**Act IV**

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

*Iago:* Will you think so?

*Othello:* Think so, Iago!

*Iago:* What,  
To kiss in private?

*Othello:* An unauthorized kiss.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Desdemona starts to leave, saying to Othello, "I will not stay to offend you." Lodovico implores Othello to call her back, and Othello does, using the opportunity to further humiliate Desdemona and himself. "What would you with her, sir?" he asks Lodovico once Desdemona has returned. Lodovico is surprised, as he did not desire anything with her but only that she should be called back and be asked forgiveness. Othello speaks of her as disobedient and a "whore" and leaves, cursing to himself. When Lodovico is alone with Iago, he voices his astonishment and questions him about Othello. Iago begins to attempt to ensnare him with innuendo against Othello, assurances of his own reluctance to speak, and suggestions that Lodovico look for himself.

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

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

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

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

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

Scene 3 begins at the Citadel, where Othello and Desdemona live. Othello is leaving with Lodovico and ordering Desdemona to get ready for bed. Alone and preparing for bed, Desdemona feels herself haunted by a song of unfaithfulness that she remembers her mother's maid, Barbary, singing after her own lover "proved mad / And did forsake her." Reflective after her song, Desdemona asks Emilia if there really are women who are unfaithful to their husbands and if she would do so "for all the world." Emilia responds, taking the words "for all the world" literally, and says she would "for the whole world." But Desdemona says she would not be unfaithful for anything. Starting by speaking of women's faults, Emilia quickly turns to their husbands and shows that they are the real cause of their wives' faults. She offers a category of similarities women share with men and concludes by reiterating that the ills women commit are in response to ill-treatment by men. But Desdemona says she prays for the strength and the ability not to do "bad" because bad was done to her "but by bad mend"—somehow to bring good from evil.

**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**