Othello's Misuse of the Syllogism

Abetted by Hastily Interpreted Empirical Evidence

The prompt to read this information appears on p. 38 of *Acting on Words*.

Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello the Moor of Venice* features a villain well acquainted with the Renaissance equivalent of *Acting on Words*, Chapter 16: Iago fully understands the psychology of concession-refutation.

> O, beware, my lord of jealousy!
> It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
> The meat it feeds upon. (3.3. 165-67)

With this and other cautions to Othello not to be misled by passion, Iago not only suggests that as an "honest" man he would be the last person to foment jealousy, he also states a position that works as a concession: jealousy is a terrible thing and should not be frivolously entertained. He thus manipulates the suspicious Othello-- a general who recently promoted Cassio to lieutenant rather than Iago-- to look past the concession to the refutation:

> 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! (3.3. 190-192)

At this point in the drama, through innuendos planted and subtly nourished by Iago, Othello has come to suspect that his new wife Desdemona may be having an affair with Cassio. Othello's commitment to seeking hard evidence implies the refutation that truth must not be cowed by fears of jealousy, that correct relations must be observed. If a proper investigation for evidence confirms that Desdemona has been unfaithful to her

husband, then the love of their marriage, being false, can no longer be considered proper marital love. Othello implies that pursuing the truth is not a matter of jealous overreaction but an obligation of conscience. He will suspend jealousy (so he tells himself) for the course of investigation. If hard proof of unfaithfulness cannot be found, then, by Desdemona's vindication, Othello will dismiss any further talk of jealousy.

This demand for truth is exactly the refutation that Iago had wanted, for he goes on to say, "I speak not yet of proof" (196), implying by the word "yet" that he will soon furnish proof. As things unfold, Othello becomes convinced that he sees proof of his wife's infidelity. Iago arranges for Othello, in hiding, to oversee and overhear a conversation between Iago and Cassio. Iago tells Othello that he will ask Cassio about Desdemona, so that Othello can judge by Cassio's reactions how intimate he may have become with her. Othello is appalled to see and hear Cassio responding to Iago as though he has been questioned about a lover. Furthermore, Cassio's mistress Bianca arrives on the scene in a pique of jealousy, accusing him of having given her a token he received from another lady. She casts the token at Cassio. Othello sees that it is the very handkerchief his mother had given him to present to his wife, and which he had given to Desdemona.

Othello believes he has all the evidence he needs. Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief, and Cassio not only has it, but his mistress claims he received it from a lover. This "empirical proof" sends Othello completely into the maw of the green-eyed monster, and he murders his innocent wife, as Iago had intended.

In truth, what Othello had seen did not mean what he took it to mean. Cassio seemed to have been speaking about a lover to Iago because Iago had asked him not about Desdemona but about Bianca. Cassio was in possession of the handkerchief simply because he had found it in his room, not knowing whose it was. Iago had planted it there.

Critics of the play refer frequently to the insecurity Othello must feel as an outsider to Venetian society, and this is surely important. Frequently portrayed as an African Black (which is most likely not what Shakespeare had intended), Othello has been seen as

someone threatened by possible rejection based on his skin colour. But Othello was hired by the Duke of Venice as a formidable general, the best warrior the Duke could employ to protect his state and its interests. The crux of Othello's insecurity may be not so much a fear of racist prejudice against him as his own lack of knowledge of Venetian culture and, especially, of its women. Well aware of this vulnerability, Iago declares

> I [unlike you] know our country disposition well:
> 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. (3.3.201-204)

In other words, Venetian women are all unfaithful, believing nothing wrong with that if they don't get caught.

With this, Iago triggers an underlying belief about women strongly entrenched in Medieval and Renaissance thought, a belief that might be expressed in the following syllogism condemning any individual female on the grounds of her sex:

> Women are unfaithful
> _____ is a woman
> Therefore _____ must be unfaithful.

Othello reveals his own knowledge and acceptance of this syllogistic prejudice when he says,

> O curse of marriage,
> That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
> And not their appetites! (3.3.268-70)

Blinded by insecurity—which is surely fuelled by his awareness of Desdemona's youth versus his advancing years— Othello fills in the blank with Desdemona's name. Emotion rather than logic has done his thinking, has led to his bogus conclusion. The inherited misogynistic syllogism seals his argument, preventing his proper questioning of the phony "proofs" that Iago has contrived.