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# Tragic Pleasure in Shakespeare's King Lear and Othello

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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

TRAGIC PLEASURE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR* AND *OTHELLO*

SUBMITTED TO  
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AND  
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BY  
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FOR  
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## Introduction

The consideration of tragic pleasure is old, harkening back to contemporary critique of Greek tragedy. It is reasonable, however, to believe that no one, from then to now, has been able to deliberate upon the subject of delight in the portrayal of suffering while excluding all reference to reader response. Even if only implicitly conveyed, the focus of tragic pleasure is studying what pleases the audience, the people outside of the play who observe its events. Hence all work on tragic pleasure speculates or assumes in order to produce a generalization about how people do or should react to tragedy. This thesis, which is chiefly preoccupied with studying pleasure in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Othello*, will begin by addressing the issue of reader response and then establish some of the theories concerning tragedy's effects on the observer which will be referenced in discussing the two plays.

In the case of this thesis, the purpose is not so much to dictate an explanation that globally encompasses reactions to these plays as it is to present a specific perspective on how the contents of the dramas might bias their viewers towards particular emotions. It is my presumption that a viable argument for certain reactions can be enforced by drawing on evidence from the play. Implied in this use of evidence is the idea that certain reactions can be reasonably predicted to follow from certain stimuli. That is, certain words, images, and situations will naturally induce specific emotions. Without this assumption, it cannot be of any use to claim that Shakespeare deliberately designed his plays to provoke any emotion at all, for it would be an impossible task to predictably influence different audiences' reactions. Yet, at the very least, there has been some consensus of approval for the plays, which attests to a level of unified feeling toward them. Because evidence can nevertheless often be interpreted in a variety of ways, the cogency of the arguments laid out will remain somewhat subjective. Even so, the assertions

here will hopefully seem plausible and provoke thought, even if strong arguments can be made against their points.

Though it would be impossible to speak on behalf of everyone acquainted with *King Lear* or *Othello*, the audience will nevertheless be addressed as if the term does refer to a universal viewer, spectator, or observer, which it does not. In clarifying here that the "audience" and similar terms actually refer to a possible audience and consequently assert only a potential response, not an absolute one, the hope is that liberty will be given for the simple use of the terms "audience," "spectator," or "observer," which shorten diction.

Matters of specific response to tragedy must be elucidated as well, beginning with the idea of catharsis. Aristotle expresses the idea of catharsis in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action which is serious and (as having magnitude) complete... through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions."<sup>1</sup> Though Aristotle does not mention pleasure in the *Poetics*, critics have since often summoned Aristotle's idea to explain tragic pleasure. Earl R. Wasserman, in chronicling the theories of tragic joy, directly states that "It is implicit in the *Poetics* that the catharsis is itself pleasurable."<sup>2</sup> Though Wasserman also notes a conflict, "But here and elsewhere [Aristotle] also wrote of the delight men take in learning and in perceiving imitations" (Wasserman 284), the concern is not with acknowledging catharsis as a pleasure but with deciding if it is a one found in tragedy. In a final note to stabilize the idea of catharsis as a pleasurable sensation, it is appropriate to look at a line translated from Aristotle's *Politics* about melodies rather tragedies which produce catharsis. Aristotle says that people, when listening to the music that incites their emotions, "all receive a sort of katharsis and are

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<sup>1</sup> As translated in Nuttall, A. D. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* Oxford: Clarendon, 1996: Print, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Wasserman, Earl R, "The Pleasures of Tragedy," *ELH* 14.4 (1947): 284.

relieved with pleasure."<sup>3</sup> Though again Aristotle does not link catharsis to tragic enjoyment, he does identify it with musical pleasure. In this thesis's analysis, the theory of catharsis will be applied to tragic pleasure. The treatment will be justified by the textual evidence, which will show that cathartic satisfaction is indeed relevant to the tragedies of *King Lear* and *Othello*.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Aristotle's explanation in the *Poetics*, the nature of catharsis has been intensely debated. J.D. Nuttall and Jonathan Lear both consider three main interpretations of catharsis, rejecting some ideas to advance others in part or in whole: purgative, purifying, and cognitive. Nuttall falls in the camp of critics who favor the view of catharsis as a "medical" purgation, as a treatment which uses fear and pity in order to rid the system of "[t]he emotions themselves" which are an "impurity" (Nuttall 6). Drawing on various lines from the *Poetics* and the *Politics*, Nuttall dismisses catharsis as a purifying mechanism which reforms the spectator's soul and as an educative tool that teaches lessons (Nuttall 8-9). Lear, however, favors the treatment of catharsis as both an emotional and cognitive response. Catharsis is the "relief of 'releasing' these [tragic] emotions in a safe environment" (Lear 325), a combination of feeling fear and pity while simultaneously being able to enjoy the sensations because one knows that the tragic events are remote. Lear rejects the purgative and purifying theories by culling evidence from Aristotle's works as well as from a range of other literature pertaining to catharsis (Lear 299-303). The debate remains unresolved, but here, catharsis will be taken as synonymous with purgation. According to Lear, "In the last hundred years it has been widely accepted that by katharsis Aristotle meant a purgation of the emotions" (Lear, 297). Purgation is taken here to be the flushing out of intense emotion, leaving one with a sense of quiet stability.

The method by which catharsis produces purgation is one that also provokes much thought, but the concern here will be more centered upon identifying the emotions that cause

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<sup>3</sup> As translated in Lear, Jonathan, "Katharsis," *Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy* 33.1 (1988):300.

catharsis. Aristotle specifically mentions fear and pity, but in the *Politics*, he also allows that other emotions may propel catharsis when people listen to music. Included among those who receive purgation are "those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature ... and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions" (Lear 300). Earlier in the passage, Aristotle mentions "enthusiasm" along with pity and fear (Lear 300). Though one cannot attribute Aristotle's thoughts about "kathartic melodies" (Lear 300) directly to his ideas about tragedy, if one can believe that catharsis can be abstractly defined outside of music or drama as a certain kind of process, then one can nevertheless conceive of catharsis as potentially involving other emotions besides fear and pity. It is this broader idea of catharsis that will be applied in this analysis of Shakespearean tragedy, for there is a range of strong emotions that can be elicited to which pity and fear do not belong, but emotional cleansing may nevertheless be possible through these alternative reactions.

The idea of emotional susceptibility in Aristotle's work also merits consideration, for this thought leads to that of sympathy, an explanation of which underlies the arguments that follow. Sympathy is not a particular emotion but simply the ability to feel emotion on another's behalf. The idea that sympathy for the protagonists is necessary for the strongest emotional response is a premise of the treatment of *King Lear* and *Othello*. Sympathy is what forges the connection between a spectator and a character whose life is so separated that it will never affect one's own. Only through establishing an observer's emotional interest in the character's wellbeing can there be any audience response based on the events and actions of the play. Sympathy is forged in two ways: by investing the audience in the excellence of the character and by creating circumstances that are already strongly associated with certain emotions. If the character under observation can be admired or liked by the audience, then the audience will rejoice in the character's fortunes and

worry for the character's misfortunes. Sometimes, however, circumstances themselves are of such enormity that they standardly elicit certain responses. For instance, to hear of an earthquake halfway across the world that kills hundreds is saddening even if one knows not a single person on that side of the globe, or to learn that some anonymous lottery player has just won a million dollars incites excitement and possibly doubt and envy. The greatest emotional response is created when both elements of sympathy are present. In a tragedy, the optimal set-up is that of an exemplary character falling from high prestige and favor to the very lowest degradation and disappointment. The magnitude of the drop is itself capable of stirring heavy feelings, but the sensation is heightened by the audience's broken hopes for the character's wellbeing.

Among emotions which can be aroused once sympathy is established, fear and pity deserve special attention since they are mentioned so particularly by Aristotle, but they must be furnished with a separate possible interpretation. To fear for another is to dread that misfortune will befall that person and the impact it will have on him or her. To feel pity for another is to mourn the condition that the person has been brought to by the catastrophe once it has come to pass. Both fear and pity are specific kinds of sympathy and as such, are most powerfully evoked in a combination of the horrifying situation and the personal involvement in the character.

The idea of strongest response will be important to an analysis of how well both cathartic pleasure and the pleasure of passion advocated by Abbé DuBos's pertain to *King Lear* and *Othello*. DuBos's theory, as elucidated by Wasserman, is "the theory that any form of agitation is pleasant to the mind in order to free it from painful indolence" (291). Though in the eighteenth century, DuBos introduced a new idea of pleasure into English literary criticism, René Rapin and John Dennis had earlier on advanced similar concepts of passion. Rapin asserted that "nothing is more sweet to the Soul than Agitation; it pleases itself in changing the Objects to satisfie the

Immensity of its Desires” (Wasserman 288). He also distinguished pity and fear as passions that “make the strongest Impressions on the Heart of Man” (Wasserman 289). Dennis similarly believed that “Pleasure is owing to Passion” but put greater emphasis on the necessity that the drama be “artifice and not reality” (Wasserman 289). Rapin and Dennis drew from the philosophy of Descartes for their inspiration. Descartes explained passions as the immaterial equivalent to physical motion, as sensations “arising from the sheer physical stimulation of the animal spirits” (Wasserman 288). He believed that as long as it did not damage the nervous system, “the motion alone [would produce] pleasure” (Wasserman 288). DuBos developed his idea of tragic pleasure by taking a separate track. He developed his theory from the Lucretian idea of the pleasure in witnessing turmoil from a distance, such as when watching from land others struggling in an off-shore storm<sup>4</sup>. The Lucretian idea was very influential in the Neo-Classical period and served as the launching point for many other theories about tragic response. DuBos actually veered very far from Lucretius’s original idea, but, according to Baxter Hathaway, “DuBos arrived at these new theories largely because of the presence of the doctrine of Lucretius of the commentaries upon it, notably that of Addison” (680). The history of passion as a pleasure in literary criticism is extensive, and gives weight to the importance of passion as its own theory of tragic pleasure. Thus, passion will be examined not only as a part of catharsis but also as it stands in its own theory. Furthermore, the extent of pleasure shall be measured through the success of sympathy.

There are additional pleasures to be considered in the following readings of *King Lear* and *Othello*, but, as they are specific to one play and not the other, they will be addressed as they arise. The advantages of examining these two particular tragedies together lie in the

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<sup>4</sup> Hathaway, Baxter, "The Lucretian "Return upon Ourselves" in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Tragedy," *PMLA* 62.3 (1947): 672.

complementary nature of the responses that they elicit. The lack of a certain pleasure in one highlights the nature of that pleasure's presence in the other. Similarly, the existence of a specific enjoyment in one reinforces the sense of its absence in the other. Additionally, the two span such different ranges of reader response that they provide a representative sample of the pleasures to be found in Shakespearean tragedy.

## Chapter 1

### Displeasure and Pleasure in *King Lear*

As difficult as it is to identify the pleasure that an observer takes from tragedy, there is nevertheless something that attracts people to these somber plays. *King Lear* is a work that is even more complicated for it denies the viewer two kinds of pleasure that, in other Shakespearean tragedies, form an important part of the audience's experience: catharsis and emotional extremes. In studying tragic pleasure, *King Lear* is a useful play to examine, for the absence of certain forms of tragic pleasure renders it easier to understand what would normally provoke those kinds of satisfaction. The play, however, also must provide alternative enjoyment; else it would not appeal as highly as it does to critics and readers. These other pleasures also deserve analysis for they bring other kinds of tragic pleasure into consideration.

In Aristotle's idea of catharsis, emotions are purged after being incited by the tragedy, bringing feelings of relief and cleanliness (Nuttall 5). The process is widely accepted in literary criticism as a positive one which brings pleasure (Lear 297). In DuBos's theory of emotional extremity, people, abhorring ennui, enjoy the excitement of strong sensations (Wasserman, 290). In both cases, the process begins by raising strong feelings in the audience toward the protagonist's circumstances, and this crucial step is exactly what *King Lear* avoids doing, restricting both catharsis and fulfillment of passion.

What tempers the emotional connection is the weakness of sympathy that the play generates for King Lear, for both admiration for his character and the magnitude of his tribulations are diminished by how they are presented in the play. As the protagonist whom the audience spends the most time following, King Lear by rights ought to rouse feelings in his observers as they reflect upon his circumstances. His sympathizers should feel fear at the

beginning when King Lear makes his first terrible decision, feel pity when the consequences of Lear's initial error become manifest, rejoice when he and Cordelia reunite, and weep when he and Cordelia die. Granted, there are scenes in which these feelings are partially evoked despite elements that would occlude them, such as when Lear faces the storm and when he marches triumphantly off to prison with Cordelia. Taken in context, however, these are isolated events, short clips offset by the preceding and ensuing scenes that dampen the overall emotional effect.

Lear's personal conduct decreases the sympathy the audience might otherwise derive from liking his character. Lear, hovering between comprehension and self-deception, always lights upon the path of the deliberately unknowing, and his failure to rise to his potential is disappointing, exasperating even, for Shakespeare makes it apparent that Lear should be able to make more accurate assessments. For instance, in the opening of the play, Lear already has a plan that suggests he knows with which daughter he shall fair best. He announces that he "loved [Cordelia] most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery."<sup>5</sup> The contest he has set up amongst his daughters for who can obtain the most land is merely a ceremony. Lear expects Cordelia to win because he thinks she loves him most. His repeated solicitations for her to "Speak again" (*King Lear*.1.1.92) and his attempt to prompt Cordelia to "Mend your speech a little" (*King Lear*.1.1.96) show that he believes she cannot really mean, in saying "Nothing" (*King Lear*.1.1.89), that she truly feels no affection for him. He already knows that she does care about him, and yet, he lets his belief in words and infatuation with flattery convince him that Cordelia loves him less than Goneril and Regan. Lear gives words to his desire for adulation over honesty when he tells Cordelia, "Better thou / Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better" (*King Lear*.1.1.235-236) His preference for obsequiousness makes him appear petty

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<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare, William, and Russell Fraser, *The Tragedy of King Lear, William Shakespeare, Four Great Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1998, 1.1.125-126.

and foolish. These are traits which cause the audience to disapprove of Lear rather than admire him.

Admittedly, Cordelia has embarrassed her father in public, which might justify Lear's behavior, except that his rebuke goes too far. In his revenge, Lear attempts to shame Cordelia in front of her suitors just as she has shamed him. To the Duke of Burgundy, Lear says that Cordelia's "price is fallen" (*King Lear*.1.1.199), devaluing her like damaged wares. To the King of France, Lear explicitly tries to discourage the match. Addressing France, Lear says, "[I] beseech you / T' avert your liking a more worthier way" (*King Lear*.1.1.212-213). When the King of France takes Cordelia as his wife despite Lear's disapproval, Lear extends his animosity to Cordelia's husband-to-be as well. Lear dismisses the couple, "Therefore be gone / Without our grace, our love, our benison" (*King Lear*.1.1.266-267). It is difficult to believe that Cordelia really deserves such harsh treatment, because her earlier asides (*King Lear*.1.1.64, 78-80) endear her to the audience and make one disapprove of the way Lear treats her. Similarly, the King of France has acted admirably in esteeming Cordelia's integrity above material advantages, and he does not deserve to be punished by Lear's hostility, especially considering his negligible involvement in the Cordelia's defiance. The more accurate assessments that Cordelia and her suitor make serve as foils to Lear's erroneous perception of the situation. Their virtues reflect poorly on his vices.

This device of using other characters to give context to Lear's behavior and circumstances is one that Shakespeare uses at many points throughout the play in order to promote an inestimable depiction of Lear. Another moderator of passion that is especially prominent in the first half of *King Lear* is the way other characters repeatedly reflect and comment upon Lear's temperament. This handling of characters invites the audience to see Lear

the way these character do, and as the audience conforms to the consensus, they are drawn away from sympathizing with Lear's plight. For instance, right after Lear casts off Cordelia, Kent confronts him. He points out Lear's foolishness: "Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak / When power to flattery bows?" (*King Lear*.1.1.149-150) and tries to persuade Lear to "check / This hideous rashness" (*King Lear*.1.1.152-153). One hopes that Lear will listen, but of course, he does not. Regan and Goneril, too, comprehend their father's foolishness. Goneril remarks that Lear has "always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly" (*King Lear*.1.1.292-294), to which Regan responds that this is, after all, only a new development in a history in which Lear "hath ever but slenderly known himself" (*King Lear*.1.1.295). Even the King of France, the instant he learns wherein Cordelia's offense consists, feels that Lear has erred, for he asks, "Is it but this?" (*King Lear*.1.1.237), and later refers to Lear's decision as "cold'st neglect" (*King Lear*.1.1.256). Gloucester continues the theme of disbelief at Lear's conduct into scene two. He asks, amazed,

Kent banished thus? And France in choler parted?  
And the King gone tonight? Prescribed his pow'r?  
Confined to exhibition? All this done  
Upon the gad? (*King Lear*.1.2.23-26)

Gloucester's many questions simply serve to emphasize the impression that Lear has committed error after error.

In *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Cesar* (when one regards Brutus as the hero), and *Othello*, supporting characters, usually the villains, comment on the weaknesses of the protagonist, but in *King Lear*, there is an unusual deluge of criticism, which is further sustained by the Fool. He provides an ongoing commentary on Lear's folly which quite carries the viewer even to act three, when the consequences of Lear's actions fall upon him. Over and over again, the Fool reminds the audience of Lear's stupidity. His riddles to Lear in act one, scene four all concern how Lear

has orchestrated his own undoing by giving away his resources to disloyal children (*King Lear*.1.4.99-112,120-178,196-205,220-236). Later, the Fool's focus shifts to Lear's lack of sense. He speaks of the need for wisdom (*King Lear*.1.5.44-45), makes suggestions by speaking of heads (*King Lear*.3.2.25-29), and in general, is the voice of pragmatic sense to Lear's dramatic nonsense. With this character constantly bringing the audience back to the causes of Lear's trials, it is difficult to become immersed in Lear's emotions. One is ever being pulled away from Lear's perspective and being chided along with Lear for sympathizing too much with his self-pity.

The beginning of act three, scene two, however, possesses emotional elements that overwhelm the Fool's irrepressible pragmatism. Emotive scenes like this one create a useful contrast to the scenes that stimulate more cognitive faculties, for the juxtaposition provides insight into the techniques that pique feelings and the techniques that counter them. In this instance, as Lear throws his rage against the storm's, even though there are elements of both reason and pathos in this spectacle, the emotions invoked have greater force than the rationale. The appeal of the Fool's practical advice is drowned out both by Lear's passionate rhetoric and by the desperate rage that the turbulence of the storm enhances. Lear declares:

Here I stand your slave,  
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.  
But yet I call you servile ministers  
That will with two pernicious daughters join  
Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head  
So old and white as this. (3.2.19-24)

One is compelled to understand him. Absent are the wild words and conduct with which the audience has become acquainted in past scenes. Without the petty shows that demonstrate the immaturity of Lear's mind and behavior, it is easier to develop an intimate interest in his situation. Here are none of his previous, ludicrous summons to nature for retribution. Nor are there any misguided ideas of divine justice. Absent as well is the impassioned but empty

vengeance of Lear's vow to "do such things-- / What they are yet I know not, but they shall be / The terrors of the earth!" (*King Lear*.2.4.279-281). Lear has, at this point, also silenced his futile injunctions against forces that so utterly dominate him: there are no more cries like, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" (*King Lear*.3.2.1), which resemble his earlier pleas for nature to strip Goneril of her fertility (*King Lear*.1.4.283), health, and beauty (*King Lear*.2.4.162-163). Lear may solicit higher powers on behalf of justice, but he asks for petty indulgences that suit his own impulsive wishes. Lear's commands also recollect his vain desire to retain the authority he has relinquished to his daughters and their husbands. The narrowness, pomp, and self-absorption that attend Lear's entreaties malign his character more than they emphasize his sufferings. Without these petty shows that demonstrate the immaturity of Lear's mind and behavior, it is easier to develop an intimate interest in King Lear's situation. His lamentations of suffering, which elsewhere tend to be too manic, are also substantiated by the authentic brutality of the storm to which Goneril and Regan have abandoned him. In this instant, Lear's surrender to his vulnerability, enforced by his exposure to the storm, and his understanding of his daughters' duplicity bring the audience to comprehend his devastation.

In subsequent lines, Lear seems also to develop a deeper discernment of his tragedy as "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (*King Lear*.3.2.58-59). The possible maturation this development suggests also harbors the potential to inspire passion in the audience: simply to witness great change caused by great circumstances rouses sentiment. The kind of sympathy compelled by the enormity of a situation is evoked here. In this case, to witness a man gain dignity through abject suffering is awe-inspiring, perhaps even wonderful. Borrowing from J.V. Cunningham's description of wonder, the emotion is "that state of overpowering surprise, the

shocked limit of feeling.”<sup>6</sup> Cunningham goes on to describe it as “either the extreme of joy or...the extreme of fear” (Cunningham 21). One could understandably be surprised and delighted by the unexpected change in Lear’s perspective from self-absorption to a more expansive consideration. He comes to consider others’ wellbeing and also refers to his personal suffering with an awareness of a greater world of tragedy. These emotions may not excite superlative delight though because of the uncertainty surrounding Lear’s ability to retain his newly learned lessons. Cunningham also, however, associates wonder with “[a]dmiration” which he calls “the Latin term for ‘wonder’” (Cunningham 21). Admiration, at least, can be confidently granted to the audience, because the natural response to victory over adversity, which is what Lear has achieved in his growth, is respect.

This is the promise of passion in act three as it extends and builds upon previous hints of Lear’s growing awareness. In act two, Lear speaks generally of man’s need for extravagance and provokes the audience’s sympathy. His perceptive statement, “Allow not nature more than nature needs / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (*King Lear*.2.4.266), is poignant because it places his own fall in a broader tragic scheme. The implication is that by depriving Lear of his kingly trappings, Goneril and Regan are also stripping their father of his humanity, to which Lear implies that every man, even beggars, have a right. Something terrible but grand is happening: man is being reduced to beast, a violation of an inviolable right. At the same time, something majestic is occurring: man is growing wiser. The gravity of Lear’s situation inspires pity; the audience and Lear have the same, full comprehension of the wretchedness of his condition. One also feels wonder because one perceives the admirable qualities in Lear that spring from his suffering. Lear’s unusually perceptive observation of his daughter’s, or both daughters’, clothes lends

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<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, J. V, *Woe or Wonder; the Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*, Denver: Alan Swallow, 1964: 21.

further momentum to the impression that Lear is gaining clarity. He notes, “Thou art a lady: . . . / Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear’st / Which scarcely keeps thee warm” (*King Lear*.2.4.266-269). Particularly acute is how Lear points out that a defining feature of a “lady” is her extravagant clothing, no matter how impractical attire may be. When his speech transitions from man’s demand for the superfluous to his individual need for patience, he also seems to realize that irascible behavior will not solve his problems. Lear’s insight is not as strongly realized as it will be later, however, for the audience cannot be sure that this is not one of Lear’s antics to somehow trump his daughters. The intentions behind Lear’s call for patience are especially unclear because of how quickly Lear qualifies his statement. He asks the heavens to “fool me not so much / To bear it tamely” (*King Lear*.2.4.274-275) if “it be you that stirs these daughters’ hearts / Against their father” (*King Lear*.2.4.273-274), suggesting that his primary goal may still be vengeance.

In act three, Lear’s words are less equivocal and create a more certain representation of his admirable growth. In what follows after the storm episode, Lear comes back once more to the idea of patience, and this time in the absence of his daughters’ galling presence. Right after the Fool generalizes Lear’s situation to a lesson about poor judgment, deceptive appearances, and hypocrisy, Lear says, “No, I will be the pattern of all patience / I will say nothing” (*King Lear*.3.2.37). He has just ended a long rant to the storm and seems suddenly calmer, as if he has hit his nadir and ascends from it. His abrupt about-face seems to mark a turning point. Although the irrelevance of Lear’s response to the Fool’s words suggests that Lear still refuses to address his own flaws, he at least puts his own suffering aside to look after the Fool’s comfort. “My wits begin to turn,” Lear says, coming to himself. “How dost, my boy? Art cold?” (*King Lear*.3.2.68-69). Here, Lear also demonstrates a sense of himself, for he recognizes the precariousness of his

mental state. Furthermore, his statement, “the art of our necessities is strange / That can make vile things precious” (*King Lear*.3.3.70-71), again speaks to encouragingly higher-level thought. His lucid comment is a step away from lurking insanity and a step toward objective assessment. The hope is that from this newfound ability to place his circumstances in the context of their causes, Lear will develop a sense of responsibility for his own actions, for this oversight is his most pervasive flaw. Even Lear’s allusion to his daughters, when he speaks of vengeance, is depersonalized and speaks to a wider range of ideas. He speaks in a way that links perjury to murder and incest (*King Lear*.3.3.51-57), as if commenting on the equal severity of all three crimes though they are not equally punishable. The final hopeful sign of King Lear’s intellectual growth lies in how he addresses his Fool as they follow Kent to the hovel. While Lear usually treats the Fool’s words as mere jests or, when Lear is distracted by his emotions, ignores them altogether, just once, Lear acknowledges what the Fool says as “True” (*King Lear*.3.2.78). The Fool has just obliquely insulted Lear, saying, “He that has and a little tiny wit / With heigh-ho, the wind and the rain / Must make content with his fortunes fit” (*King Lear*.3.2.74-76). Yet, Lear accepts the barb, which is one of the moments when he comes closest to sincerely recognizing his errors.

Both pity and awe are subsequently curtailed, however, by Lear’s regression. He begins to lose the semblance of composure when he refuses to enter the hovel. Lear seems to need bodily discomfort to distract him from his broken heart, which by itself speaks to the broken state of Lear’s psychology. He also, however, says, “But I will punish home /...In such a night / To shut me out! Pour on, I will endure“ (*King Lear*.3.4.16-18). Here, Lear has reverted to vows of vengeance. Additionally, he does not “endure” his situation as much as he perversely seeks to make it worse. His action recalls his past manic behavior. Something, too, of Lear’s self-

absorption returns, for when he meets Edgar disguised as Tom, he insists that Tom must have met with the same misfortunes as himself. When Kent tells him, “He hath no daughters, sir,” Lear responds, “Death, traitor; nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters” (*King Lear*.3.4.69-71). The audience knows that, indeed, there is an alternative explanation: Edgar is brought to his low condition by his unkind brother, a foolish father, and the threat of death. There are similarities in the two situations but also almost a complete reversal of which relative is abusing which. What the audience knows so certainly makes Lear seem all the more blinded by his own circumstances and shows the audience that Lear has not gained much clarity after all.

The ultimate demonstration of Lear’s relapse into petty behavior though is his trial of Goneril and Regan. This mock justice is Lear’s sordid vengeance, self-deception, and false authority at their worst. In Goneril’s trial, he accuses her, “she kicked the poor King her father” (*King Lear*.3.6.46-48). There are many ways in which Goneril abused her father’s affection and trust; a kick hardly encompasses them and sounds merely childish as an accusation. The Fool makes the absurdity of situation even more apparent when he points out that what represents Goneril is actually just a “joint stool” (*King Lear*.3.6.51). Then, in Regan’s trial, Lear sets the “little dogs” (*King Lear*.3.6.61) upon her. He commands, “Let them anatomize Regan” to “See what breeds about her heart” (*King Lear*.3.6.75-76). His detached, almost medical inquiry contrasts with the image of three dogs with flocculent names like “Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart” (*King Lear*.3.6.62) rending someone apart. Lear’s imagining takes on a particularly cruel and vindictive quality. Throughout the trial, Lear also readopts his authoritative personality, which is a symptom of returning conceit and also of his delusion, for he forgets that he no longer wields the authority to issue commands. Lear not only directs everyone, both real and imaginary, in

conducting the trial but also administers commands even more farcical, as when he tells Edgar, “I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say they are Persian; but let them be changed” (*King Lear*.3.6. 78-80). All the progress Lear seems to have made is undone in a ludicrous, undignified display. It especially contrasts with Edgar’s closing lines to the scene, in which he reflects, “How light and portable my pain seems now / When that which makes me bend makes the King bow / He childed as I fathered” (*King Lear*.3.6.107-109). Here, Edgar demonstrates all the perspective, reason, and maturity that seem to have escaped Lear. Sympathy for Lear, with its pity, admiration, and potential to evoke fear, ebb. As mad Lear replaces temperate Lear, the audience feels that Lear has lost out against his tragedy.

Then, when the audience has already progressed far into Lear’s tale and has just witnessed his fall to madness, the play is brought to the very beginning of consequences Gloucester will suffer for putting his trust in the wrong son, the scene in which the earl loses his eyes. This switch seems to take the audience almost back through time, driving distance between the audience and King Lear not only through a shift of characters but also through a change of placement in the tragic tale. Further differences between Lear and Gloucester also ask the observer to consider Lear’s tragedy with a more critical perspective. Although betrayed, like Lear, by his offspring, Gloucester is punished in a much more corporeal and gruesome manner. Also, while Lear is surrounded by loyal followers who would prevent him from ruining himself and who try to ameliorate his situation, Gloucester has fewer resources. Although Gloucester’s decision to persecute Edgar is obviously foolish, he has fewer reasons to distrust Edmund than Lear has to distrust Regan and Goneril because Gloucester lacks the benefit of others’ opinions. Also, Gloucester is persecuted not as a direct consequence of turning away his trustworthy child and rewarding his treacherous son. He is punished because he attempts to succor King Lear,

which is a charitable, loyal cause. That his eyes are to be put out because of it is a punishment that neither he nor the servant who defends Gloucester can prevent, whereas King Lear can act to minimize his suffering. The presentation of Gloucester's circumstances contrasts against the presentation of King Lear's. As Gloucester's misbehavior is minimized, King Lear's seem more prominent, and as Gloucester's circumstances seem more pitiable, King Lear's seem less so.

Gloucester and King Lear are also foils for each other in how they react to their falls, with a major distinction between the two being that Lear suffers comparatively mild physical distress but exacerbates both his own and his company's suffering by indulging in his self-pity. Gloucester's thoughts of suicide can also be construed as a kind of self-pity, but he never seems to lose his grasp upon reality so wholly that he fails to consider others or their opinions. As a dramatic character, Gloucester is not nearly Lear's equal. His role is much smaller, but his actions are vivid and detailed enough to deserve attention. The understatement of his role in the play also limits how deeply the audience is able to delve into his emotions, but this quietness is complemented by his own lack of emotional investment in himself compared to Lear. Hence, one comes to associate Lear's greater role with his greater penchant for histrionics, a somewhat demeaning trait, and Gloucester's less significant role with his more humble character, a more endearing trait, which is slightly marred by the darkness of his reoccurring desire to commit suicide.

Upon learning that Edmund betrayed him, Gloucester cries, "Oh my follies! Then Edgar was abused / Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him" (*King Lear*.3.7.92-93). He focuses on his own mistakes and hopes the best for Edgar. Lear also acknowledges his mistakes, as when he says, "Woe, that too late repents" (*King Lear*.1.4.264) upon realizing that Goneril will not accommodate him. Then, later, he also states, "I did her wrong" (*King Lear*.1.5.25), referring to

Cordelia. Both these statements, however, are oblique compared to Gloucester's, and Lear tends to focus on punishing his wicked daughters while Gloucester tends to think more about repairing relations with his wronged son. Also, the first words Gloucester speaks after being led out of his house are for the benefit of his servant. He commands his helper, "Away, get thee away; good friend, be gone / Thy comforts can do me no good at all / Thee they may hurt" (*King Lear*.4.1.15-17). Gloucester fears that the servant will be punished for assisting him and sends him off, even though he cannot see. Gloucester's concern is for others rather than himself.

When Gloucester and Lear meet on the heath, they represent themselves best. On the one hand, Lear is completely mad, adorned with weeds, and believes himself "every inch a king" (*King Lear*.4.6.109). On the other, Gloucester is sane and retains his great sense of loyalty to and affection for his former king. He exclaims to Lear, "O, let me kiss that hand!" (*King Lear*.4.6.134). Lear is treated with honor by Gloucester and Cordelia's people but runs away from those who would aid him (*King Lear*.4.6.205-206). Gloucester, upon seeing Lear's condition, grieves, observing that it is "a sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch / Past speaking of in a king!" (*King Lear*.4.6.207-208). He is lost in thoughts for another. Coming back to his own situation, Gloucester comes to an, albeit temporary, resolution. He asks the gods to "Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you please" (*King Lear*.4.6.221-222). Indeed, between Gloucester and Lear, Gloucester seems to be the character who more successfully gains clarity.

The psychological recovery that is Lear's equivalent to Gloucester's overcoming his suicidal thoughts is the king's return to sanity when he is reunited with Cordelia. Though an entire scene is dedicated to the incident, the touching moment is marred by Lear's slightly coy attempts to avoid facing his guilt. His first words to Cordelia revolve around his suffering not his

mistakes: “You do me wrong to take me out o’th’grave,” he says (*King Lear*.4.7.45). Then he uses his insanity to dodge what he fears will be Cordelia’s retribution. Lear asks, “Where have I been? Where am I?” (*King Lear*.4.7.52) and again alludes to his hardships, “I am mightly abused” (*King Lear*.4.7.53). It is as if Lear hopes that by emphasizing his misfortunes, he can show Cordelia that he has already been punished for his mistreatment of her. It is only after Lear has received multiple signs of Cordelia’s good will, such as her request for his blessing (*King Lear*.4.7.57-59) and her tears (*King Lear*.4.7.71), that he can confess. He says, “I know you do not love me; for your sisters / Have, as I do remember, done me wrong. / You have some cause, they have not” (*King Lear*.4.7.72-74). He is already confident of her forgiveness though, for she tells him that she has “No cause, no cause,” and he transitions immediately to an inquiry about where they are (*King Lear*.4.7.75). In his last lines in this scene, Lear rather modestly requests of Cordelia, “Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish” (*King Lear*.4.7.72-74). But Cordelia’s preceding line, in which she even more humbly asks, “Will’t please your Highness walk?” seem to encourage Lear’s humility. Though Lear is not particularly disagreeable here, once again, it is Cordelia’s virtues that shine rather than Lear’s.

The pleasure in seeing Lear and Cordelia together is more fully evoked when the pair are captured by Edmund’s forces. Once again, setting enhances sentiment and decreases the emotional deterrent. The equivalent in this case to the Fool’s comments in act three is the sense that one of Lear’s motives in acting as he does is a desire to avoid facing his eldest two daughters, who remind him of his folly. Nevertheless, that Lear and Cordelia are so wholly content simply because they are together shines out against their grim defeat and capture. The viewer trusts in their affection and rejoices to see it demonstrated. Lear’s triumphant rhetoric, though so extreme and ultimately misguided, is nevertheless appealing as well. There is such pretty imagery in his

words, “We two alone will sing like birds I’th’ cage” (*King Lear*.5.3.9) and “laugh / At gilded butterflies” (*King Lear*.5.3.12-13). It is difficult not to feel uplifted by them. Also, when Lear speaks intimately to Cordelia, “Have I caught thee?” (*King Lear*.5.3.21) Lear is cast in an admirable light. He is humble and affectionate, and contrasts against the King who demanded flattery and equated material possessions with love. On the stage, the scene is probably even more poignant, bolstered by the actors’ body language. Lear’s speech also highlights his separation from his past life as King. He turns Cordelia and himself into outsiders:

...we’ll talk with them too,  
 Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out;  
 And take upon’s the mystery of things,  
 As if we were God’s spies: and we’ll wear out,  
 In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones  
 That ebb and flow by th’ moon. (*King Lear*.5.3.14-18)

Certainly, one perceives that Lear’s confidence in being able to endure in prison, away from political maneuvers of public life, is too simplistic, but even so, these are the lines that best represent what Lear has learned from his experiences. He has finally come into his retirement and given up all thoughts of Kingship. He also has a sense of fortune’s inconstancy and, in the phrases “mystery of things” and “God’s spies”, insinuates that he can now decrypt the truth that is belied by court intrigue. From his trials, Lear has learned to shun superficial ties and trust in Cordelia, who has so obviously merited his confidence all along. The audience feels hope for King Lear.

It is with consternation, then, that the viewer is reminded of Edmund’s ominous plan, to deny Lear and Cordelia the mercy Albany wishes to extend to them. When Edmund gives his foreboding note to the captain, the audience fears the implications of Edgar’s advice to the captain, “to be tender-minded / Does not become a sword” (*King Lear*.5.3.33-34). Violence is sure to befall Lear and Cordelia. Yet, the scene is brief, and though Edmund tells the captain,

“instantly, and carry it so / As I have set it down” (*King Lear*.5.3.37), the audience hears no more about it for a long interim.

Indeed, in the intervening scenes between Edmund’s command and Cordelia’s death, so much happens concerning Gloucester’s family, Goneril, and Regan that it distracts the spectators. As the observers’ focus shifts, their passions for Lear wane and are not given an equivalent substitute for emotional inspiration. First, there is the drama of Goneril and Regan arguing over Edmund, with tensions apparent between the two sisters, and between Edmund and Albany. Matters reach a local climax as Regan falls sick from Goneril’s poison, and Albany accuses Edmund of treason. Then, Edgar arrives and defeats Edmund. As Stephen Booth notes, Edgar speaks the lines typically attributed to the hero at the victorious end of a play<sup>7</sup>, so one expects strong sensation to accompany this pseudo-ending. But this sequence of events are part of peripheral plots, which, in the drama concerning the love triangle, involve characters too wicked to sympathize with, and in the rivalry between brothers, is too little dwelt on for the audience to have the emotional investment that it gives to Lear’s situation. In any case, attention is soon shifted to other circumstances, such as Gloucester’s, Regan’s, and Goneril’s deaths, which are also emotionally limited affairs. All of them die offstage, with only report to tell their tales. This delivery lacks the immediacy and vitality to incite strong emotions. Furthermore, when the sisters’ corpses are brought onstage, their deaths become an even more impersonal display, a mere body count.

Only at last does the play return to Cordelia and Lear, the deed already done, Cordelia already dead. One cannot deny that it is a sorry event, and yet, one cannot immerse oneself entirely in King Lear’s grief. The audience has been distracted from his circumstances, for the

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<sup>7</sup> Booth, Stephen, "On the Greatness of King Lear", *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy*. Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001, 19.

viewers have been overloaded with information about the events concerning other characters. The audience is even barred from sharing the shock of sudden loss that King Lear seems to feel, for the spectators have already been prepared for the worst. While Edmund dawdles in his confession, arriving at the point, “for my writ / Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia” (*King Lear*.5.3.248), only at the end of five lines, and while the messenger is held up, waiting to take Edmund’s sword, the audience feels time slipping by. The orders of “Haste” (*King Lear*.5.3.254) seem increasingly futile to the viewers, preparing them for an unhappy ending. Edmund also reveals exactly what the note’s orders are (*King Lear*.5.3.254-257) before Lear staggers on stage with the results in his arms, so that not even the precise details of Cordelia’s death are surprising. The effect of all the plots tumbling on stage in rapid succession paired with the action-delaying explanation of Edmund’s plan undercuts the emotions that King Lear’s reunion with Cordelia build up and ultimately detracts from even the sorrowful ending.

These are demonstrations of the most moving scenes in *King Lear*, and even they fail to propel the observer through the emotion-opposing forces of ensuing events. Powerful rhetoric, dramatic setting, and demonstrations of Lear’s positive progress are countered by plot constructions that leave the audience feeling incomplete, such as the reoccurrence of Lear’s narcissist behavior and the way the other characters are juxtaposed. Throughout the play, similar techniques are employed so as to prevent strong emotional investment in the story. From the very beginning, the audience is put at a distance from the main characters. As in all of Shakespeare’s tragedies, the first act opens with a less prominent character to introduce the protagonist and the situation, but in *King Lear*, the introduction employs very few lines to actually lay out the hero’s situation. In this case, Gloucester, Kent and Edmund are the first characters to walk on stage. The audience seems to catch Kent and Gloucester toward the end of their discussion about King

Lear's intentions to divide up the kingdom (*King Lear*.1.1.1-7), and very quickly, the conversation switches over to Edmund's origins instead, a topic upon which it stays until Lear appears (*King Lear*.1.1.8-34). Even at the beginning, the audience's attention is being diverted from the main plot concerning Lear to the parallel plot concerning Gloucester, an arrangement mirrored by the conclusion.

So *King Lear* cannot provide perfect catharsis or even perfect realization of passion. What it does offer, however, is intellectual pleasure. Booth- very thoroughly examines patterning, for instance, in *King Lear*. It is quite apparent that the parallel plots invite comparisons of Gloucester to Lear, Edmund to Lear's elder daughters, and Edgar to Cordelia. As Booth demonstrates, however, each major character seems have a much broader network of connections to other characters. He uses Edgar as an example:

Edgar...echoes qualities of Cordelia (they are innocents wronged by their fathers); of Kent (each demeans, disguises, and endangers himself to serve his wronger); of Edmund (they are brothers with nearly interchangeable names, Edmund imitates a Bedlam beggar [I.ii.131– 33] several scenes before Edgar does, and – for very different ends – both brothers practice upon their father's gullibility); of Gloucester (they are Edmund's victims, and he overtly equates them as foolishly credulous); of Goneril and Regan (they are elder children, who by the various rules of primogeniture are entitled to more than their siblings are, and who by the laws of fairy tales are entitled to less); of the Fool (both pretend simple-mindedness, and both follow a great man in decline); of Lear (Lear and Poor Tom are wandering, naked madmen); of Oswald (Poor Tom says that he was formerly "a servingman, proud in heart and mind; that . . . served the lust of [his] mistress' heart" [III.iv.81– 83]); and of Albany (both evoke contempt from wicked characters who sneer at their virtuous ineffectuality). (Booth 32-33)

These comparisons are pleasurable to consider, and when one discovers them as thoroughly as Booth has, a feeling of intellectual excitement arises. There are so many characters in *King Lear* who serve roles distinct and yet resembling others as well that it fully exercises the mind to tackle all the connections. For instance, the Fool, Kent, Gloucester and Cordelia can all be compared, because they are all loyal to Lear and look after him, but each also has his or her

distinguishing traits. The Fool is cryptic and irreverent, Kent is passionately loyal, Gloucester is the paternal figure in his own tragic tale, and Cordelia is mythically virtuous. The play is also full of minor characters who seem to contribute so much in their small actions, as Cornwall's servant does by defying his master to save Gloucester's eyes and as Edmund's captain does by hanging Cordelia. These elements, too, becomes a tantalizing focal point for analysis. *King Lear* simply abounds with rich detail, making this a play that must be revisited repeatedly in order to eke out its complexities. That all these subtleties in *King Lear* seem worthwhile to contemplate also speaks to people's faith in the work as a whole.

Such is the pleasure to found in *King Lear*: those that inspire analysis and appreciation of the work. Consequently, pleasure in *King Lear* is not to be primarily found within intimacy with the plot but with an objective distance from it that allows the audience to instead admire the play as a piece. The faith in the tragedy that the audience lacks is made up for in the faith the audience retains in the work's achievements.

## Chapter 2 Tragic Fulfillment in *Othello*

In shifting focus from examining tragic pleasure in *King Lear* to woeful satisfaction in *Othello*, one finds a notable difference in the primary source of enjoyment. At least, if one accepts that *King Lear* bases its pleasure on the merits of the composition more than on presence of strong and sustaining emotion, one will find that *Othello* is very different because one of its most prominent features is its ability to evoke strong response. Even a reader deeply touched by *King Lear*'s tale can discover from the dynamics of the two plays that various aspects of *Othello* more consistently and less questionably enhance the emotional experience than *King Lear*. Unlike *King Lear*, *Othello* appears to be a work in which pleasures do affirm faith in the tragedy itself.

Where emotion is involved, it is natural to consider *Othello*, perhaps even before all the other plays. As A. C. Bradley pronounced, "Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, I would answer, not even excepting *King Lear*, *Othello* is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible."<sup>8</sup> The emotional feature of *Othello* will be prominent throughout the discussion of the play's pleasures, but the pleasures of *Othello* can be discussed in a broader way. In this study of the tragedy of *Othello*, attention will light on four types of pleasure: satisfaction in the confirmation of ideas, deliberation of how the protagonists' circumstances create a unified pattern of difficulties that the characters ultimately fail to conquer, enjoyment of the passions which the unfolding of Iago's plot incites, and respite in the cathartic note on which *Othello* ends.

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<sup>8</sup> Bradley, A. C., "Lecture V: *Othello*," *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (by A.C. Bradley, London: Macmillan, 1974, 176.

It is first necessary to give context for these four types of pleasure, starting with the delight of having one's ideas elevated. The process is somewhat like affirmation, but different in a critical way. The explanation presented here will be intensely psychological and, inevitably, will run into the problem of subjectivity. Nevertheless, there are some mental processes that may be credibly said to apply to all people through the basic necessity of their cognitive functions, and through this line of thought, a reasonable case will be argued for the points that follow. For instance, all people necessarily cope with the vast amounts of information from their memories and experiences by organizing them into more coherent packages of thought. The organizing of ideas together provides at least a faint impression of an overlying theme. What a story can do is provide greater clarity for this impression. In the case of this tragedy, misfortune, with which everyone is acquainted, is distilled into a form so pure as to step beyond empiricism and enter a realm of abstract realization. Because tragedy does not imitate a true occurrence, it cannot be adequately said to affirm real experience: the fall from eminence to affliction is too great and the process by which it happens too systematic to seem realistic. Rather, the calamitous tale isolates an idea extant in human experience and creates an alternative tragic world, in which the dynamic of small misfortune leading to impending doom is fully realized. This kind of enjoyment is particularly relevant to *Othello*, because of several episodes in the plot that emphasize the slenderness of the margin by which the tragedy is advanced.

The second pleasure that shall be treated here is the delight derived from acknowledging the cohesion of the particulars that lead to the disaster. Presumably, in all stories, character, setting, and events combine in deliberate ways to form a meaningful arc. What makes *Othello* exceptional, however, is how these elements so subtly emphasize themes which enforce the nature of the tragedy, creating a more complete sense of the play's doleful scope. This pleasure is

not that of the realized dolor itself but of appreciation for the artistic subtleties that lend themselves to the composition. In the discussion of characters, the strongest demonstrations will come from the study of the circumstances surrounding the main protagonists, Othello and Desdemona.

The third and fourth pleasures derive in some part from Dubos's theory: the enjoyment roused by *Othello's* ability to incite passion. Even though the agony, despair, and anxiety produced by Iago's machinations make for wretched sensations, the compelling strength of those feverish reactions is delightful. DuBos's theory states that acutely negative sensations, even when they cause distress, are nevertheless removed from the tepid climate of emotional lassitude and thus produce delight. Once passions are raised, catharsis, the final pleasure that will be incorporated into this discussion of *Othello*, is possible to obtain. As mentioned in the introduction and in the previous chapter, the success of cathartic release depends in part on first agitating emotion to a high level and then allowing it to subside, educing a cleansed feeling. The one consideration, that question of passion, will be addressed in examining how DuBos's theory pertains to *Othello*. The other consideration, release, will place emphasize on analyzing *Othello's* final scene and the way it allows for the attenuation of emotional involvement in the play.

Before proceeding, however, it may be necessary to tackle what the purging of emotion entails and what feelings are actually expunged. If emotions are roused in tragedy by bringing a viewer closer to the tragic circumstances, then it seems reasonable that emotions by the opposite mechanism, the creation of distance between the reader and the tragedy, are disengaged from the scene.

This disconnect is successfully effected when the ending of the play takes pains to conclude on terms on which the reader does not feel compelled to dwell. There is stability, but not such tidiness that the conclusion jars with the gravity of the tone of the tragedy. Though the ruinous consequences of the tragedy remain, the impetus for the disaster is arrested. Evil ceases its machinations, but happiness is not promised for the future. The hero's death is the conclusion to the calamitous series of events but is not the worst of them. In fact, the hero's death is redeeming, as the hero is released from suffering. Hence, his death is not traumatic. It additionally lends itself to the cathartic experience, for his corporeal release from the tragic world mirrors the spectator's deliverance via emotional purgation. When the finale's elements are balanced in such a way, the hero falls, but the audience, though vicariously suffering with him, is able to rise again. The cathartic play, even while preserving a sense of the drama's grim subject, circumscribes the feelings it rouses to rule only over the space the play occupies. Great passion is not carried beyond the realm of the tragedy, for that is a property of the tragic world and is concluded as the curtains are drawn or the last page read.

It should also be noted that while, in his discussion of catharsis, Aristotle speaks of "pity and fear" (Lear 297), the range of emotions that arises in considering *Othello's* evocations are generally not going to be referred to as pity or fear since they can be more specifically described. It is perhaps not necessary to attempt an enumeration of all these possible passions that *Othello* may inspire. Some will have elements of fear or pity, but others may not so easily fit under those categories. It is important to recognize that even emotions that are not fear or pity are, in this discussion, still relevant to the cathartic process. In fact, a feeling need only be strong and negative so that with its surcease comes a feeling of unburdening.

A pointed depiction of tragic circumstance is rendered in *Othello*, giving rise to a kind of elevation and fulfillment of ideal tragedy. This portrayal arises from the sense *Othello* gives of impending downfall but also of the painfully conspicuous, at least to the audience, possibility of circumventing mischief. For instance, the handkerchief that plays such a significant role in Iago's plan to pollute Othello's affection for Desdemona is brought into his hands only by the most mundane and unpredictable chain of events. Iago first scares Othello with the idea of Desdemona's disloyalty, which leads to Othello's exchange with Desdemona about his headache. He tells her, "I have a pain upon my forehead, here"<sup>9</sup> indicating the place where he fears his cuckold's horns grow. In her innocent ignorance, Desdemona responds, "Why, that's with watching; 'twill away again. / Let me but bind it hard, within this hour / It will be well" (*Othello*.3.3.284-286), and she attempts to tie her handkerchief around his head. Its inadequate size or Othello's impatient dismissal of "Let it alone" (*Othello*.3.3.287) and Desdemona's great concern for her husband cause her to neglect it as it falls on the ground. Emilia, as Desdemona's constant escort, is able to pick it up immediately and give it to her husband. In all these interactions, there is a plausibility supported by the apposition of each character's behavior. Yet, the sequence of events lies in so many steps that one cannot help but think that if only one link had been formed a little differently, the handkerchief would not have come into Iago's keeping.

Most narrow of these conditions, though, appears to be Emilia's decision to give Desdemona's handkerchief to Iago. There are simply so many warning signs that indicate the sinister bent of Iago's desire. Emilia herself gives expression to them. She notes that her "wayward husband hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it" (*Othello*.3.3.291-292). The word "steal" seems deliberately harsh since there are many other single syllable words that could

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<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, William, and Alvin Kernan. *The Tragedy of Othello. William Shakespeare, Four Great Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1998, 3.3.283.

be its substitute. She additionally uses the verb “filch” (*Othello*.3.3.313), which has equally strong connotations of lurking crime. It is also peculiar that she reads so little into Iago’s obsession over another woman’s handkerchief. Further, it seems reasonable for Emilia to refuse to let her husband keep the handkerchief because she knows how much it means to Desdemona. Emilia tells Iago, “If it be not for some purpose of import/ Give’t me again. Poor lady, she’ll run mad/When she shall lack it” (*Othello*.3.3.314-316). The question is present: what shall Iago do with the handkerchief? The answer that Emilia receives is far from reassuring. Iago replies, “Be not acknown on’t/I have use for it” (*Othello*.3.3.316-317), but she does not take the handkerchief back. Astonishingly, Iago believes he can ask his wife to perform the incredibly suspicious act of stealing another woman’s handkerchief, one obviously of great significance, and then, just as unethically, keep the theft a secret. Even more astounding, however, is how Emilia obeys despite how dishonest his request seems when she reminds Iago of it. The impression that this scene could so easily have played out differently is encouraged by the painful blindness of Emilia’s loyalty to her husband. This perception of an alternate future is further emphasized by the fact that had not Iago walked in on Emilia when he did, Emilia would have had “the work ta’en out” (*Othello*.3.3.295) and given that to Iago instead of the original handkerchief. Iago may have been able to confirm Othello’s suspicions with the copy, but at least, Desdemona would have had a handkerchief to show Othello as well. The if-only of this situation captures an essential element of unfortunate circumstances that plague the ideal of the tragic world.

Another particularly unfortunate episode is the staging of the conversation that Othello witnesses between Iago and Cassio. The timing of Othello’s eavesdropping so terribly misleads his understanding of the conversation, and his interpretation of Cassio’s gestures is morbidly suspicious. Even the circumstance under which he meets Cassio seems ill-fated. Cassio makes

his initial entrance right after Othello falls into a trance (*Othello*.4.1.45-50). Then, the moment he departs, Othello returns to himself and indignantly asks if Iago is making fun of his cuckold's horns. "Dost thou mock me?" Othello demands (*Othello*.4.1.62). It is impossible to guess how Othello might have reacted upon a direct confrontation with Cassio, but the narrow miss of the meeting nevertheless lends credence to a sense of perfect demise, for it seems that Cassio's entry serves only to aid Iago's purpose. Iago orders Cassio, "Do you withdraw yourself a little while. / ... When he is gone / I would on great occasion speak with you" (*Othello*.4.1.58-60). The only business that Cassio's initial appearance achieves is to give Iago greater control over the conversation he is about to manipulate.

Also curious is how Othello, watching from afar the exchange between Cassio and Iago, though he imputes even Cassio's merriment to his sexual "triumph" (*Othello*.4.1.120), waits for Iago's signal to move within earshot. It is a wonder that Othello, obsessed as he is with knowing the details of Cassio's affair with Desdemona and certain as he is of the implications of Cassio's every expression, waits for Iago's signal to hear Cassio's confession. It seems that Othello would want to hear the entire exchange since he believes all of it to relate to Desdemona. Nor does Othello hear the details of the tale that Iago promised. He expects to hear Cassio tell of "Where, how oft, how long ago, and when/He hath, and is again to cope your wife" (*Othello*.4.1.87-88), but hears only a snippet about Bianca's behavior in a certain instance. Like Emilia, Othello seems to possess a particular blindness to Iago's less explainable conduct. Of course, he is also clearly beyond the reach of reason at this point, for even within auditory reach of Cassio, he continues to fictionalize what Cassio says. When Cassio tells Iago that he "must leave her company" (*Othello*.4.1.144), Othello seems instead to believe that Cassio "tells how she plucked him to my chamber" (*Othello*.4.1.141-142). The general even manages to miss an important clue

as to the true identity of the “she” to whom Cassio is referring. Iago cries out, “Before me! Look where she comes” as Bianca, not Desdemona, comes toward Cassio. The tragedy, which this situation emphasizes, is that no matter what occurs, Othello remains fast in his belief that Desdemona has been unfaithful. In the full realization of the tragic universe, destruction is an irresistible force and calamity is unavoidable.

A final attestation to the completeness of this hapless cosmos is the exchange between Othello and Emilia that comes too late. When Emilia swears she has never left Desdemona and Cassio alone together (*Othello*.4.2.4-5), Othello is presented with strong evidence that indicates Desdemona’s faithfulness, but his jealousy has progressed beyond the point where reason can check him. After all, Othello is able to ignore Emilia’s proof based on his confidence in Desdemona’s being a truly “subtle whore/A closet lock and key of villainous secrets” (*Othello*.4.2.21-22). The most serious crime that he has witnessed her commit is that she prays, which is not sinister at all, but even that mark of her piousness is construed as sanctimony. Though he ultimately dismisses what Emilia says, when she reports that Desdemona and Cassio have never sought private conversation, the testimony is apparently powerful enough to register as “strange” (4.2.11) to him. The concession is enough to demonstrate the extent to which Iago has warped the environment of the play, for Emilia’s testimony should be conclusive. Even though she never tells Desdemona about the stolen handkerchief, nothing indicates that Emilia has not been a steadfast escort: when Desdemona is not alone with Othello then she is with Emilia. The injection of rationality that Emilia provides, timed so poorly, however, is wasted on Othello.

The pleasure of satisfaction from the way in which the work feels complete, is one that derives vitality from subtleties. There are fine details in the play that augment the tribulations of

the protagonists. For instance, the way Othello is presented as a military man and his placement in a domestic setting, through not only his marriage to Desdemona but also the unexpected dispersion of the Turkish forces, emphasize the vulnerability of his situation. When Othello relates his life's history, the emphasis is on the "battles, sieges, [and]fortune" (1.3.129) he has been acclimated to even from his "boyish days" (131). Hearing of his dispatch to Cyprus, Othello acknowledges that there is "A natural and prompt alacrity / I find in hardness and do undertake / This present wars against the Ottomites" (*Othello*.1.3.229-231). Othello's comfort in austerity contrasts against his discomfort with domesticity. Othello describes marriage as a sacrifice in which his "free condition" is "Put into circumscription," something he would not do "for the seas' worth" (*Othello*.1.2.25-27). Othello's statement is a demonstration of the love he holds for Desdemona, for he is willing to forfeit his liberty to her, but it also very clearly conveys the opposition of his nature to sedentary matters. His unfamiliarity with love's language also reinforces the incongruity. Othello's account of his courtship with Desdemona, though eloquent in his ironic confession of having "often beguiled her of her tears" (*Othello*.1.3.155) in response to Brabantio's accusation of witchcraft, nevertheless sounds very much like a soldier's report. Most of his sentences possess a basic subject-verb-object composition, for he narrates his speech more to inform than to entertain or express his own overflowing sentiment. His very mindset is military. Thus the quickly concluded matter of the war for which Othello is sent actually serves an important role in setting up the dynamic of Othello's circumstances. Though the news is briefly narrated, "Our wars are done / The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks / That their designment halts" (*Othello*.2.1.20-22), the establishment of this peace is significant in that it bolsters the domestic difficulties with which Othello will struggle.

Desdemona, too, is in a precarious position, for her marriage to Othello has estranged her not only from her father but also from her homeland. Her one close friend is Emilia, and even Emilia may have been little acquainted with Desdemona prior to Othello's request of Iago, "I prithee let thy wife attend on her" (*Othello*.1.3.291). Desdemona is completely removed from what she has known. This sacrifice is her equivalent to Othello's. She proclaims, "That I love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence, and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world" (*Othello*.1.3.243-245). Just as Othello's concession to marry proclaims his love, Desdemona's relinquishment of her former loyalties emphasizes the depth of her ardor. Though Desdemona's estrangement is a background detail, it serves as the foundation that highlights the catastrophe of her separation from the attachment for which she gave up all others. Othello enters foreign emotional territory as Desdemona enters foreign physical territory. The uncertainty of their situations complements the frailty of their union, enforcing the tragic potential of their circumstances, which is nevertheless pleasing in its deep cohesion to the atmosphere of the play.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare's dexterity in exciting emotion is demonstrated primarily through the emotions that Iago's chicanery arouses. The audience is given acute insight into Iago's true intentions while everyone in the play is utterly deceived by his presentation. The extent of Iago's falseness is so great that true words become false in his rendering. The disparity creates suspenseful dramatic irony as well as an ever-deepening sense of the loss of honor in the play. The more the other characters act according to Iago's scheme, the more certain becomes the destruction of the protagonists and the more agonizing the situation is to watch unfold. The results are sorrow, frustration, horror, and anguish.

Suspense is initially raised at the end of Act I, when Iago first lays out his sinister plan, which through his formidable skill, becomes the actual plot of the play. As it becomes evident

that Iago is entirely capable of bringing these plans to fruition, it becomes more and more terrible that he sees so accurately. It turns out that he is perfectly correct in his assessment of the other characters and is entirely capable of twisting these truths to meet his malicious ends. Iago's depiction of Cassio as a man who "hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected—framed to make women false" (*Othello*.1.3.398-399) is well observed, for Cassio demonstrates that kind of behavior with which Iago affiliates him when he greets Desdemona and Emilia. When they first land in Cyprus, he cries, "O, behold! The riches of the ship is come on shore! / You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees" (*Othello*.2.1.82-83). He kisses Emilia. He says, "'Tis my breeding / That gives me this bold show of courtesy" (2.1.98-99). Cassio's behavior is characterized by a very warm and slightly excessive gallantry, of which Iago is quick to take advantage. Iago notes with satisfaction that Cassio takes Desdemona's hand. Iago remarks, "He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper! With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (*Othello*.2.1.165-167). No interaction which he can distort is lost on Iago. He schemes, "If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kissed your three fingers so oft—which now again you are most apt to play the sir in. Very good! Well kissed!" (*Othello*.2.1.169-173). With equal success does Iago perceive Othello's nature and discover the best way to manipulate it. Iago describes Othello's role in his plans:

The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;  
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose  
As asses are. (*Othello*.1.3.383-393)

In many of his other monologues, Iago lays out similarly direct descriptions of his intentions, which only further consolidate the audience's comprehension of Iago's villainy and frustration at seeing his designs succeed.

In fact, Shakespeare takes pains to have Iago announce every move of his scheme right before he impeccably executes it. Iago announces his plan to have Cassio disgraced and displaced as lieutenant immediately before the scene in which that event occurs. Similarly, Iago delineates his plan to arrange a private meeting between Desdemona and Cassio at the end of act two, and act three opens with Cassio paying a call on Desdemona. Then, when Iago obtains possession of Desdemona's handkerchief, he reveals his plan to leave it with Cassio, and afterwards, immediately reports to Othello that he has seen Cassio with it. On the heels of that conversation follows an argument between Othello and Desdemona over that very handkerchief. In the fourth act, Iago describes how he will engage Cassio in a conversation about Bianca and deceive Othello into believing the discussion implicates Desdemona. It promptly happens. This pattern of quick turnover between Iago's plans and his successes keeps a vivid impression of Iago's knavery in one's mind, maximizing the discrepancy between what the play's characters are so fluently beguiled by and Iago's true intentions, which seem so otherwise apparent. It begets a very painful experience to witness passively.

It is the manner by which and extent to which Iago warps the truth that so pummels the heart with distress. For instance, when he reports to Othello Cassio's intransigence, he precludes truth with lies that negate the honest portion of his account. Iago's critical lie is his representation of himself. He says, "I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth/Than it should do offense to Michael Cassio" (2.3.220-221). Iago proclaims to have the most benign intent toward Cassio, and his effusive speech can leave no one who lacks contrary evidence in doubt of it. Yet, anyone who has had the privilege to see Iago's interactions with Roderigo knows that he is, in fact, the orchestrator of Cassio's offense. Iago's duplicity cannot but incite feelings of futile resistance in one who observes his lie but has no role in the play. The injustice

is aggravated by the fact that there are elements of truth in Iago's report which Othello rejects because of Iago's supposed partiality toward Cassio. It is true, for instance, that Cassio is first incited to anger by Roderigo. Hence, Iago's statement, "Yet surely Cassio I believe received/From him that fled some strange indignity/Which patience could not pass" (*Othello*.2.3.432-435) is actually one of the most honest statements Iago makes during his report. But, it becomes suspect because of the lie that precedes it. That Othello would think Iago's "honesty and love doth mince this matter/Making it light to Cassio" (*Othello*.2.3.246-247) is a reasonable inference to draw from Iago's earlier words. Yet Othello is terribly wrong. Somehow Iago manages to advance his own image through his insincerity while enfeebling potent statements.

The first conversation Iago has with Othello when Iago introduces the idea of Desdemona's infidelity is even more agonizingly mixed between truth and lies than the episode of Cassio's demotion. On Othello's part, truths are spoken obliviously. Unfortunately, "these stops of thine" which Othello observes in Iago are indeed "tricks of custom" in the "false disloyal knave" (*Othello*.3.3.120-122) and not the product of Iago's "love and honesty" (*Othello*.3.3.119). Othello is insensible to his own cautionary knowledge, and at this point, it is the audience that suffers the most mental unrest from his words. One senses that the truth is both present because the words spoken have the potential to accurately describe the situation but also completely inaccessible because they do not. In fact, Othello is describing a complete inversion of the truth and yet is so confident of its accuracy.

On Iago's part, good counsel is spoken hypocritically and then marred by his subsequent speech. He says that "Men should be what they seem" (*Othello*.3.3.127). This statement is a harmless abstraction on moral conduct. With Iago's next line, however, the phrase turns around:

“Why then, I think Cassio’s an honest man” (*Othello*.3.3.129). Now, the abstraction is being applied specifically to the conduct of one man. The idea rests on “I think” and the contracted “is”. The sentence carries a connotation of delusion, as if Iago is trying to force an ugly reality to match a utopian ideal. The uncertainty in Iago’s presentation of the statement as an opinion invites Othello to assess the accuracy of Iago’s evaluation. Is Cassio really as honest as he seems? Othello senses the ugly reality that Iago has implied, for he is not satisfied with Iago’s words. He asks “Nay, yet there’s more in this?” (*Othello*. 3.3.130). Iago has, so succinctly, stolen one of Othello’s principles and used it to sow an ugly idea. Horrible excitement and dread are natural reactions to Iago’s skill and Othello’s seduction.

The way in which Iago poisons Othello’s mind is all the more torturous because of the way he toys with rationality and philosophy. After riling Othello up, Iago exclaims, “Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on” (*Othello*.3.3.165-166). Iago’s skillful manipulation of this good counsel that turns it into a further suggestion of infidelity is unsettling. He goes on to explain:

That cuckold lives in bliss  
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger  
But O, what damnèd minutes tells he o’er  
Who dotes, yet doubts—suspects, yet fondly loves! (3.3.167-170)

Iago manages to imply multiple horrible ideas at once. First, he implies that Othello is, for a fact, being cuckolded, which, given the importance Desdemona stores by being a “deserving woman...one that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself” (*Othello*.2.1.143-145), seems implausible to anyone privy to that particular exchange with Iago. Secondly, he whets Othello’s desire for evidence of Desdemona’s affair with Cassio. It is a path of witch-hunting, in which Desdemona is condemned before her trial has even begun, and also a path which will only further spur Othello’s jealousy, not resolve it. The insight the spectator has

into these issues to which Othello himself is so blind builds upon the distress Iago has already incited. The situation is enough to raise horror by itself, but for one who has an accompanying sense of how Iago is corrupting reason, it is even more desperate.

The attempt on Cassio's life and Othello's murder of Desdemona mark the culmination of Iago's dishonesty. All his deception has funneled into the formation of these two scenes. These two episodes demonstrate that the devilry that Iago has promulgated has reached the point where he is no longer the sole source of negative response. His corruption has spread to other characters as well, most notably Othello. The heartlessness with which Othello assesses Cassio's supposed demise cannot but seem repugnant. When Othello goes further and actually praises Iago for killing the man who was once a dear friend, though Iago's work is apparent in how Othello's thoughts have turned to depravity, it does not suffice to absolve Othello from the hideousness of his own rumination. That Iago no longer needs to attach himself constantly to Othello to make the general see the worst of every situation puts Othello in a position of greater accountability. True, Iago has Othello entirely under sway, a fact which Othello's praise, "O brave Iago, honest and just/That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!/Thou teachest me" (*Othello*.5.1.31-33) recalls. Yet, Othello's physical separation from Iago suggests that even if he is a puppet of Iago's, he is one that can direct his own actions. Also his words, "Minion, your dear lies dead/And your unblest fate hies. Strumpet, I come" (*Othello*.5.1.32-33), in which he extends Iago's evil deed, applying it to his own course of action, conveys a sense of adequate independence. Though Othello is not truly his own man, he comes under the audience's censure. He is a disappointment to the memory of his past integrity and has become a revolting imitation of Iago.

Iago's tactic of twisting ideas around is abominable, but he does it with such skill that it is difficult not to admire on some level. Iago is the singular pinnacle of villainy in this play, and though he is a terrifying villain, his behavior is appropriate for the role. In Othello, however, who is the protagonist, iniquity is disappointing as well as horrifying. Othello's actions cannot be met with other than distaste. The last exchange between Othello and Desdemona gives additional fuel to feelings of displeasure at Othello's degradation, horror at what affairs have been reduced to, and apprehension for Desdemona. The disjunction of the logic Othello uses to justify his crime is as purposeless as the motives that Iago generates for his villainy. Iago, however, knows how to direct his malice, whereas Othello vacillates, creating a greater sense of the waste in Othello's actions. There is a gratuitous quality to Othello's plan to murder Desdemona that arises from all his inconsistencies. He says that he will "not shed her blood/Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow/...Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.3-6). Considering that Othello's initial report of his and Desdemona's affections was thus: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed/ And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.166-167), his fondness for her has become remarkably physically based. Othello has cast his affection as a function of Desdemona's beauty alone. Note that like Iago, he adds superfluous reasons to justify his actions: he is killing Desdemona in order to protect other men from her. The absurd, necrophilic pronouncement, "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee/And love thee after" (*Othello*.5.2.18-19), seems to indicate that Othello believes that their love will reach an ideal state if only her beauty be preserved and her fidelity certain. Othello's utterance can be compared with Iago's earlier intent of sleeping with Othello's bride, in order to get "evened with him, wife for wife" (*Othello*.2.1.299). Both Othello's idea of love and Iago's idea of lust deviate from an earlier established motivation: love based on reciprocal compassion and lust based on physical

attraction. Both Othello and Iago's considerations turn their respective feelings into much more self-centered and disfigured ideas. That Othello's views toward Desdemona have adopted this Iago-like quality seems atrocious. It is even more painful to witness in Othello than Iago because his love for Desdemona was once so grand and befitting of his honor.

The less Othello takes responsibility for his own actions and words, the more it enables one to feel contempt for the abasement of his character. When Othello, preparing to suffocate Desdemona, weeps and says, "This sorrow's heavenly / It strikes where it doth love" (5.2.21-22), heaven is really the last association anyone is willing to make with the murder of an innocent. His own lack of insight into his motivations reveals hypocrisy in Othello different from that in Iago, for Iago knows his own insincerity. Othello also turns against his own word, becoming as untrustworthy as Iago, but, again, is more ignorant of his own baseness. He presses Desdemona to confess her adultery, passionately exclaiming, "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit / No, heavens forbid!" (*Othello*.5.2.31-32). When she refuses to concede, Othello continues to urge her, for what he really wants is her confession to absolve him from "A murder," which he wants to believe is "a sacrifice" (*Othello*.5.2.65). When she finally pleads with him to let her "say one prayer" (*Othello*.5.2.84), he tells her, "It is too late" (*Othello*.5.2.83) and smothers her. Like Iago, Othello becomes despicable in the effusive expression of his lies, which indicate such noble intentions but belie selfish ones. Othello's ignorance contributes to the theme of the muddled validity of and distorted intentions behind speech. Consequently, his performance is able to raise emotion to another level of distress.

The death of Desdemona, who occupies a key role in the play as one of the main characters and as an innocent, also contributes significantly to the emotional landscape advanced by Shakespeare. Here, a spectator really might feel fear for Desdemona, for she does not, at first,

seem to realize how grave her danger is. Her ignorance is rooted in her exclusion from Othello's interactions with Iago, for she is only just becoming acquainted with the extent to which the truth has been subverted. Her innocence is reflected in how basic her inquiries of Othello are. She asks him, "Talk you of killing?" (5.2.33). She is hearing of her death for the first time while everyone else invested in the play is coming to see her murder as a foregone conclusion. Again the difference between a character's knowledge and the audience's creates a level of distress. Suspense is also produced by Desdemona's observations of Othello's foreboding behavior. She remarks, "Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip? / Some bloody passion shakes your very frame" (*Othello*.5.2.43-44). As Othello possesses only a tentative grasp on rationality, he seems also to display minimal control over his body. This instability creates tension and uncertainty, for he could attack Desdemona at any time.

Most of Desdemona's initial responses to Othello convey her confidence in truth emerging to vindicate her. She several times indicates that the matter can be easily resolved if only Cassio can be produced. She asks Othello to "Send for the man" (*Othello*.5.2.49) and says, "Let him confess a truth" (*Othello*.5.2.69). The delay of Desdemona's knowledge highlights the vulnerability of her situation and makes more grievous her eventual discovery that truth has been subverted beyond the ability of simple solutions to fix. As Desdemona's calamity climaxes with her exclamation, "Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone!" (*Othello*.5.2.76), so too is the reader's sympathy for her distress brought to ripeness. The increasing desperation of her entreaties to Othello to preserve her life is also designed to induce pity. From Desdemona's proposal, "O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!" (*Othello*.5.2.78) to the denial of her simple plea, "But while I say one prayer!" (*Othello*.5.2.84) there is an increasing modesty to her requests. That Othello denies her even the smallest of them is a situation to induce pity. Desdemona's last

words further emphasize her victimization. Her statement that it is a “guiltless death I die” (*Othello*.5.2.121) emphasizes the wastefulness of Othello’s action. He kills her for her infidelity, but the spectator knows that she was never untrue. Desdemona’s statement makes more acute that awareness. Similarly, her taking the blame for her death, “Nobody—I myself. Farewell / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!” (*Othello*.5.2.123-124), regardless of whether her tone is bitter, loving, or both, strengthens the suggestions of the martyrdom of her “guiltless death.” That she, as such an honorable character, should die for such petty motives as those with which Othello and Iago are furnished induces pity.

Thus are passions raised by the play. In examining how they are then quieted to allow for cathartic relief, it is useful to look at the final scenes in which Desdemona, Iago, and Othello appear. Because they are the three characters in whom emotions are most deeply invested, their roles in the play must conclude in a manner that advances the purgation of strong feelings. The progress of the play’s conclusion in the handling of these three characters is a diversion of attention away from Desdemona and Iago toward redemption for Othello.

Desdemona’s death is paralleled and followed by Emilia’s, and, as in *King Lear*, the shift in focus to the less major character disrupts the effects of emotional response which the main protagonist’s circumstances merit. After Desdemona’s death, Emilia usurps her position as the martyr of truth. She cries, “Let heaven and men and devils, let them all/ All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak” (*Othello*. 5.2.19-20). The effect of Emilia’s death is captured in her final words: “Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor/ So come my soul to bliss as I speak true/So speaking as I think, alas, I die” (*Othello*.5.2.246-248). The reflection upon Desdemona’s circumstances returns to the wanton waste of Desdemona’s demise. When Emilia shifts the focus to herself, though, her virtuous soul and abbreviated life capture the attention of

the audience. Through diversion then is the emotional tie Desdemona forges with the audience unknotted.

The finale's treatment of Iago is also significant in its alleviation of emotional response. Iago's words have been such a primal source of distress in the play that his refusal to speak at the end effectively corks this source of emotive stimulus. Though Iago addresses his last lines to Othello and his captors, his statements have additional meaning for the audience. Unwilling as ever to suffer any disservice to himself, Iago says, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know/ From this time forth I will never speak word" (*Othello*.5.2.299-300). Here, Iago relinquishes his power over truth and lies. What the characters know, "they know"; he will make no more attempts to distort information. Indeed, with so much knowledge already exposed, his art has been crippled. The containment of his evil and the closing of the gap between what the audience knows and what the play's characters know provide a sense that the contamination which has so antagonized everyone, both in and outside of the play, has come to a halt.

Iago's silence also leaves the conclusion for Othello's redeeming speech. Though irreparable harm has occurred in the play, captured in what Lodovico later refers to as the "tragic loading of this bed" (*Othello*.5.2.359), one important element has yet been restored by the end: Othello's honor. Not only does Othello's recovery mark the end of the behavior that so excites contempt, but it also cycles neatly back to the beginning, enforcing a sense of the play's self-containment. Othello had learned to rationalize like Iago and basely hid himself from the corruptness of his own conduct. By the end, he sees more truly, exclaiming, "O fool! Fool! Fool!" (*Othello*.5.2.319), after learning the true account of how Cassio came to possess his mother's handkerchief. "Fool!" is a sentiment which resonates with the spectator, who has known all along that Iago misled Othello and who has been able to do justice to the dismay incited by the

error of Othello's beliefs. Again, the coming of a character into alignment with the audience's perspective pacifies the anxiety caused by the former discrepancy.

Othello also returns to his own principles about right and wrong. Toward the beginning of the play, Othello indicates the slant of his beliefs when he refuses to hide from Brabantio. He tells Iago, "I must be found/ My parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly" (*Othello*.1.2.29-31). Othello, before his ensnarement, believes, much like Desdemona, in the guiding power of truth. After he wakes up to his folly, he seems to come back to this idea of justice. He seems keenly aware of his fall, as indicated by his rhetoric when he is disarmed by Montano. Othello remarks, "every puny whipster gets my sword/But why should honor outlive honesty? /Let it go all" (*Othello*.5.2.241-243). His perception of the world has returned to one in which integrity is rewarded and iniquity is punished. His death, too, seems to occupy a place in the pre-Iago world that was familiar to Othello. Again, the idea of justice comes into play. In his final act of suicide, Othello proclaims, "I took by th' throat the circumcised dog/And smote him—thus" (*Othello*.5.2.351-352) and stabs himself. Othello becomes his own arbiter and administers justice upon himself. Curiously, even as Othello punishes himself for the wrongs he has committed, he is also rewarding himself for taking responsibility. As he had said to Iago earlier, "I'd have thee live/ For in my sense, 'tis happiness to die" (*Othello*.5.2.286). Othello's world has returned to one of cohesive justice: murder is punished by death, and honor is rewarded by the end of one's suffering in this single act of suicide. Othello's death very neatly concludes his trajectory and actually marks an upward turn in the tragedy's arc, though the pathos of his last words, "No way but this/Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (*Othello*.5.2.354-355), is still heartbreaking. Othello's purgative death offsets the audience's sense of the tragic world, which disconnects them from the emotional heaviness of the play.

The situation is further stabilized by Lodovico, who portions out duties to everyone, tying up loose ends. Gratiano receives Othello's property, Cassio governs Cyprus, and Lodovico is to return home to report the events of the tragedy. That the play ends on this reference back to the play further draws it into a circle upon itself, allowing the audience to leave it and pick up again the linearity of real life. Having Othello end on the action of reporting also complements the mood that catharsis generates: reflective on the tragedy and tranquil, for no new events are introduced. The ending of *Othello* eases emotional ties, resolves the calamity, draws the play together, and strikes the balance between gravity and peace so that the audience's passions are left behind with the play's unfolding. The relief and pleasure that come of this disconnect are catharsis.

In *Othello*, one finds pleasure in the idea of tragedy portrayed in this play, in the virtuosity of character representation, in the indulgence of intense distress, and in the cathartic relief that follows. In *King Lear*, however, pleasure occupies a very different niche, in which delight arises from the skillful arrangement of characters and dynamics. Using these two plays to view woeful pleasure, one discovers that multiple theories of tragic enjoyment are, in combination, useful to analyzing the delights of any one Shakespearean tragedy. One also becomes increasingly aware that the complexity of tragedy is such that no single theory can adequately encompass all tragic pleasure.

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