A. C. BRADLEY

Shakespearean Tragedy

preferred to him; that these worthy people, who are so successful and popular and stupid, are mere puppets in his hands, but living puppets, who at the motion of his finger must contort themselves in agony, while all the time they believe that he is their one true friend and comforter? It must have been an ecstasy of bliss to him. And this, granted a most abnormal deadness of human feeling, is, however horrible, perfectly intelligible. There is no mystery in the psychology of Iago; the mystery lies in a further question, which the drama has not to answer, the question why such a being should exist.

Iago's longing to satisfy the sense of power is, I think, the strongest of the forces that drive him on. But there are two others to be noticed. One is the pleasure in an action very difficult and perilous and, therefore, intensely exciting. This action sets all his powers on the strain. He feels the delight of one who executes successfully a feat thoroughly congenial to his special aptitude, and only just within his compass; and, as he is fearless by nature, the fact that a single slip will cost him his life only increases his pleasure. His exhilaration breaks out in the ghastly words with which he greets the sunrise after the night of the drunken tumult which has led to Cassio's disgrace: 'By the mass, 'tis morning. Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.' Here, however, the joy in exciting action is quickened by other feelings. It appears more simply elsewhere in such a way as to suggest that nothing but such actions gave him happiness, and that his happiness was greater if the action was destructive as well as exciting. We find it, for instance, in his gleeful cry to Roderigo, who proposes to shout to Brabantio in order to wake him and tell him of his daughter's flight:

> Do, with like timorous[1] accent and dire yell
> As when, by night and negligence, the fire
> Is spied in populous cities.

All through that scene; again, in the scene where Cassio is attacked and Roderigo murdered; everywhere where Iago is in

1. i.e. terrifying.

physical action, we catch this sound of almost feverish enjoyment. His blood, usually so cold and slow, is racing through his veins.

But Iago, finally, is not simply a man of action; he is an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and in the conception and execution of it he experiences the tension and the joy of artistic creation. 'He is,' says Hazlitt, 'an amateur of tragedy in real life; and, instead of employing his invention on imaginary characters or long-forgotten incidents, he takes the bolder and more dangerous course of getting up his plot at home, casts the principal parts among his nearest friends and connections, and rehearses it in down-right earnest, with steady nerves and unabated resolution.' Mr Swinburne lays even greater stress on this aspect of Iago's character, and even declares that 'the very subtlest and strongest component of his complex nature' is 'the instinct of what Mr Carlyle would call an inarticulate poet'. And those to whom this idea is unfamiliar, and who may suspect it at first sight of being fanciful, will find, if they examine the play in the light of Mr Swinburne's exposition, that it rests on a true and deep perception, will stand scrutiny, and might easily be illustrated. They may observe, to take only one point, the curious analogy between the early stages of dramatic composition and those soliloquies in which Iago broods over his plot, drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work. Here at any rate Shakespeare put a good deal of himself into Iago. But the tragedian in real life was not the equal of the tragic poet. His psychology, as we shall see, was at fault at a critical point, as Shakespeare's never was. And so his catastrophe came out wrong, and his piece was ruined.

Such, then, seem to be the chief ingredients of the force which, liberated by his resentment at Cassio's promotion, drives Iago from inactivity into action, and sustains him through it. And, to pass to a new point, this force completely possesses him; it is his fate. It is like the passion with which a tragic hero wholly identifies himself, and which bears him on to his doom. It is true that, once embarked on his course, Iago

could not turn back, even if this passion did abate; and it is also true that he is compelled, by his success in convincing Othello, to advance to conclusions of which at the outset he did not dream. He is thus caught in his own web, and could not liberate himself if he would. But, in fact, he never shows a trace of wishing to do so, not a trace of hesitation, of looking back, or of fear, any more than of remorse; there is no ebb in the tide. As the crisis approaches there passes through his mind a fleeting doubt whether the deaths of Cassio and Roderigo are indispensable; but that uncertainty, which does not concern the main issue, is dismissed, and he goes forward with undiminished zest. Not even in his sleep – as in Richard's before his final battle – does any rebellion of outraged conscience or pity, or any foreboding of despair, force itself into clear consciousness. His fate – which is himself – has completely mastered him: so that, in the later scenes, where the improbability of the entire success of a design built on so many different falsehoods forces itself on the reader, Iago appears for moments not as a consummate schemer, but as a man absolutely infatuated and delivered over to certain destruction.

5

Iago stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices – such as ingratitude and cruelty – which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect. In the latter respect Iago is nearly or quite the equal of Richard, in egoism he is the superior, and his inferiority in passion and massive force only makes him more repulsive. How is it then that we can bear to contemplate him; nay, that, if

we really imagine him, we feel admiration and some kind of sympathy? Henry the Fifth tells us:

> There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
> Would men observingly distil it out;

but here, it may be said, we are shown a thing absolutely evil, and – what is more dreadful still – this absolute evil is united with supreme intellectual power. Why is the representation tolerable, and why do we not accuse its author either of untruth or of a desperate pessimism?

To these questions it might at once be replied: Iago does not stand alone; he is a factor in a whole; and we perceive him there and not in isolation, acted upon as well as acting, destroyed as well as destroying.[1] But, although this is true and important, I pass it by and, continuing to regard him by himself, I would make three remarks in answer to the questions.

In the first place, Iago is not merely negative or evil – far from it. Those very forces that moved him and made his fate – sense of power, delight in performing a difficult and dangerous action, delight in the exercise of artistic skill – are not at all evil things. We sympathize with one or other of them almost every day of our lives. And, accordingly, though in Iago they are combined with something detestable and so contribute to evil, our perception of them is accompanied with sympathy. In the same way, Iago's insight, dexterity, quickness, address, and the like, are in themselves admirable things; the perfect man would possess them. And certainly he would possess also Iago's courage and self-control, and, like Iago, would stand above the impulses of mere feeling, lord of his inner world. All this goes to evil ends in Iago, but in itself it has a great worth; and, although in reading, of course, we do not sift it out and regard it separately, it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror.

All this, however, might apparently co-exist with absolute egoism and total want of humanity. But, in the second place, it is not true that in Iago this egoism and this want are absolute,

1. Cf. note at end of lecture.

and that in this sense he is a thing of mere evil. They are frightful, but if they were absolute Iago would be a monster, not a man. The fact is, he *tries* to make them absolute and cannot succeed; and the traces of conscience, shame and humanity, though faint, are discernible. If his egoism were absolute he would be perfectly indifferent to the opinion of others; and he clearly is not so. His very irritation at goodness, again, is a sign that his faith in his creed is not entirely firm; and it is not entirely firm because he himself has a perception, however dim, of the goodness of goodness. What is the meaning of the last reason he gives himself for killing Cassio:

> He hath a daily beauty in his life
> That makes me ugly?

Does he mean that he is ugly to others? Then he is not an absolute egoist. Does he mean that he is ugly to himself? Then he makes an open confession of moral sense. And, once more, if he really possessed no moral sense, we should never have heard those soliloquies which so clearly betray his uneasiness and his unconscious desire to persuade himself that he has some excuse for the villainy he contemplates. These seem to be indubitable proofs that, against his will, Iago is a little better than his creed, and has failed to withdraw himself wholly from the human atmosphere about him. And to these proofs I would add, though with less confidence, two others. Iago's momentary doubt towards the end whether Roderigo and Cassio must be killed has always surprised me. As a mere matter of calculation it is perfectly obvious that they must; and I believe his hesitation is not merely intellectual, it is another symptom of the obscure working of conscience or humanity. Lastly, is it not significant that, when once his plot has begun to develop, Iago never seeks the presence of Desdemona; that he seems to leave her as quickly as he can (III.iv.138); and that, when he is fetched by Emilia to see her in her distress (IV.ii.110ff.), we fail to catch in his words any sign of the pleasure he shows in Othello's misery, and seem rather to perceive a certain discomfort, and, if one dare say it, a faint touch of shame or remorse? This interpretation of the passage, I admit, is not inevitable,

but to my mind (quite apart from any theorizing about Iago) it seems the natural one.[1] And if it is right, Iago's discomfort is easily understood; for Desdemona is the one person concerned against whom it is impossible for him even to imagine a ground of resentment, and so an excuse for cruelty.[2]

There remains, thirdly, the idea that Iago is a man of supreme intellect who is at the same time supremely wicked. That he is supremely wicked nobody will doubt; and I have claimed for him nothing that will interfere with his right to that title. But to say that his intellectual power is supreme is to make a great mistake. Within certain limits he has indeed extraordinary penetration, quickness, inventiveness, adaptiveness; but the limits are defined with the hardest of lines, and they are narrow limits. It would scarcely be unjust to call him simply astonishingly clever, or simply a consummate master of intrigue. But compare him with one who may perhaps be roughly called a bad man of supreme intellectual power, Napoleon, and you see how small and negative Iago's mind is, incapable of Napoleon's military achievements, and much more incapable of his political constructions. Or, to keep within the Shakespearean world, compare him with Hamlet, and you perceive how miserably close is his intellectual horizon; that such a thing as a thought beyond the reaches of his soul has never come near him; that he is prosaic through and through, deaf and blind to all but a tiny fragment of the meaning of things. Is it not quite absurd, then, to call him a man of supreme intellect?

And observe, lastly, that his failure in perception is closely connected with his badness. He was destroyed by the power

1. It was suggested to me by a Glasgow student.

2. A curious proof of Iago's inability to hold by his creed that absolute egoism is the only proper attitude, and that loyalty and affection are mere stupidity or want of spirit, may be found in his one moment of real passion, where he rushes at Emilia with the cry, 'Villainous whore!' (V.ii.229). There is more than fury in his cry, there is indignation. She has been false to him, she has betrayed him. Well, but why should she not, if his creed is true? And what a melancholy exhibition of human inconsistency it is that he should use as terms of reproach words which, according to him, should be quite neutral, if not complimentary!

that he attacked, the power of love; and he was destroyed by it because he could not understand it; and he could not understand it because it was not in him. Iago never meant his plot to be so dangerous to himself. He knew that jealousy is painful, but the jealousy of a love like Othello's he could not imagine, and he found himself involved in murders which were no part of his original design. That difficulty he surmounted, and his changed plot still seemed to prosper. Roderigo and Cassio and Desdemona once dead, all will be well. Nay, when he fails to kill Cassio, all may still be well. He will avow that he told Othello of the adultery, and persist that he told the truth, and Cassio will deny it in vain. And then, in a moment, his plot is shattered by a blow from a quarter where he never dreamt of danger. He knows his wife, he thinks. She is not over-scrupulous, she will do anything to please him, and she has learnt obedience. But one thing in her he does not know – that she *loves* her mistress and would face a hundred deaths sooner than see her fair fame darkened. There is genuine astonishment in his outburst 'What! Are you mad?' as it dawns upon him that she means to speak the truth about the handkerchief. But he might well have applied to himself the words she flings at Othello,

O gull! O dolt!
As ignorant as dirt!

The foulness of his own soul made him so ignorant that he built into the marvellous structure of his plot a piece of crass stupidity.

To the thinking mind the divorce of unusual intellect from goodness is a thing to startle; and Shakespeare clearly felt it so. The combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil is more than startling, it is frightful. It is rare, but it exists; and Shakespeare represented it in Iago. But the alliance of evil like Iago's with *supreme* intellect is an impossible fiction; and Shakespeare's fictions were truth.

6

The characters of Cassio and Emilia hardly require analysis, and I will touch on them only from a single point of view. In their combination of excellences and defects they are good examples of that truth to nature which in dramatic art is the one unfailing source of moral instruction.

Cassio is a handsome, light-hearted, good-natured young fellow, who takes life gaily, and is evidently very attractive and popular. Othello, who calls him by his Christian name, is fond of him; Desdemona likes him much; Emilia at once interests herself on his behalf. He has warm generous feelings, an enthusiastic admiration for the General, and a chivalrous adoration for his peerless wife. But he is too easy-going. He finds it hard to say No; and accordingly, although he is aware that he has a very weak head, and that the occasion is one on which he is bound to run no risk, he gets drunk – not disgustingly so, but ludicrously so.[1] And, besides, he amuses himself without any scruple by frequenting the company of a woman of more than doubtful reputation, who has fallen in love with his good looks. Moralizing critics point out that he pays for the first offence by losing his post, and for the second by nearly losing his life. They are quite entitled to do so, though the careful reader will not forget Iago's part in these transactions. But they ought also to point out that Cassio's looseness does not in the least disturb our confidence in him in his relations with Desdemona and Othello. He is loose, and we are sorry for it; but we never doubt that there was 'a daily beauty in his life', or that his rapturous admiration of Desdemona was as wholly beautiful a thing as it appears, or that Othello was perfectly safe when in his courtship he employed Cassio to 'go between' Desdemona and himself. It is fortunately a fact in human nature that these aspects of Cassio's character are quite compatible. Shakespeare simply sets it

1. Cassio's invective against drink may be compared with Hamlet's expressions of disgust at his uncle's drunkenness. Possibly the subject may for some reason have been prominent in Shakespeare's mind about this time.

down; and it is just because he is truthful in these smaller things that in greater things we trust him absolutely never to pervert the truth for the sake of some doctrine or purpose of his own.

There is something very lovable about Cassio, with his fresh eager feelings; his distress at his disgrace and still more at having lost Othello's trust; his hero-worship; and at the end his sorrow and pity, which are at first too acute for words. He is carried in, wounded, on a chair. He looks at Othello and cannot speak. His first words come later when, to Lodovico's question, 'Did you and he consent in Cassio's death?' Othello answers 'Ay.' Then he falters out, 'Dear General, I never gave you cause.' One is sure he had never used that adjective before. The love in it makes it beautiful, but there is something else in it, unknown to Cassio, which goes to one's heart. It tells us that his hero is no longer unapproachably above him.

Few of Shakespeare's minor characters are more distinct than Emilia, and towards few do our feelings change so much within the course of a play. Till close to the end she frequently sets one's teeth on edge; and at the end one is ready to worship her. She nowhere shows any sign of having a bad heart; but she is common, sometimes vulgar, in minor matters far from scrupulous, blunt in perception and feeling, and quite destitute of imagination. She let Iago take the handkerchief though she knew how much its loss would distress Desdemona; and she said nothing about it though she saw that Othello was jealous. We rightly resent her unkindness in permitting the theft, but – it is an important point – we are apt to misconstrue her subsequent silence, because we know that Othello's jealousy was intimately connected with the loss of the handkerchief. Emilia, however, certainly failed to perceive this; for otherwise, when Othello's anger showed itself violently and she was really distressed for her mistress, she could not have failed to think of the handkerchief, and would, I believe, undoubtedly have told the truth about it. But, in fact, she never thought of it, although she guessed that Othello was being deceived by some scoundrel. Even after Desdemona's death, nay, even when she knew that Iago had brought it about, she still did not

remember the handkerchief; and when Othello at last mentions, as a proof of his wife's guilt, that he had seen the handkerchief in Cassio's hand, the truth falls on Emilia like a thunder-bolt. 'O God!' she bursts out, 'O heavenly God!'[1] Her stupidity in this matter is gross, but it is stupidity and nothing worse.

But along with it goes a certain coarseness of nature. The contrast between Emilia and Desdemona in their conversation about the infidelity of wives (IV.iii) is too famous to need a word – unless it be a word of warning against critics who take her light talk too seriously. But the contrast in the preceding scene is hardly less remarkable. Othello, affecting to treat Emilia as the keeper of a brothel, sends her away, bidding her shut the door behind her; and then he proceeds to torture himself as well as Desdemona by accusations of adultery. But, as a critic has pointed out, Emilia listens at the door, for we find, as soon as Othello is gone and Iago has been summoned, that she knows what Othello has said to Desdemona. And what could better illustrate those defects of hers which make one wince, than her repeating again and again in Desdemona's presence the word Desdemona could not repeat; than her talking before Desdemona of Iago's suspicions regarding Othello and herself; than her speaking to Desdemona of husbands who strike their wives; than the expression of her honest indignation in the words,

> Has she forsook so many noble matches,
> Her father and her country and her friends,
> To be called whore?

If one were capable of laughing or even of smiling when this point in the play is reached, the difference between Desdemona's anguish at the loss of Othello's love, and Emilia's recollection of the noble matches she might have secured, would be irresistibly ludicrous.

1. So the Quarto, and certainly rightly, though modern editors reprint the feeble alteration of the Folio, due to fear of the Censor, 'O heaven! O heavenly Powers!'

And yet how all this, and all her defects, vanish into nothingness when we see her face to face with that which she can understand and feel! From the moment of her appearance after the murder to the moment of her death she is transfigured; and yet she remains perfectly true to herself, and we would not have her one atom less herself. She is the only person who utters for us the violent common emotions which we feel, together with those more tragic emotions which she does not comprehend. She has done this once already, to our great comfort. When she suggests that some villain has poisoned Othello's mind, and Iago answers,

> Fie, there is no such man; it is impossible;

and Desdemona answers,

> If any such there be, Heaven pardon him;

Emilia's retort,

> A halter pardon him, and Hell gnaw his bones,

says what we long to say, and helps us. And who has not felt in the last scene how her glorious carelessness of her own life, and her outbursts against Othello – even that most characteristic one,

> She was too fond of her most filthy bargain –

lift the overwhelming weight of calamity that oppresses us, and bring us an extraordinary lightening of the heart? Terror and pity are here too much to bear; we long to be allowed to feel also indignation, if not rage; and Emilia lets us feel them and gives them words. She brings us too the relief of joy and admiration – a joy that is not lessened by her death. Why should she live? If she lived for ever she never could soar a higher pitch, and nothing in her life became her like the losing it.[1]

1. The feelings evoked by Emilia are one of the causes which mitigate the excess of tragic pain at the conclusion. Others are the downfall of Iago, and the fact, already alluded to, that both Desdemona and Othello show themselves at their noblest just before death.

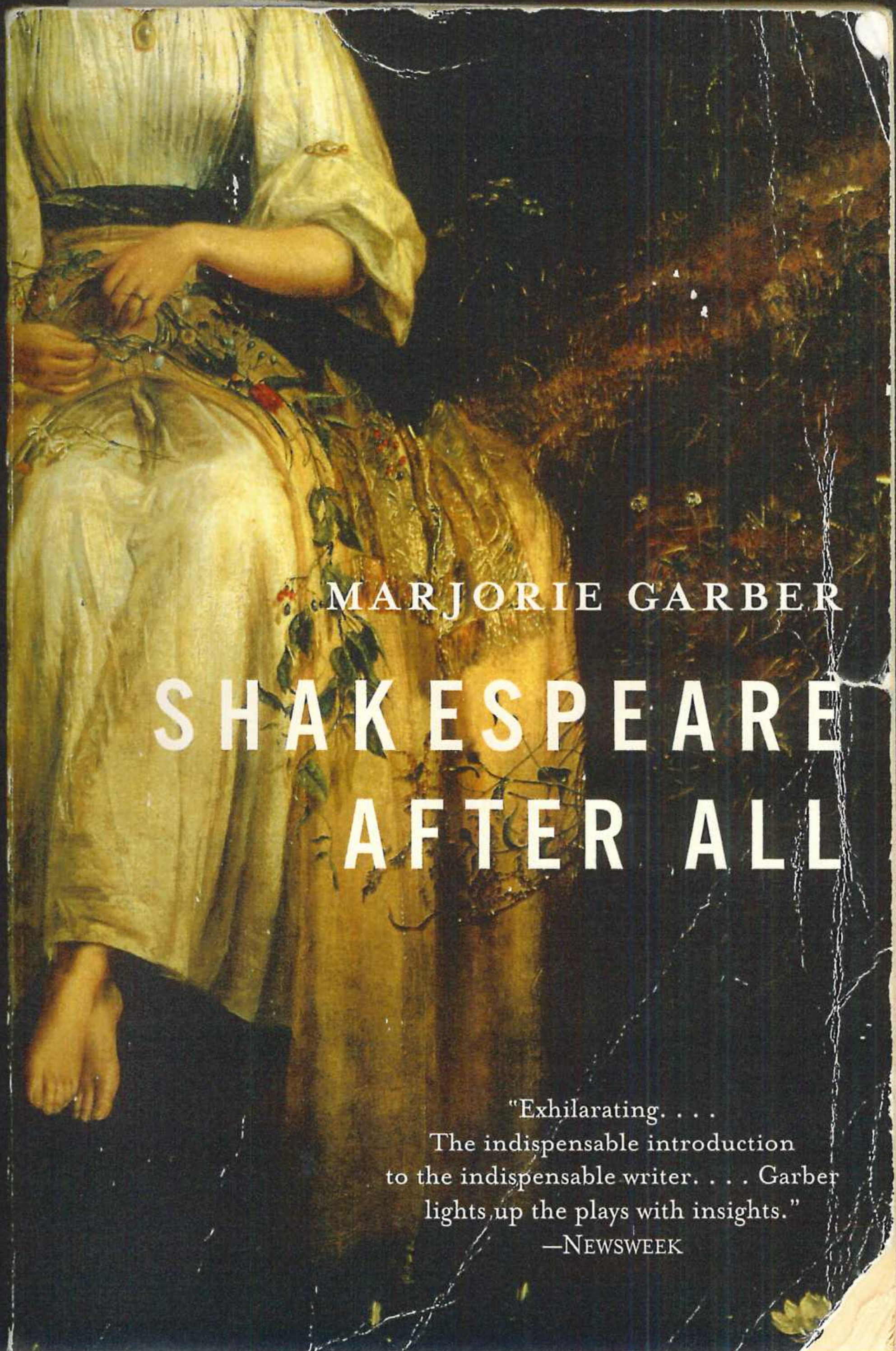
LECTURE VII

KING LEAR

King Lear has again and again been described as Shakespeare's greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers; and if we were doomed to lose all his dramas except one, probably the majority of those who know and appreciate him best would pronounce for keeping *King Lear*.

Yet this tragedy is certainly the least popular of the famous four. The 'general reader' reads it less often than the others, and, though he acknowledges its greatness, he will sometimes speak of it with a certain distaste. It is also the least often presented on the stage, and the least successful there. And when we look back on its history we find a curious fact. Some twenty years after the Restoration, Nahum Tate altered *King Lear* for the stage, giving it a happy ending, and putting Edgar in the place of the King of France as Cordelia's lover. From that time Shakespeare's tragedy in its original form was never seen on the stage for a century and a half. Betterton acted Tate's version; Garrick acted it and Dr Johnson approved it. Kemble acted it, Kean acted it. In 1823 Kean, 'stimulated by Hazlitt's remonstrances and Charles Lamb's essays', restored the original tragic ending. At last, in 1838, Macready returned to Shakespeare's text throughout.

What is the meaning of these opposite sets of facts? Are the lovers of Shakespeare wholly in the right; and is the general reader and playgoer, were even Tate and Dr Johnson, altogether in the wrong? I venture to doubt it. When I read *King Lear* two impressions are left on my mind, which seem to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whatever he can get. The great exemplar of this in early modern English drama is the figure of Mosca ("the fly") in Ben Jonson's *Volpone,* who serves his master and finally turns the table so that his master serves him. This is what parasites do, and it is what Iago does. Iago is also, at times, explicitly and recognizably satanic, as Othello indicates in that pitiful moment at the close of the play when he is confronted with the fact that Iago has tricked him into murdering the woman who loved him above everything in the world: "I look down toward his feet, but that's a fable. / If that thou beest a devil I cannot kill thee" (5.2.292–293). Iago has no cloven hoof to show that he is a "demi-devil." As Adam and Eve also discovered, one of the most dangerous things about the Devil is that he can come in such a flattering disguise.

Hate for hate's sake. Motiveless malignity. Iago is successful precisely because he has no second dimension, no doubt, no compassion. From the start he is all action, and he is everywhere. Flattering Othello, and then Roderigo. Shouting out of the darkness, and calling for light. Yet notice that in fact he does nothing himself. Cassio, made drunk by Iago, causes disorder among the troops. Roderigo, goaded by Iago, rouses Brabantio and wounds Cassio. Othello, crazed and maddened by Iago, kills Desdemona. Iago has suggested all of this, but he performs none of it. Even the handkerchief is found by Emilia, not by Iago. He is a voice in the dark, living proof that words have enormous power, even though over and over we hear characters in the play deny this. "[W]ords are words," says Brabantio. "I never yet did hear / That the bruised heart was piercèd through the ear" (1.3.217–218). Iago's words poison everyone who hears them, from Brabantio to Othello. He uses, pertinently, the image of poison in the ear, which played such a crucial and literal part in the death of old Hamlet. And Iago's use of language is worthy of examination. For just as we noticed that he never really *does* anything, but instead moves other people to do things, so he never really *says* anything, but uses language instead to insinuate, to imply, to pull out of people's imaginations the dark things that are already there. Thus Brabantio *recognized* the image Iago shouted to him from the darkness ("This accident is not unlike my dream"). He had already imagined Othello and Desdemona in bed. What Iago did for him, and what he will do for Othello, is not to invent but to confirm his victim's negative fantasies. His skill is that of a mind reader as much as it is that of a provocateur.

It is a mark of Shakespeare's habitually brilliant dramatic construction that this one quick, immediate example involving a secondary character (Iago brings Brabantio's fearful "dream" to life) becomes the template for the major action, the duping of Othello with his own fantasies as bait. For this is Iago's practice and his strategy: again and again he leads Othello to express his own suspicions, suspicions he has already had, for which Iago's trumped-up "evidence" comes as both unwelcome and entirely convincing "confirmation." One of the play's most effective and most devastating plays-within-the-play functions in exactly this manner, while demonstrating once more the way a "pageant" can keep

unwary onlookers "in false gaze." In act 3, scene 3, Cassio comes to Desdemona to ask her help in getting Othello's pardon. Their conversation is brief and formal, and it ends with Cassio's thanks and unhappy departure. At a distance, Othello and Iago appear on the scene, too far away to hear, and Iago, the opportunist, makes of Cassio's chastened exit a dumb show that he can interpret. "Ha! I like not that," he says, as if to himself. Instantly Othello's attention is caught: "What dost thou say?"

> Iago — Nothing, my lord. Or if, I know not what.
> Othello — Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
> Iago — Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it,
> That he would steal away so guilty-like
> Seeing you coming.
> Othello — I do believe 'twas he.
>
> *3.3.34–40*

"That he would steal away so guilty-like." This is crime by suggestion, the more plausible because it appears to begin with a generous denial: Iago saw "nothing"; he "cannot think" that it was Cassio.

The same kind of insinuation is achieved through Iago's constant function in the play as *echo*. For as with the many echo poems popular in the period (and like the echo song in John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*), when Iago echoes Othello, he turns the meaning of the word against itself. A good example occurs in the same scene, as Iago casually asks whether Cassio knew early on that Othello was in love with Desdemona:

> Othello — O, yes, and went between us very oft.
> Iago — Indeed?
> 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?" By heaven, thou echo'st me
> As if there were some monster in thy thought
> Too hideous to be shown! . . .
>
> *3.3.102–112*

The monster, the green-eyed monster, is in Othello's thought as much as it is in Iago's. Otherwise Iago's insinuations would have no effect. This is one reason it is possible to maintain that Iago is inside as well as outside Othello. Put another

way, he is the devil Othello deserves. The same kind of temptation directed at the sexually confident Cassio would have no effect.

Iago as echo remembers Brabantio's warning, as the wedded couple leaves for Cyprus, and reproduces it at the first opportune time. Brabantio had cautioned, somewhat bitterly, "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (1.3.291–292). Iago, repeating this, sows doubt: "She did deceive her father, marrying you, / And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks / She loved them most" (3.3.210–212). What is implied, and what is left unsaid? Desdemona is deceitful, and unfaithful. The proof of her love, averred in open court, now becomes evidence of her propensity for infidelity.

My favorite Iagan echo, though, is the one that is so universally quoted out of context to demonstrate "Shakespeare's" views on reputation. From *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* to the daily newspaper, this passage is evinced as a wise bromide that embodies Shakespeare's philosophy. Whether or not the opinion expressed in the passage below was "Shakespeare's" it is impossible to say. The ideas were commonplaces in his time, so that what this clever playwright does is to torque the bromide by putting it in the mouth of an unlikely or untrustworthy speaker. Iago is a gleeful hypocrite who has already dismissed Cassio's lament for his lost reputation ("I thought you had received some bodily wound"). In conversation with Othello, though, he takes the opposite tack, and proffers one of the best-known passages in the play:

> Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
> Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
> Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
> 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands.
> But he that filches from me my good name
> Robs me of that which not enriches him
> And makes me poor indeed.
>
> *3.3.160–166*

This is the same Iago who urged Roderigo, "[P]ut money in thy purse." But in talking about good name, about reputation, he aims unerringly at Othello's weak spot, his public reputation, what we would today, in the language of icons and publicity, call his "image." How powerful this is as a motive is demonstrated appallingly in Othello's own great speech in this scene, where he prospectively abdicates from public life and soldiering because of Desdemona's supposed infidelity. What troubles him most about it, tellingly, is that other people will know about his cuckolding:

> I had been happy if the general camp,
> Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
> So I had nothing known. O, now for ever

> Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content,
> Farewell the plumèd troops, and the big wars
> That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell,
> Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
> The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
> The royal banner, and all quality,
> Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
> And O, you mortal engines whose rude throats
> Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
> Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.
>
> *3.3.350–362*

If we decapitate this speech, removing the first two and a half lines, and begin with "O, now for ever," we get Shakespearean grandeur at full spate, round and resounding, a soldier's heartfelt reminiscence of what he loved about war. But what the speech as a whole says is something rather different: that since his wife is, as he believes, unfaithful, his professional identity is lost. The private and the public are here completely, and confusedly, intertwined. Furthermore, he would rather that every common soldier in the camp had slept with her and kept it a secret, than that she had had a single affair with his officer-friend, and that the affair had come to his notice. It is Othello's shame, not Desdemona's, that he speaks of so feelingly here.

It should come as no surprise that only two lines later we hear him address Iago: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore. / Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof" (3.3.364–365). We have already heard Desdemona say she "saw Othello's visage in his mind," not in the color of his skin. Now Othello, as if he did not comprehend the duplicity of the "ocular," asks for something he can see. Iago is carefully and calculatingly obtuse:

> [H]ow satisfied, my lord?
> Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,
> Behold her topped?
>
> . . . .
>
> It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
> To bring them to that prospect. . . .
>
> . . . .
>
> Where's satisfaction?
> It is impossible you should see this,
> Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys.
>
> *3.3.399–408*

"Supervisor" and "prospect" are both words that pertain to vision. Does Othello really want to watch? Again, Iago speaks deliberately. I am not sure, he says, that I can show them to you in bed together. The reason he cannot, of course, is that

they have not been in bed together. But Othello is led to read between the lines, to read the "truth" that is not there.

And so Iago goes on to invent "proofs," to invent, above all, what he describes as Cassio's dream, in which he claims to have shared a bed with Cassio and heard him betray the fact of the affair:

> I lay with Cassio lately,
> . . . .
> In sleep I heard him say "Sweet Desdemona,
> Let us be wary, let us hide our loves,"
> And then, sir, would he grip and wring my hand,
> Cry "O, sweet creature!," then kiss me hard,
> As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
> That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o'er my thigh,
> And sigh, and kiss, and then cry "Cursèd fate,
> That gave thee to the Moor!"
>
> *3.3.418, 423–430*

Othello's response is characteristic—"O monstrous, monstrous!"—and Iago's likewise: "Nay, this was but his dream." Once again Iago chooses the posture of exculpation—Cassio didn't mean it—leaving Othello, like a naïve Freudian, to conclude that the dream told the truth. But of course there was no dream. Whose homoerotic fantasy is this? Soldiers did share beds as a matter of course, especially in battlefield conditions. But the intensity of the scene, with its literal quotation of words that were never spoken, its anatomical specificity ("lay his leg o'er my thigh"), and the highly particularized nature of the male-male kiss—these are all inventions. For whom? For Othello, or for Iago?

All of a sudden we hear of "other" proofs: "[T]his may help to thicken other proofs / That do demonstrate thinly" (3.3.435–436); "If it [the handkerchief] be that, or any that was hers, / It speaks against her with the other proofs" (445–446). What other proofs? There are none. But Othello has demanded proof, has demanded it in legal language, a language that looks ahead to his tragic speech in the final act, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul." By claiming that there are other proofs, Iago increases the persuasive power of what are really no proofs at all. As he himself asserts, aside to the audience,

> Trifles light as air
> Are to the jealous confirmations strong
> As proofs of holy writ. . . .
>
> *3.3.326–328*

Unavoidably, ineluctably, these proofs, piled on top of one another, all assembled so quickly and devastatingly in a single scene, act 3, scene 3, lead to a devil's bargain and the selling of a soul, as Othello and Iago kneel together and swear revenge on the woman her husband now calls a "fair devil." White is black. False is true. "[L]et her live," suggests Iago, again the devil's advocate, leaving Othello to make the stern decision: she must die. "Now art thou my lieutenant," he says to Iago, and Iago answers, with a terrifying finality, "I am your own for ever."

The scene, with its two kneeling soldiers, is the parody of a marriage, another displacement of sex and death. This is the only marriage scene we see, and in it Iago displaces the bride, Desdemona, as well as the lieutenant, Cassio. Iago's complicated wish, compounded of love and hatred, is to be the person closest to Othello. His resentment of both Desdemona and Cassio is voiced from the first. By the terms of his plot he has achieved this double goal in a single gesture. The bargain is struck, and, in a sense, the tragedy is already complete.

And what are Iago's proofs? Two pieces of evidence: a handkerchief, and a conversation overheard. First, the handkerchief. A white handkerchief, spotted with strawberries. Othello tells the story of the handkerchief more than once, and the details differ in each telling. In one version it is a gift from his mother, woven by an Egyptian charmer, and said to have the power of guaranteeing love: "There's magic in the web of it." In another version it has been given by Othello's father to his mother. (These variations suggest that Othello's storytelling abilities are even more sophisticated—and dangerous—than previously thought.) Othello, characteristically, takes the thing, the sign, for the intangible fact of Desdemona's love, and when he fears she has lost the handkerchief he is certain he has lost her love. The handkerchief, properly a private love token, now becomes, again characteristically, a public spectacle. The white handkerchief marked with red becomes—because Othello makes it so—another version of the white wedding sheets that are so often mentioned in the play. The red embroidery becomes the emblem of the blood of her virginity, and Othello is now convinced that Cassio has had them both. In a most serious and tragic sense he hangs out his dirty linen in public. For him the handkerchief *is* the wedding sheets, and the wedding sheets therefore become a shroud. Deferred sexual consummation, and again deferred sexual consummation—Othello the hero, the patient, public man, wedded to his "occupation" as general and governor, willing to leave the marriage bed at the city's command to instill order in the populace—and now he finds, or thinks he finds, his wedding sheets are already stained by someone else's love. A short step leads to the second piece of ocular proof, the play-within-the-play so artfully staged by Iago, in which Iago and Cassio joke about Bianca, the courtesan, and Othello, again placed so that he can see but cannot hear, thinks they are joking about his wife. He misinterprets this dumb show, as Iago means him to do—for what he sees, after all, is the telltale handkerchief, given by Cassio to Bianca to "take the work out," to copy the design.

From the very beginning, Othello, whose tale would have won the Duke's daughter, has denied his own eloquence: "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (1.3.81–82); "Haply for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (3.3.267–269). Generations of audiences and critics have responded to his stirring language, but the breakdown of Othello's speech follows the loss of his faith in Desdemona. Iago's manipulation of language through subtraction—insinuation, artful echo, pause, and silence—ultimately outlasts and outwits the grand speeches and resounding periods. Once again it is Iago who lures Othello to this state, and the turning point, fittingly, is the utterance of the ambiguous word "lie":

> Othello — What hath he said?
> Iago — Faith, that he did—I know not what he did.
> Othello — What, what?
> Iago — Lie—
> Othello — With her?
> Iago — With her, on her, what you will.
> Othello — Lie with her? Lie on her? We say "lie on her" when they belie her. Lie with her? 'Swounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief. To confess and be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged, and then to confess! . . . It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!
>
> *4.1.32–41*

Othello says, "It is not words that shakes me thus"—yet it is only words that do, Iago's words.

Loss of language here, as elsewhere in Shakespeare, is emblematic of loss of humanity. Othello's decline into incoherence, fragments of sentences about fragments of bodies, is a sign of his temporary abandonment of human codes and qualities. The "fit" into which he falls, sometimes called "an epilepsy," and associated not only with linguistic loss of control but also with sexual orgasm, the "little death," marks the disintegration of the iron discipline he tried to enforce upon his own desires, his own sense of himself as soldier, general, diplomat, Venetian hero, and husband. The magic web of language has become for him a snare. Yet his magnificent language will return, at full throttle, in the final scenes of the play, during and especially after the murder. It is Iago who chooses the path of silence, and the ultimate, willed, dehumanization that accompanies it. "From this time forth," he will declare at the end of the play, "I never will speak word" (5.2.310). He will retreat into the archetype from which he grew, a "demi-devil," a Vice. We saw in a play like *Measure for Measure* that silence onstage is an emblem of death, as the muffled and unspeaking Claudio is dead—until he recovers to speech. Iago chooses this living death; he chooses against humanity. And yet he cannot be killed.

Iago is the "bad angel," and Desdemona the "good." The power of Desdemona's extraordinary character is such that she, too, bursts through archetype. She is ripped from the play's apparently "comic" beginnings in courtship and marriage. A "maiden never bold," according to her father, she becomes bold, like Juliet, when she sees her husband and reaches out to him. She is "one entire and perfect chrysolite," and yet she is no Isabella—she articulates passion and desire, and she speaks out, finally to her own cost—she is an articulate and ardent woman who intervenes in the world of politics and policy conventionally reserved for men. Othello, even in his jealous agony, praises her skills as a seamstress and a musician, skills possessed by some of the most noteworthy Shakespearean women. And as if for emphasis, the play presents her framed by two women who reflect the very things she is not: Bianca, the courtesan; Emilia, the obedient and pragmatic wife. Bianca is the whore Desdemona is accused of being, yet she is in love with Cassio, who treats her lightly. Emilia, Iago's wife, is a realist and a literalist, like Hamlet's gravedigger, or Macbeth's Porter. Like them, she sees things not for what they could be, but for what they are. Desdemona asks her, in tones of incredulity, whether she could imagine that a woman might be unfaithful to her husband, and Emilia's reply has the frank, down-to-earth tone of Pompey the bawd in *Measure for Measure:*

> Desdemona — Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
> Emilia — The world's a huge thing. It is a great price for a small vice.
>
> *4.3.66–68*

In this small exchange lies a huge conflict of cultures. Emilia in Desdemona's place would see no difficulties. But Desdemona's goodness, and belief in the goodness of others, is her death warrant.

The death scene itself is framed in legalisms. Othello has sought "proof" ("Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore"). When he comes to her bedside he speaks of "the cause," as if submitting his case to a heavenly—or infernal—judge:

> 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,

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 not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have plucked the rose
I cannot give it vital growth again.
It needs must wither. I'll smell thee on the tree.

5.2.1–15

In dramatic action as well as in language the play has been seeking light all this time, from the moment in the first scene when Brabantio called for light, and in scene after scene, shrouded in darkness, when the call went up for "lights, lights." Here Othello compares Desdemona's life to the candle he holds in his hand, prefiguring later moments in other tragedies (Macbeth's "brief candle" speech; Lady Macbeth's desperate command to have light by her continually). Yet even here, shrouded in the mocking whiteness of her wedding sheets, Desdemona's purity and generosity make themselves manifest. Othello smothers her, and yet she speaks. He has closed the bed-curtains, making of the marriage bed and deathbed another inner stage, and from behind the curtains, as if from death itself, Desdemona speaks: "O, falsely, falsely murdered! . . . A guiltless death I die" (5.2.126, 132). When Emilia asks "who hath done this deed," Desdemona's answer is exculpatory and enigmatic: "Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord" (5.2.132–133). Her recovery to speech, which has been so insistently equated with humanity, is itself brief, but essential. She speaks from the brink of the grave, as Iago refuses speech. He is dead, even as he lives; she alive, even as she dies.

As for Othello, at the close of the play surrounded by horrified spectators who represent the return of Venetian law, he speaks to them, and through them to the audience in the theater. Like Hamlet at the close of his tragedy, he speaks finally to us, his first words like the restraining arm of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, enforcing attention even on the unwilling:

Soft you, a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know't.
No more of that. 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; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian [*or* base Judean], threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,

Albeit unusèd to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast at the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcisèd dog
And smote him thus.

5.2.347–365

Othello kills Othello. He is both Turk and Venetian, as he has been all along, and he dies in the act of describing a noble public gesture, the killing of a public enemy, in front of Venetian ambassadors who are public men themselves. The famous textual crux, "base Indian" (the Quarto reading) or "base Judean" (the Folio reading), is produced by the fact that the capital letters for modern *I* and *J* were the same, and that the letter *n* could look like the letter *u* (the piece of type—*u* or *n*—could also be inserted upside down within the frame). Like many textual ambiguities in Shakespeare, this one, however accidental, is salutary, for it has produced competing readings of great power. If the image is that of the "base Indian," the context is New World exploration and discovery, the "savage" man who does not know the value of the jewel he finds. If the phrase is read as "base Judean," the figure invoked is that of Judas Iscariot. The "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13: 44–52) he throws away, "richer than all his tribe," is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Othello wants to be remembered for his private sins and for his public virtue. His appeal is finally to the civilizing power of language: "a word or two before you go"; "[w]hen you shall these unlucky deeds relate"; "[s]peak of me as I am"; "[t]hen must you speak." As at the end of *Hamlet* and indeed throughout Shakespearean tragedy, retelling becomes the tragic hero's only path to redemption. The request to retell is an injunction to replay the play, to speak of Othello again and again, to learn from tragic drama as we learn from history, by taking its example seriously as a model of conduct.

Samuel Johnson, the great eighteenth-century lexicographer, biographer, essayist, and editor of Shakespeare, wrote at the conclusion of his edition of *Othello:* "I am glad that I have ended my revisal of this dreadful scene; it is not to be endured."[2] As was the case in *Romeo and Juliet,* womb becomes tomb, wedding becomes funeral, marriage bed becomes deathbed. But Johnson's response is a sign of the scene's power. It *is* to be endured—that is its purpose. "Look on the tragic loading of this bed," says Lodovico, the Duke's emissary, to Iago. "This is thy work." In the final scene the audience in the theater is offered its chance to measure the tragic work of two competing dramatists, Iago and Shakespeare. Throughout the play Iago had made us his unwitting and unwilling co-conspirators, presuming on our silence. Now, through Othello's plea,

"Speak of me as I am," the audience can be said to find its own role in the drama. Language, refused by Iago, regained by Desdemona, becomes at last the joint instrument of actor, playwright, and spectators. By gazing upon the final tableau, the tragic loading of the bed, and by replaying, remembering, and even editing the play, the silent audience can find its voice.

All's Well That Ends Well

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Dowager Countess of Roussillion
Bertram, *Count of Roussillion, her son*
Helena, *an orphan, attending on the Countess*
Lavatch, *a Clown, the Countess's servant*
Reynaldo, *the Countess's steward*
Paroles, *Bertram's companion*
The King of France
Lafew, *an old lord*
First Lord Dumaine
Second Lord Dumaine, *brother to First Lord*
Interpreter, *a French soldier*
A Gentleman Austringer
The Duke of Florence
Widow Capulet
Diana, *her daughter*
Mariana, *friend of the Widow*
Lords, attendants, soldiers, citizens

"WHO CANNOT be crushed with a plot?" laments the braggart soldier Paroles in *All's Well That Ends Well,* after a staged capture by his comrades results in his cowardly (and comical) willingness to betray them, and then in his exposure and discomfiture (4.3.302). The scenario is reminiscent of Falstaff's similar fiction-making in the tavern in Eastcheap in *1 Henry IV,* although the wordy and well-named Paroles is a lesser figure (in all senses: less corpulent and less original and memorable). His combination of dismay and pique also closely resembles that of Malvolio, similarly gulled by unsympathetic peers and a clever plot ("I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you" [*Twelfth Night* 5.1.365]). But we might well take Paroles' complaint about being crushed with a plot as a key phrase for the whole of *All's Well,* a play that is constructed like an elaborate mechanism and goes off with a bang in the powerful final scene. For the alternative to being "crushed" is to have the plot work out to your advantage, despite all indications to the contrary—in effect, to have all end well. This is what happens to, and for, the play's heroine, a young woman equipped with patience, ingenuity, and good sense, as well as a strong passion for an especially unlikable hero.

Classed for much of the twentieth century with the so-called problem plays or "dark comedies," *All's Well* has not enjoyed, recently, the easy popularity with audiences of livelier and more romantic comedies, such as *Twelfth Night* and *As*

DESDEMONA
O, my fear interprets. What, is he dead?
OTHELLO
Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
Had stomach for them all.
DESDEMONA
Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone!
OTHELLO
Out, strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?
DESDEMONA
O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!
OTHELLO
Down, strumpet!
DESDEMONA
80 Kill me to-morrow; let me live to-night!
OTHELLO
Nay, if you strive –
DESDEMONA
But half an hour!
OTHELLO Being done, there is no pause.
DESDEMONA
But while I say one prayer!
OTHELLO It is too late.
Smothers her.
[DESDEMONA O Lord, Lord, Lord!]
Emilia at the door.
EMILIA *(calls within)*
My lord, my lord! What, ho! my lord, my lord!
OTHELLO
What noise is this? Not dead? not yet quite dead?
I that am cruel am yet merciful;
I would not have thee linger in thy pain.
So, so.
EMILIA *(within)*
What, ho! my lord, my lord!
OTHELLO Who's there?
EMILIA *[within]*
O, good my lord, I would speak a word with you!
OTHELLO
92 Yes, 'tis Emilia. – By and by. – She's dead. –
'Tis like she comes to speak of Cassio's death.
The noise was here. Ha! no more moving?
Still as the grave. – Shall she come in? Were't good? –
I think she stirs again. No. – What's best to do?
If she come in, she'll sure speak to my wife.
My wife! my wife! what wife? I have no wife.
O, insupportable! O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe
102 Should yawn at alteration.
EMILIA *[within]* I do beseech you
That I may speak with you, O good my lord!
OTHELLO
I had forgot thee. O, come in, Emilia.
Soft, by and by. – Let me the curtains draw. –
[Closes the bed-curtains.]
Where art thou?
[Opens the door.]
Enter Emilia.
What's the matter with thee now?
EMILIA
O my good lord, yonder's foul murder done!
OTHELLO What? Now?
EMILIA But now, my lord.
OTHELLO
It is the very error of the moon.
110 She comes more nearer earth than she was wont
And makes men mad.
EMILIA
Cassio, my lord, hath killed a young Venetian
Called Roderigo.
OTHELLO Roderigo killed?
And Cassio killed?
EMILIA No, Cassio is not killed.
OTHELLO
Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune,
And sweet revenge grows harsh.
DESDEMONA
O, falsely, falsely murdered!
EMILIA O Lord! what cry is that?
OTHELLO That? What?
EMILIA
Out and alas! that was my lady's voice.
Help! help, ho! help! O lady, speak again!
Sweet Desdemona! O sweet mistress, speak!
DESDEMONA
A guiltless death I die.
EMILIA
O, who hath done this deed?
DESDEMONA
Nobody – I myself. Farewell.
126 Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!
She dies.
OTHELLO
Why, how should she be murd'red?
EMILIA Alas, who knows?
OTHELLO
You heard her say herself, it was not I.
EMILIA
She said so. I must needs report the truth.
OTHELLO
She's like a liar gone to burning hell!
'Twas I that killed her.
EMILIA O, the more angel she,
And you the blacker devil!
OTHELLO
She turned to folly, and she was a whore.
EMILIA
Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil.
OTHELLO
135 She was false as water.
EMILIA Thou art rash as fire to say
That she was false. O, she was heavenly true!
OTHELLO
Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband else.
O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell
But that I did proceed upon just grounds
To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all.
EMILIA My husband?
OTHELLO Thy husband.
EMILIA
That she was false to wedlock?
OTHELLO
Ay, with Cassio. Nay, had she been true,

92 *By and by* just a moment (addressed to Emilia) 102 *yawn* open, as in an earthquake 110 *error* straying off course 126 *Commend* remember 135 *water* (which is yielding)