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“Nothing that is so, is so”: Indeterminate Language in Shakespeare

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The Shakespearean canon is characterized by indeterminacy. His world is one where nothing is as it seems; men pose as women, nobles as commoners, and sisters as brothers. The resulting confusion challenges conventional norms, questioning gender, cultural, and other social boundaries. The surface uncertainty extends beneath the costumes and performers to the very foundation of theatre—language—as spaces emerge between words and meaning, and what is said and what is meant. Shakespeare’s use of ambiguous language opens his plays to multiple interpretations, creating a constant but fluctuating separation between the reader and text, the literal and figurative, and the expressed and implied. From gaps in the language itself to indeterminate spaces within gender and sexuality, Shakespearean theatre’s porous quality enables each play to constantly assume new and different meanings and a timeless quality.

Whether a play’s uncertainty appears in plot, characters, or setting, it can ultimately be attributed to the subtleties of the language in which it is composed. For instance, Hamlet’s deceit and revenge of Claudius is an outward function of verbal wordplay. Othello’s murder of Desdemona and subsequent suicide results from vague language and a problematic communication process rather than misogynistic impulses and suspected adultery. *As You Like It*’s confused reality is literalized by its ambiguous text. Both the characters and setting of *Titus Andronicus* occupy a wavering middle-ground between the literal and figurative rooted in textual vagueness and duality. Meanwhile, *Twelfth Night*’s comic treatment of gender and sexuality are rooted in sexually charged dialogue rife with innuendo and double entendre. The five aforementioned plays help illuminate the effects, capabilities and boundaries of language.

## *Twelfth Night*

A Christian holiday, Twelfth Night marks the eve of Epiphany and features celebrations across North America and Europe. In Tudor England, Twelfth Night marked the final day of a winter carnival that began on All Hallows Eve during which an appointed King of Misrule presided over the Christmas festivities, ensuring a comedic reversal of order that facilitated a communal release of inhibition. The eponymous Shakespearean comedy borrows its theme from the holiday and epitomizes the indeterminacy and ambiguity characteristic to Shakespearean theater through its inversion of order. As Frank Kermode maintains, Shakespeare's theater is a "matter of disguise and appearances, of impersonation, of the attempt to discriminate what is from what is not by means of what merely appears"(Kermode 66).

*Twelfth Night's* plot revolves around mistaken identities, particularly through gender confusion. The thematic confusion operates on both dramatic and textual levels. After a shipwreck leaves Viola in a distant land and apparently kills her brother Sebastian, she dons a masculine guise as Cesario to secure a job in Orsino's court. She quickly develops an attraction for the count, and becomes torn between her desire and her job as his matchmaker with Olivia. Meanwhile, Olivia expresses her love for Cesario, further complicating Viola's predicament. Caught in a love triangle predicated on deception, Viola exclaims, "O time, thou must untangle this, not I / It is too hard a knot for m t'untie" (2.3.38-9).

A source of insight throughout the play, the jester Feste is the only character aware of the wide-ranged disorder. In Act 3, scene 1, for example, he notices the uncertainty of Viola's identity, commenting "who you are, and what you would, are out

of my welkin”(3.1.57-58). And, upon mistaking Sebastian for Cesario, he unknowingly pinpoints the dramatic situation: “your name is not Master Cesario, nor this is not my nose, neither. Nothing that is so, is so” (4.1.6-7). As a clown, Feste is inherently linked to the carnivalesque. It is not surprising, then, that he is more perceptive to the surrounding inversion of order.

Gender reversal operates simultaneously on several levels, generating comedic situations that highlight the play’s theme: things are not as they appear. Within the storyline, Viola disguises her gender in both Orsino’s and Olivia’s courts. Commenting on her appearance, Orsino notes her feminine characteristics: “Diana’s lip/Is not more smooth and rubious, thy small pipe / Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative of the woman’s part” (1.4.30-33). The comparison not only demonstrates his recognition of femininity, but implicitly expresses a sexual attraction. Consistent with Medieval and early-modern courtship, he catalogues her beauty. And, the reference to the mythological virgin goddess Diana, suggests an elevated degree of attraction. Moreover, his comments establish a homoerotic desire, as he openly acknowledges his feeling for what he believes is a young man.

The homoerotic tension between Viola’s relationships with both Orsino and Olivia represent the extent of confusion she causes throughout the play. While Orsino’s attraction is only superficially homoerotic—despite believing Viola is male he is nonetheless attracted to a female—Olivia develops a fundamentally homosexual desire that appears to be straight. However, she seems to perceive something amiss in her attraction for Viola: “I do I know not what, and fear to find / Mine eye too great a flatterer for my mind” (1.5.288-89). Although her fears may be linked to an anxiety over

class differences, they are more likely rooted in a sense that Viola is not who he claims to be. Olivia articulates her suspicion in Act 3, scene 1:

OLIVIA: I prithee tell me what thou think'st of me.

VIOLA: That you do think you are not what you are.

OLIVIA: If I think so, I think the same of you.

VIOLA: Then think you right, I am not what I am.

OLIVIA: I would you were as I would have you be.

(3.1.129-33).

While Viola argues that, as a woman, Olivia must give in to marriage regardless of her wealth and power, observing “you do think you are not what you are,” Olivia misinterprets her point as “you are not who you appear to be,” and attempts to reverse it onto Viola. In agreement, Viola admits “I am not what I am.” Again, Olivia misunderstands her meaning and assumes Viola secretly loves her.

The interchange between Viola and Olivia is further complicated by the utilization of boy-actresses in early-modern theatre, thus creating an additional layer of gender confusion. Upon *Twelfth Night*'s publication, therefore, a male actor played Viola, a woman, who pretends to be a man and meanwhile falls in love with Orsino, another man. All the romances within the play thus involve a certain degree of homoeroticism.

The omnipresent homoeroticism represents a challenge to normative British social conventions, and marks the general inversion of order thematic of *Twelfth Night*. Moreover, the confusion in *Twelfth Night*'s plot is symbolic of the confusion within the play's text. As Kermode claims, Shakespeare's “language, like reality, is turned upside

down” (Kermode 68). Full of visible representations of equivocation, ambiguity, and innuendo, *Twelfth Night* epitomizes the indeterminacy of Shakespeare’s work and clearly illustrates the intertwined relationship between the play and the language in which it is crafted, which is more subtly apparent in other pieces such as *Titus Andronicus*.

### ***Titus Andronicus***

Scholars such as T.S. Eliot claim nothing is taboo in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, criticizing, in particular, its gratuitous violence. Furthermore, they contend Shakespeare’s simplistic approach to violence lacks moral depth and the emotional complexity it entails. From its revenge-driven storyline to its black-and-white treatment of women and minorities, they maintain *Titus* smacks of a sense of artificiality that inherently weakens the play. Indeed, the violence of *Titus* achieves mythic proportions that surpass believability; but, after all, the play does not take place in the real world. Set against the backdrop of several classical stories, *Titus* is rooted in myth. Structurally, the plot evokes Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and borrows from the Roman story of the rape of Lucretia, among others. Meanwhile, within the text, the characters repeatedly connect their actions to the same myths. In addition to its half fictional setting, the characters in *Titus* possess a duality of their own. Often constructed through cartoonish exaggerations of early modern stereotypes, they nonetheless reflect very real human qualities. Finally, *Titus* explores the boundaries of language, as words become literalized and assume a physical quality. A function of its double-sided language, *Titus* possesses a duality that permeates the plot, characters, and action, ultimately making anything possible.



Perhaps *Titus'* most complex character, Aaron represents a seeming walking contradiction as his moral and physical duality mirrors that of the play. His ambiguous Moorish race—as presented by Shakespeare—is, at times, self contradictory. On the surface, the Moor is a racial and religious construct of early-modern Europe predicated on the historical interaction between Christian Europeans and a wide range of cultures scattered primarily throughout Africa and Asia. Principally identified by dark skin and Muslim faith, the Moor is distinguished from Europeans by ethnic and cultural differences. The idea of the Moor is considerably complex, however. It represents a variety of peoples only linked by their shared status of "other," and thus suffers internal conflicts as two major groups emerge—one based on skin color and the other on religion—that are directly connected to different social stereotypes. Although "Moor" refers to Muslims and dark skinned people, the two qualities are not necessarily connected, allowing a Moor to be black but not Muslim and vice versa.

Aaron displays qualities consistent with the competing understandings of "Moor." "Moor" is an unclear term that can mean either "Muslim" or "black" or both, yet each quality connotes a different stigma. As Ania Loomba notes, blackness was associated with congenital moral depravity and godlessness—traits that characterize Aaron as a black Moor. Muslims were thought to be able to convert to Christianity because their lighter skin could pass as white and they were not viewed as savage. Conversely, Loomba observes that blackness was considered a "set of attributes that cannot be either acquired or shed" (Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* 46). While Europeans considered blacks a completely alien species and subhuman, they perceived Muslims more as dangerous peers. Finally, black Muslims provided much of the crossover

between the sides, and help explain the combination of race and culture in the formation of the Moor. Despite the vast differences in culture and in the ways they are perceived by Europeans, both groups established the parameters of the Moorish race and heavily influenced Shakespeare's characterization of Aaron

Consistent with the negative implications of black skin, Aaron epitomizes the stereotypical African Moor. He relishes his iniquitous predisposition and fulfills other characters' racist expectations. Emily Bartels describes his villainy as self-serving: "for as he outlines his intentions, he reveals a purposelessness that makes his villainy all the more insidious and, even in this 'wilderness,' all the more unique"(Bartels 445). Although he briefly entertains notions of attaining power through Tamora's ascension to Empress, thus explaining his rationale for eliminating Titus and his family, he is unable to see himself as anything but a slave. He envisions his future self to attain gold and pearls, yet remain servile: "I will be bright and shine in pearl and gold / To wait upon this new-made empress"(2.1.19-20). Eventually, he becomes content to simply pursue his lust for Tamora and enjoy the downfall of Saturninus and the Anronici family, "to wanton with this queen...that will charm Rome's Saturnine and see his shipwreck and his commonweal's"(2.1.21-24). Of all the characters in *Titus* who participate in murder or rape—Titus, Lucius, Saturninus, Chiron, Demetrious, and Tamora—Aaron is the only one without a motive and the only one with black skin. Aaron's "purposeless" villainy reveals his innate difference from the other characters.

Aaron's blackness is perceived by the Romans and himself as a moral quality. Illuminating the source of his violent propensity, he declares: "Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace: Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (3.1.203-4). He

reinforces his natural taste for destruction in Act 5, scene 1 when he denies any remorse for his complicity in Lavinia's rape, Bassianus' murder, and Martius and Quintus' executions, stating,

But I have done a thousand dreadful things  
As willingly as one would kill a fly,  
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed  
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.

(5.1.141-44)

He is unable to satisfy his thirst for cruelty, as his only regret when faced with death is not having committed more crimes. Shakespeare represents Aaron's evil as a function of his race, as evil percolates inward from his skin. A congenital criminal, Aaron is bound to servitude by his political and social uselessness. Shakespeare further emphasizes Aaron's contemptibility by depicting him as one dimensional; he is given no motive. His transgressions are thus seemingly intrinsically connected to his race and identity.

Were it not for the first scene of Act 5 Aaron's congenital moral depravity would go unchallenged. Considering his previous behavior, however, his effort to protect his son sufficiently complicates our understanding of his character. While searching for Aaron, a Roman soldier overhears the fugitive speaking tenderly to his son:

I must bear thee to a trusty Goth  
Who, when he knows thou art the Empress' babe,  
Will hold thee dearly for thy mother's sake.

(5.1.34-36)

Unconcerned with his ability to escape, Aaron focuses only on ensuring his son's future survival. And, once apprehended, he negotiates an oath with Lucius to exchange incriminating information about Tamora and her sons for the safety of his child.

Aaron's defense of his son seemingly humanizes him, removing him from the role of "incarnate devil." Directly contradicting the racial stereotypes he supposedly embodies, he shows compassion. Furthermore, his actions oppose his self-proclaimed wickedness: Aaron claims he kills people as though they are flies, implying a perceived worthlessness in human life, yet, when confronted with a threat to his son, he begs that he be spared. A compulsive liar throughout the play, it is possible he also lies about or, at least, exaggerates the extent of his moral depravity. Moreover, as Loomba notes, he is the only character to place his child's life above his own; Titus kills his own children out of principle and Tamora plans to kill her baby (the same one Aaron protects) to save her honor. In one sense, then, Aaron appears more virtuous than many of the other non-black characters.

Critics suggest Aaron not only defends his child, but his skin-color as well. In saving the boy, Loomba suggests, he protects his heritage: "The child prompts him to question whether black is 'so base a hue' and to defend the steadfast nature of blackness, its inability to be washed white" (Loomba 90). Additionally, Aaron promotes blackness over whiteness several times throughout the play:

Coal-black is better than another hue  
In that it scorns to bear another hue;  
For all the water in the ocean  
Can never turn the swan's black legs to white.

(4.1.98-101)

Perhaps, for Aaron, the child embodies the struggle between black and white, as Aaron's pigment visibly overcame Tamora's: "thy hue bewray whose brat thou art," he tells the child (5.1.28). In defending his son, he thereby defends his race and his child lives on as a symbol of black superiority.

*Titus'* thematic duality extends beyond Aaron, however, appearing in both the language and plot. Shakespeare evokes classical events and figures throughout the play. Lavinia's rape parallels the *Metamorphoses*, in which Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law King Tereus, who then cuts out her tongue in order to conceal his act. Philomela discloses Tereus' crime to her sister—Tereus' wife—Progne through a tapestry. In response, Progne kills her own son and serves him to Tereus for dinner. Similarly, Tamora's sons rape Lavinia before removing her tongue and severing her hands. Unable to weave a tapestry, however, Lavinia writes the names of her assailants in sand. Titus exacts his revenge on Tamora (and her sons) by butchering Chiron and Demetrius and preparing them in a pie for Tamora to consume.

Marcus is the first to observe the connection between Lavinia and Philomela: "Some Tereus hath deflowered thee / And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue" (2.4.26-27). *Metamorphoses* serves more than an allusory function in the play, however, as Lavinia presents her own copy of Ovid's book to Marcus and Titus in attempt to communicate the story of her attack. "Wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl, / Ravished and wronged as Philomela was," Titus asks (4.1.51-52). He continues,

Give signs, sweet girl, for here are none by friends,

What Roman lord it was durst do the deed.

Or slunk not Saturnine, as Tarquin erst,  
That left the camp to sin in Lucrece' bed?

(4.1.60-63)

Titus not only extends the connection between Lavinia and Philomela, but evokes the rape of Lucretia as a precursor for both his and her fates. According to the Roman myth, Lucretia is raped by the king's son Tarquin and subsequently commits suicide. In order to restore their family name, her brothers overthrow the king and establish the Roman Republic in his place.

Just as *Titus'* plot mirrors the *Metamorphoses*, so too does it reflect the rape of Lucretia. Although Lavinia opts against suicide, her rape carries the same significance as that of Lucretia—her father and brothers' name is tarnished—and the only solution is vengeance: "Revenge the heavens for old Andronicus!" Marcus yells (4.1.128). Upon completion of their revenge in the play's final scene, the Andronicus family overthrows Saturninus and assumes command of the Roman Empire.

The interaction of the myths of Philomela and Lucretia with both the plot and dialogue of *Titus* begs the question of whether the myths merely resemble the events surrounding the Andronicus family or play a more significant role by actually setting the story in motion. In other words, Chiron and Demetrius would not have cut out Lavinia's tongue, and Titus would not have fed them to Tamora, for example, had the characters not related their circumstances to the myths. Shakespeare establishes a direct relationship between words and actions throughout the play that suggests the stories of the Philomela and Lucretia serve active roles in Lavinia's rape and the Andronicus revenge.

In “‘Lend me thy hand’: Metaphor and Mayhem in *Titus Andronicus*,” Gillian Murray Kendall identifies a connection between linguistic and physical violence in *Titus*. Words, she argues, engender violence as they “disengage from casual usage and become literalized” (Kendall 299). Within the play, she notes, Titus uses the story of Philomela to regain power:

Titus adapts the tale of Philomela and rewrites old stories with a new alphabet. In doing so, he does not transform the world of *Titus Andronicus*, but he does come to control it. (Kendall 304).

The “new alphabet” he creates represents the perfect conflation of words and meaning, a stable relationship between signifier and signified. Thus, according to Kendall, by applying Philomela’s and Lucretia’s stories to Lavinia’s condition, Titus compels himself and his sons to act them out. “As with the woeful fere. / And father of that chaste dishonoured dame,” Marcus exclaims,

Lord Junius Brutus sware for Lucrece’ rape—  
That we will prosecute by good advice  
Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths,  
And see their blood, or die with this reproach.

(4.1.88-93)

Marcus is perhaps the first to note the literal reality of words in Shakespeare’s warped projection of Rome. “I have writ my name,” he remarks, “without the help of any hand at all,” effectively challenging the notion that only the tongue can speak and the hand can write (4.1.70-71).

Contrary to the saying that only sticks and stones break bones, words become weapons in Act 4, scene 2 when Titus deceives Chiron and Demetrius into meeting him. The scroll with which he invites them contains “weapons wrapp’d about with lines / That wound beyond their feeling to the quick” (4.2.27-28). As Kendall explains, they are “all going to be destroyed by a script. Weapons collide with words—physically, literally, as the scroll touches the metal...[they] have been mortally wounded without feeling a thing: ‘what is written shall be executed’” (Kendall 312).

In a world where words are weapons, Titus and his sons determine their fates by recalling the myths of Philomela and Lucretia. The myths assume a literal significance as their stories are reenacted in a fusion of fiction and reality. By applying Progne’s revenge or Lucretia’s brother’s coup d’etat to Lavinia’s rape, they—perhaps unwittingly—set the violent tales in action.

Far from an orgy of senseless violence, *Titus* reveals the dualistic quality of characters, plot, and language. The nexus of activity and the embodiment of the play’s double sidedness, Aaron exhibits conflicting traits. He never hesitates to kill or deceive without motive, reinforcing his diabolic impetus. He dies for his son, however, exposing a previously unknown compassionate side. And, in defending his child he also defends his skin color. Race, incidentally, serves as another source of his duality, as the Moor is a historically contested and contradictory figure. Meanwhile, much of *Titus* mirrors the classical myths of Ovid, Lucretia, and Philomela, which not only inform the play, but assume an active role by setting the story in motion. *Titus* thus assumes a mythic setting, influenced by both fiction and reality. Finally, language becomes literalized; words become weapons and myths become reality as their stories are brought to life. In Titus’



“new alphabet” the sign-signified relationship is stabilized so that the expressed and the implied are inseparable; verbs precede their specified actions and threats promise to become realized. Self-conflicting characters, a mythological backdrop, and literalized language: anything can happen in *Titus*—but in this play not because of the uncertainty of words, but rather their certainty.

### *As You Like It*

Like *Titus*' setting, seemingly anything is possible in *As You Like It*'s Arden Forest. Beginning with the spelling of its name, it is distinguished from its surroundings. Though located in the French countryside, its spelling is anglicized from the French “Ardenne,” immediately introducing the thematic duality of *As You Like It*. While the Duke's French court seems to enjoy the social structure and order characteristic to early modern Europe, the nearby Arden Forest offers an escape from civilization and its requisite hierarchies. A place where nobility pose as Shepherds, women dress like men, and love is the only valuable commodity, the forest is a social and cultural inversion of 17<sup>th</sup> Century convention. Though at times seemingly removed from the dramatic situation, *As You Like It*'s uncertain setting guides the play's characters, action, and plot.

The Arden Forest serves as a site of deception both literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, cross-dressing and misrepresentation form the locus of the majority of human interaction. Gaps emerge between actors' characters and their gender. Additionally, the pastoral setting reinforces the play's thematic malleability. Shakespeare's language, meanwhile, uses literal confusion such as the setting to structure

a palpable space between the visual and verbal dimensions of the play, highlighting its linguistic source of deception.

Noting the fluidity of identities, Nathaniel Strout suggests the forest is a fictional world not only as part of a play, but within the story, as well. “The characters of *As You Like It*,” he writes, “keep telling stories to each other, enlarging the imaginative world of the play beyond the visible stage” (Strout 278). Through her creation of Ganymede, for example, Rosalind presents a new character with his own imaginary history that extends beyond both the stage and the audience’s ocular perception. Ganymede is thus a performative construction and, moreover, continues to develop as the play progresses. Furthermore, Ganymede’s fictional stories contribute to the development of the forest’s abounding sense of confusion, shaping a world where nothing is as it seems and everything is as you like it.

Further emphasizing the forest’s fictional qualities, Martha Ronk compares it with theater. According to Ronk, the forest scenes are a play within a play: “*As You Like It*,” she claims, “forces us to experience theater in the making” (Ronk 255). Similarly, the play’s characters seemingly perceive the metadrama they create. As Jacques proclaims in one of Shakespeare’s most quoted lines:

All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

(2.7.138-141)

While making a general statement about life, Jacques' observation may be understood to pertain only to the "world" of the play. After all, it is *his* world he is describing. Both critics and characters agree the setting of *As You Like It* possesses a metatheatrical element, further inviting the audience to investigate the space between the stage and their lives.

As Ronk notes, the pastoral genre traditionally exudes a sense of deceit. It is, after all, designed to deceive in order to "insinuate and glance at greater matters," as Puttenham argues (Puttenham 196). *As You Like It* further extends the deceptive capacity of the pastoral by de-emphasizing its physical—and thus visual—setting. "Although it is true that the play suggests a pastoral world," Ronk contends, "it is also true that in Shakespeare's time the stage was but minimally dressed and outfitted, 'the empty space'" (Ronk 268). Through the stage's lack of detailed ornament, the setting gains an imaginative quality that enables language, through the use of verbal rather than visual effects, to control the play and performance.

Centered on ubiquitous artifice, *As You Like It* reveals its reliance on language through the fluid relationship between the visual and verbal. "The Forest of Arden is 'seen' through the emblematic as given in words," Ronk maintains (Ronk 268). Specifically, the characters' (mis)representations of themselves throughout the play highlight the significance of speech: "Pastoral characters are...perfect examples of the tension between the visual and verbal since they appear in shepherd's garb, a defining mark of pastoral, and yet speak with the verbal sophistication of those at court" (Ronk 268). *As You Like It* thereby portrays a world constructed by words, in which the plot is

as much a function of reality as metaphor, and the literal and figurative oscillate seamlessly to create a place in which anything is possible.

According to literary theorists such as Saussure, within a text anything is possible. In his study of semiotics, he argues words themselves are unstable as there exists no tangible connection between what is stated and what is implied. Words are only abstractly related to their assigned meanings, thus opening them to equivocation, prevarication, and intimation. Meanwhile, phenomenologists such as Wolfgang Iser identify an inherent uncertainty in the reading process: “The imbalance between text and reader...is undefined, and it is this very indeterminacy that increases the variety of communication possible” (Iser 167). Due to the intentional fallacy and the lack of common experience between the author and reader, there is no direct connection between the text’s intended and perceived meanings, enabling multiple interpretations.

On top of the indeterminacy of words and reading, Shakespeare uses language in *As You Like It* to liberate the play from social and cultural restrictions that would otherwise prevent its production. Through comedic wit he insinuates images that cannot be presented on stage such as depictions of homoeroticism and sexual excitation. For example, Celia’s love for her cousin Rosalind appears alternately platonic and homoerotic. Responding to Rosalind’s bereavement after her father’s banishment, Celia questions the mutuality of their relationship:

CELIA: Herein I see thou lovest me not with the full weight that I love thee. If my uncle, thy banished father, had banished thy uncle, the Duke my father, so thou hadst been still with me I could have taught my love to take thy father for

mine. So wouldst thou, if the truth of your love to me were so righteously tempered as mine is to thee.

ROSALIND: Well, I will forget the condition of my estate to rejoice in yours.

CELIA: You know my father hath no child but I, nor none is like to have. And truly, when he dies thou shalt be his heir; for what he hath taken away from thy father perforce, I will render thee again in affection. (1.2.6-17)

Celia's love for Rosalind dwarfs her love for her father, immediately suggesting a more intense and perhaps romantic emotion than familial affinity. Moreover, Rosalind's brief response contrasts with Celia's lengthy and exaggerated speech, suggesting an unequally balanced relationship. Celia's lines assume an even stronger homoeroticism when Rosalind begins to fall for Orlando. Before the wrestling match Rosalind tells Orlando, "What little strength I have, I would it were with you." "And mine to eke out hers," Celia interjects (1.2.161-63). Though ostensibly offering Orlando additional support, her response enables multiple interpretations through its equivocation and subsequent opening of gaps, including the communication of her desire to negate Rosalind's love for him.

Celia and Rosalind continue to express what they cannot stage in increasingly sexual terms. Act 4, scene 1, for example, provides thinly disguised graphic sexual imagery through a witty, and apparently innocent, interchange.

CELIA:           You have simply misused our sex in your love-prate. We  
                          must have your doublet and hose plucked over your  
                          head and show the world what the bird hath done to  
                          her own nest.

ROSALIND: O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that thou didst  
know how many fathom deep I am in love. But it cannot  
be sounded. My affection hath an unknown bottom, like the Bay  
of Portugal.

CELIA: Or rather bottomless, that as fast as you pour affection  
In, it runs out.

(4.1.172-180)

Their sexualized anatomical discussion simultaneously evokes stimulation and adds another dimension to Rosalind's affection. By presenting images of homoeroticism and intercourse verbally rather than visually, Shakespeare subverts early-modern taboos such as overt sexual desire.

Stephen Greenblatt coins Shakespeare's use of tension between the visual and verbal in such plays as *As You Like It* "erotic chafing:"

Shakespeare realized that if sexual chafing could not be presented literally on stage, it could be represented figuratively: friction could be fictionalized, chafing chastened and hence made fit for the stage, by transforming it into the witty, erotically charged sparring that is the heart of the lover's experience. (Greenblatt 89)

The audience thus views two plays—one on stage and one which assumingly occurs offstage, in their imagination. Though we never ocularly witness scenes of erotic chafing, we believe they do take place, just as Duke Senior proclaims during Rosalind and Orlando's wedding, "We'll begin these rites, / As we do trust they'll end, in true delights" (5.4.186-87).

Erotic chafing not only contributes humor, but serves a significant role in the development of romantic love. In particular, Rosalind and Orlando's courtship is an almost exclusive function of sexual chafing. Indeed, after leaving the court Rosalind does not immediately express her love for Orlando, but instead engages in a deceitful, though good-natured, plot to both tantalize him and prove the resolve of his affection: "I will speak to him like a saucy lackey, and / under that habit play the knave with him" (3.2.270-71). According to Greenblatt, erotic chafing provides a vital step in Shakespearean romance, as it is "the central means by which characters in plays like...*As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* realize their identities and form loving unions" (Greenblatt 88). In other words, erotic chafing is the symbolic enactment of the lover's desires that would otherwise not be able to appear on stage.

In seeming contrast to the Arden Forest, Duke Frederick's Court maintains strict social codes. Ironically, the codes circumvent the very rules they are charged to uphold. Duke Frederick's usurpation of his elder brother Duke Senior subverts the same laws of primogeniture that allow Oliver to relegate Orlando to serfdom. Prevailing beliefs held the eldest son the most worthy of respect and influence; however, as Oliver notes, Orlando is the most popular among all groups of the community:

He's gentle; never schooled, and yet learned; full of noble device; of all sorts enchantingly beloved; and indeed, so much in the heart of the world, and especially of my own people, who best know him, that I am altogether misprized.

(1.1.141-44)

In addition to his charisma, Orlando exhibits noble qualities absent in his older brother. Perceiving the disparity to undermine his inherited authority, Oliver is compelled to dispose of his unwitting competition. Similarly, Duke Frederick perceives his niece Rosalind's charm to outshine that of his daughter Celia, eventually forcing her to join her father in exile. Unlike Orlando, however, Rosalind *is* the rightful heir. Moreover, by the end of Act 5, most character's roles are reversed, as Duke Senior regains the Dukedom. Orlando weds Rosalind—thus becoming heir to the Duke—while Oliver marries Celia and thereby assumes a lower position to his younger brother. Both parallels and contrasts emerge between the court's treatment of primogeniture and birthright, effectively destabilizing vital pillars of France's patriarchal system. Not limited to the forest, duality and uncertainty also characterize the court—the only extension of normative European culture within the play.

Ronk and other critics emphasize a thematic binary between the forest and court that disappears after close examination. Although the forest initially appears to contrast the court through its absence of social boundaries, further analysis exposes the court's purported structure as ineffective, un-enforced, and uncertain—thereby contesting the ostensible binary between the two settings. The underlying disorder of both the forest and court reinforces the play's sense that nothing is as it seems, as even a supposedly clear-cut binary can come undone.

*As You Like It's* thematic disorder becomes literalized by its language. Through equivocation and intimation seemingly innocent lines become loaded with sexual undertones. Meanwhile Shakespeare establishes a fluctuating but constant space between the verbal and the visual—what is said and what is implied—to expand the play beyond



the cultural and physical boundaries of the stage. Women pose as men, nobles as commoners, and homoeroticism abounds. The gender confusion is particularly notable, as Shakespeare deconstructs the seemingly scientific and unquestioned distinction between male and female. Moreover, it renders gender meaningless, effectively undermining the crux of Europe's patriarchal social order. The resultant disorder is inevitable, as Shakespeare depicts a destabilized world through an inherently unstable medium; the reading process is indeterminate and even the building blocks of language—words—elude definite meaning.

### ***Hamlet***

Exploring the space between the expressed and the implied as demonstrated in *As You Like It*, *Hamlet* is centered on wordplay. Both praised and disparaged by critics since its publication in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, *Hamlet* possesses an indeterminacy that continues to generate debate today. While Romantics champion Shakespeare's realistic depiction of "mixed emotions" and consistent idiosyncrasies within Hamlet, formalists charge the play's weakness rests in the protagonist's lack of character (Hazlitt 113). So frustrated by Hamlet's apparent character void, T.S. Eliot even proclaimed the play an "artistic failure." Critics agree on one point, however; Hamlet embodies a contradiction between doing and seeming, the literal and figurative. Representing this conflict, Hamlet's puns reveal the source of the play's indeterminacy within the space between what is said and what is meant.



apparent belief that his mourning is theatrical rather than heartfelt, maintaining the sincerity of his emotion. Moreover, he distinguishes being from seeming in a binary that inherently implies a separation exists between the two. Transitively, the same relationship exists between saying and meaning, as equivocation, ambiguity, and connotation cloud verbal expression. *Hamlet's* puns, in particular, highlight the tenuous and uncertain connection between the expressed and implied.

Not to be thrown aside as mere humorous tropes, *Hamlet's* puns are critical to illuminating the play's complexities. In her essay "A Critical History of *Hamlet*" Susan Wofford notes the critical importance of puns in expressing the major themes of the play. *Hamlet*, she argues, makes "its central points by, through, and about the pun" (Wofford 200). She elaborates on the informative quality of such wordplay:

Whether it is the psychoanalytic use of the pun as the hint of an alternative but suppressed story, or the epistemological emphasis on the ways puns intensify and express Hamlet's questioning of the grounds of meaning...the pun...gets pride of place. (Wofford 200)

In a story filled with mystery and deceit, puns uncover truths for both the characters and audience by signifying points of repressed knowledge and activity throughout the text.

Punning initially appears in scene two of the opening act and first introduces the extent of Hamlet's discontent. Upset not only with the death of his father, he broods over Gertrude's rushed marriage to his father's brother Claudius, whom he views as unworthy of both his mother's hand and his father's former position as king of Denmark. When Claudius addresses him as a son, Hamlet responds: "A little more than kin and less than kind" (1.2.65). His punning continues in the following lines:

KING CLAUDIUS: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET: Not so, my lord, I am too much i'th'sun.

(1.2.66-67)

Modifying the proverbial “the nearer in kin the less in kindness,” Hamlet reveals the enduring coldness of their connection despite their somewhat closer relationship.

Furthermore, “kind” carries a double meaning, as it also references the incestuous union that leads to Hamlet and Claudius’ new affinity. In addition, his pun on “sun / son” reinforces his resistance to Claudius, maintaining that he is still his father’s son.

Hamlet’s anger with Claudius is a function of his anger with Gertrude. After all, she admits Claudius into the royal home and, more importantly, the royal bedroom. For Hamlet, his mother’s sexuality appears coarse and unnatural. “Ay, ‘tis *common*,” he describes the incest surrounding him, in yet another pun emphasizing the pejorative sense of the word (1.2.73) [emphasis added]. Through his repeated puns, he subtly—but clearly—expresses, in Wofford’s words, a “suppressed story.”

Critics generally agree Hamlet’s actions and language suggest a dramatic self-consciousness. His numerous asides, soliloquies, and puns indicate his awareness of a constant audience. *Hamlet*’s metatheatricity becomes literalized in the play-within-the-play in Act 3, scene 2. Attempting to prove Claudius’ complicity in his father’s death, Hamlet organizes the performance of *The Mousetrap*, a loose rendition of the murder of Gonzago with clear parallels to the murder of Hamlet’s father. Prepping the players before the show, he emphasizes the finer points of acting and, perhaps unwittingly, simultaneously presents another pun; in directing the players to act he commits a tautology, as everyone on stage—including himself—is already an actor. Wofford argues

that the play-within-the-play affirms the central importance of puns in *Hamlet*, as “the play itself places the pun in the foreground. Puns...alone chart the play’s main preoccupations” (Wofford 200). Considering the significance of *The Mousetrap* scene as the locus of *Hamlet*’s storyline and the over-arching pun it represents, such wordplay thus affects all levels of the play.

Hamlet’s puns both support and contradict his apparent psychosis. Encountering Hamlet in the court, Polonius investigates Ophelia’s fear that he is mad. Hamlet seems to not recognize the lord Polonius, addressing him condescendingly as a fishmonger; however, he also asks about his daughter—indicating his awareness of Polonius as Ophelia’s father. Puzzled, Polonius continues to test Hamlet’s sanity:

POLONIUS: What do you read, my lord?

HAMLET: Words, words, words.

POLONIUS: What is the matter, my lord?

HAMLET: Between who?

POLONIUS: I mean the matter you read, my lord.

HAMLET: Slanders, sir; for the satirical slave says here that old men have grey beards...and that they have a plentiful lack of wit.

(2.2.191-196)

Punning on “read” and “matter,” Hamlet evades Polonius’ questions while appearing to not understand them. Furthermore, he speaks a slander of his own using the words of the so-called “satirical slave”—likely a self reference—to criticize Polonius’ intellect. And in yet another twist of language, Hamlet states that he reads “slanders.” Slander is spoken defamation, and thus unreadable, while libel is the written form. His pun on read

appears to come full circle, as he uses it to mean “perceive”—the sense of the word initially used in the dialogue by Polonius. Polonius fails to recognize Hamlet’s non sequiturs as puns, instead viewing them as evidence to his mental instability.

Though unaware of the extent to Hamlet’s wordplay, Polonius discerns a semblance of coherence in his speech. “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t,” he comments (2.2.203-204). He continues, “How pregnant sometimes his replies are! A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of” (2.2.206-209). *The Norton Shakespeare* clarifies the dated language, noting that in these lines “happiness” connotes “appropriateness,” and “prosperously” connotes “successfully.” Polonius thus recognizes the intimation and equivocation of Hamlet’s speech, but is unable to comprehend its significance and attributes the meaningful statements to the workings of a sick mind. To the audience, however, Hamlet’s madness becomes visibly feigned. Marveling over his successful deceit in an aside he observes “They fool me to the top of my bent,” indicating Polonius and the rest of the court are unaware of his ploy.

Hamlet’s behavior begins to resemble his indeterminate speech. Just as he says one thing and means another through his puns, so to does he say one thing and *do* another. Resolved to avenge his father’s murder after Claudius’ reaction to *The Mousetrap* confirms his guilt, Hamlet finds his uncle alone on his knees with his back turned. “Now might I do it pat, now a is praying, / And now I’ll do’t,” he proclaims (3.3.72-73). Instead of completing his revenge, however, he sheaths the sword to supposedly wait for a bloodier occasion.

Hamlet's delay begs the question of the strength of his resolve. Romantics theorize his decision against killing Claudius in Act 3, scene 3 results from the play's structure: were he to kill him at that point, the play would be too short. Meanwhile, a host of critics including Robert Weimann and Bruce Danner argue the delay reveals Hamlet's inability to act (no pun intended). As an introverted intellectual, they suggest, his world is mental rather than physical; he plots gruesome revenge and is satisfied with only knowing his plan works instead of having to physically execute it.

By visiting Gertrude in place of killing Claudius, Hamlet substitutes violent words for actual violence. "I will speak daggers to her, but use none. / My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites," he declares (3.2.366-67). In "speaking daggers," he not only switches from using literal to figurative force, but avoids killing Claudius for the time being. By "speaking daggers," Danner writes, "Hamlet simultaneously conveys force and weakness, action and passivity" (Danner 42). Moreover, the dual nature of his proclamation implies he views speech and action as interchangeable. Danner elaborates:

Muddying the distinctions between violence and speech that he hopes to maintain here, Hamlet's "speak daggers" does not simply make daggers out of words; it also makes words out of daggers. While it wrenches figuration into the play's situational "reality," the phrase also dislocates and mystifies the material action of revenge, consigning it to the realm of the imaginary. (Danner 42)

Accordingly, violent language has a cathartic affect on the prince that quells his desire for real violence. Hamlet's speech thus controls him and, consistent with his constant punning, forces him to say one thing and do another.

Constantly dwelling within the space between what is said and what is meant, the literal and the figurative, *Hamlet* is characterized by pun. Hamlet's puns shape the play, signaling major points and providing insight within a cloudy and deceitful situation. Perhaps most importantly, they frame his plotted revenge, simultaneously confirming his madness for Polonius and his family while reassuring the audience his wits are intact. From Hamlet's equivocal language to the presentation of *The Mousetrap* to his delay in killing Claudius, puns control the play's action. Moreover, their critical role partially explains the controversy surrounding *Hamlet* and its eponymous protagonist as puns necessarily entail uncertainty. The result of an abstract relationship between the expressed and the implied, puns are products of unstable language, and so too is *Hamlet*.

### ***Othello***

Continuing where *Hamlet* leaves off, *Othello* demonstrates the extent of the ability of language to deceive. A challenge to racial and cultural stereotypes, *Othello*'s early-modern Venetian setting contrasts sharply with the social and cultural intolerance of neighboring European cities. Both a Moor and a successful leader, the play's eponymous protagonist represents ostensibly conflicting traits. Meanwhile, his wife Desdemona contradicts gender stereotypes by threatening not only her father and husband's authority, but the integrity of the Venetian social structure, as well. Representing outcasts and subjugated members of the community, respectively, the couple challenges prevailing notions of gender and racial inequality. Beyond its visible unsettling of normative conventions, however, *Othello* exposes a fault line in a pillar of



European culture: language. The play reveals the literal power of words and their ability to affect reality—exposing language as a legitimate threat to human judgment, and thus social order.

Othello challenges the negative stereotypes impressed on the Moorish race. Both a Moor and a successful Venetian general, he represents a dichotomy. His noble birth contradicts the commonly accepted idea of Moors as slaves—a belief closely linked to their assumed moral depravity. Ania Loomba notes that the combination of his noble bloodline with his people's servile past gives him qualities associated with both the Moor and the European; thus he is capable of compassion (a Christian trait) *and* violence. Commonly associated with Ottoman Turks, his Spanish sword and rash jealousy indicate an Islamic background. An aristocratic Muslim, Othello occupies a higher class than other Moors within the racially influenced European social matrix because he is more easily convertible to Christian culture and thus less threatening.

Desdemona disrupts both her father's and her husband's authority by her secret elopement with the Moor Othello and apparent affair with Cassio, respectively. Desdemona seems to play a secondary role; however, she is of primary importance in the establishment of male authority. As a threat to political hierarchy, she reveals an innate source of female power capable of checking—and even controlling—male dominance asserted through patriarchy.

Desdemona demonstrates the potentially disruptive effects of her female sexuality by subverting her father's authority. In choosing a husband without Brabantio's knowledge or permission, she claims ownership of herself and her rights, simultaneously eliminating her value to him. He angrily describes a daughter's ability to deceive:

“Fathers, from hence trust not your daughter's minds / By what you see them act”

(1.1.171-74). And, after the Senate approves Othello's courtship of Desdemona, Brabantio warns him not to trust her: “Look at her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.291-92). Desdemona's control over herself carries negative connotations and is linked to deception and even sin as a violation of God's fifth commandment. Furthermore, the social and political consequences of her discreet actions include Brabantio's loss of a major signifier of his power and masculinity.

Women's sexuality is highly powerful and potentially dangerous to men. According to Bernice Harris, the Renaissance view of women considered female sexuality capable of political disruption and in need of control through stiff social institutions. Women and their rights were subsequently considered possessions of their male kin. Virginity, which cannot be regained once it is lost, was prized the most valuable feminine quality. As Harris notes, "To keep or give away a daughter's maidenhead or to possess a chaste wife is to identify one's own power as masculine" (Harris 393). Moreover, a father is able to retain the most ownership of a woman's virginity, as only he can both have it and not lose it, while a husband takes (and thus loses) his wife's virginity upon consummation of their marriage. Men seek absolute control over their female kin, who operate as signifiers of male power and masculinity.

Desdemona's ability to affect male authority through her sexuality operates as first a promise and later a threat to Othello's position of power. A Moor in Venetian society, Othello is a cultural and religious outsider. However, in subverting her father's authority by choosing to marry him, she reinforces the legitimacy of his elevated status.

Augmented by his defense of Venice from attacks by Ottoman Turks, his marriage to Desdemona marks a religious conversion to Christianity that is critical to his acceptance into European culture. But, as Loomba notes in “Delicious Traffick” Desdemona’s ability to change suggests a flippancy that threatens the success of Othello’s assimilation into Venetian society.

As a result of Iago’s false testimonies, Othello becomes progressively suspicious of Desdemona’s loyalty throughout the play. “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon?” he asks (4.4.73-74). The implications of her perceived betrayal extend beyond the bedroom, as an affair between Desdemona and Cassio, Othello’s second in command, would likely destabilize Othello’s status in the Venetian court; as a noble woman she not only helps solidify his elevated position, but her chastity reflects his on masculinity. Desdemona’s alleged infidelity thus jeopardizes his place in Venice, which is already under constant scrutiny because of his Moorish identity: “My name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (3.3.391-93). Were her supposed transgression to be true, Othello is certain he would be relegated to the lower class and his skin color would lose its transparency.

Moreover, in connecting Othello’s suspiciousness with ideas of race, Shakespeare makes possible Othello’s visible transformation from Christian back to Turk. Historically, misogyny, along with jealousy and violence, were connected to Moorish and, in particular, Muslim qualities. His violence towards Desdemona becomes increasingly associated with his race. Even he himself accepts his blackness as a moral quality, proclaiming “Arise, black vengeance, from hollow hell” (3.3.451). And, after he

smothers Desdemona, Emilia accuses, “O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil” (5.2.140). As Loomba claims, “Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of misogynist ones” (Loomba 91). His misogyny—not his skin color—therefore prompts other characters’ inscription of racial stereotypes on his actions.

Although Desdemona never cheats, Othello’s fear of her infidelity is strong enough to sufficiently ruin him. His suspicion leads him to kill Desdemona, while his later realization of her innocence drives him to commit suicide. As he admits, his confusion caused him to, “Like the base Indian, [throw] a pearl way / Richer than all his tribe” (5.2.356). Though not guilty of adultery, Desdemona embodies a multi-pronged threat to Othello, who’s perceived inability to control his wife compels him to murder her in a jealous rage. *Othello* demonstrates the threat of female sexuality and waywardness to male political hierarchies, highlighting the innate power of women.

Despite his apparent transformation from a compassionate, cool-headed leader to an impulsive, violent misogynist, the source of his change is not a function of race. More complex than the fulfillment of cultural and racial stereotypes, his violent outburst is the result of unstable language. As in *Titus*, words achieve a physical effectiveness in *Othello* and control the play’s action.

Rather than paranoia, misogyny, or physical evidence, Othello’s mistrust of Desdemona is rooted in language. In *Othello and the Plain Face of Racism*, Martin Orkin identifies a critical source of confusion for the characters of *Othello* that enables Iago’s malignant testimonies to undermine human judgment. The strength of Iago’s persuasiveness, Orkin argues, lies in the inherent instability of language, which opens itself to prevarication. He outlines a series of “trial scenes” in which Othello assumes the

role of judge over Desdemona's alleged adultery as central examples of Iago's manipulative power and, moreover, the fallibility of language. Despite Desdemona's innocence and Othello's unending love for her, Othello finds her guilty and strangles her. "Through his presentation of Iago," Orkin contends, "Shakespeare demonstrates that in an imperfect world human judgment can never penetrate beyond the opacity of deliberately deceptive discourse" (Orkin 177). Orkin's argument for opaque language as a facilitator of injustice in *Othello* locates a subtle, yet significant, message of the play. Furthermore, although he recognizes language as the locus of Othello's confusion, Orkin fails to explain why and essentially only reiterates Saussure's commonly accepted assertion that words are unstable. The "opacity" of language Orkin cites paradoxically results from open spaces in the text. Iago's lines are indeterminate because their unspecificity offers a plenitude of interpretations. *Othello* not only affirms the porous nature of language, but depicts it as a potentially disruptive and dangerous force.

The primary target of Iago's machinations, Othello reflects the increasingly palpable effects of deceptive language as the play progresses. At the beginning of the third act Othello senses no threat to his recent marriage; however, by the end of the act, he becomes highly suspicious of Desdemona's fidelity. Iago first challenges Desdemona's faithfulness in Act 3, scene 3 by questioning her relationship with Cassio:

IAGO Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed your lady,

Know of your love?

OTHELLO He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?

IAGO But for satisfaction of my thought,

No further harm.

OTHELLO Why of thy thought, Iago?

(3.3.96-100)

Iago's deflection of his interest in Cassio and Desdemona's relationship indicates he is hiding something. Iago undercuts the apparent innocence of his question with his dubious assurance that Othello has nothing to worry about. Consequently, Othello becomes curious and questions the inspiration for Iago's "thought." Iago thus baits Othello to want to know more about his wife's relation with Cassio without betraying his ulterior motives.

Iago's intentionally deceptive word choice lends his statements to multiple interpretations through which he imparts doubt in Othello without openly accusing Desdemona of adultery. Continuing their interchange, Othello construes Iago's reactions to his descriptions of Cassio's role in Othello's courtship to signify potentially disloyal intentions:

IAGO: I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

OTHELLO: O yes, and went between us very oft.

IAGO: Indeed?

OTHELLO: Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that?

Is he not honest?

IAGO: Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO: Honest? Ay, honest.

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think, my lord?

OTHELLO: ‘Think, my lord?’ By heaven, thou echo’st me

As if there were some monster in thy thought

Too hideous to be shown! Thou dost mean something.

(3.3.101-12)

Iago shows surprise that Cassio helped Othello woo Desdemona when he asks, “indeed,” as if he does not believe Cassio would want her to marry Othello. Further, his repetition, or “echoing,” of Othello seems to avert Othello’s questions as if he is protecting Cassio, in effect causing him to become increasingly suspicious. As Othello says, Iago “dost mean something,” but he does not clearly state it. Iago thus conveys a sense of mistrust without verbally expressing it. His message is implied, rather than spoken.

In forcing Othello to induce meaning from what is not said—to read between the lines, as it were—Iago infuses his lines with gaps which Othello must fill in by himself. His lines evoke a theatrical version of what Wolfgang Iser and other critics refer to as reader response. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser argues texts are filled with gaps, or “blanks of indeterminacy,” that engage the reader and shape his understanding. Without gaps, he maintains, the lack of shared experience between the author and the reader would disable a reader-text interaction: “it is the gaps, the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to the communication in the reading process”(Iser 167). Furthermore, these spaces in the text oblige the reader to interpret his own meaning by assuming an active role in its construction:

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient...The text itself simply offers "schematized aspects" through which the subject matter of the work can be produced,

while the actual production takes place through an act of concretization.

(Iser 20)

Blockage, as the process of “concretization” is called, is not limited to written words, but can be applied to speech, as well. The same subject-object relation exists in spoken words; a statement does not necessarily mean what the words state, but rather what the recipient interprets them to mean. Moreover, other aspects of speech such as intonation and temporal spaces expressed in moments of silence complicate audio interpretation, making blockage even more vital in the assignment of meaning to spoken words than to text.

Filled with gaps that require blockage in order to be understood, Iago’s manipulative language allows him to say one thing and mean another. When he reminds Othello of Desdemona’s handkerchief, which she allegedly gave to Cassio, Iago leads him to believe in his wife’s promiscuity:

IAGO    What if I had said I had seen him do you wrong,

          Or heard him say—...

OTHELLO                    Hath he said anything?

IAGO    He hath, my lord. But be you well assured,

          No more than he’ll unswear.

OTHELLO    What, what?

IAGO                        Lie—

OTHELLO                    With her?

IAGO                                With her, on her, what



you will.

OTHELLO Lie with her? Lie on her? We say 'lie on her' when  
they belie her. Lie with her? 'Swounds, thats fulsome!

(4.1.24-35)

Iago's equivocal use of "lie" appears to be a synonym for "unswear"—used to clarify his previous statement; for Othello, however, it carries a sexual connotation. Iago reinforces Othello's interpretation, affirming, "with her, on her, what you will." Regardless, both meanings of "lie" suggest Cassio and Desdemona's deceit, as they either lie to Othello or lie in bed together. His anger and jealousy ~~visibly~~ manifest, as he hyperventilates and convulses on the floor.

From Act 3 to Act 4, Othello transforms from a clear-eyed, self-secure noble general to an enraged and paranoid husband thoroughly convinced of his wife's infidelity. As late as Act 3, scene 4, for example, Desdemona attests to his contentment. When Emilia asks if he is a jealous man, she responds, "Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / drew all such humours from him" (3.4.27-28). By Act 4, scene, 1, though, he already plots his revenge: "Ay, let her rot and perish, and be damned tonight, for / She shall not live" (4.1.174-75). Yet, despite his dramatic change, Iago persuades him of Desdemona's adultery without ever directly stating her crime. The sole source of ocular proof that Othello demands—the handkerchief—solidifies her guilt in his eyes; however, it is merely an extension of Iago's deceptive testimony. As Iago recognizes, "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ" (3.3.326-28). Although the handkerchief indicates a symbolic betrayal, it only does so with Othello's

complicity. As with Iago's words, Othello interprets, and thus assigns, the handkerchief meaning.

Othello accepts Iago's testimony as proof of guilt, as—through blockage—he makes the testimony his own. Iser notes in *The Act of Reading*, “as the reader passes through the various perspectives offered by the text and relates the different views and patterns to one another he sets the work in motion, and so sets himself in motion, too”(Iser 21). In a sense, then, Iago never has to prove Desdemona's guilt. While Iago insinuates her wrongs, Othello makes the accusations himself and thereby adopts them as his own beliefs.

Throughout the play, Iago manipulates Othello with deliberately deceptive language that renders him incapable of accurately judging Desdemona's alleged adultery. He subtly conveys a sense of distrust without directly accusing Desdemona or Cassio of participating in an affair by forcing Othello to interpret his speech by himself. As Iago's porous lines require blockage, Othello assumes an active role in the construction of their meanings, and is thus equally complicit in suggesting Desdemona's guilt. Moreover, his partial authorship over Iago's accusations of adultery, imply he subconsciously adopts them as his own. Iago therefore uses the porous nature of language—not concrete proof—to convince Othello of his wife's infidelity. Disrupting Othello's sense of order, Iago's deceptive language generates a tempest of jealousy and rage that clouds Othello's judgment, fatally consuming both the general and his wife.

At once a tragic drama, social critique, and testament to the uncertainty of language, *Othello* reads on multiple levels. Like other Shakespearean works, *Othello*'s setting defies 17<sup>th</sup> Century convention. Featuring a black General in European society

and a woman with the power to disrupt patriarchal order, the play challenges the early-modern social code. Meanwhile, *Othello*'s porous lines enable the play to assume varying meanings and significance. Moreover, they affect the characters' behavior. Iago never directly accuses Desdemona of sleeping with Cassio, yet convinces Othello of her crime. By interpreting Iago's testimonies Othello performs the same comprehension process as reading, and thus becomes an active participant in creating the accusation. In other words, Othello independently transforms Iago's insinuations into accusations. By accepting Iago's suggestive but seemingly innocent testimony, Othello unconsciously accepts Desdemona's alleged adultery. Language therefore deceives through not only its uncertainty from equivocation, intimation, and prevarication, but also its psychological ability to manipulate, as one person's words become another's thoughts.

\* \* \*

One way or another, gaps shape Shakespeare's plays. On the surface, plays such as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Othello* explore the boundaries of gender, class, and culture—the gaps between male and female, rich and poor, black and white. They challenge early-modern European convention, blurring social distinctions with scenes of homoeroticism, reverse-primogeniture, and female power. *Twelfth Night*'s carnivalesque inversion of reality, for example, features a seemingly straight attraction with a homosexual reality; the relationship between Viola and Orsino operates on several levels and is simultaneously “appropriate” and “inappropriate” as a male actor plays the female character Viola who in turn disguises herself as a young man, Cesario, and develops a love for Orsino—another man. Both on stage and beneath the costumes, two men portray

a loving relationship, while the audience pretends one is a woman. Meanwhile, in defiance of birthright and class restrictions, *As You Like It*'s Orlando weds lady Rosalynde and gains rank over his elder brother as heir to a dukedom. And, through her ability to determine male authority, *Othello*'s Desdemona reveals an innate female power capable of disrupting the surrounding patriarchy. By confusing the visible distinctions between significant cultural binaries, Shakespeare demonstrates the instability and, moreover, indeterminacy of social order.

In Shakespeare, clear examples of indeterminacy such as gender confusion result from uncertain language. Lines loaded with innuendo and sexual undertones establish Rosalynde and Celia's homoerotic bond, which is only depicted verbally. In another example, Hamlet's puns control the eponymous play's action. They deceitfully convince his family of his madness and set up his revenge. However, he becomes so engrossed with punning he eventually confuses the literal with the figurative and substitutes "speaking daggers" to his mother with actual violence against Claudius—critically delaying the revenge. Similarly, language becomes literalized in *Titus*, as myths are reenacted and words transformed into weapons. Language thus assumes a duality featuring representative and physical qualities.

*Othello* extends the boundaries of language, highlighting its psychological ability to influence people. Through his interpretation of Iago's testimony, Othello actively participates in the construction of the accusation against Desdemona's fidelity. Iago never directly questions her faithfulness, but Othello subconsciously transforms Iago's insinuations into allegations. Moreover, in doing so, he convinces himself of their veracity. In a verbal performance of Iser's Reader Response, Othello fills the gaps of

Iago's vague, patchy speech with his own inferences in order to interpret it, essentially reading Iago's words. The same uncertainty of the reading process clouds Othello's audio comprehension of words, eventually persuading him of Desdemona's guilt and compelling him to kill. Iago's porous lines reveal the profound ability of words to brainwash, as his testimony becomes Othello's conviction.

Finally, Shakespeare uses language as a liberator. Aerated with gaps, his porous lines create a sense of indeterminacy that escapes limitation and eludes definition: anything is possible. Ultimately, the uncertainty of plot, characters, setting, and even language can be reduced to the unstable relationship between the expressed and the implied; the literal is intertwined with the figurative, what is said is not what is meant, and "nothing that is so, is so."

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