

Othello's Second Marriage:
The Temptation Scene and the Forms of Early Modern Marriage

By
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Abstract

This thesis explores the way Iago and Othello's binding agreement in *Othello* 3.3 echoes the marriage ceremony traditions of early modern England. Editors and scholars including Michael Neill, Ayanna Thompson and John Baxter have all referred to the end of the famous temptation scene in *Othello* as a "marriage" or "mock marriage," but none fully explains or documents why it has the markings of a marriage. This paper attempts to fill in the gaps through a detailed explanation of marriage practices in early modern England, followed by a close reading of *Othello* 3.3 that focuses on repetition, the calling of witnesses, kneeling, and the language of the vows. Finally, this thesis ends by exploring the implications of reading *Othello* 3.3 as resemblant of a marriage scene.

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Introduction

In the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1990 production of *Othello*, Willard White — playing Othello — and Ian McKellen — playing Iago — add their own artistic flair to the end of Act 3, Scene 3. Famously referred to as “the temptation scene,”¹ *Othello* 3.3 is the moment in the tragedy where the titular character turns his back on his steadfast wife, Desdemona, and instead vows his loyalty to Iago, the man who has constructed Othello's downfall. The 1622 stage directions for this pivotal scene are sparse, and at the end of the temptation scene, there are only two directions (figure 1). First, Othello kneels. Then, just before the duo vow their loyalty to each other, Iago joins him. But in the 1990 film, McKellen and White add additional actions that speak to the fuller meaning of the scene. Instead of simply falling onto his knees beside Othello, for example, McKellen first grabs White's hand, interlacing their fingers. Next, prior to the exchange of the vows, both actors stand and face each other, just inches apart. As the vow commences, and Othello tells Iago, “Now art thou my lieutenant,”² White holds out his hand for McKellen to shake. Instead, McKellen grasps White's hand and lays a kiss on it.³ The duo holds hands as Iago vows back: “I am your own forever.”⁴

¹ *Othello* 3.3 is famously known as the “temptation scene” not just because it is the scene where Iago successfully tricks Othello into his false jealousy, but also due to Shakespeare's many textual comparisons of Iago to the devil. For example, Iago famously says the line, “I am not what I am,” in Act 1, Scene 1, an inversion of Jesus' “I am who I am.” For more biblical references in *Othello*, see: Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

² William Shakespeare, *Othello* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 3.3.472.

³ *Othello*, directed by Trevor Nunn (London: 1990), Video.

⁴ Shakespeare *Othello* 3.3.473.

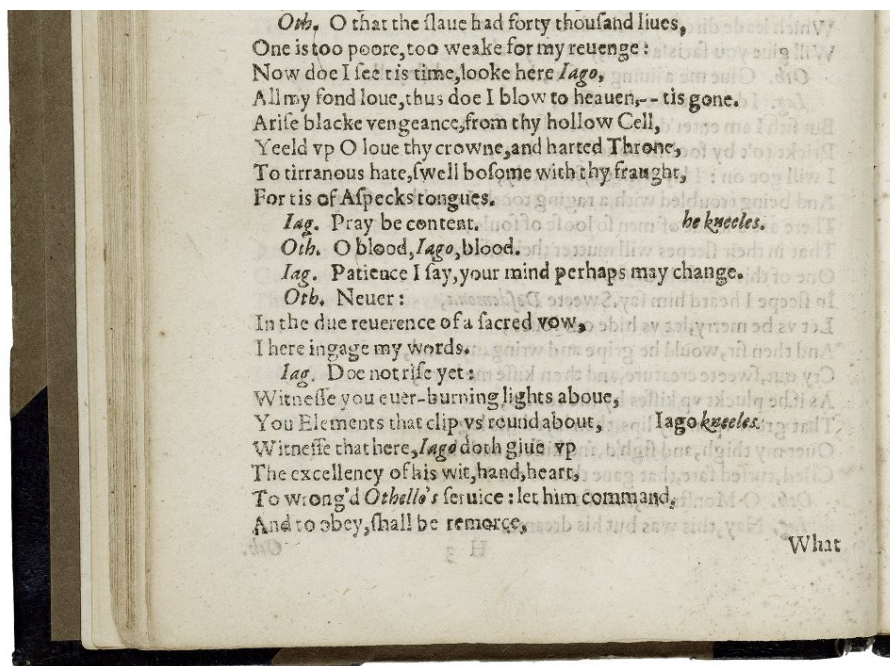


Figure 1. Shakespeare, William. *The tragædy of Othello, the Moore of Venice*. (London: 1622) STC 22305 copy 1, page 54, image 13713. Folger Shakespeare Library.

These small changes hint at a deeper meaning of the scene that scholars have long pointed out: Othello and Iago's actions and vows at the end of 3.3 resemble a sort of mock marriage. Joel Altman, for example, notes that the scene is a "notorious travesty of the Anglican marriage rite."⁵ Ayanna Thompson writes that when Othello and Iago kneel together, it looks like "a bizarre inversion of a marriage rite."⁶ And John Baxter notes that there are numerous "ironies of the parody of marriage" at the end of 3.3.⁷ Other scholars, including Stanley Edgar Hyman and Bruce Smith, have also noted the scene's resemblance to a marriage ceremony.⁸ While many scholars have noted the similarities between the marriage ceremony and the end of

⁵ Joel Altman, *The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 329.

⁶ Ayanna Thompson, introduction to *Othello*, by William Shakespeare, ed. by E.A.J. Honigmann (London: The Arden Shakespeare Third Series, 2016), 37.

⁷ John Baxter, "Tying the Knot in *Othello*," *Essays in Criticism* 64, no. 3 (2014): 286.

⁸ See Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 111, and Bruce Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 63.

3.3, however, none fully explores it. Othello and Iago's "marriage" is thus widely noted but insufficiently explained.

In this thesis, I explore the way Iago and Othello's binding agreement in *Othello* 3.3 echoes the marriage ceremony traditions of early modern England. First, I provide a detailed explanation of marriage practices in early modern England, followed by a close reading of *Othello* 3.3. In setting *Othello* in historical context, I am particularly interested in the form of marriage professed by the Anglican church, the covert and popular practice of clandestine marriages, and historical literary examples of marriages between men. In my analysis of the text, I focus on four distinct ways *Othello* 3.3 shares the form of an early modern English marriage: the couple's repetition of similar phrases, physical representations of unity such as kneeling, the calling on of witnesses, and the language of the vows. By providing the historical evidence for what marriages were like in the period, I argue that Shakespeare's audiences would have recognized 3.3 as a representation of a marriage ceremony. Then I argue that by having Othello and Iago fill out this template of a marriage ceremony, Shakespeare extends the drama of 3.3. The fact that this scene resembles a marriage ceremony changes how we understand the scene's role in the play: it is not simply an ordinary agreement between Iago and Othello, but, at the very least, an agreement that more closely figures the binding and lasting agreement between spouses. In this scene, Othello shifts from one spouse — Desdemona — to another spouse — Iago — and fully commits his allegiance to his enemy. The implication of this commitment impacts how we view the rest of the play.

Background

Marriage was a popular subject in Shakespeare's time — both in literature and in church teaching — in large part due to the Protestant Reformation, which was sweeping across Europe. The English Reformation occurred in the early sixteenth century and dramatically shifted the state religion — at times back and forth — from Catholic to Protestant. The religious change came with a need to define new practices and traditions, including the marriage ceremony. Frances Dolan writes that following the Reformation, an “extraordinary number” of texts by Protestant writers were about marriage:

Just after the Reformation, the defense and promotion of marriage was one of the ways that ministers could assert the difference between Protestant and Catholic values and priorities; it was also a topic through which ministers, most of them married themselves, could forge an intimate connection to their parishioners' lives and problems distinctly different from that possible for a celibate clergy (or so they claimed).⁹

During the Reformation, Protestants in early modern England were working to redefine marriage with their own marriage ceremony, their own marriage advice books and more. And because Renaissance England enforced a Christian — specifically Protestant— state religion, nearly all of Shakespeare's audience members would have been familiar with the church teachings and practices regarding matrimony.

To thoroughly define its practices after splitting from the Catholic Church, the Church of England deemed a marriage proper only if it adhered to certain principles (though certain legal stipulations could be more flexible, as noted below). According to the church, the wedding couple needed to get married in one of their local parishes. The ceremony needed to be

⁹ Frances Dolan, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 29.

conducted by a constituted minister in the presence of witnesses and take place during a proper time of day and season of the year. Importantly, the couple's plans to wed must be announced at least three times publicly in a church — known as the calling of the banns — in order to give the community time to protest the union, should there be concerns.¹⁰ Many of these practices were outlined in the *Book of Common Prayer*, which was published in 1549 and which was intended to offer standardized forms of service including burial services, communion services, baptism services and wedding services for the Church of England.

The section about marriage, “The Forme and Solemnizacion of Matrimonie,” offers a proper script for church-held wedding ceremonies, and emphasis is placed on the eternity of the vow. Even the earliest version of the text, which was published in 1549, has phrases that are still used in marriage ceremonies today, such as “Wilt thou love her, coumforte her, honor and kepe her...so long as you both shall live?”¹¹ Other phrases that speak to the eternity of the vow include “till death us departe” and “Those whome god hath joined together: let no man put a sunder.”¹² The text also calls for certain physical symbols of unity. The couple is instructed to hold hands as they exchange their vows. Following the exchanging of the vows, the couple is then instructed to exchange rings or other tokens to symbolize their unity.¹³

Despite the plethora of new information and teachings regarding marriage in the early modern period, some marriage practices, traditions, and laws were set in stone from the Middle Ages forward. For example, while the Church of England heavily promoted a certain form of

¹⁰ Katharine Cleland, *Irregular Unions: Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 6. Like many other scholars, Cleland also recognizes the marital nature of Othello and Iago's vows. Regarding the end of 3.3, she writes that “[this] act constitutes the only marriage or trothplight in the play that we actually witness. We never witness any kind of marital vow made between Othello and Desdemona, yet here we witness the making of a formal pact between Othello and Iago” (128-129).

¹¹ Brian Cummings, ed. *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65.

¹² Cummings 66-67.

¹³ Cummings 66.

marriage in the *Book of Common Prayer*, what legally constituted a marriage at the time was less clearly defined. In her study of the representation of clandestine marriages in early modern English literature, Katharine Cleland notes the tension between what the Church of England defined as a correct marriage ceremony, and what canon law deemed an official marriage ceremony. For example, despite the explicit requirements from the church, canon law derived from the Middle Ages deemed consent between the two parties to be the only requirement for a marriage.¹⁴ Marriages that were legally binding but did not follow the requirements of the church came to be known as clandestine marriages, which were therefore transgressive but not illegal.¹⁵ Clandestine weddings became increasingly popular in the early modern period. Indeed, Othello and Desdemona's union constitutes a clandestine marriage. Jeremy Boulton notes that the increase in private weddings in the early modern period could be due to a few factors: the higher cost of church weddings, an effort to conceal pregnancy, and a means of circumventing parental or parish oppositions to marriages.¹⁶ Clandestine marriages remained legal up until 1753, when a Marriage Act was passed that required marriages to have banns and official marriage licenses purchased by the couple. Up until that time, however, under canon law, a free exchange of vows delivered in the present tense was considered a binding union, also known as a *de praesenti* vow. Vows delivered in the future tense — known as a *de futuro* vow — was similarly binding, so long as it was followed by an act of consummation.¹⁷ Church weddings — known as *in facie ecclesiae* — were preferred but not required.¹⁸ What constituted a legal marriage in the period was much vaguer than the modern world might assume, therefore.

¹⁴ Cleland 5.

¹⁵ Cleland 6.

¹⁶ Jeremy Boulton, "Itching After Private Marryings? Marriage Customs in Seventeenth-century London," *The London Journal* 16, no. 1 (1991): 26.

¹⁷ Cleland 5.

¹⁸ Boulton 16.

Although only men and women could legally get married in early modern England, in fictional representations, marriages between two men were not unimaginable. By the time *Othello* was published in 1622, there were numerous literary examples of marriages between men. In the second century, Roman historian Suetonius wrote a collection of biographies entitled *The Twelve Caesars*. In his section about Emperor Nero, Suetonius writes about two of Nero's marriages to men. Nero's first marriage is to a young boy. Suetonius writes, "Having tried to turn the boy Sporus into a girl by castration, he went through a wedding ceremony with him — dowry, bridal veil and all — took him to his palace with a great crowd in attendance, and treated him as a wife."¹⁹ Suetonius calls attention to the importance of the form of the marriage ceremony in this sentence by mentioning the dowry, bridal veil, and the crowd who celebrated their marriage. Suetonius then writes that Nero later married a freedman named Doryphorus. He writes, "Doryphorus now married him — just as he himself had married Sporus — and on the wedding night he imitated the screams and moans of a girl being deflowered."²⁰ Suetonius' text was distributed in the early modern period in an English translation by Philemon Holland, printed in London in 1606.²¹

Just three years later, Ben Jonson's *Epicæne* was first performed in 1609, and featured a marriage between men. In the play, Morose, a cranky old man who hates noise, is on the hunt to find a wife so that his large inheritance will not be passed down to his wily and disruptive nephew, Dauphine. Through the schemes of Dauphine, Morose finds a seemingly silent woman, Epicæne, whom he happily marries. Immediately after marrying, Epicæne begins to make her voice heard — and Morose looks for any means of procuring a divorce. Dauphine promises his

¹⁹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 228.

²⁰ Suetonius 228.

²¹ Michael Grant, foreword to *The Twelve Caesars*, by Suetonius, trans. by Robert Graves (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 10.

uncle to reveal a way Morose can divorce his wife, so long as he gives Dauphine his inheritance. At the end of the play, a shock to both Morose and the audience alike, it is revealed that Epicœne is in fact a man, and the marriage is not valid.²²

There was, it seems clear, literary examples of marriages between men around the time that *Othello* was written, performed, and published. This means that although marriage between men was illegal in early modern England, it was not outside the realm of imagination for literary texts. While I do not argue that Shakespeare's audience would have recognized 3.3 as a real marriage ceremony, the audience could have recognized the *form* of the marriage ceremony in Othello and Iago's interaction, which likely would have raised the significance of the two men's connection in their minds.

Importantly, an examination of Shakespeare's primary source text for *Othello* proves that the marital elements of the scene were of Shakespeare's own contrivance. His source is an Italian text called the *Gli Hecatommithi* by Battista Giraldi Cinthio, which includes a tale about a Moor who marries a woman named Disdemona. Their marriage comes to a fatal end after the Moor's Ensign convinces the Moor that Disdemona is an adulteress who is cheating on the Moor with the Corporal. Though the only named character in the text is Disdemona, it is clear that Shakespeare based Othello off of the Moor, Iago off of the Ensign, and Cassio off of the Corporal. Shakespeare followed the plot of *Gli Hecatommithi* closely when writing *Othello*, but there are some places where he diverges widely in order to expand the short, fifteen-page Italian work into five acts.²³ Importantly, Shakespeare adds the "marriage" scene, which has little precedent in the *Gli Hecatommithi*. The closest thing to Shakespeare's "marriage scene" in the

²² Ben Jonson, *Epicœne: or, the silent woman* (Edinburgh: Martin & Wotherspoon, 1768).

²³ For specifics, see Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare Volume VII* (London, New York: Routledge and Paul; Columbia University Press, 1957).

source material comes when the Moor begs the Ensign to kill the Corporal, “promising to remain eternally grateful to him.”²⁴ But Shakespeare adds important details to *Othello* 3.3 that give it the form of a marriage ceremony: repetition, kneeling, the calling on of witnesses, and marital language. Thus, while Shakespeare’s source material has a passing reference to eternal gratefulness, it in no way explicitly evokes a marriage ceremony the way *Othello* 3.3 does. In the following close-reading section, I will describe the scene in detail and analyze how Shakespeare uses elements from the form of marriage to symbolize Othello and Iago’s union at the end of 3.3.

If Shakespeare wanted to explicitly depict Othello and Iago’s interaction at the end of 3.3 as having the form of a marriage ceremony, one might ask why he did not have his characters use the exact words and vows from the Book of Common Prayer. The commitment can only resemble a marriage for multiple reasons. As aforementioned, marriage between two men, even if available as a thought, was not sanctioned in the period. Moreover, it was not legal to use the words of the marriage ceremony in stage performances, regardless of the gender of the people getting married. Because of *de praesenti* and *de futuro* laws derived from the Middle Ages, it was quite easy to get married — even inadvertently. Karl Wentersdorf writes:

If they solemnly took each other as man and wife with the concomitant intention of fidelity, then — unless there were nullifying impediments such as consanguinity or prior contracts — a valid marriage existed at the moment of speaking the words of the contract, and it could not normally be dissolved.²⁵

These *de praesenti* and *de futuro* laws presented issues for actors portraying marriages on stage. Having actors explicitly say lines from the marriage ceremony on stage could present legality

²⁴ Bullough 249.

²⁵ Karl Wentersdorf, “The Marriage Contracts in *Measure for Measure*: A Reconsideration.” *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (1980): 131-132.

issues in terms of marriage contracts. While authorities were not concerned about an actual marriage taking place onstage (because all the actors were male), the words of the vows were considered effective — so it did not make sense for actors to say them, even in pretense. In fact, none of the holy sacraments (of which marriage is one), were allowed to be performed on the stage.²⁶ Therefore, playwrights had to find creative ways to depict marriage scenes without using marital language. Shakespeare directly addresses this problem in *As You Like It*: when Rosalind asks Celia to marry her to Orlando, Celia jokingly states, “I cannot say the words.”²⁷ Often, Shakespeare simply has marriages be occasions that happen off stage (such as in *Romeo and Juliet*), prior to the action of the play (as is the case in *Othello* between Desdemona and Othello), or presumed to occur after the play (as is the case in *As You Like It*.) Thus, while sacraments such as marriage were not allowed to be portrayed on the stage, it is significant that Shakespeare includes this scene between Iago and Othello, which has many marital elements.

There are numerous elements in *Othello* 3.3 that would suggest to playgoers — both through the language and production of the scene — that the vows at the end of Act 3 resemble marriage vows. In the following section, I pay careful attention to four of these factors in the order in which they arise: the use of repetition, kneeling as a physical representation of unity, the calling on of witnesses, and the language of the vows themselves. These four elements work together as symbols of marital unity throughout 3.3, both in body language and in explicit terms.

Repetition

Iago and Othello’s use of repetition in 3.3 mirrors the use of repetition in “The Forme of Solemnizacion of Matrimonie.” This linguistic similarity draws an important connection between

²⁶ James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, 1599* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 213.

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 4.1.111.

the characters' conversation and the preferred language of marriage ceremonies in early modern England. According to the *Book of Common Prayer*, husbands and wives were required to repeat certain phrases during the marriage ceremony. When asked one by one if they would take their partner as their husband or wife "in sickness and in health...as long as you both shall live," both partners in turn reply "I will." Then, the couples must repeat a paragraph to one another, using their names and "wife" or "husband" as appropriate:

I *N.* take thee *N.* to be my wedded wife, to have and to holde from this day forwarde, for better, for wurse, for richer, for poorer, in sickeness, and in health, to love and to cherishe, til death us departe: according to Goddes holly ordeinaunce: And therto I plight thee my trouth.²⁸

Following the exchanging of vows, the priest also leads the congregation in prayers that require repetition. Twice, the priest leads the congregation in the "Glory to the Father" doxology: a short hymn of praise.²⁹ The priest then leads the congregation in a call and answer prayer, which goes: "Lorde have mercie upon us. *Answer.* Christe have mercie upon us. *Minister.* Lorde have mercie upon us."³⁰ Repetition was thus a notable aspect of the marriage ceremony.

Just as husbands and wives repeated these familiar phrases to one another, so too do Iago and Othello repeat one another's words throughout Act 3, Scene 3. In one particularly repetitive section, Iago repeats Othello's words to hint at his doubt of Desdemona's fidelity. Iago asks Othello if Cassio knew of his courtship of Desdemona, and Othello responds that he did, and that Cassio "went between [he and Desdemona] very oft." Iago continues:

IAGO. Indeed?

²⁸ Cummings 66.

²⁹ Cummings 67-68.

³⁰ Cummings 68.

OTHELLO. Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou aught in that?

Is he not honest?

IAGO. Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO. Honest? Ay, honest.

IAGO. My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO. What dost thou think?

IAGO. Think, my lord?

OTHELLO. "Think, my lord?" Alas, thou echo'st me

As if there were some monster in thy thought

Too hideous to be shown.³¹

Iago's repetition is so apparent in this conversation that even Othello takes note of it. While Iago's rhetorical purpose in repeating Othello's words is certainly to make Othello frustrated and distrustful, the repeated lines also prepare the readers to recognize a more significant repetition between the duo later. The repeated lines also serve as a means of planting in readers' minds an idea of a specific kind of relationship between Othello and Iago.

Importantly, just following this scene between Othello and Iago — but prior to Othello and Iago's vow at the end of 3.3 — Shakespeare includes a short scene between Iago and Emilia, in which Emilia tells Iago that she has acquired the sought-after handkerchief that Iago had asked her to steal as his false evidence of Desdemona's adultery. In this scene, too, playgoers hear a similar use of repetition. This time, the exchange happens between a married couple.

Shakespeare writes:

EMILIA: Do not you chide: I have a thing for you.

³¹ Shakespeare *Othello* 3.3.99-107.

IAGO: You have a thing for me? It is a common thing —

...

EMILIA: What will you give me now

For that same handkerchief?

IAGO: What handkerchief?

EMILIA: What handkerchief?

Why, that the Moor first gave to Desdemona;

That which so often you did bid me steal.³²

It is no coincidence that Othello and Iago's repetition occurs toward the beginning of the temptation scene and that it is followed closely by the use of repetition between Iago and Emilia. By having Othello and Iago repeat lines in the same fashion as Iago and Emilia just lines after, Shakespeare signals a similar relationship forming between the two men compared to the married couple. Thus, the rhetorical device serves not only as a weapon of frustration, but also as a signal and symbol of the repeated vows in the marriage ceremony.

Kneeling

In addition to these linguistic similarities, Iago and Othello's marriage scene also shares a physical similarity to that of the official Protestant wedding ceremony. In the *Othello* scene and the *Book of Common Prayer*, physical positioning is used to show that a couple is forming a union. In *Othello*, Iago and Othello kneel to one another before exchanging their vows at the end of Act 3, Scene 3. While kneeling does not occur in the Protestant marriage ceremony, physical representations of unity occur in other ways, such as the holding and "loosing" of hands. Just as

³² Shakespeare 3.3.299-300 and 303-307.

a play is given stage directions, the marriage ceremony in the *Book of Common Prayer* includes directives as relates to physical movement and touching during the ceremony. The minister, for example, is directed to receive the wife from her father's hands and then place the wife's right hand in the husband's hand, before the husband states his oath. Then, before the wife repeats her oath to her husband, she must take her husband by his right hand.³³ Though Iago and Othello do not hold hands during their union, they express their unity in a different physical manner that is arguably reminiscent of the marriage ceremony. Kneeling, as I will write about below, was known as a symbol of pledging one's loyalty to another.

Physical positioning was important not only in heterosexual marriages in early modern Europe, but also in same-sex unions. John Boswell writes about the importance of physical symbols of unity in his book on same-sex unions in premodern Europe. In his comparison of same-sex and heterosexual union ceremonies, he writes:

But the most striking parallels have to do with visual symbolism, which was certainly more memorable for the congregation: the sight of a couple standing hand-in-hand at the altar, being joined and blessed by the priest, would last longer in imagination and memory than the precise wording of any ceremony, heard every now and then by congregants but not available in premodern societies with much lower rates of literacy and no printed books.³⁴

As Boswell notes, due to the lack of wholesale literacy, physical representations of unity were of utmost importance. Boswell writes that the symbols of unity typically shared between heterosexual and homosexual ceremonies included: binding with a stole or veil, use of crowns, hosting a post-ceremony feast, walking in circles around the altar, using a cross, occasionally

³³ Cummings 158-159.

³⁴ John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994), 206.

using a sword, and “virtually always — the joining of right hands.” Although kneeling is not a symbol that Boswell notes, Othello and Iago’s physical display of unity on stage serves as an important marital symbol.

Kneeling was also an important symbol of subordination. In the Middle Ages, vassals — subordinate parties who made oaths of fealty to lords — would kneel when pledging their loyalty to their lords. J. Russell Major writes that the typical homage ceremony involved an unarmed and bareheaded vassal kneeling to his lord. The vassal would place his hands in his lord’s hands and take an oath of fealty on the Gospels. In return, the vassal would receive a plot of land and a kiss on the mouth from the lord.³⁵ Kneeling becomes a symbol of fealty in *Othello* when the duo commits themselves to one another. And, in surprising fashion, not one, but both men kneel — despite Othello’s superior position.

Different editions of *Othello* have various directions on when the two characters kneel. In the 1622 quarto text, for example, Othello kneels following his speech that begins, “Oh, that the slave had forty thousand lives!” and Iago kneels following his line “You elements that clip us round about.”³⁶ But in the 2016 Norton edition, as is shown below, Othello and Iago kneel following different lines. Interestingly, the original 1623 folio text has no stage directions related to kneeling at all — but the stage directions associated with Shakespeare’s plays are notoriously imprecise.³⁷ It is clear, however, that Othello does indeed drop to his knees at one point during this scene because of Iago’s line, “Do not rise yet.”³⁸ And, despite various editorial decisions on

³⁵ J. Russell Major, “‘Bastard Feudalism’ and the Kiss: Changing Social Mores in Late Medieval and Early Modern France,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17, no. 3 (1987): 509-510.

³⁶ William Shakespeare, *The tragædy of Othello, the Moore of Venice*. (London: 1622) Folger Shakespeare Library STC 22305: 54.

³⁷ William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* (London: 1623) Folger Shakespeare Library STC 22273: 326.

³⁸ Shakespeare 3.3.457.

when the kneeling occurs for each character, it is important to note that Othello always kneels before Iago. Othello kneels first out of despair and anger, but when Iago joins him on his knees, the symbolism of their physical positioning changes. At the end of 3.3, Iago tells Othello two lies that send Othello into a fury: that Iago heard Cassio speak about Desdemona and their love in a dream, and that Iago saw Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief Othello had given to Desdemona. Othello responds to these falsities with a desire for revenge:

Oh, that the slave had forty thousand lives!

One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.

Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago:

All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. 'Tis gone.

[OTHELLO *kneels.*]

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell;

Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne

To tyrannous hate. Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,

For 'tis of aspics' tongues.³⁹

Othello's act of kneeling is a sign of his giving up on Desdemona and giving in to his desire for revenge. He lowers himself as he calls on hollow hell. The scene continues with Othello deciding not to look back and to fully commit his revenge on Desdemona:

IAGO: Yet be content.

OTHELLO: Oh, blood! Blood! Blood!

IAGO: Patience, I say: your mind may change.

OTHELLO: Never, Iago! Like to the Pontic Sea,

³⁹ Shakespeare 3.3.438-444.

Whose icy current and compulsive course
 Ne'er keeps retiring ebb, but keeps due on
 To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
 Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
 Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love
 Till that a capable and wide revenge
 Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven,
 In the due reverence of a sacred vow
 I here engage my words.
 IAGO: Do not rise yet.

[IAGO *kneels.*]

Immediately following Othello's mention of a "vow," Iago demands that Othello remain kneeling. When Iago joins Othello on his knees, the symbolism of the scene changes. It is at this point in the scene, as I will explain in greater detail in the two sections to come, that Iago and Othello vow themselves to one another. When Othello originally fell to the floor, it was an act of exhaustion. However, when Iago joins him on his knees and the men commit their loyalty to one another, the kneeling becomes a symbol of fealty and a physical act of unity reminiscent of those in the marriage ceremony.

The calling of witnesses

As Iago and Othello kneel together on stage — but prior to their vows to one another — Iago makes an important move: he calls on the duo's surroundings as their witnesses. Because

he and Othello are the only people present in the scene, Iago finds another means of securing spectators. He states:

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
 You elements that clip us round about,
 Witness that here Iago doth give up
 The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
 To wronged Othello's service. Let him command,
 And to obey shall be in me remorse,
 What bloody business ever.⁴⁰

This explicit reference to an important part of the official marriage ceremony in the *Book of Common Prayer* is a purposeful move by Iago to further strengthen the vows he and Othello are about to exchange. While having witnesses present was not explicitly needed for marriages in early modern England, having witnesses was necessary for marriages *in facie ecclesiae*. In “The Forme of Solemnization of Matrimonie,” witnesses are called on to speak if they have a just cause for why the couple cannot lawfully be joined together.⁴¹ Additionally, the marriage ceremony calls for someone to “give” away the bride to her husband, typically a job reserved for the bride’s father.⁴²

In *Othello* 3.3, Iago calls on objects such as the stars and the elements to be their witnesses. Iago attempts to heighten the status of their witnesses by pointing to their ever-lasting nature, compared to the mortality of humans. Cleland writes that “[this] kind of witnessed

⁴⁰ Shakespeare 3.3.457-464.

⁴¹ Cummings 65.

⁴² Cummings 66.

formality gives Othello reason to trust Iago.”⁴³ By calling attention to the need for witnesses, Iago seeks to make their union more official — and more marriage-like.

Of course, though there are no other humans present on stage with Othello and Iago, the audience also serves as a witness to the ceremony. While the fictional characters are not cognizant of the audience members, their presence helps establish the traditional form of an Anglican marriage union — complete with an audience of peers overlooking the ceremony. This is a wonderful irony of the scene: that Othello and Iago in fact have more than enough witnesses present. Thus, in addition to having Iago establish the form of a wedding ceremony on stage by calling the elements as their witnesses, the stage production itself helps establish the form of a wedding ceremony.

Language

The words exchanged between Othello and Iago at the end of 3.3 could serve as marital vows for a heterosexual couple in early modern England. After Iago calls on the stars as their witnesses, the duo secures their partnership by first discussing the forthcoming murders of Cassio and Desdemona and then vowing themselves to each other. Shakespeare writes:

OTHELLO: I greet thy love
 Not with vain thanks but with acceptance bounteous,
 And will upon the instant put thee to't.
 Within these three days let me hear thee say
 That Cassio's not alive.
 IAGO: My friend is dead.

⁴³ Cleland 129.

'Tis done at your request. But let her live.

OTHELLO: Damn her, lewd minx! Oh, damn her! Damn her!

Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw

To furnish me with some swift means of death

For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

IAGO: I am your own forever.⁴⁴

Would Othello's "Now art thou my lieutenant" and Iago's "I am your own forever" be considered marriage vows? The question of what words enact a marriage vow is of particular concern in my study of Othello and Iago's vows. In *A Treatise of Spousals, or Matrimonial Contracts*, written in 1600 but published posthumously in 1686, Henry Swinburne delves into the shockingly vague rules of the time regarding the language of *de praesenti* and *de futuro* marital vows. In the 240-page treatise, Swinburne specifies "by what form of words" *de praesenti* and *de futuro* vows can be conducted. When exemplifying the types of words used in vows, Swinburne often uses phrases such as "I take thee to my wife" or "I consent unto thee, as my Wife."⁴⁵ But the rules for what phrases constituted a marriage vow were much more flexible than one might expect.

One of the reasons there were not specific rules on exact language was due to the various educational levels of people in the period. Swinburne addresses what he calls "the vulgar sort" of people who do not have a firm grasp of the English language, and what that means for the marital vows that they make. Swinburne writes:

⁴⁴ Shakespeare 3.3.463-473.

⁴⁵ Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals, Or Matrimonial Contracts Wherein all the Questions Relating to that Subject are Ingeniously Debated and Resolved / by the Late Famous and Learned Mr. Henry Swinburne, Author of the Treatise of Wills and Testaments*, (London 1686), 74.

And therefore, since it is the very Consent of Mind only which maketh Matrimony, we are to regard not their Words, but their Intents, not the formality of the Phrase, but the drift of their Determination, not the outward sound of their Lips, which cannot speak more cunningly, but the inward Harmony or Agreement of their Hearts, which mean uprightly: Which Conclusion, as it is generally true, and is meant of all Persons; so especially it is extended to those of the *ruder* sort, whose Sayings are to be expounded with all favour to the furtherance of Matrimony.⁴⁶

Thus, it was not necessary for couples (of any educational level) to repeat a specific, pre-determined phrase in order to be married. As Swinburne notes, it is the intention, not the exactness, of the words that ultimately matters.

Couples also did not need to repeat the same phrase to be married. Swinburne writes that so long as each party uses words presenting consent to the other, they do not need to be the same words.⁴⁷ In fact, one of the parties need not even reply out loud for a marriage vow to be enacted. Swinburne writes: “As if the one party say [*I take thee to my Wife, desiring if thou likewise dost accept me to thy Husband, to receive this Ring*], she receiving the Ring, it is in effect as if she had answered [*I do accept thee for my Husband*].”⁴⁸ Signs of consent — such as receiving a physical token — could thus replace words of consent.

The effectiveness of the vow becomes more ambiguous when the vows do not include words that directly invoke matrimony. Swinburne writes that phrases such “I give thee my Faith” and “I will never fail thee,” are so general and uncertain that it is difficult to determine if they induce matrimony. However, he writes that if the couple intended for these general words to be

⁴⁶ Swinburne 62.

⁴⁷ Swinburne 86.

⁴⁸ Swinburne 86.

their exchange of vows, they would count as a marriage contract.⁴⁹ Swinburne writes of ambiguous phrases:

The first Ampliation is, that Albeit the words be ambiguous, such as of their own nature inforce neither Matrimony nor Spousals, but by common use of Speech induce Matrimony, by these words true and perfect Matrimony is Contracted, aswell as if the words were naturally and properly Matrimonial.⁵⁰

As examples of ambiguous phrases that would induce matrimony, Swinburne offers phrases that imply eternal commitment, such as “I will have thee for my Wife until the Earth cover mine Eyes,” “I will not change thee for a better,” “I will retain thee perpetually with me,” or “Here I take thee for mine own.”⁵¹ The common element of these phrases is their everlasting promise.

In applying these considerations to Othello and Iago’s vows, the marriage-like similarities of their exchange become clear. Othello and Iago do not use the exact marital vows from the *Book of Common Prayer*, nor do they repeat the same words to one another. Though Othello and Iago’s vows do not include words that directly invoke matrimony, they both resemble phrases which Swinburne deems as inducing matrimony. Othello’s vow — “Now art thou my lieutenant” resembles the aforementioned phrase “Here I take thee for mine own.” And Iago’s vow, “I am your own forever” closely resembles Swinburne’s aforementioned phrase “I will retain thee perpetually with me.” Thus, while Iago and Othello are not truly getting married on stage, it is easy to see how audience members would have recognized marriage-like language in their exchange, which heightens the drama of their commitment to one another.

⁴⁹ Swinburne 105.

⁵⁰ Swinburne 82.

⁵¹ Swinburne 82-83.

In the previous close-reading section, I have sought to trace the ways in which Shakespeare fills out the form of marriage in *Othello* 3.3. But just as Shakespeare fills out the form of marriage through his use of language and stage directions, so too does his character Iago instantiate the form of marriage as part of his manipulation of Othello. In all the details aforementioned — repetition, kneeling, the calling on of witnesses, and the language of the vows — Iago actively tries to mold his interaction with Othello into the form of a marriage. Iago’s words echo the repetition of the marriage ceremony. Iago calls on the stars to serve as witnesses to their exchange of vows. Iago’s language more closely follows the form of standard marriage vows *de praesenti* and Swinburne’s more flexible evocation of eternal commitment. Finally, although Othello kneels first, Iago sees the motion as an opportunity to create a sign of visual physical unity on stage. Iago manipulates Othello’s motion and turns it into yet another way to fit the form of a marriage.

Iago’s masterful manipulation is certainly a topic that scholars have analyzed in the past. Michael Neill writes about the end of 3.3 as a love and wooing scene, and specifically notes Iago’s mastery and manipulation therein. Iago is not simply trying to destroy Othello and Desdemona’s trust, Neill writes, but rather to create another bond in its place.⁵² Neill specifically cites Othello’s line, “Now art thou my lieutenant,” as Iago’s moment of triumph. He writes, “If there is any act of adultery in the play, this surely is it. ‘Lieutenant’ encompasses not merely Cassio’s office, but the role of domestic deputy which patriarchal theory gave to every wife.”⁵³ In his analysis, Neill gestures to the marital form of the bond, but does not expand his reading to fully explain all the marriage-like elements of the scene.

⁵² Michael Neill, “Changing Places in *Othello*” *Shakespeare Survey* 37 (1984): 129.

⁵³ Neill 130.

Many scholars have interpreted Iago's actions as a representation of Iago's homoerotic desire for Othello. Stanley Edgar Hyman, for example, reads Iago as a latent homosexual, and points to Iago's hostility toward women, marriage, and heterosexuality.⁵⁴ But Hyman's two best pieces of evidence — as Hyman himself notes — are Iago's dream about Cassio and the vow at the end of the temptation scene. Iago improvises a false encounter he had with Cassio to enrage Othello further during the temptation scene. Iago tells Othello that as he slept by Cassio's side one night, and he heard Cassio say in his sleep, "Sweet Desdemona, / Let us be wary. Let us hide our loves."⁵⁵ Hyman does a psychoanalytic reading of this improvisation of Iago's, writing, "The homosexual dynamics here are as simple and clear as they are fascinating: Iago has turned himself into a Desdemona for Cassio's sexual enjoyment on the surface of the spurious dream, and for Othello's in the latent context."⁵⁶ Then, Hyman turns to the end of the temptation scene, which he refers to as a "monstrous marriage vow" and evidence of Iago's unconscious homosexual motivation.⁵⁷ While Hyman makes an interesting and well-evidenced case for Iago's motivation, we do not need to psychoanalyze in order to see the scene's resemblance to a marriage ceremony.⁵⁸

I argue that Shakespeare's use of the form of marriage in 3.3 is two-fold. Not only does the playwright seek to create the form of a marriage onstage, but he also has his character Iago purposefully create the form of marriage onstage. The purposes of these two acts are different.

⁵⁴ Hyman 102.

⁵⁵ Shakespeare 3.3.415-416.

⁵⁶ Hyman 110-111.

⁵⁷ Hyman 111.

⁵⁸ For more information regarding homosexual desire in early modern England, see: James Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994); Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michael Rocke, *Forbidden friendships: homosexuality and male culture in Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and James M. Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance: Homosexuality in Art and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

Iago tries to make the scene marriage-like to gain Othello's trust. Shakespeare makes the scene marriage-like to increase the drama of the scene and heighten the relationship between the two males.

Implications

Having shown how Othello and Iago's vows at the end of 3.3 resemble the form of a marriage ceremony, it is now vital to explore how this revelation impacts our reading of the rest of the text. Othello shifts his allegiance from Desdemona to Iago at the end of 3.3, but as I have shown, the commitment Othello and Iago make resembles a marriage commitment. With this commitment in mind, I will now propose three possible ways this knowledge impacts our understanding of the overall play. First — and perhaps the most intuitive — is that after Act 3, Scene 3, Othello sees his relationship with Iago as his primary relationship, and, in his relationship with Othello, Iago reigns as the head of household. Second, because Othello commits adultery against Desdemona, Desdemona takes on the role of a spurned lover; that is, she has been utterly rejected by Othello. Third, I propose that we can read Othello's crazed and erratic behavior in acts 4 and 5 not just as a reaction of his jealousy, but also as an unconscious reaction to his own guilt and coming to terms with his own adultery.

After 3.3, Othello believes more fully in his relationship with Iago than with his wife. A simple comparison of Othello and Iago's conversation in 4.1 and Othello and Desdemona's conversation in 4.2 proves that all Othello's trust has been placed in Iago. In 4.1, Othello holds onto every word Iago utters about the supposed relations between Desdemona and Cassio, immediately accepting his lies and implications. Shakespeare writes:

IAGO: Will you think so?

OTHELLO: Think so, Iago?

IAGO: What,

To kiss in private?

OTHELLO: An unauthorized kiss!

IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend in bed

An hour or more, not meaning any harm?

OTHELLO: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm?

It is hypocrisy against the devil.⁵⁹

The repetition used in this scene is reminiscent of the duo's earlier repetition — a rhetorical proof of Othello and Iago's steadfast loyalty to one another. Just lines later, Iago lies to Othello, telling him he's heard Cassio say he's laid with Desdemona — and Othello believes every word.

In the next scene, Desdemona and Othello are alone together for the first time in the play, and when Othello questions Desdemona about her fidelity, he does not believe a word she says. "Swear thou art honest," Othello demands. Desdemona replies, "Heaven doth truly know it." Othello responds, "Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell."⁶⁰ In this instance, Othello echoes Desdemona's words only to then invert them, which rhetorically shows how their once-connected relationship is now broken. Just lines later, Othello and Desdemona again have a communication breach when Othello continues to question Desdemona about her fidelity.

Shakespeare writes:

OTHELLO: Are not you a strumpet?

DESDEMONA: No, as I am a Christian!

⁵⁹ Shakespeare 4.1.1-6.

⁶⁰ Shakespeare 4.2.36-39.

If to preserve this vessel for my lord
 From any other foul, unlawful touch
 Be not a strumpet, I am none.

OTHELLO: What, not a whore?

DESDEMONA: No, as I shall be saved!⁶¹

The comparison of these two scenes not only shows Othello's obvious distrust of Desdemona, but also just how tightly Iago has Othello wound around his finger. Othello repeats Iago's words, considering their meaning and verity, whereas Othello twists Desdemona's words to fit Iago's narrative. Othello has already decided in his mind that Desdemona is both a strumpet and a whore.

Othello falls for every thought Iago places into his mind, even to the method of Desdemona's murder. While Othello wanted to poison Desdemona, Iago recommends a more active method of murder: strangulation in bed. Immediately, Othello changes his mind: "The justice of it pleases."⁶² Thus, Iago has replaced Desdemona as Othello's other — but not better — half.

Othello's rejection of Desdemona is not lost on his wife. Following Act 3, Scene 3, Desdemona becomes a spurned lover who is cognizant of Othello's rejection of her. Immediately following the temptation scene, Desdemona notices a change in Othello's demeanor, and remarks "My lord is not my lord."⁶³ This line can be interpreted as Desdemona stating that Othello is not his normal self. But the use of the word "lord" also implies a certain power dynamic that is now missing. Women in early modern England were often expected to be

⁶¹ Shakespeare 4.2.81-85

⁶² Shakespeare 4.1.197.

⁶³ Shakespeare 3.4.116.

subservient to their husbands. Desdemona recognizes that Othello is no longer her “lord” in the marriage; that is, she is no longer Othello’s. Instead, Othello is now servant to his lord Iago. In an interaction with Emilia in 4.2, Desdemona once again states that she no longer has a lord:

EMILIA: Good madam, what’s the matter with my lord?

DESDEMONA: With who?

EMILIA: Why, with my lord, madam.

DESDEMONA: Who is thy lord?

EMILIA: He that is yours, sweet lady.

DESDEMONA: I have none.⁶⁴

In this interaction with Emilia, Desdemona more clearly states her disconnect from Othello.

While the couple remains wed, Desdemona realizes that he is no longer her lord. A physical representation of the couple’s split comes at the beginning of Act 4, Scene 2. Desdemona kneels before Othello, but Othello does not join her on the ground. He towers above her as he calls her “false as hell.”⁶⁵ This scene acts parallel to 3.3. Whereas Iago joins Othello on his knees, just two scenes later, the audience sees physical evidence of the destruction of Othello and Desdemona’s union when she kneels on the ground alone before her husband.

Desdemona’s reaction to Othello’s rejection of her is comparable to the character arc of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Both women face rejection from their partners, and both end up dead by the end of the plays. Shakespeare connects the two female characters in a few ways. Desdemona sings the lamentation song “willow, willow, willow” prior to her murder, and Ophelia commits suicide in a “weeping brook” above which “a willow grows askant the brook / That shows his

⁶⁴ Shakespeare 4.2.97-100.

⁶⁵ Shakespeare 4.2.38.

hoary leaves in the glassy stream.”⁶⁶ Joan Byles compares the two female characters in the way they shape their identities based on how the men in their lives perceive them, and notes that this identification translates into a lack of agency in the women speaking up for themselves.⁶⁷

Additionally, Ophelia dies by a suicidal drowning. Her clothes — “heavy with their drink” — pull her to the depths of the brook.⁶⁸ Desdemona, in a slightly similar fashion, does not fight her death. While Desdemona is indisputably brutally murdered by Othello, her last words tell that she felt some responsibility in her end. When Emilia asks who has killed Desdemona, Desdemona responds, “Nobody. I myself.”⁶⁹ Thus, a comparison of Desdemona and Ophelia makes it is easier to see Desdemona as a spurned lover — and one who is cognizant of the loss of her partner.

Lastly, I propose a third and new reading of the end of *Othello*, in which it is possible to analyze Othello’s behavior in acts 4 and 5 not merely as a reaction of jealousy but also as an unconscious reaction to his own guilt of his adultery against Desdemona. Compared to the happy “post-marriage” bliss we see in his relationship with Desdemona at the start of the play, Othello has no such calm mind after his commitment to Iago. This is likely because Othello has committed himself to a new partner without formally divorcing his first partner, Desdemona. Immediately following the temptation scene, we begin to see Othello’s loss of sense when he asks Desdemona about the location of her handkerchief. When Desdemona responds by deflecting the question and asking Othello to receive Cassio, Othello remarks, “my mind

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *Othello* 4.3.41 and William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 4.4.174 and 4.4.165-166.

⁶⁷ Joan Byles, “The Problem of the Self and the Other in the Language of Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia” *American Imago* 46, no. 1 (1989): 52.

⁶⁸ Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 4.4.180.

⁶⁹ Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.121.

misgives.”⁷⁰ As the play unfolds, Othello loses more and more of his reasoning — even suffering from an epileptic fit — and eventually finds a means of forcefully “divorcing” from Desdemona.

The object that often represents the root of Othello’s madness and the “ocular proof” of his concerns is the handkerchief. While many once believed the handkerchief to be symbolic of Desdemona and her infidelity, Ian Smith has convincingly argued that because the handkerchief is black (and not white, as scholars previously supposed), it represents Othello’s body.⁷¹

Therefore, Othello’s body, not Desdemona’s, is being tossed around and exchanged to different hands. If the handkerchief represents Othello and his body, then we know that what is truly driving Othello mad is himself. Desdemona has not been committing infidelity. Rather, the symbolism of a black handkerchief being passed around Cyprus more accurately represents Othello’s own adulterous actions with Iago.

One passage that helps readers understand Othello’s unconscious reaction to his own adultery is the speech he gives at the start of the last act. As Othello enters the bedroom in which Desdemona sleeps, he mutters about the “cause” of his forthcoming murder:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
 Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:
 It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood,
 Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow
 And smooth as monumental alabaster;
 Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.
 Put out the light, and then put out the light.
 If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,

⁷⁰ Shakespeare 3.4.86.

⁷¹ Ian Smith, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2013).

I can again thy former light restore,
 Should I repent me—but once put out thy light,
 Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
 I know now where is that Promethean heat
 That can thy light relume. When I have plucked thy rose,
 I cannot give it vital growth again:
 It needs must wither.⁷²

In this speech, Othello convinces himself of the justice of his act. He notes that Desdemona must die “else she’ll betray more men.” But this speech becomes especially interesting when read not as Othello’s commentary on Desdemona, but as Othello’s commentary on himself. Othello begins the speech by stating that “it is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.” With emphasis placed on the line’s final words “my soul,” the meaning of this line could imply that the cause of the forthcoming murder is Othello and the state of his unfaithful soul. The next lines, with their reference to the “chaste stars,” also harken back to 3.3, in which the stars witness Othello’s infidelity with Iago. Othello does not have to “name” the cause of Desdemona’s murder to the stars, because they witnessed Othello’s sin. Additionally, when Othello states, “Should I repent me,” John Money notes Othello’s “unconscious association,” writing, “Consciously he uses the word ‘repent’ only in speaking of the light; its association with the murder of Desdemona he cannot consciously admit. But the word is there.”⁷³ I add that Othello’s use of the word “repent” could also be an unconscious reference to his act of adultery. Finally, due to his adultery with Iago, Othello can no longer grow his marriage with Desdemona and thus sees the relationship as a “plucked rose” that now “needs must wither.”

⁷² Shakespeare 5.2.1-15.

⁷³ John Money, “Othello’s ‘It is the cause...’: An Analysis,” *Shakespeare Survey* 6 (1953): 99.

Othello is a comedy turned tragic. It is the story of a newly wedded couple whose relationship turns terminal soon after suspicions of adultery — and, in my reading, actual adultery — enters the storyline. At the end of the play, when Othello discovers Iago’s lies, Othello cannot bare to speak to him. Instead, he asks Cassio, “Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared by soul and body?”⁷⁴ Once his lieutenant, and now his demi-devil, Iago responds, “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak a word.”⁷⁵ Iago’s last lines remind Othello of his culpability in the ensnarement. As Othello grapples with his act of murder against his faithful wife, he gives a final speech in which he addresses his mistakes:

I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought;
 Perplexed in the extreme[.]⁷⁶

Othello’s remark that he loved “too well” speaks directly to the issue at the heart of this tragedy: Othello’s entanglement in two different commitments. Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is displaced the moment he vows himself to Iago at the end of 3.3. Othello, stuck in two commitments with opposing goals, ultimately follows through on his vow to Iago to the fatal detriment of his wife. The tragedy of Othello is constructed throughout the play by means such

⁷⁴ Shakespeare 5.2.294-295.

⁷⁵ Shakespeare 5.2.296-297.

⁷⁶ Shakespeare 5.2.333-339.

as Iago's manipulation, Othello's jealousy, and the ocular "proof" of the handkerchief, but it is cemented at the end of the temptation scene when Iago and Othello commit themselves to each other and their murderous intentions.

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