

Othello's Fainting as a Point of No Return

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In Act IV, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Othello faints when confronted with the possibility that his wife has been unfaithful. Through the past few scenes, Iago, exploiting Othello's concerns about his race, has performed a delicate act, slowly but surely leading him towards the inevitable conclusion that his wife and [Cassio](#) have 'cuckolded' him. When Iago finally refers explicitly to Desdemona's sexual betrayal, Othello can bear it no longer and faints to escape the reality he cannot bear.

From the outset, Othello has been uncomfortable in aristocratic Venetian society. He has deep insecurities about his ability to fulfill his role as Desdemona's husband, both sexually and socially. Othello is elated when he realizes that beautiful young Desdemona is attracted to him since he perceives himself to be unworthy of her love, primarily due to his old age, physical unattractiveness, and most importantly because he is a black [Moor](#). Thus, his realization of his racial identity figures prominently in his mindset. Sexually, he fears being unable to satisfy his wife's desires; for it would be only natural for her to, having sealed the vows of marriage, seek a [companion](#) more like her. For he is "rude [...] in speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (1.3:81-2), most unfit to wed the

daughter of the noble senator Brabantio[1]. Thus, he makes it clear that he prefers the military atmosphere to the aristocratic civilian one.

While Othello has thoroughly internalized his concerns regarding his marriage, shrewd Iago is able to perceive and exploit them. Iago's villainous brilliance is manifest in his ability to take himself into Othello's confidence. The relationship that develops between the two is of great significance. Iago is most careful to avoid explicitly accusing Desdemona of adultery until the time is right. Instead, he gradually weaves the thought into Othello's mind so that Othello is able to independently arrive at the same conclusion. While initially Iago exhibits deference and fear of his king, the power dynamic progressively shifts so that the two become almost equal allies in an unholy conspiracy. Othello, at one point, is almost thankful to Iago for revealing to him the truth, declaring that "I am bound to thee for ever" (3.3:218). Iago reciprocates in the next scene upon being appointed lieutenant, vowing "I am your own for ever" (3.3:482). Especially in this scene, Iago can be seen as representing Satan himself, inducing good Othello to err thereby securing a vow of loyalty from his servant.

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