

Othello I ii 28-53 put right

The following block of text is an excerpt from *The tragedy of Othello*. It comes from the second scene of the first act. As the printed lines were numbered by Furness (1886), this block comprises I ii 31-66; as the edited lines were numbered by Clark and Wright (1864), it comprises I ii 28-53. Everything grey is reproduced, letter for letter, from the first folio edition of Shakespeare's plays (1623). Alterations made by editors since then are blue: the stage directions (though I have adjusted them slightly) are chiefly due to Rowe (1709), Capell (1768) and Collier (1843); the line numbers are from Furness. Red denotes the changes that I am about to propose.

..... But looke, what Lights come yond?

>Enter Cassio, with Torches.<

Iago. These are the raised Father, and his Friends:
You were best go in.

Othel. Not I: I must be found. 35
My Parts, my Title, and my perfect Soule
Shall manifest me rightly. Is it they?

Iago. By Ianus, I thinke no.

Othel. The Seruants of the Duke?
And my Lieutenant? 40

Enter Cassio and Officers with Torches.

The goodnesse of the Night vpon you (Friends)
What is the Newes?

Officer. The Duke do's greet you (Generall)
And he requires your haste, Post-haste appearance,
Euen on the instant. 45

Othello. What is the matter, thinke you?

Cassio. Something from Cyprus, as I may diuine:
It is a businesse of some heate. The Gallies
Haue sent a dozen sequent Messengers
This very night, at one anothers heeles: 50
And many of the Consuls, rais'd and met,
Are at the Dukes already. You haue bin hotly call'd for,
When being not at your Lodging to be found,
The Senate hath sent about three seuerall Quests,
To search you out. 55

Othel. 'Tis well I am found by you:
I will but spend a word here in the house,
And goe with you. [Exit with Cassio.

Officer. Aunciant, what makes he heere?

Iago. Faith, he to night hath boarded a Land Carract, 60
If it proue lawfull prize, he's made for euer.

Officer. I do not vnderstand.

Iago. He's married.

Officer. To who?

Iago. Marry to ---

Re-enter Othello with Cassio.

Officer. Come Captaine, will you go?

65

Othel. Haue with you.

Where do we stand? The scene is taking place in the middle of the night, in a street in Venice outside the hotel where Othello and Desdemona have booked themselves a room. Iago has just interrupted their wedding night. He has come with an urgent warning. Somehow or other (we know how), Desdemona's father Brabantio has discovered that they are married; somehow or other (we know how), he has discovered where they are staying. He may arrive at any moment, with some posse of his friends behind him, with the intention of taking his daughter back.

Othello has got himself dressed. He and Iago are standing at the door of the hotel, waiting for the posse to arrive. They see lights approaching -- and at first they assume that this is Brabantio and his friends. (Othello: "Is it they?") But no, this is not the posse. (Iago: "By Janus, I think no.") It turns out that the wedding night was going to be interrupted anyway, without any scheming on Iago's part.

Other business is afoot. Alarmed by news about the movements of a Turkish fleet, the duke has summoned an emergency meeting of the senate. They need to consult with Othello straight away. After failing to find him at home, they have sent out three search parties to try to track him down. One of these parties -- the one which is heading in roughly the right direction -- knocks on Cassio's door. (Cassio is the man whom Othello has chosen as his lieutenant.) Does he know where Othello is to be found? Yes, he does. Guided by him, the searchers hasten towards the hotel.

Here they come. The search party, I suppose, consists of three or four officers of the Venice police force. They are wearing some sort of uniform. At least two are carrying torches, to remind us that this is still the middle of the night. One of them outranks the others; he is the one who does the talking. Cassio is an elegant young gentleman, something of a dandy. We have not met him before -- but we heard what Iago thinks of him in the previous scene.

In this chunk of text, there are five speeches which Folio assigns to Cassio. As I understand it, four of these speeches

belong to the officer in command of the search party, only one to Cassio. When Othello asks to know what is going on ("What is the Newes?"), he is speaking to the officer, and it is the officer who replies ("The Duke do's greet you (Generall)"). His orders were to find Othello and inform him that the duke demanded his presence. It was not for him to ask why. He was told to do it -- and now he has done it. When Othello asks for some explanation ("What is the matter, thinke you?"), he is speaking to Cassio, and it is Cassio who answers ("Something from Cyprus, as I may diuine"). Since we are meeting him for the first time, he must have something significant to say, and this has to be it.

Turning to the officer again, Othello says: "I will but spend a word here in the house, / And goe with you." He then heads for the door, and Cassio, I think, goes with him, far enough at least to remove himself from the centre of the stage. Iago and the officer are left standing there, and they engage in some desultory dialogue. All this is as it should be. Othello has to go and explain things to Desdemona; there has to be some chitchat to pass the time until he reappears. Three of the lines which Folio gives to Cassio are the officer's share of this colloquy: "Aunciant, what makes he heere? ... I do not vnderstand. ... To who?" Othello reenters at that point, and Iago's reply (so I suppose) is interrupted by the officer (who has only been making conversation and does not really care who Othello is married to): "Come Captaine, will you go?" (In Folio, ineptly, Iago interrupts himself and leaves the question that was asked of him unanswered.)

As Folio has it, it was Cassio who asked the question "To who?" And yet, in a later scene we are told emphatically, both by Desdemona and by Othello, that Cassio knew all about their courtship. "He was of my counsel", says Othello, "In my whole course of wooing" (III iii 111-12). So how can he possibly be unaware that they are married, ignorant even of the name of Othello's bride? On the contrary, it seems fair to assume that he attended the wedding, acting as Othello's best man. That is why he knows where the married couple are spending their first night together.

The inconsistency is blatant. Anyone seeing the play for the first time will be puzzled by that later scene; anyone who has seen the play before will not know whether they ought to be more puzzled by that scene or by this one.

How to account for the contradiction? One theory might be that Shakespeare blundered. Theobald, writing to Warburton in March 1730,* took this to be an instance of "terrible

forgetfulness" on Shakespeare's part. On this view, Shakespeare did not just make the mistake in the first place: he failed to put it right, even after seeing the play rehearsed and performed, when all that needed to be done was to alter these few lines of chitchat -- lines, I repeat, which only exist to fill up a few moments while Othello has a word with Desdemona. I doubt whether we are allowed to accuse any successful author of that degree of incompetence. We ought rather to think that perhaps we may be missing the point.

* A letter printed by Nichols (1817 2:586). Steevens (1778 10:446) observed that it was "somewhat singular" for Othello to ask this question, but did not follow up on that remark.

Another theory might be that Cassio was just pretending to be ignorant. Some such suggestion seems first to have been made by Ritson (1783:227); another version of it appears in the next edition of Shakespeare's plays, in one of the comments credited to William Blackstone (Reed 1785 10:554).^{*} For lack of any better idea, it has gained some measure of acceptance -- but it does not stand up to scrutiny. With the marriage now safely solemnized, why would Cassio think it necessary to keep pretending? And how can an audience seeing the play for the first time be expected to understand that he is pretending?[†] I do not see that these questions have been adequately answered; I do not see that they can be.

* Blackstone died in 1780. His comments appear for the first time in this edition. I take it that they are genuinely his; but where Steevens is involved one can never be quite sure.

† Furness (1886:35-7) quotes some advice from Edwin Booth for the actor playing Cassio. At the line "I do not understand": "But show the audience that you do." At the line "To who?": "Feign much surprise, but do it carefully." How the actor could be expected to perform these contortions without mystifying the audience is more than I can say.

The commentators would not find themselves in this predicament if they were not assuming that Folio's speech-prefixes are immutable. But that is a false assumption. Those prefixes do have some indicative value, but they are not to be relied on. At every step one ought to be asking: Is this prefix right? or is there perhaps some risk of its being wrong? Follow that logic -- recite the text with your eyes closed -- listen to the voices in your head -- give these few lines to Officer -- and the difficulty vanishes at once.

The rest of the scene is straightforward. Brabantio arrives with his posse. Othello explains that he has been summoned to a meeting of the senate. The officer corroborates that: "'Tis true, most worthy signior; / The duke's in council, and your

noble self, / I am sure, is sent for." (That is the only speech assigned to this character in Folio; but that is enough to prove that he is allowed to talk.) And the scene ends with them all marching off together in the direction of the duke's residence.

As they exit, I think, Desdemona appears at an upstairs window, in a suitably dishevelled state. (She has discovered that married life is very enjoyable.) Othello looks back. She waves to him. He waves to her. Roderigo whimpers. Iago gives him a shove.

C.F. Feb 2026

Othello I i 3-7

Roderigo. Tush, neuer tell me! I take it much vnkindly
That thou (Iago) who hast had my purse, 5
As if the strings were thine, should'st know of this
And never tell me!

Iago. 'Sblood, but you'l not heare me.

Roderigo needs to be allowed to finish what he is saying. He is not complaining that Iago knew. He is complaining that Iago knew and didn't tell him.

Half-lines are at some risk of getting omitted. Just eight lines further on, "And, in conclusion," (I i 15), is a half-line surviving only in Q1.