

## Desdemona's Lie in *Othello*

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### Abstract

*Othello* was written when Shakespeare had reached his maturity. *Othello*, different from his other tragedies, involves no struggle for the throne. In *Othello* it is the love between Othello and Desdemona that is at stake. So it can be called “a domestic play”. Shakespeare tried to probe into human nature in this simple structured play.

Blinded by outer appearance or pretense, the characters cannot understand what others really mean or what they really are. There is a deep gap between what the characters think and what things really are. Iago shows vicious malice towards people around him. He enjoys manipulating them. Othello and Desdemona's marriage is shadowed from the beginning by an ominous tinge. Pretending to be honest and loyal, Iago gets Othello's unshakable trust. He is much versed in human nature. He knows people are eager to hear more after hearing hints or a partial disclosure. Trapped by Iago, Othello comes to believe that his wife is unfaithful to him. He thinks he must kill her to prevent her further adultery. At her death Desdemona tells a lie that she had killed herself. This is her only lie. Her lie is a lie of love and sheds light on the whole story, making it noble and dignified. Her lie changes Othello's death from a miserable one to an uplifting one.

### Introduction

Shakespeare's life as a playwright is roughly divided into four periods. Most of the great Shakespearian works were written in the third period between 1601 and 1609 when he had reached his maturity. Differing from his earlier plays, the works of this period are characterized by a dark shadow which comes either from a change in his view of life or from some influence from the dark atmosphere of those days. All the four great tragedies, including *Othello*, were written in this period. The first performance of *Othello* is known to have been in 1604. Unlike the other three tragedies, *Othello* involves no struggle for the throne. The Turks' attack on Cyprus in *Othello* provides an effective setting for the predicament of one couple in a closed environment focusing on their personal struggle without any outside intervention. In *Othello* only the love between a man and a woman and a wife's loyalty to her husband are at stake. In that sense, *Othello* can be called “a domestic play”. Consequently the plot and structure of the play are the most simple among the four tragedies. But it is a highly psychological play in which Shakespeare probes into human nature more deeply than in his earlier historical plays.

In *Othello*, the plot is revealed to the audience through Iago's soliloquys and the dialogue between Iago

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and Roderigo. Iago has power to control the fate of almost everyone around him, although he is only an ensign to Othello. Everybody is trapped in Iago's evil scheme without knowing his intention, like ships in a storm or insects trapped in a spider's web, as shown in Iago's words, "With a little web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio." (*Othello*, II. 1. 164)

Blinded by the outer appearance of others or by what they say or pretend, characters in the play often overlook what others really mean or what they really are. If characters in the play had had the ability to see things as they were, they would have been able to escape from his trap. Tragedy begins when people have no ability to see things as they are. There is a deep gap between how the characters understand things and what things really are.

This gap and the process leading to these characters' destruction will be discussed in this paper.

### The Love between Othello and Desdemona

Othello and Desdemona are attracted to each other because they are so different. They belong to completely different societies and different cultures. Because of this they idealize each other. This may be more true of Desdemona, who is much younger and protected from all kinds of ugly things in this world. Othello is a brave and competent commander but lacking in manners and education while Desdemona belongs to aristocratic society and excels in manners, music and sewing as ladies in high class society were supposed to be. Othello sees in her every virtue which an ideal woman should have. Having less experience in life, Desdemona is strongly attracted by Othello's life of adventure and glorious victory in war. Why she resolved to become Othello's wife is told in the following passage:

My heart's subdued/ Even to the very quality of my lord./ I saw Othello's visage in his mind/  
And to his honours and his valiant parts/ Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (I. 3. 246-250)

She does not mind his appearance at all, nor his lack of education or refined manners. She does not mind that he is a Moor, nor that he is much older than herself. Othello's explanation of how his story of adventure entranced Desdemona with wonder and how she began to love him is persuasive and eloquent enough to make the Duke say, "I think this tale would win my daughter too." (I. 3. 170)

Brabantio's charges against Othello are as follows:

If she in chains of magic were not bound,/ Whether a maid so tender, fair, and happy,/ So  
opposite to marriage that she shunned/ The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,/ Would ever  
have, t'incur a general mock,/ Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as  
thou – to fear, not to delight. (I. 2. 63-71)

Brabantio's only thought was that his daughter had been forced or abused by some evil magic used by Othello, such as "foul charms," (I. 2. 73) or "drugs or minerals." (I. 2. 74) He explains his reasons for thinking Othello had used magic to enchant his daughter as follows:

A maiden never bold;/ Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion/ Blushed at herself; and she,  
in spite of nature,/ Of years, of country, credit, everything,/ To fall in love with what she feared  
to look on?/ It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect/ That will confess perfection so  
could err/ To find out practices of cunning hell/ Why this should be. I therefore vouch again/  
That with some mixtures powerful o'er the blood/ Or with some dram conjured to this effect/

He wrought upon her. (I. 3. 94–106)

Brabantio's words "to the sooty bosom," (I. 2. 70) or "To fall in love with what she feared to look on?" (I. 3. 98) are full of racial prejudice. They are similar to the words of Iago and Roderigo, "an old black ram," (I. 1. 89) "a Barbary horse," (I. 1. 111) and "the thick lips." (I. 1. 67) These words are describing Othello's appearance and were probably used to refer to Moors in Shakespeare's day.

The Duke's balanced and reasonable opinion stands out among the biased opinions of Brabantio, Iago and Roderigo. The Duke, as a judge between Brabantio and Othello, says:

To vouch this is no proof/ Without more wider and more overt test/ Than these thin habits  
and poor likelihoods/ Of modern seeming do prefer against him. (I. 3. 107–109)

The Duke dissuades Brabantio from judging a person only on the basis of insubstantial outward appearances. He tries to soothe Brabantio by telling him that a noble heart is far more precious than outer appearance and says, "If virtue no delighted beauty lack,/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black." (I. 3. 285–286) Othello and Desdemona's married life starts out with the Duke's support and understanding in spite of Brabantio's disapproval and blame.

#### An Ominous Shadow on the Marriage of Desdemona and Othello

It was customary to hire foreign soldiers to protect Venice against attacks from its enemies. Brabantio admired Othello as a brave and competent general and invited him to his house many times. Brabantio himself gave his daughter and Othello chances to get to know each other but Othello, the Moor, was not acceptable to Brabantio as his daughter's husband. Brabantio laments that he was deceived by his daughter and warns Othello that Othello will be deceived by her in the future:

Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds/ By what you see them act. (I. 1. 169–170)

Look to her, if thou hast eyes to see:/ She has deceived her father and may thee. (I. 3. 288–289)

Brabantio's ominous prediction probably resounds in jealous Othello's head later. But to Brabantio's warning, Othello answers, "My life upon her faith!" (I. 3. 289) His answer shows he has absolute trust in his wife. He utters words of almost the same tone at the climax of his happiness when he safely arrives in Cyprus in a storm and rejoins Desdemona:

. . . O, my soul's joy, . . . If I were to die,/ 'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear/ My  
soul hath her content so absolute/ That not another comfort like to this/ Succeeds in unknown  
fate. (II. 1. 181–184)

To these words of Othello, disturbing because they refer to death, Desdemona answers with assurance that their happiness will grow as days pass: "The Heaven forbid/ But that our loves and comforts should increase,/ Even as our days do grow." (II. 1. 185–186) Here again we see the contrast in their temperament. Othello's violent love for his wife is seen in his words, "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come again." (III. 3. 90) This also is disturbing. Later

chaos truly comes. Disturbed by doubt about his wife's chastity and tortured by jealousy, Othello is in chaos and becomes unable to carry out his task as a general. He says, "Othello's occupation's gone." (III. 3. 358) Their marriage is shadowed from the beginning by an ominous tinge in Brabantio's prediction and in Othello's words uttered at the very summit of his joy. But without Iago's malignant intervention, there would have been no catastrophe.

#### Motive for Iago's Evil Plot

Iago is unable to love others. He shows a vicious malice towards the people around him. He seems to enjoy manipulating them as if he were playing a game. Iago's hidden hatred of Othello comes partly from his failure to become Othello's lieutenant. Othello assigned Cassio to the post instead of Iago. Iago suspects that Othello had had an affair with his wife Emilia. He says, "I hate the Moor,/ And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/ He's done my office." (I. 3. 368–370) This suspicion is enough for Iago to justify his revenge on Othello:

I know not if 't be true / Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,/ Will do as if for surety. (I. 3. 370–372)

. . . I do suspect the lusty Moor/ Has leaped into my seat, the thought whereof/ Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards; (II. 1. 276–278)

He also says, "I do love her[Desdemona]." (II. 1. 272) But all these motives seem insufficient to explain his cruelty that led not only to the destruction of Othello but to that of other people as well. As his words, "Divinity of hell" (II. 3. 317) clearly show, he appears as a monstrous and satanic character who destroys others without any understandable motive. Therefore it may be useless to seek a reasonable motive for his evil deed.

#### Iago's View of Life

Iago is a genius at playing evil tricks on people and deceiving them. He knows it is very important to get people's trust first before carrying out his evil plan. Once he is trusted, it becomes much easier for him to go on to the next step, which is to take advantage of people's weak spots, or make use of their disadvantages. He succeeds by hinting at their unfaithfulness, while he keeps on pretending to be loyal and honest. By using these techniques he easily manipulates people to his heart's content.

To Iago other people exist only to serve his purpose. This is clearly shown in the following passage:

I follow him[Othello] to serve my turn upon him./ . . . Others there are/ Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,/ Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,/ And throwing but shows of service on their lords,/ Do well thrive by them; and when they have lined their coats,/ Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,/ And such a one do I profess myself./ . . . 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/ . . . I am not what I am. (I. 1. 41–66)

Iago discloses his whole evil plan in a later soliloquy:

For whiles this honest fool/ Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes,/ And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,/ I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:/ That she repeals him for her body's lust;/ And by how much she strives to do him good,/ She shall undo her credit with the Moor./ So will I turn her virtue into pitch,/ And out of her own goodness make the net/ That shall enmesh them all. (II. 3. 320–328)

Here he explains his double face, an appearance of honesty and truthfulness combined with evil intentions. His acts are based on his own evil policy as follows:

Divinity of hell!/ When devils will the blackest sins put on,/ They do suggest at first with heavenly shows/ As I do now. (II. 3. 317–320)

Knavery's plain face is never seen till used. (II.1.293)

Iago knows that Othello is talented in military action but in other things he is simple-minded and easily deceived by others. Othello's advantage as a general becomes a disadvantage to him in civil life. Iago easily gets Othello's trust by pretending to be loyal to him and is always called "honest Iago" by Othello. Once trusted, it is easy for him to manipulate Othello. It is the same with other people. When Cassio is drunk, Iago tells Montano that Cassio is an excellent lieutenant when he is sober. Iago successfully convinces Montano that Iago is warmhearted and kind to Cassio but Cassio, because he is an alcoholic, is not qualified to be Othello's lieutenant. Iago uses the same technique when he defends Cassio, who had been accused of starting a brawl and injuring Montano. He says to Othello, "I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offence to Michael Cassio." (II. 3. 202-203) Ironically Iago is the one who planned everything about this brawl. The more honest and just Iago looks, the more trust he gets from people around him and the more chance he gets to deceive Othello and others.

After he has gained Othello's unshakable trust, Iago makes plans to disturb him. Iago is better versed in human nature than anyone else in the play. He never provides decisive information, but mumbles or hints at things. He knows people are eager to hear more after hearing hints or a partial disclosure. His method of advising Othello not to jump to a conclusion is very effective in getting the opposite result and encouraging Othello to jump to that conclusion. Iago's poison works gradually. Iago's words, "Men should be what they seem; /Or those that be not, would they might seem none!" (III. 3. 128) hint to Othello that people are not what they appear to be. Othello believes undoubtingly that Iago is honest and reliable. He repeats "honest" Iago's words, ". . . men should be what they seem." (III. 3. 129) Eventually, the positions of Iago and Othello concerning Desdemona's chastity are reversed. Iago becomes the one who takes the initiative while Othello is the follower. Othello should have applied Iago's view that things are not what they seem to Iago himself and seen that Iago in reality was not what he seems. But Othello does not see it. Iago tactfully lets Othello himself apply this theory to Desdemona and Cassio. Iago hints his suspicion about their relationship and then he generalizes scornfully on Venetian women's "chastity" :

In Venice they do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands. Their best, conscience/ Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown. (III. 3. 203–206)

Iago can thus easily suggest to Othello his doubt about Desdemona's chastity without directly referring

to it. Iago points out that Desdemona deceived her father. Her father's ominous warning to the newly married Othello was initially ignored by him. Now it comes to life for him. When Othello was accused by Brabantio, Othello replied that he too is from a noble family. He spoke in a dignified manner without any sense of inferiority to any other suitors. But now, uneasy and discouraged by Iago's lies, he recognizes the disadvantage which Iago pointed out to him which Othello had not minded before.

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,  
. . . (III. 3. 265–269)

Once shaken by doubt, it does not take long for simple minded Othello to rush to his mistaken final decision that he has to kill his wife. Moreover he justifies this murder by his belief that he will prevent his wife's further adultery.

Jane Adamson describes the characters' inability to see things as they are and to face reality as it is as follows:

Throughout *Othello* we watch how every one of the characters construes and misconstrues things, how they all 'fashion' their view of others to fit with their sense of themselves (or vice versa); and increasingly we become aware – as they themselves never do – of how their fears and desires and needs lead to various kinds of emotional confusion and inflexibility, and how this in turn blocks or deforms their sense of what is and what is not. Time and again we see people who, in trying to comprehend what is happening to them (especially when they feel under threat), arrive at some conception or misconception of things, and then, once their mind is 'made up' – to use the common and significantly ambiguous phrase for the process – cannot or will not change it. (Adamson 4)

Tragic characters tend to lack flexibility. Every thought of Othello is based on the premise that Iago is honest. This premise is never questioned.

#### Desdemona's Lie to Emilia

Desdemona believed that their happiness in marriage would not only last long but grow forever. This is seen in her answer to Othello in the chapter where an ominous shadow on their marriage is discussed. Once captured by doubt, Othello finds it difficult to be honest to Desdemona. It is painful for him to tell her that he is fine when he is really going mad because of jealousy. Unlike Iago who is dishonest but keeps continually pretending to be honest, Othello probably has little or no experience with pretending. The gap between what he thinks and what he pretends to think annoys him and he says, "O hardness to dissemble!" (III. 4. 30) Once captured in jealousy, Othello becomes unhappy and irritable and easily loses his temper. Desdemona is sad to see his change but she still adores him and blames not him but herself:

'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet! (IV. 2. 106)

I am a child to chiding. (IV. 2. 113)

Desdemona's drastic change from being a brave and independent woman to a weak and passive one surprises us. She laments her husband's change and his loss of love for her, and has no energy to fight his groundless blame. Her words in the following passage are parallel to the words which Othello had uttered earlier, "and when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come again."(III. 3. 90):

If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love/  
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed;/ Or  
that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense/  
Delighted them in any other form; Or that I do not  
yet, and ever did,/ And ever will – though he do shake me off/  
To beggarly divorcement – love  
him dearly,/ Comfort forswear me! (IV. 2. 151–158)

Both Desdemona, in her prayer, and Othello, in his powerful statement, say that they cannot be happy without each other's love. Here again her passivity stands out. But when we closely examine her words, we notice that immediately after her timid words she utters a positive assertion of her everlasting and absolute love for Othello and her resolution not to be shaken by anything: "Unkindness may do much,/ And his unkindness may defeat my life,/ But never taint my love."(IV. 2. 158–160) In these words we hear a presentiment of death which was not heard when she was happy. When she asks her maid, Emilia, to shroud her in her wedding sheets when she dies, her presentiment of death becomes much stronger. Hearing Emilia's stories about many women who do not mind betraying their husbands unless their deeds are known to their husbands, Desdemona is surprised and prays, "God me such uses send,/ Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend! "(IV. 3. 101) Even though her love for Othello is absolute and strong, she is terrified when Othello tries to smother her and gasps out her feeling of unfairness: "falsely murdered"(V. 2. 118) or "A guiltless death I die."(V. 2. 125)

It is difficult to understand Desdemona's answer, "Nobody; I myself."(V. 2. 125) to Emilia's question, "who has done this deed?"(V. 2. 123). She is obviously telling a lie here. Othello takes this lie as a proof that she has been unfaithful and their whole married life has been false and gets angrier than before. But these words are uttered along with affectionate words for Othello, "Commend me to my kind lord."(V. 2. 126). So we should naturally interpret her answer to Emilia as words of affection to Othello. Othello's love for her is easily shaken by Iago's hints and suggestions. But Desdemona's love for Othello is never shaken even at her death.

How we understand Desdemona is naturally related to how we understand Othello. A. J. Cook thinks Desdemona keeps her independence of spirit to the end and it enables her "to insist to a raging Othello that she is indeed honest, and to argue her innocence with considerable passion."(Cook 192) Adamson thinks otherwise. She thinks Desdemona cannot live without Othello's love. She describes Desdemona's death as follows:

. . . accepting her death is the only way she has of being circumstanced, shutting herself up  
to Fortune's alms, by a kind of suicide. (Adamson 263)

Norman Sanders describes Desdemona's attitude as "something perilously close to masochism."(*Othello* 29) Each opinion has some plausibility. But the lie Desdemona tells at her death offers us a clue to understand her better. If we focus on Desdemona's lie, we can take it as a powerful message to Othello which leads him to repentance and readiness to join Desdemona in death after Iago's evil plot has been disclosed. Without her lie, Othello's death would have been only miserable. Desdemona is not a passive and timid woman but an affectionate independent woman to the end.

## Conclusion

Iago lives a double life: one as an honest and loyal servant to Othello and a good advisor to Desdemona and Roderigo, the other is as a demonic character who is a genius at trapping and deceiving others, and who leads them to their destruction. He is a key person in this play and everyone is at the mercy of his tricks. Shakespeare's creation of this extraordinary character will be remembered forever in the history of drama—a creation possible only to the one whom Coleridge called “myriad-minded Shakespeare” with his thorough knowledge of human nature.

Emilia realizes she had unknowingly conspired with Iago and caused Desdemona's death. She discloses Iago's evil plot and says: “So, come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;/ So speaking as I think, I die, I die.” (V. 2. 248–249) In the same manner Othello says, “When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,/ Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,/ Nor set down aught in malice.” (V. 2. 338–339) Both of them fully understand that truthfulness is most important when they are dying because of Iago's deceit. It is the same with Roderigo. But it is different with Desdemona. She has been truthful throughout her life and tells a lie only once when she is dying. Her lie is a lie of love and sheds light on the whole story making it noble and dignified. Her lie changes Othello's death from a miserable one to an uplifting one. As T. S. Eliot says, “. . . for the understanding of Shakespeare, the development of one's opinions may be the measure of one's development in wisdom,” (Eliot 6) so this great work will offer us new possibilities for understanding every time we read it.

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