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Close Reading: *Othello*

Shakespeare wrote and produced many plays in his lifetime, one of which was *Othello*, about a black moor, Othello, who falls in love with and marries a woman, Desdemona, without her father's permission. After a short fiasco with her father, a man named Iago, who has a grudge against Othello and a man named Cassio, starts trying to turn Othello against his wife by making him think she is having an affair with Cassio. In the end, Othello suffocates Desdemona and feeling such grief for killing her, he stabs himself when he learns it was all a trick.

Though it was only a small part of a much bigger plot, I thought the passage when Iago and Roderigo told Brabantio that Othello and Desdemona got married was a good show of Iago's character and of how oblivious Roderigo is to Iago's plans. It was also interesting because it was a completely made-up scene on Shakespeare's part, considering neither Brabantio nor Roderigo were characters in *The Hecatommithi*, Shakespeare's source for main plot. This passage was a seemingly insignificant subplot, though it foreshadowed the main plot of the play.

The passage started when Brabantio appears at a window in his house after being woken up by Iago and Roderigo yelling and trying to get his attention to make him think his house is being physically robbed. "What is the reason of this terribly summons?/What is the matter there?" These lines from Brabantio show his anger from being woken and his cluelessness as to his daughter's sneaking out and getting married. His first hint that something involving his family has occurred is when Roderigo replies, "Signior, is all your family within?" and Iago

seconds, “Are your doors locked?” Iago and Roderigo are trying to build the tension for Brabantio by making him think they aren’t one hundred percent sure that something happened, only that their trying to warn him that it could have. Shakespeare then leaves a long pause for Brabantio, probably to show his ponderance of what has happened and his worry that it involves his family. He then asks, “Why, wherefore ask you this?” This signifies that he is ready for the truth and to act upon it (Shakespeare).

Iago’s next short monologue shows his true character. He makes Brabantio hurry and get ready by insulting him, though he does it in such a way that it looks as if it was Othello who insulted him. “Zounds, sir, you’re robb’d; for shame, put on your gown;” He immediately insults Brabantio by acting astonished while telling him he’s been robbed of something and then telling him he better put clothes on before he shames himself. “Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul;” This line is Iago telling him how he should feel about this robbing before he even says what he has been robbed of. “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tuppung your white ewe.” The word “Tuppung” is essentially referring back to his calling Othello a “ram” because according to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, “tup” means “esp. of a ram: copulate (with).” (Brown v.2 p.3422) These lines are like a slap in the face to Brabantio, because not only has he told him that his daughter is being “plowed” by a black man, but this is the first mention of what has actually happened. He tells him in such a way that makes Brabantio immediately feel hatred and racism toward his daughter’s new husband. It also shows Iago’s feelings toward Othello, though later in the play he acts as a friend to him, showing his moral fakeness. “Arise, arise;/ Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,/ Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you:/ Arise, I say.” Here Othello calls Brabantio to action, telling him that if he

doesn't wake up and rally the town, Othello will impregnate Desdemona, fueling Brabantio's future fire. He also insults Othello again by calling him "the devil" (Shakespeare).

Brabantio then pauses again, as to show that he either is confused or infuriated, which is then confirmed for both when he says, "What, have you lost your wits?" Roderigo and Brabantio then go into Brabantio's finding out who Roderigo is, then leading to his revealing that Roderigo has been there before, to try to court Desdemona. "The worser welcome:/ I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors;/ In honest plainness thou hast heard me say/ My daughter is not for thee; and now, in madness,/ Being full of supper and distempering draughts,/ Upon malicious bravery dost thou come/ To start my quiet." Here he tells Roderigo that he's told him before not to wander around his house, and that he can't have his daughter, and yet he insists on coming back to wake him up. It shows Brabantio's frustration with Roderigo and shows the reader that Roderigo is also infatuated with Desdemona (Shakespeare).

This passage is essential to the plot and subplots of *Othello*. It is important to one subplot because it is the rising action, occurring just before Brabantio takes his anger to the Duke and trying to get Othello persecuted for "stealing" his wife. It is also important to another subplot, because it shows Roderigo's "love" for Desdemona, which is what makes him work with Iago to try to cuckold Othello. More importantly though, it is essential to the main plot because it sets the scene and tone of how Iago will act throughout the rest of the play. He seems to have no boundaries when trying to put an idea in someones head, and he continues with it as the play goes on. He even goes as far as to kill his own wife in the end to prove a point.

Works Cited

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