

Will Dingee

After *Othello* 2.1.277ff

That Cassio loves her, I do well believe't;
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.
The Moor (howbeit that I endure him not)
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature;
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband. Now I do love her too,
Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure
I stand accountant for as great a sin)
But partly led to diet my revenge [...]

That bat "E" "O" of sure, eye shoe tell received;
That me shove sin, whiz bat and of grape said it.
A door (now see it that high ed cure sin glob)
Sin love the non-pant, shoving, no-bull "A" cure.
And eye air sink eel goo goo "S" "M" "O" uh
Uh toast ear mud sand. Now eye goo of sure true,
Knot now of mad "O" you trust (though her mad denture
I brand and count ant four mad grape the him)
But archly fed to die it die pretend.

I knew when I sat down to begin this assignment that I wanted to try to distill the sound of a speech by Iago. I think he's easily the most interesting speaker in the play, and I am particularly interested in what sort of sounds he uses when addressing the audience, or perhaps himself, in soliloquy.

What I had in mind at first was to come up with some kind of loose musical composition, either a series of notes or a progression of chords, or a sound-collage, which would replicate some aspect of the sound of Iago's language. What I soon discovered, however, was that every time I thought I was translating sound into sound, I was in fact attempting to find sonic equivalents for aspects of content, such as mood and argument as expressed in dissonance and resolution, major and minor chords, etc.

I wanted, instead, to isolate something more purely formal. Of course, to a large extent, form cannot be separated from content, nor can Shakespeare's words realize their full sonic potential without a proper interpretation of the context and character behind each utterance. This is the job of the great Shakespearian actor. Nonetheless, I wanted to observe relatively invariable, something of the sound of the language on a level below inflection and the particularity of any given performance. At first, I tried simply to drum the passage's rhythms, but I was left unsatisfied because of the similarity such an analysis bore to a metrical scansion. Next, I thought I would try to isolate and record the sequence of vowel sounds in the lines I had chosen. Not knowing the International Phonetic Alphabet, I quickly realized the isolating and notating these sounds would be a fairly difficult task. I finally landed on a solution: I would re-write the text as

nonsense, changing the sequence of consonants but retaining the sequence of vowel sounds, the approximate rhythm, and the original punctuation. In practice, this means that I have replaced many words from the original with rhymes or near rhymes, but I had tried also to use non-rhyming assonantal substitutes to emphasize that it is really the vowel's that I am after.

The result is, if I may say, quite silly. I realize that vowels are especially prone to shifts in pronunciation and that this will therefore not represent the sound in Shakespeare's time with great accuracy. What I wanted to know was what sort of meaning- and context-independent effects of vowel sound, accentual stress, rhythm, and punctuation might still come through in lines that defied sense-making.

Iago seems hardly to be reaching for poetry in these fairly straightforward lines, but like all great Shakespearian characters he is a master of language, and I hope that this re-writing has brought out some of the vowel patterning in his speech. In sense, in this passage, Iago begins with careful well-ordered speech, a projection of the control he tries to exert in the play's world. As he approaches the revelation that he suspects Othello of having cuckolded him, however, he begins to lose some of this control. What should still come across from rhythm and punctuation is the end-stopped balance of the first two lines and the tendency towards more rapid, enjambed lines as the speech progresses towards the discussion of Iago's emotional stakes in the plot. But what can be found in the sound itself, on a more pure level? I could make several observations about the sounds that might confirm judgments derived from sense. However, short of an actual quantitative analysis, I fear that this might just be an exercise in confirmation bias. To start with sound, independent of sense – this is the task I tried to approximate with this exercise. I'm not sure what I have to say about it just yet, except that I sense an intensification of accumulated assonances into the final three lines, just as enjambment increases and Iago seems to begin to get carried away – by emotion, by language, by his own schemes.