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STUDY
GUIDE

OTHELLO

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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PLOT OVERVIEW

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a tragedy written in approximately 1603 and published in 1622. The play begins in Venice, where Iago, a subordinate of Othello's and a captain in the Venetian defense forces, tells Roderigo that Othello has passed him over for promotion. Instead, Othello, a Moor, has chosen the noble and popular Michael Cassio to be his lieutenant. Iago tells Roderigo that he will have his revenge on Othello but behave as a loyal friend while plotting against him. Iago enlists Roderigo to help, and Roderigo agrees because of his infatuation with Desdemona, who has just eloped with Othello. The two men begin by waking Desdemona's father, Brabantio, with racial and sexual epithets, alerting him that his daughter has run off to marry Othello. An incensed Brabantio raises a mob and confronts Othello in front of the Venetian senate, but Desdemona arrives and testifies to her love for Othello, saving the marriage. The senate, meanwhile, has decided to send Othello to Cyprus to defend it against a Turkish fleet, and the strong-willed and eloquent Desdemona insists on accompanying him.

The Turkish fleet is destroyed in a storm, leaving the characters free to celebrate their victory as well as the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. Iago has convinced Roderigo to sell his land and accompany him to Cyprus with money, promising that he will help him seduce Desdemona. Iago then gets Cassio drunk and uses Roderigo to draw him into a fight, prompting Othello to demote him. He convinces a distraught Cassio to ask Desdemona to lobby Othello on his behalf, then poisons Othello against them both by insinuating, then outright accusing Cassio and Desdemona, of having an affair. The success of Iago's plot hinges on Desdemona's handkerchief, which she drops accidentally after trying to soothe a distraught Othello. Iago's wife, Emilia, gives Iago the handkerchief but doesn't know what he plans to do with it.

Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's room, and Cassio in turn gives it to Bianca, a local woman who prostitutes herself for food and clothing. Bianca is in love with Cassio and suspects the handkerchief came from another woman he is sleeping with. Iago draws Cassio into discussing Bianca, and Othello eavesdrops and believes he is speaking about Desdemona. Bianca then enters and confronts Cassio, and Othello sees the handkerchief, sending him into a jealous fury. Iago further goads him into planning the deaths of both Cassio and Desdemona. Iago enlists Roderigo to carry out Cassio's murder by convincing him that he will take Cassio's place as Desdemona's lover. Roderigo, meanwhile, has begun to suspect that Iago had swindled him out of his money, but agrees to the plot.

Roderigo attacks Cassio, and both men are wounded but survive. Iago arrives on-scene and murders Roderigo so that he won't reveal his plot. He blames Bianca for the attack on Cassio. Desdemona, meanwhile, has come to fear Othello and seems to suspect that her life may be in danger. She asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed and goes to sleep. Othello enters as she sleeps and kisses her. When she awakes, he announces that she must make peace with God because he is going to kill her. She repeatedly protests her innocence and says that Cassio will also deny the affair, but Othello tells her (incorrectly) that Cassio is dead, and she realizes that she can't convince her husband of her innocence. He strangles her according to Iago's suggestion, and shortly thereafter Emilia arrives in time to hear Desdemona's dying statement that she has been unjustly murdered. Even in her last moments, however, Desdemona protects Othello and refuses to name him as her murderer.

A grief-stricken and enraged Emilia insults Othello's intelligence and proclaims Desdemona's innocence. Iago, Cassio, and Venetian envoys Lodovico and Montano enter, and Othello explains his rationale for killing Desdemona. Emilia realizes what Iago has done and refuses to keep quiet, revealing that she was the one who gave Iago the incriminating handkerchief. Iago kills Emilia for speaking the truth and betraying him, and she falls on the bed and dies next to Desdemona. Othello implies that Iago is some sort of devil and wounds him, preferring that he live and be tortured, as Lodovico and Cassio pledge to do. Othello asks the men to remember his previous noble deeds when telling his story back in Venice and kills himself, also falling on the bed. Lodovico charges Cassio with punishing Iago and governing Cyprus and says that he will return to Venice to tell the sad story.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

Act I

Scene 1 Summary

Iago complains to Roderigo that his commander Othello, a Moor, has promoted Cassio to be his lieutenant instead of the more battle-hardened Iago. When Roderigo suggests he quit his post, Iago tells him he instead plans to pretend to serve Othello while acting in his own self-interest. To that end, he suggests that he and Roderigo alert Desdemona's father, Brabantio, that she has eloped with Othello. Roderigo, a rejected suitor of Desdemona, agrees, and the two wake Brabantio and incite him with lewd, racist references to miscegenation: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tupping your white ewe" (97-98). When Brabantio discovers that Desdemona is missing, he raises an armed mob and asks Roderigo to lead him to Othello. Iago, not wanting to be seen working against Othello, exits before Brabantio can recognize him.

Scene 2 Summary

At Othello's residence, Iago, pretending to be allied with Othello, warns him of Brabantio's anger and impending arrival. Othello expresses confidence that his past service to the Venetian government, noble status, and legal marriage to Desdemona will protect him. Cassio enters and informs Othello that the senate has summoned him for an urgent matter of state. As Othello prepares to go with Cassio, Brabantio, Roderigo, and their mob enter. Brabantio accuses him of using magic to control Desdemona and declares his intent to imprison Othello. Othello replies that the Duke has summoned him on important business, and Brabantio, also a senator, discovers that he too has been summoned. He goes with Othello to settle the matter before the senate.

Scene 3 Summary

In the senate, the senators are discussing the Turks' impending siege on Cyprus. Othello and Brabantio enter, and Brabantio again accuses Othello of controlling his daughter with magic or drugs because she is "not deficient, blind, or/lame of sense" (76) enough to marry him otherwise. Othello tells the senate that Desdemona fell in love with him while listening to his tales of his adventures at her father's dinner table. Iago brings Desdemona before the senate and she attests to

her love for Othello. The senate intends to send him to defend Cyprus, and Desdemona asks to accompany him, which the senate agree to. Having failed to ruin the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, Roderigo contemplates killing himself. Iago brushes aside Roderigo's despair and says he should instead acquire money and join him in seeking revenge on Othello. Roderigo vows to sell his land, and after he exits, Iago reveals that he will use Roderigo's money to fund his own revenge plan. He also reveals that there is a rumor that Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia, and the possibility alone is enough to motivate him to ruin Othello. He then describes his plan to frame Cassio as Desdemona's lover.

Act I Analysis

The first act establishes the Venetians' view of Othello. They regard him as a noble servant of the state and a skilled warrior, but do not regard him as an equal because he is a "Moor" (likely meaning North African). The senators and Duke of Venice view Othello's good traits as qualities that bely his race. This ingrained bigotry allows Roderigo and Iago to goad Desdemona's father into a fury over her elopement with Othello. However, the Turks' impending attack on Cyprus reinforces Othello's military importance to Venice and probably helps convince the Senate to let the marriage stand. Although he initially seems allied with Roderigo, Iago's soliloquies let the reader see that he is using Roderigo for his own ends. Since Iago has no true allegiance to any other character, soliloquies will be an important window to his intentions throughout the play. The dramatic irony that results from Iago's revelations heighten the tension for readers and audiences and also gives them an opportunity to appreciate the complexity of Iago's manipulations.

Act II

Scene 1 Summary

A storm destroys the Turkish fleet, and Cassio, Roderigo, Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona land in Cyprus, victorious, but concerned that Othello's ship has not yet arrived. Cassio kisses Iago's wife, Emilia, upon meeting her. Iago makes insulting jokes about Emilia's chiding nature then goes on to make sexist generalizations about women: "Come on, come on! You are pictures out of door,/bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,/saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players/in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds" (122-25). Desdemona goads Iago into further wordplay that becomes increasingly insulting

towards women, at one point saying that the destiny of a beautiful, eloquent, modest, wise, and restrained woman is to nurse babies and pinch pennies.

Othello enters and reunites with Desdemona. After the two exits, Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, saying that Othello is too old and ugly to hold her sexual interest. He predicts that Desdemona and Cassio will become lovers unless Roderigo gets Cassio out of the way by drawing him into a fight, which will compel Othello to fire him. When he's alone, Iago states that he thinks Cassio and Desdemona could really love each other, that he hates Othello but admits he is a good and loving man and husband, and that he himself loves Desdemona in a vengeful parallel to Othello's rumored infidelity with his own wife. He says that he wants to get even with Othello "wife for wife" (321), or at least drive Othello insane with jealousy over Cassio, who Iago also suspects of sleeping with his wife. Iago further admits that he doesn't have a concrete idea of how his plan will end.

Scene 2 Summary

A herald announces that Othello has ordered a combined victory-and-wedding-celebration to be held on Cyprus.

Scene 3 Summary

Cassio, Iago, and the other guards celebrate the victory of the Turks while Othello and Desdemona retire to consummate their marriage. Iago goads Cassio into drinking too much. When he leaves, Iago implies to Montano, a Cyprus official, that Cassio is an alcoholic and as such, unreliable. Meanwhile, Roderigo goads Cassio into a fight, and Montano attempts to restrain Cassio, who then wounds him. Roderigo sounds the alarm which summons Othello, who demands to know the cause of the fight. Iago pretends that he doesn't want to tattle-tale on anyone and waits until Montano implicates Cassio. Othello and Montano press him, and he repeats what he saw but defends Cassio to Othello. Othello strips Cassio of his position, and Cassio is grief-stricken over the loss of his good reputation. Iago convinces him to ask Desdemona to intervene on his behalf. A dispirited Roderigo tells Iago his money is almost gone and that he will return to Venice, but Iago convinces him to be patient. When Roderigo leaves, Iago states that he will ask his wife, Emilia, to convince Desdemona to help Cassio, which will make it appear that she has feelings for him.

Act II Analysis

The sudden removal of the Turks as a plot point implicitly diminishes some of Othello's social capital. Without an enemy to fight, Iago is free to reduce Othello's identity to his (according to Iago, inferior) race and advanced age. Iago's motives also become more amorphous: he admires Othello but hates him, and Iago suspects both Othello and Cassio of having sex with his wife, a suspicion he never elaborates on. By saying that the suspicion is enough reason for him to act, Iago reveals that he isn't rational—his plots arise from his own shifting insecurities. To that end, he begins by ensuring that Cassio loses his position and Othello's esteem, and stokes Roderigo's lust for Desdemona by making him as jealous of Cassio as Iago is. His view of his wife as a sexually receptive object also sets the pattern for how he explains Desdemona to Roderigo: Othello couldn't possibly hold her sexual interest, and Cassio is a convenient and appealing alternative. He frames her imaginary interest in Cassio not as something borne out of choice, but out of proximity and indiscriminate, animal passion.

Act III

Scene 1 Summary

Emilia assures Cassio that Desdemona is speaking to Othello on his behalf, but Cassio is impatient and asks that he be allowed to make his case to Desdemona directly. Emilia agrees to arrange a meeting between the two of them.

Scene 2 Summary

Othello gives Iago letters for the ship captain to deliver to the Senate of Venice and asks him to rejoin him once his task is done.

Scene 3 Summary

Cassio makes his case to Emilia and Desdemona, who vows to convince Othello to reinstate him. Cassio leaves when Iago and Othello enter, and Iago remarks that he doesn't like to see Cassio "steal away so guiltylike,/Seeing your coming"(42-43). Desdemona presses Othello to reinstate Cassio, and he agrees for her sake. Desdemona says that he has not truly done her a favor, because reinstating Cassio is for Othello's own good.

When she leaves, Iago manipulates Othello into suspecting Cassio by pretending to be reluctant to air his own suspicions of Desdemona's infidelity. Othello tries to cast away doubt, saying there is no point in jealousy without proof, and once proof is obtained there is also no point in jealousy, since there is no longer reason to love. Iago agrees and recommends Othello neither trust nor suspect but begin to observe Desdemona closely. The more Iago protests that his own suspicions are probably baseless, the more Othello believes them. He muses to himself that Iago is extremely honest and an excellent judge of character. Iago exits, and Othello begins to curse marriage, saying that men can lay claim to women but not their appetites.

Desdemona and Emilia enter. Desdemona notices Othello looks unwell and tries to mop his head with her handkerchief, which he rejects. The handkerchief falls to the floor. After the two exits, Emilia picks it up and remarks that it was the first gift Othello gave to Desdemona and that Iago had been asking her to steal it. She presents it to Iago, who will not tell her why he wants it, and he remarks that Desdemona will be upset to lose it. When she exits, Iago delivers a short soliloquy explaining that he will plant the handkerchief in Cassio's room to cast suspicion on him because: "Trifles light as air/Are to the jealous confirmations strong/As proofs of holy writ (370-72).

Othello enters, tortured by the idea of Desdemona's infidelity and angry with Iago for planting the idea in his head in the absence of proof. When Othello threatens him, Iago pretends he's offended, gives his verbal resignation, and berates himself for being honest. Othello immediately repents and tells Iago that he should always be honest, yet Othello presses him for more evidence. Iago claims that he once slept next to Cassio, and that in his sleep Cassio called him Desdemona and kissed him. This prompts Othello, who before had only spoken of banishing Desdemona, to say, "I'll tear her to pieces!" (490). Iago then tells Othello that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello, enraged, charges Iago with ensuring Cassio's death within three days. Iago agrees but tells Othello to let Desdemona live, which prompts Othello to vow that he will kill her. He then promotes Iago to lieutenant.

Scene 4 Summary

Desdemona has a short comic dialogue with the Clown who serves her and Othello. She asks the Clown to tell Cassio that she thinks her petition to Othello on his behalf has worked. When the Clown leaves, Desdemona laments the loss of her

handkerchief and tells Emilia she is fortunate that Othello does not have a jealous nature. Emilia pretends not to know what happened to the handkerchief.

Othello enters and come up with an excuse to ask to borrow the handkerchief he gave Desdemona and tells her it is a curse to lose it—specifically that the owner's husband would hate her if she lost it or gave it away. He insists she bring it to him, and she thinks he is trying to trick and distract her into dropping the subject of Cassio's reinstatement. She continues to press his suit, interspersed with Othello's angry demands for the handkerchief. Othello exits and Emilia remarks that he seems jealous, and that men only show their true selves after a year or two, after they have had their fill of their wives.

Iago and Cassio enter, and Iago urges Cassio to keep pressing Desdemona for help. Desdemona explains that she has done all she can and is paying for it with Othello's displeasure, such that she has never seen before. Iago remarks that he has never seen Othello angry and volunteers to speak with him. When he leaves, both women say that they hope it is a matter of state that makes Othello so angry, and Emilia remarks that jealousy needs no cause and feeds upon itself. They exit, and Bianca, who Cassio is having an affair with, enters to say that she misses him and has been looking for him. He gives her Desdemona's handkerchief, and when she becomes suspicious that he got it from another woman, he says that he just found it in his chamber.

Act III Analysis

This act shows the culmination of Iago's plot. In Scene 3, he transforms Othello from a trusting husband into a murderous one. Iago is able to do this because Othello trusts him more than Desdemona, and Iago successfully enacts an "us versus them" gender binary, pitting women against men. Iago hearkens to Brabantio's own logic in this vein—that Desdemona's trickery of him, her father, was not a specific plot for a specific end but a pattern that applies to the world of men. Iago reminds Othello: "She did deceive her father, marrying you,/And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,/ She loved them most" (3.3 238-40). Iago coaxes Othello into placing his masculine identity (and its attendant values and behavioral demands) before his individual judgement, beliefs, and feelings. Emilia and Desdemona are startled by Othello's frightening transformation, which is all the more frightening because, as Emilia points out, jealousy feeds upon itself without cause. Desdemona does not realize that Iago has made her a stereotype in Othello's eyes, blinding him to her human qualities.

Act IV

Scene 1 Summary

Iago is trying (and intending the opposite) to convince Othello that Cassio's possession of Desdemona's handkerchief isn't necessarily proof that the two had sex, saying that perhaps they only kissed or lay naked in bed, "not meaning any harm" (6). Iago said he heard Cassio bragging about being in bed with Desdemona and supplies an image by saying, "With her—on her—what you will" (44). This throws Othello into a fit of rage and he says he will kill Cassio first and then force him to confess. Othello, overcome, falls into a fit, and Iago, in an aside, congratulates himself on how well his plan is working. Cassio enters to find Othello in the throes of epilepsy, but Iago sends him away.

Continuing his reverse psychology campaign, Iago tells Othello that lots of men are married to unfaithful women and that he's lucky to at least know the truth about Desdemona. Needing more proof to convince Othello, Iago tells him to hide while he tricks Cassio into talking about his exploits with Desdemona. When Cassio reenters, Iago asks him about Bianca, a prostitute who sells herself for food and clothing, and who has fallen in love with Cassio. Othello witnesses Cassio laughing and talking derisively about Bianca and thinks he is speaking of Desdemona. Bianca enters and confronts Cassio for giving her a handkerchief belonging to some other "minx" (174). Othello sees it, and Cassio goes after Bianca to keep her from making a scene in the streets.

Iago asks Othello to remember how Cassio laughed about his use of Desdemona, and Othello at first is outraged at the insult to her. Iago urges him to remember that she is not a good woman, and Othello swings between praising her fine qualities, including her wit, and damning her. Seeing that Othello is having trouble staying angry at Desdemona, Iago then works on Othello's masculine pride by suggesting that, since Othello isn't bothered by her cheating, he could just let her do it. This succeeds in enraging Othello who says he will chop her to pieces, then asks Iago to acquire poison so that he can kill her that same night. Iago says, "Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed,/even the bed she hath contaminated" (228-29). Iago says that he in turn, will kill Cassio.

Iago and Desdemona enter with Lodovico, a relative of Desdemona's from Venice with a message for Othello from the Duke and Senators. Lodovico asks after Cassio, and Othello becomes angry when Desdemona explains his falling-out with

Othello. The message instructs Othello to return to Venice and leave Cassio in charge in Cyprus. Desdemona says she is glad, and, believing that she means for Cassio's promotion and not her return to Venice, Othello strikes her. Lodovico is shocked at Othello's uncharacteristic behavior and tells him to make amends with the crying Desdemona. Instead he insults and torments her before ordering her finally to leave.

After Othello leaves, Lodovico ask Iago if he is losing his mind, and Iago implies that he is and will likely continue to threaten Desdemona. Lodovico wonders if it's the letter that has upset Othello, but Iago reiterates that he should only observe Othello's actions for himself. Lodovico says he is sorry to have so misjudged Othello's character.

Scene 2 Summary

Othello grills Emilia on the relationship between Cassio and Desdemona, and Emilia swears there is nothing going on between the two and that Desdemona is a good woman and faithful wife. Othello doesn't believe her and sends for Desdemona, then orders Emilia to leave. Desdemona can tell Othello is furious and begs him to explain why. When he accuses her, she swears she is faithful, and Othello tells her she is only damning herself by lying. He begins to weep and observes that he could have handled any hardship except being rejected by his wife and being made a laughingstock. He continues to accuse Desdemona of being a "whore" (99), and she continues to swear she isn't. He doesn't believe her protests and when Emilia reenters, leaves the room.

A shocked Desdemona asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed and send for Iago. Desdemona and Emilia recount Othello's accusations and vicious verbal abuse, with Emilia lamenting Desdemona's ill treatment after giving up so much for Othello's sake: "Hath she forsook so many noble matches,/Her father and her country and her friends,/To be called 'whore'? Would it not make one/weep?" (146-49). Iago reassures Desdemona and pretends to be outraged on her behalf. Emilia, meanwhile, concludes (correctly) that some malicious person must have planted the idea in Othello's head. Iago rejects the idea, tells Emilia she is a fool, and tells Desdemona that it is only the affairs of state that have put Othello in a bad mood.

After Desdemona and Emilia exit, Roderigo enters, angry with Iago for having tricked him out of his money. He reveals that he had given Iago jewels to pass to Desdemona in the hopes of winning some "sudden respect and acquaintance" (221)—likely meaning sexual favor—but it didn't work. He threatens to ask

Desdemona to return the jewels, and if she doesn't have them, he will instead challenge the deceiving Iago to a duel. Iago pretends to have a newfound respect for Roderigo but insists he has been honest with him. He then lies and tells Roderigo that Othello is bound for Mauritania with Desdemona, and that if Roderigo kills Cassio, Desdemona will have to stay in Cyprus, and Roderigo will get to sleep with her. Roderigo is interested, and Iago promises to give him even more reasons to kill Cassio.

Scene 3 Summary

Othello is talking with Lodovico and tells Desdemona to go to prepare for bed and to send Emilia away. Desdemona asks Emilia to use her wedding sheets as her death shroud, then tells her of her mother's maid, Barbary, who was abandoned by her lover and used to sing a song called "Willow." She sings the song while Emilia helps her dress for bed, and the lyrics include the lines: "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve" (56). Desdemona asks Emilia if she would ever cheat on her husband "for all the world" and Emilia jokes: "The world's a huge thing. It is a great price/for a small vice" (77-79). Desdemona says she wouldn't, and Emilia says that in any case, if a wife cheats on her husband, it's likely his fault for cheating on her first or for beating or controlling her. She says that infidelity is a revenge that shows men that their wives are just as much human beings as they are: "They see, and/smell,/And have their palates both for sweet and sour,/As husbands have" (105-08). She concludes that husbands must treat their wives well, or else find that their wives will take on their own bad habits, and leaves Desdemona alone in the bedroom.

Act IV Analysis

Iago continues to stoke Othello's rage by forcing him to picture Cassio and Desdemona together. Othello begins to lose his resolve when he thinks about the human qualities that he loves about Desdemona. To overcome this, Iago must threaten Othello's masculine pride by suggesting he do nothing and let Desdemona cuckold him. It's the idea of being made ridiculous in the eyes of other men that incites Othello to say, "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me?" (4.1. 219). He is externalizing his sense of right and wrong, letting Iago and the imagined judgement of other men dictate his feelings and plans. In the midst of Iago's insistent objectification of women, particularly to Othello and Roderigo, Emilia, in Scene 3, expresses that she is more than a passive sexual object and that a woman's infidelity is a reclamation of her humanity. She says that it should show

their husbands that they perceive and feel, have their own tastes, and the power to show weakness and exercise choice, just as men do. This act shows that Iago's and Emilia's views of a woman's sexual expression are in opposition. In Iago's construction, it is the men having sex with the straying wife who gain power over her husband; in Emilia's, it is the straying wife who is demanding equal status to her own morally-lapsed husband.

Act V

Scene 1 Summary

With Iago's urging, Roderigo ambushes Cassio. In a short soliloquy, Iago reveals that both men dying is an ideal outcome for him because if Roderigo lives, he will demand Iago return the jewels, and if Cassio lives, he may find out about Iago's lies to Othello. Iago is furthermore jealous of Cassio's beauty and grace. In the fight, Cassio wounds Roderigo, but Iago then stabs Cassio in the leg from behind and flees. Cassio calls for help and Othello enters, pleased that Iago has made good on his pledge to murder Cassio. He says that Iago is a model for how he himself should act, and Othello declares his intention to murder Desdemona.

Lodovico and Gratiano, another Venetian statesman, hear Cassio's and Roderigo's cries. They go to investigate along with Iago, and when Cassio implicates Roderigo, Iago stabs and kills him, then continues to wonder who the murderers are. Iago offers to bind Cassio's wound with his shirt, and when Bianca enters, Iago calls her "trash" (99) and announces that he suspects she is behind the attack. Emilia insults her, and Bianca replies, "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest/As you that thus abuse me" (143-44). In an aside, Iago comments that the events of the night are going to make or break him.

Scene 2 Summary

Othello enters the bedroom with a light and watches the sleeping Desdemona. In a soliloquy, Othello resolves not to mar Desdemona's beauty when he kills her, and laments that it is almost persuading him not to. He asserts that he must kill her to prevent her from betraying more men and kisses her, then likens himself to heaven/God, because he "strikes where it doth love" (24). Desdemona wakes, and Othello tells her she should pray for forgiveness for any crime since he plans to kill her. She maintains that she is guilty of nothing, but says she still feels his murderous look. When he again tells her to address her sins, she says, "They are

loves I bear to you" (49). Othello then for the first time accuses her of cheating on him with Cassio and says he saw Cassio with her handkerchief. She asks Othello to summon Cassio since he will say it isn't true and Othello, referring to Cassio and Iago's conversation about Bianca, says he has already admitted to having sex with her. Desdemona insists he will not say so, and Othello agrees, saying (incorrectly) that Cassio is dead. Desdemona realizes she is trapped and begs that Othello banish her instead of killing her. While she protests, tries to leave the bed, and asks to say one last prayer, Othello says it's too late and smothers her. Emilia begins to call for Othello from offstage. Othello thinks there is still some sign of life from Desdemona and attacks her again, until he's certain she's dead.

Othello draws the curtain around the bed and lets Emilia in. She tells him that Cassio is alive and has killed Roderigo. It turns out that Desdemona is not yet dead, and she cries out that she has been "falsely murdered" (144). Emilia urges her to speak again, and Desdemona proclaims her innocence. When Emilia asks her to name her killer, Desdemona protects Othello by saying, "Nobody. I myself. Farewell," before dying (152). Othello quickly confesses to a horrified Emilia, who insists on Desdemona's innocence and calls Othello "a devil" (163). Othello reveals that Iago, Emilia's own husband, told him of Desdemona's affair, and Emilia repeatedly asks, "My husband?" as Othello explains Iago's role in the plot (171, 178, 182). Emilia realizes what her husband has done, proclaims that he is lying and she hopes he rots in hell, and that Desdemona was too fond of Othello, "her most filthy bargain" (192), to ever cheat on him. Othello draws his sword and Emilia says his sword can't hurt her any more than she has already been hurt. She calls him stupid and says she will tell everyone he is a murderer, then she begins calling for help.

Iago, Gratiano, and Montano enter, and Emilia, still not believing that Iago could be so evil, urges him to deny that he told Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful. He at first hedges, saying, "I told him what I thought, and told no more/Than what he found himself was apt and true" (212-13), but when she presses him, he admits that he said Desdemona and Cassio were having an affair. He tells Emilia to stop talking, and she refuses, saying that Othello has murdered Desdemona because of Iago's lies. She says that she suspected Iago's villainy, and he orders her to go home. She refuses and says she may never go home again. When Othello explains to Gratiano and Montano that the handkerchief was proof, Emilia exclaims and again insists to Iago that no man will stop her from speaking the truth. He again tells her to go home and draws his sword, shocking Gratiano. Emilia continues to explain how she found the handkerchief and gave it to Iago, who had begged her to steal it. Realizing what Iago has done, Othello rushes at him, but Iago kills Emilia first and flees.

Montano exits to pursue Iago, leaving Gratiano to guard a disarmed Othello. Emilia sings "Willow" as she dies next to Desdemona. Othello tells Gratiano he has another sword in the bedroom, but will not use it on him, saying it is only the end of his own life. Cassio, Lodovico, and Montano enter with Iago as prisoner. Othello wounds Iago, saying he would rather have him live since death is a happiness, and asks Cassio to forgive him. Othello wants to know why Iago tortured him, but Iago replies that he will not speak, though Gratiano vows to torture him until he does. With letters from Roderigo's pocket, Roderigo's surprise deathbed confession, and Cassio's explanations, the remaining characters work out Iago's entire plot. Lodovico says that Othello will be stripped of his command and Iago tortured and brought to justice in Venice. Othello urges them not to exaggerate his tale, but to describe him as someone who loved too much and was manipulated into a frenzy. He likens Desdemona to a precious "pearl" (407) that he threw away without understanding her value, and he asks the men to remember his other valiant deeds in service of the state of Venice. He then stabs himself and kisses Desdemona as he dies. Lodovico blames Iago for the three dead people on the bed. He tells Cassio that he will govern Cyprus and decide how to punish Iago while he, Lodovico, will return to Venice and relate what has happened.

Act V Analysis

When Iago tries to blame Bianca for Roderigo's attack on Cassio, her status as a lower-class woman seems to condemn her in the eyes of the other men, and in the eyes of Emilia, who expresses disgust for her and calls her a "strumpet" (5.1 142). Emilia is willing to believe that Bianca is guilty of murder because of what she perceives as her sexual liberality, or immorality. When Bianca counters that she is as "honest" (5.1 143) as Emilia, she is likely referring to her own love for Cassio, and her refusal to let her economic circumstances and the insults of Iago and the other men damage her self-regard. In the next scene, Emilia herself also refuses to be defined or controlled by her husband, Iago, or by Othello. After Othello murders Desdemona, she verbally attacks Othello, even though he threatens her with his sword. In doing so, she insists that her observations, knowledge, and feelings have not only equal weight, but more than Othello's because they are not polluted with jealous paranoia. When Iago also threatens her with a sword, he is trying to subdue and subordinate her, forcing her to behave in line with his own interests. Instead, Emilia insists on being a separate human being and allies herself with the dead Desdemona, prompting Iago to kill her. Before committing suicide, Othello admits that he was manipulated into madness and threw away Desdemona as if she were a "pearl" (5.2 407) whose value he did not recognize. This line reveals that Othello

still thinks of Desdemona as an object whose meaning he did not decipher, not as an individual whose actions and speech he ignored.

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CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Iago

Iago is a subordinate of Othello's and a captain in the Venetian defense forces. Othello passes him over for promotion in favor of the well-spoken, handsome Cassio, although Iago believes he is more experienced. Iago is determined to exact his revenge on Othello for this perceived insult, and also suspects that both Othello and Cassio have had sex with his wife Emilia, even though he has no evidence of this. Iago's pride, jealousy, and misogyny combine into a destructive malice whose ultimate outcome even Iago can't entirely predict. Throughout the play, he infects the other characters with his own negative traits, inciting them, and himself, to murder. In addition to driving Othello to kill Desdemona and Roderigo to attempt to kill Cassio, Iago himself kills Roderigo, as well as his wife, Emilia. He has a keen sense of other men's insecurities and motivations, and in his plots, reduces women to prizes to be won, guarded, and discarded.

Roderigo

As one of Desdemona's rejected suitors, Iago tricks Roderigo into giving Iago most of his money and manipulates him into ruining Cassio's career before attempting to murder him. When Roderigo begins to suspect Iago is using him, Iago kills him. Roderigo's lust for Desdemona, and Iago's promise that he will help gratify it, drives most of his behavior.

Brabantio

Brabantio is a Venetian senator and Desdemona's father. Brabantio is horrified that his daughter has eloped with Othello because of his race, but reluctantly accepts the marriage when Desdemona attests to her love for Othello before the senate. Brabantio's bigotry and misogyny—he warns Othello that if Desdemona would trick her father she would also trick her husband—echoes Iago's and provides a framework of Othello's insecurities for Iago to exploit. Brabantio dies before Desdemona's murder, allegedly from sorrow over her marriage.

Desdemona

Desdemona is a Venetian woman who falls in love with the much-older Othello by listening to tales of his life at her father's dinner table. Desdemona is good-natured and clever, and her elopement with Othello after passing up many Venetian suitors demonstrates that she has a strong will. Othello states that he loves Desdemona for her mind. Later, Othello murders her in a misconstrued jealous rage, and she remains loyal to him, even in death.

Cassio

As Othello's new lieutenant, Cassio is well-spoken, attractive, and an object of envy to Iago. Though usually well-mannered, Cassio is prone to short-temperedness, a quality Iago exploits so that he, in a drunken scuffle with Roderigo, loses his position. Cassio is respectful towards Desdemona, but ridicules Bianca, the prostitute who is in love with him. By planting evidence, lying, and staging a misleading conversation with Cassio, Iago convinces Othello that Cassio is Desdemona's lover. Cassio survives Iago's plot to kill him, and at the end of the play, he takes Othello's place as governor of Cyprus.

Emilia

Emilia is Iago's wife and an attendant and confidante to Desdemona. Emilia unwittingly helps Iago frame Cassio by giving him Desdemona's dropped handkerchief, which Iago plants in Cassio's bedroom. When she learns that Othello suspects Desdemona of cheating on him, Emilia acts as Desdemona's advocate, insisting on her innocence. She holds a grimmer view of marriage than Desdemona and explains Othello's sudden viciousness towards her as part of the natural course of husbands revealing their true selves only after the wedding. She confronts Othello after he murders Desdemona, heedless of his drawn sword. She similarly defies her husband, refuses to be silent or to go home, and exposes his plot, even after he also draws his sword on her. Iago kills her as a result of her allegiance to Desdemona and her insistence on the truth over obedience to her husband.

Montano

Montano is the governor of Cyprus before Othello's arrival. Cassio wounds him after he tries to break up the fight between him and Roderigo, resulting in Cassio's demotion.

Bianca

Bianca is a Cyprus woman who prostitutes herself for food and clothing. She falls in love with Cassio, who is one of her customers. After Roderigo wounds Cassio, Iago attempts to blame Bianca, a woman of low social status, for ordering Cassio's murder.

Lodovico

Lodovico is a Venetian and a relative of Brabantio and Desdemona. When Lodovico arrives with a letter from Venice ordering Othello's return and Cassio's promotion to governor of Venice, Othello is enraged and strikes Desdemona, shocking Lodovico. At the end of the play, Lodovico questions Othello and Cassio, which pieces together Iago's entire plot for the characters that remain.

Gratiano

Another Venetian and relative of Brabantio and Desdemona, Gratiano arrives in Cyprus with Lodovico. He guards Othello after he murders Desdemona, and he inherits Othello's property after he commits suicide.

THEMES

Reputation as a Means of Manipulation

Iago sees reputation as a facade constructed by others, saying to Cassio: “Reputation is an idle and/ most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost/without deserving”(2.3286-89). He values these facades as far as they allow him to manipulate others. With Cassio, that means using Roderigo to goad Cassio to a single drunken brawl that ruins his reputation in Othello’s eyes, as well as his own. In his desperation to repair his reputation, Cassio spends more time with Desdemona, a behavior that Iago frames as sexual and romantic.

As a woman, Desdemona’s reputation hinges on her sexual fidelity, and consequently is easy for Iago to ruin. Her intelligence, good-humor, and strong will, qualities that Othello loved, become irrelevant once Iago questions her chastity. In the case of Othello, ruining Desdemona’s reputation as a virtuous woman also threatens Othello’s masculine reputation as a “noble” (2.3144) and valiant warrior. Othello is driven to murderous rage not only out of jealousy, but out of fear that he will look ridiculous if he doesn’t punish Desdemona. He says that a man who has been cheated on is not a man, but a “beast” (4.177). However, when Othello’s attitude towards Desdemona seems to be softening, Iago suggests that he just let her continue to cheat on him, if it doesn’t bother him. The prospect of being seen as permissive and weak in the eyes of other men drives Othello to violent ideations: “I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me?” (4.1 219).

The racial bigotry against Othello at the start of the play likely makes his reputation more vulnerable than a white man’s. As a Moor in a white society, Othello is at a disadvantage and has likely built his reputation as an asset to the Venetian state over many years. When he realizes that Iago has manipulated him into killing his wife, Othello tries to reclaim his former reputation, hearkening to his military feats and noble service record. He asks that Lodovico frame his murder of Desdemona as an act of ignorant wastefulness that shouldn’t overshadow his other deeds. In the moment before his suicide, even having just murdered a woman he claimed to love, Othello is still preoccupied with preserving his masculine reputation.

Iago, meanwhile, succeeds because of his reputation as an honest man. Although Othello briefly considers the possibility that Iago is deliberately torturing him, he casts this thought aside because of his trust in Iago’s “honest”-seeming behavior (3.3 299). The other characters, including Othello, act in accordance with their

characters and motivations. In other words, their reputations are based on their true selves, whereas Iago's is a false construction. By attributing his own deceitful behavior to Desdemona and Cassio, Iago destroys not only Othello's love for Desdemona, but also his belief that people are what they seem to be. Othello is right to be disillusioned, but wrong in blaming the destruction of his worldview on Desdemona and Cassio, as Iago is the true culprit.

Reducing People to Stereotypes and Objects

Iago is the nexus of misogyny in the play, reproducing his insecurities and malice in the men around him. What begins as a grudge against Othello for being passed over for promotion expands into a blanket destructive impulse that makes each major character a perpetrator or victim of murder (or, in the wounded Cassio's case, attempted murder). Iago changes Othello's view of Cassio from loyal subordinate to handsome philanderer. He likewise changes Othello's view of his wife from a clever, creative, and beloved companion to a valuable object, receptive to the whims and passions of other men. Once she is objectified, Desdemona becomes the unwitting pawn in a battle for masculine supremacy (for Othello, who fears the ridicule of other men) and sexual access (for Roderigo, who does not take Desdemona's rejection of him seriously, and thinks he need only be in the right place at the right time with jewelry to win her favor).

Part of the tragedy of the play is that Desdemona, Emilia, and even Bianca are strong characters who resist sexist generalizations, but ultimately discover that their thoughts, actions, and speech have no currency with the male characters. Instead, the male characters employ confirmation bias—that is, any output from these women become evidence backing up what they already believe to be true. Desdemona's protests that she is innocent, for example, become to Othello evidence that she is even more wicked than he thought—he thinks she is lying on her deathbed. Othello even dehumanizes Desdemona and himself in his murder of her by saying it is a necessary service he has performed on behalf of all men: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). By the end, Othello is fulfilling a narrative imperative demanded by the stereotypes he has assigned to himself, the betrayed husband, and Desdemona, the "cunning whore" (4.2.104).

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Desdemona's Handkerchief

Desdemona's handkerchief becomes synonymous with her sexual fidelity to Othello. It was his first gift to her, and as a result, has sentimental value to both of them. The handkerchief, which Iago plants in Cassio's room, becomes the most convincing piece of circumstantial evidence pointing to Desdemona's betrayal. When Othello sees Cassio holding the handkerchief, it's as if he is holding Desdemona herself. He assumes that Desdemona has not only cast off the love and regard he gave to her, represented in the handkerchief, but furthermore has insulted him by passing it, and her affections, on to another man. Without the handkerchief, Iago's plot may not have incited Othello to murder Desdemona. Even after the murder, Othello does not seem to regret murdering her, saying only: "Tis pitiful" (5.2 254-57), and citing the handkerchief as just cause for his crime. It is only when Emilia reveals that Desdemona never gave the handkerchief away that Othello realizes that Desdemona was blameless and feels remorse.

Animals

Throughout *Othello*, characters use animal imagery to dehumanize each other. In the first act, Iago refers to Othello as a "black ram" (1.1 97) and a "Barbary horse" (1.1 125) and Desdemona as a "white ewe" (1.1 98) to reduce their elopement to a purely sexual coupling, as well as to stoke Brabantio's racial prejudice. Iago later compares Desdemona and Cassio to "goats," "monkeys," and "wolves" (3.3 460-61) to give Othello a graphic image of their alleged coupling and in doing so stoke his jealousy. In a soliloquy, Iago compares Othello to an "ass" (1.2 445) that he will easily manipulate, and in another compares Cassio to a "fly" (2.1 184) that he is ensnaring. By positioning both men as animals, Iago is asserting his intellectual superiority and mastery over them.

IMPORTANT QUOTES

1. “For, sir, it is as sure as you are Roderigo, were I the Moor I would not be Iago. In following him, I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, but seeming so for my peculiar end. For 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.” (Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 61-71)

Iago, incensed that Othello has promoted Cassio over him, tells Roderigo of his plan to deceive Othello and vows that his behavior will not reveal his true feelings and motivation. This passage establishes Iago as a villain as well as Roderigo’s limited complicity. By confiding in Roderigo at the start of his plot, Iago captures his trust, allowing him to later manipulate the Desdemona-obsessed Roderigo into attacking Cassio. Throughout the play, Iago’s villainy deepens as his deceptions expand, ensnaring each major character. “I am not what I am” (71) hints at Othello’s later implication that Iago is a manifestation of the devil.

2. “Sir, you’re robbed. For shame, put on your gown! Your heart is burst. You have lost half your soul. Even now, now, very now, an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise!” (Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 94-98)

In exposing Desdemona’s elopement with Othello, Iago is playing on Brabantio’s racial prejudice by supplying a graphic and demeaning image to represent their coupling. In this comparison, Iago reduces both characters to animals, with their colors meant to be an object of outrage and disgust. In Iago’s comparison, Desdemona is not only a passive “white ewe” (98) being mounted by “an old black ram” (97), but she is also the property of her father.

3. “O heaven! How got she out? O treason of the blood! Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds by what you see them act.—Is there not charms by which the property of youth and maidhood may be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo, of some such thing?” (Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 191-96)

After Iago and Roderigo alert Brabantio to Desdemona’s elopement with Othello, Brabantio exclaims that fathers should not trust that their daughters’ behavior reflects their thoughts. This idea of deceitful demeanor parallels

Iago's own plan to pretend that he is a loyal friend and servant to Othello so that he can exact his revenge upon him. However, Brabantio will not accept that his daughter has her own interior life and intelligence that is inaccessible to him. Instead, he concludes that she is being controlled by magic. Brabantio, and later, Othello, believe that Desdemona's one-time deceit of her father is evidence of a deceitful (or manipulated) nature, rather than of free will and agency.

4. "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 curlèd 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! Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense." (Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 84-91)

Brabantio, confronting Othello at his residence, insists that Othello has enchanted his daughter because Desdemona had shunned marriage to her own countrymen. He tells Othello that Desdemona could not possibly care for a man of his race, that he is something to be feared and not loved. Although Othello does not directly rebut or appear wounded by any of Brabantio's racist insults in-scene, they lay the foundation for his doubt of Desdemona's love for him. Although a relatively minor character, Brabantio's bigotry and incredulousness of Othello, Desdemona, and their relationship presents Iago with insecurities that he only has to capitalize on, not invent, in order to torment Othello.

5. "My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. To you I am bound for life and education. My life and education both do learn me how to respect you. You are the lord of duty. I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband. And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord." (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 208-18)

In her first dialogue in the play, Desdemona will not yield to her father, but nor will she disavow the respect she owes him for raising her. She frames her allegiance to Othello as the natural progression from girlhood to womanhood, the husband replacing the father as the most important male figure in her life. In this reply, Desdemona insists on nuance, as well as the validity of her thoughts, feelings, and choices as a woman. She refuses to

see her elopement with Othello as a rebellion against her father, but as an expression of her adulthood that has nothing to do with her father.

6. DESDEMONA: “So that, dear lords, if I be left behind, a moth of peace, and he go to the war, the rites for why I love him are bereft me and I a heavy interim shall support by his dear absence. Let me go with him.’

OTHELLO: ‘Let her have your voice. Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not to please the palate of my appetite, nor to comply with heat (the young affects in [me] defunct) and proper satisfaction, but to be free and bounteous to her mind.’” (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 290-300)

Desdemona tells the senate that she fell in love with Othello for his character and bravery and that she does not want to separate from him in war, when he is most able to display those qualities. Othello likewise wants Desdemona to accompany him to Cyprus because he respects her wishes and thoughts, and he wants to gratify her mind. Shakespeare is casting Othello’s regard for Desdemona as a thinking, autonomous being in opposition to her father’s earlier insistence that she could not be making decisions for herself. Othello’s love for Desdemona is more spiritual and intellectual than carnal, and in ceding to her wishes, he appears to regard her as his equal.

7. “Let it be so. Good night to everyone. [To Brabantio.] And, noble signior, if virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black.” (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 328-30)

Characters throughout the play, like Duke in this scene, cast Othello’s noble and measured nature as a credit to him, in spite of his “blackness,” which refers to both the comparative color of his skin and within the play is also slang for “evil” or “ugly.” The Venetian senate respects him for his long service record, but Othello’s ethnicity is a perpetual vulnerability.

8. BRABANTIO: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee.’

OTHELLO: ‘My life upon her faith!’” (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 333-35)

Having lost his suit before the senate and in seeing that Desdemona is devoted to Othello in spite of his racial difference, Brabantio changes tactics

and tries to injure Othello's regard for Desdemona by planting the seeds of a masculine insecurity. By putting Brabantio's injunction to Othello in a rhyming couplet, Shakespeare gives it an ominous, incantatory, and memorable quality. Othello's ready rejoinder that he would bet his life on her loyalty implies that he is not succumbing to the doubt Brabantio is trying to plant in him.

9. "Lay thy finger thus, and let thy soul be instructed. Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies. [And will she] love him still for prating? Let not thy discreet heart think it. Her eye must be fed. And what delight shall she have to look on the devil?" (Act 2, Scene 1, Lines 242-47)

Iago is manipulating Roderigo into believing Desdemona will take Cassio as a lover. To convince him of this possibility, Iago must also convert Roderigo to a misogynistic view of women that subordinates their minds to their bodies. Taking a cue from Brabantio, who initially disbelieves that his daughter could love a Moor, Iago suggests that a woman could not fall in love with a man's mind. Instead, he says that women are ruled by sexual desire, which is in turn ruled by a man's appearance. When he goes on to suggest that Roderigo could replace Cassio as the object of Desdemona's lust, he further dehumanizes her. Desdemona's affections, in Iago's telling, are not vital and specific, but indiscriminate, their objects interchangeable.

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

IAGO: 'As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some bodily wound. There is more sense in that than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser.'" (Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 281-90)

Cassio is distraught that he has engaged in a drunken fight and wounded Montano, which he believes has ruined his reputation. Cassio views his reputation as synonymous with his soul, and in losing it, he has also lost his human qualities. This perception dovetails with Iago's tactic of debasing people by comparing them to animals. Here, Iago insists that Cassio is not debased (which was after all Iago's intention) unless he himself believes he

is. Iago's claim that reputation is gained and lost without deserving echoes his own false reputation as being "honest" (2.3 7), as well as Desdemona's soon-to-be (and unfairly) ruined reputation.

11. "Before Emilia here, I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee, if I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it to the last article. My lord shall never rest: I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience; his bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift; I'll intermingle everything he does with Cassio's suit. Therefore be merry, Cassio, for thy solicitor shall rather die than give thy cause away." (Act 3, Scene 1, Lines 21-30)

Desdemona, in her assurance of Cassio, shows that she is certain of Othello's regard for her intellect and opinion. In speaking to Cassio as a friend, she also takes for granted that she is his peer and not an object of sexual or romantic interest. Iago will go on to exploit Desdemona's innocence in this regard. While she does not regard herself as sexually motivated, or even as sexually influential over men, Iago reduces all of her behavior to the impulses and cover-ups of a temptress. In this passage, she furthermore demonstrates her loyal nature by vowing she would rather die than fail Cassio, thus proving false both her father's and Iago's insinuations that she has a disloyal nature.

12. IAGO: "Men should be what they seem; or those that be not, would they might seem none!"

OTHELLO: 'Certain, men should be what they seem.'

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

OTHELLO: 'Nay, yet there's more in this. I prithee speak to me as to thy thinkings, as thou dost ruminat, and give thy worst of thoughts the worst of words.'" (Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 147-55)

One of Iago's most cunning techniques throughout the play is to attribute his own negative qualities to other characters. At the start he announces: "I am not what I am" (1.1 71), signaling that his behavior will not betray his true feelings and goals. He then projects his own duplicity on to both Cassio and Desdemona, all the while claiming to despise his own malicious qualities.

13. “Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw the smallest fear or doubt of her revolt, for she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago, I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; and on the proof, there is no more but this: Away at once with love or jealousy.” (Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 218-23)

Othello is attempting to resist the doubt that Iago is planting in his mind by insisting that Desdemona possesses intellect and free will and that she used them both to choose him over any other suitor. He claims that jealousy is pointless and harmful if there is no cause, and if there is a cause, pointless because you can’t be jealous if you are no longer in love.

14. “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, I am abused, and my relief must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage, that we can call these delicate creatures ours and not their appetites! I had rather be a toad and live upon the vapor of a dungeon than keep a corner in the thing I love for others’ uses. Yet ’tis the plague [of] great ones; prerogative are they less than the base.’Tis destiny unshunnable, like death. Even then this forked plague is fated to us when we do quicken. Look where she comes.” (Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 304-18)

Othello is showing in his speech that he has internalized the other social inferiority of “blackness” expressed by Brabantio, Iago, and the Duke, as well as insecurity over his age. In this moment, he believes Desdemona has been unfaithful and wonders if it’s his race that leads him to hate her, instead of expressing some more nuanced emotion. He is also beginning to participate in Iago’s objectification of Desdemona. Far from loving her “bounteous”(1.3 300) mind as he does in Act I, he refers to her as the thing he loves and frames marriage to a woman as a way to possess her. In viewing his ideal relationship to Desdemona as one of total ownership, the deviation from this ideal—that is, her infidelity—becomes more disturbing. In this formulation, an unfaithful Desdemona is not acting for her own intellectual, emotional, or physical satisfaction, or acting at all. Instead, she is something that exists “[f]or others’ uses” (314). He goes on to frame Desdemona’s infidelity as a symptom of his own greatness, further reducing them both to stereotypes.

15. “I will in Cassio’s lodging lose this napkin and let him find it. Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ. This may do something.[The Moor already changes with my poison;]Dangerous conceits

are in their natures poisons, which at the first are scarce found to distaste, but with a little act upon the blood burn like the mines of sulfur.” (Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 369-77)

Iago correctly predicts that, now primed to be suspicious, Othello will be looking for evidence to confirm his suspicions. Othello's jealousy and sense of inferiority give more power to an object than to the behavior and speech of his wife. The handkerchief has more power to determine Desdemona's fate than she herself does.

16. “If thou dost slander her and torture me, never pray more. Abandon all remorse; on horror's head horrors accumulate; do deeds to make heaven weep, all Earth amazed; for nothing canst thou to damnation add greater than that.” (Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 421-26)

In a moment of either intuition or accident, Othello describes precisely what Iago is doing and characterizes it as a horrific, unforgivable act. Although Othello has guessed at the truth behind Iago's manipulative behavior, he is unable to believe it is possible. Instead, he finds it easier to believe that Desdemona is betraying him, likely due to a combination of personal insecurities and latent misogynistic beliefs.

17. EMILIA: “Is not this man jealous?”

DESDEMONA: ‘I ne’er saw this before. Sure, there’s some wonder in this handkerchief! I am most unhappy in the loss of it.’

EMILIA: “Tis not a year or two shows us a man. They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungrily, and when they are full they belch us.” (Act 3 Scene 4, Lines 116-23)

Emilia, with her grimmer and more pragmatic view of marriage and men, posits that Othello's aggression towards Desdemona might be the first sign of his true character. She equates the desire and decorum of courtship to a man's “hunger,” attainment of a woman to his being “full” (122), and her subsequent rejection and mistreatment to a “belch” (123). Emilia may only be trying to comfort and disillusion Desdemona, but her views of marriage also likely reflect Iago's treatment of her in particular as well as his attitudes towards women in general.

18. DESDEMONA: “Alas the day, I never gave him cause!”

EMILIA: ‘But jealous souls will not be answered so. They are not ever jealous for the cause, but jealous for they’re jealous. It is a monster Begot upon itself, born on itself.’

DESDEMONA: ‘Heaven keep [that] monster from Othello’s mind!’

EMILIA: ‘Lady, amen.’” (Act 3, Scene 4, Lines 179-85)

Emilia perceives that Othello, if driven by jealousy, is beyond the reach of reason. Both women understand that a man’s jealousy is a dangerous circumstance for women, and Desdemona, without power to stop it, instead asks “Heaven” (184) to keep him free of it. Emilia’s interpretation of jealousy as “a monster/Begot upon itself, born on itself” (182-183) also introduces the idea that Iago may not be responsible for creating Othello’s jealousy. He might instead have recognized that it existed within him already, and all of his manipulations have been in the service of feeding and directing it.

19. “Lie with her? Lie on her? We say “lie on her” when they belie her. Lie with her—[Zounds,] that’s fulsome! Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief. [To confess and be hanged for his labor. First to be hanged and then to confess—I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips—is ’t possible? Confess—handkerchief—O, devil!]” (Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 44-54)

In this moment, the image of Desdemona and Cassio having sex (which Iago supplied) is overwhelming Othello’s ability to evaluate the evidence against them and choose a course of action that is proportionate to Iago’s circumstantial evidence. Instead, his jealousy causes him to issue the sentence before having proof of a crime. He is so overtaken with emotion that he falls into an epileptic fit that could also signify the death of all that is temperate and cautious in his character.

20. EMILIA: “I will be hanged if some eternal villain, some busy and insinuating rogue, some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office, Have not devised this slander. I will be hanged else.’

IAGO: ‘Fie, there is no such man. It is impossible.’

DESDEMONA: 'If any such there be, heaven pardon him.'

EMILIA: 'A halter pardon him, and hell gnaw his bones!'" (Act 4, Scene 2, Lines 153-59)

Emilia likens the unknown instigator of Othello's rage to some evil supernatural force, "eternal villain" (153), and Iago, tongue-in-cheek, seems to play into this implication that he is some form of demon by saying "there is no such man" (157). By rejecting Desdemona's wish that heaven would pardon such a man, Emilia unwittingly reveals her allegiance to Desdemona to her husband. Her reaction confirms that if she were to know about Iago's plot, she would likely expose and condemn him, rather than subordinate her opinions to those of her husband.

21. "O, fie upon them! Some such squire he was that turned your wit the seamy side without and made you to suspect me with the Moor." (Act 4, Scene 2, Line 171)

Emilia, for the first time, reveals that she was aware that Iago suspected her of having an affair with Othello, and she indicates that this rumor is as baseless as the one now plaguing Desdemona. She is perhaps more right than she knows when she guesses that the same man was stirring up trouble in both cases—the subtext here signifies that Iago was likely his own tormentor before he was Othello's.

22. "[But I do think it is their husbands' faults if wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties, and pour our treasures into foreign laps; or else break out in peevish jealousies, throwing restraint upon us. Or say they strike us, or scant our former having in despite. Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace, yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell, and have their palates both for sweet and sour, as husbands have. What is it that they do when they change us for others? Is it sport? I think it is. And doth affection breed it? I think it doth. Is 't frailty that thus errs? It is so too. And have not we affections, desires for sport, and frailty, as men have? Then let them use us well. Else let them know, the ills we do, their ills instruct us so.]" (Act 4, Scene 3, Lines 95-115)

Emilia, seeming to reveal the dynamics in her marriage and her own thoughts on infidelity, says that likely a husband is at fault if his wife cheats on him. She says that infidelity is a form of revenge for mistreatment that

also shows men that their wives are just as much human beings as they are. Since Shakespeare establishes Iago's contempt and suspicion for his wife early in the play, it's likely that Emilia, too, is suffering in her marriage, and stating as much indirectly. Her view of equality within marriage is ultimately what allows her to betray Iago as he has betrayed her by fooling her and arranging Desdemona's murder.

23. EMILIA: "O fie upon thee, strumpet!"

BIANCA: 'I am no strumpet, but of life as honest as you that thus abuse me.'

EMILIA: 'As I? [Faugh!] Fie upon thee!'" (Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 142-45)

Bianca's claim that she is equal in integrity to Emilia presents the possibility that she is elevating her love for, and loyalty to, Cassio, to the status of a married woman. Alternatively, she could be calling in to question Emilia's principles and behaviors, which are pragmatic and based in equality and reciprocity, rather than subservience. Neither Bianca nor Emilia are as high-minded as Desdemona, who even on her deathbed refuses to betray the husband who has murdered her.

24. "Thou hast not half that power to do me harm as I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt, as ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed—I care not for thy sword. I'll make thee known, though I lost twenty lives. Help! Help, ho! Help! The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, murder!" (Act 5, Scene 2, Lines 198-203)

Emilia is powerful in her grief, frustration, and rage at Othello, as well as in her certainty in Desdemona's innocence. In this moment, she is invulnerable, having lost the person she cares about most and having no interest in the danger Othello poses to her physically. At the start of the play several of the male characters (including Iago and Brabantio) described Othello using racial slurs as well as race-based backhanded compliments, and now, in the final act, Emilia insults his intelligence. In doing so, Emilia underscores that in murdering Desdemona, Othello has destroyed all of his previously-acknowledged merits—intelligence, temperance, and loyalty.

25. "I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable.—If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee." (Act 5, Scene 2, Lines 336-37)

Othello implies that Iago is inhuman—a demon instead of a man. Killing Iago would prove that he is mortal, so instead of wounding him, Othello keeps

alive the perhaps more comforting possibility that he has been controlled by a powerful evil force rather than an ordinary, if malicious, man.

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ESSAY TOPICS

1. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to write Othello as a Moor and Desdemona as a Venetian? How do their respective races affect the plot? Support your answer with evidence.
2. In Act I, the Venetian Senate asks Othello to defend Cyprus against the Turks. All of the play's major characters sail to Cyprus, but a storm stops the Turkish fleet in Act II, eliminating the reason for Othello's journey to Cyprus. Why do you think Shakespeare moved the action of the play to Cyprus, rather than leave his characters in Venice?
3. Which character does Iago have the easiest time manipulating, and why might some characters be more susceptible to his manipulation than others?
4. If Desdemona were guilty of an affair with Cassio, do you think Emilia would have considered her murder just? Provide evidence for your argument.
5. Do you consider any of the characters in the play to be heroic? Why or why not?
6. What are the differences and similarities between Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca? How do the men regard and treat them, and how do they regard and treat each other and the men in the play?
7. In Act I, Iago states that his malice towards Othello is because he chose Cassio for promotion over him. He goes on to amend his motivation, saying that he also suspects both Othello and Cassio of having sex with Emilia. Why do you think Shakespeare gave Iago multiple motives for tormenting Othello?
8. In Act V, after Othello has murdered Desdemona, Iago refuses to explain himself. Does the reader or audience know more about Iago's motives than Othello at this point? What might be motivating Iago to stay silent?
9. At the end of the play, Othello implies that Iago is not a man, but a "devil" (5.2 337). Do you think Iago is a human character, or is he only an evil force acting on other characters?

10. Othello's insecurity is one of his greatest weaknesses. Identify the weaknesses of two other characters using evidence from the text and explain the consequences of these weaknesses for the respective characters.

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