

# The concept of patience and its representation

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In a play of jealousies and passions, patience, as a virtue, is presented as a foil to the “raging motions” seen in many characters. There are two aspects to patience in Othello, demonstrated firstly by suspending intellectual judgment and repressing instinctive emotional responses until they may be validated and grounded with logic and truth, and secondly through withstanding emotional pain and sustaining one’s integrity despite the tragedies that may have befallen one. The Duke, the voice of rationality, remarks, “What cannot be preserved when fortune takes, / Patience her injury a mockery makes.”

Shakespeare presents this lack of patience in the titular character of Othello, who, as a result, falls to tragic depths. Initially rational, Othello is capable of choosing patient reason over passion or aggression. He says to an enraged Brabantio, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them,” thereby demonstrating his control of his emotions – which appears all the more noble when juxtaposed against Brabantio’s own impassioned and rash aggression. The Blackamoor in this scene emerges as the more rational and composed of the two, whilst Brabantio continues to make preposterous indictments of witchcraft against Othello and chooses to seek immediate emotional gratification through revenge, following his own flawed sense of justice, which is, as rightly pointed out by the Duke, based on nothing but “thin habits and poor likelihoods.” Othello is even able to subtly chide the impulsive Brabantio by suggesting “Good signor, you shall more command with years/ Than with your weapons.” This moment speaks to Othello’s control over both the situation and his emotions. Later in the play, plagued

by the maleficent manipulations of Iago, Othello regresses into the state of a stereotypical Moor - emotional, impulsive and irrational.

Othello's regression is first seen when he asks Iago for "satisfaction" in place of "proof" concerning Desdemona's fidelity. Iago establishes prior to this that "it is impossible you should see [Desdemona and Cassio in an act of adultery]." He further frustrates Othello by denying him knowledge of his thoughts - "You cannot [know my thoughts, even] if my heart were in your hand." Othello, however, as the soldier used to the "tented fields" and simple clarity of the military world, where the good and bad are easily dichotomized into the Venetians and the invaders, is unable to settle for uncertainty and patiently withhold judgment until evidence is found.

Certainty that Desdemona is loyal would solve the problem but unfortunately it is impossible to prove fidelity logically; infidelity, conversely, requires just a single act. Certainty would enable and vindicate action, and Othello, in seeking to salvage his pride and soothe his seething emotions, demonstrates an affinity for action as he makes the logical leap - "To be once in doubt is to once be resolved." Instead of patiently seeking proof, withholding unfounded emotions and curbing rash actions, he pines "would I were satisfied," and accepts the flimsy suggestions of Iago as "satisfaction" - which is less logical proof than it is intellectual numbing and emotional appeasement.

Iago relates to Othello Cassio's putative dream with minute attention to detail, dramatically creating the scene in Othello's mind of Cassio and Desdemona luxuriating in libidinous sex. Othello, unable to adopt the stance

of patience, succumbs to the peremptory emotional claims of his imaginative reality and forsakes logic. Instead of accepting Iago's caveat that "this was but a dream," Othello asserts that it denoted a "foregone conclusion." Othello, in his need for certainty leaps to clutch at a "foregone conclusion," collapsing temporal sequence in favour of emotional "satisfaction." The insubstantial evidence that Iago provides hence become merely convenient articles to mollify his intellect, whilst a stronger and more primitive need for decision and action takes over.

Such action takes the form of revenge and murder - not very different from Brabantio's earlier attack. Othello's decision to do so is another incident of thwarted patience - he is unable to endure the humiliation Desdemona's alleged infidelity brings to his public name as well as the emotional pain he has to undergo. Iago ostentatiously cautions a raging Othello, "Patience, I say; your mind perhaps may change." However, as Iago predicts, Othello rejects this piece of advice completely, declaring an unrelenting resolution and refusing to consider the value of patiently living out his sense of humiliation, pain and injustice:

The accumulating enjambment and unyielding energy coupled with magnificent maritime imagery illustrate Othello's inexorable rush into the extremity of revenge. Unable to heed the Duke's advice (that "patience her injury a mockery makes"), Othello plunges straight into the solace of action and resolution, forming a conviction to murder Desdemona, the "cause" of which he, delusional, identifies as "justice."

A major portion of his emotional turmoil may be attributed to his inherent propensity to conflate the public with the private. Regarding Desdemona's putative infidelity, his initial reaction is to lament that "Othello's occupation's gone" after enumerating his adieus to the various aspects of his public life ("neighing steed," "plumed troops," "big wars," etc.). As a Moor within Venetian society Othello is keenly aware of his status as the "other." The public ramifications he views as a result of Desdemona's supposed adultery lead him to experience the emotional pain yet more acutely. Once again, he allows Patience to dissolve into oblivion - unable to live as "A fixed figure for the time of scorn/ To point his slow unmoving finger at," Othello erroneously comes to conclude - "either I must live, or bear no life." He explicitly repudiates the value of patience in referring to the symbolic gesture of Patience personified, "turn[ing] its complexion there...[to] look grim as hell." This preference for immediate satisfaction also prefigures his later decision to end his life in suicide rather than suffer the torment of living in guilt - "For, in my sense, 'tis happiness to die."

Other minor characters such as Cassio also demonstrate the consequences of a lack of patience. Iago attributes Cassio's aggressive attacks in the drunken brawl to "some strange indignity, / Which patience could not pass." Cassio's subsequent reactions to his dismissal as lieutenant are also characteristically impatient. Despite Emilia's assurance that Othello "needs no other suitor but his likings/ To take the safest occasion by the front/ To bring you (Cassio) in again," Cassio adamantly insists on seeing Desdemona, afraid "That I being absent and my place supplied, / My general will forget my love and service."

This impatience is, in a way, transferred to Desdemona, who pertinaciously plies Othello to reinstate Cassio, going to the extent of “ tam[ing] and talk[ing] him out of patience.” Unbeknownst to Desdemona, her impatience at Cassio’s reinstatement only leads to Othello’s impatient embrace of Iago’s insinuations of her alleged adultery. All these acts of impatience only lead the play inexorably towards its tragic conclusion.

Iago, the “ learned spirit of human dealings,” sums up the value of patience by saying, “ How poor are they that have not patience. What wound did ever heal but by degrees?” Othello and Cassio, unable to allow their wounds time to heal, end up seeking rash satisfaction and collapsing the play into tragedy.

This idea of patience is dramatically emphasized by Shakespeare’s use of the double time scheme. The play propels itself over the compressed span of a few days with a fiery and impulsive energy akin to the “ raging motions” and “ carnal stings” seen in some characters. Juxtaposed with this is the patient subservience of Desdemona and perhaps Emilia and Bianca as well, as they express their love in the terms of a narration that suggests a larger history of mutual affection and trust - a slow but steady and enduring cultivation of love and devotion. This is especially prominent in the oneiric quality of the willow scene with Desdemona seemingly “ half-asleep.” Instead of responding to Othello’s irrational aggression with impatient anger, she asserts, “ My love doth so approve him,/ That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns...have grace and favour in them.” She appeals to the narrative of Barbary in the willow song, establishing a female solidarity

representing a woman's patience which is ultimately transcendent of the play's own temporal propulsion. Instead of accusing Othello for hitting her, her grief turns inward and she settles down to question her own actions which might have led to Othello's rage. Her only soliloquy is thus revealed:

Her patience only serves to emphasize the monstrosity of Othello's aggression. Emilia's indictment of Othello at the end of the play - "thou art rash as fire" - is not unjust, and it is the virtuous patience of Desdemona which is perhaps the most enduring element of the play, leaving an impact beyond the passions of Othello and even the unfathomable Iago.