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The aim of the Shakespeare Review at the Theatre Royal is governed by some words in the Department of Education's 'Guidelines for Teachers of English:

*the drama-script has a performance presence, a three-dimensional quality, which is essential [...] if it is to be appreciated. Therefore, opportunities should be created whereby students can try to create interpretative presentations of parts (or all) of the drama text for themselves*

Whether you’re an Ordinary or Higher Level student, this review is an opportunity to encourage you, to remind you, to ‘see’ and imagine the play happening live, in a theatre space. And to envisage or imagine your own version ‘live’ as you sit at a desk rereading the script for revision. Try to imagine the characters on the page speaking to each other in a space. See the play, read the play three dimensionally. This review doesn’t retell the plot; instead, the director and cast have selected key scenes that should help you to decide how you understand and respond to the play’s central characters – what they say and why they say it, what they do and why they do it. Each scene you see is an interpretation by the director and cast. That interpretation – of the lines and the action that’s put ‘to’ the lines – may surprise you, or irritate you. It may present you with a version of a character you didn’t expect. Either way, it is a little challenge for you to consider how you would present key moments in the play and what you understand to be the motives of each central character.

This booklet contains some critical essays designed to expand your knowledge of *Othello* and challenge you further on the play. The essays will provoke questions for you, not provide answers. It is intended that they send you back to the play with new perspectives on what has been called Shakespeare’s ‘most perfect and most terrible tragedy’.
READING THE PLAY AS DRAMA, OR APPRECIATING A PLAY FOR ITS THREE-DIMENSIONAL QUALITY

EDWARD DENNISTON

Thoughout the play Macbeth (substitute Othello) Shakespeare makes effective use of a variety of dramatic techniques that evoke a wide range of responses from the audience. Higher English Paper 2, 2014

The above statement more than hints at what the examiners would like a student to focus on as she/he writes a drama answer. Over the last four years, either directly or indirectly, the words ‘dramatic technique’ and/or ‘audience’ have been in at least one of the two Shakespeare questions on Paper 2. So–and here’s a tip–even if it’s a ‘character’ or ‘theme question’, as you respond, try to bring in dramatic technique to demonstrate your understanding of the play as theatre.

What is meant by ‘dramatic technique’?

Dramatic technique refers to the techniques used by a playwright to provoke an audience into reacting to events and characters they witness on stage, live in a theatre. The following are some common dramatic techniques used by Shakespeare in Othello (and in his other plays). These techniques are of course used in film-making as well as drama.

The soliloquy: after Hamlet, Iago has the greatest number of lines in Shakespeare. And many of Iago’s line are spoken to us, his audience, he eavesdroppers. What effect does this have on an audience – to have someone share their true thoughts and feelings? See above: evoke a wide range of responses.

Character contrast: two very different people sharing a space and interacting. This can create tension or expectation or humour in an audience. (Emilia and Desdemona; Iago and Roderigo).
Dramatic irony: when we in the audience know and understand more than one or more of the characters on stage as she/he interacts with other characters. Or, when we share the disguised feelings and thoughts of a character on stage as he/she hides those feelings from others. Think of situations in which Iago does this. We know how bad Iago is from outset. He puts us in-the-know but we're kind of worried, or maybe entertained, by what he might do. You might have mixed feeling about listening to him as he talks to you: anger, frustration, humour, admiration?

Confrontation/Conflict: physical, mental or emotional. Think of examples from Othello. When this happens on stage our sympathy is drawn toward one character which means we're less sympathetic towards another. We constantly make judgments in response to what characters do and say. In every confrontation listen out for the language characters use.

Stage presence: having a character in a scene who doesn't say much but who, in the theatre, is a presence on stage for an audience, watching, listening. Iago watches and listens with interest. So does Emilia.

Humour: think of the scenes in Othello where there's the potential to make an audience laugh. Find out exactly what might makes the humour: what's said, the way it's said, or the gesture that goes along with what's said.

Energy and action: when what's happening on stage between characters builds up to something very physical and active. Iago's manufactured row is an example. These moments are followed by quieter moments when the focus is on who's feeling what as a reaction to the increased energy. Energy has to do with pace too – when you feel the action speeds up or slows down.

Image and metaphor: these can evoke an audience response. Think of Emilia's idea that men are stomachs and women the food to feed their stomachs.
Imagine if someone expressed this across a dinner table. And listen to this ‘picture’ painted by Iago as he retells what happened when he shared a bed with Cassio (not unusual to Shakespeare’s audience). The dreaming Cassio he tell Othello ‘would gripe and wring my hand, /Cry, “O, sweet creature” and then kiss me hard … then laid his leg/ Over my thigh, and sigh’d and kiss’d.’ We laugh at Iago as he makes this image (don’t we?) yet feel sorry for the effect it’s having on Othello. (See above: responses from audience). Iago’s invented dream turns the screw on Othello’s feelings of love for Desdemona. Remember, Iago wants to metaphorically poison Othello. Go in search of images to do with poison and/or eating.

Language: strong language is also a dramatic technique. Strong language that jumps out at us as we listen and watch a scene, language that’s ‘pushed’ at us with a strong feeling - see Brabantio, Iago, Othello. Strong language is heard when a character feel a particular emotion strongly. In responding to the play be precise in naming the emotion you feel or a particular character feels.

Mood contrast: between scenes or within a scene. See Act 5 Sc 2: the mood of romance and seduction created by Desdemona and the menace of murder and violence created by Othello – we ‘feel’ these moods simultaneously, we witness the conflict. (Film uses this technique quite a bit.)

How do you write dramatically?

Discuss the play in present tense. Othello ‘challenges’ Iago, not ‘challenged’ Iago. Mention the effect or the response evoked in you by a particular moment in a play. See the Leaving Certificate question above.

If relevant, comment on the listener as well as the speaker of lines. Refer to who is on stage with the speaker.

Mention a character that has a stage presence but doesn’t say much in any particular scene.
Mention motive. In any one scene mention specifically what’s motivating a character to speak and use the language they use. Mention what a character wants out of the conversation. What do they want to ‘do’ in the conversation (an effective revision exercise).

Refer to dramatic technique as something a playwright does to achieve/evoke a reaction/response.

Refer to particular DVD versions of key moments in play you’ve seen to explain what your ideas in response to the question or task.

If relevant, mention moments of humour.

Speculate– based on evidence – what the audience might feel or think (there’s a difference) at a particular moment in the action.

Mention ‘sympathy’ when, why and precisely where one might feel it.

Discuss the play as a series of moments and interactions that you are witness to, NOT as a vague story (this is very important).

Mention entrances and exits if they have the potential to make an impact on an audience.

Refer to status, position, rank and how it might be relevant to what you imagine on stage.

As you comment, envisage the play going on in a stage space in your head.

To write something like ‘Iago finally convinces Othello’ is NOT writing dramatically. You must say something like: this is the moment the audience feels that Othello goes from doubt to certainty. And of course, the killer blow (for you) is if you can give a detailed reference of quote a line. (For Ordinary level the text is in front of you. Use it.)
The following scenes or sections of scenes will be performed and these brief notes will help you put the scenes in the context of the overall play. The scenes have been edited for performance, that is, not every line has been performed. In itself, this raises questions about the relationship of the script to the final performance. You should reflect on what was or was not included in the performance of individual scenes when you re-read the play later.

From Act 1, scene 1 (lines 67ff)
We open with Roderigo and Iago’s entry, ‘Call up her father’. Iago must convince the love-sick Roderigo that he is acting on his behalf. We gain some insight into Iago’s nature by the images he uses. He tells Roderigo to, ‘poison his [Brabantio’s] delight’ [...] Plague him with flies’. His language suggests he takes great pleasure in shocking and insulting Brabantio. Iago’s action is also a kind of revenge on Othello for over-looking his promotion.

From Act 1, scene 3 (lines 60ff)
Enter Brabantio and Duke: we cut into this scene with Brabantio exclaiming, ‘My daughter! O my daughter.’ Momentarily, the Duke misunderstands. At this point in the action, Brabantio believes Othello has used ‘spells, medicines...witchcraft on his daughter.’ How are an audience meant to see Brabantio? There’s a dramatic contrast here: Brabantio’s emotionally fuelled accusation and Othello’s cool confidence. Also we see status competition. Brabantio is a Senator of Venice, a senior politician. Othello is an outsider – a Moor, a ex-pagan – who has ‘made it’ to the inside as a respected military leader. Which of the two is the more commanding in this exchange? Remember: in this scene, in a full production, Iago is on stage, watching, listening to the exchanges. What impression does Desdemona make on those gathered and on us? What does she say and do (in this sequence) that gives you this impression?

Iago and Roderigo remain on stage. Roderigo is love sick and wonders about why he is: ‘I confess it is my shame to be so fond; but it is not in my virtue to amend it.’ Iago’s response to him is honest; he gives us his philosophy. ‘Virtue’
is a ‘fig’ and adds, ‘tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus’. He doesn’t believe in ‘virtue’. He believes that love is merely ‘a lust of the blood’. Then he turns to speak to us, the audience. At this point in the action ask, how do you judge him, how do you feel about what he’s said and done so far?

From Act 2, scene 1 (lines 98ff)
Banter between Iago, Desdemona, Cassio while they wait for Othello’s ship to dock. They speak about the manners of women and men - prompted by Cassio kissing Emilia – ‘tis [his] breeding.’ Listen for the pleasure Iago takes in being discourteous and rude. Who is in control in this conversation? Again, Iago and Roderigo remain on stage. We hear Iago’s plan: for Roderigo and then, left alone, for himself, speaking to us. Does this second lengthy soliloquy change how you feel and think about him now, at this point? Note – Iago tells us quite a bit in this soliloquy about what preoccupies his thinking.

From Act 2, scene 3 (lines 168-257)
We enter this scene when Iago’s manufactured row has been broken up by Othello. ‘Honest Iago, that look’st dead with grieving,/ Speak, who began this? On thy love I charge thee.’ We now watch Iago perform – he works up his pretend feelings of concern for Cassio as he re-tells the events. In the course of his story he manages to mention Cassio’s name six times. Look up the following words: feign, simulate, dissemble, dissimulate – this is what Iago does with his words. Again, Iago is left on stage, this time with Cassio, and then alone, when he speaks to ‘us’ again, in his third soliloquy. He tells us he gives good advice to Cassio. So why then is he a villain? Then, he tells us straight – his divinity – Godliness – is a ‘Divinity of hell!’ He uses the apt metaphor of pouring pestilence into Othello’s ear. Iago wants to ‘emesh them all’ in a ‘net’. Does this mean he hates everybody?
From Act 3, scene 3 (lines 36-396)
The ‘temptation’ scene: what's important here is to identify precisely (a revision exercise perhaps?) the moments in the exchange between Othello and Iago when Othello takes the bait. In this scene, Othello is convinced bit by bit, until finally Othello is convinced utterly and we feel he will never be unconvinced. When Iago reminds Othello that Desdemona deceived her father and Othello responds, ‘And so she did’ (3.3.209), is this the moment when Othello is convinced fully?

From Act 4, scene 1 (lines 170ff)
We enter this scene with the line, ‘How shall I murder him, Iago?’ Iago seems to have a particular choice when it comes to the practicalities of Desdemona’s murder: ‘strangle her in her bed,/Even the bed she hath contaminated.’ Othello strikes Desdemona. This is quite shocking to see, even if you know it's only pretend. Why does Shakespeare bother to have Lodivico on stage at this point? What does it contribute to the drama?

From Act 4, scene 2 (lines 1-170)
Exchange between Emilia and Othello and Othello and Desdemona. In this sequence, what's the general feeling in the audience? Might Iago’s scheming be discovered? Do we watch hoping it will? At this point in the play what do you feel about Othello? Then, Iago enters and Emilia tells him that someone has driven Othello to jealousy in the same way he (Iago) was. Emilia’s words are heavily ironic: ‘Some such squire he was / That turn’d your wit the seamy side out.’ When Iago speaks directly to us in his soliloquies, we experience his wit with the ‘seamy side out,’ he hides nothing from us.
From Act 4, scene 3 (lines 11ff)
This is a very famous scene where two women talk about men and how cruel they can be. Listen to the language and watch for the contrasts of personality. Emilia says, ‘and have not we affections,/Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?’ Desdemona doesn't want to be cynical and says she'll turn her troubles into good, as she prepares to go to bed with Othello, her husband. In Act 3 Sc4 Line 101(not used in the Review) Emilia says that men ‘are all but stomachs, and we but food./They eat us hungrily, and when they are full/They belch us.’ Emilia seems to speak from experience.

From Act 5, scene 2 (lines 1 to the end)
This is where an audience feels that the truth just might emerge. Desdemona is smothered. Othello kills himself. But the most interesting dramatic effect in this scene is Iago's presence, and his final line: ‘Demand me nothing: what you know, you know.’ He's the Shakespeare villain who isn't killed in the action of the play and is on stage at the end and exits with the other characters – to be tortured. In this final scene he spends a lot of time on stage, listening, saying nothing, watching the tragic fall-out of his designing and plotting. Perhaps the audience already know what he refuses to tell the other characters.
The theatre in the seventeenth century was a sensory experience. The noises of drunken scuffles and food vendors could be heard in the yard outside the theatre. The smells of beer, apples and the odour from the audience's lack of personal hygiene wafted their way through the open-air theatre space. Inside the theatre the crowd of chattering, and often raucous, groundlings jostled their way to the front of the stage. Although the visual impact of the play was important, the Elizabethan theatre-going audience did not go to see a play—they went to hear a play.

The emphasis on oral culture at that time meant that the audience was more accustomed to the rhythm of the language used by Shakespeare. Patsy Rodenburg, renowned voice practitioner, emphasises the importance of rhythm in Shakespeare's plays: 'Every human being breathes differently and Shakespeare writes each character with a different rhythm of breath that changes as they change' (35). Examining the rhythm of Shakespeare's language can provide both the student of Shakespeare and the actor (and therefore, the audience) with an interesting exploration of Shakespeare's characters.

Act 1, scene 1 of *Othello* begins with an exchange between two characters. The first player speaks:

Tush! never tell me; I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

(1.i.1-3)
The second player, who has been identified as Iago, has told this man something so disturbing that he is offended by it. Iago replies:

‘Sblood, but you will not hear me:
If ever I did dream of such a matter, abhor me.
(1.i.4-5)

Iago swears (‘Sblood) that he is telling the truth. To emphasise his honesty, he asks the other character to hate or detest (abhor) him if he is found to be lying. The first player replies:

Thou told’st me
Thou didst hold him in thy hate.
(1.i.6-7)

The opening lines of Othello tell us a number of important things about Iago’s character. Firstly, Iago hates somebody and has shared that feeling. Ben Crystal, actor and expert on Shakespeare in performance, observes that in the Elizabethan era the use of the word ‘thou’ was used ‘as a marker of closeness’ (18). As a more informal greeting, it could be assumed that Roderigo sees Iago as a friend and uses ‘thou’ to signal their relationship to the audience. It is interesting to note, however, that Iago’s retort contains the more formal ‘you’, which is heard as a more distant greeting in the 1600s. As becomes clear in the soliloquy that finishes act one, Iago’s treatment of Roderigo is anything but friendly.

The second important aspect an actor might glean from the opening lines of the play is that it is important to Iago that he ‘seems’ honest. Not only does he wish to appear to be honest, but he ensures this honesty with emphatic language, ‘If ever I did dream of such a matter, Abhor me.’ Ironically, due to his devious plotting and manipulations, by the end of the play all, eventually, abhor Iago. Language is a powerful tool in the world of Othello.
Act 1 has a cyclical feel to it: Roderigo begins the play with the image of a purse and the opening line of Iago’s first soliloquy, ‘Thus do I make my fool my purse’, echoes this opening image (1.iii.374). Iago’s soliloquy, where he is conversation with the audience, contains twenty-two lines. Within these lines, Iago has a number of thoughts. The end of a thought is indicated by an exclamation mark, a question mark or a full stop. By counting the number of thoughts it emerges that, within these twenty-two lines, Iago has eleven thoughts. Thus, an actor preparing for this role can presume that in this scene Iago is thinking very quickly, casting the web that will ensnare Othello, Desdemona and Cassio.

By analysing the dramatic text, the actor might further note that eight of the thoughts end mid-line. Without understanding what Iago is saying at first, perhaps, the fact that he finishes eight thoughts mid-line suggests that his plans are not yet fully formed. This information can tell us a number of interesting things about Iago’s state of mind at this point in the play. He is quick-witted and spontaneous in his planning – this is not a man who has planned his revenge for days.

It is also important to consider the rhythm in each line. Crystal observes that ‘one line of iambic pentameter naturally fills the human lungs...[it is] the heartbeat of modern English’. Each line of rhythm has five strong (stressed) beats and five weak (unstressed) beats, a rhythm that produces a heartbeat-like effect. Although it is not a full thought, let us take the first line of Iago’s soliloquy:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse.

This line contains ten beats: five weak beats (Thus, I, er, my, my) and five strong beats (do, ev, make, foot, purse). When speaking Shakespeare’s language, the actor, and therefore the audience, can hear this regular rhythm in the text. The metre is even. The steady rhythm is fitting because Iago’s
plotting is only beginning at the outset of this soliloquy. Three lines later, his first thought finishes as follows:

But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor.

In this line there are eleven beats, which immediately suggests imbalance in the rhythm. The Elizabethan audience was more attuned to subtle changes and pauses in the rhythm. An actor speaking this line would also hear and feel that something has changed in the rhythm and so, too, should the audience. The line is divided with one thought ending on ‘profit’ and Iago’s second thought beginning on the same line with ‘I hate the Moor’. Iago’s statement of hate is emphasised by the use of uneven rhythm in this line. In fact, there are ten other lines in this soliloquy alone where the rhythm is off-balance. The unevenness of the whole soliloquy conveys the conflict about to ensue.

The use of pause in the text is also an important consideration. One of the most interesting mid-line endings in this soliloquy is the line, ‘As asses are’. The spoken line has four beats. This is significant for the actor and the audience. Shakespeare uses the remaining six beats to allow Iago to fully develop his plans. The actor has time to pause, to let the audience ‘hear’ the parts of the plan fall into place. The soliloquy ends with a rhyming couplet, which consists of two thoughts and each line contains ten beats:

I have’t—it is endender’d. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light.
(1.iii.394-5)

This balance in both the rhyme and the metre suggests that Iago’s plan is fully formed; because the first thought ends mid-line, however, Shakespeare casts an uneasy mood at the end of Act 1.
In Act 2, scene 3, once Cassio has left the stage and before Roderigo enters, Iago delivers another soliloquy beginning, ‘And what’s he then that says I play the villain?’ (2.iii.336ff). There are twenty-seven lines and eight thoughts in this soliloquy. Four thoughts end mid line and three of the eight thoughts are posed as questions and one thought is an exclamation. The first two thoughts, which are delivered as questions, are rhetorical. The use of rhetorical questions as a device is a clever use of language because Iago is wielding these questions for effect only. Indeed, from the very opening lines of the play, Iago’s artful use of rhetoric – the use of persuasive language – to manipulate other characters demonstrates how language functions as a powerful force in the play.

Of the eight thoughts in this soliloquy, two thoughts are lengthy. While the actor will make performance choices with regard to the delivery of these longer thoughts, it is worth considering why Shakespeare chose to write the verse this way. In the first part of the soliloquy, where all the rhetorical questions are placed, Iago speaks to the audience:

    And what’s he then that says I play the villain?

There is a playfulness in Iago’s questioning, for he is aware that the audience knows that thus far, he has shown himself to be a villain and so his advice, while it may be ‘free’, is certainly not ‘honest’. The mischievous tone of the first part of this soliloquy carries into the first of two long thoughts. The first thought illustrates Iago’s view of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Othello whose ‘soul is so enfetter’d to her love’ would be convinced by Desdemona to reinstate Cassio such is her power in their marriage as Iago explains:

    That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
There is an even rhythm in this line with five weak beats (that, may, un, do, she) and five strong beats (she, make, make, what, list). In fact, both these lines have an even rhythm suggesting the naturalness of Othello and Desdemona’s relationship.

The second longest thought in this soliloquy, which runs on for nine lines, paints Iago as a much more devious and corrupt character. The thought begins midline directly after Iago’s last question:

Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!

The juxtaposition of the images in this phrase—divinity and hell—is heightened by the fact that the rhythm runs over into twelve beats signifying an imbalance in both thought and character. Iago informs the audience that he is performing, ‘putting on’ a show of honesty. A number of other images are contrasted in this section—‘devils’ and ‘heavenly shows’, ‘honest’ and ‘fool’—further emphasising Iago’s public and private persona to which the audience alone is but aware.

Turning to Shakespeare’s use of the rhythm in these lines, the majority of them are in perfect iambic pentameter. Iago is convinced, and convincing the audience, that his plan is flawless, as he will manipulate Desdemona’s caring nature for his purposes. The evenness of the rhythm supports the faultless delivery of such a plan. The soliloquy comes to an end mid line:

And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

Shakespeare uses a dramatic pause in the metre to great effect by giving Iago (and the actor) four beats to bring finality to his plans. In that pause, Iago’s words permeate the stage and allow him just enough time to disguise himself as ‘Honest Iago’ before his supreme act of manipulation in Act 3, scene 3.
DESDEMONA: WHITE EWE, MOTH OF PEACE OR SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SYMBOL OF GIRL POWER?

DR ÚNA KEALY

William Gouge’s pamphlet ‘Of Domestical Duties: Eight Treaties’ was published in its third edition in 1634, approximately thirty years after Othello was first performed. In it Gouge lists in corresponding columns twelve particular duties of wives and husbands. Top of the list of wifely duties is one that will undoubtedly rankle with contemporary female readers suggesting as it does that the first priority of a wife is to acknowledge her husband’s superiority. This opening duty sets the tone for the following eleven which specifically state that a wife should comply with her husband’s judgement obediently and in a spirit of ‘sobriety, mildness and modesty’. Life for women in the 1600s was governed by an attitude of obedience to men. This is the context in which the character of Desdemona was created and Shakespeare uses her relationship with Othello to explore the tragic consequences of sexual inequality and creates in Desdemona a character that is destroyed by her attempts to reconcile her wifely duties with her independent spirit in a male-dominated society.

Contemporary interpretations of Desdemona’s character are significantly influenced by the views of two prominent male nineteenth-century literary commentators, namely the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who dubbed Desdemona as a characterless prop to Othello, and essayist William Hazlett, who described Desdemona as a character entirely without any motivation other than obedience. Editors of the text in the early 1600s and the late 1800s cut Desdemona’s speeches in ways that reduced her character to what Anna Jamison in 1900 describes as a ‘victim consecrated from the first,—an offering without blemish;’ alone worthy of the grand final sacrifice; all harmony, all grace, all purity, all tenderness, all truth!’ (200). However, the
unedited text that we read today reveals Desdemona as a feisty, witty, intellectual and independent character whose tragedy is that she is unable to reconcile her ambition to be perceived as equal to any man with society’s expectations as to how she ought to behave.

The first mention of Desdemona is in Iago’s speech to Brabantio: ‘Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe’ (1.i.85-6). An aggressive attitude by men towards women is immediately introduced by the use of the term ‘tupping’ which connotes sex and violence. The term reduces the role of the female to one of procreation and, significantly, depicts Desdemona as ovine: she is mild mannered—a sheep to be led, guarded, and guided. She is vulnerable to wolves. What is significant in this speech, however, is that this image of male/female relationships, and of Desdemona in particular, is put forward by Iago, an untrustworthy character and the villain of the piece. Shakespeare uses the character of Iago as a device to motivate and progress the breakdown of trust, loyalty and relationships and, therefore, it is useful to note how Desdemona is described by other characters in the play.

In quick succession in Act 1, and before her appearance on stage, Desdemona is described by Roderigo her admirer as ‘fair’, by Othello her husband as ‘gentle’ and by Brabantio her father as ‘tender, fair, and happy’ (1.i.119; 1.ii.24; 1.iii.65). From these descriptions a Shakespearean audience, and possibly a contemporary audience also, might expect Desdemona to exemplify Gouge’s model of obedience and duty. But in his speech of 1.iii Othello describes Desdemona as an astute woman of great imaginative powers and a sensitivity that enables her to see beyond skin colour to the heart of the individual beneath (1.iii.27ff). She has the imaginative capacity to experience, albeit vicariously, Othello’s escapades; the ambition to long for the thrill of adventure; and the sense to advise Othello as to how he might woo her.
In this speech the relationship between Othello and Desdemona is presented as one based on equality of intellect, sensitivity and trust. Othello emphasises this by requesting that Desdemona testify as to his behaviour towards her and freely admitting that he ‘thrived’ in her love therein suggesting they share a mutual nurturing partnership based on intellectual equality.

When Desdemona appears on stage, an event delayed by a conversation in which she is conspicuous by her absence, and which serves to increase the audience’s expectation and anticipation of her arrival, she paradoxically conforms to and confounds ideals of duty and obedience through an unostentatious exercise of her intellect. Also, significantly, I.iii is set in the council chamber—a male environment devoted to the discussion of grave and urgent matters of state. That Desdemona enters this arena and that she is equal to that contest suggests her rightful place there. Desdemona’s speech is ostensibly one dominated by a sense of obligation to her father and husband and, while it may appear on first reading that she is merely swapping one ‘lord’ for another, a closer reading reveals a woman of independent mind and attitude:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s husband,
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

(1.iii.178-187)
The tension between education and duty is emphasised from the outset suggesting that education has tempered Desdemona’s unquestioning acceptance of her duty. Her quick repetition of the word ‘education’ establishes her as a woman of intellect and, significantly, the weapon she uses her to argue her case is logic. While other male characters tell us of her beauty and temperament it is Desdemona who demonstrates characteristics of reason and intelligence. Additionally, her use of the word ‘challenge’ suggests that she is not only contesting her right to present her case but also claiming equal rights within that contest. Furthermore, although the word “lord” is repeated three times what are more prevalent are Desdemona’s references to herself. Dominated by the words “I” and “my” the speech suggests a woman who places and prioritizes herself centrally in her own consciousness. By positioning herself at the dividing or mid-way point between her father and her husband she occupies a central point within these relationships. The ways that theatre directors choose to position the actors playing Brabantio, Othello and Desdemona during this speech reveals implicit attitudes towards these characters. For example, if Desdemona begins the above speech by her father’s side and moves towards Othello as it ends the suggestion is that she has transferred a sense of duty and allegiance from her father to her husband but the movement also suggests that she has also subsumed her will to his. By not gravitating towards either man but remaining central on the stage Desdemona remains an independent entity. This moment is key in understanding a particular director’s interpretation of the character of Desdemona and is a crucial moment in any production of the play.

Desdemona argues convincingly for her place beside Othello as he goes to Cypress and the imagery she uses to describe her passions are those of the storm, asserting her dynamism in her declaration that she is no ‘moth of peace’ (I.iii.251). The language is somewhat contradictory here because Desdemona describes her heart as ‘subdued/ Even to the very quality of my lord’ (I.iii. 245-6) which perhaps constitutes subtle foreshadowing of the tragedy. The word ‘subdued’ suggesting an inequality within the relationship which, as the play proceeds, reveals Othello as the lesser in terms of trust,
honour and love than Desdemona who is so much more than his follower. Desdemona is a feisty and vivacious individual as we see in her obvious enjoyment in the lively and witty exchanges with both men and women notably demonstrated in II.i when she, Iago and Cassio quip and joke on the quayside in Cypress. Here Desdemona demonstrates a \textit{joie de vivre} and intelligence and a confident interaction with men. She can receive their addresses, control a conversation, engage in questioning and can see the joke in Iago’s argument that women of intelligence, beauty, riches, self-control and financial astuteness who chose to remain meek and unassertive are only fit to be consigned to the domestic realm. Desdemona enjoys the attentions of Cassio; in fact if her enjoyment of these attentions is not fully explored in performance then it becomes implausible that Iago can deceive Othello as comprehensively as he does. Desdemona, like Othello, is no paragon of virtue but unlike her husband she recognises that to expect perfection in a spouse is foolish. Desdemona’s speech to Emilia reveals this: ‘Nay, we must think, men are not gods, / Nor of them look for such observances / As fit the bridal’ (III.iv.148-50). When faced with Othello’s inexplicable behaviour Desdemona, unlike Othello, makes a logical attempt to account for it. Unlike Othello who first idealizes then demonizes her Desdemona appreciates that men can be inconsistent, irascible and imperfect and does not expect their marriage to perfect or restrict her husband. In this she demonstrates an intelligent tolerant compassion towards her husband that he fails to replicate.

Her intelligence, lively interactions with Cassio and her forbearance of Othello’s jealousy and anger are Desdemona’s undoing. Like Icarus she becomes overconfident, she flies too close to the sun and is doomed. However, where Icarus was over confident in the apparatus that enabled him to fly, Desdemona is overconfident in her belief that her husband is as enlightened and trusting as she. What is particularly troubling to a modern reader is in her last breath, after many protestations of her innocence, Desdemona replies to Emilia’s question as to who has killed her with the answer, ‘Nobody—I myself. Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell’ (V.ii.123-4). This speech, which seems to suggest that Desdemona obeys a wifely duty to protect
and forgive Othello, even in the face of his murderous and violent rage, lends weight to the interpretation of the character as passive victim. If the role of Desdemona is played as purely modest, submissive and unquestioningly obedient this reading is convincing. However, if the actor playing the part of Desdemona is directed to play the role as a woman attempting to transcend the constricting expectations of female duty and behaviour through the exertion of her own intellect and independent spirit what emerges is a character that embodies an embroidery of contradictions that continue to resonate in contemporary relationships between women and men.
INESCAPABLE BLACKNESS: RACE IN SHAKESPEARE’S OTHELLO

DR JENNY O’CONNOR

Othello’s race is a source of great anxiety in Shakespeare’s play of the same name. This anxiety is both social and personal, and is experienced by every main character in the play at one point or another. The racism that results is sometimes overt and at other times subtle, but it creates an atmosphere of inevitability that prefigures Desdemona’s murder and the reverting of Othello to racial stereotypes at the end of the play. This essay will consider Othello’s blackness in two main ways in the text: first, as a form of monstrosity that is feared on a social level; and second, as an important part of Othello’s inferiority complex. It will argue, ultimately, that Othello’s blackness is vital in understanding his susceptibility to Iago’s manipulation in the play, and his subsequent attitude and behaviour towards his wife, Desdemona.

As the play begins, Iago gives voice to his bitter jealousy over Cassio’s appointment as Othello’s lieutenant, and at the end of his first speech, calls Othello ‘his Moorship’. This first direct reference to his superior should be imbued with respect and perhaps, knowing Othello’s formidable reputation, some fear. Rather, it both closely resembles such a reference (as it puns on the title of lordship) and is a blatant subversion of it. Othello is denied the possibility of being referred to in the same way as a white man of his rank and instead is identified by his skin colour and the negative racial stereotypes that are associated with it. It is notable also that none of the characters present in the first scene (Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio) refer to Othello by his name here. Instead, he is ‘thicklips’, ‘an old black ram’, ‘a Barbery horse’ and ‘a lascivious Moor’. Iago also implies that Othello is a ‘devil’ (Act 1, scene 1).
Thus, Shakespeare sets the scene for what is to come: a play about manipulation and the thirst for power, whose main dramatic turning points are facilitated through the exploitation of ingrained anxieties over race.

So what are these anxieties? Brabantio is called upon by Iago in this first, vital scene, in order to put the wheels of hatred and suspicion in motion. Iago’s speech about Othello is founded in the social fear about miscegenation, i.e. the coupling or marrying of two people of different races. His use of language is very clever here: by suggesting to Brabantio that his house is being robbed, he creates a sudden atmosphere of panic and gains Brabantio’s immediate attention. He and Roderigo play on this metaphor of robbery in the following exchange:

BRABANTIO What is the reason of this terrible summons? What is the matter there?

RODERIGO Signior, is all your family within?

IAGO Are your doors lock’d?

BRABANTIO Why, wherefore ask you this?

IAGO ‘Zounds, sir, you’re robb’d; for shame, put on your gown; Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise; Awake the snorting citizens with the bell, Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you: Arise, I say.

(1.i.79-88)
Iago, a master manipulator, imbues this metaphor of robbery with connotations of monstrosity and abnormality. Brabantio’s ‘white ewe’ is his prize possession (and a possession is what she is considered to be) and her whiteness is a symbol of her innocence and purity. In contrast, the blackness of the ram is a symbol of corruption and destruction. The fact that the ram is ‘tupping’ the ewe suggests two things: one, that this union is both degenerate and dangerous, and two, that the ram is the aggressor in the relationship, while the ewe is passive. The union of the two creates a ‘beast with two backs’, implying that Desdemona is now herself becoming monstrous through her connection with Othello. If this threat of sexual aggression by a fearsome ‘other’ is not enough, Iago’s final stroke of genius is to plant the idea in Brabantio’s mind that this unholy union could create progeny of mixed race. The possibility that Desdemona might give birth to a black child is the final impetus that Brabantio needs to act against Othello, and incite others to fear and hatred. Thus, the anxiety of miscegenation is firmly established at the beginning of the play, and accounts for the ease with which Iago manages to wreak his revenge on Othello. Othello in the end fulfills the destiny laid out by Iago in this opening scene, and while offspring of mixed race are not the outcome, Desdemona is ultimately abused and debased by Othello as Iago had warned she would be.

The anxiety about race is not only felt by the peripheral characters of the play but by Desdemona and Othello themselves. Desdemona loves Othello but tends to overlook his blackness rather than celebrate it; it appears that for her, Othello is devoid of colour. In defending Othello against the claims made by her father and the Duke, she tells them that she fell in love with her husband when she saw ‘Othello’s visage in his mind’ (1.iii.247). She loved him, in other words, on account of his intelligence and keenness of thought. She goes on to commend his ‘honour’ as well as his ‘valiant parts’ or bravery – other qualities that she respected and loved. Nowhere during this speech does Desdemona deal directly with Othello’s blackness.
While this could be seen as a noble ability to see beyond colour, it is more likely that she cannot address the very thing that sets her husband apart, and certainly cannot admire it. And just as Desdemona avoids what is seen to be Othello's most defining characteristic, so too does Othello dance around the issue of his own blackness. As an outsider, he must ingratiating himself into Venetian society, and in order to do so, must prove himself a fearsome and capable soldier. His professional life is therefore a means of masking his blackness, and making it invisible. As a result, when he falls in love with Desdemona, it is because she offers him that vision of himself as a man of integrity and honour that he so desperately needs. By looking past his race, both of them fail to recognise that Othello’s otherness is solely responsible for the prejudices against him, and is bound up with other anxieties that comprise his own inferiority complex.

Brabantio earlier notes that Desdemona ‘fear’d to look on’ black men in advance of this marriage, and Iago exploits this revelation later in the play when he reminds Othello that,

She did deceive her father, marry you;
And when she seem’d to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most.

(3.iii.206-8)

Othello is quick to believe Iago’s claim, not because Desdemona has proven false before, or that her words are somehow insincere, but rather because of his own deep-seated insecurities. In order for Othello to prove himself an integrated member of Venetian society, he must ensure that he maintains control not only of his professional career, but of his domestic affairs too. Therefore, Desdemona’s indiscretion, real or otherwise, cannot be tolerated on account of the impact it would have on Othello’s reputation. If the ‘black ram’ cannot control his ‘ewe’, then he appears to be less fearsome and less
manly than was previously supposed. In Act 3, Othello quickly loses sight of his love for Desdemona (which arguably is based only on his love for himself) and seeks to uphold his honour, or in other words, his manliness. Thus, Othello's blackness and his masculinity are bound together: the anxiety that he feels about his blackness is that which undermines his masculinity, and the best way to reassert that masculinity is to regain control over his wife.

The play culminates in a scene that collapses all of the above mentioned anxieties into an act of barbarity that serves to confirm the racial stereotypes of the black outsider. Desdemona’s murder is Othello’s way of reasserting his manliness and proving that he cannot be cuckolded. Yet even here, we note his awareness of the cultural difference between them. Before he kills Desdemona, he comments on her whiteness and the light that is associated with it:

Yet I’ll not shed her blood;  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.  
Put out the light, and then put out the light:  
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,  
I can again thy former light restore.  

(5.ii.3-9)

In putting out this ‘light’, he realises too that he is now condemned to darkness, to being the ‘blacker devil’ that Emilia sees before her (5.ii.130). The symbolic blackness that is associated with evildoing, perversity, debasement and malignance has engulfed him, and so, his only option is to finally slay himself.
However, before he does, he discovers Desdemona’s innocence, and issues a final speech that is tinged with regret but mainly concerned once again, with his reputation:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know’t.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
Perplex’d in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban’d Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus.

(5.ii.334-352)
This final speech is wrought with racial images: a degenerate Indian, Arabian trees and a violent Turk are all invoked. Othello aligns himself with the Indian who is too ignorant to know the riches he bears, and with the Arabian trees that seep gum like tears. However, his recognition of himself as other ends there: he is prepared to accept responsibility for his lack of judgement and will shed tears for this grave error. Despite this, he urges his listeners to remember that he is not a violent interloper but a Venetian at heart. In invoking the memory of the violent Turk, he distances himself from a negative association with the other and asserts himself as a Venetian who did what he had to do to protect his honour and reputation. This final speech reasserts the complex role of the other in a white, patriarchal society, and underlines Othello’s ultimate failure to recognise the inescapable fact of his own blackness.

The play ends with Lodovico’s final instruction to cover up the bodies and punish Iago for his evildoings. Even in this last speech of the play, there are racial undertones at work. He directs his ire at Iago, saying, ‘The object poisons sight’ (5.ii.360) but it is not clear what in fact is the object of this statement. Is it the dead bodies? Or could it perhaps be the sight of a mixed race couple in bed? Perhaps it is the inert black body seeping from its wound, soiling the white sheets with its blood. Lodovico also instructs Gratiano to seize the house of ‘the Moor’ as he will now inherit all of Othello’s wealth. There is no attempt to think of Othello’s possessions as an inheritance that should be traced back to his natural family: as a former slave and a black man, he has no real claim to his own fortune. Rather, he is himself an “object” that belongs to the white men of Venice, an object that is now destructive even to gaze upon. There is a sense here that blackness is somehow catching: that in order to reduce the toxicity of the scene, it must be concealed and dealt with as quickly as possible. The negative associations of the colour black, and the anxiety that it causes, is thus evident from the first scene of the play to the last, and does not die with Othello in the final act.
OTHELLO AND WAR

DR RICHARD HAYES

The historian Christopher Hill calls the seventeenth century the ‘century of revolution’, suggesting that the period 1603 to 1714 was ‘perhaps the most decisive in English history’ (1). This was a period of enormous political and social turmoil, a century that included the divisive Civil War that of course culminated in the execution of the king, Charles I, and later included the slaughter of Cromwell’s colonial campaigns in Ireland. Shakespeare did not live to see the Civil War, but he lived and wrote in the early years of this tumultuous time. It is no surprise, given the context, to find war as the backdrop to so many of his plays, particularly his tragedies. In fact, in all four of his major tragedies—Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello—war is never very far away.

It might be suggested that Shakespeare sets plays in war-time in part to heighten the drama—no more than modern films oftentimes use the backdrop of war to heighten tension and increase the dramatic impact, the classic case being the famous film Casablanca where the stakes within the romance are raised by virtue of the fact that the two protagonists are caught up in the events of World War Two. It might also be pointed out that, given the turmoil of the time in which he lived and wrote, war against particularly foreign foes was a means of distracting the theatre-going population from tensions internal to the English state. A play like Hamlet, for instance, where an invasion by Norway threatens throughout the play and actually takes place right at the end, serves to remind audiences of past history—when the English resisted, for instance, the Spanish armada—and continuing foreign threat, and thus draws attention away from other more domestic day-to-day political matters. In Othello, similarly,
the threat to Cyprus from the Turks could be seen to represent for English audiences a reminder of the threat from overseas. Not only do the Turks here represent the perceived threat from continental Europe—always a worry for the English—but actually represent a threat in and of themselves; as Filiz Barin has suggested, ‘England was one of the European countries that perceived itself to be most vulnerable to the political, economic, and religious threats of the Ottoman Empire’ in the 1500s and 1600s (37). War was real for Shakespeare’s audiences, something many had direct experience of, and certainly something they feared. And these fears were enough to distract them from concerning themselves with the more immediate business of their own country.

In some ways, the wars that appear in Shakespeare’s major tragedies, while perhaps seeking to distract from internal political issues, also both prefigure and attempt to understand those contemporary concerns. For instance, the major tragedies concern themselves with the very serious problem of succession facing the English in the early years of the century. Queen Elizabeth I had no obvious successor, having never married, and as she got older concern grew as to who would rule after her. *Hamlet*, written around 1600-1601, a few years before Elizabeth’s death, dramatizes a succession problem: a king is murdered by his brother and it is this brother who takes the throne not, as one might expect, the king’s son, Prince Hamlet. The play, from one point of view, involves a stand-off between the Prince and the usurper with violence and mutual destruction seemingly the only outcome that can resolve the succession problem, a terrifying prospect for English audiences. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* similarly see “regime change” enacted and the tragedy unfolds around the failure of the king to surrender power, in *King Lear*, or the decision of a successful general to take power by force, disturbing the natural order, in *Macbeth*. In both cases again violent destruction seems the only logical outcome.
In all these examples, the play becomes a vehicle through which society explores important political issues without necessarily involving politicians directly, the theatre in this way acting as a forum for political debate. This is also the case in *Othello*. Succession is not necessary a ‘problem’ in Othello as the play centres not on a murder—the killing of a king or anything else—but on marriage and adultery. At the same time, in common with the monarchy and the ‘proper’ order of succession that is disrupted with such disastrous consequences in the other plays, marriage might be seen to represent stability and the law in *Othello* and the threat to marriage necessarily will lead to societal collapse. In this way, broader societal issues relating to order in England, and especially respect for the ‘natural order’, might be said to be reflected in the story. In common with the other tragedies, the action ends with an act of enforcement; in *Othello*, Lodovico concludes the action with a set of what amount to legal instructions.

Gratiano, keep the house,  
And seize upon the fortunes of the Moor,  
For they succeed to you. To you, lord governor,  
Remains the censure of this hellish villain,  
The time, the place, the torture. O, enforce it!  
Myself will straight abroad, and to the state  
This heavy act with heavy heart relate.  

(5.ii.362-367)

The fact that the play concludes with a couplet—two rhyming lines—is not only a poetically satisfying way for the speech to end,
but is also a statement of order: Lodovico’s speech, in form as well as in content, announces to the audience and the world that order has been restored, the natural law that has been disrupted (by the ‘hellish villain,’ Iago—he is not of this earth, the speech suggests) has now been re-deployed, and people can leave the theatre comforted that chaos that seemed, briefly, to reign no longer does, an important message in a society as intensely politically charged as seventeenth-century England.

War is never very far away in Othello. Indeed, war is personified in the figure of the hero of the play, Othello, who presents himself in the play consistently as, first and foremost, a soldier. When asked to defend himself before the Senate and to account for his actions in marrying Desdemona, he recounts ‘the story of my life’ as one filled with military adventure, ‘battle, sieges, fortune/That I have passed,’ ‘hairbreadth scapes,’ a story where he was even ‘taken by the insolent foe’ as a prisoner of war (see 1.iii.127-169). In his final speech, where he is again compelled to present himself before the authorities, he casts himself once more as a soldier who has ‘done the state some service.’ He asks that he be remembered certainly for his mistakes (he pleads that people recall him as ‘one whose hand […] threw a pearl away/Richer than all his tribe’) but also as similar to a ‘malignant and turbaned Turk’ whom it can be imagined Othello himself killed in battle, a killing he enacts in his own suicide:

Set you down this.
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and turbaned Turk,
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus. [He stabs himself.]

(5.ii.347-352)
It is clear from elsewhere in the play that Othello’s reputation in this regard at least is safe: ‘the man commands/Like a full soldier’, says Montano early on (2.1.35-6), a judgement he makes from direct experience, having served with Othello previously. Throughout that scene, in fact, it is clear that Othello has the full confidence of many within Venice, particularly his peers—they pray for his safe passage to Cyprus and seem utterly dependent on his skills as a soldier to repel the invaders.

Othello, nonetheless, is a suspicious figure in the city, in part because of his race, in part of course precisely because of his success as a soldier—he is, clearly, a man to be feared by those in power. Certainly questions are asked at the beginning of the play about the foundation of his relationship with Desdemona, which Othello himself explains as being directly linked to his military exploits. He rejects any claim that he has, in some way, bewitched her, insisting rather that ‘She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/And I loved her that she did pity them’ (1.iii.166-7). In other words, she fell for the soldier in him and was wooed by his tales of spectacular adventures. Later in the play, when it is suggested to Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, that link between his marriage and his occupation is made again with Othello indicating that his life as a soldier will come to an end as his life with Desdemona falls apart.

O now, forever,
Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!
And O you mortal engines whose rude throats
Th’immortal Jove’s dread clamors counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone!

(3.iii.344-354)

In bringing together in his own mind, and therefore in the minds of the audience, the rhetoric of love and the rhetoric of power, Shakespeare is drawing on a long tradition in English literature that closely associates the worlds of love and politics with one another. The courtly love tradition in English poetry—the poetry of Wyatt and Sidney from the sixteenth century, with which Shakespeare would have been very familiar—saw love as a tactical battle, a power-play enacted against the backdrop of political positioning and re-positioning in the courts surrounding first King Henry and later Queen Elizabeth. Othello draws his relationship with Desdemona in these familiar terms, and her seeming adultery ‘defeats’ him in the way an enemy might defeat him in battle.

Iago’s attack on Othello proceeds through an attack on his relationship with Desdemona. But it is principally an attack on Othello the soldier, or at least an attack on Othello’s position within Venetian society, a position where he holds some power and influence. Insofar as we can believe anything he says, Iago challenges Othello’s authority and power, initially because of Othello’s appointment of Cassio as a lieutenant instead of him.

Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him; and, by the faith of man,
I know my price; I am worth no worse a place.

(1.i.7-10)
Iago then uses Othello’s relationship to Desdemona to pursue his own claims for power and position within the military and within society as a whole. Notwithstanding this, it is important to add—as AC Bradley suggests—that Iago’s desire for position only part explains his relentless pursuit of Othello; ‘desire of advancement and resentment about the lieutenancy, though factors and indispensable factors in the cause of Iago’s action, are neither the principal nor the most characteristic factors.’ For Bradley, Iago is a man motivated by a ‘keen sense of superiority, a contempt of others,’ compounded by an ‘annoyance of having always to play a part, the consciousness of exceptional but unused ingenuity’ and ‘the enjoyment of action, and the absence of fear.’

The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved, secondly, the triumphant exertion of his abilities, and, thirdly, the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated. (186)

Iago clearly enjoys hatching plots against Othello, regardless of his ‘desire for advancement’.

Iago’s account of himself, early in the drama, like Othello’s is played out—in part at least—in military terms. ‘I follow him to serve my turn upon him,’ he declares to Roderigo, before offering a contrast between himself and others in military service.
You shall mark
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time, much like his master’s ass,
For naught but provender; and when he’s old, cashiered.
Whip me such honest knaves!

(1.i.41-6)

Iago uses the word ‘honest’ here in an ironic way, and indicates therefore by implication that he himself displays that trait. The word ‘honest’ is (in the words of William Empson) a word that Shakespeare ‘worries’ in this play more than any other. The word is used over fifty times in Othello, many times in connection with Iago whom Othello calls ‘honest’ almost obsessively. Othello’s downfall is that he is somehow convinced of Iago’s ‘honesty’

This fellow’s of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit
Of human dealings.

(3.iii.257-9)

Iago is less naïve, and uses Othello’s trust in his colleagues against him.

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.

(1.iii.390-1)

So he says early in the play. ‘Honesty’ one might think an admirable trait, and in one meaning of the word an admirable trait in a soldier: someone who faithful to his cause, perhaps, might be termed ‘honest’. But in another meaning, ‘honest’ can seem precisely the worst trait a soldier could display, for it suggests naïveté, a trust in one’s enemies, a failure to discriminate between friend and foe.
In some senses, the real ‘war’ in *Othello* is between the political cleverness of Iago—whatever his traits as a character, he knows how to manipulate and direct people in the political world of the court—and the naïve and trusting approach of Othello. Othello dies in the end, and in the end Iago lives which is perhaps something of a vindication of his approach to things and a signal that, when it comes down to it, it is Iago who is better skilled in the ways of war.


