When the play opens, it is night in Venice. Iago, an ensign (the lowest ranking commissioned officer) in the Venetian army, and Roderigo, a Venetian gentleman, discuss the important incident that has taken place prior to the play’s opening. This situation, yet unknown to us, will, by and by, form the context for the entire play. The men speak informally, using epithets, racial slurs, and ambiguous pronouns rather than direct references, to refer to the players. The opening of any story is crucial, so it is particularly interesting that neither character whose actions form the crux of the play, Othello and Desdemona, are mentioned by name in this scene.

In withholding the protagonists’ names, Shakespeare is helping to create a mood. We are meeting the two, but especially Othello, through the eyes of a disgruntled employee and a rejected lover. Our perception is skewed by the verbal slurs heaped on Othello and the objectification of Desdemona. (Note that Iago is making her into one of Brabantio’s — her father — possessions rather than referring to her as an individual with individual liberties.)

In addition, by withholding Othello’s and Desdemona’s names, Shakespeare is also implying the social status of these two individuals. Though Othello is a war hero and Desdemona is the virtuous daughter of a Venetian senator, for some Venetians the fact that Othello is a Moor makes him no better than a beast, and Desdemona’s being a woman means that she is merely an extension of her father’s property. Note, though, how our impressions of Othello and Desdemona change once we meet them and hear them speak in their own defense in Act I, Scene 3.

Shakespeare, a master at creating intricate, yet realistic, relationships, begins to develop the character of Iago, one of his most notorious villains, from the play’s very beginning. From Roderigo’s initial lines, we get a sense of the relationship between the two men. Obviously, Roderigo is displeased with Iago for withholding information about the secret marriage of Desdemona, the woman Roderigo loves, to Othello. Beyond that, though, the opening lines show us the nature of Roderigo and Iago’s relationship — it’s financial. Roderigo is upset that Iago, “who has had [his] purse / As if the strings were [his]” (2–3), would withhold such information about Desdemona. In essence, Roderigo has been paying Iago to help him win Desdemona. Their relationship is largely commercial; Iago takes Roderigo’s money and, in return, promises to help him get the item he desires. We must wonder, right from the play’s opening lines, what kind of a man Iago is. Clearly, he’s not above making money at the expense of others and is of questionable integrity in not only his inability to deliver the goods he has promised but also his willingness to use Roderigo, his client, as a pawn. This theme will continue to develop throughout the story.

Despite his questionable business practices and ethics, Iago is quick witted and quickly worms his way back into Roderigo’s good graces — and why not? Roderigo is a pawn, and Iago can easily manipulate him to whatever purpose he intends. Iago quickly offers that no one hates Othello more than he, and for a very good reason: Othello has made Michael Cassio, a Florentine and a rejected lover. Our perception is only of her father’s property. Note, though, how our impressions of Othello and Desdemona change once we meet them and hear them speak in their own defense in Act I, Scene 3.

By disclosing his essence so openly to Roderigo, we learn not only of Iago’s true nature but also of Roderigo’s. Despite just hearing that his friend is not really the kind of fellow he presents himself to be, Roderigo seems unconcerned with Iago’s disclosure. Roderigo is obviously not a deeply intellectual man, nor is he a good judge of character. It is not directly clear, though, whether he is unwilling or unable to understand what Iago is admitting to him — or maybe he’s a bit of both. For sure, though, Roderigo is easily manipulated and blinded by his unrequited love for Desdemona. Roderigo’s simple nature, combined with Iago’s opportunistic one, allows Iago to ingratiate himself with Roderigo to the point where Roderigo trusts him completely — a relationship that will be crucial to Iago’s plan of revenge later in the play. Roderigo’s lack of concern for Iago’s disclosure also indicates to us that, although he has started the play, he is a character of minor significance. He’s far too flat to hold the stage in this great tragedy. He’s merely a puppet.

By line 67, Iago and Roderigo have reached their destination, Brabantio’s house. Brabantio, the nobleman, sleeps inside, apparently unaware that his daughter Desdemona has sneaked out of the house and, against his wishes, married the Moor, Othello. Iago, with an obvious lack of decorum and sensitivity, tries to upset Brabantio by crassly informing him that his daughter Desdemona has run away and secretly married Othello. Iago goads Brabantio, refusing to tell him of the marriage directly, preferring instead an elaborate verbal game filled with metaphors that shows off Iago’s quick wit, in contrast to Brabantio’s slow wit. Speaking through heavily figurative language, naming neither Othello nor Desdemona, nor mentioning their marriage directly, Iago prolongs Brabantio’s pain while at the same time demonstrating his hatred for Othello. He suggests the situation’s gravity by remarking that half of Brabantio’s soul is now lost (87), due to the evening’s events. Iago goes on, trying his best to incite and humiliate Brabantio, while simultaneously disparaging Othello by cruelly playing the race card. Othello’s social standing is not what upsets Brabantio; it is Othello’s race. Iago offers, “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is topping your white ewe” (88–89), introducing the notion of light and dark, white and black, which will come in to contrast as the theme of racism is developed throughout the play.

Iago’s revelation to Brabantio also introduces two key images that continue to surface throughout the rest of the action. First, according to Iago, there is something bestial and animalistic about Othello (“The old black ram”); he’s base and beastly, somehow beneath everyone else in Venice because of his North African heritage. The second key motif that Iago sets up in these lines is the contrast between light and dark. He mentions the “black ram” and the “white ewe,” setting up oppositions of light and dark, innocence and evil, purity and corruption that resonate throughout the text.

Iago offers another striking animal image when he chastises Brabantio for dismissing the two visitors as drunk, suggesting that while they are wasting precious time fighting to be taken seriously by Brabantio, his daughter is being “covered by a Barbary horse” (111). Barbary is the land of the Berbers, or
Moors (although it may also refer to all the Saracen countries along the north coast of Africa), and by calling Othello “a Barbary horse,” Iago is again promoting Othello as a dark, savage animal. Iago continues the image, attempting to frighten Brabantio through allusions to the unnatural children that are, at that moment, being sired by this unnatural union. By line 116, Iago realizes that he is striking a nerve with Brabantio and continues to insult him with one of Shakespeare’s most vivid, memorable, and animalistic sexual images, “the beast with two backs,” an Elizabethan euphemism for sexual intercourse.

Finally, after Iago and Roderigo have captured Brabantio’s attention, Roderigo discloses exactly what brings them to his house. The fair and seemingly virtuous Desdemona has sneaked out of the house and gone by gondola to meet Othello (121). By using descriptions such as “a lascivious Moor” (126), “bold and saucy wrongs” (128), and “gross revolt” (134), Roderigo attempts to stress that the match between Othello and Desdemona is not one to be wished. He paints their union as underhanded, unauthorized, and unacceptable because it reflects Brabantio in a very negative light. (Of course, Roderigo, like Iago, has an ulterior motive: he’s in love with Desdemona.) As suggested in this scene (and further developed in Act I, Scene 3), for Desdemona secretly to marry a husband of her choosing, as opposed to one selected for her, was extremely uncharacteristic of women at the time and could only suggest Brabantio’s lack of success as a father.

In Roderigo’s speech (121–140), he also plays upon the fact that Othello is an outsider, an issue that underlies the entire play. Roderigo notes that Desdemona has tied “her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes/ In an extravagant and wheeling stranger/ Of here and everywhere” (135–137). Just as Iago earlier set up Othello as a darkskinned man, darker yet in his intentions (notice how frequently Iago stresses Othello’s race and his “otherness” in talking about him), so too does Roderigo keep the notion going of Othello as an outsider. We know from the play’s full title, Othello: The Moor of Venice, that the play centers on someone not originally part of Venetian society. By the time Shakespeare was writing, Moors (along with Jews) had long been banned from England. In Venice, where the play takes place, Moors as a group had also been officially banned from the city. Othello, then, is set apart from the Venetian society not only because of the color of his skin but also because he didn’t always live with them. He was a relative newcomer to Venetian circles (see Act I, Scene 3) and had been welcomed because of his military valor. Race issues aside, the fact that Othello was a military man and an outsider to Venetian society made him a less-than-desirable candidate for Desdemona. What could Brabantio possibly stand to gain through a union between his daughter and a career military man who possessed little in terms of land, political power, or wealth?

At the point where Brabantio finally takes Roderigo and Iago seriously and calls for light so that he can check on Desdemona himself (line 140), Iago makes his excuses and exits. Before leaving though, Iago tells Brabantio that he takes his leave only because it wouldn’t do for him to be seen as being publicly against Othello, who had selected him as his ensign. Iago admits to hating Othello (line 154) but reinforces his duplicitous nature by remarking how he will appear loyal and faithful to Othello in public. Iago’s chameleonic-like quality, though, will soon begin to do insurmountable harm as we see him manifest his dual nature over and over throughout the action. At this point, too, Iago brings in another of the play’s key events when he mentions the looming Cyprus wars to which Othello will soon be called (see Act I, Scenes 2 and 3). The war will necessitate Othello reassuming his military persona (as opposed to his newfound role as husband) and will shortly place him in an environment far more dangerous than any battlefield: Cyprus.

The revelation that Othello and Desdemona are really married sends Brabantio into new waves of anger. He rails against his daughter and advises all fathers to beware of the deceitful nature of women (lines 169–174), reinforcing what will be a critical theme of the play, characters who present themselves as one persona (the dutiful daughter or loyal friend, for example) and are inwardly someone quite different.

Our first encounter with Brabantio reveals three crucial things about his character. First, we find evidence that his relationship with Desdemona is not entirely close and that she is willing to risk his wrath by going away. We also learn that Brabantio is sensitive to race issues and that although he may have liked Othello once, or may have professional regard for his military skills, he does not see Othello, the Moor, as an appropriate spouse for his daughter. Finally, we learn that although Brabantio did not approve of Roderigo as a suitor for Desdemona, he is not entirely unlike him. Like Roderigo, Brabantio is wealthy, but not all that bright. Brabantio is unaware of what’s going on in his own house. We may initially feel a bit empathetic toward Brabantio because of the seemingly poor way he has been treated by his daughter, but the empathy quickly fades. Before long, we begin to see Brabantio as deserving his plight. He clearly views his daughter as a piece of property — no more or less than a vase, rug, or piece of art — and her sneaking away is equated with robbery. Brabantio is missing a valuable possession, the realization of which sends him into a fury. Because of his seemingly irrational and reactionary nature, we must also wonder what catalytic purpose Brabantio will serve. Certainly an irate father will add fuel to the fire in this great tragedy.

**ACT I, SCENE II**

This scene provides us with our first glimpse of Othello. We hear of him in Act I, Scene 1, but in this scene we hear from him for the first time. As the scene unfolds, a difference emerges between the Othello heard about in Scene 1 and the Othello here. This discrepancy is again taken up in Scene 3 when Othello speaks before the council.

This scene (as does all of Act I) takes place on the same night as the scene prior. Iago, of whom we know enough to be suspicious, has just come from Brabantio’s house and reports to Othello how he has overheard someone (unnamed, but presumably Roderigo or perhaps Brabantio) speaking disparagingly of Othello. Iago uses many of the same techniques he used in the preceding scene to work his way into Othello’s favor. Just as he did with Roderigo and Brabantio, Iago speaks convincingly and thereby wins Othello’s confidence. And just as he did in Scene 1, Iago falsely presents himself as loyal and steadfast, in this case by recounting how furious he was made by the blackguard’s disparaging remarks toward his general (1–10). For the unsuspecting Othello, Iago comes off as devoted and faithful, worried about his General’s reputation more than his own.

As the scene continues, Iago provides necessary exposition, informing Othello (and, by extension, the audience) of how Brabantio has power enough in the Venetian senate either to demand that Othello and Desdemona divorce or to bring the full measure of the law to rest on Othello’s head. Othello, unmoved by Iago’s remarks, merely comments that whatever punishment Brabantio has planned for him, his services to Venice’s government will surely outweigh them (17–24). This remark, calmly delivered, tells us much about Othello. He is so confident in his standing with the Venetian council that he need not worry whether they will side with Brabantio over him. Clearly, he does not see himself as an outsider, as suggested by the action of this scene. Rather, Othello sees himself as a crucial cog in the workings of Venetian society. His telling remarks here also show us that his bravery in battle manifests itself in the civilian sphere. He is calm and reasonable — unlike the fury-driven men that we have met up to this point — and readily assures Iago that his exploits in battle are equal in merit to the wealth and power of Brabantio. Shakespeare continues to expound on Othello’s character, having the General confess to Iago that his love for Desdemona is deep and that he wouldn’t trade being her husband for anything (24–28). Bravery and passion are paramount in this man, and we see that he is not at all the base, animalistic, greedy, and self-serving man the opening scene led us to believe. Once again, we come into contact with the theme of things not being as they appear — perhaps Othello isn’t a monster after all!
As Cassio enters, Iago tries one last time to establish himself as a loyal ally, concerned only for the General’s welfare, by again reminding him that Brabantio and his search party are out to punish him. Undaunted, Othello offers that his “parts,” “title,” and his “perfect soul” shall show him in his true, gallant light (32) — prophetic words that will ring ironic later in the play when the hero begins his descent into darkness.

Cassio, Othello’s trusted Lieutenant, approaches and explains that because of late-breaking developments regarding the Cyprian wars, the council has been deliberating action, and the Duke of Venice requires Othello’s immediate presence. Cassio mentions that the council has called repeatedly for Othello, but having been unable to find him in this time of crisis, they’ve sent out three search parties to find him. This last disclosure from Cassio is especially interesting, given that Othello is a supreme military mind, yet on the day of most need, he’s busy tending to personal, rather than political, matters. This disclosure hints that the realms of public duty and private desire may come in to play in this story and causes us to take pause and wonder about Othello’s bravado. Will the senate really side with him? Should he be so sure? Our instinct is to side with Othello, yet we must wonder why, on this day of great military movement, Othello has been oblivious to it all. Instead of focusing on the unfolding political events, he is focusing on personal ones.

Cassio, unaware of Othello’s secret marriage, asks Iago where the General has been. Iago, knowing Othello has married the potentially wealthy Desdemona, alludes to that wealth in taunting Cassio and disparaging Othello. Iago uses a market analogy that suggests Othello has “boarded a land carack” (a large trading ship, generally associated with great wealth) and that if his transaction proves lawful, he’ll be rich for the rest of his days. The baffled Cassio asks for clarification and learns, in much simpler terms, Othello has married. Notice, though, that Iago uses a motif dear to him — the market. We have already seen in Scene 1 that Iago is motivated by money and has no trouble taking money from others. It is not surprising that Iago would see Othello’s marriage as an act of commerce. As the play unfolds, we should note the other instances of the “market” motif.

When Othello briefly returns to get Cassio, Desdemona’s father intercepts the three men. When Brabantio’s party draws weapons on Othello, Othello attempts to soothe the old man by noting that his age alone commands attention and that there is no need for swords. Despite comments offered in Scene 1, Othello’s respect toward Brabantio and acknowledgment of his status goes a long way to establish Othello’s superior nature. Through his actions, Othello is combating the negative image of him set forth in Scene 1 and is establishing himself as civilized and refined rather than a marginalized outsider — a mere Moor! — as Brabantio and the others would have us believe. Ignoring Othello’s wellchosen and honorific comment, Brabantio asks the “ foul thief” (62) what he has done with his daughter, adding that Othello must certainly have cast a magic spell on Desdemona or she would never have left her father for Othello’s “sooty bosom” (70). This reference to black magic and Othello’s connection to outside forces helps Brabantio to advance his view of Othello as an outsider, as well as bring in the concept of Christianity versus paganism, which forms one of the play’s undercurrents.

Brabantio goes on at length about Othello’s perceived sorcery (62–81), working to justify Desdemona’s disobedience to himself and his peers. By doing so, he sets up a means of saving his reputation, which he believes have been attacked through his daughter’s actions. Although Desdemona’s secret marriage may seem perfectly reasonable to us today, for Brabantio the marriage promises a lifetime of shame. He fears being seen by his peers as a man unable to control his daughter, who at the time would have been considered a legal possession. By explaining Desdemona’s actions as being induced by sorcery, Brabantio attempts to explain the situation in the only way that makes sense for him. In his mind, no other reason exists that the daughter of an upstanding and prominent Venetian citizen would run off and secretly marry — especially when the groom is a Moor. In this scene, Brabantio shows how little he understands Desdemona, preferring to construct elaborate and serious charges against Othello, rather than accept that his daughter may have disobeyed him and acted under her own free will.

In line 80, Brabantio again calls for Othello’s imprisonment, only to have Othello voluntarily offer to appear in front of the Duke, whom he was already on his way to see. Brabantio, who up to this point had been intent on finding his daughter, inadvertently reveals his ignorance of the military developments and wonders how the Duke could be in council without his having heard of it. (Clearly Brabantio isn’t as central to the governing structure as he would like to believe.) Sure that his fellow statesmen will share his horror at the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, Brabantio and followers head off to the council. This section of Scene 2 is especially interesting in that the action is again in direct contrast with the idea that Brabantio is attempting to forward. Brabantio, as we now know, believes himself to be far above Othello. Yet only Othello knows that the council is meeting. In addition, Brabantio’s sudden shift of attention, from Desdemona to the council, suggests great impotence on his part. He is doubly ineffectual in that his role as senator has been made meaningless by the council’s meeting without him, just as his role as father has been made meaningless by his daughter’s actions.

This scene, although short, nicely sets up the idea of just how much people really know in this story. Othello has been with Desdemona during the one evening that his services are really needed by the Venetian council. He has been focusing on personal issues rather than state issues and is taken off guard by the news that the council is looking for him. Similarly, Brabantio has been so busy looking for the “thief” who stole his goods that he, too, is oblivious to the fact that the council has been deliberating without him. Cassio, on the other hand, has been focusing on the impending war, and although he is Othello’s lieutenant, he was not informed of the General’s impending marriage.

Interestingly, Iago is the character who seems best informed of the circumstances at hand, political and domestic. Note his ability, too, to remain in Othello’s good graces. Just as he worked his way back into Roderigo’s favor in Act I, Scene 1, he chooses his words carefully and presents himself as one of Othello’s most loyal followers — until, of course, Othello’s back is turned (50–51).

**ACT I, SCENE III**

Act I, Scene 3 brings our initial attention to the political situation of Venice and presents us with the first of three trial scenes that figure prominently in Othello. (The others can be found in Act II, Scene 3 and Act V, Scene 1.) Up to this point, the play has been concerned primarily with domestic (or household) affairs, but now the Venetian council has larger issues to tend to. Here we begin to see Shakespeare juxtaposing the struggles of the domestic sphere with the struggles of the political sphere, two seemingly distant worlds that, upon closer examination, have much in common. In many ways, the smaller domestic sphere, which will be explored throughout the bulk of the play, is in essence a microcosm, reflecting on a smaller scale many of the same struggles faced by the country. Although the war set up in this scene will be over by the beginning of the next, the issues brought up by the war — who to trust, overt tactics and covert ambushes, strategy and alliances, what seems and what is — will adumbrate throughout the domestic sphere in the following acts as we watch the war move from an international to a personal level.
That the council is holding a strategy session in the middle of the night is indicative of the urgency of the situation. The Duke is skeptical of the situation due to conflicting reports about the military strength of their opponents, the Turks (sometimes called Ottomites), in the wars over Cyprus. One report indicates one hundred and seven galleys (large war ships) while another indicates a strength of one hundred forty, and yet another report claims the Turkish fleet to be two hundred galleys strong. Regardless of the inconsistency in scouting reports, one thing is undeniable: A Turkish fleet is headed to the Venetian colony of Cyprus. The country is vying for power and is determined to exercise its military strength in order to achieve its goals.

The military struggle unfolding before us, though, is not an isolated thing. We can see the very same struggle happening in the domestic sphere as well. Iago’s quest for revenge is, in essence, his desire to triumph over a perceived enemy. Similarly, Brabantio’s desire for justice would allow him to triumph over Othello, just as Venice wishes to triumph over the Turks. The battles that rage in the scenes following require military-like vigilance. In short, a man like Othello, skilled in warfare, ought to be able to see through the attack that Iago is formulating against him. His inability to see through his adversaries in the domestic sphere, however, has puzzled critics for generations. Othello is brought low by his inability to translate what he knows to be true in one aspect of his life to what he knows to be true in another. Perhaps this poor domestic judgement is, in fact, his fatal flaw.

As the Duke attempts to gather his missing senators around him for advisement, Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, Iago, Roderoigo, and the others of the party enter the senate chambers. The Duke turns his attentions first toward Othello, welcoming him with the honorable title of “Valiant Othello” and noting how his services are needed immediately (48–49). As an almost afterthought, the Duke turns to Brabantio, offering, “I did not see you. Welcome gentle signior” (50). This small omission goes a long way to explain not just the Duke, but the Venetians at large, as well as Brabantio and Othello. Clearly the Duke sees Othello as a valorous man — just the type of man the country needs to turn to in this time of crisis. Othello is trusted by the Duke and the council to lead the army successfully in war against the Turks. By dismissing Brabantio, the Duke is showing where his allegiance lies — with a Moor, an outsider, rather than with one of his own countrymen. The Duke’s preference for Othello will be seen again and again in this scene, showing how Othello was embraced by the Venetian society, despite what Brabantio’s words and actions up to this point have suggested.

When Brabantio shrieks, “My daughter! O, my daughter!” (59), the whole council assumes that something tragic must have happened and is quick to question whether she is dead (59). Again in a decidedly melodramatic flair, playing the room for pity, Brabantio recounts his story, taking careful pains to make it sound as devastating and tragic as possible. In lines 60–64, Brabantio drives home the twin themes of sorcery and Desdemona’s second-class property status when he claims she has been “abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted/ By spells and medicines” because there is no way she would have behaved in the manner she did unless witchcraft was involved.

At this point we are introduced to another of the play’s key themes: justice. The Duke, not realizing the full extent of the situation, attempts to soothe Brabantio, assuring him that whoever has placed such a spell on Desdemona will be punished accordingly. He promises, in fact, that Brabantio himself shall be able to pronounce the sentence from the “bloody book of law” (67) and shall be able to make it as severe as he believes the situation warrants. The Duke, a seemingly noble man, ends his promise of justice claiming that even if his very own son committed this crime, Brabantio would be able to levy whatever punishment he wanted. Brabantio, now feeling as if the law is entirely and irrevocably on his side, names Othello as the perpetrator of the crime. What Brabantio doesn’t expect, however, is the Duke’s impending reversal, which, as we shall see, reveals a great deal about how fickle justice can be.

Upon hearing Brabantio’s accusation, the Duke asks Othello for an explanation. Othello, in turn, addresses the Duke and the rest of the council and makes his first real public address of the play. We’ve heard him speak informally before, but now is our first occasion to hear him speak in a formal setting, and the resulting speech is impressive. His speeches to the council (lines 76–94 and 128–170) reveal him to be anything but the base and brute monster that Iago and Brabantio would have us believe he is. Othello wastes no time in winning the senators to his side through carefully chosen rhetorical strategies (such as appealing to their egos and emotions).

Othello spends a considerable amount of time setting up the picture of himself that he wants the council to see, noting with an air of self-deprecation, that he is “rude . . . in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace” (81–82). Besides setting up an air of modesty (appropriate when one is speaking in front of the city’s most powerful citizens who have the power to end his life at their will), Othello also adds a touch of irony to the situation. Of all the people we meet in the council’s chambers, he is the one least likely to be rough in his speech. In fact, as we soon learn, his ability to use words well is exactly what has won Desdemona, not witchcraft, as Brabantio would like to think.

Through Othello’s words, we learn much about his nature. He establishes himself as a warrior, a man who has been in constant battle from the age of seven until just nine months prior to the play’s action. He professes to know little of the world, save for that which he knows from being on the battlefield. Rhetorically speaking, Othello has begun to create an escape route for himself. Knowing how much the Venetians respect military prowess, especially on this night before the Turks wage war on Cyprus, he notes that if he speaks poorly (or more literally, talks himself into a corner), his military lifestyle is to blame. He has spent his life in battle, therefore he is (in his estimation, anyway) unable to speak with the grace and ease of the learned Venetian gentlemen. Like a great orator, Othello is countering any possible objections to what he might say even before he has said it, tacitly biasing his listeners from the start. All he promises to deliver is a true, unadorned tale of how he won Desdemona (90–93).

Brabantio, still angry and wanting justice, reverses his direction and speaks in defense of his daughter, the selfsame daughter that he disowned earlier in the scene. He shows a glimmer of his fatherly ignorance when he paints Desdemona as a passive and modest maiden who blasphems at the least provocation (94–96) and who, without unnatural intervention, could never “fall in love with what she feared to look on!” (98). In this scene, much like Scene 1, Brabantio comes off as a man ruled by emotion (a trait characteristically associated with women), rather than reason (perceived as an exemplary male trait). Through Brabantio’s haphazard reversal in defense of Desdemona, we also see that he is a man of questionable judgment, which thereby encourages us to question the validity of his claims. Are his accusations of witchcraft simply the ravings of a man attempting to create excuses for his poor parenting, as a father who couldn’t rule his daughter was, in effect, a failure?

The Duke, who once promised Brabantio whatever penalty he desired for the “theft” of Desdemona, now backs away from his initial promise. He begins to turn away from Brabantio’s side, claiming that suspicion is not proof (107) and that without more evidence he doesn’t have too much of a case. The Duke’s reversal of opinion serves a few distinct and important purposes. First, in his defense of Othello, he places the General — an outsider — above Brabantio, one of his noted countrymen. Second, the reversal makes us scrutinize the Duke a bit more. Was he too hasty in his initial agreement with Brabantio? Has he
been hasty in other regards as well — perhaps in promoting Othello? We are left to question whether the Duke is, in fact, a good leader. Finally, his actions in this scene add another layer to the military/domestic parallel introduced earlier. As the leader of Venice, the Duke’s questionable judgment reflects upon him. Similarly, when the play’s focus shifts to the domestic sphere, we will see Othello exercising some of the same poor judgment, helping this scene to take on additional significance.

Othello, in a bold action, suggests the council send for Desdemona herself to find out whether he cast a spell on her (114–115), and so Iago is sent to the Sagittary, an inn where the couple was staying. What is so interesting about Othello’s sending for Desdemona is that in so doing, we realize Othello is the only one who thinks to ask Desdemona herself what happened. Brabantio’s and the council’s willingness to overlook Desdemona in this whole affair speaks to their inability to see women on par with men. Culturally, at this time women were supposed to be silent. Women who did speak out often had reputations as liars and viragos (shrewish or quarrelsome women), both bad things for the daughter of a nobleman. Additionally, calling for Desdemona shows Othello’s confidence in what Desdemona will say. He is willing to stake his reputation — even his life — on the word of this woman. Considering Desdemona will likely be put under great pressure and will have to face her father in a room of the city’s most powerful lawmakers, Othello is confident in her ability to handle herself and not change her story in order to soothe those around her. On another level, Othello’s calling for Desdemona to testify to what has happened is significant because it creates a very positive and trusting image of the two lovers early in their marriage. This trust will play a larger and larger role as the play continues.

While the council awaits Desdemona’s arrival, Othello provides crucial dramatic exposition, telling the story of how he fell in love with Desdemona and she with him (128–170). In the longest uninterrupted speech of the play, Othello explains what life has been like since he came to Venice. We learn more about his life, as well as his character, as he notes how Brabantio, the man now accusing him of bewitching his daughter, was formerly very fond of him. Othello often regaled him with tales of chance and daring ranging from his first boyish adventures to his trials of adulthood. Aware of Desdemona’s love for his stories, Othello one day drew from Desdemona a declaration of her feelings, and in return, promised to re-tell her life’s story. His tales often brought her to tears and in her pity she wished she hadn’t heard his tales, but then also wished “heaven had made [for] her such a man” (163). Clearly, Desdemona isn’t the innocent Brabantio would have us believe. She’s a woman with desires. Moreover, she is a woman willing to take action in order to satisfy them. As Othello revealed, Desdemona mentioned that if he would only teach another to woo her with such stories, that she should certainly fall in love, essentially giving him the go ahead to court her, despite her awareness of the racial bias of Venetian society.

Othello’s tale helps us to understand what is underlying his relationship with Desdemona, foundation that becomes more and more crucial as the play unfolds. From what Othello says, his understanding of love is not, perhaps, what it should be, nor is Desdemona’s. Although little doubt exists that they love each other, the reason for that love is suspect. Does Desdemona love Othello for the places he has been and the stories he tells rather than for the man he has become? Is she in love with an image of the valiant Moor? Does Othello love Desdemona because she pities him for all he has endured in his life? Does he love her because her adoration feeds his ego? Just what inspires their love is unclear, and Othello’s story, although beautiful, suggests that his relationship with Desdemona may not be based on the most solid reasoning. A counter argument may be waged, however, suggesting that what brought Desdemona and Othello together is no less valid than what brought most couples of this time together — perhaps even more so. Most marriages of noblewomen were arranged and based on which suitor would make the strongest political ally, rather than which man had the strongest romantic attachment to her. In a case such as this, wouldn’t it be better for Desdemona to marry someone for whom she has some feelings, even if they might not necessarily be completely mature, rather than marry someone for whom she feels nothing?

After Othello finishes his story, Desdemona enters, escorted by Iago. The Duke, clearly swayed by Othello’s earlier story, counsels Brabantio to withdraw his allegations and make the best of the situation at hand (173). Brabantio, unwilling to give up his suit, suggests that Desdemona speak and calls destruction onto himself if Desdemona proves his charges false. As if attempting to bully his daughter, before letting her speak, he questions her as to “Where most you owe obedience?” (180). Everything Brabantio has said up to this point suggests that he is confident Desdemona will support his claim, but clearly he doesn’t possess a great degree of understanding of his daughter.

Desdemona speaks, beginning in line 180. Her maturity and sophistication take us somewhat aback. She is not meek and passive, as women were expected to be. Rather, she is strong and forceful, showing great intelligence and courage. Without hesitation, Desdemona remarks that she has a “divided duty” (181), deftly sidestepping Brabantio’s attempts to corner her. Displaying a great deal of rhetorical skill (perceived as a decidedly masculine trait), Desdemona cleverly remarks how she is indebted and bound to Brabantio for her life up to that point, as well as to Othello with whom she will spend the rest of her years. In a move of great strength, she appeals to her father, reasoning that just as her mother left her grandfather to marry Brabantio, so too must she leave him to marry Othello. Desdemona’s appearance before the court strongly suggests that she is not a stereotypical woman bound by cultural constraints. She fails to exhibit meekness and silence; she refuses to be overwrought with emotion when placed on display. She is, in fact, a strong woman with whom we are to empathize. This empathy, in fact, is necessary if we are to be moved by the play’s later acts.

The Duke, ever the peacekeeper, attempts to help the couple back into Brabantio’s good graces after Brabantio publicly disowns his daughter. He explains that in situations where there is no remedy, it is senseless to suffer needlessly (202–203). The only thing to be gained by holding a grudge against Othello and Desdemona is more needlessly heartache (204–209). Brabantio, unwilling to see things that way, refuses the Duke’s line of reasoning. Instead, Brabantio reinforces his hatred of Othello, disparaging him as “the Turk of Cyprus” (210). The Duke’s speech on suffering introduces another thread that can be followed throughout the play. Needless suffering, here belonging to Brabantio but later belonging to Othello and Desdemona, as well as Roderigo and other minor characters, runs under the play’s surface, helping to add to the tragic appeal of the story.

After his ineffective attempt to reconcile Brabantio with his daughter, the Duke turns his attentions once again to the affairs of state, relaying the evening’s military events to Othello. He notes that of all the men, Othello is the one most qualified to lead in this war. The governor of Cyprus is an able man, but public opinion decrees that Othello is the man for the job. The Duke then informs Othello that he must replace his “new fortunes” — his life as a newlywed (227) — with a more dangerous and risky undertaking. In this ironic juxtaposition, the Duke suggests that domestic issues pale in comparison to affairs of State. Once again, we see how little the Duke knows of the domestic sphere. The war, in fact, turns out to be brief, and the Turks are handily defeated. The issues of the private realm, however, turn out to be the most dangerous. Fighting a known and avowed enemy is easy, but fighting an enemy that moves stealthily within private circles — an enemy that may even exist within one’s self — is a decidedly more risky endeavor.

Despite having been married only hours earlier, Othello is quick to come to his country’s aid, showing his integrity, as well as his importance to the Venetian military. All he asks in return is lodging and care for his wife (236–239). Desdemona, in a display of great personal strength and independence, remarks that she loves Othello dearly (248–259), and rather than endure his absence, she would go with him. Othello agrees with Desdemona, but is careful to establish that his wish is not motivated by libidinous desires. In assuring the council that if Desdemona were with him his attention would still be firmly focused on his military duty, not his personal pleasure, Othello presents himself as a man duty-bound to carry out his official role. He also appears as a man of great strength
and fortitude, ready, willing, and able to overcome physical desire in light of professional obligation. Othello comes off as clear-headed and forthright, qualities that will come into question during Act III.

As the council breaks up for the evening, important things happen. First, the Duke, in an attempt to convince Brabantio that he is overreacting to the situation, notes that Othello has really done nothing to warrant Brabantio’s anger. In his parting words he announces, “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (290), playing yet again upon the racial undertones set up earlier in the play. Unpersuaded by the Duke’s opinion, however, Brabantio is quick to get one last attack on Othello, ominously declaring, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (292–293), words that form an undercurrent for the action to come and will come to haunt Othello in Acts IV and V as his suspicion of Desdemona’s infidelity grows.

After the senators adjourn, Othello announces that he must leave. He entrusts Desdemona’s care to Iago and his wife, Emilia, with the instructions that they all come to him at the earliest safe opportunity. With an attentive eye on the time (showing his mindfulness of his military duty), Othello leaves with Desdemona so that they may enjoy their last hour together. Othello’s willingness to entrust his bride to Iago is telling. Clearly, he trusts Iago and, despite passing him over for promotion, believes him to be an honorable man. Othello’s opinion of Iago is positive, allowing Iago the “in” that he needs to manipulate Othello and extract his revenge.

Roderigo and Iago are left alone. Dismayed at what he has just witnessed, Roderigo wonders what he is to do about his love for Desdemona. Iago, with an unconcerned air, replies in a matter-of-fact way that Roderigo should “go to bed and sleep” (304). Roderigo, though, thinks that perhaps drowning himself is the only fitting remedy to his torment at losing Desdemona (305). Irked by his friend’s melancholic nature (showing again he is not at all a true friend), Iago deems him a “silly gentleman” (307). Iago continues to rail against Roderigo, claiming that in all of his twenty-eight years, he never found a woman worth such rash action. In fact, he would rather change places with a baboon than drown himself for want of a woman’s love (314–316). This passage is important because it helps set up Iago and his attitude toward women. When compared with Othello’s comments about love earlier in this scene, we see that the two men operate from entirely different places. For Othello, love is honorable and brings the fulfillment of a lifetime. For Iago, to love (specifically romantically, although Iago’s actions also suggest that perhaps he means platonically as well) is to show weakness. To lose sense of one’s self is to risk one’s safety and one’s life. In Iago’s mind, women are clearly subservient to men and never should a man compromise himself on behalf of a woman. Iago is, in essence, already set up as a foil to Othello, counteracting the Moor’s chivalric nature with Iago’s base and animalistic one. (Note the irony that the man who called Othello an animal is, in fact, himself far more animalistic.)

Roderigo, further demonstrating his complete dependence on Iago, continues to question what he should do. Lines 319–406 are dominated by Iago, who uses every opportunity he can find to manipulate Roderigo, letting Roderigo think he is securing Iago’s help, when really Iago is further setting up Roderigo as a fool. Iago’s speeches also reinforce his negative view of women, stressing how they are inconstant, lascivious, and shallow, throwing men away once they’ve taken from them whatever they want (generally, physical pleasure and material goods). Love, according to Iago, “is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will” (336–337). Rather than Roderigo drowning himself, Iago thinks Roderigo ought to relax; they are friends, and Iago will work in Roderigo’s favor.

Bringing us back to the market metaphor introduced in Scene 1, Iago tells Roderigo over and over that instead of committing suicide, he ought to put money in his purse or, quite literally, sell everything he has and turn his assets into cash. Between commands for Roderigo to liquidate his holdings, Iago claims that Desdemona, by virtue of her womanhood, will not be with Othello long (again signaling Iago’s disparaging idea of women). She will soon tire of him, and then Roderigo can step in and win her. In an attempt to demonstrate his loyalty to Roderigo, Iago offers again that he hates Othello (368) and that helping Roderigo into Desdemona’s bed is a win-win situation: Roderigo gets Desdemona, and Iago gets to see Othello humiliated by losing his wife. Iago’s lack of concern for anyone other than himself comes out nicely here. In this passage, we get a good look at the petty and small-minded nature of this important Shakespearean villain. He exhibits a blatant disregard for people’s feelings and reputations, with his chameleon-like personality hard at work. The signals are clear: Iago is not a man to be trusted. Our awareness of this fact heightens our interaction with the tragedy. We are privy to the full picture, while other characters fall blindly into Iago’s trap. We are unable to help, compounding the tragedy unfolding before us.

After Roderigo exits, rashly heading off to sell his land rather than drown himself, Iago, left alone on the stage, remarks, “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse” (385). His use of “ever” suggests that he has done this before and is a hardened cheater. He continues to remark on Roderigo’s gullibility, saying that the only reasons he’d spend any time at all with a fool like Roderigo are “sport and profit” (388). Iago introduces yet again the fact that he hates Othello, but this time follows it up with a reason we have not yet heard. He hates Othello because there is speculation Othello has had an affair with Iago’s wife, Emilia (388–390). Iago admits he has no proof of the tryst, but claims suspicion “Will do as if for surety” (392). In reasoning out his plan, Iago notes how Othello holds him in high esteem (392), thereby holding him in a position wherein he can do the greatest damage. Iago is already aware of how he may abuse Othello’s naturally good nature and use it to extract his revenge.

In lines that end the scene (396–406), Iago sounds out the plan that will encompass the rest of the action. He will ruin Cassio, the “proper man” (394), and Othello as well, by claiming that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona. Iago reinforces the idea of things seeming one way when they are really another (a key theme throughout the rest of the play), noting, “The Moor is of a free and open nature / [And] thinks men honest that but seem to be so” (401–402). Iago closes out the first act with the devilish prophesy that “Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (405–406), suggesting a few very potent ideas. First, his plan is “engendered,” or conceived. How ironic that Iago would use a term that can also be handily applied to what happens when two people join together and create a child. Engendering is, in fact, the issue that will provide the crux for the action to come. Secondly, Iago’s remarks are telling that in talking about images of hell and night (or darkness), Iago is linking himself with sorcery and devilish work. Honest Iago is, in effect, far more of a sorcerer than Othello. If there is magic at work in the following acts, it has been called upon by Iago, its primary servant. Finally, this passage helps us plumb the depths of Iago’s immorality. By claiming, “Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light,” Iago is, in fact, incriminating himself. The “monstrous birth” is the birth of his plan. Iago knows that his plan is evil, and in what is perhaps an even more frightening turn of events, he doesn’t care at all. The destruction he will cause is, in effect, inevitable. Although we may want to find him morally culpable, he clearly does not function under the same moral precepts that we do and will remain morally untouched by the havoc he is about to unleash.
As Act II opens, several weeks have passed, and our setting has changed from Venice to Cyprus, where the action will remain for the rest of the play. Cyprian governor Montano enters with two gentlemen, and the ensuing discussion reveals what has happened with the war that was set up in Act I. Rough seas have left the Cyprians unable to tell how the navy is faring. Because of the stormy weather, Montano is sure that complete destruction is at hand and fears for Othello’s safety. Montano, thinking still of the encroaching Turkish fleet, nervously remarks that anyone surviving such rough seas is nearly impossible (17–19). Montano’s extraordinary concern for the Moor’s well-being compounds the image we get of Othello in Act I. Through Montano’s eyes, we see Othello is not only a great leader but also a great man. The early part of this scene does a good job of establishing the Cyprian attitude toward Othello. Clearly, residents of Cyprus know him because of his past adventures and are familiar with his abilities as an exemplary leader. Act I establishes Othello as an extraordinary military man, and the discussion in Act II confirms it.

Of interest, too, is the quick resolution to the war. When we left Othello in Act I, he was on his way to fight the Turks, and now in the very next scene, the war is over, and everyone is awaiting his safe return. By passing so briefly over the war, Shakespeare tells us that, in this tragedy, what happens in the field is of less importance than what happens in the home. We are prepared for a play dealing with domestic issues rather than issues of national impact. We are getting ready for a play that will turn toward Othello’s private life, an issue that all of us can relate to. While not all of us have been in battle, we can understand the complications and delicate intrigues that surround personal relationships, whether with friends or lovers. By Shakespeare shifting the focus in this manner, we are able better to relate to our tragic hero and see a bit of ourselves in him.

Shortly after the scene opens, a third gentleman enters with the news that the war is over. The rough weather has so tossed about the Turks that they have withdrawn their plan to attack Cyprus. It is worth noting that the weather, not Othello’s brilliant strategy, has brought about the war’s speedy end. This, too, sets us up for a play not about military exploits, but domestic matters.

Cassio appears at line 43 and dutifully thanks Montano and the gentlemen for their courtesy and concern for Othello. Cassio joins in discussion with the two men, again adding more praise of Othello. In turn, Cassio’s praise of Othello helps us see Othello at the apex of his power, helping effectively to set up the height from which he will fall. Cassio’s appearance on stage before Othello returns helps to build suspense and heighten our emotional involvement with the text. When a messenger tells the party that a sail has been espied on the horizon, Cassio sends one of the gentlemen to find out whether Othello approaches. While waiting for the gentleman’s return, Montano asks whether Othello is married (60). Cassio gladly remarks that Othello has made a successful match, winning a maid who exemplifies only the best attributes of womanhood (61–64). Cassio’s overwhelming devotion to Othello and Desdemona is abundantly clear at this point, again helping to increase the emotional impact the following acts will have on us.

The gentleman returns with the news that the sail on the horizon belongs not to Othello, but rather to Iago. Cassio, innocently revealing his devotion to Desdemona, as well as his courtly good manners, confidently remarks that Iago’s ship had such easy passage in the rough waters because Desdemona was on board. Cassio also calls upon Jove to hasten Othello’s quick arrival so that he may be a proper husband to his wife and bring joy and direction to all in Cyprus. Upon Desdemona’s entrance (83), Cassio is quick to offer his greetings in a very formal and reverential manner. Cassio’s chivalric nature here serves several purposes. First, Cassio’s loyalty helps to clarify his character; he is, quite obviously, an honorable man. Second, Cassio’s heartfelt devotion to Othello is set up as a contrast to Iago’s fictitious devotion. Finally, Cassio’s behavior makes his alleged deception later in the play more hurtful. To spectators, it seems incredulous that Cassio would commit any acts that would go against the Moor. From Iago’s perspective, though, the infinite and steadfast nature of Cassio’s devotion to Othello will not only make his claims against Cassio more hurtful, he knows that once out of favor with Othello, Cassio will do anything to be readmitted to the General’s good graces.

In line 87, Desdemona offers her first words in Cyprus and asks about the safety and whereabouts of her husband, giving us a good indication of what’s on her mind. Cassio informs her that Othello has not yet come ashore, and he isn’t certain whether Othello is well or not (89–90). Just as Desdemona begins to worry, a cry of “A sail, a sail!” is heard from within (93). As another gentleman goes to find out who is arriving, Cassio turns his attention to the rest of Desdemona’s party. With great ceremony and gallantry, Cassio welcomes Iago, the “good ancient,” and his “mistress” or wife (96). As a form of greeting, Cassio kisses Emilia, exhibiting what has been noted as a more English courtesy than an Italian one. It is, in essence, Shakespeare using an anachronism to establish Cassio as a genteel and learned outsider in contrast to Iago’s rougher, more battle-tested, Venetian nature. Cassio remarks that his good manners prompt him to offer such welcome. Iago seizes this opportunity to disparage his wife, sarcastically remarking to Cassio that if Emilia gave Cassio “of her lips” (100) as much as she gives Iago “of her tongue” (101) — hinting crudely at kissing, as well as scolding — he’d certainly not wish for more. Iago’s remark makes us wonder, too, whether Emilia accepted Cassio’s kiss too readily, making Iago mad and igniting his fury.

Desdemona attempts to rescue Emilia from such remarks, only to have Iago continue to define his wife publicly. His inventive, though, serves a greater purpose than simply providing a peek at his chauvinistic attitudes; it introduces themes central to the new domestic focus of the play: the perception of womanly deception through infidelity and selling out. Iago tartly notes that Emilia talks incessantly, even when he tries to sleep (104). Expanding his tirade and assuming what he perceives to be a “manly” position, Iago uses Emilia as a representative for all womanhood, exclaiming, “You are pictures out of doors. / Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchen, / Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, / Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds” (109–112). In simpler terms, by equating women “with pictures out of doors he is sa—” (195) — hinting crudely at kissing, as well as scolding — he’d certainly not wish for more. Iago’s remark makes us wonder, too, whether Emilia accepted Cassio’s kiss too readily, making Iago mad and igniting his fury.

Outraged at his disparagement of women, Desdemona quickly chastises Iago. In his own defense, Iago swears he speaks the truth, “or else I am a Turk” (114). In spite of Desdemona’s protests, Iago continues, not- A typical 16th century vessel. ing that women “rise to play, and go to bed to work” (115). Desdemona, refusing to see herself among the types of women that Iago has just mentioned, asks him what he would write of her. He counters her question with a simple, yet telling remark: “do not put me to’t, / For I am nothing if not critical” (118–119). The boldness of his statements establish him as the antithesis of Cassio, who speaks to the women in only the most polite and formal ways.

The contrast between the natures of Cassio and Iago show particularly well in this scene and serve to advance the darkly ironic side of the play. Before one can appreciate the irony, however, one must have no doubts as to the differences in speech, in action, and in honor between the two men. As we will see in later scenes, Cassio, who really is trustworthy, has his life turned upside down through Iago’s sly manipulation. In a great twist of irony, however, Iago, the man most undeserving of trust, is able to orchestrate through misplaced trust the downfall of his moral superiors, both Cassio and Othello.
Desdemona is not ready to give up the battle just yet and prompts Iago about how he would praise her. After making some excuses, Iago offers, “If she be fair and wise, and fairness and wit — / The one’s for use, the other use it” (129–130), meaning neither beauty nor brains can get along without the other. An amused Desdemona reveals some of her own intellect and complexity by playing on the notion of lightness and fairness, asking what happens if the woman be “black,” or dark-haired (131). Iago replies, “If she be black, . . . / She’ll find a white that shall her blackness fit!” (132–133), hinting at a mixed union like that of Othello and Desdemona. Emilia keeps Iago going, questioning him about women who are “fair and foolish” (135). According to Iago, such a combination is impossible, for a beautiful but foolish woman could still snare a well-situated husband.

Much can be said of Desdemona in this second real glimpse of her in action. In a time when women were supposed to be quiet and demure, she stubbornly bats Iago. She shows a great degree of wit and verbal acumen (both perceived as decidedly masculine traits) and is able to hold her own quite handily. She seems to recognize that Iago is putting on a show, trying his best to unmver those present. Much to her credit, Desdemona argues calmly and rationally. On top of that, her ability to wage a successful logical argument subtly entices spectators to see her in a positive light, and the emotional attachment we begin to make with the reasonable and quick-witted Desdemona helps to increase the play’s overall dramatic impact. Dissatisfied with Iago’s depiction of women, Desdemona turns to Cassio, asking what he thinks of Iago’s words. “You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar” is Cassio’s reply (165–166), setting up the difference between the two men even more overtly. At this, Iago offers us an aside, noting how Cassio takes Desdemona “by the palm” (167).

Seeing Cassio’s attentiveness, and remembering his effusive welcome, Iago thinks how he may use Cassio’s actions to his advantage and declares that he has just been given the little bit of ammunition he needs to bring down his enemies. We learn just how far Iago will go in the name of revenge when he formulates his plan to ruin Cassio and Othello. Iago has realized that Cassio’s attentiveness toward Desdemona, although merely polite ness, can be used to substantiate his rumors of their love for each other, hence Cassio will be undone by his own courtly manners.

Finally Othello arrives. Upon his entrance, Othello addresses Desdemona as his “fair warrior” (182), painting her as his equal in valiancy. Although she did not endure battle, she endured being without Othello which, in his esteem, is equally as courageous. Desdemona is quick to rush into Othello’s arms. Othello’s attentions are turned exclusively on Desdemona at this point, and he notes that if he were now to die, he could do so happily for never has he experienced such joy and comfort as he does now with his wife (188–193). Othello’s tenderness and heartfelt emotion at being reconciled with his wife, his “soul’s joy” (184), is one of the plays’ most memorable scenes. Clearly, their love is strong, deep, and harmonious. Remember this scene, for it shall be markedly contrasted later in this play. As Othello becomes more completely ensnared in Iago’s trap, the way in which he expresses his feelings for Desdemona will become less and less pure and tender, begging the question as to what has happened to the love so beautifully depicted here.

After a very warm and passionate public greeting of Othello, his wife suggests that he head to the castle, but not before filling everyone in on what has happened. In an uncustomarily rambling speech (perhaps suggesting Othello’s true joy at being reunited with his wife), Othello announces the end of the wars and turns to greet his old Cyprian friends (203). He tells Desdemona that she shall be well received in Cyprus, as he has always been. Aware he is jumping from subject to subject, oblivious to everything but Desdemona, he instructs “good Iago” (207) to go to his ship, retrieve his trunks, and bring the ship’s captain back to the castle to be rewarded for his excellent work. Othello’s praise of Iago, following directly on the heels of Iago’s aside (199–201), indicates to us as spectators that Iago’s plan just may work somehow. There may be no doubt that, at this moment, Othello is completely duped by his deceiving ensign. In fact, we know more about Iago’s shifty nature than the noble General; we are not at all duped by Iago. By Shakespeare juxtaposing Iago’s aside with Othello’s “good Iago,” we get the distinct sense of Othello’s inability to judge the true nature of the man in front of him. As the issue of poor judgment is directly introduced, Othello turns again to Desdemona, and all but Roderigo and Iago exit.

Iago, aware of his duty as Othello’s ensign, sends an attendant to meet him at the harbor. He then turns to Roderigo and begins to enact his plan. In order to manipulate his pawn, Iago appeals to Roderigo’s ego, saying “If thou be’st valient . . . list me” (215–217). Of course Roderigo would consider himself valient. Iago then plants his malicious seed with Roderigo, informing him that Desdemona is lining up Cassio as her next lover. Iago suggests that Desdemona’s womanly nature wouldn’t let her be true to one man. Iago knows that by linking Cassio to Desdemona, Roderigo will be enraged and will want to strike out at the man who has his beloved, so he sneak s in the information that Cassio will be on watch that evening.

Roderigo again refuses to believe his trusted friend. A woman as highly praised as Desdemona --- a near paragon of feminine virtue --- would never stoop this low, he argues. Of course not! A man such as Roderigo would never be in love with a woman who didn’t fit the courtly conventions of a lover. In his case, he’s more in love with the idea of Desdemona than with Desdemona herself. Undaunted by Roderigo’s disbelief, Iago continues to unwrap his plan, duping Roderigo with sly storytelling, just as Othello swayed Desdemona and her father with his stories. After some goading, Iago gets Roderigo to agree that Cassio’s seemingly innocent greeting had a lecherous undertone. Iago, knowing he has Roderigo under his thumb, details the next part of his plan. Because Iago knows Cassio to be a bit rash, his directing Roderigo’s to pick a fight with Cassio is intended to bring about the lieutenant’s ruin. The second-in-command should be above entering into meaningless fights, after all. Iago justifies his plan by telling Roderigo that if he eliminates Cassio from the picture, he is just one step closer to Desdemona’s bed. True to his nature --- a lovesick hop --- Roderigo agrees.

Roderigo falls for Iago’s plan completely. Finally convinced of the love between Cassio and Desdemona, Roderigo is quick to agree to the plan. He now sees a direct personal benefit in having Cassio out of the way. Iago knew exactly that if he played upon Roderigo’s biggest weakness, Desdemona, he could easily get him to carry out his dirty work. Iago had only to find a way to make Roderigo believe that getting rid of Cassio would benefit him directly. By claiming that Desdemona would undoubtedly soon take Cassio for a lover, Iago knew that Roderigo would want to remove Cassio from the picture so that he himself could become Desdemona’s lover.

Left alone on the stage, Iago again exposes his shifty nature and the extreme power of his lies. He is such a consummate liar that he has, by this point, even convinced himself that Cassio really does love Desdemona and thinks that it is not unlikely she loves him too. What was once just a detail to motivate Roderigo to attack Cassio becomes (for Iago) a reality. In one of this soliloquy’s stranger moments, Iago notes that even though he hates Othello, he must admit Othello is “of a constant, loving, noble nature” (293) and is likely to make Desdemona “[a] most dear husband” (295). In a surprising statement, Iago reveals that he, too, loves Desdemona, but largely because of his desire to exact revenge on Othello for purportedly having an affair with Emilia, which sheds new light on his diatribe on womanly virtue earlier in this scene (100–178). In his quest for an Old Testament-like revenge, Iago would like to steal Desdemona (the object) from Othello, so they are “eavened . . . wife for wife” (303). If he is unable to do that, he decides that the next best thing would be to put Othello “into a jealousy so strong / That judgement cannot cure” (305–306).

In line 307, Iago again turns his attention to his pawn, Roderigo (the “poor trash of Venice”) who, if he only continues to be so bendable to Iago’s wishes, will help bring about Cassio’s downfall. Iago will do his share, though, by telling Othello of Cassio’s lecherous nature, thereby earning more of Othello’s trust. In essence, Iago hopes to make Othello jealous to the point of madness, and yet be rewarded by him for it. Iago ends the scene on a chilling note, offering that he has still to work out all of the plan’s details, but there is to be no question about his determination.
**ACT II, SCENE II**

This short scene enhances the mood of Merriment that will be starkly contrasted by the tragedy to follow. The scene also serves as a means to allow Iago some time to unfold his plans for Othello. The scene centers on Othello’s proclamation commanding that everyone take a moment to celebrate the war’s speedy and successful end. He encourages each individual to make sport in whatever direction his pleasures would lead him, with the condition that the feasting and celebration also be dedicated, at least in part, to his recent marriage. For the time being, war is over and peace, prosperity, and love are at hand.

**ACT II, SCENE III**

Act II, Scene 3 opens with an admonition, or warning. It is not unusual for Shakespeare to employ this sort of device; generally it is intended as a signpost to spectators. In essence, the admonition in this scene’s opening lines give us an idea of something important to look for. In a sense, the admonition foreshadows something critical to come. Othello addresses Cassio as the action starts. The feasting proclaimed in the previous scene is underway, and Othello reminds Cassio that they must all exercise restraint in their celebrating, being careful not “to out sport discretion” (3) or carry on past the bounds of what is reasonable. Cassio assures the General that all is under control, reminding him that Iago is to help him with the watch. Othello, inadvertently revealing just how well Iago has him convinced of his honor, affirms Cassio’s favor in Iago, noting that “Iago is most honest” (6).

Othello, assured that the island is in good hands, turns to Desdemona. Using a marketplace analogy not unlike those thrown about in Act I, he notes, “The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue / That profit’s yet to come ‘tween me and you” (9–10). His use of economic terms tells us that, on some level, he sees his union with Desdemona as an economic enterprise. Through the exchange of vows, he has made his purchase (implying ownership), and profit will come of it. The profit could be financial reward or, more likely, a child born of their marriage.

Another important issue touched on in Othello’s statement is the issue of whether Desdemona and he have consummated their marriage. Most scholars agree that at this point, the marriage is still unconsummated. It should be remembered, too, that the purpose of marriage is to bring forth fruit, and clearly, Othello sees that as ensuing or coming down the road. Why should it matter whether or not the couple had consummated their marriage? Is it really a big deal? To Elizabethan audiences, absolutely! During Shakespeare’s time a wedding consisted of three distinct parts for the match to be “official.” First, there was the reading of the banns, a public proclamation of the upcoming marriage. Next came the ceremony proper. Finally, there was the consummation. Without all three parts, the marriage was not yet complete in the eyes of God.

The issue of consummation is one that has plagued scholars for centuries (not unlike the question of Ophelia’s virginity). In addition to the general issues and complications that arise over issues of fidelity (see the “Introduction to Othello”), such as inheritance and a man’s ability to “rule” his wife, in the particular case of Desdemona, the consummation issue takes on an added significance. If, in fact, Desdemona was a virgin at this point (for which we have no evidence otherwise), then the timeframe of the play proves complicated. Essentially, there is no time for the consummation to occur after this scene. Why such detail matters is that by Desdemona calling for her wedding sheets in Act IV, Scene 2, Desdemona is, in effect, offering Othello a test of her fidelity.

As Othello and Desdemona leave this scene, Iago enters. We are aware of his true nature, but part of the tragedy’s appeal is that we seem to have more information than any of the characters, heightening the play’s emotional draw. We know that Iago intends to trap Cassio during his watch, and once Iago joins Cassio on the watch, we don’t have to wait long for Iago to begin spinning his web. Cassio, always attentive to his duty, notes that they must begin their watch. Iago, however, has different ideas. He notes that it’s not yet 10 p.m. (remember the partying was to go on until 11 p.m.), and Othello must have gotten rid of them so that he could spend time with Desdemona. Iago, seemingly aware of the state of the couple’s romance, notes that Othello “hath not yet made wanton the night with her,” but follows this up with a loaded statement: “she is sport for Jove” (16–17). Clearly Iago hasn’t backed away from his less-than-flattering depiction of women that we read in this scene.

In this case, he paints the virtuous Desdemona as a wanton woman, wild enough to be a consort to Jove himself (who, according to Greek mythology, was a notorious womanizer, in addition to ruling the gods). Cassio, again showing the difference in breeding between himself and Iago, champions Desdemona noting that she is “a most exquisite lady / . . . / a most fresh and delicate creature” (17, 20). In order to test Cassio, Iago continues to paint Desdemona as a lusty, sensual woman. He cannot help but pleased to see Cassio rise so eagerly in defense of Othello’s young bride, knowing full well that it is just this sort of response that will make his plan work.

Once Iago sees how easily Cassio can be provoked into defending Desdemona, he changes his tactic some. Iago raises his wine in a toast to the health and happiness of the couple. Of course, his goal is to get Cassio to join him in a toast, because a drunken Cassio would make his plan an even more perfect fit. Cassio, though, resists, having already consumed one cup of wine, which has made him a bit drunk already. At this news, Iago quickly puts pressure on Cassio to drink with him, striking where he knows Cassio can’t resist, “to the health of black Othello” (29). As we know, Cassio is entirely devoted to Othello, so in his honor, Cassio succumbs to Iago’s pressure, albeit reluctantly, and leaves to have a drink with the revelers. Worth noting also is that Cassio’s drinking marks the beginning of his downfall. It is ironic that his loyalty to Othello is what brings him to the brink of his decline. Had he not loved Othello so much, he might not have raised his glass in honor, and the whole course of the story would have changed. But Iago knew not to worry. Cassio’s chivalric nature would, in fact, spur him forth in honor of the General. On that, Iago could be sure.

Left alone, Iago again evaluates his plan. “If I can fasten but one cup upon him,” he says, “He’ll be as full of quarrel and offense / As my young mistress’ dog” (45–48). Roderigo, also drunk, will be the lookout for the tipsy Cassio and get him to commit such an outrageous act that he offends everyone on the island. Iago mulls all this over, looking forward to the materialization of his plan, which, if all goes well, ensures his honor and reputation while ruining Cassio’s. What is perhaps most ingenious about Iago’s plan, which we will see over the course of the next two acts especially, is that Iago can mortally destroy people’s lives, while all the while looking like a most concerned and devoted friend. He thrives on a false reputation that he has created for himself (being honest and trustworthy, for starters), while he ruins Cassio through maliciously fabricating unpleasant scenarios to tarnish his reputation. Truth becomes illusive in this world where honest men appear dishonest — all because of the work of one dishonest man who passes himself off as the paragon of virtue. As Montano and the now-drunk Cassio enter, Iago quickly reverts to his public, dutiful self. As a testament to his ability to be truly evil and monomaniacal, he is careful never to reveal that side of himself publicly.

When other characters are around him, Iago presents the side of himself he wishes them to see — no more and no less. He is a consummate disguise artist, able to cover the aspects of his true self that he doesn’t want anyone to see exposed. In this case in particular, Iago masks his malicious self as a reveler, singing drinking songs and telling jokes with his comrades. At this point, Shakespeare adds in a little levity for the benefit of his audience. Iago goes into tales about the world’s finest drinkers — with the English, of course, leading the charge. Adding a touch of levity to tragedy is not unusual in Shakespeare
As the men separate to go on their watch, Cassio exits. Iago, true to fashion, turns to Montano and offers a few well-chosen remarks on the noble Lieutenant. He praises Cassio as “a soldier fit to stand by Caesar” (118). Iago ends, though, by introducing an opportunity for Montano to see Cassio in a less-than-noble fight, suggesting that “the trust Othello puts him in / On some odd time of his infirmity / Will shake this island” (122–124). When Montano questions what he means, Iago offers Cassio a very backhanded compliment, noting that, provided drink does not get him, he will stay on duty days on end (125–127).

Montano, hearing this information, falls right into Iago’s trap and, with a hint of worry, suggests that Othello must be informed of Cassio’s tendencies. Montano, again looking at the Cypriot devotion to Othello, defends Othello, claiming that perhaps because of his good nature he “Prizes the virtue that appears in Cassio / And looks not on his evils” (130–131). Continuing to fall deeper into Iago’s plan, Montano laments how pitiful it is that the “noble Moor” should select such an unreliable man as Cassio to be his right-hand man (134–135). Iago, certainly enjoying how smoothly his plan is proceeding, assumes his falsely loyal persona, chastising Montano for even thinking of telling Othello of Cassio’s weaknesses (when, of course, informing Othello is exactly what Iago desires). His brotherly love for Cassio, he says, would have him do anything to help rid Cassio of his imperfections (139–140).

At this point, Iago is interrupted by a noise within. Rather than what Iago expects to see — Roderigo pursuing Cassio — Roderigo comes in being chased by Cassio, another in the series of testaments to Roderigo’s ineptitude. When Montano stops the men, Cassio is able to get a few good strikes in at Roderigo. In the ensuing fight, Montano, the bystander, is wounded. Iago briefly intervenes in the fight, ordering Roderigo to sneak away and raise a cry of mutiny. Just as Iago knew would happen, Roderigo’s cries raise an alarm, leaving Iago to pretend to have Cassio’s best interest at heart. Iago attempts to calm the lieutenant before Othello arrives, when Cassio will surely be punished for his raucous behavior. Again, the wily Iago is able to orchestrate someone else’s downfall while appearing completely above reproach.

Othello, unable to believe what he sees before him, conducts the first real administrative business we’ve seen so far. Othello, often the butt of racial epithets himself, offers some telling comments on the action. He queries whether the men’s actions are a result of having “turned Turks” and become worse than the heathens they have just defeated (161–164). In another reference to the superiority of the culture to which he now belongs, Othello calls “Christian shame” upon the fighters and threatens with death the next man who moves (164–165). Othello then shows us the error of his judgment when he turns to “Honest Iago” (168) for an accurate account of what happened. Iago, of course, offers a story meant to benefit himself and claims not to know what has happened, only that he is so upset by it he wishes he hadn’t been there at all (170–178).

In turning to Cassio and Montano, we see Othello the politician in action. He turns from man to man, until Montano provides him with an explanation. Montano discloses little except his allegiance to Iago (189–191), proving yet again Iago’s ability to take in even the highest ranking people on the island. We, of course, know that he is the mastermind behind the whole incident, increasing its tragic effect. By now, we have become privy to Iago’s patterns and are left helpless witnesses to the scheme that he has set in motion, which is precisely what Shakespeare intended and what makes this play so unique. In the other great tragedies (Macbeth, Hamlet, and King Lear), the protagonists’ actions (physical or mental) propel the action. In Othello, though, the protagonist has events thrust upon him. The antagonist is the one who drives this story.

By line 195, Othello is beginning to anger at being forced to ask for an explanation of the happenings for the sixth time. It is interesting that, despite being such a respected and loved leader, no one is forthcoming with information. It would seem people would be glad to tell Othello. Clearly something else is going on. For whatever reason — fear, drunkenness, jealousy — the men are unwilling to tell him. When information is not forthcoming, Othello gives us a glimpse as to how hotheaded he can be. We see that regardless of his valor on the battlefield, when things don’t fall into place at home, he is quick to allow his passions to overcome his reason. He warns the men not to get in his way when his temper begins to take over (198–200). Othello is forced to ask a seventh and eighth time what is going on, resolving that whomever is at fault, even if he were as close to Othello as a twin, shall be punished severely (202–204). Note how similar Othello’s rhetorical strategy here is to the Duke’s in Act I, Scene 3. Note also how Othello’s temper is introduced here. Othello’s attempts to deal with his temper will play out through the course of the rest of the story. As we will also see, a temper in life-or-death battle situations may be useful, but a quick temper in the domestic sphere can be deadly. Iago is counting on the Moor’s inability to control this side of his nature.

With an impressive show of false modesty, Iago laments that he would “rather have this tongue cut from my mouth / Than it should do offense to Michael Cassio” (212–213), which of course is exactly what happens by his mentioning Cassio’s name. Iago proceeds to recount a version of the evening’s activities that glosses over some points and highlights others, making Cassio out to be justified, although perhaps a bit over-reactive, Montano an innocent victim, Roderigo an unnamed villain, and Iago himself a champion. He claims to have chased the unknown perpetrator, “Lest by his clamor — as it so fell out / The town might fall in fright” (222–223).

After hearing Iago’s account, Othello shows how deeply enmeshed he is becoming in the trap that Iago is setting for him. Othello praises Iago, showing particularly bad judgment when he suggests that Iago’s “honesty” and “love” force him to sugarcoat the situation’s seriousness, “Making it light to Cassio” (238–239). In the next breath, Othello turns to Cassio and immediately demotes him. “Cassio, I love thee,” says Othello, “But never more be officer of mine” (239–240). Although Othello’s actions seem harsh, on one level they are warranted. He is a military leader, used to leading men in battle. In these situations, a general’s inability to act quickly and decisively could lead to many lives, even entire countries, being lost. Othello’s swift decision to demote Cassio stems largely from this tradition. It would not do for him to prolong the decision-making process. Doing so would only show weakness, vulnerability, and indecision on his part — something a leader never wants to show.

On another level, however, Othello’s snap decision speaks to his tendency to become overridden with passion and to exercise seemingly poor judgment. After all, the war is over, and Cyprus is not a battlefield. Should Othello still practice his military-style decision making as governor of Cyprus? Should he be able to discern the difference between wartime and peacetime? In this light, Othello seems over-reactionary and quick to jump to conclusions, needing little evidence to punish the man he had considered, up until that very point, his best advisor.

As if foreshadowing her entanglement in the play’s tragic action, Desdemona makes her entrance at this point. Her timing is important, for she will soon find herself embroiled in a triad with Othello and his now-former lieutenant. Othello immediately shifts gears, calling her pet names, such as “sweeting” (243) and moving her out of the public street and back into their private bedchamber, as if she has no business in public affairs. As the stage clears, Iago turns to Cassio and begins to discuss one of the play’s most under-riding themes: reputation. Montano has just been sent to have his wound tended, and Iago, seeing physical manifestations of Cassio’s distress, questions him as to whether he, too, has been hurt. Cassio, always a man interested in propriety and duty, answers he is wounded past all healing. His reputation, he wails, has been lost (253–256). Through his own folly, he has lost that one thing that he believed to
set him apart from all others. Without his good name, Cassio fears that he is no better than the most base of men. His reputation is what he has counted on to prove his good nature, and once besmirched, he fears it will never be repaired. He has lost his good name, the one thing he has worked his life to have.

Cassio, though, isn’t the only character in this story to be concerned with reputation. In fact, this theme reaches to nearly every character we meet. From Brabantio, who worries whether he will be acquitted of poor parenting, to Othello, who goes mad thinking that he has been made a cuckold, the play’s actions hinge on reputation. Iago fabricates and painstakingly maintains a complicated reputation for himself, though he feels he needs no remorse at all in attacking other people’s reputations. For Desdemona, as a woman, one of the only things she has that is her own is her reputation. As a woman of status, a tarnished reputation is a death knell. For a woman of means, a sterling reputation means everything.

Iago, sensing Cassio’s vulnerability, expertly targets his attack. He shows yet again how vastly different he is from Cassio by essentially refusing to validate Cassio’s complaint. Reputation, says Iago, is at best a quality imposed by others, not something you manufacture for yourself (259–260). One’s reputation is often falsely gained and unjustly lost. Iago, it seems, has for once put away his mask and speaks of what he knows in this exchange. He is a prime example of a reputation falsely won. We know that Iago is a plotting and scheming fellow — his actions as well as his words have made us very aware — yet somehow other characters continue to see him as honest, loyal, and worthy. He and Cassio are, in fact, opposites. Cassio has unjustly lost his reputation while Iago has unjustly gained and maintained his.

As if knowing that he is disclosing too much, Iago turns toward Cassio and attempts to help him make the best of a bad situation. He assures Cassio that reconciliation with Othello is possible, and that Othello’s rage was mostly put on for show (263–267). All Cassio needs to do is ask Othello to pardon him, and his sterling reputation will be reinstated (267). Cassio, again showing the mettle from which he’s made, humbly declines such a plan, believing it would be an insult to someone as great as Othello. Cursing the wine which brought him into such dire straits, Iago acknowledges that he was drunk and unwise, and he believes Othello was warranted in displacing him. Iago continues to get information from Cassio, questioning him as to his attacker. Cassio, growing more angry by the minute, admits to remembering little and again curses the wine that brought him to this position. He equates himself to the animals, saying that in the pursuit of pleasure we are no better than beasts (280–284) and heads into a spiral of self-loathing.

Iago senses that Cassio’s downward state, although it has accomplished one goal (getting Cassio removed as lieutenant), will not help him accomplish the other (besting Othello). He can’t afford to have Cassio retreat to lick his wounds; he needs Cassio to be around so that he can implicate him as Desdemona’s lover if his revenge on Othello is to be complete. Iago, playing the steadfast friend, encourages Cassio not to be so hard on himself. He admits that Cassio has had bad luck, but to do nothing to try and repair the situation would be a crime far worse than letting things rest as they are (292–295). Cassio, bolstered by what he believes to be his friend’s vote of confidence, agrees to try and make amends to Othello. At this point, Iago sees a golden opportunity to ingratitude himself with Cassio (in turn, using Cassio as a pawn in his larger plan). Iago proclaims his brotherly love for Cassio (305) and then unwraps his plan.

To Cassio, the plan seems straightforward and well intentioned, because he believes in Iago’s honesty and goodwill. We see, however, the makings of something deadly in Iago’s plan. He outlines how Cassio is to take an indirect route to Othello — through Desdemona. Because of Othello’s love for Desdemona, it seems plausible that having her plead Cassio’s case would help him back into Othello’s good graces. By assuming this route, the “crack of your love,” notes Iago, “shall grow stonger than ‘twas before” (319), meaning that like broken china which becomes stronger when it is mended, the relationship between Othello and Cassio will be better than ever.

The ever-trusting Cassio buys into Iago’s scheme completely, declaring that first thing the next morning he will seek out Desdemona and convince her to plead his case for Othello. Bidding good night to “honest Iago” (330), Cassio heads home. We, of course, see the irony of his goodbye and the error of his judgment. In the following acts, this fateful lapse in judgment will come to haunt all involved.

Iago, pleased with himself for having pulled off this part of his plan so easily, picks up the plan that he was outlining at the end of Act II, Scene 1. He now sees the next move he must make. He knows that Desdemona will be easily convinced to plead Cassio’s case with her husband, because she is a generous and gracious person. Iago almost seems to have even surprised himself — he’s seemingly leading Cassio toward reconciliation with Othello as lieutenant (344), believing that he’s seemingly leading Cassio toward reconciliation with Othello and restoration of his reputation, when in fact, he’s leading him as far away from that as can be. Knowing full well the depths of his villainous nature, Iago equates himself with the devils (346–348), remarking how devils, when tempting people, often accomplish their tasks by presenting themselves in a positive light. They make everything seem beautiful and positive, when in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Finally, beginning with line 348, we get the full range of Iago’s plan to bring down Othello. He already has the first part in motion: Cassio will entreat Desdemona to plead his case with Othello. Desdemona, he knows, will take up Cassio’s case and attempt to convince her husband to be reconciled with his former lieutenant. All this seems innocent enough, but while Cassio and Desdemona are working on their part, unbeknownst to anyone, Iago will be filling Othello with misinformation — note that he even calls it “pestilence” (351). He’s going to slander Desdemona, claiming that she only pleads Cassio’s case because of her lust for him. Iago’s plan really is magnificent, because the more forcefully Desdemona takes up Cassio’s case, the more guilty she will look. In his own words, Iago will “turn her virtue into pitch / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (355–357).

Upon the disclosure of the full plan, Roderigo reenters. This time, though, Roderigo seems to be a bit more on top of things. He is beginning to sense that he’s getting very little return for his investment with Iago. He has been doing as told, but isn’t making progress with Desdemona. In fact, all he has for his pains is experience. Roderigo begins to show signs of having a backbone when he announces his return to Venice (363–364). Just when we start to believe Roderigo might wise up, leave, and foul up Iago’s deadly plans though, Iago once again works his magic. He appeals to Roderigo to have patience, for such a big task is not to be accomplished quickly. Iago cleverly pulls Roderigo back into the affairs at hand, using the inclusive term “we” (367). Iago reassures Roderigo that they are making progress — after all, wasn’t Cassio taken out of the picture? — and that if Roderigo just bides his time a bit longer he shall have that which he desires. Apparently, Iago strikes just the right chords with Roderigo, because he quickly falls back in line with Iago and heads to his lodging.

Left alone, Iago solidifies the next events that he must orchestrate. First, he must get his wife to help convince Desdemona to take up Cassio’s request. Next, he must get Othello away from the others so that he may plant the idea of Desdemona’s infidelity, bringing Othello around just as Cassio and Desdemona are conferencing, making things look suspicious.

Clearly, Iago is a consummate villain. This scene, in particular, brings to a head all our suspicions about Iago up to this point. He has been tricking people since the beginning of the story, but now we see how far he’s really willing to go, as well as what a thoroughly evil man he is underneath his angelic disguise. He has carefully created a public image of himself that depicts him as loyal and trustworthy, concerned with the good of the country over his concern for
himself. In reality, though, nothing is further from the truth. Iago is out to take care of Iago, and it’s clear that he doesn’t care who he hurts along the way. He is a mastermind at getting people to do what he wants. He speaks falsely, often saying just the opposite of what he means. For example, when he tells Cassio that reputations really aren’t that important because they can be falsely bestowed, he’s only partially truthful. If it weren’t for his reputation as a fair man, Iago wouldn’t be in a position to wreak the kind of havoc that he is intending. Also, if Iago didn’t have the reputation for being a man who fulfills his promises, he wouldn’t be able to keep Roderigo hanging on his every word, becoming an innocent accessory to Othello’s downfall.

Iago is one of the scariest of Shakespeare’s villains, largely because of his seemingly innocent outward appearance. He is heartless in his actions and seemingly unconcerned about the pain he inflicts, but to an onlooker, he is nothing but charming and well intentioned. Characters such as Iago make us pause and consider our own lives, and the possibility that we each have an Iago lying in wait for us!

**ACT III, SCENE I**

Act III opens with an event intended to offset the heaviness of the last scene. We know now what Iago is up to, and to ensure that all the aspects of his plot have sufficient time to take place, Shakespeare offers us some comic relief. Musicians open the act, followed directly by the Clown. Note that a Shakespearean clown isn’t at all like the contemporary circus clown that readily comes to mind. Rather, a Shakespearean clown (a lesser kin to the Shakespearean fool) is oftentimes one of the most clever of all the characters in a story. Generally, the clown is someone outside the realm of action who might offer comic relief, a fresh perspective on the situation, or advances the action in some way. In this scene, the clown provides mere entertainment, demonstrating a keen wit. He puns easily with Cassio, staying one step ahead of the learned ex-lieutenant. Lest we give the Clown too much credit, though, we must note that he also loves to speak in insults and relies on eschatological humor (note his joking about flatulence in line 10). In addition to lightening the mood, this Clown also serves to move the action forward, acting as a go-between for Cassio and Emilia. He is paid by Cassio to seek Emilia.

As the Clown leaves to fetch Emilia, Iago mysteriously appears. He checks with Cassio as to his intentions and is pleased to find out Cassio has followed through with the plan from the night before. Iago, once again appearing the dutiful friend, promises to find a reason to keep Othello from the castle so Cassio can be alone with the women. Cassio, ever the dupe, thanks Iago, offering “I never knew / A Florentine more kind and honest” (42). What’s so interesting about this statement is that it seems contradictory to Act I, Scene 1, 19–20 wherein Iago condemns Cassio for being a Florentine (presumably because Iago is a Venetian). Also, the statement is telling in that Florence was the home of Machiavelli, perhaps the most wily statesman ever, and by association, Florence was not considered the seat of virtue. Finally, if Cassio honestly mistakes Iago as a Florentine, it just compounds how little Cassio really understands or knows Iago.

The scene ends with Emilia joining Cassio and disclosing that at that very minute Othello and Desdemona are speaking of his situation. Emilia also makes known that Desdemona is already taking Cassio’s defense and “speaks for [him] stoutly” (46). Clearly, Iago has convinced Emilia to help him in his plan, as Desdemona argues Cassio’s side even before Cassio himself asks. Emilia explains that Othello himself is distraught with what he had to do and that given the right public opportunity he will reinstate Cassio, convinced Cassio is honest and deserving of high praise. Until the climate is right for him to make such a decision, though, Cassio must not be reinstated. It appears, though, Iago’s plan is falling right into place. Othello has needed no convincing to be reconciled with Cassio, so any fuel Desdemona inadvertently adds to the fire will surely kindle strong reaction.

**ACT III, SCENE II**

Scene 2 is the shortest of the entire play. The scene serves to reinforce Othello’s allegiance to Venice and reconnects him with the civilized ways of that city. Additionally, the scene works as a vehicle to get Othello out of the castle. We learn that he will be walking on the embankments, giving Iago the perfect opportunity to unleash the remainder of his plan.

**ACT III, SCENE III**

Act III, Scene 3 is the longest scene in Othello, starkly contrasting the extraordinarily short scene preceding it. As the scene opens, Desdemona reassures Cassio that she will do everything in her power to plead his case to Othello. Cassio, indelibly to Desdemona, vows his undying service to her, as befits his courtly demeanor. In reply, Desdemona offers a remark that again brings up the issue of Othello’s ability to make sound judgements. We’ve seen this before in his inability to switch from a military frame of reference to a domestic one upon arriving in Cyprus, as well as in his inability to aptly judge Iago and his brusque dismissal of Cassio. This time Desdemona tells Cassio that Othello “shall in strangeness stand no farther off / Than in a politic distance” (12–13). Her use of “political” literally means “shrewd,” as in Othello will maintain only the amount of distance required by good sense, evoking images of Othello being ruled by social decorum and what’s deemed appropriate. Desdemona’s small remark reinforces the notion that Othello demoted Cassio not out of anger for his actions, but because policy dictated that the demotion was the proper response for the appearance of impropriety. This motivation will come in to play later when Othello must exercise decision- making powers.

Also introduced at the beginning of this scene is the difference between what Iago is and what others believe him to be. Innocent remarks that people make come across as ironic at best and darkly comic at the worst. For example, as the scene opens, Emilia notes how deeply Cassio’s situation “grieves [her] husband / As if the cause were his” (3–4). To the people on stage, Emilia’s is an innocent remark showing the care and courtesy of her husband. To the audience, though, the remark means much more. Her comment is a blatant reminder that appearances can be entirely deceptive and that Iago has successfully conned those around him — even his wife — into seeing him in a positive light. Desdemona’s reply that Iago is “an honest fellow” (5) illustrates again Iago’s ability to make people see what he wants them to see. This theme will resonate throughout the scene as we see over and over Iago’s ability to convince people of whatever he desires.

Cassio is warmed by Desdemona’s words, but he still has reservations as to what will become of him. Clearly, although he says that he places every faith in Desdemona’s word, he refuses to be soothed by them. Instead, he worries that the appropriate time and place for reconciliation will not come, that he will be
out of Othello’s sight, replaced by another, and thereby out of Othello’s mind. Othello and Cassio have a relationship that extends back to the early days of Othello and Desdemona’s courtship (see lines 70–74), but yet he assumes Othello unable of remembering him.

On one hand, Cassio may just be making a self-depreciatory comment, providing Desdemona with an opportunity to expound on how wrong Cassio is (see lines 19–28). Structurally speaking, though, Shakespeare is taking an opening for expanding the depth of Cassio and Desdemona’s relationship. Because of our awareness of Iago’s plan, the exchange between Cassio and Desdemona foreshadows the complications that will surely arise because Desdemona would “rather die” than give up Cassio’s cause (27–28).

On another level, though, Cassio is re-introducing the question over Othello’s decision-making strategies. Is there a possibility that Othello really might forget about Cassio because he has become so centered on newer developments? Othello’s ability to distinguish between decision-making abilities on the battlefield versus on the domestic front is called in to question in this passage. He may lead valorously on the field, but if he is unable to adapt to domestic (as opposed to political) life, he will have limited success as a leader. If this is the case, he lacks the flexibility necessary for success during peacetime. Although there is no definite answer as to what is meant by Cassio’s statements, either way, the issue of Othello’s rationality is introduced, bringing it to the forefront of our minds for use later in the scene.

When Othello and Iago enter the stage, Iago sees Cassio slip away and uses the moment to launch his plot, innocently noting, “I like not that” (35). Though Iago cleverly attempts to dismiss his comment as “Nothing, my lord” (37), Othello has heard enough to ask Iago whether they had just seen Cassio leaving. Iago again uses underhanded means to cast suspicion on Cassio. “Cassio, my lord?” Iago asks, “No, sure, I cannot think it. / That he would steal away so guilty-like / Seeing you coming” (39–41). And there it is. As simply as that, Iago has planted the seeds of suspicion in Othello, even if only subconsciously. Where once Othello had no doubt, suddenly he has. What was innocent is now uncertain, and never again will events and words be taken at face value. (In fact, one could claim that people were too willing to take things at face value, which has gotten them into this position in the first place.) As the exchange between Othello and Desdemona unfolds, Iago selects prime moments to build on the suspicion he has just released.

Desdemona is quick to champion Cassio, just as she promised. Othello is a little cautious, questioning the timing of her defense. He wonders why she would take up Cassio’s case so adamantly — notice how she presses and presses Othello for a reconciliation, especially in 56–70 — but he is obviously not too concerned yet. His use of endearing names, such as “sweet Desdemon,” “sweet,” and “my Desdemon,” shows us that, despite denying her request, he’s still very much the same affectionate Othello of earlier scenes.

Ultimately, Othello breaks down and agrees to see Cassio, offering as his motivation his inability to deny Desdemona anything. Desdemona, however, fails to quit when she has won the battle. She presses on, and in so doing, helps Iago to bring uncertainty regarding her chastity to rest on herself. Moreover, her continuation of Cassio’s cause shows just how little she really knows Othello. A wiser decision for her would have been to withdraw once Othello had agreed to see Cassio, yet Desdemona does not. Agreeing to see Cassio, she argues, is not doing her a favor (76), but is doing only what is normal and natural, like eating good food or dressing warmly. At this point, we see the first signs of Othello’s irritation with his wife, repeating his willingness to see Cassio, but this time the agreement is conditional; he demands to be left alone (85). Desdemona does have the good sense to give up her cause at that point, retreating into the castle with Emilia but not before tossing one more jab, noting “Whate’r you be, I am obedient” (89), suggesting that whether or not Othello is a good husband, she is a dutiful and proper wife.

Lest we think that the pair is at odds with one another, note that Othello calls out a pleasant, although a bit ominous, goodbye. He notes that he’ll be in directly (87) and follows her exit with an extraordinary praise. “Excellent wretch,” he sighs (here, wretch is used in a loving, positive way), “Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again” (90–92). Clearly, he loves his wife, but at the same time, he utters words that will haunt the rest of the play as Othello moves closer and closer to madness. By Act V, chaos really has come, and the law and order that holds the world together has come undone, fulfilling Othello’s prophecy.

With the women gone, Iago begins his game. With only a small interruption, Iago’s slow torture of Othello fills the rest of the scene. Iago, in a Socratic manner, begins by initiating a dialogue. When Othello answers, Iago purposely responds with a rhetorically quizzical, “Indeed!” (100), intending to provide no information while simultaneously starting Othello’s mind whirling. After Othello’s curiosity is piqued, he asks Iago for clarification. Othello eventually becomes exasperated with Iago’s rhetorical game of cat and mouse and demands an explanation, “If thou dost love me” (115). This is just the opening Iago has been waiting for. He dishonestly professes his love and duty, slyly offering, “Men should be what they seem: / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!” (126–127).

Once again, we see Shakespeare’s dependence on irony with (arguably) the play’s most degenerate character indirectly commenting on himself — with no one the wiser. Othello continues to question Iago, sensing that he’s covering something up, but at the same time unable to see the traitorous monster standing before him. Speaking slowly and deliberately, Iago makes sure that Othello sees him only as he wishes to be seen, as a dutiful friend and devoted ensign. Othello, clearly taken in by Iago’s smooth talking, chastises Iago for conspiring “against thy friend” (142), meaning himself, thereby redefining their relationship. Rather than serving Othello as his ensign, Iago is now placed on par with Othello in a more personal context. We can see Iago is successfully working his way into Othello’s confidence.

One of Iago’s charms is his uncanny ability to get people to believe lies and disbelieve the truth. We saw him in Act I tell Roderigo flatly that he is not what he appears, only to have Roderigo overlook the implications of this disclosure. That incident, though, we tend to write off as a testament to Roderigo’s stupidity. Iago does it again, though, with Othello. When Othello presses him for his thoughts on Cassio, Iago tells the general that he may not want his perspective because occasionally “my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not” (147–148). Iago continues, noting that Othello would be a fool to take his word on Cassio because he is not entirely trustworthy — he “imperfectly conjets” (149). He tells Othello not to put faith in his “scattering and unsure observance” (151) because it wouldn’t be conducive to Othello’s “quite nor your good,” (152) nor to Iago’s “manhood, honesty, or wisdom” (153) to listen to what Iago thinks. He has created such a strong public image of himself that even when he tells the truth about his monstrous nature no one believes him.

Iago, attempting to exercise reverse psychology on Othello, returns to one of the play’s central themes, reputation, saying that the person who steals one’s reputation steals something irreplaceable. Here, Iago’s spin on reputation is a complete turn-around from Act II, where he dismisses the merit of reputation as something that can be falsely won and unjustly lost (Scene 3, 257–267). Now he claims that nothing is more important than one’s good name, and he surely wouldn’t want to slander Cassio. Othello, of course, becomes more and more curious as Iago claims more and more that he just couldn’t bear to share his thoughts with Othello. As audience members, we are aware that Iago is offering up a diversion in order to lead Othello right where he wants him.
Iago warned Othello earlier in the scene not to trust what he had to say. Othello, of course, doesn’t seem to heed this warning. Beginning with line 165, Iago offers Othello yet another warning. In some of the most well-known lines from this play, Iago cautions Othello to “beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on” (165–167). At this remark, Othello interrupts, noting that he could never be jealous of Desdemona’s attention. In straightforward, military style, he insists that if one has questions, one merely needs answers. In issues of fidelity, there is no need to be suspicious of one’s mate (177–182). He justifies his claim of having no reason to be jealous by reminding Iago that Desdemona chose him above all others, despite their differences in race (187–189). As if shaking off any suggestion of improvidence that Iago may offer, Othello says, “I’ll see before I doubt” (190). If visual proof leads to doubting, he shall get the real answer, and then either love or jealousy will be ruled out. All in all, Othello’s claims seem fairly logical and well reasoned; however, we know there is a difference between what one claims one will do and what one actually does in a given circumstance.

Assured of Othello’s sensible plan for dealing with perceived infidelity, Iago agrees to speak more openly about Cassio. “Look to your wife,” he challenges. “[O]bserve her well with Cassio; / Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure” (197–198). According to Iago, women don’t choose to refrain from doing immoral acts, they just choose to keep them unknown (203–204). In an attempt to add additional worry on Othello, Iago reminds him of how well Desdemona was able to deceive her father in order to sneak away with Othello himself, subtly echoing the warning issued by Brabantio in Act I, Scene 3: “Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (292–293).

As the scene unfolds, Iago continues to bait Othello, and Othello continues to become more and more enmeshed in Iago’s scheme. By the time Iago prepares to leave, Othello laments, “Why did I marry?” (242). Clearly, Othello has bought in to Iago’s plan and is beginning to open himself to jealousy and its repercussions. “This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds” (242–243), muses Othello, demonstrating the depth of his blindness when it comes to judging character.

Iago, always alert for an opportunity to wreak more havoc, returns to Othello. He lays yet another layer of malice upon the General, suggesting that he not be too quick to meet Cassio. Rather, he suggests that Othello take time and observe his former lieutenant before reconciling (246–249). Knowing full well that Desdemona will continue to champion Cassio, Iago warns Othello to watch for evidence that Desdemona is pressing for Cassio’s reinstatement. “Much will be seen in that,” he wickedly counsels (252).

When Iago exits, Othello is left alone with the newly sprung idea of Desdemona’s infidelity. Othello shows us how fully he has misjudged Iago, validating Iago as being “of exceeding honesty” and a good judge of human character (258–260). Othello’s soliloquy goes on to explore women and their inherently deceitful nature. In fact, he says, qualifying his earlier thoughts, men of position cannot hope to have a faithful wife. It’s “destiny unshamable, like death” (275). Just as he convinces himself of the impossibility of female fidelity, especially for a man of his status, Desdemona enters to call him to dinner. She perceives a hint of illness about him, only to have her suspicions confirmed by Othello himself. She takes her handkerchief to wipe his brow, only to drop it in the process. She and Othello proceed inside, leaving the handkerchief fatefully lying on the ground.

At this moment, Emilia swoops in. She has appeared fairly helpful and good-hearted up to this point. However, once she possesses the handkerchief, she inadvertently brings the story line past the fulcrum point. Rather than taking the handkerchief back to her mistress, whom she knows places special sentimental importance on it, Emilia decides to give it to Othello. He has “a hundred times” (292) asked her to steal it for reasons unbeknownst to Emilia. The handkerchief proves to be exactly the vehicle to drive the tragedy to its inevitable end.

Iago conveniently enters at this point and Emilia suggests that he has “a thing” for him (301). Of course, we know that she means the handkerchief, but Iago does not. He chooses to offer a sexual quibble, suggesting that Emilia’s “thing” is “a common thing” (302), hinting that Iago finds his own wife is no different than a common prostitute, which fits well with many of the anti-feminine sentiments Iago has offered throughout the play. When Emilia says that the “thing” is Desdemona’s handkerchief, Iago’s tone switches. “Hast stol’n it from her?” wonders Iago (310), assuming stealing would be the only way to separate Desdemona from her keepsake. After Emilia’s departure, we finally figure out why Iago has wanted the handkerchief so badly. We know that Othello gave it to Desdemona and that it has great significance to her, but what Iago is really up to has been a mystery — until now. The love token will figure prominently in his plan. In keeping with his devilish nature, he plans to plant the handkerchief where Cassio will find it. Iago understands his prey well, for he knows that on the surface Cassio finding the handkerchief is not significant, but, with a little stage direction, Iago knows that he can get Othello to see things otherwise. As if he knows of what he speaks, Iago reminds us that “Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ” (322–324). Fully aware of the depths of his own villainy, Iago remarks how Othello is already feeling the results of his “poison” (325). The ideas he has planted, he notes, are like poisons in that there is little indication they are there (no taste or smell, like many poisons), but once they’ve been in a person for a while their deadly effects begin to be felt (326–329). Moreover, Iago shows his delight in knowing Othello will never again know the peace-filled sleep of the innocent.

Othello, in one of the most poignant speeches of the play, explains how Iago’s revelation has changed the way he sees the world. Like anyone who has learned something unsavory that he or she wishes had never been learned (and cannot be unlearned, regardless of its validity), Othello remarks how yesterday he hadn’t seen Desdemona as a lustful creature. Yesterday, unlike today and all the days hereafter, Othello slept well, ate well, and possessed a carefree nature. He “found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips” (341). It is better, Othello suggests, to be robbed without knowing, for one will never know what is gone and will therefore be more peaceful. Ignorance, Othello suggests, really is bliss.

As the exchange continues, Othello works himself deeper into despair over what we know to be a fabricated situation. “So I had nothing known,” he says, men of all backgrounds and stations in life could have slept with Desdemona and his life would have continued its peace-filled path. For Othello, it is the idea of possible improvidence that propels him over the edge. Where knowledge is often seen as power, in this instance, knowledge is deadly. Othello continues to rail against his situation in lines 345–357, saying goodbye to all the plenasanties of his life now that he has this new knowledge. On one hand, we feel sorry for him, knowing that he is sinking further into despair, all because of a series of lies and carefully orchestrated tricks. On the other hand, though, we must question Othello’s judgment. He has taken something that was merely a suggestion and has reorganized his whole life around it as if it were truth. Without waiting to ask Desdemona herself whether the allegations were true, he assumes the worst. This scene is also telling because we see how easily Othello, the great military strategist, is swayed, suggesting there are distinct actions for each environment, military and domestic, and Othello is not necessarily aware of the differences. This passage also shows us how quickly marital bonds are overthrown for brotherly ones. Remember that Iago is his comrade in arms.

In a last-chance effort to save himself from believing the worst about his wife, Othello asks Iago to provide him “ocular proof” (360), and if he is not able to do it, Iago would have been better to have been born a dog “Than answer [Othello’s] waked wrath” (362–363). Although in part we can applaud Othello’s attempt, we must also note that he relies on what has proved to be one of the slipperiest issues of the play, “ocular proof.” As the old saying goes, “seeing is believing.” But is what one sees necessarily the truth? Think of Iago, whom we see as a villain, but whom others see as virtuous. How many tricks has he
perpetrated to get someone to believe something that isn’t necessarily true. Iago has relied heavily on words to this point, but he is not beyond concocting the “ocular proof” Othello so desires. He knows, in fact, that he must be able to provide visual evidence to Desdemona’s infidelity or lose his life. The stakes are high, but Iago is ready for the game.

Re-introducing the idea of reputation, Othello laments at what Desdemona’s infidelity will mean to him, if it be true. He will suffer the repercussions of being a cuckold, of having been deceived publicly. Othello hints that he isn’t sure of Desdemona’s true nature anymore: “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not” (384). Shakespeare plays upon the notion of black and white, of light and dark, seemingly merging them together here, having Othello quickly follow his prior comment with a suggestion of Desdemona’s irrefutable guilt. “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (386–388), says Othello, linking the pure Desdemona with Diana, goddess of chastity, and the current Desdemona with impurity, suggesting that she possesses a darkened nature. What this analogy does, however, is subtly reinforce the notion of Othello as growing darker and moving farther and farther from the purity initially embodied in his marriage.

Iago, aware at how fully his plan has ruled Othello, works to move his plan forward to its end beginning in line 391. Under the guise of saving Othello misery, Iago recounts a fully fictitious story of how Cassio had been tossing and turning in his sleep lately, calling out Desdemona’s name and saying how they need to hide their love (419–420). True to course, Othello exclaims that Cassio’s actions while sleeping are only mirroring what he’s doing while awake. Iago admits that Cassio’s dream is a bit suggestive, and when combined with other suspicions, indicates an impropriety may have occurred. Note Iago’s rhetorical skill. He is very sly when it comes to advancing ideas and is able to do so with such skill that he always appears the defender, not the accuser. Note, too, that Othello, who once wooed and won over Desdemona because of his ability to use words, is now bested by the words of another. Whereas Othello’s words brought about a great love, Iago’s words undermine it.

Like a bird of prey going in for one last attack, Iago baits Othello. “Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief / . . . in your wife’s hand?” (435–436), he asks, fully aware of the fabric’s significance to the couple. When Othello admits to knowing the handkerchief, Iago heaps more circumstantial evidence against Desdemona, claiming to see Cassio wiping his beard with it earlier in the day (438–440). Faced with this final detail, Othello admits, “Now do I see ’tis true” (445).

Faced with what he believes to be irrefutable evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity, Othello relinquishes himself of all love for her, turning his attention to revenge. Calling upon the depths of his character, he commands “Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!” (447), once again associating blackness (whether literal or metaphorical) with evil. Othello then delivers his well-known Pontic (or Black) Sea simile wherein he compares his bloody thoughts to the sea that moves steadily forward, “To the Propontic and the Hellespont” (456), the Sea of Marmora and the Dardanelles, respectively. At this point, Othello has now reached the point where he is completely ensnared by Iago. He vows to have his revenge, aided by the dark depths of his inner nature; nothing on earth can stop him. Iago, always the martyr, offers his services to the “wronged Othello” (467). Quick to take Iago up on his offer, the enraged Othello decisively commands Iago to arrange for Cassio’s death within three days time (472–473).

Just as we have seen so many times before, Iago is unwilling to leave the situation alone. He agrees to kill Cassio, but slyly pushes Othello just a bit further. No mention has been made of Desdemona at this point, but Iago pleads for her life (475). Up to this point Othello has not considered ending her life, but Iago offers it as a possibility. Knowing how susceptible Othello is to the power of suggestion, Iago knows there is a chance Othello might act on the idea just touched on by the ensign (promoted to lieutenant by scene’s end). And of course, throughout the latter part of this scene that brought Othello from nobility to deadly jealousy, Iago is able to present himself in such a way that he appears helpful, caring, and innocent. Is it any wonder he is able to convince everyone of his honesty?

**ACT III, SCENE IV**

By the time Scene 4 opens, Othello is firm in his conviction that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair behind his back. Desdemona and Emilia are completely unaware of Othello’s overwhelming jealousy. Equally unbeknownst to them is the fact that Emilia’s husband Iago is at the heart of all the treachery. Desdemona, Emilia, and the Clown open Scene 4, which, in the beginning lines, functions much like Scene 1. The re-appearance of the clown is appropriately timed, providing us with some well-deserved relief after the emotion of the prior scene.

Just as in Scene 1, the Clown shows that he’s a nimble wit, playing and punning on the ladies’ questions. The subject matter of the Clown’s puns, though, is interesting, given what we know about what has been unfolding before us. Desdemona queries as to where Cassio lies (2), only to have the Clown inform her that he doesn’t lie at all. “He’s a soldier, and . . . to say a soldier lies is astabbing” (5–6). Even the Clown knows what the proper behavior of a soldier is — and clearly, what we know of him, Iago doesn’t at all measure up ethically to what a soldier should be. The Clown continues to create an elaborate series of puns, playing upon the double meaning of the word “lie” (as in, rest and tell untruths), until he is finally convinced by Desdemona to find Cassio and tell him that Othello has agreed to see him. Remember, much has happened since Desdemona last saw Othello.

In the exchange that follows, Desdemona unwittingly foreshadows her own difficulties with her concern about her handkerchief. Though she admits that her husband hasn’t a jealous tendency, the loss of her handkerchief would be enough “To put him to ill-thinking” (30). She further backes herself into a corner, resolving not to leave Othello until he agrees to call for Cassio (33–34). Because we are cognizant of the full situation, we realize that Desdemona is about to make a bad thing worse. However, in keeping with all good conjectures, we are unable to do anything to remedy the situation except learn from it and apply the knowledge to our own lives. When Othello sees Desdemona for the first time following the unfolding of Iago’s plan, he tries to maintain an air of normalcy, but the exchange quickly gives way to unpleasant conversation. Still under the veil of propriety and love, Othello examines Desdemona’s hand, only to suggest it is “a liberal hand.” (47) which “argues fruitfulness and liberal heart” (39). When Desdemona asks whether Othello will see Cassio, he pleads illness and asks Desdemona for her handkerchief. When she fails to produce the specific one Othello gave her, here minds her of its importance. The handkerchief, according to the story behind it, traces back to a Gypsy who practiced fortune telling. The handkerchief was imbued with magic, from the silk worms that made the fabric to the prophetess who embroidered it, and losing it could only bring about infidelity and disaster. Othello is quick to remind Desdemona of the power of his gift, hinting strongly at his suspicion that something is amiss without accusing her directly.

Desdemona, no longer able to hide the truth of the handkerchief’s loss from her husband, is aggressively challenged by Othello. Othello becomes more hostile, badgering Desdemona and pressing her for an explanation on the handkerchief’s whereabouts. To try to change the subject, Desdemona makes things even worse by again and again pleading Cassio’s case, until Othello, overcome with his jealous rage, exits. Emilia attempts to calm her young mistress by telling her that Othello’s rage is typical male behavior. Men, she cruelly claims, “are all but stomachs, and we all but food” (105). The men enjoy the women
when the mood strikes them, but when they’ve had their fill, “they belch” the women out (107). This short passage introduces the different perspectives that these women have on men and may also reflect their difference in age. Emilia is more cynical toward men, presumably because she has been married longer.

As Cassio and Iago enter, Cassio addresses Desdemona with regard to her defense of him. He renews his desire to regain his lost position and again serve his beloved Othello. Desdemona informs the men that “My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him / Were he in favor as in humor altered” (125–126). Rather than letting Cassio’s suit drop entirely, Desdemona, still the honorable woman of status, agrees to speak in his favor, but this time qualifies it, noting that she’ll do it when the time is right. As if somehow aware that she’s headed on a journey she’d rather not take, Desdemona notes, “What I can do I will, and more I will / Than for myself I dare. Let that suffice you” (131–132). After Iago exits, Desdemona continues to foreshadow the tragedy ahead, wondering just what has caused such a change in her husband. Something “hath muddled his clear spirit” (144). She continues, speaking more truth than she realizes: “Men’s natures wrangle with inferior things, /Though great ones are their object” (145–146).

On the level that Desdemona is intending, she’s saying that even though big things are Othello’s object — big things such as running the military and governing Cyprus — he’ll worry about small things, such as a lost handkerchief. On another level, though, Desdemona speaks a great deal of truth, although she’s unaware. Othello is wrangling with an inferior thing, the charge of Desdemona’s impropriety. Rather than worrying about the small thing — Desdemona — he should be worrying about the larger issues, the “great ones,” or in other words, Iago. Iago is far more dangerous than Desdemona, but Othello is too blinded by his rage to see that.

As the scene continues, Emilia reveals herself to be more adept at deciphering the situation at hand than her inexperienced mistress. Desdemona is quick to pass off Othello’s behavior as related to business matters, but Emilia is a bit more wary. She urges Desdemona to pray it is state matters that unnerve Othello, “and no conception nor no jealous toy / concerning you” (157–158). When Desdemona defends herself, claiming never to have given Othello reason to be jealous, Emilia, as if she knows from experience, wisely claims “jealous souls will not be answered so; / . . . . . . . / But jealous for they are jealous. ‘Tis a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself” (160–163). As Desdemona prays for the monster of jealousy to leave Othello alone, Emilia echoes her sentiments, yet neither woman is aware that her prayers come too late.

Near the end of the scene, Bianca enters. She is new to the action and is very different from other characters we’ve met. She is Cassio’s mistress and a woman of decidedly lower standing than Desdemona, or even Emilia. Cassio is surprised to see her and throws her a line about being on his way to see her. Bianca, refusing to be taken in by Cassio’s line, says she was on her way to his lodging, as it had been a week since they had seen each other (173–176). And not just a week, but a painfully slow week; time moves more slowly when one is in love (177). Cassio promises to make up his absence to Bianca, making it seem as if he loves her as an equal. But then he hands her Desdemona’s handkerchief and asks her to replicate the work. This simple request suggests that, to Cassio, Bianca isn’t an equal. Rather, she is merely a mistress, fun to be with when the mood strikes, but not the kind of woman one takes as a permanent partner.

Despite Cassio’s treatment of Bianca, she retains a semblance of independence. She is quick to question where Cassio has gotten this handkerchief, assuming rightly that it belongs to another woman (with whom, presumably, Cassio has spent the last week). Cassio, displeased at Bianca’s public accusations, is quick to dismiss the charges — and the charge maker. He notes her jealousy (187), but is quick to dispel it.

What is most curious in this exchange, though, is not that Cassio pacifies Bianca, exactly, but rather how he does it. Cassio tells Bianca he found the handkerchief in his chamber; he liked the design and wanted it copied (189–191). We must remember, though, that this answer is not likely to be completely true. That the handkerchief appeared mysteriously is true, but that he didn’t know whose it was is circumspect. Part of why Desdemona is quick to argue for Cassio, remember, is because he has been a faithful companion to Othello. In fact, all the while that Othello wooed Desdemona, Cassio was nearby, sometimes even serving as a go-between. Even after the two lovers were betrothed Cassio was close at hand. Is there really any way he could not have known that the distinctive handkerchief he found belonged to Desdemona?

Cassio’s awareness of the handkerchief’s true owner raises further questions. Why didn’t he give it back to Desdemona? Why did he want a copy for himself? Signs suggest that perhaps Iago isn’t so far off the mark and that Cassio really does love Desdemona. Of course, the chance exists that he really doesn’t know where the handkerchief came from, but that seems highly improbable given his relationships with Othello and Desdemona.

Although Bianca’s presence in this scene is brief, it is crucial. Bringing Bianca into the story at this point allows Shakespeare to develop several of his key themes more fully and build toward the climax in Act V. First, Bianca’s presence provides another aspect of femininity. Thus far, we have had women represented by Desdemona, an upper-class woman, and Emilia, a middle-class woman. Now we meet Bianca, a prostitute from the lower class. Here and in the following scenes, Bianca helps round out the depiction of women through words and actions which are much different from Desdemona’s and Emilia’s. Notice, for example, the less constrained and measured way in which Bianca responds to various situations. In addition to adding another dimension to the portrayal of womanhood, Bianca helps Shakespeare develop the idea of jealousy. Bianca has an idea that Cassio is seeing another, and she confronts him with it. By the end of this scene, she is somewhat appeased, although her appeasement and passivity will not last long. The point is, though, that Bianca has questions of jealousy and therefore confronts her lover. Othello, on the other hand, has the same sort of questions and is so much more entrenched in what is expected of him that he misses the crucial step of asking his wife of the rumor’s validity.

ACT IV, SCENE I

As we move into Act IV, the action becomes increasingly frantic in its pace. Othello has fallen completely into Iago’s trap and is moving deeper and deeper into jealous rage. As the play heads toward its climax in Act V, we hope for a reversal of where the action seems to be heading. We wish for Iago to be exposed as a villain and Othello to reclaim some of the integrity that made him such a stellar character earlier in the play; but as Scene 1 opens, a peaceable resolution seems less and less likely.

Although we don’t see Othello regaining his former heights, we do see another character transforming. As Iago unfolds more and more of his plot, dragging Othello deeper and deeper into madness, notice how Iago’s strategies change. Whereas he was formerly a bit cautious about setting up his plan — always making sure to show the appropriate public persona and ever so carefully setting his plan in motion — now he becomes outright bold. Clearly he is assured
of Othello’s jealous rage and takes this opportunity simply to reel in his catch. Iago’s speech and innuendo become far more overt in this scene, largely because he knows he can get away with it. He has so ingratiated himself with Othello that he is able to lead this once great man around with ease (linking Othello in some ways, as we will shortly see, with the ineffectual Roderigo).

The opening lines of Scene 1 bring us Othello and Iago in mid-conversation. The nature of the conversation helps us speculate as to what they’ve been discussing: Desdemona. Iago, always looking for a way to hasten Othello’s demise, continues his assault on Othello’s overactive imagination. Iago brings up the issue of kissing in private — remember that kissing in public, out of courtesy, was allowed (remember Cassio’s polite welcome to Desdemona and Emilia) — knowing that the image would unnerve Othello. Iago then develops the image more, adding detail about the alleged lovers’ nakedness. Iago has taken a literary convention and increased its potency by adding the detail of nudity. The convention has lovers accidentally maneuvering into bed — Chaucer and early romance writers were fond of this technique — however, none of the other writers who relied on this technique ever went so far as to mention a state of undress. Othello, aware of this convention, claims that two people cannot lie naked in bed innocently. Even with the most pure of intentions, a man and a woman in bed together will be tempted and will not be strong enough to withstand that temptation.

The devilish Iago, always playing the role of the saint in public, tries to soothe upset Othello. The irony of having the man who is the play’s most morally bankrupt character preach doctrine, however, is not lost on us. Iago tries to defend Desdemona, saying that even though she may be lying in bed with Cassio, if nothing happens “‘tis a venial slip” (10), meaning a pardonable sin as opposed to a mortal sin. Always the clever rhetorician, though, Iago quickly follows up his defense with the introduction of a related, but not yet vocalized, issue: the handkerchief. Knowing full well that Othello is trying to put it out of his mind and that the more forgotten the issue becomes, the more likely Othello is to abandon his rage, Iago suggests that because Desdemona was given the handkerchief, it is thereby hers to give away. Othello’s remarks are not lost on Othello, who is quick to make an analogy between Desdemona giving away the handkerchief (an item she possessed) and Desdemona giving away her honor (also something she possessed). As much as we may dislike Iago, we do have to respect his cunning. He is skilled in rhetoric, seemingly building his case without building a case at all. By introducing the lying in bed scenario, then the handkerchief, then the double meaning of “lie,” and so on, the case is framed more as from the defense than from the prosecution — not an easy feat.

Virtue, replies Iago, is much like reputation, another invisible essence. Whereas the handkerchief is a tangible item — we can see it and touch it — honor is far more slippery. In a statement of self-disclosure (that only we can appreciate, as we’re the only ones who know his true self), Iago suggests that abstract notions, such as virtue, honor, and by extension reputation, are often lauded on people who are not necessarily worthy. Unlike the handkerchief that can be produced and accounted for, abstract ideas cannot, which is, of course, to Iago’s benefit. With further irony, this statement reminds us that Desdemona is being falsely accused and her honor besmirched, while Iago profits from the opposite — everyone sees him as above reproach, although he would never be able to produce evidence of his stature if honor were tangible and measurable.

Iago, always keen on perpetuating his role as loyal friend, quickly reminds Othello that it is better he take his proof from the handkerchief than by other, more painful means. When Othello presses the issue, Iago alludes to Cassio having told tales of his encounters with Desdemona. Always eager to create confusion through the use of ambiguous words, Iago tells Othello that Cassio has said he did “lie . . . with her, on her; what you will” (34).

Two things are interesting in Iago’s statement. First, the way in which the line is delivered suggests an air of flippancy about him. He is fully aware of his words’ impact, yet dismisses them as “what you will,” which is akin to saying “whatever you want.” Whereas Iago, up to this scene, has been pretty careful to play the empathetic friend, reluctantly giving details about the alleged affair, here he abandons these pretensions. He knows that Othello has fallen hopelessly into his trap, and in his arrogance over the approaching fall of Othello, Iago shamelessly begins to show his true colors. He knows, of course, that Othello is so absorbed in his own agony that he won’t even notice. Iago, although central to the action, is becoming more and more a voice in the background, serving in some ways as Othello’s alter ego, a representation of his subconscious mind.

The other interesting thing about Iago’s speech is his choice of words. He purposely uses “lie,” most likely because of its ambiguity, and creates an additional layer of confusion by refusing to specify whether Cassio had lied with Desdemona or on Desdemona. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, when Shakespeare wrote “to lie on,” he could have meant two very different things. First, “to lie on” Desdemona could have meant to tell lies about her, a meaning that is no longer in use.

Second, of course, “to lie on” Desdemona could have been meant in a physical sense, suggesting the adulterous nature of their affair. The audacity of Iago’s suggestion is not lost on Othello who, much like Cassio in Act 2, becomes enraged and loses control. By the end of line 44, Othello is speaking in nonsensical phrases. The man once possessed by supreme eloquence has been reduced to a stammering fool.

Shakespeare’s stage directions at this point note that Othello “falls in a trance,” which is not so much a trance, but an epileptic seizure (51). Iago, seeing what’s happening before him, delights in knowing that he’s responsible for Othello’s growing instability and sardonically urges his “medicine” to continue working (45), thereby destroying Othello and his bride. As he hears another approach, Iago reverts to his public image of loyal friend. Cassio enters, only to find that Othello has “fall’n into an epilepsy” (51).

Although this is news to us, it is not apparently the first time this has happened. Iago reports that it is his second seizure in two days, although we were never privy to this information until now. Cassio’s immediate response is to aid the General (whereas Iago congratulated himself as to his wickedness, rather than helping).

Iago, though, stops Cassio from aiding Othello, claiming that interfering while he is in a seizure just makes things worse. As Othello recovers from his seizure, Cassio is sent away by Iago, with the promise of talking later.

Upon regaining his composure, Othello is still beset by the images that Iago has worked so hard to create. When Iago asks whether he has hurt his head, Othello misinterprets and, plagued by the thought of being cuckolded, assumes Iago refers to horns growing from his head. Cuckolds were often depicted as wearing horns, providing the public with a visual clue that the man had been cuckolded. Being a horned man was the absolute worst humiliation possible.

As we move further into this scene, the power positions are reversed, and Iago clearly holds the upper hand. At one point, Iago must remind Othello to “be a man” (66), revealing the total mastery that he now holds over the once-great Othello (much like the hold that Iago has over Roderigo). In a sense, Othello has fallen as low as Roderigo. Two men, seemingly opposite, now have something crucial in common: Iago’s hold over them.

Othello, so recently hailed as the most valiant, brave, and honorable man in the country, has been entirely “unnammed” by Iago. No longer does he assert his authority, but instead he is put in a passive, so-called womanly role. He is now led, as opposed to leading, suggesting that when it comes to issues in the
domestic sphere, Othello’s inability to relinquish his ability to look at the world through a military paradigm might contribute (in part or full) to his tragic flaw.

Iago, firmly holding the upper hand, gives directions to his feeble follower: Be patient, couch your emotions, don’t reveal all that you know. Iago vows to get Othello the “ocular proof” he demands (Act III, Scene 3, 360), as well as the story of “Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when / He hath, and is again to cope your wife” (86–87). As Othello withdraws to await the developments, Iago prepares to meet Cassio. What Othello doesn’t realize, of course, is that Iago will speak to Cassio of Bianca, not Desdemona. Othello, unaware of the shift in the subject, will assume Cassio speaks of Desdemona and be sent even deeper into the realm of darkness and obsession. Once again Othello will be outwitted by appearances. Just as Iago appears honest,

Cassio will appear dishonest, and Desdemona’s virtue will be implicated in the crossfire. Iago again successfully manipulates those around him by divulging only partial truths, allowing each individual to be moved by what he expects to see or hear. Othello, motivated by poorly intentioned expectations, seethes in the background as Cassio unfolds details of his affair with Bianca (not Desdemona, as Othello thinks). Cassio notes how she dotes on him, but how he shall never marry her because she is a prostitute, and it wouldn’t be fitting. Othello, of course, thinks that Cassio speaks metaphorically about Desdemona. Cassio expresses exasperation, too, at her seeking him out publicly. As Bianca approaches the men, Cassio shows his frustration with her again seeking him out. Clearly, he’s a man with a double standard when it comes to women. Bianca is a fine woman when it suits his needs, but when seeing her isn’t convenient for him, he’s greatly agitated.

As if on cue, Bianca accosts Cassio with the issue of the handkerchief. Bianca has come to the realization that there was more to it than just a nice piece of cloth that Cassio found in his chamber. She berates herself for having been fooled by Cassio into taking “some minx’s token” (154) and refuses to copy the handiwork as Cassio had asked her to do in Act III, Scene 4. Bianca’s outburst is notable because it helps draw the delineations between the classes of women. Bianca is the first woman in this story so far who is willing to confront her partner when she is not fully pleased with a situation. On the one hand, to us this reaction may seem a positive, modern trait. At the time of the play’s original production, though, such an outburst from a woman would work to reinforce the stereotypes of the lower class as cluister and less refined than their social superiors. Bianca would be seen as unruly, rather than independent.

Regardless of how she is seen, Bianca provides a third perspective to the idea of womanhood that Shakespeare presents. She may be of a lower social station, but she has integrity and is willing to confront issues rather than dance around them as so many of her social superiors do. She is more direct and refuses to play as many games as others in the story, setting up a nice contrast and reflecting quite positively on the average people. In Othello, the social elite are too caught up in projecting public images that they make more trouble for themselves than if they were direct and spoke from the heart. We also see that Bianca, despite her secondclass social status, has a great concern for her honor and her reputation. It’s not just the social elite who have need to worry about such things, but so, too, do common everyday people. Although this may seem absurd to those of the higher social order, for Bianca and all the people like her, issues of integrity are very real. Her interest in such intangible concerns adds to her appeal, despite her minor role.

As Cassio follows Bianca, Othello emerges from the shadows. His first words provide a clue as to just how far into madness and jealous rage our hero has sunk: “How shall I murder him, Iago?” (173). Othello, who in the scene prior had instructed Iago to oversee Cassio’s murder, has now taken up the cause himself. Interestingly, though, in keeping with the dependent status to which Iago has relegated him, the great warrior Othello asks Iago for advice. The resulting conversation (179–199) takes our story perilously close to farce, largely because of Othello’s unaccountable flip-flop in how he sees Desdemona. Up to this point, he had been cursing her for her alleged actions. Once he sees how Cassio is apparently using her (valuing her love token so little as to give it to Bianca), Othello begins to see Desdemona as “A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!” (182). Iago is quick to end this romantic train of thought, though, and Othello resolves that “she shall not live” (185). When Othello again slips into praising Desdemona, Iago again reminds him, “Nay, that’s not your way” (189). So why would Othello change his side and defend Desdemona? In large part, the switch demonstrates Othello’s precarious mental state. His ability to reason soundly has diminished greatly (again moving him from a masculine to a feminine position, at least for Shakespeare’s original audience). Also, Othello’s rashness sets a precedent and paves the way for the fatal rashness that he will unleash in the final act.

Iago, able to rouse Othello from his romantic reveries, convinces him that Desdemona must be killed. Othello, fully enraged and devoid of his sensible faculties, bellows “I will chop her into messes!” (203) and proposes to poison her “lest her body and beauty unprovided [his] mind again” (208–209). Iago, largely to see just how far he can take his plan, and also because it will make Othello alone the perpetrator, revises Othello’s plan. Rather than poison, Iago instructs Othello to take matters into his own hands, literally, and slanguish Desdemona “in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (210–211). The Old Testament, eye-for-an-eye, retribution of the whole scenario pleases Othello, not unlike how the wife-for-a-wife retribution that Iago introduced at the end of Act II, Scene 1 pleases him.

After Iago and Othello clarify their murderous plans, envos from Venice arrive, escorted to Othello by Desdemona. The presence of Lodovico, Desdemona’s uncle, and his entourage helps to reconnect Othello and Desdemona with Italy — supposedly a more refined and civilized place than Cyprus. For the audience, their presence will hopefully serve a moderating effect, pulling Othello away from his animal rage and reminding him of the civility and propriety expected from a man of his rank. Lodovico’s appearance at this point in the play may seem odd, but in terms of plot development, it wouldn’t have worked as well to have him arrive sooner. Part of his function is to serve as a representative of “civilization.” Had he come earlier in the play, the contrast between Lodovico and Othello would not have been nearly so great, hence we would not be able to gauge just how far Othello has fallen since his last appearance at court. As it is, when set beside Lodovico, Othello comes off as decidedly dark and base, reflecting the depths to which he has sunk. Additionally, Lodovico is part of the falling plot line and, as we know, this is a domestic tragedy, so he must not figure prominently in the story’s action. As Desdemona fills her uncle in on the falling out between Cassio and Othello, Othello reads the paper that Lodovico was sent to deliver. The paper, it turns out, calls Othello home to Venice, leaving Cassio to govern Cyprus in his absence.

Whether Desdemona is to go with Othello or stay in Cyprus is not disclosed. Desdemona casually remarks that she is glad for the letter’s news, but Othello takes this as a declaration that she is happy to have him leave her and have Cassio ascend to a position of greater power. We’ve no way of knowing what she meant in her remark, but can surmise that she meant it quite innocently. Regardless, she was hated to lose either way. When Othello becomes so enraged by her innocent remarks that he strikes her with his hand, his jealousy has become so overbearing that he has lost all sight of propriety and has crossed over an important line of decorum from which he may never return. Lodovico, justifiably shocked with what he has just witnessed, quickly and forcefully condemns Othello’s actions, contrasting his apparent lawlessness in Cyprus with the valiant and honorable way he presented himself in Venice.

As Lodovico attempts to extract an explanation from Othello, Othello slanders Desdemona as a whore, then commands her to leave. Upon her exit, Othello continues his tirade, attempting to regain some sense of composure, but failing. Lodovico, the extension of orderly Venice, can’t believe what he sees. That Othello would change so drastically in such a short time is beyond his comprehension. We would agree that such a change is drastic, but it is also a testament
to how quickly one’s jealousies may destroy one. In addition, Othello’s rapid decline also serves to heighten the tragic effect of this story. For one so great to fall so far, so quickly, is even more tragic and unexpected than had his fall happened more gradually.

ACT IV, SCENE II

Whereas the preceding scene ends with Othello’s rage exposed in public, Act IV, Scene 2 takes us from a public to a domestic space. While this change of scenery is seemingly insignificant, it plays an important role in helping us understand the character of Othello. We’ve just seen how Othello behaves in public, where one is supposed to curb one’s actions and conduct business within the bounds of public decorum. However, Othello, as we have seen, is beyond any sense of decorum and is so consumed by the monstrous rage within him that he can no longer control himself or his actions.

This scene opens in an even more private setting, the interior of the castle. We must wonder just what Othello might do, given the removal of this public element that in an earlier time may have kept him and his emotions in check. However, we’ve seen how he actually responded in public; what could happen now that Desdemona is outside the protection afforded her by the public eye?

The scene opens with Othello questioning Emilia as to what she may have seen or heard that would further incriminate her mistress, Desdemona. Emilia, with great devotion, assures Othello that Desdemona has never participated in any impropriety whatsoever. Othello cannot believe what he’s being told, but rather than use Emilia’s revelations to question his own position, he sends for his wife. Othello rationalizes Emilia’s responses, claiming that Desdemona must be a particularly crafty infidel, to have pulled off her indiscretions without arousing the least suspicion in her lady-in-waiting. It seems ironic that Othello, lauded earlier for his judgment, blindly accepts lies from Iago, his supposedly (but falsely) devoted ensign, but remains skeptical of truths told by Emilia, Desdemona’s genuinely devoted lady-in-waiting.

When Desdemona enters, she senses at once that something is amiss. She questions Othello about what is putting “a fury” in his words (32). As Emilia leaves the two alone, Desdemona is confused as to her husband’s state, but despite his striking her publicly, she exhibits valor. Her lack of fear of being alone with Othello reflects positively on her dedication to duty and her office. As much as modern readers may not see that as a positive trait, to the people in Shakespeare’s day, Desdemona’s adherence to duty speaks highly of her nature. She knows how a woman of her rank and position is supposed to react and attempts to fulfill her role valiantly, despite the apparent imbalance in her husband. As Othello’s wrath grows, he gets increasingly rough in his speech and in his actions. Though Desdemona continues to question what may be wrong with him, she swears to her charity and honor, eliciting Othello’s simple, yet closed-minded reply: “Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell” (39). Desdemona, trying to make sense of what she’s seeing before her, wonders whether Othello blames her father for his husband back to Venice. He’s not to be blamed, she claims, because he is dead and is therefore not responsible for the decisions of the council (44–47).

Unwilling to be calmed by Desdemona, Othello continues his tirade, cursing Desdemona and wishing, “would thou had’st ne’er been born!” (69). Othello continues to disparage Desdemona, furiously claiming that she is a “public commoner” (73) and an “impudent strumpet” (81). Desdemona, entirely unaware as to what has beset her formerly noble husband, tries to defend her good name, only to have Othello heap more insults on her, calling her a “cunning whore” (89) and a gatekeeper of hell (92) before leaving the stage. Emilia returns, and the two awestruck women try to decipher what they have just seen.

Desdemona, for the first time, sets aside her sense of duty in favor of personal integrity. When Emilia asks how her “lord” does (98), Desdemona refuses to acknowledge Emilia means Othello. The action has reached the point where Desdemona can no longer sit back and passively wait for Othello to return to his senses. Whereas the beginning of the scene marked Desdemona’s willingness to adhere to duty, she has now set duty aside, albeit only momentarily. In so doing, she reinforces herself as a strong character, aware that a limit exists to what one is expected to do in the name of duty. Desdemona informs Emilia that she has no lord (102) because he has not at all acted as a lord should act. Directly after this comment though, Desdemona reclaims her mantle of duty, ordering Emilia to “Lay on my bed my wedding sheets” (105) and call Iago to join them for a conference.

Much debate has centered on the meaning of Desdemona’s call for her wedding sheets. Some scholars speculate that Desdemona wishes the wedding sheets to be set out as a reminder to Othello of how much he loved her just a short time ago when they were wed. Others speculate that the wedding sheets remind us that Othello and Desdemona have not yet consummated their marriage. Despite the party in honor of the marriage in Act II, some critics offer that the lovers keep being interrupted, so no consummation has occurred. They also claim that wedding sheets were of no sentimental value and were therefore discarded after the consummation of their marriage. If this is true, then Desdemona is a virgin and is, in fact, tacitly offering Othello a means of testing her fidelity. She can, in short, provide physical evidence that she has not been unfaithful. Finally, other critics contend that Desdemona’s call for her wedding sheets is an omen of the tragedy to come, as wives were occasionally buried in their wedding sheets.

Iago arrives and is filled in on what has transpired between Othello and Desdemona. Not surprisingly, Iago plays the innocent and rails against Othello for his actions, claiming ignorance in what has caused him to behave in such a terrible way. Emilia, ironically prophetic in her words, cries out, “I will be hanged if some eternal villain / Some busy and insinuating rogue, / Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office, / Have not devised this slander” (130–133). Of course, we realize that she has pegged the situation entirely. Iago, though, attempts to redirect her line of reasoning, claiming, “Fie, there is no such man! It is impossible” (134). Desdemona, true to her virtuous nature, begs heaven to pardon whomever would do such a thing (135). Emilia, though, demonstrates her distance from Desdemona when she curses the man who has brought about this whole ordeal (36). Much to her credit, Emilia is not easily dissuaded from her line of reasoning and curses the “villainous knave” (139), the “notorious knave,” and “scurvvy fellow” (140) who has had a hand in these affairs, asking heaven to reign down punishment upon him (141–144).

When cautioned by Iago to curb her emotions, Emilia inadvertently discloses a very interesting piece of evidence that helps us to get a further explanation of Iago. When warned to quiet herself, Emilia reminds Iago of a situation not unlike the one they’re dealing with. In explaining that this work could only have been perpetrated by a very bad man, Emilia reminds Iago “some such squire he was / That turned your wit the seamy side without / And made you to suspect me with the Moor” (145–147). Clearly, Iago has been in Othello’s situation before, perhaps accounting for why he could so expertly set his trap. Having been trapped once himself, he knew precisely what would make a man insanely jealous, goading Othello just as he had been goaded himself. Emilia’s claims also tend to discount — or at least diminish — Iago’s rationale for tormenting Othello. According to Emilia, nothing happened between her and Othello. Apparently Iago, despite having gotten over the worst of his jealousy, hasn’t dismissed it completely; his suspicions still feed his anger, providing him with motive (however well or ill-founded) for lashing out at Othello.
Desdemona continues to replay the situation for Iago, all the while professing her innocence in the matter and her love for Othello, despite his allegations, which wound her deeply. As Desdemona and Emilia exit, Roderigo enters the stage. We have not seen this Venetian gentleman for a long while; he has just drifted into the background. His appearance at line 172 reminds us of all the implications of Iago’s plans and forces us to consider exactly how all the branches of the plan will synthesize as we move toward the play’s conclusion. In addition, Roderigo’s appearance reminds us that the fateful conclusion is about to begin. In this respect, Roderigo serves a purpose not unlike Laertes does in Hamlet (Laertes returns after an absence to play a pivotal role in the tragedy). That is not to say Roderigo is like Laertes, he merely serves a similar purpose (albeit in a much smaller scope).

In lines very reminiscent of the lines that opened the play, Roderigo charges Iago with having dealt with him unfairly (173). Every day, he explains in 175–180, Iago has tricked him with some sort of diversion that, rather than helping move him toward his goal (Desdemona), has moved him further and further away. Roderigo, showing more backbone than in any of his previous scenes, correctly labels Iago as being opposite in what he says and what he does. His “words and performance are no kin together” (183). Despite objections from Iago in his own defense, Roderigo continues to unravel the situation. He (rightly) alleges that Iago has taken all the jewels he has been sending to Desdemona and pocketed them himself. Roderigo has finally realized that the only thing he is getting from Iago is poorer. He vows to confront Desdemona and ask for the return of his jewels, strongly suspecting that she won’t know what he’s talking about. If Desdemona returns the jewels, Roderigo will renounce his pursuit, but if she doesn’t know anything about the jewels, Roderigo will seek out and punish Iago.

Confronted with the truth from this most unlikely source, Iago has to once again extrapolate himself from a potentially sticky situation. He appeals to Roderigo’s considerable ego, noting, “I see there’s mettle in thee; and even from this instant do build on thee a better opinion than ever before” (204–206). He reiterates that he has dealt fairly with the Venetian gentleman, but strokes his ego again by applauding him for his “wit and judgment” (212) in suspecting foul play. In a last attempt to bring Roderigo back to his dependent status, Iago promises that if Roderigo helps him out with one last thing, he will lie with Desdemona by the next night, or Iago will repel Roderigo by sacrificing his life. Roderigo, always the dupe when it comes to matters involving Desdemona, accepts this latest bit of questionable logic and prepares for his assignment.

Iago spins yet another lie, telling Roderigo that Othello has been called to Mauritania, the homeland of the North African Moors. We know, of course, that Iago is lying, because Othello has been called back to Venice, not to North Africa. By offering this lie, though, Iago has subtly placed pressure on Roderigo to act just the way he wants. If he told him that Othello and Desdemona were headed back to Venice, Roderigo’s likely response would have been to pack up and head back with them, able to carry on his pursuit of Desdemona back in familiar territory. By telling Roderigo that the couple is headed to Mauritania, though, Iago creates a more urgent situation. Roderigo is less likely to pursue Desdemona in North Africa without being completely conspicuous. In essence, by going to Mauritania, Desdemona would be beyond his reach. He must act now to prevent the couple traveling to a distant land — and how better to do it than follow Iago’s plan. Othello is only able to leave because Cassio is qualified to take over the governorship. So, of course, the obvious thing to do is remove Cassio, thereby forcing Othello to stay and rule Cyprus, in turn keeping Desdemona near by Roderigo. Iago briefs Roderigo as to Cassio’s evening plans, suggesting that he will join Cassio as the evening unfolds, and when the two return home from Bianca’s, Roderigo can wage his assault. Iago clearly points out, too, that killing Cassio at this time is the perfect plan in that Iago will be right there to back Roderigo up, if need be. As the scene ends, Roderigo hints he’ll need a bit more convincing to carry out this deed, but Iago, always sure of himself, confidently claims Roderigo’s doubt “shall be satisfied” (245).

ACT IV, SCENE III

Act IV, Scene 3 is not a particularly long scene, but it does much to develop one of the play’s key issues: the moral differences between men and women. Up to this point, we have heard much from the men, especially Iago, on the subject of women. Women are either praised unduly and objectified as superhuman and divine or are slandered as lusty, lascivious, and disloyal. The women, of course, have not been in a position to defend themselves against these verbal attacks, but they have been able to demonstrate their positions somewhat through their actions.

We have seen how Shakespeare has set up three different types of women (the gracious noble woman, the helpful but shrewd middle-class woman, and the socially unacceptable prostitute). This scene, though, moves us inward, finally giving us a chance to learn more about Desdemona and Emilia and how they feel about the world around them. Through careful character development, Shakespeare is able to take what had heretofore been a suggestion of differences between women of differing classes and ages and develop it into a much more substantial discussion.

As the scene opens, Othello, Desdemona, and the visiting Venetian dignitaries have just finished dinner. Othello invites Lodovico to join him for a brief walk and then turns to Desdemona with the order “Get you to bed on th’instant; I will be returned forthwith” (7–8). He adds one additional instruction: “Dismiss your attendant there” (8). Why Othello wishes her to do this is unclear, but calling for Emilia’s removal is decidedly out of the ordinary, foreshadowing that something is at hand.

Left alone, Emilia and Desdemona conduct the only exclusively female conversation in the play. In their discussion, Emilia remarks how relieved she is that Othello seems more in control of his faculties, but she adds a belated wish that Desdemona had never met Othello. Despite all that has happened to and around her, Desdemona quickly notes that she loves Othello so completely, faults and all, that she would never wish such a thing. What would cause Desdemona to defend her attacker? How are we supposed to respond to this news? Largely, her defense is motivated by two things: the fact that she herself chose Othello and her social status. In Desdemona’s mind, a lady must always fulfill her duties and obligations, no matter the cost. Although Desdemona’s defense of Othello makes us dislike her on one level — we want her to be more modern and take control of her life — we must respect her on another. She is fulfilling her responsibility as a woman of means. In addition, especially for an Elizabethan audience, Desdemona’s devotion adds to her purity — whiteness, if you will — hence compounding the tragedy that is to come.

As the two women prepare for Desdemona to retire for the night, they enter into a private discussion. Desdemona is obviously not herself, as witnessed by her discussion of the song of the willow once sung by her mother’s maid Barbary (whose name is, of course, reminiscent of the Barbary coast, native land of the Moors). The story of Barbary is hauntingly close to Desdemona’s own story, although she has no way of knowing it. Like Desdemona, Barbary had a lover who went mad and left her, just as Othello has taken leave of his better judgment and withdrawn from Desdemona. In her despair, Barbary sang the song of the willow, which “expressed her fortune” (29) and was on her lips as she died. Desdemona remarks that the song “Will not go from my mind” (31), though she knows not why. In fact, she says, it’s all she can do to keep from hanging her head in despair with the weight of Barbary’s story. Of course,
because we are in on all of the play’s intrigues, we can see how Desdemona’s inability to escape Barbary’s story (and the song of the willow) functions as a foreshadowing device.

The song itself is not a creation of Shakespeare’s. The “Willow Song” had been around in many forms before it was incorporated into this play. The willow tree is historically associated with sorrow, due to its long, flowing branches (the weeping willow). The lyrics of the song offer another good fit with Desdemona’s situation. She sings of a male lover who is untrue, causing the woman in the song (Desdemona, by extension) great grief. The song couldn’t be more aptly suited to Desdemona’s situation and seems strangely prophetic, casting an eerie mood on the play’s action.

After Desdemona has sung Barbary’s song, the scene moves in to another phase. Beginning with line 59, the dialogue turns into a fairly frank discussion of men and women. Desdemona, the younger of the two, asks Emilia a series of questions related to the roles men and women must fill in a marriage, indicating her youthful inexperience in them. Their discussion, particularly as it relates to the various aspects of womanhood, picks up on a debate that has had prominence since the fifteenth century. The debate over women has raged for years with much published on both sides of the issue. The anti-feminists offer the typical objections — that women are dishonest by nature, insatiable, and lose in their words, bodies, and morals, and therefore undeserving of any autonomy. The opposition claims that women qualify masters of their houses and their lives and that they should hold the primary power in a relationship.

The discussion between Emilia and Desdemona somewhat reflects this social debate, plus it keeps the theme of infidelity going in the story line, just at a different level this time. Desdemona, maintaining the “women as second-class citizens” perspective of the status quo, comes across as a naïve, passive, docile creature ready to do as her husband wishes. Emilia, on the other hand, presents herself as a woman who has learned much from the world. She is older and wiser than her mistress and is a proponent of women’s autonomy, despite sometimes buckling under Iago’s wishes. Through the ensuing dialogue, we see that she is willing to hold herself to the same standard to which men are held.

Desdemona begins the debate by asking Emilia whether women can ever abuse their husbands. Emilia responds affirmatively. When asked if she would ever be unfaithful, Emilia responds to the question with a question, asking “Why, would not you?” (63). Desdemona appears shocked at the suggestion and reiterates her question. Emilia provides a hint to her nature (and to her possessing a sense of humor) when she agrees “Nor I neither, by this heavenly light,” although her afterthought suggests that in the dark, she might consider a tryst (65–66). When Desdemona questions Emilia if she would abuse her husband “for all the world” (67), Emilia shows her jaded perspective on marriage while widening the gap between her and Desdemona, claiming that “The world’s a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice” (68). Emilia, it turns out, would be unfaithful if the price is right. Whether her opinion is precipitated by an unhappy marriage is unclear, but what is sure is that she does not function under an unrealistic, romantic notion of love and she is not above using herself for gain. In her mind, a small indiscretion is understandable, for the right price.

Emilia operates from a different moral system than Desdemona who is still youthful and ignorant of the darker side of life. Emilia’s logic tells her that infidelity is a worldly wrong, but if one were to receive the world for one’s participation, that infidelity is thereby a wrong in one’s world, and if one owns the world, one might set any standards one wishes and quickly make things right. Desdemona shows her ignorance when she questions the existence of such women. Emilia suggests that such women do exist, and they’re more common than Desdemona would like to think. She adds, however, an extra twist to the argument, laying blame for any woman’s indiscretions solidly on the man’s back (a tactic prominent in Iago’s invective against women earlier). If men have extramarital affairs or become overly jealous, women have a right to be upset. According to Emilia, women even have the right to revenge (92). At this point, Emilia turns to all the husbands, warning them that despite what they might want to believe, “Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell, / And have their palates both for sweet and sour, / As husbands have” (93–95). Emilia is a savvy woman of the world and knows that women aren’t meant to be passive, but are fully capable of all things men are capable of — both good and bad (94–100).

By introducing this private dialogue at this point in the play’s action, Shakespeare accomplishes several things. First, he keeps the infidelity theme going strong, lest we redirect our focus. However, not only do we see Desdemona and Emilia discussing whether or not infidelity is ever warranted, we also see Desdemona in action, defending Othello staunchly, thereby aligning herself with unmistakable fidelity. Unlike Iago, for example, who only says what will benefit him at the time, regardless of whether he means it, Desdemona truly does love Othello. Next, this scene helps to build the proper emotional platform necessary in order for the final act to be successful. Without this scene, we might remain interested in Desdemona, but we would be oddly detached from her, making the last act hard to believe. When contrasted to Emilia’s worldliness and bitterness toward marriage (and after all, experience is the best teacher), Desdemona comes off as even more “white,” “light,” and “pure” than before. Desdemona’s innocence and blind love is showcased in this episode, and because of that we grieve all the more at her senseless death in the play’s final scene.

ACT V, SCENE I

By the time we get to Act V, the end of the story is fast approaching. The story has been outlined for us and what remains is to find out whether the story will resolve itself happily or not. Will Iago’s scheming bring about Othello’s complete destruction? The denouement is near. Iago and Roderigo take the stage with the intention of carrying out their planned attack on Cassio (Act IV, Scene 2). Iago, always Roderigo’s master, reminds him of the plan: When Cassio appears, Roderigo must surprise him and stab him fatally with his rapier. As if Iago knows of Roderigo’s tendency not to follow through with plans (remember how Iago had to help Roderigo rout Brabantio and how he had to help him start the fight that ended in Cassio’s demotion), he reminds Roderigo that he will be right there to assist and that Roderigo must “fix most firm [his] resolution” (5). Roderigo himself knows that he often stands back in the face of adversity. He justifies his hesitancy to carry out the deed, noting that he has “no great devotion to the deed” (8), although Iago has filled him with “satisfy ingreasons” (9).

While Roderigo prepares for Cassio’s attack, Iago hides himself away and reminiscences on the whole situation. Clearly, he has not grown any fonder of Roderigo, despite his apparent earlier display of manhood (11–12). In Iago’s aside, we learn the true reason why he favors a fight between Cassio and Roderigo. In his mind, whatever should happen will result in his profit. A perfect ending, in Iago’s view, would be for both men to kill each other. In lieu of that, he would accept one man killing the other. If Roderigo kills Cassio, Iago reasons, Cassio is removed from the picture entirely, and Iago’s initial plan will have been fulfilled. If Cassio kills Roderigo, however, he cannot demand of Iago the jewels he has siphoned from him (14–16). However, Cassio can continue to live with “a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly” (19–20), and an off chance exists that Othello would reconcile with him, and Iago’s
tricks would be found out. Clearly, this is a fate worse than the foppish Roderigo demanding the return of his jewels. Iago is aware of how much is at stake and comes to the conclusion that at all costs, Cassio must die.

At this point, it appears that Iago can sink no lower. He’s debating the value of two men’s lives based completely on how he would profit personally from each man’s death. His regard for human life is absent, moving him out of the realm of the humanly and relegating him to the realm of the animals. How ironic that he tried to make Othello appear an animal, calling him “an old black ram” and “a Barbary horse,” when all along, he himself was the animal.

As Cassio approaches, Roderigo lunges at him. Not surprisingly, Roderigo is unable to connect with Cassio. The thickness of Cassio’s coat protects him and deflects Roderigo’s thrust. Nowhere in the story has Roderigo been able to pull off one plan, and this is no exception. After he begins his attack at line 23, Roderigo himself is wounded within three lines, without inflicting any wound on his intended target. Also true to Roderigo’s nerveless nature, his wound receives immediate claims of “I am slain!” (26). At this point Iago has to again step in and take matters into his own hands, sneaking into the scuffle from behind and wounding Cassio in the leg (a very cowardly and underhanded maneuver) and then sneaking off stage (even more cowardly). Cassio, like Roderigo exits the stage amidst cries of murder (remember that Cassio has only once seen battle). The fact that Roderigo and Cassio both exhibit signs of “unmanliness” is also interesting. Neither men have been tested in battle and when their weaknesses surface they are both revealed as ineffectual warriors. Roderigo’s botched attack on Cassio is also important because it shows how the world of Cyprus has undergone a complete turnabout since the soldiers arrived in Act II. Cyprus has moved from a peaceful land delivered from war into prosperity to a land where murderers lurk in the shadows just waiting to spring on their prey and men are easily manipulated, largely because of their own.

Othello, who was once the peacekeeper and valiant warrior, is delighted to hear Cassio’s cries of pain. Further demonstrating his lapse in judgement, he turns to “brave Iago, honest and just” (31), remarking how well he has taught Othello to deal with infidels. Othello then turns to speak to an absent Desdemona, telling her of Cassio’s alleged demise and forecasting the fury that he intends to unleash upon her (33–36). Iago’s revenge is nearly complete as we witness the once noble Moor journey from valiancy to vengeance. His wrath, in essence a direct result of Iago’s carefully placed lies, is nearly at its peak here. Any ability to reason has been discarded along the wayside, and we are left to wonder about Othello’s descent. Because he falls so far so quickly, the tragic element of this story is heightened, urging us to examine our own lives. If the great Othello can be so easily manipulated, what remains for us?

Othello leaves, presumably to find Desdemona in their bed chamber, while Lodovico and Gratiano, the two Venetian noblemen sent to convey Othello home in Act IV, Scene 1 enter. Cassio has also returned and, still riled by what has happened to him, cries foul play in front of the Venetians. Roderigo, too, lies on the stage wounded and howling in pain. Iago enters, and as we have seen him do so many times before, he plays the innocent, the peacekeeper, wondering what has transpired. He assists Cassio in fielding a barrage of questions related to the act that has just taken place and attempts to cover his tracks by cursing the perpetrator, whom Cassio points out as Roderigo (which also tells us Cassio doesn’t have great military strength — he is unable to pinpoint his real attacker). Iago, still playing loyal to the lieutenant rather than Roderigo, uses this opening to finish off Roderigo. “O mur’drous slave! O villain!” (62) Iago cries just before stabbing Roderigo. Roderigo, taken off guard by Iago’s betrayal, cries out at the “inhuman dog” (62), again linking Iago aptly with the animal realm.

At this point, it is worthwhile to assess how Iago’s plan is proceeding. Earlier, Iago noted that he’d be glad to see either Roderigo or Cassio die in their altercation, although Cassio was his preferred victim. Iago makes sure Roderigo is dead, but the man he most wishes to die, Cassio, still lives. Although Iago gives no indication, perhaps his plan has begun to go awry. As spectators, we must wonder if Cassio’s escaping death reflects a larger tide turning. Can Othello, too, escape Iago’s clutches?

Worried that other murderers may be lurking in the shadows, Iago turns on the Venetians, neither of whom he can see clearly (although he must surely know they’re there; he was, after all, watching from the shadows and would likely have seized the opportunity to kill Cassio, had they been alone). As he informs the Venetians what has transpired, he turns to Cassio, whom he now addresses as “brother” (72). As he turns to help Cassio, Bianca enters and rushes to Cassio’s side, lamenting the horror unfolding before her.

Iago uses Bianca’s presence as a means to defame her and implicate her in this terrible crime. Having her around is dangerous. After all, she could inform Othello that Cassio was her lover, not Desdemona’s, although the word of a prostitute could easily come into question. As Iago sets out to defame Bianca, he curtly explains that he is Cassio’s dear friend, implying that as such he has every right to inquire into what happened. Bianca, not surprisingly, is becoming faint because of what she has witnessed, and Iago is quick to exploit it. He turns to her accusingly, wondering what is making her so pale, and suggests that, if they watch her closely, they shall receive a confession as to her intimate involvement in the scheme.

At this point Emilia enters, providing another female presence. Iago briefly fills her in on what has happened: Cassio has been attacked and wounded by Roderigo (now dead) and his accomplices. Bianca and Emilia exchange a few short words with Bianca defending herself and her honor, claiming to be as honest as Emilia, only to have Emilia raise her hands in disgust. Oddly enough, though, we must question the validity of Emilia’s air of superiority. After all, she thinks there is a world of difference between her and Bianca, yet earlier she exclaimed “Alas, good gentlemen! Alas, good Cassio!” (115), linking Iago and Cassio both as exemplary men, which, of course, we know they both are not. Further, although here she seems to dismiss Bianca as lowly, largely because of her status, in Act IV, Scene 3 she told Desdemona that taking lovers was acceptable, as long as one profited well by it. Clearly, Emilia isn’t the best judge of character and is not too fond of looking below the surface.

As the scene ends, Iago sends Emilia to inform Othello and Desdemona of what has happened. He knows fully that his plan is approaching its end, and he will either be successful in destroying those around him, or he will be found out and punished accordingly. Regardless of the outcome, Iago forges ahead with full resolve, never wavering in his villainous convictions.

**ACT V, SCENE II**

As the final scene of Othello opens, we move to the play’s climax. The scenes have been moving steadily inward in location, until we now reach Desdemona and Othello’s bedchamber. The early public scenes of Acts I and II have become increasingly more private, until at this culmination scene, we enter the most private of all places. As the latter acts of the play unfold, we have seen Othello unable to control himself in public. Now that the action has turned decidedly private, we must wonder again whether he will be unable to exercise restraint. If he was bold enough to strike Desdemona in public, what might he do to her in private?
Notice, too, how well this movement of scene parallels the movement of the action. It is as if we are moving deeper into Othello’s mind as we move deeper into the castle. As the setting becomes more private, Othello’s struggles become more and more personal. The tragedy of Othello is largely a private one—a man consumed by his personal jealousies, rage, and some would say, his feeling of being an outsider.

Desdemona sleeps as Othello enters the bedchamber. Addressing the “chaste stars,” (2) he laments that “It is the cause, it is the cause” (1). In this context, Othello is speaking in characteristically legal terms, with “the cause” meaning “the cause for action.” As we have seen Othello do many times before, though, our protagonist resists naming the impetus for his action directly. His ambiguous use of language makes us wonder what, exactly, is the cause. Is it chastity? Purity? The good of the world in general? He goes on to note, “Yet I’ll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (3–5). Othello, who was originally firm in his resolve, now begins to question his actions after seeing Desdemona. Curiously, Othello doesn’t pause because of any acute qualms at what he intends to do. In his mind, he is clearly in the right. Instead, Desdemona’s beauty charms him, and he hesitates.

Desdemona’s beauty has only a limited effect on him, however. He snaps out of his moment of hesitation only to remember that to him, her beauty has caused all this trouble. For Othello, Desdemona’s physical beauty cannot be separated from her likelihood of being unfaithful. Although we know better than to think that because someone is beautiful that she or he is an infidel, in Othello’s mind the two are, and always will be, synonymous. Clearly, Othello is still thinking in terms of black and white. He is rigid in his beliefs, regardless of how ill-founded they are. As a good military leader, Othello carried stringent paradigms that likely served him well when executive decisions needed to be made. Unfortunately, as we see in this scene, in the private, domestic sphere, things are much more gray than they are black or white.

As Othello continues his monologue, his speech becomes more and more complex. As if he is having difficulty coming to terms with the dire situation in which he finds himself, he speaks figuratively of Desdemona and his plans. Early in the speech, he equates her with an alabaster monument (the kind one might see on a tomb, perhaps), and a flickering flame. By the middle, he adds in to the equation the image of Desdemona as a rose, and then later brings in Desdemona as a foil to Justice (showing us, too, that Othello sees himself as entirely blameless in what he is about to undertake. In his mind, he is merely fulfilling a role as administrator of justice). Further complicating the speech, Othello introduces an acute sense of smell. We really get a sense of Desdemona’s vitality from the sensory images in Othello’s soliloquy. Othello’s momentarily wavering also helps us see that what he is about to do is not entirely a snap judgment on his part. He has reasoned it out and decided to go ahead with his deed. The time it takes for him to reason out what he will do, too, increases our suspense and makes us hope Othello will once again regain his former faculties, and the story will resolve happily.

This sense of hope is sustained when Desdemona awakens and enters into dialogue with Othello. She tries to minimize the distance that has recently arisen between husband and wife by trying to carry on as normal, and logic were not considered appropriate thinking in terms of black and white. As Othello continues his monologue, his speech doesn’t pause or hesitate—makes us wonder if he is about to do. If he can make Desdemona confess to the crime for which she stands accused, Othello will once again regain his former faculties, and the story will resolve happily.

What is it, though, that makes Othello so blatant about his intention? Clearly, he again sees himself as blameless in the crime he is about to commit. In dispensing what he sees as deserved justice, he is essentially saving Desdemona from herself. By allowing her the opportunity to clear her soul, he is hoping to be able to send her spirit to heaven. Contrast Othello’s desire for Desdemona’s reconciliation with God to Hamlet’s refusal to kill his Uncle Claudius while he is (supposedly) in prayer. Hamlet resists the chance to kill his enemy at this point because he does not want to send a murderer’s spirit to heaven. Othello, on the other hand, sees his purpose much differently. He believes that his actions are justifiable because he will help Desdemona’s soul to reach heaven.

Desdemona, much to her credit, remains collected throughout her discussion with Othello, acknowledging her fear of him, but always retaining the composure that she has exhibited throughout the story. She attempts to reason with Othello but notes that “Some bloody passion takes your very frame”(40). Remember that reasoning and logic were not considered appropriate feminine traits, so her use of them helps depict her as a strong woman. She offers an occasional sharp comment, though, such as when she states that the only sins she possesses are the loves she bears for Othello (40). As this scene progresses, the action assumes more and more characteristics of a trial. We’ve already seen two trial scenes in the play: Othello before the council in Act 1 and Cassio on trial before Othello in Act 2. Through the course of Othello and Desdemona’s exchange, Othello questions her as to some of her deeds, such as giving her handkerchief to Cassio. As she denies the allegation, Othello is quick to warn her of committing perjury (a legal term) and reminds her that she is on her death bed, both literally and figuratively. In part, too, we must wonder whether Othello’s questions aren’t partly to appease his underlying sense of guilt at what he is about to do. If he can make Desdemona confess to the crime for which she stands accused, Othello is all the more in the right, making his actions justifiable, rather than reactionary.

Oddly enough, all of Othello’s allegations come after he has already introduced the image of Justice, historically depicted as a blindfolded woman (suggesting blind justice) bearing scales in one hand (to weight the evidence) and a sword in the other (to carry out the punishment, when necessary). Othello’s version of Justice, though, relies exclusively on the sword. Othello, as we have seen, is less interested in weighing the evidence than he is in dispensing his own sense of justice. He badgers and bullies Desdemona as both prosecutor and judge, trying to get her to confess her guilt. He goes so far as to even introduce into evidence that Cassio has confessed to “using” Desdemona (with Othello’s intended meaning being “having had sex with”). Desdemona, outraged at the allegations, refuses to believe that chivalrous Cassio is capable of such falsehoods. Othello, though, assures her that it is true, and as a result, Cassio has been killed. Further demonstrating how far Othello has fallen, from the noble general to a raging barbarian, he notes that “Had all [Cassio’s] hairs been lives, my great revenge / Had stomach for them all” (74–75).

Desdemona now realizes that she is no longer dealing with a fully functioning, rational being. Othello has become so enmeshed in Iago’s trap that he is no longer in possession of the decorum and civil nature that separates sentient humans from the beasts. By this point, Othello, once “far more fair than black” (1.3.290), has descended so far into darkness as to be barely recognizable as a human. He has become the dark animal he despises, and the entire cast of the play. Starting with line 78, Desdemona begins to plead for her life, asking first for banishment, but as Othello continues his act, justifying his actions as “cruel” yet “merciful” (86), almost praising his ability to play the executioner. He notes how he wants to make sure Desdemona is dead so that she doesn’t linger in her pain, as if that small “kindness” will absolve him from the immorality of his actions. As Othello prepares to speak to Emilia, he assures himself that his wife is “Still as the grave” (95). Trying to claw his way back from the depths of primal behavior, Othello attempts to rationalize how he will mask the situation at hand. He begins to show signs of remorse, apparently somehow aware he has crossed an invisible
line and has destroyed the order of the cosmos. He laments the situation at hand, crying that “a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon” (100-101) should take place to signal the disorder he has caused, and that the earth should open great fissures and cracks in response to the eclipse, and ultimately his murder.

Covering Desdemona’s apparently lifeless body, Othello lets Emilia in. Emilia serves, in part, as a messenger at this point, filling us in on the action that has happened outside the bedchamber. Cassio, whom Othello has assumed dead, lives; only Roderigo has died. Othello, perplexed by this change in plan, quickly invokes another celestial image, recounting that the moon “comes more nearer earth than she was wont/And makes men mad” (111–112). At this point, one of the most curious parts of Othello takes place. Desdemona, alive, but just barely, cries out about her foul ending. Emilia, of course, always devoted to her mistress, is quick to take action and runs to the bed whereon her mistress lies. Desdemona, in her final breaths, pleads innocence yet again, and in an interesting turn, motivated by her unconditional love for Othello, notes that she alone is responsible for her death.

Although some modern critics have great difficulty with Desdemona’s last words, reading it as Desdemona embracing her second-class status, being weak, and loving her victimizer to the very end, the passage is intended to work in very different ways. On one level, Desdemona’s declaration hearkens back to her discussion with Emilia in Act VI, Scene 3 where her sense of duty helped her defend Othello. Clearly, that sense of duty and decorum can still be seen. Desdemona is a lady until the very end. Another way of viewing Desdemona’s declaration that she is responsible for her own death means not that she committed suicide (smothering isn’t a likely way to kill oneself), but that she is accepting responsibility for her decisions that brought her to her demise. She’s taking responsibility for following her own wishes and marrying Othello. On yet another level, though, her request to be remembered to her “kind lord” (126), still loving him enough to not blame him for what has happened to her, helps Othello realize the magnitude of the wrong he has committed. To be defended by the wife you’ve just killed says much for her sense of honor. She demonstrates the depths of her love’s purity by defending him, despite his taking her life. Desdemona’s final words help bring Othello back to reality and facilitate his later repentance.

Othello, overwhelmed by the situation in which he finds himself, soon admits to Emilia that he was the villain who stole Desdemona’s life. At this point, Emilia begins to exhibit more strength than we have yet seen. She becomes more vocal and more forceful and, in fact, helps facilitate the play’s resolution. Whereas earlier she demonstrated she is a worldly woman, when her mistress has been murdered she reacts with increasing urgency. At Othello’s confession, Emilia turns on him with vehemence. Emilia praises Desdemona as an angel, while she plays on the racial tensions and moral deficits already present, noting that Othello is “the blacker devil” (132) for having committed this deadly deed. Othello attempts again to justify his actions as moral, citing Desdemona’s infidelity, only to be curtly countered by a strong Emilia. Showing her verbal acumen and her devotion to her mistress, Emilia speaks poetically of Desdemona and Othello,ouching her remarks in dichotomies of angels and devils, fire and water, falsehood and truth.

Othello, in an attempt to clear himself of blame, inadvertently opens the doorway for the play’s inevitable conclusion when he discloses to Emilia that her husband “knew it all” (140). Emilia is incredulous, repeatedly questioning, “My husband?” Othello, thinking that he is dealing with a woman incapable of understanding, tries to make his point, claiming that “He, woman / I say, thy husband. Dost understand the word? / My friend, thy husband; honest, honest lago” (153–155). Emilia, though, once she gets past her initial response of implausibility, begins to see that there is perhaps validity in what Othello argues. She is unwilling, though, to let Iago become the scapegoat for Othello’s actions. In her eyes, his deed “is no more worthy heaven / Than [he] was worthy [Desdemona]” (160–161). In essence, Emilia is simply arguing what we have known all along: Iago has duped Othello, yes, but something in Othello’s nature has allowed him to be responsible to the duping. Iago alone is not responsible to the moment of singular bravery, Emilia refuses to be threatened and silenced by Othello and calls for assistance, naming Othello as her mistress’ murderer.

Emilia’s cries bring the house running. Montano and Grattia, as well as Iago and other attendants come forth to investigate. Emilia immediately embroils Iago in the midst of the action. In a spate of verbal clarity, Emilia grills Iago as to his involvement in the action at hand. Her initial desire to believe her husband’s innocence is quickly abandoned when Iago’s reply to Emilia’s questioning is simply that “I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true” (177–178). Iago continues, affirming that he spoke of Desdemona’s deception with Cassio, only to have Emilia respond more and more aggressively. She refuses to be silenced as she finds out more and more how her own husband has facilitated the tragedy before them. In the exchange between Iago and Emilia, we really get an opportunity to see Iago’s true self. When presented with the ghastly reality of where his plan has led, he exhibits no remorse. True to his purely villainous nature, Iago seems entirely unmoved by Emilia’s cries of villainy, as well as the lifeless body that he sees before him. Also of interest is Iago’s apparent underestimation of Emilia’s devotion to Desdemona. He apparently never anticipated such resistance, especially from his wife, the one woman that society has told him all along he must have control over.

As Grattia laments Desdemona’s death, Othello still attempts to justify his deed, and thereby his worth, by seeking affirmation from Iago. Othello admits that the sight before them is pitiful but continues turning to Iago for support. Othello discloses to all that Iago was fully aware of Desdemona’s acts of infidelity with Cassio, “[acts] of shame / A thousand times committed” (212–213). In his attempt to clear his name, Othello again draws upon the handkerchief, part of the “ocular proof” that he previously demanded. His reliance on this token, as if circumstantial evidence and verifiable truth are synonymous, shows yet again how his military prowess fails to translate into the domestic sphere. He may be powerful in battle, but when it comes to understanding people on a personal, rather than professional, level, Othello does not succeed. All the strength and courage Othello has when under fire was not enough to help him peacefully resolve the situation he found himself in at home.

The allusion to the handkerchief, too, provides just the opening that Emilia needs to begin unraveling the knot before them. Upon hearing the evidence upon which Othello has based his claim of Desdemona’s disloyalty, Emilia speaks up. Fully aware that speaking on such an issue is not culturally prescribed, Emilia proceeds undaunted (221–223). Iago, beginning to sense peril at the hands of his unruly wife, proceeds to threaten her, but to her credit, Emilia remains firm in her resolve. Turning to Othello, Emilia confesses to her role in stealing the handkerchief for Iago. Despite threats and accusations from her husband, Emilia stands by her story.

In the resulting commotion, the play storms toward its inevitable end. As Iago attempts to silence his independent wife, the only variable he has not counted on, Othello charges Iago. Montano intercedes and disarms the Moor. Iago, though, in keeping with his entirely devilish nature, has meanwhile fatally stabbed his own wife and then makes a hasty exit. As Emilia dies, she asks to be set by Desdemona’s side. Just as the two were linked in life, they are now linked in death. On one level, they are both victims of their husbands, but on a deeper level, they are both victims of the societies that would not let them move beyond specific molds. Even the appearance of transcending the cultural confines (as in Desdemona’s case) was cause enough for vengeance. In Emilia’s case, keeping silent (as the culture dictates women should do) helped create this deadly situation, while speaking out served largely to compound the death toll.

As Montano and Gratiana exit, they make preparations for Othello’s safety, fearing that he may harm himself as he begins to realize more and more what has just transpired. Othello, left with the dying Emilia and the already passed Desdemona, begins to return from the dark place in which he has been living, but sadly his realizations are too little too late. Othello, the “valiant” Moor, knows full well that he has failed to live up to the code of honor that he has abided by all these many years. His actions are egregiously out of sync with a man of his status — showing the precarious nature of humanity and the very thin line that
separates our “civilized” personalities from the unchecked animal tendencies indicative of lesser things. Emilia’s dying words to Othello (still the “cruel Moor,” however [250]), remind him of Desdemona’s innocence and her devotion to Othello.

Despite Montano and Gratiano removing Othello’s weapon in order to ensure his own safety, Othello, still the consummate fighting man, seeks out another sword that he has hidden in his bed chamber. In his final speeches of the play, Othello contemplates his fate. Whereas in the field of battle he was unstoppable, here he is brought low. Where Othello once had command of everything in his path, fearing nothing, now he is a victim to fate, the one entity that proves the fatal match for us all. As Othello turns from Gratiano to Desdemona, full realization of that which he has done comes home to him. He is made painfully aware of the error of his actions, noting Desdemona’s coldness (276), referring not only literally to her lifeless state, but also figuratively to her chastity. Aware of the finality of his actions, as well as the error in his judgment along the way, Othello cries out to the devils and winds that will take his soul. In what is one of the most poignant of Shakespeare’s passages, Othello no longer attempts to pass his actions off as justifiable. He calls to the afterworld, noting how he shall be harshly punished for his rash deeds, for failing to listen to his heart or his head. Rather, he fell victim to the trap of another, a consummate con man who sought delight and gratification in the destruction of others, largely because he could, in fact, orchestrate it.

As Othello contemplates his last moments, Lodovico, Montano, Cassio, and others bring the captured Iago forth. Othello, aware of the devil before him, lunges at Iago, his now enemy, wounding him before he is disarmed. Iago taunts Othello with his devilish immortality, but Othello, finally assuming his former dignity, replies he is glad Iago isn’t killed. Death, in Othello’s mind, is too good for Iago. Death will bring release, while living brings incalculable pain.

Lodovico, the representative of Venice, the land of civility and prosperity, once again tries to bring order to the wiliness of the scene before us, questioning Othello as to what has happened to him. As a voice of moderation, reason, and authority, Lodovico rhetorically questions what people will say about the fall of the great Othello. Othello’s reply: “naught did I in hate, but all in honor” (296), again brings out the play’s underlying themes of public image and reputation and abiding by the constructs society tacitly creates.

As Othello and Cassio begin to make their peace, the answers the players all look for, asserting that “From this time forth I never will speak [a] word” (305), which Lodovico incredulously reminds us, means Iago will not be lifting up his voice in prayer either (306). The men need no explanation from Iago, though, because letters found on Roderigo’s body tell the tale. Cassio’s execution was documented and the players implicated. One mystery remains, though: How did Cassio obtain Desdemona’s handkerchief? Cassio’s simple explanation that Iago dropped it there for him to find is the confirmation Othello needs and with this epiphany he deems himself a fool.

In the ultimate of reversals, Othello, the military leader who has so often conquered his enemies, is relieved of his duties by Lodovico. “Your power and your command is taken off,” he tells Othello, “And Cassio rules in Cyprus” (332–333). Othello, placed under arrest, will be tried in front of the Venetian council. The once valiant Moor has now fallen victim to Fortune’s wheel. The mechanism which raised him up now brings him down. He is armed with knowledge, of course, but it was gained at a terrible cost. In Othello’s speech, beginning at 339, we once again see the more positive and noble side of him. He has come to accept responsibility for what he has done. With magnificent language more like his storytelling of Act 1 than we have seen in the intervening acts, Othello urges the men, “When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice” (342-344). The story is to be told truthfully, in all its glory and shame, “Of one that loved not wisely, but too well” (345). Othello’s poetic speech comes to a tragic end, of course, by adding the third corpse on the marriage bed.

The surprised onlookers wonder at the sight before them, bringing the play to its final curtain. In keeping with the tradition of tragedy, the stage is filled with death, as well as the overwhelming sense of something valuable being destroyed — something much greater than an individual human life. Othello has gained knowledge, but at a tremendous cost. As spectators, we are encouraged to identify with Othello and learn from his mistakes. The play’s ending also leaves us with questions about the future. What will happen to Cyprus? Venice? Iago? Cassio? On one level there is a sense of hope — the honest Cassio is in charge of Cyprus and Iago will receive just punishment. But even though we know Cassio will take over and will govern with moral justice, the scene still leaves us with unresolved feelings. Unlike Macbeth, where a tyrant is overturned, a victim of his own ambition, the ending of Othello differs. Othello is a far more personal play, involving private lives rather than affairs of entire countries, allowing us to connect with the action. Further, because we are all, at some time or another, outsiders, we identify with the part of Othello that is motivated by insecurities and doubts. We have all (unfortunately) been victims of our own suspicions, again allowing us to connect, whether on a conscious or subconscious level, with our story’s protagonist. Our connections, though, pave the way to learn from the lessons unfolded before us, so that unlike Othello, we need never have to say we’ve “loved not wisely, but too well.”