

Othello



INTRO

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

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

2 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, 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



THEMES

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color and number. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, use the numbers instead.

1 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

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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 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 **red 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.

- Speaker: Brabantio
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello, Desdemona
- Related themes: Prejudice, Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy, Womanhood and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:



ACT 1, SCENE 3 QUOTES

"Tis a pageant
To keep us in false gaze."

- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality
- Theme Tracker code:



QUOTES

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1 QUOTES

"Preferment goes by letter and affection
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to the first."

- Speaker: Iago
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello, Michael Cassio
- Related themes: Jealousy, Manhood and Honor
- Theme Tracker code:



"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."

- Speaker: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality
- Theme Tracker code:



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."

"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."

- Speaker: Othello
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Manhood and Honor
- Theme Tracker code:



"I do perceive here a divided duty."

- Speaker: Desdemona
- Related themes: Womanhood and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:



"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."

- Speaker: Iago
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello

•Related themes: Prejudice, Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy

•Theme Tracker code:



ACT 2, SCENE 1 QUOTES

"You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar."

•Speaker: Michael Cassio

•Mentioned or related characters: Iago

•Related themes: Manhood and Honor

•Theme Tracker code:



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

•Speaker: Desdemona

•Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality

•Theme Tracker code:



"If I 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."

•Speaker: Othello

•Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Manhood and Honor,
Womanhood and Sexuality

•Theme Tracker code:



"Her eye must be fed."

•Speaker: Iago

•Mentioned or related characters: Desdemona

•Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality

•Theme Tracker code:



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

•Speaker: Iago

•Mentioned or related characters: Othello

•Related themes: Prejudice

•Theme Tracker code:



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

•Speaker: Desdemona

•Mentioned or related characters: Iago

•Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Womanhood and
Sexuality

•Theme Tracker code:



ACT 2, SCENE 3 QUOTES

"Notwithstanding, with my personal eye
Will I look to't."

•Speaker: Michael Cassio

•Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality

•Theme Tracker code:



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

•Speaker: Michael Cassio

•Related themes: Manhood and Honor

•Theme Tracker code:



ACT 3, SCENE 3 QUOTES

"On horror's head horrors accumulate."

•Speaker: Othello

•Related themes: Jealousy, Manhood and Honor

•Theme Tracker code:



"I am your own forever."

- Speaker: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality
- Theme Tracker code:



"By heaven, thou echo'st me
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown."

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy
- Theme Tracker code:



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

- Speaker: Iago
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy
- Theme Tracker code:



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

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality
- Theme Tracker code:



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

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy
- Theme Tracker code:



"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"

- Speaker: Iago
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello
- Related themes: Manhood and Honor, Womanhood and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:



"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."

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Desdemona
- Related themes: Prejudice, Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy
- Theme Tracker code:



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

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality
- Theme Tracker code:



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

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Iago
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy
- Theme Tracker code:



ACT 4, SCENE 1 QUOTES

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

- Speaker: Othello
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Jealousy, Manhood and Honor, Womanhood and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:

2 3 4 5

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

- Speaker: Iago
- Mentioned or related characters: Desdemona
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality, Womanhood and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:

2 3 4 5

ACT 4, SCENE 2 QUOTES

"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"

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Desdemona

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

- Speaker: Desdemona
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello

ACT 5, SCENE 2 QUOTES

"Had she been true,
If heaven would make me such another world
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite
I'd not have sold her for it."

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Desdemona
- Related themes: Manhood and Honor
- Theme Tracker code:

4 5

"Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word."

- Speaker: Iago

"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."

- Speaker: Othello
- Related themes: Prejudice, Jealousy, Manhood and Honor
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

"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."

- Speaker: Othello
- Mentioned or related characters: Desdemona
- Related themes: Jealousy, Womanhood and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:

3 4 5

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

- Speaker: Iago
- Mentioned or related characters: Othello
- Related themes: Appearance vs. Reality

•Theme Tracker code:



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each row of Summary and Analysis below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color and number 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.

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



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 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.



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.

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.

2 4

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.

1 4 5

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.

4

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."

1 2 4 5

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.

1 4

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.

2

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.

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.

1 2 4

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.

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.

2 4

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.

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.



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.

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



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

Brabantio defines Desdemona's independence as disloyalty to men.



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.

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.

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.



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.

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.

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.



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.

Desdemona again demonstrates her loyalty and love toward her husband.



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.

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.

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.



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.

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.



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 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.



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.

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.



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.

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.



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.

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.

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.



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 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.



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.

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



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.

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 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.

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.



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.

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.



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.

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.

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.



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.

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.



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.

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 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.

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 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).

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)?

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.



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'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 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.

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 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 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.



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).

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.



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.

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.

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.



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.

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 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.

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



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**.

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.



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.

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.



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'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 than 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.

2 3 4 5

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.

2 3 4 5

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.

2 3 4 5

Iago responds that he's been working diligently on **Roderigo's** behalf and can promise that Rodrigo 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.

2 3 4 5

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 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.

2 3 4 5

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.

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's 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.

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.



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.

Iago 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.



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 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 on 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 cat 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 both beautiful but also underscores the tradition 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 is 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 makes 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** efforts 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 kills Desdemona because he thinks 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.



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.

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.



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 so 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.

Othello, now comprehending everything, shows frank, deep remorse. His curious final anecdote both 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.



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**.

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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