Summary of *Othello*

Act I

The action of *Othello* begins late at night, in the middle of an argument between two men as they walk through the empty streets of Venice. Roderigo has been wooing Desdemona and has trusted Iago to be his go-between. He has given him quite a bit of money, too, which was to be used to buy gifts for Desdemona. But now Roderigo has learned that Desdemona has married Othello, that very night. He suspects that Iago has known about their alliance all along and has been using him. Iago protests his ignorance and, to further his credibility as well as to deflect Roderigo's wrath, tells him how much he hates Othello. He complains that he was passed over for the position of Othello's lieutenant and made his ensign, or standard bearer, and the position was given to Cassio, whom Iago describes as an inferior man and a sort of dandy. Not quite placated, Roderigo challenges Iago to explain why he remains in the service of a general, Othello, whom he loathes. Iago explains to Roderigo that he is only biding his time, that he is not serving Othello, but himself, and that he has a scheme. He does not say what particular end he is pursuing. But he does identify his principal way of proceeding, by deceit and dissimulation:

> [W]hen my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

Roderigo's only response to Iago's very revealing speech is to wonder about how rich Othello must be if he could get Desdemona. He refers to Othello not by name, but by using a racial slur, "the thick-lips."

As they speak, Iago and Roderigo are walking toward the house of Brabantio, Desdemona's father. Under his windows, Iago prompts Roderigo to wake Brabantio, and they both begin loudly calling his name. When Brabantio comes onto his balcony, Iago addresses him, under cover, using Roderigo as a front, asking if his house is safe and all his family inside. He cries out,

using the image of sheep mating, that Desdemona and Othello are married, characterizing Othello as an old black ram and Desdemona as a white ewe who are together "making the beast with two backs." When Brabantio demands to know who is there, Roderigo identifies himself and Iago remains in the shadows. Convinced that his daughter is not at home, Brabantio calls for the arrest of Othello, which, as a member of the Venetian senate, he has the power to do.

As Brabantio is dressing to join Roderigo in the street, Iago slips away to join Othello at the inn where he and Desdemona plan to spend their wedding night. Brabantio goes to round up his relatives and police officers in order to follow Roderigo to where Othello is and arrest him.

The scene shifts to the inn. Outside, Iago is telling Othello how he restrained himself from killing a man who had been speaking maliciously of Othello. The audience has just seen that he himself was the man. (But Othello has not.) He then turns to the topic of Othello's marriage and asks if it has been performed, warning him of the power Desdemona's father wields. Othello responds with confidence and dignity that he is not afraid of what Brabantio can do, that he has faith that the senate of Venice will recognize the considerable service he has done as its general, and that he is proud of his own lineage. Moreover, he points out, his motive in the marriage is love—otherwise he would not have forfeited the freedom of bachelorhood.

A troop of men approaches the inn. Iago warns it must come from Brabantio to take Othello and advises Othello to go inside. Othello rebuffs him, stating, "Not I. I must be found. / My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly." It is not a troop sent out by Brabantio, however, but an escort, headed by Cassio, sent by the Venetian senate. The senate is in emergency session because news has arrived that the Turkish fleet is headed to Cyprus, a Venetian stronghold. Othello is being summoned to the senate, in his capacity as general, to lead a Venetian force to Cyprus and repel the Turks. Othello goes inside for a moment, and Cassio asks Iago what Othello is doing at the inn. When Iago tells him Othello has been married, Cassio asks, "To who?" Before Iago can answer, Othello returns. As they are about to proceed to the senate house, Brabantio's band enters, and Brabantio commands his men to seize Othello. Iago, with drawn sword, challenges Roderigo (who had not long before been his companion and whom he had set on to do what he is now challenging him for doing, leading Brabantio to the inn in order to apprehend Othello), and a general melee threatens. Iago is trying to make chaos. Appearing to be protecting Othello, he is, in fact, endangering him. But Othello calms everything. "Keep up your bright swords," he says, and adds, showing his ability to speak with a courtier's wit, "for the dew will rust them." He adds, respectfully, addressing Desdemona's father, "Good signior, you shall more command with years / Than with your weapons."

Brabantio is not pacified by this deference, which, after all, comes after the deed. He calls Othello a thief and accuses him of being an enchanter who used magic and drugs to bind Desdemona to him. Brabantio makes the case against Othello that Iago will later hypothesize and Othello will finally internalize. How could Desdemona go against her nature and marry a black man whom she would be more inclined to fear than to love? At this point, however, Othello stands his ground calmly and once again halts an outbreak of violence. He asks Brabantio where he would like him to go to answer his charges. "To prison," he retorts. Othello is almost teasing in his response, so full of confidence is he. If I go with you to prison, he replies, how can I appear before the Duke, who has summoned me on important state business? Brabantio does not relent but orders that they proceed to the senate, where he may present his case.

At the senate the Duke is analyzing the information he is receiving regarding the strength of the Turkish fleet headed for Cyprus when a messenger arrives to announce that the Turkish fleet has veered and is heading for Rhodes. The senators determine this must be a trick, "a pageant / To keep us in false gaze." It turns out to be just that, and the senators learn that the first fleet was merely joining a larger fleet near Rhodes and returning with it to Venice. Here is a mirroring of Iago's deceptions, which make Othello's gaze false and thus make him see things falsely.

Brabantio and Othello arrive at the senate, and the Duke greets each man, telling Othello that he is dispatching him to fight against the Turks. Brabantio informs the senate he has come on private, not state, business. When he cries out in grief, "My daughter," the senators think she is dead, but he says it is worse: She has been enchanted and stolen from him by Othello. The Duke remains calm and asks Othello what he can say in his defense. Othello delivers a short oration, admitting that he has married Desdemona and minimizing his skill as a speaker because of his life as a soldier; he says he will try to show how he won Desdemona. Despite Brabantio's interruption and repeated accusations that he used witchcraft, Othello is allowed to continue. He tells the senate to call for Desdemona at the inn and let her speak to them herself. While messengers are sent to bring Desdemona to the senate, Othello tells his story of their wooing. The significant aspects are: 1) that he had originally been Brabantio's friend, and 2) that it was Desdemona who made her love known to him and solicited his in return. His summation, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them," must give the audience or readers pause. The eloquence of his formulation belies its fatality. He did not love her for herself alone but for the way he found himself nobly and heroically reflected in her. When he will not find the image of himself there that he seeks, that exists only because it is reflected in her, "chaos is come again."

The Duke's response is that he thinks Othello's tale would win his daughter, too. That remark highlights the power of language, and Iago's corruption of language, upon which the plot of *Othello* is so dependent. Before Desdemona speaks, Brabantio concedes that if her marriage to Othello is not the result of some magical practice, he will yield, especially since he no longer has any choice in the matter.

Brabantio asks Desdemona "Where most you owe obedience," and she responds that she "perceive[s] . . . a divided duty," that the duty her mother owed to Brabantio she now owes to Othello, her husband. Brabantio, withdrawing in defeat, nevertheless delivers a fatal warning: "Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee." It is fatal not because it is true but precisely because it is not. Brabantio's ill-meant and angry warning is harmful because it supports Othello's chaotic mistake later.

The domestic issue apparently resolved, the senate returns to the matter of Cyprus and the Turks. Desdemona entreats the senate to allow her to live with her husband in Cyprus and not be left behind in Venice. In her petition, she begins by acknowledging what marrying Othello involved. She calls it "My downright violence." She says she "saw Othello's visage in his mind" (significantly for the arguments Iago will later use to undermine Othello, she does not say she found what to like about him in his actual face but rather in his mind) and wants to share his adventures, for which she loved him, so that they can be hers, too. The senate adjourns after deciding the fleet's departure should be that night and that Desdemona should be entrusted to Iago's care on the voyage while Othello travels on another ship.

As they were the first to appear in the only act of *Othello* that takes place in Venice, so Roderigo and Iago are the last. Remaining after the senators have filed out, Roderigo laments that he will kill himself now that he has definitively lost Desdemona. Iago convinces him not to despair but rather to turn his property into money and follow the fleet to Cyprus, continuing his quest for Desdemona. She will not, Iago assures him, stay faithful to someone as distasteful as the Moor must become to her, considering her youth and her Venetian tastes. During the formation of this intrigue, Shakespeare also continues to develop Iago's religion, as it were, the things he holds as fundamental to his self-definition—primarily that he is the creator of himself and of the way others perceive reality. The scene ends with a soliloquy in which Iago promises to use his power in order to create complete chaos.

Act II

Act II begins on the seashore of Cyprus as several Venetians from the fortress look to the sea, which is tempestuous, and speculate about the fate of the Turkish fleet. A messenger enters, bearing the news that the storm confounded the Turkish fleet and, consequently, their design on Cyprus has been frustrated.

One after another, then, ships arrive from Venice. The first brings Cassio and his party. Cassio reports that the Turkish fleet has indeed been destroyed, but his happy news is tempered by his anxiety for the safety of Othello's ship, which was separated from the rest of the fleet during the storm. Next to arrive is the vessel carrying Desdemona, who is accompanied by Iago and his wife, Emilia, who also acts as Desdemona's maid and companion.

All the chief actors, except for Othello himself, are now collected onstage, awaiting the arrival of Othello's ship. During this interval of apparent comic relief, they pass the time, as Desdemona says of herself in an aside, "not merry" but to "beguile" their anxiety about Othello by seeming so. In this context they reveal their essential characteristics outside the context of the plot. Cassio shows himself to be a refined gentleman, a courtier in the tradition prescribed by Baldassare Castiglione in his handbook *The Courtier*. A soldier, he is also accomplished in the use of fine, decorated, and refined language and in gallant behavior—especially behavior that shows his devotion to women. On Desdemona's arrival, he greets her after asking the "men of Cypress, let her have your knees" as "the grace of heaven." When Emilia, Iago's wife, emerges, he kisses her, explaining to Iago that it ought not "gall your patience . . . That I extend my manners. 'Tis my breeding."

Iago then begins an interlude of comic ribaldry. He tells Cassio that he would have enough of Emilia if he got as much of her lip as Iago gets of her tongue. But all the while Emilia is silent, while Desdemona quietly supports her. "Alas, she has no speech," Desdemona says, countering Iago's portrayal of her as outspoken or a scold. This unspeaking Emilia, who can go through the play hardly noticed, as a sort of machinery of the plot, will burst forth with a torrent of searing and honest language in the last act of *Othello*.

Desdemona reveals herself, too, in her aside. She tells the audience that she is not actually merry but seems the thing she is not in order to "beguile," to trick, the oppressive feeling away. Desdemona is not a one-dimensional or passive character. She is a complex figure whom Shakespeare draws much more by innuendo, from her responses in particular situations, than by probing her the way he does Othello. The ways of her personality—not her virtue or her love—are what lend fuel to Iago's later assault upon her husband. There hangs over any reading of Desdemona the sense that she did dissemble, even if innocently, as her father claims. And later (III, iii, 20–26), when she promises aid to Cassio, she exclaims,

> assure thee,
> If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
> To the last article: my lord shall never rest;
> I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;
> His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;

I'll intermingle every thing he does
With Cassio's suit.

When she goes about her task, it is with an ardor that might irritate the fondest husband—even one who has not already been subverted, like Othello, in his ability to see straight. She persists in her demand to know when Othello will see Cassio: "tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn, / On Tuesday noon, or night, or Tuesday morn. / I prithee, name the time, but let it not / extend three days." She begs and bargains and stipulates. And then she begins the middle section of what is becoming a short oration, lecturing Othello on the insignificance of Cassio's fault, even recognizing that the conditions of war can change the way things are done. When Othello does not respond, she reminds him, "I wonder in my soul / What you should ask me, that I should deny you." When he finally yields and says, "Let him come when he will; / I will deny thee nothing," and she has won her suit, she is yet not content. "Why, this is not a boon; / 'Tis I should entreat you wear your gloves / Or feed on nourishing dishes or keep you warm / . . . Nay, when I have a suit / Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed, / It shall be full of poise and weight, / And fearful to be granted." Othello reassures her that he will grant her suit regarding Cassio and asks her to leave him for a while. She obeys, but not without a sharp riposte: "Shall I deny you? No. Farewell, my lord." It is this side of Desdemona that is foreshadowed in the character in Act II, scene 1, who banters with Iago.

As the interlude of waiting ends, Iago observes Cassio speaking to Desdemona and notices his gestures, how he takes her by the hand or kisses his three fingers as he speaks, and formulates his plot, incorporating the material he has just seen. When Othello arrives, there is more for him to observe. Othello takes Desdemona in his arms and renews his vow of love to her. They are both roused to such an ecstatic passion of joy that they nearly totter in their happiness. Iago notices that, too. "I cannot speak enough of this content," Othello exclaims after describing the ecstasy of his soul, "It stops me here [*touching his heart*]; it is too much of joy." In an aside, blending his voice with their experience, Iago says, "O, you are well-tuned now! / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music."

Before Iago does, however, Shakespeare devotes 10 lines to a picture of peace. Othello declares, "Our wars are done," greets old friends, speaks sweetly to Desdemona, and orders Iago to supervise the unloading of his ship. Before Iago obeys, when all the other actors have left the stage, again there appear on it only the stage manager and his principal prop, Roderigo, and Iago begins to set his plot and the rest of *Othello* itself in motion.

Honing the arguments he will later employ directly to Othello—particularly that for a young woman of Desdemona's complexion and class, marriage with Othello is against nature—Iago convinces Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. He explains that Cassio is to command the guard that keeps order

in Cyprus that night and instructs Roderigo to provoke him into a fight. By this strategy, Iago says, Roderigo will advance his cause with Desdemona. He agrees and Iago continues to develop the script of his plot, working himself up to carry it out in a soliloquy that ends the scene.

A herald appears and reads Othello's proclamation, which announces a triumphant celebration of the defeat of the Turkish fleet and of his marriage, with dances, bonfires, feasting, and reveling that night in Cyprus between five o'clock and eleven.

As Othello parts from Cassio that evening, leaving him responsibility for the watch, he confirms that "Iago is most honest" when Cassio mentions that he has already given instructions about the watch to Iago. Othello leaves and Iago enters. Rather than setting down to business, as Cassio orders, Iago counters merrily, "Not this hour, lieutenant; 'tis not yet ten o' the clock. Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame: he hath not yet made wanton the night with her; and she is sport for Jove." Cassio politely corrects him when he counters Iago's lascivious description of Desdemona, saying, "She's a most exquisite lady." But Iago transforms his effort with another debasing comment: "And I'll warrant her full of game." Once again Cassio goes on the defensive, saying, "Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate nature." Their contest in verbal representation continues for a few more rounds, finally ending in Iago's triumphant, "well, happiness to their sheets!" He then invites Cassio to take a stoup of wine with him. When Cassio declines, citing his inability to hold his liquor, Iago persists and prevails, especially after Montano has given Cassio a little to drink. Once Cassio is inebriated, the plot unfolds as Iago had planned it earlier with Roderigo. Casio is seen drunk on duty. Roderigo gets Cassio into a skirmish. Drunken, brawling, and derelict in his duty, Cassio is disgraced. Iago, in testifying about him to Othello, twists rhetoric to make himself sound as if he were advocating for him when he is, in actuality, testifying against him. It is Othello, with his authority, who quells the riot instigated by Cassio's brawling, who questions his ensign, who rebukes his lieutenant, who sees to the care of the wounded, who deputizes Iago with authority while Cassio is in disgrace, and who comforts Desdemona, who had been awakened by the hubbub.

After everyone has departed, once again Iago remains, but rather than have Roderigo as his dupe/marionette, now he has Cassio. Like Roderigo bewailing his failure to win Desdemona, Cassio now bewails his drunken behavior and its consequences. As he used Roderigo's desires to further his own ends, so Iago uses Cassio's and advises him to sue to Desdemona to intervene with Othello for him. Iago knows the materials he is working with and which he must transform to seem other than they are in Othello's mind, for his description of Desdemona is remarkably true. That he knows what she is really like and how good she is—yet is unaffected by it except in as much as he wishes to crush her—is what

gives fearsomeness to his strength. He says of her, as he explains to Cassio why it would be a good idea to petition Desdemona's intervention, that "[s]he is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested." He will use this goodness in her and make it look like evil, defining "debased ardor" rather than "blessed disposition" as the reason for her advocacy for Cassio.

Cassio leaves, grateful to Iago for his ear and his advice (unable to see him for what he is, the man who maneuvered him into his troubles). In a devilishly charming soliloquy, Iago then tries his art directly on the audience, acting delightful as he delights in the subversiveness of his evil. He makes the audience, by enjoying or fearing him, aware of his power; the viewers are complicit with him, nearly co-conspirators. Roderigo enters and interrupts his soliloquy, once again complaining: He is accomplishing nothing in Cyprus, he is spending his money, and tonight he was beaten up in a brawl. No longer needing him to move his plot forward, Iago puts Roderigo off by telling him to be patient. Once alone, Iago schemes. Now he needs his wife, Emilia, not Roderigo, to go to Desdemona with entreaties from Cassio. He also needs to guide Othello to the spot where Cassio will solicit Desdemona's aid. In other words, he has just outlined Act III, scene 3, of *Othello*.

Act III

The third act begins the next morning, when Cassio, following Iago's advice with Venetian excess, plants a band of musicians under their window to serenade Othello and Desdemona when they rise. A clown, also present, makes ribald jokes as he mocks the musicians and drives them out. He then teases Cassio, first changing the meaning of his words, giving an innocuous comic foreshadowing of Iago's sinister device. "Do you hear me, mine honest friend," Cassio says to the clown. The clown twists his words to be able to respond, "I hear not your honest friend. I hear you." As the clown parts with Cassio, further mocking his florid eloquence, Iago enters, making sure the stage is set. He is assured Cassio is ready to play his part, and he says he'll send Desdemona to him immediately; he will also take Othello aside so that "your converse and business / May be more free." It is just this tactic of his that Othello's character has made him shun every time Iago has advised him to be secretive. But Cassio accepts Iago's assurance of privacy with humble thanks, even after Emilia assures him that in the conversation she has just overheard between Desdemona and Othello, Othello was favorably inclined toward him.

Scene 2 is but six lines long. It shows the public Othello guiding a delegation inspecting the fortress and handing letters addressed to the Venetian senate to Iago. Othello instructs Iago to give these letters to the pilot of the ship leaving for Venice. It shows Othello in control and Iago subordinate.

As is his way, Iago is playing a double game and does not, in fact, provide Cassio with privacy when he speaks with Desdemona. As he has planned it, Iago steers Othello to their interview. As the interview ends and Desdemona has promised to use her full art and influence with Othello to help Cassio, Emilia announces that she sees Othello approaching. Cassio does not choose to stay. By this action he becomes the image of suspicion when Iago mutters, as if to himself, but loud enough for Othello to hear, "Ha! I like not that." When Othello asks what he said, Iago, rather than answering, responds with the vaguely unsettling, "Nothing my lord; or if," but breaks off with a dismissive, "I know not what." He has framed the situation so that when Othello says, "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" there is something ominous surrounding his words. Iago's response is a deft "Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it / That he would steal away so guilty-like, / Seeing you coming." In the rhetorical act of seeming to exculpate Cassio, he actually incriminates him.

The strength of Desdemona's solicitation, to an unjaundiced eye, would only give it greater credibility. But because Othello's perspective is being shaped by Iago, Desdemona's ardor only suggests the wrong kind of attachment to Cassio. While Othello is apparently not alarmed by the ardor and insistence with which Desdemona argues in Cassio's favor in the first part of Act III, scene 3, its after-impression helps Iago when he later shapes Othello's thoughts to doubt her honesty and faithfulness. In Act III, scene 3, Othello assures Desdemona that he will grant her suit and asks her to leave him for a while. Alone with Othello now, Iago asks insinuatingly if Cassio knew about Othello's love for Desdemona before their marriage, while Othello was wooing her. Othello answers he did, "from first to last." When he then asks, "Why dost thou ask?" Iago's apparently innocuous answer, "but for a satisfaction of my thought, / No further harm," rings with the sound of something sinister. When Othello adds, defensively, that Cassio had been their go-between, Iago only says the puzzling, "Indeed?," which rattles Othello. "Indeed?" Othello repeats and then asserts, "Ay, indeed!" Othello asks, "Discern'st thou aught in that? / Is he not honest?" But Iago replies only by repeating his word, "Honest, my lord?" "Honest? Ay, honest," Othello states again. When Iago equivocates in his answer, Othello demands of him what he thinks, but Iago only repeats Othello's word as he had before: "Think, my lord?" At the end of his rope, Othello pushes his words back at him, crying out, "Think, my lord! By heaven, thou echoest me." Othello is nearly hooked now. "What are you hiding from me?" is the gist of his tirade, and he is ready to hear and accept anything Iago might reveal. Iago keeps taking him in circles, seeming to speak as his friend and protector, until he infects him with the idea that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with Cassio and that she could *not possibly not have been,* given the disparity between her and Othello, given Othello's inferiority, given his race and age. Othello's very struggle not to believe what Iago insinuates brings him nearer belief. In order to reject Iago's estimate of him, he must entertain it. In

order to struggle against the idea of Desdemona's infidelity, he must imagine it. Once imagined, it looms over him and finally consumes him.

Iago leaves Othello to a tormented reflection on his own inadequacies. Then Desdemona enters, seeing him in his debilitated state, and asks if he is not well. When he says with bitter self-mockery that he has "a pain upon my forehead," which she understands as a headache, he means to suggest that he feels the horns of a cuckolded husband growing upon his forehead. She attempts to tie her handkerchief around his head in order to soothe the ache, but her gesture only annoys him. As he pushes her away, she drops the handkerchief and follows him out, confused by his ill-tempered response. Emilia, who has been with her, sees the handkerchief and picks it up. She mentions she is glad to find it because Iago has repeatedly asked her to steal it, although she says she has no idea why. She resolves to have the handkerchief copied, give her husband the copy, and return the original to Desdemona, thus betraying neither her duty to her husband nor to her mistress.

When Iago reenters and finds Emilia alone, he begins to scold her, but she says she has "a thing for you," and he teases her, saying it's "a common thing to have a foolish wife." Goaded, she shows him the handkerchief to tease him but not yet to give it. He snatches it from her, however, and bids her to think no more about it and to leave him. She obeys, and Iago begins to weave the next strands of his plot, which involve dropping the handkerchief in Cassio's room and cementing Othello's jealousy with "trifles light as air." When Othello returns, Iago sees that his subversion is nearly accomplished. In the remainder of the scene, he wins Othello's trust entirely through innuendo, feigned reluctance to say what he knows, and outright lies. He succeeds in bringing Othello to the full rage of tormenting jealousy and simultaneously forges a bond of enduring service to him.

The fourth scene of Act III shifts locations to a street in Cyprus. Desdemona and Emilia are looking for Cassio's house so Desdemona can tell him that she has won his suit for him. In the context of Iago's lies about her and Cassio, it is telling that Shakespeare immediately makes it clear that Desdemona does not even know where Cassio lives. The clown, of whom she asks directions, plays with her words rather than answering her questions. She asks him where Cassio "lies," using the word in the sense of where he lodges. But the clown takes it in the sense of "where does he tell a falsehood" and refuses to answer for fear of calling a soldier a liar. When Desdemona changes her language, the clown says that he would lie if he answered because he does not know. This interlude offers comic relief in the midst of the painful unfolding of a man's destruction and the murder of a youthful spirit. But it also reflects the problem of the malleability of language, which is a theme at the heart of the play, since Iago fashions reality in Othello's mind with words falsely used.

The clown is dispatched to see if he can find where Cassio resides. Alone with Emilia, Desdemona is upset that she cannot find her handkerchief. She tells

what great value it is to Othello and how such a lost handkerchief could make a husband jealous—therefore, she is grateful that Othello is not a jealous man. She defends him against Emilia's challenge, but the scene that follows—in which Othello demands the handkerchief from Desdemona with increasing jealous fury—allows Emilia to say of him, "Is not this man jealous?" Desdemona herself is confused, saying, "I never saw this before." As Emilia retorts how women are in general ill-used by their husbands, Iago enters, directing Cassio to speak with Desdemona. She tells him that she cannot do anything right now, but she will help when she can, and he must be patient, because Othello is displeased with her. Hearing this, Iago intervenes, "Is my lord angry?" and says he will go to attend to him.

Speaking by themselves, Desdemona and Emilia wonder what is troubling Othello, praying that it is not that "monster," jealousy. As they leave, Cassio remains onstage, and Bianca, a prostitute in love with Cassio, enters. She chides him for avoiding her, and he tells her that he has "with leaden thoughts been pressed" but will make up for it in the future. He gives her the handkerchief to take out and copy, since he likes the work. She protests that it was given him by a beloved, but he tells her not to be "vile," that he found it in his room and does not know how it got there. When he asks her then to leave him, she protests, but he says he does not want Othello to see him with a woman. He says he will walk a little way with her and then leave her. With the acceptance of circumstances women are expected to grant, she says, "'Tis very good. I must be circumstanced" [accept circumstances].

Act IV

Like the first act of the play, Act IV of *Othello* begins in the middle of a conversation. Now, however, it is not between Iago and Roderigo but rather Iago and Othello. Othello has taken Roderigo's place as Iago's gull, or dupe. Iago has so deeply penetrated Othello's consciousness that he can fabricate reality in his mind simply by stringing words together and making up painful erotic scenarios that trumpet Othello's betrayal:

Iago: Will you think so?
Othello: Think so, Iago!

Iago: What,
To kiss in private?

Othello: An unauthorized kiss.

Iago: Or to be naked with her friend in bed
An hour or more, not meaning any harm?

Othello: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm!
It is hypocrisy against the devil:
They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,
The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.

Iago: So they do nothing, 'tis a venial slip:
But if I give my wife a handkerchief, —

Brilliant psychologist that he is, Iago segues from these imaginings to the concrete matter of the missing handkerchief, yoking the truthfulness of those images to that apparent fact. The success of his assault is obvious when Othello, raving, "falls in a trance." While he is in a fit, Cassio enters. Iago explains that Othello is subject to such fit but tells Cassio he wants to speak with him once Othello has recovered.

Iago leaves and sets up the next scene. Othello, hidden and unobserved, will eavesdrop on a scene of Iago and Cassio talking lasciviously, he thinks, about Desdemona. It is actually Bianca, however, who is the butt of their ribaldry. Othello then watches as Bianca angrily returns Desdemona's handkerchief, insulted that she is being used to copy "some minx's token."

Alone with Iago, Othello cries of Cassio, "How shall I murder him, Iago?" Regarding Desdemona, he orders, "Get me some poison, Iago, this night." He is delighted to be overruled by Iago's injunction: "Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she has contaminated." Othello repeats, "Good, good! . . . Very good." Into the midst of this conversation, Desdemona and a deputation from Venice on state business, led by Lodovico, enter. As Othello reads letters from the senate ordering him to leave Cyprus for Mauritania, he overhears the polite conversation between Desdemona and Lodovico, in which she tells him regretfully of the falling out between her husband and Cassio. It angers him. When Lodovico tells her that he thinks the letters order Othello away, making Cassio governor of Cyprus, she responds, "Trust me. I am glad on't." Othello explodes, yells, and strikes her, shocking all who behold the blow. Lodovico intervenes and asks Othello to "make her amends." But Othello only continues to rage, claiming she weeps "crocodile" tears and ordering her "out of my sight," blind to the terrible irony that she already is: He can no longer see her. He only sees Iago's phantom, with which Iago has replaced her in Othello's mind. Iago, thereby, has subverted Desdemona as well as Othello, for each word or action of hers will be interpreted not in the context of herself but in the context of Iago's version of her, which has replaced her in Othello's mind.

Desdemona starts to leave, saying to Othello, "I will not stay to offend you." Lodovico implores Othello to call her back, and Othello does, using the opportunity to further humiliate Desdemona and himself. "What would you with her, sir?" he asks Lodovico once Desdemona has returned. Lodovico is

surprised, as he did not desire anything with her but only that she should be called back and be asked forgiveness. Othello speaks of her as disobedient and a "whore" and leaves, cursing to himself. When Lodovico is alone with Iago, he voices his astonishment and questions him about Othello. Iago begins to attempt to ensnare him with innuendo against Othello, assurances of his own reluctance to speak, and suggestions that Lodovico look for himself.

The scene shifts. Othello is questioning Emilia about Desdemona. Emilia assures him with all her eloquence that Desdemona is pure and faithful. But when Othello bids her go fetch Desdemona, he thinks to himself that Emilia is nothing but a brothel mistress who will speak well of any of her girls. Of Desdemona he is convinced,

> This is a subtle whore,
> A closet lock and key of villanous secrets
> And yet she'll kneel and pray; I have seen her do't.

In this way Desdemona is negated, and her good actions are transformed, in his mind, into indications of her falseness. She pleads with him on her knees, but he merely sees her further damning herself with denials. He brands her a whore and, when she pleads she is none, he apologizes by saying he made a mistake when he took her for his wife. When he leaves, he summons Emilia and treats her as a brothel keeper, throwing her some coins. He is in a rage of perverse pleasure, enjoying the wit with which he accompanies his and his wife's degradation.

Alone with her mistress, Emilia begins to show concern for Desdemona. The quiet presence she had exhibited up to this point changes under the weight of circumstances. Emilia now becomes a strong, sure, and comic voice in the play. Even in front of Iago she curses the man who might infect another man's mind to jealousy and drive him to the madness that now torments Othello and his wife. Foreshadowing their interplay in Act V, scene 2, Iago tells his wife to be quiet. Now she is. Then she will not be.

When Desdemona and Emilia leave, Roderigo steps forward. Now he is at his wit's end, he tells Iago. He fears Iago is cheating him, his money is gone, and he will not put up with it any longer. He wants restitution of the monies he has given Iago in the attempt to corrupt Desdemona. Iago disarms him by congratulating him for his pluck in asserting himself. Iago tells Roderigo after one such act of real assertion, killing Cassio, Desdemona will be his. Roderigo leaves, mulling over Iago's plot.

Scene 3 begins at the Citadel, where Othello and Desdemona live. Othello is leaving with Lodovico and ordering Desdemona to get ready for bed. Alone and preparing for bed, Desdemona feels herself haunted by a song of unfaithfulness that she remembers her mother's maid, Barbary, singing after her own lover

"proved mad / And did forsake her." Reflective after her song, Desdemona asks Emilia if there really are women who are unfaithful to their husbands and if she would do so "for all the world." Emilia responds, taking the words "for all the world" literally, and says she would "for the whole world." But Desdemona says she would not be unfaithful for anything. Starting by speaking of women's faults, Emilia quickly turns to their husbands and shows that they are the real cause of their wives' faults. She offers a category of similarities women share with men and concludes by reiterating that the ills women commit are in response to ill-treatment by men. But Desdemona says she prays for the strength and the ability not to do "bad" because bad was done to her "but by bad mend"—somehow to bring good from evil.

Act V

Out in the street, Iago readies Roderigo for the part he will play in what must be a climax in the drama Iago has directed: Cassio's murder in a street brawl. Iago plans Roderigo's, too, out of fear that Roderigo might try to regain the sums he gave Iago and tell what he knows of Iago's machinations. Cassio passes by. Roderigo lunges out at him, sword drawn. Cassio responds with his sword. They fight. Roderigo is injured; Cassio, cut in the leg and maimed. Othello enters to survey the results of the fight and is pleased to hear "The voice of Cassio" crying out, "I am maimed forever. Help, ho! Murder! Murder!" Othello blesses Iago's "noble sense of thy friend's wrong" and leaves for Desdemona's bedchamber, where he vows, "Thy bed, lust stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted."

After Othello withdraws, Lodovico and Gratiano pass by and hear Cassio's and Roderigo's cries for help. Iago then enters, carrying a light and a weapon, an irreproachable representative of authority. He is the first to put forth a question. "Who's there?" he demands. "What noise is this that cries on murder?" Hearing Cassio's voice, he asks him who has done this. Cassio does not know but says he thinks that one of them is nearby. Iago asks Lodovico and Gratiano for help. Seeing the wounded Roderigo, Iago falls upon him, crying, "That's one of them," and, stabbing Roderigo, calls "O murd'rous slave! O villain!" Roderigo, only upon being fatally wounded, fully realizes how he has been abused. "O Damned Iago! O inhuman dog!" he curses. After he dies, attention is then paid to Cassio, whose wound is bound. When Bianca passes by and hears Cassio's cries, she approaches him with comfort, but Iago apprehends her, saying she is a strumpet, a prostitute who may somehow be involved in the crime. Cassio is removed in a chair, and Iago follows to see him cared for. He orders Emilia to hasten to the Citadel to tell Othello and Desdemona of the night's events.

Scene 2, the final scene of *Othello,* is breathtaking for its dramatic and verbal poetry. Othello enters to find Desdemona asleep beside a still-burning candle and, with great delicacy, grieves over what he is about to do. He is convinced he is

impelled by honor, not by a base impulse. He realizes the weight of a human life: He can relight a candle he snuffs out, but he cannot make breath he has stopped breathe again. He kisses Desdemona in her sleep, torn between his love for her and his diseased sense of love and justice, which demands her death. She wakes. With a sense that he is performing a holy action, he asks Desdemona if she has prayed. She says she has, and he asks her to remember "any crime / Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace," so that she may add it to her prayers because he "would not kill thy unprepared spirit . . . / I would not kill thy soul." Alarmed, Desdemona says, "Talk you of killing?" His acknowledgement triggers her cry of "heaven / have mercy on me!" He replies, "Amen, with all my heart." She then begs him not to kill her. He tells her to remember her sins. She protests, "They are loves I bear to you." "For that thou diest," he answers. Desdemona pleads with him, but he tells her to "be still." Saying she will, nevertheless, she asks him, "What's the matter?" He tells her: "The handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee, / Thou gav'st to Cassio." He responds to her denial by warning her that she is on her deathbed and, therefore, must not perjure herself. Her protestations have no effect. He is beyond believing anything she says. He saw the handkerchief in Cassio's hands, he says. "He found it then," she counters. She swears she never gave it to him and implores Othello: "Send for him hither. / Let him confess the truth." Othello responds that Cassio has confessed "[t]hat he has used thee," and Iago has killed him. When Desdemona groans, "Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone," Othello storms, "Out strumpet! Weep'st thou for him to my face?" Enraged, he then strangles her as she struggles. As Desdemona's resistance melts and she lies dying, Emilia calls from outside the bedroom door. Othello hears her and guesses she has come "to speak of Cassio's death." He hesitates to admit her to the bedchamber, for "If she come in, she'll sure speak to my wife." And then the enormity, finality, and horror of what he has done hit him:

> 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 the affrighted globe
> Should yawn at alteration.

When Emilia enters, she does not, at first, see Desdemona murdered on her bed but instead tells Othello that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Othello, not hearing what she actually said, responds, "Roderigo killed? And Cassio killed?" When she responds, "No, Cassio is not killed," Othello cries out, "Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune, / And sweet revenge grows harsh." Significantly, almost as if it were a slip of the tongue, Othello, in his fury that Cassio has not been killed, reveals that revenge, not justice or sacrifice, was the motive for his murdering Desdemona. As he speaks, Emilia hears a dying cry

from Desdemona, "falsely, falsely murdered." Emilia cries for help, and when she demands to know "who hath done this deed," Desdemona responds in her last breaths, "Nobody—I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord," and dies, even in death maintaining her absolute loyalty to her husband. It is the only falsehood that she utters in the course of the play. Othello, at first, tries to deny his responsibility: "Why, how should she be murdered?" he asks; "You heard her say herself, it was not I." But then he confronts himself and groans, "She's like a liar gone to burning hell! / 'Twas I that killed her." His confession is not yet acknowledgment of a wrong, however, for he justifies himself by saying that Desdemona was false, "a whore." Emilia calls him a devil and says he lies. Othello insists that "Cassio did top her" and, in corroboration, she ought to "[a]sk thy husband." The exchange between them mirrors and reverses the exchange between Iago and Othello in Act III, scene 3, beginning at line 99, in which Iago echoes Othello's words to make him doubtful of what he thinks. In Act V, scene 2, when Emilia hears Othello implicate Iago in the murder of Desdemona and the attack on Cassio, she replies, dumbfounded, "My husband?" Othello repeats, "Thy husband." With each further revelation that Othello makes against Iago, Emilia repeats with greater alarm, "My husband," until Othello says to her—as he had once said to Iago, "By heaven, thou echoest me"—"What needs this iterance? Woman, I say thy husband."

"If he say so," Emilia retorts, "may his pernicious soul / Rot half a grain a day. He lies to the heart. / She was too fond of her most filthy bargain." Provoked by her words, Othello draws his sword against her to quiet her, but she is fearless with outrage and cries out for "Help! / The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder! murder!" Her cry brings Montano and Gratiano, two Venetian nobles deployed in the administration of Cyprus, as well as Iago. Immediately upon seeing her husband, she scolds him, "You have done well, / That men must lay their murders on your neck." She orders him to "[d]isprove this villain" [Othello] and deny that he told him Desdemona was false. Equivocation being useless under her grilling, Iago admits, "I did." Emilia cries out, "You told a lie, an odious damned lie! / Upon my soul, a lie! A wicked lie!" Her honest and open denunciation of Iago breaks the hold he has had on language throughout the play. Despite the actual horror of the events upon the stage, the audience and readers can now experience the opposite of the dread that Iago's speech invites, the relief of hearing truth proclaimed and crooked things made straight. Strengthened by the very act of speaking, Emilia asks Iago, "She false with Cassio? Did you say with Cassio?" He confesses he did but attempts to use his husband's prerogative and instructs her, "Go to, charm your tongue." She defies him: "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak: / My mistress lies murdered in her bed." While the attendants in the chamber respond in amazement and Othello says, "It is true, indeed," Emilia continues to pour forth her anger and defiance, calling out "villany" and refusing to obey Iago's command to go home.

In his grief, Othello attempts to explain his act and justify it, thus assuring himself, if his explanation is credited, that he has not fallen from his position of honor. He tells how a handkerchief he gave Desdemona was then given by Desdemona to Cassio. Emilia continues her magnificent aria, beginning, "O God! O heavenly God!" Iago interrupts, telling her to be quiet. She refuses, and he draws his sword. But she continues,

> O thou dull Moor! that handkerchief thou speak'st of
> I found by fortune and did give my husband;
> For often, with a solemn earnestness,
> More than indeed belong'd to such a trifle,
> He begg'd of me to steal it.

Iago calls her a "villainous whore," ironically the same slander he sought to attach to Desdemona. But Emilia continues to defy him and explains that Desdemona did not give the handkerchief to Cassio; that she, Emilia, found it "And I did give't my husband." Now enlightened, complete darkness overcomes Othello. He runs, sword drawn, at Iago but is prevented from stabbing him; however, during this business, Iago stabs Emilia, joining Othello in wife murder. Emilia is laid beside Desdemona in death. Iago flees. As Emilia lies dying, singing the willow song Desdemona had sung when preparing for bed, Othello decides to kill himself, for his "honor" ought not to outlive the "honesty" of Desdemona's chastity and the faithfulness and "honesty" of Emilia's revelation.

At this point, nearly everything that is going to happen in *Othello* has happened. Iago will be captured, refuse to speak further, and be removed to be tortured and made to confess. Cassio will be deputed in Othello's place, and Lodovico will return to Venice to make a report to the senate. The only thing remaining is Othello himself. He kills himself. But as he suffers his pre-death agony, in the most exquisite and powerful verse, Othello bares himself and finds himself unbearable. He tears himself apart, convinced that the last service he can do for the Venetian state is to kill himself as one who has offended, in his fall, the city-state of Venice itself.

List of Characters in *Othello*

Othello is the head of the Venetian military forces. He is not a Venetian, however, but a Moor—a black man, Arab rather than Christian. He is a proud, strong, experienced, and disciplined soldier who is dispatched to Cypress, a Venetian stronghold, by the Venetian senate when the island falls under attack by a Turkish fleet.

Desdemona is a beautiful young Venetian woman who encourages Othello's love and marries him without her father's knowledge. She accompanies him to Cypress.

Brabantio is Desdemona's father. He is broken by her marriage.

Iago is Othello's ensign. Embittered when he is passed over by Othello for a promotion, he plots to gain Othello's confidence and, by causing him to become insecure about Desdemona's love, to destroy him.

Emilia is Iago's wife and a lady-in-waiting to Desdemona. She seems at first to be obedient to Iago, but upon discovering the extent of his villainy, she rebels.

Michael Cassio is the man Othello promotes, instead of Iago, to be his lieutenant. He is handsome, debonair, and courteous, but rather self-regarding, and he has trouble holding his liquor. Iago convinces Othello that Desdemona is really in love with Cassio.

Roderigo is a fop in love with Desdemona. Iago, promising to help him win Desdemona away from Othello, uses him in his plot against Othello and Cassio.

Bianca is a prostitute who is in love with Cassio.

The **Duke of Venice** takes Othello's side when Brabantio accuses him of winning Desdemona through charms and drugs. He sends him to Cypress as leader of his military forces.

Montano is the governor of Cypress.

Lodovico is a Venetian nobleman. The senate sends him to Cypress as a messenger, to recall Othello from his post.

The **clown** appears briefly at the beginning of the third act, mocking the **musicians** whom Cassio has hired to serenade Othello as he wakes. The clown then mocks Cassio himself for his gentlemanly flourishes and courtly speech.