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The Humiliation of Iago

KARL F. ZENDER

What does Iago want and why does he do what he does? These questions, endlessly fascinating, often discussed, stand no greater chance of being definitively answered today than they did two hundred years ago, when Coleridge spoke of the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity. In the final analysis, Iago, like all of us, does what he does because he is what he is: "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know" (V.ii.303).¹ Yet if Iago's motives must ultimately remain inscrutable, particular strands of his behavior may yet be explored and understood. Looking closely at how Iago interacts with individual characters, what he wants from each of them, what he wants to do *to* each of them, how his desires change as the play advances, can illumine much, even if not all, of his mystery.

Among these interactions, the one with Desdemona is second only to the one with Othello in complexity and interest. Beginning with nearly entire inattention to Desdemona in his first soliloquy, moving next to desire to be "even'd with [Othello], wife for wife" (II.i.299)—that is, to sleep with Desdemona as he imagines Othello has slept with Emilia—Iago moves finally to desire for Desdemona's death, or, more precisely, for a specific kind and location of death: "Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.i.207-208). How does Iago arrive at this final attitude? What, other than a reflexive opportunism, a convenient fueling of Othello's jealousy, leads him to call for Desdemona's death by strangulation in the marriage bed? This essay seeks to answer these questions. It argues that the immediate

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cause for Iago's murderous rancor lies within the play itself, in an episode where Desdemona, all inadvertently, places Iago in a situation in which he humiliates himself. It argues further that themes evoked in this scene, of speech and silence, verbal competence and incompetence, resonate throughout the play (as they do throughout Shakespeare's career), in ways that should significantly influence our understanding both of Iago's behavior in Acts III and IV and of the fifth-act climax.

I

The episode in question is II.i.83-181, the interlude in which Desdemona "beguile[s]" the time before Othello's arrival at Cyprus by asking Iago how he would praise various sorts of women. Often in Shakespeare the inconsequentiality of an episode relative to a play's plot alerts us to its significance in other terms. There is no plot reason, for example, why Borachio in *Much Ado about Nothing* should discuss fashion for thirty lines before revealing that he wooed Margaret under the name of Hero; but there is sufficient thematic reason, in the play's repeated concern with issues of true and false perception, for including the episode. So also here. Othello's ship need not arrive later than Desdemona's for any plot reason (it in fact left Venice earlier); so Shakespeare must have had other reasons for including the delay—perhaps to allow time to develop nuances of character, theme, and motive that he could not conveniently develop elsewhere.

The primary issues explored in the time between Desdemona's and Othello's arrivals are the nature and limits of Iago's verbal fluency and his attitudes toward women. In discussing these issues, it will be helpful if we first reflect on related depictions elsewhere in Shakespeare's drama—particularly in the romantic comedies, which form such a large part of *Othello's* immediate dramatic ancestry. Throughout the romantic comedies, Shakespeare links the maturation of the romantic hero (less frequently of the romantic heroine) toward a capacity for conjugal love with his becoming verbally fluent. At times, as in the instance of Claudio and Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*, this movement proceeds straightforwardly, from an opening inarticulateness to a final fluency.² More frequently, as in the instances of Helena and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, and Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, the movement is double, away from a false—because conventional, doting, self-regarding, or anger-laden—fluency toward one based on, and expressing, mature affection.

Nowhere is this double movement more transparently depicted than in *As You Like It*, the most optimistic of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. When Celia and Rosalind congratulate Orlando after his triumph over Charles, the Duke's wrestler, Orlando twice fails to speak, first saying, "Can I not say, I thank you? My better parts / Are all thrown down" (I.ii.249-50), then saying,

I cannot speak to her, yet she urg'd conference.
O poor Orlando! thou art overthrown!

(I.ii.258-59)

Significantly, this inability to speak extends only to the language of courtesy and affection, for scarcely sixty lines earlier Orlando *had* spoken fluently to Celia and Rosalind. But in this earlier instance, as in his eloquent play-opening diatribe (spoken to Adam) and his subsequent quarrel with Oliver, Orlando's verbal facility originates in self-regard and a sense of grievance:

But let your fair eyes and gentle wishes go with me to my trial; wherein if I be foil'd, there is but one sham'd that was never gracious; if kill'd, but one dead that is willing to be so. I shall do my friends no wrong, for I have none to lament me; the world no injury, for in it I have nothing. Only in the world I fill up a place, which may be better supplied when I have made it empty.

(I.ii.185-93)

In its form—its graceful, artificial, Euphuistic balance and periodicity—as in its content, this speech encapsulates the values of the opening court world of the play, where not only Orlando but almost every (male) character exhibits an anxious concern over gaining or preserving personal advantage and over repelling real or fancied assault.

The central action of *As You Like It* consists in developing its characters away from this initial fluency in a language of anger toward a final fluency in a language of affection. For Orlando, this development occurs most obviously in the mock courtship conducted by Rosalind in the guise of Ganymede, which refines his inchoate first gestures toward affectionate expression—the verses he hangs on the trees in the Forest of Arden—into a relatively sophisticated language of love. Accompanying this transformation is a parallel physical movement, centered on the act and metaphor of wrestling. Orlando's opening fluency of grievance is

accompanied by a physical "fluency" in wrestling, as a self-aggrandizing form of violence. But as Orlando's comments about his having been "overthrown" and Celia and Rosalind's later jokes about Rosalind's need to "wrestle with [her] affections" (I.iii.21) both suggest, "wrestling" is also a metaphor in this play for feelings of affection and their physical expression.

Orlando's development along this axis occurs first in his voluntary, trusting sheathing of his sword in his initial encounter with Duke Senior, later in his killing of the lion that threatens his brother's life—presumably, given the Herculean overtones of Oliver's description of the event, by wrestling with it.³ This later use of wrestling reverses the significance wrestling held at the outset of the play, transforming it from self-aggrandizing violence into an expression of fraternal affection. Once this stage in Orlando's development is reached, the way is clear for a further, metaphoric transformation of wrestling. Orlando's education into a verbal language of affection reaches its climax when he tells Ganymede, "I can live no longer by thinking" (V.ii.50), where "thinking" signifies all alternatives to direct physical experience. The play's fifth-act movement beyond "thinking" visually transforms the metaphor of wrestling, by replacing the violent grappling of Act I with the erotic embraces of the final nuptial dance. And this transformation foreshadows, we may assume, yet a further one, outside the temporal limits of the play, when the four couples engage in the marriage-night "wrestling" that is the primary language of conjugal affection.

As You Like It thus expresses in paradigmatic form a central emphasis of Shakespearean romance, on maturation as double growth, in affection and fluency of expression. Although Shakespeare's other romantic comedies depict the resolution of this double movement with a greater leaven of skepticism than is found in *As You Like It*, none challenges its essential validity. "The rarer action," says Prospero, "is / In virtue than in vengeance" (V.i.27-28). But in the tragedies, and particularly in *Othello*, the triumph of affection and of affectionate fluency is by no means so certain. The final silence toward which the arc of comedy moves is plenary, a state of emotional fulfillment arrived at through language but beyond any further need for it. By comparison, the final silence of Shakespearean tragedy—indeed, of all tragedy—is privative, the stillness of the grave, and the power of language to resist or overcome this silence is everywhere in doubt.⁴

Doubt about the regenerative and transformative power of language takes on special urgency in *Othello* because the play so deliberately turns romantic themes and assumptions to tragic

account. This doubt assumes two main forms. The first is skepticism about the independence of language in relation to society, about its ability to transcend the inequities of a fallen world. In *As You Like It*, the contrast between the court and the forest is understood allegorically as a contrast between “Fortune” and “Nature”; and the play assumes, in Rosalind’s words, that “Fortune reigns in gifts of the world, not in the lineaments of Nature” (I.ii.41-42). Although the play certainly does not suggest that all characters possess these lineaments equally, it does suggest that all can develop their share of them—their share in the language of affection—to an adequate extent, if freed temporarily from the vexations of fortune. *Othello* offers no such assurance. No other major tragedy emphasizes so relentlessly the relation between social rank and verbal style. Here Cassio’s command of a rhetoric of courtly compliment, Desdemona’s ability to be “free of speech” (III.iii.185), and Othello’s devotion to an orotund, passionate, military idiom are all reflexes of their positions in the world, not acquisitions available to all—perhaps least of all to someone of Iago’s background and social status.

The second, more important way the play renders doubtful the triumph of affectionate fluency is in the nature of the challenge Iago mounts to the dependence just described, and, more generally, to the dependence of language on reality itself. In every dimension of his identity—metaphysical, psychological, social—Iago asserts an absolute separation between language and meaning. In contrast to the notion of a “natural” language, in which signifiers are bound to, and partly determined by, their signifieds (Duke Senior’s “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones” [II.i.16-17]), Iago asserts his complete freedom to make any signifier mean anything. “Were I the Moor,” he says, “I would not be Iago”; “I am not what I am”; “I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign” (I.i.57, 65, 156-57). In a sense, then, Iago is the antitype of the romantic dream of growth through and beyond language. Where the arc of comedy moves toward an interfusion of self and other beyond the need for verbal mediation, Iago defies language’s mediatory function at its source, by asserting an absolute ability of the human will—of *his* will—to separate words from their expressive and communicative functions.

A question posed throughout *Othello* is how far this willful appropriation of meaning can extend. How completely can Iago commandeer the word “love,” that is, and for how long? Construed more generally, this question is about the nature and limits of language itself—as reference to a present-day critical context can help us to see. The doubt that Jacques Derrida has taught people

to entertain regarding a metaphysics of presence of course extends to romantic love. From a deconstructionist point of view, the dream of an entire interfusion of lover and beloved *must* fail of realization—because, as Derrida says, “pure presence itself, if such a thing were possible, would be only another name for death. . . . ‘Cohabitation with women,’ hetero-eroticism, can be lived . . . only through the ability to reserve within itself its own supplementary protection.”⁵ Hence Iago’s treatment of his own seeming language of love as “but sign” can be interpreted as an act of deconstruction, an assertion of the inability of any language—and of any asseveration of love in any form—ever to arrive at a condition of pure presence.⁶

A moment’s reflection, though, reveals that Iago is only incompletely a deconstructionist; for he does not separate signifier from signified in the service of the free play of language but of an alternative dream of presence. As Derrida also says, a decisive moment in the history of metaphysics comes in the middle of the seventeenth century, when “the determination of absolute presence is [re-]constituted as self-presence, as subjectivity.”⁷ Iago anticipates this moment. His attempt to subordinate language to will substitutes “self” for “other” as the presence beyond language that language is assumed to serve. So a central struggle in the play is between opposed ideas of the ultimate purpose of language. In their furthest extension, the romantic comedies shadow forth a cosmic optimism, a quasi-Aquinian sense that the “virtue” (to use Roderigo’s term) toward which all human expression moves is love. Iago challenges this optimism, by assuming that his own anger-driven discourse—associated throughout the play with the devil and ultimate evil—can successfully simulate all forms of loving expression. If he is right, then the teleological authority of the comedies will be overthrown, and anger will replace love as the goal (and motive) of human discourse. This possibility is at the heart of the play’s tragic questioning. Which is it, the play seems to ask—fluency in anger or fluency in love—whereto we see in all things language tends?

II

The issues broached above are joined with full force for the first time in *Othello* in the exchange between Desdemona and Iago now awaiting discussion. The episode results in intense temporary discomfiture for Iago, by momentarily exposing the inability of his manipulative rhetoric fully to masquerade as a language of

affection; but it does so at no little cost, for it also increases the virulence of his rage and settles that rage for the first time on Desdemona as its object. Interestingly, the episode begins with byplay centered on issues of social status, speech, and silence. Cassio's condescending explanation to Iago, that his "bold show of courtesy" in kissing Emilia is an effect of his "breeding" (II.i.98-99), assumes Iago's ignorance of this style of greeting; while Iago's reply—"Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough" (II.i.100-102)—shifts attention from his presumed lack of social poise to Emilia's supposed facility at angry speech. And his next statement briefly adumbrates a privative view of the relation between speech and silence, by claiming that even Emilia's silence expresses anger, because when "she puts her tongue a little in her heart," still she "chides with thinking" (II.i.106-107).⁸

This byplay, if bumptious, is yet harmless. But the episode begins to reveal its darker purpose when Desdemona asks, first, "What wouldst write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?" and, later, "But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed—one that in the authority of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?" (II.i.117, 144-47). The distinctiveness of the situation Desdemona here creates deserves emphasis. In posing her challenges, Desdemona places Iago in a situation he encounters nowhere else in the play, of being required to express affection at someone else's request. Further, she makes two assumptions, neither remarkable were her audience anyone other than Iago. The wit game she proposes is essentially a courtly pastime, like the word games in *Love's Labor's Lost*, the wit combats in *Much Ado About Nothing*, or the game of substantives and adjectives in Ben Jonson's *Cynthia's Revels*. But Desdemona assumes, in a fashion consistent with her boundary-dissolving ability to fall in love with Othello, that anyone, even a déclassé professional soldier like Iago, must command a sufficiently genuine language of affection to allow him or her to play the game adequately. And she also assumes that everyone, even Iago, would agree that the putative object of this affectionate language, a "deserving woman," must indeed exist.

In the face of both assumptions, Iago fails abjectly. Shakespeare underscores the first failure—Iago's lack of command of a genuine language of affection—by placing his comments midway between Cassio's and Othello's speeches of greeting to Desdemona. As an example of a language of affection, neither Cassio's nor Othello's speech is unproblematic. Cassio's "Hail to thee, lady! and the

grace of heaven, / Before, behind thee, and on every hand, /
Enwheel thee round!" (II.i.85-87) hovers on the edge of
rodomontade, as does his earlier description of Desdemona as

a maid
That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th' essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.

(II.i.61-65)

And Othello's speech beginning "It gives me wonder great as my
content / To see you here before me" (II.i.183-84) displays, as
many commentators have observed, a disturbing tendency to link
thoughts of love with thoughts of death. But however problematic
these speeches may be, both surely highlight the stylistic
inadequacies of Iago's severely end-stopped rhymed couplets. In
comparison to Cassio's fluid, if florid, expansiveness and Othello's
overflowing intensity of emotion, Iago's brief, labored couplets
indeed resemble, as he himself says, "birdlime" plucked "from
frieze" (II.i.126).

That Iago is resentfully aware of the failure of his language to
equal Cassio's and Othello's is evident from his reaction after the
exchange with Desdemona ends. In his first aside, spoken before
Othello's entry, Iago tries to repair the damage his self-esteem has
suffered by demeaning Cassio's "courtesy": "Ay, well said,
whisper. . . . You say true, 'tis so indeed" (II.i.167-71). As his slightly
later characterization of Cassio as "a knave very voluble" (II.i.238)
suggests, Iago here engages in sour-grapes social criticism, seeking
to diminish Cassio's language of affection to the level of a mere
courtly affectation, a way of "play[ing] the sir" (II.i.174). And after
Othello speaks, Iago engages in a similar fury of denial. His initial
response—"O, you are well tun'd now! / But I'll set down the pegs
that make this music, / As honest as I am" (II.i.199-201)—
acknowledges that he has just heard "music," even while promising
to transform this harmony into discord. But within twenty lines,
Iago closes off even this slight amount of acknowledgement of the
genuineness of Othello's affectionate language, by supplanting the
word "music" with "prating." "Lay thy finger thus," he says to
Roderigo, "and let thy soul be instructed. Mark me with what
violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling her
fantastical lies. To love him still for prating—let not thy discreet
heart think it" (II.i.221-225).⁹

In these reactions, we see an essential dynamic of Iago's character at work—a momentary recognition of inadequacy, followed by anger, followed by denial. This same dynamic operates, even more vehemently, in Iago's reactions to Desdemona. In all his responses to Desdemona's question "Come, how wouldst thou praise me?" (II.i.124) he belies her second assumption that everyone *must* believe in the existence of truly deserving women. His comments on women "fair and wise," "black and witty," "fair and foolish," and "foul and foolish" all assume the existence of a ubiquitous female manipulative intention similar to his own: "fairness and wit, / The one's for use, the other useth it" (II.i.129-30). And his response to Desdemona's final request, for praise of "a deserving woman indeed," belies her assumption directly, by elaborating an apparently positive description for twelve lines, only to conclude that the woman so described would be suited merely "to suckle fools and chronicle small beer" (II.i.160).

Yet the disproof of this misogyny stands listening even as Iago speaks. Desdemona's speeches throughout this scene are too brief to constitute a distinctive language of affection. But the comment she makes in response to Othello's "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy" (II.i.189-90) is nonetheless significant. "The heavens forbid," she says, "But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow!" (II.i.193-95). In emphasizing duration (in contrast to Othello's "content so absolute") and in coupling "loves" with "comforts," Desdemona invokes an image of marriage (and of wives) directly opposed to the one Iago has just offered. This image is fully consistent with her behavior elsewhere in the play. Perhaps more than any other character in Shakespeare, Desdemona envisions quotidian marriage as a proper arena for the achievement of human happiness. Frank in laying claim to the "rites" of marriage, eager to advise her husband to "wear [his] gloves, / Or feed on nourishing dishes" (III.iii.77-78), vehement "to the last article" (III.iii.22) in advancing the cause of friendship, capable of using the word "love" in reference to every other major character in the play, she is the "deserving woman indeed," imagined as wife, that Iago fails to praise. (She is even this woman revised in one crucial regard, for she presumably would not find suckling a child or keeping household accounts unworthy uses of her energies.)¹⁰

Desdemona's request that Iago praise women thus exposes a limit on his capacity to simulate love, even as her being exposes the lie of the misogyny he speaks instead. In the dialogue with Roderigo beginning "lay thy finger thus" (II.i.221), Iago works

furiously to occlude the self-knowledge he has just inadvertently been offered. He does so characteristically, by verbally besmirching Desdemona. Earlier in the play, when arguing that Desdemona "must change for youth" (I.iii.349-50), Iago shows little or no rancor toward Desdemona herself. Her presumed impending infidelity is merely a convenience of his argument, a way of convincing Roderigo to "follow . . . these wars" (I.iii.340). But after the episode of the mispraise of women, Desdemona emerges as a distinct object of Iago's hatred, and his language describing her takes on a new vehemence: "Her eye must be fed"; "her delicate tenderness will find itself abus'd, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor"; "Bless'd fig's-end! The wine she drinks is made of grapes. If she had been bless'd, she would never have lov'd the Moor" (II.i.225, 232-33, 251-53).¹¹

III

Anger at Desdemona vies with anger at Cassio and Othello as Iago's primary motive in the remainder of *Othello*; and this anger, even more than Othello's warrior-like propensity toward violence, decides Desdemona's fate. Our long familiarity with the outcome of the play can lead us to assume that Desdemona's death is always Othello's objective, once he becomes convinced that his jealousy is justified. But in fact he first intends divorce, not murder. "If I do prove her haggard," he says, ". . . / I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind / To prey at fortune" (III.iii.260-63).¹² Furthermore, once he begins to think in terms of murder, he wavers back and forth between Desdemona and Cassio as his intended victim. Only at the end of the seduction scene, after Iago insinuates a mock plea on Desdemona's behalf, "But let her live," does Othello say, "Damn her, lewd minx! . . . / . . . I will withdraw / To furnish me with some swift means of death / For the fair devil" (III.iii.475-79). And later, whenever Othello again wavers, Iago works to rekindle and refocus his anger. "Nay, you must forget that," he says, when Othello says, "A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman!"; "Nay, that's not your way" (IV.i.178-86).

Yet however hard Iago works to destroy Desdemona, his ultimate objective seems less her death than her and Othello's silence. As many have noted, Iago's seduction of Othello redefines certain key terms, so that "wisdom" comes to mean "suspicion"; "love," "folly"; "honor," "reputation"; and so forth.¹³ These redefinitions constitute an extended act of revenge for the discomfiture Iago suffers during the Act II interlude with Desdemona. They conduct Othello down a ladder of verbal facility, from the romantic

grandeur and openness of "It gives me wonder great as my content / To see you here before me" to an Iago-like angry vehemence. "It is not words that shakes me thus," says Othello with unconscious irony, at the moment when he descends most fully into this Iagoesque language: "Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!" (IV.i.41-43).

As with Othello, so with Desdemona. There is no sense given in the play that Iago particularly wants Othello dead. He would presumably allow Othello to live indefinitely in torment, were this possible. But Othello's nobleness of manner combines with Desdemona's beauty and virtue to cause him to ascend repeatedly (if only momentarily) back *up* the ladder of language, toward the sort of fluency in affection he had commanded before his jealousy was aroused. "Hang her, I do but say what she is. So delicate with her needle! an admirable musician! O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear. Of so high and plenteous wit and invention!" (IV.i.187-90). Hence Iago can only ensure Othello's continuation in torment by destroying the provocation of his momentary ascents out of it—by destroying, that is, Desdemona.

So from a double motive, Iago arrives at the speech in which he makes his only direct demand for Desdemona's death: "Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.i.207-208). Othello's reply—"Good, good; the justice of it pleases"—responds to only one dimension of Iago's twisted symbolic logic, by seeing in the proposed site for Desdemona's death the "justice" of a punishment that fits the crime.¹⁴ But in the terms we are pursuing here, Iago's proposal reveals further resonances. His substitution of a direct physical form of murder for Othello's poison suggests a grisly reversal of *As You Like It's* paradigmatic romance plot, wherein violent wrestling is transformed into erotic "wrestling." Similarly, his call for death by strangulation suggests a direct assault on Desdemona's voice, as if silencing her would destroy not only her capacity for affectionate speech but her ability to provoke this sort of speech in Othello. And we may if we wish also understand this call for strangulation as internal—as an attempt by Iago to silence the Desdemona *inside* himself, the voice that says "Now I do love her too" (II.i.291) and "she's fram'd as fruitful / As the free elements" (II.iii.341-42), the voice that speaks of "that sweet sleep" which Othello and Desdemona "ow'dst yesterday" (III.iii.332-33).¹⁵

Thinking of the murder of Desdemona as an act of attempted silencing gives particular salience to the odd sequence of her death, in which she "dies," revives, speaks, and dies again. Speech from beyond the grave—from beyond, that is, the foreknowledge

of death—is a repeated motif in the conclusions of Shakespeare's major tragedies. One thinks, for example, of Hamlet's, Antony's, and Cleopatra's death speeches, all of which are spoken from within a certain knowledge of impending death. Or in a different vein, one thinks of Lear's urgent claim that he has heard the dead Cordelia speak. All these speeches mitigate our sense of tragic woe. They affirm the triumph of life over death, even in the most extreme moment of tragic loss, by demonstrating their speakers' continued concern with the affairs of life. Only the fear of something after death keeps one alive, says Hamlet in the midst of his suicidal world-weariness; but at the time of his actual death, as he says, "I am dead, Horatio," his attention turns back urgently toward life and the affairs of the world—toward his concern that his story be told "aright" and that the nomination for king come to Fortinbras (V.ii.333, 339).

The conclusion of *Othello* tests in the sharpest possible way this power of tragic affirmation. Some years ago, G.R. Hibbard described *Othello* as a "play of contraction." The central actions of the other major tragedies, Hibbard argued, expand outward, gaining in social and metaphysical amplitude as they develop. "Is this the promis'd end?" asks Kent; "Or image of that horror?" replies Edgar (V.iii.264-65). But *Othello* narrows as it advances, moving from the relative amplitude of the opening concern with the "wars against the Ottomites" (I.iii.234) to the closing "tragic loading of this bed" (V.ii.363). The goal of this movement—in a sense, of all of the second half of the play—is silence: Desdemona dead, Emilia dead, Roderigo dead, Othello dead, Iago promising that "From this time forth [he] never will speak word" (V.ii.304). As Hibbard says, the surviving characters contribute to this silence, as if thereby avoiding something "monstrous and obscene." "There is no formal praise of the hero," he says; "no interpretation of the events that have led up to the disaster is given, or even promised. Faced with actions which they find shocking and unintelligible, the surviving characters seek, with a haste that is almost indecent, to put them out of sight and out of mind."¹⁶

Yet poised against this pervasive silence is some amount at least of tragic affirmation. In two instances, first with Desdemona, then with Emilia, Shakespeare allows speech in the service of love to emerge from certain death. "Unkindness may do much," says Desdemona earlier in the play, "And his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love" (IV.ii.159-61). Indeed so. For when Desdemona revives momentarily, she attempts to divert blame from Othello, answering Emilia's "O, who hath done this deed" with "Nobody; I myself" (V.ii.123-24). And as if to

underscore the significance of this affirmation (and to remove from it any imputation of mere submission to male authority), Shakespeare repeats it later in the scene, when Emilia struggles, against Iago's resistance, to state the truth about Desdemona's murder. When Emilia persists, affirming her intention to "speak as liberal as the north" (V.ii.220), Iago stabs her; then she too speaks from beyond the grave. Already "kill'd," as Gratiano twice says, she speaks a death speech associating language with music, love, and bliss:

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan,
 And die in music. [*Sings.*] "Willow, willow, willow."
 Moor, she was chaste; she lov'd thee, cruel Moor;
 So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;
 So speaking as I think, alas, I die.

(V.ii.247-51)

Considered as a response to these speeches, Iago's "From this time forth I never will speak word" displays a grim inevitability. By all evidence, Iago has been a slyly tyrannous husband to Emilia, as if to gain thereby a modicum of compensation for his sense of social and psychic inadequacy.¹⁷ When Emilia rebels against this tyranny, saying "'Tis proper I obey him; but not now" (V.ii.196), Iago's social resentment, misogyny, and desire to silence the language of affection emerge once more, this time in ironic diminuendo. From the moment he acknowledges his deception of Othello to when he stabs Emilia, Iago speaks six speeches, none longer than a line. These begin as reiterated attempts to silence Emilia by imposing upon her his husbandly authority: "Go to, charm your tongue"; "I charge you get you home"; "'Zounds, hold your peace"; "Be wise, and get you home" (V.ii.183, 194, 219, 223). When these efforts fail, there follow two brief speeches distilling to its essence Iago's entire method of assault on Desdemona, and on women in general: "Villainous whore!" he says to his own wife; "Filth, thou liest!" (V.ii.229, 231). Then Emilia responds, "By heaven, I do not, I do not, gentlemen" (V.ii.232), and the play moves beyond Iago's calumny to her final speech, in which she speaks truth, and dies.

Thus defeated a second time, what further silence can Iago seek to impose, except upon himself? His characteristic movement, from awareness of inadequacy to anger to denial, here reaches its logical conclusion, in a denial so complete that it blocks access even to a language formed from pain or anger. Here at last, it would seem, Iago has found a fully invulnerable way of repudiating

the language of affection as present in the world and latent in himself. And this repudiation might also seem to prevail over all the play's attempts at affirmation, to be Shakespeare's final statement about the relative power of love and anger, speech and silence. For even the play's one remaining attempt to articulate the power of love, Othello's death speech, ends in silence. And Lodovico's and Gratiano's responses to that speech—"O bloody period!" and "All that is spoke is marr'd" (V.ii.357)—resonate beyond their immediate context, suggesting an indictment of language itself, as tragically incapable of encompassing the pain of experience.

Yet we should not conclude too quickly that Iago's retreat into silence succeeds, or that it completely overrides the play's gestures of tragic affirmation. Iago's attempt to subordinate language to the power of will is directed at language's expressive (as well as its communicative) dimension. He not only believes that he can "show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign" (I.i.156-57), he believes that he can perfectly conceal the anger out of which this hypocrisy arises. So also with his final silence. His promise that "From this time forth [he] never will speak word" (V.ii.304) is a last attempt to impose an entirely willed meaning on an act of communication, in this instance on one that is gestural rather than verbal. In response to Lodovico's and Gratiano's urgent demands that he be wrenched, through torture, back into the arena of human speech, Iago promises a perfect and indifferent silence.

But if Iago's effort to subject language to the power of will fails in the play at large, so also does this final attempt to impose his will on silence. This is so because the meaning of silence, no less than that of speech, lies outside the power of its human embodiment entirely to control. Few would agree with Gratiano's expectation that "Torments will ope [Iago's] lips" (V.ii.305). But "silence," like any negative term, cannot independently describe reality; it necessarily evokes the positive term whose absence it names. Only in relation to some form of sound—some form of speech—is silence "silence," and not something quite literally unthinkable and unnameable.¹⁸ So even if Iago succeeds, he fails. A tense and unyielding silence in the face of torture—"O, enforce it!" (V.ii.369)—must inevitably signify an inner resistance and a denied need. Whether Iago's lips open or not, that is, he cries out. And in this cry, this fissure, this free play of signification, we hear expressed his final humiliation, his final failure to gain mastery over language and over the love it has the power to communicate.

NOTES

¹All citations of Shakespeare's plays are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). I have omitted the brackets used to indicate emended readings. The Arden edition, often the text critics choose for citation, is not to be preferred in the case of *Othello*. The editor, M.R. Ridley, used the 1622 quarto, not the folio, as his primary copy-text, and his arguments in favor of the choice are not compelling.

²Claudio displays his initial inarticulateness when called upon to speak to Hero for the first time, after Don Pedro has succeeded in wooing her. "Silence is the perfectest heralt of joy" (II.i.306) he says, then says nothing more. Hero's corresponding silence, as suggested by Beatrice's "Speak, cousin, or (if you cannot) stop his mouth with a kiss" (II.i.310) betokens an equivalent romantic immaturity. At the end of the play, the ability of Claudio to "labor . . . in sad invention" in writing epitaphs for Hero's tomb (V.i.283) and of Hero to speak forthrightly (if briefly) in defense of her virtue signals their relative maturation.

³For discussions of the Hercules references in relation to Orlando's identity as a wrestler, see Richard Knowles, "Myth and Type in *As You Like It*," *ELH* 33, 1 (March 1966): 1-22; and John Doeblér, "Orlando: Athlete of Virtue," *ShakS* 26 (1973): 11-17.

⁴Recent commentators on Shakespeare's romantic plots have emphasized skepticism over optimism; the paradigm just described derives its inspiration from an earlier generation of commentary. See, e.g., Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," in *English Institute Essays: 1948* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 58-73; C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Context* (1959; rpt. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963); and Thomas McFarland, *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1972). For a provocative recent challenge to Barber, see chap. 3, "Fiction and Friction," in Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988). For useful, broad-based discussions of the relationship between language and tragedy in Shakespeare, see Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973) and Lawrence Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare's Drama of Language* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974).

⁵Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. 155. The phrase "cohabitation with women" is quoted from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (the topic of Derrida's discussion).

⁶Cf. James Calderwood, *The Properties of "Othello"* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1989), pp. 60-61:

Iago's style is to run up flags and signs that can be switched at a moment's notice. In fact his signs are really "designs" in a double sense, a kind of deconstructive scheming, inasmuch as they "de-sign" or divest signs of meaning in order to fulfill his villainous designs.

Calderwood's chap. 4, from which this quotation is taken, is a Bakhtinian analysis of monologic and dialogic speech in *Othello*; it appeared in an earlier form as "Speech and Self in *Othello*," *SQ* 38, 3 (Autumn 1987): 293-303. For other recent studies emphasizing the role of speech and language in the play,

see Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 64-70; Eamon Grennan, "The Women's Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence," *SQ* 38, 3 (Autumn 1987): 275-92; Madelon Gohlke, "'All that is spoke is marred': Language and Consciousness in *Othello*," *Women's Studies* 9, 2 (1982): 157-76; and John N. Wall, "Shakespeare's Aural Art: The Metaphor of the Ear in *Othello*," *SQ* 30, 3 (Summer 1979): 358-66. See also Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in "Othello"* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1956), esp. chap. 16.

⁷Derrida, p. 16.

⁸The episode under discussion here has received surprisingly little extended commentary. See, however, John Bayley, *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* (New York: Basic Books, 1960), pp. 151-61; Heilman, pp. 200-208; and Kezia Vanmeter Sproat, "Rereading *Othello*, II,i," *Kenyon Review*, n.s. 7, 3 (Summer 1985): 44-51. In the notes to the Arden Edition of *Othello* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), p. 54n, M.R. Ridley cites Thomas Rymer's animadversions with approval, calling the episode "one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare."

⁹Iago's instruction to Roderigo, "Lay thy finger thus," suggests a desire to silence Roderigo and, by extension, the language Iago has just heard. As often with Shakespeare's major figures, Iago's first sentence in the play—" 'Sblood, but you'll not hear me" (I.i.4)—introduces a central element of his characterization. Iago often plays the pedagogue, lecturing his listeners, as if eager to replace their speech with his own.

¹⁰This characterization of Desdemona runs counter to some feminist commentary, which sees her loyalty to Othello and her devotion to marriage as excessive, even sedulous. See, e.g., Irene G. Dash, *Wedding, Wooing, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981); and Gayle Greene, "'This That You Call Love': Sexual and Social Tragedy in *Othello*," *Journal of Women's Studies in Literature* 1, 1 (1979): 16-32. In response, one might contemplate what the word "obedience" means to Desdemona, as compared to Iago. Iago insinuates into Othello's mind the notion that "obedience" should mean "submission." But it clearly does not mean this to Desdemona. Her promise to Cassio to "watch [Othello] tame, and talk him out of patience" (III.iii.23) is not hyperbole. Cassio learns from Emilia that even before he and Desdemona meet, "The general and his wife are talking of [the dismissal] / And she speaks for you stoutly" (III.i.43-44). Subsequent to her meeting with Cassio, Desdemona four times broaches the issue of the dismissal to Othello. Until the scene in which Cassio is named as Othello's replacement, in fact, Desdemona and Othello are never on stage together without Desdemona raising the question of Cassio's return to favor. Even in the deathbed scene, with her own life at hazard, she weeps when she hears of Cassio's supposed death. For a similar interpretation, see W.D. Adamson, "Unpinned or Undone? Desdemona's Critics and the Problems of Sexual Innocence," *ShSt* 13 (1980): 169-86.

¹¹Iago's claim that Desdemona will "begin to heave the gorge" is suggestive. Eructative imagery occurs fairly frequently in this play, usually in association with Iago. Iago uses the word "cast" three times, for example, always with the overtone of "vomiting"; and Emilia, after describing men as "stomachs" and women as "food," says, "They eat us hungrily, and when they are full / They belch us" (III.iv.104-106). In Iago's comment about Desdemona, the image of "heaving the gorge" enacts his dynamic of anger and denial. He is vomiting his anger onto Desdemona, while at the same time vomiting away the need and desire (construed as demand) to speak praisingly of women.

¹²Desdemona contemplates a similar outcome when she says "though he do shake me off / To beggarly divorcement" (IV.ii.157-58).

¹³For studies of this process, see Heilman, chap. 4; and William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, 3rd edn. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), chap. 11, "Honest in *Othello*."

¹⁴Othello states this understanding near the beginning of Act V, when he says, "Strumpet, I come. / . . . / Thy bed, lust-stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (V.i.34-36).

¹⁵In the murder itself, Othello softens the brutality of Iago's suggestion: the Folio stage direction, supported by stage tradition, has him murder Desdemona by smothering, not strangulation. (The Quarto stage direction, although less explicit, also implies death by smothering.)

¹⁶C.R. Hibbard, "Othello' and the Pattern of Shakespearean Tragedy," *ShakS* 21 (1968): 39-46. The quoted passage appears on p. 39.

¹⁷See III.iii.300-319, the episode in which Iago obtains Desdemona's handkerchief. As A.C. Bradley notes, the exchanges between Iago and Emilia in this episode (the only one in which they appear on stage alone together) bespeak a habitual rancorousness (*Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth"* [1904; rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960], p. 215). See also Ralph Berry, "Pattern in *Othello*," *SQ* 23, 1 (Winter 1972): 3-21, esp. 13-16. For an insightful discussion of Desdemona's and Emilia's death speeches, see Grennan.

¹⁸For an excellent discussion of this point in relation to *Hamlet*, see James Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in "Hamlet"* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 55-58. See also the authorities Calderwood cites: Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), pp. 419-21, 428-31; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), p. 30.