

Narrative Aberration in *Othello*

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Narrative is a rhetorically presented structure, an abstraction which is divorced from material realities. It does not represent reality but presents a representation of something that appears to be real. Here arises the autonomous structure of language, which can provide an ideal structure by means of rhetorically transforming reality according to particular interests. The point to notice is that narrative is a way of transforming a type of relation and hence it can produce a subversive effect on reality.

This paper investigates the ways in which such an subversive trait of narrative provokes conflicts¹ in *Othello*. Here we notice two distinct types of narrative: one serves the legitimacy of the institution, the Venetian Senate. The Senate transforms reality into a manipulable fiction in order to maintain the social domination. The other type of narrative works to deconstruct the social orders. The characters in this play convincingly demonstrate the fluidity of literary signification: since words signifies something separate from reality, their referents are indeterminate. A succession of such a deconstructive action of characters intensifies the instabilities in the social signification of legitimacy, as Jonathan Dollimore points out. I argue that the problems inherent in the analysis of narrative bring about the conflicts between two types of narrative in *Othello*. Further, I contend that during the course of the play these conflicts are reduced to mere abstractions which produce no violent effects on reality.

Let us start with the discussion of Othello's repetitive mode of narrative,

which is pervasive in the first act. He calls on this mode to compensate for his lack of a residential place in Venice which identifies him as Othello. He has no birthplace, no house, and no property there, he needs to establish his whole identity in Venetian society. For this purpose, he tells “the story of my life, / From year to year ; the battles, sieges, fortunes, / That I have pass’d,” “even from my boyish days” (1. 3. 129-32).² He puts his past life into his story, as if he were an epic hero. In effect, the telling and retelling of the acts of his past life win Brabantio’s and Desdemona’s hearts, and also a membership of Venetian as the husband of Desdemona. The repetitive mode of narrative helps him achieve the status of a Venetian citizen.

However, such a narrative structure of Othello’s existence is susceptible to Iago’s rhetorical scheme. Iago is a rhetorician who can transform one narrative structure to another at will, making what are “really incompatible” “imaginarily compatible in ideology” (159). As James Kavanagh defines it, “ideology” is “a system of representation that offers the subject an imaginary, compelling sense of reality” (145). In this sense, Iago distorts the meanings of his actions or his discourses and manipulates another character’s ideology in accordance with his ideology. As a result, every external sign becomes a simulacrum of his vision. Invading others’ meaning, he imposes imaginary interpretations of actions or discourses upon others.

The important point to observe here is that Iago’s main action is to generate a structure of the confusion between the imaginary and the real. He creates an illusion of reality, in the same way as an actor does on the stage (Bal 25-37). Based on this notion, it is worth analyzing Iago as an actor. Bert O. States comments: “he [an actor] moves between the contradictory zone of the illusory and the real, *vraisemblance* and *vrai*, seeming and being” (125). We can assume that Iago also moves from the real to the imaginary and then goes in the opposite direction. He does so

self-consciously, by setting other characters on a liminal plane. As a consequence, they are confused by the doubleness of the real and the imagined. Iago effaces a distinction between the two for the purpose of intensifying his subversive action.

Let us now look at some characteristic features of Iago's subversive speech in detail. First, Iago exercises the power of imaginary narrative under an obscene impulse. Even when he lacks the visible bodies of a couple, he supplements them by presenting visible figures. We should remember the following scene in Act 1, Scene 1, where Iago informs Brabantio of the secret marriage between Othello and Desdemona. Iago tells Brabantio: "Even now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1. 1. 88-89). Iago goes on to say: "you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans" (110-113). Iago uses concrete images to mention the couple. He refers to a "ram," a "ewe," and several kinds of horses such as "a Barbary horse," "coursers," and "gennets." Further, the word "neigh" produces a sound effect on Iago's imaginary staging. At the same time, he employs words like "tup" or "cover," which denote sexual intercourse. Finally, Iago directly refers to Othello and Desdemona: "your daughter, and the Moor, are now making the beast with two backs" (115-17). By exploiting these animal images under a bias toward obscenity, Iago accomplishes his presentation of the scene of their copulation.

Secondly, Iago's main method of transforming reality is asides or soliloquies behind the main action on the stage. In an aside in Act 2, Scene 1, he gives a circumstantial account of Cassio and Desdemona. There he contorts the purely courteous gesture from gentleman to lady as follows:

He [Cassio] takes her by the palm; ay, well said, whisper: as little a web as this will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do: I will

catch you in your own courtesies : you say true, 'tis so indeed. If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kiss'd your three fingers so oft, which now again you are most apt to play the sir in : good, well kiss'd, an excellent courtesy ; 'tis so indeed : yet again, your fingers at your lips ? would they were clyster-pipes for your sake . . . (167-77)

Iago's narration alters the whole meaning of the scene. Certainly he describes the facts : Cassio "takes her by the palm," "smiles," and "kisses her." However, he narrates such acts out of his intense hatred towards Cassio. As a result, the speech, which Iago begins by objectively referring to Cassio as "he," turns into a direct address to him : Iago as "I" speaks to "you," Cassio. Here again, Iago transforms his fine gallant into a sexual symbol by relating Cassio's fingers to "clyster-pipes" [=syringe for a (vaginal) douche]. Thus, Iago constantly refers to reality but distorts it with his intentional signification.

The third feature is that Iago, even lacking visible reality, creates a fiction which has an autonomous structure of words. He creates a biased fictional reality and substitutes it for actual reality. What makes this strategy so effective is the way it brings his interlocutor to see the lecherous images and confuse his senses through them. Iago not only creates fictions but also ocularizes them. Let us take an example of such ocularizing strategy below.

Iago's ocularizing strategy begins with tempting Othello into an obsession with seeing as is seen in Act 3, Scene 3. Iago repeatedly warns Othello to keep his "eye" on Desdemona, although he "speak[s] not yet of proof" (200) :

Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio;
Wear your eye thus, not jealous, nor secure.
I would not have your free and noble nature
Out of self-bounty be abused, look to't:

I know our country disposition well;
 In Venice, they do let God see the pranks
 They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience
 Is not to leave undone, but keep unknown. (201-08)

What is important here is that Iago not merely stresses the act of seeing, but also emphasizes Venetian common sense in order to deprive Othello of narrative and confine him within an obsession with seeing. Iago makes it “*our* country disposition” that Venetian women are lascivious. By remarking about “*our* country,” he excludes Othello from Venetian society and designates Othello as an outsider. Indeed Othello easily yields to what Iago presents as Venetian common knowledge, because Othello is unacquainted with the Venetian disposition at all. Iago goes on to assert that Desdemona has “deceived” her father (210); in a rapid succession, he implants in Othello the notion that a normal Venetian lady should “shake and fear” Othello’s “looks” as a Moor (211). By emphasizing Venetian common sense, Iago finally deprives Othello of a fluent speech. The outcome is that Othello merely consents to Iago’s opinion (211).

As the next step, Iago ocularizes part of his story when he tells it to Othello. Iago generates the fiction of dreaming Cassio, where he visualizes Cassio’s sexual impulse towards Desdemona in his coarse idiom. Iago begins his speech by making the excuse that Cassio’s sensual behavior is only in his dream. However, he presents it so concretely through Cassio’s verbal expression as well as his bodily action that his story makes Othello envision the situation as if he were really observing it. Iago’s story of the dreaming Cassio begins as follows :

In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona,
 Let us be wary, let us hide our loves ;”
 And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
 Cry out, “Sweet creature !” and then kiss me hard,

As if he pluck'd up kisses by the roots,
 That grew upon my lips, then laid his leg
 Over my thigh, and sigh'd, and kiss'd, and then
 Cried "Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor !"
 (425-32)

Iago emphasizes Cassio's lecherous impulse by describing his bodily movement in detail. He refers to parts of bodies such as a "hand," "lips," a "leg," and a "thigh." This bodily depiction tempts Othello into visualizing Cassio and Desdemona as a copulating couple. Finally, his strategy brings about Othello's conviction that their behavior has had "a foregone conclusion" [= previous consummation] (434).

Thus, Iago's narrative artifice works to distort Othello's proper perception. Iago's main action begins with a report of those events that are not present to the eye, happening off-stage. After he succeeds in making Othello give way to suspicions about Desdemona, Iago begins to transform Othello's views of reality. Instead of conveying the meanings which are directly connected with material facts, Iago's discourse results in presenting abstractions. In other words, he endeavors to destroy the existing sign-system and generates a new set of signs through his speeches.

I will shift the emphasis away from Iago to Othello, in order to investigate why Iago's narrative works so effectively on Othello. Facing the ambiguity in language, Othello is thrown into complete confusion; this is because Othello, in contrast with Iago, has no knowledge of rhetoric. This deficiency makes him vulnerable to Iago's rhetorical strategies.

Othello's vulnerability is due to from his epistemological problems. Let us draw attention to the problems innate in epistemology. When one pursues the meanings of materials, he cannot avoid abstraction. Such a view underlies the following remark by Sigmund Freud :

Even at the stage of description it is not possible to avoid applying certain

abstract ideas to the material in hand, ideas derived from somewhere or other but certainly not from the new observations alone. Such ideas . . . are still more indispensable as the material is further worked over. They must at first necessarily possess some degree of indefiniteness; there can be no question of any clear delimitation of their content. So long as they remain in this condition, we come to an understanding about their meaning by making repeated references to the material of observation from which they appear to have been derived, but upon which, in fact, they have been imposed. (113)

The reversal of the notion of observation and abstraction deserves explicit emphasis here: “the abstractions ‘seem’ to follow the ‘material of observation’; but in fact that material follows the ‘abstract ideas’ ” (Gallop 89). What the passages make clear is the dynamic interaction between the abstraction and the observation at the very beginning of the conceptualizing process.

Here obviously arises the disagreement between seeing and knowing (or getting a meaning). Although knowing is gained by means of seeing, seeing does not provide direct access to knowing. It is useful then to quote from Shoshana Felman as regards “a dynamical relation between *seeing* and *knowing*” (157). She begins her argument as follows: “if ‘to know’ is to know *meaning*, ‘to see’ is, on the other hand, to perceive a figure *as a sign*.” She goes on:

Seeing . . . is of the order of the *signifier* (that which is perceived as a *conveyer* . . . of signification, in the very *process* of signifying), while *knowing*, on the other hand, is of the order of the *signified* (that which *has been meant* . . .). “Knowing,” therefore, is to “seeing” as the signified is to the signifier: the signifier is the *seen*, whereas the signified is the *known*. (156)

On the basis of this definition, Felman asserts: “ambiguity is . . . thus inherent in the very essence of the act of seeing,” because the signifier, “by

its very nature, is ambiguous and obscure, while the signified is certain, clear, and unequivocal” (156). We notice then what is problematic is rather seeing, which is “a perception of ambiguous signifiers” (157).

Turning now to Othello’s case, we realize that he is deprived of such perceptions about ambiguity of seeing. He never doubts the knowledge which he draws solely from seeing. What he sees is immediately what he gets. He judges people at face value, as Iago points out: “The Moor a free and open nature too, / That thinks men honest that but seems to be so” (1. 3. 397-98). Iago is conscious of the discord between the exterior and the interior, signifiers and signifieds. In contrast, Othello assumes that signifiers and signifieds are absolutely paired, just as he considers that words and meanings are linked to one another. He trusts Iago blindly, even though Iago shows a “sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign” (1. 1. 155-56). In fact, Othello not only repeats his expression “honest Iago” (294) but finally affirms: “I am bound to thee [Iago] for ever” (3. 3. 217).

Othello’s ardent desire to see what is hidden from his sight arises from his excessive demand to know the truth. Let us take a closer look at such an exorbitant demand of Othello’s in Act 3, Scene 3. When he sees an indication of “some horrible conceit” (119) in Iago, Othello determines to visualize it exactly for what it is, and says “Show me thy thought” (120). This is because Othello cannot stand the condition where something is hidden from him; he despises “close denotements” (127), or “close dilations” (the new Cambridge edition 124)³ Whenever he has a doubt or a suspect about things, Othello intends to transform it into “a fact” through the act of seeing. His strategy is declared as follows: “I’ll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove, / And on the proof, there is no more but this” (194-95). Othello considers that his suspicion is proved, once he sees a certain situation. Here ends the process of his knowing; he firmly establishes his understanding of the situation and sticks to it.

Othello's obsession with seeing increases, as his doubt about Desdemona's betrayal grows. Othello requires "ocular" material as proof of her infidelity. He bids Iago in rough language as follows: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, / Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof" (365-66). Further he insists with increasing fury upon seeing: "Make me to see't, or at the least so prove it" (370). In spite of such an intense desire to see, reality does not satisfy it. This fact makes him change his desire into a desire to make certain of Desdemona's treachery. Othello's imagination works to satisfy his desire, which is declared as "would I were satisfied!" (396), by mediating between what he sees and what he gets. Othello's imagination serves to create a "proof" at will no matter what he actually sees; what he perceives depends on what he wants to believe. As a result, Othello receives distorted signifieds from the signifiers which his eyes really catch. Such a distortion is one of the causes for Othello epistemological problems.

The second epistemic deficiency of Othello is his monolithic understanding. In order to illustrate this deficiency, let us examine Othello's conception of Desdemona. For him, she first appears to be a sexless "fair warrior" (2. 1. 182), but at last turns out to be a "cunning whore of Venice" (4. 2. 91) whose value is set on her body. He sees Desdemona by two contrasted types of women, both of which are far removed from the real Desdemona. This is because Othello continues to confine himself within his imagination. He never sees any situations as they really are; instead, he pursues only what he imagines. Accordingly, his imagination absolutely stereotypes Desdemona. For Othello, she has been a type or a thing, never a real person with a sufficient self throughout the play. He is so obsessed with her surface features, that he excludes her personality. In fact, the firm insistence on the surface structure means to eradicate the very interiority itself.

Now it is clear that Othello's inclination to stick to surfaces of things

deprives him of simultaneous apprehension of the contrary or incompatible meanings. He cannot accept these two modes at the same time, because he essentially understands things as he imagines. As we have examined in Desdemona's case, Othello is preoccupied with the surface structure, which can be transformed into any form as he wishes. Accordingly, there always exists the only one form of perception of things for him. Such monolithic perception by Othello represents his way of thinking in general. He accepts no opposition, and therefore he lacks dialectical consideration.

Let us now consider the reason for Othello's deficiency of dialectical perception, in view of the ambiguous nature inherent in the system of signification. The following remarks by Jonathan Culler is relevant here: "interpretation is a highly conventional activity, drawing on a series of operations that can be described" (78). According to this notion, we can assume that Othello lacks "interpretive conventions." In fact, his interpretation is not logically or rhetorically structured, but brought straight from his observation. Such a trait of Othello's causes him the a priori understanding of the situations which he observes.

That Othello cannot accept opposing meanings simultaneously is due to his failure to understand the ambiguous nature of language. Culler comments on "the nature of literature" as follows: "we will have to recognize that the 'openness' and 'ambiguity' of literary works result . . . from the potential reversibility of every figure. Any figure can be read referentially or rhetorically" (78). Culler goes on to say:

The opposing, even contradictory, readings . . . depend not on prior "opinions" of the subject but on formal operations that constitute the activity of observation . . . the interpretative move that treats a linguistic sequence as figurative opens the possibility of a series of reversals, which will produce other readings. (79)

The important point to stress is the awareness that "the 'openness' and

'ambiguity' " of meaning is inherent in language. This is what Othello fails to perceive. He never realizes "the potential reversibility of every figure." Accordingly, he gets the one and absolute meaning of the situation which he faces. Othello lacks the knowledge of "interpretative conventions" and of rhetoric.

We must look more carefully into the notion of "conventions" in order to examine the features of Iago as rhetorician. Relevant to this point is Freud's remark that conceptions are formed on the basis of "conventions":

strictly speaking, they [abstract ideas] are in the nature of conventions —although everything depends on their not being arbitrarily chosen but determined by their having significant relations to the empirical material, relations that we seem to sense before we can clearly recognize and demonstrate them. (113)

Thus, concepts are formulated according to the "conventions," which provide us not with an "arbitrary" but with a "determined" way of understanding. It is through conventions, or "formal operations," that we come to an understanding about the meanings of materials. Therefore, if one knows the interpretive conventions, he can produce even opposed interpretations for the situations he confronts.

Based on this assumption, we can say that Iago has a thorough knowledge of rhetorical conventions, since he provides his own signification for the given situations. I will refer to three examples to illustrate his rhetorical strategies here. The first is that Iago denies the differences between individuals. His narrative is essentially marked by the formulation, "I am not what I am" (1. 1. 65). In this formula, he undermines his particular existence which is distinguished from others. The affirmation extends to an assault on other characters' particularities: the substitution of one person for another can be easily done. For instance, Iago acts to replace Cassio with himself for the position of lieutenant; Iago also works to substitute

Roderigo for Othello in relation to Desdemona ; later, Iago aims to replace Othello with Cassio in the same relation. Thus, Iago dissolves individual identities into a common substitute through his narrative.

The second is that Iago frequently uses anaphora (Elam 152), in order to manipulate other characters, especially Othello. Act 4, Scene 1, opens with Iago's anaphoric utterance toward Othello: "Will you think so?" (1). The word "so" indicates the referent which is presumed but not heard on the stage. In this case, even his interlocutor Othello does not know what the reference is. Then, Othello asks: "Think so, Iago?" (1). Such anaphoric utterances, which are typical of Iago, tempt Othello into activating his imagination.

The third point is that Iago deliberately puts off the direct answer to Othello's question. The strategy of postponement intensifies Othello's desire to know. There is a good example in Act 4, Scene 1, where Iago implies that Cassio has cuckolded Othello.

Othello	Hath he said anything?
Iago	He hath, my lord, but be you well assur'd, No more than he'll unswear.
Othello	What hath he said?
Iago	Faith, that he did . . . I know not what he did.
Othello	But what? (29-33)

Here we notice that Iago deliberately defers the disclosure about Cassio. Othello gets impatience with Iago's deferred narrative, so that he repeats the interrogative "what" in an elliptical sentence. Thus, the deferred narrative of Iago's succeeds in driving Othello obsessively interested in knowing. Othello, obsessed with knowing, excites his imagination about what Cassio remarks.

It is necessary, then, to consider how the rhetorical strategies of Iago's produce effects on Othello's imagination. Let us quote the following

bodies which truly exist in his imagination. Such a threat not only devastates Othello's eloquence as is in his former discourses. The deprivation of his controlled narrative becomes absolute in his last speech in the same scene ; his formal address is fragmented by his own "dramatic monologue" (Chatman 173). Thus, he comes to be completely deprived of proper use of language.

Now we are sure that the unspoken aspects of Iago's narrative arouses Othello's imagination. The next step is to investigate the ways in which Iago's narrative manipulates Othello's imagination and causes visual aberration on the latter's side. Iago's primary device is to efface the distinction between appearance and reality through narrative⁴ ; the result is a semantic deferral to interlocutors. Such a deconstructive act is based on the notion that what is verbally articulated remains indeterminate and unstable ; in other words, narrative discourse cannot avoid a kind of aberrant movement. Iago's elusive feature is due to the aberrant nature of narrative itself.

Let us take an example of visual aberration here. As we examined above, Iago's strategy begins with insinuating to Othello that Cassio has a lecherous relation with Desdemona. Then, Iago arranges for Othello to see the scene of a conversation between himself and Cassio. Actually, they talk about Bianca ; however, Othello assumes that they are speaking of Desdemona. Just before entering into conversation with Cassio, Iago says in a monologue that a visual aberration will break out in Othello :

As he [Cassio] shall smile, Othello shall go mad,
And his unbookish jealousy must conster
Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behaviour,
Quite in the wrong. (4. 1. 100-03)

As Iago devises, Othello takes Cassio's "smiles, gestures, and light behaviour" as the ocular proof of his adultery with Desdemona. Othello is thus entrapped into a visual aberration.

The important aspect here is that Iago deliberately generates his interest to manipulate Othello, while Othello is forced to arouse a obsessive interest to know more by Iago's rhetorical strategy. This is because Iago knows how to transform the present situations rhetorically according to his interests ; as he has previously manifested, "the power" to control our fates "lies in our wills" (1. 3. 325, 326). Based on this belief, Iago manipulates Othello and constrains him to arouse jealousy. In effect, Othello obediently reads Iago's plot as exactly as he has written.

In order to consider the interests of speakers and their relations, it is instructive to use Barbara Herrnstein Smith's theory of "narrative transaction." She argues about the dynamics of the interaction between the narrator's interest and those of his audience" (229). According to her theory, we can assume that the dialogues between Othello and Iago also involves competing interests. Iago has an interest in leading Othello to blind jealousy, whereas the latter has an interest in maintaining the conviction that Desdemona commits adultery with Cassio. We notice that their interests rather interact than compete with each other. They work together to make Othello imagine lecherous bodily images.

So far, Iago's action as a master rhetorician has succeeded in manipulating other characters. His acute schemes work with brilliant effectiveness under the specific conditions of reality. However, his long-range plan is undermined by Emilia's speech-acts. This leads to his abandonment of speaking at the end of the play. Let us consider in the following section how Emilia reveals his treason and why Iago stops speaking.

In the first place, I will draw attention to Emilia's insisting on speaking. When she recognizes Iago's "wicked lie," she insists : "I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak" (5. 2. 182, 185). Even though he orders her to "hold your peace" (219), she resist him instead of obeying him. Since her narrative action is beyond his manipulation, she goes on to criticize severely

not only Iago. Her speech of accusation results in the betrayal of Iago's conspiracy. Thus, Emilia subverts Iago's strategy of narrative aberration and visual aberration.

Next, I will investigate the reason for Iago's withdrawal from further discourse. Arrested as a prisoner in the final scene, Iago refuses to answer to Othello's inquiry: "Demand me nothing, what you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak word" (304-05). What is important here is that Iago, the rhetorician, abandons language. Up to this point, he exploits the aberrant nature of narrative, in order to transform his interlocutors' views of reality; his manipulation of other characters are exclusively through the persuasive power of rhetoric. This means that Iago is fully conscious of the elusive nature of narrative. He realizes that the meaning of words can be transformed into a manipulable fiction. Hence, it seems reasonable to consider that Iago's silence signifies his rejection of being interpreted according to other peoples' criteria.

We notice that Othello returns to a story-telling subject in Act 5, Scene 2. He enralls himself to telling his own story, in contrast to Iago's withdrawal from further narrative. Othello declares to Lodovico, the representative of the Venetian Senate: "I pray you, in your letters, / When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am" (5. 2. 336-38 in the new Cambridge edition). Speaking of himself, Othello confines himself within a repeatable story. In the story, he deprives himself of his unique identity as Othello; he speaks of himself as "one" or "he" instead of calling himself "I" or "Othello." He rhetorically transforms his unique identity into a story of him; he consummates this transformation by physically killing himself. Othello's excessive demand for narrative strips him not only of his dominance in speech but also of his very existence.

For the very reason that Othello demands further narrative, I disagree with the following statement by Madelon Gohlke: "Othello develops a

painful awareness of the duplicities of language as well as those of human nature" (167). I do not find any reason to assert Othello's "awareness" of the dubious nature of language. It is certain that Gratiano's comment, "All that's spoke is marr'd" (358), suggests the consciousness of the slippage feature of language, but Othello does not comment such kind of awareness at all. Moreover, the play's action itself leads to the demand for further narrative, as the concluding speech of the play by Lodovico points out: "Myself will straight aboard, and to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate" (371-72). Insinuating the existence of subsequent narrative, this speech signifies the system of language itself: "a signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier" (Lacan 316).

In conclusion, *Othello* presents the problems inherent in the analysis of narrative, by means of demonstrating the narrative conflicts between characters. They impose opposing modes of action through their utterances upon each other. Consequently, their interaction is based on the interpretation of other characters' discourses. Since the interpretation of narrative is the process of rhetorical transformation, one discourse can be interpreted in various ways. Here arises the aberrant nature of narrative, which pervades *Othello*. The following remark of Culler's offers a suggestion about how to cope with the aberrant nature of narrative:

Analysis of narrative depends . . . on the distinction between story and discourse, and this distinction always involves a relation of dependency. . . . Since the distinction between story and discourse can function only if there is a determination of one by the other, the analyst must always choose which will be treated as the given and which as the product. (186)

So far as one demands narrative, he must adopt the procedure of distinguishing what is "the product" from what is "the given." This procedure may provide him with the means of escaping from imprisonment into incessant displacement of the narrative structure.

Notes

¹ For the notion that “the action advances through a contest of stories,” see Sinfield. See also Serpieri : he discusses the discursive formation of the literary text from a semiotic perspective.

² The text for all quotations from Shakespeare is the Arden Edition of *Othello*, unless otherwise noted.

³ For a close discussion of possible emendations, see Sanders’s supplementary note in the new Cambridge edition of *Othello*, 3. 3. 124-25 ; see also Parker.

⁴ Relevant to this point is Chatman’s discussion on “the distinction between cognition and perception” (181).

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Synopsis

Narrative Aberration in *Othello*

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This paper investigates the ways in which the problems inherent in narrative provoke conflicts in *Othello*. Since the system of literary signification has a structure that is separated from material facts, it can transform the appearance of

reality by creating a biased fiction. Here arises a subversive effect of narrative on reality. Each character in this play creates his or her own fiction and imposes it on other characters. This action produces violent clashes between characters towards the end of the play.

I focus my attention on those conflicts which are provoked by two types of discourse, that is, Othello's and Iago's. It is certain that both characters convincingly demonstrate their own stories in accordance with their interests. However, there exists a fundamental difference between them: Iago deliberately deconstructs the material realities in order to form a fictional structure, while Othello does so unintentionally. I argue for such an essential distinction between them.

The first section takes up the characteristic features of Iago. He works out rhetorical strategies in order to undermine Othello, because narrative for him is a means of subversion. What is important is that Iago employs mainly two kinds of rhetorical skills; one is the skill to stimulate Othello's imagination by dissolving differences between the imaginary and the real. Its purpose is to throw Othello into epistemological confusion between the two. The other skill is to cause Othello to be obsessed with seeing; in effect, this obsession intensifies Othello's confusion.

In the next part, I examine the epistemic problems innate in Othello, which make him vulnerable to Iago's strategy. Othello has a tendency to understand people at their face values, because he directly connects seeing and knowing. Moreover, he designates what he gets from seeing before he actually sees things; as a result, he perceives exactly as he imagines. On the condition that his imagination is aroused, Othello visualizes not only the stories which Iago actually tells but also those which he merely insinuates. Indeed Othello substitutes Iago's fiction for actual reality. Throughout this section I analyze the ambiguous nature in the system of signification.

The concluding section investigates the play's excessive demand for narrative. In the final act, the produced conflicts in reality are transformed back into abstractions which are separated from incessantly changing reality. In particular,

Othello by killing himself converts his real existence into a manipulable story that produces no violent effect on reality. Moreover, the play's end signifies a further narrative addressed to the Venetian Senate. This suggests that the story of Othello will be regulated according to the institutional ideology ; narrative serves here the legitimacy of the Senate. The play's ending signifies that the system of narrative can deprive individuals of their actual existences and transform them into manipulable fictions.