

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 3 Scene 3

- KEY SCENE IN THE PLAY – often referred to as the ‘temptation scene’
- 476 lines – the longest scene in the play – its mood is intense and claustrophobic
- Long scene of multiple entrances and exits – also creates a mood of confusion
- BUT: Iago is always on stage – the only time he is not on stage, he is talked about
 - O – describes him as a man of *exceeding honesty*
 - E – decides to steal the handkerchief because Iago *hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it*
 - = even when off stage, Iago remains in control as characters still fall for/even re-confirm his deception or do his bidding
- Opening of scene – employs **dramatic irony** to alert the audience to the way **the tragic villain Iago** has practised his **deception**
 - D assures C that she will pledge for him to O
 - BUT – this is immediately followed by
 - E: *It grieves my husband as if the case were his* – audience knows that in fact Iago has caused C’s dismissal and is delighted with his work
 - D: *O, that’s an honest fellow* – audience knows I is all but honest – even at this particular moment, the three characters act out the deception Iago has planned
 - Alerts us to the way Iago has taken charge of the action – later in this scene, he will finally also take charge of O’s mind and **initiate the tragic protagonist’s downfall** by planting jealousy in his head
- More **irony** in D’s words that **forebode the tragedy to come**
 - *If I do vow a friendship, I do perform it* – BUT: O will later not only believe that she has violated her vow of friendship, but also her vow of marriage by sleeping with C
 - *My lord shall never rest*
 - unwittingly speaks the truth – **verb shall** is prophetic and implies certainty
 - BUT: reason for O’s loss of his calm is Iago’s planting of jealousy
 - *Thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away* – D will indeed die as a consequence of taking C’s side and speaking of him to O
- Iago – his **scheming**, but also his **improvisation skills** are shown – he takes advantage of Cassio’s hasty departure to begin his **villainous plan**:
 - First moment Othello and Iago are alone – I takes advantage of it
 - Initial planting of the idea of jealousy
 - *Ha! I like not that.*
 - *Nothing, my lord; or if – I know not what*

- *No, sure I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like, seeing you coming.*
- Techniques:
 - = short, emphatic phrases
 - = vague, evading language, hyphens to suggest hesitation
 - = words that carry connotations of hidden guilt and dark secrets – *steal away, guilty-like*
 - = implication – Iago knows more
- Influence of fate – Iago could not have planned that D will immediately speak to O of C's wishes
 - = she could not have chosen a worse time – Iago has just planted first seeds of doubt in O's mind and her insistent nagging seems to reinforce exactly the impression Iago is trying to create
 - = refers to C as a *suitor*
 - She means: someone who comes in suit of O's forgiveness
 - O later interprets: her suitor, someone who loves a woman and woos her

First half: Direct contrast of Desdemona's and Iago's attempts to persuade Othello

- Desdemona's honest pledging for Cassio – contrast to Iago's cunning persuasion of O afterwards
 - Simply asks O to reinstate Cassio – speaks directly and urgently
 - *If I have any grace or power over you, his present reconciliation take*
 - Emphasises that she has O's best interest at heart and links her pledges to the domestic concerns of a dutiful wife
 - *'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves, or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm*
 - Images of warmth and care
 - Repeating her obedience and duty to O
 - *Shall I deny you? No.*
 - *Whate'er you be, I am obedient*
 - = foreshadowing of her obedience to Othello before and during her murder
- Othello's reaction to D – hints at the tragedy to come and at their beginning isolation from one another:
 - *I will deny thee nothing* – she still has some influence over him
 - Strong pledge of his love for her
 - Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee; and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again
 - BUT:
 - Emotions seem to hold O in their grip and prove too much for him
 - Two strong abstract nouns that foreshadow the tragedy to come
 - Irony – by the end of the scene O's mind is troubled by dark, chaotic thoughts (chaos has replaced order in his life) and plans to murder Desdemona which will metaphorically damn his soul

- AND – begins to reject her
 - *Not now, sweet Desdemona; some other time*
 - *Leave me but a little to myself*
- Iago's cunning persuasion – contrast to Desdemona's honest but ineffective pledging
 - Short, probing questions, vaguely hinting
 - *No further harm / Indeed? / Honest, my lord? / Think, my lord?*
 - = reluctance to speak adds to Iago's credibility and creates the impression of a dark secret
 - Reluctance to speak
 - I – exploits his own reputation for complete honesty – pretends to not want to speak out of fear that he might lose his honour if his thoughts are not correct
 - O draws his own conclusions
 - *As if there were some monster in his thoughts too hideous to be shown*
 - *Thou dost mean something*
 - Clever sequencing of his ideas
 - L. 155-162 – Focuses on the importance of a man's reputation and on how it is partly based on the wife's own reputation
 - L. 167-178 – Focuses on jealousy and mentions being cuckolded
 - = reveals I's awareness of how significant his reputation as a man and military leader is to O
 - Instructs Othello with imperatives – Iago gains power over him and begins to stage-manage him
 - Look to your wife / Observe her well with Cassio / Wear your eyes thus
 - = mirrors the language Iago has so far used on Roderigo – suggests to audience Iago's growing power over his general and that O too will become Iago's victim
 - Implicit warnings
 - *She did deceive her father, marrying you*
 - = echoes Brabantio's warning from Act I Scene 3 – I uses D's decision to marry O to make him distrust her
 - Plays with O's own internal fears of his position as an outsider
 - *I know our country disposition well*
 - *I may fear her will, recoiling to her better judgement, may fall to match you with her country forms and happily repent*
- Othello's reaction to I:
 - Initially retains his confidence:
 - *I do not think but Desdemona honest*
 - *For she had eyes and chose me*
 - But – his nagging questions and short exclamations betray his doubts
 - *By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts*
 - *Ha!*
 - *O misery!*
 - He is the first to question whether D's choice of him was unnatural – echoing Brabantio's words and the prejudices Iago implanted in Act I

- *And yet how nature erring from itself – CONTEXT: Great Chain of Being*
 - *Haply for I am black...or for I am declined into the vale of years*
- **Structure: Desdemona's beginning fall is proportionate to Iago's rise in Othello's trust**
 - D – her interference with O's professional decision to dismiss Cassio begins to turn her into an enemy
 - I – as soon as O begins to feel at odds with D, uses language of love and intimacy to take her place
 - *My lord, you know I love you*
 - *I humbly do beseech you of your pardon for too much loving you*
- **AND: Othello's use of imagery reminds the audience that he is now becoming a victim of the tragic villain**
 - *I am bound to you forever*
 - **Literally:** O thanks Iago for opening his eyes to his wife's dishonesty
 - **Metaphorically:** O uses an **image of entrapment** – audience knows that O has in fact become *bound* by Iago
 - O follows the course of Iago's other victims
 - Roderigo – *as if the strings were thine*
 - Cassio – *with as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio*
- **O's soliloquy – an emotional climax that reminds the audience of the tragic protagonist's inevitable downfall**
 - *This fellow's of exceeding honesty*
 - = as Iago betrays O more and more with his scheming, **ironically** O's trust in Iago grows to reveal his gullibility
 - O begins to take on several of the prejudices about him that he earlier denied – reveals his troubled mind and self-loathing
 - *Haply for I am black* – idea that white women would never fall in love with or desire black men, but would only be passive victims in such relationships
 - *And have not those soft parts of conversation* – Iago's suggestion that O is primitive, savage and uncivilised
 - *For I am declined into the vale of years* – worries about his age that Iago played with in *an old black ram tugging your white ewe* (Act 1 Scene 1)
 - **Compares himself to an animal** – *a toad* – slowly takes on Iago's view of himself
 - Reconfirms his **greatness of character** – **one of the key aspects Aristotle defined for the tragic protagonist**
 - *'Tis the plague of great ones*
 - *Prerogatives are they less than the base*
 - = his nobility of character and high-ranking position make his fall all the more painful
 - Suggests the **inevitable influence of fate**
 - *'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death*
 - = implies that fate is at work and does not let the characters escape the confusions and pains of jealousy

- = **evocation of death** – **ironic** as from this moment when O gives into his doubts, his own death becomes indeed unavoidable

Interlude: The handkerchief

- Plays an **important symbolic role** in the play
- Desdemona:
 - = uses it to bind O's head – wifely concern, confirmation of her honest love and sense of duty
 - = a **symbol** of love and faithfulness
- Othello:
 - = rejects it – *Your napkin is too little* = sign that he is starting to reject D
 - = asks her to disregard it – *Let it alone*
 - **Is it his fault that D loses it and that it gets into the villainous hands of Iago?**
- Emilia:
 - = **fills in important information** – the handkerchief was O's first gift to D and he asked her to cherish it
 - = uses it to obey her husband and gain his affection – *I nothing but to please his fantasy*
 - = her comments are **worrying for the audience** — Iago has darker plans to use it as a prop in his deception of Othello
 - *My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it*
 - = suggestion that this has occupied Iago for a while
 - = hint at the play's time scheme – some time has passed since the arrival on the island and this moment
- Iago's **brief soliloquy** – reminds audience of his **villainous intents**:
 - Comments about how jealous people react to even the smallest hints (*trifles light as air*) – reveals Iago's excellent knowledge of human nature that he employs to manipulate O
 - **Language of disease and poison**
 - *The Moor already changes with my poison*
 - *Dangerous conceits*
 - **Imagery of hell** – link Iago with evil and the devil
 - *Burn like the mines of sulphur*
 - Imagines speaking to Othello
 - Use of the **derogative personal pronoun *thee*** (when he speaks to O face to face he employs *you*)
 - = shows I's disregard for O
 - = hint that the power balance is shifting – the **roles of master and servant are reversing**

Second half: Othello re-enters and is convinced of Desdemona's unfaithfulness

- **Structure:** Transition of O's trust from D to I:
 - Last words before he leaves the stage: *If she be false,...I'll not believe it*
 - When O re-enters, he is convinced: *Be sure thou prove my love a whore*
- Othello becomes increasingly irrational and confused
 - **Contradicts** himself
 - *I think my wife honest, and I think she is not*
 - Can only think in extremes
 - *I had been happy if the general camp...had tasted her sweet body*
 - = **hyperbole** – suddenly assumes that the whole army camp might have slept with Desdemona
 - = **exaggerated repetition** of *Farewell* to signify O's anxiety and over-reaction to the situation
 - Language is full passion and shows that anger has taken over
 - *O, blood, blood, blood!* – **repetition reflects O's trapped mind**
 - *I'll tear her all to pieces!*
 - **Exclamations reflect O's violent emotions that tear him apart**
- Iago's influence over Othello is mirrored in Othello's language that takes on features of Iago's language:
 - **Long, eloquent speeches** become **short exclamations**:
 - *Ha! / O misery! / Avaunt, be gone!*
 - AND: Iago now makes the longer speeches – is becoming more dominant (AND: a parody of O?)
 - *Her name that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face*
 - = Diana is the goddess of chastity and virtue and associated with the whiteness of the moon
 - = **echoes Iago's threat** that *So will I turn her virtue into pitch*
 - = **has absorbed Iago's racist ideas that associate blackness with corruption and bestiality**
 - *Poison or fire or suffocating streams, I'll not endure it / O's bosom is of aspic's tongues*
 - = echoes **Iago's language of poison and hell**
 - *aspic* – a venomous snake
 - **Curses**
 - *Death and damnation! O!*
 - *O, damn her, damn her!*
 - **Debased, misogynistic expressions**
 - *Lewd minx*
 - *Fair devil*
 - **Violent, savage language** – *I'll tear her all to pieces!*
- Othello becomes obsessed with the desire to obtain *ocular proof*
 - **Key theme of seeing or not seeing** – O's failure to differentiate between appearances and reality leads to his downfall
 - **Semantic field of sight** to emphasise this

- *For she had eyes and chose me*
 - *Her stolen hours of lust? I saw't not, I thought it not*
 - *Make me to see't*
 - *Iago: Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? Behold her topped?*
- *Now do I see 'tis true*
 - Final comment – reveals how clouded O's judgement has become
 - = he has NOT seen any proof, but only listened to Iago's slander
 - = **ironic** – O sees what Iago wants him to see – he believes he sees the truth, but in fact does NOT see it
- Iago again employs animal imagery to taunt Othello and increase his jealousy
 - *Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, as salt as wolves in pride*
 - = underlines words – mean 'in heat'
 - = suggestion of uncontrolled, lecherous sexuality
 - **IMPORTANT: O echoes this image in IV.1**
 - *Goats and monkeys!*
 - = reveals that Iago's doubts and images have been nagging in O's head and have left a lasting impression
- **End of the scene:** Iago has fully taken on Desdemona's role as the most trusted person in O's life - **confirmed by the parody of an Elizabethan / Jacobean marriage ceremony that closes the scene**
 - O and I make vows to each other
 - *O: In due reverence of a sacred vow I here engage my words*
 - *I: I am your own for ever*
 - Stage directions: They both kneel
 - Iago asks the stars to *Witness* his words
 - *Now art thou my lieutenant* – the private position of the wife is replaced with the public military office
 - = Othello is now bound and united with his true enemy
 - = his final words are intent on killing Desdemona – **he mirrors the villain of the Jacobean revenge tragedy** – *I will withdraw to furnish me with some swift means of death for the fair devil*