

Act I, scene i: Venice. A street.

Summary

Othello begins in the city of Venice, at night; Roderigo is having a discussion with Iago, who is bitter about being passed up for a military post. Though Iago is seasoned in battle, Cassio, a man of strategy but little practical experience, was named Othello's lieutenant. Iago says that he only serves Othello to further himself, and makes shows of his allegiance only for his own gain; he is playing false, and admits that his nature is not at all what it seems. Iago is aware that Desdemona, the daughter of Brabantio, a Venetian nobleman of some stature, has run off with Othello, the black warrior of the Moors. Brabantio knows nothing of this coupling; Iago decides to enlist Roderigo, who lusts after Desdemona, to awaken Brabantio with screams that his daughter is gone.

At first, Brabantio dismisses these cries in the dark; but when he realizes his daughter is not at home, he gives the news some credence. Though Roderigo speaks to Brabantio, Iago is there too, hidden, yelling unsavory things about Othello and his intentions toward Desdemona. Brabantio panics, and calls for a search party to find Desdemona. Iago leaves, not wanting anyone to find out that he betrayed his own leader.

Analysis

The relationship between Roderigo and Iago is obviously somewhat close. Iago "hast had [Roderigo's] purse as if the strings were thine"; the metaphor shows how much trust Roderigo has in Iago, and also how he uses Iago as a confidante (I.i.2-3). Does Iago share the same kind of feeling? As far as Roderigo knows, Iago is his friend, but Iago reveals his manipulative nature in this first scene.

Iago trusts Roderigo with the knowledge that he serves Othello only to achieve his own goals. It is thus ironic that after Iago's lengthy confession of duplicity, Roderigo still does not suspect anything untoward in his request. Appearance vs. reality is a crucial theme in Iago's story; throughout the play, he enacts a series of roles, from advisor to confidante, and appears to be helping people though he is only acting out of his twisted self-interest.

Iago seems to do a great deal of character analysis and exposition for the audience. "These fellows" that flatter for their own purposes "have some soul," Iago says (I.i.54). Contrary to his underhanded self-flattery, Iago seems to have no soul; he never repents, never lets up with his schemes, and never seems to tire of the damage he causes. His statement, "In following [Othello] I follow but myself" emphasizes that he is acting completely out of his own self-interest (I.i.58). Iago will thus hide his motivations and convey only falsehood. If he were to "wear [his] heart upon [his] sleeve", he would be torn apart (I.i.64). Honesty would destroy him.

Even when he is at his most honest, in this scene with Roderigo, Iago misrepresents just how evil he truly is. Iago parallels another Shakespearean character, Richard III, in his self-awareness of his villainous character, and lack of remorse and use of false representations. In this first scene, Iago has foreshadowed the great deceptions that he will engineer.

Already, the racial issues and themes at the core of *Othello* are beginning to surface. When Roderigo refers to Othello, he calls him "the thick lips", using a synecdoche that highlights only Othello's foreignness and belies Rodrigo's distrust of Othello based solely on his color (I.i.66). Roderigo and Iago are not the only characters to display racism when referring to Othello; racism is a pervasive theme within the work, one that is evident even from the first scene of the play.

Another element that surfaces repeatedly in the play is the use of animal imagery; "an old black ram is topping your white ewe," Iago yells to Brabantio from the street (I.i.88-9). Animal imagery is used to convey immorality, or, here, a bestial desire or illicit passion. Iago later compares Othello to a "Barbary horse" coupling with Desdemona, reinforcing a lustful picture of Othello (I.i.111). Iago's statement is doubly potent, since it not only condemns Othello for his alleged lust, but also plays on Brabantio's misgivings about Othello's color, and outsider status. The juxtaposition of black and white, in connection with the animal imagery, is meant to make this image very repellent, and to inflame Brabantio to anger and action.

Iago especially mentions the devil many times in the text, beginning in the first scene. He implies Othello is devil-like, with his lust, indiscretion, and strangeness to Venice; the irony is that Iago is so quick to make others out to be evil, when it is he who is the center of blackness and foul deeds in the play. The devil often takes disguises, just as Iago does.

The setting of night is important to the play. Like in the first scene of *Hamlet*, the darkness introduces a eerie feel, and a certain disorder rules over the proceedings. With Brabantio's call for light, there is a corresponding call for some kind of order; darkness vs. light and order vs. disorder are important juxtapositions within the play. This theme will appear again at the end, as the play returns to darkness, and also to chaos.

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