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RHETORIC AS POETIC: HUMANIST FICTION IN THE RENAISSANCE

BY ARTHUR F. KINNEY

"Immortal gods! said Catullus, what a variety of things, Crassus, you have embraced! what force, what abundance! and from what poverty have you dared to lead the orator forth and establish him in the kingdom of his fathers!" The author is Cicero, the work the conclusion of the *De Oratore* (III.xxxii.126); and the tribute follows Cicero's careful delineation of eloquence as dependent on clear distinctions, lucid ordering, sufficient amplitude, and a deliberate choice of matter and manner, the whole enabling the rhetoricians to weave from language something approaching the spell of poetry: *in ipsa oratione quasi quemdam numerum versumque conficiunt—id est quod dico ornate* (III.xiv.53).¹ We do not know now if Petrarch had this particular passage in mind or not when he praised rhetoric rather than theology as the queen of the arts²—surely Cicero was his favorite next to the Bible of all the great texts of the past—but his accolade was not less firm; eloquence, he remarks, is the proper expression of *virtus* ("naturall excellence"). Petrarch nominated rhetoric as the fundamental means to wisdom; similar to our own corrupted sense of *virtu*, Petrarch made of eloquence its own reward.

Petrarch's endorsement of Cicero is, in very real ways, both the beginning of humanism and the beginning of the Renaissance, the eloquence of the Romans in constellation with the philosophy of the Greeks and Holy Scriptures. The respect paid Roman oratory by all the humanists early and late is rehearsed by Jean Luis Vives. Rhetoric, Vives tells us in *De Tradendis Disciplinis* (1516),

Arthur F. Kinney

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LUST FOR AUDIENCE: AN INTERPRETATION OF *OTHELLO*

BY MARJORIE PRYSE

As Shakespeare's play begins, Iago has just informed Roderigo that without his knowledge, Desdemona has eloped. In the opening line, Roderigo exclaims that he doesn't want to hear this news—"Tush, never tell me!"—and especially not from Iago, whom he has been paying to be his pander. Iago jumps to his own defense: "Sblood, but you'll not hear me! / If ever I did dream of such a matter, / Abhor me" (I.i.4-6).¹ He is concerned about two things: that Roderigo accuses him of being responsible, or in some way having prior knowledge; and that Roderigo has refused to listen to him—"Sblood, but you'll not hear me!" He explains the source of his hatred for the Moor, however, not to defend himself against Roderigo's accusations, but rather to recapture his listener's attention. Othello, he says, has refused to listen to "three great ones" whom Iago has sent to plead his advancement:

But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them with a bombast circumstance.
Horribly stuffed with epithets of war;
And, in conclusion,
Nonsuits my mediators.

(I.i.12-16)

Iago hates Othello not because Othello has chosen Cassio to be his lieutenant, but because he has refused to listen to Iago and to the advocates Iago sends. As far as Othello is concerned, Iago does not exist. He does not recognize Iago's worth, and Iago is offended: "I know my price; I am worth no worse a place" (I.i.11).

Iago's hatred for Othello convinces Roderigo to become his accomplice—and to remain his audience. Iago wishes, throughout the play, to convince—"Lay thy finger thus, and let thy soul be instructed" (II.i.219)—and Roderigo to be convinced—"I will hear further reason for this" (IV.ii.240)—in spite of his lack of confidence in Iago's words:

Iago: Will you hear me, Roderigo?
 Roderigo: Faith, I have heard too much; for your words
 And performances are no kin together.
 (IV.ii.181-83)

Roderigo doesn't learn anything about Iago as the play proceeds which he doesn't know in the opening scene, yet he grants Iago his attention because Iago engages his fantasy. Roderigo, himself, cannot act to win Desdemona, yet he feeds on Iago's verbal promises. The opening scene, then, articulates not only Iago's characteristic action—he provides Roderigo with imaginative or fantastic satisfaction of his needs—but also his characteristic motive: without an audience, he is worth nothing, yet he knows his price and will be heard.

Throughout the history of *Othello* criticism, readers have understood the play as a triad of nobility, purity, and villainy. Yet Othello and Desdemona share Iago's motive for action. Desdemona's death and Othello's tragedy result not from Iago's machinations, but rather from their own insistence that they be heard. Lust for audience is neither noble nor villainous; rather, it expresses the problem of human existence.

Alone of the major characters, Cassio does not participate in the struggle for audience, but serves as mute commentary on that action when, in the reversal of favor which follows his drunkenness in Act II, he loses his ability to speak. Whether or not Cassio's linguistic impotence results from Iago's alcohol, he cannot defend his own actions:

Othello: How comes it, Michael, you are thus forgot?
 Cassio: I pray you pardon me; I cannot speak.
 (II.ii.178-79)

The infirmity survives his drunkenness, however, and in III.iii, Cassio indicates not only that he cannot speak publicly of himself, but also that he cannot bear to hear himself spoken about:

Desdemona: Why, stay, and hear me speak.
 Cassio: Madam, not now: I am very ill at ease,
 Unfit for my own purposes.
 (31-33)

Desdemona alone has the power to speak for Cassio. He pleads with her, "I do beseech you / That by your virtuous means I may again / Exist . . ." (III.iv.110-12). Cassio does not regain the powers of public articulation until Othello wounds Iago in Act

V. Yet, privately to Desdemona, he expresses the problem the other three characters all struggle against: having lost the ability to speak in his own behalf, he feels he no longer exists.

If a character is able to command an audience, he manages at the same time to articulate himself into being. At the same time, and especially on the stage, he only exists to the extent that he speaks. Othello, Desdemona, and Iago vie with each other for the center of attention: the exigencies of dramatic characters mirror existence in the natural world. The continuing ability to speak in one's own favor results directly from the speaker's power to move his listener. Thus, in his public hearing in Act I, Othello is able to defend himself against Brabantio's charges. He has appropriated not the powers of witchcraft, as Brabantio accuses, but rather the powers of storytelling. When Othello fills his speech with tales of bondage, redemption, cannibals, and "men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (I.iii.144-45), Desdemona listens with "greedy ear" and "devours" Othello's words. "My story being done, / She gave me for my pains a world of sighs" (I.iii.158-59). As Othello concludes, "This only is the witchcraft I have used" (169).

If Othello wins Desdemona because he is a good storyteller, however, he loves her because she is such a flattering audience. To engage her attention with exotic and barbarous stories about the "men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders" is to appropriate the phallic powers of young men. The Duke understands why Othello would woo Desdemona with words:

I think this tale would win my daughter too.
 Good Brabantio,
 Take up this mangled matter at the best.
 Men do their broken weapons rather use
 Than their bare hands.
 (I.iii.171-75)

A man would prefer a broken sword to none at all, and as Othello later describes himself, he has "declined / Into the vale of years" (III.iii.265-66). At the same time that Othello allows Desdemona to believe that his stories have restored his youthful manliness, he advocates setting aside swords and phalluses. In the fight which disturbs the peace in Act I and requires the Duke to intervene, he has already admonished Iago and Roderigo, "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them," and advised Brabantio, "Good Signior, you shall more

command with years / Than with your weapons" (I.ii.59-61). Othello is no longer a man of actions but of words. As he admits, he want Desdemona to accompany him to Cyprus,

not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Not to comply with heat—the young affects
In me defunct—and proper satisfaction;
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.

(I.iii.261-65)

Thus when the wars which promised to revive Othello's reputation and allow him jointly to direct his domestic and military affairs reach an abortive conclusion—"desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks / That their designment halts" (II.i.21-22)—the play's focus shifts to Othello's ability to command not an army but an audience. Othello has been deprived of an opportunity to prove himself the man his stories claimed he is.

Desdemona arrives on Cyprus before Othello does, and II.i dramatizes Desdemona's potential threat to Othello: she encourages other men than her husband to tell her stories, and to tell stories about her. Certainly Desdemona does nothing which would contradict Othello's image of her purity and honesty, but she begins to reveal ambiguities in her character which Othello has not seen:

I am not merry; but I do beguile
The thing I am by seeming otherwise.

(II.i.122-23)

Like Iago, she is not what she seems, and she encourages Iago to compete with Cassio for her attention: "Come, how wouldst thou praise me?" (124).

Yet Iago, in bantering with Emilia and Desdemona, has done nothing to mask his vulgarity—"Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk: / You rise to play, and go to bed to work" (II.i.114-15). And in the dialogue which follows, Iago's description of Desdemona consists in "old fond paradoxes" which extol woman's ability to do "foul pranks" and avoid any consideration of her virtue. As Desdemona phrases his puns, "Thou praisest the worst best" (143), yet instead of being offended by his words, she continues to encourage him until his wit fails:

O most lame and impotent conclusion! Do
not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband.

How say you, Cassio? Is he not a most profane and
liberal counsellor?

(II.i.160-63)

She rejects Iago and turns to Cassio—appropriately, since Cassio has already admitted his own inability to describe her. (When Montano asks whether Othello has a wife, Cassio states that she "paragons description" and "excels the quirks of blazoning pens" [II.i.62-63]. When Montano questions him again, Cassio terms Desdemona "our great captain's captain" [75] and her arrival saves him from further inarticulateness.) In the moment when Iago loses his audience, he begins to improvise further on his plans for revenge: "He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper! With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (II.i.166-68).

Iago's malice suggests that Desdemona has offended him by turning to Cassio. By this reasoning, she has also betrayed Othello by flirting with Iago, by granting him her audience—what wooed Othello to her in the first place. Yet she claims the license of "one that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself" (II.i.145-47). If she really is honest, then she can say whatever she pleases without altering "the authority of her merit." Yet if Desdemona, like Iago, is not what she seems, then we cannot clearly reconcile the ambiguity of her behavior. Whether we may interpret her speech as either deliberately free or unintentionally revealing, Desdemona nonetheless casts her own innocence into doubt.

If Desdemona is implying that her words are harmless, then only action becomes important in the play. In other words, no matter how much flirting she does, words are not action; flirtation is not profession of love; and thus she makes a qualitative distinction between her behavior towards other men and her love for Othello.

By this very distinction, however, she herself expresses the nature of the task which awaits Othello on his arrival in Cyprus. Desdemona relies on the distinction between words and action as the yardstick by which to gauge the difference between storytelling and serious love. It becomes important, then, in subsequent scenes, to determine whether or not Othello manages to recapture youthful potency in his middle age, or whether, in his courtship with Desdemona, his reliance on stories indeed masked his inability to woo her in any other way.

Othello upon his arrival in Cyprus proclaims a general feast in celebration of the end of war and the beginning of his marriage. It is clear that Othello and Desdemona have not yet consummated their wedding night (they had been interrupted by Iago during their elopement in Venice). Othello himself explicitly states:

Come, my dear love.
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;
That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.
(II.iii.8-10)

Iago interprets Othello's situation to Cassio: "He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove" (II.iii.15-17). Thus when the drunken brawl between Cassio, Roderigo, and Montano wakens Othello, who enters "with weapons," the scene replays that earlier coital interruption of Act I.

This second time, the status of Desdemona's chastity remains ambiguous. In a reversal of the Duke's own moderation and governance in Act I, Othello quickly loses his temper:

Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment collied,
Assays to lead the way.
(II.iii.194-97)

Unlike the Duke, who allowed Othello time to speak in his own defense and to call a witness (Desdemona) before pronouncing sentence, Othello accepts Cassio's guilt from Iago's lips (Cassio here declares himself unable to speak) and immediately, as if Cassio is also to blame for his unsuccessful wedding night, fires him: "Cassio, I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine" (II.iii.239-40).

What leads Othello to lose his temper so readily, when he has described himself, earlier, as a man in control of his passions ("I therefore beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite . . .")? Iago increases Othello's ill humor and implicitly reveals its source. When Othello first enters the scene, he says:

Iago: Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving,
Speak. Who began this? On thy love, I charge thee.
I do not know. Friends all, but now, even now,
In quarter, and in terms like bride and groom

Devesting them for bed; and then, but now—
As if some planet had unwitting them—
Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast
In opposition bloody.
(II.iii.167-74)

Iago's simile goes unnoticed. Yet it seems hardly a coincidence that he should compare the breach of peace among "friends" to the peaceful expectations of bride and groom (Desdemona and Othello) preparing to consummate a marriage. Yet the results—the "fruits"—incline more towards war than peace, and in his phrase "opposition bloody," Iago only too literally dares to cast an interpretation on Desdemona's reception of Othello's sexuality. The phallus really is a sword after all, and as we see in Act III, which opens with the clown's report to the musicians that the "general so likes your music that he desires you, for love's sake, to make no more noise with it" (III.i.12-13), Othello remains in bad humor the morning following the brawl. Iago's analogy has defined the transformation from war politic to war domestic, and the second interruption of Othello's wedding night effects that transformation.

The domestic life, however, is removed from the world of action. It is the sphere of argument rather than hand-to-hand combat, of words rather than deeds. In this world, Desdemona expects to reign supreme, to be, as Cassio earlier described her to Montano, "our great captain's captain." Thus, when Cassio asks her to be his intermediary with Othello, Desdemona has confidence in her newly-acquired power. She indicates to Cassio that this power lies in her ability to speak well:

My lord shall never rest;
I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;
I'll intermingle everything he does
With Cassio's suit.
(III.iii.22-26)

This moment is the first indication in the play that Othello may be losing his own power, that if his ability to govern his wife depends on her enraptured silence, he has lost the domestic battle before it begins. Desdemona is confident not simply that she can talk to Othello, but that she can out-talk him; she will become his schoolmistress. If Othello remains in bad humor at dawn, and Desdemona sees Cassio shortly after breakfast, the

chronology of the play's actions and Desdemona's expression of confidence leaves open the possibility that Othello has failed to consummate his marriage. Desdemona may not have a sword, but she has a tongue, and she begs Cassio to remain—"Why, stay, and hear me speak" (III.iii.31)—not thinking it to Cassio's advantage, but rather to increase the size of her audience. Like the men in the play, she is proud of commanding within her own sphere.

The scene which follows sets a trap for readers who are familiar with the play and who are watching for Iago to begin his work on Othello, for Desdemona begins her performance as soon as Othello enters, and their first domestic quarrel begins. She demands that Othello act immediately when he agrees to call Cassio back "some other time" (III.iii.55), and when he continually delays, she nags. Yet Iago has not yet begun to evoke Othello's jealousy. He will not see his opportunity until *after* Desdemona and Othello have quarreled. Desdemona's last speech, her final word in the domestic conflict, provides evidence that Iago has succeeded by another means—the coital interruptions which he engineers—in bringing on Othello's impotence. Desdemona not only nags and creates the effect of echoing Othello's words with her own questions, but she also insults and threatens:

Tell me, Othello. I wonder in my soul
 What you could ask me that I should deny
 Or stand so mamm'ring on. What? Michael Cassio,
 That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time,
 When I have spoke of you dispraisingly,
 Hath ta'en your part—to have so much to do
 To bring him in? By'r Lady, I could do much—

(III.iii.68-74)

When she accuses Othello of "mamm'ring" or stammering, she in effect tells him that his words have lost their power to move her. She admits, as well, that she herself has spoken of him "dispraisingly"—the first time in the play that she does so. To speak ill of Othello turns words to his disadvantage. Finally, she swears, "By'r Lady," thus transforming her request into a threat that she could use her own powers to work further harm.² Othello ends the argument, asking Desdemona to "leave me but a little to myself" (III.iii.85), and hints, when alone, that his own sanity has begun to crack without Iago's aid:

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

(III.iii.90-92)

Into the middle of Othello's confusion, Iago intrudes his own plan for manipulating Othello past the point of reason.

Iago: My noble lord—
 Othello: What dost thou say, Iago?

(III.iii.93)

The time during which Othello refused to hear Iago has passed. Now Othello, himself without the audience in Desdemona which he thought he had married, becomes that same audience for Iago, soliciting Iago's words as if, once again, words might end his impotence to act. (Curiously, Iago begins his dialogue with Othello by echoing him in much the same way Desdemona has just done in her preceding argument. Compare III.iii.45-74 with III.iii.99-106. In both dialogues, the echo becomes a form of echolalia, emphasizing Othello's sense of his own ensuing madness, his own returning "chaos.") The scenes between Othello and Iago demonstrate Iago's genius. He moves Othello with specific linguistic devices to the point where Othello will deny the very basis of his passion, stating, "It is not words that shakes me thus" (IV.i.41). As Shakespeare demonstrates by these devices, being able to command an audience is no mean trick. "Lust" is not an inappropriate term by which to describe the passions the play arouses.

The power which Iago possesses over Othello he acquires by evading Othello's questions. He claims that his thoughts are so vile that he has no right to utter them. In this first dialogue between the two, the question of Iago's motivation seems less important than that of Othello's. Although Othello may be angered by Desdemona, he does not suspect her. The only jealousy, then, which he initially manifests centers on Iago himself, on his access to knowledge to which Othello thinks he has a right yet no longer possesses any power to command. He can only question and plead; he cannot seize and possess. The story which Iago tells Othello moves him as deeply as Othello moved Desdemona. He ironically uses the same "witchcraft" that Othello himself used, and he teaches Othello to be his own tormentor.

The curious thing about Othello's torture is the satisfaction he derives from it. Although he states, "To be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved" (III.iii.179-80), he describes Desdemona in such a way as to increase his own appetite for carnal knowledge:

'Tis not to make me jealous
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances;
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.
Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt.

(III.iii.183-90)

In his unconscious echo of II.i, Othello seems to hear her praises sung by other men than himself. Further, the virtues he ascribes to her are sensual and expressive: feeding, speaking, singing, playing, and dancing freely. It is virtuous to be an expressive woman, but the power of speech, in particular among the expressive arts, threatens Othello. In addition, he refuses to see that everything he imagines about her is a delusion. He states, "For she had eyes, and chose me." Iago knows this to be false; Desdemona herself admitted that it was not Othello's appearance that pleased her, but that she "saw [his] visage in his mind." Finally, the power of his own embellishment on Iago's suspicions has its effect on Othello. Seeing is knowledge knowledge is possession,³ and the power Othello has lost as his own storyteller he may gain by hearing Iago's stories. In short, Othello is determined to enjoy the seeing before the doubting. He revels in his own misery.

As III.iii proceeds, Othello speaks ambiguously to Iago, as if to an unfaithful lover: "Avaunt! be gone! Thou hast set me on the rack. / I swear 'tis better to be much abused / Than but to know't a little" (335-37). In one reading, Othello is saying that to know a little leads to greater torture (the fear of the unknown) than to have full knowledge. In another reading, the phrase "'tis better" assumes the emphasis, and here Othello says that he actually prefers to be "much abused" than abused only in part, "to know't a little." The second reading reinforces the interpretation that Othello enjoys the luxurious, delayed, and comprehensive revelation of Desdemona's guilt, much as

the good audience likes the storyteller to dwell on detail. There's one thing better than being able to tell a good story: being able to listen to one. Iago has stolen Othello's identity—"Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!" (III.iii.357)—by capturing his attention. He has robbed him of his manhood and created a need for visual satisfaction, replacing Othello's phallic powers—words and swords—with an insatiable appetite for fantasy: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore! / Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof" (III.iii.359-60).

"Would that I were satisfied!" (390), Othello complains.

Iago: I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion:
I do repent me that I put it to you.
You would be satisfied?

Othello: Would? Nay, I will.
Iago: And may; but how? how satisfied, my lord?
Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
Behold her topped?

Othello: Death and damnation! O!
(III.iii.391-96)

Othello seems to mean here, as Bentley notes, that he would choose to be "completely informed."⁴ At the same time, when Iago challenges him (line 393), he puts Othello on the sexual defensive. In reasserting his former powers and in declaring, "Nay, I will," Othello implies that both kinds of satisfaction lie within his power. Iago then challenges the meaning of the word and baits Othello with a verbal description of Cassio and Desdemona engaged in sexual intercourse as Othello passively and powerlessly observes. Othello's reaction (line 396) indicates that Iago has succeeded in separating the two meanings of the word "satisfaction." Othello feels as if he were beholding Cassio and Desdemona, and thus finds, in his fantasy, the mental satisfaction or "ocular proof" that he demands; at the same time, Iago's mental picture is so vivid that it also cuts Othello off completely from sexual satisfaction. Iago turns Othello into his own wife's *voyeur*.

Iago presses his advantage. He sees that Othello reacts to verbal description as if it were real, that he views words as accomplished deeds. Thus, although Iago finds inherent difficulties in setting up a stage in which Desdemona and Cassio might actually perform acts ("Where's satisfaction? / It is impossible you should see this" [III.iii.401-02]), he surmounts these as best

he can by creating a series of dramatic scenes, for which Othello becomes his enthralled audience. In his linguistic performance of such a scene, complete with the pantomime of dialogue, he portrays Cassio asleep, dreaming of Desdemona, and attempting to mount a sleeping Iago. Again, Othello reacts as if he literally sees Iago's scene: "O monstrous! monstrous!" (III.iii.427). And in a final attempt to engage Othello's imagination, Iago sets up Cassio in Act IV to talk about Bianca as if she were Desdemona. In this scene, Othello does achieve literal visual satisfaction: he has something to watch (Iago conversing with Cassio).

Certainly critics who have described Iago as a type of playwright⁵ begin to explicate his effectiveness. The stage direction that Iago performs, the dialogue-within-dialogue that he creates in his own speeches, and the effect of his work on Othello, whom he convinces to suspend disbelief, all indicate that Iago has developed an initial need to be heard⁶ (when Othello refuses to grant his petition) into the motivating force behind the creation of drama: the need to move an audience. Othello is a fine audience. When Iago produces his stage prop, his tangible proof, the handkerchief, Othello states, "Now do I see 'tis true" (III.iii.444), and in the last speeches of the scene, he repents his marriage with Desdemona. In what many critics have termed a "marriage ceremony" between the two,⁷ Othello yields his own power as a storyteller to Iago—"I here engage my words" (III.iii.462)—and promotes Iago to Desdemona's position of power and influence.

In the final scene of Act III, Desdemona speaks in such a way that, in one interpretation of her behavior, Othello is justified in his judgment of her. As I have indicated, Desdemona has already flirted with two men, Cassio and Iago. Later, she will indicate to Emilia that Lodovico's ability to speak well attracts her (IV.iii.35-37). In III.iv, she not only allows the clown to speak to her in sexual puns, but also enlists him as her go-between—she sends him with a message to Cassio. Following immediately upon the "marriage" between Othello and Iago, this brief encounter between Desdemona and the clown can have only one interpretation: infidelity in *Othello* rests in the tongue, in the telling. In a world which values honesty and chastity above all else, and thus where sexual satisfaction is hard to come by, for Desdemona to be an audience to sexual

innuendo is for her to consent to betray Othello's exclusive position as storyteller and word-wooer. Later in the scene, she lies to Othello about the loss of the handkerchief, and when he leaves, she reports to Cassio that she stands

... within the blank of his displeasure
For my free speech! You must awhile be patient.
What I can do I will; and more I will
Than for myself I dare.

(III.iv.128-31)

Infidelity resides in language; thus Cassio may "exist" (with the sexual pun on favors conferred) in Desdemona's suit. For Desdemona as well, speech has become action.

Auden wrote that "only one character performs personal actions—all the *deeds* are Iago's—and all the others without exception only exhibit behavior."⁸ Yet Act IV demonstrates, as Othello falsely interprets Iago's dialogue with Cassio, as Othello strikes Desdemona for the first time, and as he treats Emilia as if she were the madam of a brothel, that behavior cannot be interpreted; only our words may be. Thus Desdemona is confused ("I have not deserved this" [IV.i.235]) and asks Emilia to "lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (IV.ii.105), not in a prediction of her murder, as critics in the past have interpreted the line, but rather as an expression of final determination: if, tonight, she and Othello do not manage to turn their words into deeds (to consummate their love), then she will, like her poor maid Barbary, sing herself to death. Barbary's lover forsook her, did not murder her. Desdemona thinks perhaps of suicide. Yet for Othello, the idea of physical love with Desdemona has become so repugnant that his speech deteriorates into dirty jokes. He shuts himself up with Desdemona in IV.ii. only to accuse her, and pays Emilia as if she were a procurer. Emilia replies, "Alas, what does this gentleman conceive?" (IV.ii.95). Not children, certainly.

Desdemona asks Iago to interpret her behavior to Othello, to become her intermediary. When she kneels (IV.ii.151), Iago remains standing. She says, "I cannot say 'whore.' / It does abhor me now I speak the word" (IV.iii.161-62). In light of Shakespeare's recognition that the key to power lies in the speaker's ability, Desdemona's linguistic performance here belies her intention. As she refuses to say the word and follows her refusal

by adding a homonym which echoes the very word she has just spoken in denying her ability to do so, she unwittingly expresses the play's truth: to speak the word is to do the act.

And yet, in spite of her estrangement from Othello, she refuses to surrender the stage to him, literally and symbolically. She refuses, at the end, to become Othello's audience, to listen to him and take him seriously, and tries instead to make him her own. When Othello announces his intention to kill her, she replies:

Desdemona: Talk you of killing?
 Othello: Ay, I do.
 Desdemona: Then heaven
 Have mercy on me!
 Othello: Amen, with all my heart!
 Desdemona: If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.
 Othello: Hum!

(V.ii.33-35)

As I read this scene, Desdemona is afraid, but relies on Othello's inability in the past to make his actions conform to his words. If you have gone so far as to talk of killing me, she says, I hope this means you will not be able to carry it through. Thus throughout the scene, she denies that she is on her deathbed and contradicts Othello's display of proof—that she gave Cassio the handkerchief. When Othello reveals that Cassio is dead, fear overcomes her—"Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone!" (V.ii.76)—and she resorts to frantic pleading: "Kill me tomorrow; let me live to-night!" (V.ii.80). Then, refusing her both a moment to pray and breath to continue the argument, Othello smothers her. He does not strangle her, as he initially planned; he smothers her, as if her taunts have become too much for him, as if he kills her to cut off her voice. Iago's words have proven too powerful for Othello, and in killing Desdemona, Othello turns words into deeds, destroying their imaginative hold over him.

Curiously, she does not immediately die. When Emilia enters the room, she finds enough breath to speak again.

Desdemona: A guiltless death I die.
 Emilia: O, who hath done this deed?
 Desdemona: Nobody—I myself. Farewell.
 Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!

(V.ii.123-26)

The reader's immediate response may be to interpret her refusal to blame Othello for her murder as further indication of the purity of her love for him. Yet she infuriates Othello.

Othello: Why, how should she be murd' red?
 Emilia: Alas, who knows?
 Othello: You heard her say herself, it was not I.
 Emilia: She said so. I must needs report the truth.
 Othello: She's like a liar gone to burning hell!
 'Twas I that killed her.

(V.ii.127-31)

Although he seems immediately stunned (lines 127, 129), he reacts vehemently to clarify Desdemona's lie: "'Twas I that killed her." Why does he so readily tell the truth, who has been so unable and unwilling throughout the play to search it out? As I interpret Desdemona's lie and Othello's confession, she goes to her death determined not to give Othello credit for being a man of action, who earns that reputation in a moment of passion; and he confesses his crime because doing so is the only way to prove her false: to prove that, in deed as well as in words, Othello remained his captain's captain's captain.

Emilia's death, immediately following Desdemona's, supports this interpretation. When Emilia learns that Iago has lied to Othello, she wants him to acknowledge his crime. Iago repeatedly tells her to be quiet and to go home:

Iago: What, are you mad? I charge you get you home.
 Emilia: Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak.
 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now.
 Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.

(V.ii.195-98)

Emilia: Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,
 All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak.

Iago: Be wise, and get you home.
 Emilia: I will not.

(V.ii.222-24)

In the second dialogue, Emilia indicates that speaking as she does may brand her in the eyes of men. Quite obviously, Emilia shares the attitude of the other characters in the play, that a woman with a loose tongue is a loose woman. Yet she cares nothing about her reputation here, determined to tell the truth. Iago tries in vain to stop her, and when she reveals that she gave Iago the handkerchief she found because he "begg'd of me

to steal't" (V.ii.230), he accuses her of lying. Iago kills Emilia for the same reason Othello kills Desdemona: to shut her up.

The women in the play have paid with their lives for their attempts to reveal the truth about their husbands. The result of both deaths deprives both husbands of any residual power they might yet have possessed. Montano disarms Othello, who petulantly remarks, "I am not valiant neither; / But every puny whipster gets my sword" (V.ii.244-45). Iago, wounded but not killed, speaks for the last time: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.ii.303-04). Yet the impotence of Iago and Othello results in Cassio's rejuvenation. When Cassio sees that Iago has been wounded, he speaks publicly in his own defense for the first time in the play: "Dear general, I never gave you cause" (V.ii.299). He comments on the plot for his own death, reveals that he found the handkerchief in his chamber, and has his revenge on Iago by reporting dying Roderigo's last words: "Iago hurt him, / Iago set him on" (V.ii.328-29).

Hence "Cassio rules in Cyprus" (V.ii.332). Ironically, although Desdemona is dead, she has helped Cassio to achieve his suit; he again "exists." Indirectly responsible for her death, he yet symbolizes the triumph of the formerly passive, the formerly speechless, the formerly powerless figure. Auden calls Cassio "a ladies' man . . . a man who feels most at home in feminine company . . . but is ill at ease in the company of his own sex because he is unsure of his masculinity."⁹ Yet if Othello and Iago are Shakespeare's examples of "masculine" men in the play, then manhood is the ability to command an audience, to have power over others. Cassio is the single character who combines the virtues of Desdemona (who knew words must lead to action, or else they become it) with sexual potency (Bianca's very presence in the play is evidence enough of this).

Cassio, the play's heir, does not require an audience of his own. By Auden's implication, Cassio is then a womanly man, not a manly one. Yet without audience, Othello isn't even a man, and in order to become his own historian—"Then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely, but too well . . ." (V.ii.340-44)—he kills himself. It is the only deed left to him, and as Lodovico characterizes its appropriateness, Othello puts the "bloody period" (357) to his own life's speech. Lodovico takes upon himself the task of returning to Venice to find an

audience for *Othello*: "and to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate" (V.ii.370-71). Cassio, who has managed to clear his name, unlike the surviving Iago, need not conspire to attain position. Cassio retires behind the curtain to manage the affairs of state, while Iago re-enacts his lust for audience on the Elizabethan stage: "'Sblood, but you'll not hear me!"

Yet we are ultimately that audience which Lodovico finds, and to which Iago plays; Shakespeare's study of audience becomes our mirror. Like Iago, Shakespeare dwells on the comprehensive machinations of Othello's tragedy, and like Othello, we have been compelled by it. Like Othello, we have exchanged power for knowledge, for possession. We have given over our right to speak in our own behalf and have become passive thralls before the playwright. Something is going on which is even more significant in our lives than action. The compulsion to see is even greater than our own lust for audience. We too, like Othello, have found ourselves indulging in an insatiable appetite for fantasy which has relieved us of the necessity to act.¹⁰ Like Cassio, however, we are the play's heirs. Othello's, Iago's, Desdemona's assumption that we exist only by exercising power over others is proven false. "Cassio rules in Cyprus": *Othello* soothes the impotence in all of us.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ All references in the text are to Gerald Eades Bentley's Pelican edition (Baltimore, 1970).

² As Henry Ploegstra pointed out to me, "By'r Lady" is the quarto reading; the notes to Bentley's text indicate that the folio reads "Trust me." As Bentley notes, "Although not printed until 1622, the quarto text remains totally unaffected by the Parliamentary ruling against the use of oaths in stage plays theoretically in force since 1606. On the other hand the folio text, which appears to have derived from the quarto collated with a prompt-book, reveals an unusual scrupulousness in observing this ruling" (Appendix, p. 155). Certainly the choice of texts influences the reader's view of Desdemona in this case. By the quarto reading, she becomes a woman who has seized the power of language for her own ends, and thus threatens Othello. By the folio reading, however, she remains the obedient, trusting wife who pleads for Othello's mutual trust.

³ See W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York, 1948), pp. 270-72, for a further discussion of knowledge as power.

⁴ Bentley, note for l. 390, p. 95.

⁵ See in particular Kenneth Burke, "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," *Hudson Review*, 4 (Summer 1951), 165-203.

⁶ Coleridge called Iago's reasoning "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity" and characterized at the same time the process by which a reader arrives at an interpretation of *Othello*. Although I have proposed a single motive for Iago in this essay, Iago's ambiguous and "motiveless malignity" has provided other critics with an opportunity to demonstrate various and contradictory approaches to a single literary work. See especially Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation* (New York, 1970).

⁷ See Hyman's Ch. IV., *Iago*, "Psychoanalytic Criticism: Iago as Latent Homosexual," for a full interpretation.

⁸ Auden, p. 246.

⁹ Auden, p. 246.

¹⁰ See Stanley Cavell's essay on *King Lear* in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 1969) for his analysis of the effects of witnessing a tragedy on the audience.