

Othello



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From the eleventh to the fifteenth century, Catholics battled to re-conquer Spain from the Islamic Arabs and Berbers, or Moors, who had successfully occupied it since the 900s. The struggle inspired intense prejudice and suspicion that lasted well after the Moors were overthrown. Philip III of Spain expelled 300,000 "Moriscos" from the Iberian (Spanish) peninsula not long after Shakespeare finished *Othello*, in 1609. In England during Shakespeare's time, views regarding "Moors" were slightly more complex because of strong anti-Catholic sentiment in England and English fears of invasion by the Spanish. In fact, England maintained independent trade relationships with "Moorish" Northern Africa, despite Spanish and Portuguese protest. The English slave trade also brought blacks to Europe, from mid-sixteenth century onward. Queen Elizabeth herself founded The Barbary Company, formally institutionalizing this trade; in addition, she received a delegation of Moroccan diplomats in 1600. However, the English still felt a strong suspicion of Islam: Elizabeth issued a degree expelling Moors from Africa and Spanish "Moriscos" from the boundary of England in 1599 and 1601.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shakespeare's primary source for *Othello* was *Un capitano moro* ("A Moorish Captain"), one of one hundred short stories in the collection *Gli Hecatommithi*, published by the Italian, Cinthio. Cinthio's story provides the backbone for Shakespeare's plot, although Shakespeare introduces some minor new characters (such as Brabantio and Roderigo) and other alterations—for instance, in Cinthio's version, Iago's motive for revenge against Othello is that he formerly loved and was rejected by Desdemona. There are also similarities between *Othello*, "A Moorish Captain," and a story by the name of "The Three

Apples" narrated by Scheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*
- **When Written:** c. 1603
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1622
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance
- **Genre:** Tragedy
- **Setting:** Venice and Cyprus
- **Climax:** The murder of Desdemona, by Othello
- **Antagonist:** Iago

EXTRA CREDIT

Moor or less? In Elizabethan England, the term "Moor" could be used to refer to a wide range of non-European persons, including black Africans, North Africans, Arabs, and even Indians. References to Othello's origins throughout the play are contradictory and ambiguous. Iago calls Othello a "Barbary horse" (1.1.110); Barbary was an area in Africa between Egypt and the Atlantic Ocean. Roderigo, however, calls him "thick-lips" (1.1.65-6), suggesting that he may come from further south on the African continent. Brabantio calls him "sooty" (1.2.70); Othello, along with numerous other characters, refers to himself as "black." It is impossible to know now exactly what Shakespeare or his audience would have thought a "Moor" is.



PLOT SUMMARY

In Venice, Roderigo complains to Iago that, despite the money he's given Iago to help him woo Desdemona, she's eloped with the Moorish general Othello. Iago responds that he too hates Othello, for whom he works as a standard-bearer: Othello chose Cassio, rather than Iago, to be his lieutenant. The two men go to the home of Desdemona's father, the senator Brabantio, and rouse him with graphic descriptions of his daughter having sex with the Moor. Brabantio, enraged, interrupts Othello as he receives an urgent message from the Duke of Venice, and accompanies Othello see the Duke. In front of the Duke, Brabantio accuses Othello of having used magic to seduce Desdemona. Othello responds that it was stories of his exciting life history and military bravery that won Desdemona. When summoned, Desdemona supports Othello's story. Brabantio grudgingly blesses the newlyweds. The Duke then sends Othello to lead a fleet of Venetians to defend

Cyprus from a Turkish attack. Desdemona accompanies him. Iago reassures Roderigo that he will still win Desdemona in the end, then privately admits that he's just using Roderigo for money while he plots his own revenge.

When the Venetians arrive in Cyprus, the governor Montano reports that a storm at sea has drowned the Turkish fleet, eliminating the military threat. Iago quickly hatches a plan to make Othello believe that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with either Cassio or Roderigo. That night, while Othello and Desdemona go to bed to consummate their marriage, Iago succeeds in getting Cassio drunk. He then goads Roderigo into provoking Cassio, starting a brawl. Disgusted, Othello demotes Cassio.

Meanwhile, Iago convinces Desdemona to try to get Othello to reinstate Cassio. Iago then uses Desdemona's requests that he be merciful to Cassio to make Othello suspect that Desdemona is cheating on him with Cassio. Othello, takes the bait, repeatedly praising Iago for his honesty. Later, when Desdemona accidentally drops a **handkerchief** that Othello had given to her as a love-token, Emilia gives it to Iago, who had long asked her to steal it for him. Iago then plants it in Cassio's room.

Othello, upset, demands that Iago show him proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Iago responds that he has heard Cassio fantasize lewdly about Desdemona in his sleep and that he has seen Cassio wipe his mouth with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello promotes Iago to the status of lieutenant and orders him to kill Cassio within three days. Othello then goes to Desdemona's room, and asks her for the handkerchief. Desdemona, who had been searching for the handkerchief, admits she can't find it. Othello storms off. Meanwhile, Cassio's mistress, the prostitute Bianca, comes to his quarters. Cassio asks her to make a copy of a handkerchief he's recently found in his room, because he admires it.

Iago continues to spur Othello's jealousy. When he reports that Cassio has admitted to sleeping with Desdemona, Othello falls into an epileptic fit. Iago urges Othello to hide while he questions Cassio about Desdemona. In fact, he asks Cassio about Bianca, causing Cassio to laugh. Watching from afar, Othello grows increasingly furious. Then, Bianca shows up, and throws Desdemona's handkerchief at Cassio, accusing him of having it from another whore. After Cassio and Bianca leave, Iago easily persuades Othello to kill Desdemona. Iago promises to take care of Cassio himself. He then convinces Roderigo that if Cassio were to die, Othello would have to remain in Cyprus, leaving Desdemona in Venice for Roderigo. Iago instructs Roderigo to wait outside Bianca's house that night and kill Cassio when he leaves.

That night, Iago sets Roderigo up to kill Cassio as planned. When Cassio exits Bianca's house, Roderigo attacks him; both are wounded. Overhearing Roderigo's cries for help, Othello believes that Cassio is dead and is impressed by Iago's loyalty.

Meanwhile, Iago goes to Bianca's; finding Cassio wounded, he stabs Roderigo, killing him (and thus assuring that his secret will not be revealed). Iago then calls the others, including Bianca, whom he arrests, accusing her of having conspired with Roderigo. While this is going on, Othello arrives at Desdemona's chamber. Enchanted by her beauty, he nonetheless resists her pleas to spare her life, and he smothers her with a pillow. Emilia arrives to tell Othello that Roderigo is dead and Cassio alive, when she hears Desdemona's dying cries.

When Emilia demands why Othello has killed Desdemona, Othello explains how Iago proved to him that Desdemona slept with Cassio. As Montano, Iago, and Gratiano, a relative of Brabantio's all arrive, Emilia accuses Iago of lying and explains that she stole this from Desdemona at her husband's behest. Othello attacks Iago. In the uproar, Iago stabs and kills Emilia, then flees. Montano and Gratiano disarm Othello, then chase down Iago. When he is dragged back in their custody, Othello wounds him before being disarmed again. Letters found on Roderigo's corpse reveal the full extent of Iago's plots; he himself refuses to explain himself. Othello draws a hidden dagger and, after a speech, kills himself.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Othello – A Christian Moor who has earned a high reputation as a general in the Venetian army and has recently married Desdemona, daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio. Othello is characterized by his plainspoken, honest (perhaps even naïve) nature, which, together with his status as an outsider, leaves him vulnerable to the plots of his standard-bearer, Iago, to make him suspect his loyal wife, Desdemona, of infidelity.

Iago – Othello's disloyal standard-bearer and the villain of the play. Angry at having been passed over by Othello for promotion to the rank of lieutenant, and also because he seems to enjoy creating mayhem for its own sake, Iago develops an intricate conspiracy to ruin Othello. He is married to Emilia.

Desdemona – The Daughter of the Venetian senator Brabantio. Having been charmed by Othello's tales of exotic lands and military exploits, Desdemona elopes with him before the play begins (although they do not consummate their marriage until they have received sanction from the Duke and, reluctantly, her father). Desdemona is a model wife, if perhaps too trusting of Iago. She follows Othello to Cyprus and shows constant loyalty to him, even to the moment of death, when he kills her on false suspicions that she has been unfaithful.

Michael Cassio – A young, charming, and handsome soldier, whom Othello promotes to the rank of lieutenant, over the more experienced Iago. Cassio is loyal to Othello and friendly

with Desdemona, though he's unkind to the prostitute Bianca, who seems to love him. While intelligent, he is not cunning, and Iago easily ensnares the unwitting Cassio in a plot to convince Othello that Desdemona has cheated on him with Cassio.

Brabantio – A senator in Venice and Desdemona's father. At first enraged by Desdemona's elopement with Othello, he does eventually grant a grudging blessing to their marriage. But his blessing never seems heartfelt, and he dies of grief shortly after their departure for Cyprus (and before any of the tragedies of the play occur).

Emilia – Iago's wife and Desdemona's friend and serving woman. Although Emilia is far less idealistic about marriage and the world in general than Desdemona is, she is loyal to her mistress. Though she steals Desdemona's **handkerchief** for Iago, she doesn't know else anything about Iago's plot. In fact, when she learns of his plot, she reveals Iago's duplicity, and he kills her for it.

Duke of Venice – The official authority in Venice, the Duke has great respect for Othello as a military man and, unlike the other residents of Venice, does not betray any racial prejudice against Othello and, in fact, is unsurprised that Desdemona fell in love with him. It is the Duke who sends Othello to lead the Venetian mission to defend Cyprus against the Turks.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Roderigo – A long-rejected suitor of Desdemona, who seeks to woo her with jewels through the Iago as. Like Othello, Roderigo trusts Iago and is duped by him. Otherwise, Roderigo shares none of Othello's noble characteristics.

Bianca – A prostitute in Cyprus, who expresses real affection for Cassio. He, however, only mocks her.

Lodovico – A relative of Brabantio's, Lodovico acts as an emissary, bringing letters from Venice to Cyprus. He is present on the island for the full unfolding of the tragedy.

Montana – The governor of Cyprus before Othello's arrival.

Graziano – A kinsman of Brabantio who accompanies Lodovico from Venice to Cyprus.

Clown – Othello's fool/servant. Although he appears in only two short scenes, his riddling language reflects Othello's own language as the Moor descends into jealous madness.



PREJUDICE

The most prominent form of prejudice on display in *Othello* is racial prejudice. In the very first scene, Roderigo and Iago disparage Othello in explicitly racial terms, calling him, among other things, "Barbary horse" and "thick lips." In nearly every case, the prejudiced characters use terms that describe Othello as an animal or beast. In other words, they use racist language to try to define Othello not only as an outsider to white Venetian society, but as being less human and therefore less deserving of respect. Othello himself seems to have internalized this prejudice. On a number of occasions he describes himself in similarly unflattering racial terms. And when he believes that he has lost his honor and manhood through Desdemona's supposed unfaithfulness, he quickly becomes the kind of un-rational animal or monster that the white Venetians accuse him of being.

Yet racial prejudice is not the only prejudice on display in *Othello*. Many characters in the play also exhibit misogyny, or hatred of women, primarily focused on women's honesty or dishonesty about their sexuality. Several times, Othello's age is also a reason for insulting him. In all of these cases, the characters displaying prejudice seek to control and define another person or group who frighten them. In other words, prejudice works as a kind of strategy to identify outsiders and insiders and to place yourself within the dominant group. And Othello himself seems to understand this—he concludes his suicide speech by boasting that he, a Christian, once killed a Muslim Turk, a "circumcised dog" (5.2.355) who had murdered a Venetian citizen. Othello tries to use religious prejudice against Muslims to cement his place within mainstream Christian Venetian society.



APPEARANCE VS. REALITY

The tragic plot of *Othello* hinges on the ability of the villain, Iago, to mislead other characters, particularly Roderigo and Othello, by encouraging them to misinterpret what they see. Othello is susceptible to Iago's ploys because he himself is so honest and straightforward. As Iago puts it: "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 th' nose/ As asses are" (2.1.391-4)

In *Othello*, Shakespeare plays with the idea of unreliable reality in a number of ways. The language of the play, which time and again refers to dreams, trances, and vision, constantly highlights the way in which what seems to be real may actually be fake. In addition, Shakespeare extends the theme of appearance vs. reality to include the art of playwriting and acting. As he develops his plot against Othello, Iago creates scenes within scenes. He sets up encounters between two characters and putting a third in the position of a spectator. For instance, he has Othello watch Cassio and Desdemona speak,



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

and he has Othello watch him speak with Cassio about Bianca. In each case, Iago manipulates Othello so that Othello sees the appearance that Iago wants him to see, rather than the reality of what is actually happening. In this way, Iago becomes a kind of "director"—he even directly addresses the audience through his many soliloquies—and Shakespeare draws attention to the way that a playwright and actors create an appearance onstage that tricks the audience into seeing something other than reality.



JEALOUSY

Iago refers to jealousy as the "green-eyed monster." As this metaphor suggests, jealousy is closely associated with the theme of appearance and reality. For instance, at one point Othello demands that Iago provide "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity—he demands to see reality. But Iago instead provides the circumstantial evidence of the handkerchief, which Othello, consumed by his jealousy, accepts as a substitute for "ocular proof." Othello's jealousy impedes his ability to distinguish between reality and appearance. While the prejudiced characters in the play denigrate Othello as an animal or a beast based on his race, Othello's obvious honor and intelligence makes these attacks obviously ridiculous. Yet when Othello is overcome by jealousy, he does become beast-like, falling into epileptic fits that rob him of the ability to speak intelligibly.

Othello is also not the only character in *Othello* to feel jealousy. Both Iago and Roderigo act to destroy Othello out of jealousy, with disastrous consequences.



MANHOOD AND HONOR

Throughout the play, various male figures seek to assert and protect their manhood and their honor. Based on the Duke's regard for him in 1.3, it is clear that Othello has attained political power through his military might. The subplot in which Iago gets Cassio drunk and causes him to humiliate himself, also indicates the importance of "reputation, reputation, reputation." In fact, Cassio asserts that reputation is all that makes you human ("I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial" [2.3.252-3]). Iago asserts—however genuinely or disingenuously—that reputation is more valuable than anything in the world: "good name in man and woman [...] is the immediate jewel of their souls" (3.3.156).

Though military exploits are one way for men to build their honor, when not in war the primary means by which men define their honor is their ability to command the faithfulness of their women. In 1.1, Iago and Roderigo call Brabantio's honor into question because he hasn't been able to control the romantic or sexual impulses of his daughter, Desdemona. Later, Iago drives Othello to question his own manhood—indeed, his very

humanity—by making him doubt whether he has power over his wife. In despair over his suspicions about his wife's faithfulness, Othello laments of himself: "A horned man's a monster and a beast" (4.2.62). That is, in his view, to lose control of the woman in his life is to lose everything that makes him human. In other words, without his honor, he sees himself in the same terms that the prejudiced characters see him: as an animal.



WOMANHOOD AND SEXUALITY

Two contrasting images of womanhood dominate *Othello*: the virtuous and loyal woman, or Madonna, embodied by Desdemona; and the whore, embodied, to a certain extent by Bianca. Yet over the course of the play, it becomes clear that these two different ways of describing women don't actually apply to real women. Instead, they are male fantasies imposed on women—ideals that men want women to fulfill, and roles that women therefore purposefully play for men. For instance, Desdemona often describes her devotion to Othello in front of other people, underscoring that, even though she does love him very deeply, she is to a certain extent playing the role of the virtuous wife. Iago then stokes Othello's jealousy in part by forcing Othello to realize that there is no way for a man to tell the difference between a truly virtuous wife and one who is just playing the role of virtuous wife while actually acting as a whore and being unfaithful.

Meanwhile, Iago's wife, Emilia, complicates the simple contract between the Madonna and the whore. Initially, she wants to please her husband—and does so by stealing Desdemona's handkerchief, knowing that he has long hankered after it. Yet she is not wholly loyal, and even tells Desdemona in 4.3 that she believes many women, including she herself, would cheat on their husbands under certain circumstances. And, finally, she proves her own, independent virtue by defending Desdemona's virtue and revealing her husband's crimes in the process. So while womanhood in *Othello* is, therefore, often defined by men in terms of pure virtue or voracious and deceptive sexuality, the play ultimately shows that real women are far more complex.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE HANDKERCHIEF

In European medieval and renaissance love poetry, the handkerchief is typically a symbol for a woman's romantic favor. For instance, there was a particular ritual in which a lady would drop her handkerchief for a knight to pick up and keep as a token of her regard. The handkerchief that Othello gives Desdemona is, similarly, a love-token and

therefore a symbol of their love. But the handkerchief, which originally belonged to an Egyptian sorcerer, also comes to symbolize the illusions that Iago is "casting" through his plotting and subterfuge.



ANIMALS

Othello is rife with animal metaphors. In particular, this language is used to describe **Othello**, the "Barbary horse," or the "beautiful creature" **Desdemona**. In each case, the animal language is connected to prejudice. Describing a person or group in animal terms is a way of defining that person or group as being less than human, something that deserves to be humiliated and controlled.


strategic manipulation of others.

Act 1, scene 2 Quotes

☞☞ "Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her!
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
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, t' incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight."

Related Characters: Brabantio (speaker), Desdemona, Othello

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1.2.82-90

Explanation and Analysis

Brabantio and his men have arrived at the inn where Othello is staying. Iago has advised Othello to go inside in order to avoid a confrontation with Brabantio, but Othello has decided to stay, declaring that he is a loyal soldier and husband to Desdemona and thus he has nothing to be ashamed of. Brabantio, having learned about his daughter's marriage, accuses Othello of enchanting Desdemona and binding her in "chains of magic"; he claims there is no other explanation for why she would choose to marry Othello. He uses racist language to describe Othello, calling him a "thing" with a "sooty bosom," and saying that it would make more sense to fear him as opposed to love him.

This speech is a pertinent example of the racial prejudice directed at Othello by the other characters. Brabantio's words reflect the widespread idea that Othello is not a normal human, but is either an animal-like "thing" or a fantastical being with supernatural powers. Note that Brabantio's horror emerges in particular from the thought of his daughter, whom he describes in terms that evoke pure white womanhood ("a maid, so tender, fair, and happy"), being intimate with Othello ("run... to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou"). Desdemona is presented as de-sexualized, an innocent child, whereas Othello is suggested to have sinister sexual powers akin to magical enchantment. As well as indicting Othello, this idea robs Desdemona of agency; Brabantio considers it impossible that she has




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Othello* published in 2015.

☞☞ "When my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement extern, tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.1.67-71

Explanation and Analysis



Iago and Roderigo have been arguing over the fact that Roderigo paid Iago to help win the hand of Desdemona, only for Desdemona to elope and marry Othello, a Moorish Venetian general. Iago has assured Roderigo that, although he appears to be devoted to Othello, in reality he hates Othello. In this passage, he explains that his outward behavior does not reflect his inner feelings, saying that this would leave his heart vulnerable "for daws (birds) to peck at." Throughout the play, Iago expresses the view that honesty is a sign and cause of weakness. Although Iago's deception is presented as morally wrong and dangerous, his statement in this passage comes to be proven correct by Othello and Desdemona, whose earnest, trusting personalities leave them vulnerable to manipulation.

The famous, ambiguous last phrase in this passage, "I am not what I am," proves just how deep Iago's duplicity really goes. His choice of words suggests his dishonesty is so extreme that he does not even have a stable personality beneath his

chosen to marry Othello of her own free will.

☞ "Rude am I in my speech,
And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace:
For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest 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 unvarnish'd tale deliver
Of my whole course of love."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1.3.96-107

Explanation and Analysis

Othello and Brabantio have arrived at a meeting between the Duke of Venice and his men, and Brabantio has brought up the issue of Desdemona's marriage. Othello has promised that if they summon Desdemona, she will confirm that she married him willingly, and in the meantime the Duke allows Othello to explain how the marriage came about. In this passage, Othello confesses that he does not consider himself a refined speaker, but that he will nonetheless endeavor to describe how he and Desdemona fell in love.

There are multiple levels of irony to Othello's claim to be a bad speaker. In this speech and in others, he uses evocative, lyrical, and persuasive language in order to elicit sympathy from the other characters--the very definition of rhetorical skill. Furthermore, after this statement he goes on to describe the fact that Desdemona fell in love with him while listening to the stories he told while visiting Brabantio's house as a guest. Thus if there is any truth to Brabantio's accusation that Othello "enchanted" his daughter, this enchantment was achieved through the decidedly civil art of rhetoric as opposed to sinister magic.

It is possible that Othello misrepresents his own rhetorical skill because he has internalized the racist idea that being a Moor makes him "rude in speech" in comparison to the supposedly more refined white Venetians. On the other hand, his humility is itself a useful rhetorical tactic, as it allows him to suggest that his true talents lie in the noble, masculine domain of battle.

☞ "I do perceive here a divided duty."

Related Characters: Desdemona (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1.3.209

Explanation and Analysis


Othello has told the story of how Desdemona fell in love with him, and promised the other characters that if they ask Desdemona, she will confirm that she loves him and married him willingly. Desdemona arrives, and when Brabantio asks her who she obeys, she responds that she feels she has a "divided duty," although after this quote she admits that, because he is now her husband, her primary allegiance is to Othello. The behavior of Desdemona and Othello in this scene proves that they are both honorable, truthful people who are honest about their allegiances--a characteristic that puts them in direct contrast with Iago.

The fact that Desdemona is questioned about her "duty" reveals that, in the world of the play, women are not considered people in their own right, but only ever exist in relation to men--first their fathers and brothers, and then their husbands. Indeed, one reason why Desdemona and Othello's marriage is considered so scandalous is because Desdemona has willingly chosen to marry a man her father did not select for her. Aside from this one act of rebellion, however, Desdemona unflinchingly performs the submissive, dutiful role expected of women, as is evidenced in this quote. When asked about her marriage to Othello, Desdemona speaks of a "divided duty" between her husband and father, ignoring her own feelings altogether.

☞ "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 th' nose
As asses are."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Othello

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1.3.442-445

Explanation and Analysis



Roderigo has confessed to Iago that he is miserable at the thought that he has lost Desdemona to Othello; Iago has told him not to indulge these sentimental emotions, and has promised to help Roderigo win Desdemona if Roderigo pays him. Alone onstage, Iago reflects on his own hatred of Othello and details his plan to bring about Othello's downfall. In this passage, Iago notes that Othello is an open, trusting person, and that because of this, manipulating him will be easy, like leading a donkey by the nose.

This is one of the many instances in the play in which Othello is compared to an animal. Iago's reference to an ass (donkey) in particular highlights that the racist view of Moors as animalistic is closely entwined with the idea that Moors are naturally subservient and unintelligent. Iago's view that Othello is feeble-minded is clearly false; Othello has already demonstrated that he is not only a highly skilled soldier, but also talented in rhetoric. On the other hand, Iago's observation that Othello is overly trusting is correct. Indeed, Othello's readiness to believe in appearances is the fatal flaw that—as Iago predicts—ultimately leads to his downfall.

However, the extent to which this trusting nature is actually a flaw remains ambiguous. Othello's "free and open nature" is contrasted with Iago's duplicitous cunning, and although Shakespeare shows that gullibility is dangerous, it is still presented as morally preferable to selfish scheming and deceitful appearances.

☞ "Oh heavy ignorance! Thou praisest the worst best."

Related Characters: Desdemona (speaker), Iago

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2.1.158-159

Explanation and Analysis

Desdemona and Iago have arrived in Cyprus, and while they wait for Othello's ship to join them they engage in flirtatious conversation. Iago has entertained Desdemona by telling riddles about "foul and foolish" women; Desdemona laughingly accuses him of "heavy ignorance" for praising such qualities. To some extent, their exchange confirms Desdemona's sweet and earnest nature, as she rebukes Iago for praising negative characteristics. On the other hand, the decidedly flirtatious element of their conversations suggests that Desdemona is perhaps not entirely morally innocent. At the same time, she might also

simply be fulfilling the expectation that women should always behave in a pleasant, agreeable manner, rather than expressing strong opinions. Such ambiguity highlights the difficulty of adhering to the strict, complex, and in some ways contradictory code of behavior demanded of women.

In any case, the fact that Desdemona is at least mildly flirting with Iago lends a hint of plausibility to Othello's paranoia about her possible infidelity. A further layer of tension emerges from Desdemona's accusation that Iago "praisest the worst best." Although Desdemona is referring to Iago's humorous banter, she has unwittingly made an accurate judgment of Iago's fundamental personality. After all, Iago is a Machiavellian villain who does indeed value the worst qualities—selfishness, duplicity, and ruthlessness—over moral attributes such as fairness and honesty. The fact that Iago can jokingly present himself this way without Desdemona catching on to his true nature demonstrates both Desdemona's trusting innocence and Iago's deceptive charisma.

☞ "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."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 2.1.205-209

Explanation and Analysis

While they wait for Othello to arrive, Cassio has a brief private conversation with Desdemona, inspiring Iago to trick Othello into thinking that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. Othello arrives, and declares that he could not be any happier and thus wouldn't mind if he died then and there. Othello's innocent joy in this scene could be said to tempt fate. Indeed, without realizing it, in this speech Othello accurately foreshadows that he will never be this happy again—and that he will soon die as well. The added tragedy underlying this statement is that Othello's wish to die happy will go unfulfilled; both his marital bliss and good reputation will be ruined before he dies.

☞ "Her eye must be fed."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Desdemona

Related Themes: 


Page Number: 2.1.246


Explanation and Analysis

Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio have exited to start celebrating the victory over the Turks, leaving Roderigo and Iago alone onstage. Iago assures Roderigo that Desdemona's feelings for Othello will not last, proclaiming confidently that "her eye must be fed"—meaning she'll want a more handsome lover soon. This assertion conveys the stereotype that women are fickle and shallow, and emphasizes the idea that Desdemona and Othello's union isn't viable. It also reiterates the racist view that Othello is unattractive because he is a Moor. This comment therefore demonstrates the way in which strong racist and sexist prejudices affect Othello and Desdemona as individuals and as a couple, threatening the stability of their marriage.

☞ "I'll [...] make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me For making him egregiously an ass."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Othello

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2.1.330-331

Explanation and Analysis


Having established a plan with Roderigo to provoke Cassio into a fight, Iago is once again left alone and delivers another soliloquy about his evil scheme. He has proclaimed that winning Desdemona for himself would be the best possible form of revenge against Othello, but that he will settle for driving Othello mad with jealousy by tricking him into thinking Desdemona has been unfaithful. Iago finishes his speech with the alarming boast that he will make Othello "thank me, love me, and reward me" for making a fool out of him, again using the racist imagery by saying he will turn Othello into an ass (donkey).

This passage is a reminder of Iago's scheming nature—he wants to destroy Othello not only for the pleasure of vengeance, but also for the "reward" of advancing his own career. It also reveals the truly perverse, sadistic extent of his desire for revenge. It is not enough for Iago to ruin Othello; he wants Othello to "thank" and "love" him for it.

☞ "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial."

Related Characters: Michael Cassio (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 2.3.281-283

Explanation and Analysis

Othello charged Cassio with keeping an eye on the victory celebration, instructing him to make sure the men on guard do not get too drunk; Iago, meanwhile, manipulated the situation so Cassio himself got drunk and ended up fighting and injuring Montano. Having discovered this, Othello demanded to know what happened, and Iago described the fight while making it seem like he was reluctant to implicate Cassio. A shocked Othello has said he will have to dismiss Cassio as an officer, and with Othello gone, Cassio mourns the loss of his position and reputation. In this passage, Cassio refers to his reputation as "the immortal part of myself," and says that without it he is no better than a beast.

Cassio's statement confirms the huge value placed on reputation at the time; the immediacy with which he is ruined despite his otherwise flawless record highlights the danger of mistaken appearances and foreshadows Othello's fall from grace later in the play. His comment that "what remains is bestial" emphasizes the importance of honor as the characteristic that distinguishes men from animals, again connecting Cassio's predicament to the racist distrust of Othello as animalistic.

Act 3, scene 3 Quotes

☞ "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, Chaos is come again."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Iago

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.3.100-102



Explanation and Analysis

Othello has promised Desdemona he will reinstate Cassio, though he has also seen Cassio sneak away in a seemingly

guilty manner, and remains confused and suspicious about what he is really going on. He has asked Desdemona for some time alone, and after she leaves he reflects on his love for her in mixed terms, on the one hand saying that not loving her would mean "chaos," while at the same time calling her "excellent wretch." Note that Othello is speaking to himself in this passage, seemingly unaware that Iago can hear him. This moment thus pertinently represents the way that Iago has successfully manipulated and weakened Othello without Othello realizing it.

☞ "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"

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Othello

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 3.3.182-190

Explanation and Analysis

Othello has noticed Cassio avoiding him and is suspicious; nonetheless, he has promised Desdemona to reinstate Cassio, but first asks for some time alone. With the other characters gone, Iago asks seemingly innocent questions about Cassio, and gives Othello advice that likewise appears to be well-intentioned, yet is actually designed to increase Othello's suspicions. In this passage Iago emphasizes the importance of reputation, saying that for a person's money to be stolen is ultimately meaningless, yet if his "good name" is ruined that leaves him "poor indeed." This passage shows the power of Iago's cunning strategy of undermining Othello. On the surface, he appears to be helping Othello by providing rational and wise advice; in reality, he is laying the foundation for Othello's coming frenzied paranoia.

☞ "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Othello

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 3.3.195-197

Explanation and Analysis

Othello, having been cautioned by Iago about the importance of reputation, demands to know what Iago is really thinking. Iago evades the question, and instead warns Othello to beware of jealousy, famously likening it to a "green-eyed monster" that mocks the jealous person. As in the rest of this exchange, Iago's words are technically correct, and in a different context would constitute good advice. Indeed, his warning directly prefigures the chaotic impact that jealousy will have on Othello's life, and foreshadows the way in which Othello's irrational jealousy will make a fool out of and destroy him. At the same time, Iago knows that telling Othello not to be jealous will only increase his suspicions. The "green-eyed monster" he describes in fact reflects Iago's own role as an envious, parasitic influence who mocks Othello even as he ruins him.

☞ "This honest creature doubtless
Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Iago

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3.3.283-284

Explanation and Analysis

Othello has requested that Iago ask Emilia to keep an eye on Desdemona, and has urged Iago to report anything he sees back to him. As Iago leaves, Othello says to himself that Iago is honest and probably knows more than he is letting on. Once again, Othello has made an accurate observation without realizing its true meaning. Iago does know more than what he says, though of course he deliberately conceals and misrepresents information in order to undermine Othello—a far cry from the behavior of an "honest creature." Note that, although Othello thinks he is alone when he makes this statement, immediately afterward Iago briefly returns. Depending on the production, Iago is likely to be shown overhearing Othello, a fact that adds further dramatic irony to Othello's words.

☞ "This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit
Of human dealings."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Iago

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 3.3.299-301

Explanation and Analysis

Iago, returning briefly, has urged Othello not to think about the matter anymore for the moment, and entrust Iago himself to assess what is going on. Othello has agreed, and with Iago gone again he repeats that Iago is exceedingly honest, with strong insight into how people behave. Once more, Othello's impression of Iago contains elements of truth, yet is nonetheless fundamentally mistaken. It is correct that Iago has "a learned spirit of human dealings"; his keen understanding of human psychology is what allows him to manipulate others so easily. Yet while Othello appears to think that Iago's intelligent nature makes him honest and moral, in reality the opposite is true.

The question of whether knowledge and ability make a person morally trustworthy is a central question in the play, and relates to a debate about the ethics and power that continues to this day. Both Othello and Iago are highly intelligent and skilled, and yet Iago understands a sphere of human behavior that Othello seemingly does not; namely, people's capacity to be act deceitfully and in the pursuit of their own interests. Although in many ways the audience is encouraged to admire Othello's moral goodness and faith in other people, his misestimation of Iago is notably naïve, and proves fatal. This dilemma provokes the question of who makes the better leader--Othello, who is righteous but gullible, or Iago, whose evil and cynical view of humanity is arguably more accurate.

☞ "Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years - yet that's not much -
She's gone."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Desdemona

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 3.3.304-3.3.308



Explanation and Analysis

Still alone, Othello reflects on his conversation with Iago and frets that perhaps it is unrealistic to expect Desdemona to truly love him, considering he is black, uncivilized in speech, and older than she is. Here we see the result of Iago's tactic of reverse psychology; while Iago encouraged Othello not to think too much about the situation before there was more evidence, Othello is left in a fretful, paranoid state, trying to evaluate if he is good enough for Desdemona. It is also clear from Othello's words that his fears are far more emotional than rational, and are rooted in the incoherent logic of racism.

This is the second time that Othello has referred to himself as a crude and unskilled speaker, and yet all evidence points to the falseness of this statement. Meanwhile, the fact that he is older than Desdemona is hardly significant, considering it was common for young women to marry older men at the time. The only objective fact that in this speech is that Othello is black; however, at no point in the play does Desdemona express even the slightest concern over this fact. On the other hand, Othello's experience of racism at the hands of the other characters is frequent and severe. Thus, regardless of what Desdemona thinks, he cannot escape the internalized racist idea that their racial difference makes their marriage unviable.

☞ "Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Iago

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3.3.412

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia has picked up Desdemona's handkerchief, which Iago had requested she bring to him, and dutifully presented it to her husband. Iago takes the handkerchief with the plan of leaving it in Cassio's room, when Othello suddenly enters in a frantic, enraged state, and demands that Iago show him "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity. The fact that Othello behaves aggressively and threateningly to Iago--whom he has multiple times praised as honest and righteous--shows that Othello has already been driven wild by jealousy and is no longer capable of making rational assessments of the situation. Perhaps because he is aware of this, he insists that Iago show him visual evidence of



Desdemona's supposed crime, implying Othello believes "ocular proof" is beyond doubt.


The fact that Iago is carrying the handkerchief during this interaction, however, reminds the audience that appearances can be just as misleading as rumors. Now that Iago has reduced Othello to a state of paranoid jealousy, it is easy for Iago to manipulate visual evidence to support his false claim that Desdemona is unfaithful. Othello's trust in visual appearances reflects his mistaken trust of Iago--and both will soon bring about his downfall.

Act 4, scene 1 Quotes

☝☝ "Her honor is an essence that's not seen; They have it very oft that have it not."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Desdemona

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.1.20-21

Explanation and Analysis


Iago has told Othello that he knows Cassio and Desdemona slept "naked in bed" together, but pretends to still want to give them the benefit of the doubt. Iago has repeatedly referenced the handkerchief, saying that it belongs to Desdemona and that she could therefore give it to whomever she wants; Othello asks if she could likewise give away her honor, and Iago replies that her honor is intangible, and that many seem honorable when they are actually not. Following Othello's obsession with "ocular proof," Iago now fixates on the distinction between visible and invisible evidence, and stresses the unreliability of evaluating Desdemona's "honor" because honor is not visible.

Note that Iago's statement "they have it very oft that have it not"--meaning many people appear to be honorable but aren't--does not actually apply to Desdemona, but does accurately describe Iago himself. Indeed, the phrasing is reminiscent of Iago's statement earlier in the play, "I am not what I am." Once again, Iago is making wise and astute observations about the nature of human behavior, yet uses these observations to further his deceptive and evil plan.

☝☝ "A horned man's a monster and a beast."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.1.77

Explanation and Analysis

Overcome with anguish about Desdemona, Othello has had an epileptic fit, during which time Cassio briefly enters and advises Iago on how to revive Othello. With Cassio offstage again, Othello has regained consciousness and immediately accuses Iago of mocking him. Iago, bewildered, says that he hasn't, to which Othello responds "a horned man's a monster and a beast." At the time, folklore held that a cuckold--a man whose wife was unfaithful--would grow horns, making his humiliated status visible to the rest of society. Although irrational, this clearly represents a significant fear for Othello. Not only would Desdemona's infidelity ruin his reputation as a noble and manly husband, it would confirm the racist beliefs that, as a Moor, Othello is more like an animal or supernatural creature than a human.

Act 4, scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ "Upon my knee, what doth your speech import? I understand a fury in your words But not the words."

Related Characters: Desdemona (speaker), Othello

Page Number: 4.2.37-39

Explanation and Analysis

Othello has interrogated Emilia about Desdemona and Cassio, but Emilia insisted that there is nothing between inappropriate about their relationship. Unsatisfied, Othello has dismissed Emilia and summoned Desdemona. Noticing her husband's emotional state, Desdemona kneels before him and asks what's wrong, saying she hears from his tone that he is angry but doesn't understand why. Desdemona's words here convey her total innocence, and emphasize that despite her husband's irrational behavior she remains completely loyal and devoted to him. The fact that she kneels before him demonstrates how willing she is to play the role of a submissive and subservient wife, and highlights her honesty and vulnerability. Her enduring deference to Othello (which remains even after she knows he will murder her) makes her death at his hands even more tragic.

☞ "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"

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Desdemona

Page Number: 4.2.77-80

Explanation and Analysis



Othello weeps as he addresses Desdemona, who tells him she hopes she is not the reason why he is upset. However, Desdemona's innocent behavior only further infuriates Othello, who believes she is deliberately deceiving him, and in this passage he calls her a "weed" and tells her he wishes she had never been born. Othello's language here conveys the sexist stereotype that women's attractive appearance and seductive capabilities were a dangerous trap designed to mislead and ruin innocent men. The sensual reaction caused by women's beauty ("the sense aches at thee") was thought to impair the wise and rational judgment men were supposed to naturally possess.

At the same time, this passage also reveals the impossible contradiction many women found themselves in. Society demanded that they be "lovely fair," and held that a sweet, pure appearance reflected inner goodness and honesty. Yet the moment a woman's honor was brought into question, her attractive appearance could be used as evidence of her supposed duplicity.

Act 5, scene 2 Quotes

☞ "Put out the light, and then put out the light.
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have plucked thy rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again;
It must needs wither."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker), Desdemona

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.2.7-16

Explanation and Analysis

Othello, holding a light, has entered the bedroom where Desdemona lies sleeping. Watching her, he remarks on the

purity of her snow-white skin, and vows not to shed her blood when he kills her. In this passage, he draws a parallel between putting out the light he is holding and extinguishing the light of Desdemona's life, and contemplates the finality of murdering her. Unlike a candle which can be relit, once Desdemona dies she will be gone forever. It seems as if Othello can almost predict the regret he will come to feel after murdering Desdemona and discovering her innocence.

At the same time, the light in this passage can also be interpreted as a symbol for purity, and Othello's resolve to murder Desdemona is stoked by the fact that he believes she has already destroyed her purity and innocence by having an affair with Cassio. Both these metaphors emphasize the fragility of women's existence in the play, as both their honor and even their lives are at the mercy of men, who—as Othello demonstrates—cannot always be trusted to act rationally.

☞ "I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true."

Related Characters: Iago (speaker), Othello

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5.2.212-213

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia has discovered that Othello has murdered Desdemona; Othello has told her that it was her husband, "honest, honest Iago," who made him aware that Desdemona was supposedly having an affair with Cassio. Emilia has begun to understand Iago's plan, when Iago, Montano, and Grazio arrive. Emilia informs them of Desdemona's murder and demands that Iago assure her he did not tell Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful; Iago responds by insisting he only told Othello what he thought, which was also what Othello believed to be true. Although Iago is clearly presenting a veneer of false innocence here, his sly choice of words mean that what he is saying is arguably accurate.

Note that Iago claims to have told Othello only what he "thought" and not what he knew, and mentions that this cohered with Othello's own suspicions. Of course, what Iago doesn't mention is that he skilfully manipulated Othello into these delusional suspicions in the first place. Once again, Iago's cunning influence over the other characters'

thoughts and actions blurs the distinction between appearance and reality, and obscures the evidence of what really happened.

☛ "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 Judean, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable 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."

Related Characters: Othello (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5.2.401-417

Explanation and Analysis

Thanks to Emilia, Othello has finally discovered Iago's

scheme, and after Iago kills Emilia, Othello stabs Iago, wounding him but not killing him. Lodovico, meanwhile, has told Othello that he must accompany him back to Venice and give up his position of general. In response, Othello delivers a speech in which he asks the other characters to describe him in the future as he is and not to exaggerate either his good or bad qualities. He admits that, due to being "perplexed in the extreme," he threw away something more precious than anything else. At the end, he asks that they remember the time he killed a Turk with a sword, and parallels the act by stabbing himself.

Othello's final speech is complex, and betrays Othello's ambiguous judgment of himself and the situation. His request that he neither be overly praised or condemned after death suggests that he is frustrated by a lifetime of being judged according to racist stereotypes, in addition to the pressure of maintaining an honorable reputation. His use of the word "base" in the reference to the Judean who threw the pearl away shows that he blames his own misjudgment for having killed Desdemona. At the same time, however, he notes that he is not "easily jealous" by nature and thus emphasizes Iago's role in misleading him.

Othello's final words about killing the Turk indicate that he wishes to be remembered as a loyal Venetian soldier; by comparing that act to stabbing himself, he implies that his suicide is almost a kind of service to the state of Venice. This aligns with the narrative arc of classical tragedy, which dictates that once the tragic hero has died, a proper, stable hierarchy of power can be restored.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

On a street in Venice, Italy, Roderigo, a nobleman, and Iago are in the middle of an argument. Roderigo has paid Iago a lot of money to help him win the hand of Desdemona. Yet he has just learned that Desdemona has eloped with Othello, the Moorish (North African) general under whom Iago serves.

Iago assures Roderigo that he hates Othello, and explains that Othello recently passed him over for a promotion to lieutenant despite the fact that he was Othello's ancient (standard bearer) and had the recommendations of three leading men of Venice. Instead, Othello promoted Michael Cassio, a man who in Iago's estimation is just a "spinster" (1.1.23) military theorist with no practical experience in fighting or leading men.

Iago then adds that while he currently pretends to serve Othello, he is in fact just looking out for his own self-interest: "In following him I but follow myself [...] I am not what I am" (1.1.57; 64).

Iago and Roderigo go to the house of Brabantio, a senator and Desdemona's father. They shout from the street that Brabantio has been robbed. Brabantio comes to the window, but at first doesn't believe them because he recognizes Roderigo, whom he has recently told to stop hanging around his house and pursuing Desdemona. But then Iago, who doesn't give his name and whom Brabantio doesn't recognize, graphically describes Othello and Desdemona having sex—he says that "an old **black ram** is tugging your **white ewe**" (1.1.88-89), calling Othello a "**Barbary horse**" (1.1.110), and adds that "your daughter and the Moor are making the **beast** with two backs" (1.1.118).

Brabantio goes to search his house for his daughter, worried because he has had a "dream" (1.1.140) anticipating these events. Iago takes the chance to leave in order to keep his plot against Othello secret.

Roderigo's primary reason for hating Othello is not racial prejudice, but rather jealousy that Othello has won Desdemona. That Iago has not managed to help Roderigo despite being paid hints at his duplicity.



Iago has his own jealous motives for hating Othello. When he calls Cassio a "spinster," Iago is questioning Cassio's manhood, while also implying that just as real men know how to fight, real women know how to have sex. A spinster is an old, unmarried woman who has no experience of sex, just as the military theorist Cassio has no experience of battle.



Iago here reveals his capacity to hide his feelings and motives so that his actions don't reveal them.



Brabantio thinks little of Roderigo. Iago, however, rallies the white Brabantio on their side by using prejudice as a tool, describing Othello as an animal ("black ram") and sex with Desdemona as bestial. Iago also makes use of the fact that Brabantio will feel his manly honor challenged by his daughter's having sex. Notice that Desdemona is also described in animal terms. In her case, the comparison is meant to evoke purity, but it also indicates that the men do not think of her as an equal human being.



The language of "dreams" plays into the theme of appearance vs. reality. As does Iago's slipping away without giving away his identity, so he can continue to plot against Othello.



Brabantio emerges from his house without finding Desdemona. Furious, lamenting his life as wasted, he says that his daughter has been stolen by magic and that he wishes she had married Roderigo. They set off to raise an armed search party and confront Othello.

Brabantio feels his manhood ruined by his daughter's deception, and insists that Othello could only have unmanned him in this way by twisting reality through some kind of sorcery. His change of heart regarding Roderigo as the lesser of two evils reveals his prejudice against Othello.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

At the inn where Othello is lodging, Iago tells Othello that he wanted to stab Roderigo when he hears the things Roderigo was saying about Othello. He also warns Othello that Brabantio is likely to try to legally force a divorce between Othello and Desdemona. Othello seems unconcerned.

Iago changes sides seamlessly. He tries to provoke Othello by suggesting that Roderigo has slighted his manly honor. But, at this point, Othello seems completely secure in himself, immune to challenges to his manhood.



Just then, they see a group of men approaching. Iago says it must be Brabantio and advises Othello to go inside. Othello refuses, preferring to face them, saying he has dutifully served the state of Venice and his conscience is clean: he loves Desdemona.

Othello knows that his honorable military service will outweigh Brabantio's grievance. He's also the first character to speak of love. All the other men seem to think of women as something to possess, not love.



The men turn out to be Cassio and servants of the Duke of Venice, sent to bring Othello to meet with the Duke regarding an urgent military issue in Cyprus (an island protectorate of Venice).

Cassio's news is proof that the state's need for Othello's military leadership will outweigh any racial prejudice against him.



Iago then mentions to Cassio that Othello has married. But before he can say who Othello has wed, Roderigo along with Brabantio and his men arrive. Brabantio states that Othello must have enchanted Desdemona, or else why would she have gone "to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou" (1.2.70-71). He orders his men to seize Othello.

Brabantio gives full voice to his injured sense of manhood by interweaving the language of racial prejudice with horror at interracial sexuality. He cannot believe that things are as they seem: that his daughter has voluntarily eloped with a "sooty...thing."



Othello is unfazed, tells everyone on both sides to put up their arms, and informs Brabantio that he has been called to meet with the Duke on state business. Brabantio decides to accompany Othello to the Duke and air his grievance there.

Agreeing to go before the Duke's court of law, Othello remains confident that his honorable service will outweigh his outsider status.



ACT 1, SCENE 3

The Duke of Venice meets with his senators about a Turkish invasion of Cyprus. They manage to see through a Turkish ploy to make it look as if the Turks will attack Rhodes instead of Cyprus. Then the Duke and the Senators discuss how to repel the Turkish attack on Cyprus.

Games of illusion and appearance play a serious role in politics and war as well as in jealousy and love.



Othello and Brabantio enter along with their men. Brabantio demands that they cease discussing state business and instead deal with the fact that his daughter has been corrupted by spells and potions so that she would marry a man she would never otherwise have considered. The Duke promises to help Brabantio prosecute the man who has seduced Desdemona, but when he learns that the accused man is Othello he gives Othello a chance to defend himself.

Othello admits that he married Desdemona. But he denies using any magic to win her love, and says that Desdemona will support his story. They send for her. As they wait for Desdemona to arrive, Othello says that Brabantio used to invite him to his house to hear his life story, with all its dramatic tales of travel, battle, and valor. These stories, Othello says, won Desdemona's love. The Duke comments that he thinks his own daughter might be won over by Othello's story.

Desdemona arrives. Brabantio asks his daughter to whom she owes obedience. Desdemona responds that just as her own mother once had to shift her obedience from her own father to Brabantio, so must she shift her obedience from Brabantio to Othello. At this, Brabantio grudgingly gives up his grievance against Othello, and allows the meeting to turn back to affairs of state.

As discussion turns back to fighting off the Turks, the Duke says that Othello must go to Cyprus to lead its defense. Though the Duke at first suggests that Desdemona stay in Venice with her father, Brabantio, Othello, and Desdemona all object, and the Duke says that she may go with Othello.

Brabantio exits, but not before warning Othello to watch Desdemona—since she disobeyed her father, she might disobey her husband.

Because Othello must leave for Cyprus that night, he decides that Desdemona should follow after him in the care of Iago, and asks Iago to have his wife attend Desdemona. Othello and Desdemona then exit to spend their last few hours together before Othello must depart.

Brabantio continues to insist, based on common racial, that Desdemona could never have been sexually drawn to someone of Othello's racial background in the absence of some kind of deception on his part. The Duke, though, who needs Othello's military leadership, is not so swayed by prejudice.



The truly remarkable story of Othello's life, described by Othello in plain language, contrasts with the illusions that Iago will later build out of flowery words. Yet note that Othello does explicitly assert that storytelling has a seductive power, and Iago will indeed seduce Othello with his inventions later on.



Desdemona asserts independence from her father and obedience to Othello. Women in this society were always obedient to some man, or at least were supposed to be. Men who did not keep their women obedient were seen as failures.



While she has both Othello and Brabantio backing her, here, Desdemona continues to assert her will in a highly public forum among men.



Brabantio defines Desdemona's independence as disloyalty to men.



Othello and Desdemona exhibit devotion to each other, although not excessive sexual passion. Othello clearly has faith in Iago, entrusting him with his wife.



Iago and Roderigo are left alone. Roderigo, convinced his chances with Desdemona are now hopelessly lost, talks of drowning himself. Iago mocks Roderigo for such silly sentimentality. Roderigo responds that he can't stop himself from feeling so miserable, but Iago disagrees, saying that a person can control himself by sheer force of will. He tells Roderigo to follow them to Cyprus, where he will make sure that Desdemona will end up with him—for a price. Roderigo exits.

Alone, Iago delivers a soliloquy in which he says again that he hates the Moor. He notes that there are rumors that Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia, and while he isn't at all sure that the rumors are true, he'll act as if they're true. He says that he will take Roderigo's money, and decides that he will convince Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona, and in so doing also get the position of lieutenant. He adds that Othello has a "free and open nature" (1.3.380) and therefore thinks that anyone who seems honest actually *is* honest, and that he will use this trait to lead Othello by the nose.

In contrast to Roderigo's jealous despair, Iago emphasizes his belief that you can make yourself whatever you like—a theme related to his confidence in his own ability to direct everyone around him, tricking people into doing exactly what he wants.



Iago lays out his plans to deceive the other characters, putting himself in the role of "director" of a kind of play-within-the-play. While he suspects that Othello has slept with his own wife, he seems relatively indifferent to whether or not this is true: Iago derives his sense of self, his manhood, from his ability to manipulate others, rather than sexual pride. He suggests that Othello's weakness is that he doesn't understand that appearance can hide reality. Not also that Iago seems to hold no racial prejudice against Othello at all. He just uses prejudice against Othello when it's helpful to him.



ACT 2, SCENE 1

From Cyprus, Montano, the governor of Cyprus, watches as a storm rages at sea. He states that he does not think the Turkish fleet could withstand the storm, and a moment later a gentleman enters with the news that Cassio has arrived, and that on his voyage to Cyprus, Cassio saw that the Turks lost so many ships in the storm that Cyprus need not fear them. Cassio soon arrives himself, and though glad of the defeat of the Turks, he worries that Othello might himself have been lost at sea.

The Venetian ship carrying Desdemona, Iago, Emilia (Iago's wife), and Roderigo is the next to arrive. As soon as they arrive, Desdemona asks after Othello. When she hears that Cassio and Othello's ships lost contact during the storm she worries—but just then Othello's ship is spotted arriving at Cyprus.

As they wait for Othello to arrive, Iago and Desdemona banter. Iago portrays all women, whether beautiful, ugly, smart, or foolish, as generally deceptive and sex-starved. But he also says that a woman with perfect virtue would be boring. Desdemona defends women against him, though she's clearly amused by Iago.

In the early scenes of the play, Othello is completely in command of himself, and the idea that someone could manipulate him seems almost ludicrous. But Othello's self-possession is based on his knowledge that his military leadership is needed by the state. But the storm that destroys the Turks also means that Othello's military leadership, the source of his manhood, is no longer necessary.



Desdemona again demonstrates her loyalty and love toward her husband.



Iago expounds the prejudices against women and female sexuality that he will later use to manipulate Othello. Given the comic tone of his banter with Desdemona, however, it's hard to tell how he "really" feels about anything.



Cassio, courteous as always, takes Desdemona's hand and speaks with her privately for a moment. Iago notices, and says that this little courtesy of Cassio taking Desdemona's hand will be enough of a web to "ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (2.1.169) and strip Cassio of his position as lieutenant.

Othello arrives, in triumph. He is overjoyed to see Desdemona, and says that he is so happy and content he could die now. She responds that, rather, their love and joy will only increase as they age. Othello then thanks the people of Cyprus for their hospitality. He asks Iago to oversee the unloading of his ship, and he, Desdemona, and all but Iago and Roderigo head to the castle to celebrate their victory over the Turks.

Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is bound to tire of Othello, and want instead someone younger, more handsome, and better-mannered. He says that it is obvious who this man will be—Cassio, whom he describes to Roderigo as a knave and posturer who is always looking out for his own advantage.

In fact, Iago says, Desdemona already loves Cassio, and he asks if Roderigo noticed them touching hands. Roderigo did, but says it was just courtesy. Iago convinces him otherwise, and further advises Roderigo to provoke Cassio into a fight with him that night. He says that the people of Cyprus will then demand that Cassio be replaced, and in the process remove an obstacle that separates Roderigo from Desdemona. Roderigo agrees to do it, and exits.

Alone, Iago delivers his second soliloquy. He says that he thinks it likely that Cassio does indeed love Desdemona, and believable at least that she might love him. He says that he himself loves Desdemona, though mainly he just wants to sleep with her because he wants revenge on Othello for possibly sleeping with Emilia. If he's unable to sleep with Desdemona, though, he reasons, at least the confrontation he's engineered between Roderigo and Cassio will cause Othello to suspect Desdemona of infidelity and drive him mad.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

A herald reads a proclamation that Othello has called for a night of revelry to celebrate the annihilation of the Turkish fleet as well as his recent marriage.

Iago, in his "director" role, seems to directly address the audience. He explains how he will use "reality," Cassio taking Desdemona's hand, to spin an illusion—that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair.



With the Turks defeated, the scene on Cyprus is domestic rather than military. Othello and Desdemona continue to act out their love for each other in front of all. Yet in commenting that he could happily die at this moment, Othello unwittingly adds a dark tone to the love he shares with Desdemona.



In his plotting, Iago lies to everyone, all the time. Here he gets Roderigo to dislike Cassio by making Roderigo jealous of Cassio's chances with Desdemona. Notice that Iago's description of Cassio is actually a good description of himself.



Iago continues to play on Roderigo's jealousy. Roderigo had in fact correctly interpreted the briefly touching hands of Desdemona and Cassio as just courtesy, but Iago is able to use Roderigo's jealousy to warp his understanding, to mistake appearance for reality.



Once again, Iago directly addresses the audience, laying out his plans to the audience and once again taking on the role of "director." In fact, nearly all of the rest of the action of Othello involves the character's "acting out" the "play" that Iago is "writing." Also note how clear it is to Iago that if Othello suspects he has been unable to control his wife that he would lose his sense of manhood and his mind.



In a military situation, where facts and actions are crucial, Othello is dominant. But in a domestic world of interpersonal relationships, facts can be fudged and Iago is in his element.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Othello puts Cassio in charge during the celebration. He instructs Cassio to make sure that the men on guard practice moderation and self-restraint despite the party. Cassio says that Iago knows what to do, but that he will make sure to see to it himself. Othello and Desdemona leave to consummate their marriage.

When Othello and Desdemona are gone, Iago praises Desdemona's beauty while also slyly suggesting that she might be a seductress. Cassio agrees that Desdemona is beautiful, but believes her to be modest.

Iago then turns the conversation to the revels, and tries to convince Cassio to take a drink. Cassio declines, saying he has no tolerance for alcohol. Eventually, Iago convinces Cassio to let in the revelers who are at the door. Cassio exits to do just that.

Alone, Iago addresses the audience: the revelers are Roderigo and three men of Cyprus, who are all touchy about their honor and whom he has made sure to get drunk. Once he has also gotten Cassio drunk, he will create some event that results in Cassio offending the people of Cyprus.

Cassio returns with Montano and other revelers. Cassio, in good spirits, says that they have already forced him to take a drink. The revelers drink and sing. Eventually, Cassio, who is drunk but loudly protesting that he is in fact not drunk, exits offstage.

While Cassio is gone, Iago speaks with Montano, telling him that Cassio is a great soldier, but that he has a terrible drinking problem and may not be able to handle the responsibilities Othello has given him. Montano says that they should report this to Othello, but Iago says that he cares too much for Cassio to do that. Meanwhile, Iago secretly sends Roderigo off to pick a fight with Cassio.

Seconds later Cassio chases Roderigo onstage, cursing at him. They are about to fight when Montano tries to intervene, noting that Cassio is drunk. Cassio is offended, and he and Montano fight. During the fighting, Iago sends Roderigo to raise an alarm. Cassio injures Montano.

Both Othello and Cassio wildly misjudge Iago, revealing just how duplicitous Iago is. Also notice that Othello and Desdemona did not have sex until they were married, in contrast to the graphic imaginations that the other characters have indulged in.



Iago tries to convince Cassio to actually take a shot at seducing Desdemona by alluding to the idea that demure women are probably just hiding their inner whore. Cassio, like Othello, takes people at face value.



Unable to manipulate Cassio only with words, Iago progresses toward more directly bodily means: alcohol. Cassio, however, knows himself and refrains.



Updating the audience about his secret plans, Iago continues to act as a "director." Earlier he used people's prejudices to manipulate them to do what he wants. Now he uses honor.



Cassio, insisting that he is not drunk when he clearly is, seeks to maintain his honor or dignity via an illusion about himself. At the same time, at a trivial level, he also starts to speak untruths as a result of Iago's manipulations.



Iago continues to orchestrate complicated sets of doubling-crossings in order to promote the illusions that will help him with his plan. He is a master at making someone look bad while seemingly trying to defend that person.



All of the characters in this scene, misled about each other by Iago, now do exactly what Iago wants them to do. Just as Iago hoped, Cassio's honor is offended when his drunkenness is noticed, and he reacts by fighting.



Othello enters with his attendants. He immediately puts an end to the fighting, and demands to know how the fighting began. Iago and Cassio say they do not know, while Montano says that he is too injured to speak, but he adds that Iago *does* know the full story.

Iago speaks, saying that it pains him to cause any harm to Cassio but that he must tell the truth as Othello commands. He explains that as he and Montano were talking, Cassio chased in some unknown fellow (Iago does not identify him as Roderigo) with sword drawn. He says that Montano then stepped in to stop Cassio, while Iago went after the unknown man but could not catch him. When Iago returned, Cassio and Montano were fighting. Iago then adds that the first unknown man must have offended Cassio in some way to make him behave as he did.

When Iago finishes his story, Othello says that he can tell that, out of love for Cassio, Iago tried to tell the story in a way that made Cassio look as good as possible. He says that he loves Cassio as well, but that he must dismiss Cassio as an officer. Desdemona arrives, awakened by the noise. Othello leads her back to bed, and also promises to tend to Montano's wounds. Everyone exits but Iago and Cassio.

Cassio despairs at his lost reputation: "O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is **bestial**" (2.3.251-3). Iago asks if Cassio knew who he was chasing after, but Cassio says that he can't remember anything distinctly. He adds that he plans to ask Othello to return him to his position. Iago, however, counsels him to approach Desdemona for help. Desdemona is so kind and generous, and Othello so in love with her, that she is sure to help Cassio if he asks for it and just as sure to convince Othello to return Cassio to his former position. Cassio thanks Iago for his counsel, and exits.

Iago delivers another soliloquy, in which he says that his advice to Cassio is actually good advice, and that enlisting Desdemona's help is the best way for Cassio to regain his position. But he adds that when devils want to do evil they make it seem as if they're trying to do good. Iago says that as Desdemona tries to help Cassio, Iago will convince Othello that she does so not out of goodness but lust for Cassio. "Out of her own goodness [I'll] make the net that / Shall enmesh them all" (2.3.335-336).

Othello keeps up his strong, quiet dignity in contrast to Iago's flurry of manipulations. By saying he doesn't know what happened, Iago makes it look like he is trying to protect Cassio..



As usual, Iago pretends that he does not want to say what he is about to say, which makes what he is saying seem even more authentic. Because the audience knows that he's lying, though, his tactics are clear to us, but not to the any of the other characters. In this way, Iago makes the audience complicit in his lies, and audience almost comes to root for his success.



Othello is just as decisive as he was in earlier scenes, but now he, too, has been tricked by Iago and his actions only further Iago's plot. Even so, Desdemona's arrival and then exit with Othello shows her continued obedience to Othello, and, more importantly, his confidence in that obedience.



Cassio sees his reputation, his honor, as what makes him human. Without it, he sees himself as a beast, using the kind of animal imagery that other racist characters had used only to describe Othello. Meanwhile, Iago moves his plot into its second phase: to twist two noble traits—Cassio's desire to regain his honor and Desdemona's generosity—to provoke Othello's doubt of Desdemona and sexual jealousy of Cassio.



Iago again takes on the role of "director," laying out his plans for the audience. In the soliloquy he makes the difference between appearance and reality still more obscure. He suggests that even really good actions can produce bad effects. He promises to turn Desdemona's generosity against her, and use it to provoke Othello's jealousy and ruin everyone.



Roderigo enters. He is angry that he has gotten himself beaten by Cassio and given Iago almost all his money, but does not have Desdemona. Iago tells him to be patient, notes that Cassio has already been removed as an obstacle, and says that these sorts of plans take wits and time to develop.

Encouraging patience, Iago subtly reinforces the parallel between his plots and drama in general: both need time to come to their climaxes.



Roderigo exits. Iago addresses the audience, outlining his plan: he will get his wife to set up a private meeting between Cassio and Desdemona, then make sure that Othello observes this meeting.

Iago describes how he will stage yet another scene and control how the other characters will interpret it, much as a playwright does with every scene he or she writes.



ACT 3, SCENE 1

Trying to regain Othello's favor, Cassio hires musicians to play beneath his window. But Othello sends down a clown, or servant, who mocks the musicians and sends them away.

The musicians serenading create another scene within a scene.



Cassio gives the clown a gold piece, and asks the clown to bring Emilia to him so that he may speak with her. The clown exits and Iago enters. Cassio explains that he sent the clown to get Emilia. Iago says that he will send Emilia down himself, and will also make sure that Othello does not come near so that they will be free to talk. Cassio thanks him for his kindness and honesty. Iago exits.

Following Iago's final soliloquy in 2.3, the audience knows that no good can come of Cassio's seeking Desdemona as his advocate. The fact that even Emilia plays into Iago's manipulations draws attention to how limitless Iago's capacity for deception is: he will even use his own wife.



Emilia enters, and tells Cassio that Othello and Desdemona have been talking about his situation. Desdemona spoke strongly in his favor. Othello responded that because Montano is so powerful and well-liked in Cyprus he can't simply give Cassio his job back. However, Othello also told Desdemona that he loved Cassio and that he is looking for the earliest opportunity to reinstate him. Even so, Cassio begs Emilia to help him have a brief conversation with Desdemona. Emilia agrees to help him.

Emilia's report on Othello and Desdemona's conversation about Cassio's fate underlines the extreme differences between the Othello-Desdemona and Iago-Emilia couples. The first is based on mutual respect and love, in the second, Iago keeps Emilia completely in the dark and uses her for his own ends.



ACT 3, SCENE 2

Othello, Iago, and a gentleman walk together. Othello gives Iago some letters to send to the Venetian senate, and tells him to meet him on the fortifications. Iago exits. Othello goes to tour the fortifications.

Othello yet again exhibits his trust in Iago. Such trust shows Othello's honor, yet also highlights how this good trait makes him vulnerable he is to Iago's machinations.



ACT 3, SCENE 3

Desdemona, Cassio, and Emilia enter. Desdemona assures Cassio that she will help him regain his position. Just then, Othello and Iago enter. Cassio feels so ashamed that he feels unable to talk with Othello, and exits. Othello asks Iago whether it was Cassio who just departed. Iago responds that it seems unlikely, because why would Cassio "steal away so guilty-like / Seeing your coming" (3.3.38-39)?

When Othello reaches Desdemona, she asks him to reinstate Cassio. Othello promises to do so soon, but won't give a definite time, much to Desdemona's annoyance. Othello says that he will deny her nothing, but asks for some time to himself. Desdemona exits, saying "I am obedient" (3.3.90).

Othello and Iago are now alone. Iago starts asking vague but leading questions about Cassio, until Othello finally demands that Iago make clear his suspicions. Iago then makes a show of saying that his suspicions must be wrong because Cassio seems so honest, but in the process plants the idea of an affair between Cassio and Desdemona in Othello's mind.

Iago again says that his suspicions are likely false. He warns Othello against the dangers of "the green-eyed monster" (3.3.165-7) of jealousy, while at the same time noting that Desdemona did successfully deceive her father. Othello claims not to be jealous; though it is obvious from his manner that this is untrue. Finally, Iago counsels Othello to trust only what he sees, not Iago's suspicions. Othello tells Iago to have Emilia watch Desdemona, and Iago tells Othello to watch how Desdemona acts regarding Cassio.

Iago exits. Othello, alone, now voices worry that perhaps it's unrealistic for him to expect Desdemona to love him when he is black, not well mannered, and considerably older than she is. He curses marriage and laments that it is the fate of "great ones" to be cuckolded (3.3.277).

Desdemona and Emilia enter to tell Othello it is time for dinner. Desdemona tries to soothe him with her **handkerchief**, but Othello says it is too small and drops it to the floor. They exit to go to dinner. Emilia then picks up the handkerchief, noting that Desdemona treasures it since it was the first gift that Othello gave to her, and also that Iago is always asking her to steal it for some reason. She decides to make a copy of the handkerchief for him.

Desdemona, who showed independence resisting her father's anger in 1.1, here proves herself willing to take an independent political stand against her husband. Iago once again manages to plant a seed of doubt in another person's mind without seeming to mean to.



Othello's sudden curtness to Desdemona may indicate that he is already suspicious of her, just from seeing Cassio rush away. For her part, Desdemona insists on her obedience to him as a virtuous wife.



Othello's exasperation with Iago's further supports that Othello has already become suspicious. Iago once again plants seeds of doubt while making himself look innocent by airing his suspicions and then arguing that they can't possibly be true.



Iago continues to strive to produce the effects of honesty. However, his words and shifts are carefully calculated to inspire jealousy. Notice, also, that until this moment, Othello has always been honest. Now, to protect his own honor, he lies and says that he is not jealous. Jealousy is a "green-eyed" monster because it takes you over and causes you to see what is not there.



As soon as doubt about Desdemona's faithfulness creeps in, Othello loses his sense of manhood and begins to be affected by the racial prejudice that he had formerly shrugged off.



The handkerchief is a symbol of Othello and Desdemona's love. Notice that it is Othello, now jealous, who says it is too small and lets it fall. Meanwhile, despite being misused by her own husband, Emilia nonetheless remains eager to please him. Emilia's making a copy of the handkerchief echoes her husband's diligently producing illusions.



Iago enters. To his delight, Emilia shows him the **handkerchief**. He grabs it from her hand. She asks for it back unless he has some important use for it, but he refuses to give it back and sends her away. Once he's alone, Iago plots to place the handkerchief in Cassio's room, so that Cassio will find it.

Snatching the handkerchief, Iago retains exclusive control over "directing" the unfolding jealousy of Othello. The planting of the handkerchief, which Othello dropped, in Cassio's room shows how jealousy produces the effect it fears.



Othello enters, frantic and furious, and says to Iago that he would have been happier to be deceived than to suspect. He shouts farewell to war and his "occupation's gone" (3.3.357). Othello then grabs Iago by the throat, and commands him to come up with "ocular proof" (3.3.360) that Desdemona has been unfaithful or else be punished for causing Othello such emotional pain.

Othello here states that the uncertainty of jealousy is actually worse than the possible crime, and expressly connects his worrying with the loss of military glory, of honor and manhood. He seeks to eliminate the uncertainty by getting proof—by seeing reality.



Iago responds that it's probably impossible to actually catch Desdemona and Cassio in the act of infidelity, but that he can provide circumstantial evidence. He says that one recent night he and Cassio slept in the same bed, and that Cassio, while asleep, called out Desdemona's name, kissed Iago, lay his leg over Iago's thigh, and cursed fate for giving Desdemona to the Moor. Othello is enraged, saying "I'll tear her all to pieces" (3.3.438).

Iago responds to Othello's demand for visible proof with the most circumstantial, unverifiable evidence. And Othello, overcome by jealousy, accepts it. Notice also that Othello immediately thinks of killing Desdemona. He believes that she has robbed him of his manhood, so he feels he must destroy her.



But Iago cautions Othello that it was just Cassio's dream and may not signify anything about Desdemona's faithfulness. Then Iago asks whether Othello once gave Desdemona a handkerchief with strawberries embroidered on it (this is the kerchief that Emilia earlier picked up). When Othello says yes, Iago sadly informs him that earlier that day he saw Cassio holding the handkerchief.

Yet again, Iago is most deceitful precisely in the moments in which he pretends to be most moderate. And, once again, he follows a moment of backing off with an insinuation calculated to drive Othello still madder with jealousy—all carefully staged.



Othello cries out in anguish, then kneels and vows that he will take revenge on Cassio and Desdemona. Iago kneels and vows as well. Othello makes Iago his new lieutenant.

This highly theatrical moment of vow-taking reflects the climax of Iago's plan. He has become lieutenant, and destroyed Othello's sense of his own honor in the process.



ACT 3, SCENE 4

In her quarters, Desdemona sends the clown to tell Cassio she has made entreaties on his behalf to Othello, and to ask him to come speak with her.

The sudden shift from the wrongly jealousy Othello at the end of the last scene to Desdemona emphasizes just how innocent and virtuous she actually is.



When the clown exits, Desdemona wonders what has happened to her **handkerchief**. Emilia, who is also present, says she doesn't know.

In response to Desdemona's frank question Emilia exhibits some of her husband's duplicity.



Othello enters. He takes Desdemona's hand, and notes that it is moist. When Desdemona tries to bring up Cassio's suit, Othello says he has a headache and asks for the **handkerchief** he gave her. When, Desdemona admits she doesn't have it at hand, Othello tells her that the handkerchief is magic, was given to his mother by an Egyptian sorceress, and that a woman who loses it will lose her husband.

Uncomfortable, Desdemona says she doesn't have the handkerchief with her, but that it isn't lost. When Othello demands that she go get it, she tries to change the subject back to Cassio's suit. This enrages Othello, who exits. Emilia wonders if Othello is jealous, then comments on how fickle men are towards women.

Iago and Cassio enter. Cassio asks about his suit, but Desdemona tells him that he must be patient—for some reason Othello seems not himself and her advocacy of Cassio only made Othello angrier. Iago exits, promising to look into Othello's anger.

Desdemona surmises that Othello's bad temper must arise from some affair of state. Emilia wonders again whether it might be jealousy. When Desdemona says he can't be jealous, since she gave him no reason to be, Emilia answers that jealousy needs no reason—it is a monster that grows by feeding on itself. Emilia and Desdemona exit to look for Othello.

As Cassio waits alone, a prostitute named Bianca enters. She says that he does not visit her enough. He apologizes and says he has been worn out with troubled thoughts. He then asks Bianca to make a copy of a handkerchief that he hands to her. Bianca thinks that the handkerchief must be a gift to him from another mistress, but he says that her jealousy is for nothing—he found the handkerchief in his room and doesn't know whose it is. Though Bianca wants to stay with Cassio, he says that he has to see Othello and that they'll have to meet later. Bianca grudgingly accepts.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Othello and Iago enter, discussing infidelity. Iago uses the conversation to further enrage Othello, then lets slip that Cassio has actually told him that he has slept with Desdemona. Othello grows frantic, almost incoherent, then falls into an epileptic fit.

Othello obsessively tries to find evidence of infidelity. The handkerchief's origins with an Egyptian sorceress connects it to: Othello's non-white background; illusion, such as those Iago is using the handkerchief to create; and to a threatening woman, hinting that, to men, all women are threatening.



Under Othello's pressure, the typically honest Desdemona is herself forced to equivocate. Bringing up Cassio in good faith, she plays right into Iago's hands. Emilia, who is less idealistic and more worldly than Desdemona, immediately understands that Othello's behavior stems from jealousy.



Iago continues to handle every person involved in the unfolding drama carefully. The others remain clueless.



Like Othello, Desdemona doesn't understand that a skillful liar can twist reality to look like something else. She thinks that if she is virtuous, then Othello and the world will see it. Emilia, however, understands that jealousy can warp a person's vision, so that they see what isn't there.



Bianca's jealousy of Cassio provides a contrast for the jealousy that Othello feels for Desdemona—demonstrating that women are also subject to the jealousy that Emilia, earlier in this scene, attributes only to men. Bianca also serves as a contrast to Desdemona: Bianca is whore, while Desdemona's virtuous wife. But the depiction of Bianca as a jealous woman who truly cares for Cassio complicates the contrast.



Othello's fit robs him of his ability to speak, the trait that distinguishes humans from animals. Consumed by jealousy, without his honor, he has become the animal that the prejudiced characters have described him as being.



Cassio enters while Othello is unconscious from his fit. Iago informs Cassio that this is Othello's second fit in as many days, and though Cassio wants to help advises that it would be better if Cassio stayed away. He adds that he'd like to speak with Cassio once Othello is better.

Although Cassio shows real concern for Othello, Iago skillfully maintains exclusive control over his situation.



Othello's fit ends after Cassio exits. Iago tells Othello that Cassio passed by during Othello's fit and will soon return to speak with Iago. Iago says that he will get Cassio to talk about the details of his affair with Desdemona, and that Othello should hide and watch Cassio's face during the conversation. Othello hides.

Up until now, Iago has staged events and then enjoyed them as a spectator. Now he sets up a staged event with Othello as the spectator.



Alone, Iago explains to the audience that he will actually speak with Cassio about Bianca, who's dotting pursuit of Cassio never fails to make Cassio break out in laughter. This laughter will drive Othello mad.

At the play's beginning, Othello was the center of the action, the military hero. Now, his honor gone, he skulks around the periphery, a kind of peeping tom. Cassio, by the way, is rather nasty to Bianca.



The plan works perfectly: as Cassio laughs and gestures, Othello grows angrier and angrier. Then Bianca herself enters, again accuses Cassio of having another mistress, throws the handkerchief at him, and exits. Othello recognizes the handkerchief. Cassio races after Bianca.

With Bianca's appearance, which Iago doesn't seem to have planned, his scene takes on a life of its own. Again, Bianca's jealousy provides a foil to Othello's own, while also further convincing Othello that Iago is telling the truth.



Othello comes out of hiding and promises to kill Cassio. But it is less easy for him to think about killing Desdemona. He keeps remembering what a kind, beautiful, talented, and delicate person she is. But Iago convinces him that these qualities make her unfaithfulness all the worse. Othello, at Iago's prodding, says he will strangle Desdemona in her bed. Iago promises to kill Cassio.

Othello still shows the residue of the tenderness that he and Desdemona eloquently expressed for each other in earlier scenes. But Iago turns this logic on its head, arguing that in Desdemona, as in all women, such attractive or noble traits are in fact just hiding a devious sexuality that threatens to steal men's honor and manhood.



Just then, Desdemona enters with Lodovico, an envoy who is carrying orders from the Duke of Venice that Othello is to return to Venice and leave Cassio behind to govern Cyprus. Desdemona mentions to Lodovico the falling out between Othello and Cassio, and how much she wants to heal it. This enrages Othello, and he strikes Desdemona and commands her to leave. Lodovico is shocked, and asks that Othello call Desdemona back. Othello complies, but then condemns her as a loose woman and sends her away again. He promises to obey the Duke's commands, and then exits himself.

The arrival of Lodovico, like that of Bianca just before, provides yet another serendipitous addition to Iago's plan. The presence of Lodovico as an emissary from Venice also reinforces how dramatically Othello has changed from the early scenes in Venice. Jealousy and the fear that he has been cuckolded have robbed him of his honor, and he now acts recklessly, angrily, and without self-control.



Lodovico can't believe that Othello, renowned for his unshakable self-control, would act this way. He asks Iago if Othello has gone mad. Iago refuses to answer, but clearly implies that something seems to be terribly wrong with Othello, and advises Lodovico to observe Othello for himself.

Iago quickly assumes control of this new dimension of the situation. Once again, Iago refuses to answer questions in such a way that makes him look loyal while at the same time inspiring the beliefs he wants his interlocutor to have.



ACT 4, SCENE 2

Othello questions Emilia, who insists that nothing has happened between Desdemona and Cassio. He orders her to go get Desdemona. Othello assumes that Emilia is helping Desdemona in her infidelity.

Despite naively playing into Iago's hands earlier by giving him the handkerchief, Emilia shows her earnest loyalty to Desdemona.



Emilia returns with Desdemona. Othello sends Emilia outside to guard the door. Othello then says he could have handled any affliction but infidelity. Desdemona denies being unfaithful and asserts both her love and loyalty to Othello. But her denials only make Othello more angry—he calls her a whore, and, after giving Emilia money for guarding the door, storms out.

Now that Othello suspects that Desdemona's virtue is just a cover for whore-like behavior, her denials of his accusation just makes him more certain of its truth. Jealousy feeds on itself. By paying Emilia, Othello is implying that Desdemona is a whore whose time costs money.



Desdemona asks Emilia to fetch Iago, whom Desdemona then questions about Othello's behavior. Emilia thinks that it must be the doing of some "eternal villain" who is looking "to get some office" (4.2.135-136). Iago scoffs at this, and says that Othello is just upset by affairs of state. Trumpets sound, and Emilia and Desdemona exit to go to supper.

Here Iago shows that he is both willing and able to manipulate everyone, including his own wife, to the end. Emilia herself exhibits some—but not enough—perceptiveness about the entire situation.



Roderigo enters, angry that he still does not have Desdemona despite all the jewels he's given to Iago to pass on to her. He says he is ready to give up his effort and ask her to return his jewels.

For the first time, Roderigo asserts a free will, and wants to do something that would not benefit Iago.



Iago responds that he's been working diligently on Roderigo's behalf and can promise that Roderigo will have Desdemona by the following night. He then tells Roderigo about Cassio being promoted by the Duke to take Othello's place as defender of Cyprus. But he adds a lie: that Othello, rather than returning to Venice, is being sent to Mauritania along with Desdemona. Iago persuades Roderigo that the only way to stop Desdemona from slipping forever beyond his reach is to kill Cassio, which will keep Othello in Cyprus.

But Iago manages to maintain control of the situation by once again playing on Roderigo's jealous desire for Desdemona. Once he has convinced Roderigo to stay, he then weaves him even more fully into his plots.



ACT 4, SCENE 3

After supper, Othello invites Lodovico on a walk. Before leaving, he orders Desdemona to go directly to bed and to dismiss Emilia. Emilia helps Desdemona prepare for bed. As they discuss Othello, Emilia says that she wishes Desdemona had never met him, but Desdemona responds that she loves him so much that even his bad behavior has a kind of grace to her. Yet Desdemona's next words is to instruct Emilia to use the wedding bedsheets as a shroud for her should she die. Desdemona then sings a song called "Willow" that she learned from her mother's maid, a woman who's husband went mad and abandoned her.

Desdemona then asks Emilia whether she would commit adultery. Emilia responds that women are just like men, and will cheat on their husbands if their husbands cheat on them. Desdemona responds that she does not want to learn how to emulate bad deeds, but instead how to avoid them. She dismisses Emilia and goes to bed.

Desdemona remains as faithful here in her love as in 1.3, despite the fact that Othello has berated her and that she even seems to sense that he might kill her. Her devotion to Othello even should it cost her her life could not contrast more strongly with the graphic, misogynistic picture of female sexuality Iago has described throughout the play. Othello is so threatened by the possibility of having been cuckolded that he can't see the reality of his incredibly faithful wife.



Emilia presents a cynical view of marriage, in which one bad deed inspires another. Though it should be noted that Emilia seems to think that men always cheat first, while the men suspect the women will cheat first. Once again, Desdemona displays her incredible virtue and faithfulness, which in his jealousy Othello can no longer see.



ACT 5, SCENE 1

In the street, Iago and Roderigo wait to ambush Cassio as he emerges from his visit to Bianca. Iago convinces Roderigo to make the first attack, and promises to back him up if necessary. In an aside, Iago comments that he wins either way: if Cassio kills Roderigo, he gets to keep Roderigo's jewels; if Roderigo kills Cassio, then there's no danger that Cassio and Othello will ever figure out his plot.

Cassio enters. Roderigo attacks, but Cassio's armor turns away the thrust. Cassio counterattacks, wounding Roderigo. From behind, Iago darts in and stabs Cassio in the leg, then runs away. From a distance, Othello hears Cassio's shouts of pain and believes that Iago has killed Cassio. Moved by Iago's loyalty to him, Othello steels himself to go and kill Desdemona in her bed.

Lodovico enters with Graziano (Brabantio's brother). They hear the cries of pain from Cassio and Roderigo, but it's so dark they can't see anything. Iago enters, carrying a light, and is recognized by Lodovico and Graziano. He finds Cassio, and then Roderigo. He identifies Roderigo as one of the "villains" who attacked Cassio, and stabs and kills Roderigo.

Iago manipulates Roderigo's jealousy and sense of honor to get him to attack Cassio. Iago now shows the depths of his depravity. He doesn't just want to ruin Othello, he's willing to trick people into attacking each other and dying as long as it serves his own ends.



Iago's actions are cowardly, sending Roderigo ahead of him and then attacking Cassio from behind. Othello once again misinterprets what has happened, though, to Iago's benefit. Othello's professed admiration for Iago, coupled with his newly misogynistic and violent plans for Desdemona, contrast poignantly from his declarations of love in 1.3.



Iago here reveals the full extent of his treachery, killing the character with whom he has plotted onstage since 1.1 in order to cover his tracks. Iago, basically, has no honor to lose.



As Iago, Lodovico, and Graziano tend to Cassio's wounds, Bianca enters and cries out when she sees Cassio's injuries. Iago, meanwhile, makes a show of recognizing Cassio's attacker as Roderigo of Venice, and also implicates Bianca as being in on the plot to kill Cassio by getting her to admit that Cassio had dined with her that night.

Although the other characters dismiss Bianca as a promiscuous woman, she shows real affection for Cassio. Iago, however, uses misogynistic stereotypes to implicate the (innocent) Bianca, and further put himself in the clear.



Cassio is carried offstage and Emilia enters. When Iago explains what has happened, Emilia curses Bianca. Bianca responds by saying that she is as honest as Emilia. Emilia curses her again, and then exits, sent by Iago to bring news of what has happened to Othello and Desdemona.

The brief fight between Emilia and Bianca shows that just as Othello might hold racist feelings about himself, so do women entertain gender prejudices and stereotypes against other women.



Iago has Bianca arrested, and in an aside to the audience says "This is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite" (5.1.130–131).

Iago's reference to the night as a dramatic climax once again underscores his self-consciously chosen role as "director."



ACT 5, SCENE 2

Othello enters Desdemona's quarters, holding a candle. Standing over Desdemona as she sleeps, he admires her beauty, kisses her, and is almost moved to let her live—noting that, like a flower, once plucked, she cannot be given "vital growth" (5.2.14) again. But, finally resolving to kill her, he moves to do so.

In comparison to his frantic, epileptic state in the prior scenes, Othello now seems dignified. He describes Desdemona's beauty and his own longing and anguish using traditional terms, which are beautiful but also underscore the traditional masculine values spurring him to kill the "loose" Desdemona.



Just then, Desdemona wakes. She calls out to Othello, who answers, and then tells her to pray in preparation for her to death. Terrified, Desdemona begs to know why Othello is going to kill her. He tells her that he has seen Cassio with her handkerchief. When Desdemona denies giving Cassio the handkerchief, Othello tells her that Cassio has confessed to sleeping with her and, in punishment, has been killed by Iago. Desdemona begins to weep, which only infuriates Othello since he believes that she is crying for Cassio. He struggles with Desdemona as she begs to be first banished instead of killed and then allowed to live just a few minutes more. Othello is implacable, though, and smothers Desdemona with a pillow.

By refusing to even listen to Desdemona's denials of her suspected infidelity, Othello reveals how fully he has lost his independent perspective and succumbed to Iago's web of illusions. In fact, he refuses even to let her live a bit longer so she can prove her innocence. He is not interested in her innocence, in her pleas to be given a chance to explain the truth behind appearances, because he is so consumed by the "monster" of jealousy that he is certain that she is guilty.



Emilia calls from the doorway. Othello mistakes her calls as noises made by Desdemona, and smothers Desdemona again.

Othello can't analyze reality—he can't even differentiate between Emilia's and Desdemona's voices.



Finally, Othello realizes that it is Emilia who is calling. He draws the curtains back around the bed to hide Desdemona's body. Then he goes to speak with Emilia, expecting her to tell him of Cassio's death. Othello is shocked to learn from Emilia that Cassio killed Roderigo but is himself still alive. Then, suddenly, Desdemona calls out that she has been murdered.

The slow pace of Desdemona's death stretches out its brutality and the terrible consequences of Othello's delusion. The news that Cassio has killed Roderigo is the first sign of Iago's plots unraveling. That these two things happen almost simultaneously heightens the play's tragedy.



Emilia opens the curtains and to her horror sees Desdemona, who with her dying breaths says that she is innocent, but then denies that she was murdered and instead says that she committed suicide. Desdemona dies.

In changing her story, Desdemona tries to spare Othello from the punishments he will receive, proving her love and devotion to him to the very last.



Though Emilia does not appear to suspect him, Othello voluntarily (and almost proudly) admits that he killed her for being unfaithful to him. Emilia denies that Desdemona was ever false to him, but Othello counters that it was "honest, honest Iago" (5.2.156) who showed him the truth.

However, Othello does not seek to profit from Desdemona's own attempt to "direct" a scene to his benefit. The repetition of "honest" in his description of Iago compounds the tragedy by highlighting how completely he was duped.



Emilia is dumbfounded as she digests this information, but recovers herself enough to say that Iago was lying and to condemn Othello's actions. Othello threatens Emilia to keep quiet, but Emilia is unafraid, saying "Though hast not half that power to do me harm / As I have to be hurt" (5.2.169–170). She calls out that "The Moor hath killed my mistress" (5.2.174).

Emilia, who understands Iago far better than the gullible male characters have so far, demonstrates her loyalty to Desdemona by risking her own safety and defying the murderer of her former mistress, despite his obvious willingness to do violence.



Montano, Graziano, and Iago enter. Othello admits once more, this time to Graziano, Desdemona's uncle, that he smothered Desdemona. Graziano is shocked, and says that it is a good thing that Brabantio died from grief at Desdemona's marriage so that he did not live to see this.

The speed with which Othello is transformed from respected general to reviled outsider reveals the strength of prejudices more or less repressed by other characters throughout the majority of the play. Once there's reason to exclude him from the social group, Othello quickly is diminished to the status of outsider among the Venetians.



Meanwhile, despite Iago's demands that she obey him and be quiet, Emilia begins to piece together what happened. Othello insists again that Desdemona was unfaithful and brings up the proof of the **handkerchief**. Now Emilia explodes in anger, and explains that she was the one who found the handkerchief and gave it to Iago.

Iago tries to control Emilia, commanding her as his wife to be silent. But she shows her independence and loyalty to both Desdemona and to the truth. Othello, meanwhile, his crime staring him in the face, now can only preserve his honor by insisting that Iago's version must be the truth.



Realizing that Iago lied to him, Othello attacks Iago, but is disarmed by Montano. In the uproar, Iago stabs Emilia and flees. Montano chases after Iago while Graziano stays to guard the door. Othello is left with the body of Desdemona and the dying Emilia. Emilia sings a verse of the song "Willow," and dies while telling Othello that Desdemona was faithful to him.

Othello searches his chamber and finds a sword. Graziano enters to find Othello armed and mourning Desdemona. Moments later Lodovico and Montano enter with Iago, whom they've captured. Cassio also enters, carried in on a chair. Othello immediately stabs Iago, who is injured but not killed. Othello is disarmed by Lodovico's men. Othello then begs to know why Iago did what he did, but Iago refuses to speak at all. Lodovico, however, has found two letters in Roderigo's pocket that reveal all of Iago's schemes.

Now Lodovico turns to Othello, and tells him that he must give up his command and return with them to Venice. In response, Othello asks that when they speak of what has happened they "speak of me as I am ... as one that loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.344). Then Othello tells a story about a time when he once defeated and stabbed a Muslim Turk who had killed a Venetian, and as he describes the stabbing he takes out a hidden dagger and stabs himself. He falls onto the bed next to Desdemona and dies while giving her a final kiss.

Lodovico demands that Iago look upon the destruction he has caused. He notes that Graziano is Othello's heir, and says that Cassio is to carry out the execution of Iago. Then he departs to carry the sad news to Venice.

Othello killed Desdemona because he thought she betrayed him. Iago kills Emilia because she did betray him—but she betrayed him for the greater good, and Iago's violence toward her is more graphic and terrible than the smothering of Desdemona, bringing home his full villainy.



Cassio's relative restraint, despite having been wounded by Roderigo and Iago and mistrusted by Othello, reveals his strength of character, which contrasts with Iago's increasingly sadistic malice as the extent of his plot is revealed. By refusing to speak, Iago retains some of the directorial control of events that he has striven for throughout: he never reveals his inner reality to the other characters.



Othello, now comprehending everything, shows frank, deep remorse. His curious final anecdote asserts his rightful membership in Venetian society. In a gesture reminiscent of how other characters (Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio) have drawn on racial stereotypes to exclude Othello and cement their own relationships, he here defines himself as an "insider," a Christian, against the "outsider" or enemy, the Turk. Yet, at the same time, when he tells of stabbing the Turk, he also stabs himself. In effect, he is defining himself as both an insider and an outsider, someone who defended Venice but was nevertheless seen as both a possible enemy and an animal by other Venetians.



In the final moment of the play, Iago, who has directed action throughout, ends up as a spectator to his own misdeeds.





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