Irregular Unions

Cleland, Katharine

Published by Cornell University Press

Cleland, Katharine.
Irregular Unions: Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern English Literature.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83165

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2834791
Jessica and Lorenzo’s cross-cultural clandestine marriage in *The Merchant of Venice* is comedy saved; Othello and Desdemona’s is comedy gone horribly awry. *Othello*, with its multicultural Venetian setting and interracial marriage, has long been recognized as Shakespeare’s tragic revision of *The Merchant of Venice*. Julia Reinhard Lupton observes, “Both are set in the mercantile city-state of Venice, both employ clearly marked ‘others’ as central characters, and both use the theme of conspicuous exogamy to heighten the conventional comedic situation of young lovers blocked by an old father.”^1^ Lupton, however, views Othello more as Shakespeare’s re-writing of Shylock than Jessica, and does not consider how his clandestine marriage to Desdemona impacts his identity as a Venetian citizen. In the tragedy, Shakespeare does not make the interracial clandestine marriage between Othello and Desdemona a side plot as he does Jessica and Lorenzo’s. Instead, by bringing the clandestine marriage front and center, he places more pressure on it, making it central to the play’s tragedy. As the play’s protagonist, Othello has no well-meaning Portia who can swoop in and save the day. While Shakespeare makes no attempt to incorporate the couple into a comedic plotline, the play has many characteristics of comedy. As Stephen Rogers attests, “*Othello* achieves much of its tragic power through the adaptation, often the rearrangement or inversion, of techniques, devices, and other materials traditionally belonging to comedy.”^2^ Indeed, the inversion of the elopement plot
that succeeds in Shakespearean comedy should call our attention to why it fails in *Othello*.

Like the figure of the Jew, the figure of the Moor constituted both a religious and racial outsider in early modern literature and society. Much scholarship has focused on Othello’s racial otherness, and on how Shakespeare and early modern theatergoers would have defined his racial difference. Michael Neill demonstrates that the term “Moor” could refer to a range of racial identities, describing someone from a specific region of North Africa or from anywhere on the African continent or simply anyone with dark skin. Emily C. Bartels’s argument that Othello is simultaneously a racialized outsider and Venetian insider (the two subject positions are not mutually exclusive) has become a critical commonplace. Unlike Jessica’s Jewish identity, however, Othello’s racial identity is literally marked on his skin, suggesting that he could never escape a certain amount of outsider status even if welcomed into Venetian society. No one would ever wonder, “Which is the merchant here? And which the Moor?”

Other criticism focuses less on Othello’s fixed racial alterity and more on his fluid religious identity as a Christian convert. The play presents few details of Othello’s specific origins, but we know they are pagan or, at the least, non-Christian. Both Lupton and Daniel J. Vitkus have argued for Othello’s Muslim origins, claiming that the Moor was almost indistinguishable from the Turk on the early modern stage. Neill informs that the term “‘Moor’ often came to be used as a blanket term for Muslims of any nationality.” Lupton further argues that “for the modern reader or viewer, a black Othello is more subversive, ‘other,’ or dangerous, in the Renaissance, an Othello more closely resembling the Turks whom he fights might actually challenge more deeply the integrity of the Christian paradigms set up in the play as the measure of humanity.” According to Lupton, Othello only truly becomes a member of Christian society when he identifies himself as the Turkish other by committing suicide. Dennis Austin Britton admirably takes a more positive approach to the issue of religious identity. Rather than focusing on the play’s fearmongering over conversion and religious otherness, Britton emphasizes how Othello’s Christianity allows him to enter into Venetian society, insisting that religious identity trumps racial identity. Despite Othello’s racial otherness, the white Venetian society has obviously embraced him. He is a popular general whom Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, has allowed to be a house guest, enabling the couple to fall in love in the first place. Despite the differences in their arguments, Vitkus, Lupton, and Britton all suggest that Othello begins to “turn Turk” (or re-turn to a Muslim identity) only once he has left the safety of Venice and becomes vulnerable to Iago’s machinations in Cyprus. As yet, no one
has considered how Othello’s clandestine marriage could potentially play a role in his religious turning.

Nevertheless, the clandestine marriage is perhaps the most significant revision that Shakespeare makes to his source: Cinthio’s Hecatommithi. Just as Shakespeare fabricates a story of cross-cultural clandestine marriage to include in his revision of Fiorentino’s Il Pecorone in The Merchant of Venice, he revises his source for Othello to include an elopement narrative. As we have seen in The Merchant of Venice, entering a Christian community through elopement can be a difficult, tricky business, and remains difficult if the character’s religious identity is already slippery or elusive. Othello’s willful religious transgression through his clandestine marriage to Desdemona undermines his conversion to Christianity from the outset, indicating that he begins to “turn” even before he leaves Venetian soil. Not only does the clandestine marriage cement Othello’s otherness, but it also others Desdemona in Othello’s eyes. In Othello, clandestine marriage thus creates the skepticism at the heart of Shakespearean tragedy. That the elopement calls the legitimacy of their marriage into question, contributing to Othello’s misguided belief in Desdemona’s adulterous behavior, ultimately guarantees the play’s tragic trajectory.

Elopection and Conversion in Venice

Unlike Jessica, Othello is already a Christian convert at the beginning of the play. When Iago claims that the Moor would be willing to “renounce his baptism” (2.3.343) for the sake of Desdemona, he implies that Othello has converted through the sacrament. The baptism of Muslims was an accepted—and not entirely unheard of—practice in early modern England. Meredith Hanmer’s The Baptizing of a Turke, A sermon preached at the Hospitall of Saint Katherine recounts the baptizing of a Muslim Turk named Chinano. Britton explains: Hanmer “links . . . race, black skin, geography, and religion by proclaiming that adherence to Islam, like blackness, is the consequence of Noah’s curse on Cham and his descendants; like constructions of blackness as a genealogically inherited marker of spiritual cursedness, Muslim faith becomes a racial marker that is inherited by the descendants of Cham because of their progenitor’s spiritual depravity.” Hanmer thus conflates the identity of the Moor with the identity of the Turk because of their shared predisposition to Islam. To be baptized, Chinano must make a “publike confession of his true faith in Jesus Christ.” Hanmer describes how the baptism takes place in a public forum, requiring the convert to speak openly about his faith, specifically outlining his beliefs rather than simply confirming them. Most pertinent to my
analysis is the public nature of the examination. The Church of England required conversions of Muslims/Turks through baptism to take place publicly rather than privately—congregations were not expected to accept converts into their midst without witnessing an interrogation of the convert’s faith first. Only in that way could a congregation feel satisfied that the conversion was sincere.

The suggestion that Othello could “renounce” the conversion confirms the early modern fear that the sacramental promises of converts were not necessarily absolute. If no one saw the conversion through baptism to begin with, how does anyone even know that it took place? These fears reached a fever pitch in early modern Spain where Moors forced to convert to Catholicism—“Moriscos”—became “subject to increased suspicion and regulation. Conversion did not guarantee belief.” As we have seen, it seems very unlikely that the Christian community will embrace Shylock after he presumably undergoes a forced conversion through baptism. Vikutus further argues that the theme of “turning Turk” in Othello reflects the early modern audience’s “collective anxiety” about religious conversion, particularly in the face of an expanding Islamic empire. He observes that “according to Protestant ideology, the Devil, the pope, and the Turk all desired to ‘convert’ good Protestant souls to a state of damnation.” Entering into a marriage with a Christian woman, therefore, could reinforce Othello’s Christianity for the Venetian community, serving as another means through which he demonstrates the “seals and symbols of [his] redeemed sin” (2.3.344). Lupton agrees, claiming that Othello “enters into Christian fellowship and the Venetian polity through intermarriage and public service.” According to Britton, “Othello’s black skin proves to be an insufficient reason for exclusion from either civic or married life in Venice.”

Othello is excluded from married life in Venice, however. He and Desdemona do not get married in a public ceremony with other Venetians acting as sanctifying and affirming witnesses, evincing that the Venetian community has denied their ability to marry. This departs sharply from the Hecatommithi. In the original romance, the Moorish captain falls in love with a “virtuous Lady of wondrous beauty called Disdemona.” Cinthio is eager to point out that their love is mutual and sincere: “Disdemona, impelled not by female appetite but by the Moor’s good qualities, fell in love with him, and he, vanquished by the Lady’s beauty and noble mind, likewise was enamoured of her. So propitious was their mutual love that, although the Lady’s relatives did all they could to make her take another husband, they were united in marriage and lived together in such concord and tranquility while they remained in Venice, that never a word passed between them that was not loving.” At first glance, Shakespeare appears to have followed this plotline closely. To emphasize this, E. A. J.
Honigmann usefully provides footnotes to the corresponding lines in the Arden Shakespeare so that the reader can easily see how Shakespeare is drawing on his source; Neill further observes that Shakespeare “seems to have worked with a version of this text beside him.” Shakespeare departs significantly from the way in which the marriage occurs, however—a difference that no critic has emphasized despite Neill’s assertion that Shakespeare “seldom departs from his sources without good reason.” Following Neill’s lead, I would like to consider how paying close attention to the nature of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage can influence our understanding of the tragedy. While Desdemona’s relatives attempt to persuade her from marrying the Moor, they also appear to reconcile themselves to the match. There is no indication that the couple has to elope after failing to obtain approval for a public ceremony. Since they do not elope, they also have a happily married life residing in Venice. In contrast, Othello and Desdemona leave Venice almost immediately after the elopement. They never reside in Venice as a married couple, so we never have the chance to determine whether the Venetian community would have truly accepted them. If anything, their marriage results in their immediate expulsion from Venetian society—not their inclusion. The elopement is what prevents them from being able to stay in Venice—not Othello’s blackness. Shakespeare’s revision of his source to include the elopement plot, and the way in which he makes the contestation surrounding the marriage central to the play’s entire first act, underscores the significance of the specifically clandestine marriage to the tragedy.

Even though Othello is a well-respected citizen of Venice, as both Britton and Bartels demonstrate, Othello and Desdemona know that Brabantio would never consent to their marriage. Otherwise, they would not elope. We do not know the exact nature of the marriage, but Roderigo provides some insight. “At this odd-even and dull watch o’th’night,” he explains, Desdemona was “transported with no worse nor better guard / But with a knave of common hire, a gundolier” (1.1.123–125). His description emphasizes the irregularity of the marriage’s timing. In his editorial footnote, E. A. J. Honigmann hesitantly suggests that Roderigo’s phrase “odd-even” means “neither one thing nor the other, neither night nor day.” “Odd-even” may also be Roderigo’s way of saying “uneven,” since we do know that the elopement occurs in the dead of night when all things should typically be “dull” or sleeping. We also learn from Roderigo that Othello did not help Desdemona get away—quite the opposite of the conscientious Lorenzo, who ensures that he has the help of several friends to assist Jessica in her escape. Desdemona, presumably, is too old to have someone like a nurse help her climb out a window. Instead, Desde-
mona traverses the watery streets of Venice alone and friendless. Strangely, we find out in act 3 that Cassio served as a go-between for Othello and Desdemona during their courtship. Iago asks Othello: “Did Michael Cassio, when [you] woo’d my lady, / Know of your love?” (3.3.94–95). “He did, from first to last,” Othello replies, clarifying that Cassio “went between us very oft” (3.3.96, 100). Desdemona even reminds her husband that Cassio “came a-wooing with you” (3.3.71) when trying to restore Cassio to Othello’s good graces. Cassio does know about their love affair, but Othello does not employ his help with the actual elopement. Indeed, when Iago tells him Othello is married, Cassio appears surprised, asking, “To who?” (1.2.52). Apparently, Othello has not confided in him. Othello’s decision not to include Cassio in the elopement plans, unlike Lorenzo’s employing his own friends, suggests that his trust in Cassio may not be as absolute as it seems. Othello’s lack of a close friend or confidant to aid in the elopement speaks to his isolation in Venetian society rather than his inclusion—he does not expect anyone to help him in his plan to elope with Desdemona. On his wedding night, Othello presents himself as an isolated figure rather than one who has the support of a community (or even his trusted lieutenant).

Making matters worse, the couple replaces—or at least appears to replace—the church ceremony with a sexual consummation. Both Roderigo and Iago hint that Desdemona and Othello rely on the sexual consummation to validate the marriage. Roderigo warns Brabantio that Desdemona is in “the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (1.1.126), while Iago confirms that “an old black ram / Is tupp’ng your white ewe” (1.1.88–89). Their tasteless references imply that the eloping couple has not rushed to a church to perform the necessary rites (as do, for instance, Romeo and Juliet) but to the bedroom. Of course, it is not entirely clear that this is the case. Some critics have questioned whether the marriage is actually consummated. T. G. A. Nelson and Charles Haines, for instance, have argued that the lack of a sexual consummation is why Othello becomes prey to Iago—he is so overcome by sexual frustration. If the marriage is not consummated, then one could argue that there is no marriage at all. Brabantio does not make this part of his case against the couple, however, suggesting that he believes Iago’s account of Desdemona and Othello’s sexual activity. When Desdemona begs to go with Othello to Cyprus, she insinuates the role of sexual appetite in the elopement, stating that if he goes to war without her, “the rites for why I love him are bereft me” (1.3.257). Here she intimates that the “rites” are sexual ones that could not be performed if they are apart. Othello realizes that Desdemona’s expression of sexuality might be problematic—he assures the Venetian senators that he does not feel similarly:
Let her have your voice.
Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat (the young affects
In [me] defunct), and proper satisfaction;
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.
And heaven defend your good souls, that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
[For] she is with me. No, when light-wing’d toys
Of feather’d Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and offic’d [instruments],
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation!

(1.3.260–274)

While Desdemona’s language could be taken to have a sexual connotation, Othello insists that this language does not apply to him: his age exempts him from lust since his “young affects” are “defunct.” Marital sex, Othello claims, will not distract him from his handling of military affairs or dull his ability to be a warrior. He will not “great business scant.” He would not have to make such a speech, however, if it were not a concern—he is eager to assuage the Venetian Senate’s fears concerning the oft-assumed role of sexuality in clandestine marriage. Even if sexual desire is not the actual reason for their marriage, Desdemona and Othello cannot escape the perception that this was potentially the case, particularly since the elopement appears unplanned and happens in the middle of the night.

Iago relies on the presumed role of sexual appetite in the elopement, absent from the original plot, to set his plan against the Moor in motion. Iago explains to the hopeful Roderigo:

It cannot be long that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor . . . nor he his to her. It was a violent commencement in her, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration. . . . The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as [acerb] as [the] coloquintida. She must change for youth; when she is sated with his body, she will find the [error] of her choice. [She must have change, she must].

(1.3.341–352)
The sudden, “violent” nature of the love resulting in a precipitous clandestine marriage cannot last long—both Desdemona and Othello will soon tire of one another. He further claims that Desdemona and Othello are not well suited:

When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, [again] to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties—all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these requir’d conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abus’d, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor; very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice.

(2.1.226–235)

Iago explains how clandestine marriage results in mismatched couples, not just in terms of race but also in years and manners. In his treatise Matrimoniall Honour, Daniel Rogers warns that the practice of clandestine marriage encourages such mismatched couples. Without the guidance of family and friends, couples may not even realize they are unsuited until a contract has been made. “When it appears, that the one partie is unqualified for the other,” he further admonishes, “then they that made [the union] may breake it.” Rogers laments that due to the clandestine nature of their contracts, mismatched couples could more easily break their marriage vows. Communal approval is necessary to ensure that such ill-advised marriages do not occur. Iago suggests that Desdemona will soon realize that Othello is “unqualified” for marriage since he is “defective” in looks, age, and manners. According to this theory, Desdemona’s love for Othello is not sincere like the love between the Moor and Desdemona in the original romance, but is simply a lust that can be satiated. Iago thus uses the circumstances surrounding the marriage to claim that Desdemona and Othello’s marriage will not last. Once Desdemona regains her senses, she will have a “second choice.” Iago’s implication here is that Desdemona will have the ability to choose not just another sexual partner but another husband, perhaps by refuting the clandestine marriage and marrying again. Iago would not be able to make these claims if Othello and Desdemona had married in a church ceremony, as do Cinthio’s lovers.

Othello thus inadvertently aligns himself with the excessive sexual desire that was associated with the Turks and Islam through the very act of his elopement. Edward Kellett associates Muhammad with lechery in a 1627 sermon: “That great seducer Mahomet, was a salacious, lustfull Amoroso; and his intemperate lasciuousnesse, was wayted on by infirmities and sicknesses correspondent to his lewdness.” Edward Aston, in The Manners, Lawes, and Cystomes of
all Nations, claims that Islam’s “incredible allurement” was in “giving to his people free liberty and power to pursue their lustes and all other pleasures.”

Even Othello’s epileptic seizure links him with the early modern connection between epilepsy and excessive sensuality. Othello’s religious otherness is marked on his body not only through his racial difference but also through his physical infirmity. He does not enter into Christian matrimony but rather confirms his religious otherness, renouncing his baptism in the process, by marrying clandestinely even before he comes on stage for the first time.

When meeting Othello immediately after the elopement, Iago hints that the clandestine marriage will enable Desdemona to have a “second choice.” Feigning concern, he anxiously inquires, “Are you fast married?” (1.2.11; emphasis mine). The term “fast” could mean not only “firmly” or “fixed” but also “tightly” or “securely” so “as to not permit . . . detachment.” Iago further suggests that Desdemona’s unhappy father will detach the couple from one another if their marriage is not “fast” or was not performed in such a way to make it fast. This is a perfectly legitimate worry since we have learned that some marriages could indeed be more “fast” than others depending on the kind of evidence that could be provided demonstrating that a marriage has taken place. Iago further proclaims:

That the magnifico is much belov’d,
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the Duke’s. He will divorce you,
Or put upon you what restraint or grievance
The law (with all his might to enforce it on)
Will give him cable.

(1.2.12–17)

According to Iago, Brabantio is a powerful Venetian citizen—one who has the wherewithal to pressure the duke in the matter of his daughter’s elopement. Iago warns, therefore, that Brabantio might even have the ability to “divorce” the couple, an otherwise rare occurrence in early modern society. In a modern sense, divorce was simply not available. The church courts, however, could grant two types of divorces: a vinculo matrimonii and a mensa et thoro. A divorce a vinculo matrimonii occurred if a “dirimentary impediment” voided the marriage ab initio. Essentially, the church courts determined that a marriage never existed in the first place, allowing the couple to marry again (in this case, Desdemona might have a “second choice”). A divorce a mensa et thoro released a couple from their legal obligation to cohabitate (they were not, however, allowed to marry again). If Brabantio is not able to obtain a divorce for his
daughter, Iago presumes that Brabantio will use the law to punish the couple another way.

Despite the sense of impropriety surrounding their nocturnal marriage, Othello and Desdemona are not the only ones conducting important business in Venice in the dead of night. The duke is also unexpectedly “in council” (1.2.92). Even though the duke is clearly attending to important matters of state, Brabantio claims that his case is important enough to interrupt:

Bring him away;
Mine’s not an idle cause. The Duke himself,
Or any of my brothers of the state,
Cannot but feel this wrong as ‘twere their own;
For if such actions may have passage free,
Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.

(1.2.94–99)

With this proclamation, Brabantio insists that the issue of clandestine marriage is an issue of national importance, momentous enough to drag the duke away from an emergency meeting in the middle of the night. Furthermore, Brabantio makes the argument that his grievance is not a personal one—the interests of all “brothers of the state” are at stake in the issue of clandestine marriage. By using the word “brothers,” he excludes Othello from the population of Venice since the Moor is not a brother or related by blood to anyone in the city. Brabantio’s claim that the allowance of middle-of-the-night elopements will make Venetians “pagans” also hints that Othello’s elopement with Desdemona has undermined the Moor’s Christianity—only a pagan would elope with someone’s daughter without her father’s consent. According to this rationale, if the Venetians allow the elopement to go unpunished, then they themselves will turn Turk. Accusing Othello of being “damn’d” (1.2.63), Brabantio emphasizes how Othello’s religious otherness—not his racial otherness—causes his actions to fall outside of the law. If Brabantio had been willing to accept Othello as a houseguest because of his Christian identity, as Britton argues, the patriarch changes his mind about Othello’s Christianity the moment he learns of the elopement. Brabantio questions whether Othello was ever Christian or merely masquerading as Christian so as to seduce his daughter. Similar to Spenser at the end of the *Legend of Holiness*, Brabantio believes that marriages that take place outside of the proper religious frameworks should not be valid, and are even outside the realm of Christianity.

When Brabantio uses the same language as Shylock to express his grievance over his daughter’s elopement, he suggests that the conflation of a
daughter with one’s possessions was not an idea reserved for Jewishness on the early modern stage. Iago first borrows Shylock’s language to announce the elopement: “Awake: what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter and your bags! / Thieves, thieves!” (1.1.79–81). With these words, Iago makes it seem as though the theft of a daughter alone is not enough reason to get out of bed. Brabantio’s initial statement of disbelief—“What tell’st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; / My house is not a grange” (1.1.105–106)—further underlines how Othello others himself through the act of elopement. According to Brabantio, Venetians do not rob each other, either of household goods or of daughters. Brabantio picks up Iago’s language to increase his claim’s exigence when gaining entrance to the duke. He repeatedly refers to Othello as a thief, proclaiming, “Down with him, thief!” (1.2.57) and “O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow’d my daughter?” (1.2.62), and complaining that Desdemona has been “stol’n from me” (1.3.60). On the one hand, his conflation of Desdemona with goods that can be stolen seems like callous objectification. On the other, Brabantio carefully uses language that could aid him in obtaining a divorce. If Othello has “stolen” Desdemona, then it means she may not have consented to the elopement, implying that she has been abducted against her will. In this scenario, a divorce a vinculo matrimonii could be possible.

Just as Iago predicts, the duke is sympathetic to Brabantio’s claims—despite being busy, the duke holds an impromptu ecclesiastical trial to handle the marital dispute. And Brabantio does consider himself to have sufficient grounds to contest the marriage. He demands a trial, proclaiming, “I’ll have’t disputed on” (1.2.75). Curiously, no one doubts that a marriage or marital contract of some sort has actually taken place. When Brabantio asks, “Are they married, think you?” (1.1.167), Roderigo replies, “Truly, I think they are” (1.1.168). Brabantio, therefore, does not claim that some kind of marriage has not occurred, insisting instead that Desdemona and Othello’s marriage is not “fast” because Othello must have “bound” Desdemona (1.2.65) in “chains of magic” (1.2.65). He declares that Desdemona could not have consented in the eyes of the law, since Othello “hast practic’d on her with foul charms, / Abus’d her delicate youth with drugs or minerals / That weakens motion” (1.2.73–75). Diane Purkiss observes that Brabantio’s accusation is “the only time we see something like a trial for witchcraft dramatized on the Renaissance stage.” When considering that witchcraft could be a capital offense, Brabantio’s statement becomes that much more significant. He turns his pursuit of the elopers, quite literally, into a witch hunt: Othello stands not just to lose Desdemona but also, potentially, his life. The duke agrees that trickery or beguilement resulting in
clandestine marriage would be sufficient cause for punishment, assuring
Brabantio:

Who e’er he be that in this foul proceeding
Hath thus beguil’d your daughter of herself,
And you of her, the bloody book of law
You shall yourself read in the bitter letter
After your own sense; yea, though our proper son
Stood in your action

(1.3.65–70)

He certifies that Desdemona could not have been “herself” if Othello used
witchcraft when persuading her to elope, and therefore she would not be mar-
rried. His language also conforms to the urgency of Brabantio’s request. In
stating that he would not let his own son go unpunished for such an action,
he confirms that irregular unions are indeed a concern of the entire state—a
concern that would trump his own duty as a father to protect his son from a
potentially capital offense.

Brabantio, however, is not able to offer any “ocular proof” (3.3.360) that
Othello used magic outside of his own word and speculation. Othello, of
course, does confirm that an elopement has taken place: “That I have ta’en
away this old man’s daughter, / It is most true; true I have married her” (1.3.78–
79). Othello insists, though, that he did not bewitch Desdemona but rather
told her stories of his adventurous exploits. In doing so, he makes Brabantio’s
“belief in literal witchcraft look naïve” since he proves that being able to tell
an interesting story is the “only . . . witchcraft I have us’d” (1.3.169). The duke
agrees that there is not enough evidence to confirm witchcraft, proclaiming,
“To vouch this is no proof, / Without more wider and more [overt] test”
(1.3.107–108). After hearing how Othello wooed Desdemona with stories of
his foreign adventure, he even admits, “I think this tale would win my daughter
too” (1.3.171). The duke rules that the telling of and listening to stories is a
perfectly legitimate means of courtship, and perhaps a particularly effective
one since he speculates that even his own daughter would have been suscep-
tible to it. Early modern fathers should take heed. The duke and the senators
may sympathize with Brabantio’s predicament (they profess that they are sorry
for it), but the duke’s hands are tied: he cannot dissolve the marriage.

Just as Othello does not enlist Cassio’s help during the elopement, he does
not call Cassio as a witness at the trial, even though go-betweens would have
been standard witnesses during ecclesiastical court trials. Instead, Cassio
stands by silently as Othello explains his courtship with Desdemona, completely cutting out any role that Cassio played. Perhaps Othello does not want to get his lieutenant in trouble. Or perhaps he is not sure if Cassio’s testimony will have much more weight than his own. While Cassio is not a racial or religious outsider, he is not a Venetian—he is Florentine (1.1.20). His own status as an outsider could undermine his testimony. Othello also indicates that he wants to stand on his own merit. He dismisses Iago’s initial warning that Brabantio will be angry:

Let him do his spite;
My services which I have done the signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints. ‘Tis yet to know—
Which, when I know that boasting is an honor,
I shall [prosvulgate]—I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege, and my demerits
May speak, unbonneted, to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reach’d.

(1.2.17–24)

Here Othello does not claim that he will prove his marriage by calling on witnesses or by describing the ceremony or trothplighting that would give legitimacy to the match. Instead, he claims that his military deeds in the service of the signiory should legitimate his marriage. This, however, does not seem quite right. While Othello’s military deeds are clearly admirable, they cannot take the place of a marriage ceremony. Othello reveals that he does not understand the importance of having witnesses to validate the marriage—marriages are supposed to have the support of a couple’s family and community, not be based solely on the individuals’ personal characteristics or merits. In contrast, Jessica and Lorenzo have defenders during the courtroom scene in *The Merchant of Venice* who secure their well-being. When failing to call on his friends by proudly looking to his public service instead, Othello indicates that he does not understand the role of community in making an early modern marriage successful—a fatal error.

The courtroom scene, however, does at least give Desdemona a chance to claim that she consented to the match, confirming that she was “herself” when making the decision to elope. When Brabantio asks her to whom she most owes obedience, he asks her to provide proof of her identity. Is she a daughter? Or a wife? Desdemona answers with the latter. “I do perceive here a divided duty” (1.3.181), she observes:
I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband;
And so much duty as my mother show’d
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor, my lord.

(1.3.185–189)

Despite the clandestine nature of her vows, Desdemona has undergone the successful transformation from daughter to wife—an early modern woman’s identity hinges upon to whom she owes allegiance. Desdemona understands this and responds accordingly. Upon hearing his daughter’s testimony, Brabantio admits defeat: “God be with you! I have done” (1.3.189). Desdemona’s testimony is enough for her father—he does not try to claim that she is too young or that the marriage has not been consummated. While Brabantio disapproves of her choice, he is willing to honor it. Backed into a corner, he offers his consent: “Come hither, Moor: / I here do give thee that with all my heart” (1.3.192–193). Brabantio makes clear, however, that he does not do so willingly, lamenting, “I had rather to adopt a child than get it” (1.3.191). Again conflating Desdemona with his monetary wealth by calling her a “jewel” (1.3.195), he also acknowledges that Desdemona is not a mere object but a woman who has chosen to give herself away. Early modern marriage law does allow for female agency. He claims, however, that he would turn into a Shylock if he had other children, observing “thy escape would teach me tyranny, / To hang clogs on them” (1.3.197–198). Brabantio suggests that becoming an overcontrolling patriarch would constitute a kind of religious turning that he would prefer to avoid. Referring to daughters as objects crosses the Christian-Jewish divide in Shakespeare’s Venetian plays, but disallowing daughters’ opportunities to fall in love is a characteristic of overbearing Jewish fathers only.

Brabantio cannot deny that he has given Desdemona the chance to fall in love with Othello by inviting the Moor into his household. Unlike the reclusive Shylock, Brabantio is perfectly happy to entertain foreign guests. Othello testifies that “her father lov’d me, oft invited me” (1.3.128) to his house. While Brabantio’s “love” for Othello could simply refer to common social courtesy in this context, he clearly liked and enjoyed Othello’s company since he invited the general “oft.” Othello reveals the reason for Brabantio’s frequent invitations: he “questioned me the story of my life / From year to year—the [battles], sieges, [fortunes] / That I have pass’d” (1.3.129–131). Like his daughter, Brabantio hangs on Othello’s stories of daring exploits. As the ruler of his household, Brabantio is responsible for who does and does not gain access to
it. In a sense, he has only himself to blame if his daughter runs off with a man that he willingly invited into his own home on numerous occasions.

Brabantio has done his duty as an early modern father, however, by providing Desdemona with what he considers to be acceptable alternatives. He laments: “She shunn’d / The wealthy curled [darlings] of our nation” (1.2.67–68). Here he suggests that Desdemona has had many appropriate (i.e., native Venetian) suitors from which to choose. She has rejected them. Clearly, he has not been paying close attention to her when he says Othello is someone (or something) that she “fear’d to look on” (1.3.98). Othello’s description of their courtship indicates that they spent time alone as he expanded on his stories that she did not have a chance to hear in full while attending to her household duties, explaining, “‘That I would all my pilgrimage dilate, / Whereof by parcels she had something heard / But not [intentionally]” (1.3.153–155). Considering the lack of privacy in early modern households, it seems strange that Brabantio has neglected to notice his daughter listening attentively to a man visiting his house. He falls victim to his own inability to exercise his patriarchal authority, failing to see his daughter falling in love in front of his very eyes. Indeed, the idea that Desdemona might fall in love with Othello precisely because she does “fear” him and “for the dangers [he] had passed” (1.3.168) does not even enter his mind despite the fact that he himself seems to enjoy Othello’s company for the same reasons.

The duke expresses discomfort with Brabantio’s reluctant acceptance of the match. He issues a “sentence” that he hopes will put the eloping couple into Brabantio’s favor:

> When remedies are past, the griefs are ended  
> By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.  
> To mourn a mischief that is past and gone  
> Is the next way to draw new mischief on.  

*(1.3.202–205)*

Here the duke basically tells Brabantio to get over it: what is done is done. Though he does imply that Othello has indeed stolen Desdemona when stating, “‘The robb’d that smiles steals something from the thief” (1.3.208). The duke’s acknowledgment that Othello has stolen Desdemona is significant: he hints that Othello has committed a crime. His willingness to gloss over this detail speaks to Othello’s important role in the Venetian community—the duke does not try to do anything else to make amends or smooth over the issue as the Christian characters do when requiring Shylock to leave Jessica an inheritance. The duke also needs his most valuable general in the impending battle.
against the Turks. Brabantio, however, is not so easily consoled. He classifies
the duke’s attempt at reconciliation as “Turkish”: “So let the Turk of Cyprus
us beguile” (1.3.210). Brabantio first asserts that the deception associated with
clandestine marriage parallels the acts of deception associated with the Turks.
He then asserts here that the duke’s acceptance of Othello and Desdemona’s
clandestine marriage causes his fellow Venetians to turn Turk as well.

Further troubling his religious identity, Othello’s clandestine marriage does
not perform the proper function of transforming him into a householder. He
admits that he never really wanted to settle down when telling Iago:

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
I would not my unhoused free condition
Put into circumscription and confine
For the sea’s worth.

(1.2.25–28)

His wistful reference to his “unhoused free condition” suggests that Othello
prefers being a bachelor. He is willing to confine himself or settle down only
for the sake of his love for Desdemona. This sounds romantic. It also sounds,
however, like Othello is not necessarily ready to take on the responsibilities
of married life. Furthermore, Othello has not settled down. During the trial
scene, he reveals that he is not a homeowner; he must uncomfortably admit
that Desdemona has no place to stay while he is off at war. Britton reads
Othello as a character of the romance genre. As Una must learn at the end of
book I of The Faerie Queen, soldiering is for bachelors—not for husbands—
since the Redcrosse Knight must leave her behind to continue fighting for the
Faery Queen. Redcrosse cannot officially marry Una until his military duties
are over. Othello attempts to remedy his lack of preparation for his married
state, telling the duke that he craves:

Fit disposition for my wife,
Due reference of place and exhibition,
With such accommodation and besort
As levels with her breeding.

(1.3.236–239)

His request may seem like kind regard for his spouse—he wants Desdemona
to enjoy the upper-class comforts that she is used to—but setting up a domes-
tic space is really something that he should have done in advance. Not doing
so serves only to underline the hastiness of the elopement, intimating that
the proper thought and care were not put into the preparations. Jessica and
Lorenzo’s own elopement now seems well organized in comparison—at least they had Portia’s Belmont household in which to take refuge. They had a plan. Even more importantly, they had help.

The duke’s immediate response that Desdemona should stay with her father provides another opportunity for Brabantio to bestow a blessing on the marriage. This is a crucial moment in the play’s tragedy—a request that would actually give Desdemona a place to reside in Venice and demonstrate her commitment to Christian matrimony. Underscoring his disapproval of the marriage even in his defeat, however, Brabantio immediately rejects this suggestion: “I will not have it so” (1.3.240). Since Desdemona no longer recognizes herself as having duty to him as her father, he no longer recognizes himself as having a duty to her. He will not provide her with housetroom. Brabantio, unlike Portia, does not give the couple a chance to act out the domestic responsibilities associated with marriage. He thus condemns the marriage to failure—punishing the couple as Iago forewarned—even before they leave for Cyprus.

**Sowing Skepticism on Cyprus**

On Cyprus, Iago manages to exploit the ambiguity surrounding Othello’s marriage vows not by causing his community to question their legitimacy but by causing Othello himself to question their legitimacy. Presumably, as she declares during the courtroom scene, Desdemona’s marriage vows have transformed her from loving daughter to faithful wife. Iago, however, suggests that the clandestine marriage should cause Othello to doubt Desdemona’s virtuous identity. Brabantio has already warned Othello that the act of elopement has disrupted her selfhood: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceiv’d her father, and may thee” (1.3.292–293). Iago builds on these suspicions when reminding Othello, “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.206). Brabantio and Iago advise Othello that the clandestine marriage gives him reason to doubt her virtue. Considering how quickly Othello falls for Iago’s hints and warnings, he seems to have already been experiencing doubts concerning the nature of the marriage. Even before demanding to see the “ocular proof” (3.3.360), he laments, “She’s gone. I am abus’d” (3.3.267). Just as Brabantio claims that the act of elopement causes Othello to turn away from his virtuous Christian identity, Othello claims Desdemona is susceptible to deceptive “turning.” After striking his wife in a shocking instance of domestic violence, he tells Lodovico: “Sir, she can turn, and turn; and yet go on / And turn again” (4.1.253–254). Othello believes that Desdemona’s potential for deceptive behavior—a belief that would not exist if their marriage had not been
clandestine—justifies his behavior. Harry Berger Jr. claims that Othello “is about the meaning and effects of fear of adultery.” I would go further. Othello is about how clandestine marriage creates the fear of adultery. Whether that fear is correct is beside the point—clandestine marriage sows seeds of distrust that can cause marriages to fail.

Indeed, Othello admits that his jealous imaginings are far worse than any unknown truth. He tells Iago: “I had been happy, if the general camp, / Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known” (3.3.345–347). The mere thought that Desdemona could be unfaithful results in his farewell speech to a “tranquill mind” (3.3.348). The issue is not that Desdemona has been unfaithful but that Othello thinks that she has been and can never unthink it—not, at least, until he kills her. In Matrimonial Honour, Rogers further explains the dangerous role that imagination plays in conducting clandestine marriages, elucidating that a union without a proper ceremony is simply a “union of imagination.” While not denying the legality of private contracts, Rogers recommends a public marriage since it is “an union of state and condition, standing in right, and law, above all private affection.” According to Rogers, the public ceremony creates the proper “condition” for marriage—it is as though couples that marry clandestinely do not actually inhabit a proper married “state.” A “union of imagination” is a union that may not actually exist. The members of the couple that marry publicly cannot simply change their minds later about their married condition as Othello fears Desdemona has done by committing adultery.

Othello does attempt to correct the fault of his clandestine marriage when ordering his soldiers to celebrate his marriage alongside the military triumph during their first night on Cyprus. A herald announces: “It is Othello’s pleasure, our noble and valiant general, that upon certain tidings now arriv’d, importing the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet, every man put himself into triumph; some to dance, some to make bonfires, each man to what sport and revels his [addiction] leads him; for besides these beneficial news, it is the celebration of his nuptial” (2.2.1–7). Again, Othello reveals his lack of planning when organizing his marriage. Rather than arranging for a celebration of his nuptials where both he and Desdemona reside, he must celebrate their marriage when they are abroad. The marriage is not even the main reason for the celebration. It is “besides.” The couple does not have the support of family and friends who are married householders themselves, but the highly inadequate support of a cohort of bachelors. In this way, Othello mixes his business—war and soldiering—with his domestic life.

Since Othello does not give up his military exploits before getting married, he also makes himself vulnerable to the outside forces of other men. At the
end of *The Merchant of Venice*, the couples pair off, suggesting that heterosexual coupling is more important than same-sex friendship—at least in a play with a happy ending. Othello’s continued commitment to his military life means that he must remain attached to fraternal bonds with the men serving under him. Othello’s reluctance to give up his relationships with other men allows him to enter into an inappropriately close relationship with Iago—a relationship that begins as a courtship. Iago carefully woos Othello using the language of love during the temptation scene that convinces the Moor of his wife’s deceit. Iago proclaims: “My lord, you know I love you” (3.3.117), “now I shall have reason / To show the love and duty that I bear you / with franker spirit” (3.3.193–95), “I humbly do beseech you of your pardon / For too much loving you” (3.3.212–213), “I hope you will consider what is spoke / Comes from [my] love” (3.3.216–217), “I thank you for this profit, and from hence / I’ll love no friend, sith love breeds such offense” (3.3.379–380). After wooing Othello in this manner, Iago tells the Moor that he will assist him in his “sacred vow” of revenge:

Othello: *He kneels.*

Now, by yond marble heaven,
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here engage my words.

Iago: *Do not rise yet.*

*Iago kneels.*

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wrong’d Othello’s service! Let him command,
And to obey shall be in me remorse,
What bloody business ever.

*They rise*

Othello: I greet thy love,

Now art thou my Lieutenant.

Iago: I am your own for ever.

(3.3.460–480)

The formality of this pact, echoing the language of the marriage ceremony, is astonishing. As Neill observes, “If there is any act of adultery in the play, this surely is it.” This is not just an act of adultery, however. This act constitutes
the only marriage or trothplight in the play that we actually witness. We never witness any kind of marital vow made between Othello and Desdemona, yet here we witness the making of a formal pact between Othello and Iago. The stars are not the only witnesses; the audience members are as well. This kind of witnessed formality gives Othello reason to trust Iago. He enters into this relationship with his male friend because he doubts the fastness of his own marriage. Here Shakespeare reveals the dangers of clandestine marriage. Since Othello feels uncertain of the legitimacy of his marriage to Desdemona, he creates a second unholy union with Iago. It is he—not Desdemona—who makes a “second choice.” Something that would not be possible—or at least not necessary in Othello’s mind—if the marriage had been public.

Not only does Othello remain overly committed to his relationships with other men on Cyprus, but Desdemona does as well. Without a household to run like Portia, Desdemona lacks the employment of a wife, involving herself in Othello’s employment instead. If Portia teaches Bassanio to privilege his marriage above his friendship with Antonio when settling down at Belmont, Desdemona has no such impulse since there is no domestic space to control and protect. Natasha Korda confirms, “It is Desdemona’s concern with affairs of state, rather than those of the household—with political, rather than domestic oeconomy—that both accords her tragic stature and ultimately brings her to a tragic end.”

Desdemona’s inability to concern herself with domestic responsibilities directly results from the clandestine nature of her marriage that did not include the establishment of a household. Rather than pushing Othello’s male friends away, therefore, Desdemona vows friendship with Cassio:

If I do vow a friendship, I’ll perform it
To the last article. My lord shall never rest,
I’ll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;

I’ll intermingle every thing he does
with Cassio’s suit.

(3.3.21–26)

Like Othello’s vow to Iago, this is also the only such intimate oath that we see Desdemona make in the play—to a man who is not her husband. While Desdemona remains faithful to her husband, her willingness to help Cassio overshadows her clandestine marriage vows, at least in the mind of Othello. Iago narrates her “innocently flirtatious palm-paddling with Cassio”: “He takes her by the palm; ay, well said, whisper. With as little web as this will I ensnare as
great a fly as Cassio” (2.1.167–169). This “paddling of palms” resembles the hand holding between Polonius and Hermione that so enrages Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*. The king concludes: “To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods” (1.2.109). Of course, Leontes infamously refuses to recognize that his wife is acting on his command. In light of Leontes’s insane jealousy that does not even require an Iago to stoke its flames, it is no wonder that Othello falls prey to a similar sentiment. Shakespeare warns of the dangers of a wife becoming too intimate with her husband’s male friends—an intimacy that never would have happened if Desdemona had not felt compelled to follow Othello to Cyprus, or if Othello himself had been willing and able to set up a household and settle down after his elopement.

The clandestine marriage also legitimates the importance of the handkerchief to the tragedy’s plotline. The handkerchief plot derives from Cinthio—something that easily, as Lynda E. Boose observes, could have been left out. Instead, Shakespeare keeps the plot device, so unsatisfactory for some critics, and puts even more pressure on it. It is the only token of the marriage that we see, even if an inadequate one and even though we know Cassio went between Othello and Desdemona with other tokens. The seeming “trifle” has been the subject of much derision and much scrutiny. Thomas Rymer notoriously proclaimed in frustration: “So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call’d the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*? . . . Had it been Desdemona’s Garter, the Sagacious Moor might have smelt a Rat: but the Handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby, on this side Mauritania, cou’d make any consequence from it.” Korda has argued that Othello’s focus on the handkerchief is excessive by early modern standards, contending, “Both women and Africans were in varying ways vilified as being attached in the wrong way or to too great an extent to material objects.” In this way, Othello’s obsession with the handkerchief and its whereabouts becomes a part of the play’s racism.

As we have seen, however, tokens, even small, seemingly inconsequential ones, can play big roles in early modern courtship and marriage customs, far disproportionate to their size. The fact that Othello and Desdemona’s marriage was clandestine only contributes to the importance of the handkerchief in their relationship. Emilia confirms this when Desdemona accidentally lets it drop: “She so loves the token / (For he conjur’d her she should ever keep it) / That she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to” (3.3.293–296). We have not seen Desdemona and Othello exchange rings or vows of any kind as symbols of their troth. The handkerchief thus stands in for the wedding ring. As Berger observes, the handkerchief operates in a similar fashion to the
ring that Portia gives Bassanio. When giving Desdemona the handkerchief, Othello makes her “responsible for the power she has and potentially guilty for its misuse. . . . The compensatory function of the ring is identical to that of the handkerchief.” When Desdemona loses the handkerchief, therefore, Othello registers its loss in the way that Portia registers Bassanio’s giving away of the ring. A modern reader might be more sympathetic to Portia: what kind of husband gives away his wedding ring? But the handkerchief carries the same significance for Othello. In her examination of ecclesiastical court depositions, Diana O’Hara confirms that handkerchiefs could be used as evidence in cases concerning matrimonial disputes. While a handkerchief might not seem as weighty an object as, say, a ring, it was “evidently customary for the male suitor to woo with gifts, sometimes referred to in an indiscriminate way as ‘divers tokens’ or ‘small trifles.’” “Trifles,” objects with seemingly little monetary value, actually hold great significance when used in matters of courtship and matrimony. It may also be fair to say that these trifles carry greater significance for couples that have married clandestinely. The trifles become more than trifles when presented as evidence in a matrimonial dispute. In early modern courtrooms, trifles became the “ocular proof” that a marriage had taken place.

Furthermore, Othello makes clear that the handkerchief is not a trifle. It is a family heirloom—an object of great worth to him even outside of his relationship with Desdemona. Giving the token magical characteristics contributes to his identity as a religious other. After denying his use of magic when telling Desdemona stories of love and adventure, he mysteriously describes the handkerchief’s properties: “There’s magic in the web of it.” (3.4.69). The Egyptian sibyl who gave it to his mother was a “charmer,” he reveals, that “could almost read the thoughts of people” (3.4.57–58). A reader cannot help but be reminded of Othello’s pagan background. O’Hara demonstrates, however, how love tokens were often associated with magical properties in early modern England. She explains, “A host of superstitions surrounded such gifts, and their properties, considering the evidence for belief in the efficacy, and mechanistic nature of magic and the role of village wizards and pedlars who distributed love magic, and other popular products. Indeed, the quasi-magical dimension of gift-giving cannot be ignored, since the giving of objects arguably served to symbolise and effect stages in marriage. The potential exists for gifts and tokens to take on the character of charms.” The understanding is that such tokens, imbued with a kind of magic that transformed a couple into husband and wife, could not simply be thrown away or tossed aside. While Shakespeare’s audience may not have approved of the use of magic in general, Othello’s belief in the handkerchief’s magical qualities might not have
seemed so pagan or outlandish. It is Othello’s failure to participate in the marriage ceremony that permanently others him, not necessarily his relationship with the handkerchief.

Othello’s uncharacteristic mistreatment of her makes Desdemona realize that he does not believe their marriage to be “fast.” To assuage his doubt, she asks Emilia to lay their wedding sheets on their bed (4.2.105). Desdemona wants to re-create their marriage night, either as a way of reliving that night or as a way of legitimating a marriage that remains uncertain. Whether the marriage remains unconsummated increases in exigence here. If Othello and Desdemona truly have not had a chance to consummate the marriage, their marriage really might not be “fast”—couples could renege on a marriage that had not been consummated. Even though her father did not make it an issue during the courtroom scene, Desdemona may be anxious to solidify the marriage once and for all so as to put Othello’s mind at ease. During this scene, Emilia also confirms that Desdemona’s elopement has isolated her in a way that makes her vulnerable:

Hath she forsook so many noble matches?
Her father? and her country? and her friends?
To be call’d whore? Would it not make one weep?

(4.2.125–127)

Here Emilia confirms not only Brabantio’s statement that Desdemona rejected many worthy suitors but also that Desdemona married without the approval of “her country, and her friends”—her father’s disapproval is not the only one of importance. Emilia speaks to the social network required to make an early modern marriage successful. Due to the clandestine nature of her marriage, Desdemona has no family or friends to turn to when her husband accuses her of infidelity—she is dangerously isolated in a world made up primarily of men, some of whom quite literally mean her harm. No one can vouch for the sincerity of her vows or of her virtue.

Once in Cyprus, Othello and Desdemona’s marriage fails not just because Othello is a converted other but because he has difficulty comprehending Desdemona’s own otherness. He cannot fathom Desdemona’s virtue without being able to see it. Andrew Sisson explains: “Iago compels Othello to become aware that his marriage depends upon his partnership with a virtue that cannot be known, displayed, judged, or valued in a way that would satisfy him of its reality.”56 Stanley Cavell expounds further: “Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. . . . His professions of skepticism over her faithfulness are a cover story for a deeper conviction; a ter-
rible doubt covering a yet more terrible certainty, an unstable certainty.” Of course, the whole purpose of the marriage ceremony is to make a couple “one flesh” so that they are not separate, can never be alien to one another. The purpose of the ceremony is to dispel the skepticism that Cavell identifies. Without the ceremony, the conversion to man and wife is incomplete, or at least seems incomplete to the couple’s community or even to the couple themselves as the case here. Has a marriage truly occurred or not? On the wedding night, the consummation, which Cavell dwells on, is not the only important event performed offstage—we do not see Othello and Desdemona’s vows of faith as they plight their troth. When Othello says that he has married Desdemona, he implies that a brief ceremony or simply a handfasting—something—has taken place. What did the couple say? How did they say it? The inability to know these things calls the fastness of the clandestine marriage into question. If Othello had been able to hold a proper church ceremony surrounded by friends, family, and neighbors, he would have witnessed a public affirmation of Desdemona’s virtue—the “ocular proof” of her faithfulness would not depend so much on a handkerchief, an object so easily stolen or misplaced. Othello would thus be less willing to consider any claims to the contrary—a heartbroken father or a manipulative friend could not suggest that Desdemona’s vows were insincere.

The inability to differentiate between true speech acts and false ones without the ceremony of matrimony thus lies at the heart of Othello. Without a proper ceremony, Othello cannot determine the sincerity of Desdemona’s love and instead falls prey to Iago’s own false oaths that have a distinct ceremonial sheen. The purpose behind the growing emphasis on the public marriage ceremony in the late Elizabethan period as the only way to enter into a marriage was to disambiguate the meaning behind speech acts that allowed seducers (like Iago) to deceive their lovers and allowed religious outsiders to continue practicing in Protestant England. Of course, unfortunately for Othello, the impossibility of a public courtship and marriage between a Moor and a white woman means that he has no choice but to participate in a clandestine marriage and embrace the identity of the “malignant and . . . turban’d Turk” that he abhors (5.2.353). Othello scolds his men for excessive drinking when proclaiming “Are we turn’d Turks” (2.3.170) on his first night in Cyprus. In doing so, he suggests that becoming inebriated and participating in brawls results in the excesses associated with Islam rather than with Christian soldiers. Thankfully for his men, this conversion need be only a temporary one—one that they can shake off as they sober up and return to their senses. Since Othello turns Turk through his legal marriage vows, however, the process is permanent. He cannot escape the conversion until it is complete and ultimately dams him.