

11. The Base Indian in Judea

Othello begins with a small puzzle. Two as yet unknown characters are disputing about something which one of them (having been paid) ought to have told the other. The secret emerges gradually; but other things come out first. The accused man protests that he is no friend to “the Moor,” and follows him as his “ancient,” only in order to advance his own interests. “It is as sure as you are Roderigo,/ Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago” (I, i, 56-7), he saysⁱ — meaning “I would not then pretend as I do.” Thus we learn who the characters are, and what the formal relation of Iago is to Othello.

Roderigo has been paying Iago to help him obtain access to Desdemona; he has also given him a number of costly presents for her, which Iago has turned into money for himself. But just now Roderigo has discovered (from Iago) that Othello persuaded Desdemona to elope, and marry him. How long Iago has known what was going on, we cannot be sure; but probably he was privy to the courtship, from the first. Certainly it is essential for him now, to persuade Roderigo that he hates Othello, and still supports Roderigo’s cause. But since we can only be sure that he is pretending *somehow*, we would not know what to believe, if we did not eventually hear him talking to himself. *Then* we shall discover that, strictly because it suits him, Iago has told Roderigo the unvarnished truth about his attitude towards Othello, and to his own position and duties.

They are outside the house of Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, a very influential Senator of the Republic of Venice. So Iago eggs on Roderigo to let Brabantio know what has happened to Desdemona and Othello. Actually he is himself the first to announce, with a soldier’s crudity, that “an old black ram/ is tugging your white ewe” (I, i, 88-9). But it is Roderigo who identifies himself

clearly, and takes full responsibility for the truth of the report. Brabantio recognizes *him* as a rejected suitor of Desdemona, and threatens him with severe penalties for spreading a false report. Iago continues his vulgar talk (“Your daughter, and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” — I, i, 115-7). But he is careful to remain anonymous in the background. It is plain that Iago is not known to Brabantio. He does not move in polite society; and he would not want Othello to know that he has been rousing Brabantio to act against him. When Brabantio says, “Thou art a villain,” he retorts, “You are a senator” (I, i, 118). Only a happy mercenary, perhaps, would regard that as an equivalent insult. Once Brabantio begins to act on the report, Iago must take himself off.

From what Iago says, we get a clear idea of how important Othello is in the Venetian scheme of things. “The state cannot with safety cast him” (I, i, 147-9), he says — and his soldier’s opinion seems not to be exaggerated, as the sequel will show. But Othello is now away; and the first scene ends as Brabantio consults with Roderigo in quite a new vein. “O that you had had her” (I, i, 176), Brabantio says. Clearly he sent Roderigo packing upon Desdemona’s instructions. (Roderigo is very evidently a fool, and any girl who *could* be taken with Othello, would have small patience with such fools.)

In the next scene we meet Othello himself. Iago is giving him a carefully edited account of how Brabantio heard the news of the elopement. It was all reported by Roderigo in such “scurvy and provoking terms” (I, ii, 7) that Iago could hardly endure it. But are Othello and Desdemona indeed “fast married,” because Brabantio is someone who could make serious trouble? Othello is sure that “My services . . . shall out-tongue his complaints” (I, ii, 18-9).ⁱⁱ He also thinks that his royal birth ought to make him an acceptable husband.

Can we take this fetching of “my life and being/ From men of royal siege” (I, ii, 20-2) seriously? Othello certainly believes in it, but there is reason to be doubtful. He claims that he has been a soldier “since these arms of mine had seven years pith” (I, iii, 83); and that he has told Brabantio (and indirectly Desdemona) the story of his life “from my boyish days” (I, iii, 132). But his actual origin is a mystery. By the time he was seven (if that is what “seven years pith” means) he

was in a Christian institution of some sort. Later on, he was captured and enslaved (I, iii, 137-8). But how he came to be a baptized Christian we do not know. His royal birth may be the long cherished fantasy of a boy who cannot remember the time before he was baptized. If it *is* a fantasy, it is one that has served Othello well; for he is certainly more truly regal than most of Shakespeare's actual kings.

He displays this regal quality when Brabantio and his supporters come upon him. He has already been summoned to the Senate meeting by Cassio (the second-in-command whose place Iago covets); and as soon as Brabantio hears of it, he readily agrees that Othello should go to the Senate directly, rather than to prison. (It is a small unexplained mystery that Brabantio has not been summoned to the Senate already; but presumably, like Othello, he is being sought for). Cassio seems to know nothing of the elopement and marriage. We have Desdemona's word for it (and Othello's own) that he was a go-between in their wooing (III, iii, 71-5 and 97, 101). But it is Iago who knows all about what has happened today. (Of course, Cassio may know more than he pretends; for, unlike Iago, he is no crude soldier, but a highly polished courtier, and the soul of politeness.)

The third scene is in the Council Chamber. The Senate is receiving various reports about the Turkish fleet, but it has become clear enough that the Turks intend to attack Cyprus. Othello must be sent, to command the island's defense. Brabantio arrives with Othello, complaining very seriously that his daughter has been bewitched. Othello tells the "round unvarnished tale" (I, iii, 90) of how Desdemona fell in love with him. It was Brabantio who first made a friend of him, and got him to tell his story. Hearing only parts of it, Desdemona made him tell it over again; and in the end, quite discreetly but unmistakably, she proposed to him. Since Othello is old enough to be her father, Brabantio did not expect anything of that sort. He is quite appalled by it, but he agrees that there is no magic or witchcraft in the case, and that there is nothing to be done. He must put a brave face on it (but telling him that is not very helpful).ⁱⁱⁱ

Othello must go post haste to Cyprus. Where then should Desdemona go? Her father does not want her, and she does not want to go to her old home. She wants to go with Othello; and he promises, readily enough, that he will not be distracted from his military duty. (This underlines the difference in their ages.) So Iago is charged to bring Desdemona to Cyprus, when he follows Othello in the next ship. “A man he is of honesty and trust” (I, iii, 284) says Othello.

Everyone agrees with Othello’s view of Iago. He is called “honest Iago” rather monotonously. But we see now what the basis of his “honesty” is. Roderigo, being in despair at how things have turned out, talks of “drowning himself.” Iago’s response is that at the age of twenty-eight, *he* would never be so foolish, because, alone among men, he loves himself properly. Being in love with a woman is “merely a lust of the blood” (I, iii, 335); and to be ready to die for it, is to identify with one’s animal nature as if one were a “baboon” (I, iii, 316). Iago himself suffers “lusts of the blood” — but not that of “being in love,” for that is a “permission of the will” that makes the proper “gardening of the self” impossible. One must remain always in perfect control of one’s own will, which is the “gardener” (I, iii, 320-1).

Iago’s discussion of suicide with Roderigo is a fascinating mixture of truth and pretense. When he says, “I profess thee thy friend . . . knit to thy deserving with cables of perdurable toughness” (I, iii, 337-9), he is lying — as the sequel will clearly show. Indeed, he could not be the free gardener of his own desires, if he were permanently bound to anyone else’s “deserving” — and the sequel shows clearly that a free self-gardener is just what Iago is. He talks Roderigo out of suicidal thoughts, and into the hope that all is not lost. There is only a “frail vow, betwixt an erring barbarian, and a supersubtle Venetian” (I, iii, 356-7); and “It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love unto the Moor” (I, iii, 342-4). Roderigo cannot now *marry* Desdemona. But if he can get enough money together, he will be able to buy what he wants a bit later on.

Does Iago believe these claims himself, or is he just aiming to get money out of Roderigo? We cannot say for certain, but the following evaluation is fairly safe. That marital vows are “frail,” and that a white woman will not stay enamored of a black man for long, is “soldier’s wisdom.” Iago

certainly thinks it is true in general (or quite often). He does not know when (or even *if*) any of it will turn out to be true for Othello and Desdemona. He simply does not care about that, but only about cajoling Roderigo.^{iv}

It is for Othello — and for Iago's plot against Othello — that this "soldier's wisdom" is important. Iago knows well enough that if it ever does come true, it will not be for Roderigo. It might come true for Cassio — whom Desdemona actually likes. But what matters most is that Othello can be persuaded that it is true. In the world of the soldiers, Othello is supremely sure of himself. But in the social world of Venice, he is a *black* man, an alien, a perpetual outsider. He may speak proudly of his royal birth, but he knows that Senator Brabantio cares very little for that — as far as *marriage* is concerned — and that most (perhaps all) of the senators would agree with him. Othello is socially insecure. The soldier's wisdom about these "supersubtle" Venetians is always in his mind. Has he had brief love affairs with some of them? Rumor says that he has bedded Iago's wife Emilia. Iago has challenged her about that, and she has denied it (IV, ii, 147-9). He probably believes her (on and off) — and we certainly should. But the Moor has a reputation as a womanizer; and no matter how firmly it is contradicted, the Emilia story will not go away. Many of the officers believe it — though no one says so. Iago wants the office of second-in-command. But if he were to get it, the belief that Emilia got it for him would be even more prevalent. That is Iago's problem; and only Othello's death can solve it.

Iago hates Othello for two reasons: for preferring the socially acceptable Cassio, and for being sexually successful. It is essential to his philosophical image of himself as a self-gardener, that the rest of the world should see (and admire) his garden. He wants Cassio's office; but even more he wants to *be* Othello. Only the actual removal of Othello would really give him the chance he wants. "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago" (I, i, 57), he says, because then he would be nobody's subordinate. But in order to become the Moor, he must be in Cassio's position, when the Moor disappears. (Would he get the post even then? We may well be doubtful, but he is not.)

It is Cassio's place, therefore, that is crucial at this moment. Iago "hates" the Moor, because he is the ultimate obstacle. But for the time being, he must get as close to Othello as he can; he must be his most trusted friend and agent. *Cassio* must go. Othello must be persuaded that Desdemona is tired of her marriage, and has become "too familiar" with Cassio. This can be done, because Cassio is a very attractive *white* man "framed to make women false" (I, iii, 394-6).

Thus, in Act I, Iago's plan is "engendered." Some editors insist that it develops by "gradual stages." But Iago is fully revealed to us; and the further developments of his plan are only what he is pushed into, by events which he does not foresee (and which no one could foresee). He does not initially expect that Cassio (or Desdemona) will actually be killed (though he certainly knows that sexual jealousy can produce that sort of result). It is the Moor who turns out to be quite unpredictable (and scarcely controllable). Far from being "as tenderly led by the nose/ As asses are" (I, iii, 399-400), Othello becomes as blindly violent as any mule.

Act II opens in Cyprus. Cassio, who was traveling with Othello, arrives first; but he is shortly followed by Iago and Desdemona. They sailed later, so their arrival first, makes the fate of Othello a cause for serious anxiety. Desdemona must want to be "on the brow of the sea" with the watchers (II, i, 53). But she has to prove that she is as good a soldier as the rest. So, although she confesses that "I am not merry, but I do beguile/ The thing I am, by seeming otherwise" (II, i, 122-3), she plays up to Iago quite competently. Iago shows us how cynically ironic his normal "honesty" is, in mixed company.

Cassio marks the social difference between himself and Iago, by his very courtly behavior; and Iago sees how easy it will be to persuade Othello — another soldier like himself — that this courtier is too friendly with (and agreeable to) his "supersubtle" Venetian wife. "I will catch you in your own courtesies" (II, i, 170), he says; and that is just what he does.

Othello arrives; and after a formally "military" greeting, he and Desdemona speak of their joy at the meeting in a conventionally excessive rhetorical way. Iago's private comment is, "I'll set

down the pegs that make this music,/ As honest as I am” (II, i, 200-1). He knows how strictly conventional his own “honesty” is; and with the “pegs set down,” the conventionally happy love of Othello and Desdemona will reveal a lower side that makes all of their rhetorical professions lies, and their joys misery.

Iago’s plan is now advanced, by his practicing on Roderigo the story that he will tell Othello. His object is to get Cassio into trouble as undisciplined. Roderigo is certainly a fool to accept the hypothesis that “If Desdemona can fall for Cassio, she can fall for me.” But otherwise what Iago tells him is simply what Roderigo wants to believe; and what we actually *see* is a condensation of many observations and conversations. What Roderigo is finally persuaded into, is quite incredible. But the beginning of his bewitchment is not.

Iago now kindly tells us that he *does* believe that Cassio is in love with Desdemona. (This is almost certainly a mistake on his part.) He knows that Desdemona is not in love with Cassio, but it will be easy to persuade Othello that something so natural has actually happened. About Othello he is rather confused. He suffers a violent fit of jealousy, and claims that both Othello and Cassio have made love to Emilia. At the same time, he is convinced *both* that Othello will be a kind and faithful husband, *and* that it will be possible to drive him mad with jealousy. In some sense, Iago is in love with Desdemona himself. But this is only a fantasy about which he would never do anything. His whole soliloquy is a confused muddle of feelings. That Cassio loves Desdemona is only what Iago *wants* to believe. That Othello has made love to Emilia it *suits* him to believe — his rage about it is genuine, because his military comrades believe it. Only the final promise to “Make the Moor thank me . . . for making him egregiously an ass” (II, i, 303-4) is the simple truth of action. It is a mistake to think that Iago is revealing to us that sexual jealousy is his *real* motive. His life-project is highly rational; and he is only doing a bit of “gardening” with his emotions, by whipping them up.

The Turkish threat disappears, because their fleet is scattered and wrecked by storms. Everyone is urged to celebrate this, together with the general’s new marriage (II, ii). When Cassio confesses that he has a poor head for liquor (II, iii, 35-8), he is delivered into Iago’s hands. Once he

is drunk, it is easy to get him embroiled in a fight with Roderigo — and Montano is quite properly persuaded that Cassio is unfit for his post. Iago can put on a good show as a loyal friend, who does not want to get him into trouble. Othello is bound to sack him (and he gives us a small sample of his own violent temper — II, iii, 195-8).

When he is sober again, Cassio is very sensibly downcast; and since his own world depends entirely on his reputation we can be sure that Iago is only pretending when he claims that it is “an idle and most false imposition” (II, iii, 260-1). He knows, of course, that he is describing *his own* reputation very well. But his remark that Cassio’s demotion is “a punishment more in policy than in malice” (II, iii, 265-6) is a truth that is very bitter for Iago himself. The advice that Cassio should appeal to Desdemona is easy and obvious. It is part of the plan, and has been foreseen (more clearly than Cassio’s downfall, unless Iago was already well aware that Cassio could not drink). Iago, by himself, comments on how honest and generous his advice is — and this underlines the cunning of it. Desdemona, he says, could “win the Moor . . . to renounce his baptism” (II, iii, 334). That is just what Othello’s jealousy will do — and it is Desdemona’s pleading for Cassio that turns Othello’s thoughts towards jealousy.

Cassio makes his approach to Desdemona through Emilia (which Iago had already foreseen); and what she tells him indicates that Desdemona must be discreet and patient, but that Cassio’s cause is really quite safe. The wounding of Montano (who was only trying to calm Cassio down) is a serious matter (III, i, 46) which cannot be overlooked. Othello must surely be telling Desdemona (privately) that she does not understand military discipline, and that she must not meddle with it (cf. III, iii, 65-6). Desdemona’s intervention is really quite unnecessary, because Othello will restore Cassio to his place as soon as it can with propriety be done. Cassio’s own anxiety illustrates the correctness of Iago’s view that he is not a proper professional soldier. The glimpse that we are given of Othello attending to his military duties (III, ii) underlines how imprudent all of the domestic discussions by which the scene is surrounded (III, i and iii) are. We are also reminded that Iago has continual personal access to the Moor. He is the most trusted of Othello’s subordinates; and he can “pour his pestilence into [Othello’s] ear” (II, iii, 347) with a continual affectation of unwillingness.

He never lets up; and in that sense, he can say “Dull not device by coldness and delay” (II, iii, 378). Dramatically, this helps the impression of rapid motion; but that impression is quite false. The action proceeds fairly slowly.

Desdemona can think only of the social relations that have existed between the two of them and Cassio. Unlike Iago, Cassio has been a friend of the house. He is not a Venetian, but a Florentine; but he is not a soldier who has risen from the ranks either. Desdemona knows him from the old days, when he came, like Othello, to her father’s house — Iago, we may fairly infer, did not. She thinks Othello can forgive Cassio easily and quickly; and since giving him a second chance — upon a promise not to drink — would not be very bad for discipline, she is not far wrong.^v Othello can give in to her readily. But he is clearly very irritated — and worried in his military conscience perhaps about future problems — when he asks her to leave him alone for a while (III, iii, 85-6). To be back with a simple soldier like Iago, will be a relief — and we know what “pestilence” Iago will be “pouring in his ear” (II, iii, 347). Othello’s remark that “when I love thee not/ Chaos is come again” (III, iii, 92-3) shows that chaos has already begun in his mind. The “pestilence” is at work. Othello has admitted that “not loving” Desdemona is a possibility.

This pestilence is a hard thing to manage conveniently, as Iago now discovers. Othello drives him to say what he thinks. We know that he *wants* to say it; but even if he did not, he would certainly have to. He tries the argument that it is better to know nothing than to suffer the torments of jealousy. But he knows what Othello will say to that. It is no surprise to hear “Thinkst thou I’d make a life of jealousy?/ . . . I’ll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove,/ And on the proof, there is no more but this:/ Away at once with love or jealousy” (III, iii, 181-96). It is fairly clear already, at this point, that either Desdemona, or her traducer, will die. But Iago presses on regardless. He reminds Othello that Desdemona deceived her father in marrying him (III, iii, 210). (Brabantio had already suggested that she might deceive her husband when it suited her — I, iii, 293.) Iago builds up the image of the “supersubtle Venetian.” The point is that he and Othello are soldiers together, and they have no certainty about what Venetian civilians might do. As long as he feels confident of Desdemona’s good faith, Othello is willing to accept Iago’s professions that he speaks only out of

loving concern for his commander. But once doubt assails him Othello will fly out first against the one who is causing it.

Iago, knowing that Cassio will soon be reinstated (thanks to his own good advice), cunningly suggests that Othello should delay this for a short time in order to see what Desdemona will say and do. This is the advice that brings on Othello's first attack of doubt. As he ponders it, he reflects how terrible it is that he cannot be sure whether Desdemona really is a "supersubtle Venetian" or not. Here, in his first soliloquy of uncertainty, he reveals the secret root of his insecurity, the flaw upon which his tragic downfall depends. We must take his three defects together: (i) he is black; (ii) he is a rough soldier, and no courtier; (iii) he is too old (III, iii, 267-70). Of these three facts it is the first that goes deepest in Othello's mind. He is "the Moor." Never can he be a proper member of Venetian society — or, indeed, of any Christian community. He is damned by his color; always he must be an outsider, an alien. In the men's world of the soldiers, the mercenaries who are all outsiders, and social aliens, he can get to the top, and be recognized as a superior. But once he has done that, he must face the deep truth that in the general view he is a barbarian; his baptism is a fraud.

Where this conviction began, we cannot say; and it is probable that Othello himself does not know. The sense of inferiority belongs to the lost years of childhood, and to the time when he was baptized. It is when we turn to his other defects that we can understand his readiness to doubt Desdemona. It was his color that made his marriage an absurd impossibility, and drove her father to thoughts of magic and enchantment. But when Othello wonders whether Desdemona's love was a temporary condition of bewitchment, and whether she may now be in love with Cassio, he must naturally think of how unsuited he is for polite society, and of how much older he is than his wife. How can Desdemona *stay* in love with an old soldier? Of course, he is in love with her himself, so he desperately wants her to stay in love: "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself, / I'll not believe it" (III, iii, 282-3). But he can't help *wondering*.

At this crucial point there begins the tragic story of the handkerchief. Othello confesses to Desdemona that he has a headache. In her wifely concern, she drops the handkerchief that is no help in the small emergency; and Emilia picks it up. Emilia knows that Iago wants it (or one like it as she supposes), and she thinks of having a copy made; but because he comes in right then, Iago gets the original. Iago knows how significant the handkerchief was as a present from Othello to Desdemona; and he has had the idea of using it as evidence of a guilty connection between Cassio and Desdemona for some time. This illustrates how much closer he is to Othello than Cassio is. It is essential to his plan that Cassio does not know to whom the handkerchief belongs.^{vi}

When we next see Othello he is completely in the grip of a jealous fit. *Now* he wishes that he had never suspected, and that Iago had never said anything to him. Now his success as a soldier means nothing to him. “Othello’s occupation’s gone” (III, iii, 363), he claims; and when Iago questions this, he promises him a terrible fate, if he does not *prove* that Desdemona has betrayed him. Iago naturally pretends to be both alarmed and indignant.

But it is a mistake to suppose that he has miscalculated.^{vii} He must always have known that if he did not succeed he would lose his position as the “Ancient,” and that is the worst that he has to fear. He puts it to the touch now, crying out: “take mine office. . . . To be direct and honest, is not safe” (III, iii, 381-4). He knows that a reference to his own reluctant “honesty” will bring Othello to his senses. Othello says that he is torn in two, and that the situation must be resolved in one way or the other. But how is this possible, since he can never hope to *see* Cassio and Desdemona actually making love? Surely he could simply ask Desdemona? and certainly he does that. But he cannot trust her denials for the reasons that he has given. We even see him ask her on stage, but the way he does it shows us why that way to the truth is hopelessly blocked. Iago comes as near to being a direct witness as anyone can, when he claims that Cassio talked in his sleep (III, iii, 422-32). What chance has poor Desdemona against this confidential talk of two old comrades?^{viii}

In the context of Iago’s outrageous lie about Cassio’s dream, the possession of the handkerchief becomes a damning fact. But as a fact it could easily be inquired into. What prevents

this, is the precipitancy of Othello; and what explains that, is his own inner insecurity. If someone appealed to him not to assume something so distasteful without inquiry, he would inquire. But he is badly off balance, and no one whom he can trust demands a balanced judgment.

Othello now charges Iago to make sure that Cassio dies. He promises that Iago shall be lieutenant when this happens. This leaving of Cassio to Iago is not very plausible; but at least it shows that Othello has a clear understanding of Iago's personal ambition. We can make it a little more plausible, by reflecting that Othello has already made up his mind to kill Desdemona. That is his own first order of business. After that, he will be quite prepared to acknowledge that Cassio died by his orders. This is where Iago really does miscalculate. He does not want Desdemona to die: "but let her live," he says (III, iii, 481). He knows that Desdemona has friends who will not believe in her adultery. If Othello kills Desdemona the whole story of her supposed affair with Cassio will be seriously examined. Since there is no hope of controlling Othello in this respect, Iago's plan was always doomed to fail. Othello gives a clear indication of his intentions. But from this point onwards, Iago can only trust to luck.

The little scene of Desdemona and the Clown (III, iv) gives her a chance to express her confidence that Othello will never be jealous (III, iv, 25-7). She knows the handkerchief is important, but she confirms Othello's later claim that jealousy is not natural for him (V, ii, 346). Ironically, this is the very moment when Othello comes in almost raving. She asks him to see Cassio, and he asks for the handkerchief. He tells her what we can later identify as a fairy tale about it (compare III, iv, 53-74 with V, ii, 217-8).^{ix} Desdemona is frightened, and says, quite falsely, that it is not lost. She insists that Othello must see Cassio, and he insists on the handkerchief. His jealous condition becomes quite plain.

Cassio comes in with Iago. Cassio is impatient to know his fate; and Iago pretends to think that Othello must be worried by affairs of state. Desdemona seizes hopefully on this explanation. She knows that Othello has no proper *reason* to be jealous — but Emilia rightly says that jealousy does not need a good reason. Desdemona promises to keep on speaking for Cassio. She seems to

have no idea how misguided this is; and Cassio is quite stupidly impatient for an answer. Impatience has much to answer for in *Othello*. Othello himself is shockingly impatient. Jealousy and impatience are bad companions.

Act III ends with Cassio handing the handkerchief over to Bianca to be copied. Bianca is a little suspicious about it, but not yet properly jealous. That moment will soon come for her too.

As Act IV opens, Iago is telling Othello more stories about Cassio and Desdemona. How he can pretend to know about their going to bed together is not very clear. But the point is that Othello will now believe whatever he is told, without asking awkward questions about it. The pretense is that Cassio has talked about his conquest. That is not very likely from what we have seen of him — but soldiers do do it. Othello faints (or falls in a fit) with the shock. Cassio comes in, but is persuaded to withdraw for the moment. This gives Iago the chance to tell Othello more lies, together with a promise that he will get confirmation from Cassio while Othello listens in hiding. What Iago actually does, is to talk to Cassio about Bianca. But, even without considering that, this is a shameful moment for Othello, who sinks to eavesdropping upon soldiers' gossip supposedly about his own wife — and never listens to what she has to say about any of it. (We, in the general audience, end by wondering whether Bianca really deserves the prostitute's reputation that Iago puts upon her. We shall hear her deny it. Her true status remains uncertain.)

Bianca now comes in with the handkerchief. She has now become very jealous indeed. When she throws it back at Cassio, Othello's idea that she is jealous of *Desdemona* is confirmed. The Moor is now quite determined to kill his wife; and it is Iago who suggests strangling. He must now think that there will be enough evidence to silence the doubters — or, more probably, that Othello will be condemned for unjustifiable homicide. (He has begun to play with the idea that Othello can be declared insane.)

Othello is about to make a public exhibition of his jealousy. Brabantio's cousin, Lodovico, has arrived from Venice, with a recall for Othello. Cassio is to take his place; and when Desdemona

says she is glad of this, Othello strikes her. Even among the soldiers, such a thing would be private. In this more polite company it is quite astonishing. Iago's reaction indicates that when the final crisis comes, he is preparing to argue that Othello is insane. (But he would have to be *dead*, too, for Iago's plan to work.)

Now we see Othello questioning Emilia, who protests stoutly that Desdemona is quite innocent. But he does not believe her; nor does he believe Desdemona herself in the subsequent private interview. She is "that cunning whore of Venice,/ That married with Othello" (IV, ii, 91-2). Desdemona is completely bewildered. Iago, who is called in, continues to act as if he thinks Othello is simply insane. Emilia comes near to the truth, without grasping that the "eternal villain" is her own husband (IV, ii, 134). This is good dramatic irony, but hardly plausible, because it would not occur to anyone unless they *began* from the thought of Iago's ambition. What is interesting is Emilia's certainty that Othello would never come to suspect Desdemona spontaneously, and her knowledge of how soldiers gossip. She remembers how Iago came to believe that Othello had seduced *her*. Iago simply tries to convince Desdemona that everything will come out all right — i.e. he does what everyone would expect "honest Iago" to do.

Roderigo now reaches a quite incredible extreme of folly. Beginning with a sensible resolution that he will ask Desdemona to return his jewels (a request which would uncover all of Iago's pretenses), he is persuaded that he must kill Cassio, so that Othello and Desdemona will not be able to leave for Mauretania. It would be hard to find a more creaky piece of plotting in the whole of Shakespeare. Roderigo is not one of his successes. Only Roderigo's failure to do what he promises is plausible.

In Scene iii Othello sends Desdemona to bed, to wait for him alone; and we have a nice scene of contrast between her and Emilia, as she gets ready. She cannot even imagine betraying her marriage vow; the more practical, down to earth Emilia finds it much easier. "But I do think it is their husbands' faults/ If wives do fall" (IV, iii, 86-7), she says. She well knows that Iago would expect her to do the *profitable* thing (and she also knows how he behaves when it suits him).

The last act begins with the assault on Cassio from ambush. It turns out that *he*, being a stranger in a strange place, wears a coat of mail. So Roderigo's frontal attack fails. Only Iago's thrust at his legs from behind succeeds; and Othello, hearing his cry, thinks he is done for. (Othello's presence as a witness, is even more shameful than his earlier eavesdropping.)

The wounded are now "discovered" by Iago — who kills Roderigo, to make sure of his silence. What Lodovico and Gratiano are doing round here, we cannot guess (and must not ask). But Bianca's arrival on the scene is natural, since Cassio will have been ambushed as he left her house. Iago does not scruple to try to bring suspicion upon her; and she defends herself vigorously. The arrival of Emilia (in addition to Lodovico and Gratiano) strongly suggests that "the citadel" is quite close by. That is where Cassio has been taken; and that is where the rest of the action will now take place.

In Desdemona's bedroom, with her asleep, Othello reflects upon her killing. "The cause" is her adultery. He is going to put out *her* light, after putting out the lamp that is on the table by the bed. But Desdemona wakes up, so a short discussion ensues. Now, at the last moment, she is told what she is supposed to have done. Her response is just what we should expect: "Send for the man and ask him" (V, ii, 50). But it is quite useless for her to reason with Othello.

Just when Othello has stifled Desdemona, the voice of Emilia is heard. Othello lets her in; and as soon as she knows what has happened she says that Desdemona is innocent. Now for the first time she hears of Iago's part in the affair. She can hardly even take it in. But when she does, she says, without a moment's hesitation, that he is a liar. When Iago admits what he has told Othello, she calls him a liar to his face. He tries to send her home, but she will not go. "Tis proper I obey him," she admits, "but not now" (V, ii, 197). Othello now brings up the handkerchief; and in spite of Iago's desperate attempt to stop her, Emilia tells how she found it, and gave it to him. For this Iago stabs her (fatally).

Othello finds a hidden sword and wounds Iago. He confesses that he ordered the death of Cassio — who says simply, “Dear general, I did never give you cause” (V, ii, 300). Iago claims that he will say nothing, but everything is revealed through some rather improbable letters found on Roderigo. Cassio tells how he found the handkerchief. Thus all the truth that matters has come out.^x Iago is promised torture to make him speak, Othello makes his final declaration, and then kills himself with the sword which Cassio says he did not know about.^{xi}

It is Othello’s closing declaration that we must now examine. He says that he was “one that lov’d not wisely but too well” (V, ii, 345). This hardly needs comment — except that not talking to one’s beloved is hardly “loving too well.” He was “one not easily jealous, but being wrought,/ Perplexed in the extreme.” We may be inclined to doubt this; but what we should rather doubt, is our dramatic illusion that everything has happened quickly. Othello did not become jealous quickly or easily. But when he did, he was extremely violent. He was “one whose hand,/ Like the base Indian [Judean], threw a pearl away,/ Richer than all his tribe.” This is the deepest of Othello’s self-evaluations; and it seems that Shakespeare was uncertain whether he ought to call himself an “Indian” or a “Judean.” Poetically, there is no doubt that the general editorial preference for “Indian” is right. But the reading of the Folio must be considered carefully. “The base Judean” is surely *Judas*; and Othello — who belonged (like Iago) to the tribe of the *soldiers* — threw away his Christian salvation, when he began to doubt Desdemona. The deepest truth about Othello is that, *because he was black*, he could never convince himself that he was really a Christian, one who could be saved. He remained always a “base Indian.” That Desdemona should fall in love with him was not a proper miracle, but a mistake. It was a work of witchcraft from which she was bound to recover. His soldier’s wisdom told him that the “supersubtle” white Venetian women could not be trusted; but that was only a defensive projection of his own inner insecurity. He threw the pearl of salvation away.^{xii}

The “riches of his tribe” was his military “honor.” Before he rightly understood what he had done, he claimed to be “An honourable murderer . . . / For nought did I in hate, but all in honour” (V, ii, 295-6).^{xiii} One may have one’s doubts, whether eavesdropping, and ambush, are “honorable.”

But to Othello, as a soldier, they seem so. Desdemona lived by a higher standard altogether. She was a pearl which a poor, ignorant, black barbarian — a “base Indian” — knew not how to value. So, like that “turban’d Turk” — “the circumcised dog” who was assaulting a Venetian in Aleppo — Othello must die (V, ii, 353-6).

The last lines of the play refer once more to the torture of Iago. He has declared that he will say nothing more. That is what is logically required by his philosophical position. There is no way in which the simple truth (as Iago understands it) can be *spoken*. He has come as close to it as he can, in his discourse about the will as a “gardener” of human desires. But there he was quite obviously *using* his own true belief to persuade Roderigo not to contemplate suicide. The truth cannot simply be *said*, because language must always be *used* to persuade somebody of something. Iago says (as truthfully as he can) that he will say nothing. But when he comes to the torture chamber, he will say whatever the torturers want him to say. He will garden with his desires (and theirs) as well as he can. He is bound to want them to stop torturing him. He is named for the great Spanish saint, but there is nothing *sacred* in his world. He will tell the truth only so far as it is what his torturers want to hear. (That is, of course, a *general* truth about torture.)

Notes

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- i. An authoritatively final text of the play is impossible, because we have two versions of *Othello*, and we must often *guess* what Shakespeare's final decisions would have been. In general, I follow the Arden edition (edited by M.R. Ridley). But wherever a suppressed, or rejected, reading helps my case, I shall cite it as being equally valid.
 - ii. We should notice that Othello speaks of what he has already done. Iago reasons that what the Senate *still needs* is Othello's real security.
 - iii. I, iii, 218-9 should be referred to the Duke's "sentence" in I, iii, 202-9. Brabantio has just *confirmed* it. But he wants his own irony to be clear.
 - iv. Of course, it never would be true for Desdemona; and Iago is realistic enough to know that Desdemona will not be tempted by any of Roderigo's presents. The stage action is all rapid; and Shakespeare does not want us to be wondering how much real time elapses in the unseen intervals. So the tempting of Desdemona, is not something that Iago can be allowed to think about. But *Othello* thinks about it.
 - v. Montano would have to be agreeable; but he seems to be a very reasonable soldier - civil servant.
 - vi. Iago is closer to Othello than anyone else (as his "ancient"); but also he has been closer to Desdemona (in bringing her to Cyprus) than Cassio — in spite of all Cassio's social advantages.

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- vii. This is the view of M.R. Ridley (in the Arden edition, 115 — note to iii, 374).
- viii. If she were told of it, she would demand that Iago tell his story in Cassio's presence. There might eventually be serious doubt of Iago's truthfulness. But Othello's deeper reasons for distrusting her, make this way to truth unlikely.
- ix. The stories Othello tells about the handkerchief *can* be reconciled with a little imaginative ingenuity. But since they are different, it is more natural to ask whether he has some reason for *invention* in one place — and it is then easy to see where the imaginative embroidery is.
- x. With Roderigo's letters, and a completely implausible confession of Iago, *everything* comes out. But it is best to ignore the superfluous dramatic contrivances.
- xi. There is a contradiction here, because Othello has already wounded Iago with it. It is best to omit that episode (together with V, ii, 289-91).
- xii. For T.S. Eliot to suggest that Othello is "cheering himself up" in his final speech is an outrageous libel upon him (worse than anything Thomas Rymer had to say). Eliot should have pondered the "base Judean" variant — but in any case Othello calls himself "base."
- xiii. *Here* he was certainly "cheering himself up." But he does not yet know what he has actually done. When he does, he recognizes "honor" as the riches of a barbarian tribe.