?

DESDEMONA: No, indeed, my lord.

OTHELLO: That is a fault.

That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give.

She was a charmer [sorceress], and could almost read

The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it,

'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father

Entirely to her love, but if she lost it

Or made gift of it, my father's eye

Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt

After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me;

And bid me, when my fate would have me wived,

To give it her. I did so; and take heed on 't;

Make it a darling like your precious eye.

To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition

As nothing else could match.

DESDEMONA: Is't possible?

OTHELLO: 'Tis true. There's magic in the web [weave] of it.

A sibyl, that had numbered in the world

The sun to course two hundred compasses [she was 200]

In her prophetic fury [in a trance] sewed the work;

The worms were hallow'd that did breed the silk;

And it was dyed in mummy [liquid from a body] which the skilful

Conserved of maidens' hearts.

DESDEMONA: Indeed? Is' t true?

OTHELLO: Most veritable. Therefore look to 't well.

DESDEMONA: Then would to God that I had never seen 't!

OTHELLO: Ha! Wherefore?

DESDEMONA: Why do you speak so startingly and rash?

OTHELLO: Is't lost? Is 't gone? Speak, is it out o' the way?

DESDEMONA: Heaven bless us!

OTHELLO: Say you?

DESDEMONA: It is not lost. But what an if it were?

OTHELLO: How!

DESDEMONA: I say, it is not lost.

OTHELLO: Fetch 't, let me see 't.

DESDEMONA: Why, so I can, sir, but I will not now.

This is a trick to put me from my suit.

Pray you, let Cassio be received again.

OTHELLO: Fetch me the handkerchief. My mind misgives.

DESDEMONA: Come, come!

You'll never meet a more sufficient [accomplished] man.

OTHELLO: The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA: I pray, talk me of Cassio.

OTHELLO: The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA: A man that all his time

Hath founded his good fortunes on your love,

Shared dangers with you,--

OTHELLO: The handkerchief!

DESDEMONA: In sooth, you are to blame.

OTHELLO: Away!

EMILIA: Is not this man jealous?

DESDEMONA: I ne'er saw this before.

Sure, there's some wonder in this handkerchief;

I am most unhappy in the loss of it.

EMILIA: 'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,

They belch us. Look you, Cassio and my husband!

The reason the comic relief at the beginning of this scene is so lame and is never included in production is that the central storyline is so intense. It really doesn’t allow for any variation that is integral to focus of the play. Desdemona opens this sequence wondering what happened to the handkerchief. She’s talking to Emilia, who knows better than anyone else what happened to the linen, and yet throughout the entire scene she offers no explanation, not even an indirect hint, like, “I think I saw it in the laundry.” Instead Emilia just blames men in general for Othello’s emotional reaction to her theft. We will see how the small human failings of characters like Emilia, Cassio and even Desdemona help precipitate the grand tragedy.

At line 26 Desdemona anticipates the idea of jealousy in her husband:

And but my noble Moor

Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness

As jealous creatures are, it were enough

To put him to ill thinking.

Desdemona realizes that misplacing the handkerchief might be misconstrued, and yet she rejects the idea that her husband might suffer from such an affliction. When she declares that Othello is true of mind and does not suffer from the baseness that afflicts jealous men, we have a prime example of dramatic irony. (A character says something that we know to be patently wrong.) After Emilia expresses surprise that a man could be married and not jealous (another indication of what it is like to be married to Iago), Desdemona offers her explanation of why Othello has escaped the “green-eyed monster” at line 30: I think the sun where he was born drew all such humors [personality traits] from him. Here’s another piece of folklore based on the exotic background of the man from Africa.

When Othello comes in at line 33 his relationship to his wife has been profoundly changed. Last time they were together the uncertain husband said, If she be false, heaven mocks itself. Now he is planning how to kill her. He has to hide his emotional state, and at line 34 he tells us, O, hardness to dissemble. He has not had much practice disguising his emotions in the past. Now he begins using irony, saying one thing but meaning something different which only we in the audience are aware of. At line 36 he focuses on her hand, declaring it moist, which your notes explain. If Desdemona were a little more worldly she might pick up on the implications of such as statement, but she misses it, just as she had the comment about her husband’s headache back at III, 3, line 283. She seems naïve in some respects. Her husband goes on about her hand and what it implies and what it needs:

This argues fruitfulness and liberal [warm but also promiscuous] heart.

Hot, hot, and moist. This hand of yours requires

A sequester [separation] from liberty, fasting and prayer;

Much castigation; exercise devout;

For here's a young and sweating devil here,

That commonly rebels. 'Tis a good hand,

A frank one.

We can see the ironic undertone throughout this passage with the strong suggestion of hostility, sequester from liberty, and punishment, castigation. Her reply simply reminds him that her hand gave her heart to him, just as he had reminded himself back in Act III, scene 3: she had eyes and she chose me. Rather than reaffirming her love for him, Desdemona’s answer sets Othello off on a rant about the “new” way people express their love at line 46: A liberal hand! The hearts of old gave hands, but our new heraldry [symbols of social rank] is hands, not hearts. Othello is saying that in the old days love was straight forward, from the heart, but now love is merely appearance and given out freely by hands. Once again Desdemona misses the ironic subtext and at line 48, she starts on her agenda, Cassio’s reinstatement. Her husband begs off of his previous promise to see Cassio, claiming that he has a bad cold. At line 51 he asks for her handkerchief, specifically the one he had given her. When she tells him she doesn’t have it, at line 55, he tells her about the origin of the handkerchief and why it is so important to their relationship:

That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give.

She was a charmer [sorceress], and could almost read

The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it,

'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father

Entirely to her love, but if she lost it

Or made gift of it, my father's eye

Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt

After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me;

And bid me, when my fate would have me wived,

To give it her. I did so; and take heed on 't;

Make it a darling like your precious eye.

To lose 't or give 't away were such perdition

As nothing else could match.

We have already been alerted to the idea of the handkerchief as a symbol of Desdemona’s fidelity. Iago had played with the idea that the handkerchief was not the only thing she was giving away. Othello here invests the linen with special, magical significance in itself, so that losing it or giving it away is tantamount to ending their love. At lines 69 – 75 he even offers an explanation for the source of its alleged power. If he is telling the truth this is just about the only souvenir Othello has from his previous life before he came to Venice, converted to Christianity and met Desdemona. It connects with that pagan-sounding vow he made at the end of Act III, scene 3 when he swore to replace Christian love with pagan vengeance. It also reminds us of the charges Brabantio made back in the opening scenes that Othello had used charms and witchcraft to win his daughter’s love. This handkerchief story seems to lend some credence to that accusation. There are two ways of looking at this story. First the handkerchief is as Othello has described it, an exotic charm that connects with his earlier life. Second the story of the handkerchief is pure fabrication, a story Othello makes up to convince his wife that it is too important to give away without revealing he already suspects what she did with it. If this story is indeed a fiction, then it is very similar to the story of Iago’s dream. Both are lies which have an immediate emotional impact on those who hear them. It is one more example of creeping Iagoism.

Desdemona is appalled by the story and the implications of her loss. At line 77 she declares, Then would to God that I had never seen it. The handkerchief is rapidly losing its sentimental value for her. Othello is so adamant about its whereabouts that he frightens his wife and she asks why he speaks so startingly and rash. (He is apparently so emotionally upset, it affects his speech.) He demands to know if it is lost and at line 83 she answers, It is not lost. But what an if it were? Desdemona is a bad liar, like a little kid who denies he broke the window, even as he is revealing indirectly that he did. This little fib, totally human and understandable under the circumstances, is her one flaw. We’ve seen the character failings in Iago, Othello, Roderigo, Cassio and Emilia. Even the divine Desdemona is not perfect.

In the course of this scene Othello will demand the handkerchief or some explanation of its whereabouts 13 times. After the story of its magic power and her denial that she had lost it, Desdemona at line 88 decides this is just her husband’s trick to get her sidetracked from her mission for Casio: This is a trick to put me from my suit. Pray you, let Cassio be received again. Talk about bad timing! And yet it’s exactly what we would have expected from the woman Othello called his fair warrior. The harder he pushes, the more adamant she becomes. It ends with Othello storming out at line 98: Away! Desdemona blames his behavior on the missing handkerchief, but Emilia sees it in a larger context. At line 99 she asks sarcastically, Is not this man jealous? She would certainly know the symptoms. Desdemona regrets the loss of the linen, but Emilia, who knows best where it is, takes the occasion to play the gender blame-game at line 103:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,

They belch us.

Emilia’s final lines here give us an insight into what it must be like to be married to Iago. It’s understandable that Emilia after a few months with Iago might feel like expelled gas, but Othello and Desdemona have been married less than 24 hours; it’s a little early for the honeymoon to be over. Given how she feels about marriage, it’s difficult to see why Emilia doesn’t say something about the handkerchief.

In the next sequence, lines 107 – 200, notice how cleverly Iago gains control of the means of communication among the key players, especially Othello and the others. Once he is able to determine who talks to whom, he is in a better position to affect what people think. Notice how quickly Desdemona is willing to forgive her husband’s outburst. Emilia will offer her thoughts on the nature of jealousy. Do they remind you of anybody else’s observations? Finally the scene will end with the introduction of a friend of Cassio’s, a “working girl” named Bianca. What is her relationship with Cassio? [Act III, scene 4, line 107 – 200]

IAGO: There is no other way; 'tis she must do 't:

And, lo, the happiness! Go and importune her.

DESDEMONA: How now, good Cassio! What's the news with you?

CASSIO: Madam, my former suit. I do beseech you

That by your virtuous means I may again

Exist, and be a member of his love

Whom I with all the office [duty] of my heart

Entirely honor. I would not be delayed.

If my offence be of such mortal kind

That nor my service past, nor present sorrows,

Nor purposed merit in futurity,

Can ransom me into his love again,

But to know so must be my benefit [good].

So shall I clothe me in a forced content,

And shut myself up in some other course,

To fortune's alms.

DESDEMONA: Alas, thrice-gentle Cassio!

My advocation [advocacy] is not now in tune.

My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him,

Were he in favor [appearance] as in humor altered.

So help me every spirit sanctified,

As I have spoken for you all my best

And stood within the blank [target] of his displeasure

For my free speech. You must awhile be patient:

What I can do I will; and more I will

Than for myself I dare. Let that suffice you.

IAGO: Is my lord angry?

EMILIA: He went hence but now,

And certainly in strange unquietness.

IAGO: Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon,

When it hath blown his ranks into the air,

And, like the devil, from his very arm

Puffed his own brother. And is he angry?

Something of moment [importance]then. I will go meet him.

There's matter in 't indeed, if he be angry.

DESDEMONA: I prithee, do so. [Exit IAGO]

Something, sure, of state,

Either from Venice, or some unhatched practice [undisclosed plot]

Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,

Hath puddled [muddied] his clear spirit. And in such cases

Men's natures wrangle with inferior things,

Though great ones are their object. 'Tis even so;

For let our finger ache, and it endues [Leads]

Our other healthful members even to that sense

Of pain. Nay, we must think men are not gods,

Nor of them look for such observances

As fit the bridal. Beshrew me much, Emilia,

I was, unhandsome warrior as I am,

Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;

But now I find I had suborned the witness,

And he's indicted falsely.

EMILIA: Pray heaven it be state-matters, as you think,

And no conception nor no jealous toy [trifle]

Concerning you.

DESDEMONA: Alas the day! I never gave him cause.

EMILIA: But jealous souls will not be answered so;

They are not ever jealous for the cause,

But jealous for they are jealous. 'Tis a monster

Begot upon itself, born on itself.

DESDEMONA: Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind!

`EMILIA: Lady, amen.

DESDEMONA: I will go seek him. Cassio, walk hereabout.

If I do find him fit, I'll move your suit

And seek to effect it to my uttermost.

CASSIO: I humbly thank your ladyship. [Exit DESDEMONA and EMILIA]

[Enter BIANCA]

BIANCA: Save you, friend Cassio!

CASSIO: What make you from home?

How is it with you, my most fair Bianca?

I' faith, sweet love, I was coming to your house.

BIANCA: And I was going to your lodging, Cassio.

What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights?

Eight score eight hours? And lovers' absent hours,

More tedious than the dial eight score times?

O weary reck’ning [addition]!

CASSIO: Pardon me, Bianca:

I have this while with leaden thoughts been pressed.

But I shall, in a more continuate [uninterrupted] time,

Strike off this score [pay off this bill] of absence. Sweet Bianca,

[Giving her Desdemona’s handkerchief]

Take me this work out.

BIANCA: O Cassio, whence came this?

This is some token from a newer friend:

To the felt absence now I feel a cause.

Is 't come to this? Well, well.

CASSIO: Go to, woman!

Throw your vile guesses in the devil's teeth,

From whence you have them. You are jealous now

That this is from some mistress, some remembrance:

No, in good troth, Bianca.

BIANCA: Why, whose is it?

CASSIO: I know not, sweet. I found it in my chamber.

I like the work well. Ere it be demanded,

As like enough it will, I'd have it copied.

Take it, and do 't; and leave me for this time.

BIANCA: Leave you? Wherefore?

CASSIO: I do attend here on the general;

And think it no addition, nor my wish,

To have him see me womaned.

BIANCA: Why, I pray you?

CASSIO: Not that I love you not.

BIANCA: But that you do not love me.

I pray you, bring [accompany] me on the way a little,

And say if I shall see you soon at night.

CASSIO: 'Tis but a little way that I can bring you;

For I attend here. But I'll see you soon.

BIANCA: 'Tis very good; I must be circumstanced [content with this].

As they enter at the beginning of this sequence, Iago is urging Cassio to keep pushing Desdemona about getting his job back. Cassio’s speech to Desdemona at line 110 –122 is a model of the elaborate language of the courtly gentleman. For example,

If my offence be of such mortal kind

That nor my service past, nor present sorrows,

Nor purposed merit in futurity,

Can ransom me into his love again,

But to know so must be my benefit [good].

Here Cassio is saying, “If I can’t get my job back, at least let me know it.” This fancy form of expression is something Desdemona is familiar with; it is the language of her tribe. And so at line 122 she refers to Cassio as thrice-gentle, an illuminating phrase. What she means is that Cassio is gentle in the social sense because of his birth (he was born into a socially prominent family), because of his training (he had to study hard to learn to speak like this) and because it is his natural condition (“gentlemen” believed they had to behave this way). Desdemona is complimenting Cassio on his refinement with this phrase. However, she goes on to explain that she is unable to sway Othello on the issue because he is upset. She has tried so hard that she has stood within the blank [target] of his displeasure for my free speech. Iago picks up on the news that Othello is angry. In his speech at line 134 he makes much of this fact, repeating three times the idea of Othello’s anger and then showing why it is unusual, based on his military experience:

Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon,

When it hath blown his ranks into the air,

And, like the devil, from his very arm

Puffed his own brother. And is he angry?

Something of moment [importance]then. I will go meet him.

There's matter in 't indeed, if he be angry

Iago prepares people for the change in Othello’s behavior. In battle Othello has always kept his cool, even when under attack by enemy cannons; he simply redoubled his efforts to win. So anger is not his normal response. When Othello suddenly murders his wife and Cassio’s body is discovered, Iago will be able to say, “I knew something was wrong, he wasn’t himself lately.” Notice that Iago says he will go and find out what’s bothering him, and Desdemona eagerly agrees that Iago will be the intermediary at line 139: I prithee do so. Once he is in control of the channels of communication, Iago will be able to be much more manipulative.

Having sent Iago off to fix things, Desdemona starts to speculate about what might be upsetting her husband. Maybe it is a political issue, something of state, or perhaps a plot he has uncovered here in Cyprus. She is ready to forgive her husband for his behavior toward her, and at line 148 she says, Nay, we must think men are not gods, nor of them look for such observances as fit the bridal. Desdemona has been married for only 24 hours; the honeymoon, bridal, is over. She goes on to blame herself for his unkindness, calling herself unhandsome warrior. Emilia, who has had a lot more experience in marital problems, cuts through the self-recrimination and asks again if she is sure he is not jealous. Desdemona cannot believe it: I never gave him cause. Emilia offers her insight into the nature of jealousy at line 158:

But jealous souls will not be answered so;

They are not ever jealous for the cause,

But jealous for they are jealous. 'Tis a monster

Begot upon itself, born on itself.

Once again we get an idea of what it must have been like to be married to Iago. She has dealt with his irrational jealousy and knows that it doesn’t have to have a cause. It is a self-generating affliction. Her description of the emotion as a monster echoes what her husband said of it back in Act III, scene 3, the green-eyed monster.

After Desdemona and Emilia leave to find Othello, Cassio is joined by his girlfriend, Bianca. Her name in Italian means “white,” suggesting virginal. The irony is that she is a prostitute who gives herself to many men. In one more of those anomalies of double time in this play, she complains that she hasn’t seen Cassio for a week, when he just got to Cyprus the day before. The point is that Cassio has had a long-term relationship with this girl and that she is besotted with him. When he gives her Desdemona’s handkerchief (remember that Iago had left it in his quarters) and asks her to copy the work, she immediately assumes it is a gift from another girl. The situation becomes more ironic as we discover the woman who has sex with many men is jealous. What Shakespeare has created here is a kind of complement to Othello: a black man in a monogamous sexual relationship is balanced by a white woman in an open sexual relationship. Both are shown suffering from extreme jealousy without cause. Cassio is publicly an impeccable gentleman; in his private behavior he is less admirable. We have seen that he is a bad drunk, argumentative and snobbish when he is tight. With Bianca he is shown to be less than a gallant gentleman; at line 194 he in effect tells her to get lost: I do attend here on the general; and think it no addition, nor my wish, to have him see me womaned. Ii is as if he were saying, “I don’t want to be seen with you.” At the same time a gentleman was supposed to be discreet in his affairs, and apparently he has not made a secret of his involvement with Bianca. Iago knows about her. Cassio may have to turn in his “Courtly Gentleman Club” badge for conduct unbecoming. Small personal faults, things we all might be guilty of, become the means by which Iago makes his plot successful.

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Act IV, Scene 1

This is a scene filled with a lot of action. Notice how it begins. What does it have in common with earlier scenes? What is Iago doing to Othello in the first 45 lines? What does he hope to gain from Othello he does not already have? [Act IV, scene 1, lines 1 –45]

IAGO: Will you think so?

OTHELLO: Think so, Iago!

IAGO: What,

To kiss in private?

OTHELLO: An unauthorized [illicit] kiss.

IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend in bed

An hour or more, not meaning any harm?

OTHELLO: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm!

It is hypocrisy against the devil.

They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,

The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.

IAGO: So they do nothing, 'tis a venial slip.

But if I give my wife a handkerchief --

OTHELLO: What then?

IAGO: Why, then, 'tis hers, my lord; and, being hers,

She may, I think, bestow 't on any man.

OTHELLO: She is protectress of her honor too.

May she give that?

IAGO: Her honor is an essence that's not seen;

They have it very oft that have it not.

But, for the handkerchief--

OTHELLO: By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it.

Thou said 'st – O, it comes o'er my memory,

As doth the raven [bird of death] o'er the infected house,

Boding to all -- he had my handkerchief.

IAGO: Ay, what of that?

OTHELLO: That's not so good now.

IAGO: What if I had said I had seen him do you wrong?

Or heard him say -- as knaves be such abroad [in the world],

Who having, by their own importunate suit,

Or voluntary dotage [lapse of judgment] of some mistress,

Convinced or supplied them [persuaded or gratified the mistress], cannot choose

But they must blab--

OTHELLO: Hath he said anything?

IAGO: He hath, my lord; but be you well assured,

No more than he'll unswear [deny].

OTHELLO: What hath he said?

IAGO: 'Faith, that he did--I know not what he did.

OTHELLO: What? what?

IAGO: Lie--

OTHELLO: With her?

IAGO: With her, on her; what you will.

OTHELLO: Lie with her? Lie on her? We say lie on her

when they belie her. -- Lie with her? Zounds, that's

fulsome [foul]. -- Handkerchief--confessions—handkerchief!

--To confess, and be hanged for his labor -- first, to be

hanged, and then to confess! I tremble at it.

Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing

passion without some instruction. It is not words

that shake me thus. -- Pish! Noses, ears, and lips?

Is't possible? – Confess? –Handkerchief? -- O devil!

[He falls in a trance]

First, this scene starts in the middle of a conversation, as we have seen throughout the play. In the first lines of this sequence we see Iago asking questions, What, to kiss in private? and Othello responding by picking up on the key words and asking the question again, An unauthorized kiss, as if incredulous that Iago does not see the implication. We have seen this same pattern of repeated questions before, back in Act III, scene 3, at lines 95 – 105. However, the position of the speakers has changed. Before it was Othello asking the initial question and Iago responding with repetition, implying that he suspected some wrongdoing. Now Iago is implying that Desdemona could be kissing her friend in private or lying naked in bed with him for an hour and not mean any harm. And it is Othello who insists on putting the worst interpretation on the proceedings at line 5:

Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm!

It is hypocrisy against the devil.

They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,

The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.

Othello now spies into abuses, as Iago had done earlier, and Iago is now a liberal moralist: If they do nothing, it is a venial sin. Iago is teasing Othello throughout these opening lines, offering outrageous “evidence” that he pretends is not as bad as it looks, just so he can watch Othello explode in rage. Iago no longer needs to convince Othello of his wife’s guilt. He doing it because he enjoys it; he enjoys making Othello twitch and fume and see the world in the same warped way he does.

When he tires of the echoing game, Iago brings him back to reality with the handkerchief. It is Othello at line 14, after Iago suggests that Desdemona may choose to give the linen to her friend, who equates the handkerchief with his wife’s honor: She is protectress of her honor too. May she give that? Iago dismisses the idea that honor, which really can’t be seen, is of any significance, but the handkerchief is tangible proof, and it drives Othello further into a mad rage at line 19:

By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it.

Thou said 'st – O, it comes o'er my memory,

As doth the raven [bird of death] o'er the infected house,

Boding to all -- he had my handkerchief.

One of the more picturesque pieces of folklore at that time was that if a raven landed on your roof, you were about to suffer a death in the family, especially if someone was already infected with something like the plague. Iago grows more cruel in his teasing, intimating that Cassio has blabbed about his conquest. He assures Othello that if confronted with the allegation Cassio will deny it. Iago makes Othello beg to hear what Cassio had said at lines 31 – 35:

OTHELLO: Hath he said anything?

IAGO: He hath, my lord; but be you well assured,

No more than he'll unswear [deny].

OTHELLO: What hath he said?

IAGO: 'Faith, that he did--I know not what he did.

OTHELLO: What? what?

IAGO: Lie--

OTHELLO: With her?

IAGO: With her, on her; what you will.

Iago “reluctantly” tells Othello what Cassio said, that he did lie with her, on her, what you will, in other words, he had her any way he wanted.

The effect of this horrible revelation overwhelms Othello, sending him into a confused rant before he finally loses consciousness. Later in this scene Iago will refer to it as epilepsy, but it’s a response to emotional overload that people in Shakespeare’s day would have recognized. The passage at lines 36 – 45 shows how far the eloquent leader of the opening scenes has fallen. Now he reduced to apparently random words and phrases which reflect the confused and fragmented nature of his powerful imagination at this moment. He doesn’t speak in complete sentences, indicated by the frequent dashes in the text. In the chaotic rush of language we can discern some of what he is feeling. It’s like a verbal Rorschach test. He starts out repeating that key word lie five times in one form or another: Lie with her? Lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie [slander] her. -- Lie with her? Zounds, that's fulsome [foul]. The image of Cassio lying with his wife (“lying with” was a euphemism for having sex with) is bad enough; Othello couples that with belie, which means that people are slandering Desdemona and ruining his reputation, the nagging fear of the cuckold. He signals his emotional upset by using the blasphemous taboo word Zounds, a shortened form of “God’s wounds.” Next he starts flashing on the two tangible pieces of evidence Iago has given him: the handkerchief and the “confession” Cassio has made. In his rage he imagines hearing Cassio tell him the truth at line 39: To confess, and be hanged for his labor -- first, to be hanged, and then to confess! I tremble at it. Modern readers have assumed that Othello is so crazed at this point that he gets the sequence of confessing and hanging mixed up, but one of the ways you forced people to confess in those days was to hang them so that they slowly choked. They would confess to anything. Shakespeare has Othello tell us what his physical reaction is, his trembling, so that everybody in the theater would know. If a physical reaction of a character is important in the play, Shakespeare always reinforces it with a verbal indicator. Othello at line 41 has a brief lucid moment as he considers what he is going through. Could all this be based on a mistake? Is she really guilty? Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words

that shake me thus. In effect, Othello argues that if he feels this strongly, it is proof that Desdemona did the deed. He would not experience this level of passion simply because of some words. In The Winter’s Tale, another jealous husband, Leontes, will make the same argument after the fact, that the effects must prove the cause of jealousy is valid. Othello ends his rant listing body parts at line 44: Pish! Noses, ears, and lips? Is't possible? – Confess? –Handkerchief? -- O devil! Some scholars believe Othello is thinking of Cassio and Desdemona touching each others’ noses, ears and lips. Another explanation is that criminals were often punished by having offending body parts cut off, much as thieves in Saudi Arabia have their hands cut off. He falls unconscious at Iago’s feet.

In the rest of this scene we will see Iago’s craftiness as he engineers an apparent “confession” by Cassio. [Act IV, scene 1, lines 46 –226]

IAGO: Work on,

My med’cine, works! Thus credulous fools are caught;

And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,

All guiltless, meet reproach [shame]. What, ho! My lord!

My lord, I say! Othello! [Enter CASSIO]

How now, Cassio!

CASSIO: What's the matter?

IAGO: My lord is fall'n into an epilepsy:

This is his second fit; he had one yesterday.

CASSIO: Rub him about the temples.

IAGO: The lethargy [fit] must have his quiet course.

If not, he foams at mouth and by and by

Breaks out to savage madness. Look he stirs.

Do you withdraw yourself a little while,

He will recover straight. When he is gone,

I would on great occasion [important matters] speak with you.

[Exit CASSIO]

How is it, general? Have you not hurt your head?

OTHELLO: Dost thou mock me?

IAGO: I mock you? No, by heaven.

Would you would bear your fortune like a man!

OTHELLO: A horned man's a monster and a beast.

IAGO: There's many a beast then in a populous city,

And many a civil [city-dwelling] monster.

OTHELLO: Did he confess it?

IAGO: Good sir, be a man.

Think every bearded fellow that's but yoked

May draw [pull a wagon] with you. There's millions now alive

That nightly lie in those unproper [sexually polluted] beds

Which they dare swear peculiar [their own exclusively]. Your case is better.

O, 'tis the spite of hell, the fiend's arch-mock,

To lip a wanton in a secure couch,

And to suppose her chaste! No, let me know;

And knowing what I am, I know what she shall be.

OTHELLO: O, thou art wise; 'tis certain.

IAGO: Stand you awhile apart;

Confine yourself but in a patient list [within the bounds of patience].

Whilst you were here o'erwhelmed with your grief--

A passion most unsuiting such a man--

Cassio came hither. I shifted him away [got rid of him],

And laid good 'scuse upon your ecstasy; [trance] Bade him anon return and here speak with me;

The which he promised. Do but encave [hide] yourself,

And mark the fleers [mockery], the gibes, and notable scorns,

That dwell in every region of his face;

For I will make him tell the tale anew,

Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when

He hath, and is again to cope your wife.

I say, but mark his gesture. Marry, patience;

Or I shall say you are all in all in spleen [overly emotional],

And nothing of a man.

OTHELLO: Dost thou hear, Iago?

I will be found most cunning in my patience;

But--dost thou hear?--most bloody.

IAGO: That's not amiss;

But yet keep time in all. Will you withdraw? [OTHELLO retires]

Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,

A housewife [sarcastically a whore] that by selling her desires

Buys herself bread and clothes. It is a creature

That dotes on Cassio; as 'tis the strumpet's plague

To beguile many and be beguiled by one.

He, when he hears of her, cannot refrain

From the excess of laughter. Here he comes. [Re-enter CASSIO]

As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad;

And his unbookish [naïve] jealousy must conster [construe]

Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures and light behavior,

Quite in the wrong. How do you now, lieutenant?

CASSIO: The worser that you give me the addition [title]

Whose want even kills me.

IAGO: Ply Desdemona well, and you are sure on 't. [Speaking lower]

Now, if this suit lay in Bianca's power,

How quickly should you speed!

CASSIO: Alas, poor caitiff [wretch]!

OTHELLO: Look how he laughs already!

IAGO: I never knew woman love man so.

CASSIO: Alas, poor rogue! I think, i' faith, she loves me.

OTHELLO: Now he denies it faintly, and laughs it out.

IAGO: Do you hear, Cassio?

OTHELLO: Now he importunes him

To tell it o'er. Go to! well said, well said!

IAGO: She gives it out that you shall marry her.

Do you intend it?

CASSIO: Ha, ha, ha!

OTHELLO: Do you triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?

CASSIO: I marry her? What, a customer [whore] Prithee, bear

some charity to my wit. Do not think it so unwholesome.

Ha, ha, ha!

OTHELLO: So, so, so, so. They laugh that win.

IAGO: 'Faith, the cry goes that you shall marry her.

CASSIO: Prithee, say true.

IAGO: I am a very villain else.

OTHELLO: Have you scored [defaced] me? Well.

CASSIO: This is the monkey's own giving out. She is

persuaded I will marry her, out of her own love and

flattery, not out of my promise.

OTHELLO: Iago beckons me; now he begins the story.

CASSIO: She was here even now; she haunts me in every place.

I was the other day talking on the sea-bank with

certain Venetians; and thither comes the bauble [plaything],

and, by this hand, she falls me thus about my neck--

OTHELLO: Crying “O dear Cassio!” as it were. His gesture

imports it.

CASSIO: So hangs, and lolls, and weeps upon me; so hales,

and pulls me. Ha, ha, ha!

OTHELLO: Now he tells how she plucked him to my

chamber. O, I see that nose of yours, but not that

dog I shall throw it to.

CASSIO: Well, I must leave her company.

IAGO: Before me [Gosh] ! Look, where she comes. [Enter BIANCA]

CASSIO: 'Tis such another fitchew [polecat]! Marry a perfumed one.

What do you mean by this haunting of me?

BIANCA: Let the devil and his dam haunt you! What did you

mean by that same handkerchief you gave me even now?

I was a fine fool to take it. I must take out the

work? A likely piece of work, that you should find

it in your chamber, and not know who left it there!

This is some minx's token, and I must take out the

work? There; give it your hobby-horse [whore]. Wheresoever

you had it, I'll take out no work on 't.

CASSIO: How now, my sweet Bianca? How now? how now?

OTHELLO: By heaven, that should be my handkerchief!

BIANCA: If you'll come to supper tonight, you may; if you

will not, come when you are next prepared for. [Exit BIANCA]

IAGO: After her, after her.

CASSIO: 'Faith, I must; she'll rail in the street else.

IAGO: Will you sup there?

CASSIO: 'Faith, I intend so.

IAGO: Well, I may chance to see you; for I would

very fain speak with you.

CASSIO: Prithee, come; will you?

IAGO: Go to; say no more. [Exit CASSIO]

OTHELLO: [Advancing] How shall I murder him, Iago?

IAGO: Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice?

OTHELLO: O Iago!

IAGO: And did you see the handkerchief?

OTHELLO: Was that mine?

IAGO: Yours by this hand! And to see how he prizes the

foolish woman your wife! She gave it him, and he

hath given it his whore.

OTHELLO: I would have him nine years a-killing! --

A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman?

IAGO: Nay, you must forget that.

OTHELLO: Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight;

for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to

stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the

world hath not a sweeter creature. She might lie by

an emperor's side and command him tasks.

IAGO: Nay, that's not your way.

OTHELLO: Hang her! I do but say what she is. So delicate

with her needle. an admirable musician. O! she

will sing the savageness out of a bear. Of so high

and plenteous wit and invention [imagination] --

IAGO: She's the worse for all this.

OTHELLO: O, a thousand, a thousand times. And then,

of so gentle a condition!

IAGO: Ay, too gentle.

OTHELLO: Nay, that's certain. But yet the pity of it, Iago!

O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!

IAGO: If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her

patent to offend; for, if it touch [affects] not you, it comes

near nobody.

OTHELLO: I will chop her into messes [pieces]! Cuckold me!

IAGO: O, 'tis foul in her.

OTHELLO: With mine officer!

IAGO: That's fouler.

OTHELLO: Get me some poison, Iago; this night. I'll not

expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty

unprovide [undo] my mind again. This night, Iago.

IAGO: Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even

the bed she hath contaminated.

OTHELLO: Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!

IAGO: And for Cassio, let me be his undertaker. You

shall hear more by midnight.

OTHELLO: Excellent good! [Trumpet sounds]

Throughout this lecture I have tried to emphasize that Iago has no grand master plan that he is executing step-by-step. Instead he reacts creatively to events as they unfold. He is like an actor who is very skilled in improvisation, making it up as he goes along. Another comparison might be Iago juggling different sets of lies to different characters. In this sequence we see him keeping different balls in the air, first Othello, then Cassio and finally Bianca. It is a situation he could never have foreseen taking place: reducing Othello to a human wreck, manipulating Cassio who comes in at that moment, getting Cassio to talk about Bianca is a nasty way and then working in the sudden appearance of Bianca and making it all hang together.

At line 45 Iago revels in his complete triumph over Othello; this groveling is better than having the general kneeling before him: My med’cine, works! Thus credulous fools are caught; and many worthy and chaste dames even thus, all guiltless, meet reproach [shame]. Cassio comes into unexpectedly and asks what’s wrong with the general, and Iago makes up a story on the spot that he can use later: he has epilepsy and this is his second fit; he had one yesterday. Having just created a lie to explain Othello’s condition, why would Iago embellish it with the idea that it’s his second fit in 24 hours? Iago is always looking for an escape hatch, an alternative explanation for everything that’s happening. He may have to assert that Othello’s revelation about what Iago told him is sheer fantasy, the ravings of a sick man. When Cassio tries to help, Iago quickly controls the means of communication, warning that if Cassio wakes him, it will drive him into savage madness. Iago will come and talk with the lieutenant privately about what Othello says.

When Othello regains consciousness at line 60, Iago’s first question is a subtle mock: How is it, general? Have you not hurt your head? Remember that the only sense a cuckold had of his horns was a headache? Othello picks up on the insult. Now at line 63 Iago begins a message that he will increasingly sound. The noble general that we admired back at the beginning of the play has been reduced to a shell, more and more resembling Iago with irrational jealousy and animal images. In a less obvious way it has fallen to Iago more and more to be like Othello, taking charge of the situation, setting a standard of behavior for a man, a soldier. Othello can’t get beyond his jealousy. Iago at line 65 argues that being a cuckold is not such a big deal. There's many a beast then in a populous city, and many a civil [city-dwelling] monster. Cities are loaded with men whose wives have betrayed them. Iago now argues why he and Othello are superior to all these other brothers of the horns:

Good sir, be a man.

Think every bearded fellow that's but yoked

May draw [pull a wagon] with you. There's millions now alive

That nightly lie in those unproper [sexually polluted] beds

Which they dare swear peculiar [their own exclusively]. Your case is better.

O, 'tis the spite of hell, the fiend's arch-mock,

To lip a wanton in a secure couch,

And to suppose her chaste! No, let me know;

And knowing what I am, I know what she shall be.

Iago once again urges Othello to straighten up, to be a man. All men who wear beards, virtually all adult men in that society, also have horns and could double for an ox, a horned beast of burden. They sleep each night in the same bed where their wives have betrayed them, unproper beds, and yet they foolishly believe the beds are theirs alone, peculiar beds. This is the ultimate practical joke, arch-mock, of Satan. Othello and Iago are superior because they know the truth, and because they know, they can control the destiny of the women who have betrayed them. Iago argues it is better to know; back in Act III, scene 3, at line 334 Othello had argued just the opposite, that ignorance was bliss. Iago is saying in effect that if you have any doubts, you immediately resolve them, condemning the wanton woman you are married to; it’s an argument very similar to what Othello had said also back in Act III, scene 3 at line 179: To be once in doubt is to be resolved. Iago continues to criticize Othello’s emotional response to the situation, calling it at line 79, A passion most unsuiting such a man and again at line 90, I shall say you’re all in all in spleen and nothing of a man. Iago’s concern may just be another aspect of his teasing and mocking his victim, or it may be that he is genuinely worried that Othello will no longer be the man he was. It won’t do Iago a lot of good to be the lieutenant to a man who is incapable of his office.

The sequence where Iago manipulates Cassio to talk about Bianca while Othello eavesdrops makes much more sense in performance than it does on the page. Iago literally moves Cassio around the stage so that Othello will hear those parts of the conversation where he will think they are laughing about Desdemona. At other times Iago will drop his voice so that Othello cannot hear the references to Bianca. (By the way, Iago characterizes the irony of Bianca’s situation at line 97: It is a creature that dotes on Cassio; as 'tis the strumpet's plague to beguile many and be beguiled by one. The whore suffers from the same affliction as Othello, unbookish jealousy. The adjective “unbookish” suggests that if Othello were more familiar with the world of the courtly folks, he would not succumb to jealousy. At line 107 Iago urges Cassio to keep pushing Desdemona to convince her husband and then smirks that if the suit to get his job back lay in Bianca’s power, he wouldn’t have any problem. Cassio laughs, Alas, poor caitiff! Gentlemen were supposed to be gallant about women, regardless of their social class. Certainly gentlemen were not supposed to be indiscreet and talk about their sexual conquests. Beneath his veneer of gentility, Cassio is not very nice. He makes fun of Bianca because of her obsessive love for him, calling her poor rogue, a customer, monkey, bauble and most insultingly fitchew, what we would call a skunk. He makes fun of her public display of affection before a group of Venetian visitors. Of course, Othello hears snatches of this, and the account of what he takes to be his wife’s public display of love leads him to say about Cassio at line 142: O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to. This powerful image is reference to physical mutilation as punishment for a crime, but it will be a personal punishment, culminating in feeding Cassio’s body part to a dog. We saw a similar reference to mutilation in this scene at line 44.

If Cassio’s appearance when Othello was in his fit was a surprise, like an extra ball in a juggling act, then the unexpected appearance of Bianca at line 147 comes as a total shock

Othello might well ask, “Who is this woman? I thought Cassio was talking about Desdemona, but maybe he was referring to this person.” Bianca explodes in jealousy and at line155 throws the handkerchief at Cassio’s feet telling him, Give it your hobbyhorse, a sarcastic reference to a whore. Cassio tries to placate her, and she issues an ultimatum at line 160: If you'll come to supper tonight, you may; if you will not, come when you are next prepared for. It’s another way of saying, “Don’t call me, I’ll call you.” Iago sends Cassio off to calm her down before she rails in the street.

Iago’s creative ingenuity is shown by the fact that rather than trying to explain Bianca’s sudden appearance away, he simply uses it to enrage Othello even more. When Othello asks if the handkerchief was his, Iago answers at line 177: Yours by this hand! And to see how he prizes the foolish woman your wife! She gave it him, and he hath given it his whore. Not only has your wife given away her honor, what was most important for you, but her lover thinks so little of it he has given it to a whore. Iago thinks this is the ultimate insult, and Othello’s initial response at line 180 is as we would expect: I would have him nine years a-killing! a long, lingering death. But we are not prepared for what he says next: A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman. Othello is most upset that Desdemona has been insulted! He loves her still so much that he is concerned that her lover has not treated her with respect. Despite Iago’ urging not to think that way any more, Othello reveals at line 183 his ambivalence about Desdemona:

Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight;

for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to

stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the

world hath not a sweeter creature. She might lie by

an emperor's side and command him tasks.

I’m going to kill her, but I still love her and feel terrible that Cassio has betrayed her. When she finds out, she will go through the same hell he has gone through; he will punish the man who has wronged her. Was Iago ever as concerned about his wife’s feelings? Hardly! So at line 188 an agitated Iago warns, Nay, that’s not your way. He doesn’t want Othello sympathizing with Desdemona, but the loving husband continues to feel her pain:

Hang her! I do but say what she is. So delicate

with her needle. an admirable musician. O! she

will sing the savageness out of a bear. Of so high

and plenteous wit and invention [imagination] –

Here Othello begins to list the admirable qualities she exhibits as a courtly gentlewoman. An angry Iago warns a third time against having tender feelings for the adulteress: She’s the worse for all this. And a loving husband for the fourth time expresses his hatred as he voices his affection: O, a thousand, a thousand times. And then, of so gentle a condition! The very quality which had attracted him was her gentility. Iago for the fourth time denounces Othello’s love in a revealing comment at line 196: Ay, too gentle. What Iago is saying is that the very quality of gentility is what led her to commit her betrayal. It’s the same class hatred that Iago had expressed earlier about Cassio’s supposed virtues: putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compass of his salt and most hidden loose affection (Act II, scene 1, lines 238 –240). All Othello, the outsider, can do is agree: Nay, that's certain. But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago! You can hear the pain and empathy for his wife in this simple pattern of repetition. And so at line 199 Iago puts an end to Othello’s weakness: If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend; for, if it touch [affects] not you, it comes near nobody. If you are so concerned about your wife’s feelings, give her official permission (patent) to continue making you a cuckold, because if doesn’t bother you, it won’t bother anyone else. That wakes Othello up: I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me! He goes on to say her sin is all the more egregious because she has done it with someone who works for Othello, someone of lower rank. At line 206 Othello proposes the means of murdering Desdemona: Get me some poison, Iago; this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide [undo] my mind again. This night, Iago. Othello wants to avoid weakening again, so he plans to poison her. However, Iago now takes over the direction of Desdemona’s death: Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated. Why should it make any difference to Iago where Othello kills his wife? He’s won all that he wanted, Cassio’s job, a chance to stick it to the gentle folks, Othello’s agony. Iago’s insistence on a very physical, intimate form of murder, and the location, Othello’s marriage bed, gives us an insight into Iago’s twisted motives. It’s another example of Iago’s voyeurism, his desire to watch, if only in his imagination. In his mind sexual desire means a chance to inflict pain and even death. This creepy pervert will thoroughly enjoy Desdemona’s agony vicariously. Othello buys right into his perversion, which at line 211 he calls justice.

In the final sequence we have visitors from Venice. Remember the contrast I have emphasized between the civilized city and the rough frontier of Cyprus. On the island human passions and sins are much closer to the surface. What will the emissary from Venice, Lodovico, think of how people have changed in Cyprus? He delivers a letter to Othello. On stage Othello will read the letter with his new orders while he listens to and responds to the conversation between his wife and Lodovico. How would this be staged?

[Act IV, scene 1, lines 215 – 282]

OTHELLO: What trumpet is that same?

IAGO: Something from Venice, sure. 'Tis Lodovico.

This comes from the duke. See, your wife is with him.

[Enter LODOVICO, DESDEMONA, and Attendants]

LODOVICO: God save you, worthy general!

OTHELLO: With all my heart, sir.

LODOVICO: The duke and senators of Venice greet you. [Gives him a letter]

OTHELLO: I kiss the instrument of their pleasures. [Opens the letter, reads]

DESDEMONA: And what's the news, good cousin Lodovico?

IAGO: I am very glad to see you, signior.

Welcome to Cyprus.

LODOVICO: I thank you. How does Lieutenant Cassio?

IAGO: Lives, sir.

DESDEMONA: Cousin, there's fall'n between him and my lord

An unkind [unnatural] breach; but you shall make all well.

OTHELLO: Are you sure of that?

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: [Reads] “This fail you not to do, as you will—“

LODOVICO: He did not call; he's busy in the paper.

Is there division 'twixt my lord and Cassio?

DESDEMONA: A most unhappy one. I would do much

T’ atone [reconcile] them, for the love I bear to Cassio.

OTHELLO: Fire and brimstone!

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: Are you wise?

DESDEMONA: What, is he angry?

LODOVICO: May be the letter moved him;

For, as I think, they do command him home,

Deputing Cassio in his government [office].

DESDEMONA: Trust me, I am glad on' t.

OTHELLO: Indeed?

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: I am glad to see you mad.

DESDEMONA: Why, sweet Othello,--

OTHELLO: [Striking her] Devil!

DESDEMONA: I have not deserved this.

LODOVICO: My lord, this would not be believed in Venice,

Though I should swear I saw' t. 'Tis very much.

Make her amends; she weeps.

OTHELLO: O devil, devil!

If that the earth could teem [conceive] with woman's tears,

Each drop she falls [drops] would prove a crocodile.

Out of my sight!

DESDEMONA: I will not stay to offend you. [She starts to go]

LODOVICO: Truly, an obedient lady.

I do beseech your lordship, call her back.

OTHELLO: Mistress!

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: What would you with her, sir?

LODOVICO: Who? I, my lord?

OTHELLO: Ay; you did wish that I would make her turn.

Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,

And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;

And she's obedient, as you say, obedient,

Very obedient. Proceed you in your tears.

Concerning this, sir -- O well-painted passion!--

I am commanded home. -- Get you away!

I'll send for you anon. -- Sir, I obey the mandate,

And will return to Venice. -- Hence, avaunt! [Exit DESDEMONA]

Cassio shall have my place. And, sir, tonight,

I do entreat that we may sup together.

You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus.--Goats and monkeys! [Exit]

LODOVICO: Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate

Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature

Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue

The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,

Could neither graze nor pierce?

IAGO: He is much changed.

LODOVICO: Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?

IAGO: He's that he is; I may not breathe my censure.

What he might be (if, what he might, he is not)

I would to heaven he were!

LODOVICO: What, strike his wife!

IAGO: 'Faith, that was not so well; yet would I knew

That stroke would prove the worst!

LODOVICO: Is it his use [habit]?

Or did the letters work upon his blood [passion],

And new-create this fault?

IAGO: Alas, alas!

It is not honesty in me to speak

What I have seen and known. You shall observe him,

And his own courses will denote him so

That I may save my speech. Do but go after,

And mark how he continues.

LODOVICO: I am sorry that I am deceived in him.

Throughout this sequence Desdemona is struggling to understand how she has upset her husband and in the process unwittingly using language which further enrages him. Othello misinterprets what his wife is saying until he is driven to strike her. Iago, meanwhile, continues to manipulate, working on a new victim, Lodovico, the official from Venice.

At the outset, line 218, Iago observes to Othello that Lodovico has arrived: See, your wife’s with him. There is no reason to add this detail except to subtly suggest that Desdemona may be on the prowl again. As Othello pretends to read the letter from the Duke, he is intently listening to his wife talk with Lodovico, whom she calls cousin, as a member of her extended family. The newcomer asks about Cassio, to which Iago replies Lives sir in a wonderfully ironic statement designed just for Othello; he does indeed live but he won’t for long. Desdemona, seeking for help in her quest for Cassio’s job, says at line 225 : Cousin, there's fall'n between him and my lord an unkind [unnatural] breach; but you shall make all well. Othello demands Are you sure of that? and then pretends that he is talking to himself in response to the letter. Desdemona describes the breach at line 231: A most unhappy one. I would do much t’ atone [reconcile] them, for the love I bear to Cassio. That’s just her way of speaking, but Othello erupts Fire and brimstone! and then demands Are you wise? Once again Lodovico blames Othello’s strange behavior on the contents of the letter, which he tells us orders Othello back to Venice and leaves Cassio in his place. Desdemona, whose island honeymoon has hardly been idyllic, is glad to be going home with Othello. Her husband takes offense at this statement, perhaps thinking she is happy that Cassio will replace her husband, not that she is glad to be going back to Venice. At line 239 he tells her I am glad to see you mad, a puzzling statement. Why does he think she is mad, and why should this please him? When she asks why, he calls her Devil and strikes her.

Spousal abuse was common in Shakespeare’s time, but to strike an upper class woman in public was terribly wrong. Desdemona says, I have not deserved this, and Lodovico makes clear how unacceptable this kind of behavior is: My lord, this would not be believed in Venice, though I should swear I saw' t. 'Tis very much. Make her amends; she weeps. Remember that comment that Brabantio made in the opening scene: This is Venice. My house is not a grange. Here is another difference between civilization and the frontier. Lodovico can only say ‘Tis very much. Othello is unrepentant; at line 244 he declares,

O devil, devil!

If that the earth could teem [conceive] with woman's tears,

Each drop she falls [drops] would prove a crocodile.

Out of my sight!

Once again he calls his wife devil, something he has done repeatedly since Act III, scene 3. Back at the beginning of the play, it was Othello who was called devil by Iago. We have come full circle. The folklore behind this passage is that people believed crocodiles shed false tears to trick their victims. Desdemona’s tears are also false, despite the fact she weeps copiously. She starts to leave when Lodovico urges Othello to call her back; he does so, then asks What would you with her, sir? He talks about his wife as if she were for sale, like Bianca. Othello explains his actions at line 252:

Ay! You did wish that I would make her turn.

Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,

And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;

And she's obedient, as you say, obedient,

Very obedient. Proceed you in your tears.

Concerning this, sir -- O well-painted passion!--

I am commanded home. -- Get you away!

I'll send for you anon. -- Sir, I obey the mandate,

And will return to Venice. -- Hence, avaunt! [Exit DESDEMONA]

Cassio shall have my place. And, sir, tonight,

I do entreat that we may sup together.

You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus.--Goats and monkeys!

Look at the use of the word turn here. Othello uses it to mean turn around physically and come back, but he also uses it to mean turn from one man to another. He orders Desdemona to weep as if she were a trained dog. He is humiliating her, using the same pattern of repetition he had used in his courtship. Then for four lines he carries on two conversations at once – the public one with Lodovico about the order for him to return to Venice – and the private one with his wife, calling her passion phony and ordering her away again. He ends inviting Lodovico to join him for dinner and leaves cursing Goats and monkeys! under his breath. “Goats and monkeys?” another example of creeping Iagoism, using suggestive animal images to allude to a dysfunctional relationship.

Lodovico is appalled by this change in Othello’s behavior. Who can he turn to for an explanation? Who else, but “honest Iago?” He asks Iago about Othello at line 269, Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain? The simplest explanation is that Othello has lost his mind. Iago’s answer has it both ways, supporting Othello while suggesting that there is something wrong: He's that he is; I may not breathe my censure. What he might be (if, what he might, he is not) I would to heaven he were! Iago suggests that Lodovico make his own assessment, since he cannot say anything about his general. He strongly implies that Othello is not himself. Iago has poisoned Lodovico’s mind about Othello, so that everything the Venetian visitor sees will appear to confirm his worst fears. When Lodovico expresses shock that Othello struck his wife, Iago replies ominously at line 273

'Faith, that was not so well; yet would I knew that stroke would prove the worst! It suggests that Othello regularly beats Desdemona. When Lodovico presses him for more details, he replies,

Alas, alas!

It is not honesty in me to speak

What I have seen and known. You shall observe him,

And his own courses will denote him so

That I may save my speech.

Once again Iago manipulates Lodovico through implication without ever offering any hard evidence. If the plot fails, he can always claim he was misunderstood.

Go to Menu

Act IV, Scene 2

The next scene represents a logical step in the unfolding of the plot. Sooner or later Othello will have to confront his wife with the charges. The scene will begin in the middle of a conversation, an interrogation of Emilia by Othello looking for evidence. He will dismiss her testimony and will treat Emilia in a disrespectful manner. Then he confronts his wife. This is the point where Iago’s plot is most vulnerable. Othello may say something about the handkerchief to Emilia or he might tell his wife about Iago’s dream. The whole house of cards could come tumbling down. However, Iago has done his work so well, the conspiracy remains intact, [Act IV, scene 2, line 1 – 105]

OTHELLO: You have seen nothing then?

EMILIA: Nor ever heard, nor ever did suspect.

OTHELLO: Yes, you have seen Cassio and she together.

EMILIA: But then I saw no harm, and then I heard

Each syllable that breath made up [spoken] between them.

OTHELLO: What, did they never whisper?

EMILIA: Never, my lord.

OTHELLO: Nor send you out o' the way?

EMILIA: Never.

OTHELLO: To fetch her fan, her gloves, her mask, nor nothing?

EMILIA: Never, my lord.

OTHELLO: That's strange.

EMILIA: I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest,

Lay down my soul at stake [as the wager]. If you think other,

Remove your thought. It doth abuse your bosom.

If any wretch have put this in your head,

Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse!

For, if she be not honest, chaste, and true,

There's no man happy. The purest of their wives

Is foul as slander.

OTHELLO: Bid her come hither. Go. [Exit EMILIA]

She says enough; yet she's a simple bawd [procurer]

That cannot say as much. This is a subtle whore,

A closet lock and key of villainous secrets

And yet she'll kneel and pray; I have seen her do 't.

[Enter DESDEMONA with EMILIA]

DESDEMONA: My lord, what is your will?

OTHELLO: Pray, chuck, come hither.

DESDEMONA: What is your pleasure?

OTHELLO: Let me see your eyes.

Look in my face.

DESDEMONA: What horrible fancy 's this?

OTHELLO: [To EMILIA] Some of your function [as a procurer] mistress;

Leave procreants alone and shut the door;

Cough, or cry “hem,” if anybody come:

Your mystery, your mystery [craft of your job]! Nay, dispatch.

[Exit EMILIA]

DESDEMONA: Upon my knees, what doth your speech import?

I understand a fury in your words.

OTHELLO: Why, what art thou?

DESDEMONA: Your wife, my lord; your true

And loyal wife.

OTHELLO: Come, swear it, damn thyself

Lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves

Should fear to seize thee. Therefore be double damn'd;

Swear thou art honest.

DESDEMONA: Heaven doth truly know it.

OTHELLO: Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell.

DESDEMONA: To whom, my lord? With whom? How am I false?

OTHELLO: O Desdemona! Away! Away! Away!

DESDEMONA: Alas the heavy day! Why do you weep?

Am I the motive [cause] of these tears, my lord?

If haply [perhaps] you my father do suspect

An instrument of this your calling back,

Lay not your blame on me. If you have lost him,

Why, I have lost him too.

OTHELLO: Had it pleased heaven

To try me with affliction; had they rained

All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head.

Steeped [submerged] me in poverty to the very lips,

Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,

I should have found in some place of my soul

A drop of patience. But, alas, to make me

A fixed figure for the time of scorn

To point his slow unmoving finger at! [Othello sees himself as a figure of mockery, being pointed at like the number on a clock whose hands never seem to move]

Yet could I bear that too, well, very well:

But there, where I have garnered up my heart,

Where either I must live, or bear no life,

The fountain from the which my current runs,

Or else dries up -- to be discarded thence,

Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads

To knot and gender in [twist and procreate] -- turn thy complexion there,

Patience, thou young and rose-lipped cherubin!

I here look grim as hell!

DESDEMONA: I hope my noble lord esteems me honest.

OTHELLO: O, ay, as summer flies are in the shambles [slaughter houses],

That quicken even with blowing [hatch as soon as they are laid]. O thou weed,

Who art so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet

That the sense aches at thee, would thou hadst never been born!

DESDEMONA: Alas, what ignorant [unknowing] sin have I committed?

OTHELLO: Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,

Made to write “whore” upon? What committed!

Committed! O thou public commoner [prostitute],

I should make very forges of my cheeks,

That would to cinders burn up modesty,

Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!

Heaven stops the nose at it and the moon winks,

The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets

Is hushed within the hollow mine of earth,

And will not hear it. What committed?

DESDEMONA: By heaven, you do me wrong.

OTHELLO: Are you not a strumpet?

DESDEMONA: No, as I am a Christian:

If to preserve this vessel for my lord

From any other foul unlawful touch

Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

OTHELLO: What, not a whore?

DESDEMONA: No, as I shall be saved.

OTHELLO: Is 't possible?

DESDEMONA: O, heaven forgive us!

OTHELLO: I cry you mercy [ask forgiveness], then.

I took you for that cunning whore of Venice

That married with Othello. [Calling] You, mistress,

That have the office opposite to Saint Peter,

And keep the gate of hell! [Enter EMILIA] You, you, ay, you!

We have done our course; there's money for your pains. [Throws coins]

I pray you, turn the key and keep our counsel [secret]. [Exit]

EMILIA: Alas, what does this gentleman conceive?

How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?

DESDEMONA: 'Faith, half asleep.

EMILIA: Good madam, what's the matter with my lord?

DESDEMONA: With who?

EMILIA: Why, with my lord, madam.

DESDEMONA: Who is thy lord?

EMILIA: He that is yours, sweet lady.

DESDEMONA: I have none. Do not talk to me, Emilia.

I cannot weep; nor answer have I none,

But what should go by water [tears]. Prithee, tonight

Lay on my bed my wedding sheets, remember;

And call thy husband hither.

EMILIA: Here's a change indeed!

In this sequence Othello takes the initiative for the first time since Iago dropped his bombshell. First questioning Emilia and then confronting his wife, he comes very close to revealing Iago’s deception. Yet Iago’s manipulation has been so thorough that although he is not present, his hold on Othello’s imagination continues unchallenged. The scene opens in the middle of the interrogation of Emilia. Othello’s questions are very specific about Desdemona and Cassio relationship, and when Emilia finally understands the implication of the questions, at line 11, she is emphatic in her denial:

I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest,

Lay down my soul at stake [as the wager]. If you think other,

Remove your thought. It doth abuse your bosom.

If any wretch have put this in your head,

Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse!

For, if she be not honest, chaste, and true,

There's no man happy. The purest of their wives

Is foul as slander.

Emilia is willing to wager her immortal soul that Desdemona is honest. She warns Othello that his suspicion abuses his reputation. Then she guesses that some wretch has put this idea in his mind. How easy it would have been for Othello to say at this point, “Why yes, your husband told me.” He never asks Emilia about that handkerchief, which might have uncovered the plot. Emilia ends with a powerful affirmation of his wife’s faithfulness, asserting that if she is false, then all women are. Othello ignores what Emilia testifies to, dismissing it as the result of her simplicity and Desdemona’s skill at deception:

She says enough; yet she's a simple bawd [procurer]

That cannot say as much. This is a subtle whore,

A closet lock and key of villainous secrets

And yet she'll kneel and pray; I have seen her do 't.

If Desdemona is a subtle whore, then Emilia is a bawd, a female procurer who arranged the assignation of prostitute and client and kept watch at the door. Desdemona’s very innocence has become the proof of her guilt, she is so skilled in her deception. When his wife comes in Othello orders her to look into his face. He must be frightening in his rage, because she asks, What horrible fancy’s this? What is he imagining? Othello now treats Emilia literally as a bawd at line 27:

Some of your function [as a procurer] mistress;

Leave procreants alone and shut the door;

Cough, or cry “hem,” if anybody come:

Your mystery, your mystery [craft of your job]! Nay, dispatch.

Othello speaks to Emilia of her function of her mystery, both references to the profession of procurer. He orders her out and tells her to guard the door and warn them if anyone comes If Emilia is the bawd, then Desdemona is the whore, one of the procreants having sex behind the door. Clearly this exchange is meant as sarcasm, as a way of insulting both women. Emilia might get the allusion, but I doubt Desdemona has any idea what he’s talking about.

In accusing his wife, he never mentions Cassio, although he had with Emilia. In fact he gives his wife no specifics at all that she might disprove. Instead he repeatedly calls her a whore in one way or another and plumbs the depths of his self-pity. The eloquence Othello had displayed early in the play returns in this passage. Othello begins by demanding that Desdemona swear that she is his true and loyal wife, explaining at line 34 why he wants this:

Come, swear it, damn thyself

Lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves

Should fear to seize thee. Therefore be double damn'd;

Swear thou art honest.

In Othello’s view of morality, his wife is already condemned to everlasting Hell as punishment for her sin. Now he wants her to damn her soul a second time by swearing a false oath. He reasons that she is so like an angel that the devils may be afraid to lay hold of her if she has committed only a single sin. Throughout this sequence Othello’s love for and attraction to his wife co-exists with his hatred.

Desdemona is not a passive victim. At line 31 she kneels to plead that her husband tell her why he is angry. (This is the fourth such kneeling so far in the play. What are the other three?) After insisting that heaven knows she is a true and loyal wife, she demands at line 39 that he give her specifics of the charges against her: To whom, my lord? With whom? How am I false? If only Othello had responded to Desdemona’s questions, the plot might have come to light. At line 41 Desdemona seeks a possible explanation for her husband’s rage. She guesses that if he suspects her father had arranged for him to be recalled to Venice, Othello might be upset, but she assures him, If you have lost him, I have lost him too.

Rather than responding to his wife’s questions or concerns, Othello at line 46 begins to explore his own emotional state in powerful language, a lamentation of loss:

Had it pleased heaven

To try me with affliction; had they rained

All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head.

Steeped [submerged] me in poverty to the very lips,

Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,

I should have found in some place of my soul

A drop of patience. But, alas, to make me

A fixed figure for the time of scorn

To point his slow unmoving finger at! [Othello sees himself as a figure of mockery, being pointed at like the number on a clock whose hands never seem to move; your text says “moving,”

but this is a better reading.]

Like the figure of Job who suffers unjustly in the Old Testament, Othello would accept all that the world could heap upon him without complaint and with patience. However, Desdemona’s betrayal has turned him into a figure of mockery, like the numerals on a clock. It’s a powerful metaphor which evokes the idea of time as well as the image of unending ridicule, the one affliction the proud Othello can least bear. At line 55 he asserts that he might have been able to survive even that humiliation, if only he still had something to believe in:

Yet could I bear that too, well, very well:

But there, where I have garnered up my heart,

Where either I must live, or bear no life,

The fountain from the which my current runs,

Or else dries up -- to be discarded thence,

Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads

To knot and gender in [twist and procreate] -- turn thy complexion there,

Patience, thou young and rose-lipped cherubin!

I here look grim as hell!

The metaphor of the fountain of life becomes a foul cistern, a water tank filled with dirty water in which a mass of toads (folklore held that toads were poisonous) hold an unspeakable orgy. In the final three lines Othello addresses an invisible angel representing the virtue of Patience. In his imagination Patience has already blushed at Desdemona’s sin, while he is past embarrassment and looks on her transgression grim as hell. The equation of the sexual act to a lot of horny toads is, of course, another example of creeping Iagoism. The language here is so filled with hyperbole and intricate images that it is no wonder Desdemona has trouble understanding. However, at line 64 she picks up on the suggestion that he thinks she is guilty of some sexual crime and asserts her honesty. Othello replies sarcastically that she is as honest as flies in the shambles, the primitive slaughter houses that Shakespeare was familiar with as a youth. The image here is of flies that are sexually active the moment they are hatched. Another creeping Iagoism! When she demands to know what she is accused of having committed, he picks up on the word in his reply at line 70. Notice how many times he repeats it.

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,

Made to write “whore” upon? What committed!

Committed! O thou public commoner [prostitute],

I should make very forges of my cheeks,

That would to cinders burn up modesty,

Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!

Heaven stops the nose at it and the moon winks,

The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets

Is hushed within the hollow mine of earth,

And will not hear it. What committed?

What committed becomes the refrain in this passage, but the question is never answered directly. It is as if Othello’s imagination is so obsessed with her sin, he is incapable of doing anything more than just venting his rage. We have three very powerful metaphors:

this goodly book, forges of my cheeks and heaven, moon and bawdy wind. (By the way, the moon was the ancient goddess of chastity, so it is appropriate she closes her eyes to Desdemona’s adultery. The wind was thought to be trapped under the ground, in a hollow mine, but as wanton as the wind is, kissing everyone, it cannot stand to hear of her crime.) Othello may be unable to answer his wife’s questions cogently, but his old eloquence is back in full force. (Remember the gibberish he uttered during his fit in Act IV, scene 1?) It is this eloquence and his sense of moral outrage which sets him apart from Iago. He may look at the world through Iago’s eyes now, but he makes his anger his own.

Desdemona fights back. At line 80 she accuse him of doing her wrong, at line 81 denies she is a strumpet. At line 85 when he asks if she is a whore, she declares, No, as I shall be saved. She here places the question of her moral innocence within a religious context, her hope for eternal salvation. Even this powerful affirmation does not sway Othello who responds sarcastically, I cry you mercy [ask forgiveness], then. I took you for that cunning whore of Venice that married with Othello. Othello now calls Emilia back in and concludes his humiliating charade of his wife and her attendant at line 89:

You, mistress,

That have the office opposite to Saint Peter,

And keep the gate of hell! [Enter EMILIA] You, you, ay, you!

We have done our course; there's money for your pains. [Throws coins]

I pray you, turn the key and keep our counsel [secret].

Othello treats Emilia as a bawd and his wife as a common whore. As a procurer, Emilia’s function as a gatekeeper, like Saint Peter at heaven’s gate, is to open the doors of hell. He completes his little ironic drama by throwing money to the bawd and asking her to keep his visit secret.

Emilia is amazed by Othello’s behavior and questions Desdemona about what is bothering him. For her part Desdemona shows the symptoms of being in shock. At line 96 she describes her condition: Faith, half asleep. People who are traumatized often feel a overwhelming need to sleep. When Emilia asks what is wrong with my lord, Desdemona answers Who is thy lord? and then denies that Othello is any longer her lord. She asks that Emilia put her wedding sheets on her bed that evening.

In the next sequence, line 106 – 245, Iago returns. Notice how completely Desdemona is dependent upon him in this crisis. Emilia begins to connect the dots, to draw a possible connection between Othello’s strange behavior and her husband. Finally Iago’s evil deception is uncovered at the end of the scene. Who first discovers his villainy, and how is Iago able to escape the consequences? [Act IV, scene 2, line 106 – 245]

DESDEMONA: 'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet.

How have I been behaved, that he might stick

The small'st opinion on my least misuse [base the slightest doubt on my smallest fault]? [Re-enter EMILIA and IAGO]

IAGO: What is your pleasure, madam? How is't with you?

DESDEMONA: I cannot tell. Those that do teach young babes

Do it with gentle means and easy tasks:

He might have chid me so; for, in good faith,

I am a child to chiding.

IAGO: What's the matter, lady?

EMILIA: Alas, Iago, my lord hath so bewhored her.

Thrown such despite [abuse] and heavy terms upon her,

That true hearts cannot bear.

DESDEMONA: Am I that name, Iago?

IAGO: What name, fair lady?

DESDEMONA: Such as she says my lord did say I was.

EMILIA: He called her whore. A beggar in his drink

Could not have laid such terms upon his callat [slut].

IAGO: Why did he so?

DESDEMONA: I do not know; I am sure I am none such.

IAGO: Do not weep, do not weep. Alas the day!

EMILIA: Hath she forsook so many noble matches,

Her father and her country and her friends,

To be called whore? Would it not make one weep?

DESDEMONA: It is my wretched fortune.

IAGO: Beshrew him for 't!

How comes this trick upon him?

DESDEMONA: Nay, heaven doth know.

EMILIA: I will be hanged, if some eternal villain,

Some busy and insinuating rogue,

Some cogging, cozening [cheating] slave, to get some office,

Have not devised this slander. I'll be hanged else.

IAGO: Fie, there is no such man! It is impossible.

DESDEMONA: If any such there be, heaven pardon him!

EMILIA: A halter pardon him! And hell gnaw his bones!

Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company?

What place? What time? What form? What likelihood?

The Moor's abused by some most villainous knave,

Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow.

O heaven, that such companions [rogues] thou'ldst unfold [reveal] Even from the east to the west!

IAGO: Speak within door [keep it down].

EMILIA: O, fie upon them! Some such squire [liar] he was

That turned your wit the seamy side without,

And made you to suspect me with the Moor.

IAGO: You are a fool. Go to.

DESDEMONA: O good Iago,

What shall I do to win my lord again?

Good friend, go to him, for, by this light of heaven,

I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel:

If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love

Either in discourse of thought [thinking] or actual deed,

Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense

Delighted them in any other form;

Or that I do not yet, and ever did.

And ever will (though he do shake me off

To beggarly divorcement) love him dearly,

Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;

And his unkindness may defeat [destroy] my life,

But never taint my love. I cannot say “whore:”

It does abhor me now I speak the word;

To do the act that might the addition earn

Not the world's mass of vanity could make me.

IAGO: I pray you, be content. 'Tis but his humor.

The business of the state does him offense.

DESDEMONA: If 'twere no other.

IAGO: 'Tis but so, I warrant. [Trumpets within]

Hark, how these instruments summon to supper!

The messengers of Venice stay the meat [await the meal].

Go in, and weep not. All things shall be well. [Exit DESDEMONA and EMILIA] [Enter RODERIGO]

How now, Roderigo!

RODERIGO: I do not find that thou deal’st justly with me.

IAGO: What in the contrary?

RODERIGO: Every day thou daffest [put me off] me with some device, Iago, and rather, as it seems to me now, keepest from me all conveniency [needed things] than suppliest me with the least advantage of hope. I will indeed no longer endure it; nor am I yet persuaded to put up [accept] in peace what already I have foolishly suffered.

IAGO: Will you hear me, Roderigo?

RODERIGO: 'Faith, I have heard too much, for your words and

performances are no kin together.

IAGO: You charge me most unjustly.

RODERIGO: With nought but truth. I have wasted myself out of

my means. The jewels you have had from me to

deliver to Desdemona would half have corrupted a

votarist [nun]. You have told me she hath received them and returned me expectations and comforts of sudden respect [immediate hopes] and acquaintance, but I find none.

IAGO: Well, go to; very well.

RODERIGO: Very well? Go to? I cannot go to, man; nor 'tis not very well. Nay, I think it is scurvy, and begin

to find myself fobbed [duped] in it.

IAGO: Very well.

RODERIGO: I tell you 'tis not very well. I will make myself

known to Desdemona. If she will return me my

jewels, I will give over my suit and repent my

unlawful solicitation. If not, assure yourself I

will seek satisfaction of you.

IAGO: You have said now?

RODERIGO: Ay, and said nothing but what I protest intendment of doing.

IAGO: Why, now I see there's mettle [spirit] in thee, and even from

this instant do build on thee a better opinion than

ever before. Give me thy hand, Roderigo. Thou hast

taken against me a most just exception [objection]; but yet I

protest I have dealt most directly in thy affair.

RODERIGO: It hath not appeared.

IAGO: I grant indeed it hath not appeared, and your

suspicion is not without wit and judgment. But,

Roderigo, if thou hast that in thee indeed which I

have greater reason to believe now than ever -- I mean

purpose, courage and valor -- this night show it. If

thou the next night following enjoy not Desdemona,

take me from this world with treachery and devise

engines for [schemes against] my life.

RODERIGO: Well, what is it? Is it within reason and compass [possibility]?

IAGO: Sir, there is especial commission come from Venice

to depute Cassio in Othello's place.

RODERIGO: Is that true? Why, then Othello and Desdemona

return again to Venice.

IAGO: O, no; he goes into Mauritania and takes away with

him the fair Desdemona, unless his abode be

lingered here by some accident; wherein none can be

so determinate [effective] as the removing of Cassio.

RODERIGO: How do you mean, removing of him?

IAGO: Why, by making him uncapable of Othello's place --

knocking out his brains.

RODERIGO: And that you would have me to do?

IAGO: Ay, if you dare do yourself a profit and a right.

He sups tonight with a harlotry [female] and thither will I

go to him. He knows not yet of his honorable

fortune. If you will watch his going thence, which

I will fashion to fall out between twelve and one,

you may take him at your pleasure. I will be near

to second your attempt, and he shall fall between

us. Come, stand not amazed at it, but go along with

me. I will show you such a necessity in his death

that you shall think yourself bound to put it on

him. It is now high suppertime, and the night grows

to waste. About it.

RODERIGO: I will hear further reason for this.

IAGO: And you shall be satisfied.

In a state of shock, Desdemona is still conflicted by what has just happened. At first she tries to excuse her husband’s abuse at line 106: 'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet. It’s the same tack she took in the preceding scene; if something’s wrong, it must be my fault. But then she rejects that dodge, asking herself, How have I been behaved, that he might stick the small'st opinion on my least misuse [base the slightest doubt on my smallest fault]? Emilia comes back with Iago, and the traumatized Desdemona is unable to explain what has upset Othello, saying at line 109 that those who discipline babies do it gently; she wishes her husband had done so with her since I am a child to chiding. As a privileged and somewhat protected daughter of the upper class, she is not used to the kind of rough treatment she has received. If she is in a state of shock, Emilia is working herself into a real rage: Alas, Iago, my lord hath so bewhored her. Thrown such despite [abuse] and heavy terms upon her, that true hearts cannot bear. Emilia’s use of bewhored is an excellent example of Shakespeare’s use of language. Calling the almost saintly Desdemona a “whore” really upsets Emilia. Desdemona poignantly asks about the use of the word at line 117:

DESDEMONA: Am I that name, Iago?

IAGO: What name, fair lady?

DESDEMONA: Such as she says my lord did say I was.

EMILIA: He called her whore. A beggar in his drink

Could not have laid such terms upon his callat [slut].

Desdemona cannot even say the word. The angry Emilia has no problems saying it and offering a telling social commentary. Even the lowest class beggar who was drunk wouldn’t have use a word like that for his disreputable girlfriend. Emilia’s social observation continues at line 124: Hath she forsook so many noble matches, her father and her country and her friends, to be called whore? Would it not make one weep? Desdemona had a chance to marry someone like Roderigo, but she passed that up to come to Cyprus and be spoken to insultingly. Emilia is the kind of middle class lady who is most concerned about the use of inappropriate language, more so than the reality behind the words, but she does deny Othello’s assumption at line 136: Why should he call her whore? Who keeps her company? What place? What time? What form? What likelihood? Desdemona is so overwhelmed by what took place she blames the catastrophe on her wretched fortune, it was just fated to happen to her.

Emilia won’t take this easy out and at line 129 she stumbles on the truth!

I will be hanged, if some eternal villain,

Some busy and insinuating rogue,

Some cogging, cozening [cheating] slave, to get some office,

Have not devised this slander. I'll be hanged else.

Is it any surprise that Iago’s wife figures out that there is some deception going on? She is so close to putting it all together, to naming the culprit. She comes back to this idea again at line 139 – 140, and then at line 144 she drops a bombshell: Some such squire [liar] he was that turned your wit the seamy side without, and made you to suspect me with the Moor. Iago has shared his suspicions with his wife! It’s the only mention in the play of what must have been a nasty incident. Although Desdemona is present, she never acknowledges hearing this revelation. (In some performances Desdemona is played as so out of it at this point she doesn’t even hear this statement.) Instead in a long speech at line 147 she throws herself upon Iago for help, asking, What shall I do to win my lord again? She even kneels before Iago! (He now has gotten both husband and wife to kneel before him in a kind of submission.) She takes an oath that she has never looked at another man and never will; even if he divorces her, she will continue to love him. At line 159 she suggests that Othello’s unkindness may defeat my life, but never taint my love. In a poignant touch at line 160 she comes back to his accusation: I cannot say “whore.” It does abhor me now I speak the word. This is a serious moment, but Shakespeare does not hesitate to have Desdemona do a play on words with “whore” and “abhor.” His audience did not dismiss such verbal plays as the low humor of puns, but rather another way of establishing a conceptual connection. Desdemona ends her speech by telling Iago that if she has difficulty saying the word, she could never do the deed that would make her a whore.

Throughout this passage Iago treats Desdemona as a grieving child and he the comforting parent. At line 108 he expresses his concern: How is ‘t with you, lady? At line 123 he consoles her: Do not weep, do not weep. Alas the day. When he sends Desdemona and Emilia off he tells again not to cry and reassures her, All things shall be well. The man who just gave instructions on how this poor woman should be strangled here comforts her. Iago is genuinely slimy!

On the other hand Iago is made uncomfortable by Emilia’s discovering the truth. At line 133 he denies the truth: Fie, there is no such man! It is impossible. That doesn’t deter his wife and at line 143 he harshly demands Speak within door, or keep your voice down. Finally after she reveals his jealousy over Othello, he angrily says, You are a fool. Go to. He can’t afford to have his wife start connecting the dots at this point! Best to shut her up.

If Emilia comes close to discovering the truth about Iago, the person who finally turns Iago’s rock over is none other than poor old Roderigo. He comes in accusing Iago of not dealing honestly with him. Iago just shines him on: go to; very well. As he gets angrier, Roderigo uses the formal, courtly language of the gentleman: [thou] keep’st from me all conveniency than suppliest me with the least advantage of hope. As he declares at line 180, your words and performance are no kin together. As he complains at line 184, The jewels you have had from me to deliver to Desdemona would half have corrupted a votarist [nun]. In other words, “I’ve given you enough jewels to have gotten a date with Mother Theresa!” Then he issues his ultimatum at line 195:

I will make myself

known to Desdemona. If she will return me my

jewels, I will give over my suit and repent my

unlawful solicitation. If not, assure yourself I

will seek satisfaction of you.

Roderigo is threatening to expose the whole plot! If he goes to Desdemona she will find out about Iago’s deception and may well realize that he is behind her husband’s suspicions. If Roderigo can’t get the jewels back, he will take it out on Iago – satisfaction in the form of repayment or a duel of honor. Iago probably wouldn’t have to worry about Roderigo in a fight, but throughout the play the ancient displays an aversion to physical danger. How can he “satisfy” Roderigo?

Iago manipulates Roderigo at line 203 in the same way he had earlier in the play:

Why, now I see there's mettle [spirit] in thee, and even from

this instant do build on thee a better opinion than

ever before. Give me thy hand, Roderigo. Thou hast

taken against me a most just exception [objection]; but yet I

protest I have dealt most directly in thy affair.

Iago flatters Roderigo! You’ve got the mettle to stand up to me, and I will think better of you from now on. Your objections are totally justified, but I insist I have been completely honest with you. Iago, in effect, has it both ways: you’re right, but I’m not to blame. In lines 210 – 217, he turns things around and after assuring him his suspicion is not without wit and judgment, he offer Roderigo a chance to do just one more little thing that will guarantee he can enjoy Desdemona. The one little thing is the removing of Cassio – knocking out his brains. (Iago has created one of those instant stories he does so well that Othello is being reassigned to North Africa, and the only way to keep him in Cyprus is make Cassio incapable of taking his place.) Poor Roderigo falls for Iago’s lie one more time and agrees to waylay Cassio on his way home from Bianca’s that night and to kill him, with Iago’s help. Throughout this scene three characters have come close to the upsetting Iago’s plot – Desdemona, Emilia, and Roderigo – and all three have failed.

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Act IV, Scene 3

This short scene really adds nothing to the storyline, but it is one of the most powerful and poignant that Shakespeare ever wrote. We know that night Othello will strangle Desdemona in her bed and that she is in a state of shock over her husband’s treatment of her. Essentially all that happens in the scene is that Desdemona prepares for bed and remembers a song she had learned from a maid when she was young. The maid fell in love with a man who went mad and left her behind to die of a broken heart. Desdemona sings the song while Emilia helps her undress. There is a sense of domesticity in the scene as two women talk idly about things. They get into a discussion of the possibility of adultery. What purpose does this scene play in the overall drama? [Act IV, scene 3]

[Enter OTHELLO, LODOVICO, DESDEMONA, EMILIA] LODOVICO: I do beseech you, sir, trouble yourself no further.

OTHELLO: O, pardon me: 'twill do me good to walk.

LODOVICO: Madam, good night. I humbly thank your ladyship.

DESDEMONA: Your honor is most welcome.

OTHELLO: Will you walk, sir? O, Desdemona.

DESDEMONA: My lord?

OTHELLO: Get you to bed on the instant; I will be returned

forthwith. Dismiss your attendant there. Look it be done.

DESDEMONA: I will, my lord. [Exeunt OTHELLO, LODOVICO,]

EMILIA: How goes it now? He looks gentler than he did.

DESDEMONA: He says he will return incontinent [immediately].

He hath commanded me to go to bed,

And bade me to dismiss you.

EMILIA: Dismiss me!

DESDEMONA: It was his bidding; therefore, good Emilia,.

Give me my nightly wearing, and adieu.

We must not now displease him.

EMILIA: I would you had never seen him!

DESDEMONA: So would not I. My love doth so approve him,

That even his stubbornness, his checks [rebukes] his frowns --

Prithee, unpin me -- have grace and favor in them.

EMILIA: I have laid those sheets you bade me on the bed.

DESDEMONA: All's one [no matter]. Good Father, how foolish are our minds!

If I do die before thee prithee, shroud me

In one of those same sheets.

EMILIA: Come, come you talk.

DESDEMONA: My mother had a maid called Barbary.

She was in love, and he she loved proved mad

And did forsake her. She had a song of “Willow”;

An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,

And she died singing it. That song to-night

Will not go from my mind; I have much to do,

But to go hang my head all at one side,

And sing it like poor Barbary. Prithee, dispatch.

EMILIA: Shall I go fetch your night-gown?

DESDEMONA: No, unpin me here.

This Lodovico is a proper man.

EMILIA: A very handsome man.

DESDEMONA: He speaks well.

EMILIA: I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot

to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.

DESDEMONA: [Singing] “The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,

Sing all a green willow;

Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee,

Sing willow, willow, willow.

The fresh streams ran by her, and murmured her moans;

Sing willow, willow, willow;

Her salt tears fell from her, and soft’ned the stones -- Sing willow, willow, willow –“

Lay by these:-- [Gives Emilia her clothes]

“Willow, Willow” ---

Prithee, hie thee [hurry]; he'll come anon [soon].

“Sing all a green willow must be my garland.

Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve” --

Nay, that's not next. Hark! Who is 't that knocks?

EMILIA: It is the wind.

DESDEMONA: [Singing] “I called my love false love; but what said he then?

Sing willow, willow, willow;

If I court moe [more] women, you'll couch with moe men!”

So, get thee gone; good night. Mine eyes do itch.

Doth that bode weeping?

EMILIA: 'Tis neither here nor there.

DESDEMONA: I have heard it said so. O, these men, these men!

Dost thou in conscience think, tell me, Emilia,

That there be women do abuse their husbands

In such gross kind?

EMILIA: There be some such, no question.

DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

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' th’ dark.

DESDEMONA: Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?

EMILIA: The world's a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice.

DESDEMONA: In troth, I think thou wouldst not.

EMILIA: In troth, I think I should; and undo't when I had done. Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn [linen], nor for

gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty

exhibition [payment]; but for the whole world? Why, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a

monarch? I should venture purgatory for 't.

DESDEMONA: Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong for the whole world.

EMILIA: Why the wrong is but a wrong i' th’ world; and

having the world for your labor, ‘tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right.

DESDEMONA: I do not think there is any such woman.

EMILIA: Yes, a dozen; and as many to the vantage as would store [as would fill up] the world they played for.

But I do think it is their husbands' faults

If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,

And pour our treasures into foreign [strangers’] laps,

Or else break out in peevish jealousies,

Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,

Or scant our former having in despite [reduce our allowances]; Why, we have galls; and though we have some grace, Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell

And have their palates both for sweet and sour,

As husbands have. What is it that they do

When they change [exchange] us for others? Is it sport?

I think it is. And doth affection [desire] breed it?

I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?

It is so too. 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 [teach us to do likewise].

DESDEMONA: Good night, good night. Heaven me such uses [practices] send,

Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend! The text gives us some general idea of the physical action in this scene, of Emilia helping Desdemona get ready for bed. Desdemona remembers the song her mother’s maid Barbary, or Barbara, sang, a song that connects two stories of tragic love and loss. The song is a kind of foreboding, an omen of something bad about to happen, which we in the audience anticipate. The second half of the scene is a little lighter, a little closer to comic relief, as the innocent Desdemona and the worldly Emilia discuss the topic of adultery. Desdemona says she could never commit adultery, by this heavenly light, to which Emilia rejoins at line 67, Nor I neither by this heavenly light. I might do't as well i' th’ dark. Emilia begins to argue the justification for adultery, asking what woman would not make her husband a cuckold, if doing so made him the king of the world. Her long speech at line 89 catalogues the tensions in a marriage that lead women to betray their marriage vows. (Throughout this speech we gain a valuable insight into what it must have been like to be Iago’s wife!) She point is that it is the husbands’ faults if wives to fall. Men slack their duties to their partners and pour our treasures into foreign laps, suggesting both a financial and sexual betrayal. Husbands irrationally break out in peevish jealousies, throwing restraint upon us. Such husbands even strike us, as Othello has already done and Iago probably did as well, or they cut back on money to run the home, scant our former having in despite. In such cases wives have some revenge. Adultery becomes a means of the woman striking back, satisfying their appetites for novelty and affection. She concludes at line 103,

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 [teach us to do likewise].

Desdemona cannot believe any wife would do what her husband has accused her of, and she takes a different moral position from Emilia at the end of the scene: Good night, good night. Heaven me such uses [practices] send, not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend! Just because her husband has treated her badly does not mean she will act badly, but rather such ill treatment will make her a better person.

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Act V, Scene 1

Othello ends with two scenes of murder. In the first we see Iago at the height of his power, trying to pull off a difficult double homicide of the two people he has to get rid of, Roderigo and Cassio. Most of the action takes place on a very dark street where characters are unable to recognize each other. The result is confusion which Iago takes advantage of, cleverly shifting from target to target, even managing to ensnare Bianca who sudden appears again. [Act V, scene 1]

[Enter IAGO and RODERIGO]

IAGO: Here, stand behind this bulk [storefront]; straight will he come.

Wear thy good rapier bare, and put it home.

Quick, quick! Fear nothing; I'll be at thy elbow.

It makes us, or it mars us; think on that,

And fix most firm thy resolution.

RODERIGO: Be near at hand; I may miscarry in't.

IAGO: Here, at thy hand. Be bold, and take thy stand. [Retires]

RODERIGO: I have no great devotion to the deed,

And yet he hath given me satisfying reasons.

'Tis but a man gone. Forth, my sword! He dies!

IAGO: I have rubbed this young quat [pimple] almost to the sense [raw],

And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio,

Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,

Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo,

He calls me to a restitution large

Of gold and jewels that I bobbed [swindled] from him,

As gifts to Desdemona;

It must not be. If Cassio do remain,

He hath a daily beauty in his life

That makes me ugly; and, besides, the Moor

May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril.

No, he must die. But so, I hear him coming. [Enter CASSIO]

RODERIGO: I know his gait. 'Tis he. Villain, thou diest! [Thrusts at CASSIO]

CASSIO: That thrust had been mine enemy indeed,

But that my coat [mail shirt] is better than thou know'st

I will make proof of thine. [Draws, and wounds RODERIGO]

RODERIGO: O, I am slain!

[IAGO from behind wounds CASSIO in the leg, and exit]

CASSIO: I am maimed forever. Help, ho! Murder! Murder! [Falls]

[Enter OTHELLO]

OTHELLO: The voice of Cassio. Iago keeps his word.

RODERIGO: O, villain that I am!

OTHELLO: It is even so.

CASSIO: O, help, ho! Light! A surgeon!

OTHELLO: 'Tis he. O brave Iago, honest and just,

That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!

Thou teachest me. Minion [hussy, Desdemona] your dear lies dead,

And your unblest [unholy] fate hies [approaches]. Strumpet, I come.

Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted.

Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted. [Exit]

[Enter LODOVICO and GRATIANO]

CASSIO: What, ho! No watch? No passage [passersby]? Murder! Murder!

GRATIANO: 'Tis some mischance. The cry is very direful.

CASSIO: O, help!

LODOVICO: Hark!

RODERIGO: O wretched villain!

LODOVICO: Two or three groan. It is a heavy night.

These may be counterfeits. Let's think 't unsafe

To come in to the cry without more help.

RODERIGO: Nobody come? Then shall I bleed to death.

LODOVICO: Hark! [Re-enter IAGO, with a light]

GRATIANO: Here's one comes in his shirt, with light and weapons.

IAGO: Who's there? Whose noise is this that cries on murder?

LODOVICO: We do not know.

IAGO: Did not you hear a cry?

CASSIO: Here, here! For heaven's sake, help me!

IAGO: What's the matter?

GRATIANO: This is Othello's ancient, as I take it.

LODOVICO: The same indeed, a very valiant fellow.

IAGO: What are you here that cry so grievously?

CASSIO: Iago? O, I am spoiled, undone by villains!

Give me some help.

IAGO: O me, lieutenant! What villains have done this?

CASSIO: I think that one of them is hereabout,

And cannot make away.

IAGO; O treacherous villains!

[To LODOVICO and GRATIANO] What are you there? come in, and give some help.

RODERIGO: O, help me here!

CASSIO: That's one of them.

IAGO: O murderous slave! O villain! [Stabs RODERIGO]

RODERIGO: O damn'd Iago! O inhuman dog!

IAGO: Kill men i' the dark?--Where be these bloody thieves?--

How silent is this town!--Ho! Murder! Murder!--

What may you be? Are you of good or evil?

LODOVICO: As you shall prove us, praise us.

IAGO: Signior Lodovico?

LODOVICO: He, sir.

IAGO: I cry you mercy. Here's Cassio hurt by villains.

GRATIANO: Cassio!

IAGO: How is 't, brother?

CASSIO: My leg is cut in two.

IAGO: Marry, heaven forbid!

Light, gentlemen; I'll bind it with my shirt. [Enter BIANCA]

BIANCA: What is the matter, ho? Who is 't that cried?

IAGO: Who is 't that cried?

BIANCA: O my dear Cassio! My sweet Cassio! O Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!

IAGO: O notable strumpet! Cassio, may you suspect

Who they should be that have thus mangled you?

CASSIO: No.

GRATIANO: I am to find you thus. I have been to seek you.

IAGO: Lend me a garter. So. O, for a chair,

To bear him easily hence!

BIANCA: Alas, he faints! O Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!

IAGO: Gentlemen all, I do suspect this trash

To be a party in this injury. --

Patience awhile, good Cassio. -- Come, come.

Lend me a light. Know we this face or no?

Alas my friend and my dear countryman

Roderigo? No. -- Yes, sure. – Yes, ‘tis Roderigo.

GRATIANO: What, of Venice?

IAGO: Even he, sir. Did you know him?

GRATIANO: Know him? Ay!

IAGO: Signior Gratiano? I cry you gentle pardon.

These bloody accidents must excuse my manners,

That so neglected you.

GRATIANO: I am glad to see you.

IAGO: How do you, Cassio? O, a chair, a chair!

GRATIANO: Roderigo?

IAGO: He, he 'tis he! [A chair brought in] O, that's well said. The chair!

GRATIANO: Some good man bear him carefully from hence.

I'll fetch the general's surgeon. [To BIANCA] For you, mistress,

Save you your labor. [To CASSIO] He that lies slain here, Cassio,

Was my dear friend. What malice was between you?

CASSIO: None in the world; nor do I know the man.

IAGO: [To BIANCA] What, look you pale? O, bear him out o' the air.

[CASSIO and RODERIGO are borne off]

Stay you, good gentlemen. Look you pale, mistress?

Do you perceive the gastness [terror] of her eye?

Nay, if you stare, we shall hear more anon.

Behold her well; I pray you, look upon her.

Do you see, gentlemen? Nay, guiltiness will speak,

Though tongues were out of use [silent]. [Enter EMILIA]

EMILIA: Alas, what is the matter? What is the matter, husband?

IAGO: Cassio hath here been set on in the dark

By Roderigo and fellows that are ‘scaped.

He's almost slain, and Roderigo quite dead.

EMILIA: Alas, good gentleman! Alas, good Cassio!

IAGO: This is the fruit of whoring. Prithee, Emilia,

Go know of Cassio where he supped to-night.

[To BIANCA] What, do you shake at that?

BIANCA: He supped at my house; but I therefore shake not.

IAGO: O, did he so? I charge you, go with me.

EMILIA: Oh fie upon thee, strumpet!

BIANCA: I am no strumpet, but of life as honest

As you that thus abuse me.

EMILIA: As I? Fie upon thee!

IAGO: Kind gentlemen, let's go see poor Cassio dressed [bandaged].

Come, mistress, you must tell's another tale.

Emilia, run you to the citadel,

And tell my lord and lady what hath happed. [Exit EMILIA]

Will you go on afore. [Exit all the rest]

This is the night

That either makes me or fordoes me quite [ruins me completely].

There is a startling contrast between this scene and the next, Act V, Scene 2. Here we have a dark, cramped street, very like the setting of the confrontation with Brabantio at the beginning of the play. It was a dangerous situation to have a sword fight in the dark. On the page we don’t get a full sense of the physical action which swirls around. Earlier I had compared Iago to a master juggler, manipulating others in different ways simultaneously. This scene is his masterpiece of juggling. In the course of 130 lines he controls the perceptions of seven different characters, adroitly controlling events so they befall as he wants them to and getting others to accomplish his ends. The first person he manipulates is poor old Roderigo who tells us at line 8, I have no great devotion to the deed [killing Cassio], and yet he hath given me satisfying reasons. 'Tis but a man gone. Audiences often feel sorry for Roderigo because he ends so badly, murdered in a gutter by a man he trusted. But Roderigo brings it on himself by his willingness to enter into Iago’s evil plot. Iago, at line 11, dismissing Roderigo as a young quat, or pimple he has irritated, tells us what he hopes to have happen. If either Roderigo or Cassio or both are killed, Iago wins. If Roderigo survives, he has already threatened to go to Desdemona and ask for his jewels back, thus causing Iago’s house of cards to collapse. His reasons for wanting Cassio dead are more revealing at line 18:

If Cassio do remain,

He hath a daily beauty in his life

That makes me ugly; and, besides, the Moor

May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril.

Here is one more motive behind Iago’s obsessive hatred: Cassio (and undoubtedly Desdemona as well) represent something beautiful and noble that makes Iago look and feel ugly. If he cannot be one of the superior people, the gentle folk, then he must destroy them. He adds a more practical reason as well: there is great danger Othello is going to reveal all of Iago’s machinations to someone else, so Cassio, Desdemona and even Emilia will have to die.

The actual attempted murder of Cassio happens quickly. Roderigo strikes Cassio from behind, hitting the chain mail shirt he wears under his cloak. The lieutenant stabs Roderigo but is hurt in the exchange. In many productions Iago is shown sneaking up behind Cassio and cutting him in the leg. Both men fall and cry out for help. Othello comes in, probably on the upper stage, hears what’s going on in the darkness below. He imagines what has happened at line 31:

O brave Iago, honest and just,

That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!

Thou teachest me. Minion [hussy, Desdemona] your dear lies dead,

And your unblest [unholy] fate hies [approaches]. Strumpet, I come.

Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted.

Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted.

Operating in his natural environment, in a dark alley, Iago has tried to kill two men in unfair combat, but Othello sees this as his friend being honest and just. By his actions, his noble sense of a friend’s wrong, he is forcing Othello to deal with his wife. It is important to see that Othello here is filled with hatred for his wife and promises that her death will be bloody.

On another part of the stage Lodovico and Gratiano, the two visitors from Venice come in. Their reaction at line 42 tells us how dark and dangerous the scene is: Two or three groan. It is a heavy night. These may be counterfeits. Let's think 't unsafe to come in to the cry without more help. They want to help but the situation is too dangerous. They will wait for some superhero to appear. And so he does at line 46 – Iago, the man who laughs at danger! He has taken off his coat so it looks like he was getting ready for bed. He comes in armed to make sure at least one of his victims dies. When Lodovico cries out at line 49, he knows he is not alone and has to be careful. He poses as the savior of the situation, Cassio’s friend at line 55. Lodovico recognizes him and calls him a very valiant fellow. Iago goes off to find the villains who have done this deed and finds Roderigo. The gullible gentleman discovers the full truth at line 61 as his friend, Iago, finds him and rather than helping, calls him villain and stabs him. Apparently dying, Roderigo calls his deceiver and murderer O inhuman dog! an appropriate piece of creeping Iagoism. Iago’s apparent killing of Roderigo cements his loyalty to Cassio, whom he calls brother, and boosts his heroic image. As Lodovico and Gratiano finally approach to help, Iago demands of them, Are you of good or evil? When Iago recognizes Lodovico, he is very polite, as he makes him part of the plot at line 69, calling him Signior Lodovico, with his formal title and apologizes, I cry you mercy. Later at line 93 he belatedly recognizes Gratiano, another social superior, and again apologizes in an exaggerated fashion: Signior Gratiano? I cry you gentle pardon. These bloody accidents must excuse my manners, that so neglected you. Iago is making sure that when these gentlemen get back to Venice, they will report that the one person who kept his head in the situation was Iago. Iago is everywhere, binding Cassio’s wound, calling for a chair on which to carry Cassio to a surgeon and apparently solving the crime.

At line 90 Iago pretends to discover the identity of the man he killed: Alas my friend and dear countryman, Roderigo. At line 102 he asks Cassio, What malice was between you?

Bianca enters at line 74. Iago probably never anticipated her showing up, but he quickly entangles her in the plot as a convenient scapegoat. While she worries about Cassio’s condition, Iago accuses her at line 85: I do suspect this trash to be a party in this injury. This is a masterstroke. She is already a social outcast with no one on her side, and Iago has already made a point of emphasizing her obsessive jealousy of Cassio. When he needs evidence to back up his charge at line 105, he is able to manufacture it:

Look you pale, mistress?

Do you perceive the gastness [terror] of her eye?

Nay, if you stare, we shall hear more anon.

Behold her well; I pray you, look upon her.

Do you see, gentlemen? Nay, guiltiness will speak,

Though tongues were out of use [silent].

Iago is able to use Bianca’s expression as “proof” of her guilt. The implication is that Roderigo is involved in a plot of Bianca’s hatching, confirmed by the fact that Cassio supped at Bianca’s house, which Iago already knew. When Emilia comes in at line 116 her husband declares This is the fruits of whoring. Emilia is the seventh person drawn into Iago’s web when he gives her a simple moral equation: Bianca is a strumpet; therefore she must be behind the murder. When Bianca defends herself against Emilia’s onslaught at line 121, I am no strumpet, but of life as honest as you that thus abuse me. Emilia is outraged by this defense: As I? Fie upon thee!

At the very end of the scene Iago reveals to us why he has performed as the superhero in this scene, doing all this work and making sure he dominates perceptions. At line 128 he declares, This is the night that either makes me or fordoes me quite [ruins me completely]. He has staked everything on these events.

Go to Menu

Act V, Scene 2

The final scene of the play is one of the most powerful Shakespeare ever wrote. As we read the first 83 lines we are struck by the contrast between the approach to violence between this scene and the previous. Iago committed his violence in the dark, without any reflection or moral consideration. How does the approaching murder of Desdemona differ? How does Othello’s attitude toward his victim differ from Iago’s attitude toward his? [Act V, scene 2, lines 1 – 83]

OTHELLO: It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.

It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,

And smooth as monumental alabaster.

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

Put out the light, and then put out the light.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister [worker],

I can again thy former light restore,

Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,

Thou cunning'st [most intricate] pattern of excelling nature,

I know not where is that Promethean heat [divine fire]

That can thy light relume [relight]. When I have plucked the rose,

I cannot give it vital [living] growth again.

It must needs wither. I'll smell it on the tree. [Kissing her]

Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade

Justice to break her sword! One more, one more!

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,

And love thee after. One more, and this the last!

So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,

But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly;

It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.

DESDEMONA: Who's there? Othello?

OTHELLO: Ay, Desdemona.

DESDEMONA: Will you come to bed, my lord?

OTHELLO: Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?

DESDEMONA: Ay, my lord.

OTHELLO: If you bethink yourself of any crime

Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,

Solicit for it straight.

DESDEMONA: Alas, my lord, what do you mean by that?

OTHELLO: Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by [nearby].

I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.

No, heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul.

DESDEMONA: Talk you of killing?

OTHELLO: Ay, I do.

DESDEMONA: Then heaven

Have mercy on me!

OTHELLO: Amen, with all my heart!

DESDEMONA: If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.

OTHELLO: Hum!

DESDEMONA: And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then

When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not,

Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear.

OTHELLO: Think on thy sins.

DESDEMONA: They are loves I bear to you.

OTHELLO: Ay, and for that thou diest.

DESDEMONA: That death's unnatural that kills for loving.

Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?

Some bloody passion shakes your very frame.

These are portents; but yet I hope, I hope,

They do not point on me.

OTHELLO: Peace, and be still!

DESDEMONA: I will so. What's the matter?

OTHELLO: That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee

Thou gavest to Cassio.

DESDEMONA: No, by my life and soul!

Send for the man, and ask him.

OTHELLO: Sweet soul, take heed,

Take heed of perjury; thou art on thy deathbed.

DESDEMONA: Ay, but not yet to die.

OTHELLO: Yes, presently [immediately].

Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin;

For to deny each article with oath

Cannot remove nor choke the strong conception

That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.

DESDEMONA: Then Lord have mercy on me!

OTHELLO: I say, amen.

DESDEMONA: And have you mercy too! I never did

Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio

But with such general warranty [allowance] of heaven

As I might love. I never gave him token.

OTHELLO: By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in 's hand. O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart, And mak’st me call what I intend to do A murder, which I thought a sacrifice. I saw the handkerchief.

DESDEMONA ; He found it then.

I never gave it him. Send for him hither.

Let him confess a truth.

OTHELLO: He hath confessed.

DESDEMONA: What, my lord?

OTHELLO: That he hath used thee.

DESDEMONA: How? Unlawfully?

OTHELLO: Ay.

DESDEMONA: He will not say so.

OTHELLO: No, his mouth is stopped.

Honest Iago hath ta'en order for't [made sure of it].

DESDEMONA: O! my fear interprets. What, is he dead?

OTHELLO: Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge

Had stomach [appetite] for them all.

DESDEMONA: Alas! he is betrayed and I undone.

OTHELLO: Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?

DESDEMONA: O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!

OTHELLO: Down, strumpet!

DESDEMONA: Kill me tomorrow. Let me live to-night!

OTHELLO: Nay, if you strive --

DESDEMONA: But half an hour!

OTHELLO: Being done, there is no pause.

DESDEMONA: But while I say one prayer!

OTHELLO: It is too late.

This scene stands in sharp contrast to Iago’s triumph in the previous scene. When we last saw Othello briefly in that previous scene, he was talking about murder, mayhem and blood. Now he is filled with a calm determination; he is still going to kill his wife, but his rationale has changed. The whole tone is different. If we were to envision Othello and Iago reviewing the events of this last scene, we could imagine Iago exultant because he had made Othello kill Desdemona; but Othello could counter that his reasons for killing her are now his own, not Iago’s. They are philosophical reasons, much closer to the sense of spiritual grandeur that first attracted Desdemona to Othello. The tone of the scene is also different: rather than frantic scrambling in a dark street, Othello’s actions here are almost monumental.

Othello enters steeling himself for what he has to do, using that same pattern of repetition he has used throughout the play at dramatic moments: It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars. It is the cause. Compared that with She swore in faith ‘twas strange, ‘twas passing strange; ‘twas pitiful, ‘twas wondrous pitiful from Act I, scene 3. He is not driven to tear her all to pieces as he had been earlier. He makes a point of saying at line 3 Yet I'll not shed her blood, nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, and smooth as monumental alabaster. What we get here and throughout this sequence is a conflict of feelings: he intends to kill his wife, but he loves her so much he will not inflict physical damage! The sensual imagery of Desdemona’s body contrasts with the implied violence of the opening lines. At line 6 Othello reveals his motives for going ahead with a murder he is clearly ambivalent about: Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. So rather than being about his personal revenge, Othello has shifted to killing her as an act of protecting mankind from her betrayal.

As Othello stands holding a candle to behold his wife for the last time at line 7 he is struck by a parallel, a kind of physical metaphor:

Put out the light, and then put out the light.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister [worker],

I can again thy former light restore,

Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,

Thou cunning'st [most intricate] pattern of excelling nature,

I know not where is that Promethean heat [divine fire]

That can thy light relume [relight].

Othello is not the first person to see the similarity between putting out a candle and snuffing out a life, but no one ever did it with more eloquence. In the previous scene Roderigo had contemplated the killing of Cassio saying, ‘Tis but a man gone. Othello contemplates the same thing and sees all the implications of the finality of that action. He can put out the candle, but he can also light it again; he cannot find the Promethean heat to bring his dead wife back to life. (Prometheus was the ancient Greek figure of mythology who gave humans the gift of fire, for which he was punished by the gods.) Othello uses a second comparison at line 13: When I have plucked the rose, I cannot give it vital [living] growth again. Thinking about his wife as a flower leads him to smell the blossom before he picks it, and that in turn leads him to kiss her for the last time.

I'll smell it on the tree. [Kissing her]

Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade

Justice to break her sword! One more, one more!

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,

And love thee after. One more, and this the last!

So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,

But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly;

It strikes where it doth love.

This is a real poignant passage, showing his conflicted feelings. There is a religious overtone, because the belief in the Renaissance, among a group who called themselves the Neo-Platonists, was that the closest we could come to another person’s ideal soul was through their breath. Othello and Desdemona had begun their love with religious intensity; at the end he tries to recreate that connection. If Iago witnessed this expression of love on the part of the murderer for his victim, he would dismiss it: “Dead is dead; I win!” Whether Othello’s feelings at this point make his actions in any way different from Iago’s depends on the reaction of the audience.

Kissing his wife awakens her. Once he begins to question and accuse her and hears her denials, Othello loses his lofty perspective and begins to feel rage once again. The pace of the scene increases as we get the rapid question and response pattern of his accusations. At line 26 he warns her: If you bethink yourself of any crime unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace, solicit for it straight, and then adds in a few lines, I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. No, heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul. She realizes what is about to happen to her. At line 38 she denies any guilt: Why I should fear I know not, since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear. When he assures her she must die, she counters at line 42: That death's unnatural that kills for loving. Desdemona can tell from her husband’s physical reactions – he’s gnawing his lower, nether, lip, rolling his eyes and shaking all over – that he is filled with passion.

At line 47 he finally confronts her over the handkerchief. She denies she gave it to Cassio, demanding that Othello bring the lieutenant in for questioning. In response he warns her against perjury. Throughout this scene Othello is concerned about the fate of his wife’s soul: if she commits the mortal sin of lying upon her death bed, she will be condemned to everlasting hell. As she persists in her resistance, he complains at line 63,

O perjured woman! Thou dost stone my heart, and mak’st me call what I intend to do a murder, which I thought a sacrifice. Again we get a glimpse of Othello’s efforts to cast this horrible event in religious terms. He is killing the wrong person, but he sees his motives as above reproach.

At line 71 after Othello tells his wife Cassio has confessed to using her unlawfully, he explains why the adulterer cannot deny it: his mouth is stopped. Honest Iago hath ta'en order for't [made sure of it]. Desdemona’s reaction is immediate and heartfelt at line 76: Alas! he is betrayed and I undone. She undoubtedly would have had the same reaction if her husband told her Iago or Emilia were dead – she is just an empathetic, generous person, but her husband sees it as more evidence of her illicit love: Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face? In her final moments Desdemona tries to bargain with her murderer, pleading to be banished rather than killed. Then she begs to be allowed to live through the night, but half an hour and finally while I say one prayer. Othello dismisses her pleas: Being done, there is no pause. (He is referring here to his having made the decision – there’s no turning back or delay.) His final words are It is too late as he smothers her. If only he waited for a few seconds!

In the next sequence we watch Othello’s reaction to Emilia’s discovery of his wife’s death. Why doesn’t he deny that he did it? Desdemona will momentarily revive. What is so significant about her dying words? Finally, notice how Emilia gradually realizes her husband’s part in the plot. [Act V, scene 2, line 83 – 164]

EMILIA: [Within] My lord , my lord! What, ho! my lord, my lord!

OTHELLO: What noise is this? Not dead? Not yet quite dead?

I that am cruel am yet merciful;

I would not have thee linger in thy pain.

So, so. [Smothers her again]

EMILIA: [Within] What, ho! My lord, my lord!

OTHELLO: Who's there?

EMILIA: [Within] O, good my lord, I would speak a word with you!

OTHELLO: Yes, 'tis Emilia -- By and by. -- She's dead --

'Tis like she comes to speak of Cassio's death.

The noise was high [loud]. Ha! No more moving?

Still as the grave. -- Shall she come in? Were't good? --

I think she stirs again.-No -- What's best to do?

If she come in, she'll sure speak to my wife.

My wife! My wife! What wife? I have no wife.

O insupportable! O heavy hour!

Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse

Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe

Should yawn [gape open] at alteration.

EMILIA: [Within] I do beseech you

That I may speak with you, O, good my lord!

OTHELLO: I had forgot thee. O, come in, Emilia.

Soft; by and by. -- Let me the curtains draw. –[Closes bed curtains]

Where art thou? [Unlocks the door] [Enter EMILIA]

What's the matter with thee now?

EMILIA: O, my good lord, yonder's foul murders done!

OTHELLO: What? Now?

EMILIA: But now, my lord.

OTHELLO: It is the very error of the moon.

She comes more nearer earth than she was wont,

And makes men mad.

EMILIA: Cassio, my lord, hath killed a young Venetian

Called Roderigo.

OTHELLO: Roderigo killed?

And Cassio killed?

EMILIA: No, Cassio is not killed.

OTHELLO: Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune,

And sweet revenge grows harsh.

DESDEMONA: [Awakens] O, falsely, falsely murdered!

EMILIA: O Lord! What cry is that?

OTHELLO: That? What?

EMILIA: Out, and alas! that was my lady's voice.

Help! Help, ho! Help! O lady, speak again!

Sweet Desdemona! O sweet mistress, speak!

DESDEMONA: A guiltless death I die.

EMILIA: O, who hath done this deed?

DESDEMONA: Nobody -- I myself. Farewell.

Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell! [She dies]

OTHELLO: Why, how should she be murdered?

EMILIA: Alas, who knows?

OTHELLO: You heard her say herself, it was not I.

EMILIA: She said so. I must needs report the truth.

OTHELLO: She's, like a liar, gone to burning hell!

'Twas I that killed her.

EMILIA: O, the more angel she,

And you the blacker devil!

OTHELLO: She turned to folly, and she was a whore.

EMILIA: Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil.

OTHELLO: She was false as water.

EMILIA: Thou art rash as fire, to say

That she was false. O, she was heavenly true!

OTHELLO: Cassio did top her; ask thy husband else.

O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell,

But that I did proceed upon just grounds

To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all.

EMILIA: My husband?

OTHELLO: Thy husband.

EMILIA: That she was false to wedlock?

OTHELLO: Ay, with Cassio. Nay, had she been true,

If heaven would make me such another world

Of one entire and perfect chrysolite [topaz],

I'd not have sold her for it.

EMILIA: My husband?

OTHELLO: Ay, 'twas he that told me first.

An honest man he is, and hates the slime

That sticks on filthy deeds.

EMILIA: My husband?

OTHELLO: What needs this iteration, woman? I say thy husband.

EMILIA: O mistress, villainy hath made mocks with love!

My husband say that she was false?

OTHELLO: He, woman.

I say thy husband. Dost understand the word?

My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago.

EMILIA: If he say so, may his pernicious soul

Rot half a grain a day! He lies to the heart.

She was too fond of her most filthy bargain.

OTHELLO: Hah?

EMILIA: Do thy worst.

This deed of thine is no more worthy heaven

Than thou wast worthy her.

OTHELLO: Peace, you were best.

EMILIA: Thou hast not half that power to do me harm

As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!

As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed-- [He draws his sword]

I care not for thy sword. I'll make thee known,

Though I lost twenty lives. Help! Help, Ho! Help!

The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder! murder!

The simple device which propels the tension at the beginning of this scene is having a knock at the door. Emilia’s urgent request to be let in is like the whole outside world demanding to enter that bedroom and discover the truth. Othello thought somehow the murder of his wife would have no repercussions; he is about to learn the truth. It takes Othello a long time to work through what he is going to do as she insistently knocks and calls. At one point he wonders, What’s best to do? and realizes that if she does come in she’ll speak to Desdemona. Then the realization hits him at line 96: My wife! My wife! What wife? I have no wife. Although just moments before he had been driven to kill Desdemona, now he wonders if her death has disrupted the natural order of the universe, resulting in a huge eclipse of the sun and moon and the frightened earth yawning at the alteration. Shakespeare’s audience believed that the larger universe, the macrocosm, responded to and reflected events at the human level, the microcosm. In the universal scope of this sentence we can hear the regret which Othello already feels. He also alludes to the cosmic connections at line 108 when he offers an explanation for the mayhem in the streets below: It is the very error of the moon. She comes more nearer earth than she was wont, and makes men mad. The moon, or “Luna,” has wandered out of its orbit and come too close to earth, turning men into “lunatics.”

He closes the curtains on the four-poster bed where his wife’s body lies and lets Emilia in the room. She tells him of Roderigo’s death, but when he learns Cassio was not killed, at line 114, he blurts out, Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune, and sweet revenge grows harsh. Othello makes no secret of his feelings now that Desdemona is dead. Behind the curtains Desdemona suddenly revives, calling out that she has been falsely murdered. When the frantic Emilia asks who has done the deed, the loyal wife with her dying breath at line 123, clears her husband: Nobody -- I myself. Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell! It’s a remarkable act, given what Othello has done, made all the more remarkable because, at least in Othello’s eyes she has committed a mortal sin by lying. Othello toys with the idea of using his wife’s story as an alibi for about three lines and then blurts out the truth at line 128: She's, like a liar, gone to burning hell! 'Twas I that killed her.

Emilia speaks for the wronged Desdemona at line 129: O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil! She invokes those negative images of black people as devils we had discussed in the introduction, but now Othello is a devil because of what he has done. She denies Desdemona’s guilt and asserts Othello’s demonic connection again at line 132. Then at line 135 the whole house of cards comes tumbling down as Othello explains the Iago connection:

Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband else.

O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell,

But that I did proceed upon just grounds

To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all.

This is the first time Othello has told anyone else of Iago’s part in the story. Emilia is so shocked all she can do is repeat the line My husband? How many times does she repeat the question? Othello defends his action, saying at line 140 that if Desdemona had been loyal to him, he would not have given a jewel, one entire and perfect chrysolite, the size of the earth for her. Othello is perplexed by Emilia’s incredulity, describing Iago as an honest man, who hates the slime that sticks on filthy deeds. Finally her repeated question, iterance, gets to him and at line 149 he insists, He, woman. I say thy husband. Dost understand the word? My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago. Iago now merits a double “honest” from Othello. Emilia sees the light at line 152: If he say so, may his pernicious soul rot half a grain a day! He lies to the heart. She was too fond of her most filthy bargain. Iago’s own wife rejects his story and condemns her husband, giving Othello one more shot, as Desdemona’s filthy bargain. It’s interesting that Shakespeare has Emilia return to these negative identifications of Othello as the Black Devil here at the end of the play, now that his actions have, in a sense, lowered him to this level. She insults him repeatedly, calling him a gull. (He is little better than Roderigo in some ways.) She blasts him at line 160 with as ignorant as dirt. When Othello draws his sword to threaten her, she defies him and cries out loudly that the Moor hath killed my mistress.

In the next sequence the truth continues to spill out, despite Iago’s efforts to keep it hidden, leading him to kill Emilia. Why does Iago, at this critical moment, admit to his plot? Why doesn’t Othello try to escape from custody when he has a chance? [Act V, scene 2, lines 165 – 279]

[Enter MONTANO, GRATIANO, IAGO, and others]

MONTANO: What is the matter? How now, general!

EMILIA: O, are you come, Iago? You have done well,

That men must lay their murders on your neck.

GRATIANO: What is the matter?

EMILIA: Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man.

He says thou told'st him that his wife was false.

I know thou didst not; thou'rt not such a villain.

Speak, for my heart is full.

IAGO: I told him what I thought, and told no more

Than what he found himself was apt and true.

EMILIA: But did you ever tell him she was false?

IAGO: I did.

EMILIA: You told a lie, an odious, damned lie!

Upon my soul, a lie! A wicked lie!

She false with Cassio? Did you say with Cassio?

IAGO: With Cassio, mistress. Go to, charm [control] your tongue.

EMILIA: I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak.

My mistress here lies murdered in her bed.

ALL: O heavens forfend!

EMILIA: And your reports have set the murder on.

OTHELLO: Nay, stare not, masters. It is true, indeed.

GRATIANO: 'Tis a strange truth.

MONTANO: O monstrous act!

EMILIA: Villainy, villainy, villainy!

I think upon't -- I think, I smell 't -- O villainy!

I thought so then. -- I'll kill myself for grief. --

O villainy, villainy!

IAGO: What, are you mad? I charge you, get you home.

EMILIA: Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak.

'Tis proper I obey him, but not now.

Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.

OTHELLO: O! O! O! [He falls on the bed]

EMILIA: Nay, lay thee down and roar;

For thou hast killed the sweetest innocent

That e'er did lift up eye.

OTHELLO: [Rising] O, she was foul!

I scarce did know you, uncle. There lies your niece,

Whose breath, indeed, these hands have newly stopped.

I know this act shows horrible and grim.

GRATIANO: Poor Desdemona! I am glad thy father's dead.

Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief

Shore his old thread in twain. Did he live now,

This sight would make him do a desperate turn;

Yea, curse his better angel from his side,

And fall to reprobation [damnation].

OTHELLO: 'Tis pitiful; but yet Iago knows

That she with Cassio hath the act of shame

A thousand times committed. Cassio confessed it;

And she did gratify his amorous works

With that recognizance and pledge of love

Which I first gave her. I saw it in his hand.

It was a handkerchief, an antique token

My father gave my mother.

EMILIA: O heaven! O heavenly powers!

IAGO: Come, hold your peace.

EMILIA: 'Twill out, 'twill out. I peace!

No, I will speak as liberal as the north [

Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,

All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.

IAGO: Be wise, and get you home.

EMILIA: I will not. [IAGO threatens EMILIA]

GRATIANO: Fie! Your sword upon a woman?

EMILIA: O thou dull Moor! That handkerchief thou speak'st of

I found by fortune and did give my husband;

For often, with a solemn earnestness,

More than indeed belonged to such a trifle,

He begged of me to steal it.

IAGO: Villainous whore!

EMILIA: She give it Cassio? No, alas! I found it,

And I did give 't my husband.

IAGO: Filth, thou liest!

EMILIA: By heaven, I do not, I do not, gentlemen.

O murderous coxcomb! What should such a fool

Do with so good a woman?

OTHELLO: Are there no stones in heaven

But what serve for the thunder? Precious villain!

[He runs at IAGO; IAGO, from behind, stabs EMILIA, and exit]

GRATIANO: The woman falls. Sure, he hath killed his wife.

EMILIA: Ay, ay: O, lay me by my mistress' side.

GRATIANO: He's gone, but his wife's killed.

MONTANO: 'Tis a notorious villain. Take you this weapon,

Which I have here recovered from the Moor:

Come, guard the door without. Let him not pass,

But kill him rather. I'll after that same villain,

For 'tis a damned slave. [Exit all but OTHELLO, EMILIA]

OTHELLO: I am not valiant neither,

But every puny whipster [boy whipping a top] gets my sword:

But why should honor outlive honesty?

Let it go all.

EMILIA: What did thy song bode, lady?

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan,

And die in music. [Singing] “Willow, willow, willow.”

Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor;

So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true.

So speaking as I think, alas, I die. [Dies]

OTHELLO: I have another weapon in this chamber;

It is a sword of Spain, the ice-brook's temper.

O, here it is.-- Uncle, I must come forth.

GRATIANO: [Within] If thou attempt it, it will cost thee dear:

Thou hast no weapon, and perforce must suffer.

OTHELLO: Look in upon me then and speak with me,

Or, naked as I am, I will assault thee. [Re-enter GRATIANO]

GRATIANO: What is the matter?

OTHELLO: Behold, I have a weapon;

A better never did itself sustain

Upon a soldier's thigh. I have seen the day,

That, with this little arm and this good sword,

I have made my way through more impediments

Than twenty times your stop. But, O vain boast!

Who can control his fate? 'Tis not so now.

Be not afraid, though you do see me weaponed.

Here is my journey's end, here is my butt [target],

And very sea-mark of my utmost sail [marker of furthest voyage].

Do you go back dismayed? 'Tis a lost fear.

Man but a rush [attack with only a rush] against Othello's breast,

And he retires. Where should Othello go?

Now, how dost thou look now? O ill-starred wench!

Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt [Judgment Day],

This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,

And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl?

Even like thy chastity.

O cursed slave! Whip me, ye devils,

From the possession of this heavenly sight!

Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!

Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!

O Desdemona! Desdemona! dead! O! O!

At the beginning of this sequence, around line 165, more of the outside world comes into the bedroom with the arrival of Gratiano, Montano and Iago. Emilia has already started to figure everything out, and she confronts her husband, demanding to know if he told Othello that Desdemona was an adulteress. Iago faces a dilemma at line 173: he could just deny everything, claiming that Othello is a crazed epileptic and violent spousal abuser who is imagining things. In other words he could use that escape hatch he has been carefully constructing throughout the play. But he chooses to deny nothing: I told him what I thought, and told no more than what he found himself was apt and true. Emilia asks him directly if he said Desdemona was unfaithful and he says yes. Why? In part he’s gone too far to escape at this point. The handkerchief is bound to come out; all the various lies will come back to bite him. But he tries to bluff it out. As Emilia becomes more insistent in her demands, Iago tries to reassert his old command as the husband. He tells her to shut up, to go home, to get out of there. Things have gone too far, and Emilia reveals Desdemona’s body behind the curtain. At line 187 she makes an interesting admission:

Villainy, villainy, villainy!

I think upon't -- I think, I smell 't -- O villainy!

I thought so then. -- I'll kill myself for grief. --

O villainy, villainy!

At some point she suspected something, probably back in Act IV when she guessed that some villain had filled Othello’s mind with lies. She is so overwhelmed with regret she considers killing herself. When Iago orders her to get home, Emilia, at line 192, asks for permission from the other men present to disobey her husband: 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now. Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home. This is Emilia’s first and last action as an independent, self-respecting person.

Even before she reveals the full truth, Othello anticipates what he will hear, cries out and falls to the floor. Emilia tells him at line 195, Nay, lay thee down and roar; for thou hast killed the sweetest innocent that e'er did lift up eye. He once more asserts her guilt, as if he must now defend his mistake. He recognizes Gratiano as Desdemona’s uncle and acknowledges her body and his complicity. We learn that Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, has died of a broken heart over the marriage. (Often at the end of Shakespearean tragedies we learn that relatives we met earlier have died; it is almost as if the pall of the coming tragedy has affected many more people than just the principals.) Othello at line 207 goes through the charge in more detail and mentions the handkerchief. Emilia finally sees the light at line 215: O heaven! O heavenly powers! She finally reveals her connection to the handkerchief, despite her husband’s profane oath, Zounds, and order for her to get out: Be wise, and get you home. When a verbal warning doesn’t work, Iago starts to draw his sword to stop his wife.

She warns Iago what is about to come out at line 217: 'Twill out, 'twill out. I peace! No, I will speak as liberal as the north! Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, all, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak. “As liberal as the north” refers to the cold, biting wind out of the north which will now sweep all the deception away. Finally, at line 222 she tells Othello the truth about the handkerchief, without any attempt to excuse her own culpability and making it clear that Iago had begged her to steal the linen. She has no love for Othello and makes her revelation as painful as possible for him at line 230: O murderous coxcomb! What should such a fool do with so good a woman? For his part Othello’s grief from this point on becomes almost cosmic. As he asks at line 231, Are there no stones in heaven but what serve for the thunder? Folklore in those days was that thunder was the sound of the gods rolling celestial boulders down the hills of heaven. Othello seeks some kind of divine retribution, but he also tries at this point to rush Iago. In the resulting confusion, Iago stabs Emilia fatally and escapes.

Othello is disarmed and placed under guard, Here the great soldier has been subdued by men who are hardly his equals (puny whipsters), and yet he realizes that he has so lost his identity as a warrior that it is only appropriate (why should honor outlive honesty?) The dying Emilia asks to be placed on the bed with Desdemona and does a little snatch of the “Willow Song.” With her dying breath she too assures Othello his wife was faithful, the second person whose dying words have validated Desdemona’s innocence. Othello reacts as a soldier, locating another sword, and seeks to challenge Gratiano who is guarding the bedroom. But as soon as he issues the challenge, at line 261, he realizes he is not going anywhere: O vain boast! Who can control his fate? Othello at this moment comes to a realization of his tragic fate. He cannot escape from this bedroom of death because he cannot go anywhere else. As he says at line 264, Here is my journey's end, here is my butt [target], and very sea-mark of my utmost sail [marker of furthest voyage]. He uses three different metaphors here – journey’s end, as if his life to this point has been a trek to reach this destination; my butt, meaning the target used in archery, as if his life had been aimed at this moment; and sea-mark of my utmost voyage, again evoking the image of an arduous journey by sea, very similar to the images of sea travel Romeo used to talk about his love for Juliet. Othello finally addresses his dead wife at line 272: Cold, cold my girl, even like thy chastity. This use of colloquial speech addressed to a dead lover also recalls the language used by Juliet to the dead Romeo in the tomb. He calls for divine retribution on his own head:

Whip me, ye devils,

From the possession of this heavenly sight!

Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!

Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!

These are images associated with the different views of hell in the Christian tradition. Othello is prepared for his punishment.

In the final sequence of this scene, notice how Othello moves from absolute despair to some kind of tragic nobility. If the play is going to work, we must come to view him as a worthy human being, whose suffering and death somehow ennoble the human condition. Otherwise, the play belongs to Iago; he wins. [Act V, scene 2, lines 279 – 367]

[Enter LODOVICO. MONTANO, CASSIO carried in a chair, and Officers with IAGO, prisoner]

LODOVICO: Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?

OTHELLO: That's he that was Othello. Here I am.

LODOVICO: Where is that viper? Bring the villain forth.

OTHELLO: I look down towards his feet [Satan’s cloven feet] but that's a fable.

If that thou best a devil, I cannot kill thee. [Wounds IAGO]

LODOVICO: Wrench his sword from him.

IAGO: I bleed, sir; but not killed.

OTHELLO: I am not sorry neither. I'd have thee live;

For, in my sense, 'tis happiness to die.

LODOVICO: O thou Othello, thou wert once so good,

Fall'n in the practice [deceit] of a damned slave,

What shall be said to thee?

OTHELLO: Why, anything:

An honorable murderer, if you will;

For nought I did in hate, but all in honor.

LODOVICO: This wretch hath part confessed his villainy.

Did you and he consent in Cassio's death?

OTHELLO: Ay.

CASSIO: Dear general, I never gave you cause.

OTHELLO: I do believe it, and I ask your pardon.

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil

Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

IAGO: Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.

From this time forth I never will speak word.

LODOVICO: What, not to pray?

GRATIANO: Torments will ope your lips.

OTHELLO: Well, thou dost best.

LODOVICO: Sir, you shall understand what hath befall'n,

Which, as I think, you know not. Here is a letter

Found in the pocket of the slain Roderigo;

And here another. The one of them imports

The death of Cassio to be undertook

By Roderigo.

OTHELLO: O villain!

CASSIO: Most heathenish and most gross!

LODOVICO: Now here's another discontented paper,

Found in his pocket too; and this, it seems,

Roderigo meant to have sent this damned villain;

But that belike Iago in the interim

Came in and satisfied him.

OTHELLO: O the pernicious caitiff!

How came you, Cassio, by that handkerchief

That was my wife's?

CASSIO: I found it in my chamber:

And he himself confessed but even now

That there he dropped it for a special purpose

Which wrought to his desire.

OTHELLO: O fool! Fool! Fool!

CASSIO: There is besides in Roderigo's letter,

How he upbraids Iago, that he made him

Brave me upon the watch; whereon it came

That I was cast; and even but now he spake,

After long seeming dead -- Iago hurt him,

Iago set him on.

LODOVICO: You must forsake this room, and go with us.

Your power and your command is taken off,

And Cassio rules in Cyprus. For this slave,

If there be any cunning cruelty

That can torment him much and hold him long,

It shall be his. You shall close prisoner rest,

Till that the nature of your fault be known

To the Venetian state. Come, bring him away.

OTHELLO: Soft you; a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know't.

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely but too well;

Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought

Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,

Albeit unused to the melting mood,

Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by the throat the circumcised dog,

And smote him, thus. [Stabs himself]

LODOVICO: O bloody period [end]!

GRATIANO: All that's spoke is marred.

OTHELLO: I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,

Killing myself, to die upon a kiss. [Falls on the bed, and dies]

CASSIO: This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon;

For he was great of heart.

LODOVICO: [To IAGO] O Spartan dog,

More fell [cruel] than anguish, hunger, or the sea!

Look on the tragic loading of this bed. This is This is thy work. The object poisons sight;

Let it be hid. [Bed curtains drawn]

Gratiano, keep the house,

And seize upon the fortunes of the Moor,

For they succeed on you. To you, lord governor,

Remains the censure of this hellish villain;

The time, the place, the torture: O, enforce it!

Myself will straight aboard, and to the State

This heavy act with heavy heart relate.

It is in this final sequence that the critical issue of Othello as a tragic hero is finally resolved. If the play is successful (and in performance this play succeeds only about half the time), the audiences come to feel that despite the murder of his wife Othello finally triumphs over Iago. Otherwise we react, “Well, dead is dead and Iago wins.” Let me now show how Shakespeare tilts the text in Othello’s favor.

At line 279 when Lodovico comes in and asks for this rash and most unfortunate man, Othello answers, That’s he that was Othello. He has lost his former identity. At line 282 Othello makes a strange observation: I look down towards his feet [Satan’s cloven feet] but that's a fable. If that thou best a devil, I cannot kill thee. As your footnote makes clear, Othello is reacting as if Iago were Satan himself with cloven feet, like the hooves of an animal. Even as he dismisses that as a myth, the Moor tries to kill the villain with a knife or sword, claiming that he is testing another fable: that Satan, as a fallen angel, cannot be killed. The wounded Iago grimly offers validation of the story by taunting Othello, I bleed, sir, but not killed. Othello says he’s glad Iago lives, because he thinks death would be a relief. Lodovico cannot believe that Othello has allowed himself to be tricked by Iago, fallen in the practice of a cursed slave. What is to be said to thee? Othello’s answer to that question at line 289 shows us some the recapturing of the hero’s former nobility: Why, anything: An honorable murderer, if you will; for nought I did in hate, but all in honor. Othello makes clear his motives for his wife’s murder, as awful as that is, are not Iago’s motives. We also see him recapturing that calmness of spirit he exhibited in the opening lines of this scene.

At line 297 Othello now asks the key question of Iago, not directly, but through those present: Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body? It is understandable that Othello at this point would think of Iago as a minor demon, demi-devil, but I have emphasized throughout these remarks that Iago’s evil is made up of a lot of ordinary badness. Iago is on the spot – he’s killed his wife and Roderigo, engineered the death of Desdemona, attempted to murder Cassio and driven Othello crazy. Why did he do all these awful things? Iago says to everyone on stage and to us, Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word. Now we can see this as the ultimate act of defiance, the actions of a man so perverse and evil he will not give any of his surviving victims the satisfaction of knowing his motives, even as he faces a horrible death. The other way to view this answer is to see it as Iago’s inability to understand himself why he did what he did. What could he answer? “Well, I didn’t get a job I should have.” That doesn’t explain all the bloodshed. “I thought Othello slept with my wife.” That just sounds dumb in these circumstances. “Cassio made me feel uncomfortable because he’s so good-looking and speaks well.” For this you killed or tried to kill five people, plus endangering your own life? In Shakespeare’s day the authorities would have put him on the rack and stretched him till he told all. In fact that’s exactly what Gratiano promises they will do at line 302: Torments will ope your lips. Will he ever be able to give an explanation that will justify all he has done? I don’t think so. So he will keep offering lame excuses and his torturers will keep tightening the rack in exquisite agony because they won’t believe him. Back in Act I, scene 3, at line 324 he was describing to Roderigo the importance of reason in the human will as a means to help us balance our lives so that blood and baseness of our natures would not conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. Iago has allowed himself to get caught up in his own nightmare of blood and baseness.

The loose ends are quickly tied up. Roderigo was apparently carrying a number of letters which reveal his and Iago’s part in the conspiracy. Roderigo has survived long enough to confess all the details and tell about how Iago murdered him. Othello and Cassio are reconciled and the mystery of the handkerchief is finally cleared up. Lodovico, as the representative of the Venetian State, takes charge, putting Cassio in command of Cyprus and the punishment of Iago and telling Othello he will be a prisoner until the authorities back home decide what to do with him.

That brings us to Othello’s long speech at line 334. As he faces his own imminent death he tries to reclaim his previous nobility and reputation: I have done the state some service, and they know't. No more of that. He will not try and coast by on his former glories. He pleads with those present to be even-handed in telling his story:

I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice.

Othello has always been concerned about his reputation, and he is still at this point. He offers a possible explanation for his fall from grace at line 339:

Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely but too well;

Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought

Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,

Albeit unused to the melting mood,

Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum.

Othello’s loss of faith in his wife’s love was more complex than simply saying he loved not wisely but too well. As we know there were a lot of different factors that went into what happened, but this is an eloquent and concise equation. He was indeed wrought or worked on in the extreme by Iago. Othello then gives us two wonderful comparisons which recall his exotic background. The story of the Indian who unwittingly threw away a rich jewel apparently appeared in some of the travel accounts of that day. It’s an apt way of describing what he has done with the thing most precious to him. As a result of his terrible loss he weeps as fast as the trees of Arabia which drip a resin, probably myrrh, which was used as a medicine. Now Othello has come to his final act. He recalls one of those great heroic deeds which helped earn him his reputation and his exalted rank. It is appropriately an act tinged with religious significance when he confronted an infidel, a non-believer, in a Moslem stronghold. He witnessed a malignant and turbaned Turk in the old Syrian trade center of Aleppo at the heart of the Ottoman Empire beating a Venetian Christian and traducing, insulting, Venice. Othello took the Turk and killed him with his sword, and the tragic hero commits suicide in the same way now, re-enacting that blow for Christianity by killing himself as if he were the enemy.

Othello dies with a romantic gesture at line 354: I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, killing myself, to die upon a kiss. He addresses his dead wife and reminds us that he had indeed kissed Desdemona before he killed her. He takes her in a final embrace and dies upon the bed which now contains three bodies. As in Romeo and Juliet we get that intertwining of the romance and death. On Shakespeare’s stage the corpse-laden bed was probably pulled back into the inner stage and hidden behind the curtains. At line 358 Iago is called Spartan dog; the hunting hounds of ancient Sparta were especially ferocious. He is also compared to the cruelty of anguish, hunger or the sea and told to look upon his handiwork. One wonders what passes through his mind. Lodovico, the ranking civilian present, takes care of restoring order, bestowing Othello’s belongings on Gratiano, Desdemona’s uncle, and reaffirming Cassio’s command in Cyprus. As I said it is what Othello believes and articulates in this final scene, over and above his killing of Desdemona, that set him apart from Iago in the end. It is a challenge for director, actor and audience of this great Shakespearean tragedy.

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