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After the eavesdropping scene arranged by Iago (4.1.93–158), in which Othello listens with increasing horror first to Iago's and Cassio's lewd comments about Bianca (which he imagines to be about Desdemona), and then to Bianca's angry outburst about the handkerchief she just received from Cassio, Othello's immediate reaction is to kill both Cassio and Desdemona for their alleged secret liaison.[1] His thoughts have been murderous since the end of the long temptation scene (3.3.35–482), when he promises to "tear" his wife "to pieces" (l. 434), and calls for "blood, blood, blood" (l. 454). The handkerchief spoken of and handled by Bianca during the eavesdropping scene (4.1.147–56) provides Othello with the "ocular proof" he has demanded of Iago (3.3.363), and now his mind is made up: Desdemona "shall not live" (4.1.179). His first idea is to "chop her into messes" (l. 196), but shortly after that he asks Iago to fetch him poison (l. 201).[2] While Iago has appeared to go along in principle with Othello's designs on Desdemona's life, he now challenges his choice of weapon with a firm rebuttal: "Do it not with poison," he says, "Strangle her in her bed—even the bed she hath contaminated" (ll. 204–5). This is the method of murder that Othello uses in Act 5.

I want to argue that Iago rejects poison for a cunning and pragmatic reason: not to kill Desdemona but to spare her. Desdemona's death was never part of Iago's plan, focused as it was from the beginning primarily on supplanting Cassio as Othello's lieutenant. Killing Desdemona would (as indeed it does) cause

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[1] The quotation in the title derives from *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, rev. ed. with introduction by Ayanna Thompson (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 4.1.204. All subsequent quotations from *Othello* are from this edition, cited parenthetically. All other quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Oxford Complete Works of Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

[2] The choice of poison as a possible murder weapon is first intimated by Othello during the temptation scene: "If there be cords or knives, / Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, / I'll not endure it" (3.3.391–93).

Othello's downfall and with it the end of Iago's career as lieutenant to a man whose absolute trust he enjoys and whom he knows how to manipulate.[3] At the same time, in order to appear credible before his general, now mad with a jealousy that he himself has provoked, Iago cannot but pretend to go along with Othello's murderous plan. Othello requests poison in order to avoid looking at his wife when he kills her: "Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again" (ll. 201–3). Iago rejects poison because he knows that once administered the lethal substance cannot be stopped and will do its deadly work regardless of whether the killer's initial murderous impulse has subsided. His recommendation of strangling appears designed to give the passionate Othello an opportunity to confront his wife directly and, disarmed by her beauty, to refrain from killing her. Othello's choice of poison as a murder weapon and Iago's rejection of it also create an overarching ironic metaphor, whereby a basically noble character resorts to a fundamentally ignoble and treacherous weapon, while the most insidious of Shakespeare's villains finds it expedient to reject the base method.

Against the play's focus on Othello's emotional breakdown and its excruciating climax—the protracted murder of innocent Desdemona by a jealous husband in their marriage bed—Iago's offhand half-line dismissal of poison as the murder weapon has provoked little comment.[4] In his influential essay on *Othello*, F. R. Leavis quotes the passage containing "Get me some poison, Iago" on two separate occasions, without a comment either on Othello's choice of this particular weapon or on the reasons for Iago's rejection of it.[5] In most critical editions of the play the line is left without annotation, and the possibility that Iago's plan to take Cassio's place would be wrecked by Othello's downfall or death following Desdemona's murder is overlooked. That Desdemona is killed in a highly calculated and cold-blooded way does not necessarily mean that this outcome is what Shakespeare's Iago intended. The action is obviously very different in the play's main source, Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565), in which the Ensign not only plans but also actively helps carry out the gruesome murder of the Moor's

[3] On Iago's aptitude in psychological manipulation, see Paul Cefalu, "The Burdens of Mind Reading in Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Cognitive and Psychoanalytic Approach to Iago's Theory of Mind," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64.3 (2013): 265–94.

[4] Regarding the play's climax, see, for example, A. C. Bradley, who thought that "of all Shakespeare's tragedies … , *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible" (*Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth"* [London: Penguin Books, 1991], 168). See also Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40.4 (1989): 383–412.

[5] F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero: A Note on *Othello*," *Scrutiny* (December 1937): 270, 273.

wife.[6] Rather than professional jealousy, the Ensign's motive is a secret and unrequited love for Disdemona that turns into "the bitterest hate" after the Ensign imagines that she rejects him because she is in love with a Corporal (the Cassio character).[7] The Ensign, "intent on injuring this unfortunate lady," eventually manages to persuade the Moor (by means of a handkerchief) of Disdemona's infidelity, whereupon both men undertake to kill her (and the Corporal too) "in such a way that he [the Moor] would not be blamed for it."[8] Here, as later in the play, the possible murder weapons under consideration are "poison or the dagger" ("se di veleno, o di coltello"), until the Ensign suggests a devious plan quite unlike anything we find in Shakespeare:

> A method has come into my head that will satisfy you and that nobody will suspect. It is this: the house where you are staying is very old, and the ceiling of your room has many cracks in it. I suggest that we beat Disdemona with a stocking filled with sand until she dies. Thus there will not appear on her any sign of the blows. When she is dead, we shall make part of the ceiling fall; and we'll break the Lady's head, making it seem that a rafter has injured it in falling, and killed her. In this way nobody will feel any suspicion of you, for everyone will think that she died accidentally.[9]

The plan is executed, with the Ensign doing all the dirty work: he is the one who beats Disdemona to death with the stuffed stocking. The murder is never discovered, although both the Moor and the Ensign come eventually to bad ends: the Moor, after being exiled, is killed by Disdemona's relatives, while the Ensign dies miserably after being "tortured so fiercely that his inner organs were ruptured."[10]

Cinthio's Ensign clearly wants to kill the woman who spurned him, provided he can get away with it by making her death appear to be an accident. The change of motive in Shakespeare's play, from frustrated sexual desire to

[6] Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 7, *Major Tragedies: "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth"* (New York: Columbia UP, 1973), 239–52.

[7] "I do love her too, / Not out of absolute lust—though peradventure / I stand accountant for as great a sin" (2.1.289–91) is the only echo by Shakespeare's Iago of the Ensign's passion for Disdemona in Cinthio's novella.

[8] Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, 245, 248.

[9] For the Italian quotation, see Giouanbattista Giraldi Cinthio, *Gli Hecatommihi*, Novella 7, trans. Wolstenholme Parr, reprinted in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, ed. Horace Howard Furness, vol. 6, *Othello* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886), 386. For the quotation in English, see Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, 250.

[10] Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, 252.

frustrated professional ambition, also removes Desdemona's death from Iago's plan. For Thomas Rymer, writing in 1692, the killing of Desdemona not only made no dramatic sense but also was incongruous with the ostensibly genteel ethos of the play: "*Desdemona* had never done him harm, always kind to him, and to his Wife; was his Country-woman, a Dame of quality: for him to abet her Murder, shews nothing of a Souldier, nothing of a Man, nothing of Nature in it."[11] Rymer also quotes the passage containing "Do it not with poison," making no comment on "poison" but suggesting—rightly, in my view—that Iago's insistence on strangulation was actually designed to save Desdemona: "chusing for his own share, the Murder of *Desdemona*, he had the opportunity to play booty, and to save the poor harmless wretch."[12]

Nevertheless, the perception that Iago desires Desdemona's death has been strangely persistent. In 1759 Thomas Wilkes wrote of the play's fatalities as if they all had been planned from the start to avenge Iago's frustrated professional ambition: "He then proceeds to destroy an honest gallant soldier, an innocent beautiful woman, a well-beloved modest man, and a simple outwitted coxcomb," all for "a very trifling disappointment."[13] J. H. E. Brock also made Desdemona "the central figure, and Iago's true victim and prey" to satisfy his "morbid jealousy" and "sense of power."[14] For Karl F. Zender, "Iago moves finally to desire for Desdemona's death," after she allegedly humiliated him by a request to praise various sorts of women (2.1.117–77).[15] In this interpretation, Iago's "murderous rancor" for Desdemona arises from his "lack of command of a genuine language of affection" and from his resentful awareness of the "failure of his language to equal Cassio's and Othello's."[16] After damaging his self-esteem, "Desdemona emerges as a distinct object of Iago's hatred," prompting him from then on to "destroy" her.[17] By ignoring practically everything else that happens in the play, Zender interprets Iago's choice of strangulation as an attempt to silence Desdemona: it would be "a direct assault on Desdemona's voice, as if silencing

[11] Thomas Rymer, *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt A. Zimansky (New Haven: Yale UP, 1956; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 155.

[12] Rymer, *The Critical Works*, 156. "To play booty" means "to play or act falsely so as to gain a desired object … to play badly intentionally in order to lose the game" (*OED Online* [Oxford: Oxford UP, March 2021], s.v. "booty, *n*.1," 4a).

[13] Reprinted in Brian Vickers, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 4. 1735–1765 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 361.

[14] James Henry Ernest Brock, *Iago and Some Shakespearean Villains* (Cambridge: W. Heffner and Sons, 1937), 8, 13–14, 26.

[15] Karl F. Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 34.2 (1994): 323.

[16] Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," 324, 329, 330.

[17] Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," 332, 333.

her would destroy not only her capacity for affectionate speech but her ability to provoke this sort of speech in Othello."[18]

Strangulation becomes symbolic for a different reason in Shawn Smith's intriguing interpretation, which proposes a symbolic connection between the handkerchief and the bedsheets. Desdemona must have lost the red-embroidered handkerchief the day after her marriage (it may have been rumpled up with her wedding sheets)—a circumstance that Smith refers to the practice of proving the wife's purity by exhibiting stained sheets after the wedding night.[19] Underlying this interpretation is an implicit assumption that by suggesting strangulation in the marriage bed, Iago endorses Othello's later assertion that "she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). Benjamin V. Beier, too, takes Iago's murderous intent for granted, proposing that he rejects poison because it is "too impersonal a way to kill Desdemona."[20] And Richard Strier and Richard H. McAdams echo Cinthio's *novella* by making Iago legally co-responsible for Desdemona's death.[21]

From a similar legal perspective, it could be argued that Iago recommends strangulation instead of poison in order to make Othello murder his wife without leaving any marks on her body, as in Cinthio. In this way Othello could

[18] Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," 333. For Leonard Mustazza, too, Othello robs his wife of breath, and therefore of speech, just as he orders that Cassio's mouth be stopped (5.2.71) ("Language as Poison, Plague, and Weapon in Shakespeare's *Hamlet and Othello*," *Pennsylvania English* 112 [1985]: 12).

[19] Shawn Smith, "Love, Pity, and Deception in *Othello*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 44.1 (2008): 39. See also Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 165.

[20] Benjamin V. Beier, "The Art of Persuasion and Shakespeare's Two Iagos," *Studies in Philology* 111.1 (2014): 45.

[21] Richard Strier and Richard H. McAdams, "Cold-Blooded and High-Minded Murder: The 'Case' of *Othello*," in *Fatal Fictions: Crime and Investigation in Law and Literature*, ed. Alison L. LaCroix, Richard H. McAdams, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 116. Elsewhere McAdams accepts the premise that "the play's driving force is Iago's scheme to induce Othello to kill Desdemona," arguing that Iago intends to minimize his own legal liability by (1) making sure not to be present at the scene of Desdemona's killing and (2) dissuading Othello from using poison, which Iago would have had to supply and which would have made him, under the English law of the period, an accessory to the crime and consequently liable to the same punishment as a principal, the murderer himself ("Why Iago Dissuades Othello from Using Poison: A Legal Theory," *Law School Record* 56.1 [2009]: 12, and "Vengeance, Complicity and Criminal Law in *Othello*," *University of Chicago Public Law and Legal Theory Working Paper* 504 [2015]: 121–43). A. C. Bradley also suggested that Iago's objection to poison, which he would have had to supply, springs from his possible reluctance to become directly involved in the crime (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 436). See also M. R. Ridley's gloss on 4.1.204: "The purchase of poison might be dangerous for Iago" (*Othello*, ed. Ridley [London: Routledge 1990]). I take this to imply two things: that purchasing poison would be dangerous because illegal and punishable by death, as it is in *Romeo and Juliet*'s Mantua (5.1.51), and that supplying Othello with a murder weapon would implicate Iago in the crime.

avenge himself on his "unfaithful" wife, and then get away with the murder because physical evidence was lacking. Such a possibility is indeed hinted at in the final scene when Desdemona briefly revives and seems on the verge of accusing her husband, in the presence of a witness, of murdering her. "O falsely, falsely murdered!" she cries at line 115. These words appear to be addressed only to Othello, however, for when Emilia makes herself visible by drawing the bed-curtains Desdemona changes her story, first by again confirming her innocence—"A guiltless death I die" (l. 121)—and then by attributing her death to some vague internal cause, perhaps even suicide:

EMILIA O, who hath done
This deed?
DESDEMONA Nobody. I myself. Farewell.
Commend me to my kind lord—O, farewell!
(ll. 121–23)

In her unconditional love Desdemona thus gives Othello an opportunity, if he wishes to avail himself of it, to deny that he has killed her. In other words, she forgives him and does not wish him to be punished for his deed.[22] But it is doubtful that this is what Iago contemplates when he suggests strangulation, because he knows Othello's honest nature well enough to realize that he would never deny what he has done: early in the play Othello insists before Iago that "I must be found" (1.2.30) to answer to an angry Brabantio in the senate for eloping with Desdemona. Similarly, at the end of the play, he forgoes the opportunity to deny his crime, admits to Emilia what he has done (""Twas I that killed her" [5.2.128]), accepts his responsibility before the Venetian noblemen, and, after the truth about Desdemona's innocence is finally revealed, carries out a death sentence on himself (l. 354).

To see Iago as co-responsible for Desdemona's murder is to overlook the fact that Othello's punishment by Venetian authorities (even if he did not commit suicide) means the end of Iago's career as Othello's officer. Iago's professional frustration and hatred of Othello cannot imply a desire to "destroy" his general (still less Desdemona) by causing his death or downfall, because Iago's career

[22] Also emphasizing the poignancy of Desdemona's unconditional love for Othello is her choice to die on a lie, thereby condemning her soul in the eyes of religious orthodoxy (Karl S. Guthke, "Last Words in Shakespeare's Plays: The Challenge to the *Ars moriendi* Tradition," *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft West* [1992]: 84). This is brought home to the audience by Othello's damning comment (before he realizes his tragic mistake): "She's like a liar gone to burning hell" (5.2.127). In other words, Desdemona jeopardizes her salvation to save Othello.

appears to be bound up with Othello's.[23] Even when, early in the play, Iago raises a racket under Brabantio's window to get Othello into trouble for his elopement with Desdemona, it is to vex his general, not to ruin him; he knows that the general's position is safe, because the Venetian state needs his services in the unfolding conflict with Cyprus (1.1.145–51). Iago's main goals are to reverse Othello's decision regarding Cassio (1.3.391–92) and maintain psychological control over the general. Added to these is Iago's hateful satisfaction in tormenting Othello by exploiting his insecurities arising from his age (ll. 264–65; 3.3.269–70), outsider status (Roderigo: 1.1.134–35), race and lack of urban sophistication (1.3.82–83; 3.3.267–69), trusting nature, sexual inadequacy, and apparent inexperience with Venetian women (Iago: 3.3.204–7). If Iago appears to echo the general's pain-filled calls to kill Desdemona, it is to retain his credibility, not because he wants Othello to go through with the murder. By destroying Othello Iago does not win anything in practical terms: if something were to happen to him, Cassio would be the one to take his place—which is in fact what happens after Othello's downfall at the end of the play (5.2.330).[24] To assume that Othello is the primary target of Iago's deadly plot is to deprive his intrigue of any rational basis and to turn him indeed into a demi-devil motivated by pure, gratuitous, and ultimately self-destructive hatred.

The first attempt to undermine Cassio's position is the drunken brawl stirred by Iago in the Cyprus garrison (2.3.57–58). Iago's main purpose is to disgrace Cassio and thereby to advance himself, with the added sting of disturbing Othello in bed with his wife on what appears to be their first night together. Iago's brilliant stage management of the brawl scene secures not only Cassio's demotion (l. 245) but also wider powers for himself and increased favor in Othello's eyes as an honest, trustworthy, and able man. Nor does Iago stop there, for Cassio's disgrace is not irreversible and with time can be forgiven. To ensure that Cassio is compromised permanently, Iago introduces Desdemona into his plot. Iago's advice that Cassio persuade Desdemona to advocate for him before Othello constitutes a turning point of the play (ll. 309–20), the last moment when Iago is fully in control of his intrigue. From that moment on, his actions become limited by circumstance, his decisions begin to depend on chance, and he

[23] In his neometaphysical reading, Harold Bloom sees Iago as contemplating "the total ruin of the war god Othello," which in pragmatic terms I find illogical and self-defeating for Iago. See Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 435.

[24] Even before the catastrophe of Act 5, Othello is suddenly and rather inexplicably recalled from his generalship by the arrival in Cyprus of the Venetian lord Lodovico, with a letter from the duke that puts Cassio in Othello's place (4.1.235–36). The effect of the letter is probably to speed up Iago's murderous plans concerning Cassio, for his death will keep Othello in office and Iago as Othello's lieutenant.

must improvise and take a great deal of personal risk in the now unstoppable chain of events.[25] To make sure that Cassio's entreaty to Desdemona produces the opposite effect—that is, that it irrevocably ruins Cassio's career instead of restoring him to his former office—Iago must prepare the ground from Othello's end. He directly states as much in the soliloquy in which he plans to pour "pestilence" into Othello's ear to arouse his jealousy (l. 351), pushing him to interpret his wife's advocacy on Cassio's behalf as a sign of her sexual favor for him. In this way Iago intends to "enmesh them all" (l. 357): "this honest fool" Cassio (l. 348), the virtuous Desdemona, and the gullible Othello. That his intrigue ends with Othello's and Desdemona's tragic deaths is not part of Iago's plan; the superrational manipulator seems to have underestimated the emotions of the people involved in his intrigue, which cause the situation to spiral out of his control.[26]

The precariousness of Iago's position becomes apparent during the temptation scene, in which we see that his success in persuading Othello of his wife's infidelity comes at a price. Once the charged words "jealousy" (3.3.167, 180, 195) and "cuckold" (l. 169) are uttered, Iago the accuser must provide a proof, which he does not yet have, or else he is himself in trouble. So far he has been pulling the strings of other people's behavior while remaining safe and beyond suspicion, but now the game has become a dangerous gamble: the failure of his intrigue will not just put him back to square one but may jeopardize the position he started from, or even his life. The complication results from Othello's insistence on justice that punishes false accusations (ll. 362–69), which means that Iago now must go on with his intrigue if for no other reason than to save himself. At this point several almost incredible but dramatically necessary coincidences provide Iago with the "ocular proof" he so badly needs. Desdemona accidentally and unknowingly drops her handkerchief, even though "she so loves the token" (l. 297). Emilia finds it (l. 294) and, despite her loyalty to her mistress, gives it instead to Iago (ll. 317–19), who has been pestering her about the handkerchief for some time (l. 313) and now promptly arranges to leave it in Cassio's lodgings (l. 324). Although aided by chance, Iago's plan to ruin Cassio is by no means complete: his ploy "*may* do something" (l. 327; emphasis added), but more good luck is still needed.

[25] This is also the moment when Iago's ambition, hatred, and excitement ratchet up a gear, and his admirable if disturbing pragmatism gives way to an excess that will prove his undoing. See Bradley: "No ambition or hatred short of passion could drive a man who is evidently so clear-sighted, and who must hitherto have been so prudent, into a plot so extremely hazardous" (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 209).

[26] Piotr Sadowski, *Dynamism of Character in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Newark: U of Delaware P; London: Associated UP, 2003), 188–90.

Fortunately for Iago, Othello is by now so convinced of his wife's infidelity that "Trifles light as air" (l. 325) will do in the place of hard evidence. Taking full advantage of Othello's diminished critical faculties, Iago makes deliberate logical leaps, unnoticed by Othello, in presenting as "truth" mere suppositions and fabricated reports, such as Cassio's erotic dream of Desdemona (ll. 416–28) and the story of Cassio wiping his beard with Desdemona's handkerchief (ll. 440–42)—both now accepted unquestioningly by Othello. Iago cannot but welcome Othello's subsequent decisions to punish the allegedly disloyal Cassio with death (ll. 475–77) and, even more, to appoint the ensign as his lieutenant (l. 481), which is what Iago wanted from the start. On top of all this, Othello's emotional suffering on account of his wife's supposed infidelity is Iago's revenge for being passed over for promotion the first time around.

Having achieved these three things, Iago's intrigue should end. The only thing left to do to secure his gain and retain Othello's trust is to finish the business with the handkerchief, after he has mentioned it to Othello. This is accomplished—again with almost unbelievable luck—in the eavesdropping scene, during which Iago succeeds in duping Othello into thinking that the subject of Iago's bawdy conversation with Cassio is Desdemona rather than the courtesan Bianca. The latter's disrespectful handling of the handkerchief—an object sacred to Othello—is another stroke of incredibly good luck for Iago, given his lack of awareness that the handkerchief was in Bianca's possession. It is as if destiny as some malign force rather than Iago's intelligence and foresight were weaving the fates of the characters involved, so that Iago needed to do nothing more than make the most of those extraordinary coincidences.[27]

One thing that could possibly reverse Iago's gain at this stage is Othello's determination to kill not only Cassio but also Desdemona. The killing of Desdemona is emphatically Othello's, not Iago's, idea (ll. 391–93, 434, 450, 454, 460–63, 478–81, 4.1.92, 178–80, 184, 197, 201). Cassio's permanent demotion has been part of Iago's intrigue all along; now, after all the lies about Desdemona's alleged infidelity, Iago needs Cassio's death as a matter of urgency lest Cassio and Othello ever communicate directly again. Desdemona's case is different: Iago not only gains nothing from her death, but also in fact stands to lose what he has achieved. For the pragmatic and calculating Iago, killing Desdemona is simply illogical and counterproductive. At the same time, whenever Othello explodes with a murderous passion about his wife, Iago has to tread a thin line between appearing to endorse the general's deadly intents and trying to appease him before he does something that will destroy them all. Thus, to Othello's "I'll tear her all to pieces," Iago counters with the ambiguous "Nay, yet

[27] Honigmann, introduction to *Othello*, 72–73.

be wise, yet we see nothing done, / She may be honest yet" (ll. 434–36). When Othello cries for "blood, blood, blood," Iago feigns (or maybe not) a voice of reason: "Patience, I say, your mind perhaps may change" (ll. 454–55).[28] When Othello and Iago seal Cassio's fate, Iago expressly advises Othello not to kill Desdemona:

OTHELLO Within these three days let me hear thee say
That Cassio's not alive.
IAGO My friend is dead.
'Tis done —at your request. But let her live.
(ll. 475–77)

Iago's career depends on Othello, and therefore the general's fall following uxoricide is the last thing he wants. Just as earlier he announced his tactical alliance with Othello ("In following him I follow but myself" [1.1.57]), so now at the end of the temptation scene he binds his fate to that of the general:

OTHELLO Now art thou my lieutenant.
IAGO I am your own for ever.
(3.3.481–82)

Othello's somewhat matter-of-fact request for poison in 4.1—"Get me some poison, Iago, this night"—does more than reveal his awareness of the Machiavellian tactics routinely used in his adopted country: it also signals a moral degradation of the hitherto honorable and chivalric man under the combined influence of his ancient's cynical manipulation and his own insecurities and vulnerabilities.[29] Poison has been considered a cowardly and unheroic weapon because

[28] "Blood, blood, blood" suggests using a blade weapon, which Iago—if he wants Desdemona to live—must discourage. A wife's bloody death by her husband, intimated in Othello's outburst but rejected by Iago, is described in gory detail in one of the play's putative sources, Matteo Bandello's *Certaine Tragicall Discourses* (translated by Geoffrey Fenton [London, 1567] from François de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* [Paris, 1561]), an Italian story of a jealous Albanian captain who stabbed his wife (and himself) because he didn't want another man to enjoy her after his death; see Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, 202, 260. The innocent wife's bloody end returned after Shakespeare's *Othello* in a ballad (ca. 1625), in which the Moor's wife is killed by her husband (who later kills himself) with a dagger; see Furness, *A New Variorum Edition*, 401. Shakespeare's Othello, armed with a sword and a hidden dagger in the last scene (5.2.284, 354, 358) famously decides not to shed Desdemona's blood (l. 3).

[29] According to G. M. Matthews, Iago does not want Othello to use poison "to kill Desdemona at a distance, like a civilized Venetian," but he should "'strangle her in her bed' with his bare hands, like a savage. Poison is Iago's speciality." See "Othello and the Dignity of Man," in *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), 17. I agree with Matthews's association of poison with Venice but not with the reasons he ascribes to Iago's suggestion of strangulation.

of its asymmetrical character: it can kill without incurring any risks for the attacker. As a form of premeditated violence, poison has been judged in history to be dishonorable and unmanly, and for that reason was often associated with women, with members of other disempowered social and ethnic groups (e.g., Barabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*), and, as noted above, with Machiavellian politics from continental Europe, especially Italy. In English drama (perhaps most famously in *Hamlet*), murder by poison, when committed by men in positions of power, was considered beneath contempt, precisely because it violated a sense of fair play and honorable combat.[30] As Sean Benson points out, Othello's moral degradation under Iago's toxic influence means not only dishonor but also "a certain emasculation," because in early modern England poison was associated less with high-level politics than with lower-class women and domestic crime, as in *Arden of Faversham* (1590).[31] Othello's recourse to poison in the context of a marital row further diminishes the once heroic and noble male character.

One of the paradoxes of *Othello* is that the use of poison, a secret and ignoble weapon, is suggested by a basically noble if deluded character, and is rejected by the most toxic villain in the Shakespearean canon. From the start Iago intends "to abuse Othello's ear" (1.3.394) and to "pour this pestilence into his ear" (2.3.351).[32] By the end of the temptation scene he has succeeded:

> The Moor already changes with my poison:
> Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons
> Which at the first are scarce found to distaste
> But with a little art upon the blood
> Burn like the mines of sulphur.
>
> (3.3.328–32)

In 4.1, however, the expert in verbal toxin and aural contamination must dissuade Othello from using literal poison to kill Desdemona. The reasons are, as I

[30] Piotr Sadowski, "'Foul, Strange and Unnatural': Poison as a Murder Weapon in English Renaissance Drama," *Mosaic* 53.3 (2020): 139–54.

[31] Sean Benson, *Shakespeare, "Othello" and Domestic Tragedy* (London: Continuum, 2012), 99; *Arden of Faversham*, ed. Martin White, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016). For more on the relationship between poison and women, especially in early literatures, see Margaret Hallissy, *Venomous Woman: Fear of the Female in Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987). See also Fredson Thayer Bowers, "The Audience and the Poisoners of Elizabethan Tragedy," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 36.4 (1937): 498.

[32] A classic dramatic example of aural contamination comes three years before *Othello* in *Hamlet*, in which the serpent that now wears the crown (1.5.39–40) not only has killed his brother by pouring poison in his ear but also has "the whole ear of Denmark / … by a forgèd process of my death / Rankly abused" (1.5.36–38). In *Othello*, Iago is the "viper" (5.2.282) who relies on verbal venom in his insidious attacks.

have argued, pragmatic rather than symbolic: Iago simply does not want Othello to kill his wife. Iago's cunning if risky plan therefore is to suggest strangulation, a form of killing that would require an intimate and prolonged contact with Desdemona's body. The idea to strangle Desdemona in her bed, "even the bed she hath contaminated" (l. 205), offers a moral justification that proves irresistible to Othello: "Good, good, the justice of it pleases; very good!" (l. 206). For his part Iago seems to count on the possibility that Othello will, in any physical confrontation with his wife, be mollified by her charms—a possibility suggested by Othello himself: he initially hopes to kill her from a distance, "lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again."

If Iago had really wanted Othello to kill Desdemona that night, he would not have sent Emilia to inform the general about the bloody street brawl involving Cassio and Roderigo (5.1.126–28), which he himself provoked, but would have left Othello and his wife alone. Iago seems to be thinking only about killing Cassio, not about Othello's possible killing of Desdemona. He even promises to let the general know "by midnight" (4.1.209) the outcome of their plot on Cassio's life. So when Iago later commands Emilia to "run you to the citadel / And tell my lord and lady what hath happed" (5.1.126–27), it is almost as if he had entirely forgotten about the business with Desdemona—or, more likely, as if he did not even consider the possibility that Othello might follow through on his threat. As it happens, Emilia's arrival nearly prevents her mistress's death (5.2.84–85). Later, when Iago and other Venetians follow Emilia to the general's quarters to inform him in person about the incident with Cassio, Iago must be as surprised as anyone else to witness the domestic tragedy.

Ultimately, what in Iago's calculations should have checked Othello's murderous intent—the proximity of Desdemona's body—has with shocking irony produced the opposite effect. Desdemona's sweet breath turns out to be "ne'er so fatal," and Othello

> must weep,
> But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly,
> It strikes where it doth love.
>
> (ll. 20–22)

What Iago hoped would be an aborted crime of passion turns out to be a grotesque mockery of a judicial execution performed by Othello with eerie calm.[33]

[33] John Russell Brown, "Violence and Sensationalism in the Plays of Shakespeare and Other Dramatists," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 87 (1995): 105; Jay L. Halio, "Reading Othello Backwards," in *Othello: New Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York: Routledge, 2002), 398; Edward Pechter, *"Othello" and Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1999), 142–44.

He appears to have regained a mental equilibrium of sorts, but his newly acquired self-control has a sinister quality. Othello is no longer a husband mad with jealousy but—in his imagination—the judge, the executor of God's will, solemn and dignified, about to perform a ceremonial act of sacrificial justice. The rationale for Othello's so-called honor killing has a judicial ring to it and emphasizes the public, no longer private, nature of the case: Desdemona must die for the general good, "else she'll betray more men."[34] For Irving Ribner, Othello's former vengeful wrath is now converted into "a lawful justice, his hatred into duty," in which Othello sees himself as "the instrument of justice executing his duty in a solemn ritual."[35] Nicholas Grene similarly observes that Othello the general in this scene administers "the summary justice of the court martial," acting as an agent of divine retribution and associating himself with "the icon of justice holding her sword."[36] In his mind he is an executioner, not a murderer, which is why he kills himself the moment he realizes his tragic mistake (l. 354).

The literal poison rejected earlier by Iago as the murder weapon (4.1.204) but embraced by him metaphorically in the toxic malignancy of his character and speech returns in the final tragic tableau of three dead bodies (including Emilia's) lying in and around the bed—"the object [that] poisons sight" (5.2.362). The tableau merges the metaphor and the lethal effect of material poison. For Michael Neill the tangible presence of these dead bodies "announces a kind of plague, one that taints the sight as the deadly effluvia of pestilence poison the nostrils."[37] The sight is the "monster" born in Iago's sick imagination, once "Too hideous to be shown" (3.3.110–11) but now displayed in full view. Yet the expert in aural contamination, the "viper" (5.2.282), remains famously reticent about why he has "thus ensnared [Othello's] soul and body" (l. 299). There is perhaps no space in the final scene for Iago's extended explanations—which in any case would have been redundant to the audience and would risk distracting them from the pathos of the dead bodies—but the play leaves open the questions both of Iago's motives and of his ontological status.

Whether Iago wished Desdemona dead ultimately hinges on his relationship with Othello, including his desire, as many critics have seen it, for Othello's

[34] According to Norman Council, "The idea that a cuckold is justified in taking his revenge . . . was made an integral part of Renaissance speculations about honour." See *When Honour's at the Stake: Ideas of Honour in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), 115.

[35] Irving Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (1960; repr., London: Methuen, 1979), 108.

[36] Nicholas Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 120.

[37] Neill, "Unproper Beds," 383.

"destruction."[38] Professional envy and resentment of social privilege as self-proclaimed motives in a lower-class ambitious soldier are psychologically convincing reasons for Iago's intrigue, but critics have been baffled by the "excess of malignity" in Iago for which "there are no sufficient motives apparent" in the play.[39] Two hundred years after Iago's malignity was described as "motiveless" by Coleridge, Bernard Spivak still finds the "enigma" of Othello's fatal ancient "intractable."[40] G. Wilson Knight, too, found Iago "mysterious" and "inhuman," while Grene talks about "the hybrid nature of Iago, something between evil incarnate and a humanly comprehensible psychopath."[41] Even Iago's briefly mentioned sexual jealousy appears largely insignificant as a motive and inconsequential as a spur to action. Resentful of the obstacles to his career, he seems free of the kind of jealousy that torments Roderigo and Othello. He may suspect Othello of cuckolding him (1.3.385–87), a fantasy extended even to Cassio (2.1.305), but there is no support in the play for these vain suppositions, which in any case lead only to emotional coldness toward Emilia rather than to murderous vengefulness.[42] Emily C. Bartels also finds Iago's alleged sexual offense "an unsupported afterthought," dismissed by Iago himself, who "neither knows nor cares whether the rumours of adultery are true."[43] Although he subsequently asserts that this suspicion "Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards" (l. 295), he also admits that Othello is "of a constant, loving, noble nature" (l. 287). For Bartels, "what initiates and motivates Iago's revenge is Othello's choice of Cassio as lieutenant" rather than sexual jealousy or even racial hatred.[44]

[38] Beier, "The Art of Persuasion," 46; John Drakakis, *William Shakespeare: "Othello,"* York Notes (Harlow, UK: Longman; Beirut: York Press, 1980), 73. For Emily C. Bartels, "One of the great ironies of the play is that Iago's destruction of the Moor is at least partly driven by a desire to serve as his lieutenant in Cassio's stead" (*Speaking of the Moor: From "Alcazar" to "Othello"* [Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2009], 164). More a contradiction than an irony, the seeming inconsistency disappears once we accept that Iago does *not* intend Othello's destruction.

[39] E. H. Seymour, *Remarks, Critical Conjectural, and Explanatory, upon the Plays of Shakspeare* (London: J. Wright, 1805), 2:320.

[40] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures and Notes on Shakespere and Other English Poets*, [ed. Thomas Ashe] (London: George Bell and Sons, 1884), 388; Bernard Spivack, "Iago Revisited," in *Shakespeare, the Tragedies: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 85.

[41] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1993 [1930]), 97; Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination*, 123; Sadowski, *Dynamism of Character in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*, 183.

[42] Emilia suggests that groundless jealousy is inherent to the masculine disposition: "They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself" (3.4.160–61).

[43] Emily C. Bartels, "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41.4 (1990): 450.

[44] Bartels, "Making More of the Moor," 450.

As much as these latter factors might provide perverse delight to Iago and, as noted by Neill, provoke a voyeuristic fascination in the audience, they do not explain Iago's actions as well as does the simpler fact of his grievance at being passed over for promotion.[45] Bartels goes so far as to suggest that we might "erase Othello's identity as a Moor, and the play might go on: Iago might not be happier being bypassed for military preferment by a Venetian general."[46] During the last-scene revelations, the superstitious Othello looks down at Iago's feet to see if they are cloven (5.2.283–84), but both Shakespeare's and today's audiences would probably be inclined to view Iago first of all in human terms: as an intelligent, selfish, manipulative, ambitious, resentful, misanthropic, misogynist, racist, narcissistic, unscrupulous, and unsentimental individual who will stop at nothing to achieve his goal.

There is, nevertheless, a uniquely large discrepancy between the relatively low stakes of Iago's plotting and the extent of the villain's "constant and free-floating malice, the sadistic pleasure in poisoning people's delight for the sheer unmotivated joy of doing so," in Edward Pechter's description.[47] Richard Gloucester, Claudius, and Macbeth commit sacrilegious murders to win kingdoms, but Iago's disproportionate and largely gratuitous malice serves only to win him promotion from ancient to lieutenant. Ironically, the cunning upstart ultimately cannot even enjoy his achievement: his appointment as lieutenant (3.3.481) is almost immediately invalidated by a letter from Venice that relieves Othello of his generalship and puts Cassio in his place (4.1.235–36). Iago's subsequent accelerated designs on Cassio's life have nothing to do with forestalling the senate's decision but are instead pathetic attempts to save his own life by preventing direct communication between Cassio and Othello about the handkerchief. Emilia's final revelations and the unplanned bedroom casualties further suggest that Iago's hubris and narcissism have blinded him to the emotions and humanity of people he thought were putty in his hands. The more we see of and think about Iago, the less sense we can make of the relation between his obsessive plotting, obscure motivation, and self-destructive actions. No wonder that Coleridge's "motiveless malignity," with its residual theological ring, is still an irresistible phrase in talking about Iago, as it is for example for Harold Bloom, who resorts to "ontotheology" rather than psychology to make sense of Shakespeare's elusive villain.[48] The play itself invites metaphysical interpretations alongside psychological ones with its references to "Divinity of hell" and to "Hell and night," which "Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (2.3.345; 1.3.402–3).

[45] Neill, "Unproper Beds," 395.
[46] Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 167.
[47] Pechter, *"Othello" and Interpretive Traditions*, 62.
[48] Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 447.

What is also disturbing about the play is that it allows a psychopath to involve the audience in his point of view, and that the pure venom of his hatred and amorality becomes so strangely seductive. Iago's paradoxical "I am not what I am" (1.1.64), a parody of Jehovah's "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14), may, as Pechter observes, signal a diabolical identity, but it is also a blasphemous piece of wit aimed at the audience fascinated by his blatant and self-satisfied dishonesty.[49] By flaunting his duplicity with such relish, Iago makes the audience both complicit in his villainy and suspicious that his masterful control and mischievous satisfaction at duping everyone around him might apply to them as well. As observed by Harry Berger Jr., Iago's soliloquies encourage his audience to "giggle along with [him] at everyone's stupid persistence in enlisting him as a trusty mediator and pinning medals of honesty on his chest."[50] In his bravura metatheatrical performance, Iago the consummate actor-villain seems to be telling spectators what, in their propensity for motive hunting, he thinks they want to hear. Tongue in cheek, he satisfies their lurid taste for the cheap melodramatic tricks of a stage villain gloating over his villainy, even as the succession of actions to which he commits himself render his motivations increasingly opaque.[51] In this way the play provides multiple, often conflicting ways of thinking about why Iago does what he does: metaphysical and rational, devilish and human, gratuitous and pragmatic. After finding Iago's feet human rather than cloven, Othello wounds the "demi-devil" to make sure that he also bleeds like a human (5.2.284, 98)—a test sarcastically countered by Iago with a teasing implication of satanic immortality: "I bleed, sir, but not killed" (l. 285). Even the assurances of Iago's imminent torture seem empty against his own claim that he "never will speak word" (l. 301). Stage villains tend to die onstage, both to prove that they are human after all and to satisfy the audience's desire for poetic justice, but Iago, the "hellish villain" (l. 366), is escorted off the stage while still alive as if certain of his invincibility, leaving behind the poisonous sight of his victims' corpses before the bewildered audience.

[49] Pechter, *"Othello" and Interpretive Traditions*, 63–64 (including the Biblical passage).

[50] Harry Berger Jr., *A Fury in the Words: Love and Embarrassment in Shakespeare's Venice* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), 188.

[51] Berger, *A Fury in the Words*, 191–95.