

“Nothing extenuate”: *Othello*, “a super-subtle” Tragedy

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Elizabethan psychology was on modern standards rudimentary and rooted in broad generalizations inherited from Aristotle. Yet later speculations regarding the enigma represented by Iago really came no nearer to explaining his motives than the naive personifications of the morality plays could be said to account for their actions denoting the Deadly Sins. Iago was initially understood to be “a hater”, moved by the Devil, and though drenched with much more flesh and blood than the faceless figures of Crafty Conveyance and Cloaked Collusion² he is squarely in line of descent with the mediaeval Vice. In the First Folio Iago is referred to as “a Villaine” in the list of *dramatis personae*.³

Since Coleridge’s grand diagnosis of “motiveless malignity”⁴ the fruitless search for justifications has continued. Now critics dig deeper, in the light of contemporary psycho-analysis. Iago’s conduct is base but is no longer especially shocking. Man’s delight in doing harm on a large and small scale is self-evident and even the Lear world falls short of doing justice to human capacity for destruction. Tragedy, it is argued, is no longer possible; it depended on Christian optimism and the modern world, or at least the Western world, has lost hope. The depths of human activity are better represented by Kafka and Orwell than by Shakespearean villainy. Individual loves and hates have been diminished.

Yet, although Iago’s deeds have only domestic consequences, he is still fascinating, perhaps because he is not “high-mimetic”, like most of his companions on the *Othello* stage. One may even defend the fellow and sympathize with his frustrations, if not quite with his methods, of extorting requital for his real or fancied slightings. Revenge, after all, was once a noble ideal, obligatory among Germanic tribes and inseparable from the warrior’s honour. Though it is *Othello*’s honour which, more obviously than any other, is at stake in this play, Iago, too, has good reason to feel himself dishonoured, since his heavily-emphasized reputation for “honesty” was threatened by *Othello*’s failure to promote him.⁵ His revenge is of the “backstabbing” kind and beyond the understanding of a noble warrior in the knightly tradition; he is very skilful at setting traps and in the realm of art (or even in that of real life) one can still admire his consummate villainy and relate it to familiar situations.

Iago’s inner self is well disguised. Though he feels himself humiliated, his own high opinion of his own qualities is by no means greatly exaggerated. It is held by others — *Othello*, *Desdemona*, *Cassio* and the Duke of Venice all count him reliable. His wife *Emilia*, though she calls him “my wayward

husband" (III, iii, 296) and whom he finally murders, is utterly astonished at the revelation of his villainy in the last scene.

Shakespeare's preamble to an explanation of Iago's attitude recalls a conversation which took place between him and Roderigo before the action of the play commences. Iago had already picked his target, and the other victims of his plot are incidental, or accidental.

Rod. Thou told'st me, thou didst hold him in thy hate.

Iago. Despise me if I do not. ... (I, i, 7—8)

Immediately following this, Iago starts to give his reasons. He has been "passed over" and, not surprisingly, bears a grudge. His use of the word "despise" shows that he has been concerned about his own reputation and that a "him" (Othello is unnamed until Act II) has committed some act which requires a vendetta to be maintained). Is lack of advancement adequate? Is Iago justified? Introduced as the villain of the plot, his statements are of necessity suspect, yet they seem reasonable, if somewhat obsessively expressed — Iago is angry, his self-esteem damaged, his great vanity stabbed. In a society wherein reputation is of paramount importance, a man of spirit would not easily recover from a blow delivered by higher authority, nor forgive anyone who made him look foolish.

The audience soon learns that Othello has known Iago for some time and is well aware of his ancient's practical abilities (*ibid.*, 28—9) yet he has given the vacancy to Cassio, a "bookish theoretic" having no first-hand experience of battle. This suggests that Othello's judgment of others was unbalanced, even when he was making it in his professional capacity. Moreover, what the audience learns about Cassio from others and from his own handling of situations is unimpressive. Iago's slanders — "a Florentine" (*i.e.* an untrustworthy outsider) and "this counter-caster" (text-book soldier) are part of his own envious reaction to disappointment but in the very last scene of the play Emilia calls Cassio "a fool" (*sc. cit* 234) Nor is this young man's supervision of the guard in the first part of II, iii carried out with the crisp efficiency which one might expect from an able officer — he tries to give the impression that he is in control of things but it is soon obvious that it is Iago who has seen to the punctual posting of the watch according to Othello's orders.

Later Iago relates his intentions towards Cassio :

Iago. If I can fasten but one cup upon him,
With that which he hath drunk to-night already,
He'll be as full of quarrel and offences
As my young mistress' dog.....

(*sc. cit.* 44—7)

implying that Cassio is already well on the way to being drunk on duty — which, under Iago's persuasion, he eventually becomes, to such an extent that he cannot recall what happened, as he admits to Iago after Othello has cashiered him :

Cas. I remember a mass of things, but nothing distinctly; a quarrel, but nothing wherefore. O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away their brains; that we should with joy, revel, pleasure, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts!

Iago. Why, but you are now well enough: how came you thus recovered?

Cas. It hath pleas'd the devil drunkenness to give place to the devil wrath; one unperfectness shows me another, to make me frankly despise myself.

(*ibid.* 280-9)

The same verb "despise" is used again to denote a loss of honour — in Cassio's vocabulary it is his "reputation" which has been forfeited, and he is full of remorse. For his disgrace he blames the devil in the shape of wine, then the devil "wrath". Iago blames Cassio for being prone to anger — he tells Roderigo that "he is rash and very sudden in choler" (II, i, 267) but this does not seem to be borne out by Cassio's behaviour and in II, iii Iago explains to Othello that he had never before seen him "high in oaths". One possible explanation is that Cassio has a poor head for drink, a tendency that fits in with the rest of his "light" personality. He is not a man much able to stand up for himself and indeed the only defence he puts up in the play is to draw and wound Roderigo in V, i. His accession to Othello's post in V, i, 333 is an irony.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Iago, who knows Cassio's limitations and understands him well enough to be able to entrap him without difficulty, should feel himself let down by having to play second fiddle to this "great arithmetician". But, more significantly, Iago's indignation, expressed several times as hatred and abhorrence of "the Moor" is related to his expectation of old-fashioned loyalty from his general. Evidently the *comitatus* spirit is not working. This lord has rejected his old companion, so that he feels exiled, a fearful punishment among Germanic tribes, of which traditions lingered vestigially for many centuries afterwards.⁸ Iago may have devoted his service to Othello "for my peculiar end" as he claims, but if this confession of total self-interestedness be true and not simply a post-dated claim stemming from hurt pride then he has concealed it very skilfully. Othello still reposes complete trust in his subordinate. He unhesitatingly leaves Desdemona in Iago's care, calling the latter :

... my ancient :
a man he is of honesty and trust

(I, iii, 284—5)

and unquestioningly accepts all Iago's evidence in the Cassio incident of II, iii. He believes Iago "honest" until the final scene. One may well begin to doubt Othello's ability to judge men and situations with any accuracy. Iago's earlier sneering comment, summing the Moor up as a man

..... of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th'nose
As asses are

(*ibid.*, i, 397—400)

appears more and more to have a solid foundation. Under normal conditions this quality would be a virtue. In an honourable truth-telling world he would come to no harm. But in Iago's world the Moor is helpless; out of it he is successful in his enterprises, in war and in love. He makes up his own mind until Iago starts to make it up for him.⁹

Iago fluctuates between hatred and admiration of Othello — the succession of pejoratives, "old black ram", "lascivious", "erring barbarian", "lustful", later qualified but not relieved by phrases like "of a constant, noble, loving nature", and probably "a most dear husband" shows up his jealousy and it includes sexual envy, as the stream of ugly images in II, i reveals together with the wild accusations of adultery which he casts around in the same scene (cf. n. 16). An element of admiration is essential to jealousy at its most corrosive — in the last Act Iago is even indicating envy of Cassio who in II, i is "handsome, young and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after" and in Act V is said to have

..... a daily beauty in his life,
That makes me ugly

(V, i, 19—20)

Iago's talk throughout of women is contemptuous and laced with references to lechery, eroticism, and the gross physical side of love, *eros* in marriage, without *agapē*, its spiritual counterpart.

What of Iago's judgment of Othello? Is the Moor really so naive and unworldly? He claims to be a man of no great skill in rhetoric :

Rude am I in my speech
And little blessed with the set phrase of peace

(I, iii, 81—2)

Yet his own advocacy when questioned by the Duke about his “beguilement” of Desdemona is skilful and to the point. He can always rise to the full height of his soldierly reputation.¹⁰ When he has finished speaking, the Duke observes :

I think this tale would win my daughter too
(171)

and the atmosphere lightens immediately. The Duke wants to proceed to the more pressing business of the day, namely, the threat from the Turks against Cyprus — and private feuds are given second place in his list of priorities. Othello’s technique of tale-telling (denigrated by Iago in II, i as “bragging and telling her fantastical lies”) includes accounts of cannibals, ape-men (Anthropophagi) and deformed creatures straight from the pages of Mandeville’s **Travels**, which the Duke readily accepts as constituting a proper method of courtship, but Brabantio, humiliated, remains unconvinced. He asks his daughter, who has just been escorted into the Council chamber :¹¹

Do you perceive in all this noble company,
Where most you owe obedience?

Desdemona’s answer shows that she has immediately perceived the nature of the conflict — “a divided duty” — the dilemma of the mediaeval schoolman, and she analyses it in the style of Shakespeare’s logical women, the Portia-types well able to speak up in their own interests. Cordelia’s response to Lear’s questioning about love is of a similar quality. Brabantio’s initial reaction is much milder than Lear’s — he is no tyrant — but he is fairminded and cannot let Othello go without warning him :

Look to her Moor, have a quick eye to see :
She has deceived her father, may do thee

(292—3)

thus inadvertently helping Iago’s plot to succeed. Later, Iago reminds Othello of this incident, recalling her capacity to deceive, in III, iii, 210—14.

In I, iii, 357 Iago refers to Desdemona as “a super-subtle Venetian”, whose marriage to “an erring barbarian” ought to be easily destroyed by his plot.

Certainly Desdemona's outward shows can mislead. She is a young lady who gets what she wants. Othello thinks he has "made all the running" but she has encouraged him and his wooing with her "super-subtlety":

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;
She swore i'faith twas strange, 'twas passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful;
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man: she thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her,
I should teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake :

(*ibid.* 159—68)

This was a very broad "hint" indeed. Othello does not seem to know much about women of Desdemona's class and may have been led by the nose, in Iago's words. In II, i she confirms this impression, when she is fencing with Iago and trying to draw him out on the subject of women :

I am not merry, but I do beguile (**divert attention from**)
The thing I am, by seeming otherwise.....

(122—3)

Her repartee is well up to his standard. Nowhere in the play can she be seen as a shrinking violet, and when necessity calls she can tell a lie. In fact, she dies upon one; telling Emilia that she has committed suicide :

Emil. O who has done this deed?

Des. Nobody, I myself, farewell

12 (V, ii, 124—5)

an example of Horace's **splendide mendax**, or "radiant lie", Othello, with tragic irony, misinterprets it :

She's like a liar gone to burning hell,
'Twas I that killed her

(130—1)

Even after he has been exposed, Iago claims that what he said to the Moor was in accord with the facts :

I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true

(V, ii, 177—8)

and like all good liars, always steers as close to the truth as possible — all his character-assassinations take their plausibility from their omissions as much as from their positive statements. He lets Othello deceive himself, and from the very moment in III, iii when he exclaims, on Cassio's exit at line 35 :

Ha, I like not that

and when Othello queries the remark, murmurs in reply :

Nothing, my lord, or — of — I know not what

the Moor's jealousy is born. Before the conclusion of this long scene Iago skilfully devises the handkerchief trick to provide acceptable "evidence" so that from that point in time onwards Othello becomes more and more convinced that his wife is false :

..... this is a subtle whore,
A closet, lock and key, of villainous secrets,
And yet she'll kneel and pray, I ha' seen her do't.

(IV, ii, 21—3)

even though everyone else in the state of Venice is sure of her honesty, as the numerous references to her innocence and chastity indicate.

Here Shakespeare is playing a trick on his audience since the public opinion of Iago is that he is honest, a quality which that same audience is well aware that he does not possess. This fleeting comparison, induced by an almost, though not entirely imperceptible parallel, casts a momentary shadow on Desdemona. The accusations which Othello then levels at her are so gross as to restore complete confidence in Desdemona, whose replies stress her own guiltlessness. Yet, though she is indeed guiltless of marital infidelity, she is capable of guilefulness. She did deceive her father and to marry Othello behind his back was hardly the act of a dutiful daughter. Her choice of husband before father

as explained by her in Act I is specious and legalistic. Shakespeare lays down the groundwork well. If she can produce such sophistry at short notice it argues that she was prepared for a confrontation as and when it should occur.

It is clear from the text that Brabantio already entertained suspicions regarding his daughter's clandestine activities :

This accident is not unlike my dream
Belief of it Oppresses me already

(I, i, 142—3)

in his reply to Roderigo's account of Desdemona's "gross revolt". Moreover, Iago's sudden introduction of Desdemona into his instructions to Roderigo in I, i, 68 ("Call up her father," &c.) suggests that this hitherto unidentified "her" had been the subject of a previous conversation between himself and his accomplice, whom the audience learns was a former suitor whom Brabantio had sent packing. The fact of the marriage is therefore known abroad, but not by Brabantio, the girl's own father. Desdemona has already left home, a **fait accompli** which apparently puzzles the old man.

O heaven, how got she out? O treason of the blood!
Fathers from hence, trust not your daughters' minds
By what you see them act

(*ibid*, 169—71)

he exclaims, attributing her escape to magis.¹⁴ His attitude to Roderigo is at once modified — "O that you had had her!" he groans; he would rather have welcomed that young man as his son-in-law than Othello, whom he had "oft invited", unsuspectingly. Clearly Othello was capable of playing a double game and set love above social duty by maintaining such a deception over what must have been a considerable period of time. It is important to note that not all the damage is done by Iago.

Brabantio comes out of it rather well. Though he has been affronted and his own honour threatened, he grudgingly accepts Othello after he has heard both sides of the question. He follows the Duke's advice and agrees to make the best of things. He is even ready to take the responsibility on his own shoulders :

Thus is it revealed that the marriage literally killed the old man. Brabantio looks forward to Lear when he complains of the pain of having a thankless child and berates his daughters for what they have done to him — though in Lear's case the action has been deliberate. Brabantio has simply been abandoned thoughtlessly. The last references to him as being still living come in IV. ii, when Desdemona asks Othello why he is weeping :

Am I the occasion of these tears, my lord
If haply you my father do suspect
An instrument of this your calling back,
Lay not your blame on me; if you have lost him,
Why I have lost him too.

(44—8)

and in Emilia's conversation with Iago :

Has she forsook so many noble matches,
Her father, and her country, all her friends,
To be call'd whore.

(127—8)

but his actual passing is not mentioned in the text though, according to the time-scheme, it²⁵ must have occurred within hours of Desdemona's reference to him. Shakespeare here qualified the general view of her character — strong-willed, single-minded and a mite inconsiderate as well as innocent, chaste and spotless, as the Victorians (and most modern critics) would have her. He never makes it completely transparent, however. Othello vacillates between the two extremes of judgment, prompted by Iago, as in this prose exchange :

Oth. O, the world has not
a sweeter creature, she might lie by an emperor's side, and
command his tasks.

Iago. Nay, that's not your way.

Oth. Hang her, I do but say what she is: so delicate with her
needle, an admirable musician, O she will sing the savageness
out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and invention.

Iago. She's the worse for all this.

(IV, i, 179—87)

but Iago's long suffering wife, Emilia, never falters in her devotion to Desdemona and entertains no doubts as to her virtue. Ironically, she does not suspect her own husband.

Emil. I will be hang'd, if some eternal villain,
Some busy and insinuating rogue,
Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,
Have not devis'd this slander, I'll be hang'd else.
Iago. Fie, there is no such man, it is impossible.

(*ibid.*, 133—6)

and later she remarks that Iago had suspected herself of adultery with Othello,¹⁶ an item which recalls Iago's 'motive-hunting' in the first Act :

I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office; I know not if't be true.....
Will do, as if for surety.

(I, iii, 384—8)

Othello himself is a man with a reputation to maintain and his race, physical appearance and obviously foreign origins make him vulnerable to slander. Since Cassio's Florentine birth is remarked upon by Iago, clearly outsiders are less secure than Venetians so that a "foreign" member of the noble or governing class whose public image is attacked would be expected to take sharp action. One focal point of such an image would be the man's wife, who had to appear virtuous even when she was not. Adultery was, in the court, common.¹⁷

"A horned man's a monster, and a beast," says Othello when Iago's "medicine" is working (IV, i, 62) and he is well on the way to believing in Cassio's interference with his prized honour. The Moor's condemnation of what Iago assures him is a practice of "millions" is characteristically extreme but to be thus scorned is worse for a man such as himself who feels "different". Nevertheless, the problem must be faced, and squarely, as a soldier should. He must find proof. Beyond that he is unable to think. When he starts reasoning, he cannot keep up the process; his talk soon abandons logic and degenerates into fragments under the stress of his passion. This reflects the change in him, noted by Iago in III, iii, 330, and commented on by Desdemona in III, iv, 137—140. In IV, i, 260—1, Lodovico is asking, soon after he has seen Othello strike his wife :¹⁸

Is this the noble Moor, whom our full senate
Call all in all sufficient. This the noble nature,
Whom passion could not shake. Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
Could neither graze, nor pierce.

to which Iago replies :

He is much chang'd.

So far as the Elizabethans were concerned, a Moor, full-blooded and passionate, might be counted on to react violently;¹⁹ yet Othello keeps demanding proof and continually tries to test Iago's honesty. He himself insists that he is not jealous by nature and Desdemona rejects Emilia's suggestion in this respect without hesitation :

Emil. Is he not jealous ?

Des. Who, he ? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humours from him.

(III, iv, 25—7)

and later in the same scene :

Emil. Is not this man jealous ?

Des. I ne'er saw this before :

(96—7)

Iago talks of Othello's "unbookish jealousy" (IV, i, 101) meaning that the Moor's interpretation of Cassio's actions will be certain to inflame him even though these are innocent — the unworldliness and impracticality of Othello in such matters is essential to Iago's scheming. It is Iago alone who creates "the green ey'd monster" which eventually destroys his chosen enemy.

When Othello finally accepts Iago's account, he acts, but not precipitately. His "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" speech which opens the bed-chamber scene is a deliberate self-justification — the outbursts of emotion are over in IV, ii. Now he speaks like a judge summing up and trying to predict the result of capital punishment, irrevocable but in such a case mandatory. Unlike Hamlet, Othello envisages only one outcome. Hamlet cannot act because of his logic, Othello is directed by his comprehension of reality in terms of

extreme alternatives, with no half-way position and no arguable extenuating circumstances. He follows the book of regulations. Honour precedes love :

Oth. Think on thy sins
Des. They are loves I bear to you
Oth. And for that thou diest

(V, ii, 39—41)

According to his own ideals of honour, he is scrupulously fair and, in contradiction of Victorian critics, not governed by choler at all. By killing her he has restored his honour, without consideration of the emotional or practical consequences. When he finds out that he has done it for nothing he rapidly re-assesses the situation and his "Behold I have a weapon" speech (*sc. cit.* 260—3) reveals his capacity to make quick judgments. Like a good general, though not an outstandingly good one, he knows when he is beaten and surrenders.

Here is my journey's end, here is my butt
And very seamark of my utmost sail

(269—70)

and only then does emotion overpower him. He falls into incoherence and his talk ends with an anguished cry, heart-rending in its grief and desperation :

O Desdemona, Desdemona dead,
Oh, oh, oh.

(282—3)

Yet he quickly recovers himself and can even regard the unmasked Iago dispassionately :

Iago. I bleed, sir, but not kill'd
Oth. I am not sorry neither, I'd have thee live,
For in my sense 'tis happiness to die

(290—1)

In marrying Desdemona behind her father's back he had violated the traditional obligations of a guest towards his host, since it was in Brabantio's house

that the secret **liaison** was enabled to ripen into a secret marriage. In this respect Othello had set his code of etiquette aside in favour of his love. A man who could not do this would lack humanity and forfeit the empathy of the audience. When he becomes, in his own words, "an honourable murderer" (293) he is restored — but only for a moment. Realizing that his homicidal act has been senseless after all and that, bereft of love, he is left only with his honour, Othello is directed by that same code to the only course consistent with his condition, namely, suicide. His only remaining freedom is to die by his own hand — the unique privilege of Man, denied to the beast. He even justifies his own death-sentence on himself in terms of service to the state :

..... in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.

(Stabs himself)
(354—7)

Endurance, accepted by Lear, is not possible for Othello. The Moor sees no choice left but the one which will restore his honour :

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee, no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss

359—60)

Lear's world is a Christian one, wherein charity and forgiveness of sins is paramount. That of Othello takes no thought of an after-life, in spite of the play's rhetoric involving Heaven, Hell and punishment, even though the audience must regard the hero himself as Christian.²⁰

But to talk of the "World of Othello" is a misnomer. What the audience is drawn into from the very first line of the play is the world of Iago. Compared with Lear's it is more familiar, bounded by domesticity and falling well within the limits of known experience. Shakespeare has idealized and dramatized a type and Othello, uncomplicated by any sub-plot, is a model of human behaviour of which numerous real-life examples have been recorded from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.²¹ Neither the mediaeval vice nor the Machiavellian intriguer with the fine Italian hand were expected to provide more than super-

ficial justifications for their malevolent acts. Iago is a destroyer of human happiness and since his motive is first stated to be "hate", Othello's.

For nought did I in hate, but all in honour

(96)

sets him at the opposite pole.

The death of his beloved Desdemona is also his own and since he has no conception of any life beyond the grave the ending of this tragedy is earthbound. Like Hamlet, like Macbeth, he leaves nothing behind but a memory — Cassio's epitaph — "For he was great of heart" — a cliché — is all. Gratiano inherits the Moor's fortunes and the Duke goes "aboard" to make his official report of "this heavy act". Othello's role is played out; like Hamlet he wants his story told :

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of them as they are; nothing extenuate

(343—4)

he tells his hearers. He has lost all worldly comforts save his honour — even his military office has been given to Cassio. The promised torture of Iago is irrelevant. As he had said when Iago was first unmasked :

But why should honour outlive honesty
Let it go all

(246—7)

Yet he pulls himself up into his "honourable" role. At the least, he will leave that much behind him by taking the only way, that of death. Like a skilled actor he chooses his moment, makes his final speech and bows out. The ending of Othello is however no less an irony than that of *Antony and Cleopatra*, which at least left a powerful memory of enduring love, a myth which seemed to transcend death. But the legacy of Othello is faint compared with that of the "eternal" lovers. He may have been "great of heart" but he was also a fool²² and a victim of self-deception even as he plays his last role — that of a seeker of atonement through sacrifice.

..... one whose hand
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,
Richer than all his tribe : one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Dropt tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum.²⁸

(347—52)

Love and death here are linked only in his mind. He acts out his part to the end chosen by himself. He has lost his "Being" and paradoxically, it is only at the instant of death that his fleeting triumph comes.



NOTES

1. All quotations and textual references to **Othello** relate to the Arden edition, ed. M. R. Ridley (London 1977).
2. Together with Counterfeit Countenance and Courtly Abusion, these are figures in Skelton's **Magnyfycence** (printed 1530) but the type was common in early Tudor drama.
3. The **First Quarto** had no list. Most modern editions call him "Othello's Ancient" (i.e. ensign, or under-officer).
4. **Lectures on Shakespeare** (1818).
5. 1970 ed. of **OED** gives reputation as one synonym for "honour", together with **credit, fame, glory, good name** and **renown**, all of which originate in the opinions of others, reliable or not. In **The Structure of Complex Words** (London 1951), 218 William Empson pointed out 52 usages of "honest" and "honesty" in **Othello**, citing it as an example of ambiguity. However, OF **honeste** (from Lat. *honestus*) carried no such double significance, though by Shakespeare's time the noun had shown some deterioration in status, implying the direct opposite of its original. Hamlet asks Ophelia if she is "honest" (**Ham.** III, i, 104), clearly referring to her chastity, and the word is applied to Desdemona in the same context (**Oth.** III, ii, 229-390). Othello asks if Cassio is "not honest", meaning that he does not take the young man to be a seducer. Iago refers to Cassio as "this honest fool" (II, ii, 344), implying contempt for his naivete, but all references to Iago by others imply a high moral standing denoting fair-mindedness, frankness, sincerity, and uprightness, always impelled by the very same motives — which Iago, on his own admission, lacks. Thus Iago's application of the adjective "honest" to himself is always ironic; when others call him "honest" they mean it, albeit patronisingly.
6. In each successive act of the play, honour is attacked or destroyed — Brabantio's, Cassio's, Desdemona's, Othello's and finally Iago's own, but it is Othello and Othello alone who is Iago's target.
7. In III, ii (a scene of only six lines) Othello shows his continued professional dependence on Iago.
8. Othello's cry of exile (III, iii, 353-63) recalls the "**ubi sunt?**" complaint of the Old English "Wanderer" poet and the early Christian homilists.
9. For example, he disregards the recommendations of the "three great ones

- of the city” in support of Iago’s candidature (I, i, 8—17). However, the audience has only Iago’s word for the matter.
10. Othello is a conscious actor, a role-player, who adapts his language and bearing to the occasion. His part is that of the honourable soldier and man-of-action and eventually, through constant repetition, his responses become automatic. For elaboration on this subject see Thomas van Laan, **Role-Playing in Shakespeare** (Toronto 1978), 180f.
 11. The text first mentions “the Sagittar” as the place where “him” (Othello) is to be sought (I, i, 157—8). In I, iii, 115 it is revealed that “the lady” (Desdemona) is there too. It was probably the name of an inn or private house where the newly-weds had lodged and since Othello asks Iago to show the attendants where she is because “you best know the place” (121) it may be argued that the latter had arranged the accommodation, thus accounting for his prior knowledge of this otherwise secret relationship.
 12. See Emrys Jones, **The Origins of Shakespeare** (Oxford 1977), 25—6.
 13. The opening of **Othello** is unusual in that references to the main characters are indefinite. Desdemona is not mentioned by name until I, ii, 25, Othello in I, iii, 8 (cf. **ed. cit.** introd. xlvi—ix).
 14. cf. n. 11 **infra**
 15. **ed. cit.** lixvii — lxx. Professor John Wilson (“Christopher North”) first described the device of the “Double Time” scheme in two articles contributed to **Blackwood’s Magazine** (Nov. 1849 — Apr/May 1850). The editor states: “What Shakespeare is doing is to present, before our eyes, an unbroken series of events happening in “short time”, but to present them against a background, of events not presented but implied, which gives the needed impression of “long time”. (lxx).
 16. Stated by Iago in II, i, 290—4, as part of his “motive-hunting”. He suspects Cassio too (II, i, 302) and though such accusations are impelled by his own obsessive jealousy and hatred Shakespeare cleverly puts Emilia’s “honesty” slightly in doubt by recording her conversation with Desdemona in IV, iii, 60—2 though these postures may have been intended to underline the insecurity of her marriage with Iago.
 17. See Jean Klene, “**Othello: a fixed figure for the time of scorn**” (**Shakespeare Quarterly** (1976), 126—39.

18. As many critics have remarked, this physical assault marks the climax of the tragedy.
19. A point upon which Iago harps in I, iii, and II, i when he is expounding his "motives". After his plot starts to show its effects, he ceases to proffer explanations.
20. cf. II, iii, 161—3 and 334—5 (where he is spoken of as having been baptised).
21. Two unsigned essays on jealousy in **Othello**, August, 1749 and November, 1751 in Brian Vickers ed., **Shakespeare : the Critical Heritage** (Vol. 3 1733—1752: London and Boston 1975), 206—10; 439—41.
22. The modern view that he was foolish is not shared by critics in countries where "honour" is still held in high esteem and adultery remains a punishable offence.
23. The medicinal gum of Arabian trees was myrrh, an ingredient of incense, associated with sacrifice.