

Extract Act 1 Scene 3 – Plan

Introduction

The extract is taken from the middle of Act 1 Scene 3 and portrays the beginning of Othello's public defence against Brabantio's accusations of stealing his daughter. This moment follows Iago's villainous incitement of Brabantio against Othello through taunts about Othello's bestial nature and use of witchcraft when winning Desdemona. It is significant as it confirms Othello's role as the play's tragic protagonist, but also sets up an atmosphere of confusion and conflict that prefigures the key conflicts between Othello and Cassio as well as Desdemona that stand at the heart of this tragedy.

Significance of setting

- **Setting** – council chamber in Venice = seat of reason, heart of civilisation – here Othello has powerful supporters in the senators and the Duke and is protected from prejudice and deception
- = a place where law and order rule – Duke's rationality and fairness reflects this
 - = asks O to present his side of the story: *What, in your own part, can you say to this?*
 - = looks for proof and calls mere accusations by Brabantio *thin habits / poor likelihoods* – **adjectives** reveal that arguments based on racial prejudice have no effect here
- BUT – audience's **anticipation** is furthered as they know that action is about to transfer to Cyprus – **contrast** to Venice as it was associated with a lack of civilisation (*warlike isle*), a vulnerable outpost isolated from the world of law and order
 - = forebodes that emotions, deception and prejudice will begin to rule and trigger the tragic action

Othello as tragic protagonist

- **Aristotle**: tragic protagonist must possess **magnificence of character** and **greatness of soul** (so that audience will pity him when he falls from grace)
- Othello – conforms to this notion
- a) O's humility and sophistication are revealed – can be seen as his greatness of character
 - **Calm, measured speech** in the face of Brabantio's insults
 - **Polite address** to the senators – reveals his manners / civilised character
 - Claims *Rude am I in my speech*
 - O is modest about his abilities as a speaker
 - BUT: O in fact speaks in a sophisticated, almost poetic way when he describes how he wooed D
- b) O's skills as a military leader are focused on – reveal his superiority and magnificence
 - **Time reference**: *since these arms of mine had seven years' pith, till now some nine moons wasted*
 - = reveals how long O has been a soldier – shows his great experience
 - **Verb wasted** – shows how committed he is to his military role as he only values the time he spends in it
 - *dearest action in the tented field*
 - = **Superlative form** implies O's commitment and skill on the battle field
 - *Little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broil and battle*
 - **Alliteration** draws attention to O's area of expertise – he has devoted his life to his role as a soldier and has acquired superior skills in it
- **BUT: Alternative interpretation** – O's focus on his role as a military general also carries tragic potential as it reveals his lack of experience in his other key role: that of a lover / husband
 - **Repetition** of *little* when O refers to his experience beyond the battlefield emphasises this

- **Effect:** audience is aware that Iago will exploit this lack of experience when he preys on O's mind in Act 3 Scene 3 – sets up O's tragic fall

Theme of conflict

- From opening – audience realises that conflict is at heart of this moment
 - B: *Nothing, but this is so*
 - Although O has been directly addressed, B cuts him off and denies his right to speak – immediately creates a mood of aggression
- Further developed in B's insults to O
 - Links O to *practises of cunning hell* – uses a **racial stereotype** of the Renaissance that equates black people with the devil and links them with witchcraft
 - **Repeated references** to the unnaturalness of the connection between O and D
 - *He wrought upon her* – portrays O as a cunning sexual predator who worked his magic on the passive victim Desdemona (emphasised through the way this is done *upon her* – she is the **passive object of the sentence**)
- B's aggressive accusations stir the atmosphere of conflict that will return in the following scenes in Cyprus when Iago begins to create conflict among the characters
- AND – B's accusations have wider significance – O will be reminded of these by Iago in III.3 when he begins to develop self-doubts (*And yet how nature erring from itself...*)

Conflicting presentations of Desdemona – create anticipation and tension before audience first meet her

- B – casts D as a feminine ideal of the Renaissance and a **tragic, helpless victim**
 - *Maiden never bold* – **word choices** reveal her innocence, virginity and reserve
 - *So still and quiet* – **intensifier** used to emphasise her silence and reserve
 - *To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!* – **contrast of love and fear** implies impossibility that D could have voluntarily chosen to marry O and casts her as his victim
- O – presents D as his equal
 - *Let her speak of me* – demands that D's voice is heard in public – strictly against patriarchal ideas about womanhood
 - *How I did thrive in this fair lady's love / And she in mine* = **parallel / chiasmic construction** – structure of sentence mirrors mutual, equal love between O and D
- Effect: At this point, reinforces ridiculousness of B's accusations as he clearly does not know his daughter well – BUT: **ironically**, as the play progresses, D will conform more and more to the stereotypical role of a woman described by B and will eventually become O's victim!

Othello's hamartia

- Extract also reveals what could be argued to be O's **hamartia, his fatal flaw**: his confusion of his private and public role
- Revealed through **structure of the whole extract** – conversation jumps between discussion of O's love and marriage to D and lengthy descriptions of his military role
- Comes to a head in O's vow
 - he puts *the office I do hold of you* (his public role) at stake for his private exoneration
 - uses the **military term report** to refer to D's story of their private wooing
- Later in the tragedy, O will become increasingly unable to differentiate between these roles – to the point where he replaces his private love Desdemona with his public lieutenant Iago as the person he trusts the most – a step that compounds his downfall
- Here: This confusion of roles is immediately followed by a statement that suggests O's excessive yet misplaced trust in Iago – he asks him to fetch D – this trust will play a significant role as it enables Iago to confuse O further and lead him to believe that D has been unfaithful to him