

What the Fuck, Iago?

by Max Gladstone

No unanswered question in all Shakespeare beats that one. And before you point to Hamlet, he actually resolves to be or not to be, though in a sneaky and backhanded way three acts after the question's first posed. ("If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come - the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is 't to leave betimes? Let be." Hamlet V, ii, 168-170). We know whether that's a dagger Macbeth sees before his hand. (It's not, though that opens a dialogue about the reality of images and fantasy beyond the scope of this parenthetical.) We know what Rosalind and Celia think of falling in love. (They're for it.) We know that if they prick us we do bleed, and if they wrong us we do revenge.

But this question haunts the canon: What the fuck, Iago?

Most people walk away from their first viewing or reading thinking Othello's about how love transforms jealousy, and they're not wrong; the famous summation of its theme is Othello's own, from his suicidal monologue:

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,
Perplexed in the extreme...(V.ii.342-6)

But while all this is true enough, at least from Othello's perspective, it doesn't resolve the questions that burn hottest as the curtain falls. Othello, for all his tragedy and pathos, is at root a man whose good sense has been practiced upon and subverted by Iago, the master manipulator. We've seen every step of that transition. Iago's methods are not mysterious to us. The question is, why did he deploy them in the first place?

If you haven't read or seen Othello in a while, my apologies, since we'll be rooting through a lot of text in this essay; that said, let me offer the roughest outline of the plot. Iago is the personal aide to Othello, a Venetian general, consummate soldier, and immigrant of Moorish extraction. Othello falls in love with, and in the play's first act marries, Desdemona, the daughter of a grand Venetian noble family. Iago schemes against them both - he tricks Othello into thinking Desdemona's having an affair with Michael Cassio, Othello's lieutenant and a general man-about-town. Iago's prodding, scheming and general Hannibal Lecter drive Othello mad with jealous rage; Othello kills his beloved Desdemona, while Iago tries to murder Cassio but fails. In spite of this failure, Iago has committed an apocalypse upon the stage by masterminding Othello's murder of Desdemona. After all, Othello himself says, of Desdemona, in Act III:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again. (III.iii.90-2)

By shattering Othello's bond with his wife, Iago has caused chaos to come again. He has, at least figuratively, destroyed the world. Lodovico, in the play's final speech, presents Iago in suitably apocalyptic terms:

O Spartan dog, More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea! (V, ii, 361-2)

Iago stands as a human incarnation of the all-destroying storm from II.i.

And he would have gotten away with it too, if it hadn't been for his dang wife! Emilia, Iago's wife, exposes his treachery, whereupon the man is captured and held to account. Othello, distraught on the verge of suicide, poses the question:

Othello: Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?

Iago: Demand me nothing; what you know, you know:
From this time forth I never will speak word. (V.ii.301-304)

These are Iago's last lines in the play: he refuses to answer Othello's, and by extension the audience's, questions about his true motivation. Lodovico and Cassio both claim they'll torture Iago until he talks, but given what we've seen of Iago and of the two Venetians we're quite sure he'll die leaving them unsatisfied, no matter how prolonged his demise.

Iago's actions seem so vicious they tempt the audience to, like Othello, regard him as a satanic figure:

Othello: I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable
If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee. [Wounds Iago.]

Iago: I bleed, sir, but not kill'd. (V.ii.286-8)

"I look down towards his feet," here, meaning that Othello expects to see cloven hooves. And, god, every time I read Iago's I bleed, sir, but not kill'd, I wrack my brain to think of a more horrific taunt. It's perfectly demonic, right down to the blood leaking through his knife or a smile on the stage.

But that's not enough, is it? Claiming a character is a "demon" is the 17th century version of the 21st century horror novel's abuse of "sociopathy." By calling our antagonist a demon, or a sociopath, we bow in the direction of the unknowable, as Yama from Lord of Light would have it. There's no shame in motivating a villain with a shrug of the shoulders and a twirl of the mustache, but Shakespeare does it rarely, especially in the great tragedies - Edmund, Claudius, and Lady Mac all have their reasons.

More to the point, in spite of its trappings of religious war, this play admits of supernatural intervention less than any of Shakespeare's other great tragedies. Hamlet has his ghosts, Lear his gods, and Macbeth his witches - but religious proclamations in Othello, when not explicitly

mocking, as they tend to be in Iago's mouth, are wickedly ironical. The word 'heaven' appears in the text seventy-two times; here are a few things to which characters in Othello swear 'by heaven,' according to a rapid search of MIT's full-text Othello:

Roderigo: By heaven I would rather have been [Othello's] hangman (I.i.34) than serve him as an aide-de-camp. How holy.

Iago: Heaven is my judge. (I.i.60) He sincerely hopes not.

Montano: Pray heavens [Othello] be [safe] (I.i.34), which is pretty ironic all things considered

Desdemona: The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / even as our days do grow. (II.ii.193-5) They don't.

Herald: Heaven bless the isle of Cyprus and our noble general Othello! (II.ii.11) Spoiler alert: it doesn't.

Iago: Good Heaven, the souls of all my tribe defend / from jealousy! (III.iii.175-6) Iago's plan depends on this not happening.

And so on. I could take the rest of this essay listing such examples. Thank heaven (hah!) I'm not writing this for academic publication, or I'd have to - suffice it to say that heaven gets invoked with painful dramatic irony too often for me to be comfortable reading Iago's evil as expressly or supernaturally demonic. His "I bleed, sir, but not kill'd" is a taunt, a boast, but we're not meant to credit Iago's devilry. Yes, he rejoices at the "Divinity of Hell!" (II.iii.350), but his rhetoric for the most part is aggressively materialist and nihilist, fore-echoing Nietzsche two hundred fifty years later:

Virtue? A fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are
Thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the
Which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant
Nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up tyme,
Supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with
Many; either to have it sterile with idleness or manur'd
With industry - why, the power and corrigible
Authority of this lies in our wills. (I.iii.319-26)

Iago here addresses his dupe Roderigo; later he dismisses the value of reputation to his slightly less complete dupe, Cassio, with similar rhetoric. He's practicing upon them both, yes, but the philosophy he lays out here seems consonant with his actions throughout the play. He decides what he wants, and works to achieve it. If he calls on devils for their aid, he does so because he knows no one else will help him - not because he, like the witches in Macbeth, depends on the assistance of Hell.

Which, unfortunately, brings us no closer to our question's answer! If demonic intervention does not explain why Iago's such a dick, and if Iago refuses to explain his motives, are we left with an

unresolvable problem? Lots of Shakespeare scholars think so—so many that Coleridge's quote about Iago's "motiveless malignity" shuffles around the papers of first semester Shakespeare students like a guy who needs his car jumped shuffles around a grocery store parking lot in January. If we believe Iago is basically self-interested, what prompted him to take such incredibly risky and self-ruinous action?

While Iago refuses to answer the Venetians in Act V, he offers - or tries to offer - a few reasons earlier in the play. As soon as Iago hits the stage, he starts offering motives. First, to Roderigo, he proclaims that he hates Othello because he, Othello, promoted Cassio to lieutenant over Iago:

And what was he?
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine...

That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster...

Mere prattle, without practice,
Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had th' election
And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
Christen'd and heathen, must be belee'd and calm'd. (I.i.18-30)

Iago further impresses upon Roderigo the unfairness of this promotion:

'Tis the curse of service;
Preferment goes by letter and affection,
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to th' first. Now, sir, be judge yourself
Whether I in any just term am affin'd
To love the Moor.
Roderigo: I would not follow him then.
Iago: O, sir, content you;
I follow him to serve my turn upon him. (I.i.35-42)

Iago's fury at being overlooked, he claims to Roderigo, has driven him to conspire against Othello.

But this motivation devours its own tail. If Cassio is the man who was promoted undeservingly, surely it should be Cassio Iago wants to dethrone; Othello seems to like Iago well enough, and frequently protests his affection for him. (Calling him honest Iago at every opportunity, twice even in V.ii!) We might feel persuaded by Iago's fury at corruption within the Venetian military

hierarchy, but earlier in this same speech Iago proclaims that he, himself, attempted to gain Othello's lieutenantcy by means of the "letter and affection" he later decries:

Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Of-capp'd to him...(I.i.7-10)

It stands as a testament to Iago's wit and Shakespeare's that the character can, within the same speech, present himself as furious that he has not been promoted like he would have been in the days of yore, back when men were real men, military officers were real officers, small fuzzy creatures from Alpha Centauri were real small fuzzy creatures from Alpha Centauri, back when Good Works were rewarded with Fitting Accolades and before bean counters like Cassio (who Iago also explicitly feminizes, by the way: "nor the division of battle knows / more than a spinster," I.i. 23-4) received honors belonging by right to true red-blooded Venetian warriors like Iago - and as furious that his own attempts to game the system with "mediators" (I.i.16) failed! Roderigo doesn't catch on, which is fine, Roderigo's an idiot - but nine times out of ten neither does the audience!

As if that weren't enough to make us think there was something deeper at work here, Iago keeps offering new reasons for his own actions. A few hundred lines later, he closes out Act I with the following soliloquy:

I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
H'as done my office. I know not if't be true,
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety. He holds me well,
The better shall my purpose work on him. (I.iii.386-90)

I have never seen a production of Othello for which the reaction to Iago's reasoning here was not a collective ripple of "wait. What?!" through the audience. There may be an actor who can sell the line - and Iago's decision to engage in grand treachery that will expose him to brutal reprisal even if it succeeds, on the basis of mere rumors of infidelity - but I've not yet seen it played successfully on stage or screen. Nothing we know of Othello, the devoted lover or the eminently competent and controlled soldier who can stop a lynch mob with a quip and a glare, gives the slightest hint he may have seduced Iago's wife. Iago himself lacks proof, as he admits. We haven't yet met Iago's wife Emilia, one of the play's most fascinating characters - but when we do, we discover Iago himself doesn't even seem to like her much, making this motive even less satisfying. And here, as in I.i, Iago's stated motives and goals conflict. He hates the Moor, but the plan he proposes is to "get [Cassio's] place and to plume up my will / in double knavery" (I.iii.393-4), seizing Cassio's lieutenantcy so as to...Work more closely with Othello? Who he hates?

Iago's third and most confusing attempt to explain himself comes at II.i:

Now I do love [Desdemona] too,

Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure
I stand accomptant for as great a sin),
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth (like a poisonous mineral) gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can nor shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife;
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure. Which thing to do...

I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,
Abuse him to the Moor in the [rank] garb
(For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too),
Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me,
For making him egregiously an ass,
And practicing upon his peace and quiet
Even to madness. 'Tis here; but yet confus'd,
Knavery's plain face is never seen till us'd. (II.i.290-312)

So Iago starts confessing that he wants Desdemona, sexually, for revenge - but if that's what he really desires, he probably shouldn't have spent at least fifty lines of the last scene scorning and mocking Desdemona in specific, and women generally, to her face (II.i.110-60). That said, his sexy vengeance plan's abandoned by "failing so" in line 300, by which point he's decided that because of his suspicion that Othello has slept with Emilia (who by this point we've met, seen share the stage and precisely zero words with Othello, and receive Iago's mockery herself, undercutting more resolutely a jealous motivation for Iago), he'll inspire mad jealousy in Othello. Oh, yes, and because Iago suspects Cassio, now, of having an affair with Emilia (with just as little textual evidence), he'll conspire against Cassio too - having by this point forgotten, or at least set to one side, his ostensible fury over Cassio's promotion in I.i.

Reading these speeches line by line, in sequence, we see Iago grasp at straws, desperate for a consistent explanation of his own motives. By II.i, he knows he wants to destroy these people, but each attempt to explain how he wants to destroy them, or why, slams head-on into a wall of self-contradiction. So he reaches for more reasons, more methods, only to find them crumbling. He'll sleep with Desdemona - "Or failing so," he'll infect the Moor with jealousy - he'll drive Othello mad - he'll use Cassio to do it, why? Because, oh yes, he also hates Cassio, for, um, reasons. Reasons! By the end of the speech, I read "'Tis here; but yet confused" as Iago throwing up his own hands at the futility of sussing out his motives. And this, in a soliloquy! Soliloquizing characters bare their hearts to the audience. They confess, and boast, and explain their internal logic. But Iago, in I.iii and II.i, has surrounded himself with sandcastles. In this context, Iago's final refusal to set forth his motives in V.ii may be his first true moment of honesty, in this play where he's so often described as honest (by everyone but his wife). He does not know why he has done these things.

This is especially weird because in all other respects Iago is the character in this play most likely to claim he knows how the world works and why. Here's Iago offering firm counsel to Roderigo:

I have look'd upon the world
For four times seven years, and since I could
Distinguish betwixt a benefit and an injury, I never found
Man that knew how to love himself...(I.iii.311-314)

It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her
Love to the Moor - put money in thy purse - nor he his
To her. It was a violent commencement in her, and
Thou shalt see an answerable sequestration - put
But money in thy purse. These Moors are changeable
In their wills - fill thy purse with money. The food
That to him now is luscious as locusts, shall be to him
Shortly as acerb as the coloquintida. She must change
For youth; when she is sated with his body, she
Will find the error of her choice. (I.iii.341-351)

His advice to Roderigo is full of confident statements about the world, of is verbs and musts and cannots, presenting racist and misogynist perspectives for which Roderigo is all too receptive an audience. This same speech contains the discourse on gardening and the will I quoted above. One scene later, Iago's again discoursing on the Workings of the World - this time scolding women to Desdemona and Emilia.

Iago: Come on, come on, you are pictures out of doors
Bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,
Players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds.

Desdemona: O, fie upon thee, slanderer!

Iago. Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk:
You rise to play, and go to bed to work. (II.i.109-15)

Once again, the passage turns on bald statements about the world, here in an enormous parallel construction revolving on the verb 'are' - and returning to that verb in 114: "It is true."

Iago's rhetoric continues in II.iii when he describes various nationalities' tolerance of drink:

Your Dane, your German, and your swag-bellied Hollander...
are nothing to your English.

Again, 'are,' II.iii.76-85). After engineering a rift between Cassio and Othello, Iago sweeps in to reassure Cassio reputation isn't, after all, terribly important.

As I am an honest man, I had thought you had
Receive'd some bodily wound; there is more sense in that
Than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false
Imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. (II.iii.265-70)

Of course, when poisoning Othello against Cassio and Desdemona, Iago immediately and with as much confidence reverses course, proclaiming the primacy of reputation.

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed...

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (III.iii.155-67)

Iago contradicts himself here, but in full consciousness of how his statement will affect his targets. There's no grasping at straws, no confusion here - he finds it useful to adopt another position, and so he does. He presents himself as an authority on whatever topic the moment requires: on what reputation (or good name) is, on what women are, on how people of other races behave, on what jealousy is, and if you were to ask him about the price of tea he'd probably tell you about that too. On none of them is he so uncertain as he is about his own motivations, even to himself.

Nor does anyone else in the play make such bald definitional statements, or rely so heavily on forms of 'is' - nor do other characters spend so much time defining and describing the world, rather than discussing one another. A bare bones text search for the string 'tis, again off the MIT Othello corpus, shows that Iago uses the contraction twenty-nine times. The only character to come close in the entire play is Othello, at twenty-three - but the frequency of Othello's usage of the contraction spikes after Iago has successfully 'poisoned' him with jealousy in III.iii. In the play's first half Othello 'tis-es eight times, and in the second half fifteen. Now, Iago has more lines than Othello in the play, and the two of them together outweigh any other speaker, but still, I find that shift - from relating to the world and other characters to defining that world to other characters and refusing their input - a powerful ideological hinge.

Because what if Iago's motivational difficulties, and his definitional rhetoric, really do not operate at cross purposes at all? What if Iago's inability to describe his own motives without contradicting himself, and his diagnostic rhetoric, which scorns any opinions about the world that are not useful to him - what if these two monsters give birth to one another?

To explain what I mean here, let's violate the rules of Textualist Club and discuss Iago, and Othello generally, in the greater context of Shakespeare's work. Shakespeare as an artist is always in conversation with himself. He, like everyone, repeats favorite patterns, and one of his strongest is the conflict between the passionate and the systematic man. Hotspur and Hal in 1 Henry IV are a stand-out example: Hal the watchmaker prince, careful manipulator of circumstance, utterly unsentimental, versus Hotspur the consummate knight of the old model, brave, rambunctious, loving, and arrogant. (In fact, the outcome of the Hotspur-Hal struggle prefigures the later outcome of Hal's relationship with Falstaff.) Antony and Octavian in Antony & Cleopatra are another standout example: Antony brims with love, sorrow, mysticism, and even godhood; Octavian, meanwhile, sees a world of wheels. Hamlet and Laertes similarly embody this distinction: Laertes is a fighter and a son and a brother, while Hamlet is.... Hamlet. Macbeth is a man overcome by his passions; Malcolm, the little we know about him, is enough of a schemer to test MacDuff's loyalty by tricks and treachery. In this light, Iago and Othello (and, by a lesser echo, Iago and Cassio) stand in similar relation to one another: Othello as the passionate man, who loved not wisely but too well, and Iago as the schemer and comprehender.

This angle of interpretation explains an odd doubling among Shakespeare's greatest tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Lear. Hamlet's clearly a young person's play, for all Hamlet's supposedly thirty - it cares about people coming of age in the shadow of their parents, and it's told from the perspective of young people coming of age in the shadows of their parents. It's basically YA, only with more poisoning. Lear is a play about age and loss. Younger characters in Lear are antagonists, or supporting roles; Lear and Gloucester, and to a lesser extent the also-aged Kent, occupy the centers of our minds. Othello and Macbeth seem at first to double up - they're both midlife and mid-career plays concerned with marriage and professional development by means of murder. Why treat on the same subject twice? And in adjacent years, even? (Shakespeare writes Othello in 1605, then Lear and Macbeth in 1606. Don't think about that too hard, or else your brain will explode.)

But the repetition makes sense if Shakespeare's examining the limits of both sides of the passionate-systematic dipole. Macbeth's a man of great dreams, ambition, love, and personal loyalty. He's easily afraid, easily furious, easily desperate, easily awed. His world is enchanted, albeit enchanted by evil. Macbeth tells how the passionate man destroys the world. In Othello, which on the surface might seem to revolve around passion, we see instead the systematic man destroying himself, and the surrounding universe. The operation of the systematic mind leads to chaos, come again.

Iago, you see, knows things. He knows what women are like. He'll tell you volumes about women, if you sit still long enough to listen. He knows what Venetians are like. He knows what Othello is like. He knows what is the proper course to win the Moor again. He asks no one for counsel; he trusts no person's opinion, even of their own internal state. He is complete and assured in his knowledge and judgment - and equally certain that the world has done him wrong, even if he cannot say precisely what wrong.

But his judgments about the world are only as sound as the premises upon which they are based. Judgment, in the world of Othello, is fundamentally incomplete: Iago himself says he will instill in Othello "a jealousy so strong / that judgment cannot cure" (II.i.299-300), and later describes

jealousy as the “green ey’d monster that doth mock / the meat it feeds on” (III.iii.168-9) - hearts or minds, in my reading. In fact, Othello’s jealousy - the jealousy with which the title character’s afflicted, and the condition the play describes with that word - seems more like suspicion. The problem is not that Othello feels resentful of Cassio. That’s just a symptom of his abandoning his trust in Desdemona. Iago’s true poison is his advice that Othello “Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure” (III.iii.198), that is, abandon his trust in his wife and lieutenant. Once Othello regards his people with suspicion rather than love, even their simplest speech and actions inform against them, as we see in III.iv. Even the flimsiest gesture toward proof sets Othello into a rage. All of a sudden “for mere suspicion in that kind / will do as if for surety” doesn’t sound quite so outlandish.

Jealousy, or suspicion, burrows into the heart of reason, and perverts it. Once Iago poisons Othello’s mind, once Othello alienates himself from Cassio, Desdemona, and indeed from everyone except for Iago, sole other acolyte of “the truth,” then everything Othello sees or hears - Cassio’s expressions, Desdemona’s pleas, the disposition of the handkerchief - becomes food for this poisonous world view. As Emilia herself puts it:

Desdemona: Alas the day, I never gave cause.

Emilia: But jealous souls will not be answered so:
They are not ever jealous for the cause
But jealous for they’re jealous. It is a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.

Once Othello ceases trusting Desdemona and fills with suspicion and jealousy, he is left alone in the world of proof and definitions - and in Shakespeare, that world is inimical to human life.

John Keats, in a letter to his brother George, made what is in my opinion one of the most trenchant observations about Shakespeare’s technique and art in the whole mountain of Shakespeare scholarship:

At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

This is Hamlet’s let be and the unexpected joys of *The Tempest*; this is the gift of Lear’s reunion with Cordelia, however horrific that story ends. When human beings in Shakespeare’s plays reach irritably after fact and reason in their dealings with one another, they break, or break the world. Certain truths and chains of logic bind souls, and drive people mad. There is no room for slack or play within them. Hamlet’s hunger for certainty drives him to the edge of suicide; Lear’s demand that his daughters prove their love undoes his kingdom. The isolated mind uses all its tools and power to protect and justify itself - but so long as its judgment is driven by suspicion and fear, it will never be able to diagnose its own flaws.

When Othello confronts Desdemona outright in IV.ii, he's certain of her guilt: "This is a subtle whore / a closet lock and key of villainous secrets; / And yet she'll kneel and pray; I have seen her do't" (IV.ii.21-3), he says to himself, and to her face: "Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell" (IV.ii.39). Yet when Desdemona defends herself - when she asks Othello for proof she's been false, or even to describe what he thinks she's done - he cannot answer.

Desdemona: Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?

Othello: Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write "whore" upon? What committed?
Committed? O thou public commoner,
I should make very forges of my cheeks,
That would to cinders burn up modesty,
Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed?
Heaven stops the nose at it, and the moon winks;
The bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets,
Is hush'd within the hollow of mine earth
And will not hear't. What committed? (IV.ii.70-80)

Desdemona asks Othello what she's done, and he, who's at this point convinced he has proof of her infidelity, nevertheless stutters, and stammers, grasping around for some clear and clean accusation he can throw in her face. He asks "What committed?" four times without answering it once - each time repeating the question when he's clearly stumped to provide hard proof. 'Tis clear, but yet confused, indeed! This pattern of desperate scrambling is in form and seeming identical to Iago's flailing attempts to describe his own motivation, just filtered through Othello's more vivid rhetoric. Iago has transformed Othello into a version of himself, complete with his own inability to describe the causes of his malignity. Iago has begot himself on Othello's mind.

Watching Othello, we watch contagion at work. Given the formal similarities of their development, we can, I think, grant Iago an etiology much like Othello's in Acts III and IV. He was a man with a schematic habit of mind, who at some point grew jealous, or suspicious. Perhaps he grew jealous of Cassio's promotion as he says in I.i. Perhaps he thought Emilia betrayed him, as he says in I.iii. Perhaps he grew suspicious or jealous on some other day, for some other cause. But as a man of systems and facts, once he was infected with distrust he could not convince himself to trust again. Every use of logic justified the wound in his heart. The world became a conspiracy against him. He tries to tell us, over and over, why he acts the way he does. He's angry about cuckoldry; he's angry about aristocratic hypocrisy; he's angry about ethics in military promotion. He's angry, and alone, save for his dupes and victims - unless he makes others angry too. Unless he seduces them, as he seduces Othello, to his jaundiced rhetoric and worldview - they even kneel and swear to one another in III.iii, in mockery of a marriage.

Shakespeare's plays don't sympathize with the systematic mind, often, but again and again show it victorious. Octavian crushes Antony; Hal dispatches Hotspur in a duel that, when properly staged, feels like an execution rather than a contest. Reading Shakespeare one starts to feel that, even if the systematic mind is lonely and less romantic, it's also strictly better. The

systematizers win. But not until Othello do we see so clearly the dangers of that victory, or of that mindset: that the system cannot diagnose or correct itself. It sees flaws in the world, not in its own soul.

But what alternative do we have? How can we prevent ourselves from falling victim to this poison?

Emilia offers this play's answer, I think: Emilia, Iago's wife, who has seen his degradation firsthand.

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have? (IV.iii.92-9)

When our minds cannot force their way out of the traps they set themselves - when in our jealousies we poison our own vision of the world ("The object poisons sight," V.ii.362), the only path toward healing is to forget what we think we know about other people, to break our images of them as objects of investigation and to trust them instead - to conceive of them as subjects as worthy of consideration and forgiveness as we judge ourselves. The most radical and healing revelation possible in life is that the world is full of sentient beings like us, who are like us capable of fault, growth, shame, cruelty, and beauty.

This knowledge comes too late for Othello, for Desdemona, and for Emilia. But it is not too late, I hope, for us.