

# Othello enotes

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Othello study guide Introduction Preparing to study Tragedy, comedy and history Different kinds of exam question Context questions How to answer context questions A map of the play The essay question Possible essay subjects Characters and relationships Theatrical questions The structure of the play in acts Key scenes analysed The language of the play Past essay questions Themes of the play Preparing to study This guide is written to support your study of Othello. The guide indicates the terms in which examiners will expect you to understand the play. It should be used in conjunction with study of Othello in performance, as far as possible, and of the text in one or more editions designed for study at your level. What other resources should you use? This depends on your own aptitude and readiness for study. But any serious Advanced level student should expect to use at least some of the following: Editions of the play: The most authoritative version is the Arden edition. Most students will find this challenging, although the introduction is well worth reading. The New Cambridge edition is good (but uses archaic spelling of names) while sound editions are published by Penguin and Macmillan. Critical works and background sources: For critical writing about the play, you should use the Casebook anthology (Macmillan): read the introduction, and study essays selectively. At a more basic level the guides from Brodie's Notes (Pan) and York Notes (Longman) may help you. For general background information about Shakespeare, Ms. Marchette Chute's Shakespeare and his Stage (University of London, 1953) is hard to beat. Literature reference: Useful handbooks for the general study of English literature include The Cambridge Guide to English Literature and The Oxford Guide to English Literature, J. A. Cuddon's Dictionary of Literary

Terms (Penguin, 1982) and Richard Gill's *Mastering English Literature* (Macmillan, 1985). Use these books effectively: do not try to read them for extended periods like a story (unless you have unusual intellectual powers!) Study for short periods, then write down simple statements of what you want to remember, or questions to raise in class discussion. Tragedy, comedy and history As a term to describe a category (kind) of play, tragedy (which means "goat song" in classical Greek!) originates in Athens in ancient times. Aristotle (a philosopher and scientist, but no playwright) describes rules or principles for the drama which tragedians should follow. These rules have proved helpful as a working description, but should not be seen as absolute: Shakespeare, in practice, ignores them more or less. For him a tragedy is a play in which a character begins with or attains a position of eminence, from which he falls, through circumstances which are partly within and partly outside his control. In each tragedy we see a man, generally good, but flawed in some way, destroyed by his own error or the malice of another (or both of these); the plays are so written as to excite some mixture of pity, awe or horror at the tragedy, and to question and perhaps re-affirm the justice of the world. This is a gross over-simplification of a subject which has exercised critical debate over centuries! What is not in doubt is that these tragedies work in the theatre - people continue to be moved by seeing them in performance. Comedy is a term applied to the humorous plays of Greek (e. g. Aristophanes) and later Roman (e. g. Terence) dramatists. For Shakespeare, a comedy is a play with a happy ending - it may or may not be comical in the modern sense of being humorous. In trying to arrange Shakespeare's work into categories (as for publication in book form) editors

have produced a third category, of histories. More recently critics have noted that Shakespeare's latest plays do not fit any of these categories easily. Thus we have problem plays (or tragi-comedies) in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* and pastoral plays or romances in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. You should know that these labels were not consistently or even commonly applied in Shakespeare's time. Plays classed as tragedies (such as *Macbeth*) may have a clearly historical subject. Many of our "histories" were advertised as tragedies at the time of their performance. This has led to pointless arguments, as to whether Shakespeare wrote *Richard II* or *Richard III* as history or tragedy: the dispute implies a distinction which may not have existed for the writer.

Different kinds of exam question In preparing for the exam you should be aware of the different kinds of question you will have to answer. In studying the text closely you should simply realise that the material studied can be approached in different ways in the exam. Does this seem confusing? The point is to understand how to use what is more or less the same set of ideas and references, to present different kinds of answer in different forms.

Context questions These are questions which relate to an extended passage within the whole text of the play. If a context question is set for an "unseen" exam (where the candidate does not have the text in the exam room) it is usual for the set passage to be made available. In theory any scene in the play could be chosen; in practice the number of suitable scenes is more limited, and usually the extract chosen will only be a brief part of a much longer scene.

How to answer context questions What the examiners do NOT want is a gloss (prose paraphrase) of the extract given. This might make you

feel secure, but you won't be. What (usually) is required is as follows:

Consideration of the scene's treatment of the play's general themes - the extract and its place in relation to the rest of the play. Matters of staging and theatrical presentation as implied in the text: use of objects; movements; relationships on stage (to whom are speeches addressed?) and the scene's structure (in " episodes"). Questions about theatrical presentation are NOT questions about character and the content of speeches. (See below.) How a character (or characters) is (are) revealed in the dialogue. Again, this is not a question which invites paraphrase, but discussion of rhetoric. A map of the play List the scenes down the page. After the scene number write no more than ten words about what happens. Follow this with the central phrase of a notable speech. e. g. I, iii. Othello explains his wooing of Desdemona: " Rude am I in my speech" II, iii. Cassio disgraced, consoled by Iago: " I ha' lost my reputation" V, ii. Othello kills Desdemona, then himself: " Soft you, a word or two before you go" These are only suggestions. Choose a speech which is a clue to you. The essay question This should be more straightforward. The examiners want to see lots of material but without irrelevance or sacrifice of depth and thoroughness. Sometimes, essays produced in trial examinations have shown too much narrowness of approach. It is essential to plan your essay to ensure that sufficient range of comment appears. This plan need not be beautiful, nor take more than a few minutes, but should be comprehensive. Embody the plan in your opening sentence(s), e. g. (discussing the importance of Venice in the play): " In the first act of the play we see how Othello deals with the officials of the state which values his soldiership but cannot accept him socially; in the rest of the play, which is

set in Cyprus, Venice is still present as the state which Othello is defending, and from which, still, orders are sent; and Venice as an idea is important to Othello, who in his final speech describes his mistakes as a betrayal of the state, for which he must punish himself. " This opening informs the examiner that you have seen the main textual implications of the question set, and that you intend to organize your essay to cover all of these. Having set out the agenda in this way, you should pace your writing so you do cover all the parts of the subject. Possible essay subjects Examiners will usually play fair and are not likely to set a question on Montano or Lodovico. Essays explicitly about a single character are rare at Advanced level. More common are questions on relationships between characters, or questions on their theatrical presentation. In studying Othello you should certainly expect a question about the relations of the hero with Iago, and with Desdemona, and have an idea about how far Shakespeare shows each to be at fault for what happens. In this play there are several themes about which you might expect questions: jealousy and credulity; love and hate; issues of race and nationality (or membership of/exclusion from Venetian society); the idea of " honesty" If you are given a statement to respond to, do not suppose you must agree or disagree wholly. Usually, the statement will be more or less fair but will invite some qualification. Wholly wrong comments are never used. Often the accuracy of a statement may depend upon the interpretation given to the text in performance. General comments on some possible subjects appear below. A word of caution is in order here. You can readily identify potential subjects for the essay question, and you should be prepared to answer on any of these. This is not the same as writing out an

essay you have prepared before the exam. Questions will be worded so as to make this difficult, and to make it obvious if you do it: examiners like organized answers but dislike the "prepared essay". Take your time to read all the available questions carefully before choosing which to answer. It is very often the case that a question which looks hard, because of its wording, is straightforward in reality, while a question which looks simple, rarely is!

**Theatrical questions** This question focuses more closely on the way the play, or some episodes in it, work in theatrical performance. You should answer accordingly - look at details of action, dialogue, use of properties and how the text of the play is a blueprint for performance. More simply, avoid writing about the play as a book, or, worse, as if it were a different kind of narrative, such as a novel. Detailed comments on character/relationships and themes will be found below. Use the hyperlinks to find comment on the subject you want. The structure of the play in acts Othello differs from Shakespeare's other great tragedies (Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet) in several ways: the action is more concentrated in time, and after the first act (effectively a prologue) has a single location (Aristotle thought these unities, of time and place, to be good for plays); unlike the other plays listed, Othello has no secondary plot: this can lead to a unique emotional intensity in the play, but also gives problems to the actors in sustaining it. Though Othello is certainly partly to blame (how much is a subject of critical debate) the contribution of Iago to the tragedy is certainly greater than that of any other of Shakespeare's tragic villains. This play has a distinctive structure in terms of the five acts: the first act, set in Venice, serves as a prologue to the tragedy which follows, presenting Othello's relationship with Desdemona, and

indicating Iago's malice, and general motivation. Time on stage is fairly close to "real" time, as the three scenes of the first act are more or less continuous (Brabantio's conversation with Roderigo allows Iago to re-join Othello; strictly speaking he could only do so if the distance he walks is very slight, but Shakespeare is more concerned with the impression on the audience: the effect seems to work in the theatre; we do not consider whether the interval is one of seconds or minutes, but the arrival of Brabantio and Roderigo indicates that they have covered a similar distance, delayed only by the calling up of the "officers of the night"). Scene iii appears to follow directly from scene ii, or even to overlap it slightly in time. In Cyprus, the action exhibits similar continuity. II, i is the most drawn-out scene in the play; the slow pace creates a sense of anxiety before the arrival of Othello, followed by the joyous re-union of the lovers: this marks the high point of Othello's and Desdemona's happiness, which Iago promises to destroy: they are "well-tuned" but he will "set down the pegs that make this music" (II, i, 199, 200). The rest of Act II concerns the disgracing and demotion of Cassio. Iago sees how to use Cassio's friendship with Desdemona to poison Othello's mind; he has not thought clearly of the consequences of this policy, but his mind is made up by Othello's unexpected passion and demand for "ocular proof" (III, iii, 366), coinciding with the fortunate (for Iago) appearance of "ocular proof" in the form of Desdemona's handkerchief. From this point on the momentum of the action increases, save for brief interludes of reflection by Othello (such as V, ii, 1-22). These suggest the possibility of Othello's discovering his error, so that his failure to do so, until Desdemona lies dead, is all the more painful to the



audience. In this play the absence of wider philosophical concerns or other elements of plot (as in Hamlet or King Lear) increase the horror for the audience, and the arrangement of the last three acts, the absence of interruption or comic interlude (as we have in Hamlet, Macbeth and the earlier Romeo and Juliet) exacerbate this. There are brief appearances by the Clown in III, i and iv, but these hardly constitute comic relief or commentary on the tragic qualities of the play (as do the speeches of the Porter in Macbeth or the Gravedigger in Hamlet). For the characters in the play Iago is frequently a source of amusement (especially in II, i and iii) but the audience, knowing that this performance is part of Iago's deeper malice, cannot enjoy these antics without feeling uncomfortable. In summary, the play could be seen as falling into three stages of a single linear plot: Brabantio's failed rebuke and Othello's commissioning in Venice; the demotion of Cassio, and the killing of Desdemona, leading to Othello's suicide and Iago's arrest, of which the last occupies about half of the total play. A different way of looking at the structure would be to consider III, iii as a watershed: before this, Iago can cut his losses and take some satisfaction from petty achievements (souring Othello's relations with Brabantio, and securing Cassio's post, at least temporarily); after it, events are out of his control no less than they are out of Othello's. It is worth making a plan of each act, identifying episodes/speeches in which the principal themes of the play are addressed.

Key scenes analysed Act I, scene i | Act I, scene iii | Act II, scene i | Act II, scene iii | Act III, scene iii | Act III, scene iv | Act IV, scene i | Act IV, scene ii | Act V, scene i | Act V, scene ii

Act I, scene i Roderigo, learning of Desdemona's marriage, rebukes Iago for failing to press his suit; Brabantio is

roused and informed of Desdemona's elopement. Structure The brief reference to Roderigo's "suit" (what he has asked Iago to do for him, which is to help him win Desdemona's love), leads to Iago's description of Othello and his own disappointment regarding the lieutenancy; this leads to Iago's praise of himself, followed by the rousing of Brabantio, when the two men reach the senator's house. Relationship to the play as a whole As we have yet to meet Othello and Cassio, we have, at this point, no reason to doubt that Iago's comments on each are substantially true. Modern audiences may know that Iago is evil, but this would not have been so for the Jacobean audience. When we meet the characters Iago refers to, we may judge for ourselves. Iago's "revenge" is insanely disproportionate but here and again in I, iii and (end of ) II, i there is an attempt to justify it: briefly, Othello has failed to reward Iago's loyal service, has shown favouritism to a more elegant man, and has promoted a bookish Florentine over a practical and experienced Venetian. A second motive, less certain but perhaps as harmful to Iago's standing in the barracks, is the rumour of his cuckolding by Othello. (The story is that Othello has slept with Emilia.) Theatrical qualities This is one of the most assured openings, theatrically, of any of Shakespeare's plays: we seem to be in the middle of an argument; Roderigo's interest in Desdemona (for Iago merely a means to tap Roderigo for money, and make his "fool" into a "purse") is dropped as soon as mentioned, while Iago describes Othello and Cassio; though clearly the speech of an embittered man, what Iago says, allowing for some bias, seems most plausible, especially his portrayal of the "arithmetician"; when we later find this speech to be inaccurate, we will begin to weigh Iago's words more carefully.

At some point in this conversation (the actors have only to move upstage) the two will stop walking; "Here is her father's house" can, of course, be said after the men have stopped walking, but paused while Iago completes his description of himself. The intimacy of the dialogue gives way to the hue and cry which rouses Brabantio, and the scene ends with frantic activity as the senator prepares to raise an arrest squad.

**Language** We are impressed by the fluency and plausibility of Iago, and the venom of his insults, the eloquence of which contrasts with the stupidity of Roderigo's calling Othello "the thick lips". As Othello will originally have been played by a white actor, such detail must be given verbally, of course. Iago has not exhibited especial interest in Othello's race in his speech to Roderigo (which seems to reflect his own concerns) but is well aware of Brabantio's attitude to Othello's colour, and makes much of the Moor's physical size and Desdemona's vulnerability, as he speaks of the "old black ram... tupping" Brabantio's "white ewe". It seems that Iago is crude here as a matter of policy. As we shall find, Iago has no consistent voice; in every situation he adopts the tone and manner which suit his purpose. He switches readily from blank verse to prose; the latter gives the impression to others of the frankness of "honest" Iago, but he uses this typically when he is deceiving people.

**Act I, scene iii**

**Structure** This scene readily divides into four parts: first we see the Duke and his senior officers in council, awaiting Othello's arrival; this is followed by Brabantio's accusation and Othello's defence; Desdemona arrives later still (with Iago) to confirm Othello's story and ask to accompany him to Cyprus; finally Iago consoles the disappointed Roderigo.

**Relationship to the play as a whole** In narrative terms this scene explains why Othello must go to Cyprus:

the council's convening at night indicates the urgency of the situation; though the reports are confused, their general sense is clear - an invasion fleet is heading for Cyprus. The scene also introduces an idea which is important throughout the play: Othello's balancing of public duty and private concerns. That his wife may distract him from his work is obvious, but Othello is confident in assuring the senate this will not happen. The Duke cannot simply snub Brabantio, but his ignorance of the meeting shows him not to be important to Venetian foreign policy in the way that Othello is. The Duke briefly hears the old senator's complaint, but rules in favour of Othello (he seems sincere, but may be motivated more by a pragmatic awareness of Othello's value and Brabantio's irrelevance). This done, he is able to attend to the business in hand, and despatch Othello to his ship without delay. In turn Othello and Desdemona (publicly, but both are sincere) give the audience a clear idea of their character and purposes; Iago shows more of his spite and gives hints of his line of attack on Othello and Cassio - we see him as he is, as usual, in soliloquy. Theatrical qualities After the movement of the previous scene (the abortive arrest of Othello) this scene is more formal and static. The great number of persons present indicates the importance of the occasion and makes Brabantio's exclusion all the more pointed. The Duke addresses Othello first, then excuses himself by claiming he "did not see" Brabantio. The frequent arrivals of message-bearers convey the sense of military crisis, as does the dropping of names of people and places (Montano, of course, appears in the next act). Brabantio's indignant and implausible accusation of witchcraft contrasts with Othello's composure: he waits to speak, he apologizes disingenuously for his lack of eloquence,

before delivering a beautiful and moving account of his courtship.

Desdemona speaks more briefly, but in a similar vein. Roderigo (whose presence is explained by his being with Brabantio's arresting party) has seen and heard enough, and realizes his case is desperate: there is some humour in Iago's success in dissuading him from giving up his hopes even while milking him for further funds. Othello's integrity in persuading the council with truthful rhetoric is thus balanced, at the end of the scene, by the lying rhetoric of "honest" Iago. Language The directness of the speakers who open this scene, and the brevity of their remarks, create a sense of bustle and some confusion, which they do well to sort out. This works excellently as a prelude first to the near-raving of Brabantio's fantastic charge of witchcraft (another smear on Othello's background, though the handkerchief he has given Desdemona is alleged to have magical properties), then to Othello's moving account of himself, his courtship and Desdemona's returning of his love. Now the speeches are longer, more stately and measured. When Iago speaks it is in prose: this informality is precisely one of the reasons why he is thought "honest" (his speech is not marked by the qualities of public rhetoric which Othello deals in, but he has his own tricks of persuasion, which are no less effective, not least because they pass unnoticed). We should note that when Iago is being genuinely honest (or as near as he ever comes to this), that is, with himself, the "honest" simplicity of prose is dropped: Iago's pentameters are fluent, and sometimes vigorous, usually in the choice of insults, but show his obsession with himself, his enemies and his revenge: there is no trace here of the wonder and generosity which characterize Othello's view of the world, and which we have admired earlier

in this scene. Act II, scene i Structure Like the previous scene, this breaks into four episodes: Montano and the Cypriot gentlemen, soon joined by Cassio, let us know that they are (in Cyprus) looking out to sea, awaiting the Venetian fleet; the arrival of Desdemona, with Iago as escort, allows for an exchange of gallantry between her and Cassio, followed by anxious waiting for Othello, which Iago relieves with some typically cynical banter; the arrival of Othello and his joyous reunion with his wife, leads to the fourth section, which again is occupied by Iago's manipulation of Roderigo, on whose exit Iago concludes the scene with yet another soliloquy. Relationship to the play as a whole The early part of the scene serves a narrative function, in letting us know that the action has now moved to Cyprus (where it remains).

Moreover, Cassio (via the Third Gentleman) brings news that the storm which threatened them has thwarted the intended Turkish invasion: this creates the leisure and excitable mood on the island which Iago exploits to usurp Cassio's position in II, iii. Iago, whose feigned liking for Othello we have seen only briefly in I, ii, now lets us see more clearly why he is liked generally, and why he has his reputation for "honesty". It is interesting that Cassio, apparently defending Iago from Desdemona's censure (she calls him "profane") contrasts Iago's soldiership with his lack of scholarship (Iago has made the same contrast in I, i, in condemning Cassio). The rapturous meeting of the lovers is a high point in the play, and Othello observes that his soul has "content so absolute" that he cannot know greater happiness, which is the cue for Iago to predict, in an aside, his intention to destroy this "content". Cassio's praise of Desdemona, in her absence, must be disinterested (that is, not flattery or ingratiation) and seems wholly sincere;

we see how gracious this Florentine soldier can be when the "divine Desdemona" arrives. Iago's lies to Roderigo show swiftness in improvising, but suggest to him a course of action which may work: Iago will use Roderigo to discredit Cassio and make Othello jealous ("even to madness", while Othello will be grateful to Iago for revealing the alleged offence. We should note, not only that these ideas are far from a clear plan of action, but that Iago is well aware of this: "'Tis here but yet confused"; he admits in the next line that his "knavery" is always improvised. Thus, we have Iago's own testimony to refute any idea that he is a long-term strategist, or wholly in control of events: we shall see later how he takes risks, narrowly escapes discovery, before events overtake him finally. Theatrical qualities We are closer to the action than in Venice, and rely on the attempts of the Cypriots to look out to sea, and the frequent arrivals for our sense of the voyage just completed, the storm and the destruction, further out at sea, of the Turkish fleet. The interlude in which Iago depicts his ideal woman, before ridiculing the ideal, seems odd, if we suppose that Desdemona is distracted by this from her fears for Othello; but as a way of passing the time and attempting to calm herself by attending to Iago's cynical rhymes, the device makes sense, especially if Desdemona remains uneasy throughout Iago's performance (she does state clearly that she is "not merry", but putting on a brave face, at line 119). In a way, his "honest" persona, his readiness to speak freely, and speak "home", has led Desdemona to ask him to distract her. Language Great variety is to be noted in this scene; first the directness of the short information-giving speeches, followed by Cassio's eloquence in praise of Desdemona: in the mouth of any other speaker, some of this would

seem excessive (the attribution of divinity, say). Almost at once we have Iago's "praise": where Cassio's is specific to a real woman, Iago's is of a general type. And Iago's rhyming couplets suggest that he is being less than serious (it sounds like proverbial humour) even before his punchline confirms this. The persuasion of Roderigo and the following soliloquy match the pattern seen in the previous scene. But the poetic climax of the scene comes in the exchanges between Othello and Desdemona. One metaphor suggested by Othello's reference to "discords", suggests to Iago one of his most memorable threats as he takes over Othello's image, noting that the lovers are "well-tuned", but promising to "set down the pegs that make this music". (The image refers to the way in which the pegs loosen the strings after the instrument has been played - Iago will make the music go out of tune.) Act II, scene iii Structure Othello's commission to Cassio serves as a prologue to the first part of the scene, in which Cassio's weakness is revealed, and Iago persuades him to drink to excess; Iago just has time to tell Montano (untruthfully) of Cassio's habitual drunkenness, before the brawl in which Roderigo escapes from Cassio, who wounds Montano; Iago (mostly truthfully) gives Othello his account of what has happened, leading to Cassio's demotion; Cassio is consoled by Iago, who explains himself to the audience in the soliloquy which follows, and the same pattern is repeated for Roderigo as in I, iii and II, i. Relationship to the play as a whole The cashiering (demotion) of Cassio, whom he hates, is an end in itself to Iago, but is also necessary as a means to the awakening of Othello's jealousy, as Cassio is to sue Desdemona to intercede for him. Iago's manipulation of Cassio and Roderigo in the scene anticipates his later manipulation of



Othello, Cassio and Desdemona. Iago's plans become less "confused" to himself and to the audience. Theatrical qualities Theatrically, this scene is very varied, marked by different kinds of dialogue, and a great deal of action. First we may note how Cassio diplomatically avoids endorsing Iago's description of Desdemona, while trying not to offend Iago by excessive prudery - the attitude to attractive women Iago displays can hardly be rare in the army. Cassio is compromised by Iago's insistence, and the heartiness of the Cypriots, into drinking more than the "one cup... craftily qualified" which experience has taught him he can hold. Iago leads the carousing, ensuring that more wine is drunk: the audience will enjoy the superficial good humour here, especially the (Venetian) Iago's praise of England, "where indeed they are most potent in potting", but will be aware that Iago's participation is not what it seems to those around him. Cassio's drunkenness is shown in his open snobbery to Iago, rubbing in the difference in rank, in his forgetting to set the watch, and in his protestations of sobriety. Knowing that Roderigo is about to ambush Cassio, Iago times his revelation of Cassio's alleged habitual drinking to perfection. After the merriment of the drinking and singing, comes a different kind of action: all is violence and confusion as Cassio chases Roderigo; Montano's intervention allows Roderigo to escape, while the Cypriot is injured before Cassio comes to his senses. Iago adds to the mayhem, while it appears that Roderigo has raised hue and cry, including the ringing of the bell, on Iago's aside: "Go out and cry a mutiny". The bell, of course, will terrify the island, being mistaken for a warning of invasion by the Turks. Even Othello's appearance does not stop the affray, until the bell is silenced and Iago asked for an explanation, and we move

from noise and confusion to a more static part of the scene. In his consolation of Cassio and Roderigo, we see Iago at his most assured: this part of his plan has been accomplished perfectly, and he has presided over it like a master of ceremonies. In his first soliloquy (line 315ff.) he as good as invites the admiration of the audience for his success to date. Language This is very much Iago's scene, and we see the versatility of his linguistic gifts most clearly throughout: where Othello's poetry serves to discover beauty and wonder in the world, Iago's language is fundamentally dishonest, allowing him to seem whatever serves his purpose. In this scene he affects first the rough sexuality and love of drink which typify the soldier; next we see how he affects love for Cassio ("a soldier fit to stand by Caesar"; compare this with his description in I, i) while taking his new friends into his confidence about Cassio's "vice"; he protests that he would rather have his tongue cut from his mouth than "it should do offence to Michael Cassio", and suggests that Cassio's conduct must have been provoked by "some strange indignity" from "him that fled". Othello sees this as covering up inexcusable violence and demotes Cassio, who believes nevertheless that he has "well approved" (that is, proved) Iago's friendship. In his remarks upon "reputation", Iago comes as close as he ever does to revealing his true opinions: the notion of deserved reputation or integrity does not enter into his view, which is that reputation bears little relation to merit in many cases. The informality of Iago's prose in praising English drinking is explained by the situation; but in consoling Cassio, as in his conversation at the start of the scene, Iago's informal prose suggests intimacy and friendship. He does not need to make this effort with Roderigo, as he is able, for once, to show his

dupe some return on his expenditure: he has seen his "rival", Cassio, "cashiered" in exchange for some "small hurt", and Roderigo is sent away unceremoniously. Act III, scene iii Structure This the longest scene in the play, but has a less clear structure than many. Most of the scene is occupied by dialogue between Iago and Othello only, but there are brief passages in which other characters are present, while both Othello and Iago leave the stage at times. The scene opens with Cassio's receiving Desdemona's promise of help before taking his leave; Desdemona asks Othello to reconsider Cassio's case, and leaves when he agrees to this; now begins a long section in which Iago moves Othello from hints about Cassio to near conviction of Desdemona's infidelity, before leaving his master alone; Othello's strange behaviour at Desdemona's reappearance leads her to try to comfort him with her handkerchief, which he brushes away; Emilia does not follow her mistress at once picks it up and Iago, returning, is given the handkerchief, and sends Emilia away, before explaining how he will use it; Othello returns, angrily, to demand from Iago proof of Desdemona's betrayal: confident in the use he will make of the handkerchief, Iago tells a story of Cassio's talking in his sleep; the scene ends with Othello's and Iago's vow of vengeance on the supposed lovers. Relationship to the play as a whole At the start of this scene Othello is happy and full of love for Desdemona; by the end he is in a torment of jealousy, persuaded of Desdemona's guilt and filled with murderous intent: it is clearly pivotal to the plot, and is in many ways the most important scene in the play; the bloody climax of Act V is now almost inevitable. Iago has planned to exploit Desdemona's pleading for Cassio to suggest more than friendship. Othello's extreme reaction and

insistence on "proof" have not been foreseen by Iago, but the handkerchief gives him confidence he can supply this. (Othello sees and hears the "evidence" in IV, i.) Theatrical qualities The chief dramatic focus in this scene is on Iago's manipulation of Othello, and on Othello's response. The dialogue is obviously supplemented by action when Desdemona proffers and drops her handkerchief, and when Othello and Iago kneel to make their vow; elsewhere the drama relies more on speech, and action is restricted to gesture or facial expression. We know from the previous scene that Othello and Iago are inspecting the island's fortifications, which explains their appearance "at a distance" while Cassio is speaking to Desdemona, allowing Iago's feigned failure to recognize Cassio to seem plausible. Iago's deception of Othello begins with seeming reluctance to divulge troubling thoughts, which nonetheless are hinted at sufficiently for Othello to demand to know more. "Ha! I like not that" is followed by Iago's pretence that he has said nothing which he remembers; the question about Cassio's knowledge of Othello's courtship is followed by the mysterious disclosure that Iago did not know of their acquaintance - as if this explains something which has been puzzling him. And Iago's repetition of Othello's words as questions ("Honest, my lord?... Think, my lord?" but note that it is Othello who repeats Iago's "Indeed?") all provoke Othello to ask further about Cassio. Othello himself tells us of the "stops" in Iago's speech, which he knows to be "tricks of custom" for some speakers (he is himself skilled in rhetoric) but takes to be "from the heart" in an honest man, as he believes Iago to be. As Iago's poison takes hold, our interest focuses more and more on Othello, as he considers the reasons for the supposed betrayal, and its implications for himself both

as a private and a public man. Language Iago is deeply dishonest, but his speech in this scene convinces Othello precisely because it is so apparently natural or "honest" - simple and direct for the most part, or qualified "I dare be sworn, I think that he (Cassio) is honest" as if he is minimising a genuine scruple. Iago's advice about jealousy is, in itself, very good advice, but even as he gives it, he is also giving Othello reason to be jealous. Othello's reflections on his predicament are more problematic: although we are moved by his plight, his tendency to dramatize it (as, say, "the plague of great ones") is clear. His poetic faculty is turned on himself famously in the speech in which, seeing that his private vengeance must end his public career of military service, he bids repeated "farewell" to all he loves in the soldier's life. He speaks as if for a captive audience, and yet only Iago is present, while in lines 257 to 277 (quoted above) he is alone. We are obviously aware of Iago's attempts at self-justification and explaining his plans in the first half of the play; we should note that in the second half of the play, Othello does something very similar: of course Othello is a good man, where Iago is a mystery of evil, but his own rhetoric serves to confirm Iago's version of events. An odd feature of the central part of the play is the assimilation of Othello's and Iago's language. Iago's faculty for dissimulation enables him even to affect the style of Othello at his most eloquent: the speech about "poppy... mandragora" and "all the drowsy syrups of the world" shows how he can ape Othello's exotic imagery. The style of Othello's vow (451-459) is exactly copied by Iago's "Witness, you ever-burning lights above...". Conversely, Iago's bestial imagery: "... as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, /As salt as wolves in pride" comes to characterize Othello's speech

temporarily - most notably in his "welcome" to Lodovico in IV, i, 254: "Goats and monkeys!" In IV, i, we note that Othello by degrees finds himself unable to speak in verse, in sentences, and finally even to speak at all (lines 36 to 44).

Act III, scene iv Structure After the previous scene, III, iv is brief and extremely clear in its structure: after a brief opening in which Desdemona sends for Cassio, she notes the loss of her handkerchief, and on Othello's appearance evades his request for her to produce it, while interceding for Cassio; Othello's departure, in exasperation, is followed by the arrival of Cassio with Iago, who feigns surprise at learning of Othello's anger, and goes to find him (Iago seems to be shadowing both men; ideally, he will keep them apart [as he manages to do] or, failing this, will prevent Othello from accusing Cassio to his face). After explaining to Cassio why his suit must be delayed, Desdemona also goes to find Othello (with Emilia); the arrival of Bianca (her first appearance in the play) allows Cassio to produce the handkerchief, and ask her to copy its embroidery: the statement that he has found it in his chamber indicates some interval between this scene and the previous one, although Iago's arrival with Cassio mid-way through the scene could indicate that Iago has gone straight to Cassio's lodging at the end of the previous scene, dropped the handkerchief where it would be found, and seeing Cassio pick it up, brought him to Desdemona.

Relationship to the play as a whole In this scene, Shakespeare attends to a number of details of plot: we know that the handkerchief is with Bianca (even Iago does not yet know this) and are prepared for her returning it in the next scene, a circumstance which helps Iago greatly; Desdemona's pleading for Cassio coincides unfortunately with Othello's demanding the handkerchief, the story of which

illuminates our sense of his exotic pagan background. The scene is a necessary interlude between Iago's tormenting of Othello in III, iii and the renewal of this in IV, i: in fact, Iago does very little, other than observe. We see how others' actions give support to his scheming, and suppose the handkerchief will appear again, but are not sure how. Theatrical qualities For the most part, this is a rather unremarkable but business-like scene, but the exchange between Othello and Desdemona is theatrically interesting because of the gulf of understanding between them: she thinks him incapable of jealousy, is puzzled by his manner, and supposes it to arise from some problem in his official duties; he, having already said farewell to these, believes her to be lying about the handkerchief, but cannot believe her effrontery in pleading for Cassio when she (supposedly) has given the handkerchief to him. The banter between Cassio and Bianca is, in itself, fairly comic, but the audience is aware of its serious implications: the humour chiefly arises from Cassio's initial gallantry which, in the face of her jealousy, is dropped for a disdainful manner which reveals the gulf between them in social terms. Bianca's mistaken idea that she has been supplanted by a rival parallels Othello's mistake but grotesquely so, leading to a sense of bathos. Language Othello's belief that Desdemona's hand is "hot" and "moist", and his veiled allusion to her sexuality is notable for its ambiguity (does he imagine this, or does he not realize that a Venetian is likely to feel hot in the climate of Cyprus?) The long speech about the handkerchief is interesting because Othello wishes to impress Desdemona with a sense of its importance; it may be that he exaggerates in painting his picture of its magical properties, or that its loss works on him as much through

superstition as through rational inferences as to its whereabouts. Act IV, scene i Structure At the start of the scene, Iago torments Othello with the supposed knowledge of Desdemona's infidelity, till he "falls into a trance" (a fit of some kind); Cassio, arriving at this point, conceals himself at the request of Iago, who wakes Othello and promises to give him evidence of Desdemona's guilt from Cassio's own lips; in an aside he explains his real intent, and he now asks Cassio about Bianca, who appears with Desdemona's handkerchief, and leaves, pursued by Cassio; this leaves Iago and Othello to resolve to kill their victims on this night; finally, Lodovico arrives with orders from Venice, and witnesses Othello's abuse of Desdemona, being told by Iago that Othello is "much changed". Relationship to the play as a whole In terms of the plot, this scene is important for the apparent confirmation Othello has of Iago's report of Cassio's sleeping confession and of Desdemona's giving him the handkerchief, exacerbated by Cassio's apparent gloating over his conquest. In terms of the portrayal of the hero, this scene marks a low point as Othello descends to threats of savagery, verbal incoherence, and loss of control of his private emotions and public conduct. Desdemona's protestations of innocence provoke a reply which seems nonsensical to Lodovico, but which the audience understands well. The letter reminds us of Othello's earlier, but now lost, idea of himself as the perfect servant of the Venetian state. Theatrical qualities Dramatically, this scene contains much of interest: we note first Iago's tormenting of Othello as he pretends to minimize the seriousness of her alleged offence, in order to remind Othello of the sordid detail. The "trance" or "epilepsy" shows vividly how Othello has changed: earlier in the play his



dignity and self-possession are shown in his physical stature and upright posture, as we see him stand before his accusers in I, ii or addressing the council in I, iii; now his degradation is enacted in his physical prostration, and his dignity is lost as he writhes on the ground. Othello has become almost the comic stereotype of the raving lunatic - almost, but not completely so, because we are aware of the sources of his grotesque error, and remember from what a height he has descended. As he lurks, eavesdropping and horribly misconstruing what he hears, as he issues barbaric threats to Cassio, and as he strikes and insults Desdemona, Othello repels us by his loss of humanity. But there are painful glimpses of the nobility from which he has fallen, as he recalls Desdemona as "a fine woman" and exhorts Iago to see "the pity of it". As this scene is the nadir (lowest point) of Othello's fortunes, so it is the zenith (meridian or highest point) of Iago's: for a moment he seems secure in his complete triumph. Language The language of the scene perfectly corresponds to the action: immediately before Othello's raving becomes a fit, we hear him quibble on the ambiguity of "lie" (tell untruths or have sexual intercourse), both senses of which seem appropriate to Desdemona's offence: there is no more sense in what he says ("first to be hanged and then to confess" - though, oddly, Desdemona will speak after he has strangled her) than in how he says it: Othello is no longer speaking in verse; eventually sentences give way to disconnected phrases: "Noses, ears, and lips? Is't possible? - Confess?" We note the same tendency later as Othello ends his welcome to Lodovico with the curious apostrophe: "Goats and monkeys" - as if sharing a private joke ("black humour", as we unfortunately call it) with Iago, not seeing that he is the "monkey" or butt of

the joke. Iago's power appears in his freedom repeatedly to present to Othello's bloody imagination the image of the lovers, and to rebuke him whenever he returns to his former idea of Desdemona: "Nay, you must forget that". We observe how Iago is now free to conjure up the picture of the couple sharing "a kiss in private" or "naked in bed", and to suggest the repeated, habitual nature of the offence: "Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when/He hath, and is again to cope your wife". Each monosyllable lands like a blow, culminating with the emphatic and vulgar "cope" which represents Desdemona as little better than Cassio's whore (contrast this with the conventional gallantry of "Sweet Desdemona,/Let us be wary, let us hide our loves" of III, iii, 417, 8). Critics have pointed out how there has been no opportunity (of time and place) for the alleged infidelity to occur; Iago's triumph is not merely to give the confused Othello the impression that it could have happened, before flourishing the "evidence" that it has, but now to suggest repeated occasions in the past and plans for many more in the future. The diabolical or perverted imagination has triumphed over the noble or romantic imagination and over reason. The triumph of Iago's invention will be seen as Othello repeatedly abuses Desdemona not merely as unfaithful but addresses her as "whore". Act IV, scene ii Structure Othello's questioning of Emilia reveals nothing new, but this, he takes to be evidence of Desdemona's subtlety; Desdemona, confronted with his accusations is puzzled, but he leaves her before she thinks to ask the details of her offence; Iago, sent for by Desdemona, affects sympathy, before the women go in for dinner, and he has to pacify Roderigo. Relationship to the play as a whole Othello is filled with jealous anger, but has recovered some of his composure

and eloquence, as he notes the seeming discrepancy between Desdemona's physical beauty and (supposed) moral corruption; the audience sees the real correspondence of moral and physical beauty. Desdemona protests her innocence, but does not press Othello to specify the details of his accusation. Were she to do so, Iago's plot would be exposed by Emilia and Cassio; ironically, Othello does not mention the handkerchief here, so Emilia has no occasion to clear Desdemona on this matter. The audience is keenly aware of Iago's danger; that he comes so near to discovery, yet evades it, is painful to us. When Emilia suggests that some "eternal villain" has slandered Desdemona, Iago sees how precarious his position is. Emilia uses the words somewhat loosely, as a conventional epithet for a rogue, but we see how "eternal villain", as a serious description, is exactly right for Iago. At first, Iago denies that such a man could exist; as she describes his likely conduct, Iago urges her to speak quietly (if Othello heard this, even in his confused state, he might discover his error). Roderigo's complaint shows Iago his danger even more clearly: this dissatisfied suitor has only to complain publicly and Iago is lost. Iago sees now the full logic of his position (the expected soliloquy in which he explains it to the audience comes as an aside at the start of Act V): Roderigo, Cassio and Desdemona must all die, and even then he is in danger from his own wife, though managing her silence will appear as the least of his problems. Othello has undertaken to kill Desdemona; now Iago sees how Roderigo and Cassio may both be disposed of, as he offers to be Roderigo's "second", in ambushing Cassio (in reality, being on hand to finish off the survivor of the fight). Theatrical qualities Shakespeare here conveys a sense of impending crisis, yet Othello's retribution is delayed until

he and Desdemona retire to bed, after the dinner which intervenes (we have no sense of this actually occurring; if we try to imagine it, we wonder how Othello's conduct will not prompt some disclosure from Emilia; presumably, he bides his time, but wisely the dramatist simply moves forward to the end of the banquet in the next scene). Desdemona's kneeling to pray, her reluctance even to repeat Othello's obscene language, contrasts graphically with the kneeling of Othello and Iago in III, iii: where Iago is a picture of devilish hypocrisy, and Othello the epitome of unwarranted jealous indignation, Desdemona is the embodiment of innocence and beauty, an idea developed in the next scene where she is shocked to learn from Emilia of the wiles of other women; she is also an embodiment of doomed vulnerability. Like Othello earlier, she kneels before Iago and solicits his help; we know that this prayer falls on deaf ears. Language Othello is resolute but composed, and he has recovered his rhetorical powers. He attempts to moralize about his situation, to explain how he could endure all sorts of trials, even the world's contempt, but when he considers his own plight, this, he claims, is too much for the "rose-lipped" face of patience; the right response is his, as he looks "grim as hell". The device of repetition, which we have met earlier in the play, appears as Othello four times repeats Desdemona's "committed". The rhetorical question (conventionally) presupposes the answer is obvious; the audience sees that what is obvious to Othello is neither obvious to Desdemona, innocent both of any offence and of Othello's meaning, nor true. Act V, scene i Structure In this short scene we see how Roderigo ambushes Cassio in the dark, but is wounded, and killed by Iago; the arrival of Lodovico and Gratiano prevents any further

harm to Cassio, who can only buy time by implicating Bianca (plausibly) in the attack. Relationship to the play as a whole Iago's explanation of his tactics seems hardly necessary, and we can see how he is losing control, as he acknowledges in the scene's closing couplet. For all he knows, Cassio may really be "almost slain", and he goes to see him (i. e., his wounds) "dressed", perhaps to watch for opportunity either to finish him off or otherwise to prevent Cassio's speaking to Othello (though we cannot see how this will be done). In fact, the audience can foresee exactly what will happen: the killing of Desdemona and Othello's discovering, just too late, his terrible error. In any case, the rest of the play is the climax to Othello's tragedy: the presentation of Iago's malice, and his own explication of it belongs substantially to the early part of the play; in the last two acts, Iago may continue to explain what he is doing, but why he is doing it, we already know (as much as we ever will). When Othello asks for an explanation, Iago refuses, and we suspect that torments may open his lips to cries of pain, but not to enlighten his torturers. Iago is evil, but we have no hint that he lacks physical courage. Theatrical qualities Where the preceding and following scenes are marked by poignancy, dignity, gravity and poetry, this scene is marked by darkness and confusion (not unlike part of Act II, scene iii). In the dark, Roderigo has the advantage of surprise, but Cassio, a soldier, is saved by his "coat". It need not be of metal, which might be uncomfortable (though the Longman edition's "steel-plated" seems anachronistic, but may be a slip for "of steel"). Thick quilting or leather might be adequate to save Cassio and we are no more surprised by Roderigo's botching of the attack than by Iago's evading suspicion by despatching Roderigo. The appearance

in this scene of Othello is odd, but if he is on the gallery, we can suppose that he speaks from his bedchamber, perhaps on a balcony: his praise of Iago as "brave... honest and just" is contrived to occur at the very moment where Iago is most explicitly revealed as treacherous, dishonest and unjust. That nobody attends at first to Roderigo gives the audience a sense of darkness; Iago, with his light, when he becomes aware of Lodovico and Gratiano, shows (or affects) concern for Cassio: the nightshirt he wears is a master-stroke; it clears him of blame (suggesting he has risen suddenly from his bed), and is used to demonstrate his friendship as he binds Cassio's wounds with it (has he put this on, after setting the ambush, or worn it but tucked into his hose?) The weapons Iago brings (a reasonable action from a soldier hearing sounds of a struggle) are soon put to use. As the bearer of the light, and as Othello's trusted lieutenant, Iago directs operations. Bianca is easily implicated in the ambush; her pallor, perhaps arising from genuine concern, is explained as evidence of guilt, although her looking "pale" could be either Iago's invention or the effect of his light close to her face.

Language Apart from Iago's aside at its start, the scene is notable for the brevity of the speeches: cries, questions and other confused utterances proceed with bewildering rapidity: "O, help!"/"Hark!"/"O wretched villain!"/"Two or three groan". Iago's "What may you be?" (64) may be a genuine question, or may be affected to create a sense of confusion for others, though he has grasped the situation Act V, scene ii Structure Othello's opening soliloquy eventually wakes Desdemona, who is confronted with her "crime" and murdered; Emilia brings news of the abortive attack on Cassio, learns of her mistress' murder, and calls for help; Emilia's and Cassio's

testimony shows Othello his terrible mistake; Othello acknowledges his error and contrives a just punishment for one who has "traded the (Venetian) state", as he kills himself. Relationship to the play as a whole Othello's appearance in the previous scene is the cue for his killing of Desdemona. We may suppose the two scenes to overlap slightly, although if Othello has left his house in V, i, he may need time to return (he enters with a light: this may simply indicate entering a dark room, which we can infer from Desdemona's sleeping, but see note below). This is the tragic climax to the play; we are painfully aware that the events of V, i should shortly lead to the arrival of the news of the attack on Cassio, and that this would almost certainly forestall Othello's killing of his wife, as the governor would be expected to deal with the incident. Emilia comes too late to save her mistress, but comes in time to hear her last act of love as she clears Othello of blame. Othello is calm, and has recovered almost fully at the start of the scene his earlier idealized love of Desdemona; he is moved to murder only by a sense of duty "the cause... she must die, else she'll betray more men") until Desdemona's denial of guilt briefly rouses his jealous anger and he strangles her. When he learns of his error he is almost business-like in his grief: he acknowledges his error and praises Desdemona; he demands Iago's explanation, but does not get it; finally he recalls his sense of duty, which he has earlier bidden farewell: he has been of service to the state; now he will do it one last service. Theatrical qualities There is action in this scene: the kissing, the strangling, Emilia's importunate arrival, Othello's attack on Iago which leads to Emilia's stabbing, the Moor's defiance of Gratiano, and his suicide. The bed which Othello believes Desdemona has defiled is as much a symbol as a property which is

used in the action: Lodovico describes the results of Iago's malice as "the tragic loading of this bed". For all this, the enduring effect of the scene comes from the poetry in which Othello explores his situation before and after the killing, especially in the long soliloquy at the beginning and the speech at the end of the scene. Note how the light which Othello carries supplies him with a metaphor for Desdemona's life and his imminent ending of it. Language In the middle of the scene, Emilia becomes the means of Othello's discovery of his error, as she gradually discovers the extent of Iago's wickedness: once again, the device of repetition as question is used, leading to a climax: Othello's "thy husband" is returned by Emilia's "my husband?" repeatedly (from "Ask thy husband else" to "honest, honest Iago" the noun occurs ten times). Even Othello questions Emilia's "iteration": it is as if she cannot believe what Iago is supposed to have done, while Othello cannot believe that Iago has not been "honest". The climax: "My friend, thy husband; honest, honest Iago" is Othello's daring her to deny this version of events; in an instant (without hesitating) Emilia vindicates her dead mistress and effectively damns her living husband: "He lies to the heart". Iago's "honesty" is now discovered to be what the audience but no one else has known since the play's first act. This concludes, in effect, Shakespeare's examination, through this complex word, of the ambiguous ideas behind it. That is to say, the dramatist is interested in the word because he is also interested in the idea; and he finds that by building up a rich body of associations around the word, he can use it with theatrically devastating effect. When Othello, tortured by dawning doubt, cries out: "Honest, honest Iago", the audience's complex understanding of the word, of



the two men and of their relationship, of the terrible abuse of trust, all this is exploded in an agonizing flash of dénouement. Othello's speeches are worth studying in close detail. One is struck by sensuous or exotic imagery, expressed in beautiful cadences: the final speech contains a list of similes to describe his condition, in which we encounter the "base Indian" and the "Arabian trees", while the opening soliloquy presents us with Desdemona's "whiter skin... than snow"... "smooth as monumental alabaster", and her "balmy breath". Behind these vivid images we see how Othello explores his private and public conceptions of himself. The first speech is made when he is alone, save for the sleeping Desdemona, yet he speaks almost as if in public, almost with an ear for effect, which may, of course, simply be the result of his experience of public speaking, or of his own insistence that whatever he says should be well-said. His final speech is most definitely not a soliloquy, in the sense that he is making a final, public statement of what he is, to be conveyed to Venice; and yet, like a soliloquy, it is a statement of Othello's private, inner reflection on himself. Curiously, after the first-person opening, Othello stands back from himself and speaks in the third person of "one" who has done all these things. He identifies himself with the loyal servant of the state who killed the Turk in Aleppo; the "one" who has made these mistakes is the one on whom this loyal servant must carry out the sentence of death. Finally, one should be aware of Othello's capacity for dramatizing his own plight, and inviting some response to it. Othello is certainly introspective, and his introspection is frequently marked by striking and beautiful images, as well as by elegant arrangement of what he says. But this sense of himself must certainly be considered in any attempt to

examine Othello's responsibility or at least complicity for his trusting Iago and failing to trust Cassio and Desdemona. Or rather, since they are not real people, but stage characters, how far Shakespeare gives us grounds for seeing Othello as contributing to his own tragedy. The poetic faculty inclines us to conceive ideas of reality; precisely because they are vivid and eloquent, they are plausible: thus Othello's idealized sense of Desdemona as his "fair warrior" gives way to the later, terrible vision of "the plague of great ones" and the horrible imaginings of brutal revenge: chopping Desdemona into "messes" and throwing Cassio's nose to the dogs. It is possible that Othello is partly a victim of his own poetic gift; but he is certainly no less a victim of Iago's "honesty".

The language of the play

Language and theatre | The language of Othello and Iago

Although we can observe features of the play's language on the page, it should be noted that the play was written (never published) by Shakespeare for theatrical performance, and that effects of language are meant to be heard, as by an attentive audience they would be. Moreover, few of these effects are merely decorative; most help interpret the action on stage. In discussing the play's language in an exam, you should not merely list matters of interest, but should structure your comments according to categories or some other arrangement. The headings under which this section of commentary has been arranged may help.

Language and theatre

In the play we hear dialogue used to convey the immediate action, for narration of "past" events, for description, and for comment. Detailed comments on chosen scenes (above) indicate where the dialogue is used to advance the plot (as when Bianca appears with Desdemona's handkerchief, letting us know that Iago's use of it

has succeeded). Narration is used effectively in I, iii, where Othello explains his courtship of Desdemona, though his narrative is liberally embellished with descriptive detail; Othello's descriptions of the handkerchief (III, iv, 52-72) and of himself (V, ii, 335-353) include narration of events in his past; Iago narrates events in the play, showing the audience how he is able while appearing to defend Cassio, to satisfy Montano's desire for impartiality and still to secure Cassio's demotion. Comment is extensive in the play: in the first part, Iago not only explains his plans, but goes some way to satisfying our curiosity about his motives; in the later scenes his comments are merely about the success or failure of his scheming and the danger of discovery. Othello, in the early part of the play, explains much about himself and the genesis of his love for Desdemona; he reflects on his own life, but in a very outward-looking way, speaking not of his emotions but of the places he has visited, the things he has seen: he is somehow both self-possessed and self-effacing; deceived by Iago, he becomes much more introspective: this leads him at first into near-madness, then a steely resolution to execute justice on his supposed betrayer; finally, he comes to a more complete self-knowledge before death. But the latter part of the play is far more concerned with the portrayal of Othello than of Iago. The language of Othello and Iago The contrast in the characters of these two, which works so well in the theatre, is exactly reflected in their language. This is considered in detail above, but some general tendencies should be noted here. Othello is noted for the beauty of his speaking, about which he makes falsely-modest jokes, claiming to be "rude" in his speech and (being black) not to have "those soft parts of conversation" which "chamberers have". Audiences have attested to the

beauty of Othello's speeches, but we should note that within the play, characters are aware of it (the Duke suggests that Othello's "tale would win" his daughter, too). It is a quality which Othello has doubtless developed and found useful, as a commander, for its inspiring effect on his men; that a woman with a thirst for adventure should also be inspired by it is not surprising to us. It has not occurred to Brabantio that this would move Desdemona to love, and it may at first have surprised Othello, but, given a hint by Desdemona, "upon this hint" he "spake", and won her. Othello's rhetoric is presented somewhat ambiguously. There is no doubt that he really does love using his gifts of composition, of poetic comparison, and of oratory (it is made clear that the tone of his voice is as musical as what he says) to achieve beauty in his speaking, and that, allowing for some imaginative colouring of things recalled, he uses these gifts to speak truth. On the other hand, we have a sense of Othello's self-consciousness, of knowing he is adopting a rôle, just as his controlled display of anger at the brawl in III, iii, is something of a pose. The language of Venice and the manners of the Venetian army will have been learned by one who uses them with evident awareness of what he is doing. Thus, Othello's final speech in V, ii, though it is an honest confession in its detail, is delivered with an eye (or ear, rather) to effect: he knows it is his ep