“Whereby Hangs a Tale”: Narrative and the Deconstruction of the Self in Othello

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If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence.
- Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*¹

At the center of William Shakespeare’s *Othello* lies a series of competing narratives, narratives that are also simultaneously ways of thinking about narrative. If we read *Othello* through this narratological prism, we can see that Othello envisions himself as created through an act of narrativizing. Othello establishes his history, his life, and his continued existence as products of a continuously self-told narrative. His position as the subject in his story, though, is destabilized by the time we arrive at the play’s conclusion, since his self-perception has been progressively undermined by Iago’s expressive hodgepodge of generalization, gossip, silence and repetition. For Iago’s disruptions of Othello’s tales are themselves narrative acts; not only are they transmitted through speech but they work to destabilize otherwise coherent and transparent systems of storytelling. By the play’s violent climax, Othello’s ability to narrate his own story has become so overtaken, so fragmented, that even at he struggles to come to terms with his loss of identity and narrative authority even at the moment of his death.

The importance of narrative to *Othello* has already been touched upon by several critics, most prominently Stephen Greenblatt, but also to a lesser extent by Peter Stallybrass, Jonathan Goldberg, James L. Calderwood, and Rawdon Wilson. While this essay will necessarily respond to their critical efforts, I hope to continue where those critics have faltered in assigning narrative a new prominence and value in the play. Greenblatt, Stallybrass, and Goldberg see narrative as a perspective on the “true” troubles present in *Othello*, be it Christianity’s unstable positioning of race and gender (Greenblatt), class and bodily anxiety (Stallybrass), or suppression of feminine...

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voice (Goldberg). All three bring intriguing dimensions to the study of *Othello*, but they falter in failing to see the complexity of narrative as a framework in its own right. A wider exploration of the way narrative functions in *Othello* will not simply grant us a perspective on historical currents; it offers a new reading of *Othello* that puts narrative at the forefront of the play’s psychological, political, and philosophical challenges and implications.

Narrative in *Othello* cannot remain, any longer, a path by which we come to “deeper” realizations regarding about racism, misogyny, xenophobia, etc. While those components are elemental to the play’s effects, narrative is its own perspective and problem, producing a series of paradoxes in its own right; it is essential to understanding dramatic character and meaning, rather than being solely a window into the historical subtexts and contexts informing those concerns. To answer, for example, why Othello falls so quickly to Iago’s machinations, or to explain why Othello’s sense of trauma at the play’s conclusion is framed in the language of storytelling, we must turn to narrative as both a tool in the construction of identity and a way of viewing the world. And so an examination of narrative acts in *Othello* is not only intriguing, but essential, in both broadening and focusing a reading of the play.

In seriously considering narrative as an epistemological framework, I share greater affinities with the critics Rawdon Wilson and, especially, James L. Calderwood. Their thoughtful analyses of, in Calderwood’s case, narrative speech acts and properties in *Othello*, and, in Wilson’s, narrative in the broader context of Shakespearean drama, treat narrative as a category in its own right, and their examinations are invaluable to the serious reader of Shakespearean narrative. While I am indebted to those writers, I will attempt to extend and exceed parameters of their criticism by examining the precise nature of these narrative speech acts as substantial

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2 To thusly sum up these powerful arguments might seem glib, but, for example, Goldberg’s comment that “My concern is genre, gender, and power” is indicative of the critical trend wherein narrative is merely the instrumental means for arriving at ultimate interpretive revelations (119).
features of the play’s central conflicts and conundrums. While both Wilson and Calderwood meaningfully examine narrative as concept in Othello, I would argue that my reading returns us to the key sites in the text that focus narrative as center of Shakespeare’s theatrical design, demonstrating that Othello is a play that not only involves narratives, but is fundamentally about narratives. If, as Peter Brooks says, “Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative,” in Othello that narrative presence ceases to be subconscious, subtle, or unspoken (Brooks 3). Rather in the conflicts of the play, particularly among Iago, Brabantio, and Othello, narrative functions as psychological warfare, as each character uses varying subtle and complex views of narrative to confront the world and its collection of Others.

Examination of the play’s verbal performances yields four key Iagoan mechanisms that work to deconstruct Othello’s narrative perspective. Though these forms, generalizations, gossip, silence, and repetition, are basic narrative structures themselves, Iago employs them in conjunction to destabilize Othello’s rigidly linear view of narrative. As such narrative functions in Othello as a series of structures that undermine each other. It is a complex category of speech acts and performances wherein each element must receive individual attention. And it culminates, in the play’s final act, in an anxious confrontation with the threat of an endless, eternal narrative.

I. Othello’s narrative: “I ran it through.”

In order to understand how Othello becomes vulnerable to Iago’s distortions of narrative, and how his ultimate fear is exposed as a fear of an endless, recursive narrative, we must establish exactly how narrative works for Othello. We can define Othello’s narrativizing perspective as “monological,” taking J. Hillis Miller’s view that “the line image, in whatever
region of narrative terms it is used, tends to be logocentric, monological...Narrative event follows narrative event in a purely metonymic line, but the series tends to organize itself or to be organized into a causal chain” (Miller 18). Othello is prone to such reciting of events, but as Miller points out the line compromises itself, as does Othello’s narrative mentality. In constructing a self through a monological narrative predicated on linear developments in time, Othello must always tell the story up “to the very moment.” He must always take on both the past and the present, always be narrating, creating a narrative cycle that he comes to find incompatible with a desire to fashion a stable order of beginnings, ends, and transformations.\(^3\)

Initially, Othello’s sense of place is relatively stable, in keeping with the seeming stability of his narrative. But there is early a suggestion of this stability’s fragility, not only in Brabantio and Iago’s claims that Othello is an “erring barbarian” and “an extravagant and wheeling stranger / of here and everywhere,” but in Othello’s own conception of space (1.1.151-2, 1.3.398).\(^4\) Othello positions himself as fixed, located in a specific time and place, but with the subtextual suggestion that the attempt at localizing will be unsuccessful, at the very least a source of anxiety. And so his claim upon first appearing on stage that “I must be found” suggests an anxiety about that finding, just as the claim “But that I love the gentle Desdemona, /I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / for the sea’s worth” suggests radically different meanings; namely, due to the conditional “would,” the confining is either past, present, or hypothetical future (1.2.28-31). Othello is already, or always threatening to be, “confined,” even as he defines himself in opposition to Iago’s indiscriminate view of space, the same character who intimates that there is no distinction between “Venice” and “a grange,” between a wife and a whore (1.1.119).

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\(^3\) For example, from Muslim to Christian, single to married, Turk to Venetian, etc.

\(^4\) This, and all subsequent references, are to the Folger Edition of Othello. New York, 1993.
In addressing Brabantio and attempting to clear his name, Othello promises to “a round unvarnished tale deliver / on my whole course of love” (1.3.106-7). His opening speeches are full of the subjective first person (“I” and “my”); indeed, Othello makes his I a character in his own narrative of self. His tendency toward grand speeches, never delivered alone, as opposed to Iago’s frequent asides, makes Othello’s rhetorical trademarks ones that distance him from the audience. If Iago is allowed to open and, in a sense, close the play (by controlling its conclusion through silence), his asides are equally powerful in letting him control discourse and audience response. The out-of-place Othello, by contrast, is never permitted an aside to either himself or the audience; unlike Iago, he must insist on his “I” but can never look at, or talk to, himself. As Benveniste reminds us, the “I” depends on a “you” to respond, to listen. Thus Othello is never left alone onstage; it would be unbearable, impossible for his speech acts. Even in 5.1, after his murder, Desdemona’s body accompanies him.

Clearly from the play’s beginning Othello’s narrative project, one that distinguishes Othello’s body from the bodies of others (and dismisses the physical bonds between Desdemona and Othello by muting his desire), contradicts itself. For Othello’s narrative depends on Desdemona’s ability to corroborate it with her own narrative, her own retelling of the same events, despite the position she holds as object within his own narrative: “Let her speak of me before her father” (1.3.136). The stable, individual narrative Othello wishes to construct is always undermined, always de-totalized, by those objects that threaten to become subjects in

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5 Benveniste observes that the I actively constructs the man in the speech act: “I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker... It is by identifying himself as a unique person pronouncing I that each speaker sets himself up in turn as the ‘subject’ (226). It is in the act of speaking I that I, and thus Othello’s identity, is created.

6 For example at 2.3.356, when Iago asks, pointedly, “What’s he, then, that says I play the villain?”

7 Harold Bloom writes, of Othello’s sense of self, that “his sense of himself is very large, in that its scale is vast, but he sees himself from afar, as it were; up close, he hardly confronts the void at his center” (Bloom 445).

8 Benveniste clarifies that not only are I and you dependent in construction of language (“The person being addressed ‘you’ can thus be defined as the non-I person”) but that they are reversible (“The one whom ‘I’ defines by ‘you’ thinks of himself as ‘I’ and can be inverted into ‘I’) (Benveniste 201).
their own right. Or indeed, vice versa, and so the brief mention of being “sold to slavery,” which turns Othello back into object, is hurriedly glossed over, replaced with the possessive “my redemption thence” (1.3.160). In talking about himself, in making his I both a subject and an object, Othello always jeopardizes the desire to be fully subject, to speak the uncomplicated I, the biblical “I am that I am.” Since Othello’s narrative is a narrative of “I” as subject, it is no wonder that he touches again and again on the fear of becoming an object in and of public discourse. Yet his tale to the Senate is one delivered on command, at the cry “Say it, Othello” (1.3.148). If the tale is life, then the command that makes it an object (an “it”) already threatens Othello’s writing of self-as-subject.

Defending himself against the risk of objectification, Othello searches for a narrative that cannot be copied: “little of this great world can I speak / more than pertains to feats of broil and battle” (1.3.101-2). He insists that his discourse consists only of what he himself has seen; only the “feats of broil and battle” that he has participated in. His speech cannot take in elements of the narratives of others, nor (Othello suggests) can he invent or falsify. Desdemona may, indeed must, corroborate Othello’s narrative but she must speak it for herself, from her own recollection of experience.

In narrating his own tale, Othello insists on a sense of fullness and completion (a “round unvarnished tale,” “my whole course”). He later recalls how Brabantio

still questioned me the story of my life
From year to year – the battles, sieges, fortunes
That I have passed. / I ran it through, even from my boyish days
To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it (1.3.150-154)

Othello, like Rousseau in Peter Brooks’ formulation of self-construction in narrative, sees “the question of identity” as one that “can only be thought of in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back over it to record its perpetual flight forward”
And so Othello offers to tell his story “from year to year,” allowing his listeners to partake in a life they did not experience, and whose recollection exists only for Othello. Furthermore the tale told “from my boyish days / To th’ very moment that he bade me tell it” reflects Othello’s fixed, stable narrative; in his “effort to tell a whole life” (as Brooks puts it), Othello embraces a certain trajectory, one that begins with the “boyish days” and ends at the present moment where he recites his tale, for now those moments are “passed.” Indeed, in saying “I ran it through,” Othello implies that there is a traceable path of progression to be taken through this narrative (1.1.98). Othello believes in speech as a performance with predictable acts and responses: he knows his “cue to fight,” his “hint to speak,” (1.2.103, 1.3.165).

This rhetorical strategy to fashion a “whole” tale that begins and ends creates a body for Othello with a sense of firm boundaries, a complete, classical body opposed to the physical disruption of desire. The classical body “emphasizes the head as the seat of reason, transcending the ‘merely’ bodily” (Stallybrass 124). Othello’s language of perfected completion (“I must be found. My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / shall manifest me rightly,” “I will a round unvarnished tale deliver / on my whole course of love”) repeatedly defines speech as not merely reflection the product of the body, but involved in its creation (1.2.35-37, 1.3.106-107). In saying that his speech is round, whole, and perfect, Othello implies that (since his speech is a direct reflection of his life), his body is so, and created so through delivering that “round tale”. While Othello’s body will radically return in 4.1, emphasizing the orifice, for now Othello insists on its suppression: “Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not / to please the palate of my appetite, / nor to comply with heat (the young affects in me defunct) and proper satisfaction, / But to be free and bounteous to her mind” (1.3.296-300). Othello wishes to see those “young affects” as

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9 See Peter Stallybrass, in “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” who identifies the grotesque body, in contrast to the classical, as emphasizing “those parts of the body ‘that are open to the outside world,’ ‘the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus...the anus” (124).
located in the past, and so in referring to them they are parenthetically enclosed, separated (for him), even if his audience cannot hear the distinction. His tale is predicated on being now a Christian, now part of Venetian society that, as Greenblatt demonstrates, located masculinity in libidinal repression. Iago will remind us of Othello’s “redeemed sin,” noting that only love for Desdemona could cause him to “renounce his baptism” (2.3.363). Iago will later insist on the reversal of this trajectory, from heathen to Christian, from tamed sexual “beast” to angry “ram,” and from perceived conclusion (the successful marriage) to a resurgent beginning (as Desdemona becomes rhetorically a daughter rather than a wife) (1.1.97, 1.1.130).

The past and the “now” are never separated; they are always a part of Othello’s life-narrative. Yet his desire to see them as distinguished, to see those “defunct” appetites belonging to youth and those “boyish days” solely as the material that constitutes narrative’s recollections, rather than a barely-suppressed past ever-intruding into the present, brings about Othello’s undoing. Iago is able to suggest that Desdemona is always a whore, always a daughter, because she was once, and that Othello is always a barbarian, because he was once. The narrative predicated on distinctions in time and place cannot survive this assault on the fantasy of temporal, and psychological, lucidity through narrative mastery. Desdemona’s narrative construction of the self is, by contrast, radically opposed to Othello’s linear narrative. As Iago will suggest with his emphasis on the present, and Othello actively resists, Desdemona is aware of the potential for narrative to become tangled, for multiple temporalities to exist in one body, and for that plural existence to be liberating. And so she says “You are the lord of duty. / I am hitherto your daughter,” and yet simultaneously “So much duty as my mother showed / to you...I may profess / due to the Moor my lord” (1.3.213-218). Desdemona embraces the potential for multiple times, multiple identities, and multiple loyalties to exist at once in her voice and body;
in contrast to Othello's oratorical "I," "you" and "your" fill her speech. Her "divided duty" is very literally divided: between time and place, subject and object. And yet in confronting this division, Desdemona is able to accept it, to shift seamlessly between subject and object, to say "I am hitherto your daughter" without losing a sense of self. While her later exchange with Emilia may appear naïve or idealistic (especially in her "Willow scene," 4.3), this speech suggests a remarkable complexity to Desdemona's view of the self, the self that can be mother, daughter, and wife simultaneously. And yet ironically Iago will exploit that very complexity, suggesting to Othello that Desdemona is all of those things, and at the same time a whore, a master of "obedient" guises, to bring about Othello's destruction.

In concluding his speech, Othello remembers "My story being done," on which occasion Desdemona "gave me for my pains a world of sighs" (1.3.183). The prize for a successful narrative performance for Othello is literally "the world," a world composed of breath and speech ("sighs"). Yet he does not realize that the story is never done, that if his life and identity are constructed in and through the act of narrativizing, there can be no end to the tale. The story that he wishes to tell, from beginning to end, is always at risk. The link between story and life suggests that the story can only end with death, while by contrast narratives told by others will be continued endlessly, going beyond the points of individual death. Othello the storyteller does not realize what Walter Benjamin reminds us, that "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death... it is the natural history to which his stories refer back" (Benjamin 94). Othello's fear of the eternal, which Benjamin connects with the storyteller's rapport with death, is subconsciously present in his very act of storytelling, becoming an attempt to resist death through a narrative of life.
II. Generalization: “Fond old paradoxes.”

One of Iago’s chief tools in his deconstruction of Othello’s narrative is generalization, the narrative of the other told on the grand scale. As 2.1 unfolds, we can see the powerful way that generalization works to destabilize not only Othello’s narrative of self but also the boundaries that allow him to distinguish Desdemona from other women. As Iago collapses Emilia, Bianca, and Desdemona into the sweeping category of “woman,” proceeding to suggest that “woman” can mean both whore and wife simultaneously, Othello must confront the fear of being not an individual body but, as Roderigo laments, “not like the hound that hunts, but one that fills up the cry” (2.3.384-5).

What do we mean in saying “generalization”? The Oxford English Dictionary defines the concept in several ways. To generalize is literally “to make general,” as well as “to form general notions by abstraction,” and “to render the typical or general characteristics rather than the individual peculiarities” (OED, generalize).¹¹ In Othello, the most relevant definition is the idea of creating general categories through the abstraction of individual examples, as Iago does in creating assumptions regarding female bodies. Though Othello must rely on generalizations, reflected through his use of eschatological imagery, to support his attempt to enter Venetian society (with Desdemona standing in for Venice itself), he also believes in the potential for the individual narrative.¹² And so James Calderwood’s claim that Othello is “a Platonic idealist” is followed by the qualifier that he “believes in the reality of abstractions...he naively assumes that even the most ethereal of words are bonded to their meanings and that their meanings are bonded

¹¹ There is also an intriguing evocation of Othello’s fear of Desdemona’s body, and the handkerchief, entering circulation, with the definition “to bring into general use, to make common or familiar, to make generally known.”
¹² Peter Stallybrass writes that “It is only if woman is differentiated by class (and race) that Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is significant... The prescribed transgression of romance is the displaced condition of Othello’s legitimation as Venetian. But that prescription of transgression can only be defined in relation to the proscription that it breaks” (135). Namely Desdemona must at once stand in for Venetian status, and be willing to sacrifice that status in her relationship with Othello.
to the things they represent" (295). Othello generalizes and yet insists on a reality behind those generalizations; he wishes to ground them in his own experiences and the meanings he assigns to words (a tendency to blend idealism and subjectivism that he admitted in his Senate speech).

The most telling use of generalization on Iago’s part comes in one of the play’s most dismissed scenes. The sexual banter between Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia in 2.1 has often given performers and critics alike a theoretical headache. By showing to the audience that, as he terms it, “the wine she drinks is made of grapes,” that Desdemona can appear (even if she admits that she is not) as impudent and salacious as Bianca, Iago entraps us in his rhetoric of generalities (2.1.273). Yet before he succeeds, he must establish a system of judgment based on generalities that allow us, even force us, to overlook Desdemona’s class, status, and behavior, and to see her only as “woman,” which in Iago's terms is simply another word for “whore.” Though it would be foolish to ignore the comedic purpose of this scene, which simultaneously builds anxiety (with the worry over Othello’s arrival) and deflates it (with its loose, vernacular banter), it is nonetheless a pivotal moment in the tragic design, and its apparent simplicity hides a deep current of narrative ambiguity.

In explaining why Emilia, his wife, is so willing to chide him, Iago reaches not for judgments based on his experience of her as an individual. Instead he jumps immediately into the sweeping category of woman.

Come on, come on! You are pictures out of door,
Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds. (2.1.122-125).

He insists on “you,” without specifying who that “you” encompasses, or where its boundaries end, following with a rhymed couplet that has the air of easy repeatability and little to do with

13 Stallybrass, for example, writes that in integrating Desdemona into its bawdy jokes, the scene has “consistently troubled editors” (Stallybrass 139).
Othello’s grand speeches: “‘Tis true, or else I am a Turk / You rise to play, and go to bed to work” (2.1.122-125) His project, to fuse entities as distinct as Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca in that simple “you,” begins with this rhetorical move. And in encouraging Desdemona to play along with his rhetoric, he forces the audience to see her as Othello will, as part of that category whose only bounds are the female body. By being at once “wildcats,” “saints,” “devils,” “players,” and “huswives,” the “women” Iago sees are without distinction as individuals or even as simple types (say, “the whore,” “the housewife”). Rather, like the word “huswife” itself, which has the potential to mean both housewife and hussy (OED, “housewife”), Iago’s rhetoric of the female body holds within it all of these potentialities simultaneously.

The strange temporality of these generalizations is striking; they are at once in the present tense (“There’s none so foul and foolish thereunto”), the past (“She never yet was foolish that was fair”), and the future (“She’ll find a white that shall her blackness hit”), with temporal lapses and contradictions contained in the same sentence, not unlike the play’s unsettling shifts of time and place. In contrast to Othello, whose narrative emphasizes a movement from first to last, from “boyish days” to “now,” Iago employs a temporality that actively resists linear narrative progress. He suggests that boundaries between class, age, or race are broken down, as is the temporality distinguishing past, present, and future women: all women at all times are always enacting the same, collective paths. They are all reduced all women to a shared she, referring to both muse and whore: “My muse labors, and thus she is delivered: If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit/ The one’s for use, the other useth it” (2.1.142-145, italics added).

Othello’s vulnerability lies in the paradox that Iago highlights: in daring to marry Othello, Desdemona has already shown herself to be suspect: “if she had been blessed, she would never
have loved the Moor” (2.1.274-5). Desdemona is always already under suspicion not only to Othello, but also to the audience. And in daring to love his wife so intensely, Othello has already shown himself an adulterer. Stephen Greenblatt writes that this awareness is explicitly framed through “the ambiguity of the third-person pronoun,” which allows Iago “to play upon Othello’s buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous” (Greenblatt 55).

The boundaries that should exist between wife and whore, husband and wife, and prostitute and client are collapsed; there is only man and woman, and all relations between the two are held (by Iago, and gradually by Othello) to be suspect.

Though Desdemona tries to resist these generalities by reminding Iago of the potential differences within the “woman” category (fair, wise, black, witty, foolish, married, unmarried), Iago finds each distinguisher unsatisfactory. When Desdemona offers “a deserving woman indeed” as contradiction to the universal “she,” Iago is able to subsume that individual into even more categories, each defined by impossible rules and standards. Here Iago’s generalized couplets function as an interruption of the discourse of individual bodies (Desdemona’s “What wouldst thou write of me?”) with neutral, general pronouns (2.1.131). Iago’s rhetoric, as we will see, often emphasizes these interruptions, gaps, and infiltrations. Desdemona notes the difficulty of resisting these interruptions, and shows surprising acumen, when she observes that “These are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i’th’alehouse,” emphasizing that these phrases are always public, always circulating (2.1.153-4). Iago recycles clichés and stereotypes, using commonplace assumptions about women’s promiscuity to make his slander of Desdemona believable.

Desdemona’s gendered existence proves her betrayal; no evidence of it is required.

14 For more on this, see Michael Neill’s “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello,” Greenblatt, and Stallybrass, who writes that “Because Desdemona is involved in that transgression, her status is necessarily made problematic” (135).
15 In reference to Iago’s claim to “abuse Othello’s ear / That he is too familiar with his wife” (1.3.438-9). Greenblatt aptly cites Saint Jerome in this context: “An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife” (68).
If this multiple "she" is deadly to Desdemona as individual, so too does Iago suggest a
generalized "he" that jeopardizes Othello’s sense of self. Iago suggests that "he" can mean a
multiplicity of men, and that ultimately Cassio, Othello, and Brabantio are interchangeable, all
sharing space in Desdemona’s body. And so already in the opening scene there is the pronoun
confusion of “Call up her father. / Rouse him. Make after him, poison his delight” (1.1.74-5).
“Rouse him” would appear to refer to Brabantio, “her father,” yet without adjusting the subject,
or employing Othello’s name, the sentence seems to shift to Othello, the one who “in a fertile
climate dwell[s]” (1.1.77). Brabantio and Othello, in the same sentence, occupy the same “he”
without distinction. The play repeats this masculinity identity loss continually, seldom featuring
Cassio and Othello onstage together, but rather trading one body’s position for another (as in 3.3,
when Cassio’s suit is immediately supplanted by Othello’s suit, as if one was interchangeable
with the other). Even when Othello falls into his epilepsy, he is actively prevented from seeing
Cassio, from looking and recognizing him as other, even though they share the same stage. This
slippage of male identity subtly suggests the play’s concluding anxieties, wherein Othello fears
turning into Brabantio. Emile Benveniste, in Problems in General Linguistics, suggests the way
in which the nature of the third-person pronoun here and throughout the play helps to destabilize
narrative. Benveniste writes that “the third-person is not a ‘person,’; it is really the verbal form
whose function it is to express the non-person...person is inherent only in the positions ‘I’ and
‘you’” (Benveniste 198-9). Iago’s use of these pronouns is deliberate. He reduces Othello to one
of innumerable third persons, all of whom become non-persons in their inherent absence.

This loss of self violently turns Othello against Desdemona. Immediately after Iago has

16 Indeed the play hinges on the idea of occupying spaces that are open to violation, from Brabantio’s house, which
he distinguishes as “not a grange,” to the titles conferred on the characters themselves, “lieu-tenant,” “en-sign,”
etc. Act 1.3 closes with the anxious question of Desdemona’s literal “place,” where her body fits now that she is
transitioning between daughter and wife.
suggested that Cassio is worthy of suspicion in 3.3, Desdemona makes the fatal mistake of suggesting that Cassio and Othello are one. Cassio “hath ta’en your part,” she says to Othello, reminding him that Cassio “came a-wooing with you” (3.3.81, 79). She continues, saying that a favor to Cassio on Othello’s part “is not a boon! / ‘Tis as I should entreat you...to do a peculiar profit / To your own person” (3.3.85-9). Othello’s body is Cassio’s; to help the lieutenant is to help “your own person.” Desdemona’s request emphasizes what Iago insists on: the body is not distinct, and the narratives we write of it (say, that Othello won Desdemona’s body through his own verbal prowess) already incarnate a multitude of contradictory narratives (that Cassio won Desdemona for Othello through his own body and performance). Othello’s response is pointed; he asks Desdemona “leave me a little to myself” (3.3.95, italics added).

Eventually Iago must acknowledge his use of generalizations; in doing so, he only strengthens their hold on Othello. Shortly after the critical confusion between Othello and Cassio, Iago suggests that Desdemona’s betrayal is inevitable:

Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereeto we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion thoughts unnatural.
But pardon me; I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
May fall to match you with her country forms
And happily repent. (3.3.268, italics added)

Iago again suggests that the story presented by Othello and Desdemona of their shared love is a common story, one that happens again and again, not with individual names but a story that “we see” again and again. Turning again to Benveniste, we see how “we” is simultaneously more and less than human, an assumption of collective knowledge: “we” is “an I expanded beyond the strict limits of the person, enlarged and at the same time amorphous...’we’ annexes an indistinct
mass of other person to "I" (Benveniste 203). Though Iago claims "I do not in position /
distinctly speak of her," that is exactly why his speech is so devastating. By speaking in the
general, "in position," referring to "one," "her," "such a will," without explicitly naming
Desdemona, Iago makes the same claim he did in 2.1: that all women are collapsible into shared
generalities. Iago’s distortion of narrative changes the story written by Othello and Desdemona,
altering the narrative trajectory until Iago’s anticipated ending (that Desdemona will "happily
repent") becomes written as fact, through what he depicts as assumed and common knowledge.

Thus Iago’s songs, which could resemble innocuous interludes, a pause before the
tragedy unfurls, are actually symptomatic of this view of shared, assumed discourse. Iago’s two
songs act to frustrate resolution and confuse the linear thread of action. The presence of a second
song further throws off the rhythms of the scene. Cassio here speaks for the voice that would
advance the plot, noting that to hear the song replayed again would be "unworthy of his place"
(2.3.105). Yet the songs are also inherently in public circulation. They lack an original author,
the "I" that Othello’s speeches insist on; they are rather a dramatic performance that allow Iago
to inhabit multiple selves simultaneously, as both narrator and actor. As opposed to
Desdemona’s Willow Song in 4.3, Iago’s songs have no personal histories, no links to individual
identity, though they similarly distort the progress of their respective scenes.

Since the songs rely on public discourse, they also rely on creating exclusions and
boundaries in that discourse. The first of Iago’s songs which distinguishes between “Your Dane,
your German, and your swag-bellied Hollander,” as well as “your English” (2.3.79-82). These
are broad categories, but they have no place for Othello, the wanderer, the liminal body that

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17 It is worth noting that Iago’s second song is part of a popular ballad, “Bell My Wife” (Folger edition footnotes).
18 Yet similarly Willow Song is a question of interruption. It is both interrupted (at 4.3.52, 4.3.54, and Desdemona’s
own admission at 4.3.57 "Nay, that’s not next") and interrupts the scene in which it occurs, bringing in distant
characters that seem at odds with Emilia’s straightforward concerns ("Shall I fetch your nightgown" is her response
to Desdemona’s contextualizing of the song) (4.3.35).
contains multiple nations and ethnicities. The vague, “erring” un-moored body of Othello cannot fit into these categories, and so despite the narrative Othello has written of himself which would allow him to join Venetian society, Iago suggests to both the audience and the play’s other characters that Othello’s attempt is doomed. Iago clearly compares only Western European “types,” and his next song emphasizes again a series of distinctions that both eliminate the individual and exclude Othello’s attempt to become “the general” of the Venetian polity. Iago has already compared all women to a “wight” in his couplets at 2.1, as he does here with King Stephen (2.1.173). Reducing even the King to “a wight” (though one “of high renown”), the song seems to uphold class distinctions only to suggest their fallibility.

The sheer number of maxims, generalizations, and proverbs used by Iago is nearly beyond tallying. What links these expressions is the shared absence of an individual subject, the repeated insistence on a generalized “man” or “woman.” Since Iago’s voice is, as Stallybrass says, “the voice of the ‘common sense,’ the ceaseless repetition of the always-already ‘known,’ the culturally given,” these assumptions are all the more exclusive (Stallybrass 139). These “fond paradoxes” bear the heavy burden of cultural and popular authority. The popular maxim, aphorism, and generalization allow Iago to rework the narrative of the individual, with its potential for progress, into the space of public knowledge. In that space, Othello always remains outsider, place-less; his narrative of progress becomes lost in the shared cultural knowledge of Iago’s rhetoric. This assumption of general knowledge brings us back to Benveniste, who says “use of ‘we’ blurs the too sharp assertion of ‘I’ into a broader and more diffuse expression”

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19 Some particularly relevant examples include, to Cassio: “Men are men; the best sometimes forget” (2.3.266). He repeats this sentiment, saying that “You or any man living may be drunk at a time, man,” the repeated use of “man” insisting on the fundamental lack of division between men (2.3.332-3). And to Othello, he claims “Poor and content is rich, and rich enough; / But riches finessless is as poor as winter / To him that ever fears he shall be poor” (3.3.202-204). Again, the subject of the sentence is vague, even absent in the first phrase (“Poor and content is rich, and rich enough”).
When it comes to this generalized “we,” the same voice of cultural authority that Iago calls upon in his judgment (which prominently lack the “I”) is the one that risks loss or “diffusion” of identity for speaker and subject.

Desdemona tries to combat these generalizations by employing the very distinctions that once made her appealing, and so she is not a strumpet because she is a Christian, defining her body as one preserved “from any other foul unlawful touch” (4.2.94-97). But just as Brabantio once claimed that “This is Venice. My house is not a grange,” and Iago countered his “Thou art a villain” with “You are a Senator,” the potential for generalization undoes the capacity of normative logic to define A as not B (1.1.119). If the distinctions between individuals are dismissed, then creating an identity based on those distinctions is condemned to fail. Othello has moved so far past these hierarchies of class and reputation that he can no longer see Desdemona as an individual herself. She has become “that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello,” wherein “that” emphasizes only distance and a well-known, recognizable object (4.2.105). Desdemona is so shaken by this generality on Othello’s part that she lapses into the rhetoric of identity confusion herself, asking “Who is thy lord?” before declaring “I have none” (4.2.119). She can only respond to these generalizations with absence and silence.

III. Gossip: “He takes her by the palm.”

If generalization is the narrative of the other writ large, then gossip writes that narrative on an individual level. Gossip as a category of narrative puts the individual body into the public discourse. It also repeats individual contexts of speech in a new frame (for example, repeating a speaker’s narrative I as an overheard claim by a third-party). It offers agency to the teller of gossip, allowing them to rewrite the actions of others, but in a way that does not (or does not
admit to) creative invention. According to writer and theorist Patricia Spacks, gossip "claims other people's experience by interpreting it into story...telling stories takes possessions of others’ experience" (Spacks 11). Namely, gossip is not, at least explicitly, fiction, but rather the "interpretation" of previously made statements and actions. It is a genre-bending transgressor, always identified as at best "idle," at worst "subversive," even deadly, from the Renaissance to the modern day. Gossip reduces the potential for an original narrative, its currents of speech transmitted from one speaker to another so often that it cannot be traced back to the source; clearly it has an effect on Othello's own anxieties about possession and authenticity. It is no coincidence that Alexander Gonzalez describes Iago's rhetorical technique as "infectious," spreading from Iago to the play's other characters. Gossip requires this ceaseless, anonymous spread of discourse, undermining Othello's idea of the individual self as constructed through narrative, by suggesting that Othello's grand speeches can be repeated ad nauseam, resituated as grotesque prose vernacular.

In some ways Iago is already gossiping, even in talking about himself; the multiple, contradictory messages he delivers (on the theme of reputation, for example) as well as his constantly redefined motivations cause Iago's speech about himself to resemble speech about others. Iago not only gossips about himself, but overhears his own gossip, and in the process

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20 Both Spacks and Bernard Capp, in his work, *When Gossips Meet*, elaborate on the etymology and historically negative reception of gossip. Spacks demonstrates that the Elizabethan sense of "gossip," used by Shakespeare some 8 times, refers to a type of person rather than a type of speech (for more on etymology, see Spacks 25-7). The gossip is, in early modern England, typically female, prone to "idle talk" (Capp 7). The Oxford English Dictionary goes further, noting the now obscure meaning "one who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at a baptism," as well as "a woman's female friends invited to be present at a birth." Iago's proclivity for images of birth, particularly the language of midwifery, situates him as a gossip in multiple terms. Gossip's links to femininity make it a dangerous form of discourse for contemporary writers, and so "Women's talk was stigmatized as gossip not because it differed in character from men's, but because it was perceived as the subversive behavior of subordinates" (Capp 63).

21 For more on Iago's "infectious" imagery, see Alexander Gonzalez, "The Infection and Spread of Evil."
convinces himself of his beliefs. In 1.1, since we see Othello through Iago’s malicious gossip about the general, we confront expectations in our minds that are not overcome until (potentially) the arrival of Othello himself. These racialized assumptions require the anonymity of the third person. Othello becomes not an individual with a name, but “his Moorship,” “the Moor,” “the thicklips” (1.1.35, 42, 72). Indeed in discussing Desdemona, Roderigo suggests her body is equally depersonalized, becoming “your daughter,” “she,” rather than “Desdemona”; her name, like Othello’s, is completely absent from the scene. Barthes was right to see this element of gossip as a threat to the self, saying that “Gossip reduces the other to he/she...The third person is a wicked pronoun: it is the pronoun of the non-person, it absents” (Barthes, quoted in Spacks 22). Thus Iago embraces a narrative gossip with the audience as well as the play’s characters.

Gossip rewrites the possibility of another’s “I” by retelling an individual’s story in the third person. And so in 1.1, in describing Desdemona and Othello’s actions, Iago is able to rewrite their story in a new context, depicting them as monstrous animals (“the beast with two backs”) (1.1.130). Indeed, Iago goes further, rewriting Brabantio’s narrative as a father, actively re-interpreting his own life for him: “For shame, put on your gown! You have lost half your soul. / Even now, now, very now an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.94-98). Here Iago identifies the loss of “half your soul” as public (hence the use of “shame,” and the encouragement to “put on your gown” so as to be fit to confront gossip’s public face). And Iago, the master of gossip, is able to detail all this without using the “I,” insisting instead on control through “you” and “your,” which in turn eliminates Brabantio’s potential to counter with a narration of his own life. In contrast to Iago, Roderigo attempts to situate this gossip in a less anonymous capacity, asking “Do you know my voice?” and saying “My name is Roderigo”

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22 And so he says, with no one to overhear but himself and the audience, “That she loves him, ‘tis apt and of great credit” (2.1.309).
(1.1.103,105). Iago is literally unable to tell his own story, whereas Roderigo seems compelled to. Brabantio again looks for the identity that would deprive this discussion of its anonymity: “What profane wretch art thou?” but Iago deflects with the same choice of words that will define Othello in his suicide: “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you” (1.1.129, italics added). And so 1.1 demonstrates for us a model of gossip in the play that removes the “I” voice, rewrites the narratives of others, suggests a public, anonymous discourse, and simultaneously alters the individual distinctions established around bodies.

Iago reconfigures narratives through gossip throughout the play, until eventually Othello internalizes this rhetoric. When Iago speaks of Othello and Desdemona to Roderigo, he claims “Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies” (2.1.243-5). Iago is able to fashion Othello’s divine narrative of transformative love into “bragging,” to rewrite Desdemona’s sublime passion as “violence.” And yet the danger of gossip is that it retells a singular story with new suggestions and intimations, for Desdemona herself once described her love as “violence” (1.3.284). But removed from that original context, the words themselves have lost their original referents. In the process of redefining discourse through gossip, Iago actively defines the route that the lovers’ narrative will take, rescripting their lives so intensely through gossip that he predicts a new conclusion: “Her eye must be fed...Her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor” (2.1.246-255, italics added).

In 2.1, the encounter between the newly arrived Cassio and Desdemona is forcibly rewritten before our very eyes by Iago’s gossip. Iago’s aside here functions as a spatial distinguisher, allowing Iago to rewrite Desdemona and Cassio as absent “he” and “her” even as they remain on stage: “He takes her by the palm” (2.1.182), turning an innocent gesture into
something obscene. That same gesture is “an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust” (2.1.279-80). Here Iago’s gossip reduces Cassio and Desdemona to mere characters contained within a index; their lives are nothing but a tale to be told, and Iago alone possesses the text.23

Yet this radical rewriting is more than a rhetorical trademark on Iago’s part. It creates an immediate, visceral response in Othello; without gossip’s revisioning of narrative, Othello’s sense of self would not be so threatened. Immediately after warning Othello that he cannot produce visual evidence of Desdemona’s betrayal, Iago begins his repetition of Cassio’s dream, a moment of gossip that becomes for Othello a critical proof, turning him from suspicious (“Give me a living reason she’s disloyal”) to certain (“I’ll tear her all to pieces”) (3.3.466, 490). Iago places Cassio in the third person (“In sleep I heard him say”), repeating a narrative that we know to be imagined but Othello thinks to be fact. Othello is excluded even within the play through this fiction; we and Iago share in the knowledge of the dream’s falsehood, but Othello believes it. Speech is essential to Iago’s undoing of Othello’s stable mentality: it takes multiple forms, including the “muttering” that allows Iago to report on Cassio as well as the variety of oral expressions (sighing, kissing, crying, saying) in Iago’s invention of Cassio’s narrative, even in the alleged toothache that awakes Iago (3.3.472-4). It is not merely that Cassio seduces Desdemona; it is that he verbalizes it ceaselessly, his mouth always open. Through this retelling, Iago suggests that gossip (and this is explicitly gossip, the repetition of overhearing passed along in a chain of information) is as valuable as first-hand evidence. It is not simply that Othello falls

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23 Similarly he recalls in act one: “For ‘Certes,’ says he, ‘I have always chose my officer.’ And what was he?” (1.1.17). Because we are watching a drama, we cannot know where the quote ends and Iago’s own speech begins again. Iago thus becomes a sort of playwright, taking on reassigning lines at will. Benveniste writes: “If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing I, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a quotation in which I could be imputed to another” (224). By quoting from others, Iago eliminates the rhetorical distinctions between various speakers.23
due to his desire for "ocular proof," as is so often claimed. It is rather that he falls for Iago’s narrative mentality of gossip, and comes to believe that ocular proof is not needed – or rather, that distortions of that proof, such as gossip and hearsay, are adequate stand-ins.

By the play’s end, Othello has come to see gossip as an inescapable part of his public identity. He eventually discusses not simply his own narrative, or Desdemona’s as it relates to his, but that of “that cunning whore of Venice / that married with Othello” (4.2.104-5). Not only has Othello’s identity become confused, but he has also come to see his and Desdemona’s bodies as publically narratable, inevitable objects of discussion. The emphasis on “that whore of Venice” implies that the narrative of “that whore” is one already in circulation and thus recognizable. Hence his final speech is in many ways merely an elaboration of existing currents of gossip. Here Othello chooses to assume this web of gossip: “When you shall these unlucky deeds relate...then must you speak / Of one that loved not wisely, but too well” (5.2.401-4). There is no “if” to this sentence, only the assumptive “when,” and no “should,” but “must.” Othello might be trying to control how his body will be publically discussed, but that does not affect his knowledge that such discussion is inevitable; all he can attempt to do is guide it in his absence. Othello interprets the line uttered by Lodovico, “What shall be said to thee,” as “What shall be said of thee?” for he replies with “Why, anything. / An honorable murderer, if you will” (5.2.346). This final, bloody act confronts Othello’s acceptance of the destructive, deadly role that gossip inevitably plays in determining narrative, where it reduces the story of self to “anything,” wherein one’s legacy left behind is not a history of individual actions, but the stories that others tell.

24 For more on the "ocularity" of the play, see Neill’s “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello.”
IV. Silence: “I never will speak word.”

Muriel Saville-Troike, writing in Perspectives on Silence, claims that “Just as with speech, silence is not a simply unit of communication, but is composed of complex dimensions... Just as one can utter words without saying anything, one can say something without uttering words” (4-6). It is an illustrative reminder that, just as the delivery of speech matters as much as its content, so too does the nature of silence matter. Indeed, speech and silence are invariably linked in Othello; the play’s first line is both interruption (“Tush!”) and call to silence (“Never tell me”), explicit rejections of the speech act, particularly the speech act of another.

As with gossip, Iago’s silences (and the play’s silences) turn us into Othellos and Roderigos. In insisting on what is kept off-stage (consummations, arrivals, naval battles, etc.), the play “persistently goads the audience into speculation about what is happening behind the scenes” (Neill 396). The play has its own silences, its own empty questions and echoes, which allow us to write meaning into those silences just as Othello reads into Iago’s gaps and pauses. The play reminds us constantly that, like Othello, we cannot see what we most desire to (“Where’s satisfaction? It is impossible you should see this”), that there is always an absence in the narrative, both visual and verbal (3.3.458-9). Silence in Othello requires us to see presence in absence, as it both resists the linear narrative and creates gaps in speech acts.

A play whose time scheme and spatial movements are notoriously difficult to follow Othello insists on what is left out and silenced for audience as well as characters, and critically, what is interrupted, be it speeches, bodies, or actions. In comparing the uninterrupted night

25 Michael Neill, for example, refers to 17th century critic Thomas Rymer, who observed “ludicrous inconsistencies between what the play tells the audience and what verisimilitude requires them to believe” (395-6). For Rymer, regarding the marital consummation, “The Audience must suppose a great many bouts, to make the plot operate. They must deny their senses, to reconcile it to common sense” (395). Othello’s temporal and spatial ambiguities are such that even Iago and Cassio cannot seem to agree on the time. Iago asks “You have not been abed, then?” to Cassio’s pointed reference, “In happy time, lago” (3.1.32-33). Cassio replies, as if with surprise, “Why, no. The
before Cassio and Montano’s brawl to a “bride and groom divesting them for bed,” Iago mockingly reminds Othello and the play’s audience of the interrupted marital chamber the general has been forced to leave (2.3.192-3). Iago’s claims remind the audience of the constant interruptions and violations of the marriage bed, intruded upon first by Brabantio in 1.3, and now by Cassio’s drunken fight. Indeed Iago’s speech is fixated on the present interrupting a progressive view of time and narrative, his ever-present “Now, now, very now” (1.1.98). In 2.3, he taunts Othello with the “now-ness” of the brawl’s discord, remembering “Friends all but now, even now…and then but now…in opposition bloody,” with “but” interrupting Iago’s own dialogue (2.3.191-3). These periodic interruptions, like the periodic gaps in the play’s speech, fragment and distort Othello’s narrative of temporal progress.

Indeed *Othello* as a text insists on this blend of absence and presence through expectation and deferral, and in reading into the gaps that come before answers and events. As a text it privileges anticipation over delivery; Othello fantasizes that “the profit’s yet to come between me and you,” living in the metaphorical silence before this “profit” (2.3.12). We do not know whether Othello’s marriage is consummated, but in the act of delaying or questioning that consummation, the play produces anxiety and uncertainty. There is a complex desire for and anxiety over deferral and delay, mirroring Othello’s own anxieties. It is the “unknown fate” and “destiny unshunnable” that drives Othello to madness, the expectation of an end that must come, and yet has not arrived (2.1.209, 3.3.316). Cassio is not the only character to confront anxiety over anticipation, noting that waiting will cause Othello to forget him and that he “would not be delayed” (3.4.132). And yet *Othello* is full of such waiting and anticipation, for Othello to arrive...
from sea or Emilia to finally reveal the truth of Iago's betrayal in 5.2. This deferral directly allows Iago to manipulate Othello through the gaps and pauses we have seen him employ in 3.3. For Othello content is unimportant, rather anticipation, the act of covering more than what is covered, is deadly. Hence his belief that "'Tis better to be much abused / Than but to know't a little," as well as "I had been happy if the general camp, / Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known" (3.3.386-7, 394-5). And so in his machinations, Iago instructs Othello to delay further: "Leave it to time...if you please to hold him off awhile / you shall by that perceive him and his means" (3.3.289-290). Delay here works as another kind of silencing, resisting answers and narrative progress altogether.

In the play, literal silences work both to oppose narrative resolution and to represent the "holes" in both speech and Othello's body. The text itself creates a narrative of silence and interruption that frustrates our own search for resolution and progress. In 2.3, silence first begins to actively work as a contagion, thereby opposing narrative resolution. Iago begins his cry for help with repeated, stuttering utterances: "Help, ho! Lieutenant - sir - Montano - sir - Help, masters!", and a few lines later "Lieutenant - sir - Montano - gentlemen" (2.3.166-8, 177-8). Iago interrupts himself, refusing to speak in complete sentences, letting the gaps in his phrases emerge. He continues to say, when questioned by Othello, "I cannot speak / Any beginning to this peevish odds" (2.3.196-197). Iago frames his refusal to speak as objection to narrative through silence, which will later repeat in his closing lines. And so Iago rejects "any beginning" to the event, again manipulating Othello's desire for causality and trajectory.

Iago's interruptions spread so insidiously that they turn this entire scene into an anti-narrative farce, with multiple characters suddenly resistant to narrative through silence. Only a few lines after

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27 By contrast, Othello's early claim "I cannot speak enough of this content / It stops me here" is silence because of an excess of content (both happiness and matter), rather than the reading of presence into absence, or a resistance to narrative (2.1.214-5).
Iago says “I cannot speak,” Cassio parrots him exactly: “I pray you pardon me; I cannot speak” (2.3.201). Notably this statement comes in response to Othello’s search for a cause-and-effect scenario that would allow for the linear re-tracing of events: “How comes it, Michael,” he asks “you are thus forgot?” (2.3.200). The silence spreads even further, and through the social rank: from Iago to Cassio to Montano, who claims

Your officer Iago can inform you,  
While I spare speech, which something now offends me,  
Of all that I do know; nor know I aught  
By me that’s said or done amiss this night (2.3.209-214).

As Iago and Cassio before him, Montano resists speech in a way that further frustrates Othello’s search for linear, progressive narrative. He imitates Iago’s rhetoric of gossip or, at the very least, a narrative told about one by another (“Your officer Iago can inform you”) in lieu of speaking on one’s own (“While I spare speech”). Othello naturally resists and continues in his search for a beginning to the story: “Give me to know / How this foul rout began,” “Iago, who began’t?” obsessively emphasizing “began” as origin (2.3.223-4, 231). Tellingly Cassio sees Othello’s disgust as caused not only by his appearing “drunk,” but also in “speak[ing] parrot” and “discours[ing] fustian with one’s own shadow,” showing a distrust not only of repetition but of distorted speech, speech that splits the self (2.3.298-300).

Thus this passage identifies several key elements of silence in the text: it questions agency, frustrates narrative trajectory, and employs gaps and pauses in its construction. If this early play of silence frustrates Othello, later developments of silence in the text, particularly those in 3.3 and 4.1, violently exploit the potential for the absence of silence to create presence. In employing gaps, stops, and pauses, Iago forces Othello to enter into Iago’s own narrative, to write a narrative that uses the ensign’s words, where the potential writing of the self is seemingly
eliminated. Namely, if in 2.3 silence opposes the understanding of narrative; in 3.3. and 4.1 silence begins to pervade Othello’s own speech, marking a devolution into a pre-narrative state.

For Othello, Iago’s silences speak: “These stops of thine fright me the more,” he says (3.3.139). The gaps in Iago’s musings, the pauses that prevent his gossip from becoming a linear, “perfect,” controlled narrative, are the true threat to Othello’s system of self-knowledge and awareness. The “stops” not only disrupt narrative flow, but also cause Othello to take on Iago’s tendency toward generalizations: “In a man that’s just, / They’re close dilations working from the heart / That passion cannot rule” (3.3.140). Iago’s silences are generative because Othello writes into their absence, but within Iago’s framework. By the mere suggestion of absence, Iago creates presence, presence that Othello is able to infer. The echo, the silent repetition creates the “monster” for Othello. Hence Othello’s desire for finding presence in absence creates the mental “image” that undoes him.

By the scene’s end, the “stops” that so disturbed Othello’s straightforward narrative have become present in his own speech. Othello begins to doubt not only himself, but to doubt his doubts about himself, saying that “I am declined / Into the vale of years – yet that’s not much –” (3.3.306). This critical gap represents an interruption of the speaking self by the self en abîme; we see something of the multiple selves that characterize Iago’s speech. No longer reflecting on and retelling the past, Othello is now narrating the doubts of the present. And so at the scene’s conclusion Othello’s identity, as articulated through his capacity for speech, is as fragmented as his discourse. Iago’s pauses, gaps, and silences, represent the infiltration of a “whole,” “classical” body (as we have seen, Othello manifests a clear desire for a “perfect,” complete
body) through the “grotesque” degeneration of speech acts. It is no coincidence that Lodovico uses the language of puncturing when referring to Othello’s fall, identifying his former condition as one of “solid virtue,” that “shot of accident nor dart of chance / Could neither graze nor pierce” (4.1.299-301). Iago “pierces” Othello’s sense of a classical body, in emphasizing the grotesque parts, the holes, that are open to violation and production. Turning briefly to the handkerchief, we see that Othello initially asks for the napkin because of a “salt and sorry rheum” that plagues him (3.4.58). The rheum is discharge, discourse; the perforated male body seems to be leaking from all orifices and can only be plugged up through the handkerchief, through an act of covering.

Othello’s epilepsy is thus an interruption, a nonverbal gap in the play’s narrative, and Cassio’s appearance (unseen by Othello, despite the audience’s awareness of his presence) demonstrates a gap in Othello’s own vision. In this epilepsy, the initial rhetorical “stops” of 3.3 have blossomed into a fully non-verbal state. It is a far cry from Othello’s magnificent opening speeches, his “Put up your bright swords” speech to the stuttering of his epileptic fit: “What? What?” he cries, before interrupting Iago’s own discourse: “Lie – With her?” (4.1.39-41). Iago fragments the discourse even further, suggesting that the possible options the sentence can take (“With her – on her – what you will”) all lead to the same linguistic conclusion, that harrowing “what you will.” Here Iago lets the silences between words speak, slipping between seemingly opposed meanings. For if “with her” and “on her” are equal, then the only difference standing between gossip and obscenity is a preposition: Is it “with” or “on?” Othello asks. Or, perhaps more unnervingly, would that make a difference? Iago passes his interrupted speech onto Othello, who parrots back, in his first speech in prose:

28 Stallybrass quotes, from Rabelais and his World, Bahktin’s his comparison between the “grotesque” and the “classical” bodies, noting that the grotesque is “unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” while the classical is “an image of ‘finished, completed man’” (124).
Lie with her? Lie on her? We say ‘lie on her’ when they belie her. Lie with her – Zound’s, that’s fulsome! Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief. To confess and be hanged for his labor. First to be hanged and then to confess – I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips – is’t possible? Confess – handkerchief, - O, devil!(4.1.42-52)

Calderwood claims that in this speech, Othello “is caught up in the low material stuff of speech, the carnal body of sounds devoid of sense” (297). While it is illustrative to see this passage as a retreat from speech, we can go further. Clearly gaps and pauses pervade the speech; at its conclusion, it is nothing but gaps, notably lacking any subject at all in its final sentence. The reference to the orifices “Noses, ears and lips,” the spaces that take in and exude speech, come at a fitting time: in the middle of a projection of pauses and gaps themselves. The various “holes” cited by Othello are the holes in the body that mirror the holes of his speech, the vulnerable spots, the leaking, the empty. And so Othello’s first reaction to Desdemona’s treachery is the desire to “chop her into messes,” to fragment her body just as her (alleged) adultery has fragmented his life, his narrative, and his speech (4.1.219). The mind, the body, and speech are so intertwined (as Lodovico’s “O bloody period!” at the play’s end addresses the simultaneous close of Othello’s speech and of his life) that we cannot be sure if the “stops” so frightening in Othello’s speech are symptomatic or causal of his dissociation (5.2.418). After all, the frequency of gaps and pauses in this scene starts with Iago (“But if I give my wife a handkerchief –“) and spreads throughout the conversation from there, accumulating pauses until we come to the very moment of multiple, disjointed realization, the epilepsy. There we see Othello no longer reciting the stable narrative of self but falling apart into epilepsy, a convulsion indicative not only of silence, but of a reversal into his former, Muslim condition.29 The narrative once predicated on

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29 Stephanie Moss writes, “Christian revision of Mohammedanism labeled its founder an epileptic rather than a prophet, connecting the convulsive physical manifestations of epilepsy to Mohammed’s paroxysmal contact with
development and change through time is now completely overthrown: “First to be hanged and then confess,” Othello observes, in an Iagoan temporal reworking of a popular contemporary proverb (As indicated by the Folger edition, page 172).

And so Iago’s silence, which concludes the play, represents more than an epistemological resistance; it represents a resistance to narrative itself. If Iago is to remain the menace he has been, he must remain silent, continue in the audience’s mind, and yet to resist providing any narrative closure. In one way, Iago’s famed declaration of “I am not what I am” is more than an oft-cited reversal of a Biblical proclamation. It is a reversal of the idea of self-awareness through speech, of the storyteller’s capacity to create and define himself through language. “I am not what I am” is Iago’s way of making his speech an act of silence and absence; if he has to speak, he will do so through an absence that ultimately deconstructs his identity. The circle of silence that runs from the play’s opening (“Never tell me”) to Iago’s expression of discord between self and speech (leaving the “truth” somewhere in the silence in between) to his final conclusion creates a ring of silence, one that leaves the narrative where it began: a silent, barren plane where the bodies being discussed are incapable of response (due to either absence or death).

In the face of this narrative resistance, Lodovico, like Othello, tries to reassert narrative order. Yet he fails, because in the absence of a parrot, be it Roderigo or Othello, there is no substance left to Iago’s speech. The master of repetition, of empty phrases without weight, must be silent if there is no figure left to repeat his words. And so he responds to Othello’s question (mediated through Lodovico, as if Othello cannot himself directly confront Iago) “demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?” with the infamously elusive “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak

the angel Gabriel. Epilepsy in Othello, then, alludes to the founder of Islam and thereby becomes a cultural marker of the Moor’s degeneration from Christian warrior into the infidel” (Moss 159-60)
word" (5.2.355). And unlike Desdemona, whose claim “I cannot say ‘whore’” inevitably undid itself, Iago stays true to his (final) word (4.2.190). Iago’s rejection of speech is an outright rejection of the narrative of the self, a refusal to become a subject rather than an object, an acknowledgment that, faced with no other means, the only way to resist narrative is to resist speech entirely. His resistance is troubling not only to Othello, but to the forces of authority themselves who, as Othello once did, search for the trajectory, the path that they can follow from beginning to end. The forces assailing Othello’s mentality, Iago suggests, are such that the only way to overcome them is to remove the narratable: to kill Desdemona, the whore who is “belied” and whose transgressions cause Othello’s loss of reputation, of occupation itself. Even in feigning reassurance of Othello, Iago suggests the extent to which the general will necessarily become a public spectacle: “Patience, / Or I shall say you’re all in all in spleen, / And nothing of a man” (4.1.102-4). To whom Iago will say this, Othello need not know.

V. Repetition: “I would have it copied.”

If Othello’s narrative relies on both singularity and presence, on being the tale that he himself, and only he, can tell, we see how repetition threatens and undermines that narrative. As J. Hillis Miller writes, “Repetition might be defined as anything that happens to the line to trouble its straightforward linearity: returnings, knottings, recrossings, crinklings to and fro, suspensions, interruptions” (Miller 17). In both repeating and causing Othello to repeat, Iago draws out and uses this fear of the troubled line. Indeed, repetition has undermined all of Othello’s narrative efforts since the play’s beginning. In his speech to the Senate, Othello remembers that Brabantio “oft invited me / still questioned me the story of my life” (1.3.149-50). Brabantio calls upon Othello to repeat his narrative, and so in retelling how he told it, Othello is
narrating about narrating a repetition. Thus the potential for narrative to undermine a story that posits itself as original, authentic and unique is already inscribed in the play.

But by act 3.3, repetition becomes contagious and explicit, as Othello becomes unable to tell his own – or any story – in a linear fashion. After several repetitions, including “indeed,” and “honest,” which Iago uses to position himself as object to Othello’s mind, letting Othello think himself the narrator (with Iago as merely an echo of his own thoughts), Iago follows Othello’s “What dost thou think?” with the seemingly innocent “Think, my lord?” Othello then parrots Iago’s speech directly back to him, without modification, even including the “my lord” at the end of Iago’s sentence. With this seemingly simple repetition, Othello has lost the part of himself that relied on rank, on the ability as a superior to tell his own story to Iago and to those around him. “My Lord” has become a free-floating signifier, applied equally to both Othello and Iago and thus useless in distinguishing the two. With the simple echo of “Think, my lord?” Othello has revealed his vulnerability to Iago’s verbal manipulations. Furthermore, he has highlighted a fear that will become obsessive; just as “think, my lord” as phrase collapses in on itself, losing a sense of origin and conclusion, so too will Othello come to express his murder of Desdemona as response to ceaseless, recursive narratives.

Even more critically, Othello’s following speech is consumed by second-person pronouns, with “thee,” “thou,” and “thy” supplanting “I” and “me.” Intriguingly, Othello retells the story of the events immediately preceding his speech, repeating Iago’s repetitions, copying a copy, with his statement “And when I told thee he was of my counsel...thou cried’st ‘Indeed?’” (3.3.127-8). Othello, whose initial narratives featured a retelling of not only his entire courtship, but indeed of his entire life, now is reduced to retelling the moments which occurred immediately before his speech, with Iago (rather than the general himself) at their center.
Furthermore by using quotation, Othello is forced to take on Iago’s rhetoric directly, a repetition that prevents the audience from distinguishing between Othello and Iago. Iago’s repetitions, his seemingly empty questions, create a framework of narrative within which Othello must act, though he imagines himself the master of his own meanings. As he searched for presence in the absence of silence, so Othello thinks that “thou echo’st me / as if there were some monster in thy thought / too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean / something” (3.3. 121-124). It is only through the echo that Othello first sees that monster, and from it he draws the conclusion “Thou dost mean something” (3.3.124). The vagueness of that “something” means that the path cannot be followed; we are tracing a web of suggestions wherein neither Othello nor Iago say explicitly what they mean, precisely because their repetition of each other forces them to avoid explicit meaning.

Reading repetition as a center of Othello’s anxieties allows us to redefine the handkerchief, not as a sentimental object, but a symbol of the powerful fear of repetition. The napkin comes to represent the fear of a narrative that can be “taken out,” repeated in a new context by a new voice but that, simultaneously, gains meaning only in being repeated, since “the second, the repetition, is the origin of the originality of the first” (Miller 15). The handkerchief is fundamentally based in repetition, in the passing through generations, thus mirroring Desdemona’s own claims to legitimacy. And yet Othello insists on its oneness and its irreproducibility, showing both how Othello relies on the concept of the self-directed narrative, and how that narrative undermines itself. There is, in Othello’s construction, “magic in the web” in the handkerchief’s fabric, endowing it with qualities that should make it impossible to copy (3.4.81). The handkerchief does not accumulate value through time (for Othello); for him it creates value for itself in its construction. Othello’s insistence that its loss would be something
“nothing else could match” emphasizes again this singularity (3.4.79). Furthermore the handkerchief creates a narrative with defined parameters, an outlined beginning and end that covers all potential options (loss leads to dismissal, possession leads to continued love). Problematically, in the act of transmitting it, of repeating the first act of giving with a new recipient, the handkerchief will lose its value (according to the narrative that accompanies it). And yet the handkerchief is already predicated on transmission from owner to owner.

With its “spotted” strawberries reminiscent of the spotted wedding sheets, the handkerchief is a simultaneous link to the marriage bed and the death bed (3.3.494). It is a repetition in its own existence, the repetition that Othello will enact in transforming (or rather re-transforming) Desdemona’s wedding sheets to death sheets back to wedding sheets; the sheets, like the handkerchief, contain multiple temporalities at once, all predicated on the act of spotting them with blood, blood that is the blood of the virgin in the act of losing virginity. There is thus a paradox inscribed into the handkerchief; Othello wants it to be unique, but it gains its true power in the act of being lost; before that, it is almost ignored. Emilia is only acquires it after Othello dismisses it as “your napkin,” saying it is “too little” (3.3.330). And so Emilia calls the handkerchief “a thing,” while Iago dismisses it (with a bawdy innuendo that further derides it) as “a common thing” (3.3.345-6). Even to Othello, Iago suggests that the handkerchief is nothing special, that the pattern of giving it away is inevitable and common: “But if I give my wife a handkerchief…” (4.1.13). That handkerchief becomes Iago’s, and male bodies trade places yet again. The narrative Othello is telling becomes the narrative Iago could himself potentially tell, making it his own (if I give my wife...). If gossip resituates old speech in a new context, so too does Iago’s repetitive interpretation of the handkerchief.

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30 For more on the handkerchief's weighted sexual connotations, see Neill's "Unproper Beds," which emphasizes the connections between the bed sheets and the handkerchief in terms of the play's drama of display.
Yet if male bodies lose their singularity through repetition, the handkerchief equally jeopardizes female individuality. The Egyptian and Othello’s mother are both subsumed into “her,” within the same sentence. The doubling of mother and charmer mirrors the doubling of Desdemona and her mother once again. The narrative of Desdemona and Othello is woven into the narrative (“And bid me, when my fate would have me wived / to give it her. I did so”), but it becomes simply a repetition of another narrative, the narrative of Othello’s parents, and before that the narrative of the maiden’s bodies. If the handkerchief insists on being unique, it also insists on a pattern of narrative transmission that is only a repetition of what has come before. In later insisting on the mummification and preservation of Desdemona’s white body, Othello merely re-enacts those same maidens, mummified into stillness, inscribed into the handkerchief itself. Indeed the play’s very insistence on “copying,” on “taking the work out,” situates the anxiety surrounding the handkerchief not only as one of possession, but of repetition. To “take out” is more than to copy; it is a further iteration of the play’s drama of place, of being removed or excluded out of place, suggesting that in the act of copying something is fundamentally lost, taken out, of the original. Emilia inadvertently reveals that the handkerchief is itself an erotic copy or substitute for Othello: “She so loves the token...that she reserves it evermore about her / to kiss and talk to” (340). If the handkerchief is unique, different from other tokens, the play’s obsessive repetition of its copying (repetition and copying that, notably, only happens through speech, and never through action) throws that uniqueness into question. And if Iago’s rhetoric is “infectious,” so too is the handkerchief itself, passing through characters linked through desire like a communicable disease: “She gave it him, and he hath giv’n it his whore” (4.1.195-6).

Ultimately Iago, and the play itself, is able to use repetition as a tool, not only to let Othello write

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31 The claim to “take out” or copy the work occurs four times, mentioned by Cassio, Bianca, and Emilia, at 3.3.340-1, 3.4.204, 3.4.217-8, and 4.1.174
meanings into absences, but to undermine the repetitive structure of Othello’s narratives, showing that they are anything but singular.

VI. The Loop: “Chaos is Come Again”

Having deconstructed the monological, linear nature of Othello’s narrative view, Iago is able to bring out Othello’s ultimate fear of the recursive narrative that folds in upon itself. Iago’s proclivity for distorted temporalities leads to a final vision of closure in the play that is no closure at all, where the past and present are always interwoven and where linear progress is impossible. The repeated language of failed narrative closure in the final act (including Iago’s final silence) and repeated images of unstoppable generation situate the play’s conclusion as anything but conclusive or comforting; its ending is not an ending, but rather an extension of Othello’s anxiety. Othello’s fear is not only that chaos will come, but that it has always been there, that “chaos is come again” and again (3.3.102).

Despite a resolution that actively resists closure, 5.2 shows a deep investment in the search for an end to narrative: for both Othello, who needs Desdemona’s public exposure to conclude, and for the audience, whose heightened sense of approaching tragedy must be resolved. In attempting to create a “fixed” Desdemona, a still, white, virginal, handkerchief unspotted with strawberries, Othello is trying to finally break the repetitive cycle he fears, to conclude with a body incapable of generation; if every woman either is or is about to become a whore, naturally the only solution is to preserve her in a state of virginity, but to do so requires her death. Othello obsessively enacts, indeed repeats, this fear of betrayal, noting that Desdemona “must die, else she’ll betray more men” (5.2.6).  

Indeed Desdemona’s Willow Song directly foreshadows this anxiety, in the gender-reversed admonishment that “If I court more women, you’ll couch with more men” (4.3.60-2).
only being part of a cycle of men, but for the betrayals other men will face, situates this anxiety as a temporal; the concern is not Othello as victim, but the endless “more” men she will betray in the unknowable future, those whose masculinity will be determined by Desdemona’s infidelity.

The problem confronting Othello is that Desdemona is “The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up,” (4.2.69-70). Without reproduction through Desdemona’s body, the line dies (“dries up”), but reproduction is so contaminated, and so predicated upon acts of repetition, that it only causes revulsion in Othello. And so the toads Othello imagines inside the “cistern” of Desdemona’s body will not only “gender” (reproduce), they will “knot,” entangling themselves so intricately that they cannot be untangled (4.2.71-2). And so the image of the “summer flies” is an image of ceaseless, horrible generation, of animals that “quicken even with blowing,” that are impregnated as soon as they give birth, an indistinguishable mass of grotesque reproduction (4.2.77). Just as the “beast with two backs” was a monstrous distortion of human reproduction and a faceless signifier that stripped Desdemona and Othello of their individuality, so too do Othello’s images of generation express a fear of a body with no beginning and end, a narrative that will “curve back on itself, recross itself, tie itself in knots,” (Miller 6) a fear created thanks to Iago’s anti-monological suggestions.

If the line becomes a “knot,” tangled, then it is impossible to trace a path through it. There can be no narrative that, like Othello’s, is predicated on a sense of stable distinctions in time and place. Is it any wonder, then, that we see in Othello an obsessive fear not only of the repetitive narrative, but of the narrative that actively collapses in on itself, forming a recursive loop? Iago played upon this fear early, suggesting that Desdemona “recoiling to her better judgment, may fall to match you with her country forms / And happily repent” (3.3.276-278).

33 And so Othello refers to the “strong conception / That I do groan withal” in the act of murder, using language of childbirth (5.2.69-70).
The fear is not merely that Desdemona’s behavior with Othello was transgressive, but that it is not a conclusion; the marriage that opens the play will not conclude it, and so what looks like closure is just a pause between turns, before the repenting that rewinds the narrative yet again.

Indeed Othello’s “bordello” fantasy, predicated on Desdemona’s “obedience,” a word that once signified a positive value, insists on her ability to “turn”:

Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,
And turn again. And she can weep, sir, weep.
And she’s obedient, as you say, obedient.
Very obedient — Proceed you in your tears. —
Concerning this, sir — O well-painted passion! —
I am commanded home. — Get you away.
I’ll send for you anon. — Sir, I obey the mandate
And will return to Venice. (4.1.284-292).

Turning here implies not only faithlessness, but an endless loop: Desdemona can “yet go on / and turn again.” It is as though in the act of repeating each word, Othello ascribes to it a different meaning, with “turn,” “weep,” and “obedient” changing structures and significations with each repetitive utterance. In her “turning,” Desdemona rewrites Othello, causing him to say “I...will return,” and “I obey,” using the same language with which he accuses Desdemona.

The play’s final threats, Othello’s potential return to Mauritania, Othello and Desdemona’s return to Venice are suggested, but never delivered. The spectacle of this terrible return is, like much in the play, predicated on expectation and deferral, and hence without closure. Cassio himself is not ignorant of the way in which the final act represents not closure but reversal; it is an act “most heathenish,” one that turns Christians back into “heathens,” just as Othello’s epilepsy once suggested a reversion to Islam. Indeed even the handkerchief narrative appears reversed, phrased now as a gift from Othello’s father to his mother, as opposed to the initial depiction in 3.4 (5.2.257). So Othello’s frequent cries of “O” in the final act (prominently

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34 See 3.3.98-9, Desdemona: “Be as your fancies teach you. / Whate’er you be, I am obedient.”
35 Othello aptly concludes this speech with another anxious image of fertility (“Goats and monkeys!”) (295-6).
“O, O, O!” at 5.2.135, and “O Desdemona! Dead, Desdemon, Dead! O, O!” at 5.2.332) represent not only his name, not only a guttural, pre-verbal cry, but also the O itself, the ring, the circle, the hole, the feminine absence that loops upon itself without discernable beginning or ending.

In response to this anxiety over a narrative not based on linear progression, but a looping regression, Othello expresses a desire for stillness, for a period, for silence that represents the sealing up of a narrative gap. The claim that opens the scene (“Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars”) demands silence as a response to promiscuous generation (and hence the stars must not hear, because they are “chaste”). In confronting Desdemona, Othello repetitively insists on dictating the terms of Desdemona’s speech, of invoking a confession and determining where it will end: hence his “I say Amen” (5.2.72)\(^{36}\). Thus though Desdemona pleads for longer life, Othello has hit upon the conclusion he wishes to enact (“Being done, there is no pause”) (5.2.103). When he describes Cassio as dead, he chooses to say “His mouth is stopped” (5.2.91). For Othello silence and death are the same thing; both provide an end to Cassio’s life as narrative and to the narrative he allegedly told about his affair with Desdemona. He must attempt to silence Desdemona through “stopping,” smothering, since in speech she would “maks’t me call what I intend to do / a murder, which I thought a sacrifice” (5.1.79-80). She would actively re-script this story, as Iago had done, and more powerfully makes Othello “call” it, in his own words, something different.

Yet Othello will come to learn that the narrative is never “stopped,” as long as there are those to report it. When Othello speaks of Desdemona as being finally “still as the grave,” there is always the risk that “she stirs again” (5.2.118-9, italics added). Indeed, since the sheets in which Desdemona wraps herself are her wedding sheets, the deathbed is the marriage bed, the spotting of the death sheets a repetition of the (alleged) spotting of the marriage sheets. This

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\(^{36}\) Calderwood writes that ‘Amen’ represents the conclusion of a confession, the “conventional verbal seal” (302).
alleged act of closure, of death, of completion, is merely a ceaseless repetition of the same
generation and desire that caused it. And if Othello wishes to close up the body, to seal it in its
chasteness, then the recurrence of bodies speaking after death only remind us, like the holes of
Othello’s body that likewise once spoke, that it is impossible to “seal up,” to end, to conclude.
Desdemona, Emilia, Othello, and even Roderigo speak after their “deaths,” or the mortal wounds
that will render them dead. Desdemona and Roderigo actively make a return, even, from
appearing dead (“Even but now [Roderigo] spake / after long seeming dead”) (5.2.386-7). These
constant returns make the threshold between life and death not a finite boundary, but a permeable
line that always allows for more repetition, more continuation. And as Emilia repeats
Desdemona’s Willow Song, the repetition of language continues even beyond the death of the
individual (5.2.298).

Because he wishes to frame his murder as the end to a repetitive ring of events, Othello
chooses to see it as a radical event which causes the disruption of a natural cycle, be it generation
or cyclical rhythms. And so Desdemona’s murder should cause "a huge eclipse / of sun and
moon, and that th'affrighted globe / should yawn at alteration" (5.1.123-5). Desdemona’s death is
an “alteration,” a climatic point that breaks the natural rhythms of sun and moon, because cycles
and circles are so troubling to Othello’s narrative “line.” Shortly thereafter Othello links the
murders to “the very error of the moon, / She comes more nearer earth than she was wont / And
makes men mad” (135). Here we see the language of “erring” that Brabantio used obsessively in
connection with Othello and Desdemona, implying a similar break with natural law. 

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37 See 1.3.75, "For nature so preposterously to err..." 1.3.118, "That will confess perfection so could err/ Against all
rules of nature." It is also worth noting that, though Othello does not hear this, Iago describes him as an "erring
barbarian," shortly thereafter, taking his cues from Brabantio (1.3.398). Indeed Iago seizes on Othello’s meditation
on "And yet, how nature erring from Itself - " (3.3.268).
Similarly, though Othello insists on the language of “stillness” as a response to the recursive narrative, the links between the concept of “still” and “stone” with earlier uses in the text undoes this attempt. For it was Brabantio who saw Desdemona as “so still and quiet that her motion / blushed at herself” (1.3.113-114). Though Othello initially shrugged off Brabantio’s warning that Desdemona “has deceived her father, and may thee,” this fear is central to his anxiety over Desdemona’s betrayal (1.3.334). Indeed in 3.3, Iago insists upon Othello’s transformation into a new Brabantio, saying “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.238). He continues, saying “so young, could give out such a seeming, / To seel her father’s eyes up close as oak,” bringing in the language of closure and “sealing” that blossoms in the play’s conclusion. Desdemona unwittingly contributes to Othello’s marital and paternal anxiety. She once appealed to the Senate by suggesting that she was part of an eternal cycle, that she was merely reenacting the socially appropriate behavior her mother had enacted and her mother before her (1.3.209). Shortly before the final act, she sees herself as Othello will see her, returning to infancy even in the moment of adulthood, as a “young babe,” as a “child to chiding” (4.2.132). Desdemona’s progress from daughter to wife is impossible for Othello if she is always already still a daughter, still a wife, still a whore, always described in the present tense, permanently trapped in an endless cycle. If “turning” is the metaphor that dominates the fourth act, the entire second half of the play is nonetheless a kind of turning, a repetition of itself, replaying the same formulas, actions, and rhetoric that opened it.

Othello’s attempt to create a “bloody period” to these acts is a failure; his attempt to end gossip with silence only results in more stories told. The generation that should have stopped

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38 See: “I’ll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.3-5) as well as “Peace, and be still” (5.2.56), and “Still as the grave” (5.2.118).
39 It is worth noting the seemingly contradictory meaning of “period,” which suggests the inevitable failure of this attempt to enforce an ending. Phillippa Berry points out that “the older meanings of ‘period,’ from the Greek
with the plugging up, the freezing of the white body, never does stop, it simply mutates. And so though no children are born (indeed, *Othello* despite, or perhaps because of, its obsession with generation, is a strangely childless play) gossip and legends pass on, turning Othello from an individual who narrated his own life, narrated even the narrating of his own life, into a "one," an object, deprived of name and reduced to a repeatable public commodity. While Othello does accept the inevitable public consumption of his body (using both the language of necessity and, repeatedly, the pronoun of absence and example, "one") his final speeches also confront some of the temporal anxiety present in the final two acts. Yet Othello also views his death as an act occurring in the past, narrated by him in the persona of a glance, from the future, backwards. In the act of "smiting" he reenacts a historical event in the now but sees it as past because it will be told in the future.

Set you down this.
And say besides that in Aleppo once
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus (5.2.412-15)

There is some of Iago’s temporal confusion here in the sense of “once” set against the presence of the past tense verbs. And there is indeed identity confusion, with “a turbaned Turk” and “a Venetian” standing in as placeholders for meanings that we do not know: who is the Turk? Who is the Venetian? Othello, Iago, Desdemona? Or, more unnervingly, disparate identities of Othello himself? Othello’s I has become Iago’s empty I, for he can now declare “That’s he that was Othello. Here I am” (5.2.334). So, too, does the spatial confusion of the final speech, which

*periados*, included a going round or circuit, a cycle or period of time, and the orbit of a heavenly body...In this final chiastic crossing of ‘killing’ with ‘kissing,’ there is a suggestion that the tragic ending may simultaneously be read as another beginning” (118-9).

Shakespeare eliminated from Cinthio’s version of the story Iago’s daughter: “The Ensign had a little daughter, a child three years of age, who was much loved by Disdemona” (Shakespeare, Norton Edition, 156).

From 5.2.397-417, his final speech, Othello uses “one” in reference to himself four times.
occurs simultaneously in “Aleppo once,” referring to “Arabian trees,” Judeans, Turks, and Venetians, sharply contrast with Othello’s initial attempt to portray himself as a fixed body, one that “must be found” (1.2.35). Othello, the liminal body, the undefined “thing,” splits into multiple identities and bodies, as Iago suggests. Yet the resurgence of that “I,” as well as the insistence on the present moment, where “thus” becomes a performative act that does through physicality what it does in speech, suggests a final attempt to reassert the narrative I.

Othello once feared that Desdemona's body was to become that of a “public commoner,” and yet it is his body that is most readily reproduced in the Venetian mind (4.2.84). Lodovico’s lines that suggest closure actually only continue the threat that the story will go even further, in his offer to “this heavy act with heavy heart relate” (5.2.435). And so Iago's continued existence beyond the confines of the play, despite torture, despite chains, is a final victory for the mentality opposed to the narrative of the self. It allows Iago to both live on through the narrative of others, and fail to provide resolutions or answers. Fittingly, Gratiano’s lament at the play’s end, “all that is spoke is marred,” accuses not only Othello and Iago for their murders, but language itself, as inherently contaminated, deadly, “marred.” It offers no closure, no comfort, merely constant expectation, and deferral, the culmination of an anxious narrative always at war with itself.
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