

## Excerpt I from *Othello*

In the opening scene, Iago, a soldier under the command of Othello, a Moorish general in the Venetian army, tells a Venetian gentleman named Roderigo that he intends to get revenge on Othello for deciding to promote another man to the rank of lieutenant rather than Iago himself.

### Roderigo:

Thou toldst me thou didst hold him in thy hate.

him: Othello

### Iago:

Despise me

If I do not. Three great ones of the city,  
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,

great ones of the city: noblemen of Venice

5 Off-capped to him; and, by the faith of man,  
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.

off-capped: took off their caps to him (in a show of respect)

But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,  
Evades them with a bombast circumstance,

circumstance: ceremonious speech

Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,

10 And, in conclusion,

Nonsuits my mediators. For, "Certes," says he,  
"I have already chose my officer."

nonsuits: refuses to grant the suit of  
certes: certainly

And what was he?

Forsooth, a great arithmetician,

forsooth: in truth

15 One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,

A fellow almost damned in a fair wife,

damned in: cursed by

That never set a squadron in the field,

Nor the division of a battle knows

division: military unit

More than a spinster—unless the bookish theoretic,

spinster: an older unmarried woman

20 Wherein the togèd consuls can propose

As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice

theoric: theory

Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had th'election,

togèd: wearing togas; consuls: government officials

And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof

At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds

Rhodes, Cyprus: the sites of battles

25 Christian and heathen, must be beleed and calmed

By debtor and creditor. This counter-caster,

beleed: stopped like a ship in a lee (a place sheltered from the wind)

He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,

debtor and creditor: accountant, bookkeeper

And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship's ancient.

counter-caster: a person who uses tokens (counters) to make calculations

ancient: standard-bearer (a low-ranking officer)

### Roderigo:

By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman.

### Iago:

30 Why, there's no remedy; 'tis the curse of service.

Preferment goes by letter and affection,

letter: perhaps a reference to Cassio's superior education

And not by old gradation, where each second

second: second officer; first: first officer

Stood heir to th'first. Now, sir, be judge yourself

Whether I in any just term am affined

affined: bound by obligation

35 To love the Moor.

### Roderigo:

I would not follow him, then.

### Iago:

O, sir, content you.

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.

turn: purpose

We cannot all be masters, nor all masters

40 Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark

Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave

mark: see, observe, notice

That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,

crooking: bending; knave: ① male servant ② liar

Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,

doting: ① giving excessive attention to ② showing mental deterioration like a senile old person

For naught but provender, and when he's old,

ass: a donkey; naught: nothing

cashiered.

provender: feed or food; cashiered: dismissed

- 45 Whip me such honest knaves! Others there are  
Who, trimmed in forms and **visages** of duty,  
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,  
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
Do well thrive by them; and when they have lined  
their coats,  
50 Do themselves homage. These fellows have some  
soul,  
And such a one do I profess myself. For, sir,  
It is as sure as you are Roderigo,  
Were I the Moor I would not be Iago.  
In following him, I follow but myself.  
55 Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,  
But seeming so for my peculiar end.  
For when my outward action doth demonstrate  
The native act and figure of my heart  
In **complement** extern, 'tis not long after  
60 But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.

**trimmed:** dressed

**lined their coats:** become wealthy (like thieves  
filling their coats with stolen goods)

**homage:** respect

**would not be:** would not want to be

**Heaven is my judge:** As heaven is my judge  
**peculiar:** particular

**figure:** shape, form

**extern:** external

**daws:** birds traditionally thought to be stupid

### Syntactic and Grammatical Analysis Questions

Identify the tense shift that occurs in Iago's first speech and discuss its rhetorical effect.

Restructure the clause "nor the division of a battle knows" (lines 21-22) according to standard contemporary syntax. What is the rhetorical effect of the original word order?

Rewrite the sentence in lines 39-40 according to contemporary syntax and grammar. What is the rhetorical effect of the original word order?

Restructure the clause "Others there are" (line 45) according to standard contemporary syntax. What is the rhetorical effect of the original word order?

Restructure the sentence in line 51 according to standard contemporary syntax. What is the rhetorical effect of the original word order?

unless (line 19)  
wherein (line 20)  
propose (line 20)  
practice (line 21)  
election (line 22)  
grounds (line 24)  
preferment (line 31)  
gradation (line 32)  
where (line 32)  
just (line 34)  
term (line 34)  
wears out (line 43)  
yet (line 47)  
but (lines 48 and 54)  
shows (line 48)  
profess (line 51)  
end (line 56)  
native (line 58)  
act (line 58)

Why does Iago tell Roderigo "despise me if I do not" (lines 2-3)?

What does Iago mean when he says, "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (line 6)?

What reasons does Iago give for disagreeing with Othello's choice of Cassio as his lieutenant?

What do the adjective "great" (line 14) and the expression "God bless the mark" (line 28), as well as the epithet "his Moorship" (line 28), have in common?

What does the word "proof" (line 23) refer to?

What rhetorical device is Iago's use of the words "beleed and calmed" (line 25) an example of? How is this description contextually appropriate, and what is its effect?

### Comprehension Questions

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following pronouns refer to?

he (line 13)  
that (line 17)  
his (line 27)  
it—in 'tis (line 30)  
them (line 49)  
it (line 52)

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following words and expressions mean?

suit (line 4)  
price (line 6)  
place (line 6)  
fair (line 16)

Why does Roderigo say that he would “rather have been [Othello’s] hangman” (line 29), and what might he be implying with this choice of words?

What narrative functions does this passage serve in the play?

According to Iago, what is “the curse of service” (line 30)?

What does Iago ask Roderigo to “judge [him]self” (lines 33-35)? What does Iago mean when he says, “O, sir, content you” (line 37)?

What is the description “knee-crooking” meant to suggest as used in line 41? What does Iago say about the life and the fate of such people, and what is his attitude toward “such honest knaves”?

What does Iago claim about “others” (line 45)? In what sense do they “do themselves homage” (line 50)? What does he mean by “soul” (line 50)?

Explain how the word “so” is used in line 56.

What does Iago mean when he says, “I follow but myself” (line 54), and what literary device is this expression an example of?

What is the expression “for daws to peck at” (line 61) intended to convey about Iago’s intentions?

What does Iago’s statement “I am not what I am” (line 61) mean?

### Translation Questions

Translate the following sentences into contemporary English:

lines 14-21: “Forsooth...as masterly as he.”

lines 57-61: “For when...for daws to peck at.”

*If you want to make these translation questions more challenging, try to preserve the iambic pentameter of the original lines.*

### Questions for Discussion and Writing

In addition to the ones you identified above, find instances of the following rhetorical devices in the passage and discuss their effect:

- simile
- metaphor
- epithet
- litotes
- oxymoron
- paradox

What impression of Iago does the passage give? Identify specific details and aspects of the dialogue that create this impression. What techniques does Shakespeare employ?