

It is not words that
shake me thus

Literature, Russian Literature



Othello is, among other things, a play about words. Each character's essence is expressed by a distinct idiom, and each character succeeds or fails, at least to an extent, because of language. A passage in the temptation scene, 3. 3. 191-222, demonstrates how Iago uses language to manipulate Othello, and how Othello's language in turn expresses his descent from reason into jealousy. This passage is a provocative example of how, in Othello, words not only express but actually create the characters' shifting realities. One of the major ironies of Othello is that most of its characters are unable to acknowledge the hidden meanings of words; as a result, they remain ignorant of the language-generated scripts they are following. Iago is the only character fully capable of deconstructing language and using it for manipulative purposes (Hall 45). In his efforts to convince Othello of his wife's infidelity, Iago uses language to create an air of intimate confidence. His tone is falsely caring as he plants suspicions in Othello's heart: "now I shall have reason / To show the love and duty that I bear you / With franker spirit" (3. 3. 193-95). Iago's self-serving repetition of "I hope you will consider what is spoke / Comes from my love" (3. 3. 216) furthers Othello's feeling of reassurance. In order to appear even more earnest, he feigns hesitation with lines like "I speak not yet of proof" and "I humbly do beseech you of your pardon / For too much loving you" (3. 3. 196, 214). This pretense of sincerity coupled with humility makes his adultery theories about Desdemona all the more convincing. His tentativeness also invites responses from Othello and thus enables Iago to check the progress of his manipulation. Iago uses language not only to give himself the illusion of credibility, but to create a bond between himself and Othello. In this

passage, Iago's speech is elevated to match the quality of Othello's speech and thereby win his trust. This unnaturally elevated language is a contrast to his prose idiom, which is more in keeping with his coarse nature. (The only other two characters to speak in prose are Desdemona and the clown. Prose is assigned to the clown to reflect his lower social rank; Desdemona uses prose in moments meant to emphasize her pure nature.) An example of Iago's coarse language can be found in Act Two, Scene Three when he speaks to Cassio of Desdemona: "I'll warrant her full of game! What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation! Well, happiness to their sheets! Come, lieutenant, / I have a stoup of wine, and here without are a / brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello" (19-29). This is contrasted with the delicate nature of his speech in lines 215-20 of the temptation passage: "I hope you will consider what is spoke / Comes from my love. But I do see y' are moved. / I am to pray you not to strain my speech / To grosser issues, nor to larger reach / Than to suspicion." Not only prose but also soliloquies and asides are absent from lines 3. 3. 191-222. Nor are there any interruptions to this scheming and one-sided dialogue. Presumably these kinds of cues to the audience would distract from the growing intimacy between the two men. The blank verse Iago uses instead creates a concentrated atmosphere of emotional connection between Othello and Iago, which culminates in Othello's declaration in line 215: "I am bound to thee forever." In Act Three, Scene Four, the bond is formally staged through the symbolic exchange of wedding vows between the kneeling knave Iago and his victim Othello (Hall 47). As the passage continues, Othello's psychological transformation is evident in

the words he speaks — or does not speak. The first thing to note about Othello's reactionary language in the passage is not its quality but its quantity. Despite his reputation and overall prominence, Othello speaks only eight of the passage's thirty-one lines. The first three of Othello's lines introduce a motif of the passage: the erasure of his doubt. The rest are simple responses or echoes of Iago's manipulations: "Dost thou say so?"; "And so she did"; "I will not." All show Othello's weakening spirit and compliant tone. "I am bound to thee forever" in line 213 similarly echoes Iago, who in line 195 introduced the notion that the two men are bound in fates. Othello's "Not a jot, not a jot" of line 215 recalls Iago in line thirty-six when he says, "Nothing, my lord; of if-I know not what." The repetition of nothingness and contradictions allows us to see more clearly the impotency of Othello before Iago's overwhelming verbal and emotional assaults. Iago is a miserable man and knows "I am not what I am" (2. 3. 42). Now he shares his sense of nothingness with his "noble lord." In 3. 3. 106, Othello exclaims to Iago: "By heaven, thou echoest me." Of course, the reverse is true; as Othello falls under Iago's spell, his language increasingly resembles Iago's. For example, we see the tone of irony Othello has borrowed from Iago. Ironic language was inconsistent with the self-assured identity Othello used to possess, but now that jealousy has taken hold of him, he can cry things like, "I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage / That we call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites!" (3. 3. 267-269). An example of Othello mirroring Iago's language appears in 207-8: "She loved them most. / And so she did." Another instance of echoing is in lines 195 and 213 respectively. Iago states: "as I am bound" to which

Othello replies “ I am bound to thee forever.” From this bond, insinuations are able to clutter the Moor’s once open mind. Iago’s commanding “ Why go to then!” speeds the closing of his devilish trap (3. 3. 208). Lying is another of the passage’s motifs. Ironically, Iago, the man who is misleading Othello, advises Othello against being blinded to the truth. He reminds Othello of his blackness by visualizing Desdemona seeming to “ shake and fear [his] looks” (3. 3. 207). Next, he warns that Desdemona was able to “ seel her father’s eyes up close as oak...” (3. 3. 210) and alludes to the falconry practice of sewing up hawk’s eyes. A further irony is that Othello begins the passage with a declaration of his commitment to the truth: “ I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; / And on the proof there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy!” (3. 3. 191-193). Gradually, however, Othello takes on the language of a dissembler by lying to himself or at least his former identity. Whereas Iago is able to conceal his cunning by denouncing his own actions, Othello is an inexperienced liar. He learns to lie by echoing the thoughts of Iago. Since the passage addressed comes at the beginning of Othello’s negative transformation, his language has not yet completely deteriorated. However, a suggestion of his forthcoming speech-habits appears in line 191, where his use of the doublet reflects his anxiety: “ I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove.” He is in effect reduced to a stammer. The final results of the transformation, which began in the temptation scene, are revealed in lines 299 and 339 of Act Five, Scene Two. Iago, satiated with the success of his words, affirms that “ From this time forth never will [I] speak a word.” The completeness of Othello’s transformation is underscored as he calls out a warning: “ Then must you

speak / of one that loved not wisely, but too well.” The subtext of this line is that Brabantio’s statement: “ But words are words” is wrong (1. 3. 215). Thus the tragedy concludes with a bold, if belated, acknowledgment of the power of language. The words alone are the play. Works Cited Hall, Joan. *Othello: A Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999. Shakespeare, William. “*Othello*.” New York: Signet, 1998.