

Honest iago

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



“ IAGO: Stand you a while apart. Confine yourself but in a patient list. Whilst you were here, o’erwhelmèd with your grief – A passion most unsuiting such a man – Cassio came hither. I shifted him away, And laid good ‘ scuse upon your ecstasy, Bade him anon return and here speak with me, The which he promised. Do but encave yourself, And mark the fleers, the gibes and notable scorns That dwell in every region of his face. For I will make him tell the tale anew, Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when He hath and is again to cope your wife. I say, but mark his gesture. Marry, patience, Or I shall say you’re all-in-all in spleen, And nothing of a man” (Othello 4. 1. 72-

87). Over the course of Othello, the title character endures several metaphorical falls. Indeed, one need only compare his social status in Act I and in Act V: at the start, Othello commands respect for his grand military successes; by the close of the play, unearthly jealousy has reduced him to homicide, stripped him of power, and ultimately led him to stab himself. Rather than one meteoric decline, as in Oedipus Rex, however, it seems that Othello falls a little bit with each scene. The most significant of these dips in honor occurs in Act IV, Scene I (immediately following a literal swoon by Othello, not coincidentally), when Iago tricks Othello into believing that he has seen “ ocular proof” (3. 3. 365) of Desdemona’s infidelity, thus leaving him, once and for all, destined for a tragic end. The obvious flimsiness of this evidence must compel us to ask two important questions: why is Othello so willing to trust Iago? And why is he so quick and careless to condemn his wife? For the answers, we need only look at Iago’s words to his master, in which he outlines his plan – which we know to be deceitful – to entrap Cassio in a confession. Our understanding of Iago’s state of mind at this time

depends on our interpretation of his character as a whole. More specifically, there are two popular ways to think about iago: as a human, or as a devil (or even Lucifer incarnate). If we think of him as a devil, and therefore as a wholly evil entity, the very term “state of mind” is irrelevant; a character whose being is inclined unwaveringly in one particular direction does not have mood swings, but rather, in iago’s case, remains malicious throughout. This view of iago, though popular, is overly simplistic; in order to do the play justice, we must think of iago, like we would any other character, as a human being. On this interpretation, his condition at this point in the play is relief and, one would assume, rekindled optimism for his plan. Cassio’s recent entrance, had Othello been conscious, likely would have spelled doom for the ensign, as the Moor would have had the opportunity to question his lieutenant outright and thus dispel iago’s deception; instead, Cassio’s appearance gives iago the perfect opportunity to cement his master’s fury, and thereby his downfall. Othello’s faint – caused by iago’s trickery – enables that very trickery to continue, to build to its climax, leaving the ensign in a state of barely-controlled relief and renewed vigor when he gives this short speech. iago’s language in these lines adheres to his speech patterns throughout the play. The lines follow closely to the iambic pentameter form: nine of fourteen lines (the first and last line are incomplete) have ten syllables exactly, while the rest all have eleven. This poetic conformity reflects the ensign’s feigned submission to Othello. Indeed, his entire plan hinges on his staying in the Moor’s good graces – on his role as Othello’s most trusted advisor – so he must simulate obedience, probably even more so than he normally would to a military or social superior. There is no rhyme

scheme in these lines, which removes the atmosphere of formality from a supposedly professional relationship; though Iago's strict iambic pentameter simulates a willingness to submit, his lack of a formal rhyme scheme makes the conversation more intimate, like one between two friends, rather than master and ensign. In this way, Iago cleverly maneuvers himself into a position where he has influence over Othello's decisions, but does not seem to pose a threat. Also worth noting, in terms of Iago's linguistic choices, is line 83: "Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when." This repetition of interrogatives, spoken aloud, sounds like the blows of a hammer; these words truly do hammer into Othello's brain the utter shame of his potential cuckoldry. This echo effect is but another cunning ploy by Iago to shatter his master's reserve. We can imagine a nearly-broken Othello wincing at each word, culminating in the next line, "He hath and is again to cope your wife." Not only has Cassio slept with Desdemona, but he plans to do so again – a clear sign of disdain for Othello's dignity. The grammatical construction of this line, which makes "your wife" the direct object of a rather indelicate verb (in contrast with a formation like "sleep with your wife," which employs a euphemism, and in which Othello's beloved is not objectified as a sexual conquest), makes its content brutally honest and thus infuriating to the Moor.