

# Language and Othello's Decline

By Maria Jose Bahamonde - October 21, 2007

Language and Othello's Decline

It is commonly believed that one can perceive the soul through a person's eyes. However, Shakespeare allows the audience and readers to perceive the inner spirit of a character through his words, thereby giving words magnificent power. Throughout the play Othello, the progressive deterioration of Othello's nobility of mind is reflected by his decline in control of his language. In the beginning of the play, Othello clearly uses a calm, poetic language and as the novel progresses Othello's dialogue becomes quite aggressive in tone.

As the play commences, Othello's tone is very poetic; the readers may notice that he is calm in nature and loves his dear wife Desdemona intensely. The following quotation depicts how he is very proud of his life and how fortunate he is of having found Desdemona.

Let him do his spite.

My services which I have done the signiory

Shall out- tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know

(Which, when I know that boasting is an honor, I shall promulgate) I fetch my life and being

From men of royal siege, and my demerits

May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune

As this that I have reached. For know, Iago,

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,

I would not my unhoused free condition

Put into circumscription and confine

For the sea's worth. But look, what lights come yond? (Act I, Sc.ii)

Othello's speech follows a strict iambic pentameter structure, a characteristic that Shakespeare reserved only for those characters considered nobles. By giving sophisticated and beautiful language to Othello, who is not only of ignoble beginnings but also not European, Shakespeare makes it clear that Othello is at heart a noble man. Shakespeare also emphasizes Othello's noble nature by making him the play's tragic hero.

Othello's speech displays erudition. He uses proper diction such as "circumscription," "unbonneted," "promulgate," and "signiory." Another example of Othello's eloquence appears in Act 1, Scene 3:

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,  
my very noble and approved good masters:  
that I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,  
it is most true; true I have married her.  
The very head and front of my offending  
hath this extent, no more. Rude am I in speech,  
and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace;  
for since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,  
till now some nine moons wasted, they have used  
their dearest action in the tented field,  
and little of this great world can I speak  
More than pertains to feats of (broil) and battle.  
And therefore little shall I grace my cause  
in speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious  
patience,  
I will round unvarnished tale deliver  
of my whole course of love-what drugs,  
what charms,  
What conjuration, and what mighty magic  
(For such proceeding I am charge withal)  
I won his daughter. (Act I, Sc.iii )

This type of diction demonstrates that he has had a good education, and that he is not just a simple, savage Moor as Shakespeare's contemporaries would have assumed. He is also a calm, controlled man. When Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to make Desdemona fall in love with him, Othello is able to control his temper and respond very diplomatically. Moreover, he is formal and shows decorum towards the "signiors." By demonstrating that he is not ignorant, he is able to gain the esteem he deserves from the senators.

In Act I, Othello gives his final speech of kind words to depict his noble nature as he explains the way Desdemona fell in love with him. In the following quotation, the readers gain insight on Othello's background:

Her father loved me, oft invited me,  
Still questioned me the story of my life  
From year to year- the (battles,) sieges, (fortunes)  
That I have passed.

I ran it through, even from my boyish days  
To th' very moment that he bad me tell it,  
Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances:

Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
Of hairbreadth `scapes i' th' imminet deadly  
breach,

Of being taken by the insolent foe  
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,

And portance in my traveler's history,  
Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,

Rough quarries, rocks, (ands) hills whose (heads)  
touch heaven,

It was my hint to speak- such was my process-

And of the cannibals that each (other) eat,

The Antropophagi, and men whose heads

(Do grow) beneath their shoulders. These things to

hear... (Act I, Sc. iii)

Othello uses excellent imagery to enable the readers to imagine his epic past. Sentences such as "from year to year- the (battles,) sieges, (fortunes)," and "And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence, and portance in my traveler's history," demonstrate how Othello has suffered in the past; it also indicates how he struggled to survive.

Unfortunately, as soon as Iago poisons Othello's mind with stories about his wife's alleged affair with Cassio, Othello's speech becomes dark in tone. Othello's soul leaves behind happiness and love to be enveloped by anger and hatred:

I had been happy if the general camp,

Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O, now, forever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content..  
Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!  
Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof,  
Or, by the worth of mine eternal soul,  
Thou hadst been better have been born a dog  
Than answer my waked wrath. (Act III, Sc. iii)

Othello is uttering "farewell" to his tranquil thoughts, and he now thinks of his wife as a "whore." The use of such disparaging vocabulary portrays how he no longer believes Desdemona to be the honest woman he married, and how he is developing feelings of loathing against her. The following quotation also demonstrates the grotesque progression in Othello's tone:

Never, [Iago. Like to the Pontic Sea,  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Ne'er [feels] retiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,  
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace  
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,  
Till that a capable and wide revenge  
Swallow them up. Now by yond marble  
heaven,]  
In the due reverence of a sacred vow,  
I here engage my words...  
Not with vain thanks but with acceptance  
bounteous,  
And will upon the instant put thee to 't.  
Within these three days let me hear thee say  
That Cassio's not alive...

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn

her!

Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw

To furnish me with some swift means of death

For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant. (Act III, Sc. iv)

Othello makes reference to the well-known Pontic Sea, a body of water completely surrounded by Ottoman possessions. In this simile, he compares his infuriating and bloody thoughts to the sea's current, which never stops until it reaches its destination. Othello also emphasizes his high status by identifying himself with elements of nature and makes it clear that the course he takes is one from which there is no return, just like the flow of a current. Othello now believes Iago's lies; therefore, he wants to seek revenge against Cassio. He wants Cassio dead; therefore, Othello's diction is more intense as he "damn's" his wife and refers to her as "fair devil". Moreover, his diction includes negative words such as "death," "revenge," and "violent," which reveal Othello's tortured soul and suggest his oncoming madness.

A final passage shows how completely Othello has changed. His loving, respectful tone has become an aggressive and wrathful one:

She says enough. Yet she's a simple bawd

That cannot say as much. This is a subtle whore,

A closet lock and key of villainous secrets.

And yet she'll kneel and pray. I have seen her do 't...

Come, swear it. Damn thyself,

Lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves

Should fear to seize thee. Therefore be double

damned.

Swear thou art honest...

Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell. (Act IV, Sc. ii)

Othello's perception of his once beloved Desdemona has transformed dramatically. He no longer refers to her as "the gentle Desdemona" but as "a subtle whore, a closet lock and key of villainous secrets..." Othello has lost all faith in his wife, and therefore the beauty and peacefulness of his speech has turned vulgar and insulting. Shakespeare's use of language to demonstrate this character's changing temperament is highly effective, and is instrumental to the success of Othello as a play.