

The noble hero in the end

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Shakespeare's Othello is indeed a powerful and impressive figure who is tragically brought down by Iago, a villain who goes undetected through his great drive and intellect until the very end of the play. Despite his shortcomings — of which a lack of self-knowledge is the most glaring — Othello remains “great of heart” (as Cassio proclaims in Act 5, Scene 2) because he is fundamentally a man of integrity. Furthermore, the fact that Iago universally fools everyone is also something to consider before condemning Othello's person roundly. At the same time, it should be added that Othello is also “outclassed” by certain occurrences of chance, which the opportunistic Iago then exploits.

The first example of Othello being outclassed in intellect is his lack of self-knowledge; this is with regard to how his military background has affected his logic. In Act 3, Scene 3, he constantly commands Iago to bring him “proof” of Desdemona's infidelity — “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore” — and yet he easily mistakes the handkerchief for being ocular proof when it is anything but. This may be related to how he believes that “'tis better to be much abused / Than but to know't a little.” For him, “To be once in doubt / Is once to be resolv'd” — in other words, he does not hesitate to act on things, and is thus prone to jumping to conclusions. This is a weakness that Iago is well aware of, and he prompts Othello to contort everything he sees into “evidence” that suggests Desdemona's guilt. Yet can Othello really be faulted for this? His profession as a general has led him into a life of “moving accidents by flood and field.” Because of “the imminent deadly breach,” for him hesitancy can only become a weakness, an opening point for imminent attack. Iago, on the other hand, slyly admits

that “ oft [his] jealousy / Shapes faults that are not”; he occasionally even reminds Othello that he has not yet conclusively proven these insinuations (“ I speak not yet of proof”). He is clearly aware of the faulty logic at play here, perversely even hinting at this, always in the confidence that Othello, who has never been a man of moderation (“ Perplex’d in the extreme”) will be too tempted by the desire to be “ resolv’d” and insist that “ yet there’s more in this.”

It is also telling that Iago himself admits Othello’s greatness: “ Another of his fathom they have none.” Yet it is only testament to Iago’s power and drive that he can easily turn a good thing into something horrific: just as he speaks of “ turn[ing] [Desdemona’s] virtue into pitch” and speaks of Cassio’s vice being to his virtue a “ just equinox / The one as long as the other,” so too does he know how to turn Othello’s “ free and open nature” into its absolute opposite. Othello, a general who is used to trusting his men in fighting collective wars and a soldier too used to clearly delineated battle lines, has his trusting nature exploited by Iago. Iago knows full well that he “ thinks men honest that but seem to be so” and thus knows how easily he can be “ led by th’nose / As asses are.”

In Act 3, Scene 1, we are told that “ to hear music the general does not greatly care.” This has a sinister echo of Iago’s earlier pronouncement that he will “ set down the pegs that make this music.” More significantly, it makes an important point about the pair’s drastically different capacities for perception. Listening to music was then considered to be a noble and civilizing attribute, so it is telling that this trait is so conspicuously absent in

Othello, one more suited for the battlefield. His sense of discernment is, correspondingly, much less astute than Iago's. One of the most tragic features of his downfall is the way in which his former eloquence becomes so powerfully overwhelmed by Iago's barnyard, pornographic language. From the moment he tells Iago to "give thy worst of thoughts / The worst of words," the relationship between deteriorating language and crumbling self-control becomes tragically glaring. Iago's equivocal language — "Ha! I like not that"; "Think, my lord?" — is projected onto Othello's expression, such that he is reduced to incoherent syntax, fragmented sentences, and clipped speech: "O, o, o!"; "Death and damnation!"; "Monstrous!" And yet he remains painfully unaware. After all, his ears are used to the trumpeting of war, and are not in any shape to pick out such linguistic disintegration as to connect it to his own moral deterioration. The equivocation is also transplanted into his communication with Desdemona, such that he begins to speak elliptically like Iago — "I have a pain upon my forehead" — and it is hardly Desdemona's fault that she does not understand his true meaning in the least. Iago perversely mocks him in Act 3, Scene 3 with language echoed from the trial scene; for instance, he transforms Brabantio's warning of, "She has deceived her father, and may thee," into, "She did deceive her father, marrying you," thus tapping into Othello's subconscious insecurities. He constantly reminds Othello of his unsoldierly conduct, knowing that he predicates his success as a lover on his success as a soldier; tellingly, he makes sure to tell Othello that Cassio has witnessed him in his emasculating epileptic fit: "A passion most unsuited such a man." Iago hits where he knows it will hurt the most; significantly, he launches his temptation upon

Othello's exaltation of Desdemona: "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee; and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again."

This is one of the few times when Othello has admitted such a total and absolute dependence on anyone else, and Iago thus quickly moves in to destabilize his newly-oriented bearings.

It may also be of note that Othello is furthermore at the mercy of chance. Iago admits that his plan will only work "If consequence do but approve my dream"; and approve it does, for the fortuitous occurrences like Cassio not mentioning Bianca's name, Emilia finding the handkerchief, and Desdemona unfortunately using the word "suitor" in describing Cassio only cement Othello's downfall as something painfully out of his control.

Critics like F. R. Leavis have argued that Othello's comeuppance is certain because of his rather contemptible faults, but the ending scene gives us reasonable grounds to interpret the hero as someone still "great of heart" — a "noble Moor" to the last. It is true that Othello's unraveling gets despicable at parts, such as when he publicly strikes Desdemona. Yet it is also telling that at the very end, his only criticism comes from Emilia, who in turn may be questioned for her lack of objectivity, judging from the excessively categorical condemnation: "O gull! O dolt!" Furthermore, with the death of her beloved mistress and utterly unexpected betrayal by Iago, she is hardly in any proper frame of mind for us to derive our final assessment of Othello from her. Cassio, whom we might expect to be livid for having been dismissed and suspected of treachery, says a mere, "Dear general, I never gave you cause"; it is clear that when Othello "ask[s] [his]

pardon,” he has already granted it. Upon Othello’s suicide speech, Cassio immediately pronounces him to have been “ great of heart.” Lodovico, who has stood for Venice, order, and stability throughout the play, condemns Iago with, “ Where is that viper?” and describes Othello as a most “ rash and unfortunate man.” He tells Iago that, “ This is thy work,” and it is thus legitimate for one to take this as Shakespeare’s intended interpretation of who truly is at fault. Even if one is not convinced by the responses of other characters, Othello himself redeems his unfortunate misdeeds with his speech, beginning to restore his language to its former glory. Having finally recognized the “ Turk within,” he becomes both the slayer and the slayed in a conclusive act of martyrdom; he briefly mentions he has “ done the state some service” but quickly says, “ No more of that”, concluding with an act that paradoxically cements his role as protector of the state.