

## The Plots of *Othello*: Narrative, Desire, Selfhood

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‘A very good play both for lines and plot, but especially the plot.’<sup>1</sup>

Preoccupation with the plot is a feature of many responses to *Othello* from the seventeenth century to the present. The opinions of Abraham Wright, Caroline Vicar of Okeham, typify those of early audience members, including perhaps the newly crowned James I and Queen Anne, before whom *The Moor of Venis* by ‘Shaxberd’ was performed in the Banqueting House at Whitehall on 1 November 1604. Wright seems to have heartily enjoyed the performance he saw, especially the parts of ‘Iago for rogue, and Othello for a jealous husband’ and the acts which ‘shew admirably the villanous humour of Iago when he persuades Othello to his jealousy.’ The intense scenes when the narrative accelerates and characters’ fates are decided made a great impression, and Wright contrasted *Hamlet* rather harshly, ‘an indifferent play, the lines but meane: and in nothing like *Othello*.’ His sharp sense of the latter’s narrative force is captured by the emphatic use of the word ‘plot,’ which conveys the intertwined meanings of the story’s structure and the intrigues that motivate it.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to Wright’s response, one of the key factors in Thomas Rymer’s notorious attack on *Othello* in *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693) is his utter dissatisfaction with the play’s ‘Fable.’ He considers that the ‘Words and Action’ are generally ‘at cross purposes,’ and that the Fable itself is ‘improbable and absurd’ and lacks didactic effect, the Moral, sure, of this Fable is very instructive.<sup>3</sup> His position is polemical, and many readers, from 1694 on, have been unable to resist countering his opinions, even though it is apparent that in many ways they derive from a narrow social outlook.<sup>4</sup> Rymer presumes that his critical views are naturally justified: only an English ‘Country Chamber-maid’ could be won by Othello’s tales, not an

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aristocratic heiress; a 'Black-amoor might rise to be a Trumpeter' in the English forces, but he could never be a general against the Turks; Iago should be 'an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing Souldier, a character constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the World.' These elements are regarded as indisputable, not culturally relative. Shakespeare's anomalies are thus completely dismissed: 'Nothing is more odious in Nature than an improbable lye' (pp. 28-30). The conditions of plausibility in the play's world, for Rymer as much as for the characters, are construed in terms of the natural, moral and true; that is, they are framed by ideology.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding his provocative viewpoint, Rymer's position reveals significant issues for interpretation of *Othello*. His comments raise questions about narrative and knowledge, narrative and action, and narrative and desire. First, the plot in *Othello* does unfold through a contest among meanings that simultaneously appear natural, cultural and idiosyncratic in origin and implication. Concerns about the effects of narrative are raised immediately the play begins, 'Tush, never tell me' expounds an incredulous but hapless Roderigo (1.1.1), while the play ends with Lodovico preparing to embody the tale he will take to Venice, 'This heavy act with heavy heart relate' (5.2.372).<sup>6</sup> Repeatedly, it is unclear whether stories recounted by characters have a substantive validity: are they supported by natural, social or personal values? Like Rymer, narrators in the play often assume that these values are one and the same; but inconsistencies between what is said and what is understood point to breakdowns in narrative meaning. Questions are raised not only about the reliability of narration, but about whether narrator and audience can share a set of beliefs and values that might settle a story's meaning.

Further, different audiences can receive the same story very differently, as Emilia's blunt rejection of the charges against Desdemona exemplifies, 'Thou dost belie her' (5.2.134). Interpretation is contingent on relationships between those telling and hearing stories and on the hearers' convictions and

knowledge. Yet those relationships and knowledge are in large part shaped by the stories that are told. The play shows the unpredictable effects which narratives may generate and suggests that final responsibility for understanding their meaning rests more heavily with audiences than with narrators. Though response is all-important, its basis remains uncertain and perhaps contradictory. As Edward Pechter notes, *Othello* draws attention to the way responses are shaped by stories and myths that circulate continuously and with particular potency at times of stress.<sup>7</sup> Characters are subject to others' stories and have no position outside narrative from where they can listen and respond. The social world is replete with stories whose truth can be unclear and which lack any non-narrative reference points.

In adapting an earlier prose tale, *Othello* is particularly interested in the shift from narrative to dramatic modes, from telling stories to performing them, from social speech to social action. Rymer states that where Giraldi Cinthio—the author of *Gli Hecatommithi*, the collection of tales from which *Othello* derives—had to please readers' ears, Shakespeare was 'accountable both to the Eyes and to the Ears' of his audience. He again touches on an important point: throughout the play narrative works rhetorically, in the sense of artful construction and presentation and, more importantly, in terms of suasive impact on audiences and characters, whose 'very heart[s]' must be convinced (p. 28). The play explores the force with which narrative influences characters' ideas and deeds. Their actions are shaped by the stories they have heard and then become the stuff of stories told to others. The play also pressures the distinction between audience and actor. Hearing a story involves one complicitly as well as actively in the plot; indeed, the question is raised whether someone can respond non-actively to narrative. Emilia's reaction to events again conveys this effect. Her repetition of 'My husband?' (5.2.141, 148, 150, 153) suggests that though she repudiates the fiction Iago has constructed, she feels implicated in it. Complicity can end up being as accountable as overt action, a consequence which, like Emilia, spectators have not always been able to bear silently.

Samuel Pepys, puzzled but trying to disregard any suspect inference, recalls that 'a very pretty lady that sat by me, called out, to see Desdemona smothered.'<sup>8</sup> Watching the events onstage can make people feel involved, even responsible: 'Something real is at stake for the audience of *Othello*.'<sup>9</sup>

The pretty lady's outburst, along with Pepys' own gaze-divided, at the play's violent, erotic climax, between two women, one fascinating in her unruliness, the other in her submission—exemplifies the key subjective dimension of narrative that the play explores, the link between narrative and desire as modes of interpersonal exchange. As is repeatedly staged, narrative prompts desire for others in sensual and aggressive dimensions. Desire is mediated by narrative, which directs it out from the self to the world—desire for the other is inseparable from desire for stories about or from the other. 'Shakespeare ... shews that Desdemona was won by hearing Othello talk' (p. 28)—Rymer scoffs at the effect, but his words recall the Duke's comment after hearing Othello recount his wooing of Desdemona, 'I think this tale would win my daughter too' (1.3.171). While it intimates but displaces his own pleasure at Othello's words, the Duke's remark raises points whose import grows as the action continues: first, narrative can carry a strong carnal charge; next, a story may gain for its narrator a striking sexual and cultural persona; and finally, narrative contributes powerfully to the complex of sexual and social relations—among fathers, daughters and others—which locks characters together. The Earl of Shaftesbury's response in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1710) similarly suggests the impact of Othello's speeches: 'a wondrous *Story-Teller*! ... with what suitable grace such a Lover cou'd relate the most monstrous Adventures and satisfy the wondrous Appetite with the most wondrous Tales.'<sup>10</sup> His admiring words reinforce the role of narrative in a wide range of social-sexual relations, including desire and pleasure between men and women and between men.

Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello* shows the great respect with which an audience will treat storytellers. Telling a

story becomes a theatrical or ritual event, and the narrator is the momentary star of the social drama taking place. Such may be the authority generated in the exchange that pressure is less on the narrator to win attention and belief than on the audience to show that they not only hear and accept the story but love the narrator for telling it. Even when exposed as Desdemona's murderer, Othello transcends this persona by relating one more tale. After he stabs himself, the horrified exclamations of Lodovico and Gratiano cite discursive features of the story, suggesting their absorption with his performance: 'O bloody period! / All that's spoke is marr'd' (5.2.358). The deadly act dismays them, the sudden switch from storytelling to storykilling snapping them out of narrative reverie. The chance to gain such status and admiration motivates all the storytellers in *Othello*. They desire to narrate (and narrate in order to desire) as much as others desire to hear (and hear in order to desire). In the shifting connections among narrators, audiences and the discourse that entwines them, the play explores the social and erotic stakes of telling stories.

It is in this light that the plots of *Othello* are primarily, to use Erving Goffman's distinction, dramatistic and not narrational.<sup>11</sup> They *replay* scenes, as 'dramas to an audience' (p. 508), in which their narrators have previously participated (sometimes simply as an observer). While a narrative invariably refers to past actions—'what a speaker does usually is to present for his listeners a version of what happened to him'—it remains oriented to the speaker's present and future relations with the audience. They, in turn, 'are primarily obliged ... to show some kind of audience appreciation' (p. 503), that they have understood the message and feel that the speaker is not 'drastically out of line' (p. 540). To maintain and develop these bonds, speakers manipulate the identity they speak about, often trying to ensure that it remains in some kind of harmony with the one doing the speaking. The key relation played out when a story is being told is that 'of the speaker to himself as someone about whom he is speaking,' since it will shape further interpersonal rapport (p. 512). Storytelling is thus a major means of building identity and relations. The combination of

social, personal and temporal reference again draws storytelling close to desire, tying the self's past and future experience to the response of others.

The stories that fill *Othello* recount the intensity of desire. In so doing, they suggest that desire is deeply representational, that it remains apart from but preoccupied with the objects, persons and experiences that it longingly signifies and imagines. The more intensely desire represents what it wants, the more it admits to separation; but it is separation that makes desire and its stories all the more compelling. Tales of desire capture the social, sexual conflicts that unite, and divide, self and other. Montaigne notes the play between union and division in his essay *Upon Some Verses of Virgil*, which examines the complexities of desire and representation, 'Love melts [unites] onely in pleasure,' but it is 'a pleasure inflamed by difficulty [division].'<sup>12</sup> In a number of ways the essay acts as a kind of meditative gloss on the passions staged in *Othello*, tracing the paradoxical links between desire and discourse which lead to destructive jealousy.<sup>13</sup> The text opens in a roundabout way, with the author affirming his inclination 'unto licentious allurements' as proof that despite his years, 'I will now every way be master of my selfe' (p. 62). The aim initially seems to be to assert his own power to transcend age through rejecting sexual norms. But it turns out that these claims are designed to reveal the author's honesty on all matters, especially about himself as a physical and intellectual entity: 'I ... see and search my selfe into my very bowels, and know full well what belongs unto me' (p. 69). The mixture of bodily, sensory and cognitive powers would seem to be enough to defy physical and mental decay: 'The bodies evils are discerned by their increase .... The evils of the mind are darkened by their own force; the most infected feel them least' (p. 68). Yet the grim puzzle of imperceptible mental decline might threaten self-possession. The author is at first full of rhetorical and personal confidence but, unlike Othello, he registers the possibility that the powers underlying such assurance can subvert themselves without one being aware. The opening cluster of ideas about the limits of

ageing, sexuality and discourse—that is, speech and knowledge—parallels the key concerns that Iago targets in *Othello*.

The author's assumptions are further complicated when he turns finally to 'our theame' (p. 70). From this point on, as the plural pronoun 'our' suggests, the discussion posits sexuality as a set of social concerns and practices. Many of the issues that Montaigne now raises emerge from tensions between sexuality as social and personal experience and which affect the goal of self-mastery. It becomes apparent that the author's positive account of himself thus far has been in response to these tensions, shuffling between self-expression and conformity, cautiously eliciting readers' trust prior to raising a controversial topic: 'Why was the acte of generation made so naturall, so necessary and so just, seeing we feare to speake of it without shame, and exclude it from our serious and regular discourses?' (p. 70). The slow build-up confirms the difficulty of directly broaching the topic of sex with others and possibly oneself: 'It is an action we have put in the precincts of silence' (p. 70). Acknowledging the difficulty here makes the subsequent discussion seem all the more candid and true. At the same time (and three hundred years before Foucault's reconception of the repressive hypothesis<sup>14</sup>), Montaigne observes that conventional reticence actually generates a lot of discourse about sex: first, that perhaps 'the lesse we breath out in words the more we are allowed to furnish our thoughts with' (p. 70); and second, that nowadays everyone talks about it anyway, for 'the pleasure and reporting what one hath done [is] a pleasure not much short of the act it self in sweetnesse' (p. 88). The text seems to allow that 'not much short' may well mean 'even greater than,' that telling is better than doing.<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare's manipulation of a similar slippage between talk and action adds much narrative suspense to *Othello*. Many of the characters, and the audience too, repeatedly wonder whether Othello and Desdemona have slept together. Rather than staging such a scene (or at least its end, as when Romeo leaves Juliet at dawn), the play twice shows them already parted: Othello drawn away from Desdemona by the uproar outside the Sagittar inn and on the guards' platform in Cyprus.<sup>16</sup> The separations are highly

significant. They suggest the force of social discord to intrude between them. They forestall the couple's last division 'in her bed' (4.1.203), 'thy death-bed' (5.2.52), and so ironically anticipate their final, fatal reunion, 'to die upon a kiss' (5.2.360). They preserve the bed as a place of 'forbidden disclosure' and 'forbidden desire,' a site of 'generic adulteration' that cannot be shown till the pair are about to die for their sins.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the recurrent conjecture provoked by the separations replays the shift from 'act' to 'reporting' that fuses desire and narration together.

For Montaigne, the proliferation of talk produces an array of changes in public attitudes and personal experience of sexuality. Reversals similar to those dramatized in *Othello* are observed throughout society. Reputations are inverted, 'From wenches somewhat suspected, they now hold the first rank amongst honourable Ladies' (p. 88). Demeanour is misleading, 'One may be of a loose behaviour, yet of purer will and better reformed, then another who frameth her selfe to a precise appearance' (p. 95). More troublingly, sexual talk leads to jealousy, 'the most vaine and turbulent infirmitie that may afflict mans minde' (p. 88). It is thus central to a pervasive anxiety about cuckoldry, which 'Wee have raised to the highest straine of excesse of this moodie feaver, after the example of some barbarous nations' (p. 89). At first this excess is assigned to women more than men, 'when jealousie once seazeth on these silly, weake, and unresisting soules, 'tis pitifull, to see, how cruelly it tormenteth, insultingly it tyrannizeth them' (p. 90). But as the discussion continues it is plain that jealousy and cuckoldry are really men's anxieties. The attribution to women is more a means of insinuating the way that sexual talk can undermine ideals of masculine conduct.

Faced with such subversion, men respond in futile ways—imposing chastity on women when 'Wee are not able precisely to circumscribe them the actions we forbid them .... The very Idea we forge unto their chastity is ridiculous' (p. 94); pursuing full sexual knowledge when 'It is meere folly for one to seeke to be resolved of a doubt, or search into a mischief; for which



there is no remedie, but makes it worse' (p. 95). The foremost cause of cuckoldry lies less in female libido; for though 'It lieth not in them ... to shield themselves from concupiscence' (p. 91), the author notes that men's efforts to curb women's desire often incites it (p. 98) and that some husbands prostitute their wives (pp. 94-95). More significant still is homosocial rivalry, realized through action—'There is none of you all but hath made one Cuckold or other' (p. 97)—and through discourse: 'jealousie ... insinuateth it selfe under the colour of friendship' (p. 90); 'If the accuser or intelligencer present not withall the remedy and his assistance, his office is injurious, his intelligence harmfull, and which better deserveth a stabbe, then doth a lie' (p. 96). The full effect of the intelligencer's revelation is that it totally transforms the other man's character. He can never again be who or what he once was: '*The character of cuckoldrie is perpetuall; on whom it once fastneth, it holdeth for ever*' (p. 96; Florio's emphasis). Hence Montaigne suggests that the discourse of cuckoldry enacts in personal and social life what happens 'on Tragical stages' (p. 96). Its impact is profoundly dramatic. A chain effect runs from sexual talk through jealousy and cuckoldry to identity. In this sense, cuckoldry epitomizes desire's determining impact on selfhood.

The perpetuity of cuckoldry exemplifies the way desire can never be contained by the self: 'love is nothing else but an insatiate thirst of enjoying a greedily desired subject' (p. 105). In Montaigne's account, such incompleteness ends up confounding distinctions between aim and object, self and other, mind and body, male and female, which are used to think and talk about sex. On the one hand, desire is 'a tickling delight of emptying ones seminary vessels' (p. 105); on the other, 'It is not a passion merely coporeall' (p. 115). Though 'Philosophie contends not against naturall delights' (p. 122), 'this brings each other thought under subjection, and it's imperious authority makes brutish and dulleth all Platoes philosophy' (p. 106). Delay and concealment are crucial to sustain desire, 'Both the action and description should taste of purloining' (p. 109). Fulfilment would mean its end, but it is an impossible condition: 'It yet continueth after satiety: nor can any man

prescribe it or end or constant satisfaction: it ever goeth beyond it's possession, beyond it's bounds' (p. 115). Finally, Montaigne concludes that even 'both male and female, are cast in one same mould; instruction and custome excepted, there is no great difference between them' (p. 128). Desire's strange effect is that it unmakes the social identities and relations that are the means through which it may be realized.

The logic of Montaigne's essay parallels the course of desire in *Othello*—from telling stories through jealous anxiety to the unravelling of identity. Like Shakespeare's tragedy, the essay allows no other denouement once desire and selfhood are involved in this way. The one alternative that is suggested entails curbing erotic experience, the self withdrawn from desire, a restraint which Montaigne admits to in slightly abashed tones, 'I did never suffer my selfe to bee wholly given over to that sport; I therewith pleased, but forgot not my selfe' (p. 121). This account of selfhood relies on suppressing desire for the other, rejecting the sociality of sex that is elsewhere explored in the essay. A similar tension between closed self-presence and opening the self to the social risks of desire and discourse is played out through *Othello*.

The story of 'Disdemona' in Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* is, like all of the tales, a cultural event—a story told among friends, which binds them together and reflects didactically on social mores. The story is one of two concerning the theme of honourable revenge and also illustrates important aspects of marriage. Fabio remarks that in marriage 'more than in any other affair it is needful to take reason and counsel for guide'; Curzio stresses the responsibility of a wife to be chaste and notes that, even if she is, 'the insidious plots of a villainous mind' may still threaten the relationship.<sup>18</sup> Some of the main twists to *Othello* are present in the tale, especially the paradox that visual proof of the Ensign's accusations, as demanded by the Moor, is really what he should seek the least. It will fatally transform his character: 'the Ensign would make him see that which must make him miserable for ever'; he 'sought in every way to get more proof of that which he did not wish to

discover' (pp. 226, 249). The power of narrative to change social and sexual relations and personal identity is acknowledged, though Curzio's listeners conclude, and so warn their audience, that 'the Moor ... had believed too foolishly' (p. 252). In their view, his actions result from defective knowledge rather than from a disposition to frenzied jealousy such as Montaigne attributed to 'barbarous nations' and which Iago and others project onto Othello.

Like the play, the story raises questions about the way truth and knowledge may be socially and personally determined. The problem of discerning what people seem to mean by actions and speech and what they actually mean was written about extensively in the period. Thomas Wright's remarks are typical: 'For that we cannot enter into a man's heart and view the passions or inclinations which there reside and lie hidden ... even so we must trace out passions and inclinations by some effects and external operations. And these be no more than two: words and deeds, speech and action.'<sup>19</sup> Of course, the operations named by Wright are the same ones that can mislead: 'Truth exceeds public methods of representation.'<sup>20</sup> The dilemma applies to institutional discourses such as legal evidence as well as to less formal exchanges. Their dependence on narrative opens up the risks of (mis)representation.

Narrative in *Othello* is filled with such legal and ordinary interpersonal puzzles. In Lisa Jardine's suggestion of 'substantial defamation as the crux of the plot,' we see a melding of the institutional and the everyday.<sup>21</sup> Iago and Othello's slander of Desdemona is both a major crime,<sup>22</sup> and a not uncommon kind of social storytelling. During the sixteenth century in England an increasing number of slander cases were prosecuted under common and canon law. Actions for sexual defamation were handled specifically by the church courts. Women were frequently involved in such cases as plaintiffs, that is, the victims of slander. As Martin Ingram explains, they were highly vulnerable to sexual scandal for two main reasons since 'fornication and adultery were more seriously regarded in the female than the male,' and 'sexual reputation was more

central to the female persona,' who was conceived primarily as a domestic, familial figure.<sup>23</sup> In close-knit, early modern communities, slander could have many consequences: 'church court defamation causes were important as a means of defending reputation, reflecting a society in which sexual "credit" or "honesty" were, especially for women, of considerable and probably growing importance' (p. 313). Shakespeare shows that sexual reputation could signify fatally for everyone but especially for women because it denoted their crucial place in male social relations and self-conceptions. Cassio considers reputation 'the immortal part ... of myself' (2.3.255), and he remains relatively unconcerned about his liaison with Bianca until he thinks she will 'rail i' the street' about him (4.1.159). One pretext that swiftly occurs to Iago is that 'it is thought abroad' that Othello has slept with Emilia (1.3.385). Whether such report is actually out, let alone whether it is true, is not the point. It's the possibility that such a story may be in circulation, along with the effects that he knows it would have, which brings it to Iago's mind as a likely motive.<sup>24</sup> On receiving news that he is to return to Venice, Othello immediately grasps the combined personal, social and sexual impact of cuckoldry: 'Cassio shall have my *place*' (4.1.257; emphasis added). When he later justifies the murder because 'she'll betray more men' (5.2.6), he acknowledges the power of cuckoldry to have reverberating social effect.

Montaigne recognizes that because knowledge about sexuality remains uncertain, stories about it proliferate. *Othello*, in turn, stages the uncertainty of those stories. The truth they fail to produce reveals the inseparability of personal and social experience of sexuality. While jealousy in *Othello* and other plays prompts characters to talk about 'feelings,' and so is used to open out an interiorized psychological space,<sup>25</sup> it also discloses the way that this space is filled by internalized social values. The play positions stories about cuckoldry, and sexual unfaithfulness, at the point where personal and social experience constitute each other. Both male and female characters tell stories to explore what sexuality can mean for themselves and others. From the play's start numerous males

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tell stories, almost always of women's deceptiveness, to arrange their relationships with other men.<sup>26</sup> Iago, Brabantio and Othello recount such tales in detail through the first three scenes; even where events in their stories about the elopement coincide, they evaluate the details very differently. Desdemona also uses narrative modes to explain her actions. Early in the play she invokes her mother's 'duty' to support her adherence to Othello over her father (1.3.182-89). Much later, she recounts the story of Barbary, which combines with Emilia's hypothetical questions about men's actions to replace misogynist narrative with a tale of male cruelty. Male voices dominate the play, but with this scene (4.3) the female characters speak out 'through a male-authored narrative that would otherwise occlude their voices.'<sup>27</sup> In this respect, the play stages narrative competitions between characters to assert the truth about social and sexual relations.

'Honest' Iago plays on narrative's liability to function in complex and contradictory ways. He enforces a 'network of interlocking prejudices and suspicions' but attributes them publicly to others.<sup>28</sup> Questioned by Othello, he ascribes verbal trickery to Cassio alone:

	Hath he said anything?
assured,	He hath, my lord, but be you well
	No more than he'll unswear.
	What hath he said?
what he did.	Faith, that he did ... I know not
	But what?
	Lie.
	With her?
	With her, on her, what you will.
(4.1.29-34)	

Neither character is in control of the discourse. They trail after each other's unclear meanings. The only thing Iago really admits is the possibility of 'unswearing' or denial, a possibility that destroys the assurance he would link it to. In this kind of

game, speech can bear no precise relation to what happens but remains the only way of representing it. Iago's avowal, 'I know not what he did,' is at one level true (he cannot know everything Cassio has done), at another untrue (he is practically certain that Cassio hasn't slept with Desdemona), and at another deliberately vague so as to seem suspiciously coy. His next word, 'Lie,' conflates the sexual meaning Othello thinks he is looking for with a specific sense that no matter what Cassio did, he (Cassio or, for that matter, Iago) could be lying about it anyway. It also hints at a more general sense that whatever could be said about sex would be a lie—the kind of lie about lying, or 'seeming trust,' in which the poet believes he and his love collaborate in Sonnet 138. Othello's dazed response, 'It is not words that shake me thus' (4.1.41), suggests that these kinds of words about sex do not work the way words are supposed to. They confound meaning and representation by 'shadowing passion' (4.1.40), simultaneously concealing and disclosing it.

Iago's tactic, then, is to trigger the unlimited suggestiveness of sexual stories and then let others try to finish telling them. If he embodies a 'principle of narrativity itself, cut off from original motive and final disclosure,' as Stephen Greenblatt proposes,<sup>29</sup> it is largely due to the way he can rely on the topic of his narrative tempting the audience to finish the story. Iago has no more exact idea where his story is heading than do the others. He begins his version of Othello, Cassio and Desdemona's relationship uncertainly, looking for angles and momentum, 'Nothing, my lord, or if—I know not what' (3.3.37). And he awaits its resolution with no clear end in sight, 'This is the night / That either makes me, or fordoes me quite' (5.1.127-28).<sup>30</sup> With the denouncement all but staged, he refuses to speak any more, putting the onus for explanation fully on his listeners, 'what you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak word' (5.2.304-5). In a sense, Iago's silence is now irrelevant. The stories he has told have been completely taken over by others' interpretations and actions. Through this situation, *Othello* offers a specifically dramatic insight on narrative: the puzzles in narrative—the lack of explanation,

causality and chronology that stories often raise for audiences—become the pretext for social contests and conflicts over meaning. Narrative inevitably moves beyond a discursive frame to the world of action and desire.

Multiple connections between narrative and action are staged and explored in *Othello*. Most clearly, the stories that characters tell require action to have occurred and represent versions of events for their listeners. Othello's accounts of his past are an explicit example of this kind of storytelling. Another connection is that the audience often requests that a story or tale be verified by action. Some kind of incident is required to illustrate and support the ideas that the narrative is reproducing. Othello's demand to see proof of Iago's claims is the clearest instance of this connection, though it arises initially when the Duke curtly rebuffs Brabantio's accusations against Othello, 'To vouch this is no proof, / Without more certain and more overt test' (1.3.106-7). Finally, throughout the drama there is a strong sense that important action is occurring as stories are being told. Storytelling in the play constitutes both a routine kind of interaction and moments of 'fateful eventfulness' for characters.<sup>31</sup> The stories are often retrospective, but they also influence what *will* happen. Their determining role derives from the rhetorical impact that narrative can have. It affects characters' understandings of their situation and so incites them to respond and act in particular ways. The two events framing the drama, a marriage and murder, exemplify the power of narrative to lead to action.

As noted earlier, Iago's sexually slanderous stories can be considered a criminal act which drives the plot along. However, the play begins with earlier accusations, by Iago and then Brabantio, that Othello has stolen and bewitched Desdemona. These charges are themselves stories that promote a considerable amount of talk and action. They also reflect the impact of Othello's earlier tales, told before the drama starts. His storytelling initially consolidates his relationship with the Venetian aristocrat Brabantio, and Othello seems pragmatically aware that his tale's exciting tones have a good effect: 'I ran it

through ... It was my hint to speak, such was the process' (1.3.132, 142). A change of audience alters his view of the process; it becomes a means of impressing Desdemona: 'She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them' (1.3.167-68). Numerous characters remark how different Desdemona and Othello are; the storytelling enables them to transfer their love to each other. Desdemona is affected by his experience, survival and recounting of dangers (all suggested by 'pass'd'); Othello, in turn, responds to her 'pity,' that is, the intense empathy with which she listens, "'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful' (1.3.161). Her response reveals that his fable strikes the way she pictures herself, 'she wish'd / That heaven had made her such a man' (1.3.162-63); in Bernard Paris's terms, 'As he tells his tales, she enters into his experiences, feels for and with him, and participates imaginatively in his life of adventure.'<sup>32</sup> The episode is a preview of the intense psychological action that narrative will continue to trigger.

Of course, the action taking place is highly reflexive. It is not simply women who are swayed by others' narratives.<sup>33</sup> Othello plays down his investment in the story. He seems only to tell it at other people's request—Brabantio, Desdemona, the first Senator and Duke. And, as Anthony Gilbert notes, his tales do not contain intimate characterisation: 'The epic narrative discourse he constructs throughout the play allows little space for human identity, being instead a glorification of epic deeds and splendid public gestures.'<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, the story's content and, more significantly, its grand tone and style echo and support other claims Othello makes about himself and what he can do: 'Zounds, if I stir, / Or do but lift this arm, the best of you / Shall sink in my rebuke' (2.3.198-200). He is very much the star of his tale, adopting the 'attitude of self-dramatization' and particularly 'self-approving self-dramatization,' that Eliot and then Leavis discerned.<sup>35</sup> Yet Othello is keenly dependent on others to reflect back to him not only his story's meaning and credibility but his ability to sustain the role of storyteller. His dismay at the possibility that Desdemona is unfaithful is prompted by its threat to the dual roles of actor in and narrator



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of his tale: 'To say he loses Desdemona's power to confirm his image of himself is to say he loses his old power of imagination ... he no longer has the same voice in his history.'<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Othello has no story to tell without action; but he is also unable to act if he cannot tell stories.

Accordingly, Othello's passivity through the middle of the final scene correlates closely to his inability to get in an effective narrative word. It starts with Emilia's rejection of his account of Iago's story: 'He, woman; / I say thy husband: dost understand the word?' (5.2.153-54). Her counterclaim that Iago, and thus Othello, lie is followed by her dare, 'Do thy worst,' to which Othello cannot respond verbally or physically, 'Peace, you were best' (5.2.160, 162). For the moment, he can only rehearse old stories that disclose the gap between Othello as narrator and actor:

... I have seen the day,  
That with this little arm, and this good  
sword,  
I have made my way though more  
impediments  
Than twenty time your stop: but O vain  
boast,  
Who can control his fate? 'tis not so now.  
(5.2.262-66)

Desdemona's marriage to Othello results from the early tales. The action then 'advances through a contest of stories,'<sup>37</sup> as Iago repeatedly disrupts romantic discourse. His intervention begins with the satirical dispraise of women he jokingly offers to Desdemona (2.1), and grows into a 'derangement of marriage as a social institution' through his 'contemptuous manipulation of the erotic imagination.'<sup>38</sup> Iago realizes these effects through gradually renarrating the whole course of Desdemona's and Othello's relationship. His tactics are foreshadowed by the opening steps in which he recharacterizes Cassio's motives—'I cannot think it, / That he would sneak away so guilty-like' (3.3.39-40); 'I did not think he had been acquainted with her' (3.3.100)—and reconfirms his own, 'My lord, you know I love

you' (3.3.121). On this basis, he aims to revise the identities and actions of Othello and Desdemona. The main hindrance is Othello's reiterated demand for proof—evidence of some action that will support insinuations about character and motive. Before it can produce the effects of knowledge, Iago's narrative has to connect the verbal to the physical. To do so is a difficult task, as Brabantio's earlier remark suggests, 'words are words; I never yet did hear / That the bruise'd heart was pierced through the ear' (1.3.218-19). The connection is made when the link between narrative and desire is forged.

As he races to Collatium in *The Rape of Lucrece*, Tarquin is 'Borne by ... [a] false desire' which has been triggered by Collatine's tale, 'For by our ears our hearts oft tainted be' (ll. 2, 38). Similarly, in *Othello* narrative provokes desire into action. In falling in love and succumbing to jealousy, Othello and Desdemona are both 'swayed by what is heard rather than what is seen.'<sup>39</sup> Desdemona is depicted as 'a sexual subject who hears and desires ... [in] an aural/oral libidinal economy.'<sup>40</sup> Stories are shown to be erotically provoking, their content holding a sexual charge and endowing the narrator with an alluring persona. Building on these effects, the stories often incite an appetite to hear more. They foster a desire for knowledge that only narrative itself seems to promise to fulfil: 'Nay, yet there's more in this: / I prithee, speak to me ...' (3.3.134-35); 'Come, mistress, you must tell's another tale' (5.1.124); 'Send for the man and ask him' (5.2.50). On other occasions, characters ask for narratives to be supported or confirmed. The demand for proof that echoes through the later acts exemplifies this response. In Cinthio's version of the story, the Moor commands the Ensign, 'make me see with my own eyes what you have told me.'<sup>41</sup> In this case, characters don't want more talk, they want action. The 'hunger to know,' which is incited by narrative, transforms into 'the desire to see.'<sup>42</sup>

Othello's demand, 'Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof .... Make me to see 't, or at least so prove it' (3.3.364, 370), seeks to forego reliance on words for images and actions to resolve the story. He requests a fusion of narrative and dramatic

modes to be fully 'satisfied' (3.3.396). Iago, however, torments him with the impossibility of gratification. In denying its possibility he partly admits to the falseness of his account—Othello cannot see what hasn't happened and won't. More tellingly, he affirms the paradox of jealousy and desire which, as Montaigne recognizes, can never be satisfied: 'where's satisfaction? / It is impossible you should see this' (3.3.407-8). His awareness that the story can't be verified echoes with wider scepticism about concluding any narrative and fulfilling desire.

Such scepticism does not stop the effects that narratives of desire set in motion. They reach out to others and to the self. Cassio and Desdemona are both displaced as Iago vows service to Othello. The erotic tones between them bring to a climax the 'concatenation of aggression, male bonding, and homoerotic desire' built up through the stories that have been told.<sup>43</sup> Othello accepts Iago's tale over Emilia's and Desdemona's denials. His choice suggests the authority which man's speech assumes over woman's, and the importance granted to it by other men. It also reveals that Othello's self-conception is now dependent on the stories that are told to and about him, not on the ones he tells. He reproduces phrases and gestures that Iago has used, fulfilling their racial and bestial images. As the sexual conflict of the plot becomes more explicit, narrative contests take place with growing tenseness. They are paralleled by contests between certainty and disbelief waged within characters' minds. The value of a story is seen to lie neither in its content nor in the way it is told nor in the integrity of the narrator, but in the way it fits into existing patterns of understanding. In his shocked response when Othello strikes Desdemona, Lodovico declares that 'this would not be believ'd in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw 't' (4.1.237-38). A sequence of such exchanges then occurs as Othello disbelieves Emilia and Desdemona, Desdemona discredits Othello, and even Roderigo questions Iago, 'your words and performance are no kin together' (4.2.184-85). Belief is reflexive—it substantiates the story that is told by reaffirming the believer's self-understanding.

In the final scenes between them, Othello's 'inability to maintain trust in Desdemona is directly related to his inability to trust his own racial identity and self-worth.'<sup>44</sup> He has been recharacterized by Iago's stories. He is fully aware of this effect only after it has happened, caught between the memory of his past identity and the awareness of his present one, 'That's he that was Othello; here I am' (5.2.285). His famous last story attempts to renarrate his character and settle its meaning. Othello seeks to restore his identity by saying everything about himself that could be said, thus removing himself from the risks of discourse and storytelling. Desdemona and Emilia speak of others when they die. In contrast, Othello recounts a tale of love and death in which the self is not forgotten but confirmed through a dying kiss. He claims his desire and identity over Desdemona's dead body. His self-mastery is again dependent on her submission to his story.<sup>45</sup>

Narrative flows throughout *Othello*, constructing relationships between characters in terms of knowledge, action and desire. The characters' many stories contend with each other as they struggle to gain control of situations and to reach the goals they have talked about. Telling stories in the world of *Othello* is necessary but risky, with high stakes riding on the way they are delivered and received. In this light, the play reveals a vivid sense of the discursive and dramatic texture of social and sexual life, which is punctuated by significant narrative performances that determine ensuing events and the way they are understood. These tales reach the inner thoughts of characters and affect the way they think about others and themselves. They can suddenly find themselves removed from stories they thought they knew and placed in others whose meanings they can barely follow. In exposing the characters to such *improbable* twists, Shakespeare highlights the power of narrative to make and unmake character and to realize and frustrate desire.

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- <sup>1</sup> Abraham Wright, Commonplace Book, British Museum Add. MS. 22608, in *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Brian Vickers, 6 vols. (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), i, 29.
- <sup>2</sup> Though striving to read *Othello* as a ‘tragedy of character,’ A. C. Bradley nonetheless underlines the importance of plotting to the play, ‘intrigue occupies a position in the drama for which no parallel can be found in the other tragedies’: *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 152.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy*, in *Critical Heritage*, ed. Vickers, ii, 25, 27, 29.
- <sup>4</sup> In *Some Reflections on Mr Rymer’s Short View of Tragedy* (1694), Charles Gildon argues that the Fable is admirable and probable: *Critical Heritage*, ed. Vickers, ii, 72.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 32. Gildon argues against Rymer that the unlikelihood of ‘a Negro ... ris[ing] above a Trumpeter’ results from ‘the Vice of Mankind ... ’tis certain, there is no reason in the nature of things’: *Critical Heritage*, ed. Vickers, ii, 73.
- <sup>6</sup> Reference to *Othello* is to the Arden edition, ed. M. Ridley (London: Methuen, 1959). Reference to other plays by Shakespeare is to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Where the last lines of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* all refer to visual and ritual display in the tragic finale, *Othello* recalls the end of *Romeo and Juliet* in foretelling ‘more talk of these sad things’ (5.3.307).
- <sup>7</sup> Edward Pechter, ‘“Have You Not Read of Some Such Thing?”: Sex and Sexual Stories in *Othello*,’ *Shakespeare Survey*, 49 (1996), 205.
- <sup>8</sup> Samuel Pepys, *Diary*, 11 October 1660, in *Critical Heritage*, ed. Vickers, i, 30.
- <sup>9</sup> Michael D. Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 199. Harry Berger Jr notes that *Othello* sets in a train ‘a negotiation between the play and its audience, a venerable mechanism for driving spectators/readers wild, by conspicuously blocking and deferring anagnorisis until too late’: ‘Impertinent Trifling: Desdemona’s Handkerchief,’ *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47 (1996), 246.
- <sup>10</sup> In *Critical Heritage*, ed. Vickers, ii, 264.

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<sup>11</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 504.

<sup>12</sup> *Montaigne's Essays*, trans. John Florio (London: Everyman, 1980), iii, 77.

<sup>13</sup> For connections between Montaigne and *Othello*, see Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 139; also Mark Breitenberg, 'The Anatomy of Masculine Desire in *Love's Labor's Lost*,' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 43 (1992), 430-33.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> In a similar way, a couple of pages earlier Montaigne emphasizes that abstinence is actually more sexually complicated than indulgence: 'There is no point of doing more thorny, nor more active, than this of not doing' (p. 86).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Pechter, 'Sex and Sexual Stories', pp. 207-8. A grim, third interruption occurs when Emilia prevents Othello from killing Desdemona immediately (5.2.86ff).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Neill, 'Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery and the Hideous in *Othello*,' *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989), 385, 412, 410.

<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), vii, 240, 242.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General* (1604), ed. William Webster Newbold (New York: Garland, 1986), p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Katharine Eisaman Maus, 'Proof and Consequences: Inwardness and Its Exposure in the English Renaissance', *Representations*, 34 (1991), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Valerie Wayne, 'Historical Differences: Misogyny and *Othello*,' in *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 302. Cases involving men often related to fathering illegitimate children, adultery and fornication; Ingram notes few actions in the church courts for cuckoldry (p. 302).

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- <sup>24</sup> Though Emilia knows of Iago's suspicion (4.2.147-48), it does not appear to be in wider circulation.
- <sup>25</sup> Lawrence Danson, "'The Catastrophe is a Nuptial': The Space of Masculine Desire in *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*", *Shakespeare Survey*, 46 (1993), 79. Danson, however, makes the point to distinguish between psychological and social experience.
- <sup>26</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Hanson, 'Brothers of the State: *Othello*, Bureaucracy and Epistemological Crisis', in *The Elizabethan Theatre XIV* (Toronto: Meany, 1998), p. 35.
- <sup>27</sup> Emily C. Bartels, 'Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire', *Studies in English Literature*, 36 (1996), 430.
- <sup>28</sup> Neill, 'Unproper Beds', 399.
- <sup>29</sup> *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 237.
- <sup>30</sup> William Empson makes the point that Iago is 'quite open to his own motives or preferences and interested to find out what they are': 'Honest in *Othello*,' in *Othello: A Casebook*, ed. John Wain (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 105.
- <sup>31</sup> The phrase is Goffman's, *Frame Analysis*, p. 557.
- <sup>32</sup> Bernard J. Paris, "'His scorn I approve": The Self-Effacing Desdemona', *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 44 (1984), 415.
- <sup>33</sup> Desdemona foretells how she will talk Othello into re-accepting Cassio; she is fully aware of the power of speech, 'I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience' (3.3.23).
- <sup>34</sup> Anthony J. Gilbert, 'Shakespearean Self-Talk, the Gricean Maxims, and the Unconscious,' *English Studies*, 76 (1995), 234.
- <sup>35</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in *Casebook*, ed. Wain, p. 69; F. R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero', in *Casebook*, ed. Wain, p. 130.
- <sup>36</sup> Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 130.
- <sup>37</sup> Sinfield, *Faultlines*, p. 30.
- <sup>38</sup> Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare*, pp. 180, 190.
- <sup>39</sup> Margo Hendricks, "'The Moor of Venice,'" or the Italian on the Renaissance English Stage', in *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 202.
- <sup>40</sup> Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white": Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*', in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 152.

<sup>41</sup> In *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, ed. Bullough, vii, 246.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 244.

<sup>43</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Traub: 'Othello may safely sexualize Desdemona only posthumously' (*Desire and Anxiety*, pp. 40-41).

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