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When Chaos Is Come Again:  
Narrative and Narrative Analysis in *Othello*

In her introduction to *Othello: New Perspectives* (1991), Virginia Mason Vaughan indicates that literary criticism of *Othello* has advanced from older preoccupations with character and psychological analysis of character in the play to embrace new historicism, performance, and feminist theory as well as linguistic analysis originating from speech-act theory. However, character analysis and speech-act theory are not exclusive of one another, since speech act theory can provide important insights into a character’s behavior derived from an analysis of linguistic behavior. As Stanley Fish maintains for *Coriolanus, Othello* is also a “speech-act play” (200). *Coriolanus* concerns itself extensively with the problem of making requests; at the heart of *Othello* is a concern for what H. P. Grice refers to as the “co-operative principle,” and specifically the “maxim of quality” (try to make your contribution one that is true). If *Coriolanus* is a play about requests, *Othello* is a play about narrative and the construction of narrative. While some critics differentiate between narrative in the play and action (e.g., Tsomondo), narrative as a speech act constitutes action in the play as well as what William Labov refers to as the “complicating action” in the play. What is known as the seduction scene between Othello and Iago is in fact a significant retelling of Othello’s wooing of and very brief marriage to Desdemona, a retelling that has two tellers who verbally play off one another.

In her discussion of “Women and Men in *Othello*,” Carol Thomas Neely (1985) points out that there are essentially three interpretive camps with regard to *Othello*: “Iago critics,” “Othello critics,” and “Iago-Othello critics” (106–07). Iago critics (Eliot, Empson, Kirschbaum, Rossiter, Mason, Fiedler, and Leavis) “emphasize Iago’s realism and ‘honesty’ while priding themselves on their own” (106). Othello critics (Coleridge, Bradley, Granville-Barker, Knight, Bayley, and Gardner) “accept Othello at his own high estimate” (106). “They are,” Neely says, “enamored of his ‘heroic music,’ affirm his love, and like him are overwhelmed by Iago’s diabolism” (106). The third group, Iago-Othello critics (Burke, Kirsch, Greenblatt, Cavell, Snow, and Wheeler) “see Othello and Iago as closely identified with each other” (107). Such critics find “the source of the tragedy in Iago-Othello’s anxieties regarding women, sexuality, and marriage — anxieties that are universal and generated by underlying social or psychological paradigms” (107). Linguistic critics who have examined *Othello* fall principally in the camp of the Iago critics. Malcolm Coulthard, in analysing the seduction scene, and specifically its questions and answers, notes that Iago deliberately shifts focus in this scene from AB events...
(events known to both speakers) to his own A events (events known only to the speaker) through an extensive tactic of putting off requests: “the cumulative effect of this series of unanswered questions is to convince Othello that Iago is not being truthful and to search for a reason” (189). Similarly, Johane Rudenko comments on the “breakdown of the adjacency pair format [question/answer],” suggesting that this breakdown in the discourse between Othello and Iago in the seduction scene “is linked to his forsaking of Desdemona and choosing to trust Iago, a man whom he had initially rejected for the post of lieutenant” (28). Rudenko further notes Iago’s dominance of Othello through topic control, “his ability to initiate, develop and close down topics” (52). Joseph Porter, in his discussion of Iago’s speech acts, points out that Iago’s speech is characterized by the use of imperatives, explicit performatives (“I say”), and asides, as well as verbs of perception. The fact that Iago extensively employs imperatives goes to the notion that Iago is an agent in the play directing others to do as he say or bids. Porter goes so far as to term Iago a “director” of action in the play. While it is certainly true that Iago is highly strategic in his refusal to answer questions (putting off requests for information) during the seduction scene, I would argue with the third group of critics that Othello is much more complicit in his own seduction than Iago critics would allow. Stephen Greenblatt argues that Othello submits to “narrative self-fashioning” on Iago’s part because he himself engages in such self-fashioning: “his identity depends upon a constant performance . . . of his ‘story’” (245). Catherine Bates makes the same point: “Othello falls prey to Iago’s story-telling because he is himself a story-teller, a man whose tale seduces Desdemona and has the power, according to the Duke, to win all the daughters of Venice” (53). It is still not clear to what extent Othello either submits (Greenblatt) or “falls prey” (Bates). I would suggest that Othello is more a co-narrator with Iago of his own fall from grace with Desdemona. From a linguistic perspective the seduction scene is not simply a series of questions that are studiously unanswered. The fact that Othello extensively engages Iago in both direct and indirect requests for information indicates an intense willingness to pursue a specific line of questioning. It is important to note the extent to which Shakespeare does and does not refashion Giraldi Cinthio’s original narrative, which he may have read directly from the Italian or through a French translation.

1. Othello’s Speech Acts
Before looking at the seduction scene as a site of narrative reconstruction, we need to examine Othello’s own characteristic speech acts as well as his own narrative construction of himself at the beginning of the play. Othello’s speech acts are very different from Iago’s. While Iago shows a marked preference for directives, Othello shows a marked preference for assertives. In the classification of speech acts, assertives represent the speaker’s beliefs or thoughts, his or her understanding of the way things are. In speech-act terminology, there is a word-to-world direction of fit; the word conforms to the world. In act 1, of the 69 speech acts uttered by Othello, 42 (60%) are assertives. Othello’s preference for assertives in act 1 evidences the rationality and calm that many critics have noted in Othello’s character. For
example, when told that an angry Brabantio is looking for him to confront him about his daughter’s “revolt,” Othello shows no sign of emotion. Rather than utter an expressive indicating his feelings or concerns, he utters an assertive:

Not I. I must be found.
My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly. (1.2.29–31)

In a play which concerns itself profoundly with appearance, this assertion from Othello indicates his awareness of the importance of appearance as well as his belief that his own appearance will reveal a correspondence between inner and outer. He refers to his own soul as “perfect.” “Shall” in line 31 is a deontic modal marking intentionality, which is to say that in the discourse between Othello’s parts, title, and soul, Othello has the ability to reveal himself as he truly is, a man of worth and character. In such an utterance, Othello presents himself as a man of complete self-assurance not only in himself but also in how others will perceive him. In challenging Stanley Cavell’s view of Othello as a skeptic in the play, Michael DiSanto notes this very sense of perfection: Othello “‘knows’ that his existence is perfection prior to knowing the other—in this case Desdemona” (361).

When Othello is finally confronted by Brabantio, who accuses Othello of seducing his daughter, Othello again responds not with expressives but with assertives:

That I have ta’en away this old man’s daughter,
It is most true; true I have married her
The very head and front of my offending
Hath this extent, no more. (1.3.79–81)

Othello does not respond emotionally to the attacks that he has used witchcraft to seduce Desdemona but limits himself to two simple assertions: “I have ta’en away this old man’s daughter,” “I have married her.” Othello represents his action in directional terms, “I have ta’en away [my emphasis] this old man’s daughter.” He then asserts that he has married her. What he does not explain in this brief narrative is why he has taken Brabantio’s daughter away, why he did not first go to Brabantio openly and request marriage to Desdemona. Othello’s representation of “taking away,” which is to say removing an entity from one location to another, significantly diminishes the fact that he has ignored social convention. He represents what he has done with such direct factualness as to make his actions not only factual but also faultless. Othello’s ability to represent events in terms favorable to himself explains much of his power to command and control others. He ends this particular speech with the most important of all the assertions he makes: “I won his daughter.” This is not simply an assertion but a boast, moreover a boast that is employed to justify what Othello has done. That he has “won” Desdemona justifies and further nullifies the fact that Othello has violated society’s patriarchal rules.

Othello further argues the case for himself through an extended narrative composed of 18 assertives to the effect that Desdemona rather than he himself is largely responsible for the events that took place between them. This narrative can certainly be seen as strategic on Othello’s part since it also diminishes the fact that
Othello has ignored social convention. The narrative reveals further a great deal about the narrator, with respect to how he represents himself and how he represents others, notably Desdemona. In his narrative/argument, Othello initially represents himself simply as someone who tells stories of his own life events for Brabantio, Desdemona’s father. Although Brabantio is the intended audience, Desdemona, overhearing Othello’s stories, becomes an unintended second audience. Othello observes Desdemona’s interest and then consents to tell his stories to her as well. Othello next represents Desdemona’s response to his stories, which culminates not only in the physical act of kissing but also the indirect request or hint from Desdemona herself that she would want to be wooed by a man who had experienced what Othello had experienced. Othello finishes his narrative with the assertion “Upon this hint I spake.”

In this narrative of winning and wooing, Othello positions himself not as an active agent. He wins Desdemona only because she finds his stories compelling. It is Desdemona who indirectly requests Othello to “woo” her. Also, Othello represents himself as a speaker only three times during this narrative; he employs “spoke” to represent actual conversation, but “spake” in a marked sense indicating a request for marriage. This special speech is attached literally as well as grammatically to the “hint” that Desdemona has given, her own speech act of requesting, which Shakespeare also foregrounds: “Upon this hint [my emphasis] I spake.” The line iconically represents the relations between the speakers giving Desdemona the explicit role of agent. Brabantio therefore asks Desdemona to deny that “she was half the wooer” (1.3.174). Othello’s pride in winning Desdemona comes about because she has chosen him, rather than vice-versa. He reiterates this later in the play: “For she had eyes, and chose me” (3.3.189). His narrative functions both as an argument and as a boast that he makes to Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, and to the Senators of Venice. Othello in no way represents himself as actively pursuing the women of Venice and so as a threat to the establishment that he serves. This is consistent with the notion that Othello has simply taken Brabantio’s daughter away, rather than wooing her and marrying her without his consent. The perlocutionary effect of Othello’s narrative can be seen in the Duke of Venice’s assertion to Brabantio: “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.2.285). Othello’s literal blackness as well as the inappropriateness of his action is eradicated by his very skillful representation of events. Othello’s power as a narrator is paramount. Othello is effectively able to represent the world as he wishes it to be, and as he wishes others to perceive it. We can usefully contrast Othello’s narrative of wooing to that of Iago. Having overheard Othello tell his story to the Duke and Senators of Venice, Iago presents to Roderigo a degraded version of Desdemona’s love for Othello and Othello’s method of wooing Desdemona:

Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies. To love him still for prating? Let not thy discreet heart think it. Her eye must be fed.

(2.1.230–34)

We have in these lines the characteristic features of Iago’s speech. He commences...
with an imperative, follows with a question that he himself answers, and ends with a bold assertion. He has complete command of discourse. His representation of both Othello and Desdemona is degraded: Othello is a liar, while Desdemona is a simpleton who has believed his lies. He further cannot imagine that Desdemona’s love can be sustained by narratives alone. One could argue that Iago is simply feeding Roderigo what he wants to hear, but the extreme negativity with which he constructs his comments indicates heartfelt animosity. While in a certain respect Iago actually sees through Othello in seeing him as a braggard, he nonetheless cannot understand the power of narrative to bring about love between two people. Othello’s narratives are degraded into “lies” and moreover “fantastical lies.” Iago employs redundancy and hyperbole to suggest Othello’s lack of legitimacy both as a speaker and as a lover.

Shakespeare’s recreation of Iago from the original story in *Hecatommithi* is remarkable. The original Iago is a competitor of Othello’s for Desdemona’s love and, when he loses, turns from love of Desdemona to hate. Shakespeare reconstructs the original Iago into the suitor Roderigo, who then becomes a foil for his own Iago. Shakespeare’s Iago, rather than being a rational albeit willful man, is a man who views everything is degraded terms. His hate, although centered on Othello, is also generalized. Far from being an unemotional man who simply plots in keeping with Coleridge’s notion of “motiveless malignancy,” Iago presents himself as a man in rambling hate with the world. His soliloquy in the first scene in act 2 contains 15 speech acts: 6 assertives, 6 expressives, and 3 directives. Expressives are as well represented in this soliloquy as assertives and function as the source of his ultimate directives, specifically,

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Make the Moor thank me, love me and reward me
For making him egregiously an ass
And practicing upon his peace and quiet,
Even to madness.  (2.1.308–11)
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The feelings which Iago incoherently expresses in this speech and which lead him to construct this plot are initially lust for Desdemona, motivated in part by hate for Othello, torment because he suspects that Othello has slept with his wife, desire for revenge, and hate for Cassio because he also suspects that Cassio has slept with his wife. While I have analysed the verb *suspect* as an assertive verb, it also conveys emotional content, specifically fear. Iago “suspect[s] the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat” (295–96). He suspects the same with Cassio: “For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too” (307). Iago goes so far as to say, “the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards” (396–97). Iago represents himself as someone who has been poisoned psychologically by fear, a sense of inadequacy, and hate. What he wishes on Othello and Cassio is what he believes has already been inflicted upon himself. Iago is consumed by a desire to best those whom he feels rightly or wrongly have wronged him. His agency in the play derives from profound sense of himself as victim.

Iago’s narrative of Othello’s wooing of Desdemona in its equally extreme
sentiments can also be seen as indirectly expressing jealousy of or rage at Othello’s linguistic power, which he diminishes as a form of “prating.” He comments on this explicitly in an aside after Desdemona and Othello are reunited in Cyprus: “O, you are well tuned now! / But I’ll set down the pegs that make this music” (2.1.198–99).

2. Narrative Conflict in the Seduction Scene: First Exchanges
In the seduction scene, Othello’s somewhat boastful narrative of his wooing of Desdemona is brought into conflict with that of Iago’s degraded version, with both men having an equally strong stake in how they view and understand events. Iago needs to diminish Othello because he feels himself diminished, while Othello needs to feel that Desdemona has especially selected and chosen him as her lover and her husband. Many critics have argued that Othello is very easily and rapidly “seduced” by Iago. For example, Thomas Moisan states, “The ease with which Iago triumphs in the ‘seduction’ scene, and the rapidity with which Othello succumbs, have been crucial to the distinctions critics have drawn between the characters of Othello and Iago, distinctions which, in turn, have often been associated with the ostensible differences in the ways in which the two characters use and conceive of language, differences in their elocutionary styles, in the degrees of self-consciousness they bring to their speech, indeed, in the relationship they see between their words and their ‘selves’” (56). The seduction scene, which is at the heart of the play, is actually a verbal debate between two narrators and in effect between two narratives that eventually resolves into the co-production of a new narrative concerning Othello’s wooing of Desdemona. It is also what Labov terms the “complicating action” of the story and an example of how speech itself can constitute action.

Shakespeare’s modifications of the story in the Hecatommithi are interesting. Iago in the Hecatommithi is a pragmatic being who takes advantage of situations. He is not responsible for Cassio’s demise, nor for suggesting that Cassio seek Desdemona’s interference with Othello. Cassio is responsible for his own downfall, while Desdemona independently sues on Cassio’s behalf. Furthermore, it is Othello who initiates conversation with Iago, telling him how forcefully his wife seeks his reconciliation with Cassio. Iago in the Hecatommithi uses Othello’s already existing concern about Desdemona’s behavior to suggest rather bluntly that “the lady Desdemona may have good reason to look kindly on him [Cassio]” (Kernan 135). While Iago in the Hecatommithi also employs the verbal strategy of putting off requests to encourage Othello’s curiosity and suspicions, this strategy is never dramatised but only stated. Othello, after speaking further with Desdemona, returns a second time to Iago to get some satisfaction of the jealousy he now feels. At this point Iago explicitly indicates to Othello that Desdemona takes pleasure from Cassio’s company while he is at his house and that she has also come to dislike Othello’s complexion. Iago in the Hecatommithi exploits Cassio’s demise and Othello’s already existing jealousy to destroy Desdemona, who has simply ignored his attempts at seduction. In Shakespeare’s Othello, Othello rather than Desdemona is Iago’s target. Desdemona is simply a pawn; Iago is interested in seeing how far he can push Othello “even to madness.” As a marked agent, he first manipulates Cassio and
then Desdemona, expecting further to manipulate Othello. Thus, in Shakespeare’s narrative, Iago initiates conversation with Othello rather than vice versa.

The seduction scene effectively begins when Iago, accompanying Othello, employs an expressive highly characteristic of his speech: “Ha! I like not that” (3.3.34). The “that” which Iago refers to is conversation between Desdemona and Cassio, which he himself has arranged. In different productions of the play, Iago’s expressive serves different functions. In the Orson Welles and most recent Laurence Fishburne versions, Iago uses this expressive to direct Othello’s attention to their conversation. He functions as a focalizer. In the Olivier version, however, Othello is already gazing intently at Desdemona and Cassio when Iago utters his comment. Iago in this version may give voice to what Othello is already thinking. While it is clear from following scenes that Othello hears what Iago says, at this point he refrains from commenting himself and asks Iago to repeat himself: “What does thou say?” (3.3.35). This apparently simple request for information can function as a challenge. By asking Iago to repeat himself, Othello challenges Iago to reiterate his negative expressive. However, Iago chooses not to do so: “Nothing, my lord: or if — I know not what” (3.3.36). If we interpret Iago’s expressive not as an indirect directive for Othello to look at Cassio and Desdemona together but as a device to find out Othello’s thoughts, then at this point in the exchange Othello reveals nothing about his inner emotions to Iago and also very subtly puts Iago in his place by requesting or challenging him to repeat himself. Shakespeare’s Othello, unlike that in the Hecatomithi, is not already experiencing jealousy when Iago encounters him, nor is he susceptible.

In what remains of this exchange, Othello rather than Iago takes charge of interaction between them. He asks Iago a second question, one which is positively conducive: “Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?” (3.3.37). Iago puts off Othello’s request with his own request: “Cassio, my lord?” (3.3.38). Othello in turn answers his own question: “I do believe ‘twas he” (3.3.40), using “do,” an emphatic, to reinforce this assertion, marking it as strong rather than weak. Logically, Othello has reason to question why Cassio, whom he has recently banished from his service, would be with his wife. His discourse with Iago is an attempt to ascertain this fact, and failing this, Othello confidently asserts what he sees. There is nothing in this very brief interaction to indicate Othello’s willingness to be guided by Iago. Iago’s role as a servant is in fact reinforced.

Iago does not engage in conversation with Othello again until several lines later. Between Iago’s first attempt to speak with Othello and his second, Shakespeare inserts a pivotal conversation between Othello and Desdemona that provides a third version of Othello’s wooing of Desdemona. In construction of plot, rather than have Othello go from Desdemona to Iago, back to Desdemona and back again to Iago, Shakespeare constructs two parallel scenes between Othello and Iago with one principal scene between Othello and Desdemona as their link. Without this linking scene, a playgoer or reader cannot understand Othello’s receptivity to Iago’s persuasion, or in linguistic terms his line of questioning in response to Iago’s
putting off of requests for information.

3. Desdemona’s Narrative

Few critics examine Othello’s conversation with Desdemona to understand any change in his feelings towards her, assuming as does Moison that the seduction is facilely achieved. Many view Desdemona’s support for Cassio in this scene as an unwitting aid to Iago, since she defends another man to Othello and thus engenders jealousy on his part. Frank Kermode, for example, says: “Desdemona aids the process, twice commending Iago’s honesty, a conviction of which in the other characters is now essential to his design” (173). Desdemona’s arguments are also seen as simply annoying by some critics. Edward A. Snow comments, “Even when her suit on Cassio’s behalf starts to wear on our nerves as well as Othello’s, the focus is not so much on a fault in her character as on the pathological reverberations that even a woman’s trivial indiscretions have in the minds of men” (235; my emphasis). On the whole, Desdemona’s exchange with Othello is seen either as an aid to a process that has already begun or as a trivial annoyance which is best over with so that Iago can finally proceed. Othello’s exchange with Desdemona, however, is a crucial interaction between them. What Desdemona does seems inoffensive enough; she defends Cassio to Othello. How she does this, however, is deeply disturbing as well as offensive to Othello. Desdemona’s speech act, which functions as a reprimand, provides a radically different account of Othello’s wooing of Desdemona than Othello himself has given to Brabantio and the Senators of Venice:

What! Michael Cassio,  
That came awooing with you, and so many a time,  
When I have spoke of you disparingly,  
Hath ta’en your part (3.3.71–73)

While the original narrative in the Hecatommithi indicates only that Disdemona “pray[ed] him not to be unmindful of ancient services and friendship for one small fault” (Kernan 137), Shakespeare’s Desdemona makes those “ancient services” specific, and most specific to Othello’s actual courtship of herself. Along with her “What!” of disbelief, Desdemona provides a very different narrative of events concerning her courtship than does Othello in act 1. In Desdemona’s account, Othello is not a patient who acts upon a hint but an active agent who “came awooing” accompanied by Michael Cassio. Her use of imperfective aspect denotes a long process, as does her iterative expression “and so many a time.” She represents herself both as an experiencer and as a speaker. As a speaker, she has addressed Cassio as her interlocutor and further represented to him negative feelings or thoughts which she experienced about Othello. What she chose not to praise or view favorably we do not know, but it is the first indication we have in the play that Othello was not initially considered a desirable suitor by Desdemona. Desdemona last asserts that Cassio “Hath ta’en his part.” Here she asserts Cassio’s role not simply as a go-between but as Othello’s defender, who aided him in convincing Desdemona to accept him as a lover and husband. A logical implicature of Desdemona’s as-
servation is that Othello needed Cassio to win Desdemona and therefore owes him or has an obligation to him.

In act 1, Desdemona is not present when Othello provides his narrative to the Senators of Venice. When asked by her father “If she confess that she was half the wooer,” Desdemona does not in fact answer this question. She speaks rather of having a duty to her husband that precedes that to her father. Desdemona neither validates nor refutes Othello’s narrative. In private conversation with him, however, she confronts him with the fact that he needed Cassio’s help to win her and that he could not have done this on his own. The boast that he makes to the Senators and that he appears to believe himself is challenged by Desdemona’s counternarrative. The confidence that comes from the power to assert is therefore also challenged. In Othello’s narrative, Othello himself is the goal/patient, while Desdemona is agent. However, in Desdemona’s narrative, these roles are reversed: Desdemona is goal; Othello is agent. As Desdemona continues her narrative, roles are further modified: Cassio becomes agent while Othello becomes dative or benefactive, someone for whom something is done. The thrust of Desdemona’s remarks is that Othello is indebted to Cassio for having won her. Thus, his simple assertive in act 1, “I won his daughter,” becomes problematized by the daughter herself.

Othello’s upset at Desdemona’s narrative is clearly evident in his response:

Prithee no more. Let him come when he will! I will deny thee nothing. (3.3.75–76)

In these lines, Othello utters two directives and one commissive. His first directive serves to end Desdemona’s turn at speaking. Othello interrupts Desdemona to tell her to speak no further. Othello clearly has no stomach for the version of events Desdemona presents to him. The image that he has presented to the world of a man desired and chosen by a beautiful woman has been contradicted. That he also needed another man’s help in winning her is a further assault on his ego. His second directive (“Let him come when we will!”), which indicates compliance on Othello’s part, also suggests that of the two versions of Desdemona’s courtship, Desdemona’s is the more accurate. Othello acknowledges that what she says is true by complying with her wish that he provide Cassio with an interview. However, this line is accompanied further by an exclamation mark, which suggests strong emotion on Othello’s part, also suggests that of the two versions of Desdemona’s courtship, Desdemona’s is the more accurate. Othello acknowledges that what she says is true by complying with her wish that he provide Cassio with an interview. However, this line is accompanied further by an exclamation mark, which suggests strong emotion on Othello’s part, either because he is being forced to comply or because Desdemona’s version of events disturbs him. His last utterance, a commissive, “I will deny thee nothing,” is also emphatic and suggestive of strong emotion. What is ironic about this line is that Othello has just denied Desdemona the privilege of speaking. Othello protects his own positive face, which has been seriously threatened by Desdemona herself in her attempt to defend Cassio.

That Desdemona reprimands Othello as well as pointing out his inadequacy as a suitor and lover is reason enough for Othello to react emotionally to what she has to say and to wish to cut her off. When Desdemona continues to speak despite his directive not to, Othello repeats: “I will deny thee nothing!” The second utterance of this line is accompanied by an exclamation mark, again indicating strong
emotion. Othello does not simply interrupt Desdemona; he silences her with a second extremely ironic assertion of compliance. The very violence of this utterance contradicts the presupposition which attaches to it, that he will do anything for her. This speech act itself subtly anticipates Othello’s ultimate act of silencing Desdemona. Moreover, Othello’s next speech act is to request that she leave his presence: “Whereon I do beseech thee grant me this, / To leave me but a little to myself” (3.3.84–85).

The scene ends with Othello alone contemplating his relationship with Desdemona:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again. (3.3.90–93)

These lines are very chilling and, like Othello’s earlier speech act of silencing Desdemona, suggestive of what is to come in the play. Although Othello initially comments favorably on Desdemona (“Excellent wretch!”), he then begins to question the nature of his love for her. There is the suggestion that he loves her too much: “Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee!” Othello indicates that his love for Desdemona is so great that he is prepared to be damned for it. Love is equated with the possibility of “Perdition,” while in the following lines, not loving is equated with the possibility of “Chaos.” These lines contrast markedly with Othello’s earlier characterization of Desdemona as “my soul’s joy,” and his further comment,

If it were now to die,
’Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate. (2.1.87–91)

In contrast to soul’s content and “soul’s joy,” there is now lack of content and marked discomfort with the extent of his love for Desdemona, which could now pitch his soul into perdition or into chaos in its absence. Most chilling of all is his assertion “And when I love thee not,” wherein he actually hypothesizes a time of not loving Desdemona. Othello is clearly not in a calm emotional state like that he expresses in act 2 upon being reunited with Desdemona. Although he has complied with her wish that he see Cassio, Othello has also been confronted by her with a very different image of himself than that which he has presented to the world and which he clearly maintains himself. He is not the man he thought he was or presented himself as being, and the love that he feels for Desdemona therefore also becomes confused and qualified by the language of disturbance and extremes. There is a marked change in Othello’s feelings about Desdemona, a fear that he is too much in her power, which has been precipitated not by anything Iago has said or done but by Desdemona’s own honest account of her original feelings for Othello and the role Cassio played in Othello’s winning of her. Unwittingly, Desdemona has effected a blow to Othello’s pride. It is in a state of confusion about his love for her that Othello next interacts with Iago. The Othello that Iago speaks to initially in act
3 is not the same Othello that Iago ultimately speaks to. This Othello has silenced his wife twice and asked her “to leave [him] but a little to [himself].”

James Cavell, in his analysis of Othello, raises a rather fundamental question about the play: “we need to ask not so much how Iago gained his power as how Desdemona lost hers” (486). Cavell shifts perspective extensively from analyses which concentrate on Iago’s agency and facile ability to manipulate Othello, effectively taking Iago at his word in the play. According to Cavell, “Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him” (493). Although Cavell concentrates on Desdemona’s sexual otherness, her otherness as an experiencer and as a speaker and fundamentally as a narrator is what truly disturbs Othello. A question we can ask following Cavell is what Othello knew of Cassio’s role in his own wooing of Desdemona. Did he understand him to be only a go-between or did he understand him to be an agent acting on his behalf in discussion with Desdemona? The First Folio version suggests that he was well aware of Cassio’s full role:

What? Michael Cassio
That came awooing with you, and so many a time
When I have spoken of you dispraisingly,
Hath ta’en your part —

The First Quarto, however, provides a somewhat different reading of these lines:

What, Michael Cassio?
That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time
When I have spoke of you dispraisingly,
Hath ta’en your part,

In the First Folio version, where the question mark is placed after the interrogative “What,” we have a separate speech act where the interrogative on its own acts as an expressive of Desdemona’s astonishment or disbelief that Othello shows any reluctance to listen to Cassio’s suit. Desdemona’s what references an inner state of disbelief about Othello’s behavior. The name, “Michael Cassio,” which follows, functions as a nominal reference to the pronoun “That.” In the First Quarto version, “What” functions exclusively as an interrogative to which “Michael Cassio” is the response. Desdemona is not in a state of astonishment and is simply introducing new information about Michael Cassio into the conversation. If we employ the First Folio version, Desdemona’s astonishment suggests that Othello knew the extent of Cassio’s support for his wooing of her. Desdemona’s narrative amounts to a rebuke of Othello’s behavior towards Cassio. While Cassio acted as a proper friend, Othello refuses to do the same. This further makes him the lesser of the two men. In the First Quarto version, Desdemona’s narrative is new information rather than old. Othello is not aware that Cassio had been so instrumental in his ultimate success with Desdemona. Read as new information, Desdemona’s counternarrative has shock value for Othello. Read as old information, Othello is being presented with the fact that his wife has her own power to represent and construct reality.
She has her own memories and experiences which may not confirm or match his own. She is intellectually other.

4. Narrative Conflict in the Seduction Scene: Final Exchanges
In discussing the supposed ease with which Iago seduces Othello, Moisan points out, “For one thing, Iago’s ability to lead Othello on in the ‘seduction’ scene depends heavily upon Othello’s ability to follow, upon, not Othello’s rhetorical innocence, but his sophistication, his ability to ‘read’ the cues transmitted by Iago’s repetition and questioning as a Puttenham or Hoskins would have them read, that is, as cues, as signifiers of some deeper, perhaps darker, meaning” (57). Reading cues, however, is a positive decision. Indirect speech acts do not have to be taken up; they can be ignored. The real question is why Othello chooses not to ignore Iago’s hints or indirect speech acts, why he chooses to read them at all. In his first exchange with Iago in act 3, Othello challenges Iago to repeat what he has said and actually silences him, effectively putting him in his place as a servant. In a state of either being reminded that Cassio did more for him than he himself has acknowledged, or having new information to the effect that Cassio was instrumental in his marriage to Desdemona, Othello chooses to take up Iago’s requests for confirmation.

The exchange between Othello and Iago that follows Desdemona’s departure is generally considered to constitute the principal seduction of Othello by Iago. Both characters play off one another extensively, acting out a kind of dance between them that ultimately results in a dramatic alteration of Othello’s feelings for Desdemona, which he himself has foreshadowed when he states, “And when I love thee not / Chaos is come again.” Together with Iago, Othello reconstructs his relationship with Desdemona largely by redefining the nature of his courtship of her and by extending and redefining the active role that Desdemona herself has assigned to Cassio.

When Desdemona is dismissed by Othello, Iago, who has overheard the exchange between them, returns. Shakespeare signals this return not through comment from Iago but rather through Othello’s repetition of the same question that he posed to Iago in their previous exchange: “What dost thou say, Iago?” (3.3.94). In their first exchange, this question functioned as a challenge to Iago to repeat negative commentary. However, repetition of this question in their second exchange in act 3 signals Othello’s conscious resumption of his previous conversation with Iago and his receptivity to Iago’s negative evaluation: “Ha! I like not that!” In this exchange, Othello employs 56 speech acts, of which 39 are assertives, 11 requests for information, 2 requests for confirmation, 8 directives (of action), 5 expressives, and 1 commissive. Othello’s characteristic use of assertives continues. However, Othello also employs a large number of directives either as requests for information, requests for confirmation or as requests for action. Twenty-three percent of all his speech acts are requests for information or confirmation. The fact that Othello repeats his previous question, “What dost thou say, Iago?” to initiate their second exchange, indicates that Othello now looks for and wants information from Iago.

Iago engages in what ethnomethodologists refer to as a side sequence. Rather
When Chaos Is Come Again: Narrative and Narrative Analysis in *Othello*

than repeat his previous comment, he himself requests information. First he asks, “Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady, know of your love?” (3.3.95). This is genuine insofar as Iago wishes confirmation from Othello of the new information he has learned from Desdemona. For Iago, that Cassio acted as a go-between for Othello and Desdemona is new information. Othello answers this question but also asks his own question: “Why dost thou ask?” (3.3.96). This second request on Othello’s part refers itself back to Iago’s initial comment, “Ha! I like not that!”, since it seeks to know what situation has given rise to or what is presupposed by such request. Othello is actively interested in what Iago has to say and in particular the relevance of what Iago has to say.

When Iago puts off Othello’s request by stating, “But for the satisfaction of my thought. No further harm” (3.3.97), Othello rephrases his earlier request for information: “Why of thy thought, Iago?” (3.3.98). Iago’s response “I did not know that he had been acquainted with her” (3.3.99) answers Othello’s request only in part, since it does not address relevance. Othello confirms the fact that Cassio knew Desdemona well, “O, yes, and went between us very oft” (3.3.100), to which Iago then replies, “Indeed?” (3.3.101). Through what is technically a request for confirmation, Iago again implicates that there is something he does not like.

Requests for information or confirmation are a means for an interlocutor to take or maintain control in discourse. Both Othello and Iago attempt to maintain control of their exchange through such requests. In this exchange Iago initially interviews and provokes Othello, but the roles soon reverse. Othello several times asks Iago to state the presupposition to his request for information: “Why dost thou ask?” “Why of thy thought, Iago?” “Discern’st thou aught in that?” “Is he not honest?” “What dost thou think?” (3.3.99–104). Othello goes from direct to indirect requests for information in an strategic attempt to get Iago to explicate what he does not like. Ultimately, Othello employs a commissive as an indirect request for information, “By heaven, I’ll know thy thoughts” (3.3.162). Othello’s requests for information are an attempt on his part to control both discourse and Iago. Thus, when Iago requests, “Indeed?”, Othello counters with “Indeed? Ay, Indeed! Discern’st thou aught in that?” Othello is not simply following cues but, like Iago, speaking strategically. Othello therefore asks Iago about Cassio’s honesty: “Is he not honest?” This is a request for confirmation. Othello counters Iago’s request for confirmation with his own, which is also a polar request requiring either “yes” or “no” as an answer and as such a strategic attempt on Othello’s part to get Iago to state his presupposition explicitly. However, Iago strategically avoids being pinned down by requesting clarification: “Honest, my lord?” (3.3.102), to which Othello simply repeats his request, “Honest? Ay, honest” (3.3.103). Iago is finally made to answer and states, “My lord, for aught I know” (3.3.103). This is a weak assertion but an assertion nonetheless. Othello strategically forces Iago to deny what he has intimated about Cassio and by extension Desdemona. In terms of the verbal cat-and-mouse game that goes on between them, Othello wins by employing precisely the same strategy of requesting information.
Having wrested from Iago a weak assertion concerning Cassio’s honesty, Othello might be expected to let the matter drop. Significantly, Othello does not. Just as he has initiated the previous exchange by bringing Iago back to their original conversation, Othello continues a line of questioning. Othello turns the conversation from what Iago knows to what Iago might think.

Iago has previously stated that for all he knows Cassio is honest. Othello chooses then to explore Iago’s thoughts: “What dost thou think?” (3.3.104). With this particular indirect request, Othello shows himself prepared to explore the dangerous realm of opinion or notion rather than that of fact. Moreover, when Iago puts off this request with a request for clarification, “Think, my lord?” (3.3.104), Othello interprets this delay in the most extreme terms possible:

Think, my lord?
By heaven, thou echoest me,
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something.  (3.3.105–08)

In these lines Othello actively interprets Iago’s violation of the maxim of quantity. From Iago’s reluctance to answer, Othello hypothesizes “a monster in thy thought too hideous to be shown.” He in turn asserts “Thou dost mean something” and then refers back to Iago’s original comment, “I heard thee say even now, thou lik’st not that / When Cassio left my wife” (3.3.109–10). Later in the same exchange Othello ponders whether Iago’s “stops” are either “tricks of custom” or “close dilations,” but he nonetheless chooses to interpret Iago’s stops as a representation of something “hideous.” Iago at this point in the exchange has not said very much. He has made two requests for confirmation, each strategically designed to intimate intimacy between Cassio and Desdemona. He has also been made to cancel this implicature by Othello. Despite this fact, Othello persists, pursuing the more nebulous territory of Iago’s beliefs and opinions, although he has some sense that Iago is not an honest speaker and could be engaged in “tricks of custom.” What is remarkable is the meaning that Othello makes and the language he employs, because whatever else happens in this scene and in the play, by articulating the notion of a “monster” in Iago’s thoughts, Othello himself chooses to construct an entirely new narrative of his relationship to Desdemona.

Iago responds to Othello’s request by asserting, “For Michael Cassio, I dare be sworn, I think that he is honest” (3.3.125). Iago employs think explicitly to conform to Othello’s request, but also strategically to convey weak assertion. However, a second time Iago asserts that Cassio is honest. Othello even agrees and states, “I think so too” (3.3.126). Iago’s only strategic alternative at this point is to reinforce the notion that his assertion is weak by reiterating his phrasing with think, “Why then, I think Cassio’s an honest man” (3.3.129), whereby Othello directs Iago to think again. Although having stated himself, only four lines previously, that he thinks Cassio is honest, Othello chooses to continue his line of questioning: “Nay, yet there’s more in this?” (3.3.130). He follows this somewhat open question with an explicit request for information that is positively conducive: “I prithee speak to
me as to thy thinkings, / As thou does ruminate, and give thy worst of thought / The worst of words” (3.3.130–33). This explicit and strong directive on Othello’s part also comes with the force of his authority over Iago. Othello not only commands Iago to tell him something negative but also shows himself willing to listen to any notion and rumination Iago might have, provided that it is negative. We see from Othello’s positioning of himself that he is simultaneously open to any suggestion, while also directing and constructing that suggestion. Therefore, he directs Iago to articulate “thy worst of thought.” Othello cues Iago what he wants to hear and what to say, although both characters have only lines before asserted that Cassio is an honest man. Othello, whose use of requests for information is marked from the commencement of this scene, shows himself entirely willing to proceed from fact, to thought, to mere rumination in pursuing the notion that Cassio is not honest. Othello speaks of a “monster” in Iago’s thought less than twenty lines into their second exchange in act 3. This usage of “monster” is consistent with Othello’s speech prior to Iago’s return to the stage when Othello talks of “Chaos” coming again. This language, like that which follows, is highly emotional and charged. It is also worth noting that Iago himself reflects back to Othello the same language when he speaks of jealousy as a “green-eyed monster.” By repeating this usage, Iago accommodates to Othello’s highly emotional perspective. Once Othello constructs a monster in Iago’s thought and directs Iago to explicate it, Desdemona is lost.

Although Desdemona is lost, the focus in the entire exchange between Othello and Iago is not on what Othello does or does not know about Desdemona but on what he does or does not know about Cassio. Desdemona’s narrative of wooing has constructed Cassio as an agent and herself as goal. What Othello and Iago do in their mutual interrogation of one another dominated by Othello’s line of questioning is to reconstruct a narrative version of wooing whereby Cassio is an agent acting on his own behalf rather than Othello’s. Part of Othello’s susceptibility to this version of events lies in his not conceiving of himself as an agent in his wooing of his own wife. In his own narrative in act 1 and in his assertion to Iago, “For she had eyes, and chose me,” Othello consistently makes himself patient/goal. Othello gives agency first to Desdemona and then redirects it to Cassio. Othello’s preferred role of patient is merely altered in his narrative reconstruction from someone desired by Desdemona to someone rejected and betrayed. Rather than being patient and goal (desired end), Othello becomes patient as victim.

**5. Conclusion**

In an eerie parallel to Othello’s role as interrogator in act 3, scene 2, Othello asks a last question of Iago:

> Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil  
> Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body? (5.2.97–8)

Rather than ask Iago directly, Othello employs an indirect request for information, suggesting iconically the distance that now exists between himself and Iago. This question, of course, carries an assertion, that Iago ensnared Othello’s soul and body,
which many critics have embraced as a true reading of the play. However, in his
response to Othello, Iago both challenges the question and refutes the assertion.
Iago counters Othello’s request for information with his own directive: “Demand
me nothing” (5.2.299). On its own this response would indicate Iago’s refusal to
talk and in turn to explain himself. However, Iago also adds the comment “What
you know, you know” (5.2.299). With this statement, Iago puts off Othello’s request
with the assertion that Othello already knows the answer or knows something else
which makes Othello’s question irrelevant. One could say that to the very end Iago
refuses to speak plainly — that he cannot stop himself from hinting at dark meanings,
albeit not so much dark meanings about himself as dark meanings about Othello.

What is certainly interesting is that through this last request for information,
Othello constructs as he did in act 1 a narrative in which he is patient and another
is agent. While in act 1 Desdemona ensnares his heart, in act 5 Iago ensnares his
soul. Even his use of an indirect speech act suggests Othello’s refusal to examine his
situation directly and honestly. He cannot bring himself to ask Iago directly, just as
he refuses to ask Desdemona directly or engage with her directly. Othello speaks in
act 1 of having “a perfect soul,” which will be made manifest to anyone who speaks
with him. When we see him initially, Othello is a man of supreme self-confidence
who has the capacity to assert the ways things are. When this capacity is challenged
by Desdemona’s counternarrative of their courtship, he moves readily to transform
his relationship with her, with Cassio, and with Iago. He revives discussion of
Iago’s earlier commentary and determinedly pursues a line of questioning until he
effectively commands Iago to reveal anything possibly disreputable about Cassio.
Othello is more comfortable with the idea that Cassio is an agent in Desdemona’s
bed than an agent aiding him to win her. He chooses to be betrayed as a husband
rather than to be inadequate as a suitor. His shift from assertives to requests for
information represents a shift from complete self-assurance and satisfaction in
himself to a need to reacquire control over himself, his world, and his wife.

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