

## Beauty versus honesty in *Othello*

*Paper presented at a conference on Donald Meltzer in Florence, February 2000<sup>1</sup>*

Ophelia says to Hamlet in the nunnery-scene, 'Could beauty have better commerce than with honesty?' (*Hamlet* III.i.110), to which Hamlet replies that beauty undermines honesty and makes it into a 'bawd'. In *Othello*, Shakespeare's next tragedy (apart from the anti-tragedy *Troilus and Cressida*), Shakespeare explores the confrontation between these two qualities, in order to define each more precisely. Othello as a hero is everything which Hamlet is not (simple, non-analytical, whole-hearted, the 'noble Moor'); the play is characterised by the emanations which surround this particular type of beauty – the 'Othello music' as Wilson Knight so aptly termed it. The drama of the play revolves on the interaction of this beauty with Iago's self-confessed, universally accepted, and much reiterated 'honesty'. Honesty is the bawd which undermines beauty, though beauty ultimately triumphs. They are, Shakespeare suggests, genuine opposites. By the end of the play 'honesty' has been confirmed as the absence of Donald Meltzer's 'sincerity', the heart of meaningfulness in human communication. It becomes a pseudo-quality, a no-quality, a genuine absence.

The beauty of Othello lies in his poetry and poetic qualities. He confesses to being 'rude in [his] speech', in contrast to the courtly 'smooth Venetians' or the verbose Iago; some of his poetic highlights are in fact simple repetitions 'the pity of it Iago, O Iago the pity of it' (V.i.191) (like Antony's 'I am dying Egypt dying'). The storytelling with which he won Desdemona is sneered at by Iago as 'bragging and fantastical lies' (II.i.222); yet Desdemona was drawn not to the literal picture of Anthropophagi and men with heads below their shoulders, but to the 'mind' beneath the superficial rhetoric of his outlandish adventures: 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I.iii.252). She *sees* something at the heart of Othello which grows out of his blackness (ugliness, strangeness), as with Caliban a metaphor for a primal richness, the fountainhead of poetry itself. Her vision is both pure and sensual (hence her forthrightness in speaking of 'the rites for which I love him', I.iii.257). Othello himself accepts the strangeness of his blackness in this culture ('black and begrimed as mine own face', III.iii.393), but even during his jealous torment he rises above any claustrophobic humiliation on this count: he confirms his original belief that 'She had eyes, and chose me.' (III.iii.193); she pitied his dangers 'and I loved her that she did pity them' (I.iii.168). Essentially they are stories of his inner life. He believes in his worthiness not in itself, but owing to his faith in her judgement – in the principle

<sup>1</sup> This reading of *Othello* was stimulated by Miriam Botbol's conference paper on 'Daily Beauty and Daily Ugliness', itself an exploration of Donald Meltzer's paper 'Concerning the Stupidity of Evil', which begins by quoting Shakespeare's phrase from *Othello* - 'he hath a daily beauty in his life'.

of seeing the 'ugly monster' of a new thought (as Bion describes it). In the famous line with which he magically quietens the squabbling brawlers - 'Keep up your bright swords for the dew will rust 'em' (I.ii.59) he indicates his own switch from warrior to lover, prefiguring that of Antony; and the way Ariel charms the sword of Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. (Indeed much in this realistic drama is echoed allegorically in that last play - such as Brabantio/Prospero 'losing' his daughter in the tempest of marriage, though he had himself introduced her lover; initially, 'her father lov'd me' [I.iii.128] just as Prospero once 'loved and made much of' Caliban.

**Brabantio:** She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee.

**Othello:** My life upon her faith. (I.iii.293-4)

To Desdemona, Othello is 'the stuff that dreams are made on'. Although their relationship has not had the chance to be tried and tested, so is in that way vulnerable, this does not detract from the wholehearted quality of being prepared to risk 'life for faith' in the inner vision. Ultimately we will see that Desdemona's 'faith' consists less in the conventional sense of not committing adultery, than in preserving the image of her 'kind lord' even at the point when he kills her – the ideal of Othello which no action of his can take from her. She has already chanced her fortunes in leaving family and culture for this wayward marriage ('my fair warrior' Othello calls her); ultimately she develops the courage to die when she does not want to. Othello's 'life' is indeed sacrificed literally on her 'faith', which restores his own ('I die on a kiss'); and this appears as in fact a type of *dishonesty* ('like a liar', says Othello, she says that he did not kill her, she killed herself). The faith in beauty is antithetical to mere honesty.

The image of this marriage is heralded by Cassio, himself an emanation of the Othello-music, in his youth and idealisation of a real ideal. He welcomes the 'divine Desdemona' to Cyprus with an exuberant speech which anticipates the imminent arrival of Othello to complete his picture of poetry:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,  
The gutter'd rocks, and congregated sands,  
Traitors ensteep'd, to clog the guiltless keel,  
As having sense of beauty, do omit  
Their common natures, letting go safely by  
The divine Desdemona. ...  
Great Jove, Othello guard,  
And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,  
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,  
And swiftly come to Desdemona's arms ... (II.i.68-80)

Later we learn that Cassio was Othello's intimate friend in his courtship of Desdemona, 'going between them oft', just as Iago was closest to Othello on the battlefield. Here, we see Cassio standing between them again, for a brief moment in time, as one for

whom the imminent consummation of this marriage is a 'blessing' for himself and for the island as a whole. Shakespeare places this in direct opposition to the reaction of Iago, Othello's other 'lieutenant', to indicate the twin forces which follow closely on his heel. Iago observes the embrace of Othello and Desdemona and his automatic reaction is:

O you are well-tun'd now,  
But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,  
As honest as I am. (II.i.199-201)

His impulse to destruction plays itself out as sure as inexorable fate. Indeed the role of Iago has some resemblances to abstract Fate in ancient tragedy, and to the Fool of Renaissance drama whose undermining is of a purgative nature. Ultimately, Iago is simply being himself, acting-out his inner world with an almost mechanical inevitability. Towards the end of the play comes the 'daily beauty' passage (V.i.19-20) in which Iago seeks a motive for having Cassio killed. Here, Iago comes closest to expressing the mystery of his own motivation. Wilson Knight's comment on this passage is

He hates the romance of Othello and the loveliness of Desdemona because he is by nature the enemy of these things. Cassio, he says,

hath a daily beauty in his life  
That makes me ugly.

This is his 'motive' throughout: other suggestions are surface deep only. He is cynicism loathing beauty, refusing to allow its existence ...Iago is cynicism incarnate and projected into action. ('The Othello Music' in *The Wheel of Fire*; reprinted in *Casebook*, p. 90)

This confession of his own 'ugliness' is the only sincere statement to emerge from Iago's mouth. Yet probably it does not belong to Iago as a character (where it would appear as a healthy recognition of despair) but to Shakespeare as playwright, analysing the true nature of Iago's state of feeling, and putting these words in the mouth of his character.

The puzzle of Iago's 'motiveless malignity' (as Coleridge called it) has always interested people. For it is certain that he has no motives in the usual sense; plenty of plausible motives are suggested in the play, by himself and others (ambition, rebuff, envy etc.) but neither he nor we believe in their authenticity. The closest to a motive in the conventional sense of the word is Hazlitt's *ennui* (describing him as 'a philosopher who stabs men in the dark to prevent *ennui*'), boredom - he abhors the vacuum which results from the absence of exciting and violent action (hence his fire-raising, stabbing in the dark etc.) The concept of 'cynicism incarnate', otherwise termed 'evil', concurs with Othello's final conclusion that Iago is not a man but a 'fable' (looking down for his cloven hoof), a 'demi-devil' (V.ii.302). As if Shakespeare makes us ask, what is the meaning of Iago *to himself*? In order to formulate the abstract

question, what is the nature of this mentality? William Empson in his famously clever essay on the wordplay on the word 'honest' in *Othello*, still does not penetrate the psychological condition. This is something which is only pictureable in the context of its antithesis Beauty. Shakespeare recognised this after his deadly nihilistic satire on bawdry and insincerity in *Troilus and Cressida*. In *Troilus* there is no beauty to contrast with the cynicism so this cannot be fully explored. Cynical though it may be, *Troilus* does not go far enough – there is something in the character of Iago which goes beyond cynicism, and which Shakespeare with devastating irony denotes as 'honesty'.

What does this 'honesty' consist of? Much admiration has been expressed for Iago's intellect, his cleverness in plotting and playing on the Achilles' heel – the weak spots – of his victims. Yet his many opportunistic lies and manipulations merely follow on from his state of mind or being, they are not artefacts in the service of a specific desire or intention. His stated aims change casually as the plot goes along – first merely to make Othello 'an ass'. He simply takes advantage of Cassio's self-confessed inability to hold his drink – no detective work of psychological penetration is required. His intellect expresses itself in imitative aphorisms and epithets which give the illusion of profundity and integrity: 'I am not what I am' (I.i.65); 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus' (I.iii.319); 'no, let me know, And knowing what I am, I know what she shall be' (IV.i.72-3). He employs a bullying alternation of 'soft' and 'hard' stabs at his victim – a mixture of suggestion and brutally driving his point home.

**Rodrigo:** How do you mean, removing of him?

**Iago:** Why, by making him incapable of Othello's place, knocking out his brains. (IV.ii.228-30)

Or,

**Iago:** Faith, that he did ... I know not what he did.

**Othello:** But what?

**Iago:** Lie

**Othello:** With her?

**Iago:** With her, on her, what you will. (IV.i.32-4)

Such is the crude nature of his artistry. Its vulgar imitative quality evokes from the other characters in the play the illusion that Iago personifies some myth of the common-man's earthy wisdom, unable from sheer honesty to wrap itself in language more tactful or sensitive. 'O thou art wise, 'tis certain', says Othello (IV.i.74.) Iago teasingly implies that he is full of knowledge but naturally wishes to protect his integrity from any intrusive curiosity – even a slave has the right to hide his thoughts (III.iii.138), leading Othello finally to demand 'By heaven, I'll know thy thought' (166). The hidden 'thought', this pearl of wisdom, is a veritable 'monster' of honesty:

**Iago:** Honest, my lord?

**Othello:** Honest? ay, honest.

...By heaven, he echoes me,  
As if there were some monster in his thought. (III.iii.105-11)

....

**Iago:** It were not for your quiet, nor your good  
Nor for my manhood, honesty, or wisdom,  
To let you know my thoughts. (III.iii.156-8)

This honesty, these thoughts, are an imitation of privacy – a secrecy, by nature exhibitionist and inciting to action.

At the nadir of the play the word 'honest' falls thick and fast – applied equally to Iago's honesty and Desdemona's dishonesty:

**Iago:** O wretched fool,  
That livest to make thine honesty a vice! ...  
**Othello:** Nay, stay, thou shouldst be honest.  
**Iago:** I should be wise, for honesty's a fool,  
And loses that it works for.  
**Othello:** By the world,  
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,  
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not;  
I'll have some proof...(III.iii.381-92)

Or, 'It is not honesty in me to speak What I have seen and known...' (IV.i.272-3), or Othello's reiterations, chewing on the word itself, that

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,  
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,  
Of human dealing ... (III.iii.262-4)

Or,

**Othello:** I do not think but Desdemona's honest.  
**Iago:** Long live she so, and long live you to think so! (III.iii.229-30)

To the extent that Iago is simply expressing his world-view, being himself, he could perhaps be termed 'honest'. He genuinely believes that all women are whores, all friendships are political alliances, anyone who desires anything is a fool. He embodies no 'lie in the soul' like Milton's Satan. Where Satan feels envy, jealousy, bitterness, hate and admiration, Iago feels nothing at all. He does not tell lies in order to escape the painfulness of the aesthetic conflict. On the contrary, he feels no pain, merely irritation and contempt - factors which swell his own 'honesty' as the only reality. He considers himself to be the only sensible person on the island, the only realist, able to distinguish between 'a benefit and an injury' (I.iii.312). Yet even his instinct for self-preservation is (as we see at the end of the play) merely a vestigial animal remnant, a knee-jerk reflex left over from battle, like his stabbing Emilia, not even in the dark but in public. It is not just pity which is absent but also self-pity (in contrast to

Desdemona's naturalistic desire to live 'half an hour more'). The aridity of honesty has no room for compassion. Shakespeare distinguishes honesty from genuine sincerity. Desdemona may not tell the literal truth about the handkerchief to Othello ('it is not lost, but what an if it were?') but her state of mind is sincere. Iago, in contrast, makes various statements which might appear to be true (such as, how his 'free and honest' advice is indeed to way for Cassio to 'win the Moor again' (II.iii.328), yet he is fundamentally insincere.

In Dr Meltzer's description, 'sincerity' does not apply to a particular emotion but to the state of mind within which the emotions interact. It has to do with Wittgenstein's category of "meaning it", and this in turn is integrally connected with the capacity to experience beauty:

There is a qualitative aspect of sincerity that has to do with richness of emotion. Clinical work strongly suggests that this aspect of the adult character is bound up with the richness of emotion characterizing the internal objects. It can be distinguished from other qualities such as their strength or goodness. It is different from their state of integration. It seems perhaps most coextensive with their beauty, which in turn seems related to capacity for compassion. (*Sincerity* [1994], p. 205)

It also, says Meltzer, has an 'aspirational quality'. In this description of richness, without (necessarily) corresponding strength or integration, we begin to see the possibility of characters such as Othello and Cassio, in touch with and daily governed by an inner ideal of beauty which may not have been tried and tested but which encompasses all their potential for 'meaning it', for being themselves - expressed by Othello as the place 'where I have garnered up my heart, Where either I must live or bear no life' (IV.ii.58-9). Even Cassio's casual treatment of Bianca is a type of boyish self-deprecation, that separates himself from his ideal of Desdemona-and-Othello; it is very different from Iago's contempt for his wife's sexual desires ('a common thing'). Again the contrasting tales of the sex-lives of Othello's 'lieutenants' are told in parallel, focussing on their each, for different motives, coveting the famous handkerchief which has 'magic in the web'.

Some modern critics believe Othello's vulnerability to Iago's insinuations is owing to a failure to consummate his marriage. On the contrary it derives from the complications of emotion which consummation has aroused in him. There is truth in his description of himself as one 'not easily jealous'; the occasion has never arisen before; it is a new emotional experience. The marriage-night is set in the social context of drunkenness and mindless violence in the streets of Cyprus, including Cassio's degradation. In parallel with this, Desdemona carelessly loses the handkerchief (spotted with strawberries) which represents her private genital pact with Othello ('the rites for which I married him') and is a miniature equivalent of the wedding-sheet spotted with blood, traditionally in primitive societies exposed to public view as proof of the bride's virginity. (It was Othello's 'first gift', associated with his mother and ancestral magic, III.iii.443; he tells Desdemona threateningly that it has 'magic in the web

of it', III.iv.67). There is in its loss a failure to protect their own privacy. Emilia, Iago and Cassio all desire the handkerchief for their own ends, though only Iago intends to steal it – both Emilia and Cassio intend to have it copied (as if in imitation of Desdemona), which arouses the jealousy of Bianca. At the end Desdemona asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed once again, as if in reparation, saying that should she die, these sheets must be her shroud.

The occasion on which Desdemona drops the handkerchief is when she is disturbed by Othello's signs of disturbance, after Iago has started to set him on the rack. He has begun to obsessively repeat the word 'honesty' and already shows his intolerance of the aesthetic conflict aroused by the matching of his own innate uncertainty (integral, says Meltzer, to the aesthetic experience) to the insinuations of Iago. At the beginning of the play Othello had been convinced that passion could not shake him, that sensual 'disports' would never 'corrupt and taint my business' (I.iii.271). Desdemona is his 'fair warrior', the only trade he knows. The second half of the play however is full of the sensual imagery of aesthetic conflict to an intense degree: such as:

O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?  
Thou smell'st so sweet that the sense aches at thee (IV.ii.69-70)  
...  
I'll chop her into messes ... Cuckold me! (IV.i.196)

Or,

That we should call these delicate creatures ours, and not their appetites ...  
(III.iii.273-4)

In response to his initial disturbance, Desdemona seeks to reassure Othello by placing the handkerchief on his imaginary cuckold's horn (pain in the forehead), upon which he throws it off – an image of mutual sexual failure or suspicion, unrecognised by both of them. This non-accidental loss of the handkerchief, for which both are responsible, images an inevitable aesthetic-conflict cloud hovering over their relationship - the fear of loss following on possession/consummation, the consequence of their embrace as described by Othello:

If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute ... (II.i.189-91)

The unsettling afterwards provides the vulnerable point into which Iago's poison can enter, before there is pause for reflection or the ebb-and-flow of their relationship to be established. Othello, who is described as being imperturbable, 'all in all sufficient' in all his life-history so far – the 'noble nature, Whom passion could not shake' (IV.i.261-2), has as yet no idea of the perturbation of love. With Iago coming between himself and Desdemona, 'my relief must be to loathe her' (III.iii.272).

Then at the moment when the third component of the aesthetic conflict needs to come into play (the desire to know the truth about the object, in addition to love and hate), Iago's 'honest' offer of pseudo-knowledge enters instead, prompting Othello to demand the 'ocular proof' of adultery, a travesty of unknowable mystery:

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore,  
Be sure of it, give me the ocular proof ...  
...: if there be cords, or knives,  
Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,  
I'll not endure it: would I were satisfied!

**Iago:** I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion,  
I do repent me that I put it to you;  
You would be satisfied. (III.iii.365-99)

Iago proceeds to 'satisfy' Othello with his homosexual fantasy of Cassio seducing him in the night: he 'laid his leg/ Over my thigh, and sigh'd, and kiss'd ...' (III.iii.430-1). His fantasy of his own relation to Othello during the wars was also of course a homosexual one: he has seen the cannon '(like the devil) from his very arm puff his own brother, and can he be angry?' It is a type of homosexuality which relishes the excitement of destructiveness. If Iago assumed Othello colluded in it, this would have made him a hero of sorts in Iago's eyes, in a way to compare and contrast with the nature of Cassio's hero-worship. To Iago, Othello's infatuation with Desdemona is a temporary aberration of the appetite; to Cassio it is the culmination of Othello's role as saviour of the state.

The 'ocular proof', the honest monstrosity, then focuses on the drama of the handkerchief and its role as a pseudo-symbol for honesty or honour (a word with the same root and more or less interchangeable in the play).

**Iago:** But if I give my wife a handkerchief –

**Othello:** What then?

**Iago:** Why then 'tis hers, my lord, and being hers,  
She may, I think, bestow't on any man.

**Othello:** She is protectress of her honour too,  
May she give that?

**Iago:** Her honour is an essence that's not seen,  
They have it very oft that have it not:  
But for the handkerchief –

**Othello:** By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it:  
Thou said'st (O, it comes o'er my memory,  
As doth the raven o'er the infected house,  
Boding to all) he had my handkerchief. (IV.i.10-22)

This leads to Othello's falling fit and complete disintegration, culminating in the disjointed phrases: 'Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is't possible? Confess? – Handkerchief? – O devil!'

Iago has no use for 'an essence that's not seen'. When he recovers, this concrete pseudo-symbol is again placed before his mind, a substitute for vision:

**Othello:** O Iago!

**Iago:** And did you see the handkerchief?

**Othello:** Was that mine?

**Iago:** Yours, by this hand. ((V.i.168-71))

When Emilia gives the handkerchief to her husband, the dialogue again emphasizes its role as genital possession:

**Emilia:** I have a thing for you

**Iago:** A thing for me? It is a common thing – (III.iii.485-6)

Yet ultimately, it becomes clear that the handkerchief is a pseudo-symbol, and the 'magic in its web' inherited from Othello's primitive origins (like Sycorax the witch) is a superstition, like the misunderstanding that Desdemona loved him for his adventures, rather than for something she could see through and beyond his telling of them. The handkerchief belongs with disjointedness and disintegration, the focus for an absence of knowledge. Although Iago does not realise it, when Othello demands the 'ocular proof', he is in fact taking over the action, and Iago is becoming again the mere follower or 'ancient' in a journey of knowledge which reaches far beyond anything his 'honesty' can imagine.

**Othello:** Now art thou my lieutenant.

**Iago:** I am your own for ever.

This appears to be a reinstatement of a homosexual pact, based on the battlefield. Yet behind Othello's demand for pseudo-knowledge lies his thirst for genuine knowledge (ie of Desdemona) which can only be achieved by her 'death', and his - 'my life upon her faith'. His urge to know (driven by the mix of love and hate within him) becomes the most powerful force – pushing Iago well beyond his intentions into arranging for Cassio's murder etc. - while from this point Iago's own absence of knowledge becomes more and more apparent. Critics have frequently admired his psychological acuteness. Yet what does this really consist of? A delusion that everybody fits his own conception of honesty. By the end of the play this is shattered by Emilia, Desdemona and Othello, each of whose motivation derives from a sphere outside his comprehension. Showing how throughout, Iago's honesty was merely a delusion of understanding, a reduction to his own worldview with its imitative stock of second-hand information.

The final phase of the tragedy begins with Desdemona's decision to enter a new plane of existence, having passed the point of having 'no lord' ('I have none ..', IV.ii.104)). Emilia misunderstands, taking her innocence literally; like the Chorus,

Emilia expresses the commonsense view, speaking the words that the audience wish Desdemona would speak for herself. Desdemona is sometimes accused of being 'childlike' or over-passive at the end. She can no longer even speak the word 'whore', punning that 'it abhors me' (IV.ii.164) – as if to suggest such a thing is not only beyond her doing but beyond her conceiving. Yet we remember the earlier Desdemona's social poise – in for example her banter with Iago while waiting for Othello to arrive on Cyprus, joking about women in order to fit in with Iago (and his social vulgarity) and to take her mind off her anxiety; or how she teased Othello over Cassio, saying Cassio had often defended him when she had 'dispraised' him. Her previous naturalistic behaviour is thus made to contrast with her final unworldly state of mind. This is a transition to a new phase, not merely a collapse of impossible ideals of perfection. She seeks a sincerity beyond naturalism.<sup>2</sup> Desdemona makes a deliberate choice not to return to her maiden-environment, not to seek the protection of her Venetian culture. Like Ophelia, in the 'willow' scene it becomes clear that she believes Othello has gone mad. ('my mother had a maid ,...and he she lov'd prov'd mad,/ And did forsake her', V.iii.27-8). Her song is a lament for the loss of his mind, the 'mind' which originally she saw through his visage. In order to cope with this situation she concentrates on holding fast to an inner, ideal image of a love which is being 'falsely murder'd':

**Desdemona:** O falsely, falsely murder'd!.....

**Emilia:** O, who has done this deed?

**Desdemona:** Nobody, I myself, farewell:

Commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell!...

**Othello:** She's like a liar gone to burning hell,

'Twas I that killed her. (V.ii.118-31)

She does in a sense kill herself, but not in masochism, for Shakespeare preserves her hope of life, the naturalism of 'I hope, I hope' (V.ii.44). It is a miracle how Shakespeare creates the high beauty of the death-scene, despite elements which could read as farce – Desdemona's voice joining in the dialogue after she has been strangled ('not yet quite dead'), Cassio being brought in in his wheelchair, the ineptitude of the Venetian lords in preventing Emilia from being stabbed, or in disarming Othello. Desdemona's pity for Cassio, even on the verge of her own death, interweaves her story with his, just as in courtship he 'went between' her and Othello. In remaining faithful also to Cassio, she confirms his image of the ideal in her (and he becomes Othello's successor). Her posthumous voice calls still to Othello, and also beyond him, in the cry of 'lord, lord, lord' which is echoed by Emilia, knocking at the door. It contributes to Othello's evocation of a life beyond this one, in which he can find the relief of chastisement:

<sup>2</sup> 'Naturalism' is a term coined by Stanislavsky to describe Chekhov, to distinguish his art from 'realism', a term which became associated with everyday, kitchen-sink drama. 'Naturalism' has a touch of the poetic.

O ill-starr'd wench,  
Pale as thy smock, when we shall meet at compt,  
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,  
And fiends will snatch at it: cold, cold, my girl,,  
Even like thy chastity; (V.ii.273-7)

It is the first step in a slow dawning of knowledge in Othello, culminating in his shedding the most persistence knowledge-blocker, the false symbol of the handkerchief: 'O fool, fool, fool!' This concrete representation of Iago's honesty and Desdemona's honour did not contain the mystery of his mother, there was no 'magic in the web'. Now Othello is in a position to pronounce judgement on himself, to express his position sincerely and with beauty:

Then must you speak  
Of one that lov'd not wisely, but too well:  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,  
Richer than all his tribe: of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum; ... (V...ii.344-52)

Only when honesty is jettisoned, along with its false artistry and tissue of lies, can Othello's 'subdued eyes' recover their medicinal truth.