

***Othello* – Aspects of Tragedy**

Act 1 Scene 2

- Context of opening within the play:
 - **Mid-conversation** – initially **establishes a sense of confusion** for the audience as they try to understand what Iago and Othello are discussing
 - Iago – seemingly recalls the conversation he had with Roderigo in the previous scene
- Opening: **Iago's villainous deceit and role playing is developed – a key aspect that leads to the development of the tragic action**
 - I – appears as a loyal servant as he suggests that Roderigo has spoken badly of O and that he would like to punish him with physical violence
 - *He prate, and spoke in such scurvy and provoking terms against your honour*
 - *I had thought to have yerked him here, under the ribs*
 - BUT – in fact, Iago has planted and fuelled R's anger against O in Act 1 Scene 1
 - = misrepresents the truth of his involvement with Roderigo and Brabantio to manipulate O – fuels O's trust in I
 - = reveals his adaptability and quick wit
 - L. 33: *By Janus*
 - = Iago swears by **the image of a two-faced Roman god**
 - = reflects Iago's own deception of those around him and his hypocritical nature
- Concept of **honour**
 - = significant aspect of a man's identity in patriarchal Elizabethan England
 - Iago
 - = aware of patriarchal fears of losing one's honour and masculinity
 - = uses this key term to taunt Othello: *Spoke in such scurvy and provoking terms against your honour*
 - = Othello's reaction here is calm and collected – but audience gets the idea that this will change later on
 - = **Contrast** to Act 4 when Othello has bought into Iago's ideas of masculine honour – *I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!*

The tragic protagonist – Othello's first appearance

- First appearance of Othello – **establishes him as the tragic protagonist / hero of the play**

GENRE CONTEXT: Aristotle's *Poetics* on the tragic protagonist

- Tragedy is about the destruction of human greatness
- Therefore the tragic hero must:
 - Be a man of high status
 - Possess 'greatness of soul' (*megalopsychia*) – be a character of magnificence

- Othello can be said to fulfil these two aspects:
 - **High status:**
 - Not an aristocrat – but a high-ranking military general
 - *I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege* – in his native country, O is of royal status
 - **Magnificence** – O's superior professional success and skill as a military leader is established:
 - *My services which I have done the signiory / Shall out-tongue his complaints* – identifies O as a successful general who is well-respected
 - *My demerits may speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune as that which I have reached* – a character whose personal traits and achievements make him worthy of Desdemona
 - *My parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly*
 - **Tricolon** emphasises his talent and respected public position
 - = reference to *soul* – suggestion of spiritual integrity (link to 'greatness of soul')
- **Othello's language – furthers the image of him as tragic protagonist**
 - = **calm, measured, controlled blank verse** – first character to speak calmly in the play
 - = establishes him as a figure of natural authority and sincerity
 - = short clear sentences reveal O's openness, his attempts to avoid conflict
 - *Let him do his spite*
 - *Not I; I must be found*
 - = **Contrast** to Iago – O seeks to resolve conflict while I revels in it
- First appearance of the tragic hero Othello – **contrast** to how he is described in I.1

Proud and selfish – <i>loving his own pride and purposes</i>	Aware and proud of the service he has done for Venice – has a positive self-image
Sexually driven – <i>beast, lascivious</i>	<i>I love the gentle Desdemona</i> – no mention of lust or sexual desires, first sincere reference to love in the play
A savage, uncivilised <i>thing, old black ram, devil</i> that lacks self-control and	Controlled, dignified – language remains calm and collected, avoids violence, defuses

sophistication	<p>the situation: <i>Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them</i></p> <p>Uses poetic, sophisticated speech – an image of intellect and civilisation</p>
Immoral, acting in secret – a <i>foul thief</i> , using <i>foul charms</i>	<p>Open about his actions and willing to <i>answer your charge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Let him do his spite</i> • <i>I must be found</i>

- Effect of Othello's conflicting presentations in two **consecutive scenes**
 - = emphasises **Othello as a noble, worthy man and therefore as the tragic protagonist** – necessary for the ensuing tragedy of the play (Aristotle's notion that if the audience does not respect the tragic protagonist, they will not feel pity and fear when he falls)
 - BUT – also **forebodes the internal conflict** Othello will experience about his own seemingly **contrasting roles** as a public military general and a domestic husband

BUT: Ambiguity about Othello's first appearance

- Othello's first appearance also signals to the audience the **tragic potential in his character**
 - **Repeated references** to his status/achievements, Othello's excessive confidence in them, his extravagant language
 - = can be read as **excessive pride (*hubris*) that will bring about his fall**
 - = **link to Act 1 Scene 1** – *loving his own pride and purposes*
 - = Othello might be viewed as admirable for his achievements, or alternatively as arrogant for boasting about them
 - **Contrast between Othello and Iago** – creates **dramatic tension** and **anticipation of conflict and tragedy**:
 - Othello's open nature in contrast to Iago's deception – creates potential for Iago's manipulation
 - Contrast is reflected in their **dialogue** – they **share several lines**, but speak about **conflicting ideas**
 - *You were best go in. – Not I; I must be found*
 - *'Tis better as it is. – Nay, but he prated*
 - The emphasis on Othello's position as a **soldier** throughout the scene
 - Audience knows that he now has to adjust to the role of husband too – sets up the **conflict of these two different roles** that **accelerates the tragic action**
 - Alerts audience to the **significance of war to the tragedy** – play is about soldiers who ultimately do not have to fight a war, but are stuck on an island together and in the end use their destructive potential against each other
- **Ambiguity** in Othello's description of his love for Desdemona
 - *But that I love the gentle Desdemona / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine*
 - gentle
 - = reference to her character and kind heart
 - = reference to her noble birth – reflection of O's desire to ennoble his position by marrying the daughter of a noble man?
 - **Does this undermine our view of O as a deserving romantic hero?**
 - References to their marriage
 - = stress the unique nature and power of their love – for nothing else would O have given up his freedom
 - BUT: **Images of entrapment** are used
 - *My unhoused free condition put into circumscription and confine*
 - = suggestion that O feels uncomfortable in the role as husband and that this will lead to problems

- = mirrored in Iago's images of entrapment
 - Act 1 Scene 1: *Iago, who hast had my purse as if the strings were thine*
 - Act 2 Scene 1: *With a little web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio*
 - = fabricates a link between O's marriage and the way Iago uses it to destroy O and bring about tragedy

Rest of scene

- Cassio's first appearance – **contrast to Iago's description of an inept fool**
 - Seems trustworthy, reliable – delivers urgent summons from the Duke, understands the military importance of the Cyprus mission
 - *It is a business of some heat*
 - Failure to understand Iago's crude sexual joke
 - I: *He tonight hath boarded a land carrack*
 - = **metaphor** of an act of piracy that takes a treasure ship to degrade Othello
 - = **slang term** for a prostitute
 - C: *I do not understand*
 - = C does not share Iago's crude sense of humour
 - = **distance between C and the tragic villain**
 - **IRONY**: Iago casts C as a seducer in the next scene
- Othello's language:
 - *Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.*
 - = **sophisticated and poetic image**
 - = reveals O's abilities as a story-teller that will be revealed in the next scene
- Othello's **conflict** with Brabantio
 - = adds to the other conflicts we have encountered so far – Roderigo vs. Iago, Roderigo and Iago vs. Brabantio, Othello's conflicting presentations, Othello's conflicting roles
 - = creates a feeling of **discord and impending tragedy** for the audience
 - = **language reflects this conflict**
 - O – addresses B politely with the **formal pronoun** *you*
 - B – addresses O like a lowly servant with the **informal pronoun** *thou*
- Brabantio presents O and D's love / marriage as unnatural and against the Renaissance concept of the 'Great Chain of Being' – draws attention to the idea that O's decision to love and marry D could be seen as his **hamartia** against this background
 - **Racist comments**
 - *Sooty bosom, such a thing as thou*
 - = reduces O to his skin colour
 - = dehumanisation of Othello
 - **Language of witchcraft**
 - *Thou hast enchanted her*
 - *If she in chains of magic were not bound*
 - *Such a thing as thou – to fear, not to delight*
 - *Thou hast practised on her with foul charms*
 - *A practiser of arts inhibited*
 - = B cannot imagine that D would have married O out of choice
 - = reflects Renaissance belief that black people were associated with witchcraft – evil, sinfulness

- Presentation of D as innocent, pure and vulnerable – suggestion that she will become a victim in this tragedy
 - *a maid so tender, fair, and happy*
 - *so opposite to marriage*
 - *her delicate youth*
- Final rhyming couplet – emphasis that the marriage has disrupted the natural order and turned the world upside down
 - *For if such actions may have passage free / Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be*
- = establishes the marriage as the key event that triggers the tragic action

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