**Act I**

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

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

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

As they speak, Iago and Roderigo are walking toward the house of Brabantio, Desdemona's father. Under his windows, Iago prompts Roderigo to wake Brabantio, and they both begin loudly calling his name. When Brabantio comes onto his balcony, Iago addresses him, under cover, using Roderigo as a front, asking if his house is safe and all his family inside. He cries out, using the image of sheep mating, that Desdemona and Othello are married, characterizingOthello as an old black ram and Desdemona as a white ewe who are together "making the beast with two backs." When Brabantio demands to know who is there, Roderigo identifies himself and Iago remains in the shadows. Convinced that his daughter is not at home, Brabantio calls for the arrest of Othello, which, as a member of the Venetian senate, he has the power to do.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Heims, Neil. "*Othello*." In Bloom, Harold, ed. *Othello*, Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2007. *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 24 Mar. 2015**