Othello – passage commentary

260  Othello. This fellow’s of exceeding honesty, And knows all qualities with a learned spirit Of human dealings. If I do prove her haggard, Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings, I’d whistle her off and let her down the wind

265  To pray at fortune. Haply, for I am black And have not those soft parts of conversation That chamberers have, or for I am declined Into the vale of years – yet that’s not much – She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief

270  Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage! That we can call these delicate creatures ours And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad And live upon the vapor of a dungeon Than keep a corner in the thing I love

275  For others’ uses. Yet ’tis the plague to great ones: Prerogatived are they less than the base; ’Tis destiny unshunnable, like death; Even then this forkèd plague is fated to us When we do quicken.  

Sentence 1  
This sentence is a compliment to lago’s intelligence and common sense. Othello is saying it as though assuring himself that this is a good man to be taking advice from, perhaps because his instincts are telling him to do otherwise. To the audience this sentence presents an element of irony because we know lago is anything but honest. Upon examination of diction, word choices like, “exceeding” to describe his honesty and “all” when referring to how much he knows about human nature, stand out. Since he is alone this further suggests that he can only be trying to convince himself that it is okay to put such faith into one man. The praises in this sentence seem to be exaggerations, although lago does have an all-knowing air about him when human behavior is concerned because he can predict and manipulate it so well and to his advantage.

Sentence 2  
This phrase is predicting the consequence Desdemona will face if Othello can prove that she has been unfaithful. Othello seems to be venting off some of the much accumulated rage that he has pent up. This sentence speaks of a falcon that’s leashed. The structure of the punctuation seems to make the sentence flow in such a way that it feels like a tug on a leash. This tactic is especially effective because this is a highly visual sentence. Othello calls Desdemona a “haggard” which means female falcon. Female falcons are known to be unruly, and when personified refer to a woman being unchaste. This is interesting diction following his praise of lago because to compare humans to animals is a signature of lago’s. It seems as though Othello is brain washed. The word “her” is repeated four times in this sentence, which could be a reflection of what is consuming his mind. Personification is used as Othello refers to Desdemona as a wretched bird who is leashed through marriage to his heart but would be sent off to fend for herself if he could prove she was unfaithful. Alliteration is also used, “her haggard; though that.” This series of repetitions helps serve in the illusion that the sentence is a tug on a leash.

Sentence 3  
In this sentence Othello seems to be answering the opposition of himself. The purpose of the sentence seems to be for him to calm his rage driven panicked state. The use of punctuation makes this sentence reminiscent of a conversation with the use of hyphens and commas to separate the opposing thoughts. Othello seems to be insanely arguing and engaging in banter with himself. This lack of self-confidence follows the trend of lago’s brainwashing, for a once powerful official is now reduced to a muddle of insecurities and self-doubts. A striking choice of words are the combination of “relief” and “loathe” because it shows what a bitter state Othello is in, much like the state lago was in, and similarly toward the same person: Cassio. It seems like a contagious infection of the emotions. Or, as if lago planted his seed in Othello’s fig garden.

Sentence 4  
This phrase is in the form of a lament. Just when he seemed to be resolved in loathing Desdemona, his love for her and his conflicting emotions and confusion seem to fuel out this cry. This sentence also shows the conflict between lago’s influence and his own natural tendencies referring to his wife as a “delicate creature” but then saying he’s frustrated by her sexual “appetite.” This vulgarity is out of character. This sentence is an apostrophe speaking to the “curse of marriage.” Alliteration occurs in the form of the “c” sound being repeated. Perhaps, this is to support a feeling of angry cursing since it is a hard sound.

Sentence 5  
This next sentence could be classified as a childish analogy with the purpose of furthering his self-pity. There is no punctuation in this sentence which furthers my feeling of it having a childlike or naive quality about it, like a young boy sulking about not having his way. He once again makes an animal reference which shows lago’s influence and also calls Desdemona a “thing,” which could be interpreted as misogynistic
or simply terminology from Shakespeare’s time. The word “vapor” stands out as onomatopoeia. The frog analogy is also hyperbole used to express the direness of his angst.

Sentence 6
The next opinion expressed by the Moor is probably comforting because he’s telling himself that the trade-off for being such an important person is the loss of fidelity. The sentence doesn’t, however, serve his humility and the fancy grammar emphasizes the haughtiness. There is also a play on words here because inherent in higher ranks are prerogatives and inherent in lower ranks is jealousy, or the “plague.”

Sentence 7
The next sentence is a very cynical opinion that serves to feed his depression and to communicate the gravity on his current state of mind. The construction of the sentence (ending with “death”) enforces the feeling of gloom. This sentence seems to have been a thought spawned from the previous one because it begins with “‘Tis” which was used in the phrase before making it seem like not only a word but an idea came from that sentence. This sentence is almost parallel to the next sentence, both spawning from sentence 6.

Sentence 8
This sentence is very similar in character to sentence 7, however they deal with opposite sides of the spectrum: one deals with death and the other conception. This one seems to feed from sentence 6 because of the repetition of the word “plague.” The use of the word “forked” is interesting because it has diabolical connotations yet is mentioned along with the topic of conception. This sentence also presents certain irony because the act of conception or at least sexual acts are what are causing the plague of jealousy. So, Othello seems to be headed toward a very depressing self-evaluation when he is interrupted by Desdemona.

This passage seems to have two sections: sentences one through three and sentences four onwards.

The first part seems to be Othello voicing his insecurities in himself and still showing much doubt. He says he believes Iago to be a man of very good sense. He then says that even though he loves Desdemona he would leave her if he knew she had been unfaithful. He then rants about his insecurities and finds resolve finally in loathing Desdemona, a manifestation of his jealousy planted by Iago.

From this section comes one of detest and disdain for the plague brought on by marriage. He communicates frustration in being able to call a woman yours but not being able to control their sexual activity. He also says that spousal infidelity is the drawback of being a very high rank and such problems don’t plague commoners. He professes that jealousy is unavoidable and destined from birth to everyone.

This passage serves to show how confused and befuddled this man is. It starts out with his praise of Iago and ends with the resolution that jealousy is fated at conception. This passage seems to communicate a vicious cycle of jealousy. In the end, we are left with sympathy for the tortured mind of Othello, especially since we know that his worries are false.

Final Comments
1. The dramatic elements of this passage emphasize the degree to which Othello is unraveling or going mad. His inner turmoil is fully expressed, especially since it’s a soliloquy. The language is harsh and mostly hyperbole: “exceeding honesty…haggard…into vale of years…she’s gone…loathe…curse of marriage...toad…dungeon…vapors…others’ uses…plague…unshunnable…death…forked plague.” Othello speaks in extremes, implicating his dire state of mind. His once eloquent diction is gone and has been replaced by grungier vocabulary and simpler grammar much like Iago’s. Toward the end of the passage the sentences dwindle down in length giving the impression of spiraling further into the grip of depression, rage, and most of all, jealousy. He repeats “plague” twice which enforces the idea that jealousy is fatal. This is probably foreshadowing the fate of the plagued.

2. Othello’s soliloquy is reminiscent of Iago’s (I.iii.374-395). In this, Iago is at a pinnacle of jealous fuming and is plotting his revenge. Although the word revenge implicates that someone else has done him an injustice. Iago believes the world has done him an injustice. Iago begins speaking by declaring Roderigo, the person who last exited, a fool. This mirrors the way Othello begins by declaring Iago, the last to exit, an honest fellow. Then Iago moves to an accusation of infidelity between his wife and Othello. This relates back to Othello’s accusation of Desdemona being “haggard.” Both men are unsure of the accusation’s validity; however, Othello says he’ll await proof, while Iago intends to act without verification. Othello then talks to himself about how he could possibly have not seen it coming. The punctuation of this sentence (3) is very similar to Iago’s sentence (line 385) with the use of dashes to show the thought processes of both men. Iago makes an animal reference to an “ass” as does Othello when he speaks of the word “toad.” Similarly, both passages and with satanic references: “Hell and night” in Iago’s and “forked plague” in Othello’s. The two soliloquies also both end with references to birth with Iago saying “Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” and Othello’s reference to jealousy being “fated to us when we do quicken.” Perhaps they mirror each other so because Iago’s passage is speaking of his plan and Othello’s is a result of the plan taking effect.

Paraphrase:

Othello: Iago is so truthful, and understands human nature with his wise mind. If I find out that Desdemona is cheating, even though I love her, I would leave her and let her fend for herself. Perhaps, it’s because I’m black that I couldn’t tell Desdemona was cheating on me like more refined men can, or maybe it’s because I’m old – but I’m not that old – I’ve lost her; I was tricked, and now my only comfort is to hate Desdemona. Oh I hate marriage because men can call their wife theirs but they still can’t control who she has sex with. I’d prefer being toad in a dark and dank cellar to this situation of having other men be with my wife. But I suppose that’s the drawback for us important people – to have our wives cheat; commoners don’t have to worry about that. Jealousy can’t be avoided, like dying. Actually, jealousy is destined to us at conception. Oh, here comes Desdemona.
Shakespeare’s Othello – paraphrase graph

(Make sure you label each axis.)