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Two Damned Cruces: Othello and Twelfth Night

By Barbara Everett

The establishment of Shakespeare's text is now a matter much conditioned by technology. Yet it remains deeply involved with literary criticism. Any given crux will demand an assessment of what surrounds it; and the attempt to solve even the smallest of textual problems can involve and then enlarge a reader's understanding of the entire literary work. In the first twenty lines of Othello we meet a case of this—a word, and indeed a whole line, that constitute one of the best-known and longest-unresolved cruces in the canon. The play's two original texts, the Quarto and the Folio, give a version of the passage that differs in one or two significant details, though the problem stays much the same in each. Iago, apparently lucid but showing signs also of an incoherent rage, is attempting to pacify an angrily jealous Roderigo by asserting his own hatred of the man who has won the place he himself wanted as the Moor's Lieutenant:

and what was he?
Forsooth, a great Arithmetition,
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost dambd in a faire wife,
That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the devision of a Battell knowes,
More than a Spinster . . .

(Q 20–6)

So the Quarto, with ss and vs modernized (as I have done with both original texts, here and throughout what follows). The Folio reads:

And what was he?
For-sooth, a great Arithmatician,
One Michaell Cassio, a Florentine,
(A Fellow almost damn'd in a faire Wife)
That never set a Squadron in the Field,
Nor the devision of a Battaile knowes
More then a Spinster.

(F I. i. 20–6)

Johnson referred to the fourth line here, describing Cassio as 'damned in a fair wife', as 'one of the passages which must for the present be resigned to corruption and obscurity'. His 'present' has lasted until the present day. Editors continue doubtfully to reprint the line, which still reads as nonsense. And most of them would
probably agree with the invaluable if now 100-year-old New Variorum edition, which gives to the line five pages of notes (in very small print) ending with the echo of Johnson's "‘I have nothing that I can, with any approach to confidence, propose’"—Ed.

Earlier editors occasionally emended either 'damned' or 'wife', without much improvement; but most have tried to make sense of the line not by changing it but by glossing it imaginatively. Many commentators guess at some altered intention on Shakespeare's part to marry off his Cassio, whose representative in the source-story was himself married; or they suppose here some allusion to Cassio's future affair with the whore, Bianca. It is in general believed that the line designates the Lieutenant a ladies' man.

None of these proposals meets the real problem of the line: that it fails to make sense. Productions of the play which drop the line do in their way comment on it more effectively than most editions. And the failure to make sense is intrinsic. Even if we should (and it seems a mistake that we do) call in a wholly hypothetical or unconjugal as yet unencountered mistress, it remains a fact that no one was ever damned for having a fair wife; and to be 'almost damned' is almost as curious a concept. Some sense of this unusual, not to say Calvinistical approach to damnation must account for the regularity with which editors cite an Italian proverb of the time, 'L'hai tolta bella? Tuo danno'. This M. R. Ridley, in his otherwise excellent New Arden edition, firmly translates, 'You have married a fair wife? You are damned.' His sixteenth-century Italian is, it must be said, very likely to be better than the present writer's. But the proverb certainly looks as if it means 'Your girl's good-looking? That's your loss'—with no mention of damnation; and Florio as certainly translates danno, in his 1598 Worlde of Wordes (an Italian–English dictionary), 'hurt, losse, danger, dammage, perill, skath'—again, with no mention of damnation. The two closest English equivalents of the time given by Tilley's dictionary of Renaissance proverbs are: 'He that has a white horse and a fair wife never wants trouble', and 'Who has a fair wife needs more than two eyes': yet again, no talk of damnation here.

The problem of meaning here presented by 'damned' is reflected linguistically in a problem of grammar. The phrase 'damned in' does not appear to exist—in so far, of course, as it means 'damned as a result of something' (one may speak of the damned in hell). In the several columns given by the OED to 'damn' and its derivatives, 'damned', 'dannable', and 'damnation', nowhere can be found examples of these followed by in. All have some tendency to be used absolutely and without prepositional additions, but where these
words do govern a preposition it will be for. ‘Damned in’ does not occur. We accept the phrase unthinkingly as a Shakespearian nonce-usage perhaps because the speaker, Iago, has such a compelling and question-begging presence; partly too perhaps because, if we know the play already, we may hear the line as somehow relevant to the Moor himself; but most of all because the word ‘damned’ has in itself a hypnotic power, whether through its theological absolutism or merely its expletive energy. This silencing force may surely be presumed to have worked on the play’s first printers. That the same mistake—if a mistake there is—should feature in both of Othello’s two early texts is not in itself surprising. If the word underlying ‘damned’ was obscure or illegible enough to fox one compositor it was difficult enough to bewilder the other. Nor is it strange that both the Quarto and Folio texts should agree in reading ‘damned’. If we assume that the Folio text was printed from a Shakespearian manuscript which was a twin to the source-manuscript for the Quarto Othello, but which had since the first production of the play received substantial Shakespearian revisions and additions, then the second or Folio compositor might well, if uncertain of his manuscript reading at this line, turn to the printed Quarto text which he used for a guide. The result would be ‘damned’ in both texts, however differently spelled.

It seems clear that ‘damned’ has, like all such words of power, exerted a kind of hypnotic force on all the play’s editors, as surely as on its first compositors. For the notion of someone being in any sense (whether expletive or theological) damned retains the power to attract and distract; obstructive and interruptive, the word stops readers from noticing that Iago’s discourse here has a readily comprehensible flow. But there is something else again that hinders the easy reading of these lines. Modern editors usually retain at least some of the thicket of brackets that feature in the Folio text of Othello, on which most current editions have been based—that feature, that is, at least in some (mainly early) scenes, and in Iago’s speeches in particular. Hence the brackets that in the second version here enclose the ‘faire Wife’ line, decisively isolating it from the rhetorical and syntactic movement of the whole. Although they seem not to have attracted comment from textual critics, these curious irregularly clustering brackets are interesting, and one would not want simply to dismiss them. They can strike a reader of the Folio text of the play as suggestion, however faint and fanciful, that the dramatist may have come to see his villain as possessing a kind of wholly fake ‘Jamesian’ quality. Iago, in fact an entirely social and superficial personage, conceals his emptiness from himself and
others by an external show of inwardness, of secret reflective depths; he talks endlessly in parentheses and hypotheses. Brackets are, as it were, the spirit of the man—Iago’s soul. This is a concept which the actor of Iago may have always found himself intuitively noting, meeting the character’s natural speech-rhythms with grunting sinkings of the voice, a habit of throwaway confidentiality. But it is a speech-rhythm anyway liable to thin out, like all such mannered indices of characterization, once the play is well under way. And, from the reading point of view, it is not easily practicable in a text with Elizabethan punctuation systems. Both playwright and printer alike may have sometimes been uncertain exactly where the parentheses, in such an in fact highly public rhetoric, ought to close themselves. In this sense brackets round the ‘faire Wife’ line may falsify, and the Quarto reading prove more reliable in that it gives the line back to the context to which it belongs.

That context is most clearly seen by removing the dangerous because mesmeric word ‘damned’, together with the preposition ‘in’ which it governs, and then rendering the rest into modern English without punctuation. Iago answers his own rhetorical question, ‘what was he?’:

One Michael Cassio a Florentine
A fellow almost a fair wife
That never set a squadron in the field
Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster

Set out thus, it becomes evident that, despite some syntactical ‘clotting’ produced by the incoherence of the speaker’s rage, the ‘fair wife’ is an operative phrase and governs ‘That never set a squadron in the field’, just as the ‘spinster’ ‘knows [not] the division of a battle’. And the ‘fellow’ is compared to both, just as the ‘fellow’ itself is in apposition to ‘Michael Cassio’. This is only hard to apprehend in so far as Iago wishes it to be, introducing a confusion parallel to that ‘almost’ in its capacity to shield the speaker from the blame of what he is saying. As Iago uses his syntax as a shield, so does his vocabulary here play tricks that need watching. One of the reasons, I believe, why this ‘crux’ has stayed a crux for centuries is that Shakespeare has given to Iago language with a self-defeating element: his terms are so much involved in the social medium of the period as to be historically vulnerable—they are half-lost to us now.

Iago is in fact creating the impression of plain statement (which is why editors struggle to give Cassio some kind of ‘real’ wife) while actually fabricating a deceptive texture of insults. This sleight-
of-hand starts with the word ‘Florentine’. Why does Shakespeare choose to make his villain mention Cassio’s place of origin? The answer, I think, lies in what Iago does with that factuality: quietly converting a simple datum into implication, and thence into insult. Because Roderigo is violently disappointed and he himself viciously angry, Iago’s citation of a mere place of origin makes it work to give Cassio a taint of the outsider, the ‘stranger’ to the two Venetians on stage: a foreshadowing, of course, of what will be done to the Moor. In its context ‘Florentine’ manages to sound, retrospectively, like a curiously dirty word: a shift induced by Iago’s continuing his alliterative fs. But ‘fellow’ and ‘fair wife’ would communicate something other and more to an Elizabethan ear than to ours. We hear in ‘fellow’ only some amiable, jocose, and Edwardianly dated expression of equality of status with another male; and ‘wife’ holds for us simply the sense of conjugal relationship. But in Shakespeare’s day, and after it right up into our own immediate past, ‘fellow’ was unmistakably a socially conditioned word, used by the nobility or gentry only to or of a person socially inferior. As to ‘wife’, the marital relationship is the second meaning offered by the OED; the first and earlier usage meant ‘woman’ only. Phrasally (‘a wife that did costerd’s sell’, ‘the wyfis that fostred yow’) this came to be applied to tradeswomen of low social rank (a use retained now only in such compounds as ‘fishwife’). Given its relationship to such phrasal uses, and its alliterative context here, Iago’s ‘fair wife’ carries a hint of something almost approaching ‘nice little piece’.

I am suggesting that the ‘fair wife’ does not exist as an element in Cassio’s personal history, but serves as a descriptive definition of some flaw (as Iago sees it) in Cassio’s character. As the ‘spinster’ locates the Lieutenant’s ignorance of ‘the division of a battle’, so the ‘fair wife’ establishes inability to ‘set a squadron in the field’. Moreover ‘spinster’ is a term as potentially derogatory as ‘fair wife’, and on the same grounds. Editors still sometimes insist that in Shakespeare’s time ‘spinster’ had no necessary female connotation, but simply indicated a (male or female) spinner by trade or occupation; yet all the Elizabethan examples cited by the OED either plainly indicate females or leave the gender unstated. Consonantly, the unbiased ear of a reader surely hears in the present passage a kind of rhyming, or vituperative chiastic patterning, of the triumphant closing rancour of ‘spinster’ as against the opening ‘fair wife’. If there is some shadow of contempt in that ‘fair wife’, then so too is there in the spitting conclusive ‘spinster’, which carries a charge, as of ‘withered old virgin’, as firmly as the earlier ‘Florentine’ comes to sound absurd, even indecent. In short, the use here of ‘spinster’
may provide a small instance of Shakespeare’s linguistic brilliance. He may have so caught a socially evolving word as to make his Iago the first person in literature to turn the estate of female celibacy into an insult in itself, and at the same time to make the comparison of a man with a woman an insult in itself, and to do both so ambiguously as to be all but undiscoverable.

For Iago’s purpose is dangerous enough to need the covering protection of that ‘almost’, and all the opacity of his furtively vivid rhetoric. If the ‘fellow’ is being compared equally to the ‘fair wife’ and to the ‘spinster’, then the obvious point of their comparison is their shared femaleness. The major intention of these few lines is to revenge Iago on Cassio by diminishing him: specifically, by the imputation that male intellectuals of his kind (‘Arithmatician’ is made to sound another curiously dirty word) are of course effeminate. It seems to me that this suggestion is maintained through the allusion that immediately follows these lines, an immediacy accentuated in the Quarto (which I here quote) by the more open and fluid punctuation:

Nor the devision of a Battell knowes,
More than a Spinster, unlesse the bookish Theorique,
Wherein the toged Consuls can propose
As masterly as he . . .

(Q 25–8)

The word ‘toged’ is counted among the play’s many cruces, for the Folio here reads ‘Tongued’. It may be that the dramatist decided to drop ‘toged’ (togèd or toga-ed) because the deviousness of its allusion proved difficult for both actor and audience to cope with; but that he had hoped to let Iago carry through it his snide hint of an intellectual seen as absurdly womanish as well as ‘bookish’ (consuls wear *togas* instead of decent *macho* breeches) in contrast to the male and properly experienced soldiers. Certainly Iago returns to this theme later (II. ii) and there more broadly and coarsely—it is the more openly rammed home. Pretending to defend Cassio as far as he can for his attack on Montano, Iago speaks with a plain man’s brutal kindness which (in fact) manages to hint for Cassio an even darker, more diminishingly indecent situation than the one he has on his hands as it is. The Lieutenant is presented as if caught in some sudden violent quarrel of randy rough-trading homosexual lovers (an imputation that simultaneously casts a shadow over the other ‘Bride, and Groome’, Desdemona and Othello):

Friends all, but now, even now.
In Quarter, and in termes like Bride, and Groome
Devesting them for Bed: and then, but now:
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(As if some Planet had unwitted men)
Swords out, and tilting one at others breastes . . .

(I quote here from the New Variorum Folio text: F II. ii. 203–7)

The general tendency, then, of Iago's rhetoric in this opening passage of Othello makes itself clear. He is intent on darkening and diminishing Cassio, vengefully, in any way he can. The way that offers itself most immediately is the 'little woman' implication—a hint which is the uglier obverse of that image of Cassio that troubles Iago by having a 'daily beauty in his life'. This intention is reflected in the actual phrasing of the passage. The issue is the comparison of Cassio and the 'fair wife'. Therefore, in a line that reads 'A fellow almost a fair wife', the missing words that underlie 'damned in' must mean something like 'like', 'equivalent to', 'describable as', or 'portrayed in'—indeed the concept of the portrait is desirable in that Iago's 'almost' suggests an image so alarmingly precise and definite as to need some escape-route into indeterminacy. The word or phrase moreover needs to be of that degree of difficulty that could explain its misreading by a printer as expert as Shakespeare's at this stage can be expected to be.

This provides enough information to make a guess. But further information, making guessing almost unnecessary, comes from a different source. I want here deliberately to pause, and go on a loop-line of argument that will take us back to the play written only two or three years before Othello, Twelfth Night: for it is there that we find a second crux so involving the word 'damned' as to suggest, by its solution, a possible form for the word in Othello. Two textual cruces so curiously linked should at least be allowed to throw what light they can on each other.

The third scene of the first act of Twelfth Night introduces the two knights to us. Much of the scene is taken up by Sir Toby's mockery of Sir Andrew's keen but incompetent wish to engage in the great world of life and love, a wish encapsulated in his innocent passion for the dance. This rallying is brought to a head (or perhaps a foot) by Sir Toby's amused flattery of Sir Andrew's 'legge', a compliment which the other accepts with gentlemanly detachment:

I, 'tis strong, and it does indifferent well in a dam'd colour'd stocke. Shall we sit [set] about some Revels? (I. iii. 126–7)

I quote here the New Variorum edition of the play's single original text, the First Folio. This 'dam'd' of the Folio, though a much-discussed crux, does not excite quite such editorial debate as the
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‘dambd/damn’d’ of Othello. In early editions it was sometimes allowed to stand, on the assumption that ‘dam’d colour’d’ means ‘hellfire coloured’, which is to say ‘flame red’ or (a minority verdict) ‘black’. But most commentators have felt this to be a strained interpretation, and surely rightly; to mean this the text would have to have read something more like ‘damnation coloured’, and even then it is uncertain that a Renaissance mind could define a colour in this way (there is an instructive contrast in the relative concreteness of Love's Labour's Lost's ‘black is the badge of hell’). Most texts therefore emend ‘dam’d’, with proposals including ‘flame’, ‘damask’, ‘dove’, ‘paned’, ‘claret’, and ‘dun’. Of these, Rowe’s ‘flame-coloured’ was for long the most popular reading, although more recent editions appear to be replacing it with Collier’s ‘dun-coloured’ (and the change may be in itself an interesting reflection of our whole altered sense of the play. The consciously darker and subtler shade has replaced the brighter and prettier image).

Yet all these emendations lack the sense of necessity. It is charming enough to visualize Sir Andrew in either a bright red or a dull brown stocking; but both alternatives have that pure post-Romantic randomness that is perhaps not a part of the character of Renaissance literary art. Detail in Shakespeare is invariably pointed (Shylock’s ring, Lear’s button). The impression that a point is being made here, which neither ‘flame’ nor ‘dun’ meets, is underlined by a small fact oddly ignored by editors. Sir Andrew can hardly be merely referring to what he wears at that moment on stage, which would be artlessly tautologous in a way that is not explained away by his folly; he must be indicating some altogether other pair of hose, one reserved for and even symbolic of high days and holidays—an essentially ‘special’ stocking.

Stockings recur in Twelfth Night—they could almost be called a motif or symbol in it. It therefore seems unlikely that Sir Andrew’s allusion to an off-stage wardrobe has nothing at all to do with one of the play’s most amusing events, Malvolio’s assumption of yellow stockings in the name of love. One of the rather few things we appear to know about Elizabethan hosiery is what seems to have been a vogue for yellow stockings at one period, and their survival for a longer one as a kind of (often ironic) talking-point. The New Variorum prints a note by the Victorian critic W. A. Wright, glossing Malvolio’s quotation from his pseudo-love-letter from Olivia, ‘Remember who commended thy yellow stockings’ (11. v. 144)—and the whole note is informative enough to be worth quoting here:

‘Yellow stockings’ were apparently a common article of dress in the 16th
century, and the tradition of wearing them survives in the costume of the boys at Christ's Hospital. They had apparently gone out of fashion in Sir Thomas Overbury's time, for in his *Characters* [1614] he says of 'A Country Gentleman', 'If he goes to Court, it is in yellow stockings'; as if this were a sign of rusticity. They appear to have been especially worn by the young, if any importance is to be attached to the burden of a song set to the tune of *Peg a Ramsay* . . . in which a married man laments the freedom of his bachelor days: 'Give me my yellow hose again, Give me my yellow hose.' Malvolio may have affected youthful fashions in dress.¹

From all this and other such references we may gather that yellow hose became, either in fact or as a literary theme of the time, a kind of focusing point between three areas: fashion, the Court, and love—and that like other fashions and ideas about fashion, they became too an index of staleness, the fabric of a bad joke. A tune like Noel Coward's 'Somewhere I'll find you' (instead of *Peg a Ramsay*) might still evoke both a vivid ghost of romanticism and an allusion to the 'potency of cheap music'—the charm of the modish and the repulsion of that charm. In the same way, Malvolio's investment in yellow stockings may bring with it all the by now (in 1601 or 2) accreted ambiguity of the fashionable courtly love-romanticism, a mode always 'out of date', distasteful, to those of true refinement and sensibility. The stockings act as a near-symbol of love à la mode, a passion ridiculously attractive to worldly climbers like Malvolio, but absurd or disgusting to the sincerely feeling like Olivia ('a Cipresse, not a bosome, / Hides my heart').

Seen thus, Malvolio's yellow stockings serve to highlight an essential element of *Twelfth Night*—one perhaps too little stressed by criticism, though brought to the fore in a brilliant production of the play a few years back by Jonathan Miller. This is its essential courtliness. The comedy holds at its heart the question of the value and meaning of the high-Petrarchan romantic love most at home in a Court. This Courtly context lies behind even the fooling of the two knights in the third scene of the play. Sir Andrew, a character often gulled into farce, at the same time derives most humour and most interest from the natural gravity (surely) of his expression; a formal man, he is like a young and highly proper Foreign Office underling, decorously agog to do the right thing—which for him means the smart thing, even the Courtly one. This desire he extends even to the anxious propriety of his garments. He announces non-chalantly his ownership of the right colour stockings in a manner that even imitates the Court's *sprezzatura* casualness: 'It does

¹ The original note is on p. 128 of William Aldis Wright's edition of *Twelfth Night* (Clarendon Press Series), Oxford, 1885.
indifferent well...'. In the process he tells us something about both the comedy and himself, and establishes a context for the gulling of Malvolio later on.

But the ambitious Malvolio is a vulgarian, and Sir Andrew is—though weaker and much more stupid than the Steward—pathetically 'well-born', vulnerably a gentleman. It seems possible that Shakespeare saw Sir Andrew as wistful and silly but refined enough to opt for something a little above 'yellow' in stockings. At a period in which one can come across a reference to 'peach-coloured' stockings, Sir Andrew may have favoured the special, sharply luscious shade of yellow that one calls lemon.

To see Sir Andrew's hose as 'lemon-coloured' rather than 'dam'd colour'd' has more justification on textual grounds—as well as literary—than any of its alternatives. Florio's Italian–English dictionary, quoted earlier, translates the Italian lemone as 'the fruite we call a lymond', and lemonino as 'a kinde of lymond colour'. It seems worth conjecturing that Shakespeare wrote his phrase in a form very close to Florio, as 'limond colour'd'; and since neither the word nor this spelling would be particularly familiar to the compositor, he would guess at the substitute to which, in fact, 'limond' is closer than any of the proposed alternatives, the word 'damn'd/dambd/dam'd'. For in secretary hand the introductory stroke of the l of limond could resemble the bowl of a minuscule d. On the other hand, the word 'Lemon' occurs later in Twelfth Night, at ii. iii. 28, and is in its original text, the Folio, printed with a capital L. And the relevant fragment of Sir Thomas More (which Shakespeare may have written) shows that a majuscule L followed closely by an i could even more easily be read as a normal majuscule D.² In addition, many textual cruces of the time arise from the fact that this style of handwriting reduces any series of i, m, and n, and sometimes—in their neighbourhood—o and a too, into a sequence of indeterminately numbered small wave-like strokes.³

'Lemon-coloured' or 'limond colour'd' gains support from a rather different kind of evidence. I have just mentioned that in the second act of Twelfth Night, Sir Andrew enquires of Feste: 'I sent thee sice pence for thy Lemon, hadst it?' Editors are agreed that the knight means not the fruit but the girl-friend of Feste, here referred to grandly as a 'Leman'. If Shakespeare in his reference to the

² See Harleian MS 7368 fol. 8(b) l. 11 for majuscule L as the initial of a verb. The fact that the writer of fol. 8 uses an enlarged minuscule as a form of the capital in the speech heading Dull is not relevant to the argument.

³ I should like to thank the Editor of this journal, Mr R. E. Alton, for his valuable palaeographic suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr Stanley Wells for some relevant textual considerations elsewhere in this article.
stockings, though spelling the word ‘limond’ still pronounced it ‘lemon’ and could hear in it the ‘lemon/Leman’ play implied by the printer’s error later, then Sir Andrew’s meditation on his hose is thereby enriched. For it happens that this allusion to ‘lemon-coloured stockings’ is immediately followed (as the occasional Victorian editor disapprovingly noted) by some bawdy verbal by-play on the part of Sir Toby. Though the comedy as a whole has little innuendo of this kind, perhaps because of its Court-context and the high-serious treatment of love, what there is tends to cluster in this present scene, i. iii: where Sir Toby and Maria are in effect trying to initiate Sir Andrew into a more manly role in the great dance of life and love—an attempt that comes to a climax in this otherwise pointless piece of backchat that takes the two knights off the stage. Sir Toby, insisting on the part played in our conception and birth by ‘legges and thighes’, adds ‘let me see thee caper. Ha, higher: ha, ha, excellent’.

The undermeanings of these exchanges may be understood as depending (as of course ‘legges and thighes’ do) on the suggested allusion to ‘lemon-coloured’ stockings. Because of the ‘limond/lemon/Leman’ fusion, Sir Andrew articulates a muffled impression that ‘Leman-coloured’ stockings are not only smart but positively sexy. Since the whole modern fashion industry profits by something like the same illusion, he can hardly be blamed for it.

I left Othello on the suggestion that we need to find a substitute for ‘damn’d’: a word which the context requires to mean something like ‘describable as’, ‘portrayed in’. It may be that Twelfth Night, close to the tragedy in its time of composition, will offer information about the form of the word we are looking for. If Shakespeare’s printer read ‘limond’ there as ‘dam’d’, the chances are that he substituted ‘dambd’ or ‘damn’d’ here for a word very like ‘limond’ in form. And, if we believe—as I think we should—that the Elizabethan top-level compositor is hardly less to be respected for his skills than his modern descendant, then the word can like ‘limond’ be allowed to be of some degree of difficulty.

The word that meets these conditions is ‘limned’, used elsewhere by Shakespeare in As You Like It, and as ‘limning’ in Venus and Adonis. If he here makes Iago call Cassio ‘A fellow almost limned in a fair wife’, the slight exoticism of ‘limned’ would only make the printer’s misreading comprehensible. But the word would not seem alien to an Elizabethan, as it must sound to us, being now, of course, essentially archaic (though still fairly frequently met in its own art-historical context; London’s Bond Street, for instance, offers a
Limner Gallery, that deals in miniatures). For ‘limning’ is the art of miniature painting in particular, and of portrait painting in general, thought by many in the Renaissance to be the queen of all arts. For Iago in a sudden contemptuous satirical paradox to diminish the promoted Cassio to the scale of an expensive miniature of a ‘fair wife’ gives his language an arrogant and precise expertise, a nailing clarity of image, that makes his insult all but unanswerable. Indeed the very arrogance of the art itself may be the reason why Shakespeare makes his power-hungry and humiliated Iago take refuge in its vocabulary. For the two leading masters of the time, Hilliard and Oliver, were of course centred on the Court (though they did sometimes paint ‘fair wives’), and Hilliard’s descriptive defence of his art, the only recently published Art of Limning (written about 1600) is careful to establish the high status of the profession, its aristocratic ambience: ‘None should medle with limning but gentlemen alone, for that it is a kind of gentill painting of lesse subiection than any other . . . and tendeth not to comon mens usse.’

If Iago does indeed call Cassio ‘A fellow almost limned in a fair wife, / That never set a squadron in the field . . .’, the insult holds the attention by a striking mixture of vitality with a curious deadliness: the man becomes a brilliant small flat empty doll. Though darkened, there is an interesting consonancy between this and the kind of praise given by Shakespeare to limning elsewhere. There is a tension in the celebration of Venus and Adonis:

Looke when a Painter would surpass the life,
In limming out a well proportioned steed,
His Art with Natures workmanship at strife,
As if the dead the living should exceed . . . 4

The same theme of art’s conflicting and complex relation with the natural recurs in As You Like It: where Duke Senior, in recognizing and welcoming Orlando, tells the young man that he has his dead father’s ‘effigies’ (monumental images) ‘Most truly limn’d, and living in your face’ (II. vii. 193-4). In both these passages Shakespeare’s thinking is probably aided by a subdued pun on the word ‘limbed’. The spelling ‘limming’ at line 290 of Venus and Adonis, where ‘limning’ is of course the primary meaning, is matched by the spelling ‘lim’ (for ‘limb’) at line 1067 of that poem. ‘Limned’ was often actually spelled ‘limbed’ at the time; it may be that behind the Quarto Othello’s ‘dambd’ lies the Shakespearian spelling ‘limbd’. This same shadow of another meaning enters Iago’s line about the

4 Venus and Adonis, Ciiij, 1593.
‘limning/limbing’ of Cassio in a fair wife: where ‘limbed’, while contributing its own life, also complicates the situation into real indecency—it brings in what Sir Toby calls ‘legges and thighes’ to make the confused image more disturbing as well as more absurd. The ‘in’ is both erotic and obscure. Cassio as a result not only beds with or in, but becomes the fair wife—a beast not with two backs but with one; the usual erotic frisson Iago aims at turns into a shiver of apprehension at Cassio’s hermaphroditic sexual congress.

No actual member of an audience is going to catch more than the faintest hint of all this in Iago’s ‘limn’d/limb’d in a fair wife’—although it may be some uncertain sense of the disturbed, disturbing nature of the alternatives that has kept the editorial mind backed away from Iago’s drift for so long. But it cannot be denied that the dark substance of these lines has its relevance to the play as a whole. Othello relates a man’s loving to his seeing, and his seeing to his being—as he loves, so he becomes: and the metamorphoses of love emerge in their baser form through Iago’s ‘With her? On her: what you will’. This might be summarized by saying that in the tragedy ‘limning’ and ‘limbing’ break apart, and their disjunction generates terrible loose, rampant fantasies—under the clear surface of a simple story of sexual intrigue there start to spawn all the obscene absurd varieties of sexual and emotional experience. To take one precise example: at least two distinguished actors (Olivier and MacLiammoir, as recorded in their memoirs) have toyed with the idea that Iago is in fact homosexual in love with Othello, and that his unhappy jealous passion triggers off the tragedy. This seems to me to give quite the wrong kind of interest to Iago’s role, to render a false specificity in it. But the idea is not quite alien to the play; for it is a fact that Othello’s very first lines so charge with curious undercurrents the exchanges of Iago and Roderigo, as to make them sound—if one wants—like a pair of lovers bitterly quarrelling, with the jilted and jealous Roderigo nagging the elsewhere-interested equally jealous Iago: ‘Thou . . . hast had my purse, / As if the strings were thine’; ‘Thou told’st me, / Thou did’st hold him in thy hate’; ‘I follow him, to serve my turne upon him’.

Such effects are possible because the speakers here are both possessed by a violent power-ridden quasi-erotic rage that fails to ‘limn’ truly, to be in any true self-abnegating contemplation of its object. In some of the most terrible and powerful moments of a tragedy sometimes too easily called ‘beautiful’, this rampant and frightful imagination of love breaks free and holds sway. To all of these

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5 And also perhaps to signal an opportunity for obscene gesture from the actor.
fantasies Iago gives the poisonous yet relaxedly commonplace style of ‘limn’d/limb’d in a fair wife’. The grotesquerie of that line is not very far, for instance, from the black humour of the occasion (iii. iii. 474–86) when Iago evokes for an appalled, entranced Othello the male mutuality of the pseudo-dream, in which calling ‘sweet Desdemona’ Cassio all but rapes Iago. The same muddy waters are plumbed again at iv. i, as Iago initiates a still partly truly innocent Othello into the unpleasing pleasures of their joint imagination of Cassio and Desdemona in bed together.

The sanity and depth of the tragedy lies in the way it can communicate that such images are both all too interesting to Othello, a form of experience that matures, yet all the time great agony to him. He never wholly loses his awareness that in losing Desdemona’s true ‘image’ he will lose his peace for ever—an awareness that surfaces in moments of curious incoherent only half-conscious ‘limning’: ‘My name that was as fresh / As Dian’s Visage, is now begrim’d and blacke / As mine owne face’; ‘Turne thy complexion there: / Patience, thou young and Rose-lip’d Cherubin, / I heere looke grim as hell’. In the same way, Desdemona expresses her troubled but never lost love for Othello as insight or image. In her most directly sensual speech, when she pleads to be allowed Othello’s physical company in marriage, she follows her allusion to what the Quarto calls her ‘utmost pleasure’ with the wonderfully abstract and metaphysical ‘I saw Othello’s visage in his mind’. Her beautiful summary of a loving vision created of sympathy, an imaginative apprehension embodied and real, contrasts sharply with Iago’s perverse notion of a Cassio ‘almost limned’ in some young woman.

Desdemona’s definition of love has the kind of meditative complexity that we find in the Sonnets. There is a case still to be made that such textual difficulty as we find in the first edition of the Sonnets reflects less the incompetence of its printers than, often, an extreme difficulty in the thought expressed. It is a point of some interest that, exactly as in the Sonnets, defining Desdemona’s ‘metaphysic of the physical’ seems to have caused Shakespeare such problems as to incur for the ‘Othello’s visage’ lines perhaps five important textual cruces, places where the Quarto and the Folio so significantly differ as to make the probability of authorial revision seem a near-certainty. Here, too, textual problems may take us into the depths of a writer’s work.