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Justice and the Limitations of Revenge in Othello

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JUSTICE AND THE LIMITATIONS OF REVENGE IN *OTHELLO*

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a tragedy that delves into the intertwined themes of justice and revenge. The play's characters ultimately serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of pursuing vigilante justice and the importance of impartial, evidence-based decision-making in administering justice. In this essay, I will explore the limitations and consequences of the pursuit of wild justice and why justice can only be achieved publically.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my Grandma, who made this all possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
Introduction: Justice and the Limitations of Revenge in <i>Othello</i>	page 1
Chapter 1 Justice and Revenge	page 1
Chapter 2 Cyprus and Venice: Chaos and order	page 2
Chapter 3 <i>Othello</i> and the characters	page 4
Chapter 4 Roderigo	page 5
Chapter 5 Brabantio.....	page 8
Chapter 6 Emilia.....	page 11
Chapter 7 Iago.....	page 14
Chapter 8 Othello.....	page 17
Chapter 9 Lodovico and the return of Venetian Law and Order.....	page 23
Conclusion: <i>Othello</i> as a warning against revenge	page 26
Works Cited	page 27

William Shakespeare's *Othello* is a tragedy that delves into the intertwined themes of justice and revenge. Throughout the play, the characters grapple with their notions of justice and seek to avenge perceived wrongs. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the pursuit of revenge and vigilante justice come with grave consequences. The play's characters ultimately serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of pursuing vigilante justice and the importance of impartial, evidence-based decision-making in administering justice. In this essay, I will explore the limitations and consequences of pursuing "wild justice" in *Othello* and why justice can only be achieved publically.

Before going into *Othello*, defining what justice is versus what revenge is is essential. In *Social Psychology of Punishment of Crime*, retributive justice is described as "Rational, Cold/enlightened, Impersonal/"disinterested", Clean, Public, Principle-based, Objective, Virtuous, Divine (and) Obligatory" and revenge is described as "Primitive, Hot/ passionate, Dirty, Private, Arbitrary, Subjective, Vicious, Animalistic,(and) Forbidden" (Bieneck et al. see table 8.1). One would see retributive justice play out in a modern-day courthouse. There are rules that both parties agree to ahead of time, there is an impartial judge presiding over the trial, and there are prescribed punishments for almost any offense. There are protected rights for the accuser and the accused. As described in the table, it is public, clean, and ideally objective. While the exact specifics of what it means to be just have changed, the central tenets described above share qualities that date back to Babylon when The Code of Hammurabi was posted as a recorded common law so all knew their rights. Revenge is different. Francis Bacon describes it as

"... a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong pulleth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon." (Bacon)

Revenge is not considered morally good. It is reactionary and has to exist outside of the law. Revenge is personal and serves only to perpetuate harm.

Since revenge exists outside of the proper channels of the state, vigilante justice would be under the umbrella of revenge. Vigilante justice, according to Regina Bateson, is defined as “the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offenses.” Vigilante justice may be exciting to watch in movies or read in comic books, but in real life, it can be scary and alienating. In vigilante justice, the accused loses the protections that are typically afforded to them. Today in the US, someone accused of murder, for example, would have the right to an attorney, the right to a fair trial decided by a jury of their peers, and evidence can only be accepted in prescribed ways. They are presumed innocent until proven guilty. In a vigilante situation, the accused is at the whim of the pursuer. There is no trial or evidence considered, just punishment.

The characters are not the only aspect of the play that represents justice and revenge. The setting and backdrop are equally important. Othello and Desdemona live in and are married in Venice. Around the time this was written, “Venice was the crown jewel of sixteenth-century Italy. A major Mediterranean seaport and center of commerce” (Flachman). Venice was a city comparable to somewhere like New York City or modern-day London. It was cosmopolitan and a melting pot of cultures. It was a hotspot of art and literature due to the Renaissance, and because it was a port city, there were also lots of exotic goods and luxuries that would come into the city. In the play, Venice represents law and order and justice. It also limits what the characters are able to do in terms of revenge. Iago shows how far he is willing to go on Cyprus, enacting physical harm on people. In Venice, he is unable to do that. When he manipulates Roderigo to do his bidding, he does not encourage him to hurt anyone or to try and illegally solicit Desdemona; he has him appeal to her father. Brabantio has a lawful objection to their union, and Iago knows that.

He has to play within the rules in Venice, so what better way than to rile up her father? No one is seeking revenge. They are seeking justice. Brabantio's actions that follow reinforce that idea. He does not try to duel Othello or return Desdemona by force; he goes to the proper authorities, in this case, the Duke. He pleads his case, and justice runs its course as the state sees fit.

Cyprus, as we see it play out, is not bound by the same rules as Venice. Whatever limitations Venice placed on Iago's behavior are loosened upon arriving on the island. Cyprus is home of the "wild justice", a place where revenge can take place without the state interfering. It is the wilderness to the civilization of Venice. Here we see the characters give in to the darker parts of themselves. Iago manipulations become more extreme and are no longer confined to words, goading Roderigo into attempting to kill Cassio. Othello becomes susceptible, seeing the worst in his wife, his lieutenant, and himself. Even Emilia steals the handkerchief for her husband here. For the vast majority of the play, Cyprus exists outside of law and order, and the characters' actions and revelations reflect that.

Historically Cyprus and Venice were connected. According to Joanna Montgomery Byles, Cyprus "was one of Venice's richest territorial possessions and a bastion between Islam and Western Christendom". Cyprus was under the control of Venice from 1489-1570/71. Then it was, in fact, invaded and taken over by the Ottoman Empire. It would not be a stretch to assume the invasion in the play was inspired by these real-life events and that some of the more educated or worldly spectators would have been aware of that history (the significant difference, of course, being that in the world of the play, the invasion is prevented due to a storm and Cyprus remains in control of the Venetian state). Another relevant fact about the Ottoman Empire is that they enjoyed a unique relationship with England that began in 1580. They were trade partners that "...enabled spices, silks, carpets, currants, and other luxury items to be brought directly and more cheaply to

England, without passing through entrepots such as Venice or Antwerp.” (Woodhead) Moreover, the Ottomans equally benefited from this exchange because “English exports to the Ottoman empire were mainly war-related materials such as tin, lead and strong cloth used for Janissary uniforms; items which were prohibited by the papacy from export to the infidel enemy” (Woodhead). It was a mutually beneficial relationship, especially with the additional tensions each empire felt from countries still under the papal influence.

Othello is a tragedy that revolves around Othello and the breakdown of his marriage due to the machinations of his friend and ancient Iago (Iago hates Othello for giving Cassio a promotion instead of himself and for supposedly sleeping with his wife, Emilia). He (Othello) marries a young woman, Desdemona, against her father’s wishes, and then they are immediately off to Cyprus due to an ongoing military campaign that resolves itself. There, Iago puts his perfect revenge plan in motion, which leads Othello down a path of jealousy, rage, and paranoia. He convinces him that Cassio and Desdemona slept together, which causes Othello to want both of them dead. Cassio ends up harmed but alive, and Othello smothers Desdemona before it can be revealed by Emilia that Iago used her and made everything up. Emilia is killed by Iago, and Othello kills himself as punishment for killing Desdemona. Iago is left injured and captured, facing a future punishment for his crimes.

Marriage, manipulation, and murder may be themes that run throughout *Othello*, but so is the pursuit of justice and the desire for revenge and to be able to punish those whom the characters feel have wronged them rightfully. I want to focus on five characters in the play that are dealing with this idea. There is Roderigo, a courtier who loves Desdemona and wishes to marry her, and Brabantino, Desdemona’s father, who believes that Othello has stolen his daughter away from him. They happen to be angry about the same event: the elopement of Othello and Desdemona. They

both feel that Othello has stolen her out from under them. One of them pursues a course of revenge, while the other appeals to the state for help. Emilia feels slighted in her marriage to Iago, telling Desdemona and the audience “that it is their husband’s fault if wives do fall”, implying that any wrong she may have committed was only to get even. While we do not see her pursue revenge outright in the show, at the very least, her proclivity to revenge when wronged is, in part, what starts the chain of events in the play. Iago presents his two main grievances to the audience: 1. He feels like Othello has wronged him by passing him up for a deserved promotion, giving it to Michael Cassio instead, and 2. that Othello has possibly ‘Done his office twixt my sheets’, making him a cuckold, or at the very least appear to be to the people around them. In response to these, he comes up with a perfect plan. His initial plan does not harm Othello more than he has been harmed. He is the embodiment of eye for an eye justice. Finally, our tragic general Othello feels betrayed by the innocent Desdemona. He is the most like Iago in that he, too, takes the law into his own hands and doles out what he believes to be justice. They all have different motivations for their actions, but they all inform about the pitfalls of vigilante justice, as well as the limits of the judicial system.

Roderigo is the first character that I want to talk about. His perceived wrong is the one least rooted in reality. He is utterly lovesick over Desdemona and thinks that he should be the man that gets to marry her. He feels that both Othello and, later, Cassio have effectively stolen her from him. In reality, however, neither she nor her father wants anything to do with him. Brabantio straight up tells him that “In honest plainness thou hast heard me say/ My daughter is not for thee” (Othello 1.1 94-95), and it does not sound like this is the first time he has had to chase him from his door. If that exchange wasn’t evidence enough, in his dealings with Iago, the audience is shown just how foolish and unaware of his own reality he really is. How easily he is swayed when Iago

dangles what he wants in front of him. Roderigo is only there at Brabantio's door because Iago instructs him to, saying, "Call up her father/ Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight" (1.1 67-68). His infatuation with Desdemona is the hook that Iago is able to grab onto and lead him with. Even at the end of the act, after the Duke legitimizes the new couple, Iago is somehow able to convince him that Desdemona will become "sated" by Othello and that he will be able to swoop in and make a cuckold out of Othello. Iago does not believe this to be accurate; neither does the audience. Roderigo is the only one convinced that he will somehow be able to bed a woman that wants absolutely nothing to do with him, past, present, or future.

After arriving in Cyprus, Roderigo reconnects with Iago. There Iago is able to convince him that Desdemona is now in love with Cassio. While maybe convoluted at first glance, this is actually a genius play on Iago's part. Not only has he undermined the picture of the perfect couple that Desdemona and Othello displayed, but he also restates her willingness to break her wedding vows while simultaneously creating a new enemy for any of Roderigo's jealousies. If she would cheat on Othello with one Venetian, why not another? Iago can also now use him as a proxy to be able to manipulate Cassio. I wouldn't say that Roderigo's actions are that of someone who is trying to get revenge, but he is acting almost as a private soldier on behalf of Iago, doing his bidding. He is acting outside of the law as a vigilante. This is backed up in Act V, right before Roderigo goes to murder Cassio. He says, "I have no great devotion to the deed/ And yet he hath given me satisfying reasons:/ 'Tis but a man gone" (5.1 8-10). This is the talk of an obedient soldier, ready to carry out his master's orders regardless of his own feelings or what is lawful.

Even though Roderigo is manipulated by Iago, he does not garner the same sympathy that Iago's other victims do. He is not noble like Othello, he is not charming and handsome like Cassio, he is not innocent like Desdemona, and he is not shrewd like Emilia. He literally embodies the

opposite qualities. It is hard to be on his side. He does not take no for an answer; he tries to kill Cassio, even though he knows it is wrong. He follows a married couple, who, side note, have a beautiful love story, to another country in the hopes of being a wedge between them. It is just so apparent that he is in the wrong that his pursuit of revenge, like him, is just shallow and foolish. There is not even any real revenge to be had because Othello could not have taken something from him that was never his, to begin with. His petty jealousy controls him and makes him susceptible to the suggestions of others. The only person that he has any substantial claim against is Iago. Iago has taken advantage of him and convinced him to travel abroad in order to chase after Desdemona. He persuades him to murder Cassio and steals expensive jewels from him by claiming he will give them to Desdemona. All of this, and Roderigo still chooses to follow Iago, eating all the crumbs that Iago drops in his path. And the ultimate irony is that in the end, Iago is the one that kills Roderigo. The man he trusted and followed betrayed him at every point. Had he gone to the authorities when he was most suspicious of Iago, he could have stopped much of the bloodshed that stains the last act of the play.

Roderigo's arc reveals the limitations of vigilante justice. Vigilante justice is "prone to opportunism and can generate violence, corruption, and social othering" (Davis). That is precisely what we see. Because Iago has Roderigo act on his orders and takes the law into his own hands, it directly leads to violence and corruption. The violence is self-evident. Roderigo tries to kill Cassio and dies in the process. The corruption is there too. Iago is using his position as someone close to and trusted by Othello to manipulate the situation. He is undermining the law and order that should exist in order to get himself ahead. I hate to quote Game of Thrones after season 8, but Petyr Baelish was right, "Chaos is a ladder"(Sakharov): and Roderigo is not a climber, just another rung.

Brabantio, being Desdemona's father, does have a legitimate grievance against Othello (unlike Roderigo). He essentially came to his house in the middle of the night and ran off with his daughter. In the early 1600s, when Othello was first performed, children, and especially daughters, were the property of their fathers. Marriages were not an exception to that. His daughter ran out and got married without his permission. While nowadays, that may not seem like an issue, in 1604, a daughter's marriage was the father's prerogative. Elopement was seen as something shameful, and he was entirely within his rights to bring them before the Duke.

Brabantio goes about solving his problems in the proper legal way. He does not gather up his kin and try to rescue Desdemona by force, and he does not try and harm Othello physically or start plans to ruin his life. He goes to the head of the state and pleads his case. This is important because, early on, it establishes Venice as the land of law and order. It also displays to the audience how justice is carried out. A stark difference from what we see transpire later, especially with Iago and Othello. The Duke very calmly hears both sides of their story publicly in front of the senators, various officers, Cassio, Roderigo, and Iago. The Duke hears Brabantio's claim first. He asserts that his daughter was "...stolen from me and corrupted/ By spells and medicines bought by mountebanks" (1.3 61-62). Something to note here is that he accuses his daughter's seducer of performing witchcraft to win her over. This would have been a capital crime, worse than the elopement himself. With Brabantio being a noble of the city, his coming in and making these significant accusations predisposes the Duke to be on his side in the matter. He even goes as far as to say, "You shall yourself, read in the bitter letter,/ After your own sense, yea, though our proper son/ Stood in your action" (1.3 69-71). He is saying that even if it were his own son that did this to Brabantio and his daughter, Brabantio would be able to condemn him to the maximum penalty. And then the Duke finds out the man Brabantio wants to punish is Othello.

Othello is not a Venetian noble, but he is essential to the state of Venice as a general. One can see that from the way the Duke greets him as “Valiant Othello: (1.3 49). The people around him definitely respect and value him. On the night of the elopement, there was a military emergency, and he was called away to Cyprus that night. Not having him for this campaign would be disastrous. After Brabantio identifies Othello as the perpetrator, the room deflates, all of them saying, “We are very sorry for’t” (1.3 74). What follows this is a really fair and balanced trial where we get to see how someone accused of something should be treated.

The Duke asks Othello for his side of the story very calmly and seemingly neutrally. Othello admits right off the bat that what Brabantio said was true. He did take his daughter, and he did marry her. He denies the accusation of witchcraft, however. Brabantio challenges this and doubles down on the assertion that Othello “...with some mixtures powerful o’er the blood/ Or with some dram conjured to this effect/ He wrought upon her” (1.3 105-107). This is where the wheels of justice start to turn. The Duke tells Brabantio that just because he believes something does not make it true. There needs to be proof, another mark of a fair trial. Everyone then agrees that Desdemona should be questioned as to whether she married Othello by force or by her own free will. While Iago leaves to retrieve her, Othello goes into detail on exactly how he wooed Desdemona. It was simple; all he did was tell her the stories of his life. His adventures, his failures, his travels, the wonderful things he has seen, and the dangerous events that he has lived through. He even tells the council of men that it was Desdemona herself who made the first move. He ends his account succinctly and poetically by telling them, “She loved me for the dangers that had passed/ And I loved her that she did pity them.” (1.3 168-169)

The Duke, like Desdemona, is captivated by the tale and admits, “I think that tale would win my daughter too.” (1.3 172). Brabantio also seems to become calmer by the end of Othello’s

speech. He wants to hear it from his daughter, which is fair, but he admits he could be wrong and tells the Duke, “Destruction on my head if my bad blame/ Light on the man” (1.3 177-178). Desdemona confirms what Othello has said, and the Duke makes his judgment. The couple married consensually, with no witchcraft to be found. Brabantio accepts this with a heavy heart and shares his parting words to Othello “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:/ She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3 293-294). With that, he plants a seed of doubt we see grow as the play continues.

Brabantio may not have gotten the outcome that he initially wanted, but this scene is important in establishing to the audience what a fair trial looks like when someone is accused of wrongdoing. Both parties were able to speak openly in front of one another and tell their side. The Duke heard all sides of the story, calling every potential witness, and refused to accept baseless accusations without proof. This sets the standard of law and order, and because this trial was so fair and ended so peacefully, it allows us to see just how wrong a justice system that revolves around revenge can be later on. It establishes the rules, and then all that follows is a warning of what happens when the rules are not followed.

When the Duke first hears Brabantio’s complaint, his initial reaction is to believe him and allow him to decide what punishment he sees fit. This reverence does beg the question, does this transpire because of Brabantio’s rank as a noble, or is it because of the severity of the accusation of witchcraft? I think it’s a little of column A and a little of column B. To act like the rich and powerful do not receive partial treatment is nonsense. According to Equal Justice Under the Law (a nonprofit law organization dedicated to achieving equality in the criminal system), “People who are poor are systemically treated worse than the wealthy. People without financial means remain in jail prior to trial because they can’t afford bail, resulting in a higher conviction rate.”;

and that's in today's world. In Shakespeare's time, there were The Vagabond Act of 1572 and The Poor Laws, which penalized poverty with disfigurement and jail, respectively. It would not be a stretch to assume that if the man who had run off with Desdemona were poor or of a lower station, justice would have been served swiftly and harshly. Moreover, conversely, because Brabantio is wealthy and powerful, his words and accusations carry much more weight behind them and are taken much more seriously.

The accusation of witchcraft was a huge deal at this time and would have come with an extremely harsh penalty. Under the reign of Elizabeth I, the 1562 Act against Conjurations, Enchantments, and Witchcrafts was passed. If someone used witchcraft to harm another, then they would be put to death, and if no harm were caused, then they would be imprisoned. The year before Othello was written, an even harsher law was passed and was broadened to include the use of demons and evil spirits. This was put into place under James I and was entitled An Act against Conjuraton, Witchcraft and dealing with evil and wicked spirits. It also moved the witch trials from ecclesiastical courts to civil courts because it was now a felony. James I came to power the year before Othello was written in 1603. One thing about James is that he is obsessed with witches. He even wrote a book about it: *Daemonologie*. It was published in 1597 in Scotland and in 1603 in London when he became King. Shakespeare's company, when Othello was written, was patronized by the crown of England. It is very possible that the section about witchcraft that Brabantio brings against Othello is a nod to James I. Something to perk his ears up at the top of the show, perhaps.

Emilia is the wife of Iago. The overall impression that she gives is a clever woman, one who has been around the block before and is not naive to the way the world works like Desdemona is. She is not bound by a strict code of ethics and tends to do what benefits her in the moment, but

she is in no way actively malicious like her husband. She does seem to have a black-and-white style of thinking when it comes to someone who has wronged her or Desdemona, however. When she hears Othello call Desdemona a whore, she calls the person who poisoned Othello's ear against her "...some eternal villain/ Some busy and insinuating rogue,/ Some cogging, cozenning slave..." (4.2 132-134)

Emilia never states outright that Iago has done anything specific to her in terms of harming her mentally or physically. She does acknowledge the fact that there is tension between them because Iago believes her to be false. In Act Four, when Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona are together, trying to understand Othello's rather sudden change towards Desdemona, Emilia says that whatever schemer is making up all these lies about Desdemona is no good and just trying to get ahead somehow by tearing her down. Iago tries to quiet her, and she lashes out at him, saying, "...some such squire he was/ That turned your wit the seamy side without/ And made you to suspect me with the Moor" (4.3 147-149). This is the first time that Emilia, out loud, talks about the alleged affair. We have heard it from Iago already, but this exchange means this is something that had come up, probably when they were still in Venice. This was not something that Iago kept inside; it was something he believed enough that it was spoken aloud and something that had actively been affecting their relationship.

Whether or not Emilia slept with Othello is not necessarily important in terms of the story. However, if she *did* sleep with him, she gives us two possible reasons as to why. After the interaction she has with Iago, when she and Desdemona are alone, the ladies have a conversation about fidelity. Desdemona asks Emilia, "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (4.3 67). Emilia responds, "The world's a huge thing: it is a great price./ For a small vice." (4.3 68-69). Emilia is a foil to Desdemona in this scene; while Desdemona could not imagine betraying her

husband in such a way, Emilia could definitely see herself doing it. She even says, “Why the wrong is but a wrong i’ the world: and having the world for your labour, tis a wrong in your own world, and you might quickly make it right” (4.3 80-82). She understands that right and wrong do not exist in a vacuum, stating that if it gets you ahead and puts you in a position of power, then you get to decide what is right and wrong. She states very plainly that she would sleep with other people to get her husband ahead. We also know that Iago does not receive a promotion, so if she did sleep with Othello, this wasn’t why.

The conversation continues, and Desdemona, innocent as she is, still cannot wrap her head around a wife betraying her husband in such a manner. Emilia educates her on the fact that many women do it every day. She makes an effort now to explain to her why such things may happen. She says in a monologue addressed to Desdemona:

But I do think it is their husband’s fault
If wives do fall. Say they slack their duties
And pour our treasures into foreign laps;
Or else break out into peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us;
Or scant our former having in despite
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour
As husbands have. What is it they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is’t frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have we not affections?
Desires for sport? and frailty as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so -(4.3 85-102)

Emilia is so full of passion and honesty when delivering this speech. This is something she has thought much about. If she did step out of her marriage and sleep with Othello, this is why. Iago is cold toward his wife in most of his interactions with her. This can be explained away because

he thinks that she cheated on him, but he always treated her less than. Iago plays with people like toys because he sees himself as higher than those around him; why wouldn't that apply to his wife? Emilia may claim never to have cheated, but she certainly has many justifications for why she could. Whether or not she did, we see the dangers of revenge; how it never ends. Iago wrongs Emilia, so she gets back at him, and then Iago has to get even with Othello, who then has to kill to punish her for the wrongs she committed against him. It is a horrible self-perpetuating cycle that does not end.

Iago and Othello are the most aggressive and vocal about their pursuits of revenge. They both fully believe that they have been wronged, and they are getting revenge based on their own moral code. Iago comes from a place of revenge. He wants Othello and Cassio to feel the way he felt, and he rides that wagon until the wheels come off. Othello, too wants the people he loves punished for betraying him. He takes the law into his own hands, passes a unanimous judgment, and proceeds to swiftly and harshly punish without any open investigation—just a shadow investigation performed behind the scenes.

In the opening scene of *Othello*, we hear Iago tell us exactly why he feels wronged by Othello. The two key points are 1. He was passed up for a promotion for someone who is less qualified, and 2. He heard that his wife cheated on him with Othello. The first point is stated in a conversation with Roderigo. He complains to Roderigo about how he was passed over for the lieutenant's position for someone (Cassio) who has not even been on a battlefield before. He explains to him how he rightfully deserved the promotion and how much he hates Othello for keeping it from him. The second point, he himself admits he is not sure, but people believe it to be, and that is all that counts, so much for reputation being "an idle and most false imposition" (2.3 264-2650). For these slights, he decides that he must get revenge. The plan is so simple and

elegant, “After some time to abuse Othello’s ear/ That he is too familiar with his wife” (1.3 394-395). He is not trying to punish anyone more than he himself feels wronged. It is the embodiment of “an eye for an eye”. When he tells the audience his plan at the end of Act 1, all he wants is an eye for an eye, no more, no less. And, this is so important because although we see Iago lie throughout the play, his asides to the audience reveal his true thoughts, desires, and motives. If he wanted Othello to kill Desdemona, he would have said it. If his initial plan involved killing Cassio, he would have said it. His initial plan is not to destroy everything; he just wants to get even.

Lex talionis is the law of retribution in kind, which is also understood as “an eye for an eye”. The origins of this idea can be traced back to ancient Babylon and the Code of Hammurabi. The code itself is believed to have been compiled and presented to the people between 1750 BCE and 1755 BCE. It was a set of 282 laws governing many aspects of society, from agriculture and theft, to laws governing the rights of husbands and wives and the culpability of doctors in cases of malpractice. The rules did change based on social standing, for example, “If a man knocks out a tooth of a man of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth,” (Oldstone-Moore) but “If he knocks out a tooth of a plebeian, he shall pay one-third mina of silver” (Oldstone-Moore). Overall though, it was meant to make sure that people were aware of their rights and what they could do if they felt as if they were wronged. This concept is how we see Iago especially approach his revenge. His initial plan involves no murder or anything seemingly outrageous. He wants Othello to feel like he does, and he wants Cassio to be removed from the position that he feels was owed to him based on his loyal service to The Moor.

The initial stage of Iago’s plan is easy and goes very smoothly. First, he riles up Roderigo, convincing him that Cassio is now the object of Desdemona’s affection and that in order for Roderigo to get Desdemona, Cassio needs to be eliminated first. Opportunity falls into Iago’s lap

when Othello orders a celebration to be had in honor of the Turks' defeat. Cassio is ordered to be on guard duty and is not supposed to participate in the revelries. Iago convinces him to get drunker more than he usually would have. He sings an English drinking song for the men and pushes more wine upon them. Cassio gets very drunk and is then accosted by Roderigo, whom Iago ordered to do so. Since Cassio is drunk, he is not in full control of himself; he gets into a huge brawl and wounds Montano (the governor). As a result of his actions, Cassio is fired.

The firing of Cassio leads right into step two of Iago's plan, which is to convince Othello that there is something going on between Cassio and Desdemona. After he is fired, Cassio bemoans to Iago that his reputation is ruined and that he does not know what to do. Iago tells him to plead his case to Desdemona in order to get back in the good graces of Othello. He tells him that "She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blest a disposition that she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested" (2.3 315-317). Cassio agrees that this is a perfect plan and resolves to do so in the morning.

The next day Iago calls Othello's attention to the fact that Cassio and Desdemona are having these private conversations together. He does not outright say anything; he just asks Othello leading questions so that he is able to come to his own conclusions. He keeps alluding to jealousies and the "green-eyed monster", and finally, he outright tells Othello, "Look to your wife, Observe her well with Cassio/...I know our country disposition well-/ In Venice they do let God see the pranks/ They dare not show their husbands" (3.3 200, 204-206). This does not convince Othello outright, but it does eat away at him and puts a dark cloud over his vision.

I believe that this was meant to be the extent of Iago's plan. It achieved everything he said he wanted. The issue arises when Othello threatens Iago. Now the self-preservation drive kicks in. Now he must prove this with no doubts. Luckily Emilia is able to steal the handkerchief Othello

had given to Desdemona, and with that, he is able to plant it on Cassio and convince Othello beyond a shadow of a doubt that Cassio and Desdemona have betrayed him, and Iago is the only one that he can trust.

Roderigo is Iago's bread and butter, acting out precisely as he planned him to. Othello's reactions, in my opinion, are not in the scope of what Iago expected from him. Furthermore, I think that is Iago's weakness and what leads to his downfall. It seems that when Iago learned about the possibility that Emilia and Othello slept together, he withdrew emotionally from her (if he was not already) and acted coldly toward her. I do not think he went into a fit or even thought of murdering her in the name of justice. This is where the limitations of that style of vigilante justice come into play. There is no equity. If you take the phrase "an eye for an eye," it is easy to pick apart. What if the man who injured one of your two eyes only has one? You can still see, but now the man who has injured you is blind. While the punishment may feel equitable, the effects of it never can be, and that is shown by how Othello reacts when told his wife cheated. Iago may have felt his reputation damaged or may have felt slighted by him when he believes that his wife cheated, but he does not have the same devotion to her that Othello has to Desdemona. Attacking that love breaks him down to his core, to a point he is unable to recover from.

Othello, as a character, is noble, a formidable general, a wonderful storyteller, and a man who loves his mother. When we first meet him, it is as a man accused of using witchcraft to seduce Desdemona. He is (rightly) found not guilty and is immediately sent to Cyprus to defend Venetian interests on the island. While there, he takes on the same role as the Duke had when they were in Venice. He temporarily becomes the leader and the one who is charged with maintaining law and order on the island. He, like Roderigo, shows the audience what happens when vigilante justice

takes over, with the main difference being that Othello is in a leadership position and has the power to yield, while Roderigo is just a citizen.

When Othello arrives on Cyprus, we learn his ship was separated from Desdemona's in the storm. When they reunite, it is a scene full of love and happiness. They exchange their sweet nothings, Othello gives orders to his men, and the couple retires, presumably to consummate their marriage. Not long after, the night erupts into chaos thanks to Iago, Cassio, and Roderigo. When Othello first arrives on the scene to try and calm things down and get to the bottom of what has happened, he comes out strong and assertive, ordering the men to "Hold for your lives!" (2.3 161) and "He that stirs next, to carve for his own rage,/ Holds his soul light: he dies upon his motion" (2.3 169-170). These are strong, threatening words and a different Othello than the one that's been presented thus far. We have only seen a loving, temperate man. This is the first time we see him working as a general in the midst of chaos. Now granted, there is a lot going on, the alarm bell is ringing, one man is on the floor saying he is injured to death, and his lieutenant is drunk and brandishing the sword that had stabbed him. To be able to reestablish order, he does need to be loud and cut above the clamor, and he also needs to be the dominant presence in the scene to restore order. After hearing accounts from Iago and Montano (the current governor of Cyprus), he calms down and says, "Now, by heaven,/ My blood begins my safer guides to rule/ And passion, having my best judgement collid,/ Assays to lead the way" (2.3 200-203). Then he mirrors what we saw in Venice; he questions, sees the evidence, and calmly relieves Cassio of his duty, an appropriate punishment for being drunk on the job and stabbing the governor.

This exchange prepares us for Othello's temper without giving it all away upfront. Othello's initial reaction is, for lack of a better word, reactionary and hot-blooded. Given the moment, it did not seem inappropriate; everything was in complete chaos. It is his own dialogue,

however, that gives him away. When he talks about his better judgment not being accessible to him when he first came out, that is him acknowledging that he was not thinking. That is not necessarily the best quality for a leader to have. We are given very little time to dwell on that, though, because then he is back to the soft-spoken Othello we see through Desdemona's eyes. He even tells Cassio he loves him before firing him.

As the play continues, Iago begins to plant the seeds of doubt in his head, and Othello's mental and physical health begins to degrade. It starts simply enough with Iago pointing out Desdemona and Cassio's closeness, and he makes some observational comments about what may be transpiring between them. Othello repels these notions at first. He loves his wife, and she loves him. Nonetheless, it does begin to gnaw at him. Why are they together? Why is she mentioning him so much and working so hard to get him back in my good graces? He wants to believe her to be true, but now, he cannot get it out of his head that she is false. After an interaction with his wife, Othello returns to Iago, grabs onto him, and demands proof. He exclaims, "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,/ Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof" (3.3 362-363). He threatens Iago that if he is slandering Desdemona, Othello will kill him or worse. This is the point where we see Othello unable to control himself in this matter. Just like in the earlier scene with Cassio, his emotions, somewhat understandably, guide him. He does not react with logic or question Iago publicly in front of the people he is accusing. He relies on the testimony of one corrupt individual to shape his feelings on this matter which lead to fatal consequences. Iago is able to use his trust in him to manipulate Othello. By telling him about Cassio's "dream," the handkerchief, and the overheard conversation with Cassio, Othello becomes unmovingly convinced of Desdemona's guilt.

Once Othello believes Desdemona is guilty, he passes his judgment. Both Cassio and Desdemona must die for their trespasses. There was never a fair trial, or a trial of any kind, really. He unilaterally denies Cassio and Desdemona the rights that he himself enjoyed in Venice. If it were just Brabantio's version of events that was taken into account, Othello, more likely than not, would have been arrested. His actions are very different from how the Duke conducted things. When he meets Desdemona again, he knows she does not have the handkerchief that he had given her. He reminds her of the story of where he had gotten it in an attempt to make her feel guilty, saying, "...if she lost it/ Or made a gift of it, my father's eye/ Should hold her loathed.." (3.4 62-64). In his mind, this is him telling her I know what you did, and my cold behavior towards you now has sprung from that. He also seems like he has a need to catch her. She innocently continues to try to move the conversation toward Cassio's restoration; Othello sees that as an indicator of guilt and keeps pushing her. The conversation ultimately goes nowhere, and he leaves. In the exchange that he has with her, he equates the handkerchief to the love that they have for one another. If she loses it or gives it away, she loses him.

He continues his investigation, allowing a half-understood conversation between Iago and Cassio to serve as the next piece of evidence. Othello never outright confronts Cassio or asks him if he has been with his wife; he does not even try to ask where he got the handkerchief from. He allows Iago to talk for him while he stands aside to overhear. Iago and Cassio talk rather crudely about Cassio's girlfriend, Bianca. Cassio talks about how she "So hangs and lolls and weeps upon me, so/ shakes and pulls me!" (4.1 138-139) Othello is under the impression that they are speaking about Desdemona and becomes increasingly upset. When Bianca joins them, she presents Cassio with the handkerchief, accusing him of having other women. This confirms every suspicion Othello has. Their fate is sealed. He instructs Iago to kill Cassio, and he will bring Desdemona to

justice himself. Iago weakly tries to argue against Desdemona's execution, but his drive for self-preservation supersedes any sympathy or love he has for the lady.

Othello proceeds to question Emilia about the comings and goings of her mistress. She assures him that nothing untoward could have possibly happened, but he does not believe her in the slightest. He was asking her questions he wanted specific answers to and ignored any exculpatory evidence that she provided. He dismisses her and bids her to bring him, Desdemona. He is just outright cruel to Desdemona, calling her a whore and verbally abusing her. She is understandably baffled and denies any wrongdoings. There is nothing she can say to Othello to convince him of her innocence, and any denials from her just make him more angry and cruel. He does not ask her any direct questions; he just seems to want to cause her pain. He is like Iago in this; he was hurt, and now the person who hurt him must suffer.

In the final scene of the play, Othello finally confronts Desdemona directly about everything he believes she has done. She asks him what is wrong, and he replies, "That handkerchief/ Which I so love and gave thee, thou gavest/ To Cassio" (5.2 47-49). Immediately she denies it and calls on him to summon Cassio to back up what she says, mirroring what she was able to do when Othello was falsely accused. He believes Cassio to be dead at this point since he had ordered Iago to take care of it and knows he cannot speak in her defense. He calls her a liar and sentences her to death. She says, again and again, that she is innocent and begs him to call on Cassio to get the full story; he reveals to her that he is dead by his order. Desdemona pleads, begs, and bargains for her life, but Othello's heart is hardened, and he carries out the sentence, suffocating his wife.

Emilia and Iago come to the room shortly after the execution. Emilia arrives first, cursing the Moor for what he has done to such an innocent and loving woman, again proclaiming her

innocence to him. He defends his actions, telling her, “Cassio did top her: ask thy husband else./ O, I were damned beneath all depth in hell/ But that I did proceed upon just grounds/ To this extremity. Thy husband knew it all” (5.2 134-137). He says that his actions were just, but the trial of Desdemona is nothing like the trial Othello faces in Act I. He trusted Iago above all else and refused to hear anything to the contrary. It is not until Othello speaks about the handkerchief that Emilia is able to clarify that she stole it and gave it to Iago. Once the information comes out that Iago was the mastermind behind everything, Othello sees clearly what his anger and jealousy had clouded for him: that Desdemona is innocent, and he murdered his loving wife for nothing. He condemns himself to the same justice that he condemned his wife to. For murdering his wife and having attempted to have Cassio murdered, he kills himself.

Othello’s investigation, and I use that term loosely, into whether or not Desdemona has been sleeping around is very one-sided. That is because he made up his mind already. The second he saw the handkerchief, nothing else mattered. No testimony to the contrary could possibly be true, so it is all disregarded. The public vs private aspect is the most critical distinction between how justice was pursued in Venice with the Duke versus on Cyprus with Othello. Cassio and Desdemona are never given a chance to face Iago, their accuser. They are never given a proper explanation as to why Othello has ordered their deaths. They are never given a chance to tell their side of the story and be heard. The privatization of justice allowed space for personal prejudice to cloud Othello’s judgment. Othello’s actions serve as a warning against revenge. These events could have been so easily avoided had Othello performed his duty as the Duke had.

In the aftermath of Desdemona’s and Emilia’s murders, we are presented with another relatively minor but essential detail: Lodovico is the one to conduct the investigation about everything that has transpired and the one to set the new status quo. He is a representative of the

leaders of Venice, sent by the Duke and senators to retrieve Othello and Desdemona, and at this moment, he represents the state itself. It is not a coincidence that at the end of the play, when loose ends are being tied up, it is him, and not Cassio or Gratiano, who have more personal connections to everything that has transpired, and that is going to try and resolve everything. There is a neutral third party here now. Any actions taken or decisions made are no longer things that are acted on personally. There are no more secret plans, no more murders being carried out, no more asides to the audience. Just a man calmly entering and publicly questioning the events that have transpired in the last three days.

Lodovico comes across as a fair man from the moment he steps on Cyprus. He also does not appear to be a man who looks for the worst in others. When Othello gets angry and chastises Desdemona after she speaks about the love she bears for Cassio, he assumes that Othello is upset about the letter saying, "Maybe the letter moved him." (4.1 234). He would have no cause to think Othello would be upset at Desdemona at this point and justifies his outburst, assuming the best of him. Then not even a minute later, when Othello strikes her, Lodovico reacts in a relatively measured way. He tells Othello, "My lord this would not be believed in Venice/ Though I should swear I saw't. 'Tis very much;/ Make her amends, she weeps" (4.1 241-243). To a modern reader, this might feel like an illegal assault, but in the 1600s, when this was first written and performed, Othello was entirely within his rights as a husband to treat his wife as he deemed fit. Lodovico remembers Othello as an honorable, loving man. Someone whom he thought his cousin would be safe with, someone whom he thought loved and respected her fully. However, now, right in front of his eyes, he sees the innocent Desdemona hit. And again, he does not take up arms against Othello. He asks him to apologize. He stays in line with the law, and while he does speak out against him, there is not even a tiny allusion to him avenging this wrong done to Desdemona.

When Othello leaves, Lodovico is still questioning what has happened to the man he knew, asking Iago, “Are his wits safe? Is he not right of brain?” (4.1 269). He still wants to get to the bottom of Othello’s change in character. His reactions are very moderate, especially compared to the heightened reactions we have witnessed from Othello at this point. It is acknowledging and investigating without immediately reacting.

Lodovico carries a commanding, moderate presence into the end of the play. After Othello learns that Desdemona is innocent the whole time, Emilia is killed, and Iago runs off into the night. There is an enormous sense of chaos, confusion, and danger in the room now. Othello is emotionally all over the place, now rueing what he has done to his wife, truly unable to cope. He has a sword and tells the men that are coming that he is armed. Lodovico enters the room with Cassio, some officers, and Iago in handcuffs and has the officers disarm Othello. What a difference this is from mere moments before when Othello, after killing Desdemona, was trying to kill Iago, who had just killed his own wife, Emilia. As a reader, Lodovico’s entrance has a calming presence that gives the actors onstage and the audience a chance to breathe and reflect on everything that has transpired. Lodovico questions Othello about what happened, and then he fills in the gaps of information for everyone involved by producing the letters he found while investigating what happened with Roderigo. When the final picture is painted, instead of taking revenge for the fallen women or ordering an execution then and there, he says to Othello, “You a close prisoner rest/ Till that the nature of your fault be known/ to the Venetian state” (5.2 333-335). The state is in control again. Orderly and fair. Not hot-blooded and ready for revenge.

In the closing monologue of the play, Lodovico fully reestablishes law and order. The first thing he does is settle Othello’s estate. He orders Gratiano to “...keep the house/ And seize upon the fortunes of the Moor/ For they succeed to you” (5.2 363-365) Gratiano would be the next of

kin through marriage since he is Desdemona's uncle and would have a lawful claim. In announcing it to the room, it ends any possible arguments or fights about what would have happened to Othello's estate. When emotions are running as high as they have been, this gives a sense of closure. It closes the door on Othello and Desdemona's story. Next, he addresses Cassio "...To you, lord governor,/ Remains the censure of this hellish villain,/ The time, the place, the torture: O, enforce it!" (5.2 365-367). Here we know Iago will be punished under Cassio's command as governor. This is not vigilante justice of a private citizen; this is the state torturing a prisoner for a confession. Obviously, today torture is not considered humane in many modern countries, but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it would be very common for prisoners to be tortured in custody. Iago, facing punishment for his crimes, wraps up his story. The audience would probably also have been a fan of his being tortured, the way he tortured the people around him by manipulating them. Cassio is also rewarded and elevated here. He was perhaps the most innocent man onstage, and in the end, he may be injured, but he is rewarded with power. Now he can get back at the man who caused him and the people he loved so much pain. And he would not be lowering himself to do it. It would be his duty as governor to bring this criminal to justice. It provides a nice, clean, state-approved ending, no more of what Bacon refers to as "wild justice". The evil characters are punished, and the long-suffering good character is raised.

In conclusion, justice and revenge are all deeply embedded in the world of *Othello*. The characters in the play demonstrate the limitations and consequences of pursuing the "wild justice" that comes with revenge and vigilante justice. They serve as a warning against jumping to conclusions based on emotions and acting only based on one's own desires. It reminds us that true justice works in tandem with the state and that it is impartial, public, and takes all evidence into account.

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