

John Schulz
Week 8 Exercise
Professor Dolven

Original (4.1.94-116):

Iago:

But yet keep time in all. Will you withdraw?

[Othello withdraws.]

Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,
A housewife that by selling her desires
Buys herself bread and clothes: it is a creature
That dotes on Cassio—as 'tis the strumpet's plague
To beguile many and be beguiled by one.
He, when he hears of her, cannot refrain
From the excess of laughter. Here he comes.
As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad.
And his unbookish jealousy must construe
Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures and light behavior
Quite in the wrong.
How do you now, lieutenant?

Cassio:

The worse, that you give me the addition
Whose want even kills me.

Iago:

Ply Desdemona well, and you are sure on't
[Speaking lower] Now if this suit lay in Bianca's power
How quickly should you speed!

Cassio:

Alas, poor caitiff!

Othello:

Look how he laughs already!

Iago:

I never knew a woman love man so.

Cassio:

Alas, poor rogue, I think I'faith she loves me.

Othello:

Now he denies it faintly, and laughs it out.

Iago:

Do you hear, Cassio?

Othello:

Now he importunes him
To tell it o'er; go to, well said, well said

Commentary:

In the lines I have selected from Act Four Scene One, there are explicit stage directions scripted into the play that allow for Othello to occupy the stage at the very moment he is supposed to be absent from its drama—that of Iago goading on Cassio. The scene constructs itself as a trope that is familiar in Shakespeare, a character, in this case Othello, “withdraws” so as to overhear the speech of those taking over the drama of the scene. Yet, Othello does not hear in the scene at hand, he sees. As Othello withdraws, Iago expounds on his deceptive plot, an expostulation dependent on Othello not hearing him order for the deception to occur. Cassio “hears” and is able to respond with laughter by virtue of entering into conversation with Iago. In the case of Othello, as Iago explains, “as he [Cassio] shall smile, Othello shall go mad” (4.1.102). Othello will see Cassio’s mirth, but will not hear it. And of course as the scene plays out according to Iago’s manipulation of Othello’s withdrawn position, we hear Cassio’s joking lines on Bianca, “Alas poor caitiff,” but Othello sees them: “Look how he laughs already!” (4.1.109-110).

Iago’s play on sight and sound, however, is not scripted as a pure division between characters. It is not, that is, the ostensible division in which Othello sees, Cassio hears, and Iago mediates this synesthetic disagreement. Iago’s explanation of his plot, coupled with Othello’s withdrawal, and his visual participation in the scene all tell us that Othello is out of hearing range. And yet, Shakespeare scripts volume modulations into the language the stage directions of Iago and Cassio’s perceivably “overseen” conversation. Iago breaks off from his monologic explanatory speech to hail the arrival of Cassio—“how now lieutenant!”—and draw him into conversation about “plying” Desdemona. As he turns to pun on Bianca’s affection for Cassio (as opposed to Desdemona’s affection as Othello perceives), though, the stage direction that he is now “speaking lower.” Presumably, then, the conversation prior to this direction has been carried on at a higher volume. Is it possible, then, that Othello *does* hear the beginnings of this conversation? Iago’s lowered tone, and how it modulates the names he mentions, suggest Othello at least hears snatches of the conversation to this point.

Curiously, if we follow Bruce Smith's guide to phoneme volume levels in his chapter "Within the Wooden O" from *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999), Iago plays on the voluble intensity of phonemes falling in a higher decibel range in a way that suggests an exaggerated amplification of his voice. His "how do you now, lieutenant!", in addition to being exclamatory, invokes the combination of the sixth and tenth ([au]) most voluble phonemes, as well as the seventh most voluble ([u]). The lines after Shakespeare's "speaking lower" stage direction contain similar voluble vowel sounds, suggestively rendering the heavy handed stage direction all the more necessary.

Regardless of our belief in the voluble impact of phonemes in the play, the final lines of the passage I've selected depict Othello exhibiting comprehension of Iago's question to Cassio: "Do you hear Cassio?" (4.1.114). Othello, not Cassio, responds to this question with summary: "Now he importunes him/to tell it o'er, well said, well said" (4.1.115-116). Othello's narration signals Iago has spoken loudly enough for him to comprehend, it is a speech "well said," and rather than seeing sound he summarizes it. Ultimately, volume varies throughout this scene of Othello's withdrawal, dramatizing the tragedy of his synesthetic experience of Iago and Cassio's conversation, a tragic synesthesia volubly scripted into the structure of the scene even as we, or the actors, first encounter it through the medium of reading.

In my exercise, I have tried to audibly represent how Othello hears Iago in this scene. To do so, I've recorded the scene as performed by Kenneth Branagh (Iago), Laurence Fishburne (Othello), and Nathaniel Parker (Cassio), in Oliver Parker's 1995 film adaptation of the play. I've started the recording at Iago's lines to Othello at 4.1.82 ("Do but encave yourself") just as Othello moves to withdraw. As Iago's monologue explaining his plot commences, I've overlaid a track recording the sound of increasing radio static, thereby obscuring Iago's lines from our own, and Othello's, hearing. In doing so, I aim to create a conceptual analogy to how sound works as Othello distances himself from its site of utterance. Like driving out of range of our local radio station, Othello's withdrawal gives him access to snatches of voices in the otherwise obscured conversation. On the spots of the scene where, as I've discussed, Iago modulates his volume so that Othello *does* hear, I have likewise adjusted the volume of the feedback, fading it out so that Iago's greeting of Cassio, mentioning of Desdemona's name, and Cassio's laughter enter back into the audible arena.

Ultimately I've tried to represent the way characters hear differently in *Othello*, though I've done so in an analogical way removed from the theatrical and architectural demands of the stage as a performative space. To be sure, my choice to record the lines from Parker's film adaptation wedge Parker's interpretive choices for the scene into my own interpretive framing of it. This prohibits me from being able to modulate the volume exactly as I would like. In an ideal world, Branagh would hit on the phonemes I draw attention to (not to mention perform the lines in their entirety as they were scripted) so that I could structure the static around those individual phonemes ringing out to Othello's hearing. Nonetheless, I hope to have still captured the way in which sound comes to Othello selectively in this scene. While my choices as to when that sound comes through in an audio recording may be contrived (because of my ability to technologically alter volume), I aim for this contrivance to speak to the ways in which Othello's listening experience in the passage I have chosen is scripted in the language of the play; despite what we know as readers or audience members with access to all the lines spoken in the

scene, Othello's inhibited overhearing becomes an overseeing, and this fallible synesthetic experience that I've tried to analogize in my audio recording is exactly as Iago intends Othello to hear and to see.