**Act II**

Act II begins on the seashore of Cyprus as several Venetians from the fortress look to the sea, which is tempestuous, and speculate about the fate of the Turkish fleet. A messenger enters, bearing the news that the storm confounded the Turkish fleet and, consequently, their design on Cyprus has been frustrated. One after another, then, ships arrive from Venice. The first brings Cassio and his party. Cassio reports that the Turkish fleet has indeed been destroyed, but his happy news is tempered by his anxiety for the safety of Othello's ship, which was separated from the rest of the fleet during the storm. Next to arrive is the vessel carrying Desdemona, who is accompanied by Iago and his wife, Emilia, who also acts as Desdemona's maid and companion.

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

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

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

assure thee,
If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
To the last article: my lord shall never rest;
I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift;
I'll intermingle every thing he does
With Cassio's suit.

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

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

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

Honing the arguments he will later employ directly to Othello—particularly that for a young woman of Desdemona's complexion and class, marriage withOthello is against nature—Iago convinces Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. He explains that Cassio is to command the guard that keeps order in Cyprus that night and instructs Roderigo to provoke him into a fight. By this strategy, Iago says, Roderigo will advance his cause with Desdemona. He agrees and Iago continues to develop the script of his plot, working himself up to carry it out in a soliloquy that ends the scene.

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

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

After everyone has departed, once again Iago remains, but rather than have Roderigo as his dupe/marionette, now he has Cassio. Like Roderigo bewailing his failure to win Desdemona, Cassio now bewails his drunken behavior and its consequences. As he used Roderigo's desires to further his own ends, so Iago uses Cassio's and advises him to sue to Desdemona to intervene with Othello for him. Iago knows the materials he is working with and which he must transform to seem other than they are in Othello's mind, for his description of Desdemona is remarkably true. That he knows what she is really like and how good she is—yet is unaffected by it except in as much as he wishes to crush her—is what gives fearsomeness to his strength. He says of her, as he explains to Cassio why it would be a good idea to petition Desdemona's intervention, that "[s]he is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition, she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested." He will use this goodness in her and make it look like evil, defining "debased ardor" rather than "blessed disposition" as the reason for her advocacy for Cassio.

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

**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**