

## The language of Othello and Iago

The contrast in the characters of these two is reflected in their language. Othello is noted for the beauty of his speaking, about which he makes falsely-modest jokes, claiming to be “rude” in his speech and (being black) not to have “those soft parts of conversation” which “chamberers have”. Audiences have felt the beauty of Othello's speeches, but we should note that within the play, characters are aware of it (the Duke suggests that Othello's “tale would win” his daughter, too). It is a quality which Othello has doubtless developed and found useful, as a commander, for its inspiring effect on his men; that a woman with a thirst for adventure should also be inspired by it is not surprising to us. It has not occurred to Brabantio that this would move Desdemona to love, and it may at first have surprised Othello, but, given a hint by Desdemona, “upon this hint” he “spake”, and won her. Othello's rhetoric is presented somewhat ambiguously. There is no doubt that he really does love using his gifts of **composition**, of **poetic comparison**, and of **oratory** (=art of public speaking; it is made clear that the tone of his voice is as musical as what he says) to achieve beauty in his speaking, and that, allowing for some imaginative colouring of things recalled, he uses these gifts to speak truth.

On the other hand, we have a sense of Othello's self-consciousness, of knowing he is adopting a rôle, just as his controlled display of anger at the brawl in Act 3, scene 3 is something of a pose. The language of Venice and the manners of the Venetian army will have been learned by one who uses them with evident awareness of what he is doing. Thus, Othello's final speech in Act 5, scene 2, though it is an honest confession in its detail, is delivered with an eye (or ear, rather) to effect: he knows it is his epitaph, and does his best to make it as resonant and moving in manner, as it is poignant but dignified in content. We can see this in, say, the deliberate understatement which qualifies his boast of duty done: “I have done the state some service, and they know it”, and his immediate closing of the subject which he has introduced: “No more of that...”

### Iago's mimicry

Iago is as skilled as Othello in manipulating language; if he had (but he does not) an idea of beauty, he would find the words for it no less than Othello. As he kneels by Othello (end of Act 3, scene 3) to pledge his help, Iago exactly mimics the solemn rhetoric he has just heard; we might be moved by it if we did not know it to be bogus. This identifies a problem of which we should be aware in noting others' response to Iago: we are forewarned (by him) of his wickedness, and can see, with critical detachment, how it works. If the part is well played (i.e., if Iago is not a “pantomime” villain, showing his evil in appearance and tone of voice) we should find it plausible (believable) that Iago should be thought “honest”. If, for Othello, speech is to be used to create beauty or convey the idea of beauty, nobility or goodness, for Iago, speech is

just another thing or tool, to be used to manipulate the world to his own advantage. The device of the soliloquy lets us see this at once, and in these speeches, early on in the play, Iago gives us his motives, his modus operandi (“Thus do I ever make my fool my purse”) and his intentions: the master of deception is open to the scrutiny of the audience, that we may admire, horrified, the progress of his scheming.

In his soliloquies, Iago uses a level of eloquence rarely present in his public utterances, speaking in fluent blank verse, marked by occasional, homely imagery. His bluff “honest” public persona shows in the informal prose of his advice to Cassio about reputation, or the crude, comic rhyming of his description of the ideal woman in Act 2, scene 1. The long speech describing Cassio's attack on Montano is worth studying: the language seems to have a simple, neutral quality, with simple, everyday vocabulary fluently arranged (he speaks in verse, to indicate the formality of the situation: he is giving evidence, in public, to his commander). The account of what happened is accurate, though the parenthesis: “as it so fell out”, is skilfully inserted to remind Othello of the result of the fight.

But the attempt to clear Cassio with which Iago opens and closes his account, his truthful suggestion of the “strange indignity” received from “him that fled” (a description which seems to rule out the possibility of identifying the unknown assailant), this ensures the result Iago has wished for. It is curious that it is the plainness of his speech, the clarity of meaning at the level of grammar, that supports Iago's reputation for honesty. The idea that the plain speaker tells the truth, while the more eloquent person is not to be trusted, is a commonplace: Shakespeare, through Iago and Othello, shows the error in this belief: plain speaking does not merely accompany (accidentally, as it were) Iago's malice, but is the very medium in which it operates.

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