

# BROKEN SPEECH:

A Nietzschean Perspective of Shakespeare's  
*Othello*

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"Words are but symbols for the relations of things to one another and to us; nowhere do they touch upon absolute truth," writes Friedrich Nietzsche, "through words and concepts we shall never reach beyond the wall of relations, to some sort of fabulous primal ground of things." As he suggests in his characteristically aphoristic style, language cannot articulate truths. In his essay Daniel Bergman brings the proto-deconstruction Nietzsche puts forth in "Truth and Falsity of the Ultramoral Sense" to bear on Shakespeare's *Othello*. A play that is, as Bergman writes, rife with "tragically mistaken meanings," *Othello* enacts the degrees to which language shapes and creates our realities. Reading *Othello* through the linguistic theories of Nietzsche, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jacques Derrida, Bergman deftly argues that the play is ultimately a microcosm in which we encounter the limits of signification.

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**T**ruth and meaning are often difficult, if not impossible, to grasp; the more one tries to hold onto them, the more they slip away. Much of the responsibility for this state of affairs, suggests Friedrich Nietzsche in his essay, "Truth and Falsity in an

Ultramoral Sense," can be attributed to the deceptive nature of language. Rather than being fixed and constant, linguistic significance exists in a perpetual state of uncertainty, and cannot be pinned down by a single word or phrase. This same difficult lesson lies at the core of Shakespeare's *Othello*, a play full of tragically mistaken meanings. Indeed, similarly to Nietzsche's essay, Shakespeare's text systematically problematizes the value – and even the very possibility – of signification. In the play, language cannot be understood in terms of good or evil; rather, it is portrayed as an amoral and necessarily flawed human construction that consistently impedes truthful communication. The two texts, then, complement one another, as *Othello* lends itself naturally to a Nietzschean reading. This paper will conduct just such a reading, supplemented by major ideas borrowed from Nietzsche-inflected theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. *Othello*'s tragedy is not principally brought about by the standard themes of jealousy, lust, and a desire for honour but rather by miscommunication – more specifically, by the main characters' failure to understand the impossibility of

certainty in a world governed and mediated by language.

When it comes to dissecting the roles of language and perspective in shaping human activity, there are very few theorists who can rival Friedrich Nietzsche. Though it is only a brief example of his extensive writing on the subject, "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense" contains many of the core ideas about linguistics that appear in a number of his other works. Perhaps the most relevant of these is his contention that language operates as a self-contained system that does not refer to anything outside of itself. Put simply, this means that there is no concrete external reality to which words and speech correspond – there is only ever language. "When we talk about trees, colors, snow, and flowers," he writes, "we believe we know something about the things themselves, and yet we only possess metaphors of the things, and these metaphors do not in the least correspond to the original essentials" (Nietzsche 694). In other words, language is a fundamentally deceptive entity, one whose capacity to conceal and dissemble is intimately linked to its status as a human construction. As Nietzsche argues, words are nothing more than "the expression of a nerve

stimulus in sounds" that designate "only the relations of things to men" (693), while telling us nothing about the essence of things-in-themselves. Essentially, language is a practical product of human ingenuity; it is meant to allow only for easier social interaction, and not for the communication of absolute truth.

For Nietzsche, then, the biggest obstacle to an objective representation of reality is the human intellect – the source of arbitrary and artificial language. "The intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual," Nietzsche states, "develops its chief power in dissimulation" (692). This intellect, according to his analysis, invents words that function simultaneously as ideas; rather than corresponding directly to individual objects, they correspond to a generalized category of objects. For example, although "no one leaf is exactly similar to any other [ . . . ] the idea 'leaf' has been formed through an arbitrary omission of these individual differences, through a forgetting of the differentiating qualities" (Nietzsche 694). Furthermore, in this endeavour to nullify difference for the sake of linguistic ease, "man forgets himself as subject, and what is more as an *artistically creating* subject" (Nietzsche 695). In other words,

human beings begin to believe in the absolute truth of their arbitrary categorizations and lose sight of the fact that these categorizations were initially developed from a specific subject-position. If humans were able to perceive the world from the perspective of a bird or a worm, Nietzsche suggests, "then nobody would talk of [. . .] an orderliness of nature, but would conceive of her only as an extremely subjective structure" (696). Basically, every person experiences surroundings in a different way, meaning that it does not matter whether or not an unchanging external reality actually exists. In this Nietzschean version of the world, perspective is everything.

The difficulties inherent in attempting to move outside one's subject-position, as well as the complications introduced into the quest for truth by the vagaries of language, are on full display throughout *Othello*. Indeed, in many ways, the play can be seen to be working through the same basic concerns and anxieties as Nietzsche's essay, despite having been written centuries earlier. One need look no further than the title character for evidence of someone who experiences both the benefits and disadvantages of language firsthand. At the beginning of the narrative, for example,

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language is Othello's friend – a tool that he employs to win Desdemona's love and, later, to justify their marriage to her irate father. In laying out the tale of their courtship to the Duke of Venice, Othello emphasizes the way Desdemona would “devour up [his] discourse” (1.3.149). Every time he finishes speaking, he says, “she thankèd me / and bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story, / And that would woo her” (1.3.162-165). Moreover, when Brabantio accuses Othello of having used magic potions and other “mixtures powerful o'er the blood” to steal his daughter away illicitly (1.3.168), Othello calmly responds that his words and stories constitute the only kind of “witchcraft” he has used. This elision of language with the dark arts acts as one of the reader's first clues that the discourse contained within the play is potentially untrustworthy. In other words, while Othello may not be aware of it, he has just taken his first step into Nietzschean territory.

The dangers and challenges inherent in language gain fuller expression as the play continues. In one key scene, Othello begs Iago to inform him of what he is beginning to

suspect might be impropriety between his wife and his lieutenant, Cassio:

I heard thee say even now thou liked'st not that  
When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?  
And when I told thee he was of my counsel  
In my whole course of wooing, thou cried'st  
    'Indeed?'  
And didst contract and purse thy brow together  
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain  
Some horrible conceit. If thou dost love me,  
Show me thy thought. (3.3.113-120)

The problem with this speech – which, in many ways, seals Othello's tragic fate – is that the speaker is asking precisely the wrong question. As noted earlier, Nietzsche understands words to be the expression of ideas that are so general that they are nearly meaningless. In addition, Nietzsche believes that it is impossible to view the world objectively while confined within a specific subject-position. This is a notion that Iago unwittingly acknowledges when he confesses the limitations of his perspective by stating: “it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not” (3.3.151-153). For these reasons, Othello's request that Iago display his inner thoughts through the use of language cannot be expected to yield any more than partial

truth. In the end, this is exactly what occurs, as Iago provides his master with misleading suggestions and inferences that cause Othello to entirely misconstrue Desdemona's actions. In the end, this attempt at interaction between two individuals has been corrupted by an inability to adequately express reality in words.

To further clarify the problematic relationship between thought and speech, one may consider the writings of continental theorist Ferdinand de Saussure. Building on Nietzsche's analysis of the limits of language, Saussure explores the latent tension between ideas and their expression, fully demonstrating the futility of Othello's command to "show me thy thought" (3.3.113-120). This phrase is empty, Saussure suggests, because a thought in isolation contains no independent meaning. In his opinion, "concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relation with the other terms of the system" of signification (Saussure 20). In essence, this statement is a reinterpretation of Nietzsche's initial assertion that language is inherently self-referential; words, and the concepts that they signify, have meaning only insofar as they can be



distinguished from other words and concepts. In attempting to explain this idea decades later, Jacques Derrida writes: “the signified is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself” (133). In other words, one knows what the term *dog* refers to not because one possesses an essential, unchanging idea of *dog* but because one recognizes the practical differences between dogs and other living creatures. When applied to the literary text at hand, this analysis reveals that the system of signification is ill equipped to handle Othello’s request. Even if Iago were the most honest person in the world, he could not share his thoughts with his commander, for language only permits the transmission of difference and partiality – not of positive knowledge.

*Othello’s* attack on the possibility of certain truth has long been a topic of discussion among literary critics. Unsurprisingly, the character of Iago emerges again and again as the catalyst for this deconstruction of signification. As some have reasonably argued, “Iago uses language to distort rather than to clarify [ . . . ] he manipulates people and circumstances in order to import false meaning and coherence on

what happens" (McGuire 199). Furthermore, by capitalizing on the recognition that every character's subject-position is necessarily limited, Iago undermines and eventually destroys the notion that "reasoned judgement can accurately know the nature of persons and the meaning of events" (McGuire 200). Evidence for this claim can be found in the crowning achievement of Iago's deceptive career, when he convinces Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful. In the place of concrete proof, Iago substitutes his particular brand of dissembling language - a sinister "medicine" through which "credulous fools are caught, / And many worthy and chaste dames even thus, / All guiltless, meet reproach" (4.1.42-44). Even at the end of the play, when Iago finds himself in custody following Desdemona's murder, this trickster figure denies that language in itself has any capacity to communicate truth. "Demand me nothing," he tells Othello, "what you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.309-310). Essentially, Iago informs Othello that even if he were to justify the motives for his deception verbally, they would not be any clearer. This insistence that language cannot convey meaning marks Iago

as a fundamentally and disruptively Nietzschean force in the play.

In addition, the fact that words become completely meaningless by the fifth act indicates that the play has shifted from an emphasis on Saussure's structural view of language toward a more Derridean understanding of speech, with Iago once again providing the impetus. Derrida's idea of *differance*, in particular, becomes central to our Nietzschean understanding of the text. In defining *differance* in his work, Derrida repeatedly stresses that the term does not refer to a specific idea. He writes: "there is no essence of differance [ . . . ] it threatens the authority of the *as such* in general, the thing's presence in its essence. That there is no essence of differance at this point also implies that there is neither Being nor truth to the play of writing" (Derrida 145). In many ways, this statement sounds like a reiteration of Saussure's initial contention that words in themselves contain no positive content, and can only be understood in relation to one another. However, it also contains the dark suggestion that retrieving meaning and understanding from language is impossible; there is no "truth" to the "play" of words. In a

world infused with *differance*, then, the signifier becomes detached from its signified concept. Put another way, words no longer mean what they used to, and this undermines all human communication.

Iago's machinations in *Othello* bring this idea into sharper focus. As we have seen, Iago cares little for essential truths; even when accusing his own wife of adultery, he "admits that truth is not his concern" (Shaw 307). Moreover, Iago works tirelessly to conceal the natures of Cassio and Desdemona, so that their every interaction appears fraught with adulterous potential, despite their continued – and justified – claims to innocence. In other words, as noted by literary critic Catherine M. Shaw, "what Cassio *really* is has been obliterated by a verbal projection" and "what he *seems* to be [ . . . ] is the focus of the Moor's revenge" (315). Of course, in the context of Nietzschean analysis, this phrasing is somewhat misleading; there is no such thing as what Cassio "really is" because, as we have established, names do not definitively correspond to concrete objects. Despite this confusion, Shaw's statement provides an example of Derrida's ideas in action: every time that Cassio and Desdemona try to defend

themselves, their words slip from their designated meanings and are reinterpreted by Othello through the prism of his specific subject-position as a jealous lover. In this way, Iago's pledge to turn Desdemona's "virtue into pitch / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (2.3.334-336) – wherein he inverts and transforms the meanings of "virtue" and "goodness" – can be seen as Derridean in character, and Iago himself as a primary site of *differance*.

As it turns out, the tragedy of *Othello* does not belong to the titular character alone; rather, as a Nietzschean reading reveals, the events of the play are symptomatic of a larger breakdown in meaning within the structure of language itself. Most of the characters are unable to communicate with one another because, in the absence of an absolute standard of truth, it is impossible for them to say exactly what they mean. Amid this uncertainty, the only individual with the power to influence events is the one who works within the deceptions of language to construct new meaning and shape the perceptions of others. Iago, the amoral intellect at the heart of the drama, plays this role out to its destructive conclusion, at which point the remaining

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characters are left to pick up the pieces of the rational, knowable world they once possessed. When viewed through a Nietzschean lens, *Othello* is no longer a morality play wherein goodness is undone by jealousy or poisoned by radical evil; rather, it is a cautionary tale about the limits of signification. In the end, not even Iago - upon whose decisions the action of the play depends - can definitively communicate what it all meant.

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