

Important Quotations Explained

1. Were I the Moor I would not be Iago.

In following him I follow but myself;
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 compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am. (I.i.57–65)

[Explanation for Quotation 1 >>](#)

In this early speech, Iago explains his tactics to Roderigo. He follows Othello not out of “love” or “duty,” but because he feels he can exploit and dupe his master, thereby revenging himself upon the man he suspects of having slept with his wife. Iago finds that people who are what they seem are foolish. The day he decides to demonstrate outwardly what he feels inwardly, Iago explains, will be the day he makes himself most vulnerable: “I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at.” His implication, of course, is that such a day will never come.

This speech exemplifies Iago’s cryptic and elliptical manner of speaking. Phrases such as “Were I the Moor I would not be Iago” and “I am not what I am” hide as much as, if not more than, they reveal. Iago is continually playing a game of deception, even with Roderigo and the audience. The paradox or riddle that the speech creates is emblematic of Iago’s power throughout the play: his smallest sentences (“Think, my lord?” in III.iii.109) or gestures (beckoning Othello closer in Act IV, scene i) open up whole worlds of interpretation.

2. My noble father,

I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education.
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are the lord of my duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband,
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (I.iii.179–188)

[Explanation for Quotation 2 >>](#)

These words, which Desdemona speaks to her father before the Venetian senate, are her first of the play. Her speech shows her thoughtfulness, as she does not insist on her loyalty to Othello at the expense of respect for her father, but rather acknowledges that her duty is “divided.” Because Desdemona is brave enough to stand up to her father and even partially rejects him in public, these words also establish for the audience her courage and her strength of conviction. Later, this same ability to separate different degrees and kinds of affection will make Desdemona seek, without hesitation, to help Cassio, thereby fueling Othello’s jealousy. Again and again, Desdemona speaks clearly and truthfully, but, tragically, Othello is poisoned by Iago’s constant manipulation of language and emotions and is therefore blind to Desdemona’s honesty.

3. Haply for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have; or for I am declined
Into the vale of years—yet that's not much—
She's gone. I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;
Prerogated are they less than the base.
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death. (III.iii.267–279)

[Explanation for Quotation 3 >>](#)

When, in Act I, scene iii, Othello says that he is “rude” in speech, he shows that he does not really believe his own claim by going on to deliver a lengthy and very convincing speech about how he won Desdemona over with his wonderful storytelling (I.iii.81). However, after Iago has raised Othello’s suspicions about his wife’s fidelity, Othello seems to have at least partly begun to believe that he is inarticulate and barbaric, lacking “those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers [those who avoid practical labor and confine their activities to the ‘chambers’ of ladies] have.” This is also the first time that Othello himself, and not Iago, calls negative attention to either his race or his age. His conclusion that Desdemona is “gone” shows how far Iago’s insinuations about Cassio and Desdemona have taken Othello: in a matter of a mere 100 lines or so, he has progressed from belief in his conjugal happiness to belief in his abandonment.

The ugly imagery that follows this declaration of abandonment—Othello finds Desdemona to be a mere “creature” of “appetite” and imagines himself as a “toad” in a “dungeon”—anticipates his later speech in Act IV, scene ii, in which he compares Desdemona to a “cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in,” and says that she is as honest “as summer flies are in the shambles [slaughterhouses], / That quicken even with blowing” (IV.ii.63–64, 68–69). Othello’s comment, “’tis the plague of great ones,” shows that the only potential comfort Othello finds in his moment of hopelessness is his success as a soldier, which proves that he is not “base.” He attempts to consider his wife’s purported infidelity as an inevitable part of his being a great man, but his comfort is halfhearted and unconvincing, and he concludes by resigning himself to cuckoldry as though it were “death.”

4. I am glad I have found this napkin.
This was her first remembrance from the Moor,
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Wooped me to steal it, but she so loves the token—
For he conjured her she should ever keep it—
That she reserves it evermore about her
To kiss and talk to. I'll ha' the work ta'en out,
And give't Iago. What he will do with it,
Heaven knows, not I.
I nothing, but to please his fantasy. (III.iii.294–303)

[Explanation for Quotation 4 >>](#)

This speech of Emilia's announces the beginning of *Othello's* "handkerchief plot," a seemingly insignificant event—the dropping of a handkerchief—that becomes the means by which Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, Emilia, and even Iago himself are completely undone. Before Othello lets the handkerchief fall from his brow, we have neither heard of nor seen it. The primary function of Emilia's speech is to explain the prop's importance: as the first gift Othello gave Desdemona, it represents their oldest and purest feelings for one another.

While the fact that Iago "hath a hundred times / Wooed me to steal it" immediately tips off the audience to the handkerchief's imminently prominent place in the tragic sequence of events, Emilia seems entirely unsuspecting. To her, the handkerchief is literally a trifle, "light as air," and this is perhaps why she remains silent about the handkerchief's whereabouts even when Desdemona begins to suffer for its absence. It is as though Emilia cannot, or refuses to, imagine that her husband would want the handkerchief for any devious reason. Many critics have found Emilia's silence about the handkerchief—and in fact the entire handkerchief plot—a great implausibility, and it is hard to disagree with this up to a point. At the same time, however, it serves as yet another instance in which Iago has the extraordinary power to make those around him see only what they want to see, and thereby not suspect what is obviously suspicious.

5. Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. 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. (V.ii.352–365)

[Explanation for Quotation 5 >>](#)

With these final words, Othello stabs himself in the chest. In this farewell speech, Othello reaffirms his position as a figure who is simultaneously a part of and excluded from Venetian society. The smooth eloquence of the speech and its references to "Arabian trees," "Aleppo," and a "malignant and a turbaned Turk" remind us of Othello's long speech in Act I, scene iii, lines 127–168, and of the tales of adventure and war with which he wooed Desdemona. No longer inarticulate with grief as he was when he cried, "O fool! fool! fool!," Othello seems to have calmed himself and regained his dignity and, consequently, our respect (V.ii.332). He reminds us once again of his martial prowess, the quality that made him famous in Venice. At the same time, however, by killing himself as he is describing the killing of a Turk, Othello identifies himself with those who pose a military—and, according to some, a psychological—threat to Venice, acknowledging in the most powerful and awful way the fact that he is and will remain very much an outsider. His suicide is a kind of martyrdom, a last act of service to the state, as he kills the only foe he has left to conquer: himself.