

## ***Othello – Aspects of Tragedy***

### Act 1 Scene 3

- First of the play's particularly long scenes
  - Others:
    - Act 3 Scene 3 (scene when Iago convinces O of D's unfaithfulness)
    - Act 5 Scene 2 (murder scene)
  - = full of movement, excitement, emotional intensity
  - BUT – their length and intensity connects these scenes – they structurally unite the tragedy
- **Sequencing** of discussions in the scene
  - = moving back and forth between **discussions of war and love**
    - First (War): Discussion of Duke and senators about the plans of the Turkish fleet and its course on Cyprus
    - Second (Love): Brabantio's complaint about Othello and Desdemona's elopement and O's narrative of how he wooed D
    - Third (War): Return to war – O is needed to resolve the situation
    - Fourth (Love): D wants to join Othello in Cyprus / Iago and Roderigo plot R's advancement on D
  - = suggestion that O is consistently torn between both and is pulled in different directions
- Senator's comment: *'Tis a pageant / To keep us in false gaze*
  - = picks up **the tragedy's key metaphor of not being able to see clearly / read events appropriately** – just as the Turks try to create a false impression for the Venetians about their intentions on Cyprus, Iago makes Othello 'look the wrong way' and misread events around him
  - *pageant* = link to the **theme of deception**
  - BUT:
    - In Venice, the clear mind of the Senate probes the actions of the Turks and penetrates through their purposes / pretences and makes sense of the contradictions
    - However: O and D are about to move to Cyprus – a place outside of the civic order and rational justice of Venice where Iago's deceptions are approached with heated passion rather than rational judgement
- **Othello's introduction in this scene** – focus on his role as a soldier – built on later in the scene
  - **Repetition** of *valiant*
    - = implication of bravery, strength and skill on the battlefield
    - = continues to build up O as the **tragic protagonist**
  - Importance of Cyprus to Venice is stressed in the initial dialogue between Duke and Senators – when O is asked to lead the mission, the Duke makes a public statement that Venice relies on him and trusts him – more evidence of his greatness

- Introduction of **character of Desdemona – cast as a tragic victim**
  - Brabantio:
    - **Tricolon:** abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted
      - = emphasis on D's innocence and vulnerability
      - = use of the passive mood – emphasises that B views her as a passive victim in the elopement
    - *A maiden never bold / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself*
    - = alerts audience to D's role in the tragedy – she will ironically become all the things Brabantio describes in the later acts and will be a passive victim to Othello's unbound jealousy
- BUT:
  - = B does not seem to know his daughter well – he creates her as the perfect image of female virginity and innocence of the Renaissance
  - First appearance of D – **subversion of this image**
    - = speaks assertively and in a spirited manner in public – considered inappropriate for women in Shakespeare's time
    - = speaks out against her father – *I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband...*
    - = refuses to stay with her father while O is in Cyprus – *I would not there reside*
    - = gets involved with O's military employment – demands to go with him
    - = speaks openly about her love and desire for Othello – *The rites for which I love him*
- **CONTRADICTION in Desdemona's presentation:**
  - She also casts herself as accepting male authority
    - She transfers her duty from father to husband – just as her mother did and as was tradition in this patriarchal society
    - Suggests herself to be a submissive wife – *My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord*
  - **KEY QUESTION: Is she an independent woman who makes her own choices OR is she a victim?**
- Othello focuses on his role as a soldier – **sets up his tragic fall** as it reveals his **inexperience with the role of a lover / husband**
  - *Rude am I in my speech / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace*
    - = skilled in all things that link to battle and war – but claims to be a less skilled speaker
  - *They have used their dearest action in the tented field*
    - = since a very young age, O has been involved in battle and soldiering
  - *Little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broil and battle*
    - = again stresses his lack of experience in love / the domestic sphere

- BUT: O is presented as dignified – remains respectful and calm in the face of B's insults and accusations
  - **Calm, poetic, sophisticated speeches** that are carefully composed
    - Although O claims not to be a skilled rhetorician, his speeches suggest otherwise
    - = making an intelligent speech under pressure – a key skill of a military leader
  - Duke respects O
    - *I think this tale would win my daughter too*
      - = taken in by O's power of speech and poetic descriptions
    - *Your son-in-law is far more fair than black*
      - = suggestion that O has the **dignity and sophistication of a western person** and does not fulfil the stereotypes associated with black people
      - = confirmation of his **role of tragic protagonist** – his **greatness of character** overcomes prejudices against his origin
- Potential for tragedy at the end of the court scene:
  - **Othello:** *So please your grace, my ancient: A man he is of honesty and trust [...]*  
*Honest Iago, my Desdemona must I leave to thee*
    - **Dramatic irony** – Othello repeatedly refers to Iago as 'honest', yet the audience is already aware that Iago must not be trusted
    - = reveals O's gullibility / misjudgement of character – particularly as Iago is about to plot against O after he has exited the scene
    - = **O's trust in his ensign leads to the tragedy**
  - **Duke:** *Your son-in-law is far more fair than black*
    - = confirmation of **O's role as tragic protagonist** – his '**greatness of character / soul**' is stronger than the prejudices against him
    - BUT – it is only within the bounds of civilised Venice that O is safe! – Action is about to transfer to Cyprus
  - **Brabantio:** *Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: She has deceived her father and may thee*
    - Irony – forebodes O's assumed deception by D
    - Later picked up by Iago when he taunts Othello and persuades him of D's unfaithfulness: *She did deceive her father, marrying you* (Act 3 Scene 3)
    - Builds on **patriarchal fears of female insubordination** that **stand at the core of the tragedy**
- Presentation of Iago in the final part of the scene – builds on his **role of the tragic villain**:
  - **Focus on his deception** – pretends to help R, but his **tenfold** reminder to him to *put money in your purse* reveals I's interest is only in his own gain – he is a **Machiavellian villain**

- **Use of prose** – fast-paced speech to outwit R, informal speech to gain R's confidence (supported by Iago's use of the **informal pronoun *thou*** – casts him and R as intimate conspirators)
- Mention of *revenge* (l. 352) – *Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him* – draws audience's attention to the **revenge plot** that is about to be set in motion, links Iago to **villain of Jacobean revenge tragedy** (see notes on Act 1 Scene 1)
- **Language of birth and hell**
  - I subverts images of birth into images of death and destruction
    - *There are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered*
    - *It is engendered – this monstrous birth*
  - References to hell substantiate I's dark nature
    - *Hell and night*
    - *All the tribe of hell*
    - = associates I with dark forces of evil
    - = liken I to the devil
    - **IRONY** – Iago tries hard to draw attention to O's blackness and the inherent association with evil/the devil – but it is in fact the white Iago who employs the language of hell
- **Final soliloquy**
  - = audience gets access to I's thoughts – we can understand him and feel closer to him
    - I switches back to blank verse – versatility, reveals his honest thoughts
  - = Repetition of *I hate the Moor* – reinstatement of Iago's villainy
  - = *The Moor is of a free and open nature*
    - = **CONTRAST** to Iago's deception
    - = **potential for tragedy**
  - = I revels in his own quick wit and scheming, improvises as he plans while he speaks
    - *Let me see now...How? Let's see...*
    - *For my sport and profit* – I's motive is not only his own gain, but he schemes for his entertainment too – a **Machiavel**
  - Mention of another motive for I's malignity:
    - Rumour – *'twixt my sheets / He's done my office* – O has slept with Emilia
    - How credible is this?
- **Interference of the private and the public** – at the core of this scene

Private	Public
Scene's focus alternates – on one hand: focus on private matters of love between O and D	On the other hand: focus on public affairs of war and Cyprus' defence against the Turks

Brabantio complains about his daughter's elopement	He brings his complaints before the Senate and wishes to be publicly justified
Othello wooed Desdemona	He used stories of war and battle (related to his public role as military general) to win her
Desdemona wishes to be with her love Othello at all times	She demands to be taken along to war against Cyprus
Othello's role as a lover and his desires for Desdemona	<p>He tries to verbally assert that they will not interfere with or weaken his role as a soldier – mingling of military and domestic imagery</p> <p><i>When light-winged toys of fethered Cupid seel with wanton dullness my speculative and officed instruments, that my disports corrupt and taint my business, let housewives make a skillet of my helm</i></p>