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## How Credible is the Evidence: The Problem with Naivety

Shakespeare's *Othello* is a tragedy unlike others of its time. *Othello* is a play concerned with domestic fidelity more than royal usurpations. It is a play in which ocular proof comes from a mystical strawberry handkerchief rather than a ghost of a murdered king. Indeed, *Othello* presents a matrimonial tragedy rather than a national one. *Othello* and Desdemona's relationship is most always at the forefront of the action. Although war and matters of national interest serve to move the plot along, they are merely the backdrop to the real story concerning vengeful accusations of marital betrayal. This presents a problem, as the main character, *Othello*, seems to be the least capable of successfully dealing with what turns into a complicated domestic affair. *Othello* is a warrior and statesman that admittedly knows of little else. In fact, it seems that everything that he knows about marriage and females comes from a single handkerchief, given to him by his mother. He believes that this handkerchief, his first gift to Desdemona, has magical powers. Although *Othello*, having been accused of witchcraft to win Desdemona, denies the accusation, he comes to place his entire marriage and the question of his wife's fidelity on the spellbinding handkerchief. *Othello*, the domestic novice, tragically uses the handkerchief as the touchstone of fidelity and love. Interestingly enough, the spell of the handkerchief, as narrated by *Othello*, is one which is meant to keep *Othello* faithful and thereby promote a happy union. Perhaps this is *Othello*'s concern when he gives the handkerchief. *Othello* is a novice and seems worried more about his own performance in the marriage than Desdemona's. His gift to her, the magical handkerchief, seems to reflect this worry. Desdemona's loss of this handkerchief symbolizes to him an either magical or real loss of love for her. In vain does the naive *Othello* give the handkerchief with seasonally blossoming strawberries, preserved in the embroidery with the liquid of mummies, in hopes of preserving his marriage; hopes that their love, like the strawberries, may blossom forever.

*Othello* is the picture of domestic naivety. It seems as though he has never been in love or even in the company of women. Having spent his days on the battlefield, on adventures and in captivity since boyhood, *Othello* seems scared and even reluctant to give up his bachelorhood. *Othello* says "But that I love the gentle Desdemona/ I would not my unhouse'd free condition/ Put into circumscription and confine/ For the seas' worth." (2.1.25-8). It is only *Othello*'s great love for Desdemona that implores him to embark on a new and uncharted course to matrimony. Although *Othello* loves Desdemona, we can see the instability he must feel in the relationship. Their courtship was based on Desdemona's "greedy ear." *Othello* it seems wooed her not through witchcraft, nor suave charms, but simply through his story ( Maus 2/6/03). *Othello* seems unsure of himself in the relationship at the beginning. He says after telling Desdemona his stories "I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.167). Here *Othello* suggests that his love is based on her pity. It seems no wonder that *Othello* puts so much faith in the handkerchief both

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when he gives it to her and especially when Iago ignites his suspicions. Othello believes in the magic of the handkerchief because he can not believe in himself in the marital situation and he knows little of Desdemona and Venetian women in general. Given to him by his mother, the handkerchief, to Othello, symbolizes everything that he knows about female love and matrimony. It also holds a spell that promises to keep Othello in love for as long as Desdemona keeps it. When Othello suspects that Desdemona is unfaithful and loses the handkerchief, both his faith and love for Desdemona necessarily crumble. The handkerchief loss, through whichever means, magical or real, causes Othello to turn on Desdemona and lose his love and his feeble faith in their marriage.

The handkerchief comes with an exciting tale. However, Othello neglects to tell Desdemona the story when he gives it to her. Desdemona is said to have a greedy ear through which she devours his rich adventure tales. It is also through their story teller/ audience exchange that their relationship is constructed (Maus 2/6/03). This leads us to wonder why Othello neglects to tell her a most exciting story about the handkerchief that he gives her. It seems that he has told her nothing of its origins until he confronts her about losing it. The tardiness of the telling of this story to Desdemona must be purposeful on Othello's part. Othello knew perhaps that he would be accused of witchcraft had he let it be known. After Desdemona's death at the end, Othello changes the story in front of the Venetians who had previously accused him of witchcraft. Telling Desdemona could also lead her to fear him by situating himself into a racial stereotype. However, I feel Othello's main reason for not telling Desdemona is that by making her aware of the spell he would have to completely trust her. When he finds it is lost, his faith and love are irreversibly damaged so then he can tell her the truth behind it. In telling her the story he lets her know that she possesses a great power over him. Desdemona, with this knowledge and with the handkerchief, has a determining power over Othello's love. As the spell goes, while in possession of it, Desdemona can retain Othello's love unconditionally and indefinitely. Knowing this would give Desdemona infinite power. She could do anything she wished and, holding the handkerchief, know that he had no choice but to love her. Othello doesn't know women and Desdemona well enough to divulge this secret. It is only when the handkerchief is lost and with it, his love, that Othello can tell the story.

Before Othello finds that Desdemona has lost the handkerchief, Othello is easily tricked into being suspicious of her. Professor Maus eluded to the fact that Othello is inexperienced, that he knows only of Desdemona's greedy ear and that he is a foreigner to the ways of Venetian women (Maus, 2/6/03). When Iago first eludes to Othello that Desdemona may be cheating, Othello is stunned and later demands immediate proof. Othello implores "Villain, be sure thou prove /my love a whore" (3.3.363-64). Othello seems to be combating the spell; he is tortured by his love for Desdemona and the possibility that she could be cheating while retaining the love binding handkerchief. Othello demands proof in order that, if true, he can kill her promptly. Othello never talks of any other punishment for Desdemona other than death. Perhaps he

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believes that as long as she has the handkerchief he will always love her and therefore, the only way to stop the love spell is through murder. However, for Othello, the spell fails to play out. As Othello is struggling over Desdemona's guilt or innocence and his real or spell induced love for her, Iago enters the picture with news of a handkerchief. Iago tells Othello that he has seen Cassio wiping his beard with it and Othello responds "If it be that -" (3.3.444). If it be that, Othello can not love her. To Othello, the handkerchief is proof that she has betrayed him and proof that the spell has been broken.

It is important to note that the handkerchief is not only spellbinding but visually and contextually symbolic. Embroidered on the handkerchief are strawberries "dyed in mummy, which the skilful/Conserved of maidens' hearts" (3.4.72-3). Strawberries are a seasonal fruit, however, in this handkerchief they remain preserved both in its embroidery and in the dye of mummies. The handkerchief is a symbol of something beautiful, fragile and evanescent preserved magically and symbolically in a piece of cloth. Othello gives the handkerchief as a symbol of his love. The handkerchief is central not only because of its spell, but because, like love itself, it symbolizes and preserves something beautiful, blossoming, and not easily found.

Othello's strawberry handkerchief, extraordinary in many ways, is ironically central to Shakespeare's tragic plot. Domestically naive Othello uses the handkerchief to build and determine the fate of his marriage and love. Feeling incompetent in his new field, Othello relies on his mother's magical handkerchief to promote his fidelity and undying love for Desdemona. However when suspicions of Desdemona's own supposed treachery arrive, Othello goes nearly mad, unequipped to think rationally. However, when Iago lies about the handkerchief in Cassio's possession, Othello knows his love can no longer be true. His actions are tragic and swift. Despite Othello's best intentions, the strawberryed cloth, meant to symbolize something everlastingly blossoming and beautiful, comes to be the tragic gift that guides Othello to murder and suicide.

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