

Passion and reason in othello

[Literature](#), [Character](#)



Since ancient times, philosophers have considered the dilemma of balancing reason and passion. Myths like the fall of Icarus tell of the calamities that occur when one takes precedence over the other– in this example, when passion supersedes reason. In his play *Othello*, Shakespeare illustrates this same predicament in an altogether different fashion. Three characters– Roderigo, Othello, and Iago–let passion override reason, with disastrous results. Roderigo’s infatuation with Desdemona prevails over his common sense. At the onset of the play, Roderigo is a wealthy young Venetian who had previously failed to woo Desdemona. When he learns of her marriage to Othello, Roderigo is heartbroken, and he irrationally threatens to “incontinently drown [himself] (I. iii. 305)”. Taking advantage of this weakened state, Iago, under the premise of assisting in the wooing of Desdemona, extorts large sums of money from Roderigo and convinces the boy to kill an enemy of his, Cassio. So desperately in love with Desdemona, Roderigo agrees with the plan and is ultimately killed by his benefactor, Iago. Roderigo’s passion for Desdemona had led him to attempted murder, poverty, and death. Both Roderigo and Othello let their love for Desdemona overrule reason. Othello begins the play as a high-ranking general newly married to Desdemona. He speaks simply and eloquently, and is able to quell a conflict with only his words: “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them. (I. ii. 58-9)” His temperament shifts when Iago, his jealous ensign, convinces him that Desdemona is unfaithful, changing his passionate love into fury. He hotly declares his “sweet Desdemona” (III. iii. 56) to be a “lewd minx” (III. iii. 477), and irrationally accuses his wife with accusations she knows nothing about. His passion blinds him to the fact that Iago had falsely

accused her, and his previous eloquence is transformed into savage ramblings. His anger sways him to the decision to murder Desdemona. Subsequently, he discovers that she is innocent, and kills himself in grief. Othello had begun the play as a reasonable man, but his frenzied passion culminates into the death of both his wife and himself. His is the starkest tale of passion overriding reason: reason had forsaken him, and that led to his death. Othello falls victim to passion because of the manipulations of others, but Iago leads himself to his doom. Early in the play, Iago is well aware of the dilemma of balancing passion and reason, believing that “we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts” (I. iii. 331-3). Iago believes he can control his passion with reason, but falls victim to the trappings of passion himself. His declarations of hatred towards Othello strew the play, and, for the “mere suspicion” (I. iii. 391) that Othello has slept with his wife, he is embattled with the desire for vengeance. His thirst for revenge leads him to the actions of an irrational man: he drives Othello to fury with accusations of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, threatens Emilia, his wife, and murders Roderigo. Iago’s obsession drives him to harm those undeserving of his hatred, even after he reaches his goals of promotion and ruining Othello: he slays Emilia, in the hopes of silencing her. Iago’s passion for revenge leads him to murder, and his actions do not go unpunished— it is decided to torture Iago for his crimes. With the departure of reason, passion engulfs Roderigo, Othello, and Iago. The trappings of passion lead them to death, torture, and misfortune. Since ancient times, philosophers have warned against prioritizing passion over reason. In some ways, the tale of

Othello parallels that of the Ancient Greek figure Icarus- despite all warnings, they become victims of obsession, leading to their plummets from the sun.