

Ongoing Discussions Around Phase 1/Untitled Othello

This exchange between Keith Hamilton Cobb and Stephanie Hodge followed two table readings of the [Arden Third Series \(Revised Edition\) of Shakespeare's Othello \(Bloomsbury, 2016\)](#) where Stephanie was cast as Desdemona in the 1st, and as Bianca in the 2nd for the "Untitled Othello Project," July, 2021. There were a total of seven readings. Stephanie is in blue and Keith in black. Any other italics beyond this is additional commentary that was not part of the original discussion.

The way Iago (referring to Jason O'Connell, the actor who read the role of Iago in the 1st reading) raised *almost* 1.1.20¹. What does that tell us about Cassio, beyond still being on the market? He narrowly avoided being pinned down, because he so enjoys playing the field? Because he's so wrapped up in progressing through the ranks of his career? It was a smart choice and I'm curious if it's smart for its own sake or for the play.

Immediately, Steph, you with your inconvenient intellect are taking the hard way to a comprehensive cognition of the text. Unfortunately, the hard way is the way that insures that the cognition IS comprehensive, and it's what I've been advocating for. I'm just not sure I'm ready for it...

Every editor's gloss I've ever read regarding Iago's line suggests that there is not a single soul between here and the living Shakespeare that has any fucking idea what it means. It could be corrupt. It could be a deletion that was re-inserted. I'm not sure that I need it to make sense of Cassio. In fact, I'm rather certain that I don't, and my inclination is to simply cut it. See? I don't tend to take the hard way, no matter how much I tell others that they should... On the other hand, and in my own defense, I am looking for the tale in *Othello* that would be told by human beings like us. We tend to say what we mean. If I said something to you that was nonsensical or a non sequitur, you would respond. When Shakespeare's characters don't respond to the obtuse shit that Iago says, I find it more repugnant to put words into the mouths of the silent respondents than to take words out of his.

It was an interesting choice to stress the word *almost*. But your question is also ultimately just as relevant. Whether or not it serves the line is contingent upon whether or not the line serves the play. I'm doubtful that it does, but I'm often proven wrong.

Roderigo (referring to Zach Libresco, the actor who read the role of Roderigo in the 2nd reading) was a little dangerous.

I thought so too. I think perhaps the energy of danger initially arises from not intentionally playing the idiot, which very few enactors of the role choose to do.

Maybe not much less of a dolt, and that's handy too, but can we appreciate that later in 4.2² he is the first to sniff out Iago and have the guts to call him out!!?

¹ One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,

A fellow *almost* damned in a fair wife

² I do not find that thou deal'st justly with me

Yes, the difficult thing is to direct and play against what Shakespeare has so concretely written as an abject goofball. I think it might be made clear, if it isn't naturally so already, that Roderigo, being Iago's most immediate and manipulatable tool, has had the most occasion throughout the play to be told something by him and then see it empirically proven untrue. That he then takes any self-effectuating steps on his own behalf are the only thing that redeems him at all. I also think that Roderigo approaching this scene with a high, nearly unbearable degree of self-loathing for having been so taken and that only being at all alleviated by directing rather his hatred at Iago can seed some menace in the man.

...but I was intrigued by the possibility of physical harm to Desdemona - that he would take her without her consent if given the opportunity, and could be motivated by Iago's promise of that. It sets him up as someone who could be talked into killing Cassio for whatever reasons Iago drips into his ear.

Yeah... Undoubtedly we find that man throughout or society... weak and idiotic thus dangerous... or is it weak *because* they are idiotic thus dangerous? From Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the specters beneath the robes of The Ghost of Christmas Present: "This boy is Ignorance and this girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased." The question posed for me here with regard to Roderigo, is what is ignorance and what is idiocy? Which comes first, his utterly irrational longing for this particular woman that makes him stupid, or his stupidity that leaves him with no tools of rationality to rescue himself from the situation?

We should also take into account here that there is some legitimate conflation between ignorance and racism. If racism is ignorance, intentional or not, compounded by ego, is it racism then that causes Roderigo to look upon Othello's success, in particular his romantic joy with an aristocratic white woman and experience an increasingly uncontrollable desire to possess her because of how deeply he believes himself, or wants to believe himself, as more deserving of her than any Black man?

It was chilling to hear him cast himself as Othello's hypothetical hangman.

Yes, chilling if it is spit/drooled with the sort of vitriolic grotesquery that gnawing hatred evokes... When I was 11, I was playing flag football on an intramural team and I was laughing at something with another boy, paying no attention to the coach who was giving instructions. He stopped his lecture to look directly at me and said, "I'll kick you right in the head..." Like, I believe, what Roderigo says, it must come from a place that you or I don't really have in us. I mean, of course we might. But I have tried to imagine ever since that day what deeply-seeded canker of the soul would possibly make me tell an 11-year-old that I would kick him in the head, and mean it? Conversely, what would an Othello, or anyone else, who had been told any such thing at times throughout life and had since grown into his fully capable facility to strike back; what would he do to the one who might still dare to offer him such an injury? Further still, how would a Desdemona deal with a love whom she knew was carrying such things with regard to both his hurt and his capabilities? "...for you are fatal then / When your eyes roll so."

What do you think Othello's real motivation is for promoting the younger, ambitious Cassio instead of his war-tried compatriot, especially if they have shared ranks through so much of

their careers? It cannot be that Othello thinks ill of Iago's character, but maybe sees a deficiency in some particular trait that he believes makes a good leader? (A trait other than "honest" and knowledgeable of the ways of men and the world.)

Well, first, I think that the reference to honesty that Shakespeare crams into every character's mouth with regard to Iago is an end run around truth telling that the early modern theater allowed. He is clearly not honest, and only a pack of morons would continually declare otherwise. Interestingly, Emilia seems to be the only one to nearly know better most of the time... Thus, I am not at all sure that Othello sees his comrade as particularly honest, particularly after the first phase of the temptation scene arising out of nowhere, even if I have to remove that word in reference to him from Othello's mouth myself. I am just as inclined to believe based upon Iago's general range of comportment throughout the play that his own assholery has lost him the appointment, particularly in contrast to the young, smart, and generally exemplary officer, Cassio. My take is not necessarily textual, but it makes as much sense as the text. There is something in Cassio's companionship in the courting of Desdemona, such as it was. It is not difficult to present the on-stage image of Cassio as every bit the obvious first choice. Nor is it difficult to believe that everything Iago says about him in his vitriolic diatribes is untrue. So, why??? I've never been terribly troubled with the question. You call Cassio ambitious, and perhaps he is. But perhaps it is that very ambition that has value to the General... Before you came along, regional theaters maintained resident companies. Each theater had an incestuous group of actors who got roles in the plays for each new season. They were smug, expectant and entitled. Some were quite good, but they were good in putting on that season's unworked-for set of roles in short order. The ambitious young gun injected into that place of uninspiring comfort was perceived as an immediate threat to the peace, unless an artistic director had taken a particular interest... Why does Othello choose Cassio? Perhaps he likes him... And perhaps the bigger question is why should he expect Iago to do anything but take it in stride and continue to do the yeoman's work that he has always done? He's a dependable asshole... *Iago seems the one most expectant of a boon that nothing in the text except his own say-so seems to suggest he deserves.*

Has Iago ever held love for Othello? In a moment before one was promoted before the other, before jealousy had a reason to play into Iago's psyche? He holds him "free and open," believes he will love Desdemona well, knows Othello is Venice's best bet at winning a war.

There are those scholars – mostly white ones who want to lionize Iago, or at least be his perpetual apologists – who will argue that he has loved Othello. Those who like to play up the stupid and obfuscating homosexual angle will argue that he "loves" him still. I'm not averse to the idea that Iago has held a huge sense of admiration for Othello. I would certainly like to mold an Othello whom it would not be difficult to imagine a person admiring that much, even to the point of emulation... I can also imagine the heartbreak Iago might feel at being passed over for the promotion because it means that the object of his admiration doesn't admire him nearly as much. But ultimately, a deep dive to find Iago's motives will prove fruitless. The apologists will find them in everything. I, on the other hand, am happy to leave him to flounder like the reprehensible piece of shit that he is because I think that his inexplicable ugliness is very human and the very point. Even Hitler thought that each of his heinous acts was toward some greater good. So too with Iago, I suspect, and the good actor will find a way to identify and pursue objectives that make the character proactive and purposeful. I can help...but mostly it is his job.

I've been interested in tracking the progression of Iago's scheme. If we read 1.1.67-72³ in reference to Othello and not Brabantio (as I think we must; who else has delight to poison and a transgression to proclaim?), Iago's first objective is simply to deprive Othello of the purity of his joy. To complicate his too-fortunate life.

I think I agree with you regarding the possibility, though it is odd to change objects in the middle of a sentence. The gloss about Folio punctuation is a clue, but to what? No one knows how the line was punctuated, if at all, when Shakespeare wrote it. As for Brabantio, I suppose he has the delight of his blissful ignorance regarding his daughter to be poisoned, and the transgression of being a duped father with a loose-moral'd daughter fucking a Black guy to be proclaimed...

1.1.140⁴ - let's explore Brabantio's premonition that Desdemona fell in love with Othello. So some part of his mind did observe the behavior he denies seeing, in order to keep believing the things he needs to believe about his daughter, to love her, to understand his own place in the world. (That's one hell of a theme, ain't it, that the room did begin to touch on in our discussion after R2 {the 2nd reading}. More thoughts on that to accumulate.)

Well, we really don't know what part of "this accident" Brabantio is speaking of, do we? He could simply mean that he had a dream about Desdemona contradicting his wishes and running off. That said, this you describe above is legitimate as well. The question in the staging, I believe, is which direction will be more impactful? The idea that Brabantio has always seen but denied some part of the potentially burgeoning relationship is one thing. Another is that the revelation and merciless airing of the entire affair absolutely exploding his obliviousness (existing on multiple levels) in such degree that it breaks not only his heart but his spirit and he succumbs literally to the revelation that life is not as he has held it to be. Metaphorically speaking, a really hard slap in the head can do remarkable things to a person, including kill them... We have our choices of what human dramas to portray. Which are the most interesting and yet difficult to watch for their realism?

There was a gravity in the way Brabantio (referring to Mace Perlman, the actor who read the role of Brabantio in the 2nd reading) navigated his text. The kind of "self-indulgence" that felt, to me, rife with the possibility of this man as a figure once-(maybe still) respected and feared.

I agree.

Further into his text of and to Desdemona, I felt how a deep love could exist between two people who have never clearly seen each other. That is certainly true of Brabantio to Desdemona, and I wonder if between the flashes of cognizance Desdemona has of her father's shortsightedness and bigotry, she doesn't really see him either. (That's the nature of

³ Call up her father,
Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the streets, incense her kinsmen,
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies! Thought that his joy be joy
Yet throw such changes of vexation on't
As it may lose some color.

⁴ This accident is not unlike my dream

being one's child, right? Seeing my parents as people - observing their habits and desires and taking interest in their histories - is only ever colored by my relationship to them. Time begins to shift that, but not without effort.)

Yes... I think it can certainly feed the actor's performance of Desdemona in the senate scene if she is also attempting to navigate in the moment the realization that her father is one, so utterly incensed (though I would be careful with this one), and two, that he is the sort of man who would call her to account on some matters of deepest intimacy in front of a public group of veritable strangers...

My heart always breaks a little when I read Brabantio call Desdemona "jewel." I heard that in R2.

Hmmm... Perhaps his does too... It is an argument to take one's time with these lines, both in considering them on the page, and in performance...

Every time I hear/read the lines "But that I love...I would not my unhoused free condition...confine for the sea's worth." 1.2.25-28, I feel that this is some kind of key to the story, to their love. In this resistance to confinement, is there the need for space, freedom, independence that battles with the domestic and settled nature of lasting love? Does this underlying fear make it convenient for Othello to find fault in his love, when presented with the option? (I come at this from my own obstinate fears surrounding commitment/dependence/being tied down. It resonates.) I wonder if Desdemona might share this hunger for limitless possibility; if they identify this quality in each other, and figure that if they can overcome their instincts against matrimony with each other, they might actually guarantee a lifetime of adventure. Couple that with a genuine desire for domesticity and peace, after a lifetime of battling and roving. I think (I know) the two desires can exist simultaneously and paradoxically.

I appreciate all this above. I must start my response by confessing yet again that my knee-jerk reaction to this line is to cut it. I just don't know why he makes such a proclamation in this moment. It seems to me like a non-sequitur.

Here is the received text:

IAGO: Nay, but he prated,
And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms
Against your honour
That, with the little godliness I have,
I did full hard forbear him. But, I pray you, sir,
Are you fast married? Be assured of this,
That the magnifico is much beloved,
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the duke's: he will divorce you;
Or put upon you what restraint and grievance
The law, with all his might to enforce it on,
Will give him cable.

OTHELLO: Let him do his spite:
My services which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know,--

Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
I shall promulgate--I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach'd: for know, Iago,
But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea's worth. But, look! what lights come yond?

And here is my edit as it stands at the moment (not saying it's correct or that the ensemble won't find a better way forward):

IAGO: Nay, but he prated
And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms
Against your honour,
That with the little godliness I have
I did full hard forbear him. But I pray you, sir,
Are you fast married?

It is an indelicate question, but OTHELLO smiles in response. Between them there is a moment of congratulatory celebration. They both drink..

Be assured of this,
That the magnifico is much beloved
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the duke's: he will divorce you
Or put upon you what restraint and grievance
The law, with all his might to enforce it on,
Will give him cable.

OTHELLO: Let him do his spite;
My services which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his-- I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach'd. But look, what lights come yond?

From my perspective, all this blather about boasting or not boasting and declarations of love is one, off topic, two, could be considered none of Iago's business ("are you fast married?" would generally mean "did you fuck her?"), and three, makes Othello sound like a bit of a blowhard from the very beginning. What it seems to me more realistic that Othello respond to in that exchange is the idea that someone of more political power is going to deny him something that he feels he has every right to, both with regard to social status, and what he has absolutely earned in service to that society. In my edit, he can't even finish the first thought about his service before he begins the second and more important to his mind, "I'm as much aristocracy as he is, whether he knows or can acknowledge it or not, and I've done things more worthy of honor than he has. I don't bow to anyone!"

With regard to his love for Desdemona and hers for him, where it lives and how it informs their personalities, I continue to believe that we must continue to push against the idea that the text will do all the work for us. We need to discover ways to exhibit their love in its various forms and manifestation as opposed to just letting them blather on about it. That said, I haven't got a problem with Othello's line. I believe he might very much mean that his love for this particular woman is so overwhelming that it compels him to make choices that he would not otherwise make about the ways that he will conduct his life. I think perhaps it should be said somewhere else, probably in a scene that isn't written. It is akin to:

"Excellent wretch! perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not
Chaos is come again."

Here, however, at 3.3.90, he can actually say this *to* her while he is interacting *with* her, as opposed to spouting information to someone not party to the relationship. It is not often directed that Desdemona is present to hear Othello say this. But my sense is that he says it in direct response to the fraught line from her to him: "What'er you be, I am obedient."

OTHELLO: Prithee, no more. Let him come when he will,
I will deny thee nothing.

DESDEMONA: Why, this is not a boon.
'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,
Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit
To your own person. Nay, when I have a suit
Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed
It shall be full of poise and difficult weight
And fearful to be granted.

OTHELLO: I will deny thee nothing.
Whereon I do beseech thee, grant me this,
To leave me but a little to myself.

DESDEMONA: Shall I deny you? No. Farewell, my lord.

OTHELLO: Farewell, my Desdemona.

DESDEMONA: Emilia, come.
Be as your fancies teach you;
Whate'er you be, I am obedient.

DESDEMONA turns to leave, but OTHELLO catches her up in his arms again. It is a desperate sort of hug, as if he is afraid to let her go... IAGO and EMILIA, the ATTACHE', and others look on, embarrassed...or perhaps jealous...of a so public and yet so unabashedly intimate moment.

To DESDEMONA

OTHELLO: Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not
Chaos is come again.

Finally, OTHELLO releases her. She kisses him. And, summoning EMILIA, they exit. Once they are well gone, and OTHELLO attempts to return to work. He sings a song softly as he goes about his tasks. It is a language we cannot recognize, not English nor Italian nor Spanish nor Arabic, but something from somewhere else entirely, like him. It is folkloric, perhaps a love song, and beautiful. So much so that only one with the manners of a IAGO would interrupt...

IAGO: My noble lord —

I think, if we are to create a striking humanity on-stage, Steph, then we have to focus on what we do and not what we say, OR, if we must give deference to the words, we had better be sure that the words are well placed and never superfluous.

(Stephanie is still musing on lines at 1.2.25-28.)

...is anything in that playable? Ha, possibly not. But that's the love that makes most sense to me. Desdemona is all the braver if she decides to love this man unfailingly, though she too is wary of life as a kept woman.

Encouraging that you are looking for what you can in fact play. But it must indeed make the most sense to you and be composed through the lens of your particular life and experience. And I do understand and support where your thoughts on the matter are tending.

Last time I read through this scene, I wondered about the timing of the marriage. Why marry now? Surely Othello has been hip to the stirrings of war with the Turks; did Desdemona and Othello pull the marriage trigger strategically, confident that whatever contention met would be quelled by Othello's necessity? And if that's the case, as I believe it must be, how much did they discuss the backlash, or pointedly avoid discussion about it? Was there a plan in place to break the news to Brabantio gently, now fully upset by the rapid unfolding of the war? I think you know I believe it interesting if it is in the Sagittary that for the first time Desdemona introduces the idea of accompanying Othello into the fray. Maybe there was a version of their future in which Brabantio took the news kindly, and Desdemona believed herself capable of being contented with waiting out Othello's return from her childhood home. I like the possibility that the desperation of the moment and the desperation of her love surprises everyone, including her.

Ha! Lots to unpack here. Not sure it is all worth the unpacking, then again, who picks the stones we leave unturned? I wonder if creating backstory around the timing of the marriage is creating unnecessary data that, again, cannot really be played... They've all been sitting around Venice for the past nine months in virtual "peace." The issues between the Venetians and the Ottoman Empire have been as ongoing as our Afghanistan War, to the extent that no one here tends to even think of it as a war. I don't see Othello choosing at any point to scheme his way through marrying this woman. If what he says to Iago at 1.2.17⁵ is

⁵ Let him do his spite:
My services which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know,--
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,

true, he does it because it is what he wants to do when he wants to do it (all the more reason for observers to be affronted by his blatant self-value and self-assuredness). They do indeed elope, but it seems less to soften the blow of it to the outside world than to just work their own wills free of anyone else's bullshit. What you speak of way above about Desdemona's possible revelations regarding her father's reactions is interesting, but if it were so it too argues for doing and not planning. I can't really quite imagine that Desdemona doesn't have a sense of how all this will be received by her father and others, but love, no different than Romeo and Juliet, is bigger than that, and to try to illustrate how the couple attempted to put one over on society on any level is to dilute it. These are the two most powerful figures in the play *because* they play by their own rules and not the culture's...except one of them has a debilitating psychological disease... *Or perhaps they both do, one being ego at odds with PTSD, and the other being the delusional effects of extreme privilege.*

1.2.49⁶ - If Cassio has been on the inside of the developing relationship, why would Othello keep him outside his confidence now? In exchange for Iago? Maybe he is already in knowledge of the marriage, and here, Cassio susses out how much Iago now knows. That would probably grind Iago's gears, with the rest.

You must stop believing that whatever you read is what the playwright intended, or even wrote. It ain't. Why in the world would Cassio, whom we know has been a party to the General's courtship, so much so that he has also developed a relationship with Desdemona, think perhaps, upon hearing of the marriage, that he has gotten married to Joan the plumber's daughter? Our time is ill-spent if we are using it to come up with reasons for nonsensical passages of dubious origin to make sense. Additionally, unlike a great many, I am of the mind that Cassio, aside from being a perhaps overly ambitious career soldier, is generally a straight-shooter without much of a secondary agenda regarding anything, save perhaps being manipulative and caddish with Bianca... He seems to mean no one any particular ill, and, as Iago reports, "has a daily beauty in his life." Being guileless does have its perks as well...

I have read scholarship that points at Cassio's callous behavior in the epilepsy scene wherein he sees Othello in distress and simply differs to Iago in the matter and leaves. They would like to suggest that he is not as genuinely duty-bound and loyal to his commander as he puts on. We haven't gotten there in this discussion, however, like so many places throughout this play, I see this as the act of not a calculating or callous character, but of either a very stupid one or one that is incompletely written. Having no use for simple stupidity to be the driver of the story, I have to find ways to give such characters depth that Shakespeare was, for all intents and purposes, unconcerned with.

Responded to the weight of legal action in 1.2.77⁷, in our R2. To my previous note, a Brabantio who is not thoroughly ineffectual ups the stakes of the story, says more about Othello's station to overcome.

I shall promulgate--I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach'd

⁶ Ancient, what makes he here?

⁷ I therefore apprehend and do attach thee

Agreed. I've no patience for impotent Brabantios. Nor am I at all sure that he needs to be any older than 50 or so, and thus able to display a much more virile energy, one that might take the fight directly to Othello for such an affront if he were let.

1.3.99⁸ - it makes a lot of sense to me that Desdemona would shy away from Othello in front of her father, to avoid his becoming wise of their forming relationship. And also that, especially in the early stages of their romance, she did have a phase of being uncharacteristically skittish, shy, bumbling around Othello. (Who among us are actually smooth in love?) But as she grew out of this, toward confidence and ownership of what they shared, surely Brabantio couldn't see these qualities in her. He hasn't seen her for the woman she's become in many years, because that would challenge all he knows about their relationship, himself as a figure of insight and power and safety - the primary man in his daughter's heart. {theme: We gravitate toward those whose presence helps us believe the stories we tell about ourselves (for safety, to be able to function in this world, to stomach ourselves); and we love their roles in these stories, mistaking it for the love of the person themself.}

I think all this above is relevant and generally true. There will perhaps be a prologue to explore some of this in.

I think we should also consider the possibility that "the woman she's become" relative to the woman she would have become were she not a child of extreme privilege are two very different things, and so we cannot assume that who she is when we meet her is necessarily anyone other than an "adult" daughter behaving with a self-authority she only has because of her cultural position and that it is rife with blind spots. That is to say, just because Brabantio is taken down a bit with these revelations, it does not necessarily suggest that Desdemona is raised up.

While I'm talking themes at you, may as well start tracking a motif: nature, nature, nature. "It's against my daughter's nature to love such as you are." Later, Iago poisons Othello with the sentiment that nature will surely course correct itself and seduce Desdemona back; like goes with like and all that. And Othello is quick to agree with him, and start finding evidence to hate himself for his own perceived "nature," supposedly so counter to his beloved, and thus flawed. So I guess all this talk of nature is the play's code word for racism, as we watch it become more and more internalized by Othello. I'm not breaking ground with this, but I am tracking it from act one...

Perhaps you are right that the banter around the term, "nature," is as close as the early moderns came to discussions of race. *The scholars get unworkably deep into the weeds with this stuff; epistemology versus ontology and all that, and it's great to write another post-graduate level text about but it's just not anything that can be put on a stage.* Whether that is true or not, Shakespeare is dictating Othello's self-perception by way of his own. That is to say, "Of course the black man would view himself, either covertly or overtly, as inferior in any number of ways to we normative white people. It would only need to be suggested to plunge him into self-doubt, poor man..." It's bullshit. The problem lies in Shakespeare's

For an abuser of the world, a practiser
Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.
Lay hold upon him; if he do resist
Subdue him at his peril!

⁸ To fall in love with what she feared to look on?

inability to tell this particular story truthfully. If I sent you a story that I wrote from your perspective about your relationship with a man, you would quickly show me all the places where my utterly unqualified perception of you had resulted in a bullshit story. You might be nice about it, but that would ultimately be the result. Shakespeare does not get a pass because he's Shakespeare. I'm not indicting him, I just refuse to continue to start there.

1.3.115⁹ - leave it to Shakespeare to throw a little line like that to Senator Number One. "Soul to soul."

There is a lot to be made of senator's behaviors and reactions throughout the senate scene. The senator might be speaking of a soul-to-soul connection while incredulous that such could actually be the case between two such as they...

1.3.116¹⁰ - what about this situation just shifted/got so dangerous that Othello decides it's necessary to pull Desdemona in? - Especially as the Duke favors him by telling Brabantio he'll need firmer evidence of spells and magic.

I think there is a significant degree of anger and arrogance in all that Othello does throughout this scene. If you ask me, nothing has gotten more dangerous. He feels no danger. He's faced dangers that would make everyone of these senators shit themselves. He has absolutely no fear of them, nor the first thought that they will sacrifice him and the potential winning of the Ottoman war for the "loss" of a senator's daughter. That said, it seems a rash move born more of annoyance than anything else that he suggests dragging Desdemona across town, and it speaks to insensitive male arrogance no different than all other men in the play. He is no paragon of compassion and sensitivity. I also suspect that such is not lost on Desdemona either when she arrives; a sense of "You couldn't have handled this? Why am I here at 2am on our wedding night? Isn't one of your jobs to protect me from this sort of misuse?" Questions which, were she to confront him with them, he would have no legitimate answers for. Why does he do it? Because Othello, like the rest of male humanity, is a bit of an asshole. At least that's my first impression.

1.3.168¹¹ - I think you wrote to me once, your skepticism that this is genuine love. Certainly it's an unstable foundation for one, if it's all that exists. I choose to believe it's merely a facet - maybe one that led to deeper discoveries about each other. But I also hold that this dynamic feeds directly into the theme of...utilitarian love, parsed out above.

Well... She being infatuated with him and he being enamored of her because she is infatuated with him is *not* love, and a great many people tend to make that mistake in my experience. I, as you, would prefer to find the stuff beyond that which will give rise to the energies that only some genuine love could produce. In the best case, and I think there is a

⁹ Did you by indirect and forced courses
Subdue and poison this young maid's affections?
Or came it by request and such fair question
As soul to soul affordeth?

¹⁰ I do beseech you,
Send for the lady to the Sagittary
And let he speak of me before her father.

¹¹ She loved me for the dangers I had passed
And I loved her that she did pity them.

best case to be constructed, they are still not emotionally ready to do this thing that they plunge into, and I'm not sure that they would ever be. What they might have been saved from in other circumstances is the trial of having their love tested under such natural *and* created duress. And in that saving, perhaps they would have been free to allow it to be tested by the more organic inevitable jostling of their interacting personalities, as mine are or yours are.

I don't really think that either of them is wondering about space, rather I believe they would like to be together as much as possible, a longing for closeness and perpetual contact that chemistry induces. Of course, as we know, it wears off, but they are nowhere near that point yet. To assume that their decision to go ahead with this marriage was not a rash choice, no different really than R&J is probably not helpful. Inasmuch as they have gone ahead and done it, I think it shouldn't be hard to find truly strong energetic connections between them that make an audience want them to endure.

Also, I believe, and I think you do, that even though their behavior is rash, they have had time to meet on a deeper level than that afforded by the purely physical, purely chemical attraction. Perhaps the stupid lines, "She loved me for the dangers, etc., and I loved her, etc..." need to be cut.

1.3.181¹² - discovered a couple weeks ago Desdemona's selection of words. Her father asks her about obedience, she counters him with duty. Submission to another versus responsibility; root word, due - a just reciprocation. Girl's a little fighter. But we already knew that. It excites me.

Yeah... She's a big fighter. It excites me too.

1.3.186¹³ - the mother card. Desdemona throws it a Brabantio, and there's got to be a lot loaded in it. If she's gone, as her absence from this story indicates, this father/daughter relationship would be all the more codependent and loving and fraught. Brabantio would "helicopter" Desdemona all the more, over-protect her and infantilize her. I read this and anticipate Desdemona saying to Othello that her hand has "known no sorrow." I don't believe that to be true, rather a convenient lie spoken in a state of love.

I agree. It's a statement meant somewhat tongue-in-cheek in response to what she perceives as some sort of playful banter being instigated by Othello. Tricky scene that, as she begins to realize for the first time that there is something very much not right. I think it compromises the idea of love between them for Desdemona to take a long time to figure this out. Rather, if it is as she describes: "...my heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord..." she will be acutely aware of shifts in his behavior, which she attests is steady and unflappable.

¹² I do perceive here a divided duty.

¹³ And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

Nice to hear Brabantio's acerbic in 1.3.211¹⁴, reading 1. If one were to keep all the language, it affords several colors in the processing of grief.

Ha! Yes... Again, my first inclination is to cut it... My thought was that someone actually processing the shock of this particular sort of revelation and the stakes herein appertaining would have no mind or patience for witty word banter with anyone, including the Duke:

DUKE: Let me speak like yourself, and lay a sentence,
Which, as a guise or step, may help these lovers
Into your favour.
When remedies are past the--

BRABANTIO: I never yet did hear
That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear.
I humbly beseech you, proceed to the affairs of state.

It is yet another fraught moment. The DUKE is not used to being so peremptorily spoken to. But the affairs of state are pressing.

DUKE: The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for
Cyprus.

I'm bound to be pilloried, and perhaps there is argument to be made for letting this nifty little piece of poetry have its voice, but I continue to focus on the immediacy of humanity and not Shakespeare's literary virtuosity.

Another thing to note is that the Duke in his rhyming homily says, "The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief..." thus for all intents and purposes concurring with Brabantio that he has been robbed, and that Othello is a criminal... This is something that would not be lost on Othello as he stood listening. So...issues abound... Which ones to resolve and which to yank mercilessly from the text is a perpetual question.

Post-reading discussion, R1, we spoke of Iago's thorough understanding of human nature - that it is not his brilliance as an actor nor ability to outsmart people that allows him to manipulate them, but the way he identifies their latent fears and desires and plays them to his advantage.

Yeah, we spoke of it, and we certainly will further speak of it, but I don't buy it. Shakespeare suggests that Iago is a preeminent confidence man, but it is a flaw in his writing that any real scrutiny reveals this only to be true if everyone else is an idiot. Real confidence men are far more subtle than Iago has scope to be in this play, and thus the only logical thing to be concluded about him is that he really isn't all that good at it. His struggle to pull off his haphazardly constructed confidence game should always be evident so that a bigger question can arise. That bigger question is: Why, when you know that this is going to be difficult and will very possibly bring you face-to-face with serious bodily injury if not death; why when you know that you are only nominally proficient at what you are about to attempt do you forge ahead? What is driving you?

¹⁴ So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile,
We lose it not so long as we can smile

So at 1.3.328¹⁵ he brings up reason - and since reason is one of Othello's greatest strengths, it ends up being exactly this faculty that Iago unhinges by planting fear, self-loathing, jealousy.

Iago can only plant self-loathing in the mind of someone who IS, in fact, self-loathing, and as I've said above, I believe that Othello is such only through the lens of the playwright. It is the playwright who cannot imagine a black man amongst his white culture having anything other than a somewhat lamenting disposition regarding the fact that he is not white too. Make Othello generally fearless and more self-loving than self-loathing and the entire house of cards tumbles.

It's not that Othello is an unreasonable man, incapable of seeing through Iago's thin lies; his reason is actively disabled.

Actively disabled by the playwright. Whatever contributes to Othello's stakes, a mixture of ego, potent new love chemistry, and PTSD to name a few, his reason is at odds to overcome them. I think it's important that we see Othello exercising his reason throughout. To say this all happens because the man has lost his faculties to reason is the easy and the cheap way.

- That might be another distinction that is more syntactical than playable, but it feels important to my mind.

What IS playable is Othello not talking as much as he thinks, and that his doing, which is to say his pursuit of the objectives that his thinking identifies, is proactive and effectual.

1.3.347¹⁶ - Iago is still muddled in the formation of his plot. Is it Desdemona who will lose interest in Othello, or vice versa? Sometimes I think Iago's tactic is to say anything that allows him to talk circles around Roderigo (and others), until they are so exhausted by the barrage of Iago's words, they agree to anything.

The problem with this is that no one will agree to just anything when they are pursuing objectives of their own. Also, people tend to say, "Wait. What? What did you say? Explain that. Speak fuckin' English!" Iago's tactic can indeed be to fly by the seat of his pants and compose his conversation impromptu, but we have to see that as well. It is always played far too pat, which is the actor's trap in a great deal of Shakespeare if you ask me. In memorizing a speech and playing it, the actor often forgets that the character is thinking this thing that he/she says for the first time in that very moment, and that there must be space in that 30-line speech to think. We have to see Iago struggling to stay barely ahead of the game...because he is NOT a genius, he is a pathetically troubled and reprehensible little man.

¹⁵ If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions.

¹⁶ These Moors are changeable in their wills...The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as acerb as coloquintida. She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body she will find the error of her choice...

1.3.386¹⁷ - boy I want to know the conclusion we reach on this point. It would complicate relationships in a way that is interesting, but probably not actually helpful. Still, what a thing to play with. Either way - I have no reason to believe Iago hasn't done his own degree of sleeping around (he "stands accountant for as great a sin" 2.1.291, and Emilia certainly has thoughts about infidelity's sting). And ain't it just the truth that "jealous souls...are jealous for they're jealous."

I have absolutely no reason to believe that Othello would ever come upon the compulsion to sleep with the ensign's wife. It is possible that he is addicted to sexual conquest. I had a friend who was, and it was an odd compulsion of theirs to attempt to sleep with everyone else's girlfriend simply because they were someone else's girlfriend. There is, however, simply no reason to assume that Othello is such an addict. We could also create the image that Iago married the most stunningly attractive and sexually alluring woman in Venice who also happens to sleep around, and under those circumstances Othello could not help but be seduced as well. But why to all of the above? Why would a beautiful woman, even one of seriously dubious virtue, bind herself to that asshole. ([Toni Morrison's play](#)¹⁸ offers us some thoughts on that which I find intriguing.) But in the main, I don't believe that anything that you would have to contrive to make a liaison between Emilia and Othello make any sense at all is plausible. Beyond that, my more logical assumption is that Othello has all of the sex he's wanted or needed since puberty. It may not always have come in the form of mutually consenting romantic trysts. There was probably rape, but also the hiring of courtesans replete with every trick of the sex trade known for pleasuring male paramours. Then there were perhaps even a relationship or several that actually meant something, but in all of that what reason he would ever have to fuck the ensign's wife completely eludes me.

What does make sense is to me the most obvious... Iago's sociopathy has him devising every reason in the world why he has been wronged by everyone. His self-indulgent psychobabble could be any fucking homeless nutcase rambling to himself on the NYC subway. Out of his brain fever comes a plan to exact revenge on all sorts of people only after which that same demented state of mind devises a reason for needing to. Everyone really must stop giving him the credit...

If we must actually make further sense of this matter, it might just be that Othello is as Cassio is to Iago in that they are graceful and beautiful men and he is not. Their very presence makes him feel his inferiority more acutely, and so the next logical thing for him to assume is that his wife would rather be sleeping with them than with him. In fact, he mentions in passing he fears Cassio has had his wife as well. Who knows that there is not a joke going around started by some soldier about the general and the ensign's wife that has now become a fact in Iago's mind...

None of it matters with regard to Othello. If you want to build a facet of Iago around his obsession with who has done his wife, that's fine. But Othello, for all his deep flaws and psycho-emotional debilitation, DOES have nobility, grace, discernment, loyalty, and respect for those who respect him. Desdemona, whom I need to believe also has discernment, speaks of "his honor and his valiant parts." Simply, she would not fall in love with a man who needed to fuck his under officer's wife.

¹⁷ And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office.

¹⁸ Desdemona, Toni Morrison, Oberon Modern Plays, 2012

1.3.392¹⁹ - Iago's plot thickens. We shift from wanting to vex Othello generally to aiming to displace Cassio outright and specifically cause marital strife.

Yeah... He says early on that it's just coming together. Here it is further evolved, and it continues to do so both with the necessity for mutation as circumstances dictate, and just because something else has occurred to his sociopathic thought generator. If left to do so, he would find a problem with every person in his sphere and a reason to do them harm. One last time, he is not a genius, he is emotionally broken, psychologically disturbed, a pathetic specimen of a man, and Othello has inadvertently taken from him the last thing he had that allowed him to feel good about himself.

If you can find yourself online a video copy of [RSC's *Othello* with Hugh Quarshie directed by Iqbal Kahn](#) that has been touted as some sort of groundbreaker since 2015, I recommend you watch it not only as an abject lesson in "Don't let this happen to you," but you will see in it as well what happens when theater makers barely ask the myriad questions that you are prosecuting above, and NEVER answer them even when the questions are asked... You will also see that the Brits by and large are no better at acting their Shakespeare than the majority of American performers are, nor are their directors any better at doing more than a recycling these works. If you lean it against The National's production, except for Adrian Lester's titanic performance, you will see the very same shortcomings in both highly visible British productions. But don't allow me to convince you. Do see for yourself.

¹⁹ Cassio's a proper man: let me see now,
To get his place, and to plume up my will
In double knavery. How? How?