

# Iago Dilated: Deliberating Time in *Othello*

Dean DeFino

How poor are they that have not patience!  
What wound did ever heal but by degrees?  
Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft,  
And wit depends on dilatory time. (370-73)

Iago answers Roderigo's frustration and anger over the expense his suit toward Desdemona is taking with these loaded words of wisdom in II.iii. of *Othello*: loaded not merely because they are meant to weigh the scales of Roderigo's judgment in Iago's favor (or even to crush Roderigo, as under thumb, with the pressure of their weight), but also because they represent the way the scales of the play, itself, are weighted. Key issues in the play are the economics of temperament, the efficacies of wit and time: perception, control, revenge. Of particular interest is the relationship between wit and what Iago calls "dilatory time." Wit is a slick term, which I will discuss in due course. But to dilatory time some immediate remark need be made. I read it as having at least two meanings, delay and dilation, pending time and expanding time, patience and warp. These are consubstantial: as a drop of water expands before breaking into its free fall, so time in pausing expands of its own momentum. This is a play about dilatory time, about waiting (for revenge, for justice, for morning) and about what grows/gestates while it waits (plots, hatreds,

---

*Dean DeFino is an instructor in English at State University of New York at Binghamton.*

misunderstandings). I want to argue that this term, dilatory time, and its relationship to what Iago calls wit, offers a reading of the text which places Iago at the ontological center, where he emerges not merely as a pernicious force or 'villain,' but as a character in dialogue with the play's own machinery.

Have we begun with an irremediable problem? What could a play whose many events (a marriage, an almost-battle, a series of deliberations on betrayal and revenge, a falling-out between general and lieutenant, a theft, a framing, a rumored love affair, a set of murders, a trial, a conviction, and preparation for torture and execution) happen in the course of a day and a half have to do with issues of delay, of patience? Of course this is a play, a form into which huge spans of time may be squeezed—through invention on the part of the author and willful suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience—into only a few hours. But Shakespeare does more than just pare down the episodes: one of his major innovations on Giraldi Cinthio's novella—the play's source—is to drastically, some would say impossibly, reduce the scope of time involved in the story. One critical current in *Othello* criticism is that Shakespeare wrote the play in 'double time': a short time, which is the span in which the events are supposed to have happened (a day and a half), and a long time, which is the span that would ultimately be necessary to have happen all the things which should, or might have.<sup>1</sup> The classic example of the conflict between short and long time is the proposed Cassio and Desdemona affair. Othello and Desdemona have only been married a handful of hours (none of which has she spent alone with Cassio) when Iago first implies that she has been unfaithful. Say the critics, an affair is mathematically impossible. But they say this to praise Shakespeare's cleverness, not to criticize: he has duped us by bending time in an extraordinary and poetical way. But what service does this trick do the play as a whole? And is it not, as Graham Bradshaw argues, a device that only the most pedantic critic would notice?<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw takes great pains to explore and explain away the objections of earlier critics concerning the so-called 'double-time' of the play. For example, to the question of Desdemona's infidelity, he argues that Othello means infidelity in general, not just after marriage. And since the audience is told by the Moor himself in III.iii. that Cassio knew of their relationship well before they were married, the audience and Othello both know a reasonable gap of time in which Cassio and Desdemona might have trysted. The reader believes that Othello is jealous, and that his reasoning, even if wrong, is so because he does not trust his wife enough, not because he can't count the hours. I agree that Shakespeare has an interest in time in Othello, but nothing so artificial as this 'double time' nonsense, grinning at the gaps between the teeth of time. If anything, he seems to be trying to close a gap, between what one plans to do and what one does, between deliberation and action. He shows us delay in action: dilation, ripening, gestation, the pregnancy of the pause. In a sense, the play waits on time's issue. Not long (a day and a half, squeezed into three hours of theater performance), but enough to make the point that time will bear.

I have already suggested one way to read “dilatatory time”: as the time of dilation in labor/birth, the time of expansion which allows birth to occur.<sup>3</sup> “There are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered,” Iago tells Roderigo in I.iii. (369-70). Indeed: murders, betrayals, revelations real and imagined. Here time is corporeal, a woman. So we may read dilatatory time as time’s body dilated, ready to birth. Consistent with the nature of time, in this quotation from Iago time gives birth to events rather than bodies: time is motion, duration, not object. So when Iago says that wit depends upon dilatatory time, we may understand him to mean that whatever the nebulous sense, wit, may be, it relies upon the events that time gestates, and the timely delivery of them. “This is the night/ That either makes me or fordoes me quite,” he says at the very end of IV., referring to the gamble anyone takes on time’s issue: in this case a duration called “night.”

But Iago also says that he “engenders” time with his scheme to destroy Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio at the end of Act I: “It is engend’ red. Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (403-4). Iago’s reference is to his remark to Roderigo just a few lines above (and just prior to that on the “womb of time”): “If sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt an erring/ barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian be not too hard/ for my wits and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy/ her” (355-8). These three passages together describe Iago, bolstered by the tribes of hell (i.e.: his darker purpose) using his wit to impregnate the womb of time to bear the fruit of his wanting.

Iago’s conception of wit as something which engenders is consistent throughout the play. Wit is prowess, defined by or as sexual power. In the above exchange, for instance, Iago’s wit and the tribes of hell will win Desdemona’s sex for Roderigo. Here the relationship is a surrogate one: Iago’s prowess/wit will help Roderigo have sex with Desdemona. We may say that a similar surrogacy is at work when Iago places his wit at Othello’s service during the central (geographically and thematically) “temptation scene” in III.iii: Iago promises to hold firm in service for his shaken master. Of course, the great irony in all of this is that Iago is already “his Moorship’s ancient,” his ensign, his standard-bearer. Iago degrades himself, and so resents the Moor, because he must bear the emblem of the other man’s prowess, his phallus.

Wit as emblem of sexual prowess is not only restricted to men in the play. Iago regards the sexual power of women over men as their own best strength and, in his exchange with Desdemona in II.i., he calls this power wit: “If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit,/The one’s for use, the other useth it. . ./If she be black, and therefore have wit,/She’ll find a white that shall her blackness hit” (129-33). The wise woman is the one who knows how to use the power of her sex. And even a foolish woman has power, if she is desirable: “She never yet was foolish that was fair,/For even her folly helped her to an heir” (136-7). Men and women are not equal in wit, however: men have the power to engender, and women only to be engendered. Iago sees this as a base state indeed: “There’s

none so foul and foolish thereunto,/But does foul pranks which fair and wise ones do" (141-2). But, for all his gender-role distinctions, the association that Iago makes between wit and sex is extraordinarily significant in a play where Iago's main mode of disseminating intrigue is sexual innuendo.

The first of these is his report on the sexual acrobatics of Othello and Desdemona to her father in I. i.: they make "the beast with two backs" and other animal postures. Later he will whisper the same sort of profanity into Othello's ear about Desdemona and Cassio. Iago makes no mention whatsoever of Othello's and Desdemona's marriage when speaking to Brabantio in I.i. He is clearly trying to cast a different, more vulgar, light on the matter. But to see just how different we need to open the question of dilatory time again. Marriage, and what leads up to marriage, is implicated in several forms of dilatory time, delay and dilation. Engagement, for instance, is a time to deliberate on the potential of a marriage, and to let feelings ripen, or gestate. Chastity, or "waiting until you are married," sets vigil on some legal or holy consummation of bodies. Shakespeare plays with this idea by leaving the audience to wonder if the lovers ever actually consummate their marriage.<sup>4</sup> Marriage as a legal arrangement is also a form of dilation: a union is made and, in a world of impermanence, is called a permanent union. And this ideal of permanence is a double-edged sword against which so many of the characters are cut (first Brabantio, who must find some way to deal with the permanent arrangement his daughter and the Moor have made). But Iago avoids any mention of marriage, much less its dilations, when calling Brabantio to arms because he wants to rub the situation raw, not offer resolutions—be they only ideal ones—like marriage. So he confronts Brabantio, and Roderigo, not with marriage time, but with another that is measured in beats, pulse, rhythm: copulatory time. Iago thumps the beat of sex into their psyches with the same deliberate determination as a pornographer hooks for pubescent boys with slick cover photos: get them worked up until they nearly explode, and then they are yours.

Of course, there isn't any 'real' sex going on in the play. This lack is one of the many manifestations of dilation. Things wait to happen. Othello and Desdemona keep delaying their coital union, and each time seem more exasperated by the wait. Cassio never makes it to bed with his 'prostitute,' nor does he or Roderigo have any chance with the Moor's wife. In place of sex is overwhelming desire (the very name, Othello, means "I need"). The only one who doesn't seem overcome with it is Iago, himself. One might conclude from what I said above about Iago's using his wit (as sexual prowess) to help Roderigo bed Desdemona that Iago is actually revealing his own desire for Desdemona. But to do so would be to miss the point: that Iago is merely playing with Roderigo, that he has no intention of actually helping him to get his hands on her. One might then say that Iago's stratagem in ruining Desdemona's reputation to her husband is a form of sexual aggression against her: that his wit,

which engenders suspicion in the mind of Othello, stands in for Cassio's actual sexual prowess in the story which he creates about the affair. Iago would seem to be doing her from all sides, at least in these possible fantasy projections. And why shouldn't Iago want to have her? Rumor has it that Othello has had an affair with Iago's own wife. Tit for tat. But Iago says himself that the only reason he chooses to believe the rumors about Emilia and Othello is because it fuels his hate, because it stands in for other possible motives. It justifies his rage.

Then what is Iago's motivation? Is this a cuckold's rage, or ambition, as he states in I.iii.: "To get [Cassio's] place and to plume up my will"(397)? In the double entendre—"plume up my will"—Iago again implies a relationship between sexual prowess and power, but it is an abstract rather than specific one. His desire, for a more general empowerment rather than for a single sexual conquest or revenge on a single sexual infidelity, reveals his impotence. Iago is the only major character in the play married long enough to have fathered a child, yet unlike his prototype in Cinthio's story, Shakespeare's ensign is childless. Were his own sexual organs in working order, this childlessness would be blamed upon Emilia, and she made the object of his scorn. But instead he focuses it on the very subject of sexual power, indicating an inward gaze. Iago's obsession with sexuality as an abstract condition rather than a specific desire suggests a reproductive obsession, one which plays out in his role within the play: to engender plots, rather than women.

Impotence is not only Iago's motive—what fuels his resentment and spurs his revenge—but the key to the play's sense of dilated time. Impotence is the ultimate dilation: desire never fulfilled. Iago's rage is the result of the pent-up force of dilated time, which has no sexual release but which must somehow deliver. He does this by replacing specific manly prowess with an abstract form he refers to as wit, making empowerment out of disempowerment. He turns sexual desire against others, and so imposes his own impotence upon the play. He informs the play with the beating rhythm of sexual time, yet interrupts the consummation of that time. Characters begin to act out of the frustrated desperation this temporary impotence creates. And in a dilated time, Iago's potent wit engenders demons to undo them all.

This spatialization of time, as a womb that gives birth to demons and monsters which represent events, rather than mere duration, helps us to read one of the play's major manifestations of time's dilation, in both the sense of delay and expansion: mythic time. Myth depends upon the flux of time, the infinite web of moment to moment, the concurrent suspension and engagement with a linear idea of time: suspended because much of myth happens at points in time which are difficult to locate, and engaged because myth is narrative, story line. But myth is also a spatialization of time: a way of giving it a living dimension. Things and people happen in myth. Even if they are not real people, or from real times, they inhabit a place in our psyche. More to the point: the mind

images time and events rather than merely recording their duration.

In *Othello*, the character most involved in mythic time is the Moor himself, whose stories of heroic exploits and strange adventures win Desdemona's heart, as well as the Duke's and her father's consent for the marriage. She, having heard some of his tale, draws from Othello a promise: "That I would all my pilgrimage dilate" (I.iii. 153). By the same token, he answers paternal Brabantio's fury with "a round unvarnish'd tale . . . / Of my whole course of love," braiding the story of his and Desdemona's love with references to his adventures. Nothing is directly told the audience of the specific chronology of the events. We hear of them only elliptically, and second-hand, as told to the Duke and Brabantio. More to the point: Shakespeare is mythologizing even Othello's myth-stories—removing them from real time and space—by only referring to them. We never see Othello in action. Even the Turk's attack in II.i. never materializes: the sea disables the enemy's fleet, sparing Othello the trouble. And the events portending attack happen off-stage. The audience bears no witness. We only imagine him in action, because his mythic 'dilation'—the story he only refers to—images him according to the archetype of the hero, who has fought great battles, seen strange things, and returned to tell about them. So Othello takes his place with Ulysses and Jason. Many argue that what attracts Desdemona to Othello is his strangeness, his exotic appearance and lifestyle. I say, it is the strangeness of his tale, and that he is able to emerge from it recognizable as a hero in the tradition of heroes. Like Ulysses entertaining the royal house of Phaeacia, Othello wins a place in the family of Venice—rather than just its navy—by working the spatial and temporal dilations of mythic time.

What Othello does not try to do is what Iago does so well: engender time. Othello never steps outside of mythic time, which is only one of time's many dilations, and one of little sustenance. This sort of looking backward, when too focused, misses the pregnant opportunities of the present, the labors and dilations of the present time. Othello's image is a mythic form stuck in mythic actions: those of the warrior and soldier. He is unable to deal with any inconsistencies in his mythic images. Othello's conception of his love affair with Desdemona is one of these images. I said above that, when telling her father and the Duke the story of their courtship in I.iii., Othello braided the love story with the adventure stories, and so married them in the realm of mythic time. So when Iago first suggests that Desdemona is being unfaithful to the Moor, Othello cannot conceive the thought of it, much less the deed, and lashes out in rage. Even when Iago has thoroughly convinced him, with "ocular proof" (an image to overrule the one in his mind, of chaste Desdemona), Othello still defines himself in mythic terms, as "a fixed figure in a time of scorn" (IV.ii. 54). Even betrayed, he remains static. Not even Desdemona's murder can remove the shame which he imagines will image him. It is an act of passion and disgust, all emotion. But Iago, who himself feels betrayed (or

so he tells us) is quite willing to let time hatch his plan of revenge. This does not cover all contingencies (such as his meddling wife's testimony against him, which he can only snuff with a desperate act of murder), but such are the exigencies of time, which he well enough knows. One can only engender so much, and predict so much from time's warp and womb.

Other characters are not so attuned to the properties of time as Iago. Cassio, for instance, is impatient for the time when Othello will forgive him for his drunken misconduct in II.iii. He stays up all night waiting for an interview with Desdemona, and a promise of resolution. Similarly, he hesitates with Bianca, or plays for time with promises that he never intends to keep: presumably of fine gifts, maybe even marriage. He begs her pardon for being so distracted by the business of Othello's displeasure, and promises Bianca, "I shall in a more continue time/ Strike off this score of absences" (III.iv. 178-9). The play between continuity and absence here keys us into Cassio's whole conception of time: he fantasizes about a unified time (presumably one where Cassio will always get what he wants, such as Othello's forgiveness), yet in real life sees only disjunctures and gaps. Waiting, for him, is standing in a void. He does not understand what Iago seems to: that delay is merely a dilation of time, not a fissure. Time can no more break than energy be destroyed. Change shape and course, yes, but it never ceases to be, even momentarily. Time is, after all, the very measure of the momentary.

Desdemona, too, seems a little confused about time's workings. The best example of this is her "timing" on the issue of Cassio's reinstatement. When Othello tries to lead her off the subject, saying, "Not now, sweet Desdemona, some other time," she says, "name the time, but let it not /Exceed three days" (III.iii. 55, 62-3). She makes the mistake here of demanding on time, and its issue. The exchange between Desdemona and Iago in II.i., while she waits impatiently for Othello's return from the thwarted battle, is a study in Desdemona's concept of time. Much like the tales that she demanded Othello 'dilate' of his heroic journeys, this praise comes as a diversion to her, a way of avoiding imminent reality, no matter what it might be. For Iago, too, it is a moment of revelation. "[M]y Muse labors," he tells her, "And thus she is delivered" (127-8). Where Desdemona seeks to escape the pressure building in the moment of time's dilation—the tension of not knowing, of not-happening—Iago sees it as a moment of pregnant inspiration.

Patricia Parker's 1993 discussion of "dilation" in *Othello* and *Hamlet* examines yet another spin on the word: accusation. In her essay, she places the two senses of dilation—as accusation and amplification/expansion—beside Othello (and Hamlet) and reads "the function of the delator [alternate form of 'dilator'] or informer as a secret accuser, associated both with spying and with bringing something 'hidden' before the eye; and, second, the language of uncovering, dilating and opening the 'privy' place of woman, in the quasi-pornographic discourse of anatomy and early gynecology which seeks to bring

a hidden or secret place to light.”<sup>5</sup> We could certainly apply this position to Iago’s ‘praise’ of Desdemona, and of women in general, in the above-mentioned passage: Iago (the informer, if there is one in this play) is, in a sense, accusing women who pretend to virtue (like Desdemona and Emilia) of using their own basest means (their sexuality) to empower themselves; and, in his dilation on the subject, he is exposing the hidden source of power (the female genitals). But Parker’s way of reading the play has more specific concerns. She is interested in the various discourses of Shakespeare’s England—*anatomical, medical, theatrical, and judicial*—and the way they visualize the world, and what part the language of the female body plays in that visualization. I would go still further, and investigate the economic discourse in the play, and its relationship to dilation and ‘dilatatory time.’

Iago’s most poignant remarks on dilatatory time are made in response to Roderigo’s fixed concern with money. The play opens with Roderigo accusing Iago, “who hast had my purse/As if the strings were thine,” of acting, or non-acting, in bad faith toward him. Iago insists that they are bound in cause against the Moor, and unfolds his own motives. Note how Iago uses the lexicon of economics in this response. Of his eligibility for the lieutenantcy given Cassio instead of him, Iago insists, “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place” (I.i. 11). That he knows his own price is a point of pride to Iago. Unlike Cassio, the “great arithmetician” and “bookish theoretic” and “counter-caster,” Iago’s is an applied system of values, an economy (19, 24, 31). Cassio may know how to divide, but he doesn’t know the division of a battle: “Mere prattle, without practice” (25). And the cruel irony is that Iago, who presumably does know his way around a battle, is relegated the responsibility of ensign, standard-bearer, flag-carrier. He is the emblem of the emblem, in much the same way that Cassio’s mathematical figures are emblems of some corresponding real value.

Iago then goes on to describe the economics of his relationship with Othello: “I follow him to serve my turn upon him”, and “Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago./ In following him, I follow but myself,” and “I am not what I am” (42, 58-9, 65). These statements, while on the surface seeming nonsense or contradiction, reveal the very depths of Iago’s own economy, and its relation to wit and dilatatory time. They are as the circular revolutions of a current caught in an eddy, still moving, but temporarily delayed from the straight course. And so, they swell until their own current breaks them free into the current again. But, for the dilatatory time in that eddy, they turn in circles, away from their point of entry, and back again. Their waves reflect back out into the straight current, and they reflect themselves, over and over, until they break free. Iago understands dilatatory time: it is duration swelling with its own momentum, and turning on itself, not stopped. It is time to ruminate on the self and its position to the straight current, and to step out of body, in some sense, and become what you reflect. Iago does this several times in the play. The best example is when he plays Brabantio against Othello, yet seeming to stand by both their sides (as



he likewise does with Roderigo and Cassio, Cassio and Othello, Othello and Desdemona). The circular current is also a place to discover yourself. While it is clear at the beginning of the play that Iago is already robbing Roderigo in a worthless suit for Desdemona, no plan is yet formed for his revenge on Othello. In fact, it doesn't start to form until the very end of Act I., as Iago ruminates further on motive. At first, the promotion is all there is to it. But now we discover a rumor that Othello has cuckolded Iago with Emilia. A strange moment, this, because it isn't at all clear whether Iago believes it, or even cares, so long as it represents a motive for his actions. "I, for mere suspicion in that kind./ Will do as if for surety," he says (I.iii. 389-90). In another man, we would call this over-weaned jealousy. But Iago is smarter than that. Only a few lines later he begins to unwind his plot "to abuse Othello's ear" with similar innuendo and lead the trusting Moor "as tenderly by the nose. . . / As asses are" (395, 401-2). Iago will make an ass of the man who lets his suspicions run away with him. No, for himself it's only the appearance of motive that matters. The image of the cuckold and the image of the scorned man are useful tools, not only for making allies but for plugging up any holes in one's own resolve. What Iago knows, and what the others don't, is that the image must constantly be recast if it isn't to be annihilated by time's issue. The key to a stable economy is changing with the times.

Knowing keeps its advantage by holding others in ignorance: so Othello with Iago. Othello, the mythic and static one, resists, or does not recognize, the need to turn in the current. When Iago says that he follows Othello, he means into the eddy. And when he says it is to serve his turn upon Othello, he means that he will come around in the arc of his revolution and knock the static Othello off his feet. Real wit moves in the current that dilatory time creates, and so changes constantly: "I am not what I am."

Roderigo's response to all of these revelations of Iago's is, typically, to think on money: "What a [full] fortune does the thick-lips owe/ If he can carry't thus!" (I.i. 66-7). Roderigo's sense of economy is different from Iago's, just as Cassio's and Iago's ideas of 'division' are different. But Iago, who at least temporarily needs Roderigo as an ally, is willing to play along with Roderigo's sense, and to use it as a weapon against Roderigo's better judgment. Roderigo, who sees the objects of love as "duty, beauty, wit and fortunes," is easily duped into selling everything he has to buy valuable gifts for Desdemona (which, of course, Iago keeps for himself). "Put money in thy purse," Iago tells him again and again in I.iii.: turn property and reputation to cash with which to buy your love object. Iago is playing with Roderigo's perception of wealth: the money, itself, rather than what it buys and how it sustains life. Roderigo's purse is his banner, and Iago plays ensign to help him carry that banner.

But Iago is not satisfied to leave Roderigo's perceptions alone. He wants to force them into action. This is why Iago makes a fig of Roderigo's virtue in I.iii. The fig has a double meaning here: first as a trivial obstruction to action, and second as emblem of male sexuality or potency, scrotum. Roderigo

imagines virtue in much the same way he does love, which Iago tells him is only an abstraction of lust, sexual desire. Typical of Iago, he supplants the reproductive capacity of sex with the physical desire, as a way of confusing virtue and vice. Iago is using the ambiguity of sexual function to confuse Roderigo into forgoing his original sense of virtue. Look closely: Roderigo frets that his fondness for Desdemona is no virtue. His concern is apparently not over the nature of the fondness (Roderigo as a man of honor speaks of love, not lust), but the fact that she is married, and that he is coveting his neighbor's wife. Nonetheless, Iago is able to quickly deconstruct and reconstruct Roderigo's view, not only of virtue but of love, so that virtue serves the self, as does love. Before his very eyes, Iago turns Roderigo's love to lust, and again and again advises him, "fill thy purse," so that he might buy the object of his lust, Desdemona. Of all the sexual puns in this section ("usurp'd beard," locusts and coloquintida, "hang'd in compassing thy joy"), the purse—emblem of the female genitals—is not only the most prevalent but the most telling. Here lust (explicit pleasure, implicit reproduction) and money comeingle: where sex is its own store of wealth, where it can be bought, and where woman is a depository for one's fortune (relating at once to the Renaissance idea that men are born with a wealth of sperm from which they draw until it is gone, and the humunculus theory of conception). And in so joining them, Iago creates a conduit between Roderigo's economic view of the whole situation (he's losing money in this relationship) and copulation. You will have her, Iago says: your pleasure and your fortune.

Iago cleverly introduces a balance of reason, a clear view of things: "If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to the most preposterous conclusions" (326-9). Reason "to cool our raging motions" (330). Iago uses the same reason to convince Roderigo that he must kill Cassio in IV.ii.: reason which leads him to a "most pregnant and unforc'd position," which is its own persuasion and needs no passion plea. Shakespeare underscores this idea of reason's foregone wisdom by walking the characters off-stage—out of the audience's eyes and ears—to discuss the 'reasons' Cassio must die. We are back to the connection between reason and patience, the wealth of the wise man: rash Roderigo be calmed, for only in calm, in patience, in the pregnancy of the delayed momentary, will wit birth its great progeny. Of course, Iago is messing with this equation somewhat to make Roderigo do what he wants. Wit and the "unforc'd" machinations of reason will make answer as surely as dilatory time will birth the plot engendered by the man of wit. That man of wit is Iago, and Roderigo is only another player in his plot. In Iago's own schema of self-virtue, Roderigo is just another commodity to be traded. But if he only teaches Roderigo this lesson in patience to serve himself, still the lesson is consistent with everything we know about Iago.

"Patience her injury a mockery makes," the robbed man who smiles steals something from the thief: the Duke says this to Brabantio in I.iii. to resolve the

matter of Desdemona's secret marriage, and the old senator replies that he will grin and bear it. Iago does neither of these. He smiles at thieves (Othello and Cassio), but only to distract them while he drives his knife through their backs. Patience for Iago is not a way of disarming 'karma', or letting steam off of the pressure of events: it is a way of bending time, of shifting its shape to give the victim the wrong impression, to distract him with a false security, a false sense of time.

All of this makes Iago's oath at the end of the play—to "never speak word" again—the more powerful, and ultimately terrifying. Iago, who throughout the play used language to birth phantasms and hellish plots from the womb of "dilatatory time," now engages in the ultimate form of patience, and rumination, and dilation. This is a threat is refusal, non-submission. Iago will hold his tongue until the dilation of time bursts, and births its own demons, far worse than any he could ever engender. For, "what's he then that say I play the villain./ When this advice is free I give, and honest. . .?" (II.iii. 336-7). Whatever Iago's base motives may be for destroying Othello and the others, he attempts to live within time's dilations as no other character in the play seems capable, leaves this play world mute, and all of its characters (or, those few who survive) to suffer their own collisions with time dilated, and what time births. He buries the secret with his buried voice: go figure it out for yourself.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The whole 'double-time' discussion began in a series of articles by John Wilson (alias Christopher North) for *Blackwood's Magazine* (Nov. 1849, Apr. and May 1850), and has held critical sway ever since. It has been elaborately endorsed by three major editions of Shakespeare over the past thirty years: New Arden 1965, New Cambridge 1984, Riverside 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Bradshaw, "Obeying the Time in Othello: A Myth and the Mess It Made," *English Studies*, 73:3 (June 1992) 211-28.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists 'dilatatory' as an irregular usage, favoring 'dilatatory.' But two other times in the play the word 'dilate' appears and, as I will show later in this paper, both uses suggest a function similar to the one I am reading into 'dilatatory.'

<sup>4</sup> The only consummation we have any evidence of is in death, which we may see either as eternal union or eternal delay. I am reminded of the lovers in Dante's Hell, who are frozen forever in postures of pre-ecstasy.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Parker, "*Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the 'Secret Place' of Woman*," *Shakespeare Reread*. Ed. Russ McDonald (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) 106.