

# Honesty to Speak: Speech and Silence in "Othello"

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Speech in Shakespeare's "Othello" possesses a power beyond that of deeds'. It is Othello's fantastical storytelling that won him Desdemona at the start, Iago's poisonous suggestion that leads the general to murder his own wife, Emilia's testimony that traps the villain in the end. Not all of this speech is true, and we will never know for sure whether Othello's handkerchief is magic or why Iago created his plot; but words, regardless of their truth, convince the characters even more than physical evidence does. When characters control their speech, either by remaining silent or by bursting out, they exert the strongest power they can have over the play's world.

Iago, a skilled manipulator, is in complete control of his voice. He finagles Roderigo's purse by persuading the young man that he will send the money to Desdemona, and then works on harder prey. Upon seeing Cassio finish talking to Desdemona, Iago mutters, "I like not that" a comment he pretends to be private but wants Othello to hear. Othello asks Iago what he said, and Iago replies, "Nothing, my lord; or if--I know not what." After insinuating Cassio's guilt, Iago gets Othello to mention that Cassio repeatedly visited Desdemona before her marriage. Iago exclaims, "Indeed!" and then falls silent, despite Othello's prodding for an explanation. These two lines rouse Othello's suspicions because they appear involuntary, and are therefore more likely to be indications of Iago's true thoughts. The words themselves, however, are innocent. That Iago dislikes whatever Cassio was doing, perhaps kissing Desdemona's hand or even just standing next to her, is probably true; Iago hates everybody in the play, particularly Cassio. His other comments are meaningless, but they are pauses that invite Othello to infer the darker motivations behind; Iago's silence, not his speech, frames Desdemona.

Iago excuses his silence by saying that "oft my jealousy/Shapes faults that are not," and he is honest. He discourses about Cassio's military inexperience and his tawdry affairs, warns Othello of Desdemona's unnatural behavior and deceptive practices. And yet he avoids directly accusing Cassio, and never claims that Desdemona is having an affair. Instead of lying, Iago uses silence to make Othello fill in the gaps. If Iago had laid the whole accusation bare, Othello would probably be incredulous and ask Desdemona to confirm the truth, just as Emilia, when Othello tells her about Iago's deceptions, asks her husband, "Did you ever say that she was false?" Though he admits to doing so, he never did, replacing that claim with circumstantial evidence.

For example, he says Cassio had an erotic dream about Desdemona, and the audience is no more justified to discount that claim than Othello is to believe it. Cassio's tongue has loosened against his will before, revealing a less noble officer than he first appears. He has previously made mildly insulting remarks about his social inferiors, telling Desdemona, "[Iago] speaks home, madam, you may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar," and excuses his own "breeding" for kissing Emilia. (Since Cassio knew this "courtesy" would offend Iago, his reasons for taking it are somewhat suspect.) After Iago has gotten him drunk, Cassio shows the true extent of his sense of superiority. He shouts, "The lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient," and attacks Roderigo for his presumption, crying "a knave teach me my duty?" Iago partially proves that Cassio is the "rash and very

sudden in choler" man he claimed, undeserving of the lieutenancy, and partially makes him so, much as he handles Othello. Cassio's courtly, hyperbolic praise for Desdemona, "a maid/That paragons description and wild fame," may likewise have transformed during sleep into the baser, "cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!"

Cassio, obsessed with safeguarding his reputation, can afford to admit his lapses only to Iago, whom he trusts, who has already seen Cassio's drunkenness, whose opinion he cares little for, and who thinks far worse of the lieutenant than any confession could account. If Cassio has any faults other than drinking, fighting, and whoring, he takes great pains to hide them. He also has some virtue, and can hardly bear to acknowledge his drunkenness. For both these reasons, when Othello calls upon him to account for his brawling, Cassio responds, "I pray you pardon me, I cannot speak." Montano, the other combatant, is too wounded to explain what happened, and Roderigo has slipped away. By orchestrating the silence of his comrades, Iago remains the only one able to tell Othello what happened, and by his favorite tactic of pretended reticence, convinces the general that Cassio was more at fault than he actually was.

Othello thinks that Iago is reluctant to condemn Cassio more than he does because of loyalty to his "worthy friend." Because Iago will not say that Cassio is bad, Othello thinks he is worse; because his trusted ensign keeps silent, the general thinks the truth too horrible to reveal. But when Iago keeps his mouth shut, it is to avoid divulging good. He hates to acknowledge it just as much as Othello shudders to contemplate his wife's infidelity. Othello presumes, because he cannot stomach ill deeds, that no-one can. When Iago says that Cassio lay, "With her, on her, what you will," Othello falls into an epileptic fit. He thinks it is as painful for the hesitant Iago to say such things as it is for himself to hear them. The Moor cannot even tell Desdemona her supposed crime; he "should...to cinders burn up modesty/Did I but speak thy deeds....Heaven stops the nose at it." With Iago, his mouth is freer to shout, "Damn her, lewd minx: O damn her, damn her!" but Othello does not notice this effect of Iago's presence. At first, it is joy that Othello cannot name, he "cannot speak enough of this content, it stops me here," but once Iago has finished his work, the voluble Othello has no content to speak of. Whenever the general opens his mouth to praise Desdemona, Iago warns, "Nay, you must forget all that," and by Act III, Othello's wonderful tales of "deserts vast and antres idle" have become "fantastical lies" about the handkerchief's magic powers, to frighten Desdemona.

When speaking about the handkerchief, Othello asks Desdemona where it is, and she will not answer at first. His constant questioning, "is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, is't out of the way?" implies that Desdemona here hesitates. "Heaven bless us!" is her final unfortunate response, as though she were praying to be pardoned for adultery. Her mind refuses to compass Othello's meaning, and so she thinks nothing of her words and lies about the handkerchief, as though this would protect her from its powers. Her pauses also cause Othello to trust her less both in the future and the present, as her initial dithering makes the lie that much more transparent.

Soon after, she makes the same mistake for similar reasons. Othello never tells Desdemona what she has allegedly done until too late. He calls her a whore and Emilia a bawd, but prostitution is not Desdemona's supposed crime. He orders her to swear she is honest and she will not, possibly because of confusion that he meant "honest about the handkerchief," possibly out of sheer overwhelmedness or modesty but probably because she cannot believe Othello does not love her; she blinds herself to Othello's meaning and asks whether he is mad because of

Brabantio, which he is obviously not. "[Othello's] unkindness may...never taint my love," says Desdemona, as though her husband simply were not feeling himself. ("Unkindness" in Shakespeare's usage often hovered between "unnaturalness" and the modern sense) She then decides, despite every sign to the contrary, that politics is the real reason for Othello's behavior. And when she knows herself lost beyond all hope to her husband's love, she refuses to say so, but only, "answers have I none."

She does manage to swear that she is neither a strumpet nor whore, unfortunate word choices in the context of being treated like "a public commoner" and not an adulteress, as the words could mean either. Her earnest prayer of, "heaven forgive us!" just as before moves Othello from the brink of believing her back to renewed suspicions. Othello, already believing Desdemona lost, told her with dubious theology to be "double-damned," but the first item she would be damned for (dishonesty) is the same as the second. He wanted Desdemona to convince him that she really was honest, and her avoidance of Othello's command, though she somewhat makes up for the deficiency a few lines later and even swears her faithfulness just after Othello has left the room, damns her just as Iago's silence does.

"I cannot say 'whore'," she confides to Iago, and oddly enough, shares that quality with him. (Iago does speak it in Othello's presence, but never, even during soliloquy, in reference to Desdemona.) Othello trusts Iago because the ensign will not mention foulness, and suspects Desdemona for that same quality. Iago's poison has made "what is to him as luscious as locusts...as acerb as coloquintida"; Othello fluctuates between believing Iago and not daring to, but by the time of their "marriage" is prepared not only to hear but to put any slander on her. While Iago patiently listens, Othello rages about Desdemona's infidelity and pours out his words in a gush of imagery mocking the kind seas that brought the couple to Cyprus.

Desdemona does not keep her peace for the whole play; she speaks at Cassio's request and Iago's manipulation. She pesters Othello with the suit, promising to "talk him out of patience" and giving a long, repetitive entreaty with its nagging cadences of, "Shall't be shortly?...shall't be tonight?...tomorrow dinner then?" etc. Othello dismisses Desdemona and murmurs a loving aside, apparently about to give in, but Iago turns her words against her and implicitly contrasts them with his own virtuous reticence. Othello, though possessed of an elegant tongue, professes his own inexperience in speech to the Duke's council; he mistrusts his own words, doubting that they wooed Desdemona enough, and in his worry wonders whether she tired of him because he lacks "soft parts of conversation." Iago demonstrates the power of his words as he employs them to cast doubt on Desdemona's, but Othello fails to understand the tactic. "It is not words that shakes me thus" he exclaims upon falling into a fit, yet, of course, it is; words, and the play of his imagination.

To Othello, more honesty resides in Iago's hesitant speech than in Desdemona's long scolding. As Iago's tightens his grip on Othello's mind, he speaks more freely. At first he swears, "you cannot [know my thoughts], if my heart were in your hand" and "I am not bound to...utter my thoughts," but later changes his tack, saying, "as I am bound, receive it from me." He tells Othello what the general already half-believes, furthering Othello's trust in words with him. The more Othello listens to Iago, the more words control him, and the less he realizes it. He abandons his demand for "ocular proof" in an instant; Cassio's mocking words and Desdemona's uneasy speech convince him at least as much as the sight of the handkerchief does. By his skill and luck, Iago finds enough of this

proof to prevent Othello from realizing that he only heard half a conversation and saw no proof at all. This "handkerchief scene," which mixes verbal and visual evidence, confuses Othello's trust in the visual with his suspicion of speech, and makes him put all his faith in Iago's account. And it is at this point that Desdemona, when speech could help her most, goes silent.

Because Desdemona, unlike Othello, is unwilling to harm her beloved, another character must testify for her. The somewhat less pure and virtuous Emilia, heretofore quiet, calls for help, rails at Othello, and condemns Iago. It is difficult to say just how much Emilia knew about her husband's plot, but she does come very close to unmasking him, knowingly or not, before Desdemona; she also wails, "I thought so then" upon hearing his scheme. She stood by while Othello shouted at his wife, demanding the handkerchief Emilia gave to Iago. In spite of all this suspicion, she does not open her mouth until Desdemona is already dead. Iago complains that his wife nags him constantly when not in public, but he also claims that she has slept with about half the army, and we never hear Emilia pestering her husband. She declares herself eager to make him happy, doing "nothing, but to please his fantasy," and indeed she seems to have some strange notion that Iago's fantasy can be pleased, avoiding the realization that she has married a "demi-devil" whose sole joy on earth is to destroy the greatness of better men than himself. When she asks him about the least of his crimes, suggesting Desdemona's guilt, she adds, "I know thou didst not, thou'rt not such a villain./Speak, for my heart is full." Emilia, like Desdemona, dares not incriminate her husband.

Unfortunately for Iago, Emilia is not the epitome of virtue, maidenly silence, and devoted matrimonial love that Desdemona plays. This woman finds the role of servant to a kind mistress more important than that of wife to Iago. Like Othello, she has two competing relationships, one built upon love, the other based on authority; for her the positions are switched. Emilia and Desdemona discuss sexual infidelity as equals; Iago orders his wife around. Similarly, Othello "marries" Iago and then abuses Desdemona. Othello wavers between trusting his fears and his hopes about his spouse, moving between explosive rage, explosive love, and mute horror. If he cannot name "the cause," Emilia can too well, mentioning it no less than five times in fourteen lines. She is not Iago's wife for nothing; her canny calculations of what it would take to make her cheat on her husband contrast both Othello's and Desdemona's innocent and impractical tongue-tied purity. Emilia is less effective than her husband; she does not approach his level of thinking everyone as base as possible. Perhaps Desdemona's advice of, "Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband" caused her unlucky trust in the essential goodness of humanity (unlikely) or perhaps, like Desdemona, Othello, and Roderigo, Emilia could just refused to wrap her mind around Iago's unbounded villainy. Yet she is the first to see it (except for poor Roderigo, who made the mistake of confronting Iago alone; were it not for Gratiano's protection, Emilia would have ended up like the young Venetian before she could tell of the handkerchief) and when she finally realizes a fraction of its extent, she speaks.

Emilia's powerful, vengeful outburst of righteous indignation--"You told a lie, a an odious, damn'd lie!"--is the first truly free speech in the play. She will not stop for shame, like Cassio, or as Iago pretends to, for Desdemona's modesty or Bianca's fear; Iago cannot command her silence like Roderigo's or Othello's. Nor is her accusation, like Othello's, Brabantio's, or Roderigo's (i.e., of Desdemona, not of Iago) spurred by him. Emilia, once she has seen the truth, confronts it though she betrays her husband, endangers her life, and threatens her disgrace. She does not react like Othello or Desdemona; she tells Iago plainly of the matter and

he, not realizing the trap, admits to making the suggestion. When she explains the matter of the handkerchief, Othello believes her open outrage where he doubted Desdemona's fearful prayers.

Iago, having lost his power over speech, reacts in the only way he can: he murders Emilia, and refuses to speak. His half-defiant gloat, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know./ From this time forth, I never will speak word," is his final taunt to the audience and Othello; we never doubt for an instant that he will break his oath, despite all the tortures the state can inflict. The play is over; most of the characters are or will soon be dead; he has no more reason to speak, no gulls to trap, no audience to confide in. Order has triumphed and the truth has outed, the state will handle everything and report what has happened. But none of that matters. Iago's silence still controls the play, the question of his motive still unsolved. Cassio may reign in Cyprus, but Iago rules both the hopelessly ignorant Venetians, sure that he will open his lips to pray, and the minds of the audience. Reputation and government may have the last word, but speech, the true heart of morality and power, lies beyond them.