**Act III**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**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**