Sign, Ensign, and Design:
Interpretation and Tragedy in Othello

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A popular and conventional view of Shakespeare's four great tragedies is to categorize them as tragedies of character, in contrast to tragedies of accident (Romeo and Juliet for example). Hamlet has his share of tragedy because of his hesitation, Macbeth because of his ambition, Lear because of his foolishness, and Othello because of his jealousy. This view is neat and convenient and may be true in some cases, but it oversimplifies the complex issues in some other cases. Therefore, instead of looking at Othello as a tragedy of character, I propose to study it as a tragedy of (mis)interpretation. The overall structure of Othello—the gist of the play—comes down to the problem of Othello's making proper interpretations of the many signs, some apparently obvious, some enigmatic, and most of them false, that his ensign Iago issues to trap him. In the course of the play Othello is confronted, through Iago's cunning designs, with this monstrous hermeneutic problem—is his wife unfaithful or what? It is as if Iago presents to Othello a text full of difficult and ambiguous signs to read. Unschooled as he is in interpreting signs that are exchanged among society ladies and gentlemen in Venice, Othello is doomed to misunderstand and mistrust his innocent wife.

Iago is Othello's ancient, or ensign. In Elizabethan armies, "the ensign had no command or administrative function. His job was simply to carry the colors (in the middle of his band in a set battle, at the head of his band during a charge of assault) and to conduct himself in such a way as to bring honor to his person." As Othello's standard-bearer, then, Iago is by profession both a maker of signs and a sign himself (by virtue of his bearing the title of ensign). And Shakespeare is never tired of reminding us of Iago as a professional maker of signs by constant references to Iago's official title.

The play opens with Iago's display of his understanding of signs and of his ability as a maker of signs for the sake of his own profit. Iago complains to the dupe Roderigo of Othello's appointment of Cassio as his lieutenant while keeping Iago as his ensign. Iago tells Roderigo that he will pretend to be happy to continue his service as Othello's ensign. He trusts that the signs he put up before Othello will be adequate to hide his true purposes. He will be one of those servicemen

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,
Do themselves homage.  

(I, i, 48-51)
Hereafter Iago will flaunt his "forms," "visages," and "shows" in front of his master. He confesses to Roderigo:

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 complement extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to pect at; I am not what I am. (I, i, 55-62)

Thus Iago will assume a stage-like role, a "seemer" who plays anything or anybody but himself ("I am not what I am"). He is in turn a cynic before Roderigo, a faithful ("honest") minor for Othello, an entertainer for Desdemona, and a friendly adviser for Cassio. He transforms himself into a protean theatrical sign as the occasion fits. As Calwood writes, Iago is "signlike both in the Saussurian sense that attributes meaning to what a sign is not and in the Derridean sense of what a sign is not yet." To construe his meaning is difficult, because "He is the very non-essence of semantic deferral; no matter how much he tells us about himself and his motives we never feel we have come to an end-stopped truth... His being consists in not-being, his meaning in what is not meant."

Iago is also a liar who hides his identity behind the mask he puts on to show the world. As a liar, Iago has carried Umberto Echo's famous definition of semiotics to the utmost: "Thus semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all." Iago is a consummate artist in using signs to tell lies for his own profits.

By contrast, the moor Othello is quite ignorant of the sign system operating in civilized societies. The play puts much emphasis on the contrast between Othello's origin and the society he serves. He has often been referred to as "the Moor." Brabantio just cannot understand why his daughter abandons "wealthy, curly darlings" of his nation and runs to "the sooty bosom of such a thing" as Othello. The only explanation he can think of is that Othello practices some magic on his daughter. He wants other people to believe what he believes: "Have you not read, Roderigo, / Of some such thing?" (I, i, 168-169). Iago's cynical name-calling with reference to the union of Othello and Desdemona--"an erring barbarian and supersubtle Venetian" (II, i, 37), though racially discharged, has brought the fact that Othello is an outsider to the fore.

Othello is of course aware of his position as an alien. And it is not just because he is an alien that he fails to understand the significance of such a casual remark as Iago's "By Janus, I think no" (II, ii, 32); but it is also because Othello is a professional soldier who gets himself involved in the most unsoldierly matter--the problem of feelings and
emotions. He may be proud of his military life—"I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (II, ii, 20-21)—where signs are straightforward and easy to read, but he is impatient of and deficient in reading the sophisticated signs in the Venetian society. What he tells the Venetian noblemen in defense of his honor means undoubtedly more true than he recognizes:

   Rude am I in my speech,
      And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace.
   For since these arins of mine had seven years' pith
      Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
   Their dearest action in the tened field;
      And little of this great world can I speak
   More than pertains to feats of broils and battle.
      (I, iii, 81-88)

Though Othello is delivering these words in modesty, he indeed can speak very little of this great world—the Venetian society.

   This deficiency in reading sophisticated signs has seriously hampered Othello's fortune as the husband of a society lady. Iago understands this very well: "The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so" (I, iii, 372-373). As James L. Caldwood says, commenting on Othello's simple and direct character: "For him, a person is like a sign in which signifier and signified are paired by nature; what you see is what you get." Othello's simplicity is no match against Iago's sophistication. This is the reason why Iago's strategy works so smoothly on Othello without rousing his slightest suspicion. Iago's confession to Roderigo should have been heard by Othello:

   Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains
      Yet, for necessity of present life,
   I must show out a flag and sign of love,
      Which is indeed but sign. (I, i, 149-152)

Caldwood's comment on this passage is worth noting: "Iago's stress on signs here draws attention to mediation, to signs as signs, to false signs that are indeed 'but signs'—those in which the shadow of evil intent falls between sign and referent to fashion a lie, as Iago's shadow will fall between Othello and the truth of Desdemona to fashion a murder." In uttering this confession Iago must have felt a delicious sense of revenge and of his ability as a sign-maker in that he is truly Othello's ensign in every sense of the word and that he is the designer of his master's destiny. He divests his signs of meaning in order to fulfill his villainous designs.

   Iago's major design is to create signs and interpret them himself or have Othello interpret them the way he (Iago) wants. Iago is not just a maker of intriguing signs; he
also makes misleading interpretations of the signs at hand or of his own making. He practices this first on Roderigo. He remarks to Roderigo on Cassio's gallantry to Desdemona in a social gathering: "Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Didst not mark that?" He wants Roderigo to believe that Desdemona is a lustful woman. Roderigo answers that it was but courtesy, as most people would have understood it. But Iago gives it a completely twisted interpretation: "Lechery, by his hand! an index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts" (II, i, 238-242). When Othello demands an explanation for the drunken brawl between Montano and Cassio orchestrated by Iago, both men are too ashamed to explain themselves, leaving Iago as the only legitimate interpreter of the event. With some show of reluctance, Iago reveals that it was Cassio who began the quarrel. The brawl is a sign created by Iago to dampen Othello's impression of Cassio; Iago's "explanation"--his interpretation of the created sign, already the sign of a sign--further convinces Othello of Iago's honesty and love and Cassio's "guilt." Indeed, throughout the event he gives the appearance of being friendly disposed towards Cassio, a sign favorably interpreted by everyone present. Cassio is dismissed right away.

In all these maneuvers Iago can be said to create a text full of seemingly obvious signs for his inept reader Othello. Iago's text is written in a language that is slippery and open to all sorts of interpretations. His use of language in this created text pushes us to question the very nature of language. Saussure told us a now well-known theory about language: that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. Thus "It is the plague with language, the fact that language which is supposedly meant to refer to things generally fails to." Othello, of course, conceives of language to the contrary: for him language does refer to things and there is no gap existing between language and its reference.

For Iago in Act III, scene iii, the stage is now set for further and deadly display of intriguing signs to trap Othello. He begins his attack on Othello by a remark on the "text" he has created for Othello's "reading." Cassio, who is talking to Desdemona, begging her to intercede on his behalf with the Moor so that he may be reinstated to his position of lieutenant, is seen leaving her room in haste:

\begin{verbatim}
Iago : Ha! I like not that.
Othello : What dost thou say?
Iago : Nothing, my lord; or if--I know not what.
Othello : Was not that cassio parted from my wife?
Iago : Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it
    That he would steal away so guilty like,
    Seeing you coming.
\end{verbatim}

(III, iii, 33-39)

Iago shows here why he is a master sign-maker: he begins with an exclamation designed
to capture Othello's attention emotionally, and then affirms that he does not like the fact indicated by that. Iago's tone is just good enough to leave the sense suspended, and Othello reacts, as he will continue to do throughout, with a demand for explication of the meaning.\textsuperscript{10} Othello's question (Was not that Cassio . . . ?) is "something he already knows," but which has been transformed from a fortuitous event into a sign of something else, to which Iago appears to be elliptically referring.\textsuperscript{11}

What is most intriguing and paradoxical here is that Iago's "nothing" is in reality nothing (there is really nothing going on between Cassio and Desdemona), but it means something to Othello. Jacques-Alain Miller in a recent discussion about the nature of language says that "in language, you can have much ado about nothing," and that "language produces reference to nonentities."\textsuperscript{12} Iago has forced language to perform such a function. In those moments Iago probably feels that he is devilishly like god, for, like God, he creates something out of nothing. That is the reason why Iago is so drunken with the success of his machinations and that his revenge has gotten out of hand. It is not a matter of revenge now; it is a matter of using one's signifying power to the utmost. Surely the pleasure to be like God is that one has all the signifiers and signifieds completely at one's disposal. And dispose them he does: he echoes Othello's words in deliberate absent-mindedness, which leads Othello to say that "Thou dost mean something" (III, iii. 108). His verbal language is aided by obvious body language to enhance the interpretation he wishes to illicit from Othello. As Othello says,

\begin{quote}
And when I told thee he was of my counsel
Of my whole course of wooing, thou cried'st "Indeed?"
And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit.
\end{quote}

(III, iii, 110-114)

Othello's "reading" of Iago is exactly what the ensign wants. So Othello demands to know Iago's "horrible conceit," his "thinkings." Iago's text is getting more and more intriguing, and it baits its innocent reader to anxiously dig out its supposed signifieds. Again and again Othello demands that he wants to be "satisfied." He cannot bear "such exsufflicate and blown surmises" any longer. In this case Othello is like a structuralist, who takes meaning as a given, a center, a point of reference, then tries to identify the system of codes responsible for the accepted meaning.

To induce Othello to make misinterpretations of the case at hand, Iago even teaches Othello about how to read signs: "Men should be what they seem. / Or those that be not, would they might seem none" (III, iii, 127-128). Iago is here teaching a false doctrine about language: the signifier ("seem") should have a one-to-one relationship with the signified ("be"). Added to Othello's doomed misinterpretation is that Iago does not practice what he preaches. He is the very opposite of what he SEEMS to be. He tells Othello of his suspicion of Cassio's relation with Desdemona: 'I perchance am vicious in my
guess" (III, iii, 145), meaning he is perhaps malicious in his interpretation. Ironically, though himself a "seer" all the time, he warns Othello of Desdemona's "false" signifier: "She that so young could give out such a seeming / To see her father's eyes up close as oak" (III, iii, 209-210). What Othello fails to recognize here is the very character of language: ". . .what seems to be only seems to be. What seems to be is already signs of signs, but the supplementary character of these signs goes unnoticed. Between the signifier and the signified, the word and the thing, the statement and the meaning, the expression and what is expressed, the representer and the represented, is the space, the gap, where the thing signified is lost in order to be signified."13 What renders Othello's case tragic is that "the thing signified" does not even exist, and the meaning or meanings that Othello is searching for is endlessly deterred.

When Iago sees that Othello is much moved by his insinuating words, he then tones down the power and effect of his words. He asks Othello "not to strain [his] speech"—not to enlarge the meaning of, to overinterpret, his words:

Should you do so, my lord,
My speech should fall into such vile success
Which my thoughts aimed not. (III, iii, 222-224)

Othello has done everything that Iago, in a seemingly friendly way, warns him not to do. Terry Eagleton has offered this view on Othello as a reader of signs: "Othello is on the one hand too literal and gullible a reader, implicitly crediting Iago's lying words; and at the same time too wildly fanciful, fabricating a whole imaginary sub-text at work beneath routine appearances."14 This is perhaps a little too harsh a judgment on Othello, whose deadly misinterpretation arises, I think, not so much out of his ineptness as a reader as out of his confronting an intriguing main text offered by a professional sign-maker.

Iago has summoned all of his power as a sign-maker to arouse Othello. He now supplies his main text with other signs of signs for Othello's reading. He draws a mental picture representing Desdemona's "luctfulness" in bawdy language. He gives an account of Cassio talking in his sleep which, though no proof at all, is accepted as such by Othello in his already overwrought state. Othello's interpretation of the supposed dream is just what Iago wants: "But this denoted a foregone conclusion, / 'This a shrewd doubt, though it be but a dream" (III, iii, 425-426). Othello reacts strongly to this false signifier, swearing "I'll tear her to pieces!"

Henceforward the poisoned mind of Othello gives things twisted interpretations. In this chaotic world (Othello has earlier told Desdemona "when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" [III, iii, 91-92]), signs are confusing and hard to decode. The dialogue between Desdemona and the clown in the beginning of Act III, Scene iv introduces the confusion. In answer to her simple question "Do you know, sirrah, where Lieutenant Cassio lie?" the clown plays on the word "lie": "I dare not say he lies anywhere;" "He's a soldier, and for me to say a soldier lies, 'tis stabbing;" and "To tell you where he lodges
is to tell you where I lie." (III, iv, 1-6). Desdemona can get nowhere from such a gibberish. Beneath the surface wit of the clown's replies, lies the more sinister practice of insinuating the wrong meanings into words, thereby perverting language generally. A moment later Othello enters and takes her hand in his, commenting that it is "moist." The innocent Desdemona explains that "It hath felt no age nor known no sorrow." But for Othello, now thoroughly convinced of his wife's guilt, the moist hand indicates strong sexual desires and "argues fruitfulness and liberal heart" (III, iv, 29-30). "Fruitfulness" and "liberal," both polysemic signs in this context, can mean either generosity or amorousness, depending on how one takes it. Desdemona is confused by her husband's sudden play on words and quick temper. Thus she misinterprets his anger: "Something sure of state, / Either from Venice or some unwatched practice . . . / Hath puddled his clear spirit" (III, iv, 135-138).

The fooled moor hovers uneasily between Iago's version of events and his knowledge of Desdemona, but once Iago begins to exploit language by significantly playing upon the meaning of the word "lie"--a strategy foreshadowed by the clown's earlier use of it--Othello's world begins to collapse. In fact, Othello is almost clownish when he adopts Iago's interpretation of the events: "Lie with her? Lie on her--We say lie on her when they belie her.--Lie with her!--Zounds, that's fulsome" (IV, i, 36-37). Othello's defenses crumble and he falls on the ground in a fit. One more false sign and Iago's design will be completed. He will question Cassio of Bianca, with Othello overlooking from a certain distance and mistaking Bianca for his wife. Its effect, as Iago himself explains, is that

As [Cassio] shall smile, Othello shall go mad:
And his unbookish jealousy must conter
Poor Cassio's smiles, gesture, and light behaviors
Quite in the wrong. . . . (IV, i, 99-102)

In this new "text" Iago employs space as a blank sheet on which he writes his meanings with the stylus of Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behavior. And Othello reads what Iago has written and misinterprets (misconstr) everything completely. Othello is now more convinced of his wife's dishonesty and Cassio's involvement. When he sees Desdemona again, he reads in her nothing but adultery. He asks, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book / Made to write 'whore' upon?" (IV, ii, 70-71). The comparison of Desdemona's body with paper and book, and of her relationship with men with writing on the paper, is semiotically and sexually apt. The written "word" on Desdemona's "paper" is exactly what the master sign-maker trains his disciple to do.

Though much moved, Othello asks Iago to give him an "ocular proof" for his wife's infidelity. He tells Iago: "I will see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove" (III, iii, 190). In other words, Othello wants to see a solid object as a clear evidence of his wife's guilt, in addition to Iago's language, which would otherwise be empty signifiers. This is where
the handkerchief comes to play as a powerful signifying object. Having anticipated Othello's demand, Iago has earlier asked his wife to steal one from Desdemona. Iago has provided this prominent clue to help Othello seal his misinterpretations: "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of Holy Writ" (III, iii, 319-321). That Shakespeare means to use this stage property as an important signifying object can be seen in the many references to it as a "token." Emilia, who picks it up when her mistress accidentally drops it, says that Desdemona "so loves the token... that she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to" (III, iii, 292-294). Even Bianca, when she sees it in Cassio's hand, cries that it is "some token from a newer friend" (IV, i, 175), a sign of Cassio's unfaithfulness.

In Iago's design this conspicuous object changes hands from Desdemona to Emilia, from Emilia to Cassio, and from Cassio to Bianca. What Othello does is to simplify its significance when he finds it in somebody else's hand. The French semiotician Roland Barthes once warns against this fond state of mind in an article entitled "The Kitchen of Meaning":

"The world is full of signs but these signs do not all have the fine simplicity of the letters of the alphabet, of highway signs, or of military uniforms: they are infinitely more complex. Most of the time, we take them for "natural" information; a Czech machine gun has been found in the hands of Congolese rebels: this is an incontestable piece of information; yet, to the very degree that we do not at the same moment recall the number of American weapons used by governments around the world the information becomes a secondary sign, it parades a political choice."16

Perhaps Othello is so used to the simplicity of military uniforms that he overlooks the complexity of the handkerchief. The handkerchief is found in the hand of the dismissed lieutenant Cassio: and for Othello this is an incontestable piece of information.

Othello's account of the handkerchief's history is errant. At one time, when Iago reports to have seen the handkerchief in Cassio's hand (the report is the signifier of a signifier), Othello then asks Desdemona to give him the handkerchief. Othello explains that the magic in the handkerchief's web enabled his mother to "subdue [his] father / Entirely to her love," because it was given to his mother by an Egyptian magician who "could almost read / The thoughts of people" (III, iv, 50-53). Here the handkerchief represents constancy in love, and when Desdemona fails to produce it, Othello is secretly accusing his wife of possible betrayal. At another time, after he kills his wife and immediately before Emilia reveals that she gives the handkerchief to her husband, Othello says simply that it is "an antique token" his father gives his mother—no mentioning of the Egyptian magician. But Othello's interpretation of its meaning is the same: "And she did gratify his amorous works / With that recognizance and pledge of love, / Which I first
gave her" (V, ii, 210-213). For Othello, this handkerchief, which is spotted with strawberries, signifies his affectionate love for her, and its loss is detrimental to their relationship. Therefore, much as Othello overinterprets Iago's words, he reads fatal meanings into the stolen handkerchief. Its signifying function is so powerful that Othello refuses to listen to any explanation (interpretation) from his wife:

\[
\textit{Desdemona:} \quad \text{. . . I never did}
\]
\[
\text{Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio}
\]
\[
\text{But with such general warranty of heaven}
\]
\[
\text{As I might love. I never gave him token.}
\]

\[
\textit{Othello:} \quad \text{By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in his hand!}
\]
\[
\text{O perjured woman! thou dost stone my heart,}
\]
\[
\text{And mak'est me call what I intend to do}
\]
\[
\text{A murder, which I thought a sacrifice:}
\]
\[
\text{I saw the handkerchief.}
\]

\[
\textit{Desdemona:} \quad \text{He found it then.}
\]
\[
\text{I never give it him. Send for him hither.}
\]
\[
\text{Let him confess the truth.} \quad \text{(V, ii, 59-69)}
\]

Othello says that Cassio, her only "interpreter," is dead, and Desdemona knows that all her interpretations have fallen on deaf ears; she cries, "O my fear interprets. What, is he dead?" (V, ii, 73).

In the end, when the truth is out, and Othello demands Iago to explain why he has "ensnared [his] body and soul," Iago gives a characteristic reply: "Demand me nothing. what you know, you know / From this time forth I never will speak word" (V, ii, 299-300). The ensign is true to his words, for these are his last words in the play. It is significant to find "nothing" again in Iago's last speech. In a sense Iago has answered Othello's demand for explication, considering how the designer of Othello's destiny has divested the word "nothing" with meanings beyond the moor's wildest imagination.\(^{17}\) Having got "nothing" from Iago, Othello the structuralist still desires an interpretation of his tragic experience. Hence his famous "Soft you, a word of two before you go" to the Venetian ambassadors:

\[
\text{I pray you, in your letters,}
\]
\[
\text{When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,}
\]
\[
\text{Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,}
\]
\[
\text{Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak}
\]
\[
\text{Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;}
\]
\[
\text{Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,}
\]
\[
\text{Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,}
\]
\[
\text{Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away}
\]
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their med'cinable gum. . . . (V, ii, 336-347)

It is understandable here that Othello, having misinterpreted his wife and caused her death, wishes others to represent him favorably and to leave a good name behind him. Therefore he offers a reading of himself, although he is risking triple mediations to the truth of his life, for his hints and suggestions will have to be interpreted by the ambassadors, whose letters will have to be in turn interpreted by the senators. Perhaps, after all the passions are spent, Othello himself has come to realize that his tragedy is the tragedy of misinterpretation.

Notes

2. All quotations from Othello are from the 1963 edition in the Signet classic Shakespeare Series, ed. Alvin Kernan, which is based on the First Folio of 1623.
3. Caldwood, 118. As my notes indicate (about half of which are from Caldwood), I am heavily indebted to Caldwood’s book, the first full-scale semiotic study of Othello, for many ideas in this essay. I have even taken my cue from Caldwood for this essay’s title. However, while Caldwood relates signs to properties in the play, my emphasis is on the role language and interpretation play in Othello’s tragedy.
4. Ibid.
7. Caldwood, 114.
8. See Caldwood, 61.
11. Ibid.
12. Miller, 26 and 27.

15. See Calwood, 64-65.


17. Cf. Calwood’s comment on Iago’s final lines: "Absorbing some of the negative radiation from *nothing* in the first sentence and *never* in the third, the otherwise invisible *no* within the twice repeated *know* of the second sentence begins to glow with an oxymoronic, cross-canceling energy. To *know* is to *no* to deny. . ." (p. 131).