Summary: Introduction

Along with Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, Othello is one of Shakespeare’s four great tragedies and thus a pillar of what most critics take to be the apex of Shakespeare’s dramatic art. Othello is unique among Shakespeare’s great tragedies. Unlike Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, which are set against a backdrop of affairs of state and which reverberate with suggestions of universal human concerns, Othello is set in a private world and focuses on the passions and personal lives of its major figures. Indeed, it has often been described as a "tragedy of character"; Othello’s swift descent into jealousy and rage and Iago’s dazzling display of villainy have long fascinated students and critics of the play. The relationship between these characters is another unusual feature of Othello. With two such prominent characters so closely associated, determining which is the central figure in the play and which bears the greater responsibility for the tragedy is difficult.

More than anything else, what distinguishes Othello from its great tragedies’ peers is the role of its villain, Iago. While the usurper King Claudius of Hamlet, the faithless daughters of Lear, and the unnatural villains of Macbeth (Macbeth, his Lady and the Weird Sister witches) are all impressively evil in their own way, none of them enjoys the same diabolical role as Iago.

Iago is a character who essentially writes the play’s main plot, takes a key part in it, and gives first-hand direction to the others, most notably to the noble Moor, Othello. The play presents us with two remarkable characters, Iago and his victim, with Iago as the dominant force that causes Othello to see the infidelity of his young and beautiful wife, Desdemona, with his favorite lieutenant, Michael Cassio. Indeed, not only is "seeing" and the gap between appearance and reality a central theme of the play, it overlaps with other major thematic strands (trust, honor, and reputation) and sheds light on still others, including the theme of patriarchy and the political state.

Written in 1604, Othello is one of Shakespeare’s most highly concentrated, tightly constructed tragedies, with no subplots and little humor to relieve the tension. Although he adapted the plot of his play from the sixteenth-century Italian dramatist and novelist Giraldi Cinthio’s Gli Hecatommiti, Shakespeare related almost every incident directly to the development of Iago’s schemes and Othello’s escalating fears. This structure heightens the tragedy’s ominous mood and makes the threat to both Desdemona’s innocence and the love she and Othello share more terrifying.

Although narrow in scope, Othello, with its intimate domestic setting, is widely regarded as the most moving and the most painful of Shakespeare’s great tragedies. The fall of a proud, dignified man, the murder of a graceful, loving woman, and the unreasoning hatred of a "motiveless" villain—all have evoked fear and pity in audiences throughout the centuries. If it lacks the cosmic grandeur of Hamlet or King Lear, Othello nevertheless possesses a power that is perhaps more immediate and strongly felt for operating on the personal, human plane.
Summary: Synopsis

Summary of the Play

On a quiet night in Venice, Iago, ensign to the Moorish general, Othello, enlists the aid of Roderigo in his plot against Othello. Iago secretly hates Othello and tells Roderigo, a rejected suitor to Desdemona, that she has eloped with the Moor. After this revelation, Roderigo and Iago awaken Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, with news that she has been transported into Othello’s hands. Iago informs Othello of Brabantio’s anger. Brabantio arrives with officers to confront Othello, but they are interrupted by Michael Cassio, who summons Othello to the Duke of Venice’s palace.

The duke and senators welcome Othello and inform him of his deployment to Cyprus in a defensive against the Ottomites. Brabantio accuses Othello of winning Desdemona’s affection by magic, after which Othello explains that he won Desdemona’s love by sincere means. Desdemona professes her duty to her husband. Subsequently, Othello is sent to Cyprus, leaving Iago in charge of Desdemona’s safe passage to Cyprus along with Emilia, Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s attendant. Iago suggests that Roderigo follow Desdemona to Cyprus. Once alone, Iago reveals his plan to implicate Michael Cassio in a clandestine affair with Desdemona.

During a raging storm which destroys the Turkish fleet, Othello and his men land at the Cyprian seaport. By telling Roderigo a lie that Desdemona loves Cassio, Iago now urges Roderigo to incite Cassio to violence. Later that evening at Othello’s wedding feast, Iago gets Cassio drunk; as a result, Othello dismisses Cassio from service because of behavior unbecoming a lieutenant. Iago then encourages Cassio to appeal to Desdemona to influence Othello to reinstate Cassio.

Desdemona tells Cassio that she will help him. Cassio leaves quickly, and when Othello arrives, Desdemona pleads for Cassio. Iago uses Cassio’s quick exit and Desdemona’s pleas to cast doubt on her fidelity and Cassio’s integrity.

Desdemona and Emilia enter, and Othello admits to a headache. When Desdemona tries to assuage his illness with her handkerchief, he knocks it down. Emilia picks it up and gives it to Iago. When Othello demands visible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity, Iago asserts that he has seen Cassio with the handkerchief. Having become sufficiently suspicious, Othello vows revenge. Later, Cassio gives the handkerchief that Iago hid in Cassio’s room to Bianca, his jealous mistress, in order for her to copy.

Riled by Iago’s lies and innuendos, Othello succumbs to a trance. After he revives, Iago incites him anew by talking to Cassio about Bianca while Othello eavesdrops on the conversation. Mistakenly, Othello thinks Cassio is boasting about having seduced Desdemona. Bianca enters and throws the handkerchief at Cassio; consequently, Othello, convinced of Desdemona’s guilt, swears to kill her.

Lodovico, Brabantio’s kinsman, arrives with orders from the duke for Othello to return to Venice, leaving Cassio in charge in Cyprus for which Desdemona expresses pleasure. Othello strikes her, and his actions give Iago cause to suggest that Othello is going mad. Iago then convinces Roderigo that killing Cassio will ensure his chances with Desdemona. Later in the evening, Othello orders Desdemona to wait for him alone in their bed chamber. As she prepares to retire, she sings a song about forsaken love.

At Iago’s instigation, Roderigo attacks Cassio, who in turn wounds Roderigo. Iago then stabs Cassio so that Othello thinks Iago has kept a promise to kill Cassio. When Roderigo cries out, Iago kills him.

In the bed chamber, while Othello ponders Desdemona’s beauty and innocence, she awakens, and Othello commands her to pray before she dies. In spite of her supplications, he suffocates her with a pillow. Emilia
enters, and Othello justifies his revenge by claiming the handkerchief as proof of her infidelity. Appalled at this act, Emilia reveals Iago’s guilt. Iago enters, kills Emilia, and is arrested. Othello tries to kill Iago, and despite demands for an explanation, Iago remains silent and is led off. Before Othello is led off, he draws a concealed weapon, stabs himself, and kisses Desdemona as he dies.

**Estimated Reading Time**
An average student should plan to spend at least one hour to read each act of the play for the first reading if the text used provides sufficient footnotes. Subsequent readings will take less time as familiarity with the vocabulary, the story line, and the writer’s style increases. *Othello* comprises five acts with a total of 15 scenes; consequently, the student might feel comfortable reading three to five scenes at each session, which would entail a total reading time of three to five hours.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

Iago, an ensign serving under Othello, Moorish commander of the armed forces of Venice, is passed over in promotion when Othello chooses Cassio to be his chief of staff. In revenge, Iago and his follower, Roderigo, arouse from his sleep Brabantio, senator of Venice, to tell him that his daughter, Desdemona, has stolen away and married Othello. Brabantio, incensed that his daughter would marry a Moor, leads his servants to Othello’s quarters. Meanwhile, the duke of Venice has learned that armed Turkish galleys are preparing to attack the island of Cyprus, and in this emergency he has summoned Othello to the senate chambers. Brabantio and Othello meet in the streets but postpone any violence in the national interest. Othello, upon arriving at the senate, is commanded by the duke to lead the Venetian forces to Cyprus. Then, Brabantio tells the duke that Othello has beguiled his daughter into marriage without her father’s consent. When Brabantio asks the duke for redress, Othello vigorously defends his honor and reputation; he is seconded by Desdemona, who appears during the proceedings. Othello, cleared of all suspicion, prepares to sail for Cyprus immediately. For the time being, he places Desdemona in the care of Iago; Iago’s wife, Emilia, is to be her attendant during the voyage to Cyprus.

A great storm destroys the Turkish fleet and scatters the Venetians. One by one, the ships under Othello’s command head for Cyprus until all are safely ashore and Othello and Desdemona are once again united. Still intent on revenge, Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. Roderigo, himself in love with Desdemona, is promised all of his desires by Iago if he will engage Cassio, who does not know him, in a personal brawl while Cassio is officer of the guard.

Othello declares the night dedicated to celebrating the destruction of the enemy, but he cautions Cassio to keep a careful watch on Venetian troops in the city. Iago talks Cassio into drinking too much, so that when provoked by Roderigo, Cassio loses control of himself and fights with Roderigo. Cries of riot and mutiny spread through the streets. Othello, aroused by the commotion, demotes Cassio for permitting a fight to start. Cassio, his reputation all but ruined, welcomes Iago’s promise to secure Desdemona’s goodwill and through her have Othello restore Cassio’s rank.

Cassio importunes Iago to arrange a meeting between him and Desdemona. While Cassio and Desdemona are talking, Iago entices Othello into view of the pair, and speaks vague innuendoes. Afterward, Iago from time to time asks Othello questions in such a manner as to lead Othello to think there might have been something between Cassio and Desdemona before Desdemona married him. Once Iago has sown these seeds of jealousy, Othello begins to doubt his wife.

When Othello complains to Desdemona of a headache, she offers to bind his head with the handkerchief that had been Othello’s first gift to her. She drops the handkerchief inadvertently, and Emilia picks it up. Iago,
seeing an opportunity to further his scheme, takes the handkerchief from his wife and hides it in Cassio’s room. When Othello asks Iago for proof that Desdemona is untrue to him, threatening his life if he cannot produce any evidence, Iago says that he had slept in Cassio’s room and had heard Cassio speak sweet words in his sleep to Desdemona. He reminds Othello of the handkerchief and says that he had seen Cassio wipe his beard that day with that very handkerchief. Othello, completely overcome by passion, vows revenge. He orders Iago to kill Cassio, and he appoints the ensign his new lieutenant.

Othello asks Desdemona to account for the loss of the handkerchief, but she is unable to explain its disappearance. She is mystified by Othello’s shortness of speech, and his dark moods. Goaded by Iago’s continuing innuendoes, the Moor succumbs to mad rages of jealousy in which he falls into fits resembling epilepsy. In the presence of an envoy from Venice, Othello strikes Desdemona, to the consternation of all. Emilia swears that her mistress is honest and true, but Othello, who in his madness can no longer believe anything good of Desdemona, reviles and insults her with harsh words.

One night, Othello orders Desdemona to dismiss her attendant and to go to bed immediately. That same night Iago persuades Roderigo to waylay Cassio. When Roderigo is wounded by Cassio, Iago, who had been standing nearby, stabs Cassio. In the scuffle Iago stabs Roderigo to death as well, so as to be rid of his dupe, who might talk. Then a strumpet friend of Cassio comes upon the scene of the killing and reveals to the assembled crowd her relationship with Cassio. Although Cassio is not dead, Iago hopes to use this woman to defame Cassio beyond all hope of regaining his former reputation. Pretending friendship, he assists the wounded Cassio back to Othello’s house. They are accompanied by Venetian noblemen who had gathered after the fight.

Othello enters his wife’s bedchamber and smothers her, after telling her, mistakenly, that Cassio has confessed his love for her and has been killed. Then Emilia enters the bedchamber and reports that Roderigo has been killed, but not Cassio. This information makes doubly bitter for Othello his murder of his wife. Othello tells Emilia that he learned of Desdemona’s guilt from Iago. Emilia cannot believe that Iago had made such charges.

When Iago and other Venetians arrive at Othello’s house, Emilia asks Iago to refute Othello’s statement. Then the great wickedness of Iago comes to light, and Othello learns how the handkerchief had come into Cassio’s possession. When Emilia gives further proof of her husband’s villainy, Iago stabs her. Othello lunges at Iago and manages to wound him before the Venetian gentlemen could seize the Moor. Emilia dies, still protesting the innocence of Desdemona. Mad with grief, Othello plunges a dagger into his own heart. The Venetian envoy promises that Iago will be tortured to death at the hands of the governor general of Cyprus.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act I, Scenes 1-3 Summary and Analysis**

**Act I, Scene 1**
**New Characters:**
Iago: newly appointed ensign to Othello, Moor of Venice
Roderigo: gentleman, disappointed suitor to Desdemona
Brabantio: Venetian Senator, father to Desdemona

**Summary**
One night on a street in Venice, Iago discloses to Roderigo the nature of his hatred for Othello, the Moor of Venice. It seems that in spite of the petitions of three influential Venetians, Othello has by-passed Iago for
promotion to lieutenant. Instead, he has chosen Michael Cassio, a Florentine, and has appointed Iago to the less important position of ensign. Iago then enlists the aid of Roderigo, a disappointed suitor to Desdemona, in waking Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, with the disturbing news that his household has been robbed. Roderigo then proceeds to inform Brabantio that Desdemona has eloped with Othello. Brabantio recognizes Roderigo as the suitor he forbade to come to his home. Iago interjects Roderigo’s information with images of animal lust and leaves telling Roderigo it would not be politic for him to stay, since he is officially Othello’s inferior in rank.

Analysis
When Roderigo responds to Iago by saying, “Thou told’st me thou didst hold him in thy hate,” it is clear that Iago has previously mentioned his hatred for Othello. Consequently, Iago weaves an intricate plot to undo the Moor. What drives Iago throughout the play is a manipulative duplicity which is inherent in his nature. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called this aspect a “motiveless malignancy,” since as the play progresses, Iago seems to be motivated by his pure evil rather than by any external factor or reason he may give for his actions.

The first pawn he enlists in his plan is Roderigo, who had been previously denied courtship of Desdemona by Brabantio. Playing on Roderigo’s frustration, Iago gains his trust by telling him that he hates the Moor because Othello preferred to promote Michael Cassio as his honorable lieutenant.

We learn that in spite of the “personal suit” of three influential Venetians who interceded on Iago’s behalf, Othello chose “a great arithmetician / One Michael Cassio” as his lieutenant. The biting tone Iago uses to describe Cassio reflects the contempt he feels for him. Moreover, Iago feels that Othello, “loving his own pride and purposes,” chose to ignore the petitions of the noblemen and made his choice with “a bombast circumstance.” The implication here is that Othello did not make his decision on appropriate grounds. Consequently, throughout his speech to Roderigo, Iago reveals not only his hatred for Othello, but also for Cassio. Iago feels that he has been denied promotion to lieutenant by a man “that never did set a squadron in the field, / Nor division of a battle knows.” In addition, he ignores the fact that Othello chose Cassio precisely for his expertise as a tactical soldier and theorist. Iago’s contempt for Cassio is evident in the way he demeans Cassio’s abilities without recognizing that Othello’s choice for lieutenant did not necessarily depend on field experience. Iago offers his own experience in battle “At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds” as concrete evidence that he should have been chosen lieutenant. This same jealousy and hatred for Cassio lends credibility to Iago’s desire to include Cassio in the plan of destruction that emerges in the play.

Iago’s speech also reveals his contention that “preferment goes by letter and affection” rather than by ability. Using himself as an example of how the system works, Iago professes his belief about duty and service. He believes that “we cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly followed,” suggesting that Othello is not a master to be followed. In doing so, he begins to justify to himself all that he eventually does to undo the Moor. Iago reveals his contempt for what he sees as “many a duteous and knee-crooking knave” who spends his military career in service to an officer. Then, he indicates his admiration for others “who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty, / Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves.” Iago’s contempt for the dutiful officer and his respect for the hypocrite reveal his own distorted views of duty and service in the military. He categorizes himself among the hypocrites and indicates that he will serve himself best by serving Othello.

Thus, it is no surprise when he says, “I am not what I am,” to Roderigo as an assertion that his “outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure” of his heart “In compliment extern” in order to achieve his “peculiar end.” This revelation establishes one of the recurring motifs in the play as Iago begins to present different faces to each character in order to win trust, gain confidence, and at the same time remain beyond reproach. When Iago and Roderigo awaken Brabantio and inform him of Desdemona’s elopement, much of the contrasting imagery of black and white, lust and love, and illusion and reality is established.
Iago’s first remark to Brabantio regarding Desdemona’s whereabouts begins a series of images intended to shock Brabantio and rouse hatred for Othello. Iago tells Brabantio that “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe.” The repetition of the word now stresses the immediacy of the action which Iago intends in order to create chaos and confusion. The animal imagery Iago evokes serves several purposes. First, it reveals Iago’s perception of love as an animal sexual act, a picture hardly appropriate to present to a father with respect to his daughter. Next, it degrades the love between Othello and Desdemona. Finally, it demonstrates that Iago will intentionally disregard another’s feelings to suit his purpose. In the three words old, black, and ram, Iago stresses Othello’s age, emphasizes his color, and strips him of his humanity in Brabantio’s presence.

To make the image more potent, Iago tells Brabantio that if something is not done immediately, “the devil will make a grandsire of you.” By comparing Othello to the devil, Iago suggests to Brabantio that Othello possesses a diabolical nature. As the conversation proceeds, it is clear that Brabantio, still not fully awake, has not felt the full impact of Iago’s words. Consequently, Iago plays on Brabantio’s confusion by stressing that if Brabantio does not act, he will have his “daughter covered with a Barbary horse.” Again Iago reduces love to an animal act devoid of its human component. With one final metaphor, Iago tells Brabantio that Desdemona and “the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” in order to incite him against Othello. In this reference, Iago chooses to avoid Othello’s name and, instead, refers to his ethnicity.

The success of Iago’s attempt to demean Othello is evident when Brabantio says, “This accident is not unlike my dream: / Belief of it oppresses me already,” and he calls for a search party. At this point Brabantio is so distraught that he questions whether what he has just learned is a dream or a reality.

Act I, Scene 2
New Characters:
Othello: Moor of Venice, husband to Desdemona
Cassio: Othello’s newly appointed lieutenant
Attendants: unnamed characters whose purpose is to serve the other characters
Officers: unnamed characters who serve in the military

Summary
Before the Sagittary in Venice, Iago prepares Othello for Brabantio’s anger at the elopement of Desdemona and tells Othello that he resisted attacking Brabantio who spoke ill of him. Othello says that his reputation will speak for itself and asserts his sincere love for Desdemona. Michael Cassio then enters summoning Othello to the Duke of Venice for an urgent conference regarding a military expedition to Cyprus. Brabantio, Roderigo, and officers enter ready to attack Othello, but Othello makes it clear that there is no need to fight. Brabantio demands to know where Desdemona is and accuses Othello of winning her affection through the use of magic. Othello informs Brabantio that he has been summoned by the Duke; an officer concurs; and they all proceed to the conference.

Analysis
The opening of this scene echoes the statement “I am not what I am” with which Iago previously revealed himself to Roderigo. As he speaks to Othello about Brabantio’s anger at the elopement of Desdemona, he cleverly plays on Othello’s trust in him. Accordingly he tells the Moor that because of Brabantio’s “scurvy and provoking terms” he could hardly keep himself from attacking Brabantio in defense of Othello. He presents himself to Othello in a favorable light, which emphasizes the hypocrisy and duplicity of his nature. Othello asserts his love for Desdemona with the innocence and purity which Iago also intends to destroy. Subsequently, Michael Cassio’s announcement that the duke requires the immediate service of Othello is a
reminder of Othello’s untarnished reputation as a military man in service to the duke. In contrast, Brabantio’s abrupt entrance and attempt to discredit Othello’s sincerity by accusing him of winning Desdemona “with foul charms” and “with drugs or minerals” suggests a racial aspect to his accusation.

Brabantio’s first reference to Othello as a “foul thief” reflects the influence Iago has had on Brabantio. In the previous scene, Roderigo and Iago awakened Brabantio with the declaration that his household had been robbed. This statement planted the image of Othello as a thief in Brabantio’s mind. Consequently, when Brabantio confronts Othello, “foul thief” seems to be an appropriate accusation. Brabantio cannot accept the fact that Desdemona would have gone with Othello of her own volition “if she in chains of magic were not bound.” It is as if this sort of supernatural or drug-induced seduction is the only one that would make sense—Brabantio is incredulous that Desdemona would have “shunn’d / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation” to “Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as Othello.” Brabantio’s reference to Othello as “such a thing” reduces him to a nonhuman entity, and the image of his “sooty bosom” recalls Iago’s emphasis on Othello’s skin color. There is a definite sense that the fact that Othello is an African makes this whole situation harder for Brabantio to accept, which is significant toward our understanding of Othello at this stage. Roderigo has already referred to Othello as “the thick-lips.” Later, Iago calls him “the black Othello,” pointing out the external features that separate Othello from the Venetian community.

**Act I, Scene 3**

**New Characters:**
- Duke of Venice: official who appoints Othello to Cyprus
- Senators: officials who discuss Cyprian mission
- Sailor: brings in a message about the Turkish fleet
- Messenger: delivers messages to various characters throughout the play
- Desdemona: daughter to Brabantio; wife to Othello

**Summary**

In a Senate chamber, the Duke of Venice and senators discuss the number of galleys comprising a Turkish fleet headed for Cyprus. A sailor enters with a message that the Turkish fleet is preparing for Rhodes, which the duke and senators agree may be a diversionary tactic. When a messenger enters with news from Montano, the Governor of Cyprus, that the Ottomites have joined the fleet at Rhodes, the duke and senators are convinced that Cyprus is in danger of attack. Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, Iago, and Roderigo enter, and Brabantio tells the duke that Desdemona has been tricked by Othello, who tells the duke that he did indeed win Desdemona’s affections, but not by any drugs or medicine. He tells how, as a guest in Brabantio’s house, his tales of dangerous adventure intrigued Desdemona and how her pity for his pains turned to love for him. Desdemona enters and respectfully establishes her dilemma as a “divided duty” between her father and Othello and asserts that her preference for her husband is natural “so much duty as my mother show’d / To you, preferring you before her father.” The matter is settled, and the duke assigns Othello to Cyprus. Desdemona suggests she go with him, and Othello leaves Iago in charge of Desdemona’s transport to Cyprus along with Emilia, Iago’s wife, as her attendant. Roderigo reasserts his love for Desdemona, and once he and Iago are alone, Iago convinces him that she will soon tire of the Moor and turn to Roderigo. Alone, Iago thinks of a ruse to suggest Desdemona’s infidelity with Cassio.

**Analysis**

The action of the play moves forward as the duke and the senators discuss the discrepancy of some reports from the Cyprian front. This event establishes the urgency for Othello’s assignment to Cyprus as his military duty interrupts his newly acquired duty as a husband to Desdemona. The timing of the event also takes the
action to an exotic locale and places Othello in “most disastrous chances” not only in military terms but also in terms of Iago’s treacherous plot to destroy Othello and all that he represents. Othello’s implicit trust in Iago leaves him vulnerable to Iago’s malevolent nature, and in order for Iago’s plotting to be credible, his attempts at gaining everyone’s trust must be successful.

Brabantio’s claim to the duke that Othello used “spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” to entrap Desdemona is contradicted by Othello’s “round unvarnished tale” of how he sincerely won Desdemona’s love and affection. Desdemona’s subsequent assertion that she “profess / Due to the Moor” clearly establishes that Othello is what he appears to be. Brabantio’s accusation that Othello is “an abuser of the world, a practicer / Of arts inhibited and out of warrant” along with Iago’s previous attempts to demean Othello to Roderigo contain the racial charge that Othello must have used some kind of magic or sorcery to seduce Desdemona. His accusation assumes that this is the only reason she would bypass “the wealthy curled darlings” of Venice for a man of a different race.

Othello’s speech to the Senate reveals the honest, unaffected manner with which he presents himself as he opens his address with “Most potent, brave, and reverend signiors / My very noble, and approved good masters.” Othello answers Brabantio’s charge by acknowledging his marriage to Desdemona, not by denying it. His tone is sincere and not defensive, and he demonstrates humility without ingratiating himself before the esteemed council. Othello is aware of his unsophisticated speech and manner when he says, “Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace.” However, he maintains his dignity while speaking with the impressive Venetian council as he “will a round unvarnished tale deliver” about how he won Desdemona. At this point Brabantio is quick to interject his belief that Desdemona must have been tricked by some magic because “in spite of nature / Of years, of country, credit, everything,” she defied all logic and fell in love with Othello. Othello continues his speech with his story of “battles, sieges, fortunes” through “rough quarries, rocks, and hills,” and the pattern in his speech reflects a rhythm that echoes the adventurous spirit with which Desdemona fell in love.

According to Othello, when he told his adventurous tales “of the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders,” Desdemona became enthralled and “with a greedy ear” would “devour up [his] discourse.” After hearing a few tales, Desdemona wanted to know more, so Othello took the time to tell her. At such stories, Desdemona would express sympathy and compassion for his hardships and in the end felt “twas strange, ’twas passing strange; / ’Twas pitiful, ’twas wondrous pitiful.” Her reaction suggests the awe she felt and the admiration she showed for his dangerous deeds. Othello concludes that Desdemona “loved [him] for the dangers [he] had passed,” and he in turn “loved her that she did pity him.” Such is his “witchcraft.” Even the duke comments to Brabantio, “I think this tale would win my daughter too,” attesting to the veracity of Othello’s story.

When Desdemona is called upon to explain where she “owes obedience,” she replies with respect toward her father and confidence in what she believes. In a convincing statement, Desdemona admits obedience to her father “for life and education,” but as a wife, she must “profess / Due to the Moor.” It is clear that Desdemona made her decision to marry Othello in a rational state of mind rather than in the drug-induced state of mind for which Othello has been held responsible. Her “divided duty” does not negate her responsibility as a daughter, but only adds another responsibility as a wife. Desdemona reminds her father that this same preference was made once by her mother. Desdemona’s pronouncement supports Othello’s story, and Brabantio has no choice but to drop the issue of Othello’s witchcraft.

When Othello entrusts Desdemona to Iago for safe passage to Cyprus, he unwittingly places himself in a position to become a pawn in Iago’s web of deceit as evinced by Iago’s comment that “the Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, / And will as tenderly be led by the nose / As asses are.”
At the end of Scene 3, Iago expresses his attitude toward love when Roderigo hints at drowning himself because he cannot live without Desdemona. Roderigo says he is ashamed of being so in love, yet “it is not in [his] virtue to amend it.” Iago’s immediate reaction to Roderigo’s lack of will indicates the attitude that what we are is determined by our own will. At this point, it is clear that Iago himself determines the evil he perpetrates. There are no extenuating circumstances. For Iago, a man’s reason controls the baser instincts of which love is “merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will.” Iago cannot comprehend love in terms of its virtue because he cannot rise above the level of his own baseness. From his vantage point, he debases all the goodness he sees around him. Consequently, Othello and Desdemona’s love to him is “a violent commencement” which will result in “an answerable sequestration.” Iago suggests that Othello will tire of Desdemona, and “the food that to him now is as luscious as locusts” will become “shortly as bitter as coloquintida.” Likewise, when Desdemona “is sated with his body,” she will turn to someone else. The specific imagery of food and appetite with respect to love is significant because it points out that Iago reduces love to merely a sexual appetite void of emotion.

To give further insight into his nature, Iago states a reason for his hatred of Othello in a brief soliloquy. He says, “it is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / He has done my service,” implying that Othello committed adultery with Emilia. Rumor is as sufficient as truth to breed hatred in Iago. Perhaps his own growing jealousy motivates him to create jealousy in Othello.

As Iago takes into account all that he has observed, he realizes that his best access to Othello lies in Othello’s trust. Iago feels no compunction about betraying that trust as a means to an end. This behavior is consistent with what we have seen of him thus far.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act II, Scenes 1-3 Summary and Analysis**

**Act II, Scene 1**

**New Characters:**
Montano: Governor of Cyprus

Two Gentlemen: converse with the governor

A third Gentleman: brings news of the Turkish fleet

Emilia: wife to Iago; attendant to Desdemona

**Summary**
At a seaport in Cyprus, near the harbor, Montano and two gentlemen discuss the storm raging off the coast. A third gentleman enters with news that the storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet and that Michael Cassio has arrived. Cassio enters, expressing hopes for Othello’s safe arrival in Cyprus. A messenger arrives with the news of the arrival of another ship, and Cassio directs the second gentleman to find out whose it is. The second gentleman re-enters, announcing the arrival of Iago’s ship. Desdemona enters, asking Cassio for news of Othello, and he assures her that Othello is well. Desdemona and Emilia engage in some banter with Iago, and after the word play, Iago carefully notices how Michael Cassio courteously greets Desdemona.

Othello then enters, content that the war is over and jubilant at seeing Desdemona safe. Subsequently, he directs everyone to the castle and tells Iago to disembark the spoils of war. Alone with Roderigo, Iago tells him that Desdemona is in love with Cassio and that when her appetite for the Moor wanes, Cassio is the one to whom she will turn. Roderigo expresses disbelief at this observation, so Iago describes the warm greeting Cassio gave Desdemona. Next, he urges Roderigo to instigate Cassio to anger and provoke him to a fight. He
convinces Roderigo that once Cassio is removed, he will have a better chance with Desdemona. Alone, Iago expresses his suspicion of Emilia’s infidelity with Othello, his desire for revenge, and his plan to have Othello trust him more.

**Analysis**

The opening scene of this act serves several dramatic functions. First, Montano’s discussion with the two gentlemen provides a panoramic view of the intensity of the storm with “a high-wrought flood,” “the wind-shaked surge, with high and monstrous mane,” and “the enchafted flood.” The imagery used to describe the sea suggests the fury of a wild beast with which it rages. Consequently, portraying a storm of this magnitude would present a difficulty on the Elizabethan stage. This description also makes plausible the news that the storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet. In addition, the scene justifies Cassio’s concern for Othello when he says, “O let the heavens / Give him defense against the elements / For I have lost him on a dangerous sea!” The irony here is that Othello’s enemy is not the war nor the sea but Iago who has safely landed in Cyprus. Cassio’s comment that “Tempests themselves … the guttered rocks … congregated sands, / Traitors … as having a sense of beauty, do omit / Their mortal natures” personifies a treacherous sea with a benevolent nature in sparing Desdemona. This image contrasts the malevolent nature of Iago who is a traitor sparing no one to undo Othello.

To offset the intensity of the opening of the act, Desdemona and Emilia engage in some light humor with Iago prompted by Cassio’s greeting of Emilia. After Cassio kisses Emilia, Iago remarks, “Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough.” This quip begins a series of “praises” of women by Iago under the guise of light banter with serious overtones that suit Iago’s duplicity as one who says one thing yet means another, even in humor. After the ironic word play, Iago carefully notices how Cassio greets Desdemona when he “takes her by the palm … smile[s] upon her … kissed [his] three fingers so oft” in a gallant gesture. Iago takes this innocent gesture and gives it an evil motive later to convince Roderigo of their secret love. Iago’s comment that “with as little a web as this I will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” suggests the image of a spider weaving a web to trap it victim. Like the spider, Iago is weaving a web of deceit to capture the unsuspecting Cassio.

Othello enters and expresses his joy at seeing Desdemona; Desdemona reciprocates the feeling. In an aside Iago remarks, “you are well tuned now! / But I’ll set down pegs that make this music / Honest as I am.” The music imagery suggested by his comment is that Desdemona and Othello are instruments to be played upon and manipulated. Again Iago takes something pure and debases it.

In the last part of the scene, Iago uses Cassio’s courtly greeting of Desdemona as proof of their love. When Roderigo expresses disbelief, Iago says that when the same appetite with which she loved Othello “is made dull with the act of sport” she will turn to Cassio. Again, Iago expresses his view that Desdemona’s attraction for Othello is an appetite wherein “her eyes must be fed.” When Roderigo still expresses disbelief, Iago adds, “Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand?” intimating that this innocent greeting is an act of lechery. Having cast sufficient doubt about Desdemona’s virtue, Iago instructs Roderigo to “find some occasion to anger Cassio … provoke him that he may” strike Roderigo to insure the displanting of Cassio.

In his soliloquy, Iago reveals the motivation which compels him to plan and execute his devious plot. Once again, Iago takes inventory of what he has observed as he did at the end of Act I, Scene 3. He believes Cassio loves Desdemona and that Desdemona loves Cassio. This is true. However, their love is not adulterous; it is a genuine cordiality for one another. Eventually, Iago will cast dubious motives on this mutual affection in order to suit his own needs. Iago also believes that Othello is “of a constant, loving, noble nature.” This is also true, and it becomes the means through which Iago gains access to Othello’s vulnerability. Iago even goes as far as to say he loves Desdemona “not out of absolute lust,” but merely as a means to feed his own plan of revenge. As his scheme begins to take shape, his suspicions about Emilia’s fidelity “gnaw [his] inwards.” This glimpse into Iago’s feelings provide the reason for his insatiable appetite for revenge which “nothing can or
shall content” until he is “evened with him.” The details of Iago’s scheme begin to materialize, yet they are not completely solid. If he can’t prove Desdemona false, he hopes at least to incite Othello’s jealousy to the point at which reason will not abate it. He will get Cassio at a disadvantage and demean him to Othello in such a way that Othello will trust Iago more. Iago adds parenthetically that he even suspects Cassio’s adultery with Emilia. Perhaps the jealousy that Iago hopes to instill in Othello is a projection of his own unbridled jealousy for which he has no solid basis. Iago says that his plan “tis here, but yet confused. / Knavery’s plain face is never seen till used.” He personifies his scheme as if it were a partner of his whose face is indistinct until such time as they meet with mutual purpose.

Act II, Scene 2
New Character:
Herald: Othello’s herald who reads a proclamation

Summary
In this brief scene before Othello’s castle, a Herald enters reading a proclamation of Othello’s plans for a feast to honor the defeat of the Turkish fleet and to celebrate his marriage to Desdemona.

Analysis
The dramatic purpose of this scene is, of course, to establish the celebration for the victory over the Turkish fleet and Othello’s marriage to Desdemona. However, it also serves as an ironic backdrop for Iago’s treachery which is going to be acted out on the streets of Cyprus as Iago sets his trap to discredit Cassio to Montano and Othello.

Act II, Scene 3
Summary
Othello and Desdemona enter the castle along with Cassio and attendants. Othello directs Cassio to stand guard and not to overdo the celebrating, and Cassio replies that he will personally see to it. Othello then informs Cassio that he will speak to him tomorrow and exits with Desdemona. Iago then enters, and Cassio informs him that they should stand watch to which Iago replies that Othello has dismissed them early. Next, he urges Cassio to have a drink to Othello with the other young men who are celebrating, but Cassio informs him that he has already drunk enough. However, at Iago’s insistence, Cassio goes off to get the others. Alone Iago says that if Cassio is drunk, he will be easily provoked to argument with Roderigo and the three other men who have been drinking.

Cassio, Montano, and a gentleman enter, and Iago engages Cassio in some toasting and singing. When Cassio exits, Iago tells Montano that Cassio’s weakness is drinking to which Montano replies that Othello should be informed. Cassio, drunk, enters chasing Roderigo who has provoked a fight at Iago’s prompt. In an attempt to stop Cassio’s attack on Roderigo, Montano takes Cassio’s arm after which Cassio verbally threatens Montano and fights with him. Othello enters during the scuffle and breaks it up. When he asks what is going on, Iago says that while he and Montano were speaking a fellow came crying for help while being chased by Cassio. Iago adds that Montano tried to stop Cassio while he himself pursued the other who got away. When he returned, he found Montano and Cassio fighting until Othello parted them. Othello dismisses Cassio from service, and all but Cassio and Iago exit. Cassio bemoans his reputation, and Iago tells him that he should go to Desdemona to plead his case. Alone, Iago schemes to suggest to Othello that Desdemona lusts after Cassio.

When Roderigo enters, he is disillusioned and says that he is going back to Venice. However, Iago tells him to be patient, because the plan is in action. Finally, Iago decides to have Emilia intercede with Desdemona for Cassio and to have Othello find Cassio speaking to Desdemona.

Analysis
This scene focuses on Iago’s plan to get Cassio involved in a compromising position and sully his reputation.
First, he blatantly contradicts Othello’s order to Cassio “to look … to the guard tonight” by telling Cassio that Othello “cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona.” After establishing a brief conversation about Desdemona, Iago suggests that Cassio “have a measure to the health of black Othello” to which Cassio replies that he has “very poor and unhappy brains for drinking.” However, with some encouragement by Iago, Cassio assents. Iago’s treachery is clear when he says, “‘mongst this flock of drunkards / Am I to put our Cassio in some action / That may offend the isle.”

To further his plan, Iago engages Cassio in rounds of drinking and toasting with Montano and the others. Iago uses this as proof to Montano that Cassio is “a soldier fit to stand by Caesar,” but his vice “‘Tis to his virtue a just equinox” to discredit Cassio’s suitability as Othello’s lieutenant. Iago’s plan culminates in this scene when Cassio re-enters chasing Roderigo threatening to “beat the knave into a twiggen bottle.” When Montano intercedes on Roderigo’s behalf, Cassio threatens to “knock [him] o’er the mazzard.” When Othello enters, stops the fight, and demands an explanation, Iago recounts the incidents and says, “I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth / Than it should do offense to Michael Cassio.” The irony here, as in many of Iago’s speeches, is clear. His statement belies all that he has contrived to discredit Cassio. The humiliation of Cassio is complete when Othello says, “Cassio I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine.” After his dismissal, Cassio laments the loss of his reputation which gives Iago another opportunity to dishonor Cassio. Iago tells him to seek Desdemona and “importune her help to put you in your place again.”

In yet another attempt to disgrace Cassio in Othello’s eyes, Iago says that “whiles this honest fool / Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune / … I’ll pour … into [Othello’s] ear / That she repeals him for her body’s lust.” By this time, Iago’s plan is becoming more involved as he makes use of coincidence to further his scheme. He is also more determined in his approach as he calls his lies “this pestilence” to be poured into Othello’s ear. This comment suggests a scene from Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet, in which a troop of players enact “The Murder of Gonzago.” In the play-within-a-play, the murderer pours poison into the king’s ear while he sleeps in a re-creation of King Hamlet’s murder. An Elizabethan audience would not miss the image since the ear was believed to provide access for poisonous substances to enter the body. Iago’s poison consists of the lies he plans to tell Othello little by little as if administering drops of poison into his body. Since Othello listens intently to what Iago says, the metaphor is an appropriate one for Iago to create.

As Iago envisions this plan, he relishes the opportunity to turn Desdemona’s “virtue into pitch.” The contrast of black and white is evident in this image as Iago hopes to defile Desdemona’s goodness. The black/white contrast also emphasizes the color difference between Desdemona and Othello which has been a source of contention with Brabantio’s acceptance of Othello and Iago’s hatred for him. In this scene, it is clear that Iago manipulates situations to suit his needs, and he takes harmless situations and presents them in an evil light. His soliloquy reveals that once again “knavery’s plain face” becomes clear to him as he decides to use Desdemona’s own innocence and virtue against her by making “the net / That shall enmesh them all.” This image that Iago creates suggests the catch a fisherman might make when he hauls in a net containing a plentiful supply of fish. Like the fisherman, Iago ensnares the unsuspecting characters in his net of trickery and deceit.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act III, Scenes 1-4 Summary and Analysis**

**Act III, Scene 1**
**New Character:**
Clown: comedic figure from the castle; servant to Othello

**Summary**
In this scene before Othello’s castle, Cassio enters with two musicians and tells them he will pay them to
serenade Othello and Desdemona. A clown enters and comments on the musicians’ instruments and tells them that Othello does not want to hear any more music. After the musicians leave, Cassio asks the clown to tell Emilia he wants to see Desdemona. Iago enters and Cassio tells him what he just asked the clown, and Iago tells him he will go get Emilia, and he will keep Othello away. Emilia enters and tells Cassio that Othello and Desdemona are discussing the incident between Cassio and Montano and that she will arrange a meeting.

Analysis
This scene provides some comic relief from the drama that has transpired in the previous act. Cassio’s request for the musicians to serenade Othello and Desdemona reflects the Elizabethan custom of awakening people of high rank with serenades on special occasions. When they play, a clown comes out and comments on the quality of their music by asking, “Why, masters, have your instruments been at Naples, that they speak i’ th’ nose thus?” An Elizabethan audience would be quick to pick up on the bawdy pun on the word instruments and the suggestion of the poor health conditions of the city of Naples. The clown then sarcastically says that Othello likes the music so much, he will pay the musicians to stop. After Iago enters, Cassio tells him he requested to see Desdemona, and Iago says he will “devise a means to draw the Moor / Out of the way” so they can speak more freely. Iago makes it seem as if he is helping Iago’s cause; whereas, in reality he is setting up the situation for Othello to find Cassio and Desdemona speaking. When Emilia tells Cassio that Desdemona “speaks for [him] stoutly,” Cassio hopes that his conversation with her will then prove fruitful.

Act III, Scene 2
Summary
Within the castle, Othello gives Iago letters to deliver to the senate. Othello and gentlemen walk along the fortress walls.

Analysis
This brief scene presents Othello in a situation where he carries out the duties of the office as a commander.

Act III, Scene 3
Summary
In the garden of the castle, Desdemona tells Cassio that she will do all she can to help him. Emilia adds that Iago is just as distressed by the whole incident. Othello and Iago enter as Cassio leaves, and Iago suggests that there is something suspicious in the way he left. Desdemona asks Othello to call Cassio back, but he says he will speak to him some other time. She insists and pleads Cassio’s case, so having enough, Othello says he’ll give her what she wants, and asks to be left alone. Iago asks about Cassio’s familiarity with Desdemona, and Othello tells him he was in their company many times when they were courting. Othello asks Iago to tell him his thoughts, as vile as they may be, so Iago tells him to watch out for jealousy. Othello says he’ll need more to doubt her, so Iago tells him to observe Desdemona with Cassio and adds that most Venetian women are deceptive using Desdemona’s elopement as proof of how she deceived Brabantio. Othello vacillates between doubt and certainty of Desdemona, and Iago leaves him with his thoughts.

Desdemona enters to tell him the dinner guests are waiting, and Othello replies that he has a headache. Desdemona proceeds to wipe his brow with her handkerchief, but when he pushes it away, the handkerchief drops. Emilia picks it up, and when Iago enters she says she has the handkerchief which Iago immediately snatches from her. Othello returns and asks for more tangible proof of her infidelity. Iago mentions that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief. At this, Othello swears vengeance and Iago agrees to help him. They discuss the death of Michael Cassio.

Analysis
When Emilia comments that the rift between Othello and Cassio “grieves [her] husband / As if the cause were his” we see how Iago has managed to deceive his own wife who doesn’t suspect the evil in his nature. This is an example of dramatic irony in which the character is not aware of vital information as the audience or reader
is. Desdemona’s further remark, with reference to Iago, “that’s an honest fellow,” is as ironic because she is not aware of the treachery being connived either. Iago and Othello enter, and Iago says “Ha! I like not that,” with reference to Cassio’s leaving. When Othello asks him if that was Cassio he saw leaving, Iago replies with feigned uncertainty that he thinks not “that he would steal away so guilty-like” suggesting that there is something inappropriate in Cassio’s visit with Desdemona. The conversation that follows between Othello and Iago consists of a series of half thoughts and insinuations by Iago to raise Othello’s suspicions about Cassio. As they speak, Othello comments how Iago “didst contract and purse [his] brow together, / As if [he] then [had] shut up in [his] brain / Some horrible conceit.” The gestures suggested by Othello’s statements are carefully orchestrated by Iago to generate more curiosity and prompt Othello to say “Show me thy thought” which gives Iago the opportunity he wants to plant his “worst of thoughts / The worst of words” in Othello’s mind. Iago responds with the admonition to “beware, my lord, of jealousy! / It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on.” When Othello expresses doubt about there being anything to be jealous of, “For she had eyes and chose me,” he says to Iago, “when I doubt, prove.” To weaken Othello’s confidence, Iago replies, “observe her well with Cassio … I know our country disposition well / In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands.” He seizes upon the opportunity to play upon the fact that Othello is an exotic by suggesting that he is not aware of the deceptive ways of Venetian women. He adds, “She did deceive her father, marrying you,” so much so that Brabantio “thought ’twas witchcraft. Iago uses Othello’s susceptibility to the belief in magic to feed his doubts. Iago raises the issue of Othello’s cultural differences with Desdemona which leads Othello to ponder his color, degree of sophistication, and age as he says that perhaps “For I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation … or … am declined / Into the vale of years.”

The conversation has left Othello in a highly charged emotional state, so when Desdemona enters, he tells her he has a headache, and she replies, “let me bind it hard,” with her handkerchief, the “first remembrance from the Moor.” He pushes the handkerchief away, and it falls to the ground. Emilia picks it up, and Iago immediately snatches it when he enters. This gives him the unexpected “ocular proof” which Othello soon demands in order to be convinced of Desdemona’s infidelity.

In a brief soliloquy, Iago recognizes the effect he is having as “the Moor already changes with my poison.” Iago continues the metaphor he created in Act II, Scene 3 in which he compared his lies to a pestilence he would pour into Othello’s ear. At this point in his scheme, Iago has sufficiently aroused Othello’s jealousy so that all the undetectable ministrations of poison “which at the first were scarce found to distaste” have begun to “burn like the mines of sulphur” as they course through Othello’s body. Iago is convinced that “not poppy, nor mandragora, / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep.” Othello has received a lethal dose of Iago’s poison, so that all the restoratives in the world cannot counter the fatal effects.

What follows next in the scene is a cleverly manipulated conversation once Iago has caused Othello to have serious doubts about Desdemona’s fidelity. When Othello returns, it is clear that he has been plagued by doubts as evident in his remark “Ha! Ha! False to me?” Iago’s poison is manifesting itself in Othello’s mind, but Iago understates its effect with his emphatic “Why, how now, General. No more of that!” Othello tries to convince himself that what he doesn’t see will not harm him, even “if the general camp … had tasted her body.” However, at this thought Othello loses touch with reality and fears he is losing his mind, the very source of pride in for his career as a military leader. When his senses return he demands “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity beyond a doubt. Othello warns Iago that if he “dost slander her and torture me” may he be damned for ever.

This scene represents the turning point for Othello as he borders on doubt and certainty with respect to Desdemona’s fidelity and Iago’s honesty. This is exactly the point of vulnerability Iago needs to ensure that his plan will work. Iago comments that Othello is “eaten up with passion,” and he proceeds to conjure images of animal lust to rouse Othello even further. By evoking scenes of Desdemona and Cassio “as prime as goats,
as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride,” Iago heightens Othello’s jealousy and desire for proof of her infidelity. Iago abuses Othello’s trust by pretending to be painfully honest in that he heard Cassio cry out, “Sweet Desdemona!” in his sleep. Consequently, Othello’s rage manifests itself with his threat “to tear her to pieces.” Iago hypocritically suggests that “she may be honest yet” and then plants the lie that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with Desdemona’s handkerchief. Given the significance of the handkerchief to Othello, it is no surprise that Othello’s rage turns to vengeance as he exclaims, “Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow Hell!” Othello, “eaten up with passion,” vows revenge and tells Iago he wants to “hear thee say / That Cassio’s not alive.” This scene progresses from Iago’s planting seeds of doubt in Othello’s mind to Othello’s vowing vengeance with Cassio’s death and “some swift means of death for the fair devil.”

Act III, Scene 4
New Character:
Bianca: mistress to Cassio

Summary
Desdemona asks a clown where Cassio is so that he can be told that Othello is moved considering the incident. She wonders where her handkerchief is, and Emilia says she does not know. Othello enters and asks for the handkerchief because he has a cold, and Desdemona admits that she does not have it with her. Othello gets upset and berates her. Emilia suggests that he may be jealous, and Desdemona says she does not know him to be jealous. Iago and Cassio enter, and Cassio urges Desdemona to quicken his plea with Othello to which Desdemona replies that Othello is not himself and that Cassio should be patient. Iago then inquires about Othello and goes off to meet him. Desdemona imagines that something must be weighing on Othello to make him act the way he has, and believes that it is not her fault. She and Emilia go off to find Othello so that Desdemona can plead his case. Bianca enters and wants to know why Cassio has not seen her for a week, and he tells her he has some pressing issues. He gives her the handkerchief, and she accuses him of getting it from another woman. He tells her he found it in his chamber and would like her to copy the design.

Analysis
The clown, who is Othello’s servant, in this scene provides some comic relief to offset the intensity of the previous scene. When Desdemona asks him if he knows “where Lieutenant Cassio lies” he responds by saying “I dare not say he lies anywhere. … He’s a soldier; and for one to say a soldier lies is stabbing.” The pun on the word lie is made when Desdemona asks for Cassio’s whereabouts, but the clown responds as if she had called him a liar. The dramatic irony with this pun is clear because Iago’s whole scheme is based on the lie of Desdemona’s infidelity.

Othello enters and asks for the handkerchief. The significance of the handkerchief to Othello becomes clear because he talks about how it was given to his mother by an Egyptian who “was a charmer and could read / The thoughts of people.” He adds that there is “magic in the web of it.” Othello’s comments point out his susceptibility to the suggestion of charms and spells as a cultural trait, and makes Iago’s manipulation of Othello more devious because he plays on Othello’s vulnerability. The possible loss of the handkerchief infuriates Othello because, according to the spell woven in it, “To lose’t or give’t away wer such perdition / As nothing else could match.” His strong reaction prompts Emilia to ask Desdemona if he were jealous to which Desdemona responds that she “ne’er saw this before.” Emilia’s subsequent comment that jealousy is “a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself” echoes Iago’s previous warning to Othello. However, Emilia is not motivated out of evil, but rather genuine concern for Desdemona. The incident is also a prelude to more of the behavior which is being manipulated by Iago. Desdemona is innocent of all deceit, so it is not surprising that she would believe Othello’s change is caused by “something … of state / Either from Venice or some unhatched practice … in Cyprus.”

When Iago and Cassio enter, Cassio asks Desdemona to hurry with her plea to Othello, and she says she will do what she can. Desdemona is not aware that this action will fulfill Iago’s admonition to Othello in the
previous scene to “Note if your lady strains his entertainment / With any stronger or vehement importunity.”

At the end of the scene, the handkerchief becomes more significant because Cassio gives it to Bianca for her to copy its design. Iago’s attempt to plant it in Cassio’s lodging was successful, and Cassio inadvertently becomes trapped in the plot.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act IV, Scenes 1-3 Summary and Analysis**

**Act IV, Scene 1**

**New Character:**
Lodovico: a Venetian nobleman, kinsman to Brabantio

**Summary**
Before Othello’s castle, Iago presents images of Desdemona’s infidelity to Othello until he is overcome with emotion and falls into a trance. Cassio enters and asks what is wrong. Iago tells him that Othello has fallen into a fit of epilepsy and will speak to him later. Othello revives, and Iago tells him that Cassio came but will return. Moreover, he tells Othello to hide himself and watch Cassio’s gestures as Iago speaks to him. When Cassio returns, Iago engages him in a conversation about Bianca, but Othello believes Cassio to be speaking about Desdemona and becomes furious. Bianca then enters complaining about the handkerchief he gave her to copy. Othello is convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful and-vows revenge. A trumpet announces the arrival of Lodovico, a Venetian nobleman, who brings letters from the Duke of Venice instructing Othello to return and appointing Cassio in his place. Desdemona, who also arrived, is pleased at this, and an enraged Othello strikes her. Lodovico, surprised at the change in Othello, inquires as to its cause.

**Analysis**
Iago continues to play upon the jealousy that he has generated in Othello with images of “a kiss in private” and “to be naked with her friend in bed.” He adds that giving away a handkerchief is a visible act and suggests that honor can be given away and not seen. This reminds Othello of what Iago had previously said and “would most gladly have forgot it!” Iago does not want him to forget it and intensifies the pressure by saying that Cassio said he did “lie … with her, on her; what you will.” At this point Othello is so overcome with emotion that he falls into a trance and Iago triumphantly says, “Work on / My medicine work!” relishing what his evil has wrought upon Othello. When Cassio enters, Iago creates the occasion to set up another damaging situation. When Othello revives and Iago informs him that Cassio will return, he tells Othello to “encave yourself / And mark the fleers, the gibes, the notable scorns / That dwell in every region of his face” as he prepares Othello for deception once more. When Cassio returns, Iago talks about Bianca so that Othello can conclude that Cassio’s disparaging remarks are about Desdemona. Ironically, what adds more credibility to this seeming love affair is when Bianca enters and berates Cassio for giving her “some minx’s token” to copy. Othello believes this to be Desdemona’s handkerchief, and his response is to “Hang her! … chop her into messes, and poison her,” expressing the degree which his emotions have reached. However, Iago suggests that he “strangle her in bed, even the bed she hath contaminated,” a suggestion which foreshadows the dramatic climax of the play.

The end of the scene establishes the overt changes in Othello that have occurred over a short period of time. When Desdemona learns that Othello is commissioned back to Venice and Michael Cassio has been appointed in his stead, she is happy for Michael, but Othello interprets her genuine feeling as proof of their love. He strikes her, and Lodovico questions, “Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature whom passion could not shake?” It is clear that the “pestilence” with which Iago has infected Othello has not only changed the way he thinks but also the way he acts.
Act IV, Scene 2

Summary
Within the castle, Othello asks Emilia if she ever heard or saw anything suspicious when Desdemona and Cassio were together. Emilia contends that Desdemona is honest, and Othello tells her to go get Desdemona. When Emilia exits, Othello says that Emilia cannot be taken at her word. When Emilia and Desdemona enter, Othello calls Desdemona a whore, and she is confused at this accusation because she is innocent. She wants to know what could she have done to get him into such a state. Emilia re-enters and Desdemona asks her to go get Iago. Emilia returns with Iago, and Desdemona asks him what she could do to win back Othello’s respect. He tells her that the cause is some business of the state. Next, Roderigo enters and tells Iago that he is tired of being put off by Iago’s schemes for him to win Desdemona. Iago quickly enlists Roderigo in a further scheme to kill Cassio before Othello leaves Cyprus.

Analysis
Othello’s suspicions about Cassio and Desdemona have been aroused to the point that he asks Emilia “You have seen nothing then?” When she says she has not, she also tells him that “if any wretch have put this in your head / Let heaven requite it with the serpent’s curse!” Her statement is another example of irony because neither she nor Othello recognize how true her charge is. When Desdemona enters, and Othello accuses her of being a whore, she is taken aback and wonders why he is acting so belligerently. When she admits only innocence he says “I took you for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello.” This interaction between the two of them is a direct contrast to a previous scene in which they were both overjoyed at seeing each other on Cyprus. The conversation underscores the drastic change Othello has undergone with Iago’s insidious plan, and it emphasizes the deterioration of his belief in her fidelity. Ironically, Emilia adds that she believes “some most villainous knave, / Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow” has affected Othello to which Iago tells her to watch her words. She uses as support for her belief that “some such squire he was / That turned your wit the seamy side without / And made you to suspect me with the Moor.” This comment alludes to Iago’s suspicion in Act II, Scene 1 and suggests that Iago is determined to make Othello, who is not inherently jealous, as jealous as he himself is.

When Roderigo enters, he is impatient at being stalled by Iago’s schemes for him to win Desdemona. He says that “the jewels you have had from me to deliver to Desdemona would half have corrupted a votarist.” Iago swindled Roderigo out of his possessions to use as gifts which he never delivered to Desdemona. He placates Roderigo’s anger with a scheme to remove Cassio by “knocking out his brains” before Othello leaves Cyprus to make Roderigo think that Cassio is the obstacle between Desdemona and him.

Act IV, Scene 3

Summary
In another room, Othello leads Lodovico from the castle and tells Desdemona to prepare for bed and dismiss Emilia because he will return shortly. Desdemona senses something awry and sings a “willow song” about forsaken love and death. This prompts Desdemona to ask Emilia if there really are women who deceive their husbands, and Emilia replies that there are no doubt some such women. Desdemona asks Emilia if she would betray her husband to which Emilia responds that she wouldn’t for trivial gain but would to make him a king. Desdemona insists she would never betray Othello. Emilia proceeds to tell her that the reason women fall is that their husbands neglect and are insensitive to them.

Analysis
The dominant impression in this scene is one of foreboding and imminent disaster. As Othello leads Lodovico away, he tells Desdemona to “Get you to bed on th’ instant. I will be returned forthwith. Dismiss your attendant.” Othello wants Desdemona alone so he can carry out his revenge, and she obeys his directive. After Othello leaves, Desdemona says that she has been preoccupied with a “willow” song about her mother’s maid “who was in love; and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her.” Desdemona sings this song which foreshadows her death. The song then prompts Desdemona to ask Emilia if there are men who abuse women
and Emilia replies “there be some such, no question” which is ironic because Emilia is not aware that Iago is abusing her. In a discussion of what makes women betray their husbands, Emilia presents her opinion that “I do think it is their husbands’ faults / If wives do fall … The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.” Emilia’s comment suggests men’s treatment of women is responsible for the success or failure of a relationship, an idea which echoes the spirit of independence which Elizabeth I instilled in her people during her reign.

**Act and Scene Summaries: Act V, Scenes 1-2 Summary and Analysis**

**Act V, Scene 1**
**New Character:**
Gratiano: Venetian nobleman; brother to Brabantio

**Summary**
On a street in Cyprus, Iago tells Roderigo to hide and attack Cassio as he walks by. However, when Cassio enters, Roderigo’s attempt fails, and Cassio wounds him. Iago sneaks up behind Cassio and stabs him in the leg. Othello enters, hears Cassio’s cries, and concludes that Iago has kept his word and killed Cassio. Lodovico and Gratiano enter at the confusion and comment on the cries for help coming from the street. Iago appears and asks them who is crying for help. Cassio then appears, is recognized, and says that whoever stabbed him is in the area. Roderigo cries for help and Iago immediately stabs him to death.

Bianca then enters the disturbance, and Iago suggests that she is part of the plot. Iago calls for a litter to bear off the dead Roderigo and wounded Cassio. Emilia now enters and wants to know what has just happened. Iago tells her that Cassio was attacked by Roderigo and others who escaped. He comments that this is the consequence of whoring. Next, he asks Emilia to find out where Cassio dined that evening. When Bianca admits that he was with her, Iago says that she will have some explaining to do.

**Analysis**
The opening of this scene provides the action to which all of Iago’s scheming has been a prelude. Iago physically sets Roderigo in a position “behind this bulk” to attack Cassio, and he promises to be nearby. In an aside he comments that he has “rubbed this young quat almost to the senses / And he grows angry” in a tone of contempt for Roderigo who he has manipulated all along. When Iago says “Now whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio kill him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my gain” he demonstrates how little he values human life and how self serving he is. Cassio enters and Roderigo’s attempt to kill him fails, and Cassio in turn wounds Roderigo. Iago’s subsequent wounding of Cassio leads Othello to believe that Iago kept his word in his vow to kill Cassio, so he calls him “brave … honest … and just.” The irony of this statement is that Othello still doesn’t see the evil in Iago. The melee is disturbing enough to bring out Lodovico and Gratiano who comment on the dangerousness of the situation. Iago appears and seems to show concern for Cassio’s wound, and when Roderigo appears, Cassio stabs him. The others believe that Iago acts out of revenge for his friend, but Iago’s true motive in killing Roderigo is that he served his purpose and would certainly tell all if he lived.

When Bianca comes to see what is going on, Iago implicates her in the plot to kill Cassio. His derogatory attitude is expressed when he says that he suspects “this trash / To be party to the injury.” This is another attempt to divert any suspicion away from himself. In a further ruse to appear beyond reproach he conducts an investigation into Cassio’s whereabouts and asks where Cassio had dined. Bianca asserts that he dined with her, and Cassio charges her to go with him. The events of this scene occur rapidly to bring the play to its final dramatic scene.
Act V, Scene 2
Summary
Othello enters his bedchamber and sees Desdemona sleeping. As he beholds her beauty, he almost changes his mind about killing her. He kisses her, and when she awakens, he asks her if she has prayed, accuses her of infidelity, and asks her about the handkerchief. She explains she never loved Cassio in the way Othello suggests, and she never gave him her handkerchief. Subsequently, Othello calls her a liar and says he saw Cassio with the handkerchief. Desdemona says that he must have found it, and Othello should ask him, to which Othello responds that Cassio is dead. When Desdemona expresses grief over this, Othello smothers her. Emilia enters with news that Cassio killed Roderigo. When Othello learns that Cassio is not dead, he realizes that something is not right. Desdemona cries out, dies, and Othello admits killing her. When Emilia asks why he killed her, Othello tells her to ask Iago about Desdemona’s infidelity. Disbelieving Othello, Emilia cries out, and Montano, Gratiano, and Iago enter the bedchamber. Emilia asks Iago if he ever told Othello that Desdemona was unfaithful. When he admits that as the truth, Emilia calls him a liar and blames him for causing Othello to murder Desdemona. Iago charges her to get home, and she responds that she will obey him no longer. Gratiano says that Brabantio’s death was fortunate, for to see Desdemona dead would surely kill him.

Othello says that he was sure of Desdemona’s infidelity with Cassio and uses the handkerchief as proof. Emilia immediately responds by telling Othello that she gave the handkerchief to Iago who begged her to steal it. Othello runs at Iago, but Montano unarms him. Iago stabs Emilia and runs away. Montano and Gratiano chase after him. Lodovico and Montano enter with Cassio and Iago, and Othello wounds Iago with another sword he had in his chamber, but Othello is soon disarmed. Lodovico says that Iago confessed to his part in the attempt on Cassio’s life and implicated Othello. Othello apologizes to Cassio who says he never gave Othello cause. Lodovico reveals that letters were found with Roderigo. Othello asks Cassio how he got the handkerchief, and Cassio says Iago planted it in his room. Lodovico discharges Othello and appoints Cassio in charge in Cyprus. Othello asks for a moment, stabs himself with a concealed weapon, falls across Desdemona, and dies.

Analysis
When Othello beholds “that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” he almost dismisses his suspicions of her. The image of the whiteness of her skin contrast with previous references to his blackness. His statement “Put out the light and then put out the light” suggests a comparison of the fragility of a candle flame to that of Desdemona’s life. He admits that if he blows out a candle he can relight it, but if he kills her he cannot restore her life. This is a lucid moment amid the extremes of anger, jealousy, and rage which he has experienced in a short span of time. After he kisses her and she awakens, he is reminded of all that Iago has planted in his mind, and it is too late for him to reverse his course of action. In her fear, Desdemona asks for an explanation, and Othello says he saw Cassio with the handkerchief which Desdemona says she did not give to Cassio. Now he feels she is a liar, and with the news that Cassio is dead, Desdemona expresses grief. In a fit of jealous rage, he smothers her with a pillow.

When Emilia enters, a series of dialogue occur which unravels all the twisted elements of Iago’s schemes. Othello expects “‘Tis like she comes to speak of Cassio’s death;” however, she asserts that “Cassio … hath killed a young Venetian / Called Roderigo” which prompts Othello to realize “Then murder’s out of tune, / And sweet revenge grows harsh.” This is the first sign that everything may not be as it seems.

Desdemona stirs, cries out, and dies. Consequently, Emilia calls Othello “the black devil” suggesting a contrast between the blackness of his deed to the whiteness of the slain Desdemona. Othello gives the reason that he killed her as “Cassio did top her. Ask thy husband.” Here the imagery of sex is spoken of in animal terms, and it echoes Iago’s first reference about Othello as “an old black ram tupping your white ewe” to Brabantio in the opening scene of Act I. Emilia, surprised that her husband would know this, calls for help.
When Iago comes in, Emilia confronts him with Othello’s charge, and he admits that he did tell Othello. Emilia berates him, and he orders her to go home, to which she replies, “Perchance, Iago, I will ne’er go home.”

We also learn of Brabantio’s death from Gratiano, his brother, who says that “pure grief / shore his old thread in twain” after Desdemona left with Othello.

Obsessed with the handkerchief, Othello says that Desdemona gave it to Cassio as a token of her love. At this, Emilia immediately explains that it was she who gave it to Iago. Realizing for the first time that Iago tricked him, Othello charges at him with a sword, but Montano unarms him. To silence Emilia, Iago stabs her and runs out.

By this time Othello realizes that it is futile to attempt to escape his fate and is totally dishonored. When Lodovico enters after having apprehended Iago, he asks where Othello is, and he refers to himself as “he that was Othello.” This perception suggests that he has already experienced a death and no longer exists. When Lodovico asks, “Where is that viper,” Othello remarks, “If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee.” For the first time the evil nature of Iago is recognized with references to him as a snake and a devil. After being wounded by Othello, Iago triumphantly replies, “I bleed, sir, but not killed.”

Othello admits to his part in the plan to murder Cassio, and when Cassio says he gave Othello no cause, Othello asks his pardon. Othello realizes that he has been duped by Iago and wants to know why “that demi-devil / … hath thus ensnared my soul and body.” However he gets no explanation from Iago, whose final comment is, “From this time forth I never will speak word.”

Lodovico discloses that letters found with Roderigo explain his attempt to kill Cassio, his discontent with Iago, and his upbraiding of Iago for making him provoke Cassio to a quarrel. Still unanswered for Othello is how Cassio came to possess the handkerchief. Cassio explains how he found it in his room and how Iago admitted putting it there “for a special purpose which wrought to his desire.”

After all schemes are explained, Lodovico strips Othello of his command and appoints Cassio in charge. Othello’s fate is to remain a closely guarded prisoner “Till that the nature of your fault be known / To the Venetian state.”

Othello’s final speech starkly contrasts his initial speech to the council. Othello, who was once proud of his accomplishments yet humble in his presentation, is now dishonored and humiliated with his last words. He is a man who has just experienced an agonizing personal defeat in contrast to his many glorious military triumphs. In just a short span of time, he has been deceived by a man whom he trusted, sought the murder of his honorable lieutenant, and killed his faithful wife.

In his last words to everyone, Othello is concerned about how the events will be recorded. At first, he acknowledges that “he has done the state some service,” but that is not his primary concern. He wants the truth about “these unlucky deeds” revealed without alteration. It is no surprise that he emphasizes truth after having been so maliciously deceived. Above all, he wants to be known as “one that loved not wisely, but too well.” At this point, Othello recognizes his love as a weakness because his misplaced love for Iago blinded him to Iago’s treachery and to Desdemona’s innocence. Othello faces the humiliation of “being wrought” by Iago’s manipulation and “perplexed in the extreme.” For Othello, who has prided himself in his ability to use his mind in military service, manipulation is a devastating blow. In suggesting his own epitaph, Othello regrets having thrown “a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe.” This metaphor compares Desdemona to a valuable precious stone that he threw away out of ignorance of its worth.
Othello shows remorse for his actions and, as one not given to a show of emotion, sheds “tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their med’cinable gum.” However, there is no medicine powerful enough to cure the ill. His final epithet of Iago as the “malignant and turbaned Turk” suggests that although Othello accepts responsibility for his crime, he realizes that he had been seduced by Iago’s corruption. Othello’s final description of himself as “the circumcised dog” suggests the level to which he has been reduced and evokes the animal imagery sustained throughout the play. At this point he draws a concealed weapon and kills himself rather than face dishonor. Lodovico’s direct address to Iago as a “Spartan dog” is an apt label for “this hellish villain” who has succeeded in destroying all the goodness around him with his own malignancy.

**Themes**

In the midst of the play's "corruption scene" (Act III, Scene 3), Iago says to Othello that "men should be what they seem" (III.iii.127). Here the arch-villain is referring to Cassio, but the irony is plain enough, as Iago has already disclosed to Roderigo in the opening scene of this tragedy: "I am not what I am" (I.i.65). At that stage, Iago elaborates on the meaning of this seeming paradox:

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains,
Yet, for necessity of present life,
I must show out a flag and sign of love,
Which is indeed but sign.
(I.i.154-157)

Via Iago's interwoven schemes, the demise of Othello is propelled by the disparity between appearances, on the one hand, and underlying reality, on the other. It is most often through Iago that this gap is highlighted within the play's text. At the very end of Act II in one of several soliloquies in which Iago reveals his villainy to the audience, Othello's "ancient" says:

When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now: for while this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear—
That she repeals him for her body's lust;
And by how much she strives to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch.
(II.iii.346-355)

Iago, the agency of human evil, is able to twist the distinction between what something is and what it appears to be, and it is this deception that stands at the bottom of Othello's tragic tale.

Consistent with this theme, much is made in Othello of perception, of looking, of seeing. Again in the corruption scene, Iago directs Othello, "Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio" and then adds again "look to't" (III.iii.197,200). Reacting to Iago's intimations about Desdemona, Othello warns that Iago must be sure that he can prove Desdemona to be a whore, commanding his ancient to "Give me ocular proof" (III.iii.360). It is the "ocular proof" of the mislaid handkerchief that seals Desdemona's doom and Othello's own demise. A prime example of Iago's ability to use Othello's visual perceptions against him takes place in the exchange between Iago and Othello at the start of Act IV. Here Iago suggests scenes for Othello to envision, such as finding Desdemona and Cassio in an embrace or in bed together, and then leaves their
evident meaning open for Othello to discover, thereby fanning the flames of murderous jealousy.

Iago is not the only character who exhorts Othello to "look" at Desdemona. In Act I after hearing of his daughter's intention to abide by her "betrayal" of him, Brabantio warns Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292-293). Congruent with this motif, the subject of trust, its loss and its misplacement, is clearly a salient theme in Othello. The central plot of this tragedy pivots upon Othello's loss of trust in Desdemona (and to a lesser extent, Cassio), and the irony of his misplaced trust in Iago. It is, in fact, remarkable how fully the Moor gives himself over to the trust of his ancient. After Brabantio's departure from the Duke's court, Othello tells the Duke of Iago, "A man he is of honesty and trust. / To his conveyance I assign my wife" (I.iii.284-285). Indeed, even after Emilia accuses her own husband of treachery, Othello is unable to accept her charge: "My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago" (V.ii.155).

The theme of honor and reputation intertwines with those of perception and trust. In the play's second act, Iago tells Othello that Brabantio "prated, / And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms / Against your honor" (I.ii.6-8). To this, the proven hero of Venice replies, "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul, / Shall manifest me rightly" (I.ii.31-32). The title character of Othello is supremely concerned with the reputation that he has earned as a man of military adventures and victories for the sake of his adopted homeland. Right before stabbing himself to death, Othello says to Lodovico, Gratiano and Cassio:

I have done the state some service, and they know't—
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.
(V.ii.340-344)

To the end, Othello is concerned with how he appears in the eyes of others, with his name, and with the reputation that it bears and the authority that it carries. The theme surfaces in other contexts. In Act II, Scene 3, Othello says to the drunk and disorderly Cassio,

What's the matter
That you unlace your reputation thus
And spend your rich opinion for the name
Of a night-brawler?
(II.iii.184-187)

After his superior leaves and shorn of his guard command, Cassio laments to Iago, "O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!" (II.iii.253-255).

In this exchange, Iago avers: "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself a loser" (II.iii.259-262). But when it comes to the corruption of Othello, Iago has a much different opinion about the value of one's good name.

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.
(III.iii.155-161)

The question of whether reputation, or how others see us, is meaningless or supremely important need not be answered for us to understand what Shakespeare says conclusively about "honor," "name," or "renown": that it can be used against us by a skillful practitioner of the practical black arts like Iago.

In seeking to rouse Brabantio against Othello, Iago alarms him by saying that "even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88-89). Modern Shakespeare critics have naturally focused on the racial implications of a black Othello coming into conjugal union with a white Desdemona. Leaving this dimension of their relationship aside, there is also a vast difference in age between Othello and Desdemona; indeed, the Moor is perhaps of the same age as his bride's father, Brabantio. While their love is certainly passionate, Desdemona is above all a pure and chaste heroine; it is these qualities that attract the Moor to her, and they are, in fact, the same attributes that fathers tend to cherish and protect in their daughters. Here we also observe that it is the father of the city, the Duke of Venice, who ultimately decides the dispute between Othello and Brabantio. At first, the Duke sides with Desdemona's biological father; but upon learning that Othello is the object of Brabantio's complaint, he shifts his judicial viewpoint significantly, calling the Moor "our own proper son." In essence, the patriarchal figure of the Duke allows Othello to "adopt" Desdemona. Throughout the play, Othello consistently identifies himself with the state as the basis of his own personal authority and, in this capacity, acts like a father. But Othello is not capable of paternal authority, for his insecurities as a racially-distinct outsider conspire with Iago's plans to generate behavior that is both bestial and childish.

**Themes: Advanced Themes**

Perhaps the predominant impression created by *Othello* is that of the terrible destructiveness of jealousy. Othello's suspicions regarding Desdemona's fidelity provoke him to rage and violence, and the collapse of his pride and nobility is swift. The speed and intensity of these changes in the hero have led some critics to question whether Iago's insinuations actually cause Othello's doubts or merely unleash his pre-existing fears. Shakespeare's analysis of the nature of jealousy is not limited only to the character of Othello, however. Both Roderigo and Bianca are torn by jealousy: he desires Desdemona and she yearns for Cassio. More importantly, Iago displays numerous symptoms of jealousy. His bitterness at being passed over for promotion and his suspicions that his wife has had an affair with Othello prompt his desire for revenge and give rise to his malignant schemes. Although various forms of jealousy are displayed by these characters, they are all based on unreasonable fears and lead to equally irrational behavior.

Another significant aspect of *Othello*, one related to the jealousy theme, is Shakespeare's manipulation of time in the play. For centuries, readers have noted that the play has a dual time scheme: "short" time, in which the action on stage is an unbroken sequence of events taking place over the course of a very few days; and "long" time, in which characters' statements and other indications suggest that a much greater period of time has passed. Thus, for example, a close reading reveals that all the events from his arrival on Cyprus to Othello's death take place in less than two days. This compression of time heightens the sense of reckless passion and the extreme rapidity of Othello's fall. By contrast, Othello's references to Desdemona's "stolen hours of lust" (III. ill. 338) and to his sleeping well in ignorance of the supposed trysts between his wife and Cassio, as well as Bianca's chastisement of Cassio for keeping "a week away … seven days and nights … eight score eight hours" (III. iv. 173-74), reflect a longer passage of time. This extension of time may reflect the irrational quality of Othello's and Bianca's jealousy, by which their fears cause them to exaggerate. At the same time, it makes their doubts seem more plausible: if days or weeks have passed, there has indeed been time for repeated trysts between Desdemona and Cassio. Furthermore, in "long time" Othello's decline appears less
sudden and absurd, thereby preserving the audience's sympathy with the proud and noble Moor.

Shakespeare's presentation of a black man as the hero of this tragedy has provoked much comment. In Shakespeare's England, blacks were considered exotic rarities. They were commonly feared as dangerous, threatening figures, sexually unrestrained and primitive. On stage, blacks were often stereotyped as villains; Shakespeare himself had employed this figure in Aaron in Titus Andronicus. With his presentation of the proud, virtuous soldier Othello, Shakespeare defies many of these stereotypes. In fact, actors and critics for centuries insisted that this noble "Moor" was an Arab rather than an African. However, several characters display racist attitudes and clearly designate Othello as black; this discrimination is most notable in Iago, who not only expresses his own racism but plays on the prejudices of others in his schemes against Othello. Thus, while rejecting stereotypes in his depiction of Othello, Shakespeare also presents characters who attack the hero's color and use his race to isolate and destroy him.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Othello

Othello (oh-THEHL-oh), a Moorish general in the service of Venice. A romantic and heroic warrior with a frank and honest nature, he has a weakness that makes him vulnerable to Iago’s diabolic temptation. He becomes furiously jealous of his innocent wife and his loyal lieutenant. His character decays, and he connives with Iago to have his lieutenant murdered. Finally, he decides to execute his wife with his own hands. After killing her, he learns of her innocence, and he judges and executes himself.

Iago

Iago (ee-AH-goh), Othello’s ancient (ensign), a satirical malcontent who is envious of the appointment of Michael Cassio to the position of Othello’s lieutenant. He at least pretends to suspect his wife Emilia of having an illicit affair with the Moor. A demi-devil, as Othello calls him, he destroys Othello, Desdemona, Roderigo, his own wife, and himself. He is William Shakespeare’s most consummate villain, perhaps sketched in several of Shakespeare’s other characters: Aaron the Moor in Titus Andronicus, Richard of Gloucester in Henry VI and Richard III, and Don John in Much Ado About Nothing. He is echoed in Edmund in King Lear and Iachimo in Cymbeline. He contains strong elements of the Devil and the Vice in the medieval morality plays.

Desdemona

Desdemona (dehz-dee-MOH-nuh), the daughter of Brabantio and wife of Othello. An innocent, idealistic, and romantic girl, she gives her love completely to her warrior husband. In her fear and shock at his violent behavior, she lies to him about her lost handkerchief, thus convincing him of her guilt. Even when she is dying, she tries to protect him from her kinsmen. Other characters can be judged by their attitude toward her.

Emilia

Emilia (ee-MIHL-ee-uh), Iago’s plainspoken wife. Intensely loyal to her mistress, Desdemona, she is certain that some malicious villain has belied her to the Moor. She does not suspect that her husband is that villain until too late to save her mistress. She is unwittingly the cause of Desdemona’s death; when she finds the lost handkerchief and gives it to Iago, he uses it to inflame the Moor’s insane jealousy. Emilia grows in stature throughout the play and reaches tragic dignity when she refuses to remain silent about Iago’s villainy, even though her speaking the truth costs her her life. Her dying words, clearing Desdemona of infidelity, drive Othello to his self-inflicted death.
Michael Cassio

Michael Cassio (KAS-ee-oh), Othello’s lieutenant. Devoted to his commander and Desdemona, he is impervious to Iago’s temptations where either is concerned. He is, however, given to loose living, and his behavior when discussing Bianca with Iago fires Othello’s suspicions, after Iago has made Othello believe they are discussing Desdemona. Cassio’s drinking on duty and becoming involved in a brawl lead to his replacement by Iago. He escapes the plot of Iago and Othello to murder him, and he succeeds Othello as governor of Cyprus.

Brabantio

Brabantio (brah-BAN-shee-oh), a Venetian senator. Infuriated by his daughter’s elopement with the Moor, he appeals to the senate to recover her. Losing his appeal, he publicly casts her off and warns Othello that a daughter who deceives her father may well be a wife who deceives her husband. This warning plants a small seed of uncertainty in Othello’s heart, which Iago waters diligently. Brabantio dies brokenhearted at losing Desdemona and does not learn of her horrible death.

Roderigo

Roderigo (rod-eh-REE-goh), a young Venetian suitor of Desdemona. The gullible victim of Iago, who promises Desdemona to him, he aids in bringing about the catastrophe and earns a well-deserved violent death, Ironically inflicted by Iago. The degradation of Roderigo is in striking contrast to the growth of Cassio. Iago, who makes use of Roderigo, has profound contempt for him.

Bianca

Bianca (bee-AN-kuh), a courtesan in Cyprus. Cassio gives her Desdemona’s handkerchief, which Iago has planted in his chambers. She thus serves doubly in rousing Othello’s fury.

Montano

Montano (mohn-TAH-noh), a former governor of Cyprus. He and Cassio quarrel while drinking (by Iago’s machinations), and Montano is seriously wounded. This event causes Cassio’s removal. Montano recovers and aids in apprehending Iago when his villainy is revealed.

Gratiano

Gratiano (gray-shee-AH-noh), Brabantio’s brother. He and Lodovico go to Cyprus from Venice and aid in restoring order and destroying Iago.

Lodovico

Lodovico (loh-doh-VEE-koh), a kinsman of Brabantio. As the man of most authority from Venice, he ends the play after appointing Cassio governor of Cyprus to succeed the self-killed Othello.

The clown

The clown, a servant of Othello. Among Shakespeare’s clowns, he has perhaps the weakest and briefest role.
Character Analysis: Brabantio (Character Analysis)

Brabantio is Desdemona's father. A Venetian senator, he is a magnifico, a prominent citizen and landowner in Venice. He charges Othello with bewitching his daughter and dies after Desdemona leaves for Cyprus with Othello and the Venetian forces.

When the play opens, Brabantio's household is being disrupted by Iago and Roderigo, who are crying out to Brabantio that he has been robbed. Brabantio says, "What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; / My house is not a grange" (I.i.105-06). He believes he is safely within the civilized society of Venice, not on the dangerous and uncivilized fringe of that society. When Iago cries that Brabantio's daughter is at that moment sleeping with the Moor Othello, he appeals to Brabantio's racial prejudices. When Brabantio recognizes Roderigo, he reminds him that he has prohibited Roderigo from pursuing Desdemona as a suitor. Moments later, Brabantio first reveals his racial prejudice when he tells Roderigo, "O would you had had her! / Some one way, some another" (I.i.175-76). He would prefer anyone to Othello as his daughter's husband, even the unsavory Roderigo.

Brabantio cannot believe Desdemona has freely selected Othello. When Roderigo escorts him to the place where Othello is, Brabantio draws his sword and is ready to fight with the Moor. He accuses Othello of having used spells and charms to seduce and steal his daughter. He makes the same claim to the Venetian senate, arguing that Othello has certainly used witchcraft to win his daughter. In Brabantio's eyes, Desdemona is a maiden so modest that it is unthinkable for her "To fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (I.iii.98). When Othello explains that Desdemona was initially fascinated by Othello's tales of exotic adventures, eventually falling in love with him, Brabantio misses the irony. He shared that fascination himself, inviting Othello into his home so that Othello might entertain Brabantio and his guests with the tales of his daring exploits. When Brabantio hears Desdemona support Othello's story, he gives up his appeal. He never sanctions the marriage of his daughter to Othello and leaves uttering his total disapproval.

Character Analysis: Cassio (Character Analysis)

Cassio is chosen over Iago to be Othello's lieutenant. He is discredited when he participates in a drunken brawl during Othello's wedding celebration. Cassio survives a murder attempt by Roderigo, wounding his attacker, and is appointed deputy governor of Cyprus after Othello is recalled to Venice.

According to Iago, Cassio is "a great arithmetician" (I.i.19), one "That never set a squadron in the field" (I.i.22). Cassio knows battle only from books, unlike Iago who has had a good deal of experience in combat. Cassio is apparently a handsome man, and the ladies are attracted to him. But Cassio also has his weaknesses. When Iago tries to get him to have a drink in celebration of the Turks' defeat and Othello's marriage, Cassio says, "I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking" (II.iii.30-31). Cassio is the perfect dupe for Iago. Cassio is attractive, and this fact encourages Othello's belief in Iago's suggestion that Desdemona desires Cassio. Cassio's inability to drink also gives Iago another weapon in his plan to abuse both Cassio and Othello.

Cassio represents the class privilege of which Iago is so envious and resentful. It rankles Iago that Cassio seems to have bought into the idea that he is socially superior. When they are drinking together, Cassio tells Iago that "the lieutenant is to be sav'd before the ancient" (II.iii.105-106). Cassio is perhaps referring to a commonplace for maintaining military order, but the implication is that Cassio is superior by virtue of his title alone. Again, when Othello disgraces Cassio by scolding him in public and stripping him of his rank for neglecting his watch and brawling with Montano, Cassio laments most the loss of his reputation. In his great desire to regain that reputation, he plays right into the hands of Iago, who suggests that Cassio appeal to Desdemona to intervene with Othello for restoring his rank. For Iago, through whose eyes the audience gets
its only sense of Cassio's character, Cassio is all reputation and title with no real substance. Iago refers to "One Michael Cassio, a Florentine" (I.i.20) while a gentleman in Cyprus refers to "A Veronesa; Michael Cassio" (II.i.26). Perhaps Cassio has no inner qualities that identify who and what he is, only his titles. Even so, he ends up in charge of the Venetian troops in Cyprus.

Character Analysis: Desdemona (Character Analysis)

Desdemona is the daughter of Brabantio, a man of some reputation in Venice. As such, she is part of the upper class of Venetian society. Desdemona elopes with Othello and accompanies him to Cyprus. After Cassio is discredited, she pleads for his reinstatement, an act which her husband interprets as proof of Iago's insinuations that she is unfaithful. She is ultimately murdered by Othello.

Apparently, Desdemona has many suitors vying for her hand in marriage, but she freely chooses to marry Othello, a decision which greatly upsets Brabantio, Iago, and Roderigo. She testifies before the Venetian senate that the story Othello has told about their mutual attraction is true. In that story, Othello recounts how he was invited to Brabantio's home to tell of his journeys to foreign places. Being forced to leave the room on frequent errands for her father and his guests, Desdemona was unable to hear the full account of Othello's exploits in those foreign places. But she was intrigued, and on another occasion Othello told her his story in full. Othello tells the duke and the senators, "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (I.iii.167-168). Despite what her father and Iago might think, Desdemona does seem to love Othello truly; and, despite Othello's jealous suspicions, she is faithful to him until the end.

In one sense, though, Desdemona presents a contradiction, some critics have argued. After Othello accuses her of being unfaithful, she asks Emilia, "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" (IV.iii.63). Emilia responds realistically that she would not be unfaithful for a trifle, but the world is a big place. While Desdemona's question reveals her innocence, her past actions have shown her to be capable of some level of deception: she secretly elopes with a man of whom her father greatly disapproves. She explains to Brabantio that she has only transferred her love and allegiance from father to husband, just as her mother had done. While many audiences do not judge Desdemona too harshly for this, many critics maintain that through these actions, Desdemona demonstrates the capacity to deceive men. It is this perceived capacity that Iago exploits most aggressively. He virtually seals Desdemona's fate when he tells Othello, "She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most" (III.iii.206-208).

As he contemplates killing Desdemona, Othello echoes Iago's words, "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.6). For Iago and Othello, Desdemona can only be totally pure when she can no longer experience desire, when men no longer need to fear that that desire will betray them—in death.

Desdemona has been described by some critics as a Christlike figure. Like the love Christ extends to humankind, Desdemona's love for Othello is freely given and need not be defended by reasoned explanations. Othello's great failing is that he does not simply accept Desdemona's love but finds reasons to think himself unworthy of her. He gives in to Iago's suggestions that Desdemona could not freely love one who was so different from her in "clime, complexion, and degree" (III.iii.230). After Othello has killed Desdemona, Emilia asks who has done such a deed. Desdemona revives and says, "Nobody; I myself. Farewell! / Commend me to my kind lord" (V.ii.125-126), echoing the unselfishness and forgiveness of Christ's dying words on the cross.

Additional Character Commentary

Desdemona has traditionally been seen as the "good" that contrasts with Iago's "evil." Generally overshadowed by the powerful and enigmatic figures of Othello and Iago, Desdemona has often been judged an uncomplicated character: an idealized goddess or a passive, undeveloped figure. Recently, however, critics
have begun to detect a more intricate portrait of Desdemona as a vital, courageous, and sensual woman. Significantly, it is Desdemona rather than Othello who initiates their romance and courtship. In addition, she exhibits a remarkable boldness and independence in marrying Othello in the face of her father's objections. However, she pays a price for her freedom: isolated from her familiar Venetian surroundings, she becomes dependent upon Othello; and when his love turns to violence, she is alone and defenseless

**Character Analysis: Emilia (Character Analysis)**

Emilia is Iago's wife. She travels to Cyprus with her husband and acts as a waiting woman to Desdemona. She gives Iago Desdemona's handkerchief, which he had asked her to steal. After Othello murders his wife, Emilia reveals Desdemona's fidelity and is mortally wounded by Iago for exposing the truth.

When Emilia and Iago arrive in Cyprus, we get some sense of the relationship between Emilia and her husband. Cassio greets Emilia with a kiss, and Iago says, "Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough" (II.i. 100-102).

Emilia is a strong-willed woman who apparently will not suffer her husband to abuse her. She tries to please Iago by recovering for him the handkerchief dropped by Desdemona, unknowingly contributing to Desdemona's death. But when she understands what Iago has done and why he has so often asked her to steal that handkerchief, she exposes him and will not be silenced even when he commands her to "hold your peace" (V.ii.220). Emilia is the only character whom Iago cannot totally manipulate.

The play offers other evidence of Emilia's strong-willed and independent nature. After Othello has struck Desdemona and humiliated her in public, Emilia explains to Iago what has happened. She says that, undoubtedly, some knave has slandered Desdemona to make Othello jealous, an absurd accusation similar to Iago's own accusation that Emilia has been unfaithful with the Moor (IV.ii.145-147). Emilia later explains to Desdemona that some women do cheat on their husbands and are justified in doing so if their husbands have cheated on them. She is a woman who believes that men and women experience the same passions and desires. Near the end of the play, Emilia will not be silenced in her efforts to bring Desdemona's killers to justice. She even defies Othello in his efforts to physically intimidate her. She says, "I'll make thee known / Though I lost twenty lives" (V.ii.166-167). In the end, Iago can only silence Emilia by stabbing her to death.

**Character Analysis: Iago (Character Analysis)**

Iago is Othello's ancient, or ensign. When Othello promotes Cassio, Iago feels slighted and plots revenge against them both. He manipulates Cassio into discrediting himself and urges Roderigo to slay Cassio. When the plot fails, he kills Roderigo to keep from being exposed. Iago convinces Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness and maneuvers him into killing her. He then murders his own wife, Emilia, and is taken into custody by Cassio at the play's end.

Iago is a soldier with a good deal of experience in battle, having been on the field with Othello at both Rhodes and Cyprus. He is also one of Shakespeare's greatest villains. He is a master manipulator of people and gets the other characters in the play to do just what he wants. He manipulates others through a keen understanding he seems to have of what motivates them. For example, Iago uses the vision Roderigo has of a union with Desdemona to manipulate Roderigo. Cassio is a man driven by the need to maintain outer appearances, and he easily accepts Iago's advice that he recover his rank by going through Desdemona. Iago also uses to his advantage the fact that Desdemona is of a kind and generous nature, one who will gladly accept the opportunity to persuade her husband to make amends with his lieutenant. And, finally, Iago uses Othello's jealous nature and his apparent insecurity to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity. Emilia is the only one, it seems, that Iago cannot manipulate, perhaps because she knows him so well.
Iago schemes to have Cassio demoted from his post as lieutenant, next suggesting that Cassio ask Desdemona to intercede for him with Othello on his behalf. She does, which contributes to Othello’s suspicions. Othello first begins to distrust Desdemona when Iago points out that, as he and Othello approached Desdemona and Cassio, Cassio quickly departed. Iago also reminds Othello that Desdemona, in eloping with Othello, deceived her father, which shows her capacity for deception. Additionally, Iago reminds Othello of the differences between Othello and Desdemona in terms of color, age, and social status. The handkerchief that Othello had given to Desdemona as a love token is also used to indicate her guilt, a situation also engineered by Iago.

Iago provides the audience with a number of clues to the motives for his actions. First, he feels a certain rancor at not being chosen as Othello's lieutenant. He reassures Roderigo of this:

Preferment goes by letter and affection,
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to th' first. Now, sir, be judge yourself
Whether I in any just term am affin'd
To love the Moor.
(I.i.36-40)

He is disgruntled at having been passed over for promotion, and he sees a chance to get back at both Othello, who has slighted him, and Cassio, the mocking symbol of that slight. Second, he suspects that Othello has engaged in adultery with his wife, Emilia. He mentions this on two occasions: "I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He has done my office" (I.iii.388-390), and

I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth (like a poisonous mineral) gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife.
(II.i.299-303)

Apparently, Iago is so distressed by the thought of Emilia sleeping with Othello that he has accused Emilia of the act. As is typical of her, Emilia characterizes the accusation as absurd (IV.ii.145-147). In their unfounded jealousy, Iago and Othello are very much alike.

Iago and Othello are alike in another way as well. At the end of the play, when Othello is under arrest and Iago has been apprehended and is brought into his presence, Othello says, "I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable" (V.ii.287). He is looking to see if Iago has cloven feet like the devil Othello now thinks him to be. But for all of Iago's hatred of Othello and Othello's newly discovered contempt for Iago, the two are very much alike in their sense of being excluded from upper-class Venetian society. When Othello calls him honest, honest Iago" (V.ii.155), he speaks of more than verbal truth. Iago is the only character who speaks directly to Othello's sense of his own inadequacy, a sense of inadequacy Iago perhaps shares. At the end of the play, after killing Roderigo and Emilia and revealing all he has done, Iago is taken prisoner.

Additional Character Commentary
If anything, Iago is an even stronger character than Othello. Unlike the internally-torn Moor, Iago is certain and entirely consistent in his acts and in his self-appraisals. For the sake of expediency, of course, Iago shows himself to be what he is not, a loyal supporter of Othello with limited capacity to help his "friend." But more than any other character in Shakespeare's plays, Iago is a self-professed villain whose sole motive is hatred toward his superior. It is the unrelievedly evil, maniacal fixation of Iago that provides such lines as his off-hand comment, "I am a very villain else" (IV.i.126), with their acute pungency. Before piecing it together, Iago's wife consoles a distraught Desdemona reeling from her husband's inexplicable tirade:
I will be hang'd if some eternal villain,
Some busy and insinuating rogue,
Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,
Have not devis'd this slander.
(IV.ii.130-133)

The person who is most intimate with Iago, his wife, furnishes the most accurate account of him in declaring
the person behind Othello's rage to be an "eternal villain," who is large in his capacity to concoct evil but
ultimately a small-minded slave acting on a relatively petty resentment.

Additional Character Commentary
Regardless of the degree to which Iago is to blame for Othello's downfall, he remains one of Shakespeare's
most villainous creations, variously described as a brilliant opportunist taking advantage of the chances
presented to him, as a personification of evil, and as a stock "devil" or "vice" figure. Iago's motivation remains
a topic of considerable debate. Although he offers numerous motives throughout the play—resentment at
being passed over for promotion, suspicions about Othello and Emilia, desire for Desdemona—Iago's plans
seem curiously incomplete; he appears to be making up both his schemes and his motives for them as he goes
along. The noted nineteenth-century writer and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge described this process as the
"motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity," and for many readers Iago's behavior is simply evil, beyond
explanation or understanding. For others, no explanation is necessary. They consider Iago a devil or vice
figure, a stock dramatic villain. Many scholars, however, find Iago a more fully-out character, emotionally
and psychologically complex. According to these critics, his pride and desire for power and control, along
with his brilliant scheming and his jealousy, make Iago a fascinating, multi-faceted figure.

Character Analysis: Othello (Character Analysis)

Othello, a Moor, is a general and commander of the Venetian armed forces, and later governor of Cyprus. He
secretly weds Desdemona and provokes Iago's enmity by promoting Cassio. He later relieves Cassio of his
rank when he believes that the lieutenant started a drunken brawl. Othello gradually succumbs to Iago's plot,
and, believing that Desdemona is unfaithful, smothers her. When he realizes she was innocent of Iago's
accusations, he commits suicide.

Othello is a noble and imposing man, well respected in his profession as a soldier. At the beginning of the
play, he enjoys great successes and everything seems to be going his way. Desdemona has chosen him over all
of her other Venetian suitors, and Othello prevails over Brabantio's charges that Othello has coerced and
abducted her. The duke of Venice and the Venetian senators place him in charge of the troops sent to defend
Cyprus against the Turks. Things continue to go Othello's way when he arrives in Cyprus and discovers that
the tempest has entirely eliminated the Turkish threat. He and Desdemona act differently toward each other in
Cyprus. They are more openly loving, much less formal than they appeared in Venice. The couple celebrate
their marriage; and, even when that celebration is interrupted by the brawling of Cassio and Montano, Othello
still appears confident and self-controlled. In the tradition of the best strong-armed heroic types, he says, "He
that stirs next to carve for his own rage / Holds his soul light; he dies upon his motion" (II.iii.164-165). He is a
man in charge, one that will shoot first and ask questions later. But Othello's confidence starts to slip when
Iago begins to work on his psyche, intimating that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair.

At first, Othello denies that the attractiveness of his wife's grace, charm, and beauty for other men could make
him jealous because, as he says, "she had eyes and chose me" (III.iii.189). But Iago's "medicine" (IV.i.46)
soon begins to work, and Othello begins to question how Desdemona could continue to love him. After Iago
has suggested that Desdemona has already deceived her father and Othello, the Moor begins to think
Desdemona's betrayal of him is inevitable given his skin color, greater age, and lack of courtly charm
He begins to act as if her unfaithfulness is a certainty, bemoaning that "Othello's occupation is gone" (III.iii.357).

Iago works Othello into a jealous rage through these many insinuations. But it seems to be the handkerchief—the one Othello originally gave to Desdemona as a love token—that puts Othello over the edge. Iago convinces Othello that the innocently dropped handkerchief was actually given to Cassio (who in turn gives the handkerchief to Bianca) by Desdemona. Othello focuses on this piece of cloth as damning physical evidence in his confrontation with his wife. He refers to it repeatedly before he kills Desdemona: "That handkerchief which I so loved and gave thee, / Thou gav'st to Cassio" (V.ii.48-49); "By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in ’s hand" (V.ii.62); and again, "I saw the handkerchief" (V.ii.66). Desdemona repeatedly denies giving the handkerchief to Cassio, suggesting that perhaps he found it somewhere, but to no avail.

In the end, Othello is so convinced by Iago's manipulation that he murders his wife in their bed. The most apparent reason for this deed is the one Othello gives to Emilia, stated repeatedly in response to her persistent questioning, immediately after he has smothered Desdemona: "She turn'd to folly, and she was a whore"; "She was false as water"; "Cassio did top her" (V.ii.133; 135; 137). Desdemona, Othello believes, has betrayed him and the sanctity of marriage, and she paid with her life.

Yet some believe that Othello's motives run deeper, that Othello killed Desdemona because she violated the mores of Venetian society by marrying a Moor. Proponents of this view argue that Othello is accepted by Venetian society as long as he is an external element of that society. Barbantio and the Venetian senators are more than willing to accept his strength and military knowledge, but when Othello is internalized into their society by his marriage to Desdemona, his presence becomes disruptive. In his last speech, Othello asks to be remembered as "one that lov'd not wisely but too well" (V.ii.345). Is the object of that love Desdemona or Venice? Perhaps Othello never stops seeing himself as a soldier with the primary goal of preserving Venetian society. Perhaps his last act—his own suicide—is performed in the service of Venice, as mirrored in the language he uses to introduce it. He says that those around him should record events exactly as they have happened,

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and turban’d Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc’d the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus.
(V.ii.353-357)

The last word of this speech is punctuated by the sound of Othello's knife sinking into his breast and mortally wounding him.

Additional Character Commentary
In his final speech and for the sake of posterity, Othello refers to himself as "one that loved not wisely but too well" (V.ii.345). But from our standpoint, Othello's self-assessment seems wide and short of the mark. Othello is an accomplished, experienced man of the world in his own estimation and in the eyes of the Venetian society; not only has he seen much in his career as a military leader, he is able to convey that experience to others. Defending himself to the Duke against Brabantio's charges, Othello says of his first encounters with the aggrieved senator's daughter:

It was my hint to speak—such was my process;
And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
(Do grow) beneath their shoulders. These things to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline:
But still the house affairs would draw her thence;
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse.
(I.iii.142-150)

Even Othello's indirect, summary references to the tales that underpin his life, renown and station in society is marvelous; we can hear the word "Anthropophagi" booming from the Moor and visualize those aliens whose heads hang below their shoulders. In Act I, Othello appears to be a man who is confident of his own worth. Nevertheless, by the end of the play's final act, Othello is completely at a loss concerning what her debasement says about him, her husband. He wrestles with himself while on the verge of smothering Desdemona in the final scene of the play:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood;
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
(V.ii.1-9)

The confusion that Othello suffers at this point cannot be untangled by him or (fully) by us. But here we see Othello justify the killing of Desdemona to save her good name, and this connotes that he has confused his wife's (and victim's) with his own (as both victim and perpetrator).

What strikes us about Othello and what explains in part the extent of his decline from hero-leader to savage beast is just how easily he is led by Iago down the path to self-destruction. Othello thinks he knows Iago; Iago truly knows his long-time superior and exactly how to manipulate him. He knows, for example, that Othello's self-confident posture rests upon his good name in Venetian society. Although that name is itself based on a legion of military heroics, it can be sullied. Moreover, Iago knows that Othello, a man who has spent most of his life in the field, is unsure of himself in civil society and in his role as the governor of Cyprus. In the end, the Moor is an outsider, a hired gun of Venice, on guard for threats and potentially suspicious of those who welcome him should his repute or esteem in their eyes undergo a change.

**Additional Character Commentary**

Two primary interpretations of Othello's character have emerged among students and critics of the play: that he is virtuous, strong, and trustful; and that he is guilty of self-idealization and overweening pride. Both views find support in the change in Othello's behavior. Although he is initially presented as a strong, confident character using typical heroic vocabulary, as he succumbs to jealousy and rage he becomes more like Iago and employs the villain's animal and diabolic imagery. According to critics who regard Othello as essentially noble, this change shows the innocent hero falling victim to Iago's schemes and being corrupted by his evil. Others, however, argue that Iago's actions merely cause Othello's noble facade to crumble, releasing his inherent savagery. The first interpretation places most, if not all, the responsibility for Othello's fall on Iago; the second puts much of the burden on the Moor himself.
Character Analysis: Roderigo (Character Analysis)

Roderigo is a Venetian desperately desiring, but a rejected suitor of Desdemona. He becomes Iago's pawn, wounds and is wounded by Cassio in an unsuccessful attempt to murder the lieutenant, and is killed by Iago.

Roderigo is identified in the Dramatis Personae as a gull, a dupe or easy mark. Roderigo is gullible; he believes everything Iago tells him and does everything Iago commands of him. At the beginning of the play, at Iago's instigation, he alarms Brabantio with the news that Desdemona has eloped with the Moor. He sails with Iago to Cyprus and, while there, serves as a pawn in Iago's plan to destroy Othello and Cassio. Upon instruction, he picks a fight with Cassio when the latter keeps watch during the general celebration. Later, he attacks Cassio in the dark and wounds him, suffering a wound himself. Roderigo has given Iago money to negotiate with Desdemona on his behalf and thinks that the tasks Iago assigns him are intended only to remove Cassio from the picture, paving Roderigo's way to possessing Desdemona. Although his actions are despicable, he does evoke a measure of sympathy in the way that he is so utterly manipulated and ultimately betrayed by Iago, who stabs the wounded Roderigo on the dark street in order that he might not reveal Iago's involvement in Cassio's wounding.

Roderigo is continually threatening to quit his pursuit of Desdemona and cease giving Iago money for his intervention in that matter. Each time he does so, Iago assures him that Desdemona's attraction to Othello is only physical and that she will tire of the Moor fairly quickly. Iago suggests that Roderigo's best course of action is to accumulate a solid financial foundation. Iago tells Roderigo over and over to "Put money in thy purse" (I.iii.341-360), implying that, when Desdemona has satisfied her sexual lust, she will be attracted to the rich and stable sort of man. At one point, in his frustration at not realizing his goal, Roderigo says, "It is silliness to live, when to live is torment" (I.iii.308). He apologizes for being so silly but says he does not have the "virtue" to change, to which Iago responds, "Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves we are thus or thus" (I.iii.320). Iago maintains that men make of themselves what they desire to be; men do not follow a course predetermined by any inner qualities. Iago's advice seems to renew Roderigo's resolve even as his threatened suicide gives evidence to the intensity of his longing for Desdemona.

Character Analysis: Other Characters (Descriptions)

Attendants

Othello and Desdemona are characters of some stature in the communities of both Venice and Cyprus. In their public appearances throughout the play, they are often accompanied by attendants.

Bianca

Bianca is a courtesan, a prostitute, in Cyprus. She falls in love with Cassio and pursues him, an unexpected turn of events given the callousness and lack of affection usually associated with her profession. Iago is aware that Cassio is not as affectionate toward Bianca as she is toward him, and he takes advantage of the one-sided relationship. On the pretext that he is questioning Cassio about Desdemona, Iago really questions Cassio about Bianca. He does this in order to increase Othello's jealousy, as the latter stands off to the side unable to hear but able to see Cassio's cavalier and mocking attitude. When Cassio finds the handkerchief belonging to Othello and planted in his quarters by Iago, he gives it to Bianca so that she might remove its valuable stitching. This fortunate event lends itself to Iago's plan since it increases Othello's hatred of Cassio, who seemingly equates Desdemona with a common prostitute.

Clown

In a comic interlude that temporarily breaks the building tension, the clown appears and speaks to a group of musicians who have been directed by Cassio to play outside the quarters of Desdemona and Othello. The clown tells the musicians they sound nasal, alluding to the nasal damage done in advanced cases of syphilis.
The clown also engages in some low-brow humor involving a "tale" and a "wind instrument" (III.i.10). The clown appears again in III.iv, punning evasively in response to Desdemona's simple inquiry as to whether or not the clown knows where Cassio lives.

**Duke of Venice**
See Venice

**Gentlemen (of Cyprus)**
When the play switches location to Cyprus, two gentlemen talk to Montano, the governor there, about the raging storm tossing the Turkish fleet. A third gentleman enters and announces that the storm has scattered the Turkish fleet, causing the Turks to abandon their intended invasion of Cyprus. He also reports that a Venetian ship has been wrecked and that Cassio worries the ship might have been the one carrying Othello. The second of the first two gentlemen identifies Iago when he disembarks. Later, armed gentlemen appear with Othello when he interrupts the fight between Cassio and Montano and chastises those two for brawling.

**Gratiano**
Gratiano is a kinsman of Brabantio. In some editions of the play, he is listed as Brabantio's brother. Other editions list him and Lodovico as two noble Venetians. Gratiano appears in the dark streets of Cyprus just after Roderigo has stabbed Cassio. He helps minister to Cassio and sort out the identities of others in the confusing darkness. He is also present when Emilia accuses Othello of killing Desdemona and when Othello is apprehended. His chief function in the play seems to be one of eliciting explanations from the other characters, providing them with the opportunity to sort out complex events. Twice near the end of the play he asks, "What is the matter?" (V.ii.172, 260).

**Herald**
The herald is sent by Othello to make a public proclamation: in celebration of the Turkish fleet's defeat and Othello's marriage, the populace is directed to feast, make bonfires, and dance, each man pursuing his own sport. This celebration is to continue from five to eleven that night.

**Lodovico**
Lodovico is Brabantio's kinsman. (Some editions of the play list Gratiano as Brabantio's brother and Lodovico as Brabantio's kinsman. Other editions list them both simply as two noble Venetians.) When Lodovico arrives in Cyprus, he and Othello greet one another with civil courtesy. Lodovico brings a letter from the duke of Venice, in which Othello is commanded to return to Venice immediately, Cassio taking his place of command in Cyprus. As Othello reads the letter, he overhears Lodovico ask Desdemona if the rift between the general and the lieutenant can be repaired. Desdemona is hopeful and says, "I would do much / To atone them, for the love I bear to Cassio" (IV.i.233-234). Although she means only that she is concerned for Cassio, Othello strikes her. Othello's action astounds Lodovico. When Othello leaves, Lodovico asks, "Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient?" (IV.i.265-266). He wonders aloud if the letter has caused Othello to experience such a wild mood swing. Lodovico is present later when Othello is apprehended and all finally realize that Othello has killed Desdemona.

**Messenger**
Two messengers appear in the play. The first reports to the Venetian senators that a Turkish fleet of approximately thirty ships has threatened Rhodes but has since turned and headed for Cyprus. The second messenger appears as Cassio and Montano express concern for Othello's survival on the torrid sea. He announces that all of the townspeople have gathered on the shore to keep watch of the turbulent ocean and have spotted the sail of a ship.

**Montano**
Montano is the governor of Cyprus. He has sent a messenger to the duke of Venice, confirming the presence
of the Turkish fleet near Cyprus. He welcomes the Venetian protectors when they arrive on his isle, anxious for Othello's safety and elated when the tempest scatters the Turkish threat. As all celebrate the defeat of the Turks and Othello's marriage, Cassio must leave the celebration to go watch. Iago slyly tells Montano that Cassio is an excellent man, but not when he has been drinking. He plays on Montano's concern and suggests that Cassio is not one to whom the safety of the isle should be entrusted. Then, when Roderigo attacks Cassio and the latter cries out, Montano goes to investigate the matter. From his very recent conversation with Iago, he is predisposed to see Cassio's actions as irresponsible; he accuses Cassio of being drunk, and the two men fight, the sounding of a general alarm disrupting the peace of the isle and rousing an irate Othello from his nuptial bed. Montano is present in the later scenes in which the former confusion is sorted out.

**Musicians**
See Clown

**Officers**
Officers appear in the company of both Brabantio and Othello when the two confront each other, Brabantio charging Othello with having abducted his daughter, and Othello maintaining his innocence of that charge. One of the officers confirms that the duke of Venice wants to see Othello immediately. Officers appear in the company of the duke, and the Venetian senators try to deduce the intentions of the Turkish fleet. Again, at the end of the play, officers appear with Iago in their custody after having captured the fleeing villain.

**Sailors**
In I.iii, the duke and the Venetian senators have assembled to try and determine Turkish military intentions. A sailor enters and reports that the Turkish fleet is menacing Rhodes.

**Senators**
In the republican city-state of Venice, the senators were powerful men who, along with the duke, made laws and insured public welfare. In I.iii, the senators have come together to plan a way to counter the military intentions of the Turks. They have received conflicting reports of the Turkish fleet's whereabouts, first seen heading towards Rhodes and later towards Cyprus. One of the senators deduces that the Turkish move on Rhodes is just a feinting maneuver, their real target being Cyprus. This conjecture is confirmed by the messenger from Montano. The senators have sent for Othello, whose military expertise they desperately need in countering the impending attack on Cyprus. They are present when Brabantio pleads his case before the duke, arguing that Othello has bewitched and stolen his daughter Desdemona. We might imagine that they, like the duke, are not inclined to support Brabantio's suit since, under the present circumstances, Othello's services are urgently required.

**Venice (Duke of Venice)**
The duke of Venice is concerned about the safety of Venice and its interests in Cyprus. He and the Venetian senators have assembled to try and figure out where the Turkish fleet intends to attack. After hearing conflicting reports about Turkish intentions, it is determined that the Turks will attack Cyprus. The duke summons Othello in order to place the defense of Cyprus in his hands. But Othello is being accused by Brabantio of using witchcraft to seduce his daughter. When Brabantio and Othello are brought into the duke's presence, the duke agrees to hear Brabantio's case. Othello counters the charge that he has used witchcraft by relating how he enthralled Desdemona with tales of his suffering and his adventures. When he is done, the duke says, "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.iii.171). After Desdemona confirms what Othello has said to be true, the duke rules against Brabantio, something he may have been less inclined to do on an occasion when Othello's services were not so desperately needed. The duke then tries to repair the rift between Brabantio and the newly wedded couple. He says, "The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief; / He robs himself that spends a bootless grief" (I.iii.208-9). The duke is urging Brabantio to be generous and accept things he cannot change.
Critical Essays: Sample Essay Outlines

• Topic #1

Generally, irony is the literary technique that involves differences between appearance and reality, expectation and result, or meaning and intention. More specifically, verbal irony uses words to suggest the opposite of what is meant. In dramatic irony there is a contradiction between what a character says or thinks and what the audience knows to be true. Finally situational irony refers to events that occur which contradict the expectations of the characters, audience, or readers. Identify the various types of irony used in Othello and explain their significance to the plot.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: In Shakespeare’s Othello, verbal irony, dramatic irony, and situational irony are used to propel the action forward and to intensify the drama as it proceeds.

II. Act I
A. Iago tells Roderigo “I am not what I am.”
B. Iago tells Othello “I lack iniquity / Sometimes to do me service.”
C. Othello discusses how his merits will speak for themselves.
D. Brabantio wants Othello to go to prison for eloping with Desdemona.
E. The invasion of Cyprus by the Turkish fleet causes Othello’s commission to the island.
F. Brabantio’s insistence on how Desdemona was beguiled by Othello versus Iago’s beguiling of Othello.
G. Othello’s comments to the Duke that Iago “is of honesty and trust”

III. Act II
A. The storm destroys the Turkish fleet off the coast of Cyprus.
B. In the humorous praise of women, Iago pretends that he has difficulty imagining ways to praise the various women Desdemona mentions.
C. Othello tells Desdemona “If it were now to die, / ’Twere now to be most happy.”
D. Desdemona responds to Othello with “that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days grow!”
E. Othello proclaims an evening of celebration of victory over the Turkish fleet and his marriage.
F. Othello comments to Cassio, “Iago is most honest.”
G. Iago encourages Cassio to “have a measure to the health of black Othello.”
H. Iago tells Othello that he would “rather have his tongue cut” from his mouth “than it should do offense to Michael Cassio.”
I. Iago urges Cassio to ask Desdemona for help to get reinstated with Othello.

IV. Act III
A. Iago tells Cassio that he will “devise a means to draw the Moor / Out of the way, that your converse and business / May be more free
B. Emilia says that the rift between Othello and Cassio“greives my husband / As if the cause were his.”
C. Desdemona says to Cassio that “thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away.”
D. Iago says to Othello, “My lord, you know I love you.”
E. Iago states to Othello that “men should be what they seem; / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!”
F. Othello comments that “This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds” with reference to Iago.
G. When Desdemona offers to bind Othello’s head with her handkerchief, it falls and Emilia picks it up.
H. Othello tells Iago, “Thou had’st been better have beenborn a dog / Than answer my waked wrath” after
demanding visible proof of Desdemona’s infidelity.
I. Othello tells Desdemona that to lose or give away the handkerchief “were such perdition / As nothing else could match.”
J. Cassio gives Bianca the handkerchief for her to copy the design.

V. Act IV
A. Iago instructs Othello to eavesdrop on a conversation he has with Cassio about Bianca.
B. Bianca enters and chides Cassio for giving her the handkerchief.
C. Lodovico delivers the letter recalling Othello to Venice and appointing Cassio in charge in Cyprus.
D. Emilia says to Othello that “If any wretch have put his in your head” to “Let heaven requite it with the serpent’s curse.”
E. Iago asks Desdemona “How comes this trick upon him?”
F. Emilia suggests that “some eternal villain … devised the slander.
G. Othello tells Desdemona to get “to bed on th’ instant … dismiss your attendant there.”
H. Desdemona sings the “willow” song that preoccupied her mind all day.

VI. Act V
A. Roderigo fails to kill Cassio
B. Othello hears Cassio’s cries.
C. Iago kills Roderigo
D. Bianca enters the fracas and wants to know what is going on.
E. Iago tells Cassio “He that lies here... was my friend.”
F. Iago states that “guiltiness will speak, / Though tongues were out of use.”
G. Othello tells Desdemona that Cassio is dead.
H. Emilia tells Othello that Cassio killed Roderigo.
I. Iago’s final statement is “From this time forth I never will speak word.”

Topic #2
In literature, motivation refers to the reasons that explain or partially explain a character’s thoughts, feelings, actions, or behavior. Motivation results from a combination of personality and circumstances with which he or she must deal. Samuel Taylor Coleridge describes the character of Iago in Shakespeare’s Othello as a “motiveless malignancy,” suggesting that he is a character whose motivation is pure evil. Discuss Iago in terms of the thoughts, feelings, actions, and behavior which result from his experiences.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: Iago is a manifestation of evil from which emanates a malevolent force that grows wider and deeper, destroying everyone in its path as he reveals himself throughout the play.

II. Act I
A. Roderigo responds to Iago with “Thou told’st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.”
B. Iago expresses his opinions as to why Michael Cassio was chosen as Othello’s lieutenant.
C. Iago comments that “In following him, I follow but myself.”
D. Iago urges Roderigo to awaken Brabantio with news of the elopement.
E. Iago presents images of animal lust to Brabantio.
F. Iago does not reveal himself to Brabantio.
G. Iago tells Othello how he had to defend Othello to Brabantio many times.
H. Roderigo threatens to drown himself, but Iago consoles him with promises of Desdemona.
I. Iago tells Roderigo, “Let’s be conjunctive in our revenge.”
III. Act II
A. Iago insists that it is difficult for him to easily imagine the praises for women that Desdemona asks.
B. Iago carefully observes Michael Cassio’s greeting of Desdemona.
C. Iago reveals in an aside that he will “untune” Desdemona and Othello.
D. Iago informs Roderigo of the greeting which Michael Cassio gave to Desdemona.
E. Iago enlists Roderigo in a plan to anger Cassio and provoke him to a quarrel.
F. Iago admits that he suspects Othello of infidelity with Emilia
G. Iago tells Cassio that Othello relieved them from the watch.
H. Iago insists on toasting to Othello with Cassio.
I. Iago informs Montano that Cassio’s weakness is drinking.
J. Iago instigates Roderigo to provoke a quarrel with Cassio.
K. Othello hears Iago’s version of the scuffle.
L. Iago urges Cassio to ask Desdemona for help.

IV. Act III
A. Iago tells Cassio he will keep Othello away as Michael Cassio speaks with Desdemona.
B. Iago engages in conversation with Othello regarding his thoughts.
C. Iago plants thoughts of jealousy in Othello’s mind regarding Cassio and Desdemona.
D. Iago snatches the handkerchief from Emilia.
E. Iago tells Othello he has seen Cassio with the handkerchief.
F. Iago promises to follow through with Othello’s vow for revenge.

V. Act IV
A. Iago feeds Othello with images of lust and love between Cassio and Desdemona.
B. Iago schemes to have Othello overhear a conversation he has with Bianca.
C. Iago encourages close observation of Othello’s behavior after he strikes Desdemona.
D. Iago suggests to Desdemona that Othello’s behavior is “but his humour.”
E. After Roderigo expresses impatience with Iago, he suggests that Rogerigo get involved in the plan to eliminate Michael Cassio by “knocking out his brains.”

VI. Act V
A. Iago expresses his attitude toward Cassio’s and Roderigo’s lives.
B. In the scuffle between Cassio and Roderigo, Iago wounds Cassio.
C. Iago cries for help for Cassio after Lodovico and Gratiano come onto the scene.
D. Iago pretends to search for those responsible for the villainy.
E. Iago kills Roderigo.
F. Bianca is implicated in a plot to kill Cassio.
G. Iago states he will speak no more.

Topic #3

Othello is a play in which many contrasts affect the characters’ ability to discern the difference between reality and illusion. Identify and trace the contrasts between black and white images, love and lost, and honesty and dishonesty as they are presented throughout the play.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: The juxtaposition of images of dark and light, love and lust, and honesty and dishonesty clouds the characters’ perception so much so that they are unable to distinguish the difference between reality and illusion.
II. Light and dark
A. Roderigo refers to Othello as “the thick-lips.”
B. Roderigo awakens Brabantio at night, and Brabantio demands light to seek Desdemona.
C. Iago suggests that Cassio drink a measure to “the black Othello.”
D. Othello refers to Desdemona’s “whiter skin … than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster.”
E. Othello comments “Put out the light, and then put out the light!”

III. Love and lust
A. Iago comments to Brabantio that he’ll have his daughter “covered with a Barbary horse … [his] nephews neigh to [him] and coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans.”
B. Iago refers to Othello and Desdemona as “making the beast with two backs” with reference to the consumption of their marriage.
C. Iago tells Roderigo that when Desdemona’s appetite for Othello fades she will desire Cassio.
D. Iago fills Othello’s mind with various images of animal acts of copulation to rouse his jealousy.
E. Othello tells Emilia he killed his wife because “Cassio did top her.”
F. Desdemona and Othello speak in terms of deep love when they meet in Cyprus.

IV. Honesty and dishonesty
A. Iago reveals to Roderigo “I am not what I am.”
B. Iago tells Othello that he has defended him to Brabantio many times.
C. Roderigo is tricked into thinking that all of Iago’s plans for him will get him to Desdemona.
D. Desdemona believes Iago to be an honest man.
E. Iago tells Cassio to plead his case with Desdemona.
F. Iago tells Othello to eavesdrop on a conversation he has with Cassio.

Critical Essays: Suggested Essay Topics

Act I, Scenes 1-3
1. Explain how Iago uses his power of persuasion with Roderigo, Brabantio, and Othello to create his scheme to undo the Moor.

2. Contrast what Iago says about Othello with what Othello reveals about himself through his own words.

Act II, Scenes 1-3
1. Verbal irony is a dramatic technique by which characters say the opposite of what they mean. Identify examples of verbal irony and explain the difference between what is said and what is meant.

2. In Act II, Iago’s scheme to undo Othello becomes more calculated and involves more victims. Explain the steps he takes to achieve his goal and how he traps his victims.

Act III, Scenes 1-4
1. Identify characters and incidents which provide comic relief as the drama intensifies.

2. Trace the significance of Desdemona’s handkerchief through Act III.

Act IV, Scenes 1-3
1. Describe the changes that occur in Othello during the course of Act IV as Iago increases his attempts to rouse Othello’s jealousy.
2. Defend or refute this statement: Emilia’s opinion about betrayal expresses a contemporary view of the relationship between the sexes.

Act V, Scenes 1-2
1. Describe the rapid series of events which bring about Othello’s demise.

2. Defend or refute this statement: Othello’s suicide is an honorable act.

Criticism: Overview

A. C. Bradley

Bradley presents an overview of Othello, in an attempt to discover what makes this the "most painfully exciting and the most terrible" of Shakespeare's tragedies. He highlights aspects of the play which reinforce its emotional impact: the rapid acceleration of the plot, the intensity of Othello's jealousy, the passive suffering of Desdemona, and the luck and skill involved in Iago's intrigue. According to Bradley, these features combine to produce feelings of "confinement" and "dark fatality" that suggest that the characters cannot escape their destinies. He then discusses three scenes—Othello's striking of Desdemona in IV. i, Othello's treatment of Desdemona as a whore in IV. ii, and her death in V. ii—and maintains that the emotional intensity of these scenes also greatly contributes to the unique, painful quality of Othello. He concludes by noting that the play is less symbolic and more limited in scope than Shakespeare's other tragedies, and as a result, we are left with the "impression that in Othello we are not in contact with the whole of Shakespeare.

What is the peculiarity of Othello? What is the distinctive impression that it leaves? Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, I would answer, not even excepting King Lear, Othello is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible. From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation. Evil is displayed before him, not indeed with the profusion found in King Lear, but forming, as it were, the soul of a single character, and united with an intellectual superiority so great that he watches its advance fascinated and appalled. He sees it, in itself almost irresistible, aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the innocent mistakes of its victims. He seems to breathe an atmosphere as fateful as that of King Lear, but more confined and oppressive, the darkness not of night but of a close-shut murderous room. His imagination is excited to intense activity, but it is the activity of concentration rather than dilation. (pp. 176-77)

Othello is not only the most masterly of the tragedies in point of construction, but its method of construction is unusual. And this method, by which the conflict begins late, and advances without appreciable pause and with accelerating speed to the catastrophe, is a main cause of the painful tension just described. To this may be added that, after the conflict has begun, there is very little relief by way of the ridiculous. Henceforward at any rate Iago's humour never raises a smile. The clown is a poor one; we hardly attend to him and quickly forget him; I believe most readers of Shakespeare, if asked whether there is a clown in Othello, would answer No.

In the second place, there is no subject more exciting than sexual jealousy rising to the pitch of passion; and there can hardly be any spectacle at once so engrossing and so painful as that of a great nature suffering the torment of this passion, and driven by it to a crime which is also a hideous blunder. Such a passion as ambition, however terrible its results, is not itself ignoble; if we separate it in thought from the conditions which make it guilty, it does not appear despicable; it is not a kind of suffering, its nature is active; and therefore we can watch its course without shrinking. But jealousy, and especially sexual jealousy, brings with it a sense of shame and humiliation. For this reason it is generally hidden; if we perceive it we ourselves are
ashamed and turn our eyes away; and when it is not hidden it commonly stirs contempt as well as pity. Nor is this all. Such jealousy as Othello's converts human nature into chaos, and liberates the beast in man; and it does this in relation to one of the most intense and also the most ideal of human feelings. What spectacle can be more painful than that of this feeling turned into a tortured mixture of longing and loathing, the 'golden purity' of passion split by poison into fragments, the animal in man forcing itself into his consciousness in naked grossness, and he writhing before it but powerless to deny it entrance, gasping inarticulate images of pollution, and finding relief only in a bestial thirst for blood? This is what we have to witness in one who was indeed 'great of heart' [V. ii. 361] and no less pure and tender than he was great. And this, with what it leads to, the blow to Desdemona, and the scene where she is treated as the inmate of a brothel, a scene far more painful than the murder scene, is another cause of the special effect of this tragedy.

The mere mention of these scenes will remind us painfully of a third cause; and perhaps it is the most potent of all. I mean the suffering of Desdemona. This is, unless I mistake, the most nearly intolerable spectacle that Shakespeare offers us. For one thing, it is mere suffering; and, ceteris paribus [other things being equal], that is much worse to witness than suffering that issues in action. Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. And the chief reason of her helplessness only makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. I would not challenge Mr. [Algernon Charles] Swinburne's statement [in his Study of Shakespeare] that we pity Othello even more than Desdemona; but we watch Desdemona with more unmitigated distress. We are never wholly uninfluenced by the feeling that Othello is a man contending with another man; but Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.

Turning from the hero and heroine to the third principal character, we observe (what has often been pointed out) that the action and catastrophe of Othello depend largely on intrigue. We must not say more than this. We must not call the play a tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character. Iago's plot is Iago's character in action; and it is built on his knowledge of Othello's character, and could not otherwise have succeeded. Still it remains true that an elaborate plot was necessary to elicit the catastrophe; for Othello was no Leontes [in The Winter's Tale], and his was the last nature to engender such jealousy from itself. Accordingly Iago's intrigue occupies a position in the drama for which no parallel can be found in the other tragedies; the only approach, and that a distant one, being the intrigue of Edmund in the secondary plot of King Lear. Now in any novel or play, even if the persons rouse little interest and are never in serious danger, a skilfully worked intrigue will excite eager attention and suspense. And where, as in Othello, the persons inspire the keenest sympathy and antipathy, and life and death depend on the intrigue, it becomes the source of a tension in which pain almost overpowers pleasure. Nowhere else in Shakespeare do we hold our breath in such anxiety and for so long a time as in the later Acts of Othello.

One result of the prominence of the element of intrigue is that Othello is less unlike a story of private life than any other of the great tragedies. And this impression is strengthened in further ways. In the other great tragedies the action is placed in a distant period, so that its general significance is perceived through a thin veil which separates the persons from ourselves and our own world. But Othello is a drama of modern life; when it first appeared it was a drama almost of contemporary life, for the date of the Turkish attack on Cyprus is 1570. The characters come close to us, and the application of the drama to ourselves (if the phrase may be pardoned) is more immediate than it can be in Hamlet or Lear. Besides this, their fortunes affect us as those of private individuals more than is possible in any of the later tragedies with the exception of Timon. I have not forgotten the Senate, nor Othello's position, nor his service to the State; but his deed and his death have not that influence on the interests of a nation or an empire which serves to idealise, and to remove far from our own sphere, the stories of Hamlet and Macbeth, of Coriolanus and Antony. Indeed he is already superseded at Cyprus when his fate is consummated, and as we leave him no vision rises on us, as in other tragedies, of peace descending on a distracted land.
The peculiarities so far considered combine with others to produce those feelings of oppression, of confinement to a comparatively narrow world, and of dark fatality, which haunt us in reading Othello. In Macbeth the fate which works itself out alike in the external conflict and in the hero's soul, is obviously hostile to evil; and the imagination is dilated both by the consciousness of its presence and by the appearance of supernatural agencies. These ... produce in Hamlet a somewhat similar effect, which is increased by the hero's acceptance of the accidents as a providential shaping of his end. King Lear is undoubtedly the tragedy which comes nearest to Othello in the impression of darkness and fatefulness, and in the absence of direct indications of any guiding power. But in King Lear ... the conflict assumes proportions so vast that the imagination seems, as in [John Milton's] Paradise Lost, to traverse spaces wider than the earth. In reading Othello the mind is not thus distended. It is more bound down to the spectacle of noble beings caught in toils from which there is no escape; while the prominence of the intrigue diminishes the sense of the dependence of the catastrophe on character, and the part played by accident in this catastrophe accentuates the feeling of fate.

This influence of accident is keenly felt in King Lear only once, and at the very end of the play. In Othello, after the temptation has begun, it is incessant and terrible. The skill of Iago was extraordinary, but so was his good fortune. Again and again a chance word from Desdemona, a chance meeting of Othello and Cassio, a question which starts to our lips and which anyone but Othello would have asked, would have destroyed Iago's plot and ended his life. In their stead, Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the moment most favourable to him, Cassio blunders into the presence of Othello only to find him in a swoon, Bianca arrives precisely when she is wanted to complete Othello's deception and incense his anger into fury. All this and much more seems to us quite natural, so potent is the art of the dramatist; but it confounds us with a feeling, such as we experience in [Sophocles'] Oedipus Tyrannus, that for these star-crossed mortals ... there is no escape from fate, and even with a feeling, absent from that play, that fate has taken sides with villainy. It is not surprising, therefore, that Othello should affect us as Hamlet and Macbeth never do, and as King Lear does only in slighter measure. On the contrary, it is marvellous that, before the tragedy is over, Shakespeare should have succeeded in toning down this impression into harmony with others more solemn and serene.

But has he wholly succeeded? Or is there a justification for the fact—a fact it certainly is—that some readers, while acknowledging, of course, the immense power of Othello, and even admitting that it is dramatically perhaps Shakespeare's greatest triumph, still regard it with a certain distaste, or, at any rate, hardly allow it a place in their minds beside Hamlet, King Lear and Macbeth? (pp. 177-83)

To some readers, ... parts of Othello appear shocking or even horrible. They think—if I may formulate their objection—that in these parts Shakespeare has sinned against the canons of art, by representing on the stage a violence or brutality the effect of which is unnecessarily painful and rather sensational than tragic. The passages which thus give offence are probably those already referred to,—that where Othello strikes Desdemona [IV. i. 240], that where he affects to treat her as an inmate of a house of ill-fame [IV. ii. 24-94], and finally the scene of her death.

The issues thus raised ought not to be ignored or impatiently dismissed, but they cannot be decided, it seems to me, by argument. All we can profitably do is to consider narrowly our experience, and to ask ourselves this question: If we feel these objections, do we feel them when we are reading the play with all our force, or only when we are reading it in a half-hearted manner? For, however matters may stand in the former case, in the latter case evidently the fault is ours and not Shakespeare's. And if we try the question thus, I believe we shall find that on the whole the fault is ours. The first, and least important, of the three passages—that of the blow—seems to me the most doubtful. I confess that, do what I will, I cannot reconcile myself with it. It seems certain that the blow is by no means a tap on the shoulder with a roll of paper, as some actors, feeling the repulsiveness of the passage, have made it. It must occur, too, on the open stage. And there is not, I think, a sufficiently overwhelming tragic feeling in the passage to make it bearable. But in the other two scenes the case is different. There, it seems to me, if we fully imagine the inward tragedy in the souls of the persons as we read, the more obvious and almost physical sensations of pain or horror do not appear in their own likeness, and only serve to intensify the tragic feelings in which they are absorbed. Whether this would be so
in the murder-scene if Desdemona had to be imagined as dragged about the open stage (as in some modern performances) may be doubtful; but there is absolutely no warrant in the text for imagining this, and it is also quite clear that the bed where she is stifled was within the curtains, and so, presumably, in part concealed.

Here, then, Othello does not appear to be, unless perhaps at one point, open to criticism, though it has more passages than the other three tragedies where, if imagination is not fully exerted, it is shocked or else sensationaly excited. If nevertheless we feel it to occupy a place in our minds a little lower than the other three (and I believe this feeling, though not general, is not rare), the reason lies not here but in another characteristic, to which I have already referred,—the comparative confinement of the imaginative atmosphere. Othello has not equally with the other three the power of dilating the imagination by vague suggestions of huge universal powers working in the world of individual fate and passion. It is, in a sense, less 'symbolic.' We seem to be aware in it of a certain limitation, a partial suppression of that element in Shakespeare's mind which unites him with the mystical poets and with the great musicians and philosophers. In one or two of his plays, notably in Troilus and Cressida, we are almost painfully conscious of this suppression; we feel an intense intellectual activity, but at the same time a certain coldness and hardness, as though some power in his soul, at once the highest and the sweetest, were for a time in abeyance. In other plays, notably in the Tempest, we are constantly aware of the presence of this power; and in such cases we seem to be peculiarly near to Shakespeare himself. Now this is so in Hamlet and King Lear, and, in a slightly degree, in Macbeth; but it is much less so in Othello. I do not mean that in Othello the suppression is marked, or that, as in Troilus and Cressida, it strikes us as due to some unpleasant mood; it seems rather to follow simply from the design of a play on a contemporary and wholly mundane subject. Still it makes a difference of the kind I have attempted to indicate, and it leaves an impression that in Othello we are not in contact with the whole of Shakespeare. And it is perhaps significant in this respect that the hero himself strikes us as having, probably, less of the poet's personality in him than many characters far inferior both as dramatic creations and as men. (pp. 183-86)


Criticism: Jealousy

D. R. Godfrey

[Godfrey examines the portrayal of jealousy in Othello, determining that it is the cause of evil in the play. The critic exposes the jealousy presented by several characters: Othello, Roderigo, Bianca, and Iago. He compares their irrational behavior to that of Leontes, the jealous husband of Hermoine in The Winter's Tale, and asserts that each displays a form of sexual jealousy. Iago, however, exhibits "an all-encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations." As a result, envious hatred takes possession of his soul, motivates his actions, and turns him into "the most completely villainous character in all literature."]

To proclaim Shakespeare's Othello as a tragedy of jealousy is but to echo the opinion of every critic who ever wrote about it. The jealousy not only of Othello, but of such lesser figures as Roderigo and even Bianca is surely self-evident enough to be taken for granted. And yet, though the jealousy of Othello in particular is invariably mentioned and assumed, it cannot be said that any over-riding importance has on the whole been attributed to it. While Othello may deliver judgement on himself as one,

… not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme;
[V. ii. 345-46]
critical opinion has hardly gone beyond admitting that jealousy itself has been a contributing factor, of far less importance, for example, than the diabolical "evidence" manufactured by Iago. Until we are left with the conclusion, or at least implication, that had Othello not been jealous, the tragedy would still have occurred. This taking for granted or even belittling of the factor of jealousy in Othello, is the more surprising in that Shakespeare through Iago and Emilia has taken pains to identify for our benefit the special nature of jealousy, and to call particular attention to the element of irrationality that accompanies it. Jealousy, warns Iago, in order to awaken it in Othello,

… is the green-ey'd monster, which doth mock
That meat it feeds on.
[III. iii. 166-67]

And the same essence of irrationality is later confirmed by Emilia when, in response to Desdemona's pathetically rational "Alas the day! I never gave him cause" [III. iv. 158], she bluntly retorts:

But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster,
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
[III. iv. 159-62]

The coincidence of view is remarkable, and presumably intentional, and clearly reflects more than the individual judgement of Emilia or Iago. Moreover the truth of the judgement is demonstrated again and again throughout the play wherever jealousy is manifest. The jealous person, whether Othello, Roderigo, Bianca or, as we shall attempt to show, Iago himself, is revealed as one who, from the moment that jealousy strikes, divorces himself or herself from rationality. Jealousy, once awakened, becomes self-perpetuating, self-intensifying, and where no justifying evidence for it exists, the jealous person under the impulse of an extraordinary perversity will continue to manufacture it, inventing causes, converting airy trifles into "confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ," [III. iii. 323-24]. Any attempt, in other words, to interpret jealousy rationally, to look for logic in the mental processes of a jealous person, will be unavailing. For we will be dealing invariably and in at least some measure with a monster, a form of possession, an insanity. (pp. 207-08)

[In his Shakespearean Tragedy, A. C. Bradley argues] that until Iago leaves him alone to the insinuating thoughts he has planted in him [III. iii. 257] Othello is not jealous at all. However, Othello's immediately ensuing soliloquy clearly indicates how deeply his faith in Desdemona has already been undermined, and though at the sight of her he rallies,

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,  
I'll not believe it,  
[III. iii. 278-79]

recovery is momentary, and when he reappears only minutes later, Iago does not need his "Ha, ha, false to me" [III. iii. 333] to recognize the symptoms of a consuming jealousy that all the drowsy syrups of the world can never alleviate. Othello may appear to be resisting insinuation, to recover from the shock of Iago's "Ha, ha, I like not that" [III. iii. 35], and the sight of Cassio stealing away "so guilty-like" [III. iii. 39], but it is soon evident enough that he has not recovered, that the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity has already invaded his mind. And … as with Leontes [in The Winter's Tale], the passage from initial doubt to the madness of absolute certainty, is incredibly rapid. The action of the whole "Temptation Scene" [III. iii], as it is sometimes called, is continuous, perhaps some twenty-five minutes of stage time, and by the end of it Othello is a man utterly possessed, calling out for blood and vengeance, authorizing Iago to murder Cassio, and resolving "In
Already present meanwhile in the initial reactions of Othello is of course that most encompassing of all the characteristics of the jealous man, a consuming irrationality. The presence of Iago with his diabolical insinuations tends somewhat to mask the insanity of Othello, to present him as a man reacting logically in the face of accumulating evidence, indeed of proof. By the end of the Temptation Scene, however, there is still no more than the slenderest of evidence, a handkerchief that Iago may have seen Cassio wipe his beard with, and Cassio's alleged, and, as Iago himself admits, inconclusive dream. Leontes, only after a considerable interval of time and after sending to the Oracle for confirmation puts Hermione on trial for her life. Othello, however, with nothing but Iago's word to go on, and without even seeking to confront either Desdemona or Cassio, passes sentence of death. Later, it is true, circumstantial evidences multiply: Desdemona's tacticless pleading for Cassio, Iago's statement of Cassio's confession, Bianca's returning of the handkerchief to Cassio before Othello's eyes; but it is strangely apparent that Othello's conviction of Desdemona's guilt is confirmed rather than established by such "evidences". In the exchanges between Iago and Othello at the beginning of Act IV it is revealed that the handkerchief had become so incidental to his conviction that he had actually forgotten it [IV. i. 10-22]. In the same way, when at length confrontation comes between himself and Emilia and subsequently with Desdemona, it is apparent that no rational enquiry, no seeking out of evidence is to be undertaken. Emilia's indignant denials are met with:

She says enough, yet she's a simple bawd
That cannot say as much.
[IV. ii. 20-1]

And Desdemona, assigned the horrible role of a whore in a brothel, is not to be rationally interrogated but rhetorically denounced, on the assumption, of which there is not the slightest sign, that she is fully aware of her guilt. Perhaps in no other scene is the impregnable insanity of Othello so fully evident.

Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidences are certainly there and must be allowed to provide in some measure a logical justification for Othello's "case" against Desdemona. Against that case however must always be set one unanswerable factor the effect of which is to demolish it utterly, the factor of time. With Desdemona dead, Othello can proclaim calmly and positively,

'Tis pitiful, but yet Iago knows
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame
A thousand times committed.
[V. ii. 210-12]

Whereas it is obvious to anyone not wholly bereft of reason that the time for one single act of infidelity, let alone a rhetorical thousand, has simply not existed. "What place, what time, what form, what likelihood?" [IV. ii. 138] demands the practical Emilia, and of course the questions are unanswerable.

This very problem of the time factor in Othello has been greatly debated. Since Othello and Desdemona left Venice immediately after their marriage, and since Cassio and Desdemona were on different ships, and since but one night had passed on Cyprus, a night that Othello and Desdemona had spent together, when indeed could the thousand adulteries have occurred? And how could the sheer impossibility of Desdemona's multiple
infidelities never have presented itself to Othello's mind? Various familiar explanations have been attempted: that the text as it has come down to us is incomplete and that the indication of an interval of time after the arrival on Cyprus has been lost: that Shakespeare in effect is playing a trick on his audience on the valid assumption that they will not notice the time discrepancy anyway: that Shakespeare deliberately adopted a double time scheme, involving a background of "long time" against a foreground of "short time", the latter to accommodate the inconsistencies in Iago's plot against Othello, and his need to bring it to a speedy conclusion.

The respective merits of these various explanations have been copiously debated. Common to all of them is the reluctance of critics to assume that Iago, a supremely clever man, would ever have allowed his whole plot to depend on Othello's unlikely failure to realise the obvious, namely that the infidelities of which Desdemona stands accused could not have happened because there had been no time for them. Iago, it is argued, would never have taken such a risk; and so we, as well as Othello, are being required to assume that in some way or other time for a thousand shameful acts had in fact existed. I would suggest, however, that we cannot so assume, and are indeed not being asked to do so. For Iago knew, and we should realise, that by the time he felt it safe to proceed from hints and insinuations to firm accusations of infidelity, Othello would no longer be himself, but a quite different person possessed by the eclipsing madness of jealousy. Certainly we must agree that there are two time schemes in Othello, a long and a short, but equally each must be seen to operate within its own distinct world: on the one hand the long time world of everyday normality, on the other a short time, indeed a timeless universe, in which jealousy, divorced from reality, through distortion, falsification and sheer invention creates a nightmare reality of its own.

It may still be argued, of course that the degree of Othello's irrationality manifest in his blindness to the time factor, is excessive, unrealistic, and that Iago for all his insight and daring would not have taken so great a risk. We must assume however that Shakespeare as always, knew what he was doing and presenting, and that art, the art of the theatre in particular, must concern itself with the archetypal, the universal, with that which is necessarily larger, more extreme than in life. And surely we must take into account that elsewhere in Othello, in the case of Bianca, the refusal of the jealous person to be bound by the rationality of time is once again drawn to our attention. Bianca, whose jealousy over Cassio motivates her every word and action, reproaches him on her first appearance with an alleged seven days and nights of neglect:

What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?
Eightscore eight hours, and lovers' absent hours,
More tedious than the dial, eightscore times?
[III. iv. 173-75]

The time here could hardly be more specifically stated, and yet, if we do not postulate the impossibility of an interval of almost a week between scenes three and four of Act III, the alleged duration of Cassio's neglect cannot be accepted. Act II begins with Cassio's arrival on Cyprus, and from this point to the moment of his encounter with Bianca the action on stage is continuous, and no more than a night and two days have elapsed before us. Once again it would seem that the irrationality of jealousy extending even into the reckoning of time is being demonstrated.

No less irrational, and no less typical of extreme jealousy, is the determination of Othello, as of Leontes, to destroy love through the anodyne of a deliberate cultivation of hatred. Here we must recognize that Othello, newly married, overwhelmed with relief to find Desdemona safe on Cyprus, has attained to an intensity of love deeper than that of Leontes for Hermione:

O my soul's joy,
… If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute,
That not another comfort, like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
[II. i. 184, 189-93]

Without hesitation, when jealousy strikes, Leontes achieves the transition from love to hate, but for Othello the process will be long drawn out, intermittent, subject to agonizing oscillations. The climax comes following the scene of final "proof", when Bianca has thrown the incriminating handkerchief back at Cassio, before Othello's eyes. The proof is not needed, for Othello's assumption of Desdemona's guilt has long been absolute, unassailable. On the other hand, love, or some remnant of it, still remains, and the moment has come, as Iago realises, for its final obliteration. Again and again, as Othello swings away in the dying agonies of love, Iago savagely recalls him:

Othello: … a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!

Iago: Nay, you must forget.

Othello: And let her rot, and perish, and be
damned to-night, for she shall not live; no, my heart
is turn'd to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my
hand: O, the world hath not a sweeter creature,
she might lie by an emperor's side, and command
him tasks.

Iago: Nay, that's not your way.

Othello: Hang her, I do but say what she is: so
delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, O,
she will sing the savageness out of a bear; of so
high and plenteous wit and invention!

Iago: She's the worse for all this.
[IV. i. 178-91]

Iago, the very voice of jealousy itself, would appear to succeed. Desdemona is smothered in the bed she had contaminated, and hatred's consummation is achieved. Yet it could be argued in Othello's case, in contrast to that of Leontes, that love is never wholly obliterated. The insane grip of jealousy is such that Othello can no longer doubt his wife's guilt, but he can act against it finally only by assuming the mask of impersonal justice:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
[V. ii. 6]

And we may even wonder whether Othello, still agonizing over the beauty he must destroy, could ever have sustained his assumed and precarious role of just executioner, had not Desdemona's bewilderment and terror, interpreted as prevarication, provoked him to one last paroxysm of rage and hatred.

For a while, beyond the point it had set itself to achieve, jealousy continues to sustain its victim. But the instrument has served its deadly purpose, and can be discarded. As suddenly and totally as Leontes, Othello is abandoned to the hideous and incredulous realisation of what he has done. One moment of explanation, of truth, from Emilia is now enough. The handkerchief—
She gave it Cassio? no, alas, I found it,  
And did give't my husband.  
[V. ii. 230-31]

Othello, in the full vortex of jealousy, had already heard the truth from Emilia and facilely rejected it, "She's but a simple bawd that could not say as much" [IV. ii. 20-1], but now the vortex is past, the possession ending and truth, with the completeness and instantaneousness that is jealousy's final characteristic, once more assumes control.

While Othello and Leontes, and also Bianca, present jealousy in its most characteristic form, it must be recognized that other forms and manifestations of this most devastating of human emotions are possible. At least two such variations on the play's basic theme of jealousy are to be found in Othello, the first of them presented by Roderigo. That Roderigo is jealous first of Othello and then of Cassio cannot be doubted, and Iago, before using him against Cassio, is careful to heighten in him the motivation of jealousy:

Didst thou not see her paddle  
with the palm of his hand?…  
Lechery, by this hand: an index and  
prologue to the history of lust and foul  
thoughts: they met so near with their  
licks, that their breaths embrac'd together.  
[II. i. 253-54, 257-60]

Thus primed and sustained by Iago, Roderigo overcomes his native timidity to the point of provoking the drunken Cassio on guard duty, and later of undertaking his murder. Only the irrationality of a jealous man, we might infer, could explain behaviour so savagely abnormal, could account also for that ludicrous readiness to go on accepting Iago's word, all evidence to the contrary, that Desdemona might still be his. It could perhaps be objected that Roderigo is not so much jealous as simply and deeply in love, as witnessed in particular by his uncritical idealising attitude towards Desdemona, his impregnable devotion. Surely, if jealous, he would have availed himself of the jealous man's most characteristic anodyne, a saving hatred. Need we in fact go any further than Iago in his assessment of Roderigo as one turned wrong side out by love? The answer must undoubtedly be that whatever Roderigo's love may have been at the outset, it has, thanks chiefly to the machinations of Iago, deteriorated, taken on elements of the irrational and ultimately of the diabolical; and to this deterioration jealousy has in large measure contributed. Roderigo, clutching at the straws of hope reached out to him by Iago, to the extent of selling all his land and following the Cyprus wars, has clearly ceased to act and react sanely. And when, quite definitely now under the compulsion of jealousy, he nerves himself to secure Cassio's dismissal and eventually to attempt his murder, he has reached a lower moral level than Othello, who can at least persuade himself that he is the instrument of justice. To the extent, then, of his irrationality and ultimate diabolism Roderigo is at one in jealousy with an Othello or a Leontes. On the other hand his jealousy, unlike theirs, proceeds from a love that has never been requited, and the form of his madness is to persist in hope of an ultimate possession. For him the cuckold's simple anodyne of hatred and vengeance is not available.

The second and final variation on the play's central theme of jealousy is to be found, it is suggested, in Iago. The traditional association of jealousy with sexual passion or possessiveness, must not obscure the fact that other kinds of jealousy, no less virulent in operation, are to be found; although sexual jealousy, his suspicion of the involvement of both Othello and Cassio with his wife, is also a factor in Iago's motivation. Far more, however, than suspicion over a wife he clearly does not love or value very highly, are obviously at work in Iago and must be reckoned with if his extraordinary and diabolical behaviour is to be understood. The problem of Iago's motivation is certainly a major one, no less baffling than the problem of Hamlet's delay. A whole spectrum of explanations has accordingly been attempted, ranging from the famous "motiveless
malignity” of [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, to simplistic assertions that Iago's motives, sexual jealousy and envy at Cassio's appointment, are perfectly adequate to explain him [see his Shakespearean Criticism, edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor]. That Iago is indeed a jealous and envious man has of course been generally recognized; such recognition, however, can certainly be taken further, in particular in terms of those special characteristics of jealousy we have been attempting to establish.

That certain recent events have precipitated a state of jealousy in Iago is revealed to us in the first act of the play; he is jealous of Cassio over the lieutenancy which he considered his due, jealous of Othello whom he suspects of having had a liaison with his wife. We can assume that the effect of these experiences, and especially the former, has been devastating, to the point of working a profound and sudden change in Iago, a virtual metamorphosis. That he is indeed villainous becomes clear to us by the end of the first act, but we can hardly believe that he has always been so, and that his universal reputation for honesty has been based over a long period of time on calculation and bluff. That a great change has been involved is further indicated to us by the particular way in which Iago is made to announce his age: "I ha' look'd upon the world for four times seven years" [I. iii. 311-12]—a statement that would reveal, to all events to a Shakespearean audience, that here is a man arrived at one of the great seven year climacterics [critical stages], a time especially liable to crisis and change. A far reaching change, precipitated in particular by Cassio's appointment and to a lesser extent by the apparently malicious evidence presented to him of an affair between Othello and Emilia, can certainly be postulated; and thus a new Iago confronts us, jealous, embittered, vengeful, viciously repudiating the honesty and loyalty that have led him nowhere.

It is clear, however, that the jealousy by which Iago stands possessed, as totally as an Othello or a Leontes, is of a special, a more comprehensive kind. It contains elements of sexual provocation, but it is directed also and even more powerfully against all those whose lives continue to be motivated, as his had once been, by the conventions of love, trust, honesty and goodness, and who continue on such a basis to be happy and successful, where he himself has suffered and failed. Upon them he will proceed to avenge himself, creating out of their now hated and envied love and goodness "the net that shall enmesh 'em all" [II. iii. 362].

Once the fact and comprehensive nature of Iago's jealousy has been established, all his subsequent thoughts and acts become, by reason of their very strangeness and irrationality, intelligible. Many attempts, for example, have been made to explain in rational terms the curious "motive hunting" of Iago displayed in his first two soliloquies. Here he conjures up, or so it would appear, motive after motive for proceeding in his plot against Cassio and Othello: desire to get Cassio's place, suspicion of his wife's infidelity first with Othello and then with Cassio, his own love for Desdemona. Yet there is an element of strangeness in his way of formulating his motives, as though the motive itself rather than the degree of his belief in it were at issue. What could be stranger, for example, than the irrational combination of belief and disbelief contained in his statement on the affair between Emilia and Othello:

I know not if't be true;
Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do, as if for surety.
[I. iii. 388-90]

Also, it is hard for us to suppose that Iago really did suspect Cassio with his "nightcap", or that he was really himself in love with Desdemona. And no less strange is the fact that Iago, having formulated all his motives and proceeded into action, presumably on the strength of them, never once refers to any of them again. The irrational element in the motive hunting is certainly evident, and this, rather than the validity of the motives themselves, is what must concern us. Iago, enumerating his motives and persuading himself to believe them, only to demonstrate their irrelevance by forgetting them later, is certainly not thinking as a rational man; on the other hand, and ironically, he is reacting entirely in accordance with his own remarkable understanding of the nature of jealousy. Jealousy, as he later informs Othello, is that green eyed monster, mocking the food it
feeds on. And where there is no such food, what must the jealous man do but persuade himself of its existence, endowing trifles light as air, if need be, with all the certainty of holy writ. The truth or otherwise of the reasons Iago dredges up to justify his jealous hatred of Cassio and Othello is quite irrelevant; they are the food his jealousy needs and that his intellect must provide.

Equally irrational, we must inevitably conclude, is the totality of Iago's behaviour, the way in which, with incredible persistence and ingenuity, he carries out his lunatic plot against Cassio and Othello. By way of rationalization, it is sometimes suggested that Iago starting out with no more than a vague spiteful desire to create mischief, underestimates the passions he is to awaken, and so becomes the unwilling victim of his own machinations. Certainly he is soon caught up in his own web, committed to the lies he has disseminated, unable to retreat; on the other hand he betrays no sign of ever wanting to do so, and views his own successes first against Cassio and then Othello with uninhibited satisfaction. Never once does the intrinsic insanity of what he is doing break through to him, the realisation, for example, that all the witnesses against him, Cassio, Desdemona, Roderigo, Emilia, Bianca, must somehow be killed if he himself is not sooner or later to be confronted with the awakened wrath of Othello. The truly astounding cleverness of Iago must not be allowed to blind us to the absolute stupidity, indeed the madness, of what he is attempting to do.

Iago, we must conclude, even more so than a Leontes or an Othello, confronts us as the very archetype of the jealous man. For here is an all encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations. In this connection it is pertinent, by way of conclusion, to consider jealousy as in fact the antithesis of love, as containing within itself the very essence of evil. Iago in the list of actors in the Folio [the first collected edition of Shakespeare's plays] is described as a villain, and in the first act of the play he fully reveals himself as such. However, we have suggested that by reason of his universal reputation for honesty he could not always have been evil but had become so quite suddenly under the impact of jealousy. As a result a consuming, envious hatred of the goodness and love in those who had, as he saw it, betrayed him, takes possession of his soul. Evidences of Iago's hatred of love are everywhere in the play, as for example in his bitter reaction to the outpouring of love between Othello and Desdemona at the moment of their reunion on Cyprus:

    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]

Or again, there is the extremely revealing moment when he recognizes in Cassio the continuation of all those qualities that he himself has irrevocably lost:

    If Cassio do remain,
    He has a daily beauty in his life,
    That makes me ugly.
    [V. i. 18-20]

That Iago is a villain, perhaps the most completely villainous character in all literature, is only too evident, and that his villainy originates in, is indeed synonymous with jealousy must also be recognized. By definition the supremely evil man appears as one in whom hatred of love and goodness is carried to the point of containing within itself the desire to reach out and destroy the loving and the good. Not all men of course, fortunately enough, surrender to jealousy with the absoluteness of an Iago, but the implication of Othello is that there are such men bearing latent within themselves as a kind of fate a terrible capacity for evil. "God's above all", declares Cassio in a moment of drunken insight; "and there be souls that must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved". To which Iago with tragic irony replies, "It is true, good Lieutenant" [II. iii. 103-05].
That Iago is indeed a damned soul, one predestined by his own intrinsic nature to eventual damnation, is made manifest to us in a number of ways, most frequently by what we might call his conscious diabolism. Iago, in reaction against his former honesty which has failed and betrayed him, dedicates himself in a spirit of jealous revenge to honesty's opposite, evil. Consciously and deliberately he allies himself with the powers of darkness, invoking Hell and night in his first soliloquy and later, after mocking his own "honesty" in advising Cassio to seek Desdemona's help, coining right into the open with devastating explicitness:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will their blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now.
[II. iii. 350-53]

A Shakespearean, witchcraft-conscious audience would have no difficulty in accepting such diabolism as fact, in recognizing Iago as one possessed, glorying in his identification with evil spiritual powers. For them, as he must be for us if we are to understand him, Iago is indeed a "demi-devil", one who can, rhetorically at least, be thought of as possessing the cloven hoof. Equally indicative of diabolism, of the way in which Iago serves and is in turn assisted by the powers of evil, is the disturbing and consistent "run of luck" that he is made to enjoy in carrying out his plans. He causes Roderigo to provoke Cassio on guard, but could not foresee that Cassio in his rage would attack and severely wound Montano. He could advise Cassio to seek the intercession of Desdemona, but could not anticipate her naive importunity or the luckless moments when she should manifest it. Nor could he anticipate that the fatal handkerchief would come into his hands, or that Bianca in a jealous fit would throw it back at Cassio while Othello watched. All this would be sensed in some measure by Shakespeare's audience as indicating the involvement of evil beings, ascendant for the moment, and possessed with a jealous hatred of love and goodness just as their instrument, Iago, is himself possessed.

The close association between evil and jealousy is a dominant issue in Othello, almost what the whole play is about; until we are left with the conclusion that there can scarcely be an evil act for which envy or jealousy is not in some degree or wholly responsible. The outcome for love and goodness and innocence in Othello is almost unendurably tragic; yet tragedy, as always in Shakespeare, is never allowed the final word. Iago the destroyer is by himself destroyed. Jealousy, self-harming, irrational, demonstrates once again the intrinsic instability of evil, the ultimate impotence of the jealous gods. (pp. 210-19)


**Criticism: Race**

**Ruth Cowhig**

[Cowhig provides background on blacks in England during Shakespeare's time, stressing the use of racial stereotypes in the dramas of the period. Observing that black people were typically depicted as stock villains, she suggests that Shakespeare's presentation of the noble, dignified Othello as the hero of a tragedy must have been startling to Elizabethan audiences. Cowhig also examines how several characters in the play, especially Iago, are racially prejudiced. Iago's racism is the source of his hatred of Othello, she claims, and he plays on the prejudices of other characters to turn them against the Moor. Importantly, Cowhig emphasizes that, although Shakespeare consistently challenges stereotypes with his depiction of Othello, he also demonstrates that, in a white society, the Moor's color isolates him and makes him vulnerable.]

It is difficult to assess the reactions and attitudes of people in sixteenth-century Britain to the relatively few blacks living amongst them. Their feelings would certainly be very mixed: strangeness and mystery producing
a certain fascination and fostering a taste for the exotic: on the other hand prejudice and fear, always easily aroused by people different from ourselves, causing distrust and hostility. This hostility would be encouraged by the widespread belief in the legend that blacks were descendants of Ham in the Genesis story, punished for sexual excess by their blackness. Sexual potency was therefore one of the attributes of the prototype black. Other qualities associated with black people were courage, pride, guilelessness, credulity and easily aroused passions—the list found in John Leo's *The Geographical History of Africa*, a book written in Arabic early in the sixteenth century and translated into English in 1600. Contemporary attitudes may have been more influenced by literary works such as this than by direct experience; but recently the part played by such direct contacts has been rediscovered. The scholarly and original study *[Othello's Countrymen]* by Eldred Jones of these contacts and their effects on Renaissance drama has transformed contemporary attitudes.

Black people were introduced into plays and folk dancing in mediaeval England and later, during the sixteenth century, they often appeared in the more sophisticated court masques. In these, the blackness was at first suggested by a very fine lawn [linen fabric] covering the faces, necks, arms and hands of the actors. Then black stockings, masks and wigs were used; such items are mentioned in surviving lists of properties [theater "props"]'). These characters were mainly valued for the exotic aesthetic effects which their contrasting colour provided. The culmination of this tradition can be seen in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* in 1605, which he produced in answer to Queen Anne's request that the masquers should be 'black-mores at first'. The theme is based upon the longing of the black daughters of Niger to gain whiteness and beauty. This surely contradicts the idea that Elizabethans and Jacobeaners were not conscious of colour and had no prejudice: the desirability of whiteness is taken for granted!

Elizabethan drama also used Moorish characters for visual effects and for their association with strange and remote countries. In [Christopher] Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, for instance, the three Moorish kings play little part in the plot, and have no individual character. Their main contribution to the play is in adding to the impression of power and conquest by emphasising the extent of Tamburlaine's victories. Their blackness also provides a variety of visual effects in the masques. Marlowe's plays reflect the curiosity of his contemporaries about distant countries, and must have whetted the appetites of his audiences for war and conquest; but the black characters are seen from the outside and have no human complexity. (pp. 1-2)

Only as we recognise the familiarity of the figure of the black man as villain in Elizabethan drama can we appreciate what must have been the startling impact on Shakespeare's audience of a black hero of outstanding qualities in his play *Othello*. Inevitably we are forced to ask questions which we cannot satisfactorily answer. Why did Shakespeare choose a black man as the hero of one of his great tragedies? What experience led the dramatist who had portrayed the conventional stereotype in Aaron [in *Titus Andronicus*] in 1590 to break completely with tradition ten years later? Had Shakespeare any direct contact with black people? Why did he select the tale of Othello from the large number of Italian stories available to him?

We cannot answer such questions with certainty, but we may speculate. Until the publication of Eldred Jones' study, *Othello's Countrymen*, in 1965, it was generally assumed that Shakespeare depended only on literary sources for his black characters. Although the presence of black people in England is well documented, it went unrecognised. There are two main sources of information. One is [Richard] Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*, the huge collection of narratives of Elizabethan sailors and traders which Hakluyt collected and published in twelve volumes. Volumes VI and XI describe voyages during which black men from West Africa were taken aboard, brought back to England, and afterwards used as interpreters on subsequent voyages. Later, between 1562 and 1568, [John] Hawkins had the unhappy distinction of being the first of the English gentleman slave-traders; as well as bringing 'blackamoors' to England, he sold hundreds of black slaves to Spain.

The other evidence is in the series of royal proclamations and state papers which call attention to the 'great number of Negroes and blackamoors' in the realm, 'of which kinde of people there are all-ready here too
manye’. They were regarded by Queen Elizabeth as a threat to her own subjects ‘in these hard times of dearth’. Negotiations were carried on between the Queen and Casper van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, to cancel her debt to him for transporting between two and three hundred English prisoners from Spain and Portugal back to England by allowing him to take up a similar number of unwanted black aliens—presumably to sell them as slaves. Although the correspondence shows that the deal never materialised, since the ‘owners’ of these ‘blackamoors’ refused to give them up, it is clear that there were several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and landed gentry, or working in London taverns. (pp. 4-5)

Thus the sight of black people must have been familiar to Londoners. London was a very busy port, but still a relatively small and overcrowded city, so Shakespeare could hardly have avoided seeing them. What thoughts did he have as he watched their faces, men uprooted from their country, their homes and families? I cannot help thinking of Rembrandt’s moving study of The Two Negroes painted some sixty years later, which expresses their situation poignantly. The encounter with real blacks on the streets of London would have yielded a sense of their common humanity, which would have conflicted with the myths about their cultural, sexual and religious ‘otherness’ found in the travel books. The play between reality and myth informs Titus Andronicus: Shakespeare presents Aaron as a demon, but at the end of the play suddenly shatters the illusion of myth by showing Aaron to be a black person with common feelings of compassion and fatherly care for his child. In Othello too there is conscious manipulation of reality and myth: Othello is presented initially (through the eyes of Iago and Roderigo) as a dangerous beast, before he reveals himself to be of noble, human status, only to degenerate later to the condition of bloodthirsty and irrational animalism. It is surely not surprising that Shakespeare, the dramatist whose sympathy for the despised alien upsets the balance of the otherwise ‘unrealistic’ The Merchant of Venice should want to create a play about a kind of black man not yet seen on the English stage; a black man whose humanity is eroded by the cunning and racism of whites.

Shakespeare's choice of a black hero for his tragedy must have been deliberate. His direct source was an Italian tale from [Geraldi] Cinthio's Hecatommithi (1565); he followed this tale in using the love between a Moor and a young Venetian girl of high birth as the basis of his plot, but in little else. The original story is crude and lacking in subtlety. Cinthio, in accordance with the demands of the time, expresses concern that his tale should have a moral purpose. He gives it as recommending that young people should not marry against the family's wishes, and especially not with someone separated from them by nature, heaven and mode of life. Such a moral has nothing to do with Shakespeare's play, except in so far as he uses it ironically, so his choice of the tale remains obscure. Perhaps he regretted his creation of the cruel and malevolent Aaron, and found himself imagining the feelings of proud men, possibly of royal descent in their own countries, humiliated and degraded as slaves. Whatever his intentions may have been, we have to take seriously the significance of Othello's race in our interpretation of the play. This is all the more important because teachers will find it largely ignored by critical commentaries.

The first effect of Othello's blackness is immediately grasped by the audience, but not always by the reader. It is that he is placed in isolation from the other characters from the very beginning of the play. This isolation is an integral part of Othello's experience constantly operative even if not necessarily at a conscious level; anyone black will readily appreciate that Othello's colour is important for our understanding of his character. Even before his first entry we are forced to focus our attention on his race: the speeches of Iago and Roderigo in the first scene are full of racial antipathy. Othello is 'the thick lips' [I. i. 66], 'an old black ram' [I. i. 88], 'a lascivious Moor' [I. i. 126] and 'a Barbary horse' [I. i. 111-12], and 'he is making the beast with two backs' [cf. I. i. 116-17] with Desdemona. The language is purposely offensive and sexually coarse, and the animal images convey, as they always do, the idea of someone less than human. Iago calculates on arousing in Brabantio all the latent prejudice of Venetian society, and he succeeds. To Brabantio the union is 'a treason of the blood' [I. i. 169], and he feels that its acceptance will reduce Venetian statesmen to 'bondslaves and pagans' [I. ii. 99].

Brabantio occupies a strong position in society. He
is much beloved
And hath in his effect a voice potential
As double as the Duke's
[I. ii. 12-14]

according to Iago. Although he represents a more liberal attitude than Iago's, at least on the surface, his attitude is equally prejudiced. He makes Othello's meetings with Desdemona possible by entertaining him in his own home, but his reaction to the news of the elopement is predictable. He is outraged that this black man should presume so far, and concludes that he must have used charms and witchcraft since otherwise his daughter could never 'fall in love with what she feared to look on' [I. iii. 98]. To him the match is 'against all rules of nature' [I. iii. 101], and when he confronts Othello his abuse is as bitter as Iago's.

But before this confrontation, the audience has seen Othello and we have been impressed by two characteristics. First his pride:

I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege.
[I. ii. 21-2]

and secondly, his confidence in his own achievements and position:

My services which I have done the Signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints.
[I. ii. 18-19]

It is hard to overestimate the reactions of a Renaissance audience to this unfamiliar black man, so noble in bearing and so obviously master of the situation. But however great Othello's confidence, his colour makes his vulnerability plain. If the state had not been in danger, and Othello essential to its defence, Brabantio's expectation of support from the Duke and senate would surely have been realised. He is disappointed; the Duke treats Othello as befits his position as commander-in-chief, addressing him as 'valiant Othello'. The only support Brabantio receives is from the first senator, whose parting words, 'Adieu, brave Moor, Use Desdemona well' [I. iii. 291], while not unfriendly, reveal a superior attitude. Would a senator have so advised a newly married general if he had been white and equal?

Desdemona's stature in the play springs directly from Othello's colour. Beneath a quiet exterior lay the spirited independence which comes out in her defence of her marriage before the Senate. She has resisted the pressures of society to make an approved marriage, shunning 'The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation' [I. ii. 68]. Clearly, Brabantio had exerted no force: he was no Capulet [in Romeo and Juliet]. But Desdemona was well aware of the seriousness of her decision to marry Othello: 'my downright violence and storm of fortune' [I. ill. 249] she calls it. Finally she says that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' [I. iii. 252]: obviously the audience, conditioned by prejudice, had to make the effort to overcome, with her, the tendency to associate Othello's black face with evil, or at least with inferiority.

It is made clear that the marriage between Othello and Desdemona is fully consummated. Desdemona is as explicit as decorum allows:

If I be left behind
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for why I love him are bereft me.
[I. iii. 255-57]
Othello, on the other hand, disclaims the heat of physical desire when asking that she should go with him to Cyprus:

I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat—the young affects
In me defunct.
[I. iii. 261-64]

These speeches relate directly to Othello's colour. Desdemona has to make it clear that his 'sooty bosom' (her father's phrase) is no obstacle to desire; while Othello must defend himself against the unspoken accusations, of the audience as well as of the senators, because of the association of sexual lust with blackness.

In Act III, Scene iii, often referred to as the temptation scene, Othello's faith in Desdemona is gradually undermined by Iago's insinuations, and he is eventually reduced by jealousy to an irrational madness. Iago's cynical cunning plays upon Othello's trustfulness:

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.
[I. iii. 399-400]

The spectacle of Othello's disintegration is perhaps the most painful in the whole Shakespeare canon: and Iago's destructive cruelty has seemed to many critics to be inadequately motivated. They have spoken of 'motiveless malignity' and 'diabolic intellect', sometimes considering Iago's to be the most interesting character in the play. I think this is an unbalanced view, resulting from the failure to recognise racial issues. Iago's contempt for Othello, despite his grudging recognition of his qualities, his jealousy over Cassio's 'preferment', and the gnawing hatred which drives him on are based upon an arrogant racism. He harps mercilessly upon the unnaturalness of the marriage between Othello and Desdemona:

Not to affect many proposed matches,
Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
Whereeto we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.
[III. iii. 229-33]

The exclamation of disgust and the words 'smell' and 'foul' reveal a phobia so obvious that it is strange that it is often passed over. The attack demolishes Othello's defences because this kind of racial contempt exposes his basic insecurity as an alien in a white society. His confidence in Desdemona expressed in 'For she had eyes, and chose me' [I. iii. 189], changes to the misery of

Haply for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have….
[III. iii. 263-65]

This is one of the most moving moments in the play. Given Iago's hatred and astuteness in exploiting other people's weaknesses, which we see in the plot he sets for Cassio, the black Othello is easy game. We are watching the baiting of an alien who cannot fight back on equal terms.
Othello's jealous madness is the more terrifying because of the noble figure he presented in the early scenes, when he is addressed as 'brave Othello' and 'our noble and valiant general' [II. ii. 1], and when proud self-control is his essential quality; he refuses to be roused to anger by Brabantio and Roderigo: 'Keep up your bright swords for the dew will rust them' [I. ii. 58]. After his breakdown we are reminded by Ludovico of his previous moral strengths and self-control: 'Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake?' [IV. i. 265-66]. Thus the portrait is of a man who totally contradicts the contemporary conception of the black man as one easily swayed by passion. He is the most attractive of all Shakespeare's soldier heroes: one who has achieved high rank entirely on merit. His early history given in Desdemona's account of his wooing is typical of the bitter experience of an African of his times 'Taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery' [I. iii. 137-38]. Othello's military career is everything to him, and the famous 'farewell' speech of Act IV, with its aura of romantic nostalgia, expresses the despair of a man whose achievements have been reduced to nothing: 'Othello's occupation gone' [III. iii. 357]. Spoken by a black Othello, the words 'The big wars / That make ambition virtue' [III. iii. 349-50], have a meaning beyond more rhetoric. Ambition was still reckoned as a sin in Shakespeare's time; but in Othello's case it has been purified by his courage and endurance and by the fact that only ambition could enable him to escape the humiliations of his early life. When he realises that his career is irrevocably over, he looks back at the trappings of war—the 'pride, pomp and circumstance' [III. iii. 354], the 'spirit-stirring drum' [III. iii. 352] and the rest—as a dying man looks back on life.

The sympathies of the audience for Othello are never completely destroyed. The Russian actor, Ostuzhev who set himself to study the character of Othello throughout his career, saw the problem of the final scene as 'acting the part so as to make people love Othello and forget he is a murderer'. When Othello answers Ludovico's rhetorical question, 'What shall be said of thee?' [V. ii. 293] with the words, 'An honourable murderer, if you will' [V. ii. 294], we are not outraged by such a statement: instead we see in it a terrible pathos. What we are waiting for is the unmasking of Iago. When this comes, Othello looks down at Iago's feet for the mythical cloven hoofs and demands an explanation from that 'demi-devil', reminding us that blackness of soul in this play belongs to the white villain rather than to his black victim.

The fact that Othello was a baptised Christian had considerable importance for Shakespeare's audience. This is made explicit from the beginning when he quells the drunken broil with the words: 'For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl' [II. iii. 172]. In the war he was seen to be leading the forces of Christendom against the Turks. But once Othello becomes subservient to Iago and vows his terrible revenge he seems to revert to superstitious beliefs. How else can we interpret his behaviour over the handkerchief? He seems under the spell of its long history—woven by an old sibyl out of silkworms strangely 'hallowed', given to his mother by an Egyptian with thought-reading powers, and linked with the dire prophecy of loss of love should it be lost. Yet in the final scene it becomes merely, 'An antique token / My father gave my mother' [V. ii. 216-17]. This irrational inconsistency is dramatically credible and suggests that when reason is overthrown, Othello's Christian beliefs give way to the superstitions he has rejected. The Christian veneer is thin. (pp. 7-12)

Shakespeare raises these and other questions about blackness and whiteness without fully resolving them. It rested upon the Elizabethan audience to consider them, this very act of deliberation involving a disturbance of racial complacency. If his purpose was to unsettle or perplex his audience, then he succeeded beyond expectation, for the question of Othello's blackness, and his relation with the white Desdemona, is one that provoked contradictory and heated responses in subsequent centuries. (p. 14)


Criticism: Time
Harley Granville-Barker

[Granville-Barker examines the dramatic structure of Othello and explicates the relation between Shakespeare's manipulation of time and the theme of sexual jealousy. He maintains that time in Act I passes naturally so that the audience can become familiar with the characters. Act II, however, introduces contractions and ambiguities of time that are sustained until Act V, scene ii, when "natural" time resumes, presenting a comprehensive view of the ruined Moor. The critic contends that the precipitous action is both dramatically convincing, since it hurries the audience along, and consistent with the recklessness of Iago and the pathological sexual jealousy that flaws the character of Othello.]

[In Othello] time is given no unity of treatment at all; it is contracted and expanded like a concertina. For the play's opening and closing the time of the action is the time of its acting; and such an extent of "natural" time (so to call it) is unusual. But minutes stand for hours over the sighting, docking and discharging—with a storm raging, too!—of the three ships which have carried the characters to Cyprus; the entire night of Cassio's undoing passes uninterruptedly in the speaking space of four hundred lines: and we have, of course, Othello murdering Desdemona within twenty-four hours of the consummation of their marriage, when, if Shakespeare let us—or let Othello himself—pause to consider, she plainly cannot be guilty of adultery.

Freedom with time is, of course, one of the recognised freedoms of Shakespeare's stage; he is expected only to give his exercise of it the slightest dash of plausibility. But in the maturity of his art he learns how to draw positive dramatic profit from it. For this play's beginning he does not, as we have noted, contract time at all. Moreover, he allows seven hundred lines to the three first scenes when he could well have done their business in half the space or less, could even, as [Samuel] Johnson suggests [in an end-note to Othello in his 1765 edition of Shakespeare's plays], have left it to be "occasionally related" afterwards. The profit is made evident when later, by contrast, we find him using contraction of time, and the heightening of tension so facilitated, to disguise the incongruities of the action. For he can do this more easily if he has already familiarised us with the play's characters. And he has done that more easily by presenting them to us in the unconstraint of uncontracted time, asking us for no special effort of make-believe. Accepting what they are, we the more readily accept what they do. It was well, in particular, to make Iago familiarly lifelike. If his victims are to believe in him, so, in another sense, must we. Hence the profuse self-display to Roderigo. That there is as much lying as truth in it is no matter. A man's lying, once we detect it, is as eloquent of him as the truth.

The contraction of time for the arrival in Cyprus has its dramatic purpose too. Shakespeare could have relegated the business to hearsay. But the spectacular excitement, the suspense, the ecstatic happiness of the reuniting of Othello and Desdemona, give the action fresh stimulus and impetus and compensate for the break in it occasioned by the voyage. Yet there must be no dwelling upon this, which is still only prelude to the capital events to come. For the same reason, the entire night of Cassio's undoing passes with the uninterrupted speaking of four hundred lines. It is no more than a sample of Iago's skill, so it must not be lingered upon either. Amid the distracting variety of its comings and goings we do not remark the contraction. As Iago himself has been let suggest to us:

Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.
[II. iii. 379]

Then, upon the entrance of Cassio with his propitiatory aubade and its suggestion of morning, commences the sustained main stretch of the action. This is set to something more complex than a merely contracted, it goes to a sort of ambiguous scheme of time, not only a profitable, but here—for Shakespeare turning story into play—an almost necessary device. After that we have the long last scene set to "natural" time, the play thus ending as it began. The swift-moving, close-packed action, fit product of Iago's ravening will, is over.

Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her bed.
[s.d., V. ii. 1]
—and, the dreadful deed done, all is done. While the rest come and go about him:

Here is my journey's end …
[V. ii. 267]

he says, as at a standstill, as in a very void of time. And as the "natural" time at the play's beginning lets us observe the better the man he was, so relaxation to it now lets us mark more fully the wreck that remains.

The three opening scenes move to a scheme of their own, in narrative and in the presentation of character. The first gives us a view of Iago which, if to be proved superficial, is yet a true one (for Shakespeare will never introduce a character misleadingly), and a sample of his double-dealing. Roderigo at the same time paints us a thick-lipped, lascivious Moor, which we discover in the second scene, with a slight, pleasant shock of surprise at the sight of Othello himself, to have been merely a figment of his own jealous chagrin. There also we find quite another Iago: the modest, devoted, disciplined soldier…. The third scene takes us to the Senate House, where Brabantio and his griefs, which have shrilly dominated the action so far, find weightier competition in the question of the war, and the State’s need of Othello, whose heroic aspect is heightened by this. (pp. 11-14)

The scenic mobility of Shakespeare’s stage permits him up to [I. iii] to translate his narrative straightforwardly into action. We pass, that is to say, from Brabantio's house, which Desdemona has just quitted, to the Sagittary, where she and Othello are to be found, and from there to the Senate House, to which he and she (later) and Brabantio are summoned. And the movement itself is given dramatic value by its quickening or slackening or abrupt arrest. We have the feverish impetus of Brabantio's torchlight pursuit; Othello's calm talk to Iago set in sequence and contrast; the encounter with the other current of the servants of the Duke upon their errand; the halt, the averted conflict; then the passing on together of the two parties, in sobered but still hostile detachment, towards the Senate House.

Note also that such narrative as is needed of what has passed before the play begins is mainly postponed to the third of these opening scenes. By then we should be interested in the characters, and the more, therefore, in the narrative itself, which is, besides, given a dramatic value of its own by being framed as a cause pleaded before the Senate. Further, even while we listen to the rebutting of Brabantio's accusation of witchcraft by Othello’s "round unvarnished tale" [I. iii. 90], we shall be expecting Desdemona’s appearance, the one important figure in this part of the story still to be seen. And this expectancy offsets the risk of the slackening of tension which reminiscent narrative must always involve.

Shakespeare now breaks the continuity of the action: and such a clean break as this is with him unusual. He has to transport his characters to Cyprus. The next scene takes place there. An unmeasured interval of time is suggested, and no scene on shipboard or the like has been provided for a link, nor are any of the events of the voyage recounted. The tempest which drowns the Turks, and rids him of his now superfluous war, and has more thrillingly come near besides to drowning the separated Othello and Desdemona—something of this he does contrive to present to us; and we are plunged into it as we were into the crisis of the play's opening:

What from the cape can you discern at sea?

Nothing at all. It is a high-wrought flood;
I cannot, 'twixt the heaven and the main
Descry a sail.
[II. i. 1-4]

—a second start as strenuous as the first. The excitement offsets the breaking of the continuity. And the compression of the events, of the storm and the triple landing, then the resolution of the fears for Othello's safety into the happiness of the reuniting of the two—the bringing of all this within the space of a few
minutes' acting raises tension to a high pitch and holds it there. (pp. 14-16)

The proclamation in [II. ii] serves several subsidiary purposes. It helps settle the characters in Cyprus. The chances and excitements of the arrival are over. Othello is in command; but the war is over too, and he only needs bid the people rejoice at peace and his happy marriage. It economically sketches us a background for Cassio's ill-fated carouse. It allows a small breathing space before Iago definitely gets to work. It "neutralises" the action for a moment (a herald is an anonymous voice; he has no individuality), suspends its interest without breaking its continuity. Also it brings its present timelessness to an end; events are given a clock to move by, and with that take on a certain urgency. (pp. 22-3)

[In Act III, scene iii,] the action passes into the ambiguity of time which has troubled so many critics. Compression of time, by one means or another, is common form in most drama; we … [see] it put to use in the speeding through a single unbroken scene of the whole night of Cassio's betrayal. But now comes—if we are examining the craft of the play—something more complex. When it is acted we notice nothing unusual, and neither story nor characters appear false in retrospect. It is as with the perspective of a picture, painted to be seen from a certain standpoint. Picture and play can be enjoyed and much of their art appreciated with no knowledge of how the effect is gained. But the student needs to know.

We have reached the morrow of the arrival in Cyprus and of the consummation of the marriage. This is plain. It is morning. By the coming midnight or a little later Othello will have murdered Desdemona and killed himself. To that measure of time, plainly demonstrated, the rest of the play's action will move. It comprises no more than seven scenes. From this early hour we pass without interval—the clock no more than customarily speeded—to midday dinner time and past it. Then comes a break in the action (an empty stage; one scene ended, another beginning), which, however, can only allow for a quite inconsiderable interval of time, to judge, early in the following scene, by Desdemona's "Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?" [III. iv. 23]—the handkerchief which we have recently seen Emilia retrieve and pass to Iago. And later in this scene Cassio gives it to Bianca, who begs that she may see him "soon at night" [III. iv. 198]. Then comes another break in the action. But, again, it can involve no long interval of time; since in the scene following Bianca speaks of the handkerchief given her "even now". Later in this scene Lodovico, suddenly come from Venice, is asked by Othello to supper; and between Cassio and Bianca there has been more talk of "tonight" and "supper". Another break in the action; but, again, little or no passing of time can be involved, since midway through the next scene the trumpets sound to supper, and Iago closes it with

   It is now high supper-time and the night grows to waste….
   [IV. ii. 242-43]

The following scene opens with Othello, Desdemona and Lodovico coming from supper, with Othello's command to Desdemona:

   Get you to bed on the instant …
   [IV. iii. 7]

and ends with her good-night to Emilia. The scene after—of the ambush for Cassio—we have been explicitly told is to be made by Iago to "fall out between twelve and one" [IV. ii. 236-37], and it is, we find, pitch dark, and the town is silent. And from here Othello and Emilia patently go straight to play their parts in the last scene of all, he first, she later, as quickly as she can speed.

These, then, are the events of a single day; and Shakespeare is at unusual pains to make this clear, by the devices of the morning music, dinner-time, supper-time and the midnight dark, and their linking together by the action itself and reference after reference in the dialogue. Nor need we have any doubt of his reasons for this. Only by thus precipitating the action can it be made both effective in the terms of his stage-craft and
convincing. If Othello were left time for reflection or the questioning of anyone but Iago, would not the whole flimsy fraud that is practised on him collapse?

But this granted, are they convincing as the events of that particular day, the very morrow of the reunion and of the consummation of the marriage?

Plainly they will not be; and before long Shakespeare has begun to imply that we are weeks or months—or it might be a year or more—away from anything of the sort.

What sense had I of her stolen hours of lust?  
I saw it not, thought it not; it harmed not me;  
I slept the next night well, was free and merry;  
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips….

[III. iii. 338-41]

That is evidence enough, but a variety of other implications go to confirm it; Iago's

I lay with Cassio lately….  
[III. iii. 413]

Cassio's reference to his "former suit", Bianca's reproach to him

What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?  
Eight score eight hours?…  
[III. iv. 173-74]

and more definitely yet, Lodovico's arrival from Venice with the mandate of recall, the war being over—by every assumption of the sort, indeed, Othello and Desdemona and the rest are living the life of [Giraldi] Cinthio's episodic story [in his Gli Hecatommithi, from which Shakespeare derived the plot of Othello], not at the forced pace of Shakespeare's play. But he wants to make the best of both these calendars; and, in his confident, reckless, dexterous way, he contrives to do so.

Why, however, does he neglect the obvious and simple course of allowing a likely lapse of time between the night of the arrival and of Cassio's disgrace and the priming of Othello to suspect Desdemona and her kindness to him, for which common sense—both our own, and, we might suppose, Iago's—cries out? A sufficient answer is that there has been one such break in the action already, forced on him by the voyage to Cyprus, and he must avoid another.

The bare Elizabethan stage bred a panoramic form of drama; the story straightforwardly unfolded, as many as possible of its more telling incidents presented, narrative supplying the antecedents and filling the gaps. Its only resources of any value are the action itself and the speech; and the whole burden, therefore, of stimulating and sustaining illusion falls on the actor—who, once he has captured his audience, must, like the spellbinding orator he may in method much resemble, be at pains to hold them, or much of his work will continually be to do over again. Our mere acceptance of the fiction, of the story and its peopling, we shall perhaps not withdraw; we came prepared to accept it. Something subtler is involved; the sympathy (in the word's stricter sense) which the art of the actor will have stirred in us. This current interrupted will not be automatically restored. Our emotions, roused and let grow cold, need quick rousing again. And the effects of such forced stoking are apt to stale with repetition.

Hence the help to the Elizabethan actor, with so much dependent on him, of continuity of action. Having once captured his audience, they are the easier to hold. The dramatist finds this too. Shakespeare escapes dealing
with minor incidents of the voyage to Cyprus by ignoring them; and he restarts the interrupted action amid the stimulating anxieties of the storm. But such another sustaining device would be hard to find. And were he to allow a likely lapse of time before the attack on Othello's confidence is begun it would but suggest to us when it is begun and we watch it proceeding the equal likelihood of an Iago wisely letting enough time pass between assault for the poison's full working. And with that the whole dramatic fabric would begin to crumble. Here would be Cinthio's circumspect Ensign again, and the action left stagnating, the onrush of Othello's passion to be checked and checked again, and he given time to reflect and anyone the opportunity to enlighten him! Give him such respite, and if he then does not, by the single stroke of good sense needed, free himself from the fragile web of lies which is choking him, he will indeed seem to be simply the gull and dolt "as ignorant as dirt" [V. ii. 164] of Emilia's final invective, no tragic hero, certainly.

Shakespeare has to work within the close confines of the dramatic form; and this imposes on him a double economy, a shaping of means to end and end to means, of characters to the action, the action to the characters also. If Othello's ruin is not accomplished without pause or delay, it can hardly be accomplished at all. The circumstances predicate an Iago of swift and reckless decision. These are the very qualities, first, to help him to his barren triumph, then to ensure his downfall. And Othello's precipitate fall from height to depth is tragically appropriate to the man he is—as to the man he is made to be because the fall must be precipitate. Finally, that we may rather feel with Othello in his suffering than despise him for the folly of it, we are speeded through time as unwittingly as he is, and left little more chance for reflection.

Most unconscionable treatment of time truly, had time any independent rights! But effect is all. And Shakespeare smooths incongruities away by letting the action follow the shorter, the "hourly" calendar—from dawn and the aubade to midnight and the murder—without more comment than is necessary, while he takes the longer one for granted in a few incidental references. He has only to see that the two do not clash in any overt contradiction.

The change into ambiguity of time is effected in the course of Iago's opening attack upon Othello. This is divided into two, with the summons to dinner and the finding and surrender of the handkerchief for an interlude. In the earlier part—although it is taken for granted—there is no very definite reference to the longer calendar; and Iago, to begin with, deals only in its generalities. Not until the second part do we have the determinate "I lay with Cassio lately … " [III. iii. 413], the story of his dream, the matter of the handkerchief, and Othello's own

I slept the next night well, was free and merry;
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips …
[III. iii. 340-41]

with the implication that weeks or months may have passed since the morrow of the landing. But why no tribute to likelihood here of some longer interval than that provided merely by the dinner to "the generous islanders" [III. iii. 280], between the sowing of the poison and its fierce, full fruition? There are two answers. From the standpoint of likelihood a suggested interval of days or weeks would largely defeat its own purpose, since the time given the poison to work would seem time given to good sense to intervene too. From the standpoint simply of the play's action, any interruption hereabouts, actual or suggested, must lower its tension and dissipate our interest, at the very juncture, too, when its main business, over-long held back, is fairly under way. Shakespeare will certainly not feel called on to make such a sacrifice to mere likelihood. He does loosen the tension of the inmost theme—all else beside, it would soon become intolerable—upon Othello's departure with Desdemona and by the episode of the handkerchief. But with Iago conducting this our interest will be surely held; and, Emilia left behind, the scene continuing, the continuity of action is kept. And when Othello returns, transformed in the interval from the man merely troubled in mind to a creature incapable of reason, "eaten up with passion … " [III. iii. 391], his emotion reflected in us will let us also lose count of time, obliterate yesterday in today, confound the weeks with the months in the one intolerable moment.
But the over-riding explanation of this show of Shakespeare's stagecraft is that he is not essentially concerned with time and the calendar at all. These, and other outward circumstances, must be given plausibility. But the play's essential action lies in the processes of thought and feeling by which the characters are moved and the story is forwarded. And the deeper the springs of these the less do time, place, and circumstance affect them. His imagination is concerned with fundamental passions, and its swift working demands unhampered expression. He may falsify the calendar for his convenience: but we shall find neither trickery nor anomaly in the planning of the battle for Othello's soul. And in the light of the truth of this the rest passes unnoticed. (pp. 30-8)


Criticism: Othello

Albert Gerard

[Gerard examines Othello's personality, discovering cracks in the "facade" of the generous, confident self-disciplined husband and general. The critic argues that Othello believes that his marriage to Desdemona will transform his life from one of primitive "chaos" to one of civilization and contentment. This naive dream shatters, however, with his increasing jealousy and his growing awareness that his new-found happiness is an illusion. Gerard thus regards Othello's development as a change from innocence to self-awareness and recognition that he has been looking outside—to Desdemona and Venetian society—rather than inside himself for his sense of identity. For further commentary on Othello's character, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, Wyndham Lewis, and Henry L. Warnken.]

At the beginning of the play, Othello appears as a noble figure, generous, composed, self-possessed. Besides, he is glamorously happy, both as a general and as a husband. He seems to be a fully integrated man, a great personality at peace with itself. But if we care to scrutinize this impressive and attractive facade, we find that there is a crack in it, which might be described as follows: it is the happiness of a spoilt child, not of a mature mind; it is the brittle wholeness of Innocence; it is pre-conscious, pre-rational, pre-moral. Othello has not yet come to grips with the experience of inner crisis. He has had to overcome no moral obstacles. He has not yet left the chamber of maiden-thought, and is still blessedly unaware of the burden of the mystery.

Of course, the life of a general, with its tradition of obedience and authority, is never likely to give rise to acute moral crises—especially at a time when war crimes had not yet been invented. But even Othello's love affair with Desdemona, judging by his own report, seems to have developed smoothly, without painful moral searchings of any kind. Nor is there for him any heart-rending contradiction between his love and his career: Desdemona is even willing to share the austerity of his flinty couch, so that he has every reason to believe that he will be allowed to make the best of both worlds.

Yet, at the core of this monolithic content, there is at least one ominous contradiction which announces the final disintegration of his personality: the contradiction between his obvious openheartedness, honesty and self-approval, and the fact that he does not think it beneath his dignity to court and marry Desdemona secretly. This contradiction is part and parcel of Shakespeare's conscious purpose. As Allardyce Nicoll has observed [in his Shakespeare], there is no such secrecy in [Giraldi] Cinthio's tale [the source for Shakespeare's plot of Othello], where, instead, the marriage occurs openly, though in the teeth of fierce parental opposition.

Highly significant, too, is the fact that he does not seem to feel any remorse for this most peculiar procedure. When at last he has to face the irate Brabantio, he gives no explanation, offers no apology for his conduct. Everything in his attitude shows that he is completely unaware of infringing the mores of Venetian society, the ethical code of Christian behaviour, and the sophisticated conventions of polite morality. Othello quietly
thinks of himself as a civilized Christian and a prominent citizen of Venice, certainly not as a barbarian (see II. iii. 170-72). He shares in Desdemona's illusion that his true visage is in his mind.

Beside the deficient understanding of the society into which he has made his way, the motif of the secret marriage then also suggests a definite lack of self-knowledge on Othello's part. His first step towards "perception of sense" about himself occurs in the middle of Act III. While still trying to resist Iago's innuendoes, Othello exclaims:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

[III. iii. 90-2]

This word, "again", is perhaps the most unexpected word that Shakespeare could have used here. It is one of the most pregnant words in the whole tragedy. It indicates (a) Othello's dim sense that his life before he fell in love with Desdemona was in a state of chaos, in spite of the fact that he was at the time quite satisfied with it, and (b) his conviction that his love has redeemed him from chaos, has lifted him out of his former barbarousness. Such complacency shows his total obliviousness of the intricacies, the subtleties and the dangers of moral and spiritual growth. In this first anagnorisis [recognition], Othello realizes that he has lived so far in a sphere of spontaneous bravery and natural honesty, but he assumes without any further questionings that his love has gained him easy access to the sphere of moral awareness, of high spiritual existence.

In fact, he assumes that his super-ego has materialised, suddenly and without tears. Hence, of course, the impressive self-assurance of his demeanour in circumstances which would be most embarrassing to any man gifted with more accurate self-knowledge.

This first anagnorisis is soon followed by another one, in which Othello achieves some sort of recognition of what has become of him after his faith in Desdemona has been shattered. The short speech he utters then marks a new step forward in his progress to self-knowledge:

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!…
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!

[III. iii. 345-50, 357]

The spontaneous outcry of the first three lines results from Othello's disturbed awareness that the new world he has entered into is one of (to him) unmanageable complexity. He is now facing a new kind of chaos, and he wishes he could take refuge in an ignorance similar to his former condition of moral innocence. The pathetic childishness of this ostrich-like attitude is proportionate in its intensity to the apparent monolithic quality of his previous complacency.

What follows sounds like a non sequitur. Instead of this farewell to arms, we might have expected some denunciation of the deceitful aspirations that have led him to this quandary, coupled, maybe, with a resolution to seek oblivion in renewed military activity. But we may surmise that his allusion to "the general camp" [III. iii. 345], reminding him of his "occupation", turns his mind away from his immediate preoccupations. The transition occurs in the line
which carries ambivalent implications. The content he has now lost is not only the "absolute contend' his soul enjoyed as a result of his love for Desdemona: it is also the content he had known previously, at the time when he could rejoice in his "unhoused free condition" [I. ii. 26]. This was the content of innocence and spontaneous adjustment to life. There is no recovering it, for, in this respect, he reached a point of no return when he glimpsed the truly chaotic nature of that state of innocence.

The fact that Othello starts talking about himself in the third person is of considerable significance. G. R. Elliott has noticed [in Flaming Minister: A Study of Othello] that the words have "a piercing primitive appeal: he is now simply a name". Besides, in this sudden ejaculation, there is a note of childish self-pity that reminds one of the first lines of the speech. But the main point is that it marks the occurrence of a deep dichotomy in Othello's consciousness of himself. As he had discarded his former self as an emblem of "chaos", so now he discards the super-ego that he thought had emerged into actual existence as a result of his love. It is as if that man known by the name of Othello was different from the one who will be speaking henceforward. The Othello of whom he speaks is the happy husband of Desdemona, the civilized Christian, the worthy Venetian, the illusory super-ego; but he is also the noble-spirited soldier and the natural man who guesses at heaven. That man has now disappeared, and the "I" who speaks of him is truly the savage Othello, the barbarian stripped of his wishful thinking, who gives himself up to jealousy, black magic and cruelty, the man who coarsely announces that he will "chop" his wife "into messes", the man who debases his magnificent oratory by borrowing shamelessly from Iago's lecherous vocabulary.

Thus Othello, whom love had brought from pre-rational, pre-moral satisfaction and adjustment to life to moral awareness and a higher form of "content", is now taken from excessive complacency and illusory happiness to equally excessive despair and nihilism. These are his steps to self-knowledge. That they should drive him to such alternative excesses gives the measure of his lack of judgment.

From the purely psychological point of view of character-analysis, critics have always found it difficult satisfactorily to account for Othello's steep downfall. That it would have been easy, as Robert Bridges wrote [in his essay "The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare"], for Shakespeare "to have provided a more reasonable ground for Othello's jealousy", is obvious to all reasonable readers. The fact that Othello's destruction occurs through the agency of Iago has induced the critics in the Romantic tradition to make much of what [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge has called Iago's "superhuman art", which, of course, relieves the Moor of all responsibility and deprives the play of most of its interest on the ethical and psychological level. More searching analyses, however, have shown that Iago is far from being a devil in disguise. And T. S. Eliot [in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"] has exposed the Moor as a case of bovarysme, or "the human will to see things as they are not", while Leo Kirschbaum [in the December 1944 ELH] has denounced him as "a romantic idealist, who considers human nature superior to what it actually is".

For our examination of Othello as a study in the relationships between the intellect and the moral life, it is interesting to note that the ultimate responsibility for the fateful development of the plot rests with a flaw in Othello himself. There is no "reasonable ground" for his jealousy; or, to put it somewhat differently, Shakespeare did not choose to provide any "reasonable" ground for it. The true motive, we may safely deduce, must be unreasonable. Yet, I find it difficult to agree that the Moor "considers human nature superior to what it actually is": this may be true of his opinion of Iago, but Desdemona is really the emblem of purity and trustworthiness that he initially thought her to be. Nor can we justifiably speak of his "will to see things as they are not" (though these words might actually fit Desdemona); in his confusion and perplexity there is no opportunity for his will to exert itself in any direction. The basic element that permits Othello's destiny to evolve the way it does is his utter inability to grasp the actual. If we want to locate with any accuracy the psychological origin of what F. R. Leavis [in his essay "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero"] has called his
"readiness to respond" to Iago's fiendish suggestions, we cannot escape the conclusion that his gullibility makes manifest his lack of rationality, of psychological insight and of mere common sense, and that it is a necessary product of his undeveloped mind.

Othello has to choose between trusting lago and trusting Desdemona. This is the heart of the matter, put in the simplest possible terms. The question, then, is: why does he rate Iago's honesty higher than Desdemona's? If it is admitted that lago is not a symbol of devilish skill in evildoing, but a mere fallible villain, the true answer can only be that Othello does not know his own wife.

More than a century of sentimental criticism based on the Romantic view of Othello as the trustful, chivalrous and sublime lover, has blurred our perception of his feeling for Desdemona. The quality of his "love" has recently been gone into with unprecedented thoroughness by G. R. Elliott, who points out that the Moor's speech to the Duke and Senators [I. iii] shows that "his affection for her, though fixed and true, is comparatively superficial". Othello sounds, indeed, curiously detached about Desdemona. His love is clearly subordinated, at that moment, to his soldierly pride. If he asks the Duke to let her go to Cyprus with him, it is because she wants it, it is "to be free and bounteous to her mind" [I. iii. 265]. In the juxtaposition of Desdemona's and Othello's speeches about this, there is an uncomfortable suggestion that his love is not at all equal to hers, who "did love the Moor to live with him" [I. iii. 248], and that he is not interested in her as we feel he ought to be. At a later stage the same self-centredness colours his vision of Desdemona as the vital source of his soul's life and happiness: his main concern lies with the "joy" [II. i. 184], the "absolute content" [cf. II. i. 191], the salvation [III. iii. 90-91] of his own soul, not with Desdemona as a woman in love, a human person. It lies with his love and the changes his love has wrought in him, rather than with the object of his love. It is not surprising, then, that he should know so little about his wife's inner life as to believe the charges raised by lago.

On the other hand, his attitude to Desdemona is truly one of idealization, but in a very limited, one might even say philosophical, sense. Coleridge wrote [in his Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets] that "Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence". But Coleridge failed to stress the most important point, which is that this belief is mistaken. Desdemona is not "impure and worthless", she has not fallen from the heaven of her native innocence. Othello is unable to recognize this, and his failure is thus primarily an intellectual failure.

His attitude to Desdemona is different from that of the "romantic idealist" who endows his girl with qualities which she does not possess. Desdemona does have all the qualities that her husband expects to find in her. What matters to him, however, is not Desdemona as she is, but Desdemona as a symbol, or, in other words, it is his vision of Desdemona.

In his Essay on Man, Ernst Cassirer has the following remark about the working of the primitive mind:

In primitive thought, it is still very difficult to differentiate between the two spheres of being and meaning. They are constantly being confused: a symbol is looked upon as if it were endowed with magical or metaphysical powers.

That is just what has happened to Othello: in Desdemona he has failed to differentiate between the human being and the angelic symbol. Or rather, he has overlooked the woman in his preoccupation with the angel. She is to him merely the emblem of his highest ideal, and their marriage is merely the ritual of his admission into her native world, into her spiritual sphere of values. Because he is identifying "the two spheres of being and meaning", he is possessed by the feeling that neither these values nor his accession to them have any actual existence outside her: his lack of psychological insight is only matched by his lack of rational power.
The Neo-Platonic conceit that the lover's heart and soul have their dwelling in the person of the beloved is used by Othello in a poignantly literal sense [IV. ii. 57-60]. If she fails him, everything fails him. If she is not pure, then purity does not exist. If she is not true to his ideal, that means that his ideal is an illusion. If it can be established that she does not belong to that world in which he sees her enshrined, that means that there is no such world. She becomes completely and explicitly identified with all higher spiritual values when he says:

If she be false, O! then heaven mocks itself!
[III. iii. 278]

Hence the apocalyptic quality of his nihilism and despair.

The fundamental tragic fault in the Moor can therefore be said to lie in the shortcomings of his intellect. His moral balance is without any rational foundation. He is entirely devoid of the capacity for abstraction. He fails to make the right distinction between the sphere of meaning, of the abstract, the ideal, the universal, and the sphere of being, of the concrete, the actual, the singular.

When Othello is finally made to see the truth, he recognizes the utter lack of wisdom [V. ii. 344] which is the mainspring of his tragedy, and, in the final anagnorisis, he sees himself for what he is: a "fool" [V. ii. 323]. The full import of the story is made clear in Othello's last speech, which is so seldom given the attention it merits that it may be well to quote it at some length:

I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then, must you speak
Of one that loved 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,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. (Stabs himself.)
[V. ii. 340-56]

One may find it strange that Shakespeare should have introduced at the end of Othello's last speech this apparently irrelevant allusion to a trivial incident in the course of which the Moor killed a Turk who had insulted Venice. But if we care to investigate the allegorical potentialities of the speech, we find that it is not a mere fit of oratorical self-dramatization: it clarifies the meaning of the play as a whole. There is a link between the pearl, the Venetian and Desdemona: taken together, they are an emblem of beauty, moral virtue, spiritual richness and civilized refinement. And there is a link between the "base Indian", the "malignant Turk" and Othello himself: all three are barbarians: all three have shown themselves unaware of the true value and dignity of what lay within their reach. Othello has thrown his pearl away, like the Indian. In so doing, he has insulted, like the Turk, everything that Venice and Desdemona stand for. As the Turk "traduced the State" [V. ii. 354], so did Othello misrepresent to himself that heaven of which Desdemona was the sensuous image.
S. L. Bethell [in *Shakespeare Survey* 5 (1952)] has left us in no doubt that the manner of Othello's death was intended by Shakespeare as an indication that the hero is doomed to eternal damnation. Such a view provides us with a suitable climax for this tragedy. Othello has attained full consciousness of his barbarian nature; yet, even that ultimate flash of awareness does not lift him up above his true self. He remains a barbarian to the very end, and condemns his own soul to the everlasting torments of hell in obeying the same primitive sense of rough-handed justice that had formerly prompted him to kill Desdemona.… (pp. 100-06)


**Wyndham Lewis**

*Lewis wrote in a deliberately provocative style and outside the mainstream of Shakespearean criticism. The majority of his work on Shakespeare is included in his unusual study The Lion and the Fox (1927). In the following excerpt from that work, Lewis argues that Othello depicts "the race of men at war with the race of titans" and that the gods have predetermined that Iago, the petty Everyman, will triumph over the grandeur of Othello. The critic assesses the Moor as the most typical of Shakespeare's colossi, or giants, "because he is the simplest" and emphasizes his pure, guileless, generous nature and the childlike, defenseless quality of his soul. Lewis considers Iago "no great devil," but instead claims that he represents an ordinary, average, little man. For further commentary on Othello's character, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, Albert Gerard, and Henry L. Warnken.*

Of all the colossi, Othello is the most characteristic, because he is the simplest, and he is seen in an unequal duel throughout with a perfect specimen of the appointed enemy of the giant—the representative of the race of men at war with the race of titans…. He is absolutely defenceless: it is as though he were meeting one of his appointed enemies, disguised of course, as a friend, for the first time. He seems possessed of no instinct by which he might scent his antagonist, and so be put on his guard.

So, at the outset, I will present my version of Othello; and anything that I have subsequently to say must be read in the light of this interpretation. For in Othello there is nothing equivocal, I think; and the black figure of this child-man is one of the poles of Shakespeare's sensation.

Who that has read Othello's closing speech can question Shakespeare's intentions here at least? The overwhelming truth and beauty is the clearest expression of the favour of Shakespeare's heart and mind. Nothing that could ever be said would make us misunderstand what its author meant by it. Of all his ideal giants this unhappiest, blackest, most "perplexed" child was the one of Shakespeare's predilection.

The great spectacular "pugnacious" male ideal is represented perfectly by Othello; who was led out to the slaughter on the Elizabethan stage just as the bull is thrust into the Spanish bullring. Iago, the *taurobolus* [bull catcher] of this sacrificial bull, the little David of this Goliath, or the little feat-gilded *espada* [matador], is for Shakespeare nothing but Everyman, the Judas of the world, the representative of the crowds around the crucifix, or of the ferocious crowds at the *corrida* [bull fight], or of the still more abject roman crowds at the mortuary games. Othello is of the race of Christs, or of the race of "bulls"; he is the hero with all the magnificent helplessness of the animal, or all the beauty and ultimate resignation of the god. From the moment he arrives on the scene of his execution, or when his execution is being prepared, he speaks with an unmatched grandeur and beauty. To the troop that is come to look for him, armed and snarling, he says: "Put up your bright swords or the dew will rust them!" [I. ii. 59]. And when at last he has been brought to bay he dies by that significant contrivance of remembering how he had defended the state when it was traduced, and in reviving this distant blow for his own demise. The great words roll on in your ears as the curtain falls:

> And say besides, that in Aleppo once….
> [V. ii. 352]
Iago is made to say:

The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature.
[II. i. 288-89]

But we do not need, this testimony to feel, in all our dealings with this simplest and grandest of his creations, that we are meant to be in the presence of an absolute purity of human guilelessness, a generosity as grand and unaffected, although quick and, "being wrought, Perplexed in the extreme" [V. ii. 345-46], as deep as that of his divine inventor.

There is no utterance in the whole of Shakespeare's plays that reveals the nobleness of his genius and of its intentions in the same way as the speech with which Othello closes:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know it.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then, must you speak
Of one that loved, 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, …
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
And say, besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him—thus.
[V. ii. 338-48, 350-56]

And it is the speech of a military hero, as simple-hearted as Hotspur [in Richard II and 1 Henry IV]. The tremendous and childlike pathos of this simple creature, broken by intrigue so easily and completely, is one of the most significant things for the comprehension of Shakespeare's true thought. For why should so much havoc ensue from the crude "management" of a very ordinary intriguer? It is no great devil that is pitted against him: and so much faultless affection is destroyed with such a mechanical facility. He is a toy in the hands of a person so much less real than himself; in every sense, human and divine, so immeasurably inferior.

And say besides, that in Aleppo once.

This unhappy child, caught in the fatal machinery of "Shakespearian tragedy," just as he might have been by an accident in the well-known world, remembers, with a measureless pathos, an event in the past to his credit, recalled as an afterthought, and thrown in at the last moment, a poor counter of "honour," to set against the violence to which he has been driven by the whisperings of things that have never existed.

And it is we who are intended to respond to these events, as the Venetian, Lodovico, does, when he apostrophizes Iago, describing him as:
More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!
[V. ii. 362]

The eloquence of that apostrophe is the measure of the greatness of the heart that we have seen attacked and overcome. We cannot take that as an eloquent outburst only: it was an expression of the author's conviction of the irreparable nature of the offence, because of the purity of the nature that had suffered. The green light of repugnance and judgment is thrown on to the small mechanical villain at the last. (pp. 190-93)


**Criticism: Iago**

A. C. Bradley

[Bradley closely investigates Iago's character by examining his soliloquies. Finding that the motives of hatred and ambition inadequately account for Iago's actions, Bradley stresses the importance of the character's sense of superiority and his self-interest in determining his behavior. Iago's ego, wounded by the denial of promotion, demands satisfaction, and his schemes and manipulations allow him to reestablish his sense of power and dominance over others. Bradley also finds that Iago is motivated by a love of excitement and by his perception of himself as an artist. He derives great pleasure from the successful execution of his complex and dangerous intrigues. The critic concludes that Iago's evil is comprehensible and therefore human rather than demonic. For further commentary on Iago's character, see Bradley's other essay and the excerpts by D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, Wyndham Lewis, and Henry L. Warnken.]

[Let us] consider the rise of Iago's tragedy. Why did he act as we see him acting in the play? What is the answer to that appeal of Othello's:

> Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
> Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?
> [V. ii. 301-02]

This question Why? is the question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? is the question about Hamlet. Iago refused to answer it; but I will venture to say that he could not have answered it, any more than Hamlet could tell why he delayed. But Shakespeare knew the answer, and if these characters are great creations and not blunders we ought to be able to find it too.

Is it possible to elicit it from Iago himself against his will? He makes various statements to Roderigo, and he has several soliloquies. From these sources, and especially from the latter, we should learn something. For with Shakespeare soliloquy generally gives information regarding the secret springs as well as the outward course of the plot; and, moreover, it is a curious point of technique with him that the soliloquies of his villains sometimes read almost like explanations offered to the audience. Now, Iago repeatedly offers explanations either to Roderigo or to himself. In the first place, he says more than once that he 'hates' Othello. He gives two reasons for his hatred. Othello has made Cassio lieutenant; and he suspects, and has heard it reported, that Othello has an intrigue with Emilia. Next there is Cassio. He never says he hates Cassio, but he finds in him three causes of offence: Cassio has been preferred to him; he suspects him too of an intrigue with Emilia; and, lastly, Cassio has a dally beauty in his life which makes Iago ugly. In addition to these annoyances he wants Cassio's place. As for Roderigo, he calls him a snipe, and who can hate a snipe? But Roderigo knows too much; and he is becoming a nuisance, getting angry, and asking for the gold and jewels he handed to Iago to give to Desdemona. So Iago kills Roderigo. Then for Desdemona: a fig's-end for her virtue! but he has no ill-will to her. In fact he 'loves' her, though he is good enough to explain, varying the word, that his 'lust' is
mixed with a desire to pay Othello in his own coin. To be sure she must die, and so must Emilia and so would Bianca if only the authorities saw things in their true light; but he did not set out with any hostile design against these persons.

Is the account which Iago gives of the causes of his action the true account? The answer of the most popular view will be, 'Yes. Iago was, as he says, chiefly incited by two things, the desire of advancement, and a hatred of Othello due principally to the affair of the lieutenancy. These are perfectly intelligible causes; we have only to add to them unusual ability and cruelty, and all is explained. Why should Coleridge and Hazlitt and Swinburne go further afield?' [see Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Thomas Middleton Raysor; William Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*; and Algernon Charles Swinburne's *A Study of Shakespeare*]. To which last question I will at once oppose these: If your view is correct, why should Iago be considered an extraordinary creation; and is it not odd that the people who reject it are the people who elsewhere show an exceptional understanding of Shakespeare?

The difficulty about this popular view is, in the first place, that it attributes to Iago what cannot be found in the Iago of the play. Its Iago is impelled by *passions*, a passion of ambition and a passion of hatred; for no ambition or hatred short of passion could drive a man who is evidently so clear-sighted, and who must hitherto have been so prudent, into a plot so extremely hazardous. Why, then, in the Iago of the play do we find no sign of these passions or of anything approaching to them? Why, if Shakespeare meant that Iago was impelled by them, does he suppress the signs of them? Surely not from want of ability to display them. The poet who painted Macbeth and Shylock [in *The Merchant of Venice*] understood his business. Who ever doubted Macbeth's ambition or Shylock's hate? And what resemblance is there between these passions and any feeling that we can trace in Iago? The resemblance between a volcano in eruption and a nameless fire of coke; the resemblance between a consuming desire to hack and hew your enemy's flesh, and the resentful wish, only too familiar in common life, to inflict pain in return for a slight. Passion, in Shakespeare's plays, is perfectly easy to recognise. What vestige of it, of passion unsatisfied or of passion gratified, is visible in Iago? None: that is the very horror of him. He has less passion than an ordinary man, and yet he does these frightful things. The only ground for attributing to him, I do not say a passionate hatred, but anything deserving the name of hatred at all, is his own statement, 'I hate Othello'; and we know what his statements are worth.

But the popular view, beside attributing to Iago what he does not show, ignores what he does show. It selects from his own account of his motives one or two, and drops the rest; and so it makes everything natural. But it fails to perceive how unnatural, how strange and suspicious, his own account is. Certainly he assigns motives enough; the difficulty is that he assigns so many. A man moved by simple passions due to simple causes does not stand fingering his feelings, industriously enumerating their sources, and groping about for new ones. But this is what Iago does. And this is not all. These motives appear and disappear in the most extraordinary manner. Resentment at Cassio's appointment is expressed in the first conversation with Roderigo, and from that moment is never once mentioned again in the whole play. Hatred of Othello is expressed in the First Act alone. Desire to get Cassio's place scarcely appears after the first soliloquy, and when it is gratified Iago does not refer to it by a single word. The suspicion of Cassio's intrigue with Emilia emerges suddenly, as an after-thought, not in the first soliloquy but the second, and then disappears for ever. Iago's 'love' of Desdemona is alluded to in the second soliloquy; there is not the faintest trace of it in word or deed either before or after. The mention of jealousy of Othello is followed by declarations that Othello is infatuated about Desdemona and is of a constant nature, and during Othello's sufferings Iago never shows a sign of the idea that he is now paying his rival in his own coin. In the second soliloquy he declares that he quite believes Cassio to be in love with Desdemona. It is obvious that he believes no such thing, for he never alludes to the idea again, and within a few hours describes Cassio in soliloquy as an honest fool. His final reason for ill-will to Cassio never appears till the Fifth Act.

What is the meaning of all this? Unless Shakespeare was out of his mind, it must have a meaning. And certainly this meaning is not contained in any of the popular accounts of Iago.
Is it contained then in Coleridge's word 'motive-hunting'? Yes, 'motive-hunting' exactly answers to the impression that Iago's soliloquies produce. He is pondering his design, and unconsciously trying to justify it to himself. He speaks of one or two real feelings, such as resentment against Othello, and he mentions one or two real causes of these feelings, such as resentment against Othello, and he mentions one or two real causes of these feelings. But these are not enough for him. Along with them, or alone, there come into his head, only to leave it again, ideas and suspicions, the creations of his own baseness or uneasiness, some old, some new, caressed for a moment to feed his purpose and give it a reasonable look, but never really believed in, and never the main forces which are determining his action. In fact, I would venture to describe Iago in these soliloquies as a man setting out on a project which strongly attracts his desire, but at the same time conscious of a resistance to the desire, and unconsciously trying to argue the resistance away by assigning reasons for the project. He is the counterpart of Hamlet, who tries to find reasons for his delay in pursuing a design which excites his aversion. And most of Iago's reasons for action are no more the real ones than Hamlet's reasons for delay were the real ones. Each is moved by forces which he does not understand; and it is probably no accident that these two studies of states psychologically so similar were produced at about the same period.

What then were the real moving forces of Iago's action? Are we to fall back on the idea of a 'motiveless malignity'; that is to say, a disinterested love of evil, or a delight in the pain of others as simple and direct as the delight in one's own pleasure? Surely not. I will not insist that this thing or these things are inconceivable, mere phrases, not ideas; for, even so, it would remain possible that Shakespeare had tried to represent an inconceivability. But there is not the slightest reason to suppose that he did so. Iago's action is intelligible; and indeed the popular view contains enough truth to refute this desperate theory. It greatly exaggerates his desire for advancement, and the ill-will caused by his disappointment, and it ignores other forces more important than these; but it is right in insisting on the presence of this desire and this ill-will, and their presence is enough to destroy Iago's claims to be more than a demi-devil. For love of the evil that advances my interest and hurts a person I dislike, is a very different thing from love of evil simply as evil; and pleasure in the pain of a person disliked or regarded as a competitor is quite distinct from pleasure in the pain of others simply as others. The first is intelligible, and we find it in Iago. The second, even if it were intelligible, we do not find in Iago.

Still, desire of advancement and resentment about the lieutenancy, though factors and indispensable factors in the cause of Iago's action, are neither the principal nor the most characteristic factors. To find these, let us return to our half-completed analysis of the character. Let us remember especially the keen sense of superiority, the contempt of others, the sensitiveness to everything which wounds these feelings, the spite against goodness in men as a thing not only stupid but, both in its nature and by its success, contrary to Iago's nature and irritating to his pride. Let us remember in addition the annoyance of having always to play a part, the consciousness of exceptional but unused ingenuity and address, the enjoyment of action, and the absence of fear. And let us ask what would be the greatest pleasure of such a man, and what the situation which might tempt him to abandon his habitual prudence and pursue this pleasure. Hazlitt and Mr. Swinburne do not put this question, but the answer I proceed to give to it is in principle theirs.

The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved, secondly, the triumphant exertion of his abilities, and, thirdly, the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated. And the moment most dangerous to such a man would be one when his sense of superiority had met with an affront, so that its habitual craving was reinforced by resentment, while at the same time he saw an opportunity of satisfying it by subjecting to his will the very persons who had affronted it. Now, this is the temptation that comes to Iago. Othello's eminence, Othello's goodness, and his own dependence on Othello, must have been a perpetual annoyance to him. At any time he would have enjoyed befooling and tormenting Othello. Under ordinary circumstances he was restrained, chiefly by self-interest, in some slight degree perhaps by the faint pulsations of conscience or humanity. But disappointment at the loss of the lieutenancy supplied the touch of lively resentment that was required to overcome these obstacles; and the prospect of satisfying the sense of power by mastering Othello through an
intricate and hazardous intrigue now became irresistible. Iago did not clearly understand what was moving his desire; though he tried to give himself reasons for his action, even those that had some reality made but a small part of the motive force; one may almost say they were no more than the turning of the handle which admits the driving power into the machine. Only once does he appear to see something of the truth. It is when he uses the phrase 'to plume up my will in double knavery' [I. iii. 393-94].

To 'plume up the will,' to heighten the sense of power or superiority—this seems to be the unconscious motive of many acts of cruelty which evidently do not spring chiefly from ill-will, and which therefore puzzle and sometimes horrify us most. It is often this that makes a man bully the wife or children of whom he is fond. The boy who torments another boy, as we say, 'for no reason,' or who without any hatred for frogs tortures a frog, is pleased with his victim's pain, not from any disinterested love of evil or pleasure in pain, but mainly because this pain is the unmistakable proof of his own power over his victim. So it is with Iago. His thwarted sense of superiority wants satisfaction. What fuller satisfaction could it find than the consciousness that he is the master of the General who has undervalued him and of the rival who has been preferred to him; that these worthy people, who are so successful and popular and stupid, are mere puppets in his hands, but living puppets, who at the motion of his finger must contort themselves in agony, while all the time they believe that he is their true friend and comforter? It must have been an ecstasy of bliss to him. And this, granted a most abnormal deadness of human feeling, is, however horrible, perfectly intelligible. There is no mystery in the psychology of Iago; the mystery lies in a further question, which the drama has not to answer, the question why such a being should exist.

Iago's longing to satisfy the sense of power is, I think, the strongest of the forces that drive him on. But there are two others to be noticed. One is the pleasure in an action very difficult and perilous and, therefore, intensely exciting. This action sets all his powers on the strain. He feels the delight of one who executes successfully a feat thoroughly congenial to his special aptitude, and only just within his compass; and, as he is fearless by nature, the fact that a single slip will cost him his life only increases his pleasure. His exhilaration breaks out in the ghastly words with which he greets the sunrise after the night of the drunken tumult which has led to Cassio's disgrace, 'By the mass, 'tis morning. Pleasure and action make the hours seem short' [II. iii. 378-79]. Here, however, the joy in exciting action is quickened by other feelings. It appears more simply elsewhere in such a way as to suggest that nothing but such actions gave him happiness, and that his happiness was greater if the action was destructive as well as exciting. We find it, for instance, in his gleeful cry to Roderigo, who proposes to shout to Brabantio in order to wake him and tell him of his daughter's flight:

Do, with like timorous accent and dire yell
As when, by night and negligence, the fire
Is spied in populous cities.
[I. i. 75-7]

All through that scene; again, in the scene where Cassio is attacked and Roderigo murdered; everywhere where Iago is in physical action, we catch this sound of almost feverish enjoyment. His blood, usually so cold and slow, is racing through his veins.

But Iago, finally, is not simply a man of action; he is an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and in the conception and execution of it he experiences the tension and the joy of artistic creation. 'He is,' says Hazlitt, 'an amateur of tragedy in real life; and, instead of employing his invention on imaginary characters or long-forgotten incidents, he takes the bolder and more dangerous course of getting up his plot at home, casts the principal parts among his nearest friends and connections, and rehearses it in downright earnest, with steady nerves and unabated resolution.' Mr. Swinburne lays even greater stress on this aspect of Iago's character, and even declares that 'the very subtlest and strongest component of his complex nature' is 'the instinct of what Mr. [Thomas] Carlyle would call an inarticulate poet.' And those to whom this idea is unfamiliar, and who may suspect it at first sight of being fanciful, will find, if they examine the play in the
light of Mr. Swinburne's exposition, that it rests on a true and deep perception, will stand scrutiny, and might easily be illustrated. They may observe, to take only one point, the curious analogy between the early stages of dramatic composition and those soliloquies in which Iago broods over his plot, drawing at first only an outline, puzzled how to fix more than the main idea, and gradually seeing it develop and clarify as he works upon it or lets it work. Here at any rate Shakespeare put a good deal of himself into Iago. But the tragedian in real life was not the equal of the tragic poet. His psychology, as we shall see, was at fault at a critical point, as Shakespeare's never was. And so his catastrophe came out wrong, and his piece was ruined.

Such, then, seem to be the chief ingredients of the force which, liberated by his resentment at Cassio's promotion, drives Iago from inactivity into action, and sustains him through it. And, to pass to a new point, this force completely possesses him; it is his fate. It is like the passion with which a tragic hero wholly identifies himself, and which bears him on to his doom. It is true that, once embarked on his course, Iago could not turn back, even if this passion did abate; and it is also true that he is compelled, by his success in convincing Othello, to advance to conclusions of which at the outset he did not dream. He is thus caught in his own web, and could not liberate himself if he would. But, in fact, he never shows a trace of wishing to do so, not a trace of hesitation, of looking back, or of fear, any more than of remorse; there is no ebb in the tide. As the crisis approaches there passes through his mind a fleeting doubt whether the deaths of Cassio and Roderigo are indispensable; but that uncertainty, which does not concern the main issue, is dismissed, and he goes forward with undiminished zest. Not even in his sleep—as in Richard's before his final battle—does any rebellion of outraged conscience or pity, or any foreboding of despair, force itself into clear consciousness. His fate—which is himself—has completely mastered him: so that, in the later scenes, where the improbability of the entire success of a design built on so many different falsehoods forces itself on the reader, Iago appears for moments not as a consummate schemer, but as a man absolutely infatuated and delivered over to certain destruction.

Iago stands supreme among Shakespeare's evil characters because the greatest intensity and subtlety of imagination have gone to his making, and because he illustrates in the most perfect combination the two facts concerning evil which seem to have impressed Shakespeare most. The first of these is the fact that perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them, and with it those hard vices—such as ingratitude and cruelty—which to Shakespeare were far the worst. The second is that such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily, with exceptional powers of will and intellect. In the latter respect Iago is nearly or quite the equal of Richard, in egoism he is the superior, and his inferiority in passion and massive force only makes him more repulsive. How is it then that we can bear to contemplate him; nay, that, if we really imagine him, we feel admiration and some kind of sympathy? Henry the Fifth tells us:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distil it out;

[Henry V, IV. i. 4-5]

but here, it maybe said, we are shown a thing absolutely evil, and—what is more dreadful still—this absolute evil is united with supreme intellectual power. Why is the representation tolerable, and why do we not accuse its author either of untruth or of a desperate pessimism?

To these questions it might at once be replied: Iago does not stand alone; he is a factor in a whole; and we perceive him there and not in isolation, acted upon as well as acting, destroyed as well as destroying. But, although this is true and important, I pass it by and, continuing to regard him by himself, I would make three remarks in answer to the questions.

In the first place, Iago is not merely negative or evil—far from it. Those very forces that moved him and made his fate—sense of power, delight in performing a difficult and dangerous action, delight in the exercise of
artistic skill—are not at all evil things. We sympathise with one or other of them almost every day of our lives. And, accordingly, though in Iago they are combined with something detestable and so contribute to evil, our perception of them is accompanied with sympathy. In the same way, Iago's insight, dexterity, quickness, address, and the like, are in themselves admirable things; the perfect man would possess them. And certainly he would possess also Iago's courage and self-control, and, like Iago, would stand above the impulses of mere feeling, lord of his inner world. All this goes to evil ends in Iago, but in itself it has a great worth; and, although in reading, of course, we do not sift it out and regard it separately, it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror.

All this, however, might apparently co-exist with absolute egoism and total want of humanity. But, in the second place, it is not true that in Iago this egoism and this want are absolute, and that in this sense he is a thing of mere evil. They are frightful, but if they were absolute Iago would be a monster, not a man. The fact is, he tries to make them absolute and cannot succeed; and the traces of conscience, shame and humanity, though faint, are discernible. If his egoism were absolute he would be perfectly indifferent to the opinion of others; and he clearly is not so. His very irritation at goodness, again, is a sign that his faith in his creed is not entirely firm; and it is not entirely firm because he himself has a perception, however dim, of the goodness of goodness. What is the meaning of the last reason he gives himself for killing Cassio:

He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly?
[V. i. 19-20]

Does he mean that he is ugly to others? Then he is not an absolute egoist. Does he mean that he is ugly to himself? Then he makes an open confession of moral sense. And, once more, if he really possessed no moral sense, we should never have heard those soliloquies which so clearly betray his uneasiness and his unconscious desire to persuade himself that he has some excuse for the villainy he contemplates. These seem to be indubitable proofs that, against his will, Iago is a little better than his creed, and has failed to withdraw himself wholly from the human atmosphere about him. And to these proofs I would add, though with less confidence, two others. Iago's momentary doubt towards the end whether Roderigo and Cassio must be killed has always surprised me. As a mere matter of calculation it is perfectly obvious that they must; and I believe his hesitation is not merely intellectual, it is another symptom of the obscure working of conscience or humanity. Lastly, is it not significant that, when once his plot has begun to develop, Iago never seeks the presence of Desdemona; that he seems to leave her as quickly as he can [III. iv. 138]; and that, when he is fetched by Emilia to see her in her distress [IV. ii. 110], we fail to catch in his words any sign of the pleasure he shows in Othello's misery, and seem rather to perceive a certain discomfort, and, if one dare say it, a faint touch of shame or remorse? This interpretation of the passage, I admit, is not inevitable, but to my mind (quite apart from any theorising about Iago) it seems the natural one. And if it is right, Iago's discomfort is easily understood; for Desdemona is the one person concerned against whom it is impossible for him even to imagine a ground of resentment, and so an excuse for cruelty.

There remains, thirdly, the idea that Iago is a man of supreme intellect who is at the same time supremely wicked. That he is supremely wicked nobody will doubt; and I have claimed for him nothing that will interfere with his right to that title. But to say that his intellectual power is supreme is to make a great mistake. Within certain limits he has indeed extraordinary penetration, quickness, inventiveness, adaptiveness; but the limits are defined with the hardest of lines, and they are narrow limits. It would scarcely be unjust to call him simply astonishingly clever, or simply a consummate master of intrigue. But compare him with one who may perhaps be roughly called a bad man of supreme intellectual power, Napoleon, and you see how small and negative Iago's mind is, incapable of Napoleon's military achievements, and much more incapable of his political constructions. Or, to keep within the Shakespearean world, compare him with Hamlet, and you perceive how miserably close is his intellectual horizon; that such a thing as a thought beyond the reaches of his soul has never come near him; that he is prosaic through and through, deaf and blind to all but a tiny
fragment of the meaning of things. Is it not quite absurd, then, to call him a man of supreme intellect?

And observe, lastly, that his failure in perception is closely connected with his badness. He was destroyed by the power that he attacked, the power of love; and he was destroyed by it because he could not understand it; and he could not understand it because it was not in him. Iago never meant his plot to be so dangerous to himself. He knew that jealousy is painful, but the jealousy of a love like Othello's he could not imagine, and he found himself involved in murders which were no part of his original design. That difficulty he surmounted, and his changed plot still seemed to prosper. Roderigo and Cassio and Desdemona once dead, all will be well. Nay, when he fails to kill Cassio, all may still be well. He will avow that he told Othello of the adultery, and persist that he told the truth, and Cassio will deny it in vain. And then, in a moment, his plot is shattered by a blow from a quarter where he never dreamt of danger. He knows his wife, he thinks. She is not over-scrupulous, she will do anything to please him, and she has learnt obedience. But one thing in her he does not know—that she loves her mistress and would face a hundred deaths sooner than see her fair fame darkened. There is genuine astonishment in his outburst 'What! Are you mad?' [V. ii. 194] as it dawns upon him that she means to speak the truth about the handkerchief. But he might well have applied himself the words she flings at Othello,

O gull! O dolt!
As ignorant as dirt!
[V. ii. 163-64]

The foulness of his own soul made him so ignorant that he built into the marvellous structure of his plot a piece of crass stupidity.

To the thinking mind the divorce of unusual intellect from goodness is a thing to startle; and Shakespeare clearly felt it so. The combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil is more than startling, it is frightful. It is rare, but it exists; and Shakespeare represented it in Iago. But the alliance of evil like Iago's with supreme intellect is an impossible fiction; and Shakespeare's fictions were truth. (pp. 222-37)


Henry L. Warnken
[Warnken examines the relationship between Iago and Othello, determining that while Iago's evil corrupts Othello, the potential for evil already lurked within the Moor—Iago merely frees his capacity for evil. Iago's strengths—his ability to quickly exploit situations, his knowledge of human nature, and his innate cunning—exploit Othello's weaknesses—sensitivity, pride, insecurity, and shortsightedness. The critic finds that Othello gradually adopts Iago's speech patterns and world view, and by the play's end Iago "penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing as he does so, the evil already present within Othello." Thus, Othello ends the play dominated by the emotions over which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he had control. By succumbing to these emotions, he destroys himself. For further commentary on the character of Iago, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, and Wyndham Lewis.]

Iago is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest villain. He is hate and evil made physical, the most fully developed member of a group of characters that includes Richard III, Edmund [in King Lear], and Goneril and Regan [in King Lear]. Bernard Spivack, in Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil, has suggested that Iago is the medieval Vice given new life by Shakespeare [the Morality Play character Vice would tempt the protagonist].

Such a judgment is correct; but it would be misleading to conclude that Othello is the embodiment of goodness and trust, and therefore, nothing more than the innocent foil for the other's wickedness. Othello is, in fact, the source of Iago's diabolical inspiration. He contains within himself the potential for evil. Iago could
never have succeeded in his designs were it not for Othello's dark suspicions, his predisposition to mistrust
and the sense of inferiority it breeds.

Iago repeatedly tries to justify his actions with the same kind of superficial self-righteousness manifested by
Othello. He feels and thinks that he has been cheated, betrayed, made a fool of by others—but he has no
proof. His arguments for revenge are built on suspicion, feeling, emotion, and impulse. He has no proof, for
example, that Othello—or Cassio—has committed adultery with Emilia; he acts merely on suggestion and
rationalization. In this he is remarkably similar to Othello, who also has a habit of accepting things at face
value, acting on impulse and suspicion rather than on proof. Because he acts and thinks in this manner,
Othello—like Iago—comes to accept the notion that mankind is moved only by the most selfish motives.
Desdemona herself assumes this aspect in his eyes. Othello comes to see her with the same warped and
corrupted imagination displayed by Iago.

Iago is clearly evil; but as the play progresses, Othello appears less good, less innocent than the public image
of the opening scenes may lead one to suppose. Iago may manipulate Othello, but Othello is no mere puppet.
By the middle of the play, his thoughts and feelings echo Iago's. He is the medium through which Iago works
his diabolical plans—but he is a willing medium, responding to Iago's suggestions with the same kind of
pseudo-rational justification Iago has insisted on as an excuse for his own actions. Iago thus emerges as a
projection of Othello, the full embodiment of the weaknesses and limitations of the other. Iago feeds on the
errors that result from Othello's self-deception; but he himself is deceived in his vision of the world. For him,
mankind is corruptible; love is a mere illusion; women are inferior beings. He acts on these assumptions in the
same way that Othello acts on his warped vision of love, trust, and honor. Both act on a false set of premises.
The relationship thus established is reflected and magnified, as will be seen, in the imagery and verbal
patterns of the play.

One of the most striking of Iago's characteristics is his uncanny ability to take advantage of the situations and
opportunities presented to him. His strategy, of course, does not succeed completely: Cassio remains alive,
and Iago himself is captured and his plot revealed. On the whole, however, he is unbelievably successful. In
his hands, the slightest shred of gossip, hearsay, or overheard conversation becomes a dangerous catalyst, a
catalyst that intensifies Othello's reaction to the facts and situations Iago places before him.

Othello is easy prey for Iago because he is extremely sensitive and prone to anger. So long as his confidence
remains unshaken, he has complete command of a situation. This is clearly seen when Brabantio, Roderigo,
and others, threaten to attack him:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
Good signior, you shall more command with years
Than with your weapons.
[I. ii. 59-61]

When moved to anger, however, he tends to ignore reason—as when he comes upon the drunken Cassio,
following the street fight engineered by Iago:

Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment collied,
Assays to lead the way.
[II. iii. 204-07]

Iago has already understood Othello's tendency to react without reason to a situation which touches him
personally. He understands well that Othello's emotions feed and wax violent on doubt, that he seems to have
a built-in capacity for self-deception, which can be utilized by Iago for his own ends. He works especially on Othello's doubt—planted in him by Brabantio's statements early in the play—that perhaps his marriage to Desdemona is a perversion of nature; he plays on Othello's ignorance of life and people, especially in Venice, and on his inability to distinguish between appearance and reality.

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.
[I. iii. 399-400]

Othello's judgment of Iago is, of course, the best illustration of this. "He holds me well" [I. iii. 390], Iago reminds us, but he himself is a much severer judge:

… little godliness I have …
[I. ii. 9]

… oft my jealousy
Shapes faults that are not …
[III. iii. 147-48]

I am a very villain….
[IV. i. 125]

The recognition of the contradiction between appearance and reality in his own case gives Iago the confidence he needs to turn fiction into fact and convince Othello that fair is foul. He correctly evaluates Othello's love for Desdemona:

Our General's wife is now the General … for … he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces.
[II. iii. 314-15, 316-18]

His soul is … enfetter'd to her love
[II. iii. 345]

—but he has no doubt about his ability to undermine that reality. He succeeds very often with a mere hint—as, for example, the suggestion that Desdemona can not possibly escape the corruption for which the Venetian women (he implies) are notorious:

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands.
[III. iii. 202-03]

In the eyes of others, Iago is understandably "brave," "honest," and "just," for he invariably calls upon the virtues of others to effect their fall. It is the soldier's fearlessness, his impulsive response in critical situations, which he plays upon to bring Othello to ruin. Defending his marriage to Desdemona before the Duke and others in a council chamber, Othello reminds them that

… since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd
Their dearest action in the tented field;
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.
He has known the battlefield and war since early youth. He is a soldier, and therefore accustomed to hardship and cruelty. He himself admits that he can withstand hardship, and may even be stimulated by it:

I do agnize
A natural and prompt alacrity
I find in hardness.

He is also accustomed to acting quickly and making decisions rapidly, concentrating on the present state of affairs, rather than future consequences. In Act II Scene 3, when he puts an end to the drunken brawl going on when he enters, Othello immediately demands the name of the man who started it. The first man he asks is Iago. Iago lies, saying he does not know. Finding no answer here, he turns to Cassio himself. Again, no answer, so he turns to Montano. But he, too, refuses to point a finger, and consequently, Othello learns nothing. He knows what he wants, but he lacks the reason to show him the means to obtain it. It never once enters his mind that he could see each man personally and perhaps in this manner arrive at something reasonably close to the truth. But as the situation stands at that moment, he cannot understand it; his "passion" begins "to lead the way" and his "best judgment" is obscured [II. iii. 206-07]. The whole matter is "monstrous." The proof he finally does accept is Iago's; he makes no real attempt to hear Cassio. Othello's actions here reflect his military manner of thinking. On the field, when danger and uncertainty threaten, one must gather facts as quickly as possible, reach a decision, and implement it. Such a method of handling things may succeed brilliantly when employed on the battleground; but when used in every-day life, when used with respect to one's wife and friends, the results may be disastrous. Physically, Othello is living like a civilian; mentally, like a soldier. When a domestic problem arises he tries to solve it as if he were on the battlefield. Cassio is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Cassio is dismissed. Desdemona is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Desdemona is murdered.

Othello is quick to make decisions and act upon them, and so is Iago. Although Iago makes some attempt to reason out his plans, his reasoning nevertheless comes in flashes; a moment's reason for a moment's advancement. As soon as his plan "is engendr'd," he acts quickly so that he will "Dull not device by coldness and delay" [II. iii. 388]. Later in the play, going to plant Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room, Iago senses that "this may do something" [III. iii. 324]. Like Othello, Iago also knows war. He has served with Othello at Rhodes and Cyprus and has, of course, "... in the trade of war ... slain men" [I. ii. 1]. Although Othello seems to seek understanding rather than destruction, he emerges, in the course of the play, as the image of Iago even in this respect; in his very attempts to understand Desdemona, he will destroy her.

The focal point of the entire play is Act III Scene 3, and it is here that Othello begins to show most clearly his Iago-like traits, attitudes, and verbal patterns. Watching Cassio leave Desdemona, Iago sets things in motion by exclaiming, "Ha! I like not that" [III. iii. 35]. Iago speaks it but Othello thinks it, for he adds, "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" [III. iii. 37]. Iago answers that it could not have been Cassio, for he would never "steal away so guilty-like" [III. iii. 39]. And Othello replies, "I do believe 'twas he" [III. iii. 40], beginning to confirm the doubts he has in his own mind.

Later, defending Cassio (and trying to help regain Othello's friendship), Desdemona describes him as the one "that came a-wooing with you" [III. iii. 71]. Iago catches this and quickly makes use of it:

Iago. Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,
Know of your love?

[1. iii. 83-7]
Iago here is the doubt in Othello's own mind. Othello suspects Desdemona and Cassio, and although Iago asks the questions, they are merely "echoes" of Othello's own thoughts. He does not realize how closely Iago's words match his thoughts, but he does recognize that what is in Iago's mind is a "monster," a thing "too hideous to be shown" [III. iii. 108]. Whenever Othello cannot understand something it is "monstrous"; he describes the drunken brawl in Act II Scene 3 in the same way; and later, when Iago tells him of Cassio's supposed dream (in which he makes love to Desdemona) that, too, is "monstrous." Whatever Othello cannot comprehend he sees as some hideous creation; but the creation, in a very real sense, is his own. It is his because in demanding proof, he has already accepted the implications in Iago's veiled accusations. He will accept anything that seems like proof, or rather, anything that "honest" Iago offers him as proof. Interestingly enough, he always demands proof from others: he never seeks it on his own initiative.

Iago is very close to Othello in the sense that he, too, never really obtains proof for the things he fears or believes others have done to him. He lacks proof, for example, that Othello and Cassio have committed adultery with Emilia. And he obviously lacks proof for many of the things he tells Othello about Desdemona. It is perhaps this tendency to accept things blindly, on a kind of perverted faith, that enables Iago to reach Othello so readily with the most far-fetched insinuations and concocted stories.

The more twisted and perverted the information Iago gives to Othello, the more Othello seems to believe it. He still fails to understand Iago: "I know thou'rt full of love and honesty" [III. iii. 118]. Iago, true, honest friend that he is, warns Othello to "beware … of jealousy" for it is a "green-ey'd monster" [III. iii. 165-66]. His thoughts are running parallel to Othello's and he uses one of the words Othello originally borrowed from him when he denotes something as monstrous.

Othello, constantly hindered by his limited understanding of others, cannot determine where he stands:

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….
Would I were satisfied!
[III. iii. 384-86, 390]

And Iago answers:

I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion.
[III. ill. 391]

He has seen Othello like this before, in Act II Scene 3, when he could not comprehend the reasons for the street fight:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule.
[II. iii. 205]

The Moor's passion runs over his reason, and he asks Iago:
Give me a living reason she's disloyal.
[III. iii. 409]

Once again he wants proof, but asks for it, instead of trying to obtain it on his own. Instead of using his own reasoning, he lets Iago do it for him. Iago now goes on to describe how he heard Cassio murmuring in his sleep about his love-making to Desdemona. Othello, still incapable of understanding fully what is happening, utters his old cry "O monstrous! monstrous!" and Iago replies, "Nay, this was but his dream" [III. iii. 427]. But in Othello's mind this dream "denoted a foregone conclusion" [III. iii. 428]. Othello accepts the dream partly because in his aroused emotional state he will believe virtually anything, and partly because Iago, by describing the dream, makes audible the thoughts in Othello's own mind. Though Iago may tell the dream, Othello has already thought it; the dream, in sense, is his own. Iago confirms Othello's own doubts and suspicions.

Iago can easily strengthen such doubts because the two men are so similar. For example, Iago often speaks in a brusque, harsh manner; now Othello speaks in the same way:

I'll tear her all to pieces.
[III. iii. 431]

I would have him [Cassio] nine years a-killing!
[IV. i. 178]

Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be
damn'd tonight; for she shall not live.
[IV. i. 181-82]

Othello can speak this way of Desdemona, because he is ready to "see" that what Iago has been telling him is "true." What Iago tells him merely reinforces his own doubts and fears; proof is not really necessary since Iago's words merely echo Othello's own dark judgments. As the identity between the designs of Iago and the conclusions of the Moor becomes more explicit, Othello comes to sound like Iago more and more. In Act I, Iago had exclaimed:

I have't! It is engendered! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.
[I. iii. 403-04]

And later:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on.
[II. iii. 350-51]

Othello soon swears revenge in much the same terms:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!
[III. iii. 447]

Othello, full of "bloody thoughts," now demands "blood, blood, blood" [III. iii. 457, 451], the very word used by Iago on a number of earlier occasions.
Othello's thoughts are now as evil as Iago's, and to think like Iago is to speak like him. Now, in his bewilderment and the confusion brought on by his lack of reason and discrimination, Othello takes evil for good and good for evil. Desdemona has become a "devil" and Iago is now Othello's "lieutenant." And when Iago utters, "I am your own for ever" [III. iii. 479], he echoes the earlier words that Othello spoke to him: "I am bound to thee for ever" [III. iii. 213].

Iago continues to work upon Othello, and in Act IV Scene 1, he plans to have Cassio talk about Bianca, and Othello, hiding and listening, will think that he is speaking about Desdemona. But before Othello goes behind his hiding place, Iago urges him to "mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns that dwell in every region of his [Cassio's] face" [IV. i. 82-3]. Othello accepts Iago's words because they reflect what he has already conceived in his own mind. He agrees with Iago's picture of Cassio because he himself pictures the former officer in the same way. After the conversation between Iago, Cassio, and later, Bianca, Othello emerges from his hiding place completely convinced of Cassio's guilt: "How shall I murther him, Iago?" [IV. i. 170]. His emotions are so intense and his desire for vengeance so strong, that he forgets that Iago has already promised to kill Cassio:

\[
Oth. \text{Within these three days let me hear thee say} \\
\text{That Cassio's not alive.}
\]

\[
Iago. \text{My friend is dead; 'tis done at your request.} \\
[III. iii. 472-74]
\]

He has, for the moment, lost all love for Desdemona, for his "heart is turn'd to stone" [IV. i. 182]. Iago at this point reinforces practically everything Othello says. The two seem in perfect accord. Iago's success is assured; all he does from this time on is to elaborate the evil Othello has come to acknowledge within himself. The following dialogue is, in a sense, the workings of one mind:

\[
\text{Oth. I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!} \\
Iago. O,'tis foul in her. \\
\text{Oth. With mine officer!} \\
Iago. That's fouler. \\
\text{Oth. Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago!} \\
Iago. Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated. \\
\text{Oth. Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!} \\
[IV. i. 200-10]
\]

Parallels such as this between Iago and Othello are reinforced by the imagery and verbal echoes found in the play. One of the primary patterns of imagery is that of animals, and more than half of these images are Iago's. The animals which he mentions are usually small and repellent in some way, whether it be for their ugliness, filth, cunning, or some other quality the reader normally associates with them. Iago's use of such images can be seen when he and Roderigo come at night to awake Brabantio in order to tell him that his daughter has eloped with Othello and is by now married to him. Othello's happiness must be destroyed by constant irritation, and he tells Roderigo:
Plague him with flies.
[I. i. 711]

Animal and sexual images are combined in his conversation with Brabantio:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe.
[I. i. 88-9]

... you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse.
[I. i. 111-12]

... your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.
[I. i. 116-17]

With such terms Iago reveals his firm conviction that all love is lust. By using imagery of this kind he
provides a powerful emotional accompaniment for his arguments, which are designed to convince Othello of
Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago plays upon Othello's fear that Desdemona might some day deceive him as
she did her father. He manages to twist Othello's view of his own marriage until it appears to be nothing more
than a perversion of nature, and corrupts his image of Desdemona, until she seems to be nothing but a
prostitute.

These patterns of animal, sexual and other images are highly important, because they underline the close
similarities that exist between the two apparently different personalities. It is perhaps even more significant to
note that such patterns of imagery abound in Iago's speech, initially, but are gradually absorbed and taken over
by Othello as his mind and speech become twisted and corrupted by the evil rising up within him. Throughout
the early part of the play, Iago makes repeated references to animals, most of them possessing cruel and
despicable traits. He mentions the fox, with its selfish cunning, the ass, with its stupidity, the baboon, the
locust, the spider, the wolf, the fly, the goat, and others. Through images such as these, he suggests stealth and
evil, lechery, disease, and disaster. Such imagery reinforces Iago's view of life and people as things governed
by animal instinct. Iago's world is similar in this respect to that in *King Lear*, where human beings are reduced
to nothing more than a dog-eat-dog relationship. From Act III Scene 3 onward Othello joins Iago in the habit
of seeing and describing things in terms of repulsive or dangerous animals. He echoes the earlier references to
the goat, toad, dog, asp, worm, raven, bear, crocodile, monkey, and fly.... The progression is clear: the images
used by Iago are gradually taken over by Othello. Words such as *monster*, *monstrous*, and *beast* follow a
similar pattern, as does another group of images which refers to parts of the human body—blood, arms, ear,
heart, lips, brain, legs. In the beginning of the play it is Iago who uses these images most frequently. But in
the third act, Othello becomes their chief spokesman, and remains so for the rest of the play. (pp. 1-12)

Readers of the play cannot help noticing the fact that Iago very often speaks of things in terms of imagery that
contains connotations of, or outright references to, sex, lust, lechery, and prostitution. Iago is the first to use
terms such as these, but when Othello begins to see and value things as Iago does, he, too, begins to use these
images and, when he does, uses them with greater frequency than does Iago. The frequency and the shift of
these images from one character to the other reinforces the pattern we have already defined.... In *Shakespeare
Survey* 5, S. L. Bethell discusses the shift in the use of diabolical images such as hell, devil, fiend, and damn,
noting that Iago introduces these references, but Othello takes them over as evil increases its hold upon him.
(pp. 12-13)

All of these patterns of imagery and verbal echoes elaborate and stress the change in Othello and the release
of the latent evil within him, Iago being the spark that ignites it. But whereas Iago recognizes evil for what it
is, Othello must regard it as a good in order to accept it; for him it becomes a means for obtaining justice and
destroying those whom he considers corrupt—Cassio and Desdemona.

By the end of the play, Othello has become a man dominated and possessed by the very emotions which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he was not subject to. He thought he had perfect control over his emotions; he felt he could handle any situation, and often said so with colorful imagery:

Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it
Without a prompter.
[I. ii. 82-3]

He proclaimed himself free from the heated passions of youth:

—the young affects
In me defunct—
[I. iii. 263-64]

But his actions in the course of the play show that he does not have control over his emotions, and that he does not have the ability to handle any situation. The image he has of himself is as erroneous as his understanding of others. His ability to weigh and evaluate character and action is limited; and when caught in the mire of something he cannot comprehend, he often asks a series of questions, begging assistance, and ends with a half-pleading,

Give me answer to't.
[II. iii. 196]

And, of course, Iago is always ready to trigger Othello's buried passion and evil. Iago, like Othello, gropes about and makes hasty use of the materials he finds—gossip, hearsay, rumor—and with these tries and succeeds in giving direction and assistance to Othello's stumbling thoughts. He is a diabolic crutch, providing the assistance and direction that Othello craves. It is only at the very end of the play that Othello comes to have some insight into his own hidden motivations:

[A man] not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme.
[V. ii. 345-46]

By succumbing to the emotions he thought he could control, he destroys himself, of course; by yielding to passion and weak reasoning he murders Desdemona, whose death shatters his "soul's joy." But his realization that he had "lov'd not wisely, but too well" [V. ii. 344] applies to the trusted, "honest" friend, Iago, as well as to Desdemona. His passions aroused, his reason fled and left him "perplex'd in the extreme." When he did try to rationalize, he built his arguments on the trusted words of Iago, which merely reinforced the suspicions and fears which he had already admitted into his own heart. He found true what Iago said about Desdemona because he himself thought it before Iago uttered it. Thus, he took Iago's words as a confirmation of truth. Iago understood this perfectly well, for as he himself explains:

I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true.
[V. ii. 176-77]

Iago's powerful hold over Othello is proof of Othello's own potential for evil. Iago penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing, as he does so, the evil already present within Othello. As Iago's weakly conceived ideas and convictions are given expression, Othello accepts them as his own,
alienating himself more and more from the human and the rational. In his failure to understand himself, Desdemona, and Iago, he paves the way for his own ruin in the same way that Iago comes to destroy himself through his self-absorption. The destruction of one signals, in fact the destruction of the other. Having destroyed Othello, Iago promises that he "never will speak word" [V. ii. 304] of what he has done, much less why it has been done. With Othello dead, the rich field upon which Iago's malice and hate had taken root and flourished now lies wasted and destroyed. The public, dignified, military figure presented to us at the beginning of the play has fallen prey to what it tried most to believe was never there, conquered in large measure by its own weaknesses and delusions. And Iago, the forger of the perfect phrase, the subtle lie, the devastating hint, the man to whom language was both a mirror and a tool of personality, sentences himself to eternal silence. (pp. 13-15)


Criticism: Desdemona

S. N. Garner

[Garner elucidates Desdemona's character, maintaining that Shakespeare carefully balanced the other characters' accounts of her as goddess or whore to present a complex portrait. Othello's sensual view is countered by Brabantio's idealized concept in Act I and Roderigo and Cassio's romanticized vision is opposed by Iago's coarse innuendo in Act II. Garner then points out that Desdemona's liveliness and assertiveness are confirmed by her marriage to Othello and that these positive traits become a fatal liability. Finally, the critic ends with a discussion of Desdemona's powerlessness in the face of her husband's accusations, which leads to her death. For further commentary on the character of Desdemona, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley and Albert Gerard.]

As Desdemona prepares to go to bed with Othello in Act IV, scene iii of Shakespeare's Othello, the following conversation occurs between her and Emilia:

Emilia. Shall I go fetch your night-gown?

Desdemona. No, unpin me here. This Lodovico is a proper man.

Emilia. A very handsome man.

Desdemona. He speaks well.

Emilia. I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.

[IV. iii. 34-9]

Surely this is startling dialogue coming as it does between the brothel scene and the moment when Desdemona will go to her wedding with death. An actress or director would certainly have to think a great deal about how these lines are to be spoken and what they are to reveal of Desdemona's character. But a reader or critic is not so hard pressed, and he may, if it suits him, simply skip over them. This is precisely what most critics do.

Robert Heilman is representative. In his lengthy book on the play, Magic in the Web, he does not discuss the passage. One reason for this omission, of course, is that he, like most critics, is mainly interested in Othello and Iago. Nevertheless, since he uses the New Critics' method of close reading—underscoring images, habits
of diction, and grammatical structure—it is peculiar that when he treats Desdemona's character, dealing in two instances with Act IV, scene iii specifically (pp. 189-90, 208-10), he fails to notice these lines. A partial explanation for this failure is that he sustains his interpretation of Othello and Iago and the theme of the play by insisting on Desdemona's relative simplicity and diverges from other critics who make her "overintricate." More significantly, however, the passage is difficult to square with his contention that in the last act Desdemona "becomes … the saint," a representation of "the world of spirit." (p. 233)

Many critics and scholars come to Shakespeare's play with the idea that Desdemona ought to be pure and virtuous and, above all, unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty to Othello. The notion is so tenacious that when Desdemona even appears to threaten it, they cannot contemplate her character with their usual care and imagination.

At what appears to be the other extreme is such a critic as W. H. Auden, one of the few who notices the passage and sees it as a significant revelation of Desdemona's character. Viewing her cynically partly on account of it, he remarks: "It is worth noting that, in the willow-song scene with Emilia, she speaks with admiration of Ludovico [sic] and then turns to the topic of adultery…. It is as if she had suddenly realized that she had made a mésalliance [marriage with with a person of inferior social rank] and that the sort of man she ought to have married was someone of her own class and colour like Ludovico. Given a few more years of Othello and of Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover" ["The Alienated City: Reflections on 'Othello,'" *Encounter* 17 (1961)]. But isn't Auden finally making the same assumption as the others? Doesn't his cynical and easy dismissal of Desdemona imply that he has expected her to be perfect? If she is not, then she must be corrupt. Isn't this Othello's mistake exactly? Either Desdemona is pure or she is the "cunning whore of Venice" [IV. ii. 88].

The poles of critical opinion are exactly those presented in the play. On the one hand is the view of Desdemona the "good" characters have; on the other is the negative vision of her that Iago persuades Othello to accept. At a time when we have become especially careful about adopting any single perspective of a character as the dramatist's or the "right" perspective, why do many critics now simply accept one extreme view of Desdemona or the other? I can only assume that they share a vision Shakespeare presents as limited.

Desdemona's character is neither simple nor any more easily defined than Iago's or Othello's. Any effort to describe it must take into account all of what she says and does as well as what other characters say about her and how their views are limited by their own personalities and values. Though Shakespeare does not give Desdemona center stage with Othello, as he gives Juliet with Romeo and Cleopatra with Antony, he does not keep her in the wings for most of the play, as he does Cordelia [in *King Lear*] or Hermione [in *The Winter's Tale*]. She is often present so that we must witness her joy, fear, bewilderment, and pain. What happens to her matters because we see how it affects her as well as Othello. The meaning of the tragedy depends, then, on a clear vision of her character and experience as well as those of Othello and Iago.

That Desdemona is neither goddess nor slut Shakespeare makes very clear. He evidently realized that he would have to defend his characterization of her more against the idealization of the essentially good characters than the denigration of the villain. Consequently, though he undermines both extremes, he expends his main efforts in disarming Desdemona's champions rather than her enemy. In her first two appearances, Shakespeare establishes her character and thus holds in balance the diverging views, but he goes out of his way to make her human rather than divine.

He carefully shapes Othello's account of Desdemona to counter Brabantio's initial description of her as "A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" [I. iii. 94-6]. Because Brabantio is unwilling to believe that Desdemona's "perfection so could err" [I. iii. 100] that she would elope with Othello, he accuses him of seducing her by witchcraft or drugs. In Othello's eloquent defense [I. iii. 127-69], he shows not only that Brabantio's accusations are false but also that it was Desdemona who invited
his courtship. His description of her coming with "greedy ear" to "devour" his tales of cannibals, anthropophagi, and his own exploits suggests that she is starved for excitement and fascinated by Othello because his life has been filled with adventure. She loved him, he says, for the dangers he had passed. So far is Desdemona from being Brabantio's "maiden never bold" [I. iii. 94] that she gave Othello "a world of kisses" [I. iii. 159] for his pains and clearly indicated that she would welcome his suit:

She wished
That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.
[I. iii. 162-66]

The scene is carefully managed so as to create sympathy for both Othello and Desdemona. Because Desdemona initiates the courtship, Othello is absolutely exonerated of Brabantio's charge. His cautiousness acknowledges the tenuousness of his position as a black man in Venetian society and is appropriate and even admirable. The Moor cannot be confident of Desdemona's attraction to him, and he undoubtedly knows that marrying him would isolate her from her countrymen. Recognizing Othello's reticence and undoubtedly its causes, Desdemona makes it clear she loves him but, at the same time, maintains a degree of indirection. Shakespeare does not wish to make her seem either shy or overly forward.

When Desdemona finally appears, she strengthens the image Othello has presented. Before the senators, she answers her father's charges forcefully and persuasively, without shyness or reticence. More significantly, it is she, and not Othello, who first raises the possibility of her going to Cyprus. Othello asks only that the senators give his wife "fit disposition" [I. iii. 236], but when the Duke asks her preference, Desdemona pleads:

If I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.
[I. iii. 255-59]

Her wish not to be left behind as a "moth of peace" is a desire not to be treated as someone too fragile to share the intensity of Othello's military life. As though she might have overheard Brabantio tell Othello that she would not have run to his "sooty bosom" [I. ii. 69], she confirms her sexual attraction to him as well as her own sexuality by insisting that she wants the full "rites" of her marriage.

Shakespeare must have wanted to make doubly sure of establishing Desdemona's sensuality, for he underscores it the next time she appears. At the beginning of Act II, while she awaits Othello on the shore of Cyprus, her jesting with Iago displays the kind of sexual playfulness that we might have anticipated from Othello's description of their courtship.

As soon as Desdemona arrives at Cyprus, together with Emilia, Iago, and Roderigo, and is greeted by Cassio, she asks about Othello. Immediately a ship is sighted, and someone goes to the harbor to see whether it is Othello's. Anxious about her husband, Desdemona plays a game with Iago to pass the time; in an aside, she remarks, "I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" [II. i. 121-22]. Their repartee grows out of a debate that Iago begins by accusing Emilia of talking too much. A practiced slanderer of women, he chides both his wife and Desdemona. Although Desdemona rebukes him, "O, fie upon thee, slanderer!" [II. i. 113], she asks him to write her praise. Instead he comments on general types of women:
Iago. If she be fair and wise: fairness and wit,
The one's for use, the other useth it.

Desdemona. Well praised. How if she be black and witty?

Iago. If she be black, and thereto have a wit,
She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.

Desdemona. Worse and worse!

[II. i. 129-34]

Iago's "praises" commend women for what he might expect Desdemona to regard as faults, and none are without sexual overtones. Though Desdemona remarks that they "are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i' th' alehouse" [II. i. 138-39], they do not offend her and serve her well enough as a pastime for fifty-five lines, until Othello arrives.

Critics who take an extreme view of Desdemona see her pleasure in this exchange with Iago as a failure of Shakespeare's art. [M. R.] Ridley, for example, comments [in the Arden edition of *Othello*]: "This is to many readers, and I think rightly, one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare. To begin with it is unnatural. Desdemona's natural instinct must surely be to go herself to the harbour, instead of asking parenthetically whether someone has gone. Then, it is distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap backchat with Iago, and so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way. All we gain from it is some further unneeded light on Iago's vulgarity." But this scene is unnatural for Ridley's Desdemona, not Shakespeare's. What the dramatist gives us here is an extension of the spirited and sensual Desdemona that has been revealed in the first act. Her scene with Iago shows her to be the same woman who could initiate Othello's courtship and complain before the senators about the "rites" she would lose in Othello's absence. Her stance is similar to the one she will take later when she tries to coax Othello into reinstating Cassio. That the scene impedes the dramatic movement too long and that its humor is weak are perhaps legitimate criticisms; to suggest that it distorts Desdemona's character is surely to misunderstand her character.

Shakespeare makes a special effort to maintain the balance of the scene. He keeps Desdemona off a pedestal and shows her to have a full range of human feelings and capacities. Yet he is careful not to allow her to fail in feeling or propriety. The point of her aside is to affirm her concern for Othello as well as to show her personal need to contain anxiety and distance pain and fear. As we see how Desdemona acts under stress later in the play, it seems consistent with her character that she should want a distraction to divert her attention in this extremity. Shakespeare brings the exchange between Desdemona and Iago to a brilliant close as Othello enters and greets his "fair warrior." The sensual import of this moment and his address is surely heightened by what we have seen of Desdemona shortly before.

Shakespeare's delicately poised portrayal of Desdemona to this point prepares us for the splendid antithesis between Iago and Cassio in the middle of the second act:

Iago. Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame. He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove.

Cassio. She's a most exquisite lady.

Iago. And, I'll warrant her, full of game.

Cassio. Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.
Iago. What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.

Cassio. An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

Iago. And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

Cassio. She is indeed perfection.

[II. iii. 14-28]

Such a carefully counterpointed exchange invites us to adjust both views.

Iago distorts Desdemona’s character by suppressing the side of it that Cassio insists on and emphasizing her sensuality. His suggestions that she is "full of game" and that her eye "sounds a parley to provocation" call up an image of a flirtatious and inconstant woman. Iago’s view is clearly limited by his devious purpose and also by his cynical notions about human nature in general and women in particular.

But Cassio’s view is limited as well. He idealizes Desdemona as much as her father did. It is evidently clear to Iago that his efforts to persuade Cassio of his vision will fail when he pronounces Desdemona “perfection,” as had Brabantio before him” [I. iii. 100]. The extravagance of language Cassio uses earlier in describing Desdemona must also make his view suspect. For example, he tells Montano that Othello

hath achieved a maid
That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th’ essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.

[II. i. 61-5]

After the safe arrival of Desdemona and her companion in Cyprus, Cassio rhapsodizes:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The guttered rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteeped to enclog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their moral natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.

[II. i. 68-73; italics added]

This idealization gives as false a picture of Desdemona as Iago’s denigration of her. Cassio’s lines in fact comment more on his character than on Desdemona’s. To accept his view of Desdemona, as many have done, is as grievous a critical mistake as to accept Iago’s.

Desdemona’s liveliness, assertiveness, and sensuality are corroborated in her marrying Othello. The crucial fact of her marriage is not that she elopes but that she, a white woman, weds a black man. Though many critics focus on the universality of experience in Othello, we cannot forget the play’s racial context. Othello’s blackness is as important as Shylock’s Jewishness [in The Merchant of Venice], and indeed the play dwells relentlessly upon it.

It is underscored heavily from the beginning. The first references to Othello, made by Iago to Roderigo, are to "the Moor" [I. i. 39,57]. Roderigo immediately refers to him as "the thick-lips" [I. i. 66]. He is not called by name until he appears before the senators in scene ii when the Duke of Venice addresses him. He has been
referred to as "the Moor" nine times before that moment.

Iago and Roderigo know they may depend on Brabantio's fears of black sexuality and miscegenation. When he appears at his window to answer their summons, Iago immediately cries up to him, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" [I. i. 88-9] and urges him to arise lest "the devil" make a grandfather of him. The tone intensifies as Iago harps on Othello's bestial sexuality. To the uncomprehending and reticent Brabantio he urges impatiently:

You'll have
your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll
have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers
for cousins, and gennets for germans.
[I. i. 111-14]

Mercilessly, he draws a final image: "Your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs" [I. i. 115-17]. The unimaginative and literal Roderigo adds that Desdemona has gone to the "gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" [I. i. 126]. (pp. 234-40)

Critics speculate about what Othello's marriage to Desdemona means for him but usually fail to consider what it means for her to marry someone so completely an outsider. What are we to make of Desdemona's choosing Othello rather than one of her own countrymen? Brabantio tells Othello that Desdemona has "shunned / The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation" [I. ii. 66-7]. It seems incredible to him that, having done so, she should then choose Othello. But Shakespeare intends to suggest that the "curled darlings" of Italy leave something to be desired; the image implies preciousness and perhaps effeminacy. He expects us to find her choice understandable and even admirable.

Of all Desdemona's reputed suitors, we see only Roderigo. The easy gull of Iago and mawkishly lovesick, he is obviously not worthy of Desdemona. When Othello and Desdemona leave for Cyprus, Roderigo tells Iago, "I will incontinently drown myself " [I. iii. 305], and we cannot help but assent to Iago's estimation of him as a "silly gentleman" [I. iii. 307]. Even Brabantio agrees that he is unsuitable, for he tells him, "My daughter is not for thee" [I. i. 98]. Only by comparing him to Othello does he find him acceptable.

The only other character who might be a suitor for Desdemona is Cassio. But it occurs to neither Cassio nor Desdemona that he should court her. Shakespeare makes him a foil to Othello and characterizes him so as to suggest what Desdemona might have found wanting in her countrymen. He is evidently handsome and sexually attractive. In soliloquy, where he may be trusted, Iago remarks that "Cassio's a proper man" [I. iii. 392] and that "he hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected—framed to make women false" [I. iii. 397-98]. Drawing Cassio as one who is "handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after" [II. i. 245-47], Iago persuades Roderigo that Cassio is most likely to be second after Othello in Desdemona's affections. In soliloquy again, Iago makes clear that he thinks Cassio loves Desdemona: "That Cassio loves her, I do well believe t" [II. i. 286].

Though he is handsome and has all the surface graces, Cassio is wanting in manliness. Shakespeare certainly intends Cassio's inability to hold his liquor to undermine his character. He gives this trait mainly to comic figures, such as Sir Toby Belch [in Twelfth Night], or villains, like Claudius [in Hamlet]. Once drunk, the mild-mannered Cassio is "full of quarrel and offense" [II. iii. 50]. His knowledge of his weakness [II. iii. 39-42] might mitigate it, but even aware of it, he succumbs easily. Though at first he refuses Iago's invitation to drink with the Cypriots, he gives in later with only a little hesitation to Iago's exclamation, "What, man! 'Tis a night of revels, the gallants desire it" [II. iii. 43-4]. His lack of discipline here and his subsequent behavior that disgraces him lend some credence to Iago's objections to Othello's preferring him as lieutenant. (pp. 241-42)
Desdemona’s marrying a man different from Roderigo, Cassio, and the other “curled darlings” of Italy is to her credit. She must recognize in Othello a dignity, energy, excitement, and power that all around her lack. Since these qualities are attributable to his heritage, she may be said to choose him because he is African, black, an outsider. When she says she saw Othello’s visage in his mind, she suggests that she saw beneath the surface to those realities that seemed to offer more promise of life. If the myth of black sexuality (which Othello’s character denies at every turn) operates for Desdemona, as it does for some of the other characters, it can only enhance Othello's attractiveness for her as she compares him with the pale men around her.

Desdemona shows courage and a capacity for risk in choosing Othello, for it puts her in an extreme position, cutting her off from her father and countrymen. Brabantio in effect disowns her since he would not have allowed her to live with him after her marriage [I. iii. 240] if she had not been permitted to go with Othello to Cyprus. His last words are not to her, but to Othello, and they cut deep: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" [I. iii. 292-93]. Later we learn that Brabantio died of grief over the marriage [V. ii. 204-06]. We are to disapprove of Desdemona’s deception no more than we are to disapprove of Juliet’s similar deception of Capulet, or Hermia’s of Egeus [in A Midsummer Night’s Dream]. Shakespeare gives Brabantio’s character a comic tinge so that our sympathies do not shift from Desdemona to him.

That her marriage separates her from society is implied because of the attitudes we hear expressed toward Othello, but it is also made explicit. Brabantio does not believe that Desdemona would have married Othello unless she had been charmed partially because of his sense that she will "incur a general mock" [I. ii. 68]. After Othello has insulted Desdemona, Emilia’s question of Iago makes clear what lines have been drawn: "Hath she forsook … Her father and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore?" [IV. ii. 124-27]. Desdemona does not marry Othello ignorant of the consequences; when she pleads with the Duke to allow her to go to Cyprus, she proclaims:

That I love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world.
[I. i. 248-50]

She knows her action is a "storm of fortunes." Her willingness to risk the censure of her father and society is some measure of her capacity for love, even though her love is not based on complete knowledge. She does not see Othello clearly and cannot anticipate any of the difficulties that must necessarily attend his spirited life. Her elopement is more surely a measure of her determination to have a life that seems to offer the promise of excitement and adventure denied her as a sheltered Venetian senator’s daughter.

Because Desdemona cuts herself off from her father and friends and marries someone from a vastly different culture, she is even more alone on Cyprus than she would ordinarily have been in a strange place and as a woman in a military camp besides. These circumstances, as well as her character and experience, account in part for the turn the tragedy takes.

At the beginning she unwittingly plays into Iago’s hands by insisting that Othello reinstate Cassio immediately. On the one hand, she cannot know what web of evil Iago is weaving to trap her. On the other, her behavior in this matter is not entirely without fault. It is only natural that Desdemona should wish Cassio reinstated since he is her old friend and, except for Emilia, her only close friend on Cyprus. But her insistence is excessive. She assures Cassio that Othello "shall never rest" [III. iii. 22] until he promises to restore the lieutenant’s position, and indeed, she makes sure that he never does. Yet her persistence does not seem necessary, for Emilia has assured Cassio earlier:
All will sure be well.
The general and his wife are talking of it.
And she speaks for you stoutly. The Moor replies
That he you hurt is of great fame in Cyprus
And great affinity, and that in wholesome wisdom
He might not but refuse you. But he protests he loves you,
And needs no other suitor but his likings
To take the safest occasion by the front
To bring you in again.
[III. i. 42-50]

Desdemona harps on her single theme playfully, teasingly. Her manner is no different from that which she took when she courted Othello or jested with Iago. Her vision seems not to extend beyond the range that allowed her to manage domestic life in Brabantio's quiet household.

As soon as Othello's jealousy and rage begin to manifest themselves, Desdemona's forthrightness and courage start to desert her. She can no longer summon up those resources that might help her. She is not as fragile as Ophelia [in Hamlet]; she will not go mad. But neither is she as resilient or as alert to possibilities as Juliet, who was probably younger and no more experienced than she. Before Juliet takes the potion the Friar has prepared to make her appear dead, she considers whether he might have mixed a poison instead, since he would be dishonored if it were known he had married her to Romeo [IV. iii. 24-7]. She confronts the possibility of evil, weighs her own position, and takes the risk she feels she must. There is never such a moment for Desdemona.

Under the pressure of Othello's anger, Desdemona lies to him, by denying she has lost the handkerchief he gave her, and makes herself appear guilty. Her action is perfectly understandable. To begin with, she feels guilty about losing it, for she has told Emilia earlier that if Othello were given to jealousy, "it were enough / To put him to ill thinking" [III. iv. 28-9). But more important, she lies out of fear, as her initial response to Othello indicates:

Desdemona. Why do you speak so startingly and rash?

Othello. Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, is it out o' th" way?

Desdemona. Heaven bless us!
[III. iv. 79-81]

Then she becomes defensive: "It is not lost. But what an if it were?" [III. iv. 83]. At this point Othello's demeanor must be incredibly frightening. Shortly before this moment he has knelt with Iago to vow vengeance against Desdemona if she proves unfaithful, and moments later, he is so enraged that he "falls in a trance" [IV. i. 43]. In this sudden crisis, latent fears of Othello that are inevitably part of Desdemona's cultural experience must be called into play. Her compounded terror destroys her capacity for addressing him with the courage and dignity that she had summoned in facing her father and the senators when they called her actions in question.

If Desdemona has wanted the heights of passion, she finds its depths instead. That she is simply bewildered and unable to respond more forcefully to Othello's subsequent fury is attributable to several causes. To begin with, his change is sudden and extreme. When Lodovico arrives from Venice and meets the raging Othello, he asks incredulously:
Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?
[IV. i. 264-68]

Noble Othello is like the flower that festers and smells far worse than weeds. Only Iago anticipates the full possibilities of his corruption.

But the most important causes of Desdemona's powerlessness lie within herself. She idealizes Othello and cannot recognize that he is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. She tells Emilia that her "noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are" [III. iv. 26-8]. Evidently surprised, Emilia asks if he is not jealous, and Desdemona replies as though the suggestion were preposterous: "Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" [III. iv. 29-30]. Though Emilia immediately suspects that Othello is jealous [III. iv. 98], Desdemona does not credit her suspicions since she "never gave him cause" [III. iv. 158]. Emilia tries to explain that jealousy is not rational and does not need a cause:

But jealous souls will not be answered so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
[III. iv. 159-62]

Though Iago provokes Othello, his jealousy, as Emilia says, arises out of his own susceptibility. He has romanticized Desdemona, as she has him. Forced to confront the fact that she is human and therefore capable of treachery, he is threatened by his own vulnerability to her. If he cannot keep himself invulnerable by idealizing her, then he will do so by degrading her. His fears are heightened because he thinks his blackness, age, and lack of elegance make him less attractive sexually than Cassio.

Despite the worsening crisis, Desdemona will not be instructed by Emilia, nor will she alter her view of Othello so that she might understand and possibly confront what is happening. Her only defense is to maintain an appalling innocence. The more she must struggle to keep her innocence in the face of the overwhelming events of the last two acts, the more passive and less able to cope she becomes. She must hold on to it for two reasons. First, nothing of her life in the rarefied atmosphere of Brabantio's home and society could have anticipated this moment, and nothing in her being can rise to meet it now. Therefore, she must close it out. Second, if she is deserted by her husband, there is nowhere for her to turn. Rather than suffer the terror and pain of her isolation, she must deny that it exists.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Desdemona from the beginning of Act IV until her death illustrates how finely and clearly he had conceived her character and how well he understood the psychology of a mind under pressure. As Iago's poison works and Othello becomes more convinced of Desdemona's guilt and increasingly madder with rage, Desdemona will become gradually more passive and continually frame means of escape in her imagination.

After the brothel scene, when Othello leaves calling Desdemona the "cunning whore of Venice" [IV. ii. 88] and throwing money to Emilia as to a madam, Desdemona is stunned. Emilia asks, "Alas, what does this gentleman conceive? / How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?"; Desdemona replies, "Faith, half asleep" [IV. ii. 95-7]. The action is too quick for her to be literally asleep; Othello has just that moment left. Rather, she is dazed; her mind simply cannot take in what it encounters. Almost at once she begins to look for
ways out. Directing Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed [IV. ii. 105], she hopes to be able to go back in time, to recover the brief happiness and harmony she and Othello shared when they were newly married. Though she will subsequently assert that she approves of Othello's behavior, part of her will not approve and will continue to create fantasies to save herself.

Next, Desdemona begins to anticipate her death, directing Emilia to shroud her in her wedding sheets if she should die [IV. iii. 25-6] and singing the willow song. She not only foreshadows her death but also expresses an unconscious desire for it. Her preface to the song makes her wish clear:

> My mother had a maid called Barbary.
> She was in love; and he she loved proved mad
> And did forsake her. She had a song of "Willow";
> An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune,
> And she died singing it. That song tonight
> Will not go from my mind; I have much to do
> But to go hang my head all at one side
> And sing it like poor Barbary.

[IV. iii. 26-33]

That the song will not go from her mind and that she has "much to do" to keep from hanging her head and singing it suggest the insistence of a death wish. To express a desire for death here and to plead with Othello later to let her live is not inconsistent. Death wishes are more often hopes of finding peace and escape rather than real wishes to die. The song itself—quiet, soporific—promises calm in contrast to Othello's raging.

Just before Desdemona sings, she starts the conversation about Lodovico quoted at the beginning. That she thinks of Lodovico when she is undressing to go to bed with Othello suggests that she is still trying to find a way around the emergency of the moment. She admires Lodovico as "a proper man"—precisely the phrase Iago used to describe Cassio [I. iii. 392]—and as one who "speaks well," calling up those qualities that Cassio has and Othello lacks. Since the man Desdemona has loved, married, and risked her social position for has turned into a barbarian and a madman, she unconsciously longs for a man like Lodovico—a handsome, white man, with those attributes she recognizes as civilized. In her heart she must feel she has made a mistake.

Desdemonako does not know the world, or herself, for that matter. Like Lear, she has been led to believe she is "ague-proof." At the end of Act IV Shakespeare makes it certain, if he has not before, that she is self-deceived and that there is a great discrepancy between what she unconsciously feels and what she consciously acknowledges. When Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would cuckold her husband "for all the world" [IV. iii. 67], Emilia plays with the question, answering, "The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice" [IV. iii. 68-9]. Desdemona finally says she does not think "there is any such woman" who would [IV. iii. 83]. Her comment underscores her need to close out knowledge that might threaten her. Coming as it does after the passage about Lodovico, her remark can only emphasize her pitiable need to maintain an innocence that must inevitably court ruin.

Like Sleeping Beauty waiting for the prince's kiss, Desdemona is asleep when Othello comes. When he threatens her, the most she can do is plead for her life. Desdemona is not Hermione, who has the wisdom to know that if Leontes doubts her fidelity [in The Winter's Tale], she cannot convince him of her chastity by insisting on it. And unlike Hermione, Desdemona merely asserts her innocence rather than reproaches her husband, with whom the final blame must lie. She can only lament that she is "undone" [V. ii. 76] and beg for time. She acts differently from the heroine of The Winter's Tale not only because she is more fragile and less wise but also because her accuser is not a white man following at least the forms of justice in a court. Othello is a black man with rolling eyes [V. ii. 38] coming to do "justice" in her bedroom at night.
When Desdemona revives for a moment after Othello has stifled her, she affirms her guiltlessness [V. ii. 122] and to Emilia's asking who has "done this deed," she answers, "Nobody—I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord" [V. ii. 123-25]. Her answer is often thought of as an effort to protect Othello. Had Othello stabbed Desdemona, then the notion is plausible that she might pretend to have killed herself to save him. But Desdemona could not have smothered or strangled herself. I think her answer acknowledges instead her full responsibility for her marriage and its consequences. What her implied forgiveness of Othello means is unclear. Her remark of a moment before, "A guiltless death I die" [V. ii. 122], must be rendered with pain or anger, so her forgiveness may merely follow her old pattern of denying what she feels and acknowledging what she must; in other words, it may be unfelt. If her forgiveness is genuinely felt, however, it might suggest that Desdemona has come to see Othello with the prejudices of her countrymen and to regard him as acting according to a barbarian nature that will not allow him to act otherwise. She forgives him, then, as she would a child. Or at its best, her pardoning Othello means that she is finally capable of an ideal love, one that does not alter "when it alteration finds" or bend "with the remover to remove" [Sonnet 116]. But even if we see Desdemona as acting out of pure love, as most critics do, her triumph is undercut because she never confronts the full and unyielding knowledge in the face of which true love and forgiveness must maintain themselves. Furthermore, there is no ritual of reconciliation between Desdemona and Othello. Though Othello is by Desdemona's side when she forgives him, she uses the third person and speaks to Emilia.

Othello learns that he is wrong, that Iago, whom he trusted, has deceived him heartlessly, monstrously. But he never understands what in himself allowed him to become prey to Iago. The final truth for him is that he has thrown a pearl away. His suicide is a despairing act. He finally sees himself as unblessed and bestial—beyond mercy. Paradoxically, his only redemption must come through self-execution.

Othello is surely one of Shakespeare's bleakest tragedies. Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello must fail. They do not know themselves, and they cannot know each other. Further, they never understand the way the world fosters their misperceptions. We must watch as Othello is reduced from a heroic general, with dignity, assurance, and power to a raging, jealous husband and murderer, out of control and duped by Iago. We see Desdemona lose her energy, vitality, and courage for living to become fearful and passive. Both suffer the pains of deception, real or supposed loss of love, final powerlessness, and death. Tragedy never allows its protagonists to escape suffering and death, but it often graces them with the knowledge of life, without which they cannot have lived in the fullest sense. Yet for all their terrible suffering, Desdemona and Othello are finally denied even that knowledge. (pp. 243-50)


Critical Essays: Othello

Othello, the drama's vain hero, is a Moor—traditionally interpreted as a black man—who wins the heart of Desdemona with his rollicking tales of battle and adventure, much to the dismay of her father and the Venetian court of which they are a part. Othello is a military man, ill at ease with public pomp and circumstance. The plot speeds up quickly when Iago, a subordinate of Othello, vows revenge after he has been passed over for promotion.

What follows is a series of intrigues in which Iago slowly convinces Othello of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio, the lieutenant to whom Othello had given the position Iago had sought. Othello's inability to relate to individuals on a personal basis makes him a poor judge of character and highly susceptible to the ruthless Iago's machinations.
Oblivious to Iago’s scheming and the transparent innocence of his wife and lieutenant, Othello is ultimately a victim of his own naivete and implacable ignorance. The final verdict upon Othello’s character, despite what he claims in his final speech, is that he loved neither “wisely” nor “too well.”

Bibliography:


Calderwood, James L. *The Properties of “Othello.”* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989. Takes the theme of ownership as a starting point and provides an overview of Elizabethan property lines to set the stage for argument. Stretches the term property to include not only material and territorial possessions but racial, social, and personal identity.


Critical Commentary: Preface to the Critical Commentary

Shakespeare's plays as we read them today are not as they appeared in his lifetime. Some plays were printed in quarto version before being printed in the First Folio of 1623. A quarto was produced by folding a sheet of printing paper into four sections. Our modern paperbacks approximate a quarto. A folio was produced from folding a sheet of printing paper in two. Today's large "coffee table" books are a rough equivalent to a folio. Once the paper size was decided, the type for the printing press was set up by hand by men known as compositors. Working from a handwritten, or scribal, document, the compositors would often misread a word or change words so that the print made sense. Since spelling and punctuation rules had not yet been established, there was no consistency in these two areas. These and a variety of other production problems meant that in order for a modern reader to understand the text of Shakespeare's plays, an editor will attempt to put the language of the plays into a more literate format.

When an editor tackles a play like *Othello*, he is dealing with a play that exists in both quarto and folio versions. By comparing the two versions (texts), an editor chooses what he considers to be the best reading. The edition which results from this process is known as a "conflated" text. Many copies of Shakespeare's plays that we use today are conflated texts.

This analysis has used: *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, E. A. J. Honigmann, ed. Walton-on-Thames, England: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd. (The Arden 3 Series), 1997.
Critical Commentary: Act I Commentary

Scene 1
Like other Shakespeare plays, Othello opens with a scene that sets the tone for the rest of the play. The playwright is intentionally vague in the details of the conversation between two men with one exception: line 2 reveals that one of the men is called Iago. We arrive in media res, literally in the middle of things.

The first man is complaining that Iago has spent his money freely and is very upset that Iago knows about "this" (I.i.3). As the conversation continues, we learn that Iago hates "him" (I.i.6) because "he" has passed over Iago for promotion to lieutenant, choosing instead "Michael Cassio, a Florentine" (I.i.19) and "a great arithmetician" (I.i.18). Who is this "he," and why does Iago hate him so much? After a lengthy list of complaints, Iago throws us a slight hint: "And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient" (I.i.32). Iago's sarcasm is distilled into a single epithet, "Moorship." Not only is the man under verbal attack Iago's superior, he is a Moor, an outsider to the world of Venice.

Speaking logically, the other man tells Iago that if he were in Iago's place, he would quit. Defensively, Iago explains that he only serves him to get even eventually. Iago assures his companion, Roderigo, that

... I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at; I am not what I am.
(I.i.63-64)

As with his other plays, Shakespeare puts the whole play before us in a few lines. Iago is not what he is. As we will see, neither is anyone else. The key to this play is the effect of real and/or imagined deception: things are not what they are.

Roderigo, at Iago's urging, yells up to Brabantio's window, rousing the house from their sleep. Iago wastes no time in putting his plot for revenge against this Moor into action. He informs Brabantio:

Zounds, sir, you're robbed; for shame, put on your gown!
Your heart is burst, you have lost your soul,
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe!
(I.i.86-89)

Here Iago not only informs Brabantio of a matter that is of obvious importance, but he also reveals a lot about himself and the people with whom he deals.

Iago begins a speech pattern he will continue throughout the play, especially when he is speaking about women. He uses animal imagery to categorise the hated Moor. He continues its use to describe the sex act as an act of bestiality and to demean the woman involved. Iago also apparently knows Brabantio's weak spot. His abuse of the woman contrasts starkly to "heart" and "soul" used to describe Brabantio's loss, thus revealing that the woman sleeping with the Moor is very close to Brabantio. The sexual value of this woman is a core issue for the old man.

When Roderigo addresses Brabantio, we learn that Roderigo has been banned from Brabantio's house as an unsuitable marriage candidate. Roderigo, however, tries to calm Brabantio. Iago finally interrupts with the news that "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (I.i.114-116). Once again, Iago is crude and unyielding, incensing Brabantio who begins to search the house for his daughter. Abruptly, Iago tells Roderigo that he must leave since he cannot bring such an open accusation against the Moor.
At first we may find this scene amusing, that Iago, having made the accusation, cannot make the accusation. On consideration, we discover what a great psychologist Iago actually is. He has put forth a truth: the Moor is sleeping with Brabantio's daughter. He has, however, omitted the details and context of the truth, thereby altering its reception and perception. It is not what it is. Iago will do this "truth-bending" throughout the play until we ourselves question what the truth is.

As Iago leaves, an irate Brabantio confronts Roderigo with the fact that his daughter is indeed missing. He wonders if she is married; if so, perhaps she was charmed into it by magic. Brabantio thanks Roderigo and leads his household into Venice's dark streets.

Scene 2
In this scene, we meet the Moor who has apparently kidnapped Brabantio's daughter. His first line is a telling one. When Iago tells Othello that he had wanted to kill a man (possibly Roderigo or Brabantio), Othello responds: "Tis better as it is" (I.ii.6). In 186 lines, Shakespeare has subtly given us the entire play:

I am not what I am.
'Tis better as it is.

We will discover that if Othello had left things as they were, he would not have met tragedy. But for now, Iago informs Othello that he faces an annulment or jail for marrying "the gentle Desdemona" (I.ii.25). Othello responds that he is not afraid of whatever Brabantio may do because of the service he has done for Venice. He tells Iago that his reputation as a general is such that only for his love of Desdemona would he even consider compromising it.

Othello's lieutenant arrives with officers from the Duke of Venice and the Senate. Othello is summoned to the Senate on an urgent matter concerning Cyprus. Othello prepares to leave, and while he does, Iago tells the lieutenant that Othello is married. As the men leave, Brabantio, Roderigo, and others draw their weapons to attack Othello. Brabantio is furious and demands to know the whereabouts of Desdemona. He accuses Othello of casting a spell on the girl. He contends that Desdemona was

So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation.
(I.ii.67-68)

Brabantio goes even further to accuse Othello of using drugs and witchcraft. Brabantio orders the officers with him to arrest Othello and kill him if he resists. Calmly Othello asks the irate father where he would like Othello to go. Brabantio says "To prison" and Othello counters that he is summoned by the Duke. Brabantio does not believe that the Duke has called for a council meeting in the middle of the night, but decides that his cause has such overwhelming importance that it should be presented directly to the Duke.

On the surface, this scene may be viewed as giving us details about and introductions to characters we will meet later. However, the scene also gives us immediate access to the dynamics of the various relationships which shape the play. We meet Othello's lieutenant who Iago had so maligned in Scene 1. From his dialogue, we can see that he is a straight-to-the-point military man. We are unaware that he has any connection to Desdemona at this point, but Iago's comment, "If it prove a lawful prize, he's made for ever" (I.ii.51), serves two purposes. Iago knows something that the lieutenant does not but should know. And Iago, while saying Othello will be "made for ever" is planning the general's downfall as well as that of the lieutenant. Therefore, we see Iago as consistently sarcastic and manipulative without being shown why he is that way.

The scene also gives us a strong first impression of Othello. He is a general who is a career soldier. His handling of Brabantio shows his prowess at dealing with men either in the heat of battle or the heat of passion,
which could almost be synonymous. He is so confident in his capabilities that he seems to ride above Brabantio's racial epithets and wrath.

Without our realizing it, Shakespeare has constructed several triangles which will frame the action of the play: Iago, Roderigo, Othello; Iago, Cassio, Othello; Brabantio, Othello, Desdemona; Cassio, Othello, Desdemona. Each of these triangles are interlinked and have as their common thread the inclusion of Othello. The difference in how these problems of these relationships are resolved will be based on how Othello acts or does not act on Iago's "I am not what I am."

**Scene 3**

This scene opens with the Duke's and the senators' comments on the inconsistencies in the reports of the number of galleys (ships) in the Turkish fleet. This discussion creates a geographical triangle: Venice, Turkey, Cyprus. The Duke arrives at the conclusion that whether the Turkish fleet has 170, 140, or 200 galleys, it is certain that they pose a threat to Cyprus and, as is soon reported, to Rhodes. The messenger comes from the governor of Cyprus who begs the Duke to send help. The Duke wants to send Othello, who enters the senate chamber with Roderigo and Brabantio.

The Cyprus situation is the last thing on Brabantio's mind. When the man wails, "My daughter, O, my daughter" (I.iii.60) in response to the Duke's "what's the matter" (I.iii.59), the Duke thinks Desdemona has died. Obviously, the two men have different criteria for defining "grief" (I.iii.56). Brabantio repeats his accusation that Desdemona has been bewitched and points the finger at Othello. Othello's response to the Duke and the others shows him to be a true tactician.

Othello admits witchcraft and asks for the Duke to bring Desdemona to the Senate, which he does, with Iago showing them the way. During this time, Othello tells a moving story of how Desdemona listened to his stories of "the battles, sieges, fortunes / That I have passed" (I.iii.131-132). The general relates that frequently Desdemona was moved to tears by his tales. When Desdemona indicated she was in love with Othello "for the dangers I had passed" (I.iii.167), he admitted that he "loved her that she did pity them" (I.iii.168). The Duke believes Othello because the story he has just heard moved him. When Desdemona arrives, she tells Brabantio that she is indebted to him "for life and education" (I.iii.182) but that she now must be loyal to her husband. Brabantio concedes and the Duke urges him to be reconciled to his daughter's marriage. But Brabantio knows that the Senate has convened to discuss action against the Turks, and that his personal problem is subordinate to the needs of the State.

Shakespeare cues us to the shift from private problems to public ones through the language. Othello tells his story in blank verse. Brabantio's capitulation is in rhyming couplets. The Duke follows with a speech in prose. The jarring change is also reflected in the content of the Duke's speech: Othello must leave the comfort of Venice as we have left the comfort of rhyming couplet, which is often the way nursery rhymes are constructed. Othello must return to his life as general in command of a "stubborn and boisterous expedition" (I.iii.229).

Othello is unfazed by this assignment. He is accustomed to the hardships imposed on a soldier by war. He knows, however, that Desdemona is not so accustomed, and he asks the Duke to make sure she is cared for. The Duke suggests she stay at her father's. Brabantio immediately refuses and Othello agrees. Desdemona joins the discussion by agreeing with the two men, asking the Duke to allow her to accompany Othello. Othello assures the Duke that if he agrees to let Desdemona go on the long trip, it will not to be to satisfy his needs as a man nor would he ignore his duties as a soldier. The Duke responds that it does not matter to him, but the Turks invasion of Cyprus does. Othello must leave immediately, whatever he decides about Desdemona.
Othello leaves Iago to secure the commission from the Duke and to make arrangements for Desdemona. As
the Duke leaves, Othello assures Brabantio that he (Othello) is a man of strong moral fiber. Brabantio,
however, leaves him with a bitter truth:

   Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
   She has deceived her father, and may thee.
   (I.iii.293-294)

Othello shrugs off the comment, and tells Iago that Iago's wife would be a good companion for Desdemona.
Iago is to bring both women to Cyprus. Othello and Desdemona leave to spend a last hour together before the
trip separates them.

Roderigo is despondent over the turn of events and threatens to drown himself. Iago knows that if he does,
then Iago loses extra income. In the passages that follow, the word "purse" is used six times in fourteen lines,
and "money" seven times in sixteen lines. Iago succeeds in gulling the man who will sell his land and travel to
Cyprus in pursuit of Desdemona. Iago then lets us in on his plan. He knows Othello judges men by
appearances, and he will use this weakness to manipulate the general into believing that Desdemona and
Cassio, the lieutenant, are lovers. This way, he can get revenge on Othello and destroy Cassio. It does not
seem that Roderigo figures very prominently in this plan.

We now know all we need to understand the play. We have met the main characters, we have the background
of life in Venice, and we are about to move to Cyprus. With Iago's plan now verbalized and Othello's
commission for war against the Turks, the play promises plenty of action. But Shakespeare is never so
obvious, so simple. The scenes so far have given us just a peek at the psychology of these men and women of
Venice. How will things change when they are at war in Cyprus?

Critical Commentary: Act II Commentary

Scene 1
Act II opens with Signor Montano and his friends discussing the weather and its effect on the sea that
surrounds Cyprus. The Turks are attempting an invasion, but with most of their fleet wrecked by a storm, their
attack is aborted. The storm, however, has not affected the Venetian ship on which Cassio sailed. He arrives
safely in Cyprus, and is nervous about Othello's safe arrival. Iago arrives soon after with Desdemona and his
wife, Emilia. Othello has yet to land.

While the company waits for the general, Desdemona engages Cassio, Iago and his wife, Emilia, in a word
game that reveals Iago's disdain of women so intensely that Desdemona comments, "O heavy ignorance, thou
praisest the worst best" (II.i.143-144). Cassio takes Desdemona's hand, and Iago decides that it will be by
such simple actions that he will trap Cassio.

Othello's ship pulls in, and Desdemona greets her husband with a kiss, a very private action in a public forum.
Othello announces that the Turks are drowned, and that the war is over. When Othello and Desdemona leave,
Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio, but it takes a while to convince him. Ultimately,
Iago brings Roderigo around to believing the lie, and they agree to meet later.

This scene poses several perplexing questions. Othello's commission is to fight the Turks and protect Cyprus,
but the war is over when he arrives. So, what is this play about? Iago tells Roderigo a deliberate lie. What is
he up to? Why does Roderigo believe him? Why does Roderigo stay in Cyprus? Othello and Desdemona are
happy newlyweds. How will Iago get his revenge with their love so obviously, and publicly, strong?
The key to these questions can be found in Iago's soliloquy at the end of the scene. He plans to

put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure.
(II.i.304-306)

Iago is a supreme judge of human nature. By seizing on Othello's and Cassio's weaknesses, and by colouring Othello's interpretation of what he sees, Iago will be able to manipulate these people any way he wants.

Scene 2
Othello's Herald reads his proclamation for celebrating the defeat of the Turks and his wedding for six hours from 5-11 PM. This scene provides the transition from Iago's plan to Iago's action.

Scene 3
Othello begins the scene by instructing Cassio to make sure that the celebration does not get out of hand. Cassio replies that Iago is overseeing the feast, but, nonetheless, he will follow the general's order. Othello and Desdemona retire to bed.

When Cassio tells Iago that they must attend to the watch, Iago tells him that it is not yet 10 and the celebration has a bit more to go. Cassio protests that he has no capacity for drinking, but Iago insists. Cassio is soon intoxicated. Iago then tells Montano that Cassio is a habitual drunk, and Montano resolves to inform Othello of this fact. When Iago sends Roderigo after Cassio, Cassio chases Roderigo and gets into a fight with Montano. Roderigo sounds the alarm when Montano is wounded. Othello comes in from his bedroom to break up the brawl. He asks "honest Iago" (II.iii.168) to tell him what is going on. Othello presses for information until Iago is "forced" to confess that Cassio started the brawl. Othello relieves Cassio of being his officer. Cassio is devastated by the loss of his reputation.

Iago assures Cassio that nothing is lost, that all Cassio needs to do is to go back to Othello when the time is right. Cassio curses drinking and says that if he did go to Othello to get his place back, Othello would label him a drunkard. Iago then tells him that he should go to Desdemona instead and have her intercede for him with Othello. Cassio agrees and thanks Iago for his "honest" advice.

Iago tells us how his plan will play out when Roderigo comes in, complaining that he is broke, beaten, and on his way home. Iago tells him he must have patience. Othello has already fired Cassio, and soon Othello will get rid of Desdemona.

This scene not only sets Iago plan into motion, but also achieves one of his goals, the demotion of Cassio. If this goal is achieved, what else could be left for him to do?

What is particularly interesting is the depiction of small personal events against the backdrop of global political events. The war with the Turks is over before it begins as Iago's plan opportunistically is completed before he initiates it. One other notable point is that Othello is now in an arena in which he has a place: he is the general. In Venice he was a subordinate outsider. Here he is the leader. Desdemona, on the other hand, was a daughter in Venice, and is now a wife—both roles subservient to strong, older men. Curiously, Othello demands Christian behavior from his troops in non-Christian Cyprus.

Clearly, Iago realizes that, while in Venice, he has little opportunity to effect his plan because of the proximity of people who can contradict him on Desdemona's reputation, in spite of her father's advice to Othello. However, in this environment, as Othello's ancient, Iago's position is more heavily weighted.
Critical Commentary: Act III Commentary

Scene 1
To relieve some of the tension already established and perhaps to distract us a little, Shakespeare brings in musicians and a clown to begin this scene. The more practical purpose is to get the Clown to relay a message from Cassio to Emilia, Iago's wife. As Cassio waits for Desdemona, Iago himself comes by to check on the humiliated lieutenant. Cassio is touched to the point where he exclaims: "I never knew / A Florentine more kind and honest" (III.i.40-41). Emilia comes to tell Cassio that Othello and Desdemona are discussing the situation and that Desdemona is on Cassio's side. Cassio asks Emilia to arrange a private meeting between Cassio and Desdemona. She agrees.

Once again the word "honest" is used to describe Iago, but Cassio does so in the context of identifying Iago as a fellow as good as any Florentine. Italian city-states were fiercely separatist and patriotic. For Cassio, a Florentine, to praise an outsider like Iago as kind and honest' "as a Florentine is a high compliment indeed, and, as such, underlines the dramatic irony of the statement. Iago is obviously far from kind, definitely not honest, nor eager to be classified as a Florentine. Furthermore, Iago draws his innocent wife into his web of intrigue.

Scene 2
This six-line scene between Othello, Iago, and some gentlemen allows us to see Othello dispatching his duties as a general. It is also apparent that Iago has replaced Cassio. In addition, we learn that Othello will be on official public business, which becomes important in the following scenes.

Scene 3: Desdemona assures Cassio that she will do her best to get him reinstated with Othello. Emilia adds that her husband is worried too. Desdemona pledges before Emilia that she will persist in Cassio's cause. Cassio leaves hurriedly when Othello and Iago approach.

Iago comments to Othello that he does not like the young man's leaving at the sight of Othello. Desdemona begins her suit on behalf of Cassio. Having completed some official business and having more to do, Othello tells Desdemona that now is not the time to discuss Cassio. Desdemona, however, continues, unwilling to stop talking even when Othello concedes. Finally Desdemona leaves.

Iago questions Othello about Cassio's role as a go-between between Othello and Desdemona when they were courting. Othello is furious at Iago's insinuation that Cassio courted Desdemona for himself. Yet he is unsure. Othello presses Iago to tell him what he is thinking. Iago finally plants the seed: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy!" (III.iii.167). Othello begins to fight the identity of the emotion he has been feeling. Iago seizes the opportunity to remain free of suspicion. When Othello demands proof of Desdemona's deception, Iago tells Othello to use his eyes. He reminds the general that Desdemona deceived Brabantio to marry him, an echo of what Desdemona's father had told him in the Senate chamber.

Although Othello says, "I do not think but Desdemona's honest" (III.iii.229), it is obvious that he has serious doubts by saying that the girl had rejected all other suitors of her own social standing and race to marry Othello—an act way out of character for her.

Iago has struck at the heart of Othello's insecurities, but he has done so in Othello's native environment, a war zone. Desdemona's interference in this area is not only unwise, but presents a challenge to her husband's decisions regarding his army. It is very ironic that Othello would be most vulnerable where he is most secure. Iago knows this full well and presses onward.
Iago advises Othello to hold off on Cassio's reinstatement and observe Cassio and Desdemona together, not giving what Iago has just said a second thought. After Iago leaves, Othello verbalizes his inadequacies in assessing human behavior and in knowing about love. Othello suddenly and firmly arrives at the conclusion that he has been wronged by Desdemona and that he can only hate her now. Just as quickly he says:

Look where she comes.
If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself,
I'll not believe it.
(III.iii.281-283)

Critically, Desdemona and Emilia come to call Othello to the state banquet he has arranged. Othello tells his wife he has a headache, and she tries to soothe it with her handkerchief. Almost imperceptibly, she drops it, and she and Othello go to the banquet. Emilia picks up the handkerchief, and because Iago had pressured her for it, Emilia decides to give it to him instead of Desdemona. Iago determines to plant the handkerchief on Cassio, observing that it is the little things that aggravate jealousy.

Othello has left the banquet, tortured by his thoughts, alleging that as long as he did not know of Desdemona's falsity, he was better off. Iago sympathizes with him. Othello again demands proof of Desdemona's sin. Iago is evasive again, but asks if catching Desdemona in bed with Cassio would be proof. Othello angrily responds that that would be impossible, but Iago says "imputation and strong circumstances" (III.iii.409) should be enough. Othello demands "a living reason" (III.iii.412). Iago insists on telling his lies. He says that while he slept with Cassio (as soldiers shared sleeping arrangements), Cassio thought Iago was Desdemona, but then says it must have been a dream. Othello is enraged.

Having worked Othello to a fever pitch, Iago tells him that Cassio has Desdemona's handkerchief. As Othello continues to curse and rage against Desdemona, Iago takes a vow of service to Othello, who orders him to kill Cassio "within these three days" (III.iii.475). He then promotes Iago to lieutenant.

It would seem that Iago has achieved all he set out to do. Yet this is only the middle of the play. The forces Iago has unleashed are beyond his control, and we are uncertain at the end of this very long scene where the play is going. This uncertainty is akin to that felt by Othello. He does not want to believe that his wife is an adulteress, but his experience with women is small when compared to his experience with men on whom he relies and with whom he has shared the majority of his life.

In addition, Othello's tendency to make judgements by appearances, an essential skill for a soldier, will prove to be his downfall in the area of marital relations. It is a dangerous game that Iago is playing and his instinct for self-preservation demands the sacrifice of many innocent lives.

Scene 4
Desdemona and Emilia have been looking for the handkerchief, and Emilia has lied about its whereabouts. Desdemona, unaware of what has transpired between Othello and Iago, comments that Othello is incapable of jealousy. Simultaneously, it is a silly and tragic statement that reveals Desdemona's lack of perception and understanding of her husband.

When she sees him, Desdemona immediately tells Othello that she has sent for Cassio so that Othello may speak with him about reinstatement. Suddenly, Othello says he feels a chill and asks Desdemona for her handkerchief. When she offers it, he asks for the one that he had given her, the one that had belonged to his mother, the one Emilia has given to Iago. He tells Desdemona that the cloth is magic. They begin to squabble about where it could be, and Desdemona tells Othello that his demand for the handkerchief is a trick to distract her from pleading for Cassio. Othello leaves in a fury.
Iago has convinced Cassio that only Desdemona can plead his cause, and when Cassio asks her how things are going, Desdemona responds that Othello is not himself and that she has done her best. Iago cannot believe that Othello is angry and goes off to investigate, ostensibly. Desdemona tried to analyze why Othello should be so irritated, and ascribes it to matters of state. Emilia hopes that this is indeed the reason and jealousy. Desdemona and Emilia leave Cassio to find Othello, and Bianca approaches the dishonored officer.

Bianca, a local prostitute, asks Cassio where he has been. He tells her he has serious problems to consider, and then asks her if she would remove some embroidery from a handkerchief he had found in his chamber. He tells Bianca he is waiting for Othello, but he will walk with her a little, promising to see her soon.

With this scene's beginning with a word play game between Desdemona and the Clown, it would be easy to dismiss it as a light scene that only tells us about the handkerchief, which is such a little thing. But there is a clever structure here. In a comedy, the accidental passing of a small item such as a handkerchief would be a running joke and probably would be very funny. However, at this point in the play, negative passions are abundant. The handkerchief is critical to Desdemona's "defense." By starting the scene with a comic convention and twisting it to fit tragic circumstances, Shakespeare emphasises the intensity of Othello's jealousy and its tragic results. There is nothing funny about this little item, not even the facts that it was given to Othello by his mother and that it has magic powers. These ascriptions underline the effects that irrational jealousy has on Othello's psyche, and quite possibly, on us too.

Emilia's lack of honesty to Desdemona is minor in comparison to Iago's lies to Othello, but it is no less deadly. Both women seriously misjudge their mates and their moods. Such misjudgements counter the males' distorted views of women. Neither is correct, but both are absolute and ingrained on either side of the male-female equation.

**Critical Commentary: Act IV Commentary**

**Scene 1**
This scene illustrates how strong a hold irrational jealousy has on Othello. Iago pushes Othello so far that the general "falls in a trance" (IV.i.43, stage direction) or epileptic fit. Cassio comes in at this point, but Iago sends him away. When Othello recovers, Iago tells him that Cassio came by, and that, while Othello observes, Iago will question the young man.

Iago then engages Cassio in conversation about Bianca, while Othello watches, thinking Desdemona is the topic. When Bianca arrives with the handkerchief, Othello realizes it must be the one he gave Desdemona. Cassio goes after Bianca and Iago goes after Othello. Othello means to kill both Desdemona and Cassio.

Desdemona arrives with Lodovico, who has a letter from Venice. As Desdemona tells Lodovico of the rift between Cassio and Othello, Othello strikes her. Lodovico cannot believe that such behavior has happened publicly right before his eyes. Othello further humiliates Desdemona and leaves in a rage. Left alone with Iago, Lodovico is told that Othello is not in his right mind. Lodovico takes "honest" Iago's word for the truth, commenting, "I am sorry that I am deceived in him" (IV.i.282).

The entire scene clearly illustrates Othello's inexperience with women. He too quickly ascribes the qualities of a loose woman to an innocent woman. Rather than confront Desdemona with Iago's accusations, Othello chooses to believe his "friend." This may seem strange to us, but when we consider that the army has been Othello's life, it becomes easier to understand. On the battlefield, Othello is only as good as the troops under his command. Within a military structure, discipline is handled by a strict, universally observed, code, which may include striking a soldier. Because of the ever-present threat of death, soldiers learn quickly to be co-dependent on each other. Therefore, Othello has no valid reason to doubt a man with whom he would
entrust his life, however obvious Iago's lies may seem to us.

**Scene 2**

Othello opens the scene by questioning Emilia about her observation of Cassio and Desdemona. It may seem a small glimmer of hope, but when Emilia leaves to fetch Desdemona, Othello completely discounts Emilia's story. His mind is made up.

He calls Desdemona "whore," "public commoner," and "impudent strumpet," terms that would never have crossed his mind had they stayed in Venice, and words which were tantamount to curses for Elizabethan audiences. No matter what Desdemona says or does, she cannot prove her innocence to her husband. She also cannot understand why Othello is behaving this way.

When Emilia returns, she interrupts Othello's stream of verbal abuse. Of course, Emilia's first concern is for the dazed Desdemona:

> Do not talk to me, Emilia;  
> I cannot weep, nor answers have I none  
> But what should go by water.  
> (IV.ii.104-106)

Desdemona sends Emilia to get Iago, and when he enters, he asks Desdemona what is wrong. Emilia answers for her mistress who cannot even bring herself to repeat the word "whore." Emilia knows that

> some eternal villain,  
> Some busy and insinuating rogue,  
> Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,  
> (IV.ii.132-134)

has spread this tale(s) about Desdemona.

Iago hears his wife speak the truth and instantly denies that such a man exists. But Emilia persists. Finally, Iago calls her a fool. The distraught Desdemona asks her betrayer for advice on how to win Othello back. Iago assures her that Othello is simply under pressure from state business, and Desdemona and Emilia go in to supper as Roderigo arrives.

Roderigo is very annoyed with Iago because Iago has failed to deliver Desdemona to him. Iago turns Roderigo's wrath to purposeful anger by asking him to kill Cassio so that Othello and Desdemona cannot return to Venice. Iago tells Roderigo that Cassio is having supper with a prostitute. Iago will also help Roderigo kill Cassio.

This scene is loaded with dramatic irony. Othello, who did not ask for it, received advice from Iago that leads him to believe Desdemona is a shameful adulteress. Desdemona, who asks for Iago's advice, is told nothing is wrong with her husband and that all will be well. In the meantime, Iago, the villain, further deceives the innocent Roderigo, who seems intent on his own destruction. Single-handedly, Iago has taken him beyond bankruptcy to murder. There seems to be no limit to Iago's evil ventures. But just as Emilia interrupts Othello's tirade, she will interrupt her husband's plan. She has unwittingly spoken the truth, but next time, she will be acutely aware of the truth. For Iago, the limits are soon to be reached.

**Scene 3**

This scene is often cut in performances, but its inclusion is essential to the unrelenting tension building to the climax of Act V.
Othello, Lodovico, Desdemona, and Emilia leave the state banquet, and Othello orders Desdemona to go to bed alone. But before Emilia leaves, she and Desdemona have a revealing conversation about the relationship between men and women.

Desdemona speaks of dying for love as Emilia prepares her for bed. Desdemona has noted that Lodovico is "a proper man. / A very handsome man" (IV.iii.34-35), indicating two things: (1) that she can note these qualities in a man other than her husband; (2) that she had recognized those qualities in Othello. This second point clearly demonstrates her internal confusion about the sudden change in his behavior toward her. Desdemona begins to sing a sad song that ends "If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men" (IV.iii.56). In his moments of darkest despair, Othello will repeat this same sentiment almost verbatim.

But for now, Desdemona asks her maid if there are women who will cheat on their husbands. Emilia says that there are, and that if she were offered "the whole wide world" (IV.iii.74), she would too. Desdemona refuses to believe her. Emilia tells her that if wives stray, it is the fault of their husbands, because men sleep with other women when they are abroad, they get jealous over petty things, they restrict their wives' liberty, beat them or reduce them to less than when they were married. According to Emilia, husbands should treat wives as equals and recognize that women's feelings are just as intense as men's.

The placement of this scene before Act V shows us just how well Emilia knows Iago and what her life with him has meant. Thus, the playwright underlines Desdemona's lack of knowledge about sexual politics. Not only is Desdemona naive, but she also refuses to heed Emilia's worldly advice.

It must be remembered that Desdemona was raised in the world of courtly love. Putting the wedding sheets on the bed, asking Emilia to wrap her body in them should she die, and singing "The Willow Song," are all conventions of how a lover should behave, a philosophy to which Emilia does not subscribe. The contrast between the two women is the contrast between illusion and reality, being in love with love and being in love, young idealism and old practicality, inexperience and experience.

**Critical Commentary: Act V Commentary**

**Scene 1**
The last two scenes of the play bring all the plot elements together in the final spiral of destruction of most of the people we have had under observation for four acts. Iago has convinced a reluctant, and we might think hopeless, Roderigo to kill an unsuspecting Cassio with his help. To Iago, however, Roderigo is the one who must be killed in addition to Cassio, because Iago has robbed Roderigo of a fortune that Iago cannot possibly repay. Furthermore, if Cassio lives, Iago risks being exposed to Othello for the conniving villain he is.

Roderigo attacks Cassio, but misses. Cassio stabs Roderigo, and Iago follows suit, wounding Cassio in the leg. When Othello hears Cassio cry "Murder! Murder!" (V.i.27), he is convinced that Iago has slain Cassio as promised. Othello goes off to kill Desdemona.

Lodovico and another Venetian, hearing the commotion, think it is a trap; however, Iago comes upon the scene like an innocent, concerned bystander. Iago fatally stabs Roderigo, binds up Cassio's leg wound, and pretends to be overly concerned in front of the two Venetians. He then tries to implicate the innocent Bianca in the proceedings.

Iago is now in a most precarious situation unless Cassio also dies. But as a prologue to the final scene, Shakespeare sets up the audience well. According to Lodovico, "it is a heavy night" (V.i.41), meaning that it is foggy and dark, but it is also a heavy night because of the number of deaths and the violence that is yet to come. Throughout the play, Shakespeare has been playing with the motif of light and darkness: Othello is
black, Desdemona white; Iago wakes Brabantio at night and furthers his plan by day; Othello will soon debate Desdemona's death in terms of light and dark.

In addition, Iago is acting more impulsively without a thought for the consequences. Although his primary concern was the murder of Cassio, he slays Roderigo and does not have the opportunity to follow through on his pledge to Othello. Weighed one against the other, the murder of Roderigo is of less consequence to Iago than that of Cassio. Iago's schemes are beginning to disintegrate.

*Scene 2*

As Othello comes in to his and Desdemona's bedroom, he has reverted to "civilized" language, unable to mention Desdemona's supposed sin to the "chaste stars" (V.ii.2). He compares Desdemona's life to the light he carries, and realises that once he snuffs out her life, he cannot just bring it back.

Once Desdemona acknowledges him, however, Othello is angry again, accusing her of giving Cassio her handkerchief and of sleeping with him. Her denials fall on deaf ears. Desdemona pleads for her life, but Othello smothers her. Emilia knocks on the door at this crucial moment, and Othello thinks she is there with news of Cassio's death.

Emilia, however, tells Othello that Cassio has killed Roderigo. Desdemona, not yet dead, cries, "O falsely, falsely murdered" (V.ii.115). Emilia discovers her mistress dying, and Desdemona says that she alone is responsible for her death. But Othello confesses it to Emilia.

Emilia further learns that her husband, Iago, has told Othello the story of Desdemona's infidelity. Emilia, against Iago's pleas for her to be quiet, tells Othello the truth about the handkerchief. Othello tries to attack Iago, but Iago stabs Emilia and runs. With her dying breath, Emilia swears to Othello that Desdemona was a good, chaste, and faithful wife.

Othello cannot escape the pain and horror of his own making. The Venetians return with Iago and the wounded Cassio. Cassio reveals that Roderigo left a letter with the full details of Iago's plot. Othello is shattered. He stabs himself, and dies kissing Desdemona.

Lodovico takes control, remands Iago to custody, and prepares to return to Venice to file his report on the situation.

So it would seem that Shakespeare has neatly worked out the fate of all the characters. But has he? We get no further news about Bianca, nor do we know if Cassio is reinstated into the army. Will Othello and Desdemona be buried together in Cyprus or will they be returned to Venice? Will Othello have a full military funeral like Hamlet's? What is "the torture" (V.ii.367) to which Iago will be subjected? Can any punishment really suit his crimes? Are they really crimes or are they the actions of an opportunist, a name that could easily describe any of the Venetians?

Shakespeare has left us the end of the domestic tragedy, the death of two lovers, but he also leaves us with a cautionary parable about politics, race relations and the equivocal definition of "honesty."

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

Although *Othello* has frequently been praised as William Shakespeare’s most unified tragedy, many critics have found the central character to be the most unheroic of Shakespeare’s heroes. Some have found him stupid beyond redemption; others have described him as a passionate being overwhelmed by powerful emotion; still others have found him self-pitying and insensitive to the enormity of his actions. Yet all of these
denigrations pale before the excitement and sympathy generated for the noble soldier in the course of the play.

As a Moor, or black man, Othello is an exotic, a foreigner from a fascinating and mysterious land. He is passionate, but he is not devoid of sensitivity. Rather, his problem is that he is thrust into the sophisticated and highly cultivated context of Renaissance Italy, a land that in the England of Shakespeare’s time had a reputation for connivance and intrigue. Shakespeare uses the racial difference to many effects: most obviously, to emphasize Othello’s difference from the society in which he finds himself and to which he allies himself through marriage; more subtly and ironically to heighten his tragic stance against the white Iago, the embodiment of evil in the play. More than anything, Othello is “natural man” confronted with the machinations and contrivances of an overly civilized society. His instincts are to be loving and trusting, but he is cast into a society where these natural virtues would have made him extremely vulnerable.

The prime source of that vulnerability is personified in the figure of Iago, perhaps Shakespeare’s consummate villain. Iago is so evil by nature that he does not even need any motivation for his antagonism toward Othello. He has been passed over for promotion, but that is clearly a pretext for a malignant nature whose hatred for Othello needs no specific grounds. It is Othello’s candor, openness, and spontaneous, generous love that Iago finds offensive. His suggestion that Othello has seduced his own wife is an even flimsier fabrication to cover his essential corruption.

Iago sees other human beings only as victims or tools. He is the classical Renaissance atheist—intelligent, beyond moral scruple, and one who finds pleasure in the corruption of the virtuous and the abuse of the pliable. That he brings himself into danger is of no consequence, because he relies on his wit and believes that all can be duped and destroyed. There is no further purpose to his life. For such a manipulator, Othello, a good man out of his cultural element, is the perfect target.

More so than in any other Shakespeare play, one character, Iago, is the stage manager of the whole action. Once he sets out to destroy Othello, he proceeds by plot and by innuendo to achieve his goal. He tells others just what he wishes them to know, sets one character against another, and develops an elaborate web of circumstantial evidence to dupe the vulnerable Moor. Edgar Stoll has argued that the extraordinary success of Iago in convincing other characters of his fabrications is simply a matter of the conventional ability of the Renaissance villain. Yet there is more to the conflict than Iago’s abilities, conventional or natural. Othello is the perfect victim because he bases his opinions and his human relationships on intuition rather than reason. His courtship of Desdemona is brief and his devotion absolute, as is his trust of his comrades, including Iago. It is not simply that Iago is universally believed. Ironically, he is able to fool everyone about everything except the subject of Desdemona’s chastity. On that subject it is only Othello whom he is able to deceive. Roderigo, Cassio, and Emilia all reject Iago’s allegations that Desdemona has been unfaithful. Only Othello is deceived, but that is because Iago is able to make him play a game with unfamiliar rules.

Iago entices Othello to use Venetian criteria of truth rather than the intuition on which he should rely. Iago plants doubts in Othello’s mind, but his decisive success comes when he gets Othello to demand “ocular proof.” Although it seems that Othello is demanding conclusive evidence before jumping to the conclusion that his wife has been unfaithful, it is more important that he has accepted Iago’s idea of concrete evidence. From that point on, it is easy for Iago to falsify evidence and create appearances that will lead to erroneous judgments. Othello betrays hyperemotional behavior in his rantings and his fits, but these are the result of his acceptance of what seems indisputable proof. It takes a long time, and a lot of falsifications, before Othello finally abandons his intuitive perception of the truth of his domestic situation. As Othello himself recognizes, he is not quick to anger but, once angered, his natural passion takes over.

The crime that Othello commits is made to appear all the more heinous because of Desdemona’s utter loyalty. It is not that she is naïve—indeed, her conversation reflects that she is sophisticated—but there is no question of her total fidelity to her husband. The evil represented by the murder is intensified by the audience’s
perception of the contrast between the victim’s virtue and Othello’s conviction that he is an instrument of justice. His chilling conviction reminds readers of the essential probity of a man deranged by confrontation with an evil he cannot comprehend.

Critics such as T. S. Eliot have argued that Othello never comes to an understanding of the gravity of his crime—that he realizes his error but consoles himself in his final speech with cheering reminders of his own virtue. That does not, however, seem consistent with the valiant and honest military character who has thus far been depicted. Othello may have been grossly deceived, and he may be responsible for not clinging to the truth of his mutual love with Desdemona, but, in his final speech, he does face up to his error with the same passion with which he had followed his earlier misconception. Just as he had believed that his murder of Desdemona was divine retribution, he now believes that his suicide is a just act. His passionate nature believes it is meting out justice for the earlier transgression. There is a reference to punishment for Iago, but Shakespeare dismisses the obvious villain so as to focus on Othello’s final act of expiation.

**Critical Essays: Have You Not Read of Some Such Thing?**

**Sex and Sexual Stories in Othello**

"Have You Not Read of Some Such Thing?" Sex and Sexual Stories in *Othello*

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Why does Othello suddenly abandon his affectionate trust in Desdemona for a conviction of betrayal? This question, by placing the protagonist's understanding at the play's centre, takes us back to Bradley's first words about the play in *Shakespearean Tragedy*: 'the character of Othello is comparatively simple, but . . . essentially the success of Iago's plot is connected with this character. Othello's description of himself as "one not easily jealous" . . . is perfectly just. His tragedy lies in this—that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet . . . unusually open to deception'.

Bradley has long been discredited—a story with which we are all familiar. In 1993 L. C. Knights's 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' repudiated the notion of treating dramatic characters as the authors and origins of their own histories, autonomous agents with lives outside the dramatic action. Knights's essay coincided with a redirection of Shakespeare studies from character to language, from the 'whole nature' of the protagonist to the coherent artifice of the play itself. Wilson Knight's 'spatial hermeneutics' figures notably in this move away from Bradley, as part of a 'modernist paradigm'; psychological integrity is fragmented into linguistic patterns that re-achieve wholeness in a self-reflexive rather than representational text. If a play begins to resemble *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, it makes more sense to speak of the structural relation of geometric forms—image patterns contributing to symbolic coherence in a dramatic poem—than about which if any of the characters has a noble nature.

We no longer indulge in the Bradley-bashing that was routine during this period; we ignore him now, the consequence of yet another shift that has rendered his kind of commentary apparently irrelevant. In Richard Rorty's view, there is no such 'thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self . . . socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down. Rorty wants to collapse the distinctions between depth and surface, inner and outer. If modernists reconceived representation, renouncing the mirror of nature for an abstract and self-referring aesthetic text, a view like Rorty's seems to abandon the concept of representation altogether, denying that there is any stable substance out there (or in here) to be imitated, and that the aesthetic text itself exists with any authority beyond that given by a contingent historical process. From another angle, however, current critics have not abandoned representation but universalized it. If everything is a text, then nature (including the 'whole nature' of Othello's 'character') and art (including *Othello*) are just different cultural constructs or discursive practices—of many, two. As a consequence, we cash in the question of Othello's jealousy for an enquiry into the sex-gender system; and *Othello* as an object of interest leads us not to Shakespeare or heroic tragedy, authors or theatrical genres, but to the literary system and its contribution to
the production and reproduction of cultural value. Hence Valerie Traub, in her state-of-the-art book about *Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama:* 'I am less interested in the ways works of art are empowered than in the ways characters are represented as negotiating and struggling for power, the extent to which they are granted or denied agency—in short, the ways their subjectivity is constructed through representational means [and] the "processes whereby sexual desires are constructed, mass-produced, and distributed".'

In conducting this breathless Cook's Tour, I have bypassed some picturesque complications. As W. B. Worthen points out, the typical 'actorly reading' of Shakespeare remains, in contrast to academic criticism, 'notably trained on questions of "character" [as] integrated, self-present, internalized, psychologically motivated'. As with acting, so with teaching Shakespeare: drop into most Shakespeare classes and you will hear Bradley-speak. Since academic criticism is a different mode of understanding from teaching or acting, we should not expect an identity of interests and assumptions. At the same time, the remoteness of academic discourse from two such influential ways of representing Shakespeare as pedagogy and theatre is remarkable. Even more remarkable are the residues of Bradley surviving in academic criticism itself. As Margaret Mikesell points out, the 'renewed criticism of Bradleyan traditions in the early 1950s' often rested in the very methods that were being repudiated, treating 'Othello and Iago as characters [with] the personalities of real people'. This is still the case. 'It is important, of course', Ania Loomba declares, 'to guard against reading dramatic characters as real, three dimensional people'; but these words follow a description of Othello as shedding his alienated 'insecurity' for a 'conception of his own worth' that 'slowly comes to centre in' and then depart from Desdemona's choice—a description that would sit comfortably in the pages of *Shakespearean Tragedy.*

Why does Bradley haunt us, like a half-remembered, maybe even unread text? In one of the first attempts to recuperate Bradley for critical practice, A. D. Nuttall, pointing to an odd discrepancy between the frequently nonsensical claims of Knights's attack and the general acceptance of his claims as self-evidently true, remarked that 'the whole debate may be complicated by the presence of unacknowledged historical factors', a 'pre-rational historical reaction' against 'the over-heated Victorian age'. This shrewd suggestion allows us to understand Bradley-bashing as an overdetermined gesture by which Shakespearians could assert their authentic modernity, liberated from the naiveties of eminent Victorianism. But the 'unacknowledged historical factors' may extend deeper than Victorian sentiment. Consider Michael Bristol who, after proposing recently that audiences should 'efface their response to . . . Othello, Desdmona, and Iago as individual subjects endowed with personalities and with some mode of autonomous interiorized life', has to admit the difficulty of such an effacement, 'not least because the experience of individual subjectivity as we have come to know it is objectively operative in the text'. From this perspective, an interest in Othello's character is not merely a hangover from Bradley or nineteenth-century novels, some recently acquired detritus to be jettisoned, but part of a continuing engagement going back to the origins, as best we can determine them, of our interest in the Shakespearian text.

The explanatory narrative I synopsized earlier has a lot going for it: by accounting for Bradley's irrelevance in terms of a naive representability underwritten by an old-fashioned assumption of personal integrity, it makes use of powerfully central concepts in the development of modern thought—'master-problems', in Perry Anderson's phrase. At the same time, these concepts may be serving as screens in the composition of a story generated out of wish-fulfilment as well as disinterested analysis, motivated by a desire to bring about the disappearance we claim to be describing as an accomplished fact. Bristol's 'efface', in concert with 'unacknowledged' and 'pre-rational' in Nuttall, suggest that the uncanny residual presence of Bradley in current criticism is the consequence of denial. We need to reconsider our relation to Bradley, and to the long tradition of commentary which lies behind *Shakespearean Tragedy*, not in order to restore his eminence but to understand our own situation. And *Othello* seems like a particularly appropriate play on which to base this reconsideration, for as Edward Snow has argued, from its irascible inauguration ('Tush, never tell me! . . . 'Sblood, but you'll not hear me!') to its agonized terminal gesture ('The object poisons sight; / Let it be hid'),
'repression pervades the entire world' of the play.\textsuperscript{14}

Once more, then: how to explain Othello's reversal of feelings about Desdemona, from 'Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee' to 'O curse of marriage' within only a few minutes time (3.3.91-2, 272)? I am quoting from the Temptation Scene which, parading before us familiar ideas and feelings from the play's opening, suggests that Othello's alteration should be understood as part of a lucid sequence. At the beginning of the play, Othello speaks self-confidently of his marriage: 'my demerits / May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune / As this that I have reached' (1.2.22-4); now he begins to doubt 'mine own weak merits' (3.3.191). This acknowledgement, trivial in itself, precipitates a rush of startling reversals. Brabantio's warning, 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee', had prompted a secure dismissal early on: 'My life upon her faith' (1.3.292-4). Now in the face of Iago's reiteration, 'She did deceive her father, marrying you', Othello becomes worried: 'And so she did' (210, 212). In the scene's turning point a moment later, Othello suddenly takes the initiative, 'And yet how nature, erring from itself—' and Iago, himself cautious so far, spots an opportunity so desirable that he interrupts Othello to seize it:

\begin{quote}
Ay, there's the point; as, to be bold with you,
Not to affect many proposèd matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Where to we see in all things nature tends.
Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural!
\end{quote}

(232-8)

At the end of this speech, a shaken Othello dismisses Iago, but too late to reverse the process that will lead to catastrophe.

Nature is the crucial idea here, and again we hear echoes of the beginning: 'and she in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, everything, / To fall in love with what she feared to look on!' (1.3.96-8). For Brabantio, nature should have drawn Desdemona to young Venetians of her own rank, 'the wealthy curled darlings of our nation' (1.22.69), and her attraction to Othello, 'against all rules of nature' (1.3.101), must be the perverse consequence of witchcraft. The perplexing questions and ambivalent feelings raised by this claim,\textsuperscript{15} unresolved in themselves, migrate into a narrative conclusion: Othello denies witchcraft, Desdemona acknowledges she was half the wooer, Brabantio drops the case. But the question returns here in its own conceptual terms, moving Othello to adopt the same cultural stereotypes articulated earlier by Brabantio and now reiterated by Iago as defining his own nature.

\begin{quote}
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
Must be to loathe her.
\end{quote}

(3.3.267-72)

As Arthur Kirsch says, 'Othello eventually internalizes Iago's maleficent sexual vision and sees himself with Iago's eyes', repellent in 'his age and color', thus 'becom[ing] convinced that Desdemona's manifest attraction to him is itself perverse'.\textsuperscript{16} Kirsch's story represents something like a current consensus,\textsuperscript{17} but if the meaning of Othello's transformation is thus clear, the motive remains mysterious. Why should Othello, against all evidence and self-interest, buy into the view Iago offers of himself and Desdemona? Othello himself sees the
foolishness—‘Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsufflicate and
blowed surmises’ (3.3.184-6)—but proceeds to make the investment nonetheless.

All this, however, assumes what is at issue—namely, that Othello is free to make up his mind, not just about
Desdemona but about himself, as though he has secure possession of a stable core of autonomous being. The
play seems to encourage our current scepticism about such an assumption, drawing attention to the way belief
rests on and is shaped by cultural clutter—stories, superstitions, social stereotypes, clichéd aphorisms, vague
memories, dreams, the immediate influence of overheard aimless chatter and snatches of old songs. Such
influences are particularly potent in times of stress. Brabantio's jump to the witchcraft conclusion is a good
example: ‘Have you not read, Roderigo, / Of some such thing?’ (1.1.175-6). Iago is the source of this clutter,
Burke's voice whispering at the ear,

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burrowing under the threshold of conscious reflection and lodging the
vinous poison of mistrust, disgust, abhorrence. He represents what we now call ideological interpellation, or
what Renaissance commentators, describing the world from inside a theological rather than a sociological
lexicon, understood as diabolical possession. As such, Iago is the origin and the content of Brabantio's dream
(‘This accident is not unlike my dream'), which Brabantio has no choice but to believe (‘Belief of it oppresses
me already' [1.1.144-5]), because Iago's white (or is it black?) noise subtends and determines belief. He has
already turned Cassio inside out by the time of the Temptation Scene; Othello is a more ambitious project, but
Iago's success should seem predictable as well as amazing.

Othello's alien status gives us a familiar current context to understand his story: the immigrant novel. Othello's
metaphorical transformation happens literally to Saladin Chamcha in The Satanic Verses: he turns into a goat.

His thighs had grown uncommonly wide and powerful, as well as hairy. Below the knee the
hairiness came to a halt, and his legs narrowed into tough, bony, almost fleshless calves,
terminating in a pair of shiny, cloven hoofs, such as one might find on any billy-goat. Saladin
was also taken aback by the sight of his phallus, greatly enlarged and embarrassingly erect, an
organ that he had the greatest difficulty in acknowledging his own.

Finding himself in a kind of asylum along with other embodied clichés of an exotic colonial domain—a
manticore, some water-buffalo, slippery snakes, 'a very lecherous-looking wolf—Chamcha asks, 'But how
do they do it?' 'They describe us', the manticore tells him. 'That's all. They have the power of
description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct.' Rushdie's description of The Satanic
Verses—the move from one part of the world to another and what that does to the various aspects of one's
being-in-the-world—can make Othello's transformation the centre-piece of an altogether plausible narrative.
First he has the power to describe himself, inhabits his own narrative, but moving to Christian Europe he
becomes displaced from his 'perfect soul' (1.2.31) and begins to occupy a different story, until finally his
blackness serves to figure not a royal-heroic self but bestial sexuality.

But should we be reading Othello as the abject victim at the centre of an immigrant novel? The play was
produced in an early colonialist culture, substantially ignorant of much that we have come to know of colonial
and postcolonial experience. More to my formalist purposes here, Othello lacks the accumulation of finely
attenuated nuance required to work in the manner of an immigrant novel, the sense of 'dilatory time' (2.3.363)
that Iago, a master narratologist, understands as necessary for such a mode. This problem is insoluble (plays
are not novels), but Othello goes out of its way to exacerbate it, compressing Cinthio's expansive narrative
into an action that seems to occupy a mere two days, beginning at night with the elopement, arriving the next
day at Cyprus, proceeding to the Temptation Scene on the day after, and concluding with the murder that
night. We have bumped into the famous 'double-time' problem—'the gap', as John Bayley puts it, 'between the
swift dramatic time of the plot and the lingering fictional time of the domestic psychology . . . between the
impact of the coup de théâtre on our emotions, and the effect of the analysis of love and jealousy upon our
minds'. It is easy to demonstrate that the impact of swift time is misleading, but the impression remains, and
in Morgann's famous adage, 'In Dramatic composition, the Impression is the Fact.' We must understand
Othello's transformation not as the 'eventual' internalizing of Kirsch's narrative, nor as something that 'slowly' or 'finally' comes about, as in Loomba's or my own rewriting of the play, but as issuing from his experience in the very brief interval that seems to elapse since the beginning of the action.

According to Stanley Cavell, Othello makes us think 'not merely generally of marriage but specifically of the wedding night. It is with this that the play opens.' Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.88-9). This coupling, the first concrete image we are offered upon which to load (or lodge) the play's matter, may not describe what really happened, or even what happened at all. As many critics have argued, the uncertainty when or even whether Othello and Desdemona consummate their marriage serves to generate anxious speculation on our part, sustained by the pressure of a highly eroticized language which enacts to the mind's eye various images of the deed about whose actual performance we remain unresolved.

This irresolution lasts until Othello's invitation on the first Cyprus night: 'Come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue. / The profit's yet to come 'tween me and you' (2.3.8-10); but even as Othello's disarmingly ingenuous couplet gives rest to one kind of anxious uncertainty, have they or haven't they?, its alarming specificity creates another: what now will it be like? This interest is displaced by the flurry of business with Iago, Cassio, Roderigo, and Montano; but Cassio's violent story sustains as well as displaces our interest in Othello and Desdemona's lovemaking, occurring (presumably) 'even now, now, very now'; especially when Iago's astounding simile to describe the disturbance re-evokes that opening image:

Friends all but now, even now,
In quarter and in terms like bride and groom
Devesting them for bed; and then but now—
As if some planet had unwitted men—
Swords out, and tilting one at others’ breasts
In opposition bloody.

(2.3.172-7)

The Temptation Scene follows and the play gives us the dramatic impression—the fact—of its occurring the next morning. By means of post hoc ergo propter hoc, a mode of narrative understanding implicit in Morgann's Law of Dramatic Composition, we are encouraged to locate the origins of Othello's transformation in his sexual consummation: it is the cause, it is the cause.

The impression is powerfully confirmed at just this pivotal point of the Temptation Scene when Othello's sudden loathing situates itself with specific reference to Desdemona's body:

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 vapour of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of 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.

(3.3.272-81).

The 'corner in the thing I love' directs us to Desdemona's genitals. The forkèd plague alludes to the cuckold's horns, but its demonstrative specificity, 'this forkèd plague', so soon after 'keep a corner', summons the groin to the mind's eye, like the 'bare, forked animal' in Lear (3.4.101). And like the 'simp'ring dame, / Whose face
between her forks presages snow' later in the same play (4.5.116-17), Desdemona's whole being seems for a
bizarre moment drawn down and compressed into her private part: she is both the thing and the thing in the
thing.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly graphic details inform Othello's speech to and about Desdemona later on:

\begin{quote}
OTHELLO But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in! Turn thy complexion there,
Patience, thou young and rose-lipped cherubin,
Ay, here look grim as hell.
DESDEMONA I hope my noble lord esteems me honest.
OTHELLO O, ay—as summer flies are in the shambles,
That quicken even with blowing. O thou weed,
Who are so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet,
That the sense aches at thee—would thou hadst ne'er been born!
\end{quote}

(4.2.59-71)

As Kittredge points out,\textsuperscript{28} thence, the repeated thers and finally here emphatically situate our attention; the
sequence reduces Desdemona to an it' at once vague and grotesquely specific, especially when the roselipped
cherubin now looks out, his face between the forks, from the place he was looking at a moment earlier. The
proliferating evocative power of these passages performs a similar compression upon Othello's life story.
'When we do quicken' in the first passage conflates birth and desire (quickening as tumescence) and locates
both in the place of betrayal—the place in the second passage where life is both given and denied
('discarded'), and where desire is at the same time awakened and repelled (the summer flies that quicken with
blowing); as though birth, desire, and betrayal—the entire trajectory of any male's affective career in the
tragic (or satiric) mode—are simultaneously present in this same loved and loathed thing.

Writing about 'the thing denied our sight throughout the opening scene',\textsuperscript{29} Cavell described an image of sexual
coupling; but as Patricia Parker notes, the focus in these passages is much more concentrated upon 'the
"privities" of woman opened simultaneously to scientific "discovery" and the pornographic gaze'.\textsuperscript{30} Like many
recent critics for whom Othello enacts a primal scene (see note 26), Parker suggests that the play entices its
spectator into the quasi-erotic pleasures of a dominant position from which to determine meaning; but we can
be sceptical about 'the gaze', both generally and as an approach to this play.\textsuperscript{31} Rich as they are in vivid detail,
these passages multiply and condense incompatible images and contradictory significances to produce an
effect not of mastery—a privileged vantage from which to fix meanings, as in a stable visual field—but of
giddiness verging on nausea. The 'mind now floods', as Graham Bradshaw says of the rapid sequence of
images in the second passage—'fountain', 'cistern', 'it'—unarrestably until we are allowed (or required) to
pause at the climactic image of the copulating toads.\textsuperscript{32} They are the most memorably vivid presence here, as
was the solitary toad in the earlier passage, but in neither do the toads function primarily in terms of visual
representation. In the dungeon of the Temptation Scene, 'that dank corner of the emotional prison',\textsuperscript{33} you are
less likely to see anything than to feel what Othello later describes as 'the slime / That sticks on filthy deeds';\textsuperscript{34} or to
smell the damp and stagnant air, 'the vapour', as he says here, we must breathe in to sustain life. With the
cesspool and the slaughterhouse, the cistern and shambles, this evocation of malodorous fumes intensifies into
the overwhelming specificity of excrement and rotting flesh—the aroma that seems to generate Flaubert's
curious question about one of his whores: 'Have you . . . sniffed at the fog of her clitoris'?\textsuperscript{35} what Eliot, in the
pre-Pound version of The Waste Land, called 'the good old hearty female stench'.\textsuperscript{36}
Following a long line back to Plato, Renaissance commentators on the senses designated sight and hearing as the higher faculties, consigning smell, along with taste and touch, to the carnal modes of knowledge.\textsuperscript{37} In \textit{Civilization and Its Discontents}, Freud imagines a primal scene in which primitive humanity stands upright, discovers its nakedness, and transfers its sensory allegiance from smell to sight.\textsuperscript{38} Such stories underwrite Hans J. Rindisbacher's claims about smell as 'strongly connected with sexuality', the 'very animal function', the 'oldest unsublimated medium', within which we experience the 'force of individual attraction between the sexes'.\textsuperscript{39} The play's evocation of smell may be understood as a way around the problem Iago describes:

\begin{quote}
But how, how satisfied, my lord?
Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,
Behold her topped? . . .
It were a tedious difficulty, I think,
To bring them to that prospect.
\end{quote}

(3.3.399-403)

Ocular proof may be impossible, but it is olfactory proof, anyway, that provides the most powerfully convincing testimony about what really happened on the wedding night. This evidence finally allows us to answer my original question why Othello reverses his feelings about Desdemona: it is \textit{because of her nasty smell}.

This conclusion is even sillier than Rymer's: if not 'the \textit{Tragedy of the Handkerchief}',\textsuperscript{40} then of the vaginal douche—the 'clyster-pipes', as Iago says, blowing reechy kisses from his fingers into the air (2.1.179). Like Rymer—unresponsive to the handkerchief's symbolic resonances: the wedding sheets, stained with blood and sexual fluids\textsuperscript{41}—we are being too literal. The smells do not tell us what really happened in Othello and Desdemona's consummation, but what Othello thinks happened. Smells are notoriously transient—as here: the stench of the shambles does not prevent Othello's registering her 'smell . . . so sweet', nor the sweetness the stench of her deed ('Heaven stops the nose at it' [4.2.79]) a moment later.\textsuperscript{42} And smells are notoriously subjective. As Marston's Cockledemoy says, 'Every man's turd smells well in his own nose.'\textsuperscript{43} But this is not to say that the meanings of smell are determined uniquely by an autonomous individual sensorium. Any somatic base for smell is located beneath the semantic threshold of meaning or consequence. Since all sensory experience belongs to the moment, we need, as Rindisbacher says, 'acculturation and particularly language' in order to 'give it a temporal dimension, add past and future, loss and longing, hope and despair'.\textsuperscript{44} This dependence is particularly strong in the case of smells, whose very evanescence seems capturable only through the memories and historical associations which language can evoke.\textsuperscript{45} The transience and subjectivity of smell thus bring us back to the verbal or cultural constructedness of the subject itself. The 'foul and the fragrant' qualities detected by an individual's nose are the product, as Alain Corbin says, of the 'social imagination'.\textsuperscript{46}

From this perspective, the meaning of Cockledemoy's words matters less than their aphoristic tone. He sounds as though he is quoting, and so he is—Montaigne, Erasmus, perhaps on back to Aristotle.\textsuperscript{47} Eliot implies a similarly general familiarity as with 'the good old hearty female stench'; \textit{oh, that stench}, we are asked to respond; \textit{of course}. Cassio's description of Bianca, 'Tis such another fitchew! Marry, a perfumed one!' (4.1.143) works the same way. The polecat is 'noted for its rank odour and lechery', Sanders tells us, and the phrase \textit{such another} is 'a common idiom meaning "one just like all the others"'.\textsuperscript{48} Eliot may have had a private waste land and individual talent, Shakespeare his secret sorrows and period of sex nausea, but language like this derives its authority elsewhere. 'Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement.' Crazy Jane's words to the bishop may recall her particular sexual experience, but like the 'saws of books' Hamlet tries to wipe from the tables of his memory after meeting the ghost (1.5.100), they resonate a sententious generality. \textit{Has she not read of some such thing?} Perhaps the good old hearty male tag, \textit{inter urinas et faeces nascimur}, we are born between piss and shit. The aphorism is sometimes attributed to St
Augustine—wrongly, it seems, and unlike Cockledemoy's, its origins cannot be determined; but the very anonymity helps to produce the sense of an impersonal authority, independent of any particular author or individual source: 'True he it said, what ever man it sayd'.

Othello's disgust in the Temptation Scene is embedded deeply in the same aphoristic generality. "'Tis the plague of great ones', he says and, describing the curse of marriage, affirms the collective wisdom of the plural pronoun, speaking for all married men ('that we can call these delicate creatures ours') and for all heroes ('even then this forkèd plague is fated to us / When we do quicken'). This is the tone of the canny insider, and though new to Othello's speech, it is not new to us. This is Iago's tone. His speech has been from the beginning a tissue of sententious topoi—as here: 'I know our country disposition well' (3.3.205). This is Hamlet's pun on 'country matters', 'a fair thought to lie between maids' legs' (3.2.111, 113), and it may be said to originate the explicit focus upon female sexual parts. The double meaning—I know how our Venetian women dispose of their cunts; I know how our Venetian cunts dispose of themselves—substantiates the gross synecdoche realized a moment later in Othello's speech: transforming women into the things that make them women. But if Othello assimilates Iago's innuendoes, it is through the suave confidence with which they are communicated: 'This fellow . . . knows all qualities with a learned spirit / Of human dealings' (3.3.262-4). Iago speaks from the cultural centre. The manticore was right. Iago has 'the power of description', and Othello 'succumbs to the pictures' Iago constructs. As Kirsch said, Othello comes 'eventually' to 'see . . . with Iago's eyes'—or smell with his nose, or (as in Rushdie's Heideggerian phrase) to reconstitute his 'being-in-the-world' to accord with Iago's.

Whatever the play's impressions upon us, it seems we cannot escape from an understanding in which Othello's sexual knowledge of Desdemona is not the origin but the consequence of his transformation, not the cause but the effect—specifically, an effect of discourse. 'It is not words that shakes me thus', Othello says later in a spastic trance that seems to re-enact his lovemaking with Desdemona (4.1.40). But it is words, the story woven of social, racial, and sexual stereotypes in which his knowledge—of himself, Desdemona, everything—is embedded. How it came to be embedded thus we are not told; the play does not record the process of this transformation. It provides a beginning, up to and including 'Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee', and an ending, starting with 'O curse of marriage', separated by only a few minutes playing time. In lieu of an extended narrative middle, the play gives us intensely charged erotic images, requiring us to imagine Othello's lovemaking with Desdemona; but whatever (and however) we can register disperses itself into stories about sexual feelings and actions, and still other stories (about military promotions, for instance) to which sexual feelings and actions do not seem immediately relevant. The cause for Othello's transformation must be there, in these hints of an immigrant novel the play requires us to invent.

Like Bradley's kind of criticism, the problem I have been struggling with has been relegated to the status of error, and then to oblivion. This story begins with Eliot's charge of 'bovarisme' in Othello's final speeches. Leavis projected this view backward to reveal an Othello who 'has from the beginning responded' with a selfdramatizing egotism: 'the essential traitor is within the gates'. As a consequence, Bradley's view of a noteasily-jealous Othello becomes 'sentimental perversity'. For current critics too, Othello is vulnerable from the beginning—not, though, because of some peculiar (and presumably corrigible) failure on his part but as the necessary consequence of a general condition. The essential traitor is now 'always already' within the gates. In one version of the current story, we focus on the inherent vulnerability of Othello's alien status, Loomba's 'insecurity', or the 'self-doubt of this displaced stranger' which, according to Neill, 'opens him so fatally to Iago's attack'. From another angle, Othello suffers not from his cultural background but his gender. According to Janet Adelman, male desire 'inevitably soils that object' in which it invests itself and therefore 'threatens to "corrupt and taint" [Othello's] business from the start'. In the Lacanian description, Othello's fate is determined by desire itself, irrespective of gender. 'If language is born of absence', Catherine Belsey tells us, 'so is desire, and at the same moment. This must be so . . . Desire, which invests the self in another, necessarily precipitates a division in the subject.' In Stephen Greenblatt's strong and influential version, Othello's transformation is simply the 'clearest and most important' example of social construction as a general
condition: 'In *Othello* the characters have always already experienced submission to narrativity.'

Greenblatt builds from a perception of Othello's Senate speech as 'a narrative in which the storyteller is constantly swallowed up by the story'. This anxiety is then displaced onto Desdemona, as in the lovers' ecstatic Cypriot reunion:

```
OTHELLO O my fair warrior!
DESDEMONA My dear Othello.
OTHELLO It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. O my soul's joy,
If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds bellow till they have wakened death,
And let the labouring barque climb hills of seas
Olympus-high, and duck again as low
As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
DESDEMONA The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should increase
Even as our days do grow.
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(2.1.183-96)

Like many others, Greenblatt recognizes in this passage two distinct registers for experiencing pleasure. Othello's speech describes violent movement building to a climax so intense, 'content so absolute', that an intuition of disappointment follows: maybe never again, a sort of *post coitum tristis*. By contrast Desdemona registers pleasure not as the short sharp shock of termination, but as a slow and gradual increase, unfolding without any evident anxiety or much differentiation into an indefinite future. But does it follow from this, as Greenblatt claims, that Desdemona's promise of a daily increase is actually a threat because it 'denies the possibility of [Othello]'s narrative control' and 'devours up his discourse' in a way that eventually drives him to murder? Whatever ominous premonitions we may sense, the lovers' greeting in Cyprus ends in blissful fulfilment. 'Amen to that, sweet powers!' he says in response to her prayer for an endless daily increase of love and comfort, thereby accepting her version; but with 'I cannot speak enough of this content. / It stops me here, it is too much of joy', he immediately reaffirms his own. Then finally—'And this (they kiss) and this, the greatest discords be / That e'er our hearts shall make' (196-20)—he transforms their 'discords' into kisses, as though unresolved differences, far from disrupting the pleasure of their union, become the source of its security.

So too with the Senate speech. Like all life stories, Othello's describes displacement: growing up, leaving home, enslavement, religious conversion; but these potential traumas are represented (if at all) not as rupture but as continuity, the accumulation of undifferentiated experience. That his journey goes from 'boyish days / To th' very moment' of the telling (1.3.131-2) suggests not the risk of engulfment but the confident assumption of a capacious future, an unperturbed sense that he will continue to assimilate and structure the material of his life into the daily increase Desdemona later describes. (Indeed, one reason why Desdemona's later words fail to threaten Othello is that he can already experience his life in this female-gendered register.) On the first page of the 'personal history' that bears his name, David Copperfield acknowledges uncertainty whether he will 'turn out to be the hero of my own life', deferring to a text behind his own control: 'these pages must show'. But Othello seems somehow to have eluded this problematic split between narrator and narrative subject. 'Such was my process', he says (141), referring at once to his experience and his relation of
that experience, his life and his life story. He cannot be swallowed up by his narrative, because he and his narrative are perfectly identical. How can we know the storyteller from the story?

A protagonist of 'perfect soul' such as this or one anxiously vulnerable and radically flawed from the beginning, as in Greenblatt and other recent accounts of the play: what is at stake in this disagreement? Consider Hazlitt, who opens his commentary on Othello by declaring that 'tragedy purifies the affections by terror and pity. That is, it substitutes imaginary sympathy for mere selfishness. It gives us a high and permanent interest, beyond ourselves, in humanity as such. . . . It makes man a partaker with his kind.' Hazlitt, writing in a book called The Characters of Shakespeare's Plays, helped develop the tradition that culminated in Bradley. By treating Othello's character as the play's motivational centre, and by emphasizing Othello's 'perfect soul' at the beginning, I have been trying to reconnect with this tradition; but I have no wish to reaffirm Bradley's apparent faith as such in the transcendent humanity of heroic individuals, or to imitate the methods apparently generated out of that faith. By abstracting dramatic characters from their relationship in the dramatic action to produce individualized portraits, Bradley sought to guarantee that our fascination with Iago never interferes with our admiration for Othello. This strategy, however, systematically sanitizes and diminishes the play's power, for while it assures a full measure of pity for Othello's collapse, it avoids terror and any intuition of our own complicity in the events leading to the catastrophe—a guilty complicity that must underlie all the testimony from critical and theatrical traditions of this play's intolerable experience.

On the other hand, consider the tone of normative certitude in the current view: 'always already', 'inevitably', 'necessarily', 'this must be so'. Così fan tutti. These critics are worldly and insouciant; they know their culture disposition well. As I am by no means the first to remark, the anti-heroic reading of the play winds up sounding like Iago. This is not a bad thing. The play writes us into Iago's perspective at the beginning and in one way or another succeeds in sustaining this alliance, no matter how unholy we understand it to be, up to the end. Current versions should help to account for precisely that sense of guilty complicity Bradley refused; but by moulding the protagonist to conform to a normative shape, they manage to make an equal (though opposite) refusal. For by treating Othello as an exemplary subject, trapped in the prisonhouse of language or the impossible condition of male desire, current versions leave only his alien status as extraordinary; and once this status is defined as the immigrant protagonist's inherent and necessary vulnerability, we are left with nothing more than abjection: l'homme moyen sensuel—not a transcendent 'humanity as such' but a derisory 'human, all too human'.

A fall from this height, like Gloucester's from what he supposes to be Dover Cliff, evokes some pity, perhaps, but no fear, and (since we see it coming) not even much surprise. That Bradleyan and anti-Bradleyan assumptions arrive at similar conclusions might suggest that differing beliefs about character are less than fully determining. It matters, of course, whether we come to the play as humanists or constructionists, but watching Othello does not require us to solve conceptual problems, like the relative weight of nature and culture, from a position of absolute ontological conviction. To the extent that such conviction commits us to stability and consistency of understanding, it may be the last thing we need. Consistency led Bradley into a maudling pathos, but at least he knew where to start. For unless we are prepared to respond to Othello's existence at the beginning with 'imaginary sympathy', responding with affection and wonder to a marvelous strangeness emanating from a different bodily place, black or tawny, and a world elsewhere—unless, that is, we can see Othello's visage in his mind, we will never be able to acknowledge the play's tragic power.

Theatrical impressions, heroic tragedy, pity and terror: all these acknowledge a major investment on my part in mode, genre, and above all artistic effect. Unlike Valerie Traub, who in the passage I quoted early on declares a relative lack of interest 'in the ways works of art are empowered', I have been writing from inside the traditional vocabulary of literary aesthetics. Traub's diminished interest represents a strong claim often made in current criticism that the sceptical scrutiny of this vocabulary—seeing through aesthetics to the literary system of which it is part, and finally to the cultural system that is said to generate and contain it (as well as everything else)—produces powerful results. According to Traub, since sexual taboos, 'prohibitions on
incest or homosexuality, for instance’, are 'arbitrary political constructs and thus open to transformation', then 'by deconstructing and refiguring the anxieties that regulate and discipline erotic life', we can 'contribute modestly to the project of carving out space within the social structure for greater erotic variety'.

This is not a very plausible story; it is hard to believe that a politically inflected deconstruction, or any other way of studying Shakespeare, can contribute, even modestly, to a greater erotic variety. How, then, can we account for the proliferation of such claims on the current critical scene? Here, by way of an answer, is one story: in these austere times, we inhabit an increasingly production-driven research culture, characterized by the felt need to pursue socially useful projects. The functional value of these projects is defined by the functionaries who hold us accountable to themselves in the name of their own accountability to a construct called 'the public' or 'the taxpayer'. In this environment of 'targeted research', we are all cultural workers—willy nilly, though some of us do make love to our employment. As such, we experience submission to the relentlessly instrumental narrativity of the regulators and so find ourselves pointing to imaginary profits on the bottom line. It would be quixotic to inveigh against such strategic claims; after all, the regulators control the purse strings, and they have the power of description. Now, however, it seems we have succumbed to their pictures, promising such payoffs not just strategically to our administrators, but with genuine conviction to each other and even to ourselves.

Hazlitt too was doing targeted research, aiming at 'a high and permanent interest, beyond ourselves, in humanity as such'. In returning to Hazlitt and to Bradley, I am not suggesting that Hazlitt's target is inherently superior, or any more accessible to literary study. Responding with 'imaginary sympathy' to Othello's power will not lead us necessarily to realize humanity as such, erotic variety, or any of the other goals in our various agendas (at least not without the anguished self-disgust Burke described as 'Our filthy purgation'). The relation between literary study and ethics, Richard Lanham's ' "Q" question', has gone without satisfactory answer since Plato, because there is no single answer. Stanley Fish is right: like virtue, literary study is its own reward. With a masterpiece like Othello, this is more than enough.

Notes


2 This essay is available with some minor revisions in Knights's Explorations: Essays in Criticism Mainly on the Literature of the Seventeenth Century (1947; rpt. New York, 1964), pp. 15-54.


5 More precisely, Rorty wishes to displace these distinctions from the status of ontological categories, where they inscribe a foundational difference between Reality and Appearance, and put them into service for a rough-and-ready pragmatist use, specific to a particular context.


9 Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama (Manchester, 1989), pp. 54-8.


11 ‘Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in Othello', in Linda Woodbridge and Edward Berry, eds., True Rites and Maimed Rites: Ritual and Anti-Ritual in Shakespeare and His Age (Urbana and Chicago, 1992), pp. 75-97, p. 85 (Bristol's emphasis). For a powerful argument that Shakespeare not only sustains but originates modern notions of subjectivity, see Joel Fineman, Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986).

12 'It is clear', Anderson tells us, writing about theory since World War Two, 'that there has been one master-problem around which all contenders have revolved[;] the nature of the relationships between structure and subject in human history and society'. See In the Tracks of Historical Materialism (Chicago, 1984), p. 33 (Anderson's emphasis).


141.1.1 and 4; 5.2.374-5. See Edward A. Snow, 'Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in Othello ', English Literary Renaissance, 10 (1980), 384-412, p. 384.

15 The perplexing questions centre on the competing claims of nature and culture. The ambivalent feelings can be located in terms of the contradictory generic signals many commentators have associated with this play (Susan Snyder, for instance, in The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies: 'Romeo and Juliet', 'Hamlet', 'Othello', and 'King Lear' (Princeton, 1979)): if we are watching a comedy, then we are on the side of young love in general and female desire in particular; if tragedy, then the claims of established patriarchal authority demand our primary allegiance. In 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', G. K. Hunter suggests that the play provokes racist feelings only to require their repudiation (Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: Critical Essays (Liverpool, 1978), pp. 31-59). A. J. Cook describes a similar change in our feelings about Desdemona in 'The Design of Desdemona: Doubt Raised and Resolved', Shakespeare Studies, 13 (1980), 187-96.


18 In this regard, Lisa Jardine comments brilliantly on Iago's misogynist clichés at the beginning of Act 2. See 'Cultural Confusion and Shakespeare's Learned Heroines: "These are old paradoxes" ', Shakespeare Quarterly, 38 (1987), 1-18.


For versions of the distinctions at work in the double time of *Othello*, consider Paul Valéry's discussion of the way 'our poetic pendulum travels from our sensation toward some idea or some sentiment, and returns toward some memory of the sensation and toward the potential act which could reproduce the sensation'. See *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot in Jackson Mathews, ed., *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry* (London, 1958), vol. 7, p. 72. See also Kenneth Burke's distinction between plots driven by lyrical associationism and by rational extension in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), pp. 30-2.


27 Cf. Neill: Desdemona is 'not merely the precious "thing", the stolen treasure of love's corrupted commerce, but herself the lost place of love' ('Changing Places', p. 128).

28 George Lyman Kittredge, ed., *Othello* (Boston, 1941), p. 211.

29 *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 132.

30 'Fantasies of "Race" ', p. 87.

31 Laura Mulvey, who established the idea of 'the gaze' ('Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (1975), 6-18), twice subsequently cautioned against applying it to all movies ('Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*'. *Framework*, 15-17 (1981), 12-15; and 'Changes', *Discourse*, 7 (1985), 11-30. All this material is now conveniently available in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989.). We should be even more sceptical about transferring 'the gaze' to theatre, and even more sceptical yet again when the theatre was produced in such a remote period. Notions of ocular proof associated with experimental science were developing in the Renaissance, as were notions of true perspective in painting and a single privileged vantage point in the masque. These ideas, however, had not achieved anything like their subsequent authority. They competed with other ideas about perception and different epistemological theories. Renaissance ideas about poetry and theatre, moreover, often repudiated the primacy of the visual, an integrated objective stage *gestalt*, and a single controlling point of view. In support of these claims, see Desmet, *Reading Shakespeare's Characters*, pp. 112-13; Barbara Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca, 1991); Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare's Talking Animals: Language and Drama in Society* (London, 1970), p. 43 and p. 130; James R. Siemon, *Shakespearean Iconoclasm* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985); Wylie Sypher, *TheEthic of Time: Structures of Experience in Shakespeare* (New York, 1976), pp. 116-20; Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth-Century Critics* (Chicago, 1947); and Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form* (Baltimore and London, 1978). There have been others, apart from Mulvey herself, who have warned against overinvesting in the idea of the gaze (see Edward Snow, 'Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems', *Representations*, 25 (1989), 330-41; and Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London, 1990), pp. 175-81); nonetheless, critics carry on with the gaze sometimes in full knowledge of Mulvey's disclaimers. Its power seems to be irresistible.

32 Bradshaw adds that 'flooded seems the right word [until] the images smash against dries up, and reform into the wrenchingly gross, unhinging image of "it"—"it!"—as a foul cistern' (*Misrepresentations*, p. 179).


37 'Love regards as its end the enjoyment of beauty; beauty pertains only to the mind, sight, and hearing. Love, therefore, is limited to these three, but desire which rises from the other senses is called, not love, but lust or madness.' Sears R. Jayne, ed. and trans., *Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (Columbia, Missouri; 1944), p. 130.

38 According to Freud, the civilizing of human sexuality since prehistory, said to reside in the stability of family arrangements, involved 'the diminution of the olfactory stimuli by means of which the menstrual process produced an effect on the male psyche. Their role was taken over by visual excitations, which, in contrast to the intermittent olfactory stimuli, were able to maintain a permanent effect . . . The diminution of the olfactory stimuli seems itself to be a consequence of man's raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait; this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him.' *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1962), p. 46. For a suggestive discussion of Freud and of various associations, especially in the nineteenth century, between smell and the primitive, see Hal Foster, ' "Primitive" Scenes', *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1993), 69-102.


41 Cf. Boose, 'Desdemona's Handkerchief. Rymer, though, seems to have taken the point almost despite himself; consider the following remarks, intended to make fun of the play's concentration on such a trivial thing as the handkerchief: 'Desdemona dropt the Handkerchief, and missed it that very day after her Marriage; it might have been rumpl'd up with her Wedding sheets: And this Night that she lay in her wedding sheets, the Fairey Napkin (whilst Othello was stifling her) might have started up to disarm his fury, and stop his ungracious mouth' (p. 162). Or, just earlier: 'Had it been Desdemona's Garter, the Sagacious Moor might have smelt a Rat; but the Handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby, on this side Mauritania, cou'd make any consequence from it' (p. 160). One might say that, though blind, Rymer could register the meaning well enough as taste and smell. Rudnytsky argues that 'Rymer's comparison of the handkerchief to a "Garter" comes to seem particularly inspired' as suggesting its fetish-like quality ('The Purloined Handkerchief, p. 185). Peter Davison is picking up similar olfactory resonances in his remark that Rymer's point about the garter and smelling a rat is very 'pungently put' (*Othello*. The Critics Debate Series (Basingstoke, 1988), p. 83 [my emphasis]). Davison, who remarks on the 'surprising . . . personal acrimony' in *Othello*criticism (p. 10), suggests that 'the peculiar viciousness that animates some critics . . . may stem from what in *Othello* subconsciously disturbs them' (p. 53). This suggestion seems plausible, especially in conjunction with all the anecdotes from the play's theatrical history of audiences so upset that they felt moved in some way to intervene in the action. In this context, Rymer's tone of furious resistance is interesting and revealing. He may not be a good critic, but he is not the perverse anomaly he is sometimes taken to be.

42 By contrast, the primary visible qualities can be fixed in a quantitatively determinate space (this tall, that shape, even such-and-such a colour). As a consequence of its greater stability, ocular proof may seem like a more realistic and even worthwhile project than olfactory proof. It was, arguably, beginning to acquire such authority in the Renaissance—but only beginning to, and not for everybody (my point in note 31).

44 *The Smell of Books*, p. 4.

45 The 'auratic phenomenon' of smell 'is almost purely linguistic, despite its evident lack of terminological grounding, in fact precisely because of it. The connectors in the "smell like . . ." or the "smell of . . ." are the true linguistic places of the olfactory, empty of sensual quality themselves, functional particles, providers of linkage, connections, bonds. [The] shortcoming of language for the olfactory thus turns out to be the true reflection of the liminal and transgressive qualities of that sensory mode' (Rindisbacher, *The Smell of Books*, pp. 330-1).

46 *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.; 1986). The book was originally called *Le Miasme et la Jonquille*, so the phrase is actually the translator's, perhaps thinking of 'l'imaginaire'.

47 In an unpublished essay, 'The Adverse Body: John Marston', Ronald Huebert points out that Marston found the adage in Florio's Montaigne, 'where it appears as a bathetically unheroic couplet: "Ev'ry mans ordure well, To his own sense doth smell."' According to Huebert, Florio would have found it 'not in Montaigne's racy French', but in a Latin epigram, 'Stercus cuiusque suum bene olet', itself a mistranslation of Erasmus's Adage 2302. 'suus cuique crepitus bene olet'. For the presumed origins in Aristotle, see John Weightman, 'How Wise Was Montaigne?' *New York Review of Books* (5 November 1992), 32-5, p. 33.

The idea still commands belief. Freud claimed that the social factor in the repression of anal erotism is 'attested by the circumstance that, in spite of all man's developmental advances, he scarcely finds the smell of his own excreta repulsive, but only that of other people's' (*Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 47, Freud's emphasis). And Weightman reports that 'When, quite recently, I heard it said of a world-famous but rather self-righteous musician, "He thinks his own shit doesn't smell", I took the expression to be a typically rude Australianism' ('How Wise?' p. 33). Its current authority has a different rhetorical register—or two different registers—from the aphoristic mode. For Freud, inhabiting a culture more respectful of scientific empiricism than of familiar topoi, the authority is represented not as a maxim but as data—something 'attested by circumstance'. Weightman seems to imply that a bumptious colonial's language may be more authoritative, closer to the true core of tradition, than the polite diction of the metropolitan centre.


50 *Spenser's 'Faerie Queene*', ed. J. C. Smith (Oxford, 1909), vol. 2, p. 121 (Book 4, Canto 10, 1). The misattribution may originate with Freud, to infer from Traub, who passes it along in *Desire and Anxiety* (p. 58 and p. 156). St Augustine is a likely candidate, considering how frequently he participated in this traditional repugnance for the female body. The aphorism can serve also to celebrate the carnivalesque body ('Fair and foul are near of kin'—the main tone in Yeats's poem). For recent commentators who have appropriated the maxim without any attribution, see Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, p. 60; Norman Mailer, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (New York, 1984), p. 116; and Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1993), p. 210. Mailer is a particularly interesting writer in this context. He writes obsessively about different excremental-sexual smells and has developed a whole metaphysics about the proximity of female orifices (Mailer's Manichaenism is a subject about which doctoral dissertations are presumably being written even now, now, very now). He even invented a witty neologism for the perineum (employing the plural pronoun whose rhetorical power I shall be describing in a moment): 'we boys out on Long Island used to call [it] the Taint'—presumably for its suggestions of rotten meat, like
Othello's 'shambles', but explicitly because 'taint vagina, 'taint anus, ho, ho' (Tough Guys, p. 93).


54 Suffocating Mothers, p. 63 and p. 65. Adelman's generously detailed notes indicate the depth and range of this object-relations approach among current critics.


56 Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago, 1980), p. 237. Adelman uses the same phrase about 'the impossible condition of male desire, the condition always already lost' (Suffocating Mothers, p. 69).

57 Adelman makes the point and provides references to five others who interpret the passage in similar ways, ibid., pp. 72-3 and p. 278.


62 Bradley clearly knows what he is doing and why. About Iago he asks, 'How is it then that we can bear to contemplate him; nay, that, if we really imagine him, we feel admiration and some kind of sympathy? . . . Why is the representation tolerable, and why do we not accuse its author either of untruth or of a desperate pessimism? To these questions it might at once be replied: Iago does not stand alone; he is a factor in a whole; and we perceive him there and not in isolation, acted upon as well as acting, destroyed as well as destroying. But, although this is true and important, I pass it by and . . . regard him by himself (PP. 190-1).

63 For others who make this point, see Bayley (pp. 129-30) and Kirsch (p. 31). Calderwood is particularly given to the canny insider's tone, as witness the words I emphasize in the following passages from The Properties of 'Othello' (keyed to the order of the four versions of contemporary criticism as I described them
above): (1) The alien's abject dependency and Iago's inevitable triumph: 'But after all what should we have expected? The Moor is a stranger' (p. 68). (2) The impossible condition of male desire: 'This masculine appropriation of women in Venice helps explain why Othello's faith in Desdemona succumbs with such surprising ease to Iago's beguilements. He loses faith in part because he never really had any. Though he endows his wife with heavenly qualities, deep down he suspects, like any other husband, the sorry truth' (p. 31). (3) Lacan: 'To see yourself in another, as he does—as we all do in our psychological extensions of Lacan's mirror stage—is to divide as well as unify the here/thereness of the body/self (p. 105). (4) The submission to narrativity: 'Normally the speaking subject is enormously in excess of the grammatical subject; we are [Calderwood's emphasis] far more than we can say' (p. 58).

64 The play leaves the question open. Though asking us to credit Othello's nobility, it does not insist that we understand this nobility as necessarily self-generated. Maybe he is formed by his birth, social position, family and early environment. 'I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege', he tells us early on (1.2.21-2). Maybe he is climatologically constructed (not a ridiculous notion in the Renaissance), as Desdemona suggests explaining his temperamental indisposition to jealousy: 'the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him' (3.4.30-1).

65 Desire and Anxiety, p. 8.

66 Othello', p. 200.


Critical Essays: Iago's Alter Ego: Race as Projection in Othello

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Othello famously begins not with Othello but with Iago. Other tragedies begin with ancillary figures commenting on the character who will turn out to be at the center of the tragedy—one thinks of Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra—but no other play subjects its ostensibly tragic hero to so long and intensive a debunking before he even sets foot onstage. And the audience is inevitably complicit in this debunking: before we meet Othello, we are utterly dependent on Iago's and Roderigo's descriptions of him. For the first long minutes of the play, we know only that the Moor, "the thicklips" (1.1.66), has done something that Roderigo (like the audience) feels he should have been told about before-hand; we find out what it is for the first time only through Iago's violently eroticizing and racializing report to Brabantio: "Even now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (11. 88-89).

At this point in my teaching of the play, I normally point to all the ways in which Othello belies Iago's description as soon as he appears; in the classroom my reading of race in Othello turns on this contrast as Shakespeare's way of denaturalizing the tropes of race, so that we are made to understand Othello not as the "natural" embodiment of Iago's "old black ram" gone insanely jealous but as the victim of the racist ideology everywhere visible in Venice, an ideology to which he is relentlessly subjected and which increasingly comes to define him as he internalizes it—internalizes it so fully that, searching for a metaphor to convey his sense of
the soil attaching both to his name and to Desdemona's body, Othello can come up with no term of comparison other than his own face ("My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black / As mine own face" [3.3.392-94]). Othello's "discovering" that his blackness is a stain—a stain specifically associated with his sexuality—and "discovering" that stain on Desdemona are virtually simultaneous for him; hence the metaphoric transformation of Dian's visage into his own begrimed face. If Desdemona becomes a "black weed" (4.2.69) for Othello, her "blackening" is a kind of shorthand for his sense that his blackness has in fact contaminated her; as many have argued, his quickness to believe her always-already contaminated is in part a function of his horrified recoil from his suspicion that he is the contaminating agent.

In other words, in the classroom I usually read race in Othello through what I take to be the play's representation of Othello's experience of race as it comes to dominate his sense of himself as polluted and polluting, undeserving of Desdemona and hence quick to believe her unfaithful. But although the play locates Othello in a deeply racist society, the sense of pollution attaching to blackness comes first of all (for the audience if not for Othello) from Iago; though Iago needed Brabantio to convince Othello of Desdemona's tendency to deception and the "disproportion" of Othello as her marriage choice, Iago legitimizes and intensifies Brabantio's racism through his initial sexualizing and racializing invocation of Othello. And if the play offers us a rich representation of the effects of racism on Othello, it offers us an equally rich—and in some ways more disturbing—representation of the function of Othello's race for Iago. I offer the following reading of that representation as a thought-experiment with two aims: first, to test out the applicability of psychoanalytic theory—especially Kleinian theory—to problems of race, an arena in which its applicability is often questioned; and, second, to identify some of the ways in which racism is the psychic property (and rightly the concern) of the racist, not simply of his victim.

Iago erupts out of the night (this play, like Hamlet, begins in palpable darkness), as though he were a condensation of its properties. Marking himself as opposite to light through his demonic "I am not what I am," Iago calls forth a world, I will argue, in which he can see his own darkness localized and reflected in Othello's blackness, or rather in what he makes—and teaches Othello to make—of Othello's blackness.

Iago's voice inducts us into the play: long before Othello has a name, much less a voice, of his own, Iago has a distinctive "I." The matter of Othello, and satisfaction of the audience's urgent curiosity about what exactly Roderigo has just learned, are deferred until after we have heard Iago's catalogue of injuries to that "I" ("I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" [1.1.11]; "And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof, . . . must be lee'd, and calm'd" [11. 28-30]; "And I, God bless the mark, his worship's ancient" [1. 33]). Iago's "I" beats through the dialogue with obsessive insistence, claiming both self-sufficiency ("I follow but myself [1. 58]) and self-division, defining itself by what it is not ("Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago" [1. 57]), in fact simultaneously proclaiming its existence and nonexistence: "I am not what I am" (1. 65). I, I, I: Iago's name unfolds from the Italian io, Latin ego; and the injured "I" is his signature, the ground of his being and the ground, I will argue, of the play. For Iago calls up the action of the play as though in response to this sense of injury: "Call up her father, . . . poison his delight" (11. 67-68), he says, like a stage manager, or like a magician calling forth spirits to perform his will; and with his words, the action begins.

The structure of the first scene models Iago's relation to the world that he calls up, for the play proper seems to arise out of Iago's injured "I": it is not only set in motion by Iago's "I" but becomes in effect a projection of it, as Iago successfully attempts to rid himself of interior pain by replicating it in Othello. Othello—and particularly in relation to Desdemona—becomes Iago's primary target in part because Othello has the presence, the fullness of being, that Iago lacks. Othello is everywhere associated with the kind of interior solidity and wholeness that stands as a reproach to Iago's interior emptiness and fragmentation: if Iago takes Janus as his patron saint (1.2.33) and repeatedly announces his affiliation with nothingness ("I am not what I am"; "I am nothing, if not critical" [2.1.119]), Othello is initially "all in all sufficient" (4.1.261), a "full soldier" (2.1.36), whose "solid virtue" (4.1.262) and "perfect soul" (1.2.31) allow him to achieve the "full
fortune” (1.1.66) of possessing Desdemona. "Tell me what you need to spoil and I will tell you what you want," says Adam Phillips:7 the extent to which Othello's fullness and solidity are the object of Iago's envy can be gauged by the extent to which he works to replicate his own self-division in Othello. Split himself, Iago is a master at splitting others; his seduction of Othello works by inscribing in Othello the sense of dangerous interior spaces—thoughts that cannot be known, monsters in the mind—which Othello seems to lack, introducing him to the world of self-alienation that Iago inhabits;8 by the end, Othello is so self-divided that he can take arms against himself, Christian against Turk, literalizing self-division by splitting himself graphically down the middle.9 Though Iago is not there to see his victory, we might imagine him as invisible commentator, saying in effect, "Look, he is not all-in-all sufficient, self-sustaining and full; he is as self-divided as I am.”10

To shatter the illusion of Othello's fullness and presence is also to shatter the illusion of his erotic power; his division from himself is first of all his division from Desdemona and from the fair portion of himself invested in her. If Cassio is any indication, that erotic power is heavily idealized by the Italians:

Great Jove, Othello guard,
And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,
Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms
Give renew'd fire to our extincted spirits. . . .

(2.1.77-81)11

But for Iago it is intolerable: what begins as a means to an end (Iago creates Othello's suspicions about Desdemona to discredit Cassio in order to replace him as lieutenant) increasingly becomes an end in itself, as Iago drives Othello toward a murderous reenactment of sexual union on the marriage bed, even though that reenactment will make Othello incapable of bestowing the position Iago initially seeks. The thrust of his plot toward the marriage bed, even at the cost of his own ambition, suggests that what Iago needs to spoil is on that bed: the fullness and presence signified by Othello's possession of Desdemona, the sexual union that reminds him of his own extincted spirits. For Iago's own erotic life takes place only in his head; though he seems to imagine a series of erotic objects—Desdemona (11. 286-89), Cassio (3.3.419-32), and Othello himself (in the coded language—"the lustful Moor / Hath leap'd into my seat" [2.1.290-91]—that makes cuckoldry an anal invasion of Iago's own body)—he imagines them less as realizable erotic objects than as mental counters in his revenge plot, and he imagines them only in sexual unions (Othello with Desdemona, Othello with Emilia, Cassio with Desdemona, Cassio with Emilia) that everywhere exclude and diminish him. And in response, he effectively neutralizes the erotic potency that mocks his own lack.

His primary tool in this neutralization is the creation of Othello as "black": and in fact it is Othello as progenitor that first excites Iago's racializing rage. His first use of the language of black and white is in his call to Brabantio: "An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe." If Cassio needs to make Othello into an exotic super-phallus, capable of restoring Italian potency, Iago needs to make him into a black monster, invading the citadel of whiteness. (The idealization and the debasement are of course two sides of the same coin, and they are equally damaging to Othello: both use him only as the container for white fantasies, whether of desire or fear.) Your white ewe/you: Iago's half-pun invokes the whiteness of his auditors via the image of Othello's contaminating miscegenation;12 true to form in racist discourse, "whiteness" emerges as a category only when it is imagined as threatened by its opposite. Iago's language here works through separation, works by placing "blackness" outside of "whiteness" even as it provokes terror at the thought of their mixture. But the play has already affiliated Iago himself with darkness and the demonic; the threat of a contaminating blackness is already there, already present inside the "whiteness" he would invoke. Iago creates Othello as "black"—and therefore himself as "white"—when he constructs him as monstrous progenitor; and
he uses that racialized blackness to destroy what he cannot tolerate. But the trope through which Iago imagines that destruction makes Iago himself into the monstrous progenitor, filled with a dark conception that only darkness can bring forth: "I ha't, it is engender'd," he tells us; "Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.3.401-2). This trope makes the blackness Iago would attribute to Othello—like his monstrous generativity—something already inside Iago himself, something that he must project out into the world: as though Iago were pregnant with the monster he makes of Othello.13

If the structure of the first scene predicts the process through which Iago becomes the progenitor of Othello's racialized blackness, the trope of the monstrous birth in the first act's final lines perfectly anticipates the mechanism of projection through which Iago will come to use Othello's black skin as the container for his own interior blackness. Cassio uses Othello as the locus for fantasies of inseminating sexual renewal; Iago uses him as the repository for his own bodily insufficiency and his self-disgust. For Iago needs the blackness of others: even the "white ewe" Desdemona is blackened in his imagination as he turns "her virtue into pitch" (2.3.351). How are we to understand Iago's impulse to blacken, the impulse for which Othello becomes the perfect vehicle? What does it mean to take another person's body as the receptacle for one's own contents? The text gives us, I think, a very exact account of what I've come to call the psycho-physiology of Iago's projection: that is, not simply an account of the psychological processes themselves but also an account of the fantasized bodily processes that underlie them. "Projection" is in its own way comfortably abstract; by invoking the body behind the abstraction, Othello in effect rubs our noses in it.14

Let me begin, then, by thinking about the way Iago thinks about bodies, especially about the insides of bodies. For Iago is the play's spokesman for the idea of the inside, the hidden away. At the beginning of his seduction of Othello, he defends the privacy of his thought by asking "where's that palace, whereinto foul things / Sometimes intrude not?" (3.3.141-42); no palace is impregnable, no inside uncontaminated. Characteristically, Othello takes this image and makes it his own, reinscribing it in his later anatomy of Desdemona as "a cistern, for foul toads / To knot and gender in" (4.2.62-63). But merely by insisting on the hidden inwardness of thought, Iago has already succeeded in causing Othello to conflate the hidden with the hideous, as though that which is inside, invisible, must inevitably be monstrous ("he echoes me, / As if there were some monster in his thought, / Too hideous to be shown" [3.3.110-12]). According to this logic, the case against Desdemona is complete as soon as Iago can insinuate that she, too, has—psychically and anatomically—an inside, unknowable and monstrous because it is inside, unseen.

If Iago succeeds in transferring his own sense of hidden contamination to Desdemona, localizing it in her body, the sense of the hideous thing within—monstrous birth or foul intruder—begins with him. Seen from this vantage point, his initial alarum to Brabantio ("Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags. . . . Are all doors lock'd?" [1.1.80, 85]) looks less like a description of danger to Brabantio or Desdemona than like a description of danger to Iago himself. For Iago finds—or creates—in Brabantio's house the perfect analogue for his own sense of vulnerability to intrusion, and he can make of Othello the perfect analogue for the intrusive "foul thing," the old black ram who is tupping your white ewe—you—or, as we later find out, tupping Iago himself in Iago's fantasy, and leaving behind a poisonous residue ("I do suspect the lustful Moor / Hath leap'd into my seat, the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards" [2.1.290-92]).

But even the image of the body as a breached and contaminated "palace" suggests rather more interior structure than most of Iago's other images for the body. Again and again Iago imagines the body filled with liquid putrefaction, with contents that can and should be vomited out or excreted. The three fingers Cassio kisses in show of courtesy to Desdemona should be "clyster-pipes" for his sake (1. 176), Iago says; through the bizarre reworking of Iago's fantasy, Cassio's fingers are transformed into enema tubes, an imagistic transformation that violently brings together not only lips and faeces, mouth, vagina, and anus, but also digital, phallic, and emetic penetration of a body—Desdemona's? Cassio's?—imagined only as a container for faeces. Early in the play, poor Roderigo is a "sick fool . . . Whom love has turn'd almost the wrong side outward" (2.3.47-48); by the end, he is a "quat" rubbed almost to the sense (5.1.11), that is, a pus-filled pimple.
about to break. The congruence of these images suggests that Roderigo becomes a "quat" for Iago because he can't keep his insides from running out: the love that has almost turned him inside out is here refigured as pus that threatens to break through the surface of his body. In Iago's fantasy of the body, what is inside does not need to be contaminated by a foul intruder because it is already pus or faeces; in fact, anything brought into this interior will be contaminated by it. Iago cannot imagine ordinary eating, in which matter is taken in for the body's nourishment; any good object taken in will be violently transformed and violently expelled. When he is done with her, Iago tells us, Othello will excrete Desdemona ("The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coloquintida," an emetic or purgative [1.3.349-50]); when Desdemona is "sated" with Othello's body (1.351), she will "heave the gorge" (2.1.231-32). (Poor Emilia has obviously learned from her husband: in her view men "are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, / They belch us" [3.4.101-3].)

Given this image of the body's interior as a mass of undifferentiated and contaminated matter, it's no wonder that Iago propounds the ideal of self-control to Roderigo in the garden metaphor that insists both on the rigid demarcation and differentiation of the body's interior and on its malleability to the exercise of will:

. . . 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus: our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners, so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop, and weed up thyme; supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many; either to have it sterile with idleness, or manur'd with industry, why, the power, and corrigible authority of this, lies in our wills.

(1.3.319-26)

This is not, presumably, his experience of his own body's interior or of his management of it; it seems rather a defensive fantasy of an orderly pseudo-Eden, in which man is wholly in control both of the inner processes of his body/garden and of the troublesome business of gender, and woman is wholly absent.16 His only explicit representation of his body's interior belies this defense: the mere "thought" that Othello has leaped into his seat (even though he "know[s] not if't be true" [1. 386]) "Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw [his] inwards." No reassuring gardener with his tidy—or even his untidy—rows here: Iago's "inwards" are hideously vulnerable, subject to a poisonous penetration. Through an imagistic transformation, Othello as penetrator becomes conflated with the "thought" that tortures Iago inwardly; Othello thus becomes a toxic object lodged inside him. (The garden passage simultaneously expresses and defends against the homoerotic desire that here makes Othello a poisonous inner object, insofar as it voices a fantasy of "supply[ing]" the body with one gender rather than "distract[ing]" it with many.17)

What I have earlier called Iago's injured "I"—his sense that he is chronically slighted and betrayed, his sense of self-division—produces (or perhaps is produced by) fantasies of his body as penetrated and contaminated, especially by Othello. In fact, any traffic between inner and outer is dangerous for Iago, who needs to keep an absolute barrier between them by making his outside opaque, a false "sign" (1.1.156 and 157) of his inside; to do less would be to risk being (Roderigolike) turned almost the wrong side outward, to "wear [his] heart upon [his] sleeve, / For dawes to peck at" (11. 64-65).18 To allow himself to be seen or known is tantamount to being stabbed, eaten alive: pecked at from the outside unless he manages to keep the barrier between inner and outer perfectly intact, gnawed from the inside if he lets anyone in. Iago's need for sadistic control of others ("Pleasure, and action, make the hours seem short" [2.3.369], he says, after managing Cassio's cashiering) goes in tandem with his extraordinarily vivid sense of vulnerability: unable to be gardener to himself, he will sadistically manage everyone else, simultaneously demonstrating his superiority to those quats whose insides are so sloppily prone to bursting out, and hiding the contamination and chaos of his own insides.
Roderigo plays a pivotal role in this process. As the embodiment of what Iago would avoid, Roderigo exists largely to give Iago repeated occasions on which to display his mastery over both self and other: in effect, Iago can load his contaminated insides into Roderigo and then rub him to the sense in order to demonstrate the difference between them and, hence, the impermeability of Iago's own insides. Moreover, in managing Roderigo, Iago can continually replenish himself with the fantasy of new objects to be taken into the self: objects over which—unlike the thought of Othello, which gnaws at his inwards—he can exert full control. Obsessively—six times in fourteen lines—Iago tells Roderigo to "Put money in thy purse . . . fill thy purse with money" (1.3.340, 348). We know that Iago has received enough jewels and gold from Roderigo to have half-corrupted a votarist (4.2.189), but we never see Iago taking the miser's or even the spendthrift's ordinary delight in this treasure; detached from any ordinary human motivation, the money accrues almost purely psychic meaning, becoming the sign not of any palpable economic advantage but of Iago's pleasure in being able to empty Roderigo out, to fill himself at will. "Put money in thy purse," he repeats insistently, and then adds, "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (1.3.381), as though the emptied-out Roderigo becomes the container that holds the illusion of Iago's fullness. For his repetition signals a compulsive need to fill himself with objects in order to compensate for the contamination and chaos inside: hard shiny objects that might be kept safe and might keep the self safe, objects that could magically repair the sense of what the self is made of and filled with.

Iago's hoarding, his sadism, his references to purgatives and clyster-pipes can be read through the language of classical psychoanalysis as evidence of an anal fixation; in that language the equation of money with faeces is familiar enough, as is the association of sadistic control with the anal phase. Iago's obsessive suspicion that Othello has leaped into his seat, along with his heavily eroticized account of Cassio's dream, similarly lend themselves to a classically psychoanalytic reading of Iago as repressed homosexual. While these readings are not "wrong" within their own terms, they nonetheless seem to me limited, and not only insofar as they can be said to assume a historically inaccurate concept of the subject or of "the homosexual" limited even within the terms of psychoanalysis insofar as they do not get at either the quality of Iago's emotional relationships (his inability to form any kind of libidinal bond, his tendency to treat others as poisonous inner objects) or the terrifying theatrical seductiveness of the processes of projection that we witness through him. I want consequently to move from the consideration of libidinal zones and conflicted object choices characteristic of classical psychoanalysis to the areas opened up by the work of Melanie Klein; a Kleinian reading of Iago will, I think, help us to understand the ways in which Iago's imagination of his own interior shapes his object relations as he projects this interior onto the landscape of the play.

In Klein's account the primitive self is composed in part of remnants of internalized objects (people, or bits and pieces of people, taken into the self as part of the self's continual negotiation with what an outside observer would call the world) and the world is composed in part of projected bits and pieces of the self. Ideally, "the good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego, and the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself." Internalization of the good object "is the basis for trust in one's own goodness"; "full identification with a good object goes with a feeling of the self possessing goodness of its own" and hence enables the return of goodness to the world: "Through processes of projection and introjection, through inner wealth given out and re-introjected, an enrichment and deepening of the ego comes about. . . . Inner wealth derives from having assimilated the good object so that the individual becomes able to share its gifts with others." And the corollary is clear: if the infant cannot take in the experience of the good breast (either because of his/her own constitutional conditions or because the experience is not there to be had in a consistent way), the bad breast may be introjected, with accompanying feelings of one's own internal badness, poverty, poisonousness, one's own inability to give back anything good to the world.

But, in the words of Harold Boris, a contemporary post-Kleinian analyst of envy, "the infant who cannot, sooner or later, feed the hand from which it feeds . . . is the child who will then attempt to bite it." The infant stuck with a depleted or contaminated inner world will, Klein suggests, exist in a peculiar relation to the good breast: even if it is there and apparently available, the infant may not be able to use it. For if the infant cannot
tolerate either the discrepancy between its own badness and the goodness outside itself or the sense of dependency on this external source of goodness, the good breast will not be available for the infant's use: its goodness will in effect be spoiled by the infant's own envious rage. The prototype for Kleinian envy is the hungry baby, experiencing itself as helplessly dependent, empty, or filled only with badness, confronted with the imagined fullness of a source of goodness outside itself: "the first object to be envied is the feeding breast, for the infant feels that it possesses everything he desires and that it has an unlimited flow of milk, and love which the breast keeps for its own gratification."26 Klein's insistence on the priority of the breast as the first object of envy effectively reverses Freud's concept of penis envy; in Klein's account even penis envy becomes secondary, derivative from this earlier prototype.27 But Klein's concept of envy turns on an even more startling innovation: for most analysts of infantile destructiveness and rage, the source and target is the frustrating "bad" object—a maternal object that doesn't provide enough, is not at the infant's beck and call, provides milk that in some way is felt to be spoiled; but in Klein's reading of envy, the source and target of rage is not the frustrating or poisonous bad breast but the good breast, and it is exactly its goodness that provokes the rage. Hence the peculiar sensitivity of the envious to the good—and the consequent need not to possess but to destroy it, or, in Klein's terms, "to put badness, primarily bad excrement and bad parts of the self, into the mother, and first of all into her breast, in order to spoil and destroy her."28 But the breast so destroyed is of course no longer available to the child as a source of good: "The breast attacked in this way has lost its value, it has become bad by being bitten up and poisoned by urine and faeces."29 Insofar as the infant has succeeded in destroying the good object, he has confirmed its destruction as a source of goodness within himself; hence the peculiarly vicious circle of envy, which destroys all good both in the world and in the self, and hence also its peculiar despair.

We do not, of course, need the help of a Kleinian perspective to identify Iago as envious. His willingness to kill Cassio simply because "He has a daily beauty in his life, / That makes me ugly" (5.1.19-20) marks the extent to which he is driven by envy; in an older theatrical tradition he might well have been named Envy. Here, for example, is Envy from Impatient Poverty:

A syr is not thys a ioly game . . .
Enuy in fayth I am the same . . .
I hate conscience, peace loue and reste
Debate and stryfye that loue I beste
Accordynge to my properte
When a man louethe well hys wyfe
I brynge theym at debate and stryfye.30

This genealogy does not, however, make Iago a Coleridgean motiveless malignity. For in Iago, Shakespeare gives motiveless malignity a body: incorporating this element of the morality tradition, he releases through Iago the range of bodily fantasies associated with a specifically Kleinian envy.

Klein describes an envy so primal—and so despairing—that it cannot tolerate the existence of goodness in the world: its whole delight lies not in possessing what is good but in spoiling it. And that spoiling takes place in fantasy through a special form of object-relating: through the violent projection of bits of the self and its contaminated objects—often localized as contaminated bodily products—into the good object. By means of this projection, the self succeeds in replicating its own inner world "out there" and thus in destroying the goodness it cannot tolerate; at the end of the process, in the words of one Kleinian analyst, "There is nothing left to envy."31 Through the lens of a Kleinian perspective, we can see traces of this process as Iago fills Othello with the poison that fills him.

In Iago's fantasy, as I have suggested, there is no uncontaminated interior space: he can allow no one access to his interior and has to keep it hidden away because it is more a cesspool than a palace or a garden. And there are no uncontaminated inner objects: every intruder is foul; everything taken in turns to pus or faeces or
poison; everything swallowed must be vomited out. This sense of inner contamination leaves him—as Klein
would predict—particularly subject to the sense of goodness in others and particularly ambivalent toward that
goodness. His goal is to make those around him as ugly as he is; but that goal depends on his unusual
sensitivity to their beauty. Even after he has managed to bring out the quarrelsome drunkard and
class-conscious snob in Cassio, transforming him into a man who clearly enjoys sneaking around to see his
general’s wife, Iago remains struck by the daily beauty in Cassio’s life—at a point when that beauty has
become largely invisible to the audience. To Roderigo, Iago always contemptuously denies the goodness of
Othello and Desdemona (he is an erring barbarian and she a supersubtle Venetian); but in soliloquy he
specificially affirms their goodness—and affirms it in order to imagine spoiling it. Othello’s "free and open
nature" he will remake as the stupidity of an ass who can be led by the nose (1.3.397-400). He will not only
use Desdemona’s virtue; he will turn it into pitch, in a near-perfect replication of the projection of faeces into
the good breast that Klein posits.

For Iago the desire to spoil always takes precedence over the desire to possess; one need only contrast him
with Othello to see the difference in their relation to good objects.\footnote{Othello’s anguish over the loss of the
good object gives the play much of its emotional resonance. He imagines himself as safely enclosed in its
garnery, nourished and protected by it, and then cast out: "But there, where I have garner’d up my heart, / Where
either I must live, or bear no life, / The fountain, from the which my current runs, / Or else dries up, to
be discarded thence’ (4.2.58-61). When he is made to imagine that object as spoiled—"a cistern, for foul
Toads / To knot and gender in”—its loss is wholly intolerable to him; even at the end, as he kills Desdemona,
he is working very hard to restore some remnant of the good object in her. Although he approaches
Desdemona’s bed planning to bloody it ("Thy bed, lust-stain’d, shall with lust’s blood be spotted” [5.1.36]), his
deepest desire is not to stain but to restore the purity of the good object, rescuing it from contamination, even
the contamination he himself has visited upon it. By the time he reaches her bed, he has decided not to shed
her blood (5.2.3). Instead he attempts to recreate her unviolated wholeness ("that whiter skin of hers than
snow, / And smooth, as monumental alabaster" [11. 149-50, 146]).

But Iago’s only joy comes in spoiling good objects: Othello mourns being cast out from the garnery/fountain
that has nourished him; Iago mocks the meat he feeds on (3.3.170-71). His description of the green-eyed
monster he cautions Othello against marks the workings of a very Kleinian envy in him:\footnote{like the empty
infant who cannot tolerate the fullness of the breast, he will mock the objects that might nourish and sustain
him, spoiling them by means of his corrosive wit.} \footnote{Or perhaps—in good Kleinian fashion—by tearing at
them with his teeth: especially in conjunction with the image of feeding on meat, "mock" may carry traces of
mammock, to tear into pieces, suggesting the oral aggression behind Iago’s biting mockery and hence the
talion logic in his fantasy of being pecked at.) Mockery—especially of the meat he might feed on—is Iago’s
signature: different as they are, Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo share an almost religious awe toward
Desdemona; Iago insists that "the wine she drinks is made of grapes" (2.1.249-50), that even the best woman
is only good enough "To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer” (1.1.160). If "the first object to be envied is the
feeding breast,” Iago’s devaluation of maternal nurturance here is just what we might expect.}

But envy does not stop there. As Klein suggests, "Excessive envy of the breast is likely to extend to all
feminine attributes, in particular to the woman’s capacity to bear children. . . . The capacity to give and to
preserve life is felt as the greatest gift and therefore creativeness becomes the deepest cause for envy.”\footnote{If
Othello’s potency and fullness make him the immediate target of Iago’s envious rage, the destruction of
Desdemona’s generativity has been Iago’s ultimate goal from the beginning: "poison his delight,” he says;
“And though he in a fertile climate dwell, / Plague him with flies” (1.1.70-71). The image half-echoes
Hamlet’s linking of conception and breeding with the stirring of maggots in dead flesh, for the “fertile
climate” that Iago will transform into a breeding ground for plague is Desdemona’s generative body. Hence, I
think, the urgency with which Iago propels the plot toward the marriage bed (“Do it not with poison, strangle

\footnote{But Klein suggests, “Excessive envy of the breast is likely to extend to all feminine attributes, in particular to the woman’s capacity to bear children. . . . The capacity to give and to preserve life is felt as the greatest gift and therefore creativeness becomes the deepest cause for envy.”}}
her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” [4.1.203-4]): the ultimate game is to make father destroy mother on that bed in a parody of the life-giving insemination that might have taken place there. 39

And hence the subterranean logic of Iago's favorite metaphor for that destruction, his monstrous birth. For if Iago enviously devalues Desdemona's generativity (she can only suckle, and only suckle fools; her body will breed only flies), he also appropriates it, and appropriates it specifically through imitation. Here both senses of mock—as devaluation and derisive imitation—come together, as Boris's work on envy predicts: "The urge to take charge of the envied object has several components to it. First, of course, is the denuding (an idea) and disparagement (an emotion) of the inherent value of the original. This makes possible what follows, namely the idea that the 'knock-off (the 'as-if' ) is in every way the equal of the real thing." 40 In conceiving of his monstrous birth, that is, Iago not only mocks but also displaces Desdemona's generativity by taking on its powers for himself, denying the difference—between her fruitfulness and his barrenness, between her fullness and his emptiness—that he cannot tolerate. Iago's substitution in fact proceeds by stages. When he first invokes the metaphor of pregnancy, he is merely the midwife/observer: "There are many events in the womb of time, which will be delivered" (1.3.369-70). But his triumphant "I ha't" only thirty lines later—"I ha't, it is engender'd; Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light"—replaces time's womb with his own: as I have already argued, his is the body in which the monstrous birth is engendered, and hell and night have become the midwives.

Through this metaphor, Iago's mental production becomes his substitute birth, in which he replaces the world outside himself—the world of time's womb, or of Desdemona's—with the projection of his own interior monstrosity; thus conceived, his plot manages simultaneously to destroy the generativity that he cannot tolerate and to proclaim the superior efficacy of his own product. Emilia's description of the jealousy Iago creates in Othello—it is "a monster, / Begot upon itself, born on itself (3.4.159-60)—is not accurate about Othello, but it suggestively tracks Iago's own envy to its psychic sources. If Iago imagines himself enacting a substitute birth, making the world conform to the shape of his envy by undoing the contours of the already-existing generative world, Emilia expresses the wish behind his metaphor: the wish to be begot upon oneself, born on oneself, no longer subject to—dependent on, vulnerable to—the generative fullness outside the self and the unendurable envy it provokes. 42 Unable to achieve that end, he will empty himself out on the wedding bed, substituting his own monstrous conception for the generative fullness that torments him, and destroying in the process the envied good object in Desdemona.

And it is just here, in this fantasy, that Othello's blackness becomes such a powerful vehicle for Iago. I have already suggested that Iago's capacity to spoil good objects rests on his capacity to blacken them, and to blacken them through a bodily process of projection. His monstrous birth is from the first associated with the darkness of hell and night; and when, in his conversation with Desdemona, he imagines his invention as his baby, that baby is associated specifically with the extrusion of a dark and sticky substance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{my invention} \\
\text{Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze,} \\
\text{It plucks out brain and all: but my Muse labours,} \\
\text{And thus she is deliver'd. . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

(2.1.125-28) 43

Presumably Iago means that his invention is as slow—as laborious—as the process of removing birdlime from rough cloth (frieze), in which the nap of the cloth is removed along with the soiling agent (hence "plucks out brain and all"). But the route to this relatively rational meaning is treacherous: the syntax first presents us with birdlime oozing from his head ("invention / Comes from my pate as birdlime does"), takes us on an
apparent detour through the soiling of cloth (the birdlime stuck to the frieze), and ends with the image of his head emptied out altogether ("plucks out brain and all"), as though in a dangerous evacuation. Then, through a buried pun on conception, the concealed intermediary term, the evacuation becomes a pregnancy and delivery, displaced from his own body to that of the Muse, who labors and is delivered.

Invention, in other words, becomes the male equivalent of pregnancy, the production of a sticky dark baby. What we have here, I suggest, is the vindictive fantasy of a faecal pregnancy and delivery that can project Iago's inner monstrosity and darkness into the world: initially displaced upward to the evacuated pate, this faecal baby is then returned to its source as his monstrous birth, the baby he has conceived in response to Desdemona's request for praise (2.1.124) and the easy generativity (his own is a difficult labor) that he envies in her. This baby's emergence here marks, I think, both the source of his envy and the exchange that envy will demand: he will attempt in effect to replicate his dark sticky baby in her, soiling her generative body by turning her virtue into pitch, spoiling the object whose fullness and goodness he cannot tolerate by making it the receptacle for his own bodily contents. And he counts on the contagion of this contaminated object: he will turn Desdemona into pitch not only because pitch is black and sticky—hence entrapping—but because it is notoriously defiling; his scheme depends on using Desdemona as a kind of tar baby, counting on her defilement—her blackening—to make Othello "black." In fantasy, that is, Iago uses Desdemona and Othello to contaminate each other; they become for him one defiled object as he imagines them on that wedding bed. But at the same time, Othello plays a special role for Iago: in Othello's black skin Iago can find a fortuitous external sign for the entire process, or, more accurately, a container for the internal blackness that he would project outward, the dark baby that hell and night must bring to the world's light; emptying himself out, Iago can project his faecal baby into Othello, blackening him with his own inner waste.

Iago plainly needs an Othello who can carry the burden of his own contamination; and to some extent the play makes us complicit in the process, as it makes Othello in effect into Iago's monstrous creation, carrying out Iago's "conception" as he murders Desdemona on her wedding bed, enacting a perverse version of the childbirth that might have taken place there. Othello himself seems to recognize that a birth of sorts is taking place, though he does not recognize it as Iago's: preparing to kill Desdemona on that bed, he says that her denials "Cannot remove, nor choke the strong conception, / That I do groan withal" (5.2.56-57), as though he has been impregnated through Iago's monstrous birth. And in fact he has: part of the peculiar horror of this play is that Othello becomes so effective a receptacle for—and enactor of—Iago's fantasies. If Iago imagines himself filled with a gnawing poisonous mineral through what amounts to Othello's anal insemination of him (2.1.290-92), he turns that poison back on Othello: "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear" (2.3.347). This retaliatory aural/anal insemination fills Othello with Iago's own contents, allowing Iago to serve his turn on Othello by doing to Othello what he imagines Othello has done to him. ("I follow him to serve my turn upon him" is sexualized in ways not likely to be audible to a modern audience [1.1.42]. For turn, see Othello's later "she can turn, and turn, and yet go on, / And turn again" [4.1.249-50]; characteristically, Othello replicates in Desdemona the "turn" Iago has replicated in him.) And "The Moor already changes with my poison," Iago says, adding for our benefit—in case we have not noticed the links between his poisonous conceit and Othello's—"Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, / Which . . . Burn like the mines of sulphur" (3.3.330-34).

"The Moor already changes with my poison": the line marks what is distinctive about projection in this play—and distinctively Kleinian. Before Klein, projection was usually understood as a relatively uncomplicated process in which disowned ideas and emotions were displaced onto an external figure. Klein insisted both on the fantasies of bodily function accompanying this process and on the extent to which it is specifically pieces of the self and its inner objects that are thus relocated, with the consequence that pieces of the self are now felt to be "out there," both controlling the object into which they have been projected and subject to dangers from it; Klein renamed this process "projective identification." And her followers have expanded on the concept, stressing the effects of these projected contents on the recipient of the projection, the ways in which the projector can in fact control the recipient. In this version of projective identification, the
recipient will not only experience the bits of self projected into him but also enact the projector's fantasy scenarios, hence relieving the projector of all responsibility for them.49 When Iago imagines Roderigo turned inside out, his body filled with pus, he seems to me to be engaging in something close to garden-variety projection: he is attributing to Roderigo portions of himself, or ideas about himself, that he would like to disown; and, as far as we know, Roderigo does not come to experience himself as pus-filled or inside out. But when Iago imagines filling Othello with his poison, when he imagines (in Klein's formulation) "the forceful entry into the object and control of the object by parts of the self,"50 he is much closer to a specifically Kleinian projective identification; and, as Klein's followers would predict, Othello really does change with Iago's poison, as he begins to experience himself as contaminated and hence to act out Iago's scenarios.

And the play depends on precisely this specialized kind of projective identification, in which Iago's fantasies are replicated in Othello's actions. When we first meet Othello, he is confident enough about his status and his color that he wishes to be found; he can confidently wish "the goodness of the night" (1.2.35) on Cassio and the duke's servants because blackness has not yet been poisoned for him. But as Iago projects his faecal baby into him, Othello comes more and more to imagine himself as the foul thing—the old black ram—intruding into the palace of Venetian civilization or the palace of Desdemona's body; as Iago succeeds in making Othello the container for his own interior waste, Othello himself increasingly affiliates his blackness with soiling (he becomes "collied" or blackened by passion [2.3.197];51 his name is "begrim'd, and black" as his face) and with bad interior objects. (In "Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell" [3.3.454], he calls on "black vengeance" to arise as though from within the hollow of himself.)52 His experience of himself, that is, comes increasingly to resemble what Iago has projected into him; and he begins to act in accordance with that projection, replicating in Desdemona the contagion of projection itself. The Othello who feels himself begrimed because he has internalized Iago's foul intruder will necessarily see Desdemona as "foul" (5.2.201), as a "begrim'd" Diana or a "black weed," and will evacuate his good object as Iago had predicted (1.3.350); by the end of the play, Emilia can call Othello "the blacker devil," Desdemona's "most filthy bargain," "As ignorant as dirt" (5.2.132, 158, 165) because he has so perfectly introjected Iago's sense of inner filth.

Insofar as Iago can make Othello experience his own blackness as a contamination that contaminates Desdemona, he succeeds in emptying himself out into Othello; and insofar as Othello becomes in effect Iago's faecal baby, Othello—rather than Iago—becomes the bearer of the fantasy of inner filth. Through projective identification, that is, Iago invents blackness as a contaminated category before our eyes, enacting his monstrous birth through Othello, and then allowing the Venetians (and most members of the audience) to congratulate themselves—as he does—on their distance from the now-racialized Othello. Through this process, Othello becomes assimilated to, and motivated by, his racial "type"—becomes the monstrous Moor easily made jealous—and Iago escapes our human categories altogether, becoming unknowable, a motiveless malignity.

But this emptying out of Iago is no more than Iago has already performed on himself: if the projection of his own inner contamination into Othello is Iago's relief, it is also his undoing, and in a way that corroborates both the bodiiness of the fantasy of projection and its dangers to the projector as well as the recipient. Klein notes that excessive use of projective identification results in the "weakening and impoverishment of the ego"; in the words of Betty Joseph, "at times the mind can be . . . so evacuated by projective identification that the individual appears empty."53 If at the end of the play there is nothing left to envy, there is also no one left to experience envy: Iago's projection of himself into the racial other he constructs as the container for his contamination ends not only by destroying his (and our) good objects but also by leaving him entirely evacuated. Having poured the pestilence of himself into Othello, Iago has nothing left inside him: his antigenerative birth hollows him out, leaving him empty. The closer he is to his goal, the flatter his language becomes; by the end, there is no inside left, no place to speak from. The play that begins with his insistent "I" ends with his silence: from this time forth he never will speak word.

Notes

2 *Race* is of course a vexed term; many have pointed out that the word *race* gained its current meaning only as it was biologized in support of the economic institution of slavery and that the link between race and skin color is a peculiarly contemporary obsession, that (for example) Irish and Jews might in 1604 have been thought of as racially separate from the English. For a particularly lucid account of the questions surrounding the invocation of race as a category in early modern England, see Lynda E. Boose, "'The Getting of a Lawful Race': Racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman" in *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 35-54, esp. 35-40; see also John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the geography of difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), for the claim that early modern otherness was based on geography rather than on the anachronistic category of race (25). Nonetheless, in Iago's capacity to make Othello's blackness the primary signifier of his otherness—as Boose observes, "once his Ensign has raised the flag inscribing Othello within the difference of skin color, all the presumably meaningful differences Othello has constructed between himself and the infidel collapse" (38)—the text insists on the visible difference of skin color that will increasingly come to define race, perhaps because, unlike religion, it (proverbially) cannot be changed. For a discussion of the significance of visible difference in early modern England, see Kim Hall, "Reading What Isn't There: 'Black' Studies in Early Modern England," *Stanford Humanities Review* 3 (1993): 23-33, esp. 25-27; in her account "science merely takes up already pre-existing terms of difference, such as skin color and features, that have [previously] been combined with physical and mental characteristics" (25).

3 Ridley follows the Folio reading of line 392, since this line occurs in a passage not found in Q1; Q2 (1630) famously reads "Her name" in place of F's "My name," perhaps to rationalize Othello's peculiar association of his name with the fairness of a figure for female virginity. I prefer "My name," partly because it suggests the identificatory dynamics that underlie Othello's love for Desdemona; but either reading points toward Othello's association of the stain on Desdemona's virgin body with the blackness of his own face.

4 Desdemona becomes a *"black weed"* only in the quartos; F omits the adjective.

category of monstrous sexuality.

6 See W. H. Auden's related account of Iago as practical joker: "The practical joker despises his victims, but at the same time he envies them because their desires, however childish and mistaken, are real to them, whereas he has no desire which he can call his own. . . . If the word motive is given its normal meaning of a positive purpose of the self like sex, money, glory, etc., then the practical joker is without motive. Yet the professional practical joker is certainly driven, . . . but the drive is negative, a fear of lacking a concrete self, of being nobody. In any practical joker to whom playing such jokes is a passion, there is always an element of malice, a projection of his self-hatred onto others, and in the ultimate case of the absolute practical joker, this is projected onto all created things" (The Dyer's Hand and other essays [New York: Random House, 1962], 256-57). The emptiness of Auden's practical joker is sometimes associated by later critics with Iago's facility in role-playing; see, e.g., Shelley Orgel, whose Iago gains a temporary sense of self by playing the roles that others project onto him ("Iago," American Imago 25 [1968]: 258-73, esp. 272). Greenblatt's Iago "has the role-player's ability to imagine his nonexistence so that he can exist for a moment in another and as another"; but for Greenblatt, Iago's imagined emptiness is less an ontological state than a cover for his emptying out of his victim (235 and 236). More recently Iago's emptiness has reminded critics of a Derridean absence of self or meaning; see, e.g., Bonnie Melchior, "Iago as Deconstructionist," Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association 16 (1990): 63-81, esp. 79; or Karl F. Zender, "The Humiliation of Iago," SEL 34 (1994): 323-39, esp. 327-28. In Alessandro Serpieri's brilliant semiotic reading, Iago suffers from an "envy of being" that is the deconstructionist's equivalent of the state Auden describes: "Iago cannot identify with any situation or sign or énoncé, and is thus condemned to deconstruct through his own énonciations the énoncés of others, transforming them into simulacra. Othello is precisely the lord of the énoncé" (Serpieri, "Reading the signs: towards a semiotics of Shakespearean drama," trans. Keir Elam, in Alternative Shakespeares, John Drakakis, ed. [London and New York: Methuen, 1985], 119-43, esp. 139). In its emphasis on envy and projection, Auden's and Serpieri's work is closest to my own; but see also David Pollard's powerful Baudelairian reading of Iago's emptiness and the sadistic projections through which he attempts to fill it ("Iago's Wound" in Othello: New Perspectives, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Kent Cartwright, eds. [Rutherford, Madison, and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1991], 89-96).


8 For some, Othello is split long before Iago begins his work. In Berry's account, for example, Othello is divided from the beginning by the two contradictory self-images he absorbs from Venice; his failure to escape this limiting framework and hence to "achieve a true sense of personal identity" is a powerful source of tragic feeling in the play (323 and 330). But for critics who read Othello as an early instance of a colonized subject, this "failure" is not personal but systemic: both Loomba (32, 48, and 54) and Jyotsna Singh ("Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of Othello" in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 287-99, esp. 288) position Othello specifically in opposition to what Singh calls "the dominant, Western fantasy of a singular, unified identity" (288). But Iago at least insists that he is the divided one, and Othello initially claims that his soul is "perfect" or undivided; whatever the state to which Othello is reduced, Othello—like The Tempest—seems to me to encode the fantasy that the exotic other possesses a primitive unitary identity before his induction into a Western-style split self.

9 I first read this paper to a very helpful and responsive audience at Notre Dame in November 1994, on which occasion Richard Dutton called my attention to the way in which Othello's self-division is literally played out on the stage.

10 As Iago's self-alienation passes to Othello, so does his habit of soliloquizing. Soliloquies are usually in Shakespearean tragedy the discourse of self-division: only those whose selves are in pieces need to explain
themselves to themselves and have distinct-enough interior voices to carry out the job for our benefit. Initially Iago's soliloquies formally mark him as fractured in comparison with Othello's wholeness; by the end, Othello is the soliloquizer.

11 I here depart from Ridley in following F's version of line 80; Ridley and Q1 (1622) give "And swiftly come to Desdemona's arms." Ridley himself finds Q1's version of line 80 "palid" and thinks Shakespeare probably revised it for F; that he nonetheless rejects the Folio version on the grounds that it is inconsistent with Cassio's character suggests his resistance to seeing just how eroticized Cassio's idealizing of Othello is (xxixxxx and 52n). In the context of lovemaking, spirits is not a neutral term; for its specifically sexual senses, see Stephen Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1977), 441-43.

12 See Neill's powerful account of the ways in which the audience is implicated in Iago's invocation of the horrors of miscegenation, the improper sexual mixture that medieval theologians called adultery (395-99 and 407-9). For Arthur L. Little Jr. the whole of the play constitutes "the primal scene of racism," a forbidden sexual sight/site from which the audience "constructs the significance of race" ("An essence that's not seen": The Primal Scene of Racism in Othello," SQ 44 [1993]: 304-24, esp. 305-6).

13 The familiar associations of blackness with monstrosity (see, e.g., Newman, 148; and James R. Aubrey, "Race and the Spectacle of the Monstrous in Othello," Clio 22 [1993]: 221-38) and specifically with monstrous births (see Neill, 409-10; and Aubrey, 222-27) would probably have made the subterranean connection between Othello and Iago's monstrous birth more available to Shakespeare's audiences than it is to a modern audience.

14 Projection has classically been invoked as a mechanism in Othello, but usually in the other direction, from Othello to Iago; see, e.g., J.I.M. Stewart, Character and Motive in Shakespeare: Some Recent Appraisals Examined ([London, New York, and Toronto: Long-mans, Green and Company, 1949], 102-5), though Stewart ultimately abandons a naturalistic reading of the play through projection for a symbolic reading of Iago and Othello as parts of a single whole. For somewhat later versions of Iago as Othello's projection, see, e.g., Henry L. Warnken, "Iago as a Projection of Othello" in Shakespeare Encomium 1564-1964, Anne Paolucci, ed. (New York: The City College, 1964), 1-15; and Orgel, 258-73. In these accounts projection is loosely used to indicate that Iago expresses unacknowledged doubts or desires in Othello's mind (or, in Orgel's reading, Othello's unacknowledged need for a punitive superego); they generally do not explore the mechanism of projection or consider the degree to which the structure of the play posits Iago—not Othello—as its psychic starting point. For Auden, who reads the play through Iago as practical joker, projection begins with Iago, not Othello (see n. 6, above); see also Leslie Y. Rabkin and Jeffrey Brown, who read Iago as a Horneyan sadist, assuaging his pain by projecting his self-contempt and hopelessness onto others ("Some Monster in His Thought: Sadism and Tragedy in Othello" Literature and Psychology 23 [1973]: 59-67, esp. 59-60); and Pollard, who reads Iago as Baudelairian sadist, filling the world with sadistic projections with which he then identifies to fill his inner emptiness (92-95). Serpieri sees Iago as the "artificer of a destructive projection"; in his semiotic analysis, litotes—Iago's characteristic nay-saying figure—becomes the linguistic equivalent of projection, "a figure of persuasion which, by denying, affirms in the 'other' all that—the diabolical, the lustful, the alien—which it refutes or censures in the 'self" (134 and 142). Attention to the status of "others" has made contemporary criticism particularly sensitive to Othello as the site of Iago's projections rather than as the originator of projection; see, e.g., Parker on "the violence of projection" (100). My account differs from those cited here largely in giving projection a body and in specifying the mechanisms of projective identification at work in the play.

15 Although Neill emphasizes the hidden/hideousness of the bed rather than of bodily interiors (394-95), my formulation here is very much indebted to his. In the course of her enormously suggestive account of the cultural resonances of the hidden/private in Othello and Hamlet, Parker comments extensively on the association of the hidden with the woman's private parts, partly via gynecological discourse; see Parker,

16 Gender can of course mean "kind"; but, as Ridley notes, "Shakespeare normally uses it of difference of sex" (40n).

17 Ridley notes that "supply = satisfy" (40n); for a specifically sexualized use, see Measure for Measure, 5.1.210.

18 “Doves” is the reading in Ridley and Q1; I here depart from it in giving F’s and Q2’s "dawes."


20 The loci classici for this reading are Martin Wangh, "Othello: The Tragedy of Iago," Psychoanalytic Quarterly 19 (1950): 202-12; and Gordon Ross Smith, "Iago the Paranoiac," American Imago 16 (1959): 155-67. Both essays are based on Freud's account of delusional jealousy as a defense against homosexual desire in the Schreber case. For an extension and elaboration of this view, with particular focus on Iago's hatred of women, see also Stanley Edgar Hyman, Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 101-21. Contemporary critics who comment on the homoerotic dynamic between Iago and Othello tend to locate their readings not in this model but in the complex of metaphors that makes Iago's seduction of Othello into an aural penetration and insemination, with a resulting monstrous (and miscegenetic) conception; see, e.g., Coppélia Kahn, Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U of California P, 1981), 144-45; and Parker in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 99-100. Parker notes that the imagined penetration is anal as well as aural (99); see also, e.g., Graham Hammill's brief discussion of Iago's anal eroticism, "The Epistemology of Expurgation: Bacon and The Masculine Birth of Time" in Queering the Renaissance, Jonathan Goldberg, ed. (Durham, NC, and London: Duke UP, 1994), 236-52, esp. 251n.

21 For historically based arguments against Iago-as-repressed-homosexual, see Jonathan Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 157-62; and Bruce R. Smith, Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1991), 61-63 and 75. Both Dollimore and Smith stress the social functions of the male homosocial bond rather than the dynamics of homoerotic feeling partly on the grounds that the homosexual subject is an anachronism in the early modern period. But Shakespeare does not need to have the category of the "homosexual subject" available to him in order to represent Iago as acting out of desires inadmissible to him, including sodomitical desires; and critics who insist that we do away with "the homosexual" as a category sometimes throw out the baby with the bathwater. In "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England" (in Goldberg, ed., 40-61) Alan Bray demonstrates the cultural (nonsexual) uses to which the "bedfellow" could be put; but in order for Smith, for example, to invoke Iago's report of Cassio's "bedfellow" dream to make the argument that Iago is a self-conscious male-bonder rather than a repressed homosexual, he has to ignore the explicit sexiness of the dream (the hard kisses plucked up by the roots, the leg over the thigh). The dream clearly crosses the line—between male friendship and sodomy—that Bray delineates, more strikingly because Iago need not have included all that sexiness to convey his "information" to Othello; and whether or not the reported dream
proclaims Iago a "repressed homosexual," its effect on Othello clearly depends as much on its crossing of that line as on the information that Cassio dreams about Desdemona. As for subjectivity: whether or not the Renaissance shared our sense of the bourgeois subject—in any case, emphatically not the subject as it is construed by psychoanalysis—Othello is obsessively about what is hidden away within the person, the inner, private, and unknowable self that might harbor inaccessible desires. For a good summary of these controversies—and a sensible middle position—see Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994), 12-14.


23 Klein, 188.

24 Klein, 192 and 189.

25 Boris, xvi.

26 Klein, 183.


28 Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 181.

29 Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 186.


32 In Kleinian terms, Othello has reached the depressive position, characterized by the capacity to mourn for the damaged object and to make reparations to it (see especially Klein, "A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States" [1935] and "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States" [1940], both in *Love, Guilt and Reparation*, 262-89 and 344-69); Iago functions from within the more primitive paranoid-schizoid position, with its characteristic mechanisms of splitting and projection/introjection (see especially Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms" in *Envy and Gratitude*, 1-24).

33 As many have argued: see especially Cavell, 134; and Snow, 392. See also my *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare*, Hamlet to The Tempest (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 69-70.

34 Iago's words here, like Emilia's at 3.4.157-60, refer explicitly to jealousy but nonetheless define the self-referential qualities of envy. Although the two terms are sometimes popularly confused, they are distinct in psychoanalytic thought: jealousy occurs in a three-body relationship, derived from the oedipus complex, in which the loss of a good object to a rival is at stake; envy occurs in a pre-oedipal two-body relationship, in which the "good" qualities of the object are felt to be intolerable. Jealousy seeks to preserve the good object, if
necessary by killing it; envy seeks to spoil the good object. (For these distinctions, see Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 196-99; and Joseph in Feldman and Spillius, eds., 182.) Jealousy is a derivative of envy but is more easily recognized and more socially acceptable (Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 198; Joseph in Feldman and Spillius, eds., 182); partly as a consequence, it can sometimes serve as "an important defence against envy" (Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 198). This defensive structure seems to me at work both in Iago and in the play at large: in Iago, who repeatedly comes up with narratives of jealousy as though to justify his intolerable envy to himself (tellingly, he uses the traditional language of envy—Spenser's Envy "inwardly . . . chawed his owne maw" in *The Faerie Queene* [Liv.30]—to register the gnawing effects of jealousy on him); and in *Othello* itself, insofar as its own narratives of jealousy are far more legible and recognizably "human" than the envy represented through Iago and dismissed in him as unrecognizable, inhuman, or demonic.

35 "Mock" has puzzled commentators for years, occasioning five pages of commentary in the New Variorum edition of *Othello* (ed. Horace Howard Furness [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886]). William Warburton (1747) glosses "mocke" (in terms strikingly close to my own) as "loaths that which nourishes and sustains it" (176). With very little plausibility but some interest for my argument, Andrew Becket (1815) transforms "mocke" to "muck," glossing it as to "bedaub or make foul": two other commentators—Zachariah Jackson and Lord John Chedworth—approved of this emendation enough to come up with candidates for the monstrous animal that befouls its food, mouse and dragon-fly, respectively (179).

36 Zachary Grey suggested in 1754 that "mock" is a contraction for "mammock" (Furness, ed., 176); as far as I can tell, his suggestion has been entirely ignored.


38 See *Hamlet*, 2.2.181-82.

39 This destruction also has the effect of separating the two figures whose conjunction has haunted Iago's imagination. Klein hypothesizes the combined parent figure as a special target of envy ("the suspicion that the parents are always getting sexual gratification from one another reinforces the phantasy . . . that they are always combined" [*Envy and Gratitude*, 198]); Iago in fact evokes such a fantasy-figure in his initial description of Othello and Desdemona as fused, a "beast with two backs" (1.1.116), always in the process of achieving the "incorporate conclusion" (2.1.258-59) that is always denied him.

40 Boris, 36.

41 My formulation here is partly indebted to Janine Chaussegueut-Smirgel's work on perversion, especially anal perversion, which she sees as an attempt to dissolve generational and gender differences in order to defend against acknowledgment of the pervert's own puniness and vulnerability; though she does not draw specifically on Klein's concept of envy, her work sometimes intersects usefully with Klein's. In Chaussegueut-Smirgel's reading, Sade's intention, for example, is "to reduce the universe to faeces, or rather to annihilate the universe of differences" ("Perversion and the Universal Law" in Chaussegueut-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1984], 4). Insofar as perversion attempts to replace God's differentiated universe with its own undifferentiation, it is "the equivalent of Devil religion" (9); the undifferentiated anal universe "constitutes an imitation or parody of the genital universe of the father" (11). While this formulation is suggestive for Iago, I think that Chaussegueut-Smirgel is hampered by her Lacanian milieu, with its overvaluation of the phallus and the father's law; Iago is at least as intent on imitating and ultimately replacing the mother's generative function as the father's law.

42 With the kind of psychological intuition that everywhere animates his portrayal of Satan, Milton reworks Emilia's comment: unable to stand the "debt immense of endless gratitude" to the God who has created him (*Paradise Lost*, Bk. 4, 1. 52), Satan proclaims himself "self-begot, self-rais'd / By our own quick'ning power"
(Bk. 5, 11. 860-61). Klein cites Milton's Satan as an instance of "the spoiling of creativity implied in envy" (Envy and Gratitude, 202).

43 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, birdlime is a sticky substance made out of the bark of the holly tree and smeared on branches to entrap birds; "With the barks of Holme they make Bird-lyme," cited from Henry Lyte's 1578 *Niewe herball or historie of plantes* (Oxford English Dictionary, prep. J. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, 2d ed., 20 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989], 2:216). *Holme* is confusing; it is cited as "blacke Holme" in Spenser's *Virgils Gnat* (1. 215), but there apparently refers to the oak, not the holly. In any case, despite the echo of lime, birdlime seems to have been dark, not white.

44 The equation of faeces with baby is familiar to psychoanalysis; see, e.g., Freud, "On the Sexual Theories of Children," on the cloacal theory of birth ("If babies are born through the anus, then a man can give birth just as well as a woman" [9:205-26, esp. 219-20]); Jones, 274-75; and Susan Isaacs, "Penis-Feces-Child," *International journal of Psycho-analysis* 8 (1927): 74-76. For fantasies that overvalue the power of faecal creation "to create or destroy every object," see Abraham, "The Narcissistic Evaluation of Excretory Processes," 322; about one of his patients he reports, "That night he dreamed that he had to expel the universe out of his anus" (320).

45 Oddly, Ridley associates the pitch into which Iago will turn Desdemona's virtue with birdlime without noting its source in Iago's earlier metaphor (88n).

46 For Shakespeare's reworkings of the proverbially defiling properties of pitch, see, e.g., *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.3.3; *1 Henry IV*, 2.4.394-96; and *Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.3.53.

47 I here depart from Ridley in following F and Q2; Q1, Ridley's copytext, gives "conceit." The half-buried metaphor of childbirth is, I think, present in either case, both through the association of "groan"—especially in proximity to a bed—with childbirth (see, e.g., *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.3.140 and 4.5.10; and *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.15) and through the family relation between conceit and Latin conceptus, cited in the *OED*; the *OED* also gives "Conception of offspring" as an obsolete meaning for conceit with a 1589 instance, though it notes that this usage is "Perhaps only a pun" (3:647-48, esp. 648).

48 See also "the best turn F th' bed" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.5.59). For serve, see *Lear's Oswald," A serviceable villain, / As due to the vices of thy mistress / As badness would desire" (4.6.248-50); for serve my turn, see Costard's exchange with the king (*Love's Labor's Lost*, 1.1.281-82). For follow / fallow, see Parker in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 99, citing Herbert A. Ellis, *Shakespeare 's Lusty Punning in Love 's Labour's Lost* (1973).


50 Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 11.

51 *Collied* is conjecturally related to *coaly* by the *OED*, 3:390-91.
Folio gives "hell" for Q1's "cell." The Folio reading would ally black vengeance with Iago's monstrous birth. In either reading, the apparently superfluous hollowness suggests an inner space; as Ridley notes, it occurs, again redundantly, in the reference to a "hollow mine" (4.2.81). Shortly after he calls up black vengeance, and again in 5.2, Othello imagines his revenge swallowing up his victims (3.3.467 and 5.2.76), as though returning them to the interior source of his vengeance.


**Othello (Vol. 35): Introduction**

**Othello**

The themes of jealousy, pride, and revenge have consistently interested scholars throughout *Othello's* critical history. With the development of psychoanalysis and its application to literary characters, twentieth-century critics have expanded on earlier interpretations of the play's three primary characters and suggested new explanations and motivations for their actions.

Interpretations of Othello's character are often negative, focusing on his pride and jealousy as fatal flaws. Robert Hapgood (1966) has described Othello as excessively self-righteous and judgemental and argued that the play should make viewers wary of their own tendencies to judge. Focusing his analysis on the play's structure, Larry S. Champion (1973) has written that Shakespeare's "economy of design" centers attention on the "destruction of character resulting from a lack of self-knowledge, … which is the consequence of the vanity of one's insistence on viewing everything through the distorting medium of his [Othello's] own self-importance." Othello's egocentricity, Champion argued, rendered him exceedingly susceptible to jealousy and fabrications concerning his wife. Other scholars have employed psychoanalytic theories in their interpretations of Othello's character. Stephen Reid (1968), for example, has suggested an unresolved Oedipus complex as the source of Othello's delusional jealousy. Reid argued that Othello's mother rejected him for his father and this "treachery" on her part led him to reject women. Similarly, Robert Rogers (1969) has viewed Othello as a composite character composed of conflicting tendencies and has identified the Oedipus complex as a primary factor in explaining Othello's behavior.

Opinion on the character of Desdemona has been sharply divided. While some critics have depicted her as an innocent, passive victim, others have described her as wanton, domineering, and at least partially responsible for her fate. Robert Dickes (1970) has contended that Desdemona is a domineering character who actively strives to achieve her ends and harbors an unconscious death-wish. As evidence of this nature, Dickes observes her wooing of Othello and her efforts to have Cassio reinstated and attributes the motivation for her actions—which ultimately lead to her death—to the Oedipus complex. Desdemona, he argued, "chose as a love object a man representative of her father. Forced by the prompting of her superego, she then atoned for this incestuous choice by behaving in such a way as to make Othello even more certain in his jealousy." W. D. Adamson (1980), however, has interpreted Desdemona's "ambiguous-looking behavior" as a sign of her innocence and positive moral standing. He maintained that *Othello* is the "tragedy of an unworldly woman calumniated and murdered by … a sex-obsessed tyrant who insists on thinking the worst as she insists on the best." Other scholars who have centered their attention on Desdemona have sought to shift interpretation of the play away from the tragedy of an individual. Julian C. Rice (1974) has suggested that Desdemona resembles Othello more than she transcends him and that the play is primarily a tragedy of human nature, while Irene G. Dash (1981) has asserted that *Othello* is a study of the complexities of marriage.
One of the play's most perplexing characters, Iago's actions appear to lack a clear sense of motive. A dominant theme in *Othello* criticism, therefore, has been an effort to explain Iago's motivations. Some scholars, such as Daniel Stempel (1969), have conceded that Shakespeare's text does not offer a solution to the question of Iago's motives and was never intended to do so. Stempel has maintained that "Iago embodies the mystery of the evil will, an enigma which Shakespeare strove to realize, not to analyze." Many commentators, however, have contended that simply labeling Iago as the personification of evil does not do justice to Shakespeare's skills of character development. Fred West (1978), for instance, has suggested that Shakespeare created a profound and accurate portrait of a psychopath in Iago. As such, West continued, "Iago's only motivation is an immature urge toward instant pleasure." Gordon Ross Smith (1959) has maintained that Iago's actions and his hatred of Desdemona—whose marriage usurped his place in Othello's affections—are attributable to his repressed homosexual feelings toward Othello and Cassio. Other critics, such as Leslie Y. Rabkin and Jeffrey Brown (1973), have argued that Iago is a sadist who suffers from a sense of hopelessness and self-contempt and that he attempts to deal with these emotions by projecting his feelings onto others and working to destroy their sense of peace and joy. "Tragedy resides in the heart of character," Smith concluded. "Its inescapable quality is justified by what responsibility each person ultimately carries for what he has become, but its tragic qualities derive from the helplessness of people to escape from what they essentially are."

**Othello (Vol. 35): Overviews**

Robert Hapgood (essay date 1966)


*[In the essay below, Hapgood analyzes themes of judgment and justice in Othello, characterizing the play as a tragedy of self-righteousness that "warrants little confidence in human attempts at judiciousness."]*

Leonard F. Dean's collection of essays, *A Casebook on Othello*, has all too apt a title. For so much has been written about the play's justice theme and so many judgments have been passed upon its hero that recent criticism does read like a legal casebook, in which Othello is tried and judged—in this world and the next.¹ In a way, Othello "asks for" such treatment by presuming to judge himself and others; and certainly a judgment of the hero is part of our response to his tragedy. Yet not, I submit, the dominant part. Overre-acting against the Bradleyan Othello, so idealized that his vulnerability to Iago could only be accounted for by colossal simplen-mindedness² or by Stoll's convention of the "calumniator credited,"³ recent commentators have presented an Othello so culpably self-deceived that Iago becomes virtually superfluous—"merely ancillary," as Leavis puts it.⁴ Excessive identification with the hero has been replaced by excessive detachment from him.

One way to moderate this excess would be simply to recall in detail how much less often we are invited in the course of the play to judge than we are to admire, dread, grieve, laugh, marvel, shudder, pity, fear, and so on through a rich variety of responses. But that would take a much longer study than this one. Here I want to make a start by concentrating on a key area, the justice theme itself. Often taken as the occasion for severe judgments on Othello, analysis of it, rightly understood, carries a built-in warning. For if Othello's is in part a tragedy of self-righteousness, as I think it is, that should make us wary of our own self-righteousness. Moreover, the whole world of *Othello* warrants little confidence in human attempts at judiciousness. In this play, rough justice ensues when disputants confront one another openly and are restrained from violence. But would-be judges not only seem unnecessary to the process but often get in its way. The better we understand *Othello*, I believe, the slower we will be to judge. In support of this belief, I should like to look closely at the four main "trials" in which Othello figures: of Othello after his elopement with Desdemona, of Cassio after the brawl, of Desdemona, and of Othello at the close of the play.
The most extensive analysis of the justice theme in *Othello* is Robert Heilman's in *Magic in the Web*. Again and again, he recurs to the "hearing" in the Duke's court (I.iii), finding in the Duke's administration of justice a standard against which Othello's subsequent perversions of due process may be measured:

The drama may be said to begin with a successful formal court action, to advance by implicitly contrasting this with less adequate court actions that gradually shrink into simulations of the judicial, and to complete the series by a contrast of the quasi-courtly with brute action that supersedes the judicial. Justice: the imitation of justice: the negation of justice.\(^5\)

I do not believe that the Duke's hearing will bear this stress as the exemplar of "Justice."

In various places, Heilman characterizes the process of justice in the Duke's hearing as formal, organized, institutional. Chiefly because of the Duke's passiveness, the scene does not fully answer this description. I would not, on the other hand, call the hearing "helterskelter" (as does John Draper) or compare the Duke's manner to that of Dogberry.\(^6\) The hearing is orderly, and legal traditions doubtless play a part in it (as the incidental legal terms in the episode bear out). Yet it is quite informal—as compared, say, with the impromptu hearing conducted by the Duke at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is conducted not so much by the judge as by the participants themselves. The judge starts the hearing by asking the accused to testify, but thereafter he can hardly be said to "administer" justice. It is only when Othello suggests it that the Duke says "Fetch Desdemona hither," and even after she arrives, the judge has been so moved by the defendant's testimony that he advises the plaintiff to withdraw his charge. Brabantio must insist that the witness be heard.

Although Heilman does not go so far as to set up the Duke as an ideal judge, he does praise the Duke's poise and general manner of executing justice. To me, even though he presides over several processes in which just decisions are reached, the Duke seems notably injudicious—hasty, easily swayed, openly partisan, and inclined to abdicate his authority.

At our introduction to the Duke, in the brief passage in which the Venetian council is sifting conflicting reports about the movements of the Turkish fleet, the most that can be said for his sagacity is that he accepts a sound judgment when he hears it. He himself opens the scene with the remark that "There is no composition in these news / That gives them credit." It is the Second Senator who must point out that although the reports differ as to the number of ships they "all confirm / A Turkish fleet, and bearing up to Cyprus." As persuasive as the loquacious First Senator is in discounting the later report that a "Turkish preparation makes for Rhodes," his arguments do not warrant the positiveness of the Duke's conclusion: "Nay, in all confidence, he's not for Rhodes," and later "'Tis Certain, then, for Cyprus." These are minor matters, but they suggest that the Duke—as Heilman puts it of Othello—"cannot abide the temporary uncertainty which is essential to wise conclusions: he must have assurance now."

In the "hearing" of Brabantio's charge against Othello, the Duke obstructs at least as much as he advances the course of justice. His first response is to invite his friend the plaintiff to be his own judge:

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the bloody book of law
You shall yourself read in the bitter letter
After your own sense, yea, though our proper
son
Stood in your action.
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(1.iii.66-69)

After he learns, however, that his general-of-the-hour is the accused, he appears to change sides. The part of his response to Brabantio's accusation which Heilman quotes as the Duke's "ruling" sounds admirably
judicious: "To vouch this is no proof, / Without more certain and more overt test"; but the rest of his comment—with its concentration of weighted words, "thin," "poor," "modern"—is a good deal less than impartial:

Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods
Of modern seeming do prefer against him.

(I.iii. 107-109)

It might be thought that what seems injudiciousness in the Duke is, in a larger view, tact; that his positiveness about the Turkish fleet, as Stanislavsky has suggested, is the kind of assured leadership the crisis requires; that his apparent passivity is in fact a relaxed control, so secure in its authority that it can allow the antagonists, as it were, to settle their own dispute. Yet such a view supposes a degree of wisdom which would preclude the Duke's blunders later in the scene. His "sentence" to Brabantio—"The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief; / He robs himself that spends a bootless grief"—is no comfort to Brabantio and scarcely flattering to Othello. A little later, the Duke's proposed "disposition" of Desdemona "at her father's" is singularly inept, emphatically displeasing all three of the parties involved. His decision, after the pleas of Desdemona and Othello, to let her go to Cyprus—"Be it as you shall privately determine, / Either for her stay or going"—seems sensible enough at the time; later one wishes the Duke had been less ready to leave it to the judgment of a bridegroom whether his marriage would interfere with his military responsibilities. His haste might be attributed to a desire to get on with state business. Yet it is Brabantio in his grief who beseeches him to drop the private problem for "the affairs of the state"; and once the disposition of Desdemona has been arranged, the Duke leaves further problems till the next morning, says good night, and leaves.

The Duke, then, is not the poised administrator of justice that Heilman takes him to be. The key contrast between his conduct in this hearing and that of Othello when he "tries" Desdemona is that the Duke—whether from fairness of mind or mere weakness—is not so secure in his own sense of justice as to give his impulsive prejudgments full sway.

Brabantio provides the same contrast, a contrast that stands out amid the numerous ways in which he resembles Othello. Like Othello, he idealizes Desdemona and—using almost the same words as Othello—is appalled at the thought that such perfection "would err / Against all rules of nature." He, too, thinks that he has been wronged by his friend. He, too, learns of the "crime" from Iago and after some resistance takes over his formulation of it (theft). Almost as sure as Othello of his own capacity to determine what is just, he mixes investigation and condemnation in a way which epitomizes Othello's later methods (I.i.161-174). So strong is he in his own judgment that Gratiano feels that the sight of Desdemona dead would have made him "curse his better angel from his side / And fall to reprobation"—a surmise that comes shortly before Othello's own speech of self-damnation.

For all his rectitude, however, Brabantio does not rely on it as much as Othello does. He brings his case before the proper authorities and makes an open accusation. Brabantio is no model. With no more evidence than his belief that his daughter would never do such a thing voluntarily, he leaps to the conclusion that she has been bewitched. He takes the matter to the Duke, not because he is a law-abiding citizen but because he feels sure his friends will back him up. He does not follow through to confirm the whole truth of Desdemona's wooing. And once he sees the essential truth of Desdemona's true devotion to the Moor, he acknowledges it with a bitterness which prepares us for his subsequent "death of grief." Yet he does in fact, as well as in the Duke's fiction, judge his own case and arrive at a just decision, withdrawing his charge. If one compares him with other Shakespearean characters who judge their own cases—Angelo, Malvolio, Leontes, not to mention Othello—one sees what an achievement this represents. With none of the idealism which inspires Othello's sense of justice, Brabantio, like the Duke, has the willingness to submit his prejudgments to a full and open test of experience that Othello so fatally lacks.
The trial of Cassio presents another instance in which human injudiciousness is corrected by an open hearing. Heilman finds that "in contrast with the Duke's hearing in Venice" there is here a deterioration in the administering of justice, with Othello exhibiting less poise than the Duke. At the other extreme, Samuel Kliger finds in this incident a praiseworthy instance of Othello's "specific judicial capacity" for discriminating between official and personal loyalties. If there is a deterioration from the earlier trial, it is in the testimony. Iago tells less than the whole truth, and Cassio and Montano simply won't talk. I myself find little to choose between the Duke and Othello as judges; if anything, Othello seems somewhat the less injudicious. Certainly he is much more actively in charge of the proceeding than was the Duke. And, with Cassio visibly drunk while in charge of the guard, and making no defense for his assault on a ranking official, does Othello after all need further occasion for his verdict? Still there is no denying that he is abrupt and intemperate; and that, as a result, he fails to get at the whole truth: even Iago seems to have assumed that he would inquire into the cause of the quarrel.

His outburst—"My blood begins my safer guides to rule"—ominously exceeds the occasion. It is true that there was considerable difficulty in restoring order at his arrival and that although he has been elaborately courteous to each of the three witnesses, each one has refused to testify. The situation plainly calls for some assertion of authority, of the same sort that Henry IV employs when he tells the rebellious Percies, "My blood hath been too cold and temperate" (I Henry IV, I.iii.1-9). Yet Othello's threat is so extreme ("if I once stir, / Or do but lift this arm, the best of you / Shall sink in my rebuke") and his estimation of the offense so exaggerated ("Tis monstrous"), that a real, as well as rhetorical, passion appears to have "collied" his best judgment. His outburst anticipates his later explosions with Iago and Desdemona when they, like these witnesses, seem evasive. His final disposition of the case seems to me remarkably fair. Kliger feels that Othello "has little choice but to dismiss Cassio from military office." Heilman, while granting that "some disciplinary action against Cassio" was inevitable, feels that Othello's "never more be officer of mine" is excessive: "We can imagine a more intrinsically assured Othello who might himself take part of the blame and discipline Cassio by suspension for a limited time." Puzzlingly, since Kliger quotes all but the last three lines of the passage and Heilman cites it in another connection, both leave out of account Othello's final position, as reported by Emilia to Cassio in the next scene:

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all will sure be well.
The general and his wife are talking of it;
And she speaks for you stoutly: the Moor replies,
That he you hurt is of great fame in Cyprus
And great affinity and that in wholesome wisdom
He might not but refuse you, but he protests he loves you
And needs no other suitor but his likings
To take the safest occasion by the front
To bring you in again.
(III.i.45-53)
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This is perhaps a second thought, but it amounts to the "suspension for a limited time" which Heilman favors. This revised verdict has resulted, it should be noted, not from a fair-minded review of the case but from considerations of local politics and personal likings.
When, just before he kills her, Othello at long last tells Desdemona, the name of her supposed lover, her response is immediate and insistent: "Send for the man and ask him." She speaks for us, voicing the prime expectation that the preceding "trials" have helped to point up. For their primary function is not to emphasize Othello's injudiciousness, although no one in the play is less judicious than he at this point. Contrary to Heilman and Kliger, neither of the earlier trials embodies an ideal of judiciousness which by implicit contrast would underline Othello's obvious shortcomings here. Instead, they show how open, orderly hearings—even though imperfect—can correct just such gross errors as his.

Why doesn't Othello bring his suspicions to open trial?—a major question, yet one which to my knowledge only G. R. Elliott has given its due. Indeed, he seems to me to make too much of it when he writes: "The chief cause of Othello's downfall is not his jealousy but the fact that he conceals it from all concerned—except his evil other self, Iago—by reason of his pride. That is the main point of this story ... "9 Certainly Othello's secretiveness—so striking in one noted for his free and open nature—is an important factor in this story, a necessary condition for the working out of the larger tragedy of trust and mistrust; but that is scarcely its main point. Elliott's preoccupation does, however, lead him to record very alertly the various opportunities which Othello has for expressing his suspicions and to explore searchingly the interventions of "shame, wrath, grief, and pride" which keep him from doing so.10

Especially pride. Over the whole play, Elliott sees Othello moving from right self-esteem at the beginning, to sinful pride (reaching its extreme when he repudiates Desdemona's dying forgiveness), back again to right self-esteem at the end; and he is very discerning about what is pridefully defensive and self-protective in Othello's secretiveness. But he neglects what seems to me Othello's most prideful quality, the trait that the justice theme in the whole play does most to bring out: an excessive assurance of his innate rectitude—both in judging himself and others—that makes open confrontation unnecessary.

This excessive assurance characterizes his self-esteem throughout the play. It is an aspect of his magnificent self-confidence in the opening scenes, first made explicit when he declares: "My parts, my title and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly." At this point, it is proof against Iago's bad counsel of concealment ("Those are the raised father and his friends: / You were best go in"); Othello answers, "Not I; I must be found." Again at the trial, confidence in his self-judgment prompts his advice to the Council that if they find him foul in Desdemona's report:

The trust, the office I do hold of you,  
Not only take away, but let your sentence  
Even fall upon my life.  

(Liii.117-119)

And again it makes for openness; he promises: "justly to your grave ears I'll present / How I did thrive in this fair lady's love, / And she in mine."

Its first turn from openness comes at Cassio's hearing, where it contributes to the summariness of Othello's investigation. His confidence in being a "good judge of men" leads him to assume that Iago's honesty and love mince Cassio's guilt and thus to leap in the next line to his verdict. Thereafter, it repeatedly makes him vulnerable to Iago's deceit. Iago's innuendoes have all the more force because Othello is so sure that he knows the ways of a "man that's just":

these stops of thine fright me the more:  
For such things in a false disloyal knave  
Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just  
They are close delations, working from the heart ...
A little later, Iago is able to speak "with franker spirit" and warn "Look to your wife" because Othello has declared his own dispassionate judiciousness, as methodical as a machine:

I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this,—
Away at once with love or jealousy!

(III.iii.190-192)

Only momentarily does Othello waver in his assurance:

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.384-387)

He is not used to such waverings and is the more easily gulled by the "proofs" Iago then offers because his habitual certitude makes him long "to be satisfied."

What Hardin Craig has called Othello's passionate rectitude grows stronger as the play proceeds. Just before his fit, he identifies his own "good instincts" with the judgment of nature: "I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shake me thus." And in his "It is the cause" soliloquy, again as Craig puts it, he first takes on himself "the justice of god, the acme of tragic madness in both ancient and modern drama" (p. 204):

O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword!
… I must weep,
But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's
heavenly;
It strikes where it doth love.

(V.ii. 16-22)

To such self-righteousness, "proof is essentially a process of confirming a prejudgment. And with Othello this perversion of due process is further deranged by passion and Iago's practices, so much so that a number of commentators have thought him concerned merely with self-justification. Heilman, for example, has considerable difficulty in telling the difference between those two wife-killers Iago and Othello. All that Heilman can say for Othello is that he shows "an impulse to formal propriety," makes "an effort at legal good form." This view follows from his analysis of the death scene, especially of the actual killing of Desdemona, where he writes of Othello:

The synthetic role blows up: judge and priest are gone: what is left is the executioner serving the law of his own passion … The tension of his unsuccessful effort to ennoble his conduct is released in the act of violence and pushes him to the necessary haste: he can now depend only on the integrity of passion, he must act when it is quick and full, lest a dilution leave him with no assurance at all [p. 156].
But this is to resist the obvious difference between Othello and Iago: Othello, however deludedly, believes that killing Desdemona is an act of justice whereas Iago knows that killing Emilia is a piece of knavery. And Othello's violence does not betray his "desire to do and be right," as Heilman elsewhere calls it; it only completes this misled drive. Othello rejects Desdemona's final plea to pray because he is now functioning as the lawful executioner. In Othello's eyes there is no "haste" about his act; if anything, he is dilatory: "Being done, there is no pause." In a spirit of righteous indignation (Bradley's term), he inexorably does his duty.

The immense ironies of this "trial" are thus clinched. The least judicious verdicts of the play have been executed by the man who is most sure of his own (very considerable) rectitude. The grossest violations of elementary, practical justice have been committed by the man most devoted to ideal justice. The misjudgments most in need of correction by an open hearing have been formed, tested, and carried out—so sure is this judge of his own judgment—in private.

During the inquest at the end, we are so concerned with Othello's adjudicating that we scarcely notice Lodovico's. But it is worth noting that here is another impromptu hearing, presided over by another imperfect judge. For although Lodovico is a more active magistrate than his duke, largely controlling the questioning, there is tragic disorder in his court: one culprit, who won't talk, is wounded by the other, who later kills himself. Even so, a rough justice results. Given half a chance in an open confrontation, it seems, the truth—in Emilia's words—"'Twill out, 'twill out!"

Is Othello just in the judgments he makes upon himself in this world and the next? The question has received such a diversity of responsible critical answers as to suggest that Shakespeare deliberately did not make the matter clear, perhaps even invited our confusion. What is clear is that Othello's confidence is his own power of self-judgment is unimpaired, although he now distinguishes sharply between himself as culprit ("he that was Othello") and himself as judge ("here I am"). Indeed, he is never so presumptuous as at the end. For at his own hearing and Cassio's he was fully within his rights, and in his trial of Desdemona he had the right of dealing private justice that Elizabethans, though ambiguously, accorded wronged husbands. But at the end he clearly presumes on the authority of both God and the state, pronouncing his own damnation ("Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur! / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!"), defining his own guilt ("Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak … "), taking his own life.

Our response to this presumption is confused. Certainly, with Honor Matthews, we feel that "Even when he dies … he is still occupying the usurped throne of the only true Judge." Yet surely we would think less of him if he did not, as H.S. Wilson puts it, execute "justice upon himself, as he had measured justice to Desdemona." These confusions are further compounded by the alternative values suggested by the dead body of Desdemona, eloquently symbolic throughout this last scene. To Wilson, it seems that Shakespeare avoided any judgment concerning Othello's ultimate fate, remembering the text: "Judge not, that ye be not judged." Certainly, the Christian charity that Desdemona pleaded for and tried to practice must be in our minds at the finale. Yet her example is not compelling; we remember the way her all-excusing forgivingness blinded her to Othello's jealousy, the way her ill-timed pleas for mercy confirmed for him her guilt.

All of these confusions, it seems to me, are to Shakespeare's tragic purpose, which transcends doomsday distribution of either justice or mercy. Bradley puts the matter so well, and speaks so prophetically to the current condition of Othello studies, that I should like to quote him at length:

... the ideas of justice and desert are, it seems to me, in all cases—even those of Richard III and of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—untrue to our imaginative experience. When we are immersed in a tragedy, we feel towards dispositions, actions, and persons such emotions as attraction and repulsion, pity, wonder, fear, horror, perhaps hatred; but we do not judge. This is a point of view which emerges only when, in reading a play, we slip, by our own fault or
the dramatist's, from the tragic position, or when, in thinking about the play afterwards, we fall back on our everyday legal and moral notions. But tragedy does not belong, any more than religion belongs, to the sphere of these notions; neither does the imaginative attitude in presence of it. While we are in its world we watch what is, seeing that so it happened and must have happened, feeling that it is piteous, dreadful, awful, mysterious, but neither passing sentence on the agents, nor asking whether the behaviour of the ultimate power towards them is just.

I would feel happier with this statement if it were confined to the final effect of Shakespearian tragedy and if judgment were not altogether excluded but allowed a secondary place in it. Yet the main gist—the denial that judgment has a primary place among our responses to tragedy—seems to me true to the finale of Othello and to the implication of the justice theme throughout. For this theme is self-limiting: if I have understood the various trials of Othello correctly, the need to put him on trial in our own judgments is the last one we should feel inclined to fulfill.

When we finally do, the closer we come to Othello's self-estimate—"An honourable murderer, if you will"—the closer we will be, I suspect, to a just verdict. The trick is to keep both terms of Othello's oxymoron operative and evenly balanced; and that is not easy. He himself, in his various comments at the end, tips the scales now to one side and then to the other: if "fool! fool! fool!" is not stern enough an indictment for the murderer, "dog" is too harsh for the honorable man. But approval and disapproval of his successive judgments are only two, let me insist, among many reactions we are experiencing toward Othello during the finale. We may feel wonder at his poise in the face of such radical self-discovery, and dismay that—partly because of this self-assurance—it is still not complete: he never sees the presumption of his self-righteousness. When Cassio says, "Dear general, I never gave you cause" and Othello replies, "I do believe it, and I ask your pardon"—we must feel the poignance of their reconciliation (especially that Cassio should still call Othello "general"), made all the sharper by its brevity and mixed, perhaps, with a sense of protest that this long avoided confrontation did not take place much earlier. Most of all, of course, we feel the pity of it when Othello realizes and admits that he threw a pearl away, and yet we rejoice at his realization that Desdemona was, after all, a true pearl. Our shock when he produces still another weapon may be followed by a sense of consummation as he dies upon a kiss. And so on, our sense of justice being appealed to, confused, swept aside, returned to, clarified, again swept away—as part of an overwhelming sequence of responses. After Othello's suicide, I can't help feeling, with Nowottny, that "Justice now comes into its own." Yet as if to counter this reaction, Shakespeare brings the theme to the forefront one last time, as Lodovico puts Iago in the custody of Cassio:

To you, lord governor,
Remains the censure of this hellish villain;
The time, the place, the torture: O, enforce it!
(V.ii.367-369)

Can we help remembering Othello's self-delegated authority to censure those who, as he believed, had wronged him? Or the Duke's rash offer to let Brabantio read the bloody book of law after his own sense against the thief who stole his daughter? We may feel that Iago deserves whatever torture Cassio may devise for him; but we cannot feel that the chain of human injudiciousness has been broken.

Notes

1 Of the studies which give particular attention to the justice theme, Winifred M. T. Nowottny's "Justice and Love in Othello," UTO, XXI (1951-2), 330-344, seems to me decidedly the best. It is reprinted in Dean's collection (1961). A fuller study than she undertakes of "the contention of love and justice" would find, I believe, that it cuts both ways. Not only the values of justice but also those of love are subjected to a searching


3 E. E. Stoll first formulated this idea in *Othello* (Minneapolis, 1915), and elaborated upon it in numerous subsequent works.


10 Elliott has an eye, too, for the way Cassio's vain restraint from contact with Othello and Desdemona's innocent reticences contribute to the misunderstandings. For key passages, see pp. 95-99, 109, 126, 131, 144, 150, 152, 177, 183, 187, 216, 227. Like any important Shakespearian element, this restraint from "the whole truth" is refracted in many directions. Emilia is very much to blame for keeping quiet about the handkerchief, a fault she rectifies by her recklessly frank revelations at the end. Iago is, of course, from first to last a master of withholding the whole truth. His silence at the end—"From this time forth I never will speak word"—is thus particularly apt.


12 For instance, in *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (London, 1960), pp. 113-114, n., Irving Ribner polls scholarly opinion on the issue of Othello's damnation, finding: three scholars, counting himself, for salvation; four for damnation; one for ambivalence. In her book, *Character and Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge, 1962), Honor Matthews concludes that "The social-religious thought of his time marked Othello, the unrepentant suicide, inevitably for damnation" (p. 137).


14 Matthews, p. 136.


Larry S. Champion (essay date 1973)
In adapting to the stage Cinthio's 'Tale of the Moor of Venice' Shakespeare developed his principal roles along familiar lines. Like Richard III, Shakespeare's ensign is possessed of a bold audacity and devilish wit; pre-disposed to evil, he delights in sharing his machinations with the audience. The Moor, like Brutus, is heroic and noble, but naively egotistic; his tunnel-visioned idealism, based ultimately on conceptions of his own magnanimous forthrightness and self-importance, makes him susceptible to the schemes of clear-sighted men of evil intent and blinds him to the bestial side of his own nature which pride bides its time to reveal.

Both characters are more powerful delineations than their earlier dramatic counterparts. Although Iago is more totally a single-dimensional creature of calculated self-control than Richard, Shakespeare manipulates him to give the appearance in the early acts of credible and intriguing character development. And Othello, far more so than Brutus, is provoked to the cruel and vicious consequences of pride and is forced more completely—and, to most spectators and critics, more satisfactorily—to experience the full cycle of the tragic wheel of fire.

By its very nature drama is inseparable from the reaction of the audience. As one critic has recently observed, the 'playwright's task is not simply to create an illusion: he must know how to control it too'. Otherwise, he continues (quoting Sartre), tragedy becomes for the spectators 'a means not to self-knowledge, but to self-indulgence'. Othello, of course, is conceded to be one of Shakespeare's best plays, though not perhaps his greatest work; 'its grip upon the emotions of the audience', writes the Arden editor, 'is more relentless and sustained than that of the others'. The success is in large measure the result of Shakespeare's structural skill in creating, through the two principals, a perspective of double vision by which to accommodate a plot of mounting tension and of progressively restricted focus. On the one hand, the spectators are forced credibly and sympathetically to experience the protagonist's dilemma while, on the other, their more expansive perception of the values which control the stage-world forces them to sit in judgment on his decisions and anticipate the consequences. This type of perspective Northrop Frye presumes in his assertion that 'a tragic figure is fully tragic only to its spectators: heroes do not suffer except when they become objective to themselves'. Specifically, Iago, fully integrated within the narrative, functions as a tragic pointer through whom the spectators observe the forces which create Othello's situation and the values against which he must contend; and Othello is a protagonist with whom, through the devices of internalization, the spectators share fully the private agony of passion and also the insight to which he is led.

Iago, though deprived of even the momentary flashes of a live conscience which to a degree humanize Richard III, gives the impression of being far more alive. Like the Yorkist king, he is not merely the cold, calculating abstraction which critics delight in tracing from medieval drama; his soft underside is the burning inner hell of envy and unsatisfied ambition. He experiences, for instance, the same fear of cuckoldry which he implants in Othello: he suspects that the 'lusty Moor' 'twixt [his] sheets / … has done [his] office' (I, iii, 393-4), 'hath leap'd into [his] seat':

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the thought whereof} \\
\text{Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my} \\
\text{inwards;} \\
\text{And nothing can or shall content my} \\
\text{soul…}
\end{align*}
\]

(II, i, 305-7)
He also fears 'with [his] night-cap' (316) Cassio, who 'hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes [him] ugly' (V, i, 19-20). Such fears arise largely from his own twisted personality. As his own comments reveal, he has no conception of love beyond its basest and lustiest connotations. Othello, married, dwells 'in a fertile climate' (I, i, 70); 'an old black ram / Is tupping [Brabantio's] white ewe' (88-9); the 'daughter [is] cover'd with a Barbary horse' (111-12); Othello, Cassio is informed, 'hath boarded a land carack' (I, ii, 49); '[it] is a common thing', he tells Emilia, '[t]o have a foolish wife' (III, iii, 302, 304); a woman who has beauty but refuses to use it freely for self-advantage is fit only to 'suckle fools and chronicle small beer' (II, i, 161). On occasions when he feels rebuffed, his inner hell burns suddenly brighter. At the outset, for example, he painfully asserts, 'I know my price' (I, i, 11) in the face of Cassio's promotion, proclaiming that he must serve Othello outwardly, '[t]hough I do hate him as I do hell-pains' (155). Later the perceptive actor should not miss a similar cue when Cassio refuses to listen to Iago's song a second time, informing him: 'I hold him to be unworthy of his place that does those things' (II, iii, 104-5)—or when Cassio in his cups affirms that Iago is not to be saved before him: 'the lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient' (113-14).

Along with this gnawing frustration, Iago possesses the cruelly fascinating wit which also characterizes Richard III; he takes a similar unholy delight in the machinations which contort in agony those who trust him unquestioningly. He gloats, for example, over his counsel to Cassio that Desdemona be persuaded to intercede in the lieutenant's behalf ('Divinity of hell! / When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows' [II, iii, 356-8]; so also he delights that the Moor, in the temptation scene, 'changes with [his] poison' (III, iii, 325); two scenes later he stands ecstatically over the collapsed general ('Work on, / My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught … ' [IV, i, 45-6]). In the final act he relishes the fact that, whether Cassio kill Roderigo, or Roderigo Cassio, he stands to profit. Some perverted sense of superiority prevails even in his assertion that Othello has not dealt him a mortal wound and that '[f]rom this time forth I never will speak a word' (V, ii, 304). In a sense the success of his scheming is more amazing than Richard's, since he operates, not from the base of a royal position which in itself commands obeisance, but from a relatively insignificant position of third in command in a Venetian military force. As a matter of fact, every character whom Iago manipulates into destruction or physical harm is his social or professional superior—Brabantio, Montano, Cassio, Desdemona, Othello. Even Roderigo, a 'fool' whom the ensign rightly claims to be his 'purse', possesses far more wealth, if not common sense.

Most significant in contrast with the characterization of Richard III, Iago from his opening lines consistently and progressively develops. Such development does not occur in terms of moral complexity (as Shakespeare attempted with Richard), and certainly there is no abortive attempt to force the audience to a sympathetic perspective. He does, however, become progressively more subtle and sophisticated in his ability to practice upon virtually everyone else in the stage world. At the outset he operates from the shadows, goading Roderigo to incense Brabantio against Othello. As the distraught father descends to the main stage and calls for a taper, Iago quickly exits in order to avoid identification, informing Roderigo: 'I must leave you. / It seems not meet, nor wholesome to my place, / To be produc'd' (I, i, 145-7). Throughout the first act Iago's double face quite literally must be concealed in darkness for its effectiveness. In the second act, after exhibiting his mental dexterity by bandying words with Desdemona and Emilia, Iago moves into the physical light in order to practice upon minds confused by alcohol: Roderigo, having 'carous'd / Potations pottle-deep' (II, iii, 55-6), is persuaded to attack Cassio: Cassio, 'drunk … full of quarrel and offence' (51, 52), as Captain of the Guard allows himself to become involved in a brawling squabble which disrupts the peace; Montano, having 'do[ne] … justice' in pledging the 'health of [his] general' (90, 88), gullibly swallows Iago's insinuations that Cassio is an alcoholic and bluntly charges that the captain is drunk.

In both practices Iago fails to achieve his goals, either of which would effectively have destroyed Othello's reputation, if not his life—(1) an annulment of the marriage and the provocation of Brabantio's party to an open attack (an attack which he personally strives to initiate by drawing his sword and mocking an assault upon Roderigo) and (2) the rousing of Cyprus to a general mutiny. If the ultimate goals fail, however, Cassio is displaced; more important, Shakespeare, through the progressive sophistication and complexity of Iago's
methods, has both made the antagonist dramatically interesting and also prepared the spectators for the moment of his greater success.

The third act is the ensign's most glorious moment as the fires of insinuation and implication raze his most precious adversaries. In the great temptation scene, as before, the playwright achieves maximum interest through a successive delineation of the villainy. More specifically, Iago's manipulation of Othello in this scene involves three distinct phases. In the first (35-192), carefully avoiding any reference whatever to Desdemona, he subtly and unobtrusively plants the seeds of suspicion against Cassio which, as they take root in the general's mind, will suggest the possibility of his wife's infidelity. Iago like[s] not that Cassio 'steal[s] away so guilty-like' from Desdemona, that he knew of Othello's love during the courtship; perchance Cassio is 'honest', but the ensign is not bound to utter his deepest thoughts; Othello must beware of jealousy—not (as one might expect to hear) because jealousy preys destructively upon the mind but because the 'cuckold' (how carefully the implication is inserted) 'lives in bliss' who knows not his condition. In the second phase (193-369), with the poison in Othello's mind taking hold, Iago's comments are marked by 'increasing insolence' as he slants his attacks indirectly against Desdemona: she must be observed with Cassio; she deceived her father; her refusal to accept the 'matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree' betokens a 'will most rank'. In the third phase Iago confronts the passion-ridden Moor with direct charges of his cuckoldry: he speaks blatantly of Desdemona's being 'topped', of her giving Cassio the handkerchief which had been Othello's wedding gift, and of Cassio's protestations of love in a dream.

Physical darkness, inebriation, spiritual darkness—each in turn serves as a basis for the increasing audacity of Iago's schemes; so also, from insinuations against Cassio, to indirect and direct charges against Desdemona, the spectator witnesses a carefully modulated delineation of the antagonist in action. And his fortunes have indeed reached remarkable heights. To be sure, he will continue to goad the Moor; he—with both Cassio and Othello disposed of—will even entertain thoughts of a command in Cyprus. His control of others for his own benefit, however, will never transcend this moment when in III, iii, Othello commissions his ensign to destroy Cassio and commits himself to the destruction of Desdemona. Nor is there any further progression in the complexity and perverse artistry of his villainy which to this point has given the impression of steadily developing characterization.

In this key scene, on which the play literally turns, Shakespeare shifts the major focus from Iago to Othello—and he does so primarily through the devices of internalization. To this point Iago has spoken five soliloquies and two asides (a total of one hundred and eleven lines); Othello has had not one such line. In this central scene Iago has one soliloquy (nine lines) and Othello delivers his first two soliloquies (twenty-two lines). For the remainder of the play Iago speaks only four further brief soliloquies (twenty-six lines) while Othello has six further soliloquies and thirteen asides (sixty-eight lines). Through the first half of the play, then, the spectators' attention is drawn sharply to Iago; the issues and events of the action—and, above all, Othello himself—they see through the ensign's eyes. All is colored by his hatred and envy. He establishes with unrelenting intensity the egocentric values which destroy man's judgment and will convert the Moor to a passionate monster of destruction. On the other hand, he does not in the final analysis force the protagonist to commit murder any more so than does the ghost in Hamlet or than do the witches in Macbeth. Like these forces the ensign is only a single and dreadful aspect of the environment which triggers the Moor's passion. Any assumption that the play is a 'pure melodrama' (as George Bernard Shaw would have it) disregards the fact that the evil culminating in Othello's destruction wells up from within him, from the same reservoir of pride which previously has generated the self-esteem that makes him a leader among men. Through Iago the spectators recognize how stupidly—yet how understandably—Othello has acted (or is going to act); through him they confront the brutal necessity in such a world of the self-knowledge which ultimately the Moor so painfully achieves.

As an arrant villain, the ensign is, of course, a single-dimensional figure about whom the spectators have no delusions and with whom—though they may sit in awe—they can develop no trace of a sympathetic rapport.
Quite candidly he proclaims himself a creature of Hobbesian self-interest: he 'ever make[s his] fool [his] purse', spending time 'with such a snipe / But for [his] sport and profit' (I, iii, 389, 391-2); his honest appearance is but a facade (406); he is a devil deceiving with 'heavenly shows' (II, iii, 358). His conversations with Roderigo underscore this egocentricity: he 'know[s his] price'; 'trimm'd in forms and visages of duty', he '[k]eep[...][his] heart … attending on [himself]' (I, i, 11, 50-1). One has only himself to blame for failure to thrive at another's expense:

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardners; … [T]he power and corrigeable authority of this lies in our wills.

(I, iii, 322-4, 328-9)

In his singular dedication to self lies his chief importance as a tragic pointer; so clear is his obsessive self-interest and so obvious is his hatred for Othello that his very detestation points the spectators to admiration for the Moor. Since, from the moment he appears on stage, there is 'no question about his essential character', the playwright through him develops our sympathy for the protagonist and at the same time, through dramatic irony, 'involve[s the] audience … in an awareness of impending and inevitable catastrophe'. Iago resents not receiving the promotion; he suspects Othello of cuckolding him; he loves the woman the Moor has wed; he detests Othello's military hauteur and greatly resents the high regard of the community for the commander. That time and again his remarks should underscore his leader's abilities reflects doubly to Othello's credit. Of the Cyprus expedition, for instance, Iago admits to Roderigo that the Venetians have not '[a]mother of [Othello's] fathom' (I, i, 153) to lead them. Even as in soliloquy his machinations take form, he observes that the Moor is 'of a free and open nature' (I, iii, 405), 'of a constant, loving, noble nature' (II, i, 298; see also ).

Various minor characters, in conjunction with Iago, firmly guide our response to the protagonist. In the first scene, for example, the emphasis is totally against Othello, to whom the spectators are introduced through the observations of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio as a prideful general who has foolishly selected an inexperienced lieutenant and who with gross disrespect and possibly even with the practice of black magic has eloped with a daughter of a Venetian senator. This initial impression the two subsequent scenes totally reverse—in scene two by Othello's first appearance on the stage and in scene three by the additional minor pointers and by Iago's first soliloquy. The Duke and the senators welcome '[v]aliant Othello' (48), '[B]rave Moor' (292), to whom they will entrust their national defense (220-3); Desdemona lovingly acknowledges her husband in the face of her furiously irate father, and the Duke's reactions to Brabantio's charge is that his 'son-in-law is far more fair than black' (291); his tale could 'win my daughter too' (171). Additional pointers reinforce this perspective in Act II. Montano, the governor of Cyprus, describes 'brave Othello' as a 'worthy governor' who 'commands / Like a full soldier' (i, 38, 30, 35-6), a '[w]orthy' (iii, 197) and 'noble Moor' (143) of 'good nature' (138). Cassio, whose toast is '[t]o the health of our general' (88) and whose 'hopes do shape [Othello] for the governor' (i, 55), prays that the heavens will defend him against the sea (44-6) so that he 'may bless this bay with his tall ship' (79). The Herald proclaims the orders of 'our noble and valiant general' (ii, 1, 2) and invokes a blessing on 'our noble general' (12). Desdemona greets her 'dear Othello' (i, 184) with a love that increases even as the 'days do grow' (197).

Moreover, in the first half of the play Othello's personality (which we see only from the outside) affirms these opinions. In Act I he is a veritable paragon of reason in his ability to maintain self-control. He refuses to be ruffled by Iago's inflammatory remarks about Brabantio; he personally prevents an open battle between his party and his father-in-law's; he unhesitatingly offers to face Brabantio's charge before the Duke and at the counsel table maintains his dignity in face of pointedly insulting comments; he himself suggests that his wife be allowed to speak before the senators, after which he calmly describes the development of their love. Certainly, that the Duke would allow Desdemona to accompany him to battle is a powerful attestation to the general assumption that he is a man 'whom passion [can] not shake'.

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Equally obvious from the outset, however, are the touches of incipient pride which blind him to an objective evaluation of those around him. He, to be sure, would be the last to admit to such pride, but his ego is at the center of his every thought. Thus, for instance, he asserts that his services to the state will 'out-tongue' (I, ii, 18) any of Brabantio's complaints to the Duke and that, moreover, his family is the social equal of that into which he has married (20-3). Above all, the love that he describes before the Duke is clearly a love of Desdemona for Othello; she has fallen in love with his tales of his past adventures, and he 'love[s] her that she d[oes] pity them' (I, iii, 168). In the sixty-one lines in which Othello describes their love, he refers to himself twice as frequently as he does to her (forty-six to twenty-three); in fifty-one lines he is specifically describing himself. Similarly, in Act II as Othello's first symptoms of passion appear, he demands a full report of the strife between Cassio and Montano:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule;
   ... If I once stir
Or do but lift this arm, the best of you
   Shall sink in my rebuke.
   (II, iii, 205, 207-9)

Similarly, in the peremptory dismissal of his lieutenant a few lines later, his magnanimity has a disturbingly pompous ring: 'Cassio, I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine' (248-9). Such self-righteous words again suggest more than a soldierly rebuke from the commanding officer. Cassio's remorse—although never developed significantly beyond a mere lamentation that he has lost the 'immortal part' of himself (his 'reputation') and that what is left is 'bestial'—does of course preplot the experience to which Othello's egocentricity is shortly to lead him.

This pride is the fatal ingredient in III, iii, which makes Othello susceptible to Iago's machinations. His willingness to listen to insinuations about Cassio, couched subtly in terms of the ensign's love and regard for the Moor, soon lead him to demand a fuller version; and, as Iago turns his remarks against Desdemona, the spectators through soliloquy move directly within the distraught protagonist. The remainder of the play they will experience, not through the eyes of one who with burning joy intrigues to trap another, but through the eyes and soul of the victim who must bring himself to admit both the crime of passion against the fair Desdemona and also the stupidity and prideful naivety which render him susceptible to jealousy. Questioning the prudence of marriage, Othello considers his age and his color, concluding with a touch of typical pomposity that marriage is 'the plague [of] great ones; / Prerogativ'd are they less than the base' (273-4). At this point the general is visibly disturbed, as Iago notes on three occasions within the scope of ten lines (214-24). By the end of the scene Othello has himself seized the initiative, agonizing—with his characteristic egocentricity—that his 'occupation's gone' (357). His

   name, that was as fresh
   As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black
   As mine own face.
   (386-8)

It is the supreme irony of the play and the supreme act of hubris for Othello to kneel ritualistically and '[i]n the due reverence of a sacred vow' to 'engage [his] words' to 'yond marble heaven' (457 ff.). Iago's most precious moment must surely be the Moor's response to his request to let Desdemona live:

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her! damn her!
   ... I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of
death
For the fair devil. Now art thou my
lieutenant.

(474-8)

Once the spectators' vision has moved within Othello, comments on his nobility become painfully ironic, as in Desdemona's greeting her '[g]ood love' (III, iii, 54), her submissive obedience (88-9), her insistence that her 'noble Moor / Is true of mind and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are' (iv, 26-8) and that his momentary rancor is provoked by '[s]omething, sure, of state': 'we must think men are not gods, / Nor of them look for such observancy / As fits the bridal' (148-50); the reference to Othello's being no god is especially ironic, of course, in that it is precisely such a role which he deludedly is assuming in his wife's execution. Desdemona later asserts to Emilia that her 'love doth so approve him, / That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns,—I … have grace and favour' (IV, iii, 19-21). Most painful of all, although it is to have a profound influence in convincing him of her innocence, is her dying remark to Emilia that she dies a guiltless death provoked by herself alone, a remark which carries not a word of reproach or recrimination for her husband's hideous cruelty: 'Farewell! / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!' (V, ii, 124-5). Lodovico, who warmly greets the 'worthy General' (IV, i, 228) moments before Desdemona is slapped, best captures the amazement of all save Iago at the bestial change which has transformed Othello into the green-eyed monster:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid
virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?

(274-8)

The structure of the last half of the play is remarkably firm as, following III, iii, the spectators' attention is drawn toward Othello's private struggles with progressively increasing intensity. More specifically, in four successive waves Shakespeare repeats and intensifies Othello's commitment to passion, thus building the tension to a maximum peak just prior to the murder in Act V. Othello's fateful decisions are made, to be sure, at the end of III, iii, without the benefit of one shared of evidence; and nothing essentially changes between this scene and V, ii. What the spectators do see, however, is the progressive deterioration of Othello's mentality as he grows more determined to commit the action to which a moment of hot passion has already forced him to agree. The first such wave (III, iv, 32-98) occurs immediately after his decision, as he confronts Desdemona in the street, addressing her as 'chuck' and demanding the handkerchief which he believes she has given to Cassio. His pride again colors the scene with his fantastic claims of 'magic in the web', hallowed worm, and silk 'dy'd in mummy which the skilful / Conserv'd of maidens' hearts' (69, 74-5) and his pompous implication that, like his father, he will now loathe his wife and 'hunt / After new fancies' (62-3). As his anger waxes hotter, he for the first time becomes overtly disrespectful to his shocked and bewildered wife, stubbornly demanding the 'napkin' in threatening grunts that become almost bestial: 'Ha! Wherefore? … Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, is't out o' th' way? … Say you? … How? … Fetch't, let me see't. … Fetch me the handkerchief; my mind misgives … The handkerchief! … The handkerchief! … 'Zounds!' (78 ff.).

In the second wave, which follows immediately (IV, i, 1-225), Iago is at further work upon the Moor's diseased mind. Far bolder now, he graphically describes Desdemona's liaison with Cassio, their kissing in private, their being naked in bed together, the handkerchief she has given him as a love token, Cassio's blabbing of lying '[w]ith her, on her; what wou will!' (34). Othello's white-hot passion renders him literally incoherent ('Pish! Noses, ears, and lips.—Is't possible?—/ Confess—handkerchief!—O devil!' [42-3])
moments before, in physical collapse, he reveals to the spectators and to the immensely pleased Iago the extent of the inner corrosion. Following the ensign's clever staging of the scene-within-the-scene in which Cassio appears to brag anew of his amorous conquest and in which the fateful handkerchief passes from Bianca's hand to Cassio's, Othello's spiritual perturbations are graphically reflected in his whirling dialogue:

[L]et her rot, and perish, and be damn'd to-night; for she shall not live … O, the world hath not a sweeter creature! … Hang her! … O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear. …

[T]he pity of it, lago! O lago, the pity of it, lago!

(191, 192, 198, 200, 206-7)

Within moments, however, Othello recommits himself to destroying Desdemona, blinded by hubris as he responds to the suggestion of strangulation with 'Good, good; the justice of it pleases; very good' (222).

The third wave (IV, i, 226-71) provokes Othello to strike his wife in public. Lodovico arrives with orders for Othello to return to Venice and for Cassio to replace him in command (an order which, assuming sufficient time has elapsed, sharply points up how ineffective the Moor's command and his communication with his home base have become). Again, when the orders remind him of Cassio, his speech becomes fragmented ('Fire and brimstone! … Are you wise? … Indeed? … I am glad to see you mad … Devil! … O devil, devil!' [238 ff.]); and, when he overhears Desdemona indicate pleasure that Cassio is to assume command, he strikes her impulsively in what amounts to a painful preplotting of the perversely contemplated deed he will shortly thereafter enact in the privacy of his bedchamber. Above all, this scene intensifies Othello's passion by forcing him to realize that his time and opportunity are limited and that, if he is indeed to move against the sinful lovers, it must be posthaste.

In the 'brothel scene' (IV, ii, 1-94), the fourth wave, both Othello's pride and his language are at their most extravagant. Openly confronting Desdemona with charges of infidelity, he brands her 'chuck' (24), 'strumpet' (81), 'weed' (67), and 'cunning whore of Venice' (89), guilty of deeds at which 'heaven stops the nose' (77), the 'moon winks' (77), and the 'bawdy wind … [i]s hush'd' (78-9); her honesty equates with 'summer flies … in the shambles, / That quicken even with blowing' (66-7). The source of his wrath is not a heart broken as a result of unreciprocated love, but an ego smarting from rejection and fearing the public ridicule which will result. He is incensed, for example, that she has transformed his heart into a 'cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in' (61-2). Above all, he is furious that she has made him '[t]he fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow and moving finger at!' (54-5).

Othello, in his soliloquy in Act V, the spectators see as a man whose judgment has been literally destroyed by an obsession with his own importance. Presuming that his judgment is synonymous with God's, he avers with pitiful pomposity, as he enters Desdemona's bed-chamber:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—

[S]he must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light.

Oh, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword!

This sorrow's heavenly;
It strikes where it doth love.

(ii, 1, 6-7, 16-17, 21-2)
His final conversation with his wife is replete with Christian terms: 'Repent', 'pray'd', 'unreconcil'd', 'Heaven', 'grace', 'spirit', 'soul', 'amen', 'confess', 'sin', 'oath' (10-54 passim). Beneath this verbal façade of piety, however, is the bloody passion which causes his eyes to roll (38), which prompts him to 'gnaw … [his] nether lip' (43), and which bursts forth in the cruelty of his 'strumpet! … strumpet!' (77,79) in defiance of her request for time '[b]ut … [to] say one prayer!' (83). The impact of the scene results in part from Desdemona's total innocence. Indeed, in her appearance immediately prior to her death (a scene which serves a purpose far more significant than one of comic relief) Desdemona has reaffirmed her determination to be faithful to her husband at all cost. Emilia, developed at this point as a foil to her mistress, coyly asserts that she would not 'abuse' her husband for a small price, but for the world—well, '[W]ho would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?' (IV, iii, 75-6). After all, if one gained the world, would she not also gain the privilege of redefining 'wrong' and 'right'? (80-3). Even in this unguarded moment of levity and in the wake of having received from Othello a gross repudiation both public and private, Desdemona is unable to comprehend such an action: 'Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong / For the whole world. … I do not think there is any such a woman' (78-9, 84).

His tragic insight begins within seconds, as the shock of Emilia's call rings from him, 'My wife; My wife! What wife? I have no wife. / O, insupportablel O heavy hour' (97-8). And while in life she could not persuade him of her innocence, her dying word to Emilia (which, in returning love for hatred, makes no mention of his brutal act) apparently does. Confronted on every side with evidence of the stupidity and cruelty of his deed, his momentary reactions range from the painful 'O! O! O!' (198) to his 'why should honour outlive honesty?' (245). The significant feature is the purgation of his awesome pride, the removal of self from the center of everything he treasures. Indeed, a conscious self-debasement (not unlike Lear's, 'I am a very foolish fond old man') is involved in his admission that it is only a 'vain boast' that one 'can control his fate' (264-5), an assumption which had been at the very center of his earlier proclamations concerning 'the cause' and heavenly justice. So also it is deliberate humiliation which provokes him to assert that one look from Desdemona will 'hurl [his] soul from heaven' (274) and to call for the devils to 'whip' him from her 'heavenly sight!' (277, 278), to 'roast [him] in sulphur!' (279) and to 'wash [him] in steep-down guls of liquid fire!' (280). In his most telling comment, he requests that the report of his deeds 'nothing extenuate', that he be set down as one who, '[p]erples'd in the extreme … threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe' (342, 346-7), as one, 'whose subdu'd eyes … [d]rops tears' (348, 346), as a 'circumcised dog' (355) whose only remaining honor was to destroy himself as a form of expiation for his murderous deed.

Christian apologists have argued at length that Othello's suicide is the ultimate act of pride and despair, that on the one hand his soul is saved and on the other hand that it is damned. It may well be either; without a sixth act in which Shakespeare might conceivably be interested in the protagonist's eternal state, the most one can say with assurance is that such a matter is not a concern of the play. The essential thrust is the self-knowledge concerning this life which the protagonist gains (though the acquisition may well cost his life) and the implications of such an experience for the spectators. And, for Othello, the spectators are made to feel that his death, whatever the church might say about it, is somehow ennobling, that it is an act of expiation which he is capable of only after he achieves humility and self-knowledge through agony and heart-rending suffering. At the very least he 'recognizes [his] utter lack of wisdom', and in his final rhetorical efforts to 'rise above the muddle and death' 'the audience … is released from antipathy and made able to react to the hero's demand for what is essentially sympathy … without the distracting necessity for moral judgment'.

All things considered, Othello is probably the least complicated of Shakespeare's tragic plots. Once past the rush of events in Act I—which motivate the journey to Cyprus and also develop the spectators' perspective for the protagonist—very little actually happens. The action is simple, and, with the exception of Othello, the characterization is static. Yet, just such economy of design permits the playwright to focus the audience's attention intensely on the destruction of character resulting from a lack of self-knowledge, from a kind of monumental naiveté which is the consequence of the vanity of one's insistence on viewing everything through the distorting medium of his own self-importance. Such egocentricity in Othello renders him woefully
susceptible to jealousy concerning his new wife, and the important thing is not what in fact happens, but what
Othello thinks happens—not what he is told, but the monstrous fabrications which he allows to result from it.

Shakespeare's essential purpose, in short, is to force the viewers inside the mind of a man, noble and talented
but incipiently proud and jealous, and (even as they observe the total sweep of the action) to confront them
with the emotional impact of his destruction. If the dramatist is to succeed, the interest must arise from the
ever-intensifying pressures mounting in Othello's spirit rather than from the external events of the plot itself.
To this end he creates an antagonist whose soliloquies and asides in the early acts provide a rich perspective
dramatic irony and whose comments guide the spectators' attention to both Othello's present nobility and
his potential weakness. These same structural devices of internalization are transferred to Othello in the last
half of the play; and, in successive scenes which reiterate the situation of the protagonist's decision and
intensify his spiritual agony, the spectators' interest is increased progressively to the climactic moments of the
murder and the subsequent heartsick despair of tragic waste coupled with the self-knowledge which results
from his suffering. The cosmological implications are still significant—the storm which provides a
macrocosmic 'foretaste … of what is to happen in Othello's soul';25 the symbolic movement 'from the city to
barbarism, … from order to riot, from justice to wild revenge and murder, from truth to falsehood';26 the
universal nature of the struggle between the higher and lower faculties of the human spirit. But the focus is
sharply limited: the time is condensed, too sensationally for many; and the action is single, permitting no
diversion of interest. The action, in fact, 'narrows down … [to] a bedroom at night where two people …
misunderstand each other disastrously'.27 Othello's agony—involving the actual murder and the recognition of
his error—is more isolated than that of any other Shakespearean tragic hero. The structure of the drama,
which forces the spectators' focus to become progressively more personal and progressively more intense, is
the key to its power.

Notes

1 Maynard Mack, 'Engagement and Detachment in Shakespeare's Plays', in Essays on Shakespeare and
276.

2 The occasional charges epitomized in Thomas Rymer's view of the play is a 'Bloody farce, without salt or
savour' (A Short View of Tragedy, in The Works of Thomas Rymer, ed. Curt Zimansky [New Haven: Yale
U.P., 1956], p. 150; see also attract attention largely because they are so anomalous.


5 At least one critic seriously assumes that Iago believes Othello has cuckolded him (J. W. Draper, 'Honest
Iago', PMLA, 46 [1931], 736). Outwardly his veins seem to be filled with 'an icy fire' (H. C. Goddard, The
Meaning of Shakespeare [Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1951], II, 77); but he 'is, behind the mask, as restless as
a cage of those cruel and lustful monkeys that he mentions so often' (Francis Fergusson, The Pattern in his
Carpet [New York: Delacorte, 1970], p. 222). His revenge demands that Othello feel the 'same gnawing
jealousy which is destroying him' (L. B. Campbell, Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes [New York: Barnes and
Noble, 1952], p. 160).

6 All citations of Shakespeare's text are from The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, eds. W.
A. Neilson and C. J. Hill (Cambridge, 1942).

7 Iago is the apostle of self-love (Irving Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy [London: Methuen, 1960],
p. 97), 'the champion of the absolute autonomy of the will' (Daniel Stempel, 'The Silence of Iago'. PMLA, 84
Both Wolfgang Clemen (The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1951], pp. 121-2) and Caroline Spurgeon (Shakespeare's Imagery [Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1935], p. 335) comment on his fondness for images of animals engaged in obscene activity. As Caroll Camden has pointed out, he makes extensive use of the 'traditional anti-feminist literature' of the period ('Iago on Women', JEGP, 48 [1949], 57).

His plot and his 'gambler's sang-froid' grow with his opportunities (A. P. Rossiter, Angel With Horns [New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961], p. 205). And the manner of his fall reflects his vulnerability: 'it never occurred to him that his wife might betray him with nothing to gain by such betrayal' (R. G. Moulton, Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888], p. 239). Joseph T. McCullen, Jr., observes that Iago's use of proverbs lends an air of increasing complexity to his machinations ('Iago's Use of Proverbs for Persuasion', SEL, 4 [1964], 261).

This scene revealing Iago's destructive manipulation of others may provoke a few apprehensive chuckles, but it hardly 'borders on slapstick' (Robert A. Watts, 'The Comic Scenes in Othello', SQ, 19 [1968], 349).


In 1937, following the lead of Dr. Ernest Jones, Lawrence Olivier as a homosexual Iago and Ralph Richardson as Othello played the exchanging of vows in III, iii, as virtually a love scene (Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello [Berkeley: U. of California P., 1961], pp. 175-84); see further, N. N. Holland, Psychoanalysis in Shakespeare (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), pp. 246-58.


Maud Bodkin labeled him the devil archetype (Archetypal Patterns in Poetry [London: O.U.P., 1934], pp. 211-18), and Bernard Spivack is one of the most recent to trace his descent from the Vice of the medieval moralities (Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil [New York: Columbia U.P., 1958]). The ensign is 'as nearly an absolutely evil character as Shakespeare created' (Marion B. Smith, Dualities in Shakespeare [Toronto: U. of Toronto P., 1966], p. 39); his mystery lies 'in the purity, the unmixedness of his terribly vivid acts' (Robert H. West, Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery [Lexington: U. of Kentucky P., 1968], p. 106).


Norman Rabkin, Shakespeare and the Common Understanding (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 60; see also

Such action 'serve[s] only to set in relief the magnificence of Othello' (Moody E. Prior, 'Character in Relation to Action in Othello', MP, 44 [1946], 226); it defines 'the supreme importance of the hero' (G. R. Hibbard, 'Othello and the Pattern of Shakespearean Tragedy', Shakespeare Survey 21 [Cambridge: C.U.P., 1968], p. 41).

Othello is 'both superior to passion and its slave' (Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1939], p. 192). He is 'magnanimous' but 'egotistic' (F. R. Leavis, 'Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero', Scrutiny, 5 [1937], 265); if he is 'one of the world's great lovers' (Othello, ed. J. D. Wilson [Cambridge: C.U.P., 1957], p. xxii), he is also 'too much of a romantic idealist' (Leo Kirschkbaum, 'The Modern Othello', ELH, 2 [1944], 287). 'It is a reciprocal matter of motivation … in both victim and victimizer' (E. E. Stoll, From Shakespeare to Joyce [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1944], p. 302); in Iago Othello hears a voice that he would 'fain hear and fain deny' (J. I. M. Stewart, Character and Motive in Shakespeare [London: Longmans, Green, 1949], p. 103). 'He is inexpert in simple intellectual judgement … [T]he intellectual confusion … gives … opportunity for his passion to break through' (H. B. Charlton, Shakespearian Tragedy
On the significance of the theme of reputation in the play, see Brents Stirling, *Unity in Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1956), pp. 111-38.

Recently Othello has been described as a composite character: 'normal', 'romantic', 'psychotic' (Robert Rogers, 'Endopsychic Drama in *Othello*', *SQ*, 20 [1969], 213); he is transformed 'from a tender trusting lover into an insanely jealous murderer' (K. P. Wentieth, 'Structure and Characterization in *Othello* and *King Lear*', *CE*, 26 [1965], 647). G. Wilson Knight traces this degeneration in the 'two styles of Othello's speech' (*The Wheel of Fire* [Oxford: O.U.P., 1930], p. 119).

The obsession with the handkerchief is a symptom of 'the delusion which grips the hero in the middle phase of the tragic action' (David Kaula, 'Othello Possessed: Shakespeare's Use of Magic and Witchcraft', *Shakespeare Studies*, 2 [1966], 127).

At one extreme critics call this moment a 'sacrament of penance' (R. N. Hallstead, 'Idolatrous Love:

A New Approach to Othello', *SQ*, 19 [1968], 122), 'salvation' (K. O. Myrick, 'The Theme of Damnation in Shakespearean Tragedy', *SP*, 38, 124), 'redemption' (Riben, p. 91). At the other extreme it is 'the dupe's attempt at self-justification in an irrelevant pose' (Traversi, p. 148), Othello 'cheering himself up' (Eliot, p. 129), 'darkness with no gleam of hope' (E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* [London: Sidwick and Jackson, 1925], p. 224), a final prideful act of 'self-justification' (V. K. Whitaker, *The Mirror Up to Nature* [San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1965], p. 253) in which 'everybody loses' (Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966], p. 125). Whatever moral judgments one may draw (at his own risk), the spectators are made to feel that Othello in his final moments is restored to a kind of dignity (Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* [Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1946], IV, 116); if the Moor 'has not the self-knowledge' of the other Shakespearean heroes, 'he at least has a super abundance of vitality' (Clifford Leeceh, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* [New York: O.U.P., 1950], p. 39); in 'ask[ing] only that the truth be told about him' he achieves a kind of purgation, a 'swearing of the truth' (Madeleine Doran, 'Good Name in Othello', *SEL*, 1 [1967], 216); see also


Peter Mercer, 'Othello and the Form of Heroic Tragedy', *Critical Quarterly*, 11 (1969), 48-61. By emphasizing the 'heroic intensity of the struggle, against the conventional background of the *ars moriendi*', Shakespeare evokes great sympathy for the human Othello' (Bettie Anne Doebler, 'Othello's Angels: The *Ars Morienidi*', *ELH*, 34 [1967], 158).


Hibbald, p. 42.
THE SOUL OF OTHELLO

Othello is in many ways an extended meditation on revenge. As we will see, Shakespeare gives us a full-scale portrait of vindictiveness in the figure of Iago; but he also shows us, in Othello himself, the emergence of vindictive trends in a character constitutionally devoted to affirmative goals. Once separated from those goals, however, and convinced Desdemona has betrayed him, Othello feels sullied by her very existence. He kills her both to avenge himself and to redeem the world.

Although the revenges practiced by Iago and Othello are both corrupt and destructive, they differ in their foundations, aims, and moral flavor. For Iago, to whom love represents an irrational, enervating surrender of self-interest, revenge seems a pleasurable means of serving oneself and validating a philosophy of opportunism. For Othello, to whom love is an act of voluntary, creative submission, revenge is a painful duty, requiring strict personal discipline, performed in the service of selfless ideals and in the name of justice.

In Iago we perceive a sharp distinction between what he pretends to be and what he is; using various poses of blunt cynicism and excessive skepticism to gain credibility, he presents himself as a man fundamentally, even compulsively, honest. In Othello the telling distinction is between what he understands himself to be and what he is. He thinks he is a man of inviolable integrity, master of his emotions, whereas he is, in fact, easily overwhelmed by his passions and most strongly under Iago's control when he thinks he is under his own.

Rhetorically, there are parallels between Iago's manner of seducing Othello and Antony's transformation of the crowd during the funeral oration in Julius Caesar. In both cases, a revenger is fashioned before an audience's eyes through manipulations that manufacture a sense of injury where there was none before. The manipulator does not inscribe the doctrine of revenge upon a blank slate but, rather, appeals to a particular personality's anxieties and vulnerabilities. The key to his success is to locate the basic psychological investments of the character being seduced, then make it seem they are being violated and abused by the target of revenge. We have seen how Antony did that with the Roman crowd. Iago uses some obviously similar strategies: he convinces Othello he is full of "love and honesty" (3.3.119), qualities Othello admires; he pretends to speak of Othello's wrongs only reluctantly ("It were not for your quiet nor your good / ... To let you know my thoughts" [152-54]); he gets Othello to command him to say what he already intends to say ("If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought" [115-16]); he gives Othello evidence both visual (mental images of adultery) and aural (Cassio's partially heard conversation); he plays on Othello's fears of seeming irresolute ("If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend, for if it touch not you, it comes near nobody" [4.1.197-98]); he appeals to Othello's blunt sense of justice ("Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" [207-8]). Othello's soul is composed of these investments, and it is Shakespeare's point that Iago, knowing his prey, can use them against him.

CATCHING OTHELLO'S SOUL

Soul is the word Othello uses when he wants to speak of the irreducible and inviolable center of his being, his essential identity. It is not only his "parts" and his "title" but also his "perfect soul" that put him beyond Brabantio's reproaches; and that soul is perfect because it is self-validating and autonomous. "Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it, / Without a prompter" (1.2.83-84), he tells his followers; he assures the Senators of Venice that no "light-wing'd toys / Of feather'd Cupid" (1.3.268-69) will keep him from his duty.
He recognizes, and warns others, that should he lose self-control, he would become a menace to them all:

Now by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment
collie,
Assays to lead the way. 'Zounds, if I stir,
Or do but lift this arm, the best of you
Shall sink in my rebuke.
(2.3.204-9)

Therefore, it is necessary not only for his own peace but for the world's that Othello's soul remain inviolable.

Othello serves only two masters: his reason and the Senators of Venice. To neither does he feel he has surrendered his independence: indeed, the faithfulness with which he serves them is his personal measure of value. But what Othello has done at the start of the play is, for the first time in his life, to share that intimate space, his soul, with another. For Desdemona he has his "unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine" (1.2.26-27). She has become his "soul's joy" (2.1.184); being with her, he declares,

My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
(191-93)

What she signifies to him, what she supplies in that secret inner space that defines him, is peace and harmony, conditions that apparently represent his chief happiness. As he says on his arrival in Cyprus after a stormy journey,

If after every tempest comes such calm,
May the winds blow, till they have waken'd
death!
(2.1.185)

It almost seems that the point of enduring the storm is to enjoy such rest.

This precious commodity, integrity of soul, is important to his existence both as a soldier and as a man. Should he let his sensual pleasures interfere with his duties, he will deserve to "Let housewives make a skillet of [his] helm" (1.3.272); and should he "make a life of jealousy" and turn the business of his soul to such "exsufficate and blown surmises" as a jealous mind conceives, it would be appropriate to "exchange [him] for a goat" (3.3.177-80). That he had actually lived according to his principles is attested to by Lodovico, who, seeing Othello's violence against Desdemona, cannot believe it can be the same man he knew:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid
virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?
(4.1.264-68)
But independence of soul is just what Othello has given up for Desdemona. Love involves some degree of submission to its object: Desdemona commented that her heart was "subdu'd / Even to the very quality of her lord" (1.3.250-51). And for Othello, too, love is experienced as surrender: his mother, he said, had managed to "subdue his father / Entirely to her love" (3.4.59-60). By sharing his soul with Desdemona, Othello has made his integrity contingent on hers.

Iago thoroughly unsettles Othello by making him believe that Desdemona has betrayed that act of surrender and sharing. For Othello the situation is untenable and unbearable; as he says, he would rather

be a toad  
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon 

Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
For others' uses. 

(3.3.270-73)

His confident faith in his "perfect" soul gives way to doubts about his color, his lack of social graces, his age, and his judgment: "If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself (278). His security in being the sort of person for whom "to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolv'd" (179-80) gives way to his realization that he really thinks "'tis better to be much abus'd / Than but to know't a little" (336-37). Each source of his pride and confidence seems contingent on the other; when one gives way, they all go:

O now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! 

Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone. 

(347-57)

Desdemona's betrayal not only makes forever unavailable to him his previous sources of pleasure and glory ("The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife" [352]); it also infects his inner identity (in F1):

My name, that was as fresh  
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black  
As mine own face. 

(386-88)\(^5\)

As with revengers generally, the integrity-altering injury seems in Othello to require an act of counter-aggression that will declare his potency and control over his own identity:

If there be cords, or knives,  
Poison, or fire, or suffocating streams,  
I'll not endure it! 

(388-90)

These are the stakes, then; these the elements of integrity and self-esteem that trusting another has cost him. When Othello turns against Desdemona, he ousts her from her privileged place and now fills his soul with violent hatred:
Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!
Yield up, O love, thy crown, and hearted
throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy
fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues!

(3.3.446-49)

He recognizes the terrible consequences of what he is doing, but it is beyond him to resist what seems, and is
experienced as, a violent current outside and around him. His love of Desdemona was a powerful substance;
when it vanishes, the vacuum it leaves must be filled by an equally powerful force, a violent propulsion
toward revenge:

Like to the Pontic Sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Nev'r feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont.

(453-56)

Surrender to it gives him comfort and confidence. In order to achieve what he thinks will assuage his pain and
restore his sense of autonomous selfhood—"a capable and wide revenge" against Desdemona and Cassio that
will "swallow them up"—he needs above all to be sure his "bloody thoughts" will "nev'r ebb to humble love"
(457-60).

However, if we want to get to the heart of Othello's motive for revenge, to understand what is at stake for him,
we must look beyond such melodramatic rant to a much sadder and more intimate moment. In act 4, scene 2,
Othello, having humiliated Desdemona—and himself—by striking her before the Venetian ambassadors,
directly accuses her of adultery. He has sworn revenge against her; he has demanded and received what he
deems "proof" of her guilt—the handkerchief and Cassio's bragging; he has declared his heart turned to stone
against her. And yet when it comes to making his most heartbroken declaration of what all that means to him,
it is to Desdemona that he expresses himself: she remains the intimate of his soul, and it is to her that he
explains what her seeming treachery means and what his pain is like:

Had it pleas'd heaven
To try me with affliction, had they rain'd
All kind of sores and shames on my bare
head,
Steep's me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience; but, alas, to make me
The fixed figure for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving finger at!
Yet could I bear that too, well, very well;
But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life;
The fountain from which my current runs
Or else dries up: to be discarded thence!
Or keep it as a cestern for foul toads
To knot and gender in!

(4.2.47-62)
That is intolerable, the end of Othello's being—not just the "big wars" and military pomp he had earlier declared he had to surrender, but his absolute and deeply cherished integrity. When this moment of devastating pathos is over, Othello's mind turns quickly and completely to vituperation and bitter hatred; but in the meanwhile he has revealed the source of his agony.

But when the time comes for Othello to kill Desdemona, he cannot do it on the basis of his subjective pain. Because justice is so important to him, he must convince himself that he has transcended personal considerations. He becomes in his own mind the agent of justice, a benign sort of justice that aims to recreate the object of his adoration in her original purity by destroying her. Separating her vice from her beauty, Othello can say of the sleeping Desdemona, "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee after" (5.2.18-19). (His dismissal of Cassio earlier had expressed his capacity to separate his feeling for someone from his objective sense of that person's fitness: "Cassio, I love thee, / But never more be officer of mine" [2.3.248-49].)

Throughout the play, Othello displays an appreciation, sometimes witty, of what is fair and appropriate in his reciprocal dealings with others. To the enraged Brabantio he not only points out the folly of his attempt to intimidate a soldier by force of arms, but with kindness he suggests the values that should control relations between them: "Good signior, you shall more command with years / Than with your weapons" (1.2.60-61). Reciprocity of feeling had drawn him and Desdemona together: "She gave me for my pains a world of sighs" (1.3.159), he says, and concludes:

\[
\text{She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,} \\
\text{And I lov'd her that she did pity them.} \\
(167-68)
\]

Thus, Othello's sense of self is invested not only in his feelings of personal inviolability, but also in the sense of decorum, appropriateness, and justice that governs his manner of falling in love. When his love turns to hate, he of course retains that habit of thought. "How shall I murther him, Iago?" he says of Cassio; "I would have him nine years a-killing" (4.1.170, 178). When Iago suggests he strangle Desdemona "in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.207-8), he is delighted: "Good, good; the justice of it pleases; very good" (209-10).

In the soliloquy "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (5.2.1-22), Othello takes up the question of justice. Consider Desdemona's outward beauty alone, he observes, and it would certainly be wrong to "scar that whiter skin of hers than snow" (4); but consider her character, and she must die, because if he lets her live, "she'll betray more men" (6). He must struggle against his senses—of sight, of smell; but justice in the end wins out, and he finds a point of personal harmony in the holding of oxymorons in suspension:

\[
\text{So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,} \\
\text{But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's} \\
\text{heavenly,} \\
\text{It strikes where it doth love.} \\
(5.1.20-22)
\]

\[
\text{I that am cruel am yet merciful,} \\
\text{I would not have thee linger in thy pain.} \\
(87-88)
\]

Othello is reading his actions as issuing from a sense of justice and fairness: he is striving, while walking into strange and foreign moral territory, to keep the familiar guideposts of his personality in view.
And of course when it comes time to judge himself, he applies the same criteria. He thinks it appropriate that his weapon should be taken from him by Montano: "why should honor outlive honesty?" (5.2.245). He sees himself as deserving torment for his deed—being whipped from the sight of Desdemona, blown about in winds, roasted in sulphur, and washed in gulfs of liquid fire (277-80). And finally, of course, after having "read" himself, with a sense of balance and measure, as one "that lov'd not wisely but too well; / … not easily jealous, but being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (344-47), he judges himself to deserve the same fate as the "malignant … Turk" who "Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state" (353-54). When justice demands that he be punished, he, using the only means left him to act out his self-sufficiency, imposes his punishment upon himself. He does it with a characteristic sense of symmetry in his last flourish:

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

(358-59)

And in that self-imposed justice he seeks to restore his integrity by avenging Desdemona.

Antony, the Roman populace, and Othello seem to me to stand at the borders of vindictiveness. What holds them back, in my view, is the presence in them of a potential capacity—or at least a wish—to live for affirmative goals. In making this judgment in the case of Antony, I may be reading backward from Antony and Cleopatra and ascribing his skillful Machiavellianism too fully to his chagrin at failing Caesar; and in the case of the Roman populace, I may too easily exculpate them for their malleability in the hands of a master rhetorician. But … vindictiveness was seen as a more deep-seated evil, as a full-blown psychic disorder and the product of profound moral flaws. At his very worst moments—planning to poison Desdemona, cheering on the assassination of Cassio—Othello briefly occupies that mental territory, but he is finally as much a stranger there as he had ever been in Venice.

Note

5 I here depart from The Riverside Shakespeare, which rejects the Folio text's "my name" (3.3.386) in favor of Q2's "her name." The emendation has a certain logic: Othello has just been speaking of Desdemona, whose reputation, here conflated with her beauty, seems sullied by her actions. However, I prefer (and my view of the play is better served by) the view of the Arden editor, M. R. Ridley: "I see little justification for accepting Q2's 'her name' as most edd. have done. Othello is maddened by the befoulment of his own honour; it is that which he will not endure, and which only revenge will clear." See M. R. Ridley, ed., Othello (London: Methuen, 1962), 117.

Othello (Vol. 35): Madness

A. André Glaz (essay date 1962)


[In the essay below, Glaz remarks on the play's organization and major psychological themes, including guilt, jealousy, and sadism.]

Wilst du der getreue Eckart sein
Und jedermann vor Schaden warnen
Es ist auch eine Rolle, Sie trägt nichts ein:
Sie laufen dennoch nach den Garnen
In psychoanalytic literature, as well as in belles-lettres, we find a wealth of details and descriptions of masochism. Sadism, on the other hand, is very rarely described in the literature in general, or psychoanalytic literature in particular. What is the reason for this paucity? The masochist speaks; the sadist is silent.

As is well known, the word 'sadism' was coined from the name of the writer who has described sexual sadism; i.e. when sadism is fused with sexual components. But sadism fused with sexuality is mainly attenuated cruelty. Not all sadism is mingled with sexuality.

Pure sadism is described more widely than is realized. As a matter of fact all criminology is nothing but sadism in its purest form; all mystery stories deal with it. A pure sadist never comes under analytic scrutiny simply because he seeks the acting-out of his sadism and not its cure. The sadist feels uncomfortable only when he does not dare act out his sadism—then he may come for treatment. The danger in such a treatment is that unless we are very careful, we may help a potential criminal become an actual criminal.

In this paper I have no intention of describing or analyzing sadism as such. My intention is rather to describe a type of sadism, which to my knowledge is not yet classified. I call this type "Moral Sadism". The moral sadist is rarely, if ever, uncovered. I use the word 'uncovered' purposely. The moral sadist has no internalized super ego. He is only afraid of being 'uncovered':

Their best conscience
is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.
Othello Act III; Scene 3

In order not to be found out, he adopts an attitude of helplessness, pseudo-stupidity, or righteousness. This attitude is not a real defense mechanism, but a conscious mask or "seemliness". In order not to be uncovered, first he puts wool upon the eyes of the victim,

to seal her father's eyes up close as oak.
Othello Act III; Scene 3

Second, no murder should be performed, no blood on his hands. To achieve that, he uses psychology. This kind of psychology, I shall name "Black Psychology". The use of black psychology is needed either to drive the victim crazy,

And practising upon his peace and quiet
Even to madness
Othello Act II; Scene 2

or to drive the victim to commit a crime, or make the victim commit suicide. Thus the sadist has achieved his purpose. It is clear that no sadist will come and 'uncover' himself. We can only recognize the sadist through his effects on the masochist. The sadist always performs his tricks on an unconsciously willing object, namely a masochist, and more often than not on a moral masochist. The latter finds in the moral sadist the stern and murderous super ego he is longing for. Outwardly it will look as if the sadist is the victim and the masochist is the brute. Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair. Often, much too often, even experienced psychiatrists, and to my greatest regret, psychoanalysts were fooled in such conditions.

I found it expedient to take a case history described by Shakespeare in the tragedy of Othello. Othello has to be looked upon as a pure psychiatric case and not as a stage tragedy. It is really too tragic to be a tragedy.
Shakespeare, in *Othello*, gives us all the details of how to recognize the moral sadist.

Let us make a supposition. Othello at one moment comes to us for treatment. Imagine we do not know anything about Iago's dealings and double dealings. Othello tells us; "My wife is unfaithful". No proof! "I want to kill my wife and then commit suicide." Who would not make a diagnosis that Othello is psychotic or schizophrenic or stark mad? And yet no one would say after reading the tragedy *Othello*, that he was schizophrenic. That effect Shakespeare obtained by presenting to us the dealings of Iago. We do not approve of Othello's reactions and yet we pity him. He has all our sympathy.

\[\text{If the balance of our lives}
\text{had not one scale of reason}
\text{to cool our raging motions,}
\text{our carnal stings, our unbitten}
\text{lustsOthello Act III; Scene 3}
\]

*Othello Act I; Scene 3*

I said before that the victim has to be a moral masochist. Does Shakespeare say it? Yes. Shakespeare knew exactly the difference between day remnants, latent material, primary or secondary elaboration, and symbolism. In order to produce his effect, he used indifferently one of the foregoing modes of expression.

We know that a moral masochist feels excessively guilty. In the unconscious mind, guilt is represented by the color black. Black in Latin is Negro. Thus Othello is a Negro. Guilt in the latent material, black in the primary elaboration, becomes Negro in the secondary elaboration. The description Shakespeare gives of Othello coincides to the iota with what we know to be the behavior of a moral masochist. He is frank, just, and naive. He has to live up to his super ego or destroy himself. It is enough if the balance between his super ego and his ideals is upset by an external event, to make him break down.

Furthermore, Othello is called the Moor. This quality of being a Moor comes from the day remnants, namely the original story by Cinthio. The latter, in his original story of Othello, makes it simply a story of jealousy. Therefore he makes a Moor out of Othello, as the Moors' jealous nature is proverbial. In French we say "Jaloux comme un Turc" and in his story Desdemona says to her husband:

> You Moors are of so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge.

To sum it up, Cinthio's Othello suffers from excess jealousy. He is a "Moor". Shakespeare's Othello suffers from excess guilt. He is a Negro—black.

Let me give examples of how the same phenomenon can be expressed in three different ways:

When we finish *The Red and Black* by Stendhal we do not know why the novel is called *Le Rouge et le Noir*. How shall we account for it?

Let us keep in mind that Dostoyevsky wrote a novel *Crime and Punishment*. We could write, let me say, a mystery story on the same theme and call it *Blood and Guilt*. The next step is easy. For Stendhal, Blood is Red and Guilt is Black. Thus we have *Le Rouge et le Noir*.

A further point has to be singled out and that is the fact that an adjective is applied to characterize the hero; the adjective being the color "black". A name or an adjective in the hands of a writer often serves to indicate the inner characteristics of the hero. As an example, I shall take the name Roskilnikoff. The word "Roskol" means "split", "Marmaladoff" means "made of marmalade", etc. Some people have outstanding characteristics. To them you can apply a name which is in of itself a definition. Others have neutral names.
For instance, to indicate the average, you will say "the Joneses" or "the Babbitts". Certain names play the role of mere photography. They give only the external appearance. Other names are like portraits made by great artists. They give us the inner image of the sitter. Thus we may say that the word 'black' as applied to Othello gives us the inner characteristic of the hero and not the color of his skin. The word 'Moor', on the other hand, comes from Cinthio's original story. However, Shakespeare by the end of the play, says almost explicitly that Othello is not a Moor.

Since Moors are circumcised, how could Othello, if he were a Moor, say:

And say besides that in Aleppo once  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him—thus

In conclusion we have to say that Othello is not really a Negro nor a Moor. He has the inner characteristics of black, namely guilt, and he is jealous like a Turk. Thus Desdemona says:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind

*Othello Act I; Scene 3*

Before I go any further in the analysis of the play, I have to say a few words about the sources and the construction of the play.

Shakespeare's plays are generally constructed like dreams. Almost every dream has day remnants. The day remnants for a Shakespearean play are the sources from which he takes the plot. In *Othello*, it is Cinthio's story of paranoiac jealousy. This origin of the play is well known. However, when one reads the play carefully, one is struck by a very familiar note. A kind of "déjà vu". (Heimatsklaenge)

When one put all the "déjà vu" passages together, one finds oneself transported to biblical times.

Iago says "I am not what I am", and about Othello, Iago says "He is what he is".

"I am what I am" was said for the first time by Yahve to Moses in Exodus. Next to that I point again to a passage quoted above:

And say besides that in Aleppo once  
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
and smote him—thus

Is that not exactly what Moses did:

… and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren.  
And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

*Exodus 2; 11-12*
Let us now take another passage from *Othello*:

Are we turne'd Turks, and to ourselves do
that
Which heaven hath forbid to Ottomites.

*Othello Act II; Scene 3*

Compare this passage with:

And when Moses went out the second
day,
behind, two men of the Hebrews strove
together; and he said to him that did
the wrong. Wherefore smitest thou thy
fellow

*Exodus 2; 13*

Next:

And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord,
I am not eloquent, neither
Heretofore, nor since thou hast
spoken unto thy servant: but
I am slow of speech and of a slow
tongue.

*Exodus 4: 10*

Juxtapose the above passage to the lines in *Othello*:

Rude am I in my speech,
And little blesse'd with the soft
phrase of peace.

*Othello Act I; Scene 3*

In order not to overburden the paper, I shall refrain from quoting and I shall synoptically indicate the passages.

Does not the description of the drowning of the Turks and their fleet remind one of the fate which befell the Egyptians in the Red Sea?

The Venetians, like the Hebrews, passed through the Sea without any damage, and the Turks with their ships, like the Egyptians with their chariots, drowned completely. The similarity goes even farther. We know that Moses led the Hebrews in the direction of the Red Sea in order to disorient the Egyptians, or as we have it in *Othello*:

A pageant to keep us in false gaze.

*Othello Act I; Scene 3*

Finally, no sooner did Othello conquer Cyprus, than a delegation comes from Venice to tell him that he has to leave Cyprus … and give the Island over to Cassio. Venice could not have had even an inkling of what
happened in Cyprus between Othello and Desdemona. All critics are baffled by this inexplicable detail. Let us turn once more to Exodus and we find that God said to Moses that he can only see the land but cannot enter it.

Furthermore, the discussion about Moses' origin is well known. Was he, was he not, of royal origin? That is so well known that quotations from Exodus or Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* seem superfluous.

Does not the same discussion apply to Othello? On one hand he is a Negro and on the other hand Othello says:

> I shall promulgate, I fetch my life and being  
> From men of royal siege; and my demerits  
> May speak (unbonneted) to as proud a fortune  
> As this that I have reached.  

*Othello Act I; Scene 2*

After having juxtaposed these passages, one can hardly escape the conclusion that Shakespeare had consciously or unconsciously Moses in mind. To summarize, Shakespeare took his plot from Cinthio and from Exodus. Thus we already have two themes. One theme is paranoia. The other, the fate of the leader or the great artist who is never recognized in his lifetime.

> Yet tis the plague of great ones  
> prerogatived are they less than the base  
> 'Tis destiny unshunnable like death.  

*Othello Act III; Scene 3*

To the foregoing two themes, we will add a third one which is entirely Shakespeare's. But for that later.

After having indicated the two main sources of *Othello*; I can resume the thread where I have left off.

I shall in this paper be little concerned with Othello, the moral masochist being known. I shall rather concentrate on Iago, the moral sadist. All critics down the line call Iago names. The moral indignation of the critics is so great that they forget to be objective. What does it do to call Iago a villain or arch-villain? Let us silence our indignation, let us silence our desire to tear Iago to pieces, and concentrate our faculties on the understanding of Iago's personality.

> Als ich einmal eine Spinne erschlagen,  
> Dacht ich, ob ich das wohl gesollt?  
> Hat Gott ihr doch wie mir gewollt  
> Einen Anteil an diesen Tagen!  

*Goethe, Lyrische Dichtungen*

The mountain lion eats the nice lovable deer. Do we hate the mountain lion? Don't we study the mountain lion in all impartiality? What not study the sadist, and especially the moral sadist, with detached reflection? True, Iago is not a mountain lion, but does he not behave like one! Othello is not a deer, but he seems to have less instinct for survival than a deer. What revolts us is the fact that Iago looks like a human being and yet behaves like a beast. What revolts us is that he looks like ourselves and yet he does not act as we would act. Or maybe he reminds us of our own cannibalism, cruelty and destructiveness, that we shy away from him. We do not like such a distorted image of our own inner self. Most probably that is the reason why we do not believe the masochists or the victims when they describe what has happened to them. I do not know if God was created in our image, but I am sure the devil is in our likeness.
I have in mind in the first place August Strindberg, Arthur Schopenhauer, Francisco Goya. We say Strindberg is psychotic, Schopenhauer is paranoic, Goya is cruel, and we let it go at that. Are we still the "key keepers" of bygone times? Is it not our task to try to solve the riddle of madness rather than call names and apply labels?

Maybe when we understand sadism, cruelty, somewhat better, we may solve, if not a chapter, at least a paragraph in madness.

Iago thus destroys Othello, Rodrigo, Desdemona, Emilia, and by a miracle, Cassio is spared. The whore Bianca is safe altogether. Has Iago any motive for his vandalism? In the first place, no reason would be good enough to justify such a massacre. If we apply to Iago our logical reason or we apply our emotional feelings, we remain baffled by the phenomenon. The only reason we can give is instinct.

Let us follow Shakespeare's exposition of Iago's deeds and relationships with his fellow men. As the play opens we are confronted with a scene which, in ordinary terms, is incomprehensible. Rodrigo accuses Iago of having

had my purse  
As if the strings were thine  
Othello Act I; Scene 1

and Iago had not done what he promised. What did he promise? Iago had to procure Desdemona to Rodrigo for money. I do apologize to Honest Iago for calling him a procurer! I do not apologize to Rodrigo, for his stupidity is in any case monumental.

Let us turn to Iago. Either or—either the description of Desdemona is true and she is what she seems to be—then Iago could never deliver the goods; or she is not what she seems to be. What then? We shall see later that the whole play is filled with the dilemma of seems to be and to be, the mask and the inner self, the reputation and the reality. From the beginning, Iago bleeding Rodrigo of his money has to kill Rodrigo in the end if he is to retain his reputation of "honest" Iago.

One can immediately see that we are dealing with a criminal—a cruel sadist. We, the spectators or readers, do not ponder too much about Iago's dealings with Rodrigo. We are used to the fact that certain people kill for money. Why should this kind of crime be so self evident is a problem in itself. I do believe that we do not try to reflect, but move the easy way—the way of our habits. The Talmud says:

Ein adam choté veló lo  
Baba Meziah 5B

A man does not steal if it does not profit him. It is customary in our criminal code, when a crime is committed and the murderer be unknown, to follow the rule "cui bono"—whom did this crime pay. In other words, we understand murder only in relation to profit. As a consequence, We try to make people understand "crime does not pay". Thus we naively believe to keep them from killing. Neither the Talmud nor the Roman Code foresaw the thrill-killing. The killing is the thing. If we disabuse our minds of our routine thinking and we admit that Iago is a killer and no other motives are necessary to explain his killings, it would be easy for us to study pragmatically the characteristics of thrill-killers. There is nothing to understand; there is only to observe. We may say the thrill is sexual in nature. It may be so, but that does not make us understand the thrill-killer any better.

Let us now examine the relationship of Iago to Cassio. It would seem as if Iago had some reasons for killing Cassio. The reasons Iago gives or implies are: first, competition. Cassio got the lieutenancy which Iago
believed should have been bestowed on him. Second, he suspects Cassio of having slept with Emilia; in other words, jealousy. Coleridge very penetratingly says:

the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity

One may argue that Iago himself did believe in the motives he puts forward. But this is flatly denied by Iago himself. After he succeeds by his cunning in making Cassio and Rodrigo fight, he confesses that he wants them both to die. Rodrigo, because he will thus get rid of his creditor. Cassio, however, because:

He has a daily beauty in his life  
That makes me ugly.

Gone are the pretences, gone the lieutenancy, gone Emilia. Iago wants to kill because he wants to kill.

To sum up. Iago wants Rodrigo's money and he gets it. He gets it without even using any skill, as he says himself:

Thus do I ever make my fool my purse  
For mine own gain'd knowledge should profane  
If I could time expend with such a snipe

All Cassio has is good looks and worldly behavior. Iago wants to be Cassio and therefore he tries to kill Cassio. To achieve Cassio's downfall, he already uses his masterly conniving. I believe all his principles can be reduced to one major phrase. Iago himself says:

I am not what I am

The phrase is clear in itself. I act as if I am somebody else. We will see that Iago is an "as if" personality.

The main characteristic of an "as if is to want to be somebody else or at least to appear as somebody else. That is only half of their properties. The second important characteristic is to make their victims appear other than they are. That is clearly shown in Iago's dealings with Cassio. Cassio never drinks. Iago makes him drink and then insinuates that Cassio is a habitual drunkard. Cassio is not a fighter. Iago gets Rodrigo to provoke Cassio into self-defense. As soon as Cassio is engaged in the fight with Rodrigo, Iago calls the whole city of Cyprus to see Cassio drunk and pugnacious, and thus shows Cassio different from what he really is. Cassio, by this stratagem, appears as Iago wants him to appear. Cassio is "not what he is".

Were it true that Iago wanted money or the lieutenancy or both, he should have stopped his manoeuvres then and there. He had Rodrigo's money and Cassio's place. But Iago forgets his booty and goes on destroying as if propelled by an inner irresistible force. Thus we come to the "plut de resistance". Iago versus Othello. Shakespeare shows here the full extent of his craftsmanship and his unequalled understanding of human nature and mental structure.

What we see here is a psychological struggle of two giants, giants in different fields. One is extreme honesty, the other extreme wickedness.

The divinity of hell against the divinity of heaven. Christ and antichrist.

In this struggle Othello becomes Iago and Iago becomes Othello. This change of identity is described by Shakespeare almost step by step. I shall only indicate two landmarks.
First: he echoes me
Second: Iago becomes me

True, in the modern editions we do not have "Iago becomes me" but "Iago beckons me". However, in the original text as it is reproduced in the Furness edition, the line is "Iago becomes me".

Presumably the editors, not knowing psychology as Shakespeare did and not understanding the phrase "Iago becomes me", have cut down the phrase to their size and thus the modern editions have the more generally understandable phrase "Iago beckons me".

This phenomenon, as described by Shakespeare, can easily be verified under hypnosis. It is enough to give a post-hypnotic suggestion in the form "from now on you are me and I am you". The hypnotized, after being awakened, will echo the hypnotizer. That is the meaning of "Iago echos me".

Granville-Barker hits very near the mark when he says: "One way and a swift one, to the corruption of the mind is through a perverting of the imagination. Othello is, even as his nature is full powered. But he has exercised it in spiritual solitude, and for that it is the less sophisticated and the more easily to be victimized by suggestion. It is a poetic practice bedeviled and Iago is expert in it."

After having studied Iago's dealings with his male protagonists, it is necessary to present all the cast, male and female. But before doing that, I still must speak about the technique Shakespeare uses to present and to conceal, to expose and cover up his Personae Dramatis.

The technique Shakespeare uses is the technique of the opposites. For the clarity of the exposition I shall not define the word Opposites. I shall rather use it in its everyday meaning.

The Talmud uses extensively the technique of the opposites under the name of: Lashon sagi nahor

Sagi means abundant
Nahor is light

Thus instead of saying a blind man, the expression goes "a man rich with light". We still have the same implication when we speak about the "lighthouse" for the house of the blind. By extension, the expression became:

Belashon sagí nahor

or the language of the opposites. I shall give only two examples of its use in biblical times:

Barech Elohim vamét

The literal meaning is "Bless God and Die". The real meaning is "Curse God and Die".

The second example is:

Lo tiye kedeshah mibenot Israel

"There shall be no harlot of the daughters of Israel". However, the word for harlot is: ZONAH. The word which the phrase employs is: KEDESHAH which comes from: KADOSH and means Holy; Blessed.

So much for the Biblical usage. Let us have a look at Shakespeare's writings in *Romeo and Juliet*:
Juliet: O Serpent heart hid with a flowring
face
Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?
beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical
Dove-feathered raven! wolvish-ravenging lamb!
Despised substance of divinest show
Just opposite to what thou justly seem'st
Was ever book containing such vile matter
So fairly bound.
O that deceit should dwell
in such a gorgeous palace.

Let us leave Shakespeare for a minute and turn to Freud. Sigmund Freud states that if in a dream one element
has to be reversed, all the elements have to be reversed. Let us boldly apply that rule to the tragedy Othello.

We see that Iago is called a million times—Honest Iago. Honest as applied to Iago is manifest nonsense.

The text forces upon us the reversal from Honest to Dishonest. So we have to change Honest Iago to
Dis-honest Iago. No other alternative is left but to say Black Othello is White Othello; in other words Guilty
Othello is Innocent Othello.

We may leave out the two minor male characters—Rodrigo and Cassio—and go haste, post haste, to the
female cast. The most important is Desdemona. She is called many times Virtuous, Honest Desdemona. If we
stick to Freud's rule, we come to Whore Desdemona.

Once again I have to interrupt the logical sequence and turn my attention in a different direction. Let us leave
Desdemona for a while and go to an incident in the play which craves analyzing.

The Handkerchief

Take away the incident of the napkin and the entire play falls to pieces. The handkerchief seems to be a
corner-stone of the edifice. The same napkin incident is differently presented by Cinthio. Iago trains his child
to steal the napkin. In Othello, Emilia steals the hand-kerchief. We have two versions of how Othello's mother
got the famous napkin; once Othello says that his mother got it from an Egyptian who "was a mind reader"
and the napkin had magic in its web. Later, Othello changes the story and maintains that his father gave it to
his mother.

One cannot escape the impression that the napkin is a symbol and not a real napkin.

It is customary in Spain and among Orthodox Jews to hang out through the window the blood stained sheet
after the consummation of the marriage. This custom has for its purpose to prove that the bride was a real
virgin. She had her honor. She was innocent. More than that, in Othello the napkin had a pattern, and behold,
strawberries. It is well known that berries stand for virginity.

Thus we have to understand that Othello on the night of the consummation of marriage, found Desdemona
lacking in the attributes of virginity. Here, to my mind, Othello's tragedy begins.

Othello comes to Cyprus and in the first night the consummation of the marriage takes place. Othello:

    Come, my dear love,
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue
that profit's yet to come tween me and you
Good night.

Behold, Desdemona is no virgin. Othello found a "slight alteration",

That love is not love that alters when it
alteration finds

Sonnet 166

Once that happened, Iago has an easy time to insinuate and Othello, sponge-like, absorbs the venom Iago distills and takes in even Iago's way of looking at the event and Othello becomes jealous according to Iago's patterns.

That Desdemona must have been promiscuous long before she even knew Othello was discussed by many critics. They failed to exploit this point out of sheer prejudice. To make this point clear, I shall once again quote Granville-Barker:

Other explanations have been offered: one, that Othello is driven to suspect Desdemona of fornication with Cassio before her marriage. But this is frivolous.

Does a thing or a deed stop existing merely because it seems frivolous? Is there a better example of magic thinking?

Is it easier to admit that Othello suspects adultery when adultery was a physical impossibility? Indeed the outburst of suspicion takes place 24 hours after Othello's arrival in Cyprus. All the 24 hours Othello is with Desdemona, he is with her even between 5 and 7. Then how can he suspect her of having slept with Cassio "a thousand times"?

Most critics chant Halleluja to Desdemona's virtue. It is bewildering how we are drawn to false gods. Yet here and there a critic is bold enough to look through the white bridal veil and see a "blessed" one; a "perfumed" one. So the critic Pye after the passage:

My lord shall never rest
I'll watch him tame and talk him of patience
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shift
I'll intermingle everything he does
With Cassio's suit

makes the following comment:

This strumpet-like resolution of Desdemona's takes off much from the interest we should take in her fate.

Shakespeare, if he does not say that Desdemona is a nagger, describes her as one. Read carefully the scene in which Desdemona is after Othello and harrasses him to obtain favors for Cassio. It is despairing indeed if this should be a loving wife's behavior.

Does not Desdemona herself say: "I am not merry; but I do beguile the thing I am by seeming otherwise"; and all the conversation which takes place between Iago, Emilia and Desdemona in Act II; Scene 1.
I cannot help it if my perverted or prophetic ear tells me that such a conversation can take place only between people of the underworld. Yes, let me state it bluntly—the conversation sounds to me as one between a pimp and two whores, or a pimp, a madame and a whore. No, a house is not a home and a whore is not virgin. Indeed, when Iago says to Desdemona:

You rise to play, and go to bed to work

is he speaking about a virtuous lady? And since when does an "ancient" (ensign) speak thus to the wife of his commander-in-chief?

To make it more spicy, Iago says to Rodrigo, speaking about Desdemona:

Blessed fig's-end! The wine
she drinks is made of grapes
If she had been blessed, she would
never have lov'd the Moor.
Blessed pudding

What is the meaning of "The wine she drinks is made of grapes"? The phrase does not seem to make sense. The phrase means that Desdemona uses the "grape vine" technique—in other words she is a gossip and a malicious gossip. She is a slanderer.

So traurig, dass in Kriegestagen
Zu Tode sich die Manner schlagen
Im Frieden ists dieselbe Not
Die Weiber schlagen mit Zungen tot

Goethe—Lyrische Dichtungen

And "blessed pudding"? We have seen above that "blessed" stands for harlot, the word "tart" is a known term to denote a whore. "Pudding" is a substitute for "tart". Thus we have

blessed pudding.

Mark, those are not Othello's accusations. It is Iago speaking.

One has to read without wool upon one's eyes and the scenes become crystal clear and the plot makes sense. Before I leave Desdemona, I must say a few words about her name.

Desdemona is the only name which Shakespeare took from Cinthio, who calls her Disdemona. It may be worth noting that in Othello she is called five times Desdemon. If I take the liberty to disjoin the word, we have Des Demon. The fact that the Russian title to Dostoyevsky's novel "The Possessed" is literally "The Demons" (BIESI), furthermore Anski's "Dibuk" is the "Demon", gives us leeway to say that Desdemona or Desdemon means possessed, bewitched, bedeviled. Her father says:

Is there not charms
By which the property of youth and maidhood
May be abused? Have you not read Rodrigo
Of some such thing?

Othello Act I; Scene 3

or later:
If she in chains of magic were not bound.

*Othello Act I; Scene 3*

If Trilby was bedeviled by Svengali into becoming a great singer, Desdemona was bewitched by Iago into becoming a great whore.

Now, after having put Desdemona in what I believe is her true light, we can go back to the themes of the play.

As I said before, one theme is jealousy and comes from Cinthio. One is the tragedy of the spiritual leader or Moses; the third theme is a sordid story of a procurer—Iago, a bawd—Emilia, a wore—Desdemona, and a naive customer taken for a good ride.

I shall say nothing about Emilia. Her role becomes clear in the new setting.

However, for more clarity, a few words about Bianca may be necessary. Bianca means "white". The opposite is "black"—whore. Besides being a whore, she is a "professional virgin". A "professional virgin" is a whore who plays the offended virgin with each successive man. Shakespeare indicates this quality of Bianca by making her copy the pattern of the famous napkin many times. If what I say about Bianca is correct, we can easily understand the famous line which has puzzled the critics. The critics gave up hope of finding the meaning of the following phrase: (Iago speaking about Cassio)

A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife.

*Othello Act I; Scene 1*

The phrase should read.

A fellow damn'd in an almost fair wife.

Bianca, so to speak, is faithful 23 hours a day. "Almost Fair". Shakespeare, out of poetical license, could displace the "almost" in order to save the harmony of the line.

Shakespeare blends these three themes in his masterly fashion. His writing is an orchestration as opposed to chamber music. One sits at a play and believes to hear De Falla's La Dance de Feu. One studies the play and finds himself confronted with La Dance Macabre by St. Saens.

Words, words, words, will never render the grandeur of Shakespeare. Papers, papers, papers, will never tell the splendor of Shakespeare. We may say we have analyzed Shakespeare. The truth of the matter is, Shakespeare, from his remote past and everlasting present, has analyzed us. It was easy for his genius to perform such a sleight-of-hand trick. Shakespeare knew that no matter how many washing machines and univacs we may invent, our inner nature remains the very same as it ever was. It is not out of micromania, that I confess I never had Shakespeare on my analytical couch. In a sense, I may proudly say I was on Shakespeare's analytical couch. But the couches in Shakespeare's time were not built like nowadays. You could not lie down comfortably, gaze at the ceiling and speak freely. No, you had to kneel down and be dazed by his shining face. "Mets toi a genoux et tu croiras" said Pascal. Go on your knees and Shakespeare will guide you like Virgil guided Dante in this infernal world.

Before you may become Shakespeare's pupil, you have to make preliminary studies and you have to make them well. Do not learn the rules; grasp the spirit. After Freud's couch you may sometimes go to Shakespeare's pew. Go there after Freud has broken your narcissistic iron-lung. Go there with scars on your body and with a bleeding heart. Go there to learn and not to teach. Take with you Freud's way of thinking. Do not make the mistake of taking with you Freud's catechism or Freud's Bedaeker. Freud has never propounded
a Weltanschaung. After well digested preliminary studies, go in all humility, go in all sincerity. Never forget Freud's advice to look at the evergreen observation and look and look until it dawns on you. I am no periwigpated fellow or town-crier to believe that I have analyzed Shakespeare.

After this intermezzo in which I have tried as best as I could to express my admiration for and devotion to Shakespeare, we have to go back to our cast. While the curtain is up and the public is applauding the artists for their performances, let me summarize the characters they have portrayed.

Let me speak about Iago first. He had the hardest and the most unbecoming role. His performance is magnificent and true to life. He really holds the mirror up to nature and shows scorn of her own image. He portrays the conscious schizophrenic. For him defence mechanisms do not exist. He sees in his victims their motives and acts on them. Already Dante Aligheri warns against such people:

Ah! how cautious ought men to be with those who see not only the deed, but with their sense look through into the thoughts

_Inferno, Canto XVI_

Iago knows it and says it:

Virtue a fig. It is in ourselves that we are thus or thus.

He increases the inner pressure of the victim and virtue is gone. For Iago, love is nothing. He has sex for sale. Love is but a sect or a scion, and a weakness of the will. Iago skillfully performs vivisection on his victims. He is a surgeon and at the same time a butcher. He dissects with art and cuts his victims into pieces.

Othello lives by a code. For him the spirit is the thing. He can be a murderer but an honest murderer. He can kill only when the idealistic self dictates. The dictate comes exclusively when he identifies with the victim and takes its defence. He did not suspect that killers exist. He paid with his own life for it. A love object for him carries the shadow of himself. Thus the faults of the love object are his. By killing Desdemona he kills part of himself. When one part of himself is gone, the other part has to follow. With a bare bodkin.

Iago knows how to put Othello's seamy side out. Iago forces his identity on Othello by assuming Othello's identity. Already in the first act we can see Iago at work:

Iago: Though in trade of war I have slain men Yet do I hold it very stuff o'conscience To do no contrived murder. I lack iniquity Sometimes to do service. Nine or ten times I had thought t'have yerk'd him here under the ribs

Iago says that to Othello. Is it not rather Othello's way of thinking? This speech is Othello in a nutshell. Thus to this speech Othello only says, as if musing to himself:

'Tis better as it is

Iago's lines plus the line of Othello sound like an inner reflection of Othello. Thus Othello gets the feeling that Iago is a mirror of himself and little by little Iago first echos Othello and finally Othello becomes Iago.
I cannot in my two dimensional paper give more clarity to my three dimensional thoughts. Dostoyevsky said that he always succeeded to give only one third of what he intended to write. Dante in his Comedy gives the advice:

> Always to that truth which has an
> air of falsehood a man should close his
> lips, so far as he is able, for, though
> blameless, he incurs reproach.

*Inferno, Canto XVI*

Desdemona has no identity at all. She is never herself. It follows that she can never collapse. Her identity shifts chameleon-like. Thus her father can say about her:

> A maiden never bold
> of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
> Blush'd at herself—

The very same young girl could answer in the presence of the duke and senators:

> But here's my husband;
> And so much duty as my mother show'd
> to you, preferring you before her father
> So much I challenge that I may profess
> Due to the Moor My Lord

and in her speech to the senators a martial trumpet would have been the best accompaniment.

Later her underworld conversation with Emilia and Iago, and again her attorney-like pleading for Cassio. And finally a sudden and total regression to the willow song of her old nurse.

Her changes are not adaptation to environment. She is histrionic. The changes are sudden changes of identity.

Before finishing the paper on Othello, I noticed Dostoyevsky beckoning me. Dostoyevsky opened his *Brothers Karamazoff* and I read:

> Jealousy! 'Othello was not jealous, he was trustful', observed Pushkin. And that remark alone is enough to show the deep insight of our great poet. Othello's soul was shattered and his whole outlook clouded simply because his ideal was destroyed. But Othello did not begin hiding, spying, peeping. He was trustful. On the contrary, he had to be led up, pushed on, excited with great difficulty before he could entertain the idea of deceit. The truly jealous man is not like that. It is impossible to picture to oneself the shame and moral degradation to which the jealous man can descend without a qualm of conscience. And yet it's not as though the jealous were all vulgar and base souls. On the contrary, a man of lofty feelings, whose love is pure and full of self-sacrifice, may yet hide under tables, bribe the vilest people, and be familiar with the lowest ignominy of spying and eavesdropping.

Othello was incapable of making up his mind to faithlessness—not incapable of forgiving it, but of making up his mind to it—though his soul was as innocent and free from malice as a babe's. It is not so with the really jealous man. It is hard to imagine what some jealous men can make up their minds to and overlook, and what they can forgive! The jealous are the readiest of all to forgive, and all women know it. The jealous man can forgive extraordinarily
quickly (though, of course, after a violent scene) and he is able to forgive infidelity almost conclusively proved, the very kisses and embraces he has seen, if only he can somehow be convinced that it has all been "for the last time", and that his rival will vanish from that day forward, will depart to the ends of the earth, or that he himself will carry her away somewhere, where that dreaded rival will not get near her. Of course the reconciliation is only for an hour. For, even if the rival did disappear the next day, he would invent another one and would be jealous of him. And one might wonder what there was in a love that had to be so watched over, what a love could be worth that needed such strenuous guarding. But that the jealous will never understand. And yet among them are men of noble hearts. It is remarkable too, that those very men of noble hearts, standing hidden in some cupboard, listening and spying, never feel the stings of conscience at that moment, anyway, though they understand clearly enough with their "noble hearts" the shameful depths to which they have voluntarily sunk.

Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, Modern Library pp. 402-403

While reading Brothers Karmozov, I overheard Coleridge saying to Dostoyevsky:

Though I have seen and known enough mankind to be well aware that I shall perhaps stand alone in my creed, and that it will be well if I subject myself to no worse charge than that of singularity; I am, therefore, deterred from avowing that I regard, and ever have regarded the obligations of intellect among the most sacred of the claims of gratitude.

Principles of Criticism—Coleridge

And Coleridge went on:

For jealousy is a vice of the mind, a culpable tendency of the temper, having certain well-known and well defined effects and concomitants, all of which are visible in Leontes, and, I boldly say, not one of which marks its presence in Othello; such as, first an excitability by the most inadequate causes, and an eagerness to snatch at proofs; secondly a grossness of conception, and a disposition to degrade the object of the passion by sensual fancies and images; thirdly a sense of shame of his own feelings exhibited in a solitary moodiness of humour; and yet from the violence of the passion forced to utter itself, and therefore catching occasions to ease the mind by ambiguities, equivoques, by talking to those we cannot, and who are known to be able to, understand what is said to them—in short, by soliloquy in the form of dialogue, and hence a confused, broken and fragmentary manner; fourthly a dread of vulgar ridicule, as distinct from high sense of honour or a mistaken sense of duty; and lastly and immediately consequent on this, a spirit of selfish vindictiveness.

Quoted by Furness, P. 168

While Coleridge was speaking to Dostoyevsky, the Witch of Endor came in riding on her well-known broomstick. She sarcastically said, as if speaking to nobody, the trickster Shakespeare took all the spectators for a ride. For a four hundred year ride. The spectators did not see that Shakespeare does to them what Iago does to Othello. Othello on the stage believes that Iago is honest and the groundlings believe that Desdemona is virtuous. How many priceless but useless tears were shed during four centuries. The Witch of Endor, or maybe she was one of the three wierd sisters, went on saying: "I would rather spell the spectators by the costumes." Nobody dared interrupt the witch and she went on:
I would dress Iago in raven black and Othello in snow white. Above this first costume I would make them wear a second suit of removable parts but of opposite colors. Namely Iago in white; thus we will have honest Iago; and Othello in black, so we will have black Othello. When the real battle of the giants begins, they strip the superficial suits. At the moment when Othello says "Iago echos me" both Iago and Othello would be half stripped so that they look like clowns, each one half white and half black. At the moment when Othello says "Iago becomes me" the last piece of the superficial suit falls and Iago is in black and Othello is in snow white.

She went on explaining:

Don't you see that Shakespeare could not have written a role for a Negro knowing that he has no Negro in his cast to play the role. He knew that a white man will have to put on a mask in order to portray a Negro. Yes, black mask on a white face. And Babeuge, who was the first to play Othello, had a mask of a Negro.

I kept my eyes closed to better concentrate on what the great ones were saying. When I reopened my eyes the curtain was down for good, the stage was empty. The echo was still vibrating:

The pity of it Iago

and as if another echo, much fainter, replied:

Thou shalt not kill.

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In the essay below, Rabkin and Brown argue that feelings of helplessness and hopelessness exercise a deciding influence over the behavior of both Iago and Othello.

The character and motives of Iago have long been a source of contention and bewilderment among the commentators on Othello. Hazlitt suggested that Iago's "gaiety, such as it is, arises from the success of his treachery; his ease from the torture he has inflicted on others," and noted his "desire of finding out the worst side of everything." Coleridge extended this observation through his suggestion that Iago's need for berating others is rooted in his fear that others will berate him.

Lacking, however, in the analyses of Hazlitt, Stoll, Shaw and the many others is a satisfactory explanation for Iago's admitted irrationality, for his being the apparently "motiveless villain." There are those who dismiss Iago as "unnatural" and attempt to ignore the issue, and those who have fallen back on an "instinctual hypothesis" or moral allegory and a "myth of evil"—all of which remain "substitute(s) for analysis of the individual." An explanation hinted at by Heilman and Kirschbaum may help to rationalize Iago's irrational behaviour, and to understand how and why his behaviour arises logically out of the given conditions of the play.

The key variable here is sadism. We suggest that by examining this aspect of behaviour, and exploring its apparent roots, both Iago's and Othello's characters and the atmosphere of the play can be illumined in new ways.

Sadism is, as Horney notes, ultimately rooted in the sadist's feelings of helplessness. She writes: "nobody develops pronounced sadistic trends who has not a profound feeling of futility as regards his own life." This sense of hopelessness itself arises out of the unconscious realization of an unbridgeable gap between the individual's actual self and his falsely elaborated view of what "he believes himself to be, or what at the time he feels he can or ought to be."

The sadist could conceivably relieve his feeling of hopelessness, at least on the conscious level, through a process of moderating his idealized self-image. But this would involve a set of compromises with the self-intolerable to the sadist's ego. Instead, the sadist may seek some way of ignoring or lessening the conflict between his ideal and real selves, to rid himself of hopelessness and self-contempt without undermining his precious idealized image. In short, he endeavours to curb his anxiety by a refusal "to face reality."
his "talent … for self-deception."\(^{13}\)

One such avenue of escape lies in the sadist's being able to successfully project his self-contempt. He will "blame, berate, and humiliate others" to avoid having to do the same to himself: "the more he despises others, the less he is aware of his own self-contempt." In fact, "to strike out against others becomes … a matter of self-preservation,"\(^{14}\) for if the sadist does not strike first, others may lash out at him, despise him, and make him face his short-comings.

These defensive maneuvers explain why Iago has "the dread of contempt habitual to those who encourage in themselves and have their keenest pleasure in the feeling and expression of contempt for others."\(^{15}\) Similarly, these underly the compulsive nature of Iago's plan "to deliver blow on blow, and never to allow his victim to recover from the confusion of the first shock."\(^{16}\)

Just as he may project his self-contempt onto others, the sadist can find relief from his conflicts by projecting his feelings of hopelessness, thus destroying the peace of others and killing their joys.\(^{17}\) For seeing them as miserable as himself, by bringing others into his own world of suffering and self-contempt, his pain is assuaged. This is why Iago is driven to cause Othello to suffer through making him realize the discrepancies between his own false and true selves, why he must

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Make after him, poison his delight} \\
\text{And though he in a fertile climate dwell,} \\
\text{Plague him with flies; though that his joy be} \\
\text{joy,} \\
\text{Yet throw some changes of vexation on't} \\
\text{As it may lose some colour.}
\end{align*}
\]

(I.i. 68-73)

Further, this projection of his own warped values helps explain why Iago attempts to convince Roderigo that "self-love" must come before all (I.iii. 312-388),\(^{18}\) that he should think of "moral feelings and qualities only as prudential ends to means,"\(^{19}\) and why he must make Othello believe that he who "filches" from him his "good name" makes him "poor indeed" (III.iii. 160).

If, however, this defense is frustrated the sadist may resort to drastic measures in order to preserve his insecure inner balance. Iago must prove to himself that everyone is as he is, or else he will have to face the agonies of introspection. He must consider Cassio, like himself, to be one who is "no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of the civil and humane seeming for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection" (II.i. 243-244). But he cannot convince himself that Cassio is "a devillish knave" (II.i. 248); in fact, he realizes that "he hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly" (V.i. 19-20), a beauty which threatens to negate the fruits of Iago's compulsion for "proving himself an overmatch for appearance,"\(^{20}\) so "he must die." (V.i. 22).

Iago similarly senses that he will never be able to corrupt the "divine" Desdemona, and so must also dispose of her. That he is finally able to do so provides him with a double joy—that of seeing this threat to his Satanic rationalization of his own helplessness destroyed, and of knowing that he, still the self-deceived "Divinity," was directly responsible. So Hazlitt is right; in this case, his "gaiety, such as it is" truly arises "from the success of his treachery." Iago is thus happiest when the height of his Satanic power, when his diabolical "medicine" appears to be having the proper effect, when

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thus credulous fools are caught,} \\
\text{And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,}
\end{align*}
\]
All guiltless, meet reproach …

(IV.i. 45-48)

This double joy leads to an understanding of a third defensive maneuver of the sadist, that of exploiting and triumphing over others. For when the sadist defeats others, "he wins a triumphant elation which obscures his own helpless defeat. This craving for vindictive triumph is probably his most intense motivating force." That is, in victory the sadist imagines he is realizing his goals, destructive as they are, by virtue of his "superiority."

Furthermore, the sadistic individual does not care how he justifies his self-deceptive conceit; the only thing that matters is the necessity of his being God of something. Iago chooses to be the "Divinity of Hell" (II.iii. 356), the God of Ungodliness, the omniscient, omnipotent tempter who can "tenderly" lead all his simple victims into damnation "by the nose."

Iago remains locked in his megalomania, obsessed with the unearthing of justifications for his vision of himself as the Prince of Darkness. He constantly acts this out, offering his victims, in true Satanic fashion, a plausible rationalization for the evil he proposes, while manipulating, for these purposes, the sinner's own "black thoughts."

That is, Iago does in fact succeed in consummating his desire to

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Make the Moor thank me, love me, and} \\
\text{reward me} \\
\text{For making him egregiously an ass} \\
\text{And practicing upon his peace and quiet} \\
\text{Even to madness.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[(\text{II.iii. 317-320})\]

but, and this is all important, he can only do so and be most malignantly effective when he brings Othello to say

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O brave Iago, honest and just,} \\
\text{Thou has such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[(\text{V.i. 31-33})\]

In other words, Othello is not an innocent victim. Iago, Shakespeare's Devil, no more forces Othello to "fall" than Milton's Satan does Adam. Even more, as Kirschbaum\textsuperscript{22} says, "by stressing Othello's innocence, modern critics have robbed the character of what the Elizabethans considered man's highest dignity—his own responsibility for his own life and character."

The question here is why Othello is "so easily deceived, so easily taken in by appearances and the false physician and the honesty game,"\textsuperscript{23} what is the "tragic flaw" which causes him to abrogate his integrity to precipitate his tragic fall? Kirschbaum, as does Heilman, suggests that Othello's prime fault was that "he had such a talent, and even a need, for self-deception."\textsuperscript{24} Furthermore,

\[
\text{It is this, the refusal to face reality, this, the trait of self-idealization, which makes of Shakespeare's Othello a psychologically consistent characterization, and which explains why he falls so quickly into Iago's trap, why he alone on Iago's instigation believes Desdemona a strumpet.}^{25}
\]
And so, Othello is even more like his nemesis than we would like him to be. Is Othello's character perhaps even tinged with some of the sadism which colours Iago's?

But if we are to grasp the similarities, as well as the important differences between Iago and Othello we must look at the process of the play's unfolding. At the outset of the play Othello is in a far happier situation than Iago. He has the glory he craves: as Iago is to be Evil, Othello begins as Nobility, Honour and Virtue. He, and nearly everyone else, sees himself as the "valiant Othello" (I.iii. 47-48), the only one who can save Cyprus from the Turks, the glorious romantic26 who is willing to give up his "unhoused free condition" and kingdom for the love of the "glorious Desdemona" (I.ii. 18-27), and he manifests the utmost self-confidence that, when put on the spot,

My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
Shall manifest me rightly.
(I.ii. 31-32)

The fact that Othello has all this fame, glory and confidence does not, however, make him a noble figure: nobility implies selflessness, and unselfish he is not. Even his "noble" bravery is, like Macbeth's, based on selfish ambitions—wars to him are situations "that make ambition virtue" (III.iii. 350).

Even his love is largely egotistical. For him, as for Iago, "every love must confirm … self-love."27 He loves Desdemona because the attachment to her feeds his idealized self-image, because she sympathizes with his troubles, because she gives him what he wants: "I love her for she did pity the dangers I had passed" (I.iii. 167-168); "She gave for my pain a world of sighs" (I.iii. 159). He loves her because of the ego gratification she gave him by the very act of being "conquered"—Othello is proud that he could win the affections of such a "divine" person, that he could "beguile her of her tears" (I.iii. 156).

The point is that "Othello loves Desdemona so much that it is questionable in human terms he loves her at all. He loves not Desdemona but his image of her,"28 which he then internalizes and makes his image of himself. Desdemona becomes "not a woman but the matrix of his universe,"29 a universe which Othello, out of his own weakness, must completely identify himself with.

Othello's jealousy, then, can be seen as a spontaneous reaction to a threat to his self-esteem. For all his "self-idealization" (Kirschbaum) he cannot convince himself that he is irresistible enough to keep his wife faithful (III.iii. 264-266). He is confronted with a variety of threats: to his self-love, the threat of realizing he is not "good enough" for her, the threat of recognizing that his attempt to lessen the discrepancy between his real and idealized images through consciously idealizing his real one has been a failure.

Initially, Othello cannot accept this fact and the destruction of his delusive heavenly hierarchy it implies:

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks
itself!
I'll not believe't.
(III.iii. 278-279)

But then he is able to "cheer himself up,"30 to cope with this threat by shoring up his idealized image: "This destiny unshunnable, like death"—the "plague of great ones" (III.iii. 273-277).

We must bear in mind that Othello cannot comprehend Desdemona's love because he himself does not know what unselfish love is. He is not jealous for her, he is jealous for himself, like the child who does not want a toy until it is taken away from him. Othello even admits that
I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet
body,

So had I nothing known.

(III.iii. 345-347)

and

I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses.

(III.iii. 270-273)

Because he feels that Desdemona is exploiting him, ruining his reputation, he has the characteristic sadistic
reaction of "an almost insane rage." He screams, "I'll tear her all to pieces!" (III.iii. 432) "I will chop her into
messes!" (IV.i. 211) when he "realizes" Desdemona is giving Cassio the kisses he never really enjoyed. He is
especially incensed by the thought that Desdemona would insult him by giving away his "precious"
handkerchief at first chance—and to his now suddenly hated rival, Cassio. But this is not the worst
degradation. Cassio does not even want the handkerchief, or, symbolically, Othello's woman—and he gives it
"to his whore" (IV.i. 185-187).

Importantly, Othello, who, like Iago, is an exploiter, paradoxically has a real need to feel exploited
himself. For feeling exploited allows one to express his self-contempt but, in letting him attribute this to his
weakness in dealing with others rather than in dealing with himself, allows him to exchange feelings of
persecution and attacks on his attackers, for the untenable self-accusations he would otherwise have to face.

This is why "jealousy is the most important affective manifestation of sadism": jealousy allows one to blame the exploiter and not the self. It furthermore lets the jealous person discharge his own self-hatred
through hating the other person who is seen as a danger. And, finally, jealousy lets him adopt a cynical view
of a hopeless existence which is highly consonant with his own projected feelings of worthlessness. Jealousy
has the effect of purging one's feelings of helplessness and hopelessness by crystallizing the "poisonous
mineral" of self-doubt and affording its elimination through assertive, if destructive, activity. Jealousy enables
one to undergo catharsis.

We now see why Othello must kill his bride. For, as he himself says, "I am abused, and my relief must be to
loathe her" (III.iii. 267). In killing her he is killing what has become for him the embodiment of all his
consuming self-contempt, for the old, stupid, "black devil" he despises for not having "the soft parts of
conversation that chamberers have" (III.iii. 263-265). The fact is that Othello considers Desdemona to be his
personal Saviour, the one who will remove all his sins by dying—sacrificing herself—for them.

So when Othello, like Iago, is faced with the possibility of having to confront self-doubts arising from the
discrepancy between a too idealized self-image and a too depreciated real self, he solves his conflict (like
Iago) not by summoning up the strength for a new, more realistic self-evaluation, not by substituting "realistic
self-confidence and realistic pride" for his idealized image, but rather by looking upon Dante's "Gorgon of
despair" and choosing a "frigid", maladaptive course instead. That is, Othello's tragic flow is his refusal to
face the reality of his own nature," a flaw which, alas, "all flesh is heir to."

The question which still has not been answered is: why sadism? Or, given the conditions of the play, why do
both Iago and Othello choose an exploitative defense? For the fact remains that although the concept of
sadism helps us get to the root of fear of helplessness underlying Iago's and Othello's conflicts, this does not necessarily mean that another concept would not work as well. As Horney herself notes, sublimation, apathy, alcoholism, whoring, and even a fixation with hobbies may serve as nuclei around which "persons without hope" can attempt to reconstruct their disturbed lives. And so we must again ask, why the conflict here between real and idealized images out of which sadism ultimately arises?

The answer lies in understanding the fact that, in the Weltanschauung which guides Othello's Venetians, there is much too great an emphasis on "reputation." As Cassio cries

Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial! My reputation, Iago, my reputation!

(II.iii. 262-265)

And Iago says, when he is tempting Othello:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

(III.iii. 155-161)

The point is that if one's normal need for others' esteem is over-driven, through personal need or societal emphasis, what these others think of him may be experienced as more important than his own view of himself. The alienation of personal from social self may in the end lead to a loss of self or the feeling that there is no self apart from what others think one to be.38 The power of such a Weltanschauung is enormous. For now one is trustworthy if others trust him, honest if others think him so, lovable if others can love him—whether or not he himself thinks so.39 More importantly, the substitution of judgement from without for judgement from within, of opinions of others for self-awareness, can spiral out of control and ironically destroy the person using it as a shield.

Othello begins his fall, which ends with his elaborating a meaning behind his losing his now "magic" handkerchief, as soon as he permits Venetian Iago to convince him that his match with Desdemona is "unnatural" because—and only because—of their superficial differences, because he is not of her "own clime, complexion, and degree."40 That is, Othello begins to fall when and only when he begins to deny his own intrinsic self-worth, when he chooses Iago over Desdemona and Iago's arguments over her rebuttals.41

Once this Venetian weltanschauung successfully tempts its adherents into forgetting "the realities of their own natures," it diabolically provides the rationalization for maintaining this self-blindness. That is, by finding emotional release in the exploitation, mastery, and control of others, the Venetian sadist can successfully subdue the anxiety he experiences over not being able to control himself.42 Finally, the fact that Iago can succeed in his exploitation through discovering that his sadistic philosophy resonates enough with that of his society to enable him to go out and cause a foreigner to fall into and share in his own web of suffering, provides a powerful compensation for his deep feelings of loneliness, ineptitude, and self-isolation in a way which "hobbies" or apathy never can.
One more point must be made, however. Othello himself is not a tragic hero but the play is, paradoxically, a tragedy nonetheless, and this statement relates to the previous discussion perhaps more deeply than at first apparent.

To see why, let us examine the Macbeths and Oedipuses who can be said to form one end of the tragic hero continuum. They are ones who are noble, "restless, intense, probing and questioning the universe and their own souls." They are, in short, ones whom we admire and, to the extent that they conform to the description above, we would like more to resemble. They are men who can be seen as our own "idealized images." We even give them some of our faults, notably pride, and hope that these "ignoble" qualities will not affect their nobility.

But they do. That pride and ambition which we fear will get out of control in ourselves does in fact do so with these heroes and is that which causes their "tragic fall." Or, to put it another way, Oedipus and Macbeth, like many tragic heroes, are our own whipping boys, our Saviours, our sacrificial Lambs—they die for those projected sins we can now guiltlessly deny in ourselves and we are purged; catharsis is achieved.

To put this in still another way, we ourselves get a sadistic pleasure when we see a great man destroyed, a pleasure just as real as that which Iago experiences when he witnesses Othello's downfall. It is, as Blake perceived, that in

… pitying and weeping as at a tragic scene
The soul drinks murder and revenge and
applauds
Its own holiness.44

We get no such sadistic joy when we see Othello destroyed, however, because he is not noble enough.45 He is not "restless" or "intense." He is, rather, "quite free from introspection," very much "not given to reflection."46 Othello reminds us too much of our real selves and not of our idealized images, or rather, arouses too much of the unconscious conflict going on between them and not enough of possible defensive maneuvers. For we also share his hopelessness, his search for identity, and his tendency to fall victim to the temptations of a "marketing society."

And so we cannot pity Othello or Iago, cannot pity the "suffering human beings behind the apparently inhuman behaviour,"47 precisely because, in the end, they are still blind to their conflicts and are still suffering.48 In other words, we cannot pity them because then we would have to admit we are all suffering, that "we all have a touch of paranoia in us."49 The sad fact is that we all share Othello's flaw of "refusing to face the reality of his own nature."

The tragedy of Othello is personal, and this is why the play is so "difficult." The realizations which the hero cannot come to we must achieve ourselves. The truths behind Othello are acquired by the pain of self-revelation rather than by the specious pleasure of self-deception. To understand that Othello's and Iago's desire to remove their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness is a driving force in their lives, the reader must be willing to see that the same may be true of himself.

In sum, when we read the play we have a choice: to dismiss Othello as "peripheral" tragedy because we will not let it touch upon more than the periphery of our response, or to face its challenge, scrutinize ourselves in the play's light, and obtain all the self-vision it has to offer. This is the choice of calling the play "a bloody farce"50 or a simple "melodrama,"51 or of courageously facing the humanity in Iago's and Othello's natures.

Notes
1 William Hazlitt, "Othello as Tragedy and the Character of Iago," in Leonard F. Dean (Ed.) A Casebook on Othello (New York, 1961), p. 131. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes refer to the Casebook.


3 Hazlitt, p. 131.

4 The only objective point of contention is Cassio's promotion. But that this "slight" is insufficient rational motivation is clear if we follow Iago's own blind attempts to explain himself and his hatred of Othello and Cassio to himself. In quick succession he tries to convince himself that he is jealous of Desdemona (ILL 300-302); that he is jealous of Othello's leaping into his own "seat," Emilia (304-305); that he is jealous of Cassio for also sleeping with Emilia (316); until, in the end, he drops all pretense of rationality, of their being a moral justification for what he plans, and adopts the supreme contradictory role of the "Divinity of hell" (II.iii. 356), of literally casting "good" or "God" or "superego" to the Devil and letting his own hostile impulses take complete control.

5 Hazlitt, pp. 131-133.


9 Horney's concept of sadism is particularly pertinent in that she takes account of the "sadistic patterns in everyday relationships" and attempts to fit her formulation into a larger theory of human nature.

10 Karen Horney, Our Inner Conflicts (New York, 1945), p. 201.

11 Ibid., p. 96.

12 From Kirschbaum's description of Othello, p. 160.


14 Horney, p. 204.

15 Coleridge, p. 126.


17 The image of destroying peace takes many forms in the play. Note the war, the breaking of peace between nations; the storm, the destruction of the peace of nature; the brawl, the shattering of peace between individual men; and Othello's self-doubts, the ruining of his "peace of mind."

18 Yet, as Erich Fromm notes in his The Art of Loving (New York, 1956), pp. 48-53, the labelling of selfishness as self-love is a mistake, and thus Iago's "self-love" is not love at all.

19 Coleridge, p. 127. Iago lives for the moment when everyone will finally say "I am changed" (I.iii. 388).

20 Hazlitt, p. 132.
21 Horney, p. 207. Also see Fromm's "exploitative orientation" as outlined in his Man For Himself (New York, 1947), pp. 64-117.

22 Kirschbaum, p. 157.

23 Heilman (in Dean), p. 189.

24 Ibid.

25 Kirschbaum, p. 160. See pp. 158-159 (and, in the play, I.II. 220-225; II.iii. 20-28; V.ii. 156) for the explanation of Kirschbaum's statement that "Iago tells four of the characters that Desdemona is unchaste—and the only one who believes this accusation is Othello!" On p. 160, Kirschbaum goes beyond Hazlitt when he connects self-idealization and "refusing to face reality," a relationship which, however, he does not really explain.

26 Bradley, pp. 139-140.


28 Kirschbaum, p. 163.

29 Ibid.


31 Horney, p. 159.

32 Although Othello's sadistic impulses are not as overt as those of Iago, we must take note of their existence. Othello, like Iago, has his role to play, and this role is that of being "the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient," "the nature whom passion could not shake," the one "whose solid virtue / The shot of accident nor dart of chance / Could neither graze nor pierce" (IV.i. 275-278). To preserve his noble "reputation," Othello must suppress his sadism, and only once are these impulses released. And it is then that this sanity and reputation are doubted (IV.i. 244-293). Meanwhile, Iago is called an "inhuman dog" (V.i. 62) and a villain in many places and by many different characters, his wife included. There are subtle clues to Othello's sadism, however, which Shakespeare has set before us. Consider, for example, how when his destructive drives break through his control Othello uses Iago's terminology—"Fire and brimstone!" (IV.i. 243), and "roast me in sulfur!" (V.ii. 279).

33 See Iago's speech in I.iii., especially 392-396, which foreshadows his mad wish-to-be-exploited speech in II.i. (see note 4). Note that in the former speech Iago actually admits, "yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind / Will do as if for surety" (I.ii. 395-396).

34 Stekel, p. 128.

35 Horney, p. 100.

36 Kirschbaum, p. 165.

37 Kirschbaum never attempts to show why Othello's peculiar flaws exist.
38 Fromm, *Man For Himself*, pp. 107-111 and 188.

39 Cf. Fromm's "marketing orientation" as outlined in *Man For Himself*, pp. 67-82 and pp. 70-90 in *The Art of Loving*. In his pre-occupation with this underlying "marketing orientation" Shakespeare exercises his most subtle art. Note the shades of meaning of the two key words, "love" and "honour," as used by the different characters. Iago, for example, used them to justify his exploitation of Roderigo (I.iii. 307) and Cassio (II.iii. 147-149), as well as Othello (II.iii. 178, 225-227). Or just how spurious "honour" and "love" are as self-justifications for Othello's later sadistic behaviour (especially V.ii. 294-297 and 344-347). Emilia sees through this spuriousness in her summary comment that Desdemona was true because "She was too fond of her most filthy bargain" (V.ii. 155-158).

40 Cf. Brabantio's accusations in I.i. and I.iii., and note that, at least before his "fall," Othello has enough self-confidence to deny the potency of the magic in which he later puts his faith (see I.iii. 169-170 and compare with III.iv. 54-75).

41 See, in particular, Desdemona's speech, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind," etc. (I.iii. 253-260).

42 Or, rather, the anxiety arising from wanting to control himself and realizing that his real self is unable to do so.


45 Iago does so because Othello's destruction is symbolic to him of his sadistic personal success.

46 Bradley, p. 141.

47 Horney, pp. 215-216.

48 Othello and Iago never realize the real reasons for their sadism. Iago says "Demand me nothing … " (V.ii. 294-295) because he really cannot explain. But at least he realizes he is being destructive and calls himself a "devil." Othello does not do so, and this makes his self-deception an even more destructive act. Iago admits that he wants to destroy everyone (ILL 300-315; II.iii. 365-368), while Othello can only say "For naught did I hate, but all in honour" (V.ii. 295).

49 Kirschbaum, p. 160.


**M. D. Faber (essay date 1974)**


[In the following essay, Faber asserts that Othello's development from joyful bridegroom to murderer can best be understood in terms of the hero's attempt "to resolve the mystery of maternal ambivalence"—a trait which
The critic contends is common to Western tragic literature.

The following discussion is grounded in specific theoretical and critical propositions which should be stated clearly at the outset: I believe that western tragedy, whether it receives narrative or dramatic expression, invariably presents us with characters who undergo a traumatic reactivation of infantile feelings. Tragedy's inner chaos, tragedy's inner disruption expressed through the character of the hero, is always a chaos, is always a disruption, grounded in reactivation. What is reactivated? Basically, the unconscious ego, the repressed introjections of very early experience during which a splitting of the maternal image takes place.

The hero discovers himself in a situation that reactivates the bad maternal object, which is but another way of saying that the hero confronts within himself a constellation of repressed desires; the introject is an expression of the forbidden aim.

The splitting of the maternal object is prompted by maternal ambivalence; I regard it as a primitive defensive maneuver whose intensity will vary in proportion to the ambivalence expressed toward the subject. Where the mother harbors truly annihilative inclinations the splitting will be radical. Where the mother's ambivalence is minimal the splitting will be minimal. In most instances splitting results from the mother's confusional behavior, rejecting at times, accepting at others. This can be particularly destructive. The ubiquity of maternal ambivalence is grounded in a patriarchal social organization, a social organization which all of western literature reflects. The male child is both the mother's phallus and an exemplification of her inferiority. The male child is something to cherish and seduce on the one hand, and to abuse and destroy on the other. To be raised at the hands of an ambivalent western mother is to undergo a confusing, damaging experience which creates in the male child—who is at the level of artistic expression captured in the character of the western tragic hero—a primal anxiety over loss, mutilation, abandonment, betrayal (catastrophic death complex), and a deep, regressive predilection that is ultimately oral in nature but that can receive expression at the genital level as well: incestuous inclination results from early trauma. What all of this means is that western tragic heroes will be vulnerable to female influences or to the power of women who are able to reawaken through their behavior the anxiety of the early period, anxiety that is invariably bound up with the split-off bad object which, in turn, is expressive of forbidden aims. The deepest urge of the western tragic hero is to resolve the mystery of maternal ambivalence, and the quest to resolve that mystery is often given disguised expression in western literary works, works such as Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, Othello, Werther, Pierre, The Sound and the Fury, and countless others. The male western belief, often given literary expression, that woman is a mystery, is also rooted in maternal ambivalence.

Because the western hero experiences an emotive crisis bound up with the reactivation of early affect, and because this affect is integrally associated with maternal power, and because the western literary work invariably brings about such reactivation through the hero's involvement with a female (actual mother or mother substitute) who confuses and betrays (either in actuality or through loss), the western tragedy achieves its conflict, its artistic tension, through a partial regression to matriarchy. The hero moves toward the female realm, is absorbed into the dreaded maternal environment, exemplifies the motive power of woman and the danger inherent in her subjection. It is artistically and culturally significant, then, that the hero is always destroyed by patriarchal forces, by male forces which represent a hierarchial order that is ultimately patriarchal in nature. Such destruction is enacted either from within by the suicidal hero who obliterates himself in deference to the introjected father (superego) and in remorse for his oral, incestuous defection to the mother, or from without by the representatives of the patriarchy, such as Macduff who is, as we all know, of no woman born. In his life, the western tragic hero is the transgressor who threatens the patriarchy. In his death he is the scapegoat who reestablishes and reaffirms that patriarchy. The conflict of western tragedy is ultimately the conflict of male and female control. Its heroes are overwhelmingly male and its secret, enigmatic, confusional influences, are overwhelmingly female because the culture is patriarchal. This macro-cosmic model expresses the conflict within the western home, the western family, the microscosmic unit in which the western hero is bred.
All of this, needless to say, is based upon phenomenological as well as analytic grounds. The literary work is the artist's fantasy expression of the reality factors which stand behind his development as a person and which drive him to seek a positive, enlarging solution to his own human dilemma through his own work. The characters he creates—the vulnerable hero who undergoes reactivation, the enigmatic female who seduces, betrays, and thereby catalyzes reactivation—behave upon the stage or upon the page in such fashion as to call to our minds the kind of early experience that would perforce stand behind the "present" character. In a word, the text allows us to complete the picture in our heads.

Having set forth these critical and theoretical propositions, I would move on to Shakespeare's play.

For the clearest, most striking instance of a Shakespearean character undergoing upon the stage the reactivation of repressed affect bound up with the dynamics of the mother-infant interaction one looks to Othello, and only Leontes, hero of The Winter's Tale, challenges this claim. Within fifty minutes of dramatic time we witness the transformation of the Moor from solicitous, doting bridegroom into frenzied cuckold plotting the strangulation of his bride. Nor can one fail to notice as he moves through this section of the play the extent to which the hero's sense of having been betrayed and tricked is significantly connected with the problem of self-esteem. Desdemona's "defection" and the implicit rejection of Othello that resides therein takes from the man his "occupation," his function in the competitive military world from which he derives his grandiose conception of himself. In this way, the events which trigger the reactivation of infantile materials and the aims affectively associated with them reveal the essential fragility of Othello's ego, as well as the primitive, regressive manner in which he responds to the re-opening of the early wound. What must also be stressed, is that while the actual mother is virtually absent from Othello, the few mentionings of her which do occur are of crucial analytic significance in that they enable us to grasp the nature of the hero's projective re-creation of Desdemona into a version of the original parent. In Othello, we have not only an abundance of associative materials that clarify the manner in which Desdemona is fated to succeed to the mother's role in the hero's fantasy world, we also have an explicit connection between the actual mother and the mother substitute, a connection that is established through something we can regard, in Winnicott's terms, as a transitional object, namely the all-important handkerchief with which, as Iago announces to Othello, Cassio wipes his beard. But I must be careful at this juncture not to anticipate the substance of future arguments.

That Othello has "abstracted out of the living Desdemona a virginal but maternal idol to worship,"¹ that there is something child-like about his conception of their union, that he brings to it a personality virtually incapable of supporting ambivalent feelings toward the love object, all of this has been well established by analytic critics, particularly Shapiro and Reid. I want to present briefly the gist of their views in order to establish a general orientation and then proceed to discuss at some length the hero's behavior during the middle and final acts.

Shapiro contends that Othello presents us with a hero who is "physically impotent," who is fated to debase, indeed to hate the heroine because she ultimately inhibits the full expression of his instincts, and who is therefore eager to hear Iago's news when Iago steps forward to present it.² The tragedy contains, of course, numerous passages which offer substantiation of Shapiro's view, and Shapiro makes the most of them, as anyone who cares to read his work will see. But what is important for us to stress in preparation for a discussion of the reactive significance of the play's middle and final acts is the kind of genetic and economic development which stands behind the psychically impotent male that Shapiro describes, a development which is invariably grounded in a defensive splitting of the mother into good and bad object, a splitting which arises in an interaction of mother and child where the child's demands combine with maternal seductiveness to produce a potentially dangerous situation, and where the child represses not only his objectionable aims but the knowledge of his mother's seductiveness as well; needless to say, such a development leads to the formation of a personality that is apt to experience anxiety in the face of situations that reactivate the repressed wishes, anxiety which Freud associated exclusively with castration at the father's hand.³ but which should be associated also with the child's awareness of maternal hostility coming either directly from the
mother or projected defensively into the mother by the angry child who is unable to have things his own way. When a man retains such development into maturity he is prone to regard women dichotomously, and as long as his sexual urges are expressed exclusively toward the "bad" ones—prostitutes, promiscuous servants, etc.—, as long, in other words, as the original split is maintained, a kind of psychic equilibrium holds. When, however, circumstances provoke the fantasy of sexual expression in association with the good maternal object, profound anxiety results, anxiety that warns against the lifting of the repression. Now let me stress that my purpose here is not to make a case for Othello as the tragedy of a psychically impotent protagonist, or to see this particular pattern as the answer to all the many problems that the play poses; I want only to stress that Shapiro has touched upon something that can be regarded in a general way as true of Othello; the impression of the hero that Shakespeare creates in our minds is of an individual who has split women into good and bad objects in accordance with the initial splitting of the mother. Othello's reaction to Desdemona's "defection," a reaction that transforms her in his fantasy world from chaste and perfect wife into loose and lustful whore, as well as the huge anxiety, indeed panic, that he evinces in the midst of the crisis, bears this out strikingly. But let us look more closely at specific occurrences in the first Act in an effort to pinpoint the behaviors that stand behind Shapiro's view.

When Othello denies in himself "the young affects of heat" (I.iii.264), when he announces that his attraction to Desdemona arose from the "pity" she expressed upon learning of his adult life, when he declares that he relinquishes the joys of his wedding night gladly, without disappointment, we feel ourselves in the presence of a personality that is grounded in the repression of certain impulses and aims, and this is, as we shall see, confirmed by Othello's behavior in subsequent scenes. Nor can we overlook in this regard the significance of Othello's confident, supremely confident, appearance before the Fathers of Venice. I mean that Othello is convinced of his acceptability as good son and good servant because he has, after all, done nothing that would be unacceptable to the introjected father in uniting with Desdemona. At the unconscious level Othello has married a version of the good object, the virginal idol, and the aims which might arouse castration anxiety are simply "not there." Which means, of course, that they are still firmly repressed, not so firmly, however, that they cannot be awakened, for this is precisely what Iago, in a later scene, does.

We appreciate from this perspective the irony of Brabantio's vociferous presence throughout the early scenes, particularly during the time in which Othello defends himself before the Senators. Brabantio reminds us that Othello has taken a real woman away from a real father, that the father's affection for the daughter is genuinely grounded in the oedipal situation. But Othello, lost in the illusion that his attraction to Desdemona is purely spiritual, and that her attraction to him is spiritual too, simply misses the father's anger and grief; he cannot say anything meaningful to Brabantio because he does not understand. Convinced of his incorruptibility and of the "purity" of his intentions toward his bride, he calmly wins over the members of the Signiory, who are, for military reasons, eager to believe in Othello anyway. Still, Brabantio's grieved, sensual voice is heard for a final time; the subject is betrayal: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see," he says to the hero; "She has betrayed her father and may thee" (I.ii.293). Othello's reply is, "My life upon her faith." When we realize that Othello's Desdemona exists as a psychological projection, a fantasy product of the hero's mind, and when we recall the suddenness with which the split-off version of the mother image can undergo transformation into its opposite, when we reflect, in short, that everything depends upon Othello's immature, radical personality, we feel a definite chill in these words. It is not Desdemona we doubt from the start, but the pure, all-confident Moor whose grandiose self-image makes us wonder about what lies beneath it.

Reid's conclusions move us in a different direction, one that not only accords the problem a fuller, more useful treatment but that raises an interesting phenomenological question as well. Proposing that Othello "offers a case of delusional jealousy in a man in whom the 'homosexual solution' (as Ernest Jones put it) to the mother's rejection has not 'gone far,'" Reid constructs a hypothetical history of the hero's development. Othello's attachment to his mother, Reid maintains, was very strong, and "very early she must have sensed this and rejected him. That is, after a period of loving attention. Othello's mother changed. This change was felt by Othello as treachery, and it stirred him to a 'jealous rage' against her. He turned in a passive, feminine way
toward the father for love. But, for reasons we cannot determine, this, the 'homosexual solution' … did not 'go
far.' The treachery and anger it evoked, however, quite obliterated for him his earlier, intense fear of castration
by the father as punishment for his love of the mother. This he could then afford to ignore because all real
danger had been removed by the mother's rejection. This anger against the mother fell victim to repression, for
he still needed his mother's protection and the limited love she still offered. The anger was transformed into
nonerotic idealization, and the image of the father as a retaliatory, castrating figure became significantly
weaker. Othello, the adult, retained the same complex of responses: an idealization of women which masked
unacceptable anger at his mother's treachery and a singular lack of fear of men." In this way, Reid maintains,
Othello is prone to avoid women, to feel an "uncomplicated ascendency over men (insofar as was socially
possible, and due in part to the fact that, having avoided women, he automatically avoided the essential
anxiety that dominates competition among men)," and to experience considerable narcissism, "a high degree of
self-consciousness," about "his value as a soldier." Why, one then asks, should Othello have responded to
Desdemona? "The answer is not difficult," writes Reid; "their relationship reproduces all too perfectly the
situation Othello had longed to experience with his mother after rejection. Desdemona is, first of all,
inaccessible. Not only is she of a different race … but she has held herself aloof from all suitors (the 'wealthy
curled darlings' of Venice). This inaccessible woman makes the first advances—that which the child Othello
had longed for his mother to have done and, most significantly, the advances are made in response to Othello's
tales of adventure—tales of heroic exploit that are the typical fantasies of a little boy…. This is the fatal
combination—the inaccessible woman who believes in and accepts the heroic fancies of the boy—that
destroys Othello. It is fatal because it unleashes quite suddenly the castration anxieties that he had never faced
quite fully in childhood, anxieties which had been effectively quieted by the mother's putting herself out of
reach. And it awakens as well the long buried rage at the mother for her rejection." It is the meeting on Cyprus
that betrays this anxiety directly, says Reid. "After proclaiming his joy in their reunion—a joy whose
hyperbolic exaggeration warns us—Othello says:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

It is the anxiety of impending doom in this speech and not its declaration of love that Desdemona catches:

The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should
increase
Even as our days do grow.

(II.i.192-197)

Then comes the hint of infidelity and he breaks down completely. Up to that moment (twice postponed) of the
consummation of the marriage, this anxiety had been under control. But now the guilt is overwhelming. He
cannot deny it (the entire military community on Cyprus is pointedly aware that the marriage is being
consummated), but he can attempt to relieve the guilt by deflecting it. The mental process is this: She has
betrayed me (as well as her father), and so I am an innocent wronged one, along with him. His idea that he
must kill her to prevent her from betraying more men is an announcement to his super-ego: You see I am
serving your interest, not my own. He announces to his introjected father: "I have not really done you a
disservice, she has, and to protect your interests, I will prevent all future betrayals by killing her. You
therefore will not need to punish me." Reid then goes on to elaborate his thesis in considerable detail, by
demonstrating the manner in which the hero's interactions with Iago, Desdemona, Cassio, and with the other
characters confirm the basic pattern of delusional jealousy with precisely the emphases Reid has given in his
theoretical exposition.5
What should be stressed first of all in response to this material is the phenomenological ground that supports Reid's interpretation but that rejects the manner in which the interpretation is stated. In other words, the childhood history of Othello which Reid constructs is ultimately an expression of the response that Othello's "personality" is awakening in the critic. *Othello, upon the stage, manifests a character that would have perforce undergone a development similar to the one Reid describes had Othello existed in real life.* Thus the audience, which does exist in "real life," projectively fills in with its affective responses the "real life" aspect of the hero. There is no need, then, for the critic to construct real histories when parts or aspects of character are sufficiently rich to enable us to understand the developmental forces that *had* to give rise to that particular kind of personality.

Reid touches upon, as does Shapiro, aspects of Othello's behavior which are of crucial importance; Reid is particularly convincing when he analyzes Othello's courtship of Desdemona, its child-like quality, its regressive implications, its "fatality." Reid also introduces us to the significance of the superego in this play, something we will explore fully when we come to the drama's final scene. Nor can we overlook the problem of Othello's self-esteem as it is presented here. Othello turns to the father when rejection at the mother's hands occurs; he strives to compete successfully in a masculine, military world that offers compensation for the mother's loss and that protects the wounded one from the recurrence of early damage. Finally, Reid's remarks emphasize Othello's tendency to split females into good and bad objects, to view women in a way that recalls the original splitting of the maternal figure and the concomitant repression of aims. We are allowed, through Reid's work, to picture Othello precariously committed in marriage to a version of the good mother and, hence, precariously close to the situation he has sought to avoid at all costs. Reid tells us that Othello breaks down when the hint of infidelity comes, for such a hint forces the hero to fantasy the good object in a way that calls forth the repressed, split-off version of the mother and the sexual aims bound up with that version. Othello's fantasies contain his drives, his mind and his body go together. This is what Othello does not realize, this is what he cannot understand, as witnessed by his reliance upon a spiritual interpretation of the union, an interpretation grounded in his repressed, sublimated inclinations. Thus Reid is correct in suggesting that the slightest mixing of the split images will undo the hero who is now actually united to the one who corresponds to the original object and into whom can be projected the entire content of Othello's unconscious ego forged in the early relationship with his mother. There is nothing surprising, then, about the rapidity with which Desdemona becomes "another" in Othello's mind, for she never had any secure foundation there to begin with, any solid, established identity which a man might not easily alter. We are reminded here of the masculine capacity to alter good object to bad in a matter of moments; it is the *retention of the splits for defensive purposes* that shrinks the capacity for ambivalence and obliges one to crudely substitute objects, the one for the other, when anxiety provoking situations occur. However, it is when Iago presents the hero with a fantasy version of the primal scene that the full collapse takes place. I would look closely at this section of the play, keeping in mind everything that has been said thus far.

His own suspicions of Desdemona's "honesty" having been awakened by Iago, Othello asks his "ancient" to gave his "worst of thoughts" his "worst of words" (III.iii.132). In truth, of course, it is Othello's own "worst" thoughts which are pressing toward the surface as he internalizes the doubts about Desdemona's honesty with which Iago presents him. We see here the limitations inherent in Shapiro's idea that the hate mobilized by psychic impotence stands behind the sudden change in the hero. While Othello is certainly "impotent" in the sense that he regards women dichotomously as good and bad, the play gives us no evidence of his ability or inclination to perform with prostitutes; and even his willingness to forego his wedding night, his tendency to stress platonic union, and the symbolic interruption of the love act upon Cyprus which comes shortly before the breakdown, while all suggesting incomplete masculinity do not when taken together on the dynamic level of the action point toward frustration of desire and resultant aggression as the cause of Othello's violence. There simply has not been time, realistic or imaginative, for such a reactive development to have occurred. What is imaginatively and artistically understandable is the dynamic inherent in Reid's view of the action and the extrapolation upon that view made in preceding paragraphs. Othello experiences profound anxiety as he listens to Iago and it is this anxiety which calls forth his primitive defenses of projection and anger. The
marriage to the good object has brought him affectively close to the constellation of feelings originating in early interaction with the mother and resulting in separation and loss. The whole complex has been brought to life with the marriage; the suppression of the unacceptable aspects of the early experience has, in this way, been weakened so that when Iago offers his insinuations Othello, who is, after all, joined now with a version of the good mother and thus affectively closer to the repressed mother figure who lurks in his endogenous world, finds himself unable to ignore his forbidden aims. He must, therefore, project those aims as swiftly as possible, affirm their existence in the other, and in this way deny their existence in himself. His fantasies about Desdemona, about "what she has been doing," race on because they are projective translations of his own fantasies of his own behavior. Needless to say, this does not occur as patently as I am suggesting in my effort to get at the essence of the hero's defensive strategy; on three or four occasions his flexible repression harden and he asks Iago for more proof; in other words, he makes an effort not to see that which he unconsciously wants to see but which mobilizes so much anxiety that he must deny his own aims at the sight and attribute the desiring totally to the object with whom he longs and dreads to be in sensual contact. The effort not to see fails for two reasons. One is the radical splitting that Othello has done in relation to women, or to put it another way, the vulnerability of his personality to the pressure arising from this radical split. "Oh, the cure of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites," cries the hero (III.iii.269) completely separating the idealized image, "delicate creature," from the notion of sexual urge in lines which argue an almost total lack of integration. When the one aspect of woman is called into doubt, the other aspect takes its place.

The second reason is, of course, Iago's persistent presentation of forbidden images to the Moor, images which ultimately constitute counterparts of his own repressed impulses, most notably the primal scene images mentioned earlier: Having pricked the repressed complex life, having awakened Othello's "worst" thoughts, Iago asks, "You would be satisfied?" (III.iii.393), to which the Moor responds, "Would! Nay, I will." "And may, but, how?" persists Iago; "Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topped?" "Death and damnation," cries Othello, and then "Oh!" What Iago has accomplished here is extremely important to the progress of his plan; he has obliged Othello to entertain the primal scene in his mind, to image the good mother to whom Othello is now united in a posture which catalyzes in the hero precisely those aims and impulses that have been long repressed and that are contained in the fantasied behavior of the anxiety-provoking object. Iago does this again when he recounts the dream of Cassio, a narration which begets from Othello the deep cry, "Monstrous!" (III.iii.427). Thinking upon the primal significance of this word, namely to show, reveal, expose, one "gets the feel" of what Othello goes through as he actualizes in fantasy forbidden aims associated with the good mother figure. The point is, what Iago has done is quite sufficient in terms of the personality Othello has; there is no need for the Moor to actually behold what would be the equivalent of the primal scene. So vulnerable is the hero to the anxiety aroused by apprehending in himself aims which have been attributed to the bad object that he turns almost automatically to those primitive defenses (protection and rage) through which he will strive to maintain the repression and to propitiate the superego. Wounded, profoundly depressed, without self-esteem, Othello will, as he says, tear Desdemona to pieces; this becomes, as a matter of fact, his sacred "cause." Understood analytically, Othello's "cause" comprises his attempt to enact revenge upon the rejecting object and, at the same time, to remain the good son. It is his own aims in Desdemona that Othello will destroy for his conscience's sake; his murder of the bad mother into whom he transforms his wife is in reality a twisted, defensive murdering of himself, a murdering that is completed by his suicide.

In this way, while Iago proceeds in ignorance of those psychological factors which make Othello such a "simple" victim, while he does not know exactly why it is so easy to topple the Moor, to awaken his capacity for "chaos," he does proceed with a kind of sensitivity to the hero's underlying insecurity; like all great villains he can intuit weakness; he has, as the saying goes, a "nose for evil."

Again, Othello's tragic development within the drama's middle acts calls to mind Winnicott's work on the development of the capacity for concern, the degree to which this capacity arises from early integration of the
ego, and the manner in which its lack is grounded in the traumata of early experience. "The word 'concern' is used to cover in a positive way a phenomenon that is covered in a negative way by the word 'guilt.' A sense of guilt is anxiety linked with the concept of ambivalence, and implies a degree of integration in the individual ego that allows for the retention of good object-image along with the ideal of a destruction of it. Concern implies further integration, and further growth, and relates in a positive way to the individual's sense of responsibility, especially in respect of relationships into which the instinctual drives have entered. Concern refers to the fact that the individual cares, or minds, and both feels and accepts responsibility. At the genital level in the statement of the theory of development, concern could be said to be the basis of the family, where both partners in intercourse beyond their pleasure—take responsibility for the result. But in the total imaginative life of the individual, the subject of concern is at the back of all constructive play and work. It belongs to normal, healthy living, and deserves the attention of the psychoanalyst. There is much reason to believe that concern—with its positive sense—emerges in the earlier emotional development of the child before the period of the classical Oedipus complex."

Winnicott further declares that concern develops out of the baby's ability to "combine erotic and aggressive experience, and in relation to one object," the ability to reach "ambivalence." When, for whatever reason, the child is unable to make reparation for its aggressive aims toward the mother, when, in short, he undergoes a confusional and depriving development, he fails to get the good and bad mother images together; he remains unintegrated, deficient in the ability to see women as whole and real objects toward whom one might feel conflicting urges and about whom one might feel concerned when one's aggression has been vented. The point is, Othello feels no concern for Desdemona in the midst of everything that happens; he does not worry about what has become of her; he has no desire to help her, to investigate matters for her benefit. Having failed to achieve personality integration, having failed to achieve the ability to integrate the love and the hate that are affectively correlated to the split version of the mother which obtains at an early age, the thought of saving Desdemona never occurs to Othello. In this sense, the Moor, like all tragic heroes, evinces a personality arrested in its growth, especially as that growth relates to the mother-infant interaction. It is their arrestation that is the ground of the play's disorder; it is this arrestation that predicates the swift mobilization of primitive defenses in the face of awakened aims bound up with the fantasied betrayal by Desdemona and the fantasied primal scene. Indeed, Othello's only concern during the course of the play's third act, at which we have been looking, is to save himself.

The reactivation of early dangers precipitates at the deep unconscious level the mobilization of the catastrophic death complex that lurks in all men. Revenge for Othello is grounded in projection, and projection is a way of avoiding aims that threaten one's annihilation by a superego which is comprised of projected and subsequently re-introjected impulses ascribed ultimately to the mother and father, or their equivalents; revenge is also a way of compensating for a loss of self-esteem so severe as to constitute a kind of death. But for Othello the arousal of forbidden aims harbors not only punishment and loss of identity, it harbors the loss of the good object as well, the good object who would reject the son were he to actualize such aims, or even acknowledge them, a kind of actualization. Othello is thus concerned not only with castration but with abandonment, abandonment by the mother image that has merged with paternal introjections to comprise the superego. With regard to the text of the play, the implication of this is, as we have said, that events proceed on a number of levels at once, levels which touch upon all the developmental phases. A good way to demonstrate the need for multiphasic criticism and to highlight the pregenital dimension of the tragedy, particularly its oral dimension, is to investigate closely the destruction of Desdemona, a destruction that results from the hero's frantic attempt to stave off the contents of his unconscious. I have in mind here discussing the analytical significance of the strangling, a key problem and one that will help us to grasp fully the manner in which oral outrage, outrage rooted in the infantile nature of Othello's attachment to the heroine, as explored by Reid, underlies the drama as a whole.

It is of considerable interest that Othello's mind touches upon four ways to deal with Desdemona immediately before Iago makes his suggestion about strangling her, and that all four of these ways attest to deep oral pre-occupation at both the primary and secondary levels. Notice, for example, the manner in which Othello dwells on Desdemona's "fairness," "fineness," "sweetness," until Iago interrupts him with, "Nay, you must
"forget that" (IV.i.189-190, italics added). "Aye," says Othello, "let her rot, and perish." Returning a few seconds later to the subject of the woman's "sweetness," Othello is once again interrupted by Iago who says, "Nay, that's not your way," a statement which prompts Othello to cry out, "Hang her!" (198). Othello's ambivalence, however, causes him to return yet again to the subject of his wife's attractiveness, to the "pity" of her fall from chastity. Reminded by Iago yet again of her "iniquity," of her terrible "offense" against him, Othello exclaims, "I will chop her into messes" (211). Othello then goes on to propose the poisoning of his wife: "Get me some poison, Iago, this night" (216), are his words. It is at this point that Iago steps in with his suggestion: "Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (219-220). Othello's reply to this is as follows: "Good, good. The justice of it pleases. Very good" (221).

Othello's initial fantasy of Desdemona's death is, then, entirely passive. Desdemona will be left to "rot," to become something which offends the olfactory and gustatory senses; the betrayer will be destroyed simply by being left alone. Rapidly regressing to pregenital levels, the hero imagines that the mere withholding of his attention and affection will bring about the rotting, the decay, the death of the object. This narcissistic fantasy is, of course, based upon primary identification, for it was Othello who was left to "perish," to "rot," by the withdrawal of mother's narcissistic supplies, and now he would exact a similar punishment upon the maternal substitute who has reopened the old psychic wound. Othello's next fantasy of destruction is not only more active, it moves considerably closer to Desdemona's breathing apparatus, closer to her mouth, closer to her breath. Indeed, I would maintain the thought of Desdemona "hanging" awakens the emotions that ultimately cause Othello to follow Iago's suggestion (and Iago to make the suggestion in the first place). We will say more about the primary significance of hanging very shortly. Othello's next exclamation, "I will chop her into messes," actively balances his earlier passive gustatory notion of Desdemona being left to "rot." In other words, the emotionally concomitant inverse of the orally sadistic desire to retaliate by withholding narcissistic supplies, by denying the denier all nourishment, is the orally sadistic desire to retaliate by devouring the object, by enacting upon the frustrating mother the terrible version of the fantasy of incorporation. The "sweet" Desdemona, who has rejected Othello, who has refused to take him unto and into herself, will be chopped into messes in obvious preparation for a cannibalistic feast. There is no sensationalism here. Shakespeare is not titillating his audience by allowing them to imagine the black man devouring the white woman. He is sensing the extent and the nature of Othello's emotional injury and he is presenting what he senses in a remarkably accurate dramatic depiction. Othello's fourth fantasy, embodied in his command, "Get me some poison," not only reveals the manner in which he has progressed in the space of about thirty lines from fleeting meditation to implementing behavior, it also completes the movement toward Desdemona's mouth, the movement adumbrated earlier in the exclamation, "Hang her!" Othello will destroy Desdemona by feeding her poison, by putting into her mouth, and throat, and stomach, a death-dealing substance—presumably liquid—which exacts a "suitable" revenge for the withholding of the life-giving "nourishment" which is associatively connected with the mother's breast.

From one perspective, Othello accedes to Iago's suggestion because Iago has become a kind of superego figure for Othello. He speaks with the voice of Othello's own conscience, in line with Reid's formulation of the mechanisms at work in Othello's delusional jealousy. But Othello does not simply accede to Iago's suggestion: he is taken with it. "Good, good," he says, "The justice of it pleases" and then again, meditating deeply upon the notion, "Very good." At the secondary level, of course, Othello wants to strangle Desdemona in bed because it is in "the bed" that she has betrayed him. Too, the implicit genitality in Othello's incestuous fixation, the genitality bound up with the internalized father who wants Desdemona punished for her adulterous betrayal, also discovers an opportunity for expression in Iago's plan and reminds us of the primary genital significance of Othello's murderous inclination. But the most important primary significances here are oral; they follow consistently from the developing oral imagery which informs the scene as a whole, and they oblige us to recognize that the murder of Desdemona is chiefly a matter of oral retaliation. In preparation for the pinpointing of these significances I would briefly take up a crucial analytic paper which deals with the related topics of choking, strangling, sexual perversion, and self-inflicted death by hanging.
Attempting to clarify the underlying dynamics of what he terms "eroticized repetitive hanging," Resnik, in a meticulously researched contribution, begins by citing the mechanisms operative in masochistic perversions, namely fear of the loss of the object or its love, castration fear, and superego anxiety, and then goes on to postulate the activity of these mechanisms in the hanging syndrome. "Because of castration anxiety," he writes, "libidinal and aggressive impulses directed at forbidden (incestuous) objects may be turned against the self as punishment. The feminine posture of passivity and helplessness, as exemplified by bondage, places the subject completely in another's power, removing responsibility for any sexual gratification derived. The bondage can also exemplify a wish for unity with mother … or the fear one cannot separate from her. The anxiety can be determined by viewing the gamble with death as an index of the forbidden wish itself. To anticipate actively what one passively fears or wishes is not unusual." Proceeding to the heart of his thesis, Resnik continues, "The fundamental underlying conflict … in the treatment of males / is anxiety at separation from the mother. Weisman has reported case material of a patient who attempted suicide by hanging, which behavior was later followed by subjugation, suffocation and overtly sadomasochistic sexual behavior. The patient was able to recover an early memory associated with smothering and the patient's wish for mother's breast. The finding of smothering probably associated with breast feeding and associated with a diffuse feeling of well-being … was also observed in a patient of ours. Although this man did not clinically demonstrate hanging behavior, nonetheless hypercathexis of his head and neck revealed clinical material which appears related to it. This patient was struggling with his own oral incorporative wishes toward the nipple and breast. A slip of the tongue revealed his sadistic fantasies were of biting off the nipple. This author continues, in a passage which bears importantly on the behavior of both Iago and Othello, "At the oral level, the conflict is over separation from the mother. Immobilization and asphyxia contribute to the fantasies of feeding, reunion and rebirth. The male infant while feeding … has been observed to develop erections. The neonate may experience a relative asphyxia in association with the sense of well-being derived from feeding; these sensations may then be accompanied by a gastrourethral reflex resulting in erection. The continued choice to be learned while feeding may be one of feed and remain somewhat short of breath at the risk of letting go of the nipple, or breathe completely and lose the good visceral feelings—and the associated erection. Mothers may often interpret the child's relinquishing of the nipple as a personal rejection rather than a very real choice against strangling." And finally, "Blos has characterized adolescence as the second separation phase. We would agree and suggest that the original conflict over separation, smother, or experience sexual feelings again becomes reawakened. The eroticized hanging behavior allays the anxiety thus engendered. Whereas the nursing infant concludes, 'I'll strangle a while and feed,' the hanging masturbator concludes, 'I'll strangle a while and get sexual.' As we shall see momentarily, Othello bears witness to the persistence of this syndrome into adulthood, with the emphasis upon the sadistic rather than the masochistic end of the continuum.

Striking clinical evidence for the primary significance of strangling, this time directly expressive of sadistic aims, may also be found in the work of Harold Searles. There, of example, is a passage from his 1955 paper on vengefulness, a paper which stresses the close connection between the desire for revenge and problems of early maternal separation. Referring to one of his male patients, Searles writes, 'When I then suggested for association, 'something you couldn't do anything about,' he replied, 'Well, ther've been so many things, of course that I've felt for so long that I couldn't do anything about, like wanting to get people by the throat and strangle them till they're black in the face …' This last statement he made in the vengeful spirit which had been so characteristic of him throughout the analysis. Here it seemed reasonably clear that his vindictiveness was serving a defensive function, to ward off the awareness of some degree of his anxiety about separation—from, originally, his mother early in his childhood. I believe we are now in a position to fully understand Othello's attraction to Iago's scheme.

When he hears Iago speak of strangling Desdemona in her bed, Othello, who has already cried out, "Hang her!", who has already evinced his interest in attacking Desdemona through the mouth, suddenly "recovers" in his unconscious early memory traces associated with smothering and with his desire for the mother's breast. To "stifle" Desdemona is to retaliate with perfect accuracy by enacting upon her a lethal version of the
primary union he wished for in his marriage, the primary union that Desdemona has denied him by her betrayal, by her defection to the "other," to Cassio. Thus, in planning to strangle Desdemona Othello does not simply prepare to placate the internalized father, to expiate his attempt to secure narcissistic supplies through objectionable means, in line with Reid's formulations; he also prepares for the enactment of his oral rage upon the mother for having rejected him, for having withheld narcissitic supplies in the first place. "The justice of its pleases" both the introjected superego figure and the rejected son; in one ambivalent gesture Othello is able to satisfy a longing for vengeance that is rooted in his oral as well as in his genital development, a longing for vengeance which derives its essential energy from two deflected drives.

Instrumental in bringing Othello to the verge of revenge is, of course, the handkerchief, and while it functions importantly as "evidence" of Desdemona's guilt, it functions even more importantly as a symbol, a symbol which expresses not only the nature of Othello's union with the heroine but the nature of his union with his parents, the union upon which his marriage preoedipally rests. Again, as we shall see when we examine the murder scene, the handkerchief lights up the tragedy's oral dimension through the over-determined design that is sewn into it and that becomes linked at a crucial moment with the rival's (Cassio's) mouth. Finally, and most important of all perhaps, the to-do over the handkerchief, the search for it, underscores through its explicit connection with the mother the tragedy's crucial formal disguise, a disguise that aligns Othello with Oedipus Rex and with Hamlet and that differentiates it from a play like Ajax. I mean that the handkerchief serves as the basic mechanism through which the quest for the mother, the attempt to find the mother by going, as it were, behind her ambivalence, is displaced; the quest for the mother is disguised as another quest at the secondary level and in such a way as to draw us into empathetic involvement with the primary material.

The play announces in Acts Three and Four that the truth of the handkerchief's whereabouts is a central preoccupation, a mystery that the hero must solve; but this mystery is explicitly related to the mother, and even more, to the mother as she figures into problems of fidelity, loyalty, trust, and betrayal. The handkerchief is thus analytically significant in the same way that the search for the father's murderer is analytically significant in Hamlet and in Oedipus Rex; it is an indication of the manner in which Shakespeare must distance the play's deepest interest, the interst in the maternal mystery, the riddle of the mother's ambivalence, the problem of her inevitable betrayal, by substituting one quest, the basic quest, for another related quest which keeps the audience "on the track" but not directly or undisguisedly so.

The displacement of the basic quest is weaker in Othello than it is in Hamlet and in Oedipus Rex; the deeper significance of the quest for the handkerchief is closer to the surface than the deeper significance of the quest for the father-killers; this is because Shakespeare, with the actual mother absent, can approximate the crucial issue very closely through a reliance upon the audience's awareness of the projective nature of the action, its awareness of the degree to which the hero's fantasies create the "situation." Ultimately this is a powerful technique, one that mobilizes far more anxiety than might be expected at first glance; and in a later section we will explore the analytic and formal reasons for this. Our business here is to concentrate upon key lines surrounding the handkerchief in order to round out the suggestions we have just made about its multiple significance.

His suspicions aroused, Othello asks Desdemona to let him see the handkerchief (III.iv.52); Desdemona no longer has the thing, of course, and so replies, "I have it not about me." "Not?" asks Othello, who then goes on to describe for his wife the handkerchief's origins and the "mythology" associated with it. He says:

That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while
she kept it
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my
father
Entirely to her love, but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed and his spirits should
hunt
After new fancies. She dying gave it me,
And bid me, when my fate would have me
wive,
To give it her. I did so. And take heed on't,
Make it a darling like your precious eye.
To lose't or giv't away were such perdition
As nothing else could match.

To this remarkable speech Desdemona replies, "Is it possible?" to which Othello responds in an even more remarkable series of lines:

'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it.
A sibyl, that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work,
The worms were hallowed that did breed the
silk,
And it was dyed in mummy which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts.

One notices, first of all, the manner in which Othello's employment of his charm argues underlying insecurity. The handkerchief is explicitly connected not only with the mother but with the idealized view of the parents' marriage. The marriage was perfect as Othello defines perfect: the mother did not lose the handkerchief and so the father never strayed, nor did the mother, who held fast to the father. The progenitors of Othello were faithful, and such a view Othello uses, of course, to maintain his psychic equilibrium, for "father" is the simplified, unalloyed model of superego formation, and of the ego ideal, and "mother," being "true," poses no threat of incestuous involvement, as one able to "stray" might pose. The point is, Othello has used this object—the handkerchief—in an effort to achieve a similar union with his wife; he has depended, through the object, upon his parents to help him forge a marriage which he himself does not feel able to forge without the parents' aid. This becomes doubly clear when we recall the immediate dramatic context in which Othello reveals the secrets of the handkerchief to Desdemona; he has sided with Iago in that he believes Desdemona to be false, and so he can use the handkerchief to reproach her for failing to approximate the perfect union which the handkerchief was magically supposed to bring about. There is, then, an aggressive intention in Othello's revelation of the handkerchief's "magic." What this all boils down to is that Othello has employed the handkerchief as a "transitional object," an object that would enable him to separate himself from one psychic position,—associated with the good mother introject, with the repression of sexual aims, with castration anxiety, with a brittle, compensatory self-esteem, with a rigid ego ideal, and with buried anger at the mother for her betrayal—and to move toward another position. In marrying Desdemona Othello relinquishes the isolation that protected him so thoroughly and embarks upon a course that mobilizes unconscious fears bound up with the mother whose place is now being taken by the wife. Thus the separation and reunion that Othello is undertaking in the play is primarily maternal, and he relies upon the handkerchief's power to ease him through this separation and into a new arrangement which will be safe insofar as it will preserve the kind of relationship to the mother that is expressed by the handkerchief, a relationship in which the good object governs, in which the idealized parental marriage obtains, in which repressions are maintained in both the husband and the controlled spouse. "The transitional object represents not only the mother's breast and body but the total maternal environment as it is experienced in combination with sensations from the infant's body.
It serves as a support and 'convoy' during that period of rapid growth which necessitates increasing separation from the mother. The infantile fetish, although related to the transitional object, is the product of marked disturbance in infancy and is a defensive measure in response to great need stemming from early inadequate object relationships. The fetish is more concretized in its form and use, and tends to be permanently incorporated into the individual's life, constricting further development of object relationships. The transitional object which arises at about the same time (the end of the first year and early in the second year of life) is chosen and created by the child as a 'faithful protective escort.' Its softness and pliability are useful at a time when the infant's perceptions and physical relationships with the outer world are changing and when speech is in the process of formation. Thus it lends itself to symbolic representation. The transitional object plays a role in promoting illusion formation. By relating new experiences back to earlier ones, it lends illusory support to new experiences and helps the infant to investigate and widen his interests. The fetish represents a replacement of breast and penis and may gain anal-genital significance. By its solidity and durability of form, it may consolidate the illusion of maternal supplementation to the body in children whose early relationship to the mother has been 'not good enough.' The transitional object aids growth.\textsuperscript{14}

In this way, Othello is not simply separating from the internalized mother and using the handkerchief as a "convoy" to the new mother; he is attempting by its use to "relate his new experience back to his earlier one," to preserve the acceptable "maternal environment" in which, with regard to his inner world, his inner presences, he has dwelled for so long. That the strawberry design upon the handkerchief signifies the maternal environment, and more particularly, the breast and the nipple,\textsuperscript{15} further underscores the oral substructure of the action, the manner in which the hero's deepest anxieties are grounded in pregenital fixations and stresses, the manner in which the reactivation of the early wound and of the defenses associated with it is largely bound up with the object relation between mother and infant, the object relation that governs the course of later development through the anal and phallic stages.

But if we look at these lines more carefully we spy further analytic significances. In spite of the use to which he puts it, in spite of what he insists upon making it out to be, what Othello says about the handkerchief ironically belies his idealized views. Notice, for example, that the story of the handkerchief underscores the splitting of the maternal object in which the entire play is grounded; the handkerchief comes from the hand of an Egyptian, a kind of gypsy in Shakespeare's day, and it contains, as Othello reveals inadvertently, a strong sexual charm insofar as it prevents the father from straying, from fancying others; because the mother must not innately possess the sexual power to hold the father, because that would be unthinkable in her nature, she gets it from the outside, from one who is in reality a version of her own unacceptable sexuality, the side of her that is not supposed to exist. In this way, the Egyptian and Othello's mother are but divided images of the maternal figure, in Freud's words, "the divided images of a single prototype," and Othello's reliance upon the handkerchief to forge another false, idealized union is doomed to failure: the handkerchief expresses, over Othello's head and to the audience, \textit{the very lack of integration, the very inability to reach and to maintain ambivalence, that ultimately causes him to succumb to the seductions of Iago}. The "magic" in the "web" of the handkerchief is ironically the magical thinking that Othello has attached to it, a magical thinking that repeats, again ironically, the magical thinking of his own mother who used the "napkin" in such a way as to deny the realities of her own nature. We have here a striking insight into the generational passing-on of similar marital difficulties, a certain kind of mother moulding a certain kind of son who becomes a certain kind of husband. It is in this sense that the handkerchief is slightly sinister or weird; it speaks for reliance not upon true feeling, integration, personality strength, love, to forge a marriage, but upon outside influences (in this case the maternal influence) to preserve defenses which permit the maintenance of a psychic equilibrium that is grounded in splitting, repression, the denial of one's full humanity and one's strong erotic aims. The "hallowed" worms and the blood of maidens' hearts which provide the materials for the handkerchief give magnificent expression of this. Through sympathetic magic the object that is to preserve the idealized marriage, maintain the repression, support the original split is composed of "stuff that signifies in a prototypical fashion the idealized object and the idealized mother. Finally, through a simple replacement by the opposite we are able to spy the negative significations of this magical, fantastic handkerchief: As its
purpose is to preserve the idealized union, it is also to prevent the supersedure of another kind of union; it is there because the problem of betrayal is such a pressing one; the idealized objects are human after all; the threat of the straying husband is particularly great because the mother is alienated from her sexuality; the perfect marriage, in a word, is grounded in self-deception and repression. As Othello remarks, to lose the handkerchief is "perdition," for to lose it is to loose the repressed energies that lie behind the idealized union that is based, in turn, upon splitting. The "napkin" lost, mother is no longer what she is supposed to be and father does what he is not supposed to do, and this is, of course, precisely the threat that Othello confronts in the now of the action; Desdemona is upon the verge of transformation from good to bad object and Othello is about to experience aims that he is not supposed to harbor. Everything the handkerchief protects against exists; everything the handkerchief protects against is viable. In the last analysis, then, the handkerchief attests to the persistence of repression grounded in the mother-infant interaction. Perhaps this is best expressed by the manner in which the loss of the handkerchief is dramatically associated with the rival, with the one for whom Desdemona has ostensibly betrayed the hero.

When Iago confronts Othello with the handkerchief's loss, suggesting that Desdemona bestowed it upon Cassio, he does not simply state that he has seen it in Cassio's possession; in a moment of magnificent villainous intuition he touches upon Othello's tenderest spot, upon Othello's oral wound, by claiming that he has recently spied Cassio wiping his beard with the thing, and this immediately after calling the hero's attention to the strawberry pattern, the symbolic significance of which we have already examined. The notion of the handkerchief at Cassio's mouth ([III.iii.439]), the notion, to express it in terms of primary process, of the rival at the mother's nipple, is almost too much for Othello to bear. "If it be that—" he says chokingly, and a moment later he goes on in one of his most regressive, frenzied, and revealing utterances:

Oh, that the slave had forty thousand lives!
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.
Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago,
All my fond love thus do I blow to Heaven—
'Tis gone.
Arise, black Vengeance, from thy hollow cell!
Yield up, O Love; thy crown and hearted
thron
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy
fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues! ...
Oh, blood, blood, blood!

(III.iii.442)

It is this "blood" that is associatively and symbolically linked to the maidens' blood in which the handkerchief is dyed. Thinking, then, upon Cassio's mouth, upon the betrayal which, through the handkerchief, probes the Moor's psychic wound down to the early oral level, we better appreciate the analytic significance of the manner in which Othello informs Desdemona of Cassio's supposed death. After reminding Desdemona, who is in her bed and about to be murdered, that Cassio is in possession of the handkerchief, and after listening to her deny that she gave it to him, Othello tells his wife that Cassio will never be able to deny the adulterous betrayal because, as Othello puts it, Cassio's "mouth is stopped" (V.ii.71). Othello's revenge upon Cassio is, then, largely a matter of stopping Cassio's mouth, of stopping his usurpation of narcissistic supplies which derive from the maternal breast, and which fill the infant's void, apprehended gastrointestinally by the primitive body ego, and later, apprehended existentially by the miserable, vulnerable adult who transposes the neglected stomach into cosmic symbols: "the meaningless universe," "the abyss," "the emptiness of the world," etc. "Had all his hairs been lives," says Othello moments after he has told Desdemona that Cassio's mouth is stopped, "my great revenge / Had stomach for them all."
But let us take up the murder scene from its inception in an effort to fit it into the tragic pattern we are
developing, in an effort to disclose its analytic significance, its connection with Othello's regressive defense
against the reactivation of his early wound, the lifting of his repression, the arousal of what Rheingold would
call the Moor's catastrophic death complex, remembering as we proceed that murder, especially matricidal
murder, is a way of protecting the self from intolerable injury and unbearable anxiety, a proposition that is
vividly exemplified in *Oedipus Rex*.

We might notice, first of all, the numerous oral images and behaviors that surround and accompany the act of
 strangulation, the oral significance of which we have previously noted. Approaching his victim as she sleeps
in her bed (a place for feeding the infant as well as gratifying the husband), Othello is interested primarily in
smelling his wife, in breathing her *breath*, in getting close to her *mouth*, in touching her lips with his lips. It is
the *pregenital* quality of this behavior that allows Othello to derive sensual gratification from the homicidal
moment without offending the introjected father. Snuffing the flame of the candle he holds in his hand—an
obvious anticipatory symbolic gesture—the hero says,

> When I have plucked the rose
> I cannot give it vital growth again,
> It needs must wither. I'll *smell* it on the
> tree.
> Ah, *balmy breath*, that dost almost
> persuade
> Justice to break her sword! One more, one
> more.
> Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill
> thee,
> And love thee after. One more, and this the
> last.
> So *sweet* was ne'er so fatal.
> (V.ii. 13-20, italics added)

It might be wise to recall here the extent to which Othello has used a similar "mouth-breath imagery" in the
immediate dramatic context. "I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips" (III.iii.341), he cries as Iago awakens his
doubts; "I had been happy if the general camp, / Pioners and all, had *tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing
known*" (345-347, italics added). And again, from the same scene,

> No, to be once in doubt
> Is once to be resolved. Exchange me for a
> goat
> When I shall turn the business of my soul
> To such *exsufficate and blown surmises,*
> Matching thy inference …

> 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.*
> (179-183, 260-264, italics added)

There is simply no stopping this. Here, for example, are passages which we have looked at in another context
and which we might profitably glance at again now:
Oh, that the slave had forty thousand lives!
One is too poor, too weak, for my revenge.
Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago,
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven—
'Tis gone.

(443-446, italics added)

A moment later:

Yield up. O Love, they crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues.

(447-449, italics added)

Lie with her! "Zounds, that's fulsome! Hand- Kerchief—confessions—handkerchief!—To confess, and be hanged for his labor. First to be hanged, and then to confess.

(IV.i.35-39, italics added)

From the next scene:

What committed!
Committed! O thou public commoner!
I should make very forges of my cheeks
That would to cinders burn up modesty
Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!
Heaven stops the nose at it, and the moon winks.
The bawdy wind, that kisses all it meets,
Is hushed within the hollow mine of earth
And will not hear it.

(IV.ii.72-80, italics added)

Returning to the murder scene and still with oral imagery in mind, we must note that Othello, after making it clear to Desdemona that she is about to die, commands:

… confess thee freely of thy sin,
For to deny each article with oath
Cannot remove nor choke the strong conception
That I do groan withal.

(53-56, italics added)

But Othello's behavior toward Desdemona harbors even deeper meanings than those uncovered by connecting his oral images with the reactivation of his repressed desires. Commentators have long recognized that Othello appears to be acting like a priest or sacrificer as he goes about his business during the murder scene, that he seems to be involved in some sort of ritual, and indeed, Othello himself remarks at one point in the scene that Desdemona's exclamations are transforming his "sacrifice" into a "murder" (V.ii.65), something that distresses him profoundly. With this in mind, let us examine this scene closely as one that contains sacrificial behaviors,
using Hubert and Mauss' definitive exploration of sacrifice as a guide to the underlying analytic significances. I would make clear at the outset, however, that I do not regard Othello's murder of Desdemona as a sacrifice and that my close adherence to the actualities of sacrifice is designed to point up the manner in which Othello's conduct shares with real sacrifices specific affective goals. In other words, Othello is attempting to accomplish through his destruction of Desdemona those emotive aims which are accomplished in actual sacrifice.

Hubert and Mauss begin by informing us that "sacrifice always implies a consecration; in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain; it is consecrated. But not all consecrations are of the same kind. In some the effects are limited to the consecrated object, be it a man or a thing. This is, for example, the case with unction. When a king is consecrated, his religious personality alone is modified; apart from this, nothing is changed. In sacrifice, on the other hand, the consecration extends beyond the thing consecrated; among other objects, it touches the moral person who bears the expenses of the ceremony. The devotee who provides the victim which is the object of the consecration is not, at the completion of the operation, the same as he was at the beginning. He has acquired a religious character which he did not have before, or has rid himself of an unfavorable character with which he was affected; he has raised himself to a state of grace or has emerged from a state of sin. In either case he has been religiously transformed." The point, of course, is that we must regard Othello's behavior during the murder scene as ultimately egocentric or narcissistic. Every motivation which drives him is designed to afford him a specific gratification. Thinking upon this from a multilevel perspective, and calling to mind once again the quotation from Hubert and Mauss, we might say in a preliminary manner that Othello's deed—the murder of Desdemona—has the purpose of allaying his anxiety in the face of his internal persecutors, the maternal superego which threatens him with retributive annihilation and the internalized father—represented in the play by Venice—which threatens him with withdrawal of approval; the internalized authorities, female and male, are outraged by Othello's fantasy participation in the primal scene and by his proximity to the object of his repressed, unacceptable impulses. Othello, as we have suggested earlier, turns the matter the other way around through projection: It is Desdemona who is bad and Othello will destroy her so that she will not, as he says, "betray more men." In other words, the hero will serve his internalized moralistic agency by retaliating upon the object that has caused him to betray his own conscience: It is Othello—and here again are the words of Hubert and Mauss—who is in a "state of sin"; it is Othello who would "rise to a state of grace," who would "rid himself of an unfavorable character," and recapture a former identity, by destroying the sacrificial victim. Thus the defense of projection which creates the hero's entire fantasy world—sparked into life by the probing of Iago—stands finally behind the killing of Desdemona. Needless to say, such a defence is an integral part of all sacrificial behaviors and is epitomized in the very notion of victim or scapegoat, the animal who bears the sin of the other, the animal into which one has projected his own unacceptable or "evil" aims. Hubert and Mauss highlight this unconscious signification when they write of the ambivalence and guilt experienced in relation to the sacrificial victim: "While the victim was being led to the place of slaughter, some rituals prescribed libations and expiations. Excuses were made for the act that was about to be carried out, the death of the animal was lamented, one wept for it as one would weep for a relative. Its pardon was asked before it was struck down. The rest of the species to which it belonged were harangued, as if they were one vast family, entreated not to avenge the wrong about to be done them in the person of one of their number. Under the influence of these same ideas the instigator of the slaughter might be punished by beating or exile. At Athens the priest at the sacrifice of the Bouphonia fled, casting his axe away. All those who had taken part in the sacrifice were called to the Prytaneion. They threw the blame upon each other. Finally, the knife was condemned and thrown into the sea." It is precisely because the victim of the sacrifice is always an unconscious representation of one's own relative or loved one that this ambivalence and guilt obtains. The projective defence is, while adequate, not perfect.

Further light is shed upon this matter by Hubert and Mauss when they write that the thing consecrated "serves as an intermediary" between the one who is doing the sacrificing—note that Othello has taken on the role of both priest and layman, a symbolic departure from religious sacrifice—and the divinity "to whom the sacrifice
is usually addressed. Man and the god are not in direct contact. In this way sacrifice is distinguished from most of the facts grouped under the heading of blood covenant, in which by the exchange of blood a direct fusion of human and divine life is brought about."18 We are reminded here that Othello is concerned with reestablishing contact with his moral center, in this case with the punitive superego that has resulted from his early experience with the mother, his splitting of her image into good and bad representations, his strong repressed impulses, his unconscious anger, and his turning to the father as a substitute object, which may have harbored a guilt-inducing element of retaliation toward mother (she betrayed me, so I'll betray her and go to father). To put our first and second major points together by way of partial summary, we can say that Othello's need to approximate a state of grace and to emerge from a state of sin by consecrating his victim is a need to avoid self-rejection, or rejection by all the significant presences of his endogenous world, a need to reaffirm contact with the part of himself that issues compensatory narcissistic supplies, supplies that gratify the idealized self-image that substitutes for genuine self-esteem, the kind that emerges from a gratifying mother-infant interaction. When Hubert and Mauss point out that in sacrifice there is always an element of expiation and an element of communication, that we would "seek in vain for examples of an expiatory sacrifice into which no element of communion is interpolated, or for examples of communion sacrifices which do not in some respect resemble expiatory ones,"19 they remind us of something which Shakespeare effectively captures for us in Othello through the reactivation of the hero's early experience and the murder of Desdemona, namely that guilt and separation go together, that in the former there is always the threat of the latter. Othello's "sacrifice" would obviate the threat of separation from his customary source of narcissistic supplies by re-establishing contact (communion) with Good Mother and Good Father, by restoring Desdemona to them, and the need for such contact is rooted in his guilt, guilt attendant upon his "descent," his participation in primal materials.

As the hero goes about his business we note his frequent references to light, to heavenly bodies, stars, heaven itself (V.ii.1-83); psychologically, he appears to be rising off the ground, moving up, extending himself toward the sky, as if he were above what he is actually doing. This is, of course, an aspect of Othello's desire to offset his descent into the pit, the cistern of foul toads, hell, damnation, darkness, the metaphorical equivalents of the mother's forfended parts, her engulfing, terrifying power. He will rise toward the heavens, toward the divine image of the Good Mother, the "chaste star." This upward psychological movement calls to mind specific aspects of Renaissance thought, highlights the analytic significance of the "chain of being," the notion of hierarchy, the universal order which projectively affirms the order of the family and of society, particularly the boundaries that must be fixed during the parent-child interaction, the boundaries that ultimately create the order of the inner world. Othello provokes "chaos" or "disorder" as he falls under the influence of maternal power; he gravitates psychologically in a direction that offends the Father and that threatens the patriarchal establishment. During the murder scene Othello binds his aggressive impulses through a ritual that ostensibly affirms order but that actually masks his longing to revenge the oral outrage. We will pursue this more thoroughly in a moment; to be stressed at this juncture is the degree to which the hero's "heavenly" imagery (V.ii) constitutes exemplification of his need to expiate his own undivulged fantasy crimes. As Hubert and Mauss express it in a passage dealing with actual practices, "sacrifice is a religious act that can only be carried out in a religious atmosphere and by means of essentially religious agents. But, in general, before the ceremony neither sacrificer nor sacrificer, nor place, instruments, or victim, possess this characteristic to a suitable degree. The first phase of the sacrifice is intended to impart it to them. They are profane; their condition must be changed. To do this, rites are necessary to introduce them into the sacred world and involve them in it, more or less profoundly, according to the importance of the part they have subsequently to play... As soon as the priests have been selected, a whole series of symbolic ceremonies begins for the sacrificer. These will progressively strip him of the temporal being that he possessed, in order to cause him to be reborn in an entirely new form. All that touches upon the gods must be divine; the sacrificer is obliged to become a god himself in order to be capable of acting upon them."20 Othello, then, is attempting to strip himself of his own profanity, to touch the gods as it were; however, as we have suggested, his usurpation of the religious place, his attempt to become both priest and sacrificer, violates the order he claims to uphold and makes a travesty of the ritual. Indeed, Othello simply uses his power of fantasy, the power that has guided
him all along, to achieve his state of grace. If he must "move upwards," then he will do so by affirming one aspect of his intrapsychic world and negating another. The murder scene is ritual gone mad in the arbitrary projection of regressive, hysterical fantasies. Othello "passes from the world of men into the world of the gods;" he eliminates "the imperfections of his secular nature, cutting him off from the common life," and introduces himself into "the sacred world of the gods." Ordinarily, say Hubert and Mauss, this introduction to the gods is accomplished through the priest, through the "minister" who stands "on the threshold of the sacred and the profane world." This, in a tragic sense, is precisely where Othello stands.

The Moor's association with actual fire has precisely the same significance as his association with "heaven." In sacrifice "the fire is the slayer of demons. It is even more than this: it is the god, it is Agni in his complete form. In the same way, according to certain Biblical legends also, the fire of sacrifice is none other than the divinity itself, which consumes the victim, or, to put it more exactly, the fire is the sign of consecration which sets it on fire. What is divine in the fire of the Hindu sacrifice is thus transmitted to the place of sacrifice and consecrates it. This site consisted of a fairly large rectangular space, called the vihara. The quenching of the candle ("Put out the light") realizes symbolically the absence of this divine element from the scene as a whole. With one mortal breath the fire disappears, "put out" by one who believes it may be rekindled at any time, that is, by one who misses its deeper significance, who regards the "flaming minister" as his own servant to be employed at will. Thus does Othello take upon himself the function of the godhead, with his wilfulness and sense of omnipotence constituting an integral part of his generalized regression to earlier psychic stages.

We said some moments ago that Othello strives to reestablish positive contact with his internalized presences by returning Desdemona to the maternal and paternal superego, by employing her as a sacrificial bridge to what he projectively regards as "heaven," the symbolical counterpart of his puritanical conscience. To explore this aspect of Othello's behavior is to confront a difficult problem, one that points up the complexity of Othello's motivation, its basic confusion; the problem to which I refer is resolved dramatically through the mechanism of splitting, a mechanism that has characterized Othello's behavior all along and that directs us toward the aggressive and sexual drives which operate "beneath" the hero's ritualistic, sacrificial action. Dealing with the moment of death, Hubert and Mauss maintain, "For the most part it was wished that death should be prompt, and the passage of the victim from its earthly life to its divine one was hastened so as not to leave evil influences time to vitiate the sacrificial act. If the animal's cries were held to be bad omens, an attempt was made to stifle or prevent them. Often, in order to avoid any possible deviations once consecration had taken place, the attempt was made to control the effusion of the consecrated blood. Care was taken that it fell only on a favourable spot, or things were so arranged that not a single drop of it was shed. Sometimes, however, these precautions were considered unnecessary." And again, "Through this act of destruction the essential action of the sacrifice was accomplished. The victim was separated definitively from the profane world; it was consecrated, it was sacrificed, in the etymological sense of the word, and various languages gave the name sanctification to the act which brought that condition about. The victim changed its nature, as did Demophoon, as did Achilles, as did the son of the King of Byblos, when Demeter, Thetis, and Isis consumed their humanity in the fire. Its death was like that of the phoenix: it was reborn sacred. But the phenomenon that occurred at that moment had another aspect. If on the one hand the spirit was released, if it had passed completely 'behind the veil' into the world of the gods, the body of the animal on the other hand remained visible and tangible. And it too, by the fact of consecration, was filled with a sacred force that excluded it from the profane world. In short, the sacrificed victim resembled the dead whose souls dealt at one and the same time in the other world and in the corpse. Thus its remains were treated with a religious respect: honours were paid to them. The slaughter thus left a sacred matter behind it, and it was this, as we shall now see, that served to procure the useful effects of the sacrifice. For this purpose it was submitted to a double series of operations. What survived of the animal was attributed entirely to the sacred world, attributed entirely to the profane world, or shared between the two." With these remarks in mind we begin to grasp that Othello is attempting to heal the divisiveness in his own personality, to reintegrate himself, by destroying Desdemona in such a way as to satisfy in one ritualistic act both aspects of the split version of the mother which inform his mentation and which stand behind his enormous anxiety and his enormous rage. At one level Desdemona will
be *consecrated*, sacrificed, restored to the pristine condition which preceded her fall, the only condition acceptable to the internalized parents. Othello must "lay his hands on the victim" but in such a way as to leave her "perfect," unmarked, unblemished; no evidence of violation, of outrage, will exist: "I'll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow." At another level, of course, Othello lays his hands upon Desdemona in order to vent his oral outrage, to release his aggression, to revenge the betrayal, the deception, the trickery of the "strumpet." This we explored throughly in the earlier section on the analytic meaning of the strangling. Thus, it is not simply that the ritualistic sacrifice is employed as a rationalization for the murder, rooted in oral outrage; Othello feels a deep, genuine need to act in a manner that will appease the internal persecutors who are outraged by *his* activated aims. He protects himself by projecting these aims into Desdemona, and finally, *by destroying them through her*; he obliterates his wife to placate inner voices; in this way, *his destruction of Desdemona is a destruction of himself*, a defensive annihilation of forces in his own personality which he cannot master, an act of partial self-destruction in homage to the conscience, an act that is completed when he actually suicides at the play's close.

When we view these conflicting aims together—revenge for oral outrage and placating the superego—, aims which mirror the hero's early development, particularly with regard to the splitting of the maternal object, the withdrawal of catheaxes from the mother, and the turning to the father's world, we better understand the manner in which Othello's punitive superego and the anxiety generated therefrom determine the kind of sensuality he displays toward Desdemona as he goes about murdering her. I mean that the obviously erotic aspect of Othello's behavior takes an entirely pregenital form. Othello smells his wife, he touches her with his lips while she sleeps, he looks at her, takes her in with his eyes and nostrils; not only is all of this acceptable to the hero's internal guides, it is, in one particular sense, encouraged by them; Othello can love orally with minimal anxiety because oral love expresses pregenital desire, the desire of the child; any other kind of love on Othello's part would not be acceptable to the maternal and paternal superego. We apprehend here the origin of Othello's *tension* in the murder scene as a whole; we see how the "higher" forces of conscience go hand in hand with the "lower" forces of oral eroticism. Specifically, these so-called higher forces check the hero's genital sexuality, arrest it, impede its expression; while this occurs, the hero's oral aims emerge in all their intensity; the orality, then, "cooperates with," indeed *reinforces* the controlling influences of conscience which, in turn, reinforce or encourage the orality. In this way, Othello is able to love Desdemona, to murder Desdemona, and to sacrifice Desdemona *at the same time*. However, when we explore Desdemona's behavior in the murder scene, her response to Othello's "sacrificial intention," her own unconscious attitude toward her victimization, we will grasp more thoroughly the full significance of Shakespeare's ritualistic intention.

Thus far we have been dealing with sacrifice in which the victim is *consecrated*, in which the victim is magically transformed by the priest into an object fit to serve as an intermediary between man and god, and we have seen how this relates to Othello's conflicting aims, his desire on the one hand to destroy Desdemona and on the other to leave her unmarked, unviolated, perfect. We have also pointed out that in reality the victim *had* to be made perfect because it "carried" the projected version of the sacrificer's guilt, and that the function of the priest was in reality to "remove" this guilt from the victim through the consecrating ceremony so that the victim would be acceptable to the god. The victim, in short, is the scapegoat of the sacrificer's troubled conscience and the priest is the magical remover of projected taint. In Shakespeare's tragedy, where Othello is both sacrificer and priest, the one who benefits and the one who purifies, this consecrating action is never accomplished, or accomplished only abortively; because Othello projects his aims into Desdemona, and because there is no way for him to stop doing this and have at the same time cause to destroy her, Desdemona is simply made as "perfect" as possible, acceptable as possible to the "heavens" of Othello's private world, by remaining unmarked in her death. But there is another condition in which the victim might find itself at the time of sacrifice, a condition that further illuminates observations made previously, that helps us to understand the relation of Desdemona's conduct to Othello's, and that brings us to a perspective from which the affective, unconscious *unity of all sacrifice* clearly emerges.
Briefly, the victim in sacrifice may not be made perfect, may not be consecrated to the divinity in a purified state. On the contrary, the victim may quite explicitly take on the sins of the sacrificer and in the act of sacrificial destruction bear them away so as to cleanse the sacrificer’s soul. When this occurs the victim does not go to the gods but is simply destroyed, and the gods are pacified not by the arrival of the intermediary but by the removal of the sinfulness from the sacrificer. Here, of course, the role of victim as scapegoat, as the bearer of the “sinner’s” impulses and deeds, is obvious; we understand that in the first kind of sacrifice “sin” is projected into the victim and then removed by the priest, and that in the second kind “sin” is also transferred from sacrificer to victim through projection but that it is then “left” there to be obliterated in death. Clearly, projection is the basic mechanism upon which all sacrifice is based, and projection is ultimately grounded in social restrictions; we project aims and impulses which we have been trained to consider unacceptable. Sacrifice thus removes the tension within the individual who is unable to follow the rules perfectly; sacrifice allows the individual to preserve a social and intrapsychic equilibrium; it allows societal restrictions to continue effective; it is the institutional counterpart of psychological flexibility. Now when we think on Desdemona’s behavior in this scene after she is taken by surprise and strangled, when we think of her attempt to shield Othello by claiming to have killed herself—”Oh, who hath done this deed?” asks Emilia; ”Nobody, I myself,” replies Desdemona—we realize that the murder scene offers us two versions of the victim, one Othello’s and one Desdemona’s. Othello strives to consecrate Desdemona in line with his conscience and pregenital sexuality, and Desdemona strives to bear away the sin, to become a scapegoat in the immediate and obvious sense. The murder scene, in a word, is based upon a conflict of rituals surrounding the victim, and it is from this conflict that the scene’s emotive power proceeds. That Desdemona’s struggle to become another kind of victim aligns her quite obviously with the martyrs, that it is rooted in her powerful self-destructive impulses, impulses which emerge during the play’s third and fourth acts, I have delineated in detail elsewhere. Here it will be enough to say that Desdemona, in her attempt to shield the hero, exudes the atmosphere of the sacrificing maternal figure, the archetype of the Good Mother whose shelter does not entail the terror of engulfment and regressive libidinal aims but succor, nourishment, protection. That Othello is eager to annihilate such a creature, and to call her “strumpet” in the process, measures with tragic irony his blindness, his total immersion in projective fantasy.

Having came this far, one realizes that what Othello is striving for as he destroys Desdemona is not simply the gratification of his oral outrage and the pacification of his conscience but the reestablishment of his former identity, in a way, the rebirth of the Othello who existed before the “descent,” before the reactivation of forbidden aims. To a degree, the murder of Desdemona is an act of undoing. As Hubert and Mauss make clear, the rebirth of the sacrificer is the cardinal aim of sacrifice. “We have seen the symbols which identify the dikshita with a foetus, then a Brahmin and a god. We know the importance of the doctrines of rebirth in the Greek mysteries, the Scandinavian and Celtic mythologies, the cult of Osiris, the Hindu and Avestan theologies, and even in Christian dogma. Now very often these doctrines are linked distinctly with the accomplishment of certain sacrificial rites: the consuming of the cake at Eleusis, of the soma, of the Iranian hoama, etc. Often a change of name marks this re-creation of the individual. We know that in religious belief the name is closely linked with the personality of him who bears it: it contains something of his soul. Now sacrifice is accompanied fairly frequently by a change of name.” And again, ”This vitalizing power of sacrifice is not limited to life here below, but is extended to the future life. In the course of religious evolution the notion of sacrifice has been linked to ideas concerning the immortality of the soul. On this point we have nothing to add to the theories of Rohde, Jevons, and Nutt on the Greek mysteries, with which must be compared the facts cited by S. Lévi taken from the teachings of the Brahmanas, and those that Bergaigne and Darmesteter had already gleaned from the Vedic and Avestan texts. The relationship that connects Christian communion with everlasting salvation must also be maintained. However important these facts may be, their importance must not be exaggerated. So long as the belief in immortality is not disentangled from the crude theology of sacrifice it remains vague. It is the "non-death" (amritam) of the soul that is ensured by sacrifice. It is a guarantee against annihilation in the other life as well as in this.” Clearly then, Othello’s “sacrifice” of Desdemona is proof to his internalized gods and goddesses, the pregenital introjects of mother and father, that he is, after all, what they have taken him to be all along. What is the upshot?
When it becomes clear to Othello that Desdemona is innocent, that he has destroyed one who did indeed reflect the perfection of Good Mother, the hero is confronted once again with annihilation, this time at the hands of those to whom he turned for support upon experiencing the original rejection, namely the Fathers, those who came to mould his paternal superego as well as his ego ideal. At the same time, Othello, through the destruction of Desdemona, has lost the maternal object with whom he recently united or, from a stricter psychological angle, reunited, and he is faced again with a loss that recalls the early trauma of maternal separation. In this way, the murder of Desdemona ironically causes the old and terrible pattern to repeat itself. The hero experiences an abandonment—"O Desdemona! Desdemona! Dead! Oh! Oh! Oh!"—and a loss of self-esteem—"O fool! Fool! Fool!"—that leave him virtually without resources. That he longs to turn to Father in this crisis is clear from the way in which he refers to the strawberry handkerchief seconds before the full truth is out. "It was a handkerchief," he says to Gratanio who represents the Venetian Senators, "an antique token / My father gave my mother." This is not a slip on Shakespeare's part (Othello earlier claimed that an Egyptian gave his mother "the napkin"). Othello is now using the very same transitional object as a means of making contact with the Father, the Father he wants frantically to substitute again for the mother's loss. However, what Othello does not experience here is the realization that his version of Desdemona was grounded entirely in his own projections, that he bears the aims he ascribed to her. This never occurs to him. When commentators claim, as they often do, that Othello fails to really understand the forces which drove him to the murder, that he dies ignorant and unchastened, they mean, to put it in precise analytical language, that Othello never gets at the projective nature of his accusations against Desdemona; he never sees himself as the morally corrupt agent of destruction; to an extent he blames Iago, and rightly so; but in the hour of his suicidal death—as witnessed by his final speech—he is concerned overwhelmingly with the reestablishment of his former greatness, with his after-death reputation, with the way in which Venice, the Father, will think of him, and not with his own error and guilt; these, in fact, are ancillary matters. Hubert and Mauss point out that many gods are said to have died by their own hand; without going into considerable detail, we may suggest that "in these sacrifices the god and the victim are especially homogenous," and that the sacrifice, "of itself, effects an exaltation of the victims, which renders them directly divine." These authors go on, "There are numerous legends in which these apotheoses are related. Herakles was not admitted to Olympus until his suicide on Oeta. Attis and Eshmun were animated after death with a divine life. The constellation of Virgo in none other than Erigone, an agrarian goddess who hanged herself. In Mexico a myth relates that the sun and moon were created by a sacrifice. The goddess Toci, mother of the gods, was also presented as a woman whom sacrifice made divine." And finally, "The sacrificial apotheosis is none other than the rebirth of the victim. Its divinization is a special case and a superior kind of sanctification and separation. But this form hardly occurs save in sacrifices where, by localizing, concentrating, and accumulating a sacred character, the victim is invested with the highest degree of sanctity—a sanctity organized and personified in the sacrifice." The point is, Othello's initial failure at rebirth, a failure contained in the murder of Desdemona, is followed by a second attempt, an attempt contained in the destruction of himself. Let us look at the final speech:

Soft you, a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then, must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well,
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed 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,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,  
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Bet a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog  
And smote him, thus.

Stabs himself

Othello is making an appeal here, an appeal directly related to persons within his environment, for the reestablishment of a former symbiotic relationship. He will destroy the Moor of Venice so that the Moor of Aleppo may live on in the hearts and minds of the Venetian state the metaphorical Father. The wayward son, having fallen into the clutches of maternal power, power residing in his own character, makes amends through his voluntary death, his self-sacrifice to the ego ideal forged in the patriarchal, military world.

Thus Othello, in the end, becomes the sacrificial victim that he sought to make his wife; in this way, he participates in the magical powers of transformation associated with the sacrificial act and with the concept of divinity. Hubert and Mauss explore the suicide of the god along these lines: since the victim in sacrifice brings about rebirth (of the sacrificer), the victim has a god-like function; a single god, then, may become both the begetter of renewed life and the victim by condensing, as it were, the divided ritual into a single behavior that speaks for death and life at the same time. The notion of undoing will allow us to understand this along analytical lines; that is, to undo is to negate (destroy) a behavior and the identity associated with it; thus, to undo is to reestablish (resurrect) an identity that existed before the enactment of that behavior. It is in this sense that suicide constitutes undoing, and through undoing, reboring, starting afresh. Because these "two" occurrences transpire in one event, one god can constitute divinity and victim; in other words, the victim and the divinity are in reality the split halves of the single mind (need) that stands behind the sacrificial act.

That Othello's magical appeal to the Venetian fathers is finally successful, one cannot with certainty say; Shakespeare seems to reckon here upon a wide latitude of response in the audience. Cassio's reaction to the Moor's self-destruction goes thus: "This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon. / For he was great of heart." Yet Gratiano, a Venetian elder, exclaims upon watching Othello take his own life, "All that's spoke is marred." What is worth stressing, however, is the manner in which Othello's final moments attest to the ultimate power of The Mother figure. Immediately after having stabbed himself the hero turns away from the men and toward the body of his dead wife. "I kissed thee ere I killed thee," he says, keeping the play's oral imagery at the forefront of our minds; "No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss," and he falls upon the bed where Desdemona lies. The point is, Othello's relationship with the father and the father's world is, in the last analysis, substitutive and compensatory; he gravitates toward the men when he discovers himself "out in the cold," separated from the all-important mother. To put it in a nutshell, the father of Othello's emotive world represents at the deepest level a kind of avenue backward to the maternal figure. By the end of the play Othello is where he wanted to be all along, although not in the condition he desired. He is lying next to "Mother" on the bed. But perhaps the condition of death is the only one in which the grown person can fulfill his regressive wish for the symbiotic union of long ago.

As we have suggested already, the Elders of Venice speak for the patriarchal order that Othello, in his regressive madness, his "cannibalism," his infantilism, threatens. Having fallen under the sway of maternal influence, worshipping the matriarchal goddess of his twisted world, Othello, who has introjected the standards of the Father, removes this threat himself when he truncates his own existence. The last words of the play touch upon the necessity of reporting the debacle to the "state," of restoring order upon Cyprus, of punishing Iago who has been so instrumental in catalyzing the reactivation of Othello's repressed emotions.
However, it is precisely this patriarchal order that engenders the ambivalence of the mother-infant relationship, that breeds the familial tensions which, in turn, produce the tragic characters, the characters who are vulnerable to the power of women, the characters who are apt to create havoc in the world around them. The wheel may come full circle at the close of *Othello*, but the wheel continues to turn; it is not "Fortune" that spins it; it is a specific pattern of culture, a specific method of rearing children, a specific kind of mother who is herself trapped.

Finally, from a purely formalistic standpoint, we should note that the absence of the actual mother in the play, along with 1) the crucial role of projective mechanisms in manufacturing the fantasy version of the mother, and 2) the presence of Iago as catalyst, make the aesthetic experience of *Othello* strikingly different from that of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. Othello's power to draw us in derives, of course, from our own ambivalence, our own splitting of the maternal figure, our own fascination with betrayal, the bad object, sadism, revenge, not to mention our own desire to explore through identification the mystery of the mother's feelings, the actual quality of the early time. In this sense, Othello is like the other plays. What differentiates it, however, and what explains its enormous power, is the manner in which, through the mother's absence, through the role of projection, and through the character of Iago, the play engages our fascination with the testing of reality. We know that Othello's version of Desdemona is chimerical; we know that it is called into life by Iago; to this extent we can enter into the fantasy world with assurance; at the same time we can experience the very basic pleasure of reality testing by reminding ourselves that we know what is real and what is not. Hence, identification with Othello is relatively harmless; why not identify? Why not peer at what Othello peers at? Continually able to test reality, we are not threatened by these primal materials. Thus the absence of the actual mother in *Othello* offers us the opportunity to examine the purely fantastic mother of the hero in such a way as to repudiate her and participate in her at the same time. In addition to this, Iago, by constantly reminding us of Othello's victimization, and by contributing himself to the fantasy of the bad object, further distances the audience from the primal realities and makes participation morally acceptable at the secondary level. In this way, *Iago helps us to test reality* and to know where we stand in relation to the version of the bad object which emerges during the middle acts. Thus the impression readers often get that Iago is a realist, an impression that is wrong, derives from the play's defensive or distancing techniques and not from what Iago says and does, which is quite passionate and even mad. Iago allows us to test reality, to be realistic, by reminding us of the fantastic nature of the projective version of the mother which informs the play as a whole. Essentially then, it is the mother's absence that permits us to gaze intensively at the central fantasy (primal scene) and to enjoy in a very basic way our own ability to test reality by opposing it to Othello's inability to do so. In other words, an *adaptive* strength combines with an *affective* drive to create the play's dynamic power.

Consideration such as this clearly reveals the degree to which the hero of *Othello* functions not only as victim, but our victim, the one into whom we project our forbidden aims and impulses, the one who, through suicide, pays the price for our indulgence, the one for whom we mourn because he has taken on the godlike function of our purgation: the tragic theater of *Othello* is a secular version of the old religious sacrifice, the ancient ritual in Renaissance dress. In one way or another, all tragedy shares this characteristic.

Notes


7 Ibid., p. 75.

8 See my presentation of Reid's work toward the inception of the *Othello* section.

9 Harvey L. Resnik, "Eroticized Repetitive Hangings: A Form of Self-Destructive Behavior," pp. 8-9. This paper is currently in proofsheets at the *American Journal of Psychotherapy*. I am working with a manuscript version.

10 Ibid., pp. 10-10a.

11 Ibid., pp. 20-21.

12 Ibid.


15 Martin Wangh, "'Othello': The Tragedy of Iago" (1950), in *The Design Within*, op. cit., p. 166.


17 Ibid., p. 33.

18 Ibid., p. 11.

19 Ibid., p. 17.

20 Ibid., pp. 19-20.

21 Ibid., p. 22.

22 Ibid., p. 23.


24 Othello's primitivism throughout the play calls to mind the kind of primitivism Freud explored in *Totem and Taboo*, particularly in the chapter on Anamism, Magic, and the Omnipotence of Thought. Freud's pre-occupation with projection in that essay and his attempt to link the projective tendencies of the "savage" and those of the "neurotic" are salient.
Othello (Vol. 35): Jealousy

Stephen Reid (essay date 1968)


[In the following essay, Reid contends that Othello suffers from a delusional jealousy that springs from "castration anxiety aroused by his marriage to Desdemona."]

Freud's conjectures on the origin and meaning of sexual jealousy1 have been the basis for psychoanalytic explanations of all manifestations of jealousy—real or fictional. His distinctions among three "layers or grades of jealousy" are well known: competitive or normal, projected, and delusional.2 It is the third of these that has attracted the most attention, and it is this "layer" or "grade" of jealousy which has been seen as the source of Othello's unfounded belief in Desdemona's infidelity. Freud's explanation of delusional jealousy is as follows:

It too [like "projected" jealousy] has its origin in repressed impulses towards unfaithfulness; but the object in these cases is of the same sex as the subject. Delusional jealousy is what is left of a homosexuality that has run its course, and it rightly takes its position among the classical forms of paranoia. As an attempt at defence against an unduly strong homosexual impulse it may, in a man, be described in the formula: "I do not love him, she loves him!" In a delusional case one will be prepared to find jealousy belonging to all three layers, never to the third alone.3

Abraham Bronson Feldman, in an article, "Othello's Obsessions," makes the case that Othello's jealousy is of this nature:
That Othello's jealousy is for love of Cassio cannot, of course, be demonstrated by overt testimony. . . . The Moor's unconscious hides his true feeling for the Florentine by a trick of ambiguity, compelling his ego to couple the love with his honorable sentiment for Desdemona. His superego allows him to think lecherously of Cassio under cover of righteous horror at his wife's alleged guilt.

It should be obvious by now that Othello's love for Brabantio's daughter was a makeshift passion, the device of a mind in terror of a certain chaos to save itself. The chaos feared by the Moor can be defined as a madness resulting from a revelation of his inner lack of manliness. This fear of unvirility springs from a deeply repressed homosexual impulse, manifested by his passion for Cassio.4

I have never felt that the text really bears out this reading. But I do think that the text points to another, a different "mechanism" for his delusional jealousy (for that it certainly is, however we attempt to explain it) than that offered by Feldman. If so, it will not have been the first time that a poet has offered the basis for a new psychoanalytic insight.

In Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale, Leontes' jealousy of his wife fits, point by point, Freud's description. This is widely acknowledged. W. H. Auden states that "Leontes is a classical case of paranoid sexual jealousy due to repressed homosexual feelings."5 And Bernard Shaw was moved to say that Leontes' jealousy was the "real article … an unmistakeable study of a jealous man from life," in contrast to Othello's jealousy, which was "pure melodrama."6 Othello's jealousy, needless to say, is not "pure melodrama," although it is, I suggest, something other than a delusional jealousy based on an unconscious homosexual impulse. His jealousy can best be explained, I believe, as a more elementary defence against the castration anxiety aroused by his marriage to Desdemona. Now, the castration anxiety that lies behind Freud's formulation of delusional jealousy has a different meaning. It is the dread of castration as the price of being loved by the father—a secondary construct resulting from the boy's wish to be loved by him. In Othello (as I shall attempt to demonstrate), it is the older fear of punitive action by the father for the crime of originally desiring the mother. In both cases, the starting point is the same: deep resentment toward the mother for her rejection of him in favor of the father. The following passage from Charles Brenner's An Elementary Textbook of Psychoanalysis concludes his exposition of the central oedipal conflicts:

The situation is complicated by the fact that the little boy is also stirred to a jealous rage against his mother for her rejection of his wish for exclusive possession of her caresses and her body and this either reinforces or gives rise to a wish to get rid of her (kill her) and to be loved by the father in her place. Since this too leads to the fear of castration, once he has learned that to be a woman is to be without a penis, these wishes also must eventually be repressed.7

This passage describes the typical pattern in general terms. It is inevitable that the boy will be stirred to a "jealous rage" by what he feels is his mother's rejection, and it is inevitable that he will turn, in a feminine way, to his father for love; it is also inevitable that he must repress both these feelings. But each case is individual and will exhibit a unique outcome depending (among many things) on the amount of seductive love shown by the mother before the inevitable rejection, the degree of that rejection, the age at which that rejection takes place, the degree of masculinity of the father—to say nothing of the innate strength of the boy's instincts. Suffice it to say, the intensity of homo-sexual dread that lies behind Freud's formulation of delusional jealousy, although common, is not inevitable, even though we grant the universal fact that the mother does indeed reject her young son and that the son, in turn, rejects her by submitting in fantasy to the homosexual love of the father. I am proposing that Othello offers a case of delusional jealousy in a man in whom the "homosexual solution" (as Ernest Jones puts it8) to the mother's rejection has "not gone far."
I will present first a hypothetical reconstruction of Othello's development, and then look at his behavior in the play as dependent upon it. (I put the following in definite terms for the sake of simplicity and clarity. It is, as I stated, a hypothetical reconstruction.) Othello's attachment to his mother was very strong, and very early she must have sensed this and rejected him. That is, after a period of loving attention, Othello's mother changed. This change was felt by Othello as treachery, and it stirred him to a "jealous rage" against her. He turned in a passive, feminine way toward the father for love. But, for reasons we cannot determine, this, the "homosexual solution" to the mother's rejection, did "not go far." The treachery and the anger it evoked, however, quite obliterated for him his earlier, intense fear of castration by the father as punishment for his love of the mother. This he could then afford to ignore because all real danger had been removed by the mother's rejection. This anger against the mother fell victim to repression, for he still needed his mother's protection and the limited love she still offered. The anger was transformed into nonerotic idealization, and the image of the father as a retaliatory, castrating figure became significantly weaker. Othello, the adult, retained the same complex of responses: an idealization of women which masked the unacceptable anger at his mother's treachery and a singular lack of fear of men. Othello rejects women and has (in part at least because of this rejection) little cause to elicit hostile impulses in men. Lodovico's summary of the Othello that was is a very good one:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid
virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?*

(IV, i, 275-279)

Othello's absolute barrier against love is the secret of this "admirable" personality. Now, an absolute barrier against love is not the usual thing in cases of delusional jealousy based on unconscious homosexual drives. In these cases, jealousy develops after a certain time in the love relationship. The jealousy of Leontes in The Winter's Tale is a good example: it comes after many years of marriage. At bottom, the greatest weakness that men display is rooted in their attempts to resolve the oedipal conflicts. Othello had not attempted to resolve them—to find an acceptable love object—and hence was not subject to the irresolutions, doubts, disappointments, and jealousies that account for so much in the lives of most men. Coleridge's pronouncement that Othello's was not a jealous personality is correct. To Emilia's question, "Is he not jealous?" Desdemona answers in astonishment: "Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him" (III, iv, 29-31). Such a personality is most open to danger. Freud opens his article on "Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality" with the following statements:

Jealousy is one of those affective states, like grief, that may be described as normal. If anyone appears to be without it, the inference is justified that it has undergone severe repression and consequently plays all the greater part in his unconscious mental life.10

The three factors that Freud finds in the psychical etiology of homosexuality—attachment to the mother, fear of castration, and narcissism—are all to be seen in Othello. But these have not led to a significant homosexual orientation. They have led to the following characteristics: an avoidance of women, an un-complicated ascendency over men (in so far as was socially possible, and due in part to the fact that, having avoided women, he automatically avoided the essential anxiety that dominates competition among men), and a high degree of self-consciousness—a display of narcissism—about his value as a soldier. One might see this group of characteristics as typical of the latency period. In particular, Othello's loyalty to the Venetian state can be taken as the normal latency reconciliation with the positive oedipal father. This is, as we know, a temporary and unstable posture, one which is destined to be disrupted in adolescence.
Such is the noble Moor, in middle years and at the height of his career, when he is confronted by Desdemona's love for him. (In this paper, I am expressly avoiding analysis of both Desdemona and Iago.) "Fate," as Freud would put it, catches Othello at his weakest point. Why, one asks, should Othello have responded to Desdemona? The answer is not difficult: their relationship reproduces all to perfectly the situation Othello had longed to experience with his mother after her rejection. Desdemona is, first of all, inaccessible. Not only is she of a different race (the force of which Othello acknowledges when he says of Desdemona that her choosing him was a case of "nature erring from itself III, i, 227), but she has held herself aloof from all suitors ("the wealthy curled darlings" of Venice, I, ii, 68). This inaccessible woman makes the first advances—that which the child Othello had longed for his mother to have done and, most significantly, the advances are made in response to Othello's tales of adventure—tales of heroic exploit that are the typical fantasies of the little boy, tales of masculine success designed to impress the mother with his superiority to her husband. This is the fatal combination—the inaccessible woman who believes in and accepts the heroic fancies of the boy—that destroys Othello. It is fatal because it unleashes quite suddenly the castration anxieties that he had never faced quite fully in childhood, anxieties which had been effectively quieted by the mother's putting herself out of reach. And it awakens as well the long buried rage at the mother for her rejection.

Consider what happens the moment he accepts Desdemona's love. Instead of confronting Brabantio, he elopes with Desdemona. When the Duke states that Othello's story of his exploits would have won his daughter also, we can assume that from the viewpoint of a Venetian Senator, Othello's marriage to a Venetian daughter was at least a distinct social possibility. But Othello assumes that Brabantio will oppose the marriage, and instead of facing that opposition he chooses to avoid it. Only Iago knows that he is spending the night at the Sagittary Inn. The noise of the Senate's emissaries arouses Othello, and although the marriage is as yet unconsummated, he goes to the Senate chamber. To the Senate and to Brabantio, Othello calmly tells the story of the courtship, but he nonetheless says that he has taken away Brabantio's daughter, as though father and suitor stood in the same relationship to the woman. And, when he gains permission of the Duke to do as he pleases about Desdemona, he sends her on a different ship to Cyprus. As a result, the consummation of the marriage is once more postponed—this time for the length of the voyage to Cyprus. We are justified in seeing here motive, not chance. The reasons for his postponement are clear: the idea of marriage to Desdemona suddenly releases the long buried oedipal anxieties, and he behaves as though he had indeed succeeded in having his mother reject his father for him. He is afraid. He tries to deny that fear, to reaffirm his "all in all" sufficiency. To Iago's statement that "You were best go in" (when it appears—mistakenly—that Brabantio and his armed men are approaching), he says: "Not I; I must be found" (I, ii, 30). But, despite the fact that his elopement is a declaration of guilt, he now asserts his right to have her: "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" (I, ii, 31-32). We know from countless examples that the man who is moved to proclaim his innocence ("my perfect soul") announces a guilty conscience. It is not necessary to recount the overly calm dignity with which he faces the Senate and the father. It covers the anxiety.

The meeting on Cyprus betrays this anxiety more directly. After proclaiming his joy in their reunion—a joy whose hyperbolic exaggeration warns us—Othello says:

If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

It is the anxiety of impending doom in this speech and not its declaration of love that Desdemona catches:

The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase
Even as our days do grow.
(II, i, 192-197)

Then comes the hint of infidelity and he breaks down completely. Up until that moment (twice postponed) of the consummation of the marriage, this anxiety had been under control. But now the guilt is overwhelming. He cannot deny it (the entire military community on Cyprus is pointedly aware that the marriage is being consummated), but he can attempt to relieve the guilt by deflecting it. The mental process is this: She has betrayed me (as well as her father), and so I am an innocent wronged one, along with him. His idea that he must kill her to prevent her from betraying more men is an announcement to his super-ego: You see, I am serving your interest, not my own. He announces to his introjected father: I have not really done you a disservice, she has, and to protect your interests, I will prevent all future betrayals by killing her. You therefore will not need to punish me.

Because of the strength of his guilt, he is widely open to Iago's insinuations. To Iago's statement, "She did deceive her father, marrying you," Othello answers with a surprising promptness and simplicity: "And so she did" (III, iii, 206; 208). Earlier, before the consummation of the marriage, when the anxiety was under control, Othello had answered Brabantio's warning, "She has deceived her father, and may thee" with the brave affirmative: "My life upon her faith!" (I, iii, 294-295). That Othello now accepts Desdemona's love for him as a fault in her indicates clearly enough that he has shifted all blame from himself to her.

We must now assess Cassio's role in Othello's anxieties. What is the evidence the text offers, up to the "temptation" scene, of an idealized homosexual love that Othello has for Cassio? He has chosen him, above Iago, as his officer, and, in dismissing him, he says: "Cassio, I love thee; / But never more be officer of mine" (II, iii, 248-249). There is nothing else. As to Iago's superior qualifications, we have no way of knowing. But in any case, we know better than to trust him. And the statement of his continued "love" for Cassio is certainly more than offset by his prior statement:

I know, Iago,
Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,
Making it light to Cassio. Cassio, I love thee;
But never more be officer of mine.
(II, iii, 246-249)

This is not the statement of a man whose fondness for Cassio was abnormal (or he would have accepted Iago's whitewashing job) or that of a man whose anxieties about an unconscious homosexual attraction was significant (or he would not have added the phrase: "I love thee"). These lines by Othello are those of a man quite untouched by deep feelings for the man he is addressing. The outburst of Leontes' jealousy could not be more different. The subject matter of the conversation that issues in the jealousy is simply that of the love between Leontes and Polixenes—a love that goes back to childhood and which was an exclusive passion. Polixenes has spent nine months at the court of Leontes and Hermione—after a long separation—and is about to depart. Leontes tries to persuade him to stay longer, unsuccessfully. Leontes then asks Hermione to persuade Polixenes to stay longer, and at her bidding he complies. It is at this point that the jealousy quite spontaneously enters Leontes' mind. The dynamics of Leontes' conflicts may be described in this way. He had struggled with his repressed love for Polixenes for many months. He has wished him to remain, but the anxieties his presence aroused caused Leontes to wish him gone. Now, that Polixenes is about to depart, the danger is past, and all that Leontes wishes is that he stay. When that wish is unexpectedly realized (at the bidding of his wife), the anxieties suddenly flood back in the form of delusional jealousy. It is a startlingly clear picture and remarkably different from the content of Othello's anxieties in the first half of the play.

What follows Iago's insinuation? There are some half dozen references by Othello that he wishes to see Cassio dead. I shall return to them in a moment. I have deduced that the oedipal anxieties which were released in
Othello upon his marriage to Desdemona caused him to deflect his guilt by accusing Desdemona. This is the irresistible solution to his anxieties. But this solution in its turn creates another, equally painful anxiety. That is, to face the actual position as a betrayed husband—to be sneered at as a cuckold. The conflict that Othello faces in the last half of the play is between his overpowering need to find Desdemona guilty and the resulting fact that his is now an unendurably humiliating position. I believe that the back-and-forth expostulations that Othello produces in the last half of the play can be laid to this very simple fact. At one moment, Desdemona is an angel; the next, a devil. The pain of humiliation is so great that it causes him to find her innocent ("I'll not believe it." III, iii, 279); but then the pain of the reawakened castration anxiety is so great that he must find her guilty.

Now, in so far as he finds her guilty and accepts his position as a cuckold, it is to be expected that this new pain would find a scapegoat—naturally Cassio. But—and this is the central point—his aggressive language concerning the murder of Cassio is, when contrasted with his rage at Desdemona, bloodless. The language is weak because Cassio is not the primary cause of his anxiety. For example, Othello says:

Within these three days let me hear thee say
That Cassio's not alive.
(III, iii, 471-472)

Again:

Not Cassio killed? Then murder's out of tune,
And sweet revenge grows harsh.
(V, ii, 115-116)

The only time that Othello's anger toward Cassio reaches fever pitch is in the following line: "I would have him nine years a-killing!" and this is followed at once with a reference to Desdemona: "A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman!" (IV, i, 188). But when we compare Othello's statements about Cassio with those about Desdemona we are aware of being in a different sphere: "Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her!" (III, iii, 475); "I'll tear her all to pieces!" (III, iii, 431); "I will chop her into messes!" (IV, i, 211). Finally, when the error is revealed at the end, Othello's apology to Cassio is perfunctory, uncharged with any kind of feeling:

Cassio. Dear General, I never you cause.
Othello. I do believe it, and I ask your pardon.
Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?
(V, ii, 299-303)

Were the essential cause of Othello's jealousy an anxiety created by an unconscious homosexual love for Cassio, surely the relief that the truth afforded would have shown itself in a more significant statement. Once again, one has only to contrast this with the heartfelt repentence and penance of Leontes after he learns the truth about Polixenes' innocence. We understand this repentence, this remorse, as the renewed expression of love for the man he had wronged. There is nothing like this in Othello. Rather, Cassio becomes through projection the positive oedipal son. Othello, particularly while witnessing the by-play about the handkerchief in the fourth act, sees in Cassio the successful oedipal son. By a series of displacements (Desdemona-EmiliaBianca), Othello vicariously and safely enjoys the consummation of the oedipal sins. His attitude toward Cassio, then, is essentially the resentment of an unsuccessful evil-doer towards a successful evil-doer. As such, it is similar to Hamlet's hatred of Claudius.
In his study of *Hamlet*, Ernest Jones raises the following point: if a man is moved by jealousy to murder, whom does he kill—his wife or her lover? It is, as Jones puts it, a "nice question." But his answer is simple. The man will kill the one who gives him the most anxiety. If the love is genuine—that is, not fraught by anxiety—he will kill the lover who threatens to take the wife from him. A number of reasons might be advanced for the more abnormal case in which the husband murders his wife. It is clear that it is Desdemona, and not Cassio, who gives Othello the essential anxiety. I have adduced that Desdemona's love for Othello reawakened in him two logically incompatible feelings: the intolerable oedipal anxieties (which had effectively been quieted by the mother's rejection) and the old rage at the mother for that rejection (which had been transformed into a non-erotic idealization). These feelings, as I have said, are logically incompatible, but are perfectly compatible in the unconscious. And it is the combination of these feelings which, I believe, leads him to the murder of Desdemona.

Nonetheless, psychoanalytic theory insists on the presence of decisive homosexual tendencies in delusional jealousy. There are two mechanisms to be considered: first (in time) the boy attempts to ward off the initial castration anxiety by *placating* the father—by acting in a feminine way with him, and second, the boy attempts to revenge himself upon his mother for her rejection of him by *offering* himself to his father—by acting in a feminine way with him. The first is an attempt to reduce the fears of castration, the second (what I have called the "homosexual solution" to the rage at the mother's rejection) *creates* the anxiety of a self-imposed castration, since that is the price of being loved as a woman by the father. I have already dealt with the second of these mechanisms, and I have found no evidence of this mechanism in *Othello*. It is of interest now to examine the first. In his article on jealousy, Jones states:

> Whether this anger [the protection against fear and guilt] will be directed more against the woman or the man depends on the level to which his psychosexual development has proceeded. If the inhibition is a deep one, so that the homosexual development has gone far, then he will turn on the woman and in certain cases will even kill her. If he has proceeded further along the normal line of development, his fear of the father is less and his aggressive opposition to him will be allowed to express itself against the rival.¹¹

Now the flight to this *earlier* homosexual solution—the homosexual solution of the primary oedipal anxieties rather than the homosexual solution to the (later) rage at the mother for her rejection—is put by Jones as follows:

> The ultimate source of the fear and guilt that lie behind all these reactions is the relationship to another potential man and it is derived from the boy's attitude towards his father. So long as there is an unconscious fixation on the childish attitudes it is hard for him to picture a woman quite apart from another man to whom she secretly belongs; this is simply another way of saying that he cannot refrain from reproducing the situation of childhood when the woman he loved belonged to another man who was never far away. The homosexual tendency we noted is really an impulse to placate this 'other man'—i. e., the father—by identifying himself with the woman, by replacing his masculine attitude towards the mother by a feminine one towards the father. In his love life he needs, as I indicated formerly, a certain masculinity in the woman; this is the father she carries about with her. The woman's love protects him from his guilt and the fear of the father. If this love is unsuccessful he has to reproduce a triangular situation, often delusionally, so as to deal along homosexual lines with the father.¹²

The intolerable anxiety that can develop then turns, according to Jones, into a murderous hatred for the woman: "He reproaches her with not loving him enough. Psychologically this means a reproach that she no longer by her love protects him from the feared and hated father."¹³ When the repressed homosexual impulses are reawakened "often in response to some new stimulation, some change in the environment, or perhaps
some diminution in the woman's attractiveness," the anxiety will vent itself in murderous hatred of the woman who had previously protected him from the feared results of these impulses. Hence, this victim of delusional jealousy will kill his wife.

But again, the text of Othello, in which a victim of delusional jealousy does indeed kill his wife, will not corroborate this particular analysis. The central point of Jones's analysis is that because the wife is no longer felt to protect him against his original oedipal fears, the man "often delusionally" will "reproduce a triangular situation" in order to have an object, another man who stands for the father, which he can try to placate. Now, this hypothetical step taken by the husband implies in fantasy a submissive posture to this other man or, in reaction to the new castration fears this submissive posture creates, intense hostility toward that man or, perhaps, both in rapid alternation. Of the first, a submissive posture toward Cassio, there is not a hint. Of the second, intense hostility toward Cassio, there is as I have indicated, little evidence. And it might be noted that the hostile feelings Othello does produce against Cassio are all in response to suggestions of Iago: they do not arise spontaneously. Furthermore, Desdemona is hardly the woman of "a certain masculinity" that Jones describes—a woman who could by her masculine strength protect Othello from his oedipal fears. Hermione, in The Winter's Tale, is a very strong woman. It can not be said that Desdemona's love protects Othello from anything. It is the very idea of her love that unsettles him. In Cinthio, Shakespeare's source, the Moor and Desdemona have been married publically, although against her parents' wishes, and have lived together in harmony and peace for some time. This Shakespeare changed quite drastically, and the wildly implausible fact that Othello murders Desdemona within twenty-four hours after the consummation of the marriage makes no psychoanalytic sense if we must assume that it is the wife's eventual failure to protect him from fears of the father that drives Othello to murder.

Othello's idealization of Desdemona is the heart of the tragedy. This idealization can be demonstrated throughout the play. I cite three statements. In the midst of his agony, and spliced between statements of his hatred for her, we find this:

O, the world hath not a sweeter creature! She might lie by an emperor's side and command him tasks.

(IV, i, 195-196)

So delicate with her needle! an admirable musician! O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear!

(IV, i, 199-201)

And at the end:

Nay, had she been true,  
If heaven would make me such another world  
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,  
I'd not have sold her for it.  

(V, ii, 143-146)

Such idealization may be taken as a combined defence against his own too dangerous incestuous impulses and against either a) the bitter resentment that the mother did not, after all, prefer him to the father, or b) the intensified anxiety induced by an overly demonstrative mother. In both cases, the result is the same: idealization as a safeguard against anxiety and hatred. But there is a critical difference as well. Hamlet is instructive at this point—and perhaps it is no accident that the two plays are close together in point of
composition. We know a great deal about Hamlet's mother, and we have assumed with all justification that
Gertrude lavished a great amount of love on her young son for a long time. And we have assumed that this
reinforcement of his own incestuous love for her resulted in Hamlet's idealization of both parents. The
resolution of his own dangerous wishes and the encouragement of them by Gertrude was as follows: Hamlet
neutralized his own incestuous longings by repressing them and he neutralized Gertrude's "infidelity" with
him by transforming her into the opposite of what she appeared to him—he made her to be a loving wife to
her husband. The idealization of his father was the result of an excessive fear of him—the fear strengthened
by his mother's behavior with him. Othello's case was different. He wished to punish the mother not because
she reinforced his oedipal anxieties but because she so frustrated his erotic wishes. In Hamlet's case, the
reawakening of the buried feelings (occasioned by his discovery of Gertrude's incest and adultery) was the
reawakening of an anxiety that had been extreme in childhood, and it results in a loathing of the woman who
had done this. This loathing, it is important to note, implies no small degree of tolerance of the anxieties
which his mother's behavior had occasioned. In Othello's case, the reawakening of the buried feelings
(occasioned by Desdemona's love for him) is the reawakening of anxieties that his mother had originally
reduced by her rejection of him, and it results not in the more mild feeling of loathing—which involves a
certain acceptance of his own feelings (Hamlet experiences bad dreams, not Othello)—but in the more
absolute mechanism of deflecting the guilt entirely on to the woman who had suddenly betrayed him into a
dangerous situation. In other words, Hamlet had had more to repress than Othello. Hamlet's mother
encouraged his incestuous yearnings; Othello's mother had discouraged his incestuous yearnings. The
reawakening in Hamlet, therefore, stirs him to a hatred for his mother—but a hatred which says this: You,
whom I had always thought a wonderful woman, who loved my father, now show yourself to be common.
You make me sick. The reawakening in Othello, however, stirs him to a hatred for the mother surrogate,
Desdemona—but a hatred which says this: You are guilty for betraying your (my) father, not I. The eruption
of oedipal guilt in Othello is that of a sudden and dramatic confrontation of frightening drives and frightful
punishments which Othello had not had to face strongly in childhood. The eruption of oedipal guilt in Hamlet
is that of a renewed struggle against those drives and punishments which he had at one time faced strongly in
childhood. Othello faces for the first time the enormity of oedipal guilt while Hamlet faces a renewal of his
awareness of that enormity. Othello is altogether unable to cope with his feelings and denies them by accusing
the now seductive mother with absolute guilt. He blames her now as before—before for withholding love,
now for giving it. Hamlet is more able to cope with this renewed onslaught by ranting at her. He blames
Gertrude now as before—before for having offered her love, now for offering it once again.

Before "fate" had caught both Othello and Hamlet at their weak points, they had been as follows: Hamlet had
withdrawn from active competition with men, but had established a love-relationship with Ophelia. Othello
had engaged very handsomely in active competition with other men, but had never established a love
relationship. These patterns are understandable from my hypotheses about their very different mothers.
Hamlet had registered to the full his oedipal fears of his father, and his defence against those fears was an
avoidance of competitive activity by the safety of feeling his father a god—above competing with. However,
the path to a certain kind of love object was not barred, and he chose as a love object Ophelia, a girl very
different from his sensual mother. Othello had not registered to the full his oedipal fears of his father and
hence was better equipped to enter the competitive world. However, the rejection by the mother sealed off for
him any possible relationship with women: his resentment had turned into an all but insurmountable safety of
idealization.

In contrast to what we know of Gertrude and the elder Hamlet, we know almost nothing of Othello's parents.
But this lack of knowledge is instructive. Except in one connection—the handkerchief—Othello makes no
important reference to his parents. He was not apparently given to thinking of them. Now this in itself proves
nothing. But the handkerchief is important. He had apparently kept it carefully and continually for all these
many years—in battle, in slavery. He must, therefore, have been continually aware of what it means—that it
takes charms to keep a husband from loathing his wife. In other words, he was always aware that marriage
was a danger. The handkerchief was known to Emilia, as it was of course to Desdemona herself, to have been
Othello's first gift. Very clearly, such a gift has its significance. But until it is lost, the extreme and deadly nature of its significance is known only to Othello. When he gave the handkerchief to Desdemona, Othello did not tell her of its essential significance. We do learn from Emilia that Desdemona so loves the token (For he conjured her she should ever keep it) That she reserves it evermore about her To kiss and talk to. (III, iii, 293-296)

Its magical properties she learns only after the jealousy is at work. She is then told that it was given to Othello's mother by an Egyptian and that its possession would ensure the continued love of his mother's husband, while its loss would occasion the husband's loathing. From Desdemona's response—"Then would to God that I had never seen't!" (III, iv, 77)—we must assume that she never suspected the awful import Othello now tells her the cloth carries. After the murder, Othello says that it was his father who gave the magical cloth to his mother. Now, we are left with several interpretations of the story of the handkerchief. Either the story of the magical properties was true and that Othello chose not to reveal it to Desdemona when he made her a gift of it, or it is a fabrication which Othello produces at the appropriate moment. And, if the story of the magical properties is true, it was given to Othello's mother by the Egyptian charmer or by her husband. Let us assume the story he tells Desdemona in Act III to have been actual. Othello's giving her the gift without warning her of its full significance puts her in more danger of being careless with it than she otherwise might be. But, whether she knows it or not, her possession of the handkerchief places—in Othello's mind—all responsibility for the success of the marriage in her hands, and it absolves the giver from any responsibility. This, of course, fits very well the anxiety he feels when he marries her and the need to find her singly guilty after the marriage is consummated. The somewhat altered story at the end—that his father gave it—represents his real feelings: that the father himself places all responsibility for the happiness of the marriage in the hands of the mother. It reduplicates Othello's blame of Desdemona for having betrayed her (his) father. It exonerates him completely.

Othello's solution to his conflicts is to convince himself that his killing of Desdemona is a sacrifice, not a murder. It has frequently been pointed out that legal terminology dominates the final scene. Two articles in particular explore the meaning of that terminology—"Justice and Love in Othello" by Winifred M. T. Nowottny and "Othello: The Unheroic Tragic Hero," by Robert B. Heilman. I cite a summary passage from the latter:

Though some of these lines [V, ii 25-57] might be spoken by a Christian judge, they belong rather to the Christian priest, especially the priest in the role of confessor. This, then, is Othello's climactic means of placing himself on a pinnacle of assurance and of blinding himself to the true nature of what he does there. Though he has already inclined to assume the role of priest, only now does he invest it with a brief air of dignity, which Shakespeare uses skillfully to dramatize the horror of Othello's conduct: to the coolness, the prayerfulness, the almost gentle calmness of the priest is added the frankness of the killer: "I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. / No, heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul" (31-32). Repeatedly Othello talks of "killing" her—his voice quiet and controlled—at the same time that he urges her to save her soul. The shock is that of a murder by rite, of an exotic depravity in which the selfless spiritual concern and the wholly selfish violence are confounded. The priest as killer is a remarkable dramatic conception: an ultimate violence is expressed by doing violence to all our preconceptions. This strategy is used doubly: the priestly role is worked out alongside the judicial role, so that we have the judge as killer. But the judge, we recall, is also the plaintiff and the prosecutor: and he now becomes also the executioner—as well as the confessor bent on the spiritual salvation of the criminal. In this merging of incompatible roles
is the apex of Othello's self-deception.\footnote{Sigmund Freud: "Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality." \textit{The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud}, XVIII.}

Plaintiff, Prosecutor, Judge, Executioner, Priest—it is indeed a formidable grouping of roles. But it fits the situation exactly. Plaintiff: he is the wronged party. Prosecutor: he (notwithstanding his position as plaintiff) acts on behalf of the other wronged party—the father. Judge: his "solid virtue" which was not open to temptation entitles him to this. Executioner: he will demonstrate that even though he is susceptible to her beauty, he will not (did not) yield to it ("I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again" IV, i, 216). Priest: he will make her, above all, admit her guilt. When she denies it, the priest becomes indignant:

\begin{verbatim}
By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in's hand!
O perjured woman! thou dost stone my heart,
And mak'st me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.
\end{verbatim}

(V, ii, 62-65)

The entire tragedy is in these lines, and the key to them is a passage some twenty lines earlier:

\begin{verbatim}
Othello. Think on thy sins.
Desdemona. They are the loves I bear to you.
Othello. Ay, and for that thou diest.
\end{verbatim}

(V, ii, 39-41)

Othello here speaks more accurately than he knows. It is precisely Desdemona's love for him that drives him to murder her. The painful irony of the situation is that every declaration of love by Desdemona serves a fresh charge to Othello's guilt and so reinforces his need to find her guilty. And so Desdemona's final words—her answer to Emilia's question, "O, who hath done this deed?"

\begin{verbatim}
Nobody—I myself. Farewell. Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!
\end{verbatim}

(V, ii, 123-125)

can only elicit from Othello a last charge against her: "She's like a liar gone to burning hell!" (V, ii, 129).

Notes

\footnote{Sigmund Freud: "Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality." \textit{The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud}, XVIII.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 223.}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 225.}

\footnote{Abraham Bronson Feldman: "Othello's Obsessions." \textit{American Imago}, IX (1952-1953).}

\footnote{W. H. Auden: "The Alienated City: Reflections on 'Othello.'" \textit{Encounter}, August, 1961, pp. 3-14, p. 11.}


D. R. Godfrey (essay date 1972)


[In the essay below, Godfrey discusses the interplay between jealousy and evil in Othello.]

To proclaim Shakespeare's *Othello* as a tragedy of jealousy is but to echo the opinion of every critic who ever wrote about it. The jealousy not only of Othello, but of such lesser figures as Roderigo and even Bianca is surely self-evident enough to be taken for granted. And yet, though the jealousy of Othello in particular is invariably mentioned and assumed, it cannot be said that any over-riding importance has on the whole been attributed to it. While Othello may deliver judgement on himself as one,

not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme,
(V. ii. 346/7)

critical opinion has hardly gone beyond admitting that jealousy itself has been a contributing factor, of far less importance, for example, than the diabolical "evidence" manufactured by Iago. Until we are left with the conclusion, or at least implication, that had Othello not been jealous, the tragedy would still have occurred. This taking for granted or even belittling of the factor of jealousy in *Othello*, is the more surprising in that Shakespeare through Iago and Emilia has taken pains to identify for our benefit the special nature of jealousy, and to call particular attention to the element of irrationality that accompanies it. Jealousy, warns Iago, in order to awaken it in Othello,

… is the green-ey'd monster, which doth
mock
That meat it feeds on.
(III. iii. 170/1)
And the same essence of irrationality is later confirmed by Emilia when, in response to Desdemona's pathetically rational "Alas the day! I never gave him cause", she bluntly retorts:

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But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: 'tis a monster,
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
(III. iv. 157/60)
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The coincidence of view is remarkable, and presumably intentional, and clearly reflects more than the individual judgement of Emilia or Iago. Moreover the truth of the judgement is demonstrated again and again throughout the play wherever jealousy is manifest. The jealous person, whether Othello, Roderigo, Bianca or, as we shall attempt to show, Iago himself, is revealed as one who, from the moment that jealousy strikes, divorces himself or herself from rationality. Jealousy, once awakened, becomes self-perpetuating, self-intensifying, and where no justifying evidence for it exists, the jealous person under the impulse of an extraordinary perversity will continue to manufacture it, inventing causes, converting airy trifles into "confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ." Any attempt, in other words, to interpret jealousy rationally, to look for logic in the mental processes of a jealous person, will be unavailing. For we will be dealing invariably and in at least some measure with a monster, a form of possession, an insanity.

Before considering the manifestations of jealousy within Othello, it would be advantageous to look briefly at another famous Shakespearean example of jealousy in action, one in which the element of insanity is particularly pronounced, the jealousy, namely of Leontes in The Winter's Tale. The jealousy of Othello appears to us somewhat more rational than it actually is because of the part played by Iago in precipitating it, but Leontes is his own Iago, the sole deviser of his own manifest insanity; and whereas Othello's jealousy is worked out in secret with Iago, Leontes from the start proclaims his fantastic inventions openly, before the astounded eyes of the whole Sicilian court. In The Winter's Tale therefore, even more nakedly than in Othello, the essential characteristics of jealousy and the self-deluding capacities of the jealous man stand revealed. The first, and not the least astonishing, of such characteristics is of course the extraordinary suddenness with which jealousy begins. So suddenly indeed does jealousy strike Leontes, that some critics, in an attempt to rationalise the irrational, have searched for textual evidences of an already existing jealous state before it is unequivocally revealed. The evidences, however, are speculative, the impression of overwhelming suddenness paramount, and Shakespeare, had he intended otherwise, would surely have made that intention clear. An onset therefore, irrational in its swiftness and that the merest triviality can precipitate—in this case Hermione's success in persuading Polixenes to delay his departure—is presented to us as jealousy's initial characteristic. And from this moment, on the same continuing irrationality, amounting in Leontes' case to raving, murderous madness, relentlessly prevails. The stubborn insanities of Leontes, "these dangerous, unsafe lunes i' th' King", as Paulina correctly identifies them, need not be specified in detail. However, certain aspects of Leontes' behaviour may be adjudged typical, and such as may be found in varying degree wherever there is jealousy, and the first of these is the imperviousness of the jealous man to any form of rational persuasion. Leontes confronted with the shocked incredulity of his entire court, with the dignified denials of Hermione, the impassioned rationality of Camillo, Antigonus and Paulina, and even ultimately with the divine judgement of the Oracle, remains unaffected and inflexible, perceives himself as the one clear sighted man at the centre of a villainous conspiracy. Without a shred of real evidence to go on, he distorts the past, falsifying its remembered innocence with diabolical ingenuity:

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Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career
Of laughing with a sigh? (a note infallible
```
Present happenings also will be ingeniously misinterpreted. Camillo, fleeing with Polixenes, has not only betrayed his master, but is now proclaimed as pre-employed, a pander to the lovers, united with them in a conspiracy against his life.

No less remarkable in Leontes' case, and thus in the case of all those deprived of reason by jealousy, is the extent to which the former state of love is cancelled out by hatred. Here indeed in *The Winter's Tale* calculated vindictiveness could hardly be taken further. Leontes proceeding to a public denunciation of his wife, speculating as to whether her death would ease his mind, haling her to prison, condemning her and her new-born babe to the fire and relenting, at the instigation of the kneeling court, only to the extent of ordering the babe exposed in the wilderness, is manifestly responding to a positive frenzy of hatred. Jealousy, it might be argued, originating in the agonizing experience, real or imaginary, of rejected love, is no more than a continuing protest against that rejection, a witness in fact to love's continuation; and to this extent Leontes, the supremely jealous man, may yet be in love while striving through an induced frenzy of hatred to kill that love whose rejection, so real to him, is the source of an intolerable pain. In any event, the frantic desire of the jealous man to replace former love with present hatred and to avenge on the loved one his present torment, would seem to be typical.

Finally, and in itself perhaps a further indication that throughout the madness of jealousy love does continue to exist, there is once again the phenomenon of suddenness—the suddenness this time with which the jealous fit, so suddenly started, comes to an end. Even beyond the point of divine intervention, the voice of the Oracle, Leontes is prepared to extend his defiant madness, but, almost immediately, the news of his son's death, which he attributes to the anger of Apollo, shocks him at last into instant realisation. In a single stride, total sanity returns. So complete and instantaneous is Leontes' recognition of all the simple truths he has for so long and so frenziedly denied, that we may feel inclined to question Shakespeare's psychological insight, to argue, for example, that he is here telescoping time for purposes of dramatic effect. Some such artistic heightening of human reality may in fact be present, yet the essential truth of the sudden ending of jealousy must clearly be accepted. The whole example of Leontes presents jealousy to us as a self-contained experience, beginning and ending with itself, a fantastic interruption of the relationships and processes of the sane, everyday world.

With such an example before us, we can now refer back, for confirmation as it were, to Othello, in whom those characteristics of the experience of jealousy which we have identified should, by definition, also be found. First then, we would expect to find in Othello the same rapid onset of jealousy so evident in Leontes. Perhaps here the immediacy of impact is less dramatically apparent, so that A. C. Bradley, for example, argues that until Iago leaves him alone to the insinuating thoughts he has planted in him (III. iii. 261) Othello is not jealous at all. However, Othello's immediately ensuing soliloquy (262ff.) clearly indicates how deeply his faith in Desdemona has already been undermined, and though at the sight of her he rallies,

If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,
I'll not believe it,

recovery is momentary, and when he reappears only minutes later, Iago does not need his "Ha, ha, false to me, to me", to recognize the symptoms of a consuming jealousy that all the drowsy syrups of the world can never alleviate. Othello may appear to be resisting insinuation, to recover from the shock of Iago's "Ha, ha, I like not that", and the sight of Cassio stealing away "so guilty-like", but it is soon evident enough that he has not recovered, that the possibility of Desdemona's infidelity has already invaded his mind. And once again, as
with Leontes, the passage from initial doubt to the madness of absolute certainty, is incredibly rapid. The action of the whole "Temptation Scene", as it is sometimes called, is continuous, perhaps some twenty-five minutes of stage time, and by the end of it Othello is a man utterly possessed, calling out for blood and vengeance, authorizing Iago to murder Cassio, and resolving "In the due reverence of a sacred vow", himself to do the same for Desdemona:

Damn her, lewd minx: O, damn her!
Come, go with me apart, I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of death.
For the fair devil.

(III. iii. 482/5)

Already present meanwhile in the initial reactions of Othello is of course that most encompassing of all the characteristics of the jealous man, a consuming irrationality. The presence of Iago with his diabolical insinuations tends somewhat to mask the insanity of Othello, to present him as a man reacting logically in the face of accumulating evidence, indeed of proof. By the end of the Temptation Scene, however, there is still no more than the slenderest of evidence, a handkerchief that Iago may have seen Cassio wipe his beard with, and Cassio's alleged, and as Iago himself admits, inconclusive dream. Leontes, only after a considerable interval of time and after sending to the Oracle for confirmation, puts Hermione on trial for her life. Othello, however, with nothing but Iago's word to go on, and without even seeking to confront either Desdemona or Cassio, passes sentence of death. Later, it is true, circumstantial evidences multiply: Desdemona's tactless pleading for Cassio, Iago's statement of Cassio's confession, Bianca's returning of the handkerchief to Cassio before Othello's eyes; but it is strangely apparent that Othello's conviction of Desdemona's guilt is confirmed rather than established by such "evidences". In the exchanges between Iago and Othello at the beginning of Act IV it is revealed that the handkerchief had become so incidental to his conviction that he had actually forgotten it (IV. i. 10/22). In the same way, when at length confrontation comes between himself and Emilia and subsequently with Desdemona, it is apparent that no rational enquiry, no seeking out of evidence is to be undertaken. Emilia's indignant denials are met with:

She says enough, yet she's a simple bawd
That cannot say as much.

(IV. ii. 20/1)

And Desdemona, assigned the horrible role of a whore in a brothel, is not to be rationally interrogated but rhetorically denounced, on the assumption, of which there is not the slightest sign, that she is fully aware of her guilt. Perhaps in no other scene is the impregnable insanity of Othello so fully evident.

Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidences are certainly there and must be allowed to provide in some measure a logical justification for Othello's "case" against Desdemona. Against that case however must always be set one unanswerable factor the effect of which is to demolish it utterly, the factor of time. With Desdemona dead, Othello can proclaim calmly and positively,

'Tis pitiful, but yet Iago knows
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame
A thousand times committed,

(V. ii. 11/13)

Whereas it is obvious to anyone not wholly bereft of reason that the time for one single act of infidelity, let alone a rhetorical thousand, has simply not existed. "What place, what time, what form, what likelihood?" (IV. ii. 140) demands the practical Emilia, and of course the questions are unanswerable.
This very problem of the time factor in *Othello* has been greatly debated. Since Othello and Desdemona left Venice immediately after their marriage, and since Cassio and Desdemona were on different ships, and since but one night had passed on Cyprus, a night that Othello and Desdemona had spent together, when indeed could the thousand adulteries have occurred? And how could the sheer impossibility of Desdemona's multiple infidelities never have presented itself to Othello's mind? Various familiar explanations have been attempted: that the text as it has come down to us is incomplete and that the indication of an interval of time after the arrival on Cyprus has been lost; that Shakespeare in effect is playing a trick on his audience on the valid assumption that they will not notice the time discrepancy anyway; that Shakespeare deliberately adopted a double time scheme, involving a background of "long time" against a foreground of "short time", the latter to accommodate the inconsistencies in Iago's plot against Othello, and his need to bring it to a speedy conclusion.

The respective merits of these various explanations have been copiously debated. Common to all of them is the reluctance of critics to assume that Iago, a supremely clever man, would ever have allowed his whole plot to depend on Othello's unlikely failure to realise the obvious, namely that the infidelities of which Desdemona stands accused could not have happened because there had been no time for them. Iago, it is argued, would never have taken such a risk; and so we, as well as Othello, are being required to assume that in some way or other time for a thousand shameful acts had in fact existed. I would suggest, however, that we cannot so assume, and are indeed not being asked to do so. For Iago knew, and we should realise, that by the time he felt it safe to proceed from hints and insinuations to firm accusations of infidelity, Othello would no longer be himself, but a quite different person possessed by the eclipsing madness of jealousy. Certainly we must agree that there are two time schemes in *Othello*, a long and a short, but equally each must be seen to operate within its own distinct world: on the one hand the long time world of everyday normality, on the other a short time, indeed a timeless universe, in which jealousy, divorced from reality, through distortion, falsification and sheer invention creates a nightmare reality of its own.

It may still be argued, of course that the degree of Othello's irrationality manifest in his blindness to the time factor, is excessive, unrealistic, and that Iago for all his insight and daring would not have taken so great a risk. We must assume however that Shakespeare as always, knew what he was doing and presenting, and that art, the art of the theatre in particular, must concern itself with the archetypal, the universal, with that which is necessarily larger, more extreme than in life. And surely we must take into account that elsewhere in *Othello*, in the case of Bianca, the refusal of the jealous person to be bound by the rationality of time is once again drawn to our attention. Bianca, whose jealousy over Cassio motivates her every word and action, reproaches him on her first appearance with an alleged seven days and nights of neglect:

> What, keep a week away? seven days and
> nights?
> Eightscore eight hours, and lovers' absent
> hours,
> More tedious than the dial, eightscore times?
> (III. iv. 171/3)

The time here could hardly be more specifically stated, and yet, if we do not postulate the impossibility of an interval of almost a week between scenes three and four of Act III, the alleged duration of Cassio's neglect cannot be accepted. Act II begins with Cassio's arrival on Cyprus, and from this point to the moment of his encounter with Bianca the action on stage is continuous, and no more than a night and two days have elapsed before us. Once again it would seem that the irrationality of jealousy extending even into the reckoning of time is being demonstrated.

No less irrational, and no less typical of extreme jealousy, is the determination of Othello, as of Leontes, to destroy love through the anodyne of a deliberate cultivation of hatred. Here we must recognize that Othello,
newly married, overwhelmed with relief to find Desdemona safe on Cyprus, has attained to an intensity of love deeper than that of Leontes for Hermione:

O my soul's joy,
... If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute,
That not another comfort, like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(Il. i. 189/93)

Without hesitation, when jealousy strikes, Leontes achieves the transition from love to hate, but for Othello the process will be long drawn out, intermittent, subject to agonizing oscillations. The climax comes following the scene of final "proof", when Bianca has thrown the incriminating handkerchief back at Cassio, before Othello's eyes. The proof is not needed, for Othello's assumption of Desdemona's guilt has long been absolute, unassailable. On the other hand, love, or some remnant of it, still remains, and the moment has come, as Iago realises, for its final obliteration. Again and again, as Othello swings away in the dying agonies of love, Iago savagely recalls him:

Othello: … a fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!

Iago: Nay, you must forget.

Othello: And let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight, for she shall not live; no, my heart is turn'd to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand: O, the world hath not a sweeter creature, she might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks.

Iago: Nay, that's not your way.

Othello: Hang her, I do but say what she is: so delicate with her needle, an admirable musician, O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear; of so high and plenteous wit and invention!

Iago: She's the worse for all this.

(IV. i. 174/187)

Iago, the very voice of jealousy itself, would appear to succeed. Desdemona is smothered in the bed she had contaminated, and hatred's consummation is achieved. Yet it could be argued in Othello's case, in contrast to that of Leontes, that love is never wholly obliterated. The insane grip of jealousy is such that Othello can no longer doubt his wife's guilt, but he can act against it finally only by assuming the mask of impersonal justice:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

(V. ii. 6)

And we may even wonder whether Othello, still agonizing over the beauty he must destroy, could ever have sustained his assumed and precarious role of just executioner, had not Desdemona's bewilderment and terror, interpreted as prevarication, provoked him to one last paroxysm of rage and hatred.

For a while, beyond the point it had set itself to achieve, jealousy continues to sustain its victim. But the instrument has served its deadly purpose, and can be discarded. As suddenly and totally as Leontes, Othello is
abandoned to the hideous and incredulous realisation of what he has done. One moment of explanation, of truth, from Emilia is now enough. The handkerchief—

She gave it Cassio? no, alas, I found it,
And did give't my husband.

(V. ii. 231/2)

Othello, in the full vortex of jealousy, had already heard the truth from Emilia and facilely rejected it, "She's but a simple bawd that could not say as much", but now the vortex is past, the possession ending and truth, with the completeness and instantaneousness that is jealousy's final characteristic, once more assumes control10.

While Othello and Leontes, and also Bianca, present jealousy in its most characteristic form, it must be recognized that other forms and manifestations of this most devastating of human emotions are possible. At least two such variations on the play's basic theme of jealousy are to be found in Othello, the first of them presented by Roderigo. That Roderigo is jealous first of Othello and then of Cassio cannot be doubted, and Iago, before using him against Cassio, is careful to heighten in him the motivation of jealousy:

Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of
his hand? … Lechery,
by this hand: an index and prologue
to the history of lust and foul thoughts:
they met so near with their lips, that their
breaths embrac'd together.

(II. i. 251/6)

Thus primed and sustained by Iago, Roderigo overcomes his native timidity to the point of provoking the drunken Cassio on guard duty, and later of undertaking his murder. Only the irrationality of a jealous man, we might infer, could explain behaviour so savagely abnormal, could account also for that ludicrous readiness to go on accepting Iago's word, all evidence to the contrary, that Desdemona might still be his. It could perhaps be objected that Roderigo is not so much jealous as simply and deeply in love, as witnessed in particular by his uncritical idealising attitude towards Desdemona, his impregnable devotion. Surely, if jealous, he would have availed himself of the jealous man's most characteristic anodyne, a saving hatred. Need we in fact go any further than Iago in his assessment of Roderigo as one turned wrong side out by love? The answer must undoubtedly be that whatever Roderigo's love may have been at the outset, it has, thanks chiefly to the machinations of Iago, deteriorated, taken on elements of the irrational and ultimately of the diabolical; and to this deterioration jealousy has in large measure contributed. Roderigo, clutching at the straws of hope reached out to him by Iago, to the extent of selling all his land and following the Cyprus wars, has clearly ceased to act and react sanely. And when, quite definitely now under the compulsion of jealousy, he nerves himself to secure Cassio's dismissal and eventually to attempt his murder, he has reached a lower moral level than Othello, who can at least persuade himself that he is the instrument of justice. To the extent, then, of his irrationality and ultimate diabolism Roderigo is at one in jealousy with an Othello or a Leontes. On the other hand his jealousy, unlike theirs, proceeds from a love that has never been requited, and the form of his madness is to persist in hope of an ultimate possession. For him the cuckold's simple anodyne of hatred and vengeance is not available.

The second and final variation on the play's central theme of jealousy is to be found, it is suggested, in Iago. The traditional association of jealousy with sexual passion or possessiveness, must not obscure the fact that other kinds of jealousy, no less virulent in operation, are to be found; although sexual jealousy, his suspicion of the involvement of both Othello and Cassio with his wife, is also a factor in Iago's motivation. Far more, however, than suspicion over a wife he clearly does not love or value very highly, are obviously at work in
Iago and must be reckoned with if his extraordinary and diabolical behaviour is to be understood. The problem of Iago's motivation is certainly a major one, no less baffling than the problem of Hamlet's delay. A whole spectrum of explanations has accordingly been attempted, ranging from the famous "motiveless malignity" of Coleridge, to simplistic assertions that Iago's motives, sexual jealousy and envy at Cassio's appointment, are perfectly adequate to explain him. That Iago is indeed a jealous and envious man has of course been generally recognized; such recognition, however, can certainly be taken further, in particular in terms of those special characteristics of jealousy we have been attempting to establish.

That certain recent events have precipitated a state of jealousy in Iago is revealed to us in the first act of the play; he is jealous of Cassio over the lieutenancy which he considered his due, jealous of Othello whom he suspects of having had a liaison with his wife. We can assume that the effect of these experiences, and especially the former, has been devastating, to the point of working a profound and sudden change in Iago, a virtual metamorphosis. That he is indeed villainous becomes clear to us by the end of the first act, but we can hardly believe that he has always been so, and that his universal reputation for honesty has been based over a long period of time on calculation and bluff. That a great change has been involved is further indicated to us by the particular way in which Iago is made to announce his age: "I ha' look'd upon the world for four times seven years" (I. iii. 311/2)—a statement that would reveal, at all events to a Shakespearean audience, that here is a man arrived at one of the great seven year climacterics, a time especially liable to crisis and change. A far reaching change, precipitated in particular by Cassio's appointment and to a lesser extent by the apparently malicious evidence presented to him of an affair between Othello and Emilia, can certainly be postulated; and thus a new Iago confronts us, jealous, embittered, vengeful, viciously repudiating the honesty and loyalty that have led him nowhere.

It is clear, however, that the jealousy by which Iago stands possessed, as totally as an Othello or a Leontes, is of a special, a more comprehensive kind. It contains elements of sexual provocation, but it is directed also and even more powerfully against all those whose lives continue to be motivated, as his had once been, by the conventions of love, trust, honesty and goodness, and who continue on such a basis to be happy and successful, where he himself has suffered and failed. Upon them he will proceed to avenge himself, creating out of their now hated and envied love and goodness "the net that shall enmesh 'em all".

Once the fact and comprehensive nature of Iago's jealousy has been established, all his subsequent thoughts and acts become, by reason of their very strangeness and irrationality, intelligible. Many attempts, for example, have been made to explain in rational terms the curious "motive hunting" of Iago displayed in his first two soliloquies. Here he conjures up, or so it would appear, motive after motive for proceeding in his plot against Cassio and Othello: desire to get Cassio's place, suspicion of his wife's infidelity first with Othello and then with Cassio, his own love for Desdemona. Yet there is an element of strangeness in his way of formulating his motives, as though the motive itself rather than the degree of his belief in it were at issue.

What could be stranger, for example, than the irrational combination of belief and disbelief contained in his statement on the affair between Emilia and Othello:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ know not if't be true …} \\
& \text{Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind,} \\
& \text{Will do, as if for surety.} \\
& (\text{I. iii. 386/8})^{13}
\end{align*}
\]

Also, it is hard for us to suppose that Iago really did suspect Cassio with his "nightcap," or that he was really himself in love with Desdemona. And no less strange is the fact that Iago, having formulated all his motives and proceeded into action, presumably on the strength of them, never once refers to any of them again. The irrational element in the motive hunting is certainly evident, and this, rather than the validity of the motives themselves, is what must concern us. Iago, enumerating his motives and persuading himself to believe them, only to demonstrate their irrelevance by forgetting them later, is certainly not thinking as a rational man; on
the other hand, and Ironically, he is reacting entirely in accordance with his own remarkable understanding of the nature of jealousy\textsuperscript{15}. Jealousy, as he later informs Othello, is that green-eyed monster, mocking the food it feeds on. And where there is no such food, what must the jealous man do but persuade himself of its existence, endowing trifles light as air, if need be, with all the certainty of holy writ. The truth or otherwise of the reasons Iago dredges up to justify his jealous hatred of Cassio and Othello is quite irrelevant; they are the food his jealousy needs and that his intellect must provide.

Equally irrational, we must inevitably conclude, is the totality of Iago's behaviour, the way in which, with incredible persistence and ingenuity, he carries out his lunatic plot against Cassio and Othello. By way of rationalization, it is sometimes suggested that Iago starting out with no more than a vague spiteful desire to create mischief, underestimates the passions he is to awaken, and so becomes the unwilling victim of his own machinations. Certainly he is soon caught up in his own web, committed to the lies he has disseminated, unable to retreat; on the other hand he betrays no sign of ever wanting to do so, and views his own successes first against Cassio and then Othello with uninhibited satisfaction. Never once does the intrinsic insanity of what he is doing break through to him, the realisation, for example, that all the witnesses against him, Cassio, Desdemona, Roderigo, Emilia, Bianca, must somehow be killed if he himself is not sooner or later to be confronted with the awakened wrath of Othello. The truly astounding cleverness of Iago must not be allowed to blind us to the absolute stupidity, indeed the madness, of what he is attempting to do.

Iago, we must conclude, even more so than a Leontes or an Othello, confronts us as the very archetype of the jealous man. For here is an all-encompassing jealousy directed not only against sexual love but against love itself in all its manifestations. In this connection it is pertinent, by way of conclusion, to consider jealousy as in fact the antithesis of love, as containing within itself the very essence of evil. Iago in the list of actors in the Folio is described as a villain, and in the first act of the play he fully reveals himself as such. However, we have suggested that by reason of his universal reputation for honesty he could not always have been evil but had become so quite suddenly under the impact of jealousy. As a result a consuming, envious hatred of the goodness and love in those who had, as he saw it, betrayed him, takes possession of his soul. Evidences of Iago's hatred of love are everywhere in the play, as for example in his bitter reaction to the outpouring of love between Othello and Desdemona at the moment of their reunion on Cyprus:

\begin{quote}
O, you are well tun'd now, \\
But I'll set down the pegs that make this \\
music, \\
As honest as I am. \\
\end{quote}

(II. i. 199/201)\textsuperscript{16}

Or again there is the extremely revealing moment when he recognizes in Cassio the continuation of all those qualities that he himself has irrevocably lost:

\begin{quote}
If Cassio do remain, \\
He has a daily beauty in his life, \\
That makes me ugly. \\
\end{quote}

(V. i. 18/20)\textsuperscript{17}

That Iago is a villain, perhaps the most completely villainous character in all literature, is only too evident, and that his villainy originates in, is indeed synonymous with jealousy must also be recognized. By definition the supremely evil man appears as one in whom hatred of love and goodness is carried to the point of containing within itself the desire to reach out and destroy the loving and the good. Not all men of course, fortunately enough, surrender to jealousy with the absoluteness of an Iago, but the implication of Othello is that there are such men bearing latent within themselves as a kind of fate a terrible capacity for evil. "God's above all", declares Cassio in a moment of drunken insight; "and there be souls that must be saved, and there
be souls must not be saved". To which Iago with tragic irony replies, "It is true, good Lieutenant". (II. iii. 96/9)

That Iago is indeed a damned soul, one predestined by his own intrinsic nature to eventual damnation, is made manifest to us in a number of ways, most frequently by what we might call his conscious diabolism. Iago, in reaction against his former honesty which has failed and betrayed him, dedicates himself in a spirit of jealous revenge to honesty's opposite, evil. Consciously and deliberately he allies himself with the powers of darkness, invoking Hell and night in his first soliloquy and later, after mocking his own "honesty" in advising Cassio to seek Desdemona's help, coming right into the open with devastating explicitness:

Divinity of hell!
When devils will their blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now.

(II. iii. 341/4)

A Shakespearean, witchcraft-conscious audience would have no difficulty in accepting such diabolism as fact, in recognizing Iago as one possessed, glorying in his identification with evil spiritual powers. For them, as he must be for us if we are to understand him, Iago is indeed a "demi-devil", one who can, rhetorically at least, be thought of as possessing the cloven hoof. Equally indicative of diabolism, of the way in which Iago serves and is in turn assisted by the powers of evil, is the disturbing and consistent "run of luck" that he is made to enjoy in carrying out his plans. He causes Roderigo to provoke Cassio on guard, but could not foresee that Cassio in his rage would attack and severely wound Montano. He could advise Cassio to seek the intercession of Desdemona, but could not anticipate her naive importunity or the luckless moments when she should manifest it. Nor could he anticipate that the fatal handkerchief would come into his hands, or that Bianca in a jealous fit would throw it back at Cassio while Othello watched. All this would be sensed in some measure by Shakespeare's audience as indicating the involvement of evil beings, ascendant for the moment, and possessed with a jealous hatred of love and goodness just as their instrument, Iago, is himself possessed.

The close association between evil and jealousy is a dominant issue in Othello, almost what the whole play is about; until we are left with the conclusion that there can scarcely be an evil act for which envy or jealousy is not in some degree or wholly responsible. The outcome for love and goodness and innocence in Othello is almost unendurably tragic; yet tragedy, as always in Shakespeare, is never allowed the final word. Iago the destroyer is by himself destroyed. Jealousy, self-harming, irrational, demonstrates once again the intrinsic instability of evil, the ultimate impotence of the jealous gods.

Notes

1 Textual quotations are taken from the Arden edition of Othello (ed. M. R. Ridley).

2 The exact meaning of this passage has been much disputed (see New Variorum Shakespeare, 175-180). As it stands, and assuming that the word "mock" is correct, and not "make" as some contend, two interpretations are possible. Either the monster jealously is seen as mocking its victims as it devours them, or the jealous individual mocks the "evidences" with which he feeds himself. In either case, and the former seems the more plausible, the irrationality of the jealous condition is being indicated. Irrationality is also involved if "make" is substituted for "mock".

3 The irrational, self-destructive aspect of jealousy is also indicated in The Comedy of Errors (II, i, 102 & 116) when Luciana warns her jealous sister, Adriana, "Self-harming jealousy! fie, beat it hence", and later comments, "How many fond fools serve mad jealousy?"
4 J. H. P. Pafford in a footnote in his introduction to the Arden edition of *The Winter's Tale* (p. lvii) has summarized the arguments for the "Jealousy from the start." theory.

5 The absurd fantasies of the jealous husband are more frequently treated in literature at the level of comedy or farce than of tragedy. The farcical aspect of Leontes' accusations against Hermione is hinted at in an aside by Antigonus when he speculates that if Leontes makes them public people will be raised to laughter (II, i, 199-200).


7 Othello's irrationality in relation to time is especially evident in the scene (IV, ii, 1-23) where he questions Emilia as to whether she has seen Desdemona and Cassio together. Since Emilia's association with Desdemona only began at the time of their departure together from Venice, it is clear that Othello's questions must refer to supposed meetings between Cassio and Desdemona on Cyprus. Unless we attempt to rationalize by postulating an indication of a time interval on Cyprus lost from the play, the questions must be seen as totally irrational.

8 No evidence in the play supports the suggestion (see Donald C. Miller's "Iago and the Problem of Time", *English Studies*, XXII (1940), 97-115) that Cassio knew Bianca in Venice, that she came to Cyprus as camp-follower, and that the "seven days and nights," refer to Cassio's neglect of her on board ship. Bianca is referred to by Iago as a "housewife" and is clearly a citizen of Cyprus.

9 Othello's early realization of the need he will have for hatred is indicated in his lines:

She's gone, I am abus'd, and my relief Must be to loathe her.

(III. iii. 271-2)

10 H. Sommerville in his *Madness in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1929, 69-97) recognizes that Othello passes through a state of temporary insanity culminating in the murder of Desdemona. However, he attributes Othello's outburst of madness, not to jealousy (which he hardly mentions), but to the intrinsic abnormality of the marriage he has entered into.

11 Emilia confirms that this happened:

Some such squire he was,
That turn'd your wit, the seamy side without,
And made you to suspect me with the Moor.

(IV. ii. 147-9)

12 Iago's outward honesty up to the time of the play could very well have masked a latent subconscious capacity for evil.

13 The dependence of jealousy upon suspicion should be especially noted. Once suspicion is confronted with proof, jealousy ceases—as Othello realises:

No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove,
And on the proof, there is no more but this:
Away at once with love or jealousy.

(III. iii. 193/6)
It is interesting to note on Cassio's appearance after Othello has hidden himself (IV, i, 103) that Iago greets him with the words, "How do you now, lieutenant?" Cassio of course is no longer the lieutenant and so Iago's "mistake" has to be accounted for. It is possible that he made it deliberately out of malice. On the other hand the whole business of the lieutenantcy, including the fact that he himself was now the lieutenant, may simply have slipped his mind. (Othello's comparable forgetting of the handkerchief has already been noted.)

It may seem implausible that Iago who can with such insight detect jealousy in others should fail to recognize it at work in himself. It is however something of a psychological commonplace that we tend to criticize most strongly in others what are in fact our own defects.

Hatred of love is also strongly manifest in his speeches to Roderigo (I. iii. 311ff) when he equates love with lust and speaks of it with cynical contempt. There is also the extreme cynicism of his exchanges with Desdemona on the subject of women (II, i, 109ff).

Any assessment of the character of Iago must take into account the analysis put forward by Bradley (Shakespearean Tragedy, 207-237), in which he interprets Iago as a man essentially incapable of feeling and only incidentally jealous, but diabolically intent on subjecting others to his will. The Iago in the play, however, is clearly moved by the violent and vindictive emotions peculiar to jealousy, and though he certainly imposes his will he does not do so coldly.

The presence of evil in Othello is indicated not only by the conscious diabolism of Iago but through the extensive use of imagery. See S. L. Bethell's "Diabolic Images in Othello", Shakespeare Survey, V, (1952), 62-80.

It is perhaps not too far-fetched to consider the supreme betrayer, Judas Iscariot, as one motivated to the ultimate degree by jealousy. Is it just coincidence that an anachronistic reference to Judas, "my name Be yok'd with his that did betray the Best," is introduced into The Winter's Tale (I, ii, 418-9)? Also there is the critical support given to the contention that the "base Indian" in Othello's final speech should in fact be the "base Iudean" and that this in turn refers to Judas.

Othello (Vol. 35): Sexual Conflict

Stephen A. Shapiro (essay date 1964)


[In this essay which first appeared in Literature and Psychology in 1964, Shapiro concentrates on the relationship between Othello and Desdemona in his exploration of Othello's character.]

The last scene of Othello poses a difficult but crucial interpretive problem. Does Othello achieve self-awareness before he dies or does he remain the victim of his tendency to dramatize and deceive himself? This question cannot be answered in such a way as to remove the possibility of the alternate solution, but a psycho-analytic exploration of the conflicts within Othello will tend to strengthen the argument that Othello remains blind, that he is the object of irony at the end.

The critics who have considered Othello from a psychoanalytic view-point have, in general, followed two lines of reasoning. The first, exemplified by Dr. Martin Wangh1 or Professor Gordon R. Smith,2 explores Iago's homosexual attraction to Othello. The second, represented by Dr. A. Bronson Feldman,3 Professor John V. Hagopian,4 or W. H. Auden,5 traces Othello's doubts about his virility, or his insecurity as a black man in a
white world, and shows why Othello is an easy prey to Iago. All of these writers concentrate on Iago. Their points of view should, it seems to me, be supplemented by a third one which focuses on the relationship between Othello and Desdemona.

When Othello claims that Desdemona has committed "the act of shame / A thousand times" (V.ii.212-213) with Cassio, we know that he is deceiving himself, that his exaggeration is a desperate and wild attempt to justify his own actions. But when Othello speaks of himself as "one that lov'd not wisely but too well" (V.ii.344), reactions and interpretations are mixed. Some critics accept Othello's description of himself as an accurate one. But F. R. Leavis insists that "Othello's Othello" must be distinguished from Shakespeare's Othello.6 And R. B. Heilman suggests that Othello loved "not wisely, nor enough."7 A third possibility, that Othello is an ironist lacerating himself, does not seem to be supported by the lines—despite the savage twist at the end of the speech. And Othello's final speech.

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee, no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss
(V.ii.358-359)

indicates that whether "pride is purged"8 or not, Othello believes that he loved Desdemona as he killed her, just as he loves her now. What Othello never sees or admits is that he hated Desdemona. No critic could maintain that Othello lacks dignity as he punishes himself with death. But he does lack the kind of dignity conferred by insight into the black heart of human motivations. The question whether we ought to expect this kind of insight from Othello, or whether it is necessary to a tragic effect, is outside the realm of this essay. I am primarily concerned with the textual evidence that gives us insight into the reasons for Othello's failure or refusal to acknowledge the hate in his love for Desdemona, the hate that surges out of his love and submerges it.

Several critics have commented incisively on the incompleteness of Othello's response to Desdemona. In Act I Othello seems quite tepid for a lover on his wedding night. He begs the Duke not to suspect

I will your serious and great business scant
For she is with me. No, when light-wing'd toys
Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dulness
My speculative and offic'd instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation!
(I.iii.268-275)

Othello's language, his associations, are quite revealing. He equates sensual love with "light-wing'd toys." There is scorn in his use of the terms "disports," "corrupt," and "taint." Othello is clearly more concerned with his "reputation" than with loving Desdemona.

Even if we grant that war is a serious business, and must take priority over private matters, Othello still remains curiously "detached." Desdemona is emotional:

… if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft
me, …

(I.iii.256-258)

Othello asks that she be allowed to join him, but not

To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat, the young affects
In me defunct, and proper satisfaction, …

(I.iii.263-265)

He is not confessing impotence; he is simply asserting that he is not a passionate sensualist. But his "tone" is quite strange. Whereas Desdemona's speech is pregnant with her love of Othello, his is full of formal posing. Even more striking, however, is his response to the First Senator's "You must away tonight" (I.iii.279). What can one say of Othello's "With all my heart" (I.iii.279) except that he seems eager to be separated from Desdemona on their marriage night (though he is, of course, unconscious of this feeling).

In Act I Shakespeare has exposed Othello as a man concerned more with the "serious business" of war and with ceremony than with loving Desdemona. The absence of passion in Othello in Act I is connected to his attitude toward Desdemona, an attitude expressed in the following lines:

She love'd me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I lov'd her that she did pity them.

(I.iii.167-168)

Othello loves Desdemona for the purity of her sympathy for him. He delights in the fact that, "She gave me for my pains a world of sighs" (I.iii.159). Othello has abstracted out of the living Desdemona a virginal but maternal idol to worship.

An examination of the connection between idealization and psychic impotence will illuminate the character of Othello. Psychic impotence results from the radical separation of affection or reverence and sensuality in the lover. Of the psychically impotent, Freud has written, "Where they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love."⁹ We have already seen that in Act I Othello reveals his profoundly divided psyche. His love for Desdemona seems naked of sexual desire. We need only turn to Antony or Benedict to see how "pure" Othello's love is. He displays no erotic awareness, beyond a kind of contempt for the corrupt and animal-trivial nature of sex.

However, Othello is a sex-drenched drama. Heilman has discussed the voyeuristic elements in the play, noting that what Iago, Othello, and Roderigo have in common is a tormenting but morbidly exciting vision of Desdemona having sexual intercourse with "another."¹⁰ Clearly, Othello does not remain the statue of moderation that was undraped in Act I. In Act II Othello's suspicions outtrace Iago's suggestions:

… he echoes me,

As if there were some monster in his thought,
Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost means something:

And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit….

(III.iii. 106-108, 113-115)
Is the horrible monster in Iago's mind or in Othello's? Why is Othello so readily convinced that Desdemona is a whore? A psychoanalytic explanation of Othello's behavior will illuminate some of the dark and unexplored areas of his character.

Othello wants to debase Desdemona. His instincts must hate the virginal-maternal idol he has created because it inhibits their expression. Freud has explained that the main defense utilized by men threatened by psychic impotence, by the split in their love, "consists in a phychical debasement of the sexual object…. As soon as the condition of debasement is fulfilled, sensuality can be freely expressed …,"11 because the inhibiting fear of incest has been evaded. The inevitable complaint that psychoanalytic criticism "imposes a pattern" can be forestalled by a detailed examination of the text. Freud was not paying an idle compliment when he said that the poets discovered the unconscious.

The horror of the "brothel scene" (IV.ii) arises from Othello's reduction from a person to a repulsive animal. And, as we shall see, there is a vital connection between the brothel scene and the murder scene. In the brothel scene we can observe the intimate relationship between Desdemona's debasement and the awakening of Othello's sexuality:

… O thou weed!
Who are so lovely fair, and smell' st so sweet
That the sense aches at thee, …
(IV.ii.67-69)

"Sense" still aching, Othello calls her "public commoner" (1. 73), "impudent strumpet" (1. 81), "whore" (1. 87). Of course, Iago has told Othello that Desdemona has betrayed him with Cassio. But Othello is inventing elaborate variations on the adultery theme when he transforms Desdemona into a "public commoner." Only a very simple conception of man's psychological constitution could deny that Othello's fury is compounded partially of relish. Othello has created the brothel and the whore. He luxuriates in the fantasy he has woven out of his own perversity.

In the last scene of Othello, Desdemona says, "That death's unnatural that kills for loving" (V.ii.42). She thus prepares us to reject Othello's estimation of himself as "one that lov'd not wisely but too well." And Othello's protest that "nought did I in hate, but all in honour" (V.ii.295) is nothing but an evasion of self-knowledge. In Professor Heilman's terms: "Othello does not know how close hate is to love, and he has forgot the intensity of his passion to destroy."12 The "passion to destroy" is a much more accurate description of Othello's behavior than his own self-deceiving formulation of his motivation.

Professor Brents Stirling has examined Othello's ritualization of his passion in this final scene and has indicated how Othello has fortified his delusion by transforming violence into impersonal ceremony.13 Othello refuses to see himself as a maddened, lusting animal. He masquerades as a self-controlled priest, as a judge. This "trial scene" in which Othello is prosecutor, judge, and jury is an inversion of the fair hearing of the Brabantio claim against Othello in Act I. Similarly, Othello's strangling of Desdemona, a symbolic enactment of sexual intercourse, is an ironic consummation of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona.

Let us recall that Desdemona has ordered her "wedding sheets" (IV.ii. 106) placed on the bed she is to die in. I doubt that this is a detail added simply to heighten the pathos of the murder scene. Shakespeare is deliberately identifying the marriage with the murder. But it is quite significant that before Othello kills Desdemona in bed, and dies by her side, one condition has been manufactured by Othello. He has transformed Desdemona into a whore, and has staged their chambers as a brothel. It is not psychoanalytic theory, but structural irony, that we are dealing with here.
In Act I Othello vindicates his marriage in a trial scene. He reveals little passion for Desdemona and betrays a desire to leave her on their wedding night. By the middle of the third act, Othello's moderation in love has given way to an erotically intense jealousy, made possible by the degradation of Desdemona. In Act IV he acts out a fantasy that establishes Desdemona as a whore in a brothel. This, in turn, makes possible the consummation of their marriage in death. Othello's last words,

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee; no way but this,  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss,  
(V.ii.358-359)

seem full of a sense of reconciliation. But we must realize that this reconciliation has come only after Othello has expressed his desire to degrade and destroy Desdemona. The fact that he kisses Desdemona before he kills her (let us remember that "kill" is a metaphor for the sexual climax) is not to be accepted in a simple sentimental sense. The Desdemona that Othello kisses and kills is to him a whore. Love, hate, degradation, and death are fused in Othello.

However, if we return to our original problem—Othello's recognition of his responsibility for the tragedy—we are forced to observe that Othello has no awareness of the destructive elements in his being. He speaks right to the end like an innocent man who has been at worst a fool, at best the victim of Iago's diabolism. His symbolic self-transformation into a "dog" of a Turk certainly lends him the dignity of a willingness to undergo punishment. But sandwiched as it is between his conviction that he loved "too well" and his final kiss to Desdemona, it is inadequate to give one the sense that Othello realized that one does not kill because one loves. Othello dies blind to the fact that his fear of Desdemona's being a whore is also his desire.

But Othello is not blind alone. Roderigo is blind. Emilia is blind. Cassio is blind. Desdemona is blind. Even subtle Iago is blind to his own motivations. Othello, like Shakespeare's other tragedies, presents man as a creature groping in the darkness of self, misconstruing the motives of others, stumbling over unforeseen, fatal consequences. Othello says, "Certain, men should be what they seem" (III.iii.128). But he cannot see either Cassio or Iago. And he cannot distinguish between Desdemona as she "seems" to him, and Desdemona herself. When Othello "put[s] out the light" (V.ii.7) before he kills her, the darkness is deeper than he knows.

Suspicion or fear that something may come to pass is also ambiguously a desire for that thing to occur. Othello offers us not a simple warning against unfounded jealousy, but the opportunity to purge ourselves of the desire to degrade and destroy where we love. If we accept Othello's version of himself instead of the whole play's comment on Othello, we are, I fear, revealing that we, like Othello believe ourselves innocent of all desire to degrade and destroy.

Notes


Robert Rogers (essay date 1969)


[In the essay below, Rogers examines attitudes toward sexuality and women in Othello and maintains that the conflict between Othello and Iago represents an "antagonism between two inseparable components of a single psychological configuration."

The poet whose characters make a thousand sly jokes at the expense of cuckolds wrote a charming spoof on pastoral love in which he has two of his "country copulatives" say:

Audrey: Would you not have me honest?

Touchstone: No, truly, unless thou wert hard-favored, for honesty coupled to beauty is to have honey a sauce to sugar.

Audrey: I am not a slut, though I thank the gods I am foul.

Touchstone: Well, praised be the gods for thy foulness! Sluttishness may come hereafter. But be it as it may be, I will marry thee…. .

(As You Like It III. iii)

Awareness of the light, frolicsome manner with which Shakespeare treats sexual honesty in As You Like It and elsewhere serves to deepen our interest in the tragic, terrifying construction he places on marital infidelity in Othello, where fair seems foul and foulness—or the mere suspicion of it—has a peculiarly prurient fascination for both the hero and villain alike.

In accounting for this fascination and in attempting to explain why Othello deals at such length with two fundamentally different conceptions of the nature of womankind it will be helpful to review some of the more significant pronouncements about Othello and Iago. A. C. Bradley's conception of Othello as one "not easily jealous" and altogether noble has been disputed by a number of commentators, among whom T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, R. B. Heilman, and Leo Kirschbaum may be taken as representative. They argue with some force that
the man who loves not wisely but too well is really given to self-dramatization, or "cheering himself up" as Eliot puts it, and that in his last great speech Othello does not arrive at anything like a just estimate of his own folly. Views of Iago differ widely. Those who hold them might be grouped as follows: the Apologist, who regard Iago as a much-wronged and rather good sort of fellow; the Diabolists, who see him as a fiend incarnate or a stock Machiavel; and the Realists, who find him evil enough yet a man withal, neurotic or psychotic perhaps but essentially mirroring a real human being and not an evil spirit or stereotype. The Apologists are rare and feeble. The Diabolists, most common of all, may be represented for the moment by Coleridge, who speaks of Iago's "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity" and of his "passionless character" which is "all will in intellect", and by E. E. Stoll, who sees Iago as simply a stock Machiavel embodying the convention of the credible calumniator.

The Realists may be represented by A. C. Bradley (p. 151), who finds in Iago a power-loving egotist, bent upon executing his intricate, dangerous design in an ecstatic "joy of artistic creation", and by Marvin Rosenberg, who regards Iago as a man plagued by an ulcer.

Anyone approaching Othello from a psychoanalytic point of view—as I do—must take his stand with the Realists even if he is dissatisfied with the specific views of Iago just attributed to Bradley and Rosenberg. He will look at the drama as a whole in human as well as artistic terms, subscribing to the statement that "if the play is to be anything more than a parable, we must feel that it represents conflict between, and within, actual human beings." In taking this position my paper stresses the presence of conflict within, as distinct from between, human beings. It explains the necessity of understanding the opposition between Othello and Iago as the dramatic portrayal of what is fundamentally an endopsychic conflict.

Earlier psychoanalytic studies have shown much insight in apprehending the play in terms of inner conflict. The best effort in this vein, later supported with additional evidence by Gordon Ross Smith, was made by Martin Wangh. As Ernest Jones does in the case of Hamlet's procrastination, Wangh discounts all of the reasons Iago offers for his revenge. Wangh argues that where so many are given, none is likely to be true. Specifically he says (p. 203), "If the first motivation [that of being passed over for promotion] is the true one, then the play should end in the second act with the displacement of Cassio. If the second motivation [that Iago suspects Othello and Cassio with his "nightcap"] is the true one, why is it not present at once?" According to Wangh the real reason why Iago seeks revenge is an unconscious one: he is a paranoid personality suffering from repressed homosexuality who unknowingly regards Desdemona as a rival for the love of Othello. Thus Othello's marriage precipitates the action of the play, not the promotion of Cassio. The plan of revenge itself stems from the basic paranoid defense mechanism, projection: Iago's jealousy of his own wife, a defense against repressed homosexuality, is projected onto Othello. From a strictly psychoanalytic viewpoint, this analysis fits Iago like the skin on a snake. The only serious limitations to Wangh's contributions are, first, that in his eagerness to analyze Iago he almost ignores Othello and, second, he does not explain why it is Othello who is involved rather than some other chance person. In other words, the particular traits and values of Othello as an individual do not enter into the equation which Wangh sets up, so that Othello figures only as a handy victim. But surely Othello and Iago are bound together by more than a fortuitous predator-victim relationship.

One cluster of critical opinion contributes a partial explanation of the special relationship between Othello and Iago and at the same time depicts the conflict of the play as "inner" in a more profound way than Wangh does. According to this view the conflict subsists not simply within Othello or Iago as separate individuals, or between them, for the reason that the two characters taken together constitute a single psychological entity; in other words, Othello and Iago are doubles or decomposed parts of a single self. The relevant equation takes the form: conflict between = conflict within. What appears on the stage as conflict between two persons depicts endopsychic warfare. The main action of the play represents an antagonism between two inseparable components of a single psychological configuration.

Perhaps the honor of being the first to record this insight belongs to Joyce, who has Stephen Dedalus say of Shakespeare, "In Othello he is bawd and cuckold…. His unremitting intellect is the hornmad Iago ceaselessly
willing that the moor in him shall suffer." Several academic scholars echo this general idea. Maud Bodkin regards Iago as "a projected image of forces present in Othello" and "the shadow-side of Othello, the devil-shape that the resistant clay, 'moving awry,' generates from the imposition of that too single-hearted ideal which Othello as a hero represents" (pp. 215-239). Unhappily the Jungian strain in Miss Bodkin's archetypal criticism beguiles her into stopping short with a formula too generalized to be valuable: "The devil is our tendency to represent in personal form the forces within and without us that threaten our supreme values." Simon O. Lesser, who remarks in Fiction and the Unconscious (pp. 116-188) that Iago succeeds in convincing Othello "because the doubts he whispers in Othello's ear are Othello's own", supports Miss Bodkin's assertions, though without refining them. Thomas F. Connolly, who regards the "double man" as a common feature of Shakespeare's plays, sees the pair as reflecting the "day and night" sides of man (pp. 30-33). Two other critics take much the same position in non-psychoanalytic terminology: F. R. Leavis contends that what we must see in Iago's prompt success "is not so much Iago's diabolic intellect as Othello's readiness to respond. Iago's power, in fact, in the temptation scene is that he represents something that is in Othello…. The essential traitor is within the gates" (italics added); and J. I. M. Stewart remarks that "Othello is the human soul as it strives to be, and Iago is that which corrodes and subverts it from within." While all of these views share the valuable perspective of discerning the conflict between Othello and Iago to be endopsychic in essence, they share the common weakness of being too broadly formulated in terms of such grand antimonies as good and evil, day and night, with the result that at their lowest common denominator the exponents of these views belong more in the camp of the Diabolists than in that of the Realists with respect to the character of Iago.

The psychoanalytic study of A. B. Feldman constitutes an exception to this oversimplification. Like Wangh (though independent of him), Feldman perceives in the intensity of Iago's hatred for Othello the fury of an outraged homosexual love, but unlike Wangh and like the others just mentioned Feldman considers Othello and Iago to be doubles:

I have suggested that Iago's devotion to the Moor is the outcome of unconscious lust. Possibly there is another reason for their sinister alliance, a reason springing from the unconscious tendency of Shakespeare's art in creating characters. Dr. Ludwig Jekels once argued (in Imago, V, 1918) that the poet frequently split his characters in two, converting them to separate personae, each of whom appears not altogether comprehensible until combined again with the other. Macbeth and his Lady, according to Jekels, presented the dramatic poles of such a schism. I believe that Othello and Iago offer a more reliable proof of his theory. … We might describe the ancient as the Moor's evil alter-ego. When Iago observes the encounter of Cassio and Desdemona he utters a noncommittal sentence or two and repeats the questions his master flings at him. At once the Moor declares: 'By heaven, he echoes me, As if there were some monster in his thought Too hideous to be shown.' (III, iii) There is no hint of a monster in Iago's words; the hideousness hides in Othello's own heart. (P. 156)

Worthy of note as this passage may be, most of Feldman's paper must be rejected on grounds of inconsistency of logic and lack of sensitivity to and respect for the work of art. Having set up Iago as an alter-ego of Othello, Feldman makes the lamentable error of confusing one "self with the other and the part with the whole in that he attributes all of Iago's failings and cravings to Othello. As a result he arrives at such untenable conclusions as these: "It should be obvious by now that Othello's love for Brabantio's daughter was a makeshift passion, the device of a mind in terror of certain chaos to save itself [sic]"; this chaos which the Moor fears, Feldman defines as "a madness resulting from a revelation of his inner lack of manliness. This fear of unvirility springs from a deeply repressed homosexual impulse, manifested by his passion for Cassio." Feldman argues that Othello's "sentiment" for Desdemona constitutes a defense-mechanism "against the pull of his barbaric past, the return of the repressed. The magnetic spell of barbarism in Othello's id functioned indivisible from his craving for sodomy. His martial exterior deceives nobody outside the play; the essence of Othello is effeminate" (pp. 158-159). The embarrassed literary critic who is psychoanalytically oriented must
repudiate such balder-dash.

A satisfactory account has to be rendered of the precise psychosexual relationship between Othello and Iago if the pregnant suggestion that they are doubles is to bear fruit. When given, such an account will reveal the play as being not so much an Aristotelian fable, an imitation of an action, but rather the representation through action, character, and poetry of an attitude or series of attitudes towards sexuality in general and woman in particular. The drama may be regarded as portraying intrapsychic rather than interpersonal conflict, the specific tension involved being between competing sexual orientations. The dynamics of this tension are in part reflected in the dissociation of personality manifested by Othello and Iago, and the outcome of the tension is symbolized by the action of the play.

A glance at two other plays composed within a couple of years or so of Othello will help to clarify the nature of these competing sexual orientations. Both All's Well That Ends Well and Measure for Measure deal extensively in masculine attitudes toward marriageable and unmarriageable women. In All's Well Parolles' words of advice to young Bertram depict the supposed drawbacks and imagined perils of connubial sex:

He wears his honor in a box unseen
That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home,
Spending his manly marrow in her arms,
Which should sustain the bound and high curvet
Of Mars's fiery steed.

(II. iv. 296-300)

As compared to Othello, who takes his bride with him to the wars, Bertram leaves his marriage unconsummated and his wife behind (or so he thinks). This frantic flight from Venus to Mars can be conceived—without offering conclusive support here—as representing a dualistic attitude toward women born of an unconscious incest prohibition, for we recall that Bertram entertains no inhibitions about enjoying the favors, as he supposes, of Diana (whom he regards as no better than a prostitute), and we know that his physician wife, Helena, can almost be said to be his sister. As for so strange and problematic a play as Measure for Measure—one peopled by hot bawds and cold saints, prurient pimps and sexual hypocrites—no more can be said at the moment than to call attention to the fact that the fantastic, Lucio, gives clear evidence of a sexual double standard when he declares with apparent earnestness to Isabella that, "though 'tis my familiar sin / With maids to seem the lapwing, and to jest, / tongue far from heart", he holds Isabella herself

... as a thing enskied and sainted,
By your renouncement, an immortal spirit,
And to be talked with in sincerity,
As with a saint.

(I. iv. 31ff.)

This same Lucio is sentenced by the Duke at the end to marry the whore he got with child, a cruel and comic punishment for this idealist who pretends to cynicism.

When we survey Othello with the subject of masculine attitudes toward the fair sex in mind it seems astonishing how great a proportion of the play is devoted to their exposition. The inquiry may well begin with Cassio, who presents the sexual double standard in classic form. Do not the mannered speeches of the handsome cavalier to Desdemona bear a striking resemblance to the elaborate rhetoric of Lucio just quoted? Cassio tells Montano that Othello has married
Most fortunately. He hath achieved a maid
That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th' essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.

(II. i. 61ff.)

Shakespeare allows Cassio an overelaborate verbiage in speaking of Desdemona which Cassio does not customarily use elsewhere in the play, one distinctly artificial as compared to Othello's sublime yet controlled passages about Desdemona. We encounter hyperbole again when Cassio declaims at the news of her arrival in Cyprus:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling
winds,
The guttered rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteeped to clog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.

(II. i. 68ff)

The style of these passages reveals the exaggerated nature of Cassio's respect for Desdemona, though the well-bred courtier would presumably treat any lady of Desdemona's station to similar speeches; he even extends his "bold show of courtesy" to the lower-caste Emilia a few moments later by kissing her hand. Cassio gives further evidence of his idealization of women during Iago's futile attempts at the beginning of Act II, Scene iii, to arouse in Cassio an erotic interest in Desdemona: to Iago's suggestive "man-talk" speculations about how voluptuous Desdemona may be in bed, Cassio—the perfect gentleman—responds primly with polite compliments about the "exquisite lady". Yet Cassio, like Lucio, has his whore, and he shows no reluctance to indulge in persiflage with respect to his mistress in the scene where Iago pretends to Othello that he and Cassio speak of Desdemona. Cassio laughs about Bianca's passion for him, and when Iago mentions marriage Cassio responds, "I marry her? What, a customer? Prithee bear some charity to my wit; do not think it so unwholesome" (IV. i).

Thus in view of the sexual double standard that Cassio entertains the suggestion here put forth for the first time that he functions as a psychological "double" or component part of Othello acquires special point. That this relationship obtains seems at least tentatively indicated on the grounds that Cassio was present at Othello's wooing of Desdemona; that he stands as Othello's "second" or lieutenant; that he takes Othello's place as governor of Cyprus; that he takes Othello's sexual welfare to heart, hoping that he will survive the storm to make "love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms"; that he shares Othello's idealization of women; and that just before Othello dismisses Cassio from his position he declares, "He that is approved in this offense, / Though he had twinned with me, / both at a birth, / shall lose me" (II. iii. 211-212; italics added). In a sense what happens is that just after Othello cashiers Cassio he jettisons—by calling into doubt—the worshipful attitude toward women he has in common with Cassio, his psychic twin in many respects.

The trouble with the plaster-cast conception of Desdemona which Othello shares with Cassio is that it is so friable. Othello's conscious worship of his "cunning'st pattern of excelling nature"—however noble and admirable—betokens an unrealistic and therefore precarious assessment of womankind. The audience knows that the beautiful, honorable, devoted Desdemona is only human and hence fallible: she is evasive if not mendacious about the handkerchief when straightforwardness might have saved her, she peevishly charges that Othello's insistence about the handkerchief is "a trick to put me from my suit", she grovels in the face of death ("Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight"), and she is doubtless a bit devious with her father concerning
her love for Othello. Leo Kirschbaum remarks (p. 292) in calling Othello a romantic idealist who overvalues Desdemona, "He loves not Desdemona but his image of her." Perhaps it should be said that he loves both but cannot distinguish between the two. Although there is only one Desdemona involved, there are at least two psychic dispositions of Othello to contend with. One of these, represented by Cassio, is that of the manly warrior whose arms have heretofore found "their dearest action in the tented field" and whose bed has been "the flinty and steel couch of war"—a man who if he knew women at all must have known them either politely and remotely or else in passing dalliance, as Cassio has. As opposed to this double standard, another disposition is that of the normal, sensual, integrated Othello, of a man able under ordinary conditions to combine the currents of affection and eroticism, a man who can say to Desdemona without any romantic claptrap, "The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (II. iii. 9-10) and who reveals that "the young affects" in him are not entirely defunct when he cries in the brothel scene, "O thou weed, / Who art so lovely fair, and smell'st so sweet, / That the sense aches at thee…. "

What has just been described as the sensual side of Othello obviously contrasts more sharply with the component represented by Iago than that by Cassio. Wived or not, Iago hates women. At the very beginning of the play he speaks, in that puzzling line, of Cassio as "almost damned in a fair wife." The animal imagery he typically uses in sexual contexts, and which Othello employs after succumbing to Iago's medicine, betrays the anti-feminine in him which is but the obverse of his latent homosexuality. "Plague him with flies", he tells Roderigo as he incites him to approach Brabantio in Act I, and to the latter he says, "An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe", "You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse", and "Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs." But the truest words Iago speaks against women (true for him) are spoken in seeming jest in Act II, scene i, where he is indeed nothing if not critical:

You are pictures out of doors,
Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being offended,
Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds.

Following this speech Iago presents his series of clever paradoxes in mock praise of Desdemona. All of them besmirch women for infidelity. Still another jest betraying Iago's subterranean attitudes occurs when he says, in response to Emilia's "I have a thing for you" (the handkerchief), "It is a common thing—"; when Emilia gets angry, Iago softens his joke by adding, "to have a foolish wife" (III. iii. 301-305). Equally un-amusing but even more expressive of Iago's latent homosexuality is the anal fantasy he articulates in an aside upon watching Cassio kiss his fingers to the ladies: "Would they were clyster pipes for your sake!" (II. i. 179).

That most of Iago's scatalogical remarks denigrate women is no coincidence nor simply a matter of dramatic and thematic relevance. Allardyce Nicoli recognizes Iago's anti-feminism but attributes it to his cynicism (without considering the psychological roots of cynicism, which is a defense against anxiety) and presumes that Iago "had experience of frail women", arguing with quaint logic that because Iago's nature is essentially masculine he despises or ignores the women he encounters. Quite the contrary, his behavior reflects that of a paranoid personality whose repressed homosexual tendencies have erupted under stress in the form of delusions of persecution and jealousy, as Martin Wangh's sound analysis reveals. With the paranoid's marvelous ingenuity he converts his delusional system into a plan of revenge. That this plan singles out Cassio as the cuckolder of Othello is over-determined. Consciously Iago wants revenge on Cassio because of the promotion. Unconsciously he wants revenge because the characteristic envy of Cassio he experiences: "He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly" and "The knave is handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after." This envious antipathy masks the sexual desire he has for Cassio, reminding us of the similar "pale ire, envy, and despair" which Melville's Claggart experiences with respect to Billy Budd for similar reasons. Wangh suggests that, as both dreams and lies embody wishes,
Iago's "dream-lie" about Cassio further substantiates his latent homosexual tendencies:

And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry "O sweet creature!" and then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg
Over my thigh, and sighed, and kissed, and then
Cried "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!"

(III. iii. 421-426)

But Wangh's assertion that Iago unconsciously yearns for Othello and identifies with Desdemona, whom he regards as a rival, must be called a misleading over-simplification.

Why this is so can be understood if Othello be conceived of as a composite character with certain conflicting tendencies of the composite represented by Cassio and Iago. Better yet, let there be a paradigm of three Othellos. One may be called the Normal Othello, a man more gifted than the average, but normal and healthy psychologically in that he possesses control ("Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them"), awareness of reality, and self-respect. This is the "noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient", the man "Whom passion could not shake" (IV. i. 275ff.). He is good and trusting, "of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so" (I. iii. 405-406). He is a manly, masculine man, the man called to mind by G. Wilson Knight's description of Othello as "a symbol of human—especially masculine—'purpose, courage, and valour';" Knight further says, "Othello is essential man in all his prowess and protective strength" and Desdemona is "essential woman, gentle, loving, brave in trust of her warrior husband." This is the Othello described earlier as the integrated, sensual man who is able under ordinary circumstances to combine the currents of affection and lust. Next there is the Romantic Othello, more refined, sensitive, idealistic, whose impulses in these respects are exaggerated in Cassio, especially in the matter of the sexual double standard for women. Finally there is the Psychotic Othello, personified by Iago, who can experience neither affection nor lust except in perverted form.

Confusing as this multiplication of Othello may seem at first, it makes perfect sense from a clinical point of view when seen in terms of the origin of the sexual double standard. If Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex has any meaning and validity, then the male child must at some time both experience a possessive lust for his mother and eventually deny that lust. He must also both recognize that she has sexual appetites and as a defense against this unbearable fact deny that she has any such appetites and attribute a false sexual purity to her. During the course of psychosexual maturation he comes eventually to accept a substitute for her in marriage and to resolve the dual view he has had to entertain of women as sexual saints or sinners by dropping the distinction altogether. When so-called fixation on the mother occurs, with its attendant incest fear, or when because of father-son hostility too much castration anxiety is mobilized, then the reconciliation of the two views of women either never takes place or else is resolved in a negative fashion by flight into homosexuality. In application of these matters to the play, it is argued that the sexual double standard is perceptible in Othello, obvious in Cassio, and symbolized in extreme pathological form by Othello-Iago. One trifle light as air, the handkerchief, tends to confirm because of its history and multiple symbolism that Desdemona enjoys the (natural) position of a surrogate of Othello's mother. Intimations of conflict with the father are also present in the play. Brabantio says to the Moor, "She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I. iii. 294). Since psychologically speaking Brabantio and Othello are father and son as well as father-in-law and son-in-law, the oedipal overtones are discernible. Thus, as previously mentioned, the true precipitating factor in the play is not the promotion of Cassio but the marriage of Othello; in contrast to Wangh's contention, however, the
reason lies not so much in the mobilization of jealousy on Iago's part as in the flood of excitation aroused in
Othello by the marriage and the simultaneous conflict with the father. This conflict in turn promotes confusion
with respect to sexual role and makes Brabantio's threat to Othello that Desdemona may deceive him too seem
a real possibility, particularly when Iago reminds Othello of it later.15

The significance of considering Othello as a composite character and the play as an endopsychic drama whose
action symbolizes certain conflicting possibilities of sexual orientation seems considerable. Perhaps now the
unanswerable plea, "Demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body", has been
answered. And Iago's reply, "Demand me nothing. ... / From this time forth I never will speak word", makes
peculiar sense in that when Othello kills himself Iago may be said to expire with him (so that in terms of
formal resolution of the dramatic conflict, the artist at this point silences the voice of divisiveness, which no
longer has any power to create a split in Othello's soul). The interpretation offered helps to highlight many
minor aspects of the play, such as the parallel that both Othello and Iago murder their own wives; the
profound significance of the brothel scene; the ease with which Iago succeeds in tempting Othello; the
attendant "echo" effect of the temptation; the implications of Iago's cryptic and ambiguous "Were I the Moor,
I would not be Iago" (I. i. 57); the narcissism which Othello and Iago share (cf. Othello's "my perfect soul"
and Iago's "I know my price"); their complementary masochism and sadism; the deeper function of Emilia's
earthly sexual realism at the end of Act IV as a foil to Desdemona's naiveté; the castration overtones of
Othello's closing "I took by th' throat the circumciséd dog / and smote him—thus."

One special gain of regarding Othello as a composite character is that of having resolved to some extent the
disagreement about his nature. This discord exists in large part because critics must find it difficult to
distinguish among the various guises or facets of Othello; hence they are generally right even when they differ
with each other. As Heilman suggests (p. 138), "There is no master term for Othello." Certainly there is room
for both A. C. Bradley's noble Moor and for T. S. Eliot's escapist from reality. In the light of the present paper
perhaps Kirschbaum has passed the most accurate and comprehensive judgment on Othello in saying that "It
is the close interweaving of the great man, the mere man, and the base man that makes of Othello the
peculiarly powerful and mysterious figure he is" (p. 295).

As for the measure of tragic insight Othello attains, it may be argued that at the end he comprehends that he
loved too well and that this adoration was unwise but not why it was unwise. His talk of "one not easily
jealous" and his choice of metaphor in saying, "threw a pearl away", suggest that he has not yet grasped how
his idealization of Desdemona betrayed him into the strategy of employing all his troops in conducting an
external defense against an imaginary danger instead of attacking the real, internal enemy—the one within the
gates, as Leavis puts it.

Notes

1 A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), Lecture V; T. S. Eliot,
"Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932); F. R.
Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero", Scrutiny, VI (December, 1937); R. B. Heilman, Magic in the
Web (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1956); Leo Kirschbaum, "The Modern Othello", ELH, II (1944),
283-296.

2 Marvin Rosenberg gives a good account of the many views of Iago in his "In Defense of Iago", SQ, VI
(Spring, 1955), 145-158.

Univ. Press, 1946), pp. 266 ff.; E. E. Stall, Othello: An Historical and Comparative Study (Minneapolis,
1915) and Art and Artifice in Shakespeare (Cambridge at the University Press, 1934).


6 Wangh uses Freud's distinction among three types of jealousy (competitive or normal, projective, and delusional) as a point of departure; he shows that Iago suffers primarily from the last type; and he quotes Freud as saying that delusional jealousy "represents an acidulated homosexuality and rightly takes its position among the classical forms of paranoia. As an attempt at defense against an unduly strong homosexual impulse it may, in a man, be described in the formula: 'Indeed I do not love him, she loves him'"; and Wangh adds, "the sufferer suspects the woman's relation to all the men he himself is tempted to love."

The most relevant papers by Freud are "Certain Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality", *Collected Papers*, II; "Psycho-Analytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia", *CP*, III; and "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life", *CP*, IV.


10 Both his mother and father have Helena under their protection; moreover, the Countess says, "You know, Helen, I am a mother to you", at which way of putting the relationship Helena balks, saying, "Or were you both our mothers, / I care no more for than I do for Heaven / So I were not his sister" (I. iii. 144 and 169 ff.).

11 Most of the first two acts (apart from the more perfunctory portions such as the details of the war with the Turks) deal with the matter, directly or indirectly, not to mention many later portions of the play such as the brothel scene.


14 For discussion of the handkerchief symbolism, see items by Feldman, Fliess, and Smith mentioned in note 5.
The same complex of factors presides in *Cymbeline*: the conflict between Cymbeline and Posthumus Leonatus (who resembles Othello in many ways) is that of father and son (for the King raised him *as a son*); an unsanctioned marriage precipitates the conflict; and the wife of Posthumus is a mother-substitute. All of these features appear in the lines spoken by Posthumus after he is led by the deceitful Iachimo (cf. Iago) to believe that Imogen has been unfaithful:

> We are all bastards,
> And that most venerable man which I
> Did call my father was I know not where
> When I was stamped. Some coiner with his
> tools
> Made me a counterfeit. Yet my mother
> seemed
> The Dian of that time: so doth my wife
> The nonpareil of this.

(III. i. 1-8)

*Marilyn French (essay date 1981)*

SOURCE: "The Late Tragedies: *Othello,*" in *Shakespeare’s Division of Experience,* 1981, pp. 204-19.

[In the excerpt below, French centers on Othello and Iago in her examination of masculine values and behavior, focusing in particular on their relation to women and feminine qualities.]

Nowhere in Shakespeare are relations between males and females more searchingly, painfully probed. *Othello* is the last play in which this occurs; with it, the concerns that are central in *Comedy of Errors, Taming,* *Much Ado,* and *All’s Well* are finally laid to rest.

The dominant culture of the play is that of Venice, which is shown here as similar to the Venice of *Merchant,* but in a more positive light. Venice is worldly, powerful, moneyed, and mannered. It is not just a place but an influence, and its mores are implanted in all the characters, even in those who, like Othello and Cassio, are not native Venetians. Venice is civilization, a civilization the characters carry with them to primitive, wild, wartorn Cyprus. The graft is as uneasy as the overlay of civility on any basic human core.

The scenes in Venice present the masculine principle in two aspects. The Senate scene shows it at its finest, possessed of honor, lawfulness, decorum, knowledge, and power, yet "feminine" in its protective and consolatory inclinations. The city is dominated by reason, and the council scene (I, iii) exemplifies reason in action, whether the issue is a set of conflicting reports of an enemy's movements or a father's hysterical attack. Reason is a form of control, and it is control above all that is the ideal of this culture. Control is essential to a culture which views natural humanity as depraved and vicious: thus Hamlet values Horatio, and Polonius lectures Laertes. It is also essential to a culture which views natural humanity as bestial and voracious, which is closer to the view of this play. The shocked Lodovico laments:

> Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
> Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
> Whom passion could not shake? whose
> solid virtue
> The shot of accident nor dart of chance
> Could neither graze nor pierce?

(IV, i, 264-268)
Control over others is power. Control over self is invulnerability, transcendence over nature and the contingencies of natural life. In "Venetian" cultures, control is an absolute good. But belief in the existence of control is belief that reason, which leads to control, can be separated from and dominate feeling.

From a Venetian perspective, self-control is desirable in all people, necessary in males, and most valuable in soldiers, who must frequently undergo physical discomfort and danger. Othello must sleep on "the flinty and steel couch of war" (I, iii, 230), and survive "disastrous chances" (I, iii, 134) of battle, accident, and capture. Othello shows a strong self-control from his first appearance in the play. He is ideally calm, reasonable, and rooted in a sense of legitimacy. He does not fear Brabantio; he knows his lineage to be more royal than and as wealthy as that of the Venetians. He remains calm and in control even when suddenly encompassed by naked swords. Attacked in the Senate, he speaks mildly, moderately, and brilliantly, never responding to Brabantio's wild charges. Although when during his wedding night, a melee breaks out in Cyprus, he warns that "passion, having my best judgment collied, / Assays to lead the way" (II, iii, 206-207), he remains calm throughout the disruption. Othello represents an ideal control.

Iago too is controlled, although his self-control is used for dissembling, as he announces in the first scene and repeats frequently. Loss of self-control makes Brabantio appear a fool in the council scene; it causes Cassio to lose his lieutenantship. Important as this quality is, every major male figure loses self-control at some point in the play except Iago.

The values of Venice are shared by all of the characters. The values most important in this play are power (of various sorts), control (which means believing in the possibility of the supremacy of reason over emotion, and thus in the control, or repression, of emotion), and possession.

There is, however, inevitably in a culture that respects control, an "underside" to the Venetian culture. It is Venice unclothed, lacking ermine robes and gold seals of office. This sphere has the same values as the world of senator and aristocrat, but its members lack some of the cushions legitimacy grants. It is occupied by males with lesser legitimacy, but it is foreign to no male figure. It is rawer and cruder than Venice; the assumptions which can be sugared over, or spread with velvet in aristocratic circles, are glaringly open here. And it is this sphere that we see first as the play opens.

It is the world of the streets, the locker room, the pool hall. It is dominated by concern about money, and by male competition, which may take the form of envy or hatred. The opening scene (as well as all of Iago's scenes with Roderigo) presents its terms, as Iago bilks Roderigo of his money, and spits hatred at Cassio and Othello.

The aristocratic Venetians do nothing like this. They don't have to. Those with wealth do not have to con a man of his purse—they have subtler means, means they have legitimated by law. Those with political power do not have savagely to manipulate one man: they can impersonally manipulate an entire army. Although Shakespeare does not explicitly identify the two worlds (one senses, indeed, that he would prefer to believe them different), their kinship is demonstrated when members of the aristocratic world—Othello, Cassio, and Brabantio—accede to the terms of the second, and even use those terms themselves.

Because both of these spheres are based in a desire to transcend nature, in control, both are profoundly misogynistic. Their fear and contempt for the feminine principle is expressed not just in contemptuous treatment of women, but in disdain for "feminine" qualities like loyalty, obedience, and above all, emotion. Women are seen largely as functions, and trivialized; there is general belief in male right to own women and control them. In this kind of thinking, there is disdain for bonds that do not advance one (in a linear way) in the world, for any subordination of self, and for sex.
There is a third sphere in the play, although its character is not as firmly delineated as the two Venetian spheres. This is Cyprus, which can be reached only by immersing oneself in nature, risking drowning. It is a space, rather than place, and thus like the "places apart" found in comedy. It is a space where those things normally kept in control and hidden can—and do—grow and appear in the light. In Cyprus, where there is, symbolically, no real civilization, only that brought by the Venetians, a man may be his own judge and jury and executioner, a woman may be inconstant, and the underlying assumptions of a culture may be glaringly displayed. And, most important, in Cyprus, the conventions of civilization which permit revocability are lacking. In reversal of the comedic device of using equivocating language to suggest the ambivalence of human affairs and to permit revocability, Othello shows words as deeds, and as irrevocable as murder.

The character who symbolizes the upper crust of Venice, despite his different nativity, is Othello; the character who bears the lower burden is Iago. But they are two crusts of one pie, and thus do not just intersect, but share the same base, like the imprints on two sides of a coin.

Iago is unadulteratedly "masculine." He believes in control, reason, power, possession, and individualism; he holds any manifestation of the feminine principle in contempt. It is significant that Iago opens the play: it is his terms that dictate its events throughout. The language of that opening is indicative: Roderigo speaks of money; Iago says "Abhor me," and Roderigo speaks of hate. Iago replies "despise me," and proceeds to attack Cassio. He claims his rival is "almost damn'd in a fair wife," and knows no more of war than a "spinster" or "toged consul." Essentially, Iago is calling Cassio a sissy, effeminate, as containing "feminine" qualities. He blames Othello for choosing his lieutenant by "affection" (which is sometimes glossed to mean "favoritism," although the OED lists no such meaning for Shakespeare's period, which contains pejorative connotations not present in Shakespeare's term) rather than by "old gradation"—seniority, a coded hierarchy. The conversation moves to assertion of self, individuality at the expense of a social whole, and again Iago shows contempt for loyalty, subordination of self, service based on love, and equates such qualities with bestiality: a duteous servant is his "master's ass," and earns but "provender" for his pains.

What Iago lacks are the rewards of masculinity—wealth and status; his actions at the opening seem designed to gain these. He does bilk Roderigo of his fortune, and in time, he does supplant Cassio. But these achievements do not seem to satisfy him; they seem utterly insignificant. Like Richard III, Iago is cut off by his nature from the feminine principle. He not only scorns "feminine" qualities, but wishes to destroy them in others. He is not such an anomaly as he has been made out. His character is not unlike that of some historical figures who have gone into the world carrying the banner of a religious or political cause, wiping out pleasure, mercy, and sexual love.

Iago is totally rational—and I use that word as critics use it who call the feminine principle irrational—and his means is his end. Control is his absolute good, but it gets him nothing: he goes round and round, at every step inventing new reasons to exercise control. In the hollowness of those without satisfying ends, he wills the destruction of those who have them; he wants to "poison the delight" of those who, like Cassio, have a "daily beauty" in their lives. The only thing that makes Iago unbelievable is that he does this in the name of his own individuality, and not in the name of some "higher" cause.

Iago's weapons are his unremitting hatred of the feminine principle and his brilliance at articulating that hatred. This hatred appears in the first scene (thus completing the statement of values that dictates the events) when Iago cries out to Brabantio. He first describes Desdemona as if she were one more possession: "look to your house, your daughter, and your bags"; "sir, y'are robbed" (I, i, 80-85). Then he presents the marriage of Desdemona and Othello in these ugly images: "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe"; "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"; Othello and Desdemona, he says, are "making the beast with two backs" (I, i, 88-89; 111-113; 116).
Iago consistently uses animal images—that is, images from nature—to describe sexuality and generation. He goes always directly to the heart of things, even if they are prejudices. Roderigo and Brabantio use political terms to describe what has occurred. Brabantio too sees his daughter as his possession: “She is … stol’n from me” (I, iii, 60). Roderigo says that Desdemona has made a “gross revolt”; Brabantio calls it “treason of the blood.” Both men mean not only a revolt against her father's lawful possession and control, but also a revolt against the “laws of nature,” as she moves to the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor.”

Both kinds of descriptions of what Desdemona has done are "masculine," and both betray the values of this culture. But Iago's way of speaking moves the case from the particular to the general. He casts filth not just on the coupling of Desdemona and Othello, but on coupling itself. All sexuality is "making the beast with two backs," if one has contempt for sex and sees it as bestial.  

Othello at first appears to be his ensign's opposite. That he is noble and that Shakespeare intended him to seem so appears to me to be unquestionable. His demeanor is authoritative and calm, his language intelligent and beautiful, and only rarely inflated. He appears in a particularly shining way because he appears after Iago. Iago's revelations about his own character "blacken" him instantly; his hatred for the Moor serves to exalt the general, and to "whiten" him. And in all the early scenes, Othello is steadily admirable, Iago steadily despicable. On the surface, the two present a clear contrast. Underneath, however, another current moves. For Othello, magnificent as he is, is also as egotistical as his ensign; moreover, his gentility and magniloquence tend to dull. Although it does not happen in the play, Othello could become tedious, boring; Iago is never that. The point is that Iago has the energy and wit and delight in himself that Shakespeare associates with the unleashed masculine principle. Hateful as he is, Iago is fun (in the way Richard III is fun) to listen to.

Othello's values are those of aristocratic Venice; Iago's are those of its underside. Iago has contempt for the feminine principle, for women, and feeling, and sex. Othello, without his awareness, shares this contempt. The first clue to this is his behavior in the Senate chamber. Othello swears that "as truly as to heaven / I do confess the vices of my blood, / So justly to your grave ears I'll present / How I did thrive in this fair lady's love" (I, iii, 122-125). The comparison seems inept, but Othello is never inept. Unconsciously, he is associating love with vice. In his effort to persuade the Senate that his commission will take priority over his marriage, he uses terms that could be Iago's: if he neglects his work for love, he says, "Let housewives make a skillet of my helm" (I, iii, 272). In response to the order to leave immediately, before the consummation of his marriage, he says "With all my heart." He accepts the commission for Cyprus with "a natural and prompt alacrity." He seems to have no regret whatever about leaving Desdemona. When she demurs and asks to go with him, he seconds her, but assures the Senate that he wants her "not / To please the palate of my appetite … but to be free and bounteous to her mind" (I, iii, 261; 262; 265). We might assume from this that Othello has a weak or undemanding sensual nature—indeed, one critic has so concluded—but this is the same man who later tells Desdemona she is "so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet / That the sense aches at thee" (IV, ii, 68-69).

Othello's denial of the erotic element in love is related to Iago's denial of the loving element in eros. Both denials emerge from a need to separate love (the inlaw aspect) from sex (the outlaw). Both attempt to control sexuality, Othello by idealizing it, Iago by demeaning it: "But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion" (I, iii, 329-332). Both men assume that love and lust are related; Othello tries to purify the lustfulness from love, and Iago tries to rationalize the love out of lust.

Othello is almost as "masculine" as Iago. He too believes in control, reason, and the assertion of individuality. (Consider his statements: "Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it / Without a prompter" [I, ii, 83-84]; "She lov'd me for the dangers I had passed, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" [I, iii, 167-168]. Both show a strong ego sense.) He respects power and hierarchy. Dignified and self-respecting as he is before the Senate, he acknowledges it his superior; decent and humane as he is with his inferiors, he never forgets his authority over them. In addition, he shares Iago's sense of the degradation sexuality constitutes, but whereas
Iago would engage in sex and then hurl contempt at the woman, assuming boys will be boys, Othello attempts to idealize sex out of existence.

However, misogynistic cultures, because they need the women they despise, always contain a safety pocket. They open a very narrow gate, through which pass those women considered purified from taint, and thus elevated. Othello, Cassio, and the play itself exalt one woman, Desdemona, as being above the common run. Cassio describes Desdemona in terms that any mortal would have trouble living up to: she "paragons description"; she is so divine that even nature gives her homage. (Othello too is exalted in this section of II, i. The exaltation, coupled with the suspense attending his arrival, emphasizes his greatness. Thus the pair seems, at the moment of their meeting, two superhumans matched.) Between Cassio's hyperbolic comments about Desdemona before Othello's arrival, and Othello's hyperbolic description of his feelings about Desdemona after he arrives, is a short, odd section. It is a dialogue that would be unnecessary and irrelevant to the play if Shakespeare were not focusing on the subject of attitudes towards women.

Iago begins by castigating Emilia, and immediately extends his criticism to women in general. Desdemona challenges him on this, clearly (if implicitly) believing herself worthy, and wishing to hear some words describing worthy women. Iago dredges up a set of ancient attacks on women. Women are dissemblers; by nature they are angry, argumentative, and sexual; they pretend to competence (huswifery), and sainthood. To Desdemona's challenge he replies with a set of verses which emphasize one thing and only one thing: female (dissembling) sexuality. When she challenges him further, he admits that there may be deserving women (the very phrase betrays the assumptions of the culture), and what they deserve is to "suckle fools and chronicle small beer" (II, i, 160). For Iago, women are body, child-bearers and nurturers, and housewives, none of which functions warrant any respect.

The language of Othello on his arrival is beautiful and extreme. Beside it, Desdemona's sounds pedestrian. In his ecstasy, he wishes for death because "I fear / My soul hath her content so absolute / That not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate" (II, i, 190-193). He is, of course, ironically, quite accurate, but his negligence of, or ignoring of, the sexual consummation still to come is most untypical and therefore significant. Desdemona's language is matter-of-fact and plain. She is not an enraptured idealist, but simply a happy woman expecting a happy life.

These two attitudes—one exalting, one degrading, neither able to deal with the reality—towards women, and particularly towards Desdemona, are contrasted again in II, iii, 15-29, in the dialogue of Cassio and Iago about Desdemona and sex, but they come into direct confrontation in III, iii. And in this scene, it is Othello, not Iago, who associates vulnerability to feeling with bestiality. To Iago's warning against jealousy, he responds "Exchange me for a goat" if ever he suffers from such an emotion. Iago's campaign is careful. First he impugns Cassio, then warns Othello against jealousy. His warning alone is enough to shake Othello a little; beneath his calm and assured exterior there is a sense of some kind of unworthiness. But he dismisses it: "she had eyes, and chose me."

Because male legitimacy is based on pretense, it is always shaky. Like Brabantio and others of his culture, Othello believes in his possession and right to command his wife: inconstancy would be a "revolt." But beneath this belief always lurks the suspicion that one person cannot really own another. Thus the grounds on which the entire Renaissance concept of marriage is erected are shaky, and Othello is feeling the tremor.

Iago's next step is a slide onto the dangerous ground of Desdemona. He begins with a commonplace misogynistic statement—Venetian women (all of them, of course) are inconstant. Then he moves closer to home: she deceived her father, why not you? This has special force because Brabantio himself has hurled the warning—about his own daughter—at Othello. Iago adds: she even deceived you, for when she seemed frightened of you, she was most in love with you.
Just these assertions are enough to dash Othello, to undermine all his exalted love. Since for Desdemona to be worthy of his love she must be better than the common run of women, the mere suggestion that she is not the utter paragon of virtue and honesty she has been made out is sufficient to tarnish her. Since she obviously could not be superhuman, Iago's suggestion that she is not has the strong force of truth: honest Iago, indeed. And seeing how the mere intimation that she can deceive shakes Othello, understanding that such a suspicion will lead to doubts as to whether she is really free from moral taint (with women, that means sexuality), Iago has a clear path for his next step. He trains Othello to see sex, women, and love as he does.

He accomplishes this through language, which is his greatest gift: Iago is literally a poet of hate and disgust. And in this play, language is action. Iago destroys Othello and Desdemona without lifting a finger; he uses his tongue alone. And it is a brilliant one.

Nevertheless, it would be impossible for Iago to seduce Othello if Othello did not already share Iago's value structure. Othello is not dense or blind, he is not a noble savage. He is a male who lives and thrives in a masculine occupation in a "masculine" culture, the assumptions of which he shares.

There are two kinds of women, one being superhuman, totally virtuous. (Even Iago believes there are such things as virtuous women: see II, iii, 360-361; IV, i, 46-47). The other kind is a dissembler, a deceiver, because of sexuality; she is thus subhuman, bestial, capable of any degradation. And the two kinds are absolutely mutually exclusive. One can cross into the subhuman camp at any time, but once in it, one can never return. So Othello, perceiving taint in Desdemona for the first time, is deeply shaken. Her later, frightened deception about the handkerchief will clinch the case against her.

But Othello is a deeply feeling person. Unlike Iago, he is capable of dedicating himself to something or someone outside himself. Thus his fury against Desdemona is nothing like Iago's contemptuous treatment of Emilia. Desdemona has betrayed Othello in the deepest part of his being, "there, where I have garner'd up my heart, / Where either I must live or bear no life; / The fountain from which my current runs / Or else dries up" (IV, ii, 57-60). When he stops loving Desdemona, "chaos is come again."

Yet in I, ii, Othello tells Iago that he would not have confined his "unhoused free condition" except that he loves Desdemona. He does not seem to have suffered from "chaos" in the years before he loved; he did not "bear no life" before he met her.

Desdemona has seduced Othello into placing faith and trust in that unfixable, uncontrollable feminine principle; her love for him has seduced him into allowing himself to love. By submitting to the feminine principle, Othello turns his back on his training. While Iago is contemptuous of the qualities of the feminine principle, Othello feels ignorant of them. He apologizes to the Senate for his lack of polish; he thinks Desdemona may have turned against him because he is old, or black, or lacks the "soft parts of conversation" (III, iii, 264). In loving her he has opened the deepest parts of himself, allowed himself to feel, although he is unused to the "melting mood." He has freely accepted vulnerability and subordination to another. And it is Othello's ignorance of the inlaw aspect, an ignorance that in a person of mature years has to be based in fear and distrust, that makes him so vulnerable to Iago's certainty that with women, distrust, mistrust, is the only reasonable, the only rational position.

In truth, the mere suggestion that Desdemona is unfaithful is enough to send Othello into a renunciatory paroxysm that goes beyond just love and marriage and women: he renounces his career as well. It is tempting to read that passage as self-dramatization, but it is of a piece with his character generally. Othello does dramatize his emotions—consider his speech just before he kills Desdemona. He is a passionate man. And loss of faith, once he has placed it, leads to loss of the will to live. In this way, he is related to Hamlet. (So is Iago, in another way.)
We are, I think, meant to find Othello a bit of an innocent, regardless of his age. He sees himself thus and so does Iago at one moment. He is emotionally deep but inexperienced, like Hamlet and (perhaps) Troilus; he is as idealistic as they are as well. His blackness is partly an emblem for this sort of difference from wily Venetians and courtly Florentines. For Othello, as for Hamlet and Troilus, the altar on which he has first placed his devotion must remain fixed, constant, else chaos is come again.

Chaos comes swiftly and it comes through language. It is the vividness and ugliness of the sexual images Iago is able to conjure that leads Othello to hell. "Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? Behold her topp'd?" (III, iii, 345). Othello replies, "Death and damnation!" The vividness of Iago's account of Cassio's talking in his sleep is enough to lead Othello to swear "I'll tear her all to pieces," and to abjure all his "fond love."

An essential part of the exchanges of Othello and Iago is the pervasive animal imagery. It can signify subordination, as in Iago's early characterization of a loyal servant as an ass; in Iago's hectoring of Brabantio, it is applied to copulation and generation. It next appears—again in Iago's mouth—when Roderigo claims he will die from love. Iago scoffs: "Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon" (I, iii, 314-316). He then proceeds to outline what he considers to be the proper relations among human faculties; his ideas are classical and Catholic, items of accepted philosophical and theological doctrine. One could read his speech and shrug about devils who can quote Scripture. But it is far more likely that Shakespeare was suggesting that the values that motivate and characterize an Iago are accepted and respected values in the Western world. Only his apparent ignorance of love makes his statement seem that of a villain; like Troilus, Iago identifies love as appetite (in II, i, 225-235).

Iago's associations are clear: sex, subervience, and affection are parts of the feminine principle, and are therefore not within the pale of the human because they are tied to nature, beasts, and deservedly enslaved classes, which include women.

But Othello, once his idealism is undermined (indeed his idealism is a shift made to allow love in the face of his real beliefs), shares Iago's ideas. Like the ensign, he equates love with appetite, marriage with possession, and considers less than total possession of a wife "toadlike" (III, iii, 270). Iago whets him with images of Desdemona and Cassio as goats, monkeys, and wolves. Othello falls into a fit, then mutters, "A horned man's a monster and a beast" (IV, i, 62). "Goats and monkeys!" (IV, i, 263), his uncontrolled outburst at the end of his tormented speech to Lodovico, proves that Iago's poison poured in his ears has done its work.

Once Iago has poisoned sexuality itself in Othello's mind, there is nothing to be done. Desdemona as idealized woman and his exalted notion of love are dead for him whether he kills the real woman or not. If Desdemona, that paragon, is tainted, so are all women. In his rage at the destruction of his illusion, Othello treats both Desdemona and Emilia as whores. (Thus, at the end of the play, Iago calls Emilia "whore" when she tells the truth about the handkerchief.) And since Desdemona is clearly sexual—physically as well as emotionally and intellectually in love with Othello—she is tainted (whether unfaithful or not) once Iago has taught Othello to see sex as he does.

Nevertheless, Othello could simply turn away from Desdemona; he could divorce her; he could talk to her about the charges; he could ... a thousand things. But he must kill her because of the prime value of his culture, his own prime value as well: control. As I said earlier, there are only two forms of control—domestication and killing. Desdemona seems unable to be domesticated, so she must be killed. Trust of the fluid feminine principle is difficult precisely because it cannot be controlled; its very nature is defined by that. Division into inlaw and outlaw aspects is a way of trying to control it, but it does not work very well. Othello must kill Desdemona because he loves her so much that if he did not kill her, he would slide into accepting her infidelity, to giving up control over her entirely.
Although he attempts, in his words over her sleeping body, to ceremonialize her murder, invoking justice and "more men" as his reasons, he cannot accomplish this. Desdemona's crime is worse than his, and this justifies his. Wakened and asked to confess her sins, Desdemona says "They are loves I bear to you" (V, ii, 40). She too sees love as sin. The murder in *Othello* is the murder of a vision of human love purified from the taint of a sexuality seen as bestial, vicious, and chaotic.\(^{18}\)

That Shakespeare himself was thinking in terms like those I have described is demonstrated by his portraits of the three women in the play. They come from three moral levels: the "divine" Desdemona from the super-human; Emilia from the realistic world; and Bianca from the subhuman, since she is a prostitute and thus, in the moral universe of Shakespeare's plays (and else-where as well), not deserving of human consideration or rights. Yet all three of these women are finally treated in the same way. Moreover, Shakespeare placed words in their mouths that show he was aware of the political situation of women and their personal identities apart from men.

Desdemona, the angel who has not yet experienced mistreatment, accepts her culture's dictum that she must be obedient to males. Her first words in the play express her sense of duty to father and husband, a "divided duty" (I, iii, 181). The last words she speaks before she is aware of a change in Othello are: "Be as your fancies teach you; / What e'er you be, I am obedient" (III, iii, 88-89). She cannot even conceive of infidelity to a husband; she does not struggle against Othello when he commences to abuse her. To the end she remains submissive, begging Othello to let her live one more night, one more half hour. Her last words, placing the blame for her death on herself, are self-denying in the extreme: they are the words of a martyr. With Cordelia and Hermoine, Desdemona represents the inlaw feminine principle at its most superhuman.

Yet Shakespeare also takes pains to show her human, whole, and possessed of will. She confesses, in the Senate chamber, to "violence, and storm of fortunes" (I, iii, 249). It is she who protests the separation of the newlyweds; she asserts she wants to live with Othello because she wants "the rites for why I love him" (I, iii, 257). And it is she who cries out to the senators in dismay, "To-night, my lord?" (I, iii, 278), after the order to leave immediately. She has defied and deceived her father; like Helena, she would lose her virginity to her own liking.

Desdemona is sexual. Her innocence resides not in her freedom from sexual "taint" (as does the Virgin Mary's), but in her ignorance of the bestiality others see implicit in it. She is chaste and constant by nature: she cannot conceive of infidelity; she cannot imagine that love can end; and she is ignorant of male ways of talking and thinking about sex. To the degree that she represents part of Othello's psyche, she embodies that part which exalts and idealizes love, separating it from bestial sex. But Shakespeare is at some pains to emphasize that Desdemona herself has no need of such moral schizophrenia, that in her wholeness she finds no need to redeem or idealize sex.

Desdemona has no sexual guilt because she feels no need to transcend sex. She does not claim she wants to go to Cyprus to be "free and bounteous" to Othello's mind: nor is she hesitant to assert publicly that she has sexual desires. She can jest with Iago about women without embarrassment. Although she knows that sex is sin, her own sexual acts have been sanctified by ceremony into "rites." She teases Othello about Cassio with the tenacity of a cajoling child; she lies about the handkerchief like a wary child. And yet when Othello strikes her publicly, she stands her ground with adult dignity: "I have not deserv'd this" (IV, i, 224).

In short, until the "brothel" scene, she is a sensitive and confident young woman, straitly kept, kept a dependent child, but retaining spirit nevertheless. She is whole, sexual, given to be happy. But the men in the play see her differently.

For Brabantio, she has the passivity and silence proper in women: "a maiden, never bold; / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blush'd at itself" (I, iii, 94-96). He thinks she is unfeminine, "opposite to marriage" (I,
ii, 67). Thus her elopement with Othello is doubly "unnatural": she has chosen a man of a color different from her own, and she has betrayed that she does possess sexual desires.

Roderigo idealizes Desdemona as holy, "full of most bless'd condition" (II, i, 249-250). Cassio exalts her even more than Othello does, as divine, a paragon, "our great captain's captain." For Othello, Desdemona is not fully a separate being but part of himself, the completion of himself.

But honest Iago sees her only as "fram'd as fruitful / As the free elements" (II, iii, 341-342). It is ironic that of all the men, he sees Desdemona the most accurately.

Desdemona perceives herself the way Othello perceives her—as part of him, as not existing without him; his rejection of her in IV, ii stuns her into stupefaction. She tells Iago that the removal of Othello's love will kill her "but never taint my love" (IV, ii, 161). And as she dies, she puts the blame for her murder on herself. (Interestingly, Othello sneers that she dies in sin, lying; over and again, the inflexibility of the masculine principle leads to a devaluation of the feminine.)

Yet even this ideal figure complains bitterly, after Othello strikes her, of his injustice. And she sighs "O, these men, these men!" (IV, iii, 60). And that she is shown as near-ideal, and seen by most of the male characters as fully an ideal, does not keep her from being called a "land-carrack" (slang for prostitute) by Iago. Or from being treated like a whore by her husband.

Bianca echoes, with sad resignation, Desdemona's happy statement of subordination to her man: "'Tis very good; I must be circumstanc'd" (III, iv, 201), she replies to Cassio's order to leave lest Othello see him "woman'd" (III, iv, 195). Cassio's abrupt contempt for her jealousy provides a brief but pointed contrast to the main action. Woman may get jealous as well as men; but they have no power, and their jealousy is dismissed with scorn.

Bianca appears after an amused, contemptuous conversation about her between Iago and Cassio. Cassio attacks her, using animal imagery, until she retorts jealously. He retreats, and Bianca leaves in anger. Nevertheless, she is still supplicant: "An' you'll come to supper tonight, you may" (IV, i, 159-160).

It is emblematic that Iago and Cassio are discussing Bianca when Othello thinks they are discussing Desdemona. In this male world, all women are the same. Like Othello, Cassio exalts Desdemona; nevertheless, he shares his culture's misogyny, saying to Desdemona after Iago's satire on women, "he speaks home" (II, i, 165). And he has contempt for the woman whose body he uses. Even her most genuine love and fidelity cannot protect Desdemona from the language, the attitudes, and finally the oppression of the male view of women.

Othello treats Emelia as a bawd when he castigates Desdemona as whore; Iago treats his wife with curt contempt. None of the women imagines independence of men, but Emilia is aware of her own and other women's autonomous being. And she is the spokeswoman for the females of the play. She is worldly, a little cynical, resigned. She murmurs bitterly about male dominance: "I nothing but to please his fantasy" (III, iii, 299), she says of her relation to Iago. She is bitter: men "are all but stomachs and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us" (III, iv, 104-106).

In IV, iii, Emilia delivers a little sermon on the relations of husbands and wives. In context it seems almost irrelevant, since it is a defense of adultery in wives and Desdemona has not performed this act. It is a piece of moralizing, similar to other passages in Shakespeare in which the lower orders comment on the exemplary implications of the behavior of the upper classes. Here, Emilia suggests that the behavior of husbands and their treatment of their wives necessarily have consequences, and that inconstancy is, after all, a "small vice" (IV, iii, 69). She assumes that women are human—merely human, but at least human—and like men are
subject to affection, temptation, and anger.

One effect of Emilia's speech is to counter the attitudes of the males in the play. Whether they idealize women or degrade them all into whores, like Iago, who says, "knowing what I am, I know what she shall be" (IV, i, 73), or whether they do both simultaneously, the thing they do not do is see women as human beings. Shakespeare does, in this play.

But on another level, Emilia's speech broadens the implications of the action. Desdemona has not been unfaithful to Othello: that is insisted upon by the play. We overhear her conversations with Cassio; we overhear her shocked conversation with Emilia; we are clearly asked to give the last drop of pity to her and to her maid as they die. In the comedies, an accusation of infidelity is tantamount to actual infidelity on the mythic level of the play. It does not function this way here. Shakespeare took too many pains to inform us at every step of the line, not only of Iago's plot, but also of Desdemona's innocence. But he clearly wishes to consider the broader issue: if Desdemona had been constant, would she have deserved death? Does Othello have the right to kill her if she is guilty? He does not deal with these questions in Othello, because this play is about male attitudes towards women—and each other—and thus Desdemona must stand as a symbol of what men destroy. He does consider it in Cymbeline. But Emilia's defense of inconstancy in women brings up the question. Suppose Desdemona had been constant? Would the audience wish her dead? And Emilia's speech is a long, long way from the speech given by Luciana to Adriana in Comedy of Errors: a lifetime away.

Othello is a profound examination of male modes of thought and behavior, especially with regard to women and "feminine" qualities. Iago is honest: he speaks the ordinary wisdom of the male world. The consequences of the values he shares with the other males of the play destroy the "feminine" values held by Desdemona, above all, but also Othello, Emilia, Cassio, Roderigo.

And Iago never changes. He remains. He endures without cracking, the only character in the play who never shows a sign of emotion or passion or the weakness he despises, although his behavior clearly has to be motivated by passion. He talks about lust, but never shows any sign of it. The prime exponent of reason and control stands firm even as the world around him collapses, even knowing that he caused its collapse. Although tortures are promised, things that will make him speak word again, this brilliant verbal manipulator, this poet for whom silence is indeed punishment, stands alive at the end of the play, surrounded by bodies, and is, in our imagination, triumphant. Well, the truth is, he is.

Notes

3 Alvin Kernan describes three circles or worlds in the play: an outer world, representing "the brute power of nature"; Venice, representing reason, law, and social concord; and Cyprus, which is halfway between the two. Intro., Signet Edition (New York, 1963).


5 Many twentieth-century critics find Iago a rationalist, among them Robert Heilman, who refers to R. P. Warren's remark that Shakespeare's villains are marked by rationalism. Magic in the Web (Lexington, Ky., 1956), and "The Lear World." Mark Van Doren says Iago has "a heart that passion cannot rule." Shakespeare (Garden City, N.Y., 1953), p. 194. Alvin Kernan calls Iago "icily logical."

6 Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of "Othello" (Berkeley, Calif., 1961), pp. 170-171, asserts that the ultimate motive for Iago's hatred of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is "his denial of the values they affirm." Elsewhere, Rosenberg describes Iago as a cool manipulator who asserts the supremacy of will and intelligence and "their power to efface emotions," and quotes to the same effect Karen Horney's description of a

7 Iago's misogyny and loathing for sex have been noted by many critics, among them William Empson, "Honest in Othello, " The Structure of Complex Words (London, 1951); Bernard Spivack, Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil (New York, 1958); and Robert Rogers, "Endopsychic Drama in Othello," SQ XX (1969): 205-215.

8 Othello has been described as an unsensual lover by Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (New York, 1942), p. 127. Kernan praises Othello for what he calls self-control, and adds that every major character except Desdemona "is in some degree touched with sexual corruption." Wolfgang Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery (Cambridge, Mass., 1951), p. 124, concludes from the imagery that Othello's approach to experience is primarily sensory.


Yet as Helen Gardner persuasively argues, the tone of the play does not support such readings, which arise mainly because of twentieth-century distaste for authority, a code of honor, and heroic postures. See The Noble Moor, British Academy Lecture, 1956.


11 Kenneth Burke writes: "In ownership as thus conceived [by Othello] … there is … forever lurking the sinister invitation to an ultimate lie, an illusion carried to the edge of metaphysical madness, as private ownership, thus projected into realms for which there are no unquestionably attested securities, is seen to imply also, profoundly, ultimately, estrangement." "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method," Hudson Review IV, 2 (1951): 165-203.

12 The accusation made against Othello by Leo Kirschbaum ("The Modern Othello," ELH II [1944]: 283-296) is that he tries to transcend the merely human, and thus moves easily into the posture of a god and an agent of divine justice.

13 That Iago and Othello share something has been pointed out by Kirschbaum, Leavis, Frank Kermode, Intro., Riverside Shakespeare (Boston, 1974), and Irving Ribner in the Ribner-Kittredge Intro. to the play (Waltham, Mass., 1963), as well as J. I. M. Stewart, Character and Motive in Shakespeare (London, 1949).

14 The "something" that critics point to that binds Othello and Iago is the misogyny and fear of sex implicit in Western culture. John Holloway suggests this very obliquely when he writes that Iago conjures in Othello the memory of something he has heard or read about women. The Story of the Night (London, 1961), p. 46. Iago and Othello are "binary or double stars revolving about a common axis within a gravitational field." Brents Stirling, Unity in Shakespearean Tragedy (New York, 1956), p. 123. In my reading, the common axis is women=sex, the gravitational field a "masculine" way of seeing. But Helen Gardner writes that Iago's views represent a "true view of life." "Othello: A Retrospect," SS 21 (1968).

15 Robert Ornstein points out that Othello's anguish shows the profound involvement of the male ego in what I call chaste constancy. Moral Vision, p. 221.
In fact, of course, misogyny too is both classical and Catholic. Traditional patriarchal thinking disdains both women and the qualities (rightly or wrongly) associated with them.

In a way of thinking that exalts transcendence, anything merely human seems bestial, and is most easily expressed in animal imagery. Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (Boston, 1961), p. 335, shows that the animal imagery comes mainly from Iago, who utters over half of it, and that most of the rest comes from Othello. Other images contribute to the delineation of the characters of the two men. Iago refers frequently to bodily functions and uses technical and commercial—"masculine"—terms. Othello, the idealist, refers to the cosmos—the elements, the heavens, celestial bodies, winds, and sea. Cf. Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art* (London, 1972), p. 122, and Mikhail Morozov, "The Individuation of Shakespeare's Characters Through Imagery," *SS* 2 (1949).

Maynard Mack claims Othello faces "two ways of understanding love: Iago's and Desdemona's," and must choose between "two systems of valuing and two ways of being." "The World of Hamlet," *Yale Review* XLI (1952): 502-523. But in fact there are three ways to seeing sex (not love) in the play: Iago's, which reduces it to appetite and commerce, Othello's, which idealizes it into exalted romantic love, and Desdemona's, which blends sex, love, and the everyday into what we may call married love.

Alvin Kernan states that his murder of Desdemona destroys in Othello "all the ordering powers of love, of trust, of the bond between human beings." S. L. Bethell writes that Othello "loses his heaven with his faith in Desdemona." "Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in Othello," *SS* 5 (1952).

Marvin Rosenberg remarks that critics do not notice Iago's treatment of Emilia, although it is very significant. "At best he treats her with sadistic humor, alone with her … he snarls orders at her as if she were an inferior being." "In Defense of Iago."

**Othello (Vol. 35): Iago**

Daniel Stempel (essay date 1969)


*In the essay below, Stempel examines Iago's motives and the irrationality of evil which, the critic argues, Shakespeare dramatized through Iago.*

In the final scene of *Othello*, Iago has been unmasked as the villain responsible for Othello's desperate act; there is no escape for him. Yet he spurns Othello's demand of an explanation, and, despite the threat of torture, maintains an obdurate silence. That silence, however, is not the mere bravado of a "Sparton Dogge"; it is the logical and ultimate fulfillment of Iago's boast to Roderigo in the opening scene:

> For when my outward Action doth
demonstrate
The native act, and figure of my heart
In Complement externe, 'tis not long after
But I will weare my heart vpon my sleeue
For Dawes to pecke at; I am not what I am.
(I.i.67-71)

Thus Iago takes refuge in silence, cloaking the native act and figure of his heart in darkness for all time. The critics, left (like Lodovico) with no satisfactory explanation of Iago's arrogant malignity, have racked the text
with cunning cruelty, seeking an answer; every contradictory facet of Iago's ambiguous nature has been accounted for: his motives and his lack of motives, his honesty and his duplicity, his orthodoxy and his diabolism. But the play offers no solution; it gives us Iago, and, despite his disclaimer, he is what he is—we must accept him. Nevertheless, that acceptance must rest on something more substantial than the romantic admiration of a colossus of iniquity. Iago embodies the mystery of the evil will, an enigma which Shakespeare strove to realize, not to analyze. And if we follow, as best we can, Shakespeare's shaping of the mind and heart of Iago, we shall discover a profound unconscious irony beneath the conscious dissimulation of Iago's speeches, an irony whose significance is symbolized, paradoxically, by the final silence of Iago.

To Iago, of course, there is no mystery. The will is free to choose, unmoved by good or evil. When Roderigo asks his advice, "What should I do? I confess it is my shame to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue to amend it," Iago replies, "Vertue? A figge, 'tis in our selues that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our Gardens to the which, our Wills are Gardiners. So that if we will plant Nettels, or sowe Lettice: Set Hisope, and weede vp Time: Supplie it with one gender of Hearbes, or distract it with many: either to have it sterrili with idlenesse, or manured with Industry, why the power and Corrigible authoritie of this lies in our Wills. If the braine of our Hues had not one Scale of Reason, to poize another of Sensualitie, the blood, and basenesse of our Natures would conduct vs to most prepostrous Conclusions. But we haue Reason to coole our raging Motions, our carnali Stings, or unbidden Lusts: whereof I take this, that you call Loue, to be a Sect, or Seyen" (I.iii.348-363).

Here again the critics are at odds. Bernard Spivack construes "vertue" as "the divine grace flowing into the otherwise helpless nature of man, creating there the power toward good without which salvation is not possible." Iago, he claims, is "demolishing in a phrase the theological foundations beneath the whole system of Christian ethics. He is homo emancipatus a Deo, seeing the whole world and human life as self-sufficient on their own terms, obedient only to natural law, uninhibited and uninspired by any participation in divinity," Spivack labels Iago a "Machiavel": "Nature is Iago's goddess as well as Edmund's, with the articles of the ancient's faith even more explicit and wider in their application."

Yet Roland M. Frye, in Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine, quotes Luther, Calvin, and Hooker on individual responsibility for actions and concludes, "These remarks summarize the personal accountability insisted upon by the Christian tradition and accepted by Iago when he tells Roderigo that "tis in ourselves we are thus or thus … the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills"."

Both interpretations, however, mistake the meaning of virtue as Roderigo and Iago understand it. Neither is talking about morality per se; they are taking opposite sides on the question of human freedom. Roderigo is using "virtue" in the older sense of an innate trait of character, a meaning close to that of Machiavelli's virtù. He is pleading that he cannot help being what he is, and in this, he, not Iago, is the Machiavellian. As Leo Strauss points out, Machiavelli taught that "the specific nature of a man so far from being determined by him, by his choice or free will, determines him, his choice or free will."

The stage Machiavel, however, cannot be charged with a perversion of the actual doctrines of II Principe, since the appellation was extended to any plotter against duly constituted authority. Recognizing this, Spivack is reluctant to use the term and warns, "Provided we extend the significance of the label beyond Machiavelli, since it embraces concepts of which Tudor England was conscious without the Florentine's instruction, Iago is a Machiavel." He amplifies this warning by pointing out, "Applied to Iago, the Machiavellian label, while supplying some prefatory enlightenment, is too general to carry us very far into the moral meaning of his role. The high art that wrought him into the dense and exclusive design of his own play does not allow him to remain an undifferentiated specimen of villainous humanity according to the commonplace Elizabethan formula of the Machiavel." This is an admirable summation and no judicious critic could possibly deny its accuracy; nevertheless it overlooks an important clue which supports Spivack's major theme, the survival of elements of the Vice of the morality play in Shakespeare's villains and specifically in Iago. Spivack stresses the strong moral and homiletic character of Iago's language; he writes, "A villain can act this way, but it is
only Villainy in a Geneva gown that can talk this way." A palpable hit indeed, but it misses the heart of the matter by pinking the wrong church and the wrong doctrine; it is not Villainy in a Geneva gown that talks this way, but Villainy in a black cassock.

Shortly before the staging of *Othello* in 1604 a new breed of Machiavel, "the monstrous combination *Ignatian Machiavell*," had been created by the imaginative masters of Elizabethan polemic. To the patriotic defenders of the English crown against the encroachment of Spain and the Papacy, the association of Loyola and Machiavelli seemed natural and fitting, despite the Jesuit record of fierce opposition to Machiavellian secularism, for both, from the English point of view, had sacrificed morality to expediency. The Jesuitical Machiavell made his appearance as early as 1601 when a spokesman for the English Catholic secular clergy called the Society of Jesus "the very schoole of Machiavellisme." J. Hull, a Protestant, accused the Jesuits of being "well practised in Machiavel, turning religion into policie" in *The Unmasking of the Politique Atheist* (1602). In *The Downfall of Poperie* (1604), Thomas Bell stated "that the Iesuits are right Machiavels, and that whosoever will adhere vnto them must depend vpon the deuil of hell." To the Elizabethan the Jesuitical Machiavel seemed even more wicked than the conventional Machiavel who cast aside both religion and morality, for he justified his villainy by an appeal to faith and piety. This seeming contradiction, the blending of sanctity and crime, of hell boasting that it served heaven, was more shocking than open blasphemy. As a contemporary pamphlet put it, "But in the meane time you see the strange mysteries of the *Iesuites* doctrine that haue mingled heauen and hel, and lift yp the hands of Subjects against the anointed of God; arming them with the inuisible armour of Scriptures, Sacraments, Prayers and Blessings against their naturali Soueraigne." The legendary obedience of Jesuits to their superiors was cited triumphantly by their foes as proof that they were ready to use any means to achieve the ends assigned to them. They were even accused of being prepared to poison the Pope himself "if their purposes and plots bee but a little crossed." To a Jacobean audience, Iago was merely summing up standard Jesuit procedure when he impatiently prodded Brabantio: "Sir: you are one of those that will not serue God, if the deuill bid you" (I.i.121-122).

Although the Jesuitical Machiavel, unlike the traditional Machiavel, manipulated doctrine to further his schemes, his view of "personal accountability" was certainly not in agreement with the views of those strange bedfellows, Luther, Calvin, and Hooker. Mr. Frye disposes of the knotty abstractions of the problem of free will by assuring us, "Fortunately, we do not need to follow the intricacies of this matter, for Shakespeare did not employ them, and so we may turn to the theologians' practical teachings on freedom" (p. 157). After this neat amputation of practical morality from the living body of doctrine, Mr. Frye finds (to no one's surprise) that Luther, Calvin, and Hooker agree on man's possession of freedom and responsibility in the limited context of this world. But no serious moralist, outside of certain Oriental sects, would argue otherwise, any more than a competent politician would campaign against home and mother! The imposition of this spurious ecumenism suggests that a unanimity of opinion existed at a time when religious dissension and controversy were actually growing sharper and more hostile. It is far more likely that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were better acquainted with the points of difference between theologians than with their occasional admissions of a common ground, for these differences were vigorously defended, privately and publicly, by the warring factions. Iago's speech on free will cannot be understood by those who assume that Shakespeare would not have been acquainted with "the intricacies of this matter"; it is a carefully phrased exposition of a sharply defined viewpoint, not a vague generalization on "personal accountability."

Iago, as I have suggested, is entirely unconcerned with the moral consequences of choice; it is all one to him, if we "will plant Nettels, or sowe Lettice: Set Hysope, and weede up Time." He is arguing for the unimpeded freedom to choose what we will, good or evil. Surely it is not necessary to demonstrate that neither Luther nor Calvin granted the will that freedom which Iago claims for it. For both, as for St. Augustine, the human will is free only to sin, not to choose the good. Without the grace of God, man is the slave, not the master, of his will. Hooker, who follows Aquinas on this point, is much more liberal in expanding the scope of freedom of choice; yet there is also a fundamental difference between Hooker's freedom and Iago's. For Hooker, reason or
"the show of reason" makes the choice and the will assents to it. The act of choice is initiated by the reason, not the will; thus, all sin begins with a clouding of the judgment rather than with a perverse will. Iago, in contrast, insists that will determines choice and reason must perforce assist it. The actual function of reason is to neutralize the pull of the appetites and leave the will absolutely free to make its choice. Reason is no more than an instrument of the will. As Virgil K. Whitaker sums it up, "with a nice sophistication Iago readjusts the accepted philosophy to his own wilfulness: reason must control the appetites, but so that they do not interfere with the will, to which the reason is therefore a servant."

But this is more than a readjustment of the accepted philosophy—it is an inversion of it, and Iago cannot be credited with its invention. At the time that Othello was first produced at the court (1604), a bitter controversy over free will was raging on the Continent. In his Spiritual Exercises St. Ignatius Loyola had called for the defense of the freedom of the will and justification by works against the attacks of Luther and Calvin: "Likewise we ought not to speak of grace at such length and with such emphasis that the poison of doing away with liberty is engendered. Hence, as far as is possible with the help of God, one may speak of faith and grace that the Divine Majesty may be praised. But let it not be done in such a way, above all not in times which are as dangerous as ours, that works and free will suffer harm, or that they are considered of no value."

The line of battle which was drawn, with the forces of the champions of grace on one side and those of free will on the other, was destined to cut an irregular path through the ranks of both Protestants and Catholics. Although others had prepared the way for him, the standard-bearer of the Jesuit army was Luis de Molina, a Spanish Jesuit who taught at Evora in Portugal. In 1588 Molina published a brilliantly argued defense of human freedom, Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione. Molina's doctrines placed him in opposition not only to the heretics but to the stringent interpretation of Thomist theology by the Dominicans, who promptly accused him of teaching "Pelagianism." A long struggle followed, as the Jesuits, with certain modifications of Molina's extreme position, united in his defense. In 1602 Pope Clement VIII summoned the Congregation de Auxiliis to judge the merits or defects of Molina's work; the Congregation carried on its deliberations through the short reign of Leo XI in 1605 and into the first years of Paul V's term of office. Finally, in 1607, the Pope declared that the quarrel was to be broken off without deciding for either party; the question was left open and the disputants were forbidden to label their opponents heretical. Since, after all the years of bitter debate, the Concordia had not been condemned, the Molinists hailed the decision as a victory.

Molina's approach to the perennial problem of the reconciliation of divine grace and human freedom was to make man a completely free agent to whom grace was freely proffered. The crucial question for Molina was whether a man could choose to accept or reject grace; if he could not, he was not free. Liberty for Molina was the absence of any constraint alien to the human will. He resolutely blocked the loophole through which his opponents escaped the charge of determinism by asserting that an inner or "spontaneous" inclination of the will by God violates human freedom as much as any external constraint. Molina insisted that any antecedent cause, including the First Cause, was a determination outside the human will and therefore a limitation of its intrinsic freedom.

To harmonize divine providence with man's complete liberty of indifference—the freedom to act or not to act, or to take either of two contrary courses of action—Molina postulated three types of divine knowledge: scientia naturalis, the knowledge of all things possible; scientia libera, the knowledge of what God will decree to exist in actuality; and, between these, scientia media, the knowledge of what would be in any hypothetical circumstance. Through scientia media God foresees the acceptance or rejection of grace by men in diverse situations and then wills that the actual circumstances will be such that their response to the aids of grace is predictable, but not caused. As Anton C. Pegis suggests, Molina transfers the mystery of grace from the will of God to the will of man; sufficient grace is extended to all men, but it is efficacious only for those who, as God foresees, will exercise their free power of choice to accept it.
That act of choice is not preceded by the judgment's rational selection of an end toward which the will is then directed, as the "accepted philosophy" taught. It is an act of pure freedom, directed from within; the will, in short, is autonomous.

Moreover, I think that freedom is in the will and not in the intellect and for the freedom of willing or nilling or refraining from action by not willing when we can will, and by not nilling when we can nill, not so much deliberation on the part of the intellect is necessary as many consider it to be, and much less the command of the intellect by which it orders the will to will or nill or to refrain from action; but for willing it is sufficient to have a notion of some good which manifests itself in the object as a thing pleasurable or useful or honorable. Indeed, if this good is not so great and so clearly known as to enforce necessity upon the will, as nothing is, except for God clearly seen, the will is free not to elicit action, although it usually elicits it, if the good is great and nothing prevents it from this eliciting. In a similar instance of a notion of some evil the same will is free to nill it and reject the object; and yet it is not constrained to nill, but it is able not to elicit the nolition by refraining from the act; although when the object is powerful it usually elicits nilling, unless there is something present which may move it from another direction not to elicit that (nilling) or even to a sorrowful embracing of the (evil object) because of a good conjoined with it. And so, since there is this disposition and notion on the part of the intellect, the will can by its innate liberty will or nill or elicit neither action.\(^{18}\)

This liberty of indifference, founded on the autonomy of the will, is just what Iago claims for all men, brushing aside as weakness Roderigo's surrender to the domination of his affections. Iago's analysis of human freedom is so clearly defined that its source is unmistakable. It is, of course, completely at odds with the teachings of contemporary Protestant theology, Anglican or Calvinistic, as well as with the doctrines of the rigorous Thomists.\(^{19}\) Nor, as I have indicated, is there any evidence to show that this will-centered psychology was derived from Machiavelli or from the naturalistic stage Machiavel. We must conclude, I believe, that Iago is the spokesman of Jesuit "Pelagianism"; and if we follow the direction indicated by this significant clue, perhaps we shall come closer to the heart of the mystery concealed by Iago's (and Shakespeare's) baffling silence.

Like all Englishmen of his time, Shakespeare was exposed to a flood of anti-Jesuit literature. The Jesuits, driven into hiding by the zeal of the Queen's men, were likely targets for the technique of the big lie, a favorite device of Elizabethan pamphleteers of all persuasions, few of whom were noted for veracity or temperate language. Frank L. Huntley, in an article on "Macbeth and the Background of Jesuitical Equivocation," has traced the history of this anti-Jesuit propaganda and has shown that it was flourishing long before the outbreak of popular indignation at the time of the Gunpowder Plot.\(^{20}\) Shakespeare was acquainted with at least one of these tracts, Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), which he used as a source in *Lear*. Although *Othello* was written and staged a year before the Gunpowder Plot, no one would have been surprised to see a Jesuitical villain, especially in a drama with a Venetian setting.\(^{21}\)

Most of the animosity directed toward the Jesuits was political in origin, since they were regarded as subverters of royal authority, but their theological doctrines, at a time when theology and politics were inextricably blended, were also singled out for attack. A specific reference to the Molinist controversy was made by the anonymous author of "The secular Priests Preface to the English Catholiques" in *The Jesuites Catechisme* (1602). One faction in the secular clergy of the Roman Church in England regarded the Jesuits as foreign interlopers and spies, and did not hesitate to make their grievances known both at home and abroad. To his readers, the unnamed cleric piously pointed out the perilous ground on which his opponents were even then treading: "At this instant, there is a great and most dangerous contention in particular, betwixt them and the Dominicans, about a speciali point of grace."\(^{22}\)
This "speciali point of grace" had also been noted by William Perkins, the popular preacher and casuist of Cambridge University. In "The Epistle Dedicatorie" of A Treatise of Gods free Grace and Mans Free-Will (1602), Perkins, addressing Sir Edward Dennie, wrote, "Right Worshipfull, it is a thing most evident, that the present Religion of the Church of Rome, is an enemie to the grace of God, two waies." First, Perkins stated, "because it exalts the libertie of mans will, and extenuates the grace of God," and, second, because it teaches justification through works as well as faith. Under the former of these two headings, Perkins divided his charges into five specific points, two of which bear directly on the issues brought up by Molina and the Jesuits: "Secondly, some of the Romish Religion avouch, that the efficacie of Gods preventing grace, depends upon the cooperation of mans will: and they affirmed, that the Councell of Trent is of this minde: but then to the question of Paul, 1 Cor.4.7. Who hath separated thee? The answer may be made, I my selfe have done it by mine own will. And that shall be false which Paul teacheth, that beside posse velie, the power of wel-willing, ipsum velie: that is, the act of wel-willing, is of God, P phil, 2.13." In a marginal gloss Perkins quotes from "Molina de grat. & lib. arb.": "Gratiae auxilia, quod efficacia sint, habent dependenter ab arbitrii libertate."

As his third point, Perkins charged, "They give unto God in all contingent actions, a depending will, whereby God wills and determines nothing, but according as he fore-sees, that the will of man determine it selfe. And thus to mainaine the supposed libertie of the will, that is, the indifferencie and indetermination thereof, they deprive God of his honour and soveraigntie. For by this means, not God, but the will it selfe, is the first moover and beginner of her owne actions. And there are even of the Papists themselves, that condemne this doctrine as a conceit."

Perkins, the most influential of the Puritan divines, was shocked by the immense power given to the will of man by the Jesuits. His own definition of the will is "Will, is a power of willing, choosing, refusing suspending, which depends on reason... And in every act of will there are two things, Reason to guide and Election to assent, or dissent" (Works, 1, 703). For Perkins, as for Calvin, there are two kinds of liberty, the liberty of nature, which is simply the power of choice, whether it is effective or not, and the liberty of grace, "which is a power to will or nill well, or to will that which is good, & to nill that which is evil" (Works, 1, 708). Without grace the will is not free to choose good; further, "there is not only an Impotencie to good, but such a forcible proneness & disposition to evil, as that we can do nothing but sinne." Perkins sees man in his fallen state as a prisoner: "The prisoner though he have lost a great part of his liberty, yet hath he not lost all for within the prison he may (as he will) either sit, stand, lie, or walke. And though he which is captive to sinne can do nothing but sin, yet may he in sinning use his liberty: & in the divers kinds of evil intended, shew the freedome of his will" (Works, 1, 711).

For Perkins, God's grace, when granted, is irresistible; it is not in the power of the will to reject it. The Jesuit doctrine of the cooperation of free will and grace seemed to him to be "much derogatorie to the divine grace of God, to place the efficacie thereof in mans will & it ministers much matter of boasting unto men." Beside this passage he also supplied a marginal gloss from Molina, "L. Molina saith, that our will maketh grace to be effectuall. De. li. arb. pag. 326. 327. and sometime againe he saith, will is but a condition, and no cause of the efficacie of grace, p. 329. Yet alwaies he graunteth, that it lieth in mans will whether grace shall be effectual, or no. Thus when grace is offered on Gods part, wil within stands as the Porter, to open or shut, or as master Controller to accept or reject the worke of God" (Works, 1, 716).

Perkins had evidently studied the views of all parties in the Molinist controversy and triumphantly decided the question in favor of the greater glory of divine grace and Calvin's theology: "Lumbard in his time much declined from the purity of former daies: and yet he is far sounder than the Jesuites of our daies. For he saith thus: Freewill is now hindered by the law of the flesh from doing good, and stirred up to evil, so as it can not will and doe good, unless it be delivered and helped by grace. We leaving the Papistes in their dissensions, place the efficacie of grace in grace itselffe" (Works, 1, 717).
These quotations, from Catholic and Protestant sources, indicate that the Molinist debate was no minor theological squabble unknown in England. Assuming then that Shakespeare had some knowledge of contemporary Jesuit doctrine and practices, let us turn to the text of the play and see where our hypothesis will lead us. As a general impression, it is noteworthy that, for a play ostensibly about military men and events, the language owes as much to the jargon of the pulpit as to the oaths and boasts of the cockpit.

Roland Frye points out, "Predestination was a labyrinth into which one was well advised not to wander, and only Cassio does wander into it, in his maudlin discussion with Iago: 'there be souls must be saved, and there be souls must not be saved,' and 'the Lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient'" (p. 147). Frye sees no significance in Cassio's lines; it is simply the stock comic situation of a drunken discussion of a serious topic. Yet these lines would be more suited to an officer in Cromwell's New Model Army than to a bawdy young Florentine. Cassio's drunken jest is a twisting of a theme that runs through the play, culminating in Desdemona's dying words and in Othello's speeches before and after her murder. From the Calvinistic point of view, there is more truth in Cassio's babbling than in Iago's brilliant rationalizations. It is Othello who bitterly and tersely phrases that truth after the revelation of Desdemona's innocence: "But (oh vain boast) / Who can control his Fate?" (V.ii.327-328).

In contrast, Iago, the champion of the absolute autonomy of the will, shows no remorse, but simply withdraws behind a wall of defiant indifference after he has lost his power to manipulate circumstances. If he is no longer free to act, he is at least free not to act, to remain silent and unmoved by accusations and threats. The consistency of Iago's thought and behavior throughout the play, reflecting his unshaken belief in the doctrine of freedom which he expounds to Roderigo, may provide a new reading for a baffling crux in one of his earliest speeches, a reading which is closely linked to the recurrent theme of predestination. This theme, as we have seen, appears in Cassio's speech as a variation of the perennial theological riddle which asks why, of two men, one is to be saved and the other damned. If we alter Iago's reference to Cassio in the first scene, "A Fellowe almost damn'd in a faire Wife" to "A Fellowe almost damn'd in a faire Wise" (I.i.23), and place it in the context of Iago's "divinity of hell," it becomes a meaningful statement of Iago's pride in his own unfettered will and his scorn for Cassio, "the Bookish Theoricke." As Father Brodrick explains it in his life of Cardinal Bellarmine, "Another of Molina's propositions ran as follows: it might happen that a man with more and greater graces than his fellow should be damned, while that other, owing to his correspondence with the lesser graces given him, should be saved." It is indeed possible, according to this proposition, to be damned in a fair wise. Iago readily concedes Cassio's greater graces, the favor of Othello and "a dayly beauty in his life / That makes me vgly" (V.i.22-23), but his self-confidence remains unshaken; his lesser graces can be used efficaciously for his advantage while Cassio is the passive victim of his apparent superiority. Here, as elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare seems to be forcing to its extreme conclusions Iago's advocacy of the Jesuit emphasis on the self-determination of the will.

While this may seem to be mere casuistical juggling to us, it was a vital question in an age which took its theology seriously. In the earlier text of his sermon of 18 April 1619, John Donne noted that the problem had been crucial for both Jesuits, and, one assumes, English Arminians: "Consider the other faculty, the will of man, and thereby those bitternesses which have passed between the Jesuits and the Dominicans in the Romane Church, even to the imputation of the crime of heresie upon one another in questions concerning the will of man, and how that concurs with the grace of God; particularly whether the same proportion of grace being offered by God to two men, equally disposed towards him before, must not necessarily worke equally in those two: and by those bitternesses amongst persons nearest us, even to the drawing of swords in questions of the same kinde, particularly whether that proportion of grace, which doth effectually convert a particular man, might not have been resisted by the perversnes of that mans will, whether that grace were irresistible or noe." Casuistry, in fact, forms the pattern of Iago's reasoning throughout the play, in keeping with his character as a Jesuitical Machiavel. He is a master of the art of judging cases of conscience—for the advancement of his
own aims, of course. His first speech to Othello bolsters his much vaunted reputation for honesty by referring to a scruple of conscience somewhat alien to a professional soldier:

Though in the trade of Warre I haue slaine
men,
Yet do I hold it very stuffe o’ th’
conscience
To do no contriu’d Murder:

(I.ii.3-5)

In his speech on virtue, Iago delivers a brief lecture on self-control to Roderigo, pointing out to him that the appetites are under the rule of the will; love, Iago tells him, is "meerly a Lust of the blood, and a permission of the will" (I.iii.365-366). "Permission" is used in its exact scholastic sense; it indicates that love is not caused by the will since it is an appetite, "a Lust of the blood," but it is allowed to exist because the will does not act against it, just as God does not cause evil but permits it to exist. Cynically, Iago reviews for Roderigo all the reasons for not giving way to despair, punctuating his discourse with repeated admonitions to pile up riches: "If thou wilt needs damne thy selfe, do it a more delicate way than drowning. Make all the Money thou canst" (I.iii.382-383). His cunning casuistry and his greed are both in keeping with the popular image of the Jesuit. John Manningham noted in his diary that Roger Fenton, an Anglican casuist, preaching at Paul's Cross on 21 November 1602, warned, "Popishe priests and Jesuites play fast and loose with mens consciences. Jesuites come into riche mens houses, not to bring them salvacion, but because there is something to be fisht for." 27

When Cassio, lamenting the loss of his good name, turns to Iago, he is reminded that "Reputation is an idle, and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deseruing" (II.ii.297-299), as Iago suits his moralizing to his man. His task is to induce Cassio to take his suit to Desdemona, not to give up all hope of recovery, and so Iago carefully nurtures his expectations with a liberal waiver of Cassio's error: "Come, you are to seuere a Moraller. As the Time, the Place, & the Condition of this Country stands I could hartily wish this had not befalne: but since it is, as it is, mend it for your owne good" (II.ii.327-330). This is certainly the language of the casuist; it echoes the opinion of William Perkins, Shakespeare's contemporary, and the founder of "the Divine Science of Cases of Conscience" in England: "For it hath bin prooved at large, by induction of sundrie particulars, that there are degrees of sinnes, some lesser, some greater: some more offensive and odious to God and man, some lesse. And that the circumstances of time, place, person, and maner of doing, doe serve to enlarge or extenuate the sin committed." 28

After Iago has persuaded Cassio to ask for Desdemona's intercession, he congratulates himself on his skill in handling cases of conscience:

And what's he then,
That saies I play the Villaine?
When this aduise is free I giue, and honest,
Proball to thinking, and indeed the course
To win the Moore againe.

(II.ii.365-369)

"Proball," which has usually been taken as a contraction of "probable," may have a specific and pertinent meaning in this context. Certain Jesuit casuists were noted for their application of the rule of probability ("probabilism") in cases of doubtful conscience. Where authorities disagreed on a moral question, the less probable opinion was allowed as long as it was supported by a reputable source; that is, the rule of reasonable doubt was invoked to the benefit of the sinner. Writing of differing opinions on equivocation among the Jesuits, Bishop Thomas Morton noted, "These may seem contrarie to men of synceritie, but among these speakers, in their practically judgement, there is no contradiction: for they have another winding in this their
Labyrinth, that Many times the lesse probable opinion is to be followed. So then as yet we have but an Eele by the tayle. Againe, to determine against so damnable a doctrine onely in these termes, More probable; yea and peradventure more probable: I say, to doubt of such a Protestant and orthodoxall truth, is doubtlesse to deny it." Iago is certain that the advice he has given Cassio is most probable indeed and deserves the approbation of the strictest moralist:

   How am I then a Villaine,
   To counsell Cassio to this parateli course,
   Directly to his good?

   (II.ii.379-381)

The question is ironic, of course; Iago savors his own duplicity, viewing with delight the prospect of using Desdemona's virtue "to enmesh them all." What he is practicing is not that Casuistical Divinity which Perkins claimed to have purified from all Roman error, but the "Diuinitie of hell' of the Jesuits:

   When deuils will the blackest sinnes put on,
   They do suggest at first with heauenly shews,
   As I do now.

   (II.ii.382-384)

Again this is part of the Elizabethan caricature of the Jesuit. As early as 1583, the Puritan Phillip Stubbes, fired by piety and patriotism, had emptied the vials of his wrath on the Jesuits in a diatribe whose charges were to be repeated ad nauseam in the following decades: "And forsooth these goodlie fellowes, the diuels agents, that must work these feates, are called (in the diuels name) by the name of Iesuites, seminaries preests, and catholikes, vsurping to themselves a name neuer heard of till of late daies, being indeed a name vere blasphemously deriued from the name of Iesus, and improperly alluded and attributed to themselues." He warned, "Take heed of those fellowes that haue mel in ore, verba lactis, sweet words and plausible speeches: for they haue fel in corde, and Fraudem faclis, Gall in their harts & deceit in their deeds. So falleth it out with these ambidexters, these hollow harted friends, where they intend destruction, then will they couer it with the cloke or garment of amity & friendship; therefore are they not to be trusted."

Having gained the confidence of Roderigo and Cassio in this manner, Iago applies his ability in manipulating consciences to Othello. After inserting the thin edge of doubt between Othello's reason and his love, Iago establishes himself as an incorruptible authority on morals who cannot gloss over the faults of his country-women:

   In Venice, they do let Heauen see the
   prankes
   They dare not shew their Husbands.
   Their best Conscience,
   Is not to leaue't vndone, but kept
   vnknowne.

   (III.iii.231-234)

And Desdemona, Iago points out, may be no better than the others. His syllogism is simple and valid: Venetian women are not to be trusted; Desdemona is a Venetian woman; therefore Desdemona is not to be trusted. Since Iago is a Venetian, Othello must take his word for it and accept his major premise; he knows the minor premise is true; and so he is forced, with the help of Iago's pertinent thrusts at Desdemona, to the inevitable conclusion. Iago's analysis is so plausible that Othello pays tribute to his skill in casuistry:
This Fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knowes all Quantities with a learn'd
Spirit
Of humane dealings.

(III.iii.302-304)

But everything which Othello has been told is an equivocation, not an outright lie but a clever perversion of the truth. The irony of Iago's pose as a simple honest soldier, a plaindealer, is sharpened by his protestations to Othello:

Oh wretched Foole,
That lou'st to make thine Honesty, a Vice!
Oh monstrous world! Take note, take (note
World)
To be direct and honest, is not safe.

(III.iii.433-436)

Yet, like the English Jesuits, Iago demonstrates a certain care in the phrasing of an oath; he has mental reservations and he guards himself against overstepping their bounds. Unlike the emancipated Machiavel, Iago will not swear a false oath. When Othello swears "by yond Marble Heauen," meaning God and His angels, "In the due reuerence of a Sacred vow" (III.iii.523-524), Iago deliberately takes the word "heaven" in its purely natural sense: "Witnesse you euer-burning Lights aboue, / You Elements, that clip vs round about" (III.iii.527-528). Since, unlike Edmund, he does not worship Nature, the oath is meaningless, and he has not forsworn himself.

It is worth noting that as Iago plies his craft, enmeshing Othello in a cleverly woven net of moral decisions, he can be as liberal as the most lax of the Jesuit casuists. Indeed, he is at times much more forgiving than Othello, and his liberality serves his purpose, for it kindles Othello's wrath. Othello is impatient with subtle distinctions between right and wrong; he has a passion for justice and, once his mind is made up, he acts swiftly. It is Iago who advises Othello to let Desdemona live (III.iii.541); his advice, of course, is savagely rejected. When Othello writhes at the suggestion that Desdemona has been "naked with her Friend in bed, / An houre, or more, not meaning any harme" (IV.i.7-8), Iago shrugs it off as a mere peccadillo, "If they do nothing, 'tis a Veniali slip." Othello, in contrast, shares the Protestant horror of temptation: "They that meane vertuously, and yet do so, / The Diuell their vertue tempts, and they tempt Heauen."

Iago puts the matter as a hypothetical case of conscience: "But if I giue my wife a Handkerchiefe / ... Why then 'tis hers (my Lord) and being hers / She may (I thinke) bestow't on any man" (IV.i.14, 16-17). When Othello asks if she may also bestow her honor wherever she wishes, Iago sneers at his lack of sophistication: "Her honor is an Essence that's not seene, / They haue it very oft, that haue it not." Again, as with Cassio, he reduces honor to a mere fiction, an abstraction without substance; Iago is concerned only with things that can be seen, the "ocular proof demanded by Othello: "But for the Handkerchiefe." Having focused Othello's attention on his one tangible item of evidence, he pursues his hypothetical instance one step farther: "What if I had said, I had seene him do you wrong? / Or heard him say ... " Although Iago can offer no proof of the first of these alternatives, he is eager to supply new evidence for the second. His hypothesis suddenly comes closer to reality—if it is not ocular proof, it is at least hearsay.

The close juxtaposition of these alternatives confuses the enraged Othello and he falls into Iago's snare. As he listens to Iago's tale of Cassio's boasted conquest of Desdemona, he fails to distinguish between the two, and accepts hearsay for ocular proof. Yet, even as he swoons in a fit, overcome by the strength of his passions, his broken mutterings reveal a scrupulous conscience untouched by Iago's malign casuistry; Othello, the magnificent hero, has a greatness of soul which encompasses mercy as well as justice: "To confesse, and be
hang'd for his labour. First, to be hang'd and then to confesse: I tremble at it" (IV.i.46-48). "Confess and be hanged" is a stock phrase; Othello reverses it, but trembles at the thought of sending even Cassio to eternal damnation without absolution. It is the same scruple of conscience that prevents him from killing Desdemona without giving her an opportunity to confess her sins: "I would not kill thy unprepared Spirit, / No, Heauens forfend, I would not kill thy Soule" (V.ii.37-38). It is only by his clever appeal to Othello's outraged sense of justice that Iago can quell the natural insurrection of mercy: "But yet the pitty of it, Iago: oh Iago, the pitty of it" (IV.i.214).

Iago turns every favorable circumstance to account, never forgetting his immediate purpose: to enmesh them all while leaving himself unharmed and the master of the situation. It is necessary for him to get rid of all three, Cassio, Othello, and Desdemona, in as brief a span of time as possible so that his plot may not be betrayed. Iago volunteers to serve as Cassio's "undertaker" and cunningly changes Othello's design to poison Desdemona by suggesting that it would be more just to strangle her in the bed which she has dishonored. Since Othello will be alone with Desdemona, there will be no doubt of the identity of her murderer. After the deed is done, with Cassio out of the way, Othello will be regarded as a husband de-ranged by jealousy, and his word will not be taken against Iago's. Iago prepares the Venetian nobles for the event by hinting that Othello can be expected to do more than strike his wife: "'Faith that was not so well: yet would I knew / That stroke would proove the worst" (IV.i.306-307). Characteristically, he makes no overt accusations but merely hints at Othello's madness: "You shall obserue him. / And his own courses will denote him so, / That I may saue my speech."

Iago's last act of persuasion through casuistry is his enlistment of Roderigo to kill Cassio. Roderigo has his doubts—"And that you would haue me to do"—but Iago dangles the bait of Desdemona before his eyes and promises, "Come, stand not amaz'd at it, but go along with me: I will shew you such a necessitie in his death, that you shall thinke your selfe bound to put it on him" (IV.ii.273-275). We do not know what Iago's arguments are, but they are cogent enough to nerve a reluctant Roderigo:

    I haue no great deuotion to the deed,
    And yet he hath giuen me satisfying Reasons:
    'Tis but a man gone. Forth my Sword: he
dies.

(V.i.11-13)

Since both the doctrine and the language of Iago are Jesuitical, one might, by adopting the attitude of Shakespeare's Protestant contemporaries, find other hints pointing toward the Jesuitical Machiavel. It took little encouragement to set a patriotic Englishman off on the scent of a concealed Jesuit; like Iago, he might have shrugged off the question of truth by averring, "I know not if't be true, / But I, for mere suspition in that
dinde, / Will do, as if for Surety." No one, Thomas Bell warned, could be sure that he was not dealing with a Jesuit: "Note here gentle reader, what a cursed crewe of disloyall caterpillers these Jesuites be, they are not onely ranke traytors, as you haue hard at large; but so full of cozongage, and hypocritcall dealing, in their pestilent sect; that no man can tell, when he talketh, or conuerseth with a lesuite, for they are both Friars and Nunnes, both men, and women, and Hue in the world to set forward Jesuiticall plots and treasonable practises, as if they were lay-people." 33

Remembering that Loyola (whose Spanish name was Íñigo de Loyola) was, like Iago, a soldier, our hypothetical patriot would have seen no incongruity in the use of casuistry by a veteran of the wars. As George Whetstone pointed out, "I the lesse maruel that these Jesuits sow their seditions in such disguised, warlike, and ruffianly order, and intice men to violent murther, without difference of persons, when their first founder Ignatius Loyola was a Spanish souldier, who decreeped with wounds, to keepe himselfe from begging in age, disguised himselfe with the habite of holinesse, and with counterfeit miracles began this holy order." 34
More important, since the Jesuitical Machiavel is usually associated with a plot to subvert secular authority, would our Jacobean zealot have seen any political implications in Iago's machinations against Othello? In 1604 the quarrel between Venice and the Pope, which was to lead to an interdict in 1606 and the expulsion of the Jesuits, was already brewing. In one of his letters from Venice in 1604, Sir Henry Wotton described the Venetian state as neutral in religion and not unfriendly to the Protestant cause. There is a tantalizing ambiguity in Iago's soliloquy (II.i.319-345) as he casts about for both a motive and a scheme to injure Othello and advance his own fortunes; he states that it is not out of "absolute lust" that he "loves" Desdemona, an ironic hyperbole since he goes on to evaluate the probability of furthering an affair between Desdemona and Cassio. But he does admit that he stands "accomptant for as great a sin," which he does not name. Further, he is only "partly led to dyet my Reuenge"; but he does not clarify the nature of the other motives which spur him on. Iago's final silence rules out any possibility of an answer to this enigma, but Lodovico's order does indicate that his crime against his general is not to be passed off as a personal vendetta: "You shall close Prisoner rest, / Till that the Nature of your fault be knoue / To the Venetian State" (V.ii.408-410). To those who were sensitive to political overtones, it may well have appeared that Iago's clever casuistic maneuvering of his general into a crime of passion was an act of subversion as well as pure malevolence. This, in conjunction with the other hallmarks of the Jesuitical villain, might have led our credulous playgoer to view Iago's stubborn refusal to speak as mute evidence of the usual obdurate resistance of imprisoned Jesuits and their followers to the ingenious tortures devised by their persecutors.

But while these political overtones may either have been sensed or read into the villainy of Iago by an audience alert to any shift of policy, they are only remote ripples of the maelstrom of evil that constitutes the core of Iago's character. Breaking through the superficial pattern of double-dealing which is typical of the "supersubtle" Venetian (or Italian) ruffian, Shakespeare probed beyond mere diabolical plotting to its metaphysical source. For him, Iago embodies that principle of evil which unites the Jesuit and the Machiavel: not simply the sacrifice of morality to expediency, but the arrogant claim of the insatiable ego to be free of all limitations except those imposed by its own will, a freedom beyond good and evil.

The aura of malignity which surrounds Iago—"No light, but rather darkness visible"—is not to be attributed to the means he employs nor even to their ends, but to the manner in which he relishes and savors the act of evil. His stated motives are flimsy rationalizations that have little to do with either fact or logic; they are flotsam tossed up from depths that even his subtle intellect cannot plumb. When Iago is most absolute in his assertion of the freedom of the self-determined will, he is, at the same time, most deceived. The entire play must be read as a protest against this doctrine of the autonomous will and a confutation of it. Iago is not the ranting Machiavellian blasphemer who both defies and denies his God; he is something far more sinister, the demi-devil who "plumes up" his will in the confident belief that he is free to determine his own salvation or damnation as he pleases. The center of his universe is his ego and its infinite lust for power recognizes no circumferential bounds; for him there is neither divine nor social order. All values are derived from the central isolated will: "I haue look'd upon the world for foure times seuen yeares, and since I could distinguish betwixt a Benefit, and an Injurie: I neuer found man that knew how to loue himselfe" (I.iii.342-345). Loyalty to a superior is meaningless: "In following him, I follow but my selfe" (I.i.64).

Chaucer's Pardoner is an excellent example of this type of villain. As Alfred L. Kellogg points out in his brilliant analysis, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Chaucer's Pardoner," "The essential contrast of The Pardoner's Tale, is between living in accordance with 'Goddes wille' and living 'right at our owene wille,' the eternal antithesis of the pride of Satan and the humility of Christ." Iago is an important link in the chain of the literary avatars of this "eternal antithesis": as a figure of evil endowed with an enormous vitality breathed into him by his creator, he has shaped a tradition that sprang into renewed life in romanticism and persists in our own time.

Coleridge's famous formula for Iago, "the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity," has been sneered at by sophisticated critics as a typical romantic obfuscation. But Coleridge, like Schopenhauer, had rejected the
easy solutions and comforting dogmas of the Enlightenment for a frank admission of the irrational nature of the evil will. This, as Robert Penn Warren has argued convincingly, is the theme of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner:* "The bolt whizzes from the crossbow and the bird falls and all comment that the Mariner has no proper dramatic motive or is the child of necessity or is innocent of everything except a little wantonness is completely irrelevant, for we are confronting the mystery of the corruption of the will, the mystery which is the beginning of the 'moral history of Man'."³⁸

And this, as Coleridge surmised, is the mystery of Iago's motivation. When Iago utters his last defiant words, "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: / From this time forth, I neuer will speake word" (V.ii.370-371), he is unwittingly paraphrasing the wise admonition of Augustine:

> Let no one, therefore, look for an efficient cause of the evil will; for it is not efficient, but deficient, as the will itself is not an effecting of something, but a defect. For defection from that which supremely is, to that which has less of being—this is to begin to have an evil will. Now, to seek to discover the causes of these defections—causes, as I have said, not efficient, but deficient—is as if someone sought to see darkness, or hear silence. Yet both of these are known by us, and the former by means only of the eye, the latter only by the ear; but not by their positive actuality, but by their want of it. Let no one, then, seek to know from me what I know I do not know; unless he perhaps wishes to be ignorant of that of which all we know is, that it cannot be known.³⁹

Notes


4 *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), p. 246. See also "The individual agent cannot escape the nature he is born with. He acts in such and such a way because this nature requires it." Gentillett's *A discourse upon the meanes of wel governing against N. Machiavelle*, trans. S. Paterick (London, 1602), p. 138, gives the following version of Ch. xxv of *Il Principe:* "So that if hee which governes himselfe moderately, encounter and meet with a time, wherein his vertue is requisit, he cannot faile but prosper; yet if the time change, he shall undoubtedly overthrowe himselfe, if hee likewise change not his manners and order of life." Gentillett comments, "Now Machiavell would make men beleive, that this is true, and that all the good and evill which come to men, happeneth, because they have Fortune accordant or discordant to their complexions."

5 *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, pp. 423, 425, 437.


"Unless, therefore, the will itself is set free by the grace of God from that misery by which it has been made a servant of sin, and unless it is given help to overcome its vices, mortal men cannot live upright and devout lives." Retractions, I, 9. St. Augustine, The Problem of Free Choice, trans. Dom Mark Pontifex (Westminster, Md., and London, 1955), Appendix, p. 24.


13 Shakespeare's Use of Learning (San Marino, Calif., 1953), pp. 281-82.


15 For this article I have used the edition of Johannes Rabeneck, S. J. (Madrid, 1953).


18 "Ceterum arbitrer libertatem esse in voluntate et non in intellectu atque ad libertatem volendi aut nolendi vel continendi actum non volendo, quando velie possumus, et non nolendo, quando possumus nolle, non esse necessarium tantam deliberationem ex parte intellectus quantam multi necessarium esse existimant et multo minus imperium intellectus quo voluntati imperet ut velit aut nolit vel continet actum; sed ad volendum satis esse notitiam bonitatis alicuius quae in obiecto eluceat rei delectabilis vel utilis aut honestae. Ea vero bonitas si tanta non sit et tam perspicue cognita quae voluntati necessitatem inferat, ut nulla est talis praeter Deum clare visum, integrum est voluntati non elicere actum, tametsi regulariter ilium eliciet, si magna sit nihilque adsit quod ab eo eliciendo retractat. Similiter existente notitia alicuius mali integrum volendi est nolle ac respuerre objectum; nec tamen necessitatur ad nolendum, sed potest non elicere nolitionem continuendo actum, tametsi quando objectum est vehemens, regulariter nolitionem eliciet, nisi adsit quod aliunde moveat ad illam non eliciendum aut etiam ad contristationem amptecendum propter bonum cum eo conjunctum. Itaque existente eadem dispositione ac notitia ex parte intellectus qualis explicata est potest voluntas sua innata libertate velie aut nolle vel neutrum elicere actum." Concordia, Quaest. 14, art. 13, disp. 2, 9, pp. 15-16.

19 Although the first stirrings of Arminianism made their appearance in the decade preceding the staging of Othello, they were not identified as a Protestant reaction to Calvinism, but rather as a Catholic fifth column. William Perkins (1558-1602) warned, "Lastly, it were to be wished that some of our students euen of Divinity, had not a spice of this sinne of Core: for within this sixe or seuen yeares, divers haue addicted themselves to studie Popish writers and Monkish discourses, despising in the meane time the writings of those famous instruments and cleare lights, whom the Lord raised up for the raising and restoring of true religion; such as Luther, Calvin, Bucer, Beta, Martyr, &c, which argueth that their minds are alienated from the sinceritie of the truth." Works (1609), III, 552. He may have been referring to William Barret, who was forced to make a public recantation of his unpopular views at Cambridge in 1595. William Prynne gives a complete account of the incident in his Anti-Arminianisme, 2nd ed. (1630), pp. 61-62. Prynne describes Barret's doctrines as "these then Pelagian, and Popish, but now both Popish, and Arminian tenets."

20 PMLA, LXXIX (Sept. 1964), 390-400.

21 Thomas Dekker's The Whore of Babylon, registered in 1607 but possibly written and performed earlier, includes in its "Drammatis Personae" Palmio, "a Iesuite."
22 *The Iesuites Catechisme or Examination of their doctrine*. Published in French this present year 1602, and nowe translated into English. N.p.


24 The emendation "wise" for "wife" has been offered before (see the discussion in the Variorum *Othello*), but not with this specific meaning. As for the "divinity of hell," Bell, *Anatomie of Popish Tyrannie*, p. 45, writes: "But in regard of brevitie, I referre the reader, that shall desire more of this kind of their hellish divinitie, to that worthie book which the French papistes haue put forth, (intituled the Iesuites catechisme,) a golden booke indeede." See also "Will you haue the truth, their proper element is Diuinitie, that's their Facultie, that's their field: therein are they expert."

25 Bellarmine, II, 38. Also see *Concordia*, p. 645: "Quare potest unus cum aequali aut minori eiusdem gratiae praeventiens auxilio converti, quando alius cum aequali aut maiori eiusdem praeventibus gratiae auxilio non convertitur."


28 *Works*, II, 11-12. Also see Thomas Wood, *English Casuistical Divinity During the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1952), Ch. i.

29 *A Full Satisfaction Concerning a Double Romish Iniquitie* (London, 1606), p. 87. Although the reference is dated two years after the first performance of *Othello*, it indicates that there was a contemporary knowledge of the methods of Jesuit casuistry.


32 Spivack also notes Iago's "sexual syllogism," p. 426.

33 *Anatomie of Popish Tyrannie*, p. 78.


37 *Speculum*, XXVI (1951), 473.

Fred West (essay date 1978)


[In the following essay, West argues that in Iago Shakespeare created a profound and accurate portrait of a psychopath.]

It is not sufficient to simply drape Iago in allegorical trappings and proclaim him Mister Evil or a Machiavel or a Vice. Such a limited view of Iago is an injustice to the complexity of his character, since Shakespeare's studies in personality are acclaimed by psychologists for their accuracy and profundity. Although the influence of the miracle plays and the later morality plays with their type-characters still lingered in some Elizabethan drama, the English Renaissance is widely recognized as a period of great interest in that branch of science which has become known in modern times as psychology. Dramatists were particularly intrigued by the more bizarre working of the human mind, often creating characters whose personalities could form the subjects of contemporary psychological case studies. This is certainly true of Iago, who is an accurate portrait of a psychopath.

One of the best-argued essays on Iago-as-Machiavel is that of Daniel Stempel, who depicts Iago as the Jesuitical Machiavel, a popular combination the Elizabethans conjured up against the Papacy. Yet in developing his thesis, Stempel does much to explain the psychology of Iago. "The individual cannot escape the nature he is born with," he says, "but must act as this nature requires him to act…. Iago is entirely unconcerned with the moral consequences of choice; it is all one to him if we 'plant Nettels, or sowe Lettuce, set Hysop, and weed up Time,' … His stated motives are flimsy rationalizations that have little to do with either fact or logic; they are flotsam tossed up from depths that even his subtle intellect cannot plumb." And, "Iago, the champion of the absolute autonomy of the will, shows no remorse, but simply withdraws behind a wall of defiant indifference after he has lost his power to manipulate circumstances." Here we have, as we shall see, the salient characteristics not just of the Machiavel, but also of the psychopath.

In criticizing those who see Iago as mere symbol, a personification or extension of Satan, or the Spirit of Evil, Marvin Rosenberg says, "They fail to do justice to Iago's flesh and blood qualities in seeing him as a symbol…. He was wonderfully shaped by Shakespeare into a first-rate dramatic character, as well as a clearly recognizable type of human being, with passage and frustrations—and even physical symptoms—characteristic of a type of troubled humanity common enough so that psychologists in our time regularly encounter it. Shakespeare was not content, in Iago, to load his play with yet another stock Machiavel, another version of an old Morality figure … with a great playwright's searching insight, he was probing into the roots of human wickedness…. " While Rosenberg nowhere labels Iago as a psychopath, he does quote from Karen Horney at length to show that Iago is a kind of human being "so common in society that in psychological writing we may find it charted as a type … of a familiar neurotic pattern." This indeed comes close to the mark, but Iago is considerably more than the familiar "ulcer" type that Rosenberg calls him.

Inevitably, Iago has been likened to Aaron, the villainous Moor of Titus Andronicus, who is something more like the stock figure of Evil. That Shakespeare was under the influence of the morality play in this early work is made clear by such scenes as the appearance of Tamora and her two son in the allegorical garb of Revenge, Rape, and Murder. Yet, even Aaron gives evidence of being more than a mere symbol of Evil. He has certain very human motives that urge him on to evil deeds: the illicit love of the queen with its concomitant chance of power, and the threat to the life of his baby son. In Aaron, Shakespeare foreshadows some of the characteristics of Iago.
Lucius: What shall I swear by? Thou believest no god:
That granted, how canst thou believe an oath?
Aaron: What if I do not? As indeed I do not;
Yet, for I know thou art religious,
And hast a thing within thee called conscience.³

(V.i.71-75)

A bit later in the same scene Aaron's defiant lines to Lucius (124-44) proclaim not only a lack of remorse but also a baneful wish that he could have committed even more evil, both directly and by manipulating others. This speech is significantly indicative of Shakespeare's early awareness of the characteristics of the psychopath. As if to discount the notion that his role is merely symbolic Evil, Aaron says, "If there be devils, would I were a devil" (147). But whereas Aaron makes his final exit lusting to do more evil, and calling evil by its name, Iago is a more complex psychopath. He does not regard his own actions as horrendously evil.

Interestingly enough, A. C. Bradley, at the turn of this century, came very close to diagnosing Iago as a psychopath. At the time Bradley wrote, very few clinical studies had appeared on the subject of the psychopath. Long regarded as a sort of wastebasket category for aberrant types who did not fit well into more clearly defined categories of behavioral variants, the clinical profile of the psychopath is only now becoming sharply delineated. Furthermore, the general reading public is just now becoming aware of the term—and the type. *The Mask of Sanity*, Hervey Cleckley's landmark study of the psychopath, was first published in 1941, almost half a century after Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* appeared. Yet, in comparing Bradley's analysis of Iago with the profile of psychopath in Cleckley, it is astonishing how close Bradley's analysis comes to the psychiatrist's description of the psychopath. Bradley, however, did not delineate a major characteristic of the psychopath: he could not quite stomach his own analysis that Iago is a moral blank, so he protested that Iago is not a monster, but a man with a conscience, however faint. But the play itself shows clearly enough that Iago goes off as he comes on, devoid of conscience, with no remorse. "This guiltlessness," according to McCord and McCord, "is one of the central features of psychopathy."⁶

Bradley died before Cleckley wrote. Whether Cleckley was acquainted with Bradley's work is not really to the point. He does indeed devote a chapter (Chapter 40) to fictional characters of psychiatric interest, and even mentions Iago: "Perhaps the most interesting and ingenious creation of vindictiveness known to man, [he] carries out his schemes of hate and treachery without adequate motivation in the ordinary sense" (pp. 370-71). Cleckley's analysis of the psychopath, however, is based not on fictional works, but on thirteen in-depth case studies and close observations of still other cases.

Early in his analysis Bradley cites Coleridge's astute phrase—the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity”—with approval, qualifying it as a "disinterested delight in the pain of others" (p. 170). He is most certainly on the right track. He also supports Coleridge's "passionless character of Iago"; according to Bradley, Iago, "was by no means a man of strong feelings and passions … but decidedly cold by temperament" (p. 177). This matches closely with Cleckley's statement that "the psychopath always shows general poverty of affect. While it is true that he sometimes becomes excited and shouts as if in rage or seems to exult in enthusiasm and again weeps in what appear to be bitter tears or speaks eloquent and mournful words about his misfortunes or his follies … mature, wholehearted anger, true or consistent indignation, honest, solid grief, sustaining pride, deep joy, genuine despair, are reactions not likely to be found within this scale" (p. 397).

As Coleridge said, Iago is motiveless. His motives—or excuses—come more as afterthoughts, not as stimuli toward the heinous actions he perpetrates. Like the psychopath described by Cleckley, Iago is impulsive, but he sees nothing basically wrong with his own behavior, no matter how erratic or antisocial; therefore, he
doesn't bother to find or invent excuses unless prodded. The very first lines of Othello contain just such prodding on the part of Roderigo, Iago's gull. Roderigo says to Iago: "Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate" (5-6). Iago's resentment toward Othello begins to burn, as he replies: "I know my price... And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship's ancient" (10, 30). Roderigo fuels the heat: "By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman" (31) and "I would not follow him then" (37). To which Iago finally replies: "O, sir, content you. I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (38-39).

The psychopath, in Cleckley's words, seems "sweetly free" of any doubts that his behavior is perfectly compatible with normal standards of morality, realiability, and so on. Even Iago's insidious speeches—"I am not what I am" (62) and "Virtue? a fig!" (I.iii.314)—are not reflective soliloquies revealing his true being and his awareness of his innate evil; they are boastful speeches to Roderigo. As a psychopath, he has no real insight into his own true nature, hence it would never occur to him to inquire if he were evil or malignant. Also, he projects his own views and shallowness of affect upon others, so he has no reason for making an unfavorable evaluation of himself against anyone else. Only in matters of intelligence does he see any difference: he considers himself more complex and more intelligent than anyone around him.

Bradley more or less anticipates this clinical view, arguing that Iago, "though thoroughly selfish and unfeeling, was not by nature malignant." On the contrary, "he had a superficial good-nature, the kind of good-nature that wins popularity and is often taken as a sign ... of a good heart." Bradley asserts, "It may be inferred that before the giant crime which we witness, Iago had never been detected in any serious offence and may even never have been guilty of one, but had pursued a selfish but outwardly decent life, enjoying the excitement of war and of casual pleasures" (p. 177).

True enough, Iago seems always to support his general. He moves jovially and at ease among the gentlemen of Cyprus, even as he sets up Cassio for a drunken fall (II.iii). He is more convincing yet in his ribald but humorous description of women to Desdemona, who is far more amused than offended (II.i). All of which fits Cleckley's description: "More often than not such a person will seem particularly agreeable and make a distinctly positive impression when one first meets him. Alert and friendly in his attitude, he is easy to talk with and seems to have a good many genuine interests. Signs of affection or excessive affability are not characteristic. He looks like the real thing" (p. 382). But, Cleckley goes on to say, "Not only is [the psychopath] undependable, but also in more active ways he cheats, deserts, annoys, brawls, fails and lies without any apparent compunction. He will commit theft, forgery, adultery, fraud, and other deeds for astonishingly small stakes and under such greater risks of being discovered than will the ordinary scoundrel. He will, in fact, commit such deeds in the absence of any apparent goal at all" (p. 390).

How, then, are we to account for Iago's never having performed any horrendous deeds before? Again, Bradley has, perhaps unwittingly, given the answer in suggesting that Iago has enjoyed "the excitement of war and of casual pleasures." As a bluff, hearty soldier, he had indulged himself in all the picaresques that are generally more excused in the uniformed warrior than in the civilian; his more excessive asocial whims had been pretty well channeled off in the violence of war where even killing was not only accepted but honored. The psychopath is asocial; war is asocial; Iago was in his element, and praised for his actions, not condemned. He did what heroic Othello did, the difference being that Othello was supremely motivated and master of himself, while Iago was satisfying his quest for instant pleasure in excitement. This search is another indication of his psychopathic nature, for, according to McCord and McCord, the "psychopath often seems willing to sacrifice everything for excitement. His satisfactions have always been fleeting and highly changeable from childhood through maturity. Consequently, he seems to know no greater pleasure than constant change, and the search for excitement at any cost becomes an important motive" (p. 9). Similarly, Cleckley points out that "in a life devoid of higher-order stimuli, of primary or serious goals and values, of intense and meaningful satisfactions, one can better understand the patient who, for the trivial excitement of stealing a dollar (or a candy bar), the small gain of forging a $20.00 check, half-hearted intercourse with an unappealing partner, sacrifices his job, the respect of his friends, or perhaps his marriage" (p. 444).
Plainly enough, the "motive" for Iago's eventual crime is no motive in the normal adult sense, but only the whim of a very young child. As the play opens, there are no immediate wars to occupy him. Othello, his chief, has moved into domesticity, a constant guest in the home of Brabantio for months before his marriage to Desdemona. The scene is now set for an exciting prank by the lateness of the hour, Roderigo's distress, the proximity of Brabantio's house. Perhaps on the spur of the moment an idea occurs to Iago:

Call up her father,
Rouse him. Make after him, poison his
delight,
Proclaim him in the streets, incense her
kinsmen.

(I.i.64-66)

But what about his disappointment at the placing of Cassio, an "arithmetician," over himself, a seasoned warrior; his suspicions that the Moor "twixt my sheets has done my office"? It is unnecessary here to repeat in full the ample, detailed argument of Bradley that Iago is a consistent and consummate liar, that "one must constantly remember not to believe a syllable that Iago utters on any subject … " (p. 172). What he says in reference to the causes of his frustrations and hatred is not borne out by any evidence in the play. On the contrary, as Bradley shows, the opposite is generally true.

Yet he is never suspected of lying—until the final scene, of course, when even his wife Emilia, the closest of all human beings to him, is thunderstruck to discover that Iago has lied. And Othello still calls him "honest, honest Iago" almost to the end. How does he bring it off so well?

The psychopath does not set out to lie in the self-conscious, guilt-beset way that a normal person would. Lying does not bother him. Cleckley says, "One gets the impression that he is incapable of ever attaining realistic comprehension of an attitude in other people which causes them to value truth and cherish truthfulness in themselves. Typically he is at ease…. His simple statement … carries special powers of conviction. Candor and trustworthiness seem implicit in him at such times. Though he will lie about any matter, under any circumstances, and often for no good reason, he may, on the contrary, sometimes own up to his errors (usually when detection is certain) and appear to be facing the consequences with singular honesty, fortitude, and manliness" (p. 387). What better description could one find of "honest" Iago, who protests that his rough-hewn probity is his greatest fault:

O wretched fool
That liv'st to mak'le thine honesty a vice!
O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O
world,
To be direct and honest is not safe.

(III.iii.375-78)

Is Othello a fool for being duped? No, he merely shares the opinion of everyone else who knows Iago. Of the play—and Iago—Bradley says accurately: "Evil is … united with an intellectual superiority so great that [one] watches its advance fascinated and appalled" (p. 145).

And, "Such evil is compatible, and even appears to ally itself easily with exceptional powers of will and intellect" (p. 189). An early question of psychiatrists in regard to a psychopathic personality was, "Can the moral sense be diseased and the intellectual faculty remain unimpaired?" While at least one study indicates that on the whole psychopaths share the same IQ distribution as normal individuals, specific psychopathic individuals have demonstrated exceptional intelligence. For instance, the subjects of Cleckley's case studies generally show a higher-than-normal intelligence. Of one of these subjects Cleckley reports: "His ability to
plan and execute schemes to provide money for himself, to escape legal consequences … could be matched by few, if any, people whom I have known. In such thinking he not only shows objective ingenuity, but also remarkable knowledge of other people and their reactions (of psychology in the popular sense) at certain levels, or, perhaps one should say, in certain modes, of personality-reaction. At any sort of contest based on a matching of wits, he is unlikely to come off second best” (pp. 60-61).

Iago consistently dramatizes these characteristics, from his self-serving admonition to Roderigo to "put money in thy purse," to his astute management of Cassio's drunkenness, to his first sly hint to Othello that Cassio's relationship with Desdemona is not entirely honorable. Even Othello remarks upon Iago's keen perception of human nature: "This fellow's of exceeding honesty, and knows all qualities, with a learned spirit of human dealings" (III.iii.257-59). Not only does he prove his exceptional skill at planning events, but when he finds himself in an exceedingly dangerous situation, not once does he falter or display uncertainty, but adroitly shifts the circumstances to his own favor. Othello's threat of horrible death (III.iii.) does not faze Iago in the least, but rather seems to reinforce his self-assurance. Thus we see Iago as a perfect example of Cleckley's psychopath in whom we find "extraordinary poise rather than jitteriness or worry…. Even under concrete circumstances that would for the ordinary person cause embarrassment, confusion, acute insecurity, or visible agitation, his relative serenity is likely to be noteworthy” (p. 384).

We have already established the poverty of affect in the psychopath. He may weep and shout with rage, but all this is a readiness of expression rather than a strength of feeling. This would preclude any honest indignation on the part of Iago over Othello's preference of Cassio, or any sincere jealousy or true conviction that Othello was committing adultery with Emilia. We have also considered that conditions in the opening scene of the play were suitable for Iago to yield to an immature urge to excitement, setting into motion circumstances and happenings that developed into tragedy. But another facet of Iago's psychopathic personality contributed to the trouble-making: Cleckley says, "The psychopath is always distinguished by egocentricity. This is usually of a degree not seen in ordinary people and often is little short of astonishing" (p. 395). Part of Iago's egocentricity is his vanity. In his "motive-hunting" Iago picks on what is closest at hand (the psychopath has no difficulty in finding "plausible" excuses for his actions, then believing them himself), the upbraiding by Roderigo for his seeming cowardice in serving the Moor while professedly hating him. Bradley remarks, "What is clear is that Iago is keenly sensitive to anything that touches his pride or self-esteem” (p. 179). And so, in justifying his behavior to Roderigo, Iago sets his course of action. He must now manipulate people and outwit his adversaries to demonstrate his superiority. As we have already noted, it doesn't really matter to Iago whether or not Othello has committed adultery with Emilia: "I known not if't be true, but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do, as if for surety" (I.iii.377-79).

As Bradley so acutely observes: "The most delightful thing to such a man would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved secondly, the triumphant exertion of his abilities, and, thirdly, the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated. And the moment most dangerous to such a man would be one when his sense of superiority had met with an affront, so that its habitual craving was reinforced by resentment, while at the same time he saw an opportunity of satisfying it by subjecting to his will the very persons who had affronted it” (p. 185).

As stated earlier, Bradley could not accept fully this creature which he had so accurately diagnosed. These characteristics, he protested, are too frightful to constitute a man. Such a being would be a monster. The evidence, however, has been accumulated overwhelmingly by psychologists and psychiatrists that such a moral blank does indeed exist, and in frightening numbers. Shakespeare knew the type well enough, and though the "wicked Ensign" was furnished him by Cinthio, he constructed Iago so that he fulfills the clinical profile of the psychopath. Shakespeare had observed that there exist perfectly sane people in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is extremely weak while egoism is virtually absolute, and thus he made Iago. Aggressive and highly impulsive like all psychopaths, Iago's only motivation is an immature urge toward instant pleasure. Bluff and affable among his fellows, he is still unable to form lasting bonds of affection, not
even with his wife. He has no real loyalties, but serves only his own ends, using people ruthlessly with no concern for their feelings. Shakespeare's crowning touch to his creation is the absolute lack of remorse in Iago, when at the very end, Iago views with equanimity all the hideous results of his manipulations. To quote Cleckley once more: "All the horror is in just this—that there is no horror" (p. 153).

Notes


8 McCord and McCord, p. 43.

**Othello (Vol. 35): Desdemona**

**Julian C. Rice (essay date 1974)**


[In the following essay, Rice centers on the character of Desdemona in his discussion of guilt and human nature in Othello.]

The linking and parallelism between individual characters in Shakespearean drama is nowhere more prevalent than it is in *Othello*. As Barbara Everett has expressed it, the characters are all "forced by the 'elements that clip us round about' into a perpetual sense of, or straining toward, community. The 'net shall enmesh them all' is made at the instant the play begins, and is a condition of common need and common imperfection, so that a characters."1 The linking may have serious thematics implications. Is Othello responsible for his actions, or does he perhaps represent a common human vulnerability to Iago's destructive powers? The idea that all men share the responsibility for the acts of any individual human being is suggested when Desdemona paradoxically accuses herself of her own murder: "Emilia. O, who hath done this deed? / Desdemona. Nobody—I myself."

Although the abstract idea of universal guilt, stemming from the Fall, has been connected with the play, the criticism almost unanimously excludes Desdemona from participation. Most frequently, she is viewed as a Christ-figure, a morally perfect and entirely innocent victim. If it can be shown that Desdemona resembles Othello in more ways than she transcends him, however, the drama may be said to be less a tragedy of individual character than of human nature itself. Evil is most terrifying when it is performed with the conviction of goodness and moral necessity. But the archetypal evil-doer, like Oedipus, is not himself as
malicious as he is, ultimately, blind. It is the "blood and baseness" of Othello's nature which leads him to "preposterous conclusions," but the same blood and baseness is present in the most outwardly virtuous of human beings—even in Desdemona.

Brabantio's disillusion with Desdemona foreshadows the play's more subtle revelations. Just as Desdemona's last speech in the play indicates that, being human, she shares the responsibility for her own murder, so her first lines in the play force Brabantio to face the reality that "she was half the wooer." Significantly, Brabantio says that he will forswear retributive justice upon Othello, if Desdemona turns out to be guilty. The realization that if all do offend, none do offend, is a traditional concomitant of the very logical Christian response of compassion toward human frailty.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I pray you hear her speak,} \\
\text{If she confess that she was half the wooer} \\
\text{Destruction on my head if my bad blame} \\
\text{Light on the man!}
\end{align*}
\]

\[(I.iii.175-78)\]

But Brabantio is as foolish as King Lear temporarily is, when, faced with human imperfection, he condemns generation: "I had rather adopt a child than get it." No child of Adam and Eve can be any better than Desdemona proves to be, but even she is morally vulnerable.

Her first major motive in the play, to accompany Othello to Cyprus, occasions a plea for sympathy from the "gracious Duke." Her speech may also be taken as a Christian plea for charity from the audience:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Most gracious Duke,} \\
\text{To my unfolding lend your prosperous ear,} \\
\text{And let me find a charter in your voice,} \\
\text{T'assist my simpleness.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[(I.iii. 239-42)\]

As her true nature and simultaneous naiveté are "unfolded" in the course of the play, so are the same qualities shown in her husband. To hold Othello or Desdemona morally responsible or "damned" for the unfolding tragedy would presumably not be the response of a "prosperous" or "gracious" auditor. Her next speech expresses her love for as well as her resemblance to Othello. Being married, they are of the same family, and more symbolically they have always been married members of the human family: "My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord." In their Platonically proud denial of the body's claims (like Othello's earlier refusal to promote Iago), they are exactly alike.

While Othello and Desdemona may consider their union to be a marriage of true minds, many members of Shakespeare's audience were probably not Neoplatonists. A denial of sexual reality may have been as obviously naïve to devout "married" Protestants in Shakespeare's audience as it would be today to commonplace psychological perception. After Desdemona insists that she wants to go to Cyprus for reasons other than sexual desire ("I saw Othello's visage in his mind") Othello himself puts what he comically considers to be first things first:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Let her have your voice.} \\
\text{Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it} \\
\text{not} \\
\text{To please the palate of my appetite,} \\
\text{Nor to comply with heat—the young affects}
\end{align*}
\]
In me defunct—and proper satisfaction;
But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
(I.iii.261-66)

His next lines ominously andironically foreshadow the tragic action:

  No, when light-winged toys
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton
dullness
My speculative and officed instrument,
That my disports corrupt and taint my
business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation!
(I.iii.263-69)

A base adversary does indeed suborn Othello's noble sentiments and psychological naivete to his own purposes. A new tragic "estimation" of human nature is a major aspect of the play's development. The audience will have to reassess the appearance which the noble Moor presents in Act I. To neglect this and to accept Othello's and Desdemona's own definitions of themselves is to be fooled as they are by flattery, that is, an overly optimistic or Neoplatonic view of the human condition.

In II.i Desdemona listens disapprovingly to Iago's pessimistic view of women:

  You are pictures out of door,
Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your
kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being
offended,
Players in your housewifery, and
housewives in your beds.
(II.i.110-13)

Such a slanderous view disturbs Desdemona, and she needs to reassure herself that she does not resemble the universal woman which Iago describes. In effect she dares him to define her:

Desdemona. What wouldst write of me, if
   thou shouldst praise me?
lago. O gentle lady, do not put me to't,
   For I am nothing if not critical.
(II.i.118-20)

The whole scene is an example of her need for self-justification, perhaps to repress a subconscious guilt. An audience need never have heard of Freud to sense that in this scene "the lady doth protest too much." In her aside, she even justifies her participation in the conversation. She feels that she should be more concerned for Othello's safety than for her own need to be reassured. She cannot face this need and thinks of the whole conversation as simply a diversionary means of passing the time. But her aside itself is the real diversion:

Desdemona. I am not merry; but I do
beguile
The thing I am by seeming otherwise.—
Come, how wouldst thou praise me.

(II.i.123-25)

Iago's answers comprise an accurate and unflattering description which is corroborated by the rest of the scenes in which Desdemona appears. The language of his answer resembles the riddling responses of a fool character, and such language intentionally invites speculation and explication. In the repartee which follows Desdemona's invitation, there is a significant pun on "white" and "wit." Desdemona asks how Iago would praise a woman who is black (unattractive) and witty:

Iago. If she be black, and thereto have a wit,
She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.

(II.i.133-34)

Just as Iago has mocked the human need to justify action, when he flippantly speaks of his "motives" for destroying Othello, so he is mocking Desdemona's use of her "wit" to "fit" or to cover the inner "blackness" of her psyche. Similarly, to complete the pun, human beings have little difficulty finding a "white" reason to cover a black sinful impulse. A wit in fallen man is only a device to whitewash the reality of insistent desires.

It is, symbolically, the inner blackness which both Othello and Desdemona try to deny. Desdemona is not unfaithful to Othello, but, like Othello, she is unfaithful to herself. When she insists that Iago describe "a deserving woman indeed—one that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself," she is obviously thinking of herself. Ironically she is asking Iago to "vouch" for her virtue. And his response, being that of "very malice itself," another quality which the single Vice may personify, is maliciously candid. In each line of his speech, he mentions an abstract quality of moral perfection which does not match the reality of human capability. In the last line he suggests that such a "wight" is a human impossibility. Again there may be a pun on Desdemona's being white. Nothing is all white or all black, as it were. A pure "wight" is impossible. All human beings are "black," or fallen, within. When Desdemona asks Iago to describe one who is "black and witty," good and evil, or sinful and self-deceiving, she is asking for the description of herself which he then extensively supplies:

She that was ever fair, and ever proud;
Had tongue at will, and yet was never loud;
Never lacked gold, and yet went never gay;
Fled from her wish, and yet said "Now I may";
She that being angered, her revenge being nigh,
Bade her wrong stay, and her displeasure fly;
She that in wisdom never was so frail
To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail;
She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind,
See suitors following, and not look behind:
She was a wight (if ever such wights were)—

To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

(II.i.149-61)
Desdemona's primary virtue in the play is her ability to forswear revenge, to bid "her wrong stay, and her displeasure fly" and to transcend the "frailty" of hasty and useless retributive action, or changing the "cod's head for the salmon's tail." Emilia tempts her to precisely this sort of "womanly" revenge in IV.iii. Such virtues, however, are no panacea for curing folly, as Iago's last line suggests. Folly is an inherent and permanent frailty, passed on to children, and existing within even the most virtuous individuals. Desdemona perhaps displays some of the most important virtues mentioned in Iago's speech, but she also reveals some of the faults which he catalogs. Most obviously, the words "never proud" do not accurately fit Desdemona. Both she and Othello are as complacently confident as Adam and Eve were before Eve encountered the serpent, although it is the male half of "mankind" who most directly confronts the devil in this play. And in Othello the Fall occurs without any explicitly reassuring hope of redemption, as Desdemona's lines ironically suggest. The heavens are not clearly protecting mankind against evil here:

Desdemona. The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should
can.
Even as our days do grow.
Othello. Amen to that, sweet powers!
I cannot speak enough of this content;
It stops me here; it is too much of joy
And this, and this, the greatest discords be
[Kissing her]
That e'er our hearts shall make!
lago. [Aside] O, you are well tuned now!
But I'll set down the pegs that make this
music,
As honest as I am.

(II.i.195-203)

What Bradley called "fate" seems to be the unconscious combination of contradictory good intention gone awry, furthered by unlucky chance incidents and blind human optimism or pride. Tragically and unwittingly, Desdemona contributes to her murder with her idealistic zeal. Her overconfidence in the power of virtue to triumph, often taken to be an example of her pure faith, may be simply a self-righteous obliviousness to sin and frailty. It is really her own power to move Othello that she repeatedly assures Cassio of when he entreats her intercession. The scene reveals her vanity and her susceptibility to flattery, qualities of Eve rather than Christ:

Desdemona. Be thou assured, good Cassio, I
will do
All my abilities in thy behalf.

Do not doubt, Cassio
But I will have my lord and you again
As friendly as you were.

And be you well assured
He shall in strangeness stand no farther off
Than in a politic distance.

Do not doubt that; before Emilia here
I give thee warrant of thy place.

(III.iii.1-2, 5-7, 11-13, 19-20)
Desdemona’s faith in the power of virtue to triumph may foreshadow the play’s skepticism concerning Providence as well as her psychological naiveté. Although Othello might be particularly prone to insecurity because of the racial differences emphasized in the opening scenes, Desdemona’s idealistic Neoplatonism makes her impervious to his vulnerabilities.

Assure thee,
If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
To the last article. My lord shall never rest;
I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience;
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift:
I'll intermingle everything he does
With Cassio's suit.

(III.iii.20-26)

Othello then enters and Cassio leaves in spite of Desdemona’s request that he stay and hear her speak, a request dictated by her desire to demonstrate her power over her husband to an admiring audience. Sans audience (on stage, at least) she confidently approaches Othello and begins almost peremptorily, "How now, my lord? / I have been talking with a suitor here, / A man that languishes in your displeasure." As she continues, her references to "grace and power to move " are marks of feminine vanity, the desire to have the "maistrye," rather than genuine Christlike attributes. Her power to move is ironically limited to her ability to sexually attract. It is really this power which she is, very normally and inevitably, playing upon. Her description of Cassio is really a description of herself. Although both Cassio and Desdemona have faults, the play repetitively and indirectly invokes a compassionate response toward them.

For if he be not one that truly loves you,
That errs in ignorance and not in cunning,
I have no judgment in an honest face.
I prithee call him back.

(III.iii.48-50)

Her lack of judgment allows her to aggravate Othello's incipient suspicion. She presses on, more because Othello is refusing her than out of genuine concern for Cassio. The comic repetition of her insistent questions suggests this:

Desdemona. … Good love, call him back.
Othello. Not now, sweet Desdemona; some other time.
Desdemona. But shall't be shortly?
Othello. The sooner, sweet, for you.
Desdemona. Shall't be tonight at supper?
Othello. No, not tonight.
Desdemona. Tomorrow dinner, then?
Othello. I shall not dine at home;
I meet the captains at the citadel.

(III.iii.54-59)

She offers a pretext of wifely demurral to her husband's wishes, but her specific request is a paradoxical combination of entreaty and command:
Why then, tomorrow night, on Tuesday morn,
On Tuesday noon, or night, on Wednesday morn.
I prithee name the time, but let it not
Exceed three days.

(III.iii.59-63)

When Othello inadvertently hits upon Desdemona's real motive of intercession ("Let him come when he will! I will deny thee nothing"), she strongly "denies" that she is testing Othello's devotion and her own power over him. There is an inherent comic quality in her insistence that the "boon" is for Othello's sake rather than her own. Othello's lines about denial are repeated again after Desdemona's speech, which is, with dramatic transparency, a psychological denial of her own selfishness:

Othello. … I will deny thee nothing.
Desdemona. Why, this is not a boon;
’Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,
Or sue to you to do a particular profit
To your own person. Nay, when I have a suit
Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,
It shall be full of poise and difficult weight,
And fearful to be granted.
Othello. I will deny thee nothing!

(III.iii.76-83)

She reveals herself entirely, when she petulantly answers Othello's request to be left to himself: "Shall I deny you? No. Farewell my lord." As she exits, she speaks a couple of lines, which bear more ironic implications:

Emilia, come. Be as your fancies teach you;
Whate’er you be, I am obedient.

(III.iii.88-89)

The decorous obedience which a wife was supposed to offer her husband has been only a thinly disguised veil over Desdemona's words which reveal the traditional feminine vice of desiring the "maistrye." Desdemona is not obedient to the ideals of generosity and charity, in regard to Cassio, any more than she is truly obedient to her husband. She is in reality obedient, as all mankind must frequently be, to her pride, her fallen nature, and her "fancies." Both Othello and Desdemona are as their "fancies teach" them. The line is a fore-shadowing of Othello's surrender to his own jealous fancies, externalized in the personified Vice, Iago. "Whate’er" Othello is by nature, Desdemona must also be.

But Desdemona certainly does not wish to believe in her own frailty, judging by her responses to Othello's direct accusations in IV.ii. Before Desdemona's entrance, Othello, although referring literally to Emilia, unwittingly describes both himself and Desdemona:

This is a subtle whore
A closet lock and key of villainous secrets,
And yet she'll kneel and pray; I have seen her do’t.

(IV.ii.21-23)
The same irony continues as he identifies Emilia's "mystery" in a way which ironically describes his denial of his own inherent sin:

Othello. [To Emilia] Some of your function, mistress:
Leave procreants alone and shut the door;
Cough or cry hem if anybody come.
Your mystery, your mystery! Nay, dispatch!

(IV.ii.27-30)

When he confronts Desdemona, Othello is especially concerned with the indignity of his imagined situation: "But, alas, to make me / The fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow and moving finger at." Actually, both accuser and accused are guilty of the same sin and the same falseness here. This is implied in Desdemona's self-exonerating question, which is simultaneously an ironic indictment of herself, "Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?" The sin of ignorance can be committed by anyone, regardless of social identity. Desdemona believes that because she is a Christian, she cannot possibly be a strumpet:

Othello. Are not you a strumpet?
Desdemona. No, as I am a Christian!

(IV.ii.82)

Her refusal to face the reality of her nature and of the Fall is suggested further in the next scene. When Emilia asks how she is, Desdemona accurately defines her awareness: "Faith, half asleep." She restates her naïveté within a few lines. Her words consciously imply that she deserves no chiding, but they also describe an old habit of self-righteousness, an imperviousness to self-chiding:

Those that do teach young babes
Do it with gentle means and easy tasks.
He might have chid me so; for, in good faith
I am a child to chiding.

(IV.ii.111-14)

As she cannot face her own feminine frailty, she cannot bring herself to pronounce the word "whore"—"Am I that name, Iago?" She reiterates her image of herself by dramatizing her virtue for Iago and Emilia:

Here I kneel:
If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,
Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense
Delighted them in any other form.

(IV.ii.151/-55)

Her reference to her "discourse of thought" and to her "senses" as having been perfectly pure is another example of pride, since the mind and the senses were notoriously fickle from the Skeptical and Calvinistic points of view. The line foreshadows Desdemona's becoming guilty of just these "sins" in the next scene. A virtuous person was expected to acknowledge and thus control his sinful impulses (thought and sense) rather than try to deny them as Desdemona does. But for Desdemona the fallen nature within her is literally an unspeakable horror: "I cannot say 'whore,' / It does abhor me now I speak the word." The presence of Bianca in the play suggests that all women are sisters. Desdemona shrinks with horror from, or "abhors," the word "whore." The obvious pun also suggests that she shrinks from the reality of the whore within her, the potential
whore which exists within all women. Just as Cassio runs from the external, literal whore, Bianca, so Desdemona psychologically flees or abhors a part of her inner self. Cassio is in a sense "married" to the whore without, and Desdemona is bound to the whore within.

The courtesan, Bianca, is an important character for what she reveals to the audience about the other less "honest" women in the play. She does not appear in Cinthio's novella, and Spivack has a number of explanations for her presence in Othello: 1) "a married Cassio would have been less tractable a subject for Iago's intrigue"; 2) "with two respectable wives already inside a play dealing with matrimony, a third would have had no dramatic virtue at all compared with the opportunity to stage a harlot," especially given "the theatrical fashion in prostitutes … during the early years of the seventeenth century"; and 3) Iago is able to increase Othello's anger by saying that Cassio looked upon Desdemona with no more respect than he did "his whore." He emphasizes that practical dramaturgic considerations were the major reasons for unmarrying Cassio, and that these took precedence over a morally accurate picture of the lieutenant, whose "daily beauty" would have gained from a wife "a degree of enhancement that the courtesan does not altogether supply."3 The point that Spivack has minimized suggests that Shakespeare did not neglect moral considerations by including Bianca but may actually have enhanced them. Her presence in the play serves to reveal the hypocrisies of Cassio and Desdemona rather than their "daily beauty." Bianca is a "fallen" woman, but she is generous and loving to Cassio. If she is dishonest in the sense of being unchaste, she is at least psychologically honest about her feelings and her identity. Othello's wife is literally honest or chaste, an "honest" woman, but like her husband and like Cassio, she is, in her pride, psychologically dishonest. Emilia stands between the other two women. More psychologically honest about herself and human nature than Desdemona, she nevertheless is not ready to admit to herself that she could be as bad as Bianca.

Although Emilia admits that she would not commit adultery by the "heavenly light" Desdemona swears by, her humorous rejoinder echoes the mocking but disturbingly truthful comments of Iago:

Desdemona. Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
Emilia. Why, would not you?
Desdemona. No, by this heavenly light!
Emilia. Nor I neither by this heavenly light; I might do't as well i' th' dark.

(IV.iii.64-67)

She goes on to distinguish herself from a courtesan, however, with a humorous sort of moral doublethink:

Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, or caps, or any petty exhibition; but, for all the whole world … ?

(IV. iii.72-74)

She then plays the Vice to Desdemona as Iago plays it to Othello. Emilia tempts Desdemona to evil by preaching a gospel of justice and logical retribution. If Emilia is not so purely an incarnation of evil as Iago, the Iago-presence within her is strong enough. The illusion of justice and repayment for wrong accompanies moral evil as tenaciously as Iago serves Othello. Emilia is so specific in cataloging "wrongs" that although she shows admirable courage and loyalty later, she may here be playing the bawd. Courage, loyalty, and sexual promiscuity are not contradictory qualities, especially if Shakespeare is as psychologically sophisticated as the critical tradition considers him to be:

And have not we affections?
Desires for sport? and frailty? as men have?
Then let them use us well; else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
Desdemona. Good night, good night.
Heaven me such uses send,
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend.
(IV.iii.101-6)

Desdemona's response is a human emulation of Christ-like behavior, not necessarily that of a spotless soul. It is the only psychologically possible answer for her to make at the moment, although her moral hypocrisy is not as crude as that of Emilia. Emilia makes a fine distinction between adultery for a gown and adultery for the whole world, but she is comically self-righteous later when she berates Bianca, who has been falsely accused of complicity in Roderigo's death and Cassio's injury:

Iago. This is the fruits of whoring. Printhee,
Emilia,
Go know of Cassio where he supped tonight.
[To Bianca.] What, do you shake at that?
Bianca. He supped at my house; but I therefore shake not.
Iago. O, did he so? I charge you go with me.
Emilia. O fie upon thee, strumpet!
Bianca. I am no strumpet, but of life as honest
As you that thus abuse me.
Emilia. As I? Fie upon thee!
(V.ii.116-23)

But the play carefully and subtly expresses what the characters strenuously attempt to deny. And if IV.iii reveals certain aspects of Emilia's character, it also seems to me to reveal more about Desdemona than many critics have been willing to admit. In the scene, Desdemona is preparing for bed, and during a section of about thirty lines she is shedding articles of clothing while she speaks. The scene employs the conventional topos of clothing to symbolize the psychological exposure of Desdemona, which is simultaneously occurring. As she takes off articles of clothing, the lines reveal previously concealed qualities of her psyche. She tells Emilia that Othello has dismissed her, and Emilia replies that she wishes Desdemona had never seen Othello. Desdemona disagrees:

So would not I. My love doth so approve him
That even his stubbornness, his checks, his frowns—
Prithee unpin me—have grace and favor.
(IV.iii.19-21)

Her love for Othello has never admitted the possibility of human fault, and she can only turn the reality into an illusion. Her speech is, however, punctuated by a significant request that Emilia "unpin" her. The request foreshadows the revelation of the next few lines. Desdemona's next speech suggests a traditional truth she had never accepted: "All's one. Good Father, how foolish are our minds!" Although "all's one" is literally a reference to the unimportance of Emilia's having laid out the wedding sheets, in another sense the words along with what follows suggest the universal inclusiveness of human folly, which inevitably includes the "divine Desdemona." The story of her maid, "Barbary," whose love proved mad and did forsake her, also suggests
that Desdemona is not meant to be a unique exemplar of virtue. The maid's name recalls Othello's nationality, and Iago's earlier mocking reference to him as a "Barbary horse." If Desdemona parallels "Barbary," who by implication is a Moor like Othello, she and Othello are interchangeable in their possession of the same human weaknesses. When, a few lines before, she says her love "approves" Othello, another Renaissance meaning of "approve" as "resemble" suggests that she, like Othello, sees faults (such as "stubbornness") as virtues. This is, in a sense, a "song" which Desdemona dies singing:

She had a song of "Willow;"
An old thing 'twas, but it expressed her
fortune,
And she died singing it.

(IV.iii.28-30)

In saying that she feels like hanging her "head all at one side" and singing "like poor Barbary," there is the implication that she, like Barbary and like Othello, has faced only one side of her character and of human identity.

Another shocking revelation occurs after her second request to be "unpinned." In an unguarded utterance Desdemona reveals that she is not above normal human impulses. In IV.i Iago fed Othello's jealousy by implying that Lodovico, as well as Cassio, was involved with Desdemona: "'Tis Lodovico, / This comes from the Duke. See, your wife's with him." When Othello strikes Desdemona, Lodovico defends her and tells him to "call her back." Othello's reaction implies further jealousy: "Othello. What would you with her sir? / Lodovico. Who? I, my lord? / Othello. Ay! You did wish that I would make her turn." Othello then speaks bitterly of his wife, directing the speech to Lodovico. Thus Lodovico is established in Othello's mind as a potential threat or rival. This is obviously, in a literal sense, as preposterous as his accusation of Cassio. But in a more subtle psychological sense Othello's jealousy may be unwittingly accurate. Desdemona has been repeatedly abused and checked by her husband. She has been defended by a handsome young emissary from Venice. Desdemona's momentarily "unpinned" words to Emilia suggest that she is a descendant of Eve, and, however pure, a sister of the Wife of Bath and Bianca. Emilia's more basic response simply places Desdemona's inner character into sharper relief for the audience:

Emilia. Shall I go fetch your nightgown?
Desdemona. No, unpin me here.
This Lodovico is a proper man.
Emilia. A very handsome man.
Desdemona. He speaks well.
Emilia. I know a lady in Venice would have
walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of
his nether lip.

(IV.iii.34-40)

Being unable to face the implications of what she and Emilia have just said, she sings her willow song, which itself suggests that Desdemona refuses to face undeniable natural realities. The first two lines contain a contradiction. Although the "poor soul sat singing by a sycamore tree," she sang "all a green willow." Although Desdemona lives in a world which is undeniably and by nature composed of good and evil elements, she has admitted only the good. This is as foolish as sitting next to a sycamore tree, while "singing" that "all" trees are "green willows." After giving Emilia her clothes ("Lay by these"), she repeats the chorus, and with her literal and symbolic clothing removed, her line suggests her own limitations of insight within the play: "Sing all a green willow must be my garland." In her next line she repeats her "approval" of Othello's "scorn." She then stops singing momentarily, because she feels that she is not singing accurately. Why should she approve Othello's scorn, unless the insistent knocking of a repressed truth might make her feel that
Othello's jealousy is somehow justified? Only a few lines before she had spoken admiringly of Lodovico. She fears that her song, or her soothingly idealistic view of herself and of life, will be interrupted. But the knocking or potential interruption is being sounded only in her own mind:

Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve—
Nay, that's not next. Hark! Who is't that knocks?
Emilia. It is the wind.

(IV.iii.52-54)

The song then concludes with the sort of skepticism Desdemona has always fled from. The disparity between the prettiness of the sound of the singing and the reality of the words' meaning is, in the theater, a dramatic perspective on the pathetic attempt at denial which consistently characterizes Desdemona. Her natural human impulses attract her to Lodovico and make her potentially, if not actually, unfaithful to Othello. It is this view of human nature that neither she nor Othello can accept. But the voice of psychological reality is growing so loud in her mind that she "approves" Othello's scorn, although in a literal sense it is unjustified. When the song itself becomes cynically real, Desdemona attempts to dismiss Emilia, a personification of this cynical reality (as Othello had dismissed her earlier).

"I called my love false love; but what said he then?
Sing willow, willow, willow:
If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men."
So, get thee gone; goodnight.

(IV.iii.55-58)

But Emilia does not leave, and Desdemona can only ask her a desperate question. The question is necessary, since she fears the encroachment into her consciousness of a hidden part of herself. If she can deny that women are naturally promiscuous, she can more effectively deny the urgings she senses knocking in herself. But Emilia's response, like those of her husband to Othello, expresses the tragic reality rather than a romantic dream:

Desdemona. O, these men, these men.
Dost thou in conscience think, tell me, Emilia,
That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind?

(IV.iii.59-63)

Emilia's longer speech of definition, previously quoted, appropriately concludes the scene's revelation that women are more like men than angels: "And have not we affections? Desires for sport? and frailty? as men have?"

Although Desdemona may not be naturally superior to the other characters in the play, there are at least two instances where she seems to distinguish herself favorably. At the end of the scene just discussed she refuses to cynically capitalize on the definition of human nature with which Emilia has just provided her: "Heaven me such uses send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend." And in the scene immediately preceding, IV.ii, she reacts to Othello's abuse without vengeful anger. Thematically, the following speech suggests that
Desdemona is asserting the bond between human beings rather than exaggerating the division. In so doing she is departing from the retributive and angry actions which possess Othello and most of the rest of humanity. Thus, as Emilia unthinkingly remarks, Desdemona's reaction is both a change indeed and, as the line's double entendre suggests, a change in deed:

**Desdemona.** Prithee tonight
Lay on my bed my wedding sheets,
remember
And call thy husband hither.

**Emilia.** Here's a change indeed!

(IV.ii.104-6)

On the other hand, it may actually be Desdemona's inability to face reality which accounts for her "virtue" here. She can only reply to Emilia with a trite proverb in IV.iii, and she would prefer to return to her Edenic honeymoon rather than admit the state to which her marriage has fallen. Her "sacrifice," whether consciously virtuous or psychologically necessitated, does not evoke the heaven-sent "uses" to which she had earlier referred.

The play ends with the "bloody period" of Othello's final stab. Iago's contemptuous references to humanity's destructive foolishness cannot be glossed over or evaded as unduly cynical. Desdemona is not a living contradiction of Iago's demonstration of human nature. His cynicism does not "break down upon the rock of her truth." As the Vice he has caused the other characters to exhibit the various vices he personifies. And the picture is not heroically tragic in any sense. The self-destructive urges are not understood. Man knows no more at the end of the play about why evil occurs than he did at the beginning. No Providential revelation explains the tragic action. The ritual quality of the last act arises from the use of the traditional familial convention. Man can be counted upon to behave recurrently in the same basic ways. He loves, sexually, and he murders. The human race exists perpetually bound in a marriage of love and of death. The implied sexual puns on "die" in the speeches of Othello before he kills Desdemona suggest the tragic basicity of these two human actions:

**Othello.** Sweet soul take heed,
Take heed of perjury; thou art on thy
deathbed.

**Desdemona.** Ay, but not yet to die.

**Othello.** Presently.
Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin,
For to deny each article with oath
Cannot remove nor choke the strong
conception
That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.

(V.ii.50-56)

Othello's final words at the end of the play also reveal the parallelism between sexual love and murder: "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this? Killing myself, to die upon a kiss." His words imply the question of the play. Must the blind continue to slaughter the blind? Must man be as much at the mercy of his impulses to destroy for a "cause" as he is compelled to express his sexual nature? No very reassuringly redemptive note is sounded at the end. Lodovico compares Iago's cruelty to other natural threats. Human evil is as powerful as "anguish, hunger, or the sea!" And Cassio, a man who has many of the same faults which characterized Othello and Desdemona, now has the task of governing the "city" and of dealing with Iago. There is no progressive feeling that the new governor, or the new generation, so to speak, will be any more successful in dealing with the problem of Iago than the old one was: "No way but this?" Othello is decidedly
not a comedy of redemption. The futures of Othello and Desdemona in another life and the future of the human race in this life are frighteningly and tragically ambiguous.

Notes


4 The plot is an allegory of what in modern speech would be called "man's inhumanity to man" or a violation of the "brotherhood" of man. A relatively literal age like ours retains only the metaphor of opposing brothers. But the familial convention in an older tradition was used more broadly. In Euripides' tragedy, *The Bacchae*, an Iago-like god named Dionysus provides the impetus and the illusion of justice which culminates in the ritual murder of Pentheus at the hands of his mother, Agaue. Oedipus kills his father, and the "unnatural" children in *King Lear* think themselves justified in the cruelty they inflict upon their father. In *Hamlet* brother kills brother, and the meaning is more immediately clear to a modern perception. But the murder of a wife may have carried the same metaphorical meaning for Shakespeare's audience as the murder of a brother does for us.

W. D. Adamson (essay date 1980)


[In the essay below, Adamson surveys critical opinion on Desdemona's moral character and concludes that her dominant trait is innocence, which, the critic argues, contrasts sharply with the characters of Othello and Iago.]

Surveys of *Othello* criticism have for years noted that most of the opinion about Desdemona's moral significance is lamentably polarized: at one extreme are her idolaters, the readers who see her as a desexualized spirit, "ardent with the courage and idealism of a saint" (A. C. Bradley); and at the opposite one, her attackers, including those who disparage her as "little less than a wanton" (President John Quincy Adams) or even as an outright strumpet.1 Perhaps because both Othello and Iago are moral absolutists, themselves interpreting Desdemona oversimply, critics tend to grasp the same absolute moral contrasts to explain her too. Whatever the reason, very few readers have been able to contemplate Desdemona with anything like true balance—to attain an objectivity in viewing her that is also consistent with the inferable values of Shakespeare's play. But this widespread failure to avoid reductive moral extremes like "saint" and "strumpet" may at bottom be simply a persistent consequence of our culture's sexual heritage, as entailed upon Othello and the critics alike. Reviewing some typical beliefs of her idolaters, attackers, and most recently her "humanizers"—critics who seek to make her simply a sort of "femme moyenne sensuelle," equipped with all the ordinary longings and frailties—may clarify Shakespeare's apparent intention in making Desdemona's true nature so difficult for readers to agree about.

Marvin Rosenberg observed that even among twentieth-century critics, Desdemona "has been in grave danger of being canonized" as Bradley is quoted doing above.3 One version of this approach is to align her with the forces of good in *Othello* s supposed morality play antagonism, or otherwise to "interpret" her. Thus Robert B. Heilman reads her as "the symbolization of spirit," that "world of spirit which Iago by philosophical necessity must destroy."4 Alvin Kernan places her on a more robust sounding moral pole, associating her with "a life
force that strives for order, community, growth, and light" against Iago's "anti-life force that seeks anarchy, death, and darkness." The father of all such systems was not Norman O. Brown but Prudentius, as Bernard Spivack acknowledged a few years before, reading Othello as "the elemental strife between Good and Evil, the metaphor of the moral dualism sustained by the Christian imagination through the dozen centuries between Prudentius and Shakespeare" and this moral dualism "includes Desdemona as well." On which side is she? "Iago destroys the bond of love and marriage which, in the persons of Desdemona and Othello, unites transcendent virtues—love and purity with valor and magnanimity" (p. 46). Thus far the allegorizers are in agreement: Desdemona is goodness and purity incarnate.

But oddly, though here suggesting that Desdemona is an avatar of purity, in several other remarks Spivack reveals a conflicting image of her:

There turns out to be additional justice, then, in [Iago's] already well-established plot to accuse Cassio and Desdemona of adultery, since one may very well believe that they are really in love with one another.

(p. 9)

That statement could be overlooked, except that Spivack follows it by observing that Iago might well find it "credible that Cassio and Desdemona love each other" (p. 12) and then even writes of "a Desdemona [Iago] can properly accuse of adultery because it is likely she loves Cassio anyway" (p. 30). In short, if we may believe this reputable critic, Iago was right about Desdemona all along.

That is—or should be—a staggering claim, yet Spivack is simply an extreme example of a cynical tendency to overemphasize Desdemona's human "frailty" which has quietly been developing among critics ever since the days of Thomas Rymer and John Quincy Adams, as seen for example in W. H. Auden, writing three years after Spivack. Though conceding that Desdemona's present relationship with Cassio is "perfectly innocent," Auden feels that her fall is simply a question of time:

One cannot but share Iago's doubts as to the durability of the marriage. It is worth noting that, in the willow-song scene with Emilia, [Desdemona] speaks with admiration of Ludovico and then turns to the topic of adultery. Of course she discussed that in general terms and is shocked by Emilia's attitude, but she does discuss the subject and she does listen to what Emilia has to say about husbands and wives. It is as if she had suddenly realized that she had made a mesalliance and that the sort of man she ought to have married was someone of her own class and color like Ludovico. Given a few more years of Othello and of Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover.

More insidiously plausible than Spivack's opinion, this is the classic view of Desdemona as that typical femme moyenne sensuelle which so fascinates Shakespeare, according to an intelligent essay about his heroines written years ago by Eric W. Stockton. Auden's Desdemona will degenerate into a sort of Madame Bovary eventually, and in fact "bovarysme" in T. S. Eliot's sense of congenital moral duplicity and self-deception has been laid to Desdemona in a French article. The fashion soon spread to America.

Perhaps inspired by some clinical jargon in Auden's essay, a group of psychoanalysts soon began to argue that "Desdemona was not a passive and innocent victim of Othello's jealousy" but instead is "an overt contributor to her own death both by word and act." She is crippled by a "moral masochism"; her attachment to Othello is basically Oedipal, and her masochistic self-incrimination stems from her suicidal sense of guilt. (Another article in the same issue of the review diagnosis of incestuous guilt, also touching like Auden on the critical "problem" caused by the comment about Lodovico.) Though unchallengeable by lay critics, this insistence on Desdemona's Oedipal guilt does concern us insofar as it also asserts her moral guilt—that she
incites Othello and thus is to blame for her own fate. In this respect the psychoanalysts are part of the growing overreaction to Desdemona idolatry.

In the "mainstream" of Shakespeare criticism the antidualtrous impulse of recent years may have reached its extreme development in Julian C. Rice's article entitled "Desdemona Unpinned: Universal Guilt in Othello." Not surprisingly, Rice assails her image as a "Christ-figure, a morally perfect and entirely innocent victim" that he says critics "most frequently" hold of her, "almost unanimously exclud[ing] Desdemona from participation" in that "universal guilt, stemming from the Fall" named in his title (p. 209). In this same broad sense of guilt, writes Rice, Desdemona "shares the responsibility for her own murder" if only because "all men share the responsibility for the acts of any individual being" (p. 209). But if guilt were universal, none would offend; and Rice's Desdemona definitely has offended. She may not be a saint, he implies, but she evidently thinks she is one: with Othello, she supposedly shares "a Platonically proud denial of the body's claims," and there is a damnable pride too in their "overly optimistic or neoplatonic view of the human condition" (pp. 210, 211). Typically, what the idolaters see as saintly virtue in Desdemona is now read as a moral defect: "Her overconfidence in the power of virtue of triumph, often taken to be an example of her pure faith, may be simply a self-righteous obliviousness to sin and frailty." (p. 214).

Now we may perceive the central issue emerging: how are critics like Rice justified in terming Desdemona's attitude "obliviousness to sin and frailty," and not simply "innocence"? It is a matter of interpretation and of their working assumptions. For example, Desdemona's inability in the boudoir scene to say the word "whore" which Othello has thrown at her is not, on Rice's reading, because of her sense of hurt at his brutal treatment; it is due to the recognition of sexual reality she is hypocritically suppressing:

for Desdemona the fallen nature within her is literally an unspeakable horror… . The presence of Bianca in the play suggests that all women are sisters. Desdemona shrinks with horror from, or "abhors," the word "whore." The obvious pun also suggests that she shrinks from the reality of the whore within her, the potential whore which exists within all women.

(pp. 218, 219)

And naturally, if a critic's working assumption is that all women are potential whores—whatever the statement may be intended to mean—the Lodovico comment will even further undermine her claim to innocence:

Another shocking revelation occurs after her second request to be "unpinned." In an unguarded utterance Desdemona reveals that she is not above normal human impulses … Desdemona's momentarily "unpinned" words to Emilia suggest that she is a descendant of Eve, and, however pure, a sister of the Wife of Bath and Bianca.

(p. 222)

Thus Rice, like Spivack, sees a "pure" Desdemona with one eye and with the other sees a woman whose unguarded utterances—"This Lodovico is a proper man" and "He speaks well"—prove that the slanders are "accurate":

in a more subtle psychological sense Othello's jealousy may be unwittingly accurate … her human impulses attract her to Lodovico and make her potentially, if not actually, unfaithful to Othello.

(pp. 222-23)
There is a sensitive nuance of distinction in this "potentially, if not actually unfaithful," we may judge. Or we may feel that in the context there is no difference.

It appears that a basic working assumption in this essay is that "women are naturally promiscuous," then (p. 224), and in many of the other critics too there are implicit assumptions about female sexual frailty reminiscent of the clerical antifeminists of the Middle Ages. This male critical bias in fact is a historical echo of the antifeminist—ultimately antisecondary—and attitudes Shakespeare portrays in characters like Othello, Leontes, and Hamlet, who embody the masochistic, guilt-laden residue of ascetic Augustinian Christianity passed on to Shakespeare's generation by the continental Reformation and Anglo-Catholicism alike. Perhaps it is not surprising that male critics respond too sympathetically to the sexual paranoia Shakespeare pictures in Othello and Iago, which Juliet Dusinberre terms in the similarly afflicted Leontes the "diseased conviction of [woman's] generic frailty." However, it is not the case that Desdemona's continuing devaluation in modern criticism is a conspiracy of cynical males: her most dangerous enemies are some of her feminist defenders. One of the most intelligent and balanced of the feminist oriented reappraisals is an essay by S. N. Garner, "Shakespeare's Desdemona." Overall, the paper is a valuable contribution to Othello criticism, particularly because it shows beyond question that Shakespeare does in fact portray Desdemona as a mature, "spirited and sensual," even "sexually playful" woman, far from the etherealized Desdemona of the idolaters: "he goes out of his way to make her human rather than divine," Garner writes (pp. 238, 237, 235). Yet this Desdemona is no hoyden, either: "Shakespeare does not wish to make her seem either shy or overly forward" in the equivocal-looking scene of risqué banter with Iago (II.i). The playwright "makes a special effort to maintain the balance" here, keeping Desdemona "off a pedestal" yet also picturing in her "a full range of human feelings and capacities" (p. 238). To this point Garner does full justice to "Shakespeare's delicately poised portrayal" of the heroine, a woman "neither goddess nor slut" (p. 235), and we should desire most modern critics a fuller acquaintance with this particular Desdemona. But eventually Garner overinterprets the boudoir scene in the same way the cynical detractors had done, this time adding a new assumption of dubious validity.

The new assumption concerns the view critics should hold of Desdemona's loyalty to Othello: does it ever waver, and if so, how is the wavering materially important? I would argue that critics must be "absolutists" in this matter. She must be read as having been unwaveringly faithful to the Moor—though we may not be absolutely assured of this until just before her murder—or Iago begins to seem correct in principle when he makes obscene slanders against her, Othello begins to appear justified in murdering her as an unfaithful wife, and the play's entire structure of meaning collapses like a house built of sand: Othello becomes a stupefying muddle of conflicting ironies, in the end vindicating the semi-devil Iago's keen knowledge of human nature and the gullied Moor's heroic firmness of purpose in giving Desdemona nothing that she did not, after all, deserve. There simply is no critical alternative to insisting on her loyalty which will not, pressed to its logical conclusion (as occasional "experimental" stage productions do), invert the play Shakespeare wrote—in effect making Desdemona a villainous fraud and Iago the conscience of the play. (Then chaos is come again.) Yet the Garner essay commences with the clear implication that Desdemona need not necessarily be unwavering:


Many critics and scholars come to Shakespeare's play with the idea that Desdemona ought to be pure and virtuous and, above all, unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty to Othello. The notion is so tenacious that when Desdemona even appears to threaten it, they cannot contemplate her character with their usual care and imagination.

(p. 234)

This seems reasonable at first, especially if by "pure" the writer is cautioning critics against thinking Desdemona sexless. But at bottom it is equivocation and temporizing.
We need to remember the fallen world that we, like Shakespeare, are living, reading, and writing in: it is only too easy to take an honest woman for a whore if from the start we believe in "the potential whore which exists within all woman" or attribute "potential" existence to anything whatever simply because it has not actually happened. (Is Lady Macbeth a "potentially" loving mother in the same way Desdemona is a "potential whore"?) Moreover, in Shakespeare's times as in his plays a woman not "unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty" to her husband invariably was dismissed as a whore: "A man who is unchaste loses nothing in the eyes of the world. A woman who is unchaste is nothing." Sexual fidelity in Shakespeare's lifetime and for centuries afterward was a vastly more sensitive issue than it is today, and this is a historical fact that criticism must reckon with when considering Desdemona's morality.

Let us then face the real critical issue. The question is not "Is it right to call an unfaithful wife a whore?" It may not be right, but Shakespeare always does. Nor should we now still need to be reminded that the wine Desdemona drinks is made of grapes—still think that the central question is "Is Desdemona a normally sexed woman?" Shakespeare says she is, as Garner and others demonstrate. But what then? Must "normally sexed" imply "potentially unfaithful"—or even "naturally promiscuous"? Male critic or female, if we assume so or write equivocally as though we might, we are falling ill with the "diseased conviction of woman's generic frailty" that Dusinberre so rightly exposes.

Then we must decide once and for all if Desdemona should be read as having been faithful to Othello—physically faithful of course, but faithful also without prejudicial qualification about her "potential." Garner, not unlike Rice, makes a point of Desdemona's supposed discovery that "she is human and therefore capable of treachery" (p. 247). But is she capable of it, assuredly? What if she should be revealed to us as constitutionally incapable of treachery—decisively revealed, when it is too late to prevent her murder? What if, notwithstanding the antifeminist slanders about woman's generic frailty, Desdemona were revealed as having been the one richer than all her tribe? The true tragic waste, then, "the pity of it all." I suggest that the real issue is, therefore, "Is Desdemona innocent?"—legally innocent of adultery, morally innocent of idly considering it, and psychologically innocent of even being capable of it. We should resist the temptation to "humanize" her to the extent of equivocating fatally about her innocence and temporizing from the irrelevant (and to Shakespeare inconceivable) perspective of our own era's very different valuation of sexual fidelity. We must not, in "unpinning" Desdemona, undo her as well.

Because S. N. Garner does not share these strict assumptions about Desdemona's unwavering loyalty and the dubiousness of the concept of generic frailty, even her heretofore balanced discussion of Desdemona over-interprets the boudoir scene damagingly:

That she thinks of Lodovico when she is undressing to go to bed with Othello suggests that she is still trying to find a way around the emergency of the moment.... Since the man that Desdemona has loved, married, and risked her social position for has turned into a barbarian and a madman, she unconsciously longs for a man like Lodovico—a handsome, white man, with those attributes she recognizes as civilized. In her heart she must feel she has made a mistake.

(pp. 248-49)

Here is Desdemona as Madame Bovary again, a femme moyenne sensuelle who is precisely no better than she should be. The trouble with this "realists's" view of her is that it imperceptibly merges with Iago's absurdly lewd picture of her as a super-subtle Venetian whore, and the critics either do not see this or do not mind. The "unconsciously longing" reference to Lodovico confirms her true nature to the cynics, and to some feminists the "human" frailty is welcome in helping to repudiate arrogant male stereotypes of chilly sexual "virtue" and constricting sexual loyalty. Thus, both male cynics and feminists can arrive at the conclusion Spivack had precociously announced twenty years ago, that Iago's accusations against Desdemona are "proper" ones. So
would they turn her virtue into pitch.

These are "worst case" readings of the boudoir scene, but what if we read it without prejudice? Let us inquire what Shakespeare might have thought he was depicting in Desdemona, tentatively ruling out the conclusion of "unconscious longing" for another man. Possibly he wished merely to show her distracting her mind from the strong premonition of death that the scene's willow song shows; then the Lodovico reference carries pathos, not prejudice. But why Lodovico, in particular? First, Shakespeare may have wished at this turning point to remind us of the road Desdemona has not taken, when instead of a proper and respectable citizen like Lodovico she embraces her storm of fortunes in Othello. Second, he may well have wished to characterize her by what she does not say about the eligible bachelor, under such outrageous provocation as Othello has given her in the brothel scene. Earlier (III.iii.236-38), Iago maliciously predicted to him that she may "hap'ly repent" her choice of the Moor should she "fail to match [him] with her country forms" as seen in countrymen like Lodovico; it would be especially impressive in her now if she pointedly does not repent her choice when offered this cue to do so. (Emilia, at IV.iii.17, says she wishes Desdemona had never seen her husband.) There would be deep pathos in this touch of suppressed—or possibly even unthought—regret, with the emphasis on what Desdemona does not say, which any normal woman would say. But, of course, the eye of the beholder can see what it wishes in this scene, either loyally suppressed regret or disloyal unconscious longing.

For to be sure, the Lodovico comment is ambiguous; it might be felt that Shakespeare is in fact suggesting the faintest of wistful vellüeties in Desdemona (though surely nothing so psychologically crude as a desperate contingency plan to save herself from death). Here then is the third point: that it is precisely the sort of fatal ambiguity that Shakespeare has made Desdemona exhibit to us and Othello all along and that the prejudiced Moor has mis construed against her loyalty, just as the critics would. (Other ambiguities are her "downright violence" in deceiving her father and eloping with Othello, her stout-hearted plea to accompany him to Cyprus, the scene of risqué banter with Iago at II.i, her overseen farewell to Cassio at the opening of III.iii, her obtusely tactless suit to reinstate Cassio, her embarrassment over the lost "napkin," etc.) The Lodovico comment and all the other ambiguities are needed to make Othello's suspicions dramatically credible to an audience, at least credible enough that he will not seem to us the ignorant dolt he seems to Emilia, who is not a man and has not seen the ambiguities, including Iago's contrived ones. And more: all the ambiguities are needed—in fact indispensable—to draw the audience partway into Othello's tragic dilemma of "seemings" about his wife—to keep half-invoking (at least in the minds of comparably predisposed observers) until the hour of her murder the fleeting suspicion that Desdemona might indeed be simply an ordinary woman, false one way or another, in deed or in thought, and "the cause" thus more or less just. Unlike Othello we know Iago is lying about Desdemona, but like Othello we must sporadically wonder if he may be right about her anyway, in principle.  

It is only on the brink of her murder that we are allowed to see unequivocally that "the cause" will be a dreadful travesty of justice, that she is not the "super-subtle Venetian" of Iago and the critics. Thus the one final ambiguity of the Lodovico comment—which shows us how Desdemona has brought herself to the brink of doom—is supplanted immediately by unmistakable proof of her innocence.

It is because she is innocent that she is about to die, and the essence of her innocence is her inability to imagine sexual evil—must less to conceive of Othello or anyone else imagining it.  

Despite her own spirited sexuality and her carnal knowledge, she has no idea what disastrous misconstructions the sexually paranoid Othello has been putting on her incautious, guiltless expressions of vitality. (Othello lists for us her conspicuous vital qualities at III.iii. 183-86.) Thus, because the essence of sexual evil is sexual disloyalty, the boudoir scene makes it abundantly clear that Desdemona literally cannot conceive of committing the sin that Othello is about to execute her for. I quote at length, to stress what I feel is Shakespeare's manifest intention in the scene:

Desdemona. O, these men, these men!
Dost thou in conscience think—tell me,
Emilia—

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That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind?

_Emilía._ There be some such, no question.
_Desdemona._ Wouldst thou do such a deed for
all the world?
_Emilía._ Why, would not you?
_Desdemona._ No, by this heavenly light!
_Emilía._ Nor I neither by this heavenly light.
I migh do't as well i'th' dark.
_Desdemona._ Wouldst thou do such a deed for
all the world?
_Emilía._ The World's a huge thing; it is a
great price for a small vice.
_Desdemona._ In troth, I think thou wouldst
not.
Beshrew me if I would do such a wrong
For the whole world...
I do not think there is any such woman.
_Emilía._ Yes, a dozen...

(IV. iii. 58-83)

"Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" "Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?" and again,
"Beshrew me if I would do such a wrong for the whole world." This reiteration underlines Desdemona's
innocence in its aspect of naïveté, as she tries and fails repeatedly to comprehend the way of the world,
represented by Emilia's counterpoint of pungent but not ungentle irony ("Yes, a dozen"). This cannot be "a
self-righteous obliviousness to sin and frailty" as Julian Rice called it, because Shakespeare is showing that
Desdemona has never known of the sin and frailty to begin with. (For Rice, Desdemona's ironic question
"Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?" becomes, in a prejudiced and theologically self-contradictory
misconstruction, "the sin of ignorance," [p. 218].) And lest we still are perplexed about Desdemona, tempted
still at this late point in the play to read her as an ordinary sensual woman, this adultery discussion plainly
shows us that she is an extraordinary woman. In fact, as Maynard Mack has written, this kind of
scene—which Shakespeare typically inserts to clarify the heroic commitment of his tragic protagonists just
before the climax—is an epitome of his method:

the implicit subject of all these episodes is the predicament of being human. They bring
before us the grandeur of man's nature, which contains, potentially, both voices, both ends of
the moral and psychic spectrum. They bring before us the necessity of his choice, because it is
rarely given to him to go through any door without closing the rest. And they bring before us
the sadness, the infinite sadness of his lot, because … he has no sublunar way of knowing
whether defiant "heroism" is more to be desired than suppler "wisdom." The alabaster
innocence of Desdemona's world shines out beside the crumpled bedsitters of Emilia's—

and ultimately, Mack concludes, "these are incommensurables which human nature nevertheless must
somehow measure, reconcile and enclose."23

Thus any hesitation about the issue exposed in the boudoir scene—or any suggestion that Desdemona is being
disingenuous, neurotically "strugg[ling] to keep her innocence" against the emerging "truth" about
herself24—risks obscuring a fundamental pattern of Shakespeare's art. We may see also that it is because of
this arresting contrast between the absolute moral innocence of Desdemona and the supple moral relativism of
Emilia that Shakespeare makes Emilia pronounce Desdemona's epitaph, with particular emphasis on her
innocence. She cries to Othello,
Nay, lay thee down and roar!
For thou hast killed the sweetest innocent
That e'er did lift up eye.

(V.ii.199-201)

This is not to idealize Desdemona, for it is true, on the authority of Emilia. And no other character's testimony could be so decisive as this archrealist's, Shakespeare says.

We need to accept that Desdemona is conceived as absolutely innocent, then; Iago and the sceptical critics are wrong. But a perhaps insurmountable obstacle to critical harmony is that her innocence is increasingly seen as an even greater liability than her supposed guilt and, if not denied, is deplored and stigmatized all the more. We see that a major critic like Maynard Mack cannot write "innocence" without writing "alabaster" in front of it, and many of today's younger critics find it hard to write "innocence" without writing "life-denying" in front of it. Where the earlier critics sentimentalize innocence and tend to suppress Desdemona's apparently contradictory sexuality, the newer ones often see her innocence as a neurotic defense mechanism, or even at one extreme a "life-destroying" characteristic, the epitome of "the sexual unreality the race longs for." Criticism thus goes a progress from the desexualizing idolaters through the cynics and "humanizers" and eventually comes out close to where it began, with some readers who see Desdemona as a sexually repressed zombie (the modern equivalent of a sexless saint?). But all are mistaken, Shakespeare implies; Desdemona's innocence coexists with a rich sexuality, and the conspicuous expression of her innocence is her vital exuberance, including the hot, moist hand of sexual vitality. She herself is a natural alternative to "saint or strumpet," which is all along a tragically false dilemma exploited by Iago.

Cassio is the unlikely spokesman for this virtually unperceived alternative. We need to distinguish him carefully from the characters involved in the dilemma; though calling her "the divine Desdemona," he is not in the sex-suppressing sense an idolater of her—it is inaccurate to say that "Cassio idealizes Desdemona as much as her father did"—and he politely but firmly repudiates Iago's obscene reading of her as well, in another interesting scene of verbal counterpoint, at the start of II.iii. Cassio finds that Desdemona has "An inviting eye, and yet methinks right modest" (1. 23), acknowledging her sexiness while in nowise leering at it. In this way he functions to provide an idea of Desdemona's virtuous sexuality, as the peculiar language of his invocation speech may suggest:

Great Jove, Othello guard,
And swell his sail with thine own pow'rful breath,
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,
Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms,
Give renewed fire to our extincted spirits,
And bring all Cyprus comfort! O, behold!
The riches of the ship is come on shore!
You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.
Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,
Before, behind thee, and on every hand,
Enwheel thee round!

(II.i.77-87)

Here and elsewhere Cassio is full of breathless hyperbole about Desdemona, but the important thing to note is that he definitely does not hold a desexualized view of her. On balance, this invocation speech contrasts with Iago's hellish, bestial vision of their love and human sexuality in general, which is the play's dominant
emphasis. And at the same time it is—in a line like "make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms"—clearly not the desexualized alternative of maiden saintliness that her father Brabantio and Othello think is the only other choice. Though only a passing emphasis in the play and inseparable from Cassio's somewhat sophomoric admiration of Desdemona, the speech very possibly is Shakespeare's understated attempt to "take the curse of f Desdemona's and Othello's sexual union, the curse Iago puts on it in the nightmarish opening scene. (Naturally, in the sexual hell of goats and monkeys where everyone becomes a monstrous beast with two backs, such exorcism must be ineffectual.)

In this connection, it seems a bit beside the point to write as A. P. Rossiter did that "the antithesis to [Iago's and Othello's] fundamentally sex-loathing attitude … is nowhere a normal acceptance of sexuality in human love." Rossiter continues, "It is either a glorifying idealization or a glorified sensuality that we are shown, as hyperbolic as the idealization and as little in touch with the real love of a real woman." After all, Othello is not social realism, and some hyperbole is part of tragedy's decorum. And if we must choose, a glorified sensuality is relatively "normal" compared to Iago's degrading smuttness and Othello's desexualizing idolatry and is certainly preferable in any case. (Its virtue is that it does not reduce all women to whores and will not degenerate into that diseased conviction since, being sensual already, it cannot be disenchanted by the discovery of sensuality in woman.) To be sure, Cassio's view of sex is obviously flawed, not perfectly "in touch with the real love of a real woman," but Shakespeare probably drew it that way deliberately: if Cassio were too philosophically attractive, he might begin to look like poor Desdemona's natural soulmate, and the vexatious issue of Iago's slanders seeming "proper accusations" would arise again. He may be a slightly silly fellow, but Cassio is also the only male character in the play whose idea of Desdemona's sexuality is not revealed to be disastrously erroneous.

Strictly speaking, then, it is inaccurate to say that "the poles of critical opinion" we have seen "are exactly those presented in the play." Though it was almost certainly Shakespeare's design that the sexual choice must seem limited to those equally unpleasant categories of "saint" and "strumpet." Nor is it true that "we are shown extremes" of sexual attitudes, "with a kind of blank between." Because of Cassio it is not quite a blank, and moreover Othello's desexualized idolatry and Iago's sexual nihilism are "extremes" only in the sense that the two faces of a coin are; the nihilism is a reaction to the idolatry. Like Brabantio, Othello thinks of Desdemona as "a maiden still and quiet"; when it becomes obvious to him that she is not this (particularly after her body apparently unprovides his mind during their unquiet wedding night on Cyprus) but is instead a healthy young woman with a frank delight in life, his implicit fear of sex and his sense of personal inadequacy tip the balance, and Iago can "prove" to him with suspicious ease that Desdemona all along has been "that cunning whore of Venice." Like the critics, Othello and Iago both finds it inconceivable that Desdemona might be simultaneously an innocent person and a normally sexed one. Othello's pitiable need for a woman who is a "saintly" maiden and Iago's compulsive need to find a whore within every woman are fundamentally the same mental attitude, the "infected knowledge" of one who has drunk the cup of sexual experience and seen a spider within. Idolater and slanderer are the same man under the skin; it is only Desdemona's innocent, virtuous sexuality, implicitly recognized by the comparably unsuspecting and (mutatis mutandis) unworldly Cassio, which is the real alternative to their sickness.

So much for the specific charge of sexual unreality in Desdemona's innocence and the play. The catchall charge that Desdemona represents a "life-destroying" innocence—the exact opposite of what Alvin Kernan argues—should also be rejected. This objection arises from those feminist critics who are preoccupied with the inadequacy of traditional literary heroines as role models. They are right but irrelevant, for Shakespeare writes tragic stories, not mirrors for women. More importantly, to stigmatize Desdemona's innocence as "life-destroying" is to put the case exactly backwards: her innocence is if anything life-destroyed, and Shakespeare clearly implies that it is not the fruitful Desdemona who is neurotic but the sex-hating, masochistic, and destructive males.
Nevertheless, if readers come to Shakespeare primarily in search of women characters who are "self-actualizing, strong, risk-taking, independent" and above all not martyred by tragically deluded males, they will inevitably respond unsympathetically to Desdemona and her innocence. Clearly, it is not "viable": "Desdemona is young, innocent, sweet, naive, and trusting—and these characteristics help to kill her," Janet Overmyer has written. A woman more aware of the workings of the sexual imagination, sophisticated enough to know the folly of uninhibited, ambiguous-looking behavior in a world of eavesdropping males—could certainly catch herself before doing the things that provoke Othello's delusion (though her physical beauty itself carries a stigma). But what does this imply? It must be the ultimate perversity to make Desdemona's innocence a moral weakness. From an objectively feminist perspective, Othello is Desdemona's tragedy too—the tragedy of an unworldly woman calumniated and murdered by a husband who is not the free and open mind he seems but a sex-obsessed tyrant who insists on thinking the worst as she insists on the best. However, the tragedy really carries no moral lesson, only "The pity of it." It is pointless to obscure the pity by wishfully thinking Desdemona Emilia, or condemning her as a disingenuous, sexually repressed Ophelia.

Innocence entails the most appalling vulnerability to those who have lost it or never possessed it. But knowing this should not prevent our seeing that Desdemona, much like the innocent, persecuted Hermione of The Winter's Tale, stands, however vulnerably, in a state of "grace." (Compare Cassio's invocation of heavenly grace upon Desdemona, and Hermione's much noted link with "gracious" things and with "great creating nature.") Desdemona's blissful sexual unself-consciousness, neither an ignorant nor a repressed state of mind, becomes the mark of her absolutely positive moral standing when contrasted with the sexually self-conscious, self-torturing and destructive personalities of her persecutors. ("I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!") The free and fruitful Desdemona suggests human nature before the birth of guilt; like an unfallen Eve she does not know sexual shame, though unlike her, Desdemona definitely does know sexual passion already and thus cannot "fall." This evanescent, tragically doomed grace seems to be the uniquely Shakespearean idea of innocence at its richest. As critic Robert E. Fitch described it, it is "not crudely sexual in character but is the innocence of life in all its beauty and pathos and weakness that is overwhelmed and destroyed by an evil which it cannot comprehend." If we cannot respond positively to this quality, or if we still feel (in Desdemona's own words) "I do not think there is any such woman," perhaps it is not with Shakespeare that our ultimate reproaches should be lodged.

Notes


2 Some welcome exceptions to this rule include G. Wilson Knight, Harley Granville-Barker, and Hugh M. Richmond. Knight, in The Wheel of Fire, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1949), wrote that "Desdemona is [Othello's] divinity. She is, at the same time, warmly human" (p. 107). There may be the seeds of an idolatrous influence, however, in his statement that "in the far flight of a transcendental interpretation, it is clear that she becomes a symbol of man's ideal, the supreme value of love" (p. 109). Granville-Barker, in Prefaces to Shakespeare 4: Othello (1948; rpt. London: Batsford, 1969), though finding Desdemona innocent and "absolutely good," also recognized her ardor and her candor, verging on childishness (pp. 69, 123, 65). Richmond admits that Desdemona "is partly responsible for what comes about," behaving with "outrageous tact-lessness toward her tense husband" when pleading for Cassio's reinstatement, yet finds that "she emerges as the most admirable figure of all": she is "a woman of heroic clarity of mind and commitment, a fit spouse for a great general, and moreover one (like Juliet) not squeamish about sex, pleading in public almost too daringly to share his bed on his campaigns" ("Love and Justice: Othello's Shakespearean Context," in Waldo F. McNeir and Thelma N. Greenfield, eds., Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare [Eugene: Univ. of Oregon Books, 1966], pp. 166, 167, 159, 169).
3 The Masks of Othello, p. 208.


7 Rymer affects to believe that "there is nothing in the noble Desdemona that is not below any Countrey Chambermaid with us" (A Short View of Tragedy, quoted in The Masks of Othello, p. 207).


10 The article was by Andre Raphael, entitled "Le bovarysme de Desdemone," Langues Modernes, 66 (1972), 795-802. (Eliot had originally defined "bovarysme" as, essentially, "the human will to see things as they are not," in his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," collected in Laurence Lerner, ed., Shakespeare’s Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism [Baltimore: Penguin, 1963], pp. 301-13.) Raphael’s reading of Desdemona, with an epigraph from Alice in Wonderland in which Alice says, "I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then," predicates of her the same fickleness and super-subtlety that Iago does.


14 Two useful general surveys of this subject are in Vern L. Bullough’s The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes Toward Women (1973; rpt. Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), and Katherine M. Rogers’ The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1966). Bullough shows that "Sex in the early Christian church was virtually equated with women, and … it was women who were looked upon as the source of all male difficulties" (pp. 97-98). Another study, Juliet Dusinberre’s, explains that this bias led to an all-or-nothing view of sex in women: "The medieval elevation of chastity in women is the counterpart to the conviction, apparent in the writings of the Church fathers and of medieval satirists, that women are by nature inordinately lustful. In practical terms a way of keeping the natural concupiscence of women under control is to make the highest virtue of its antithesis: the state of virginity" (Shakespeare and the Nature of Women [London: Macmillan, 1975], p. 32).

15 I have developed this view in my study entitled "Shakespeare’s Drama of Calumny: Sexual Innocence Against Infected Knowledge," Diss. University of Minnesota 1977, Ch. 2.

Of course, as Eric W. Stockton asserted, Shakespeare himself "is as much a feminist as an Elizabethan can be" ("The Adulthood of Shakespeare's Heroines," p. 162), and Juliet Dusinberre has shown that it was possible for an Elizabethan to be very much a feminist: "Shakespeare could take only one thing for granted in his creation of women characters and the worlds they people: that asseverations about women in the aggregate belonged to an old order of thinking" ("On Taking Shakespeare's Women for Granted," p. 18).

18*Shakespeare Studies*, 9 (1976), 233-52.

19 Dusinberre, p. 53.

20 Cf. Wendy Martin, commenting upon a heroine of Mary McCarthy's whose role model was Chaucer's Criseye: "Her favorite quotation is from Chaucer's Criseye: 'I am my owene woman, wel at ese,' but although she is sexually liberated, she continues to be psychologically enslaved because she persists in looking for her identity in a man" ("Seduced and Abandoned in the New World," in Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, eds., *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness* [1971; rpt. New York: Signet, 1972], p. 344). The ideals of sexual liberation and "selfhood" depend upon the creation in our time of the much needed new literary image of women Wendy Martin calls the "new Eve," but of course in Chaucer and in Shakespeare the sexually liberated Cressida is a whore, and it is moreover the essence of Desdemona's strengths as well as her weaknesses that she reposes all of her being in a man, Othello.

21 All of the ambiguities are the focus of what Terence Hawkes describes as "the tragic dilemma which makes it necessary to choose between two opposed versions of the truth" (*Shakespeare and the Reason: A Study of the Tragedies and the Problem Plays* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964], p. 115).

22 Granville-Barker writes of Desdemona's "gently obstinate incredulity of evil," p. 69.


25 Rabkin too applies "alabaster" to Desdemona, but with a difference, pointedly restricting its invidious connotations to Othello's image of her (p. 66).

26 Vivian Gornick, "Woman as Outsider," in Gornick and Moran, p. 139. "Without a shred of actuality," Gornick writes, "Desdemona is a total projection of Othello's fears and self-hatred, a direct reflection of his great longings and his melancholy sense of humiliated defeat" (p. 138).

27 Garner, p. 239.

28 Alfred Harbage, in writing that this speech sounds like "a prayer to the virgin," seems to have missed much of its emphasis: Cassio's explicitly sexual reference to Desdemona and Othello and the numinous potency he attributes to Othello and associates with the communal welfare sound more like fertility cult worship than devotions to the Virgin (*William Shakespeare: A Reader's Guide* [1963; rpt. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1970], p. 351).


30 Garner, p. 235.
Rossiter, p. 205.

Rossiter himself points out that "the ideal exists by the inhibition of the real; and in the collapse of the ideal (unreal love), Othello is left with many views of Iago-like crudity and brutality" (p. 204).

This is basically the "enemy within the gates" reading of F. R. Leavis. ("Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero; or The Sentimentalist's Othello," in The Common Pursuit [New York: New York Univ. Press, 1952], pp. 140-41.) It is elaborated convincingly by Hugh M. Richmond, writing in the essay cited above that "Othello falls victim so completely to Iago not because he is the dupe of another but because he is deceived and overpowered by his own repudiated instincts," p. 163. Earlier, Terence Hawkes's study had seen that "Sexuality appears to be almost entirely absent" from Othello's relationship (p. 113), and the consequences of all three of these points were worked out by R. N. Hallstead in the essay "Idolatrous Love: A New Approach to Othello," Shakespeare Quarterly, 19 (1968), 108-20, an essay to which I am particularly indebted. In slightly different terms, Norman Rabkin earlier described Othello's downfall in love as a tragedy of religious absolutism; "It is Othello's tragedy that he tries to validate his faith" (Shakespeare and the Common Understanding, p. 72).

The tendency of readers to overidentify with fictional characters is suggested by Vivian Gornick's remarks on George Washington Cable's heroine Aurora, which follow the remarks quoted above on Desdemona: "[Aurora] is magnificently, touchingly beautiful, brave, true, soft, good, loyal, courageous, quiet, need I go on? She is the quintessential Victorian fantasy female. As I continued to read of Aurora, I felt a strange sickening feeling developing in my chest and stomach... I said fiercely to myself, Aurora, you are destroying me! If you live, I surely cannot!" (p. 139).

Wendy Martin, in Gornick and Martin, p. 345.


As Granville-Barker wrote, "As we listen [to the boudoir scene], and watch Desdemona indifferently listening, and mark the contrast between the two, there may slip into the margin of our minds the thought: better indeed for her had she been made of this coarser clay. But then she would not have been Desdemona" (p. 70). Ophelia, with the songs of deranged bawdy she babbles before her death, is in contrast to Desdemona a character who can legitimately be seen as sexually repressed. But there is a kind of innocence in her too, despite the traditional chorus of jeers that she was Hamlet's mistress (a conclusion which the play does not support); and the least prejudicial readings of her bawdy may be those like Una Ellis-Fermor's which see in it "faint echoes of Hamlet's obscenity" in the nunnery and mousetrap scenes (The Jacobean Drama, 5th ed. [London: Methuen, 1965], p. 253).


Irene G. Dash (essay date 1981)


[In the following essay, Dash discusses Desdemona's character and Shakespeare's treatment of marriage.]

"Be as your fancies teach you; What e'er you be, I am obedient."
Married to Othello before the drama opens, Desdemona is a woman slowly tamed in the crucible of marriage. Bright, intelligent, and courageous, she is endowed with qualities that should assure her success. Nevertheless, these strengths become handicaps when she seeks to adjust to a new role. Continuing where *Romeo and Juliet* ended, *Othello* raises questions left unanswered by the swift deaths of those youthful star-crossed lovers. It asks whether the passion and idealism of two lovers who have courageously crossed color lines and defied conventions can be sustained in marriage. It asks whether the patterns of marriage are stronger than the individuals, even the most outstanding individuals. Arguing for the success of Desdemona and Othello are their maturity, their long friendship and love preceding marriage, her managerial skills, and his gentleness. Arguing against their success are miscegenation and villainy feeding passion. Holding the balance are martial conventions—conventions that demand more of women than of men.

The regulations that limit a woman's activity in marriage are greater than those limiting a man's; despite the advantages of security and protection that marriage assures her, the woman actually loses more and gains less than does the man, reasons the late nineteenth-century sociologist, Emile Durkheim. John Stuart Mill denounces the relationship because "it confers upon one of the parties to the contract, legal power and control over the person, property, and freedom of action of the other party, independent of her own wishes." Even more significant to *Othello* is Mill's conclusion that this arrangement is demoralizing for both parties.

Although the play examines marriage, it is not a domestic tragedy, for, as Helen Gardner reminds us, any evaluation of *Othello* must begin with our first responses to the drama—our sense of its grandeur and soaring beauty. Domestic tragedy usually presents characters of limited power in imagination and background. The magnificence of Othello, the range in Desdemona as a woman, including her intelligence, originality, and defiance of convention, belie this designation of the work. But it is the tragedy of a woman, of women, pummeled into shape by the conventions that bind. For Shakespeare takes not one, but two marriages—one new and fresh, one old and worn—to give us a double vision of the experience. Some critics tend to prefer Emilia, the wife of Iago, to Desdemona because Emilia's story ends defiantly on a positive note, offering hope for women. But the extremity of the force that breaks her submission to her husband hardly argues for her independence. Desdemona's tragedy is the more usual—a slow wearing away of the resistance, a slow imposition of patterns—a slow loss of confidence in the strength of the self, always with the aim of adjusting to marriage. Coleridge believed that she was just the woman every man "wishes … for a wife." How sad that this should be a man's dream.

Shakespeare presents Desdemona in all of her power at the beginning of the play. To heighten our curiosity, he offers three different perspectives of her before she ever appears. The first is from Iago who, hidden by the dark of night, coarsely taunts her father, "An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88-89). The next is from her adoring father who, describing the Desdemona he knows, refuses to believe she has married Othello:

> A maiden, never bold;  
> Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion  
> Blush'd at herself.  

*(I.iii.94-96)*

Finally, we listen while Othello adds still another dimension to the portrait, suggesting that she was not merely a passive woman entrapped by him:

> My story being done,  
> She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;

*(III.iii.88-89)*
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she
wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man.
(I.iii.158-63)

Thus claims Othello. We anxiously await Desdemona's entrance.

When, at last, she appears, she speaks with dignity and self-possession. Her first words are addressed to her father, Brabantio. Standing before the Venetian Senate, she listens when he asks:

Come hither, gentle mistress.
Do you perceive in all this noble company
Where most you owe obedience?
(I.iii.178-80)

Neither weepingly begging her father's approval, like Juliet, nor angrily fighting his treatment of her, like Kate, Desdemona rationally answers him. Admitting her obligation to him for "life and education" (182), she then insists:

… so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor, my lord.
(186-89)

Her words are terse; her approach direct. Aware of her father's prejudice, she chooses her language with precision. Unwilling to equivocate, she challenges him with her phrase, "The Moor, my lord."

Father and daughter duel with words. While the senators stand on the sidelines, time-keepers and referees in this combat, Desdemona and Brabantio carry on their battle, focusing on the naming process surrounding the word "Moor." "Valiant Othello" (I.iii.48), says the Duke. "Brave Moor" (291), asserts a senator. But Brabantio admits neither. He converts "Moor" from a term of approbation to one of disgust by omitting the definite article or any descriptive adjective from his words of address. "Look to her, Moor," the father warns in his final words, "She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (292-93).

Nor are these Brabantio's only words as we tend to believe from stage productions that often cut his earlier anguished interchange with his colleagues. The senators, having decided to send their most capable general, Othello, to repel the Turks, and hoping to defeat the enemy, are immersed instead in a family dispute. Faced with a political and military as well as a social problem, the Venetians attempt mediation between Brabantio, one of their members, and his daughter, who has married their most able general. Speaking on Desdemona's behalf, the Duke reprimands her father with "Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (I.iii.290). But Brabantio knows only a father's loss, "He bears the sentence well that nothing bears / But the free comfort which from thence he hears" (212-13). In this vein, the father rejects solicitude or kind words. "But words are words; I never yet did hear / That the bruis'd heart was pierced through the ear" (218-19). The speech, searing in its intensity, helps define Desdemona. Frequently, however, this speech dwindles to a few lines. Desdemona, then, loses some of her specificity, for drama relies on the interaction of characters. A colorless father diminishes the intensity of the daughter. The full text, however, vibrates with the challenge of youth to age, of daughter to father.

The victim of neither magic nor drugs, Desdemona convinces the court of her love for Othello. Nor will she willingly remain behind when he must depart for war. "I crave fit disposition for my wife" (Liii.236), Othello
requests. Insensitively, unimaginatively, the Duke suggests she reside in her father's home. Swiftly all three—Desdemona, Brabantio, and Othello—reject the proposal. In comparison with the almost monosyllabic responses of Othello and Brabantio, Desdemona speaks at length, offering several reasons against the Duke's plan. Among her arguments, she cites the strain such an arrangement would be on her father—how repugnant to him. Finally, she proposes an alternative. She would accompany Othello to Cyprus. Speaking in direct language once again, she refers to conjugal rights—the joys of marriage that include sexual fulfillment:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world.
(I.iii.248-50)

Although the language obscures exact meaning, the individual words convey the speaker's intensity: "violence," "storm," and "trumpet" as a verb. Desdemona speaks for youth, sexual honesty, and passion.

At Cyprus, she continues to surprise us with her freshness and vigor, as well as her sensitivity to those around her. With Iago, she parries in verbal quips. With Lieutenant Cassio, her husband's second in command, she acts the solicitous friend. To all, waiting anxiously with her for Othello's arrival, hoping that his ship has not been lost in the storm, she reassures with her gaiety, confiding to the audience:

I am not merry; but I do beguile
The thing I am by seeming otherwise.—
(II.i. 122-23)

Thomas Rymer, writing in 1693, denounced Desdemona's behavior in this scene, accusing her of crudeness. But Shakespeare was expanding his earlier portrait of an independent, bright woman, worthy of audience interest. "Come, how wouldst thou praise me?" (124), she laughingly challenges Iago, then matches him witticism for witticism. She recognizes the "fond paradoxes" he sports "to make fools laugh i' th' ale-house." (138-39). She accuses him of inaccuracy in the way he praises (actually denigrates) all but the worst women. She listens to his puns and double entendres. "O most lame and impotent conclusion" (161) she asserts of his last quip in a series of descriptions of women, introducing her own pun. Most of these lines usually disappear from stage productions. The excision may seem slight—a mere thirty-six lines of quick banter—but it alters the portrait of Desdemona, simplifying her character.

Desdemona's activities on the quay at Cyprus prior to Othello's arrival illustrate her skill and training as a hostess as well as her sophistication. In the scene where he addresses the senators, Othello had described her activities in the days when he came courting. He spoke of how she alternated between listening to his tales of adventure and acting the housewife for her father:

… These things to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline;
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear Devour up my discourse.
(I.iii. 145-50)

The scene at the dock verifies Othello's report, reveals the self-confidence nurtured by her early experience, and provides additional background on the youthful Desdemona before she attempts to adjust to marriage. On
the quay at Cyprus she is testing her old skills in a new setting. Verbal agility, outspokenness, honesty—they all seem to work.

In an excellent essay on *Othello*, Susan Snyder compares the endings of the comedies, which, she claims, insist that interdependence in marriage is a way of completing oneself, with the ending of *Othello*, which challenges such a postulate. Snyder believes Shakespeare to be saying that, since separateness is part of the human condition, when two people who love each other become interdependent they are bound to meet tragedy. Upon this concept of the separateness of people, I wish to offer a further theory for consideration. In *Othello*, Shakespeare is dealing with two people who have known and loved each other for some time. Until they marry, the tragedy does not occur because until that time they do not have to conform to any set roles; they function as two individuals. With marriage, they receive a new set of rules, new patterns for behavior. Desdemona, in Act III, reminds Othello of how often they disagreed. Attempting lightness, she speaks of:

… Michael Cassio,
That came a-wooing with you, and so many a time,
When I have spoke of you disparaisingly,
Hath ta'en your part—

(III.iii.70-73)

Implicit here is the idea that disagreements between them could lead her to disparage Othello. Her lines also suggest that these disagreements were an integral part of their relationship.

We hear an example of this disagreement and mutual respect when they reunite at Cyprus. "Oh my fair Warrior" (II.i. 182), exclaims Othello joyously. "My dear Othello" (182), returns Desdemona, her speech tempered while his words continue to soar in hyperbole. "If after every tempest come such clams, / May the winds blow till they have waken'd death" (185-86), he begins, continuing uninterrupted until he ventures to speak of the absolute comfort and contentment achieved at this moment:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear

My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(189-93)

Vehemently, Desdemona protests. She envisions marriage as an ongoing process, one that promises continued growth.

The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should
increase
Even as our days do grow!

(193-95)

They have disagreed before. They disagree now. He accepts her semantic correction, her meticulousness with words that she exhibited in the interchange with her father. "Amen to that, sweet powers!" (195), Othello responds. Although his words prove prophetic within the context of the drama, his willingness to alter his views underlines the uniqueness of their early relationship.
Marriage will impose new forms. Mutual respect will give way to an aloneness created by one party holding the power, the other being powerless. Shakespeare offers an immediate illustration in the lines of Iago and the interaction between him and Emilia. Despite her sullen protest that her husband has "little cause" to complain, Iago, in a few swift strokes, blocks in the basic forms of his marriage:

Bells in your parlors, wild-cats in your kitchens,
Saints in your injuries, devils being offended.

(II.i.110-11)

For Iago, women's voices clang like dissonant bells in the parlor and rise to the level of screams in the kitchen, the word "wild-cat" even implying a physical tearing at one another by women. But try to stop such behavior, he suggests, and women will act the injured saints. Hardly a pretty picture of women or of marriage emerges from these lines. Although spoken in jest, they hint at the interaction between him and Emilia. More revealing are her weak protests of innocence, confirming Iago's description. In this glimpse of a marriage long suffered by a man and a woman, he emerges as the dominant person. Nevertheless, he has no illusions about the potential for happiness in marriage but speaks with the bitterness of a misogynist. Later, in an aside about Othello and Desdemona, he sneers: "O, you are well tun'd now! / But I'll set down the pegs that make this music" (199-200). His words are those of skeptical humanity to the joy and hope of new found love. The guest at the wedding wishes the bride and groom joy but thinks of the disappointments that lie ahead for them. Othello, too, will discover reality; Iago promises to guide him to it. Thus Shakespeare contrasts the mutual respect between the newlyweds with the imbalanced relationship in a long standing marriage.

As the drama progresses, Desdemona continues to exhibit the self-confidence fostered during her youth. She assumes that the virtues of rationalism and forthrightness will prove natural supports. Instead, she finds they trap her. Her first semi-defeat occurs when she appeals for the reinstatement of Cassio who has been stripped of his position because of fighting when drunk. Desdemona appeals to Othello, not on the basis of his arbitrarily pleasing her, but on the basis of reason. She questions the wisdom of his extraordinarily harsh punishment for Cassio's comparatively harmless offense:

And yet his trespass, in our common reason
(Save that they say the wars must make example
Out of her best), is not almost a fault
T' incur a private check.

(III.iii.64-67)

Conceding that some reprimand is necessary, she believes that in time of joyous celebration her husband is applying measures reserved for wartime.

Othello refuses to argue with her. Accustomed to discussing their disagreements, she is surprised by his answer. "I will deny thee nothing" (76), he asserts. But she is not asking blind assent. She then lists all of the normal processes of living to which Cassio's return to his former position might be compared. Finally, Desdemona distinguishes between a reasonable request, such as she here presents, and a favor of great weight:

Why, this is not a boon;
'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves, Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm, Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit To your own person. Nay, when I have a suit
Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,
It shall be full of poise and difficult weight,
And fearful to be granted.

(76-83)

Arguing with him, as she had previous to marriage, she expects a rational answer. Instead, Othello repeats his earlier statement, learning the ways of a husband:

I will deny thee nothing.

(83)

Role playing has begun. Othello's vulnerability to convention not only leads him to permit Iago to malign Desdemona in the scene immediately following this encounter, but also marks the beginning of the decline in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Prior to her appeal for Cassio, Iago's innuendo had been limited to a few comparatively inoffensive lines. After it, he freely muddies Desdemona's reputation. Striving to conform to a role, Othello dams the easy flow of talk between himself and his wife. The man who had prided himself on her independence, asking the senators to "Let her have your voice" (I.iii.260), now begins to think in terms of power and powerlessness. This precedes only briefly the thought of a wife as a possession.

Because her appeal for Cassio in this scene so clearly reaffirms her strength, the stage history offers interesting insights into attitudes toward Desdemona. Both the longer speech, beginning "Why, this is not a boon," and the shorter one, on the subject of Cassio's trespass, tend to disappear, whole or in part, from productions. As I have previously indicated, I believe an inter-relationship exists between textual excision or emendation and attitudes toward women in the larger society of the time. Othello has always been a popular play; it has also frequently been cut. Fairly extensive records exist of acting texts since 1761. A few characteristic texts suggest the treatment of these speeches. In 1761, both disappear from the stage. In 1804, Kemble eliminates both although retaining the longer speech in the printed text (it is crossed out in the promptbook). The same formula holds as late as 1871. One of the speeches appears in the text but both disappear in the theater. In the twentieth century—and here I cite the 1930 Paul Robeson production—stage business offers a valuable key to Desdemona. Again only the longer speech appears in print. A fountain on stage provides the focus for the major action. From it Desdemona plucks a lily, sprinkling the water from the lily on Othello's head. At the conclusion of her appeal, she crosses to Othello and kneels. Accompanying his second "I will deny thee nothing," he rises and lifts Desdemona from her kneeling, suppliant position. Finally, when she departs, the stage directions "cross left and curtsey" accompany her lines "farewell my lord." There can be little misinterpretation of the role of Desdemona in these acting versions. Either she is denied the power of reasoning, appearing submissive and begging, or she is transformed into a coquette, whose coy gestures, rather than her words, form the focal center of the action.

Anyone seeking to understand Desdemona's attitude toward herself vis-à-vis Othello must carefully scrutinize her response after his second "I will deny thee nothing" followed by his request to "leave me but a little to myself (III.iii.85). She picks up his phraseology and skillfully converts it into the interrogative, "Shall I deny you? No. Farewell, my lord" (86). Before leaving, however, she makes one final comment: "Be as your fancies teach you; / What e'er you be, I am obedient" (88-89). Is this the statement of a compliant wife, or does the word "fancies," with its negative connotation in the Elizabethan era, suggest a challenge? (The word "fancies" at that time included "delusive imagination" and "caprice" among its many definitions.) Loaded with ambiguities, the speech has ironic overtones. When, however, excisions occur, or stage directions dictate coquettish, compliant actions, a new meaning emerges. Then, the meekness implicit in the individual words dictates a straight reading.

As the play progresses, we watch Desdemona attempting to understand her role but inevitably exhibiting—although with less frequency—the strength that characterized her at the start. One of the last
examples occurs in Act IV. Already convinced of her infidelity, Othello listens incredulously while she speaks to the Ambassador from Venice. Unfortunately, the subject is Cassio, the person with whom Othello believes her unfaithful. The lines have a double edge. "How does Lieutenant Cassio?" (IV.i.222), Lodovico, the Ambassador asks. Iago noncommitally responds, "Lives, sir" (223). Desdemona gives the more complete explanation "Cousin, there's fall'n between him and my lord / An unkind breach; but you shall make all well" (224-25). When Othello challenges "Are you sure of that?" Desdemona, stunned, answers "My lord?" But when Lodovico pursues the questioning, Desdemona volunteers to explain, using the unfortunate phrase, "for the love I bear to Cassio" (233). Still not fully aware of the demands on a wife, she fails to be silent.

Throughout the play, we hear echoes of the voice that defied her father and society to marry Othello, the Moor. Dynamic and verbal in the early scenes, she resembles many of Shakespeare's strong women—particularly Juliet, who defied her parents, and Beatrice, who knew that wooing is not smooth. Like them, Desdemona is "half the wooer." Unlike them, her story begins with marriage, and her tragedy derives from the testing of premarital ideals against the reality of marriage. Jessie Bernard writes of woman's being "ciphered out" in marriage—losing her identity as an individual; Simone de Beauvoir speaks of woman accepting the role of "Other" where man is the "Subject." Virginia Woolf offers still another perspective when she describes woman as the magic mirror in which man sees himself at twice his normal size. Like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians, man then sees woman as a diminutive being. For a person like Desdemona, such a swift transformation is difficult although she thinks she understands her new role. "So much duty as my mother show'd / To you," she claims to her father, she will give to Othello.

Shakespeare forces the audience to recognize her strength in the first act where two conflicting qualities surface: her sense of self-confidence and her belief in woman's dedication to her husband. After addressing her father, she offers her reasons for loving Othello:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honors and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

(I.iii.252-54)

Charles Lamb cites this speech when presenting his own reason for preferring to read the play in the privacy of his study rather than seeing it on the stage where miscegenation would be obvious. "I appeal to everyone that has seen Othello played, whether he did not, on the contrary, sink Othello's mind in his colour." The lines are important not only because they challenge those present to acknowledge Othello's blackness, but because of the religious connotations of the language: "valiant parts," "honors," "souls," and "consecrate." The words betray an almost holy dedication to the man she has married. Desdemona is willing to subordinate her life to him, illustrating de Beauvoir's thesis of the male as "Subject," or major focus of attention, and the woman as "Other." But this new bride does not comprehend the full implications of such selfdenigration, believing rather that reciprocity and mutual respect, elements that animated their relationship before marriage, will continue to prevail. She little realizes that these words will conflict with the person behind them—the woman who had been certain of her self.

Othello's reasons for marrying have nothing to do with gods and super-beings. "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd" (I.iii.167), he tells the senators before her arrival. "And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (168). In greater detail, he explains how their relationship grew, his tales of adventure eliciting her pity:

She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas
    passing strange;
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.

(160-61)
The words "pitiful" and "pity" ring through his speech, offering a verbal portrait of Desdemona as an emotional woman highly influenced by romantic tales. Was this Othello's impression of her—was he hoping that the words would appeal to his auditors—or was he, perhaps, transferring to her some of his own perceptions of what a woman's role should be? The word "pity" never enters Desdemona's vocabulary when describing her love, just as "duty" never enters Othello's. Nor does he express views similar to Desdemona's on the relationship of sex to marriage. Compared with her healthy, outspoken desire to accompany him to Cyprus, he protests little interest in the "light-wing'd toys / Of feather'd Cupid" (268-69), insisting that his obligations to the state supersede all others. Seeming to dismiss romantic love and sexuality, he refers to "wanton dullness" (269) that can result from love interfering with business. The irony of his statement vibrates through the tragedy.

Finally, Desdemona and Othello present different visions of the future. Early in the play, he confides privately that were it not for Desdemona's unusual qualities, he would never have married:

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

(I.i.25-28)

Marriage confines; no vast horizons exist here. The most illuminating contrast, however, occurs in the exchange already cited when he and Desdemona disagree during their reunion at Cyprus.

Despite their differences, they promise an original marriage for it will include an interchange of ideas; it will even allow for disagreement. Othello's lines when they leave the senate acknowledge a multifaceted role for Desdemona:

Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour
Of love, of worldly matter and direction,
To spend with thee.

(Liii.298-300)

But something happens to their relationship that is not attributable merely to the machinations of Iago, a character who probably grew out of the medieval Vice figure and reveals elements of evil in men. Whether he exhibits, as Coleridge suggests, "motiveless malignity," personifies evil within Othello himself, as others believe, or is a valid, recognizable character, Iago contributes to the tragedy and arouses our pity for Othello, his major victim. Nevertheless, Shakespeare goes beyond the relationship between these two men to delve into that between Othello and Desdemona. The tragic portrait is one we still recognize of a man and a woman who have entered an unconventional marriage but lack the creativity and strength to nurture it. Divided by their cultural backgrounds as well as by their self-perceptions as male and female, they discover marriage to be more complex than either had anticipated. Their racial differences, which helped emphasize their strengths in the early section of the drama, exacerbate their problems of adjustment. Othello, unfamiliar with Venetian ways, enters a foreign territory both emotionally and socially. False reports of Venetian patterns of marriage delude and confuse him. Desdemona, too, clings to conventions, believing that mutual respect can coexist in a relationship where a woman owes "duty" to a husband and considers him almost godlike. Slowly, unwillingly, she discovers the contradiction implicit here. Finally, Othello's attempt to conform means a retreat to a male world, setting another network into operation, one that supersedes the intimacy between husband and wife. As a result, he becomes vulnerable to Iago's description of Desdemona. This willingness to allow another man to speak of her as Iago does reveals Othello's inability to create new patterns of marriage.
In the medieval morality plays, good and evil battle for the soul of mankind. The Vice figure, or Devil, frequently triumphs until the last moments before death when Virtue finally convinces the protagonist to repent, saving his soul, if not his life. Because of Othello's anguished choice between believing Desdemona and accepting Iago's word as truth, some critics consider Iago the representative of evil and Desdemona that of good in a conflict for Othello's soul. But this formula fails because the play transcends the simple battle between the personifications of two abstract ideas for a soul. Although Iago is the quintessence of evil—whether a Satan figure or evil in mankind—Desdemona is far more complex than a simple representation of good. Nor are the two characters exact opposites. Any neat equation balancing them distorts, minimizing the strength of Shakespeare's portrait of this new bride. Compared with Iago, she has stimulated far less indepth critical analysis—perhaps because evil is more flamboyant and more easily discernable than good. Nevertheless, close explication of her lines reveals a well-developed character guided by reason, complementing her intense love for her husband in a tragedy exploring the impact of marriage on a woman of courage and independence.

That Shakespeare was concentrating on marriage rather than just discussing love seems apparent from the references to the long courtship of Othello and Desdemona, indicating an extensive period of love before marriage. Mutuality of respect and affection could survive then. Marriage alters this. The demoralizing effect of its conventions and institutions may be observed in Othello's new attitude toward Desdemona as property:

O curse of marriage!
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites!

(III.iii.268-70)

Desdemona too feels the effect of the inequality in the power relationship, becoming confused as to obligations to self and obligations as wife. Finally, Shakespeare expands his canvas by his portrayal of Emilia who is explicable as a consistent character only if one constantly reminds oneself of the meaning of adjustment to the role of wife for a woman.

Rymer mockingly called this play the "tragedy of the handkerchief." But Shakespeare merely uses the device of a handkerchief to expose the fragility of marriage and to question the standards that govern the behavior of a husband and a wife. Treasured by Desdemona as the first gift from Othello, the handkerchief is the key to his other life. Dropped by Desdemona in a moment of confusion, the handkerchief is stolen by Emilia and given to her husband. It becomes the symbol of fidelity and infidelity, of a woman's obedience and disobedience, of the cultural gap between Othello and Desdemona. Asking Desdemona for the handkerchief after she has lost it, Othello entwines it in a tale of magic and mystery. An enchanted token, given him by his mother on her deathbed that he in turn might give it to his wife, the handkerchief has special powers governing marital felicity. Its loss "were such perdition / As nothing else could match" (III.iv.67-68).

Listening, Desdemona is terrorized by the intensity of Othello's emotion. While we as audience know that Othello has already been victimized into believing his wife unfaithful, she, knowing nothing of this, is repelled by his words. "Is't possible?" (68), she asks, wondering that he could accept such a myth. But her question is ambiguous. To Othello, it merely challenges the authenticity of the story. "Then would to God that I had never seen't" (77) she passionately concludes. The magic in the web of the handkerchief—the charmer, the furies—suddenly reveals to Desdemona a world she does not know. She is meeting a stranger: the man she married.

In this scene, Desdemona counterpoints Othello's references to the handkerchief with her second request for the reinstatement of Cassio. Rosenberg cites the scene as an example of Desdemona's dishonesty, noting that "She 'meddles' in her husband's business, presses him to reinstate his dismissed officer—presses him at the worst moment, when he most needs understanding. Finally, she lies to him, and destroys their hope of love. Is this quite a heroine?" That depends, of course, on whether one considers supportiveness of a husband to be a
necessary component of a heroine or whether one judges a hero/heroine as a character of unusual strength and moral fortitude striving to achieve a particular goal, aware, eventually, that he/she may be destroyed in the quest. Desdemona continues to strive for success in an unusual marriage, relying on her two major supports: her intelligence and her ideal of a wife's role. At this moment in the play, however, she faces tremendous disappointment.

One is reminded of Hamlet's sudden explosion at Ophelia in his "Get thee to a nunn'ry" (III.i.120) scene. Unlike the comments on that scene, where critics do not worry about the truth or falsehood of Hamlet's, "I lov'd you not" (118), they worry a great deal about Desdemona's honesty in the handkerchief scene. Nevertheless, in both instances, Shakespeare is presenting the emotional response of one character to qualities previously unknown in a loved one: Hamlet to Ophelia, Desdemona to Othello.

Desdemona's concept of her role is shaken. Othello's intense response to the seeming loss of the handkerchief forces her to rethink her expectations. What are the dimensions of her husband? Is he a mere man, not a god after all? Having rationalized excuses for Othello's behavior—attributing his unreasonableness to worries about affairs of state—he concedes:

\[
\text{Nay, we must think men are not gods,} \\
\text{Nor of them look for such observancy} \\
\text{As fits the brid'al.} \\
\text{(III.iv. 148-50)}
\]

Reality presses her to reevaluate the man she married.

Writing of the "shocks" a woman faces in marriage, Bernard includes the wife's discovery of the fallacy of the sex stereotype that women have been "socialized into accepting."

\[
\text{Her husband is not the sturdy oak on whom she can depend. There are few trauma greater than … the wife's discovery of her husband's dependencies; than the discovery of her own gut-superiority in a thousand hidden crannies of the relationship… . These trauma are the more harrowing because they are interpreted as individual, unique, secret, not-to-be-shared with others, not even, if possible, to be admitted to oneself.}^{19}
\]

Desdemona follows the pattern described above. No sooner has she come to the awful realization that her husband is but a man than she backtracks. The thought must be obliterated, pushed aside. For a woman brought up to think of man as superior, the shift requires too much psychological energy. Before she completes her speech, Desdemona begins to blame herself—retrogressing—becoming forgiving and apologetic.

\[
\text{I was …} \\
\text{Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;} \\
\text{But now I find I had suborn'd the witness,} \\
\text{And he's indicted falsely.} \\
\text{(III.iv.151-54)}
\]

Does she really believe that she has been dishonest in her evaluation of Othello? Bernard's explanation sounds more valid.

This retraction by Desdemona marks her first major decline. John W. Draper, a critic writing in the nineteen-thirties, suggests that in creating the contrast between the Desdemona of Act I and the Desdemona of the other acts, who "becomes increasingly naive and innocent," Shakespeare was combining English and
Venetian mores of the period—the free versus the restricted life for women. But Shakespeare's portrait has a remarkable consistency as the story of the decline of a woman from a single, self-confident person to an uncertain, married woman still attempting to understand her role.

Demonstrating the decline and confusion in a woman's value system, Shakespeare contrapuntally presents Emilia in the scene where she hands her husband the stolen handkerchief. Rationalizing that she hopes to "please his fantasy" (III.i.299), she is aware of the immorality of the act. No sooner has she handed Iago the handkerchief than she seeks to retreat from the deed, desiring to absolve herself of responsibility by weakly demanding the handkerchief's return. Since she knows that it will not be returned, her action merely characterizes a woman who, although she has not lost her ability to discern right from wrong, finds it simpler to be guided by her husband's moral code than her own. She prefers not to confront him. Iago knows this. Observing the intensity of his reaction to the handkerchief, she momentarily reconsidered what she has done. "If it be not for some purpose of import, / Give't me again" (316-17), she protests, knowing he will refuse. Unfortunately, Emilia has learned her role too well. In actions she conforms to her husband, hoping to evade responsibility and rid herself of guilt. In many ways, she presents the syndrome of the battered wife. "The psychological costs to women of the happiness achieved by thus adjusting to the demands of marriage have been not inconsiderable," writes Bernard.

When, therefore, in subsequent scenes, Emilia fails to admit the theft of the handkerchief, despite being witness to Othello's tirade against Desdemona, we realize the extensiveness of this domination by a husband of his wife. After Othello leaves, having shocked Desdemona with the story of the magic in the cloth, Emilia can rant about men:

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man:  
They are all but stomachs, and we all but  
food;  
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full  
They belch us.

(III.iv.103-6)

Emilia speaks from her deepest knowledge and experience but loyalty to her husband supersedes all others. The images in the quote above are ugly and sensual, indicating man's attitude toward woman as object rather than person. They also fairly accurately suggest what has happened to Othello. Trying to conform to the societal patterns for a husband's behavior, he has allowed all former interchange with Desdemona to be wiped out by this new relationship: marriage.

We witness his further sense of ownership of his wife in the famous brothel scene (IV.i) where he considers her offenses insults to his own name. Desdemona, already broken by a hostility she cannot fathom in a marriage to which she cannot adapt, clings to the one strength she still retains—her ability to reason. "Am I the motive of these tears?" (43), she queries early in the scene, hoping that Othello's anger is directed against the Venetian Senate, not herself. And then reminding us of the third scene when she challenged her father, she mourns the loss of Brabantio's love: "If you have lost him, / Why, I have lost him too" (46-47). Not hearing her, Othello speaks only of his own anguish. "But, alas, to make me / The fixed figure for the time of scorn" (53-54), he exclaims.

Still unknowing and inexperienced in the new art of wifely compliance, Desdemona attempts neither to soothe nor to placate him. Rather, she returns to her earlier theme, "I hope my noble lord esteems me honest?" (65). Not a question, but a plea, the words nevertheless arouse his anger, reminding him of the original purpose of the interview. From "chuck" and "Desdemon," the affectionate names he called her at the scene's opening, he spits out the epithet, "O thou weed" (67). And still Desdemona persists, as Emilia would not. This new young bride has not yet learned the lesson that wives must know—to absorb insult without responding. "Alas, what
ignorant sin have I committed?" (70), she insists, hoping for a rational answer. But reason has fled. Othello names her "whore" and "public commoner" (72-73). Automatically she rebels, "By heaven, you do me wrong" (81).

After he leaves, Desdemona recognizes that "his unkindness may defeat" her life (160), but concludes that it will "never taint" her love. Because of these lines, Desdemona's critics hail the noble, selfless, Desdemona—constant, forgiving, loving. By then, however, she is a woman defeated by marriage. Even were she not murdered at the drama's close, her tragedy has occurred. A. C. Bradley found her "helplessly passive … because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute." Desdemona, however, is not helplessly passive when she decides to marry Othello. Her love is absolute but her nature seems more varied than Bradley would grant. He continues to say that, although we may pity Othello more, we are aware that he is "a man contending with another man; but Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being she adores." Unable to see a woman as a full-blooded person, the critic fails to realize how accurately Shakespeare portrays the transformation of a woman, even a strong woman, by marriage.

John Stuart Mill, writing more than two centuries after Othello was composed, suggests a major reason for critical inability to recognize this conflict facing Desdemona. "Many a man thinks he perfectly understands women, because he has had amatory relations with several, perhaps with many of them." But such an observer, while he may learn something about the sexual nature of woman, will not learn about the other aspects of woman because she carefully hides her true self from him. On the other hand, a man who is a husband may think he knows women well because he may know one woman very well, the woman to whom he is married. Mill continues:

And in fact, this is the source from which any knowledge worth having on the subject has, I believe, generally come. But most men have not had the opportunity of studying in this way more than a single case: accordingly one can, to an almost laughable degree, infer what a man's wife is like, from his opinions about women in general.

Thomas McFarland, writing today, applies contemporary philosophical ideas to his analysis. "Desdemona's virtuous purity is not only an existentially unique event, but a youthful idealism and unawareness of the exceeding worldliness of the world." In this comment, we find Desdemona's innocence partly responsible for her fall. Again the tendency is to consider a force acting for good rather than evil as being passive. Here the early religious tradition of the psychomachia for the soul of mankind may have contributed to Shakespeare's development of Desdemona as a more vital character than usually believed. However critics, seeking to understand her, continue to think primarily in terms of "Other." Is she unaware? Or is she, like Hamlet, aware but unwilling to compromise her ideals?

As well as innocence and naïveté, the word "unaware" may also carry negative connotations. Listen to D. A. Traversi, another twentieth-century critic. He finds that, "like Isabella and even Ophelia before her, Desdemona has the power to exercise upon men an influence of whose nature and strength she remains until the last moment very largely unaware; and this power, given a logical basis and a perverse interpretation in Iago's 'philosophy' of 'nature,' becomes a principle of dissolution and destruction." Where is this power of which she is unaware? Surely she has confidence in her ability to sway the senators and to match wits with Iago at Cyprus. Nor does she believe herself lacking in power when she promises Cassio:

My lord shall never rest,
I'll intermingle every thing he does
With Cassio's suit.

(III.iii.22-26)
But how does her power become a principle of dissolution unless Traversi, too, is asking for a completely compliant Desdemona? Somehow, Desdemona here sounds evil despite her inherent goodness.

Then there are the almost classic interpretations of the woman's role as forgiver or supporter of men. We are told that Desdemona learns the depths of her love through suffering. Bernard McElroy, in his recent study of tragedy, offers a version of this approach when he observes that Desdemona comes eventually "to know her love only by discovering the powers of loyalty and forgiveness with which it endows her." Did she misunderstand loyalty before? Had she no perception of the meaning of forgiveness? I find it difficult to accept the theory that woman is enhanced by her ability to be the constant "forgiver" in an inequitable arrangement. She may also be destroyed by suppressing the self and continually accepting others' affronts. Too often, a woman painfully adjusts to a vision of marriage that she had never anticipated.

Whereas many critics have idealized Desdemona, others have found her responsible for the tragedy—usually because she did not fulfill her role properly. Both types of criticism are based on expectations about women's behavior and both have persisted into our own time. J. A. Bryant in a recent work comments, "Othello represents the figure of God... Desdemona is the ideal—truth, goodness, beauty—made flesh, an incarnation of her creator's ideal excellence." If to Bryant Desdemona represents the ideal, to other critics writing today she falls far short of that perfection. Hugh Richmond, for example, finds her guilty of forgetting her social tact and H. A. Mason, another of our contemporaries, believes her cold, observing:

As soon as we see that Othello is blind and ignorant we hope that Desdemona will be able to save him by a love both clairvoyant and active. We are consequently appalled to find her with her warm-blooded nature, in matters of intelligence about life so cold, inert and self-contained.

We continue to read Shakespeare's plays and to enjoy them in the theater, not because the characters are idealizations but because they capture human elements that we recognize. Helen Gardner suggests that the reason for the strong disagreement about Othello is that the ideas it explores are still alive: "The conflict of attitudes on such subjects as jealousy, fidelity, chastity, the quality of desire between a man and a woman, the illicit or degenerate forms of it, the rights that lovers have over each other, the proper response to amorous treachery' is one reason for the conflict of views about the play and its hero."

It is also the reason for the conflict of views about Desdemona. Tillie Olsen may offer the answer when discussing the oppression of women. She sees the problems women face as unique: "The oppression of women is like no other form of oppression (class, color—though these have parallels). It is an oppression entangled through with human love, human need, genuine (core) human satisfactions, identifications, fulfillments."

When in the last scene, after Desdemona's death, Emilia finally blurts out the truth, she first throws off the yoke of marriage: "My husband?" (V.ii.146), and again two lines later, "My husband?" until she expands on this question, "My husband say she was false?" (152). Only after challenging Iago and discovering his villainy does she finally break loose, but not before indicating the long force of habit—submission. "'Tis proper I obey him; but not now. / Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home" (196-97). Only the murder of a woman she treasured could finally break the chain that had dictated Emilia's relinquishing of responsibility for her own actions.

By examining not one, but two marriages, Shakespeare records the effect of "adjustment," of being a "proper wife," on a woman. Emilia follows the formula. Did she ever rebel when first married? We do not know. No remnant of rebellion remains until the death of Desdemona shocks the long-married woman into action. It is as if the hypnosis of role were suddenly broken.
Othello is one of Shakespeare's studies of the complexity of marriage and of the pressure of conventional patterns on even the most unusual characters. The play examines the many qualities demanded of a man and a woman to succeed in marriage. It contrasts the mutual respect between a man and a woman with the more usual power-versus-powerlessness relationship. It contrasts a long standing marriage with one newly consummated, recording the corrosion of value systems in a woman long dominated by her husband. By creating in Desdemona a woman of intelligence, courage, and self-confidence, Shakespeare intensifies the tragedy of her disintegration. Unable to discard her habits of thinking and speaking, she fails to adjust to marriage. Although Shakespeare creates in Iago a powerful agent for the destruction of Othello and Desdemona, the lack of communication between them and the inability to transfer to marriage patterns of mutual respect practiced when they were single made their tragedy inevitable. In this play, Shakespeare suggests the dangers of attempting to conform to stereotyped ideals of marriage, and the cost to husband and wife….

Notes

1 Emile Durkheim, Suicide, pp. 269-72, 275-76.


4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Shakespearean Criticism, 2:354.

5 Thomas Rymer, A Short View of Tragedy, p. 110.

6 Susan Snyder, "Othello and the Conventions of Romantic Comedy," pp. 123-42.

7 Folger Prompt Oth 27.

8 Folger Prompt Oth 19.

9 Folger Prompt Oth 2.

10 Folger Prompt Oth Fo 2.


12 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 35.


14 Among recent critics who have written at length on the subject are Bernard Spivack who cites the Vice of the morality play as the major ancestor of Iago, in Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil; Leah Scragg, who contends that the Devil was the prototype, "Iago—Vice or Devil?"; and Joyce H. Sexton, who believes Envy most closely resembles Iago, The Slandered Woman in Shakespeare, pp. 50-60.

Alvin Kernan, for example, writes, "Desdemona is balanced by her opposite, Iago; love and concern for others at one end of the scale, hatred and concern for self at the other." Kernan, ed., Othello, p. xxiv.

After arriving at my conclusions, I found similar observations on the general blandness of the criticism of Desdemona in Carol Thomas Neely's interesting article, "Women and Men in Othello," pp. 133-58.


John W. Draper, "Desdemona: A Compound of Two Cultures."


Andrew C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 179.


Hugh M. Richmond, Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy, p. 71; H. A. Mason, Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love, p. 142.


Tillie Olsen, Silences, p. 258.

Works Cited


Harry Berger Jr. (essay date 1996)


[In the following essay, Berger focuses on the character of Desdemona and the significance of her handkerchief.]

— that's but a trifle here —
— we make trifles of terrors —

Too much attention has been paid to the symbolic meanings of the famous handkerchief and too little to such considerations as its putative size (is it as big as a flag or as small as a facial tissue?) and the odd circumstances of its appearance and removal. Just when Othello's rage has reached a first climax, Desdemona enters to tell him he is keeping his dinner and dinner guests waiting (3.3.283-85). "I am to blame," he replies, and her next questions—"Why is your speech so faint? are you not well?" (11. 286-87)—tell us to hear something more in his reply than an apology for delaying dinner. "I am to blame" is at the same time a logical response to the thought that concludes the soliloquy he has just uttered: "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself, / I'll not believe it" (11. 282-83). "Haply," he is to blame, "for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have"; therefore "She's gone" (11. 267-71). Seeing Desdemona approach, he veers away from that dread conclusion and, in effect, blames himself for believing it possible. But perhaps he is to blame for having aroused her desire in the first place. The idea that "this forked plague is fated to us" (1. 280)—"us" males, husbands, and especially "great ones" (1. 277), not to mention great ones who are black, who don't have extended manners, who are somewhat "declin'd" in years (1. 269)—this idea, manured by Iago, allows Othello to share the blame with Desdemona and leads him to answer her questions by hinting at his imaginary horns:

    OTHELLO I have a pain upon my forehead, here.
    DESDEMONA Faith, that's with watching, 'twill
    away again;
    Let me but bind your head, within this hour
    It will be well again.
    OTHELLO              Your napkin is too little:
    Let it alone, come, I'll go in with you.
    DESDEMONA I am very sorry that you are not
    well.
    (11. 288-93)

The crucial object makes its appearance modestly and anonymously as a "napkin," and that is what Emilia also calls it before she enlarges on its significance and Iago's interest in it, after which she teasingly offers it to Iago as "that same handkerchief (1. 309). Thus almost as soon as it appears, we learn that it has already been the topic of much conversation and observation, fetishized by Othello as a token of Desdemona's love and fidelity, and loved by her for this reason. To learn this is to realize that, in the moment of Desdemona's producing and then losing the handkerchief, an extraordinary event has taken place. Of course, Othello's "Let it alone" is teasingly laconic, but whether "it" denotes his forehead or the napkin, the result of his command is that Desdemona drops the napkin, and this tells us how she heard the statement. Yet he had "conjur'd her she should ever keep it," and "she reserves it evermore about her" (11. 298-99). This precious object could hardly
go unrecognized, and it would be perverse to stage the episode in a manner that concealed the handkerchief from Othello (for example, by having Desdemona wad it up in her hand). She, at any rate, knows what she is dropping. To represent Othello as recognizing it makes him perceive what she offers to bind his head with. If she registers that recognition, she must hear him countermand his general conjuration in ordering her to drop the handkerchief before he escorts her off-stage.

When Othello points to the pain on his forehead and Desdemona says "that's with watching," she obviously refers to his staying up too late, working too hard, etc.; yet listening to the phrase with Othello's ears may give it a different ring, for it comes after a stretch of dialogue between him and Iago in which much has been made of perceiving, observing, seeing, scanning, and noting (11. 245-56); "watching" may, like standing the watch, mean protecting against trouble, and it may also mean looking for trouble. Desdemona's "twill away again" then has the force of a shallow consolation, like his "I'll not believe it"; and (still listening with his ears) her repeating the sentiment in the next line's "within this hour / It will be well again" sounds suspiciously dismissive: perhaps her offer to "bind" his head is an offer to hide his horns and seel up his eyes—and with the very handkerchief that signifies the power of the gift that binds her to him in loving obligation. If she has abused and soiled the gift, if she is doing so now with this brazen gesture, it makes sense for him to protect himself by refusing the offer. He will not let her touch him with it, and his command is so phrased as to persuade her he wants her to drop the fetish and leave it behind. But doesn't he notice that she drops the precious keepsake? Only a little later in the same scene, he explodes when Iago, who has not left the stage and still has the handkerchief, all but gives him the "ocular proof he demanded (1. 366), telling him that "today" he saw "Cassio wipe his beard" with it (11. 445-46). Presumably Iago does not know that Othello has seen the handkerchief several minutes earlier—Emilia neglects to tell him when or under what conditions she found the handkerchief. But doesn't Othello remember? It is evidently useful to him to disremember in order to set up the possibility of Desdemona's losing it. For on the one hand she does not deserve to keep it if she has violated what it represents; if on the other hand she loses it in spite of his conjuration, she violates what it represents. Thus by helping Desdemona lose the handkerchief and by dis-remembering the episode, Othello facilitates the production of the ocular proof that will give him vantage to exclaim on her.

If Desdemona normally keeps the handkerchief "evermore about her," why doesn't she pick it up before going offstage? Emilia tells Iago she "let it drop by negligence" (1. 315), and at 3.4.19 Desdemona wonders, "Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?" What could cause such unexpected negligence and forgetfulness? What motivates Desdemona's act of disremembrance? The gesture that interprets Othello's "Let it alone" as a command to let go of the handkerchief signals a double rejection. In his rejection of her offer to soothe him, she hears the message that she does not deserve and should not have the handkerchief. Dropping it may be read simultaneously as an act of obedience and as a contestatory gesture rejecting his rejection—he doesn't deserve the love and fidelity her possession of the handkerchief symbolizes. Dropping the handkerchief enables her to be in the position of losing it, and losing it, she knows, would be "enough / To put him to ill thinking" if he were capable of jealousy, which of course he isn't (11. 23-24). So (one is tempted to say), knowing this, she loses it. And later, having elicited from him all the signs of jealousy, she ignores the signs and firmly denies that she has lost the handkerchief (11. 81-84). Her stubbornness in this exchange is closely and strangely linked to the maddening stubbornness with which she changes the subject from the handkerchief to Cassio. In spite of her devotion to and concern for Othello, her sense of injured merit keeps her from acknowledging his jealousy while pursuing a course of rhetorical action that aggravates it.

Othello and Desdemona work closely together to lose the handkerchief and to disremember its loss. In the dissociated agency of deep emplotment, the playing-through of disowned desires and apprehensions, they cooperate with Iago by losing the handkerchief in order to make the kind of trouble for themselves, for each other, that both are motivated to make. "Give me the ocular proof," Othello commands Iago (3.3.366), but not until after he has helped provide a likely candidate for that function. Desdemona's dropping the handkerchief is already ocular proof: if she is unfaithful, she should not have the handkerchief; if she does not have it, she is unfaithful. For Desdemona his rejection of her offer to soothe him with the handkerchief is already ocular
proof that he has rejected her, and losing the handkerchief puts her in a good position to test the force and
meaning of his rejection.

The fruits of disremembrance are harvested in 3.4. Desdemona initiates the action by sending the Clown in
search of Cassio, then pauses to wonder about the handkerchief and to assure Emilia that Othello is incapable
of jealousy. Seeing Othello approach, she says, "I will not leave him now till Cassio / Be called to him" (11.
28-29). Othello barges in with a series of broad hints about her lechery that hark back in tone to Iago's quips
and his comments on hand-paddling in 2.1. To Othello's angry variations on the topic of her moist and liberal
hand, she responds at first with reserve, then more tartly, and finally, as if to put an end to this nonsense and
get back to her topic of choice,

DESDEMONA I cannot speak of this; come,
come, your promise.

OTHELLO What promise, chuck?

DESDEMONA I have sent to bid Cassio come
speak with you.

(11. 44-46)

I find it hard to imagine that Desdemona—the Desdemona who engaged in what Ridley disapprovingly calls
"cheap backchat" with Iago and in innocently flirtatious palm-paddling with Cassio (2.1.167), the Desdemona
who displayed acquaintance with humoral theory just before Othello's entrance in 3.4—grasps the meaning of
Othello's little disquisition on her hot hand (11. 32-43) with a jot less clarity than the editors who gloss his
adjectives: "The palm, if hot and moist, was taken to be an indication of 'hot' desires"; "liberal] free, and so 'too free' and so 'loose.'" She knows whereof she "cannot speak," or will not speak. It is she, after all, and not
Emilia who first brings up the possibility of "ill thinking" and jealousy, but only to rule it out in advance.
Immediately after she does so, Othello enters displaying all the signs of ill thinking and jealousy. Far from
appearing ingenuously unaware of the jealousy with which he confronts her from this point on, she shows
rather that she refuses to acknowledge it—refuses to acknowledge that he has any cause, therefore any right,
to be jealous, refuses to acknowledge even the possibility of behavior on her part which could be
misinterpreted. As Rymer huffily and astutely observes, "Othello's Jealousie, that had rag'd so loudly and had
been so uneasie to himself, must have reach'd her knowledge… . And yet she must still be impertinent in her
suit for Cassio." After 3.4 her refusal to acknowledge his jealousy modulates into a desire to rise above
it—or, to put it more precisely, a desire to show herself rising above it. Yet if we take simple interlocutory
logic into account and premise that her ability to ignore or rise above Othello's jealousy depends on his
expressing it, her behavior from 3.4 on leads to an interesting conclusion: Desdemona secures that ability by
pushing the button that lights up his angry-husband display; she acts in a manner calculated to evoke from
him the signs of ill thinking that denote the passion she won't acknowledge.

The battle between them is joined when Othello, armed (as he thinks) with his ocular proof, prepares to
establish the guilt that will justify the sentence of death he has already passed on Desdemona (3.3.483-85).
His preparation—in effect, the argument for the prosecution—consists in conferring the broadest possible
significance on her betrayal, which he interprets as misuse of the generous gift of power he has bestowed on
her, the apotropaic power to ward off the contamination of their coupling by moderating the sexuality she
arouses. This gift, this alienated power, together with the sexuality he both desires and fears, makes
Desdemona her captain's captain and her general's general. It is to insure against the risk involved in
alienating power—the risk (let us say it now) of castration—that Othello reifies gift and power together in the
second gift of the handkerchief. Thus he tries to reclaim some of the control he has alienated by making
Desdemona responsible for the power she has and potentially guilty for its misuse. In its structure this tactic
resembles Portia's bestowal of the ring on Bassanio after she admits, "Myself, and what is mine, to you and
yours / Is now converted" (The Merchant of Venice, 3.2.166-67). The compensatory function of the ring is
identical to that of the handkerchief:
I give ... this ring,
Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
Let it presage the ruin of your love,
And be my vantage to exclaim on you.
(11. 171-74)

It is important to remember that the gift of the handkerchief is, like Othello's courtship, introduced as part of the prehistory of the play. Desdemona has been apprised of and embraced the general tenor of the gift since before her arrival at Cyprus. Yet if we recall this when Othello parries Desdemona's "I have sent to bid Cassio come speak with you" with his handkerchief attack, we may be puzzled as to the status of the Egyptian narrative he tells. Is he now filling in details omitted when he first gave her the handkerchief? His meticulous exposition and her puzzled responses suggest this is the case. It is idle to wonder whether he had such a narrative in mind from the beginning, but the fantasy he unfolds is obviously parabolic, and the parable is consistent with the divided attitude toward sexuality and blackness his language displays in 1.2 and 1.3. The parable conveys, in Carol Neely's words, "something of Othello's ... imagined relations to ... the myth of African men's sexual excess," that is, he makes the handkerchief symbolize first the wife's sexual power over her husband and then the chastity that the husband demands as an always-inadequate placeholder for the virginity she lost when she subdued him to her love (3.4.53-61, 67-73). The burden of the parable is that if the exotic blackness of the romantic and heroic stranger gives way to the monstrous blackness of the Barbary horse, it will be—it already is—her fault.

Desdemona's "Is't possible?" (1. 66) punctuates the parable's first thesis, and her "I' faith, is't true?" (1. 73) punctuates the second. These puzzled responses are themselves puzzling. Given what we have already heard from her, it is not clear that these questions express the wide-eyed bewilderment of the naive auditor. They may suggest that she realizes for the first time how serious he was when "he conjur'd her she should ever keep it," and realizes also that the conjuration contained as an admonitory nucleus his "vantage to exclaim on [her]." I hear as much anger as perplexity in the placement and voicing of her questions: Can he really be holding me responsible and setting me up this way? Is my noble Moor going mad? Is he actually going to make a Thing, threaten me with matchless "perdition," over my losing the handkerchief? "Then would to God that I had never seen it!" (1. 75). The intensity of her recoil may be measured by setting it against the fetishistic attachment described by Emilia: "she so loves the token, ... / That she reserves it evermore about her, / To kiss, and talk to" (3.3.297-300). What she cherished as a token of his love she now rejects as a token of his bad faith. The terms of his threat are themselves revealingly obfuscatory: the implied perdition she faces is that he will "hold her loathly" and "hunt / After new fancies" (3.4.60-61, my emphasis). But since the parable follows his harping on her moist hand, the threat has the hapless ring of the betrayed victim's desire for revenge: her losing the handkerchief or giving it away not only symbolizes but also actualizes both her failure to moderate his desire and her success in moderating another's.

I imagine Desdemona as capable of hearing this message in Othello's words and offended by his aggressive yet devious power plays as much as she is dismayed by his unstable behavior and the groundless accusation he all but makes. For it is not fear and trembling alone that her three mendacious utterances convey:

DESDEMONA It is not lost, but what an if it were? ...
I say it is not lost.
OTHELLO Fetch't, let me see it.
DESDEMONA Why, so I can sir, but I will not now,
This is a trick, to put me from my suit,
I pray let Cassio be receiv'd again.
Her tone is at first defiant and truculent and then dismissive as she counterattacks with her own weapon and continues to rub Cassio in Othello's face:

OTHELLO Fetch me that handkerchief, my mind misgives.
DESDEMONA Come, come,
You'll never meet a more sufficient man.
OTHELLO The handkerchief!
DESDEMONA I pray, talk me of Cassio.
OTHELLO The handkerchief!
DESDEMONA A man that all his time
Hath founded his good fortunes on your love,
Shar'd dangers with you,—
OTHELLO The handkerchief!
DESDEMONA I'faith, you are to blame.
(11. 81, 83-86)

Her concluding utterance echoes his "I am to blame" and has the same indeterminate reference. He is to blame for what? His treatment of Cassio? His treatment of her? Her losing the handkerchief? She ducks away from Emilia's second question about jealousy and continues to make excuses for Othello later in the scene, attributing his "puddled … spirit" to state matters. "Pray heaven," Emilia responds, that "it be state-matters, as you think, / And no conception, nor no jealous toy / Concerning you," at which Desdemona exclaims, "Alas the day, I never gave him cause!" (11. 137-40,153-56). That note of rueful but defiant self-exonerating underlies her interlocutory moves in 3.4: Othello is not the sort of man to be jealous (and if he were, it would be the result of humoral imbalance); if he is jealous, it must be because of the handkerchief's magic or its loss; perhaps, as Emilia helpfully suggests later, he is jealous because he is jealous (jealousy is a self-begotten monster [11. 159-60]); at any rate, it has nothing to do with Desdemona. All she can do is implore heaven to "keep that monster from Othello's mind" (1. 161). Othello can't—that is, he shouldn't—be jealous because she never gave him cause, and it would be unworthy of him to imagine something unworthy of her. Therefore she will ignore the signs of jealousy. Her way of ignoring them is to deny she lost the handkerchief in order to deny his interpretation of the loss. If the loss of the token signifies or actualizes the loser's infidelity, it signifies or actualizes falsely with respect to her, and she rejects its lie. If she has to lie in order to maintain the truth, Othello is to blame for that as well as for evading the Cassio problem, for making her badger him about it, and for mistreating the man who shared with him the dangers not only of war but also of courtship.

Desdemona's heated exchange with Othello displays an interest in keeping him angry, but angry on her terms, not his: she brushes past his demands for the handkerchief and irritates him by switching to a topic entirely unrelated to jealousy, a topic she has already seen him reluctant to deal with, the topic of Cassio. There is no indication in her language that she associates Cassio with Othello's display of jealousy, much less that she is angrily taunting him with the possibility that she has committed adultery. She frames the Cassio Project as an enterprise that has everything to do with gender—with the struggle of will between her and Othello—and nothing to do with sex. This strategy is consistent with (and reinforces) her refusal to acknowledge Othello's jealousy. Yet, as I have suggested, not only does the refusal seem perversely self-scotomizing, it accompanies behavior that seems, even more perversely, to arouse and intensify the very object of that refusal, the jealousy that gives her vantage, if not to exclaim on Othello, then to dramatize her injured merit ("I never gave him cause," "you are to blame," "poor Barbary" [3.4.156 and 94; 4.3.33]). To view it from this stand-point is to throw the harshest light on her motivation—i.e., if encouraging his unjustified jealousy is important to her
own self-justification, what better way to do this than couple her persistence in denying his jealousy with her persistence in rubbing the salt of Cassio into its wound?

This is no doubt too harsh a light. It's enough to say that ignoring Othello's jealousy allows Desdemona to defend herself and even seize the offensive in 3.4. It gives her permission to bring up Cassio as often as she likes without for a moment having to entertain the not improbable possibility that Othello suspects a liaison between her and this most "sufficient man" who helped bring them together. Yet the Cassio Project remains the instrument of her anger, and she is not unaware of its effect. "I have spoken for you, all my best," she tells Cassio, "And stood within the blank of his displeasure / For my free speech" (11. 124-26). In 4.1 her persistence in this line produces the predictable climax of the collision course on which she and Othello have set themselves. Speaking to Lodovico in Othello's presence, she tells him of the "unkind breach" between Othello and Cassio and predicts that Lodovico will "make all well" (11. 220-21). Othello, who is reading about Cassio's replacing him as governor, interjects, "Are you sure of that?" Desdemona's "My lord?" indicates that she is aware he is listening (11. 222-23). Her next comment seems meant to be overheard by him. To Lodovico's inquiry about the breach, she replies that it is "most unhappy" and that she "would do much / To atone them, for the love [she] bear[s] to Cassio" (11. 227-28). This piece of free speech draws "Fire and brimstone!" from Othello (1. 229), and why shouldn't she expect that, since she is harping on what she knows displeases him, and her comment is itself a continuance of her effort to "atone them"? Moreover, their exchanges are now being monitored by Lodovico and his attendants, which affects the way her response to Othello—another "My lord?" (1. 229)—can be played and heard: not only What did you say? I didn't hear you but also Say that again, so everyone can hear it. By the end of the skirmish that follows, Lodovico has shifted from a bystander to Desdemona's partisan:

OTHELLO Fire and brimstone!

DESDEMONA My lord?

OTHELLO Are you wise?

DESDEMONA What, is he angry?

LODOVICO May be the letter mov'd him;

For, as I think, they do command him home,

Deputing Cassio in his government.

DESDEMONA By my troth, I am glad on't.

OTHELLO Indeed!

DESDEMONA My lord?

OTHELLO I am glad to see you mad.

DESDEMONA How, sweet Othello?

OTHELLO Devil! [Striking her.]

DESDEMONA I have not deserv'd this.

LODOVICO My lord, this would not be believ'd in Venice,

Though I should swear I saw't: 'tis very much,

Make her amends, she weeps.

(11. 229-39)

Desdemona's second question has demonstrative or even exclamatory force because directed to Lodovico: "What, is he angry?" equals Look, he's angry. Her reply to Lodovico's news is ambiguous: she is truly glad because they will return to Venice and leave the Cassio problem behind them; she is glad to hear Cassio will be not only reinstated but promoted; perhaps also, since she has just heard Lodovico speculate that the letter may have caused Othello's anger, she is glad to hear the news even if he isn't. Given this choice of targets, Othello's "Indeed!" is relatively restrained, only a warmup, and Desdemona's third "My lord?" challenges him
to speak up and say what's on his mind. He does not directly meet the challenge but throws "I am glad" back
in her face and muffles his meaning, if not his aggression, enough to confuse several commentators and elicit
another inquiry from Desdemona. "How, sweet Othello?" is, again, ambiguous in its reach, and the work done
by "sweet" is affected by the scope of "How?" Because Othello's utterance is more than an ejaculation or
mutter, because it redirects attention from the letter to her, and because it is a cryptic nonsequitur, I take
Desdemona's question to be asking for a more explicit restatement: What are you getting at? Why do you call
me—or how am I—mad? Why are you talking and behaving this way? I see that you're angry, but why take it
out on me? Her words contain something like a challenge to him to come clean. She solicits accusation and he
withholds it. But this is a drama she, more than he, is displaying for Lodovico's benefit. Thus although her
"sweet Othello" may be no more than a gesture of affection and concern, an attempt to soothe him
(comparable to her earlier offer to bind his head with the handkerchief), it can't escape the aggressiveness of
the context or the performative edge given it by the presence of onstage spectators. "Sweet Othello" shows
Lodovico her love and concern for her husband and asks him to join her in wondering why Othello is being so
hostile: See, I love him, why is he talking to me this way? Even in terms of Desdemona's preferred
interpretation of her "for the love I bear to Cassio," she may be expected to know why he is talking to her
thus. In her terms Othello clearly overreacts and enables Desdemona to show Lodovico the spectacle of an
unjustly battered wife.

To return for a moment to Othello's "I am glad to see you mad," the most satisfactory gloss on the utterance is
the one proposed by Ridley, who links it to "Are you wise?: "are you in your right wits?" (i.e. thus openly to
speak of love for Cassio).... 'I am glad to see that you have so manifestly taken leave of your senses, and
betrayed yourself publicly'. But if this is what Othello insinuates, he refrains from saying so outright, and the
gap between insinuated message and cryptic utterance is important because it is part of a withholding pattern:
Othello never mentions Cassio by name to Desdemona until 5.2.48 and after 3.3.76 makes no pronominal
reference to him in her presence. This is especially noticeable in the accusation scene, 4.2, during which, as
Kenneth Muir points out, "he does not give her a chance of defending herself by naming her supposed lover,
her accuser, or the evidence against her." When he finally mentions Cassio in 5.2 (and mentions him together
with the handkerchief), he does so on the mistaken assumption that Cassio has been killed. I conclude from
this that he doesn't want to give her a chance to clear herself by confronting him together with Cassio. He has
a use for his jealousy. But, as we have seen, Desdemona also has a use for it. Her insistence on mentioning
Cassio in the martial context of her project has the same effect as—and reinforces—Othello's refusal to
mention Cassio in the venerean context. She departs from her withholding pattern only once, responding in a
justifiable moment of weakness to Othello's "thou art false as hell" with "To whom, my lord? with whom?
how am I false?" He avoids the questions ("O Desdemona, away! away! away!") and she herself then
obediently veers away through "Am I the occasion of those tears, my lord?" to the hypothesis that he may be
unhappy because he suspects her father had a hand in his recall to Venice—therefore, "Lay not your blame on
me; if you have lost him, / Why, I have lost him too" (4.2.40-48). After this exchange Othello and Desdemona
collaborate in redirecting blame from the third party, steering it back to her so that he can continue belaboring
her as if she is the sole offender and she can continue protesting her honesty and injured merit.

This collaboration is founded and dependent on the losing of the handkerchief, which in turn has its potential
meanings preinscribed by the terms of Othello's gift, terms he mysteriously displaces or injects into "the web
of it" as its "magic." Karen Newman observes that this "snowballing signifier…. first appears simply as a
love token given by Othello to Desdemona and therefore treasured by her," but it would be more accurate to
say that it first disappears as a love token and that, at its appearance or disappearance, what it represents is not
so simple. Newman herself remarks on its "doubleness": "when the handkerchief is first given, it represents
her virtue and their chaste love, but it later becomes a sign, indeed a proof, of her unfaithfulness." Yet
Emilia's "he conjur'd her she should ever keep it" places the representational emphasis less on her virtue and
their chaste love than on his desire to test her fidelity. Whatever the object symbolizes must be something he
entrusts to her safekeeping—this something could include his reputation—and the point of the gift is that it
transfers accountability from him to her. Should she lose it, she will bear the culpability of losing all that he
has decided to make it stand for.

The sense that Othello presented the handkerchief not only as a gift but also as a threat or warning is of course reinforced in 3.4, after it has become a sign of her unfaithfulness. Othello blusters that the gift of chaste desire to be entrusted to and safeguarded by the woman is the man's:

... while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my
father
Entirely to her love: but if she lost it,
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should
hunt
After new fancies.
(11. 56-61)

Thus, if we have only Emilia's and Othello's comments to judge by, we must conclude that "when the handkerchief is first given" the anticipation of betrayal is already woven into the web of the gift, the terms of which express an anxiety about, a potential proof of, Desdemona's unfaithfulness. The apotropaic function of the handkerchief may be suggested by recalling an earlier exchange:

BRABANTIO Look to her, Moor, have a quick
eye to see:
She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee.
OTHELLO My life upon her faith: honest Iago,
My Desdemona must I leave to thee.
(1.3.292-95)

The handkerchief transfers responsibility for his life to her faith. In 3.4, having—as he thinks—proved her unfaithful, he makes it represent the power (of prophetesses, mothers, wives, virgins) she has lost but also, coterminously, the power he has lost—has tried and failed to domesticate—because of her.

It is in this gestural drama more than in the reified web of the handkerchief that symbolic action resides.

The action is not merely iconographic—not merely elicited from a description of the object ("a handkerchief, / Spotted with strawberries" [3.3.441-42]). It is agentive. That is, the handkerchief becomes the locus and medium of a complex motivational conflict between agents who displace or alienate their agency from themselves to it as to a scapegoat, a pharmakon, a fetish. The poison in Othello's gift is mystified as the magic in the web. The agency of subjects and discourses is detextualized both in and as the handkerchief. But the handkerchief itself is, as Emilia says, only "a trifle" (5.2.229), the word picked up by Rymer in his notorious critique of "the Tragedy of the Handkerchief that is "a Tragedy of this Trifle."9

Othello and Desdemona are not alone in promoting the loss of the handkerchief. Someone else is complicit with them and, indeed, makes it possible for them to capitalize later on its loss. After they go offstage leaving the handkerchief behind them in 3.3, Emilia snaps it up, for at that point she does not view it as an unconsidered trifle:

I am glad I have found this napkin;
This was her first remembrance from the Moor,
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Woo'd me to steal it, but she so loves the
token,
For he conjur'd her she should ever keep it,
That she reserves it evermore about her,
To kiss, and talk to; I'll ha' the work ta'en out,
And give't Iago: what he'll do with it
Heaven knows, not I,
I nothing know, but for his fantasy.

(11.294-303)

The final line here is the First Quarto variant; the Folio reads "I nothing, but to please his fantasy." The elided verb in the Folio version could be do or wish, but the influence of the preceding phrase suggests the Quarto's "know." Emilia disowns knowledge in a manner that recalls Brakenbury's "I will not reason what is meant hereby, / Because I will be guiltless from the meaning" (Richard III, 1.4.93-94), but her "because" is more indirect: my husband is a little weird ("wayward") and is probably up to some mischief, but it's none of my business; he has odd fancies or whims, and my job is to humor him and keep him happy. When she offers it to Iago, she wonders what he will do with the handkerchief he has "been / So earnest to have me filch," and she has a moment of hesitation:

EMILIA If it be not for some purpose of
import,
Give me't again, poor lady, she'll run mad,
When she shall lack it.
IAGO Be not you known on't, I have use for
it.

(3.3.321-24)

"[P]oor lady, she'll run mad" sounds a note of pity verging on condescension, as if for a child who has been imposed upon by the Moor's strangely demanding act of donation; Desdemona will have to suffer the consequences not only of her negligence but also of the enthusiasm with which she embraces the odd conditions attendant on his gift. Momentarily distanced from Desdemona by her own acquiescence in Iago's "fantasy," Emilia expresses the mixture of curiosity, sympathy, and censure with which members of the serving class scrutinize the follies of their (often less worldly) betters.

Emilia, then, anticipates trouble but blinkers herself and throws in her lot with Iago. The dramatic crescendo of threats that concludes 3.3 enhances our sense of Desdemona's vulnerability and of Emilia's contribution to it. In 3.4 an onstage Emilia remains mum during the whole stretch of dialogue in which Othello spins out his history of the handkerchief and hectors Desdemona about its whereabouts. After he leaves, Desdemona expresses her unhappiness "in the loss of it" and thus gives Emilia a chance to make her less unhappy by speaking up. Emilia's refusal is therefore all the more conspicuous: she responds with an evasively general witticism about men's mistreatment of women (11. 100-103). This pattern of nondisclosure continues into the fourth act. At the beginning of 4.2, Emilia learns from Othello himself, as he questions her for evidence of Desdemona's infidelity, that he suspects Cassio. She stoutly defends Desdemona against his misguided suspicion in words that carry the true Desdemonan pitch: "if she be not honest, chaste, and true, / There's no man happy" (11. 17-18). Then she leaves the stage when Othello orders her to summon Desdemona, returns with her five lines later, is thereafter shortly and curtly dismissed again as if she were Desdemona's procuress (11. 27-30), and returns some sixty lines later just in time—as the Quarto places her entrance—to hear Othello ranting about "that cunning whore of Venice, / That married with Othello" and to give him another chance to call Emilia "madam" before he exits (11. 91-96). "Alas," she exclaims, "what does this gentleman conceive?" and, a moment later, "what's the matter with my lord?" (11. 97, 100). Has she forgotten the discussion that opened the scene? Critics comment on the dramatic irony and heightened suspense of Emilia's all but fingering Iago in this scene, yet her failure to mention the scene's opening discussion is equally damaging and
of a different order of complicity. Her failure to put two and two together and recognize that the scoundrel she describes is Iago is strictly part of a negotiation between the play and its audience, a venerable mechanism for driving spectators/readers wild by conspicuously blocking and deferring anagnorisis until too late. But her silence about her conversation with Othello is part of Emilia's negotiations with Desdemona and Iago. This is the second time she fails to report something she has seen or heard, though here, as before, she is well positioned to know that her failure can increase Desdemona's jeopardy along with Othello's jealousy. These lapses are deeply problematic; they haunt the interchange between Emilia and Desdemona from the handkerchief episode on.

I hasten to add that none of this should be construed as reflecting adversely on Emilia's loyalty and devotion to Desdemona, any more than Desdemona's passive-aggressive reactions to Othello reflect adversely on her loyalty and devotion to him. It is just that Emilia's behavior in the play is charted along, and straddles, two different trajectories, one dominated by Desdemona and the other by Iago. In the first she is a faithful attendant, in the second a closemouthed watcher. The relation between these trajectories is textually underdetermined and therefore open. Like one of Philip McGuire's "open silences," it solicits performative and contextual interpretation. It wants, in other words, to be motivated, and several motivational cues present themselves as candidates for inspection to anyone imagining or staging the speaker of Emilia's language.

First, in the context of socioliterary allusion, Emilia occupies a well-stencilled and recognizable position, that of the servant or attendant who innocently or corruptly helps betray her mistress in order to humor her lover. Examples are Pryene in the tale told by Phedon in Faerie Queene (Book 2, stanza 14) and Margaret in Much Ado About Nothing. According to Much Ado's notoriously inconsistent stage directions, Margaret is not among the dramatis personae listed in the Quarto for the repudiation scene (4.1); the possibility that she might be present, watching but not exposing the slander of Hero, is not thereby foreclosed, but it is not thematized. Emilia's collusion with Iago over the handkerchief differs from the charade Don John and Borachio have Margaret innocently perform, because it involves Emilia in a voyeuristic exercise of the power of nondisclosure. Within the citational context, one of the motives imaginable for Emilia is a socially coded pleasure in watching one's betters misbehave and suffer, a pleasure Don John and Iago vigorously pursue in their self-appointed roles as performers of the villain's and victim/revenger's discourses.

Emilia's relationship to Iago provides a second context. Does she remain silent because she is afraid of Iago? Because she is interested in finding out what her weird husband is up to? Because in such matters a wife should obey her husband?—though her silence about the handkerchief is not something Iago explicitly enjoins; it appears to be Emilia's decision. In their interchange at 3.3.305-13, she offers the handkerchief as a gesture that seems partly an attempt to surprise and please him, partly a rebuke to his brusque and chiding manner. The gesture suggests that she finds his manner more a challenge than a threat. At 4.2.147-49 she rattles him by mocking his idle jealousy. Her discomposure at discovering his villainy in 5.2 suggests that she has previously humored him as a kind of crank, a buffoon, that is, a husband, like herself an exemplary player in the Venetian game of marriage, a game that reflects and reproduces the cynical norms they both articulate as conventional wisdom.

This is the game depicted for Desdemona by Iago in 2.1 and by Emilia in 4.3. It is the game Desdemona refuses to play, and her anomalous marriage to Othello promises at first to flout its rules. After Othello finds a use for the game, Desdemona continues to represent herself as an exception and to buttress her claim by denying that their marriage could be jeopardized by suspicions for which there are obviously no grounds. I can imagine an Emilia who expects husbands to be jealous, who is intrigued by the possibility of Othello's conforming to the rule, and who may even be willing to prove her point to Desdemona by the silence that facilitates his conformity. In 3.4 Emilia disingenuously puts Desdemona to the test. Having watched Othello go on about the handkerchief, heard Desdemona defy him with her lies and talk of Cassio, and seen Othello storm onstage, Emilia asks, "Is not this man jealous?" (1. 96). This is scarcely reducible to a request for information. It has the force of a rhetorical question soliciting Desdemona's assent; the force, perhaps, of a
Q.E.D., as if Emilia has just run off an experiment that proves Desdemona's marriage is no more impervious than hers to the slings and arrows of outrageous husbands. The demonstration is set up at the beginning of 3.4:

DESDEMONA Where should I lose that handkerchief, Emilia?
EMILIA I know not, madam.
DESDEMONA Believe me, I had rather lose my purse
Full of crusadoes: and but my noble Moor
Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are, it were enough
To put him to ill thinking.
EMILIA Is he not jealous?
DESDEMONA Who, he? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humours from him.
(11. 19-27)

At the end of the demonstration, when Emilia archly repeats her question, Desdemona swerves from a direct answer and steers her perplexity toward the handkerchief:

EMILIA Is not this man jealous?
DESDEMONA I ne'er saw this before:
Sure there's some wonder in this handkerchief,
I am most unhappy in the loss of it.
(11. 96-99)

Her refusal to enlighten Desdemona allows Emilia to put pressure on Desdemona to acknowledge both the truth about Othello and the larger truth that their marriage is not the exception Desdemona thinks it is—that it is as difficult, as precarious, as frangible as any other. Not even the divine Desdemona can avoid being victimized by the misogynist discourse that governs relations between men and women, wives and husbands, in and out of Venice.

Desdemona continues to resist this pressure. When she can no longer justify Othello's behavior, she justifies her own. Indeed, after Othello has struck and bewhored her, she more insistently affirms her difference and uniqueness not only against his slander but also against Emilia's worldly norm. In 4.3 she appropriates the childlike and wounded bewilderment of poor Barbary to put questions to the Emilian voice of experience: can there be women who abuse their husbands as grossly as Barbary and I were abused? would you do such a deed? Unlike the run of women described by and including Emilia, she would never dream of cheating on her husband. And as if to dramatize her innocence by a show of unworldly ignorance, she goes so far as to claim not to believe "there is any such woman" (1. 83). Thus where Iago wants to prove to himself that he can make Othello jealous, and where Emilia wants to prove to Desdemona that Othello is jealous, Desdemona seems intent on showing she can rise above his jealousy when she can no longer deny it.

Given the predicament Desdemona is placed in by her position at the juncture where "in one line" the "crafts" of Iago, Emilia, and Othello "directly meet" (Hamlet, 3.4.210), what can she do? For she is being unjustly victimized, and that needs to be emphasized in the face of the argument that she won't let Othello victimize her all by himself but will get herself victimized, make him do it, be his partner in crime. At one tender moment she all but acknowledges the anger behind her militantly nonviolent resistance when, after rationalizing his rage as a reaction to state matters, she says,
beshrew me much, Emilia,
I was (unhandsome warrior as I am)
Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;
But now I find I had suborn’d the witness,
And he’s indicted falsely.
(3.4.148-52)

"Unhandsome warrior" is like a lifeline of self-accusation thrown from the "O my fair warrior!" it remembers (2.1.182). But if this makes for tenderness of tone, the legalistic rhetoric that follows resonates more harshly. She concedes that she persuaded herself to misinterpret the behavior she witnessed, but hers remains the prerogative of judgment, the power of indictment, and she derives that power from "the authority of her merits" as the "deserving woman" she knows herself to be (11. 144-46). Those merits measure his unkindness, which is still the defendant and may still undergo a new trial in her "soul's court of justice." She will give him another chance.

Desdemona is indeed a warrior, a trooper, who defends against the fate predicted by Iago in 2.1: it is possible to be a good wife and yet to avoid being reduced to a suckler of fools and chronicler of small beer. When the man she loves begins very soon, and unaccountably, to abuse her, she turns the other cheek. She makes excuses for him. She forgives him. Finally, when all else fails, she reduces herself to poor Barbary, who, forsaken by her mad lover, dies singing the willow song. From one line of this song—"Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve" (4.3.51)—she takes the idea for her death scenario in 5.2: after reviving to announce that she is "falsely, falsely murder’d" and "A guiltless death I die," she answers Emilia's "who has done this deed?" with "Nobody, I myself, farewell: / Commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell" (11. 118-26). Thus she bids "her wrong stay, and her displeasure fly" (2.1.153). "Let nobody blame him" solicits pity and praise for the innocent victim who has the charity to forgive. But at the same time, the phrase arraigns his unkindness by creating the presupposition that he is to blame and is being blamed by others, so that her charity only intensifies our sense of the wrong he did, and the instruction coded in her speech act is, Let everyone blame him. The same effect is serially produced in her final three utterances. The complex balance of the final gesture is testified to by the diverse and sensitive reactions of several critics. On the one hand, Desdemona "effectively authorizes" Othello's view of the murder as a sacrifice, "allowing him to have the last word"; "her last breath is a protective lie"; she is thus "fully in collusion with Othello's destruction of her," for "if she did not actually kill herself, she unwittingly invited death through the nobility of a love that platonically (and foolishly) refused to register Othello's metamorphosis." On the other hand, in this emphasis on her ennobling if suicidal power lurks the suggestion that her final utterance disempowers, arraigns, and indicts Othello: it was she who drove him to it and made him less than himself; if she dies helping him live his lie about her, it is to intensify his sense of her value and of his loss; if she represents herself as having invited "death through the nobility of a love that … refused," etc., it is to prove to him that he couldn't have killed her without her complicity.

It must be obvious that this account of Desdemona has taken an odd but not unusual critical turn. In spite of my effort to portray Desdemona as a strong and admirable figure, a true member of the sisterhood that includes Rosalind, Helena, Portia, and Hermione, my frequent reliance on free indirect discourse snidely exposes her utterances and motives to the citational rhetoric of moral disapproval. The message this procedure conveys is let nobody blame her. It is as if in my delight to find Desdemona complicit in her undoing and thus prove my point about the redistribution of complicities, I equate her complicity with moral culpability rather than discursive responsibility. Granted that free indirect discourse is a form of paraphrastic mimicry and thus easily lends itself to critique or parody of its object, it derives this power from its aptness as a technique for representing self-representation. One therefore ought to be able to deploy the technique without prejudice in (let us say) a non-Flaubertian manner to register the traces in language of the motivational and discursive pressures on the stories people tell themselves and others. I look for negotiations between those pressures and the pressure to maintain self-esteem—the cardinal value in the normative stories one is told to tell about
oneself—in the linguistic signs of the activity I have elsewhere called "practical unconsciousness," the materials for which are supplied by the network of discourses circulating through the speech community of the play. Now it may be appropriate to aim free indirect discourse tendentiously toward the normative stories per se and toward the strategies of misrecognition they mobilize on their behalf, but that isn't the same as using paraphrastic mimicry against a particular storytelling subject, Desdemona, for example. Yet I don't think the foregoing account of her complicity is "wrong"; it is one-sided; it gloats too much over its discovery of the extent to which she shares with Othello and Iago responsibility for what happens.

A less tendentious view of Desdemona might begin with the observation that her final words permit of a paraphrase that amounts to a refutation of her earlier claim, "I never gave him cause": to say "Nobody, I myself is to acknowledge that she gave him cause. As a confessional gesture, this edges toward self-accusation. But if a glimmer of the sinner's discourse is discernible, it remains faint: "falsely murder'd," she dies a "guiltless death," not, however, as one who was victimized but as one who got victimized; she accepts responsibility, not culpability. Can the words signify that she accepts responsibility for his culpability? Isn't that what "my kind lord" may suggest if one imagines it uttered with no trace of bitterness, sarcasm, or reproach? This reading, however, doesn't neutralize the more tendentious interpretation unfolded above. She acknowledges that she gave him cause and even perhaps—pushing it toward the sinner's desire for punishment—that she deserves what she got. But her prosecution of the victim's discourse, culminating in her reduction of herself to poor Barbary, who, saintlike, forgives her tormentor, vibrates through her last words and solicits a different reading: he will discover too late what a jewel he has thrown away. Thus "I gave him cause" struggles with I never gave him cause, and I deserve what I got struggles with he'll deserve what he gets; and in my reading of Desdemona, these combatants remain locked in mortal embrace.

Notes


2 I have here kept the Arden line count but replaced Ridley's First Quarto reading ("Let Cassio") with the Folio variant ("till Cassio"). The Folio is the basis of most modern editions.

3 Ridley, ed., 2.1.109-66n, 3.4.32n, and 3.4.34n.


5 Carol Thomas Neely, "Circumscription and Unhousedness: Othello at the Crossroads," paper delivered at the 1992 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Kansas City. I'm grateful to Professor Neely for sending me a copy of the paper. See also For a similar and equally stimulating interpretation, see Janet Adelman, Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 68-69. Adelman lays more emphasis on the parable's strange conjunction of maternal power with virginity as representing "the impossible condition of male desire, the condition always already lost" (69).

6 Ridley, ed., 4.1.234n.


9 Rymer in Spingarn, ed., 2.251 and 254.


**Othello (Vol. 35): Further Reading**


Compares the main female characters from *Othello* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, focusing on their "gestures of submission" that "paradoxically enable" self-expression.


Centers on the structure of *Othello* as it relates to the revelation of Desdemona's character. Cook contends that Shakespeare raises numerous doubts about Desdemona's true nature in the same manner that the playwright clouds the issue of Iago's and Othello's characters.


Argues that Desdemona is an active participant who shapes her own destiny rather than a passive victim of other character's machinations.


Discusses Othello's "loss of reason" and argues that it leads him to condemn his wife and lieutenant to death on the basis of flimsy, circumstantial evidence.


Argues that numerous aspects of Desdemona's character are self-destructive and suicidal. Faber also comments on Othello's suicide.

Psychoanalytic interpretation of Othello's and Iago's characters in which Faber focuses on "Iago's suggestion that Othello strangle Desdemona in her bed and Othello's enthusiastic reception of this idea."


Examines Othello's and Iago's attitudes toward love and childbearing, arguing that the attitudes of both are influenced by their positions within the state.


Interprets Othello through a psychoanalytic approach, commenting on themes of jealousy, sexuality, and the relationship between the individual and society.


Refutes other scholars who have argued that Othello's marriage to Desdemona is never consummated.


Interprets Othello as a depiction of paranoid jealousy with Iago and Othello as two parts of a single personality. Saul also discusses the psychological concept of projection as it relates to Shakespeare's creation of Othello.


Draws on psychoanalytic theory to argue that Iago's motives stem in part from repressed homosexual feelings for Othello and Cassio.


Discusses characterization and the psychological and cultural factors that impact it.

**Othello (Vol. 53): Introduction**

*Othello*

Critics have not formed any sort of consensus about the role of race in Othello, despite the fact that the topic of racism continues to be one of the most predominant issues in modern scholarship about the play. Some commentators have held that Othello is not about racism, that Othello is essentially white, or that his race is irrelevant. This position, rather popular among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics, including Charles Lamb and A. C. Bradley, has sparked numerous responses among modern critics who maintain emphatically that race is the essential element of the play. Scholars who assign primacy to race in Othello can be divided roughly into three categories. Critics such as John Gillies, for instance, argue that Shakespeare was upholding the racist views of the Renaissance, and that the play advocates racism. Conversely, other critics, among them Martin Orkin and Emily C. Bartels, state that Shakespeare, through his sympathetic portrayal of Othello, was critiquing racism, and taking his society to task for its racist behavior. Finally, Michael Neill
(1998) and other scholars argue that it is anachronistic to apply modern ideas of racism to an earlier period. These scholars maintain that Shakespeare and his audience would have understood race, a cultural construct, in a wholly different way than we do today.

Other theorists offer additional nuances to the analysis of race in Othello. Several feminist scholars, among them Karen Newman and Marianne Novy (1984), explore the relationship of gender and race. Newman's argument that Desdemona and Othello are scorned equally by Venetian society, and that Othello's race and Desdemona's freely expressed sexuality represent the same threat to the dominant white male society, has sparked a heated debate. In a second significant development of theory, such scholars as Paul A. Cantor and Emily C. Bartels, apply anthropologists' concepts of “Self" and “Other" to Othello. They argue that Shakespeare wanted to distinguish Othello from the rest of the play's cast, to set him apart, in order to make a point about society's propensity to vilify those who are not like the “Self.” Cantor maintains that the issue of race is a means unto an end for Shakespeare, allowing the playwright to create an opportunity for the dominant society to isolate, ridicule, even destroy Othello, and through the telling of the story Shakespeare warns the audience against such behavior. Many of these critiques liken the role of Othello with that of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice.

A third trend in modern studies of the play is the examination of the ramifications of Othello across time and among different ethnicities. Critics explore the history of the play's production from the Renaissance (when people of color were relatively unknown to the audience), through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the height of the slave trade and institutionalized racism), and into the twentieth century with its move toward greater racial tolerance. Ferial J. Ghazoul studies Othello's influence on Arab culture and literature; Jyotsna Singh's work focuses on the impact of Othello on African and Asian writers. James R. Andreas (1992) compares the work of three twentieth-century writers who have manipulated the plot of Othello to highlight personal concerns about race in their society. Andreas concludes that “the play itself seems to incriminate Western society at large for its predisposition to the periodic, ritual slaughter of marginal and aboriginal groups and all whites—especially women—who consort with them.”

**Criticism: Race: Ruth Cowhig (essay date 1977)**


[In the following essay, Cowhig argues that race is essential to the meaning of Othello.]

There has recently been general agreement amongst critics that Shakespeare conceived of Othello as a Negro, and not as the tawny Arab on whom Coleridge insisted with such vehemence. But there is a considerable gap between critical opinion and the ideas and assumptions that linger on, even when people have some degree of specialized interest. It is more than usually so where Othello's colour is concerned. To speak of a conspiracy of silence might be to use too strong a phrase; but there is a reluctance to disturb accepted ideas, and a Negro Othello has a greater novelty than the study either of critical writing or of stage history would lead one to expect—as I found when reading Othello with a group of adult students. The edition we were using included a series of critical essays, but none even mentioned Othello's colour; that it was an American publication had an obvious significance.

Eldred Jones's Othello's Countrymen has clearly established the familiarity of the Elizabethans with Negroes, especially in London. Traders with West Africa used them as interpreters and often brought a few home as gifts, or for the family household. Thus Shakespeare must have had opportunities for contact with Negroes, although there is no direct evidence of any. There was also a strong stage tradition which made use of Negroes in the role of villain or of villain-hero. As Shakespeare had himself followed this tradition with Aaron in Titus
Andronicus, first performed between 1590 and 1592, it follows that his choice of a Negro as the hero of his tragedy of Othello, thus completely breaking the tradition, must have been deliberate. It is true that the plot was taken from Cinthio's Hecatommithi; but hardly any of Shakespeare's plots were original, and there was evidently something about this tale that led him to select it out of many. The story as it stands is crude and lacking in subtlety: the only thing that distinguishes it is that it is concerned with the love between a Moor and a young Venetian girl of high birth.

The reasons for Shakespeare's choice remain obscure, and we can only speculate about them; perhaps Shakespeare felt sympathy for aliens in an intolerant society, as is suggested by his treatment of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, though here he was hampered by an inflexible story, with the result that Shylock's moving speeches burst out of the framework of the play. In Othello there is no suggestion of deliberate social injustice; but one wonders whether, as he watched the humiliation of Negro slaves and servants, Shakespeare found himself imagining the feelings of proud men, perhaps of royal descent like Othello, whose black skins betrayed no blushes. ‘Haply for I am black’, cries Othello, as the first doubts begin to torment him: it is the first of the alternative reasons that he considers in trying to account for his betrayal, so that we cannot ignore his awareness of the colour barrier. Shakespeare has moved far from his acceptance of the traditional Negro in Titus Andronicus, whose colour reflects his evil motives:

Let fools do good and fair men call for grace,
Aaron will have his soul black like his face.

(III, i, 202-5)

Whatever Shakespeare's intentions may have been, we have to take seriously the importance of Othello's race in our interpretation of the play.

The first effect of Othello's blackness is immediately grasped by the audience, but not always by the reader of the play. It is that he is, from the beginning, placed in a position of isolation from the other characters. In the same way, Hamlet's black clothes isolate him visually from the rest of the Danish court. This isolation is such an integral part of Othello's experience that it is constantly operative, even if not necessarily at a conscious level. Anyone who is black would appreciate its importance in understanding the character of Othello. Before he appears, our attention is forcibly focussed on Othello's race. The speeches of Iago and Roderigo in the first scene are full of racial antipathy. Othello is ‘the thick-lips’, ‘an old black ram’, ‘a lascivious Moor’ and ‘a Barbary horse’, and he ‘is making the beast with two backs’ with Desdemona. The language is purposely offensive and sexually coarse, and the animal images convey, as such images always do, the idea of someone who is less than human. Coriolanus expresses his contempt for the plebeians similarly, through a series of animal comparisons. Iago calculates on arousing in Brabantio all the latent prejudice of Venetian society, and he succeeds. The union is, to Brabantio, ‘a treason of the blood’, and he feels that its acceptance will reduce Venetian statesmen to ‘bondslaves and pagans’. We, the audience, are not at first given any opportunity of forming our own opinion of Othello, although Iago's personal grievances over his lack of promotion may put us on our guard against his claims to impartiality.

Brabantio occupies a strong position in society. He is ‘much beloved’, and ‘hath in his effect a voice potential / As double as the Duke's’, if we can believe Iago. His attitude to Othello's race is as prejudiced as Iago's, though it is important to realize that he represents a more liberal outlook, at least on the surface. Willing to entertain Othello in his own home, it is he who makes Othello's meetings with Desdemona possible. His reaction to the news of the elopement is predictable. He is outraged that this Negro should presume so far, and at once concludes that charms and witchcraft must have been used, since otherwise his daughter could never ‘fall in love with what she feared to look on’. To him the match is ‘against all rules of nature’; only spells and medicines could make it possible ‘for nature so prepost’rously to err’. When he confronts Othello his abuse is no less bitter than Iago's.
Before this confrontation Othello makes his first appearance, and two characteristics impress us. First his pride:

I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege

(I, ii, 21-2)

Secondly, his confidence in his own achievements:

My services which I have done the Signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints.

(I, ii, 95-7)

It is difficult to estimate the reactions of an Elizabethan audience to this Negro, so obviously in control of the situation and so noble in his bearing. No black man remotely like him had ever appeared on the English stage before, nor has one since. However great his confidence, however, his colour makes his vulnerability plain to all. Brabantio is sure of the Duke's support, since he and the other senators 'cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own'. He is disappointed, but he would probably have been right if the state had not been in danger and Othello essential for its defence. As it is, Brabantio gets cold comfort; he is to 'take up this mangled matter at the best'. The Duke treats Othello as befits his position as Commander-in-Chief, addressing him as 'valiant Othello', whereas Brabantio never uses his name, calling him scornfully just 'Moor!'. The First Senator gives Othello some support, but his parting words, 'Adieu, brave Moor. Use Desdemona well', while not unfriendly, reveal an attitude of superiority. Would a senator have made such an injunction to a newly-married general if he had been white, and an equal?

It is Desdemona's stand before the Senate that first breaks Othello's isolation. Her stature is immensely increased by the fact that he is black. Her passivity in later scenes cannot be seen as a natural docility after the spirited independence which she shows in her defence of the marriage. Beneath a quiet exterior lay the strength to resist the pressures of society; she was

So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation

(I, ii, 67-8)

The choice of words makes clear to us the kind of suitors who were unable to attract Desdemona, but there is no suggestion that Brabantio wished, like Capulet, to force his daughter against her inclination. The marriage is something that he could not anticipate, and Othello and Desdemona are trapped by their predicament, just as Romeo and Juliet were, but with the great difference that theirs is a mature match in which the couple are well aware of the seriousness of the step they have taken: 'My downright violence and storm of fortunes', Desdemona calls it. It is made very clear, in Othello's account of the wooing, that she had to take the initiative:

She thanked me
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.

(I, iii, 163-6)
It is, of course, because of Othello's race; there would be no need for Desdemona to break with the long and absolute custom, that the man must speak first, in any but the rarest circumstances. Before the Senate she remains level-headed. In her speech about ‘divided duty’ she softens the blow, but does not try to avoid the issue. Finally, when she says that she ‘saw Othello's visage in his mind’, the audience has to make the effort to overcome, with her, the tendency to connect Othello's black face with evil. Brabantio's insistence that she is going against nature is repudiated. ‘Nature’ has a variety of meanings in Shakespeare's plays; in this one it is linked with Iago's cynical and materialistic outlook, whereas the love between Othello and Desdemona belongs to another plane.

The ease with which Othello succumbs to Iago's insinuations has puzzled many critics. Some have been led to a grudging admiration of Iago's ‘diabolic intellect’, while others have belittled Othello for being such easy prey. Dr. Leavis's analysis reduces Othello to a pitiable figure; he is ‘beyond any question, the nobly massive man of action’, but ‘his habit of self-approving self-dramatization’ is evidence of his egotism. Nevertheless, most playgoers have been deeply moved by Othello's suffering. Perhaps the explanation lies in Othello's colour, which Dr. Leavis does not think important: ‘his colour, whether or not “colour feeling” existed among the Elizabethans, we are certain to take as emphasizing the disparity of the match.’ I do not think that Othello's colour can be relegated to a parenthesis in this way. It is the basic cause of his insecurity, which, when the part is played by a Negro, needs no explanation. Its origin is there for us to see. If we do need words to make it clear, they are there too. Iago harps mercilessly on the unnaturalness of the match:

Not to affect many proposed matches,
Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
Whereo we see in all things nature tends—
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.

(III, iii, 233-7)

The exclamation of disgust and the words ‘smell’ and ‘foul’ reveal a phobia so obvious that it is strange it is so often passed over. The attack demolishes Othello's defences simply because there is no defence against this kind of racial contempt. ‘For she had eyes, and chose me’, changes to:

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 …

(III, iii 267-70)

It is one of the most moving moments in the play. Othello's vulnerability is no surprise to himself, for he has had to marry in secret, and his confidence is based on his knowledge that his expertise is valuable to the state, not on the expectation of being valued for himself. Given Iago's hatred and astuteness in exploiting other people's weaknesses, which we see in the trap he sets for Cassio, the black Othello is easy game. We are not watching the collapse of a self-deceiving fool, but the baiting of an alien who cannot fight back on equal terms.

Othello's stature as a tragic hero is built up mainly through his prowess as a soldier. He is unique amongst Shakespeare's soldier heroes because he has achieved his position as general on merit, after hard and bitter experience. The early history described in the account of his wooing is typical of the experience of an African of his times who has been ‘taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery’. His whole life, since the age of seven, has been the precarious life of the soldier, and against this background his blackness is evidence of his outstanding ability. As a Negro, employed by the state of Venice, he receives tributes from all: he is ‘the
warlike Moor Othello', ‘brave Othello’, and ‘our noble and valiant general’. The war with the Turks is presented in a businesslike way as a national emergency, and the ironic undertones that we find in the presentation of war in the history plays (even Henry V gives us Williams's speech about the legs and arms and heads joining together at the latter day to confront the warrior king) seem to be excluded from Othello. The hero is marked by his self-control and refusal to be roused to anger, as in ‘Put up your bright swords for the dew will rust them’ and ‘Were it my cue to fight I should have known it / Without a prompter’. After Othello's disintegration we are sadly reminded of this moral strength by Lodovico's words: ‘Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake?’ (IV, i, 261-2). The portrait is of a kind of soldier who does not exist elsewhere in the plays, except in minor characters. Othello tries to control emotion, unlike Henry V, who before battle has to:

Imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favoured rage

This emphasis gives his breakdown of control in Act III a more intense effect, and is also in direct contradiction to the conception of the Negro as a man swayed by passion which was current in Shakespeare's time.

The famous ‘farewell’ speech also becomes more meaningful when spoken by a black Othello. ‘The big wars / That make ambition virtue’, a phrase which one tends to accept as a piece of rhetoric, gains a literal truth, because the sin of ambition (and ambition was still reckoned as a sin) has been purified, in Othello, by courage and endurance, and by the fact that only ambition could enable him to escape the hardships and humiliations of his early life. The speech is not merely the longing for military action of the incurable romantic. The pride, pomp and circumstance, the spirit-stirring drum, and the rest must be seen in relation to the harshly realistic conclusion, ‘Othello's occupation's gone’. This moment reduced Kean's audiences to tears; it was a part of Othello's experience which Kean, with his precarious and uneven career, was well able to understand and convey. The realization that his career is irrevocably over throws an aura of nostalgia over Othello's war experience, so that he looks back at the trappings of war as a dying man looks back at life.

As we approach the tragic climax, when jealousy has taken possession, Othello behaves very like the Moor of ancient tradition; his irrational acceptance of the flimsiest evidence, his return to superstitious beliefs, his uncontrollable anger, and his resort to violence and revenge—all these are consistent with mediaeval tradition. Nevertheless, it seems to me unlikely that Shakespeare intended to go back to an acceptance of the popular preconceptions which he had flouted in the early scenes. Othello was very closely followed by King Lear, and in both plays Shakespeare seems to be exploring the basic nature of man, and especially the effect on that nature of the subservience of reason to the passions. In Lear reason is literally overthrown when Lear becomes mad, while in Othello jealousy and rage take control. By portraying the disintegration of a black hero whose nobility had been effectively established, Shakespeare was able to show man as the prey of his uncontrollable emotions with extra dramatic effect, and it suggests another reason for the choice of a black hero. No more extreme example of jealousy could be imagined than that of a man who kills the wife he deeply loves, but there would have been difficulty in making such a theme acceptable to the audience. If, however, the jealous husband who must commit the murder is black, it removes the crime of sexual violence from everyday surroundings and experience and makes the audience more prepared to accept it. By taking an alien from a strange cultural background the dramatist would feel liberated. True, it is made quite explicit that Othello is a baptized Christian, which brings him closer to the audience and separates him from the Turkish enemy. But once subservient to Iago, and having taken his terrible vow of revenge, Othello reverts to superstitious belief. Here, I think, lies the significance of the much-discussed speech about the handkerchief, although there are other possible interpretations. The Christian veneer is thin, and Othello is left exposed to unknown forces of evil. In the same way, Macbeth succumbs to the destructive influence of the witches once he has embarked on the series of murders; the first one involves the betrayal of the most sacred laws of kinship. Shakespeare's
tragedies are much concerned with the precariousness of civilized behaviour in man.

The Russian actor, Alexander Ostumov, who set himself to study the part of Othello throughout his career, identifying with him as if he were a real man, saw the problem of the final scene to be that of acting the part so as to make people love Othello and forget he is a murderer. ‘Forget’ may seem an over-statement, but Shakespeare comes near to making it possible when Othello answers Lodovico’s question, ‘What shall be said of thee?’ (a question which hardly expects a reply) with the words, ‘An honourable murderer, if you will’. Rather than being outraged by such a statement, we see in it a terrible pathos. Our sympathy for Othello is never completely destroyed. Here again Othello's colour plays some part. Throughout the scene he is a lonely but dominating figure. Emilia's horror at what has happened brings her racial prejudice to the fore: ‘O my good lord’, as she enters, becomes ‘you the blacker devil!’, ‘her most filthy bargain’, and ‘O thou dull Moor’. By this time the audience is expecting the event for which they have long been waiting, the unmasking of Iago. When it comes, Othello looks down at Iago's feet for the mythical cloven hoofs, and demands an explanation from ‘that demi-devil’, and we are once more reminded that blackness of soul belongs to the white villain rather than to his black victim. The term ‘slave’ is used several times: Montano pursues Iago, ‘for tis a damned slave’; Lodovico reproaches Othello for having ‘fall’n in the practice of a cursed slave’, and later refers to Iago as ‘this slave’. Slavery here represents degraded behaviour, and it is the deed, the ‘practice’ of Othello (who was once redeemed from slavery) that is slavish, whereas in Iago's case it is the man himself.

There is no record of any controversy over the type of Moor intended by Shakespeare until late in the eighteenth century. Before that the principal actor blacked himself as far as he could. Edmund Kean was the first to play Othello as a ‘tawny’ Moor and he was so successful in the part that he dominated the stage for many years. The Romantic critics, especially Lamb and Coleridge, reacted so violently against the idea of a Negro Othello that their views became firmly established. The great Negro actor, Ira Aldridge, played in London just as Kean's career was ending. In 1833 the critics wrote scathing reviews of his performance, although the audiences received him well. He did not play again in London for many years, but he did return in 1865, after playing in Othello all over Europe and winning many awards and medals. By that time he had more favourable notices; but although no other actor had much success as Othello during the rest of the nineteenth century, the question of colour remained unresolved. In 1876 Henry Irving played him ‘slightly tinged with walnut brown, according to the Edmund Kean precedent, so much applauded by Coleridge’. In 1881 he acted the part again, this time as black as possible, so that Ellen Terry records: ‘Before he had done with me, I was nearly as black as he.’ Neither production was successful.

The other outstanding Negro actor to play Othello was Paul Robeson. When he first came to London he studied voice and diction with Amanda Aldridge, Ira Aldridge's youngest daughter, who was only an infant when her father died in 1867. It is thus more than likely that some of the tradition of the first great Negro actor was passed on to the next, since Amanda would know many people who had seen her father's performances. Robeson first played in London in 1930, and his last performance in England was in Stratford in 1959: Aldridge's appearances in Othello covered thirty-nine years. It is an interesting example of the potential time-span of theatrical tradition.

These Negro actors did much to change the accepted ideas about Othello's colour, as contemporary tributes show. Two examples provide enough evidence that the importance of this question is not merely hypothetical. Theophile Gautier wrote of Ira Aldridge's Othello in St. Petersburg:

L’origine d’Ira Aldrigge le dispensait de toute teinture au jus de réglisse et au marc de café; il n’avait pas besoin de mettre ses bras dans les manches d’un tricot chocolat. La peau du rôle était la sienne, et il ne lui fallait nul effort pour y entrer. Aussi son entrée en scène fut-elle magnifique: c’était Othello lui-même comme l’a créé Shakespeare, avec ses yeux à demi-fermés comme éblouis du soleil d’Afrique, sa nonchalante attitude orientale et cette désinvolture de nègre qu’aucun Européen ne peut imiter.
When John Dover Wilson wrote his introduction to the New Cambridge edition of *Othello* in 1943, he recorded the lasting impression which Robeson made on him. His first heading is ‘The Moor’, indicating that he felt that the question of Othello's race should be considered before everything else. He writes:

I felt I was seeing the tragedy for the first time, not merely because of Robeson's acting, which despite a few petty faults of technique was magnificent, but because the fact that he was a true Negro seemed to floodlight the whole drama. Everything was slightly different from what I had previously imagined; new points, fresh nuances, were constantly emerging; and all had, I felt, been clearly intended by the author. The performance convinced me, in short, that a Negro Othello is essential to the full understanding of the play.

It is exciting to think that the truth of this view may be demonstrated by an infinite set of variations in the interpretations of the part of Othello, as more Negro actors undertake it.

**Notes**


**Criticism: Race: Phyllis Natalie Braxton (essay date 1990)**


[In the essay below, Braxton contends that Othello is not a play about race, and suggests “a dramaturgical purpose for the character's blackness. …”]

Although the circumstance of Othello's blackness is often assumed to embody a racial problem, as in K. W. Evans's assertion in “The Racial Factor in *Othello*” that “no analysis of the play can be adequate if it ignores the factor of race” (125), Shakespeare's play itself demonstrates that Othello's color outweighs in significance the element of race. Physical characteristics, of course, help define race, and Othello's black skin and thick lips identify him as a member of the Negroid race, as distinguished from either the Caucasoid or Mongoloid races. The difficulty of determining Othello's specific ethnic background on the basis of textual evidence suggests that those details that relate to race are included for the purpose of lending verisimilitude to the character's black skin color and not for the purpose of describing an ethnic black of any fixed derivation. In this article, I will try, first, to demonstrate the manner in which race is used in the play primarily to support the fact of Othello's black skin color and, second, to suggest a dramaturgical purpose for the character's blackness in light of the ambiguity of his race.

I

The attempt of critics to discover Othello's specific ethnic background has generally resulted in identifying the character as a native of the African continent. A. W. Schlegel, for example, who seems to have initiated the subject of Othello's ethnicity in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, comments that Shakespeare transformed Cinthio's Moor—“a baptized Saracen of the Northern coast of Africa”—into a Negro, whom Schlegel located in the southern regions of Africa (401). A. C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, similarly accepted Othello as a native of the African continent, even though he considered it of little consequence.
“whether Shakespeare imagined Othello as a Negro or as a Moor” (166). In his study of Othello’s Countrymen, Eldred Jones considers Othello, together with all stage Moors, as natives of the African continent, without specifying the particular location (87).

In an essay entitled “Did Shakespeare Know Leo Africanus?” Lois Whitney proposes that Shakespeare drew the salient features of Othello's portrayal from the work of this early historian, adding that “Shakespeare was describing neither a Moor nor a negro in our modern conception of the terms but a confusion of the two types” (477). M. R. Ridley, in his edition of Othello, judges that the evidence about Othello's origins is “indecisive” (liii). He accepts the description of the black-skinned, thick-lipped Othello as that of an African, but observes that, while the character may look like a “negro,” two words used in connection with Othello—“‘Barbary’ and ‘Mauritania’”—suggest that he may be an Arab from North Africa (liii).

While such criticism tends to assume that Negroes occupy sub-Saharan Africa, whereas Arabs live in North Africa, the suggestion of ambiguity about Othello's geographical background is not addressed in terms of the significance this feature may have for dramaturgical necessity.

Those sociological and historical discussions of race that include Shakespeare's Othello as a document illustrating Elizabethan racism seem to assume that Othello is an African, but do not concern themselves about the particular region in Africa from which he may derive. In White Over Black, his influential study of racial attitudes in the United States of America, Winthrop Jordan simply accepts the character as an example of the average Elizabethan Englishman's idea of a black African or Moor—Jordan, like Jones, uses the terms interchangeably (37-38). Jordan then ascribes to Shakespeare and his contemporary audiences the pernicious notions about blacks that the playwright had been careful to assign to Iago as an element in Iago's plot to destroy Othello (37). Like Jordan, Joseph Washington, in Anti-Blackness in English Religion, 1500-1800, uses Othello as an example of what he considers the English nation's antipathy towards blacks (71). In his view, Othello is “deliberately caricatured as an African” (71).

Such views to the contrary, criticism has also taken the position that Othello is white. Mary Preston of Maryland, for example, in her 1869 Studies in Shakespeare, declared that “Othello was a white man” (qtd. in Furness 395). Washington judges that Shakespeare created Othello to be “in reality black but in character white” (71). Jonathan Miller, in Subsequent Performances, claims dramaturgical necessity for having presented the white actor Anthony Hopkins as a white Othello in the BBC-TV version of the play so as to minimize the differences between Othello and Desdemona (159).2

Textual evidence, of course, is conclusive that the character is black in color. Othello calls himself “black” (3.3.263) and describes his face as “begrim’d and black” (3.3.387); Iago likens him to “an old black ram” (1.1.88) and refers to him as “black Othello” (2.3.32); Brabantio notes his “sooty bosom” (1.2.70); the Duke, praising Othello's character, tells Brabantio that “your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.290); and Roderigo initially sets Iago to thinking in terms of race when he characterizes Othello to Iago, by a feature common to native Africans and their descendants, as “the thick lips” (1.1.66).

The unequivocal manner in which Othello's blackness is described in the text suggests that the playwright wanted the character understood as literally black in color, as he seems to be in twentieth-century criticism, just as Aaron in Titus Andronicus is literally black in color (Titus Andronicus 3.1.205). He is not a light-skinned or “tawny Moor,” as is the Prince of Morocco in The Merchant of Venice (2.1.1.s.d.), although, according to Bradley, nineteenth-century criticism tended to describe Othello in this way (168).

While insisting that the character is black in color, the text does not point to any one ethnic background for Othello. Features in his portrayal seem to have been drawn from all of the blacks who may have been in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. This would have included Spanish Moors, as well as Africans from a variety of locations on the African continent. Indeed, the playwright seems to have avoided assigning to
Othello a specific geographical origin or ethnic background.

Eldred Jones, in *The Elizabethan Image of Africa*, notes that blacks from Africa had been present in England since 1554, chiefly in the capacity of slaves, although he points out that, until the initiation of the triangular slaving voyages in the following decade, Africans also traveled freely between Africa and England (*Elizabethan Image* 15-16).

Africans in Elizabethan England—either slave or free—might have come from a variety of backgrounds, and their skin colors might have varied in shade (Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 16). Whatever the Africans may have called themselves, literature on the subject seems to designate as Negroes those Africans of native African ancestry who predominated in the lands south of the Sahara, although they lived in North Africa as well; they were generally dark-skinned. West Africans might be almost any shade from black to cream. Africans of Arabian ancestry seemed to predominate in North Africa, but dwelt south of the Sahara also. The prevailing religion in North Africa was Islam; native African religions predominated in the sub-Saharan regions (Bennett 17-25). Jones, in an evident reference to Africans of any background, comments that “not only is it certain that Shakespeare, living as he did in London and being so much a part of his times, would have had the opportunity to see Negroes, it seems impossible that he could have escaped seeing them” (*Elizabethan Image* 16-17). Jones probably did not exclude Arabs of African birth from his observation. He comments on the presence of the Moslem nobleman who had been “sent by the king of Morocco on an embassy” to Elizabeth's court in 1600 (*Elizabethan Image* 35); it does not seem unreasonable to assume that this North African was also seen by Shakespeare. This visit occurred too late to influence the portrayal of Shakespeare's Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* but the ambassador's exotic presence could have affected his creation of *Othello*, presented in 1604.

In addition to Africans, Spanish Moors seem also to have been present in England in Shakespeare's lifetime. The Spanish Moors were descendants of those Moslems who rode out of the Arabian peninsula in the seventh century (Abercrombie 87), “carr[y]ing Islam across North Africa and into Spain” (Bennett 12). Many African Negroes, converts to Islam, accompanied the Moslem armies into Spain (Bennett 12). As Thomas J. Abercrombie notes, in his article “When the Moors Ruled Spain,” these Moorish conquerors, who were not ousted from power until 1492, “brought no women with them. From this heady mix of race and culture sprang the Moorish civilization” of Spain (88). These Spanish Moors seem to be the subject of the decrees which Queen Elizabeth issued in 1599 and 1601 concerning the numbers of blacks in England. In the 1601 decree, the Queen complains that

> whereas the Queen's majesty … is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm since the troubles between Her Highness and the King of Spain, who are fostered and relieved here to the great annoyance of her own liege people that want the relief which those people consume; as also for that most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel, hath given especial commandment that the said kind of people should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this Her Majesty's dominions.

(qtd. in Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 20)

In his history of *The Moriscos of Spain*, Henry Charles Lea points out that those Islamic Moors in Spain who had refused, despite the threat of reprisals, to convert to Catholicism had sought assistance from Spain’s enemies—France and, later, England (Lea 281-82, 287; see also 292-365). Officially, England denied assistance to the Islamic Moors from Spain (287), but Elizabeth's order seems to indicate that they were in the kingdom, albeit unofficially, where Shakespeare may well have had an opportunity to observe them.
Accustomed to seeing these various dark-skinned people in England, and probably having developed no special attitudes towards them, either disparaging or complimentary, a playwright might have exploited their characteristics in a portrayal of a fictional character who was black in color. Nothing in the text of *Othello* suggests that Shakespeare was concerned with depicting Othello exclusively as an African. The character is not identified in the play as an African. Instead, throughout the play, he is called either by the name “Othello,” or, following Cinthio’s practice, is designated “The Moor” (Kermode 1198). One might, of course, ask whether the term “African” is simply missing from Shakespeare’s customary vocabulary, but in *The Tempest*, he demonstrates that he has no hesitation in describing someone as an African. In that play, on the occasion of the supposed drowning of Alonso’s son, during the storm that occurs as the royal family are returning from the wedding of Alonso’s daughter, the playwright causes Sebastian to declare to Alonso:

Sir, you may thank yourself for this great loss,  
That would not bless our Europe with your daughter,  
But rather loose her to an African.

(*The Tempest* 2.1.124-26)

Even though the playwright is not specific about Othello's background, critics generally consider that Shakespeare developed the character as an African, and many details in his portrayal can be traced to African sources. Whitney conjectures that Othello is composed of features drawn from both North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans (see above, p. 2). Jones considers that the character is a “blend of characteristics popularly attributed to North African Moors with the color known to be more common in West Africa, and called no more erroneously then than now, black” (*Elizabethan Image* 37). The character's black skin, of course, could have derived from any of the blacks observed in England. The insistence upon “sooty” black skin and upon thick lips suggests that the playwright selected these details from among those Africans who would have provided what Jones terms the greatest “dramatic contrast” with Europeans (*Elizabethan Image* 41). The character's claim of descent from “men of royal siege” indicates a background resembling that of that Moroccan nobleman who visited the court in 1600, and, as Whitney demonstrates in her speculative article, Othello's nobility also seems to parallel the status of the historian Leo Africanus (477),4 who converted to Christianity as an adult, after his Moslem parents had taken him to Africa during his childhood when the Moors were finally defeated at Granada (Washington 64-65). Whether or not Shakespeare knew the English translation of Leo’s *History of Africa* (1600), his probable knowledge of the blacks in England would have no doubt provided him with ample information for his portrayal of Othello.

Cultural details in Shakespeare’s portrait of Othello are as ambiguous as are details about the character's background. Othello's language, for example, may have been influenced by his conception of Arabic as much as by the playwright’s acquaintance with native African tongues. The copiousness of Othello's speech has been commented upon in criticism at least since the observation by Thomas Rymer in *A Short View of Tragedy* that “our Noble Venetian[’s] ... words flow in abundance; no Butter-Quean can be more lavish” (Rymer 139). At least one critic, G. B. Harrison, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, considers that Othello “has some characteristics of the savage [including] a hyperbolic utterance when aroused” (1057), suggesting with his unfortunate locution that Othello's speech is influenced by native African languages. While it is possible, of course, that Shakespeare was influenced by what he may have known of native African tongues, it is also possible that he found a model for Othello's language among the Moors, either from North Africa or Spain, and their Arabic, with its “wealth of vocabulary [and] its sonorous sounds” (Abercrombie 107). Othello's melodious speech seems to imitate these features of the Arabic.5

While the depiction of Othello's background and his language both could have been influenced by knowledge of Africans from any location on that continent, or of Moors from Africa or Spain, some of the details in his portrayal seem to have a uniquely Spanish source. In religion Othello is a Christian. He exhorts Cassio and the other brawling soldiers “for Christian shame” (2.3.172) to cease fighting, and Iago, speaking in a soliloquy,
muses about Othello's wanting Desdemona, even if it means that the Moor has to “renounce his baptism” (2.3.343). This feature in Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello seems to refer specifically to the Spanish Moors. The conversion of many of the Moors in Spain to Christianity is well-documented in history (Lea 82-177). Whether great numbers of native Africans became converts to Christianity is doubtful. There seems to have been no exigency in Africa that urged conversion to any religion other than Islam similar to the impetus in Spain for Moors to become Christians.

Similarly, when Othello describes himself as a slave who has been redeemed (1.3.137-38), the detail seems to allude to a situation prevailing among the Spanish Moors. The Moors in Spain were repeatedly enslaved for reasons of war or religion, and often their chief reason for converting to Christianity was to regain their freedom (Lea 27). Africans, on the other hand, seem usually to have been held as bond slaves (Craton xii-xiii), and bond slaves did not seem to have the option of redemption open to them. It appears, therefore, that Shakespeare had in mind the type of slavery common in Spain when he included this feature in his portrayal of Othello. Brabantio's sneering reference to “bond slaves and pagans” (1.2.99) seems to be an oblique attempt to sully the reputation of the redeemed slave and baptized Christian, Othello.

As with his ancestry and his language, details of Othello's military career and his travels may have been influenced by either African or Spanish sources, or both. The bravery of the Africans is noted by Basil Davidson, who points out in his *The African Slave Trade* that African armies successfully resisted invasion from outside the continent for centuries (27). Leo Africanus praises the Moors in Africa as “brave and noble soldiers” (Whitney 480). The Moors in Spain were also great warriors, as their conquest and long occupation of that land attests. The threat of a Moorish reconquest of Spain remained so real that, in 1570 (Lea 230-65) and again in 1609, the monarchy ordered the expulsion of all non-Catholic Moors from Spanish soil (Livermore 289). This demonstrated military prowess of the Spanish Moors may, therefore, have influenced Shakespeare in describing Othello's military ability as much as any knowledge of African warriors he may have had.

Those details concerning Othello's travels that could have been drawn from African sources suggest that he may have traveled widely, but they do not give any indication of the particular countries to which he traveled or from which he came. The sights that he reports seeing are strange to him; he tells

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of antres vast and deserts idle
Rough quarries, rocks [and] hills whose [heads] touch heaven,
......And of the Cannibals that each [other] eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
[Do grow] beneath their shoulders.
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(1.3.140-45)

Othello does not identify these sights as belonging to any particular country. Geographically speaking, the description could refer to Africa (Jones, *Elizabethan Image* 5) or India (French 808); in the text of the play, these features seem to belong to some vague, unidentified (perhaps, to Othello, unidentifiable) lands. The source for the description is unclear. Ridley suggests that it “seems as idle as the deserts to try to determine whether Shakespeare was primarily indebted to Mandeville or Raleigh [sic] or Holland's Pliny” as a source for such “travellers' tales” (Ridley 29). Othello, of course, states that he had come to know these places as a traveler (1.3.139). Shakespeare had it within his power to name the lands to which his Moor traveled, as easily as he named, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Goodwins, where one of Antonio's ships had been wrecked (3.1.2-4). Dramaturgically, he must have found it necessary to be unspecific about Othello's travels, just as he was about the Moor's origins.

The details of Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello seem to indicate that the character was not meant to be limited to either an African, from whatever locale, or a Moor, either Spanish or African. Unlike Leo
Africanus, the historian, who came from a particular place, Granada, and went specifically to Africa and, later, to Italy, Othello is represented as traveling constantly, but to vague, unspecified places, while his homeland is not named. Even the designation of Othello as a Moor is ambiguous. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy's etymology of Moor, in Black Face, Maligned Race, while probably exaggerating the Elizabethans' total identification of this term with “black African” (1), at least makes it clear that to the Elizabethans “Moor” described “at the simplest level … the Other, the non-English, the non-Christian” (17). Although a Christian, the non-Venetian Othello is indeed the Other. But the term “Moor” is vague. According to Abercrombie, Moors never called themselves Moors: “they were Arabs from Damascus and Medina, leading armies of North African Berber converts” (Abercrombie 88). To Elliot H. Tokson in The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688, the only definite feature about a Moor was that he was black in color (3). Unlike the terms used to describe characters such as Portia's suitors—“the Neapolitan prince,” “the French lord,” “the County Palentine” (The Merchant of Venice 1.2.39-54), or the Princes of Morocco (1.2.125) and Arragon (2.9.2), all of which indicate the characters' origins—Othello's origin is not named. The details in his characterization confirm that Othello is black in color without making the blackness that of a black of any one particular background.

II

Why does Othello have to be black? When I heard this question at a scholarly meeting, it was raised by a person who probably just wanted an answer. Long accustomed to having black heroes belittled by the dominant culture, I reacted with a barely restrained hostility, demonstrating my susceptibility to the modern tendency to foreground race. On reflection, I realized that the questioner seemed to be trying to place the problem within the context of the fictional world of the play.

Within the context of the fictional worlds of Venice and Cyprus, “why,” as Washington phrases the question, “did Shakespeare choose to develop Othello in the character and action of a black Moor?” (70). Washington's answer was that Shakespeare wanted “to show the particular problems of a black in white society” (72). Yet the playwright seems to have made no effort to create a black of any specific ethnicity. He simply insists upon the character's black skin color.

Shakespeare could be demonstrating, in the nonspecific nature of Othello's background and the ambiguity of the cultural details in his portrayal, that the Other is always mysterious and without clear definition. Once defined, he is no longer the Other. Immediately contradicting this theory is The Merchant of Venice, in which Shylock may be defined as the Other. Shylock's background as a Jew is never in doubt. A Jew supposed to be living in Venice in the Renaissance could be assumed to be a resident of the ghetto (Sachar 251). Although he may be the Other in his relationship to the majority of Venetians, he is located securely within a tradition, a culture, and a history. However, Shylock's role does not seem to be designed for the purpose of exploring the character of a Jew but rather of exploiting the characteristics of a usurer.6 The dramatic structure called for a character who takes no chances. Shakespeare found such a feature in the character of a money lender, and money lenders at that time were Jewish. Consequently, the playwright wove into his plot the Jewish money lender, apologizing in advance for any implied anti-Semitism by placing in Shylock's mouth a moving plea for understanding (3.1.53-73).

In the same way that Shylock fills a specific need in the dramatic structure by virtue of the usurer's characteristic of absolute caution (while he remains the Other in terms of societal relationships), Othello's color seems to derive from a specific dramaturgical requirement. As with Shylock, the playwright does not seem to be exploring the character; he is exploiting one feature—in Othello's case, he is exploiting the black skin color. Other features are included only insofar as they are required to complete a believable portrayal of a black. These other details are drawn from the many blacks who were presumably present in England in Shakespeare's lifetime. From the great variety in the appearance of these strangers, the playwright seems to have selected those physical features which would most clearly distinguish Othello from the native inhabitants
of Venice (which was, of course, a way of making the character most alien to an audience of native Englishmen). Othello, therefore, was given black skin and thick lips.

As I have attempted to show, the character is not a black of a particular ethnicity; furthermore, the play does not focus upon his problems as a black in the community. His problems do not seem to be with the community at large; he has the respect of the Duke and the government; he has a sensitive and trusted position as general; he marries a girl who has previously been the object of many suitors of her own race. His problems seem to be confined to Iago's personal animosity toward him. Thus, the thesis that Othello's tragedy derives from his status as the Other is not dramaturgically defensible. Despite his physical identification as the Other, his interaction with the native Venetians (other than Iago) would discourage an interpretation of him as the Other in the sense of an outsider who is totally alienated from the community. In this respect, then, the plot does not require that he be black. He is not white—although, to some critics in the nineteenth century, his personal characteristics may have seemed at variance with certain widely-held notions of the proper traits for a stage black. The motive of jealousy in the play does not require that he be black. Yet the playwright seems to have gone to extraordinary pains to develop this character so that his black skin color would be clearly understood.

The reason for the character's black skin color should be inherent in the dramatic elements of character and plot. Thus, the need for the Jewish money lender in The Merchant of Venice grows out of the demands of character and plot, and Aaron's black skin color in Titus Andronicus is dramaturgically necessary and probable because black is usually accepted as the color of the evil that Aaron personifies (3.1.205). The seeming failure of character and plot in Othello to yield a dramaturgical purpose for the character's black skin color is perhaps what has led to the critical assumption that the purpose is extradramatic, residing in the audience's response to the relationship between blacks and whites. When examined, however, even this reason has less validity for Shakespeare's Elizabethan audiences than it has for later audiences viewing the play against the background of bond slavery.

Additionally, the visual and emblematic contrasts provided by Othello's color are insufficient to explain why he is black. Visually, the blackness contrasts with Desdemona's "whiter skin … than snow" (5.2.4). But there seems to be little point in providing a visual contrast that does not appear to illuminate the text. Emblematically, the traditional associations with black and white are reversed, as Doris Adler demonstrates in her article on "The Rhetoric of Black and White in Othello," so that in the play, as G. K. Hunter observes in "Othello and Colour Prejudice," Iago is represented as "the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul" (151). Moreover, as Adler points out (255), Bianca, whose name translates as "white," with its resonances of "good" and "pure," is so far from being pure that she is characterized as a courtesan, or in Iago's words, Cassio's "whore" (4.1.177). In Romeo and Juliet, verbal contrasts, including black-versus-white imagery, support the tragic conflict between the two feuding families; along similar lines, one might assume that the black-and-white contrasts in Othello are employed for the purpose of supporting the major theme, but the major theme of the play seems to contradict this notion. Iago and Othello are not equal antagonists as are the families in Romeo and Juliet, and as the diametric opposition in a black-versus-white contrast suggests should be the case. Othello is a passive victim who does not recognize Iago as his antagonist until Desdemona is dead and Iago's plot to destroy Othello is irreversible. The seeming divergence between traditional color symbolism and the use of color in Othello suggests that color in the play is not used primarily to underscore a conflict between evenly matched contestants.

Othello is destroyed as the result of the machinations of Iago, who is nevertheless not punished within the confines of the dramatic action. Such an absence of predetermined poetic justice demonstrates an arbitrary working of fate. While this theme of the arbitrariness of fate seems to be reflected in the unexpected reversal of the color symbolism, the skin color, as a detail of the characterization of the protagonist, calls for an explanation arising out of both character and plot. Within the great chain of being that the Elizabethans assumed gave order to the universe (Tillyard 25-36), one could find illustrations of the arbitrariness of fate.
among the meanest creatures of the earth. E. M. W. Tillyard explains in *The Elizabethan World Picture* how the Elizabethans drew lessons about their own lives by observing these humble creatures:

[T]he Elizabethans looked on the lower end of the chain of being mainly in the light of themselves. Its great variety and ingenuity were indeed testimonies of the creator's wonderful power, but its main function was to provide symbols or to point morals for the benefit of man. The ant was a wonderful creation, but the chief thing was that he was there for the sluggard to go to.

(80)

Ben Jonson's *Volpone* demonstrates the manner in which Elizabethans gave dramatic form to such lessons drawn from observation of the lower orders. The behavior of the fictional Volpone, who pretends to be dying in order to expose the rapaciousness of his friends, parallels the *modus operandi* in the legends that Jonson's sources gave him about the fox, who “feigned death in order to catch birds, especially ‘ravens, crows, and other birds,’ which light near the supposed carcass and are seized” (Nethercot 131).

An easily observable natural phenomenon, which demonstrates the arbitrariness of fate and which requires no confirmation except the evidence of one's eyes, occurs in the action of a spider capturing a fly in its web. The events of *Othello* parallel the actions of the spider in his destruction of the fly. Iago is the spider who, with true “motiveless malignity,” seeks the destruction of Othello for a variety of invented reasons, but chiefly for the unspoken reason that Othello, the fly, is his natural enemy. The metaphor, which can be traced throughout the language as well as the action of the play, has been noted by Caroline Spurgeon. In her seminal study, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, she includes a description of the preponderance of animal imagery in *Othello* (336); Spurgeon comments that, in this play,

we see a low type of life, insects and reptiles, swarming and preying on each other, not out of special ferocity, but just in accordance with their natural instincts. … This reflects and repeats the spectacle of the wanton torture of one human being by another, which we witness in the tragedy, the human spider and his fly.

(336)

Iago's language reflects this metaphor of the “human spider and his fly,” while, at the same time, it reveals his method of trapping his intended victims. At one moment, when Iago, Cassio, Emilia, and Desdemona are engaged in conversation, Iago observes Cassio touch Desdemona's hand, and the ensign murmurs to himself, “With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” (2.1.168-69). Later, in a soliloquy, he declares of Desdemona that “out of her own goodness [will I] make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (2.3.361-62). Iago turns the circumstances of the victim's own life into the material to destroy the victim: Othello's blackness; Cassio's casual action of respect for Desdemona; Desdemona's goodness. Although he is eventually unsuccessful in his plot against Cassio, Iago has included him in his widening plot, as the destruction of everyone seems to have become, for him, an end in itself. As with spiders, his “web” will snare any creature that falls into it.

Iago is portrayed throughout with features peculiar to the spider; details in Othello's portrait conform to the characteristics of the fly. The resemblances between both of these fictional inventions and their counterparts in the insect world are too consistent to be considered coincidental. From his childhood to his death, Othello corresponds in development to a fly. He has been a warrior since the age of seven; in other words, upon his transformation from infancy and early childhood, he has assumed the responsibilities of an adult. In the same way, the fly assumes adult status immediately upon emerging from the larval stage. Othello's residence on islands—areas surrounded by seas—parallels the fly's tendency to inhabit almost exclusively damp places.
Othello travels constantly, just as flies are always on the wing; Othello's sonorous and repetitive speech has the droning quality associated with insects such as flies and mosquitoes. Maturity is accompanied, in humans and animals alike, by courtship rituals—Desdemona is attracted by Othello's stories of his wondrous exploits—and the sudden elopement of the sheltered Desdemona with Othello is perhaps not dissimilar to the abrupt mating of the creatures of the wild, which select mates independently of any authority, and depart suddenly from the nurturing habitation without plan or warning. Most significantly, the Moor is helpless to save himself when in the throes of his enemy, Iago, just as the fly is a helpless victim when it is caught in the web of its natural enemy, the spider.

Through this metaphor, Othello's blackness is revealed as a function of both character and plot. The spider's victim is typically some kind of wandering insect who blunders into the spider's web. The spider does not seek out its victim, but when it sees one in its web, it sets out immediately to destroy that victim. The play, therefore, required first of all a character who would be recognized by the audience as someone out of his native element—a wanderer. Persons with black skin in Elizabethan England could generally be classified as wanderers; Othello is thus depicted with the black skin common to these wanderers, the color of his skin conforming to the color of the spider's most frequent victim, the fly. The spider, who remains in its web awaiting a victim, need only be characterized as a creature on its home grounds, prepared to destroy any unwitting trespasser. In the dramatic structure, therefore, the spider is depicted with the protective coloring of one who is native to the environment; consequently, Iago (a Florentine [3.1.40]), has the white skin of a native of the Italian peninsula. The action of the play dramatizes the manner in which the fly wanders into the spider's web and is destroyed by the spider.

Just as the Holocaust has altered our reaction to Shylock, so that, in recoiling from the horror of recent historical events, we now foreground the humanity of the Jew in the fictive tragedy of _The Merchant of Venice_ rather than the caution of the usurer, so the legacy of chattel slavery has affected modern responses to _Othello_. Audiences and critics now try to come to terms with what they perceive as a racial emphasis in the play and, in the process, fail to realize that Othello, as a fictional construct, is an element in the controlling metaphor. In his thoughtful essay on “Othello and the ‘plain face’ of Racism,” Martin Orkin asserts that the play stands against racism. While Shakespeare's play is perhaps less consciously didactic than Orkin claims, the playwright does demonstrate the virulence of racism by having Iago introduce it into the plot as a fatal “poison” (1.1.68), just as the spider injects venom into its victim. Iago gloats as he lets his “medicine” work (4.1.45), just as the spider lets its victim writhe under the effect of the poison.

The playwright lets the punishment of the poisoner remain uncertain, reflecting the manner in which the spider in nature is not necessarily punished for killing the fly. Iago's punishment, if any, which is urged by Lodovico, but left to the discretion of Cassio (5.2.367-69), does not take place within the confines of the dramatic action. Those in the audience who demand retribution are therefore free to conjecture that Iago suffers proper punishment for his evil. The playwright, meanwhile, remains true to the natural order that is demonstrated in the mimetic action when he refrains from actively punishing this “human spider,” for nature does not judge as evil a natural force, or treat as evil the natural enmity of one species towards another. If the spider should also be killed as a result of this struggle, it is not in the nature of retribution, punishment, or revenge, but simply another incident in the bitter fight for survival. If the spider is not killed, that also is in the natural order of things. The destruction of Othello as a result of the machinations of Iago reflects this cosmic struggle, with the absence of predetermined poetic justice in the drama suggesting both the amoral aspects of the natural forces at work and the arbitrariness of an indifferent fate.

_Notes_

1. Norman Verrle McCullough, in contrast to the actor Paul Robeson and director Margaret Webster, both of whom, he asserts, tried to prove that _Othello_ is a “play about race,” is sure that “_Othello_ is not a play of race, and only by following a raceless approach to the play will the reader or viewer discover
the true tragic thrill of Shakespeare's play” (The Negro in English Literature 47).
2. According to James C. Bulman in an article in the Shakespeare Quarterly, the original producer of the BBC-TV series, Cedric Messina, had “tried to cast James Earl Jones as Othello but was forbidden to do so by British Equity” (580).
3. Jones cites this order to support his theory that the Queen thought the number of African natives in England so great as to create a problem (Elizabethan Image 20). That the Queen included not only Spanish Moors but also African slaves in her order, seems evident from her special statement that people who were “possessed of any such Blackamoors” should surrender them (10).
4. According to John Pory, who, in 1600 had translated Leo's History of Africa into English, prefacing it with a biography of the author, Leo's “[p]arentage seemeth not to have bin ignoble” (qtd. in Whitney 477).
5. Othello's speech before the Senate, in which he relates how his marriage came about, occupies forty-three lines (1.3.127-70). His language frequently includes repetition, in phrases such as the following: “She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange: / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful” (1.3.160-61), and “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (5.2.7), as he utters a thought and returns to utter it again.
6. Warren D. Smith, who also suggests this idea in an essay entitled “Shakespeare's Shylock,” does not follow the notion up for its dramaturgical possibilities (195).
7. Barthelemy notes that the “overwhelming majority” of black characters presented on the stage in England “between 1589 and 1695 endorsed, represented, or were evil” (72). Characters such as the Moor Muly Mahamet in George Peele's Battle of Alcazar were strong, self-confident characters, but as blacks, they stood for evil. The strength and confidence of the evil black characters were perhaps mistaken by Preston in the nineteenth century (see above, page 2) for traits more appropriate for white characters. During the nineteenth century, audiences were probably more accustomed to the representation on stage of the type of subservient, menial blacks that appeared in such popular plays as Dion Boucicault’s The Octoroon (1859). This new stereotype of the stage black was a result of the crystallization of attitudes developed in an attempt to justify chattel slavery (Jordan 27). This social conditioning is perhaps what caused Preston, “Coleridge, and … the American writers” who professed to believe that Othello was a white or tawny Moor (Bradley 168) to allow their critical judgment to falter.
8. The allegory of spiders and flies was familiar to Shakespeare’s audiences from John Heywood's poem, The Spider and the Flie, which had appeared a generation previously in 1556. In the introduction to this long, allegorical work, A. W. Ward reports that, in one reading of the poem, anthropomorphic spiders and flies, representing respectively Protestants and Catholics, fight a war about idolatry, until the head spider—who represents the Duke of Northumberland, the leader of the Protestant plot against the Catholic Queen Mary—is crushed underfoot by the Maid, signifying the beheading of the Duke (Heywood vii-ix). The poem demonstrates how the Renaissance imagination could seriously entertain an insect metaphor that modern audiences tend to deem trivial.
9. The lesson of an arbitrary fate was probably not lost upon the audience at court for whom the play seems to have had its first performance on 1 November 1604, during the second year of the reign of James I. The description of James's life by Maurice Ashley in England in the Seventeenth Century suggests that James was at the mercy of a particularly arbitrary fate. Before he was a year old, the man who was presumably his father, Lord Darnley, was murdered, if not with the actual connivance of James's mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, at least with her approval. James inherited the throne of Scotland as James VI when his mother abdicated and fled to England, where she was eventually executed by Parliament with the consent of her cousin, Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth provided no heirs to the throne and, on her deathbed, is supposed to have named “our cousin of Scotland” to succeed her, a prize that James secured for himself when he “contented himself with restrained protests” to his mother's execution (9).

Works Cited


Criticism: Race: James R. Andreas (essay date 1992)

Derrida writes; “There’s no racism without a language.”¹ I take this to mean that racism—and all the violence historically associated with it—is generated by language. Racial difference is not genetically “real,” nor is it grounded in real experience but is a product of verbal conditioning.² Racism cannot long survive without the verbal and symbolic apparatus that generates and sustains it: the names, the jokes, the plays, the speeches, the casual exchanges, the novels. In short, racism is a cultural virus that is verbally transmitted and its antidote must therefore be verbally administered as well. Othello—along with the many African American texts it has inspired—provides a running record of Western civilization's attempt to confront what Paul Robeson called “the problem of my own people.” Othello, he said, “is a tragedy of racial conflict, a tragedy of honor, rather than jealousy.”³

As such, the play has traumatized African American literature, and indeed Western culture at large, for most of its existence. The racist's nightmare of biracial sexual relationships between white women and black males, which Gunnar Myrdal claimed suffered “the full fury of anti-amalgamation sanctions,”⁴ is the paradigm for three great revisions—“three rewritings”—of the myth: Native Son by Richard Wright, Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, and Dutchman, by Amiri Baraka.⁵ Briefly, Wright restages and reinterprets the problematic relationship of Othello and Desdemona; Ellison represents it comically; and Baraka reverses or inverts it. We might note in passing that many literary works have been written that deal with unwanted sexual attentions of white males sometimes violently imposed on African American females; among these works are many slave narratives, including Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, as well as a number of celebrated novels such as Uncle Tom's Cabin, Pudd'nhead Wilson, Quicksand, Oxherding Tale, Beloved, and Absalom, Absalom!⁶ James Kinney claims that interracial sexual relations flourished in colonial and antebellum America and that the violent response to miscegenation began only in the 1830s, “when the economics of slavery led to [the] systematic justification [of slavery] based on innate irreconcilable ‘racial differences’” (xii).⁷ In any case, the vast number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century works that feature the fate of mulattoes in American culture provides graphic evidence that miscegenation has long been on the minds of African and European American authors alike. What we get in Shakespeare's play and the African American works under investigation here is, of course, the typical patriarchal perspective on the cultural trauma of miscegenation in the West. Another article representing women's perspectives on this trauma needs to be written.

Robeson’s statement that Othello “is a tragedy of racial conflict,” would probably have seemed self-evident to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, both in terms of the social background and the performance and interpretation of the play.⁸ A score of historical studies in the last thirty years has unearthed evidence proving that the response to Africans and Moors in the seventeenth century, before the advent of institutional slavery, was complicated and problematic.⁹ Sylvan Barnet has shown in a masterful new essay on the performance history of the play that “the Elizabethans thought of Moors as black” (274). Barnet and Errol Hill, in his Shakespeare in Sable, have demonstrated conclusively that Othello's part was played in blackface, corkface actually, well into the nineteenth century, because blacks were thought of as inappropriate for or incapable of playing the role.¹⁰ A single quotation from Coleridge indicates what the problem was by the time of the romantics:

Can we suppose [Shakespeare] so utterly ignorant as to make a barbarous negro plead royal birth? …[N]egroes [were] then known but as slaves. … No doubt Desdemona saw Othello's visage in his [Othello's] mind; yet, as we are constituted, and most surely as an English audience was disposed in the beginning of the seventeenth century, it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated.
Thus, by the nineteenth century, when the barbarities of “the peculiar institution” of slavery had peaked in the Western world, audiences could no longer tolerate nor would directors depict the “monstrous” sexual relationship of black males and white females on stage. To get the picture, audiences no longer needed Iago lashing up racist sentiments in the credulous Roderigo and Brabantio with incendiary remarks such as “Even now, … an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe”; “[Y]ou’ll have your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse”; and “Your daughter and the Moor are now … making the beast with two backs” (1.1.88-89, 110-11, 115-17). Such explosive preconceptions were ingrained in the psyches of playgoers well before arriving at the theater. Accordingly, Othello paled and such lines were often cut in production; the Moor was played “in tawny” throughout the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by the films of Olivier and Jonathan Miller. In regard to the relatively recent BBC version of the play, Jonathan Miller defended his choice of Anthony Hopkins in blackface for the Moor because, he said, “I do not see the play as being about color but as being about jealousy. … When a black actor does the part, it offsets the play, puts it out of balance. It makes it a play about blackness, which it is not.” Now that we are recovering the black Othello, such sentiments seem a bit awkward, if not downright ludicrous. Anyone who has seen Miller's Othello or a live production in which the hero is played in blackface knows the murder scene may well evoke laughter in the audience.

From the earliest moments in Othello, the language is imbued with traditional racist sentiment and prejudice that erupt into predictable violence by the play's end, when “Chaos is come again” (3.3.92). Collective violence—read riot—is, in fact, the outcome of all the literary vehicles of the myth under investigation here, even the comic Invisible Man. The catalyst for and efficient cause of such violence in the play is Iago, perhaps the most important of all Shakespeare's notorious stage directors, with the possible exception of Hamlet. Both Iago and Hamlet are tricksters, variations, as has often been noted, on the role of the traditional fool. Iago's humor takes a peculiar turn, however. He is the racist trickster; his is the scenario that eventually defines and corners Othello exclusively in his color, a scenario like the “blueprints” for behavior the hero of Invisible Man must live with. Is Iago without motive, as he is traditionally conceived to be? In terms of the racial themes in the play, hardly! He tells us repeatedly that Othello has slept with his wife, Emilia, and whether this is the case or not is irrelevant; as a racist, he believes what he imagines and brilliantly formulates his preconceptions verbally to himself and to others under his influence.

Iago fuels his nefarious plots to undermine the relationship between Othello and Desdemona by playing the bigot's game; he preys upon the vulnerability of all the players to sneaking suspicions about the behavior of the racial alien, in the long run convincing even Othello himself that he is inferior. “Rude … in speech, and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,” Othello declares himself while suing for Brabantio's daughter in marriage, although he woos and wins Desdemona with his spellbinding stories (1.3.81-82). As an alien, Othello doubts his capacities for speech and for peace. “Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have” (3.3.264-65), he says. Brabantio, for one, is simply aghast that Desdemona has chosen “to marry one.” Would his daughter 't'incur a general mock, / Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight” (1.2.69-71)? The disturbed father feels certain that Othello has influenced his daughter's foul choice with powerful drugs (1.2.73-75). Centuries later, the police will assume Bigger Thomas has plied Mary Dalton with liquor before murdering her in Native Son, and Sybil is depicted as drunk when she is “raped by Santa Claus” in Invisible Man (511). Iago can even use blatant racist arguments on Othello, who does not seem to blink an eye:
Does not Iago suggest throughout—even directly to Othello—that Desdemona is not to be trusted because she has already committed the unpardonable sin against her “kind”: the sexual choice of an alien? Even Othello accepts the argument, as is indicated by his admission that Desdemona's name and virtue have been blackened and fouled by her relationship with him: “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face” (3.3.386-87). This is a play about reputation, real and attributed, and the jealousy and passion that such “reputation” can evoke. Racism is predicated on “repute,” that is, on “evil” imputed to a cultural group so conditioned by the dominant culture that the “evil” often materializes in real behavior. Shakespeare, in fact, cleverly interweaves the themes of the destructive effects exerted by the emotions of sexual jealousy and racial bigotry in the play, both of which inflame the imagination with illusions about the “other,” alienate the parties involved artificially, and lead to violent ends based on often unfounded presuppositions or prejudices about the behavior of the “other.”

A number of motifs in the murder scene of the play will be echoed and revised in the African American scenarios to follow. When sexual consummation between the black male and white female is to occur in this “master trope” of white racism, we get murder instead. The murder is always *witnessed* in the works investigated, often, significantly, by a white woman who is presumably forewarned of the consequences of her actions—Emilia in the play and Mrs. Dalton in *Native Son*. Also, the murdered victims are portrayed as human beings of flesh-and-blood, not passive victims. During the scene just prior to the murder, when Desdemona asks Emilia about fidelity and admits an attraction for Lodovico, we question the credibility of the fragile purity that is usually attributed to Desdemona. Like the white women who follow in the African American novel, for example, Mary Dalton and the anonymous “sister” in the brotherhood, Desdemona is a woman with real desires and considerable courage. The murderers in these works often remark that they feel like actors in a play or figures in a dream. Othello carries a candle into the bedroom and comments that he feels like a character in a dream. In *Dutchman*, Lula, as we shall see, repeatedly calls the conversation she is having with Clay, her future victim, a “script.”

No matter how hard critics since Bradley have tried to saddle Othello with the full burden of the guilt for his passionate crime and to view Iago as “motiveless,” the play itself seems to incriminate Western society at large for its predisposition to the periodic, ritual slaughter of marginal and aboriginal groups and all whites—especially women—who consort with them. Trevor Nunn's recent controversial production at the Young Vic in London (fall 1989) unleashed the social and political possibilities of this play that have lain dormant in the text for centuries, with the exception of the powerful portrayals of Othello by Paul Robeson in the thirties and forties. Nunn's production featured American Civil War decor and uniforms to underscore the racial implications of the text, and Willard White, a black operatic baritone debuted as a huge, barrel-chested Othello. Iago, played brilliantly by Ian McKellan, entertained as he conspired with an audience of white males—Roderigo, Cassio, and Brabantio—as willing partners in his plot to murder lovers soiled in the blood feud between races. McKellan as Iago assumed he had many willing collaborators in the audience, because Iago projects and exacerbates the deepest Western fears of the “other,” of the alien free to prowl and pollute the streets of Venice. During his many soliloquies—for Iago is the most perniciously private character in all the canon—McKellan closed the shutters on the set, pulled up a chair, leaned toward the audience and told them what they had been conditioned to know and fear implicitly all their lives: a “liver lips” has been given professional preferment over him and has desired and taken his wife right from under his very nose. What’s more, this “black ram,” this “Barbary horse” is about to “tup” the most eligible maid in Venice and produce the “monstrous offspring” of miscegenation. Ian McKellan's Iago, like the Native American mischief maker *Iagoo*, was played as the sprite of malice, in this case, of racial hatred. McKellan's purpose was to arrange and realize our basest fears on stage: the ritual slaughter of a couple transgressing racial and sexual codes. The invisible theme of racism and the murder it provokes were rendered visible for all to see in this gruesome production. The scenario of European colonial history with its periodic racial assassination, rape, and riot was here dramatized; this was a history that was beginning to peak during Shakespeare's time.
In *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, Trudier Harris has given us a book on the subject of this gruesome scenario in its most virulent form, which developed after the American Civil War during Reconstruction. The “primal crime” in a racist society, the coupling of black male and white female—either real or, most often, imagined and impugned—justifies and drives the ritual retaliation of the mutilation, castration, and lynching of black male victims in the presence of white women and children, often on Sunday afternoons and accompanied by “carnival.” Harris writes:

I have defined ritual initially as a ceremony, one which by countless repetitions has made it traditional among a given group of people or within a given community. Such repetitions are homage to certain beliefs that are vital to the community. … To violate the inviolable, as any Black would who touched a white woman … is taboo. It upsets the white world view or conception of the universe. Therefore, in order to exorcise the evil and restore the topsyturvy world to its rightful position, the violator must be symbolically punished

(11-12).

The horror of these events is graphically documented in the newspapers and monthlies of the times—*Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly*—and only then becomes the material fictionalized in the novels. Charles Herbert Stember calls “intimacy between a Negro male and a white female” the “master taboo” of white racism dating back for centuries (10).

The “primal scene” of the white racist, the “black ram … tupping your white ewe,” is recreated and revised by African American writers some 350 years after *Othello* in *Native Son, Invisible Man*, and *Dutchman*. Bigger Thomas is America's black “native son,” raised in the sordid conditions of ghetto life on Chicago's southside. Bigger, his name screaming the rhyme with “nigger,” is the all-but-inevitable product of the racist nightmare he will be made to play out in the novel. Perhaps drawing on the ultimate recognition and understanding of the racist process Othello experiences just before his suicide, Richard Wright takes Bigger through a long educational ordeal under the tutelage of Max, his lawyer. However, the primal scene and crime—the sexual relationship between black male and white female and its reputedly inevitable consequence, the brutal murder of the white female—is reenacted with gruesome precision as the pivotal moment in the novel. Othello is momentarily accepted by Venetian society as an equal and, through the machinations of Iago, is reduced to acting the part of the alien “Turk” or “African” by the play's end. Bigger, however, is destined to act the “young Turk” immediately, replicating the violent image of the “African” he watches on the silver screen in films like *Trader Horn* every Saturday afternoon. As Wright explains in his introduction to the novel, “How Bigger was Born,” his hero “is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man,” and his violence is predictable and inevitable (xx). However, risking “premature closure,” Wright proceeds beyond the murder early in the novel to show that this violence, however misguided on Bigger's part, has spawned in his hero a new understanding of his life and destiny by the novel's end. After his conviction and reconciliation with Jan, the fiancé of the woman he has murdered, Bigger becomes what every Venetian wants to believe Othello is at the beginning of the play: aware, self-reflective, and bold.

Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life, [Bigger realizes] … a new pride and a new humility would have to be born in him, a humility springing from a new identification with some part of the world in which he lived.

(255-56)

Bigger is from the modern “Cyprus”—the slums of south Chicago; the Daltons, of course, are “Venetians”—from the suburbs. The ideological rivalry between the Turk and the Christian has been
displaced by the confrontation between the Communists and capitalists in the novel. Moreover, Mary's father, Mr. Dalton, as a wealthy slum landlord, is, like Brabantio, a true “Senator,” that is, Iago quips, “a villain” (1.1.18-19). Mary Dalton, like Desdemona, is thrilled by what she imagines to be the primitive power of Bigger's race. To be sure, Mary is more aggressive in her pursuit of Bigger as an exotic than Desdemona is in her relationship with Othello, ostensibly because she, under the influence of Jan, is sympathetic with his political plight: “[T]his rich girl walked over everything, put herself in the way, and, what was strange beyond understanding, talked and acted so simply and directly she confounded him” (56). Mary asks her boyfriend, “Say, Jan, do you know many Negroes? I want to meet some. … They have so much emotion! What a people! If we could ever get them going. … And their songs—the spirituals! Aren’t they marvelous?” (76). The white heroine in each of our “stories” becomes increasingly aggressive in pursuing her black lover, violently so, as we shall see, in Dutchman.

The sexuality of Desdemona has always been a moot question. As I suggested earlier, critics have debated just how aggressive and even promiscuous she is in her obvious interest in and pursuit of Othello. There is no doubt that Mary Dalton, stimulated perhaps by all her drinking that evening, has sex on her mind just prior to the death scene in the novel, although Wright makes it clear that very little sexual contact occurs and that there certainly is no rape, no sexual consummation whatsoever, in spite of the lurid “reports” in the Chicago newspapers. Mary sidles up to Bigger in the car drunk, garters showing, her scent arousing him, her breath, like Desdemona's in the death scene, on his face:

She was resting on the small of her back and her dress was pulled up so far that he could see where her stockings ended on her thighs. … He helped her and his hands felt the softness of her body as she stepped to the ground. Her dark eyes looked at him feverishly from deep sockets. Her hair was in his face, filling him with its scent.

(80-81)

Most significantly, in all versions of the primal scene of biracial contact and murder, witnesses to the murder are involved, either directly, as in the case of Othello, or implied, as in the case of Invisible Man. Emilia in the former and Mrs. Dalton in the latter both intrude on the ritual murder, which in each of the works begins as a sexual encounter. In both cases white females who are blind to their own husband's evil witness the murder. My point here, and perhaps this is the point of the biracial myth I am trying to identify, is that sexual encounters between the races are not private moments as they would be in normal relationships. They represent a public shattering of the racist taboo and as such demand an audience whose predisposition toward the event alters its outcome in violent, ritualistic ways. Once that audience appears, the deed can run its gruesome course.

In both Othello and Native Son, the females are passive when they are murdered, in every sense sacrificial victims to what might be interpreted psychologically as the demands of the mythos—the script being enacted through their characters and witnessed by the onstage audience. It is significant that Iago is always played as an eavesdropper, whose access to private moments allows him to reinterpret events in a manner that will inevitably precipitate the racial violence at the play's climax. In the Nunn production, McKellan's Iago returns just before curtain to glare at the lovers finally united in bed—dead. Both Mary in Native Son and, as we shall see, Sybil in Invisible Man, are drugged in a sense and are thus not cognizant of their participation in this ritual event. Desdemona is nearly asleep when Othello strangles her. There are other similarities in the structures of Othello and Native Son that we might mention in passing. The novel has a Cassio figure in Jan and a Bianca in Bessie, and both works conclude with a judgment scene and the final appearance of the heroes, Othello and Bigger, who are given speeches underscoring the dignity and pathos of their respective characters.

Ralph Ellison sums up the problem under investigation here succinctly and comically in Invisible Man:
Why did they have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically. Why, goodamit, why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them—all human motives?

The hero confronts a series of white women in *Invisible Man*, beginning with the stripper who is brought in by the elders to teach little black boys a lesson in attraction and repulsion; they are encouraged to desire sexually what they cannot have—a white woman. The stripper is as frightened as the boys, and when she performs, both parties are watched by the elders who represent the omnipresent audience cuing and skewing the interpretation of these illicit, public sexual events. There are other brief encounters between the hero and white women, one on the subway where he is pressed by the crowd up against a blond in a scene that may have sparked the imagination of Baraka, who stages his fatal biracial ritual on the subway in *Dutchman*. White women represent one of the perpetual challenges the hero faces throughout the novel along with his speeches, the accumulation of the bric-a-brac of his “heritage” in the briefcase he is perpetually trying to discard, and his run-ins with various political parties.

Ellison is perfectly aware that his hero is acting in a performance scripted with racist assumptions, and the result in the novel is usually farcical. Before his affair with the appropriately anonymous white wife of a “brother,” the hero wishes he were Paul Robeson:

> If only I were a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier, I could simply stand before them with a sign across my chest, stating i know all about them, and they’d be as awed as though I were the original boogey man—somehow reformed and domesticated. I’d no more have to speak than Paul Robeson had to act; they’d simply thrill at the sight of me.

“They,” of course, are the audience intruding on the couple in each of the instances examined here. When the hero first meets this woman, she “glowed as though acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility” (399). The white woman here has become more solicitous than Mary Dalton and conspicuously more aggressive than Desdemona. She is almost a willing pawn in the white racist’s game. She appears by “the uncoiled fire hose” (400), and the phallic jokes abound in this chapter, just as they do in *Othello*, where Cassio quips to Iago “That he [Othello] may bless this bay with his tall ship, / Make love’s quick pants in Desdemona’s arms” (2.1.79-80) and Othello himself remarks, after he has killed his own wife on the night he is to have consummated his marriage, “Behold, I have a weapon; / A better never did itself sustain / Upon a soldier’s thigh” (5.2.259-61).

The woman's conversation is full of erotic overtones of which she, as opposed to her predecessors, seems perfectly aware. She is attracted to the hero by the same attributes Desdemona discovers in Othello: both are drawn to the primitive “vitality,” exoticism, and strength of the African. Of the hero’s ideology, she wishes to embrace “[a]ll of it, … to embrace the whole of it” (402). Like Desdemona, she thrills to hear the hero speak: “[S]omehow you convey the great throbbing vitality of the movement” (402). His speech is so “primitive, … forceful, powerful. …[I]t has so much naked power that it goes straight through me” (403).

The hero sees the “ivory” arms of the woman in her huge “white bed” (407), just as Othello had characterized Desdemona's skin as “whiter … than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.4-5). But the hero, unlike Othello, watches himself and his sexual actions replicated infinitely in the bedroom's multiple mirrors, “caught in a guilty stance, my face taut, tie dangling; and behind the bed another mirror which now like a surge of the sea tossed our images back and forth, back and forth, furiously multiplying the time and the place
and the circumstance” (406). Moreover, the hero thinks he might have seen the husband of the woman at the
door momentarily. He also conjectures that he might just be dreaming. Here we have the omnipresent witness
to the act again as well as the suggestion that the terrible ritual of sexual contact between the races is a
collective dream or nightmare. As ritual scenario, biracial sexual contact can be infinitely duplicated, reflected
in the repetition of the infamous act. What has changed in Ellison's novel for the most part is the genre;
Ellison replays the mating ritual of blacks and whites comically. The hero is a little man, a clown in a farce
that Robeson would not dignify, and like all clowns, he is self-reflective. He sees what the audience demands
even before he performs his role.

Farce gives way to high comedy in the hero's escapade with Sybil at the end of the novel. By this time the
hero is perfectly aware that he is playing a role, although Sybil, his white victim, is still in the dark. She, like
Mary Dalton, is intoxicated throughout the encounter, but she wants to be “raped.” However, the hero has
learned to manipulate the illusions of racism to his own advantage from one Rinehart, a
hustler-turned-preacher on the streets of Harlem. In short, he has become his own Iago and continues to
monitor himself in the mirror of others' expectations for him. Sybil, consistent with the preconceptions she has
about her race and sex in the biracial context, claims to be a “nymphomaniac” (508). What other motive could
she have in seeking out the sexual favors of a “black buck”? “Threaten to kill me, if I don’t give in. You
know, talk rough to me, beautiful,” she pleads (508). “What would Rinehart do about this,” the hero ponders,
“and knowing,” he is “determined not to let her provoke [him] to violence” (506).

Unlike Othello, his literary progenitor, Ellison's hero will not be manipulated sexually and racially. He
speculates on the motives behind the ridiculous spectacle that he and Sybil are cornered into performing to
corroborate preconceptions about sexual relationships between the races: “Who’s taking revenge on whom?
But why be surprised, when that’s what they [white women] hear all their lives. … With all the warnings
against it, some are bound to want to try it out for themselves. The conquerors conquered” (509). The hero's
reaction is pity for Sybil: “She had me on the ropes; I felt punch drunk, I couldn’t deliver and I couldn’t be
angry either. I thought of lecturing her on the respect due one's bedmate in our society” (509). He realizes she
thinks he is an “entertainer,” and he accepts the role temporarily. The hero, however, assumes control of the
script, the blueprint, as Ellison calls it, for the spectacle. There will be no sex, no rape, no violence, no
murder. He gets Sybil drunk, promising her that he “rapes real good” when he’s drunk, and scribbles across
her belly with lipstick, “Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus. Surprise!” (511). The hero has anticipated the
outcome of the tragedy he is expected to play out: he recontextualizes the encounter as comedy, and hearts
and lives are spared in the process. Like the other roles the hero attempts, manipulates, and sets aside for
further refinement, the “part” of Othello is played only momentarily, and its “erasure” allows the hero the
opportunity to spare Sybil the mutual humiliation and injury of “raping” her. But of course, the function of
comedy is to repeat in a finer tone, to recontextualize tragic situations, and to reverse tragic outcomes through
reconciliation and clarification. The variation Ellison achieves in his representation of the racist mythos is a
function of generic—read verbal—manipulation.

*Dutchman* may well represent the ultimate African American revision of *Othello*. Amiri Baraka alludes to
Shakespeare frequently in his works, particularly in *The Slave*, the companion piece to *Dutchman*. The myth
of the ritual murder of innocent white virgins is, in *Dutchman*, fully deconstructed or inverted to reflect more
accurately the relationship between the races that has existed throughout Western history. Lula—the white
woman—has become the aggressor in a war overtly declared and waged between the races, and Clay is her
black victim. Baraka is suggesting that the true victim in the biracial sexual struggle is the black *male*, and he
is the partner who is ritually sacrificed in *Dutchman*. The setting of the play is the subway, which is “heaped
in modern myth” (3). Clay, a poet who would be “the black Baudelaire,” watches Lula enter the car and take
the seat next to him in an ironic recreation of the very action that launched the civil rights movement just ten
years before the first production of the play—integration of the city transit system.
Clay, “without a trace of self-consciousness,” naively “hopes that his memory of this brief encounter will be pleasant” (4). The young black man, putty or “clay” in the hands of the white vamp, will be made to react to a taunting series of white stereotypes about black male behavior, and Lula will cue the “lines” (16) he is “supposed” (10) to say. Clay does realize early on that the “struggle” here is indeed over “abstract asses” (7) and that nothing sexual will come of this relationship. As we have seen in previous versions of the biracial sexual encounter, the act is rarely consummated. Nevertheless, Lula immediately accuses Clay, saying, “You think I want to pick you up, get you to take me somewhere and screw me, huh?” (8).

Unlike any of her predecessors, Lula knows what she is doing throughout the play—lying. “I lie a lot. It helps me control the world” (9). She tells Clay she is an actress, and he nicknames her Tallulah Bankhead. Both “players” agree they know what is “supposed to happen” between them (10). Only Lula really does, however. Lula thinks Clay is a “well-known type” (12) and proceeds to “dictate” the script, the “chronicle” as Clay calls it, of their predictable melodrama (24). Lula cues Clay throughout the play with taunts such as, “It’s your turn, and let those be your lines.” (16). She warns him, “Don’t get smart with me, Buster, I know you like the palm of my hand” (17). Lula suggests a series of stereotypes for Clay to emulate. She notices he is wearing a three-button suit, even though his grandfather had been a slave. Lula claims he does not know who he is, taunting him by saying, “I bet you never once thought you were a black nigger” (19). Clay hopes the two of them can pretend to be “free of [their] own history,” but Lula knows better (21). She has another more predictable and more violent outcome in mind. They are about to “groove,” as she announces at the end of scene 1—and they are indeed in the “groove” of the biracial ritual (21).

At the beginning of scene 2, the players are rehearsing their “codes of lust” (23). Lula will “make a map” of Clay’s “manhood” (26). She tries to pretend they are in Romeo and Juliet (26). He will call her room “black,” when they arrive there later, “like Juliet’s tomb.” But the play is not Romeo and Juliet, it is Othello revised. Lula will be no victim of jealously and racial misunderstanding, much less a suicide-for-love at the end of the play. She is the murderer this time. The black male is the victim as he so often is in the very real historical lynching of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Clay wants “the whole story,” and he will get it; Lula will keep “turning pages” to arrive at the ritual climax of the story (28). As the scenario unfolds, Lula realizes there is a problem here: Clay, like Othello, Bigger, and Ellison’s hero, is “an escaped nigger” (29). As such, he must be exposed; she threatens him in front of an audience of middle-class businessmen that assembles in the car between scenes. These businessmen represent the ever-important witnesses to the biracial murder who will, in Baraka's version, become accomplices, and the jury judging the deed as well. Lula continues her verbal abuse: she calls Clay a “black son of a bitch,” an “Uncle Thomas Woolly-Head,” and an “Uncle Tom Big Lip” because he will not do the belly-rub with her (32-33). “You’re afraid of white people. And your father was,” she taunts (33). What follows is Clay’s impassioned plea to let him live, to let him be, to let him make choices about his life, even the choice to be middle class if that is what he wants (33).

Finally angered, Clay explains why blacks should kill, but usually show restraint. Like his predecessors, Clay is ready to strangle the symbolic white female. “Such a tiny ugly throat. I could squeeze it flat, and watch you turn blue, on a humble. For dull kicks. And all these weak-faced ofays squatting around here, staring over their papers at me. Murder them too. Even if they expected it” (33). The moment of truth has arrived; the audience has been primed; but, Clay, just as Ellison’s hero, refuses to play the role. Othello and Bigger have wised up in Invisible Man and Dutchman. Ellison and Baraka have revised, actually inverted, the paradigm of the biracial sexual encounter. Clay then proceeds to tell us what he and black artists do instead of killing hateful whites—they create music and poetry: “And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors” (35). In short, the “[c]razy niggers [are] turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all

At this point, Baraka tells us that Lula's “voice takes on a different, more businesslike quality.” She concludes, “I’ve heard enough” (36) and stabs Clay with an impunity that might well have anticipated that of Bernard Goetz. The businessmen on the car then “come and drag Clay's body down the aisle” (34). In Othello and Native Son, the citizens of Venice and Chicago are violently outraged about the murders of Desdemona and Mary Dalton, but the murder of Clay in Dutchman is virtually ignored. Lula's next young victim then enters the car and the ritual begins again, but not before an old black conductor tips his hat to Lula and shuffles down the aisle exiting the train, a survivor in the struggle, like Ellison's “moon-mad” war veterans in Invisible Man (132).

Baraka knows precisely what he is up to here, and in The Slave, a companion play usually reprinted with Dutchman, he tells us all about it. In this play, Easely, a white professor, argues politics with Walker Vessels, a former black theater student, and Grace, Easley's wife, listens in. Grace announces that “Mr. Vessels is playing the mad scene from Native Son,” when Walker mentions having played a “second-rate Othello” in college: “Grace there was Desdemona … and you [Easely] were Iago … [Laughs] or at least between classes, you were Iago. … If a white man is Iago when you see him … uhh … chances are he’s eviler when you don’t.” Grace, like Lula, tells Vessels to shut up, but, like Clay in Dutchman, Vessels refuses (57-58).

Black writers have revised the biracial sexual myth that represents the primal impediment to the freedom and equal treatment of black people as human beings. Sexual parity is the ultimate expression of racial equality. If language inscribes racial difference and dissension, and then ascribes or even prescribes behavior based on that inscription, perhaps it may also de-scribe such behavior, or at least rewrite the story as it exists in the Western mind. Obviously such a hope informs the rereading and representation of the crucial myth of biracial relationship discussed here.

The philologist Leo Spitzer offers us some help. The problem of “race,” the great problem of our century according to W. E. B. DuBois, might indeed hinge on the misunderstanding of a single word: the word “race” itself. In his inimitable fashion Spitzer, as linguistic sleuth, traces the word “race” through its German, French, Italian, and English uses and abuses to the Latin root ratio. The concept of race, and perhaps the attitudes associated with racism, are all locked up in this term ratio, perhaps most artfully wielded by Thomas Aquinas in his Summa: “God, in willing himself, wills all the things which are in himself; but all things in a certain manner preexist in him by their types (rationes)” (qtd. in Spitzer 147). Spitzer explains, “Thus rations is a rendering of idea and can shift to the meaning ‘types’ [which becomes ‘races’] precisely because all the different rations of things are integrated in the creator of things” (148). Rations or “races” may be conceived, then, as figments of the collective mind derived from what are presumed to be God's categories of human existence. Spitzer concludes, “What a significant comment this affords on the modern ‘racial’ beliefs!” (152).

If “race” is a platonic concept, existing in genres and not in genes, existing in subjective human judgments rather than in the “nature of things” and if it is historically conditioned instead of “predetermined,” then this notion, this “idea,” can be changed, can be modified, can be adapted to new circumstances and experience. Through language, which gave us the notion of “race” in the first place, we can model a new reality, a reality that reverses outcomes posited as necessities in the racist mentality. Through the clever manipulation of the language of traditional character and circumstance, the writers under investigation here, Shakespeare included, have helped us perceive new solutions to a problem that remains catastrophically troublesome in the modern world, the problem of racial violence.

Notes
1. Derrida continues, “The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words, but rather that they have to have a word. [Racism] institutes, declares, writes, inscribes, prescribes” (Derrida 331).
2. Tzvetan Todorov writes, “[W]hereas racism is a well-attested social phenomenon, ‘race’ itself does not exist! Or, to put it more clearly: there are a great number of physical differences among human groups, but these differences cannot be superimposed; we obtain completely divergent subdivisions of the human species according to whether we base our description of the ‘races’ on an analysis of their epidermis or their blood types, their genetic heritages or their bone structures. For contemporary biology, the concept of ‘race’ is therefore useless” (370-71).
3. Quoted in Barnet 280. For an honest history of Robeson's reactions to his roles in the two great productions of Othello in which he starred (London, 1930, and New York, 1943) and the pronounced racial implications of and reactions to these productions, see Martin Duberman's biography of Robeson (134, 263). Some items of interest: Peggy Ashcroft, who played Desdemona in the London production, found her entire experience in Othello (1930) “an education in racism,” particularly the public reaction to the kissing scenes between Desdemona and Othello (134-35); significant passages from the play were cut by the director, Nellie Van Volkenburg, who Ashcroft decided was a “racist” because of her treatment of Robeson. The murder scene was staged with the bed tucked inconspicuously away in a corner of the room, and the light was so dimmed to the point of “inscrutability” that Ralph Richardson, who played Iago, kept a flashlight up his sleeve to negotiate the stage after his departure (136). The attempt to take the production to the United States was virtually sabotaged, and when it was produced here in 1943, it provoked broad racial protest, especially in the southern states (265).
4. Gunnar Myrdal writes, “The illicit relations freely allowed or only frowned upon are, however, restricted to those between white men and Negro women. A white woman's relation with a Negro man is met by the full fury of anti-amalgamation sanctions” (56).
5. Baraka's play is given in the list of works cited under his original name, Leroi Jones, as it is in the original edition of the play used for this article.
6. I am in debt here to an anonymous reader for SAR who provided this list of novels dealing with our theme and who suggested especially that Charles Johnson's Oxherding Tale offers “first a kind of mock acknowledgement of the myth of the supersexual black male, and then [completely dismantles] the tradition … of its original fears, prejudices, and taboos.”
8. The reevaluation of Othello in its historical context is well underway at this point. I am much indebted to Emily Bartels's “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race.” Bartels's article as well as my own are products of a seminar on “Shakespeare's Aliens” convened at the 1988 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America by Edward Berry. On the matter of race, see Phyllis Braxton's recent article, “Othello: The Moor and the Metaphor,” which argues “that Othello's color outweighs in significance the element of race” (1). According to Braxton, Shakespeare leaves the matter of Othello's ethnic identification deliberately ambiguous but ominous, because “the Other is always mysterious and without clear definition. Once defined, he is no longer the Other” (9).
9. See, for instance, the studies of Barthelemy, Braxton, Brown, Dabydeen, D’Amico, Hulme, Hunter, Eldred D. Jones, Jordan, Loomba, Miller, Pratt, Said, and Tokson.
10. Black actors, too, have been strongly attracted to the role because, as Hill suggests, the play offers “an opportunity vividly to convey to audiences the message that racism is the green-eyed monster that destroys not just its victim but also its perpetrator and innocent bystanders who fall into its clutches” (41).
11. For other indignant, clearly racist reviews of nineteenth-century performances of the play, see Ruth Cowhig's essay (14-20).
12. All quotations from the plays are taken from The Riverside Shakespeare.
13. Quoted in Barnet 284. Miller's sentiment typifies critical comment about all of Shakespeare's plays dealing with the problem of "complexion"—*Titus Andronicus, The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*. For instance, both Frank Kermode and Alvin Kernan ignore racial themes altogether in their respective introductions to *Othello* in *The Riverside Shakespeare* and the 1987 Signet edition of the play. Kermode does use interesting language to discuss other issues arising in the text, however: "The whiteness of Desdemona blackened, we see the white and tranquil mind of Othello darkened by atavistic shock and disgust. … He has behaved like a Turk (used throughout the play as an enemy of civility and grace, a type of cunning and disorder). He has become that person of different 'clime, complexion, and degree' whom it was wanton of Desdemona to marry" (*The Riverside Shakespeare* 1201). Braxton claims Miller was trying "to minimize the differences between Othello and Desdemona" by using Anthony Hopkins in the role (2-3 and 14).

14. See, however, Wayne Holmes's article. Holmes goes so far as to suggest "that Desdemona and Cassio, some time prior to Desdemona and Othello's marriage, had an affair" (1).

15. Harris speculates, "Almost all of the deaths [by ritual lynchings] have as their causes the improper interactions of black males and white females. But what happened in depictions after 1968? Are black writers now beginning to suggest that black males and white females can interact with each other without some fatal violence occurring?" (xii). In another passage she writes, "Historically, in their ritualistic lynchings of black people, white Americans were carrying out rites of exorcism in which they seemed determined to eradicate the black 'beast' from their midst, except when he existed in the most servile, accommodationist, and helpful of positions" (xiii).

16. Howard Felperin, for one, is so incensed by Holmes's suggestion (cited in note 14 above) that Desdemona might be more "experienced" than we usually suppose her, that he charitably leaves the author of the article "unnamed for reasons by now apparent" (3).

Works Cited

Baraka, Amiri. See Leroi Jones.


In the following essay, Hall examines the figure of the black woman in order to show the “problematics of the historical study of race and gender.”

It is particularly difficult to “attend” to racial difference in early modern England. Given the lessening but still widely held assumption, that “race” is not a viable category of analysis not only in the early modern period, but for literature in general, added to the distressing lack of data on people of color in England before the codification of the slave trade, it is not surprising that women of color constitute a largely “invisible” presence in the English Renaissance. In its very title, Elliot Tokson’s *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688*, a standard work on the subject, announces the absence of black women. Another influential text, Winthrop Jordan’s *White Over Black*, devotes very little space to the problem of gender in racial discourse, even in his discussion of the English obsession with fairness.

In this article, I will use the figure of the black woman as an example for the problematics of the historical study of race and gender. My concerns spring from my own investment in a politicized historical study of Europe that dialogues with the work being done by women of color which has been at the forefront of critiquing both assumptions about race and gender and the role of “race” in identity formation. Rather than making a specific argument about the linkages of race and gender, my goals for the essay are twofold: (1) to question the underlying assumptions of two contemporary constructions of the black presence in early modern England and to suggest ways in which both the standard tools of analysis and the materials subject to analysis work to elide black women from discussions of race; (2) to question the somewhat arbitrary boundaries between “history” and “literature” by juxtaposing an historical document with a literary representation of a black woman and to thereby suggest some possible relationships between representation and history in studies of race in the early modern period.

The historical study of black women poses interesting problems for critical practice. As Audre Lorde has argued, “Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have always been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism.” Certainly discourses of race did not begin in America and the combination of distortion and high visibility that Lorde notes may operate in early modern culture as well. The distortion Lorde notes suggests that black women are in a sense unretrievable in such a past since they are objects “named only in ways that define [their] relationship to those who are subject.” Yet we disregard their infrequent appearances with peril, since their very visibility and the purposes it serves in a white supremacist culture means that representations of black women have a significance that the actual number of appearances would belie.
In the recent anthology *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, African-American critic Kwame Anthony Appiah begins his entry on “race” by recognizing a continuing bias against the inclusion of race in literary studies: “the idea that the concept of race should have any place, let alone an important one—in literary studies has been attacked from a good many directions.” Working against such a notion, Appiah then goes on to outline a history of racial “conceptions,” and contends that earlier conceptions of race, particularly in the Renaissance, are rooted in theological distinctions rather than “racial” ones. He begins what is to be a discussion of *Othello, The Merchant of Venice,* and *The Jew of Malta* with the assertion:

*In each of these plays a central figure—Othello, Shylock, Barabas—plays out a role we can understand only in terms of a stereotype of a people, Moors or Jews; a stereotype we are likely, if we are hasty, to conceive of as simply racialist. So it is important to go carefully. We should begin by recognizing that in Shakespearean England both Jews and Moors were barely an empirical reality. And even though there were small numbers of Jews and black people in England in Shakespeare’s day, attitudes toward ‘the Moor’ and ‘The Jew’ do not seem to have been based on experience of these people. Furthermore, despite the fact that there was an increasing amount of information available about dark-skinned foreigners in this, the first great period of modern Western exploration, actual reports of black or Jewish foreigners did not play an important part in forming these images (Appiah 277 emphasis added).*

His notions of Elizabethan England are a clear articulation of a largely unstated bias against the study of “pre-slavery” Europe by scholars centrally concerned with race; that studies of race and blackness should primarily be concerned with the construction of black subjectivity (the corollary being that the early modern period cannot be the subject of black studies because there were no blacks to study). In Women’s Studies, this problem can best be summed up by the now famous words of Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Her formulation proposes that a study of the master himself with scholarship defined by the academy can never lead to scholarship with a significant political impact. Too often, it can be used to erase the study of the formation of dominant culture altogether.

Appiah’s admonitions for care in discussing “race” in early modern England simultaneously authorizes and de-authorizes race as a “critical” term for study in the Renaissance. His sense that race is an unexplored category in literature empowers the critic who wants to examine the category. However, his insistence on empirical evidence is particularly oppressive from a text that purports to enable new reading strategies as is his curious declaration of the irrelevence of “actual reports” in discussion of early modern formations of difference. This sense that the “experience of” actual blacks or Jews did not inform literary representation excludes one of the more enabling strategies of the “new historicism”—“describing culture in action” (Veeser xiii)—as well as ignores the possibility that both the reports and “actual experience were inflected by the assumptions about the character” of certain peoples.

While Appiah is rightly concerned with our making broad generalizations about a category, “race,” that has an historical specificity, at the same time he falls into the trap of accepting the post-Enlightenment science that created “racialism” on its own terms. Specifically, this entry seems backed by a narrative of modern science and a myth of empiricism that relies on a clear break from the historical past. Rather, I would argue that the “inherited characteristics” (Appiah 26) that are an elemental part of modern scientific discourses on race are in large part the result of lingering notions of “difference” that resided at the intersections of English travel and trade, plantation, empire, and science in the early modern period. Science merely takes up already pre-existing terms of difference, such as skin color and features, that have been combined with physical and mental characteristics. It is no accident that Sir Thomas Browne, one of the forerunners of modern science, devotes three chapters of his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1672) to dispelling myths on “the blackness of Negroes.” Despite these laudable intentions, his investigation is heavily weighted with value judgements concerning color, such as “they of Europe in Candy, Sicily, and some parts of Spaine deserve not properly so low a name
as Tawny” (512). The bias that appears in Appiah, even as he deconstructs the terms of nineteenth-century science and biological determinism, can be located specifically in his insistence on “empirical evidence” of a black presence. This delimits the permitted reading strategies of Renaissance critics because we are not allowed to read “backwards,” to draw from the insights of current theorists on race and racism to investigate the birth pangs of these modern attitudes in the early modern period.11

Appiah’s vision of an England populated with mere images of non-white, non-Christians contrasts sharply with that of white feminist critic Karen Newman who, in her influential essay, “And wash the Ethiop white’: femininity and the Monstrous in Othello,” argues that “In England itself, by 1596, blacks were numerous enough to generate alarm.”12 With apologies for making too broad generalizations, I would like to suggest that these critics are fairly typical of the assumptions made about race in the Renaissance. Both confront the problem of the evidence of a viable black presence (albeit with differing conclusions) and both base their work on an equation of race with blackness. “White” as a racial category is left unexamined.13 While there is no way of establishing how many blacks there were in England, there were numerous Englishmen and women fashioning their cultural identity with discourses of race. Without ignoring the problem of evidence, I do want to suggest that an uncritical (or overly critical) emphasis on proof may impede historical studies before they have even begun.

What is the evidence for the black presence? Most of the data from Europe on Africans in particular emerge from travel narratives and historical/bureaucratic accounts of Transatlantic trade. The English were late, but eager arrivals in the European slave trade. In 1562, John Hawkins crashed the Portuguese market and organized the first transatlantic slave trading venture, thereby demonstrating the potential value of the market to England and thus encouraging England’s future encroachments in the slave trade.14 With Elizabeth I’s consent, other traders attempted to make inroads into the Portuguese monopoly, and slaves were bought surreptitiously or kidnapped and sold along with stolen gold and ivory. As merchants made inroads into the African trade, they brought to England slaves who served as personal attendants. In 1618, James I gave the charter of monopoly to 30 London merchants, the Company of Adventurers of London Trading into parts of Africa. It was not until 1663 that the English incorporated a company, The Royal Adventurers into Africa, which had as its primary goal the acquisition of slaves. Even at this point its primary objective was to provide labor for English plantations in America. The demand for sugar made the trade grow at a furious pace; however, until that point, evidence for a black population in England remained fairly small. Until the codification of slavery, we only get elusive hints of the Africans brought to England as the slaves, servants, linguists, and curiosities who constituted England’s black population.

Not surprisingly, most documentary evidence concerning blacks in the period before the signing of the Asiento in the 1660’s is extremely limited. Consequently the few documents available have assumed monumental importance in discussions of the black presence. I would like to look at one such document in juxtaposition with a representation of a black woman fairly invisible to modern criticism. Despite her support of English piracy in the slave trade, in 1596 Queen Elizabeth sent an open letter to the Lord Mayor of London and to the mayors of other towns, stating, “Her majesties understanding that there are of late divers Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm since the troubles between Her highness and the King of Spain, who are fostered and relieved here to the annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume; as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of whereas the Queen’s Majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm since the troubles between Her highness and the King of Spain, who are fostered and relieved here to the annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume; as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of
Christ or his Gospel, hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people should be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms; and to that end and purpose hath appointed Casper van Denden, merchant of Lucbeck, for their speedy transportation, a man that hath somewhat deserved of this realm in respect that by his own labor and charge he hath relieved and brought from Spain divers of our English nation who otherwise would have perished ther ... and ... if there be any person or persons which be possessed of any such Blackamoors that refuse to deliver them in sort aforesaid, then we require you to call them before you and to advice and persuade them by all good means to satisfy her Majesty's pleasure therein which if they shall etsoons willfully and obstinately refuse, we preay you then to certify their names unto us, to the end her majesty may take such further course therein as it shall seem best in her princely wisdom (emphasis added).

This document and the image of Elizabeth, that white and red icon of English racial purity and superiority, casting out her polar opposites, “Moors and Negars” gives startling materiality to Winthrop Jordan's assertion that discourses on blackness occurred in tandem with ideals of female beauty as represented by Elizabeth (8). While such critical attention as has been paid to this document concentrates on the attempt to discharge Moors out of the realm and uses the attempt to prove the existence of a viable black presence in England (Newman 148), the terms of the proclamation demand special attention. The image of large numbers of Moors having “crept into this island” suggests that they suddenly “appeared” on their own volition (despite having been “fostered and relieved” here by unnamed residents). The rest of the document is concerned to prevent contact between these invaders and “her own liege” people despite its contradictory contention that her own subjects are the ones “possessed” of “Blackamoors” to the detriment of the state.

Equally important is the reference to the religion (or lack of religion) of the Moors which supposes that they are a logical group to cut off from state resources because they have “no understanding of Christ or his Gospel.” In this time of perceived crisis Christianity becomes the prerequisite for access to limited resources. Certainly, Elizabeth's evocation of the religious difference of the Moor would seem to support Appiah's contention that religious difference is the crucial part of the construction of black “difference.” I would argue, however, that even though religion is given as a compelling reason for excluding Moors, merely emphasizing religious difference only clouds the political reality that the Moors' visibility in the culture made them a viable target for exclusion. In other words, it is their physical difference and the moral/spiritual qualities associated with it that provokes their exclusion, not simply their religion.

This is the document Newman uses to support her contention that blacks were “numerous enough to generate alarm.” The tone of the document does imply a state of national emergency, since Elizabeth opens with a reminder of “these hard times of dearth.” If we take the proclamation at face value, the “great numbers of Negars or Blackamoors … of which kind there is allready here too manie” suggests a large number, but the furor caused by the presence of Moroccan ambassadors at Elizabeth's court in 1601 suggests that blacks, particularly royal blacks, were still a novelty. There is no evidence that this had to constitute a large number, particularly if we remember that the threat of the black to the state is continually magnified in a racist culture. Given such contradictory evidence and Basil Davidson's early warning in The African Slave Trade that “A great deal of historical writing is propaganda” (26), a more fruitful and significant question might be not how many black Africans were in early modern England, but “How many Moors does it take to generate alarm in England”?

In his Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain, commenting on this passage, Peter Fryer suggests that the first expulsion of these “Negars” was payment for the release of English hostages. The merchant involved asked for the right to confiscate black slaves in exchange for his arrangement for the release of 89 English hostages in Spain and Portugal. Fryer's evidence convincingly demonstrates the real political and economic factors underlying the expulsions and forces us to question the rhetoric of the second expulsion as well. Nevertheless, his explanation only heightens our curiosity about the specificity of the terms
of the expulsion. Certainly the political/religious rationale mystifies the wholesale confiscation of “property” from her citizens. However, the reliance on the good of the commonwealth suggests that Queen Elizabeth draws on a series of associations about Moors as a group that seem to persist in contemporary Anglo-American racial discourse: in times of economic stress, visible minorities very often become the scapegoat for a national problem.

Elizabeth's proclamation may open up another text which reveals the economic and racial fears of Elizabethan England, *The Merchant of Venice*. At the end of Act III of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the audience witnesses a joking interchange between Shylock's servant, Launcelot Gobbo, and Lorenzo and Jessica about their mixed marriage:

*Jessica:*  
Nay you need not fear us, Lorenzo, Launcelot  
and I are out. He tells me flatly that there’s no mercy for me in heaven  
because I am a Jew's daughter; and he says that you are no good member  
of the commonwealth, for in converting Jews to Christians, you raise the price  
of pork.  
*Lorenzo:*  
I shall answer that better to the commonwealth  
than you can the getting up of the Negro's belly; the Moor is with child  
by you Launcelot.  
*Launcelot:*  
It is much that the Moor should be more than  
reason; but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I  
took her for.

(III.v.31-42).

This passage proves to be a very problematic re-presentation (with the double distancing that this implies) for Shakespearean criticism. The female Moor is not a character presented to the audience by an actor, but one only spoken about by other characters; she literally does not exist on stage. So too, she barely exists in the area of textual analysis. The Arden edition of *Merchant* helpfully notes that “this passage has not been explained” and suggests “Perhaps it was introduced simply for the sake of the elaborate pun on Moor/more” (99, n.35). The annotations in the Variorum Shakespeare suggest that this emphasis on the purely linguistic aspects of the scene is typical, giving several such reading, including, “A change of ‘less’ into ’more’ makes the jingle fuller.” Even editions that acknowledge the racial charge in this scene still elide the black woman as a part of the play. The notes to the 1926 Cambridge edition attribute this scene to an adapter rather than to Shakespeare and then asks:

*Who was the black woman referred to in this passage?* Clearly she has nothing to do with the play as it stands. *Was she a character in an earlier version, e.g. a member of Morocco’s train? Or was she a real figure, a London notoriety familiar to the audience for whom the dialogue was written? Holding the opinion we do on the authorship of this scene, we are inclined to interpret this reference as a topical one* (emphasis added).

Interestingly, even an edition that confronts the startling reference to a black woman and posits the existence of an actual black woman completely detaches her from the Shakespearean text by asserting that the dialogue is not Shakespeare's and that the figure “has nothing to do with the play.” Both readings, the linguistic and the topical, insist on the obscurity of the scene and of the black woman. For one, she exists only as a text; for the other, she may exist in history, but not in the text.

This joking conversation no doubt parodically reflects the investment of the commonwealth in marriage practices. Nevertheless, the audience is left to question the difference between Lorenzo's liaison with a Jew
and Launcelot's with a Moor. The Renaissance stage abounds with jokes about bastards. Certainly, if Launcelot's fault was merely the getting of another bastard, there would be no reason to emphasize that this invisible woman is a Moor. Anthony Barthelemy, in his *Black Face, Maligned Race*, notes that this exchange reflects ideas of the licentiousness of the black woman typical of the time. However, the pregnant, unheard (and by critics unseen) black woman becomes in some ways the silent symbol for the economic and racial politics of *The Merchant of Venice*. Like the pregnant Indian maid in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she works within the desire for the riches that come from cultural interaction; however, she also exemplifies the necessity for controlling such interactions. She is, perhaps, an example of what Peter Stallybrass has called “the female grotesque” which “interrogate[s] class and gender hierarchies alike, subverting the enclosed body in the name of a body that is ‘unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits’.”

The pressures of race, religion, and economics in Elizabeth's proclamation help contextualize the threat posed by a Launcelot Gobbo and his Moor. A similar sense of a critical scarcity of resources pervades *The Merchant of Venice*. This sense of privation felt by the citizens of Venice produces an economic imperative in the play which insists on the exclusion of racial, religious, and cultural difference. In Gobbo's jesting evocation of the scarcity of food we see the same unease over limited resources and possibly, famine. Famine, one of the particular rationales for colonial plantation and expansion, becomes here associated with the black woman. With the finite resources of a Venetian (or Elizabethan) society reserved for the wealthy elite, the offspring of Gobbo and the Moor present a triple threat that in this world is perceived as a crime against the state. This miscegenation is perhaps more suspect than the possibility of that between a Portia and a Morocco; it raises the possibility of a half Black, half Christian child from the lower classes threatens to upset the desired balance of consumption.

Ultimately both sources draw on/create the same racial stereotype. Just as the image of the black female as consumer of state resources in twentieth-century United States is statistically inaccurate but politically powerful, so may the black presence have been a threat to white European labor, a threat magnified by its very visibility. I borrow here from Patricia Hill Collins' discussion of the image of the welfare mother in the United States:

*Controlling Black women's fertility in such a political economy becomes important. The image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not white and middle class … The image of the welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group's interest in limiting the fertility of black mothers who are seen as producing too many unproductive children.*

Similarly, the alignment of class, race, and religious difference in the jesting over the female Moor in *Merchant* serves to label her fertility as dangerous and ultimately disruptive of the desired homology between Christianity and economic vitality.

The unnoticed black woman in *The Merchant of Venice* suggests a great deal about the racial and sexual politics of reading and consequently “writing” the Renaissance. Much attention is paid to Portia's gender-bending and the Prince of Morocco's role in the sex/gender system of Venice. However, modern critical attention to the play in some ways replicates a dynamic typical of modern Europe. The current historical work on the black presence in England, not surprisingly, ignores gender difference as well. Then, as now, black women fall into the margins of difference. As Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith propose in their provocatively titled anthology, *All of the Men are Black, All the Women are White, But Some of Us are Brave*, the elision of the female from the category of race only contributes to the invisibility of black women.
This tendency in modern works is only exacerbated by early discourses of race. A travel narrative printed in Richard Hakluyt's influential *Principal Voyages*, “The Prosperous Voyage of Master James Lancaster to the towne of Fernambruck in Brasil,” graphically illustrates this point. The English, in the midst of a battle with the Portuguese and the Native Americans in Brazil, block off a harbor and commandeer all enemy ships:

And this farther good chance or blessing of God we had to helpe us, that assoone as we had taken our cartes, the next morning came in a ship with some 60 Negros, 10 Portugall woman, and 40 Portugals: the women and the Negros we turned out of the towne, but the Portugals our Admirall kept us to draw the carts when they were laden, which to us was a very great ease. For the country is very hote and ill for our nation to take any great travell in.23

At this point in Lancaster's narrative, issues of numbering and cataloguing seem to take precedence over narrative detail. While we are given the illusion of numerical specificity in the numbering of the Portuguese by nationality and gender, the “Negroes” are made genderless (or all male): “the women and the Negroes we turned out of the towne.”

Similarly, we find in Peter Fryer's account of the use of blacks as symbols of status in seventeenth-century England, the revelation of a 100 year tradition of the Sackville family who kept a page who was always to be known as John Morocco. A look at the diary of Lady Anne Clifford shows that, in addition to John Morocco, the Sackvilles acquired a black laundrymaid, named Grace Robinson around 1613.24 Even with this seemingly innocent piece of evidence, we need to question (without valorizing) why it is that the black male's name and identity is subsumed under his racial status. The Sackville family literally name him “Morocco” and make him the focus of necessary racial distinctions that shaped family status. Grace Robinson and her labor (like most women's work) disappears from the narrative of the Sackville family only to appear in a list of family retainers at the end of the text. If nothing else, her appearance suggests that although most slaves were men, black women were not absent. Such narrative fragments hint at the possibilities for the study of race in early modern England; however, they should also represent a cautionary tale about the ways in which the terms of representation dictate the terms of critical analysis. The master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house: the insistence on traditional standards of evidence, on “ocular proof” of a black female presence before any discussion of the gendering of race, merely maintains the traditional silence that surrounded black women from their earliest experiences in England and America.

Newman ends her essay on *Othello* urging that Shakespeare be read from a position of opposition:

We need to read Shakespeare in ways which produce resistant readings, ways which contest the hegemonic forces the plays at the same time affirm. Our critical task is not merely to describe the formal parameters of a play, not is it to make claims about Shakespeare's politics, conservative or subversive, but to reveal the discursive and dramatic evidence for such representations, and their counterparts in criticism and representations (158).

I want to suggest here that Newman's contention needs expansion: Not only do we need to read Shakespeare in ways that produce resistant readings, we need to read “other” documents with the same care. The documents that would seem to provide empirical evidence are as deeply imbricated by the same cultural assumptions as Shakespeare's plays. Thus, we need to interpret Elizabeth's “creation” as carefully and with as the same critical consciousness as we read Shakespeare's. The reticence Appiah states in speaking of Renaissance notions of race may be rooted in the apprehension that one might take a European representation of difference as an “accurate” sense of difference. This does not mean that representations of blackness are not in the proper purview of critical theories of race. It does, however, mean that we need to read with the constant recognition that the evidence of that presence is still the product of a European—and Eurocentric—mind.
Notes

1. I adopt the term “Black” as a more inclusive term that takes into account the study early descriptions of blackness as well as the presence of Africans in Europe and the Americas.

2. Although his title might seem to acknowledge the difficulty of analyzing a black female presence, the text itself suggests that the work is based on the assumption that the category “black” means “black male.” His text is full of sentences such as the following which equate African difference with masculinity: “Put briefly, English dramatists were trying to respond imaginatively to a black African who was a stranger to their land and their consciousness at exactly the same time that English commercial interests were beginning to exploit that same Black man as the most suitable material for slave labor.” Elliot Tokson, *The Image of the Black Man in English Drama* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), ix (emphasis added). A more recent work that substantially revises Tokson, Anthony Barthelemy's *Black Face/Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), while not feminist in its approach, pays much more attention to representations of black women.


4. This latter question may in fact seem wellworn to those who have been in immersed in the arguments over the “New Historicism.” I bring up this specific question again, because this issue of “evidence” is of pressing concern to historical studies of race, as one faces from students and from peers the need to “prove” a significant black presence in the Renaissance. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's essay “Literary Criticism and The New Historicism” charges that the reading strategies of the more prominent “new historicists” ignore the unique qualities of history: “In most cases they have implicitly preferred to absorb history into the text or discourse without (re)considering the specific characteristics of history herself. Such a blanket charge may appear churlish, especially since so much of the work in new historicism has attempted to restore women, working people, and other marginal groups (although rarely, so far, black people) to the discussion of literary texts.” in *The New Historicism*, H.Aram Veeser ed., (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 217. Interestingly, even as she foregrounds the absence of blacks from analysis, she proposes a reading of history which may perpetuate that absence, “Both in the past and in the interpretation of the past history follows a pattern or structure, according to which some systems of relations and some events possess greater significance than others” (218). Such an emphasis on patterns and degrees of significance, this essay should demonstrate, still works to preclude the restoration of marginalized figures to literature and history.


8. I use Appiah here because, as the author of an entry presumably designed to enable further discussions on this category, he shows some recalcitrance in his thinking on the Renaissance which is, in effect, not unlike the objections made by more conservative scholars against race as a focus of inquiry in earlier periods.

9. In the introduction to the volume, editor Thomas McLaughlin outlines the project of the individual entries: “Each theorist considered a different term prevalent in literary discourse, examining its history, the controversies it generates, the questions it raises, the reading strategies it permits” (emphasis added).


11. I am thinking here specifically of such writers on feminism and identity politics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela Davis and bell hooks and post-colonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak. One


13. I make these claims with some qualifications. Newman's study is very much concerned with the way black and white work against each other in miscegenative pairings. However, the effect is to locate “race” in Othello and “gender” in Desdemona.


19. I do not rule out a topical allusion. One could consider it a reference to the infamous case of the black woman, Maria, impregnated and abandoned by Drake and his crew on his third circumnavigation: “Drake left behind him upon this island two negroes … and likewise the negro wench Maria. She being gotten with child in the ship and now being very great was left here on the island, which Drake named the isle Francisco after one of the negroes” (196). There is no way of knowing how long such an incident would remain in the public memory. William Camden's 1625 *Annales* records castigations of Drake for this and other actions on that voyage. See John Hampden, ed. *Francis Drake: Privateer: Contemporary Narratives and Documents.* (Alabama: The U of Alabama P, 1972).


22. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of us are Brave* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1982).


**Criticism: Race: James R. Aubrey (essay date 1993)**


[In the essay below, Aubrey attempts to show that Shakespeare's construction of Othello's character would have “engaged such popular associations of blacks with monsters and thereby would have intensified audience responses to early performances.”]

Whoever believed in the Ethiopians before actually seeing them?
Pliny

Near the end of The Tempest, Antonio jests that the monster Caliban “is a plain fish, and no doubt marketable.” As an earlier remark in the play makes clear, however, Caliban would be valuable not only in a fishmarket but also as an exotic creature for display at court, “a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat’s leather.”¹ When Shakespeare was writing Othello, his attraction to Cinthio’s narrative about a black Moor in Venice may likewise have been a playwright’s recognition that Othello’s skin color would give him a “marketable,” spectacular charge on the stage, as a character whose appearance marked him as Other, as having originated somewhere beyond the boundaries of the familiar. Although blacks had appeared on stage in earlier English plays, such roles were still extraordinary in 1604, when Othello was probably first performed.² The opening scene of the play further exoticizes Othello with its references to him not by name but as “the Moor,” and as an “extravagant and wheeling stranger” (1.1.58 and 1.1.37). Blacks were outsiders in a more profound sense as well, at this time, for they were associated in the popular imagination with monsters, so that the play’s numerous references to monstrosity would have resonated with Othello’s racial characteristics to establish his extreme difference from typical Europeans. Whether some biographical Shakespeare actually considered such ideas “marketable” is not a question I can answer, but I will show that Othello’s character is constructed in a way that would have engaged such popular associations of blacks with monsters and thereby would have intensified audience responses to early performances.

From the thirteenth century, monstrous races were increasingly reported to be living in Africa rather than in Asia, as Rudolf Wittkower notes.³ Other critics have suggested that the English in the early 1600s still thought of blacks much as they thought of monsters, as strange creatures from outside the boundaries of the known world. Michael Neill touches the issue when he discusses linkage between blackness and moral monstrosity.⁴ Emily C. Bartels locates Othello’s power as a character partly in the audience’s perception of his racial difference, on the basis of which people “demonize an Other as a means of securing the self.”⁵ Karen Newman asserts that there is a cultural association of blacks with monsters: by virtue of his color, “Othello is a monster in the Renaissance sense of the word.”⁶ Although precise attitudes in the early seventeenth century are not recoverable, documents from that time can enable us to understand more about what constituted this “Renaissance sense” of Othello’s monstrousness.

The most useful evidence is, of course, contemporaneous with Othello. An example is the pamphlet translated in 1605 by Edward Gresham, who summarizes the contents in an arresting title:

Strange fearful & true news, which happened at Carlstadt, in the kingdom of Croatia.
Declaring how the sun did shine like blood nine days together, and how two armies were seen in the Air, the one encountering the other. And how also a Woman was delivered of three prodigious sons, which Prophesied many strange & fearful things, which should shortly come to pass.

Whether or not Gresham’s London bookseller believed the report to be true, he evidently believed that there was a paying readership for such “news” and sold it with a cover illustration just as sensational as the contents (Figure 1). The cover visually represents the battle in the air and the three “prodigious sons,” described inside as follows: “The first of these Prodigious Children had four heads, which spoke and uttered strange things. The second Child was black like a Moor, and the third Child like unto Death.” Depicted as fully grown and articulate, these newly-born “children” prophesy eventual defeat of the Turks and a time of dearth “both here and in other places.” Devout buyers no doubt took the pamphlet seriously; others probably bought it for the kind of textual pleasures available today from supermarket tabloids. The predicted conflict in Croatia may seem ironic to historians of the late twentieth century, but of more historical interest is the cover’s use of black skin as a sign of monstrosity, indeed, as the child’s only monstrous characteristic.
Social anthropologists would say that this idea, that blacks and monsters are related, if not equated, on some level of the popular imagination, constituted part of early modern London's “habitus,” what Pierre Bourdieu defines as “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,” or more simply, “a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures.”7 If there was a social disposition in 1604-5 to regard blacks and monsters as similar manifestations of the Other, as Strange News implies that there was, such a disposition would have affected both the generation and the reception of Othello at that historical moment. Indeed, as parts of the same habitus, each text simultaneously reflected and reinforced that very mental linkage.

Strange News and Othello are by no means the only documents of the late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century to connect blacks and monsters. In 1569 Histoires Prodigeuses was translated as Certain Secret Wonders of Nature, in which Pierre Boiastuau rehearsed various explanations for “monstrous childbearing” including “the influence of the stars,” the “superabundance or default and corruption of the seed and womb,” or “an ardent and obstinate imagination, which the Woman hath, whilst she conceives the child.” Boiastuau illustrates this last cause both verbally and visually, first with two anecdotes:

Damascenus a grave author doth assure this to be true, that being present with Charles, the iv. Emperor and king of Bohemia, there was brought to him a maid, rough and covered with hair like a bear, the which the mother had brought forth in so hideous and deformed a shape, by having too much regard to the picture of St[aint] John clothed with a beast's skin, the which was tied or made fast continually during her conception at her bed's feet. By the like means Hippocrates saved a princess accused of adultery, for that she was delivered of a child black like an Ethiopiyan, her husband being of a fair and white complexion, which by the persuasion of Hippocrates, was absolved and pardoned, for that the child was like unto a [picture of a] Moor, accustomedly tied at her bed.8

If the first child had been the offspring of hirsute parents, or if the second child had been the offspring of an adulterous, interracial union, they would not have been considered monsters. Boiastuau considers them to be monstrous because of the “unnatural” intervention by the female imagination during the process of conception. Whether or not Shakespeare read Boiastuau, he would have recognized in this folk-theory of teratogenesis a consistency with the Biblical story he cites in The Merchant of Venice, the story of Jacob's intervention to produce parti-colored lambs by placing striped wands in front of ewes while they mate (1.3.75-85).

Boiastuau's contemporary Ambroise Paré, in his treatise Of Monsters and Prodigies, recounts a story that is similar to Boiastuau's but which reverses the colors, as a white child is born to black parents:

We have read in Heliodorus that Persiana, Queen of Ethiopia, by her husband Hidustes, being also an Ethiope, had a daughter of a white complexion, because in the embraces of her husband, by which she proved with child, she earnestly fixed her eye and mind upon the picture of the fair Andromeda standing opposite to her.9

Here, too, it is not the color but the extraordinary process by which the child's skin color is determined that gives this child the status of monster, the fact that its “formation is contrary to the general rule and to what is usual”—as Aristotle once defined monstrosities.10

The illustrations in both Paré and Boiastuau, however, unlike the verbal texts, suggest that black skin alone could constitute a sign of monstrosity (Figures 2 and 3). Regardless of who the illustrators may have been, or whether the second copied the first, both chose to depict as a monster—along with the hairy girl—the black child born to white parents rather than the white one born to black parents. The illustrators must on some level
have recognized that for a white audience of readers, the representation of a white child-monster would appear “normal” rather than “monstrous” until one had read the accompanying narratives. The illustrators’ artistic decision to show only the black child points to the existence of a deep cultural centrism, linked with what would come to be known as racial identity, centrism of a kind which is likely also to have shaped audience responses to the still extraordinary sight of a black person seen on the street—or represented on the stage of a predominantly white culture such as France or England.

It is hard to imagine that Shakespeare is not deliberately exploiting such Anglo-centrism in the way he prepares an audience for Othello's entrance. In the first scene, Iago awakens Brabantio with the cry that “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.89-90)—an image of Othello and Desdemona intended to horrify her father. Iago next represents their sexual union as “your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse” (1.1.112). Desdemona's imagined mating with an African animal is the kind of act which Paré describes among the causes of monsters, a “copulation with beasts” that leads to “the confusion of seed of diverse kinds” (25.982). Reminding her father that Othello and Desdemona may be generating monsters, Iago further baits Brabantio, “you’ll have your nephews neigh to you,” then reinforces the idea with a final image of Othello and Desdemona during sexual intercourse with the conventional figure of “the beast with two backs” (1.1.112-18). The first scene of the play thus prepares an audience verbally for the entrance of some “thing” that is not-human; that this “Barbary horse” will turn out to be more human than Iago—who initially seems to be the audience’s kinsman—is an irony that can prove as unsettling as Gulliver's discovery that Houyhnhnms behave like people and the creatures that look like himself behave like animals.

In scene two, the metaphors applied to Othello take on more social and political overtones. Brabantio addresses Othello as a “foul thief” whose enchantment of his daughter has led her to flee from “the wealthy curled darling of our nation” to “the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” (1.2.62-72). Although the word “thing” is in accord with Iago's earlier beauty-and-beast metaphors, Brabantio seems to see Othello's offense as more political than personal, a transgression of the boundaries of acceptable behavior in Venetian culture because Othello's “sooty” color marks him as ineligible to compete legitimately for Desdemona with the white males of “our nation.” Anthropologist Robin Fox has observed that “[g]roups speaking the same language and being alike in other ways might well exchange wives among themselves—but the connubium stopped at the boundaries of the language, territory, or colour, or whatever marked ‘us’ off from ‘them.’” A marriage between an African black and a Venetian white would have seemed clearly beyond the bounds of acceptable exogamy to Shakespeare's audience—especially to the white, aristocratic males, whose marital options in England Lawrence Stone has described as “very limited” in social and geographical range and reflecting “a very high degree of social and economic endogamy.” Even without the language depicting Othello as less than human, then, Desdemona's unauthorized choice of husband would itself have seemed socially and politically “monstrous.”

Persons watching the play would not yet appreciate Othello's virtues when he appears at court in Scene Three, so his self-justification must persuade a theater audience as well as the Duke of Venice. To indicate how he captivated Desdemona, Othello mentions two exotic races he has told her about: “The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (1.3.146-47). Desdemona evidently has responded to his exotic stories with awe:

She swore in faith ’twas strange, ’twas passing strange, ’Twas pitiful, ’twas wondrous pitiful. She wish’d she had not heard it, yet she wish’d That heaven had made her such a man.

(1.3.161-64)

Desdemona's response to the “wondrous” and “strange” narratives is confused with her response to the
wonderful stranger who narrates them; as she puts it, the tales themselves “woo her” (1.3.168). Shakespeare gives Othello's wooing additional credibility by including exotic but recognizable travel lore such as the anthropophagi, which Montaigne had recently written about in his essay “Of Cannibals.” The headless monsters were formerly described by Pliny as “some people without necks, having their eyes in their shoulders,” in ancient India; but they also had been described in the more recent, 1582 edition of Mandeville's Travels, where they were illustrated (Figure 4), and in Hakluyt's expanded Voyages published between 1598 and 1600, where Sir Walter Raleigh was said to have been assured that headless monsters could be found just two rivers away from the place he was visiting in Guiana. If the existence of this monstrous race was commonly thought to have been validated by recent travelers to remote places, then surely theatergoers—the auditors of Othello's auditors—would, like Desdemona, have found the teller as exotic as his tales.

Of course, Othello's most obvious difference is his skin color, a sign of his African origin. Pliny once remarked, “Whoever believed in the Ethiopians before actually seeing them?” (511), and black Africans seem not to have lost their associations with such marvels by 1581, when Stephen Bateman in his Doom Warning All Men to the Judgment turned first to Africa in his catalogue of monsters whose existence testifies to God's continuing punishment of man. Bateman's catalogue includes Negritae, with lips that hang down to their breasts, who are labeled in the margin as “Black Monsters,” and what seems to be something of a catch-all:

*Ethiopes* a people in the west part of Ethiopia: also there are of those black men, that have four eyes: and it is said that in Eripia be found very comely bodied men, notwithstanding they are long necked, and mouthed as a crane, the other part of the head like a man: also sundry strange and deformed men and women there are, which we omit. …

However suspect such reports may have become by the late sixteenth century, they still were being published and read. Even if Othello was not considered to be a Bateman-esque “black monster” himself, as an African he might have been assumed to know first hand about monstrous races.

There seems to have been further confusion over, or failure to distinguish between, traditional races of monsters in far-off lands and the occasional birth closer to home of a monstrous, individual child. Readers could find discussion of both kinds of monster in James Rueff's treatise The Expert Midwife, translated into English in 1637, whose chapter “Of Unperfect Children, Also of Monstrous Births” contains both a description of a terribly deformed, yet human child born in Oxford in 1551, and a description of a beast with a man's head, a beast's tail, and dogs' heads at its elbows and knees, followed by a description of a mythical creature with two wings and one foot. Rueff notes that such misshapen offspring must be manifestations of God's will but that “through the insight of our reason, we may perceive also the detestable sin of Sodomy.” Rueff's assumption that particular births of monsters indicate breeding between humans and animals suggests that he considers even animal-like monsters to be individual cases rather the offspring of monstrous races, but he goes on to mention Pliny's “reports of living creatures in Africa that have such various forms and shapes.” Even Rueff seems unwilling to let go completely of the older explanations of monsters that associates them, like Blacks, with Africa.

Anthropologists have noticed a relation between attitudes toward such outsiders and stories of monsters. Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to the Gobineau hypothesis as a way of accounting for the proliferation of fantastic beings in a culture as less the result of rich imagination than of “the inability of fellow-citizens to conceive of strangers in the same way as themselves.” Othello as “blackamoor” is visibly marked as a member of a culture different from that of everyone else on the stage or in the audience; he may have seemed as fantastic as the monsters associated with him.

There is another kind of historical evidence on which to base an inference that theatergoers would have felt a thrill of disturbed awe at the sight of Othello: the fact that a black person would still have been an unusual sight to most English theatergoers. The exact size of the black population in England at the turn of the
seventeenth century is uncertain, and historians are reluctant even to guess, but there is no doubt that their numbers had been growing over the forty years since the first West Africans had been introduced to London in 1563. Ruth Cowhig has written that “there were several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and landed gentry, or working in London taverns,” so she imagines that “the sight of black people must have been familiar to Londoners.” Even if most Londoners had seen blacks, however, the appearance on stage of a black person who spoke and felt must still have seemed remarkable. And even if blacks were visible on the streets, they may not have been accepted as “familiar.” Parish records from Barking for 1 October 1599 show two blacks living in the parish of All Hallows: “Clare a Negra at Widdow S[tokes?]” and “M[a]ry a Negra at Richard Wood.” W. E. Miller used this in 1961 as evidence that there were Blacks in London in 1599, a point no longer in doubt; what is more interesting is that the two blacks are further described not as inhabitants but as “Straungers” in the parish.” This word may be merely an expression of parochialism, a reference to the fact that they were not locally born, but the term also suggests that they were thought of in terms of their “otherness.”

The 1601 draft of a royal proclamation further indicates the extent to which blacks in England were thought of as “strangers” at the turn of the seventeenth century. Endorsed by Queen Elizabeth, the document authorizes the transportation to Spain or Portugal of any “Negroes and blackamoors … within the realm of England.” She justifies this action partly in terms of the precedent of prisoner exchanges, the tradition that a captive may be enslaved by the victor in warfare. A second justification is a perception of social unrest. Both these arguments are based on an assumption of cultural centrism and racial difference:

> Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms.

The proclamation goes on to license Casper van Senden, a merchant who had rescued eighty-nine English subjects detained by Spain and Portugal, to take “such Negroes and blackamoors to be transported as aforesaid as he shall find within the realm of England.” Van Senden is not authorized to use force, but if any persons “possessed of any such blackamoors … refuse to deliver them,” the proclamation authorizes him to “advise and persuade them by all good means to satisfy her majesty's pleasure therein” and to report the names of anyone who refuses to cooperate.

The proclamation indicates that a black person can only be a servant, “possessed” by a master who should hand over the possession. Blacks are a “kind of people,” different not only in color but also by virtue of their religion—rather, their lack of Christian religion—which makes them “infidels.” The concern expressed in the proclamation is perhaps over their probable lack of political as well as religious fidelity, for the comment about infidels follows close upon a description of the English people as Elizabeth's “liege,” or loyal subjects. And political concerns seem to be what have led at least some people to feel annoyed that blacks are “powered” as well as “fostered” at the expense of the English. The black population is said to be “great,” but the document includes a parenthetical “as she is informed,” perhaps indicating some doubt in Elizabeth's mind over the claimed growth in size of the black population. Or, the absence of a numerical estimate could be a deliberate omission, if the approximate number was small enough to have reduced the force of the argument that deportation of blacks would significantly ease the shortages of food.

The proclamation perhaps exaggerates the problems in order to further the financial interests of van Senden, who had been petitioning for this kind of support for more than four years. Nevertheless, the arguments
were evidently thought plausible enough by the court that the power of the monarchy was invoked to formally delineate a social boundary based on skin color and even to bring the power of the state to bear on racially-marked strangers in what amounted to a kind of cultural exorcism. Given the presence of such an attitude among the English toward blacks as unwelcome intruders, the character of Othello as both different from Venetians but powerful within that culture must have contained a particularly powerful social charge for those who originally watched *Othello*.

A perception of African blacks as “not English” would further have reinforced the idea that Africa is an exotic, mysterious world. In 1600 that world was of sufficient interest that John Leo's *A Geographical History of Africa* was translated into English and published in London. Leo was a Moor from Morocco who had converted to Christianity, according to John Pory's introduction. His book had first been published in Italian around 1526. Leo did not offer just one more traveler's rehearsal of sights mixed with legends but an ethnographer's report, sometimes describing particular details from particular kingdoms in a given geographical area, sometimes drawing inferences from the observations, and sometimes making moral judgments. Leo's “General Description” notes that there are five “principal nations” in that part of the world, the Cafri, the Abyssins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and “the Africans or Moors, properly so called: which last are of two kinds, namely white or tawny Moors, and Negroes or black Moors.” Members of these groups can be found in various regions, he goes on to point out, but later, in Book Seven, he states that “the fifteen kingdoms of the land of the Negroes known to us, are all situated upon the river of Niger, and upon other rivers which fall thereunto” (285). In his description of these kingdoms, Leo is not inclined to offer sweeping judgments, but in his General Description he offers some statements about the vices of the people of Africa which would have reinforced English fears and stereotypes of blacks, attitudes implicit in phrases such as Ben Jonson's “quick Negro” or Shakespeare's “lascivious moor” (1.1.126):

The Negroes [compared to the “lewd” and “brutish” inhabitants of Libya] likewise lead a beastly kind of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexterity of wit, and of all arts. Yea they so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a forest among wild beasts. They have great swarms of harlots among them; whereupon a man may easily conjecture their manner of living.

Perhaps John Leo's tone of abhorrence is a sop to European readers, or perhaps the Western-educated Leo was feeling an urge to scrawl in the margin, “Exterminate all the brutes!” as Conrad's Kurtz would do in his report on dark Africa. In any case Leo's *History of Africa* tended to reinforce the European view of black moors as “beasts,” and it was probably known to Shakespeare, as it certainly was to Jonson. The book's London publication at the turn of the seventeenth century is one more event that helped to constitute the London habitus from which *Othello* emerged and into which it was received.

Much as associations of monsters and Blacks would have affected how a playgoer regarded Othello in the first act of the play, ideas about how monsters were conceived, carried, and delivered inform many other passages in the play and would further have shaped responses to characters on stage.

The language of monstrous childbearing appears frequently in the play, often in the tradition of prodigious births hinting at some ominous event to come. At the end of the first act of *Othello*, Iago appeals to Roderigo to plot with him against the Moor:

[L]et us be conjunctive in our revenge against him; if thou canst cuckold him, thou does thyself a pleasure, and me a sport. There are many events in the womb of time, which will be deliver’d.
Iago's description of time as a womb from which events will issue gives him a role something like that of Edward Gresham, the doomsday pamphleteer who warned that the monstrous births in *Strange News* portended future calamities. Iago is a more cheerful prophet, perhaps because he sees himself less as human victim than as divine ordinator of the supernatural events: “I have ’t. It is engender’d. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light” (1.3.404-05). The emphasis is on the “I have ’t.” Iago, not God or the devil, is engendering, or conceiving the offspring. “Hell and night” are cast in the lesser role of midwives, as enabling rather than causative agents.

Iago's metaphor is noteworthy for its implied equivalence between an idea and a birth, a concept and a conception—a metaphor that will recur. The idea that the brain gives birth to thoughts as the body gives birth to children—or monsters—was well-embedded in the culture of early modern England. Other examples of the metaphor include the dedication of Shakespeare's sonnets to “their only begetter” and the complaint of Sidney's Astrophil that he feels “great with child to speake,” as well as Thomas Underdowne's compliment to Edward DeVere: “in your Honour is, I think, expressed the right pattern of a Noble Gentleman, which in my head I have conceived.”

In *Othello* the metaphor is used deliberately, almost literally, so that the comparison becomes explicit between mental conception and physical birth. Iago plays with the metaphor in Act Two, when Desdemona asks him to compose some lines of praise; he describes how his invention is taxing his brain, then announces: “But my Muse labours, / And thus she is deliver'd” (2.1.127-28). As the comparison is extended with reference to Iago's plot, however, playgoers are reminded of the metaphor's basis in ideas about biological generation, and they may also recall Iago's reference at the end of Act One to the impending “birth” as “monstrous”; as the metaphor becomes conscious, it helps to convey the morally monstrous nature of Iago's "conception."

In Act Three, Iago transfers the monstrous conception, which includes the idea of Desdemona's infidelity, from his own mind to Othello's. Othello comments in an aside that Iago seems to echo Othello's own doubts about Cassio, “[a]s if there were some monster in his thought, / Too hideous to be shown” (3.3.111-12). He then says to Iago that there must be some reason Iago has looked concerned as they were discussing Cassio:

[Thou] didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit. ...
[Thou] weigh'st thy words, before thou giv'st them breath,
Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more;
For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just
They're close dilations, working from the heart
That passion cannot rule.

(1.3.118-29)

The first lines, about a “horrible conceit,” seem an obvious continuation of the metaphorical language of generation that has previously represented Iago's thoughts as some hideous progeny awaiting birth, confined in the womb of his brain. The contracting and pursing of Iago's brow are symptoms of metaphorical labor to bring forth the offspring, to present the idea to Othello—who is afraid to see it. The description of Iago's pausing before giving breath to his words may also be a continuation of the birth imagery, as well as a literal declaration that Iago thinks before he speaks; although the “stops” Othello refers to are what he senses to be Iago's hesitations, that is, stoppages of the breath that gives voice to his thoughts, they also resemble the breathing of a prospective mother in labor. Indeed, this pattern of references to childbirth provides a justification for the Folio reading of “dilations” instead of the First Quarto's “denotements,” since dilations (of the cervix) could be one more reference to the birth process, whose ineluctability “passion cannot rule.” All
these images of childbirth help to constitute an understanding that Iago is carrying a monstrous idea as a mother might carry a deformed child in her womb.

In subsequent lines of the play, however, Iago does not give birth to his monstrous thoughts but, somehow, transfers the metaphorical pregnancy to Othello. Perhaps the metaphor breaks down, here, since pregnancy could not (until the late twentieth century) be moved from one womb to another. Elizabeth Sacks has tried to explain the process of transfer as metaphorical “theft,” first by showing that wombs were sometimes compared to purses in the seventeenth century, then by suggesting that Othello somehow, “psychosexually,” has stolen Iago's “purse” of “trashy thoughts.”28 The pregnancy is not necessarily shifted from Iago to Othello, however, if one thinks of this mental conception, like physical conception, as a process requiring two partners. The idea that Desdemona has been unfaithful is generated by verbal intercourse between partners, analogous to sexual intercourse with Iago as male and Othello as female, impregnated through his ear. The conception process can be understood in terms of Aristotle's theories about the Generation of Animals, current well into the eighteenth century, according to which male seed is not simply deposited in the female, nor does it join with female seed in the womb, but it shapes the female seed. Aristotle describes the process with a comparison to carpentry, where the artisan forms wood into a shape but does not join himself with the material; “the active partner is not situated within the thing which is being formed” (113). As Thomas Laquer has summarized this way of understanding generation, “conception is for the male to have an idea, an artistic or artisanal conception, in the brain-uterus of the female.”29 Aristotle's theory would also allow the play's metaphorical impregnation of one male by another male to seem less strained, for in this traditional view of human generation, neither mind and body nor gender and sex were so clearly distinguished as they have since come to be. In Othello, then, the possibility that Desdemona has been unfaithful is the idea actively imparted by Iago, like a formative male seed, into the brain-uterus of Othello, whose tractable character provides the passive material to be shaped. Then, like a pregnant woman with a seemingly irrational desire for something, Othello insists that Desdemona show him the misplaced handkerchief decorated with strawberries—the fruit commonly associated with maternal cravings, the frustration of which could supposedly result in “strawberry marks” on children.30 Othello's “maternal” imagination thus deforms the gestating conception of possible infidelity into the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy he had been warned to beware (3.3.170-72).

Although the metaphorical language is not perfectly consistent, this underlying idea that a monstrous birth is impending continues to inform the play. Later in Act Three, Othello refers to cuckoldry as a matter of destiny: “Even then this forked plague is fated to us / When we do quicken” (3.3.282-83). The audience hears a statement capable of another construction than Othello's intended fatalism, however, for he will be plagued when he suspects that he is a cuckold, when the green-eyed monster will “quicken” in the womb of his own brain. A few lines later Othello says, “I have a pain upon my forehead here” (3.3.290)—as the monstrous thought kicks in its mental womb, perhaps, or as Othello feels a mental contraction that anticipates the birth of the idea. In the next scene, Emilia repeats the comparison of jealousy to “a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself,” to which Desdemona replies “Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind!” (3.4.161-63). Anyone attending to the play has heard enough auditory images to know that Othello already is bearing that very monster of a conception, as he announces to Desdemona in Act Five:

... confess thee freely of thy sin;
For to deny each article with oath
Cannot remove, nor choke the strong conception,
That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.

(5.2.56-59)

For Othello to contemplate the murder is for his mental womb to labor painfully to give birth to its deformed “child”; his monstrous conception will issue forth as horrifying action.
Othello has always been one of Shakespeare's most moving dramas, but it moves its audiences in different ways as their mentalities differ. A part of its effect when first performed in the early seventeenth-century England would have resided in the confused mixture of powerful ideas about monsters and about blacks circulating in the culture that was producing Shakespeare and Othello, as that culture was in turn being reproduced by them.

Notes

1. The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. David Bevington, 3d edition (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1980), 5.1.269 (act 5, scene 1, line 269), and 2.2.70-71. Subsequent citations to Shakespeare's work are from this edition.
Criticism: Race: Margo Hendricks (essay date 1996)


A number of critics have read Othello principally with an eye toward illuminating the moral sense of the problematic racial and sexual politics engendered not only by the play's depiction of what is viewed as an interracial marriage but also by Othello's sensationalized murder of his wife, Desdemona.1 The obstacle facing all such critical readings, as Michael Neill astutely points out, is that the play itself conspicuously denies us (even as it denies Othello) an opportunity to enact “the funeral dignities that usually serve to put a form of [moral] order upon such spectacles of ruins,” creating an “ending [that is] perhaps the most shocking in Shakespearean tragedy” (383-412). Neill concludes that it is the final tragic scene, where “white” Desdemona is murdered and her husband/murderer, “black” Othello, violently avenges her murder—“I took by th’throat the circumcised dog / And smote him thus” (5.2.351-52)—which most “articulate[s] the [racial] anxiety evident almost everywhere in the play's history—a sense of scandal that informs the textual strategies of editors and theatrical productions as much as it does the disturbed reactions of audiences and critics” (384).

Feminist scholars have made clear that this “scandal” actually begins long before this most “unnatural” ending to the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. For example, Patricia Parker sees the “simultaneously eroticized and epistemological impulse to open up to show” the “fantasies of race and gender” in Othello as an anxiety-ridden linkage of female sexuality and the exotic narratives of “African or New World discovery” (92), while Janet Adelman argues that the “whole of his exchange with Desdemona demonstrates Othello's terrible conflict between his intense desire for fusion with the woman he idealizes as the nurturant source of his being and his equally intense conviction that her participation in sexuality has contaminated her and thus contaminated the perfection that he has vested in her” (66-67). What has become obvious in these recent studies of Othello, as Valerie Traub contends, is that “Othello's anxiety is culturally and psychosexually overdetermined by erotic, gender, and racial anxieties, including … the fear of chaos [usually] associate[d] with sexual activity.”3 In what follows, I wish to reconsider the possibilities of reading the racial and sexual anxieties latent in Shakespeare's Othello. The focus of my discussion is not so much the personal relationships represented in the play as it is the cultural assumptions which may be coincident with the notion of race in Othello: in particular, I want to argue the possibility that the social site of Shakespeare's tragedy, Venice, is a

29. Thomas Laquer, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990), 42.
much more significant player in the construction of early modern English racialist ideology than critics have hitherto illuminated. Simply stated, my purpose is to show that Venice is a crucial yet often critically neglected racial persona in *Othello*.4

My reading builds upon and diverges from studies that examine Shakespeare's use of Italian city-states, in particular Venice, in his dramatic works—a usage which, according to these critics, highlights an Elizabethan "fascination" with Italian culture.5 In the case of Venice, this fascination is rooted in, as David C. McPherson terms it, the "myth of Venice," wherein the city is perceived as a state whose wealth, political stability, justice, and civility set it above all others (27). This image, of course, has its origins in early modern Italian political theories whose principal goal was to conceptualize a model civil society that "was to be paradigmatic for [Italian] civic humanism" (Pocock 271). In these theories Venice is represented as an uncorrupted, tranquil, and stable state; in fact, "Venice appears, both physically and politically, 'rather framed by the hands of the immortal Gods, than any way by the arte, industry or invention of men.'"6 Ultimately, as J. G. A. Pocock has shown, this "myth of Venice (at its most mythical) was to lie in the assertion that the Venetian commonwealth was an immortally serene, because perfectly balanced, combination of the three elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy" (102).

It is my contention that this myth inheres in Shakespeare's *Othello* and exercises a "compulsive force on the imagination," of both the characters within the play and the audience watching events unfold. But, because it is a mythology, "framed by the hands, … arte, industry, [and] invention of men," the ideal of Venice is also a paradox which ultimately subverts its illusion of perfection by drawing attention not only to the dichotomies (pure/impure, black/white) it constructs but also to the interiority that the myth and its dichotomies seek to conceal (Pocock 102). In other words, while the myth extols an image of Venice as the idealized feminine body, beautiful, desirable, and virginal, it also vicariously projects an image of Venice as the imperfect body—corruptive, desiring, and easily violated. If, as Patricia Parker argues, "the gaze is a vicarious gaze, a substitution of narrative" (89), then our attempt to discern how this paradox works racially must make use of this vicarious perspective.

**THE CUNNING WHORE OF VENICE**

Lewes Lewkenor's 1599 translation of Gasparo Contarini's *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* (along with Thomas Coryat's *Crudities*) did much to circulate this particular variant of the "myth of Venice" in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. In his dedication to the reader, Lewkenor writes that visitors to Venice, at least those "of a grauer humor,"

would dilate of the greatnes of their Empire, the grauitie of their prince, the majesty of their Senate, the vnuiolablenes of their lawes, their zeale in religion, and lastly their moderation, and equitte, wherewith they gouerne such subjected prouinces as are vnder their dominion, binding them therby in a faster bond of obedience then all the cytadels, garrisons, or whatsoeuer other tyrannicall inventions could euer haue brought them vnto. (A2)

Lewkenor uses the dedication to set the context for his dilation of the greatness of Venice and to encourage his readers to gaze upon the book as if it were the city itself. Characterized as a "pure and vntouched virgine, free from the taste or violence of any forraine enforcement," Venice is laid open for the "admiration" and entertainment of the book's English readers. Though not often viewed as a narrative of discovery, Lewkenor's text might well be included in that genre, as it has in common with other narratives of discovery what Patricia Parker calls "the language of opening, uncovering or bringing to light … what had been secret, closed or hid" from the majority of the English reading public whose travels were limited to environs of London (87).

Of course, Venice is neither Africa nor the "New World," and Lewkenor's dedication to the reader of *The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice* is intended merely to set the stage for his translation of a work of
political philosophy. Even so, the edition circulates conflicting images of the republic known as *La Serenissima*. In contrast to Lewkenor's praise of Venice's "unblemished" status, the commendatory poems written in praise of Lewkenor's endeavor convey a somewhat different vision of Venice. For example, one poem compares Venice to the "antique" cities of Babel, "fallen" "with the weight of their own furquedry." In another poem, though her "virgins state ambition nere could blot," the "swarmes" from "forrein nation[s]" prompt the writer to proclaim Venice's "ruinous case" which, of course, is reflected in the city's "painted face." Ironically, what is intended to honor the celebrated myth of Venetian stability and invulnerability, Lewkenor's dedication and the commendatory poems, actually draws attention to what stands behind the myth—Venice's notoriety as a site of illicit sexuality, dangerous passions, violence, and extraordinary cunning.

Thomas Coryat's *Crudities* exhibits a similar ambivalence toward Venice. In the account of his travel to Italy in 1608, Coryat begins with a description of Venice as "the fairest Lady," a "noble citie" (311). After a rather detailed description of the magnificence of Venice's architecture, Coryat interrupts his narrative to warn his readers to be wary of the city's gondoliers, who are "the most vicious and licentious varlets about all the City" (311). Coryat's warning is typical of his tendency to juxtapose an image of Venice as "this thrice worthie city … yea the richest Paragon" with an image of Venice as a city whose blatant acceptance of sexuality (the seeming valorization of the courtesans and the touted infidelity of Venetian wives) and violence denotes the "Virgin's" corruptibility. Coryat's maneuver serves strategically, as Ann Rosalind Jones suggests, as both a lure and an admonition: "Coryat writes with a double agenda: to thrill his readers and to protect their morals, to sell his book with the promise of titillation and to dignify it by setting his ethical seriousness as an Englishman against the variety of 'Ethnicke' types he encounters" (104). Jones rightly observes that the Venice "of English [writers such as Coryat] from the 1580s on was not a geographer's record but a fantasy setting for dramas of passion, Machiavellian politics, and revenge—a landscape of the mind" (110). For Coryat and others, within this "landscape of the mind" it is the "interplay of pleasure and danger" (Jones 102) posed by Venice's gendered and Janus-like status within European culture that must be castigated and the city reclaimed as the paradigm of cultural perfection.7 And it is this gendered "interplay" that Shakespeare distills in *Othello*, coupling the metaphoric blackness of Venice's reputation as a site of feminine sexual corruption and the literalness of Moorish Othello's black skin with the unstained honor of the Venetian military commander Othello and the symbolic whiteness of an uncorrupted Venice. Shakespeare's *Othello* joins these other early modern English texts in presenting a perspective of Venice that satisfies the desire to see encompassed in one racialized body, even if vicariously, both the virgin and the whore. And that body belongs, of course, to a woman.

**“DESDEMONA’S CHOICE”**

From the play's inception, when Brabantio reprimands Iago for his indecent language and both Roderigo and Iago for their disruption of Brabantio's peace—"What, tell'st thou me of robbing? this is Venice, my house is not a grange" (1.1.105-106)—the paradoxical "myth of Venice" is instantiated as a paradigm for reading the play's presumed sexual and racial deviances. Brabantio's words obviously are intended to correct what he perceives to be a misperception on the part of Iago, namely that there are no farm animals in his house. Significantly, Brabantio's rebuke conjures images of the Venice, *La Serenissima*, extolled in Lewkenor's translation, as the tone of Brabantio's declaration suggests that such a crime could never take place in Venice, and, more important, that Roderigo's and Iago's accusations of a barnyard theft would not have been brought surreptitiously to the victim's door in the middle of the night. Brabantio's reprimand indicates that he is a man possessed of the judicious gravity praised in Lewkenor's preface: a man whose "moderation and equitie" will lead him to behave rationally when confronted by what appears to be the irrational pranks of a spurned suitor.

Once he understands the implication of Iago's salacious words, however, Brabantio begins to exhibit the stereotypical irrationality which came to be a metaphoric staple of Jacobean dramatic depictions of Italians. Governed by his fury, Brabantio accuses Othello of sorcery or witchcraft even before the marriage is
confirmed by the couple: “is there not charms, / By which the property of youth and maidhood, / May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo, / Of such a thing?” (1.1.171-74) When we consider Brabantio's grave “This is Venice,” the sight of the rational “senator's” descent into illogic is somewhat surprising as he attempts to explain what he perceives to be unexplainable:

My daughter, O my daughter, ...  
She is abus'd, stol'n from me and corrupted,  
By spells and medicines, bought of mountebanks,  
For nature so preposterously to err,  
(Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,)  
Sans witchcraft could not.

(1.3.60-64)

Brabantio's “My daughter, O my daughter” poignantly recalls Solanio's account of Shylock's pained cry at Jessica's elopement with Lorenzo—“My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!—” and Shylock's own descent into irrationality (MV 2.8.15). Given Desdemona's position as only child and heir to Brabantio's estate, a situation analogous to Jessica's in The Merchant of Venice, it is not without significance that Shakespeare alludes to this earlier work in depicting a father's reaction to the news that his daughter has married without his approval and apparently to someone outside his ethnic community.

Shakespeare draws one other parallel between Brabantio and Shylock, in that both men seek to exploit the strict terms of Venetian law to extract justice from their perceived enemies. When he finally confronts Othello, Brabantio tells the general, “I therefore apprehend and do attach thee” (1.2.77). In this moment, the rational Venetian has displaced the irrational father who has roused his “kindred” to pursue the couple. Once he has Othello in custody, Brabantio is confident that he will be able to prove Othello guilty of witchcraft and that the Venetian legal institution will prove “pure and uncorrupted” as it evaluates the truth of his accusation. And, not unexpectedly, when Venetian law appears, in the persona of the Duke, it reaffirms Brabantio's faith in its exactitude:

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

(1.3.65-69)

No matter the cost, Brabantio is being guaranteed that the “penal Lawes [will be] most unpardonably executed” (Pocock 325).

Whatever Brabantio's cause, when Othello is named the guilty party, the senators who have accompanied the Duke respond to Brabantio's accusation in a rather cryptic fashion: “We are very sorry for't” (1.3.73). This comment can, of course, be interpreted in one of two ways. First, it can be seen as an expression of regret that Othello's service will be lost to Venice, given the political tensions that exist between Venetians and Turks. Or it can be read as an expression of compassion for Brabantio and the loss of his daughter in the manner he has described. I would propose that the former reading (regret at the loss of Othello's service to Venice) is the more likely intent behind the senators' words. When Othello and Brabantio first come into the presence of the Duke and senators, one senator refers to Othello as “the valiant Moor.” More telling of the esteem Othello has in Venice is the Duke's reaction after hearing Othello's narrative, when the Duke exhorts Brabantio to “Take up this mangled matter at the best; / Men do their broken weapons rather use, / Than their bare hands” (1.3.172-74). Brabantio's refusal to comply with the Duke's admonition is, as Lynda Booze argues, a refusal to
“act out,” to ritualize the symbolic transfer of his daughter to her husband not because Othello is necessarily unworthy but because the selection of Desdemona's husband was not Brabantio's: that right had been usurped by his daughter (“Father and Daughter” 327).

Desdemona's choice of a husband has been the object of critical gaze ever since Thomas Rymer first questioned Shakespeare's use of a “Blackamoor” as the tragic protagonist in *Othello*: whether in M. R. Ridley's introduction to the Arden edition of *Othello*, where Ridley writes, “It is the very essence of the play that Desdemona in marrying Othello—a man to whom her ‘natural’ reaction should (her father holds) have been fear, not delight—has done something peculiarly startling” (liii), or in Stanley Cavell's careful explanation that, in choosing Othello, Desdemona has “overlooked his blackness in favor of his inner brilliance”: in effect, “that she saw his visage as he sees it, that she understands his blackness as he understands it, as the expression (or in his word, his manifestation) of his mind” (129).

Complicating these, and other, critical attempts to explain Desdemona's choice is the fact that Shakespeare's play presents a world whose very social codes are frequently contradictory and conflicting, thus enabling Desdemona to act as she does. On one level, Venice is a place where the contagious rhetoric of racialism can easily destroy lives and careers, as Iago's manipulation so aptly illustrates. Yet it seems that early modern Venice is also a society where a man such as Othello can achieve success and fame to such a degree that a duke is moved to declare, “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.171). Othello's status and position, that is, his “honours and valiant parts” (1.3.253), prove as desirable to Desdemona as the narratives for which “She gave … a world of sighs” (1.3.159) and … lov’d [Othello] for the dangers [he] had pass’d” (1.3.167).

Though a Moor, Othello is perceived as a valuable member of Venetian society and his action as nothing more than “a mischiefe that is past and gone” [emphasis mine] (1.3.204). Emily Bartels rightfully argues that Othello's acceptance includes Iago, who “even as he attempts to prove Othello the outsider, … represents him as an authorizing insider.”9 As Lewkenor's translation of Contarini work documents and J. G. A. Pocock's study substantiates, Venice was often cited by early modern political theorists as a state to be commended for its successful handling of its imperial aims through the hiring of foreign nationals to provide its military force and to police the city. This long-standing practice, plus the city's mercantile zeal, created a cosmopolitan environment where “one sees in this city an infinite number of men from different parts of the world” (McPherson 30). Furthermore, according to Lewkenor, it was apparently not unusual for “forreyn mercenarie souldiers” to be “enabled, with the title of citizens & gentlemen of Venice” (S2).

Brabantio's cultivation and acceptance of Othello, therefore, may very well reflect this custom, so that when Othello explains that Desdemona's “father lov'd me, oft invited me” (1.3.128), we are reminded that it was Brabantio himself, as a senator, who first acknowledged Othello an “insider.”10 It is the senator Brabantio, and thus by extension Venice, who sets up contradictory notions about racial identity and social place within Venetian society. Desdemona's marital choice, therefore, may very well enact not only adherence to assumptions about appropriate spouses (Othello is, by birth, a prince, by merit a general, and through patronage wealthy) but, in addition, the transference of the daughter's love for her father to another Venetian father figure and not an “outsider.” Thus we may want to ask not why Othello drew her love but what is it in the man that her father loved that moves a woman “So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation …” (1.2.67-68) to set aside her reluctance to marriage and elope? And, whether Brabantio's reaction to the marriage, and Othello, is linked not to Othello's physical appearance but to that “thing … to fear, not to delight” in (1.2.71)—an incestuous desire for his daughter? If we view Desdemona's choice as being consistent with Shakespeare's characterization of her, of Othello, of Desdemona's willingness to perform her symbolic role in the ritual expression of marriage, and the myth of Venice, then perhaps it is Brabantio who continually refuses to participate in the ritual by subverting the activities which would require that he allow himself to be dispossessed of his daughter, that he permit another Venetian to sexually claim the one female body that he himself cannot sexually possess.11
Thus Brabantio's earlier rebuke of Iago becomes an ironic echo when Brabantio employs not only the language of theft to accuse Othello, “O thou foul thief,” but also the language often associated with witchcraft, “chains of magic” and “foul charms,” in an effort to destabilize the ritualized exchange of the female body that marks the institution of marriage. And Brabantio's charges, like his censure of Iago, allude to the complex and often contradictory social attitudes in Venice which allow for an Othello and a Desdemona but which also demand that they adhere to the customs and laws which govern that society.

Jacques Lacan has argued that “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted from stage, to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (73). I have been arguing that throughout Othello, this “something” is Venice, and I wish to conclude by looking briefly at the paradox that Shakespeare's play reveals Venice to be.

THE VENETIAN MOOR, OR THE ITALIAN ON THE ENGLISH STATE

One of the disturbing things about Othello, despite centuries of ideological intervention, is the play's ability to disrupt any attempt to make uneven the level playing field Shakespeare has created in his tragedy. This dilemma is further exacerbated by the crudely psychosexual dimensions engendered by Iago's rhetoric in the very first scene of the play:

Zounds, sir, you are robb’d, for shame put on your gown,
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul;
Even now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe. ... 

(1.1.86-89)

Iago's words neatly transform what is an act of elopement into an imagined cuckoldry; that is, in the double reference to Brabantio's nakedness (he lacks both property and his “gown”), Iago sets the stage for a further shaming of Brabantio by subtly naming what is lost as if it were a wife (“half your soul”) and luridly localizing this pseudo-wife in a pornographic fantasy. And though this fantasy is momentarily displaced by the intrusion (in the person of Othello) of Lewkenor's Venice, its affective power to create and sustain its image of perversion is not altered one whit.

Ironically, Iago's thematization of an imagined (and bestial) cuckoldry insinuates itself not only in Brabantio's imagination but in his later replacement of that anxiety onto Othello: “Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see: / She has deceiv’d her father, may do thee” (1.3.292-93). Predictably, Othello reenacts the violent passions that drove Brabantio to repudiate Desdemona, once again bringing to the surface the male anxiety about female sexuality (despite Desdemona's married state), considered the hallmark of “corrupt” Venice, that initiates the “tragedy of Othello.” However, Othello's complete displacement of Brabantio can occur only when, I would argue, he takes to its ultimate, punitive conclusion (by killing Desdemona) Brabantio's disowning of his daughter.12 In effect, it is the Venetian Othello who must see to it that Venice's “penal Lawes [are] most unpardonably executed” when the virgin is shown to be a whore.13

Representations of early modern Venice were always gendered feminine: it was a city “so beautiful, so renowned, so glorious a Virgin” and, at the same time, a “‘Circe's court,’ teeming with ‘wanton and dallying’ Calypsoes and Sirens.”14 This allusion to the seductive women who delayed Ulysses' return to Ithaca finds its parallel in Desdemona's “supersubtle” seduction of the warrior Othello: “she thank’d me, / And bade me, if I had a friend that lov’d her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story, / And that would woo her” (1.3.163-66). Like Venice, Desdemona has the appearance of purity (and discretion) even as she boldly lays herself open to Othello's suit. Even so, when Iago calls into question Desdemona's virtue, Othello iterates his
faith in his wife—“For she had eyes, and chose me” (3.3.193)—even as he leaves open the possibility of her infidelity: “No Iago, / I’ll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove, / And on the proof, there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy” (3.3.194-96).

Othello's insistence on “proof,” of course, becomes the opening that Iago needs to “abuse Othello's ear” (1.3.393). It is not insignificant that both Othello and Desdemona initially are swayed by what is heard rather than what is seen. From its inception, the play luridly juxtaposes rumor and storytelling, on the one hand, and an emphasis on seeing, on the other. Brabantio must see for himself the truth of Roderigo's and Iago's report of Desdemona's elopement. Othello will not question Desdemona's virtue until he sees proof; but once rumor “abuses” his ear, Othello, as did Brabantio, begins the process of “bringing to light” the blackness of his Venetian wife.15 If the first act of the play serves to displace Othello's blackness into his Venetian identity, then the remaining acts serve to dilate Desdemona's.

Iago is the first to constitute Desdemona black when, in response to her question “what wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst / praise me” (2.1.118), he reiterates a familiar trope of femininity:

If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit;
The one's for use, the other using it. ...
If she be black, and thereto have a wit,
She’ll find a white, that shall her blackness hit.

(2.1.129-33)

Lines 132-33, not surprisingly, find their close interpretive echo in the adage “wash the Ethiop white.” If Desdemona is “black” and possesses a “wit,” Iago's advice to her is to seek that which will transform her, her opposite. Iago ends his “praise” of Desdemona by railing against even fair women, terming them “wight[s]” who “suckle fools, and chronicle small beer” (2.1.160).

This exchange, for all its seeming irreverence, finds its dramatic replay in act 4, scene 2. After a mournful lament for his “affliction,” Othello turns his fury to Desdemona: “Turn thy complexion there; / Patience, thy young and rose-lipp’d cherubin, / I here look grim as hell” (4.2.63-65). Othello then goes on to say,

O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?
Thou smel’st so sweet, that the sense aches at thee,
Would thou hads’t ne’er been born!

(4.2.69-71)

Othello's language enacts the familiar Petrarchan opposition of fair/dark, yet it also perverts that rhetoric with its reluctance to further denigrate the object which it initially constitutes as undesirable (see Hall, esp. 178-79). More important, this semantic instantiation of Desdemona's desirability registers the allure traditionally associated with Venice, and which prompts Othello later to name Desdemona that which no Englishman who has read Coryat would have failed to understand, “that cunning whore of Venice.”

Once again, despite the domesticity of this bedroom scene, it is Venice which becomes the object of our gaze as both the symbolic virgin that the warrior Othello defends and the corrupted bride he has wed.16 In an emotionally charged accusation to Desdemona, Othello declares, “I took you for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello” (4.2.91). Othello's words become a distorted projection of Brabantio's caution that the mask of virginity hid a corruption. It is Venice itself which suffers the “dilation” of its exterior to reveal the blackness inside. Othello's search for “proof” must begin “in” Venice, and thus with himself. What is revealed is the sameness of the interior and exterior: the Moor without is the Venetian within, and the Venetian within is the Moor without. And, in a remarkable mimicry of Brabantio's incredulity over
Desdemona’s willing participation in the marriage, Othello stages himself as the innocent seduced by the wiles of the Venetian whore—aided and abetted by the plot’s initial and careful delineation of Othello as a Venetian. We see mirrored in Othello’s rage that of Brabantio. Though born a Moor, in his irrationality Othello is very much a Venetian. And in an ironic though not surprising twist of fact, both the father and the husband, whose violations of the rites of marriage set into motion the tragic events of Shakespeare’s tragedy, die as a result of their attempts to defend the illusion of perfection that is the myth of Venice.

“I TOOK BY TH’ THROAT THE CIRCUMCISED DOG”

At the conclusion of Othello, Shakespeare leaves us with a disturbing dramatic tableau: the corpses of Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia upon the bed which has occupied (most likely) center stage for much of the final act; a (for once) silent Iago; and the Venetian lords as witnesses to this final tragic event. Just before he commits suicide, Othello says,

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
where a malignant and a turban’d Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduc’d the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him thus.

(5.2.353-57)

This speech has often been read as, symbolically, a racialized confirmation of Othello's awareness of himself as an outsider—a Moor. But if my argument is valid, then such a reading is highly questionable and may point to the deployment of the “racial anxiety” that Michael Neill suggests is “everywhere” in the play's critical and cultural history rather than in Shakespeare's representation of Othello's self-consciousness.

I would argue that what Othello does is to draw upon the myth of Venice to re-create not just a racial image but also a political one where Venetian law is exact, swift, and inviolate—whether one is a Turk or, in the case of Othello, a Venetian. More important, as the symbol of Venetian law on Cyprus, it is Othello who must stand in for the Duke and affirm the “bloody book of law” against those who have violated that very law. It is Venetian Othello who judges and executes the Turk who assaulted a Venetian, and it’s this same Othello who must judge and execute the murderer of another Venetian, Desdemona. The race of this judge cannot, therefore, be viewed in terms of his color but as identical to that of the Duke in whose stead Othello carries out Venetian law.

It seems imperative, therefore, not to overlook the complex history that the concept and the word race may project in early modern English discourses and its implications for interpretations of Othello. In a world where women were often described as a “race,” where the word race signified aristocratic or noble lineage, where race was often used as synonymous with nation, to argue that issues of race in Othello are easily reducible to one matrix—color—is a problematic misreading of an emerging taxonomic shift in the process of classifying human beings. In early modern Venice and England, where racial and social identities are formulated as much in genealogy as in ethnicity or geography, in gender as in color, the “illusion of perfection” cannot sustain itself as its own discourse points to the almost yet not quite invisible fractures that inevitably occur in the process of mythologizing “race.” And it is this paradox which must be recognized in Othello rather than, as Jack D’Amico suggests, the idea that “Shakespeare revealed how a man could be destroyed when he accepts a perspective that deprives him of his humanity, … Othello is debased by a role that he adopts and acts out on the Venetian-Elizabethan stage” (177). Ignoring, for the moment, the problematic collapsing of Venice and England, I want to call into question the implicit assumption that there is English identification with the Venetians as a homogeneous racial group. As I have suggested elsewhere, “the contours of race may not be as fixed, as transcendental, as universal as critical practices and postmodern social discourses seem to infer” (“Managing the Barbarian” 183). English writers, Shakespeare included, pointedly distinguished within the
European community just as they did without (perhaps even more so given their more extensive knowledge of nations within Europe). One has only to recall Portia's mockery of her French, German, Scottish, and English suitors, or Shakespeare's depiction of the Welsh and French in *Merry Wives of Windsor* to know that D'Amico's "Venetian-Elizabethan" elides the powerful sense of national consciousness that encodes itself in the dramatic representation of other cultures (see Howard).

It seems to me that we might derive a better understanding of Shakespeare's tragedy if we recognize that the "lustful" Moor is the "whorish" Venetian. Behind Desdemona stands the duplicitous Venice, behind Iago the cunning "Machiavel," and behind Othello the irrationality of Italian masculinity. What sets into motion the tragic events in Shakespeare's tragedy, and what makes *Othello* an ideological quagmire, is the Venetian ambivalence that accepts Othello as a well-born, honorable, successful military commander and courtier even as it insists that he remain an outsider, an alien who must resort to sorcery or witchcraft to become a part of the world he inhabits already. In the end, our interpretive and critical imperative, in addition to tracing the overdetermined markings formalized by the racialist rhetoric figured by the references to the color of Othello, should be one of exploring the multifaceted and often subtly nuanced discourse of race that aligns color, gender, geography as it sees fit. In this vein, we might also want to pose another query that Shakespeare's tragedy seems to invoke and which has bearing for our understanding of racial discourse in early modern English contexts. Who, symbolically, comes to be racialized as the "cunning whore" of Venice capable of causing nature to err from itself? The answer, not surprisingly, is all in how one defines the concept of race.

*Notes*

1. See Newman; Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief"; and Little. For a useful summary of critical responses to the play, see Neill, "Unproper Beds," particularly 391-95.
2. All *Othello* quotations are from the Arden edition, ed. M. R. Ridley.
3. Traub 36. See also Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief"; and Neill, "Changing Places."
4. Most references to Venice note either the city's significance in the Mediterranean political economy, its idealization as a model republic, or its exoticization as an international cultural site. See, for example, McPherson, esp. 27-50; Parker 95-96; Bartels; D'Amico 177; Cantor 296-319; and Braxton. In most other discussions of Shakespeare's tragedy, as I will argue, Venice appears to implicitly "stand in" for England.
5. See, for example, Levith, Partridge, McWilliam, Lievsay, Hale, and McPherson.
6. This panegyric appears in Lewes Lewkenor's 1599 translation of the Italian version of Gasparo Contarini's *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum*. Qtd. in Pocock 320.
7. Here I am referring to Stephanie Jed's brilliant argument in *Chaste Thinking*.
8. See Ruggerio, who argues that "in the Renaissance, ideally, the honor dynamic, with its threat of vendetta, was supposed to limit the level of violence in society. One did not cross the honor of another, one did not do violence to another, because that would require vendetta, that is violence and dishonor in return. Thus ideally, violence was avoided without formal institutions or additional violence within a community or group simply by maintaining a balance of honor." However, as Ruggerio further adds, if an individual "did not have the power to pursue vendetta, the support of threatened violence fell away, one's honor became problematic, and violent passions became easier to indulge, especially for the powerful."
9. Bartels 450. While Bartels's argument makes less of Othello's color than other critical essays, her reading succeeds in "making more" of the Moor-Venetian dichotomy than it makes of the racial ideology the play fashion. For similar discussions see Berry; D’Amico 177-96; Cantor; and Braxton.
11. Garner argues that Shakespeare "keeps Desdemona off a pedestal and shows her to have a full range of human feelings and capacities. Yet he is careful not to allow her to fail in feeling or propriety" (238).
12. Snow notes that when Iago manipulates Othello's husbandly anxiety about Desdemona's chastity, Othello “comes to see Cassio in his place” as Brabantio came to see Othello in his (Brabantio's). What also needs to be explored is the continual replay of the incestuous undertones created by Iago's words to Brabantio. See esp. 395.

13. It is not my intent to prove or disprove Desdemona's guilt or innocence, but to “dilate” her significance to Shakespeare's handling of the myth of Venice.


15. I am indebted to Parker's “Fantasies of ‘Race’ and ‘Gender’: Africa, Othello and Bringing to Light” for this analysis. What I would add to Parker's cogent discussion on the “visual” necessity of “bringing to light” that which is secret is the way aurality serves as a prefigurement to such dilation.

16. I am indebted to Adelman's excellent discussion in Suffocating Mothers for this idea.

Works Cited


 Criticism: Race: Janet Adelman (essay date 1997)


[In the following essay, Adelman discusses Iago's role in corrupting Othello's views on race and sexuality.]

Othello famously begins not with Othello but with Iago. Other tragedies begin with ancillary figures commenting on the character who will turn out to be at the center of the tragedy—one thinks of Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra—but no other play subjects its ostensibly tragic hero to so long and intensive a debunking before he even sets foot onstage. And the audience is inevitably complicit in this debunking: before we meet Othello, we are utterly dependent on Iago's and Roderigo's descriptions of him. For the first long minutes of the play, we know only that the Moor, “the thicklips” (1.1.66), has done something that Roderigo (like the audience) feels he should have been told about beforehand; we find out what it is only through Iago's violently eroticizing and racializing report to Brabantio: “Even now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (ll. 88-89).

At this point in my teaching of the play, I normally point to all the ways in which Othello belies Iago's description as soon as he appears; in the classroom my reading of race in Othello turns on this contrast as Shakespeare's way of denaturalizing the tropes of race, so that we are made to understand Othello not as the “natural” embodiment of Iago's “old black ram” gone insanely jealous but as the victim of the racist ideology everywhere visible in Venice, an ideology to which he is relentlessly subjected and which increasingly comes to define him as he internalizes it—internalizes it so fully that, searching for a metaphor to convey his sense of the soil attaching both to his name and to Desdemona's body, Othello can come up with no term of comparison other than his own face (“My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black / As mine own face” [3.3.392-94]). Othello's “discovering” that his blackness is a stain—a stain specifically associated with his sexuality—and “discovering” that stain on Desdemona are virtually simultaneous for him; hence the metaphoric transformation of Dian's visage into his own begrimmed face. If Desdemona becomes a “black weed” (4.2.69) for Othello, her “blackening” is a kind of shorthand for his sense that his blackness has in fact contaminated her; as many have argued, his quickness to believe her always-already contaminated is in part a function of his horrified recoil from his suspicion that he is the contaminating agent.

In other words, in the classroom I usually read race in Othello through what I take to be the play's representation of Othello's experience of race as it comes to dominate his sense of himself as polluted and polluting, undeserving of Desdemona and hence quick to believe her unfaithful. But although the play locates Othello in a deeply racist society, the sense of pollution attaching to blackness comes first of all (for the audience if not for Othello) from Iago; though Iago needed Brabantio to convince Othello of Desdemona's tendency to deception and the “disproportion” of Othello as her marriage choice, Iago legitimizes and intensifies Brabantio's racism through his initial sexualizing and racializing invocation of Othello. And if the play offers us a rich representation of the effects of racism on Othello, it offers us an equally rich—and in some ways more disturbing—representation of the function of Othello's race for Iago. I offer the following reading of that representation as a thought-experiment with two aims: first, to test out the applicability of psychoanalytic theory—especially Kleinian theory—to problems of race, an arena in which its applicability is
often questioned; and, second, to identify some of the ways in which racism is the psychic property (and rightly the concern) of the racist, not simply of his victim.

Iago erupts out of the night (this play, like Hamlet, begins in palpable darkness), as though he were a condensation of its properties. Marking himself as opposite to light through his demonic “I am not what I am,” Iago calls forth a world, I will argue, in which he can see his own darkness localized and reflected in Othello's blackness, or rather in what he makes—and teaches Othello to make—of Othello's blackness.

Iago's voice inducts us into the play: long before Othello has a name, much less a voice, of his own, Iago has a distinctive “I.” The matter of Othello, and satisfaction of the audience's urgent curiosity about what exactly Roderigo has just learned, are deferred until after we have heard Iago's catalogue of injuries to that “I” (“I know my price, I am worth no worse a place” [1.1.11]; “And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof, ... must be lee'd, and calm'd” [ll. 28-30]; “And I, God bless the mark, his worship's ancient” [l. 33]). Iago's “I” beats through the dialogue with obsessive insistence, claiming both self-sufficiency (“I follow but myself” [l. 58]) and self-division, defining itself by what it is not (“Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago” [l. 57]), in fact simultaneously proclaiming its existence and nonexistence: “I am not what I am” (l. 65). I, I, I: Iago's name unfolds from the Italian io, Latin ego; and the injured “I” is his signature, the ground of his being and the ground, I will argue, of the play. For Iago calls up the action of the play as though in response to this sense of injury: “Call up her father, ... poison his delight” (ll. 67-68), he says, like a stage manager, or like a magician calling forth spirits to perform his will; and with his words, the action begins.

The structure of the first scene models Iago's relation to the world that he calls up, for the play proper seems to arise out of Iago's injured “I”: it is not only set in motion by Iago's “I” but becomes in effect a projection of it, as Iago successfully attempts to rid himself of interior pain by replicating it in Othello. Othello—and particularly in relation to Desdemona—becomes Iago's primary target in part because Othello has the presence, the fullness of being, that Iago lacks. Othello is everywhere associated with the kind of interior solidity and wholeness that stands as a reproach to Iago's interior emptiness and fragmentation: if Iago takes Janus as his patron saint (1.2.33) and repeatedly announces his affiliation with nothingness (“I am not what I am”; “I am nothing, if not critical” [2.1.119]), Othello is initially “all in all sufficient” (4.1.261), a “full soldier” (2.1.36), whose “solid virtue” (4.1.262) and “perfect soul” (1.2.31) allow him to achieve the “full fortune” (1.1.66) of possessing Desdemona. “Tell me what you need to spoil and I will tell you what you want,” says Adam Phillips: the extent to which Othello's fullness and solidity are the object of Iago's envy can be gauged by the extent to which he works to replicate his own self-division in Othello. Split himself, Iago is a master at splitting others: his seduction of Othello works by inscribing in Othello the sense of dangerous interior spaces—thoughts that cannot be known, monsters in the mind—which Othello seems to lack, introducing him to the world of self-alienation that Iago inhabits; by the end, Othello is so self-divided that he can take arms against himself, Christian against Turk, literalizing self-division by splitting himself graphically down the middle. Though Iago is not there to see his victory, we might imagine him as invisible commentator, saying in effect, “Look, he is not all-in-all sufficient, self-sustaining and full; he is as self-divided as I am.”

To shatter the illusion of Othello's fullness and presence is also to shatter the illusion of his erotic power; his division from himself is first of all his division from Desdemona and from the fair portion of himself invested in her. If Cassio is any indication, that erotic power is heavily idealized by the Italians:

Great Jove, Othello guard,  
And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath,  
That he may bless this bay with his tall ship,  
Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms  
Give renew'd fire to our extincted spirits. ...  

(2.1.77-81)
But for Iago it is intolerable: what begins as a means to an end (Iago creates Othello's suspicions about Desdemona to discredit Cassio in order to replace him as lieutenant) increasingly becomes an end in itself, as Iago drives Othello toward a murderous reenactment of sexual union on the marriage bed, even though that reenactment will make Othello incapable of bestowing the position Iago initially seeks. The thrust of his plot toward the marriage bed, even at the cost of his own ambition, suggests that what Iago needs to spoil is on that bed: the fullness and presence signified by Othello's possession of Desdemona, the sexual union that reminds him of his own extincted spirits. For Iago's own erotic life takes place only in his head; though he seems to imagine a series of erotic objects—Desdemona (ll. 286-89), Cassio (3.3.419-32), and Othello himself (in the coded language—“the lustful Moor / Hath leap’d into my seat” [2.1.290-91]—that makes cuckoldry an anal invasion of Iago's own body)—he imagines them less as realizable erotic objects than as mental counters in his revenge plot, and he imagines them only in sexual unions (Othello with Desdemona, Othello with Emilia, Cassio with Desdemona, Cassio with Emilia) that everywhere exclude and diminish him. And in response, he effectively neutralizes the erotic potency that mocks his own lack.

His primary tool in this neutralization is the creation of Othello as “black”: and in fact it is Othello as progenitor that first excites Iago's racializing rage. His first use of the language of black and white is in his call to Brabantio: “An old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe.” If Cassio needs to make Othello into an exotic super-phallus, capable of restoring Italian potency, Iago needs to make him into a black monster, invading the citadel of whiteness. (The idealization and the debasement are of course two sides of the same coin, and they are equally damaging to Othello: both use him only as the container for white fantasies, whether of desire or fear.) Your white ewe/you: Iago's half-pun invokes the whiteness of his auditors via the image of Othello's contaminating miscegenation; true to form in racist discourse, “whiteness” emerges as a category only when it is imagined as threatened by its opposite. Iago's language here works through separation, works by placing “blackness” outside of “whiteness” even as it provokes terror at the thought of their mixture. But the play has already affiliated Iago himself with darkness and the demonic; the threat of a contaminating blackness is already there, already present inside the “whiteness” he would invoke. Iago creates Othello as “black”—and therefore himself as “white”—when he constructs him as monstrous progenitor; and he uses that racialized blackness to destroy what he cannot tolerate. But the trope through which Iago imagines that destruction makes Iago himself into the monstrous progenitor, filled with a dark conception that only darkness can bring forth: “I ha’t, it is engender'd,” he tells us; “Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light” (1.3.401-2). This trope makes the blackness Iago would attribute to Othello—like his monstrous generativity—something already inside Iago himself, something that he must project out into the world: as though Iago were pregnant with the monster he makes of Othello.

If the structure of the first scene predicts the process through which Iago becomes the progenitor of Othello's racialized blackness, the trope of the monstrous birth in the first act's final lines perfectly anticipates the mechanism of projection through which Iago will come to use Othello's black skin as the container for his own interior blackness. Cassio uses Othello as the locus for fantasies of inseminating sexual renewal; Iago uses him as the repository for his own bodily insufficiency and his self-disgust. For Iago needs the blackness of others: even the “white ewe” Desdemona is blackened in his imagination as he turns “her virtue into pitch” (2.3.351). How are we to understand Iago's impulse to blacken, the impulse for which Othello becomes the perfect vehicle? What does it mean to take another person's body as the receptacle for one's own contents? The text gives us, I think, a very exact account of what I’ve come to call the psycho-physiology of Iago's projection: that is, not simply an account of the psychological processes themselves but also an account of the fantasized bodily processes that underlie them. “Projection” is in its own way comfortingly abstract; by invoking the body behind the abstraction, Othello in effect rubs our noses in it. Let me begin, then, by thinking about the way Iago thinks about bodies, especially about the insides of bodies. For Iago is the play's spokesman for the idea of the inside, the hidden away. At the beginning of his seduction of Othello, he defends the privacy of his thought by asking “where's that palace, whereinto foul things / Sometimes intrude not?” (3.3.141-42); no palace is impregnable, no inside uncontaminated. Characteristically,
Othello takes this image and makes it his own, reinscribing it in his later anatomy of Desdemona as “a cistern, for foul toads / To knot and gender in” (4.2.62-63). But merely by insisting on the hidden inwardness of thought, Iago has already succeeded in causing Othello to conflate the hidden with the hideous, as though that which is inside, invisible, must inevitably be monstrous (“he echoes me, / As if there were some monster in his thought, / Too hideous to be shown” [3.3.110-12]). According to this logic, the case against Desdemona is complete as soon as Iago can insinuate that she, too, has—psychically and anatomically—an inside, unknowable and monstrous because it is inside, unseen.

If Iago succeeds in transferring his own sense of hidden contamination to Desdemona, localizing it in her body, the sense of the hideous thing within—monstrous birth or foul intruder—begins with him. Seen from this vantage point, his initial alarum to Brabantio (“Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags. … Are all doors lock’d?” [1.1.80, 85]) looks less like a description of danger to Brabantio or Desdemona than like a description of danger to Iago himself. For Iago finds—or creates—in Brabantio's house the perfect analogue for his own sense of vulnerability to intrusion, and he can make of Othello the perfect analogue for the intrusive “foul thing,” the old black ram who is tupping your white ewe/you—or, as we later find out, tupping Iago himself in Iago's fantasy, and leaving behind a poisonous residue (“I do suspect the lustful Moor / Hath leap’d into my seat, the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards” [2.1.290-92]).

But even the image of the body as a breached and contaminated “palace” suggests rather more interior structure than most of Iago's other images for the body. Again and again Iago imagines the body filled with liquid putrefaction, with contents that can and should be vomited out or excreted. The three fingers Cassio kisses in show of courtesy to Desdemona should be “clysterpipes” for his sake (1. 176), Iago says; through the bizarre reworking of Iago's fantasy, Cassio's fingers are transformed into enema tubes, an imagistic transformation that violently brings together not only lips and faeces, mouth, vagina, and anus, but also digital, phallic, and emetic penetration of a body—Desdemona’s? Cassio's?—imagined only as a container for faeces. Early in the play, poor Roderigo is a “sick fool … Whom love has turn’d almost the wrong side outward” (2.3.47-48); by the end, he is a “quat” rubbed almost to the sense (5.1.11), that is, a pus-filled pimple about to break. The congruence of these images suggests that Roderigo becomes a “quat” for Iago because he can’t keep his insides from running out: the love that has almost turned him inside out is here refigured as pus that threatens to break through the surface of his body. In Iago's fantasy of the body, what is inside does not need to be contaminated by a foul intruder because it is already pus or faeces; in fact, anything brought into this interior will be contaminated by it. Iago cannot imagine ordinary eating, in which matter is taken in for the body's nourishment; any good object taken in will be violently transformed and violently expelled. When he is done with her, Iago tells us, Othello will excrete Desdemona (“The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coloquintida,” an emetic or purgative [1.3.349-50]); when Desdemona is “sated” with Othello's body (1.351), she will “heave the gorge” (2.1.231-32). (Poor Emilia has obviously learned from her husband: in her view men “are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungrily, and when they are full, / They belch us” [3.4.101-3].)

Given this image of the body's interior as a mass of undifferentiated and contaminated matter, it’s no wonder that Iago propounds the ideal of self-control to Roderigo in the garden metaphor that insists both on the rigid demarcation and differentiation of the body's interior and on its malleability to the exercise of will:

… 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus, or thus: our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners, so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop, and weed up thyme; supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many; either to have it sterile with idleness, or manur’d with industry, why, the power, and corrigible authority of this, lies in our wills.

(1.3.319-26)
This is not, presumably, his experience of his own body's interior or of his management of it; it seems rather a defensive fantasy of an orderly pseudo-Eden, in which man is wholly in control both of the inner processes of his body/garden and of the troublesome business of gender, and woman is wholly absent. His only explicit representation of his body's interior belies this defense: the mere “thought” that Othello has leaped into his seat (even though he “know[s] not if’t be true” [1. 386]) “Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw [his] inwards.” No reassuring gardener with his tidy—or even his untidy—rows here: Iago's “inwards” are hideously vulnerable, subject to a poisonous penetration. Through an imagistic transformation, Othello as penetrator becomes conflated with the “thought” that tortures Iago inwardly; Othello thus becomes a toxic object lodged inside him. (The garden passage simultaneously expresses and defends against the homoerotic desire that here makes Othello a poisonous inner object, insofar as it voices a fantasy of “supply[ing]” the body with one gender rather than “distract[ing]” it with many.)

What I have earlier called Iago's injured “I”—his sense that he is chronically slighted and betrayed, his sense of self-division—produces (or perhaps is produced by) fantasies of his body as penetrated and contaminated, especially by Othello. In fact, any traffic between inner and outer is dangerous for Iago, who needs to keep an absolute barrier between them by making his outside opaque, a false “sign” (1.1.156 and 157) of his inside; to do less would be to risk being (Roderigo-like) turned almost the wrong side outward, to “wear [his] heart upon [his] sleeve, / For dawes to peack at” (ll. 64-65). To allow himself to be seen or known is tantamount to being stabbed, eaten alive: pecked at from the outside unless he manages to keep the barrier between inner and outer perfectly intact, gnawed from the inside if he lets anyone in. Iago's need for sadistic control of others (“Pleasure, and action, make the hours seem short” [2.3.369], he says, after managing Cassio's cashiering) goes in tandem with his extraordinarily vivid sense of vulnerability: unable to be gardener to himself, he will sadistically manage everyone else, simultaneously demonstrating his superiority to those quats whose insides are so sloppily prone to bursting out, and hiding the contamination and chaos of his own insides.

Roderigo plays a pivotal role in this process. As the embodiment of what Iago would avoid, Roderigo exists largely to give Iago repeated occasions on which to display his mastery over both self and other: in effect, Iago can load his contaminated insides into Roderigo and then rub him to the sense in order to demonstrate the difference between them and, hence, the impermeability of Iago's own insides. Moreover, in managing Roderigo, Iago can continually replenish himself with the fantasy of new objects to be taken into the self: objects over which—unlike the thought of Othello, which gnaws at his inwards—he can exert full control. Obsessively—six times in fourteen lines—Iago tells Roderigo to “Put money in thy purse … fill thy purse with money” (1.3.340, 348). We know that Iago has received enough jewels and gold from Roderigo to have half-corrupted a votarist (4.2.189), but we never see Iago taking the miser's or even the spendthrift's ordinary delight in this treasure; detached from any ordinary human motivation, the money accrues almost purely psychic meaning, becoming the sign not of any palpable economic advantage but of Iago's pleasure in being able to empty Roderigo out, to fill himself at will. “Put money in thy purse,” he repeats insistently, and then adds, “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse” (1.3.381), as though the emptied-out Roderigo becomes the container that holds the illusion of Iago's fullness. For his repetition signals a compulsive need to fill himself with objects in order to compensate for the contamination and chaos inside: hard shiny objects that might be kept safe and might keep the self safe, objects that could magically repair the sense of what the self is made of and filled with.

Iago's hoarding, his sadism, his references to purgatives and clyster-pipes can be read through the language of classical psychoanalysis as evidence of an anal fixation; in that language the equation of money with faeces is familiar enough, as is the association of sadistic control with the anal phase. Iago's obsessive suspicion that Othello has leaped into his seat, along with his heavily eroticized account of Cassio's dream, similarly lend themselves to a classically psychoanalytic reading of Iago as repressed homosexual. While these readings are not “wrong” within their own terms, they nonetheless seem to me limited, and not only insofar as they can be said to assume a historically inaccurate concept of the subject or of “the homosexual”; limited even
within the terms of psychoanalysis insofar as they do not get at either the quality of Iago's emotional relationships (his inability to form any kind of libidinal bond, his tendency to treat others as poisonous inner objects) or the terrifying theatrical seductiveness of the processes of projection that we witness through him. I want consequently to move from the consideration of libidinal zones and conflicted object choices characteristic of classical psychoanalysis to the areas opened up by the work of Melanie Klein; a Kleinian reading of Iago will, I think, help us to understand the ways in which Iago's imagination of his own interior shapes his object relations as he projects this interior onto the landscape of the play.

In Klein's account the primitive self is composed in part of remnants of internalized objects (people, or bits and pieces of people, taken into the self as part of the self's continual negotiation with what an outside observer would call the world) and the world is composed in part of projected bits and pieces of the self. Ideally, “the good breast is taken in and becomes part of the ego, and the infant who was first inside the mother now has the mother inside himself.” Internalization of the good object “is the basis for trust in one's own goodness”; full identification with a good object goes with a feeling of the self possessing goodness of its own” and hence enables the return of goodness to the world: “Through processes of projection and introjection, through inner wealth given out and re-introjected, an enrichment and deepening of the ego comes about. … Inner wealth derives from having assimilated the good object so that the individual becomes able to share its gifts with others.” And the corollary is clear: if the infant cannot take in the experience of the good breast (either because of his/her own constitutional conditions or because the experience is not there to be had in a consistent way), the bad breast may be introjected, with accompanying feelings of one's own internal badness, poverty, poisonousness, one's own inability to give back anything good to the world.

But, in the words of Harold Boris, a contemporary post-Kleinian analyst of envy, “the infant who cannot, sooner or later, feed the hand from which it feeds … is the child who will then attempt to bite it.” The infant stuck with a depleted or contaminated inner world will, Klein suggests, exist in a peculiar relation to the good breast: even if it is there and apparently available, the infant may not be able to use it. For if the infant cannot tolerate either the discrepancy between its own badness and the goodness outside itself or the sense of dependency on this external source of goodness, the good breast will not be available for the infant's use: its goodness will in effect be spoiled by the infant's own envious rage. The prototype for Kleinian envy is the hungry baby, experiencing itself as helplessly dependent, empty, or filled only with badness, confronted with the imagined fullness of a source of goodness outside itself: “the first object to be envied is the feeding breast, for the infant feels that it possesses everything he desires and that it has an unlimited flow of milk, and love which the breast keeps for its own gratification.” Klein's insistence on the priority of the breast as the first object of envy effectively reverses Freud's concept of penis envy; in Klein's account even penis envy becomes secondary, derivative from this earlier prototype. But Klein's concept of envy turns on an even more startling innovation: for most analysts of infantile destructiveness and rage, the source and target is the frustrating "bad" object—a maternal object that doesn't provide enough, is not at the infant's beck and call, provides milk that in some way is felt to be spoiled; but in Klein's reading of envy, the source and target of rage is not the frustrating or poisonous bad breast but the good breast, and it is exactly its goodness that provokes the rage. Hence the peculiar sensitivity of the envious to the good—and the consequent need not to possess but to destroy it, or, in Klein's terms, “to put badness, primarily bad excrement and bad parts of the self, into the mother, and first of all into her breast, in order to spoil and destroy her.” But the breast so destroyed is of course no longer available to the child as a source of good: “The breast attacked in this way has lost its value, it has become bad by being bitten up and poisoned by urine and faeces.” Insofar as the infant has succeeded in destroying the good object, he has confirmed its destruction as a source of goodness within himself; hence the peculiarly vicious circle of envy, which destroys all good both in the world and in the self, and hence also its peculiar despair.

We do not, of course, need the help of a Kleinian perspective to identify Iago as envious. His willingness to kill Cassio simply because “He has a daily beauty in his life, / That makes me ugly” (5.1.19–20) marks the extent to which he is driven by envy; in an older theatrical tradition he might well have been named Envy.
Here, for example, is Envy from *Impatient Poverty*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A syr is not thys a ioly game ...} \\
\text{Enuy in fayth I am the same ...} \\
\text{I hate conscience, peace loue and reste} \\
\text{Debate and stryfe that loue I beste} \\
\text{Accordyng to my properte} \\
\text{When a man louethe well hys wyfe} \\
\text{I brynge theym at debate and stryfe.}(30)
\end{align*}
\]

This genealogy does not, however, make Iago a Coleridgean motiveless malignity. For in Iago, Shakespeare gives motiveless malignity a body: incorporating this element of the morality tradition, he releases through Iago the range of bodily fantasies associated with a specifically Kleinian envy.

Klein describes an envy so primal—and so despairing—that it cannot tolerate the existence of goodness in the world: its whole delight lies not in possessing what is good but in spoiling it. And that spoiling takes place in fantasy through a special form of object-relating: through the violent projection of bits of the self and its contaminated objects—often localized as contaminated bodily products—into the good object. By means of this projection, the self succeeds in replicating its own inner world “out there” and thus in destroying the goodness it cannot tolerate; at the end of the process, in the words of one Kleinian analyst, “There is nothing left to envy.” Through the lens of a Kleinian perspective, we can see traces of this process as Iago fills Othello with the poison that fills him.

In Iago's fantasy, as I have suggested, there is no uncontaminated interior space: he can allow no one access to his interior and has to keep it hidden away because it is more a cesspool than a palace or a garden. And there are no uncontaminated inner objects: every intruder is foul; everything taken in turns to pus or faeces or poison; everything swallowed must be vomited out. This sense of inner contamination leaves him—as Klein would predict—particularly subject to the sense of goodness in others and particularly ambivalent toward that goodness. His goal is to make those around him as ugly as he is; but that goal depends on his unusual sensitivity to their beauty. Even after he has managed to bring out the quarrelsome drunkard and class-conscious snob in Cassio, transforming him into a man who clearly enjoys sneaking around to see his general's wife, Iago remains struck by the daily beauty in Cassio's life—at a point when that beauty has become largely invisible to the audience. To Roderigo, Iago always contempitously denies the goodness of Othello and Desdemona (he is an erring barbarian and she a supersubtle Venetian); but in soliloquy he specifically affirms their goodness—and affirms it in order to imagine spoiling it. Othello's “free and open nature” he will remake as the stupidity of an ass who can be led by the nose (1.3.397-400). He will not only use Desdemona's virtue; he will turn it into pitch, in a near-perfect replication of the projection of faeces into the good breast that Klein posits.

For Iago the desire to spoil always takes precedence over the desire to possess; one need only contrast him with Othello to see the difference in their relation to good objects. Othello's anguish over the loss of the good object gives the play much of its emotional resonance. He imagines himself as safely enclosed in its garnery, nourished and protected by it, and then cast out: “But there, where I have garner'd up my heart, / Where either I must live, or bear no life, / The fountain, from the which my current runs, / Or else dries up, to be discarded thence” (4.2.58-61). When he is made to imagine that object as spoiled—“a cistern, for foul toads / To knot and gender in”—its loss is wholly intolerable to him; even at the end, as he kills Desdemona, he is working very hard to restore some remnant of the good object in her. Although he approaches Desdemona's bed planning to bloody it (“Thy bed, lust-stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted” [5.1.36]), his deepest desire is not to stain but to restore the purity of the good object, rescuing it from contamination, even the contamination he himself has visited upon it. By the time he reaches her bed, he has decided not to shed her blood (5.2.3). Instead he attempts to recreate her unviolated wholeness (“that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth, as monumental alabaster” [ll. 4-5]) in a death that he imagines as a revirgination;
fantasy he cleanses “the slime / That sticks on filthy deeds,” remaking her unmarred and unpenetrated, “one entire and perfect chrysolite” (ll. 149-50, 146).

But Iago’s only joy comes in spoiling good objects: Othello mourns being cast out from the garnery/fountain that has nourished him; Iago mocks the meat he feeds on (3.3.170-71). His description of the green-eyed monster he cautions Othello against marks the workings of a very Kleinian envy in him:34 like the empty infant who cannot tolerate the fullness of the breast, he will mock the objects that might nourish and sustain him, spoiling them by means of his corrosive wit.35 (Or perhaps—in good Kleinian fashion—by tearing at them with his teeth: especially in conjunction with the image of feeding on meat, “mock” may carry traces of *mammock,*36 to tear into pieces, suggesting the oral aggression behind Iago’s biting mockery and hence the talion logic in his fantasy of being pecked at.) Mockery—especially of the meat he might feed on—is Iago’s signature: different as they are, Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo share an almost religious awe toward Desdemona; Iago insists that “the wine she drinks is made of grapes” (2.1.249-50), that even the best woman is only good enough “To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer” (l. 160). If “the first object to be envied is the feeding breast,” Iago’s devaluation of maternal nurturance here is just what we might expect.

But envy does not stop there. As Klein suggests, “Excessive envy of the breast is likely to extend to all feminine attributes, in particular to the woman’s capacity to bear children. … The capacity to give and to preserve life is felt as the greatest gift and therefore creativeness becomes the deepest cause for envy.”37 If Othello’s potency and fullness make him the immediate target of Iago’s envious rage, the destruction of Desdemona’s generativity has been Iago’s ultimate goal from the beginning: “poison his delight,” he says; “And though he in a fertile climate dwell, / Plague him with flies” (1.1.70-71). The image half-echoes Hamlet’s linking of conception and breeding with the stirring of maggots in dead flesh,38 for the “fertile climate” that Iago will transform into a breeding ground for plague is Desdemona’s generative body. Hence, I think, the urgency with which Iago propels the plot toward the marriage bed (“Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” [4.1.203-4]): the ultimate game is to make father destroy mother on that bed in a parody of the life-giving insemination that might have taken place there.39

And hence the subterranean logic of Iago’s favorite metaphor for that destruction, his monstrous birth. For if Iago enviously devalues Desdemona’s generativity (she can only suckle, and only suckle fools; her body will breed only flies), he also appropriates it, and appropriates it specifically through imitation. Here both senses of *mock*—as devaluation and derisive imitation—come together, as Boris’s work on envy predicts: “The urge to take charge of the envied object has several components to it. First, of course, is the denuding (an idea) and disparagement (an emotion) of the inherent value of the original. This makes possible what follows, namely the idea that the ‘knockoff’ (the ‘as-if’) is in every way the equal of the real thing.”40 In conceiving of his monstrous birth, that is, Iago not only mocks but also displaces Desdemona’s generativity by taking on its powers for himself, denying the difference—between her fruitfulness and his barrenness, between her fullness and his emptiness—that he cannot tolerate. Iago’s substitution in fact proceeds by stages. When he first invokes the metaphor of pregnancy, he is merely the midwife/observer: “There are many events in the womb of time, which will be delivered” (1.3.369-70). But his triumphant “I ha’it” only thirty lines later—“I ha’it, it is engender’d; Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light”—replaces time’s womb with his own: as I have already argued, his is the body in which the monstrous birth is engendered, and hell and night have become the midwives.

Through this metaphor, Iago’s mental production becomes his substitute birth, in which he replaces the world outside himself41—the world of time’s womb, or of Desdemona’s—with the projection of his own interior monstrosity; thus conceived, his plot manages simultaneously to destroy the generativity that he cannot tolerate and to proclaim the superior efficacy of his own product. Emilia’s description of the jealousy Iago creates in Othello—it is “a monster, / Begot upon itself, born on itself” (3.4.159-60)—is not accurate about Othello, but it suggestively tracks Iago’s own envy to its psychic sources. If Iago imagines himself enacting a substitute birth, making the world conform to the shape of his envy by undoing the contours of the
already-existing generative world, Emilia expresses the wish behind his metaphor: the wish to be begot upon oneself, born on oneself, no longer subject to—dependent on, vulnerable to—the generative fullness outside the self and the unendurable envy it provokes. Unable to achieve that end, he will empty himself out on the wedding bed, substituting his own monstrous conception for the generative fullness that torments him, and destroying in the process the envied good object in Desdemona.

And it is just here, in this fantasy, that Othello's blackness becomes such a powerful vehicle for Iago. I have already suggested that Iago's capacity to spoil good objects rests on his capacity to blacken them, and to blacken them through a bodily process of projection. His monstrous birth is from the first associated with the darkness of hell and night; and when, in his conversation with Desdemona, he imagines his invention as his baby, that baby is associated specifically with the extrusion of a dark and sticky substance:

my invention
Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze,
It plucks out brain and all: but my Muse labours,
And thus she is deliver’d. …

(2.1.125-28)

Presumably Iago means that his invention is as slow—as laborious—as the process of removing birdlime from rough cloth (frieze), in which the nap of the cloth is removed along with the soiling agent (hence “plucks out brain and all”). But the route to this relatively rational meaning is treacherous: the syntax first presents us with birdlime oozing from his head (“invention / Comes from my pate as birdlime does”), takes us on an apparent detour through the soiling of cloth (the birdlime stuck to the frieze), and ends with the image of his head emptied out altogether (“plucks out brain and all”), as though in a dangerous evacuation. Then, through a buried pun on conception, the concealed intermediary term, the evacuation becomes a pregnancy and delivery, displaced from his own body to that of the Muse, who labors and is delivered.

Invention, in other words, becomes the male equivalent of pregnancy, the production of a sticky dark baby. What we have here, I suggest, is the vindicative fantasy of a faecal pregnancy and delivery that can project Iago’s inner monstrosity and darkness into the world: initially displaced upward to the evacuated pate, this faecal baby is then returned to its source as his monstrous birth, the baby he has conceived in response to Desdemona’s request for praise (2.1.124) and the easy generativity (his own is a difficult labor) that he envies in her. This baby’s emergence here marks, I think, both the source of his envy and the exchange that envy will demand: he will attempt in effect to replicate his dark sticky baby in her, soiling her generative body by turning her virtue into pitch, spoiling the object whose fullness and goodness he cannot tolerate by making it the receptacle for his own bodily contents. And he counts on the contagion of this contaminated object: he will turn Desdemona into pitch not only because pitch is black and sticky—hence entrapping—but because it is notoriously defiling; his scheme depends on using Desdemona as a kind of tar baby, counting on her defilement—her blackening—to make Othello “black.” In fantasy, that is, Iago uses Desdemona and Othello to contaminate each other; they become for him one defiled object as he imagines them on that wedding bed. But at the same time, Othello plays a special role for Iago: in Othello’s black skin Iago can find a fortuitous external sign for the entire process, or, more accurately, a container for the internal blackness that he would project outward, the dark baby that hell and night must bring to the world’s light; emptying himself out, Iago can project his faecal baby into Othello, blackening him with his own inner waste.

Iago plainly needs an Othello who can carry the burden of his own contamination; and to some extent the play makes us complicit in the process, as it makes Othello in effect into Iago’s monstrous creation, carrying out Iago’s “conception” as he murders Desdemona on her wedding bed, enacting a perverse version of the childbirth that might have taken place there. Othello himself seems to recognize that a birth of sorts is taking place, though he does not recognize it as Iago’s: preparing to kill Desdemona on that bed, he says that her
denials “Cannot remove, nor choke the strong conception, / That I do groan withal” (5.2.56-57), as though he has been impregnated through Iago's monstrous birth. And in fact he has: part of the peculiar horror of this play is that Othello becomes so effective a receptacle for—and enactor of—Iago's fantasies. If Iago imagines himself filled with a gnawing poisonous mineral through what amounts to Othello's anal insemination of him (2.1.290-92), he turns that poison back on Othello: “I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear” (2.3.347). This retaliatory aural/anal insemination fills Othello with Iago's own contents, allowing Iago to serve his turn on Othello by doing to Othello what he imagines Othello has done to him. (“I follow him to serve my turn upon him” is sexualized in ways not likely to be audible to a modern audience [1.1.42]. For turn, see Othello's later “she can turn, and turn, and yet go on, / And turn again” [4.1.249-50]; characteristically, Othello replicates in Desdemona the “turn” Iago has replicated in him.) And “The Moor already changes with my poison,” Iago says, adding for our benefit—in case we have not noticed the links between his poisonous conceit and Othello's—“Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, / Which … Burn like the mines of sulphur” (3.3.330-34).

“The Moor already changes with my poison”: the line marks what is distinctive about projection in this play—and distinctively Kleinian. Before Klein, projection was usually understood as a relatively uncomplicated process in which disowned ideas and emotions were displaced onto an external figure. Klein insisted both on the fantasies of bodily function accompanying this process and on the extent to which it is specifically pieces of the self and its inner objects that are thus relocated, with the consequence that pieces of the self are now felt to be “out there,” both controlling the object into which they have been projected and subject to dangers from it; Klein renamed this process “projective identification.” And her followers have expanded on the concept, stressing the effects of these projected contents on the recipient of the projection, the ways in which the projector can in fact control the recipient. In this version of projective identification, the recipient will not only experience the bits of self projected into him but also enact the projector's fantasy scenarios, hence relieving the projector of all responsibility for them. When Iago imagines Roderigo turned inside out, his body filled with pus, he seems to me to be engaging in something close to garden-variety projection: he is attributing to Roderigo portions of himself, or ideas about himself, that he would like to disown; and, as far as we know, Roderigo does not come to experience himself as pus-filled or inside out. But when Iago imagines filling Othello with his poison, when he imagines (in Klein's formulation) “the forceful entry into the object and control of the object by parts of the self,” he is much closer to a specifically Kleinian projective identification; and, as Klein's followers would predict, Othello really does change with Iago's poison, as he begins to experience himself as contaminated and hence to act out Iago's scenarios.

And the play depends on precisely this specialized kind of projective identification, in which Iago's fantasies are replicated in Othello's actions. When we first meet Othello, he is confident enough about his status and his color that he wishes to be found; he can confidently wish “the goodness of the night” (1.2.35) on Cassio and the duke's servants because blackness has not yet been poisoned for him. But as Iago projects his faecal baby into him, Othello comes more and more to imagine himself as the foul thing—the old black ram—intruding into the palace of Venetian civilization or the palace of Desdemona's body; as Iago succeeds in making Othello the container for his own interior waste, Othello himself increasingly affiliates his blackness with soilings (he becomes “collied” or blackened by passion [2.3.197]; his name is “begrim’d, and black” as his face) and with bad interior objects. (In “Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell” [3.3.454], he calls on “black vengeance” to arise as though from within the hollow of himself.) His experience of himself, that is, comes increasingly to resemble what Iago has projected into him; and he begins to act in accordance with that projection, replicating in Desdemona the contagion of projection itself. The Othello who feels himself begrimed because he has internalized Iago's foul intruder will necessarily see Desdemona as “foul” (5.2.201), as a “begrim’d” Diana or a “black weed,” and will evacuate his good object as Iago had predicted (1.3.350); by the end of the play, Emilia can call Othello “the blacker devil,” Desdemona's “most filthy bargain,” “As ignorant as dirt” (5.2.132, 158, 165) because he has so perfectly introjected Iago's sense of inner filth.
Insofar as Iago can make Othello experience his own blackness as a contamination that contaminates Desdemona, he succeeds in emptying himself out into Othello; and insofar as Othello becomes in effect Iago's faecal baby, Othello—rather than Iago—becomes the bearer of the fantasy of inner filth. Through projective identification, that is, Iago invents blackness as a contaminated category before our eyes, enacting his monstrous birth through Othello, and then allowing the Venetians (and most members of the audience) to congratulate themselves—as he does—on their distance from the now-racialized Othello. Through this process, Othello becomes assimilated to, and motivated by, his racial “type”—becomes the monstrous Moor easily made jealous—and Iago escapes our human categories altogether, becoming unknowable, a motiveless malignity.

But this emptying out of Iago is no more than Iago has already performed on himself: if the projection of his own inner contamination into Othello is Iago's relief, it is also his undoing, and in a way that corroborates both the bodiliness of the fantasy of projection and its dangers to the projector as well as the recipient. Klein notes that excessive use of projective identification results in the “weakening and impoverishment of the ego”; in the words of Betty Joseph, “at times the mind can be … so evacuated by projective identification that the individual appears empty.”

If at the end of the play there is nothing left to envy, there is also no one left to experience envy: Iago's projection of himself into the racial other he constructs as the container for his contamination ends not only by destroying his (and our) good objects but also by leaving him entirely evacuated. Having poured the pestilence of himself into Othello, Iago has nothing left inside him: his antigenerative birth hollows him out, leaving him empty. The closer he is to his goal, the flatter his language becomes; by the end, there is no inside left, no place to speak from. The play that begins with his insistent “I” ends with his silence: from this time forth he never will speak word.

Notes


2. Race is of course a vexed term; many have pointed out that the word race gained its current meaning only as it was biologized in support of the economic institution of slavery and that the link between race and skin color is a peculiarly contemporary obsession, that (for example) Irish and Jews might in 1604 have been thought of as racially separate from the English. For a particularly lucid account of the questions surrounding the invocation of race as a category in early modern England, see Lynda E. Boone, “‘The Getting of a Lawful Race’: Racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman” in Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period, Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 35-54, esp. 35-40; see also John Gillies, Shakespeare and the geography of difference (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), for the claim that early modern otherness was based on geography rather than on the anachronistic category of race (25). Nonetheless, in Iago's capacity to make Othello's blackness the primary signifier of his otherness—as Boone observes, “once his Ensign has raised the flag inscribing Othello within the difference of skin color, all the presumably meaningful differences Othello has constructed between himself and the infidel collapse” (38)—the text insists on the visible difference of skin color that will increasingly come to define race, perhaps because, unlike religion, it (proverbially) cannot be changed. For a discussion of the significance of visible difference in early modern England, see Kim Hall, “Reading What Isn’t There: ‘Black’ Studies in Early Modern England,” Stanford Humanities Review 3 (1993): 23-33, esp. 25-27; in her account “science merely takes up already pre-existing terms of difference, such as skin color and features, that have [previously] been combined with physical and mental characteristics” (25).

3. Ridley follows the Folio reading of line 392, since this line occurs in a passage not found in Q1; Q2 (1630) famously reads “Her name” in place of F’s “My name,” perhaps to rationalize Othello's
peculiar association of his name with the fairness of a figure for female virginity. I prefer “My name,” partly because it suggests the identificatory dynamics that underlie Othello's love for Desdemona; but either reading points toward Othello's association of the stain on Desdemona's virgin body with the blackness of his own face.

4. Desdemona becomes a “black weed” only in the quartos; F omits the adjective.


6. See W. H. Auden's related account of Iago as practical joker: “The practical joker despises his victims, but at the same time he envies them because their desires, however childish and mistaken, are real to them, whereas he has no desire which he can call his own, … If the word motive is given its normal meaning of a positive purpose of the self like sex, money, glory, etc., then the practical joker is without motive. Yet the professional practical joker is certainly driven, … but the drive is negative, a fear of lacking a concrete self, of being nobody. In any practical joker to whom playing such jokes is a passion, there is always an element of malice, a projection of his self-hatred onto others, and in the ultimate case of the absolute practical joker, this is projected onto all created things” (The Dyer's Hand and other essays [New York: Random House, 1962], 256-57). The emptiness of Auden's practical joker is sometimes associated by later critics with Iago's facility in role-playing; see, e.g., Shelley Orgel, whose Iago gains a temporary sense of self by playing the roles that others project onto him (“Iago,” American Imago 25 [1968]: 258-73, esp. 272). Greenblatt's Iago “has the role-player's ability to imagine his nonexistence so that he can exist for a moment in another and as another”; but for Greenblatt, Iago's imagined emptiness is less an ontological state than a cover for his emptying out of his victim (235 and 236). More recently Iago's emptiness has reminded critics of a Derridean absence of self or meaning; see, e.g., Bonnie Melchior, “Iago as Deconstructionist,” Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association 16 (1990): 63-81, esp. 79; or Karl F. Zender, “The Humiliation of Iago,” SEL 34 (1994): 323-39, esp. 327-28. In Alessandro Serpieri's brilliant semiotic reading, Iago suffers from an “envy of being” that is the deconstructionist's equivalent of the state Auden describes: “Iago cannot identify with any situation or sign or énoncé, and is thus condemned to deconstruct through his own énonciations the énoncés of others, transforming them into simulacra. Othello is precisely the lord of the énoncé” (Serpieri, “Reading the signs: towards a semiotics of Shakespearean drama,” trans. Keir Elam, in Alternative Shakespeares, John Drakakis, ed. [London and New York: Methuen, 1985], 119-43, esp. 139). In its emphasis on envy and projection, Auden's and Serpieri's work is closest to my own; but see also David Pollard's powerful Baudelairian reading of Iago's


8. For some, Othello is split long before Iago begins his work. In Berry's account, for example, Othello is divided from the beginning by the two contradictory self-images he absorbs from Venice; his failure to escape this limiting framework and hence to “achieve a true sense of personal identity” is a powerful source of tragic feeling in the play (323 and 330). But for critics who read Othello as an early instance of a colonized subject, this “failure” is not personal but systemic: both Loomba (32, 48, and 54) and Jyotsna Singh (“Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of Othello” in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 287-99, esp. 288) position Othello specifically in opposition to what Singh calls “the dominant, Western fantasy of a singular, unified identity” (288). But Iago at least insists that he is the divided one, and Othello initially claims that his soul is “perfect” or undivided; whatever the state to which Othello is reduced, Othello—like The Tempest—seems to me to encode the fantasy that the exotic other possesses a primitive unitary identity before his induction into a Western-style split self.

9. I first read this paper to a very helpful and responsive audience at Notre Dame in November 1994, on which occasion Richard Dutton called my attention to the way in which Othello's self-division is literally played out on the stage.

10. As Iago's self-alienation passes to Othello, so does his habit of soliloquizing. Soliloquies are usually in Shakespearean tragedy the discourse of self-division: only those whose selves are in pieces need to explain themselves to themselves and have distinct-enough interior voices to carry out the job for our benefit. Initially Iago's soliloquies formally mark him as fractured in comparison with Othello's wholeness; by the end, Othello is the soliloquizer.

11. I here depart from Ridley in following F's version of line 80; Ridley and Q1 (1622) give “And swiftly come to Desdemona's arms.” Ridley himself finds Q1's version of line 80 "pallid" and thinks Shakespeare probably revised it for F; that he nonetheless rejects the Folio version on the grounds that it is inconsistent with Cassio's character suggests his resistance to seeing just how eroticized Cassio's idealizing of Othello is (xxix-xxx and 52n). In the context of lovemaking, spirits is not a neutral term; for its specifically sexual senses, see Stephen Booth, Shakespeare's Sonnets (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale UP, 1977), 441-43.

12. See Neill's powerful account of the ways in which the audience is implicated in Iago's invocation of the horrors of miscegenation, the improper sexual mixture that medieval theologians called adultery (395-99 and 407-9). For Arthur L. Little Jr. the whole of the play constitutes “the primal scene of racism,” a forbidden sexual sight/site from which the audience “constructs the significance of race” (“‘An essence that's not seen’: The Primal Scene of Racism in Othello,” SQ 44 [1993]: 304-24, esp. 305-6).

13. The familiar associations of blackness with monstrosity (see, e.g., Newman, 148; and James R. Aubrey, “Race and the Spectacle of the Monstrous in Othello,” Clio 22 [1993]: 221-38) and specifically with monstrous births (see Neill, 409-10; and Aubrey, 222-27) would probably have made the subterranean connection between Othello and Iago's monstrous birth more available to Shakespeare's audiences than it is to a modern audience.

14. Projection has classically been invoked as a mechanism in Othello, but usually in the other direction, from Othello to Iago; see, e.g., J. I. M. Stewart, Character and Motive in Shakespeare: Some Recent Appraisals Examined ([London, New York, and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Company, 1949], 102-5), though Stewart ultimately abandons a naturalistic reading of the play through projection for a symbolic reading of Iago and Othello as parts of a single whole. For somewhat later versions of Iago as Othello's projection, see, e.g., Henry L. Warnken, “Iago as a Projection of Othello” in Shakespeare Encomium 1564-1964, Anne Paolucci, ed. (New York: The City College, 1964), 1-15; and Orgel,
In these accounts projection is loosely used to indicate that Iago expresses unacknowledged doubts or desires in Othello's mind (or, in Orgel's reading, Othello's unacknowledged need for a punitive superego); they generally do not explore the mechanism of projection or consider the degree to which the structure of the play posits Iago—not Othello—as its psychic starting point. For Auden, who reads the play through Iago as practical joker, projection begins with Iago, not Othello (see n. 6, above); see also Leslie Y. Rabkin and Jeffrey Brown, who read Iago as a Horneyan sadist, assuaging his pain by projecting his self-contempt and hopelessness onto others (“Some Monster in His Thought: Sadism and Tragedy in Othello,” Literature and Psychology 23 [1973]: 59-67, esp. 59-60); and Pollard, who reads Iago as Baudelairian sadist, filling the world with sadistic projections with which he then identifies to fill his inner emptiness (92-95). Serpieri sees Iago as the “artificer of a destructive projection”; in his semiotic analysis, litotes—Iago's characteristic nay-saying figure—becomes the linguistic equivalent of projection, “a figure of persuasion which, by denying, affirms in the ‘other’ all that—the diabolical, the lustful, the alien—which it refutes or censures in the ‘self’” (134 and 142). Attention to the status of “others” has made contemporary criticism particularly sensitive to Othello as the site of Iago's projections rather than as the originator of projection; see, e.g., Parker on “the violence of projection” (100). My account differs from those cited here largely in giving projection a body and in specifying the mechanisms of projective identification at work in the play.

15. Although Neill emphasizes the hidden/hideousness of the bed rather than of bodily interiors (394-95), my formulation here is very much indebted to his. In the course of her enormously suggestive account of the cultural resonances of the hidden/private in Othello and Hamlet, Parker comments extensively on the association of the hidden with the woman's private parts, partly via gynecological discourse; see Parker, “Othello and Hamlet: Dilation, Spying, and the ‘Secret Place’ of Woman,” Representations 44 (1993): 60-95, esp. 64-69.

16. Gender can of course mean “kind”; but, as Ridley notes, “Shakespeare normally uses it of difference of sex” (40n).

17. Ridley notes that “supply = satisfy” (40n); for a specifically sexualized use, see Measure for Measure, 5.1.210.

18. “Doves” is the reading in Ridley and Q1; I here depart from it in giving Fs and Q2's “dawes.”


20. The loci classici for this reading are Martin Wangh, “Othello: The Tragedy of Iago,” Psychoanalytic Quarterly 19 (1950): 202-12; and Gordon Ross Smith, “Iago the Paranoiac,” American Imago 16 (1959): 155-67. Both essays are based on Freud's account of delusional jealousy as a defense against homosexual desire in the Schreber case. For an extension and elaboration of this view, with particular focus on Iago's hatred of women, see also Stanley Edgar Hyman, Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 101-21. Contemporary critics who comment on the homoerotic dynamic between Iago and Othello tend to locate their readings not in this model but in the complex of metaphors that makes Iago's seduction of Othello into an aural penetration and insemination, with a resulting monstrous (and miscegenistic) conception; see, e.g., Coppélia Kahn, Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U of California P, 1981), 144-45; and Parker in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 99-100. Parker notes that the imagined penetration is anal as well as aural (99); see also, e.g., Graham Hammill's brief discussion of Iago's anal eroticism, “The Epistemology of Expurgation: Bacon and The Masculine Birth of Time” in

21. For historically based arguments against Iago-as-repressed-homosexual, see Jonathan Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 157-62; and Bruce R. Smith, Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1991), 61-63 and 75. Both Dollimore and Smith stress the social functions of the male homosocial bond rather than the dynamics of homoerotic feeling partly on the grounds that the homosexual subject is an anachronism in the early modern period. But Shakespeare does not need to have the category of the “homosexual subject” available to him in order to represent Iago as acting out of desires inadmissible to him, including sodomitical desires; and critics who insist that we do away with “the homosexual” as a category sometimes throw out the baby with the bathwater. In “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England” (in Goldberg, ed., 40-61) Alan Bray demonstrates the cultural (nonsexual) uses to which the “bedfellow” could be put; but in order for Smith, for example, to invoke Iago's report of Cassio's “bedfellow” dream to make the argument that Iago is a self-conscious male-bonder rather than a repressed homosexual, he has to ignore the explicit sexiness of the dream (the hard kisses plucked up by the roots, the leg over the thigh). The dream clearly crosses the line—between male friendship and sodomy—that Bray delineates, more strikingly because Iago need not have included all that sexiness to convey his “information” to Othello; and whether or not the reported dream proclaims Iago a “repressed homosexual,” its effect on Othello clearly depends as much on its crossing of that line as on the information that Cassio dreams about Desdemona. As for subjectivity: whether or not the Renaissance shared our sense of the bourgeois subject—in any case, emphatically not the subject as it is construed by psychoanalysis—Othello is obsessively about what is hidden away within the person, the inner, private, and unknowable self that might harbor inaccessible desires. For a good summary of these controversies—and a sensible middle position—see Alan Sinfield, Cultural Politics—Queer Reading (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994), 12-14.


23. Klein, 188.
24. Klein, 192 and 189.
25. Boris, xvi.

29. Klein, Envy and Gratitude, 186.


32. In Kleinian terms, Othello has reached the depressive position, characterized by the capacity to mourn for the damaged object and to make reparations to it (see especially Klein, “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States” [1935] and “Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States” [1940], both in Love, Guilt and Reparation, 262-89 and 344-69); Iago functions from within the more primitive paranoid-schizoid position, with its characteristic mechanisms of splitting and projection/introjection (see especially Klein, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms” in Envy and Gratitude, 1-24).
33. As many have argued: see especially Cavell, 134; and Snow, 392. See also my *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare*, Hamlet to The Tempest (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 69-70.

34. Iago's words here, like Emilia's at 3.4.157-60, refer explicitly to *jealousy* but nonetheless define the self-referential qualities of *envy*. Although the two terms are sometimes popularly confused, they are distinct in psychoanalytic thought: jealousy occurs in a three-body relationship, derived from the oedipus complex, in which the loss of a good object to a rival is at stake; envy occurs in a pre-oedipal two-body relationship, in which the “good” qualities of the object are felt to be intolerable. Jealousy seeks to preserve the good object, if necessary by killing it; envy seeks to spoil the good object. (For these distinctions, see Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 196-99; and Joseph in Feldman and Spillius, eds., 182.) Jealousy is a derivative of envy but is more easily recognized and more socially acceptable (Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 198; Joseph in Feldman and Spillius, eds., 182); partly as a consequence, it can sometimes serve as “an important defence against envy” (Klein, *Envy and Gratitude*, 198). This defensive structure seems to me at work both in Iago and in the play at large: in Iago, who repeatedly comes up with narratives of jealousy as though to justify his intolerable envy to himself (tellingly, he uses the traditional language of envy—Spenser's Envy “inwardly … chawed his owne maw” in *The Faerie Queene* [I.iv.30]—to register the gnawing effects of jealousy on him); and in *Othello* itself, insofar as its own narratives of jealousy are far more legible and recognizably “human” than the envy represented through Iago and dismissed in him as unrecognizable, inhuman, or demonic.

35. “Mock” has puzzled commentators for years, occasioning five pages of commentary in the New Variorum edition of *Othello* (ed. Horace Howard Furness [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886]). William Warburton (1747) glosses “mocke” (in terms strikingly close to my own) as “loaths that which nourishes and sustains it” (176). With very little plausibility but some interest for my argument, Andrew Becket (1815) transforms “mocke” to “muck,” glossing it as to “bedaub or make foul”; two other commentators—Zachariah Jackson and Lord John Chedworth—approved of this emendation enough to come up with candidates for the monstrous animal that befouls its food, mouse and dragon-fly, respectively (179).

36. Zachary Grey suggested in 1754 that “mock” is a contraction for “mammock” (Furness, ed., 176); as far as I can tell, his suggestion has been entirely ignored.


38. See *Hamlet*, 2.2.181-82.

39. This destruction also has the effect of separating the two figures whose conjunction has haunted Iago's imagination. Klein hypothesizes the combined parent figure as a special target of envy (“the suspicion that the parents are always getting sexual gratification from one another reinforces the phantasy … that they are always combined” [*Envy and Gratitude*, 198]); Iago in fact evokes such a fantasy-figure in his initial description of Othello and Desdemona as fused, a “beast with two backs” (1.1.116), always in the process of achieving the “incorporate conclusion” (2.1.258-59) that is always denied him.

40. Boris, 36.

41. My formulation here is partly indebted to Janine Chaussegueut-Smirgel's work on perversion, especially anal perversion, which she sees as an attempt to dissolve generational and gender differences in order to defend against acknowledgment of the pervert's own puniness and vulnerability; though she does not draw specifically on Klein's concept of envy, her work sometimes intersects usefully with Klein's. In Chaussegueut-Smirgel's reading, Sade's intention, for example, is “to reduce the universe to faeces, or rather to annihilate the universe of differences” (“Perversion and the Universal Law” in Chaussegueut-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1984], 4). Insofar as perversion attempts to replace God's differentiated universe with its own undifferentiation, it is “the equivalent of Devil religion (9); the undifferentiated and universe ‘constitutes an imitation or parody of the genital universe of the father’ (11). While this formulation is suggestive for Iago, I think that Chaussegueut-Smirgel is hampered by her Lacanian milieu, with its overvaluation of the phallus and the father's law; Iago is at least as intent on imitating and ultimately
replacing the mother's generative function as the father's law.

42. With the kind of psychological intuition that everywhere animates his portrayal of Satan, Milton reworks Emilia's comment: unable to stand the “debt immense of endless gratitude” to the God who has created him (Paradise Lost, Bk. 4, l. 52), Satan proclaims himself “self-begot, self-rais’d / By our own quick’ning power” (Bk. 5, ll. 860-61). Klein cites Milton's Satan as an instance of “the spoiling of creativity implied in envy” (Envy and Gratitude, 202).

43. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, birdlime is a sticky substance made out of the bark of the holly tree and smeared on branches to entrap birds; “With the barkes of Holme they make Bird-lyme,” cited from Henry Lyte's 1578 Niewe herball or historie of plantes (Oxford English Dictionary, prep. J. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, 2d ed., 20 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989], 2:216). Holme is confusing; it is cited as “blacke Holme” in Spenser's Virgils Gnat (l. 215), but there apparently refers to the oak, not the holly. In any case, despite the echo of lime, birdlime seems to have been dark, not white.

44. The equation of faeces with baby is familiar to psychoanalysis; see, e.g., Freud, “On the Sexual Theories of Children,” on the cloacal theory of birth (“If babies are born through the anus, then a man can give birth just as well as a woman” [9:205-26, esp. 219-20]); Jones, 274-75; and Susan Isaacs, “Penis-Feces-Child,” International Journal of Psycho-analysis 8 (1927): 74-76. For fantasies that overvalue the power of faecal creation “to create or destroy every object,” see Abraham, “The Narcissistic Evaluation of Excretory Processes,” 322; about one of his patients he reports, “That night he dreamed that he had to expel the universe out of his anus” (320).

45. Oddly, Ridley associates the pitch into which Iago will turn Desdemona's virtue with birdlime without noting its source in Iago's earlier metaphor (88n).

46. For Shakespeare's reworkings of the proverbially defiling properties of pitch, see, e.g., Love's Labor's Lost, 4.3.3; 1 Henry IV, 2.4.394-96; and Much Ado About Nothing, 3.3.53.

47. I here depart from Ridley in following F and Q2; Q1, Ridley's copytext, gives “conceit.” The half-buried metaphor of childbirth is, I think, present in either case, both through the association of “groan”—especially in proximity to a bed—with childbirth (see, e.g., All's Well That Ends Well, 1.3.140 and 4.5.10; and Measure for Measure, 2.2.15) and through the family relation between conceit and Latin conceptus, cited in the OED; the OED also gives “Conception of offspring” as an obsolete meaning for conceit with a 1589 instance, though it notes that this usage is “Perhaps only a pun” (3:647-48, esp. 648).

48. See also “the best turn i' th' bed” (Antony and Cleopatra, 2.5.59). For serve, see Lear's Oswald, “A serviceable villain, / As duteous to the vices of thy mistress / As badness would desire” (4.6.248-50); for serve my turn, see Costard's exchange with the king (Love's Labor's Lost, 1.1.281-82). For follow/fallow, see Parker in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 99, citing Herbert A. Ellis, Shakespeare's Lusty Punning in Love's Labour's Lost (1973).

49. This is an oversimplified summary of a very complex development in psychoanalytic theory; for a fuller summary, see “Projective Identification” in R. D. Hinshelwood's A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 179-208; or Elizabeth Bott Spillius's “Clinical experiences of projective identification” in Clinical Lectures on Klein and Bion, Robin Anderson, ed. (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), 59-73, esp. 59-64. For Klein's initial development of the concept of projective identification, see Envy and Gratitude, 8-11. The development of the concept by her followers has had broad ramifications for clinical work; for a particularly lucid account of some of these, see, in addition to Spillius, Joseph, “Projective identification—some clinical aspects” in Melanie Klein Today: Developments in Theory and Practice, Elizabeth Bott Spillius, ed., 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 1:138-50.

50. Klein, Envy and Gratitude, 11.

51. Collied is conjecturally related to coaly by the OED, 3:390-91.

52. Folio gives “hell” for Q1’s “cell.” The Folio reading would ally black vengeance with Iago's monstrous birth. In either reading, the apparently superfluous hollowness suggests an inner space; as Ridley notes, it occurs, again redundantly, in the reference to a “hollow mine” (4.2.81). Shortly after
he calls up black vengeance, and again in 5.2, Othello imagines his revenge swallowing up his victims (3.3.467 and 5.2.76), as though returning them to the interior source of his vengeance.


**Criticism: Race: Michael Neill (essay date 1998)**


*[In the following essay, Neill discusses the contradictory significance of race in Othello.]*

“I think this play is racist, and I think it is not”:\(^1\) Virginia Vaughan's perplexed response to *Othello* is symptomatic of the problems faced by late-twentieth-century critics in approaching the racial dimensions of Shakespeare's play. For if the work of recent scholars has taught us anything about early modern constructions of human difference, it is that any attempt to read back into the early modern period an idea of “race” based on post-Enlightenment taxonomy is doomed to failure.\(^2\) To talk about race in *Othello* is to fall into anachronism; yet not to talk about it is to ignore something fundamental about a play that has rightly come to be identified as a foundational text in the emergence of modern European racial consciousness—a play that trades in constructions of human difference at once misleadingly like and confusingly unlike those twentieth-century notions to which they are nevertheless recognizably ancestral. In the latter part of this paper, I hope to cast some light on Shakespeare's treatment of what came to be called “race” by exploring an experience of alterity in the East Indian archipelago, a theater of colonial encounter which may at first seem far away from the Mediterranean world of *Othello*. But I should like to frame that discussion by briefly considering some of the ways in which this tragedy perplexes the notions of ethnic and national identity that its subtitle so casually invokes.

In an essay that provides a useful corrective to anachronistically postcolonial understandings of race in *Othello*, Emily Bartels has stressed the ideological openness of the play's treatment of human difference, arguing that (except in the eyes of Iago and those he manipulates) “Othello is, as the subtitle announces, ‘the Moor of Venice’. … neither an alienated nor an assimilated subject, but a figure defined by two worlds, a figure (like Marlowe's Jew of Malta) whose ethnicity occupies one slot, professional interests another, compatibly”—the fortunate possessor, then, of “a dual, rather than divided, identity.”\(^3\) But the invocation of Barabas as a parallel type of comfortably hyphenated hybridity seems something of a giveaway here. One has only to think of the extreme anxieties surrounding the question of what it meant to belong to, say, the “Old English” of Ireland to recall how easily dual identity could be interpreted as sinister doubleness or self-contradiction: from the viewpoint of “New English” settlers like Spenser, the adoption of Irish customs and speech by the Old English descendants of Norman conquerors could signal only a treacherous repudiation of their birthright.\(^4\) The unease of hybridity (whether elective or enforced), in a world where the hybrid was always liable to be construed as prodigious or monstrous, is apparent in the ambivalent ethnographic discourse of one of Shakespeare's principal sources for *Othello*—the *Geographical Historie of Africa*, written by the Granada-born Moor John Leo Africanus. In a somewhat poignant moment, this native informant and Christian *converso*, for whom African peoples are both “them” and “us,” describes himself as an “amphibian,”\(^5\) thereby acknowledging his contradictory position as a denizen of both Muslim and Christian worlds, as both African and European, humanist scholar and “barbarian.” It is a position that can seem inscribed in an adopted Latin name equally suggestive of dedicated papal allegiance and an unreconstructed bestial ferocity.\(^6\) In much the same way, Othello's Africa is at once the place that authenticates his birth “from men of royal siege” (1.2.22) and a wilderness of Plinian monstrosities, of “Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (1.3.145-46).\(^7\) One way of describing the action of his tragedy is in terms of the process by which Iago progressively prises open the contradictions in an oxymoronic subtitle that marks the uneasy translation of “erring Barbarian” into “civil monster” (1.3.356; 4.1.64)—the process (to put it another way) by which he
successfully essentializes or “racializes” Othello’s difference.

When Roderigo, under Iago's tutelage, dismisses Othello as “an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere” (1.1.134-35), he issues a fundamental challenge to the syntax of identity inscribed in the play's subtitle, “The Moor of Venice.” To be a Moor, he insists, is to be a fundamentally dislocated creature, a wandering denizen of that un-place known as wilderness, heath, or moor—“an erring Barbarian” in the punning phrase with which Iago assimilates Barbary to the notoriously vagrant condition of barbarism. From Roderigo's perspective, then, to be a “Moor of Venice” is to represent a principle of wild disorder lodged in the very heart of metropolitan civilization—to be, in another of Iago's violent oxymorons, a kind of “civil monster.” The innocent-seeming preposition that yokes Moorish origin to Venetian identity is thus a site of violent contradiction.

Yet the of in “Moor of Venice” is easily passed over as a mere instrument of descriptive amplification, as unproblematic in its implications as the similarly deployed locatives in, say, Timon of Athens, The Two Gentleman of Verona—or, indeed, The Merchant of Venice, the play that is in some respects Othello’s counterpart in Shakespeare's comic canon. To remember The Merchant of Venice in this context, however, is to recall the tellingly ambiguous description of the play in the Stationers' Register, “a booke of the Marchaunte of Venyce, or otherwise called the Jew of Venyce,” and hence to be confronted with the troubling implications of Portia's question, “Which is the Merchant here, and which the Jew?” (4.1.171)—a question that directs us toward a reading of that play in which issues of place and identity, of the “native” and the “stranger,” become so vexed as to seriously destabilize the innocent-seeming of that ties both Shylock and Antonio to their native city. The effect is to send us further back to Marlowe's satiric deconstruction of geographic identity in The Jew of Malta. As the alienated representative of “a scatter’d Nation” (1.1.121), Barabas is not so much of Malta as in it—just as his vaunted colleagues in international Jewry are located “in” Bairseth, Portugal, Italy, and France. Scorning allegiance not only to “those of Malta” (1.143) but even to his own professed “Countreymen” (1.159), the fellow Jews who share his persecution, Barabas takes sardonic pleasure in representing himself as an archetypal cosmopolitan, whose politic schooling in Machiavelli's Florence has helped him to manipulate “the warres ’twixt France and Germanie” (2.3.187) as it now enables him to exploit the conflict between Turk and Christian. Yet the pseudo-cathartic action of his “tragedy,” with its ludicrously repeated efforts to purge him from the costive body politic, suggests a more organic relationship between this outsider and “those of Malta” than either Barabas or his Christian persecutors would acknowledge.

Of course the particular fear that attaches to the demon-Jew in early modern European culture has to do with his insidious role as the hidden stranger, the alien whose otherness is the more threatening for its guise of semblance. This was a culture whose own expansionism, ironically enough, generated fears of a hungrily absorptive otherness which were expressed in complementary fantasies of dangerous miscegenation, degeneration, and cannibalistic desire; in its fictions the Jew represents the deepest threat of all—that of a secret difference masquerading as likeness, whose presence threatens the surreptitious erosion of identity from within. One reason why Shylock remains such a deeply troubling figure at the end of Merchant is the unspoken possibility that his forcible conversion (like that of Jews in sixteenth-century Spain) will only institutionalize the very uncertainty it is designed to efface. Jessica's marriage to Lorenzo—albeit that marriage in some sense confers the husband's identity on the wife—contains the same latent threat; hence, perhaps, the uneasy silence that surrounds her in the concluding moments of the play.

The great advantage of Moors over Jews—or so it might seem to early modern Europeans—was that they could not so easily disguise their difference: blackness (as Aaron boasts in Titus Andronicus) “scorns to bear another hue” (4.2.99); and the ultimately reassuring thing about George Best’s famous story of the English mother who gave birth to a black baby is that the taint of alterity seems compelled by nature to discover itself—“the blacke More,” as Scripture and proverb insisted, “[c]annot change his skin [any more than] the leopard his spottes,” for it was impossible “to wash the Ethiop white.” Yet, of course, Aaron's boast is undercut by his own scheme to substitute the impeccably white offspring of his “countryman” Muliteus for Tamora's black infant, and—as the parallel campaigns of persecution against converted Jews (marranos) and
converted Moors (*moriscos*) were calculated to demonstrate—it turns out that Moorishness was almost as capable as Jewishness of concealing its aggressive Otherness within the body of the Same. This was the case partly because of the notorious indeterminacy of the term *Moor* itself: insofar as it was a term of racial description, it could refer quite specifically to the Berber-Arab people of the part of North Africa then rather vaguely denominated as “Morocco,” “Mauritania,” or “Barbary”; or it could be used to embrace the inhabitants of the whole North African littoral; or it might be extended to refer to Africans generally (whether “white,” “black,” or “tawny” Moors); or, by an even more promiscuous extension, it might be applied (like “Indian”) to almost any darker-skinned peoples—even, on occasion, those of the New World. Consequently when Marlowe's Valdes refers to the supine obedience of “Indian Moores” to “their Spanish Lords” (*Faustus*, 1.1.148), it is usually assumed that the two terms are simply mutually intensifying synonyms, and that the magician means something like “dusky New World natives.” But *Moor* could often be deployed (in a fashion perhaps inflected, even for the English, by memories of the Spanish *Reconquista*) as a religious category. Thus Muslims on the Indian subcontinent were habitually called “Moors,” and the same term is used in East India Company literature to describe the Muslim inhabitants of Southeast Asia, whether they be Arab or Indian traders, or indigenous Malays. So Valdes's “Indian Moores” could equally well be Muslims from the Spanish-controlled Portuguese East Indies. In such contexts it is simply impossible to be sure whether *Moor* is a description of color or religion or some vague amalgam of the two, and in the intoxicated exoticism of Marlovian geography, such discriminations hardly matter.

But in less fantastical contexts they could matter a great deal—as, for example, when renegade Europeans in the East Indies were said to “turn Moor,” just as in the Mediterranean they were more usually said to “turn Turk.” In travel literature of the period these two expressions are sometimes interchangeable, “Turk” being used even in descriptions of the East Indies as a loosely generic description of the people otherwise called “Islams” or “Mahomettans.” The Dutch voyager William Cornelison Schouten, for example, describes an encounter with the men of Tidore, “some [of whom] … had Wreathes about their heads, which they say were Turkes or Moores in Religion.” Turkishness or Moorishness here is a matter of religious allegiance, rendered visible (like the malignancy of Othello's “turbanned Turk” [5.2.351]) in details of costume. Thus when Othello, the Moor turned Christian, accuses his brawling Venetian followers of “turn[ing] Turk …” (2.3.166), his hyperbole has a disturbing irony that (as critics now routinely observe) resonates with a suicide in Act 5 that takes the form of a re-enacted slaughter of the Turk. Moreover, because the religious and racial parameters of Moorishness were seldom entirely distinct, the exact implications of the metamorphoses whereby Christians “turned Moor” and Moors “turned Christian” were disturbingly blurred. If a Christian turned Moor, did he in some sense “blacken” himself? If a Moor “turned Christian,” did he thereby cease in some important sense to be a Moor? If he did not, would residual Moorishness turn out to be a matter of blood, color, or faith? It is true that the purely religious connotations of “Christian” produce a significant asymmetry between “turning Christian” and “turning Turk (or Moor),” making it seem as though the “racial” component of identity can be transformed in only one direction; yet these questions were difficult to answer with any assurance, so long as the language of difference remained as shifting and uncertain as it was before the emergence of the modern discourses of race and color. The history of the simultaneous (and largely inseparable) campaigns for purity of blood (*limpieza de sangre*) and purity of religion in Spain are only extreme symptoms of a larger European difficulty that threatened to turn a phrase such as “Moor of Venice” into a hopeless oxymoron. That, indeed, is what Richard Brome clearly felt it to be when he dubbed his comedy of senile jealousy *The English Moor* (1637). Brome's plot turns on the performance of a “Masque of Blackamoors” (a self-conscious travesty of his old master Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*), in the course of which it is prophesied that the princess of Ethiopia will be blanched by marriage to an Englishman. But in the play proper, metamorphosis never amounts to anything more than the shedding of the heroine's blackface disguise. And just as (in the words of the inset masque) “’tis no better then a Prodigee / To haue white children in a black Contree” (4.4.22-23), so it appears that there can be no such thing in nature as an “English Moor.”
Of course the English (like other Europeans) brought some important cultural baggage to their encounters with foreign peoples: ideas about genealogy, about the biblical separation of humankind, and about the moral symbolism of color, all of which pushed them toward an essentialist reading of phenotypic difference. Yet, as Karen Ordahl Kupperman has recently argued, because they were predisposed to think “in terms of socially or culturally created categories,” treating most “differences between people … [as] ‘accidental’ …[consequences of] environment or experience,” they had not yet learned to “divide humankind into broad fixed classifications demarcated by visible distinctions.”22 As with the disdainful attitudes of the English toward the Irish—a people whose physical similarities to the English were conveniently obscured by their cultural differences—categories such as “civil” and “barbarous,” “naked” and “clothed” were often of far more significance in establishing the boundaries of otherness than the markers of mere biological diversity.23 In the later sixteenth century, however, the rapid expansion of national horizons through exploration and trade increasingly faced the English with foreign cultures whose sophisticated ways of life resisted assimilation into the cultural categories by which the threat of alterity had traditionally been contained.

In the early part of the period, the English often approached these peoples with a certain ethnographic objectivity. Much of the travel literature collected by Hakluyt is quite assiduous in cataloguing the various “distinction[s] of color, Nation, language[,] … condition” that divide the peoples of the earth;24 and variations of dress, weapons, manners, custom, social organization, and (above all) religion figure at least as prominently as differences of skin and feature. But as we move into the seventeenth century, the pressure of encounter with so many unfamiliar peoples begins to shift definitions of alterity away from the dominant paradigm of culture. In another telling asymmetry, it is possible to see color emerging as the most important criterion for defining otherness, even as nation becomes the key term of self-definition.25 The gradations of color appear to cause significant difficulties for the Dutch traveler Van Linschoten, for example, in his influential Voyages (translated and published with Hakluyt's endorsement in 1598), as he struggles (in sometimes-contradictory language) to define the nature of the differences between the various Asian peoples he encountered. The people of Ormuz are “white like the Persians,” those of Bengal “somewhat whiter then the Chingalas” ; “The people of Aracan, Pegu, and Sian are … much like those of China, onely one difference they haue, which is, that they are somewhat whiter then the Bengalon, and somewhat browner then the men of China”; in China itself, “Those that dwell on the Sea side … are a people of a brownish colour, like the white Moores in Africa and Barbaria, and part of the Spaniards, but those that dwell within the land, are for color like Netherlanders & high Dutches.” Yet “[t]here are many among them that are cleane blacke,” while “[i]n the lande lying westward from China, they say there are white people, and the land called Cathaia, where (as it is thought) are many Christians.”26

The East Indian archipelago posed particular problems of definition since the islands were themselves undergoing a rapid cultural transformation, as a militant, expansionist Islam progressively displaced well-established Hindu and surviving Buddhist and animist practices. The proliferation of religious, cultural, and ethnic differences must have been baffling to the English newcomers, subjecting their available definitions to peculiar strains. The various indigenous peoples and the rival groups of traders who clustered in their towns could of course be classified according to the geographical or political entities to which they belonged as “Javans, Chineses, Men of Pegu, Bandaneses,” and so forth; or they might be categorized according to religion as “ethnicks,” “pagans,” or “Moors”; or they might be grouped, together with the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, as “Indians” or “East Indians” (in a regional designation that the uncertainties of post-Columbian geography had permanently confused with differences of complexion). What precisely this meant in terms of color was a little confused: George Best's A Trve Discovrse of the late voyages of discouerie (1578), for example, had described East Indians, along with American “Indians,” as being “not blacke, but white,” though this was altered in Hakluyt's version of the True Discovrse to “tauney and white,”27 a distinction that other observers typically aligned with gender, remarking (in the words of Thomas Cavendish) that “although the men bee tawnie of colour … yet their women be faire of complexion”—something they attributed to the effects of clothing and exposure to the sun.28 In the familiar (and deeply ambiguous) trope routinely employed in both West and East Indian contexts, the hue of the
natives is figured as “the sun’s livery.” So we are told of Princess Quisara in Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* (1621) that “The very Sun I think, affects her sweetnesse, / And dares not as he does to all else, dye it / Into his tauny Livery” (1.1.60-62). The princess’s whiteness is the sign of inward “sweetnesse” that will be expressed in the conversion to Christianity that accompanies her betrothal to the Portuguese hero Armusia at the end of the play. The issue of color cannot be entirely erased, however; and the cynical Pyniero is allowed to suggest that there is something unnatural about the princess’s “wear[ing] her complexon in a case,” because if exposed to the sun’s kisses, it would so readily convert to a dusky hue: “let him but like it / A week or two, or three, she would look like a Lion” (ll. 63-64). East Indian tawniness (whether actual or, like Quisara’s, merely potential) may constitute an accident of culture and geography, but it is also a kind of servile “Livery,” the badge of allegiance to the false religion to which the princess and her countrymen are in thrall. And it resonates dangerously with those contemporary discourses that interpreted dark skin (in both African and West Indian contexts) as a sign of natural servitude.

One way of dealing with the taxonomic complications exemplified in Van Linschoten and reflected in *The Island Princess* was to develop a notion of difference that would effectually obscure the confusing variations of hue that Van Linschoten acknowledges in both European and non-European populations by establishing a more absolute division between “them” and “us”. During the first three decades of the seventeenth century, uncertainties about the nature of human difference are gradually flattened out in the literature of East Indian voyaging, as the peoples of the region begin to be categorized, according to the crudest distinction of color, as “black”—a designation that serves solely to distinguish them from “white” Europeans.

This idea of Europeanness as a form of group identity delimited by color seems itself to have been something new. In a probing analysis, “‘The Getting of a Lawful race,’” Lynda Boose has posed the question whether English notions of Moorishness, for example, were shaped by anything resembling “the modern sense of some definitively racial shared ‘Europeanness’”? Or was the difference between a ‘Moor’ and someone we would call a ‘European’ conceptually organized around the religio-political geography of Christian vs. Muslim more than around a geography of skin color?” In this regard, it might seem significant that the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s earliest cited use of *European* to distinguish the inhabitants of Europe from “Indians” is in Massinger’s *The City Madam* (1632)—“You are learn’d Europeans, and we worse / Than ignorant Americans” (3.3.127-28); for in this case the grounds of distinction are clearly cultural and religious rather than racial. Moreover, the dictionary offers no example of the word as a generic term for “white” people before 1696. But in fact Samuel Purchas had used *European* to define a community of color as early as 1613, when, in describing the divided condition of postlapsarian humankind, he contrasted “the tawney Moore, black Negro, duskie Libyan, ash-colored Indian, olivue-colored American. … with the whiter European.” In Purchas’s taxonomy Europeans are united by a common whiteness, while other peoples are divided by differing degrees of color, even as those colors taken together associate them in a common non-Europeanness.

It is important to recognize, I think, that this way of discriminating otherness—whatever its ultimate effects may have been—was not in itself motivated by an aggressive colonialism. On the contrary, as the section of Purchas’s *Hakleytus Posthumus* devoted to East Indian voyaging suggests, it seems to have arisen from the profound sense of insecurity experienced by the increasingly embattled English trading community in the region, an insecurity felt as a disorienting challenge to their own identity. Included among Purchas’s documents is Edmund Scott’s *An Exact Discourse of the Subtilties, Fashions, Religion and Ceremonies of the East Indians*, a narrative that offers a particularly revealing glimpse of the processes by which an acute anxiety about the sustainability of their enterprise and community helped to shape an ideology of color. In *An Exact Discourse*, a text almost exactly contemporary with *Othello*, the negotiation and demonstration of various kinds of difference—in rank, nation, and color—become crucial to the preservation of the identity of the vulnerable enclave that Scott calls “the English nation at Bantan.”

At the heart of Scott’s narrative, as I have argued elsewhere, is an acute anxiety about the threat to English identity experienced by the mercantile representatives of “the English nation” in the newly established trading
factory of the East India Company at Bantam in Java. This threat was triggered initially by the perplexing discovery (referred to elsewhere in Purchas's documents) that their Dutch rivals had been passing themselves off as English: “the common people knew us not from the Hollanders, for both they and wee were called by the name of Englishmen, by reason of their usurping our name at their first coming to trade.”

The potential for violence in such a confusion of identities is registered in the quibbling chapter title that Purchas added to Scott's narrative: “Differences [i.e., quarrels] betwixt the Hollanders (stiling themselves English), the Javans, and other things remarkable.” The problem was an especially vexing one because the English self-image was partially dependent on their sense of affinity with the Dutch, of whom Scott writes: “though wee were mortall enemies in our trade, in all other matters wee were friends, and would haue liued and dyed one for the other.”

But the merchants were able to overcome this difficulty through a display of self-fashioning pageantry when they resolved to stage their difference from the Dutch through an improvised Accession Day triumph: marching in elaborately sinuous patterns up and down their compound, clad in their best finery, with scarves and hatbands of red-and-white taffeta, the tiny company (“being but fourteene in number”) waved their banners of St. George, beat their drums, and discharged volumes of shot into the air. This swaggering (if undermanned) performance of Englishness so impressed the natives, according to Scott, that he and his companions felt empowered to deliver a brief disquisition on the linguistic and political distinctions between Dutch and English, thereby ensuring that this unhappy confusion would never be repeated.

But even as Scott's band succeeded in shoring up their sense of national distinctiveness on one front, they found it threatened with dissolution on another: for this crisis of identity with the Dutch was quickly followed by a second in which the terms of difference were much less easy to define and whose menace the English could only disarm by appealing to a rhetoric of color. This “Tragedie” (as Scott calls it) concerned “a Mullato of Pegu” (i.e., a man of mixed race from Burma) who, as a result of his ambiguous role as a servant in the English trading factory, was taken for an Englishman. The story begins with what we might now read as an explosion of racial resentment on the part of its protagonist. Having been drinking with a second mulatto, “one of his countreymen” who belonged to a visiting Flemish vessel, the “English” mulatto became enraged when the Flemish provost attacked his fellow Peguan and beat him back onto the Flemish ship. “Seeing his countryman misused, and being somewhat tickled in the heade with wine,” the mulatto planned to “reuenge his countryman's quarrell.” A small orgy of killing ensued: the mulatto sought out and stabbed both the Fleming and the other mulatto (whom he allegedly feared as a potentially hostile witness); he then tried unsuccessfully to kill a Philippino slave who accompanied his victims; and finally, “being nuzled in blood,” as Scott puts it, and “meeting with a poore Iauan … [he] stabde him likewise.” Unfortunately for the killer, however, the Fleming lived long enough to give some clues as to the identity of his assailant; and the mulatto, incriminated by inconsistencies in his own story as well as by the testimony of the slave, was at last brought to confess all three murders.

Scott, who was now the senior East India Company man in Bantam, found himself torn between a righteous desire to appease “the bloud of those Christians that were murthered” and a proprietorial insistence on his exclusive claim to administer justice to members of his own community. He resisted both what he saw as extravagant Javan demands for compensation and an arrogant Dutch insistence that he hand over the killer for a lingering death: they “saying hee should haue the bones of his legs and armes broken, and so he should lye and drie, or else haue his feete and hands cut off, and so lye and starue to death.”

Treating the issue as one of both personal pride (“I answered, that it lay not in them to put him to death, if I list to saue him”) and national prestige (“for an Englishman scornes to giue place to Hollanders in any forraine countrie”), he roundly declared that the murderer “should dye the ordinary death of the country, & no other.” Hiring a local executioner, Scott made him promise to dispatch the mulatto as swiftly and humanely as possible, even lending the “hangman” his own well-sharpened kris (short sword), “which was very seruiceable for such a purpose.” The choice of this quintessentially Malay (though English-owned) weapon to be the proxy instrument of judicial Englishness seems fraught with ironies at least as complicated as those that attend Othello's flourishing of Spanish steel to reassert his hybrid identity as “Moor of Venice.” But the choice had a certain appropriateness to a situation in which the contradictions of mixed identity became a source of
significant unease—an unease strikingly illustrated, I think, in Purchas's brutal abridgment of this section of Scott's narrative. In Purchas all but the bare details of the killing and of the murderer's execution have been excised—reducing Scott's complex “Tragedie” to a simple monitory account of physical “Dangers by a Molato.” There are numerous other cuts in Purchas's version of the pamphlet, but this is the only one for which he feels constrained to apologize, in a marginal note that disingenuously pleads the danger of prolixity.

No doubt Purchas’s anxiety, like Scott’s own, had everything to do with the ambiguous status given to the killer by the contradictory identity that the text ascribes to him—that of a man “of Pegu” who is, at the same time, “our mulatto.” Scott's possessive pronoun mediates as uneasily between ownership, community, and kinship as the deeply equivocal “mine” that announces Prospero's final acknowledgment of Caliban. It is the same unstable pronoun that both defines and masks the relationship of Shakespeare’s mercenary “stranger” to the Venetian state when “the Moor” is transformed into “our noble and valiant general” (2.2.1-2). In Scott the dangerous ambiguity of the connection that his “our” at once declares and mystifies becomes apparent at the point where the dying provost is said to have claimed that “an Englishman had slaine him.” A deputation of Dutch went at once to the English house to inform Scott that “one of our men had slaine one of theirs … [and] they thought it was our Mulatto.”

The inclusive “us” here brings the reader momentarily close to the pieties of Purchas’s climactic vision in the Pilgrimage, when he imagines a future redemption in which the divided branches of humanity will be reunited, “their long robes made white in the bloud of the Lambe … without any more distinction of color, Nation, language, sexe, condition.” But the efficacy of this emulsifying mystery belongs only to the extratemporal moment of penitence: it cannot affect the day-to-day management of difference in a situation where any loss of distinction threatens the elimination of “the English nation at Bantan.” Hence the narrative now goes on to detach the condemned man from the English camp and to link him, through the indelible mark of color, with the proper denizens of Bantam, the East Indian and Chinese, whose vicious and guileful “subtilties” Scott finds so threatening to English interests.

When the mulatto denies the Dutch accusation, he is dispatched, along with Scott's deputy, Gabriel Towerson, to question the mortally wounded Fleming: “when they came, they asked him who had hurt him, hee said an English man. Maister Towerson asked him whether it was a white man, or a blacke, … because he named still an English man, wee were in some doubt: the Fleming being also in drinke said, a white man, then presently hee said againe, it was darke, hee knew not well, and so gaue up his life.” Resonating with the symbolism of Othello's “Put out the light” soliloquy, darkness temporarily effaces the markers of difference here; but what is really extraordinary about the passage is the almost casual way in which the English seem to acceded to the mulatto's inclusion in the category “English man”—almost as if there could be such a creature as a “Mulatto of England.” This temporary recognition of kinship was perhaps partly enabled by the murderer's status as Christian—“though he was a Pegu borne, yet he was a Christian, & brought vp among the Portingalls”—so that Scott was at charitable pains to have the murderer brought to repentance before his death. The chosen agent of religious instruction, fittingly enough, was another hybrid figure—a renegade Muslim, “an Arabian borne [who] belonged to the Dutch ships, and spake the Spanish tongue marvellous well”; this go-between convinced the murderer of the power of God's son “to redeeme vs, and to wash away our sinnes were they neuer so bloody.”

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By a convenient rhetorical sleight, the mulatto is first kinned with his own executioner. Scott records with some satisfaction the hangman's promise to serve this prisoner better than he had earlier served a counterfeiter whose punishment he grievously botched: “when he killed the coyner,” the man protests, “he did not execute his own father.” Scott explains this as a reference to the custom whereby “when a Iauan of any account is put to death[,] … their nearest of kin doth execute [the common executioner's] office, and it is held the greatest fauour they can do them.” The executioner, we can surmise, intends a compliment to Scott by identifying
the humblest of the “Englishmen” as his own senior kinsman. But Scott's failure to spell out the meaning of the hyperbole has the effect of stressing the tie between the headsman and his victim, rhetorically severing the mulatto from the English camp and consigning him to the community of Others. But then, as the condemned man is led into the fields outside the town of Bantam to meet his death, a large crowd of townspeople, “both Iauans and Chyneses,” comes “flocking amaine,” excited by the rumor “that there was an Englishman to be executed.” They are disconcerted by their sight of the victim, however: “many were blanke, and wee might heare them tell one another it was a black man.” Scott and his men immediately seize the opportunity to deliver a second lesson on difference which completes the alienation of “our Mulatto”: “wee told them, he was iust of their own color and condition and that an Englishman or white man would not doe such a bloody deed.” At this moment a common blackness is announced as the defining condition of all who are not English or white, regardless of whether they are Chinese, Javan, men of mixed race, or men of Pegu (groups whose various gradations of color are elsewhere quite carefully catalogued). By the same token, the mulatto's crime becomes a proof of his racial difference, just as his color is the badge of his reprobate condition.

Something very similar, it seems to me, happens in Othello through the systematic blackening of the Moor and the symbolic detachment from Venice that it involves. To begin with, Othello's blackness seems to be an almost casual effect of Iago's improvisatory malice and of Roderigo's and Brabantio's gullibility. It is at best an accident whose superficial significance could even be underpinned (in ways to which Dympna Callaghan has alerted us) by the audience's pleasurable consciousness that it is only a cosmetic illusion: “Othello” is, after all, a white man; so his appearance of blackness is something easily annulled by the duke's invocation of that essential whiteness that unites all Christians under the skin (“your son-in-law is far more fair than black” [1.3.291]). Yet by the end of the play, the Venetian world—and the audience, too, if they are not careful—will have come to see it as the sign not only of his reprobate condition but of the irreducible alterity that the language of racial abuse insists is inseparable from it: “blacker devil,” “filthy bargain,” “gull … / As ignorant as dirt,” “dull Moor” (5.2.129, 153, 159-60, 223). In the reading of the Moor's body so successfully propagated by Iago, none of Othello's efforts to reinstitute the sustaining paradoxes of his mixed condition, as an “honorable murderer” whose suicide triumphantly enacts and cancels out the contradictions that have been exposed in the designation “Moor of Venice,” is sufficient to overcome the suggestion that such a creature can only constitute a kind of “civil monster.” Othello's re-enacted killing of the “circumcised dog” is also a re-enactment of his original apostasy by one whose contradictory position forces him to “turn, and turn … / And turn again” (4.1.253-54). But such desperate iteration is as hopeless as it is compulsive. For, as the outpost condition of Scott's mulatto implies, while a Moor may turn Christian, he can never “turn” Venetian. Like the mulatto's thinly motivated stabbing of his own countryman, Othello's overdetermined killing of the “turbanned Turk” is on one level a demonstration of his own essential unkindness; on another, like the executioner's hyperbolic killing of “his own father,” it enacts a violent re-absorption into the domain of the Other—confirming the rhetorical estrangement by which the Venetians return “he that was Othello” to the condition of anonymous “Moor” in which he was first brought into the play. It is in this sense that we can speak of the play's progressive racialization of the protagonist.

Yet Emily Bartels's insistence on Othello's openness is not entirely misplaced, and Virginia Vaughan's perplexity (“I think this play is racist, and I think it is not”) remains understandable. Even Edmund Scott, after all, is only partially successful in his attempt to purge “the English nation at Bantan” of the confusions created by the hybridizing presence of “our Mulatto.” As the murderer's body lies “gasping on the ground,” Scott cannot forbear offering it to the Dutch as a reproof to their own vices—“I openly told the Hollanders that, that was the fruite of drunkennesse, & byd them euer after beware of it”—thus carelessly blurring the boundary between colors and conditions which his lesson to the townspeople had established. And as he pauses to reflect on the fatal sickness of yet another of his fellow-merchants, the chief factor's anxiety at the fragile state of the English trading community seems to readmit the ghostly presence of his scapegoat to membership of a “we” that is once again exposed as dangerously unstable: “we had lost in all, since the departure of our ships eight men besides the Mulatto that was executed, and we were now ten liuing and one boy.” The “Mulatto of Pegu” is once again one of “our” men, a “Mulatto of England,” as it were. In Othello it is precisely the
desperate haste with which the Venetians seek to efface the admonitory spectacle of slaughter (“The object poisons sight, / Let it be hid” [5.2.362-63]) that calls into question the sustainability of the racial scapegoating that Iago has brought about, forcing us to pay attention to a very different narrative—the one that ends not in the self-alienating and murderous expulsion of a Moor turned Turk again but in a kiss that self-consciously proclaims an act of union. The play, however—and this is why it continues to torment us—refuses to align itself with either narrative, retreating instead into the obliquity of the taunting pleonasm with which Iago at once challenges and disables judgment: “What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word” (ll. 300-301).

Notes

6. In his First Book, for example, Leo breaks off his description of the vices to which “they” are subject in order to acknowledge his own relationship to these Others as one whose life resembles that of the strange fish-bird he calls “Amphibia”: “Neither am I ignorant, how much mine owne credit is impeached, when I my selfe write so homely of Africa, vnto which countrie I stand indebted both for my birth, and also for the best part of my education. … For mine owne part, when I heare the Africans euill spoken of, I will affirme my selfe to be one of Granada: and when I perceiue the nation of Granada to be discommended, then will I profess my selfe to be an African” (42-44). For a more extended treatment of Leo's ambivalence about his identity, see Emily C. Bartels, “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashonings of Race,” *SQ* 41 (1990): 433-54, esp. 436-38.
8. The significance of the subtitle is indicated by the remarkable consistency with which (in contrast to the generally fluid treatment of nomenclature in the period) it is repeated from the Stationers' Register entry to the Quarto and Folio and the other early texts deriving from them.
9. The same point is made by Peter Swaab in his program notes for the recent Royal National Theatre production of *Othello*: “Shakespeare's title has the force of a paradox. How far can ‘the Moor’ really be ‘of’ Venice? Like Marlowe's Jew of Malta, Othello is a resident who remains in important ways alien; like Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, his downfall involves too much trusting that a culture can give him an identity; and as with a historical figure such as Lawrence of Arabia, the word ‘of’ conceals a vulnerable fantasy of power in distant lands. ‘The Moor of Venice’ is a mixed marriage of
a phrase” (quoted from the program for the run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 8-11 April 1998; this production was first staged at the Salzburg Festival on 22 August 1997 and subsequently at the Lyttelton Theatre in London).


12. For the resemblances between Moor and Jew as figures of alterity, see Leslie A. Fielder, The Stranger in Shakespeare (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), 103-6 and 195-96. Cf. Shapiro, 171-72, on Jewish “blackness.”


14. On the forcible conversion of the Spanish Moors and the suspicion to which it paradoxically rendered them vulnerable, thereby exposing them to the malice of the Inquisition, see Henry Charles Lea, The Moriscos of Spain: Their Conversion and Expulsion (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1968). The near paranoia that inspired the official campaign for limpieza de sangre (purity of blood) in Spain issued directly from this fear of the hidden stranger masquerading as one of the familiar.

15. See also Bartels, “Making More of the Moor,” 434.

16. The phrase is common to both A and B texts; see Bowers, ed., 2:165.


20. For a useful account of the complex entanglement of color and religion in early Iberian racism, see James H. Sweet, “The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., 54 (1997): 143-66; in the same issue, see also Robin Blackburn, “The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery,” 65-102, esp. 77-78. On the uncertain denotation of Moor in the play, see Vitkus: “Othello, the noble Moor of Venice, is … not to be identified with a specific, historically accurate racial category; rather he is a hybrid who might be associated, in the minds of Shakespeare's audience, with a whole set of related terms—Moor, Turk, Ottomite, Saracen, Mahometan, Egyptian, Judean, Indian—all constructed and positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue” (160). The opposition, however, is never simply religious or even cultural.


24. Samuel Purchas, Purchas His Pilgrimage or Relations of the World and the Religions Observed in All Ages (London, 1613), 546.
25. In his richly informative “The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods” (William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., 54 [1997]: 103-42) Benjamin Braude discerns an analogous shift in the treatment of African peoples between 1589 and 1625, as the biblical Curse of Ham was increasingly interpreted as an explanation of both color and moral character: “slavery,” he argues, “had started to make it credible” (138).
27. George Best, A True Discovrse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northwest (London, 1578), 5:393-642. For American examples of descriptions featuring this trope, see Kupperman, 207.
30. In a deliberate confusion of reality, the Islamic allegiance of the actual Moluccans is assimilated in the play with idolatry through the disguise adopted by the villainous Governor of Ternata, who is at once a (presumably Mahometan) “Moore Priest” (4.1. s.d.) and the false prophet of “the Sun and Moon” (4.5.70). For more detailed discussion of this play as an instrument of mercantile colonialism, see Shanker Raman, “Imaginary Islands: Staging the East,” Renaissance Drama n.s. 26 (1995): 131-61; and my essay “‘Materiall flames’: The Space of Mercantile Fantasy in John Fletcher's The Island Princess,” forthcoming in Renaissance Drama.
31. See Sweet, 146-47, 149, 155-56, and 166.
33. Boose in Hendricks and Parker, eds., 360n.
35. Purchas, Purchas His Pilgrimage, 546. On Purchas's shift toward an increasingly moralized construction of blackness in his later writing, see Braude, 135-37.
36. Published in London, the Exact Discourse survives in two significantly different texts—the original pamphlet of 1606 and the abbreviated and annotated version (apparently based on a separate manuscript) published in Purchas His Pilgrimage. The different manuscript origins of the two versions are suggested by numerous minor variants. Unless otherwise indicated, citations of Scott follow the 1606 edition.
38. Scott, C2v.
39. Scott, H3r.
40. Scott, C2v.
41. For Scott the word mulatto seems to describe any person of part-European ethnicity; although the term is nowadays considered offensive, I have felt bound to replicate Scott's usage, since the protagonist of his story is identified in no other way.
42. Scott, D1v-D2r.
43. Scott, D2r.
44. Scott, D3v.
45. Scott, D4r.
46. Scott, D3v, D3r, and D4r.
47. Scott, D4v.
49. Scott, D2r, emphasis added.
50. Scott, D2v.
51. Scott, D4r.
52. Purchas, *Purchase His Pilgrimage*, 546.
53. Scott, D4v.
54. Scott, D4v.
56. “[D]ull Moor”—involving as it does a complicated quibble that depends on the resemblances and etymological links (supposed or otherwise) between Medieval Latin *Morus* = Moor; Latin *morus* (from Greek *µs*) = dull, stupid; and *morum* = blackberry or mulberry (hence *morulus* = black, dark-colored)—can be construed as a contemptuous inversion of the oxymoronic “Moor of Venice.”
57. Scott, E1r, emphasis added.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1997 South Atlantic Modern Language Association conference in Atlanta, at the Folger Shakespeare Library's Midday Colloquium, at Muhlenberg College, and to members of the Graduate Seminar at Trinity College, Cambridge. I am grateful to all four audiences for their constructive comments and suggestions.

**Criticism: Race: Patrick C. Hogan (essay date 1998)**


*[In the essay below, Hogan argues that race is a central issue in Othello, stating that Shakespeare opposed racism because it was not Christian.]*

In the middle of this century, in the context of the anticolonial struggles being waged throughout Africa and the Caribbean, writers such as Frantz Fanon explored the effects of racism on the minds and hearts of those black men and women who came to internalize the inhuman attitudes of their oppressors, conceiving of themselves in the same brutish terms. More recently, Derek Walcott has spoken of having black skin but looking at the world through blue eyes—seeing oneself and others through the distorting lenses of white racism. One result of this, Walcott tells us, is “racial despair,” despondency over the possibilities for accomplishment, for change, fulfillment, a good life—what the Greeks called *eudaimonia*. Racial despair is a secular descendent of spiritual despair. The latter results from a sense that one's sin is too great even for all-merciful God to forgive, that this sin blots out one's soul. The former results from a sense that one's skin is too black for anyone to accept—to forget or to “forgive”—that one's skin blots out one's soul.

This, I wish to argue, is the tragedy of Othello, the reason that he murders both Desdemona and himself. Like many tragic heroes, Othello is greater than those around him. He is, in Aristotle's term, *spoudaios*: excellent in character, intense in thought, elevated in feeling. But the forces arrayed against him are immense—not superhuman forces, Greek gods or Satan in a usurped human form, but all of intimate society. Everywhere he turns, Othello confronts racism. Its different faces or masks—not only enmity, disdain, abuse, but friendship, admiration, love—serve to make it more insistent, compelling, inexorable. In the end, he succumbs to the racist vision of those around him. The consequent despair leads to murder and to suicide.
A number of critics have argued that *Othello* is, in effect, an antiracist play.\(^4\) Others have seen the play as racist or at least as partially acquiescing in racist views about miscegenation.\(^5\) Still others have argued that it is anachronistic to see the play in terms of racism at all. Thus Michael Neill maintains against Martin Orkin that it was not “possible for Shakespeare to ‘oppose racism’ in 1604 … the argument simply could not be constituted in those terms.”\(^6\)

As to the third (“historicist”) position, it is a critical commonplace today that there is profound discontinuity and incommensurability between different historical periods, and between cultures. We cannot discuss this view at length here, but its status as dogma seems, at best, questionable. Orkin, Anthony Barthelemy,\(^7\) and others offer considerable evidence that many Europeans of Shakespeare’s time categorized people according to skin color, analogized nonwhites to animals, judged nonwhites inferior to whites and, more specifically, lascivious, “hypersexualized,” etc., in keeping with standard stereotypes. Indeed, citing work done by Fanon only a few decades ago, Fintan O’Toole argues that in the seventeenth century blacks were demeaned in the very same terms as they are today.\(^9\) It seems odd to deny that this is racism. Moreover, Orkin argues convincingly that there were many people of the time (most famously, Montaigne\(^10\)) who deplored, and thus opposed, this tendency to denigrate non-Europeans. It seems odd to insist that this is not antiracism.

But our use of the word “racism” is, in any case, not the point. We can, after all, substitute another term if “racism” seems too burdened by modern biological pseudoscience. What is important is just that Shakespeare recognized when people were not conceived of nor treated as human beings. He sensed the emotional violence of this; he could see its sources—including its sources in beliefs relating to skin color and national origin—and its devastating effects. In *Othello*, Shakespeare has illustrated this human recognition. And sharing that recognition is crucial to our experience of the play’s tragedy.

Indeed, my purpose in writing this essay is perhaps not so much to defend a particular interpretive thesis, as to facilitate a particular tragic experience. In doing this, I follow the great Arabic theorists—al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd—in seeking the ethical and political value of a literary work not in its “message,” but in its *takhyil*, the imaginative experience which inspires and focusses our moral feelings.\(^11\) In other words, following the views of these writers, my aim is not merely to analyze the play in a particular manner, but to foster a takhyil that is at once more fully tragic and more pointedly ethical.

The idea is worth elaborating briefly. The major medieval Arabic theorists saw the prime function of literature as ethical. However, they did not conceive of this ethical function as a matter of a work expressing or inculcating some moral precept. Rather, they saw it as the fostering of an imaginative experience which serves to excite moral feelings, particularly the Islamic feelings of *rahmah* and *taqwa*\(^12\)—the former signifying mercy or “tenderness requiring the exercise of beneficence”;\(^13\) the latter meaning piety or “observance of duty.”\(^14\) For these writers, the moral aim of literature is not the teaching of ideas, but rather what, many centuries later, European Romantic theorists came to call “the training of sensibility.”

Keeping in mind recent work on reception and response, we may further develop this view in a way that links it productively with practical literary criticism. Many modern European theorists have emphasized the incompleteness of the literary work, stressing the role of the readers in completing the story, “filling in” the character as they read. Roman Ingarden speaks of “concretizing” the literary work;\(^15\) Wolfgang Iser talks of filling gaps.\(^16\) If we combine this insight with the Arabic view, we see directly that a single literary work may produce a number of very different imaginative experiences depending upon how it is completed by a reader. These different imaginative experiences may, in turn, have quite different ethical functions. Some may stifle rahmah and taqwa; others may foster them. A critical practice concerned primarily with the takhyil of a work, would, then, aim to develop, from these possible readings, an interpretation conducive toward a literary experience that would foster such moral feelings, not stifle them.
In the following pages, I wish to make the interpretive argument that *Othello* is a play focussed on the devastating effects of racism. But at the same time, and more importantly, I wish to encourage a particular “concretization” of the play, and thus a particular imaginative experience of it. In other words, while the focus of my analysis is on meaning, my underlying concern is with takhyil. In this way, my project is continuous with that set out by Kiernan Ryan, “to activate the revolutionary imaginative vision which invites discovery in [Shakespeare’s] plays today,” “to make his drama more disturbing in its impact on the institutions through which Shakespeare is reproduced, and more constructively alert to our most pressing problems and needs.”

In short, the overarching goal, which I share with Ryan, is to integrate our imagination of Shakespeare with current concerns about political and social dilemmas—in this case, the persistent dilemmas of racism and racial despair. It is precisely this sort of integration that the Arabic theorists conceptualized many centuries ago as *takhyil*.

**IS OTHELLO A FURIOUS MOOR?**

In Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, from which Shakespeare drew the story of Othello, Desdemona tells her husband outright, “You Moors are of so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge.”

A common stereotype was the hot-blooded Turk, the vengeful Arab, the passionate and impulsive African. Shakespeare was, of course, free to create a character who fit this stereotype. And if he did, if Othello is indeed a furious Moor whose (more than human) passion overpowers his (less than human) reason, then there is nothing to be explained in the final murder and suicide. He kills Desdemona and himself because the divine faculty of reason is racially weak, and the animal impulses of passion are racially potent.

But it is easy to see that this is not the case. Shakespeare is at pains to portray Othello as more reasonable (more contemplative, calm, reflective, discerning) and less passionate (less impulsive, desirous, pugnacious) than any of the Venetians around him. Roderigo is a fool, his reason pathetically overwhelmed by lust for Desdemona. Cassio, deceived into inebriation, loses self-control and brawls on the slightest provocation. Brabantio storms into Othello's company crying havoc and flailing his sword hysterically. Most of all, Iago is crazed with the green-eyed monster, jealousy. It takes labor, and stage-craft, and practiced deceit to convince Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful. It also takes *moira*, a tragic conspiracy of fate: Cassio bragging of his conquest, the compromising appearance of a handkerchief. But Iago requires no such evidence to accuse his wife of multiple adulteries. He speaks darkly of rumors: “[I]t is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets / H’as done my office” (I.iii.378-79).

Later, he delivers a mad speech on female “Lechery … lust and foul thoughts” (II.i.257-59), culminating with a fantastical accusation:

[T]he lusty Moor
Hath leaped into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife.

(II.i.295-99)

He concludes by elaborating the delusion further still: “I fear Cassio with my nightcap too” (II.i.307). In sum, the Venetians of the play fit Desdemona's description well: almost to a man, they are “of so hot a nature that every little trifle moves [them] to anger and revenge.”

But Othello does not fit at all. When we first see Othello, Iago is trying to anger him. He gossips that a nobleman “spoke … scurvy and provoking terms” against Othello (I.ii.8). In the preceding scene, Iago's ploys had successfully inflamed Brabantio and duped Roderigo. But with Othello, he has no success: “Let him do his spite,” Othello responds, unmoved (I.ii.16). When Brabantio, Roderigo, and the officers enter, and both sides draw their swords, in preparation for bloody combat, Othello merely says: “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them” (I.ii.58). Then, after Brabantio abuses him with gross racial invective, he
continues, “Hold your hands, / Both you of my inclining and the rest” (I.ii.80-81). The scene and the phrase “Keep up your bright swords” are reminiscent of the garden at Gethsemane. When the armed men sent by the chief priests have come to arrest and imprison him, Jesus commands his followers not to fight, ordering Simon Peter (in the Geneva translation of 1560), “Put up thy sword”—a famous phrase alluded to in Othello's first command. Later, in a similar manner, Othello is calm, though forceful, in ending the brawl between Cassio and Montano. Here he makes the religious significance of the act explicit, calling out, “For Christian shame put by this barbarous brawl!” (II.iii.171).

Othello is not committed to peace, however, due to some flaw; he is not pusillanimous or lacking in military skill. Despite the great racism of Venetian society (to which we shall turn presently), he has risen to command the Venetian troops. All acknowledge him valiant (see, for example, I.iii.48), and his status indicates his strategic abilities. In opposing battle, he is reasonable, not timorous. Moreover, his rational skills go beyond those of strategy. For example, he is a physician also, capable in the art of healing (see II.iii.253), where he comforts Montano, saying, “Sir, for your hurts, myself will be your surgeon”). Even Iago, despite his vicious hatred, must acknowledge that Othello is “constant, loving, noble” (II.i.289). In short, he, almost alone among the major characters in the play, is guided by reason, not passion. He is as far from the stereotype of the passionate Moor as he could possibly be, and as far superior to his white associates.

Why, then, does he kill?

THE UBIQUITY OF RACISM

In almost every way, the attitude of the Venetians toward Othello is racialist, even when it is not derogatory. Othello is a great general in the Venetian army, a friend and colleague of many Venetians. And yet, they refer to him far less frequently as “Othello,” as this particular man, than as “the Moor”—when counted up, the proportion is almost two to one in favor of the generic category over the name. In other words, they routinely discuss, and even address him, not as an individual person, but as an instance of his race.

Of course, much of the address and discussion is indeed derogatory as well—and in all the standard ways, Iago is particularly adept at racial slander. After Roderigo has referred to Othello as “the thick-lips” (I.i.63), Iago goes on to characterize Othello as a brute beast. He shouts that Othello is “an old black ram” (I.i.85). He taunts Brabantio with the dreadful possibility that Brabantio's grandchildren will be of mixed race, saying, “[Y]our daughter [is] covered with a Barbary horse, [hence] you'll have nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans” (I.i.108-11). Worse still, at times he sees Othello as demonic: “[T]he devil will make a grandsire of you” (I.i.88). Though, later, Shakespeare has Iago admit that it is he himself, not Othello, who is of Satan's party. Speaking of his plot against Othello, Iago says: “When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now” (II.iii.351-53). And at the end of the play, Othello repeats the characterization, asking Cassio to inquire of “the demi-devil” Iago “Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?” (V.ii.297-98).

Despite his own degradation, however, Iago finds Desdemona degraded in loving Othello. It is a violation of nature—akin almost to the bestiality of Pasiphaë—for this woman who is so “fair” (both so beautiful and so white) to choose “the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (I.i.119,123). It is beyond reason: “[W]hat delight shall she have to look on the devil?” he asks Roderigo (II.i.224-25).

Brabantio takes up this theme most vehemently, accusing Othello of witchcraft. Only magic, “foul charms” and “drugs” could drive Desdemona “from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight” (I.ii.72, 73, 69-70). Because he is black, he is hideous (another common stereotype of the period; see, for example, Barthelmy 27). His natural color is soot, filth—a physical degradation paralleling a spiritual degradation. No fair woman could love “such a thing.” Later, he questions again how she could “fall in love with what she feared to look on” (I.iii.99). In the brief period of the play, Brabantio pines away and
dies. He too is struck down by despair. What point is there to living, once his daughter has espoused the kin of Lucifer?

When I teach this play, I ask my students to imagine themselves in Othello's position, to make a self-conscious effort at developing a particular takhyil. It is, I think, a worthwhile exercise. To the society around Othello, it makes no sense that Desdemona would love him. His father-in-law vilifies him and demands that he be tried, for it is unimaginable that a white woman could genuinely love a black demonic thing. And this father-in-law's racial hatred is so immense and implacable that it drives him to his grave. It is important to try to imagine this: you are in a society which is almost entirely racially different. Everyone of your race is repulsive to the eye, socially and spiritually subhuman. The father of the person you love drags you to the law courts screeching these obscenities.

Now imagine that even this man or woman you love has not entirely escaped the racist view. Sometimes he/she refers to you by name, but sometimes simply invokes your racial category—your wife or husband calling you not “John” or “Jane,” but “the caucasian,” or “the oriental,” or “the hispanic.” And he/she implicitly agrees that you, and everyone like you, is repugnant to the eye. This is how Othello lives. Of the men in the play, the Duke is certainly the most enlightened. He can see the value in Othello's work, his skill, the character of his mind. Yet he too acknowledges the outer man blackly repulsive: “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (I.ii.284-85). In complimenting Othello's virtue, he simultaneously characterizes all beauty—primarily physical beauty, but also spiritual beauty—as white, as “fair.” Even for the Duke, Othello's appearance is grotesque. Indeed, in this, the most enlightened view of the play, Othello has achieved his inner virtue only insofar as he has become “fair” inside, insofar as he is not black within.

Desdemona is worse. In her first speech, discussing her recent marriage, she does not refer to her new husband as “Othello,” but as “the Moor” (I.iii.187). In her next reference to him, she expresses deep affection, but still does not give him a name, and thus a personal identity. “I love the Moor,” she says (I.iii.243). She then goes on to account for this love—for she too implicitly acknowledges that it is queer to love “such a thing” as Othello, that it requires an explanation. Indeed, she too implicitly acknowledges that he is unsightly. “My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord” (I.iii.245-46), she says. The phrase is ambiguous. It may mean, as it is sometimes glossed, that she has accepted his warlike profession. But this does not fit the general context. As Othello has already explained (I.iii.166), she fell in love with him because of his martial and other exploits. Thus it makes no sense to say that she accepts even these. It seems likely, then, that “quality” here refers to the nature or origin of Othello, or to a salient attribute of his person, thus to his being African and black. Desdemona's heart has, it seems, been subdued even to the dark foreignness—the frightful sooty bosom—of what Roderigo called “an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (I.i.133). This meaning is made fully clear in the following line, where Desdemona explains her intent to the curious auditors, who still baffle at this strange marriage of fair and foul. What does she mean when she says that her heart's subdued to the very quality of Othello? She means, “I saw Othello's visage in his mind” (I.iii.247). In the presence of her husband, on her first day of marriage, she announces publicly that, because of his valor, she could love him despite his color. Her comment is akin to that of the Duke: I see him as fair, because I see his virtue, not the dreadful blackness of his face. And, again like the Duke, in affirming Othello's transcendence of his race, she simultaneously affirms that, in Venice, or among Venetians, he will never be considered anything other than an instance of that race.

OTHELLO'S CRIME

The apparent ease with which Othello is convinced by Iago's deceptions already becomes more comprehensible in this context: the almost universal judgment of Venetians is that Othello is a racial eyesore. Few of us would feel secure if our spouses casually acknowledged that they had to become reconciled to our disagreeable appearance. Moreover, Desdemona might seem to have manifest an impetuous character by
eloping with Othello. And, then, she speaks gaily with other men, the fair men, pink-skinned and comely. She even pleads the case of Michael Cassio, a “curled darling of our nation,” as Brabantio might put it (see I.ii.67). Certainly, these are no faults, yet to a husband whom she has publicly portrayed as unalluring, they might appear significant.

But Othello does not succumb this easily. Again, it takes ill-fortune and the evil genius of Iago. Despite her belief that black is ugly, despite her references to him as “the Moor,” Desdemona is the one Venetian, the one white person by whom Othello feels—at least at times—acknowledged as a subject. She, almost alone, gives him love and respect. She alone will defy convention and self-interest for him. (Even the Duke's respect may be strategic, motivated by Othello's usefulness—for he has done the state some service.) That her heart and mind too should be warped by racism is, almost necessarily, Othello's deepest fear. If this were so, the one link connecting him with the Venetian community would be severed. He would in effect no longer have a place in human society.

And yet, she has already called him “the Moor,” already affirmed that black is ugly. Her words have already sown uncertainty in Othello's mind. He tries to suppress the doubts and questions. But Iago will not let him. At first, Othello is unconvinced, affirming Desdemona's honesty (III.i.225). He recognizes that even good natures can err (III.i.227), but this is brief, Christian doubt, expressed in Christian terms. Iago intentionally twists Othello's point, perverting it into a statement about race—that Desdemona has erred from “nature” in not marrying a European: “Not to affect many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree, / Whereto we see in all things nature tends” (III.i.229-31). Iago's point is that the mating of white and black is unnatural—all nature moves to unite like with like, thus not Desdemona and Othello, but (perhaps) Desdemona and Cassio. He continues, “I may fear / Her will, recoiling to her better judgment, / May fall to match you with her country forms, / And happily repent” (III.i.235-38). He cautions Othello: Beware. If she is reasonable, and follows nature, she will at last compare you with the fair-complexioned men of Venice and repent her wedding vows—just as she might repent a sin, a temporary alliance with the devil.

This persuasion works deeply on Othello, and in his next long speech, he pathetically concludes that Iago is correct: “She’s gone” (II.i.266). He gives two possible reasons for her betrayal. One is age, that he is “declined / Into the vale of years,” but this he dismisses, “yet that's not much” (III.i.264-65). The remaining reason, then, is the reason he accepts, the compelling reason. It is very simple: “I am black” (III.i.263).

From this point on, the language in which Othello speaks of Desdemona's infidelity is saturated with images of blackness and whiteness, and the beginnings of racial despair. In considering his reputation, he says, “My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (III.i.383-85). It does not take a psychoanalyst to see the incipient self-hate below the shallow surface of anger. The contrast between Diana's whiteness and Othello's blackness displaces only slightly his sense that Desdemona has betrayed him because of his black face. When he contemplates revenge, it is “black vengeance, from the hollow hell!” (III.i.444), vengeance by a black man betrayed due to his blackness, but also vengeance by a man who is perhaps beginning to sink into despondency, believing that he is indeed not human, that he is instead some ill-formed demon, a wretched and diminished image of black Lucifer. (Later, accusing Desdemona of infidelity, he similarly contrasts the “complexion” of Desdemona with his own appearance, “grim as hell” [IV.i.61-63].)

The misplaced handkerchief is, of course, the final datum edging Othello over the brink to complete despair, and murder. In part, it is an ordinary love token, similar to the love tokens in so many comedies of forbidden love. But it has further resonance as well, resonance amplified by Othello's sense that he has been betrayed due to his race. It was his mother's handkerchief, from Egypt (III.iv.56). She gave it to Othello for his wife. When he gave it to Desdemona, it was a token not only of his love, but of his family, his heritage, his home—Africa, from which he was “taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery” (I.iii.136-37). For Desdemona to give away this handkerchief to the curled darling Cassio, that he might pass it casually to a
prostitute—this not only denigrates Othello's love, but dishonors his family, his past, his origins, his race. Again, the deepest hurt is not that he has lost sexual possession of his wife, but that he has lost the one point of contact with human community, that even Desdemona's love conceals mockery and disdain.

The murder too follows this pattern. But here the self-hatred, the racial despair, has progressed even further. The imagery of her death is all imagery of white and black: putting out the light (V.ii.7), or, more suggestively, “a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon” (V.ii.98-99). There are more literal connections as well. Indeed, putting out the light is an image of suffocation, and Othello chooses to suffocate Desdemona for a racial reason, for a reason which indicates that he has, at least in part, internalized the racism of Venetian society: “I’ll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow” (V.ii.3-4). Her whiteness has become sacred, just as his blackness has become demonic. Emilia makes this explicit when she summarizes the murder: “the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!” (V.ii.129-30). Of course, Othello does at moments reverse this, asserting that Desdemona is a “fair devil” (III.iv.475), that her soul has “gone to burning hell” (V.ii.128). But, then, racial despair does not exclude ambivalence. Indeed, one despairs precisely because one has moments when one feels and sees oneself as human, and recognizes with horror the inhumanity of the oppressor.

TURKS, VENETIANS, CHRISTIANS

Shakespeare, it seems, was not only aware but deeply critical of racial hatred and related forms of exclusion and oppression. He was pained by the brutality of majority toward minority groups. But his empathy was not our multicultural empathy. It was, rather, thoroughly Christian. His plays indicate that he believed in the unity and equality of humankind, but that he believed in this unity and equality as meaningful only in and through Christian belief and practice. Indeed, that unity and equality would appear to have been, for Shakespeare, a doctrine of Christianity. The racism of the Venetians against Othello is thoroughly unchristian, as is their racism against Shylock in The Merchant of Venice. In both plays, Shakespeare sets out to represent a putatively Christian society violating the precepts of Christianity and, in consequence, driving men to acts of barbarism. In short, he shows “Christian” society turning people away from God, when it is their Christian duty to lead people towards God.

A unfortunate aspect of Shakespeare's Christian antiracism is his apparent willingness to condemn all religions other than Christianity. On the other hand, these condemnations were not directed against people but against beliefs and practices. Moreover, they were aimed not at extending colonial oppression but at achieving conversion, and they were paired with equally strong condemnations of hypocritical Christianity.

Put differently, there are two ways in which one may conceive of the opposition between Turk and Venetian. One is religious, the other racial. One identifies Othello with the Venetians as a Christian. The other identifies Othello with the Turks as a Moor. Shakespeare stacks the deck strongly in favor of the former opposition. Othello is the general in charge of defeating the Turks. A violent tempest destroys the Turkish fleet, giving victory to the Venetians before military engagement, thus without loss or suffering. The storm is not, however, a mere natural occurrence. It is too discerning to be random: destroying the Turkish fleet alone, sparing the Venetians, it is a classic literary act of divine providence. For a few moments, it is unclear whether God has chosen to spare Othello or to drown him with the Ottomites, whether God has identified Othello with the Turks as a Moor or has identified him with the Turks as a Christian. Of course, Othello is spared. God has judged on religious, not racial grounds.

Later, Othello makes this opposition clear, referring to the providential nature of the storm. When restraining the inebriated Cassio, he asks, “Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that / Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? / For Christian shame put by this barbarous brawl!” (II.iii.169-71). In saying that heaven has forbidden the Ottomites to kill the Venetian soldiers, Othello is referring to the storm and explicitly characterizing it as a manifestation of divine will. In addition, he implicitly explains this providential
intervention of God in religious terms. For Othello, “turning Turk” is opposed not to being Venetian, being white, but to being “Christian.” Indeed, Othello refers to the entire group as “we,” rightly including himself in the body opposed to the Turks—more rightly than those around him, for he alone remembers “Christian shame.”

But not everyone sees the division in these terms. Early in the play, Brabantio draws an analogy between Othello's marriage to Desdemona and the Turks' conquest of Cyprus, at that point not yet prevented by the tempest (I.iii.207-08). For him, it is clear that the difference between Turks and Venetians is racial, not religious. The final and perhaps most devastating tragedy of Othello is that, in the end, Othello himself comes to believe Brabantio. He comes to accept that he is not an individual with a name and all the attributes of humanity, that he is not, even more importantly, a soul whose worth is defined by devotion to God rather than outward color. He comes to see himself as nothing but an instance of blackness. Through this distorting lens, he sees the horror of his crime, but he fails to see its nature. He has killed Desdemona because he fell prey to “Christian” inhumanity and became himself as “unchristian” as those around him. But this is not what he sees. When he looks at his crime, and when he looks into the heart of darkness deep in European society, he does not recognize the brutal racism of that society. Instead, he accepts it. Falling headlong into racial despair, he sees his crime as confirmation that he is a dog, a demon, a Turk, that he is all and only blackness, in body and in spirit. Indeed, this racial despair is not only similar to spiritual despair; it is, for Shakespeare, an instance of spiritual despair. Othello cannot dream of forgiveness, for his sin is his very being. It cannot be washed away from his soul by divine grace any more than the “soot” of his bosom or the “grime” of his face can be washed away. The only way to end the sin is to destroy the life which sustains it—and so he murders himself, perversely driven to spiritual despair by the “Christian” community which should have functioned precisely to prevent such feelings, to inspire faith in divine mercy.

There are hints of this self-hatred earlier, as we have already seen. But it is only in his final speech, leading to self-murder, that they are fully developed and fully articulated. *Spoudaios* even in disgrace, he asks his captors to “extenuate” nothing. His full acceptance of his crime, and the racial despair which follows from this, is, again, an aspect of his “constant, loving, noble” character. He will not blame others, only himself. But he blames himself racially, seeing himself through the blue eyes of a racist society. (O”Toole: “Racism isn’t just the context in which Othello lives. It has entered his mind and his soul.”) In the final lines leading to the suicide, he stops speaking of himself in the first person, as a subject, and begins to speak of himself in the third person, as “one,” as an object. He draws three comparisons. First, he is like a “Judean” (V.ii.343); second, he is like an “Arabian tree”; and, finally, he is a “Turk.” All are variations on his racial difference from those around him. His final conception of himself is of a Moor only, a dark stranger, no longer this singular man, Othello.

In the first comparison, he is a Jew who “threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe” (V.ii.343-44). The pearl was, of course, Desdemona. She was a pearl because she was white, and in being white worth more than an entire Semitic “tribe,” her fairness giving her greater value than all the dark men and women in combination. In the second analogy, he is like a tree from Arabia, his sorrow producing a curative balm. The balm is his tears of repentance—the cure, one must assume, is death.

The final comparison is the most painful. Othello has already announced that he will not speak of service he has done the state. But he ends with a story of this service:

\[
\text{In Aleppo once,} \\
\text{Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk} \\
\text{Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,} \\
\text{I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog} \\
\text{And smote him—thus.}
\]  

*(V.ii.348-52)*
In speaking the final words, he stabs himself, as if he were that very Turk. Othello is no longer capable of seeing either Desdemona or himself as individual people, even as husband and wife. She and he have become merely Venetian and Turk, white and black. Othello is now a “malignant” Turk who beat a Venetian, and who must, in consequence, be killed. Looking at himself, he sees an inhuman beast, a “circumcised dog.” He has come around to the view of Iago and of Brabantio. He must be punished not because he, Othello, took the life of his beloved Desdemona, but because this black, subhuman Turk took the life of a fair Venetian. When Othello plunges the dagger into his chest, he is not killing himself, for he no longer recognizes himself as a self, a subject, a human body with a divine soul. He is, rather, slaying a dark beast.

This is what makes the ending of the play so devastating, especially for a Christian such as Shakespeare. Othello was a greater Christian than all the Christians of Venice, but he was driven to these final acts of desperation because of the evil of the “Christians” around him, and because of his own “constant, loving, noble nature” (II.i.289). Thus, by Christian doctrine, he is condemned to eternal torment, the death of the soul which he, in Christian conscience, did not wish to inflict on anyone, even Desdemona, even at the extremity of loathing and despair: “If you bethink yourself of any crime / Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace, / Solicit for it straight. … I would not kill thy unprepared spirit. / No, heavens forfend! I would not kill thy soul” (V.ii.26-27, 31-32). It is worth contrasting this attitude with that of Hamlet, who once refrains from killing Claudius for fear that Claudius is at prayer and thus would rise to heaven. To kill someone at prayer, he reflects, “is hire and salary, not revenge!” (III.iii.82). For Shakespeare, the difference between this and the attitude of Othello is not trivial. And both remind a Christian reader of the eternal tragedy that follows inexorably from Othello's unsanctified death. Unlike Hamlet, who piled up corpses on the stage and would even have killed a man's soul—all based on evidence as flimsy as an apparition—unlike Hamlet, Othello will never have “flights of angels sing [him] to [his] rest” (Hamlet V.ii.386).

Indeed, even for those of us who do not accept the Christian attitudes behind the work, the dual culmination of events is devastating. In any moral system—religious or secular—it is all too brutally unnecessary and unjust. Othello is one of the most impassioned and moving studies of racism in English literature, one of the most powerful in takhyil. For Shakespeare makes painfully clear the quiet, pervasive cruelty of racism, and its terrible human consequences.

Notes


19. Cf. Peter Davison, Othello (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988) 63. The contrast between Shakespeare's treatment of blacks and that of the source has been noted by several critics; see, for example, Edward Berry, “Othello's Alienation,” Studies in English Literature 1500-1900 30.3 (Spring 1990) 316. For an historical overview of racist stereotyping in the Renaissance, see Barthelmy, note 7 above.


21. Cinthio 175.


23. This parallel seems to have gone unnoticed; indeed, despite the obviously Judas-like character of Iago and the occasional links between Othello and Jesus, critics have tended to associate Othello with Judas—bizarrely, in my view; for an overview, see Roy Battenhouse, ed., Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).

24. This point has been noted by several critics; see, for example, Derek Cohen, “Othello's Suicide,” University of Toronto Quarterly 62.3 (Spring 1993): 324.

25. O'Toole 64.


**Criticism: Race: Virginia Mason Vaughan (essay date 1998)**


*[In the following essay, Vaughan provides insight into the seemingly irreconcilable popularity of Othello among eighteenth-century audiences during a time of tense racial debates.]*

‘When Paul Robeson stepped onto the stage for the very first time’, Margaret Webster recalled, ‘when he spoke his very first line, he immediately, by his very presence, brought an incalculable sense of reality to the entire play.’1 That reality emanated from Robeson's status as the first actor of African descent to impersonate Shakespeare's Othello on Broadway. Because of his biological heritage, Robeson was perceived as being more ‘real’ as the Moor than a white actor in blackface. Robeson's performance in the longest-running
Shakespeare production ever staged on Broadway thus revolutionized the way many people felt about its hero.

As public reaction to Webster's *Othello* demonstrated, a play in performance is both a maker and a transmitter of cultural codes; it is necessarily imbricated in the broader discourses that surround it. Shakespearians concerned with the history of performance must determine the nature of those discourses and how they shaped the text's reception and transmission. For the history of *Othello*, especially, the discourses inevitably include the messy matter of racial ideology.²

The received view of *Othello* in the late eighteenth century seems to deny this premise, however, and to isolate the play in performance from the broad context of English culture. At a time when the justice of British enslavement of black Africans in England and the West Indies was hotly debated,³ *Othello*’s race and his relation to a white woman seem, in the eyes of most theatre historians, not to have mattered. Thus two contradictory discourses circulated simultaneously and, at first glance, seem to have had little or no impact on each other: (1) the pro- and anti-slavery polemics in pamphlets and magazines, and (2) criticism of *Othello* on stage in memoirs, acting treatises, and reviews.

Perhaps because *Othello* boasts a continuous acting history from the Restoration to the present, or perhaps because of its privileged place in the canon as one of the Big Four, there is abundant perceptive commentary about its early performance history. Marvin Rosenberg began his long and fruitful career with *The Masks of Othello* in 1961. His chapter on the eighteenth century argues that ‘a proper, neoclassic hero was aimed at’ and demonstrates how cuts in the acting text were designed to display Othello at his best and to protect the audience from overt sexual references.⁴ Rosenberg never mentions race per se. Carol Carlisle’s thoughtful study of actor-critic responses to the Big Four, *Shakespeare from the Greenroom*, recognizes that colour had indeed created problems in the performance history of *Othello* but concludes that ‘there is no interpretation of *Othello* advanced by an actor-critic of that period [the eighteenth century] that might not bear the stamp of nobility upon it’.⁵ Julie Hankey's performance edition also offers a detailed survey of *Othello*’s acting history; she characterizes the eighteenth-century Moor as ‘the hero-and-the-lover’ and suggests that theatre critics such as James Boaden saw little significance in Othello as an African; rather, in Hankey’s words, ‘Othello was in their minds a hot and fiery southern gentleman in whom the qualities of an Englishman were not so much abandoned as exaggerated.’⁶ Gino Matteo is more emphatic, insisting that the issue of race ‘simply never materialised in the eighteenth-century theatre’.⁷ Even so astute a critic as James Siemon is reticent on the topic of race, asserting ‘the age's nearly universal insistence on Othello's nobility’.⁸

This reticence about the racial dynamics of eighteenth-century *Othello* performances, which is admittedly exhibited in my recent book,⁹ reflects the traditional sources. They are either silent about Othello's race or insist that it was not an issue. William Cooke, for example, anointed Spranger Barry as the best eighteenth-century Othello in his *Memoirs of Charles Macklin* because he was the perfect hero and lover. Cooke concludes: ‘those who before doubted of the poet's consistency in forming a mutual passion between such characters as the black Othello, and the fair Desdemona, were now convinced of his propriety. They saw, from Barry's predominant and fascinating manner, that mere colour could not be a barrier to affection’.¹⁰

In somewhat the same vein, Francis Gentleman’s 1777 edition of *Othello* emphasizes that the Moor should ‘be amiably elegant and above the middle stature; his expression full and sententious, for the declamatory part; flowing and harmonious, for the love-scenes; rapid and powerful for each violent climax of jealous rage’.¹¹ In *The Dramatic Censor*, Gentleman describes Othello as ‘open, generous, free, subject to violent feelings, not, as himself expresses it, easily jealous, yet roused by that pernicious passion above all violent restraint; weak in his confidence, partial in discernment, fatal in resolution’.¹² Despite his expansive concern with character, Gentleman never mentions colour or race. Nor is there any reference to Othello's make-up or colour in Kemble's promptbook.¹³
There are, to be sure, some hints in the standard sources that Othello's blackness was sometimes of passing interest. In a frequently cited anecdote, David Garrick is said to have answered the question, ‘why Shakespeare made his hero black?’ with this rejoinder:

Shakespeare had shown us white men jealous in other pieces, but ... their jealousy had limits, and was not so terrible; ... in ... Othello, he had wished to paint that passion in all its violence, and that is why he chose an African in whose veins circulated fire instead of blood, and whose true or imaginary character could excuse all boldnesses of expression and all exaggerations of passion.14

Garrick drew here upon the common assumption that people living in Africa, Ethiopia, and Egypt were violent by nature, whereas people from more northern climes were steadier in temperament.15 But what had been a cultural bias during the late sixteenth century became a fixed ideology two hundred years later when London had acquired a substantial black population.

James Boaden's memoir of John Philip Kemble echoes this received wisdom when he describes the actor-manager's Moor as ‘grand and awful and pathetic. But he was a European: there seemed to be philosophy in his bearing; there was reason in his rage’.16 Because Kemble was too northern, or English, in his self-control, Boaden implies, the actor never fully realized the role's emotional dynamics. The 29 October 1787 Public Advertiser echoes Boaden's assessment in its evaluation of the first act: ‘in his first scenes [Kemble] was judicious, but too studiously so; and though most critically correct in his address to the Senate, evidenced he was more anxious to do justice to the text of his author than the feelings of Othello’. The reviewer praises the actor's performance in the later scenes, but, in a curious aside, comments: ‘We much approve his dressing Othello in the Moorish habit ... [but] is it necessary the Moor should be as black as a native of Guiney?’17

That Kemble's Moor was too like an African from Guinea (most likely a slave to be exported to the West Indian sugar plantations) suggests that, to some viewers at least, the distinction between the white actor playing a black man and the real thing had to be maintained. This may be one explanation for David Garrick's failure in the role of Othello—not that he was too black, but that in his turban and feather, he looked too much like the black servants fashionable Londoners encountered every day. The historian Peter Fryer estimates that by the late eighteenth century approximately 10,000 black people resided in a nation whose total population was approaching nine million.18 Despite the popular impression that there was no slavery in England during the eighteenth century, slaves were regularly bought and sold in London and the port cities of Bristol and Liverpool.19 The majority of blacks in England had been imported by West Indian planters returning to the mother country. Slaves, many of them children, often decked in special livery, accompanied wealthy white women, their blackness highlighting by contrast the mistress's fair beauty. ‘Given classical names like Pompey and Caesar’, contends historian Gretchen Gerzina, ‘they were dressed in brightly coloured silks and satins, silver padlocked collars, and feathered turbans’.20 William Hogarth's ‘The Harlot's Progress’, Plate 2, satirized this social practice with a be-turbaned black child bearing the tea kettle to his mistress's table.21 David Dabydeen observes in his study of Hogarth's blacks that the boy's

sartorial elegance, his silver collar and his polite domestic duties (English ladies employed black boys to wait at the tea-table, to carry their fans and smelling-salts, to comb their lap dogs, and so on) belies the sordid reality of the servitude of naked and manacled blacks in the colonies.22

Hogarth's engraving thus illustrates the context for actor James Quin's famous quip about Garrick's representation of Shakespeare's Moor: ‘There was a little black boy, like Pompey attending with a tea-kettle, fretting and fumbling about the stage; but I saw no Othello.’23 As the hero of a major tragedy crafted by the National Poet, Othello could not look like a little black slave. Garrick's diminutive stature and exotic turban
thus doomed his Othello. Eighteenth-century audiences sought a Moor, as I concluded in 1994, who appeared ‘as a high ranking, noble, courageous general, an English gentleman, represented by a white actor in blackface’. But does this performance preference mean that, as I once thought, race was not an issue in the late eighteenth-century interpretation of Othello? How could it not be an issue when cultural anxiety about Britain's black population and the future of the slave trade was at its peak, when litigation such as the highly contested Somerset case of 1772 sparked a public debate about the merits of the slave system? In the 1770s, after the Somerset ruling set a precedent that escaped slaves could not be deported to the West Indies, allowing them to claim freedom on English soil, the pro-slavery lobby countered with loud assertions of Negro inferiority and bestiality, claims that blacks had a better life on the plantations than they would in London competing for scarce employment, and predictions of an English future polluted by miscegenation. By 1783, when a new influx of blacks who had served the Loyalist cause in America arrived to claim their promised freedom, public discussion of their status accelerated. A scheme to remove the black poor from London streets and resettle them in Sierra Leone won backing even from those in favour of abolition and was actually implemented in 1786, though to little success.

London's theatres may seem far removed from this political battlefield, but the same volumes that we comb for theatre reviews—journals like The Public Advertiser and The Gentleman's Magazine—published letters, reports, and reviews from both sides. The literate gentlemen who read such magazines probably knew Othello well, but perhaps it was to avoid making any connections between Shakespeare's moving tragedy and the reality of most black people's lives that they insisted on the Moor's nobility and exalted status.

Outside the magazines and other standard theatrical sources, there is admittedly slender but nonetheless suggestive evidence as to how Othello was constructed within the larger culture. His blackness, of course, was a given, so it is not surprising to find Othello as the name of a slave or a member of an all-black military musical regiment. That Othello married a white woman was also a given. Thus the white chambermaids who flirted with the Duchess of Queensberry's black servant, Julius Soubise (notorious for womanizing and other vices), called him ‘the young Othello’. Othello was jealous. So, when Hester Piozzi reported the jealous quarrel between Francis Barber, Samuel Johnson's black servant, and his white wife, she called the wife ‘his Desdemona’.

More surprising is that literate Africans also used Othello as a self-construction when writing to a white audience. For example, when the West Indian pro-slavery lobby attacked the writings of the ex-slave Olaudah Equiano (who had gained a large and sympathetic white audience), claiming he was not African at all, he added this to the 1792 edition of his popular Interesting Narrative: ‘An invidious falsehood having appeared … with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative … it is necessary [to]

Speak of me as I am,
Nothing extenuate, nor set down aught
In malice.’ (29)

If Equiano, a passionate advocate for abolition, did not otherwise identify himself with Shakespeare's Moor, he probably assumed his white readers would make the connection and respond sympathetically, as they did in the theatre, to words from Othello's suicide speech.

Ignatius Sancho is another well-known exslave from the period. Hogarth's engraving ‘Taste in High Life’ (1746) depicts him as a child. Like Pompey with the tea kettle, Sancho is dressed in fancy livery with a feathered turban, serving—as does the monkey in the engraving's foreground—as a plaything to his fashionable white mistress. But Sancho was lucky. Despite his first mistress's reservations, he learned to
read and, in the service of the Duke of Montagu, he found greater opportunities to exercise his musical and literary talents.

In the 1770s, after Sancho became gout ridden and incapable of further service, the Montagus helped to set him up in London as a grocer. From his shop, Sancho associated with many of London’s artists and literati, including David Garrick. His letters, published after his death in 1782, quoted frequently from eighteenth-century writers such as Pope, Sterne, and Fielding, and less frequently from Shakespeare. In one letter, he adopts Othello’s words and describes himself as ‘unused to the melting mood’.31 In another, more telling, letter, he jokingly speculates as to why gentlemen should ‘make elections of wide different beings than Blackamoors for their friends’. The reason is obvious, he concludes, ‘—from Othello to Sancho the big—we are either foolish—or mulish—all—all without a single exception’.32 Mocking the stereotyping of black people, Sancho chooses the black best known in the dominant white culture, Shakespeare’s Othello.

Equiano and Sancho were powerful spokesmen for the abolitionist cause. After gaining their freedom, both constructed identities for themselves in the white world of eighteenth-century London, yet in their writings both display the double consciousness described by W. E. B. DuBois, ‘the simultaneous and sometimes conflicting awareness of being both a part of the political and social organism as a citizen, and of being a descendant of Africa’.33 When they presented themselves to the mainstream culture, whether seriously or playfully, they chose Othello, a black hero constructed by whites, to speak for them.

Eighteenth-century publishing was, of course, controlled by white men, and it was through the efforts of white abolitionists that Equiano and Sancho’s writings circulated. Would the ex-slaves have been as successful at being heard in other venues? Sancho’s earliest biographer, Joseph Jekyll, reports that the grocer had a passion for the theatre and that as a young man, ‘He had been even induced to consider the stage as a resource … and his complexion suggested an offer to the manager [David Garrick] of attempting Othello and Oroonoko; but a defective and incorrigible articulation rendered it abortive.’34 Perhaps Garrick would have arranged for Sancho’s debut as the noble Moor had the plump grocer been endowed with Paul Robeson’s voice and heroic figure, but it seems more likely that the performance would never have materialized.

I draw here on the distinction Dympna Callaghan makes in her recent essay, “Othello was a white man”, between ‘the display of black people themselves’ (an exhibition) and ‘the simulation of negritude’ (an imitation or mimesis).35 As she convincingly concludes, the actor who imitates can control the image and its signification; the person on display, in contrast, is passive, leaving the spectators in charge of determining her or his signification. White actors impersonating Othello could—and if we believe contemporary accounts, did—reinforce the stereotype of African passion. If Sancho had been able to portray Othello in the London theatres, his occupation of a speaking, subject position would have been too threatening. This may be a reason, among others, why London theatres would not accept Ira Aldridge as Othello fifty years later. Joyce Green MacDonald contends in a recent essay that by being black instead of acting black, in a ‘self-authorization of blackness’, Aldridge ‘disrupted and complicated the economy of race in unforeseen ways’.36 In any case, the distinction between exhibit—the thing itself—and imitation may explain why, as one historian puts it, Londoners in the eighteenth century could read about slave auctions at home and ‘sensational stories of revolts on West Indian plantations quite coolly in the morning newspaper, and then shed tears that evening over similar situations presented on stage’.37

Although Francis Gentleman never mentions race in his comments on Othello, he repeatedly frets about indecorous sexual suggestions, something Rosenberg pointed out long ago. Decorum was certainly an eighteenth-century preoccupation, and most plays were emended or cut to satisfy current tastes. For example, Gentleman describe Mercutio’s reference to the ‘demesnes’ that lie adjacent to Rosaline’s (in Garrick’s version, Juliet’s) thigh as ‘a very indecent line of ludicrous conjuration’.38 Though Juliet’s contemplation of the loss of her maidenhead is removed from her ‘Gallop apace’ soliloquy in Gentleman’s edition, the cuts in Romeo and Juliet are nevertheless minor compared to those in Gentleman’s Othello. Moreover, Gentleman’s
commentary on *Othello* has a touch of hysteria about it that clearly contrasts with his sentimental acceptance of Romeo and Juliet's passion. There are, to be sure, many differences between these two tragedies, but I suggest that the impulse to clean up and cut loomed larger when it came to *Othello* because black sexuality and the prospect of miscegenation caused far more anxiety than sexual relations between two white lovers.

As Michael Neill shows in his analysis of the early illustrations of the murder scene, the figures of the white Desdemona, prone and helpless in her bed, and the black Othello who hovers over her ‘foreground not merely the perverse eroticism of the scene but its aspect of forbidden disclosure’. Neill shows how fear and fascination at the idea of miscegenation lurked behind audience responses to the play's final scene. William Leney's engraving of J. Graham's painting of the same scene, commissioned for the Boydell Gallery, shows a diminutive, be-turbaned figure who recalls descriptions of Garrick's performance. The engraving also suggests quasi-pornographic eroticism encoded in black and white. Like the black page whose dark skin highlights by contrast his mistress's whiteness, the black Othello hovers in the shadows of the bed curtains while Desdemona's exposed neck and breast form the picture's erotic centre. As Othello holds the light in one hand and the dagger in the other, the viewer is implicitly invited to contemplate what will happen when the black man ‘tops’ the helpless white female figure and kills her in an erotic embrace. Leney's engraving encodes the spectre of racial intermarriage and ‘contamination’ incessantly invoked by the West Indian slavery lobby, a spectre that according to Fryer, haunted England from the 1770s well into the next century. Though this fear was not articulated in contemporary theatrical discourse, Cooke's denial of its existence in his description of Spranger Barry suggests its power. Moreover, the spectre's widespread circulation in larger social discourses may well explain the repeated insistence that Othello had to bear himself like an English gentleman and wear makeup that everyone recognized as artificial. Reality would be too terrifying.

However contradictory this may seem on the surface, it is less a contradiction than it is a paradox of the times and of the history of *Othello* in performance. Returning to Francis Gentleman's description of Othello—

he is open, generous, free, subject to violent feelings, not, as himself expresses it, *easily jealous*, yet roused by that pernicious passion above all violent restraint; weak in his confidence, partial in discernment, *fatal in resolution*. [my italics]

we find striking similarities with Hector McNeill's *Observations on the Treatment of the Negroes in the Island of Jamaica*, a pro-slavery treatise published in 1788:

The Negro is possessed of passions not only strong but ungovernable; a mind dauntless, warlike, and unmerciful; a temper extremely irascible; a disposition indolent, selfish, and deceitful … He has certain portions of kindness for his friends, generosity and friendship for his favourites, and affection for his connections … Furious in his love as in his hate.

Perhaps Gentleman's seeming silence about race is not silence at all; perhaps it is simply the product of shared cultural assumptions—that Othello's blackness and his jealous passion are integrally connected. This linking of race with character, temperament, and values is an incipient form of the racialism that flowered in England and America during the next century.

When theatre historians look outside the standard theatrical resources for the late eighteenth century and examine the personal and political discourses that circulated simultaneously, the evidence is impressive that Shakespeare's *Othello* was deeply imbricated in England's growing racialism. Race mattered to performances of *Othello* but in ways that were discussed only when an inviolable line was crossed; when stage representations moved uncomfortably close to verisimilitude—when Kemble was too black, like a native of Guinea, or Garrick too like Hogarth's depiction of the slave boy Pompey with his tea kettle—only then did Othello's biological heritage merit serious comment.
As theatre historians, we should be especially careful when dealing with texts that foreground volatile issues of race, class, gender, religion, or sexual identity. Eighteenth-century reviews and memoirs were written by educated white men whose prosperous standard of living often rested on traffic in human flesh; what they did not discuss may be as important as what they did. We need to ponder their silences and, as best we can, burrow in alternative discourses to understand fully Shakespeare's role within the cultural tradition.

Notes

16. James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble*, vol. 1 (London: Longman et al., 1825), p. 256. Earlier in his career, Kemble produced an adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors*, called *OH! 'tis Impossible*; Boaden attributes the staging of the twin Dromios as black slaves (so that the faces of Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus could not be distinguished by the audience) as the reason for the production's failure (p. 33).
30. The description of plate 200 in *Hogarth: The Complete Engravings* identifies the black boy as Ignatius Sancho. Dabydeen suggests that the lady's seductive gesture implies the sexual role sometimes played by the black male slave with aristocratic white ladies; see *Hogarth's Blacks*, p. 79.
38. *Romeo and Juliet* (London: John Bell, 1774), p. 100. Gentleman used Garrick's acting edition which, among other changes, cut Rosaline from the play's beginning and added an extended dialogue between Romeo and Juliet before they expire at the end.
41. Gentleman, *Dramatic Censor*, vol. 1, p. 150.

My title is an allusion to Cornel West's recent analysis of race relations in the United States, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994). Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Shakespeare Association of America, the Higgins School of Humanities Lecture Series at Clark University, and the Shakespearian Studies Seminar at the Harvard Center for Literary and Cultural Studies; the essay has benefitted greatly from the ensuing discussions and I thank all who generously shared their ideas with me. I am also grateful to Alden T. Vaughan and R. A. Foakes for suggestions about sources and revisions.

Criticism: Gender Issues: June Sturrock (essay date 1984)

In the essay below, Sturrock examines Shakespeare's attack on anti-feminist propaganda, arguing that in Othello Shakespeare urges the audience to recognize the worth of the individual.

It hath ever beene a common custome amongst Idle, and humerous Poets, Pamphleters, and Rimers, out of passionate discontents, or having little otherwise to imploy themselves about, to write some bitter Satire-Pamphlet, or Rime against women: in which argument he who could devise anything more bitterly, or spitefully, against our sexe hath never wanted the liking, allowance and applause of giddy-headed people.¹

Women in Shakespeare's England, as in the England of the Wife of Bath and Janekin, were among the easiest and commonest targets of satire. According to Louis B. Wright in his Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England, the increasingly active role of women during this period “aroused the ire of conservatives, who vented their displeasure in pulpit and pamphlet.”² The mid-16th century publication of The School-House of Women (1542?)³ renewed the arguments for and against women which continued throughout the rest of the century. In the early years of the next century, partly through the license given by King James's notorious dislike of women, anti-feminism gathered momentum, and these years produced such works as Barnabe Riche's Faultes, Faultes, and Nothing Else but Faultes (1606) and Joseph Swetnam's The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Forward and Unconstant Women (1615) which brought public responses from outraged women. Throughout Shakespeare's lifetime, for all the glorification of Elizabeth, there was a living tradition of anti-feminism.

In Othello, Shakespeare takes this English tradition of satire against women and uses it dramatically and ironically: the old libels on women are voiced repeatedly by the speeches of the principal male characters while their falsity, inadequacy, and destructive nature are demonstrated amply by the actions of the women in the play. The anti-feminist invective of the play is weighed against the action of the play, in which all three women are almost entirely motivated by love and loyalty, and in which indeed their major function is to demonstrate various kinds of love and loyalty. Here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare makes use of current and facile generalizations about groups of people; he also compels us in various ways to question such generalizations and to recognise that any person's individuality and humanity signifies more than his or her membership of a group.

Iago is obviously the chief mouthpiece for such attitudes in Othello and especially for the attack on women. Although he is notoriously chameleon-like, adapting his attitudes and his bearing to his company and to his own complex motives—"I am not what I am," he says of himself, (I.i.65)⁴—the one constant feature in his various guises, whether he is with Cassio, Roderigo, or Desdemona, is his contempt for women. When he is with Desdemona and Emilia, he makes this contempt appear like the jovial banter of a rough soldier. Cassio, indeed, half-apologizes to Desdemona for him in just these terms: “You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar” (II.i.165). When alone with his wife, Iago shows his contempt in dirty jokes and insults:

Emilia:  
I have a thing for you.  
Iago:  
A thing for me? it is a common thing—  
Emilia:  
Ha!  
Iago:  
To have a foolish wife.

(III.iii.301-04)

With Cassio, Iago is more circumspect—no doubt the “daily beauty” in Cassio's life warns him off—but his description of Desdemona ignores her finer qualities and stresses her sexuality and availability; it is an
implicit testing of Cassio's attitude to Desdemona: “She is sport for Jove—and, I’ll warrant her, full of game. … What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley of provocation … and when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?” With Roderigo, who notably lacks daily beauty in his life, Iago is more openly cynical. Desdemona is a “guinea hen,” a “supersubtle Venetian,” and Roderigo's love for her is “merely a lust of the blood and the permission of the will” (I.iii.318, 364 & 339). With Othello, Iago plays on the comparative social ignorance of his General and calumniates Desdemona through a condemnation of Venetian women in general, thus making use of two traditions of prejudice:

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not let their husbands see. Their best conscience
Is not to leave’t undone but keep’t unknown.

(III.iii.202)

Whatever form this hostility takes, it is always present: one feature which Iago never quite discards or disguises in his contempt for women and indeed it is supremely useful to him.

His attack on women is inevitably the traditional attack; as Desdemona observes of his strictures on women, “These are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh in th’alehouse” (II.i.140). Iago's misogyny is such that he apparently feels that the highest possible feat of the best of possible women is merely trivially domestic: “to suckle fools and chronicle small beer” (II.i.159). Women, according to Iago, are idle, shrewish, ignorant, wilful, avaricious, vain and above all lecherous and adulterous—Iago accuses every one of the women of the play of faithlessness to the man she loves. Every one of these faults is a commonplace of the Elizabethan satirists' case against women. Thomas Nashe for instance brings all his learning—or perhaps all his invention—to the cause:

The olde Sages did admonish young men, if ever they matcht wyth any wife, not to take a rich wife, because if she be rich, shee wyll not be content to be a wife, but will be a Master or Mistresse, in commandoing, chiding, correcting & controlling … Socrates deemed it the desperatest enterprise that one can take in hand, to governe a womans will … Demosthenes saide, that it was the greatest tormente, that a man could invent to his enemies vexation, to give him his daughter in marriage, as a domesticall Furie to disquiet him night and day. Democritus accounted a faire chaste woman a miracle of miracles, a degree of immortality, a crowne of triumph because shee is so harde to be founde.5

The views ascribed to Democritus here remind one of Iago consoling Othello by referring to the normality, even universality, of female adultery. “Think every beared fellow that’s but yoked may draw with you” (IV.i.65-67). On the common Elizabethan theme of the vanity of women Nashe writes:

She had rather view her face a whole morning in a looking Glasse then worke by the howre Glasse, shee is more sparing of her Spanish needle than her Spanish gloves, occupies oftner her setting stick then sheeres, and joyes more in her Jewels then in her Jesus.6

The related sin of female pride—indeed when reading some satirists one might almost be tempted to say female sin of pride—is usually central in the satirists' version of the female character. For Iago, “she that was ever fair and never proud” (II.i.149) is a rare, perhaps nonexistent, woman. For Arthur Dent, writing in 1601, female pride was almost literally earth-shaking:

And truly wee may thinke the very stones on the streete, and the beames in the house do quake, & wonder at their monstrous, intollerable, and excessive pride: for it seemeth that they are altogether a lumpe of pride, a mass of pride, even altogether made of pride, and nothing
else but pride, pride.  

Rodney Poisson has written interestingly of the “Italianate antifeminism” of Iago, in an article which establishes the relevance of Renaissance anti-feminism to this play. There is no need to place the anti-feminism as particularly Italian: there is abundant anti-feminist material written in English, published in England in Shakespeare's lifetime. Iago's point of view would be familiar enough to the average member of Shakespeare's audience.

Shakespeare uses this ancient though still lively tradition to place Iago and his hatred and fear of women and sexuality. Indeed, Iago is presented as a character who is prepared to accept and to voice group hatred in general, and clichés about groups. Robert Heilman comments on Iago's use of plurals, generic singulars and abstractions to “subtly imply universal experience.” It is Iago too who uses the well-known contemporary national slurs: “Your Dane, your German, and your swag-bellied Hollander … are nothing to your English [as drinkers, that is]” (II.iii.79-80). It is he who condemns Venetian women with the traditional insult; it is he who stresses Othello's blackness and strangeness: Iago describes Othello as “an old black ram,” a “Barbary horse” (I.ii.112) and “an erring Barbarian” and as a typical member of his race: “These Moors are changeable in their wills” (III.iii.355). Because of this vision of people as grouped and labelled, he can speak of Desdemona's love for Othello as being, because it is exogamous, a sexual perversion, as displaying a “will most rank” (III.iii.232). And Othello tragically comes to accept this generalized view of his marriage and the generalized view of Desdemona.

For as Iago gradually takes possession of Othello, Othello loses sight of the actual Desdemona, his wife whom he trusts and admires and of whose love he has ample evidence; he sees instead only the sexual generalization, the woman, the Venetian, the stranger. Though his own senses assure him of her truth: “If she be false, then Heaven mocks itself,” he prefers rather to trust Iago's words. Indeed, this play is very much concerned with the power of words as opposed to the lesser power of evidence. Othello comes to see Desdemona as a “lewd minx” (II.iii.476), “public commoner” (IV.ii.73), “impudent strumpet” (IV.ii.81) and “that cunning whore of Venice” (IV.ii.89). Othello is, as Rodney Poisson points out, all the more easily convinced by Iago because Iago's accusations would sound all too familiar to him, as to any man or woman of the period. The pattern is ready waiting for any calumniated woman to be fitted into it, as Imogen was fitted into it, and even the unaccused Hermione. And Othello knew little of women and of the ordinary world of social intercourse:

Little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle

(I.iii.86-87)

This is why Iago chooses to ruin Othello in the way that he does, realizing that Othello depends on his ancient's superior knowledge of the Venetian world and of women. Othello says of Iago:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit
Of human dealings

(III.iii.258-60)

Othello, then, is a play which voices clearly a bitter hostility towards women and towards sex. Women are whores or madams, sheep and mares. But while voicing this attitude, Othello also demonstrates clearly, though with hardly any direct comment, a contrasting view, so that there is an ironic counterpoint between words and action. The actual women of the play compel our admiration partly for their command of the very virtues which Iago and the satirists believe them to lack. Desdemona has indeed been criticized as being excessively saintly. When Cassio greets her:
Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,
Before, behind thee, and on every hand
Enwheel thee round

(II.i.85-87)

his words sound more like a description of her present state than a wish for her future state. Her chastity is so instinctive that she cannot imagine considering adultery. Her charity is almost beyond comprehension: despite her natural terror of death, she entirely forgives Othello to the point of lying with her last breath to shield him. She even forgives and prays for her unknown defamer, when Emilia guesses that such a person must exist: “If any such there be, Heaven pardon him” (IV.ii.135). Every speech in its very structure and diction shows her frankness and her simplicity: even her two lies reveal her nature, one in its childlike anxiety to avert the anger of an authority, the other in its final nobility. Above all, Shakespeare stresses Desdemona’s love for Othello. He presents her with superb economy so that she becomes a sort of embodiment of love in speech and action. She is prepared to court Othello, to defy her father for him, to go to war with him, to bear his blows and insults, and to lie with her last breath for his sake. Indeed, as Winifred Nowottny has shown, it is the very strength of the love for which she marries a stranger which leaves her particularly vulnerable to Iago’s insinuations in the temptation scene. For Othello too easily forgets that her bold actions are tokens of love, and in his lack of confidence in his own judgement of such matters, is made to think them rather signs of female depravity. He has been told that women are depraved: his knowledge that a woman can love is based merely on his own senses. Even by the end of the play, Othello has not fully grasped the completeness and depth of Desdemona’s love, for if he had, he could never claim that he was “one that loved not wisely, but too well.” The comparative poverty of his love would be too clear. His love is rich enough in its power to delight: even when he is convinced of her adultery, his sense of her graces and talents compel him to acknowledge “the pity of it” (IV.i.197); even as he is about to kill her, he is overcome with her beauty. His love is also strong enough in its power to shatter lives. Yet it is less than Desdemona’s in that it lacks the power of forgiveness, and of perfect trust. As Philip Edwards says, “the fact that he can allow suspicion of Desdemona to enter his mind … argues his love as simply not on her level.”

Desdemona in her lovingness and virtue is obviously remarkable and exceptional. As such, she cannot really be seen as necessarily counteracting the views of the anti-feminists, as most of the satirists after all would be prepared to concede some remarkable exceptions to their rule—perhaps the Virgin Mary, perhaps the Virgin Queen. But, of course, Desdemona is not the only female character of the play. And if her virtues seem rare and remote, then those of Emilia and Bianca are much more readily imaginable and accessible—more human in that they are more flawed.

Emilia, indeed, voices the one explicit defence of woman in the play by stressing the common, flawed humanity of men and women, in much the same way that Shylock expresses the common needy humanity of Jews in The Merchant of Venice—Shakespeare’s earlier Venetian play of justice and forgiveness:

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us shall we not revenge?

(III.i.62-70)

In a similar vein, with similar rhetorical questions, and similarly to defend a hypothetical or proposed wrong action, Emilia points out the ordinary human fallibility of women:

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is’t frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty as men have?

(IV.iii.94-102)

As E. A. M. Colman points out, “Emilia’s apologia, even by its very pace and tone, establishes for Othello as a whole, the feeling that reasonableness still exists, that despite all the perversion and furies an ordinary recognisable world will somehow prevail.”\textsuperscript{12} Like her husband, Emilia is well aware of human weaknesses; but whereas he responds to such weakness with a kind of gloating contempt, her reaction is more humane and charitable. Emilia, in her basic humanity, has a most useful function in the play in that she provides a kind of release for the audience by voicing its ordinary spontaneous “low” reactions to the speech and actions of the major characters. For instance, after Desdemona’s breath-taking prayer for her hypothetical accuser “Heav’n pardon him,” Emilia retorts “A halter pardon him and hell gnaw his bones,” (IV.ii.136), and in the final scene, she relieves the audience greatly by actually naming Othello a fool. She is not too scrupulous to pilfer the handkerchief, not too pure to use the word “whore” or to consider a suitably rewarded adultery; yet it should be noted that in these faults she is in a twisted way considering her husband’s welfare. However, finally she rises above the moral level at which her marriage has established her: “’Tis proper I obey him, but not now” (V.ii.195). In extremes, her instinct is for truth and for faithfulness to the best that she knows, which is Desdemona. She tells her husband in outraged love and truth:

You told a lie; an odious, damned lie;
Upon my soul, a lie, a wicked lie …

(V.ii.180-82)

I will speak liberal as the north.
Let heaven and men and devils, let them all,
All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak.

(V.ii.220-22)

She shows an unquestioning courage in the face of the swords of both Iago and Othello:

Thou hast not half the power to do me harm
As I have to be hurt.

(V.ii.257-61)

Like Desdemona, she dies at the hands of her husband; like Desdemona, she dies full of love, vindicating the person she loves best:

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan
And die in music. [singing] Willow, willow, willow.
Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor;
So come my soul to bliss as I speak true;
So speaking as I think, I die, I die.

(V.ii.257-61)
Ultimately, her motive and her values are the same as Desdemona's: Emilia's essential role as the revealer of the truth in this last scene of the play is an expression of love.

Indeed, this is true of all the women in the play. The third of these, Bianca, is of course foolish, inarticulate and ridiculous, but again what is significant and remarkable about her is her love for Cassio, a love which, like Desdemona's for Othello and Emilia's for Desdemona, is uncommon, in excess of what is normally expected: “I never knew a women love man so” (IV.i.111). Shakespeare rapidly establishes through her speech habits two significant elements of Bianca's love, its absurdity and its jealous tendency. Her absurdity is established through her use of the standard lover's hyperbole, appropriate enough in the lips of a Juliet but not on those of a whore:

What, keep a week away? Seven days and nights?
Eight score eight hours? And lovers' absent hours
More tedious than the dial eight score times
O weary reck'ning.

(III.iv.172-75)

Her jealousy appears through vigorous, vulgar (and totally realistic) scolding:

This is some minx's token and I must take out the work?
There! [She throws down the handkerchief].
Give it to your hobbyhorse.

(IV.i.151-55)

Both the jealousy and the absurdity are significant because Othello must see Cassio laugh at Bianca and think he is laughing at Desdemona, and because he must also see Bianca throw down the handkerchief. These actions, which spring from her excessive passion, provide Bianca with a dramatic function. Her inordinate love gives her a role in the play, in the same way as Emilia's love gives her the role of revealer of the truth in the last scene, and Desdemona's love provides a basic tenet of the whole plot. And although like Othello Bianca is jealous, her love is not like his—ultimately destructive, but protective. Her love gives her courage, as it gave courage to Desdemona and Emilia; it gives her the courage to stay with the wounded Cassio, the courage to avow her actions to Iago, and to defy his condemnation of her.

Thus all the women in the play are lovers, are faithful and courageous. In contrast with most of the men of the play, with Roderigo, Cassio and of course, above all Othello, they are uncorrupted, unmoved from their avowed standards and acknowledged alliances. Under pressure from Iago's mastery of words and skill in manipulating established prejudices, Roderigo abandons his hazy sense of Desdemona's virtue and the special nature of his love for her, Cassio his abstinence, and Othello his trust in Desdemona; but Bianca, Emilia and Desdemona stay firm.

The intensity of this play, which is reinforced by its speed, the singleness of its plot, and its small cast, is made yet stronger by its constant references to heaven and hell, to the ultimate destination of the soul. All the main characters refer, however thoughtlessly, to redemption and damnation: the bitterest part of Othello's final sufferings is his sense of his eternal severance from Desdemona.

When we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven
And fiends will snatch at it.

(V.ii.276)
This stress on eternal justice has an ironic relation with Othello's insistence on temporal justice, for this is in clear contrast to Desdemona's instinctive forgiveness. Whatever Shakespeare's beliefs were, and this is not at issue here, this play obviously uses in its "evaluation of justice in its relation to love" the Pauline contrast between the new covenant and the old, between grace and law, forgiveness and justice. It is, in this context, the women of the play who embody Christian values. They are motivated by love, not by justice, that is by the new covenant and not the old. Desdemona's love for Othello is larger than his for her because it includes agape as well as eros. Furthermore, their behaviour is Christian in that they are not transmitters of the pain they receive, as Iago is when he turns his large and general sense of being wronged into a brilliant campaign of destruction, or as Othello is when his agony of jealousy drives him to murder. Desdemona, in forgiving any wrong which has been done her, attempts to prevent that wrong from passing on, while Emilia, more effectively, finally insists on full publicity for the truth and thus prevents her husband's lies from doing any further damage.

The issue between Iago and Emilia is honesty and dishonesty, as the issue between Othello and Desdemona is love and justice. Indeed, the complex interaction between the two marriages is illuminating. In this play, we see Iago deliberately lead Othello away from his trust in Desdemona, his wife, into corruption and folly. Desdemona, quite unconsciously, causes Emilia to be led from her trust in Iago, her husband, and thus from corruption and folly. Desdemona weighs against Iago not only with Othello but with Emilia. Man gravitates towards man destructively, woman towards woman redemptively. Emilia has an Othello-like role again in Act Five where, as Othello had before, she must face an accusation against her spouse. But in Othello's position, Emilia is direct, immediate: immediately and publicly she faces her husband with the charge against him and insists on verification. Othello had indeed also asked for verification:

Villain be sure thou prove my love a whore!
Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof;
Or by the worth of my eternal soul,
Thou hadst been better have been born a dog
Than answer my waked wrath.

(III.iii.359-63)

But this demand is satisfied more by its own dramatic force than by a proper answer and is in any case addressed to the wrong person. Othello is diverted by the extremity of his own emotion, and by the vehement expression of it, and yet it is sincere emotion. Emilia is not without feelings: indeed she's almost dumbstruck: "my husband" she repeats incredulously; yet unlike Othello, she does not allow the strength of her feelings to divert her from action and the quest for truth.

Of course, part of the tragedy springs from the inadequacy of the women of the play, from Bianca's amorousness, Emilia's willingness to pilfer and above all Desdemona's reluctance to oppose and question Othello. Yet on the whole, the women of the play are dramatic contradictions of Iago's generalized and distorted view of human nature because they are concerned with love, and because, as John Bayley says in his discussion of Othello, "the capacity to love—though it contains the desire of possession—is quite separate from the urge to dominate by knowing and placing," as Iago does.

The wide currency in Shakespeare's England of the traditional prejudice against women which Iago voices is demonstrated by the host of pamphlets with such titles as: The Proude Wyves Pater Noster; The deceity of women, to the instruction and example of all men, yonge and olde; A glass to view the Pride of Vainglorious women; My Ladies Looking Glasse; The Slights of Wanton Maids and so on. This tradition clearly enables the jealous husbands of faithful wives in Shakespeare's later plays, Othello, Posthumus, and Leontes, to turn circumstantial evidence into an instant conviction of guilt and a hatred of woman—"there's no motion / That tends to vice in man, but I affirm / it is the woman's part" (Cymbeline II.v.20-22). In Othello, such prejudice is used to place evil: Iago is placed partly by his use of such destructive and demonstrably false generalizations
and cynical stock attitudes. And these attitudes in turn are implicitly and strongly placed by the very fact that they are the stock-in-trade of such a man as Iago.

Notes

3. *The School-House of Women* was probably written by Edward Gosynhill: the date of its first edition is probably 1542, though the earliest copy extant is dated (doubtfully) 1550 by the *Short Title Catalogue*. See Wright, p. 468.
4. All references to Shakespeare's works are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* ed. Hardin Craig (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1961).
15. Both the behaviour of these two women and its varying effectiveness is in keeping with their roles in the stories of detraction discussed by Joyce C. Sexton in *The Slandered Woman in Shakespeare* (Victoria, B.C.: ELS Monograph Series 12, 1978). She speaks of “the traditional sense that the victim of detraction is helpless” and goes on to discuss “the absolute necessity that the unjustly accused woman regain her good fame, that the truth be widely publicized” (p. 45). Such publicity for the truth is Emilia's achievement.

Criticism: Gender Issues: Marianne Novy (essay date 1984)


*In the essay below, Novy considers patriarchy in the marriage of Othello and Desdemona.*

In an article entitled “Marriage and the Construction of Reality,” the sociologists Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner say, “Unlike an earlier situation in which the establishment of the new marriage simply added to the differentiation and complexity of an already existing social world, the marriage partners are now embarked on the often difficult task of constructing for themselves the little world in which they will live.”1 By this definition, Othello and Desdemona seem to begin their marriage in a situation more modern than traditional. Othello is cut off from his ancestry; Desdemona is disowned by her father. They spend most of the play in Cyprus, a setting native to neither of them. Thus they have some of both the opportunities and the difficulties of constructing their own world that Berger and Kellner discuss. “The re-construction of the world in
marriage,” they continue, “occurs principally in the course of conversation. … The implicit problem of this conversation is how to match two individual definitions of reality.”

Marriage for Berger and Kellner, as, I have argued, for Shakespeare's comedies, involves a combination of ideals of mutuality and assumptions of patriarchy, though of course patriarchy takes a different form in twentieth-century America than in seventeenth-century England. Though the balance may tip in one direction or the other, the predominance of playfulness and of festive disguise helps to remove threatening elements. In Shakespeare's tragedies, however, the combination of patriarchy and mutuality breaks down. We never see Othello and Desdemona creating together a private game-like world of conversation onstage. All the early scenes where they both speak are public, and events in the outside world remain important to their relationship. Othello's public role as warrior is part of what Desdemona loves in him. Furthermore, Berger and Kellner assume a situation in which “the husband typically talks with his wife about his friend, but not with his friend about his wife”; in Othello the opposite is true. One principal representative of the already existing social world stays with Othello and Desdemona—Iago. And accompanying his presence is the persistence of conventional attitudes from the outside world in Othello's mind. Othello cannot completely free himself from the conventional assumption that Desdemona's marriage to him is unnatural. He cannot keep distrust of women out of his marriage. Brabantio may not be physically present, but his message, “She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.293), rings in Othello's memory. And after Othello has stopped believing anything Desdemona says, Iago's presence makes it impossible for Othello to keep out of his marriage a code of proving manhood by violent revenge. Between patriarchy and racism, the initial mutuality between Desdemona and Othello is destroyed. To restore it is the aim of Othello's suicide.

In Shakespeare's comedies we usually see mutuality being established; in Othello we hear the process described. Othello calls it, “How I did thrive in this fair lady's love / And she in mine” (1.3.125-26). While he told his life story to her father,

This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline;
But still the house affairs would draw her thence;
Which ever as she could with haste dispatch,
She’d come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse. Which I observing,
Took once a plaint hour, and found good means
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,
Whereof by parcels she had something heard,
But not intently. I did consent,
And often did beguile her of her tears
When I did speak of some distressful stroke
That my youth suffered.

(1.3.145-58)

Here Othello gives a description of a process of initiative and response leading to further response—Othello talks, Desdemona listens, Othello sees her listening and encourages it, hopes she will ask to hear more; she does, he agrees, and she responds with tears of sympathy. Othello is gratified by her initial interest in his performance and draws her out for more active participation.

While this scene fits some conventions of patriarchy—male activity and female response—the imagery by which Othello's words become food that Desdemona devours should signal that roles here are not altogether limited to conventional ones. As Brabantio says, Othello's story portrays Desdemona as “half the wooer” (1.3.176). She goes beyond the audience's responsiveness, as an earlier chapter noted, to initiate courtship by her hint. The content of their conversation in this story is Othello's experience, not Desdemona's, but we
should notice how closely he has observed her, how carefully he has elicited her request. While Desdemona has been an audience to Othello's performance, he has also behaved like an audience in closely observing her. In the narrative Othello tells, he has judged Desdemona's feelings from her gestures, guessed at meaning beneath her words, and he has been right about her interest in him—beyond his dreams. Othello describes a powerful experience of emotional sharing—he has gone back to his youth and relived his sufferings and she has felt them along with him: “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them” (1.3.167-68).

Yet in spite of her active participation, Desdemona describes her loyalty to Othello as a matter of duty. Furthermore, Desdemona makes as many concessions as she can to her father in explaining her “divided duty” (1.3.181); she speaks first of her bonds as a daughter, and she compares her choice of Othello with her mother's choice of her father. One of few Shakespearean women who claim to imitate their mothers, she is trying to reassure Brabantio by putting her marriage into an orderly continuity of marriages, trying to remind him that his marriage too was won at the cost of separation from a father.

In these introductory statements by Othello and Desdemona, their marriage appears as a combination of patriarchy and mutuality. Othello makes the marriage proposal and keeps the title of lord, yet there is a genuine emotional sharing and companionship. Desdemona further emphasizes both these elements later on in this scene. “That I did love the Moor to live with him,” she says, 

My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,  
May trumpet to the world.  

(1.3.248-50)

She joins him in his imagery as in his career. “My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord” (1.3.250-51). She identifies with him in a way that subordinates her.4 He does not, for example, ask that she accompany him to Cyprus until after she does, and he makes a point of saying that he asks it only as a magnanimous gesture, “to be free and bounteous to her mind” (1.3.265). Although his description of their courtship revealed the importance to him of her emotional response—the mutual dependence that they have created—he wants to deny his need of her and, most emphatically, to deny any sexual appetite that would clamor for satisfaction—“Not to comply with heat—the young affects / In me defunct” (1.3.263-64). Furthermore, while she values his world, his words here suggest that he scorns the domestic world she comes from; his curse to be imposed on himself if he neglects his duty because of her ends:

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my estimation!  

(1.3.272-74)

In their meeting in Cyprus, it is Othello who uses imagery that describes their love as a fusion of Desdemona's essence into his: he calls her “My fair warrior … my soul's joy” (2.1.180-82). In this reunion, as in his scene of self-revelation to her described earlier, social structures and temperamental differences may drop away and two people can create the illusion of unity; such scenes are the end of love as quest and of the typical plot of romantic comedy.5 But what can follow them? Othello's words of joy are filled with apprehension. It is as if the hardships of his life have led him always to expect disaster:

If it were now to die,  
‘Twere now to be most happy; for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.
It is easier for Othello to imagine a *Liebestod* than a love enduring the test of daily life; yet he sees their love not as the passion usually identified with *Liebestod* but as calm, content, comfort. This suggests, perhaps, the element in their love that involves regression to a relationship like that of mother and infant.

Desdemona's response, however, is more active and creative:

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The heavens forbid
But that our loves and comforts should increase
Even as our days do grow.
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Othello quickly agrees, but the memory of his fear is there to mix with the ominous suggestions of Iago's asides.

Why is Iago so successful in his attempts to destroy the relationship between Othello and Desdemona? Many different approaches can work toward answers to this question; here I am interested in looking at what the play shows about the vulnerability of the combination of patriarchy and mutuality that we see in that relationship, and about how Iago manipulates Othello's persisting need for mutuality.

If mutuality and patriarchy are to be combined, as we have already suggested, the woman must make the gesture of subordinating herself to the man; in addition, in *Othello*, much more than in the comedies, the man believes he must subdue qualities in himself that he considers would make him woman-like or too dependent on a woman. Othello's need for control to assert his manliness often coalesces with the need for control to assert that he is civilized and not a barbarian slave to passion. It is important to note here the overlap between the stereotypes of the woman and of the Moor: conventional Renaissance European views would see both as excessively passionate. Othello's first appearance, contrary to this stereotype, is an amazing show of self-possession under Brabantio's attacks. Even in his description of his life history, he recounts his adventures in a controlled tone. He is, however, moved when Desdemona cries over them; if he beguiles her of her tears, she can express his emotions for him. It further suggests his control, based on his sense of social distinctions, that Desdemona first speaks of love, and Othello can see himself as loving only in response, and therefore rationally. Indeed, he is, as we have seen, curiously emphatic about his lack of sexual passion.

Othello's stress on control of passion may add to the implications of his dismissal of Cassio. Just after the announcement that Othello has proclaimed a general festivity because of the coincidence of the victory over the Turks and the celebration of his nuptial, Othello says to Cassio:

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Good Michael, look you to the guard to-night.
Let’s teach ourselves that honorable stop,
Not to outsport discretion.
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Here Othello seems to be identifying himself with Cassio, the potential drunkard, in a common need for control. A few lines later, Othello leaves with Desdemona, saying

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Come, my dear love.
The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;
That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.
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After the first line, this is a rather business-like description for the sexual initiation of a wedding night. Again it suggests a concern for sharing, but it is odd that he should turn pleasure into financial imagery. Iago's words a few lines later suggest one kind of language Othello has avoided using: “He hath not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for Jove” (2.3.15-17).

Thus, while Cassio drinks too much and gets into a fight with Rodrigo and then with Montano, the characters and the audience are frequently reminded that Othello and Desdemona are meeting in bed for the first time. Iago, in fact, brings this juxtaposition shockingly into focus when he describes the fight to Othello, who has been called back by its clamor:

Friends all, but now, even now,
In quarter, and in terms like bride and groom
Devesting them for bed; and then but now—
As if some planet had unwitted men—
Swords out, and tilting one at other's breast
In opposition bloody.

(2.3.169-74)

What Iago has described is perilously close to the reality of the wedding night, when at least briefly rational control must be abandoned and blood must be shed.

I suggest that, partly under Iago's influence, partly because of his own emphasis on self-control, Othello feels guilty about the passion involved in his intercourse with Desdemona; he identifies with the offender who has also let passion run away with him, and in effect he makes Cassio a scapegoat for himself. When he dismisses Cassio, as later when he kills Desdemona, he insists that he is acting justly when he is really moved by his emotions. Here he returns to Desdemona saying “All's well now, sweeting” (2.3.242), because Cassio is dismissed, and so too, Othello thinks, is the disturbing image of sexuality becoming violent with which Iago has associated him. Like Stanley Cavell, I think that Othello's guilt about sexuality is an important subtext of the play; but in addition to the guilt about hurting Desdemona, which Cavell stresses, I see him as feeling guilty for loss of control of his passions, such loss of control as many medieval theologians whose views were still reflected in some Elizabethan sermons thought made sex inevitably suspect even within marriage.

Of course, Othello is a play about passionate love; but part of its impact comes from the tension between that passion and the restraints that Othello is constantly trying to place on it, as suggested by his words. Furthermore, Othello's very idealization of Desdemona has a passionate component. He is passionate in wishing her to be totally fused in identification with him, in a symbiosis possible only for the mother and infant before the infant's discovery of sex. In one of his final confrontations with Desdemona, he describes her, in language that brings to mind the dependence of the infant at the mother's breast, as the place

Where either I must love or bear no life,
The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up.

(4.2.58-60)

C. L. Barber has suggested that many of Shakespeare's female characters have the resonance for the hero, and for the audience, of the Virgin Mary; Shakespeare's audience still had the fantasy of a total and pure relationship such as one could have only with a mother who was perpetually a virgin, and this fantasy could no longer be dealt with through religious symbolism and ritual because of the Reformation. Thus Othello
projects the kind of religious need onto Desdemona that no merely human being could fulfill.\textsuperscript{9}

In his description of the handkerchief and its provenance, there are more suggestions of Othello's fantasy of love as fusion with a woman both maternal and virginal. He describes a gypsy sorceress as telling his mother that the handkerchief,

\begin{verbatim}
while she kept it,
[would] make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathèd.
\end{verbatim}

(3.4.58-62)

In sharp contrast with Desdemona's description of her parents as bound by duty, here are the precarious bonds of magic. The mere chance loss of the handkerchief can turn one side of the polarized image—Othello's father entirely subdued to her love—to the other—loathing. Furthermore, by concluding the description with a reference to dye made from maiden's hearts. Othello calls up the image of dead women and associates it with the blood lost in the loss of virginity, which Lynda Boose has shown might well be visually suggested by the handkerchief.\textsuperscript{10} Othello's words imply that if Desdemona could keep the handkerchief, could keep her fidelity safe from any accusation, could define herself as the virgin who shed her blood for him, then she would be like his mother and would keep his love.

Othello's desire for a love that is total fusion is, in part, his attempt to escape from his underlying sense of separateness. His blackness is a visual sign of how his history differs from that of the other characters; his narrative tells of an early life far from ordinary family and domestic connections. His ties in Venice, except with Desdemona, are those made by military service, and as Brabantio's behavior shows, they are precarious. Thus it is particularly easy for Iago to play on Othello's sense of separateness with regard to Desdemona, who is not only Venetian but also a woman. Othello is defenseless against commonplaces of antifeminism when couched as the insider's sociological observation:

\begin{verbatim}
I know our country disposition well:
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands.
\end{verbatim}

(3.3.201-3)

It is at this key point that Iago's hints depend most on the structure of a patriarchal society; because of fathers' controls over their daughters, women can choose their husbands only through some deception—and that deception can forever after be held against them. “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.206). There is always a latent male alliance, which Iago brings to the surface here as a compensation for the sense of alienation he is arousing in Othello. By stressing Desdemona's youth, also, Iago makes her sound like a diabolically clever child:

\begin{verbatim}
She that, so young, could give out such a seeming
To seel her father's eyes up close as oak—
He thought 'twas witchcraft.
\end{verbatim}

(3.3.209-11)

The witchcraft charges originally applied to Othello have been projected to Desdemona. Othello's sense of being an outsider is evident as he resigns himself:
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
Must be to loathe her.

(3.3.263-68)

One of the reasons that Iago can play so easily on Othello's sense of separateness to break up his relationship with Desdemona is that he himself can supply a pretense of the mutuality Othello so longs for. It is ironic that Iago is one of the few characters in Shakespeare to use in his dialogue a form of the word “mutuality”; to him it is a suggestive word that can make Cassio's gestures of courtesy to Desdemona sound like foreplay: “When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th’ incorporate conclusion” (2.1.255-57). To Iago, sincere mutuality of feeling is impossible, and most of the time he assumes that other people are as shallow in their relationships. He reduces love to a precariously matched set of appetites that he can easily manipulate.

It is unsettling to see, with Stephen Greenblatt, how well Iago's attitude toward Othello fits some definitions of empathy. As W. H. Auden has noted, “Iago treats Othello as an analyst treats a patient except that, of course, his intention is to kill, not to cure. Everything he says is designed to bring to Othello's consciousness what he has already guessed is there.” Iago cleverly postpones making direct charges against Desdemona and Cassio. Rather he drops hints and raises questions, leaving Othello to imagine the charges himself. His technique here is particularly poigniant because it plays on the attempt to read gestures and see unspoken thoughts which worked for Othello in his recounted conversation with Desdemona. While earlier we heard about Desdemona and Othello creating a mutual trust together, here we see Iago and Othello creating a union based on suspicion of Desdemona, pretended by Iago and believed by Othello. Furthermore, Iago speaks openly of his own love for Othello—knowing that Othello will respond—and uses this technique especially when Othello sounds as if he is likely to doubt him: “From hence / I’ll love no friend, sith love breeds such offence” (3.3.379-80). Othello's growing fascination with Iago's words is heightened as Iago calls up the image of Cassio and Desdemona in bed, “as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys” (3.3.403), and then the image of Cassio in bed with Iago, mistaking him for Desdemona; the dream-like image of sexual union between two men parallels and charges the emotional union that Iago is creating with Othello. The excitement of the image adds to the tension of the conversation.

The parody marriage ceremony enacted when they kneel and vow murder, and Iago says, “I am your own forever” (3.3.480), offers a return to a relationship in one respect like the one Othello earlier had with Desdemona. In the worldview Iago offers, Othello again has someone's total dedication:

Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart
To wronged Othello's service!

(3.3.465-67)

Desdemona, by contrast, has given evidence that she extends her sympathy not only to Othello but also to Cassio.

In loving Desdemona, Othello has ventured outside of the man's world of war and made himself vulnerable to charges of being ruled by his emotions and therefore, in Renaissance terms, less than manly; remember his oath that if he neglects his duty because of Desdemona, “Let housewives make a skillet of my helm” (1.3.272). Iago plays on these fears as well by the way he acts the advocate of cold reason. His image of
Cassio and Desdemona in bestial lust is introduced by “It is impossible you should see this” (3.3.402). The struggle between passion and control that initially was internal to Othello is now externalized; all of Iago's qualifications and admonitions to patience serve to enrage Othello further:

Iago:
And this may help to thicken other proofs
That do demonstrate thinly.
Othello:
I’ll tear her all to pieces!

(3.3.430-31)

After Othello's emotions have surfaced so powerfully that he falls into a fit, Iago begins to harp on the issue of manhood. “Would you would bear your fortune like a man. … Be a man … grief—a passion most unsuiting such a man” (4.1.61, 64, 76-77). By trying to emphasize the need for control, he is still promoting Othello's passion, but helping to channel it toward revenge:

Iago:
Marry, patience!
Or I shall say y’are all in all in spleen,
And nothing of a man.
Othello:
Dost thou hear, Iago?
I will be found most cunning in my patience
But—dost thou hear?—most bloody.

(4.1.87-91)

Under Iago's influence, Othello starts to name Desdemona in ways that fit more into the harshest potential of the patriarchal structure of marriage than into a mutuality of love. The images that he uses for Desdemona put her into categories of objects to be controlled or possessed. His sense of her as different from him becomes more and more an image of her as strange, not quite human. He compares her to a hawk, using one of Petruchio's more patriarchal images:

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
To prey at fortune.

(3.3.260-63)

He cannot bear to think that total control of her is impossible—the impossibility seems to threaten reducing him to an animal as well:

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
For others' uses.

(3.3.268-73)

“The thing I love”—that is now Othello's phrase for Desdemona. Emilia and Iago echo the word, with similar undertones of sexuality and a reductive approach to women, a few lines later, when they gain possession of
the handkerchief:

Emilia:
I have a thing for you.
Iago:
A thing for me? It is a common thing—
Emilia:
Ha?
Iago:
To have a foolish wife.

(3.3.301-4)

The word suggests the reduction of woman to object and particularly to sexual object that has occurred in Othello's mind under Iago's influence.

When Othello starts to doubt Desdemona, he also uses more images of dirt, often associated with sexuality. Desdemona, instead of a clear fountain, becomes “a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in” (4.2.61-62). This dirt also becomes associated with blackness. Here too we see Othello showing more self-hatred in his imagery as his distrust of Desdemona grows. “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (3.3.386-88).

This opposition between cleanness and dirt is another reason why the handkerchief becomes central to Othello's rejection of his love for Desdemona. “Such a handkerchief ...,” says Iago, “did I today / See Cassio wipe his beard with” (3.3.437-39), and Othello explodes: “O, that the slave had forty thousand lives! / One is too poor, too weak for my revenge” (3.3.443-44). The handkerchief, something originally clean, is juxtaposed with dirt from Cassio's beard and for Othello it is as if that dirt soiled Desdemona herself.

When Othello becomes more distrusting of Desdemona, he also becomes more conscious of his passionate physical attraction to her, which earlier in the play he did not speak of, or denied.14 While initially he called her “My soul's joy,” now he speaks of “her sweet body” (3.3.346) and declares, “I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again” (4.1.200-202). The more he imagines her guilt, the more he feels his own attraction to her; he feels it more intensely, no doubt, because it appears split off from all her good qualities in which he no longer believes. He plans to kill her as a way to control his own unruly passion for her body as he punishes her passion.

In spite of this general tendency, Othello has moments even as he is planning the murder when he sees Desdemona not as an object to be controlled or punished but as an active, even civilizing woman. “So delicate with her needle! an admirable musician! O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear! of so high and plenteous wit and invention” (4.1.184-87). Struck by his admiration of her, Othello is moved to exclaim, “But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago” (4.1.192-93). But Iago can expel this mood in a moment by returning to the patriarchal imagery of possession: “If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent to offend; for if it touch not you, it comes near nobody” (4.1.194-95).

As Othello is torn by the conflict between his admiration and his disgust, Desdemona's synthesis of attitudes breaks up disastrously. After the marriage Desdemona's combination of initiative—which contributes to mutuality—and pretense—which accommodates to patriarchy—dissolves, and both forms of acting contribute to Othello's anger at her. Her commitment to Cassio is carried out with such vehemence that some critics have accused her of trying to take away Othello's military authority; on the other hand, her resort to the evasive technique of lying about the handkerchief causes his anger even more intensely.
Desdemona knows that in some ways she is transcending patriarchal categories in pleading for Cassio with Othello (although of course she would not have called it that); she uses images suggesting that she sees herself in roles held predominantly by men in Renaissance society: “His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift. … Thy solicitor shall rather die / Than give thy cause away” (3.2.24, 27-28). Furthermore, she asks that Othello pardon Cassio not as an obedient inferior asks for a favor from a condescending superior but with the suggestion that their marriage is one of mutual generosity: “I wonder in my soul / What you could ask me that I should deny / Or stand so mamm’ring on” (3.3.68-70). At the same time she goes on to suggest a different vision of their relationship: “Why, this is not a boon; / ’Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves, / Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm” (3.3.76-78). This imagery suggests either that she is imagining total identification with him—she is asking for this because it is what he needs—or that she sees herself as taking care of him as a nurturing mother does a child. In the light of psychoanalytic theory it is easy to conflate these two suggestions and to see the lines as hints that she too participates in the fantasy of a union with Othello as close as that of mother and infant. It is at this point that she swears “By’r Lady [By Our Lady], I could do much” (3.3.74), and Othello dismisses her by saying, “Leave me but a little to myself” (3.3.85), words that suggest he feels his identity threatened by engulfment. He has wanted fusion, yes, but it is also threatening, especially for someone who values control as Othello does.

As Othello's jealousy becomes clearer, Desdemona's attitudes are a mixture of mature strength and evasion. When openly accused she defends herself forcefully to Othello:

Othello: Are not you a strumpet?
Desdemona: No, as I am a Christian!

(4.2.82)

But after this scene she emphasizes her innocence in language that makes her seem more weak and passive:

Those that do teach young babes
Do it with gentle means and easy tasks:
He might have child me so; for, in good faith,
I am a child to chiding.
.....Am I that name, Iago?

(4.2.111-14, 118)

She has been slow to see that Othello is jealous and even slower to see that he is jealous of Cassio: she has intuitions that she is in danger in her last scene with Emilia, but she dismisses them:

Good faith, how foolish are our minds!
If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me
In one of those same sheets.

(4.3.22-24)

Early in the play she seems mature and aware of people's limitations (“I would not there reside, / To put my father in impatient thoughts / By being in his eye”—1.3.241-43) and worldly-wise enough to deal with Iago's antifeminist jokes with a cool “O heavy ignorance! Thou praisest the worst best” (2.1.143-44). She can be calm and tolerant about Othello's bad temper, although this tolerance sounds like evasion in the light of later events:

Nay, we must think men are not gods,
Nor of them look for such observancy
As fits the bridal.

(3.4.148-50)

Near the end, with Emilia, she retreats into a willful ignorance, as her disillusionment with Othello leads her to cling harder, perhaps, to a belief in women:

Desdemona:
O, these men, these men!
Dost thou in conscience think—tell me, Emilia—
That there be women do abuse their husbands
In such gross kind?
Emilia:
There be some such, no question.
.....Desdemona:
I do not think there is any such woman.

(4.3.58-61, 82)

At this point it is Emilia who takes over the articulate awareness that Desdemona showed earlier. She makes a speech attacking the institution behind Othello's assumption of his right to kill Desdemona—the double standard. Elsewhere than in this speech, the play alludes to adultery by men only in Iago's fantasies—and there, of course, he sees it as an offense against one man by another. Here, suddenly, the whole perspective changes, and we see adultery not as a world-shaking crime committed by women, but as one of a whole group of men's possible behaviors annoying to wives—in the same category as jealousy, violence, and stinginess. How different it is to see adultery as a violation of "there where I have garnered up my heart" and to see it as analogous to cutting an allowance. Emilia rejects the patriarchal valuation of female adultery as worse than male adultery:

Let husbands know,
Their wives have sense like them. They see and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. ...
... And have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

(4.3.92-95, 99-100)

Othello's murder of Desdemona is the epitome of his failure to accept the fact that both of them have what Emilia calls frailties and affections. When he sees her sleeping, his words show appreciation of her beauty as a passive object, which he can describe in static, lifeless terms—sensuous conversions of passion to coldness and art—“That whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.3-4). As he becomes more aware of the irrevocability of her death, the imagery changes:

I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. When I have plucked the rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again.

(5.2.12-14)

Yet this awareness falters: “I will kill thee, / And love thee after” (5.2.18-19). When seeing her sleeping, he talks tenderly of her, even kisses her, in spite of his intent to kill, and wants to give her time to confess her sins, but on confronting the awakened woman, who struggles for life and denies his accusations, he becomes
enraged.

Again Desdemona defends her innocence stoutly in a mix of assertiveness, generosity, and naiveté:

I never did
Offend you in my life; never loved Cassio
But with such general warranty of heaven
As I might love.

(5.2.58-61)

But her earlier resourcefulness and understanding of Othello have left her. She cannot believe that he will kill her. “Why I should fear I know not, / Since guiltiness I know not; but yet I feel I fear” (5.2.38-39), she says, after he has already begun to talk of killing. The best she can do for her survival, when she learns that Othello will not believe her and Cassio is dead, is to ask for a stay of execution.

In her last words, uttered after she is apparently dead and Emilia has returned, her first impulse is to proclaim her murder and thus to maintain her own innocence. But when Emilia asks her to name her murderer, Desdemona shows that she has forgiven Othello—“Commend me to my kind lord”—and for the last time uses a lie to try to cover up—this time Othello's guilt—“Nobody—I myself” (5.2.125-26).

Othello does not see her forgiveness but rather the lie that fits with his insistence on her dishonesty. But eventually he learns the truth, when Emilia tells the story of her own responsibility in the loss of the handkerchief—at the cost of her life. Yet Othello's words at the end show that he still fails to understand Desdemona. If she were true, he says, after Emilia has challenged his charges,

If heaven would make me such another world
Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
I’d not have sold her for it.

(5.2.145-47)

And at the end he compares her to a foolishly discarded “pearl … / Richer than all his tribe” (5.2.347-48). Value is evident in these images, but it is lifeless, inanimate—a possession: “Cold, cold, my girl? / Even like thy chastity” (5.2.276-77). His identification of her chastity with the coldness of death shows his inability to connect it with the warmth of her love; it is in keeping with this that he does not understand the forgiveness that she has already granted him:

When we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it.

(5.2.274-76)

At the end Othello seems again to regain control of himself and can finally admit his earlier lack of control, his passivity to “being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme” (5.2.345-46). He maintains control of his own destiny by killing himself but also intends a return to mutuality. The final image of three people dead on a bed is on one level an image of the power of sexual passion to take life. Yet unlike the first two deaths, inflicted in passion, this one is calm. These deaths show not the simple destructiveness of passion but the more complicated destructiveness of passion combined with an attempt to control, closely related to social structures of sexual polarization.
Let us consider briefly three of the ways that Shakespeare's characters see sexual relations between man and woman. They can be seen as a sharing of passion and action in mutual responsiveness, as the man asserting his dominance over the woman, or as the man overcome by his passion for the woman. The second and third views come out of a mental structure of sexual polarization, in which either man = action and woman = passivity or man = control and woman = passion. In the comedies, the first view of sexuality (mutuality) balances the second (male dominance), as in The Taming of the Shrew, or the second and third (male submission to passion, represented by a woman), as in As You Like It. Comic game-playing helps keep this balance. Either male or female dominance can seem less threatening and less permanent if portrayed as a game, and the participation of the lovers in a game not understood by other characters adds to the sense of their existence in a shared world that dramatizes the strength of their relationship. This structure of play allows the lovers to try out the extremity of passion (“Then, in mine own person, I die”—As You Like It, 4.1.84) and to draw back from it (“No, faith, die by attorney”—As You Like It, 4.1.85). The fears of betrayal and rejection surface and are dealt with. Desdemona has something of the playful attitude, the ability to try out situations through imagining alternatives. But unlike the comedy heroes, Othello lacks any trace of such flexibility. “Disport” seems a bad word to him. Unlike them, also, he is matched with Iago, one of the most notable game-players in Shakespeare, who uses his abilities to create false mutuality and destroy true mutuality. Under his influence, Othello's wish to assert his dominance over Desdemona and control their passions becomes desperate and contaminated by the masculine code of revenge by murder. When he discovers his guilt, however, Desdemona becomes identified with control (“Cold, cold as thy chastity”) and himself with passion. Then with his final act he turns his activity against himself and tells us that this gesture of control is intended as a union with her.

While in the first part of the speech, his guilt about his excess of passion is apparent—“one that loved not wisely, but too well” (5.2.344)—there is a section of it in which he speaks of a kind of passion in himself that by implication becomes healing:

One whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinable gum.

(5.2.348-51)

He is following Desdemona in weeping and in speaking of himself as subdued. Furthermore, his image momentarily suggests a reconciliation with nature and its fluids. Othello has often used similar images of biological viscosity with disgust—“The slime / That sticks on filthy deeds” (5.2.149-50). Now for perhaps the first time he sees something in nature as healing. Furthermore, the gum is from Arabian trees—from an exotic, non-European land, one closer to Othello's heritage. It is a brief moment—only four lines—of relative peace—with the trees and the tears that recall Desdemona's willow song, where “Her salt tears fell from her, and soft'd the stones” (4.2.45). Othello knows his heart is not the stone he once said it was. For these few moments he transcends the stereotype of masculine control to which he has elsewhere aspired. But he cannot accept as adequate the forgiveness that Desdemona has already granted him; he must return to the code of violence and control, and kill the passionate alien self that he earlier thought he was killing in Desdemona: “No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss” (5.2.358-59).

The violent events of Othello dramatize, in hyperbolical form, many aspects of the predominant form of emotional symbiosis between men and women that remains in our society still. The references that I have occasionally made to echoes of the mother-child relationship in the imagery of the play are not intended as a prologue to comments about special pathologies in Othello's childhood, or Shakespeare's; rather, they are meant to underline the psychological influence that the restriction of child-rearing to women has had for centuries over the prevailing feelings of both sexes about women. Some of Othello's resonance comes from
the imagery by which Othello's words about Desdemona evoke, at one moment, the way she gives him such joy as the mother gives the infant, and, at another moment, the way that his disillusionment with her re-creates the total desolation of the infant in a temporary state of frustration. I am following here the analysis of Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur.* Dinnerstein believes that the boy raised by a woman feels “that the original, most primitive source of life will always lie outside himself, that to be sure of reliable access to it he must have exclusive access to a woman” (p. 43). Before the child has a defined self “a woman is the helpless child's main contact with the natural surround. … She is this global, inchoate, all-embracing presence before she is a person, a discrete, finite human individual with a subjectivity of her own” (p. 93). She is, perhaps, more a place than a person:

There where I have garnered up my heart,  
Where either I must live or bear no life,  
The fountain from the which my current runs  
Or else dries up.

(4.2.57-60)

Initially, in her warmth and sympathy for him Desdemona seems to fulfill Othello's dreams of how a woman ought to behave. Indeed, we in the audience know, though Othello does not, that she never loses that warmth and sympathy and that her only conflict with him arises because she also takes on the role of trying to help Cassio.

But that conflict does arise, and Othello's experience of it, magnified by Iago's hints, has echoes of the discovery, as Dinnerstein puts it, “that the infant does not own or control the mother's body. Because this body has needs and impulses of its own, its responsiveness to the infant's needs is never totally reliable” (p. 60). “We can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites.” We never completely learn to deal with this truth, says Dinnerstein: “That the other to whom we look for nurturance has, like any sentient other, needs and a viewpoint separate from and never wholly subject to our own” (p. 240). But conventional female behavior serves to hide this fact as much as possible; “woman traditionally agrees to listen to man's opinions and keep her own to herself, lets him hog the limelight and offers herself as audience, allows herself activity only as it nourishes his projects” (pp. 239-40). Desdemona does more than this, but like many such women she possesses what Dinnerstein calls “a monstrously overdeveloped talent for unreciprocated empathy, an adult talent that she must exercise in a situation in many ways as vulnerable as a child's” (p. 236).

Desdemona's “talent for empathy”—perhaps “sympathy” is more accurate in view of her misunderstandings of him—and her inability to fight back when her life is at stake are symmetrical to Othello's military prowess and inability to sympathize when he feels wronged. His role as a soldier makes the point about the contrast between his and Desdemona's skills according to typical sex roles in the most emphatic way. Yet Desdemona admires Othello's military abilities and identifies with them so much that Othello calls her “fair warrior,” and she later calls herself “unhandsome warrior” (3.4.151). They are re-creating the traditional woman's “privilege of enjoying man's achievements and triumphs vicariously” (p. 211).

When Desdemona hears of Othello's earlier experiences, her tears serve, as Dinnerstein suggests that women's tears often do, to help a man go on—“for she is doing his weeping for him, and he is doing what she weeps about for her” (p. 226). The flashback to his earlier life in this speech is the only time in the play when we have a glimpse of Othello acting without regard to Desdemona, and even that is put in the context of their relationship by its position in the story of their courtship. Thus we see his identity as a soldier as connected with his confidence in Desdemona's admiration and sympathy from almost the beginning of the play. It is in keeping with this connection that when he loses faith in Desdemona he says farewell not only to the tranquil mind but also to “the big wars / That make ambition virtue” (3.3.349-50). After he has regained belief in Desdemona's faith, at the end, he speaks again of his service to the state and he stages his suicide as a
re-creation of an earlier battle against a Turk.

Dinnerstein's analysis illuminates the connections between three attitudes that we have seen linked in Othello: emphasis on control, rejection of physicality, and rejection of women. Her analysis suggests that the kind of mutuality at the beginning of Othello, moving though it may be, contains some of the seeds of the disaster that follows. Erikson defines mutuality, we recall, as a relationship in which partners depend on one another for the development of their respective strengths: after Dinnerstein's analysis, we may be more critical of that word “respective,” if it implies a traditional differentiation of roles. As she puts it, “what each sex knows best has been distorted by … sealing off from what the other knows best” (p. 272). Finally, Othello's and Desdemona's definitions of reality diverge so much that no conversation can match them. Othello's limited development of sympathy combines with Desdemona's limited development of self-defense, and with all the powers that both of them have developed, to destroy both of them. And this destruction is more poignant because neither of them is simply stereotypical, because Desdemona has shown initiative and courage, because Othello has felt more love for her than he can kill. But finally they act out ideals of their own culture, ideals that are still part of our own culture. It is Shakespeare's genius that the play can suggest both the limitations and infantile roots of these ideals and their magnetic power.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Ibid., p. 12.
6. On the Moor, see, for example, Eldred Jones, Othello's Countrymen (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), especially pp. 8, 22, 71.
15. Her continued strength is emphasized by Carol Thomas Neely, “Women and Men in Othello: what should such a fool / Do with so good a woman?,” Shakespeare Studies 10 (1977): 133-58. I am much indebted to this article for its redress of critical disparagement of Desdemona, and my emphasis on her limitations is meant to be juxtaposed with Neely's lengthier discussion of her strengths.


**Criticism: Gender Issues: Mark Rose (essay date 1985)**


> [In the following essay, Rose discusses the role of chivalry in Othello.]

Othello's adieus to tranquility and content at the start of this speech evoke something more like the pastoral than the military ideal. Even when the imagery becomes explicitly military in the evocation of the “plumed troops” and the “big wars” there is a subtle continuity with the opening pastoralism. Here the lines suggest a transformation in which “ambition,” which is a vice in a world defined by pastoral content, becomes a “virtue” in a martial context—that is, both a positive good, and in the archaic sense of virtu, a source of strength. Moreover, the static quality of “plumed troops” and “big wars” is compatible with the feeling the lines convey that something like pastoral otium is being continued in a martial vein. Explicit activity enters the picture when Othello imagines the world he has lost as a parade of neighing horses and playing instruments—trumpet, drum, and fife—an ascending procession of sound that climaxes in the godlike roar of the cannon. “Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.” Six times in eleven lines Othello says farewell. The repetition articulates the speech, contributing to the sense of a procession passing with Othello bidding adieu to each of the squadrons in the parade of his life. It also unifies the speech, turning it into a nostalgic lament for a paradoxically apprehended martial pastoral.

What has Othello lost? The contradictions in this speech, at once static and active, pastoral and martial, convey the emotional urgency with which an image of the perfected world of absolute being is here fashioned. It is a world in which everything, including the neighing of horses and the booming of cannon, takes on the aspect of music; a world without stress, one in which even ambitious striving for glory has been reconceived as a form of tranquility. To participate in the harmonious clamor of this grand march in which mortal engines counterfeit the huge sounds of immortal Jove is to live at the farthest verge of human possibility. It is to be nearly as absolute as a god. Plainly such a state of being, one in which there is no gap between desire and satisfaction, between, as Macbeth puts it, the firstlings of the heart and the firstlings of the hand, is a condition radically incompatible with self-reflection, thought, or uncertainty of any kind. To banish Othello from such an Eden, proof of Desdemona's infidelity is unnecessary; mere suspicion will do as well as certainty.
Why should suspicion of Desdemona's infidelity end Othello's occupation as a soldier? It helps to observe that Othello conceives himself in this speech as a type of the knight validated by the absolute worthiness of the mistress he serves. Call the mistress into question and not only the knight's activity but his very identity collapses. Of course in this case the mistress, the necessarily unattainable lady of romance, has become the wife: sexual availability—as opposed to the intensity of mere fantasizing—has entered the picture. Even without Iago's machinations, then, the romantic image of the absolute worthiness of the lady is at best unstable. Others have developed this aspect of Othello's vulnerability to Iago. Here let us note simply that this speech is a clue to Othello's romanticizing imagination. It is of a piece with his address to the Senate in which he retells the story of his adventures among cannibals and monsters, his speech to Desdemona about the magic in the web of the handkerchief in which he invokes witches and charms as a way of explaining its overwhelming significance, or his final speech in which he recalls the exotic turbaned Turk in order to explain why he is about to slay himself. One might interpret Othello as a kind of tragic Don Quixote, a play in which Shakespeare explores the ways in which a romanticizing imagination can lead to devastating error. Yet despite the appeal of such an approach—and certainly it would be illuminating up to a point—we should note that Othello's romanticism is neither so explicit as Don Quixote's nor so firmly demarcated from the general world of the narrative.

There are no giants or dragons in Othello. The play's military world consists of generals, lieutenants, and ancients rather than knights, squires, evil magicians, and faithless Saracens. It is a world in which career advancement can be presented as a plausible motive for action; it is a comparatively workaday place of fleets, intelligence reports, and expeditionary forces. But the proximate realism should not blind us to the play's romantic aspects. There are Christian soldiers and threatening infidels here. Othello, a black warrior of royal lineage who turns out to be capable of astonishing violence, has something of a Savage Knight about him, and Desdemona may well in the constancy of her affection recall a Princess of Love and Chastity. Iago is no magician—indeed, he explicitly denies that he works by witchcraft—and yet his ensnarement of Othello's soul together with his manipulation of his perceptions may recall Spenser's Archimago, who similarly provides Redcross with ocular proof of his lady's infidelity. Moreover, all these elements reminiscent of chivalric romance—Othello's royal blood and adventurous past, the somewhat miraculous quality of Desdemona's innocence, the air of diabolical mystery that clings to Iago, the background of war with the infidel—are Shakespeare's additions to the Othello story as he found it in Cinthio's novella. Not just Othello's imagination but, I would suggest, Shakespeare's own is informed by the patterns of chivalric romance.

II

A few words about the Elizabethan chivalric revival are in order here. As Roy Strong says, “It is one of the great paradoxes of the Elizabethan world, one of its touchstones, that an age of social, political and religious revolution should cling to and deliberately erect a façade of the trappings of feudalism”\(^3\) Elizabethan culture was saturated with feudal idealism. In life and in art chivalric themes were pervasive. By the 1580s the spectacular Accession Day Tilts had reached their fully developed form. In this period, too, Robert Smythson was designing such fantasy castles as Wollaton Hall, Sidney was writing the Arcadia, Spenser was writing The Faerie Queene, and the London stages were populated by damsels in distress, knights in armor, and wicked enchanters in dozens of plays—most now lost—with names like Herpetulus the Blue Knight and Perobia, The History of the Solitary Knight, and Sir Clyomon and Sir Clamydes.\(^4\) Chivalric fantasies of service to the Virgin Queen shaped Elizabethan court style and also affected foreign policy. One product of the chivalric revival was Sidney's Arcadia, another was his death in 1586 in a campaign in which romantic notions continually obscured for Eliza's knights the complex facts of a situation in which Dutch burghers were attempting to throw off Spanish rule.\(^5\)

Northrop Frye's conception of romance as “the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality”\(^6\) might well be a gloss on the Elizabethan effort to turn reality into a romance. The late sixteenth century was a time of dramatic social
changes and probably also a period of considerable social anxiety. London was burgeoning, commerce was
developing rapidly, old bonds of service and obligation were yielding to new relationships based on the
marketplace, and the religious unity of Europe was gone forever. Chivalric games and ceremonies helped to
obscure the relative newness of so many of the noble families as well as the fact that, despite the continuing
prestige of war, the aristocracy had ceased to be a warrior class and was becoming an administrative elite. By
this period, as Lawrence Stone has shown, there was little that was particularly feudal about the English
nobility, who from an early time had been deeply engaged in entrepreneurial activity.7 On the other hand,
there was little that was clearly bourgeois—in the modern sense—about the sensibility of the Elizabethan
middle class. Interestingly, the bourgeois hero tales of the 1590s and early 1600s—Deloney's Jack of
Newbury, Dekker's Shoemaker's Holiday and other stories and plays celebrating the virtues of the new men of
commerce—show middle-class figures in feudal postures, fighting and feasting like knights.8 The usual
aspiration of the successful businessman was not to oppose the interests of the landed aristocracy and gentry
but to join them as soon as possible, one notable case in point being Shakespeare himself.

The chivalric revival assimilated the complexities of the present to a mythical world of the past, but at its
center was the living Queen. In her own person Elizabeth held the contradictions of her culture together, and
she did this in part by turning herself into a character, Gloriana, and her life and that of her country into a
story. But the moment of magical balance was necessarily brief. By the late 1590s the fervor of the previous
decade was gone. Corruption at court was more marked and commented on, and it had become increasingly
more difficult for the Queen, who was now a full generation older than her principal courtiers, to play the role
of the virginal beauty.9 Nor should the traumatic effect of the Earl of Essex's rebellion and execution be
underestimated. Essex, who is one of the very few contemporary figures to whom Shakespeare directly
alludes, was the inheritor of Philip Sidney's sword and of his position in the national imagination as the
embodiment of chivalry. According to his biographer, his rise and sudden fall in 1601 probably affected the
nation more deeply than any event since the defeat of the Spanish Armada.10 In any case, the time came when
the Elizabethan romances—both the romance enacted by the Queen and those composed by her poets and
dramatists—could no longer carry conviction. Despite a brief revival of some of its themes in 1610-1612 at
the court of Prince Henry, nothing like the special quality of Elizabethan chivalry could occur again.

III

I know of no general study of Shakespeare's relation to the romance dramas of the 1570s and 1580s and to the
Elizabethan chivalric revival.11 Nevertheless, it is not hard to see how, for instance, 1 Henry VI with its
opposition between the heroic knight Talbot and the wicked enchantress Joan represents a continuation and
transformation of chivalric romance materials, or how similar materials influence the romantic comedies with
their disguised and wandering heroines. Moreover, the theme of both historical tetralogies is the disintegration
of an absolute world of chivalry, and in this theme the histories might be said to look forward to Othello's
farewell to arms. Thus the first tetralogy begins with Henry V's funeral, a symbolic procession that suggests
the death of chivalry itself, after which the Henry VI plays trace the collapse of the heroic society into faction
and civil war. There follows the emergence of Richard the Third, a monstrous antitype of the chivalric hero,
and finally the return of chivalry in the person of the Earl of Richmond. The pattern of the second tetralogy is
similar. Here the interrupted combat at the start of Richard II establishes the lost world of perfected chivalric
kingship, after which the plays trace a decline into strife and rebellion and finally the emergence of a new
chivalric figure, Prince Hal as Henry V. But this time, we note, the chivalric return is not simply a return.
Hal's chivalry is political and contingent rather than mystical and absolute in the vein of Richmond at the end
of Richard III. Like Elizabeth holding the contradictions of her culture together in her person, Hal holds the
contradictions of his history-play world together, and, like her, he does it through self-conscious role-playing.

The tone of Shakespeare's treatment of chivalric themes, like so much else, changes in the early seventeenth
century. Troilus and Cressida, probably written the year after the Essex rebellion, is biting in its exposure of
the putrefied core that seems to hide within the goodly armor of chivalric pretentions, and in King Lear not

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even the spectacular romancelike triumph of the unknown knight Edgar over his evil brother Edmund can prevent the ugly hanging of Cordelia and the play's tragic end. Particularly relevant to *Othello*, however, is the tragedy that immediately precedes it chronologically. It would be hard, I think, to overemphasize the importance of chivalry to *Hamlet*. The play takes its point of departure, and finds its image of the lost chivalric world, in Horatio's evocation of King Hamlet and King Fortinbras locked in a valiant single combat ratified by law and chivalry. It is this evocation of heroic combat in a past time when things were absolutely what they seemed to be that gives meaning to the great falling off that constitutes the play's present world. In creeping into the garden to poison his brother, Claudius has in effect poisoned chivalry. His secret duel with Hamlet, fought with such human weapons as Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the actors, represents a travesty of chivalric ideals, and the play moves not toward the heroic restorations of the histories but toward a grotesque and deadly recapitulation of the original combat between the kings in *Hamlet* and Laertes' duel with the poisoned foils, overseen by Osric as chivalric judge-at-arms.

IV

“I'll pour this pestilence into his ear” (2.3.356): the language with which Iago introduces his plan for undoing Othello strikingly recalls Claudius' poison poured into the porches of King Hamlet's ears. We can note, too, that Othello's farewell to arms figures in the play's structure in a manner analogous to the image of the kings in combat, providing in its martial pastoral a point of reference against which the present situation, Othello in the agonies of Iago's poison, is to be measured. But the fact that in *Othello* the nostalgic reference point comes in the middle rather than at the start of the tragedy is important; whereas in *Hamlet* chivalry is dead before the play begins, in *Othello* we observe the process of the poisonous transformation. In fact we do more than observe, we participate. In *Hamlet* the audience's representative, the figure who draws us into dramatic engagement with his purposes, is the prince, and Claudius, as his antagonist, becomes in consequence a relatively opaque figure. In *Othello*, as in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare plays the dynamics of theatrical engagement against moral judgment, and this is one reason that *Othello* does not lapse into melodrama. From the opening in which Iago manipulates Roderigo and Brabantio the play is structured so that we enter the action from Iago's point of view, and his many strategically placed soliloquies and asides confirm our dramatic engagement with him through at least the first half of the play. Othello himself is magnificent, a commanding and dominating figure, but until the temptation scene and the start of his falling off he is also, like Claudius, apprehended at a certain distance, observed as one might observe a public figure and a stranger.

Othello, the exotic black man from Africa, is a stranger in another, more literal, sense as well. In *Hamlet* and in the history plays the representatives of chivalric perfection—King Hamlet, Henry V in the first tetralogy, Edward the Black Prince as he is evoked at the start of the second tetralogy—are generally ancestral figures. Even the Earl of Richmond and Henry V in the second tetralogy are ancestral figures to the audience if not to the characters in the plays. In *Othello*, however, the knightly defender of Christian civilization is projected as an alien. Othello's blackness is the index of a different orientation toward the chivalric figure. Moreover, as many critics since Bradley have remarked, Iago is a kind of playwright, an artist carefully maneuvering his characters into position to bring his tragedy to fulfillment.12 Perhaps, then, we can think of *Othello* as a play in which Shakespeare is recapitulating his own earlier representations of an absolute world of chivalry, alienating them, and through Iago representing something like his own role in plotting the disintegration of the absolute world.

V

Put money in thy purse … I say put money in thy purse … put money in thy purse … put but money in thy purse … fill thy purse with money … put money in thy purse … Make all the money thou canst … therefore make money … go make money … go, provide thy money … put money enough in your purse.
It is more than a little tempting to think of Iago as an embodiment of the prodigious energies of the new commercialism of the Renaissance, and thus to turn *Othello* into an allegory in which bourgeois man destroys the representative of the older feudal values. Thus, whereas Othello speaks of the plumed troop and the royal banner in terms that evoke an activity of transcendent worth, Iago can talk casually of “the trade of war” (1.2.1). Iago's speech is shot through with the language of commerce. “I know my price,” he says when he describes being passed over for promotion, “I am worth no worse a place” (1.1.11), and, contrasting himself with Cassio, he dismisses the lieutenant as a mere accountant, a “debitor and creditor,” and a “counter-caster” (1.1.31). Yet even though he has money and purses on his mind, Iago's motive for bringing down Othello is certainly not profit. Moreover, Othello too can speak in commercial terms, as when he invites Desdemona to bed after their arrival in Cyprus: “Come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; / The profit's yet to come 'tween me and you” (2.3.8-10).

To reduce *Othello* to historical allegory would plainly be to distort the play. Such a reduction would also be anachronistic. As Lawrence Stone and other social historians have taught us, we must beware of imagining anything like a clear-cut opposition in this period between a declining feudal class and a rising bourgeoisie. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were a time of transition and contradiction, a period in which fundamentally incompatible social forms and structures of thought sat uneasily side by side in a manner that may make us think of those sixteenth-century account books kept partly in Arabic, partly in Roman numerals. An old world of traditional forms and values was largely gone, but a new one had not yet clearly taken shape.

Particularly apparent were the tensions between the traditional feudal values of honor, loyalty, and service, and the less absolute imperatives of the marketplace. On the one hand honor might be regarded as a kind of religion, something worth dying for, as for instance when Cassio equates his good name with his soul: “Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial” (2.3.262-64). On the other, it was often treated as merchandise. “I would to God thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought,” Falstaff says mockingly to Hal (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.82-83), and a few years later in the Jacobean debasement of honors, good names were openly traded like stocks and bonds. Thus Stone reports that in 1606 Lionel Cranfield bought the making of six knights from his friend Arthur Ingram for £373.1s.8d. In this transitional moment, no simple antithesis between the values of the marketplace and those of the field of honor is possible. Despite his skepticism about honor, Sir John Falstaff is not a bourgeois figure. Likewise, Antonio, the paragon of lordly generosity who is contrasted with Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, is not, as we might suppose given the values that he embodies, a feudal figure. Perhaps, then, we should imagine the tension between feudal and commercial codes at this time as less like a modern class struggle than like a medieval psychomachia—that is, as a still internalized struggle in which members of the same group, or even at times a single individual, can be found operating inconsistently, now according to one set of values, now according to another.

The mediation of contradiction can be understood as one of the functions of drama or even of narrative generally. With this in mind let us briefly note that Shakespeare often plays romantic and absolute attitudes against contingent and commercial ones, building drama out of the tension. *The Merchant of Venice* is an obvious case in point, as is *As You Like It* where the absoluteness of Orlando's professions of love is measured against the more mundane view evoked in Rosalind's mockery of dying for love and her advice to Phoebe, “Sell when you can, you are not for all markets” (3.5.60). And yet for all her mockery, Rosalind is, we know, a very romantic young lady, many fathoms deep in love. Just so *1 Henry IV*, in which the romanticism is expressed in chivalric rather than erotic terms, measures Hotspur against Falstaff. Like Rosalind, Hal is able to play both mocker and romantic, or, to make the point at the level of diction where it may be easiest to observe, he is able to blend the language of commerce with that of chivalry, as when he predicts his triumph over Hotspur:
Percy is but my factor, good my lord,
To engross up glorious deeds on my behalf;
And I will call him to so strict account
That he shall render every glory up,
Yea, even the slightest worship of his time,
Or I will tear the reckoning from his heart.

(3.2.147-52)

In this way the flexibility of language allows contrary systems of value to be expressed. At the same time, the conventions of narrative achieve forward thrust. No practical resolution of the cultural contradiction may be possible but at least there can be the satisfactions of the achievement of narrative closure. In any case, Othello, too, incorporates the tension between romantic absolutism and the antithetical values of the marketplace, but here instead of being held in triumphant balance in the style of the 1590s, the brutal power latent in the contradiction is used to drive a tragedy.

VI

Let us begin by observing a major change that Shakespeare makes in the structure of Cinthio's narrative. In the novella the wicked ensign's revenge is not directed at the Moor so much as at the lady. Cinthio's ensign is a rebuffed suitor whose passion for Desdemona turns to hate. Shakespeare, however, pits Iago directly against Othello. One effect of this change is to obscure the villain's motive. Another is to alter the lady's position in the narrative structure, demoting her from one of the two ultimate figures in the story to an intermediary. Like the handkerchief with which she is associated, Desdemona becomes a kind of object, an instrument of Iago's revenge against Othello. Passed first from Brabantio's hands into the Moor's and then ignorantly thrown away, Shakespeare's Desdemona figures in the narrative as property. Iago's revenge looks forward to the bourgeois style of a later age; he achieves satisfaction by depriving his enemy of his most valued possession.

At the same time that Shakespeare's narrative demotes Desdemona from a person to property, it also elevates her to an angel. Cinthio's lady is a rather matter of fact heroine, but Shakespeare's is a transcendent figure who refracts the long series of divine ladies that reaches back through the sonnet and romance heroines of the sixteenth century to, among others, Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice. Her conversation with Emilia about women who betray their husbands evokes the realm of the marketplace precisely in order to separate her from it absolutely. “Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?” she asks Emilia, who replies less romantically that while she would not do it for anything trivial such as a ring or a dress, she certainly would do it for the world: “The world's a huge thing; it is a great price / For a small vice” (4.3.67-69). Later, guiltlessly dying, Desdemona refuses to blame Othello for anything: “Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!” (5.2.125). At once property and an angel of selflessness, Desdemona, too, looks forward to the bourgeois age and to its conception of woman.

Behind the contradictions implicit in Shakespeare's Desdemona may be glimpsed the tensions of a moment of cultural transformation. In a penetrating observation, Kenneth Burke suggests that Othello incorporates an analogue in the realm of human affinity to the enclosure acts whereby common lands were made private. Shakespeare's play inscribes an act of spiritual enclosure, love transformed into private property. Whatever is owned may be seized. The fear of loss is integral to the principle of property and thus the threat that Iago represents comes as much from within Othello as from without; Shakespeare externalizes the already implicit fear in the figure of Iago, making the villain, in Burke's phrase, into a voice at Othello's ear. Othello and Iago, possessor and the threat of loss, are dialectically related parts of the one “fascination.” Add Desdemona to the integral, Burke says, “and you have a tragic trinity of ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property in human affections, as fetishistically localized in the object of possession.”

17
Property implies theft: therein lies the play's premise. Opening in Venice, the city of fabled commercial wealth, *Othello* is structured as a series of thefts. The first is a variant of the stock comic action of the stolen daughter that Shakespeare uses also in his other play set in Venice when Jessica escapes from Shylock's house laden with ducats and jewels. Here, in an episode that foreshadows his later and more subtle arousing of Othello, Iago wakes Brabantio: “Awake! what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! / Thieves, thieves!” (1.1.79-81). And a moment after: “Zounds, sir, y’are robb’d! For shame, put on your gown; / Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul” (1.1.86-87).

Let us note the fusion of spiritual and proprietary ideas: Desdemona is both half her father's soul and a possession equivalent to his money. Let us note, too, that so far as the play is concerned Desdemona might have no mother. She is represented as wholly her father's possession, and the principal question concerning her at the opening is whether the transfer from father to husband has been rightfully made, whether she has in fact been stolen from Brabantio or properly won. Again, the play fuses spiritual and proprietary themes when in the Senate scene the Duke decides the case on romantic principles. “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.171), he comments on Othello's speech, and when Desdemona acknowledges that she freely loves the Moor, Brabantio must yield.

The play's first movement is “The Abduction of Desdemona”; the second is “The Theft of Cassio's Name.” Cassio supposes that he is wholly responsible for the loss of his reputation, but we know that Iago, plying his victim with wine, has robbed him. The presentation of Cassio as a decent man changed into a drunken madman foreshadows the action with Othello to come, specifically, the theme of diabolic possession: “O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil! … To be now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast! O strange! Every inordinate cup is unbliss’d, and the ingredient is a devil” (2.3.281-308). To which Iago replies in language that plays upon the theme: “Come, come; good wine is a good familiar creature, if it be well us’d” (2.3.309-10).

In the transitional culture of the early modern period the concept of the soul is also affected by the hegemonic principle of property. Now a soul is something a person *has* as well as something a person *is.* We think, of course, of Marlowe's Faustus selling his soul by contract like an aristocrat turning his land into cash; and it may be, too, that the interest in cases of possession and exorcism at the end of the sixteenth century reveals the influence of proprietary modes of thought. In *Othello,* at any rate, the theme of diabolic possession is related to the play's concern with property. Here the ideas of soul, property, and honor join together in a complex dance of equivalences and ironies, as when Iago tells Brabantio that he has been robbed of half his soul or when Cassio speaks of his reputation as his immortal part.

The play's main action, which begins in the temptation scene when Iago at last turns to work directly upon Othello, depends upon this system of unstable equivalences. Speaking to Cassio, Iago has dismissed the loss of reputation as insignificant, but now he echoes Cassio when he proclaims the opposite to Othello:

> Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
> Is the immediate jewel of their souls.  
> Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;  
> 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;  
> But he that filches from me my good name  
> Robs me of that which not enriches him,  
> And makes me poor indeed.

> (3.3.155-61)

With the idea of theft thus implanted in his thoughts, Othello himself is soon speaking of robbery—“What sense had I in her stol’n hours of lust?” (3.3.338)—accusing Desdemona of filching her honor, which as her husband belongs ultimately to him, and thus of stealing also his own good name.
“I am your own for ever” (3.3.480). When at the end of the temptation scene Iago says that he belongs to Othello forever we understand that he means the opposite of what he speaks: Othello is now his. Othello believes that Desdemona has been stolen from him but the truth is that he has been stolen from himself. The demi-devil Iago has taken possession of his soul. Soon, like a classic case of demonic possession, Othello will be thrashing on the ground, foaming and raving in a fit. Soon, too, diabolic powers will in effect speak through Othello’s mouth as the smooth and authoritative cadences of what Wilson Knight calls the “Othello music” yield to the staccato fragments and ugly images associated with Iago. In this way the unitary world of absolute self-possession that is recapitulated in “Farewell the tranquil mind” is split open and Othello becomes estranged not only from Desdemona but from himself. Like Spenser’s Redcross knight, who is also launched into a world of doubleness, Othello is propelled into a nightmare of duplicity in which his love and his doubt are at war with each other. This process of self-alienation climaxes in Othello’s suicide, the one half of his divided self executing justice upon the other as once he administered justice to the Turk in Aleppo. Thus the narrative—although not of course the contradictions that drive the narrative—is resolved.

VII

Iago’s diabolism is of course only metaphorical. Shakespeare is exploring a secular equivalent to demonic possession, showing how a terrible misapprehension can take control of a normally rational mind. Othello, in which there are neither ghosts, soothsayers, witches, nor supernatural prodigies, is one of the most secular of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Nevertheless, it is significant that the word “devil” occurs in its various forms more often here than in any other Shakespeare play. The word “faith,” too, is prominent whether it is used casually as in Iago and Cassio’s discussion of Bianca where it occurs repeatedly as a mild expletive (4.1) or whether it is used portentously as in Othello’s tremendous oath, “My life upon her faith” (1.3.294). What Shakespeare is doing in this play is appropriating spiritual conceptions, turning them into metaphors for secular experiences. But metaphors work two ways. If Othello incorporates a process of demystification, the assimilation of the supernatural to the natural world, it also incorporates the antithetical movement. The story may not literally be the temptation and fall of man from faith, but the play is not purely domestic tragedy either. An interpretation may legitimately stress either the process of naturalization or the way the domestic drama suggests events of cosmic significance. Like all of Shakespeare’s work, Othello is implicated in the Renaissance system of analogical thought in which the realms of matter and spirit are not yet wholly divided and distinguished. Thus the play can be at once domestic and cosmic, secular and supernatural.

Othello is fascinating as a historical document because of the way it inscribes a transitional moment in Western culture. In it we can almost see the supernatural realm receding. The feudal world of honor, fidelity, and service is becoming the bourgeois world of property and contractual relations. Heroic tragedy is turning into domestic tragedy. It was Shakespeare’s fortune to partake of two worlds without belonging completely to either. Shakespeare’s myriad-mindedness—the quality that Norman Rabkin speaks of as complementarity—has much to do with this particular historical situation, as does his endless self-consciousness, the metadramatic aspect of his plays that has been emphasized by Sigurd Burckhardt and James Calderwood.

We can locate Shakespeare’s historical situation with some precision by observing that his friend and colleague Ben Jonson, a man less than ten years younger than Shakespeare, belongs much more to the new era. Whereas Shakespeare fuses and blends the spiritual and the secular, the realms of honor and commerce, Jonson uses comic irony to create distinctions. The spectacularly blasphemous opening of Volpone—a play like Othello set in the commercial city of Venice—makes the point.

Good morning to the day; and next, my gold!
Open the shrine that I may see my saint.
Hail the world’s soul, and mine! More glad than is
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun
Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,
Am I, to view thy splendor darkening his;
That lying here, amongst my other hoards,
Show'st like a flame by night, or like the day
Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled
Unto the center.(19)

Here the Renaissance system of correspondence between matter and spirit, microcosm and macrocosm, is used against itself to expose the gap between traditional values and the realities of the marketplace and to suggest the emptying out of spiritual significance from the world.

Jonson typically pokes fun at magicians, monsters, and fairy queens. Concerned with verisimilitude and poetic justice, his plays look forward in a way that Shakespeare's, with their marvels, anachronisms, and freedoms of time and place, do not. His attitude toward chivalric romanticism is also different from Shakespeare's. In *Prince Henry's Barriers*, the masque that Jonson wrote in connection with the Prince of Wales's first bearing arms in January 1610, Henry is cast as the reviver of chivalry. The masque begins with the Lady of the Lake praising James's court as greater than Arthur's but lamenting the decay of chivalry which is represented by the scene, the ruined House of Chivalry. Arthur appears and prophesies the advent of a knight who will restore chivalry, whereupon Merlin rises from his tomb to reveal Prince Henry, discovered with his companions in arms in a new scene representing St. George's Portico, where knighthood now lives. In a long speech Merlin lectures the Prince on English history, emphasizing industriousness, peaceability, and other values that are distinctly not chivalric. Most interesting, Merlin says that Henry will not seek to emulate the deeds of “antique knights” by thinking to rescue ladies from giants or to do battle with a score of men at once.

These were bold stories of our Arthur's age;
But here are other acts; another stage
And scene appears; it is not since as then:
No giants, dwarfs or monsters here, but men.(21)

The arts of the modern hero must be to govern and give laws and to preserve the peace whenever possible.

The matter-of-factness incorporated in the apparently romantic and chivalric pageant of *Prince Henry's Barriers* may remind us of the similar quality in Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, probably performed three years earlier in 1607. Here too we are in a world of men, a world drained of the supernatural and marvelous. Like Jonson in the comedies, Beaumont uses comedy to make distinctions between realms that Shakespeare characteristically blends. Shakespeare's Hal fuses the language of the marketplace and that of the field of honor, speaking of Hotspur as his factor to purchase glorious deeds for him wholesale. Beaumont disjoins the two realms, gaining comic mileage by placing Hotspur's “bright honor” speech in Rafe the grocer's man's mouth and then by placing Rafe and his chivalric posturings in a world in which innkeepers expect to be paid and servants to be tipped. In this unromantic place things are simply what they are, and the comedy ridicules Rafe's attempt to transvalue them by renaming forests and heaths “deserts,” horses “palfreys,” and by referring to females as either “fair lady” or “distressed damsel” depending upon whether they have their desires or not. At this point *Don Quixote*, which may have influenced both Beaumont and Jonson, virtually demands to be mentioned. I referred to Cervantes earlier in order to distinguish between his novelistic exploration of the romanticizing imagination and Shakespeare's play in which the protagonist's romanticism is not perfectly demarcated from the general world of the narrative. Published in 1605, a year after *Othello* was performed, *Don Quixote* marks a cultural watershed, the emergence of what Michel Foucault calls the classical epistemé. In the Renaissance, Foucault suggests, the principle of resemblance plays a constitutive role in knowledge. The Renaissance conceives a universe of magical correspondences. From this point of view the cosmos is a single vast text and knowledge is a form of interpretation, a matter of reading the mystic signatures written in things. There is finally no difference between language and nature, authority and observation. In *Don Quixote*,
however, the bond between words and things has been severed. The Don seeks to reestablish a world of magical resemblances; his entire journey is a quest for similitudes. But the world he inhabits is one in which things are simply what they are, one in which flocks and serving girls are not subject to the transmutation of language. The Renaissance cosmos has dissolved. In its place the empire of fact is emerging and language is retreating into a special domain, literature, with only an indirect relationship to the world in the neo-classical doctrines of representation and verisimilitude.\(^{23}\)

It is indicative of the importance of chivalry as a locus for the contradictions of Renaissance culture that such a crucial text as *Don Quixote* should take the form of a negation of chivalric romance. While the chivalric revival of the sixteenth century helped to obscure some of the social and intellectual contradictions of the period, it also contributed to them, raising, as it were, the level of tension by a notch. We can note that in its nostalgia the chivalric revival was a way of possessing the past, of turning chivalry into property. To turn honor literally into property, as the sale of honors did, or to portray merchants and tradesmen in heroic postures, as the bourgeois hero tales did, was to approach the breaking point. In Jonson, Beaumont, and above all in Cervantes, the contradictions of the late Renaissance snap into laughter. *Don Quixote* in particular prefigures the bourgeois civilization of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which the romance becomes the novel and the emblematic theater of the world, Shakespeare's theater, becomes the illusionistic theater of scenes and stage properties, the theater of things.

**VIII**

But what of Shakespeare, whose sensibility is perhaps as close to that of Spenser as to Jonson? Shakespeare, who came to maturity in the 1580s at the height of the Elizabethan revival of chivalry, was not ready to write anti-romances like *Don Quixote* or *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. He was, I think, still too deeply possessed by the absolute world of fidelity. He could write about the death of chivalry or the corruption of chivalry but he could not distance himself sufficiently from its imaginative claims to burlesque it. As a principal shareholder in London's most successful theatrical company and an energetic accumulator of wealth in Stratford and London, Shakespeare evidently participated in the new ethos of the marketplace. But he was also still something of a romantic, even if an unillusioned one.

I suggested earlier that we might think of *Othello* as a play in which Shakespeare recapitulates his own earlier representations of the absolute world of chivalry and that we might regard Iago, the cunning artist of tragedy, as at least in part a representation of Shakespeare himself. Iago is not bourgeois man—that creature had not, so to speak, been thought in 1604. Nevertheless, he is a figure in which the age could find something like the bourgeois cast of mind, together with the multitude of fears and desires that it aroused, made manifest. But Iago is not simply the pragmatist and materialist that he seems to take himself to be. Why should he want to destroy Othello? Iago and Othello are reciprocal figures, part of the same—to use Burke's word—fascination. Just as Othello is possessed by Iago, so Iago is from the beginning of the play possessed by Othello. But though Iago succeeds in destroying the Moor and Desdemona as well, he does not, we might say, succeed in exorcising the spirit they embody. Desdemona remains a miracle of fidelity to the end, and Othello, released from the demi-devil's snares, dies reasserting his allegiance to his heroic self.

True enough; yet to conclude our discussion on this romantic note of sustained fidelity and reasserted heroism misrepresents the tenor of Shakespeare's play. Othello may be an honorable murderer but he is a murderer nonetheless, and at the story's end both Desdemona and the Moor are dead. The world of *Othello* is not that of the novel, the characteristic genre of bourgeois civilization, but neither is it that of Elizabethan romance. *Othello* represents an intermediate moment in cultural development and an intermediate form, tragedy. Romance incorporates certainties, absolute opposites of good and evil. Tragedy subverts, deconstructs, certainties and absolutes, or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, tragedy rebukes romance.\(^{24}\) What Shakespeare has done in *Othello* is to convert the material of Elizabethan romance into tragedy.
Tragedy involves *katharsis*: purging, cleansing, exorcising. The scapegoats of this particular tragic sacrifice are Desdemona and Othello, figures of an exquisite and dangerous romantic beauty. The high priest is Iago, who draws us as audience into dynamic engagement with his purposes, mobilizing destructive emotions that we may not wish to acknowledge. We participate with Iago in splitting open the absolutes of Othello's martial pastoral. We assist in his project of driving the romance hero and his lady out of the world, of torturing Othello and Desdemona to death. Like Othello, we too are in a sense possessed. But because this is theater we are simultaneously dispossessed. Iago engages our rapaciousness, jealousy, and fear, but he also allows us to alienate ourselves from those ungentle emotions, projecting them onto him. Thus he too becomes a scapegoat. Protagonist and antagonist cancel each other out. We are left at the end with neither a reassertion of an old world nor a prefiguration of a new one, but a mere vacancy, or, rather, a tableau of corpses and a disconcerting promise that Iago too will be tortured.

**Notes**

1. 3.3.347-57. All citations of Shakespeare refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, Mass., 1974).
11. There have been a number of interesting particular studies, among them Paul N. Siegel's “Shakespeare and the Neo-Chivalric Cult of Honor,” *The Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences*, 8 (1964), 39-70, which focuses on the code of the duello; Sheldon Zitner's “Hamlet, Duellist,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 34 (1969), 1-18, which discusses *Hamlet* and the duello; and Frances A. Yates' controversial *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London, 1978), which discusses the late plays in the context of the chivalric revival at the court of Prince Henry.
Shakespeare's ambiguity reveals his full awareness of the social changes taking place in his time, but his discussion is grounded in a misleading conception of clear class distinctions in the period.

17. “Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method,” The Hudson Review, 4 (1951), 165-203. In a few brilliant pages (pp. 165-69) Burke anticipates many of the points made here in a different context.


25. Cf. Franco Moretti: Shakespeare “may announce the dawn of bourgeois civilization, but not by prefiguring it. On the contrary, he demonstrates inexorably how, obeying the old rules, which are the only ones he knows, the world can only fall apart,” Signs Taken For Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms (London, 1983), p. 68. Moretti’s exciting discussion of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy also appears in abridged form as ‘‘A Huge Eclipse’: Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty,” Genre, 15 (1982), 7-40.

Criticism: Language And Imagery: Graham Bradshaw
(essay date 1992)


[In the following essay, Bradshaw explores whether Othello consummates his marriage to Desdemona, examining the element of timing in the play.]

Although it is factitious and distracting, the theory or myth of ‘double time’ is still respectfully trundled out in every modern scholarly edition of Othello, even the most recent.¹ It has been as long-lived as Nahum Tate's adaptation of King Lear, which held the stage for a century and a half, and, like that adaptation, deserves to be firmly laid to rest. It betrays its bad nineteenth century provenance in three different (though related) ways. First, it expects Shakespearean poetic drama to repay an approach which (as C.P. Sanger’s examination of the handling of time in Wuthering Heights famously showed) is more appropriate to mid-nineteenth century novels; this, as Jane Adamson crisply put it, leads ‘our attention away from Othello’s obsession, towards the kind of details that might obsess an Inspector from Scotland Yard’.² Secondly, it is bardolatrous, and offends against what Richard Levin has called the undisputed principle of Knowing When to Give Up.³ For although the theory describes and depends on what is unashamedly called a ‘trick’, which makes a few scrupulous critics like Bradley and Emrys Jones squeamish, this is usually seen as an occasion for bardolatrous rejoicing. Finally, the theory cannot be separated from that nineteenth century tendency which found its glorious apotheosis in Verdi’s Otello. Othello is the ‘Noble’ Moor, Desdemona is beatified, Iago is demonised—and, in the opera, even gets a satanic ‘Credo’. There is then no need for a drastically compressed time scheme, and indeed Verdi’s lovers, like Giraldi Cinthio’s in the Italian source story, have been married for some time: here Arrigo Boito, Verdi’s brilliant librettist and collaborator in Otello and Falstaff, might just as well have claimed

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of *Otello* what he claimed of *Falstaff*—that he had returned the Shakespearean play to its native Italian source. *Otello* is a work of genius, and the ‘Double Time Scheme’ a product of misguided bardolatrous ingenuity; but neither makes sense of (I want to say, more bluntly, the nineteenth century couldn’t make sense of) the dramatic and psychological effect of Shakespeare’s *purposefully* drastic compression of the loose, indefinite ‘romance’ time in the Italian novella.5

As Emrys Jones emphasises in *Scenic Form in Shakepeare*, it is important not to confuse ‘double time’ with accelerated time, which is theatrically indispensable, commonplace, and usually untroubling. So, for example, nearly five hours of ‘stage’ time and less than a minute of ‘real’ time pass *between* that moment in 2.2 when we hear the Herald proclaim ‘full libertie of Feasting from this present houre of five’, and our hearing Iago observe in 2.3 that ‘tis not yet ten o’clocke’. What follows in 2.3 is more remarkable, since the first night in Cyprus passes during this scene; Jones pertinently compares this with *Richard III*, 5.3, which takes us through the night before the battle of Bosworth. So, by the time the scene ends, the triumphant Iago can tell Roderigo that

> Thou know'st we worke by Wit, and not by Witchcraft
> And Wit depends on dilatory time,

and exclaim, with self-congratulatory cheerfulness:

> Introth ‘tis Morning;
> Pleasure, and Action, make the houres seeme short.

(2.3.362-3, 368-9)

Indeed this is exuberantly and unnervingly witty: the surrogate dramatist who has produced chaos in this scene and whose reference to ‘Witchcraft’ gleefully recalls his earlier triumph over Brabantio seems here to be sharing a professional joke with the real dramatist, whose own skill in managing this scene’s *accelerated* time has helped to ‘make the houres seeme short’.

The third act follows in similarly precipitate fashion. When Iago encounters Cassio again in 3.1 he asks, ‘You have not bin a-bed then?’, and Cassio reminds him that ‘the day had broke before we parted’; Emilia then enters, telling Cassio (and us) that the ‘Generall and his wife are talking’ of Cassio’s disgrace—not were, but ‘are’, talking of it, now. Although Emilia has heard enough of this conversation to be able to assure Cassio that Desdemona ‘speakes for you stoutly’, while Othello ‘protests’ that he ‘needs no other Suitor, but his likings' to reinstate Cassio after a prudent interval, Cassio determines to stay for ‘some breefe Discourse’ with Desdemona ‘alone’. The brief glimpse of Othello in 3.2 shows him already busy with the day's work: the letters for the Senate have already been written, and he sets off to inspect the ‘Fortification’. By now the play is half over, without its being at all obvious that this is a play—the play—about ‘adultery’ and jealousy.

Throughout this first half of the play the only indeterminate period of time is that taken up by the voyage to Cyprus, when (it is emphasised) Othello and Desdemona are in different ships. To say there is nothing troubling about this carefully managed compression of the Italian story's time scheme would be heartless: to be sure, it maximises tension and the continuity between the scenes in a theatrically impressive way, but it also ensures—takes pains to ensure—that the newly married lovers have so little time together. When Othello leads Desdemona off to bed some hours after their arrival in Cyprus (and immediately after telling Cassio to report the next morning at his ‘earliest’ convenience) he confirms that the marriage still has not been consummated:

> Come my deere Love,
> The purchase made, the fruites are to ensue,
> That profit's yet to come ‘tweene me, and you.
The stage direction for Iago's entrance follows these lines, leaving open the possibility that he arrives on stage just in time to hear Othello's words and perhaps register some malignantly interested response. Be that as it may, his next words show that Iago is well aware that the marriage still hasn’t been consummated, and he immediately insinuates, in his busy, tirelessly malicious way, that Othello is neglecting his official duties:

‘tis not yet ten o’th’clocke. Our Generall
cast us thus earely for the love of his
Desdemona:
Who, let us not therefor blame; he hath not yet made wanton the night
with her …

Learning that the marriage still hasn’t been consummated is, for the audience, a confirmation rather than a surprise—precisely because Shakespeare's handling of time has been both careful and suggestive, constantly bringing home how little time these lovers are allowed together. In the second scene they were interrupted by Iago's warning that Brabantio's posse is on its way. Then, after Desdemona's bold affirmation in the Senate scene that she would not be ‘bereft’ of the ‘Rites’, it was determined that the newly-weds would leave that night, in different ships; as Othello tells Desdemona, he has

but an houre
Of Love, of wordly matter, and direction
To spend with thee. We must obey the time.

And of course in 2.3 they are disturbed once again, by that riot which Iago engineers; after quelling the riot Othello goes off to dress Montano's wounds while Desdemona goes back to bed. Indeed, the accelerated time in 2.3 makes it impossible to know how much time the lovers have together before they are disturbed; although critics assume that the marriage is consummated, it is not clear whether this happens before or after the riot, or not at all.

I shall return to this point later, but advocates of the double time theory are more concerned that Desdemona hasn’t had time to sleep with Cassio. So, the ‘difficulty’ which—as the New Arden editor puts it—it—threatens to make ‘nonsense’ of the ‘dramatic action’ is that within the play’s ‘short time’ there is no time in which ‘adultery’ could have occurred. Nobody doubts that (as Frank Kermode assures us in the Riverside edition) Shakespeare ‘is clearly aware’ of this difficulty. But we are to suppose that, having taken such pains to get into it, Shakespeare ‘resolved’ it not by a real extension, or loosening, of the stage time, like that in the second half of The Merchant of Venice, but by what the New Arden editor, M. R. Ridley, describes as a craftily engineered ‘trick’: ‘What Shakespeare is doing is to present, before our eyes, an unbroken series of events happening in “short time”, but to present them against a background, of events not presented but implied, which gives the needed impression of “long time”’ (p. lxx). Instead of feeling uneasy about a play that must resort to a trick ‘to make the whole progress of the plot credible’ (p. lxix), the excited Ridley affirms that this ‘throws light on Shakespeare's astonishing skill and judgement as a practical craftsman’: ‘He knew to a fraction of an inch how far he could go in playing a trick upon his audience, and the measure of his success is precisely the unawareness of the audience in the theatre that any trick is being played’ (p. lxx). Dover Wilson similarly invites us to discover and marvel over ‘yet another piece of dramatic legerdemain, the most audacious in the whole canon, which has come to be known as Double Time’.
One strange feature of this argument appears in that question-begging emphasis on a needful ‘impression’: since ‘short time’ is also, and no less, an ‘impression’ or dramatic illusion, it is hard to see what could prevent the one ‘impression’ jarring against the other. Moreover, although having an ‘impression’ of ‘long time’ is thought to be wonderfully helpful where Desdemona’s (alleged) relationship with Cassio is concerned, it wouldn’t be at all helpful to any spectator who then began wondering about Desdemona’s (actual) relationship with her husband. What would they be talking about? Where would Othello sleep for however many nights are in question? I hasten to add that I don’t for one moment think we do ask such questions, in reading or watching Shakespeare’s play. But then Othello is constantly making us think, and dredging monsters in the mind—whereas the presumed point of creating the ‘impression’ of ‘long time’ is to prevent thought.

Another general difficulty is that the ‘trick’ can work only if we first notice, but then don’t think about, the various alleged ‘instances’ and ‘indications’ of an illusory period of ‘long time’. Here the argument becomes alarmingly circular, and also depends on an elaborate but confidently predictive set of assumptions about what our old, dim friend—the Audience as Monolithic Entity: a fabulous beast with many bodies but a single, unimpressive mind—can be relied upon to notice or not to notice. Evidently, we don’t reflect, when reading or watching Othello, that there has been no time for Desdemona to commit adultery. But then, it’s assumed, we would notice this, or would have noticed it, were it not for all those craftily planted ‘indications’ of an illusory period of ‘Long Time’; and this in turn assumes that we will notice, and be tricked by, the ‘indications’ of ‘long time’. Finally, this magic circle closes with the further assurance, or assumption, that we won’t also notice and reflect on the discrepancy between the ‘short time’ of the stage action and the illusory ‘impression’ of ‘long time’. Noticing that discrepancy would of course expose the very ‘difficulty’ which the ‘trick’ is to prevent us from noticing—along with other new difficulties which, we shall see, the ‘trick’ introduces. But later, as a kind of reward, we are also being invited to notice, and marvel at, this ‘legerdemain’ as a supreme instance of Shakespearean art. Part of the theory’s appeal is that of feeling superior—of being initiated into a bardolatrous inner circle that knows how the trick works and is (as Catherine Earnshaw might say, but all this is very nineteenth century) incomparably above and beyond that dumb uncomprehending creature, the Audience.

Something is evidently wrong, but how much is wrong in Shakespeare’s play? To take one of the ‘instances’, it is apparent—on reflection, if not in the theatre—that Lodovico’s arrival in Cyprus in Act IV is implausibly rapid, and involves the sort of discrepancy which diligent editors are quite properly expected to spot, and try to account for. As the very diligent New Arden editor observes, ‘the government of Venice can hardly be supposed to recall Othello till there has been time for the report of the Turkish disaster to reach them and for them to send the order for recall’ (p. lxx). Here is a case where we might readily agree that Shakespeare has nodded. Perhaps he failed to notice the lapse; perhaps he noticed it but saw that nothing was to be done, since he could hardly postpone the play’s climax for however many days would suffice to forestall such a fribblingly literal-minded objection. We cannot know either way; more to the point, we have little reason to care. So long as we do regard it as an instance of nodding—of Shakespeare failing to notice what few members of his audience would notice—it is not difficult to account for as a loose end, or unwanted consequence of Shakespeare’s drastic compression of the Italian story’s loose and indeterminate time scheme. However, it is a quite different matter to suppose that this is, as the New Arden editor tells us, a ‘very clear instance’ of the conscious, deliberate and wonderfully crafty way in which the Bard tricks us by including various ‘indications’ of an illusory period of ‘long time’. Nor could we suppose that the trick works in this ‘very clear instance’ unless we believe what seems inherently unlikely: that the dim but sturdily reliable Audience (which, if we gave it a shape and form, might resemble Orwell’s Boxer) could be counted upon to take in the ‘indication’, though without thinking any more about it.

Let us try another, instructively different ‘instance’. Beady-eyed sleuths have assumed that Bianca’s complaint about Cassio’s weeklong absence (3.4.173) must refer to a period of time spent in Cyprus:

Bianca:
'Save you (Friend Cassio).
Cassio:
What make you from home?
How is't with you, my most faire Bianca?
Indeed (sweet Love) I was comming to your house.
Bianca:
And I was going to your Lodging, Cassio.
What? keepe a weeke away? Seven dayes and Nights?
Eight score eight houres? And Lovers absent howres
More tedious then the Diall, eight score times?
Oh weary reck'ning.
Cassio:
Pardon me, Bianca:
I have this while with leaden thoughts beeene prest,
But I shall in a more continuate time
Strike off this score of absence ...

(3.4.168-79)

I have quoted so much of this dreadfully undistinguished exchange because I don’t want to be accused of special pleading: Cassio must live in army lodgings and Bianca clearly can’t, but it’s easy to see how the references to her ‘house’ and his ‘Lodging’ made double-time sleuths pounce—supposing that the week in question has passed in Cyprus, and that Cassio’s fumbled excuse for his weeklong absence refers back to his catastrophe on the first night in Cyprus. Nonetheless, this must be wrong. If we do take Bianca’s reference to a weeklong absence as another ‘indication’ of ‘long time’, then a moment’s reflection is enough to suggest that the long time in question must be real not illusory, while the period of time spent in Cyprus must then be considerably longer than a week—since it is also being assumed that the liaison between Cassio and Bianca has run its whole course in Cyprus. We see the New Arden editor assuming this (without reflecting further) when he observes that, although there is ‘no doubt’ that Iago’s reference to Bianca as a ‘Huswife, that by selling her desires / Buyes her selfe Bread, and Cloath’ (4.1.94-5) gives ‘Huswife’ its bawdy sense, meaning that Bianca is a courtesan, ‘there is also little doubt that Bianca is also a housewife in the normal sense, a citizen of Cyprus, with her own house, and not a mere camp-follower’ (p. 141). Norman Sanders hedges on this point in the recent New Cambridge edition, saying that ‘there is no clear evidence in the play for or against the idea that Cassio knew Bianca before he landed in Cyprus’ (p. 189); but again a moment’s reflection suggests what more is ‘clear’. For if the relationship was going on before the journey to Cyprus, there is no need to take Bianca’s reference to a weeklong absence as an ‘indication’ of ‘long time’; moreover, the alternative—supposing that they have been in Cyprus for more than a week—produces a quite horrendous difficulty, since the business with the handkerchief in 4.1 is so important within the main action. Nobody can suppose that 4.1 is taking place on the second day in Cyprus and more than a week after the arrival in Cyprus. Iago acquires the handkerchief in 3.3, and that scene clearly takes place on the first morning in Cyprus. In the latter part of 3.4 Cassio enters with Iago and gives Bianca the handkerchief he has found in his ‘lodging’; in the next scene—4.1—she angrily returns it, having examined it ‘even now’ and found impossible to ‘take out’. Time passes between and during these successive scenes, but how much time? Pressing Ridley’s argument to its logical conclusion would mean having to suppose that in the handkerchief scene we have that impression of ‘short time’ which the stage action establishes, and a cunningly contrived ‘impression’ of an illusory period of ‘long time’, and a logically inescapable impression of non-illusory ‘long time’.

The ‘double time’ theory cannot resolve this difficulty, since it is what has produced it. Nor can I believe that any spectator or reader who was not already distracted by the theory, and peering excitedly round every textual corner for ‘evidence’ to support it, could suppose that Bianca’s complaint shows that a week has passed in Cyprus without also feeling some disturbance and dissatisfaction. Yet the difficulty dissolves if we forget the theory and stay with the ‘short time’. If the meetings between Cassio and Bianca in Acts III and IV take place later on the second day in Cyprus, Bianca’s complaint about a weeklong absence then confirms that she was already Cassio’s mistress in Venice—where he was already avoiding her, since he likes sleeping with
her but has no intention of marrying her. The doting, determined Bianca has followed him to Cyprus, provoking Cassio's complacent complaint to Iago that she 'haunts me in every place' (4.1.132); she is a camp-follower in this literal sense, while he, like Mann's Felix Krull, understands that since he is irresistible he should try to make some allowances.

3

In the Italian story the captain is married; it is Shakespeare who makes his captain a ladies' man, invents 'the faire Bianca', and so provides his play with three couples or two trios of men and women with very different attitudes towards the opposite sex, sexual relationships, and marriage. It is not easy to believe that in inventing the Cassio-Bianca liaison Shakespeare never considered when and where it starts. If we suppose that it starts in Cyprus this produces far more problems than the only alternative—which is to stay with the 'short time'. But then that also helps with two textual cruces, which have led editors who are loyal to the nonsense about double time to pronounce Shakespeare 'careless' in his handling of Cassio. They are another part of the mess the myth of double time has made.

We know from Othello's first speech to the Senators that he has spent the last nine months in Venice and found this first experience of civilian life enervating:

\[\text{since these Armes of mine, had seven years pith,}\\\quad \text{Till now, some nine Moones wasted, they have us'd}\\\quad \text{Their dearest action, in the Tented Field ...}\]

(1.3.83-5)

We also know that during this period Cassio has been with Othello, who prefers him to Iago not only as his chosen lieutenant, but also as the close, trusted friend who frequently accompanied him in his secret wooing and knew of Othello's love 'from first to last' (3.3.97). The obvious need for discretion in that case explains Cassio's circumspection in the play's second scene when he pretends not even to know whom Othello might have married, and asks Iago, 'To who?' (1.2.53). Similarly, keeping to the 'short time' yields a consistent explanation of that other much debated 'crux' which is so often said to show that Shakespeare is careless or that the text needs emendation: Iago's apparently knowing but mysterious joke about Cassio being 'A Fellow almost damn'd in a fair Wife' (1.1.18) seems mysterious and is knowing because Iago already knows what we cannot yet know.11 Cassio is 'almost damn'd in a faire Wife' because, although he wants nothing more than a sexually convenient liaison with the 'very faire Bianca', she is determined to marry him—and because, for Iago, to be almost married is to be almost married is to be almost damned.

Iago clearly knows about the Cassio-Bianca relationship and its difficulties in 4.1, when we hear him planning to make use of that knowledge:

\[\text{Now will I question Cassio}\\\quad \text{of Bianca,}\\\quad \text{A Huswife, that by selling her desires}\\\quad \text{Buys her selfe Bread, and Cloath. It is Creature}\\\quad \text{That dotes on Cassio, (as 'tis}\\\quad \text{the Strumpets plague}\\\quad \text{To be-guile many, and be be-guil'd by one)}\]
\[\text{He, when he heares of her, cannot restraine}\\\quad \text{From the excesse of Laughter.}\]

(4.1.93-7)
Unless we have been distracted by the 'double time' theory, it is also clear that whatever Iago knows about this liaison in 4.1, on the second day in Cyprus, must also have been known to him in the play's first scene, which takes place only hours before Iago and Cassio set off (again in different ships) for Cyprus. But the New Arden and New Cambridge editors have been distracted by the theory. Ridley explains in his long note on ‘A Fellow almost damn’d in a faire Wife’ that this cannot allude to Cassio's liaison with Bianca, since at this ‘moment he has not met her’ (p. 4)—just as Barbara Everett refers to, and supposes that Iago's cynical joke cannot refer to, ‘Cassio's future affair with the whore, Bianca’ (p. 209). And in the recent New Cambridge edition Norman Sanders recycles the idea that both Iago's remark and the way in which Cassio 'appears to be completely ignorant of Othello's interest in Desdemona' in 1.2 are ‘inconsistencies’, and make the character of Cassio ‘something of a puzzle’ (pp. 189, 16).

I think this wrong, but it might be objected that the kind of explanation I am offering is embarrassingly like the argument for 'double time', which floats on an elaborate and implausible tapestry of assumptions about what an audience would or would not notice in performance. Yet there is an important difference.

Certainly, no spectator watching the play for the first time could know, when Cassio asks, ‘To who?’, that Cassio has reason to be discreet. Edwin Booth's recommendation that the actor playing Cassio should signal circumspection—letting on that there is something Cassio isn’t letting on—is pedantically fussy and dramatically unhelpful: even if we noticed and stored the signal we couldn’t make sense of it until the revelations in 3.3, while any such signalling would threaten to make Cassio seem the kind of friend who couldn’t be trusted to keep a confidence. Similarly, nobody watching the play for the first time and hearing Iago describe Cassio as ‘almost damn’d in a faire Wife’ could know about the liaison with Bianca and its difficulties. Shakespeare is giving Iago and Cassio lines that are consistent with their characters and situation—but the first-time spectator or reader is in no position to see how.

In other words, this kind of explanation is peculiar because it addresses a peculiar kind of 'problem': the problem is as remote as its solution from theatrical experience. No spectator would see the ‘inconsistency’ in Cassio's question, or start trembling before a ‘crux’. As for Iago's joke, since it is ambiguously phrased a spectator might feel uncertain how to take it, or might just mistake it, supposing that Cassio must be married and, for some reason, badly matched. The play has only just begun, Cassio has only just been mentioned, and we know nothing about Bianca. We are only beginning to put things together and make sense of what we are making out: in a significant sense we expect to understand, and have no reason to suspect that our information may be contradictory. In both cases the ‘problem’ or ‘crux’ appears only when we are studying the text closely and, as it were, reading and thinking forwards and backwards—or when we are reading the text in a modern scholarly edition and letting our eye be dragged down to the ballast of notes beneath the precious ribbon of Shakespearean matter. As that ribbon thins, we know that scrupulous editors have discovered a difficulty which we had better attend to, now, if we want to be sure we won’t forget its existence; but unfortunately, because editors are usually more concerned with the play as text than with the text as play, they rarely point out (or notice) when a difficulty which the text throws out and which has exercised generations of editors isn’t apparent in performance. The ‘problem’ is there in the text but, like its explanation, cannot be a part of our initial dramatic experience.

This peculiar kind of problem is best considered as a question about dramatic intention. Shakespeare clearly was in a unique situation to be thinking backwards and forwards, and wouldn’t have given Cassio his question or Iago that joke unless he thought the lines meant something when he wrote them. Shakespeare wrote quickly, and on the whole rather well, but he could write badly, as in that slovenly verse exchange between Cassio and Bianca; he could fail to notice some problems which are there in the text and there in the play, like Lady Macbeth's giving suck or Jessica's account of conversations between Shylock and Tubal which could only have taken place after her elopement; he could be negligent about minor matters and characters, like Lodovico's implausibly rapid arrival in Cyprus. But such things aren’t as surprising as it would be if, after taking pains to compress his time scheme and keep Othello and Desdemona apart, Shakespeare had carelessly
given them an extra week or two in Cyprus without considering what they might do there, or talk about. As for Cassio and Bianca, Shakespeare is perfunctory about filling in the background of their relationship. Ibsen once remarked that he liked to work everything out ‘down to the last button’ before beginning to write; Shakespeare doesn’t attend to buttons so closely, but there is an important difference between not working things out and not making them clear. That an explanation is available within the play’s ‘short time’ suggests that in this case—as indeed with Iago’s joke—the perfunctoriness is that of a dramatist who is writing rapidly and with a very sure sense of his characters and their situations, but hasn’t paused to consider whether what is clear to him might seem less than clear to an audience. Once we comb through the text, putting together scattered references and weighing alternative possibilities, the text shows why the Cassio-Bianca relationship must have been going on during the same nine month period as Othello’s secret wooing. To say this is not to suppose that Othello’s specific reference to ‘nine Moones’ would be noticed and remembered by every attentive spectator: the theatre is not a court or classroom, and we might well pay more attention to the information that this was his first experience of civilian life than to his specification of the precise period of time in question. The point is rather that we could expect, and can confirm, that Shakespeare thought carefully about what important matters need to have taken place before his play starts.

4

But now we can observe what is most strange about that basic assumption on which the ‘double time’ theory rests. It is always taken for granted that there is a ‘difficulty’ which, as Dover Wilson proudly observes, ‘might well have seemed insuperable to any ordinary dramatist’: ‘For, if Othello and Desdemona consummated their marriage during the first night in Cyprus, when could she have committed the adultery that Iago charges her with?’ (p. xxxii). This is true only if we are using the word ‘adultery’ in a strict, legalistic sense—but what warrant does the play provide for supposing that Othello is concerned only with what might have happened after his marriage?

Early in 3.3, the ever vigilant Iago hears Desdemona protest to Othello that she could not have ‘so much to do’ in pleading on behalf of that very friend who

came a wooing with you? and so many a time
(When I have spoke of you disparagingly)
Hath tane your part ...

(3.3.71-3)

Once Iago is alone with Othello, he can launch his first direct assault by concentrating on that very question to which Desdemona has just provided the answer:

Iago:
Did Michael Cassio
When you woo’d my Lady, know of your love?
Othello:
He did, from the first to last: Why dost thou aske?
Iago:
But for a satisfaction on my Thought,
No further harme.
Othello:
What of thy thought, Iago?
Iago:
I did not thinke he had bin acquainted with hir.
Othello:
O yes, and went betweene us very oft.
Iago:
Indeed?
Othello:
Indeed? I indeed. Discern'st thou ought in that?
Is he not honest?
Iago:
Honest, my Lord?
Othello:
Honest? I, Honest.
Iago:
My Lord, for ought I know.
Othello:
What do'st thou thinke?
Iago:
Thinke, my Lord?
Othello:
Thinke, my Lord? Alas, thou ecchos't me;
As if there were some Monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shewne …

In capitalising on his new knowledge Iago must tread very carefully: if the marriage was consummated hours before, Othello is likely to know whether his wife was a virgin. Throughout this first stage of the assault what is in question is not the absurd suggestion that Desdemona has committed adultery with Cassio since her wedding, in what would indeed be ‘stolen hours'; Iago's insinuation, as he feels his way forward, is that something took place before the wedding, which can be expected to continue, and would explain Desdemona's passionate concern to have Cassio reinstated—and we see the ‘Monster’ emerging in Othello's own mind as he begins to make out what is in question. Similarly, when Iago later promises Othello that he will persuade Cassio to ‘tell the Tale anew; / Where, how, how, how oft, how long ago, and when / He hath, and is againe to cope your wife’ (4.1.85-6), this is not another ‘indication’ of ‘long time’, as editors tell us: Iago is once again conjuring up that nightmare of a promiscuous liaison which began when Cassio was the trusted friend who ‘very oft’ went between the lovers. This nightmare is familiar: the situation in the Sonnets is not as irrelevant as Dover Wilson supposes.

Yet this suggests that there is no ‘difficulty’ which requires a ‘needful impression’ of ‘long time’. Not only does the theory of ‘Double Time’ not work, or work to ruining effect: it is redundant. At this point, and with these various objections to the theory in mind, it is worth quickly running through those other alleged ‘indications’ of ‘long time’ which are conveniently (and confidently) set out in the New Arden introduction and notes. The first two ‘instances’, involving references to the handkerchief, are perhaps the most troubling, but suggest negligence rather than the carefully laid foundation for the edifice of Double Time. The others are no more compelling than the ‘very clear instance’ of Lodovico's premature arrival (really an instance of Shakespeare nodding) or of Cassio's weeklong absence from Bianca (which makes good sense in the play's ‘short time’, and produces nightmarish complications if taken as evidence of ‘long time’).

(1) 3.3.296 [Iago's asking Emilia to steal the handkerchief ‘a hundred times’]. There is no reason to suppose that Iago had not often seen it. in Othello's possession or in Desdemona's when, in her girlish way, she kisses and talks to it (3.3.295).

(2) 3.3.313 [‘so often did you bid me steale’] Ditto; and, as Ridley himself observes, this ‘might have been on voyage’.

(3) 3.3.344-8 [Othello on ‘stolne houres of Lust’ which ‘harm’d not me’]. Othello's speech is rapid and excited, but makes better sense in relation to the lengthy period before the marriage. His reference to ‘the next night’ need not refer to the first night in Cyprus, unless we refuse to suppose that Othello could have kissed Desdemona before marriage.
(4) 3.3.419 ['I lay with Cassio lately']. That is, in Venice, where (as Iago now knows) Cassio was ‘very oft’ alone with Desdemona; the ‘foregone conclusion’ Othello tormentedly imagines would have preceded the marriage.

(5) 3.4.97 ['I nev’r saw this before'] Desdemona (who has been pursued by other suitors) is simply saying that she has never before seen any sign that Othello is prone to jealousy.

(6) 4.1.50f [the ‘second Fit’ of ‘Epilepsie’]. Iago is lying about the earlier fit, in order to get rid of Cassio. Any direct confrontation between Othello and Cassio might be catastrophic, so he improvises cleverly, assuring Cassio that this has happened before and that he knows what to do.

(7) 4.1.85-6 [Iago's promise to make Cassio 'tell the Tale anew']. Iago is speaking of the whole period from the wooing to the present—and into the future.

(8) 4.1.132 ['I was the other day talking on the Sea-banke with certaine Venetians']. The conversation was taking place in Venice; ironically, Ridley finds in ‘Sea-banke’ a ‘suggestion of something raised above sea-level’—which might in turn have suggested Venice if Ridley were not so sure that Bianca is a Cypriot householder.

(9) 4.1.274 [Iago's ‘what I have seene and knowne’]. It is quite arbitrary to take this as an indication of ‘long time’.

(10) 4.2.23 ['she’le kneele, and pray: I have seene her do’t']. Othello's remark makes perfectly good sense if he has only ever seen her kneel and pray once, on their first night in Cyprus.

(11) 4.2.1-10 [dialogue between Emilia and Othello]. This is compatible with ‘short time’; Emilia was with Desdemona and Cassio, at the beginning of 3.3.

(12) 5.2.213 ['a thousand times committed']. Othello is speaking wildly, not attempting a sober calculation of what sexual feats a young hotblooded Florentine might manage; still, the exaggeration is less grotesque if the period in question includes the months (up to nine) of the wooing.

To dismiss this horribly long-lived idea that the play depends upon a trick to make its action credible is a critical relief, but historically disquieting—unless we can also see why the theory has had so long a life. Here, rather than simply dismiss it as groundless, we should notice how it is grounded on that willingness to generalise about the audience as a monolithic entity which has resurfaced in the ‘new’ historicism, and on a corresponding interpretative assumption which emerges very clearly in Dover Wilson's Cambridge edition: ‘An accusation of premarital incontinence would not have served either [Iago’s] purpose or Shakespeare's, since adultery was required to make Othello a cuckold, and it is the dishonourable stigma of cuckoldry that maddens Othello once his confidence has gone and, we may add, greatly increased the excitement for a Jacobean audience’ (p. xxxii). This of course raises fundamental questions about what Shakespeare's play is ‘about’, but Dover Wilson tells us, and in terms which show that persisting nineteenth-century tendency to see Shakespeare's Othello in terms more appropriate to Verdi's Othello: in ‘its simplest terms’, ‘the tragedy of Othello represents the destruction of a sublime love between two noble spirits through the intrigues of a villain devilish in his cunning and unscrupulousness’ (p. xxx). These terms are indeed ‘simple’, or simplistic; they deliver a play very much less intelligent than Shakespeare's, not least by preserving the Romantic, Coleridgean assumption that murdering Desdemona would have been all right, or at least compatible with being very noble, if only she had committed adultery.
'We must obey the time', Othello tells his bride: the ‘rites’ she eagerly awaits must wait. But here too critics who are obedient to the myth of double time get into further difficulties. As I observed earlier, there is nothing in 2.3 to tell us—and the accelerated time makes it more than ever difficult to guess—whether the marriage is consummated before the riot, or after it, or not at all. The established assumption is that it is consummated, and some readings—like that in Stephen Greenblatt's immensely influential Renaissance Self-Fashioning—fall apart if we think that it isn’t.

Here it seems worth recording how my own experience ran counter to what critics and editors assume we ‘naturally’ assume. Having seen the play twice as a schoolboy before I ever read it, then read it several times before I ’studied’ it and consulted critics, I had always supposed that the marriage wasn’t consummated. I still thought that in a 1979 article where I refered to the murder as this marriage’s ‘poetic consummation’, giving that word ‘poetic’ the unfairly cruel sense it has in talk of ‘poetic justice’,13 That was unguarded, in assuming what is by no means an inevitable reading, and I found myself prompted to a more systematic consideration in 1983, when Essays in Criticism published an article called ‘Othello's Unconsummated Marriage’.14 The authors, T.G.A. Nelson and Charles Haines, carefully explored the whole question of whether we are to suppose that the marriage is consummated, and concluded that it isn’t. Since they were also arguing that Othello's behaviour is the result of unbearable sexual frustration their reading was diametrically opposed to Greenblatt's, though similarly reductive. Setting that aside, their textual arguments for thinking that the marriage is not consummated were unprecedentedly thorough, but open to three objections.

The first may well seem the most important to readers who assume that consummation takes place in 2.3. Nelson and Haines are confusing ‘stage’ time with ‘real’ time when they say that ‘Othello and Desdemona have hardly gone to bed when a brawl begins’ (p. 4), and that when Othello does, ‘in the end, get back to bed’ (after going off with the seriously injured Montano to tend his wounds), ‘there is, indeed, nothing left of the night’ (p. 5). Later, Desdemona’s touchingly innocent assumption that the ‘pain’ on Othello’s forehead is caused by ‘watching’ (3.3.289) confirms that Othello has spent much of the night looking after Montano, but doesn’t tell us how much. In other words, Nelson and Haines don’t reckon with the complications caused by accelerated time—which is not to be confused with double time. The second objection is prompted by what these critics say of the scene between the clown and the musicians at the start of Act III. Most critics ignore this scene; Nelson and Haines argue, like Lawrence Ross15, that its dramatic ‘point’ is to signal that the serenade is ‘ill-timed, for the even it is intended to celebrate has not yet taken place’ (p. 6). Unfortunately the persuasive argument that the incompetently executed serenade becomes a badly timed, inadvertently mocking charivari is shackled to a far from persuasive argument about Othello’s ‘impotence’ and ‘temporary failure of virility’ (p. 17). The third objection seems to me the most important, and is that Nelson and Haines aren’t sufficiently concerned with the wedding sheets. Because they are disposed—like Leavis and Greenblatt—to pluck out the mystery of Othello by offering a psychologically reductive account of Othello as a ‘case’, their textual argument is weakened by their interpretative assumptions. More precisely, because they are so sure how the failure to consummate the marriage matters, they aren’t sufficiently concerned to specify when it most clearly matters, as the play unfolds. Here those sheets matter, quite crucially.

They evidently matter very much to Desdemona in 4.2—either because she has already lost her virginity on them or because she still hasn’t and still wants to. ‘Prythee’, she carefully instructs Emilia, ‘Lay on my bed my wedding sheetes, remember’ (4.2.105). And when Emilia returns in the next scene to assure Desdemona that she has ‘laid those Sheetes you bad me on the bed’, she receives this unnerving reply:

All's one: good Father, how foolish are our minds? 
If I do die before, prythee shrow'd me
In one of these same Sheetes.
And in the penultimate scene the idea of bloodied sheets is inflaming Othello's mind, as he determines, ‘Thy bed lust-stain’d, shall with Lusts blood bee spotted’ (5.1.36).

Here, if anywhere, is a ‘difficulty’ which threatens to make ‘nonsense’ of the ‘dramatic action’—or, since an interpretative choice is in question, of all those readings which depend upon the assumption that the marriage is consummated. To take an extreme but influential case, Greenblatt's reading altogether depends upon his assumption that Othello 'took' Desdemona's ‘virginity’, ‘shed her blood’, and then not only noticed but became violently obsessed by the condition of the wedding sheets. So, in the final scene the play's 'symbolic center' becomes 'increasingly visible' (not before time, since there isn’t much left) as the raging Othello ‘comes close to revealing his tormenting identification of marital sexuality—limited perhaps to the night he took Desdemona's virginity—and adultery’.16 Yet this throws out a difficulty which Greenblatt doesn’t recognise because his sampling of the text is so partial, and because in offering his curious explanation of why the sheets matter so much to Othello he never explains, or asks, why they also matter so much to Desdemona. Part of the difficulty, put bluntly and indelicately, is that of understanding why, if Desdemona is no longer a virgin, she should want lust-stained sheets relaid. I dare say there is someone, somewhere, who believes that she is wanting to confront her husband with visual proof of her chastity, so that it is a great pity when Othello decides to put out the light. But that only underlines the other part of the difficulty, which is that of understanding what kind of mental defective could first take his wife's virginity and then, the morning after, become convinced of her continued infidelity. Here Greenblatt's reading might well seem to need—or, if it is not to become risible, depend upon—the double time theory which his 'perhaps' discreetly acknowledges. But that theory cannot help here, since 3.3 clearly takes place the morning after the first night in Cyprus, and not even the most convinced advocates of ‘long time’ suppose that Othello and Desdemona are making love between 3.3 and the murder. If the marriage isn’t consummated on that first night in Cyprus it isn’t consummated at all; here the double time theory merely blurs the textual and dramatic issues.

I had better add, since Greenblatt's reading is so influential, that its 'historical' component doesn’t help either. Where Leavis saw Othello as a deluded egotist Greenblatt sees him as a deluded Christian convert who is unhinged by the neurotic-making dynamics of ‘orthodox’ Christian (that is, Pauline) teaching on sexuality: so, the 'dark essence of Iago's whole enterprise’ is to ‘play upon Othello's buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous’ (p. 233). Greenblatt's exposition of the ‘centuries-old’, ‘orthodox doctrine that governs Othello's sexual attitudes’ starts from Jerome's ‘An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife’, and runs through Augustine and Calvin and other ‘orthodox’ warnings like that in the King's Book, ‘attributed to Henry VIII’, that a man may break the Seventh Commandment and ‘live unchaste with his own wife, if he do unmeasurable or inordinately serve his or her fleshly appetite or lust’. In other words, Greenblatt provides an old historicist cento of highly selective quotations which briskly cuts through many complicated historical and theological issues and is most obviously selective where it matters most—at the Renaissance end. There is no doubt that the desert fathers took up the Pauline exaltation of celibacy with an anti-sexual vengeance, and that—despite some dissidents, like the fifth-century Synesius of Cyrene—this then dominated ‘orthodox’ Christian teaching from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries.17 Nor can we soften the force of Jerome's fourth-century application of the stoic Xystus's ugly little maxim that ‘He who loves his won wife too ardently is an adulterer’ (omnis ardentior amator propriae uxoris adulter est) by supposing that Jerome means that pleasure in marital sex should be ardent but not too ardent: in Jerome's majestic view any sexual pleasure is excessive and sinful. But this was not quite the view taken by Peter Lombard and Aquinas a millennium later, when they discussed Jerome's recyclings of Xystus's maxim, as appears in this modern theologian's commentary: ‘The man thus denounced is not, apparently, he who entertains too warm an affection for his wife, but he whose amor (that is, his desire for vernal pleasure—the word here does not mean ‘love’, as we understand it) is so vehement that it impels him to abandon the restraint which pays careful regard to the bona matrimonii, and incites him to treat her as if she were merely, like any other woman, a means of lustful gratifications’.18 On this view sexual pleasure is not sinful per se, although it cannot be
pursued for its own sake without sin—a venial sin when sought within marriage, and a mortal sin when sought outside it. Greenblatt doesn’t make room for Lombard or Aquinas, and quotes Calvin's warning that ‘the man who shows no modesty or comeliness in conjugal intercourse is committing adultery with his wife’ as though Calvin thought on this matter like Jerome; yet Calvin specifically and very sternly repudiated Jerome's argument that ‘If it is good not to touch a woman, it is bad to touch one’—affirming that sexual intercourse is a pure institution of God and that the idea that ‘we are polluted by intercourse with our wives’ emanates from Satan (not Paul).19 Greenblatt quotes from the ‘influential’ Raymond and Jacobus Ungarelli, but what of Luther, of Thomas Becon's The Book of Matrimony, or Erasmus's colloquies on marriage—where there is a direct link, not only with the ‘marriage group’ of Sonnets but with the witty sexual frankness of women in Shakespeare's romantic comedies? After quoting Nicolaus of Ausimo's warning that the conjugal act may be without sin, but only if ‘in the performance of this act there is no enjoyment of pleasure’, Greenblatt solemnly concludes that ‘Few summas and no marriage manuals take so extreme a position, but virtually all are in agreement that the active pursuit of pleasure in sexuality is damnable’—but are we then to conclude that Shakespeare's audiences would have thought that Desdemona's forthright declaration in the Senate of what Greenblatt himself describes as a ‘frankly, though by no means exclusively sexual’ passion was ‘damnable'? And if not, why not?

To return to the textual and critical issue: were it not for those references to the sheets, the question of whether this marriage has been consummated—whether Othello and Desdemona had slept together once, like Romeo and Juliet, or not at all—wouldn’t matter in the same way. It might still occur to us to wonder how Othello could entertain the idea of Desdemona's infidelity if, as Greenblatt supposes, he so recently 'took her virginity' and ‘shed her blood’; but such a worry would still be, as it were, dispersed through the latter half of the play. The references to the sheets—not to mention a strawberry-spotted handkerchief—are what make this worry immediately pressing and alarmingly definite. And that throws out another difficulty, the moment we ask what on earth Shakespeare is up to. I take it that we should ask that, ignoring the protests of those who prefer to talk of plays 'emerging' from 'fields of discourse', like poppies: one reason we don’t argue about how to interpret poppies is that poppies aren’t meant.20 And it seems inconceivable that, in so drastically compressing the Italian novella's time scheme, making Othello and Desdemona newly married lovers and then taking such pains to keep them physically apart, Shakespeare never considered whether this marriage was consummated. If we are to think that it is, Shakespeare should have been no less anxious than Iago that Othello shouldn’t consider (and that the audience shouldn’t notice Othello failing to consider) any physical evidence of Desdemona's virginity—especially in an age when it was not uncommon, after nuptials, to display the bloodied wedding sheets or a blood-spotted (strawberry-spotted!) napkin or handkerchief.

By now we might be relieved that the textual evidence of whether the marriage is or is not consummated in 2.3 is so uncertain. For if we think the received idea that it is consummated throws out too many problems, we are free to prefer the alternative reading. Desdemona wants the sheets to be relaid because she is still a virgin, and still poignantly longs for ‘such observancie / As fits the Bridall’ (3.4.147-8). When Othello determines that ‘Thy Bed lust-stain'd, shall with Lusts blood bee spotted’ he is tormenting himself with the deluded thought of what somebody else has done: as Montaigne might say, another bed, other sheets. Virginity, like a life, can only be taken once: in Othello's diseased, self-tormenting imagination all that remains for him to do—the only way in which he can 'shed her blood'—is to murder her.

In the final scene that horrible tragicomic irony is given a still more dreadful twist. Just as Desdemona could not bring herself to say the word 'whore' in 4.2, Othello tells the 'chaste Starres' that he cannot ‘name’ the ‘Cause’, but will not ‘shed her blood’ (5.2.2-3). ‘Yet lle not shed her blood … Yet she must dye …’: what he is talking about—what he has now changed his mind about—is not whether to kill her, but how. This resolution is still insanely ensnared with his obsessive sense of what he has never done and thinks he can never do—and what his still virginal bride still hopes he will do, as she lies waiting for him on those relaid, unspotted wedding sheets. The murder is indeed this marriage's only consummation, and the ghastly parody of an erotic ‘death’:
Desdemona:
And yet I feare you: for you’re fatall then
When your eyes rowle so. Why I should feare. I know not,
Since guiltinesse I know not: But yet I feele I feare.
Othello:
Thinke on thy sinnes.
Desdemona:
They are Loves I beare to you.
Othello:
I, and for that thou dy’st.
Desdemona:
That death's unnaturall, that kils for loving.
Alas, why gnaw you so your nether-lip?
Some bloody passion shakes your very Frame ...

Her ‘Rose’ is ‘pluck’d’ when the ‘Light’ is finally ‘put out’. I find myself wanting to ask not only Greenblatt but every critic who thinks Othello took Desdemona's virginity not long before, on this bed and these relaid sheets, how they understand Othello's horrible, wrenching words when he realises what he has done and bends over what is now a corpse:

Cold, cold, my Girle?
Even like thy Chastity.

Indeed he has not ‘shed her blood’: that final sniffing and snuffing has been his only ‘possession of this Heavenly sight’. The irony seems obvious, and ‘as grim as hell’.

Notes

5. See the discussion of Shakespeare's treatment of Italian novelle in my Shakespeare's Scepticism (Brighton, 1987), pp. 22-4.
10. The quotations in this paragraph are all from Ridley's discussion in the New Arden edition.
11. In Young Hamlet (Oxford, 1989) Barbara Everett discusses this at length, as ‘one of the best-known and longest-unresolved cruces in the canon’, and proposes that damn’d (Q: dambd) should read limm’d: pp. 208-225. The Furness Variorum footnotes cover five pages.
12. At the outset of *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford, 1988) Greenblatt explains that the “Shakespearean theater” is the product of collective intentions and manifestly addresses its audience as collectivity; it depends upon a felt community, and there is no attempt to isolate and awaken the sensibilities of each individual member of the audience, no sense of the disappearance of the crowd (p. 5).


15. See Lawrence J. Roses, ‘The Meaning of Strawberries in Shakespeare’, *Studies in the Renaissance* 7 (1960) pp. 225-240, and ‘Shakespeare’s “Dull Clown” and Symbolic Music’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17 (1966), pp. 107-28. Curiously, these very scholarly essays both approach the issue that concerns Nelson and Haines by different routes, without pressing to their conclusion. They must have felt Ross was mumbling the game he dared not, quite, bite.


20. See the queer but representative passage in *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (London, 1987) where Graham Holderness explains why ‘We have not … made the personal qualities of William Shakespeare our subject’: ‘with no disrespect to the writer's talents or powers, it seems safer to locate the drama’s play of ideological contradictions in the heterogeneous and pluralistic fields of discourse from which it emerged, rather than to infer superhuman potencies in an “author” whose name may have been, for all we know, legion’. A work of art is worked.

Quotations from *Othello* are from the First Folio; scene and line references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

**Criticism: Language And Imagery: David Lucking (essay date 1994)**


*[In the essay below, Lucking explores Othello's attempts to assess and define his identity.]*

One of the cardinal tenets underpinning contemporary theory in the fields of linguistics, semiotics and literary criticism is that enunciated in Saussure's famous assertion that the relation between signifier and signified is an arbitrary one. Although this intuition is by now indelibly associated with the author of its most celebrated formulation, very clear anticipations of the notion can be detected in the literature of preceding centuries. While the statements to which I am referring are predominantly philosophical in character, in the case of certain works the arbitrary nature of signification does not constitute a theoretical problem only, but is conceived instead as entailing potentially far-reaching consequences for all human beings. We are constrained to use signs in order to compose experience and render it intelligible but, because the signs we employ are only contingently related to the world we seek to impose them on, a radical incongruity between the sign and its referent can make itself felt at any moment. And because as culturally constituted beings we inhabit a world of signification, within the framework of which we formulate our own selves as well as the reality that surrounds us, this means that not only the codes we employ, but in the final analysis our very identities as well, are perpetually in jeopardy.
In this paper I propose to discuss the manner in which Shakespeare explores these ideas in *Othello*, a work that is vitally concerned with the nature of signification and the problematics involved in the interpretation of signs. My argument will be that *Othello* might instructively be analyzed as a dramatization of the existential consequences ensuing from the disruption of a single paradigmatic system of semiotic contrapositions, a system which Shakespeare himself habitually manipulated in the form of puns and other varieties of verbal play. Reduced to essentials, this system consists in the image clusters light/white/fair on the one hand, and dark/black/foul on the other, a structure of binary oppositions which embraces the sphere of values as well as that of physical properties, and which therefore establishes a parallel between otherwise discrete areas of experience. Although in exploiting such a pattern Shakespeare was drawing on a consolidated iconographical tradition, he did so in ways that were very much peculiar to himself, ways which are symptomatic of the critical and profoundly dialectical cast of his thought.

In the European cultural tradition at least, the clusters of words and images I am examining have been more or less consistently employed to refer to concepts which, although heterogeneous in character and even type, are nonetheless considered to be related by some degree of affinity. Light, or its associated colour white, might variously symbolize goodness, virtue, life, reason, order, truth, purity, or faith; while darkness, or the colour black, serves as the emblem of the contrary of all these things. These two image-families thus comprise categories which are mutually exclusive and yet formally related to one another if only in an antithetical sense—which is to say that a term in one cluster might be definable only in inverse relation to a corresponding term in the other. A considerable degree of semantic uncertainty inevitably arises therefore whenever any incompatibility emerges between different associations of the same term, when connotations are invoked which seem to contradict the more customary meanings of the words and hence challenge the stability of the system of polarities these encode. In extreme instances, as in that of the albino whale in *Moby Dick* for example, the physical attribute can become the node or point of intersection between conceptual and emotive complexes which, because they comprehend mutually exclusive properties, are not reconcilable even in principle. In such cases, the sign has become radically ambivalent, transforming itself from vehicle of meaning into mere cipher, designating little other than a semantic vacancy within which conflicting meanings collide.

Through the deft manipulation of the divergent meanings—or simply the denotative and connotative dimensions—of terms belonging to the same cluster, Shakespeare frequently generates an atmosphere of paradox analogous to that which occasions Melville's Ishmael such perplexity. This process can assume a relatively uncomplicated form in which figurative meaning is merely substituted for the literal, as when the Duchess of Gloucester, in the second part of *Henry VI*, responds to public disgrace and the prospect of exile with the lament that henceforth 'dark shall be my light, and night my day'. A somewhat different order of semantic confusion is produced however when multiple connotation is exploited so as to invest words with qualities which are formally opposed to them, thereby making them appear self-contradictory at least on the strictly verbal level. An example of this occurs when Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra*, speaking of the sumptuous banquets to which he has been witness while in Egypt, reports that ‘we did sleep day out of countenance, and made the night light with drinking’. In much the same way, the use of the word ‘fair’ in the sense of beautiful makes possible such elaborate transpositions of meaning as are to be found in Berowne's remark in *Love's Labour's Lost* that Roseline has been born ‘to make black fair’, which provokes in turn Dumain's sarcastic observation that ‘Dark needs no candles now, for dark is light’.

These more or less frivolous quibbles on the various meanings of the words ‘fair’ and ‘black’, together with their respective cognates and synonyms, anticipate a number of very similar puns in *Othello*, where however they assume a rather less innocuous character. While it would certainly be a gross simplification to suggest that *Othello* is a single pun writ large, there is nonetheless a sense in which the manipulations to which the luminary imagery of the play is subjected enact on the verbal level the movement of the play as a whole, just as there is a sense in which the three witches are forecasting the entire course of events in *Macbeth*, and not merely indulging in idle wordplay, when they too announce that fair is foul and foul is fair.
In *Othello*, the symbolic pattern based on the opposition of light and darkness is of course invoked most vividly in the contrast between the Moor's notorious blackness and Desdemona's no less insistently proclaimed fairness. Initially at least, the clear suggestion is conveyed that the physical attributes of these personages might be emblematic of less manifest qualities of a moral or spiritual nature, that there is an essential continuity in other words between the denotative and connotative aspects of the terms involved. It has been argued indeed that Othello's colour would have assimilated him in the mind of the original spectator to what one critic refers to as the ‘exo-cultural stereotype’ of the Moor, and that the Elizabethan audience would have projected onto him certain stock expectations—of lustfulness, credulousness, jealousy, bravery, simplicity, etc.—in relation to which his dramatic identity would necessarily have to define itself. Whether we in fact agree that this strictly racial stereotype figures as a significant factor in our response to the play or not, there seems little doubt that the emphatic contrast of black and white is calculated to appeal to a predisposition, conceptually Manichean in tendency, to construe characters and events in terms of radical dichotomies or antithetical principles.

One of the profounder ironies of this drama resides in the fact that Othello himself, whose colour defines one term in the symbolic polarity around which much of the imagery of the play is articulated, is called upon to fathom the significance of precisely that polarity, upon the understanding of which his sense of self ultimately depends. Othello's fundamental problem is how to construe signs, a difficulty compounded in his case by the circumstance that as a foreigner, comparatively unconversant with the complex customs of his adopted country, he is uncertain what readings to place on signs, and even what qualifies as a sign in the first place. It is this perplexity which puts him at the mercy of Iago, to whom he too ingenuously defers as an authority on the category of signs in question, those having to do with the conduct of a ‘super-subtle Venetian’ such as Desdemona (I.iii.357). His faith in Iago's capacity to interpret such signs with frankness and accuracy is uncritical to the point of being almost culpably obtuse:

> This fellow's of exceeding honesty,  
> And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,  
> Of human dealing ...

(III.iii.263-4)

As his own remarks indicate, however, Iago is not so much an exegete of signs as their accomplished manipulator, who recognizes that there is no inevitable correspondence between sign and referent, and who is therefore able to impose on events whatever constructions suit his evil fancy. It is symptomatic of the immense delight he takes in the ambiguity of signs that he should at one point lower his guard to the extent of swearing by Janus (I.ii.33), and symptomatic too of Othello's enormous naïveté that he should fail so egregiously to take the hint.

The essential character of Othello's dilemma announces itself in the opening scene of the play, when the Moor's trusted 'ancient' declares to Roderigo that

> I must show out a flag, and sign of love,  
> Which is indeed but sign.

(I.i.156-7)

In this remarkably candid statement of intent, Iago is punning among other things on the etymology of his own official title, his military rank being that of ensign—or standard-bearer—a term of which the word 'ancient' is a corruption. In Shakespeare's time the term 'ensign' also meant 'sign' or 'token', which suggests that Iago is not only a bearer of signs by nominal profession, but himself a 'sign' by titular designation as well. As his own private remarks to Roderigo imply, however, there is no connection whatsoever between the signs he parades before the world and the reality to which they purportedly refer. He commends the
shrewdness of those who are only ‘trimm’d in forms, and visages of duty’ (I.i.50), avows that his ostentatious displays of regard for his general are no more than ‘shows of service’ (I.i.52), and protests ‘not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end’ (I.i.59-60). He habitually defines himself and his conduct in terms of negatives, assuring Roderigo that ‘Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago’ (I.i.57), and delivering himself of the portentously cryptic announcement that ‘I am not what I am’ (I.i.65). Othello's ensign thus incarnates what G. Wilson Knight aptly described as the ‘spirit of denial’, a fact which has induced various critics to compare his role to that of Mephistopheles. Another way of characterizing Iago's dramatic function is to say that he insinuates himself into the world of established values as an infinitely mutable sign whose want of fixed referent calls into question the authority of all other signs. As he himself sardonically acknowledges at one point, ‘I am nothing, if not critical’ (II.i.119).

To a very large degree this disjunction between outward conduct and underlying intention extends also to the relation between Iago's covert activities and the personal motives ostensibly prompting them, which means that even the audience—privey to his soliloquies and confidential asides though it may be—is denied a satisfactory understanding of the nexus. As Coleridge was remarking when he alluded in a famous phrase to ‘the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity’, although Iago perfunctorily cites several reasons for his animosity towards Othello, they are not really plausible and probably not meant even to appear so. It is to be noted that even at the end of the tragedy, after his villainy has been unmasked and he has nothing more either to gain or to lose, Iago obstinately persists in concealing his true motives: ‘what you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak word’ (V.ii.304-5). This elusiveness is essential to the function Iago performs within the play, for if Shakespeare had furnished him with a truly credible grievance he would have become less menacing at the same time that he became more human. There would have been a definable relation, though only an inverse one, between appearance and reality or, more specifically, sign and substance. As things stand, however, we are presented with signs in abundance, but nothing definite with which to correlate them. The trajectory of the play is essentially that of the process by which Othello himself, who is dependent to a more than average degree upon the stability of the semiotic order, inexorably falls victim to this indeterminateness.

It has already been remarked that the connotations of the colour images that Shakespeare makes use of in this play do not at first seem to deviate in any marked degree from those traditionally assigned to them. At least in appearance, in other words, the symbolic pattern based on the contrast of light and darkness is both coherent and stable, and consonant in all essential respects with the dictates of convention. An instance of this initial orthodoxy may be found in the commonplace equation of blackness with hell invoked by Iago in the opening scene, when by means of a volley of obscene innuendoes he tries to goad Desdemona's father into taking violent action against the Moor:

\[
\text{Even now, very now, an old black ram} \\
\text{Is tupping your white ewe: arise, arise,} \\
\text{Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,} \\
\text{Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you} \\
\](I.i.88-91)

Although nobody is expected to take the imputation of diabolism seriously, Brabantio is sufficiently influenced by the infernal associations of blackness as to leap to the conclusion that Othello has resorted to ‘practices of cunning hell’ to work his will on Desdemona (I.iii.102). ‘Damn’d as thou art, thou hast enchanted her’ (I.ii.63), he accuses him, several times linking the Moor's dark complexion with the ‘foulness’ of his alleged tactics (I.ii.62, 73).

At the hastily improvised inquiry subsequently held in the presence of the Duke, however, Othello is exonerated from all suspicion of impropriety in his courtship of Desdemona, the girl having according to her
own testimony been won not by ‘foul’ means but by what one senator describes as ‘such fair question, / As soul to soul affordeth’ (I.iii.113-14). From what we learn of his past history and personal disposition, such ‘fairness’ seems to characterize all of Othello’s proceedings. If Iago can accurately sum up his own paradoxical identity in the enigmatic statement ‘I am not what I am’, Othello is quite palpably everything he professes to be—all in all sufficient’ (IV.i.261), as one member of the Senate later puts it. He is, moreover, vividly conscious of this coherence in his personality, confidently asserting even when his conduct falls under temporary suspicion that ‘My parts, my title, and my perfect soul, / Shall manifest me rightly’ (I.ii.31-2). In terms of the moral and spiritual connotations with which colours are conventionally invested, however, this apparently seamless continuity between what Othello is and what he appears to be, his proud and triumphant integrity as a human being, might seem somewhat at variance with his physical aspect as a black man among whites. If white Iago is not what he is, black Othello is only too emphatically what he is, yet it is blackness, not whiteness, that is traditionally associated with the principle of negation. The tribute which the Moor’s notable accomplishments elicit from the Duke contains an implicit recognition of such a reversal, an acknowledgement that the conventional values attaching to colour have, in Othello's case, no application:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

(I.iii.289-90)

This is all very well, but the logical inference is that a sign can, through the multiplicity of its potential meanings, effectively contradict itself. It is precisely this possibility, subversive of the conventions which give codes their meanings, which invest experience itself with its shape and significance, that Iago contrives to exploit. If black Othello can, by identifying him exclusively with the ‘delighted beauty’ of his virtue, be represented as essentially fair, then fair Desdemona can through an inversion of this process be made to look black. ‘So will I turn her virtue into pitch’ (II.iii.351), Iago proclaims as he prepares to transform fairness itself into its diametrical opposite. This radical transmutation of light into darkness has a precedent in Iago's earlier and less ambitious scheme, represented in this case as well as an attack on colour, to mar the tranquillity of Othello's wedding night, ‘poison his delight’, by inciting Brabantio against him:

... though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on ’t,
As it may lose some colour.

(I.i.71-3)

Iago's project, consisting in the systematic inversion of a code, is implicitly an attack upon the possibility of signification at large, and to the degree that signs actually constitute the reality in which human beings live, may be seen as tending toward the destruction of the ordered universe itself.

Iago's sinister power derives from the circumstance that, consisting himself solely of empty signs, he is uniquely aware that there is no inevitability in signs or in their relation to what they purport to represent. Signs can be cast adrift from their conventional meanings, to the infinite confusion of those who inhabit—as all men do—a universe of signs. Such a process of semiotic dissociation is to be seen operating in the symbiotic metamorphosis undergone by the handkerchief which Othello has bestowed upon his wife as a love-token, a ‘flag, and sign of love’ par excellence, but once again patently arbitrary in its character as signifier, and ironically susceptible of being transformed into what seems to be an incontrovertible sign of Desdemona's infidelity. Iago's distinctive rhetoric frequently makes use of the discrepancies that can arise between a sign and its referent, or between the various possible meanings of the same sign. He relishes paradoxes that depend on multiple connotation: Cassio, he remarks for instance at the beginning of the play, is a man ‘almost damn’d in a fair wife’ (I.i.21). The sequence of mildly ribald epigrams with which he entertains Desdemona and Emilia as they are awaiting Othello's arrival in Cyprus reveals how adept he is at juggling
with the various meanings of this crucial word ‘fair’ and its two possible antonyms ‘black’ and ‘foul’:

If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit;
The one's for use, the other using it.

If she be black, and thereto have a wit,
She’ll find a white, that shall her blackness hit.

She never yet was foolish, that was fair,
For even her folly help’d her, to an heir.

There’s none so foul, and foolish therunto,
But does foul pranks, which fair and wise ones do.

(II.i.129-42)

Part of the significance of this humorous interlude lies in the fact that while Iago is exercising his talent for verbal prestidigitation Desdemona is dissembling her anxiety for Othello's safety beneath a false display of levity: ‘I am not merry, but I do beguile / The thing I am, by seeming otherwise’ (II.i.122-3). However irreproachable her solicitude for her husband may be in itself, in other words, she reveals herself capable of exploiting precisely that distinction between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ that Iago's machinations pivot on. For a brief interval she too, like Iago himself, is ‘not what she is’, for she is simulating signs that bear no relation to her actual state of mind, using them to project a persona at variance with her true self. When Othello greets his wife with the words ‘fair warrior’ while Iago's set of variations on the theme of fairness is still vibrating in the air, therefore, the spectator might well register the epithet with a certain diffidence (II.i.182).

Before succumbing to Iago's malevolent influence Othello himself appears to be, as I have remarked, incapable of the least duplicity in his personal conduct. His outward action is always an unambiguous sign for what he ‘really’ is, and Iago is obviously mocking his general's own unexamined assumption when he sanctimoniously declares that 'men should be that they seem' (III.iii.130). The world inhabited by the Moor is essentially one of face values and, when he is confronted even by the mere possibility that Desdemona might be capable of being something other than what she seems, he is driven into a state of mental turmoil which threatens at every moment to erupt into outright insanity. The sensation induced in him as his certitudes begin to crumble is that ‘Chaos is come again’ (III.iii.93), and the inevitable consequence of this impression of general dissolution is that the stability even of his own identity is menaced. He resorts to forms of behaviour that would previously have been totally repugnant to him, presenting a false front to the world, concealing himself according to Iago's instructions, spying, eavesdropping, brooding obsessively over trivial or sordid details, echoing the cheap wordplay of the clown who is his own servant. He absorbs not only Iago's repulsive conception of mankind, but also his distinctive idiom, his predilection for couching his observations in bestial and infernal imagery. It is clear that there is something more in this than sexual jealousy or the sense of outraged personal honour or the anxiety experienced by an unwitting representative of a threatened patriarchal order. More profoundly disorientating than any of these is the intolerable cognitive challenge to which Othello's mental faculties are being subjected, and to which in his simplicity he does not know how to respond. Perceived now solely in the light of Iago's dark insinuations, Desdemona has become for him an incarnate paradox, a fair woman whose whiteness, once the manifest emblem of an immaculate virtue, is now the perverse symbol of its own opposite. ‘O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair’ (IV.ii.69), is the anguished question he addresses to his wife at one point, and his subsequent remarks continue to advert to the same apparent disparity: ‘Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write “whore” on?’ (IV.ii.73-4). Desdemona's conspicuous fairness has thus been transformed into a radically ambiguous sign. She is now ‘the fair devil’ (III.iii.485), a living contradiction for Othello's semiotically unsophisticated mind, an affront to the conventions that make experience intelligible.
Since it is in terms of these very conventions that Othello has defined his own identity, this subversion of meaning has fatal implications for his personal self-conception as well, compromising the integrity of the sign which is his name. Othello's own remarks make the association between his name—or the public self of which that name is the verbal token—and the polarity of light and darkness perfectly explicit:

... my name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black
As mine own face ...

(III.iii.392-4)

Iago is diabolically aware of the critical role played by cultural codes in the constitution of selfhood, and his attack on meaning—in particular on the meaning of personal names—is an attack on identity as well. ‘He that filches from me my good name’, he slyly remarks at one point, ‘... makes me poor indeed’ (III.iii.163-5). Cassio is the first major character to be deprived of his good name through Iago's scheming, and when he expresses his humiliation in the exclamation ‘Reputation, reputation, I ha’ lost my reputation! I ha’ lost the immortal part, sir, of myself, and what remains is bestial’ (II.iii.254-6), he is anticipating Othello's still more critical loss of self. Even Desdemona, accused of harlotry by her husband, is finally driven to the extreme of asking ‘Am I that name, Iago?’—to which the ensign replies with only barely concealed irony: ‘What name, fair lady?’ (IV.ii.120).

Almost for relief Othello, confronted with this growing uncertainty as to the real significance of names and signs, allows himself to be swallowed up in the oblivion of mindless passion, seeking certitudes of a different order in the absolute and uncomplicated darkness of revenge: ‘Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell’ (III.iii.454). Interestingly enough, it is precisely at this juncture of the play, when triumphant darkness seems on the point of overwhelming everything, that a new personage is introduced—in time as it happens to be woven into Iago's ever more intricate web. This is Cassio's mistress, hitherto unmentioned, whose name Bianca might seem to collocate her instantly within a universe of self-contradicting signs. While fair Desdemona is represented as the blackest of harlots, the real harlot is dignified with a name that means white. It is perhaps arguable, however—though this is not the place to pursue the point—that Bianca's appearance, rather than complicating matters still further, in fact heralds the beginning of a restorative movement back towards the clarification of signs and their meanings. Despite her manifest defects she is not an unsympathetic character, and her unrequited devotion to Cassio seems unfeigned; she protests that her life is as honest as Emilia's, and perhaps, according to her ‘lights’ at least, she is right (V.i.121-2).

Such positive notes are sounded only later in the play, however, and in the meantime the momentum of the drama continues in the direction of ever greater perplexity. As I have suggested, perhaps the most ironic aspect of Othello's deterioration is that, plunged without warning into an alien world in which signs have become divorced from their meanings, he too has been severed from his own identity. He has been incorporated into a deeply problematic universe in which things do not even represent themselves, in which the Iago-principle prevails and nothing is what it is. ‘My lord is not my lord’ (III.iv.121), says Desdemona in explanation for her husband's aberrant behaviour, and Iago archly excites Lodovico's apprehensions regarding the Moor's psychological state with the characteristically circuitous observation:

He's that he is; I may not breathe my censure,
What he might be; if, as he might, he is not,
I would to heaven he were!

(IV.1.266-8)

The terrible resolution to exact vengeance seems to act as a stabilizing factor, however, presumably because it affords a precise, if only momentary, focus around which Othello's disintegrating personality can realign
itself. In view of the confounding of colour values that has been taking place throughout the play, it is perhaps entirely to be expected that the invocation of ‘black vengeance’ should be paradoxically associated with light, Othello swearing ‘by yond marble heaven’ (III.iii.467) to punish the supposed malefactors, and Iago calling to witness ‘you ever-burning lights above’ (III.iii.470) when he pledges himself to the same dark purpose.

By the time the Moor actually addresses himself to what he has come to look upon as the ‘sacrifice’ of his wife, he has recovered a measure of self-control and achieved a genuine, though desperate, equilibrium. Among other things, this manifests itself in the restored stateliness of his diction, and in the elevated soliloquy commencing with the phrase ‘It is the cause’ we perceive the more traditional associations of light and darkness beginning to reaffirm themselves despite the symbolic confusion generated by the preceding scenes. Ironically, however, this rehabilitation of colour values is rendered possible only through what amounts to the annihilation of the positive term in that symbolic contraposition which has by now become hopelessly corrupt. If light and darkness can exchange places with one another with such facility that they lose their separate characters, then the readiest and most definitive remedy that an absolutist such as Othello can resort to is simply to eliminate the problematic element in the contrast, by both literally and figuratively ‘putting out the light’:

... yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth, as monumental alabaster;
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; but once put out thine,
Thou cunning pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume ...

(V.ii.3-13)

In thus extinguishing light in the person of Desdemona—who has continued to invoke ‘this light of heaven’ (IV.ii.152) and ‘this heavenly light’ (IV.iii.64) in the final hours of her life—Othello does seem, in his own terms at least, to accomplish his purpose. A semiotic order in continual flux, that for the Moor has been a source only of perpetual confusion, has been stabilized through the simple expedient of giving the world over to a complete and absolute darkness that does not admit of potentially dangerous discriminations:

O heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon ...

(V.ii.99-101)

The irony latent in Othello's effort to impose perfect coherence upon what seems to be the incessantly mutating world of signs lies of course in the circumstance that the dilemma, or at least the assumption precipitating the dilemma, has been a false one, that there has been in fact no discrepancy between Desdemona's colour and her conduct. The process by which Othello is disabused of his enormous error implicates the final reconstitution of a cognitively familiar, though no less terrible world, a world in which the Moor has Ironically justified the infernal associations evoked by his colour at the beginning of the play. Emilia refuses to admit that Desdemona's dying effort to exculpate Othello perjures her soul: on the contrary 'the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!' (V.ii.131-2). Words like ‘filth’ and ‘slime’, denoting substances that make white things black, abound in the dialogue between the Moor and Emilia. Until Iago is unmasked by his wife Othello rather desperately persists in believing that Desdemona was ‘foul’ (V.ii.201),
but in the end he sees the light, in every sense of the expression. Desdemona is once again unambiguously white (‘Pale as thy smock’), even if her pallor is ironically now only that of death (V.ii.274), Iago is at last identified as the real fiend in the piece (V.ii.287-8), and Othello is restored to a world in which the distinction between light and darkness makes some sort of sense.

There is reason to suspect that, in consequence of the delirium of despair provoked in him by the discovery of his error, Othello briefly undergoes a final phase of dissociation from self, and that it is for this reason that he momentarily refers to himself not in the first but in the third person: ‘Man but a rush against Othello's breast, / And he retires. Where should Othello go?’ (V.ii.271-2). Even if this is so, however, it would appear that the Moor's belated recognition of the truth ultimately makes possible, if not the complete restoration of his lost identity, then at least the capacity to perceive himself in relation to that identity. When Lodovico demands to see ‘this rash and most unfortunate man’ the Moor recognizes himself instantly in the sombre epithet, replying ‘That’s he that was Othello; here I am’ (V.ii.284-5). Instead of being ‘not what he is’ (‘My lord is not my lord’), he now perceives himself to be not what he was, and this opens up the possibility at least of forging some kind of link between what he is now and what he has been previously. I would suggest that it is precisely this that Othello is attempting to accomplish in his final speech, which culminates in a suicide that he explicitly assimilates to one of the many colourful exploits in his past. Readers of the play have not always been entirely convinced by Othello's grandiloquent and enormously self-conscious eulogy for himself, which seems to betray, as T. S. Eliot and others have pointed out in disparagement of the Moor, an 'aesthetic rather than a moral attitude' towards himself and what he has done, and thus raises doubts concerning his sincerity.

But since Othello seems always to have identified his personality with his public performances, to the extent that even his courtship of Desdemona has assumed the form of a detailed recitation of his autobiography, it is perhaps only to be expected that under the present circumstances he will try to recapture a sense of the continuity of that personality through the identical means. The Moor is not, in other words, attempting to deliver judgement or render an account of himself in his concluding speech, and still less is he seeking to elicit anyone's compassion. What he is really trying to do is discover, in the final moments of his life, an adequate signification for that complex and fatally compromised sign which is the name Othello. While the question of whether he has fully succeeded in this endeavour doubtless remains an open one, the terse encomium pronounced by Cassio over the body of his dead commander that 'he was great of heart' (V.ii.362) perhaps suggests that his final effort at self-definition has not met with total defeat.

Notes


2. These oppositions have been examined in rhetorical terms by Doris Adler in her article ‘The Rhetoric of Black and White in Othello’, Shakespeare Quarterly 25 (1974), 248-57. Though very different in viewpoint and emphasis, my own argument coincides with Adler's analysis at a number of points.

3. Melville's Ishmael makes this explicit. He refers to the 'elusive quality' which 'causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds'. And specifically adducing the whiteness of the polar bear, he advances a hypothesis according to which 'that heightened hideousness … only arises from the circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in


5. *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.184-5.


8. This and all subsequent references to *Othello* are in the New Arden Edition of the play, edited by M. R. Ridley (London, reprinted 1979), and conform to the lineation of that text.

9. Under the entry ‘Ancient’ the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites *2 Henry IV* (II.iv.120 [II.iv.118 in Craig]) and *Henry V* (III.vi.20 [III.vi.19 in Craig]) as early instances of this usage.

10. Cf. Romeo's lines: ‘beauty's ensign yet / Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks, / And death's pale flag is not advanced there.’ *Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.94-6.


15. The word ‘light’ recurs in a variety of senses throughout *Othello*, sustaining the verbal momentum if not always reinforcing the symbolic implications of the play. See for instance Brabantio's ‘Destruction light on me, if my bad blame / Light on the man!’ (I.iii.177-8); Othello's reference to ‘light-wing'd toys' (I.iii.268); his warning to his quarrelling officers that whoever commits any further act of aggression 'Holds his soul light' (II.iii.165); Cassio's disparagement of himself as ‘so light, so drunken, and indiscreet an officer’ (II.iii.270-1); Iago's observation that ‘trifles light as air / Are to the jealous, confirmations strong’ (III.iii.327-8); Iago's reference to ‘Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behaviour’(IV.i.102); and Lodovico's inquiry with regard to Othello: ‘is he not light of brain?’ (IV.1.265).

16. Although there is no etymological connection between the words ‘delight’ and ‘light’, it appears quite evident that in *Othello* Shakespeare is associating the two words in an imaginative sense at least. The reader might note for instance the contraposition of colours implicit in Brabantio's question to Othello as to whether it is credible that his daughter would have ‘Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight’ (I.ii.70-71). In a similar vein, Iago later remarks of Desdemona that ‘Her eye must be fed, and what delight shall she have to look on the devil?’ (II.i.224-5).

17. The seeming inevitability of the symbolic associations with which the handkerchief is invested does not make its status as a sign any less arbitrary. Lynda E. Boose's ingenious analysis of the emblematic significance of this object, for instance, is not an effort to tease out intrinsic meanings but to recuperate the codes (embodied chiefly in European folk practices surrounding nuptials and in the Book of Deuteronomy) that might have enabled meaning in the minds of Shakespeare's audience. See Boose, ‘Othello's Handkerchief: “The Recognizance and Pledge of Love”’, *English Literary Renaissance* 5 (1975), 360-74.

18. ‘We say lie on her, when they belie her’ (IV.i.35-6). Cf. the clown's quip: 'I know not where he [Cassio] lodges, and for me to devise a lodging, and say he lies here, or he lies there, were to lie in mine own throat’ (III.iv.9-11).

19. A thorough analysis of this latter aspect of Othello's plight is to be found in Edward A. Snow, ‘Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*’, *English Literary Renaissance* 10 (1980), 384-412. To the degree that the patriarchal view of the world itself represents a codification of reality in which
the individual's identity is vested, of course, the potential challenge posed to that order by the empowering of the woman as an active sexual being in her own right might be seen as correlative to the subversion of the luminary code that I am discussing here.

20. For a stimulating recent discussion of the more specifically 'linguistic’ determinants of Othello's dilemma, see Kenneth Gross, ‘Slander and Skepticism in Othello’, *ELH* 56 (1989), 819-52.


**Othello (Vol. 53): Criticism: Social Background**


*[In the following essay, Matheson explores Shakespeare’s concept of life in Venice as portrayed in Othello.]*

In *Othello* Shakespeare represents a society in many ways fundamentally different from his own, and rather than minimizing or obscuring these differences he explores them in a politically creative way. The play is a powerful illustration of his ability to perceive and represent different forms of political organization, and to situate personal relationships and issues of individual subjectivity in a specific institutional context. Here and in much of his other work Shakespeare displays what might be described as a sociological imagination. He portrays in *Othello* not a feudal monarchy or Renaissance court but an enduring Italian city-state, a republic which continued to survive despite growing Habsburg domination in the rest of the peninsula. Taken in the context of his career as a whole the play is a fascinating example of Shakespeare's interest in republicanism, which is evident from ‘The Rape of Lucrece’ to *The Tempest*. It provides clear evidence that he was neither an uncritical advocate of conservative Tudor ideology, as an older critical tradition maintained, nor a writer materially unable to think and imagine beyond the monarchical paradigm, as a more recent historicist criticism has sometimes suggested. In the English context the act of representing a republican culture was itself a progressive gesture, since Venice offered an existing and stable alternative to the ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ order of monarchy. In addition to this, and to a degree not usually recognized, Shakespeare represents the city's institutions exercising a shaping influence on personal relationships and individual experience. These institutions inform and complicate the ongoing process of cultural exchange at the heart of the play, which is *Othello's* attempt to thrive in the foreign cultural world of an aggressive European power, and they also influence the representation of women's experience, which the play suggests would be different in a patriarchal but non-monarchical culture. The play is itself the product of cultural exchange, and Shakespeare's imaginative sensitivity to the ways of a different society generates political energies in the text which carry it beyond the ideological boundaries of official English culture.

The extent of Shakespeare's interest in the institutional life of Venice can be suggested by a comparison with contemporary playwrights. John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (c. 1600) is set in the city but offers little sense of its specific social and political practices. Jonson's *Volpone* (1605) reveals a much greater interest in particular Venetian institutions, and Daniel C. Boughner has argued that Jonson's research for the play was stimulated in part by Shakespeare's recent portrayal of Venice in *Othello*.¹ Shakespeare had probably read Lewes Lewkenor's *The Common-Wealth and Government of Venice* (1599), a translation of Contarini's laudatory exposition of the Venetian state.² Those who wrote dedicatory poems for this volume include Edmund Spenser, who praises not only the beauty of Venice but its ‘policie of right’, and John Harington, who compares it ‘For Freedome’ with the Roman republic.³ Jonson read Contarini for *Volpone*, in which Sir Politic Would-Be reveals that he has hastily studied ‘Contarene’ in order to pass himself off as a Venetian citizen (4.1.40). Boughner has argued that in this play Jonson deliberately undercuts the idealized portrait of Venice in Contarini's work and Lewkenor's introduction. This is a plausible view, since the Venice of *Volpone*
is a greed-driven city where predatory relations are the norm, where the citizens take a Machiavellian attitude toward religion (4.1.22-7), and where the supposedly democratic law courts are venues in which ‘multitude’ and ‘clamour’ overcome justice (4.6.19).

Shakespeare's more favourable representation of Venice may suggest an imaginative willingness to explore the strengths of a republican culture, and may also reflect a sympathy with the political interests of the Sidney and Essex circles, with which of course he had some connection. Members of these aristocratic circles were interested in the mixed government of the Venetian republic, and as Protestants they approved of its steadfast opposition to the authoritarianism of the Counter-Reformation. Some took a specific interest in the work of Lewkenor, who in his address to the reader describes the Venetian state as comprising monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements. The prince has ‘all exterior ornamentes of royall dignitie’ but is nevertheless ‘wholy subjected to the lawes’; the ‘Councell of Pregati or Senators’ is invested with great authority but has no ‘power, mean, or possibility at all to tyranize’; and a ‘Democrasie or popular estate’ is evident in the existence of a ‘great councell, consisting at least of 3000. Gentlemen, whereupon the highest strength and mightinesse of the estate absolutely relyeth.’ Lewkenor's adverb in this final clause demonstrates how terms usually associated with monarchy could slip from their ordinary usage in descriptions of a state with a mixed constitution, and his account is an example of how cultural exchange could destabilize and enrich conventional English political discourse. There is unquestionably a degree of idealization in Lewkenor's discussion of Venice, just as there is in the text of Contarini, but the enthusiasm he reveals is itself suggestive of the political interest the city was generating in England at the end of the sixteenth century.

The governmental structure of Venice may seem to be of only incidental importance to Othello, but in fact it is indispensable for generating the basic dramatic situation, and it influences every personal relationship in the play. In the first act Shakespeare offers a compelling representation of the city's political and cultural life, and his interest in its institutional structure is evident in a variety of ways. There is a notable shift, for instance, to a more explicitly republican discourse than he had used in The Merchant of Venice. In part this might be due to his intervening work with Roman republicanism in Julius Caesar, which seems to have influenced the later play. The councilmen who were simply ‘magnificoes’ (4.1.1 stage directions) in The Merchant have become ‘Senators’ in Othello (1.3.1 stage directions). Other traces of a discourse associated with republican Rome include Iago's early reference to ‘togaed consuls’ (1.1.24), with whom he compares Cassio for their common lack of military experience. Iago may be making a vague reference to classical culture, but he is probably referring instead to the current members of the Venetian council, as becomes clear in the next scene when Cassio uses the republican term ‘consuls’ for the senators who are meeting with the Duke (1.2.43). Iago's words may glance at Rome but can also be read as referring to a specifically Venetian practice. It was widely known that the members of the Venetian council had no military pretensions, and Lewkenor finds it extraordinary that these ‘vnweaponed men in gownes’ should give direction to ‘many mightie and warlike armies’. The practice of employing foreign mercenary officers and generals—by law no Venetian citizen could have more than twenty-five men in his command—was also based on republican principle. Contarini writes that Venetian leaders and armies involved in long wars on land would inevitably fall into ‘a Kinde of faction’ against the other ‘peaceable citizens’. This could easily lead to civil war, and he notes in an analysis identical to Machiavelli's that this problem helped to undermine the Roman republic, since Caesar drew the loyalty of his men away from the state and to himself, and this permitted him ‘to tyrannize ouer that commonwealth to which hee did owe all duty and obedience’. The Venetian policy designed to prevent any conquering Caesar from turning against the republican state opened the way for men like Othello, and owing to its setting in this particular city the play has genuine plausibility.

Perhaps the character most clearly shaped by the institutional life of Venice is Desdemona. In part this influence is traditional, since Brabanzio's household functions on a typical patriarchal model. His rule seems to have been mostly benign, but a specifically political idiom emerges in his spontaneous laments over Desdemona's behaviour: ‘O heaven, how got she out? O, treason of the blood!’ (1.1.171) After he learns that she has willingly married Othello he employs the same political language:
Throughout Act 1 Brabanzio speaks the language of fatherly ownership with a frightening intensity, and he has inculcated in Desdemona obedience to the father's word. But Brabanzio's absolutist regime at home exists in tension with the government of the state, which as the council scene attests is based on debate and consultation. His household is built on the older political model of a corpus, of which he is unquestionably the head, but it exists within a larger political order based on the more progressive model of a res publica, whose participants are citizens rather than subjects, and whose leaders conduct affairs of state on a generally equal footing.

In the council scene Brabanzio uses a kind of absolutist discourse in his address to Desdemona, asking if she knows where most she owes 'obedience', and she replies by saying that what she owes her father is 'respect' (1.3.179, 183). Desdemona's response represents a cultural shift away from her father's conception of the family, with her carefully chosen term 'respect' indicating in part the degree to which she has been shaped by the relatively liberal institutions of Venice. It seems to be a word in some ways specific to the republican context, where it characterizes the tenor of relations among members of the council, and this government has certainly made Desdemona aware of alternatives to the royalist doctrine of unquestioning obedience.

Desdemona herself introduces the concept of a broader cultural order in her reply to Brabanzio before the senators, in which she makes repeated mention of her 'education' (1.3.181)—the only time this word appears in Shakespearian tragedy. This education is partly responsible for her independence, and for the verbal agility with which she disengages herself from the identities constructed for her by her father. The most striking line by which she accomplishes this is 'I am hitherto your daughter' (1.3.184), in which she brings out an instability in the word 'daughter' itself, using it to designate not the natural bond she refers to earlier when she says she is 'bound' to Brabanzio for 'life', but rather a relationship of power in which the daughter is the father's possession as guaranteed by a specific set of cultural arrangements. By using the word in this second sense she implicitly asserts the role of culture in establishing such identities, and thus disturbs Brabanzio's simple distinction between a nature which cannot 'err' and the supernatural order of 'witchcraft' (1.3.62, 64).

The problem for Brabanzio is that the progressive political and economic life of Venice is at work beneath his conservative ideology of gender and paternal relations, and Shakespeare's broad representation of Venetian political life makes Desdemona's capacity for independent judgment and action more convincing. A comparison with the sexual politics of The Merchant of Venice can be instructive here. As Walter Cohen has pointed out Belmont functions in that play as a ‘green’ world inhabited by a traditional landed aristocracy, who in the course of events are brought into contact with the commercial and urban world of contemporary Venice. The central figure of this green world is Portia, ‘a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father’ (1.2.23-4), and one who completely accepts that her father's word has taken away her choice in marriage. As witty and resourceful as she is Portia never contemplates the transgression of the patriarchal decree, and even allowing for the difference in genre her behaviour makes a notable contrast with that of the city-dwelling Desdemona, who does something incomparably more daring. It also happens that Portia is visited by the Moorish Prince of Morocco, who comes in suit to her for marriage, and of whom she says ‘If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil, I had rather he should shrive me than wive me’ (1.2.126-8). The first thing Morocco says to her is ‘Mislike me not for my complexion’ (2.1.1), and when he has departed after failing to choose the correct casket Portia says ‘Let all of his complexion choose me so’ (2.7.79). Next to Desdenoma's cosmopolitan open-mindedness Portia's response looks very provincial, a predictable reaction to cultural otherness from the daughter of a traditionalist aristocracy. Portia lives idly in her great house on inherited wealth, with perhaps the nearest neighbour a ‘monastery two miles off’ (3.4.31); by contrast Desdemona lives in the city which Contarini describes as ‘a common and generall market to the whole world’,
its streets thronging with a ‘wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people’. In this setting the traditionalist gender and racial ideologies of Belmont are on rather more shaky ground, subjected as they are to the pressures of a society moved by the concerns of commercial exchange and with a practical-minded government ready to reward merit rather than birth.

Shakespeare thus represents Desdemona's self-confidence as partly a product of the progressive Venetian culture he portrays in the play. Othello comes to this culture as an outsider, and his association with the city is based on both the government's republican principles and its readiness to seek out those with merit and to pay for their services. Much of Othello's relationship with Venetian culture is determined by the racial prejudice (like Portia's) he encounters there, which Shakespeare makes a deliberate point of portraying in the opening scenes of the play. This prejudice surfaces repeatedly, as in Brabanzio's insistence that the case be heard that very night:

For if such actions may have passage free,  
Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.

(1.2.99-100)

This is one of the earliest recorded uses of ‘statesmen’, a noun which evokes the republican setting of the Italian city-state. (Jonson had used it a few years earlier to name a category of men typified by Machiavelli.)

The limits to popular participation in contemporary republican government are abundantly clear in Brabanzio's speech, in which he apparently alludes to the period when Othello was ‘sold to slavery’ (1.3.137). He also leaves little doubt about his view of Othello's conversion to Christianity, which he evidently regards as a flimsy overlay for an essentially pagan nature. It seems to be Shakespeare's imaginative sympathy for the experience of the cultural outsider, particularly in the hostile environment often created by natives like Brabanzio, which enables him to move beyond the stereotypical images of Moorish people retailed in plays and pageants in England throughout his lifetime. He created this highly original character by imagining Othello in a concrete social situation, and by permitting him to bring to Venice an ideological orientation formed under a different set of cultural institutions.

If one judges this orientation in the context of the Venice Shakespeare represents, Othello emerges as arguably the most conservative character in the play. The rich portrayal of his conservative sensibility seems to be generated in part by Shakespeare's interest in liberal Venetian institutions, and in the contrasts which accordingly emerge as Othello's relationship with Venice unfolds. He finds a model for his personal and political relationships in the tradition of monarchy, and in his first appearance he offers an indication of the degree to which his sense of self has been shaped by this tradition: ‘I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege’ (1.2.21-2). Among the things to which Othello will later bid farewell is ‘the royal banner’ (3.3.358), a detail suggesting once again his experience of a political order remote from the republican institutions of contemporary Venice. Othello's language before the council in Act 1 tends to obscure the economic basis of his relationship with the state, which is accurately described by Iago's reference to their employment in ‘the trade of war’ (1.2.1). Othello has a more nearly feudal conception of this relationship, which he speaks of in terms of duty and religious devotion. He conveys this in his first address to the senators—‘Most potent, grave, and reverend signors, / My very noble and approved good masters’ (1.3.76-7)—where his devotional attitude contrasts with the practical tone of the council's deliberations. Othello positions himself here in the role of devoted servant, and interestingly to the men themselves rather than to the state as an institution. His sense of his relationship with Venice as a personal tie rather than a contractual agreement is also evident when he prefaces a request to the council with ‘Most humbly therefore bending to your state’ (1.3.234), where ‘state’ slips from its usual sense of designating the Venetian republic and refers instead to the personal status of the senators. At one point he likens their council to the judgement seat of the Christian God:
as truly as to heaven
I do confess the vices of my blood,
So justly to your grave ears I’ll present
How I did thrive in this fair lady's love,
And she in mine.

(1.3.122-6)

Some have read this as an ominous passage, as perhaps revealing an unconscious identification in Othello's mind between sexual vice and his love for Desdemona, but more plainly it indicates the hierarchical understanding he has of both political and religious institutions. The deep identification Othello makes in these lines would seem to be between Roman Catholicism and political absolutism, a conceptual integration roughly on the Habsburg model. The council acts in a way which contrasts sharply with the political world as understood by Othello. Shakespeare represents them as a functioning participatory government, with a large measure of equality among aristocratic peers. Brabanzio makes reference to 'my brothers of the state' (1.2.97), an unusual locution which recalls the republican rhetoric of *Julius Caesar*, in which the anti-imperial faction employs the metaphor of fraternity in regarding themselves as the true sons of Rome. The members of the council make no sweeping ideological claims about what is at stake, but engage instead in a business-like attempt to calculate the number of ships in the Turkish fleet. In denying the accuracy of a certain report the First Senator says ‘tis a pageant / To keep us in false gaze’ (1.3.19-20), which suggests the deliberative nature of their government, and their ability to see through theatrical displays of power associated in contemporary culture (and in present-day criticism of Renaissance texts) with imperial and absolutist governments. The practical-mindedness of the council was objected to in the late seventeenth century by Thomas Rymer, who found that Shakespeare's presentation lacked sufficient nobility:

By their Conduct and manner of talk, a body must strain hard to fancy the Scene at Venice;
And not rather in some of our Cinq-ports, where the Baily and his Fisher-men are knocking their heads together on account of some Whale, or some terrible broil up the Coast.14

What Rymer sees as a fault (and exaggerates to make his point) can also be read in terms of Shakespeare's awareness of different political cultures. He may have thought it fitting that the senators of this commercial republic should be less concerned with shows of worldly greatness than with shrewd calculation and getting their figures right.

Certainly the religious character of Othello's devotion to the Venetian cause cannot be found among members of the council, who make no plea of any kind for Christendom. In fact in the context of Venetian culture Othello's religious sensibility seems rather antiquated. More than any other character he invests the Turkish-Christian conflict with spiritual significance, as his attribution of the Turkish defeat to God's will and his plea for 'Christian shame' among the victors makes clear (2.3.163-5). His piety seems to belong more to the era of the Crusades than to the increasingly secular world of sixteenth-century politics, when the powers of Europe were sometimes willing to ally themselves with the Ottoman empire to gain an advantage over other Christian states. Desdemona's sensitivity to this aspect of her husband's character may emerge when she tells Emilia that instead of losing the 'handkerchief' she would rather have lost her purse 'Full of crusadoes' (3.4.26). This is Shakespeare's only reference to this coin, which was stamped with a cross and current in contemporary England, and its name evokes the larger context of religious war in which Othello is involved, and perhaps also his tendency to regard the Christian-Turkish conflict in heroic and romantic terms. Desdemona's reference to 'crusadoes' might thus be read as an involuntary testimony to her sympathetic understanding of Othello's motives.
The character most aware of how Othello's traditionalist perspective makes him vulnerable to exploitation in Venice is Iago. Shakespeare makes a point of emphasizing Iago's role in the Venetian army, whose rigidly hierarchical relations contrast markedly with those within the state government, where the rule is consultation among equals rather than a structure of command and obedience. Like Brabanzio's household, the army and the martial law government in Cyprus have absolutist associations. Marguerite Waller has pointed out how Iago derives a sense of his own value from the military hierarchy—‘I know my price, I am worth no worse a place’ (1.1.11)—and that what he regards as the intrusion of Othello and the Florentine Cassio helps to create the ‘obsessive energy’ with which he plots their ruin. Othello and Cassio are also incorporated into the structure of the army in a way which shapes their subjective experience, but their concept of this institution lacks the commercial connotations of Iago's view. Both tend to regard the army as an instance of the organic community envisioned by the ideology of contemporary monarchy, and the politicized language of love which typifies political discourse in absolutism comes easily to them both. Cassio reveals this in his fall from Othello's favour, particularly in his request to Desdemona to intercede on his behalf:

I do beseech you
That by your virtuous means I may again
Exist and be a member of his love
Whom I, with all the office of my heart,
Entirely honour.

(3.4.108-12)

Cassio's identity is dependent on his place within the institution, though he figures this not in practical political or economic terms but in the language of love, with the term ‘member’ recalling the traditional monopolistic rhetoric of the ‘body’ politic and the organic community. Shakespeare may represent Cassio in this way partly because he is a product of the absolutist government of Florence, which had reverted from its earlier republicanism to the autocracy of the later Medici. In any case the crucial role played by the army in supporting Cassio's sense of self is evident in his use of the surprisingly strong verb ‘Exist’, and in its prominent placement. The play offers an analysis of male identity within the army as profoundly dependent on place and hierarchical relations, and as being distinct in this way from the system of relative equality among members of the Venetian governing class. In the speech quoted above Cassio's discourse of love and duty is suggestive of the personalized politics of absolute monarchy, and at odds with the legalism and practical business relationships of Venetian society as a whole. As a product of this society Desdemona is influenced by these more progressive conditions, and the legal or contractual basis for relationships in the city is evident in her language. She tells Cassio ‘If I do vow a friendship I'll perform it / To the last article’ (3.3.21-2).

Othello prefers to conduct his political relationships in the older language of loyalty and loving service, and Iago plays on this idealistic and somewhat dated vocabulary to exploit him. In the central scene of the play (3.3) he is attuned to Othello's habit of viewing power relations in terms of devotion and love. When Othello threatens to kill him he projects indignation at his general's ingratitude: ‘I'll love no friend, sith love breeds such offence’ (3.3.385). At this Othello retreats, and presently Iago swears himself to ‘wronged Othello's service’:

Let him command,
And to obey shall be in me remorse,
What bloody business ever.
othello
I greet thy love,
Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance
bounteous.

(3.3.470-3)
In the speech partly quoted Iago never mentions love, and that Othello interprets his promise of devoted obedience in this way reveals the politicized nature of ‘love’ in his discourse. The extent to which Othello’s mind is imbued with the monarchical is evident in the despairing language he uses after falling to Iago’s treachery. It emerges in his vow of revenge, ‘Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate!’ (3.3.452-3), in which Othello represents his own subjective world as an absolutist political order. The following image in which he compares his ‘bloody thoughts’ to the rushing Pontic Sea is a remarkable intensification of a conventional Renaissance metaphor for tyranny, in which the boundless ocean is used to figure engulfing despotism.

There is also a religious element in the political discourse Othello uses at this point in the play, as in his accusation that Desdemona’s hand is ‘moist’:

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This argues fruitfulness, and liberal heart.
Hot, hot and moist—this hand of yours requires
A sequester from liberty; fasting, and prayer,
Much castigation, exercise devout,
For here’s a young and sweating devil here
That commonly rebels. ’Tis a good hand,
A frank one.
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desdemona
You may indeed say so,
For ’twas that hand that gave away my heart.

othello
A liberal hand. The hearts of old gave hands,
But our new heraldry is hands, not hearts.
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It is typical of Othello’s deeply conservative notions of service and heroism that he praises the ‘old’ ways and speaks of infidelity in love in terms of the debasement of heraldic signs. His speeches here are an interesting mix of political and sexual discourse, in which he conflates the Venetian tradition of political liberty with sexual licence—another tradition for which the city was widely known. Othello uses the term ‘liberty’ to imply sexual indulgence, and the remedy he prescribes is the very un-Venetian practice of authoritarian religious discipline, indicating once again the distance of his sensibility from the religion and politics of Venice.

One further aspect of Othello’s ideological orientation needs to be mentioned: he has no conception of a world divided into public and private spheres. This is manifest when Iago impugns the fidelity of Desdemona, and Othello responds by bidding farewell to his career in war, uttering in a painful lament that his ‘occupation’s gone’ (3.3.362). Michael Neill has noted Othello’s tendency to make no distinction in his life between public and private roles, and that his reference to ‘occupation’ can be read at a variety of levels both political and sexual. The play seems to suggest in fact that the domestic or private sphere is in the process of evolving as a practical and conceptual category within the broader institutional life of the Venetian state. Francis Barker has argued that a conception of the public and private as autonomous spheres developed mostly after Shakespeare's work in the theatre, and he cites the second scene of Hamlet to support his point. He suggests that in that scene the looming war with Norway, Laertes’ intention to return to France, and Hamlet’s melancholy are all represented as continuous issues within a single conceptual and political order. The scene which invites comparison in Othello is the gathering of the council, in which the Duke responds tellingly to the question of whether Desdemona should be permitted to accompany Othello to Cyprus: ‘Be it as you shall privately determine’ (1.3.275). In Hamlet Claudius involves himself much more conspicuously in the familial debate over whether Laertes should return to France. What Shakespeare seems to suggest in Othello is that the distinction between public and private is more developed in the context of a commercial and republican society. If it is less evident in Hamlet this is probably because in that play he represents a monarchy in which the traditions of feudalism continue to exert an influence. In royalist countries the corporate ideology which Barker finds in Hamlet may have inhibited any sharp distinction between the domestic and public spheres, but
Shakespeare's treatment of the issue in his play about Venice suggests his ability to think beyond the social practices of monarchy, and perhaps also his awareness of how the conceptual order would be different in a commercial state based on citizenship rather than on the older notion of membership in a body politic.

As the play develops Shakespeare shows an increasing interest in the association of Venetian women with the private sphere, and in the different roles they play there. In part this seems to be because the domestic sphere is charged over the course of the play with the displaced energies of state politics, and this politicizes the language of this sphere and the actions and speech of women to an unusual degree. The relative equality of Desdemona and Othello in their marriage is evident in the encounter when she first pleads Cassio's 'cause', in which she adopts the part of a 'solicitor' and establishes the setting for debate and persuasion (3.3.27). Both the legalism of Venice and its consultative government are influences here, and Desdemona brings a consciousness shaped by republican traditions to both her marriage and the more conservative institutional setting of Cyprus. After speaking her mind freely throughout this scene she exits telling Othello 'Whate'er you be, I am obedient' (3.3.90), and thus uses a traditional discourse of submission to male authority only when she has already succeeded in creating a space for negotiation. Much more oppressive is the marriage between Iago and Emilia, in which the husband exerts a despotic control over his wife's actions and speech. In this relationship Shakespeare portrays the private sphere as a place of privation, with Emilia deprived of any broader agency or public role. Her plight reflects Iago's virulent misogyny and his obsession with hierarchical relations, and perhaps also a contemporary republican tendency to masculinize the state and to confine women exclusively to the private order. That Iago believes Emilia has no role in the public world is evident in his rebuke to her for suggesting that some 'villainous knave' is poisoning Othello's mind: 'Speak within door' (4.2.148). But Shakespeare also shows an interest in the private order as the place of women's collective experience, and this is most clearly evident in the 'willow' scene (4.3). Desdemona and Emilia experience solidarity and freedom of speech in this setting, and in the absence of male controls they touch issues of power and desire beyond the range of ordinary discourse. Shakespeare represents them developing a collective consciousness by quietly exploiting the limited freedom of the private sphere, and this scene clearly generates some of the political energy Emilia displays in the final act.

In the last scene Othello is moved not only by his desire for revenge but by what he regards as the requirements of 'Justice' (5.2.17). As it opens he is still the military governor of Cyprus, and he evidently believes the murder of Desdemona to be within the purview of his powers under martial law. Desdemona may refer to his status as the ruler of the island when she says 'O, banish me, my lord, but kill me not' (5.2.85). Othello is thus guilty not only of murder but of the arbitrary exercise of power, and Shakespeare represents his actions as both morally wrong and tyrannical. Othello has himself been tyrannized by Iago, and the character responsible for overthrowing both these tyrannies is Emilia. That Shakespeare chose her as the agent responsible for breaking her husband's domination can be regarded as the fulfillment of a certain logic in the play in which a relationship develops between the women of Venice and the city's tradition of political liberty. The aspect of this tradition focused on in the text is the idea of free speech, which is defined not in terms of modern liberalism but in the contemporary context of monarchical and patriarchal restrictions on utterance, an absolutist context in which political speech is made 'tongue-tied by authority' (Sonnet 66). Desdemona's candid political and sexual discourse before the council is the first evidence of this relationship between women and the city's traditions, and she is associated with such discursive freedom repeatedly in the play, as when Othello says (approvingly) that his wife is 'free of speech' (3.3.189), and when she later tells Cassio that she stands in the blank of her husband's displeasure for 'my free speech' (3.4.127).

In the final scene Emilia uses much the same discourse to bring down the tyranny of her husband. Shakespeare's interest in Emilia in the context of the relationship between Venetian women and political speech emerges much earlier in the play. When Iago implies in Act 2 that his wife is a scold Desdemona defends her by saying 'Alas, she has no speech!' (2.1.106). This is a rather unusual phrase for making the point, and its oddity signals the gradually developing connection between the women of Venice and political expression. When Emilia's speech threatens him at the end of the play Iago tries to return her to the private
sphere: ‘I charge you get you home’ (5.2.201). Having already spoken without male permission in interrupting Montano's address to Othello, Emilia asks the representatives of the Venetian state for ‘leave to speak’:

‘Tis proper I obey him, but not now.
Perchance, Iago, I will ne’er go home.

(5.2.203-4)

What Emilia announces in these lines is a political revolt: in this context ‘going home’ has both its literal meaning and the political sense of returning to a state of complete subordination. Emilia’s disobedience of her husband’s authority will likely have radical consequences, as she is well aware. When Iago again tells her to be silent she again rejects him:

‘Twill out, ‘twill out. I peace?
No, I will speak as liberal as the north.
Let heaven, and men, and devils, let ’em all,
All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak.

(5.2.225-8)

In Emilia’s use ‘liberal’ is completely without the sexual connotations it had in Othello’s discourse, and suggests a freedom exercised with great effort in the face of traditional male authority. Her image of the north wind for the force of a woman’s speech in the public sphere summons up other Renaissance usages in which storm and tempest are metaphors for political upheaval and revolution. And the emerging emphasis late in the play on the solidarity of women makes it possible to take her reference to ‘men’ as designating not humankind but the ruling gender. Like the Venetian woman she serves Emilia seems to be an agent for realizing the city’s political ideals of justice and liberty. Her last words are ‘So, speaking as I think, alas, I die’ (5.2.258), a line which foreshadows Edgar’s closing speech in King Lear, in which he says that the witnesses to the catastrophe must ‘Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say’ (5.3.300). Emilia’s words endow what Edgar says with a significance more clearly political, and they may suggest that Shakespeare regarded such speech as a recourse against both loss and tyranny.

Critical awareness of Shakespeare’s interest in fundamentally different forms of social organization allows this kind of political content in his work to emerge more clearly. Certainly this interest informs Othello, and the tension between monarchy and republicanism charges its language with nuance and political significance. Shakespeare’s representation of a non-European’s life in Venice and of women’s experience in the city is creatively influenced by his awareness of these different systems, and his encounter with the foreign political culture of Venice produces a play that explores and at times subtly endorses ideological perspectives outside the framework established by the monarchical and patriarchal traditions of contemporary English politics.

Notes


8. Walter Cohen, ‘*The Merchant of Venice* and the Possibilities of Historical Criticism’, *ELH* 49 (1982): 777. Cultural historians have pointed out that in contemporary Italy the countryside became a prime area for the investment of urban capital, and this was especially true of the region around Venice. Powerful families who made their fortunes in banking or trade bought estates in the country, and city interests dominated the rural economy. Partly as a result there was a revival of the pastoral genre and older aristocratic ideals, a ‘re-feudalization’ similar in some respects to what was happening elsewhere in Europe. Cohen is right to stress the conservatism of aristocratic culture in the ‘green’ world of the play, though in actual historical terms it was often an instance of the ‘new’ traditionalism. See Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 221-9.


10. See *Every Man Out of His Humour*, 2.6.168.


12. Barbara Everett has noted the conflict between Othello's romanticized view of war and the fact that he is paid to fight by a city known for commerce and secularism. See her ‘“Spanish” Othello: The Making of Shakespeare's Moor’, *Shakespeare Survey* 35 (1982), p. 112.


14. From his *Short View of Tragedy* (1693); quoted in G. R. Hibbard, ‘*Othello* and the Pattern of Shakespearian Tragedy’, *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968), p. 41.


19. The practice of Shakespeare's own culture was closer to that represented in *Hamlet*. On 29 June 1601 William Herbert, third earl of Pembroke, asked the queen through Robert Cecil for permission ‘to go abroad to follow mine own business’. He was still asking for this permission two months later. At Elizabeth's court such royal control over the travels of the nobility was the general rule, and Shakespeare was thus departing from the custom of his own society in imagining a different political practice for contemporary Venice. See ‘William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke’, *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 9, p. 678.

Othello (Vol. 53): Further Reading

CRITICISM


*Compares Shakespeare’s treatment of Moors in Titus Andronicus and Othello, arguing that dominant Renaissance racial views were contested in Othello.*


*Traces Othello’s struggle between the domestic world of Venice and his past as a warrior and outsider.*

Cohen, Derek. “Othello’s Suicide.” University of Toronto Quarterly 62, No. 3 (Spring 1993): 323-33.

*Links Othello's suicide to his ultimate capitulation to the dominant Venetian society.*


*Discusses Arab reactions to and interpretations of Othello.*


*Argues the importance of the female voices in Othello and posits that their speeches play a pivotal role in creating the play's moral landscape.*


*Considers Shakespeare's depiction of Othello in relation to the traditional depiction of Moors in England. Jones argues that Shakespeare exploits the stereotype, but that Othello emerges as an individual whose weaknesses are attributable to human nature.*


*Explores the transformation of the meaning of Othello's race throughout the play.*


*Discusses race and feminist ideology in Othello.*


*Examines race and femininity in Othello, arguing that the play is centered around miscegenation.*

Reexamines the racial nature of Othello from the perspective of post-colonial African writers.


Considers emerging ideas about self and their relationship to concepts of slavery and race in Othello.


Argues that both Desdemona's father and Othello are obsessed with the concept of absolute goodness, which they ascribe to the character of Desdemona.

Othello (Vol. 68): Introduction

Othello

Often described as a tragedy of character, much of the critical commentary of Othello focuses on the main characters of the play—Othello, Iago, and Desdemona—and their relationships to one another. Other areas of scholarly interest include the role of race and racism in the play, as well as gender roles and relationships. One of Shakespeare’s most frequently performed plays, modern film and stage adaptations of Othello also reflect these critical concerns.

Scholars have not reached a consensus on Desdemona's character. S. N. Garner (1976) finds that just as the other characters in the play see Desdemona as either pure and perfect or as Venice's “cunning whore,” so do many modern critics. Garner finds, however, that Desdemona is much more complex than either of these views, and that an interpretation of the play's meaning depends as much on an accurate understanding of her character as it does on understanding the characters of Iago and Othello. Shakespeare depicted Desdemona as neither pure nor corrupt, Garner maintains, but as a women possessing a full range of human emotions. Other critics focus on Othello's character and on his relationship with Iago. Arthur M. Eastman (1972), for example, identifies a marked similarity between Othello and Iago in that they both approach the world as ironists. Eastman explains that as ironists, they assert their authority by addressing situations from a position of concealed power. It is this affinity between Othello and Iago, Eastman contends, that allows Iago to manipulate Othello successfully. Derek Cohen (see Further Reading) centers his study of Othello on the character's suicide, tracing the political and psychological factors contributing to Othello's mental state. The critic views Othello as a pawn of white domination and demonstrates the way in which he is used by the Venetian state to sustain its dominion over its black foes, and used by Shakespeare to portray the dangers of miscegenation.

Like Cohen, G. K. Hunter (1967) also investigates the role of race and racism in Othello. Hunter reviews the notions Elizabethans held about foreigners in general and blacks in particular, finding that there existed a widespread association of blacks with sin, wickedness, and the devil. According to the critic, Shakespeare did not present Othello as a stereotypical black character, and contends that it is the darkness of Iago's soul that ruins Othello. James R. Aubrey (1993) also examines Elizabethan views regarding blacks, noting that blacks were often associated with monsters. Aubrey demonstrates that Othello's character is fashioned in such a way as to exploit this association, and thereby heighten the response of early audiences to Othello's character. Arthur L. Little, Jr. (1993) studies the way in which the play emphasizes a connection between Othello's “otherness” and sexual subversiveness. The critic also examines the way in which the audience and the other
Othello's treatment of Desdemona is at the center of many critical studies exploring gender roles and relationships in *Othello*. Carol Thomas Neely (1985) demonstrates the centrality of the marriage bed and the consummation of the marriage in the play. Neely finds that such a focus on the couple's sexual relationship reveals that marital love is the play's main theme and that the primary conflict is between men and women. Furthermore, Neely associates the fueling of this conflict with the fact that the men's sense of identity and self-worth is dependent not only on their relationships with women, but on the bonds developed with other men, who honor another one's reputation. By contrast, the critic contends, the women in the play are relatively indifferent to reputation, and in part free from the jealousy and competitiveness that impair the men. An analysis of the bonds between males also figures prominently in Ruth Vanita's 1994 essay. Vanita examines the complicity of male society in the murders of Desdemona and Emilia. The men fail to intervene on behalf of the women, according to Vanita, because they believe that the husband/wife relationship is distinct from other types of human relationships. Valerie Wayne (1991) takes another approach to the topic of gender roles, maintaining that the play presents a range of ideologies concerning women and marriage, and that this reflects English Renaissance culture, where multiple discourses on women and marriage were also available. Wayne argues that the misogyny in *Othello*, for which Iago serves as the primary mouthpiece, represents just one of the prevailing views of the Renaissance.

Gender and race relations also play a significant role in modern stage and film productions of *Othello*. Sharon Friedman (1999) compares Othello with Desdemona, Paula Vogel's revision of Shakespeare's play, examining in particular the way in which Vogel dramatized the threat posed by female desire and questioned conventional categories associated with virginity and faithfulness. Judith Buchanan (2000) reviews a 1995 film version of *Othello*, directed by Oliver Parker, starring Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago. Buchanan investigates the ways in which the film constructs “otherness,” showing that Fishburne's Othello is a man willing to announce his resistance to Venetian society, and hence, his otherness. Buchanan also studies the way the film manipulates the subjective gaze, and contends that the film encourages the voyeuristic viewing of Othello's own self-observations. Another recent film adaptation of Othello, *O* (2001), is reviewed by Peter Travers (2001), who finds the film a flawed interpretation of Shakespeare's play, but one worth seeing nevertheless. Specifically, Travers criticizes the film's reliance on plot mechanics borrowed from Shakespeare that do not make sense given the film's modern context.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Arthur M. Eastman (essay date 1972)**


*[In the following essay, Eastman investigates the similarities between the characters of Othello and Iago, maintaining that since both approach the world as ironists, Iago's efforts to corrupt Othello are successful.]*

When we think about it, it is scarcely less extraordinary that Othello should submit himself to Iago's tutelage, turn his love into hate, and destroy Desdemona, then himself, than that he and Desdemona should have transcended the barriers of race and age and culture in the first place and boldly entered into their ecstatically intuitive union. Iago is diabolically skillful, of course, and the marriage *was* quick, denying in its brevity of courtship the richness of familiarity that might have withstood the Devil himself. We recognize, too, Othello's role as alien, his radical ignorance of Venetian society, his military simplicity, and his proven faith in “honest” and bluff Iago. All these things bear on Othello's transformation, but they do not get to the center of the mystery. The center of it—the psychological center, at least, if not the archetypal, religious, or
dramaturgic—may be this: that just as beneath all their multitudinous differences Othello and Desdemona shared some essential identity that made them one whatever the worldly odds might be, so between Othello and Iago there obtains “an unfortunate affinity” (Schlegel's phrase) by means of which, despite the extraordinary differences between them, the Ancient practices upon and destroys his master. Van Doren observes that

Nothing that is in Iago is absent from Othello, though there is much in Othello of which Iago never dreamed. It would be misleading to say that Iago is an extension of Othello, for Iago is complete in himself. But it may be illuminating to point out that the response of one to the other is immediate, or if not immediate, sure.

Iago, we might say, is able to find his way to Othello's heart by looking within his own.

The thing he finds there is a way of addressing his world that is for him, and Othello, temperamentally necessary. It is the ironist's way. It is the asserting of authority by confronting situations from a position of partially or totally masked power. Partial masking serves to remind the potential adversary of power which he knows but which in the circumstances he may have overlooked. It is an oblique display of recognized force. Total masking occurs when there is no immediate need to assert control, and its value to the ironist is that it multiplies his power. Socrates' wisdom gained potency from his mask of ignorance and the ace in a poker game gains potency from being buried. The might of a platoon of armed men is augmented by the surprise of ambush. Totally masked power is multiplied power kept in reserve, the knowledge of which secures the ironist in his authority.

From first to last Iago is an ironist. He contrives his life to appear other than he is—cold-blooded, self-seeking, amoral, sexually pathological, and obsessed with envy—so that what he seems becomes an ambush from which he destroys his enemies and plumes up his will in double knavery. Othello is necessarily an ironist in his vocation. As a general he must be able to confront his enemy with shows that conceal his real strength. He must keep decisive power in hidden reserve. He must betray his enemy into false estimates of his plans, strength, and disposition. But Othello is also an ironist in non-military relationships. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that his life is all military. He approaches it as a battle, himself against a potential enemy, with victory assured, should hostilities break out, to the side that manipulates its power and appearance of power most effectively.

Shakespeare has been at pains to make this clear at the outset. Iago warns Othello of Brabantio's strength. Othello replies: “My services which I have done the signiory / Shall outtongue his complaints.” Here is an unironic consciousness of recognized power: there is no question on either side about the nature of Othello's services. But the irony enters immediately:

'Tis yet to know—
Which, when I know that boasting is an honor,
I shall promulgate—I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege ...

Here is power in reserve, the hidden royalty, knowledge of which fortifies Othello in his conflict with Brabantio.

Shakespeare does not isolate this first revelation. The ironic temperament shines through a few moments later in the oblique intimation of recognized strength, “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.” And it appears again at the end of the scene. Brabantio has arrested Othello. His men move toward Othello's party, their hands on their swords. Othello's men prepare for resistance. Before the fray can begin, Othello stills it, turns to Brabantio, and asks: “Where will you that I go / To answer this your charge?” The irony of
the situation is marvelous and of Othello's contriving. The general is apparently surrendering to the enemy, making the speech of conciliation, ready to accept the unavoidable terms. Even as he bows toward the yoke, however, hidden power is at his beck to snatch victory from defeat. For Othello's question is not candid. He knows the Duke has sent for him, that affairs of state demand his presence at the Senate, that Brabantio's cause must give way, for the moment, to the call of military council. Othello might have told this to Brabantio. Instead, the question, the trap. And Brabantio walks into it: Othello must go to prison.

What if I do obey?
How may the Duke be therewith satisfied,
Whose messengers are here about my side
Upon some present business of the state
To bring me to him?

Othello contrives his life to have authoritative power or knowledge in hidden reserve. He stands before the Senate, accused of witchcraft. Though he knows that he comes of royal seige and feels that he may speak unbonneted to the best, he addresses them with ceremonial humility: “Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors, / My very noble and approved good masters.” Like a Southern Senator unaccustomed to public speaking, he proclaims that he is “rude” in speech. To explain his inadequacies in “the soft phrase of peace,” he reminds them of his lifetime of broil and battle. The stated purpose is to explain a non-existent inadequacy; the ironic effect is to remind his listeners of his military prowess and their need of him.

Othello tells his tale in the quiet consciousness of his unknown royalty, the need the state has of him, the testimony Desdemona will make in his behalf. These things he keeps in reserve. The tale itself is an ironic and progressive revelation of hitherto hidden things—a marshalling of authoritative knowledge that saves the day. It begins by revealing that Brabantio had loved Othello, “oft invited” him, “still questioned” him: the accuser had himself created the occasion he now bemoans. The body of the tale puts the Senate in Desdemona's place, carries it through strange lands, moving accidents, hair-breadth 'scapes, until it is similarly bewitched. “I think this tale would win my daughter too,” says the Duke. Othello's private knowledge of the nature of his wooing, in other words, turns into persuasive strength on his behalf. And finally, most devastating revelation of all and most powerful as it evokes the admiration that men confer on those of their sex conspicuously successful in love, Desdemona was herself the wooer:

My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs.
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
That Heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story
And that would woo her.

Both Othello and Iago are ironists. Within certain important limitations, they tend to think and feel in the same ways. The elements that Iago finds within Othello, by looking within or projecting himself, are these: first, a sense of authority from the ironist's superior power or knowledge in a conflict situation; second, an almost overpowering frustration when one is denied this superior knowledge—either by conscious ignorance of the salient elements in the situation or by finding that one is the victim of another's irony; third, a general tendency, which under the stimulus of frustration may mount to compulsion, to confront or manipulate situations so that one achieves ironic mastery—by reserving knowledge, by finding knowledge hidden from others, by posing as ignorant where one has knowledge or as weak where one is strong; and fourth, a tendency to project one's own nature, to assume that others also confront life ironically.
Iago's irony is inhibited only by the prudential concerns of psychopathic self-centeredness while Othello's irony, initially, is moral. “The Moor is of a free and open nature” not because he lacks a feeling for irony, but because his own irony does not hit below the belt; not because he lacks subtlety but because he lacks dishonesty. Similarly, the motives governing their resort to irony differ. For Iago irony is compensatory. It bridges the gap between his self-esteem and the place accorded him by the world. Irony becomes for him both a means and an end, a means of getting what he wants, whether Roderigo's money or the downfall of his enemies, but an end as the very act of irony indulges his self-importance. Othello, at least at first, needs no such compensation, for in most respects the world agrees with his self-judgment. For Othello irony is primarily a means, a prudential approach to potential danger, and, as an end, it signifies not self-importance, though there are occasional hints of self-indulgence, but self-confidence. Yet whatever the ultimate causes and however different the morality and motives, the basic tendencies are the same. From his secure intuition of these Iago projects his plot.

Iago's strategy is first to deny and then to provide Othello with the superior knowledge the ironic temperament needs. The strategy gets its test in the attack on Cassio. The alarum has sounded; the general has risen from his bed, stands before Cassio, Montano, and “Honest Iago, that look'st dead with grieving.” What does happen is step one in the strategy: Othello is forced into conscious ignorance. Neither Cassio nor Montano can speak and Iago will not. Othello is not simply in ignorance; he is ignorant where others have knowledge, and knowledge that, as commanding general, deeply concerns him. His blood begins his safer guides to rule. Now it is Iago's turn to speak, and so to speak that Montano will credit his integrity, Cassio his loyalty, and Othello find the authoritative knowledge toward which his temperament inclines him. Playing the role of one reluctant to give his friend away, Iago protests Cassio's decency too much. And Othello seizes on the hint: “I know, Iago, / Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter, / Making it light to Cassio.” Iago has not made it light, but Othello, projecting his own tendency to keep knowledge in reserve, sees Iago doing the same. Compelled by his initial frustration, Othello vaults to the compensating and satisfying certainty, composed partly of truth, partly of falsehood, that Iago has prepared for him. Secure in the true knowledge of Cassio's guilt and the false knowledge of the extent of that guilt, Othello sacks his lieutenant.

With his strategy approved by its baptism of fire, Iago is prepared to attack the marriage itself. Why the marriage? For many reasons, undoubtedly, but among them, these three. First, Othello is vastly ignorant about Desdemona and marriage, a point generally recognized. Othello's ignorance is his Achilles' heel. Second, Iago's temperament, both jealous and ironic, finds the poetic justice of it satisfying just as Othello will find a gratifying propriety in strangling Desdemona in her bed, “even the bed she hath contaminated.” Third, Iago knows from his own experience both the frustration of marital suspicion and the compulsive tendency toward a knowledge that remains unverifiable, unstable, and unsatisfactory. If the jealous man is inevitably doomed to spiritual malaise, the jealous ironist is doubly damned. Doubt opens the gate to the frustration of conscious ignorance, the worse frustration of feeling oneself the victim of others' irony—and such is the common way of thinking, the frustrations are not momentary: once to be a cuckold is always to be a cuckold, always to be the ruled rather than the ruler of a power complex. Fourth, Iago knows in the marrow of his own jealous nature that when marital doubt arises, the cards are stacked in favor of the assumption of guilt. If one assumes innocence, one continues to be vulnerable, which is, to the ironic temperament, impossible. If one assumes guilt, however, one cannot be hurt further. One knows, and knowing, one is in a sense impregnable. Iago knows the frustrations and the compulsion toward assuming guilt. He knows, finally, the intolerable instability of that assumption. If one cannot verify it, if one cannot get ocular proof or admission, one's power is insecure. One has trumps that no one else will recognize. Like a man in a nightmare, one has strength and uses it, but the door will not open, the enemy will not fall. So, nagged by the knowledge that the assumption of guilt may be false yet driven to that assumption, and thwarted in realizing the mastery that the assumption should provide, the jealous ironist finds in neither poppy nor mandragora the sweet sleep he owed yesterday.
Iago adapts his attack to Othello's temperament. His first words, “Ha! I like not that,” suggest an ulterior knowledge that places Othello in ignorance. Othello, only partly attentive, asks, “What dost thou say?” and Iago, overly protesting the unimportance of his exclamation as he had overly protested Cassio's decency, baits Othello's predisposition to find out hidden knowledge: “Nothing, my lord. Or if—I know not what.” Was it not Cassio that parted from Desdemona?

Cassio, my lord! No, sure, I cannot think it,
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing you coming.

But it was Cassio. And he did steal away guilty-like. Othello feels a vague unrest. If Iago thinks Cassio would not, should not steal away, then there is something more here than meets the eye. Some kind of knowledge lies back of these exclamations and disclaimers, this unwillingness to accept the truth. In a quiet way, Othello's frustration has begun. Shall he call back Cassio? The ironist wants power in reserve. And the frustrated ironist needs that power to the extent of his frustration. Othello demurs. Iago has gained a foothold on Othello's mind.

Slowly, carefully, Iago teases Othello into a sense of his own ignorance; slowly, carefully, he sets up the counters on which Othello's mind, driven toward knowledge, will close. When Othello, progressively irritated by Iago's echoes, “As if there were some monster in his thought / Too hideous to be shown,” asks to be released from ignorance—“If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought”—Iago, sensing that the frustration is not strong enough, retreats from the question but dangles before Othello further suggestions of secret intelligence. And step by step Othello follows until his frustration flares out: “By Heaven, I'll know thy thoughts.” The time has come for Iago to force the corrective knowledge home: “Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy.”

Othello is rescued from ignorance and is again secure. The knowledge he has gained, however, is not of Desdemona's dishonesty; it is simply of Iago's suspicion. In the quenching of his frustration, he relaxes into quiet confidence, unaware that his new knowledge is as flawed as his knowledge about Cassio's guilt, unaware that Iago has led him into admitting question of Desdemona's chastity. Though he does not know it, his ignorance, his temperament, and Iago's guile already doom his security forever.

Iago's job is now to fan the flames of new frustration by directly convincing Othello of his own ignorance about Desdemona and by suggesting that Othello is the victim of adulterous irony. He does it skillfully. First the argument from personal experience, which depends on a kind of knowledge Othello cannot have:

I know our country disposition well.
In Venice they do let Heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands.

Then, the twin arguments of Desdemona's deceit: she deceived her father and she showed Othello fear when she felt love. As the flame mounts, Iago breaks off, but when Othello tries to gain certitude, seeking within his heart and experience for the truth with which to confront these doubts, Iago will not let him. With each solicitous fear that he has dashed Othello's spirits, he keeps Othello emotionally off balance and subtly evokes the ironist's predisposition to accept guilt as fact. With very few words more he achieves his goal. “Why did I marry?” cries Othello; “This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds.” The conviction grows as Othello seeks out the hidden knowledge to give him mastery:

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 …
She's gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her.

Doubt withers away as the conviction becomes, momentarily, absolute:

'tis the plague of great ones ...
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.
Even then this forkèd plague is fated to us
When we do quicken

When Othello returns, he is on the rack. Each slightest realization of his new knowledge becomes an agony of frustration. As he imagines Desdemona's stolen hours of lust, he finds his assumption of guilt inadequately supported by knowledge: “'tis better to be much abused / Than but to know 't a little.” As he finds Cassio’s kisses on Desdemona's lips, he tastes the bitter fruit of another's irony. The pain of these unfolding realizations forces doubt upon Othello: “Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore.” The doubt, alas, is at best a forlorn hope—is, in fact, little more than procrastinated belief, a shrinking from and a testimonial to the inevitable. Intuiting this, Iago floods Othello's mind with images of sexual guilt. As Othello stares in fascinated revulsion—at pictures of himself, the supervisor, grossly gaping on while Desdemona is topped, of Cassio and Desdemona "prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride”—his very act of imagination is an act of acceptance. When he demands “a living reason she's disloyal,” he is no longer challenging the fact. Like a hanging judge, he is simply asking evidence to support the predetermined verdict. The businesses of the dream and the handkerchief satisfy the demand.

Iago's temptation and Othello's fall have been presented. The catastrophe looms in the offing. In between Shakespeare focuses on the workings of Othello's temperament, on the dynamics of jealousy as it operates, under cynical tutelage, in a highly imaginative mind habituated to ironic consciousness of power. In Act II Shakespeare had shown Iago listening in on the exchange of courtesies between Cassio and Desdemona. Iago's asides tainted the scene with cynical malevolence:

He takes her by the palm. Aye, well said, whisper.
With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Aye, smile upon her, do, I will gyve thee in thine own courtship ... Very good, well kissed! An excellent courtesy! 'Tis so indeed.
Yet again your fingers to your lips? Would they were clyster pipes for your sake!

Now, in Act IV, it is Othello who stands outside a friendly exchange, sustaining his need for authority by cynically misconstruing its meaning, breathing out hate and threats:

Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber.
Oh, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to.

Othello has sunk to Iago.

In his degradation he is true to his temperament. He is the dupe of adultery, hence the butt of others' power; but because he knows and because his knowledge is concealed from those who have hurt him, he has again something of that reserve strength the ironist needs. His realization of this strength wavers, however, for, as we have seen, he can feel it intensely only as he simultaneously senses in all its bitterness the source of that strength, which is his own ignominy.

It is such a bittersweet realization that Iago offers when he has Othello spy upon his conversation with Cassio. Othello watches and suffers, watches and feels his power wax. Predisposed to know rather than doubt, predisposed to project his own temperament on others, he twists Cassio’s every motion into confirmation. And
like Iago earlier, he gains power from a knowledge of which his victim is ignorant, the knowledge of his own feelings and motives, now inflamed by his kindled shame. In his threat, Othello momentarily realizes the strength he relies on.

Since this realization is twinned with shame, however, it is unstable, and as Cassio leaves, reaction sets it. Othello's mind drives back on his ignominy, on the transparent ease with which he has been duped, on the naïveté of his trust in Cassio, on the sickly sweet folly of his love for Desdemona. In his agony he feels, too, a deeper vision, a tragic and impersonal sense of Desdemona's lost perfection. Simultaneously to feel these things, however, is to be torn apart. Othello cannot say “let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight” and “O, Iago, the pity of it” and remain whole. To escape from this emotional torment, he smothers his sense of the tragic. He asserts his ironic temperament over his deepest apprehensions of life's meaning. By the end of this episode Othello has reasserted his mastery and strengthened it with the will, born of shame, to strangle Desdemona.

Even now, however, his mastery is but momentary. Not only does his sense of power depend on a sense of shame too painful to be steadily realised, but his power must be recognized or susceptible of recognition before it is secure. Othello must test his power. Hence the brothel scene. What Othello seeks is a guarantee to his conviction, not a discovery of innocence, and he seeks it in the masochistically ambivalent way already defined, tormenting himself to satisfy his corrupted imagination.

Emilia provides no satisfaction. Her attitude, in fact, threatens Othello's conviction, for it denies the very premise on which his strength is built. But he does not yet feel much frustration, for Emilia is “a simple bawd” and Othello has to do with “a subtle whore, / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets.”

Othello begins his interview with Desdemona in ironic mastery. He is a customer, she a whore. They know the secret promptings of the flesh, these two. Then he shifts from the initiate to the outsider, the sardonically indignant justicer, his language still ironic, still making Desdemona the pawn of his bitter conviction:

Othello:

Why, what art thou?

Desdemona:

Your wife, my lord, your true and loyal wife.

Othello:

Come, swear it, damn thyself …

Swear thou art honest.

Her protestation of innocence but intensifies his conviction of her guilt and of what she has done to him. Momentarily, like a man standing outside of himself yet looking in, Othello tries to come to terms with his estate. He could have borne pain, poverty, captivity—

But, alas, to make me
A fixed figure for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving finger at!

This is the ironist's response to Othello's condition, the sense of humiliation. But deeper than the ironic vision is the tragic, the sense not of humiliation, but of utter, unredeemable loss. Once again this surfaces:
But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence!

Yet even as Othello contemplates his tragedy, revulsion floods through him:

to be discarded thence!
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in!

His attention rebounds from the destruction of his life to the destroyer, and with that shift, his ironic pride reasserts itself. “I hope my noble lord esteems me honest” meets for reply “Oh, aye, as summer flies are in the shambles, / That quicken even with blowing.”

To this point Othello has not really tested his power. He has asked, he has made his charge, but his sense of his loss, his sense of the pity of it, has dominated his mind. Now, when Desdemona cries out, “what ignorant sin have I committed,” he suddenly finds himself facing nightmare. He had built a universe out of self-confidence and love only to have it destroyed. He has built another out of the ruins, one founded on pain, a suffering universe but an ordered one. And this woman who ruined the first will ruin the second, will deny its existence, will mock him with her insistence that the first world was the true one. Othello cannot surrender his certitude, for that would be to invite a second chaos, but in his torture and frustration he strikes out. He seizes on the ambiguity of “committed” and wrathfully demands,

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write “whore” upon? What committed!
Committed! O thou public commoner!

When he can still obtain no confession, no corroboration of his conviction, Othello ends the interview as he began it. To maintain his universe and his own suffering authority over it, he returns to the acted irony, the leering insistence on shared knowledge of guilt:

I cry you mercy …
I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
That married with Othello.

When Othello first succumbed to Iago’s temptation, he knelt down and “by yond marble Heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow,” swore his revenge. When Iago proposed that he strangle Desdemona in “the bed she hath contaminated,” Othello replied, “Good, good. The justice of it pleases.” Now, as he stands over his sleeping wife, it is as justicer. Why? The reasons are in part religious, but they are also temperamental. When Othello swore his vow, he was putting himself in a position of power, both as his reverently sworn intent was knowledge denied Desdemona and Cassio and as he thereby enlisted in the cause of divine justice and thus became its agent. When he was gratified by the poetic justice Iago proposed, he was realizing a sense of providential strength: the all-powerful forces of the universe bring about their justice with ironic propriety, and Othello found himself, as it were, partaking of divine knowledge, divine intent, divine strength as he planned strangulation in the very bed of shame. At the bedside he is supreme. His conviction is absolute, his intent gives him the fullest realization of that conviction, and in his identification of his own purposes with the moral order of the universe, he has purged himself alike of the lust he had imaginatively shared and the sense of shame, powerlessness, and frustration hitherto concomitant with his mastery.

The strangulation scene is in many ways the brothel scene all over again. Again Othello puts his power, now religiously enforced, to the test; and again the test fails. Again he begins in ironic, though impersonal, control; again the control is threatened, and again his passion erupts, nullifying the religious reinforcement, to destroy
the thing that threatens him. Othello destroys Desdemona, it seems to me, to save himself, to assert for the last
time against the challenge of her adultery and her protested innocence his own mastery.

As the play draws to a close, Iago, by his final act of sealing his lips, remains true to his temperament and
maintains his power over those who would exort confession from him. Othello, at the end, likewise remains
true to his ironic nature. He has struggled out of chaos only to find chaos again in Emilia's dying revelation.
Now he builds anew, rapidly, for the true order is but the old one turned upside down: his is the damnation,
not Desdemona's; hers is the purity, not his. This discovery, though, and the suffering that has gone into it
change Othello's relation to his world. He is beyond it now, invulnerable. Other men cannot touch him. When
Gratiano tries, Othello begins to respond as of old, bringing forth a concealed weapon and explicitly,
ironically insisting on his physical mastery:

    I have seen the day
That with this little arm and this good sword
I have made my way through more impediments
Than twenty times your stop.

“Little” arm indeed! Yet scarcely has he asserted his power over others than he repudiates it:

    Do you go back dismayed? 'Tis a lost fear.
Man but a rush against Othello's breast,
And he retires.

His present authority is of another sort. These men are concerned with life, as Othello once was, but now he
holds the power which his suffering and discovery have conferred upon him, the power to reject life. Hence he
leaves the stage of our minds as he entered it, the holder of concealed knowledge, concealed intent, even in
death the ironic master of those whose wills oppose his own.

    Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcisèd dog,
And smote him, thus.

**Criticism: Character Studies: S. N. Garner (essay date 1976)**


*In the following essay, Garner stresses the importance and complexity of Desdemona's role in Othello, and
asserts that Shakespeare endowed her with a full range of human emotions.*

**I**

As Desdemona prepares to go to bed with Othello in Act IV, scene iii of Shakespeare's *Othello*, the following
conversation occurs between her and Emilia:

**EMILIA.**

Shall I go fetch your nightgown?

**DESDEMONA.**
No, unpin me here.

This Lodovico is a proper man.

EMILIA.

A very handsome man.

DESDEMONA.

He speaks well.

EMILIA.

I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.

(ll. 36-42)\(^1\)

Surely this is startling dialogue coming as it does between the brothel scene and the moment when Desdemona will go to her wedding with death. An actress or director would certainly have to think a great deal about how these lines are to be spoken and what they are to reveal of Desdemona's character. But a reader or critic is not so hard pressed, and he may, if it suits him, simply skip over them. This is precisely what most critics do.

Robert Heilman is representative. In his lengthy book on the play, *Magic in the Web*,\(^2\) he does not discuss the passage. One reason for this omission, of course, is that he, like most critics, is mainly interested in Othello and Iago. Nevertheless, since he uses the New Critics' method of close reading—underscoring images, habits of diction, and grammatical structure—it is peculiar that when he treats Desdemona's character, dealing in two instances with Act IV, scene iii specifically (pp. 189-90, 208-10), he fails to notice these lines. A partial explanation for this failure is that he sustains his interpretation of Othello and Iago and the theme of the play by insisting on Desdemona's relative simplicity and diverges from other critics who make her "overintricate" (p. 209). More significantly, however, the passage is difficult to square with his contention that in the last act Desdemona "becomes … the saint" (p. 215), a representation of "the world of spirit" (p. 218).

Other critics whose method, if nothing else, will scarcely allow them to ignore the passage cancel it out as best they can. G. R. Elliott, for example, in his line-by-line commentary, *Flaming Minister*, remarks that here Desdemona "speaks listlessly" [italics mine]; and she pays no heed to the vivid tale begun by her woman of the Venetian lady. … She herself would make a hard pilgrimage for a 'touch' of Othello's love."\(^3\) In other words, she does not mean what she says about Lodovico, her mind is really on Othello, and when Emilia talks about touching Lodovico's "nether lip," Desdemona *must*, Elliott implies, think of Othello. Similarly, M. R. Ridley, editor of the Arden edition, is evidently bothered by the lines and can only hope they somehow do not belong to Desdemona: "What did Shakespeare intend by this sudden transition to Lodovico? Is Desdemona for a moment 'matching Othello with her country forms'? One is tempted to wonder whether there has not been a misattribution of speeches, so that this line [38] as well as the next should be Emilia's."\(^4\) It is unusual, to say the least, that an editor who has argued so carefully for his preference of the quarto to the folio edition for his copy-text should speculate so carelessly here. He wishes to attribute to Emilia a line that both editions give to Desdemona, make Emilia's lines repetitious (as they would be since "proper" and "handsome" are synonymous), and destroy the rhythm of the dialogue, rather than let Desdemona have the line Shakespeare evidently gave her.\(^5\)

The reason for these efforts to get rid of Desdemona's lines about Lodovico seems obvious. Many critics and scholars come to Shakespeare's play with the idea that Desdemona ought to be pure and virtuous and, above
all, unwavering in her faithfulness and loyalty to Othello. The notion is so tenacious that when Desdemona even appears to threaten it, they cannot contemplate her character with their usual care and imagination.

At what appears to be the other extreme is such a critic as W. H. Auden, one of the few who notices the passage and sees it as a significant revelation of Desdemona's character. Viewing her cynically partly on account of it, he remarks: “It is worth noting that, in the willow-song scene with Emilia, she speaks with admiration of Ludovico [sic] and then turns to the topic of adultery. … It is as if she had suddenly realized that she had made a mésalliance and that the sort of man she ought to have married was someone of her own class and colour like Ludovico. Given a few more years of Othello and of Emilia's influence and she might well, one feels, have taken a lover.” But isn't Auden finally making the same assumption as the others? Doesn't his cynical and easy dismissal of Desdemona imply that he has expected her to be perfect? If she is not, then she must be corrupt. Isn't this Othello's mistake exactly? Either Desdemona is pure or she is the “cunning whore of Venice” (IV.ii.88).

The poles of critical opinion are exactly those presented in the play. On the one hand is the view of Desdemona the “good” characters have; on the other is the negative vision of her that Iago persuades Othello to accept. At a time when we have become especially careful about adopting any single perspective of a character as the dramatist's or the “right” perspective, why do many critics now simply accept one extreme view of Desdemona or the other? I can only assume that they share a vision Shakespeare presents as limited.

Desdemona's character is neither simple nor any more easily defined than Iago's or Othello's. Any effort to describe it must take into account all of what she says and does as well as what other characters say about her and how their views are limited by their own personalities and values. Though Shakespeare does not give Desdemona center stage with Othello, as he gives Juliet with Romeo and Cleopatra with Antony, he does not keep her in the wings for most of the play, as he does Cordelia or Hermione. She is often present so that we must witness her joy, fear, bewilderment, and pain. What happens to her matters because we see how it affects her as well as Othello. The meaning of the tragedy depends, then, on a clear vision of her character and experience as well as those of Othello and Iago.

II

That Desdemona is neither goddess nor slut Shakespeare makes very clear. He evidently realized that he would have to defend his characterization of her more against the idealization of the essentially good characters than the denigration of the villain. Consequently, though he undermines both extremes, he expends his main efforts in disarming Desdemona's champions rather than her enemy. In her first two appearances, Shakespeare establishes her character and thus holds in balance the diverging views, but he goes out of his way to make her human rather than divine.

He carefully shapes Othello's account of Desdemona to counter Brabantio's initial description of her as “A maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself” (I.iii.94-96). Because Brabantio is unwilling to believe that Desdemona's “perfection so could err” (l. 100) that she would elope with Othello, he accuses him of seducing her by witchcraft or drugs. In Othello's eloquent defense (II. 127-69), he shows not only that Brabantio's accusations are false but also that it was Desdemona who invited his courtship. His description of her coming with “greedy ear” to “devour” his tales of cannibals, anthropophagi, and his own exploits suggests that she is starved for excitement and fascinated by Othello because his life has been filled with adventure. She loved him, he says, for the dangers he had passed. So far is Desdemona from being Brabantio's “maiden never bold” that she gave Othello “a world of kisses” for his pains and clearly indicated that she would welcome his suit:

That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.

(ll. 161-65)

The scene is carefully managed so as to create sympathy for both Othello and Desdemona. Because Desdemona initiates the courtship, Othello is absolutely exonerated of Brabantio's charge. His cautiousness acknowledges the tenuousness of his position as a black man in Venetian society and is appropriate and even admirable. The Moor cannot be confident of Desdemona's attraction to him, and he undoubtedly knows that marrying him would isolate her from her countrymen. Recognizing Othello's reticence and undoubtedly its causes, Desdemona makes it clear she loves him but, at the same time, maintains a degree of indirection. Shakespeare does not wish to make her seem either shy or overly forward.

When Desdemona finally appears, she strengthens the image Othello has presented. Before the senators, she answers her father's charges forcefully and persuasively, without shyness or reticence. More significantly, it is she, and not Othello, who first raises the possibility of her going to Cyprus. Othello asks only that the senators give his wife “fit disposition” (I.iii.233), but when the Duke asks her preference, Desdemona pleads:

If I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for why I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence. Let me go with him.

(ll. 250-54)

Her wish not to be left behind as a “moth of peace” is a desire not to be treated as someone too fragile to share the intensity of Othello's military life. As though she might have overheard Brabantio tell Othello that she would not have run to his “sooty bosom” (I.ii.69), she confirms her sexual attraction to him as well as her own sexuality by insisting that she wants the full “rites” of her marriage.9

Shakespeare must have wanted to make doubly sure of establishing Desdemona's sensuality, for he underscores it the next time she appears. At the beginning of Act II, while she awaits Othello on the shore of Cyprus, her jesting with Iago displays the kind of sexual playfulness that we might have anticipated from Othello's description of their courtship.

As soon as Desdemona arrives at Cyprus, together with Emilia, Iago, and Roderigo, and is greeted by Cassio, she asks about Othello. Immediately a ship is sighted, and someone goes to the harbor to see whether it is Othello's. Anxious about her husband, Desdemona plays a game with Iago to pass the time; in an aside, she remarks, “I am not merry; but I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise” (II.i.120-21). Their repartee grows out of a debate that Iago begins by accusing Emilia of talking too much. A practiced slanderer of women, he chides both his wife and Desdemona. Although Desdemona rebukes him, “O, fie upon thee, slanderer!” (l. 111), she asks him to write her praise. Instead he comments on general types of women:

IAGO.

If she be fair and wise: fairness and wit,
The one’s for use, the other useth it.

DESDEMONA.
Well praised. How if she be black and witty?

IAGO.

If she be black, and thereto have a wit,

She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.

DESDEMONA.

Worse and worse!

(II.127-32)

Iago's “praises” commend women for what he might expect Desdemona to regard as faults, and none are without sexual overtones. Though Desdemona remarks that they “are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i' th' alehouse” (II. 136-37), they do not offend her and serve her well enough as a pastime for fifty-five lines, until Othello arrives.

 Critics who take an extreme view of Desdemona see her pleasure in this exchange with Iago as a failure of Shakespeare's art. Ridley, for example, comments: “This is to many readers, and I think rightly, one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare. To begin with it is unnatural. Desdemona's natural instinct must surely be to go herself to the harbour, instead of asking parenthetically whether someone has gone. Then, it is distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap backchat with Iago, and so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way. All we gain from it is some further unneeded light on Iago's vulgarity” (p. 54 n).10 But this scene is unnatural for Ridley's Desdemona, not Shakespeare's. What the dramatist gives us here is an extension of the spirited and sensual Desdemona that has been revealed in the first act. Her scene with Iago shows her to be the same woman who could initiate Othello's courtship and complain before the senators about the “rites” she would lose in Othello's absence. Her stance is similar to the one she will take later when she tries to coax Othello into reinstating Cassio. That the scene impedes the dramatic movement too long and that its humor is weak are perhaps legitimate criticisms; to suggest that it distorts Desdemona's character is surely to misunderstand her character.

Shakespeare makes a special effort to maintain the balance of the scene. He keeps Desdemona off a pedestal and shows her to have a full range of human feelings and capacities. Yet he is careful not to allow her to fail in feeling or propriety. The point of her aside is to affirm her concern for Othello as well as to show her personal need to contain anxiety and distance pain and fear. As we see how Desdemona acts under stress later in the play, it seems consistent with her character that she should want a distraction to divert her attention in this extremity. Shakespeare brings the exchange between Desdemona and Iago to a brilliant close as Othello enters and greets his “fair warrior.”11 The sensual import of this moment and his address is surely heightened by what we have seen of Desdemona shortly before.

Shakespeare's delicately poised portrayal of Desdemona to this point prepares us for the splendid antithesis between Iago and Cassio in the middle of the second act:

IAGO.

Our general cast us thus early for the love of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore blame. He

CASSIO.

She's a most exquisite lady.
IAGO.
And, I'll warrant her, full of game.

CASSIO.
Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.

IAGO.
What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.

CASSIO.
An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

IAGO.
And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

CASSIO.
She is indeed perfection.

(II.iii.14-28)

Such a carefully counterpointed exchange invites us to adjust both views.

Iago distorts Desdemona's character by suppressing the side of it that Cassio insists on and emphasizing her sensuality. His suggestions that she is “full of game” and that her eye “sounds a parley to provocation” call up an image of a flirtatious and inconstant woman. Iago's view is clearly limited by his devious purpose and also by his cynical notions about human nature in general and women in particular.

But Cassio's view is limited as well. He idealizes Desdemona as much as her father did. It is evidently clear to Iago that his efforts to persuade Cassio of his vision will fail when he pronounces Desdemona “perfection,” as had Brabantio before him (I.iii.100). The extravagance of language Cassio uses earlier in describing Desdemona must also make his view suspect. For example, he tells Montano that Othello

That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th' essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.

(II.i.61-65)

After the safe arrival of Desdemona and her companion in Cyprus, Cassio rhapsodizes:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The guttered rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors ensteeped to enclog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty, do omit
Their moral natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.
This idealization gives as false a picture of Desdemona as Iago's denigration of her. Cassio's lines in fact comment more on his character than on Desdemona's. To accept his view of Desdemona, as many have done, is as grievous a critical mistake as to accept Iago's.

III

Desdemona's liveliness, assertiveness, and sensuality are corroborated in her marrying Othello. The crucial fact of her marriage is not that she elopes but that she, a white woman, weds a black man. Though many critics focus on the universality of experience in Othello, we cannot forget the play's racial context. Othello's blackness is as important as Shylock's Jewishness, and indeed the play dwells relentlessly upon it.

It is underscored heavily from the beginning. The first references to Othello, made by Iago to Roderigo, are to "the Moor" (I.i.37, 54). Roderigo immediately refers to him as "the thick-lips" (I.i.63). He is not called by name until he appears before the senators in scene ii when the Duke of Venice addresses him. He has been referred to as "the Moor" nine times before that moment.

Iago and Roderigo know they may depend on Brabantio's fears of black sexuality and miscegenation. When he appears at his window to answer their summons, Iago immediately cries up to him, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.85-86) and urges him to arise lest "the devil" (l. 88) make a grandfather of him. The tone intensifies as Iago harps on Othello's bestial sexuality. To the uncomprehending and reticent Brabantio he urges impatiently:

> your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans.

(ll. 107-10)

Mercilessly, he draws a final image: “Your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs” (ll. 112-14). The unimaginative and literal Roderigo adds that Desdemona has gone to the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (l. 123).

Brabantio had “loved” Othello, invited him often to his home, and encouraged him to tell the stories that captivated Desdemona (Liii.127-31); yet he has the prejudices that Iago and Roderigo expect. Although he had objected earlier to Roderigo as Desdemona's suitor (I.92-95), he now commiserates with him, “O, would you had had her!” (I.172). Brabantio obviously never imagined that Desdemona could be attracted to Othello because he is black. When Othello appears, he tells him that only if his daughter was enchanted or drugged would she have “run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight” (I.ii.69-70). He cannot believe that she fell in love with what he assumes “she feared to look on!” (I.iii.98).

But even to the other characters who do not have reason to malign Othello as do Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio, black is not beautiful. Othello is accepted because he is like white men or in spite of his blackness. The Duke tells Brabantio, “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (Liii.285). When Desdemona affirms her love for Othello, she explains, “I saw Othello's visage in his mind” (I.iii.247). More importantly, Othello himself sees his blackness as a defect. When Iago first tries to raise doubts about Desdemona's fidelity, Othello reassures himself, “She had eyes, and chose me” (III.iii.189); that is, she married him despite his blackness. Later, as he begins to believe Iago's insinuations about Desdemona, he laments:

> My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.

(III.iii.383-85)

Iago knows that he may appeal to Othello's sense that his blackness is a liability to undermine his faith in Desdemona. He warns him that Desdemona's "will, recoiling to her better judgment," may begin to "match" him "with her country forms, / And happily repent" (III.iii.236-38).

Othello's blackness is further associated with a lack of grace, particularly with a lack of manners and eloquence. Mistakenly imagining that he speaks ineloquently, Othello apologizes to the senators before he addresses them, "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (I.iii.81-82). Later when he finds causes in himself for Desdemona's supposed infidelity, he considers one possibility, "Haply for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (III.iii.262-64). Iago will, of course, take advantage of Othello's superficial deficiencies; he tries to persuade Roderigo that Desdemona will tire of Othello because the Moor lacks "loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties" (II.i.227-28). It is probable that Othello takes Cassio with him when he courts Desdemona to compensate for what he considers his own insufficiency. The Florentine aristocrat is distinguished for his handsomeness, grace, and eloquence.

Critics speculate about what Othello's marriage to Desdemona means for him but usually fail to consider what it means for her to marry someone so completely an outsider. What are we to make of Desdemona's choosing Othello rather than one of her own countrymen? Brabantio tells Othello that Desdemona has "shunned / The wealthy, curlèd darlings of our nation" (I.ii.66-67). It seems incredible to him that, having done so, she should then choose Othello. But Shakespeare intends to suggest that the "curlèd darlings" of Italy leave something to be desired; the image implies preciousness and perhaps effeminacy. He expects us to find her choice understandable and even admirable.

Of all Desdemona's reputed suitors, we see only Roderigo. The easy gull of Iago and mawkishly lovesick, he is obviously not worthy of Desdemona. When Othello and Desdemona leave for Cyprus, Roderigo tells Iago, "I will incontinently drown myself" (I.iii.300), and we cannot help but assent to Iago's estimation of him as a "silly gentleman" (I.iii.302). Even Brabantio agrees that he is unsuitable, for he tells him, "My daughter is not for thee" (I.i.95). Only by comparing him to Othello does he find him acceptable.

The only other character who might be a suitor for Desdemona is Cassio. But it occurs to neither Cassio nor Desdemona that he should court her. Shakespeare makes him a foil to Othello and characterizes him so as to suggest what Desdemona might have found wanting in her countrymen. He is evidently handsome and sexually attractive. In soliloquy, where he may be trusted, Iago remarks that "Cassio's a proper man" (I.iii.381) and that "he hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected—framed to make women false" (II. 386-87). Drawing Cassio as one who is "handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after" (II.i.244-45), Iago persuades Roderigo that Cassio is most likely to be second after Othello in Desdemona's affections. In soliloquy again, Iago makes clear that he thinks Cassio loves Desdemona: "That Cassio loves her, I do well believe 't" (II.i.285).

Though he is handsome and has all the surface graces, Cassio is wanting in manliness. Shakespeare certainly intends Cassio's inability to hold his liquor to undermine his character. He gives this trait mainly to comic figures, such as Sir Toby Belch, or villains, like Claudius. Once drunk, the mild-mannered Cassio is "full of quarrel and offense" (II.iii.50). His knowledge of his weakness (II.iii.39-42) might mitigate it, but even aware of it, he succumbs easily. Though at first he refuses Iago's invitation to drink with the Cypriots, he gives in later with only a little hesitation to Iago's exclamation, "What, man! 'Tis a night of revels, the gallants desire it" (II.iii.43-44). His lack of discipline here and his subsequent behavior that disgraces him lend some
credence to Iago's objections to Othello's preferring him as lieutenant.

Cassio's relationship with Bianca also calls his masculinity in question. Nowhere else does Shakespeare show a man of Cassio's rank keeping company with prostitutes. His affair with Bianca tends to reduce him to the level of Touchstone, though Bianca is far superior to Audrey. Yet his friendship with Bianca in itself does not discredit him as much as his behavior towards her. He makes fun of her behind her back; Iago tells us, “He, when he hears of her, cannot restrain / From the excess of laughter” (IV.i.99-100). Yet when she confronts him, angry because she believes he is unfaithful to her, and threatens to stop seeing him, he anxiously follows after her for fear “she'll rail in the streets” (IV.i.162).

Cassio is, then, as Auden has described him, something of a “ladies' man” (p. 10), who idealizes women of his own social class and spends his time with prostitutes. He serves ideally to help Othello woo Desdemona because he has no interest in her sexually; he would keep her “divine” Desdemona. The embodiment of style, Cassio is hollow at the core. But just as he knows that he has a tendency toward drunkenness, so he recognizes his own impotence. As he awaits Othello's ship on Cyprus, he prays that “Great Jove” will guard it so that Othello can “Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms, / Give renewed fire to our extincted spirits” (II.i.80-81). In this last line he recognizes a potency in Othello that he finds wanting in himself and those around him. Desdemona enters immediately, and Cassio's striking address, following his anticipation of Othello's and Desdemona's sexual union, underscores his sexual failing:

O, behold! The riches of the ship is come on shore!  
You men of Cyprus, let her have your knees.  
    Kneeling.  
Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven,  
Before, behind thee, and on every hand,  
Enwheel thee round.  

(II.i.82-86)

As Alfred Harbage has remarked, his greeting suggests “a prayer to the Virgin”;14 the extravagance of these lines and others that describe Desdemona point up Cassio's tendency to idealize her.

Desdemona's marrying a man different from Roderigo, Cassio, and the other “curlèd darlings” of Italy is to her credit. She must recognize in Othello a dignity, energy, excitement, and power that all around her lack. Since these qualities are attributable to his heritage, she may be said to choose him because he is African, black, an outsider. When she says she saw Othello's visage in his mind, she suggests that she saw beneath the surface to those realities that seemed to offer more promise of life. If the myth of black sexuality (which Othello's character denies at every turn) operates for Desdemona, as it does for some of the other characters,15 it can only enhance Othello's attractiveness for her as she compares him with the pale men around her.

Desdemona shows courage and a capacity for risk in choosing Othello, for it puts her in an extreme position, cutting her off from her father and countrymen. Brabantio in effect disowns her since he would not have allowed her to live with him after her marriage (I.iii.237) if she had not been permitted to go with Othello to Cyprus. His last words are not to her, but to Othello, and they cut deep: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (I.iii.287-88). Later we learn that Brabantio died of grief over the marriage (V.ii.204-206). We are to disapprove of Desdemona's deception no more than we are to disapprove of Juliet's similar deception of Capulet, or Hermia's of Egeus. Shakespeare gives Brabantio's character a comic tinge so that our sympathies do not shift from Desdemona to him.

That her marriage separates her from society is implied because of the attitudes we hear expressed toward Othello, but it is also made explicit. Brabantio does not believe that Desdemona would have married Othello unless she had been charmed partially because of his sense that she will “incur a general mock” (I.ii.68). After
Othello has insulted Desdemona, Emilia's question of Iago makes clear what lines have been drawn: “Hath she forsook … Her father and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore?” (IV.ii.124-26). Desdemona does not marry Othello ignorant of the consequences; when she pleads with the Duke to allow her to go to Cyprus, she proclaims:

That I love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,  
May trumpet to the world.

(I.iii.243-45)

She knows her action is a “storm of fortunes.” Her willingness to risk the censure of her father and society is some measure of her capacity for love, even though her love is not based on complete knowledge. She does not see Othello clearly and cannot anticipate any of the difficulties that must necessarily attend his spirited life. Her elopement is more surely a measure of her determination to have a life that seems to offer the promise of excitement and adventure denied her as a sheltered Venetian senator's daughter.

IV

Because Desdemona cuts herself off from her father and friends and marries someone from a vastly different culture, she is even more alone on Cyprus than she would ordinarily have been in a strange place and as a woman in a military camp besides. These circumstances, as well as her character and experience, account in part for the turn the tragedy takes.

At the beginning she unwittingly plays into Iago's hands by insisting that Othello reinstate Cassio immediately. On the one hand, she cannot know what web of evil Iago is weaving to trap her. On the other, her behavior in this matter is not entirely without fault. It is only natural that Desdemona should wish Cassio reinstated since he is her old friend and, except for Emilia, her only close friend on Cyprus. But her insistence is excessive. She assures Cassio that Othello “shall never rest” (III.iii.22) until he promises to restore the lieutenant's position, and indeed, she makes sure that he never does. Yet her persistence does not seem necessary, for Emilia has assured Cassio earlier:

All will sure be well.  
The general and his wife are talking of it,  
And she speaks for you stoutly. The Moor replies  
That he you hurt is of great fame in Cyprus  
And great affinity, and that in wholesome wisdom  
He might not but refuse you. But he protests he loves you,  
And needs no other suitor but his likings  
To bring you in again.

(III.i.41-48)

Desdemona harps on her single theme playfully, teasingly. Her manner is no different from that which she took when she courted Othello or jested with Iago. Her vision seems not to extend beyond the range that allowed her to manage domestic life in Brabantio's quiet household.

As soon as Othello's jealousy and rage begin to manifest themselves, Desdemona's forthrightness and courage start to desert her. She can no longer summon up those resources that might help her. She is not as fragile as Ophelia; she will not go mad. But neither is she as resilient or as alert to possibilities as Juliet, who was probably younger and no more experienced than she. Before Juliet takes the potion the Friar has prepared to make her appear dead, she considers whether he might have mixed a poison instead, since he would be dishonored if it were known he had married her to Romeo (IV.iii.24-27). She confronts the possibility of evil,
weighs her own position, and takes the risk she feels she must. There is never such a moment for Desdemona.

Under the pressure of Othello's anger, Desdemona lies to him, by denying she has lost the handkerchief he gave her, and makes herself appear guilty. Her action is perfectly understandable. To begin with, she feels guilty about losing it, for she has told Emilia earlier that if Othello were given to jealousy, “it were enough / To put him to ill thinking” (III.iv.28-29). But more important, she lies out of fear, as her initial response to Othello indicates:

Why do you speak so startingly and rash?

OTHELLO.

Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, is it out o' th' way?

DESDEMONA.

Heaven bless us!

(III.iv.79-81)

Then she becomes defensive: “It is not lost. But what an if it were?” At this point Othello's demeanor must be incredibly frightening. Shortly before this moment he has knelt with Iago to vow vengeance against Desdemona if she proves unfaithful, and moments later, he is so enraged that he “falls in a trance” (IV.i.44). In this sudden crisis, latent fears of Othello that are inevitably part of Desdemona's cultural experience must be called into play. Her compounded terror destroys her capacity for addressing him with the courage and dignity that she had summoned in facing her father and the senators when they called her actions in question.

If Desdemona has wanted the heights of passion, she finds its depths instead. That she is simply bewildered and unable to respond more forcefully to Othello's subsequent fury is attributable to several causes. To begin with, his change is sudden and extreme. When Lodovico arrives from Venice and meets the raging Othello, he asks incredulously:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?

(IV.i.262-66)

Noble Othello is like the flower that festers and smells far worse than weeds. Only Iago anticipates the full possibilities of his corruption.

But the most important causes of Desdemona's powerlessness lie within herself. She idealizes Othello and cannot recognize that he is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. She tells Emilia that her “noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are.” Evidently surprised, Emilia asks if he is not jealous, and Desdemona replies as though the suggestion were preposterous: “Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him” (III.iv.26-31). Though Emilia immediately suspects that Othello is jealous (III.iv.98), Desdemona does not credit her suspicions since she “never gave him cause” (l. 156). Emilia tries to explain that jealousy is not rational and does not need a cause:

But jealous souls will not be answered so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they’re jealous. It is a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.

(ll. 157-60)

Though Iago provokes Othello, his jealousy, as Emilia says, arises out of his own susceptibility. He has romanticized Desdemona, as she has him. Forced to confront the fact that she is human and therefore capable of treachery, he is threatened by his own vulnerability to her. If he cannot keep himself invulnerable by idealizing her, then he will do so by degrading her. His fears are heightened because he thinks his blackness, age, and lack of elegance make him less attractive sexually than Cassio.

Despite the worsening crisis, Desdemona will not be instructed by Emilia, nor will she alter her view of Othello so that she might understand and possibly confront what is happening. Her only defense is to maintain an appalling innocence. The more she must struggle to keep her innocence in the face of the overwhelming events of the last two acts, the more passive and less able to cope she becomes. She must hold on to it for two reasons. First, nothing of her life in the rarefied atmosphere of Brabantio’s home and society could have anticipated this moment, and nothing in her being can rise to meet it now. Therefore, she must close it out. Second, if she is deserted by her husband, there is nowhere for her to turn. Rather than suffer the terror and pain of her isolation, she must deny that it exists.

Shakespeare's portrayal of Desdemona from the beginning of Act IV until her death illustrates how finely and clearly he had conceived her character and how well he understood the psychology of a mind under pressure. As Iago's poison works and Othello becomes more convinced of Desdemona's guilt and increasingly madder with rage, Desdemona will become gradually more passive and continually frame means of escape in her imagination.

After the brothel scene, when Othello leaves calling Desdemona the “cunning whore of Venice” (IV.ii.88) and throwing money to Emilia as to a madam, Desdemona is stunned. Emilia asks, “Alas, what does this gentleman conceive? / How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?”; Desdemona replies, “Faith, half asleep” (IV.ii.94-96). The action is too quick for her to be literally asleep; Othello has just that moment left. Rather, she is dazed; her mind simply cannot take in what it encounters. Almost at once she begins to look for ways out. Directing Emilia to put her wedding sheets on the bed (IV.ii.104), she hopes to be able to go back in time, to recover the brief happiness and harmony she and Othello shared when they were newly married. Though she will subsequently assert that she approves of Othello’s behavior (IV.ii.106; iii.20-22), part of her will not approve and will continue to create fantasies to save herself.

Next, Desdemona begins to anticipate her death, directing Emilia to shroud her in her wedding sheets if she should die (IV.iii.26-27) and singing the willow song. She not only foreshadows her death but also expresses an unconscious desire for it. Her preface to the song makes her wish clear:

My mother had a maid called Barbary.
She was in love; and he she loved proved mad
And did forsake her. She had a song of “Willow”;
An old thing ’twas, but it expressed her fortune,
And she died singing it. That song tonight
Will not go from my mind; I have much to do
But to go hang my head all at one side
And sing it like poor Barbary.

(IV.iii.28-35)

That the song will not go from her mind and that she has “much to do” to keep from hanging her head and singing it suggest the insistence of a death wish. To express a desire for death here and to plead with Othello
later to let her live is not inconsistent. Death wishes are more often hopes of finding peace and escape rather than real wishes to die. The song itself—quiet, soporific—promises calm in contrast to Othello's raging.

Just before Desdemona sings, she starts the conversation about Lodovico quoted at the beginning. That she thinks of Lodovico when she is undressing to go to bed with Othello suggests that she is still trying to find a way around the emergency of the moment. She admires Lodovico as “a proper man”—precisely the phrase Iago used to describe Cassio (I.iii.381)—and as one who “speaks well,” calling up those qualities that Cassio has and Othello lacks. Since the man Desdemona has loved, married, and risked her social position for has turned into a barbarian and a madman, she unconsciously longs for a man like Lodovico—a handsome, white man, with those attributes she recognizes as civilized. In her heart she must feel she has made a mistake.

Desdemona does not know the world, or herself, for that matter. Like Lear, she has been led to believe she is “ague-proof.” At the end of Act IV Shakespeare makes it certain, if he has not before, that she is self-deceived and that there is a great discrepancy between what she unconsciously feels and what she consciously acknowledges. When Desdemona asks Emilia whether she would cuckold her husband “for all the world,” Emilia plays with the question, answering, “The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice” (IV.iii.71-73). Desdemona finally says she does not think “there is any such woman” who would (IV.iii.88). Her comment underscores her need to close out knowledge that might threaten her. Coming as it does after the passage about Lodovico, her remark can only emphasize her pitiable need to maintain an innocence that must inevitably court ruin.

Like Sleeping Beauty waiting for the prince's kiss, Desdemona is asleep when Othello comes. When he threatens her, the most she can do is plead for her life. Desdemona is not Hermione, who has the wisdom to know that if Leontes doubts her fidelity, she cannot convince him of her chastity by insisting on it. And unlike Hermione, Desdemona merely asserts her innocence rather than reproaches her husband, with whom the final blame must lie. She can only lament that she is “undone” (V.ii.76) and beg for time. She acts differently from the heroine of The Winter's Tale not only because she is more fragile and less wise but also because her accuser is not a white man following at least the forms of justice in a court. Othello is a black man with rolling eyes (V.ii.38) coming to do “justice” in her bedroom at night.

When Desdemona revives for a moment after Othello has stifled her, she affirms her guiltlessness (V.ii.122) and to Emilia’s asking who has “done this deed,” she answers, “Nobody—I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord” (V.ii.123-25). Her answer is often thought of as an effort to protect Othello. Had Othello stabbed Desdemona, then the notion is plausible that she might pretend to have killed herself to save him. But Desdemona could not have smothered or strangled herself. I think her answer acknowledges instead her full responsibility for her marriage and its consequences. What her implied forgiveness of Othello means is unclear. Her remark of a moment before, “A guiltless death I die,” must be rendered with pain or anger, so her forgiveness may merely follow her old pattern of denying what she feels and acknowledging what she must; in other words, it may be unfelt. If her forgiveness is genuinely felt, however, it might suggest that Desdemona has come to see Othello with the prejudices of her countrymen and to regard him as acting according to a barbarian nature that will not allow him to act otherwise. She forgives him, then, as she would a child. Or at its best, her pardoning Othello means that she is finally capable of an ideal love, one that does not alter “when it alteration finds” or bend “with the remover to remove.” But even if we see Desdemona as acting out of pure love, as most critics do, her triumph is undercut because she never confronts the full and unyielding knowledge in the face of which true love and forgiveness must maintain themselves. Furthermore, there is no ritual of reconciliation between Desdemona and Othello. Though Othello is by Desdemona's side when she forgives him, she uses the third person and speaks to Emilia.

Othello learns that he is wrong, that Iago, whom he trusted, has deceived him heartlessly, monstrously. But he never understands what in himself allowed him to become prey to Iago. The final truth for him is that he has thrown a pearl away. His suicide is a despairing act. He finally sees himself as unblessed and
bestial—beyond mercy. Paradoxically, his only redemption must come through self-execution.

*Othello* is surely one of Shakespeare's bleakest tragedies. Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello must fail. They do not know themselves, and they cannot know each other. Further, they never understand the way the world fosters their misperceptions. We must watch as Othello is reduced from a heroic general, with dignity, assurance, and power to a raging, jealous husband and murderer, out of control and duped by Iago. We see Desdemona lose her energy, vitality, and courage for living to become fearful and passive. Both suffer the pains of deception, real or supposed loss of love, final powerlessness, and death. Tragedy never allows its protagonists to escape suffering and death, but it often graces them with the knowledge of life, without which they cannot have lived in the fullest sense. Yet for all their terrible suffering, Desdemona and Othello are finally denied even that knowledge.

**Notes**

5. In *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), Leslie Fiedler forgets that it is Desdemona who begins the conversation about Lodovico when he comments that Emilia “appears to be tempting poor Desdemona by evoking the charms of … Lodovico” (p. 166).
8. Though using the Folio edition, which reads “kisses,” as copy-text, editors adopt the quarto's “sighs” more often than not; Alvin Kernan, editor of the Signet *Othello*, is a pleasing exception. Though most offer no explanation for the gratuitous change, “kisses” evidently violates their sense of Desdemona's character and the dramatic situation. The differences in the Folio and quarto texts prompt some of Ridley's most unpromising speculation: “Perhaps the compositor had recently been setting a passage in which 'world of kisses' occurred, and it stuck in his mind.” He finds it “hard to imagine anyone making the alteration deliberately” (p. 30n). Ridley, of course, is justified in retaining “sighs” since his copy-text is the quarto edition.
9. Ridley (p. 36n) compares Shakespeare's use of “rites” here to *Romeo and Juliet*, III.i.8-9: “‘Lovers can see to do their amorous rites / By their own beauties.”’
10. So strong are Ridley's objections to this passage that he even calls Thomas Rymer to his aid; he quotes from *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693): “‘Now follows a long rabble of Jack-pudding farce [i.e. stuffing, padding] between Jago and Desdemona, that runs on with all the little plays, jingle, and trash below the patience of any Country Kitchenmaid with her Sweetheart … and when every moment she might expect to hear her Lord (as she calls him) that she runs so mad after, is arrived or lost’” (p. 54n).
11. Desdemona is obviously Othello's “warrior” because she has come to battle along with him, but his address has sexual implications as well. It recalls the opening line of Spenser's “Sonnett LVII” in the *Amoretti*: “Sweet warriour when shall I have peace with you?”
12. Heilman sees the play as “a drama about Everyman” (p. 139); Leo Kirschebaum (“The Modern Othello,” *ELH*, 11 [1944]) regards Othello as a “romantic idealist” (p. 289); R. N. Hallstead


15. The myth is apparent in Iago's and Roderigo's efforts to incite Brabantio (see pp. [17-18] above) and in Iago's absurd suspicions that Othello has slept with Emilia as well as in the rumors that give fuel to those suspicions (I.iii.375-77; II.i.294-95; IV.ii.144-46).

16. Many have commented on Desdemona's passiveness, but there is no indication that Shakespeare means us to see it with the condescension of Fiedler, who describes her as becoming a "passive, whimpering Griselda" (p. 142), or Allardyce Nicoll, who sees her as becoming "a mere slave" to Othello (Studies in Shakespeare [London: Hogarth, 1927], p. 88).


18. Though my view differs from his, Harley Granville-Barker, in Prefaces to Shakespeare (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), is the only critic who sees Lodovico as having a significant function in the play (II, 57-60).

19. The play, of course, does not support such a view of Othello; G. K. Hunter comments: "The fact that the darkness of 'Hell and night' spreads from Iago and then takes over Othello—this fact at least should prevent us from supposing that the blackness is inherent in Othello's barbarian nature" (p. 159).

Criticism: Production Reviews: Sharon Friedman (review date 1999)


In the following essay, Friedman compares Othello with Desdemona, Paula Vogel's revision of Shakespeare's play, examining in particular the way in which Vogel dramatized the threat posed by female desire and questioned conventional categories associated with virginity and faithfulness.

In his introduction to Othello, Alvin Kernan asserts that Shakespeare's vision of human nature dramatizes 'ancient terrors and primal drives—fear of the unknown, pride, greed, lust, underlying smooth, civilized surfaces', and that there is a marked 'contrast between surface manner and inner nature. … In Desdemona alone do the heart and the hand go together: she is what she seems to be.'¹

This characterization is reversed in Paula Vogel's revision of Othello as Desdemona.² In this play, we have a Desdemona who is not what she seems, 'of spirit so still and quiet'. Rather, she is Othello's worst nightmare, the transformation of Iago's pretence into reality. Though still naive, Desdemona is no longer the innocent—unselfish in her love, forgiving of all transgressions against her. She is sexually adventurous as she works for Cassio's harlot Bianca in her brothel, seemingly voracious in her appetites, manipulative of anyone who can feed them, and anything but loyal in her relationships with women or men.
Questions abound. Why has Paula Vogel created a Desdemona who, though ostensibly inside out, still seems like Othello's projection? Could a lascivious Desdemona represent a feminist reclamation of the powers of desire and, at long last, ownership of the gaze? What, in this revision, constitutes change, subversion, or the revelation of patriarchal ideology concerning women's sexuality encoded in *Othello*?

To be sure, Vogel joins a throng of critics, writers, directors, and actors who have challenged Shakespeare's plays with their new readings, literary applications, film adaptations, and inventive theatrical productions, often from a feminist perspective. In her call for ‘more new readings’ of Shakespeare in the 1990s, the scholar Jean Howard argues against the traditional approach to criticism that sees meaning ‘already in the text’, there to be discovered by the ‘alert reader’. Rather, Howard argues that a Shakespeare play is an occasion for a ‘complex, contemporary interaction with a classic text’ and ‘an occasion for creation by which the critic acknowledges his own place in history’.

Peter Erickson, in *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves*, locates the writer as well as the critic in history. Emphasizing the ‘interactions between past and present that we construct and negotiate’, he is seeking representations of Shakespeare which go beyond contemporary theatrical performance and pedagogy to the ‘different cultural sites of contemporary literature’, which he perceives as ripe for ‘imaginative free play and for the development of an independent perspective’.

Erickson's prime example is the poet Adrienne Rich's re-visioning of the father-daughter motif and women's forgiveness in both *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*. Given Shakespeare's iconic status, the danger is that the image can become ‘fixed in our minds as an inviolable element of father-daughter relations’, despite the ideological tensions in ‘values and expectations’, which are subject to dramatic pressure within the text. ‘Whether or not Shakespeare is seen as critical of Lear, Shakespeare cannot give us Cordelia's point of view.’

This critical distance from Shakespeare in twentieth-century rewritings of his works is also noted by Marianne Novy, whose collection of articles documents women's readings of Shakespeare over the past three hundred years. Carol Neely, in an epilogue to this book, observes categories of revisions. Some writers foreground female friendship and express a connection to women characters who demonstrate assertiveness, exploit the uses of disguise to transcend confinement, and display wit as well as passion (e.g., Rosalind, Beatrice, Helena, Cleopatra). Other writers who adapt Shakespeare for their texts seem more detached as they ‘balance sympathy and judgement. … Patriarchal structures and the constrictions suffered by women are exposed and, sometimes, corrected through revision.’ Neely notes that several often seemingly conflicting responses alternate—

between anger and empowerment, between critique of patriarchal culture and the creation of alternatives to it. … Analysis of patriarchy moves beyond characters, beyond the playwright himself, to a probing analysis of his culture as well as the writer's, with Shakespeare's plays enabling the critique.

These revisions eventually lead to ‘transformational’ readings which, in alliance with Shakespeare, ‘transform his scripts into their own’.

**A SHIFT IN THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

Paula Vogel's raucous *Desdemona* draws on many of these conventions of feminist revisioning. She foregrounds the women in the play; explores female friendship; and refocuses plot to reveal the ‘high cost of patriarchal values’ that several critics see embedded in Shakespeare's tragedies. As the editors of *The Woman's Part* assert, ‘the men who uphold [these values] atrophy, and the women, whether resistant [Emilia] or acquiescent [Desdemona], die’.
However, departing from her re-visionary and transformational predecessors, Paula Vogel does not attempt to celebrate the purportedly ‘womanly’ virtues—the ‘flexibility, compassion, realism’ attributed to Shakespearean heroines. She does not perceive in the women's intimacy a ‘mutual affection and a kind of female subculture apart from the man's world’. Nor does she correct and revise the restrictions that so obviously oppress the women and inform the men's destructive fantasies of betrayal.

Rather, Vogel's play marks an important shift in the feminist critical perspective, specifically in drama, as characterized by Lynda Hart in her collection of essays on contemporary women's theatre: ‘the shift … from discovering and creating positive images of women in the content of the drama to analyzing and disrupting the ideological codes embedded in the inherited structures of dramatic representation’.

Whether one takes the interpretive stance that Shakespeare questions and explodes patriarchal attitudes toward women or that he reinscribes profound fears of female sexuality and desperate attempts to control it, the terms by which women are defined (e.g., the virgin or the whore) and the spheres to which they are relegated—backroom, bedroom, balconies—remain in place. A revisionary theatre perceives genre, language, stage space, and the body as the ‘loci’ for the playwright to ‘dramatically challenge’ the terms, categories, and beliefs by which women are defined and determined in the discourse of dramatic and cultural texts.

In any revision, the original work hovers over its present incarnation. In fact, the programme notes to Desdemona include a brief synopsis of Othello, followed by a letter from Vogel to her audience in which she reveals her implicit dialogue with the Bard. She begins by sharing her memories of earlier readings, when she had wept for the Moor, who ‘goaded to desperation by the innuendos of cuckoldry that [his ensign] Iago manufactured, [and] believing his virginal bride to be the harlot coupling with his lieutenant Cassio, gives in to homicide’, strangling ‘pure, blameless Desdemona’ in her bed.

At the same time, however, and despite Vogel's admiration for Shakespeare's ‘fantastic verse’, she began to question the critical assessment of Desdemona as a ‘fully dimensional heroine’. The woman that she reads is an abstraction played by ‘gawky male adolescents’. Furthermore, Vogel raises two provocative questions regarding conduct in a text which, though naturalized through the ages, in her mind bears questioning:

Had Desdemona been sleeping with the Russian Navy [that is, the Venetian garrison], would Othello have been justified in his self-pitying act of murder? [And] why did Emilia steal the handkerchief Othello had given his wife, if she was such a devoted servant to Desdemona?

(A Letter from the Playwright)

In this self-reflexive reading of Othello, the playwright/critic also becomes a feminist spectator who, as Randi Koppen defines such a viewer, resists, revises, and produces meanings ‘in response to the text's own promptings’. In a deconstructive parody, Vogel dislodges the convention of the intimate scene between women in Shakespeare's theatre and expands it into an entire play. Now decentering the tragic hero, she foregrounds and enacts the threat of female transgression—the construction of female desire—that incites the tragic action of the play.

Using bodily presence and ribald language in place of whispering asides, delicately expressed confidences, and plaintive ballads (e.g., Desdemona's song in the willow scene), these familiar female characters, central to our most cherished narratives and cultural paradigms, speak in a forbidden language, and disrupt the categories of their representation—the twin images of the virgin/whore dichotomy and the faithful handmaiden—linked to their gender and class status. Vogel produces multiple and shifting identities as she dramatizes, among various postures, a whoring Desdemona, a spiritually monogamous Bianca, and a sassy Emilia, who does not invariably understand and support the lady she serves. As in women's performance art, ‘the position of the female subject talking back throws that position into process, into doubt’.
FEMALE CHARACTERS AND PUBLIC ACTION

In Renaissance drama, particularly tragedy, centre stage is the site of public action and oratory more often reserved for male characters, reflecting the ‘relationship between the male-defined polis and the politics of stage space’. Several critics have lauded Shakespeare for creating a counter-universe in scenes where women share intimate conversations that reveal both their ‘freedoms and constraints’. Carole McKewin observes that although this enclosed space is often ‘shaped by the larger world of the play’, in scenes where women talk to each other apart from men, they engage in freer expression of their ‘perceptions and identities, comment on masculine society, gather strength, and engage in reconnaissance to act in it’.

McKewin illustrates this assertion with her view that Desdemona and Emilia’s ‘feminine friendship … is affectionate and frank, generous and nurturing’. In the willow-song scene in Othello, Desdemona laments the plight of her mother's maidservant forsaken by her lover, and initiates a dialogue with Emilia about women's attitudes toward adultery and honour. According to McKewin, this dialogue between women ‘reflects both the increased oppression of the outside world and the effect, however limited, the counter-universe can have on its opposite’. McKewin admires Emilia's loyalty to Desdemona and her ‘egalitarian view of man and woman in marriage’. Indeed, with more than a hint of cultural feminism, the critic perceives their friendship as what ultimately emerges from this counter-universe to ‘reveal what woman is, and to reshape the chimeras of slander’ that result in the ‘debacle of Othello’.

Vogel, focusing her lens onto the background of the play, brings Bianca from the streets into the palace, juxtaposes her with Desdemona and Emilia, and complicates this intimate conversation with material concerns. Her women engage in frank discussion and behaviour that undermines their valorization and camaraderie, and so frustrates any attempt at a unified construction of ‘what woman is’. Her counter-universe is fraught with differences among the women and contradictions within each character. Their world is presented as inextricably intertwined with all that surrounds it, to reveal the hierarchy and intersection of gender and class relationships that might explain Emilia's careless but fatal betrayal as well as the harsh Renaissance code governing a woman's adultery.

PROBING THE IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

To establish the links between the ostensibly dual universe of feminine and masculine, Vogel probes the ‘unconscious’ of the text—that which is not directly spoken or presented but ‘operate[s] contrapuntally’ in the ‘absence’, ‘silence’, or ‘reverse side’ of what is written. Although Othello is not a tragedy of a woman's infidelity, but rather of the tragic consequences of Iago's plot inflaming Othello's fantasy of betrayal, the subject of Desdemona's sexuality and, most notably, the men's construction of it, is always there, ‘latent’, bubbling to the surface in speech and action. Indeed, the hint of Desdemona's alleged indiscretion with Cassio is instantaneously translated by Othello into her whorish behaviour with his men of every rank and file, ‘pioneers and all’ (III, iii, 343). As Jyotsna Singh succinctly states:

To label Othello a ‘tragedy of jealousy’ has almost become a critical commonplace. What has less frequently been specified is a crucial aspect of his male jealousy—namely, the fear that wives can turn into whores or, put another way, that wives and whores are indistinguishable.

It is precisely this binary construction that Vogel dramatizes and, in the process, deconstructs as she probes the ideological discourse that informs the play's lofty themes of marital love, honour, and loyalty.

What lurks behind the Renaissance ideal of pure and passive femininity, guardian of masculine sexuality, if not the anxiety that all women are descendants of Eve, responsible for ‘both mortality and the “sin” of human sexuality’? Female sexuality is contained in the social practice of marriage to a virginal bride. That which is
not contained ‘emerges as whoredom’. Singh observes that the terms ‘harlot’, ‘whore’, ‘strumpet’, and ‘courtesan’ recur ‘frequently in various Renaissance discourses such as court records, sermons, moral treatises, and literary texts’ in the service of moral prescriptions.

Singh also notes that prostitution, as a social and economic institution that expanded in the early modern period, is ‘elided’ in narratives which demonize women's unbridled sexuality and associate it with the prostitute.22 The idea of woman's desire (as opposed to woman as the object of desire) was seen as a threat to the moral and social order dependent on strict gender opposition and hierarchy.23

Within Othello, this polarization between the sexes is generated by the men and leads to the destruction of all the major characters. What one remembers of this conflict is the male preoccupation with honour that Othello speaks of as dependent upon a woman's faithfulness—‘I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapour of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses’ (III, iii, 269-72). And even after the discovery of his error, he calls himself an ‘honourable murderer’ (V, ii, 290).

Several critics have identified the root of this concern in the struggle for a secure masculine identity which gives rise to images of threatening females. Thus, in Man’s Estate Coppelia Kahn argues that, although ‘in its outward forms, patriarchy granted near-absolute legal and political powers to the father … in unacknowledged ways it conceded to women, who were essential to its continuance, the power to validate men's identities through their obedience and fidelity as wives and daughters’.24

Shakespeare's Desdemona is continually called upon to defend her honour in a display of her faithfulness and obedience to her husband. She speaks her desire only in her wish to consecrate her marriage ('the rites for which I love him', I, iii, 252) by following Othello to Cyprus. Othello, however, speaks of it in fear and loathing:

O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites!

(III, iii, 267-9)

And when he believes her guilty of sexual impropriety with one man, he declares her a threat to all men that he must eliminate ('Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men’, V, ii, 6).

Iago's plot is consistently underscored by his numerous references to wives as whores. Taunting Desdemona and Emilia in repartee, he claims that though ‘pictures out of door’, you are ‘wildcats in your kitchens … players in your huswifery, and huswives in your beds’ (II, i, 108-11). And in his plot to dupe Othello, he substitutes talk of Bianca for incriminating remarks about Desdemona. In the staged conversation with Cassio which he intends to be inaccurately overheard by Othello, Bianca the whore serves as the ‘embodiment’ of Desdemona's transgression.25

REPLACING THE ‘ABSENT FEMALE’

By ‘making the silences speak’,26 Paula Vogel engages us in a production that replaces the ‘absent female’, represented by the boy players of the Elizabethan theatre, with real women whose sexual desires and psychic needs are no longer cursed, camouflaged, mimicked, or encoded in stylized gestures, at least by the men.27 As Sue Ellen Case argues:

Without the public appearance of the female body, cultural representations of sexuality could not be physical ones. Rather, sexuality became located within the symbolic system that was
the property of the spiritual domain, for instance language. … In theatre, the sexual danger inherent in the female gender was alleviated by the male assimilation of female roles. …

In Vogel's production, the women, not the men, comprise an almost exclusive community. Their formidable presence momentarily evokes the spectre of women's emasculating power and duplicitous nature that had only been treated symbolically in *Othello*.

In her *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Linda Bamber argues that the ‘feminine in Shakespeare … is always something unlike and external to the Self, who is male. … The Feminine … is that which exists on the other side of … the barrier of sexual differentiation.’ With ironic references to the men's suspicions in *Othello*, Vogel brings her audience across the great divide only to find that the women's quest for fulfilment seems to mirror the men's, as they yearn for sexual adventure, power and position, and, of course, true love.

Even sexual betrayal is in the air. Desdemona unwittingly cuckolds Emilia during her night at the brothel, and Bianca is almost driven to violence when she discovers that the handkerchief given to her by Cassio belongs to Desdemona. The playwright heeds Emilia's words in *Othello*: ‘Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell, / And have their palates both for sweet and sour …’ (IV, iii, 96–8). Women's desire, though boldly advocated by Shakespeare's Emilia, is articulated in terms of men's sensibilities. It is this version of sexuality that Vogel puts on display.

Making no attempt to capture the lost voices of Renaissance noblewomen, handmaidens or prostitutes, Paula Vogel stages the threat of female desire in a patriarchal culture and the conditions that might structure women's fantasies about themselves and each other. In dramatic texts, perhaps the most salient feature of what Sue Ellen Case calls the 'Fictional Woman' is her representation as an 'object of exchange between men'. As maiden or prostitute, her ‘sexual allure can never escape the thrall of commodification'. Paula Vogel's women, exercising a kind of agency, are acutely aware of the value of their charms.

**MANIPULATING THE SEXUAL EXCHANGE**

In *Desdemona*, the three women spring to life as they appropriate the language of sexuality and manipulate the exchange. In coarsely mocking banter, they talk to each other about their experience of sex; objectify the male organ (as Desdemona fondles a hoof-pick, she stretches out and says ‘Oh me, oh my—if I could find a man with just such a hoofpick—he could pluck out my stone’); name the various forms of couplation (as does Bianca when she informs and instructs the eager Desdemona in the tricks of her trade); and acknowledge the barter of their sexuality in exchange for money, gifts (‘a brooch for a breast’) and, in Emilia's case, her place in the world as the ensign's wife.

In *Othello*, the handkerchief functions as a powerful metaphor for the proprietary attitude toward women's sexuality. Whoever possesses the handkerchief possesses the woman. Thus, the handkerchief confiscated by Emilia and placed by Iago in Cassio's possession—only to end up in the hands of his strumpet Bianca—duly becomes proof of Desdemona's alleged betrayal.

The handkerchief in Vogel's play—visible in a lit corner of the stage as the play opens—retains its power to convict Desdemona (Vogel's subtitle is ‘A Play about a Handkerchief’). However, we see it as a mere contrivance—a ‘snot rag’, in Desdemona's contemptuous language, which stands for nothing. The women become the ‘ocular proof’ that Shakespeare's Othello yearns for to justify his accusation and revenge.

Still, this Desdemona is far more complex than Othello imagines her to be. Vogel relies on dramatic irony as she reaches back through Othello to Shakespeare in order to fashion a Desdemona out of his subversive cues—for example, Brabantio, Desdemona's father, warning Othello that his daughter may betray him as she has betrayed her father in marrying without his consent. She has defied the patriarchal code in placing her will
above her father's judgement—even the judgement of the Venetian Senate, in her refusal to postpone the consecration of her marriage. She professes not to have fallen prey to mysterious potions and charms, but to have responded to her heart's 'preferences'. Furthermore, Othello tells us that she had been aroused by listening to his dangerous exploits:

She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse. ... 

She wished she had not heard it;
Yet she wished that heaven had made her such a man.

(I, iii, 148-9, 161-2)

Vogel transposes this 'greedy ear', this desire to be a male warrior, into a greed for conquest and sexual adventure that Desdemona associates with male freedom.\(^{33}\) She explains to the scornful Emilia her desire to break out of her ‘narrow world’ and to see the ‘other worlds’ that married women never get to see, ‘bridled with linen, blinded with lace’ (19). Seeking to assuage her disappointment with the ‘strange dark man’, whom she mistakenly believed would offer her escape, she proclaims her ‘desire to know the world’:

I lie in the blackness of the room at … [Bianca's] establishment … on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights, and the men come into that pitch-black room—men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin—rough skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, Emilia—seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me; I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh how I travel!

(20)

Desdemona reveals at once her desire to know and the limits on her desire as she seeks only carnal knowledge and imagines herself a passive learner. She becomes whatever they are. She knows whatever they know. Furthermore, Vogel associates Desdemona's desire for the ‘strange, dark man’ with the desire for a different and, using Coleridge's word, ‘monstrous’ union. The critic Karen Newman has linked Othello and his tales of ‘slavery and redemption’, ‘of Cannibals, that each other eat’, and ‘men whose heads Grew beneath their shoulders’, to the play's ‘other marginality, femininity’. Both thus represent the fear and power of the Other, which ‘threatens the while male sexual norm here represented by Iago’.\(^{34}\)

Vogel's Desdemona openly expresses her attraction for the feared Other, acts out her propensity for a union which is alluded to by Shakespeare's male characters as unnatural and bestial. Concomitantly, she expresses disappointment in the divided self that marks Othello. As the Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt observes, Othello's own identity

depends upon a constant performance … of his story, the loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture. … He is both representative and upholder of a rigorous sexual code which prohibits desire, and yet is a sign of a different, unbridled sexuality.\(^{35}\)

Vogel's Desdemona, less discreetly than Shakespeare's, aligns herself with the latter Othello as she quests for global encounters that will replicate if not surpass his mythical journeys.\(^{36}\)

In *Othello*, it is Emilia who punctures the ideal of women's purity and of unwavering faithfulness to husbands.
When Desdemona asks her, ‘Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?’ Emilia replies: ‘The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice’ (IV, iii, 70). In Shakespeare's dialogue, Emilia imagines fashioning a world that would make her wrong a right. However, it is a world in which her cuckoldry would make her husband a ‘monarch’.

In Desdemona, Vogel switches the women's respective stances. Her Emilia is unwilling to take chances, intimating that her position in the social order is vulnerable enough. It is Desdemona, with the haughtiness of the desirable noblewoman, who tries to remake the world—not for her husband's gain, but for her own power, responding, ‘The world's a huge thing for so small a vice’ (19).

With these inverted representations of the women, Vogel offers us a dual response. She reads against the text in order to reveal the material concerns and the discursive representations that haunt the women in Shakespeare's Othello. So, in Vogel's invention, the women are situated in the back room of the citadel, the private sphere of the servant Emilia where her work is no longer invisible. Among the artifacts of her daily life—tools, baskets, leather bits—she peels potatoes and washes blood-stained sheets and nightgowns (actually the chicken's blood used to feign Desdemona's virginity on her wedding night). The sense of containment in the back room and the association of sex and the spilling of blood seem to reflect a more vulnerable, certainly less lofty, image of women's lives.

The latter half of Vogel's play introduces Bianca. As the owner of a brothel, she is depicted as a more aggressive prostitute than the courtesan who in Shakespeare's play follows Cassio around, pining for his love and waits on his attention. Vogel's Desdemona, true to her class, ignores the destitute conditions underlying Bianca's plight. She sees her as the sexually and financially independent new woman of the Renaissance, that which the men of her station might perceive as the threat of organized lechery. Here, the women speak openly of sex, but like their Shakespearean counterparts are defined by the attachment to the men in their lives, and are frequently subject to physical abuse. And though they share these intimacies, they are separated by class divisions that evoke condescension, misunderstanding, and distrust among them.

Bianca, though on the surface free, is still subject to violence from her customers, and will never have her dream of romance and security with Cassio. In the end, she shatters Desdemona's misguided fantasy about her when she says: ‘Inside every born one of us want smugs an’ babies, smugs wot are man enowt t’ keep us in our place’ (38).

Emilia will continue to be ignored or mistreated by Iago, and, whatever fraught allegiance she has to Desdemona, cannot look to her for salvation as her lady's maid in exchange for keeping Desdemona's confidences. She has taken the handkerchief to advance the career of her husband on whom she is forever dependent. Despite the contempt for Iago that she openly expresses to Desdemona, she explains that

for us in the bottom ranks, when man and wife hate each other, what is left in a lifetime of marriage but to save and scrimp, plot and plan? … I says to him each night—I long for the day you make me a lieutenant's widow.

(13)

And finally, amidst all of her daring and bravado, Desdemona's fate is sealed in the cultural code reflected in the punishment of death for betrayal that she is to receive from Othello, even in Vogel's revision.

**JUDGEMENT BETWEEN THE ACTS**

As spectators, producing meaning in our interaction with Shakespeare's text and with Vogel's production simultaneously, we might resist her disturbing representation as we long for a Desdemona free of Othello's
conception of her, pure or vile, and revisioned as more tragically heroic. Yet we feel Othello's conception
more powerfully in his absence, sensing from the tension within the female enclave that the male world is
‘everywhere around’, and that the female world of love and desire is ‘entirely constituted by the gaze of
man’. And when this Desdemona addresses the audience directly, without the mediation of the male
protagonist, spectators might, in Brechtian terms, become ‘alienated’ from their ‘habitual perceptions’ of a
character made strange by this shift in viewpoint.

Clearly Vogel makes use of Brechtian techniques—the alienation effect, epic (episodic) structure, and the
social gest—to disrupt the spectator's expectations of Othello, to ‘surprise the spectator into thought’. As
Janelle Reinelt describes it, Brechtian technique

provides the means to … foreground and examine ideologically determined beliefs and
unconscious habitual perceptions, and to make visible those signs inscribed on the body
which distinguish social behaviour in relation to class, gender, and history … to see what is
missing, or what new insights emerge if hidden aspects are thrown into relief.

In thirty short scenes, or ‘takes’, punctuated with flashes of light and percussive music, Paula Vogel creates an
episodic structure that invites the spectators to interpose their judgement between the acts. By contrast with a
seamless narrative or plot structure in which the characters move to what feels like an inevitable end, the
division between scenes allows the spectator greater freedom here to imagine alternatives to the course of
these events, or to reflect on their determinants.

At the same time, the playwright explicitly frames the angles from which we view each character in a series of
what one critic called ‘character-freezing tableaux’, that at once eliminate a single viewpoint while drawing
attention to the framing of characters on stage. Freeing (or ‘alienating’) these characters from the audience's
familiar or conditioned responses, the actors posture to the audience employing the device of the ‘social gest’.

Consisting of a singular gesture or a ‘realm of attitudes’ expressed in words and movement, the gest
demonstrates the character's identification with social attitudes and relationships. Emilia, the confidante in
servitude, bends over her crate of potatoes or her pile of washing; Bianca, the sexually aggressive prostitute,
stands with legs apart, hands on hips which are thrust forward; and Desdemona, with unladylike abandon,
leans back upon a table, and dangles her head arched upside down, suggesting both privilege and
vulnerability.

The final four frames constitute a tragic recognition shared by two women, though they have no authority to
act on it. Once again, Vogel dislodges a generic convention associated with tragedy—the moment of
recognition that signals self-knowledge for the protagonist. In their dialogic relationship, Desdemona and
Emilia together discover that Othello's gathering up of the wedding sheets from her bed, ‘like a body’,
breathing it in ‘like a bouquet’, isn't love (45). Indeed, it has been surveillance.

The final gest, which spans three ‘takes’ (scenes), conveys resignation as Emilia prepares Desdemona for her
impending death in the marriage bed, brushing her hair the requisite hundred strokes. Desdemona, ‘listening
to the off-stage palace’, leans back, this time to accept her fate. The audience, presumably grappling with their
various responses to the revisions of the original text, might also become aware of what does not change. The
female world, though presented more subjectively, is still performing under a watchful, scrutinizing eye,
awaiting judgement. For all of Desdemona's fidgetings, she is forever confined within Othello's gaze. But the
spectator, perhaps for the first time, might stand outside it, recognize it, and resist its compelling vision.

Notes

2. Desdemona was first produced in association with Circle Repertory Company by the Bay Street Theatre Festival, Sag Harbor, New York, in July 1993, then by the Circle Repertory Company, New York in Fall 1993, and was published by Dramatists Play Service, 1994. All subsequent references to Desdemona appear as page numbers in parentheses.

For a discussion of the ‘multiple implications’ of the phrase ‘the woman's part’, see the ‘Introduction’ to Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely, eds., The Woman's Part (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 12. The reference to ‘part’ in the title plays upon five different senses in which the term may be understood. It assumes (1) that women play a ‘distinct, gender-determined part’ in the world of the plays as well as outside them; (2) the bawdy meaning of ‘part’, as used by Shakespeare to indicate women's sexuality; (3) that the parts women play are social as well as sexual, and in the plays may be false—‘roles adopted to deceive or inflicted by the dominant patriarchal culture’—and constitute only part ‘of a whole’: that is, the complex identity of any character and of the men and women in relation to each other; (4) that feminine and masculine characteristics are changing cultural constructs and thus not restricted to females or males; and (5) that feminist criticism, in confronting these limiting constructs within texts, is ‘avowedly partisan’, and so taking the ‘woman’s part’.

3. For example, Peter Erickson's readings of the representations of Shakespeare by twentieth-century women writers (Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, Adrienne Rich) in Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1991); the numerous films of recent years such as Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet, Trevor Nunn's Twelfth Night, Al Pacino's Looking for Richard; or Kristin Linklater's all-woman cast in the Company of Women's production of Henry V at Smith College, in September, 1994.


5. Erickson, p. 2, 7.


8. Lenz, Greene, and Neely, p. 6.


10. Lenz, Greene, and Neely, p. 5.


14. See Dymptna Callaghan, Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1989), p. 56-9, where she argues for ‘deconstructing certain crucial terms of canonical criticism’ in order to examine women's status in tragic drama and its reproduction in traditional criticism by ‘juxtaposing the concept of tragic transcendence with that of female transgression’.


Politics, eds. Dympna Callaghan, Lorraine Helms, and Jyotsna Singh (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 111, examines the effects of theatrical production in relation to performance choices for those who play ‘the woman's part’ in contemporary performance. She claims that ‘with some exceptions, Shakespeare's female characters play their roles in the illusionistic scenes of the locus. They enjoy few opportunities to express the interiority of the reflexive soliloquy and even fewer to address the audience from the interactive platea.’


27. Lorraine Helms (p. 106-7) cites varying critical responses to women playing female roles originally written by men for male performers. For example, Elaine Showalter argues positively that ‘when Shakespeare's heroines began to be played by women instead of boys, the presence of the female body and the female voice, quite apart from interpretation, created new meanings and subversive tensions in these roles’. On the other hand, Sue Ellen Case argues that these roles are ‘caricatures’, and that they should again be played by men to underscore that classic roles are ‘classic drag’. Helms argues for a 'partial, problematic, and paradoxical' freedom at the same time that one acknowledges these constraints.
32. According to Carol Thomas Neely, the handkerchief also functions symbolically to represent ‘sexuality controlled by chastity’. Passed from female sibyl to female charmer to Othello's mother to Desdemona, its purpose has been to make women ‘amiable’, and prevent men from hunting ‘after new fancies’. (See her extended discussion in ‘Women and Men in Othello’, in The Woman's Part, eds. Lenz, Greene and Nealy, p. 228-30.) Karen Newman discusses the handkerchief's historical as well as psychological significance: in her view, it ‘figures not simply [the mother's] missing penis’ but the ‘lack around which the play's dramatic action is structured, a desiring femininity … an aberrant and monstrous sexuality’. “‘And Wash the Ethiop White’; Femininity and the Monstrous in Othello”, Shakespeare Reproduced, eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion O'Connor (New York: Methuen,
Karen Newman observes that Desdemona's responses to Othello's tales are 'perceived as voracious ... conflating the oral and aural'. Othello's language ‘betray a masculine fear of a cultural femininity ... envisioned as a greedy mouth never satisfied, always seeking increase, a point of view which Desdemona's response to their reunion at Cyprus reinforces. ... Othello fears Desdemona's desire because it invokes his monstrous difference from the sex/race code he has adopted, or alternatively allies her imagined monstrous sexual appetite with his own’ (p. 152).

34. Newman (p. 157) further argues that although Shakespeare was subject to racist, sexist, and colonial discourses of his time, by making Othello a hero and Desdemona's love for him sympathetic, the play stands in a contestatory relationship to the hegemonic ideologies of race and gender in early modern England.

35. Greenblatt, quoted in Newman, p. 150.

36. Desdemona is, after all, willing to accompany Othello to Cyprus, which Alvin Kernan sees as a society 'less secure' than the idealized city represented by Venice—the image of government, 'of reason, of law, and of social concord’. The island of Cyprus is more exposed to the 'Turks, emblematic of the forces of barbarism, the 'geographical form of an action that occurs on the social and psychological levels as well’ (xxvi-vii).

37. See Jyotsna Singh's discourse on such facts as unemployment and population displacements that led to the prosperity of brothels in early modern England (p. 28-33).

38. Roland Barthes, quoted in Greene and Kahn, p. 4.


41. Brecht, p. 198.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Russell Jackson (review date 2000)


In the following excerpt, Jackson assesses the production of Othello staged during the 1999-2000 season at Stratford-upon-Avon. Jackson finds that Ray Fearon's and Zoë Waites's performances as Othello and Desdemona were “subtle and convincing” but reserves his highest praise for Richard McCabe's Iago.

Othello, like A Midsummer Night's Dream, gave a satisfying sense of having visited many—if not all—of the play's possibilities within the framework of a production seeking to find coherence in the text. In this case the setting was late-nineteenth century. Many local effects worked very well, as they have proved to do in other productions with a similar choice of period. The midnight council of the Venetian senate became a lamp-lit cabinet room, with a globe representing the world at stake in an imperialist struggle; the discomfiture of Cassio took place in a mess-hall drinking ritual, away from the more decorous festivities of the island (fireworks visible and audible in the distance). In this kind of transposition one loses the specific identity of the Turks as an alternative, threatening, and non-Christian power—the decaying Ottoman Empire was by the late 1800s a pretext for imperial aggression in others rather than a threat in itself. Like Trevor Nunn's memorable Other Place production of 1989 (subsequently a television film) with Willard White, Ian McKellen, and Imogen Stubbs, this year's Othello was a domestic drama with a military background, in which the religious dimension did not figure strongly.
Ray Fearon and Zoë Waites were subtle and convincing as Othello and Desdemona. In the little time we saw them happy together they were charmed with each other's company and physically affectionate in a light-hearted way: there was no intrusive consciousness of their role as victims in a tragedy of love. Othello's "Excellent wretch" had a tinge of amusement, with no preemptive sense that perdition was about to catch his—or anyone's—soul. Fearon was clear and perhaps a little quieter than he could have afforded to be in the more grandiloquent passages of the part. He refused to invest "Farewell the tranquil mind" with any specious lyricism, rather making it sadly reflective. However, the valuable quality of danger may have been lacking in this Othello.

The most commanding performance was that of Richard McCabe as Iago. This was a chubby, utterly believable, ingratiating ensign. Like McKellen in Nunn's production, he was dependable and resourceful (producing iodine for Roderigo's wound in 3.1); but unlike him, he showed no signs of repression. Trying to cheer Desdemona up as they waited for the arrival of Othello's ship, he was relaxed and solicitous. In the officer's mess he was clearly at home, and it was Cassio who seemed awkward, with his abstemious glass of orange juice in his hand (before he was seduced into drinking wine) and his clear distaste for Iago's jovial "Health to their sheets." Iago was easygoing to the point of being able to start the poisoning of Othello's mind in 3.3 lightly, with shared laughter. (This also marked the turning-point in Othello's lightness of attitude: when Iago apologetically remarked that Othello seemed to have been "dashed," his "Not a jot" was given with a snort of laughter—almost the last we would hear from him.) After Othello's "I do not think but Desdemona's honest," Iago replied: "Long live she so," but the next phrase had murderous pauses in it: "And long live you to think—so—." The scene ended in a gesture of blood brotherhood, with the two men kneeling side by side. This was all excellent ensemble work, which may explain to some degree the sense of diminishment in Othello himself from the customary heroic ideal.

McCabe delivered his soliloquies with a horrifying relish: even the way he spoke the noun in "I hate the Moor" seemed to afford him a tinge of perverse pleasure in his own disgust. When, seated in the doge's chair at the end of 1.3, Iago encouraged Roderigo to think of Desdemona's likely disposition after she was "sated with [Othello's] body," he himself clearly enjoyed the notion. In the credible but not overelaborate context of this nineteenth-century setting, what we saw of Iago's own marriage to Emilia evoked one of Ibsen's lighter family pictures, and the effect his poison had on Othello and Desdemona suggested Strindberg at his bleakest. Iago cultivated an almost fatherly relationship with Aidan McCardle's dapper, pathetic Roderigo—carefully patting down the false moustache he had persuaded the young man to wear as part of his disguise in Cyprus—until the worm began to turn (the wonderful moment when the audience learns for the first time about those jewels!) and he had to be gotten rid of.

The staging was handsome and simple, with all the significant action down on the forestage. In the opening scene the full depth of the stage, with a few lighted windows visible in the background, suggested the Venetian cityscape. After the arrival in Cyprus the acting area was closed in by a drop set a few feet upstage of the proscenium arch, in which vertical curtains of cream-colored fabric could be raised or lowered. Othello could be seen through them, lurking to watch Iago with Cassio and Bianca, and in the final scenes of the play, shadows were thrown onto this screen from both directions. …

**Criticalism: Production Reviews: Judith Buchanan (review date 2000)**

In the following review, Buchanan considers Othello's cultural placement and the depictions of otherness in Oliver Parker's 1995 film version of Othello, starring Laurence Fishburne in the title role. Buchanan studies the way the film manipulates the subjective gaze and contends that the film encourages the voyeuristic viewing of Othello's own self-observations.

In February 1998, Kofi Anan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, arrived in Iraq to confront the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. Of all the things that were crucially relevant to Anan's high-profile embassy, colour was certainly not one of them. And yet, in the context of a world order which, in other respects, is anything but consistently equitable in its view of black and white, the symbolism of his 'ride to the rescue' of 'the civilized world' (as characterized in the Wall Street Journal) can carry a Shakespearean resonance: a black African was the commissioned representative of an organization, the majority of whose central power has traditionally lain in white communities, upholding its values against the dangerous infidel. Seen in this light, Anan's mission to Iraq exposes the degrees of alterity that sometimes underpin cultural relations. In the face of a common foe explicitly defined in 'the civilized world' in terms of its absolute alterity, subsidiary categories of alien and insider—black and white, African and Euro-American—are pragmatically elided.

In Othello, white Venice's collective sense of what constitutes insider and outsider status is similarly, though more dramatically, challenged: Venice sends Othello, a Moor, to Cyprus as its commissioned representative in opposing its dangerous Other, the Turk. It is testimony to how thoroughly Othello is seen to have assimilated to a Venetian value-system that he, so visibly a non-Venetian, is chosen to serve as its strategic ambassador elsewhere.

Film productions of the play have depicted Othello in a variety of cultural relations to the city-state that employs him. In the first section of this essay, I survey the ways in which the balance of Othello's assimilation to Venetian culture, and resistance to it, has been signalled in different productions. Against this backdrop I then consider the cultural placement of Othello, and configurations of otherness, specifically in Oliver Parker's film. In the second section, I examine how the manipulation of the subjectivized gaze contributes to notions of belonging and alterity in the film. In the third section, I weigh the implications of a contemporary narrative by which the film was ambushed in its earliest reception context. And finally, I question the pertinence of our millennium moment in constructing a critical frame within which discussions of alterity may be conducted.

'WHO ALBEIT … A MORE'

The Venice depicted in Shakespeare's play is acutely conscious of the particularity, and assumed rightness, of its own mores and beliefs. 'This is Venice: / My house is not a grange' (I.i.104-5), says Brabantio with smug indignation when awoken in the night. The Venetians believe in the harmony and civilized order of their life, their rhetoric perpetuating this myth even when the evidence before them throws doubt upon it. To sustain its self-image as the epitome of well-regulated government and Christian virtue, Venice needs a foil, and the Turk—Venice's religious, economic and imperial rival—neatly provides one. In Shakespeare's Venice, as in the real Venice of the early modern period, the Turk is demonized as everything that is barbaric, untrustworthy and dangerous. Thus in Othello, Venice's sense of its own worth is implicitly pitted against the Turks' supposed barbarism and indiscipline ('Are we turned Turks? … For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl' [II.iii.166, 168]), deceitfulness ('Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk' [II.i.114]) and damned condition (the 'Turks, unlike the Christians, 'shall [not] be saved' [IV.ii.88]). In being commissioned to represent Venice, Othello is being asked to oppose the very thing against which Venice defines itself most obviously. He must be Venice abroad, upholding its values in the face of its opposite.

We may assume that Shakespeare's depiction of Othello's Moorishness is intended to indicate a Muslim background. Indeed, sections of Othello's own life story as told to the Senate have parallels with that of a real Muslim-born North African of the period, Wazzân Al-Fasi. In 1550, Wazzân had published an account of the
geography and customs of Africa under his Christianized name, John Leo. In 1600, John Pory translated this into English as *A Geographical Historie of Africa,* adding a prefatory address to the reader in which he recommended his author with this two-edged testimonial:

> Who albeit by birth a More, and by religion for many yeeres a Mahumetan; yet if you consider his Parentage, Witte, Education, Learning, Employments, Travels, and his conuersion to Christianitie; you shall find him not altogether … unwoorthy to be regarded.\textsuperscript{4}

Some details of Wazzân's life (the North African origins, roaming the Mediterranean, being sold into slavery) may well have served as a pattern for Othello's own history.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, Shakespeare's depiction of his Muslim Moor-turned-Christian, and his depiction of Venice's conditional acceptance of him, turn on the same telling ‘albeit’ that underscores Pory's recommendation. Othello, ‘albeit … a More’, is noble, courageous, dignified, experienced in battle, well-born and a convert to Christianitie, and so, *despite* his colour and culture, the Venetian Senate considers that he, too, on these terms, is ‘not altogether … unwoorthy to be regarded’.

Othello, like Wazzân, makes one of the expressions of his assimilation to his elected culture the adoption of its religion as his own. In advertisement of Othello's adopted Christianity, Laurence Olivier's Othello (filmed in 1965) wears a large cross around his neck to which he clings in moments of crisis. This symbol of his Christianizing, worn proudly on his chest, indicates his self-conscious and earnest desire to align himself with Venetian culture and beliefs. However, it sits oddly with his African robe, highly polished blacked-up appearance, African accent and bare, manacled feet. In a moment of torment on Cyprus, Olivier's Othello rips the cross violently from his neck, actively rejecting the value-system by which he now feels abused. His relationship with the symbol of his Venetian affiliation had from the first seemed strained. In ridding himself of it, he reclaims a cultural identity less riven by contradiction.

In Sam Mendes' 1998 National Theatre production, Othello (played for the first time at the National by a black actor, John Harewood) once again clutched a large gold cross at critical moments in the action. His obsessive fingering of this symbol of his adopted culture helped him sustain his affiliation. Indeed, Harewood's Othello clung to his cross almost as a talisman, a point of security in an increasingly tormenting world. Later, however, it became also, quite literally, the instrument of his destruction. Othello's secret weapon (produced at the end of the play to thwart those who would prevent him from taking his own life) emerged in this production from within the decorative cross that had been present throughout. Harewood's Othello unscrewed his crucifix and inserted the hidden blade contained therein into his jugular with surgical precision, appropriately declaring himself the slain ‘turbanned Turk’ (V.ii.351) as he died by the cross. At the last Othello had cast himself in the role of the dangerous infidel whom he had been sent by Christian Venice to oppose.

Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995) aligns itself with the placement of Othello as a man willing to advertise his resistance to his environment more than with productions that present a man trying to minimize his distinction from it.\textsuperscript{6} Laurence Fishburne, the first black actor to have played the role in a commercial cinema production, presents an Othello who is far from being a Venetian in all but skin colour.\textsuperscript{7} Parker configures him as a fascinating and useful outsider in Venice, a man whose power carries hints of an eroticism, derived from his arresting physicality. Our first view of him is a close-up of his prominently scarred hand taking Desdemona's unblemished one during their clandestine marriage ceremony: a striking introductory image of black meeting white. The Othello who then leans in to claim a kiss from his bride is half-shrouded in a black hooded cloak. For Desdemona (Irene Jacob), as for the rest of Venice, his unapologetic otherness is undeniably part of his attraction. His Venetian garb does little to moderate the effect: his colour, stature, bearing, earrings, unfamiliar gestures and half-mocking atmosphere make him less the supreme exemplum of Venice than an exotic misfit within it.
In Janet Suzman’s 1988 made-for-television production, one of the symbols by which John Kani’s Othello powerfully signals his Otherness from his environment is his constantly visible African tribal necklace. Even in front of the Venetian Senate, this symbol of his non-alignment with white Christian Venice is worn with pride. The blue gem around Fishburne’s neck is not worn as prominently as Kani’s necklace. Nevertheless, having no equivalent among the Venetians, its presence marks him out as a man from a place governed by different cultural, aesthetic and trading norms and conventions. In the course of Parker's film, as Othello feels increasingly tormented by Venice and all that he takes it to represent, his symbols of non-assimilation—the blue gem, his loose African cape, a wooden staff—assume an increasing prominence. The necklace, in common with the one in Mendes’ production, is more than mere decoration. At the end of Parker's film, in a self-dramatizing gesture, Othello pulls it tight round his own neck as he stabs himself. Whereas Harewood’s Othello symbolically dies by the Venetian cross he has tried, but failed, to make his own, in the symbolic scheme of Parker’s film, Othello dies from his refusal to break free of his old cultural attachments and make Venice's systems and beliefs fully his own.

In 1599, the English poet I. Ashley concluded his sonnet apostrophizing Venice with the line, ‘Enamour’d like Narcissus thou shalt dye’. Renaissance England perceived Venice as a place whose image had been constructed partly to gratify its desire to think well of itself. Parker's Venice, like Shakespeare's, is also in love with its own self-image: it believes the myths it has created about itself. In the opening scene of the film, a gondola skims quietly at night across the Grand Canal in Venice. The world to which we are immediately introduced is one of shimmering and beautiful reflections. It is a city whose very architecture dictates that it gaze unceasingly upon its own reflected image.

Shakespeare's Moor has a history as a mercenary (‘an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere’ [I.i.134-5]). Fishburne’s half-snarling, half-mocking, powerfully physical screen presence makes him credible in such a role. His Othello adjusts his character as he adjusts his allegiances. In Venice, even while standing clearly distinct from its inhabitants, he mirrors aspects of the character of the city. He is an Othello who, like Venice itself, is captivated by an image of himself which he fashions carefully for public consumption—a man not only taken with his own reflection but happy to encourage others also to gaze upon it.

Othello’s self-dramatizing tendencies emerge early in Parker’s film. His account of his life to the Senate is punctuated by flashback scenes which he conjures as pleonastic illustration to his words. He is quick to visualise how well received he was at Brabantio’s house, and how irresistibly drawn to him Desdemona was. Othello is inspired and consoled by the graphic recollection of his own favourable impact on his world. As Parker's camera aligns itself intermittently with Desdemona’s desirous gaze throughout the film, Othello’s body is explicitly eroticized by its visual strategy. On the night of their arrival in Cyprus, it is, for example, his undressing, not hers, upon which the camera lingers with the most intimate and detailed appreciation. Moreover, the way in which Iago (Kenneth Branagh) looks at Othello, though more complex and full of contradictory impulses than Desdemona’s gaze, is itself not free of a fascinated attraction. When Iago sits on the beach delivering his ‘The Moor already changes with my poison’ soliloquy, his line (‘Look where he comes’ [III.iii.333]), which in the text heralds Othello’s entrance, is in the film reduced simply to ‘Look’. Iago’s instruction that we should ‘look’, delivered intimately straight to camera, immediately instructs it to swing around, following Iago’s own turning gaze, until it lights upon Othello standing on a promontory. Parker’s editing of the Shakespeare line here, and accompanying camera direction, is a defining moment for his film as its implicit visual strategy becomes momentarily explicit. The eroticized gaze is made central, and potential distractions from that concentration are minimized or excluded. Parker’s interest in ‘where he comes’ (both cultural placement and historical context) is, by contrast, more limited. Rather, Parker attempts to spin the dramatic material into an erotic myth not finally determined by context or history. It is, moreover, impossible not to heed Iago’s instruction that we ‘look’ upon Othello not only at this moment but throughout the film, since he is the privileged centre of its visual design.
Iago spends much of the time observing Othello with a complex mix of proprietorship, detestation and irresistible intimacy. Near the end of the temptation scene, Iago watches Othello looking at himself in a full-length mirror. The voyeuristic observation of self-observation is laden with significance, since it is the narcissism of Othello's self-obsessed gaze that Iago succeeds in warping. “Why did I marry?” (III.iii.245) Othello is left to ask of his own reflection, seeing himself already as a man weakened and compromised. His admiration for himself as hero becomes in stages a contempt for himself as an idiotic aberration in a white world beyond his comprehension or control. Near the end of the film, the injured Iago climbs onto the bed to join its tragic loading, clinging like a needy, damaged child to his dead general's leg. Othello's body is thus fetishized as a point of fascination by the intradiegetic attentivenesses (voyeuristic and physical) of both Desdemona and Iago. And in tune with the self-indulgent dictates of Othello's own mind, it is also treated as an object of fascination and awe by the camera.

While still mirroring something of the self-dramatizing and narcissistic character of Venice, Fishburne's Othello, once on Cyprus, also then mirrors aspects of its cultural placement. Cyprus is a liminal territory. Both geographically and culturally it sits between worlds, looking both towards Christian Venice and towards the infidel Turk, having been conquered by each and unsure of its proper belonging. In the action of Shakespeare's drama, the Turkish fleet is drowned in a sea-storm off the coast of Cyprus, and the Venetian forces posted there hold their subsequent night of revels in celebration of "the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet" (II.ii.3). In Parker's film, a stuffed effigy of a turbanned Turk with a crescent on his tunic is jeered at and ceremonially burned during these festivities. For a historically savvy audience, however, the 1570 date of the film's setting would ironize the implied triumphalism of this gesture. The months of that year were to be the island's last moments under Venetian rule: it was in the following year that the Turks were to rout the Venetians soundly from Cyprus in the name of the Islamic Ottoman Empire.

An audience in the 1990s could not be expected to know of the imminent fall of Cyprus to the Turks in 1571 in the way that Shakespeare's first audiences may have done. Nevertheless, Parker's Othello does capture a sense of the precariousness of an outpost of empire that is not invulnerable to attack and whose complete collapse, though it does not yet know it, is imminent. A general sense of fragility in colonial Cyprus is evoked. Few things there may be relied upon as solid or dependable. Although the fortress, turrets and weaponry on Cyprus with their clear, hard edges present an appropriately defined front to a potentially threatening world, the dominant motifs in the film's visual scheme involve water and the billowing, diaphanous fabrics of curtains, drapes, dresses and a fluttering handkerchief. Elements in which one might drown or become impotently entangled define the psychological climate of Parker's Cyprus. With studied indifference, for example, Iago casually knocks two chess board figures—the black King and the white Queen—into a well where we see them sink in slow motion. This scene is then revisited at the end of the film in the burial at sea of Othello and Desdemona when their shrouded bodies are shown drifting towards the bottom of the ocean. Iago as director of his own fantasy drama has ensured that Othello's and Desdemona's black and white bodies eventually replace the corresponding chess figures which acted as substitutes for them in his earlier rehearsal of the scene.

Cyprus' cultural indeterminacy provides a disastrous pattern for Othello. As a man used to making a quick identification with each new territory he serves, he absorbs the cultural ambivalence of Cyprus into his own person and reproduces it for his final self-dramatizing speech. Here he casts himself simultaneously in the role of Venetian soldier of the cross and as the Turkish infidel, deliberately conflating a glorious incident from his past with his present situation:

And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus! He stabs himself.
In slaying himself he feels himself to be both upholding his Venetian commission (smiting the infidel) and the obstacle to that commission (the malignant traducer of the state that must be smitten). He is both perpetrator and victim in his own death, ascribing not only different roles to the dichotomized self that emerges in the act, but also different cultures—Venetian and Turk. As Fishburne's Othello lies on his death bed strangled by his Moorish jewel, surrounded by all the personnel of his Venetian life, and identifying himself as the Turk, his unresolved cultural identity echoes that of the island he had briefly and unsuccessfully attempted to govern.

**CONTROLLING THE LOOK—DIRECTORS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE CAMERA**

On arrival in Cyprus, Branagh's Iago peels a piece of fruit with a small knife. In its blade he watches the reflection of Cassio and Desdemona as they whisper together. The scene is directly reminiscent of the parallel scene in the 1955 Yutkevich *Othello* in which Iago (Andrei Popov) watches their innocent dalliance in blurred reflection in the hilt of his sword. However, the small neat knife wielded by Branagh's Iago, as he does precisely controlled violence to a piece of fruit, plays a more pivotal role in Parker's film than did the equivalent scene in the Russian *Othello*. In Parker's version, it becomes clear that it is Iago's observation of Cassio and Desdemona in distorted reflection in the blade of his knife that suggests his own future strategy to him: he must render the image of these two people blurred also to Othello by interposing himself as a distorting mirror through which Othello may observe the world.

Iago's desire to dictate the lens through which Othello is to perceive things identifies him as the film's internal cinematographer. It is Iago who explicitly instructs the spectator to 'look', and indeed how to 'look', at Othello when he is standing ruminatively by the shore. It is also Iago who determines how Othello should look both at others and at himself. In the carefully stage-managed encavement scene, Iago places Othello behind bars and theatrically blocks Cassio's mock-disclosure specifically to suit Othello's angle of vision. In a slightly heavy-handed metaphor for his emotional enslavement, the shadows of the bars fall on Othello's face. As our perceptions are then aligned with Othello's, we, too, are invited to see through the bars what Iago would have him see.

Envisaging Branagh's Iago as the man who determines who will see what, from what angle and in what clarity of focus, carries, of course, its own biographical resonance. Branagh, like the Iago he plays, is a man who likes to direct his own dramas. In having Branagh's character determine the ways in which others should look, Parker has incidentally alluded to the contained talent, the unacknowledged director, that he had on his set in the person of Kenneth Branagh. Rita Kempley in her review for the *Washington Post* speculated that Branagh's role in this production might have been more extensive than this: 'Kenneth Branagh doesn't just steal the show; one suspects he might have sat in the director's chair as well.' In the penultimate scene of the production, however, Parker's camera finally makes clear its distance from Iago by rising above the bed to look down upon him as he lies injured and enfeebled. As the only rising, high-angle shot in the film, it is particularly striking, immediately and drastically redefining the camera's relationship with Iago. He looks up at the camera from his huddled position on the bed, but his look has changed. No longer is it the look of a man in control, a man whose intimate and knowing glances at the camera have encouraged the spectator into a complicity with his vicious designs. He has now been diminished and objectified. He is now denied the consoling illusion that he is constructing the pictures we see; rather, he is himself looked down upon as part of the composed patterning of the frame. As Parker's last-minute assertion of a superior angle upon a disempowered Iago cannily reminds us, the *Othello* picture that was finally created was, despite Kempley's speculations, not Branagh's but Parker's.

Although Othello is the chief object of fascination and eroticism in the film, he is by no means always objectified by the film's gaze. By intermittently aligning the film's fluid subjectivities with Othello's own perceptions, Parker destabilizes a sense of his Moor's alterity. Of all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Othello is
perhaps the least intimate with an audience. He has fewer soliloquies than Hamlet, Macbeth or Lear, and those that he does have do not offer much honest disclosure, differing little in tone from his public speeches. He is, arguably, so accustomed to sculpting an image of himself for the benefit of an appreciative public that he never develops an honest inner life distinct from that. Parker, however, allows the spectator an unusual degree of intimacy with Othello, both through occasional voice-overs (a device often withheld from screen Othellos, although standard for screen Hamlets, for example), and by subjectivizing his perceptions. On both counts, Othello seems to be rendered a more private and knowable character than has been true of most Othellos. So strategic is the film's decision not to keep Othello simply as an objectified Other, viewed by the world and by the camera as an item of fascination, desire and horror, that he is even given a moment to parallel and parody Iago's imperious and directorial 'Look' that determines the subsequent camera angle and object. As Desdemona enters the bedchamber, in the second half of the film, Othello says, 'Look where she comes'. His instruction causes the camera to spin hastily through 180 degrees from objectifying him to subjectivizing his view of Desdemona's approach in the same shot. The camera work thus creates the illusion that he, too, like Iago, can control the spectatorial gaze. Othello's aspiration to subject status is, however, most obviously validated when Desdemona dances for him and the other guests after their victorious arrival on Cyprus. Her display is designed specifically to gratify his attentive observation of her, and the scene cuts between a shot of him as delighted voyeur and shots of her as self-styled object of his appreciative gaze. In his love scene with Desdemona, and in its many subsequent tormenting variations in his anxious fantasy, he is both voyeur and predator. At their first sexual encounter, she seems to back off a little nervously across the room before his semi-naked figure. He advances, the subjectivized camera alternating between seeing her retreating figure from his perspective and seeing his advancing one from hers. The impression generated both by point of view and editing is inescapably one of reluctance on her part and insistence on his—if only in a spirit of amorous play. Once she has slipped half-coyly, half-invitingly behind the curtains onto the bed, he parts the flimsy barrier purposefully and enters the bed, in order to claim the 'fruits' that he has just said were still 'to ensue' (II.iii.9). He has styled himself as the warrior-conqueror, she as the coyly vanquished. Parker has thus added a further slightly troubling, if titillating, opposition—that of desire and fear—to the array of more neutral contrasts (physical strength and physical fragility, a scarred body and an unblemished one, black skin and white, male and female) already inherent in the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona. Later, in a sequence from Othello's tormented fantasy, he once again advances naked towards the billowing bed curtains with clear sexual purpose to divide, see, enter and possess. With disturbing symbolism, however, in his fantasy he advances with his knife drawn. He parts the curtains with its blade and, still in his troubled fantasy, finds Desdemona and Cassio entwined naked there, mocking him. For Othello—a military man of action who feels increasingly adrift in a world of sexual intrigue—the knife which he grips in his fantasy is one of the few reliable and solid objects amidst the fluttering, shifting, insubstantial fabrics of his environment. From his perspective, it is also a symbol of his manhood in the face of bafflingly complex female charms and snares.

From a spectator's perspective, however, the presence of Othello's knife in his nightmare is also a reminder of the previous knife which had assumed some prominence in the film—that in which Iago had observed Desdemona's and Cassio's distorted reflection upon their first arrival in Cyprus. In triggering the recollection of the earlier scene, the knife in Othello's fantasy world serves as a reminder that his vision of Desdemona and Cassio has been deliberately rendered blurred by the interposing presence of Iago. The association punctures the impression of Othello's power as subject not object of the film's gaze by reminding the spectator of the strategic interference that now determines his observation of the world. Shortly afterwards, Othello watches from behind a muslin hanging as Desdemona searches for the missing handkerchief. Our spectatorial position is once again aligned with his so that we, too, see her only indistinctly through the distorting muslin filter. His stepping from behind this curtain in order to bring her into a clarity of focus has several parallel moments throughout the film. After his brief vigil sitting watching Desdemona sleep before he kills her, for example, Othello deliberately moves aside the flimsy curtain with his staff that he (and we with him) might see her more clearly. His several efforts to move aside the various obstructions that cloud his view of Desdemona are, however, futile. The flimsy fabrics that constantly interpose themselves between him and his wife are Parker's metaphors for a blurring of his vision that has taken place on a more fundamental emotional level. His
attempts to manoeuvre his way around such material obstructions merely serve to emphasize his inability to lift the emotional filter that has been placed over his vision.

The irony of Othello's parodically directorial ‘Look’ moment is, therefore, that, far from being able to influence others' ways of looking, not even his own gaze is reliable, having been distorted by the interposing filter of Iago's vicious interpretative lens (itself a construct of the real director, Parker). Although the composition of the shot of Desdemona's approach here, and of Desdemona more generally at other moments in the film, is advertised as being part of Othello's perception, when we look upon Desdemona, what we are made most aware of is the discrepancy between the (innocent) woman whom we see and the (adulterous) woman whom Othello sees in the same figure. The fact that we are looking as it were with him serves only to emphasize the distinction between his and our reading of the image we have jointly received. Thus, being aligned with his point of view does not ultimately generate an unShakespearean kinship between audience and Othello, but rather reinforces a sense of the failings in his vision and, therefore, most commonly of the (wholly Shakespearean) gulf between him and us.

‘SET YOU DOWN THIS’: THE BLACK MAN IN WHITE PUBLIC SPACE

Unlike many Shakespeare films of the past decade (most obviously Baz Lurhmann's William Shakespeare's 'Romeo + Juliet' and Christine Edzard's As You Like It), and many theatrical productions of Othello over the same period which have deliberately courted topical resonances, Parker's Othello does not update its source drama to modern times, nor does it explicitly draw out any contemporary parallels. In fact, although evidently stylistically of its moment, Parker's film shows every sign of attempting to abstract itself from topical allusions of all kinds through its firmly historical 1570 setting. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's play is so brimful of emotive triggers not exclusive to moment or context that it can scarcely escape chiming with contemporary narratives in a reception context. Just as no contemporary production of The Merchant of Venice can duck the resonances of being played in a post-Holocaust world, so no contemporary production of Othello can be oblivious of how the interracial encounters in the play relate to those beyond its bounds. The increasingly multicultural nature of our world renders this necessary, and an ostensibly distant temporal setting for the production does nothing to circumscribe this.

The black man was, of course, notably absent from productions of Othello on the Jacobean stage, and has largely remained so since. When Othello is played by a blacked-up white actor, as he has so often been, the play may be a discourse about race, but at a discernible symbolic remove from the subject of its consideration. The 1920 silent Anson Dyer animated Othello contributes an apposite joke to the performance history of blacked-up Othellos. A cartoonist's hand appears in front of a line drawing and starts to colour in the figure of a man sitting in front of a dressing table mirror. As we watch, the bare figure is transformed in stages into a music-hall black minstrel, complete with banjo slung across his back. Mid-task, however, the cartoonist's hand places the burnt cork he has been using on the dressing table in front of his half-coloured creation and withdraws from the frame. Left to his own devices, the newly animated, but only half-coloured, Othello then himself picks up the cork and completes the task of blacking-up himself. The accompanying intertitles to this opening sequence make the joke yet more self-conscious. The opening intertitle, ‘Othello the moor was black’, is immediately followed by a second, which puns on the dual significance of black (literal colour and synonym for wicked) to emphasize the constructed nature both of Othello's colour and of his degenerative reputation: ‘but he was not as black as he was painted!’ The fact that Dyer's Othello is made so obviously responsible for applying his own colour, and therefore for constructing his own racial self-projections, reflects back interestingly upon the play which it is parodying. The character of Shakespeare's Othello deliberately spins culturally evocative myths about himself and his history (by, for example, dwelling on the mystical origins of the handkerchief) in order to nurture a sense of his own exotic Otherness. Moreover, the actor of Shakespeare's Othello has indeed rarely been as ‘black as he was painted’, since he has almost always been a white man painted black. Both his reputation and his colour have been blackened by deliberate decision. In the final shot, Othello's girlfriend (known familiarly as Mona) becomes comically and exaggeratedly smeared
with black as his artificially applied colour rubs off on her. Thus the Dyer cartoon ridicules by extravagant parody the contemporary practice of casting a white man as Othello who needs to turn himself into a comically grotesque sideshow in order to play the part.

Fishburne's performance as a black man playing the part of a black man reduces the gap between the player and the part played, and so renders the debates about skin colour and ethnicity more immediate and less stylized than they could have been on the Renaissance stage, and than they have been in earlier film adaptations with a blacked-up Jannings, Welles, Olivier or Hopkins. In the opening scene of Parker's film, another Venetian black man is seen floating by on a gondola with another white woman, covering his face with a white mask—as if to adopt a pretence of belonging, of 'being' a white man in ways similar to those in which Jannings, Olivier, Welles, Hopkins and even Dyer's minstrel have, conversely, covered their faces in order to 'be' black men. And in an ironic reversal of this opening, Branagh's Iago deliberately blackens his own hand with charcoal—a gesture simultaneously of mock-derision and of intimate identification with the black Other whom he professes to hate. In sudden acknowledgement of the fact that he is himself being watched, Branagh's Iago then puts this freshly blackened hand over the lens of the camera as he declares his intention to construct a 'net / That shall enmesh them all' (II.iii.356-7). The conjunction of word and gesture here is doubly eloquent in the terms of the film. The camera in this production is that enmeshing net. It is the camera's characterization of the subjectivized gaze, and a failure to acknowledge the limits of one's own subjectivity, that enmeshes them all. Iago makes the spectator inescapably conscious of the camera's crucial role in the process of the drama by manually obscuring it here as he unfolds the detail of his plot. The conscious irony of the gesture is that, in putting it out of commission, he alerts us to its multiple functions. But it is also, as Branagh's Iago's artificially blackened hand attests, a man pretending to be black that brings about the downfall of the central characters. Iago's obvious pretence of blackening is a literalized metaphor for the way in which he has urged Othello to live. At the opening of the film, Fishburne's Othello is a black man who defies many of Venice's expectations about black men. He is noble, dignified, articulate, restrained. As the Duke says of him, in value-laden terminology, he is 'far more fair than black' (I.iii.291). He does not live out the stereotype of a black man—passionate, irrational, brutal, jealous, barbaric, libidinous, inarticulate. However, the racist propaganda of the dramatic milieu, championed most obviously and most crudely by Iago, eventually has its effect on Othello, who begins to live down to the prevalent expectations of his environment, becoming the thing he had been claimed to be. Thus Othello's emerging 'blackness' as a set of stereotypical behavioural patterns is the force tapped by Iago that eventually 'enmesh[es] them all'. In Parker's production, the complementary moments of assuming whiteness (literally, with a hand-held mask) and assuming blackness (literally, with charcoal by Iago, and metaphorically, with passionate jealousy and violence by Othello) appropriately point to the complexity of the constructions of cultural identity in the world of the play.

Despite the film's eschewing of any obvious topical engagement, contemporary parallels presented themselves irresistibly after the film's release. Played in the movie theatres of the United States in late 1995 and early 1996, for example, a Shakespearean story about a successful, high-profile black man living in a predominantly white world, married to a white woman, made sexually jealous, driven to violent extremes and finally accused of her murder, could not but take on a particular topical resonance. Another story composed of the same essential narrative ingredients had until very recently enthralled the United States as it played out on every television in the country (and many more around the world). Parker's Othello was released in the United States shortly after the height of the media hysteria surrounding the trial of the black American football player, sports commentator and actor, O. J. Simpson, accused of murdering his white ex-wife. The political and emotional fall-out from what became known as ‘the trial of the century’ was still being felt. In both Othello's and O. J. Simpson's story, the central protagonist was a black man who had been celebrated by white society for his heroic performances in a masculine, combative endeavour (soldiery/football) and who had refused to allow himself to be confined by restrictive definitions of his colour, in each case marrying a white woman (Desdemona/Nicole Brown), attracting a blaze of publicity in the process and, rightly or wrongly, suspecting her of having a sexual relationship with a white man (Cassio/Ronald Goldman). After the murder, each displayed self-dramatizing suicidal tendencies: Othello delivered a self-exonerating obituary for himself...
before his public suicide, and Simpson memorably held a gun to his own head in the glare of the television cameras on a Los Angeles freeway. Each confined his expression of personal remorse to an accusation of having loved his wife ‘too well’ or ‘so much’. Simpson wrote a suicide note, addressed ‘To Whom It May Concern’. In an uncanny echo of Othello's self-portrait as ‘one that loved not wisely, but too well’ (V.ii.342), Simpson wrote: ‘I loved her. I always have and I always will. If we had a problem, it’s because I loved her so much.’ Later in the letter he reiterated the sentiment: ‘I loved her; make that clear to everyone.’ His ‘make that clear to everyone’ exhibits the same concern for how he will be remembered after his death that motivates Othello’s comparably insistent ‘set you down this’. Each invests his energies in trying to script his own obituary. Othello’s initial plea for truthfulness in the account:

I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice …  

(V.ii.338-41)

is immediately followed by his dictation of exactly what he would like that ‘unextenuated’ truth to be:

Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous …  

(V.ii.341-3)

Othello’s attempts at self-exoneration and self-ennoblement in trying to ensure that the dimensions of his love for Desdemona are mythologized after his death carry the same hollow ring that accompanies O. J.’s ‘I loved her; make that clear to everyone’. Under pressure, each reaches for words of self-consolation.

The several parallels and uncanny echoes ensured that, in its American reception, Parker's Othello was overwritten by the O. J. story. The film became a palimpsest on which were inscribed both its own intended Shakespearean story and a closely related, though accidentally acquired, contemporary narrative. The O. J.-saturated cultural backdrop for the early exhibition of Parker's Othello ensured that the film offered itself as a site on which the host of fears and prejudices unleashed by the O. J. affair could be remediated and examined at a useful symbolic remove through the distancing filter of a Shakespearean narrative. Roger Ebert in the Chicago Sun-Times saw ‘the fates of O. J. and Nicole Simpson projected like a scrim on top of the screen’ when he watched Parker's Othello, and John Dargie in the L.A. Weekly asked ‘Why … is there something so creepy and so very O. J. in the initial love scene between Othello and Desdemona?’

The O. J. Simpson trial received an astonishing, unremitting level of press coverage, keeping the television ratings high and selling newspapers. There was something inherent in the material that fascinated, and the fascination ran deeper than simply seeing a famous and successful man brought to account. The story played to a firmly entrenched set of cultural anxieties about the dangerous libido of the black man and the concomitant vulnerability of the white woman before his lascivious and violent clasps. It is an image whose disturbing and erotic inflection has found repeated narrative representation. The stories that are told most frequently, and which resurface in new guises in successive generations, are the ones that explore and assuage deep-rooted human anxieties, fears and repressed desires. The frequency with which the central image of the Othello/O. J. story finds narrative expression suggests that there is something latent in its texture that both troubles and appeals to us considerably. In his poem, ‘Goats and Monkeys’ (1969), which was inspired by his reading of Othello, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott provided a cartooned and exaggerated image of the union of Desdemona and Othello as ‘Virgin and ape, maid and malevolent Moor’. The dichotomized imaging of ‘virgin and ape’ tips the story quickly towards the same fascinating grotesque that has given
stories such as *Beauty and the Beast* (and, by extension, *King Kong*) a central place among our narrative myths. The extremity of contrast in an image of female helplessness juxtaposed with a powerful male monstrosity has the power to trouble and to titillate. Introducing also a black-white colour contrast to the formula adds an additional layer of sensationalism.

Within a few years, the parallels between the O. J. story and *Othello* will have become part of the critical orthodoxy about the play in general and perhaps about Parker's production, with its successful African-American in the central role, in particular. As a telling of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Parker's film certainly plays to the same primal prejudices about the black man and black male sexuality that the O. J. affair drew to the surface of white American society. In its representation of an interracial sexuality, it is alive to the emotive power and visual appeal of the exaggerated dichotomy in the aggressive black ram/defiled white ewe image. In fact, the film even flirts with the suggestion of an aggression in Othello's sexual relations with Desdemona from their first scene of love-making, and, in more pronounced fashion, in his subsequent fantasy. Thus for the film marketed as an ‘erotic thriller’, and whose advertising poster played up the eroticism of the sexual union of Othello and Desdemona, Parker exploited some of the disturbing eroticism lurking in the deep-rooted white prejudice about the danger that attaches to black male sexuality.

Early in cinema's development, a black-white violent sexual clasp was made a subject of grotesque fascination. In D. W. Griffith's seminal feature film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, the Ku Klux Klan arrive on horseback (to the triumphant accompaniment of ‘The Ride of the Valkyries’) to save Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) from the lascivious and violent clutches of Silas Lynch (played in black face by Griffith's assistant, George Siegmann). Although there were plenty of black actors in minor roles in the film, it was considered unthinkable to subject a white actress to the trauma of being manhandled by a real black man, even in pretence; Lynch therefore had to be played by a blacked-up white man. *The Birth of a Nation* established or confirmed many filmic conventions, both technical and thematic, that were to influence later filmmakers. One of these conventions, much emulated since, was a corrosive sexual-racial pattern. A subliminal message of the film was that black men's desire of white women is animal, ignoble and predatory. The message was not new, but Griffith's insistence upon it in one of the most influential films of the first quarter century of cinema helped to suggest it as a fertile subject for later film treatment.

The intensity of emotional responses to such images ensures that they are constantly recycled, providing the opportunity for the horror and the primal appeal of this particular taboo to be felt anew. In a predominantly white interpretative community in which racist fears still have an almost inexhensibly deep hold, the story of a passionate and violent black man doing violence to a defenceless white woman can lend itself to being read as a narrative on a continuum at the most extreme end of which is the ‘virgin and ape’ myth. Parker's particular contribution to the corpus of *Othello* films nudges the material further in that direction.

**OTHELLO'S RESISTANCE TO CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATIONS**

In Othello's dignified and eloquent speech to the Senate in Act I, he seems to out-Venice Venice in exemplifying the virtues for which it would like to believe it stands. So amenable is he to being absorbed into Christendom that he even accepts a commission to fight for its interests. In aligning himself with Venice's values and cultural systems, he implicitly turns his back on those of his past. Even his view of the black man, and of the negatively charged connotations of the word black, seem to have been inherited wholesale from a culture overtly antagonistic to all that is not white. ‘Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face’ (III.iii.389-91), he says of Desdemona, poignantly illustrating how Venice's value-laden views of colour have infiltrated his own perceptions.

Once on Cyprus, however, the Venetian veneer is pared away from him in stages, suggesting that, although he had learned Venice's forms and manners, its identity had never been organically his. His marriage to Venetian ideals, like his marriage to one of its most eligible maidens, unravels in the course of the play. As if living
down to the prevalent expectations of his cultural environment, Othello finally starts to resemble Christian Venice's stereotypical image of an infidel Moor—superstitious, inarticulate, crude, irrational, dangerous: the very things that Venice had initially been at pains to reassure itself that Othello, despite his Moorish origins, was not.

Although Norman Rabkin thinks him ‘the most emphatically Christian’ of ‘all the tragic heroes’, Othello ultimately resists Christianizing. In slaying himself, he both voices and enacts his resistance to it, ‘turning Turk’ in his act of suicide. His final speech (in which he casts himself simultaneously as champion of, and emblem of absolute alterity to, Christian Venice) demonstrates his sense of a riven identity: in his own person, as in the culturally ambivalent territory of Cyprus, the conflict between competing worlds, Christian and infidel, is played out.

The focus of this collection is to read these Shakespeare films, made on the cusp of the new millennium, in the light of anxieties attendant upon a moment of historical transition. Although the specifically Christian apocalyptic myth about the year 2000 ad had some purchase on the intellectual climate in the period in which Shakespeare was writing, it is no longer a feature of Christian consciousness. Its emotional legacy (associating significant temporal end markers with momentous events on a material or metaphysical level) now finds its most obvious focus in direful prophecies about the possible consequences of the ‘Millennium Bug’. That apart, little serious eschatological significance is now attached to the fact of calendrical juncture. Rather than heralding metaphysical crisis, the millennium is, more mundanely, now taken to refer simply to a system for counting time. That counting system is not, however, culturally neutral, and its heritage is significant.

At midnight on 31 December 1999 (or 2000, to be calendrically pedantic), it will be 2000 years since the date (erroneously) taken as the birth of Christ. In the midst of the millennial mania, it is easy, in an historically Christian culture, to be seduced into believing that the turn of the millennium is of moment to the whole of humanity. Rather, of course, it is only according to the Gregorian calendar of Christianity that this is a fin de siècle, and a new millennium. Other religions and other cultures have employed, and many still do employ, other calendars. The Christocentric assumption that the millennium is a universal phenomenon carries traces of an anachronistic cultural imperialism. Where this calendar now holds sway, it is due to the economic and militaristic expansionist successes of Christian Europe. As much as anything, therefore, the millennium serves as a reminder that European Christians have been empire-builders. It is, after all, only by a Christian dating system (devised by Dionysius Exiguus, a sixth-century monk) that this moment receives the specific temporal labels that identify it as the end of a century and of a millennium.

Parcelling up history into temporal units—decades, centuries, millennia—helps us to organize and focus our sense of things. ‘Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom’ writes the Psalmist (Psalms 90:12), implying a close association between counting time and understanding its import. In this same endeavour, we not only identify discrete temporal units but retrospectively assign a character to them too—the roaring twenties, swinging sixties, selfish eighties. If we are to ask what characterizes the drift tendencies of thought specifically at the end of this century and millennium, however, we encounter a paradox. One of the characteristics of the tide of thought in our own time springs from an increasing awareness of, and sensitivity to, cultural diversity. Alongside this has emerged a desire to challenge systems of cultural norm-referencing that automatically interpret difference from ourselves as either inferior or threatening. So one aspect of the spirit of the age at the end of this millennium—the aspiration to live multiculturally—sits in tension with the label applied to the moment, whose unexamined provenance is so specifically Christian.

Parker’s film explores the locations and labellings of Otherness and, through its troubling and shifting subjectivities, the means by which notions of Otherness are constructed. It depicts a Venetian world trying to conceive of itself as a multicultural place—a place that can embrace the exoticism of another and even employ that Other on useful service in the pursuit of its own interests. Its ‘embracing’ of that exoticism,
however, succeeds in extinguishing it. The story of Othello acknowledges that squeezing cultural others into the mould of the dominant power of the moment is unlikely to yield healthy results. Othello's response is finally to exaggerate his alterity in Venetian terms by aligning himself dramatically with the infidel Turk.

C. L. Barber has argued that Shakespeare's tragedies ‘present a post-Christian situation where, with some of the expectations and values of Christianity, we do not have God’. Their ‘extraordinary relevance to the modern age’, he writes, derives from their refusal to accommodate themselves to a specifically Christian world view. Not only Othello, but the tragic world of the play as a whole resists Christianizing. Reading this particular dramatic material (which both narrates and illustrates the resistance to a process of Christianizing) in millennial terms (whose heritage is so institutionally Christian) is, perhaps, a symbolically fraught project. Its implied Christocentric assumption about hegemony and cultural dominance even perhaps mimics Christian Venice's attempt, dramatized in the play, to subsume Othello into the heart of its values and systems.

Notes

6. Jonathan Miller's 1981 BBC production, for example, boasts a very pale-skinned Othello (Anthony Hopkins), who obfuscates his cultural heritage in both appearance and behaviour—a thorough-going Venetian in his self-projections.
7. Liz White's filmed Othello (1980) had a black Othello and other black cast members. However, it was never commercially released. For a discussion of the distinction between the exhibition of black people and the mimesis of blackness in relation to Othello, see Dympna Callaghan, ‘“Othello was a white man”: Properties of race on Shakespeare's stage’, in Terence Hawkes (ed.), Alternative Shakespeares, Volume 2 (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 192-215.
9. Venice had annexed Cyprus in 1489 and ruled it as an outpost of empire, strategically placed to facilitate trade with the East. After sieges at Nicosia and Famagusta in 1570-1, Cyprus finally fell to the Turkish invasion fleet, led by Mustapha Bassa, on 1 August 1571. Cyprus had, therefore, been both Venetian and Turkish within living memory of 1604, the probable year of Othello's composition.
10. Sections of a 1604 London audience familiar with the newly published English translation of Richard Knolles' Generall Historie of the Turkes (London: A. Islip, 1603) would have known that Cyprus had recently been lost to the Turks and was still a Turkish possession. This would have introduced a filter of cynicism through which Venice's pride in the face of the Turkish threat was viewed by the first audiences for Othello.
12. For the UK release, Branagh insisted that his image be removed from the advertising posters. It was not his production, and he clearly wished to distance himself from it lest others should speculate as Kempley had.
13. In this century, for example, Paul Robeson has written that American audiences found the play ‘strikingly contemporary in its overtones of a clash of cultures, of the partial acceptance of and consequent effect upon one of a minority group’ (Paul Robeson, ‘Some Reflections on Othello and
the Nature of Our Time’, *American Scholar*, 14.4 [1995], p. 391), and Janet Suzman, a South African, that ‘[t]he overtones, undercurrents and reverberations for our country were hauntingly evident’ (Janet Suzman, about the 1987 Market Theatre production in Johannesburg, *Washington Post*, 6 September 1987). David Harewood said that he had found part of his inspiration for his role as a black man in a white world (in Sam Mendes’ 1998 production of *Othello* at the National) by attending during the rehearsal period to the case of the murdered black London teenager, Stephen Lawrence (David Harewood, interviewed on Radio 4’s *Midweek*, 27 May 1998).

14. A selection of these stereotypes about Moors is peddled in Leo, *A Geographical Historie*.

15. The verdict at the O. J. Simpson trial was delivered on 3 October 1995 after almost nine months of testimony. Parker’s *Othello* was released in the United States on 15 December 1995.

16. The letter was read at a news conference on behalf of Simpson on 17 June 1994 and reprinted the following day in the American dailies. See, for example, *New York Times*, 18 June 1994, late edition.


19. Even in *King Kong*, the primitive, sexually insistent, oversized gorilla who wants as his ‘bride’ ‘The Golden Woman’ (Fay Wray in a blond wig) is associated with the sexuality of the black man. The men from the African village even dress up as Kong in gorilla fur as part of a ceremonial dance.

20. It is difficult to identify from where in our social or psychological make-up such deep-rooted myths emerge. It is, however, tempting to speculate that this particular one may have sprung from an unconscious desire by insecure white men to ‘blacken’ that rival male sexuality that has also taken on other, intimidatingly desirable, proportions in the popular imagination.

21. In the costume tests for the film, the character of Lynch is even more sexually threatening to Elsie than he is in the finished film. The costume tests were shown in the first part of the Thames Television and Thirteen/WNET 1993 co-produced three-part documentary, ‘D. W. Griffith: Father of Film’.

22. In 1920, for the filming of *Way Down East*, Griffith had Gish lie on real ice-floes while wearing only a thin cotton dress. Griffith considered that risking the health of his leading lady (who did indeed suffer from the exposure to the cold) was an acceptable nuisance in the pursuit of the filmic moment; nevertheless, allowing her to be grabbed by a black man would have been an indignity too far. This relative discrimination is revealing about attitudes of the time, and about Griffith’s in particular.

23. In Emil Jannings’ 1922 silent film adaptation of the play, the potential horror of this taboo must have been felt so keenly that it was considered advisable to mollify its effects by diluting the ‘Africanness’ of Othello’s pedigree. In his moment of formal self-annunciation, Jannings’ Othello declares himself (by intertitle) the ‘son of an Egyptian Prince and a Spanish Princess’. It is his half-European royal lineage that enables him then to make the claim, ‘My blood is fair, like hers, my wife’s’. This suggestion of ‘fairness’ makes it the more likely that his mother is not intended to be thought a Spanish Moor. The decision to temper Othello’s alterity (and explain his nobility) by giving him a Spanish mother is illuminating about the anxieties that surrounded even the fictional representation of a black and white sexual union in 1922.

25. Christian thinking about the apocalypse had often taken the Genesis account of Creation as an allegory for the life of the world, which would toil for six days and then rest for one day. Since in 2 Peter 3:8 it is written ‘one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day’, this was taken literally to signify that one day in God-speak meant a thousand years in human-speak. Thus the Creation would endure for 6,000 years before being brought to account and entering the 1,000-year reign of Christ (the Millennium). Since it was thought to have endured 4,000 years already at the moment when Christ was born, it therefore had 2,000 years left to run before the second coming and the beginning of the millennium. These anxieties were certainly characteristic of the period in which Shakespeare was writing. In 1593, for example, John Napier published *The Plaine Discoverie of the Whole Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave). In it he calculated that the ‘latter daies’ of Creation had already arrived and the Day of Judgement was at hand, since the allotted span of 2,000 years ‘appeareth to be shortnd’ (Proposition 14, p. 19). Napier was well respected as a mathematician and scientist, and his *Plaine Discoverie* sold so well that by 1700 (the last date to which he calculated the world could endure) it had run to more than twenty editions. Despite the minor flurry of millenarianism in his intellectual environment, however, Shakespeare demonstrated little interest in it.

26. Let us for a moment pursue a batty line of enquiry. If we were to construct out of Shakespeare's Othello a full person with a history, we would deduce that he would not have grown up within a Christian dating system. As a Moor, he would, more probably, have known the Muslim calendar which counts as its year 0 the Christian year 622 ad (the year in which Mohammed fled from Mecca) and which works to a 354-day year. One of his gestures of assimilation to Christian Venice is, therefore, to transform his way of thinking about time and its passing. Thus, to locate him now within an explicitly Christian system of time-keeping is akin to Venice's attempt to subsume him into the heart of their values and beliefs.


**Criticism: Production Reviews: Peter Travers (review date 2001)**


*[In the following review, Travers offers a mixed assessment of the film O, a modern version of Othello directed by Tim Blake Nelson. Although Travers praises the performances of Mekhi Phifer as O (Othello) and Julia Stiles as Desi (Desdemona), the critic finds that the film relies too heavily on plot mechanics from the original play that do not make sense in Nelson's contemporary context.]*

Sometimes these updates of Shakespeare's plays work well, whether they junk the text (*10 Things I Hate About You*) or stick with the iambic pentameter (*Michael Almereyda's Hamlet*). This is not one of those times. *O*, a modern spin on *Othello*, is a bumpy ride that is nonetheless worth taking. Set in a Southern prep school, the film shows the tragic consequences that occur when basketball champ Odin James (Mekhi Phifer)—no, they don't call him O. J.—falls hard for Desi (Julia Stiles), the dean's daughter. It's not their interracial romance that makes waves in this all-white school, it's the jealousy awakened in Odin by his court “bro” Hugo (Josh Hartnett). Hugo thinks his dad, Coach Duke (a hammy Martin Sheen), likes Odin better then he does his own son.
Phifer and Stiles put real heat into their performances. Hartnett, who survived the debacle of Pearl Harbor, is less successful in wrestling with his role as a modern-day Iago. Despite a colloquial script by Brad Kaaya, O relies on plot mechanics from the Bard that make no sense in a contemporary context. Nor does it help that director Tim Blake Nelson lays on a heavy hand that you don't see in his work as an actor (he played the spaciest convict in O Brother, Where Art Thou?). The film ends with a climactic shootout that litters the campus with bodies. Nelson doesn't overplay the shootings, but O has sat on a shelf for two years because Miramax, the film's original distributor, feared releasing a kids-with-guns film in a post-Columbine climate. Now, with Lions Gate stepping in for Miramax, O—flaws and all—has a chance to find an audience willing to engage the film on its own provocative terms. It's about time.

**Criticism: Themes: G. K. Hunter (lecture date 1967)**


*In the following lecture, originally delivered in 1967, Hunter attempts to ascertain Shakespeare's theatrical purpose behind Othello's blackness and contends that Shakespeare did not present Othello as a stereotypical black character.*

It is generally admitted today that Shakespeare was a practical man of the theatre: however careless he may have been about maintaining consistency for the exact reader of his plays, he was not likely to introduce a theatrical novelty which would only puzzle his audience; it does not seem wise, therefore, to dismiss his theatrical innovations as if they were unintentional. The blackness of Othello is a case in point. Shakespeare largely modified the story he took over from Cinthio: he made a tragic hero out of Cinthio's passionate and bloody lover; he gave him a royal origin, a Christian baptism, a romantic bravura of manner and, most important of all, an orotund magnificence of diction. Yet, changing all this, he did not change his colour, and so produced a daring theatrical novelty—a black hero for a white community—a novelty which remains too daring for many recent theatrical audiences. Shakespeare cannot merely have carried over the colour of Othello by being too lazy or too uninterested to meddled with it; for no actor, spending the time in ‘blacking-up’, and hence no producer, could be indifferent to such an innovation, especially in that age, devoted to ‘imitation’ and hostile to ‘originality’. In fact, the repeated references to Othello's colour in the play and the wider net of images of dark and light spread across the diction, show that Shakespeare was not only not unaware of the implication of his hero's colour, but was indeed intensely aware of it as one of the primary factors in his play. I am therefore assuming in this lecture that the blackness of Othello has a theatrical purpose, and I intend to try to suggest what it was possible for that purpose to have been.

Shakespeare intended his hero to be a black man—that much I take for granted; what is unknown is what the idea of a black man suggested to Shakespeare, and what reaction the appearance of a black man on the stage was calculated to produce. It is fairly certain, however, that some modern reactions are not likely to have been shared by the Elizabethans. The modern theatre-going European intellectual, with a background of cultivated superiority to ‘colour problems’ in other continents, would often choose to regard Othello as a fellow man and to watch the story—which could so easily be reduced to its headline level: ‘sheltered white girl errs: said, “Colour does not matter”’—with a sense of freedom from such prejudices. But this lofty fair-mindedness may be too lofty for Shakespeare's play, and not take the European any nearer the Othello of Shakespeare than the lady from Maryland quoted in the Furness New Variorum edition: ‘In studying the play of Othello, I have always imagined its hero a white man.’ Both views, that the colour of Othello does not matter, and that it matters too much to be tolerable, err, I suggest, by over-simplifying. Shakespeare was clearly deliberate in keeping Othello's colour; and it is obvious that he counted on some positive audience reaction to this colour; but it is equally obvious that he did not wish the audience to dismiss Othello as a stereotype nigger.
Modern rationalizations about ‘colour’ tend to be different from those of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. We are powerfully aware of the relativism of viewpoints; we distinguish easily between different racial cultures; and explicit arguments about the mingling of the races usually begin at the economic and social level and only move to questions of God’s providence at the lunatic fringe.

The Elizabethans also had a powerful sense of the economic threat posed by the foreign groups they had daily contact with—Flemings or Frenchmen—but they had little or no continuous contact with ‘Moors’, and no sense of economic threat from them. This did not mean, however, that they had no racial or colour prejudice. They had, to start with, the basic common man's attitude that all foreigners are curious and inferior—the more curious the more inferior, in the sense of the proverb quoted by Purchas: ‘Three Moors to a Portuguese; three Portuguese to an Englishman.’ They had also the basic and ancient sense that black is the colour of sin and death, ‘the badge of hell, The hue of dungeons, and the Schoole of night’ (as Shakespeare himself says).

This supposition is found all over the world (even in darkest Africa) from the earliest to the latest times; and in the West there is a continuous and documented tradition of it. It may be worth while giving some account of this. In Greece and Rome black was the colour of ill luck, death, condemnation, malevolence. The Roman feeling about the colour is well summed up in Horace’s line:

hic niger est; hunc tu, Romane, caveto

—on which the Delphin editor comments: ‘Niger est] Homo pestilens, malus, perniciosus: contra est candidus, albus.’ The soldiers of Brutus were dismayed to meet an Ethiop just before the battle of Philippi. In Lucian's Philopseudes (§ 31) we hear of a ghost met in Corinth: ‘when the Spirit appeared … he was squalid and long-haired and blacker than the dark’ (s). Suetonius tells us of a play, being rehearsed at the time of Caligula’s death, in which the infernal connotations of the colour were used with self-conscious art. In this play Egyptians and Ethiopians played the parts of the inhabitants of the underworld.

The coming of Christianity made no break in the tradition. Indeed, Christian eschatology seems to have taken over the black man from the underworld with great speed and enthusiasm. In the dream of Marcellus in the Acts of Peter (c. a.d. 200) a demon appeared ‘in sight like an Ethiopian … altogether black and filthy’. In the third-century Acta Xanthippae the devil manifested himself as the King of Ethiopia. In the so-called ‘Epistle of Barnabas’ the devil is called s. In another early text the martyrdom of Perpetua is represented as a battle between the saint and a black-faced Egyptian—the devil, of course. Among the visitors to the much-tried St. Anthony was the devil as a s; in Cassian's Collationes Patrum the devil appears several times in figura Aethiopis taetri. And so on; I have elsewhere given later examples of the same religious visions.

They went on, unchanging, into Shakespeare’s own day.

The linguistic change from Greek or Latin to English did not free the word black from the associations that had formed round niger. As candidus had combined the ideas of white skin and clear soul, so the word fair served to combine the ideas of beauty and whiteness. Black remains the adjective appropriate to the ugly and the frightening, to the devil and his children, the wicked and the infidel. In the medieval romances, the enemies of the knights are usually Saracens, often misshapen and monstrous (eyes in forehead, mouth in breast, etc.) and commonly black. This is a tradition that Shakespeare picks up in his description of Thomas Mowbray as a Crusader,

Streaming the ensign of the Christian cross
Against black pagans, Turks and Saracens.

There was then, it appears, a powerful, widespread, and ancient tradition associating black-faced men with wickedness, and this tradition came right up to Shakespeare's own day. The habit of representing evil men as black-faced or negroid had also established itself in a pictorial tradition that persists from the Middle Ages through and beyond the sixteenth century. This appears especially in works showing the tormentors of Christ,
in scenes of the Flagellation and the Mocking, though the tormentors of other saints are liable to have the same external characteristics used to show their evil natures. Thus in the south porch of the Cathedral of Chartres, the executioner of St. Denis is shown as negroid (Pl. XXIa). The alabaster tablets produced in England in the late Middle Ages, and exported to the Continent in large numbers, frequently have enough pigment remaining to show some faces coloured black. W. L. Hildburgh, writing in *Archaeologia*, xciii (1949), assumes that there is a link between this characteristic and the medieval drama: ‘the very dark colour of the faces of the wicked persons [is] intended to indicate their villainous natures; in some tables the faces of the torturers and other iniquitous persons are black’ (p. 76). E. S. Prior, *Catalogue of the Exhibition of English Medieval Alabaster Work* (1913), had made the same point: ‘the blackening of the faces of the ruffians and executioners and heretics as seen in many of the tables was no doubt a stage trick’ (p. 21, n. 1). There is a good example in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, a crucifixion which the 1836 catalogue describes thus: ‘the penitent thief looks towards Christ and the other has his face averted and is painted as a negro’ (p. 146).

Again, A. Gardner, writing of English medieval sculpture, tells us that ‘In the martyrdom scenes the executioners are given hideous faces, which seem sometimes to have been painted black’, *English Medieval Sculpture* (1951), p. 310. He illustrates a good example showing the martyrdom of St. Catherine (fig. 609, p. 309). Further examples are described in ‘Medieval English Alabasters in American Museums’, *Speculum*, xxx (1955), where the Scourging and the Resurrection are both marked by this feature. Wall-paintings in English churches preserve evidence of the same usage. A Massacre of the Innocents from Croughton (Northants.), illustrated in Borenius and Tristram, *English Medieval Painting* (1927) as plate 51, shows dark-faced soldiers. The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul at Pickering (N. Yorks.) has splendid fifteenth-century wall-paintings—not yet properly photographed—in which both Herod and the scourgers are given dark faces. Herod is represented in the same way, it may be noticed, in an alabaster tablet described in *The Archaeological Journal*, lxxiv (1917), plate xiii.

Among the sixteenth-century painted windows of King's College Chapel, Cambridge, the Scourging itself does not have this feature, but the window above (window X), intended as a typological comment on it (‘Shimei cursing David’), gives a dark face to Shimei, the *vir sanguinum et vir Belial* (2 Samuel, 16. 7), as the legend tells us.

Among illuminated manuscripts, the Luttrell Psalter has a black scourger on fol. 92v (Pl. XXIb), and the Chichester Psalter, now in the John Rylands Library, has several full-page pictures of the Passion, in which the tormentors are black with grossly distorted features (see Pl. XXIa). The *Très-Belles Heures de Notre Dame* du Duc Jean de Berry has a full-page Scourging, with two white tormentors and one black (Pl. XXIIb). Bodleian MS. Douce 5—a Book of Hours of Flemish Provenance and fourteenth-century date—has a similar scene. The most celebrated picture in which this tradition appears is the Scourging by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padua. In this the negro scourger stands alone brandishing his rod above the head of Christ. Among the many monographs devoted to Giotto no one seems to have pointed to the tradition with which I am here concerned.

The latest picture which uses this tradition, so far as I know, is a martyrdom of St. James, attributed to Van Dyck, sold by Weinmüller of Munich in 1958 (Catalogue 721, item 501—Pl. XXIII).

It is suggested by several of the authorities cited here that the pictorial tradition was associated with theatrical usage. Certainly the drama of the Middle Ages seems to have used black figures to represent the evil of this world and the next. Creizenach describes the European diffusion of the black faces. The surviving accounts of the Coventry cycle (which some think Shakespeare may have seen—and which he could have seen) retain the distinction between ‘white (or saved) souls’ and ‘black (or damned) souls’. The English folk-play describes St. George's enemy as (*inter alia* ‘Black Morocco Dog’, ‘Black Prince of Darkness’, or even ‘Black and American Dog’). In Thomas Lupton's *All for Money* (1558-77) ‘Judas cometh in like a damned soul in black’. Udall's *Ezechias*, acted in Cambridge in 1564 is stated to have represented the leader of the Assyrians as a giant and made his followers coal-black. As the reporter of the performance tells us:

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In John Redford's *Wit and Science* (c. 1530) we seem to have a moral transformation scene *coram populo*, expressed in terms of face colouring. Wit goes to sleep on Idleness's lap. Idleness then tells us:

Well, whyle he sleept in Idlenes lappe,
Idleness marke on hym shall I clappe.

(434 f.)

When Wit awakens he is taken for Ignorance (child of Idleness); he looks in a glass and exclaims:

hah, goges sowle,
What have we here, a dyvyll?
This glas I se well hath bene kept evyll
.....Other this glas is shamefully spotted,
Or els am I to shamefully blotted.
.....And as for this face
Is abhominable as black as the devyll.

(826-40)

Even in a proverbial title like ‘Like will to like quoth the Devil to the Collier’ the widespread and universally accepted point is exposed as part of the air that Englishmen of Shakespeare's age breathed. Indeed, as late as Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* (1676) stray reference to the Devil's blackness was supposed to be intelligible to a theatrical audience (‘like a devil in a play … this darkness … conceals her angel's face’).

How mindlessly and how totally accepted in this period was the image of the black man as the devil may be seen from the use of ‘Moors’ or ‘Morians’ in civic pageants. ‘Moors’ were an accepted part of the world of pageantry. There were Moors in London Lord Mayor's Pageants in 1519, 1521, 1524, 1536, 1541, 1551, 1589, 1609, 1611, 1624, who seem to have acted as bogey-man figures to clear the way before the main procession. They were sometimes supplied with fireworks for this purpose, and in this function seem to have been fairly indifferent alternatives to green-men, wodewoses, devils. As Withington has remarked, ‘it seems obvious that all these figures are connected’; they are connected as frightening marginal comments on the human state—as inhabitants of those peripheral regions in the *mappae mundi* where Moors, together with

*Anthropophagi and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders,*

rubbed shoulders (such as these were) with Satyrs, Hermaphrodites, salvage men, and others of the species *semihomo*. An extreme example of this status of the Moor appears in the report of the pageant for the baptism of Prince Henry in 1594. It had been arranged that a lion should pull the triumphal car; but the lion could not be used, so a Moor was substituted.

Renaissance scepticism and the voyages of discovery might seem, at first sight, to have destroyed the ignorance on which such thoughtless equations of black men and devils depended. But this does not prove to have been so. The voyagers brought back some accurate reports of black and heathen; but they often saw, or said they saw, what they expected to see—the marvels of the East. In any case the vocabulary at their disposal frustrated any attempt at scientific discrimination. The world was still seen largely, in terms of vocabulary, as a network of religious names. The word ‘Moor’ had no clear racial status. The first meaning in the *O.E.D.* (with examples up to 1629) is ‘Mahomedan’. And very often this means no more than ‘infidel’, ‘non-Christian’. Like *Barbarian* and *Gentile* (or *Wog*) it was a word for ‘people not like us’, so signalled by
The word *Gentile* itself had still the religious sense of *Pagan*, and the combined phrase ‘Moors and Gentiles’ is used regularly to represent the religious gamut of non-Christian possibilities (see *O.E.D.* for examples). Similarly, *Barbary* was not simply a place in Africa, but also the unclearly located home of Barbarism, as in Chaucer (Franklin's Tale, 1451, Man of Law's Tale, 183).

I have suggested elsewhere that the discoveries of the voyagers had little opportunity of scientific or non-theological development. And this was particularly true of the problems raised by the black-skinned races. No scientific explanation of black skins had ever been achieved, though doctors had long disputed it. Lodovicus Caelius Rhodiginus in his *Lectionum Antiquarum libri XXX* (1620) can cite column after column of authorities; but all without conclusive answers. We hear among the latest reports of Africa collected in T. Astley's *New General Collection of Voyages* (1745) that the blackness of the Negro is ‘a Topic that has given Rise to numberless Conjectures and great Disputes among the Learned in Europe’ (ii. 269). Sir Thomas Browne in three essays in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (VI. x-xii) not only declared that the subject was ‘amply and satisfactorily discussed as we know by no man’ but proceeded to remedy this by way of amplitude rather than satisfactoriness. The theological explanation was left in possession of the field. Adam and Eve, it must be assumed, were white; it follows that the creation of the black races can only be ascribed to some subsequent fiat. The two favourite possibilities were the cursing of Cain and the cursing of Ham or Cham and his posterity—and sometimes these two were assumed to be different expressions of the same event; at least one might allege, with Sir Walter Ralegh, that ‘the sonnes of Cham did possesse the vices of the sonnes of Cain’. The Cham explanation had the great advantage that ‘the threefold world’ of tradition could be described in terms of the three sons of Noah—Japhet having produced the Europeans. Shem the Asiatics, while the posterity of Ham occupied Africa, or, in a more sophisticated version, ‘the Meridionall or southern partes of the world both in Asia and Africa’—sophisticated, we should notice, without altering the basic theological assumption that Cham's posterity were banished to the most uncomfortable part of the globe, and a foretaste of the Hell to come. This geographical assumption fitted in with the wisdom that the etymological doctors had in the Middle Ages been able to glean from the word *Ham*—defined as ‘*Cham: calidus*, et ipse ex praesagio futuri cognominatus est. Posteritas enim eius eam terrae partem possedit quae vicino sole calentior est.’ When this is linked to the other point made in relation to the Cham story—that his posterity were cursed to be slaves—one can see how conveniently and plausibly such a view fitted the facts and desires found in the early navigators. Azurara, the chronicler of Prince Henry the Navigator's voyages, tells us that it was natural to find blackamoors as the slaves of lighter skinned men:

these blacks were Moors (i.e. Mahomedans) like the others, though their slaves, in accordance with ancient custom which I believe to have been because of the curse which, after the Deluge, Noah laid upon his son Cain [sic], cursing him in this way: that his race should be subject to all the other races in the world. And from his race these blacks are descended.

The qualities of the ‘Moors’ who appear on the Elizabethan stage are hardly at all affected by Elizabethan knowledge of real Moors from real geographical locations, and, given the literary modes available, this is hardly surprising. It is true that the first important Moor-role—that of Muly Hamet in Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (c. 1589)—tells the story of a real man (with whom Queen Elizabeth had a treaty) in a real historical situation. But the dramatic focus that Peele manages to give to his Moorish character is largely dependent on the devil and underworld association he can suggest for him—making him call up ‘Fiends, Fairies, hags that fight in beds of steel’ and causing him to show more acquaintance with the geography of hell than with that of Africa. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* is liberated from even such slender ties as associate Muly Hamet with geography. Aaron is in the play as the representative of a world of generalized barbarism, which is Gothic in Tamora and Moorish in Aaron, and unfocused in both. The purpose of the play is served by a general opposition between Roman order and Barbarian disorder. Shakespeare has the doubtful distinction of making explicit here (perhaps for the first time in English literature) the projection of black wickedness in terms of negro sexuality. The relationship between Tamora and Aaron is meant, clearly enough, to shock our normal sensibilities and their black baby is present as an emblem of disorder. In this respect, as in most others,
Eleazer in *Lust's Dominion* (c. 1600)—the third pre-Othello stage-Moor—is copied from Aaron. The location of this play (Spain) gives a historically plausible excuse to present the devil in his favourite human form—‘that of a Negro or Moor’, as Reginald Scott tells us—but does not really use the locale to establish any racial points.

These characters provide the dominant images that must have been present in the minds of Shakespeare’s original audience when they entered the Globe to see a play called *The Moor of Venice*—an expectation of pagan devilry set against white Christian civilization—excessive civilization perhaps in Venice, but civilization at least ‘like us’. Even those who knew Cinthio’s story of the Moor of Venice could not have had very different expectations, which may be summed up from the story told by Bandello (III. xxi) in which a master beats his Moorish servant, and the servant in revenge rapes and murders his wife and children. Bandello draws an illuminating moral:

> By this I intend it to appear that a man should not be served by this sort of slave; for they are seldom found faithful, and at best they are full of filth, unclean, and stink all the time like goats. But all this is as nothing put beside the savage cruelty that reigns in them.

It is in such terms that the play opens. We hear from men like us of a man not like us, of ‘his Moorship’, ‘the Moor’, ‘the thick-lips’, ‘an old black ram’, ‘a Barbary horse’, ‘the devil’, of ‘the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor’. The sexual fear and disgust that lies behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive expectations to fasten upon them. And we are at this point bound to agree with these valuations, for no alternative view is revealed. There is, of course, a certain comic *brio* which helps to distance the whole situation, and neither Brabantio, nor Iago nor Roderigo can wholly command our identification. None the less we are drawn on to await the entry of a traditional Moor figure, the kind of person we came to the theatre expecting to find.

When the second scene begins, however, it is clear that Shakespeare is bent to ends other than the fulfilment of these expectations. The Iago/Roderigo relationship of I. i is repeated in the Iago/Othello relationship of the opening of I. ii; but Othello's response to the real-seeming circumstance with which Iago lards his discourse is very different from the hungrily self-absorbed questionings of Roderigo. Othello draws on an inward certainty about himself, a radiant clarity about his own well-founded moral position. This is no ‘lascivious Moor’, but a great Christian gentleman, against whom Iago's insinuations break like water against granite. Not only is Othello a Christian, moreover, he is the leader of Christendom in the last and highest sense in which Christendom existed as a viable entity, crusading against the ‘black pagans’. He is to defend Cyprus against the Turk, the ‘general enemy Ottoman’. It was the fall of Cyprus which produced the alliance of Lepanto, and we should associate Othello with the emotion that Europe continued to feel—till well after the date of *Othello*—about that victory and about Don John of Austria.

Shakespeare has presented to us a traditional view of what Moors are like, i.e. gross, disgusting, inferior, carrying the symbol of their damnation on their skin; and has caught our over-easy assent to such assumptions in the grip of a guilt which associates us and our assent with the white man representative of such views in the play—Iago. Othello acquires the glamour of an innocent man that we have wronged, and an admiration stronger than he could have achieved by virtue plainly represented:

... as these black masks  
Proclaim an enshield beauty ten times louder  
Than beauty could, displayed.

(Is it an accident that Shakespeare wrote these lines from *Measure for Measure* in approximately the same year as he wrote *Othello*)? Iago is a ‘civilized’ man; but where, for the ‘inferior’ Othello, appearance and reality, statement and truth are linked indissolubly, civilization for Iago consists largely of a capacity to
manipulate appearances and probabilities:

For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

Othello may be 'the devil' in appearance: but it is the 'fair' Iago who gives birth to the dark realities of sin and death in the play:

It is engender'd. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light

The relationship between these two is developed in terms of appearance and reality. Othello controls the reality of action; Iago the 'appearance' of talk about action; Iago the Italian is isolated (even from his wife), envious, enigmatic (even to himself), self-centred; Othello the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger' is surrounded and protected by a network of duties, obligations, esteems, pious to his father-in-law, deferential to his superiors, kind to his subordinates, loving to his wife. To sum up, assuming that soul is reality and body is appearance, we may say that Iago is the white man with the black soul while Othello is the black man with the white soul. Long before Blake's little black boy had said

I am black, but oh my soul is white.
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black as if bereaved of light.

and before Kipling's Gunga Din:

An' for all 'is dirty 'ide
'E was white, clear white inside ...
You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!

Othello had represented the guilty awareness of Europe that the 'foreigner type' is only the type we do not know, whose foreignness vanishes when we have better acquaintance; that the prejudicial foreign appearance may conceal a vision of truth, as Brabantio is told:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

This reality of fairness in Othello provides a principal function for Desdemona in the play. Her love is of a spiritual intensity, of a strong simplicity equal to that of Othello himself, and pierces without effort beyond appearance, into reality:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind.

Her love is a daring act of faith, beyond reason or social propriety. Like Beauty in the fairytale she denies the beastly (or devilish) appearance to proclaim her allegiance to the invisible reality. And she does so throughout the play, even when the case for the appearance seems most strong and when Iago's power over appearances rides highest. Even when on the point of death at Othello's hands, she gives testimony to her faith (martyr in the true sense of the word):

Commend me to my kind lord.
Othello is then a play which manipulates our sympathies, supposing that we will have brought to the theatre a set of careless assumptions about ‘Moor’s’. It assumes also that we will find it easy to abandon these as the play brings them into focus and identifies them with Iago, draws its elaborate distinction between the external appearance of devilishness and the inner reality.

Shakespeare's playcraft, however, would hardly have been able to superimpose these new valuations on his audience (unique as they were in this form) if it had not been for complicating factors which had begun to affect thought in his day.

The first counter-current I should mention is theological in origin and is found dispersed in several parts of the Bible. It was a fairly important doctrine of the Evangelists that faith could wash away the stains of sin, and the inheritance of disbelief, that the breach between chosen and non-chosen peoples could be closed by faith. The apostle Philip baptised the Ethiopian eunuch and thereupon, says Bede, the Ethiop changed his skin.⁴² The sons of darkness could be seen to become the sons of light, or as Ephesians 5. 8 puts it:

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as the children of light.

Jerome remarks on this (in Epistle xxii, § 1):

He that committeth sin is of the devil (John, 3: 8). Born of such a parent first we are black by nature, and even after repentance, until we have climbed to Virtue’s height we may say Nigra sum sed speciosa, filiae Hierusalem.

Only after conversion, he goes on, will the colour be changed, as by miracle, and then will the verse be fitting: Quae est ista, quae ascendit dealbata? (Cant. iii. 6 and viii. 5—Septuagint version).

Augustine hangs the same point on an interpretation of Psalm 73 (74 in the English Psalter), v. 14. The verse in the Authorized Version reads ‘Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness’, but the Vulgate version has … Dedisti eum in escam populis Ethiopibus. Augustine⁴³ asks who are meant by the Ethiopians; and answers that all nations are Ethiopians, black in their natural sinfulness; but they may become white in the knowledge of the Lord. Fuistis enim aliquando tenebrae; nunc autem lux in Domino (Ephesians 5. 8). As late as Bishop Joseph Hall, writing one of his Occasional Meditations (1630) ‘on the sight of a blackamoor’, we find the same use of nigra sum sed speciosa:

This is our colour spiritually; yet the eye of our gracious God and Saviour, can see that beauty in us wherewith he is delighted. The true Moses marries a Blackamoor; Christ, his church. It is not for us to regard the skin, but the soul. If that be innocent, pure, holy, the blots of an outside cannot set us off from the love of him who hath said, Behold, thou art fair, my Sister, my Spouse: if that be foul and black, it is not in the power of an angelical brightness of our hide, to make us other than a loathsome eye-sore to the Almighty.

The relevance of this passage to Othello need not be stressed.

The grandest of all visual representations of this view that all men are within the scope of the Christian ministry (‘We, being many, are one body in Christ’, says St. Paul in Romans 12. 5) is probably the portal of the narthex at Vézelay (Pl. XXIV), displaying the relevance of the pentecostal spirit of evangelism even to the monsters on the verge of humanity—Cynocephali and long-eared Scythians, whose relation to the Christian world had been debated by St. Augustine and other Fathers. But this monument has been treated with admirable fullness by Émile Mâle,⁴⁴ and it is no part of my function either to repeat or dispute what he has
Moreover, Vézelay does not touch on the colour question. And visual images are obviously of crucial importance here in establishing the idea of the black man as more than a patristic metaphor, as a figure that might be met with in real life. For the image of the black man, considered in relation to the scheme of the Christian Evangel, we have to turn in the main to representations of the three Magi. In early Christian art there seems no evidence that the three kings were shown different from one another. As early as the eighth century, however, the Excerptio Patrum, attributed to Bede, had described Balthazar, the third king, in the following terms:

Tertius, fuscus, integre barbatus, Balthazar nomine, habens tunicam rubeam.46

I may quote Mâle on this description:

It should also be noted that ... the term fuscus applied to Balthazar by the pseudo-Bede was never taken literally, and it was only in the fourteenth and still more in the fifteenth centuries that the king has the appearance of a Negro.47

It would be interesting to know what factors impeded the development of the black Balthazar in iconography. For as early as 1180, in the great typological sequence at Klosterneuburg, Nicholas of Verdun had represented the Old Testament type of the Epiphany—the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon—with a Negro Sheba (Pl. XXVa)—a feature to be met with elsewhere (e.g. Pl. XXVb).

It was another typological parallel, however, that probably did most to establish the black Balthazar—that between the three kings and the three sons of Noah. The genuine Bede makes this point in his commentary on Matthew:

Mystice autem tres Magi tres partes mundi significant, Asiam, Africam, Europam, sive humanum genus, quod a tribus filiis Noe sumpsit.48

and this view was given general diffusion in the Glossa Ordinaria.49 If we suppose that Cham became the father of the black races, it follows that one of the Magi must represent these races. Balthazar carries on his face the curse of Cham, but reveals the capacity for redemption through faith available to all races. And such another is Othello.

The sense that inferior and black-faced foreigners might in fact be figures from a more innocent world close to Christianity grew apace in the Renaissance as the voyagers gave their accounts, not of highly organized Mahomedan kingdoms, but of simple pagans, timid, naked as their mothers brought them forth, without laws and without arms (as Columbus first saw them and first described them) and perhaps having minds naturally prone to accept Christianity.51 The old ideals and dreams of travellers, the terrestrial paradise, the fountain of youth, the kingdom of Prester John, assumed a new immediacy. And so the old impulse to bring the Evangel to all nations acquired a new primitivist dynamic. An interesting demonstration of this is supplied in a Portuguese picture of the Epiphany c. 1505, sometimes attributed to Vasco Fernandes, where a Brazilian chief, in full regalia, replaces the black Balthazar (Pl. XXVI). Alongside the view that such black pagans could only acquire Christian hope by enslavement grew an alternative vision of their innocence as bringing them near to God, by way of nature. Nowhere was the opposition between these two views more dramatically presented than in the famous debate at Valladolid between Sepulveda and Las Casas.53 Sepulveda asserted that the American Indians were ‘slaves by nature’, since their natural inferiority made it impossible for them to achieve the light of the gospel without enslavement.54 Las Casas, on the other hand, dwelt on the innocence of the Indians, living secundum naturam, on their natural capacity for devotion, and on the appalling contrast between the mild and timid Indians and the inhumanity of their ‘civilized’ or ‘Christian’ exploiters. Of these
two it was of course Las Casas who made the greatest impact in Europe. We should not forget that the Valladolid debate was decided in his favour; but it was not in Spain, but in France and England that primitivism grew most rapidly. Spanish claims to the New World and Spanish brutality in the New World combined the forces of jealousy, frustrated greed, and local self-righteousness so as to create (even if with initially polemical purpose) a whole new critique of European Christian pretensions. It could now be said that white European Christianity had been put to the test in America (the test being the salvation of souls) and had been found wanting. ‘Upon these lambs’, writes Richard Hakluyt (quoting Las Casas), ‘so meke, so qualified and endewed of their maker and creator as hath bene saied, entred the spanishe, incontinent as they knew them, as wolves, as lyons and as Tigres moste cruell of long tyme famished’.55 Fulke Greville puts the same point even more categorically:

And in stead of spreading Christian religion by good life, [the Spaniards] committed such terrible inhumanities as gave those that lived under nature manifest occasion to abhor the devilry character of so tyrannical a deity [as the Christian God].56

The crown of all such Renaissance primitivism is Montaigne's Essays, and especially that on the Cannibals, where the criticism of Spanish Christianity has become a libertin critique of modern European civility. Shakespeare, in The Tempest, seems to show a knowledge of this essay,57 and certainly The Tempest reveals a searching interest in the status of Western civilization parallel to Montaigne's, and a concern to understand the point of reconciliation between innocence and sophistication, ignorance and knowledge.

Of course, we must not assume that Shakespeare, because he had these concerns in The Tempest, must have had them also in Othello; but The Tempest at one end of his career, like Titus Andronicus at the other end, indicates that the polarities of thought on which Othello moves (if I am correct) were available to his mind.

I have spoken of 'polarities' in the plural because it is important to notice that Shakespeare does not present his Othello story in any simple primitivist terms. Othello is not adequately described as the exploitation of a noble savage by a corrupt European.58 This is an element in the play, and it is the element that Henry James found so seminal for his own images of the relationship between American and European;59 but it is not the whole play.

Othello has something of the structure of a morality play, with Othello caught between Desdemona and Iago, the good angel and the evil angel. Iago is the master of appearances, which he seeks to exploit as realities; Desdemona, on the other hand, cares nothing for appearances (as her ‘downright violence and storm of fortunes y trumpet to the world’), only for realities; Othello, seeing appearance and reality as indissoluble cues to action, stands between the two, the object of the attentions and the assumptions of both. The play has something of this morality structure; but by giving too much importance to this it would be easy to underplay the extent to which Othello becomes what Iago and the society to which we belong assumes him to be.

There is considerable strength in the anti-primitivist side of the great Renaissance debate (as that is represented in Othello) and this lies in the extent to which the whole social organism pictured is one we recognize as our own, and recognize as necessarily geared to reject 'extravagant and wheeling strangers'. I speak of the social organism here, not in terms of its official existence—its commands, duties, performances; for in these terms Othello's life is well meshed into the state machine:

My services which I have done the Signiory
Shall out-tongue his complaints.

I speak rather of the unspoken assumptions and careless prejudices by which we all conduct most of our lives. And it is in these respects that Iago is the master of us all, the snapper-up of every psychological trifle, every unnoticed dropped handkerchief. It is by virtue of such a multitude of our tiny and unnoticed assents that Iago
is able to force Othello into the actions he expects of him. Only the hermit can stand outside such social assumptions; but, by marrying, Othello has become part of society in this sense, the natural victim of the man-in-the-know, the man universally thought well of. And Iago's knowingness finds little or no resistance. We all believe the Iagos in our midst; they are, as our vocabulary interestingly insists, the ‘realists’.

The dramatic function of Iago is to reduce the white ‘reality’ of Othello to the black ‘appearance’ of his face, indeed induce in him the belief that all reality is ‘black’, that Desdemona in particular, ‘where I have garnered up my heart’

... that was fresh
As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.

Thus in the bedroom scene (V. ii) Othello's view of Desdemona is one that contrasts

that whiter skin of hers than snow
And smooth as monumental alablaster

with the dark deeds her nature requires of her.

Put out the light, and then put out the light,

he says; that is, ‘let the face be as dark as the soul it covers’; and then murder will be justified.

This intention on Shakespeare’s part is made very explicit at one point where Othello tells Desdemona,

Come, swear it, damn thyself; lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves should fear to seize thee; therefore be double-damn’d—swear thou art honest.

(IV. ii. 36 ff.)

What Othello is asking here is that the white and so ‘heavenly’ Desdemona should damn herself black, as Esdras of Granada had done in Nashe’s The Unfortunate Traveller, with the result that:

His body being dead lookt as blacke as a toad: the devill presently branded it for his own.⁶⁰

It is, of course, to the same belief that Shakespeare alludes in Macbeth’s ‘The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon’.

The dark reality originating in Iago’s soul spreads across the play, blackening whatever it overcomes and making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face at first excited. Sometimes it is supposed that this proves the prejudice to have been justified. There is a powerful line of criticism on Othello, going back at least as far as A. W. Schlegel,⁶¹ that paints the Moor as a savage at heart, one whose veneer of Christianity and civilization cracks as the play proceeds, to reveal and liberate his basic savagery: Othello turns out to be in fact what barbarians have to be.

This view, however comforting to our sense of society and our prejudices, does not find much support in the play itself. The fact that the darkness of ‘Hell and night’ spreads from Iago and then takes over Othello—this fact at least should prevent us from supposing that the blackness is inherent in Othello's barbarian nature. Othello himself, it is true, loses faith not only in Desdemona but in that fair quality of himself which Desdemona saw and worshipped: (‘for she had eyes and chose me’). Believing that she lied about the qualities she saw in him it is easy for him to believe that she lies elsewhere and everywhere. Once the visionary quality
of faith, which made it possible to believe (what in common sense was unbelievable) that she chose him—once this is cancelled, knowingness acquires a claim to truth that only faith could dispossess; and so when Iago says

I know our country disposition well; In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks They dare not show their husbands.

Othello can only answer ‘Dost thou say so?’ Once faith is gone, physical common sense becomes all too probable:

Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank, Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.

The superficial ‘disproportion’ between black skin and white skin conquers the inward, unseen ‘marriage of true minds’. Similarly with the disproportion between youth and age: ‘She must change for youth’; being sated with his body she will find the error of her choice. The tragedy becomes, as Helen Gardner has described it, a tragedy of the loss of faith.62 And, such is the nature of Othello's heroic temperament, the loss of faith means the loss of all meaning and all value, all sense of light:

I have no wife, O insupportable! O heavy hour! Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe Should yawn at alteration.

Universal darkness has buried all.

But the end of the play is not simply a collapse of civilization into barbarism, nor a destruction of meaning. Desdemona was true, faith was justified, the appearance was not the key to the truth. To complete the circle we must accept, finally and above all, that Othello was not the credulous and passionate savage that Iago has tried to make him, but that he was justified in his second, as in his first, self-defence:

For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.

The imposition of Iago's vulgar prejudices on Othello (‘These Moors are changeable in their wills’, etc.) is so successful that it takes over not only Othello but almost all the critics. But Iago's suppression of Othello into the vulgar prejudice about him can only be sustained as the truth if we ignore the end of the play. The wonderful recovery here of the sense of ethical meaning in the world, even in the ashes of all that embodied meaning—this requires that we see the final speech of Othello as more than that of a repentant blackamoor ‘cheering himself up’, as Mr. Eliot phrased it.63 It is in fact a marvellous stretto of all the themes that have sounded throughout the play. I shall only dwell on Othello's self-judgement and self-execution, repeating and reversing the judgement and execution on Desdemona and so, in a sense, cancelling them. Othello is the ‘base Indian’ who threw away the white pearl Desdemona, but he is also the state servant and Christian who, when the Infidel or ‘black Pagan’ within him seemed to triumph,

Took by the throat the circumcised dog And smote him—thus.

With poetic justice, the Christian reality reasserts its superior position over the pagan appearance, not in terms that can be lived through, but at least in terms that can be understood. We may rejoice even as we sorrow, catharsis is achieved, for
What may quiet us in a death so noble,
as this in the Aleppo of the mind?

It is often suggested that Othello is a play of claustrophobic intensity, painfully narrow in its range of vision. A. C. Bradley finds it ‘the darkness not of night, but of a close-shut murderous room’; he assumes that this is due to a limitation in its scope ‘as if some power in his soul, at once the highest and the sweetest, were for a time in abeyance … that element … which unites him with the mystical poets and with the great musicians’. Elsewhere he refers to it as ‘a play on a contemporary and wholly mundane subject’. Many other notable critics have felt the same. Granville Barker believes that it is ‘not a spiritual tragedy in the sense that the others may be called so … it is a tragedy without meaning, and that is the ultimate horror of it’.

Given the approach to the play outlined in this essay I think it is possible to modify the view shared by these great critics. If we think of the action not simply in terms of the bad Iago's unresisted destruction of the good Othello, and of the bad Othello's unresisted destruction of Desdemona, but see these actions instead in terms of prejudice and vision, appearance and reality, indeed in terms of the whole question of civilization as canvassed, for example, in Montaigne's Essays—if we see these large questions as begged continuously by the action we may feel that some wider vision has been let into ‘the close-shut murderous room’.

The domestic intensities of King Lear have been seen usefully and interestingly (by Theodore Spencer, for example) in relation to the intellectual history of the Renaissance. The position of the king obviously calls on one set of traditional assumptions, while Edmund’s doctrine of nature equally obviously draws on the views of the libertins, of Montaigne and Machiavelli. The pressure of these larger formulations may be seen to add to the largeness of scope in the play. Othello, on the other hand, is thought not to be a play of this kind. ‘The play itself is primarily concerned with the effect of one human being on another’, says Spencer. It is true that Iago operates in a less conceptualized situation than Edmund; but the contrast between his world view and that of Othello is closely related to the contrast between Edmund and Lear. On the one side we have the chivalrous world of the Crusader, the effortless superiority of the ‘great man’, the orotund public voice of the leader, the magnetism of the famous lover. The values of the world of late medieval and Renaissance magnificence seem compressed in Othello—crusader, stoic, traveller, believer, orator, commander, lover—Chaucer's parfit knight, Spenser's Red Cross, the Ruggiero of Ariosto. In Iago we have the other face of the Renaissance (or Counter-Renaissance), rationalist, individual, empirical (or inductive), a master in the Machiavellian art of manipulating appearances, a Baconian or Hobbesian ‘Realist’.

In the conflict of Othello and Iago we have, as in that setting Edmund, Goneril and Regan against Lear and Gloucester, a collision of these two Renaissance views. Bradley points to a similarity between Lear and Othello, that they are both ‘survivors of a heroic age living in a later and smaller world’. Both represent a golden age naïvety which was disappearing then (as now, and always). Lear's survival is across a temporal gap; his long life has carried him out of one age and stranded him in another. But Othello's travel is geographical rather than temporal, from the heroic simplicities of

I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege

into the supersubtle world of Venice, the most sophisticated and ‘modern’ city on earth, as it seemed to the Elizabethans.

Here, if anywhere, was the scene-setting for no merely domestic intrigue, but for an exercise in the quality of civilization, a contest between the capacities and ideals claimed by Christendom, and those that Christians were actually employing in that context where (as Marlowe says)

... Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords.(68)
Othello's black skin makes the coexistence of his vulnerable romanticism and epic grandeur with the bleak or even pathological realism of Iago a believable fact. The lines that collide here started thousands of miles apart. But Shakespeare's choice of a black man for his Red Cross Knight, his Rinaldo, has a further advantage. *Our* involvement in prejudice gives us a double focus on his reality. We admire him—I fear that one has to be trained as a literary critic to find him unadmirable—but we are aware of the difficulty of sustaining that vision of the golden world of poetry; and this is so because *we* feel the disproportion and the difficulty of his social life and of his marriage (as a social act). We are aware of the easy responses that Iago can command, not only of people on the stage but also in the audience. The perilous and temporary achievements of heroism are achieved most sharply in this play, because they have to be achieved in *our* minds, through *our* self-awareness.

**Notes**

1. See R. B. Heilman, ‘More Fair than Black; Light and Dark in *Othello*, Essays in Criticism, i (1951), 313-35.
2. I ignore the many treatises devoted to proving that he was of tawny or sunburnt colour. These are, however, very worthy of study, as documents of prejudice.
15. See *Patrologia Graeca*, xxvi, col. 849 a.
17. G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.
18. See Walter Clyde Curry, *The Middle English Ideal of Personal Beauty* (1916). I have not been able to see J. E. Willms, *Über den Gebrauch der Farbenbezeichnungen in der Poesie Alteanglands* (München, 1902). The kind of shock that could be produced by the association of blackness and beauty is illustrated by the Scottish tournament of 1505 in which James IV set up a negro as the Queen of Beauty, and himself as ‘the wild knight’ defended her honour. (See *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, III, xlviii ff., lxi, 258 f.) The scandal that this caused can be discovered from Pitscottie.
19. See, for example, *Cursor Mundi*, 8077; *Sir Ferumbras*, 2785; *Alisaunder*, B. 6402.
21. *Geschichte des neueren Dramas*, i (1911), 201. An interesting detail appears in footnote 3 on this page: ‘Wie intensiv die Bemalung war, ergibt sich den Summen, die in Frankreich den Barbarien und Badestubenbesitzern für Reinigung der Teufel bezahlt wurden.’ (See also E. J. Haslinghuis, *De Duivel in het drama der Middeleeuwen* [1912], p. 182.)
Moors (like dwarfs and fools) were found also in the human menageries that the courts of the Renaissance liked to possess. The Moors at the court of James IV of Scotland appear often in the Treasurer's Accounts. One item there throws an interesting light on their status: ‘The nuris that brocht the Moris barne to see (i.e. to be seen), be the Kingis command’ (volume iii, p. 182).

The association of the negro with *semihomines* appears in a sixteenth-century sword-dance of ‘Mores, Sauvages et Satyres’, cited by Chambers (Mediaeval Stage, i. 199, n. 5), and in the decoration of the ‘vasque de Saint Denis’ (c. 1180) decorated with sculptures of ‘Sylvanus, satyr and negro’ (see H. W. Janson, *Apes and Ape-lore* (1952), p. 55). The *vasque* also uses a sculpture of an ape, and this may be associated with the others as a further illustration of the *semi homo*. The confusion of the ape and the negro has a considerable history. The Negro at the Court of James IV of Scotland who was set up as ‘Queen of Beauty’ (see above, ..., n. [18]) was compared to an ape; Dunbar tells us ‘Quhou schou is tute mowitt lyk ane aep’ (‘of an blak-moir’). Joseph Glanvill (*Scepsis Scientifica* [1665]) suggests that the apes (rather than the negroes) are the descendants of Cham. The confusion was a useful one for the defenders of negro slavery, and drew extra support from the often-repeated stories that orang-utangs frequently stole away and ravished black women. Thus Edward Long in his History of Jamaica says that ‘The equally hot temperament of their women has given probability to the charge of their admitting these animals [monkies or baboons] to their embrace’ (ii. 383). Thomas Jefferson, in his Notes on Virginia (written in 1781), treats as an acknowledged fact ‘the preference of the Oranootan for black women’ (Question XIV).

See *A True Reportary of the Baptisme of Frederik Henry, Prince of Scotland* (1594) (S.T.C. 13163).


G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.

*The History of the World*, I. vi. 2.


Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, VII. vi. 17. (Patrologia Latina, lxxxii, col. 276.)

See St. Ambrose, *Comment. in epist. ad Philippenses* (Pat. Lat. xvii, col. 432): ‘servi autem ex peccato fiunt, sicut Cham filius Noe, qui primus merito nomen servi accepit.’

*Discovery and Conquest of Guinea* (Hakluyt Society, XCV [1896], 54).

Bandello, *Novelle*, Book III, novel xxi, derived from Pontanus (Opera, i. 25 b), and translated by Belleforest, *Histoires tragiques*. The story was apparently Englished in ballad form, in 1569, 1570, and again in 1624, 1675. See Hyder Rollins, ‘Analytical Index’ (Studies in Philology, xxi [1924]), item 2542: ‘a strange petyful novell Dyscoursynge of a noble Lorde and his lady with thayre ij children executed by a blacke morryon.’

See G. K. Hunter, loc. cit.


For the dating see P. Glorieux, *Pour revaloriser Migne* (1844), and J. F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland* (1929).
There is an iconographic parallel in the use of negro figures to represent primitive innocence, in Bosch and perhaps elsewhere. Fränger, _The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch_ (1952), notes (p. 108): ‘This scene takes place in the presence of a Nubian girl, who is _nigra sed formosa_ like the black bride of the Song of Songs (i. 5). We are doubtless justified in regarding these negresses, who appear so often in the picture, as embodiments of the innocence that had not yet vanished from the primal condition of tropical nature.’


52. So Columbus in the journal of his first voyage (16 October 1492): ‘They do not know any religion, and I believe they could easily be converted to Christianity, for they are very intelligent.’ The Bull _Inter cetera_ of 1493 (which divided the New World between Spain and Portugal) speaks of the Indians as _gentes pacifice viventes … nudi incedentes, nec carnibus vescentes … credunt unum Deum creatorem in celis esse, ac ad fidem catholicam amplexandam et bonis moribus imbuendum satis apti videntur._

54. See Eric Williams, *Documents of West Indian History* (1963), item 155, discussing the view that a ‘negro cannot become a Christian without being a slave’. Cf. the summary of Sepulveda’s position in Hanke, op. cit., pp. 44 f. The same views persist today, though with interesting modifications in the vocabulary: ‘He (the Negro) requires the constant control of white people to keep him in check. Without the presence of the white police force negroes would turn upon themselves and destroy each other. The white man is the only authority he knows.’ (Quoted in E. T. Thompson, *Race Relations* [1939], p. 174.)

55. A _Discourse on the Western Planting_ (1584) printed in _The Writings of the two Richard Hakluys_, vol. ii (Hakluyt Society [second series], lxxvi [1935], p. 258).


57. Disputed in M. T. Hodgen, ‘Montaigne and Shakespeare’, _Huntington Library Quarterly_, xvi (1952), 23-42. Miss Hodgen finds a similarity of elements used to praise primitive life in Louis le Roy, Boemus, Vespucci, Mexia, etc.

58. But Iago’s Spanish name (and his nautical imagery) may represent Shakespeare’s awareness of this potentiality in his play at some level of his consciousness. The relevance of the figure of Sant’ Iago Matamoros (Moor-slayer) has been suggested by G. N. Murphy, ‘A Note on Iago’s name’, _Literature and Society_, ed. B. Slote (1964).


60. Nashe, _Works_, ed. McKerrow, ii. 326.

61. August Wilhelm Schlegel, _Lectures on Dramatic Art_ (1815), ii. 189.


64. A. C. Bradley, _Shakespearean Tragedy_ (1904), pp. 177, 185, 186.


68. Marlowe, _Doctor Faustus_, I. i. 122.
Criticism: Themes: Carol Thomas Neely (essay date 1985)


[In the following essay, originally published in 1985, Neely contends that the central theme of Othello is marital love and that its primary conflict is between men and women.]

What should such a fool
Do with so good a woman?

Othello, 5.2.234-35

Relations between love, sexuality, and marriage are under scrutiny in Othello, as in the comedies, problem plays, and Hamlet. In more extreme form than in the problem plays, we see here the idealization and degradation of sexuality, the disintegration of male authority and the loss of female power, the isolation of men and women, and the association of sexual consummation with death. The festive comedies conclude with the anticipation of fertile marriage beds. The problem comedies achieve their resolutions with the help of midpoint bedtricks. The marriage bed is at the very heart of the tragedy of Othello;offset but dramatically the center of attention in the first scene and again in the first scene of the second act, it is literally and symbolically at the center of the last scene and is explicitly hidden from sight at the conclusion. Whether the marriage is consummated, when it is consummated, and what the significance of this consummation is for Othello and Desdemona have all been an important source of debate about the play. Throughout its critical history, Othello, like the other problem plays, has generated passionate and radically conflicting responses—responses that are invariably tied to the critics' emotional responses to the characters and to the gender relations in the play. Othello, Iago, and Desdemona have been loved and loathed, defended and attacked, judged and exonerated by critics just as they are by characters within the play.

“Almost damned in a fair wife” is Leslie Fiedler's alternate title for his chapter on Othello in The Stranger in Shakespeare. In it he asserts of the women in the play: “Three out of four, then, [are] weak, or treacherous, or both.” Thus he seconds Iago's misogyny and broadens the attack on what Leavis has called “The sentimentalist's Othello,” the traditional view of the play held by Coleridge, Bradley, Granville-Barker, Knight, Bayley, Gardner, and many others. These “Othello critics,” as I shall call them, accept Othello at his own high estimate. They are enamored of his “heroic music,” affirm his love, and, like him, are overwhelmed by Iago's diabolism, to which they devote much of their analysis. Like Othello, they do not always argue rationally or rigorously for their views and so are vulnerable to attacks on their romanticism or sentimentality. Reacting against these traditionalists, “Iago critics” (Eliot, Empson, Kirschbaum, Rossiter, and Mason, as well as Fiedler and Leavis) take their cues from Iago. Like him, they are attracted to Othello, unmoved by his rhetoric, and eager to “set down the pegs that make this music.” They attack Othello at his most vulnerable point, his love. They support their case by quoting Iago's estimates of Othello; they emphasize Iago's realism and “honesty” while priding themselves on their own. Their realism or cynicism gives them, with Iago, an apparent invulnerability. But, like “Othello critics,” they share the bias and blindness of the character whose perspective they adopt. Most damagingly, both groups of critics, like both Othello and Iago, badly misunderstand and misrepresent the women in the play.

Iago critics implicitly demean Desdemona, for if Othello's character and love are called into question, then her love for him loses its justification and validity. Explicitly they have little to say about her. Othello critics idealize her along with the hero, but, like him, they have a tendency to see her as an object. The source of her sainthood seems a passivity verging on catatonia: “Desdemona is helplessly passive. She can do nothing whatever. She cannot retaliate even in speech; no, not even in silent feeling. … She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute. … Desdemona's suffering is like that of the most loving of
dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.” Iago critics, finding the same trait, condemn Desdemona for it. “But the damage to her symbolic value is greater when we see her passively leaving everything to Heaven. She ought in a sense to have embodied Heaven, given us a human equivalent that would ‘make sense’ of Heaven. For this task she had the wrong sort of purity.” When Desdemona is credited with activity, she is condemned for that, too; she is accused of being domineering, of using witchcraft, of rebelliousness, disobedience, wantonness. Although discussion of her has frequently been an afterthought to the analysis of the men, recently she has been the focus of a number of studies. Both Othello and Iago critics tend to see good versus evil as the play's central theme, Othello versus Iago as the play's central conflict, and hence, the major tragedies as its most important context.

A third group of “Iago-Othello critics,” including Kenneth Burke, Arthur Kirsch, Stephen Greenblatt, Stanley Cavell, Edward Snow, and Richard Wheeler, elide the divisions between the first two groups and view the play from a perspective more like my own. They see Othello and Iago as closely identified with each other; they are “two parts of a single motive—related not as the halves of a sphere, but each implicit in the other.” They find the source of the tragedy in Iago-Othello's anxieties regarding women, sexuality, and marriage—anxieties that are universal and generated by underlying social or psychological paradigms. Like Iago-Othello, these critics find the tragedy inevitable and locate its “cause” in an impersonal, implacable agency outside of the protagonists: for Burke, this “cause” is the “disequilibrium of monogamistic love”; for Kirsch, it is “the polarization of erotic love,” with its psychological and theological roots; for Greenblatt, it is ambivalent Christian views of marital sexuality as chaste and adulterous; for Snow, it is “the male order of things,” the patriarchal society that represses male sexuality and suppresses female sexuality at the behest of the superego; for Cavell, it is universal (male) fears of impotence and deflowering, and of mortality; for Wheeler, it is the conflict among male autonomy, female sexuality, and nurturing femininity. These critics do not ignore or sanctify Desdemona; nor do they condemn her explicitly. All emphasize her active, loving, passionate sensuality and extol her worth. An effect of their focus is, however, that she, more than Iago, becomes the cause of Othello's destruction; it is her relaxed, frank, sexuality and the passionate response it arouses in Othello which generate the tragedy. These critics show how Desdemona’s virtues catalyze Othello's sexual anxieties, but they fail to emphasize enough that she has the potential to provide a cure for them.

With this third group of critics, I argue that the play's central theme is love—specifically marital love—that is central conflict is between the men and the women, and that contexts as illuminating as the tragedies are its source, Cinthio’s Gli Hecatommithi and Shakespeare’s preceding comedies. Within Othello it is Emilia who most explicitly speaks to this theme, recognizes this central conflict, and inherits from the heroines of comedy the role of potential mediator of it. She is dramatically and symbolically the play's fulcrum. It is as an Emilia critic, then, that I should like to approach the play, hoping to perceive it with something akin to her clear-sighted passion.

Gli Hecatommithi could have provided Othello with its theme and organizing principle as well as with its plot. The battle of the sexes in marriage is its central motif and dominates the frame, subject matter, and arrangement of the tales. In the introduction the company debates whether harmony can be achieved in marriage. Poncio denies this, supporting his view with platitudes that Iago would relish: “Better bury a woman than marry her” “For there to be peace between husband and wife, the husband must be deaf and the wife blind.” Fabio, the group's leader, asserts instead that “the only rational love is that which has marriage as its goal, and that this is the quiet of true and wise lovers, coupled together, cooling their amorous flames with sage discourse and in legitimate union.” Othello similarly presents marriage as either potentially strife-ridden or harmonious. In Gli Hecatommithi the debate continues in the tales, and in the Third Decade it is intensified by the inflammatory subject matter—the infidelity of husbands and wives. The seventh tale, the source of Othello, is a rebuttal of the sixth, in which a husband discovers his wife's infidelity and, as the company judges, “most prudently” (prudentissimamente) arranges to have her “accidentally” drowned. In the eighth tale, a contrast to the two preceding it, harmony supersedes warfare. A wife forgives her unfaithful husband and wins him back, behaving with a “prudence” (la prudenza) exactly opposite to the behavior of the
husbands in tales six and seven. Othello similarly rings changes on the theme of male and female in a series of parallel and contrasting couples—Desdemona/Othello, Emilia/Iago, Bianca/Cassio—along with fantasy couples—Roderigo/Desdemona, Cassio/Desdemona, Othello/Emilia. Throughout the tales of the Third Decade it is most often the men who intensify the conflicts, practicing infidelity or taking revenge on wives they suspect of infidelity; the wives, even when wronged, often succeed in mending the relationships. The men in Othello similarly seek revenge; the women similarly seek to secure harmonious relationships but fail to do so.

Their predecessors in this task are the heroines of Shakespearean comedy, to which Othello shows pervasive and profound resemblances. Though it is almost always assumed that Othello is dominated by a tightly meshed plot, the play seems, like many of the comedies, loosely plotted, held together by theme. The conflicts introduced in the first act between Desdemona and her father and between Venetians and Turks evaporate before they are under way exactly as do those between Hermia and Egeus in Midsummer Night's Dream and between Duke Frederick and Duke Senior in As You Like It. As in the comedies, these early plot developments are presented in a flat, compressed way; they seem almost an excuse to get the characters to the woods or to Cyprus where the play's real conflicts emerge. Iago plots the remainder of the play; but his scheme is slight, repetitive, and flawed. It has been found lacking in both motive (like Rosalind's plot in As You Like It) and goal (like Don John's plot in Much Ado about Nothing), and although the play's increasing intensity is undeniable, there is little actual plot development between the end of the first phase of the temptation scene (3.3.275) [All Othello citations are to the Arden Shakespeare edition, ed. M. R. Ridley] and the attempt on Cassio's life in act 5. Iago's destruction of Othello, like Rosalind's education of Orlando, is not merely linear. Both are continually starting over; they are repeated variations on opposite themes: Iago works to induce fantasy and Rosalind to dispel it. Neither entirely succeeds. Iago's plot, like those of the comedies, rests on coincidence and absurdity. The handkerchief is like the givens of the comedies—the fairy juice, the caskets, the disguises, the identical twins; it is trivial and ridiculous but, as I shall show, symbolically all-important. The play proceeds as much by a clash of attitudes, viewpoints, and sexes as by plot developments.

Structure, too, imitates that of the pastoral comedies in its movement from an urban center to an isolated retreat, with resultant intensity, freedom, breakdown, and interaction among disparate characters. Though Othello refers to Cyprus as a "town of war," once the threats of Turks and the storm have lifted, it is instead Venus's isle, a place for celebration—relaxation, drinking, eating (dinner arrangements are a frequent topic of conversation here as in Arden), flirting, sleeping, lovemaking. In the comedies, the potential corruption of these activities is suggested in witty banter, songs, comic simile and metaphor; in Othello, this corruption becomes literal.

The play is a terrifying completion of the comedies. In them, realism and romanticism, lust and desire, heterosexual and homosexual bonds, male and female power are held in precarious balance. The men's idealism, misogyny, foolishness, and anxiety are mocked, transformed, and dispelled—"laugh[ed] to scorn" (As You Like It, 4.2.19)—by disguises and mock deaths, by parodied or aborted nuptials, by delayed or deceitful consummations. The women, through their "high and plenteous wit and invention" (Othello, 4.1.185), transform the men from foolish lovers into—we trust—sensible husbands, and at the end submit to their control. Although "The cuckoo then, on every tree, / Mocks married men," (Love's Labor's Lost, 5.2.896-97), the mockery grounds love without seriously threatening it. The comedies' relaxed incorporation of marital sexuality is evident in their endings, which look forward to fruitful, harmonious marital consumption—in the fairy-blessed beds of the Midsummer Night's Dream couples; the rewon beds of Bassanio and Portia, Gratiano and Nerissa in Merchant of Venice; the "well-deserved bed" of Silvius and the rest in As You Like It. But in Othello, the marriage has taken place before the play begins, and its consummation may already be under way, imaged by Iago as a theft, a violent attack. In the play, women's wit is constrained, their power over men is lost, and the men are transformed downward—"to be now and now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast" (2.3.296-97). The men's profound anxieties and murderous fantasies cannot be restrained by the women's affection, wit, and shrewishness. The play ends as it
began, in a world of men—political, loveless, undomesticated.

The men in *Othello* extend and darken the anxieties of the comedy heroes. They are, in Emilia's words, “murderous coxcombs” (5.2.234). Three out of the five attempt murder; five out of the five are foolish and vain. Roderigo, most obviously a coxcomb, shows in exaggerated fashion the dangerous combination of romanticism and misogyny and the dissociation of love and sex that all the men share. He is a parody of the conventional Petrarchan lover: love is a “torment,” death a “physician” (1.3.308-9), Desdemona “full of most blest condition” (2.1.247), and consummation of their relationship securely impossible. Yet he easily accepts Desdemona's supposed adultery and the necessity of Cassio's murder; his casual cynicism comes to outdo Iago's: “‘Tis but a man gone” (5.1.10). The other men have similarly divided and possessive views of women. Brabantio shifts abruptly from protective affection for the chaste Desdemona—“of spirit / So still and quiet, that her motion / Blush'd at her self” (1.3.94-96)—to physical revulsion from the assertive sexuality revealed by her elopement—“I had rather to adopt a child than get it” (1.3.191). Cassio's divided view is more conventionally accommodated. He idealizes the “divine Desdemona,” flirting courteously and cautiously with her and rejecting Iago's insinuations about her sexuality; this side of women is left to Bianca, who is a “monkey” and a “fitchew” and is used and degraded for it. Othello's conflict regarding women is more profound, and the other men's solutions are not open to him. Because of his marriage and his integrity, he cannot, like Roderigo, assert Desdemona's chastity and corruptibility simultaneously; like Cassio, direct his divided emotions toward different objects; or, like Brabantio, disown the problem.

Othello's shifts from the idealization of women to their degradation are “extravagant and wheeling” (1.1.136). Iago is the catalyst, but Othello makes his task easy. At the play's start, Othello's idealistic love, like that of the comedy heroes, needs some realistic grounding in the facts of sex. For Othello, sex is secondary and potentially either frivolous or debilitating and in conflict with his soldier's duty:

> And feather'd Cupid, foils with wanton dullness
> My speculative and active instruments,
> That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
> Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
> And all indign and base adversities
> Make head against my reputation!

(1.3.268-74)

Marriage and consummation naturally pose a threat to this idealistic love. Othello's greeting on Cyprus suggests his preference for a perpetually unconsummated courtship:

> 'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
> My soul hath her content so absolute,
> That not another comfort, like to this
> Succeeds in unknown fate.

(2.1.189-93)

In response Desdemona asserts instead quotidian joys:

> The heavens forbid
> But that our loves and comforts should increase,
> Even as our days do grow.

Perhaps she, like Rosalind or Viola or the ladies in *Love's Labor's Lost*, might have tempered Othello's
idealism, his need for absolute, unchanging love. Instead, it is nudged by Iago into its antithesis—contempt for women, disgust at sexuality, terror of cuckoldry, the preference for literal death over metaphorical “death.” The acceptance of cuckoldry and sexuality found in the comedies—“as horns are odious, they are necessary” (As You Like It, 3.3.49-50)—is impossible for Othello. Instead he turns Petrarchan imagery against Desdemona—“O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?” (Othello, 4.2.69)—praising and damning her simultaneously. His conflicts are resolved, his needs to idealize and degrade her to maintain their love intact are momentarily reconciled only when he kills her, performing a sacrifice which is also a murder.

Iago, though primarily the manipulator of these conflicts in the other men, is also the victim of his own. His cynical generalizations are, like those of Jaques, the parody and inverse of the romantics' claims; they are self-conscious, defensive, self-aggrandizing, and divorced from reality: “My muse labours / And thus she is deliver’d” (2.1.127-28). Like the other men, he accepts generalizations—especially generalizations about women—as true, provided they are “apt and of great credit” (2.1.282), “probable, and palpable to thinking” (1.2.76). Like the others, he is careful not to contaminate his fantasies about women with facts. Roderigo does not court Desdemona in person, Othello does not immediately confront Desdemona and Cassio with his suspicions, and Iago never tries to ascertain whether or not Emilia is unfaithful.

In fact—like Don John and Parolles—he has little contact with the women in the play. He is at ease in act 2 engaging Desdemona in witty banter, but he is subdued and almost speechless in act 4 when confronted with her misery and fidelity. Treating Emilia with casual contempt throughout, he is astounded by her exposure of him in the last scene. Like Brabantio, Iago assumes that “consequence” will “approve” his “dream” (2.3.58) and ignores evidence to the contrary.

Even protected as it is from reality, Iago's cynicism/misogyny has cracks just as Othello's idealism does. He has a grudging admiration for and envy of Desdemona's “blest condition,” Othello's “constant, noble loving, nature” (2.1.289), and Cassio's “daily beauty” (5.1.19). He aspires to Cassio's job and Othello's “content” and tries to identify with their love for Desdemona—“now I do love her too” (2.1.286), although this love is immediately subsumed under notions of lust and revenge. The tension between his theoretical misogyny and his awareness of Desdemona's particular virtue drives him to resolve the conflicts, to turn that virtue “into pitch” (2.3.351), just as his verses extravagantly praise the deserving woman the better to be able to diminish her. Othello's conflict has the opposite issue; he murders Desdemona to redeem her from degradation.

The women in Othello are not murderous, nor are they foolishly idealistic or anxiously cynical, as the men are. From the start they, like the comedy heroines, combine realism with romance, mockery with affection. Bianca comically reflects the qualities of the women as Roderigo does those of the men. The play associates her with the other two women by means of the overheard conversation about her which Othello takes to be about Desdemona and by means of her ire and essentially just response to Emilia's attack: “I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you, that thus abuse me” (5.1.120-21). At this point, Iago tries to fabricate evidence against her, just as Othello, in the scene immediately following, fabricates a case against Desdemona. Bianca's active, open-eyed enduring affection is similar to that of the other women. She neither romanticizes love nor degrades sex. She sees Cassio's callousness but accepts it wryly—“Tis very good, I must be circumspect'd” (3.4.199). She mocks him to his face but not behind his back, as he does her. Her active pursuit of Cassio is in contrast to his indifference, to Roderigo's passivity, and to Othello's naiveté. Even when jealous, she continues to feel affection for Cassio, accusing him openly and demanding that he come to dinner on her terms. The play's humanization of her, much like, for example, that of the bourgeois characters at the end of Love's Labor's Lost, underlines the folly of the male characters (and critics) who see her as merely a whore.

Emilia articulates the balanced view that Bianca embodies—“and though we have some grace, / Yet have we some revenge” (4.3.92-93). She, like other Shakespearean shrews, especially Beatrice and Paulina, combines sharp-tongued honesty with warm affection. Her views are midway between Desdemona's and Bianca's and
between those of the women and those of the men. She rejects the identification with Bianca yet sympathizes with female promiscuity. She corrects Desdemona's occasional naivety but defends her chastity. Although she comprehends male jealousy and espouses sexual equality, she seems remarkably free from jealousy herself. She wittily sees cuckoldry and marital affection as compatible: “Who would not make her husband a cuckold, to make him a monarch?” (4.3.74-75). She understands, but tolerates, male fancy; the dangers of such tolerance become evident in this play as they never do in the comedies.

Desdemona's and Emilia's contrasting viewpoints in the willow scene have led critics to think of them as opposites, but both are strong, realistic, and compliant. When we first see them together, they encourage and participate in Iago's misogynist banter but reject his stereotypes. Desdemona here defends Emilia from Iago's insults just as Emilia will ultimately defend Desdemona from Othello's calumny. While Desdemona is no shrew (though she might be said to approach one in the matter of Cassio's reinstatement), her love is everywhere tempered by realism and wit like that of the comedy heroines. During courtship she hides, as they did, behind a sort of disguise, in this case not male dress, but a mask of docility and indifference which conceals her passion from both her father and Othello. Like Iago's docile and deserving woman she is one that could “think, and ne'er disclose her mind, / See suitors following, and not look behind” (2.1.156-57). Eventually, though, she takes the lead in the courtship as the heroines do; she finds an excuse to be alone with Othello, mocks him by speaking of him “dispraisingly” (3.3.73), and traps him into a proposal using indirection not unlike Rosalind's with Orlando.

After marriage, as during courtship, Desdemona's love tempers romance with realism, obedience with self-assertion. She is indifferent to Cassio's elaborate compliments (2.1.87ff.). She rejects Othello's desire to stop time, instead emphasizing love's growth. Her healthy, casual acceptance of sexuality is evident in her banter with Iago and with the clown, in her affirmation that she “did love the Moor, to live with him” (1.3.248), and in her refusal to postpone consummation of “the rites for which I love him” (1.3.257). She will not allow herself to be idealized; nor will she romanticize Othello. She had spoken “dispraisingly” of him during courtship, and she mocks him gently after marriage:

Tell me, Othello: I wonder in my soul,
What you could ask me, that I should deny?
Or stand so mammering on?

Shall I deny you? no, farewell, my lord.

(3.3.69-71, 87)

She reminds herself, in an emphatically short line:

Men are not gods;
Nor of them look for such observances
As fits the bridal.

(3.4.145-48)

Her concise statement about her love reveals its balance and health:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honours, and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.

(1.3.252-54)
She loves Othello for his body and mind, for his reputation and actions; she consecrates herself to him spiritually and practically.

Desdemona's spirit, clarity, and realism do not desert her entirely in the latter half of the play as many critics and performances imply. Her inability to defend herself is partly the result of Othello's refusal to voice his suspicions directly. When he does so in the brothel scene, she persistently questions him to discover exactly what he is accusing her of and defends herself as “stoutly” (3.1.45) as she had earlier defended Cassio:

If to preserve this vessel for my lord
From any hated foul unlawful touch,
Be not to be a strumpet, I am none.

(4.2.85-87)

Her naiveté and docility in the willow scene are partly a result of her confusion and fear, but perhaps also partly a protective facade behind which she waits, as she did during courtship, while determining the most appropriate and fruitful reaction to Othello's rage. The conversation and the song with its alternate last verses explore alternate responses to male perfidy—acceptance “Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve”—or retaliation “If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men” (4.3.51-56). Emilia supports retaliation—“The ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (l. 103)—though, like Bianca, she practices acceptance. Desdemona's final couplet suggests that she is groping for a third response, one that is midway between “grace” and “revenge,” one that would be more active than acceptance yet more loving than retaliation:

Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!

(4.3.104-05)

The lines are a reply to Emilia and a transformation of an earlier couplet of Iago's: “fairness and wit / The one's for use, the other using it” (2.1.129-30). Desdemona will put fairness and wit to use in a sense that includes and goes beyond the sexual one, acknowledging and using “bad” to heal it. Her earlier command to have the wedding sheets put on her bed seems one expression of this positive usage. Just before her death, as earlier in the handkerchief and brothel scenes, Desdemona strives to “mend” Othello's debased view of her, transforming the “sins” he accuses her of into “loves I bear to you”; a testimony to her pure, active, humble, fertile affections. But Othello recorrupts them: “And for that thou diest” (5.2.40-41).

The men's sense of identity and worth is dependent not only on their relations with women but on their bonds with other men who guarantee their honor and reputation. Vanity, rivalry, and dependence characterize the relations among all the men in the play. Jaques's portrait of the soldier aptly sums up traits which they share: “Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the canon's mouth” (2.7.149-52), traits which are those of coxcombs but grow murderous here. Cassio, of course, explicitly voices the men's concern with “the bubble reputation” and reveals how central their position and image are to their sense of identity: “I ha' lost my reputation! I ha' lost the immortal part, sir, of myself, and what remains is bestial” (2.3.255). This identity is highly vulnerable because the men view reputation as detachable, external; it is a matter of rank or title, something to be conferred—or removed—by other men. Hence Iago continues to care about the rank of lieutenant in spite of his continuing intimacy with Othello. Cassio equally relishes his title; “The lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient,” he boasts (2.3.103). Othello must fire Cassio for appearances' sake and because Montano “is of great fame in Cyprus” (3.1.46). Othello's dependence on others' “rich opinion” (2.3.286) creates conflict in his love; “feather'd Cupid” potentially threatens “reputation” in the first act, and later he finds the scorn due the cuckold almost as difficult to bear as the loss of Desdemona.
Although they are neither “bearded like a pard” nor “full of strange oaths,” the men in this play, in their vanity, desire the swaggering manliness which such characteristics conjure up. Iago successfully plays on the others' nervousness about this “manliness,” driving them to acts of “malicious bravery” (1.1.100). He jovially calls them “man” while questioning their manhood or urging new proofs of it. He goads Cassio into “manly” drunkenness and good fellowship—“What, man, 'tis a night of revels, the gallants desire it” (2.3.39). He urges Othello, “Good sir, be a man” (4.1.65). He flatters Roderigo's manly pride: “if thou hast that within thee indeed, which I have greater reason to believe now than ever, I mean purpose, courage, and valour, this night show it” (4.2.213-16). His suggestive battle cries to Roderigo imply a connection that all the men assume between sexual and martial prowess: “Wear thy good rapier bare, and put it home. … fix most firm thy resolution” (5.1.2, 5); perhaps the gull's melodramatic attack on Cassio is “satisfying” even beyond Iago's “reasons,” compensating him for his lack of sexual success. Inversely, cuckoldry is seen by Othello as invalidating his military glories; only the murder of Desdemona and his own suicide restore his pride in his “occupation.”

Since the reputation and manliness which the men covet is achieved in competition with others, all the men are “jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel.” Iago's success derives largely from his ability to manipulate male rivalries, verifying his friendship with each man by shared contempt toward another. In this way, he feeds the men's need for self-esteem, insures their bond with him, and exacerbates their potential rivalries with each other. He enrages Brabantio by claiming that his friend has “robbed” his daughter. He gulls Roderigo by demeaning Othello and urging that they have common cause against him: “my cause is hearted, thine has no less reason, let us be communicative in our revenge against him: if thou canst cuckold him, thou doest thyself a pleasure, and me a sport” (1.3.366-69). He almost offhandedly belittles Othello to Cassio, Cassio to Montano, Othello to Lodovico. His entrapment of Othello begins by insinuating not Desdemona's unfaithfulness but Othello's cuckoldry, his loss of “good name.” This cuckoldry triply threatens Othello: with the loss of Desdemona's love; with the supremacy of Cassio, his lieutenant, over him; and with the loss of his reputation and the scorn of other men.

Iago offers to compensate for these losses with his own love—to replace Othello's other bonds with their friendship. Iago's attack is set up when Othello demands that Iago prove his love by complying with his general's wishes (he has just been threatened by Desdemona's seeming to put similar pressure on him): “If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought” (3.3.119-20). It concludes with Othello's attempt to replace his love for Desdemona with a vow of vengeance and a (coerced) bond with Iago, through which it seems he can restore his heroism and control by regaining the love and dependence he fears he has lost:

IAGO:
Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The excellency of his wit, hand, heart,
To wrong'd Othello's service: let him command,
And to obey him shall be in me remorse,
What bloody work so ever.

OTHELLO:
I greet thy love;
Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous.

(3.3.470-78)

Iago's feigned love gives him power which Desdemona's genuine love cannot counteract; he destroys his superior by destroying Othello's belief in his own superiority and the bonds which confirm that superiority. Nowhere is his power and its roots in Othello's fear of inferiority to other men more ruthlessly and painfully demonstrated than when Iago engineers Othello's eavesdropping of his and Cassio's mockery of Bianca; here, Othello's wounded vanity, obsessive jealousy, and competitive concern for reputation and manliness coalesce in his terse asides with their sexual-martial double entendres:

Do you triumph, Roman, do you triumph?
So, so, so, so; laugh that wins.
Ha' you scor'd me? Well.
I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw't to.

(4.1.118,122,126,140)

Iago likewise gains power by imposing on the play, through his bawdy, an image of heterosexuality which, like male bonds, is seen as competitive and violent. Sexuality here is not merely represented as an act of male assertion, as in Much Ado, or as painful debilitation, as in All's Well That Ends Well, but as a violent, bestial overpowering of the woman by the man which degrades both: “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe,” “you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse,” “he hath boarded a land carrack”; Desdemona is in the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (1.1.88-89; 110-11; 2.2.50; 1.1.126). This vision of sexuality comes to replace the tender, hallowed passion of Desdemona for Othello, her desire to participate in “the rites for which I love him” (1.3.257), as Othello imagines that Cassio “lie[s] with her, lie[s] on her” (4.1.38), “pluck[s] up kisses by the roots” (3.3.429). The inevitable culmination of this fantasy occurs when Othello clasps, covers, and stifles Desdemona—“Down, strumpet. … Nay and you strive” (5.2.80,82), silencing her “even in the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.203)—and then kills himself.

Although the men's aggression destroys the women, their attempts at heroic violence against each other do not completely succeed. Othello vows to kill Cassio but never does, and Roderigo's murder attempt on Cassio fails. It takes Cassio and Iago together to kill poor Roderigo, and Othello cannot kill Iago. The cowardice, clumsiness, and insecurity that belie male pretensions to valor are manifested comically—as in the Twelfth Night duel or in the gulling of Parolles—in the hesitation of Lodovico and Gratiano to answer Roderigo's and Cassio's cries for help: “Two or three groans; it is a heavy night, / These may be counterfeits, let's think 't unsafe / To come into the cry without more help” (5.1.42-45). Even after Iago's entrance, they still hang back, ascertaining his identity (51) but ignoring his cry (thus allowing him to murder Roderigo), introducing themselves (67), discovering Cassio's identity (70), and finally coming to his side after Bianca, who has just entered (75). They still offer no assistance but only perfunctory sympathy and an anticlimactic explanation: “I am sorry to find you thus, I have been to seek you” (81).

Male friendship, like male courage, is in this play sadly deteriorated from the Renaissance ideal. In romance and comedy, the world of male friendship in which the work opens (see, for example, the Arcadia, Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merchant of Venice, Love's Labor's Lost) is disrupted and transcended by romantic love. In the problem comedies, male friendship is already corrupted as friends exploit and betray each other. As Othello begins, romantic love already dominates, but friendship is reasserted in perverted form. Iago's hypocritical friendship for all of the men, which aims to gratify his own will and gain power over them, is the model for male friendship in the play. Brabantio's "love" for Othello evaporates when his friend marries his daughter. Roderigo intends to use Iago though he is worse used by him. Othello has no hesitation in cashiering Cassio and ordering his death. The men's vanity and rivalry, their preoccupation with rank and reputation, and their cowardice render them as incapable of friendship as they are of love.
The women, in contrast, are indifferent to reputation and partially free of vanity, jealousy, and competitiveness. Desdemona's willingness “to incur a general mock” is evident in her elopement and her defense of it, and in her request to go to Cyprus. Emilia braves scorn to defend her mistress, “Let heaven, and men, and devils, let 'em all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak” (5.2.222-23). If Cassio's description of Bianca corresponds at all to fact, she too ignores reputation, comically, to pursue him—“she haunts me in every place … she falls thus about my neck; … so hangs, and lolls, and weeps upon me” (4.1.131-36)—and we see her brave the confusion of the night and the ugliness of Iago's insinuations to come to Cassio's side when he is wounded. Bianca's jealousy is also in contrast to the men's; instead of corroding within, it is quickly vented and dissipates, leaving her affection for Cassio essentially unchanged. Furthermore, she makes no effort to discover her rival, to obtain “proof,” or to get revenge. Likewise Emilia, though expert at noting and analyzing jealousy, seems untouched by it herself. Even her argument for the single standard is good-natured; it contains little hatred of men and no personal animosity toward Iago.

Desdemona is neither jealous nor envious nor suspicious. She is not suspicious or possessive about Othello's job, his intimacy with Iago, or his “love” for Cassio, but supports all three. She seems entirely lacking in the sense of class, race, rank, and hierarchy that concerns the men and is shared by Emilia, who refuses to be identified with Bianca. She treats her father, the Duke, Othello, Cassio, Iago, Emilia, even the clown, with precisely the same combination of politeness, generosity, openness, and firmness. Emilia's and Desdemona's lack of competitiveness, jealousy, and class consciousness facilitates their growing intimacy, which culminates in the willow scene. The scene, sandwiched between two exchanges of Iago and Roderigo, sharply contrasts the genuine intimacy of the women with the hypocritical friendship of the men, while underlining the women's isolation and powerlessness. Emilia's concern for Desdemona is real, and her advice well meant, whereas Iago's concern for Roderigo is feigned, his advice deadly—“whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my game” (5.1.12-14). Roderigo accepts Iago's “satisfying reasons,” finding them sufficient to justify murder; Desdemona rejects Emilia's reasonable justification of wives' adultery without rejecting the concern that prompts her to offer it. In the willow scene sympathy stretches from Emilia and Desdemona to include Barbary and the protagonist of the song—all victims of male perfidy; in the Roderigo/Iago scenes, enmity reaches Cassio. In this play romantic love is destroyed by the semblance of male friendship, which itself soon disintegrates. Meanwhile, friendship between women is established and dominates the play's final scene. Othello chooses Iago's friendship over Desdemona's love temporarily and unwittingly; Emilia's choice of Desdemona over Iago is voluntary and final. Though the stakes here are higher, the friendship of Desdemona and Emilia is reminiscent of the generous, witty female friendship in the comedies, where women share their friends' hardships (Rosalind and Celia), vigorously defend their honor (Beatrice and Hero), support their stratagems (Portia and Nerissa), and sympathize with and aid even their rivals (Julia and Sylvia, Viola and Olivia, Helen and Diana, Mariana and Isabella). But in Othello, without the aid of disguise, bedtricks, or mock deaths, the women cannot protect each other from male animosity.

Because of the men's vanity, competitiveness, and concern for honor and reputation, when they do act, they try to exonerate themselves, persistently placing blame for their actions outside themselves. Even Cassio, while abusing himself for his drunkenness, comes to personify that drunkenness as a “devil,” something which invades him. Roderigo blames Iago for his failure to prosper: “Iago hurt [me]. Iago set [me] on” (5.2.329-30). Iago, at the last, instead of boasting about the execution of his grand design (as, for example, Satan does in Paradise Lost), tries to shift responsibility for it elsewhere—to Bianca, to Emilia, and finally, even after the facts are known, to Othello: “I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true” (5.2.177-78). Othello's longing for passivity and his denial of responsibility are intertwined throughout the play. He both sees himself as passive and desires passivity. His narrative history before the senate, the basis for our original impression of the heroic Othello, describes, when closely examined, what he has suffered rather than what he has done; he speaks of “moving accidents by flood and field; / Of hair-breadth scapes 'i th' imminent deadly breach; / Of being taken by the insolent foe; / And sold to slavery, and my redemption hence” (1.3.135-38), and of his subsequent enslavement by Desdemona, whom he
entertained with similar tales, for example, “of some distressed stroke / That my youth suffer'd” (1.3.157-58).
Pity is indeed the appropriate response to his tale. His farewell to arms is, curiously, a farewell to “content,” to “the tranquil mind” (3.3.354), and to the instruments of war; it is they who are seen as active and heroic, not himself. His vow of revenge, likening him to the “compulsive course” of the “Pontic sea,” reveals the longing for external control and validation which underlies the heroic stance. In a parallel passage after his error is revealed, he again wants to be swept along by a current: “Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur, / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!” (5.2.280-81), to be consumed by hell-fire rather than by desire. Two of his significant actions in the play—the cashiering of Cassio and the murder of Desdemona—are, in a sense, “compulsive,” achieved, as he himself notes, only when passion “Assays to lead the way” (2.3.198), and he feels out of control or seeks a false sense of being under the control of an impersonal “cause.” Even at his suicide, when he is in control, he sees himself as “you” rather than “I,” object rather than actor, as “being wrought,” / Perplex'd in the extreme … one whose subdued eyes, … Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinal gum” (5.2.246-51). In the anecdote that accompanies his suicide, Othello is actor and acted upon, hero and victim, and his action is again violent and enraged. But it is also premeditated—and gives him, at last, the command over himself he has not achieved throughout.

Desdemona's self-recreinations must be seen in the light of Othello's evasions. Critics have found them puzzling, excessive, intolerable, even neurotic, perhaps they are all of these. But her unwarranted self-accusations—“beshrew me much, Emilia, / I was (unhandsome warrior as I am) / Arraigning his unkindness with my soul; / But now I find I had suborn'd the witness, / And he's indited falsely” (3.4.148-52)—and her false assumption of responsibility for her death—“Nobody, I myself, farewell” (5.2.125) provide the sharpest possible contrast to the men's excuses. Her last request, “Commend me to my kind lord,” not only conveys her forgiveness but is one final active effort to restore their mutual love. She is not, however, a willing victim and does not sacrifice herself to Othello, although she does not attribute guilt to him either. She defends her innocence and pleads for her life; but he murders her anyway.

Desdemona's cryptic lines after she is apparently dead give to her actual death some of the functions and the feel of Shakespearean mock deaths. Like the women who stage them, she defends her innocence—“A guiltless death I die” (5.2.123)—assumes responsibility for the death, and seeks to transform Othello into a “kind lord.” When the audience finds that the women it has thought dead remains alive, the poignant, momentary impression that this may be a mock death intensifies the horror of the scene. Desdemona's refusal to blame and hurt Othello is at the heart of her loving virtue. Hero, Helen, and Hermione likewise do not blame their detractors directly. But this virtue coalesces in dangerous ways with Othello's need to blame and hurt her.

From the beginning, Desdemona has viewed love as risk and challenge. She has violently uprooted herself from her father's protection and the conventional expectations of Venetian society, whereas Othello has put himself into “circumscription and confine” for her. She has initiated while Othello has responded. She is neither the “rose” or “chrysolite” of Petrarchan convention seen by Othello nor the saint extolled by critics. She sets the stage for her wooing by an extraordinarily active listening, which Othello naturally notices and describes; she would “with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse” (1.3.149-50). She engenders his love by her own: “She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them” (ll. 168-69); she proposes and elopes. She is the one who challenges her father directly, who determines to go to Cyprus. She moves after marriage to bring the lovers' idiom down to earth, using all of her “plenteous wit and invention” at their reunion and in the discussion of Cassio. All the characters in the play make mention of her energizing power. Cassio, hyperbolically, attributes to her the ability to influence recalcitrant nature:

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.

(2.1.68-73)

Othello is awed by her power to move man and beast—“She might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks. ... O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear” (4.1.180-185)—testifying, late in the play, to his ineradicable love for her. Iago, in soliloquy, attributes to her unlimited power over Othello—“she may make, unmake, do what she list” (2.3.327). And Desdemona herself, vowing support for Cassio, reveals her sense of her own persistence and controlling force:

If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it
To the last article.

(3.1.21-22)

But Desdemona's energy, assertiveness, and power are made possible by Othello's loving response to her, just as his subduing of himself to her, his “garners[ing] up” (4.2.58) of his heart is engendered by her love for him. Each has “thrivel[d]” (1.3.25) in the apparent security of their mutual love, but their joyous subduing of themselves to each other leaves them vulnerable. With that certainty lost, with their responses to each other mistrusted, Othello is plunged into chaos and Desdemona into helplessness. In this crisis, he seeks to be “unhoused” again, and she refuses to acknowledge the loss of her new home: “Commend me to my kind lord” (5.2.126).

All of the women, in spite of their affection, good sense, and energy, fail to transform or to be reconciled with the men. The sexes, so sharply differentiated in the play, badly misunderstand each other. The men, as we have seen, persistently misconceive the women; the women fatally overestimate the men. Each sex, trapped in its own values and attitudes, misjudges the other. Iago acts on the hypothesis that women, on the one hand, share his concern with reputation and propriety (“Be wise, and get you home” [5.2.224], he orders Emilia) and, on the other, enact his salacious fantasies. Othello assumes, with Iago's prompting, that just as he is the stereotypical soldier, foreigner, older husband, so Desdemona will be the stereotypical mistress, Venetian, young bride. He responds to Iago's claim to knowledge about Desdemona—“knowing what I am, I know what she shall be”—with comic enthusiasm: “O thou art wise, 'tis certain” (4.1.73-74). Likewise the women attribute their own qualities to the men. Desdemona projects her lack of jealousy onto Othello. Emilia attributes to Iago her own capacity for empathy: “I know it grieves my husband, / As if the case were his” (3.3.3-4). Even Bianca, because she does not view herself as a whore in her relationship with Cassio, is surprised that he should treat her as one. Hence, although the women recognize the foolishness of the men's fancies, they are all too tolerant of them. Emilia steals the handkerchief for the sake of Iago's “fantasy” (3.3.303) and thus assures the success of his plot. Desdemona's salutation to Othello in act 3 is lamentably prophetic—“Be it as your fancies teach you, / What e'er you be, I am obedient” (3.89-90). He leaves her to be instructed in her whoredom.

The lost handkerchief becomes the emblem of the women's power and its loss. Both Othello's original description of the handkerchief and its part in the plot reveal that it is a symbol of women's loving, civilizing, sexual power. It has passed from female sibyl to female “charmer” to Othello's mother to Desdemona. Othello is merely a necessary intermediary between his mother and his wife—“She dying, gave it me, / And bid me, when my fate would have me wive, / To give it her” (3.4.61-63). Its creator, the sibyl, who “In her prophetic fury sew'd the work,” and its next owner, the Egyptian charmer who “could almost read / The thoughts of people,” reveal the source of its power in women's passionate intuitive knowledge. This knowledge, it seems, enables them to use and control sexuality. The middle ground that women find between lust and abstinence (as the men in the play cannot do) is suggested in the description of the process by which the handkerchief is made. The worms that did “breed” the silk, emblems of death, sexuality, and procreation, are “hallow'd.” The
thread they spin vitally and naturally from themselves is artificially improved, dyed in “mummy” which is “conserve[d] from maiden's hearts.” The handkerchief then represents marital chastity—sexuality transformed by loving fidelity. Its function is to chasten and control men's love and desire:

'she told her, while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies.

(ll. 56-61)

It represents women's ability to moderate men's erratic (and erotic) “fancies,” to “subdue” their promiscuity (assumed to be the norm under the double standard outlined by Emilia), and perhaps, by extension, their vanity, romanticism, jealousy, and rage as well. The handkerchief is the symbol of Desdemona's loving power over Othello:

Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul,
But I do love, thee, and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

(3.3.91-93)

The handkerchief is lost, literally and symbolically, not because of the failure of Desdemona's love, but because of Othello's loss of faith in that love. Once lost, the female power it symbolizes is degraded and constrained, and comedy gives way to tragedy.

After the handkerchief's original loss, all of the characters, men and women alike, misuse its power and misinterpret its symbolism, marking the disruption of all the love relationships in the play. The abuse begins when Othello pushes it aside, rejecting Desdemona's loving attempt to heal the pain on his forehead, and Emilia picks it up to give it to Iago, thereby making herself subservient to him and placing her loyalty to her husband above affection for Desdemona. Her silence about its whereabouts confirms her choice. Shakespeare's alteration of his source—removing Iago from an active role in the theft of the handkerchief and dramatizing its loss in these particular circumstances—emphasizes the handkerchief's symbolism and the active role played by Desdemona and Emilia in the misunderstandings that follow from its loss. In Iago's hands, its function is reversed; it is used to confirm his power over Emilia and Othello and to induce in Othello loathing for Desdemona. Iago's first mention of it incites Othello to reject love and embrace vengeance (3.3.441-86). Now the hero, under Iago's tutelage, proceeds to reinterpret the handkerchief as his love token—a pledge of his love and possession of Desdemona and of her sexual fidelity—“She is protectress of her honour too, / May she give that?” (4.1.14-15). Hence its loss provides “proof” of his suspicions. The reinterpretation continues in his altered description of its history in the last act. As he uses it to support his “cause” against Desdemona, it becomes “the recognizance and pledge of love / Which I first gave her … an antique token / My father gave my mother” (5.2.215-18; italics mine). It is now a symbol of the male control and love which Desdemona has betrayed; hence she must be punished—“Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men” (5.2.6).

Desdemona, too, alters her view of the handkerchief. Instinctively using it to cure Othello's pain, she almost succeeds. She “loves” the handkerchief (3.3.297) and recognizes the danger of its loss. But when pressed by Othello, she rejects its significance—“Then would to God that I had never seen it!” (3.4.75). Her rejection reflects the failure of her power. In Desdemona's earlier discussion of Cassio she was in control; now her persistence is foolish and provokes Othello's rage. Even in the early part of this scene, Desdemona deftly
parries and “mends” Othello's ugly insinuations, turning his implied sexual vices into passionate virtues:

**OTHELLO:**

This hand is moist, my lady.

**DESDEMONA:**

It yet has felt no age, nor known no sorrow.

....

**OTHELLO:**

For here's a young and sweating devil here,

That commonly rebels: 'tis a good hand,

A frank one.

**DESDEMONA:**

You may indeed say so,

For 'twas that hand that gave away my heart.

(3.4.32-41)

But after the tale of the handkerchief she loses the initiative. She tries to regain it by—just barely—lying, and by changing the subject. But the attempt to calm and heal Othello fails. Her lie, like Ophelia's similarly well-intentioned lie to Hamlet, is generated by her love but signals the loss of her maiden's power and innocence; it confirms—Othello believes—his notions about female depravity, as Ophelia's lie confirms Hamlet's similar views. Both women, rejected by their lovers, do not regain the initiative in the relationship.

The handkerchief next creates conflict in the Iago/Emilia and Cassio/Bianca relationships. Both men use it, as Othello has done, to consolidate their power over women. When Emilia regrets its theft, Iago snatches it from her and dismisses her, “Be not you known on ‘t” (3.3.324). Cassio similarly gives orders to Bianca regarding it and dismisses her (3.4.188-89). She, though jealous, agrees to copy the work; her willingness to be “circumstanc’d” (l. 200) is a flaw which all the women share. Later, however, she returns the handkerchief in a scene parallel and in contrast to that when the handkerchief was lost. Bianca, like Othello, is jealous. She flings down the handkerchief as he pushed it aside, and it lies on the stage ignored by the couple, who go off to a possible reconciliation. But Bianca's refusal to be used by the handkerchief or by Cassio leads to a truce and a supper engagement, whereas Othello's refusal to be healed by it opens the breach in his relationship with Desdemona that culminates in her murder.

Eventually the handkerchief's original function is reestablished; it becomes the vehicle through which civilizing control is returned to the women. The reference to it by Othello in the last scene enlightens Emilia; it ends Iago's domination of her, engenders her accusations of Othello and Iago, and enables her to prove Desdemona's faithful “amiable” love. Othello is once again “subdue[d]” to this love. Emilia, stealing the handkerchief, is catalyst for the play's crisis; revealing its theft, she is catalyst for the play's denouement.

Her reiteration of “husband” and “mistress” in the last scene emphasizes the play's central division and the “divided duty” of Emilia. When Iago's villainy is made known, she shifts her allegiance unhesitatingly.
Instead of tolerating both Iago's "fancy" and Desdemona's virtue, she denounces the one and affirms the other. She questions Iago's manliness: "Disprove this villain, if thou be'st a man: / He said thou told'st him that his wife was false, / I know thou didst not, thou art not such a villain" (5.2.173-75). Then she rejects the wifely virtues of silence, obedience, and prudence that are demanded of her, "unhousing" herself:

I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak:

'Tis proper I obey him, but not now:
Perchance, Iago, I will ne'er go home.

(ll. 185,197-98)

Her epithet just before she is stabbed appropriately refers to all the men in the play: Iago, to whose taunts it is a response; Othello, who responds to it; and Cassio, Roderigo, and Brabantio as well:

O murderous coxcomb! what should such a fool
Do with so good a woman?

(ll. 234-35)

Emilia, another "good woman," dies without self-justifications or calls for revenge; instead she testifies to Desdemona's innocence and love just as her mistress had done at her own death. Her request to be laid by her mistress, her reiteration of the willow song, and her own attempts to "by bad mend" complete her identification with Desdemona.

Emilia's story has utterly destroyed Iago's bond with Othello and foiled his attempt to "make up [his] will," (1.3.393), to complete himself by compensating for his own misshapenness through the stories that allow him to shape others. He and his fantasies are repudiated by Roderigo, by Othello, and by Emilia. Her refusal of obedience destroys Iago's plot and refutes his philosophy, which requires that she act in her own self-interest. Iago's final, Othello-like attempt to deny his wife's betrayal is to call her "villainous whore" and stab her, thus validating her confession and her epitaph for him. But this act, like all of the other events of the night, "forbodes" Iago instead of "mak[ing]" him (5.1.128). He has not eradicated Othello's love for Desdemona or turned her virtue into pitch. The deaths of Roderigo, Desdemona, Emilia, and Othello destroy the power over others which is the source of his self-engendering and identity. His final silence—"Demand me nothing, what you know, you know, / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.304-5)—is, for him, the equivalent of suicide. Iago's silence, his imperviousness, his unmade-upness, his refusal to suffer, all mitigate his scapegoat function throughout the last scene, emphasizing instead his role as catalyst to Othello's tragedy. It is Othello's speech, his pain, his recreation of a self to which we attend.

While the division between Iago and Emilia is absolute after he kills her, some connections between Othello and Desdemona are reestablished in the last act. Desdemona, as we have seen, continues to affirm their relationship up to the moment of her death, and Othello in the last scene does move away from the men and toward the women. Othello, like Desdemona and Emilia, dies in pain testifying to love, whereas Iago lives, silent; Othello, like the women, stays to acknowledge at least partial responsibility for his actions, while Iago flees, accepting none. But Othello cannot abandon his masculine identity by asserting a new one: “That's he that was Othello; here I am” (l. 285). Instead of applying Emilia's accusation to himself, he stabs Iago; the two men are one in their desire to place guilt elsewhere and eliminate its bearer. With Iago's exit, Othello turns his attention, characteristically, to his honor and a suicide weapon. Emilia's death, though it reenacts Desdemona's, is a mere parenthesis in his search, scarcely noticed by him. Although male bombast is virtually silenced at the end of this play, as it is in the comedies—Iago will “never more speak word” (l. 305) and the terseness and precision of Roderigo's dying epithet for Iago ("O inhuman dog") are equaled in Cassio's epitaph for the dead Othello ("For he was great of heart")—Othello's rhetoric continues unchecked.
Throughout the scene, he persists in seeing himself and Desdemona as ill-fated, “unlucky,” as victims of Iago who has “ensnar’d” (I. 303) him. Desdemona is still imagined as the remote, passive, perfect object of romantic love. She is “cold, cold” as her “chastity” (II. 276-77), associated with “monumental alabaster” (I. 5), with an “entire and perfect chrysolite” (I. 146), and with a “pearl” (I. 348). In his last speeches, his own brand of Iago’s “motive-hunting,” he strives to reconstitute his heroic reputation. He leaves the play exactly as he had entered it, affirming his services to the state (compare 1.2.17), confessing, asking for justice and judgment (compare 1.3.122-25), telling stories about his past, and putting his “unhoused free condition” into its ultimate “confine” for love of Desdemona. His suicide both punishes himself as an Iago-like “dog” and reasserts his identity as a decisive, just commander and a passionate lover of Desdemona: “I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee, no way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss” (ll. 359-60). His love remains idealistic, anxious, self-justifying—consummated “no way” but in death.

Indeed, most of the characters remain where they started—or return there. Here there is not even the tentative movement beyond folly that we find in the comedy heroes. Roderigo was upbraiding Iago in the play's first lines and is still doing so in the letter that is his last communication. Cassio has again received a promotion and is again caught up in events he does not comprehend. Brabantio, had he lived, likely would have responded to Desdemona's death exactly as he did to her elopement: “This sight would make him do a desperate turn” (I. 208). Iago, like Jaques, Malvolio, and Shylock, the villains of the comedies, is opaque and static. His cryptic last words, “What you know, you know,” (I. 304) reveal no more about him than did his overexplanatory soliloquies. Desdemona, just before her death, challenges Othello as she had challenged her father and defends herself with the same straightforward precision she used before the senate:

And have you mercy too! I never did
Offend you in my life, ... never lov'd Cassio,
But with such general warranty of heaven,
As I might love: I never gave him token.

(ll. 59-62)

Bianca comes forth to seek Cassio at her last appearance as at her first; both times she frankly declares her affection and is brusquely dismissed. Emilia's function and attitudes do change, however, though her character perhaps does not. She moves from tolerating men's fancies to exploding them and from prudent acceptance to courageous repudiation. She ceases to function as reconciler of the views of the men and the women, and the separation between them widens.

The play's ending is tragic; but it is also cankered comedy. The final speech effects a disengagement even greater than that which is usual at the end of the tragedies. Avoiding mention of the love of Othello and Desdemona and direct reference to Othello's murder and suicide, it focuses on the “state matters” (3.4.153) which the lovers themselves earlier sought refuge in and on the punishment of Iago, who does, at this point, become a scapegoat. Lodovico asks us to see the tragedy as Iago’s “work,” to look forward with relish to his torture, and to avert our gaze from the bed and its significance. But the restoration of military order provides little satisfaction here. The speech does not look back over the events of the play, creating a sense of completion and exhaustion as in Romeo and Juliet and King Lear; it does not look forward to a new beginning, however equivocally, as do Hamlet and Macbeth. The conflict between the men and the women has not been eliminated or resolved. The men have been unable to turn the women's virtue into pitch, but the women have been unable to mend male fantasies. The comic resolution of male with female, idealism with realism, love with sex, the individual with society is aborted. The play concludes, not with symmetrical pairings off and a movement toward marriage beds, but with one final triangle: Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello dead on wedding sheets. We are made to look with Iago, ominously a survivor, at the “tragic lodging of this bed”; lodging here, with its resonance from other Shakespearean uses, concludes the play on a note of arrested growth, devastated fertility. “The object poisons sight”; it signifies destruction without catharsis.
release without resolution. The pain and division of the ending are unmitigated, and the clarification it offers is intolerable. “Let it be hid” is our inevitable response.

**Criticism: Themes: Valerie Wayne (essay date 1991)**


[In the following essay, Wayne contends that Othello depicts an array of ideologies concerning women and marriage, and argues that the misogyny in Othello, for which Iago serves as the primary mouthpiece, represents just one of the prevailing views of the Renaissance.]

I

Among all the critiques of the new historicism that are currently available, Carolyn Porter's remarkable essay, ‘Are we being historical yet?’, seems to me to explain most fully the process by which subversive elements are contained and marginal elements subordinated, dominated and othered in some new historicist practices. ‘The problem lies … in being limited to one set of discourses—those which form the site of a dominant ideology—and then reifying that limit as if it were coterminous with the limits of discourse in general. It is this issue of framing the discursive field which new historicists most urgently need to address.’ I would like to approach this problem by examining the text of Othello as presenting a range of ideologies on women and marriage that interact with one another, on the assumption, which I have illustrated elsewhere, that there were also multiple discourses on those subjects available within English Renaissance culture. An obvious place to look within the text for at least one alternative discourse is where it is hardest to find in recent productions—in the scene that has so troubled modern editors and directors that it has been complained about and cut in performances of the play. That is the conversation about women between Iago and Desdemona in Act II, scene i.

No one has objected to the scene more than M. R. Ridley, who calls it ‘one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare’ because it is ‘unnatural’ to Desdemona's ‘instinct’ and ‘distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap backchat with Iago’. Ridley's comments show that he is offended by Desdemona's ‘vulgarity’, as Lisa Jardine has already pointed out; his own critical discourse also attempts to establish an interpretive purity for which objection becomes ‘backchat’ and backchat is always ‘cheap’. Reading Shakespeare apart from other texts of the period, including those in the debate about women that Jardine connects briefly to the play, there were also multiple discourses on those subjects available within English Renaissance culture. An obvious place to look within the text for at least one alternative discourse is where it is hardest to find in recent productions—in the scene that has so troubled modern editors and directors that it has been complained about and cut in performances of the play. That is the conversation about women between Iago and Desdemona in Act II, scene i.

Yet while asserting the claims of history and showing how Othello figures monstrosity in the play, Newman creates her own totalising gesture by describing ‘the white male norms’ of the play encoded through Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio. This gesture, made in an important essay that expands our knowledge of the racism in western culture, also occurs with disturbing frequency in less sophisticated feminist criticism—in uses of patriarchy as a monolithic and unvarying phenomenon, in assumptions that the forms by which men dominate women are the same across cultures, and in the compatible assumption that women's oppression is similarly felt and repressed at various historical moments. If very different totalising moves have marginalised women in the texts of new historicists, as feminist critics we need to be wary of comparable gestures that totalise and reify men, in order to free our own critical practices from complicity in the operations we seek to criticise and
resist. ‘What we do not need’, Porter points out, and her ‘we’ applies to feminist as well as historical critics, ‘is a criticism which re-others those voices which were and are marginalised and disempowered by dominant discourses.’ Nor do we need a criticism that essentialises white men.

Porter's caution applies whether marginal voices arise from persons of other races or classes, from women, or from men as malevolent as Iago. So rather than seeking alternative discourses only through the differences of race, class or sex in Othello, I want to consider Iago not as an archetype of patriarchy or of evil, but as one who articulates a marginal discourse in English Renaissance culture, a discourse that was and is in a particularly unstable relation with the dominant discourses available both then and now. I will argue that Iago's conversation with Desdemona in Act II, scene i, associates him quite specifically with the residual Renaissance discourse of misogyny. Through Iago's influence on Othello, the misogynist text of the Renaissance is written onto Desdemona's body after the woman's text that marks her as chaste has been displaced. While my focus will be on the play's allusions to the writing of texts in the Renaissance debate about women, and on the historically specific ideological positions and gender differences arising from it and from discourses on marriage, I want also to comment on how the discourses we privilege in relation to Renaissance texts inscribe the criticism we produce about them.

Misogyny is especially effective as an ideology when it masquerades or is taken for something else, and it has been taken for much besides misogyny in discussions of this play, as if Shakespeare could not possibly have understood what he was writing. Thomas Rymer confused it with ‘“Jack-pudding farce … that runs with all the little plays, jingle, and trash below the patience of any Country Kitchenmaid with her Sweetheart”’. Ridley quotes him and comments: ‘It is difficult not to sympathise for once with Rymer, who, for all his regrettably crude ebullience of expression, does sometimes hit the nail on the head.’ But which (gendered) head? In Rymer's remark Iago's discourse on gender is effaced as the discourse of class, too low even for the kitchen-maid; and in Ridley's, the critic also becomes ‘crude’. Peter Stallybrass, in his essay addressing Othello, observes that members of oppressed groups sometimes deny class boundaries by 'collapsing … women into a single undifferentiated group' through the articulation of 'misogynist discourse'. What happens in this critical discourse on the play is a related, although reverse, move: Ridley affirms Rymer's displacement of the concerns of gender onto class, thereby muting issues in the play relating to women, and simultaneously condemns Rymer's remarks as evincing a lower-class style like its subject matter, thereby reasserting the class boundaries of critical discourse that Rymer supposedly violated. In this way an elitist critical discourse maintains the marginalisation of gender while asserting the primacy of class in style and content. Since displacements such as these occur frequently in Renaissance drama and its criticism, effecting a double silencing of gender issues, misogyny has often not been addressed as a discourse that articulates the distrust and hatred of women. Yet in its undisplaced form it was prevalent in medieval and Renaissance literature.

The Middle Ages was so known for it that Howard Bloch remarks in ‘Medieval misogyny’ that the title of his essay may seem redundant,

because the topic of misogyny … participates in a vestigial horror practically synonymous with the term medieval, and because one of the assumptions governing our perception of the Middle Ages is the viral presence of antifeminism. … The discourse of misogyny runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature.

Christine de Pisan was so angered to find it in Matheolus that she wrote The Book of the City of Ladies in response, and incited the querelle des femmes in French literature. Chaucer provides a good bibliography of medieval misogyny through the texts listed in Jankyn's 'boke of wikked wives' from The Wife of Bath's Prologue. Jean de Meun's portions of The Romance of the Rose made Le Jaloux's tirades against women widely available to medieval and Renaissance readers, but they could also find misogyny in the Bible, in writings of the church fathers, in books on courtly love and in countless proverbs. While these texts raise
interpretable complexities, there was still nothing subtle about their denunciation of women. It was blatant:

> All you women are, will be, and have been whores, in fact or in desire, for, whoever could eliminate the deed, no man can constrain desire. All women have the advantage of being mistresses of their desires. For no amount of beating or upgrading can one change your hearts, but the man who could change them would have lordship over your bodies.\(^\text{13}\)

Such passages are designed to persuade as fully against marriage as against women, and Bloch identifies ‘the defining rhetorical context of all misogynistic literature’ as that ‘which seeks to dissuade from marriage’.\(^\text{14}\)

During the Renaissance, misogyny does not disappear but is seemingly contained through an association with specific characters. Lord Gasper in Castiglione’s *Courtier*, Master Gualter in Tilney’s *Flower of Friendchippe*, the eponymous characters of the anonymous play, *Misogonous*, or Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Woman Hater*: these figures articulate a misogyny that is directed against marriage as well as women but is condemned by other participants in the fictions. There is also a misogynist in Shakespeare's source for *Othello*, Cinthio’s *Gli Hecatomithi*, a fellow named Ponzio who rejects Fabio's praise of marriage in the debate that opens the collection of tales on the grounds that ‘women are dangerous beings’. Ponzio quotes from Menander, “Better bury a woman than marry her”, from King Alfonso of Naples, “For there to be peace between husband and wife the husband must be deaf and the wife blind”, and from other authors to support his position.\(^\text{15}\) In *Women and the English Renaissance*, Linda Woodbridge discusses over three dozen stage misogynists, Iago among them, and she describes their ‘antimasque function’ as embodying all doubts, fears and hatred of women, so that when the misogynist is converted, banished or killed, those responses to women appear to be, too.\(^\text{16}\) By the time William Gouge published his *Domesticall Duties* in 1612, it was even possible to charge a Puritan clergyman who discussed marital duties with misogyny. Although Gouge advocates the subjection of wives, he also resists husbands' abuse of their authority, so he protests that wives have no cause to complain about his advice: ‘This just Apologie I have beene forced to make, that I might not ever be judged (as some have censured me) an hater of women.’\(^\text{17}\) Gouge did not carry the badge of misogynist proudly, especially since that criticism could have implied that he advocated a Catholic, rather than Protestant or Puritan, position on marriage. Through its frequent use as a charge, the term came to function as a threat, much as the charge of ‘shrew’ functioned for insubordinate wives.

The illusion that misogyny was contained or destroyed by these Renaissance texts is important to a character who was nearly always recuperated, for attributing misogynist attitudes only to him obscured similar assumptions within other characters and the defences they offered on behalf of women. Gasper and Gualter are both threatened with being thrown out of the restricted aristocratic worlds that they inhabit by the female participants in their dialogues, and their continued presence within courtly society depends upon their containment. The existence of the misogynist in a text does not, therefore, guarantee its position on women from a modern perspective, for as an identifiable ideology, misogyny was overdetermined during the Renaissance. While it was presented as a residual ideology that the dominant discourse had put aside, the debate about women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts was one means by which misogyny was fully sustained in the culture. It was residual in the sense that Raymond Williams uses that term to identify an ideology that ‘has been effectively formed in the past, but … is still active in the cultural process.’\(^\text{18}\) During the Renaissance, misogynist discourse had a history and continued to make history.

The frequent identification of misogyny in Renaissance texts distinguishes it from the dominant ideology, usually with the implication that the later writers are superior for having spurned such outmoded ways of thinking. But literary misogyny was still being produced. In 1596, for example, C. M. (perhaps Christopher Middleton), the author of a very conventional romance, defended the title of his text by remarking on misogyny's residual position in the culture. *The Nature of a Woman* tells of twin brothers who are ‘blessed in all worldly wealth, except the unfortunate choyse of two wicked wives, … both wicked, because both women’. These women become the occasion for discord between the brothers and their children, and after
many fabulous episodes in the woods, everyone is reconciled when the two wives admit their guilt. For the reader who is wondering why such a story has this title, C. M. explains in his preface to the second part that he was ‘loath to breake square’ with his real purpose, so he used the present title, ‘which though therein it answer not everie mans privat expectation in what they meane, yet could not I fit it better to the matter, containing indeede nothing but the envious practises of two wicked women.’ His title is admittedly misleading, but it has a kind of validity given his misogynist text. Then he explains the cause: ‘wherein if any take offence, let him for this time winke at my fault, as rather affecting to frame my selfe to the new fashion, that it should be accounted new stuffe, then following the old be esteemed as too stale.’

The old fashion here referred to is literary misogyny, which is C. M.'s mode within a romance genre; the new stuff is the more positive presentation of women that would have been signalled by the apparently neutral phrase, ‘the nature of a woman’. We can now read that phrase as naturalising yet another, hardly neutral, construct of woman; but in 1596, at least in C. M.’s opinion, the most blatant form of misogyny that associated women with evil was clearly old hat. Yet it was not so outmoded or irrelevant that he felt obliged to apologise for producing a misogynist text: he merely asks pardon for the disjunction between text and title.

In ‘Discourse in life and discourse in art’, Vološinov/Bakhtin makes a distinction that explains why a residual ideology such as misogyny would appear even more visible in a culture than one that was dominant:

> If a value judgment is in actual fact conditioned by the being of a given community, it becomes a matter of dogmatic belief, something taken for granted and not subject to discussion. On the contrary, whenever some basic value judgment is verbalized and justified, we may be certain that it has already become dubious, has separated from its referent, has ceased to organize life, and, consequently, has lost its connection with the existential conditions of the given group.

The very presence of misogynist discourse in the Renaissance suggests the instability of that view of women. It was not that no one any longer associated women with evil, but that the ideology was at issue and not an unquestioned presupposition or a given of the culture. Many texts in the Renaissance debate position themselves against that ideology. Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* places a character named Candidus against Caninius, who ‘lyke a curre, at womennes condicions is alwaye barkynge’: Candidus is not unambiguously feminist, but Caninius is clearly antifeminist and is prompting a humanist defense of women's worth. The misogynists in Renaissance texts engender controversy over that ideology rather than belief: they keep misogyny alive at the same time that they call it into question.

What this discourse also diverts attention from are the misogynist assumptions about women's inferiority and inadequacies that patriarchal structures often assert in historically different forms and modes. Less explicit forms of misogyny or sexism were not frequently contested during the Renaissance, so the observation that Candidus's domesticated and idealised prescriptions for women in *The Defence of Good Women* also restrict women's agency, or that Cassio treats women as others in a way similar to Iago, requires working against the distinctions between discourses available at that time, since the rhetoric that both characters use is markedly different from Iago's. Gouge's resistance to being identified as a woman-hater is similarly justified on rhetorical grounds, since he does not associate women with evil. Yet the women who charged him with misogyny may have felt that his justifications for wives' subjection to their husbands were based not on an articulated hatred, but on a structural requirement of the subordination of women in theology and in social formations that also assumes a deep distrust of women. By what means can we distinguish more pervasive and less explicit forms of misogyny, which are still with us, from the local version so readily identified by its rhetoric? During the Renaissance, the very presence of a separate discourse made the latter form of misogyny more easy to see, while it also obscured the visibility of other ‘misogynies’ that operated in that culture and continue to operate in ours. The charges made against Gouge suggest the possibility that some persons in his culture saw through the screen of rhetorical misogyny to some other means of condemning or confining women that functioned in many personal and institutional contexts.
The different forms that misogyny can assume within cultures therefore require some modified application of Vološinov/Bakhtin's axiom in relation to this problem, because misogyny as a structural principle governing power-relations has not ‘ceased to organize life’ or ‘lost its connection with the existential conditions of the given group’. Patriarchal structures create numerous and varied opportunities for reinforcing misogyny, so there is an uneasy relation between misogynist discourse and other forms of patriarchal oppression. The localised, residual misogyny available in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could therefore be remotibilised by the dominant discourse: the ideology of marriage that valorised chastity as yet another means of containing women's desire was its complement, not its opposite. Because both ideologies were still active in the cultural process, the dominant discourse could simultaneously reject and promulgate residual misogyny in order to enforce women's continued subordination within the culture.

We do need a way of identifying discursive misogyny, especially in medieval and Renaissance texts, because its very visibility made it function as a literary device during those periods. Yet if we are presently spared some of that rhetoric, various other means of subordinating and discrediting women that have very material consequences affect us daily. Literary theories and critical practices often marginalise and degrade issues relating to women. Forces within the academy effectively establish a male elite and simultaneously demean the work of women. As feminist critics, we address these problems by resisting the marginalisation of women in texts and in other material practices and by calling attention to issues of gender that other critics either do not see or prefer to ignore. To interpret from our present moment meanings in Othello that have been effaced through time, for example, we can consider the play's association of Iago with the misogynist and its use of Renaissance discourses on women. It is not historical accident that has obscured our knowledge of those controversies: it is the historical oppression of women that marginalises those controversies and continues to do so within contemporary critical practice. So in this analysis I want to look at two kinds of difference in the play—the historical difference of positions for and against women as they were constructed by the Renaissance debate and texts on marriage, and the gender differences that were mapped out by those discourses.

II

In Act II, scene i, the audience hears divergent constructions of women by Cassio and Iago that parallel the praise and blame accorded to women in the Renaissance debate. Even before Desdemona comes on stage, Cassio celebrates her as one who surpasses all other textual constructions of exemplary women: she is a maid

That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens
And in th'essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.(23)

The passage says less about Desdemona than about the effort of an ingenious artist to pen her praise, drawing attention to the verbal constructions of women that will be a concern of the next one hundred lines. When she does arrive in Cyprus, Desdemona is greeted with a proud flourish from Cassio:

Hail to thee, lady! And the grace of heaven
Before, behind thee, and on every hand,
Enwheel thee round.

(85-7)

This salutation is adventitious, given Desdemona's more material concern for her husband's safety, and perhaps repetitious of the wheeling round she received during her sea voyage; but Cassio's enthusiasms extend beyond rhetorical praise of Desdemona to a kiss for Emilia.
Such ‘courtesy’ prompts Iago's first remark:

Sir, would she give you so much of her lips
As of her tongue she oft bestows on me
You would have enough.

(100-2)

Here the misogynist charges his wife with being a shrew, which was a common, not an ingenious, assertion. Although Desdemona observes that Emilia has not yet spoken and may have been stunned into silence by his attack—‘Alas, she has no speech’ (103), Iago replies that his wife speaks ‘too much … when I have list to sleep’ (104). He is referring to the ‘curtain lecture’, when wives were said to complain to their husbands while they were both within the curtains of their bed. Since even an absence of woman's speech is described by Iago as ‘too much’, he revises his complaint: ‘she chides with thinking’ (106). Yet he is the one who thinks of chiding as he projects his own dissatisfaction onto her. Emilia then defends herself—‘You have little cause to say so’ (107)—and Iago reveals the ‘cause’ through generalised charges against women:

Come on, come on; you are pictures out of doors, bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, saints in your injuries, devils being offended, players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds.

(108-11)

Again Iago says nothing new; these charges were proverbial assaults. Yet the speech makes it clear Emilia's fault is simply that she is a woman. In this catalogue of vices, women are vain, talkative, vengeful, idle and wanton.

When Desdemona hears these remarks, she replies, ‘O fie upon thee, slanderer!’ and however playfully she delivers the line, it can imply a serious charge, one with more far-reaching consequences than the generalised charge of ‘misogynist’. The two words were related because misogynists frequently slandered women: Linda Woodbridge explains that ‘misogynists libel womankind; slanderers blacken one woman's reputation.’ The more localised abuse was also an actionable offence during the Renaissance if it occurred in a public context. On this subject, Lisa Jardine's relation of defamation suits in ecclesiastical courts to the events in Othello is especially informative. Jardine sets out the consequences of the public event of calling someone a whore, for example: the offended party made a deposition that, ‘if substantiated in court, led to the offender's doing public penance, paying a fine, or (in extreme cases) being excommunicated.’ In addition to the cases Jardine cites from the Durham records, there is the instance of Shakespeare's own daughter, Susanna, who, like her biblical antecedent, also suffered the abuse of slander.

On 15 July 1613, Susanna Shakespeare Hall sued John Lane, Jr., for slander in the consistory court of Worcester Cathedral. ‘[A]bout 5 weeks past the defendant [Lane] reported that the plaintiff [Susanna] had the running of the reins and had been naught with Rafe Smith at John Palmer.’ Schoenbaum glosses ‘the running of the reins’ as ‘to suffer from gonorrhoea (“reins” = kidneys or loins).’ Lane had charged that Susanna had a venereal disease and had been wicked or ‘naughty’ with Rafe Smith: and the phrase ‘to have been naught with’ suggests how immediately a woman could become naught through the charge of adultery. Lane did not appear for the court proceedings, and less than a fortnight later he was excommunicated. Schoenbaum infers the need for Susanna's suit from the community she inhabited: ‘Stratford was a closely knit society, in which scandal—quick to circulate—had to be quickly quashed.’ In her more general account of such suits, Jardine points out ‘the defamation, if it went unchallenged could become an “actuality”’, not only through gossip but through charges brought in the courts if the defamation were allowed to stand. For personal and for legal reasons, it was important that Susanna act to defend herself.
Othello also conveys the need for a woman to defend herself from slander, because it calls attention to the relation between verbal abuses and their ‘eventful’ consequences, whether in defamation suits or in the murder of one’s wife. Slander is the offence that Emilia suspects ‘some eternal villain’ to have committed when Othello accuses Desdemona of being a whore—that ‘some busy and insinuating rogue’ has ‘devis’d this slander’ of Desdemona in order ‘to get some office’ (IV, ii, 129-32). The act is consistent with Iago's earlier intent ‘to abuse Othello's [ear] / That he [Cassio] is too familiar with his wife’ (I, iii, 377-8), and with Othello's threat that Iago should ‘abandon all remorse’ if he ‘doest slander her and torture me’ (III, iii, 369-70). It is a major crime committed in the play and the only one committed by Iago against Desdemona: we see and hear it committed, and objected to, as early as II, i. In these instances, too, it deserves to be treated as a serious offence: Madeleine Doran observed that ‘in Shakespeare slander is one of the worst of evils; it is a vice that I do not recall ever being excused.’

Emilia's response to Iago's generalisations about women specifically relates his slander to the misogynist position against women that formed one side in the Renaissance debate, for she denies her husband the opportunity to construct her as a text by saying, ‘You shall not write my praise’ (II, i, 115). The statement forbids Iago's inscriptions, but he easily agrees—he certainly will not be the one to praise his own wife. Yet the remark also implies a rejection of any praise that he might attempt to write. Emilia suggests that even the praise of women can convey blame when constructed by someone like Iago, so she refuses him the opportunity. Desdemona, who has less experience of this man, understands less the risk of being the object of Iago's pen, so she sets him to the task of using words in praise rather than blame of herself: ‘What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?’ She is requesting that he assume the opposite side in the Renaissance debate. Although her request seems unwise and self-congratulatory, it does coerce Iago into trying to speak well of women. At the same time, her engagement in this banter reveals that she is not the perfect creation Cassio described her as being, or Ridley wished she were.

Iago is so unsure that he can meet Desdemona's challenge that he at first declines to try; even when he begins, he admits his own insufficiency in this kind of discourse:

I am about it, but indeed my invention
Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze—
It plucks out brains and all. But my muse labours,
And thus she is delivered.

(124-7)

Stephen Greenblatt reads these lines as a ‘covert celebration of Iago's power to ensnare others’, associating birdlime, the sticky substance used to catch birds, with Iago's own invention, but they can also be read as an overt admission that Iago sees himself unfit for this kind of creative activity. When birdlime is removed from coarse wool, it takes the nap off; when Iago tries to praise women, he has to work so hard that the task plucks his brains out. It is the project of praising women that is like the birdlime—a project that might have caught women as well as birds; and Iago's mental activity is like the wool losing its nap. Iago's worry that he cannot do what Desdemona asks implies that his dispraise of women was candid and easily produced, while the praise requires labour and inspiration from a source beyond himself. His insufficiency is more surprising because elsewhere in the play Iago appears as a master rhetorician, but as Bloch explains, ‘the misogynistic writer uses rhetoric as a means of renouncing it, and, by extension, woman.’ To be asked to produce the economiastic flourishes of Cassio exposes Iago's ruse against rhetoric. It is to ask him not to speak ‘home’, which is Cassio's own word for plain speech (II, i, 161), one that evokes the domestic nature of Iago's crabbed complaints.
While he tries to praise women or at least gives some appearance of trying, Iago's muse at first only delivers standard misogynist fare: approaching women through four categories and showing their insufficiency in each derived from Theophrastus's famously misogynist *Golden Book on Marriage*, as that text was cited in Jerome's *Epistle Against Jovinian*, *The Romance of the Rose* and *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Each account presented wives as inconvenient and troublesome whether they were rich or poor, fair or ugly. Iago instead claims that four different kinds of women are sexually wanton: either their beauty or intelligence help them to bed, or their ugliness or foolishness get them there anyway. Fair or foul, wise or foolish, women are all whores to him. Desdemona dismisses this 'miserable praise' as 'old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i'th'alehouse' (136-7), but it is a particularly rank form of such mockery that dilates in every instance upon women as objects for sexual use and then blames them, as whores, for a use constructed by that discourse. Shakespeare adapts misogynist rhetoric with such precision and in a context so relevant to the debate and the events of the play that it is not an 'unsatisfactory' version of that discourse. The talk was cheap and it is represented as such. It suits this uneasy moment in the play and aligns Iago with an ideological position that is consistent with, and anticipates, his future actions and those of Othello. It specifically identifies Iago's slander as an act of verbal violence against women, one that will lead to the physical violence against one woman later in the play. So the scene establishes the gendered character of the crimes of both men by evoking positions in the written texts about women available in Renaissance culture. If we cut it or ignore it because we cannot understand it, we are effacing the concerns of gender that the play, as written, raises.

Desdemona does collude in this activity, and she persists in asking for a third time: ‘But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed? One that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?’ (II, i, 141-2), a malice very like that Iago has just displayed. Her insistence is finally rewarded, because what follows might, but for the last line, have been written by the most devoted humanist in praise of women:

IAGO

She that was ever fair, and never proud,
Had tongue at will, and yet was never loud;
Never lacked gold, and yet went never gay;
Fled from her wish, and yet said, 'Now I may';
She that being angered, her revenge being nigh,
Bade her wrong stay, and her displeasure fly;
She that in wisdom never was so frail
To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail;
She that could think, and ne'er disclose her mind,
See suitors following, and not look behind;
She was a wight, if ever such wight were—

DESDEMONA

To do what?

IAGO

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To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

(145-57)

Iago does achieve some eloquence here. In this catalogue, a woman may be beautiful without being vain, able to speak without being loud, wealthy without showing her riches off, restrained but consenting where appropriate. She is not vengeful; she would not commit adultery—that is, she would not exchange her sexual partner for one who is more attractive;\(^{37}\) she can keep confidences; suitors do not turn her head. The same categories that appeared in Iago's attack on women appear here but are inverted. That is why the description is so often framed in the negative, since it is in large part what women do not do, given men's charges against them, that makes them good. To constitute that goodness primarily through restricted activity, Shakespeare puts six 'nevers' in this passage. The last line then undercuts the entire construction by positing only the hypothetical existence of such a woman—which reasserts Iago's doubt and also suggests how difficult it would be to affirm anyone's identity through a catalogue of prohibited behaviours.

Yet if such a woman does exist, the problem is not one of nature, but of culture: what is she permitted to do—generally and sexually—ever? Iago's answer to Desdemona's question is appropriate given the rigid restrictions placed upon women's lives by those who praised them—by the humanists and Protestant reformers. Lines 61-162 in this scene present the problems on both sides of the controversy: it was not just that misogynists condemned all women, but that even their advocates, like Elyot's Candidus and William Gouge, described a severely restricted life for them. They show that the sport of debates about women was suspect from the start, since it assumed positions of attack or defence that defined women as uncomplicated others who could be catalogued for their virtues and vices because they were inferior to and far less complex than men. Only a woman who admits men's restrictions on her behaviour deserves to be a person, a 'wight', which is a term that suggests, especially when heard, how different from 'whites' both women and Moors could be. Yet Desdemona refuses to acknowledge just any man's right to direct his wife: after Iago's 'praise' she contradicts humanist advice by remarking, 'Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband' (159-60). She notes too the 'most lame and impotent conclusion' (159) of Iago's last speech, implying that he who cannot praise women cannot relate genitally with them. Again, the words of the debate are interpreted as more than rhetorical display, more than writing, by their relation to feelings and actions: Desdemona reads them on Iago's body.\(^{38}\)

The entire project of the debate depended on a perception of women that Emilia calls into question later in the play:

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What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have we not affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
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(IV, iii, 92-7)

When men 'change us for others', the double standard that permits men's adultery and forbids a woman's depends upon constituting women's sexuality as different from their own. The debate about women was one way of constructing that difference. In it, as outside of it, the otherness of heterosexual attraction became a basis for inferring differences in sexual desire: women were seen as either less or more desiring, less or more chaste, because they were different in other ways, in the ways of the other. When Emilia affirms women's similar desire, she questions the presuppositions of many inscriptions of women and constructs us differently from anyone else in the play.
Even Desdemona, who in Act I had affirmed the ‘downright violence’ (iii, 245) of her love for Othello, had asserted her desire only when the man who became her husband had provoked it. While the degree of her arousal might have made humanist and Protestant writers on marriage uneasy, even as Othello has been interpreted as uneasy at her assertion, the conduct books harnessed women's devotion to their husbands through valorising acts of self-sacrifice in loving wives. As long as a woman's affection was directed to her husband, the authors of conduct books did not object to it: when the misogynist in Tilney's text remarks that Julia should advise women to ‘bring your mayred women unto a meane’, the latter responds, ‘Not so … I will have no meane in love.’ Destructive acts such as wives jumping off cliffs with their husbands or slitting their wrists after their husbands had died were celebrated as proving the exemplary love of women. Female masochism in the interests of marital harmony was not only tolerated but actively encouraged by some Renaissance discourses on marriage.

When Stephen Greenblatt claims that Protestant as well as Catholic approaches to marriage assert a ‘constant fear of excess’ of sexual desire in marriage, he is eliding important differences between Catholic and Protestant ideologies as well as different treatments of desire set forth for women as compared to men. The former difference did not even begin as a Protestant protest: it was Erasmus who first naturalised sexual relations in marriage by claiming that bodily pleasure, although the least of all pleasures in marriage, was not unworthy of ‘man’:

Neither do I here utter unto you those pleasures of the body, the which, whereas nature hath made to be moste pleaesaunt unto man, yet these greate witted men, rather hide them, and disseme them (I cannot tel how) then utterly contempte them. And yet what is he that is so sower of witte, and so drowpyng of braine (I will not saie) blockheded, or insensate, that is not moved with suche pleasure, namely if he maie have his desire, without offence either of God or man, and without hynderaunce of his estimacion. Truely I would take such a one, not to be a man, but rather to bee a very stone. Although this pleasure of the body, is the least parte of all those good thynges, that are in wedlocke. But bee it that you passe not upon this pleasure, and thinke it unworthy for man to use, although in deede we deserve not the name of manne without it, but compte it emong the least and uttermoste profites, that wedlock hath.

It was this humanist view that, with all the other writings of Erasmus, was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in the ‘highest category of heterodoxy’ in 1559 and condemned by the Council of Trent. At its session in November 1563, the Council declared as anathema anyone who claimed that the married state excelled the state of virginity or celibacy. After Trent, the humanist position on marriage was primarily associated with Protestants and Puritans. In Christian Oeconomie, for example, which was written in the 1590s and first published in English in 1609, William Perkins objects to the results of the Counter-Reformation in the Catholic church by saying that ‘whereas it opposeth mariage and chastitie; it plainely determineth that in marriage there is no chastitie.’ Perkins aligns these Catholic retrenchments with Rome's earlier view of sexual relations in marriage as acts of ‘filthines’ and ‘uncleanness of the flesh’, adding that through such condemnations of sexuality, ‘some beganne to detest and hate women.’ He asserts a relation between post-Tridentine Catholicism, misogyny and the condemnation of sexual pleasure in marriage, in order to resist it from his Puritan position. While Protestants of any sort did not sanction unrestrained sexual play in marriage, and while they, too, were not free of the fear of desire, the valorisation of marital chastity offered them an alternative to the position of Rome that seemingly contained desire.

When he elides this difference between Catholic and Protestant positions on marriage, Greenblatt blames Desdemona for what he terms her ‘erotic submission’: ‘this frank acceptance of pleasure and submission to her spouse’s pleasure is, I would argue, as much as Iago's slander the cause of Desdemona’s death, for it awakens the deep current of sexual anxiety in Othello.’ The danger of erotic pleasure in marriage has been heightened to the degree that it accords with medieval misogyny, leading Greenblatt to displace considerable
AA blame for the words and actions of Iago and Othello onto Desdemona. He has presented a residual discourse as if it were the dominant one, and, from this alignment, has produced a construction of Desdemona's role in her own death that is consistent with the misogynist view of her. In other words, the displacement of blame for Iago's slander results in a critic's collusion with that slander in his estimate of Desdemona. While I am not asserting that this interpretation results from a conscious or willed desire on Greenblatt's part, it does result from his reluctance to distinguish between a residual and a dominant discourse, his inattention to historical differences in advice to women and men, and his use of 'arbitrary connectedness' to relate literary and extra-literary texts. The result of this procedure is that Desdemona has been slandered yet once more by a fine critic who is refashioning our approach to the Renaissance. Residual misogyny remains at risk of being remobilised by the dominant discourse.

Emilia's alternative claims for women's desire are made through asserting not a difference but a likeness between the 'affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty' of men and women, and those claims constituted an emergent ideology during the period. While the dominant discourse asserted difference and inequality (yet, as Gouge would have it, a 'small inequality … for of all degrees wherein there is any difference betwixt person and person, there is the least disparitie betwixt man and wife'), the emergent discourse on women's behalf argued for equality on the grounds of a similarity between the sexes. Tilney's Isabella contends, 'For women have soules as wel as men, they have wit as wel as men, and more apt for procreation of children than men. What reason is it then, that they should be bound, whom nature hath made free?' Shakespeare's Emilia reasons on the same principle of likeness, but her questions were even more threatening to those who championed marriage, because the dominant discourses presented marriage as a relation that would contain women's desire. While an antimatrimonial misogyny is the residual ideology articulated in this play through Iago and, eventually, Othello, and a general advocacy for marriage is projected as dominant through Desdemona, Emilia's emergent position calls the constitution of woman as other into question by claiming that woman's desire can no more be harnessed than man's can. Her position challenged the double standard implicit in some (though not all) descriptions of monogamy and questioned the objectification of the other that occurs in many manifestations of desire. Instead of affirming an opposition between women and men, Emilia proposes that women, like men, are not so constituted as to permit sexual control by their spouses. The emergent character of her approach is especially difficult for us to read now because our own emergent discourses ask us to be alert to gender differences and to differences within genders; yet during the Renaissance, asserting a likeness with men was an important means by which women justified some of their claims to power. The position most fundamentally opposed to Emilia's in the play is that which asserts identity as absolutely different from and opposite to an other.

Iago constructs his own identity on this principle in Act II, scene i. After Desdemona calls him a slanderer for his generalisations against women, he replies,

Nay, it is true, or else I am a Turk:
You rise to play, and go to bed to work.

(113-14)

Iago's projections on women ensure his own identity as a Venetian, but if women are not objects or whores, then the alternative is that he is the other, the Turk, because someone has to play the other in his world. When Othello finally kills himself and says he is killing the 'turbaned Turk' who 'beat a Venetian and traduced the state' (V, ii, 349-50), he is killing the monster he became through Iago's mental poison, but he is also killing the only ethnic and racial other of the play. To be more precise, he is killing that self who is the other, the Turk or the Moor, as an act of Venetian patriotism. Just as one woman was praised by Iago for becoming a 'wight' through restricting her behaviour to the requirements of men, so Othello becomes white—both virtuous and Venetian—through annihilating his alien self. This is one way in which the coherent self is established in some forms of discourse, by defining itself off against internal and external selves, asserting its
own freedom by denying ‘theirs’. Critical discourse can also engage in this practice through the monolithic construction of others. Shakespeare's Venice looks like some accounts of his plays, since it is not a place that can tolerate difference: the only characters left alive on stage are white men.

But all of the white men left on stage are not the same, and it is important that Iago's misogynist discourse is specific to his character and then spreads, through a kind of oral/aural abuse, to Othello. In Act IV, scene ii, Othello's focus is on Desdemona's body, specifically ‘there’ on her body:

"But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in!"

(56-61)

Norman Sanders notes the origin of the vocabulary of this passage in Proverbs 5:15-18. The biblical chapter advises against whoredom and compares the wife of a man's youth to ‘thine owne well’ or a ‘fountaine blessed’. A woman's womb sustains her husband with life-giving water, and to be discarded from it is to die of thirst. Yet the waters offered there are not for everyone: ‘But let them be thine, even thine onely, and not the strangers with thee.’ It is this verse that prompts Othello's alternative image of the womb as a site for engendering foul creatures when it is not exclusive property. The womb is either a place of privileged ownership or a common pond breeding bestiality. In both instances its nurturant and procreative function gives wives the power of phallic mothers, who can turn each husband into a ‘young and rose-lipped cherubin' (IV, ii, 62).

Having constructed Desdemona as a pre-Oedipal and powerful whore, Othello then sees her as capable of having authored her own identity:

"Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write 'whore' upon? What committed?
Committed? O thou public commoner."

(70-2)

Desdemona's body before her supposed adultery is here likened to a paper-book, one of the books of blank paper that Renaissance students used for practice in writing, translation and copying. Othello imagines she has written ‘whore’ there through committing adulterous deeds. But Desdemona does no writing in this play and hence no ‘committing’ in word or deed. The activities of writing are always associated there with men; it is women's speech that Iago worries about. So Othello is confusing the agency of the discourse: he does not notice who does the writing, who commits it. In this scene it is Othello who is writing the body of misogynist discourse onto Desdemona's ‘book’.

The act is so clear to Emilia that she makes it a verb:

"Alas, Iago, my lord hath so bewhored her,
Thrown such despite and heavy terms upon her
As true hearts cannot bear."

(IV, ii, 114-16)
The word ‘bewhored’ marks the connection between this discourse and Desdemona's body, for in being termed a whore, Desdemona becomes one. Three more times in the scene Emilia objects to his applying the word to her (119, 126, 136). When Desdemona begs Iago to tell her husband that she did not ‘trespass ‘gainst his love / Either in discourse of thought or actual deed’ (151-2), something Iago is not likely to do, her request asserts the relation between thoughts, words and deeds. For her the connection is intolerably close, and she admits, while contradicting herself as she says so, ‘I cannot say “whore”: / It does abhor me now I speak the word’ (160-1). She cannot separate the language from her own body—‘abhor’ again affirms the connection—and Stallybrass reminds us that ‘there is no simple opposition between language and body because the body maps out the cultural terrain and is in turn mapped out by it.’ For Desdemona there is no difference at all, because she is unable to resist this rhetoric when it comes from her own husband. Instead she thinks he may be right:

'Tis meet I should be used so, very meet!
How have I been behav'd, that he might stick
The smallest opinion on my least misuse?

(106-8)

When she does not oppose misogynist discourse, Othello’s words ‘stick’ on Desdemona's body and become a part of her mind. Her response shows how misogyny spreads within a text and a culture, for as it works through language, it constructs the very thoughts and deeds that Desdemona did not do.

The other signifier that moves through the play in a complementary way is the handkerchief. Newman remarks that ‘as it passes from hand to hand, both literal and critical, it accumulates myriad associations and meanings.’ I want to link some of those associations with the dominant ideology concerning women in the Renaissance, in order to suggest why its loss is an important precedent to the bewhoring of Desdemona and how it figures women’s activity, their work. Edward Snow observes two genealogies for the handkerchief in the play: the matrilineal account of its passage from an Egyptian charmer to Othello’s mother to Desdemona, where the three women merge into one another; and the patrilineal descent of the token from Othello’s father to his mother. He sees the first story as narrating the gap in the second concerning how the son received from his mother the emblem of his father's sexual power and the means by which he establishes authority over his wife. Then he adds, ‘although it would be missing the point to try to distinguish the true version of the story from the false, the first version clearly engages Othello’s imagination more deeply, and his psychic investment in it appears much greater.’ The matrilineal origin of the handkerchief also extends to its embroidered inscription: to the sibyl who ‘sewed the work’ in a ‘prophetic fury’, to the hallowed worms that bred the silk thread, and the ‘mummy’ or embalming fluid taken from ‘maidens’ hearts’, which was thought to have healing properties and provided its red dye (III, iv, 66-71). I think Lynda Boose is right to see in the handkerchief spotted with strawberries ‘visual proof of [Desdemona and Othello’s] consummated marriage’ through its evidence of Desdemona’s virginity, like wedding sheets spotted with blood: the dye ‘conserved of maidens’ hearts’ used to colour the embroidery thread even seems applied to the handkerchief itself, since the ‘it’ of line 70 might refer to ‘the work’ (168) and the entire piece, as if the dye had bled from the pattern through to the cloth. The handkerchief becomes both metaphor and metonymy to prove the state of Desdemona’s body before and after their marriage. And in serving this function it remains also a symbol for the woman’s text—for the work that women do, since in the play they do not write books but serve as bodies to be written upon.

In Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, the handkerchief has no genealogy and no specific pattern, although it had been 'embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion'. A woman in the house of the captain, Cassio's counterpart, ‘worked the most wonderful embroidery on lawn’ (a sheer linen or cotton), and she ‘began to make a similar one before it went back’. Shakespeare heightens this emphasis on copying the pattern in the handkerchief: Emilia remarks, ‘I'll have the work tane out’ (III, iii, 298) when she finds it; Cassio says to
Bianca, ‘Take me this work out’ (III, iv, 174) and

I like the work well. Ere it be demanded—
As like enough it will—I’d have it copied.
Take it and do’t, and leave me for this time

(183–5)

Bianca returns later with objections to the task: ‘I must take out the work? … This is some minx’s token, and I must take out the work? There, give it your hobby-horse, wheresoever you had it. I’ll take out no work on’t’ (IV, i, 145–9). These passages shift the emphasis from making a handkerchief like the one Desdemona had to copying the pattern itself. The phrase used so consistently for this activity, ‘taking the work out’, which may have come from the French translation of Hecatommithi, 58 conveys in its ambiguity a threat that when the pattern is copied, it is also taken away. Neither Emilia nor Bianca does copy the work as the woman did in the source: Emilia seems unable to take it out herself and gives the handkerchief to Iago before she can have it copied, and Bianca refuses to perform the task. So with all this emphasis on copying the handkerchief, it remains a single and original piece of work.

The handkerchief serves as a woman’s text in that women alone are associated with the work and copying of it. During the Renaissance embroidery was women’s work because they did it; but it was also an activity they were enjoined to do rather than reading or writing, for it kept them busy without allowing their minds to become too active. The pen and the sword were associated with men, while the counterparts for women were the distaff and the needle. In The Subversive Stitch, Rozsika Parker explains that ‘Needlework was designated a frontline position in the defense of women’s chastity. … No other activity so successfully promoted the qualities that Renaissance man, anxious to define sexual difference, wanted in a wife.’ 59 This emblem of Desdemona’s body that is made by women is made for women’s apparent well-being: the Egyptian charmer told Othello’s mother ‘Twould make her amiable and subdue my father / Entirely to her love’ (III, iv, 55–6). It reassures a husband that his wife is doing her work by engaging in the domestic activities proper to her—by day and by night—for Iago was not alone in claiming that women ‘go to bed to work’, too (II, i, 14).

Because the handkerchief serves as proof of married chastity, it cannot be copied by Emilia and Bianca. It is an emblem of Desdemona’s body that does not circulate because her body is not supposed to circulate: the regulated passage of the handkerchief is along family lines, not elsewhere. This restriction usually applied as well to the woman’s text, for her work was private, performed for her family and produced primarily for their consumption. In Cinthio’s narrative, the mere appearance of the woman in the window doing her work of embroidery, since she ‘could be seen by whoever passed by on the street’, convinced the Moor of her adultery. 60 The value of married chastity, which is figured in the handkerchief, asserts a worth and purpose for women that contradict the assertions of misogyny by requiring the sexual control of women in marriage. Chastity was a charm. The Egyptian charmer knew that ‘if she lost it / Or made a gift of it’, Othello’s father and any husband would lapse into misogyny—he ‘should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies’ (III, iv, 56–9). When Desdemona loses the handkerchief, she loses the means of presenting herself as amiable, the proof that she is doing her private, domestic, bed-work. She loses her own text, as the Renaissance constructed it for her.

Marriage was, then, the historical response to misogyny in the Renaissance: those who praised marriage worked in concert with those who defended women to claim that marriage was a holy and chaste state and women were sufficiently virtuous to be suitable as marital partners. But the shift from a valorisation of virginity to married chastity still depended on women’s sexual control. It was haunted by the very question that Emilia asks about women’s desire and that Othello raises earlier in the play:

O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
And not their appetites!

(III, iii, 270-2)

Othello's lines are uncomfortably close to Le Jaloux's charge that 'all you women are, will be, and have been whores, in fact or in desire, for whoever could eliminate the deed, no man can constrain desire.' They are preceded by Othello's harrassed question, 'Why did I marry?' (III, iii, 244). By the middle of the play, Othello has absorbed Iago's misogyny and a residual discourse has infected the dominant ideology. However, this transference was not due simply to the brilliant exercise of Iago's own malice: it was made easier by a contradiction that obtained within the dominant discourse. The ideology of marriage permitted husbands to call their wives 'ours' and to write upon their bodies, but it could not control women's desire. Since men's appropriation of women was never entire, jealousy arose from the contradictory claims of possession and desire. In this play Renaissance marriage produced what Kenneth Burke has called 'a tragic trinity of ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property in human affections, as fetishistically localized in the object of possession, while the possessor is himself possessed by his very engrossment'. The handkerchief becomes a fetishised sign of Desdemona's commodification through marital exchange, yet for her jealous husband the curse of marriage is that she, like it, cannot be fully possessed. Desdemona and Othello are no phoenix and turtle: their relation collapses when property is not appalled but marriage permits a partial and appalling assertion of property rights.

The woman's text as it appears in this play colluded with this ideology: instead of interrogating it, it was intent only upon proving wives' chastity in order to keep their husbands' good opinion. There was no way of copying or passing the text from woman to woman because it depended upon men for its production: the staining of the wedding sheets required men's agency, the embroidery women wrought did not sustain them, and the only safe passage of the text was within the line of the patriarchal family. However, the presence of that emblem in the play and its association with the historical response to misogyny does not signify women as complete lack, as some contemporary criticism does: this is not a blank handkerchief, for women have inscribed it. It is the historical antidote to the blank page of Desdemona's body where Othello inscribed 'whore'. Instead of constructing women as an absence, it figures chastity as their charm that they must keep and treasure, lest it be lost. When it is lost, the handkerchief comes to signify Renaissance women's painful contingency, for their reputations were as easily displaced through some of the texts of men.

Hence the gender differences that were mapped out by discourses on women and marriage and that are refigured in this play represent men as writers and women as bodies that are written upon. Women assert themselves more actively through speech and through sewing (Marina in Pericles says that instead of being a prostitute, 'I can sing, weave, sew, and dance', and even as Othello curses Desdemona, he claims she is 'so delicate with her needle' [IV, i, 177]), but these activities do not create texts with a discursive content that is widely recognised as contributing to history. Feminist critics have claimed the importance of listening to 'the voice of the shuttle', and that voice can be heard through the story of Philomela, who gave evidence through her weaving that Tereus had raped her. In Chaucer's version in The Legend of Good Women, Philomela does 'endyte' her own story in 'letters' as she weaves her tapestry, since in prison she is denied use of a pen: 'She coude eek rede and wel ynow endyte, / But with a penne coude she nat wryte.' Because women's hands manage to tell the story of their oppression in Ovid and Chaucer, Shakespeare's Lavinia must lose hers when she is raped: the words she writes with a stick in the sand produce an even more transient text that soon disappears. The ephemeral nature of speech and the silent status of sewn or woven characters are in some ways like Lavinia's letters: given their impermanency and the difference of their form, they are not often recognised as texts producing history. Like texts in the debate about women, those by women are washed away on the next high tide of historical reproduction.

Yet becoming alert to alternative discourses that are present at a particular historical moment and the variety of textual forms associated with them may enlarge our notion of what is available to us as we reconstruct
history and politics in our own present. The male text in Othello shows that men have the power to appropriate women for their own purposes and to write women out, annihilate them or make them ‘naught’. The female texts often collude with those projects rather than resisting them. The risks of appropriative writing were high in the Renaissance when women were enjoined to silence and compliance; they are high now as we write about a silent past that cannot talk back. Approaching the past through dominant discourses only doubles the risk of that appropriation and prevents our being able to distinguish among available ideologies. It is in this sense, among others, that ‘knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity’, for one cannot grasp what is or is not dominant without examining the range of positions occurring within a given culture. Instead of treating the Renaissance as a passive body at the mercy of our own inscriptions, we might address its texts for the play of their diversity—permitting their dissonances, giving them voice—as still another way of remaking the past into a palpable presence.

Notes

2. See the introduction to my edition of Edmund Tilney’s The Flower of Friendshipe: A Renaissance Dialogue Contesting Marriage, forthcoming from Cornell University Press. An earlier version of this essay on Othello was prepared for a seminar on ‘Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender’ at the Shakespeare Association of America meetings in 1987.
4. Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), p. 120.
8. Bernard Spivack’s Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) explores another side to Iago’s character that also connects him to medieval traditions. When the figure of medieval vice is combined with the misogynist, misogyny becomes more recognisable as a vice rather than a slight character flaw or conversational habit.
14. Bloch, ‘Medieval misogyny’, p. 18. His reference to ‘all misogynist literature’ as situated against marriage is in conflict with his earlier discussion of a passage from Theophrastus as ‘less a true
example of misogyny, a denunciation of the essential evil of woman, than a subgeneric topos known as the molestiae nuptiarum or antimarriage literature' (p. 2). Miller remarks that 'it has been soundly suggested that this tradition should not be labeled “antifeminist”, but rather “antimatrionial”, directed primarily at clerks tempted to search out the “mixed love” of the world’ (Chaucer: Sources, p. 402). While the term ‘anti-marriage’ is more descriptive of some types of misogyny, it is also important to distinguish, when possible, between places where women and where marriage are being denounced. If we do not, we contribute to the invisibility of misogyny, which I believe has a much wider field than antimatrimonial texts.

22. See Joan Smith's Misogynies (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), for an account of the discrimination, denigration and violence that women have suffered recently in Britain. I am grateful to Marion Wynne-Davies for this reference.
25. Sanders's note to II, i, 108-11, cites Tilley W702: ‘Women are in church saints, abroad angels, at home devils.’
28. For discussion of another Susanna and parallels with Shakespeare, see Joyce Hengerer Sexton, ‘The theme of slander in Much Ado about Nothing and Garter's Susanna’, Philological Quarterly, 54 (Spring 1975), pp. 419-33. The biblical story of Susanna that appears in the Apocrypha was included in the Geneva Bible.
30. *OED* [Oxford English Dictionary] 'naught', adj., 2.c. 'Const. with (one of the other sex)'. See also *Richard III*, I, i, 99, for the implication of adultery:

Naught to do with Mistress Shore? I tell thee, fellow,
He that doth naught with her (excepting one)
Were best to do it secretly alone.


36. The production of *Othello* by Sir Laurence Olivier, which was first staged in 1963 and filmed shortly thereafter, eliminates lines 115-62 of Act II, scene i, including Iago's comments on four kinds of woman and the passage of ‘praise’. Jonathan Miller's more recent production for the BBC Shakespeare series cuts the fourth kind of woman and the entire ‘praise’ passage, II. 137-59.

37. Iago's admirable woman is one who is sexually confined, so she refuses to exchange one penis for another, however desirable the latter or undesirable the former. One who would do so would be, to him, weak in wisdom. Hence Iago explicitly forbids good women from exchanging men as men do women. Sanders's note to l. 152 in his edition glosses ‘to change the cod's head for the salmon's tail’ as ‘‘to exchange something worthless for something more valuable’’, noting the sexual innuendos in 'cod's head' for 'penis' and 'tail' for 'pudendum'. See also Eric Partridge in *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, rev. edn (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), pp. 77-8, who glosses 'tail' as 'penis' at p. 196. The *OED* defines 'change, v.' with 'for' as 'taken in exchange' at 1.b and 'cod's head' as 'blockhead' at meaning 2. For an alternate reading, see Balz Engler, ‘*Othello*, II, i, 155: to change the cod's head for the salmon's tail', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35 (1984), pp. 202-3.

38. Since misogynist discourse was sustained during the Middle Ages in order to justify and support a celibate clergy, the connection that Desdemona asserts between its rhetoric and sexual impotence might have been happily received—as a kind of insurance—in some quarters, although restraining desire for women risked its being redirected towards men.


41. The quotation is from the English text of Erasmus's *Encomium Matrimonii* that appeared in Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (New York and London: Garland, 1982), pp. 126-7, since Erasmus's text was published most frequently in this translation.


probably written in the early 1590s’ (p. 414). See also C. S. Lewis, who remarks in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) that ‘so far as there was any difference about sexual morality, the Old Religion was the more austere. The exaltation of virginity is a Roman, that of marriage, a Protestant, trait’ (p. 35).


45. ‘Arbitrary connectedness’ is Walter Cohen's phrase for the relation new historicists assume between diverse cultural texts. See his ‘Political Criticism of Shakespeare’, in Howard and O'Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced*, esp. pp. 34-8. The assumption ‘seems to preclude a systematic survey of the available evidence, leading instead to a kind of synecdoche in which a single text or group of texts stands in for all texts and thus exhausts the discursive field. … Thus in the extreme case women cease to be historical actors or subjects. They can be victims or objects, but it is not, however complexly, their experience that matters’ (p. 38).


47. *The Flower of Friendshipe* (1568), sig. D8. I have discussed another emergent aspect of Emilia's words as a positive adaptation of shrewish speech in ‘Refashioning the shrew’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 17 (1985), pp. 159-87.

48. *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 268; and Sanders's edn, note to IV, ii, 58-61. Since the biblical passages uses ‘cistern’ to mean a reservoir or pond, and toads breed in such places, I have departed from Sanders's gloss of the word as ‘cesspool’ at l.60, although it does begin to take on those associations. See OED, ‘cistern’, 1-3.


50. The *OED* defines sixteenth-century meanings of the verb ‘commit’ as ‘to commit to writing, to put in writing, write down for preservation’, etc.


52. Newman, p. 156.


54. E. A. Wallis Budge discusses the medicinal use of ‘mummy’ in *The Mummy: A handbook of Egyptian funerary archaeology* (1893; 2nd edn 1925; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 201-9, explaining that the fluid was sometimes taken out of previously mumified bodies for its healing properties. ‘Abd al-Latif mentioned that he saw mumia, or bitumen, which had been taken out of the skulls and stomachs of mummies sold in the towns, and he adds, “I bought three heads filled with it for half an Egyptian dirham.”’ Budge continues, ‘About three or four hundred years ago [from 1893] Egyptian mummy formed one of the ordinary drugs in apothecaries' shops. The trade in mummy was carried on chiefly by Jews, and as early as the XIIth century a physician called Al-Magar was in the habit of prescribing mummy to his patients. It was said to be good for bruises and wounds’ (p. 202).


58. See Sanders’s introduction to the play, p. 3.


60. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources*, p. 249.

61. In *The Expense of Spirit: Love and sexuality in English Renaissance drama* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), Mary Beth Rose shows that in *Othello*, ‘the heroics of marriage also
collapses from within, dissolving inevitably from its own unresolved contradictions’ (p. 131). I agree generally with her conclusions and especially like pp. 144-53, where she discusses Desdemona's three lies, although I have described the discursive field of the play differently to include its evocations of the Renaissance debate about women and conflicting religious positions.


**Criticism: Themes: Arthur L. Little, Jr. (essay date 1993)**


[In the following essay, Little studies the way in which the audience and the other characters in Othello react to Othello's blackness in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense.]

Shortly after Iago convinces Othello that evidence of Desdemona's guilt needs only ocular proof, Iago tells Othello that a woman's honor is “an essence that's not seen” (4.1.16). From this point on, Othello attempts to see this unseen essence, zealously searching for the origins of Desdemona's honor, i.e., the original symbolic intactness of her hymeneal or undivided body. His psychological and discursive examination of this unseen body simulates the play's interrogations of Othello's own metaphorical black body, unseen and missing despite his literal black presence. The Duke offers the official reading of Othello's body when he proclaims to Desdemona's father, “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (1.3.284-85). In other words, Othello's literal blackness should not be read as ocular proof of Othello's metaphorical blackness. But, as Othello's countrymen will finally have it, no amount of rhyming or coupling (or punning) will leave unseen the black Other whom the audience suspects is hidden within Othello. Like Othello's search for Desdemona's honor, the play probes into his blackness, always scrutinizing and presumably moving towards the origin and essence of his black presence.

Several recent essays have addressed Othello's blackness as a serious and complex trope. Emily Bartels argues that the Moor becomes demonized and implicated in the growing desires of England to delineate territory and establish borders between the Other and the self. Michael Neill traces how the play and its directors, engravers, and critics have fetishized and agonized over the racially adulterated marriage bed. And, by way of the idea of cultural monsters, Karen Newman exemplifies how femininity and blackness are made to complement each other in the play's construction of horrific desires. None of these essays addresses the question of how Othello goes about the (re)discovery of Othello's origins. I am not asking how Shakespeare's play allegorizes blackness. Critics have entertained such readings from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. To the extent that blackness in Othello is allegorical, it functions as Shakespeare's pre-text, what the audience knows before it comes to experience the play. Shakespeare's play is the text that will at once unsettle and fill in, substantiate and resolve what the audience suspects it already knows about the essence of blackness as the savage and libidinous Other. But blackness is also Shakespeare's pretext in the more common sense of this word. Blackness is Shakespeare's pretense, the metaphor to which onlookers, both the audience and characters onstage, can pretend to react only as the image is produced before them. The ongoing
interplay between response and creation is what I mean more broadly by the “primal scene.” The “primal scene of racism,” then, denotes the site (as well as the sight) where an audience at one and the same time reactively and proactively constructs the signification of race—in this instance, blackness. I am insisting on a noncausal relationship: an audience does not simply become reflexive after blackness is visualized. Response and creation are concurrent.

More specifically, I am using “primal scene” as it derives from psychoanalysis, which is generally interested in the relationship between response and creation and which therefore provides a conceptual field for thinking through the ways in which this relationship manifests itself in Shakespeare's play. Since Freud, who first identified the primal scene (the Urszene), the concept has become more interdisciplinarily and critically applied and implied in the work of theoretical critics such as Ned Lukacher and William Beatty Warner. The primal scene denotes the moment when a child imagines or (by accident) actually sees his or her parents engaged in sexual intercourse. The child attempts to repress this moment, but it becomes known and seen through his or her repeated effort to hide it. It manifests itself in representations that are never exact, never literal, but always distorted. Because of this distortion, the primal scene does not point to a first scene so much as to the absence of the originary one, whose prior existence is evinced by some present scene. And because of a range of scene is forever figured and disfigured by this moment. As Warner says, the scene “has a decisive effect upon the person, his neurotic symptoms, his relationships with others, his style of thinking and feeling—in other words, it is a contributing factor in much of what we take an individual person to be.”

The primal scene is both real and fantastical, both literal and metamorphical. It is also, like Othello’s blackness, something that the onlooker both responds to (i.e., represses) and creates (i.e., repeats). And Othello’s blackness, like the primal scene, remains from beginning to end a site of interplay between the literal and the metaphorical. As Lukacher has argued, in the primal scene “every disclosure [is] also a concealment, and every literal truth a figural lie.” The primal scene, writes Lukacher, exists in the constant enfolding of “historical memory and imaginative construction”; in the language of my essay, it exists in the always present relationship between pre-text (memory) and pretext (construction), or between response and creation.

The three crucial structural elements of Shakespeare’s play are Othello’s blackness, his marriage to a white Desdemona, and his killing of her. These elements are, of course, related. The meaning of Othello’s murdering Desdemona depends upon their marriage, and the marriage’s meaning is the thoroughly invested in Othello’s blackness. Each element is in effect a repetition of the other two, with Othello’s blackness understood as the originary moment of the play’s anxieties. Certainly by the end of the play, Othello’s allegorical blackness is presumably literal and real, that is, he comes to be seen as having invested blackness with the audience’s allegorical presumption. Notwithstanding, the Urszene that represses and repeats—responds and creates—the meaning of all three of the structural elements derives from the sexual coupling of Othello and Desdemona. I am arguing that the scene of sexual intercourse between them functions, for the on- and offstage audiences alike, as the sexual site and sight of the play’s racial anxieties. I am arguing further that the way the play responds to and creates these anxieties is by mocking the sexual coupling of Othello and Desdemona and by associating it with other culturally horrifying scenes of sexuality, especially bestiality and homosexuality.

I

Othello has a black protagonist. But what does this black inscription mean? The pre-texts of Shakespeare’s play had already made the black persona synonymous with the Other. Frequently the Other’s status as a cultural, aesthetic, or textual truth is created by the dominant discourse as it returns to and rehearses the Other’s presumed originary history—that is, the moment when the Other first plays through the event that has made him or her essentially different. This originary history comes to signify the Other’s difference. (Historically in England and the United States, women, blacks and homosexuals have often been subjected to such originary inquisitions.) In the period from the late sixteenth through the middle of the seventeenth century, one finds the otherness of the black persona increasingly transformed into a truth. Originary myths
and theories linked to blackness to Africa’s proximity to the sun. Especially during the early part of this period, England popularized the classical myth of Phaeton as a story about the origins of blackness. As Ben Jonson tells the story in his *Masque of Blackness* (1605), before Phaeton’s “heedless flames were hurled / About the globe, the Ethiops were as fair / As other[s].” Now, “black with black despair,” Ethiopian dames roam the world in search of their missing beauty, their lost identities. Although the popularity of the Phaeton myth was superseded by others stories and theories, it remained in circulation at least until the late seventeenth century. In John Crowne’s masque *Calisto* (1675), for example, one African nymph laments to another, “Did not a frantic youth of late / O’erset the chariot of the sun?... It is he that hath undone us.... And now we range the world around... To see if our lost beauty can be found.” More than signifying a different identity, blackness throughout the seventeenth century came to represent a lost identity.

The mythic reading of blackness was only one of several originary explanations. As “scientific” evidence increasingly became the official, or real, proof of the day—and as England’s black population flourished—there developed a need for more such scientific histories. Of particular interest was George Best’s *Discourse* (published in 1578 and reprinted in Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* in 1600), which meticulously maps out God’s condemnation of Ham, who, against the commandment of God and his father Noah, copulated with his wife while in the ark. God presumably punished Ham by making his son, Chus, and all Chus’s offspring “so blacke and lothsome, that it [i.e., their blackness] might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde.” Best also tells of another spectacle: “I my selfe have seene an Ethiopian as blache as a cole brought into England, who taking a faire English woman to wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was. …” He concludes by arguing that the blackness of the child was owing to some “natural infection” of the father. Sir Thomas Browne confronted the same issue in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), where he raises objections to many of these earlier explanations and offers that “in the generation and sperm of Negroes, that being first and in its natural white, but upon separation of parts, accidents before invisible become apparent; there arising a shadow or dark efflorescence in the outside.”

These typifying examples assume that whiteness functions as the originary truth and that blackness signifies some later horror, a kind of accident or aberration. Further, a traumatic sexual encounter informs many of these scenes, hinting at something sexually bungled or impolitic. As Newman says about both *Othello* and European travel accounts of Africa, “always we find the link between blackness and the monstrous, and particularly a monstrous sexuality.” The disobedient Ham secretly copulates with his wife, who then gives birth to a black child. Best has what I would argue is a voyeuristic encounter with miscegenation, saying in effect that he has *seen* a white English woman give birth to a black child; his not ending the sentence until he has explained the source of the infection (the black father) also licenses him to see this scene, this moment of the infectious Other. And Browne’s biological explanation brings before the onlooker’s eyes the initially unseen bad seed (the bad copulation), thereby repeating in his writing the move from invisibility to visibility. Blackness becomes represented as the scene of a black birth. Black identity seems all too naturally to find its origins in an imaginary scene of some horrific copulation.

The impetus for these originary explanations is, of course, to find the missing essence of blackness. If found, this missing essence (or scene) would provide ocular proof that the savage and libidinous nature of the black persona is literal and not simply metaphorical. Jacques Derrida has argued that culture desires to transform itself from the literal and personal into the metaphorical and universal, but (as he demonstrates throughout his work) culture never fully accomplishes this and everywhere betrays signs of the ongoing interplay between the two. While such an interplay may be said to be everywhere, *Othello*’s blackness functions as a metadramatic example. Throughout *Othello* the literal and metaphorical repeatedly express and repress each other, defining and denying each other’s evidential presence. Arthur Kirsch makes this point clear. Iterating how the play implicates its audience in the “primordial prejudices” against the black man, Kirsch states that that process is kept constantly in our consciousness by *Othello*’s literal appearance, by the pervasive imagery of blackness and fairness and of true and false vision, and by Iago’s
increasingly ominous and explicitly diabolic threats to turn the spiritual metaphor [of blackness as sinfulness] into an “ocular proof.”

Kirsch is right to note a tension in the play between literal and metaphorical representations, but there remains the issue of audience accessibility—then or now—to a blackness unadulterated by this emphatically visual metaphor.

Kirsch himself is not immune to such literal and personal readings of the metaphorical. Even though he shows an awareness of metaphorical and cultural scripting, he locates Othello's hamartia not in some complex interplay between Othello's literal and metaphorical blackness but precisely and literally in Othello's own body. Kirsch writes: “The tragedy of Othello is that finally he fails to love his own body, to love himself, and it is this despairing self-hatred that spawns the enormous savagery, degradation, and destructiveness of his jealousy.” He argues that Othello is “in a state of despair” because he has “lost” his religious faith, the very faith that has damned blackness. Othello is understood to have at his core an essential absence, to have as his essence a lost and unlovable blackamoor “self”—savage, degraded, and destructive—that always already exists as a subject within quotation marks. He has no literal self that is not already metaphorically lost or missing.

Othello is caught in a discourse of lack. (The full effect of the Duke's witticism in the third scene of the play depends on the audience's knowledge of this entrapment.) Either he is “far more fair than black” and therefore does not have a metaphorical black identity, or he really is black and is therefore entrapped by those pre-textual histories of blackness as an essential absence. Whether attention is focused on a theological or aesthetic racism, the presence of Othello's self depends (in the play and in criticism) upon the success of culture in rendering invisible itself and its “racialist ideology.” It depends, finally, upon the ability to accuse Othello the man rather than the culture that damns him from the start, thereby making personal the definition of Othello as savage and libidinous Other. To define Othello's blackness as personal is to argue that it does not metaphorically represent blackness but is literally the thing itself.

Critics tend toward such readings of Othello's person, searching for the lack or loss of the civilized that they know is deep within him. Such critiques are commonly posed in the form of a question that ends with a recognition of Othello's gullibility or vulnerability. One example of this type of reading is Carol Thomas Neely's 1980 essay “Women and Men in Othello,” the subtitle of which repeats Emilia's accusatory question: “What should such a fool / Do with so good a woman?” What is it—so the question goes—that makes possible such inconceivable deeds? Here, as so often in these studies, Othello's anxiety is equated with his self-hatred or self-recognized inferiority, and his blackness becomes personal as opposed to cultural. But, I would argue, Othello's conviction that Desdemona would prefer Cassio cannot be sustained as evidence of Othello's prejudice against himself. These issues are not one and the same. In Shakespeare's Venetian world Othello's belief in Desdemona's preference is not a reflection of his self-hatred; rather, the alleged inferiority of black to white is a cultural cliché.

The literal presence of Othello's black, male body, especially as defined in relation to Desdemona's white, female body, emerges as the crucial scene in need of erasure in order to satisfy the fictions of a Western European cultural order. Neill reads the play through what “we can now identify as a racialist ideology [that] was beginning to evolve under the pressures of nascent imperialism.” He links Desdemona's “imagined adultery” to her “act of racial adulteration,” which is seen in the play as “violating the natural laws of kind.” These natural laws do more than subsume the unnatural—these laws are the very creation of the unnatural. Neill iterates this point when he speaks of the play's making of aberrations, “monsters that the play at once invents and naturalizes, declaring them improper, even as it implies that they were always ‘naturally’ there.” Such an argument shows the interminable interplay between the natural and unnatural, as well as the fiction's pretext of bringing into presence and visibility the essence of Othello's blackness which the audience knows is always already there.
The sexual relations Othello imagines between Desdemona and Cassio are no simple matter in Shakespeare's play. *Othello* dramatizes the ideological and sexual reciprocity between the absence of one couple—Desdemona and Cassio—and the presence of another—Desdemona and Othello. It is, however, the presence or absence of Othello's blackness that shapes the emotional, psychological, and intellectual center of the play.

II

Blackness figures as an unending exchange between Othello's literal black presence and his metaphorical black absence; throughout, his blackness continues to elude. It is not an isolated issue in the construction of this single character; it informs and is informed by every other object and event in the drama. And what brings objectness (presence and visibility) to his blackness is nothing less than his own confrontation with objects—namely, the bed and the handkerchief. These objects are thoroughly inscribed in both the presence and the absence of his blackness, an identity at which the play will often only hint. Unlike his blackness, the bed and the handkerchief are so explicitly and frequently imaged throughout the play that they do not seem so critically elusive. In the end, however, the meaning of the bed and the handkerchief, like that of Othello and Desdemona's marriage, hinges on what the audience already knows to be the meaning (or emotional content) of Othello's blackness.

As both Michael Neill and Lynda E. Boose have argued, the bed (along with its sexual couple) finally emerges as an object that the play has all along been bumping into or trying to maneuver its way around. It stands before the audience as visible and climactic. I am inclined to agree with Stanley Cavell, whose "hypothesis about the structure of the play is that the thing denied our sight throughout the opening scene—the thing, the scene, that Iago takes Othello back to again and again, retouching it for Othello's enchafed imagination—is what we are shown in the final scene, the scene of murder." But, as Neill demonstrates, it is first and foremost the bed—and not the murder—that the play persists in dangling before our eyes and repeatedly snatching away. While Lodovico's response to the tragic loading of this bed—"The object poisons sight; / Let it be hid" (5.2.360-61)—may attempt to return the bed to its hiddenness, it also figures this bed as an object always represented as a textual negotiation between presence and absence.

The handkerchief even more than the bed is an object that repeatedly appears and disappears. It acts as a kind of prefatorial object, providing a visible token of one of Shakespeare's pre-texts, Leo Africanus's *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600). In his *Historie*, Africanus relates the custom in which "a certaine woman standeth before the bride-chamber doore, expecting till the bridegroome haung defloured his bride reacheth her a napkin stained with blood, which napkin she carrieth incontinent [i.e., immediately] and sheweth to the guestes, proclaiming with a lowd voice, that the bride was euer till that time an vnspotted and pure virgine." Steeped in consummation ritual from a culture of the Other, the napkin has at least a dual function: it speaks to Othello about the displacement of his marriage and to the audience about the exoticism and out-of-placeness of Othello's blackness in Western European culture. Rather than having a meaning that "may well lie hidden in rituals and customs which were accessible to Elizabethans but have since been lost," the handkerchief most likely already functioned when the play was written as Shakespeare's token of lost or hidden rituals.

Like the napkin in Africanus's text, which exhibits the woman's loss of virginity, the napkin in Shakespeare's play is thoroughly invested with issues of loss and displacement. First of all, only after Othello and Desdemona lose the handkerchief does it become a significant object. This happens, of course, almost immediately. Lost a few lines after its first appearance, the handkerchief enters the play as a displaced object (3.3.285-88) and is, in essence, about its own absence. Further, its origins are textualized in loss of life:

... There's magic in the web of it.
A sibyl that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy which the skillful
Conserved of maidens’ hearts.

(3.4.69-75)

Othello himself comes into possession of it as he loses his mother: “She, dying, gave it me” (l. 63).

And the nature of its enchantment depends upon whether it is lost or, instead, properly bestowed. Othello tells Desdemona that if his mother “lost it / Or made a gift of it, [his] father's eye / Should hold her loathed” (ll. 60-62). Bianca also reads the handkerchief as a sign of loss. When Cassio gives it to her and asks her to copy the pattern, she blames his absence on the handkerchief and its owner: “This is some token from a newer friend. / To the felt absence now I feel a cause” (ll. 179-80). The pattern continues. There is a certain lack of objectness to this cloth. Rather than representing some real corporeal thing—a body part, for example—the napkin instead turns Othello's enchafted mind back to the presence or absence of a first sexual scene between Desdemona and himself.

In its origins as well as in its ritualistic propriety, the handkerchief conjures up an originary sexual scene. It encourages the audience's return to Africanus or to some such pre-text and to narratives of foreign rites of devirgination found in those pre-texts. More incisively than any other critic, Boose has argued for a relationship between the cloth and some scene of sexual intercourse. She quite rightly links the handkerchief to the “ritual origins of marital blood pledge [that] stretch back into man's ancient consciousness.” As she points out, the allusion to the phallic worms that made the cloth and the “mummy … Conserved of maidens' hearts” which made the spotted-strawberry (or bloody) pattern on it “repeats the picture of the handkerchief.” And as “an antique token / [His] father gave [his] mother” (5.2.216-17), this napkin represents “that which every husband ‘gives’ his bride.” Peter L. Rudnytsky argues more explicitly for the handkerchief as a substitution for the primal scene. As Boose and Rudnytsky insist, the absent/present napkin, like the matrimonial bed itself, works to summon the audience again and again to the missing scene of the sexual coupling.

The handkerchief does not simply substitute for the sexual scene of Othello and Desdemona. Rudnytsky reads the cloth as a symbol of “all the ‘displacements of affect’” throughout the play, that is, as the thing that replaces what the audience is not allowed to see; but the significance of the napkin is less in its being a symbol and more in its being a distorted representation than Rudnytsky's argument allows. The trivial handkerchief displaces the sexual scene; it parodies the more momentous and much larger wedding-bed sheets. The mere presence of the handkerchief pushes the matrimonial bed and couple from a private into a public arena, where their marriage is itself subjected to and doomed by public scrutiny and cultural prejudice. The rites of marriage instead of belonging to Othello and Desdemona alone, seem always to be displaced and possessed by whoever possesses the napkin. The displaced cloth comes to represent the displaced bed, which represents the displaced couple; and these objects and the couple of Othello and Desdemona are significant because they are displaced.

Displacement, like Browne's reading of the accident of blackness, is signified by its visibility. The primal scene is the site and sight of such displacements, such emergences from invisibility. The couple that effects such a displacement is, of course, Othello and Desdemona. Notwithstanding, their difference depends upon the sameness of Desdemona and Cassio, who throughout serve as a kind of originary couple. Cassio, like Othello, is a foreigner in the Venetian community, but while Othello represents the sinister outsider, the Florentine Cassio signifies a kind of white knight from abroad. He is the courtier par excellence, who is more “gentleman” than any Venetian. Of the women and men found in this play, Desdemona and Cassio function as this Venetian playworld's most natural pair. As Stephen Greenblatt has argued, “it is eminently probable that a
young, beautiful Venetian gentlewoman would tire of her old, outlandish husband and turn instead to the handsome, young lieutenant.”

Cassio and Desdemona have about them a social legitimacy that grants them cultural invisibility: without Desdemona's marriage to Othello, she and Cassio would be the play's most probable and conventional couple.

Iago iterates as much shortly after Desdemona arrives in Cyprus and engages in banter with Cassio; Iago watches and comments on their ingenuous parody of courtly affectation. And when at the end of his chorus the sound of Othello's horns is heard and Iago proclaims, “The Moor! I know his trumpet” (2.1.175-76), Iago takes the trumpet as the cue for his own Jerichoan destruction of Othello and his world. He takes it also as a signal to begin his own revelatory trumpeting of Othello's trumpet. Iago's call for destruction first and foremost announces the metamorphosis of Desdemona from a virgin to an adulterous whore. The perfection of Desdemona and Cassio that could have been is forever lost: they are the originary couple that cannot be recovered. The courtly and proper couple is effectively displaced into the sexual and improper couple of Othello and Desdemona. Genteel courtship has been displaced by the bedroom, the most telling and exhibitionistic topos of the primal scene.

In most of the essays that have acknowledged or discussed the concept of a primal scene in this play, Othello is described as suffering from some maternal anxiety. All too commonly he figures as a child still erotically attached to his mother and forever entangled in some primal childhood experience. These readings are informative and sometimes provocative, but I do take a few exceptions to them. First, they rely too heavily on the explicit or implicit creation of Othello's childhood. Second, their projections of Othello's childhood lead them to construct the present Othello as a child. And third, their arguments locate Othello's primal scene in the imagined adulterous relations between Desdemona and Cassio. These studies fail to realize that Desdemona and Cassio are Othello's pretext (and pre-text). They are the play's originary couple, and they are also the fiction through which Othello is able to confront his own adulteration of Desdemona. Edward A. Snow's attention to the primal scene in Othello is more textually grounded. He attempts neither to transmogrify Othello into a child nor to imagine a childhood for him. He argues that “Othello becomes absorbed in a fantasy that makes him the guilty and at the same time punitive onlooker in the primal scene of his own marriage.” Finally, however, Snow's psychoanalytic portrait of Othello is more interested in Othello's psychological self than in the interplay between his psychological and cultural selves or his literal and metaphorical selves.

As already noted, the improper relationship between Othello and Desdemona is in its essence a displacement of the proper relationship between Desdemona and Cassio. Warner theorizes that “the primal scene is always already displaced from its originary oneness”; it is, he argues, “the figure of an always divided interpretative strategy that points toward the Real [i.e., its originary oneness] in the very act of establishing its inaccessibility.” The originary oneness of Desdemona and Cassio haunts the “divided” (1.3.179) relationship of Othello and Desdemona. Othello attempts to recover this oneness through his reunion with Desdemona in Cyprus (which has the potential to become the prelapsarian or fantastical other place often evoked in Shakespearean romantic comedy), but he finds their oneness repeated and displaced by the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio. This latter couple, however, can now offer only a monstrous and grotesque parody of Othello's union with Desdemona because, given Desdemona's (obscene) marriage, the proper coupling of Desdemona and Cassio is now recoverable only as a scene of sexual adulteration or deviance. Iago attempts to make Othello see his (Othello's) complicity in Desdemona's adulteration.

III

It is Iago who most adroitly pushes Othello towards the (re)discovery of his black origins. Beginning with Act 3, scene 3, he taunts Othello with the division, difference, and irrecoverable sameness between the sex scene of Desdemona and Cassio and the sex scene of Othello and Desdemona, thus returning Othello to the horror of his relationship with Desdemona. This focal scene opens with Iago's distortion of Cassio's conversation
with Desdemona and closes with the homosocial and homosexual marriage between Othello and Iago. Primal-scene imagery dominates the scene: from the pain of Othello's “watching” (l. 284) to his demand for “ocular proof” (l. 357) and satisfaction (l. 387) to Iago's pornographic teasing of Othello and pornographic indictment of Desdemona—“How satisfied, my lord? / Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topped?” (ll. 391-93)—through Iago's evocation of bestiality, “Where's satisfaction? / It is impossible you should see this, / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk” (ll. 398-402). Behind these representations is the sex scene between Desdemona and Cassio, which becomes more and more transformed into a kind of pornographic freak show.\footnote{44}

Throughout this scene, Iago manipulates the originary and invisible scene of Desdemona and Cassio. Like the absent/present bed and handkerchief, the sexual coupling of Desdemona and Cassio comes into the play as a missing scene. When Iago remarks that he himself “cannot think it / That [Cassio] would steal away so guilty-like” upon seeing Othello approach (3.3.38-39), Iago constructs Cassio's departure as signifying the post-coital moment of Desdemona and Cassio. This occurrence in and of itself is about an originary loss, a scene manqué, and this is all the more true following Iago's intimation that Cassio, in his role as go-between for Othello and Desdemona, probably began sexual relations with Desdemona long before her marriage to Othello. Othello comes to understand the sex scene between Desdemona and Cassio not from having seen it but from having missed seeing it.

The most memorable gesture in this scene of Othello and Iago's theatrics is Cassio's alleged dream, which Othello demands to have represented and which Iago feigns a reluctance to repeat:

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... I lay with Cassio lately,
And being troubled with a raging tooth,
I could not sleep.
There are a kind of men so loose of soul
That in their sleeps will mutter their affairs.
One of this kind is Cassio.
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 "O sweet creature!" Then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o'ert my thigh,
And sigh, and kiss, and then cry, "Cursèd fate
That gave thee to the Moor!"
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(ll. 410-23)

“O monstrous! monstrous,” responds Othello. “Nay,” says Iago, “this was but his dream” (l. 424). Iago's account works through a series of repetitions. He foregrounds his own telling of the story by emphasizing how much he begrudges telling it, and then, after setting the scene, speaks about men such as Cassio who in their sleep will “mutter their affairs,” presumably things they would normally not publicize or confess. Only after repeatedly drawing attention to more aggressive acts of speaking—“mutter,” “say,” “cry”—does Iago quote Cassio, whose words reveal the hidden sex scene between Desdemona and Cassio. An oral anxiety permeates various levels of Iago's narrative—his “raging tooth,” which somatically replicates and evinces the story he tells; his supposedly begrudged telling of the story to Othello; Cassio's painful and accidental confession in his dream; and the kiss on which this oral anxiety comes to focus: “Then kiss me hard, / As if he plucked up kisses by the roots / That grew upon my lips.” The repetition of this oral anxiety brings a sense of coherence to the pastiche that comprises Iago's narrative.

The image hidden from, but being made visible for, Othello is supposedly of Desdemona and Cassio, while Iago actually presents a homoerotic scene involving the sexual interaction between Cassio and himself.

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Rudnytsky, who attributes too narrow an objective to Iago, says that Cassio's dream "shocks both Othello and the audience with its sexual explicitness, while in reality proving nothing." To read this moment as "proving nothing" both ignores Othello's own response to it and minimalizes its implication in Othello's desire for ocular proof. More perceptive is Neill, who does not elaborate but who at least acknowledges the "homoerotic displacement of the kisses that grow upon Iago's lips."

I would like to go further than Neill and suggest that Othello's "monstrous" response, rather than missing the sex scene of Iago and Cassio, can be seen as immediately directed towards this sexual coupling. This too is a scene of displacement: Iago displaces Desdemona; homosexuality displaces heterosexuality. Iago structures the scene so that the primal story intensifies as the scene continues, moving from Othello's "seeing" the missing Desdemona-Cassio scene to Othello's demand for ocular proof—a proof that is represented to him as a scene of bestial sexuality and then as a scene of homosexuality. This final gesture is quite explicitly Iago's coup de théâtre. The uncovering of the homosexual scene as the play's most pornographic and immediate sexual event (except for Othello's and Desdemona's deaths) brings into focus the many emphases throughout on adultery and bestiality. Not only in Shakespeare's play but in his culture as well, homosexuality is often made to signify the climactic scene of horrific sexuality.

The sex scene of Iago and Cassio repeats and displaces the sex scene of Desdemona and Cassio which, of course, displaces that of Othello and Desdemona. At the same time, however, the scene itself reverts, returning finally to the nuptials alluded to in the first scene. These nuptials are repeated in Iago's parodic marriage to Othello. This marriage (with its caustic vows) conjures up and explodes any inclination to situate Othello and Desdemona in romantic comedy. The contextually grotesque marriage between Othello and Iago repeats and displaces the missing ceremony between Othello and Desdemona.

What we see explicitly in 3.3 appears more obliquely in 4.1, where Iago draws Othello back into the primal and homosexual story, a story Iago uses to reinforce and intensify his other stories about (an adulterous and bestial) blackness. When the scene opens, Othello and Iago talk about an "unauthorized kiss" and about a man and woman being naked in bed together without any intention of engaging in an illicit sexual affair (ll. 2-8). All this culminates with Othello's epileptic response to this imagined sex scene: "Lie with her? Lie on her?—We say lie on her when they belie her.—Lie with her!" (ll. 36-37). After Othello recovers, Iago stages the conversation between himself and Cassio which will supposedly provide Othello with evidence of the sexual liaison between Desdemona and Cassio. The conversation is actually about Bianca, to whom Cassio is said to be engaged. Cassio, denying any rumors about his betrothal to a woman he calls a whore, says that he would not be so "unwholesome" (l. 121), that is, he would not be so "unwhoresome" as to go against social expectation by actually marrying her.

While Othello mistakes the explicit subject being discussed by them, this scene about marriage and whoredom is nevertheless relevant to the perception of his marriage to Desdemona. This scene about Cassio and his mistress replays for the audience the Cyprus arrival scene between Cassio and Desdemona. It also repeats and displaces Othello and Desdemona's marriage, which it reduces to a parodic image of sexual whoredom. Finally, it recalls the homoerotic scene in the third act, as Othello experiences first and foremost, as in Iago's dream narrative, an encounter between Iago and Cassio. And this time he does not merely hear about their coming together but is made to see it. Furthermore, when Othello thinks Cassio's gestures mimic those of Desdemona and imagines Cassio (as Desdemona) saying "O dear Cassio!" (l. 136), he seems to remember that earlier ventriloquial and homoerotic scene in which Cassio falls about Iago's neck, plucks him forward, and cries, "O sweet creature!" Othello also recalls the plucked orality of the earlier scene: "Now [Cassio] tells how she plucked him to my chamber" (ll. 140-41). Othello's voyeuristic drama ends when Bianca enters carrying the handkerchief, the ocular proof of what Othello thinks he has missed seeing all along. Bianca has taken Desdemona's place. With the handkerchief in her hand, she becomes the visual testimonial that Desdemona has been transformed (or deformed) into a whore.
On the level of story, *Othello* poses a question for its protagonist—about the (in)fidelity of Desdemona—that eludes any response of empathic intellection from the on- or offstage audience, since the audience knows (with as much surety as any play permits) the answer to *Othello*’s question, which is never a question for the audience. On the level of discourse, however, where the couple of Desdemona and Cassio is entangled in the couple of Othello and Desdemona, *Othello*’s question forces the audience to confront those cultural matrices that give rise to and continually repeat the possibility of such a question. Discursively, no moment exists prior to the adulteration already scripted into Othello and Desdemona’s relationship. The couple admits as much when Desdemona says before her death that her sins are the loves she bears Othello and he agrees, saying that she will die for those loves (5.2.40-41). Even in their bedchamber their love in its personal essence is an adulteration.

More is at issue than Othello’s psychological or sexual profile, as I suggested earlier when taking issue with Snow’s essay. Othello’s adulteration of Desdemona is not so exclusively personal. Anxieties about the scene of Othello and Desdemona are promulgated before the couple actually has the possibility of staging such a scene. Iago’s first words in the play speak of the coupling of Othello and Desdemona: “’Sblood, but you'll not hear me! If ever I did dream / Of such a matter, abhor me” (1.1.4-5), using words that draw on a primal discourse of blood, dreams, and whoredom (pun on “abhor”). Before identifying Othello and Desdemona by their names, Iago conjures them up in the familiarly ominous images of the primal scene. Long before Iago tells Cassio’s dream in Act 3, the dream of Othello and Desdemona has been put into discursive circulation. This dream is not simply Iago’s; when Brabantio hears that Desdemona has eloped with Othello, he confesses, “This accident is not unlike my dream” (1.1.139). Brabantio’s dream is one that presumably murders him before the “sight” (i.e., of the couple on the bed) would, according to Gratiano, have forced him to “do a desperate turn” (5.2.204-6). Each of these dreams is a “foregone conclusion” (3.3.425), a fait accompli, before the play ever opens.

**IV**

Despite Othello’s repeated deliberations over the scene of Desdemona and Cassio, critics turn again and again to the scene of Othello and Desdemona, attempting to see or not see its presence in Shakespeare’s play. From the absent/present bed and handkerchief to the repetitious and displaced sexual events throughout, the theater audience perceives the play’s obsessive focus on the sex scene of this couple. As Rudnytsky argues,

> The same primal scene fantasies animating Othello as a character are aroused in the audience or readers of Shakespeare’s play. Like Othello, who desires to obtain the “ocular proof” of his wife’s adultery, we long to pry into the secrets of the matrimonial bed-chamber.48

Perhaps second only to the conundrum of Hamlet’s delay (the number of Lady Macbeth’s children being a distant third) is the status of the sexual relations between Othello and Desdemona. Boose contends that every student or critic of the play is forced to inquire into this couple’s sexual status, arguing that the question is “built into the text” and that

> the dramatic construction of *Othello* … is one that seduces us into repeating Iago’s first question to Othello: “Are you fast married?” What is important is not any presumed answer to the question, which can probably be argued either way. What is important is the fact that we need to ask it.49

Very much to Boose’s point are the titles of two essays, T. G. A. Nelson and Charles Haines’s “Othello’s Unconsummated Marriage” and, written in response, Norman Nathan’s “Othello’s Marriage is Consummated.”50 The consummation question is no more incidental to interpretations of the play than the other primal constructs already discussed in this essay. Do they or do they not consummate their marriage? Hidden in the question is the desire for the evidence needed to praise or condemn Othello, Desdemona, and
even the play itself. (Nathan, for example, has argued that “a lack of consummation cannot be a part of Shakespeare's play,” if only because of what would happen to the “quality of the play.”

Whether Othello and Desdemona consummate their marriage is, finally, immaterial, in that the consummation has more to do with ideology than with any physical act. Othello and Desdemona as a cultural idea or ideal is what the play is always displaying. The closing scene provides an emphatic example. The idea of an intense sexual experience, or even of a sexual betrayal, permeates, shapes, and gives meaning to the physical elements of the final scene, as the language that has hitherto been able to differentiate between sexual death and mortal death breaks down. The collapse is articulated quite succinctly when Desdemona comments (just before Othello murders her) that “that death's unnatural that kills for loving” (l. 42). The coupling of Othello and Desdemona here reaches its most explicit and pornographic moment in the play as Othello uses murder to both preempt and repeat the moment of sexual intercourse. The marriage is both consummated and not consummated. The ideological or symbolic story allows such paradoxes.

The final scene is informed by overdetermined symbols: the bed, the handkerchief, bestiality, homosexuality, and the devil. Symbolic rape also figures in this scene in which Othello violates Desdemona's body. The anxiety of the black man overpowering the white woman does not allow for any real ideological dissociation between sexual intercourse and rape. Othello finally overreaches the circumscription of his black sign; he is not simply the black devil but the “blacker devil” (l. 131). Along with him is his “demi-devil” (l. 300) in the figure of Iago, who is no diavolo incarnato since, despite his disposition, his body remains free of the physical signs of the devil's body (l. 285). (Desdemona escapes critical scrutiny from the onstage audience in this scene; she is finally martyred and apotheosized: “O, the more angel she” [l. 130].) This scene does more, however, than merely reiterate the metaphorical constructs used in the play to repeat and displace the sexual coupling of Othello and Desdemona.

Metaphorical representations are only part of the story. Instead of transforming the sex scene of Othello and Desdemona into something symbolic, the play moves ineluctably towards the literalization of their sexual moment. The symbolic reading of the black devil or beast overpowering the white woman is already in place. When Othello kills Desdemona, his literal blackness becomes metaphorical, or, better still, he becomes the literal embodiment of a metaphorical blackness. At this moment any cultural sympathy that an audience may have had for him is seriously compromised. The play reaches a “shocking literalization” in its closing moments. Othello's murderous deed brings a literalness to all those metaphorical constructs that have become so familiar during the play's repetition and displacement of Othello's blackness.

Othello comes to signify his blackness; he is made to fill in the missing scene of his black self. Because the physical blackness of this “fair” courtier is always visible to the audience, he threatens the proper codes of Venetian discourse. As a mercenary he helps return this Venetian culture to its deeply embedded racial codes by smiting himself, the Other. Once Othello (dis)figures himself as begrimed and black as his own face (3.3.384-85), the establishment of his blackness as literal and personal, that is, as properly his own, becomes a matter of allowing each person on- and offstage to remember and reconstruct for him/herself the literal evidence of what was thought to be only a metaphor. Blackness is not simply a metaphor, a cultural sign or response to a specific body or soul. It is also a personal thing, an individual body or soul that creates and gives credence to the already present cultural meanings of blackness. Shakespeare's onstage audience renders Othello an even blacker devil than what may simply be signified by the metaphor of blackness. During the play, Othello does become a beast, a sexual deviant, a whoremonger, a devil, and a rapist, evoking also in these closing moments the fantasies of a necrophiliac: “Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, / And love thee after” (5.2.18-19). He becomes the text that Shakespeare's audience already knows. As Iago himself says, “What you know, you know” (l. 302). By adopting all these roles, Othello devours the metaphors of blackness into his “hideous” body, which, like jealousy, “doth mock / The meat it feeds on” (3.3.166-67).
Othello is made to create the ocular proof that legitimizes an audience’s guarded response to his blackness. (This is true despite whatever sympathy or antipathy one may have for Othello.) I am not suggesting that the play succeeds in demonizing Othello or that it even has the demonization of Othello as its ultimate objective. Like the fictions about bestiality or homosexuality evoked or generated by the play, blackness is never literal in Othello. If anything, blackness figures as the ocular sign of a cultural need to create and destroy monsters: create them so that they may not create themselves, destroy them so that they may not procreate or multiply. In the nascent imperialism of early seventeenth-century England, this process is not merely birth control but ideological control. The black presence in Shakespeare’s play makes visible and then amalgamates and critiques those impolitic fictions that become engendered and intermixed in the name of cultural order. Bestiality, homosexuality, and black sexuality (or blackness) are essentially one and the same horrific trope. The act of making fair fair and black black itself becomes a dramatic metaphor hinting at the ways Realpolitik uses metaphor in the spirit of literalness.

This does not mean that blackness in Othello is less concerned with race than with metaphor. The play is imbued with Othello’s black sexuality. But unlike many of its pre-textual narratives that presume to look into the bedroom in order to pontificate on the mythic, moral, or scientific origins of blackness, Othello does not really hide or repress its pornographic reasons for invading the privy chamber of black sexuality. In fact, by having Iago anticipate a birth scene that never materializes, the play forces into the foreground the presumed incidental pornography of writers such as Best, Africanus, or even Shakespeare himself in Titus Andronicus.

From the opening words of Othello to its closing moments, the play simulates some imagined or actual pornographic scene. Nothing distracts attention from it. Boose is only partly right when she argues that the audience finally “finds itself stirred by, trapped within, and ultimately castigated for its prurience.” It is important not to think of prurience alone. The play’s pornography is deeply embedded in the ideological portrayal of Othello’s blackness, even when his literal body is not the object on exhibition. Greenblatt exemplifies this in the ecstatic image at the conclusion of his Othello essay: he writes that the play’s “liberation from the massive power structures that determine social and psychic reality” ends “in an excessive aesthetic delight, an erotic embrace of those very structures.” Kirsch speaks even more excitedly and personally. He concludes that Othello himself “enacts for us, with beautiful and terrifying nakedness, the primitive energies that are the substance of our own erotic lives.” The critique of Othello in the play and in criticism depends very much upon the audience knowing, i.e., fantasizing about, the eroticism of the Other. Prurience alone does not entrap the audience. The members of the audience are captivated and caught by the play’s public knowledge that, long before Othello was ever conceived, they have already privately conjured up or dreamt about the seductive Other. The play argues that this is the crucial primal scene of racism which needs to be seen and decoded, this scene where culture creates but fails or refuses to see any reciprocity between its knowledge of cultural Others and its own erotic fantasies and anxieties.

Notes

2. Cf. the Song of Solomon: “I am blacke (O ye daughters of hierusalem) but yet fayre and well fauoured” (Bishop’s Bible [1568], 1:5).
4. I am in part alluding to Edward Said’s Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), especially his chapter “Knowing the Oriental” (pp. 31-49). Said is interested in exploring how European cultures
(especially in the nineteenth century) come to know the “Oriental” as Other. He argues that “knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (p. 36). Said also writes about how Europeans came to believe that their representations of the Oriental could actually lead to their discovery of the Oriental’s “Platonic essence” (p. 38).


6. Lukacher, Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986); and Warner, Chance and the Text of Experience: Freud, Nietzsche, and Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986). The terms “applied” and “implied” are deftly explained by Shoshana Felman in her essay “To Open the Question” in Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise, Shoshana Felman, ed. (1977; rpt. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 5-10. She argues that the critic’s role is “not to apply to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between to generate implications between literature and psychoanalysis—to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other” (p. 9). My essay assumes an implicable relationship between psychoanalysis and literature. Furthermore, here the “primal scene” as a theoretical model is a scene of implication—one of enlightenment, affectation, etc. For me Othello makes most critical sense through an implicable model.

9. I am thus expanding Michael Neill’s argument, which focuses on the offstage audience, turned into voyeurs by the play.
10. Samuel Taylor Coleridge popularized a tradition of whitewashing, interpreting Othello as tawny rather than black, arguing that Othello was not a “veritable negro.” For some variations on this theme (in addition to a few other views), see the appendix on “Othello’s Colour” in Horace Howard Furness’s New Variorum edition of the play (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1886), pp. 389-96. In the same genre is M. R. Ridley, who does not attempt to whitewash Othello but argues instead that some blacks have the classic features of the Europeans and not the “sub-human” ones of Africans; see his Arden edition of the play (London: Methuen, 1958), p. li.

The Works of Sir Thomas Browne, ed. Charles Sayle, 16 vols. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1927), Vol. 2, pp. 367-95, esp. p. 380. For all his empiricism, his explanatory images do not seem so far removed from the images associated with Phaeton. See Browne's two chapters on “the Blackness of Negroes” and his chapter on the color black more generally. Quite interestingly, Browne argues against those who find blackness a “curse of deformity.” He writes that beauty is not in one's color but in “a comely commensurability of the whole unto the parts, and the parts between themselves.” Blacks, he emphasizes, are “not excluded from beauty” (pp. 383-84).

16. p. 148. Derrida's argument about the discursive manipulation of race underscores my argument here: "The point is not that acts of racial violence are only words but rather that they have to have a word. Even though it offers the excuse of blood, color, birth—or rather because it uses this naturalist and sometimes creationist discourse—racism always betrays the perversion of man, the "talking animal" (p. 292 [cited in n. 5, above]).

17. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator's Preface” to Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), pp. ix-lxxxvii, esp. pp. lxxxiii-lxxxiv. See also Terry Eagleton's recapitulation of Paul de Man's critique of literature and language in Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983). Eagleton writes that de Man has discovered “nothing less than a new way of defining the ‘essence’ of literature itself. All language, as de Man rightly perceives, is ineradicably metaphorical, working by tropes and figures; it is a mistake to believe that any language is literally literal” (p. 145). Similarly, the language of Othello's blackness can never become literal. Hidden in the play's move towards literalness is the fiction of symbolic blackness as real blackness. This fiction is the essence of racism, and, as Bartels has argued, the language of racism professes to be descriptive and literal but is really prescriptive and metaphorical (p. 433). See also Derrida, “Racism's Last Word,” p. 292.


19. pp. 32-33, emphases added.


21. The expression “racialist ideology” is from Neill (cited in n. 3, above). It may also be inferred from Neill that England during this time really began to confront the socioethnic presence of a racial self/Other; see esp. p. 394. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Living On/Border Lines” in Deconstruction and Criticism, Harold Bloom et al., eds. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 75-176: “Visibility should—not be visible. According to an old omnipotent logic that has reigned since Plato, that which enables us to see should remain invisible: black, blinding” (pp. 90-91).

22. It is arguable, of course, that Shakespearean criticism does not single out Othello for its personal readings. Notwithstanding, critical discourses that allow one to work around the cultural construction of blackness as though it is merely allegorical and can ultimately be divorced from a critique of Othello's personal self only exemplify the way such cultural thinking has already personalized (and made chaste) its metaphors of the black Other. This comment is in part inspired by Stephanie H. Jed's Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989).


26. Martin Orkin maintains that “the possibility of racism” is “only one element in the unfolding of Othello's crisis” (“Othello and the ‘Plain Face’ of Racism,” SQ, 38 [1987], 166-88, esp. p. 175). Orkin argues that the play is actually an affirmation of Othello's blackness. While Orkin's essay includes a comprehensive survey of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writings on the subject of blacks, his conclusions do not sufficiently respond to the uneasy depths of Shakespeare's cultural interrogation.

27. I am thinking here of the number of times particular words occur in the text. The bed and sheets are mentioned twenty-five times and the handkerchief twenty-eight, versus only eleven mentions of blackness.


There is also a comparison to be made between Iago, who claims, “I am not what I am” (1.1.62), and Africanus, who writes, “When I heare the Africans euill spoken of, I wil affirme my selfe to be one of Granada: and when I perceiue the nation of Granada to be discommended, then I professe my selfe to be an African” (quoted in Bartels, pp. 436-37).


34. Peter L. Rudnytsky is one of the few critics who take seriously not only the handkerchief but its absence. While his reading concurs with the one I am presenting in this essay to the extent that he links the cloth to the primal scene, for him the primal scene is ultimately the “maternal penis,” this “always absent thing” (“The Purloined Handkerchief in Othello” in The Psychoanalytic Study of Literature, Joseph Reppen and Maurice Charney, eds. [Hillsdale, N.J.: The Analytic Press, 1985], pp. 169-90, esp. p. 185). Such a reading risks ascribing to the napkin a real objectness. See also Susan Gubar's “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity” in Writing and Sexual Difference, Elizabeth Abel, ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 73-93, where she discusses concepts of absence/presence and (in)visibility with regard to blood-stained nuptial bed sheets.

35. For more bibliography as well as for further discussion of the breast, penis, nipples, glans, and some of the other corporeal objects critics have associated with the cloth and its design, see Boose, p. 371.


37. pp. 184-85. Rudnytsky thinks of the “primal scene” as the scene of Desdemona and Cassio. Understanding the primal scene to signify the originary moment of the ocular crisis, I am arguing that the primal scene is the scene of Othello and Desdemona. It should be noted, however, that the meaning of the primal scene depends upon the ultimate inseparability of these two scenes.

38. Rudnytsky's reading is similar to that of Kenneth Burke, who, according to Boose, thought of the strawberryed cloth as “some sort of displaced genital symbol of Desdemona” (p. 371).

39. p. 39 (cited in n. [16], above). For more discussion about the issue of probability and improbability in Othello (especially as it is treated by critics from Thomas Rymer through Harley Granville-Barker), see Joel Altman, “‘Preposterous Conclusions’: Eros, Enargeia, and the Composition of Othello,”

40. The essays to which I am referring are Randolph Splitter, “Language, Sexual Conflict and ‘Symbiosis Anxiety’ in Othello,” Mosaic, 15 (1982), 17-26, esp. p. 24; Kirsch (cited in n. [11], above), pp. 23-24; and Rudnitsky, p. 177. See also Rudnitsky, pp. 181 and 185. The maternal/birth anxiety looks back into Othello's psychological “history” and, in the opinion of these critics, springs from his traumatic or unresolved relationship with his mother.

41. Even though Rudnitsky is anxious about such characterological, biographical critiques, he attempts to unproblematicize himself in the name of psychoanalytic truth: “Shakespeare's characters are not, of course, real people, and in a literal sense possess neither childhoods nor unconscious fantasies. But there is compelling evidence to suggest that Shakespeare anticipated Freud's discoveries about the importance of early experiences and the unconscious” (p. 177).

42. “Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in Othello” in Othello: Critical Essays, Susan Snyder, ed. (New York and London: Garland, 1988), pp. 213-49. The transmogrification of Othello into child as a kind of grotesque image is made especially pointed in the similar attempt to associate Othello with the senex iratus figure. Kirsch himself argues that “January figures were commonly depicted in the second childhood of senility” (p. 23). The depiction of Othello as a comic or farcical body entrapped in tragic form, making him incongruous with the heroic classicism of tragedy, serves most demonstratively to create Othello as a parodic or monstrous figure—in patriarchal language, to portray Othello as a distracted boy in a man's story; see also Kirsch, pp. 21-22.

43. Warner (cited in n. 6, above), pp. 73-74 and 24, respectively.

44. See, for example, Lynda E. Boose's more extensive discussion of pornography in Othello in “‘Let It Be Hid’: Renaissance Pornography, Iago, and Audience Response” in Autour d'Othello, Richard Marienstras and Dominique Goy-Blanquet, eds. (Presses de L'UFR Clerc Université Picardie, 1987), pp. 135-43. Her essay examines both the assumptions of our voyeuristic compliance in the play and those imperatives that, throughout, command the visual attention of the audience on- and offstage. Her observation that the “forbidden” gets repeatedly eroticized is suggestive of the primal-scene claims of my essay.

45. p. 184. Many critics hesitate to see or take seriously the homoeroticism evoked by Iago. For example, Splitter has argued that “Othello sees what he wants to see and remains blind to the existence of Iago in the bed” (p. 24). Bruce R. Smith has argued that this scene has more to do with Iago's “militant maleness” than Iago's homosexuality (Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England [Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991], pp. 61-64). Smith does not grasp Iago staging what is presumably a culturally horrific representation. Jonathan Dollimore misses this scene, too, in his section entitled “Forget Iago's Homosexuality” in Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Dollimore may be on target in his refusal to fashion Iago as a “repressed homosexual,” but Dollimore fails to see the homosexual scene, saying (as does Rudnitsky) “that such a conclusion would obscure much and reveal little.” Dollimore also does not recognize the symbolic importance of homosexuality itself, conceding that there may be some hint of a homoeroticism between Othello and Iago “if only because the homoerotic, like other forms of eroticism, might in principle be anywhere, attached to anyone, and in an indeterminate number of contexts” (pp. 157-62). While there may be an element of accuracy in this remark, it also comes dangerously close to eliding the way(s) in which culture so frequently specifies and overdetermines homosexuality and the homosexual subject. True, Iago's homosexuality is not necessarily at issue here; but this reading of the scene should not detract from the homosexual construction of Iago's narrative.

In his study of “homosexuality” in the Renaissance, Alan Bray discusses the intertextual associations among such terms or concepts as bestiality, whoredom, rape, adultery, and incest and emphasizes how an act of homosexuality quite frequently figures as the culmination of these “perversions.” Paraphrasing Du Bartas, Bray writes, “through rape, adultery and incest they came at last—‘glutted with all granted loves’—to homosexuality” (Homosexuality in Renaissance England [London: Gay Men's Press, 1982], pp. 14-15). See also Du Bartas's chapter entitled “The Vocation” in his Suite de la second semaine (1603), where Du Bartas revels in the punishment of the “homosexual,” the most profane of sinners (The Divine Weeks and Works of Guillaume de Saluste, Sieur Du Bartas, ed. Susan Snyder [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979], ll. 1189-320). Excluding incest (on an overt level), Othello is quite thoroughly implicated in this particular construction of homosexuality. Notwithstanding, Bray is surprisingly silent about Othello and about homosexuality in Shakespeare more generally. On the subject of homosexuality and its association with bestiality, see also Smith, esp. pp. 174-80.

In his article “Renaissance Pornography,” pp. 135-36, Nelson and Haines's article is cited in note [23], above; Nathan's appears in Cahiers Elisabéthains, 34 (1988), 79-82. In his article Nathan challenges not only Nelson and Haines's position; he also takes issue with Pierre Janton's article “Othello's Weak Function,” in which Janton, taking one of his cues from Iago's reference to Othello's “weak function” (2.3.345), writes that Othello's marriage is unconsummated since “Othello's libidinous aggressivity” remains unchanneled because of Othello's impotence (Cahiers, [Cahiers Elisabéthains] 7 [1975], 43-50).

In short, Nathan argues that the tragic genre would prove inappropriate for such a comedic or farcial story and that the “characters of Othello and Desdemona would be greatly weakened” (p. 82).

The bed is, of course, the scene's dominant object, and the handkerchief is mentioned several times during the final moments. The bestial image is most explicitly present in Othello's reference to himself as a “circumcisèd dog” (5.2.354). And the homoerotic, at least the use of homosexual marriage, is discursively evident once Emilia enters and she and Othello engage in a repartee that amounts to a refrain in which Emilia asks, “My husband?” and Othello responds, “Thy husband” (ll. 136-51). This exchange (read with a penchant for wordplay) recalls for me the marriage between Othello and Iago. My concern is not with these symbolic representations per se but with the fact that they are all in some way scripted into the final scene.

There is an image of rape in Othello's choice of a defloration metaphor to refer to his murder of Desdemona: “When I have plucked the rose, / I cannot give it vital growth again” (ll. 13-14). Neill comes to a similar conclusion in his reading of critical responses to this closing scene. He quotes, for example, a nineteenth-century Russian writer who comments on the portrayal of Othello by Ira Aldridge, the first black actor to perform the role: “That savage flesh did its fleshly work.” Neill reminds that in this commentator's account “the play exhibits nothing less than the symbolic rape of the European ‘spirit’ by the ‘savage, wild flesh’ of black otherness” (“Unproper Beds,” p. 391). The sense of rape evoked by this scene is also apparent in many of the engravings and paintings of it. For some examples, see frontispieces to the Rowe (1709) and the Bell editions (1785) and a print by H. Hofmann. The first two of these depict Othello standing over a sleeping Desdemona, her breasts exposed. In the Hofmann portrait Othello stands over a rather peaceful and angelic Desdemona; he holds a knife in one hand, and protruding from his cloak is a large, dark sword hilt that is unmistakably figured as a giant phallus. For reproductions of these images, see Shakespeareean Criticism, Vol. 4, Mark W. Scott, ed. (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Research, 1987), pp. 393, 426, and 587, respectively. For some additional examples, see Neill, pp. 386-89. The image of rape in the play is first conjured up by Brabantio, who argues that Othello has “abused [Desdemona's] delicate youth with drugs or minerals / That weaken motion” (1.2.73-74). Both the Signet and Riverside editions gloss “motion” as denoting mental capability; the interpretation of “motion” as referring to physical
capability does not contradict this reading.


56. See Greenblatt (cited in n. [16], above), who argues of this passage that “it is as if Othello had found in a necrophilic fantasy the secret solution to the intolerable demands of the rigorist sexual ethic” (p. 252). The necrophilia works only (and almost gratuitously) as a way of further exploiting the play's exclusion of Othello as inscribable within any “rigorist sexual ethic.”

57. Black identity and black sexuality are at issue in Titus Andronicus but to a different end than in Othello. In Titus the birth of Aaron's child allows the on- and offstage audience to look beyond the sexual affairs of Aaron and Tamora (see 4.2 and 5.1). The audience can focus its moral outrage on the black child produced by Aaron and Tamora's relationship. An interesting commentary on this use of Aaron's child emerges in the BBC production (1985) when the camera lingers long and frequently on Aaron's child, who is eventually killed and displayed by Marcus as a court spectacle. In Othello, Iago promises that Othello's demonic seed will bring forth gennets, monsters, and nightmares (1.1.110; 1.3.394-95; and 1.3.365-66, respectively). The play threatens to bring forth a child but does not deliver; it actively resists the demonic moralization that is all too easily inscribed on the black body of Aaron's child. Othello keeps the pornographic story in front of the audience.


59. p. 254.

60. p. 39 (cited in n. [11], above).

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Criticism: Themes: Ruth Vanita (essay date 1994)


[In the following essay, Vanita identifies the similarities between the deaths of Desdemona and Emilia and explores the complicity of male society in the two murders.]

A surprisingly large number of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays represent or culminate in the murder of a wife, the reason cited almost always being her infidelity. The plays construct these murders, often led up to by beating and torture of the wife, as tragedy, yet endorse them as a form of justice.

These tragedies have come to be known as “domestic tragedies,” suggesting that the events are private, springing from a familial relationship, unlike tragedies which involve political murders and take place in the public sphere. An unresolved contradiction is evident in the titles of these plays which signal the intention to preach a public sermon to women, for example, Women Beware Women, A Woman Killed with Kindness, and A Warning to Fair Women. In Othello, this contradiction is forced to the surface, as the private is insistently made public.

One of the questions that has most vexed critical commentary on Othello is that of the responsibility for Desdemona's death, some critics ascribing it to Othello, others to Iago, others to both, and yet others to Desdemona herself. Emilia's death has not, until very recently, received comparable attention, and it is agreed that Iago is solely responsible for her death. My argument is that Desdemona and Emilia die similar deaths for similar reasons. In each case, the death blow is struck by one particular individual, but it is made possible by the collusion of a number of others who act on the assumption that husband-wife relations are
governed by norms different from those that govern other human relations. These men, who spontaneously intervene to save a man from another man's violence, remain ineffectual, albeit deploring, spectators of the escalating violence inflicted by husband on wife. Their failure to intervene and prevent what they deplore is the crucial cause of Desdemona's and Emilia's deaths, insofar as an intervention to save these lives is dramatically presented as viable and possible.

The peculiar painfulness of Othello that many commentators have felt, springs from its dramatization of the ordinary, the normal, and its revelation of that normality as innately brutal and horrifying. Most Indian women students perceive Othello's behavior as “typical,” that is, as normal, husbandly, manly behavior. This concurs with Othello's own insight when he describes murderous jealousy as innate in the husband-wife relationship which posits the wife as the exclusive possession of the husband and is thus at odds with the human condition wherein one can never know another person's inmost thoughts and desires: “O curse of marriage! / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!” (III.iii.265-67).

Several recent critics have sought to explain Othello's behavior as arising from his insecurity as a black in a racist white society. However, I would contend that the play forcefully combats racism (which posits blacks and whites as essentially different) precisely by its presentation of Othello as not at all different from any white husband. The development of his jealousy, the language of property ownership he uses, and his misogynist generalizations about women and marriage, are very similar to those of Leontes, Claudio, Posthumus, and even Thomas Heywood's Frankford in A Woman Killed with Kindness or Chapman's Montsurry in Bussy D'Ambois, two plays about jealous husbands and adulterous wives staged within a year or two of Othello (all three ca. 1602-1604).

The difference between Othello and Shakespeare's other jealous husbands—Leontes, Claudio, Posthumus, Master Ford—is the far greater depth and intensity of Othello's love for his wife. What is interesting is that of all Shakespeare's jealous husbands, the one who is black is the one who wins most sympathy and admiration, not only from all those around him, but also from audiences. Othello's blackness does not diminish his power over his wife. Paradoxically, social prejudice against him results in an outcasting of Desdemona which isolates her even more than other wives and places her more completely at her husband's mercy. The murder of a wife is different from many other kinds of murder (for example, those represented in Hamlet and Macbeth) insofar as the victim is more definitely placed in the murderer's power. Leontes, in The Winter's Tale, enunciates the difference most clearly when explaining why it is so much easier and safer for him to kill his wife than to kill her supposed paramour:

The very thought of my revenges that way
Recoil upon me: in himself too mighty,
And in his parties, his alliance; let him be
Until a time may serve. For present vengeance,
Take it on her …
.....They should not laugh if I could reach them, nor
Shall she, within my power.(6)

A woman's lack of “parties” and “alliance” to come to her aid against a murderous husband renders her an easily available victim. The actual killing is generally the culmination of an escalating continuum of violence, a process represented in both Othello and The Winter's Tale. If Desdemona dies, it is not merely for the formal reason that Othello is a “tragedy” and has to end in death. The tragedy is shown at every point to be avoidable and finally occurs because those who should intervene fail to do so. Society's covert condemnation of Desdemona for choosing to marry a black man reinforces the prejudice that what happens between husband and wife is a private and domestic affair in which no one should interfere. Emilia's death at her husband's hands is again attributable to the onlookers' nonintervention. This is one of the rare cases where wife-murder is represented as occurring because Emilia is “unfaithful” not sexually but mentally. She breaks faith with
Iago by choosing to be loyal to Desdemona rather than to him. The dramatic presentation of the two murders as parallels sharply undercuts the dominant ideology that legitimized the murder of an adulterous wife.

Despite S. N. Garner's elucidation of Desdemona's extreme situation, cut off from father and countrymen, a compulsion which renders her powerless, the myth of her passivity dies hard. David Farley-Hills is the latest in a long line of critics who term her passive and relate this passivity to the stereotype of the patient Griselda.

The disinheritied Desdemona is a stranger in Cyprus, her only status being that of Othello's wife. He, on the other hand, has lived in Cyprus before and has many friends: “How does my old acquaintance of this isle? / Honey, you shall be well desired in Cyprus: / I have found great love amongst them” (II.i.197-99). When Othello contemplates the possibility of divorcing her, he is aware that she will have nowhere to go: “I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind / To prey at fortune” (III.iii.260-61). Desdemona uses a more explicitly economic term “beggarly divorcement” in the scene where her desperation is evident in her seeking Iago's intervention:

Good friend, go to him; for, by this light of heaven,  
I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel:  
If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love ...  
.....Or that I do not yet, and ever did,  
And ever will—though he do shake me off  
To beggarly divorcement—love him dearly,  
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much,  
And his unkindness may defeat my life,  
But never taint my love. I cannot say “whore”:  
It does abhor me now I speak the word;  
To do the act that might the addition earn  
Not the world's mass of vanity could make me.

(IV.ii.149-63)

The underlying trend of thought here suggests that the alternatives before a divorced woman in her position would be to die in destitution like Barbary, or to become a whore like Bianca. Since the latter is impossible for her, it is the former that she envisages in the unrobing scene.

Given this absence of viable options, patient submission is the best survival strategy. It may win Othello over, as it did many husbands in legend. If it does not, Desdemona has the consolation of having behaved with exemplary virtue. Her apparent fatalism (“It is my wretched fortune” [IV.ii.127]) is the inevitable product of a situation she realistically perceives as offering no escape route.

Desdemona foresees her death but fights for her life with every means available to her. She tries to find allies. The only Venetians who are at hand are Iago, Emilia, and Cassio. Cassio is himself alienated from Othello and in need of a mediator. Therefore, Iago is the only possible ally. She asks him to go to Othello and plead her case. In reply, Iago offers all the timeworn excuses offered for violent husbands: “I pray you, be content: 'tis but his humour; / The business of the state does him offence, / And he does chide with you” (IV.ii.164-66). When Emilia's indignation bursts forth, he tells her to “speak within door,” that is, as M. R. Ridley aptly glosses: “speak lower; 'you don't want the whole street to hear'; Onions notes that in Warwickshire the phrase ‘Speak within the house’ was current till recently in the same sense.” And, finally, Iago advises her not to express her grief, but to act normally in the hope that Othello will reform as inexplicably as he has degenerated: “Go in, and weep not; all things shall be well” (IV.ii.171).

Iago's speeches here are not especially “villainous”; they are typical of the advice routinely offered to victimized wives by family, neighbors, and friends. In fact, Iago's villainy is as successful as it is because he speaks to the lowest common denominator, the most widely accepted prejudices. This is the case not just in
his manipulation of Othello, but here, in the mischievous counsel offered to Desdemona. Desdemona faithfully tries to implement his advice by being obedient and meek, a strategy the play reveals as singularly ineffective. Desdemona is not presented as patient Griselda—representations of the latter kind of heroine show patience as a strategy that works; in Othello it does not.12

While Iago counsels patience, Emilia's impatience continues to explode, and she makes the most telling comment on Desdemona's predicament: “Hath she forsook ... / Her father, and her country, all her friends, / To be called whore?” (IV.ii.124-26). The scene presents Emilia as Desdemona's only ally, but Emilia is a powerless wife like Desdemona herself.

Before this, however, Desdemona had tentatively sought another ally—Lodovico, whose role I should like to examine in some detail.13 Helen Gardner notes that the sensible strategy of leaving Othello and going home with the messengers from Venice never occurs to Desdemona.14 While Desdemona does not express any desire to leave Othello, she does express gladness at the news that he has been recalled to Venice, and thus, implicitly, at the idea of going home.

Lodovico arrives in Cyprus when Desdemona is aware of Othello's displeasure with her but not of her own danger. Lodovico is her kinsman, come from her home, her native city. He thus represents, or should represent, some form of support for her. When he appears on stage in IV.i, Desdemona is with him and her form of addressing him (she twice calls him “cousin”) shows an awareness of kinship. She is also eager for news from home: “And what's the news, good cousin Lodovico?” (IV.i.218). She is happy at the news that Othello is recalled to Venice—“By my troth, I am glad on't” (IV.i.238)—and her innocent expression of happiness is misinterpreted by Othello who strikes her. When Lodovico mildly requests him to “make her amends” Othello responds by heaping further insults on her and then storming out.

In his conversation immediately following with Iago, Lodovico expresses shock, and Iago warns him that the blow was no aberration but the symptom of a rapidly deteriorating situation: “yet would I knew / That stroke would prove the worst!” (IV.i.275-76). The implication, that Desdemona is in danger of further maltreatment, is clear. Yet Lodovico makes no attempt to intervene, to speak to Desdemona in private, or to question Othello as to the reasons for his anger. When we next see him, after the dinner hosted by Othello, Lodovico conducts himself with ceremonious formality. He speaks in a way that distances him equally from Othello and Desdemona and the responses he receives are couched in the same kind of formal language:

LODOVICO.
I do beseech you, sir, trouble yourself no further.

OTHELLO.
O, pardon me: 'twill do me good to walk.

LODOVICO.

Madam, good night. I humbly thank your ladyship.

DESDEMONA.

Your honour is most welcome.

(IV.iii.1-4)
Thus sent to her deathbed by the irresponsible formality of Lodovico's “good night,” Desdemona responds by addressing him as “your honour,” not the earlier, intimate “cousin.” For Lodovico does not act the part of a cousin. One may contrast with his uncaring behavior here Hero's cousin Beatrice's response to the public dishonoring of her kinswoman, and Laertes' fury at the betrayal of his sister. Lodovico's response suggests that the First Senator's parting injunction “Adieu, brave Moor: use Desdemona well” (I.iii.287) in fact represented her community's acceptance of the idea that, disowned by her father, she henceforth would be wholly at the disposal of Othello.

At an individual level too, Lodovico betrays an unwillingness to take any personal risk in order to help victims of violence when he disregards Cassio's and Roderigo's cries for help, with the canny “Let's think't unsafe / To come in to the cry without more help” (V.i.43-44). Roderigo's response “Nobody come? Then shall I bleed to death” does not move either Lodovico or Gratiano to go to his help. When Iago comes in and asks who called out, Lodovico replies “We do not know” (line 47), and when Iago goes to Cassio's aid, he comments admiringly on what he sees as Iago's intrepidity: “a very valiant fellow” (line 52).

I suggest that it is this dimension of Lodovico that Desdemona comments on in the unrobing scene. Her comments represent a crux which has never been satisfactorily resolved. Critics have read her comments as straightforward praise of Lodovico, and have interpreted them as either irrelevant women's chatter, or as signs of Desdemona's sensuality and flawed innocence. However, a reading of the lines as ironical fits in much better with the trend of thought in this scene which focuses on male-female relations as experienced and perceived by women, and ends with Emilia's magnificent dissection and condemnation of the double standard of sexual morality. Desdemona's comment “This Lodovico is a proper man” (IV.iii.34) interjected into her memories of her mother's forsaken maid and her premonitions of her own approaching death, anticipates her cry “O these men, these men!” (line 57). The word “proper” is used with similar irony by Beatrice in Much Ado about Nothing in a very similar situation:

> Is a' not approved in the height a villain, that hath slandered, scorned, dishonored my kinswoman? … O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place. … Talk with a man out at a window—a proper saying!

Emilia misinterprets Desdemona's subtle irony when she replies “A very handsome man.” Desdemona answers “He speaks well,” an ironical reference to Lodovico's elaborately polite speeches that mask his fatal failure to act the proper role of a man. Again, a close parallel is available in Beatrice's angry comment on men's fine speaking and lack of chivalry in action when Benedick refuses to kill Claudio who has traduced Hero:

> O that I were a man for his sake! or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curtsies, valor into complement, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too. … I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman with grieving.

(IV.i.316-22)

The last line sums up Desdemona's life. She began by wishing for a man's adventurous existence (“she wished / That heaven had made her such a man” [I.iii.161.62]) and dies, grieving, trapped in the predicament of a woman. Emilia's failure to understand what Desdemona is saying here completes Desdemona's isolation. At this point, Desdemona alone grasps the gravity of the situation, Emilia dismissing her anticipation of imminent death: “Come, come, you talk” (IV.iii.24).

Desdemona is killed not only by Othello and Iago but also by all those who see her humiliated and beaten in public, and fail to intervene. The presumption that husband and wife, even when literally in a public space,
metaphorically inhabit a private space wherein violence is somehow different from the violence of one man on another fosters the development of a continuum of violence that escalates from abuse to beating to killing. Lodovico’s role, as a Venetian and a kinsman, is crucial in the play’s exposure of this pattern.

Interestingly, Thomas Rymer, one of Shakespeare’s earliest critics, is perhaps the only one to comment on Lodovico’s failure to aid Desdemona. In A Short View of Tragedy (1693) he writes:

her Father … sends his Kinsman, Seignior Ludovico, to Cyprus … who, at his arrival, finds the Moor calling the Lady, his Kinswoman, Whore and Strumpet, and kicking her: what says the Magnifico?

LUD.

My Lord, this would not be believ’d in Venice,

Tho’ I should swear I saw’t; ’tis very much;

Make her amends: she weeps.

… What Tramontain could fancy the Venetians so low, so despicable, or so patient? 19

Rymer reads Lodovico’s behavior as evidence of Shakespeare’s incompetence as a dramatist; it is possible, however, to read it as a representation of the societal “hands-off” approach to marital relations.

A clear contrast is provided by the reaction of all onlookers to the striking of Montano by Cassio. This is treated as a public act, a crime that must, like any act of cognizable violence even today, be pursued and punished by the state. A trial is virtually conducted on the spot, witnesses forced to testify, and Cassio’s drunken state not admitted as an excuse. Othello feels compelled by social pressure to punish Cassio harshly even though he would much rather not. Iago’s conjecture about Othello’s state of mind: “You are but now cast in his mood—a punishment more in policy than in malice” (II.iii.265-67) is borne out by Emilia’s later report of the private conversation between Othello and Desdemona:

The Moor replies
That he you hurt is of great fame in Cyprus,
And great affinity; and that in wholesome wisdom
He might not but refuse you; but he protests he loves you
And needs no other suitor but his likings
To take the safest occasion by the front
To bring you in again.

(III.i.43-49)

That Montano has “great affinity” or “kinsmen of high rank” 20 is the crucial reason why Othello cannot overlook Cassio’s assault on him. Violence on a male produces an immediate counterreaction. Othello is the only one of Shakespeare’s major tragedies in which the innocent victim is put to death before our eyes after systematic physical and mental torture in the presence of witnesses, and this is possible because she is a wife.

Societal collusion in husbandly violence is dramatized more starkly in the death of Emilia. Carol Thomas Neely and Eamon Grennan, 21 among others, have emphasized the importance of Emilia’s courageous intervention on Desdemona’s behalf, and her deliberate taking of risks to do so when she asserts the power of nonviolent resistance against the power of destructive violence: “Thou hast not half that power to do me harm / As I have to be hurt” (V.ii.161-62). However, the similarity of the two deaths has not been sufficiently commented upon.
Desdemona, dying, gives Emilia the responsibility of clearing her name, much as Hamlet charges Horatio to tell his story to the unsatisfied. “Commend me to my kind lord” (V.ii.126) is an injunction that Emilia literally fulfills. The way she is killed is a condensed version of the more long-drawn-out process of Desdemona’s murder.

Emilia is not killed by Iago alone, as Desdemona was not killed by Othello alone. The other men present, by their inaction, literally create the space, as Lodovico did metaphorically, wherein a wife can be killed by her husband. At line 221 Iago draws his sword and is observed to do so, Gratiano calling attention to the action with “Fie! / Your sword upon a woman!” (V.ii.221-22). Yet, even though it is evident by this time that Emilia is exposing Iago’s guilt and is therefore in need of protection (like any state witness), none of the men present makes a move to disarm Iago. What we see on stage at this point is a lone unarmed woman surrounded by armed men who deliberately fail to protect her—a visual presentation of the defenselessness of a wife. Iago, with his sword drawn, continues to abuse Emilia in increasingly violent terms but it is only twelve lines later that he stabs her. At the moment he stabs her, Othello simultaneously tries to stab him. Montano immediately disarms Othello with the result that Iago is able to kill Emilia and run away. What we see in this piece of stage business is two people being simultaneously assaulted—one a murderer, the other the woman who has exposed him. He is armed, she unarmed. And, in this moment, the man who intervenes does so to save the murderer, not his victim.

The rationale behind Montano’s apparently illogical behavior is provided by Gratiano: “The woman falls: sure, he has killed his wife” (line 234), and, again: “He’s gone, but his wife’s killed” (line 236). Iago, like Othello, must be preserved for the state to deal with, but Emilia, a woman and a wife, is a different order of being. Even though she has deliberately transgressed the role of wife to denounce her husband, and even as she declares another allegiance: “Ay, ay: O, lay me by my mistress’ side” (line 235), she continues to be perceived by the men as the wife of her murderer, adjunct rather than agent. While the moral outrage expressed is real, it is limited, and consequently protest is blunted, by the perception of the husband-wife relation as the most significant element in the violent action, precisely as in Lodovico’s earlier comment: “What! Strike his wife!” (IV.i.274).

The dramatization of Desdemona’s and Emilia’s murders challenges some of the most fundamental assumptions of Elizabethan society and of our own—that outsiders should not interfere between husband and wife, and that an adulterous woman deserves death. The latter idea pervades Elizabethan and Jacobean drama but was by no means restricted to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It surfaces repeatedly in later literary texts—to take a famous example, in Goldsmith’s lyric “When lovely woman stoops to folly.” That the idea is alive and well today is clear from the fact that a number of twentieth-century commentators on Othello and The Winter’s Tale have seen Desdemona’s and Hermione’s behavior as “provocative,” thus implicitly arguing that a wife should not only be chaste but should give her husband no grounds to doubt her.

Othello is the only play of its time which carries the chastity test to its logical conclusion by ending with the death of the innocent heroine. Desdemona’s chastity fails to save her life. Her death demonstrates that innocent wives subjected to tests and ordeals are more likely to end up dead than triumphant. The presentation of her murder on stage is a departure from Shakespeare’s normal practice. Michael Neill has documented critics’ and producers’ disturbed responses to this scene (from Dr. Johnson onward), and nineteenth-century productions’ tendency to distance and veil the bed, and James R. Siemon has noted the tendency to tone down the violence of Desdemona’s physical struggle with Othello. Neill suggests that audiences’ sense of unease springs from their covert sharing of Iago’s and society’s horror at the interracial sexual encounter viewed as innately “adulterated” and “adulterous.” But the last scene focuses on murder rather than eroticism, on the irrevocability of the act of murder. Questions of chastity and guilt or innocence are submerged in the overpowering focus on life itself. In her last moments, Desdemona realizes that “beggarly divorcement” would be preferable to death: “O banish me, my lord, but kill me not” (V.ii.79). She fights for survival, pleading for one night more, one half hour more, as such heroines as Lucrece pleaded with their ravishers to
spare their virtue.

If the audience feels guiltily engaged and hence doubly revulsed, this is not because it is complicit in the perspective of Iago, who is not only physically absent but also forgotten, swept away in the flow of Othello's magnificent rhetoric. The audience, as silent witness, is placed in the position of those men of Cyprus and Venice who silently witnessed the abuse of Desdemona and failed to intervene. The audience is guilty of failing to intervene in the daily drama of domestic violence that lies hidden behind countless bedroom doors in every society where Othello is staged. As Desdemona's bedroom door opens with terrifying finality to let in her licensed "lord" and murderer, the dramatist raises the curtain on the most invisible, least glorifiable, and yet most condoned of all forms of violence—the violence of armed men on the unarmed women within their power. Hermione's trial is far less painful because those who witness it are not silent; they are articulately and actively on her side. Their presence is an indication of hope, of a society whose conscience is alive. Desdemona's aloneness in her bedroom is a more true-to-life representation of the powerless position of wives. Modern productions generally reduce the full force of the scene by darkening the stage. On the Jacobean daylit stage, the candles were mere symbolic props. The audience could not evade or sentimentalize the stark horror of this murder.

Most domestic tragedies' presentations of the torture, self-abasement, and death of the guilty wife were intended as a warning to women, and often display a near-sadistic delight in the woman's sufferings. We are invited and guided to pass judgment. Othello, because of its dual focus—unconditional sympathy for Desdemona, and sympathy for Othello qualified by the uncomfortable awareness of our own culpability in feeling any sympathy with the assumptions upon which he and Iago act—does not allow us to pass judgment without simultaneously judging ourselves. Iago's entire argument is based on the misogynist assumptions that underlay rising Puritan morality; hence the audience could not indict him without some measure of self-questioning.

The effect of the last scene, unique in Shakespeare for the killings of two unarmed women by two armed men, one cast as hero, the other as villain, is surely, in one sense, to render unimportant the question of chastity. Who, watching this play, ever worries about the technicality of Emilia's chastity while she is waging her heroic battle for justice? Michael Neill suggests that the spectacle of the three bodies (Othello, Emilia, Desdemona) on one bed at the end of the play has "a covert suggestion of something adulterous." He is here combatting G. M. Matthew's view of the two bodies, one black, one white (Othello, Desdemona) embracing in death as an emblem of the indivisibility of human dignity.

But there is a fairly longish interval before the third body, Othello's, is added to the bed. In that interval, the spectacle of Desdemona and Emilia lying dead together is much more strongly suggestive of how great lady and ordinary gentlewoman are equally defenseless as wives, yet retain their dignity in death. It focuses visual attention on the similarity of their deaths, as their last words focus aural attention: "A guiltless death I die" (V.ii.123) and "So speaking as I think, I die, I die" (line 249).

One of the ironical echoes in Gratiano's statement "The woman falls" may derive from Emilia's earlier denunciation of the double standard: "But I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall" (IV.iii.86-87). These words occur again in Lodovico's "O thou Othello, that Wert once so good / Fall'n in the practice of a damned slave" (V.ii.292-93), and "you shall close prisoner rest / Till that the nature of your fault be known / To the Venetian state" (lines 336-38). The ultimate irony in the play's representation of male-female relations is the fact that two women accused by their husbands of "falling" morally, actually fall not morally but physically, before our eyes, felled by those morally "fallen" husbands' hands and, symbolically, by the male-dominated society which endorses the murder of supposedly fallen women.

Shakespeare's highlighting of the importance of human intervention to save a woman from a murderous husband was not unique in its time. A sixteenth-century Northern English ballad on the theme specifically
makes the point that onlookers have a duty to stop an enraged man from killing his wife. In this ballad, “Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard,” the lady's husband, informed by a pageboy of her love affair, discovers her in bed with her lover. He tells the paramour to arm himself and fight, and kills him in the ensuing encounter. The wife defies her husband, declaring her love for her paramour. He then cuts off her breasts and kills her. The ballad is singularly free from any moralizing comment on the narrative, unlike plays on the theme. Instead, the lady's death is followed by a comment on the pity of the way the lady was killed, and then by the husband's addressing his followers:

He cut her paps from off her brest;
Great pitty it was to see
That some drops of this ladie's heart's blood
Ran trickling downe her knee.

Woe worth you, woe worth, my mery men all,
You were nere borne for my good;
Why did you not offer to stay my hand,
When you see me wax so wood?

For I have slaine the bravest sir knight
That ever rode on steed;
So have I done the fairest lady
That ever did woman's deed.(30)

The idea expressed here, that a husband may go temporarily mad with jealousy (“wax so wood”) and that uninvolved onlookers have therefore a greater responsibility to restrain him, a restraint that would be for his good, is an insight particularly appropriate to Othello.

Notes

1. Although such murder was not, strictly speaking, legal in England (as it was in contemporary Venice), a betrayed husband was widely perceived as having the right, almost the duty, to kill his unfaithful wife and her paramour. See Norman Council, When Honour's at the Stake: Ideas of Honour in Shakespeare's Plays (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973). Council argues that Othello questions this dominant notion, departing from the source story by Giraldi Cinthio in this respect. For the Venetian law, see Rodney Poisson, “Death for Adultery: A Note on Othello,” SQ [Shakespeare Quarterly], 28, 1 (Winter 1977): 89-92, 90.

2. Carol Thomas Neely, Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 105-108, sums up the controversy and goes on to turn the spotlight on Emilia and her relationship with Desdemona.


5. Sarup Singh, The Double Standard in Shakespeare and Related Essays (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1988): “It is notable that given the same situation, Shakespeare's men, whether black or white,
respond in the same way” (p. 29).
9. The irony is exacerbated by Bianca's fate. Both Desdemona and Emilia, perceived by their husbands as unfaithful, are termed prostitutes. Iago calls Emilia “Villainous whore” (V.ii.227) just before he kills her, as Othello, strangling the struggling Desdemona, berates her: “Down, strumpet” (line 80). Bianca, called a prostitute by Cassio, shows her faithful love for him by rushing to his side when he is wounded, oblivious of the risk to herself. Iago arrests her on no evidence other than her reputation as a “strumpet” (V.i.78), a reputation she disputes. On this occasion too, none of the men present intervenes to save her, even Emilia self-righteously joining in her condemnation. This scene, immediately preceding the murder scene as it does, underlines the equal vulnerability of women, married or unmarried, to the violence of men.
11. As Peter Stallybrass puts it, Iago's “is the voice of 'common sense,' the ceaseless repetition of the always-already 'known,' the culturally 'given,'” “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed” in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., Rewriting the Renaissance (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 139.
12. Puritan tracts and homilies of the time routinely handed out the Iago kind of advice to women, telling them to be silent and submissive, and endure even maltreatment by the husband. See Sarup Singh, and Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters (Sussex: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1983), esp. chap. 6, where she reads Desdemona as cast in the patient Griselda mold.
13. Lodovico's role has never, to my knowledge, been adequately dwelt upon, although Desdemona's comments on him in the unrobing scene have led to endless speculation about her.
15. That Desdemona is “publicly struck” in the presence of “men,” and can subsequently “acquit herself with … decorum” at a formal banquet is seen by Ridley as a sign of her “quality” (Ridley, Introduction, p. lxv). Another kind of reading is more concerned with Othello's than Desdemona's pain: “His striking her in public … is a symbolic act, a calling the world's attention to the intolerableness of what he suffers by the intolerableness of what he does” (Winifred Nowottny, “Justice and Love in Othello,” University of Toronto Quarterly 21 [1952], 339). No critic appears to notice the role of the onlookers here, especially of Lodovico.
16. S. N. Garner sums up the critical debate between those who see Desdemona as saint and those who see her as slut, the former ignoring, explaining away, or, like M. R. Ridley, wishing to transfer the lines to Emilia, the latter, like W. H. Auden, reading them as evidence of Desdemona's sensual interest in men. The lines are central to Garner's argument that Desdemona is represented in the play as fully human. According to him, “Since the man Desdemona has married, and risked her social position for has turned into a barbarian, she unconsciously longs for a man like Lodovico. … In her heart she must feel she has made a mistake” (p. 249). This speculation about what Desdemona “must feel” springs from what Garner himself feels—that the marriage is a doomed misalliance which “must fail” (p. 250), an assumption colored with racist feeling; see note 25 below. The lines are also central to Lisa Jardine's argument that Shakespeare represents Desdemona as culpable, based on the “patriarchal assumption” that she is driven by sensuality in marrying a black man. Jardine reads Iago's view as “a relevant view of Desdemona throughout the play” (p. 75).
17. Much Ado About Nothing, New Shakespeare, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), IV.i.300-309. All references are to this edition and subsequently will appear in the text.
18. Such miscommunication between two people holding a conversation is characteristic of *Othello*. People frequently misread speech, deriving a meaning opposite to that intended by the speaker. This is an important dimension of the representation of a society that fails to check injustice and violence, allowing them to build towards tragedy.


22. Desdemona's dying “I lie,” “Nobody. I myself,” bears an uncanny resemblance to the dying statements given by hundreds of Indian women over the last two decades to police and doctors, declaring their deaths suicides, thus exonerating the husbands and in-laws who murder them. See, for instance, “Letters Written at Death's Door,” *Manushi* 1 (January 1979): 13-14. In the context of the masculine obsession with revenge displayed in the drama of the period, Desdemona's nonpunitive attitude would seem to signify women's insight that to follow the logic of an eye for an eye would be to make the whole world blind.

23. The Quarto stage direction “He runs at Iago. Iago stabs Emilia” only confirms the indications built into both the Folio and the Quarto text that Montano intervenes to disarm Othello.


26. With a characteristic flash of insight, A. C. Bradley noted in *Othello* “the darkness not of night, but of a close-shut murderous room” (Shakespearean Tragedy [London: 1904; rpt. Macmillan, 1969], p. 177). S. N. Garner makes a surprisingly racist comment when contrasting Desdemona with Hermione: “She acts differently from the heroine of *The Winter's Tale* not only because she is more fragile and less wise but also because her accuser is not a white man following at least the forms of justice in a court. Othello is a black man with rolling eyes coming to do ‘justice’ in her bedroom at night” (p. 249). He forgets that many other white men on the Elizabethan stage executed precisely such justice as did Othello, and that in *Cymbeline*, a white man, Posthumus, tries to do “justice” by proxy, instructing his servant to lure Imogen into a forest and murder her there.

27. *A Woman Killed with Kindness* is a good example of such plays that wallow in self-righteous sadism masquerading as Christian charity. See my essay “Men Beware Men: Shakespeare's Warnings for Unfair Husbands,” forthcoming in Comparative Drama (Summer 1994), for a detailed consideration of *Othello* as a response to Heywood's play.


**Othello (Vol. 68): Further Reading**

**CRITICISM**
Attempts to determine how Shakespeare's original audiences would have viewed the actions of Desdemona and Othello, suggesting Shakespeare hinted that Desdemona, at least in part, deserved her fate and that Othello's love for Desdemona was unwise.


Explores the implications of Othello's suicide, suggesting that it is a result of the culmination of political and psychological stresses that assault Othello throughout the play.


Traces the linear development of Desdemona's character throughout the play, demonstrating the symmetry of the framework through which the audience receives information about her.


Defends Othello against charges that it lacks meaning, arguing that the play is characterized by poetic, intellectual, and moral beauty.


Traces the progression of Othello's intellectual development, and explores the concepts of thinking and knowing as primary preoccupations in the play.


Investigates the role of miscegenation in Othello, particularly as it functions in terms of plot and language.


Maintains that Othello's jealousy is not an eruption of something primitive or barbaric, but is an attempt to reassert patriarchal authority threatened by Desdemona's sexuality.


Contends that Othello weighs in on the Elizabethan and Jacobean debate concerning a husband's treatment of an unfaithful wife, arguing that the play challenges the commonly held notion that a chaste wife could always survive a suspicious husband's test.
Othello (Vol. 79): Introduction

_Othello_ (ca. 1604) is generally considered to be one of Shakespeare's finest dramatic works. The play, a character-driven domestic tragedy of jealousy and deception, is set in Venice and Cyprus and recounts how the Venetian general Othello falls victim to the treachery of his ensign Iago. Scholars have identified the principal source of the story as Cinthio's Italian novella _Hecatommithi_ (1565), which features in broad outline the characters and incidents that Shakespeare adapted into his tragic drama. In Shakespeare's version, Othello, after blindly succumbing to the diabolic machinations of his trusted standard-bearer Iago, quickly descends into enraged jealousy, falsely believing that his lieutenant Cassio has had a sexual affair with Desdemona, his innocent wife. Othello later smothers Desdemona, and then falls on his own sword when Iago's nefarious scheming comes to light. Commentators, actors, and directors have generally been drawn to the fascinating figures of Iago, the quintessential Shakespearean villain whose murky motivations for evil have remained elusive; Desdemona, a complex amalgam of feminine submissiveness and willful determination; and Othello, possessed of intriguing qualities ranging from his status as an exotic “Other” to his tragic propensity for self-deception. These figures have largely shaped modern critical assessments of the drama.

Character-centered study of _Othello_ has long been the centerpiece of scholarly interest, with each of the drama's three principal figures—Othello, Iago, and Desdemona—eliciting some share of critical examination. Twentieth-century criticism of Othello's character has commonly emphasized the Moor's status as an exotic “Other” within the contexts of the racially heterogeneous Venetian society depicted in Shakespeare's drama. Albert Gerard (1957) opts for a moral understanding of Othello that highlights his anti-intellectual or “barbarian” nature. According to Gerard, the Moorish general, although a noble figure, lacks the full capacity for self-knowledge and moral wisdom necessary to avert tragedy; thus he is the perfect victim of Iago's cynical intrigues. Gerard insists that even at the play's conclusion Othello fails to attain an adequate intellectual awareness of his moral deficiencies. Millicent Bell (2002) concentrates on Othello's self-doubt as conditioned by the racialistic social world in which he exists. In Bell's view, Othello, as a black converted Christian recently married to a white woman, ultimately suffers from his inability to completely assimilate into a community that deems him a racial outsider. Turning to Iago, Leah Scragg (1968) maintains that the stage ancestry of this generally despicable character derives from dramatic representations of the Devil, rather than from the allegorical figure of Vice, a staple player in the medieval morality play tradition. Scragg argues that far from being an ambiguously motivated, amoral role, Shakespeare's consummate villain bears affinities to the Christian dark angel, a merciless seducer of souls driven by a cosmological desire for revenge. Addressing the last of the central triad of characters in _Othello_, Emily C. Bartels (1996) offers a feminist assessment of Desdemona's assertive qualities, explicating her impulse to question and destabilize the repressive hierarchy of patriarchal social order in the drama. According to Bartels, this defining aspect of Desdemona's character is one that traditional, male-oriented criticism of the play has tended to circumvent,
Othello has had a sustained appeal among audiences, perhaps due to its decidedly human themes and potent, domestic intimacy, and remains one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed plays. The problem of successfully realizing its multifaceted characters and balancing the diverse issues raised in the play, however, has made the task of staging an entirely satisfying production an elusive one. Doug Hughes's 2001 production at New York City's Public Theater received mixed reviews. Ben Brantley (2001) finds the dramatic power of Liev Schreiber's near-psychopathic Iago to be the central element of this production and contends that no one else in the cast "comes close to matching Mr. Schreiber's playful interpretive intelligence." Barbara D. Phillips (2001) likewise praises Schreiber, and observes that his star performance as Iago tended to highlight the deficiencies of the remaining members of the cast, including those of Keith David, whose representation of Othello she deems less compelling. In another review of Hughes's production, Charles Isherwood (2001) offers a complementary estimation. Acknowledging the "confident grasp of Schreiber's bewitching Iago," Isherwood describes how the actor was able to draw audiences into a circle of complicity with his evil acts. The critic additionally stresses the manner in which stage and lighting effects served to illuminate Schreiber's mesmerizing power. Other commentators, however, found the emphasis on Othello's spiteful ensign less appealing. Michael Feingold (2001) records flashes of brilliance from Schreiber, but nevertheless finds that his impassive rendition of Iago "lacks credibility." Feingold deems Keith David's Othello the better of the two character interpretations, although he does contend that David could not sustain his stately, moving, and dignified performance evenly throughout the evening. John Simon (2001) offers the most negative review of the staging, suggesting that the responsibility for its limitations rests solidly with director Doug Hughes, whose casting and interpretive decisions, he claims, obscured the tragic grandeur of Shakespeare's drama, burying its loftier, philosophical qualities among the sordidness of domestic drama.

Contemporary assessments of the thematic issues raised in Othello have included the play's representation of race symbolized by Othello's dark skin, the elements of wonder and spectacle embodied in Desdemona's lost handkerchief, and the linguistic subversion found in Iago's masterful manipulation of language. Race and colonialism figure prominently in Thorell Porter Tsomondo's (1999) new historicist estimation of the drama, which underscores a narrative dislocation of Othello as "Other," an outsider displaced from Venetian norms by language, skin color, geography, and ideology. While exploring the racial dynamics at work in Othello, Edward Washington (1997) nevertheless focuses on the drama as a tragedy of misinterpreted signs, locating Othello's culpability for his own downfall in his reliance on a coded system of gestures and images, rather than on the underlying truths they represent. Paul Yachnin (1996) and Andrew Sofer (1997) concentrate on the symbolic and thematic resonance of Desdemona's handkerchief in Othello. Stolen by Iago and later produced as proof of her infidelity, the handkerchief is a fetishized commodity in Yachnin's reading, capable of eliciting wonder and ultimately violence. For Sofer, the handkerchief embodies a broad spectrum of thematic functions in the play, designating an interlocking chain of signification that includes witchcraft, sexuality, jealousy, revenge, murder, inconstancy, and falsified evidence. A prop as metaphor, the handkerchief ties together the drama's leading motifs as well as drawing attention to its own theatricality, Sofer concludes. Linguistic signification is the subject of Lucille P. Fultz's (1997) essay, which considers Iago's skillful manipulation of language to orchestrate the deaths of Othello and Desdemona. For Fultz, verbal seduction—a desire for power achieved through language—is a basic thematic component of the drama, one embodied by Iago in each of his relationships with fellow characters. Lastly, Thomas Moisan (2002) considers the role of the Venetian state in shaping the characters and tragic outcome of the play.

Othello (Vol. 79): Criticism: Overviews And General Studies

In the following essay, Tsomondo analyzes the narrative and dramatic strategies of Othello, concentrating on the construction of Othello as “Other” in terms of its implications within the play and for Shakespeare’s canonical status in the postcolonial epoch.

New historicist and postcolonial research has lent to narratology's concern with voice and location of voice a heightened awareness of the sociopolitical as well as ideological functions of narrative discourse and the ways that literary texts inscribe and exploit these functions. In Hayden White's view, narrative is “not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events … but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications” (ix). More concretely, Foucault's Discipline and Punish, and Said's Culture and Imperialism, draw critical attention not only to the sociopolitical and psychic dimensions of narrative discourse but to questions of power relations that inform narrative structures and practices.

Although Shakespeare's Othello is a dramatic rather than a narrative work—or perhaps because it is drama in which racially-turned narrative performance is conspicuously, structurally staged—the play offers a fascinating, if unusual, site for examining narrative production and use. The plot in itself is simple enough: Othello, a General in the Venetian army and a Moor, secretly weds Desdemona, the young daughter of a Venetian senator. Iago, Othello's ensign, beguiles him into believing that Desdemona has been adulterous with the lieutenant, Cassio, and in a jealous rage, Othello murders Desdemona. The period in which the play was written—the Elizabethan age of exploration and colonial expansion, a time of shifting geographic boundaries and of unprecedented cross-cultural transaction—has already attracted considerable attention on the part of theorists concerned with the constitution of institutionalized sociopolitical structures and the textualization of these structures, as well as those concerned with modes and processes of literary representation and the ideological and rhetorical tensions that it necessarily inscribes. What needs more attention, however, is how these features are concretely conjoined in a work like Othello and how this play makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the politics and poetics of the Elizabethan period.

Thus in the following essay, I want to focus on the significance of the narrative/dramatic strategies that Shakespeare employs in Othello, arguing that these strategies subtly distinguish and operate along the geographic, political, and cultural boundaries that the play's Renaissance world stage draws. With a view to showing how the contrastive interplay of these generic techniques enacts the ideological accountability of narrative functions in general as well as of Shakespeare's manipulation of these functions, I will first analyze Shakespeare's use of these formal literary devices in the play to create a thematics of absence/presence that comments tellingly on Othello's dubious identity in Renaissance society. Then, I will elaborate on Shakespeare's procedure by linking it to the dynamics of fiction-making in general, going on to explore what his particular construction of Othello reveals about his poetic agenda. Finally, I will expand my argument to explore relations of power in imperialist culture and the signs of this power in Shakespeare's art and canonic status. In this way, I wish to demonstrate not only how Shakespeare's schizoid casting of the Moor as, at once, central subject and marginalized object reflects colonial power relations but also how the play's colonializing instrumentality extends beyond the literary text and pertains to Shakespeare scholarship and criticism of the play as well.

In the last scene of Othello, the protagonist, aware of how he has been duped by Iago, is confined with the corpse of his wife whom he has just murdered; the time seems to have come finally for what Othello has not yet done: self-examination in the heroic tradition of Shakespearean tragedy. Though Othello's predicament is markedly different from that of Richard II, one might expect that like Richard he would study how to “compare this prison … unto the world,” and engage in setting “the word itself against the word” (5.5.1-14). Given his knowledge of Desdemona's innocence—the sight of “the tragic loading of this bed”—and the realization that he has been nothing more than a comic actor in Iago's deadly play, one might have expected Othello to be teased into thoughts of the kind that Macbeth utters upon hearing of the death of his wife:
She should have died hereafter;  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
... Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.17-28)

Macbeth’s aside, indeed, captures the meaning that Iago has imposed on Othello’s life and what must have seemed to Othello to be the significance of his life as he gazes on its deadly outcome.

Othello, however, has no capacity for reflection of this kind, either in personal or general humanistic terms. Faced with the tragic results of his poor judgment, he musters an audience and, predictably, tells another story: “I have seen the day / That with this little arm, and this good sword, / I have made my way …” (5.2.261-63). Earlier, goaded into believing that Desdemona is guilty of adultery, he disintegrated into apoplectic incoherence: “Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her, when they belie her … Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief—… Pish! Noses, ears, and lips…” (4.1.36-42). When faced with similarly disillusioning circumstance, Hamlet (though it is highly unlikely that he could be tricked by Iago) protested:

... O God, God,  
How [weary], stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't, Ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. That it should come [to this]!  
But [two days married], nay, not so much, not two.  
Let me not think on't! Frailty, thy name is woman!

(1.2.132-46)

Though one cannot applaud Macbeth’s oblique assessment of his dilemma nor endorse Hamlet’s misogyny, one is aware that their commentaries represent stages in their moral and intellectual delineation. The closest Othello comes to soliloquizing in the vein characteristic of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes is in his paranoiac(ally) telescoped aside:

Haply for I am black,  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberes have, or for I am declin’d  
Into the vale of years (yet that's not much),  
She's gone. I am abus'd and my relief  
Must be to loathe her.

(3.3.236-68)

In these lines, Othello’s insuppressible urge to tell his story points not inward to a heightened consciousness but outward to the narrative signs of his insecurity.

Othello (1604) was written four years after Hamlet, one year before King Lear and two years before Macbeth, the three plays with which it is usually ranked. Yet Othello is not invested with any of the self-searching, self-revelatory monologues that endow Shakespeare’s tragic heroes with their special poignancy. Othello does not experience those ennobling moments when with lyric intensity the protagonist faces a personal crisis and
gains and imparts insight into self and the vicissitudes of human life. In Shakespeare, the soliloquy is one means of bringing the hero closer to the audience; it magnifies and at the same time humanizes him. Lear's self-excoriating “unaccommodated man,” Hamlet's benumbing “heartache and the thousand natural shocks / that flesh is heir to,” Macbeth's sobering “brief candle,” all involve their audiences in moments of intense moral reckoning and philosophical contemplation.

Notably, in Othello, instead of the Moor, it is Iago, his white ensign, who is given to self-communing and his primary role is to diminish, through calculated psychic violence, Othello's humanity. As part of this function, Iago's privileged soliloquizing installs him between the protagonist and the audience even as it signals his own impressive intellectual capabilities and psychological astuteness. With this edge, Iago interprets, manipulates, even forecasts the hero's thought and actions for the audience, flattening the character, rendering increasingly evanescent verbal profundities like those allowed to Hamlet and Lear. Othello himself, in contrast, is limited to retailing his history, telling stories about his past exploits.

The predominance of narrative in Othello, that is “the presence of a story and a storyteller” (Scholes & Kellogg 4), distinguishes the play and, in turn, has prompted much critical dispute, which inevitably turns on Othello's verbal proclivities and therefore his character. In a well-documented critical dialogue, when A. C. Bradley defined Othello as a poetic romantic victimized by Iago's “absolute egoism” (179), T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis respectively responded by describing Othello as someone given to “dramatizing himself” (111) and as doomed by his own “noble,” “brutal egoism” (146). More recently, Stephen Greenblatt has described Othello as self-fashioner of an “identity” that is dependent upon “constant performance … of his story” (81); Martin Elliott, in turn, has noted what he sees as a “habit of self-publication” (108), and Valerie Traub has argued that Othello essentially becomes a “signifier only of another signifier” (36). James Calderwood goes even so far as to suggest that Othello's preoccupation with storytelling comes close to jeopardizing the drama: “For a moment we seem on the edge of an Arabian Nights infinite regression of stories: Shakespeare's dramatic story yields to Othello's senatorial story, which disappears into stories of cannibals and Anthropophagy which might disappear into. … But fortunately they do not” (294). While these assessments accord with the play's own depiction of Othello's “bumbast circumstance / Horribly stuff'd with epithites of war” (1.1.13-14), in doing so they also point to a number of questions that need to be asked of Othello and its author. Why this yielding to the narrative impulse in this drama? Why in this play more than in any other is Shakespeare's dramatic art in danger of being upstaged by the characters' storytelling? What necessary dramatic function does narrative serve in Othello?

Drama and narrative are not, of course, mutually exclusive generic provinces, and Derrida's observation that a text may participate in more than one genre—thereby not belonging to any one specifically (61)—seems particularly applicable to Shakespeare. Harold Bloom, indeed, rates Shakespeare as one of the “great originals among the world's strongest authors” on the grounds that he “violates known forms”: “Shakespeare wrote five-act dramas for stage presentation, yet Shakespeare wrote no genre. What … is Troilus and Cressida? It is comedy, history, tragedy, satire, yet none of these singly and more than all of them together” (18). While one could similarly ask whether Othello is drama or narrative singly or more than both combined, and while it is true that Shakespeare resists generic prescriptive, one also needs to bear in mind that “violation of forms” does not erase form, and that there can be no infringement where there are no boundaries. Todorov's solution is to regard theory of genre as “hypothesis” or proposition merely; he maintains that study of literary works from a generic viewpoint will “discover a principle operative in a number of texts rather than what is specific about each of them” and that the best procedure is to begin by “presenting our own point of departure” (1,19-20).

For my purposes, then, a helpful starting point is Robert Scholes's contrastive definition of the two genres: “drama is presence in time and space; narrative is past, always past” (206; emphasis mine). Because narrating can take place only in the “once upon a time” of the story that it relates, in the dramatic here and now of the play, the staged present of the tale that Othello tells about himself is not the events he recounts or the “self” he
re-creates but the act of narration. This act or role directs attention to past events and to a protagonist (the hero of his narrative) whose experiences are framed in an earlier time than stage time, the time of the narrating, and in unfamiliar, distant locations. Interpreted in this context, Scholes's definition may be reworded thus: narrative is a sign of absence, whereas drama is a sign of presence. To some extent, then, drama and narrative could work at cross-purposes. And when, as in Othello, narrative is woven extensively into the dramatic work, the significance of Scholes's “time” and “space” translates into stage-time and stage-space and thereby into commentary on the play's dramatic representation.

In Othello, the “pastness” which narrative re-presents, functions as a “distancing” device which enables Shakespeare to locate the Moor or alien on the Elizabethan stage and by extension in the European community. Through juggling of narrative and dramatic devices, Shakespeare is able to manipulate stage time and space so that much of the action that defines the protagonist is located offstage, outside the cultural and geographical purviews of the Elizabethan audience, in revealing contradistinction to his central, heroic stage position. Thereby the playwright renders largely innocuous the threatening or “undramatizable” elements of his material he displaces them into the storied realms of distant lands and times. Just as within the play the Turks' diversionary military tactics are described as “a pageant / to keep us in false gaze” (1.3.18-19), so there may be something deceptively seductive about Shakespeare's recourse to narrative strategies.

In the terms used by critics to define Othello's self-expression—“self-fashioner,” “self-publication,” “signifier … of another signifier,” “disappearing” stories, “bumbast”—one can detect a tacit articulation of a sense of lack or absence, and at the heart of this absence and lending it validity is Othello's blackness. It is this otherness that necessitates and gives impetus to his narrative “I am” and correspondingly to his individuated expansive rhetoric, just as conversely it is Shylock's otherness that induces his startingly callous economy of speech. According to Greenblatt, “the telling of the story of one's life—the conception of one's life as a story—is a response to public inquiry: to the demands of the Senate sitting in judgment, or at least to the presence of an inquiring community” (42; emphasis mine). Othello's self-declarative stories, however, register less his presence than they do a palpable absence. This dilemma is due in part to the nature and utility of narrative itself. It is Othello's awareness of his cultural disconnectedness that makes his narrative performance necessary. At the same time, it is this awareness that further cultivates and intensifies the very sense of discontinuity that his story attempts to dispel—the story can be told from the beginning, his childhood, but only up to the point at which he is required to tell it. So, Othello must repeat his history later for Desdemona and later still for the Senate in a seemingly endless effort to establish an identity. In this light he is, for the most part, a potential presence only, his dramatic contextualization, his presence, being seriously undermined by his narrative (dis)position.

In an attempt to fix this problematic characterization, Leslie Fiedler makes a telling remark: “mythologically speaking, Othello is really black only before we see him; after his first appearance [on the stage], he is archetypally white, though a stranger still, as long as he remains in Venice: a stranger in blackface” (185). Since the dramatic tension throughout the work rests upon Othello's blackness, Fiedler's comment also raises questions about representation. Is the “lascivious Moor”—“the old black ram” with “thick lips”—of Scene 1 indeed transformed into and replaced by a disguised European in Scene 2? Does the audience, or rather can the audience, dispel the scathing image of blackness so pointedly drawn in the first scene when the disguised “white” Othello later enters the stage? Or does the audience, cognizant of the essential discrepancy, merely sit back and enjoy the power of dramatic irony?

What Fiedler reads as the substitution of identities—familiar for strange—is a strategic stage dislocation: a shift in the Moor's figurenposition, as Robert Weiman terms “the actor's position on the stage and the speech, action, and degree of stylization associated with that position” (224). The shift in Othello's figurenposition is from a narrativised presentation in Scene 1 to a dramatic representation in Scene 2, in other words, from a figural absence to a symbolic presence. The play between these two modes of enactment creates the ironic illusion of the color-coded color blindness that Fiedler's statement describes: black and white being
interchangeable, racial difference is neutralized; Shakespeare is vindicated. In the debate about Othello's color, Fiedler takes his place among those critics who abstract the sign of Othello's presence and name it “white.” The early scenes of the drama invite this interpretation by splitting the character into competing fragments: a narrativised (alien) half and a dramatized (familiar) counterpart. Besides, this interpretation is necessary if the tragedy of a noble-mind-in-a-black-body corrupted by a black-mind-in-a-noble-body is to work.

The question of race continues to be a vexed one in Othello criticism. In her study, Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama, Ania Loomba points out that whereas there has been controversy about Othello's ethnicity, there has been no debate concerning the racial identity of Aaron the Moor of Titus Andronicus; Aaron, “unlike Othello,” corresponds easily to “the stereotype of black wickedness, lust and malignity”—he, as well as other characters repeatedly link his intractably evil nature to his “physical features” (46). In an essay titled “Race,” Kwame Appiah cautions against attributing such bias to Shakespeare's works since, he argues, in Elizabethan England Jews and Moors were hardly an “empirical reality”; stereotypes were based largely on the non-Christian standing of these ethnic groups, not on experience of them (277).

Some critics, however, see things differently, arguing that Elizabethans had access to much more than inherited theological beliefs. Eldred Jones, for example, marshals a wealth of research data to support his contention that factual information concerning peoples of Africa was available: classical historical documents, popular digests, and eyewitness “accounts of actual sea voyages and land travels” (1). Noting as well that black slaves were introduced into England as early as 1554, several years before John Hawkins's first voyage (15-16), Jones concludes that Othello derives from “conflicting material” from various sources (14). Similarly, Jack D'Amico traces a “Moroccan connection” of extensive trade and diplomacy between England and Morocco from circa 1550-1603; as he sees it, Othello represents the sum of Elizabethan images of the Moor as “everything” from the noble to the monstrous, and that in creating him Shakespeare explores the inherent contradictions (177-96).

In addition to “conflicting material” and complexity of issue, it is likely that, given his subject matter, Shakespeare had to deal also with his own divided impulses regarding Africans. His extended deployment of narrative in a dramatic work and the tension created by the dynamics of the two generic modes may be evidence of this division. Of course, shifting perspectives is nothing new in his art. John Keats lauds as “Negative Capability” this quality in Shakespeare. John Bayley sees as a mark of genius the irresolution and reserve that characterize the dramatist's works (15). Herman Melville identifies Shakespeare as a master “of the great Art of Telling the Truth” “not so much for what” the playwright “did do as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing” (65-66). However, unsettledness and reticence do not signify neutrality, and in the case of Othello, moreover, we have the kind of social and political baggage that has a charged ideological resonance in whatever context the subject appears and by whomever it is addressed.

Through the narrative/dramatic strategies that Shakespeare employs, Othello reveals, among divided impulses and motives, some instructive exclusions, emphases, and suppressions. Othello's initial introduction to the audience takes place in his absence and in the form of gossip between Iago and Roderigo. This gossip may be likened to the third person narrative point of view which voyeuristically creates the character it describes. Shakespeare's use of this means of introducing Othello is felicitous. The familiarity that is apparent in Iago and Roderigo's conversation, in the coarse language they use and in their interrelationship, is soon seconded by the concordant sentiments that their “concern” about Desdemona's elopement awakens in the socially and politically privileged senator and parent, Brabantio, who endorses Roderigo: “O would you had had her” (1.1.175). This breakdown of reserve between social classes and individuals signifies the existence of common cause with the Elizabethan audience; it articulates the society's deepest fears: sexual deviation and miscegenation. Already, before the audience sees him, Othello is guilty of a cultural transgression; he has seduced the senator's daughter, married her without parental consent. Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio react within the bounds of a shared cultural understanding that makes Othello a threatening otherness. Aply,
therefore, their conversation locates him offstage, out of sight.

By contrast, in *Macbeth*, the absence of the protagonist and the use of a third person, formal narrative to introduce him, locates him centerstage. The sergeant's story of Macbeth's battlefield prowess and the king's response establishes the protagonist as defender, kinsman, hero whose past as well as destiny is also the community's. In this case, the distance that narrative signals is temporary only; the past, because it is shared, is retrievable. In a similar vein, Prospero's story of his past provides Miranda with a history, bridges the reserve between father and daughter and preludes their return home. In these instances, narrative creates a sense of distance the better to dramatize presence and continuity.

This is not to say that narrative always works in the same way in Shakespeare or generally. The distance inherent in and implied by narrative performance varies in its schema and function. The form it takes will depend upon the relation between teller, story, and audience and what is at stake. For example, Caliban and Prospero tell similar stories of loss and dispossession but from different standpoints. Prospero's story subjects Caliban: “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine” (5.1.275). And even if, as is commonly believed, Caliban is Prospero's psychological double, it takes a degree of “heroic” suzerainty to claim the “dark” or alien thing, whether one does battle with it like Ahab or, like Prospero, puts it to work. The encoding of removedness in the stories that characters tell or that are told about them, therefore, is determined largely by the text's discourse on power and power relations, whereby it is of some significance, then, that even when Othello is located physically in the presence of an audience—one on the stage or in the Senate—his stories place him figurally elsewhere.

In Elizabethan drama, as John Draper observes, “the initial appearance of a character generally strikes a fundamental keynote in his nature” (91), or, to put it another way, in the way a figure is characterized. In addition to the symbolic significance of the subversive introduction of Othello and of his strategic location offstage in the opening scene, there is his problematic first actual appearance on the stage. His dignified response to Brabantio and the Senate tends to minimize the fact that he enters under siege, that he is on trial for a cultural infraction, and that the terms of Iago's devaluation of him are a central part of Brabantio's suit as well as of the outcome of the play.

Othello is on trial before the Senate, before all Venice and, simultaneously, before all audiences wherever the play is produced for as long as it continues to be acted or read. Ironically, the charges against him—“she [Desdemona] is abus'd, stol'n from me and corrupted. …” (1.3. 60-61)—as well as his defense are bound up with the very thing that marks his alienness, his history. His story chronicles “most disastrous chances” and “hairbreadth scape” involving cannibalism, threatening landscapes, human anomalies. These foreign, uncultivated, and therefore unreclaimable elements constitute a heritage and persona with which Venetians and Elizabethans can have little empathy. Later, this sign of (dis)location will be emphasized metonymically in the way that Desdemona's handkerchief, token of the bond between the lovers, also signifies spatial and temporal disjunction; in its Egyptian legacy of ancient magic, “prophetic fury” and mummy's dye it symbolizes the social gulf between the couple. Although Othello is aware, albeit subconsciously, of his disarticulation, he must nevertheless depend on the past to sway the Senate: “My services which I have done the signiory / Shall out-tongue his [Brabantio's] complaints” (1.2.18-19). They do.

Othello's exoneration, however, has been anticipated and subverted by Iago's declaration in Scene 1 that the State needs Othello “to lead their business” and cannot “with safety cast him” off (1.1147-53). Iago's unreliability notwithstanding, the implication that the Senate, like he, must “show out a flag and sign of love / which is indeed but sign” renders suspect the Duke's ready capitulation: “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (1.1.156-57). It also draws attention to the Duke's double-edged conciliatory advice to Brabantio: “Take up this mangled matter at the best; / Men do their broken weapons rather use / Than their bare hands: (1.3.173-75). This caution is more relevant to the Senate than to Desdemona's father; Othello is Venice's only weapon against the advancing Ottomites. Significantly, Brabantio leaves the Signiory to die of
“pure grief”—Desdemona’s “match [being] mortal to him” (5.2.205)—and his dissenting, estranged, and foreboding voice may be representative of the protesting attitudes of civilian Venice. Thus in 1693, Thomas Rymer was to cite Othello as “a caution to all Maidens of Quality, how without their parents' consent they run away with Blackamoors” (89).

Othello is distanced also by the manner in which he tells his story. Storytelling around the cottage hearth served an important social function in early modern Europe; it had the power to unite the community by bringing together its diverse elements. As Dennis Kay notes, Renaissance England, in particular, was not only a “storytelling culture,” but also “a world of ritualized social narrative,” which some of its writers exploited by interpreting and moralizing “the act of storytelling” in their art (209, 211). It is of particular interest, then, that Shakespeare's audience hears Othello's history at the trial and therefore at great remove from the domestic “ritualized” fireside setting in which Desdemona and her father would have heard it. By placing the domestic scene offstage, the dramatist conjures and rejects at once the familiarity that the retelling can only insinuate, whereby the Elizabethan ritualized social pastime becomes a means of identifying and excluding the Moor. Further, Othello recounts not his story but the story of his storytelling and its outcome. In the process, he locates himself in another place at an earlier time, telling a story that situates him in yet a more distant place and time in seemingly endless regression. In addition to denoting his receding figurenposition, the narrative retrogradation imbues Othello's speech with a more literary than spoken quality, thus proclaiming a lack of the full presence that drama by its very definition signifies. The play of difference, spatial and temporal, within the mimetic cosmos of the dramatic stage provides a striking commentary on Othello's tenuous identity and place.

The series of narrative displacements inscribed in Othello's story also serves to move offstage another significant social ritual. The audience does not witness Othello's wooing of Desdemona but hears of it rather in the context of a trial in which the audience is being asked to judge. Interestingly, the tale that Othello relates on this occasion begins not with his courtship of Desdemona but, aptly, his relationship to Brabantio: “Her father loved me, oft invited me; / Still question'd me the story of my life” (1.3.128-29). In this public, male, juridical emplotment, Desdemona's love is the unforeseen, unsought outcome of a domestic travesty which implicates her father, who, in inviting the stranger to the hearth, unwittingly exposed her heart.

The significance of this situation becomes even clearer if we note that in Romeo and Juliet the wooing scene is by contrast an important dramatic exponent. The play resembles Othello in plot; both works test the boundaries of forbidden love. In the former play, however, Shakespeare's task is to reconcile coequals—“two houses both alike in dignity”—whereas in Othello his problem is more challenging; he must unite the irreconcilable. It is a tribute to the playwright's skill that in neither case does he espouse any easy solution, for while in Romeo and Juliet reconciliation does succeed, it is at great cost to the two houses. In that play, at first the stage bustles with energy, the possibility of and necessity for change taking place against the backdrop of habituation and impotence. The wooing, which lasts for an entire scene of approximately one hundred ninety lines, registers that energy with a whole gamut of emotions and impulses: rebellious idealism—“deny thy father and refuse thy name” (2.2.34); fascination/fear—“this contract tonight, / It is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden / Too like the lightening” (2.2.117-119); romantic optimism—“this bud of love / … may prove a beauteous flow'r when next we meet” (2.2.120-22). Ultimately, however, as Romeo and Juliet pledge their love in the moonlight, they also court and win favor with the audience. In contrast, the wooing scene in Othello is screened from view. Is it that the Moor is not easily integrated into the role of lover on the Elizabethan stage? And by way of answer here consider how, unlikely lover though he is, the diabolical Richard III, in the midst of a funeral procession and in full view of the audience, substitutes one ritual (wooing) for another (mourning) with the dramatic facility that only an insider could.

By narrativising where he might have dramatized Shakespeare also displaces Othello's much touted heroism with fairy-tale sleight of hand: “our wars are done; the Turks are drown'd” (2.1.202). Provided with the equivalent of neither a Dunsinane nor a Bosworth Field, with no heraldic account of triumph and no heroic
battle-scarred stage entry, Othello's martial courage remains a matter of repute. Besides, if Anthony Hecht is right, the “valor” with which Othello is credited may bear ironic implications:

An Elizabethan audience would not have been willing to grant Othello the unlimited admiration he receives from Cassio, Desdemona, the Duke, and his senate at the beginning of the play. He would have been recognized from the start as an anomaly, not only “an extravagant and wheeling stranger / of here and everywhere,” who has no real home, and therefore no civic allegiance, but, far more suspiciously, one who, had things only been slightly different (and perhaps more normal) would have been fighting on the enemy side, with the Turks against the Venetians. (123)

And yet, unquestionably, Shakespeare invests Othello with regal bearing and dignity, particularly in the early scenes of the play. In Venice, he faces Brabantio's aggression with authoritative restraint and the Signiory with aplomb, and the positive aspects of his portrayal are especially evident in contrast to Shakespeare's other “black” characters who fare poorly with regard to cherished heroic tropes like valor, honor, and romantic love. Aaron is an “irreligious Moor,” a self-styled “black dog” who instigates rape and mutilation and fathers a “tawny slave,” even if later his courageous attempts to save his son earn him a measure of humanity; Caliban is a would-be rapist; the Prince of Morocco chooses in love as badly as Portia wishes that all those of his “complexion” would; Shylock is a shocking figure of inhumane greed. In comparison to the way that these characters are cast, Othello is not only hero of the play but initially his sterling reputation and his endearing tenderness with Desdemona bespeak the playwright's attempt to paint the Other in humanistic strokes.

It is significant, though, that the opportunities for dramatizing various features that would bolster Othello's heroic profile are transposed into narrative and, therefore, are not staged. Did Shakespeare experience a greater sense of division in treating Othello than he did with his other tragic heroes? He figurally displaces Othello even while ostensibly setting him at the center of the stage, through deft manipulation of narrative/dramatic modes. This explains why the play is often interpreted from Iago's perspective. It also explains why the Moor is never a serious threat to the Venetian social order. The catastrophic ending of the drama is inscribed in the apprehensive beginning which, in turn, is validated by the violent conclusion. That is, the concluding tableau—the “tragic loading” of the “bed” that “poisons sight” and must be “hid”—harks back to the opening of the play or the fearful bed that Brabantio had tried to forestall: “the black ram … tupping your white ewe.” By focusing on this loaded bed—ironically one of the rare “domestic frames” in this “domestic tragedy”—the play exposes that at its very center, the bedroom, there is the following proscription: “if such actions may have passage free, bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be” (1.2.98-99). Not surprisingly therefore, Othello's suicide is usually viewed as propitiatory: the protagonist's Christianized half destroys the Moorish part and Othello defers to Venetian society in a final attempt to (re)gain entry into the civilized world against which he has transgressed.

But far more than conciliation, Othello's suicide represents his final (dis)location. Othello's death occurs at a telling juncture; it coincides with, indeed impels the past (“in Allepo once”) into the present (“I took … / And smote him thus”). In other words, as Othello stabs himself, narrative translates into drama, signifying his conscious emergence into the dramatic now. This coming forth, however, is insupportable in the world of the play; the Moor's psychic debut is synonymous with suicide. Othello dies into, and with, his story, to be re-created in Lodovico's narrative. But, unlike Hamlet who need only call upon Horatio's loyalty and intimate knowledge of his affairs to speak for him—“Absent thee from felicity a while / … To tell my story” (5.2.347-49)—Othello, outsider, feels distrustful; he pleads for fair accounting and anxiously attempts to dictate his own narrative terms: “Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice” (5.2.342-43). Since Othello's audience is made up primarily of the Venetian deputation, the episode repeats the early trial scene in the Signiory, and implicitly indict the protagonist even as he publicly executes himself. Othello's story will be recreated by Lodovico, therefore, in the only format possible for a Moor: Lodovico's story will be a Venetian narrative in and to which Othello is subject.
Actually, Othello's subjection has been apparent to the audience, though not to him, from the moment Iago fabricates a tale with which “to abuse Othello's [ear] / That he is too familiar with his wife” (1.3.395-96). Iago's declared aim is to convince Othello that “he” (Cassio) is having an affair with Desdemona, but as Greenblatt notes, the use of the vague pronoun carries the implication that Othello's relationship with his own wife is also transgressive. Through Iago's ability and the privilege to fashion a story and the power to translate it into drama, he accomplishes what Othello cannot; within the given cultural context, Othello cannot locate his history and himself in the present, and therefore he also cannot exert control over his future. Because of the difference in their narrative trajectories, Iago is able to make Othello into the audience of a play in which the latter is unwittingly also the main actor; he makes Othello spectator to Othello's own life. In the process, Iago not only dramatizes but parodies Othello's dubious figurenposition, his figural absence, thereby baring the divide that invites and accommodates his (Iago's) plot.

Notwithstanding Iago's elaborate metaphor of conception and birth: “It [his scheme] is engend'red. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light” (1.3.403-05), his story is largely the appropriation and exploitation of one of the potential narratives that are inferable, given the immediate social scenario, from Othello's history up to the time that he himself can relate it. In her discussion of “Narrative Versions,” Barbara Herstein Smith suggests the dynamic that functions here when she observes:

For any particular narrative, there is no single basically basic story subsisting beneath it but, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives that can be constructed in response to it or perceived as related to it. … [For] basicness is always arrived at by the exercise of some set of operations, in accord with some set of principles, that reflect some set of interests, all of which are, by nature, variable and thus multiple. … Whenever these potentially perceptible relations become actually perceived, it is by virtue of some set of interests on the part of the perceiver.

(217-18)

One may speculate, then, that had it suited Iago's purpose, he would have fabricated, in response to Othello's story, a very different “play.” He could have produced, for example, an “and they lived happily ever after” romance. And so, of course, could Shakespeare. To examine the way that, instead of opting for some of the other potentially available stories, Iago construed from Othello's history a tale of sexual anxiety, lust, betrayal, and murder, is also to raise questions about Shakespeare's perceptions. Using Hernstein Smith's terms, we might ask what “set of operations,” what “principles,” what “interests” motivated the playwright to construct—out of the multiple other narratives open to him—this Othello?

By way of answering this question, it is instructive to consider the earlier narrative upon which Shakespeare based his tale. Generally, Shakespeare exercises great license in utilizing his sources, and in writing Othello, his use of the Italian novella from Cinthio's collection, Gli Hecatommithi, is no exception. In Cinthio's fiction, the Moor and “Disdemona” have been a happily married couple for some time when they set out for Cyprus, and Iago's motive for ensnaring them is clear: a jealous lust for Disdemona. In addition, as John Gilles points out, Disdemona and her unnamed Moorish spouse are both commoners and of equivalent age, whereas in Shakespeare's play, there is a discrepancy in their ages and both are of higher rank—Desdemona is the young daughter of a senator, Othello is a Venetian General “declined / Into the value of years.” Paradoxically, however, Othello's military rank does not allay the unease that the biracial coupling fosters. Instead, Gilles further notes, “as in the myth of Tereus,” Othello's position is presented as a “circumstantial anomaly, enabling a bizarre exception to the rule rather than legitimizing miscegenation per se”; these elements of the text added to Othello's “utterly black and physiologically Negroid” appearance make the marital pairing pointedly “transgressive” and therefore pointedly indecorous (26).
Mindful that the language of “racial difference” in the play is symptomatic of the embedded discourse of racial divide in the dramatist's culture, Virginia Mason Vaughan concludes that “when Shakespeare tackled Cinthio's tale of a moor and his ancient, he had no choice but to use this discourse” (Contextual History 70). I agree with Vaughan only partially. While the paradigmatic dimension of this discourse is not uniquely Shakespearean, the syntactic structure, the choice, combination, and sequence of vocabulary, statements, and concepts are the playwright's own. And it is also from this standpoint that Shakespeare's most inventive departure from Cinthio—his prescribing for the Moor a storytelling definition and role—makes most sense.

A number of issues bear emphasis here. First, in making Othello and Desdemona newlyweds, Shakespeare changes what in Cinthio's tale was an established relationship into a question about the possibility of such a marriage, while by interjecting a sense of “indecorum” he implies the “proper” response. Second, in making Iago's motive equivocal the playwright ensures that, at any given moment in the play, the audience has no stable ground on which to take a decided stand against the villain, as one is likely to do in the case of Edmund in King Lear. Rather, Iago inspires in the audience a deep fascination for his craft, a fascination that widens the distance between them and the protagonist since the latter's otherness is intensified by his facile surrender to Iago's subterfuge. The audience may feel pity for, but cannot empathize with, Othello. In effect, Shakespeare induces the audience's complicity in Othello's duping and thereupon communalizes Iago's “motives,” subtly reinforcing the reservations voiced at the outset concerning the propriety of the fateful match. Finally, in making Othello the teller, audience, subject, and target of stories, Shakespeare circumscribes the protagonist in the narrative outskirts of the dramatic here and now. In so doing, he provides an acceptable, reassuring profile of the exotic barbarian and of the controlled, safely exploitable space that he does and must inhabit.

Narrative/dramatic space in Othello bears a strong kinship with Renaissance colonial plots; both are caught up in the politics of space. In many respects, therefore, both may be defined as what Foucault calls “disciplinary space,” whose purpose is to “establish presences and absences,” to categorize and “locate individuals” and groups, to “set up useful communications, to interrupt others” (143). Disciplinary space is “a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering, and using” (193); it fabricates reality. Though these insights are based on Foucault's study of post Renaissance penal systems, they are crucial, as he himself makes clear, to understanding the structure and operation of other institutions such as education, religion, the military, as well as colonization and slavery, to name a few. On a general plane, Foucault's analysis probes the “technology of power” that produces, indeed fabricates, western society and that accounts for the kinds of individuals that comprise that society. Central to disciplinary space, according to Foucault, is an “apparatus of production”—commerce and industry marked by “conflict” and governed by “rules of strategy” (308), which include “techniques” and “methods” for the distribution and “control and use of men” (141). In the course of this mass location and exploitation of people, strategy becomes normalized and the distinction between the concocted and the real breaks down. In Othello, “disciplinary space” aptly defines the organization of representational space; we might say that the play anticipates Foucault, exposing the common ground that dramatic representation shares with the colonialist enterprise: spatial politics and the construction of its machinery of production and control.

The case for viewing certain of Shakespeare's plays, most notably The Tempest, as a commentary on colonialism has a well documented history. Especially since the new historicists, it has also become commonplace to read Othello as, among other things, a discourse on the complex relationship between colonist and colonized. From this perspective, my critique of the “narrativising” process in Othello supports what Greenblatt defines as “the process of fictionalization,” a procedure whereby “another's reality” is transformed into a “manipulable fiction” (“Improvisation and Power” 61). Such a “process” will betray, of course “some set of operations” and “principles” that both reflect and promote the colonizer's agenda. We will recall that Iago produces Othello's life by weaving into Othello's history a seemingly logical and predictable part. This sequel is dictated not by Othello's interests but by those of Iago and of the larger Venetian community. In Foucault's terms, “a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation” (202).
Commenting on racial difference in this play, Loomba has observed:

Othello is valuable as a Christian warrior, or the exotic colonial subject in the service of the state. In the Senate scene, the Venetian patriarchy displays an amazing capacity to variously construct, co-opt and exclude its “others.” Brabantio is certain that the Senate will back his opposition to Othello's marriage, and if it appears strange (or remarkably liberal) that they don't, we need only to recall their concern with the Turkish threat. Othello, the warrior is strategically included as one of “us” as opposed to the Turkish “they” (50).

Greenblatt regards the chameleon “ability to capitalize on the unforeseen and transform given materials into one's own scenario,” as a form of “improvisation” which on a larger scale can be viewed as “a central Renaissance mode of behaviour” whereby “the Europeans … again and again … insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic, structures of the natives and … turn those structures to their advantage (60,63,60). In this light, Greenblatt suggests, Shakespeare the “master improviser” is neither “rebel” nor “blasphemer”; he is a conservative Elizabethan extemporizing a part of his own within his culture's “orthodoxy” (90).

While Greenblatt's conclusion accords with my reading of Othello thus far, we still have to consider what all this means in Shakespeare criticism, including the way that my own conclusions, for example, seem to be drawn from arguments founded largely on assumptions that are binarily opposed—black/white, drama/narrative, one/other—and which, therefore, are suspect. This limitation raises questions about the nature and roles of our own “extemporizations” as literary critics, our recourse to ideological or “colonizing” narrative productions in the continuing process of fictionalization. Here, again, Greenblatt is helpful when he observes that in order to be successful, “improvisation” must mask itself, conceal its true purposes. So, “if after centuries” Shakespeare's “improvisation” has been revealed to us as embodying an almost boundless challenge to [his] culture's every tenet, a devastation of every source” (90; emphasis mine), that is hardly surprising.

Greenblatt's claim has far-reaching implications, and what I now wish to contend is that what Shakespeare's art “reveals” to us at any given critical juncture will depend largely on the kind of story that we have need to devise. If my contention has validity, then Greenblatt's further commentary—in “The Improvisation of Power,” his 1987 version of his earlier 1978 “Improvisation and Power”—has a certain efficacy in Shakespeare criticism. In this updated version, he returns to a familiar issue: Shakespeare's elusive, because constantly shifting, point of view:

"If any reductive generalization about Shakespeare's relation to his culture seems dubious, it is because his plays offer no single, timeless affirmation or denial of legitimate authority and no central, unwavering authorial presence. Shakespeare's language and themes are caught up, like the medium itself, in unsettling repetitions, committed to the shifting voices and audiences, with their shifting aesthetic assumptions and historical imperatives, that govern a living theater."

(58-59)

Greenblatt concludes, therefore, that “all that can be convincingly demonstrated, is that Shakespeare relentlessly explores the relations of power in a given culture” (59). Christopher Norris would agree; in Shakespearean criticism from Johnson to Leavis he detects “a certain dominant cultural formation,” “an effort” to secure “ideological containment,” and “harness the unruly energies of the text to a stable order of significance,” whereas what is needed, he feels, is the recognition that Shakespeare's “meaning” cannot be reduced to suit notions of “liberal-humanist faith” nor of “pristine incorrupt authority” (66).
That Shakespeare's plays have an exploratory energy cannot be denied, and unquestionably it behooves the critic to avoid reductive generalizations. Yet one wonders whether insistence on and submission to what Norris calls “the lawlessness of Shakespeare's equivocating style” (55) is not another kind of “effort of ideological containment,” an attempt to release the “unruly energies of the text” from implication in its own “ideological compulsions.” Equivocation is open to analysis, and equivocation, as Shakespeare himself demonstrates through Iago and Macbeth, can also be the instrument by which “meaning” is insinuated and by which the individual is (mis)led. If we have reason for celebrating this “equivocating lawlessness,” therefore, we also have reason for resisting it. What about those elements, social and historical, for instance, that are discernible among its shifting accents and which enter into its discourse? Criticism's “shifting aesthetic assumptions and historical imperatives” may highlight or background these elements from time to time, but they seem to persist.

If one may judge from Othello and from the socio/political climate of the 1990s, “race” and attitudes toward it have altered little since the Renaissance. In fact, racist attitudes of the kind that Iago represents have deepened in ways that affect people's lives as profoundly as they affect Shakespeare's fictional characters. Colonialism, too, became a force that shaped our world irrevocably. With respect to his handling of race and colonial discourse in Othello, Shakespeare's so-called challenges to his culture's “every tenet” are difficult to demonstrate when Othello's narrative circumscription within the dramatic text is viewed not as the result of the character's peculiar rhetorical tendency but as the playwright's brilliantly devised stratagem. For then the burden of proof shifts from apprehension of the fictional character as a living volitional being to character as an ideologically crafted device.

Further, the claim that Shakespeare poses a challenge to his culture's “every tenet” and “every source” must be assessed against the culturally unchallenged ascendency of the Shakespeare canon and the global role that it has played in the promotion and dissemination of his culture. To say that Shakespeare's art conceals multiple levels of meaning cannot satisfactorily explain why, for instance, in spite of the blatant racist language and stereotypes that they display, works like Othello, Titus Andronicus, Merchant of Venice, and The Tempest have been handed down uncritically from generation to generation of students on various levels, not only in the West but in the colonized areas of Africa, the African Diaspora, and Asia. Presented as works not concerned with race or even otherness, such plays have been lauded as dealing unequivocally with universal human issues such as jealousy, justice, greed, betrayal, good/evil, to name a few. Neither can the notion of Shakespeare's “elusiveness” explain why contemporary American students “do not readily recognize racism as an issue within Othello,” as Vaughan observes in her 1991 introduction to “New Perspectives” on the play (22), and wherein she suggests that perhaps these students do not see racism as a concern in their own lives.

Of course much has happened since 1991 to draw national attention to racial discourse in American Society—the highly publicized Rodney King affair and the O. J. Simpson trial come to mind. At the same time, however, it would seem that Hollywood—that trendsetter in, as well as gauge of, the American cultural mass market—has not been sensitized. In spring of 1996, a film version of Othello was produced by Castle Rock, a subsidiary of Columbia Studios, in which Othello's otherness and its implication in the tragedy are dismissed, and it is the jealousy theme that is emphasized. Oliver Parker, scriptwriter and director, may have pursued this angle because it produces a comfortable, totalizing and commercially prudent narrative, but the general blindness to the sociopolitical issue in the text may also have something to do with Shakespeare's reputation. Readers and viewers tend to approach the playwright with reverence; his mammoth literary stature precludes what is, for them, a diminishing, if humanizing, factor. They are caught in the kind of “cultural trap” that Lawrence Levine experienced in writing Highbrow/Lowbrow, his study of Shakespeare's transformation from 19th-century American popular theater to 20th-century sacred author who warranted protection from the intellectually uninitiated and/or unsuitably appreciative. As Levine explains, before he could commence his study, he had to overcome an intimidating cultural “legacy”: the belief that so formidable a talent as Shakespeare could be approached “only with great humility” (4-5).
One issue that thus becomes clear as one studies Shakespeare and the critical responses to his works is the extent to which criticism itself is a stratagem, a form of what Greenblatt terms “improvisation.” Literary tradition has made of Shakespeare an institution and a cultural enterprise. Under the auspices of the literary dealers in cultural commerce, Shakespeare, like the Christian God, is made to embrace all—Jew and Christian, African and European, king and slave—with impartial, universal, cultural largesse. In fact, the Shakespeare canon has provided Britain with one of its most powerful and enduring colonizing commodities, second in its appeal perhaps only to the King James Bible. On the colonial front, Shakespeare (unlike Othello in Venice) is confidently cast. Billed, installed, and received centerstage, even when Shakespeare is perceived as historically Other, he is never regarded as strange, exotic or transgressive. His works, authorized on multiple levels, speak in the here-and-now of other cultures and times with the soliloquizing, “humanizing” comprehensiveness of a Hamlet or a Lear, while with the narrative inventiveness and chameleon dominion of an Iago they locate and direct alien players in their many parts.

This unexcelled canonical power may be measured in laudatory comments such as that by Caribbean artist, V. S. Naipaul: “all literatures are regional; perhaps it is only the placelessness of a Shakespeare … that makes them less so” (29). Similarly, in The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, Bengali writer Nirad Chaudhuri recalls: “our first notion of Shakespeare was of a man whose writings all grown-up persons were expected to discuss and, what was even more important, to recite” (99). The extent to which the Shakespeare canon served as a cultural catechismal text for Indians can also be seen in Chaudhuri’s dedicatory epigraph:

To the Memory of the
British Empire in India
Which conferred Subjecthood on us
But withheld citizenship;
To which yet
Every one of us threw out the challenge
“civis Britannicus sum”
Because
All that was good and living
Within us
was made, shaped and quickened
By the same British rule.

The astonishing because unintentional irony in this 1951 eulogy comments forcefully on the phenomenon of cultural imperialism, a subject which prompted African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, to protest in 1986 that “it is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues” (20).

Discussing the effects of a colonial identity bound by a “logic … embodied deep in imperialism,” Ngugi contends that “regardless of the extent to which the imported literature carried the great humanist tradition of the best in Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, Brecht, Sholokhov, Dickens,” the point to be noticed and decried is the way that European history and culture became for the African the “center” of his universe (18). Eight years earlier, writing about Rhodesia during the war for independence, Shona artist and rebel, Dambudzo Marechera, had similarly chafed: “When I was a student I had discovered late that however much I tried to be objective in my criticism of Shakespeare … (in Titus Andronicus, Othello, and The Tempest) … there was always at the back of my mind a smouldering discontent which one day would erupt” (122). Not surprisingly, therefore, some of the fiercest academic battles waged in post-independence African schools and universities have been over Shakespeare: how to dislodge the canon from its curricular eminence to make room for the indigenous literature.

Naipaul’s and Chaudhuri’s testimonials, as well as Ngugi’s and Marechera's apostasy, attest to the insidious nature and force of ideological domination and the part that literature may play. They also call attention to the reciprocally constituted position of the dominated in relations of power and in transmission of knowledge. This reciprocity, indeed, is what leads Foucault to object to the use of negative terms—“it excludes,” “it
represses”—for describing the effects of power. As he sees it, “power produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (194; emphasis mine). The individual, whether dominant or subjected, and whatever we know about him/her are the products of this transmission of knowledge.

The forever elusive, the non-partisan Shakespeare—or what, by another route is but a covert re-visioning of the placeless, timeless artistis a fictional construct, a product of cultural commerce and a means for ideological containment. Though Norris is right in maintaining that the narratives we write of Shakespeare's texts are but “partial and complicated stories of our own devising” (66), we need also to note that collectively these stories have erected a monument that is at its most powerful when it most insists on a Shakespearean canon that is voiceless in both the authorial and authorizing sense. But the literary text, like all criticism itself, is bound by the politics of space and cannot escape the “disciplinary” grammar of boundaries. It is within such a context, therefore, that I have attempted to show that Shakespeare's use of narrative/dramatic strategies in Othello reveals not only a great artist but also an Elizabethan who explores—at a time when Europe was redefining its geographical, economic, and psychic boundaries—a topical issue: the relationship between “civilization” and Other. In his narrative (dis)position of the hero, as I see it, the dramatist takes a distinctly conservative stand: he effects artistically and ideologically a spatial reserve that discourages the very kinds of cross-boundary communication that his society fears, and in the process defines the limits of the “barbarian” located within the European “economy of power.”

To this end, the conclusion of Othello can be seen as one of Shakespeare's most trenchant. The irony in the protagonist's anxiously attempting to relinquish in death that which he unwittingly forfeited several scenes ago—that is, his power to control his history—demonstrates as forcefully as the playwright's worldwide appeal does today that power does create. These insights make palpable the at once fragile yet compelling utility of language, of narrative constructions and their commodification, and how they function both among individuals as well as among peoples.

Works Cited


It is through the malice of this earthly air, that only by being guilty of Folly does mortal man in many cases arrive at the perception of sense.

Herman Melville

There are three schools of Othello criticism. The most recent of these is the symbolic school, chiefly represented by G. Wilson Knight and J. I. M. Stewart, who have endeavoured to explain away the difficulties inherent in the traditional psychological interpretation of the Moor by turning the play into a mythic image of the eternal struggle between good and evil, embodied in the noble aspirations of Othello and the cunning cynicism of Iago.\(^1\) This school arose in part as a reaction to an attitude mainly exemplified by Stoll, though already initiated by Rymer and Bridges, according to whom this tragedy ought to be treated as a purely dramatic phenomenon, created by Shakespeare for the sake of sensation and emotional effect.\(^2\) The third school is the traditional school of naturalistic interpretation; it branches off into two main streams: the Romantic critics, from Coleridge to Bradley, take Othello at his own valuation, and seem to experience no difficulty in assuming that his greatness of mind should blind him to Iago's evil purposes; more recent students, however, tend to have a more realistic view of the Moor and to stress the flaws in his character: T. S. Eliot speaks of *bov Larsme* and self-dramatization, while his homonym, G. R. Elliott, asserts that the main tragic fault in Othello is pride.\(^3\)
One way to solve this crux of Shakespeare criticism is to use the inductive method recently advocated by R. S. Crane, and look for the “particular shaping principle (which) we must suppose to have governed Shakespeare's construction of the tragedy” through “a comparison of the material data of action, character, and motive supplied to Shakespeare by Cinthio's *novella* with what happened to these in the completed play”.

By analysing the way Shakespeare used (or neglected) some of the data provided by Cinthio, the way he transmuted a vaudevillesque melodrama into one of the unforgettable tragedies in world literature, we may perhaps hope to gain a fresh insight into what he saw in it, why he was attracted by it and what he meant to do with it.

**ERRING BARBARIAN AND CREDULOUS FOOL**

This method is the one already applied by H. B. Charlton in his Clark Lectures at Cambridge, 1946-7.

According to Charlton, one of the most significant alterations made by Shakespeare to Cinthio's story consists in the strengthened emphasis upon the difference in manners and outlook between Desdemona and her husband. Though this motif is barely alluded to by Cinthio, Shakespeare seized on the hint and expanded it to meaningful proportions. The most conspicuous, though, admittedly, the most superficial, aspect of this difference is the complexion of the Moor. In the original tale, there is only one allusion to Othello's blackness. In the play, his black skin and thick lips are mentioned time and again. As it is obviously impossible to retain the Romantic view that Othello is not a real Negro, we can safely assume that the blackness of the Moor, though it did not strike the Italian writer, appealed to the imagination of Shakespeare, who found it significant in a way that Cinthio, probably, could not even conceive.

Where is this significance to be found? I do not feel very happy about Charlton's suggestion that Shakespeare wanted to stress the physical and psychological antinomies between Othello and Desdemona because “the situation created by the marriage of a man and a woman who are widely different in race, in tradition and in customary way of life” was, at the time, “a particular problem of immediate contemporary interest”. There does not seem to be any compelling evidence that such a problem was especially acute in the early seventeenth century, so that it may be worth while to try another line of interpretation.

In *The Dream of Learning*, D. G. James has made excellent use of the changes which Shakespeare introduced into the personality of Belleforest's Hamlet so as to make it plausible that this young Danish chieftain should appear to all ages as the embodiment of the man of thought, or, to use a more up-to-date expression, of the intellectual. Now, if Shakespeare turned Hamlet into an intellectual, it is equally true that he reversed the process in his handling of Othello. Not only does Iago call the Moor an “ass” and a “fool”, not only does Othello concur with this unfavourable view in the last stages of the action, but the action itself is hinged upon Othello's obtuseness. This is quite palpable in III, iii, and we may be confident that if Partridge had seen *Othello* performed, he would have felt, at that moment, like jumping on to the stage and telling the Moor not to be an ass. Othello's muddle-headedness on this occasion is so extreme that critics like Rymer, Bridges and Stoll have indeed found it incredible and psychologically untrue. We might draw up a formidable list of Othello's glaring mistakes as exemplified in this scene. A few examples will suffice.

First, he must know that Iago wanted to become his lieutenant: he ought to be suspicious of his accusations against Cassio. Even though he believes, like everybody else, in Iago's honesty, he must know that his Ancient has a vulgar mind, and he should not allow his imagination to be impressed by Iago's obscene pictures of Desdemona. It is also remarkable that he does not try to argue the matter with Iago; in the early stages of his evolution, he simply proclaims his faith in Desdemona's chastity, but he cannot find any sensible argument with which to counter Iago's charges. It is true that he asks for some material proof of his wife's treachery, but he never bothers to inquire about the value of the “evidence” produced by Iago. Finally, once he is convinced of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, surely the next step is to go and discuss things with her or with Cassio; this he never does. Few people would make such a hopeless mess of the situation.
Whereas Shakespeare had keyed Hamlet's intelligence to the highest possible pitch, he deliberately stressed Othello's lack of intellectual acumen, psychological insight, and even plain common sense. In the play, Othello's negroid physiognomy is simply the emblem of a difference that reaches down to the deepest levels of personality. If Hamlet is over-civilized, Othello is, in actual fact, what Iago says he is, a “barbarian” (I, iii, 363).

Othello's fundamental barbarousness becomes clear when we consider his religious beliefs. His superficial acceptance of Christianity should not blind us to his fundamental paganism. To quote again from Charlton's study, “when his innermost being is stirred to its depths”, he has “gestures and phrases” which belong rather “to dim pagan cults than to any form of Christian worship”. These primitive elements receive poetic and dramatic shape in the aura of black magic which at times surrounds Othello. Though Brabantio is wide of the mark when he charges the Moor with resorting to witchcraft in order to seduce his daughter, it is nevertheless true, as Mark Van Doren has said, that “an infusion of magic does tincture the play”, and it comes to the fore in the handkerchief episode. The magic in Othello results from his acquiescence in obscure savage beliefs. It is an elemental force at work in the soul of the hero. It helps to build up the Moor as a primitive type.

Here again, we wonder why Shakespeare was attracted by such a hero. A twentieth-century dramatist might be interested in the clash of two cultures, which occurs in the mind of Othello. But though this aspect of the situation is not altogether ignored by Shakespeare, his main concern lies in another direction. The fact is that this tragedy of deception, self-deception, unjustified jealousy and criminal revenge demanded such a hero.

The crime-columns of the newspapers teach us that the people who murder their wives out of jealousy are generally mental defectives. Ordinary sensible people simply cannot believe that such a crime should deserve such a punishment. It was impossible for Shakespeare to take a subnormal type as a hero for his tragedy. Tennessee Williams could do it, I suppose, but not Shakespeare, because the Renaissance tradition required that tragedy should chronicle the actions of aristocratic characters. He might have chosen as his hero some nobleman with an inflated sense of honour, but then he probably could not have made him gullible enough to swallow Iago's lies. And it is precisely the gullibility that is essential. Shakespeare was not intent on emulating Heywood's achievement of the year before in A Woman Killed With Kindness. Othello is not a tragedy of jealousy: it is a tragedy of groundless jealousy.

So, in Cinthio's tale, Shakespeare found reconciled with a maximum of credibility the requirements of Renaissance tragedy and the necessities of his own private purpose: a character with a high rank in society, with a noble heart, and with an under-developed mind. It seems therefore reasonable to suppose that if Shakespeare was interested in Othello, it was not primarily because he is a barbarian, but because this noble savage provided him with a plausible example, suitable for use within the framework of the Renaissance view of tragedy, of a psychological characteristic that makes Othello the very antithesis of Hamlet. Othello's intellectual shortcomings have not passed unnoticed by students of the play, but the importance of this feature for its total meaning has not received the attention it deserves. We may say without exaggeration that Othello's lack of intellectual power is the basic element in his character. It is a necessary pre-requisite for his predicament. It is essential to the development of the situation as Shakespeare intended it to develop. And it may also throw some light on the nature of Shakespeare's tragic inspiration.

**STEPS TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

At the beginning of the play, Othello appears as a noble figure, generous, composed, self-possessed. Besides, he is glamorously happy, both as a general and as a husband. He seems to be a fully integrated man, a great personality at peace with itself. But if we care to scrutinize this impressive and attractive façade, we find that there is a crack in it, which might be described as follows: it is the happiness of a spoilt child, not of a mature mind; it is the brittle wholeness of innocence; it is pre-conscious, pre-rational, pre-moral. Othello has not yet come to grips with the experience of inner crisis. He has had to overcome no moral obstacles. He has not yet
left the chamber of maiden-thought, and is still blessedly unaware of the burden of the mystery.

Of course, the life of a general, with its tradition of obedience and authority, is never likely to give rise to acute moral crises—especially at a time when war crimes had not yet been invented. But even Othello's love affair with Desdemona, judging by his own report, seems to have developed smoothly, without painful moral searchings of any kind. Nor is there for him any heart-rending contradiction between his love and his career: Desdemona is even willing to share the austerity of his flinty couch, so that he has every reason to believe that he will be allowed to make the best of both worlds.

Yet, at the core of this monolithic content, there is at least one ominous contradiction which announces the final disintegration of his personality: the contradiction between his obvious openheartedness, honesty and self-approval, and the fact that he does not think it beneath his dignity to court and marry Desdemona secretly. This contradiction is part and parcel of Shakespeare's conscious purpose. As Allardyce Nicoll has observed, there is no such secrecy in Cinthio's tale, where, instead, the marriage occurs openly, though in the teeth of fierce parental opposition.

Highly significant, too, is the fact that he does not seem to feel any remorse for this most peculiar procedure. When at last he has to face the irate Brabantio, he gives no explanation, offers no apology for his conduct. Everything in his attitude shows that he is completely unaware of infringing the mores of Venetian society, the ethical code of Christian behaviour, and the sophisticated conventions of polite morality. Othello quietly thinks of himself as a civilized Christian and a prominent citizen of Venice, certainly not as a barbarian (see II, iii, 170-2). He shares in Desdemona's illusion that his true visage is in his mind.

Beside the deficient understanding of the society into which he has made his way, the motif of the secret marriage then also suggests a definite lack of self-knowledge on Othello's part. His first step towards “perception of sense” about himself occurs in the middle of Act III. While still trying to resist Iago's innuendoes, Othello exclaims:

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

(III, iii, 90-2)

This word, “again”, is perhaps the most unexpected word that Shakespeare could have used here. It is one of the most pregnant words in the whole tragedy. It indicates (a) Othello's dim sense that his life before he fell in love with Desdemona was in a state of chaos, in spite of the fact that he was at the time quite satisfied with it, and (b) his conviction that his love has redeemed him from chaos, has lifted him out of his former barbarousness. Such complacency shows his total obliviousness of the intricacies, the subtleties and the dangers of moral and spiritual growth. In this first anagnorisis, Othello realizes that he has lived so far in a sphere of spontaneous bravery and natural honesty, but he assumes without any further questionings that his love has gained him easy access to the sphere of moral awareness, of high spiritual existence. In fact, he assumes that his super-ego has materialised, suddenly and without tears. Hence, of course, the impressive self-assurance of his demeanour in circumstances which would be most embarrassing to any man gifted with more accurate self-knowledge.

This first anagnorisis is soon followed by another one, in which Othello achieves some sort of recognition of what has become of him after his faith in Desdemona has been shattered. The short speech he utters then marks a new step forward in his progress to self-knowledge:

I had been happy, if the general camp,
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
.....Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!

(III, iii, 345-57)

The spontaneous outcry of the first three lines results from Othello's disturbed awareness that the new world he has entered into is one of (to him) unmanageable complexity. He is now facing a new kind of chaos, and he wishes he could take refuge in an ignorance similar to his former condition of moral innocence. The pathetic childishness of this ostrich-like attitude is proportionate in its intensity to the apparent monolithic quality of his previous complacency.

What follows sounds like a non sequitur. Instead of this farewell to arms, we might have expected some denunciation of the deceitful aspirations that have led him to this quandary, coupled, maybe, with a resolution to seek oblivion in renewed military activity. But we may surmise that his allusion to “the general camp”, reminding him of his “occupation”, turns his mind away from his immediate preoccupations. The transition occurs in the line

Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!

which carries ambivalent implications. The content he has now lost is not only the “absolute content” his soul enjoyed as a result of his love for Desdemona: it is also the content he had known previously, at the time when he could rejoice in his “unhoused free condition”. This was the content of innocence and spontaneous adjustment to life. There is no recovering it, for, in this respect, he reached a point of no return when he glimpsed the truly chaotic nature of that state of innocence.

The fact that Othello starts talking about himself in the third person is of considerable significance. G. R. Elliott has noticed that the words have “a piercing primitive appeal: he is now simply a name”. Besides, in this sudden ejaculation, there is a note of childish self-pity that reminds one of the first lines of the speech. But the main point is that it marks the occurrence of a deep dichotomy in Othello's consciousness of himself. As he had discarded his former self as an emblem of “chaos”, so now he discards the super-ego that he thought had emerged into actual existence as a result of his love. It is as if that man known by the name of Othello was different from the one who will be speaking henceforward. The Othello of whom he speaks is the happy husband of Desdemona, the civilized Christian, the worthy Venetian, the illusory super-ego; but he is also the noble-spirited soldier and the natural man who guesses at heaven. That man has now disappeared, and the “I” who speaks of him is truly the savage Othello, the barbarian stripped of his wishful thinking, who gives himself up to jealousy, black magic and cruelty, the man who coarsely announces that he will “chop” his wife “into messes”, the man who debases his magnificent oratory by borrowing shamelessly from Iago's lecherous vocabulary.

Thus Othello, whom love had brought from pre-rational, pre-moral satisfaction and adjustment to life to moral awareness and a higher form of “content”, is now taken from excessive complacency and illusory happiness to equally excessive despair and nihilism. These are his steps to self-knowledge. That they should drive him to such alternative excesses gives the measure of his lack of judgment.

NO MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

From the purely psychological point of view of character-analysis, critics have always found it difficult satisfactorily to account for Othello's steep downfall. That it would have been easy, as Robert Bridges wrote, for Shakespeare “to have provided a more reasonable ground for Othello's jealousy”, is obvious to all
The fact that Othello's destruction occurs through the agency of Iago has induced the critics in the Romantic tradition to make much of what Coleridge has called Iago's "superhuman art", which, of course, relieves the Moor of all responsibility and deprives the play of most of its interest on the ethical and psychological level. More searching analyses, however, have shown that Iago is far from being a devil in disguise. And T. S. Eliot has exposed the Moor as a case of bovaysme, or "the human will to see things as they are not", while Leo Kirschbaum has denounced him as "a romantic idealist, who considers human nature superior to what it actually is".

For our examination of Othello as a study in the relationships between the intellect and the moral life, it is interesting to note that the ultimate responsibility for the fateful development of the plot rests with a flaw in Othello himself. There is no "reasonable ground" for his jealousy; or, to put it somewhat differently, Shakespeare did not choose to provide any "reasonable" ground for it. The true motive, we may safely deduce, must be unreasonable. Yet, I find it difficult to agree that the Moor "considers human nature superior to what it actually is": this may be true of his opinion of Iago, but Desdemona is really the emblem of purity and trustworthiness that he initially thought her to be. Nor can we justifiably speak of his "will to see things as they are not" (though these words might actually fit Desdemona); in his confusion and perplexity there is no opportunity for his will to exert itself in any direction. The basic element that permits Othello's destiny to evolve the way it does is his utter inability to grasp the actual. If we want to locate with any accuracy the psychological origin of what F. R. Leavis has called his "readiness to respond" to Iago's fiendish suggestions, we cannot escape the conclusion that his gullibility makes manifest his lack of rationality, of psychological insight and of mere common sense, and that it is a necessary product of his undeveloped mind.

Othello has to choose between trusting Iago and trusting Desdemona. This is the heart of the matter, put in the simplest possible terms. The question, then, is: why does he rate Iago's honesty higher than Desdemona's? If it is admitted that Iago is not a symbol of devilish skill in evil-doing, but a mere fallible villain, the true answer can only be that Othello does not know his own wife.

More than a century of sentimental criticism based on the Romantic view of Othello as the trustful, chivalrous and sublime lover, has blurred our perception of his feeling for Desdemona. The quality of his "love" has recently been gone into with unprecedented thoroughness by G. R. Elliott, who points out that the Moor's speech to the Duke and Senators (I, iii) shows that "his affection for her, though fixed and true, is comparatively superficial". Othello sounds, indeed, curiously detached about Desdemona. His love is clearly subordinated, at that moment, to his soldierly pride. If he asks the Duke to let her go to Cyprus with him, it is because she wants it, it is "to be free and bounteous to her mind". In the juxtaposition of Desdemona's and Othello's speeches about this, there is an uncomfortable suggestion that his love is not at all equal to hers, who "did love the Moor to live with him", and that he is not interested in her as we feel he ought to be. At a later stage the same self-centredness colours his vision of Desdemona as the vital source of his soul's life and happiness: his main concern lies with the "joy" (II, i, 186), the "absolute content" (II, i, 193), the salvation (III, iii, 90-1) of his own soul, not with Desdemona as a woman in love, a human person. It lies with his love and the changes his love has wrought in him, rather than with the object of his love. It is not surprising, then, that he should know so little about his wife's inner life as to believe the charges raised by Iago.

On the other hand, his attitude to Desdemona is truly one of idealization, but in a very limited, one might even say philosophical, sense. Coleridge wrote that "Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy, but in the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence". But Coleridge failed to stress the most important point, which is that this belief is mistaken. Desdemona is not "impure and worthless", she has not fallen from the heaven of her native innocence. Othello is unable to recognize this, and his failure is thus primarily an intellectual failure.
His attitude to Desdemona is different from that of the “romantic idealist” who endows his girl with qualities which she does not possess. Desdemona does have all the qualities that her husband expects to find in her. What matters to him, however, is not Desdemona as she is, but Desdemona as a symbol, or, in other words, it is his vision of Desdemona.

In his *Essay on Man*, Ernst Cassirer has the following remark about the working of the primitive mind:

> In primitive thought, it is still very difficult to differentiate between the two spheres of being and meaning. They are constantly being confused: a symbol is looked upon as if it were endowed with magical or metaphysical powers.

That is just what has happened to Othello: in Desdemona he has failed to differentiate between the human being and the angelic symbol. Or rather, he has overlooked the woman in his preoccupation with the angel. She is to him merely the emblem of his highest ideal, and their marriage is merely the ritual of his admission into her native world, into her spiritual sphere of values. Because he is identifying “the two spheres of being and meaning”, he is possessed by the feeling that neither these values nor his accession to them have any actual existence outside her: his lack of psychological insight is only matched by his lack of rational power.

The Neo-Platonic conceit that the lover's heart and soul have their dwelling in the person of the beloved is used by Othello in a poignantly literal sense (IV, ii, 57-60). If she fails him, everything fails him. If she is not pure, then purity does not exist. If she is not true to his ideal, that means that his ideal is an illusion. If it can be established that she does not belong to that world in which he sees her enshrined, that means that there is no such world. She becomes completely and explicitly identified with all higher spiritual values when he says:

> If she be false, O! then heaven mocks itself!

(III, iii, 278)

Hence the apocalyptic quality of his nihilism and despair.

The fundamental tragic fault in the Moor can therefore be said to lie in the shortcomings of his intellect. His moral balance is without any rational foundation. He is entirely devoid of the capacity for abstraction. He fails to make the right distinction between the sphere of meaning, of the abstract, the ideal, the universal, and the sphere of being, of the concrete, the actual, the singular.

When Othello is finally made to see the truth, he recognizes the utter lack of wisdom (V, ii, 344) which is the mainspring of his tragedy, and, in the final anagnorisis, he sees himself for what he is: a “fool” (V, ii, 323). The full import of the story is made clear in Othello's last speech, which is so seldom given the attention it merits that it may be well to quote it at some length:

> I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, 
Nor set down aught in malice: then, must you speak
Of one that loved 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, 
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees 
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
And say besides, that in Aleppo once, 
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. (Stabs himself)

(V, ii, 340-56)

One may find it strange that Shakespeare should have introduced at the end of Othello's last speech this apparently irrelevant allusion to a trivial incident in the course of which the Moor killed a Turk who had insulted Venice. But if we care to investigate the allegorical potentialities of the speech, we find that it is not a mere fit of oratorical self-dramatization: it clarifies the meaning of the play as a whole. There is a link between the pearl, the Venetian and Desdemona: taken together, they are an emblem of beauty, moral virtue, spiritual richness and civilized refinement. And there is a link between the “base Indian”, the “malignant Turk” and Othello himself: all three are barbarians: all three have shown themselves unaware of the true value and dignity of what lay within their reach. Othello has thrown his pearl away, like the Indian. In so doing, he has insulted, like the Turk, everything that Venice and Desdemona stand for. As the Turk “traduced the State”, so did Othello misrepresent to himself that heaven of which Desdemona was the sensuous image.

S. L. Bethell has left us in no doubt that the manner of Othello's death was intended by Shakespeare as an indication that the hero is doomed to eternal damnation. Such a view provides us with a suitable climax for this tragedy. Othello has attained full consciousness of his barbarian nature; yet, even that ultimate flash of awareness does not lift him up above his true self. He remains a barbarian to the very end, and condemns his own soul to the everlasting torments of hell in obeying the same primitive sense of rough-handed justice that had formerly prompted him to kill Desdemona: it is a natural culmination to what a Swiss critic has aptly called “eine Tragödie der Verirrung”.

Notes

2. For a close discussion of the views of Rymer, Bridges and Stoll, cf. Stewart, op. cit. [Character and Motive in Shakespeare (1949)].
7. Levin L. Schuckling, in Shakespeare und der Tragödienstil seiner Zeit (Bern, 1947) considers Othello's belief in Iago's honesty as “eine der Hauptschwächen in der Konstruktion der Fabel”, for, he says “es ist höchst unwahrscheinlich, dass Othello nach so langem Zusammenleben im Kriegsdienst sich derart über den böswilligen Character seines Fahhrichs im unklaren geblieben sein sollte” (p. 68). The general consensus about Iago's honesty, carefully stressed by Shakespeare, should nullify this particular criticism.
p. 34.
18. S. L. Bethell, ‘Shakespeare’s Imagery: The Diabolic Images in *Othello*’, pp. 29-47 of this volume.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Leah Scragg (essay date 1968)**


*[In the following essay, Scragg contends that Iago, who exhibits distinct affinities with the allegorical figure of Vice found in medieval mystery and morality plays, should more properly be said to derive from stage representations of the Devil.]*

For a considerable time critics have traced the characteristics displayed by Iago back to the Vice, the artful seducer of the Morality plays. Alois Brandl in 1898 included Iago among the descendants of the Vice, although apparently associating that figure with the Devil:

> If we follow the role of Vice in the other English tragedies of this period and the following decades, we still find Haphazard in ‘Appius and Virginia’ as well as Ambidexter in ‘Cambyses’ as representatives of the old Morality-type, i.e. as seducer and hypocrite. In Marlowe's Mephistopheles the original diabolic character of this figure once more reaches full expression; in Marlowe's black Ithimor, Shakespeare's Aaron and Iago it is still strongly to be felt;¹

and Cushman in 1900, while showing the utter disparity between the nature of Vice and Devil, explicitly endorses Brandl's derivation of Iago from the former and would add other Shakespearean villains to the list:

> Why not also add to these Edmund in *Lear*, Richard III, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Antonio in *The Tempest?²*

The most recent and convincing exponent of this view is Bernard Spivack (*Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, New York, 1958), who examined the typical characteristics of the Vice, proved that figures displaying similar characteristics were found in a number of Elizabethan plays and having shown Iago possessed the same attributes, concluded that he was, in fact, a descendant of the Vice playing his traditionally motiveless role beneath a mask of motivated hostility. In this way, the difficulties encountered in the play, particularly the ambiguous nature of Iago's motivation, are seen as the result of an attempt to ‘translate’ the popular, but amoral, seducer of the Morality stage into realistic Elizabethan-Jacobean drama.

However, if the characteristics which are thought to be typical of the Vice, and which are used by these critics as a kind of hallmark to detect his literary progeny, were found before, during and after the period of the popularity of the Morality play in the figure of the Devil, it would be equally arguable that it is to the Devil, not the Vice, that Iago is indebted. In this case he would revert once more from the unmotivated seducer to the motivated antagonist—from the amoral to the immoral. In the first part of this article I shall therefore attempt
to show that Vice-like characteristics are not restricted to amoral beings, and in the second to suggest that the evidence within *Othello* points to an association between Iago and the powers of darkness which at least confirms his moral nature, if not proving his derivation from a traditional stage presentation of the Devil.

I

The attributes which typify ‘The Vice’, the figure which emerged after 1500 from the group of vices engaged in the psychomachia of the early Morality plays, and which are said to characterize his descendants, are as follows. He was a gay, light-hearted intriguer, existing on intimate terms with his audience, whom he invited to witness a display of his ability to reduce a man from a state of grace to utter ruin. He invariably posed as the friend of his victim, often disguising himself for the purpose, and always appearing to devote himself to his friend's welfare. He treated his seduction as ‘sport’ combining mischief with merriment, triumphing over his fallen adversary and glorying in his skill in deceit. So far the analogy with Iago is obvious. He provided for his audience both humour and homiletic instruction. Above all, he was an amoral being whose behaviour was completely unmotivated—he simply demonstrated the nature of the abstraction he represented. In this respect, as Spivack points out, the Devil and the Vice are completely distinct:

The purposes of the Devil are those of a complex moral being. The whole purpose of the Vice is to illustrate his name and nature and to reflect upon the audience the single moral idea he personifies. The former acts to achieve his desires, the latter only to show what he is. Between the two no ethical continuity is possible because in the nature of a personification there is nothing that is subject to ethical definition.

But although entirely disparate ethically, in their dramatic presentation the Vice and the Devil have much in common, those characteristics which I have outlined as typical of the Vice being found in the Devil of the Mystery plays over a hundred years before the emergence of the allegorical figure—as the motivated antagonist who leaped on to the stage at York, pushing the audience aside, reveals:

*Make rome be-lyve, and late me gang,*  
*Who makis here all þis þrang?*  
*High you hense! high myght ang*  
*I drede me þat I dwelle to lang.*

(XXII, 1-6)

This is the introduction to Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness, but the tones in which the Devil speaks are exactly those of the Vice, with his direct, familiar relationship with the audience, his vivacity and emphasis on what is to take place as a ‘jape’. He too confides in the audience, relating the way in which he delights to bring men to eternal pain (XXII, 7-12), why he intends to tempt Christ—i.e. his motivation (XXII, 19-22), what he intends towards his victim (XXII, 39-42) and how he is going to attempt it (XXII, 43-8). In other words he invites us to witness a display of his boasted ability to bring men to sin. When he actually approaches Christ, he poses as his friend:

*Dou hast fasted longe, I wene,*  
*I wolde now som mete wer sene*  
*For olde acqueyntaunce vs by-twene,*  
*Ther sall noman witte what I mene.*

(XXII, 61-6)
The Devil is naturally unsuccessful and his actions are limited by the necessity of following the Biblical
narrative, but nevertheless, in this earliest surviving dramatic presentation of a tempter on the English stage,
the attitudes of the later Vice figure are already evinced. The intimacy with the audience, the self-explanatory,
demonstrative role for homiletic effect, the attitude to the attack on the spiritual welfare of the victim as
‘sport’, the device of posing as the friend of the person to be betrayed, are all present. The only, and very
significant, difference lies in the fact that the Devil is implicitly and explicitly motivated. Since the York cycle
was first presented between 1362 and 1376 and was played until 1568 this kind of antagonist was seen on the
English stage long before the emergence of the Vice after 1500 and continued to be seen throughout the
period of the popularity of the Morality play.

The Chester cycle, which probably originated between 1377 and 1382 and which was played until 1575, does
not present such a vivacious Devil as the York plays but elements which are to be typical of the Vice may be
seen—notably the emphasis on disguise:

A manner of an Adder is in this place,
that wynges like a byrd she hase,
feete as an Adder, a maydens face;
her kinde I will take;

(II, 193-6)

and the pose as the friend of the victim:

Take of this fruite and assaie:
It is good meate, I dare laye,
and, but thou fynde yt to thy paye,
say that I am false.

(II, 233-6)

Similarly the attitude to the temptation of Christ as a game is still present:

a gammon I will assay.

(XII, 4)

The play of the Last Judgement in the Wakefield cycle (originated 1390-1410) also presents vivacious Devils
eager to destroy their human victims. Their chief, Tutivillus, introduces himself on his first entrance, priding
himself on his dexterity in entrapping the unwary (XXX, 211-21), and commenting with cynical glee on the
lasciviousness and general corruption of the times which give him his opportunity to win souls (XXX,
273-304). Although a Devil, Tutivillus does not comment in any way on the motive for his antagonism. He
shows no cause for his hostility towards mankind—his whole being is involved in an attitude of merriment,
almost glee, not hatred and resentment. His joyful, triumphant, imaginary welcoming of the sinners to hell is
typical:

ye lurdans and lyars / mychers and thefes,
fflytars and flyars / that all men reprefes,
Spolars, extorcyonars / Welcom, my lefes!
ffals lurars and vsurars / to symony that clevys,
To tell;
hasardars and dysars,
ffals dedys forgars,
Slanderars, bakbytars,
All vnto hell.
He has the energy, life and homiletic function which are claimed to be typical of the Vice, together with his professional pride in his work:

I am one of your ordir / and one of your sons;
I stande at my tristur / when othere men shones.

And like the Vice these Devils blend comedy and homiletics as they triumph over their fallen victims:

SECUNDUS Demon:
Where is the gold and the good / that ye gederd togedir?
The mery menee that yode / hider and thedir?

TUTIUILLUS:
Gay gyrdyls, iaggid hode / prankyd gownes, whedir?
Haue ye wit or ye wode / ye broght not hider
Bot sorowe,
And youre synnes in youre nekkys.

PRIMUS Demon:
I beshrew thaym that rekkys! He comes to late that bekkys youre bodyes to borow.

The Devil is beginning to appear on the stage with the motive for his antagonism taken for granted, while he simply exhibits his delight in evil and his dexterity in entrapping souls.

The Devil of the single pageant extant from the Newcastle plays, which originated before 1462 and were played until 1567-8, has similar characteristics. He exists on intimate terms with his audience, confiding to them his plans to corrupt Noah's wife (lines 109-13). He too exhibits a light-hearted approach to his deception and insinuates himself into the confidence of his dupe. His bland greeting to Mrs Noah, whom he hopes to destroy, ‘Rest well, rest well, my own dere dame’ (line 115), might well have been spoken by innumerable later Vice figures.

Quires N, P, Q, R, of the Ludus Coventriae (originated c. 1400-c. 1450) probably had a separate existence before their inclusion in the cycle and the Devil of these sections is of a very different kind from the demon filled with overt hatred found in other parts. He shares the characteristics noted in earlier Devils, particularly the intimacy with the audience to whom he introduces himself (26, 1-2), recounts with pride his aim in the world:

I am Norsshere of synne · to þe confusyon of man
To bryng hym to my dongeon · þer in fyre to dwelle
and recites his past triumphs and his skill in entrapping souls (26, 23-4). He also confides to them his plans for the destruction of Christ (26, 50-3), invites them to become his friends (26, 61-3) and finally departs with a declaration of alliance (with obvious homiletic significance) between himself and his listeners:

I am with t all tymes · whan councel me call
But for A short tyme · my-self I devoyde.

The Devil here has much in common with the Vice and clearly shows that Vice-like characteristics are not solely the province of amoral beings. The Devil, as Satan, also has a speech addressed directly to the audience at the opening of Play 31, in which, having introduced himself, he confides to the audience his fears about Christ, and outlines his plans for revenging the rebuff given to him by Christ when he tempted him in the wilderness:

Dat rebuke þat he gaf me · xal not be vn-qwyt
Som what I haue be-gonne · & more xal be do
Ffor All his barfot goying · fro me xal he not skyp
but my derk dongeon I xal bryngyn hym to.

The Devil, the original motivated revenger of English drama addresses his audience here in tones very like those of innumerable self-explanatory villains of the Elizabethan stage. When the other Devils are appalled at the prospect of Christ coming to hell and Satan realizes that he has over-stepped himself, it is in terms of his ‘sport’ that he laments:

A · A · than haue I go to ferre
but som wyle help I haue a shrewde torne
My game is wers þan I wend here
I may seyn · my game is lorne.

Once more the Devil anticipates the Vice.

All that remains of the Norwich Mystery cycle are two versions of the pageant of Adam and Eve where the Devil appears simply as the Serpent. However in the version composed after 1565 he shows his kinship with the traditional tempter—taking his audience into his confidence and revealing to them his intention to disguise himself to further the temptation (lines 38-41). The motive for the antagonism displayed by the Serpent is not commented upon; like Iago he simply ‘can yt nott abyde, in theis joyes they shulde be’. Antagonism from the Devil, in whatever form he appears, is understood.

Thus in three out of the four major Mystery cycles extant (if the Chester cycle is regarded as a partial exception), as well as in those pageants surviving from the Newcastle and Norwich plays, the Devil shows many of the characteristics which typify the Vice, and which have been identified by Brandl, Cushman and Spivack as vestigial traces of the Vice in the self-explanatory villains of the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage with their curious combination of malice and merriment. It seems fairly safe to assume that these Devils were typical of those in the Mystery plays as a whole, which originated before the emergence of the allegorical drama, were performed throughout the period when the Morality play enjoyed its popularity, and, judging from the number of copies made at the close of the sixteenth century, would still have been familiar after they
had actually disappeared from the stage.

However, the Devil was presented as the seducer of mankind in the Morality plays themselves before 'The Vice' as distinct from a number of vices, emerged into dramatic prominence. In the first complete Morality play extant, *The Castle of Perseverance* (1405-25), it is the Evil Angel, not the subsidiary vices, nor even The World or The Flesh, who is Humanum Genus's chief enemy. His method of seduction is the traditional one. He poses as man's friend supporting him against the 'bad' counsels of the Good Angel (IV, 340-8) while instructing the vices on the means to be used to procure Humanum Genus's downfall (V, 547-51). But he is not simply the artful contriver of the hero's ruin—he also displays the irreverent humour and contempt for virtue shown by Spivack to be typical of the Vice, for example:

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hanne þe fox prechyth, kepe wel gees!
he spekyth as it were a holy pope.
goo, felaw, & pyke of þe lys
pat crepe þer up-on þi cope!
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(VI, 804-7)

—a speech addressed to the Good Angel! When Humanum Genus finally dies in sin, he triumphs over him as the Vice is to triumph over his victim and as Iago is to triumph over the fallen Othello.

Similarly, in *Mankind* (1465-70), the second complete Morality play extant, it is not the vices—Nought, New-Guisce and Now-a-days—who are Mankind's most potent adversaries, for he is easily able to repel them by beating them away; it is their cunning chief, Titivillus, who brings about his downfall. Mr Spivack devotes a long section to Titivillus (*op. cit.* pp. 123-5) showing, step by step, how his actions and speeches provide a pattern for the behaviour of a Vice, but in fact, as Spivack barely notices, he is not a Vice at all. The playwright makes his nature perfectly clear when he declares, 'propy[l]ly Titiuilly syngnyfyes the fend of helle' (III, 879). He is not an unmotivated amoral figure representing an inner moral frailty, he is the motivated antagonist of Mankind, the moral being devoted to his spiritual destruction. It is true that the role he plays is soon to be taken over by the Vice because, as Mr. Spivack rightly observes, the Devil 'is not a personification but an historical figure out of Christian mythology and folklore, and an illogical intrusion, therefore, into the drama of abstraction' (*op. cit.* p. 132), but the dramatic qualities the Vice comes to represent are surely derived from him.

The Devil also acts as seducer in the third of the so-called Macro-morals, *Mind, Will and Understanding* (1450-1500). Here he enters immediately after Mind, Will and Understanding have been presented and in typical manner quickly takes the audience into his confidence, revealing who he is:

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I am he pat syn be-gane
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(line 332)

and what has motivated his animosity:

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My place to restore,
    God hath mad a man.
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(lines 327-8)

In Vice-like manner he boasts of his cunning (lines 341-2) and then proceeds to share with the audience his intention to corrupt Mind, Will and Understanding, thus bringing the soul to damnation (lines 365-70). Most significantly, however, he disguises himself before proceeding to the temptation, showing once more that the
disguise motif, associated with the pose as the friend of the victim, originated with the Devil:

For, to tempte man in my lyknes,
yt wolde bryngre hym to grett feerfullness,
I wyll change me in-to bryghtnes,
& so hym to be-gy[le].

(lines 373-6)

In the role of well-wisher, he then dupes the trio into believing that a life of prayer and contrition is not pleasing to God, brings them from piety to depravity and triumphs to his intimates, the audience, on his good success, while he proceeds, Iago-like, to tell the ultimate goal of his operation:

That soule, God made in-comparable,
To hys lyknes most amyable:
I xall make yt most reprouable,
  Ewyn lyke to a fende of hell.
At hys deth I xall a-pere informable,
Schewynge hym all hys synnys abhomynable,
Prewynge hys soule damnable,
  So with dyspeyer I xall hym qwell.

(lines 536-43)

Similarly in Mary Magdalene (c. 1480-1520), a curious combination of Mystery and Morality, it is the Devil, as Satan, who is once more the cause of the central character's downfall. He enters in the seventh scene to confide to the audience both the motive for his hatred of mankind and his desire for their destruction (lines 366-71).16 It is he who initiates the attack on Mary Magdalene, inviting the help of The World and The Flesh, and his is the principal triumph and joy at the news of her downfall (‘a! how I tremyl & trott for tydynges!’). It is he who severely punishes his agents when Mary escapes his clutches and he who, with the Seven Deadly Sins under his command, provides the combination of temptation and comedy associated with the Vice.

John Bale's anti-catholic Mystery play The Temptation of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Satan (1538) also gives a picture of a Satan who is a fitting heir to the traditional archetypal adversary of the Mystery stage. He enters immediately after Christ's first speech and proceeds to explain his name and function to the audience in the manner typical of the Vice. The only difference lies in the motivated hostility displayed:

I am Satan, the common adversary,
An enemy to man, him seeking to destroy
And to bring to nought, by my assaults most crafty.
I watch everywhere, wanting no policy
To trap him in a snare, and make him the child of Hell.

(p. 155)17

He then confides his fears of Christ's coming (p. 155) and reveals his purpose towards him. He intends to deceive him by guile and will adopt a disguise frequently used by Vices for the same purpose:

I will not leave him till I know what he is,
And what he intendeth in this same border here:
Subtlety must help; else all will be amiss;
A godly pretence, outwardly, must I bear,
Seeming religious, devout and sad in my gear.
If he be come now for the redemption of man,
As I fear he is, I will stop him if I can.
He then disguises himself as a hermit, approaches Christ and poses as one well-disposed towards him (p. 156). Having insinuated himself into his company, he begins to flatter him, to seem solicitous for his welfare, while at the same time trying to instil doubts into his mind beneath the cloak of friendship—just as Iago is later to plant seeds of doubt in the mind of his victim:

Now, forsooth and God! it is joy of your life
That ye take such pains; and are in virtue so rife
Where so small joys are to recreate the heart:

(p. 156)

—compare his exclamation on hearing how long Christ has fasted:

So much I judged by your pale countenance.

(p. 156)

In his attempt to persuade Christ to change the stones to bread, he emphasizes that his sole thought is upon the well-being of his friend:

My mind is, in this, ye should your body regard;
And not, indiscreetly, to cast yourself away.

(p. 157)

His attitude throughout the temptation is that of an honest man showing his friend the ‘folly’ of his behaviour. He is the man of the world, offering his knowledge of things to the unrealistic idealist—the analogy with Iago is obvious:

I put case: ye be God’s son—what can that further?
Preach ye once the truth the bishops will ye murther.

(p. 157)

Compare:

Alas! it grieveth me that ye are such a believer:

(p. 164)

and

If I bid ye make of stones bread for your body,
Ye say man liveth not in temporal feeding only.
As I bid ye leap down from the pinnacle above,
Ye will not tempt God, otherwise than you behave.
Thus are ye still poor; thus are ye still weak and needy:

(p. 164)
and the supreme counsel of the down-to-earth man of the world, the counsel Iago gives Othello: renounce your faith, it is foolish:

Forsake the belief that ye have in God's word,
That ye are His son, for it is not worth a turd!
Is he a father that see his son thus famish?
If ye believe it, I say ye are too foolish.
Ye see these pleasures—if you be ruled by me,
I shall make ye a man: to my words, therefore, agree.

(p. 164)

Defeated, Satan, the eternal antagonist, like Iago, vows eternal defiance:

I defy thee ... and take thy words but as wind.

(p. 166)

This Devil with his pose of friendship, his man of the world attitude and his subtlety, is a direct pointer to the kind of Devil Iago is.

The Devil continued to appear, sporadically, as the antagonist of mankind throughout the history of the Morality play. He was the chief enemy of Youth in *Lusty Juventus* (1547-53), he had a less important role as Satan in *All For Money* (1559-77) when the transition from allegorical to literal drama had begun, and, while the Morality play was foundering in the closing decades of the century, he took new life as Mephistophilis in *Dr Faustus* (1588-92).

Thus not only did the Devil possess many of the characteristics of the Vice long before the emergence of the latter figure (such Devils as Titivillus anticipating the Vice in every respect), he continued to appear on the stage as tempter throughout the history of the Morality play. Moreover, a number of plays show that in fact a certain confusion between the respective roles of Vice and Devil existed in the minds of at least some Tudor dramatists. In *The World and The Child* (1500-22), when Conscience hears that Manhood has been seduced by the Vice, Folly, he exclaims:

Lo, sirs, a great example you may see,
The frailness of mankind,
How oft he falleth in folly
Through temptation of the fiend:

(p. 267)\(^{18}\)

which suggests that even if Folly does not partake of the nature of the Devil, he somehow acts under his guidance. Similarly, in Bale's *Three Laws of Nature, Moses and Christ* (1538), Natural Law exclaims to the Vice, Infidelity,

I defy thee, wicked fiend.

(p. 15)\(^{19}\)

This Vice is called ‘fiend’ more than once in the course of the action and Natural Law declares that he shuns his company as he would ‘the devil of hell’ (p. 16). Confusion of this kind is most apparent in the 1578 edition of *All For Money*. In addition to the usual stage directions this edition provides elaborate instructions for the costumes of the various characters, including:
Here commeth in Gluttonie and Pride dressed in deuils apparel.

(B iii r)²⁰

Later in the same play we are told that ‘Here all the deuilles departe’ (B iii r) when it is clear that Satan, Gluttony and Pride have gone out. Ethically disparate as they undoubtedly are, the Vice and the Devil have a similar function and share a fund of common characteristics which makes confusion between their dramatic roles possible.

Finally, the Devil was still seen on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage long after the decline of both Mystery and Morality play—Grim the Collier (1600), The Merry Devil of Edmonton (1599-1604), If it Be Not Good, The Devil is in it (1611-12), The Birth of Merlin (1597-1621), etc., all testifying to the perennial popularity of the figure of the supreme antagonist. For, ultimately, it is the Devil who, in Christian myth, and thus in Christian drama, is the implacable enemy of mankind. The Vice, the allegorical representation of an inner moral frailty, takes over the role of seducer in the Morality play, but he continues to show the traditional attitude to the part—the intimacy with the audience, the self-revelation, glee, irreverence, triumph over the fallen victim, etc. Freed from the confines of the Biblical narrative and the limitations of a narrowly defined moral status, he is able to develop these characteristics to a more marked degree, and by virtue of his amoral demonstrative nature and consequent detachment from the fate of his victims, he is able to pass naturally and easily, as Spivack has shown, into non-allegorical farce. But, fundamentally, the operation of the Vice is the operation of the Devil adapted to fulfil the needs of the dramatized psychomachia, and it is as the Devil that the figure passed into Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. If, therefore, the characteristics Iago displays were derived from an earlier figure, it seems extremely likely that it is to the Devil rather than the Vice that he is indebted, and that far from being a basically motiveless, amoral figure, he is a motivated being, engaged in the pursuit of some kind of revenge.

II

There is much evidence in Othello to confirm the suggestion that Iago is related, in some way, to the powers of darkness, and critics have long commented upon the diabolism that surrounds the figure of the ‘villain’ and invests the imagery of the play. Coleridge called Iago ‘a being next to devil, and only not quite devil’, Coleridge called Iago ‘a being next to devil, and only not quite devil’,²¹ Bradley disputed the point²² and modern critics continue to argue the question. Among those who support the view (in one way or another) that Iago partakes of the nature of the Devil, Stoll has pointed to the ambiguity of his motivation:

None of the motives at which Iago glances—the grievance in the matter of the promotion, or his lust for Desdemona, or his fancy that Othello or Cassio may have played him foul with Emilia—is sufficient for the vast villainy of his nature …

and concluded that:

He is a son of Belial, he is a limb of Satan.(23)

Wilson Knight has seen the play as a cosmic battle for the soul of man with Iago as a ‘kind of Mephistopheles’, Mephistopheles’,²⁴ Maud Bodkin sees Iago as an archetype of the Devil, defining ‘Devil’ as ‘our tendency to represent in personal form the forces within and without us that threaten our supreme values’,²⁵ and S. L. Bethell analysing the distribution of the diabolic imagery in the play concludes that:

The play is a solemn game of hunt the devil, with, of course, the audience largely in the know. And it is in this game that the diabolic imagery is bandied about from character to character until the denouement: we know the devil then, but he has summoned another lost
Heilman, discussing Iago's loss of humanity and the function of the serpent imagery in this respect, has suggested the way in which Iago's diabolism functions in the play:

As Iago's diabolism thus emerges distinct from the interwoven texture of action and language, we see how the myth of the devil enters into the play—not as a formula which squeezes out the individuality of Iago, nor as a pure idea of which the dramatic parts are an allegorical projection, but as an added dimension, a collateral presence that makes us sense the inclusiveness of the fable.

But against this view stands Dr Leavis with his famous pronouncement that Iago is no more than 'a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism' designed to trigger off Othello's jealousy, and Marvin Rosenberg who emphasizes Iago's humanity (showing him to be a recognizable psychological type) and repudiates his fiendishness in spite of the fact that his study of the stage history of the play shows that Iago's role is most powerful when played, as Macready played it, as 'a revelation of subtle, poetic, vigorous, manly, many-sided devilry'.

To attempt to analyse the diabolic element in the play when this has been done so fully by the critics cited would be superfluous, but for the purpose of this article it is necessary to summarize very briefly the evidence in support of the view that the myth of the Devil does enter, at some level, into the play. From the very opening of the action, Iago's relationship with the powers of darkness is continually emphasized—it is towards hell that he looks constantly for inspiration, hell and the Devil are for ever in his mouth, continually invoked by him; compare

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light

(I, iii, 397-8)

with:

Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now:

(II, iii, 339-42)

and

I do hate him as I do hell pains

(I, i, 155)

where his very tones suggest familiarity with the pains he speaks of. Examples could be multiplied. As Heilman has shown, when Othello falls a victim to Iago's temptation, he catches from him not only his debased view of life but his field of reference:

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!
Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of death
For the fair devil.
(III, iii, 479-82)

Naked abed, Iago, and not mean harm!
It is hypocrisy against the devil.

(IV, i, 5-6)

Fire and brimstone!

(IV, i, 228)

The word 'devil' is passed constantly from mouth to mouth. Much of the action of the play seems to take place in the darkness and horror of hell itself—the confusion and darkness of the night scene before Brabantio's house, the quarrel during the night watch, the attempted murder of Cassio—scenes of darkness and mischief over which Iago presides like an evil genius. But it is the final scene of the play that provides the most convincing evidence for Iago's diabolism when the accumulated reference of the play is finally crystallized and centred on him as Othello, in a moment of terrible clarity, realizes the truth:

I look down towards his feet—but that's a fable.
If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee.

(V, ii, 289-90)

His failure to do so and Iago's derisive reply,

I bleed, sir; but not kill'd

(V, ii, 291)

surely provide a comment on Iago's ultimate nature. Othello, at least, has no doubts about the nature of the deception that has been practised on him.

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?

(V, ii, 304-5)

Indisputably Iago is engaged in the elaborate seduction of a representative of mankind and the destruction of the values that he represents. But although he undertakes this attack with joy, almost light-heartedness, he reveals that, however gleeful he is in pursuing the downfall of his victim, his hatred of him, of the virtues he possesses, is malevolent in the extreme. Note the intensity of the hatred in the following:

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.

(I, i, 42)

So will I turn her virtue into pitch;
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

(II, iii, 349-51)

If Cassio do remain,
He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly.

(V, i, 18-20)

These are not the tones of an amoral figure acting under the necessity imposed by dramatic convention to demonstrate his own nature, but the accents of a moral being impelled by a burning desire to feed fat a consuming hatred with revenge.31

But if Iago is to be regarded on one level (Heilman's 'added dimension') as a Devil rather than a Vice, his famous motives may no longer be regarded as the realistic trappings designed to cloak his allegorical origins, and fit him for the literal stage. They must be organic rather than functional. The proposition that Iago is a Devil in some sense of the word32 implies that it is his nature to envy those whose character or situation is in any way superior to his own, to suffer from a sense of injured merit and to seek to destroy anything which by its very superiority threatens his self-love. Hence, locally, he feels he has been slighted by Othello in the promotion of Cassio, he asserts that Othello and Cassio have cuckolded him from his conviction that they cannot be as virtuous as they appear, and from his diseased belief that he is being constantly slighted. His 'love' for Desdemona is his desire to possess that object which is clearly highly desirable and belongs to someone else. But the ultimate motive for his hatred of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is his denial of the values they affirm, his fixed opposition to the virtues they represent. It is the hatred of Satan for the sanctity of Adam and Eve, the hatred of a being who is forced to recognize a virtue he cannot share and constantly desires. Hence the 'daily beauty' of the lives of Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona is a constant affront to him. The myth of Satan depicts him as falling from heaven from a sense of being undervalued; he tempted Adam and Eve both because they were superior to him, and therefore an object of envious hatred, and because he desired to avenge a supposed injury. Iago's motivation is very similar. At the close of the play, when he has corrupted Othello's mind, destroyed both him and Desdemona, when, for them, Paradise has been lost, Iago is dragged away to the tortures that are his element. He does not die at the end of the play, he is not to be put rapidly to death. He is to linger in pain like the powers of whom he is the instrument. Iago follows the pattern laid down in the garden of Eden and repeated over and over again in Christian literature by the archetypal adversary of mankind. Antagonistic to all forms of virtue, obscurely envying a state he constantly denies, he is the inveterate opponent of virtue, the seducer of mankind, who reduces his victims by guile from their original state of bliss to grief, death and hell.

It is clear that the characteristics displayed by Iago could well have been derived from the Devil rather than the Vice and that this proposition is reinforced by the emphasis on devilry in the play and the nature of Iago's attitude to his victims. But it would be overstating the position to assert categorically that Iago's characterization is necessarily derived from a traditional stage presentation of the Devil. All that can be claimed is that the Devil's claim to be Iago's forefather is at least as good as that of the Vice, and is supported by evidence in the play. Thus, while the Devil cannot be proved to be Iago's ancestor, his contradictory claim clearly invalidates the view that Iago must be regarded as a descendant of the Vice because of the dramatic characteristics he displays. Literary origins make dubious discussion at best, and it would be highly lamentable for Iago to be deprived of his motivation on the grounds that he is an amoral survivor from the psychomachia, roughly clad in the garments of realism, when the very characteristics which have reduced him to this exigency, together with the corroborative evidence from the play, suggest that he is not a Vice but a Devil.

Notes

2. ‘The Devil and The Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare’, Studien zur englischen Philologie, Heft VI (Halle A. S., 1900).
3. This summary is drawn from Mr Spivack's analysis of the figure.
5. References are to *York Plays*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Oxford, 1885).
6. The dates of all plays are those given in *Annals of English Drama 975-1700*, by Alfred Harbage, revised by S. Schoenbaum (1964).
10. References are to *Ludus Coventriae* or *The Play called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, E.E.T.S. E.S. CXX (1922).
11. References are to the text included in *The Non-Cycle Mystery Plays* (see n. 9 above).
13. A text of this play may be found in *The Macro Plays* (see n. 12 above).
14. Cp. ‘The pivotal action of the allegorical drama, repeated as many times almost as there are plays, is a more sophisticated version of just such a demonstration and such a lecture’ (Spivack, *op. cit.* p. 125).
15. References are to the text of the play included in *The Macro Plays* (see n. 12 above).
17. References are to *The Dramatic Writings of John Bale*, ed. John S. Farmer, Early English Drama Society (1907).
19. See n. 17 above.
31. Rosenberg’s study of the stage history of Othello is again illuminating here, for he shows that Iago's role is unsatisfying when played as Vice rather than Devil. Thus an Iago of 1912 ‘tended to be impish rather than devilish … the real venom … seldom emerged’ (p. 156) and Maurice Evans failed in the part because ‘young, open of countenance, light and gay of speech and step’ as his Iago was, his evil lost its point, was ‘too much akin to irresponsible mischief making’ (my italics). He was clearly amoral rather than immoral.
32. He has been variously regarded as a Devil on the metaphysical level, as a Devil incarnate, as a man possessed, and as a man in the process of becoming a Devil by the denial of the basic facts of his humanity.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Emily C. Bartels (essay date spring 1996)**
In the following essay, Bartels offers a feminist assessment of Desdemona’s assertive qualities, explicating her impulse to question and destabilize the repressive hierarchy of patriarchal social order in Othello.

Chaste, silent, shamefast, and obedient—these have become the buzz words in feminist discussions of early modern women: the dictates of an anxious patriarchal network, intent on regulating inevitably unruly female voices and bodies; the signs that women, continually accosted by sermons, marriage tracts, conduct books, communal rituals, and laws espousing these terms, really could not have had a renaissance. Renaissance women seem to have known it too. Why is it that Queen Elizabeth, visibly the most powerful woman in England from the mid-sixteenth to early seventeenth century, “speak(s) a discourse of apparent abjection,” alternately adjuring her femaleness and acknowledging its weaknesses? Why is it that “Jane Anger” (probably a pseudonym for an English gentlewoman) begins her proto-feminist “Protection for Women” (1589) with a letter to “the Gentlemens of England” “crav(ing) pardon” for speaking out “rashly”? Why is it that Aemilia Lanyer introduces her bold poetic defense of women, Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum (1611), by critiquing the “powers of ill speaking” exhibited “unadvisedly” by “some women”? Why is it, that is, that even the most outspoken women of the early modern period reiterate the terms that would prevent women from “inhabiting their own subjectivity”?

The easy—and recently, automatic—answer is, of course, containment, brought into currency not only by New Historicians, whose preoccupation with power marginalized the subject of women, but also by feminists themselves. The necessary project of exposing the long-ignored but long-standing oppression of women has almost destined us, when we focus on women, to focus on their circumscription. Couple that to a tradition of representation in which rebellious, outspoken, or desiring women habitually end up married, muted, or dead, and there seems to be no escape, even for those subjects who show remarkable autonomy before they go. Yet women such as Lanyer and Anger (literally) were making names for themselves. And if we continue to read their acts of compliance as signs of limitation, we ourselves put serious limits on their agency, subjectivity, and voice.

Part of the problem is our hesitancy to think of early modern women—who, after all, had no place on the stage—as actors. Recent work has begun to uncover multiplicity and conflict within established positions of those in and out of power, but we still tend to take women's voices, whether represented or real, at face value. Men get to play all the parts, to fashion states, society, selves, and even femininity. Since, in this period, self-making is an activity of the public sphere, we do not expect women (other than the queen) to do it—at least not with the same self-consciousness, manipulativeness, and control. They fill, rather than construct, roles. By and large, we recognize only the most exceptional or “unruly” figures as exceptions—figures such as As You Like It’s Rosalind (1599-1600) or Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s “roaring girl” (1608-10?), who mastermind strategic, self-serving if not self-affirming, fictions, albeit through male voices and bodies and sometimes in male drag. Even then, we allow more license to fictive characters than to “real” disorderly women, and we privilege punishments over “crimes” which sometimes evidence impressive autonomy. In any case, these stories predestine us to see female agency only in and as resistance, itself delimited (whether contained or not) by the challenged terms.

Indeed, when these or other women play by the rules, into obedience, chastity, shamefastness, and silence, we routinely assume them either constrained or restrained, despite histories that suggest otherwise. When aggressively outspoken women such as Jane Anger apologize for their rashness, we have read their gestures as a sign that they “accepted silence as a feminine ideal” or, at best, “felt constrained” to comply with it. Less consistently aggressive figures fare even worse. Although Desdemona has the audacity to elope with a Moor and follow him to Cyprus, that she is “so good a wife” (V.ii.234) makes us lose faith in her daring. She becomes “the perfect wife,” who “remains perfectly submissive to the end” and whose “very self consists in
not being a self, not being even a body, but a bodiless obedient silence.”

Wives, like Desdemona, are particularly susceptible to this kind of critical circumscription, perhaps because they were among the most (if they were not themselves the most) vigorously regulated of early modern women. Yet, as historians have shown, across the classes they had substantial power within their households. Consider, for example, the case of Margaret Ferneseede, a one-time prostitute and bawd, who apparently “barred” her husband “of the possession and command” of their (legally his) home, who lived prosperously (probably with her lover) on her own, and who, upon her husband’s death, openly mocked him, saying she scarcely expected to “hear so well of him.” Margaret was ultimately condemned for murdering her husband, largely on the grounds that she showed such “slight regard” for him in life and such “careless sorrow” at his death (p. 355). As her case suggests, what wives lacked was not power, but authority, terms which Constance Jordan has usefully separated.

According to Jordan, contemporary defenses of women (most authored by men) offered a wife only two strategies for validating her worth: either she could “reaffirm the value of her duties as her husband’s subordinate,” or she could “reject the grounds upon which she ha(d) been assigned her role and discover others that provide(d) her with greater scope.” The cost in each case is self-sacrifice: either the wife remains fully subordinate (though she elevates the value of her subordinate part), or she risks incrimination (as a scold or worse) for options that, if legal, may have been only theoretically available.

There is, however, a middle ground that proffers the safety of the first option with the radicality of the second and allows women to be actors: to speak out through, rather than against, established postures and make room for self-expression within self-suppressing roles. Under the cover of male authority, women could modify its terms and sanction their moves without direct resistance. They could be good wives and desiring subjects, obedient and self-assertive, silent and outspoken. In *Julius Caesar* (1599), Portia is unable to gain her husband's confidence by appealing to “the right and virtue of (her) place” (II.i.269) as wife and trying to give that place a “greater scope.” But when she recasts herself as subordinate—when she kneels before Brutus, “grant(s)” that she is an implicitly inferior “woman” (II.i.292), and gives herself value in terms of men, as a woman nobly “father’d” and “husbanded” (II.i.297)—she gets what she wants, Brutus's promise to disclose to her “the secrets of (his) heart” (II.i.306).

Portia's role and desires become subordinated as the action moves back to its hyper-male spheres, but elsewhere on the stage, where only men had the chance to act out modes of self-presentation, women's capacity to perform and construct strategic selves emerges as a central subject. Importantly, what figures there as a key device for radical self-expression is the posture of obedience. I want to look here at two examples, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and William Shakespeare's *Othello*, whose female leads seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum of behavior: the one (the duchess) a willful and defiant actor, and the other (Desdemona) a self-effacing and compliant victim. Yet the stories they tell are similar. For in each, gestures of submission paradoxically enable the expression of desire, showing female figures who inhabit their subjectivities, who are able to seem as well as be and, consequently, be as well as seem.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is ostensibly a story of resistance of a willful widow who actively defies her brothers' wishes and refuses to be constrained by (male) authority. While her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, “would not have her marry again” (I.i.265), she immediately sets out to do so, declaring: “If all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I’d make them my low footsteps” (I.i.348-50). When she does marry (soon after), she not only marries in secret, she also marries out of class, choosing Antonio Bologna, her household steward. Before we know it, she has also had several children—provocative signs to her brothers (who have little room to talk) of a sexuality gone wild. Her actions peg her as a woman willing and
eager to fight back, to prevent anyone (even her new husband, who is already her subordinate) from taking charge of her body and desires. She does have grounds for asserting such authority. She is, after all, an aristocratic widow with claims on a duchy and with autonomy so legitimate that her brothers must use clandestine means to restrain her. Yet at stake in the play is not merely the question (or problem) of a widow's unique rights, independence, and power and how they can or cannot be contained by male authority. At issue too is the prospect of female self-fashioning and the kind of voice and agency it carries. Though in part The Duchess of Malfi dramatizes what men can do to women, at its core is rather what women can do to men.

That the duchess will act on her will comes as no surprise, given her initial asides. What is puzzling, and revealing, however (especially since she seems to have married as much to exhibit her autonomy as to satisfy herself), is that she does so through submission. On the one hand, she dares “old wives” to report that she “winked, and chose a husband” (I.i.355-6). On the other, she keeps her move into marriage and sexuality under close cover. When the “deadly air” (III.i.56) of a “scandalous report” (III.i.47) actually approaches her, her honor, and her brothers, she proclaims her innocence. In the face of the suspecting Ferdinand, she denies the truth and assures him that she will marry only “for (his) honor” (III.i.44). Pretending to be deeply troubled by rumors “touching (her) honor” (III.i.48) and helpless to intervene, she leaves the remedy in his hands. It is only later, when he overhears her speaking of her closeted sex life (she thinks to Antonio), that she confesses to her marriage. Yet when she does, she strategically hides her husband’s identity and his problematic social standing and underplays the implications of all her secrecy, insisting: “I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world, or custom” (III.ii.111-2).

To some degree, the duchess's posture of “innocency” (III.i.55) is a matter of survival, forced upon her by a family and society intent on keeping the widow under wraps. At the end of the play, when her secret is out, her time to live is up. Importantly, however, hers is not a simple case of co-optation, a forced relinquishing of her desires. Instead, her ostensible compliance marks a move into will and desire, giving her significant leverage to do as she pleases, to have her cake and eat it too in a society that would have no more cakes and ale.

Her gains are truly extraordinary, at least for a female character on the early modern stage, and the play amplifies their significance by underscoring the pressures that surround her. By the end of act II, the duchess's reputation is under siege and her life threatened. Ferdinand, an early modern Wolfman, vilifies her as “a notorious strumpet” and is ready to “purge” her “infected blood” (II.iv.26) and, even to the Cardinal's horror, “(hew) her to pieces” (II.iv.31). At the beginning of act III, her infamy has spread to the “common rabble,” who, according to Antonio, “do directly say / She is a strumpet” (III.i.25-6). Yet in the meantime, during a leap of two children and several years, this “excellent / Feeder of pedigrees” (III.i.5-6) is living and producing heirs at liberty. And her brothers, the representatives of church and state, have not said a word, at least not one that stops her. To some degree, the play smooths over this gap in time and plot, unprecedented in Jacobean tragedy, by having characters talk about it, about how time and children fly. Nonetheless, it remains so jarring that critics have questioned the text's authority and coherence. But whatever its textual origins, the break works dramatically to underscore the duchess's unprecedented freedom, to highlight the remarkable, though invisible, license that comes with visible compliance. Secretly autonomous, she is overtly submissive to her brothers' constraints; overtly submissive, she seems at once untouched and untouchable. Under the cover of patriarchal authority, she can act on her will.

In the end, of course, the duchess is caught, confined, tormented by madmen, and turned into “a box of worm seed” (IV.ii.124) at the murderous hands of Bosola, Ferdinand's righthand man. Yet tellingly, when her subjugation becomes reality, a matter of force rather than choice, she no longer complies. When there is nothing left to gain from submission, she asserts her will directly, making clear the uncompromised and uncompromising nature of her voice. As long as there is hope for release, as long as Ferdinand (as Bosola pretends) will entertain reconciliation, the duchess displays “a behavior so noble / As gives a majesty to
adversity” (IV.i.5-6), and asks for her brother's pardon, still (if Bosola is right) “passionately apprehend(ing) / Those pleasures she's kept from” (IV.i.14-5). But once Ferdinand himself gives up his guise of innocence and betrays his undaunted aggression, so also does she. When he brings her the hand of (he pretends) Antonio and denounces her children as “bastards” (IV.i.36), she lambastes him for denying the legitimacy of her marriage and “violat(ing) a sacrament o' th' Church” (IV.i.39)—once again invoking a patriarchal authority to authorize herself, but this time openly against him. It is then that she “account(s) this world a tedious theater” where she “play(s) a part … 'gainst (her) will” (IV.i.83-4), and then that she refuses to play it. It is also then that she resists Bosola's efforts to dominate and destroy her, and then that she declares herself “Duchess of Malfi still” (IV.ii.142).

In locating this, her signal moment of self-assertion, in the midst of her confinement and immediately before her death, Webster may be underscoring the vacuity of such expression in an era only beginning to come to terms with interiority, as some have argued. But he may also be dramatizing what he has been showing throughout—the possibility of self-assertion within circumscription. Even if the self in question is not yet fully interiorized, articulated, or defined, the duchess's claim is neither vacuous nor defeating. For it is she who ultimately gets the last word. After her death, her voice reverberates from the grave, echoing warnings to Antonio that could (if this were not Jacobean tragedy) save his life. And at the end of the play, we hear that one of her and Antonio's sons will inherit the duchy—importantly, through his “mother's right” (V.v.113). She is “Duchess of Malfi still.”

Significantly, it is from a position as wife and not widow, the ruled rather than the unruly, that the duchess has established her “right”; through marriage and not widowhood that she has acted on her desires. In Elizabethan drama, when marriage figures as a means to power, it is predominantly as a means to male power—a means for men to safeguard (male) society from oversexed and overactive women, to manipulate, appropriate, traffic in, and otherwise dominate women. Yet in *The Duchess of Malfi* and plays emerging in the surrounding decades, when the debate about women is also in full and vigorous swing, the illusion (probably always an illusion) that women could be contained through marriage is seriously challenged. Indeed, in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (ca. 1620), Isabella (who has pledged herself to the doltish Ward in order to have an incestuous affair with her uncle) celebrates marriage as “the only veil wit can devise / To keep our (illicit) acts hid from sin-piercing eyes” (II.i.237-8)—a veil for her use, protection, and pleasure.

In the cases of Isabella and the duchess of Malfi, of female figures who let us in on their secrets and come out fighting from the start, it is easier to see compliance for the strategy that it, in these cases, is. But what about wives or would-be wives who do not talk to us? who are less transgressive at the beginning and less assertive at the end? What about “so good a wife” as Desdemona?

Although Desdemona seems much less a player than the duchess of Malfi, she is, in some ways, more—so much so that she has continually eluded our critical grasp. Desdemona gives us, in effect, two selves to choose from: the one, a fully sexual “woman capable of ‘downright violence’” (I.iii.249); and the other, “‘A maiden, never bold’” (I.iii.94), as Peter Stallybrass has argued. The first escapes her father's “guardage” (I.ii.70) to elope with a Moor and insists on accompanying her husband to Cyprus—a military outpost in the play and the locus of Venus and “very wanton” women in classical and other contemporary accounts—a dangerous place for a new wife to be on both counts. Too, this first self notices, while undressing, that “Lodovico is a proper man” (IV.iii.35). The second, that “perfect wife” and “bodiless obedient silence” mentioned above, emerges primarily in the play's second half and stands passively by as her husband destroys her reputation and her life. She then takes responsibility for the deed and clears his name.

When Hamlet, the prince of players, moves in and out of madness, inertia, and love, we readily entertain the possibility that he indeed knows “seems,” that he is a man of many masks (if not of all mask and no interior). When Desdemona, the good wife, shows two ostensibly incompatible sides, our tendency has been to treat them as a dramatic or characterological disruption, as something that impedes rather than enables her
emergence as a subject. Attempting to resolve the problem of these dueling personas, critics have either argued for one at the expense of the other or located a gap within the characterization, a moment (in the middle of act III) when type A Desdemona becomes type B. Or they have displaced the conflict onto culture: Desdemona becomes a site of ideological production and supports the normative “sex/race system” even as she “deviate(s)” from its “norms,” or unwittingly threatens it just by being sexual and female. As astute as many of these readings are, what they occlude is the possibility that Shakespeare creates a Desdemona who, like her male or more rebellious female counterparts, stages different selves.

It is clear from the start that Desdemona is an actor, as adept as Iago, Othello's second wife, at manipulating the system from within. When Othello wants to exonerate himself from charges of bewitching Desdemona, he writes her into his narrative of exoticism, portraying her as a vicarious adventurer, hungry to hear of his “disastrous chances” (I.iii.134) and frustrated by “house affairs” (I.iii.147). When Desdemona herself testifies, she—to the contrary and better advantage of both—stresses her conventionality and cloaks her unprecedented marital choices in social and familial precedent. Paying due respect to her “noble father” (I.iii.180), she acknowledges that she is “bound” to him “for life and education” (I.iii.182), that he is “the lord of duty” (I.iii.184), and that she is “hitherto (his) daughter” (I.iii.185). She then insists that her marriage fulfills her “duty” to turn from father to husband, as daughters must and as her mother did, “preferring (Brabantio) before her father” (I.iii.187). Significantly, in aligning herself with her mother, she strategically glosses over two factors that make her own marriage radically different and socially taboo: that she has eloped and eloped with a Moor. She further deflects attention from the incriminating specifics of her case by finding fault with society for assigning women an impossible “divided duty” (I.iii.181) to both fathers and husbands. In her hands, acts of filial disobedience and miscegenation (brilliantly) become not only acceptable but also expected behavior. Brabantio, the one protesting against those acts, has no choice but to give up and in, as indeed he does.

Similarly, when Desdemona seeks permission from the duke to go to Cyprus rather than, as he suggests, stay with Brabantio, she presents her plan as better for her father, whom she would otherwise put “in impatient thoughts / By being in his eye” (I.iii.242-3), and then humbly begs assistance for her “simpleness” (I.iii.246). Not surprisingly, one scene later, she is in Cyprus, welcoming her “dear Othello” to the shore (II.i.182).

In these instances, Desdemona's interventions do not markedly disturb the political system, since what she wants (to be in Cyprus as Othello's wife) does not alter what the Venetian court wants (to have Othello there, wife or no wife). Yet on the domestic front, as critics have argued, her desires do go beyond Othello's, who is determined to keep Cupid's "lightwing'd toys" from blunting his "speculative and offic'd (instruments)" (I.iii.268, 270) and housewives from making "a skillet of (his) helm" (I.iii.272). When she acts on those desires, albeit to enhance rather than subvert her marital relations, she, in effect, counters the terms of those relations. In these cases, the stakes in her staging of submission are higher. For through it she not only gets what she wants; she also challenges the very system that makes what she wants taboo.

Desdemona's most blatant expression of her desires comes as she mediates for Cassio, under the patriarchally sanctioned authority of his voice. She (and Shakespeare) make clear from the outset that, while the agenda is Cassio's, at issue is her will and her right to voice it. When agreeing to intercede, she promises (in the space of less than thirty lines):

Be thou assur'd, good Cassio, I will do
All my abilities in thy behalf.

(III.iii.1-2)

Do not doubt, Cassio,
But I will have my lord and you again
As friendly as you were.
(III.iii.5-7)

Do not doubt ... 
I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee, 
If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it 
To the last article.

(III.iii.19-22)

And perform she does, in ways that license her self-expression and desire at the expense of male authority.

Her performance exploits and collapses the two male fantasies that most define early modern wives: the one, negative, of the shrew, and the other, the ideal of the submissive subordinate. Lest we believe the stereotypes and think Desdemona truly shrewish, she announces that she will play the shrew—that she will “talk (Othello) out of patience” (III.iii.23), “intermingle every thing he does / With Cassio's suit” (III.iii.25-6), make his bed “a school” and “his board a shrift” (III.iii.24), and assault him verbally at every turn until he again embraces the lieutenant. True and alert to form she does so, hounding Othello to meet with Cassio “shortly,” “to-night at supper,” “To-morrow dinner,” “to-morrow night,” and so on (III.iii.56-60). Othello responds as if she were indeed a shrew, overstepping the proper bounds of female speech. Although he insists “I will deny thee nothing” (III.iii.76), his acquiescence serves to cut her off at the pass. In response, Desdemona outdoes his own illusory submission and rewrites her outspokenness as part of, and not subversive to, her duty as wife, as a gesture that neither threatens his position nor advances hers. “Why, this is not a boon,” she tells him:

'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves, 
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm, 
Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit 
To your own person.

(III.iii.76-80)

When Othello misses the point, again asserts “I will deny thee nothing” (III.iii.83), and asks to be left “but a little to myself” (III.iii.85), Desdemona reiterates the submissiveness of her pose. “Shall I deny you?” she asks, echoing Othello's own denial of denial, and answers with a firm “No” (III.iii.86). She then assures him, “Be as your fancies teach you; / What e'er you be, I am obedient” (III.iii.88-9)—presenting an assertive “I am” boldly in line with obedience.

In merging the postures of good wife and shrew, Desdemona indirectly challenges the presumption of their difference enforced in marriage handbooks, homilies, church courts, misogynist pamphlets, and the like. Her performance highlights what that discourse masks: that to be a shrew is, in fact, to follow the rules, to be obediently disobedient, to fill a role created by (male) authorities who needed shrews in order to contain, by criminalizing, female speech. Conversely, Desdemona also places outspokenness within the perimeters of appropriate wifely behavior, insisting that to speak out against her husband (and his refusal to see Cassio) is to “do a peculiar profit to” him.

While Othello uses acquiescence to repress, Desdemona uses it to assert herself, to sanction the expression of her own desires. After declaring that what she seeks is “not a boon,” she warns Othello that someday she may seek one:

when I have a suit 
Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed, 
It shall be full of poise and difficult weight, 
And fearful to be granted.
Although she only promises here to make “fearful” and “difficult” personal demands in the future (notably a “when” and not an “if”), she claims the right to do so now, to be a desiring subject, to command Othello’s love, and to “mean.” It is no wonder that Othello tries to curtail their interchange or that, immediately after (and not before), he begins to pick up on Iago’s incriminating hints that Desdemona has been untrue. For Desdemona’s message comes through loudly and clearly; her “meaning has a meaning” that is decidedly her own.34

What then are we to do in the play’s second half when, as the going gets rough, Desdemona seems to fall apart at the seams and slide into a fatal passivity, the woman capable of “downright violence” subsumed by the “maiden never bold” whom she has staged? What happens to the space Desdemona and Shakespeare have opened for her voice? We still see hints that Desdemona will stand her ground under the cover of obedience. When Othello strikes her in public, for example, she both protests that she has “not deserv’d this” (IV.i.241) and then withdraws, as Lodovico notes, like an “obedient lady” (IV.i.248). Later, in the face of Othello’s mistrust, she declares that she is “honest” (IV.ii.65) while addressing herself to his “will” and “pleasure” (IV.ii.24-5). Like the duchess of Malfi, she also calls on heaven—on the fact that she is a Christian and “shall be sav’d” (IV.ii.86)—to support her stance, using male authority to dispute Othello’s. Yet by and large, in the last acts of the play, Desdemona’s interactions with her husband show her to be increasingly silent and submissive and her desires increasingly at bay. Although she promises to mediate further for Cassio, she gives up speaking for herself, admitting that, for his case, “What I can do, I will; and more I will / Than for myself I dare” (III.iv.130-1). Presenting herself as “a child to chiding” (IV.ii.114) who cannot negotiate for herself, who “cannot tell” how it is with her (IV.ii.111) or whether or not she is “that name,” whore, that Othello has called her (IV.ii.118), she enlists Iago to help her “win my lord again” (IV.ii.149).

Yet in her case as in the duchess’s, what has changed is not Desdemona but the circumstances which surround her—circumstances that force her, not to give up her voice, but to redirect it. Once Othello decides that she is a whore, her gestures of obedience cease to have any meaning and any power to safeguard her speech. Desdemona, of course, does not know the whole story, does not know, that is, what drives Othello’s “strange unquietness” (III.iv.133). Even after he has accused her repeatedly of being false, she continues to ask “What’s the matter?” (V.ii.47). But she is aware that she has a husband she “nev’r saw … before” (III.iv.100), one whose erratic responses give her no readable text to play into. And two things more are clear: outspokenness may hurt her and obedience will not help her. In the face of Othello’s distraction, Desdemona senses that her “advocation is not now in tune” (III.iv.123) and admits for the first time that she has “stood within the blank of (Othello’s) displeasure / For (her) free speech” (III.iv.128-9). She twice evokes the possibility that she could be “beshrewed”—telling Emilia, at one point, to “beshrew me much” (III.iv.150) for “arraigning (Othello’s) unkindness with my soul” (III.iv.152) and, at another, to “beshrew” her if she were ever to be unfaithful (IV.iii.78)—as if she now understands speech as dangerous. Othello also makes all too clear to her that submissiveness is no antidote. After Lodovico has praised her obedience, Othello harshly mocks it, retorting (to Lodovico):

Ay, you did wish that I would make her turn.  
Sir, she can turn, and turn; and yet go on  
And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;  
And she's obedient, as you say, obedient;  
Very obedient.—Proceed you in your tears.—  
Concerning this, sir—O well-painted passion!—

(IV.i.252-7)

Obedience, the very thing that has made her self-assertions safe, now leaves them and her defenseless, blurring into her tears as a “well-painted passion.”
Importantly, though, while Desdemona does become less willing to assert her desires in Othello's presence, she continues to define herself as a desiring subject and to set the terms in which she is to mean. While she seems, to feminists' dismay, to defend Othello to the end (and even after) at her own expense, she actually exonerates herself and implicates him. She presents herself as a loyal wife, willing to sacrifice herself for love. But registered within her narrative of self-sacrifice is what we have been waiting desperately for her to produce—testimony of her fidelity and Othello's error. She vows in front of Emilia and Iago: “Unkindness may do much, / And his (Othello's) unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love” (IV.ii.159-61). She uses the story of her love to render his “unkindness” questionable. As she prepares herself for the bed that (as she too anticipates) will be her deathbed, she recounts the tragedy of her mother's maid Barbary and, through it, sets herself in the context of other women who suffered or died wrongly at the hands of their lovers. Recent interest in issues of race has brought the seemingly digressive tale into currency for its evocation of Africa. As significant as that context is in a play about a Moor, that Barbary is a woman, and a woman wronged in love, is, I think, more significant still, at least as far as the representation of Desdemona is concerned. For Barbary's story and song provide a crucial model for Desdemona's own self-fashioning and a critical key for our interpretation of it.

35

The story itself is simple: Barbary “was in love” with one who “prov’d mad / And did forsake her”; as a result, she died, singing “a song of ‘Willow,’” “an old thing” that “express'd her fortune” (IV.iii.27-9). That song (which Desdemona admittedly cannot get out of her mind and so sings) tells of a woman, “I,” who “sat (sighing) by a sycamore tree” (IV.iii.40), mourning a lover, and declaring: “‘Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve’” (IV.iii.52). Her approval, however, seems more strategic than sincere. When Desdemona reaches this final line, she notices that “that's not next” (IV.iii.53) and inserts what should have preceded, what explains the speaker's acquiescence—the possibility that she herself will be slandered:

I call'd my love false love; but what said he then?
Sing willow, willow, willow;
If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men.—

(IV.iii.55-7)

In refusing to blame her lover, the speaker (followed by Barbary) keeps blame from herself. For as the male voice within the ballad threatens, her incriminations of him will only lead to his recriminations against her: if she accuses him for courting more women, then he will accuse her of “couching” with more men. Admittedly, by loyally “approving” his scorn, she seems to be subdued by her husband. But by exposing the circumstances that surround her submission, she exposes also the falseness and vacuity of his position.

And so it is with Desdemona. When direct attempts to modify the system promise only recrimination, she turns to indirection and tells, rather than acts out, her story. Yet even though at the end she is forced to play defense rather than offense, she continues to play, to creative a submissive counternarrative that challenges and changes the order of things. In the final act, when she speaks after death, she breaks through the code of silence expected of the dead as of women and not only declares her death “guiltless” (V.ii.122) and herself “Oh falsely, falsely murder'd” (V.ii.117), but also, enigmatically, insists that “Nobody; I myself” (V.ii.124) killed her. Her “nobody” points suggestively back to the Willow Song, to the speaker's directive that “nobody” blame her lover, and reiterates the loyalty that has defined the speaker, Barbary, and Desdemona. Although critics have routinely heard the “nobody” rather than the “I” and turned her into a “bodiless obedient silence,” Desdemona has both voice and body here. Given the dramatic context surrounding her assertion, and her characterization throughout, the real enigma here is that we take her answer, literally the lie direct, at face value, her performance as passivity.

In fact, the onstage audience hears her. And her dying voice destabilizes the master narrative that has defamed her and puts incriminating words in Othello's mouth. Ironically, in order to prove her a liar (which is, to him, a
who) and to usurp the claim to truth, Othello confesses to the crime, insisting “‘Twas I that kill’d her’” (V.ii.130), undoing himself in order to undo her. Her voice also licenses Emilia's revolt against Iago. It is only after Desdemona has spoken that Emilia questions her husband's honesty, vows to “ne'er go home” (V.ii.197), and dies testifying against him. Tellingly, as Emilia “speak(s) as liberal as the north” (V.ii.220) before she too dies at her husband's hand, she reinvokes the Willow Song and, as she says, “die(s) in music” (V.ii.248) like her lady—music that is the food not just of love but also of female affirmation.

Desdemona, Emilia, Barbary, and the ballad's anonymous speaker all submit and die, but not before speaking out through a male-authored narrative that would otherwise occlude their voices. Each, in effect, tells her own story, registering desires not suitable for women through postures of obedience that are. Singing “willow” under a sycamore tree, they turn “nobody” into “I.” There are reasons that lead Othello to cry whore and Ferdinand to cry wolf—reasons that caution us against taking conventional postures, in general, and conventional female postures, in particular, as authentic rather than posed. Shakespeare, Webster, Jane Anger, and Aemilia Lanyer may have different reasons for staging female compliance. But however their representations promote, remodel, resist, or otherwise respond to the possibility of such performance, together they testify to a prominent cultural awareness that all the world was indeed a stage, and its men and women players.36

Notes


8. Unruly women were also doing remarkable things in the street literature of the period. For a useful survey of it, see Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1992).

9. See the case of Margaret Ferneseede, discussed below.

10. One notable exception is Michael C. Schoenfeldt's intriguing essay on “Gender and Conduct in Paradise Lost,” in Turner, pp. 310-38. Schoenfeldt sees in Eve's “artful expression of blind obedience,” not “the intellectual and ontological inferiority it ostensibly declares,” but “impressive verbal dexterity” (p. 325). “Gestures of submission in Milton,” he argues, “are at once static and dynamic, unquestioned declarations of one's place in a hierarchy and the necessary condition for rising,” and *Paradise Lost* “uses the constrictions of courtesy literature to construct a space—albeit limited, and only sporadically inhabited—for the conception of active female virtue” (p. 336).

11. Henderson and McManus, p. 54.


21. Compare Jardine, who sees the duchess as a flagrant “strong woman,” who “must be systematically taught the error of her ways” (pp. 68-102, 98).

22. See, for example, Belsey, pp. 35-41.


24. Because of the prominence of this challenge, I would argue against the assumption that “misogyny is generally on the rise in the drama of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean years,” reiterated most recently in Steven Mullaney, “Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy,* and the *Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600-1607,*” *SQ* 45, 2 (Summer 1994): 139-62, 144.


30. See also II.i., where Desdemona points to her role-playing, her plan to “beguile / The thing (she is) by seeming otherwise” (II.i.122-3).


33. Related is the instance of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, which, if Quilligan is right, seems “to grant Kate the exercise of her own biologically gendered sexual desire at the moment of her most freely chosen obedience” (p. 223).


36. I have presented versions of this paper at the Shakespeare Association of America Convention, Kansas City, April 1992, and to the Columbia Shakespeare Seminar, Columbia University, October 1992, and am indebted to the participants in both, especially to Rob Watson, Maurice Charney, and Jean Howard, as well as to the reader at *SEL*. Finally, very special thanks to Jim Siemon, whose comments and encouragement have been vital.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Millicent Bell (essay date spring 2002)**


*[In the following essay, Bell explores the racial dynamics of Othello's character and contends that he ultimately suffers from his inability to completely assimilate into a community that deems him a racial outsider.]*

Othello's whole life seems to be shaped by a society—like Shakespeare's England—in which self-transformation as well as the transformations effected by the forces of social change, or even by mere accident, operate to alter what one is, shift one's very selfhood from one template to another. Before he became the hero who won the regard of the Venetian state and the love of Desdemona, he had been someone we can only dimly imagine. Somehow, his career had begun by exile from an origin we never see directly. We can merely suspect its vast difference from his present condition. What he might have been as a person of station in his native place we will never know.

We do not even know without doubt that he is a “blackamoor,” a Negro from sub-Saharan Africa, like “raven-coloured” Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* who is described as having a “fleece of wooly hair” and whose child is called a “thick-lipped slave.” Roderigo slurringly refers to Othello as “the thick lips,” and he is called “black” throughout the play and says, himself, “Haply for I am black.” But, perhaps, he is a “tawny Moor” from the Mediterranean rim, like the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, or a
Berber or “erring Barbarian,” as Iago puns, or the “Barbary horse” who has “covered” Desdemona, as the same racist provocateur vulgarly tells Brabantio. Shakespeare does not remove all doubt, but he seems willing to let us visualize “a veritable negro,” to use Coleridge's phrase for the Othello whose love for a white woman he found “something monstrous to conceive.” Elizabethans might not have reacted as Coleridge would come to do. Othello was played as a black man on the stage in Shakespeare's own day and for over a century and a half after. And so again we feel that the part must be played today, though the nineteenth and a good portion of the twentieth century were able only to tolerate a sort of light-skinned Arab sheik to represent him.

But one way or another, his exact beginnings remain obscure to us. Though he has told Desdemona as well as her father “the story of [his] life / From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes / That [he] passed … even from [his] boyish days”—his summary to the signory of Venice is vague, and the “travailous history” he offers of wars and wanderings, of captures and escapes, and of encounters with monsters and cannibals is mythically Odyssean. One thing we know is that he had once experienced the ultimate degradation that had come when, “taken by the insolent foe,” he had been “sold to slavery.” Somehow, he found his freedom, and we can presume that he was converted from his original Muhammadanism, but we are ignorant of when or how. Already, when we first meet him, he is a Christian and a “self-made man” who has made the most of opportunity and his own genius and has overcome the handicaps of being foreign and black in the white Venetian world in which he has found a place. This stranger with an exotic, almost mythical otherness has acquired a place within the order of Venice by his own efforts on behalf of a colonial empire. And yet, in the end, he cannot sustain this new personhood, this transformed social being donated by altered occasion, forged by his own will.

The curtain rises for good reason on a discussion about jobs and how one is qualified for them. Iago's declared envy of Cassio's promotion is plausible, even though he expresses this resentment only in a single remark to Roderigo. It serves to relate the play to a new seventeenth-century social climate that gave rise to uncertainty about personal identity—and gives a historical meaning to the way Iago comes before us as the man who believes that one is only what one appears to be, what role one is able to personate successfully. Iago's most significant statement of this view is the skeptical declaration he makes to Roderigo—“'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to which our wills are gardeners”—which is almost sincerely his own philosophy, though it hardly serves the feckless Roderigo to whom it is addressed. Iago calls Cassio, just appointed lieutenant, a mere classroom soldier, “a great arithmetician … / That never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows / More than a spinster.” Practical field experience is a legitimate requirement for the promotion Cassio has gained—and something different from the mere entitlement of class and even the textbook theory he has acquired. In contrast, Iago has served in battle, as he reminds Othello: “in the trade of war I have slain men.” Iago professes to believe in promotion for merit and resents the arbitrary advancement of the candidate, like Cassio, who is part of an old boys' network. He also claims the earned rights of seniority rather than preferment gained by letters of recommendation from influential somebodies.

But though he makes his claim by referring to a system of respect for service he calls “old gradation,” he himself has tried to go up the ladder by the aid of “letter and affection” and secured the support of “[t]hree great ones of the city.” He is one of the new breed of men who not only claim advancement by merit but will manipulate and scheme for advancement—and by either means expect to escape assignment to a fixed definition. That he has not received his deserved promotion and must prosper just the same is something he is prepared for as a master of Machiavellian elasticity. He deprecates title and position and even the old division into masters and followers that organizes society:

We cannot be all masters, nor all masters
Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time much like his master's ass
For nought but provender, and when he's old, cashiered.
Whip me such honest knaves!

Others, adapting to a new social climate, know the meaninglessness of the identities society assigns. Taking instruction from Machiavelli, they make the most of opportunity, and, though observing the old boundaries of outer behavior,

trimmed in forms, and visages of duty,
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
Do well thrive by them, and when they have lined their coats,
Do themselves homage; these fellows have some soul
And such a one do I profess myself.

But not all have Iago's confidence. In a mobile society, one is always likely to lose one's footing and become a nobody—that is, to cease to exist in a social sense. The play is full of implicit references to a milieu in which, as in today's corporate world, there is no longer a guarantee of tenure. Demotion breaks Cassio's heart. Othello remembers with grief how he had “done the state some service” before his replacement as general and administrator of Cyprus.

Unlike the aristocratic Cassio, Othello, who may once have been a prince, has been a mercenary soldier and before that even a slave in another world. But, as the play begins, he is in command of the Venetian forces in defense of Cyprus against the Turks. A Renaissance idea of fame, or of “making a name” for oneself, is invoked in the play, as is Iago's Machiavellian idea of “thriving.” It is the heroic character Othello has made for himself that achieves his success in his wooing. He makes Desdemona put aside the prerequisites of class and race assumed for her appropriate suitor. She says she “loved [him] for the dangers [he] had passed,” though her father, who looks for inherited credentials he understands better in the sons of Venetian aristocracy, calls Othello's recounting of his history “witchcraft.” And perhaps such self-fabrication, such transformation by which one of the colonized joins the military elite of a colonial power, is a kind of magic. For Brabantio, miscegenation is, classically, a threat of redefinition not to be made less threatening by proof of Othello's worthiness. “For if such actions may have passage free / Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be,” he shouts in an outburst of class panic. Iago will remark a bit later to Cassio, “he to-night hath boarded a land carrack,” implicitly comparing Othello's sexual conquest to the seizure of a Spanish or Portuguese treasure ship (a “carrack”) by an English privateer—in other words, an act of social piracy.

Yet nothing can be more fragile than Othello's self-making, which has none of Iago's confidence in being whatever, for the occasion, he wills himself to be. His attempt to give rebirth to an ancient ideal of epic heroism is vulnerable to the spirit of the later time represented by Iago. As his nobility is erased by rage and despair in the middle of the third act, he mourns,

Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars
That make ambition virtue! O farewell,
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!
And, O ye mortal engines, whose wide throats
Th' immortal Jove's great clamours counterfeit,
Farewell: Othello's occupation's gone.
The strangeness of this wonderful speech is seldom commented on. There is no real reason why Othello should say goodbye at this point to his soldier’s profession, which has given him an epic selfhood. His terrible crime, for which he only escapes punishment by performing his own execution, is still ahead of him. But the collapse of personal being he is already experiencing is inseparable from the loss of occupation. Before he embraces his literal self-destruction at the last, he refers to himself in the third person, saying “Where should Othello go?” as though the man he was is no longer speaking. Afterwards, when Lodovico comes looking for him with “Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?” he replies, “That's he that was Othello? here I am.”

Then, he remembers his former self—the self created by his public career—as having once defended the Venetian State even as, at this ultimate moment of further transformation, he identifies himself with the “circumcised dog” he once killed. Critics are mistaken who have spoken of Othello’s “recovery” in the final scene when he seems to become, again, a fearless soldier and romantic lover who dies by his own hand. It is hard to admire Othello uncritically once having read T. S. Eliot on this hero’s famous final speech (“What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is cheering himself up. He is endeavoring to escape reality”). But Eliot did not observe that what happens at this last moment is tragic acceptance rather than escape, an acceptance of his original status as a racial outsider, which neither his military achievements nor his marriage have succeeded in permanently altering.

His marriage has proved to be the theater in which the issues of self-realization, the issues that beset men in society at large, are acted out for Othello on the scale of intimate relations. Marriage to a woman of a rank above one’s own has been a universally practiced means of male self-advancement throughout human history, of course, but the marriage of Othello to Desdemona has provided a precarious bridge over the gaps between them. Shakespeare hints that Othello’s jealous anguish and distrust of his own perceptions may be caused by the interracial character of his union with a daughter of his Venetian masters. All those reminders by Iago of the impossibility of establishing Desdemona’s adultery—a privacy invisible directly—refer one back to a miscegenation over whose consummation a cloud of unknowableness also hangs. The real but equally transgressive relation of Othello and Desdemona is even less easily viewable than the adultery of Desdemona with Cassio that did not take place but was so vividly supposed. This marriage becomes, by implication, something not to be made “ocular,” as though it is obscene, as though it can be fairly represented only by animalistic metaphor in Iago’s description to the shuddering Brabantio at the beginning of the play: “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe!” Just as he will cause Othello to hallucinate the false image of Desdemona and Cassio locked in naked embrace, Iago rouses her father with his wizard evocation, setting into the mind of the old man the animal coupling that represents their racial transgression as “making the beast with two backs,” and figuring Othello as a black ram as well as a Barbary horse.

It seems probable that, at this early point, Othello and Desdemona have not yet had the opportunity of establishing the union they have secretly contracted. The newly married pair could not have enjoyed their nuptial rapture for long during their first night in Venice when a midnight summons from the Duke posts the bridegroom to the defense of Cyprus. But not only circumstances or conditions keep this marriage from being consummated. The play suggests that Othello himself is engaged in a deferral of this forbidden act. Othello portrays himself convincingly at his trial before the Venetian Duke and Senators as one more used to the “flinty and steel couch of war” than to the “downy” bed of love. This war-hardened soldier hasn’t had much experience of love’s soft delights. He confesses: “since these arms of mine had seven years' pith, / Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used / Their dearest action in the tented field.” He is no Marc Antony. Though Desdemona will accompany him to Cyprus, he is at pains to remind the Duke how largely his military preoccupation will absorb him:

And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
When she is with me. No, when light-winged toys
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and officed instrument
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm.

He tells Desdemona, as he assumes his new assignment, “I have but an hour / Of love, of worldly matter and
direction / To spend with thee. We must obey the time.”

Desdemona may still be a virgin when they are reunited after separate crossings to Cyprus, and Othello says,
“The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue. / The profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.” He gives orders for
a wedding party while he leads his wife to bed, but the party grows wild and brings Cassio into disgrace, and
Othello and Desdemona are interrupted once more-after which Othello lingers on with the wounded Montano,
saying to his wife, with some equanimity, “Come Desdemona: lis the soldiers’ life / To have their balmy
slumbers waked with strife.” Shakespeare may have wanted us to wonder how well their lovemaking had
gone or if it had even got under way, and to sustain the doubt in Iago's earlier question, “Are you well
married?”

We may connect the jealousy aroused so readily in Othello with one of those postnuptial awakenings that
come to men unprepared for the active sexuality of the women they marry. Was Desdemona too quick or he
too slow? It has been evident from the start of the play that she can take the initiative. We recall that when she
first heard Othello's narrative of his past exploits she told him that “she wished / That heaven had made her
such a man”—a remark that either expresses her longing for masculine roles or her bold invitation to him to
make himself hers. She prompted Othello by telling him that if he had a friend who loved her, he “should but
teach him how to tell” such a story as his own, “and that would woo her.” She herself admits to the Duke of
Venice, “That I did love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence and scorn of fortunes / May
trumpet to the world,” and so she pleads to be allowed to accompany him to Cyprus rather than to be left
behind, “a moth of peace.” When Othello lands in Cyprus to find her already there waiting for him he greets
her, “O my fair warrior!” Perhaps she already is what Cassio calls her, his “captain's captain.” Her father may
not have known the daughter he describes as “[a] maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her
motion / Blushed at herself.”

Her activeness may be sexual. She had insisted to the Duke that if she were left behind, “the rites for which I
love [Othello] are bereft me.” Later, convinced that she has made love to Cassio, Othello will come to say,
under Iago's influence, “O curse of marriage / That we can think these delicate creatures ours / And not their
appetites!” Iago will have laid the ground for such a disillusion by his suggestion that Desdemona had already
been an awakened woman before her marriage, a “super-subtle Venetian”: “In Venice they do let God see the
pranks / They dare not show their husbands.” Brabantio charged Othello before the Venetian signory with
having bound Desdemona in “chains of magic”—for how, otherwise, could she, “so opposite to marriage that
she shunned / The wealthy, curled darlings of our nation” and incurred “the general mock,” have “run from
her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing”? But Othello knows he has used no witchcraft, and to him
Iago suggests “a will most rank, / Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural” in Desdemona. And with this
disbelief in her genuine love for him, along with a suspicion of her too-ready sexual forwardness, he is lost.
Perhaps he suspects a racial will to dominion in her sexual “appetite,” which declares that she is not his but
that he is hers as a slave belongs to his owner.

This, of course, is a counterpart to the white master's fear of the slave's rebellion, which expresses itself in the
racist presumption of the dangerous lustfulness of the oppressed and repressed—the cliche of a primitive
savagery more powerful than the white man's, a lust threatening white womanhood. Someone like the stupid
Roderigo, who has failed to get Desdemona even to glance at him, will refer to the “gross clasps of a
lascivious Moor” when he attempts to arouse Brabantio against Othello. Iago works this vein when he
portrays Othello as someone of mere impulse. “These Moors,” he says, “are changeable in their wills.” He
even claims to believe that “it is thought abroad” that his General's unbridled lust has extended to Emilia, and
cuckolded him. “I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat,” he says, and though he may not
really think this possible, he repeats his half-belief in this suggestion that Othello had “done [his] office 'twixt [his] sheets,” while confessing that he is only looking for specious causes for his animosity: “I know not ift be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety.” Perhaps the same promptness to such presumption has infected the minds of some of the plays readers ever since, despite Shakespeare’s exposure of the motives of both Iago and Roderigo in seizing so readily upon the ancient stereotype of the “lusty Moor.” A refined version of it has even been discovered in Othello by so distinguished a modern Shakespeare scholar as E. A. J. Honigmann, the editor of the latest Arden Edition of the play, who speaks of Othello’s “exceptional sensuousness, though not necessarily ‘racial’” to be found in some of Othello's tributes to Desdemona's effect upon him. Honigmann cites, particularly, Othello's swooning recall of her appeal to his sense of smell—as when he exclaims, in his culminating anguish, “O thou weed / Who art so lovely fair and smellst so sweet / That the senses ache at thee.”

But, in fact, Othello himself, as Shakespeare shows, is quite the reverse of the stereotypical “lusty Moor.” To respond to the call of arms, Othello delays his wedding-night happiness without hesitation, almost welcoming, in a curious way, as I have noted, the deferral of his bliss. Moreover, he himself goes so far as to deny the sensuality of his feelings for his beautiful bride. He supports her plea to accompany him to Cyprus with the odd observation to the Duke: “I … beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite / Nor to comply with heat, the young affects / In me defunct, and proper satisfaction, / But to be free and bounteous to her mind.” This renunciation of sexual urgency almost removes his color for his grateful employers as though to refute the convention that attributes “savage” sexuality to the black man. “Your son-in-law is far more fair than black,” the Duke tells Brabantio as Othello accepts his mission. It is Desdemona rather than himself who is to be suspected of illicit lust, as Iago will soon persuade him when he stresses the positive unnaturalness of her love for her husband instead of for a social and racial equal—knowing, rightly, how such a thought will promote that jealous insecurity he wishes to arouse. He responds to Othello's protest that Desdemona's betrayal would be an incredible case of “nature erring from itself” by suggesting that it is her marriage itself, her inclination for Othello, that is a perversity.

Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Where to we see, in all things, nature tends—  
Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,  
Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural.

We can imagine how these suggestions affect Othello, most especially the reference to “complexion.” Paradoxically, Iago actually increases Othello's self-doubt when he suggests that Desdemona has not freed herself from her father's racism. Is not this borne out by a love that began with her vision of her lover’s “visage in his mind”—rather than in the black face gazing at her? To match this, Othello's disclaimer to the Duke and Senators of Venice of his physical desire for his wife may be connected to his fear of their physical union stated in almost the same terms when he declares that all he looks forward to is “but to be free and bounteous to her mind.”

So, Othello seems to suffer the insecurity of someone who has crossed the racial line yet feels reproved for it when his white wife is reclaimed by her social and racial world in her supposed affair with Cassio. Iago can count on the self-hating that afflicts the victim of prejudice who cannot, himself, believe that he is loveable to someone of the other race. He has been compelled to hallucinate her intimacy with a white man, but can hardly imagine his own union with her. She may be expected to retain an inclination for such a familiar species as Cassio. Only moments before she is murdered she will remark upon the Venetian nobleman to whom she is related by blood as well as class, “This Lodovico is a proper man.” To which Emilia replies, woman-to-woman, “I know a lady in Venice would have walked barefoot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.” For this is how, according to the code of Venice, a Venetian woman should feel; it is perfectly “natural.” When Desdemona is called a “whore” by an Othello reduced to the racial enemy's language by his jealousy, Emilia exclaims, “Hath she forsook so many noble matches, / Her father, and her country, and her friends, /
To be called whore?” But this is exactly what her social desertion must seem to white society, something more adulterous, indeed, than the affair with Cassio of which she is falsely accused.

Othello’s collapse into murderous violence would seem to be an illustration of the way, according to the racist view, the coating of civilization must slide readily off the “savage” personality. But Shakespeare’s readiness to admit the instability of personality—as though he is ready to entertain Iago’s denial of intrinsic and permanent character—is apparent in all his tragedies. The Macbeth who is held by his wife to be too full of the milk of human kindness before his murder of Duncan is not the same as that “dead butcher” whose head is triumphantly carried onto the stage on the uplifted lance of Macduff at the end. Certainly, in Othello, the serene and just commander of himself and others we first meet is not the madman who shrieks, “I will chop her into messes,” as he accepts the view that his wife has betrayed him. The play exhibits that mutability in the alteration of his very language from a majestic poetry that has been called the “Othello music” to a debased tone from which all music has gone. But this alteration is only temporary. The play does not justify the racist theory of the uneducable savage. Othello is always too noble even in his preposterous delusion and degradation, too superior to everyone else on the scene, for such a view. And yet, again, though many have seen in Othello’s final end a full recovery of tragic greatness, Shakespeare’s vision may be too pessimistic to allow that either.

There are no more romantic lovers in all of Shakespeare than the almost virginal warrior and the high-minded virgin Lady whose love he wins by recital of his heroic past. But they also recall the May-December prototypes of farce; Othello feels his head for horns like the deluded old husband of a thousand comic tales. Despite the grimness of this tragic history, the comic foregrounding of sex, as in farce, is both invoked and obscured in a play in which so much of the time the marriage bed is at least present to mind even if offstage, just guessed at, though unseen, like the sexual union enacted there. Othello’s sexual secret discloses itself, however—rather than being merely suspected or hinted—on the deathbed that has been laid with his and Desdemona’s wedding sheets—“sheets” being an evasive metonymy for the bed and for the lovemaking that takes place upon it. When Iago claims to hate Othello because “twixt my sheets / He’s done my office,” or when he remarks to Cassio on Cyprus, “Well, happiness to their sheets!” the same figure of speech, along with the sniggering euphemism of “office,” has been employed. Like Desdemona’s honor, which Iago thinks of as “an essence that’s not seen,” her sexual union with Othello, though sanctified by marriage, has not been directly imaginable till now when it is revealed to the prurient gaze as the curtains of the marriage bed are drawn apart. “My mistress here lies murdered in her bed,” Emilia announces, as though the bed of marriage, with its “tragic lodging” of dead bodies—one black, the other white, lying side by side—is what horrified vision must take in at last. “Lodging” even implies the living together, the cohabitation of the lovers. The change of the word to “loading” in the Folio version of the text recalls Iago’s plundered “land carrack.” When Lodovico says, “the object poisons sight, / Let it be hid,” the horror he feels is for a forbidden union as much as for the deaths this union has caused. To intensify that horror and to further emphasize the perversity of their sexual relation, there is a hint of necrophilia in the implication that now, at last, their love is consummated. Othello tells his victim, “Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee after,” and then, having done so, “I kissed thee are I killed thee. No way but this: / Killing myself to die upon a kiss,” giving “die” its usual Elizabethan double sense as orgasm.

The play makes it seem, even if we are sure of the contrary, that only their deathbed unites their bodies in ultimate union. “Starcrossed” by racial difference, they resemble Romeo and Juliet, their prototypes in the enactment of a Liebestod climaxing a forbidden love, forbidden for both pairs of lovers even in marriages that constitute social adultery. We must recall that Othello’s anticipations of bliss had prompted thoughts of death:

’Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
It is one of those flights of Othello's hyperbole that suggests too much before the fact, and Desdemona herself reins him in with, “The heavens forbid / But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow.” To think that one will reach the peak of happiness—and so be ready to die—is a traditional poetic extravagance, but here more sinister, forecasting as it does the death which will actually be the consequence of their love and Desdemona's literalism seems to express an appropriate caution. And well it might, for in the calculus of their unanticipated difficulties Shakespeare has added something besides the uncertainty of the bridegroom, the too-readiness of the bride. In this play about love and jealousy, which shows how love is a moment's hazardous leap over vast distance, he has included the crippling prohibition of racial difference.

At the last, Othello surrenders himself to the prison of race he thought he had escaped. He is not able, in the end, to cast away the role and character which societal convention prescribed to him at the beginning of his career in the white colonial world. He recalls an exploit of his adopted Venetian identity when he remembers how, “in Aleppo once,” he had taken by the throat a “turbanned,” that is, unconverted, Turk (wearer of what Shakespeare calls in Cymbeline an “impious turband”) who “[b]eat a Venetian and traduced the state.” He remembers how he “smote him-thus,” as he turns his dagger toward himself. This has generally been taken as splendid coup de theatre—but it is more. Reenacting that killing of an infidel by his transformed Christian self, Othello becomes again what he was before his conversion and enlistment in the service of Venice. His magnificent self-making has been undone and he now kills, again, the irreversibly circumcised, unassimilable racial other that he is.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Ben Brantley (essay date 10 December 2001)**


In the following review of Othello directed by Doug Hughes at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, Brantley observes the dominance of Liev Schreiber's Iago in the production.

The psychopath is running the asylum again. And isn't it wonderful to know that you're in such—shall we say—capable hands?

Playing the ultimate disgruntled employee in the fast-paced production of Othello that opened last night at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, the amazing Liev Schreiber presents a tic-ridden, sexually crippled Iago who is clearly as mad as a rabid raccoon.

Yet he also possesses the sort of gifts that are usually rewarded with keys to the executive washroom: charm, efficiency, discreet sycophancy, organization and excellent people skills, including an ability to plant an idea in someone else's head and make him think it's his own.

A pity about that motiveless evil thing. But if he lived in latter-day Manhattan instead of long-ago Cyprus, this Iago would be the head of a Fortune 500 company or perhaps be one of Broadway's few bankable directors. At least until someone discovered a body in one of his filing cabinets.

Anyone doubting that Mr. Schreiber has advanced to the top rungs of American stage actors need only check out his smart, flashy and extremely entertaining portrait of Shakespeare's most subtle destroyer of men. Last seen in New York in an exquisitely understated portrait of one of the cryptic adulterers in Harold Pinter's Betrayal, Mr. Schreiber here shifts into a more flamboyant mode.
But don't worry. The cool fireworks he sends off have been just as impeccably orchestrated as the elliptical silences of Betrayal. In Doug Hughes's swift and streamlined interpretation of Shakespeare's most relentless tragedy, Iago and the man playing him are unconditionally in charge.

Granted, this leads to a definite imbalance. No one else in the cast, led by the gifted Keith David as Othello, comes close to matching Mr. Schreiber's playful interpretive intelligence.

So Mr. Hughes really has no choice but to lead with the ace that is Mr. Schreiber, turning the whole evening into Iago's playground. For here is a Mephistopheles who was born, as he sees it, not just to rebel against God but to usurp his function.

Correspondingly, in ways beautifully enhanced by the staging and production design, all the world—or at least most of Cyprus—becomes Iago's stage. Mr. Hughes is expert in clearly configuring his cast members in the patterns of chess figures as seen through Iago's eyes.

Robert Wierzel's superb lighting takes us directly into the overheated workshop of Iago's mind, where we find him serenading his own shadow. And David Van Tieghem's sound design includes sinister bell noises that seem to signal those moments when Iago clicks another piece of his diabolical puzzle into place.

Even Neil Patel's minimal set, in which screens play an appropriately central role, and Catherine Zuber's costumes seem to feed into Iago's master plan. The mood is 18th-century rococo, recalling a time in which rank and class were elaborately stratified. In an inspired interpolative touch, Iago becomes Othello's valet cum dresser as well as his ensign. And who is more invisible than a valet?

Taking advantage of such handy camouflage, this Iago proceeds to write the script of the undoing of his charismatic boss, barely able to repress a murmur of delight when props, actors and scenery all conspire to fall into place. You'll often find him in an aisle of the theater, looking on like the archetypal nervous director, nibbling his fingers with a mixture of satisfaction and anxiety. He's like an evil urban twin of Prospero, the world-ordering wizard of The Tempest.

This Iago, for the record, is no bland-seeming, self-effacing functionary, which has become the fashion. The brilliant British actor Simon Russell Beale provided the last word in that vein in his landmark performance for the Royal National Theater several seasons ago.

Instead, Mr. Schreiber leaves no doubt that his Iago, addled by sexual resentment and class envy, is as bonkers as the serial killer played by Kevin Spacey in Seven or one of Thomas Harris's diabolical pleasure killers. This Iago knows he has to keep a somber mask over his enjoyment of the disasters he brings about, but every so often the mask slips in public. And there, fleetingly, in plain view are the compulsive flinches and twitches, that infernal smile of self-satisfaction.

The struggle to sustain the mask provides most of the real tension in this Othello. Mr. David's interpretation of the Moor scales down the usual majesty of presence. He's extremely composed and authoritative, a natural leader. But he doesn't have the hypnotic grandeur or the implicit force of passion that so famously won over Desdemona (Kate Forbes).

This means that when Othello does battle with that old green-eyed monster, he doesn't really have very far to fall. He suggests a self-involved businessman (too self-involved and self-confident to notice that his ensign Iago is subverting him at every turn). When he famously bids farewell to the “tranquil mind” and martial glory, it's as if he's saying goodbye to expense account lunches at “21.”
Christopher Evan Welch's foppish, foolish Roderigo is perhaps too easy a characterization, but it works. And Mr. Schleiber is never so creepy as when pulling Mr. Welch into a comradely embrace that seems mighty close to a stranglehold. Jay Goede is fine as the handsome Cassio, especially when in his drunkenness he says exactly what he shouldn't say if he wants to stay in Iago's good graces. Becky Ann Baker, an excellent actress, anachronistically brings to mind a whiny Shelly Winters as Desdemona's handmaiden.

Ms. Forbes, once you get past the self-conscious plumminess of her diction, is a refreshingly plucky Desdemona. She's heartier and more self-assertive than most Desdemonas, and it makes sense that she would stand up both to her father (Jack Ryland, in an enjoyably distraught performance) and her husband. She also does beautifully by the melancholy, introspective scene that precedes her murder.

Mr. David incisively conveys the uxorious sensual pride that Othello takes in his wife. But in this Othello it's Iago's relationship with Desdemona that seizes our imagination. Watch this Iago venturing, ever so tentatively, to touch Desdemona's neck as she weeps, simultaneously registering impulses both erotic and homicidal.

He's such a fascinating creature that you at first shrug off that no one else reaches Mr. Schreiber's level. After all, isn't that sort of appropriate, given the upper hand that Iago sustains for most of the evening?

By the second half, however, you're forced to remember that the play's title is indeed Othello. And this Othello's descent into tragic rage just doesn't intrigue except as it gratifies Iago. Tellingly, the audience was chuckling away even when Desdemona was being strangled (instead of suffocated as usual), not a good sign.

All the same, it isn't often that a production of a play as well known as Othello tells you anything new. And Mr. Schreiber, working with Mr. Hughes, draws an intriguing and persuasive new diagram of Iago's pathological web. Now if only his victims presented slightly more of a challenge.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Barbara D. Phillips (essay date 12 December 2001)**


[In the following review of the 2001 Public Theater staging of Othello, Phillips notes the “austere power” of director Doug Hughes's production, but laments the lack of a more compelling Othello to match Liev Schreiber's masterful Iago.]

Othello is Shakespeare's most intimate tragedy, one in which the audience is made privy from the start to Iago's corrosive envy and hatred, his malign manipulations unrestrained by moral bounds. And it is the playwright's most concentrated drama, one in which the villain makes quick work of love, loyalty and honor as he destroys a forthright war hero and his innocent young bride using a stealthy arsenal of artful insinuation, pregnant pauses and a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries. The play, which opened Sunday at the Public Theater in a compelling production directed by Doug Hughes, and starring Keith David as Othello, the masterly Liev Schreiber as Iago and Kate Forbes as Desdemona, has its share of swordplay. But the true battlefield is one of wordplay—a personal realm in which language, well-aimed, is a powerful weapon.

Othello's soaring rhetorical gifts win the heart of his bride, Desdemona, who is entranced by his tales of far-off lands and courageous adventures. And they persuade the Duke, despite the anger of Desdemona's father, to give the couple his blessing. But this African prince, a foreign-born hero of the Venetian public realm, finds himself brought to ground by Iago, his low-born ensign, a gutter-fighter who can paint a lurid picture of Desdemona's supposed sexual deception with just a few well-placed strokes. Iago creates an
illusory world in which he is perceived as an “honest” friend by those he sees as enemies and is both director and playwright of their undoing.

Iago's self-justifying motives—fury at being passed over for promotion; contempt for Cassio, the higher-born man who got the job from Othello; suspicion that his own wife, Emilia, has slept with the Moor; lust for Othello's wife, Desdemona—never quite explain the intensity of his anger or the scope of his evil.

The Public's Anspacher Theater proves to be the perfect setting for this rapid descent into hell, where its thrust stage and steeply banked seats keep some 275 ticket-holders within spitting distance of Iago's devilry. And director Doug Hughes puts the action at even closer range, staging the play in the aisles as well.

This could be a painful proximity in a production less sure-footed than the Public's. But Mr. Hughes's American cast shows a rare ease with both the music and meaning of Shakespeare's language. (Messrs. David and Schreiber are both noted voice-of-God narrators of TV documentaries, as well as classical actors.) Just as important, their well-chosen gestures serve as narrative footnotes for the modern audience, conveying the intent of words and phrases that the past four centuries of linguistic change have obscured.

It is, however, Mr. Schreiber's show from the start, more Iago than Othello. There is something in the way he carries himself, in his slightly askew posture, twitchy movements and the hooded nature of his gaze, that makes the skin crawl. Yet Iago's ability to gull both the innocents and sophisticates around him is plausible. Thanks to Mr. Schreiber's finely calibrated performance, we see with horror—and a guilty thrill—how Iago, his own self-control always threatening to slip away, is able to prey upon the individual weaknesses of each of his victims and play on the instruments of their destruction, remaining in their deluded eyes (until his final unmasking) a trusted confidante.

Mr. David is a less compelling actor, lacking the charismatic fire needed to balance Mr. Schreiber's infernal flame. When proud Othello is pulled downward, caught in the sinkhole of Iago's lies and fetid imagery, as well as his own unworldliness in the private realm, we don't feel the full measure of the distance he has traveled. Still, this Othello's epileptic seizure is frighteningly real, as are the tender kisses he plants on the sleeping mouth of the bride he is about to strangle to death.

In Catherine Zuber's 18th-century costumes, Ms. Forbes projects a nubile innocence as young Desdemona, her breasts all but popping out of her tightly bodiced dresses—no wonder she attracts the attention of these soldiers. But there is a firm determination beneath her soft curves, as when she pleads her own case with her choleric father, Brabantio (Jack Ryland), and lobbies for Cassio (Jay Goede) with her husband. In the secondary role of Iago's wife, an earthy Becky Ann Baker (probably best known as the mom on Freaks and Geeks) makes the most of Emilia's horror at the unwitting role she has played in Iago's cruel and deadly schemes.

Robert Wierzel's dramatic lighting, David Van Tieghen's expressionistic sound and Neil Patel's spare but strong scenic design (moveable Gothic screens, hanging lanterns, African drums)—underscore the austere power of this Othello.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Charles Isherwood (essay date 17-23 December 2001)**


[In the following review of the Public Theater's 2001 Othello, Isherwood remarks on the weakening of the drama's tragic anguish caused by its focus on Iago as enacted by Liev Schreiber—a performance unmatched...]
Destruction is raised to the level of art in Othello, and audiences couldn't ask for a more captivating creator of chaos than the Iago of Liev Schreiber, the latest and finest in this exemplary young actor's growing gallery of Shakespeare performances for the Public Theater. Title notwithstanding, Shakespeare's tragedy is dominated on the page and often on the stage by its nihilistic antihero, and such is the case with Doug Hughes' clean-lined, efficient production. Keith David's performance as the manipulated Moor has many fine attributes, but it ultimately lacks the grandeur to wrest the play from the cool, confident grasp of Schreiber's bewitching Iago.

Schreiber, who has previously won major acclaim for his Iachimo (in Cymbeline) and his Hamlet in Public Theater productions, is the rare American actor of any generation who lives so comfortably inside the sound and sense of Shakespearean verse that centuries of developments in syntax, vocabulary and grammar seem to evaporate as soon as he opens his mouth. While some actors merely bellow fancy language at us (here Jack Ryland's overacted Brabantio is an egregious example), Schreiber seems to be whispering Iago's thoughts clearly into our ear.

That's a particularly happy aptitude for this inventive schemer, who makes the audience his unwilling confidante by way of some of Shakespeare's richest soliloquies. The role is significantly larger than Othello's, and one of the longest in the canon, but it's also multifaceted and mysterious, and the great achievement of Schreiber's Iago is that we can never pin him down.

At first he seems unhinged, as the show opens with a whirl of whispering voices inside his head (David Van Tieghem's aggressive sound design and electronic music have both effectively unsettling and overbearing moments). A certain twitchiness, a straining of the neck as if to escape the sufferings of his skin, arises when Iago speaks of his humiliation at being passed over in favor of Cassio for promotion by Othello, and he seems equally disturbed at the rumor of his wife's infidelity with the Moor, His eyes become slits, his voice takes on a seething, sullen tone when the subject of women arises.

But most of the time, Iago's cool as a cucumber, a puppeteer pulling strings and taking a cheeky, casually chilling pleasure in doing so. The scene in which Iago languidly plants the suggestion of Desdemona's unfaithfulness in Othello's gullible heart is brilliantly played here by both actors. Throughout, as Iago flits between a kind of seething incipient madness and nearly diffident manipulation—his famous avowal "I am not what I am" made manifest—Schreiber's seductive voice, his sly charm and sheer intelligence lend Iago's machinations more than enough of the malignant fascination that are necessary to keep us from recoiling; on the contrary, when he's offstage, and we're watching his plots unfold without his sardonic commentary, we miss him. (The production's sharp, expressionistic lighting design by Robert Wierzel also serves to emphasize the character's centrality: The play ends with the spotlight not on the doomed lovers but on the shivering figure of Iago, for instance.)

Poised in opposition to the negative energy of Iago is the love between Othello and Desdemona, of course, and the piteousness of the play comes from our discovery of how easily the match is won by Iago's wanton destructiveness. The play offers a sad commentary on the fragility of faith in the face of reason, of love when opposed by hate: Our hearts should break at the ease with which Othello's great love for Desdemona is undone by the insinuating arguments and feeble "proofs" Iago puts before him.

Here Hughes' production disappoints—it doesn't give rise to real anguish. For the play to acquire the tragic dimension it needs to transfer our engagement from the mind of Iago to the heart of Othello, the profundity of Othello's love and the paralyzing pain of its loss need to come across forcefully. It doesn't quite, here.
David is in many respects a fine, respectable Othello. He cuts a virile figure, and the sensual attraction between his Othello and Kate Forbes' serene, sensible and lovely Desdemona is palpably felt. He is an experienced, accomplished handler of Shakespearean verse, too, and has a baritone of supple richness to do it full musical justice.

Othello's jittery unease as Iago's poison works its way into his heart is effectively rendered, but as we listen to David's handsome voice rise in anger or drop suddenly to a smooth basso aside, it's often the sculpted phrases we hear, not the volcano of feeling behind them. The superficial nobility of the warrior and hero are here, but the greater nobility of the full-hearted lover, in which resides the character's grandeur and significance, is not. As a result, Othello's duping is a sad waste, but not quite tragic, so its consequences don't carry the horrific force they should, despite Forbes' fine work in the last scene.

The supporting cast, clad in Catherine Zuber's handsome if somewhat generic 18th-century garb, is competent. Becky Ann Baker's Emilia is surprisingly lacking in color, as is, less surprisingly, Jay Goede's Cassio (that's a reflection on the character, not the actor). The set design by Neil Patel is an odd mixture whose cement pillars and walls sometimes recall contemporary Venice, Calif., more than Venice, Italy, and Cyprus.

But the evening belongs to Schreiber's Iago, and he's no less fascinating at the conclusion than the start. The character's final lines, in answer to Othello's demand to know the cause of his hate, are among the most bluntly stunning in Shakespeare. “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word.” Iago's sudden silence is a rebuke to the comforting idea that human evil has a cause, and thus a cure. All we really know about Iago, in the end, is that he's awful and he's fascinating. And, thanks to the lucid complexity of Schreiber's performance, he's disturbingly real.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Michael Feingold (essay date 18 December 2001)**


[In the following review of Doug Hughes's 2001 Othello staged at New York City's Public Theater, Feingold acknowledges the overall merit of this production, but finds its passion “distressingly contained.”]

Greed is the drama critic's prevailing sin. Not greed for power or money—though none of us would complain if the artists all did exactly what we told them, and offered us bushels of cash to praise them for doing it—but greed for greatness. Offer me passable, I want good; give me good, I demand excellent; grant me excellent, and I say, “What ever happened to sublime?”

Take Doug Hughes's staging of *Othello*. It is a solid, handsome, intelligent, and skillfully acted production, at which I had a good time. And now I shall prove almost as ungrateful as Iago, who had a good job and hated his employer for not giving him a better one. *Othello* is such a good job that I want it to be great. It ought to be great; the people involved are capable of greatness, and some of them have occasionally demonstrated it. Why the show isn't great, I don't know. Whether it will be great in a few more weeks, I can't predict. Right now it is a good job; if you've never seen a great *Othello*, or great performances of the individual roles, and so have no yardstick by which to gauge its greatness, this solidly competent production will introduce the play to you very effectively.

I should add in fairness that great Othellos are not easily come by. The play is the most concentrated of Shakespeare's late tragedies, with virtually no spectacle or battle to distract from the central story. Its one perfunctory clown scene is always blessedly cut (most people don't even know it exists), and one of the few
better-than-good things in the current production is Christopher Evan Welch's demonstration that Roderigo is a brave, albeit foolish, gentleman and not the usual pratfalling fop who provides alleged comic relief. This leaves, to interrupt the main characters' tragic conflict, only the party scene where Cassio gets drunk, staged here by Hughes with the same taut, abstemious lucidity as everything else. No, there's never a lot of diversion in *Othello*: Its pleasure lives in the acting and the word—music of two of the most arduous and complex roles in the canon (Iago is actually the longest role in Shakespeare), flanked by four supporting roles, all of which must also be played superbly for a production to take flight. Like you, I've never seen it happen, though I've seen sublime performances of all six roles individually.

Hughes's cast is a handsome one, astutely assembled. Before we even got to the meaty central acts, I liked Welch's clash of dignity and tempted gullibility; I liked Jack Ryland's tantrummy bulldog of a Brabantio; and I grinned with an old playgoer's satisfaction at George Morfogen's foilxly soft-spoken Duke of Venice. But even in Venice, both Keith David's Othello and Liev Schreiber's Iago gave warning signs of acting trouble ahead. Or maybe one should say "lack-of-warning" signs, since the problem stalking this production seems to be that neither actor knows exactly who he is—a surprising letdown for Hughes, whose Delacorte *Henry V* was so good precisely because Andre Braugher's Henry knew more about himself, and made us learn more, with every scene. There a director and an actor reaffirmed the central reality of drama: It progresses through time and reveals itself over time. Schreiber and David have many colors to their acting, but the colors are laid intermittently, and sometimes not at all; they don't build over time to reveal a complete picture.

David fares the better of the two. Amiable and genteel at the beginning, he has moving bursts later of both rage and a pathos just this side of self-pity. At the end, he offers a fierce dignity—we see his power as a military commander best when he's with Desdemona—and a sense of loving desperation that, abetted by Kate Forbes's ripe sincerity, makes the familiar death scene deeply stirring. When David hits these high marks, the production seems fresh and electric. Catherine Zuber's handsome, somber-toned costumes put the play in the Regency era, evoking images of Lord Nelson or the Napoleonic Wars; they give David's African-sculpted good looks a Byronic touch.

But the beautiful touches in David's performance dissipate as quickly as they come. He has rage and tenderness, but not, apparently, the inner dynamic to produce both at once. Othello is a man riven by contradictions; one reason the play has such resonance for us is that he sees himself—like so many Americans, black and otherwise—as an outsider, who has won status in a society where he still feels alien, a poetically articulate man who apologizes for his rudeness of speech. Iago succeeds with him by playing on fears that are already there. Never wholly believing that Desdemona can love him, Othello lets himself be convinced that she doesn't. Under his early affirmations, we need to see the fears; under his late rages, the nagging doubts. With David, until the death scene, they come one at a time, or not at all.

Then there is the question of pomp. Othello's rage is often linked to his stature and power: Between the first and fifth acts, virtually everyone we see is under his command, and Shakespeare gives him plenty of word-music in which to affirm his grandeur. Giuseppe Verdi made the old way of playing the role as pure word-music unfeasible. Next to what he achieved with a heroic tenor voice and a full orchestra, even Paul Robeson, at least on record, pales by comparison. In the shadow of such competition, David and his director seem to have decided consciously to keep the role low-keyed. You would never know, hearing David, that the passage about the Propontic and the Hellespont was one in which all English-speaking actors used to dream of displaying their most vibrant tones, just as you wouldn't know, from his suavely gentle first act, why Salvini was described as playing it like "a smoldering volcano." For a play with so much fevered passion and blood in it, the performance is distressingly contained.

As is, even more distressingly, Schreiber's Iago. Here is an actor whose power in this realm was proved several years back, when he played what might be called the junior version of the role (Iachimo is the diminutive of Iago) so gloriously in the Delacorte production of *Cymbeline*. Expecting the best, what we get
here is merely all right. Even more complex than Othello, Iago is also a more elusive figure. Far from having no motive, his malignity has almost too many: Othello gave someone else the better job; he may have slept with Iago's wife; the fellow he gave the job to, Cassio, is unqualified. There is a class issue—Cassio is a gentleman, Iago a professional soldier—to go with the race issue. Modern eyes have seen a homosexual element in Iago's fixation on Othello's love life (Hughes's staging relocates his interest in Roderigo), and a degree of projection that suggests his desire to replace not Cassio but Othello. Two of Schreiber's most striking moments come when he nearly kisses Desdemona, and when, plotting Cassio's murder, the notion of taking command himself seems to cross his mind. Such moments are like lightning flashes of the great Iago Schreiber ought to be.

For the most part, though, what we get is solid, not quite stolid, impassivity. Like David avoiding the trumpet tones of pomp, Schreiber shuns the temptation to revel in his evil with shriek and rant, which has destroyed countless Iagos (the worst ever was Christopher Plummer's, so openly demented that even Roderigo would have had him put away). But in dodging the one trap, Schreiber falls into its opposite, enjoying his evil so little that it lacks credibility. The best Iago I ever saw, because the most convincingly scary, was Christopher Walken. You could see why the other characters accepted him as sane, though he was clearly unhinged; he rarely raised his voice, but it was easy to believe that he might want to kill any number of people. Schreiber dutifully declares that he hates the Moor; he goes efficiently through the motions of killing Roderigo and Emilia; but the person whose thoughts we've been privy to, through lines and lines of lucidly spoken soliloquy, doesn't appear to have any strong connection to these acts. You expect his alibi to be “The script made me do it.” Mary McCarthy praised Jose Ferrer (playing opposite Robeson) for finding in the role the visionary “who makes his dream of evil come true on earth.” Maybe that was more readily imaginable in the late 1940s, with Hitler just destroyed and Stalin still alive. But surely we have examples enough all around us today; bringing them to imaginative life, so that we can exorcise them from ourselves through the ritual of playgoing, is the difficult part.

As if trying hard not to steal the muted thunder of these centerpieces, Hughes's supporting actors often tend to come in just slightly under their best work. Even Forbes, a strong and beautiful Desdemona, occasionally gets too soft-spoken for the Anspacher's three-quarter stage. The good work by oldsters Ryland and Morfogen at the start is balanced, later on, by two appealing youngsters in tiny roles: Natacha Roi (Bianca) and Dan Snook (Lodovico). Jay Goede is a likable, slightly callow Cassio, and Becky Ann Baker a firm but oddly unincisive Emilia. Some of the limitation involved may come from Hughes, whose austere approach consciously leaves blank many moments that beg for supportive detail. Just as drama critics, getting the good, always beg for the better.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: John Simon (essay date 24 December 2001)**


In the following review of the 2001 Public Theater staging of *Othello* directed by Doug Hughes, Simon faults Hughes's casting and interpretive decisions, claiming that they obscured the tragic grandeur of Shakespeare's play, burying its loftier, philosophical qualities among the sordidness of domestic drama.

What a chance for timeliness was missed by Doug Hughes's staging of *Othello*! By reducing the play to domestic drama (which on one level it is), the Public Theater has deprived it of its political and metaphysical half: the war between civilized goodness (Venice, Christianity, order) and barbarous evil (the Turks, treachery, chaos). That may have cut too close to the bone and required a larger, grander production than the impoverished one here. But how sad to see a shatteringly relevant historical and philosophical clash shrunk to a chamber piece of mere personal conflict, and even that poorly executed.
The casting of the principals demands a keen aesthetic sensibility. Whereas it is right to give nearly central importance to Iago, he should not physically dominate Othello, yet the hulking Liev Schreiber as Iago does precisely that. By making Iago smaller and physiognomically more trustworthy, the power of unperspicuous, insidious evil is more graphically highlighted. Othello, though decently acted by Keith David, needs to be of more heroic stature, more purblind nobility, and, eventually, of more pitiable, poetic grandeur than mere competence can summon. An even greater problem is Desdemona, surely the most demanding female role in the Shakespeare canon, a role of feminine and human perfection, neither of which the visually and histrionically ordinary Kate Forbes can approximate.

It is a costly mistake to have a Roderigo (Christopher Evan Welch) more interesting than Cassio (Jay Goede); to turn Lodovico (Dan Snook) into an immature and prissily spoken hunk; to cast an Emilia (Becky Ann Baker) who looks more like Iago's sexless aunt than his jealousy-provoking wife; and to give us a Bianca (Natacha Roi) more desirable than Desdemona.

Schreiber does wring a good deal out of Iago, but much of it is literally and figuratively misdirected. Although lechery for Desdemona may be a minor cause of his intrigues, directing him to clasp, cradle, and fondle her consolingly is socially and dramatically unacceptable. And the final image of Iago—already reduced to cowering from a mighty blow of Othello's Notung-like sword—left standing tall above the three corpses of his making is absurd. What's called for is his being dragged off to punishment. For him to start twitching in what looks like remorse as the lights go down is even more preposterous.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Caryn James (essay date 21 January 2002)**


*In the following excerpted review of a BBC television adaptation of Othello directed by Geoffrey Saxe in 2002, James emphasizes the film's contemporary, racially charged setting and overall merit, despite its flawed depiction of a simplified dramatic villain.*

*I*nstitutional racism is the backdrop for [a televised] Othello, which entirely abandons Shakespeare's language. It cuts from a passionate scene of Othello in bed with Dessie (the cloyingly contrived name for Desdemona) to an episode in which the police beat a black suspect to death.

The film is richly photographed and stylized. Eamonn Walker, an English actor known for his utterly convincing role as the American Muslim Said in HBO's prison series, *Oz*, is Othello. He makes his name by standing outside his station house on the night of the attack, raising his arms and declaring to an angry crowd that if the police acted badly they will be held responsible. Set against a dark sky and the glare of lights, this scene is one of many (directed by Geoffrey Saxe) that has an iconic, theatrical feel yet firmly reflects reality. Soon Othello is the new police commissioner, and Jago is incensed at being passed over.

*This film does not bludgeon viewers with social commentary. Instead, the story of Othello's love for and jealousy of Dessie, and of Jago's ambition and manipulation, is set against the backdrop of a racist, media-driven society. When Othello marries Dessie (Keeley Hawes), a white heiress who works as a journalist, they become media darlings. Michael Cass (Richard Coyle), the updated Cassio, is a police officer sent to protect Dessie after racist thugs throw stones through her window—the perfect setup for Jago to hint that Dessie and Cass are having an affair. Mr. Walker creates a convincingly strong, impassioned Othello, though at times he seems to sigh more than Al Gore at a political debate, reducing Othello's growing suspicions to simple exasperation.*
This fascinating, multilayered film suffers from one central flaw, though. Jago's character, as written and as acted by Christopher Eccleston, is too transparent, so obviously slimy that it is hard to believe Othello would fall for his pretence at friendship. Characters in many other films written by Mr. Davies talk directly to the camera, as Jago needlessly does here.

“It was about love,” he says at the start and again at the end of his story. “Don't talk to me about race, don't talk to me about politics—it was love, simple as that.” By the end, he is more clearly alluding to his own love for Othello, but of course he is wrong about other things. …

**Criticism: Themes: Paul Yachnin (essay date 1996)**


>[In the following essay, Yachnin interprets Othello as a theatrical evocation of the violent potentiality of wonder, embodied in Desdemona's fetishized handkerchief.]

A specter is haunting new historicism—the specter of the aesthetic: the attributes of beauty and sublimity, the realm of wonderful objects and feelings of awe. From Louis Montrose's evocation of the uncanny connections between Simon Forman's dream of Queen Elizabeth and William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Stephen Greenblatt's book, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, we can discern an investment in wonder among those whom we might have expected to be more attuned to the political dimensions of literature. Of course, materialist criticism is entitled to examine the forms of wonder, since wonder is as much involved in the socio-political realm as is gender, rank, or race. But it is not merely a cool-headed interest in wonder that we find in new historicism; on the contrary, it is an undertaking to arouse amazement in the reader. For some practitioners, the attempt to awe their readers has to do with the cachet associated with the mystifying style of postmodernist French theory, but for lucid writers such as Montrose and Greenblatt, the attempt to arouse wonder has its roots in other ground. That ground is Shakespeare.

My focus is the operations of wonder in Shakespeare's playhouse, but I also will examine the differences between Renaissance versions of theatrical wonder and later forms in Shakespeare as literature. These versions are linked by their relationship with subjectivity, possession, and the nature of the object, but are produced in different ways and toward different ends—theatrical wonder is largely visual, processive, and collective; literary and critical wonder is “visionary,” possessive, and directed toward the individual as individual. Roughly speaking, it is the difference between an outing to the circus and a morning in church; we tend to misinterpret the earthly pleasures of the former in light of the heavenly raptures of the latter. *Othello* is an illuminating text for the purposes of my discussion because it is both wonderful in itself and critical of how “magical” properties can seduce the eye and mind. By analyzing *Othello's* attempts to fetishize theatrical properties, we can begin to understand the fetishistic investments made by present-day readers and critics. This is not to suggest that the play is magically prescient. Rather its fictions of possession and wonder imply the conditions of its production and make the contradictions in that production visible as ideology. Pierre Machery tells us that “the book revolves around this myth [i.e., that the book is uncannily alive]; but in the process of its formation the book takes a stand regarding this myth, exposing it. This does not mean that the book is able to become its own criticism: it gives an implicit critique of its ideological content, if only because it resists being incorporated into the flow of ideology in order to give a determinate representation of it.” So while Shakespeare is the source of the specter haunting recent Shakespeare criticism, his play's “implicit critique of its ideological content” might nevertheless provide something like an exorcism.
Shakespeare's attempts to reconfigure playgoing as conversional wonder have meshed with the emergence of the aesthetic as a major cultural formation; however, it is unlikely that his drama in fact transformed the experiences of Renaissance playgoers. They, no doubt, continued to expect recreation rather than re-creation. In *Othello*, Shakespeare maneuvers to make wonder out of the material he has to work with, which, among other things such as language and costume, includes the fabric of the handkerchief and the body of the boy actor who plays Desdemona. These two objects are constructed so as to enhance the cultural status of the play by raising it above the commercialism and materiality of actual play production. But if we can deploy a strategic resistance to the play's sublimity (a resistance that came more easily to the original audiences), then the ordinariness of these “wonders” and the particular ways in which they are presented will allow us critical insight into the mystifications of Shakespeare and Shakespeare criticism.

To move toward a historical understanding of Shakespearean wonder, let us begin by considering two exemplary views—Northrop Frye's idea of *The Tempest* as a play where wonder leads to self-knowledge and Greenblatt's troubled but similar account of the effects of wonder. Of course, new historicism arose in opposition to approaches such as Frye's, but humanist and antihumanist forms of criticism share some surprisingly similar assumptions about the relationship between the literary text and the subject. Here is Frye, writing in 1959:

> [The play is an illusion like the dream, and yet a focus of reality more intense than life affords. The action of *The Tempest* moves from … reality to realization. What seems at first illusory, the magic and music, becomes real, and the *Realpolitik* of Antonio and Sebastian becomes illusion. … When the Court Party first came to the island “no man was his own”; they had not found their “proper selves.” Through the mirages of Ariel, the mops and mows of the other spirits, the vanities of Prospero's art, and the fevers of madness, reality grows up in them from inside, in response to the fertilizing influence of illusion.]

Greenblatt in 1991 sees wonder as “the central figure in the initial European response to the New World”—“something like the 'startle reflex' one can observe in infants.” Although his model of personhood is far more corporealized than Frye's, he nevertheless sees wonder as ineluctably inward:

> Someone witnesses something amazing, but what most matters takes place not “out there” or along the receptive surfaces of the body where the self encounters the world, but deep within, at the vital, emotional center of the witness. This inward response cannot be marginalized or denied, any more than a constriction of the heart in terror can be denied; wonder is absolutely exigent, a primary or radical passion. … The experience of wonder seems to resist recuperation, containment, ideological incorporation; it sits strangely apart from everything that gives coherence to Léry’s universe [Jean de Léry, whose *History of a Voyage* (1585) Greenblatt is discussing here], apart and yet utterly compelling.

Although connected with the violent harrowing of the self central to Christian visionary experience, Frye and Greenblatt generally understand wonder in terms of a modern idea of personhood, where wonder provokes what Frye calls “realization,” the emptying out of the world and the concomitant expansion of the self. This view differs from Shakespeare's; Shakespeare usually shows how wonder violates or nullifies the self rather than how it precipitates the self's expansive fulfilment. We remember Horatio “harrow[ed] … with fear and wonder” (*Hamlet*, 1.1.45) or Cleomenes reduced to nothing by “the ear-deaf'ning voice o' th' oracle” (*Winter’s Tale*, 3.1.9). For Frye and Greenblatt, in contrast, our ability to grasp an authentic selfhood has to do centrally with possessing and with being possessed by a fetishized text. “*The Tempest,*” Frye says, “is a play not simply to be read or seen or even studied, but possessed.” At the beginning of *Marvelous Possessions*, Greenblatt too declares his investments in the marvels of narrative: “I remain possessed by stories and obsessed with their complex uses.”
To be sure, the idea of being possessed by theatrical spectacle was current in the Renaissance. In his *Apology for Actors* (1612), Thomas Heywood, reiterating Shakespeare's emphasis on the invasive power of spectacle, praises theatre's capacity to re-fashion the members of the audience: "so bewitching a thing is lively and well-spirited action that it hath power to new mold the hearts of the spectators and fashion them to the shape of any noble and notable attempt." But among eyewitness accounts of the drama, there are far fewer indications of the formative power ascribed to it by Heywood. We remember that the actors normally performed in the cold light of day and did not have the scenic resources of the court masque. Thomas Platter, in 1599, writes of the "marvelous" dancing that followed a performance of *Julius Caesar*; about the play he notes only that it was "very well acted." In 1613, Sir Henry Wotton recounts disapprovingly the tawdry spectacle Shakespeare's company made of the history of Henry VIII: "The King's Players had a new play called *All is True*, representing some principal pieces of the reign of Henry VIII, which was set forth with many extraordinary circumstances of pomp and majesty, even to the matting of the stage … sufficient in truth within a while to make greatness very familiar, if not ridiculous." So while there were marvels in the theatre, they were usually greeted as something akin to mere showiness.

In accord with these views of theatrical spectacle, playgoers seem not usually to have been possessed by wonder. The antitheatricalist writer and sometime dramatist Stephen Gosson writes scathingly about the fun audience-members have at the playhouse:

> In our assemblies at plays in London, you shall see such heaving and shoving, such itching and shouldering to sit by women. Such care for their garments that they should not be trod on, such eyes to their laps that no chips light in them, such pillows to their backs that they take no hurt … such tickling, such toying, such smiling, such winking, and such manning them home when the sports are ended that it is a right comedy to mark their behavior.

Indeed, a considerable part of the thrill of playgoing had little to do with the plays themselves, but was involved instead with the erotic and social gratifications of seeing and being seen by other spectators. In 1613, Henry Parrot satirizes the practices of self-display characteristic of a theatre described by one antitheatricalist as "Venus' palace":

> When young Rogero goes to see a play,  
> His pleasure is you place him on the stage,  
> The better to demonstrate his array,  
> And how he sits attended by his page,  
> That only serves to fill those pipes with smoke,  
> For which he pawned hath his riding cloak.

In view of the mirthful and eroticized atmosphere of Renaissance playhouses, it seems clear that the emphasis upon the conversional marvelousness of Shakespeare's plays must have been consequent upon their transformation into literature, a process that began in earnest only after Shakespeare's death. In the 1623 First Folio, Jonson lauds Shakespeare as "the wonder of our stage," but promotes his "book" as an embodiment of genius that makes an irresistible claim on all those who “have wits to read, and praise to give.” In the Second Folio (1632), Milton expresses similar “wonder and astonishment” at Shakespeare's "Delphic lines.” In Milton's account, Shakespeare's astonishing book transforms the reader into a "livelong monument"—"thou our fancy of itself bereaving, / Dost make us marble with too much conceiving." In commendatory verses prefixed to *Poems: written by Wil. Shake-speare* (1640)—twenty-four years after the playwright's death—Leonard Digges is able to remember "how the audience, / Were ravished, with what wonder they went hence," but invites the reader to look upon the "wit-fraught book, … whose worth / Like old-coined gold, … / Shall pass true current to succeeding age." These tributes suggest that Shakespearean wonder, from the outset, was an experience which, while it might be imagined as the rapture of audience—members possessed by a bewitching spectacle, in fact belonged to readers who owned the text. "[Y]ou will stand for your privileges … to read, and censure,” urge John Heminge and Henry Condell, the actors responsible for the
publication of the First Folio. “Do so, but buy it first … whatever you do, buy.”  

But while there are differences, there is also a historical line to be traced from the spectacles performed in Shakespeare's playhouse to the visionary wonders of the First Folio to the retailing of literary wonder in recent criticism. These versions of the marvelous are related to the broader development of what Georg Lukács calls “reified consciousness,” the idea that persons become objects to themselves because of their traffic in fetishized commodities—goods onto which are projected the realities of human labor and relations, and for whose commodified value real persons exchange their own worth. In “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Lukács develops an analysis of the alienating effects of commodity fetishism: “The essence of commodity-structure … is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.” “The commodity character of the commodity, the abstract, quantitative mode of calculability shows itself here in its purest form: the reified mind necessarily sees it as the form in which its own authentic immediacy becomes manifest.”

When the commodity in question is literary wonder, and when such wonder is a possession that possesses and is the form in which the reader's mind finds its own “authentic immediacy,” readerly investments will be both profound and unstable. A text like Othello will be to the engrossed reader as Desdemona is to her husband—an object whose capacity to arouse wonder in the beholder is seen to underwrite the beholder's selfhood. Kenneth Burke explains Othello's stake in Desdemona as “ownership in the profoundest sense of ownership, the property of human affections, as fetishistically localized in the object of possession, while the possessor is himself possessed by his very engrossment.” We want to bear in mind the differences between the spectacular marvels staged in the culturally lowbrow Shakespearean theatre and the visionary wonder produced in the highbrow province of Shakespeare as literature. We also should remember that a performance—unlike a book—cannot be owned. But we also want to consider the possibility that reading Shakespeare for his profound insights into the meaning of life, or writing about Shakespeare in ways calculated to arouse wonder in our readers, might constitute particular institutional transformations of spectacular, commercial theatricality.

In Shakespeare's London, Othello's handkerchief would have been marketable goods, a square of embroidered cloth in a nation whose primary industry was the production of textiles, a stage property in a theatre whose largest operating expense was the purchase of costumes and draperies. Othello's mystification of the handkerchief within the play is of a piece with Renaissance Londoners' investments, both financial and psychological, in what even Caliban recognizes as “trash”—the “glistering apparel” (Tempest, 4.1. 224, 193 [stage direction]) that advertised individuals' high social status in the real world and whose visual appeal in the theatre helped to make Shakespeare's drama so popular. The play's stake in the handkerchief registers the theatre's participation in English society's fetishized trade in textiles.

In the world of the play, all the characters except Othello view the handkerchief as marketable goods; he defines it as a magical talisman. The effect of this definitional contest is twofold. One, the handkerchief emerges as wondrous—an object of great emotional and sexual energy. The napkin's enhancement serves the institutional project of valorizing drama over against the theatre's degraded world of work and its trade in playtexts and textiles. Two, the intensity of Othello's investments in this square of cloth works to reveal the fetish character of commodities in general. Although everyone except Othello thinks of the handkerchief as an ordinary object, they fetishize it too. They turn it into a commodity, in Marx's sense: a thing that becomes “mysterious … simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour.” To understand the particular mystery the fetishized handkerchief evokes, however, we need to expand the field of labor and exchange to include the “work” of sex. That is necessary because the characters' projections of themselves onto the handkerchief run along lines determined by sex and gender. Moreover, to take sex and gender into account is to recognize their importance in the development of modern aesthetic fetishism. In this view, the art-object is the feminine beloved of the
masculine owner—“a non-alienated object, one quite the reverse of a commodity, which like the ‘auratic’ phenomenon of a Walter Benjamin returns our tender gaze and whispers that it was created for us alone.”

For most of the characters, the handkerchief is reproducible, exchangeable, and has a certain cash value. Furthermore, although it circulates widely, everyone recognizes it as private property. Because it is private property, Emilia, Cassio, and Bianca all speak about making copies of it. In this regard, is it even clear that Emilia plans to keep it after having found it? She says, “My wayward husband hath a hundred times / Woo'd me to steal it … I'll have the work ta'en out, / And give 't Iago” (3.3.292-96). Does she intend to give Iago the original or the copy? Does she perhaps prefer robbing the handkerchief of its singularity to stealing the thing itself from Desdemona? For Desdemona, the handkerchief balances between the everyday and the sacred, becoming a hugely valued love token that is nonetheless commensurable with monetary value. “Where should I lose the handkerchief?” she asks, “Believe me, I had rather have lost my purse / Full of crusadoes” (3.4.23,25-26).

Cassio and Emilia each intend to have the handkerchief copied because they recognize it as property that will be wanted by its owner. The strawberry-spotted handkerchief bears the print of the owner's possessive desire for it as a singular object, even though it is not necessarily unique, but potentially only the first of a series. It could be reproduced endlessly for an endless number of owners. This contradiction is paralleled by Iago's jealous ownership of his wife. She bears the imprint of his possessive desire for her as a unique prize even though he discounts her, with a sexual quibble, as “a common thing”: “You have a thing for me? It is a common thing” (3.3.302).

The handkerchief's properties are continuous with the properties of love. Were Desdemona an object like the handkerchief, Othello could possess her, but so could anyone else, and in any case she would then be a “common thing” like the handkerchief, certainly not the inimitable treasure for which Othello happily sacrifices his “unhoused free condition” (1.2.26). If she is not an object to Othello, then she is a subject—which is to say she is an object to herself. As self-possessed, she is free to give herself away to another. If she is her own private property, as Peter Stallybrass points out, then her defining attribute—her honor—becomes as detachable as her handkerchief:

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 honor too;

May she give that?

[4.1.10-15]
No possible permutation is able to unburden heterosexual love of the contradictions involved in the patriarchal ownership of women, who are also required to be owners of themselves.

The handkerchief figures possessive male desire for the female “common thing” in ways that legitimize jealousy in terms of the “phantom objectivity” of the gender system. The operation of this system seems invisible to the characters, and its effects cut across gender lines. Bianca returns the handkerchief to Cassio, refusing to “take out the work” since she thinks it was given to him by another woman. This other woman is a “hobby-horse,” while Cassio is allowed the agential attributes of desire and deceitfulness:

What did you mean by that same handkerchief you gave me even now? I was a fine fool to take it. I must take out the work? A likely piece of work, that you should find it in your chamber, and know not who left it there! This is some minx's token, and I must take out the work? There, give it your hobby-horse.

[4.1.148-54]

Given the invisible influence that the handkerchief wields in its travels through the play, the claims Othello makes about both its sacred, feminine origins and its magical power to bind husband to wife through male desire seem not to belong to an enchanted world entirely foreign to Venetian civility, but rather to constitute a somewhat outlandish explanation of the handkerchief's actual operations. The play opens to analysis the fetish character of the handkerchief with regard to all the characters who touch it. It does so through Othello's explanation of its quasi-magical powers, but more so by the way Othello convinces himself into accepting it as “ocular proof” (3.3.360) against his wife (since it falls to the stage in his presence and as a result of his action some 150 lines before Iago reports having seen Cassio wipe his beard with it). Othello uses the handkerchief to prove something against Desdemona that the desirable thingness of the handkerchief has already inscribed as inevitable in heterosexual relations—the “destiny unshunnable” (3.3.275) of being made a cuckold. It is the fate of every man to invest his all in the vexed figure of Woman, she who is unique because she is a rare object and “common” because she is a subject. On this account, the vexing constitution of Othello's selfhood on the basis of heterosexual mutuality is no different from anyone else's—it is only that his terminology is strangely revealing.

But Othello's terms constitute more than an exotic account of the ordinary. In Othello's telling, the handkerchief is a different kind of thing—a wonder that possesses a particular history and a charismatic hold on its owner. Desdemona is reframed as just such a wonderful object. If she were like the handkerchief that Othello imagines, then he could possess her wholly yet she would become neither the “common thing” of marketplace exchanges nor the free trader of her own honor. Not, of course, that the handkerchief ever becomes convincingly magical. It is rather that its movements in the play suggest that there could be “magic in the web of it” (3.4.69). The handkerchief is held in hand after hand, but its significance is never grasped by any one possessor. Its power to generate an unseen network of connections over the heads of every character except Iago lends it a certain marvelousness. Even Iago cannot quite get hold of it. He is just lucky: it is surprising that Cassio is unacquainted with Othello's first and most valued gift to Desdemona, especially since Cassio went “a-wooing” with Othello “from first to last” (3.3.71,96). “Sure,” Desdemona says, “there's some wonder in this handkerchief” (3.4.101). For the play's original spectators and for us, there is indeed some wonder since, as Douglas Bruster comments, “uncanniness arises as the result of an extended social order” that is apparent in the handkerchief but not visible to the characters.25

So while the play opens to examination the operations of commodity fetishism, it also works to fetishize the handkerchief in the wonderful terms of Egyptian charmers, sibylline prophetic fury, and “mummy … / Conserved of maidens' hearts” (3.4.74-75). In order to understand the theatre's apparent need to redescribe its most important material resource, we do not need to follow Richard Wilson's spirited attack either on Shakespeare's theatre as “part of the apparatus of the English nation-state” or on Shakespeare as a
proto-capitalist enemy of the artisanal class of clothworkers. But perhaps we do need to consider that costumes in the commercial theatre, while expensive and often gorgeous, were also redolent of the theatre's participation in trade and manual labor. Some costumes could project the somewhat grubby aura that went with being aristocratic cast-offs, but those costumes had themselves passed through the pawnbrokers and the second-hand dealers' shops; and other costumes and all the rest of the cloth used in performances constituted at one level "ocular proof" of the theatre's material and class connections with the increasingly hard-pressed and riotous clothworkers. In this view, the play endeavors to "take out the work" from textiles in order to purge theatre of the manual labor that made theatre possible, aligning drama thereby with the ethos of courtliness that itself was an important factor in the theatre's commercial success.

In 1610, Henry Jackson, member of Corpus Christi College, witnessed a performance of Othello at Oxford. "They also had tragedies," he wrote,

which they acted with propriety and fitness. In which [tragedies], not only through speaking but also through acting certain things, they moved [the audience] to tears. But truly the celebrated Desdemona, slain in our presence by her husband, although she pleaded her case very effectively throughout, yet moved [us] more after she was dead, when, lying on her bed, she entreated the pity of the spectators by her very countenance.

Jackson was a serious and religious young man, and Oxford probably provided a more attentive audience than the Globe or even Blackfriars. Yet his response to the boy actor, while deeply engaged, is equivalent to neither Frye's "realization" nor Greenblatt's "radical passion." In Jackson's account, the audience's response mirrors the shift within the play from the language-based relationship between the lovers at the outset to Othello's subsequent attempt to gain visual mastery over Desdemona. At first they woo each other through story-telling, hinting, and speaking (1.3.128-70); under Iago's instruction, however, Othello learns to "wear" his eyes so as to be ever on the watch for signs of his wife's infidelity (3.3.198). As a consequence of this shift from an aural to an ocular axis of relationship, Desdemona is transformed into a spectacle of duplicity within Othello's theatre of the gaze. In similar fashion, the Oxford spectators are moved by the speaking and acting of the actors, but are more affected by the sight of the countenance of the dead Desdemona. Importantly, however, the audience resists the conversion of Desdemona into the iconic figure of purity exemplified by Othello's comparison of his wife to "such another world / Of one entire and perfect chrysolite" (5.2.144-45) or by A. C. Bradley's classic description—"her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute." On stage at Oxford, not even death can transform her into the figure of "monumental alablaster" (5.2.5) envisioned by the text and by critics such as Bradley. Instead the murdered Desdemona remains like a speaking subject: her face "entreated the pity of the spectators" ("spectantium misericordiam ipso vultu imploraret").

Plays such as Othello, King Lear, Pericles, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest work fetishistically to transform the bodies of the boy actors into sights of wonder. It is not surprising that Shakespeare and his theatre should use the actors in this way. The body as show-piece is simply more impressive than any other spectacular object—with the possible exceptions of the costly machines being developed by Inigo Jones for court masques or the fireworks or cannon-fire displays like the one that caused the destruction of the Globe in 1613. Yet however well woman-as-fetish works within the playtexts or in the context of the modern formation of aesthetic fetishism, it seems unlikely that the early modern audience would have agreed, for example, with Ferdinand's proprietary, already jealous awe at his first sight of Miranda: "My prime request, / … is (O you wonder!) / If you be a maid, or no?" (Tempest, 1.2.426-28).

Finally, let us consider the relationship between the handkerchief and Desdemona as well as the idea that the play's infusion of charisma into the body of Desdemona operates in relation to the Renaissance difference between movable property and land. That Desdemona's body replaces the handkerchief (not to mention Othello's blackness) as an object of wonder makes good sense because bodies are more evocative than textiles, but what I want to suggest is that the play trades the handkerchief for Desdemona's body. To
understand the wonder of Desdemona as the profit accruing from a sequence of exchanges within the spectacular economy of the play is to begin to grasp the production of woman-as-fetish and understand the Shakespearean fetish as continuous with ordinary life rather than as something sacred set over the ordinary.

Desdemona’s amazing value is the culmination of a series of trades involving land, cash and movables, women, and status. Roderigo, very much like a number of young, landed gentlemen in Jacobean city comedy, converts his land into money in order to buy jewels in order to win the love of a woman, a treasure, who will bring him high status. But while Roderigo believes that Desdemona will confer greater sexual and social status than his land, the play, like so many city comedies, suggests the ideal that landedness is the only true basis of high status. Land is different from commodities because, in this somewhat nostalgic view, land possesses the possessor, who must live on it in order to administer and preserve it. In medieval law, all land belongs in principle inalienably to the king; general unease with the system by which land becomes virtually exchangeable as other commodities finds expression in John of Gaunt’s lament for the shameful binding of the sacred “earth of majesty, … / This other Eden” within “inky blots, and rotten parchment” (Richard II, 2.1.41-42).31 In the early seventeenth century, furthermore, the duties of landholders to their property and tenants was an acute social issue. The landed gentry flocked to London, leaving the rural population without governance, judicial supervision, or “hospitality”; some members of the gentry even lost their inherited estates while pursuing status in the spendthrift circles around the court.32 Roderigo speaks for this group when he promises to invest everything he owns in the chase after Desdemona: “I am chang’d. … I’ll sell all my land” (1.3.380,382). Since land itself has become a commodity like all others, Desdemona, “full of most bless’d condition” (2.1.249-50), takes its place (as the possession that possesses) in the conferring of social status and personal worth.

So Desdemona is not merely a treasure, but the treasure of land. With wicked irony, Iago says, “[Othello] to-night hath boarded a land carract. / If it prove a lawful prize, he’s made for ever” (1.2.50-51). Desdemona is as solid and valuable as land, Iago insinuates, but she is also movable and leaky like a boat. That irony infects Othello. Only by killing Desdemona can he be cured of it. Only at the end can he settle into a view of Desdemona as the permanent, possessing possession that land ideally was for the Jacobean. This construction of Desdemona is intensely tragic for Othello. That she is Othello’s homeland means that her murder renders his personhood irredeemably homeless:

Where should Othello go?
Now—how dost thou look now? 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.

[5.2.271-75]

From the shattered viewpoint of Othello’s impending damnation, Desdemona’s body shines out wonderfully as the promised land forever out of reach. We should perhaps bear in mind Othello’s scattered, destroyed personhood when we—following, indeed, the play’s hint—undertake to transvalue Othello, making it into “a play not simply to be read or seen or even studied, but possessed.”33 We might also remember Othello’s fate when we attempt to exchange the moving sight of Desdemona’s body for a “magical property,” a visionary possession of Desdemona in which we try to find manifested our own “authentic immediacy.”

The eighteenth-century writer and lawyer Arthur Murphy once imagined himself at Parnassus. He saw that the land had been divided by Apollo among the great writers of the classical and modern canons. Among these figures he found Shakespeare:

The great Shakespeare sat upon a cliff, looking abroad through all creation. His possessions were very near as extensive as Homer’s, but in some places, had not received sufficient
culture. But even there spontaneous flowers shot up, and in the *unweeded garden, which grows to seed*, you might cull lavender, myrtle, and wild thyme. ... Even *Milton* was looking for flowers to transplant into his own Paradise.\textsuperscript{34}

Murphy's quaint description of Shakespeare as land and as landholder may remind us of the fetishistic investments readers and critics make when they attempt to inhabit and be inhabited by a text such as *Othello*. Like the wandering Court Party on Prospero's Island or the wonder-struck conquistadors in the New World, we attempt to stake a claim to territories that seem able to restore us to ourselves. Instead of possessing and being possessed by *Othello*, however, we might do better to prize it for the multiplicity of its uses. As a useful rather than a sacred object, *Othello* would be, among other things, a work of literature, a script for actors, a text of some historical importance, and, by virtue of its implicit critique of ideology, a parable about the violence of wonderful representation.

**Notes**

6. All Shakespeare quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.
10. Thomas Platter, quoted in the *Riverside Shakespeare*, 1839. The *Riverside* prints both the original German text and the translation used here.
Criticism: Themes: Andrew Sofer (essay date fall 1997)


[In the following essay, Sofer examines the symbolic and thematic significance of the handkerchief in Othello, listing the varying qualities it represents, such as Desdemona's misused honor, Othello's "ocular proof," the powers of magic, the poetic notion of "felt absences," and the inescapable "charm of objects."]

Desdemona's handkerchief makes its first appearance in Shakespeare's source, Giraldi Cinthio's Hecatommithi. According to Cinthio, it is "a handkerchief embroidered most delicately in the Moorish fashion, which the Moor had given her [Desdemona] and which was treasured by the Lady and her husband too."¹ Cinthio's handkerchief contains no magic in its web; it is, rather, a crude plot device whose utility depends upon a string of chance events.² By contrast, there is nothing coincidental in Shakespeare's dramatic embroidering of Cinthio's lurid pulp. In performance, Othello's handkerchief exerts an uncanny power over both characters and audience, and it propels the action as it repeatedly emerges in the right place at the wrong time. It seems almost to bend the characters to its own enigmatic will.

How do we account for the handkerchief's extraordinary grip on the audience's experience of Othello? Certainly no performance of the play can occur without it. When Iago tells Roderigo that "we work by wit and
not by witchcraft,” he may not, strictly speaking, be accurate. Without the magic handkerchief, Iago's lies would not stick; the drama would be literally and figuratively unstageable. In its three brief appearances, the handkerchief draws the six characters it touches—Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Iago, Cassio, Bianca—into its own repetitive story, a story which begins in love and ends in death. As if to fulfill the sibyl's prophecy of doom, by the play's end the first three characters are dead, the fourth faces torture and death, the fifth is wounded, and the sixth is in prison, where (as a prostitute jailed under military law for the suspected murder of a high-ranking officer) her prospects for survival are dim.

In hindsight, Bianca's initial wariness regarding the handkerchief seems justified. But the phrase she uses to describe it is peculiar:

O Cassio, whence came this?
This is some token from a newer friend.
To the felt absence now I feel a cause.
Is't come to this? Well, well.

(3.4.174-77)

In context we can understand this speech in two ways. Bianca interprets the handkerchief as an incriminating sign, concrete evidence of a woman for whose sake Cassio has been neglecting her (“some token from a newer friend”), but she speaks more truly than she knows. Bianca herself is the latest “cause”—the latest link in the chain—animating the handkerchief's “felt absence”: its paradoxical ability to be at once present, felt, corporeal, yet also somehow absent, elusive, lost. We begin to disentangle the handkerchief's “magic in the web” (3.4.65) once we see that, from a phenomenological perspective, the peculiarity of stage properties is that they both are and are not themselves. Oscillating between sign and thing, props are “felt absences” that draw our attention simultaneously to their signifying function—Bianca's word “token” simply means a sign—and to their materiality (“felt” is of course a particular fabric). Thus the handkerchief is at once a token—a signifier which points to something absent, beyond itself, like Bianca's fictitious minx—and a talisman, an object that possesses (or seems to possess) magical qualities inherently bound up in its “work.”

The handkerchief's double status as sign and thing explains why, as Bert O. States has persuasively argued, we must supplement a purely semiotic approach to stage objects with a phenomenological one in “a kind of binocular vision” that allows us to see them both as signs for something else and as nothing but themselves. Following States's lead, I wish to supplement the many accounts of the handkerchief's symbolism with a phenomenological description of its magic. Bracketing the question of whether the handkerchief's magic (or magic in general) exists outside the confines of the playhouse, I shall instead describe how the handkerchief appears to consciousness—both that of the characters and of the audience—as the play unfolds in performance. The handkerchief is not merely a sign but a performer in the play's action, and its physical movements and shifting emotional impact deserve as much attention as its symbolism.

That symbolism is relentlessly overdetermined. In a sort of semiotic juggling act, the play requires us to bear so many conflicting accounts of the handkerchief in mind—forehead binder, erotic toy, “Trifle light as air” (3.3.323), “magic in the web” (3.4.65), “minx's token” (4.1.147), “recognisance and pledge of love” (5.2.213), “antique token” (5.2.215) that they ultimately collapse into a mute object which, like Posthumus's “[s]enseless linen,” refuses to signify beyond itself. While the characters ascribe greater and greater significance to the handkerchief which culminates in the fateful ocular proof, the actual square of cloth refuses coherent meaning and insists instead on its own phenomenal “charm,” its lethal materiality in performance. Like a black hole, the handkerchief sucks the characters into its magic web, literally absorbing those who would reduce it to a mere sign (or “token”) into the folds of its own uncopiable “work.” The handkerchief arrogates a dizzying number of significations only to repudiate them; to paraphrase Brabantio, the handkerchief “engluts and swallows other [signs] / And yet is still itself” (1.3. 57-58).
A phenomenological approach is thus justified partly because the handkerchief exhausts all attempts to pin down its meaning and partly because the characters themselves, confronted by the handkerchief's strange properties, face the same interpretive hurdle as the audience or critic. If we examine the handkerchief purely in the semiotic attitude, as almost all its critics have done, we risk misreading its magic as a sign or metaphor for something else and failing to account for its grip on us in the heat of performance. While audience members since Thomas Rymer have complained of the handkerchief's inanity as a plot device, the very fascination it holds for the characters seductively commands our attention in the playhouse.

More crucially, a close examination of the handkerchief's three appearances reveals the specific theatrical mechanism at the core of the play. Shakespeare stages the handkerchief as a series of imaginative “reductions” performed by the play's characters. At these key moments, the play—world is “bracketed” (or reduced) so that the handkerchief alone absorbs a character's attention in all its mystery. In performance, Othello likewise demands that we perform the same process of imaginative reduction as the characters who serially encounter the handkerchief in the play. Shakespeare asks his audience to suspend the skeptical attitude towards witchcraft exemplified by the Venetian senate in act 1 and consider this particular handkerchief—not as an object “out there,” but as it seeps into our consciousness. The handkerchief's numinous properties, which accrete as the action unfolds, then color our perception of the surrounding play-world just as Othello's jealousy, once aroused, infects his interpretation of all subsequent events. The play's strategic repetitions ensure that we cannot get the handkerchief off our minds.

The scene in which Bianca takes the handkerchief from Cassio serves as a concrete example. Bianca has come upon her neglectful lover while he waits for Desdemona to press his suit for reinstatement to Othello. Cassio bears a strange handkerchief and demands that Bianca “[t]ake me this work out” (3.4.174). The moment when the handkerchief changes hands is dramatically ironic, for the audience is by now aware of the magic in its web. While to Cassio it is merely a pleasing trinket he has found in his chamber, we have just heard Othello's “magic in the web” speech (3.4.51-71) and have witnessed his obsessive iteration of “The handkerchief!” together with Desdemona's ensuing panic: “Sure there's some wonder in this handkerchief; / I am most unhappy in the loss of it” (3.4.95-96). Magic or no, the handkerchief has become charged with dramatic value and danger.

When Bianca takes the handkerchief, however, we are invited to “bracket” what we have heard and seen about the handkerchief so far—not in order to disavow its magic, but to put it, as it were, on hold. As the handkerchief is “given” to Bianca's consciousness, we are invited to see it through her eyes as if for the first time. The handkerchief takes on a sharper outline as its “felt absence” etches itself into Bianca's awareness, doubling the pain of Cassio's neglect by adding insult to injury. If Bianca is not charmed by the magic into falling further in love with Cassio—for she returns to fling it back at 4.1.149—she is nevertheless seized by the conviction that she has been thrown over: “Is't come to this? Well, well” (3.4.177).

Cassio himself seems smitten by the handkerchief in another way. In answer to Bianca's reasonable question, “Why, whose is it?” he replies:

I know not neither; I found it in my chamber.
I like the work well. Ere it be demanded
As like enough it will—I'd have it copied.
Take it and do't, and leave me for this time.

(3.4.182-85)

Cassio seems oblivious to the pain he has caused Bianca, and his peculiar assertion that “like enough” the handkerchief will be “demanded” is unlikely to render convincing his account of chancing upon it. The handkerchief here throws the couple's relationship into stark relief. Cassio is upset that Bianca has followed
him and that Othello might glimpse him with a prostitute—hardly auspicious, given his disgraced circumstances—and brushes her off, while Bianca's parting comment, "'Tis very good; I must be circumstanced" (3.4.195), shows that she is resigned to making the best of things as they are. Bianca is forced to take the handkerchief with her as a bitter reminder of her own subservient position and a galling sign that Cassio is "womaned" (3.4.189). The handkerchief thus imports quite different values, and incites virtually opposite emotions, in the two characters whose consciousness it absorbs for the duration of the scene.

In sum, I am arguing that at privileged moments in performance the handkerchief becomes a dramatic event unto itself. It is an object "given to" a person's consciousness while at the same time being constituted by that consciousness. Shakespeare calls this reduction of the external world to the contents of consciousness "magic." (Iago's word for the same mechanism is "jealousy," of which more later.) Shakespeare might just as easily have used the term "glamour," in the archaic sense of a spell; for it is the charm of objects apprehended in performance—their glamour, in fact—that is my subject here, just as it is Shakespeare's covert subject in Othello.

But with what sort of magic are we dealing? Critics, reluctant to take the handkerchief's magic seriously, have treated it as delusion or symbol. John A. Hodgson, for instance, asserts that "Othello lies ... when he asserts that there is magic in the web of the handkerchief."¹¹ David Kaula dismisses Othello's belief in the handkerchief's magic as merely a psychic defense: "The magical associations of the handkerchief are temporary. They are symptoms of the delusion which grips the hero in the middle phase of the tragic action."¹² In a recent article, Paul Yachnin equates the handkerchief's spurious magic with that of commodity fetishism: Shakespeare at once fetishizes "magical" props so as to enhance his play's cultural status and unwittingly exercises that magic by deconstructing the ideology behind it.¹³ Linda Woodbridge more cautiously historicizes the play's magic as "a mental phenomenon that is part metaphor, part intellectual construct, part protection magic."¹⁴

To Robert B. Heilman, the handkerchief's "magic in the web" intertwines various strands of symbolic association and thus provides him with the title and subject matter of an influential book outlining "patterns of permanence" in the play's poetic language: a matrix of connections in which images echo and re-echo to forge a new kind of dramatic unity.¹⁵ Heilman argues that the poetic language surrounding the handkerchief becomes mysteriously endowed with dramatic value and meaning, but his figurative account of the handkerchief's magic as a spiritualized symbol of love gives us only half the story. If we strip Othello of its literal magic, its power to reduce consciousness at will, we miss what the play is doing: using magic not as a metaphor for something else (love, reputation, commodity fetishism) but as a reflexive model of theater itself. The handkerchief not only symbolizes magic but enacts it by reducing its victims' consciousness to consciousness of itself. In other words, the handkerchief does to its victims in the play-world precisely what Othello does to its audience in the playhouse.

I am not claiming that the handkerchief's "magic" is real to any particular character or that members of Shakespeare's original audience (or indeed Shakespeare himself) identified the handkerchief with witchcraft.¹⁶ Instead, I aim to clarify what kinds of magic are taken seriously by whom at which points in the play and to what dramatic purpose. My argument is that magic in Othello can be defined as self-authenticating, self-consuming emotion: once you believe it's real, it's real. Whether it "exists" independently of consciousness or not, magic is shown to work effectively wherever and whenever consciousness of magic is present. As Brabantio puts it, "'Tis probable and palpable to thinking" (1.2.76). Just as the handkerchief weaves its magic by reducing to itself the consciousness of each character with whom it comes into contact, so Iago reduces Othello's awareness to a groundless jealousy that engulfs him.

The very point of jealousy, in fact, is its groundlessness, for as soon as one suspects one might have cause to be jealous, one is. In Emilia's apt words:
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they're jealous. 'Tis a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.

(3.4.154-56)

Magic and jealousy thus mirror each other and model Othello as it works on its audience. Magic is the
mechanism by which we come to accept an object before us (a handkerchief, a wife, a play) as “charmed,” for
good or ill; and as we follow its path through the action, the handkerchief models for us the glamorous process
by which a thing becomes a charm, relentlessly accruing talismanic value beyond its mundane function as it is
handled both by characters and in dialogue. When critics disagree over whether the handkerchief is “really”
magical, they are in some sense missing the point. In performance, its charm is inescapable.

II

Desdemona produces her handkerchief at 3.3.289, the midpoint of the play's central scene. It is thus the pivot
around which the play turns. Desdemona takes literally Othello's metaphorical reference to cuckoldry (“I have
a pain upon my forehead here” [3.3.286]) and offers to bind Othello's head. There is no hint as yet of the
handkerchief's peculiarity, although blood-stained cloths recur in Shakespeare as signs of death and wounding
that are open to misreading: Posthumus's bloody handkerchief in Cymbeline, like Thisbe's bloody mantle,
misleadingly betokens the death of the heroine. In this scene there is no actual blood, but it is possible that
the strawberries later said by Iago to “spot” the handkerchief (3.3.436) are visible to the audience. There is
nothing odd about the handkerchief at this point, however, except the virulence with which Othello rejects
what is clearly a token of Desdemona's solicitude.

Yet the handkerchief's physical trajectory is unstable and resists precise plotting. The handkerchief must pass
in the space of thirty lines from Desdemona to Othello, from Othello to Emilia, and from Emilia to Iago, but
there is no textual indication as to how this stage minuet is to be executed. After Othello retorts, “Your napkin
is too little,” neither F nor Q1 provides a stage direction. Rowe's 1709 edition inserts the stage direction “She
drops her handkerchief” (adopted by Ridley's Arden edition); Capell's 1768 edition adds “He puts the
handkerchief from him, and she drops it” (adopted by Sanders); Alvin Kernan's Signet edition has “He pushes
the handkerchief away, and it falls.” Othello's next line is: “Let it alone. Come, I'll go in with you” (3.3.290),
and, as Kernan notes, “it makes a considerable difference in the interpretation of later events whether this ‘it’
refers to Othello's forehead or to the handkerchief.” Both referents are consistent with the dialogue, but
nothing in the spoken text precludes Emilia from seizing the handkerchief; she is on stage throughout the
couple's exchange, and Shakespeare leaves unclear what she is doing. Q1 indicates that Desdemona leaves
with Othello, possibly leaving the handkerchief on the ground for Emilia to pick up; F indicates that Othello
storms out first, so perhaps Desdemona must choose between retrieving her handkerchief and following her
husband. Yet a third possibility is that Emilia takes advantage of the lovers' quarrel to filch the handkerchief
directly. Perhaps the handkerchief's precise trajectory is left open so as to occlude the motives of those who
handle it.

In the first of the handkerchief's imaginative reductions, the stage empties and the action contracts to Emilia's
consciousness as she, turning the handkerchief over in her mind and hand, literally toys with its possibilities.
Emilia's soliloquy clarifies her pleasure at discovering the handkerchief but obscures her reasons for keeping
it:

I am glad I have found this napkin:
This was her first remembrance from the Moor.
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Woed me to steal it; but she so loves the token,
For he conjured her she should ever keep it,
That she reserves it evermore about her
To kiss and talk to. I’ll have the work tane out
And give’t Iago.
What he will do with it, heaven knows, not I:
I nothing but to please his fantasy.

(3.3.292-301)

Shakespeare's elision of the staging forces the actor playing Emilia to make choices that are left ambiguous by the text. Why should Emilia feel compelled to justify her actions here, and why offer the handkerchief to her “wayward” husband, a man she already has good reason to distrust, especially since she knows that it is her mistress's prized possession? Emilia accepts or feigns ignorance of Iago's intentions (“heaven knows, not I”) even though she claims he is already obsessed with the handkerchief; at line 301, Q1 provides the even more suggestive “I nothing know, but for his fantasy.” Is her nonchalance a piece of self-deception masking a need she herself may not fully fathom? Emilia's feigned ignorance of the handkerchief's whereabouts at 3.4.20 is especially puzzling if one assumes Emilia's motives towards Desdemona are benign. Emilia's decision to “have the work tane out” before giving it to her husband is suggestive. The syntax is ambiguous as to which “work,” the original or the duplicate, she intends to give him. Perhaps she wishes to keep the original for her own devices; perhaps she anticipates that it may give her some power over Iago. Whichever, Emilia's fascination seems motivated by the attractive “work” itself, just as Cassio's will be, rather than by any talismanic properties she ascribes to it.

Emilia's enumeration of the handkerchief's properties is intriguing, nevertheless. We learn that it was Othello's first gift to Desdemona and that she values it highly; perhaps that is the sole reason Iago covets it. In the first whiff of magic since act 1, Emilia notes that Othello “conjured” Desdemona to keep it (3. 3.296a word used by Shakespeare in two senses: to “[c]all upon solemnly, adjure” and to “[c]all upon, constrain (a devil or spirit) to appear or to do one's bidding by incantation or the use of some spell, raise or bring into existence as by magic.” This double meaning casts a grim retrospective irony on Brabantio's earlier accusation of witchcraft: “conjured” into accepting the magic handkerchief as her lover's first gift, Desdemona may have had no choice but to fall (or remain) in love. Of course we have no inkling as yet that the handkerchief contains magic in its web—though the ambiguous “conjured” might have jarred a contemporary audience—but we are told that the handkerchief is of intense interest both to Iago and to Desdemona, who “so loves the token / … That she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to” (3.3.295, 297-98).

With these lines a new interior landscape emerges. Desdemona's child-like behavior in this regard marks a peculiar emotional regression from her apparent maturity and self-possession earlier in the text and invites a psychoanalytical interpretation. On the manifest level, the handkerchief is Desdemona's stand-in for Othello: a “token” that can substitute for kissing and stroking the true object of her affections, Othello's felt absence. But at an unconscious level, Desdemona treats her gift precisely as a child treats what psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott calls a “transitional object.” In Winnicott's scheme, a child adopts a bit of cloth, blanket, or hair-ribbon as a way of holding onto the absent mother at a crucial stage in its development when its own boundaries are still inchoate. “It is a first symbol, and it stands for confidence in the union of baby and mother based on the experience of the mother's reliability and capacity to know what the baby needs through identification with the baby.” Transitional objects become essential to the child's security and happiness—objects “created” by the baby even if they existed, as it were, before their creation. They are themselves felt absences, neither purely objective nor purely subjective but liminal, existing both “inside” and “outside” the baby. A handkerchief is an interesting choice in this regard: it is the repository of inner bodily matter, a prophylactic extension of the permeable borders of the body's surface which itself blurs the distinction between inner and outer.

Desdemona has a father but no mother, and Brabantio in act 1 sees his daughter as property to be guarded from unwanted male attention until she can be married off to his advantage. By trading her father's protection
for Othello's, Desdemona moves from one masculine domain to another. Disowned by her father, Desdemona is utterly at the mercy of a husband whose military life she has elected to share in a military outpost far out at sea, 1,300 miles from Venice. In legal terms, she is now her husband's property. Desdemona understandably imbues her handkerchief with the sympathetic qualities of her dead mother and treats it as a confidante, a feminized ally in a masculine stronghold. In Kristevan terms, the handkerchief operates both at the level of the “symbolic,” as a token of heterosexual desire and commitment, and of the “semiotic,” as a tie to the prediscursive maternal body. Desdemona's mother never speaks and is mentioned only in passing (1.3.184), yet in act 4, scene 3, as Emilia prepares her for bed, Desdemona identifies herself with her mother's maid Barbary, abandoned by a lover who “proved mad” (4.3.26). Barbary died singing the “willow song” that Desdemona reprises and which itself retails Barbary's story in verse, even as the handkerchief re-stages it in death. Singing poor Barbary's song, Desdemona inserts herself into a weave of dead women abandoned by men and edged with madness.

The handkerchief, given to Desdemona by Othello and symbolizing his ownership of both, thus partakes of male and female economies simultaneously. It looks at once forward to Desdemona's sexual maturity and husband, and backward to her childhood and mother. It signals both Desdemona's readiness to enter into the patriarchal order of wifehood and motherhood and her unconscious resistance to adopting those subject positions. Desdemona's relation to the handkerchief is thus ambivalent from the outset and soon turns to panic when she discovers its absence. At the moment she loses possession of the handkerchief, Desdemona loses her self-possession along with her last link to her mother, and becomes herself possessed by a feeling of dread: “I had rather lose my purse / Full of crusadoes … it were enough / To put him to ill thinking” (3.4.21-25). The handkerchief has crossed over from the Kristevan “semiotic” to the “symbolic,” has changed from token of female companionship to fetish of male jealousy and murderous revenge.

If this psychoanalytical account seems glib, that is partly the point. Seemingly casual revelations surrounding the handkerchief—in this case, a chance remark by Emilia easily generate intriguing psychological landscapes. By momentarily focusing all our attention on the handkerchief, Emilia's charged language weaves the handkerchief into a shifting pattern of felt absences, a network of significances that increases its charm—its emotional grip on us in performance—while obscuring the source of its mysterious power over the characters to which we are never privy. The fact that Desdemona fondles the handkerchief invites us to reevaluate her relationship to Othello, which in turn invites us to reevaluate the handkerchief's meaning as a “remembrance,” and so forth ad infinitum. Emilia's monologue may occupy only a minute of stage time, but it posits a network of fraught emotional relationships (“he hath a hundred times …”). The monologue at once stresses the handkerchief's bewitching materiality and deepens its semiotic mystery. Emilia (and, perhaps, the actor playing her) knows why she wants the handkerchief, but this information is deliberately withheld from the audience even in soliloquy, the traditional place where obscure motives are revealed and clarified.

No sooner has the notion of taking out the work occurred to her than Emilia is left empty-handed: Iago appears, as if on cue, and acquires the handkerchief to plant in Cassio's lodging. Once again, the text does not indicate whether Iago grabs the handkerchief from Emilia or persuades her to relinquish it, leaving the couple's literal hold over each other open to directorial interpretation. In a bid for power, Emilia tries to use the precious object as a token of exchange (“What will you give me now / For that same handkerchief?” [3.3.307-08]) and offers a version of events which may or may not be true: “she let it drop by negligence, / And to th'advantage I being here took't up” (3.3.313-14). As soon as Iago takes hold, Emilia feels the handkerchief's absence and demands it back: “Poor lady, she'll run mad / When she shall lack it” (3.3.319-20). Iago dismisses her, and once again the stage empties to a solitary figure, alone with the suggestive piece of cloth. It is the handkerchief which gives Iago the vague idea of implicating Cassio somehow, a strategy of which he is himself dubious: “I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin / And let him find it. … This may do something” (3.3. 322-25).
Iago secretes the handkerchief just as his general reappears, Othello's own consciousness now entirely subdued to jealousy. Iago's improvised narrative at once creates and authenticates a past history of infidelity: when Iago tells Othello that he saw Cassio wipe his beard with "a handkerchief / Spotted with strawberries" (3.3.435-36), the very handkerchief that is hidden on Iago's person, Othello swears his revenge. One of the handkerchief's key stage functions, then, is to capture the imagination of those who intersect with it. In quick succession, Desdemona, Othello, Emilia, Iago, and Cassio are enmeshed in an emotional net Iago sees himself as controlling, but it is the handkerchief that allows Iago's improvisations to take root rather than vice versa.

The handkerchief refuses to stay fixed in time or space; it must continually be "given over" to please another's "fantasy" before it can satisfy one's own.

III

Our fullest glimpse of the handkerchief's strange properties is offered by Othello as he admonishes the panicked Desdemona not to lose what is already, to her, a keenly felt absence. When Desdemona is unable to produce the handkerchief on demand, Othello launches into his story before an onstage audience of Emilia (who knows Iago has the handkerchief) and his alarmed wife (who does not). Whether Othello believes his own tale or not, its effect on Desdemona is palpable. The "magic in the web" speech puts her into a panic, and as we witness Desdemona's response via Emilia's mute presence, Emilia cues our reaction. The contagious (mimetic) structure of magic is thus triangulated through a third party. What is important here is not that Othello or Desdemona "really" believes in the charm—Othello may well be lying—but that they are seen to seem to believe in the moment of performance by Emilia, and this is what makes it "real enough" at this moment. For the space of Othello's speech, the audience's consciousness is altered. We are imaginatively drawn into a world of magic and death that eclipses the play's formerly skeptical attitude towards witchcraft, as evinced by the Venetian senate's dismissal of Brabantio's accusations in act 1.

Shakespeare reintroduces the theme of witchcraft, absent since Othello's trial, by reducing our imaginative attention to the effect of Othello's words on Desdemona; we see the handkerchief fill Desdemona's harried consciousness as it acquires an otherworldly history. Othello spins his narrative thread both backwards to include his parents, an Egyptian charmer, and the sibyl who sewed the work; and forwards, propelling the charm via Desdemona (and the mute Emilia) out to the audience in language that links the handkerchief to a supernatural domain:

That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give:
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it,
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies. She dying gave it me,
And bid me when my fate would have me wive,
To give it her. I did so, and take heed on't:
Make it a darling, like your precious eye.
To lose't or give'at away were such perdition
As nothing else could match. ... 'Tis true. There's magic in the web of it:
A sibyl, that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts.

(3.4.51-71)
The language surrounding the handkerchief adds an eerie supernatural coloring to the familiar landscapes of sixteenth-century Venice and Cyprus that have so far dominated the play. While it is true that the handkerchief is an “emblem of Othello's exotic genealogy and hence of his family's honor,” its provenance is at once feminine and fey.28 Othello's measured, dream-like cadences limn a pagan world inhabited by psychic soothsayers, two-hundred year old sibyls in the throes of prophetic ecstasy, and dye made from lovingly preserved hearts ripped from living virgins' bodies. This is a far cry from the ordered republic of Venice we have witnessed in act 1; but Cyprus, where the bulk of the action takes place, is a contested battleground in the process of shifting from the Christian sphere of Venice to the “heathen” sphere of the Ottomans.29 Writing in about 1603, Shakespeare here followed contemporary history: Cyprus fell to the Turks in 1572 after a temporary reprieve by gales corresponding to the storm that disperses the Turkish fleet in 2.1. Cyprus itself would have constituted a recently felt absence, at least to Shakespeare's more educated audience, and Shakespeare here romantically associates Islam's exoticism with mummies, sybils, and love charms.

By invoking a pagan dimension to the world of the play, the handkerchief suggests also the historic association of Cyprus with the ancient rites of Venus, an association for which preparation has already been made by Desdemona's arrival on the island in 2.1. Arriving safely ashore, Cassio states:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
The gutted rocks and congregated sands,
Traitors enscarped to clog the guiltless keel,
As having sense of beauty do omit
Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
The divine Desdemona.

(2.1.68-73)

According to legend, Aphrodite was born from the sea out of the genitals of Uranus, castrated by his son Cronos to avenge his oppression. The goddess of fertility, of love both pure and carnal, of beauty (and, especially relevant to 2.1, the protectress of sailors) then came ashore at Cyprus. The “divine Desdemona” becomes for a moment the genius loci, the goddess before whom Cassio bids the men of Cyprus kneel (2.1.84).30 But this association has its sinister side. Paphos became the site of a temple where sacrifices took place during an annual festival, the Aphrodisia, and, according to Doros Alastos, “The ritual included mysteries, the character of which we do not exactly know.”31 These mysteries may well have included human sacrifice; certainly the cult of Aphrodite involved the ritual sacred prostitution of virgins before their wedding, and these rites of Venus, according to Frazer's The Golden Bough, incorporated Near-Eastern pagan rituals we can only guess at.32

Not coincidentally, there are clear textual indications that Desdemona is still a virgin on her death night. Iago interrupts Othello and Desdemona's nuptials between 1.1 and 1.2, and Othello sets sail next morning for Cyprus. Once there, Othello leads his wife to bed with the words “Come, my dear love, / The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue; / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you” (2.3.8-10), which Iago glosses as “he hath not yet made wanton the night with her” (2.3.15-16). But this second intended night of pleasure is usurped by Iago's mutiny (2.3), and the action next day is continuous until Desdemona asks Emilia to put the wedding sheets on her bed (4.2.104), an action which implies that their marriage is never consummated.

“Divine Desdemona,” then, provides a propitiatory virgin offering to her own divine image. Her handkerchief “[s] potted with strawberries” (3.3.436) becomes the emblem of a deflowering that, ironically, never takes place.33 By refusing to shed Desdemona's hymeneal blood through consummating her marriage (“Yet I'll not shed her blood” [5.2.3]), and thus by refusing to stain her wedding sheets, Othello denies himself the only real ocular and tactile proof of Desdemona's chastity he could ever have.34 In killing Desdemona, Othello is careful not to shed the virgin blood that was, by rights, to have been his but instead is consecrated to “yond marble heaven” (3.3.461).35
Once we break the spell of Othello's verse, however, the handkerchief's charm becomes impossible to quantify. In Othello's account, the charm passes down a human chain which to this point comprises the sibyl, the Egyptian charmer, Othello's mother, Othello, and Desdemona. What seems at first glance a simple repeated pattern of erotic binding is in fact so complex that it becomes very hard to say just when and how the magic is supposed to work, for the charm never acts in the same way twice. Rather than mechanically binding receiver to giver, the handkerchief adjusts its erotic valence to fit shifting circumstance. No erotic link exists between the Egyptian charmer and Othello's mother, for instance, nor between the latter and Othello. The charm, first conferring desirability on Othello's mother, subdues her sexual partner. Its magic then lies dormant until Othello's "fate" decrees his marriage (3.4.60). This seems to imply that Desdemona is bound to Othello, her future husband; but for the handkerchief's charm to work the same way twice, Othello should have kept it, since that is how his mother subdued his father. Yet Othello cannot keep it, because his mother tells him that he must give it away in order for the charm to work at all.

Perhaps, Desdemona's telling admission that "My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord" (1.3.24647) notwithstanding, the magic subdues Othello to Desdemona rather than vice versa. Othello's "when my fate would have me wive" is ambiguous; we cannot tell if he himself controls the timing and direction of the charm, or if he is compelled by fate to give it up at the propitious moment (something of this ambiguity is caught in the variance between QI's "wive" and F's more passive "Wiu'd"). Logically, Desdemona's receipt of the handkerchief should confer desirability on her and not on Othello. This seems borne out by the fact that, once she loses it, Othello fulfills the dreaded prospect and "hold[s] her loathed" (3.4.58). Yet because Othello prevents the initial pattern from repeating itself, by giving the handkerchief away rather than keeping it, we can never be certain if Othello charms Desdemona by giving, or if Desdemona charms Othello by receiving, or both, or neither.

Thus far the handkerchief's magic seems selective according to the hidden direction of its own inscrutable fatedness. To complicate matters still further, it is impossible to say whether the handkerchief is inherently magical or is abruptly endowed with pseudo-magical properties by Othello's mesmerizing speech. In other words, we do not know if Othello is telling the truth or improvising the magic in order to spook Desdemona—that is, whether the handkerchief is a genuine charm (the magic inheres in and originates with the object itself) or a fetish (an ordinary object Othello chooses to endow with special significance). This latter possibility is especially evident given that, as we shall see, Othello later revises his account of the handkerchief's origin and thus obscures its magical status still further. In either case, we must reevaluate the sardonic attitude towards magic that came so easily to Iago and the senators in act 1, the self-evident superiority of wit-craft to witchcraft.

As the handkerchief tightens its grip on the characters' emotions, its dramatic function shifts from that of love charm to death fetish. Othello's love turns to raging jealousy, fulfilling the fate prophesied by the sibyl. Desdemona's desperate evasions only spur Othello's demands to produce the gift, and Othello's thrice-repeated "The handkerchief!" (3.4.88-92) threatens to break down communication altogether (as it will later, when Othello falls into his fit and misses a potentially decisive encounter with Cassio), substituting the brute sound of the words for the square of cloth they signify. Desdemona can only respond by accusing Othello for the first and only time—"I'faith, you are to blame" (3.4.92)—which only enrages him further. Emilia fatally ignores the opportunity to confess to stealing the handkerchief, and act 3 ends, as we have seen, with Bianca's receiving the handkerchief from Cassio in what is almost a burlesque of Othello and Desdemona's quarrel. Shakespeare cunningly conflates Cassio's prostitute and sewing-woman, separate in Cinthio, so as to stress the handkerchief's economy of movement. Bianca's resigned jealousy over the handkerchief is a pale echo of Othello's, but her pain is apparent. Cassio's displeasure at seeing her out of doors and his insistence she return home anticipate the claustrophobic shuttering of the other women in act 5 and the chilling confinement of the death chamber.
The handkerchief continues to sew dissension and heartache as, through Cassio and Bianca, it repeats its by now familiar dance of absent presence. Bianca initially accepts Cassio's demands to copy the work (again, the text leaves open when and how it changes hands), but its charm cools and she returns to fling it back: "wheresoever you had it. I'll take out no work on't" (4.1.148-49). The handkerchief, then, repeatedly inspires, yet refuses its own duplication; what is repeated instead is the pattern of human beings seeking to replicate its unique work. Like a director, the handkerchief compels a repeat performance but one that is always slightly different from the previous one. In this case, the magic circuit fails (or perhaps its erotic current reverses): instead of making Bianca fall further in love with Cassio, the handkerchief turns her against him. It evidently has no romantic designs for Cassio and Bianca but uses them to provide a crucial tableau.

It is of course Iago who sets the stage for Othello's misprision of the "ocular proof," the handkerchief's final appearance in its brief stage career. Having reduced Othello to a state of furious jealousy, Iago stages a scene in which Othello observes Iago's interview of Cassio but mistakes the latter's object of scorn (Bianca) for Desdemona. By placing Othello out of earshot, Iago encourages him to loose his imagination just he has manipulated it all along by perversely framing the general's experience as a judicious phenomenological reduction, one that sets aside all subjective value judgments: "Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio; / Wear your eyes thus: not jealous, nor secure" (3.3.199-200). As fate would have it, when Bianca unexpectedly erupts into the scene bearing the handkerchief, Othello glimpses the very ocular proof he has demanded of Iago and thus allows the latter once more to improvise: "she gave it him, and he hath given it his whore" (4.1.168). While Iago has staged a "reduction" whereby Othello can see but not hear—a recipe for misreading—once again it is the handkerchief that clinches the scene. Iago's lies have transformed the handkerchief into an emblem of Desdemona's faithlessness. Ironically, Othello is so intent on the handkerchief's function as a sign that he almost misses its material presence as an image: "Was that mine?" (4.1. 166). For Othello, the handkerchief now embodies the most palpable absence of all: Desdemona's honor.

The Egyptian charmer's gift is a double-edged sword, administering love and death in equal measure. For Cassio and Bianca, the handkerchief's eros and thanatos here cancel each other out. Considering its potentially lethal powers, the characters may be said to get off lightly, at least for now. Once Bianca gives it up (always the fatal error) we never see the handkerchief again, but her line "There, give it your hobby-horse" (4.1.148) leaves open the possibility that a dumbfounded Cassio simply takes it back and hence inadvertently starts a new cycle of love and death. The handkerchief's felt absence is invoked one final time, however, which marks the collapse as well as the finale of its narrative. Once Montano, Gratiano, and Iago burst into the death chamber, Othello justifies Desdemona's murder to the aghast nobles by explaining that he saw Cassio with "an antique token / My father gave my mother" (5.2.215-16)—thereby revising his previous account of the handkerchief and, in effect, complicating its origins past all intelligibility. As we have seen, a "token" is not magical at all but is any object that has some significance for somebody—in other words, a sign. With one stroke, the play forces us to reevaluate Othello as an unreliable narrator. If Othello's father gave Othello's mother the handkerchief, the tale of the sibyl is mere invention, and all bets as to the handkerchief's magical properties are off.

Why does Othello revise his story? Faced with this crux, critics diverge. David Kaula notes, "Shakespeare provides no definite clue that he intends this [alteration] to be taken as the true account of the handkerchief's history and the former one as a fabrication," but on balance he sees the "antique token" as "a more plausible love token than the horrific thing contrived by the superannuated sibyl in her prophetic fury." Despite Othello's insistence that his magic fable is "most veritable" (3.4.72), Robert S. Miola takes him at his second word: the Moor's revision reveals "the more mundane truth" about the origins of the handkerchief. John A. Hodgson, too, agrees that Othello's revision of his earlier "wild story" reveals its untruth; Michael C. Andrews, by contrast, argues that the magic is real for Othello but no longer of interest to Shakespeare. Fernand Baldensperger and Mark Van Doren are also hesitant in rejecting Othello's belief in the charm. One of the handkerchief's apparent abilities, then, is to obscure and efface its own origin. By the play's end, all we can say for certain is that the handkerchief is an "antique token"—but of what?
The handkerchief’s elusive properties bring us back to the enigma of Desdemona herself. The handkerchief emerges from Desdemona’s person to become an agent of her destruction, providing an odd mirror of her own “divine” powers. If in psychoanalytic terms Desdemona projects the emotional residue of her mother onto the handkerchief, in magic terms the handkerchief slyly absorbs Desdemona’s symbolic essence just as it has literally introjected the victims whose “mummy” dyes its work. Both Desdemona and the handkerchief share the same numinous quality, seeming at once to belong to and to transcend the frenzied masculine world of the play. Desdemona’s consecration of her “soul and fortunes” to Othello (1.3.250) and her simple declaration that “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (1.3.248) seem utterly at odds with her dogged (even shrewish) commitment to Cassio’s reinstatement in 3.3. Miraculously flickering back to life, Desdemona’s final words come as if from beyond the grave: “Commend me to my kind lord” (5.2.126). Her pardon of Othello marks a Christlike level of forgiveness that can only be deemed beyond the human. Like the handkerchief, she has possessed a lethal attractiveness: love of her has destroyed Brabantio and Roderigo as well as Othello and Emilia. Committing the final act of slaughter, Othello, providing the pagan gods with a final immolation, simultaneously tries and executes himself and thus acts as both faithful servant to the Venetian state and “turbaned Turk” (5.2.349); his act transforms the struggle between Venice and Constantinople into something primitive and frightening.

Like Prospero’s, the sibyl’s magic has drawn the characters to an island in order to involve them in a ritual action beyond their ken. From the moment Othello’s mother “gave it [him] / And bid [him] when [his] fate would have [him] wife, / To give it her” (3.4.59-61), the handkerchief’s fatedness has driven the plot forward. Desdemona produces the handkerchief to aid Othello; Iago happens upon Emilia just as she finds the handkerchief; Bianca returns it to Cassio just at the point when an eavesdropping Othello is close enough to recognize it. At each step the handkerchief inspires Iago to ever more lethal improvisation, and, shorn of the handkerchief in the play’s last scene, he has nothing more to add. Yet the handkerchief is conjured once more in a final tableau: when Othello stabs himself and falls on the spotless wedding sheets, he replicates the pattern of the strawberry-spotted token, magnifying the play’s central image in our consciousness before the bed-curtains are drawn (5.2.361). Othello’s bloody climax is thus the handkerchief writ large.

IV

In tracing the handkerchief’s felt absences, its oscillation between sign and thing, I have tried to show that Othello provides two seemingly incompatible perspectives on magic. In one, a mundane object such as a handkerchief accrues value and significance through the otherworldly meaning imputed to it; in the other, a thing is inherently magical and carries its charm wherever it goes. The handkerchief exhibits both properties, and the play’s final irony is that these properties’ effect is identical: the charm works because people believe in it. As in the case of Winnicott’s transitional object, we need never ask if the charm exists independently of our consciousness of it. It suffices that something or someone appears to be magical (or unfaithful) for the magic (or jealousy) to work. Magic is mimetic—always caught, like an infection, from someone else. Thus the fact that Othello seems to believe his “magic in the web” speech is enough to convince Desdemona, while the fact that she seems to believe him (“Then would to God that I had never seen’t!” [3.4.73]) is enough to convince Emilia and the offstage audience—at least for the duration of the scene. In each case, the handkerchief is “magic enough” to produce real consequences.

The analogue of this ju-ju, by which something becomes real as soon as it is perceived, is jealousy. Iago’s success bears witness that this self-authenticating, self-consuming emotion need only be entertained as a possibility for it to become real. Iago himself is not inured to this infectious disease, which “gnaw[s] my inwards” (2.1.278). Contemplating the rumor that Emilia has slept with Othello, Iago unwittingly lays bare the mechanism at the heart of the play: “I know not if’t be true / Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety” (1.3.370-72). Iago admits that it does not matter to him whether Emilia slept with Othello or not; he has bracketed the question of reality (i.e., adultery) entirely, and his untrammeled jealousy soon includes Cassio (2.1.288).
Othello reveals that the effects of magic and jealousy are identical. Jealousy—or magic—becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, like the sibyl's curse. It is as real as we think it is, which is precisely what makes it dangerous. I have outlined this mechanism in detail because I believe the play can be understood as a cautionary fable about the phenomenological power of theater. Just as the handkerchief invites its victims to bracket the world outside itself, with all its skepticism about magic—hence the play's Venetian prologue, a pageant of rationality to keep us in false gaze—so the theater invites us to bracket the world outside the playhouse and thus serves to reduce reality to the objects presently before our eyes. Magic is neither trick nor metaphor, Othello warns, but a psychic mechanism whose workings we ignore at our peril. The play implies that theater is a phenomenological rather than an epistemological endeavor: we go to the theater not because it represents things true but because it makes us feel things which we experience as true. Othello acknowledges the theatricality of its own magic but argues that theatrical magic should be taken seriously because it produces genuine emotions, and emotions have potentially lethal results—both in and out of the playhouse.

However opaque its moral, Othello does provide an object lesson in the dangers of hermeneutic tunnel vision. Taken to its extreme, the semiotic attitude yields an Othello-like obsession with an object's sign-function, a refusal to see the lost handkerchief as simply a lost handkerchief. Conversely, taken to its extreme, the phenomenological attitude yields Iago, a reductive ego gone berserk. Iago refuses to see the world except through the distorting lens of his own pathology, and he achieves a nightmarish solipsism in which love is lust, honor a word, marriage a farce. What remains once Iago performs his cynical reductions is not transcendence but pornography: a world of bodies without souls, "a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.326). Iago embodies a monstrous Cartesian dualism, a mind reflecting coolly on the body's depravities. Instead of the transcendental, revelatory structures of the ego envisioned by Husserl, Iago's reductionism offers anarchy and chaos.

The play's very topography is a metaphor for phenomenological reduction gone haywire. Venice in part represents a skeptical audience's "natural attitude" to sorcery, which is literally put on trial in act 1 as if to underscore the point. The senate is a model of rational deliberation, admirably suspicious of "pageant[s] / To keep us in false gaze" (1.3.18-19), and Brabantio is all but ridiculed for suggesting that Othello practiced charms on Desdemona. Once we reach Cyprus, however, "a town of war, / Yet wild" (2.3.194-95), the rational world of Venice is bracketed, and the passionate energies unleashed by the handkerchief engulf us. Othello's reductions on the emotional level are mirrored by reduction at the spatial level. The play forces upon us a series of near-concentric constrictions in spatial possibility—Venice, Cyprus, citadel, chamber, bed, sheets, bodies, blood—precisely to increase our sense of claustrophobic bracketing. Othello's self-stabbing, providing a visual reminder of the handkerchief, collapses everything to the dimensions of this central property.

Thomas Rymer famously derided "[s]o much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief!!" But from the handkerchief's perspective, Othello can be seen as a witty and disturbing mediation on the magical properties of props: their liminal status in performance as both themselves and other than themselves, objects as well as symbols. It is true that, as a "token" or gift, the handkerchief can be seen as a conveniently empty counter in a series of symbolic exchanges; but in performance the handkerchief stubbornly insists on its materiality over and above its referentiality and refuses to accede to an overdetermined symbolic "absence." In a startling reversal of a prop's usual function, Othello's handkerchief uses and discards its victims rather than vice versa. Instead of merely symbolizing its human couriers, the handkerchief absorbs and literally inscribes them as felt absences within its ghostly palimpsest. The "mummy" that forms its dye (3.4.70) is liquid drained from the embalmed bodies of its victims, an ironic parody of a handkerchief's mundane function as a repository of bodily waste. To the handkerchief, waste is all that the body is, and Othello's tragedy is merely an episode in its larger (offstage) life. The felt absence which the handkerchief embodies is Shakespeare's synecdoche for the theater itself: an alchemy whereby the word is briefly made flesh before being once more absorbed into the "work."
Notes


2. The evil ensign (Shakespeare's Iago) steals the handkerchief directly from Desdemona and impulsively plants it in the bed of the captain (Shakespeare's Cassio). The captain decides to return it to Desdemona by the back door but runs away when the suspicious Moor reappears. Later, the ensign and the Moor happen to pass by the captain's lodging when the captain's woman is visible in a window duplicating the handkerchief's pattern—and thus providing the ocular proof of Desdemona's infidelity and sealing her doom at the men's hands with a sand-filled stocking.


4. According to Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), “The talisman is an object imprinted with an image which has been supposed to have been rendered magical, or to have magical efficacy, through having been made in accordance with certain magical rules” (154). Fernand Baldensperger, “Was Othello an Ethiopian?” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 20 (1938): 3-14, argues that “poor Othello's 'handkerchief' is an amulet—one of those powerful Ethiopian talismans, already alluded to in Heliodorus, which any specialist in superstitions ranks to-day among the most efficient of all the magic helpers of a credulous humanity” (13). Linda Woodbridge, in *The Scythe of Saturn: Shakespeare and Magical Thinking* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), also will see Desdemona's handkerchief as an amulet, "a bodily protection against a magical weapon: the supernaturally powerful gaze of an enemy" (60) the "evil eye" passed from Iago to Othello to Desdemona.

5. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 8. According to States, objects are constantly mutating (via language) into signs and then back into what States calls “images.” In what could stand as an apt image of Desdemona's handkerchief, States calls the sign/image “a Janus-faced thing: it wants to say something about something, to be a sign, and it wants to be something, a thing in itself, a site of beauty” (10).

6. Obviously not every member of all audiences for every production will understand a theatrical moment in a definitive way. By repeatedly invoking “the (attentive) audience,” however, I am trying to pinpoint moments when the text seems to demand specific effects in the theater, independent of any given production. The handkerchief itself, for example, like its own “work,” cannot be “tane out” of the play (3.3.298). If I risk imposing my own staging ideas on *Othello*, I do so in the hope that my arguments will be suggestive enough to provoke the reader's own sense of the play's demands in performance.

7. Iago tells Emilia that he has “use” for the handkerchief (3.3.321) and Othello that he saw Cassio “wipe his beard” with it (3.3.439). For the erotic connotations of these terms, see David Kaula, “Othello Possessed: Notes on Shakespeare's Use of Magic and Witchcraft,” *Shakespeare Studies* 2 (1966): 123.

8. *Cymbeline*, 1.3.7; quotations from *Cymbeline* in my paper are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

9. We are told the handkerchief “was dyed in mummy, which the skilful Conserved of maidens' hearts” (3.4.70-71). The handkerchief's dye is thus derived from the embalmed bodies of its victims. See A. H. R. Fairchild, “‘Mummy’ in Shakespeare,” *Philological Quarterly* 1 (1922): 143-46.

10. The phrase “take out” is ambiguous. To “take out” embroidery is an idiom that means to copy, but the phrase also suggests somehow removing the embroidery itself. If we are to equate this “work” with the handkerchief's strawberry-spotted pattern, this second meaning would imply restoring the handkerchief to a state of pure whiteness—an interesting concept if we link the handkerchief's pattern to Desdemona's virginity and to her (perhaps) spotless wedding sheets, which she bids Emilia place on her bed at 4.2.104. For a reading equating the handkerchief with wedding sheets and its


13. Paul Yachnin, “Magical Properties: Vision, Possession, and Wonder in *Othello*,” *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 197-208. Yachnin's claim that “[t]he play's stake in the handkerchief registers the theatre's participation in English society's fetishized trade in textiles” (202) is intriguing but proceeds from very different foundational assumptions than mine about the kind of “registering” audiences (and critics) do when confronted with objects on stage.


17. Compare Queen Margaret's handkerchief, stained with the blood of Rutland and used to torment York in *3 Henry VI*, and Orlando's “bloody napkin” in *As You Like It* which makes “Ganymede” swoon. In a gothic twist, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* features a handkerchief whose blood engulfs the initials of Antonio's name and presages his death. In Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronymo displays a handkerchief besmeared in his son's blood that becomes a token of his revenge. J. L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), remarks that for the Elizabethans “dipping a handkerchief in the victim's blood was a practice at public executions” (115).


19. It is as if Shakespeare has left it up to the handkerchief itself to choreograph the action. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), indicates that "an external symbol can mysteriously help the co-ordination of brain and body. Actors' memoirs frequently recount cases in which a material symbol conveys effective power: the actor knows his part, knows exactly how he wants to interpret it. But an intellectual knowing of what is to be done is not enough to produce the action. He tries continually and fails. One day some prop is passed to him, a hat or green umbrella, and with this symbol suddenly knowledge and intention are realised in the flawless performance” (63). I am grateful to Judith Issroff for this reference.

20. The actor playing Emilia is given some scope here. Writing of a 1990 production at *The Other Place* in Stratford-upon-Avon, for instance, the editors of *Shakespeare in Performance* explain: “When Emilia denies to Desdemona any knowledge of what has happened to the handkerchief, it can be an uncomfortable moment inconsistent with loyal friendship, but for Zoe Wanamaker it read powerfully as a moment in which she was prepared to have Desdemona suffer a little of the marital disharmony that for Emilia was habitual” (*Shakespeare in Performance*, ed. Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason [London: Salamander Books, 1995], 167).

22. In “Honest Othello: The Handkerchief Once More,” Studies in English Literature 13 (1973): 273-84, Michael C. Andrews exonerates Othello of the charge of witchcraft by begging the question: “[I]t is plain enough that Othello regards the handkerchief as ensuring the continuance of his love for Desdemona, not hers for him” (281-82). Nevertheless, the fact that Brabantio has earlier accused Othello of binding Desdemona “in chains of magic” (1.2.65) eerily resonates throughout the play.


26. Both acts 1 and 2 end by shrinking the stage to Iago's solo figure, and the audience's attention is thus forcibly reduced to his malevolent consciousness. The handkerchief takes up this “spotlighted” function at the close of act 3. On Iago's own capacity “to reduce imaginatively all he contemplates,” see Sanders's introduction to the New Cambridge edition, 30-34.

27. Shakespeare here follows Cinthio: “The wicked Ensign, seizing a suitable opportunity, went to the Corporal's room, and with cunning malice left the handkerchief at the head of his bed” (Narrative and Dramatic Sources, ed. Bullough, 7:247).


29. In his introduction to Othello, Sanders notes that for Shakespeare's contemporaries Janus-faced Venice itself “gazed in two directions: towards civilised Christianity and towards the remote eastern world of pagan infidels, the Turks, and the mighty power of Islam” (18).  


33. Jean Jofen, in “The Case of the Strawberry Handkerchief,” Shakespeare Newsletter 21 (1971): 14, traces Shakespeare's association of strawberries with impotence and linen with innocence and also identifies the spotted handkerchief with “the successful culmination of the sexual act.” Jofen sees a tension between the virginal innocence of the “handkerchief” derived from the mother and the “minx's token” of sexual promiscuity perceived by Bianca. In “The Meaning of Strawberries in Shakespeare,” Studies in the Renaissance 7 (1960): 225-40, Lawrence J. Ross equates the strawberries with the handkerchief's “work” and explains that the strawberry emblem, classical in origin, was by Shakespeare's day ambiguous: it could represent both perfect righteousness and lurking moral corruption. Expanding Ross's insights, Kaula, “Othello Possessed,” speculates that “[i]n view of the sacramental implications of the strawberry emblem, Iago's verbal abusing of the handkerchief, like his other conversions of caritas to lust, parallels one of the more lurid features of the Black Mass, the sexual defilement of the eucharist, the theoretical purpose of which was magically to reduce the power of the white god and transfer it to the black” (123-24). McPeek, “The 'Arts Inhibited',” suggests that the strawberries are symbols of maidens' hearts (145). The handkerchief's strawberries,
worked into the folds of the handkerchief, are a fascinating emblem within an emblem whose significance clearly merits further discussion.

34. I am grateful to Grace Tiffany for this observation.

35. Shakespeare may here be referring to the faux-marble underside of the stage cover in the Globe Theater. In Cymbeline, Sicilius bids Jupiter “[p]eep through thy marble mansion” (5.4.87); and after Jupiter ascends Sicilius remarks, “The marble pavement closes, he is enter’d / His radiant roof” (5.4.120-21), presumably referring to a trap door in the stage cover itself. Both Othello and Cymbeline played at the Globe in Shakespeare’s lifetime: Othello in April 1610, and Cymbeline in September 1611.

36. It is even somewhat misleading to characterize the handkerchief’s intricate exchanges in terms of “givers” and “receivers” since Othello refuses the handkerchief (3.3.289); Iago apparently snatches it (3.3.317); and Cassio finds it in his lodging and lends it to Bianca (3.4.185), who tries (and possibly fails) to return it (4.1.149).

37. Hodgson, “Desdemona’s Handkerchief as an Emblem,” is thus mistaken in asserting that “[w]hile no one, as it happens, takes out the work of Desdemona’s handkerchief, we must recognize that it would be quite possible for someone to do so” (318). Yachnin, too, misses the point when he claims that the handkerchief “is not necessarily unique, but potentially only the first of a series. It could be reproduced endlessly for an endless number of owners” (“Magical Properties,” 203). In fact, the handkerchief’s uniqueness reinforces States’s crucial phenomenological distinction between signs and images: “Unlike the sign, the image is unique and unreproducible (except as facsimile); whereas the sign is of no value unless it repeats itself” (Great Reckonings, 25). States goes on to quote Derrida: “a sign which does not repeat itself, which is not already divided by repetition in its ‘first time’, is not a sign” (Jacques Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 246, as quoted by States, 25).

38. Hodgson, “Desdemona’s Handkerchief as an Emblem,” muses that the handkerchief might appear one last time, when Bianca tends the wounded Cassio in 5.1, which “would be intriguingly evocative of the handkerchief’s first appearance, when Desdemona tries to bind Othello’s aching forehead with it” (319) but this is pure conjecture.


42. Baldensperger, “Was Othello an Ethiopian?” excuses Othello’s deliberate lie about the “antique token” by asking rhetorically, “Among so many enlightened people, how could he speak of the fatal abduction of an amulet?” (14). Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare (New York: Henry Holt, 1939), suggests that “in Othello’s case an element of mystery and magic, native to his original environment and in the meantime only half-forgotten, would seem to have become operative again. His voice and his very clothes have brought the scent of it along” (229).

43. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we may say that the handkerchief identifies with its victims, given that “[i]dentification is a process in which the human subject ‘introjects’ attributes of other people and transforms them through the unconscious imagination. This identification with another is made a part of the subject by incorporation: the taking in of objects, either wholly or partially, to form the basis of an ego” (Anthony Elliott, Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction [Oxford: B. H. Blackwell, 1994], 13). In its bloodthirsty incorporations, the handkerchief may be said to take the Freudian model of ego-formation very much to heart.

44. In this, magic resembles desire, which is also mimetic in the play. Desdemona falls in love while eavesdropping on Othello recounting his adventures to Brabantio; Desdemona then tells Othello that the way to “woo” her would be to teach his story to a friend and have him tell it to her (1.3.163-65). Even Brabantio’s conviction that Desdemona has been stolen is both instantiated and confirmed by a dream (1.141-42). Narrative, it seems, works like a charm.


Criticism: Themes: Edward Washington (essay date 1997)


[In the following essay, Washington locates Othello's personal flaw in his tragic “dependence on image at the expense of truth, reality, and hope” and details the process of his downfall within the context of race.]

Even in this time of diverse, sophisticated, and politically progressive critical methodologies, Kenneth Burke's formalist statements (144, 149) remain a valuable guide for critics of Othello who wish to avoid the dubious conclusions that ensue from ill-premised racist ideology. In the first detailed account of racism's influence on Othello scholarship, Martin Orkin exposes and denounces the long tradition of racist discourse that pervades even the highest echelons of Othello criticism. Several scholars have since taken up the issue of race in Othello seemingly in response to Orkin's implicit challenge to critics to construct unbiased (that is, reliable if not precisely “objective”) evaluations of the drama's racial dimensions. Although most of these more recent essays strive to establish critical positions that eschew hasty racial prejudgments, no reading of the play has yet emerged that fully sets forth the semantic complexity of Othello's blackness.¹ There are two reasons for this. First, Othello scholarship has relied too heavily on historical and anthropological methodologies to explain the significance of Othello's blackness and has neglected available alternative meanings of blackness within the play.² Second, critics tend to evaluate Othello's motivations and actions from the delimiting (or delimited) gaze of the dominant white Venetian society, thereby precluding an unsentimentalized view of “the action as a whole” from Othello's perspective—that is, from the perspective of an “all sufficient” (IV.i.261) black figure ascribed a culturally marginal position by white “others.” In the effort to address these two critical deficiencies, and to supply the interpretive lacuna regarding racial blackness in Othello, this essay will explore the relationship between the play's racial signifiers and the transmutations of convention in the text. More important, given the ways in which the authority of Shakespeare—and by extension that of his critics—continues to shape normative cultural values, this essay will also seek to determine the degree to which Shakespeare's Othello reconfigures, rather than confirms, conventional cultural stereotypes of blacks.

The difficulty in defining Othello's blackness as either a conventional or unconventional literary sign (or trope) is illustrated by the sharply varying opinions of critics who question its moral and aesthetic value. Thus, whereas Eldred Jones, Gwyn Williams, and Martin Orkin see Othello as admirable (that is, finally unstereotypical and unconventional) because of his intrinsic but tragically vulnerable honor and nobility, others such as Lemuel Johnson and Anthony Barthelemy see Othello's blackness as an artfully devised ironic mask, a black patina of virtue and nobility that obscures the more conventional meaning of the sign. And although cultural materialist Ania Loomba believes that Othello's “barbarity” is an “ideological construct” rather than a quality “natural” to blacks, she warns against glossing the faults in Othello that do in fact uphold insidious racial stereotypes. This variety of critical opinion leaves unresolved the question of whether blackness in Othello is good or evil, literal or symbolic, conventional or unconventional, stereotypical or typically human. As Elliot Tokson laments:
Arguments have been raised both for and against the view of Othello as a noble Moor … and the problem of that nobility—or barbarism—unavoidably has turned attention to the question of Shakespeare's racial tolerance or bigotry. Some critics believe that Shakespeare was uninterested in the racial aspects of the tragic situation altogether while others hold that Shakespeare was so deeply concerned with Othello's blackness that to miss that theme is to miss the heart of the play. … Whether Shakespeare's imagination probed more deeply than any other writer of this period into the possibilities of the black man, or whether he basically followed the stereotyped pattern on which he traced the outline of Othello's character, or whether he combined popular notions with original perspective are gritty questions that one could more fruitfully pursue were there available some suitable materials with which Othello could be compared.

Tokson's frustration with the inconclusiveness of meaning inherent in Othello's blackness is, however, exactly the point: that is, the ambiguous mixture of virtues and deficiencies in Othello is what makes him both more mimetically “human,” and tragically complex. This is not to suggest (as many have) that Othello's blackness is simply incidental (or coincidental) to the “larger” meanings in the play. On the contrary, although Othello's blackness is not a one-dimensional emblematic signifier, it does represent an essential element in his dramatic characterization—like Richard III's deformity, Shylock's “Jewishness,” Falstaff's rotundity, or Lear's age. That is, blackness in Othello's character provides the rationale for why he thinks and acts the way he does in the given dramatic context.

I

Bernard Spivack, Mark Rose, and Howard Felperin (among others) draw attention to a metaphorical relationship that exists between the play's dramatic realities regarding race and the play's dramatization of blackness as an unconventional Shakespearean literary emblem. They see Othello as a struggle between two traditional literary genres—(chivalric) romance and morality drama—each vying with the other for ascendency in the play. To the extent that Othello knows his “cues” and can play his part “without a prompter” (I.iii.82-83), he would have us see the play as a romance: more particularly, I would argue, as his version of the romantic fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast.” In this tale, Othello plays the part of the black prince, once thought to be beastly, but whose true beauty is revealed through the love of the fair woman whom he marries. Iago, on the other hand, in his role as playwright or stage director, prefers to have us see the play as a morality drama, with himself in the role of Chief Vice. Through deceit and innuendo, Iago seeks to destroy Othello's romance by turning the virtue of the would-be fairy tale into the pitch of tragedy. Taken together, Iago's lies and innuendos make up a false story, a parallel second plot that constitutes a morality drama test for the Beauty and Beast of Othello's plot. As the author of this false second story, Iago strongly resembles the dark tempter Archimago in Spenser's Faerie Queene. Like Archimago, Iago deceives his victim into believing that his love has been unfaithful to him. Like Archimago, Iago also achieves his goal by deluding his victim with falsehoods so realistic that the false seems truer than the true. Like the Redcrosse Knight, once Othello is taken in by these potent lies, he loses faith in real love.

In the balance of the struggle between Iago and Othello hangs not only the play's tragic outcome but also the fate of the image that Othello has carefully built up of himself. That is, depending on the outcome of the struggle, Othello's reputation as an “all-sufficient” black soldier will be either furthered or destroyed. Similarly, on the level of metadrama, Othello's (or Shakespeare's) poetic image of unconventional black beauty either will be confirmed through romance or, should Iago prevail, will revert (as many critics argue it does) to stereotypical definitions of beastly blackness.

II
In spite of Othello's relatively secure situation in Venice, his role in the drama is circumscribed (more than has been generally recognized) by the social realities of race-centered marginalization, or racism. This racism is not always overt (Othello is held in high regard by many); rather it is most often a latent and muted hatred of blackness that surfaces suddenly with vituperative and sometimes destructive force, with or without the necessity of demonstrably “Moorish” behavior by Othello. For example, throughout the play, Emilia either implies or states outright that Othello is unfit for Desdemona because of his blackness; Roderigo glosses over his own unsuitability for Desdemona by denigrating Othello as “the thick lips” or the “gross … lascivious Moor” (I.i.66, 126). Iago of course claims to hate the Moor for particular and perhaps for general reasons, and it is significant that he (and Roderigo) incite the ire of Brabantio, the “good” (that is, white) citizen and cheated father, by resorting to racebaiting.

Brabantio himself reflects most sharply the quite real and unpredictable nature of antiblackness in Venice, dangerous even to a black figure as well-situated as Othello. Having once been the charitable host to Othello, Brabantio suddenly becomes not simply a wounded father who has lost his daughter to an “unlawful” suitor but a racist demagogue who would brand Othello a conjuring black witch, to be imprisoned (and burned at the stake, we might imagine, should the accusations be sustained). Thus, although Othello has found some acceptance in Venice, his blackness is nevertheless susceptible to the dangers of white racism that erupt when he transgresses Venetian definitions of racial acceptability.

Although recent critics have begun to acknowledge the role of racism in the play, few have pursued in much depth the degree to which the play shows Othello himself to be keenly aware of forces that stand ready to reject his blackness at the least provocation. It is unlikely that Othello could have achieved the success he has over a period of years without being cognizant of the latent (and overt) racism in society. Despite the fair number of critics who maintain that Othello's tragedy results from his being an outsider in Venice, one wonders how Othello could have not only survived but thrived here, without having understood a good deal about this society's dangerous racial waters. I would suggest that Othello has survived Venice's latent racism by cultivating a reputation and respect strong enough to hold back the tide of antiblackness. The bedrock of this reputation is, of course, military prowess, but Othello is no mere brute soldier. He has the charisma of a commander, and he emphasizes the ceremonial aspects, the pomp and circumstance of the position he holds. But more than this, Othello has established himself socially in Venice: he is well liked, much respected, and welcomed into the homes of Venetian aristocrats like Brabantio. He inspires so much respect in fact that he is able to defuse, without much effort, the racial protest against a marriage that few dominant groups would allow to an outsider. (Even the Jewess Jessica in The Merchant of Venice must turn Christian in order to marry Lorenzo.)

Othello achieves this acceptance by his politic behavior. We see it in his conduct of military affairs: in the selection of the highly regarded Cassio as his lieutenant; in the way he halts the impending clash on the streets of Venice; in the “full liberty” he grants his men after the defeat of the Turks (and before they begin their new duties in Cyprus). We also see it in Othello's judicious handling of Cassio's drunken brawling on the island: Othello demotes Cassio, not because he believes him unworthy but rather to “make … an example” (II.iii.242) of him to the other soldiers. (As Iago says, the demotion is “a punishment more in policy than in malice” [II.iii.265-66]). We see it again in his timely reminders to Venice of how much it has benefited from his military service. Othello's politic abilities are not limited to war matters, however; in social situations, too, he uses his intelligence and his grandiloquence (G. Wilson Knight's “Othello music”) in a manner that serves to distance him from conventional white notions of blacks as barbarians and beasts. More than being simply articulate and sonorous, Othello is a consummate storyteller whose tales impress not only Desdemona but even the Duke, who observes that Othello's story “would win [his] daughter too” (III.iii.171). Othello's wondrous stories invariably draw attention to his stellar accomplishments—but in addition to presenting images of all sufficiency, they are infused with a pathos that gains him generous sympathy and tolerance from the Venetians.
There are times also when Othello goes to great lengths to efface himself, ingratiate himself, and evoke pity. Many critics have argued that Othello's excessive deference to the Venetians denotes a callow disavowal of his identity as a black outsider, and that this naivete about his “place” as a black in Venice explains why he is so easily duped by the lies of a “true” Venetian like Iago. This view of Othello leads Anthony Barthelemy to conclude that Othello, as a Shakespearean black character, “never possesses the power or desire to subvert civic and natural order” (161).

To this charge of co-optation or “Uncle Tomism” in Othello, I would respond that Othello uses ingratiation, purposely, to smooth his way in a racist Venice. His intent is to achieve success and humanization for his blackness in moderate fashion. Othello's mode of achieving change differentiates him from Aaron, who would avoid racial conflict by leaving Rome to return “home”; from the “dark lady,” who seemingly never appears in public with her white lover; and from Caliban, who attempts to raise violent revolt against his oppressors. Most simply, the choice between militancy or moderation in the need for change is endemic to all political contexts in which weaker forces struggle against those with more power. (In black-white race relations, the best example of this conflict is the militancy of Malcolm X and the moderation of Martin Luther King, Jr.) Hence, Othello has not forgotten that he is black, nor does he forget his cultural heritage or his history of enslavement. Rather he has taken a moderate course as he seeks to achieve personal success through the politic “humanization” of his blackness in Venice.

In a broader sense, Othello's deference to forces that have power over him is part of a larger issue of decorum and “place” in the play. That is, all the characters are very much concerned with their status in social hierarchies—whether in terms of public influence, like Brabantio; military rank, like Iago and Cassio; the proper place of fathers, daughters, wives, and “men”; or the proper “place” of a black in white Venice. Like Othello, the other characters are concerned with either maintaining their achieved “place” by any means they can or trying to improve their given status through some form of deference or ingratiation to those who have power to grant them what they seek. In one way or another, everyone has to be politic.

Thus, when Othello tells the Duke, “Rude am I in my speech … / And therefore little shall I grace my cause / In speaking for myself” (I.iii.81-89), we realize that this is far from true. And when Othello claims that “little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broils and battles” (I.iii.86-87), we sense, likewise, that he exaggerates the extent to which his life has been “a flinty and steel couch of war” (I.iii.230). And after the bold fait accompli of his elopement with Desdemona, Othello is again politic—in deferring to the Duke's judgement, and by downplaying his sexual desires—thus refashioning the stereotype of blacks as lascivious beasts, which Iago and Roderigo have invoked to incite Brabantio (that is, the black ram tupping a white ewe). As Othello says:

And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant,
For she is with me; … no, when light-wing'd toys,
And feather'd Cupid, foils with wanton dullness
My speculative and active instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation!

(I.iii.266-74)

Although several critics have argued that these statements reveal the central patriarchal flaw in Othello's “love” for Desdemona, it seems to me that they are the finishing touches Othello gives to a muted image of black sexuality, an image that attempts to assuage conventional white fears of black lasciviousness.
This politic behavior determines, in part, Othello's unlikely marriage. Because Othello asks himself why he ever married (III.iii.246), we might presume that he had some reason for not marrying earlier. The most likely explanation for his extended bachelorhood is that the soldier's life has not allowed "skillets" to interfere with "service"; but it is interesting to speculate on the circumstances (beyond love) that lead him to marry this particular woman at this particular time, especially given the potential racial dangers of such a marriage.

After world travel, exploits, and wars, Othello has seemingly found a place for himself in Venice, even before his marriage to Desdemona. He is the Venetians' chief military officer; he speaks their language and is a Christian; he seems well connected socially and has loyal supporters; he has "fortunes" that revert to Venetian legal "relatives" on his death. Thus, despite his blackness, Othello is more integrated into the dominant community than are other Shakespearean black characters, and he is less socially isolated than Venice's own Shylock. Yet, although the cornerstone of black Othello's acceptance in Venice is his military indispensability, it is also true that this indispensability is subject to time. Being "no god" (III.iv.146), the strength of his mighty arm will decline as he ages—and Othello is already "getting older" at the start of the play. Thus, when we meet Othello, he is a man at the apex of his career and at a point in life where it would be plausible for him to be more open to the prospect of settling down. In this context, marriage to an admired and well-placed Venetian woman might bestow on him an ideal image of social (and human) sufficiency that would protect his blackness in Venice in his declining years. This is not to suggest that Othello calculatingly directs his life toward this end, nor to doubt that he "loves the gentle Desdemona" (I.ii.25) as he says he does. Rather, the dramatic givens of the play—racism, Othello's age, and later, the correlation Othello sees between a successful marriage and a successful military "occupation"—simply emphasize the further advantages of his marriage to Desdemona at present. As in "Beauty and the Beast," she will be the beautiful wife who will help to reveal the full humanity in Othello's blackness.

In the light of the discussion thus far, it is not surprising that Othello's concern for his image, especially in the context of his marriage, becomes the vulnerable spot that Iago attacks when he selects the marriage as the vehicle through which he will destroy the Moor.

III

The beginning of Act II presents an Othello who has defended himself in a judicious and politic manner against each racist charge leveled against him, an Othello at the high point of his powers. His facile victory over the Turks only further confirms the security of his place in Venice. At this point, Othello's romance seems "well-shipped" (II.i.47).

But Iago perseveres in his Vice-like effort to discredit the Moor and to transform this blithe romance into a dark morality drama. In seeking to turn Othello's unconventional virtue into conventional pitch, he applies jealousy, a potent morality drama temptation that might cause anyone to miss a step. The jealousy that Iago grafts on Othello is, however, simply the catalyst that brings to the fore a more prominent vulnerability in Othello—a vulnerability of which not even Iago is fully aware and one that Othello can least defend himself against (as seems indicated by his swift, easy, and complete collapse): his fear of the loss of his image of "all in all" sufficiency in Venice. Thus, while the thought of Desdemona's unfaithfulness touches a raw nerve in Othello, it also raises the specter of a dashed opportunity (at a key point in his career) to preserve and even enhance the possibility of a safe and viable life in Venice—a city whose acceptance of blackness would seem to be contingent on his maintaining a flawless image of all-sufficiency. Thus when Iago mounts his assault, the Moor loses rational control of a situation that, earlier in his life, he might have been able to control; or had Iago's evil not been quite so pernicious, one he might have been able to ward off (as he does Brabantio's less potent challenge earlier on).

After what appear to have been years devoted to promoting an image of ideal blackness that allows him to claim his due and protect his place in Venice, Othello has, in fact, begun to reason and act on images of truth
as if they were truth itself. His storytelling, for example, shows him using vivid and effective images of his past to win hearts and minds in Venice. These imagistic tales are essentially true but sound suspiciously similar to those titillatingly imagistic (but apocryphal) travel book stories so popular at the time. Even Othello's beautiful language is sprinkled with high-sounding neologisms (provulgate, exsuffligate) whose actual meaning and application are vague. Significantly, the things he cherishes most about his life as a soldier involve the outward trappings of war, the images of war rather than actual fighting:

Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue; O farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife;
The royal banner and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!

(III.iii.355-60)

Ironically, there is a vast discrepancy between the image and the reality—between Othello's gestures and the fact that there is little or no concrete action to back them up. Othello helps to keep the peace in Venice (“Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust'em” [I.ii.58-59]), but no fighting actually occurs. In the ensuing sea battle with the Turks, strangely, a storm sinks the enemy ships, and Othello receives accolades without having fired a shot. Othello's scapegoating of Cassio on Cyprus saves him from having to “lift [his] arm” (II.iii.199) to quell further quarrels among his men.

The same dearth of substantive action prevails in situations occurring after Iago's lies about Desdemona have begun. For instance, the Moor's menacing threats against Iago in Act III and Emilia in Act V fall flat, as Iago slithers to safety and Emilia proclaims, “Thou hast not half the power to do me harm as I have to be hurt” (V.ii.163-64). Othello invokes black vengeance against Cassio but shuffles the job off onto Iago, and in the end, he sees the murder attempt fail. He is disarmed by Montano, and his final avenging lunge at Iago is ineffective. The only person he is physically violent with is Desdemona—and as Lodovico says, violence against a woman is not valorous. Othello does manage to take his own life—but this represents less an act of warlike power than the supreme gesture of powerlessness.10

The same empty gestures mark Othello's sexual power in the play. That is, despite all the talk about sexuality in Othello, there is little of it in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona. Although I disagree with those who suggest that Othello and Desdemona never consummate their marriage, the dramatic action of the play is orchestrated in a way that suggests that the couple's private time together suffers constant interruption. And after Iago's lies, sexual relations between the two seem simply unlikely. Also, although little reason exists to doubt that Othello loves Desdemona, many have noted how Othello often speaks of her in idealized Petrarchan terms—revealing his sense of her as a wonderful “image” of womanhood rather than as a real woman to love. Thus, for Othello, Desdemona appears a “rose,” a “perfect chrysolite,” a “pearl” with skin as “white as snow” and as “smooth as alabaster”; his “soul's joy” to whom he would “deny nothing.”

Given this tendency to objectify Desdemona as an “image” of beauty, and the way in which the play obscures real sexuality between them, Othello's reactions to Desdemona in the bedchamber scene just prior to her murder not only raise questions concerning his sexual power but also accentuate what lies at the heart of Othello's susceptibility to Iago's evil: his general propensity to treat abstract images as concrete realities. When Othello contemplates the sleeping Desdemona, with genuine ardor he murmurs words of Petrarchan praise and love. Then, when she wakens and invites him to bed, offering him, it seems, an opportunity to give his romance story a happy ending after all, the prospect of an enlivened and desirous Desdemona (as opposed to an alabaster figure) disorients Othello, and he draws back from the prospect of love made concrete and actual. Although it is easy enough to see Othello's withdrawal as the steeling of his resolve to carry out the execution, it also seems clear that it is not within the scope of his capabilities to move beyond an imagined
view of love to its concrete reality. At the very end of the play, we do find Othello and Desdemona lying together on the bed; but the lifeless bodies only underscore the lost potential for real love—and even this final image of unity is disrupted by the presence of Emilia lying beside them.

IV

Othello's too-strong dependence on gestures and images—his taking them for truth—is the Achilles heel Iago exploits. Such gestures include the false images of Cassio's nonexistent dream, the misrepresenting dumb show of Cassio's cuckolding brag, and generally speaking, all circumstantial signs “which lead … to the door of truth” (III.iii.412-13). This dependence on image prevents Othello from seeing that the white antagonism he would defend himself against has undergone a change for the better—perhaps due to his own influence. That is, even with its dangers, Othello's Venice is not the antiblack and antilife “wilderness of tigers” that Aaron contends with in Titus's Rome; even the Venetians in The Merchant of Venice are more superciliously intolerant of cultural others, among them Moroccan princes and rich Jews, than is the case in Othello. In fact, given Renaissance England's and Renaissance drama's image of Italian cities as hotbeds of intrigue and sin, all in all, Othello's Venice seems remarkably civilized. This is not to suggest that Venetian society is ideal; however, in key ways, it is more tolerant and accepting of Othello than he realizes. Othello's inability to perceive this, however, makes it impossible for him to read the signs of hope that exist for him in Venice—positive signs that would allow him to resist the fearful images of lost love, lost marriage and lost occupation, painted by Iago.

The leaders of the State indicate this change and hope. They ferret out the truth and have a clear sense of justice—traits that bode well for a black man wary of racist stereotypes, assumptions, and prejudices by whites. The best examples of the State's pursuit of truth occur during the War Room scene in Act I. The Duke and several other leaders receive a flurry of confusing and conflicting reports about the strength and strategy of the enemy Turks. Obviously, these false reports foreshadow the seemingly true falsehoods that Iago will unleash on Othello during the course of the play. Through patience and good judgment, however, the Venetian leaders uncover the truth about the Turks, seeing through the false report of Angelo, one who, like Iago, should be “honest” but is not. Later, the State, through the Duke, challenges and dismisses Brabantio's accusations against Othello as “thin habits and poor likelihoods” (I.iii.108) and finally adjudges Othello a suitable husband for Desdemona. Further, no leader in the State denigrates Othello; and even when the truth of Othello's crime is known, Lodovico responds more in sorrow than in anger.

Corroborating and extending the idea that these Venetians are more unconventionally accepting of Othello's blackness than he realizes are the suggestions that Othello is not the only “outsider” in Venice, a remarkably healthy political and religious state whose power and success derive from cultural heterogeneity rather than from narrow ethnocentrism. This sense of Venice as an expansive, inclusive, and fluid society comes to us in part from the many references to people, places, and things that originate outside the city's ethnic and geographical boundaries but that, nevertheless, seem integral to Venetian life and perspective. The characters, for example, allude to crusades, carracks, guineas, coloquintidas, and Spanish swords; they have some knowledge of monkeys, baboons, aspics, crocodiles, locusts, and Barbary horses; they have been to or know about Aleppo, Rhodes, Cyprus, Egypt, Mauritania (and Moors). Cited also are the Pontic, the Propontic, and the Hellespont, as well as England, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Rome, Sparta, and Verona. Venetian men are said to be partial to “foreign laps” (IV.iii.88), and the Venetian women would proverbially “walk barefoot to Palestine” (IV.iii.38-39) to find a good husband. All of these references connote a sense of cultural and geographic expansiveness. Then too, there is the well-known passage in which Emilia speaks to Desdemona at length about what she would do to gain “all the world”: the “huge thing” of “great price” that she would risk “purgatory for” if she could have it for her labor (IV.iii.65-75). Even here, Emilia's reference serves as the culminating epiphany to over thirty allusions to the “world” in this play—from Brabantio who wants to be judged by “the world” (I.i.72) if his accusation of Othello is false, to Iago's desire to bring his monstrous evil “to the world's light” (I.iii.402), to the Clown who would “catechize the world” (III.iv.13) to find Cassio.
Admittedly, other Shakespearean plays allude to places outside of the immediate dramatic setting. In *Othello*, however, the Venetians are construed to be the leaders of a group of Christian “others” who join together to oppose, not non-Venetians, but rather nonbelievers—in this case the infidel Turks: Florentines, like Cassio; Greeks, like Marcus Luccios; Cypriots, who are old friends; black Moors “of here and everywhere” (I.i.137) like Othello. In fact, as Venice’s field general, it is Othello’s “occupation” to unite Florentines, Greeks, Cypriots, and Venetians alike under the Christian banner of the Venetian State and to serve the State in places like Aleppo, Rhodes, Cyprus, and Mauritania.

This general acceptance of heterogeneity and of the Other is particularized in Desdemona. She is the center of moral rightness and truth in the play, and it follows that her views on blackness provide the best instruction regarding its meaning in the play. At the beginning of the drama, we are told that Desdemona’s love for Othello derives from having seen “his visage in his mind” (I.iii.252), thereby rendering Othello’s racial blackness a moot issue in her affections for him. In Act III, after Desdemona discovers that she has misplaced the handkerchief, Emilia asks her if the Moor is jealous. Desdemona replies, “Who, he? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him” (III.iv.26-27). Here, not only does Desdemona reject the conventional stereotype of black jealousy, but her speculation that Africa’s hot climate is actually beneficial opposes the standard Renaissance view of Africa as the “foul furnace” that turned Africans into hellish black devils. Furthermore, in a play that so earnestly questions whether the “best” women in a society ought not to marry their own kind, it is significant that, even after she has been called a “whore” and struck in public, Desdemona asserts that Othello’s “[u]nkindness may do much, / And his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love” (IV.ii.161-63). When Desdemona affirms her love for Othello despite his behavior, the figurative sense of “unkind” as “unnatural” and thus “racially different” is heard as well, and Desdemona vows that—no matter what Othello has done, or why—she will not capitulate to the temptation to scapegoat his racial Otherness.

The idea of Othello’s Venice as a heterogeneous state (and therefore more accepting of Othello than he realizes) is nevertheless confused by the racism and ethnocentrism that Iago advances in order to create a larger “place” or status for himself at the expense of an outsider. Moreover, although Roderigo, Brabantio, and (to a lesser degree) Emilia also foster racial divisiveness, these Venetians are as much under Iago’s spell as Othello or Cassio. It is Iago who sabotages the friendship, camaraderie, and love that has developed around, or in spite of, difference. He helps to poison the friendship between Brabantio and Othello and between Othello and Cassio; he tries to divide Cassio and Montano, the respective lieutenants of the newly combined Venetian and Cypriot forces. Most important, he poisons the love between Othello and Desdemona, in part by emphasizing their differences:

Not to affect many proposed matches,
Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends;
Fie, we may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion; thoughts unnatural.
.....I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent.

(III.iii.233-37; 239-42)

In general then, Iago seeks to turn fathers against daughters, husbands against wives, men against women, whites against blacks, and ultimately a heterogeneous Venetian society against itself.

Despite Iago's antiblackness, the play itself intentionally undercuts blackness as a signifier of evil by investing the white characters (even the more likable ones) with traits that are dark and sinister: Brabantio is exposed as
a hypocrite and a racist; Roderigo is a fortune-hunter, a racist, and a would-be murderer; Emilia's loyalty and egalitarianism are diametrically counterposed by her slavishness, her deceit, and her bigotry; the suave Cassio has a nasty temper and a coarse side to his view of women. Even Desdemona seems to sway in the wrong direction when she attempts to redress Othello's demotion of Cassio. And Iago, of course, epitomizes the play's conversion of white to black as he plays the part of a Renaissance white devil. But the character who best exemplifies how the play transmutes the conventional meanings of black and white in *Othello* is Bianca.

Giving the name *Bianca* (that is, *white* in Italian) to a relatively substantial character in a play with a major black character is highly suggestive. As the character signifying whiteness, Bianca should, according to convention, be an ideal Petrarchan woman—which she is not. Yet, confusingly, a further reversal in Bianca's unconventionally “evil” whiteness occurs when she is said to be a whore in order to obtain the essentials of “bread and clothes” (IV.i.95). Also, in a play so obsessed with fidelity, Bianca loves but one man (although her profession gives her license to “love” many [IV.i.97]), and like Desdemona with Othello, she remains devoted to Cassio despite his ill-treatment of her.

But Bianca's most positive aspect is her implied rejection of Iago's hypocrisy and falsehood. At the end of Act IV, she rebels against Iago's and Emilia's efforts to bewhore her and to implicate her falsely in the wounding of Cassio. Even more significant is Bianca's earlier refusal to make a copy of Desdemona's stolen handkerchief: in refusing to fall in line with Iago's surreptitious effort to create a second (morality drama) story of infidelity with the handkerchief, she refuses to fabricate a false signifier of Othello's and Desdemona's romance. Moreover, in declining to “take out the work” (that is, destroy through replication) of the true love token (IV.i.153), Bianca is the first to reject outright Iago's evil designs. Her defiance signals a major turning point in the play, the point where other manipulated characters begin to throw off Iago's influence, thus bringing his plot to light.

The point here is that the conventional forms of antiblackness in this play occur almost exclusively in the context of Iago's fabrications about Othello and Desdemona. The racist sentiments in the play are uttered either by Iago or by characters over whom he has gained power through an exploitation of their frailties. As such, Iago spins an Archimago-like illusion of racial intolerance that distorts a truer (though certainly not perfect) reality of Venice that Othello does not discern.

**V**

Despite any sympathy we might have for Othello's need to foster an ideal black image in Venice, and despite our awareness of Iago's potent malignity, Othello remains culpable. Although his culpability ensues neither from his emblematic blackness nor (up to a point) from his “human” susceptibility to error and sin, Othello may be held accountable for his failure to read and understand the unconventional signs of hope in Venice that could have allowed him to see through Iago's false images.

In a sense, the question of Othello's culpability ought to be resolved when he realizes that he has foolishly killed a faithful wife, and seeing his error, embarks on what appears to be a reconciling course of tragic resolution. With good tragic form, Othello confesses his mistakes and then takes his own life in order to atone for his tragic folly. Thus, although Othello fails in his attempt to remake “Beauty and the Beast,” he does manage to rework his part to fit that of the hero in a tragic romance (“I will kill thee, / And love thee after” [V.ii.18-19]). After all, to die by one's own hand while in the arms of one's slain lover is the stuff of tragic romance in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The point, however, is that although Othello realizes that he has mistakenly killed a faithful wife, and that a scheming ensign has gulled him, he never recognizes how his own too-strong dependence on images has contributed to the crime he has committed. This lack of recognition reveals his inability, even at the end, to see the whole truth. Thus, Othello's noble reconciliation at the end of the play is more ambiguous than it initially appears, and there is much in Othello's last words and deed to suggest that the image of blackness in this play is not redeemed.
For example, something seems awry in Othello's perception of reality when he describes Montano, the soldier who has disarmed him, as a "puny whipster" (V.ii.245). He understates the soldierly abilities of Montano and overstates his own capabilities. Some lines later, he seems to come to terms with his actual powerlessness when he admits that his threat against Gratiano is but a "vain boast" (V.ii.265). Yet it is disquieting that Othello should define his lost power as his inability to "control … fate" (V.ii.266), since he is at least partly to blame in the death of Desdemona. Othello cannot have fully come to terms with his own failings if he can refer to the Desdemona he has murdered as an "ill-starr'd wench" (V.ii.273). Just a few lines further, Othello asserts that Desdemona's faultless spirit "will hurl [his] soul from heaven, / And fiends will snatch at it" (V.ii.275-76); but despite his genuine anguish, he again misses the point when he fails to acknowledge not only Desdemona's commitment to their conjugal love but also the forgiveness and redemption she offers when she assumes responsibility for his crime.

The most telling instances of ambiguity concerning Othello's redeemed vision occur in his very last speech. Although the tone of Othello's once again noble words is lofty, the words themselves raise many questions about the clarity of Othello's vision and his motivations at the end. That is, although Othello claims to be heart-stricken over the senseless loss of the woman he loves, he begins his final speech with, "Soft you, a word or two … / I have done the state some service, and they know't" (V.ii.339-40). We have seen how Othello has used this ploy, understandably but manipulatively, to defend his ideal black image from racist attacks; but here, Othello's reinvocation of an earlier politic defensiveness seems uncontritely self-serving and unredeemingly out of place, not only in the light of his contrition but also in the light of his culpability in Desdemona's death.

Shortly thereafter Othello almost literally spells out how his part in recent events should be represented, in writing, to the Venetian State. As he has done in the past, Othello idealizes the image of himself that he would have Venice remember. When he tells Lodovico to "speak of my deeds as they are; nothing extenuate" (V.ii.343), he should mean, "Don't spare the awful truth"—but he probably does not. Further, in instructing Lodovico not to "set down aught in malice" (V.ii.344), Othello seems to say, "Don't tone down anything about me (for I am great of heart), but also, don't say anything that suggests that you don't approve of me.” Othello thus asks us to keep our image of him not only grand but also uncritical—for his errors are but the consequence of “unlucky deeds” (V.ii.342). He goes on to fashion his future storied image of himself as “one that lov'd not wisely, but too well: / Of one not easily jealous” (V.ii.345-46). But is he completely truthful when he claims to have loved Desdemona “too well”? Did he love her so well that he judged her guilty on evidence that even Iago called circumstantial? Did he love her too well when he denied her the right to prove herself innocent? Can we ever accept his view that in killing Desdemona quickly he has somehow been “merciful” (V.ii.88)? And can we accept, without question or qualification, his assertion that he is not easily jealous in the absence of all resistance on his part against the lies of Iago? To raise such questions is to deny neither Othello's love for Desdemona nor the pernicious evil of Iago, but rather to gauge the degree to which Othello fully sees, understands, admits to, and mends the weaknesses within himself that have allowed Iago to bring forth the hideous scene that lies before him.

In short, the other characters in Othello come to terms with the truth, confess their disastrous errors, and go on to gain either real or symbolic salvation. Although Othello appears to undergo a similar process, his continued posturing prompts us to question whether he has recognized how his dependence on image has contributed to the tragic events—and in turn, to wonder if in fact he redeems himself with his dramatic self-sacrifice. In questioning the soundness of Othello's tragic resolution, we must also question whether he has seen the avenues of hope before him that might have saved his wife, his life, and his soul in Venice. That is, has Othello understood that Desdemona accepted him, loved him, and then saved him with her forgiveness? Does Othello (despite his error) see the possibility of redemptive vindication at the hands of a clear-sighted, just, and tolerant white Venetian state? And, in the context of the play as a morality drama, has Othello faith enough to believe that he will receive grace despite his earthly trials and sins?
VI

The last half of Othello’s last speech is an imagistic travelogue of his sojourns culminating in his story of the slaughtered infidel. Othello then transposes the image of the slain infidel into a metaphorical image that represents his own faithlessness and penitent suicide. Putting a knife to his own throat is Othello’s last grand gesture. Yet Gratiano startles us with his deflating observation that Othello’s ostensibly noble and redeeming act mars “all that’s spoke” (V.ii.358).

In the context of morality drama, Othello’s suicide (especially with the signs of change and hope in Venice) denotes his capitulation to the last and most subtle deception of Vice—despair—the hopelessness that blinds one to the grace of God. Hence, at the end of the play, we find Othello to be in much the same predicament as Spenser’s Redcrosse as he nears the end of his trials. Like Othello, the image-bound Redcrosse struggles with his fiend in an effort to come to terms with his lack of faith in a faithful woman. Having seen his errors, Redcrosse, like Othello, would redress his sins by doing away with himself at knifepoint:

[The fiend] to [Redcrosse] raught a dagger sharpe and keene,
And gave it him in hand: his hand did quake,
And tremble like a leaf of Aspin greene,
And troubled blood through his pale face was scene
To come, and goe with tydings from the hart,
As it a running messenger had beene.
At last resolved to worke his finall smart
He lifted up his hand, that backe againe did start.

(I.ix.51)

But unlike Othello, in the end, Redcrosse remains open to the truth of Una’s love and forgiveness and God’s grace—and pulls back from the pit to gain his salvation:

“Come, come away, fraile, feeble, fleshly wight,
Ne let vaine words bewitch thy manly hart,
Ne divelish thoughts dismay thy constant spright.
In heavenly mercies hast thou not a part?
Why shouldst thou then despeire, that chosen art?
Where justice growes, there grows eke greater grace,
The which doth quench the brond of hellish smart,
And accurst hand-writing doth deface.
Arise, Sir knight arise, and leave this cursed place.”
.....So up he rose, and thence amounted streight.

(I.ix.53; 54)

The trials of Redcrosse reflect the trials of morality drama protagonists generally; and to the degree that Othello is a play that incorporates the form and substance of morality drama, Othello’s attempt to redeem himself through an otherwise noble suicide inadvertently leads him directly into the clutches of a hellish Vice. Thus, in the metadramatic struggle between genres, morality drama bests romance; for as Lodovico observes to Iago as the curtain is closed on the tragic bed, “[T]his is thy work” (V.ii.365).

My argument is that Othello’s dependence on image at the expense of truth, reality, and hope (what the play calls “matter”) is the “cause” of his downfall. More specifically, in the context of race, Othello continues to view his salvation in terms of his ability to build and live up to an ideal image—as valiant soldier, as fairy-tale husband, as the hero of a tragic romance—in order to redeem the integrity of his black humanity from denigration at the hands of conventionally hostile white “critics” (II.i.119) like Iago (or even those cited by Orkin). In this context of black survival, Othello’s aims are fatal but not ignoble; consequently, his fall is more
dramatically tragic than stereotypically evil—especially because the black image he strives to protect has found some measure of acceptance in Venice.

Notes

1. See Neill, Loomba, Newman, Braxton, Dollimore, Berry, Cantor, and Bartels. These critics, however, almost invariably discuss the issue of race in Othello in conjunction with a “related” subject, such as colonialism, Renaissance ideologies of gender, sexual mores of the audience, and psychosocial functions of perversion. In Othello criticism, the introduction of such “larger” issues tends to obfuscate rather than reveal fully the complexities of racial blackness in the play. In this regard, Loomba, Berry, and Bartels are more focused, and many areas of agreement exist between their arguments and my own.

2. Leah Marcus has outlined the essential problem of historical analyses of Shakespeare as follows: “What we call Shakespeare is somehow mysteriously different, impervious to history at the level of specific factual data, the day to day chronicling of events” (xi). See also Graham Holderness.

3. Spivack examines the play in relation to morality drama allegory; Rose presents a convincing case for his view of Othello as a chivalric romance; and more broadly, Felperin asserts that several literary forms (morality drama and romance inclusive) are showcased in Othello—varied forms that ensue from the tendency of most of the characters to present, and represent, themselves in an array of conventional literary roles. Most recently, Paul Cantor has described the play as a “generic … displacement … [of] martial epic … into Italian bedroom comedy” (297).

4. Rose cites this analogy (295).

5. The idea that Othello's way with words, his “music,” is related to issues of race in the play would seem to be confirmed by New York Times editor Brent Staples, in his essay “Black Men in Public Space.” In this essay, Staples discusses the problems of “image” encountered by people of color in U.S. cities today. He says: “Over the years, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness. I now take precautions to make myself less threatening. [For example] I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's Four Seasons.” Staples's frequently anthologized essay first appeared in Ms. magazine, September 1986.

6. Othello is not enfeebled; however, we may note that the play encourages us to accept the idea of aging as a motif of some consequence. We know that Othello contemplates his own “declin[e] / Into the vale of years” (III.iii.270) as a possible reason for Desdemona's ostensible unfaithfulness. More to the point is Iago's suggestion that no matter how faithful a man's service to the state, “when he's old” he is sure to be unceremoniously “cashier'd” (I.i.48).

7. Felperin sums up this line of argument succinctly: “As the living symbol of high Venetian culture, Desdemona is not simply a wife to Othello but the legitimating agent of his acculturation” (78). Peter Stallybrass states more simply: “Desdemona is the active agent of Othello's legitimization” (272).

8. It should be underscored again that, although Othello's preoccupation with image makes him more vulnerable to Iago's lies, this vulnerability should not be construed as an attribute of “blackness” that confirms him to be a stereotypical racial emblem. Like other somewhat less than ideal qualities in Othello, the Moor's anxious concern to be seen as all-sufficient derives largely from his desire to achieve his deserved place in Venice: to defend himself against a race-based antiblackness that would deny him his just rewards.

9. The play encourages us to equate Othello's vulnerability to Iago's lies with Cassio's susceptibility to wine. Hence, like Cassio, Othello is imbued with a poisonous force powerful enough to swiftly and completely bring about the destruction of his better self and give rein to his weaknesses and fallibilities.
10. The absence of concrete military power in Othello might be seen to further confirm his need to look ahead to a time when he would no longer be able to sustain his ideal soldier's image: a good marriage would be a hedge against any resulting loss of place in Venice.

11. Despite Desdemona's Christian intention to mend evil with good, and her Christ-like sacrifice at the end, many critics have found fault with her as the voice of right reason in the play. Some have judged her to be a weak white foil who exists only for the purpose of dramatizing the black deeds of men; others have seen her as a beautiful, but naive and wayward romantic who wanders into dark and forbidden waters; still others have claimed that her Christ-like forgiveness of Othello is so ideal that it unfits her as a true sounding board for meaning in a mature Shakespearean tragedy. Notwithstanding these criticisms, Desdemona is the beacon of moral rightness in Othello, and her viability in this role is sustained in part by the fact that she is not the stock good angel of a morality drama or fairy-tale romance. That is, Desdemona is as prone to error and flaw as any character in the play; but, to a greater degree than all other characters, she has the ability to adapt and grow, and ultimately, through love and faith, to find out truth.


13. In addition to hoodwinking both Othello and Cassio, Iago exploits Roderigo's desire for Desdemona and her "full fortune," Brabantio's paternal possessiveness, and Emilia's love for him.

Works Cited


In her “Introduction” to Othello: New Perspectives, Virginia Mason Vaughan delineates the genealogy of Othello criticism, which according to her, “remained … a bastion of formalism and psychological analysis” well into the 1980s (13). Prior to this period, according to Vaughan, Othello critics were concerned with issues of textual history and authority, while debates swirled around issues of definitive editions and textual conflations. Vaughan maps the movement of criticism from controversies surrounding “which version was better” or “closer to Shakespeare's original text” to analyses of patterns of language and imagery, symbolism, and psychological motivations of characters. A major turning point in Othello criticism occurred in the 1980s with a shift toward feminist critique, deconstruction, and performance (14-18). Georgianna Ziegler, speaking of Hamlet criticism, contends that “in every age Shakespeare's text[s] [have] been subjected to the interests and the view of that generation” (1), and Jean E. Howard observes, “[W]e need more new readings of Shakespeare: readings which continue to bring to bear on these plays the human concerns which press on us now” (145). This is particularly applicable to Othello at present.

My own critique of Othello is situated in a postmodern moment that foregrounds discursivity as constitutive of the self and the worlds the self inhabits. Such a reading seeks to expose Iago's desire to locate power in discourse, a power that ultimately leads to Desdemona's murder and Othello's suicide. In other words, this study examines the ways in which Iago discursively problematizes Othello's marriage to Desdemona. To this end, Iago engages in what Michael Neill terms an “operation … principally aimed at converting the absent/present bed into a locus of imagined adultery by producing Othello's abduction of Desdemona as an act of racial adulteration” (391). Iago's campaign against the marriage begins in the opening scene and continues until he has ensnared Othello into his trap of “racial adulteration” by convincing him that Desdemona is unfaithful to him mainly because of his race. By opening the play with Iago's base commentary on Othello's marriage, Shakespeare foregrounds marriage as the thematic and discursive issue in the play. Commenting on Iago's influence and Othello's vulnerability as an alien in Venice, G. M. Matthews contends that despite his physical and cultural difference, Othello is “a great human being who … recognizes (within the limits of his social role) only universal humane values of love and loyalty,” which he loses once he allows himself to become “vulnerable to irrational, unhuman forces, embodied in Iago” (123).

Othello offers an expansive view of the ways in which language works against certain speakers and is twisted and perverted in the mouth of a dishonest practitioner. By playing on the ambiguities and ironies inherent in language, Iago is able to use the seductive dimensions of discourse to achieve diabolical ends. Through a consciously selective use of language, Iago distorts reality and manipulates others so that they unwittingly play into his hands. In short, Iago listens for the spaces and slippages in discourse in order to play upon latent
and manifest fears. As Kenneth Burke observes, “Iago, to arouse Othello, must talk a language that Othello knows as well as he, a language implicit in the nature of Othello's love as the idealization of his private property in Desdemona.” Although Iago's language is the “dialectical opposite of Othello's,” Burke continues, “it so thoroughly shares a common ground with Othello's language that its insinuations are never for one moment irrelevant to Othello's thinking” (414). Ultimately, Iago's double discourse destroys Othello and Desdemona by distorting their love and their most intimate relationship. I wish to argue that by analyzing Iago's control and manipulation of discourse, we can better understand Othello's downfall.

_Othello_ is at one level a dramatization of the mechanism and failure of language, a dialectic between reality and “invention.” Iago's diabolical, insatiable desire, bounded only by Desdemona's death, moves within a socially established discourse that feeds on itself and devours other discourses in its wake. Language in _Othello_ is, then, not merely a dramatic vehicle or tool; language is the element of thematic concern. Language confirms, indicts, and convicts.

The marriage of Othello and Desdemona, with which the play opens, seems to suggest that deeply entrenched prejudices—suspiciousness of other races and cultures, of those who are “alien” and do not seem to belong—are about to be overcome and there is a possibility of social transformation. But such a possibility is challenged at the very moment of its inception, even before the marriage is consummated, because Iago insists—even in the face of Brabantio’s acquiescence (“Gone she is, / And what's to come of my despised time / Is nought but bitterness” [I.i.159-61]) and the Duke's sanction of the marriage on the grounds of Othello's character (“If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” [I.iii.285-86])—that marriage to a black man is not proper for a Venetian woman. Consequently, Iago jealously guards what is putatively now his exclusive sphere of influence in order to avenge himself on the Moor by challenging his humanity and coextensively his right to be wedded to Desdemona.

Through a shrewd insight into the desires and fears of others, and through a radical inversion of their discourses, Iago fulfills his own desire for revenge and control. Anthony Kubiak argues that Iago's “terrorist discourse” is far “more potent” than Othello's physical violence because it “operates through the effect of discourse on seeing.” Such a seeing, Kubiak further states, “engenders the perjury and its vengeance” (63). Thus, in order to manipulate and/or forestall truth/proof, Iago constantly resorts to this terrorist discourse by substituting a “manifest discourse” (Baudrillard, 53) for ocularity and by positing a discourse that contradicts or delays verification. In short, Iago manipulates discourse as a medium of power.

Iago's desire constitutes and controls the dramatic movement of _Othello_. His conviction that Brabantio will object to his daughter's marriage on racial grounds provides Iago with the terms for a disruptive discourse, the first in a series of rhetorical gestures that jeopardize rather than undermine and dissolve Desdemona's marriage to the Moor. Iago intends not merely to call attention to “a sexual union represented as a form of pollution” (Tennenhouse, 89) but to destroy the partners in this union as well. As Michael Neill observes, Iago keeps the “real imaginative focus of the action always the hidden marriage-bed … within which [he] can operate as a uniquely deceitful version of the _nuntius_, whose vivid imaginary descriptions taint the vision of the audience, even as they colonize the minds of Brabantio and Othello” (396).

The structure of any play resides, in large measure, in the words of characters. The structure of _Othello_ resides in the words of the character who simultaneously has control of her or his own discourse and the discourse of others. Both Desdemona and Iago evince their ability to expropriate other characters' discourses. But in the final analysis, Iago subverts Desdemona's linguistic power, not so much by dominating her discourse directly as by controlling the discourse of those in close communication with her.

It is interesting to note that near the opening of the play, Iago tells Roderigo to call up Brabantio, rouse and incense him with “timorous accent and dire yell” (I.i.74). Iago's directive is metalinguistic, one that announces Iago's awareness of language and its power to persuade, to excite and incite. He says as much in a soliloquy:
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
As I do now. For whiles this honest fool
Flies Desdemona to repair his fortunes,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear.

(II.iii.318-23)

The lines to Roderigo, then, indicate Iago's modus operandi. In order to “poison” Brabantio's “delight,” Iago bombards him with gross images of Othello:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe. ...
... the devil will make a grandsire of you.

(I.i.89-92)

Iago posits physicality and sexuality as the essential markers of the Moor's humanity and continues this line of discourse in the face of Brabantio's disbelief. But Iago's language and intent are so egregiously offensive that poetic discourse cannot accommodate them and gives way to debased prose:

[Y]ou'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 jennets for germans.

(I.i.111-13)

In notable contrast to Roderigo's discourse which invokes Othello's race (“thick lips,” “lascivious,” and “extravagant and wheeling stranger”), Iago’s “diseased preoccupation” (Neill, 397) with Othello's sexuality results in a bestialization of the Moor and a devaluation of his marriage by making it sound obscene. His vision, as Kubiak points out, is “transformative and perjured” (24), a vision he imposes through language. Principally, Iago's aim is to control the discursive field. Such control resides in the hybrid nature of his discourse. Thus, Othello is as much about the ways in which one discourse is able to devour other discourses as it is about Iago's diabolical revenge on the Moor. In short, Othello is about the failure or fulfillment of desire through the loss or adroit use of discursive power.

Iago, as Margaret Ranald observes, is a “skillful opportunist who turns situations to his own account.” His discursive power is cumulative; it relies on repetition and insinuation. He is aware of Desdemona's naivete about the “wickedness of the world outside” and knows “inexperience and decency blind her to the possibility that her motives might appear questionable and her actions capable of misconstruction” (136, 137). As Ranald further observes, Iago uses this naivete to undermine Desdemona's virtue and invert the “warm[th] and vital[ity]” she evinces in her spontaneous espousal of Cassio's cause (144). She is, thus, caught in a web of words spun by Iago from the matrix of male domination, “the pernicious effects of chastity … a doctrine men impose upon women” (Snow, 387). To achieve his purpose of undermining Desdemona's chastity, Iago concludes that his most effective method would be “to abuse Othello's ear / That [Cassio] is too familiar with his wife,” since Cassio has “a smooth dispose / To be suspected, framed to make women false” (L.iii.378-81). Although Othello is to be the dupe of Iago's performative gestures, it is clearly Desdemona who must suffer character assassination via the male order.

At this point, a review of Jean Baudrillard's theory of seduction might help us better articulate the theater of discourse in Othello, since his theory accommodates my reading. Baudrillard observes that “in seduction … it is manifest discourse—discourse at its most superficial—that turns back on the deeper order (whether
conscious or unconscious) in order to invalidate it, substituting the charm and illusion of appearances” in contrast to “all meaningful discourse [which] seeks to end appearance.” But, Baudrillard continues, “inexorably, discourse is left to its appearances, and thus to the stakes of seduction, thus to its own failure as discourse” (53-54). It is in this light that we might examine the use of discourse in Othello, especially discourse as manipulated and enjoyed by Iago, who, as Roy Roussel observes, shows the “seducer's fascination with the spectacle of his own manipulation and control” (725). In other words, Iago is seduced by his own ability to seduce. Baudrillard describes this autoseduction as the moment when “perhaps discourse is secretly tempted … by the bracketing of its objectives, of its truth effects which become absorbed within a surface that swallows meaning. … [I]t is the original form by which discourse becomes absorbed within itself and emptied of its truth in order to better fascinate others: the primitive seduction of language” (54).

Reading Othello in the context of Baudrillard's seduction theory permits us to examine discourse motivated by desire. To begin with, it is worth remarking that marriage between Desdemona and Othello stems from Desdemona's desire for knowledge about Othello and the seductive power of that desired knowledge. For example, when asked about his use of charms to win Desdemona's affection, Othello argues that his narrative discourse was the charm, the power, he employed. Observing Desdemona's eagerness to hear him recount his exploits, Othello states that he:

Took once a pliant hour and found good means  
To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
That would all my pilgrimage dilate  
Whereof by parcels she had something heard,  
But not intently. I did consent.  

(I.iii.150-54)

Desdemona confirms the force of Othello's narrative discourse, its seductive power, by hinting that he propose marriage, by preferring him to men of her own race and class:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind  
And to his honors and his valiant parts  
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.  

(I.iii.248-50)

“I saw Othello's visage in his mind” is the critical line because it simultaneously discloses Desdemona's awareness of Othello's race and her ready acceptance of his mind (his intellectual and narrative powers) above any thoughts of race. She insists that she has looked beyond the physical—which on the surface seems of no consequence to her—into the soul of the Moor and likes what she discovers. But her dismissal of his face underscores her recognition of the fact that Othello's race does matter. At the same time, she readily submits to his maleness as evinced by her unquestioned “duty” to him—a duty dictated by tradition and gender.

Desdemona's statement cannot be contradicted by Brabantio, but it is too much for him to accept. And he is prepared to lose his daughter rather than accept the Moor as an affine:

I here do give thee [Othello] that with all my heart  
Which, but thou has already, with all my heart  
I would keep from thee.  

(I.iii.191-93)

Brabantio's pronouncement on his daughter's behavior in marrying Othello without permission is precisely the utterance that opens a space for Iago to work his will on the Moor and undermine the union that Iago himself
finds most repugnant: “Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father and may thee” (I.iii.288-89), words Iago will later reiterate to Othello.

Othello and Desdemona use language to “deliver” what Baudrillard terms “real meaning,” “truth,” or honest discourse, in contradistinction to Iago's manifestly perjured discourse. If, as Baudrillard observes, seduction sports “triumphantly with weakness, making a game of it with its own rules,” then we cannot rightly call Othello's narrative of his personal history, recited at Brabantio's and Desdemona's requests, a seductive act. Seduction robs discourse of its “sense and turns it from truth” by causing “manifest discourse”—the surface meaning—to “say what it does not want to say; it causes determinations and profound indeterminations to show through in manifest discourse.” It is, then, the responsibility of interpretation to “break the appearance and play of the manifest discourse” (53). Interpretation is vital to a deeper understanding of the ways by which discourse operates in Othello, where, as Kubiak convincingly argues, “we can begin to see how the language of the theatre within the theatre is … always eminently terrorist because of language's failure to adequately state its intentions” (63). Yet early in Othello, language does achieve what Roland Barthes terms its “adequation of enunciation” (208) through Othello's and Desdemona's performative gestures.

For example, when Othello is accused of bewitching Desdemona, and thus marrying her without her “knowing” what was happening to her, he defends himself on discursive grounds: he argues from the force of his narrative, categorically stating that it was language's power to recreate the images of his exploits that merited Desdemona's affection. [Though he declares at one point that he is “rude” of speech “[a]nd little blessed with the soft phrase of peace” (I.iii.81-82), we are perhaps not meant to take the declaration seriously.] Othello won her father, too, initially:

Her father loved me, oft invited me,
Still questioned me the story of my life
From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes,
That I have passed.

(I.iii.127-30)

Othello—like any “author” recognizing that his words have not merely conveyed their intentions but have moved to another level of meaning beyond their author's expectation—realizes that the more he reiterates his deeds of valor and his triumphs over adversities, the closer Desdemona is drawn to him:

This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline;
…..She would come again, and with a greedy ear
Devour up my discourse.

(I.iii.144-49)

In other words, Othello tells the Venetians, Desdemona was moved by his deeds and seduced by his discourse:

She thanked me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her.

(I.iii.162-65)

In fact, Othello's rehearsal of the scene clearly reveals that Desdemona, not he, was the seducer:
Upon this hint I spake:
She [first] loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I [in return] loved her that she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used.

(I.iii.165-68)

Asked to corroborate Othello's testimony, Desdemona, like Othello, preempts her father's argument by taking
the discursive initiative: she expropriates her father's discourse of “obedience” and, like Othello, demonstrates
language's ability to state the bald truth as she understands it, a truth by which she lives. She brilliantly turns
her father's discourse on duty back on him without hint of conscious irony, but rather by a conscious rhetorical
gesture. Because she wants desperately to have his approval, she reaches for the best way to articulate that
duty—by placing her duty on par with her mother's, a claim her father cannot gainsay:

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are lord of all my duty;
I am hither to your daughter. But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

(I.iii.178-87)

Both Desdemona and Othello demonstrate that “real meaning” and “manifest discourse” are not necessarily
mutually exclusive, that they can operate simultaneously toward a mutual telos at this juncture. The tragedy
occurs when the two pull in opposite directions and when Othello and Desdemona, especially Desdemona,
lose the discursive advantage.

Iago's observation of Desdemona's “seduction” of Othello and her discursive power over her father, no doubt,
warns Iago against a direct attempt to seduce her to leave Othello. Having seen her turn male discourse back
on her father and the Senate in her resolve to remain with Othello by arguing that it was she, not Othello, who
did the seducing and by requesting and obtaining from that august body permission to join Othello in Cyprus,
despite the fact that it is a site of battle, Iago surely realizes that Desdemona can discursively match him.
Witness, for example, her astute comparison of her decision to marry Othello to a battle and her boldness in
trumpeting the implications of that decision to the world:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world.

(I.iii.244-46)

Iago most surely observes that Desdemona belies what Teresa De Lauretis terms “the web of the male Oedipal
logic” in which “the little girl has no other prospect but to consent and be seduced into femininity” (52).
Desdemona preempts her father's traditional right to make a “proper” choice for her.

Iago's power to manipulate discourse, however, gives him the dramatic edge over Desdemona. The motivation
for linguistic manipulation, and thereby manipulation of human beings, stems from Iago's
perception—whether real or imagined—that he has been superseded by an inferior military man, namely
Cassio, and that he has been cuckolded by Othello. Furthermore, he “smarts under neglect” by a general he
deems racially inferior to himself. This conviction that he has been slighted, Harley Granville-Barker contends, is the “immediate spring” of Iago’s desire to denigrate the Moor (125).

Lacking a sphere of influence within the civil and military hierarchy, Iago locates his power in the manipulation of discourse. And, ironically, in the final analysis, Othello is seduced by his own discourse because the language Iago employs to defame Desdemona and challenge Othello’s manhood is Othello’s, albeit perverted and polluted.

Iago plays upon what Philip McGuire terms the “deliberate disjunction of action and feeling” to accomplish his goal of turning Othello into an animal. In other words, Iago employs “rhetoric to undercut reason” (205). The play is, then, to borrow from McGuire again, “an imitation of an action of knowing and judging”; an “assay on the limits of intelligence and natural passion, deception deftly and most intelligently practiced” (209) through terrorist discourse. Kubiak adds to this when he states that Iago “terrorizes Othello with the most subtle shift of seeing refracted through an almost imperceptible misdirection of the eye—a misdirection effected through Iago’s words” (63-64).

Roderigo and Othello challenge or try to circumvent such terrorist discourse when they ask Iago to substantiate his verbal claims with objective proof. They, especially Roderigo, recognize the tension between Iago’s discourse and objective reality; yet ironically, they must rely on Iago, whose discourse they question, to resolve that tension. Although Othello is satisfied to have Iago supply the evidence, Roderigo threatens to see for himself—to confront Desdemona directly now that he has begun to “find [him]self fopped” (IV.ii.190). When threatened by Roderigo’s decision to confront Desdemona, however, Iago proves that he still controls the discourse, which he quickly interposes between Roderigo’s demand for proof and his own will to power. Moreover, according to Kubiak, Iago knows that “ocularity in which [Roderigo] seeks his truth is as much a failure as the language that directs it.” Kubiak describes the failure of ocular proof in Othello as the “violence of failed seeing—the desire to see, seeing desire, seeing what one has been told (not) to” and adds that “both seeing and speaking” in Othello are ensnared by a “falsely assumed empiricism” that relies not on proof but on Iago’s capacity “to reproduce or rehearse ‘the Same,’ that impossibility” (66). If sight is not to be trusted, then discourse must bear the greater responsibility for proof, which should, therefore, be an incontrovertible proof that does not rely on but rather opposes and exposes seduction. Baudrillard formulates this opposition between ocularity and discourse: “All appearances conspire to combat and root out meaning (whether intentional or otherwise), and turn it into a game … one that is more adventurous and seductive than the directive line of meaning” (54).

Roderigo first challenges Iago’s discourse in Act IV when he realizes that he has been duped: “I heard too much; for your words and performances are no kin together” (my emphasis). He protests Iago’s failure to deliver on his promises and decides to “make [him]self known to Desdemona”:

If she will return my jewels, I will give over my suit and repent my unlawful solicitation; if not, assure yourself I will seek satisfaction of you.

(IV.ii.193-96)

There will be no further deliberation on this issue, and Iago knows it. Now he must retreat from dilatory,\(^1\) verbal strategy to direct action. Hence the fabrication about Cassio’s delivering a message that will send Othello and Desdemona to Mauritania and the proposal to murder Cassio: “I will show you such a necessity in his death that you shall think yourself bound to put it on him” (IV.ii.231-32). Iago’s “show” will, of course, be verbal.

Roderigo’s recognition that Iago’s words are at odds with his actions—promises without proof, discourse without substance—begins the ineluctable drive toward the failure of Iago’s disruptive discourse. Roderigo’s
threat to confront Desdemona engenders a quick and strategic discursive move on Iago's part. Roderigo's suspicions coupled with Othello's desire for “ocular proof” sorely undermine Iago's discourse. Thus, discourse cannot serve Iago in this crisis of credibility and therefore must be “redeployed as action” (Baudrillard, 54). He must stage another scenario while he recovers the discursive ground, first, by praising Roderigo's decision and then by forestalling that decision. It is noteworthy that at this juncture, Iago shifts from poetic discourse to prose, a clear indication of his failure to control his best weapon, language, and of his diminishing power to manipulate Roderigo:

Why, now I see there's mettle in thee, and even from this instant do build on thee a better opinion than ever before. Give me thy hand, Roderigo. Thou has taken against me a most just exception; but yet I protest I have dealt most directly in thy affair.

Roderigo counters that he has seen no evidence to support Iago's claims: “It hath not appeared.” Iago concedes as much but does not stop at mere concession: he inverts Roderigo's argument:

I grant indeed it hath not appeared; and your suspicion is not without wit and judgement. But, Roderigo, if thou hast that in thee indeed, which I have greater reason to believe now than ever—I mean purpose, courage, and value—this night show it. If thou the next night following enjoy not Desdemona, take me from this world with treachery, and devise engines for my life.

(IV.ii.200-11)

Clearly, Iago is weakened by Roderigo's threat of intervention, a threat that not only will expose his machinations vis-à-vis Roderigo but also will expose Iago's entire charade. Iago skillfully diverts Roderigo from his failure to deliver on his promises. This scene brilliantly illustrates Baudrillard's observation that seduction stems from weakness, not power: “To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak” (83). Iago is unquestionably the “seduced” in this scene because Roderigo has weakened Iago's ability to control him by words alone.

_Othello_ is marked by a series of seductive gestures that lead to the untimely and unwarranted death of Desdemona. In _Othello_, the contours of desire are shaped by individual discourse and gestures of seduction. Iago's desire to bend Othello to his will is contingent upon his power of seduction. Iago's desire constitutes and controls the dramatic center, while Desdemona's position as object of male desire—her marriage to the Moor and Roderigo's desire for a sexual union with her—constitutes the thematic center of the drama. Iago's actions circulate around this marriage plot. Desdemona's elopement with a black man provides the basis for Iago's seduction of Roderigo, Brabantio, and Othello, while her position as Othello's wife provides the ground on which Iago's vengeance operates.

Iago recognizes power when he meets it. He recognizes the strength of Desdemona's resolve, which makes the Senate agree to her remaining with him even in Cyprus. Thus, Iago elects to work toward denying Desdemona her desires by manipulating those around her and by subterfuge, or what Baudrillard calls seduction or a turning “from one's own truth” or leading another “from his/her truth.” It is precisely Iago's desire to lead Desdemona from the Moor's bed that results in her tragic death. Very early on, Iago insists to Roderigo that Desdemona will turn from Othello once his narrative becomes tiresome and she is forced to see him in racial terms, that is, see him as black. He insists that Desdemona's violent love for the Moor, engendered by his “bragging and telling her fantastical lies” (II.i.213), will eventually be destroyed by ocularity: “Her eye must be fed. And what delight will she have to look on the devil?” (II.i.215-16). Being sated, Iago contends, Desdemona will see the physical reality of Othello:
When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners and beauties: all which the Moor is defective in. Now for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor.

(II.i.216-22)

Iago articulates this thesis of Desdemona's “momentary” infatuation with the Moor and true attachment to the younger, handsome Cassio not only to Roderigo but to Othello as well. Only instead of stating it openly, he makes insidious suggestions—“Did Michael Cassio, / When you wooed my lady, know of your love?” (III.iii.93-94)—that force Othello to voice doubts about Desdemona's fidelity. The conversation proceeds with Iago's saying little by way of direct accusation but suggesting a great deal, insinuating his thoughts into Othello's psyche:

By heaven, he echoes me,
As if there were some monster in his thought
Too hideous to be shown.

(III.iii.109-11)

Finally, Othello, seduced into believing his wife has been unfaithful, becomes totally confused about his own thoughts. So muddled, in fact, is Othello at this juncture that he fails to note and pick up Iago's overt admission of treachery, “[O]ft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not” (III.iii.148-49), or heed his warning, “O beware, my lord, of jealousy” (III.iii.167).

Othello, at first, defends Desdemona's virtue, her playful spirit and easy show of affection for others: “Where virtue is, these are more virtuous” (III.iii.188). He defends her honesty on the grounds that she chose him despite his race. But Iago returns to his discursive strategy by echoing Brabantio's warning:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks
She loved them most.

(III.iii.207-9)

Edward Snow brilliantly observes that the “decisive moment in Iago's seduction” occurs when Iago gets Othello to see Desdemona “in terms of Brabantio's warning” (399). Snow further argues that Othello's reference to Desdemona's reputation being as “black as [his] own face” suggests that he is being manipulated by a language “calculated to make him despise himself because he is black” (401).

Subtly goaded by Iago, Othello admits, “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not, / I think thou art just, and think thou art not” (III.iii.385-86). But, Othello continues, Desdemona has made an unnatural match by marrying him, her “nature erring from itself” (III.iii.229), a point Iago seizes on to undermine Othello's faith in Desdemona's love and acceptance of him. He reminds Othello that Desdemona refused numerous “proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion and degree” (III.iii.231-32), implying that Othello is not on the same human level as the Venetian suitors.

Doubting/trusting both his wife and Iago, Othello asks Iago for a “living reason,” actual proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Iago obliges with a performance calculated to remove all doubt: Cassio's discourse of love ostensibly spoken during sleep. Iago cleverly reminds Othello that what he has reported is only a dream; Othello counters that it is “a foregone conclusion” (III.iii.429). At this juncture, Iago sets the discursive stage for the tragic conclusion. All that remains is ocular proof misdirected and interpreted by Iago. Finally, what
Othello sees is infected by his desire, a desire informed through Iago's words. Othello's murder of Desdemona results from his own victimization by Iago. Iago is partially correct when he tells Emilia, “I told [Othello] what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true” (V.ii.175-76).

The circulation of desire in Othello and the concomitant acts that affect desire provide an insight into Iago's decision to manipulate others discursively. Iago's narrative is directed toward a conclusion that satisfies his desire for power through discursive control, whereas Desdemona's narrative moves along an axis of desire for happiness through a shared experience. Iago's and Desdemona's interlocking desires collide through Iago's attempts to break Othello's hold on Desdemona and through Desdemona's efforts to influence Othello on Cassio's behalf. Out of this matrix of interlocking and conflicting desires comes Iago's seduction of Othello.

Iago's seductive power is situated in his ability to manipulate the sociolect, a hybridization of a desire to manipulate and destroy Othello, who is for Iago the locus of misplaced power and the object of illegitimate desire. Iago's enterprise is, then, to desempower Othello, not by making Othello undesirable to Desdemona (which he realizes he cannot do) but by turning Othello against Desdemona.

To achieve this end, Iago employs another of his dramatic skills—acting. Granville-Barker observes that Iago assumes a dual acting role—he his both the persona Iago of the play Othello and the character who exploits the role of actor to accomplish his desired goal:

The medium in which Iago works is the actor's; and the crude sense of pretending to be what he is not, and in his chameleonlike ability to adapt himself to change of company and circumstance, we find him an accomplished actor.

(162)

Both the pleasure and the success of Iago's enterprise are contingent upon what Roussel terms the “seducer's fascination with the spectacle of his own manipulation and control” (725), while Baudrillard argues that seduction derives its “passion” and “intensity” not from an “energy of desire” but rather “from gaming as pure form and from purely formal bluffing” (82). “Gaming” and “purely formal bluffing” describe Iago's method precisely and completely.

The so-called “brothel scene” represents the triumph of Iago's gaming and bluffing. Iago's strategy proposes to expose Othello's gullibility and confirm his contention that Othello is not quite on the same human level with Desdemona and is therefore not a suitable mate for her. This strategic move by Iago clearly indicates that Othello is the object of Iago's seduction, not Desdemona. It is as though Iago seeks Othello's moral and mental downfall, in part, because he cannot match Othello's physical prowess and narrative skill. What he seeks, and what he succeeds in effecting, is the undermining of the Moor's intelligence and coextensively his humanity. The outcome of the play turns, then, on Iago's seduction of Othello and Othello's collusion in his own downfall, and that collusion becomes the ultimate sign of Iago's mastery of multiple discourses.

Notes

1. Patricia Parker notes that Iago gains power over Othello “at the threshold of the great temptation scene … through those pauses, single words and pregnant phrases which seem to suggest something secret or withheld, a withholding which fills the Moor with the desire to hear more” (54).
2. Michael Riffaterre notes that the sociolect is the site of “myths, traditions, ideological and esthetic stereotypes … harbored by a society,” as well as the site of “ready-made narrative and descriptive models that reflect a group's idea of or consensus about reality.” Iago refers to Othello in animalistic terms to play to the Venetian sociolect. His references to Othello as “an old black ram,” “the devil,” and “a Barbary horse” reveal Renaissance stereotypes and, more important, play upon the racial fears
of the Western male (130).

Bibliography


Criticism: Themes: Thomas Moisan (essay date 2002)


[In the following essay, Moisan considers the role of the Venetian state in shaping the characters and tragic outcome of Othello.]

Ye and some forrain men and strangers haue beene adopted into this number of citizens, eyther in regard of their great nobility, or that they had beene dutifull towards the state, or els had done unto them some notable service.

(Contareni, 18)

Men in Great Place, are thrice Servants: Servants of the Soueraigne or State; Servants of Fame; and Servants of Businesse. So as they haue no Freedome; neither in their Persons; nor in their Actions; nor in their Times.

(Bacon, “Of Great Place,” 42)

From “honest” to “dilate,” from “what’s the matter?” to “My husband?” Othello has been shown to be home to a number of aurally and thematically resonant expressions, expressions that ramify in significance even as they impress themselves reiteratively upon the ear, contributing to what G. B. Shaw, writing of Othello, termed “the splendor of its word music” (135). One is reminded of such expressions by the collocation whose occurrence, and recurrence, draw the attention of this essay, namely, “the state.” On the face of it, to be sure, the interpretative possibilities annunciated by “the state” seem modest. Lacking the ironic power that builds in the numerous variations we hear on the word “honest,” and less susceptible to the revealing paranoumasic dissonances that Patricia Parker has heard in “delate” and “dilate,” references to “the state” seem to be what their contexts suggest: collectively an ellipsis for Venice the city-state, metonyms for the Venetian polity, for Venice in its governing authority and power. Indeed, context would seem to render it difficult to hear in the phrase a reference to “state” as “condition”; we do not hear anyone complain that there is something rotten in, or with, the state of Venice. Nor is the word “state” paired off against its etymological and phonological kin, “estate,” which does not occur in the play. Instead, with the long vowel of its iamb giving it insinuatingly easy entree to the rhythms and sound of both prose and verse, references to “the state” make the domain and claims of public affairs audible and rather talismanic presences in the opening act of the play and in its closing minutes: the claims of “the state” set the geographical agenda of the play; the recollection of service done “the state” brings the play to its “bloody period”; the intent to “relate” what has happened to “the state” brings the play to its smoothly rhyming close.

“The state” occurs more frequently in Othello than in Hamlet, with its princely protagonist and “statist” preoccupations; it occurs more often than in Shakespeare’s earlier “Venetian” play, The Merchant of Venice,
where a spate of references to “the state” clustered in the “trial” scene intones what Venice is legally exacted to permit and what it is legally permitted to exact (4.1.222, 312, 354, 365, 371, 373; also, 3.2.278; 3.3.29). Indeed, references to “the state” occur more frequently in Othello than in any other of Shakespeare's plays except Coriolanus, a coincidence that would seem anomalous. For, however one assesses the various topical political readings that have been offered for Coriolanus, Coriolanus is still a play whose fable centrally concerns “the state,” something that would seem less self-evidently true about Othello. In Coriolanus “the state” of Rome is part of the focal agon of the play, making Coriolanus and undoing him quite, its presence sustained and citations of it evenly distributed over the five acts of the play; in Othello, on the other hand, the role of “the state” and the Venice it represents seem thematically relegated to the margins they help spatially and aurally to define, the public sphere they evoke in acts 1 and 5 muted in and displaced by the domestic and claustrophobically private action of acts 2, 3, and 4. In short, “the state” seems integral to the subject of Coriolanus, but not to that of Othello.

Or so at least we might infer from Verdi and his librettist, Boito, who, locating the operatic center of the play in, in fact, the heavily domestic and claustrophobically private action on Cyprus, effectively mute references to “the state” by excising Shakespeare's entire first act along with Venice and “the state.” In doing so, however, Verdi and Boito are only subtracting what Shakespeare appears to have added, at least if we follow Geoffrey Bullough's lead in taking as the principal source for Othello Cinthio's story of the “Moorish Captain.” In Cinthio Shakespeare would have found references to the Signoria (Bullough, 242; 252)—which he absorbs (1.2.17)—but not to “the state.” What difference does the addition of “the state” make? Most obviously, the presence of “the state,” with its foreign strategic concerns and its debate over whether it is Rhodes or Cyprus that is likely to be in danger, brings into the discourse of the play the threat of the Turk, “the angrie Turke” whom “of all others,” Richard Knolles wrote (1603) “that understanding and provident State” of Venice “most dread” (Bullough, 262). How potent was the fear of “turning Turk” or forced conversion to the infidel for an early modern English audience has been interrogated recently by Daniel J. Vitkus (“Turning Turk in Othello”), and it may have had an especial immediacy for the original audience of Othello, who, as Virginia Mason Vaughan has suggested, were likely to have known about the fall of the historical Cyprus to the Turk some years before the play, and might have seen in the ruination of Venice's chosen general an admonition for the Christian West (34). Less obvious, perhaps, is the effect the presence of “the state” has upon the definition of the general himself. At the very least, to make Othello the most significant servant of the mysterium of Venetian power invests Othello and his story with a tragic gravitas that his counterpart in Cinthio's fiction—a fiction that evokes those steamy “enchantments of Circe” Roger Ascham derides in Italian novelle (67-68)—simply does not have. The repeated reference to Venice in act 1 as “the state” elevates Othello from mere employee of the city to savior of the nation—or at least part of its commercial empire—someone so vital that “the state” “[c]annot,” as Iago remarks, “with safety cast him” (1.1.148).

Yet references to “the state” do more than provide a courtesy upgrade to this tragedy without a crowned head. Rather, in what is to follow I would suggest that “the state” and Othello are tied to each other in a relationship both mutually exploitative and mutually revealing, one that leads Othello to define himself by his reading of “the state,” and that makes “the state” an interested participant in Othello's tragedy. Moreover, even as a number of recent analyses have invaluably drawn our attention to the culturally charged images in the play of disclosure, to the darknesses that whet the obsession within the play with “ocular proof” (Patricia Parker, Shakespeare from the Margins; Michael Neill, “Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in Othello, Issues of Death, 141-67; and Arthur L. Little, Jr.), a consideration of the role of “the state” complicates our appreciation, not simply of the discursive in the play, but of the sense in which the play draws attention to discourse, and to its medial and ultimately repressive relationship with the visual. It is for “the state” that certain accounts get delivered; it is with the intent of “relating” things to “the state” that the stage is cleared and the sight blocked off of “the tragic loading” of the bed. Indeed, though Richard Helgerson's caution against reading the early modern notion of “state” through anything even as little removed in time as a Hobbesian lens (295) makes us cautious in treating “the state” as an abstraction of political theory, still, the
discursive interaction of protagonist and “state” in Othello, with “the state” vetting discourse and Othello shaping discourse on “cue,” evokes the relationship of two powerful institutions whose negotiation was an ineluctable reality of Shakespeare's existence: the state—or the crown with which the state was identified—and the theater.

But what is “the state” in Othello, and would a contemporary audience have heard in the term anything but a transparent marker for Venice? Though it is unlikely that the audience would have felt invited to ponder the term as an abstraction, surely even an early Jacobean audience was not unfamiliar with efforts to describe the workings of “the state,” or its equally familiar—if less prosodically commodious—synonym, “the commonweal.” “Amongst many the great and deepe deuices of worldly wisedome, for the maintenance and preseruing of human societies (the ground and stay of mans earthly blisse) the fairest, firmest, and the best, was the framing and forming of Commonweales …” So Knolles alliteratively opines at the outset of a work he produced not long after his The Generall Historie of the Turkes, his translation (1606) of Jean Bodin's The Six Bookees of a Commonweale (“To the Reader,” iv). Still, in Othello the reiterated appearances of “the state” have the effect of underscoring Venice in the exercise of its governing power and leaving unstated anything that would suggest that large complex organism Bodin and Knolles thought of as the “commonweal”; when, after all, Othello refers to “the state” as anything but “the state” or Venice he chooses a transliteration for the Venetian version of an executive council, “the signiory” (1.2.17).

And, to be sure, in this case any hint of mystery and abstraction that builds in the repetition of “the state” may well have reminded the audience how little they understood Venice itself. After all, as editors have observed, it is not clear that the playwright himself had fully mastered the technicalities of various Venetian governmental offices (Saunders, 64; n. 1.2.14; Honigmann 128, n. 1.2.13-14)—perhaps a reason in itself for referring to matters of state as often as possible by the umbrella term … “the state”! Nor if, as has been frequently suggested, the playwright looked at Lewis Lewkenor's translation of Gasparo Contareni's The Commonwealth and Gouernment of Venice (1599), would he have found the picture it presented of the intricate formulation of the Venetian system of government uniformly lucid, either in the model of government produced, or in the means that produced it.4 “Shakespeare saw Venice as part of his world,” E. A. J. Honigmann has observed, “but not so Cyprus” (11), a valid distinction if on no other grounds than that by the time of the play Cyprus had succumbed to Ottoman invasion, while Venice was still at least in the Christian orb. And the sense that Venice, for all its celebrated, or notorious, opulence was nonetheless culturally familiar has been helpful to a reading of the play that would parse it in culturally oppositional terms, with Othello the “outsider” and “extravagant and wheeling stranger” and Venice, or “the state,” the establishment, indeed, a reading to which Brabantio, Roderigo, and Iago all in various ways find it convenient to subscribe: “This is Venice; / My house is not a grange” (1.1.105-106). Still, a glance at the commentary Lewkenor provided at the outset of his translation suggests that for this Englishman at least, unblushing purveyor, as Vaughan has noted, of the myth of Venice (17), “the state” of Venice was best appreciated as an exciting, “culturally broadening” conundrum. From the preface “To the Reader” to Lewkenor's translation of Contareni it is Venice itself that emerges as the “extravagant and wheeling stranger.” Recalling that Homer especially praises Ulysses for the breadth of his travels, for the fact that “Multorum mores vidit & urbes” (Ad), Lewkenor—who might have agreed with the Duke that Othello's adventurous “tale would win my daughter too”—offers a paean to the difference that is Venice in which two notes predominate: the “strangeness” of everything connected with Venice—its history, its government, its prosperity, its physical situation; “wonder” at having observed these things. Venice, the veritably floating signifier? Lewkenor signifies the intensity of his wonder at the thought by employing as an adverb of “otherness” a word we hear repeatedly in Othello to suggest moral hideousness: “what euer hath the worlde brought forth more monstrously strange, then that so great & glorious a Citie should be seated in the middle of the sea. … ?” (A3v).

Not, of course, that “the state” remains an abstraction throughout the play, and, indeed, it is in its selective moments of demystification that “the state” and the Venice it represents come to be drawn into the play as
actors, at least as proximate occasions, in the circumstances that shape Othello's tragedy. In no scene are the officers and workings of “the state” rendered more humanly recognizable than in the momentous council scene (1.3), and particularly in the first forty-five lines, where we come upon the Duke and two senators attempting to puzzle out the sense of conflicting reports they have received on the Turks’ intentions (1-43), a scene that seems especially demystified when compared with the description of the Great Council of three thousand described by Lewkenor, that body which deliberates so efficiently, and with so divine a peaceableness, and so without all tumult and confusion,” Lewkenor gushes, “that it rather seemeth to bee an assembly of Angels, then of men” (A2d). Decidedly more sublunary, the effort of the three officers of “the state” at disambiguation puts “the state” in the business of reading signs and thus gives “the state” something in common with numerous enigma-pondering characters throughout the play, with the notable difference that the Duke and his colleagues actually manage to reason their way to a correct answer. Nor is it the only time in the play at which “the state” turns out to refer to personages or collectivities. In an instance we noted earlier, Iago, who has already displayed a knack for demystifying august Venetian institutions—parrying Brabantio’s charge, “Thou art a villain,” with “you are a Senator” (1.1.117)—and can always be relied upon to “demystify” anyone or, in this case, thing by attributing to it a recognizably humanly self-serving motivation, and follows hard upon Roderigo’s hendyadic invocation of “the state” as some abstract guarantor of justice—“the justice of the state” (91.1.139) to predict, correctly, that “the state” will find Othello too valuable to “cast him” (1.1.147). Brabantio, anxious to assert his importance at a moment when that importance seems to have been disregarded, makes the state a fraternity to which he belongs, certain that the Duke or any of his “brothers of the state” would feel his grievance (1.2.96). And in its most impersonated form, “the state” becomes a “they,” when Othello reminds those about to lead him away that he had “done the state some service, and they know’t” (5.2.354).

Still, when read in the diverse contexts in which it is cited, “the state” as an entity appears something of a chimera, less a thing or concept with definable terms than a rhetorical inflection. We encounter it as an affiliative tag-on that enables Brabantio both to flash his influence and ground his personal outrage and complaint in a presumption of socio-political empathy: “The Duke himself, / Or any of my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own” (1.2.95-7). We hear it invoked to justify why something is to be done, not done, or done later; a piece of allusion and illusion central to praeteritive devices of which Iago is only the most malevolent, not the sole, practitioner. “What if I do obey?” asks Othello, of course rhetorically, when Brabantio orders him to prison. “How may the Duke be therewith satisfied, / Whose messengers are here about my side / Upon some present business of the state / To bring me to him?” (1.2.87-91). And having enabled Othello to elude detention at the beginning of the play, the discourse of “the state” serves Othello at the end as well in the literally breathtaking praeteritio with which Othello takes his leave, putting his “bloody period” to a lively demonstration of the sort of service to “the state” that he had begun this nineteen-line, “word or two” speech by reminding the assembled emissaries of the state that he would not continue to remind them of: “I have done the state some service, and they know’t—No more of that” (5.2.339-40). “The state” occupies the final rhyme and image of the play, but its concluding centrality as the authority offstage to which Lodovico will “[t]his heavy act with heavy heart relate,” not to mention the nature of the report it is likely to receive, are complicated by the image onstage of the tragically loaded bed, the “object” which “poisons sight,” and which Lodovico orders to be “hid.” In the final piece of praeteritio perpetrated in the play “the state” is kept in shadow: the audience is invited to pass over what it has seen and is not likely to forget; to look forward to a report it will never hear to an entity it cannot see; instead of enjoying a privileged position as the repository of what has happened, “the state” is relegated to an alternative realm of report, a realm and report rendered necessarily more shadowy in the degree to which they are to be denied the fullness of sight, a realm and report associated through the words of Lodovico with suggestions of repression and censorship.

Shadowy as the representation of “the state” may be, things still get done in its name; indeed, it is an insight of the play into the paradox of Venetian power, and perhaps the power of states in general, that we never discern the power of Venetian authority so much as when we do not see it. When, for example, Lodovico
exercises his authority to announce to Othello after his murder of Desdemona has been discovered that “Your power and your command is taken off, / And Cassio rules in Cyprus” (5.2.331-32), we may initially feel that we are in the presence of Venetian justice, until we recall that what sound like penalties meted out to Othello for his crime are performative statements of administrative actions that “the state” had already taken, news of which, it is supposed, Lodovico had brought to Othello in the letter from Venice (4.1.225). Since Othello had only arrived in Cyprus in act 2, clearly “the state” had wasted no time, or, rather, operated offstage and by its own “dilatory” time to remove the Moor once, presumably, it had somehow ascertained that the military threat to Cyprus had passed. Othello's transgression only allowed “the state” to give a punitive articulation and formality to actions intended to be muted in the silences of the epistolary form.

Yet as the visit of Lodovico to Cyprus can by itself only hint, the nature of “the state” in Othello is most fully on display in the complexities of its relationship with its “all in all sufficient” general. That Shakespeare seems to have conned the notion that aliens were permitted, even encouraged, to contribute their talents and services, artisanal, commercial, or military, to the Venetian state is evident, and A. D. Nuttall makes a useful observation when he declares that for Shakespeare Venetian tolerance, indeed, use of the exotically different would merely have been a reflection in its political culture of the exoticism and difference that defined Venice's physical environment. “Venice,” Nuttall remarks, listing just a bit towards the coloratura, “is for Shakespeare an anthropological laboratory. Itself nowhere, suspended between sea and sky, it receives and utilizes all kinds of people” (141).

That Shakespeare was aware that the Venetian state received “all kinds of people,” at least as business traders, was clear in The Merchant of Venice (3.3.27). His sense—and his character Othello's sense—of how Venice utilized “strangers” could only have been complicated by exposure to Contareni, who at once celebrates the welcome aliens received, while giving clues of the limits the Venetian state placed on its inclusiveness, particularly in its relationship with aliens it retained to address its military affairs. In Lewkenor's translation of Contareni one finds, for example, an accounting of the special legal processes instituted to expedite suits brought by “strangers,” with the ostensibly benign rationale that they “should not be molested and lingred off with long delayes, but quickly come to an ende of their suites” (105). Implicit, of course, in the very attention paid to the benign and genuinely more than just treatment of “strangers,” is the fact that aliens normally remain aliens and outside the citizenship reserved for “Venetians,” natives of “the state,” and far from all of those. One thinks of the norm when Contareni duly notes a significant exception, an exception for merit, one that echoes memorably in Othello's parting apologia—even in its association, by proximity, of “the state” with a plural pronoun. It happens, Contareni observes, that “some forrain men and strangers haue beene adopted into this number of citizens, eyther in regard of their great nobility, or that they had beene dutifull towardes the state, or else had done vnto them some notable seruice” (18). “[S]ome notable seruice,” naturally, could refer to the deeds done by those mercenary generals who tend to Venice's military foreign policy, by the likes of Othello and, perhaps, the as yet unidentified Marcus Luccicos, for whom the Duke sends along with “the valiant Moor” (1.3.45-8). Yet a scan of Contareni's comments on the attitude of “the state” towards affairs and personages military reveals an ambivalence that would render any mercenary general's hold on public esteem precarious. With an early modern nod to the policy of preparedness, leaders are encouraged to cultivate “the offices of warre,” but only “for the cause of peace” (9), while a historical aside reminds the reader that the founders of “the state” “alwaies with greater regard and reckoning applyed their minds to the maintenance of peace then to glorie of warres” (15). So much for “the plumed troop, and the big wars / That make ambition virtue” (3.3349-50); to thrive in Venice Othello's occupation might indeed be gone, or rather, the cast of mind that could find “content” (348) in battle might well be distrusted. That distrust surfaces, as it were, in a Venetian law that gives ancient Roman practice a nautical twist and prohibits any returning “Generall, Legate, or Captaine of a nauie” from bringing his war gallies into the city of Venice, and obliges him to disband at a point about a hundred miles away from Venice. And though, as Honigmann reminds us (7), Lewkenor's translation mentions that the “Captaine Generall” of the Venetian army is always a “straunger,” the text adds the significant qualification that the “Captaine Generall” “hath no authority to doe or deliberate any thing without the aduice of the Legates,” the political officers “who neuer stirre from the
side of the Captaine Generall” (132). In Othello this anti-militarism attributed to the Venetian state goes unvoiced, conveniently displaced by the threat posed by the Turk, not to Venice itself, but to a colonial and commercial vital interest, and a threat not unacknowledged. Yet the cultural anxieties that, as Emily Bartels has shown, a Western audience was likely to have brought towards a Moorish protagonist may only have been reinforced by the peculiar symbiosis of Venice and its military factotums. Read in this context, the determination arrived at offstage by “the state” to have Othello replaced for unspecified reasons by Cassio—a change that seems all the more peremptory to an audience that has not been given any reason to believe that a substantial amount of time has elapsed in the play—seems merely to give dramatic emphasis to the uncertain position of the warrior and the stranger in Venice recorded in Contareni and Lewkenor.

That Othello reflects the uncertainty of the soldier's and stranger's position in the Venetian state helps, of course, to define the vulnerability that is his undoing with Iago in act 3. My concern here, however, is not to revisit the psychic dynamics of that scene, and ask why Othello falls or falls so rapidly in it, but to consider the role “the state” has in shaping the vulnerable self that Othello exhibits in the play, in the beginning and at the end. We observed above that Othello's memorable protest, at “the end,” that “I have done the state some service—and they know it” recalls closely the section in Lewkenor's translation that describes how “forrain men and strangers” can attain citizenship by “Notable seruise,” by merit and deeds. The recollection is worth noting because Othello's outcry very much sounds like the protest of injured merit, or of merit unrecognized, or, rather, of someone who believes that “the state” about to cart him away would be susceptible to arguments from merit—“and they know it.” The particular line Othello employs here to buy time with which to dictate his statement and do away with himself is interesting. For one thing, we had not been acutely aware that Othello was suffering the pangs of injured or unrecognized merit, and the circumstances seem hardly propitious for raising questions of merit. On the other hand, however, the tack Othello takes here reminds us of Othello's first appearance in the play, when Othello dismisses the concerns Iago so helpfully raises about the harm the enraged Brabantio may do, on the grounds that “[My services which I have done the signiory / Shall outongue his complaints” (1.2.18-19). Michael Neill has referred to the “civil self” of Othello from which Iago strips away the fabric to expose the “dark” secrets Iago “has taught the audience to expect”(Issues of Death, 167). In Othello's comment to Iago in this first appearance we get a hint of what the fabric of that “civil self” may consist. Othello stakes his survival and advancement on the very Venetian notion of a meritocracy; that is, he defines himself according to what he believes “the state” will recognize and reward. In doing so, however, he chooses to suppress another part of himself, or, indeed, another version of himself, that part “'Tis yet to know,” the lineage of “royal siege,” of which, in the first piece of praeterition in which he engages in the play, he at once brags while claiming he will not brag of it until bragging is in vogue (1.2.19-23). Praeterition it is, but it is a piece of praeterition that ultimately gets nullified, in that that other self Othello claims he will suppress for awhile actually stays suppressed. “Men in Great Fortunes”, Bacon claims in the essay that provides one of the epigraphs to this essay, “are strangers to themselves” (42). Othello has not defined himself by his fortune, but he follows the path Bacon sees men “Of Great Place,” who are enslaved to “the state,” following to self-alienation. Small wonder that in his final speech, just when he has ensured himself a captive audience and can say anything he might want to say about himself, his sense of subjectivity should lead him to reenact an episode from his vita and subsume, indeed, extinguish himself in deeds done for “the state.”

Still, as Othello tells Iago, it is not exactly his deeds that Othello claims will redeem him with “the state,” but the ability of his deeds to “outongue” Brabantio's complaints. At a glance one might take this to be Othello's appeal to meritocracy and a depreciation of rhetoric, an assertion that his deeds “speak for themselves,” or that “actions speak louder than words.” Yet as the scene in the council meeting unfolds, “outongue” proves, of course, to be less metaphorical, or closer to personification than one at first supposes. For rather like “the state” itself, Othello's deeds in the play exist as rhetorical fodder, allusions to accomplishments designed to make points for or about Othello. It is not, we know, Othello's deeds as such that lead the Duke to “think” that “this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.171), or even the tale itself, but a metatale, Othello's telling of how he had been accustomed to telling it, or as James Calderwood has described it, “a voice telling about himself
telling about himself” (294). In approving that voice, “the state” does more than yet the rhetoric in which Othello fashions himself; rather, “the state” helps to define that self as rhetorical.

And well might “the state” claim some authority at judging rhetoric, since “the state” itself proves attentive to rhetoric, if ultimately transparent at its use, when it serves its interests. Nowhere is this more on display than in the council scene, where Shakespeare gives “the state” its fullest personification in the play and gives most audible voice to the celebrations of Venice's deliberative wisdom he might have found in Contareni and Lewkenor. That “the state” has interests is dramatically underscored when its spokesmen come to perceive those interests to be threatened, when in rapid succession the Duke and the senators deduce the threat to Cyprus only to hear Brabantio bring charges of witchcraft against their best hope at resisting that threat. “We are very sorry for't,” the response of “All” to Brabantio's accusations (1.3.73) is heartfelt, even though the sentiment it embodies probably transcends fraternal regard for the injury suffered by their “brother of the state,” Brabantio. And, indeed, it is a measure of their moral sense, or at least of their desire to live up to the moral reputation of the Venetian state, that its representatives on stage should feel an ethical dilemma at the possibility that defending Cyprus and avenging Brabantio might not be compatible goals, a dilemma that is made all the more embarrassing by the firm pledge of judicial severity the Duke issues—“yea, though our proper son / Stood in your action” (1.3.69-70)—immediately before he learns who the accused is. When “the state” is spared the necessity of condemning its military champion, it is, of course, still left with the dilemma of reconciling itself, and Brabantio, to the marriage of the fair skinned-Desdemona and the dark-skinned Moor. Wooed by Othello's own rhetoric and bound by Venice's reputation of toleration towards strangers, especially strangers that are to help it defend its possessions against the Turk, “the state” in the cloying balm of the Duke's rhymed couplets, employs a trope to deny the seemingly undeniable fact of skin color, in the process endorsing the sort of color-coded metaphysics that, as Neill has demonstrated, ultimately enables Othello to demonize Desdemona by demonizing himself (Issues of Death, 144-44):

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,  
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.

(1.3.289-90)

What the Duke so fecklessly does here, Lodovico will much more effectively do later, in fact ending the play in the process. That is, both align the authority of “the state” and rhetorical discourse to deny nothing less than the evidence of sight: the Duke formally bolsters the authority of his rank with the authority of rhymed couplets to claim that black can really be white; Lodovico, as we have noted before, forcibly averts everyone's glance from the sight-poisoning bed and diverts attention to a narrative to come, the narrative to be “related.” In the process, the invention of “the state,” its extrapolation on Shakespeare's putative source in Cinthio, provides a vehicle by means of which Othello appears to tame the narrative it has staged, devising strategies of domestication, familiarization, and ultimately recuperation while calling attention to the ways in which that narrative ultimately eludes control. Indeed, we get a hint of this in the scene in the council meeting when the Duke first calls for and then blesses Othello's account of how he used to account for his past and its adventures. Again, what wins Othello sympathy in this speech, before Desdemona arrives to exonerate him formally, is as much the performance of the speech as its content, its collection of wild and unfamiliar things and experiences harnessed within Othello's recognizably and sonorously attractive delivery. The Duke's prompt, “Say it, Othello” (1.3.126), or what Honigmann calls an unusual turn of phrase” (143, n.1.3.128), does not so much command Othello to speak as him to perform, and exemplifies both the way in which “the state” domesticates Othello's “extravagant strangeness” and part of the “service” through which Othello ingratiates himself with “the state.” In “Othello Furens” Robert S. Miola has charted a number of instances in which Othello's language is suffused with recollections of Seneca's Hercules Furens, a possible source of the argot that Iago claims is laden with “bumbast circumstance / Horribly stuff'd with epithites of war” (1.1.13-14). Invested with a familiarly theatrically wild, heroic language that, much to Iago's stated chagrin, is part of the winning persona Othello wears in “the state,” Othello and “the state” demonstrate the terms of their
peculiar, mutually cultivating, mutually exploitative relationship. Indeed, that moment so central to Othello’s need for ocular proof, the scenario Iago stages with Cassio for Othello’s benefit (4.1.103-68), only demonstrates the way in which the imposition of a conventional dramatic form can hide sight and misinform, since Othello becomes enraged, less at what he sees than by the words he thinks he hears, the script from familiar plays he is imaginatively writing into what he sees before him, with Cassio a swaggering stage Roman: “Do [you] triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?” (4.1.118).

Finally, Lodovico’s determination at the end of the play to hide the bed and what it reveals and his announcement of his intention to “relate” what had happened to “the state” enlist “the state” in a recuperative strategy that attempts to rewrite what has happened in familiarly, manageably, and conventionally tragic terms, terms that exempt us from having to pose or cope with the harder questions the events onstage force. To Iago, now conveniently demonized as “O Spartan dog” (5.2.361), incomprehensibly evil but, then, beyond the need to comprehend because undeniably inhuman, is shifted all of the responsibility for “the tragic loading of this bed; / This is thy work” (5.2.363-64). Simultaneously Othello emerges as a tragic icon and victim: his suicide provides a theatrically familiar demonstration that “he was great of heart” (5.2.361), and spares “the state” the burden of having to learn from his own testimony “the nature of [his] fault.” In the degree to which the recuperative strategy doesn’t work, leaving in our sight the bed and the questions it provokes, underscoring as a strategy of denial the narrative Lodovico will present to “the state,” and affiliating “the state” itself with the agency of censor, Othello presents as an undomesticatable form drama itself.

Notes

1. See Granville-Barker, 130; Moisan; Parker, “Shakespeare and Rhetoric: ‘dilation’ and ‘delation’ in Othello, 54-74, Shakespeare from the Margins 229-72; Shaw.
2. So “the state” slips seems to slip formulaically into the rhythm of an editorial gloss by Kittredge on the name Marcus Luccicos, whom Kittredge surmises is “[d]oubtless some foreigner in the service of the Venetian state” (16, n.1.3.44).
3. Unless otherwise stated, references to Shakespeare’s text are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). References to “the state” are not affected by the notorious variations between Folio and Quarto.
4. So, for example, we have Contareni’s account of Venice’s “great counsell”—the Duke’s voting powers on which Shakespeare has been said to have misrepresented—wherein “the shew of a popular estate” is seasoned, somehow, by just enough of “entermixture of the government of the nobility” to ensure a meritocracy, a salutary hybridity that draws the marginal gloss, “The commonwealth of Venice is neither a popular estate, nor an Olygarchy, but a wel tempered government betwenee both” (33-4).
5. Kenneth Muir (187) has detected resemblances between Lewkenor’s language and the language of the play in the Council Scene (.3), including the parallel between the modesty topos with which Othello prefaces his defense against Brabantio’s accusation (1.3. 81-2)
6. Vaughan (20-21) cites speculation, or as she dubs it, “wild surmise,” that the representation of the deliberations of the Venetian Senate in 1.3 could have had a topical significance and coincided with a visit by Venetian ambassadors to the English court around the time when Othello was first performed.
7. Indeed, as the play unfolds, Othello’s standing with “the state” continues to be, in modern bureaucratic parlance, “performance based,” but his “performance” is measured by criteria other than his military prowess, which, after all, becomes moot once nature intervenes to destroy the Turkish fleet. When Lodovico’s arrival in Cyprus triggers Othello’s outburst against Desdemona, Lodovico’s indignant question, “Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient” (4.1.264-5), suggests that “the state” reserves the right to define “sufficiency” by a number of criteria, including the decorum of one’s public behavior. When Lodovico rebukes Othello for striking Desdemona by invoking Venice as an arbiter, “this would not be believ’d in Venice” (4.1.242), “the state” emerges as much as an aesthetic and theatrical critic as a moral censor.

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CRITICISM


*Probes the Renaissance racial discourse that informs Shakespeare’s characters Othello and Aaron, the Moor in his drama Titus Andronicus, as exotic threats to the social order.*

Caro, Robert V. “Ignatian Discernment and the World of *Othello.*” *Cross Currents* 44, no. 3 (fall 1994): 332-44.

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*Surveys the reception of Othello in the Arab world through translation, interpretation, and literary adaptation.*

Hunt, Maurice. “Predestination and the Heresy of Merit in *Othello.*” *Comparative Drama* 30, no. 3 (fall 1996): 346-76.

*Explores Othello as a Christian morality play in which the traditional Catholic theology of free will and temptation clashes with the Reformed Protestant doctrine of predestination.*


*Collection of fourteen essays by various contributors on issues of theatrical, literary, or academic interest in regard to *Othello*, with a general emphasis on the racial aspects of Shakespeare's drama.*


*Comprised of twenty contemporary, interpretive essays on Othello from a range of scholars, preceded by a survey of critical, stage, and filmic interpretations of the drama by the volume editor.*
Othello (Vol. 89): Introduction

Othello

Othello (c. 1604) is one of Shakespeare's most revered and frequently performed tragedies. Its enduring appeal stems partly from its timeless subject matter—the possessive and jealous love of a husband for his wife. Set in Venice and Cyprus, the play recounts how the respected Venetian general Othello falls victim to the treachery of his ensign Iago. Recently wed, Othello's seemingly happy relationship with his wife Desdemona disintegrates due to the deceitful machinations of Iago, who convinces his commander that Desdemona has been having a sexual affair with his lieutenant Cassio. Othello quickly descends into a jealous rage and murders his innocent wife. After discovering that Iago's accusations were lies, Othello takes his own life. Scholars have identified the principal source of the story as Cinthio's Italian novella Hecatommithi (1565), which features in broad outline the characters and incidents that Shakespeare adapted into his tragic drama. Throughout the centuries, commentators have been drawn to the play's fascinating figures: Iago, the quintessential Shakespearean villain whose murky motivations for evil have remained elusive; Desdemona, a complex combination of feminine submissiveness and willful determination; and Othello, a tragic hero who transforms from a loving husband into a jealous killer.

Critics have frequently debated Othello's character and the degree to which he is responsible for his actions. In the opinion of some scholars, Othello possesses an essentially noble character, and his simple and trusting nature is exploited by Iago's ruthless actions. Others, including Leo Kirschbaum (1944), contend that Othello follows the traditional pattern of the tragic hero who comes to grief because of flaws within his character. According to Kirschbaum, Othello is “understandably human—but he is not greatly noble.” R. N. Hallstead (1968) also attributes the murder to Othello's flawed disposition. The critic emphasizes the Moor's “idolatrous love,” arguing that Othello's descent into uncontrollable rage results from the fact that he cannot reconcile his idealized image of Desdemona with her sexuality. Piotr Sadowski (2003) applies psychological theory to the actions of Othello and finds him to be a “static personality” who requires accepted rules to guide his life. According to Sadowski, when the accepted rules are thrown into doubt, such as when he perceives that Desdemona has been unfaithful, Othello experiences extreme turmoil. Sadowski notes that Othello, like most static figures, demands that his sense of justice be satisfied, and realizes this through Desdemona's murder. Critics are also interested in the ambiguous and despicable character of Iago. Hugh Macrae Richmond (see Further Reading) maintains that Iago is the central character of Othello and that his self-awareness is the key dramatic device in the play. Estelle W. Taylor (1977) examines Iago as the initiator of the play's central irony: that illusion is mistaken for reality. The critic notes that Iago himself becomes victimized by this misconception, as do most of the other characters in Othello.

Despite the popularity of the Othello, commentators have been frequently disappointed with the play in performance. The play's stage history documents that few Othellos have emerged critically unscathed, and
many prominent actors have been frustrated in their attempts to interpret the Moor's transition from noble commander to misled murderer. Geoffrey Bent (1998) analyzes the impact that different actors have had upon the play's meaning through their portrayals of Othello. Bent focuses on two motion-picture adaptations of Othello, from 1952 and 1995, and a filmed version of the 1964 National Theatre of Great Britain production. In his analysis of the three famed actors—Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, and Laurence Fishburne—Bent finds that Welles presented Othello as a sympathetic figure, Olivier played up the character's flaws and his race, and Fishburne oversimplified the general's complex emotions. Ray Fearon's portrayal of Othello in the 1999/2000 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Michael Attenborough received mixed reviews. Alastair Macaulay (2000) argues that although Fearon's performance as Othello was good, there was "no greatness about this Moor." Macaulay reserves his highest praise for Aidan McArdle's Roderigo, who "listens better than most actors speak, and he speaks with absolutely characterful naturalness." Similarly, Paul Taylor (see Further Reading) praises the production's energy but contends that Fearon was too young to be convincing in the role of Othello. Katherine Duncan-Jones (1999) also admires the liveliness and clarity of the staging, but finds the "assured and charismatic" performance of Fearon as Othello to be one of the highlights of the production.

Critics of Othello are particularly interested in the play's treatment of race. Martin Orkin (1987) considers attitudes toward race in England in the late 1500s and early 1600s and focuses on the way that Shakespeare treated the subject of race in Othello. Orkin concludes that the playwright opposed racism and argues that Shakespeare was "working consciously against the color prejudice" that is voiced by some characters in the play. A similar point is made by R. V. Young (2004), who claims that Othello "highlights the danger of racial categorization" by presenting a nonwhite protagonist who embodies both noble qualities and human vulnerability. In his 1987 essay, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy traces the transformation of Othello within the course of the play. The critic notes that although Othello begins as the antithesis of the stereotypical black characters presented on stage in the late 1500s and early 1600s, by the play's end Othello has tragically relapsed into "the stereotypical Moor." Michael C. Andrews (1973) examines the significance of the handkerchief in the play. Andrews is particularly interested in the different accounts that Othello gives of the handkerchief's origins, maintaining that the first account is true and that the second account is false. The critic contends that Othello changes his story in order to downplay his superstitious beliefs, which would have been viewed negatively by the Venetians. In her feminist interpretation of Othello, Lynda E. Boose (see Further Reading) focuses on the bedroom murder scene. According to Boose, Othello shares elements with pornographic literature, particularly in its emphasis on voyeuristic watching and the way in which Desdemona is silenced by erotic violence.

**Criticism: Character Studies: Leo Kirschbaum (essay date December 1944)**


*[In the following essay, Kirschbaum argues that many modern critics have misread Othello's character by viewing him as an essentially noble figure who is misled by others. Instead, Kirschbaum contends that Shakespeare intended Othello to be a tragically noble figure whose fate is attributable to his own character flaws.]*

Is the Othello of modern critics Shakespeare's Othello?

Here are three representative opinions. To Sir Edmund Chambers, Othello is “the simple open-hearted soldier,” “a gracious and doomed creature” who is an “easy victim.” For Kittredge, he is “an heroic and simple nature, putting full trust in two friends, both of whom betray him, the one in angry malice, the other by weakness and self-seeking.” Stoll sees him as a very noble dramatic puppet who evinces no psychological
consistency in his passage from love to sudden jealousy and who must fall because of the dramatic device that
every one trusts the villain: Iago is Othello's nemesis.

I do not think that this Othello is Shakespeare's Othello. I do not think that this is the Othello whom the
judicious reader or spectator or actor sees. I do not think that this is the Othello whom an Elizabethan
audience saw. Theodore Spencer is more cautious: “It is solely because Othello is the kind of man that he is
that a man like Iago can destroy him.” Yet what kind of man is the Moor? I think that Shakespeare gives the
answer partially by means of contrast within the play.

Consider the following speech of Iago to Roderigo in I, ii, when the latter says that it is not in his power to
control his love for Desdemona:

… 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills
are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme,
supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with
idleness or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our
wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the
blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions; but we
have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take
this that you call love to be a sect or scion.

Shakespeare, says Kittredge, uses Iago “for the utterance of great truths.” “Of all these the most remarkable is
his sublime assertion (to Roderigo) of the supremacy of will and reason in the cultivation of the moral
faculties. … That is a saying of which Hamlet himself might be proud, and to which the noble Brutus would
assent with enthusiasm.” Yet Iago's statement is simple Christian catechism. It is “the true doctrine” which is
uttered by Jack Cade in the Mirror for Magistrates. If this doctrine be noble, then the Othello of modern
critics is not noble, for they assert that he is not the maker of his own destiny: Iago is. But if we are going to
insist on understanding Elizabethan dramatic artifice, let us also insist on examining Othello according to the
traditional values which Shakespeare has injected implicitly and explicitly into the play. Actually by stressing
Othello's innocence, modern critics have robbed the character of what the Elizabethans considered man's
highest dignity—his own responsibility for his own life and character. Othello is less innocuous than modern
critics conceive him because he ultimately is responsible for his terrible fate. On the other hand, precisely
because of this responsibility, he possesses a stature as tragic protagonist which without this responsibility he
could not possess.

Modern critics exonerate Othello. The noble hero is not responsible for the catastrophe. It is the devil-man,
Iago, who is. But Othello is not the only noble character in the play who falls because of the wiles of Iago.
Cassio does too. But Cassio does not excuse himself of culpability. He, too, follows the doctrine laid down by
Iago above. Let us examine II, iii, 278-312. Knowing that he should not drink, Cassio has listened to the
tempter, Iago, has become drunk in consequence, has created a scene, and has been dismissed from office:

CAS.
I will rather sue to be despis'd than to deceive so good a commander with so slight, so drunken,
IAGO.

Why, but you are now well enough. How come you thus recovered?
CAS.
It hath pleas'd the devil drunkenness to give place to the devil wrath. One unperfectness shows me

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IAGO.

Come, you are too severe a moraler. As the time, the place, and the condition of this country stands, I could heartily wish this had not befallen; but since it is as it is, mend it for your own good.

CAS.

I will ask him for my place again; he shall tell me I am a drunkard! Had I as many mouth as Hydra, such an answer would ... man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast! O strange! Every inordinate cup is unbless'd and the ingredient is a devil.

Clearly Cassio considers that his succumbing to the devil was his own fault. He does not exonerate himself of responsibility for his own ruin. An Elizabethan audience would not have understood a dramatist who implied that the Devil was man's nemesis. Man had free will.

But, says Stoll constantly, the question of free will does not enter into the matter of Othello's believing Iago. It is a dramatic convention that Iago's mask is impenetrable. All the characters believe him to be honest. Hence, Othello must believe Iago's slander against Desdemona.

It is true that Shakespeare has artfully maintained the fiction of Iago's honesty among the dramatis personae. But Shakespeare is more artful than Stoll notes. There are three clean-cut occasions in the play when the characters do not believe Iago. And each of these occasions occurs when he suggests that Desdemona is unchaste! Or let us put the matter a different way. Iago tells four of the characters that Desdemona is unchaste—and the only one who believes this accusation is Othello! It may be stated categorically that, contrary to Stoll, Shakespeare has underlined the premise that Othello need not have believed Iago's imputations.

In II, i, after the arrival scene in Cyprus, Iago asserts to Roderigo that Desdemona is in love with Cassio (220-1) “With him? Why, 'tis not possible.” Iago persists (223-53): Cassio is “a pestilent complete knave, and the woman hath found him already.” But Roderigo answers, “I cannot believe that in her. She's full of most bless'd condition.” And when Iago points to seeming proof, “Dids't thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Dids't not mark that?”, Roderigo refuses to believe him: “Yes, that I did; but that was but courtesy.” The next scene but one (II, iii) is the scene of Cassio's downfall. But though Iago can tempt Cassio to drink, he cannot tempt him to disbelief in Desdemona's chastity:

CAS.

Welcome, Iago; we must to the watch.

IAGO.

Not this hour, Lieutenant; 'tis not yet ten o' th' clock. Our general cast us thus early for the

CAS.

She's a most exquisite lady.

IAGO.

And, I'll warrant her, full of game.

CAS.

Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.

IAGO.
What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.

CAS.

An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

IAGO.

And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

CAS.

She is indeed perfection.

IAGO.

Well, happiness to their sheets! Come, Lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine; and here without are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure to the health of black Othello.

And the very denouement of the play depends on one character’s having more faith in Desdemona than in Iago. When Emilia first hears that her own husband has said that Desdemona was unfaithful, she cries, “He lies to the heart” (V, ii, 156). Thus, by having Iago always believed except in the matter of Desdemona’s morality and believed in this matter only by Othello, Shakespeare is certainly using the dramatic device of contrast for a purpose. And what can this purpose be but to indicate that there is something in Othello’s character which leads him to believe Iago’s calumny concerning his wife?

But what is this something? T. S. Eliot has made an illuminating statement concerning Othello’s final great speech, “Soft you; a word or two before you go, etc.” (V, ii, 338-56):

What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is cheering himself up. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself. Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. I do not believe that any writer has ever exposed this bovarysme, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare.7

But Eliot could have gone much further. In this last scene there is much evidence that Othello refuses to look squarely at his crime. Fate was responsible: “But, O vain boast! Who can control his fate? ’tis not so now” (264-5). Or it was the stars: “O ill-starr’d wench!” (272). Or his motive was of the best: He is “An honourable murderer. … For nought I did in hate, but all in honour!” (294-5). Contrast this self-exculpation with the attitude of Cassio toward his fall which we discussed earlier. There is little doubt, I believe, that the Othello of the last scene is not quite so strong a character as critics have made him out to be.8 He is understandably human—but he is not greatly noble.

It is this, the refusal to face reality, this, the trait of self-idealization, which makes of Shakespeare’s Othello a psychologically consistent characterization and which explains why he falls so quickly into Iago’s trap, why he alone on Iago’s instigation believes Desdemona a strumpet.

Stoll maintains that Othello’s belief in Iago is not grounded in Othello’s psychology but is merely Shakespeare’s dramatic device. “And it is only … by means of a specious and unreal psychology that he is made incapable of distrusting the testimony which his nature forbids him to accept, to the point of distrusting
the testimony and character of those whom both his nature and their own forbid him to discredit.”

Accordingly, Stoll belabors those critics who have attempted to see Othello as a psychologically consistent character.

It is interesting to see the way Stoll reasons. Again and again, when in discussing characters he says that Shakespeare substitutes artifice for authentic psychology, it is always Stoll's own concept of psychology which is the criterion. It may be, indeed, that the “psychology” of the critics whom Stoll attacks is entirely false. It does not follow that the “psychology” which Stoll employs to disprove them is correct. It is possible that Shakespeare's knowledge of how certain human beings operate in given situations is better than Stoll's. One is very much inclined to believe this merely on *a priori* grounds when he reads the following sentence in the midst of Stoll's rebuttal of those who have tried to read Othello's character: “Psychology, like law, is common sense, though art itself need not be.”

No one who has any knowledge of the human heart and mind—whether he be a psychiatrist, or a psychologist, or a literary critic interested in determining to what extent art reflects life, or a spectator in the theater—will be inclined to agree with Stoll.

As a matter of fact, so irrational can human behavior be that in order to create probability the dramatist has to make his characters more consistent than people are in real life. It is a measure of Shakespeare's greatness that his probable characters are also possible characters. When Shakespeare created Othello, he was merely imitating a life that produces a Rousseau or a William Blake, romantic idealists who swing from overtrust to unjust suspicion in a twinkling. Emotional polarity is one of the commonest traits of humanity. We all have a touch of paranoia in us. To the extent that we acclaim our own greatness (*i.e.*, escape reality), to that extent do we suspect others. This is not common sense—but it is life. And Shakespeare imitates life. And the spectator reacts to this imitation not with technical knowledge but with awareness of human nature.

Othello from the beginning is too much of a romantic idealist—in regard to himself and others. He considers human nature superior to what it actually is. He overvalues Desdemona as much as he overvalues Iago—and himself. In IV, iii, Emilia discusses sex in blunt unromantic terms. And her husband tells Othello in III, iii, 138-141:

> But some uncleannly apprehensions
> Keep leets and law-days and in sessions sit
> With meditations lawful?

And even Desdemona in III, iv, 148, says: “Nay, we must think men are not gods.” But now listen to Othello when we see him and Desdemona together for the first time, when she has just pleaded to be allowed to go to Cyprus with him (I, iii, 261-79):

> Your voyces Lords: beseech you let her will,
> Haue a free way, I therefore beg it not
> To please the pallat of my appetite,
> Nor to comply with heate, the young affects
> In [me] defunct, and proper satisfaction,
> But to be free and bounteous of her mind,
> And heauen defend your good soules that you thinke
I will your serious and good businesse scant,
For she is with me;—no, when light-wing'd toyes,
And feather'd Cupid foyles with wanton dulnesse,
My speculativue and actiue instruments,
That my disports, corrupt and taint my businesse,
Let huswiues make a skellet of my Helme,
And all indigne and base aduersities,
Make head against my reputation.

DU.
Be it, as you shall priuately determine,
Either for stay or going, the affaires cry hast,
And speede must answer, you must hence to night,

DESD.
To night my Lord?
DU.
This night.

OTH.
With all my heart.

Note how carefully Shakespeare distinguishes between Desdemona's cry (This is their wedding night!) and Othello's almost inhuman, “With all my heart.”

Just as Othello flees from facing what he is in the last act, so too does he flee from what he is in the above speech in the first act. That which makes him psychologically consistent is his refusal to see himself as ordinarily human. The importance of I, iii, 261-75, in which Othello disclaims sexual feelings, is that it furnishes the spectator with the first clear indication that Othello considers himself above human passions. From that time on the spectator will watch for repetition of this dangerous self-delusion and evidence that indicates it is a delusion. The spectator will contrast the Platonic exhilaration of the “O my fair warrior!” passage (II, i, 185 ff.) with the sexuality of “Come, my dear love, etc.” (II, iii, 3-10). The spectator will be prepared for the outbreak of passion dissolving judgment in III, iii, by Othello's outburst toward the drunken Cassio in II, iii, 204-7:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule;
And passion, having my best judgment collied,
Assays to lead the way.
Here, for the first time, the god pose clearly dissolves. The spectator will observe self-delusion permeating the temptation scene (III, iii) in which Othello disclaims attitudes and emotions which he immediately exhibits. The spectator will see Othello holding on to his high opinion of himself in IV, i, 39-40: “Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus.” When Iago tells Othello that he must have patience or the former will consider him “all in all in spleen,” the spectator will hear Othello say, “I will be found most cunning in my patience” (IV, i, 88-91) though word and act deny him. The spectator will see grating sensuality and the god pose held concomittantly in V, ii, 13-22. The conjunction of “I’ll smell it on the tree” and self-justification is pretty ghastly. I quote Kittredge's note in his individual edition on lines 21-22: “This sorrow's heavenly … love”: “My sorrow is like that which God feels when he punishes the guilty: he loves the sinner, yet punishes the sin. Cf. Hebrews, xii, 6: ‘Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.’ Here again we see that Othello regards himself as the agent of divine justice. He strives to maintain this attitude of mind throughout the scene, but in vain.” In short the spectator will not, like Stoll, accept Othello's description of himself as “one not easily jealous” in V, ii, 345, as a trustworthy remark, for it comes from one who from the first has believed himself to be what actually he is not.

Othello's romantic idealism has made him overidealize himself and Desdemona from the first. And like other romantic idealists, his overtrust speedily shifts to undertrust on the first provocation. Careful readers of the temptation scene (III, iii) will observe how Othello cooperates with Iago, how Iago seems rather to make Othello see what corruption is within himself than to put something there which has not been there.

Paradoxically, Othello loves Desdemona so much that it is questionable whether in human terms he loves her at all. He loves not Desdemona but his image of her. (Shelley was such another.) To Othello, his wife is not a woman but the matrix of his universe. And to Othello he himself is not a man but a super-being without ordinary human emotions. I never read the Othello speech above without recalling Juliet’s passionate hymeneal, “Gallop apace, etc.” (III, ii, 1-31). Why does Iago say of Othello in relation to Desdemona (II, iii, 345-54)?

To win the Moor, were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
His soul is so enfettr'd to her love,
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function.

Othello, Iago is indicating here, keeps no proportion in his love. And there is no proportion in his fall. What makes of him a consistent character is a species of romantic idealism which soars, shatters, and partially recovers—which at no time. Shakespeare indicates by contrast, is ever to be taken on its own terms as modern critics tend to take it—which at no time, one can say, is completely equivalent with a nobility based on what the world is and not on what it is not.

Concerning this view, however, critics may say that I avoid the crucial descriptions of Othello by Iago:

The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are.
The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband.

Of course both these statements are choral. The first supports my analysis. It is a cynically realistic judgment of Othello's particular kind of nobility. What better definition of a romantic idealist can we find than that he is one “That thinks men honest that but seem to be so”—including himself? And the second statement is followed by lines which indicate that Othello can be made jealous “Even to madness.” There is no difficulty here in reconciling how Iago sees Othello and how the spectator sees him. The trouble is that critics tend to see him as he sees himself. Do we take other self-deluded characters on their own terms—Angelo, Romeo, Lear, Timon, Hotspur?

For Othello is not the only self-deluded character in Shakespeare's plays who thinks himself more ideal than actuality permits. Consider Romeo in his relationship with Rosaline. Remember what happens to Angelo in Measure for Measure. Of him, at the opening of the play, the Duke says (I, iii, 50-4):

Lord An

Stands at guard with envy, scarce confesses
That his blood flows, or that his appetite
Is more to bread than stone; hence shall we see,
If power change purpose, what our seemers be.

There is probably more likeness between Othello and Angelo than critics care to find. Doesn't Othello fail in the test too? And there is one other Shakespeare character who suddenly swings from the high pinnacle of an idealism which is not based on reality to a ghastly misanthropy which, also, is not based on reality. Of Timon of Athens, Apemantus says, “The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends” (IV, iii, 300-1). How apt these words are for Othello too! That an outwardly noble character could fall because of an inner flaw, Shakespeare had indicated by means of Proteus even in the early The Two Gentlemen of Verona. And what of the thrice-noble Macbeth?

In short, it seems to me that by means of Iago's soliloquies; by means of character contrast with the brutally clear-eyed Iago, the earthy Emilia, the self-honest Cassio (who, also, be it remembered, openly admits his relationship to Bianca); by means of action contrast in the rejoinders of Roderigo, Cassio, and Emilia to the proposal that Desdemona is unchaste; by means of Othello's own words in the first and second acts; by means of a carefully drawn Othello in the temptation scene who considers himself much stronger than he actually is; by means of sundry touches throughout which show Othello refusing to recognize his own passionate nature; by means of a broken Othello in the last act, who tries to hang on to his nobility by refusing to face the fact of his murder—by means of all this Shakespeare has shown us that his hero is not as strong or as good a man as he thinks he is, that the hero's flaw is his refusal to face the reality of his own nature. This Othello, who (I think) is the Othello Shakespeare intended to convey, is rather different from the modern Othello, who is always thoroughly noble—before, during, and after his downfall. The truly noble aspects of Othello I have not stressed. They are obvious. The blots on the scutcheon I have stressed, for critics have obscured them.

The Othello that Shakespeare presents is nobly tragic in the same sense in which Macbeth and Antony and Coriolanus and Lear are nobly tragic. Shakespeare's tragic protagonist is noble, but he is not altogether noble. He represents Aristotle's dictum:
A man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment, he being one of those who enjoy great reputation and prosperity. … The change in the hero’s fortunes must be … from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any depravity, but in some great error on his part; the man himself being either such as we have described, or better, not worse, than that.

(Poetics, Chapter 13)

It is not the hero’s nobility in Shakespeare's tragedies but the flaw, the sin or error that all flesh is heir to, that destroys him. It is the close interweaving of great man, mere man, and base man that makes of Othello the peculiarly powerful and mysterious figure he is. In him Shakespeare shows the possible greatness, the possible baseness not only closely allied in what is after all mere man but also so causally connected that one must perforce wonder and weep.

Notes

3. Art and Artifice in Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, 1933), pp. 6-55, 173-4, passim; Shakespeare and Other Masters (Harvard University Press, 1940), pp. 59-84, passim; “Source and Motive in Macbeth and Othello,” RES [Review of English Studies] 19 (1943), 25-32. The opinions of Stoll, Chambers, and Kittredge have been arbitrarily selected. Further examples of the same view can easily be found. For example, Dover Wilson says that “Iago's victim is blameless”; The Essential Shakespeare (New York and Cambridge, 1932), p. 120. For a most interesting consideration of Othello, far different from most, one which takes the Moor as a not totally assimilated black barbarian, see Mark Van Doren's Shakespeare (New York, 1939), pp. 225-37. To Van Doren, Othello “deserves his tragedy.”
7. “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca,” in Selected Essays: 1917-1932 (London, 1932), pp. 130-1. Though this viewpoint can be supported much more than Eliot supports it, as I indicate above, Stoll takes issue with it in Art and Artifice, pp. 173-4. “As I have shown elsewhere this is a self-descriptive method …: if taken as a bit of self-consciousness, it much troubles the noble and heroic impression.” The answer to this is, simply, that apparently Shakespeare did want this impression to be troubled. One cannot possibly take Othello on his own terms. Every single thing that he says about himself in III, iii, 177 ff., “Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy, etc.” is immediately disproved by the way he acts in the lines immediately succeeding.

Although Stoll constantly rebukes other critics for their “psychology,” in answering Eliot he does not hesitate to invent his own “psychology”: “And even as dramatic psychology—that is, such as does not press and peer behind drama and poetry—the speech is finely appropriate. After such an experience and such depths of despair Othello must, in sheer reaction and relapse, think a little well of himself. It is one of the glories of Shakespeare that … he recognizes the limits of human nature. …”

Then does Stoll agree with Eliot? The issue seems to be that the former sees the hero as thoroughly noble, the latter as imperfectly noble. However, Eliot also indicates the tension between these two viewpoints going on at one and the same time in the spectator, for Eliot himself is a spectator.
8. The final Othello is not a pretty sight to watch. Consider his whimpering (243-5 and 270-1), his refusal to be by himself (257-8), his uncontrolled screaming (277-82). I cannot see how Schücking
can write of Othello that “Shakespeare's intention ... was to create a hero who, for all his weakness in the matter of jealousy, never falls so low as to lose his dignity”; “The Baroque Character of the Elizabethan Tragic Hero,” Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy (1938), p. 27. Critics state—but do no more than state—that Othello at the end is a better man than he has been before; see A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London and New York, 1906), p. 198; R. W. Chambers, Man's Unconquerable Mind (London and Toronto, 1939), pp. 261, 303; E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's Last Plays (London, 1938), pp. 17, 21. G. Wilson Knight, “The Othello Music,” in The Wheel of Fire (Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 130, does not claim growth but does claim that during the last scene “Othello is a nobly tragic figure.”


10. Art and Artifice in Shakespeare, p. 17.

11. The underlying premise of the present paper is that expressed by W. W. Lawrence, “Artifice must always be sustained by a due proportion of nature, of psychological consistency.” “Hamlet's Sea Voyage,” PMLA 59 (1944). 69.

12. See Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 217-24, 245, 332-4. This is probably the best psychological discussion of Othello to be found. But Miss Bodkin is interested in much broader matters than I am.

13. I quote from the first quarto because folio omits Desdemona's question and the Duke's reply in 279. Modern texts differ, some following Q, some F.

14. Of this speech, Theodore Spencer (op. cit., pp. 127-8) writes: “His love for Desdemona is in keeping with such a character; entirely unlike the love of Troilus for Cressida, it has no sensuality in it. When he asks to be allowed to take Desdemona to Cyprus with him, he explicitly describes—in the terms of Elizabethan psychology—the exalted quality of his devotion: [Spencer quotes the speech.] Like Horatio, Othello appears to all the world as a man who is not passion's slave. His higher faculties, his 'speculative and offic’d instruments,' are apparently in complete control.”

Is Othello, then, displaying sensuality when in Cyprus, in II, iii, 8-10, he says to Desdemona:

The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;
That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.

Is Desdemona displaying “sensuality” when she cries, “Tonight, my lord?” Othello may play the noble stoic concerning marriage in I, iii. But he talks like a normal man concerning marriage in II, iii. And unless Shakespeare was extraordinarily careless, the two speeches were meant to contrast. In the first Othello indicates that he is above men; in the second, that he is a man. He is a good man in the second, an extraordinary man (if honest) in the first. But since the second contradicts the first, Othello is neither extraordinary nor honest. Certainly an audience feels if it does not see something wrong in the first. One function of Iago's filth in I, i, is certainly to indicate to the audience the sexual aspect of marriage.

15. Compare Othello's opinion of himself with Henry the Fifth's (HV, IV, i, 104-12):

For, though I speak it to you, I think the King is but a man, as I am. The violet smells to him as it does to me; the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet, when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing.

16. Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns, p. 222.

17. “My life upon her faith” (I, iii, 295). Iago's opinion (II, iii, 348-54), quoted above. “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul, etc.” (III, iii, 90-2). “If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself!” (III, iii.
278). “O, now for ever Farewell the tranquil mind! etc.” (III, iii, 347-57). The most notable expression of the total dependence of Othello on his image of Desdemona is in IV, ii, 47-64, “Had it pleas’d heaven, etc.” But these are explicit statements. His whole bearing toward Desdemona, especially in II, i, the arrival in Cyprus scene, implies this view of her.

18. Objective analysis of this relationship is supplied by Friar Laurence in II, iii, 64-82.


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Knock there, and ask you heart what it doth know
That's like my brother's fault. If it confess
A natural guiltiness such as is his,
Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
Against my brother's life.
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20. Since writing the above, I have read an important little book, Allardyce Nicoll's Studies in Shakespeare (Hogarth Lectures No. 3, London, 1931). Since students of Shakespeare tend to distrust—and rightly—any character interpretation that differs sharply from the traditional view, I am happy to record that Professor Nicoll (though he uses a different approach, less inductive and comparative than impressionistic) has come to the same conclusion as this paper presents—that Othello is a self-deceiving romantic idealist. Though he merely outlines rather than fills in in detail (as this paper attempts), yet our interpretations even to the use sometimes of the same passages coincide remarkably. But I do not think that Professor Nicoll sees Othello as in tension between conflicting inward forces: he tends to strip him bluntly of all nobility. I suppose I should say that when it comes to Desdemona and Iago, I accept the traditional interpretations rather than Nicoll's.

**Criticism: Character Studies: R. N. Hallstead (essay date spring 1968)**


[In the following essay, Hallstead examines Othello's “idolatrous love” for Desdemona and contends that Othello's descent into uncontrollable rage results from the fact that he cannot reconcile his idealized image of Desdemona with her sexuality.]

I

A critical appreciation of Othello should above all make clear that Othello is himself the tragic hero of the play. Critics since late in the seventeenth century have, however, found it difficult to achieve any such end. Either Iago, as anti-hero, emerges as the main character in the play, or Othello, as hero, is considered to be a ranting, murderous barbarian of limited intelligence. Any such errors, or variants of them, destroy the artistic integrity of the play and reduce one of Shakespeare's greatest accomplishments to a failure. Yet such errors almost inevitably result when the critic fails to see, however dimly, what the play is about.

Othello is the story of an idolatrous love which comes to an inevitable tragic end; the hero is a man of tragic stature who loved “not wisely but too well”. After the consummation of his marriage, Othello, as Iago points out and as he himself confesses, makes Desdemona the source of purpose, meaning, and value in his life. This is to say that he worships her, that she becomes his “god”.

1 But as Desdemona says, “We must think men are not gods”, for, as they are human, things of body, men and women fail those who worship them. But what is more important, as the play shows, is that if the idolatrous relationship is also sexual, the worshipper is betrayed by his own body, by his sensuousness. The reduction of the presentation of so large a theme as this to
a tale of mere jealousy has led to endless error and an understanding of the play usually little better than that of Thomas Rymer.

Idolatrous love is a not uncommon phenomenon, and everyone has met it, both in life and in literature. It occurs especially among young males. It is the contention of this paper that in a sense Othello’s idolatry bears some marks of the youthful naïveté that makes its occurrence frequent at that time of life. The phenomenon can be understood in a number of ways, but Shakespeare, not unnaturally, chose to understand it in terms of Christian psychology. That psychology provided him both an understanding of what happens to Othello and a method of organizing the tragedy. Moreover, the religious implications give the play a grandeur and universality which link it to Greek tragedy in terror and greatness.

Othello's worship comes to grief through sexuality, his own and Desdemona's. It is this which justifies the unpleasant, offensive treatment of sex in the first scene. In addition to its introduction of the plot, this scene serves as a reminder that sex is a part of every marriage, however elevated its nature. It is wrong, therefore, to attribute the view that man is an animal, as the words of Iago so clearly say he is, merely to the nasty-minded villain of the play. However dubious the authority of Iago is, the fact remains that man is an animal. His life may be said to be a struggle between his aspirations toward the divine, the transcendent, and the recurring awareness of his animality. Certainly this struggle is part of Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida, and Measure for Measure, plays probably written at about the same time as Othello. Shakespeare's concern with this matter has been called “sexual nausea”, though the term fails to take into account the divine element that Shakespeare clearly shows to be part of the sexual impulse. Iago, of course, does not recognize this element either, and treats sex in terms so offensive and so visual that they have troubled audiences and readers for as long as we have record of reactions to the play. The unpleasantness of Iago's speeches is justified only by the fact that his point of view is necessary if we are to understand what follows.

What follows immediately is the introduction of the “lascivious Moor”. Much has been made of the grandeur of Othello in the first act. We have had adequate discussion of Othello the great military figure in the tradition of Shakespeare's warrior heroes. We have, likewise, been offered the questionable Othello, whose speeches in scenes two and three of the first act can indubitably be shown to suggest “bombast circumstance / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war.” (Iago always speaks something of truth.) This romantic or “romantic” figure has been adequately treated by numerous critics. What is missing is a consideration of the sexual man, the “lascivious Moor”, the “old black ram”. It is precisely this last concept, which the playwright has given in the first scene, which should be brought forward as a measure of the man we meet.

The Othello of this act, incredible as it seems, is a man of virginal mind, of unsullied mind, one to which the implications of physical sexuality are quite unknown. To say this is to rouse a thousand doubts. The reader thinks at once of all the common associations of the military with sex, of the background of Othello, which would have been markedly lacking in sensitive respect for the female, and of the man's age. It will be shown, nevertheless, that only such an interpretation can make sense of the Othello of the first act.

Othello's first statement about his marriage is to Iago:

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

(I. ii. 24-28)²

The word gentle in this speech is one of the miracles of Shakespeare's poetry in this play. Because it may seem a strange word from a man looking forward to the consummation of his marriage, it is absolutely right;
it says precisely what the author wishes it to say; it eliminates effectively not only the charge of lasciviousness
but the presence even of the sensuality, the passion, that might be expected of a normal healthy male in such a
situation. For these it substitutes tenderness, one of the less frequently discussed attributes of mature love.
Herbert Marcuse speaks of “The love to the wife which is sensual as well as tender, aim-inhibited as well as
aim-attaining”. It is tenderness that characterizes Othello's attitude toward his love in this act. His statement,
“I loved her that she did pity them”, contains nothing of sensuality. Granting that “sympathized with”
expresses more exactly what Othello means, is this not an expression of an asexual anticipation of a shared
life? Such an interpretation makes comprehensible Othello's willing response to his appointment to Cyprus.

It throws even more light on his lengthy defense of Desdemona's plea that she accompany him:

Vouch with me heaven, I therefore beg it not,
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat—the young affects
In me defunct—and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
For she is with me. No, when light-wing'd toys
Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and officed instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation!

(I. iii. 261-274)

Our response to this remarkable speech is probably the sense of terror that Othello will be so little able to keep
his word, that it is hardly given before it is broken. Next we are struck, surely, by amazement at the naiveté of
the man. It is as if he were an inexperienced boy, as if he were virginal. In truth, Desdemona has been more
than “half the wooer” as far as sexuality is concerned. This is made unmistakably clear by her plea to
accompany Othello to Cyprus:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world.

(I. iii. 248-250)

and

... if I be left behind,

A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support
By his dear absence.

(I. iii. 255-259)

Yet in regard to Othello's sexuality, considering his background and experience, one may well ask whether it
is not the writer who is naive rather than Othello. It would, indeed, be rash to suggest that Othello is quite
without sexual experience. But that a man may have had sexual experience and still retain a kind of innocence
is made clear by what we know of Count Tolstoy's sexual attitudes. Aylmer Maude offers evidence of
Tolstoi's early sexual experiences, including one affair with a servant girl which led to her death. Yet Maude
is able to quote from Tolstoy's diary at a later date to show his “attitude toward a girl he thoroughly respected …”:

Love and religion are two pure and lofty feelings. I do not know what people call love. If it is what I have read and heard about, then I have never experienced it. I had formerly seen Zinaida when she was a pupil at the Institute. I liked her, but knew her only slightly. … I have now stayed a week in Kazan, and how pleasant it was. If I were asked why I stayed there, and what I found so pleasant, and why I was so happy, I should not say it was because I was in love. I did not know that. It seems to me that just that unconsciousness is the chief feature of love and forms its whole charm. How morally at ease I was at that time! I did not then feel this burden of mean passions that spoil all the pleasures of life. I did not utter a word of love, but I am sure that she knows my feelings and that if she loves me it is due only to the fact that she understood me. All the first impulses of the soul are pure and lofty. Actual life destroys their innocence and charm.⁴

That much of what Tolstoy says applies to Othello should be rather obvious. What has been referred to as Othello's virginal attitude is precisely covered by the phrase “morally at ease”; indeed the phrase illuminates that attitude. That “mean passions … spoil all the pleasure of life” is a partial description of the theme of the play. Othello is at this moment in the play involved in “the first impulses of the soul”. Actual life will destroy “their innocence and charm”. And this will happen only in part because of the machinations of Iago.

Equally enlightening is Maude's comment that this is Tolstoy's attitude toward a woman “he thoroughly respected”. Respect has been one of the elements of Othello's attitude toward Desdemona, was partly the reason that she was “half the wooer”. Western civilization, especially insofar as it is influenced by the Judaean-Christian tradition, attaches a sense of shame to sexuality which is often inhibitive. This is most frequently true of a relationship with one held in high respect. There is nothing in Othello's account of his wooing to suggest that it involves the slightest sexuality. It is, perhaps, a normal omission, but it may very well be a significant one. The inhibitive factor in the relationship may be conceived of as such that this stranger, this converted heathen in a Christian land, would be completely prevented from entertaining sexual ideas before marriage.⁵ Unless we hold the same view of life as Iago does, it will be difficult to imagine another attitude for Othello. His very ignorance of Venetian customs and ways of seeing things, which Iago later plays upon so successfully, would provide another restraint. It is unlikely that a man of Othello's character would risk, even in his mind, an offense against the sublime creature that he has in some incredible way managed to capture.

It is for a man with these unusual, but far from unique, sexual attitudes that Shakespeare has invented the strange device of the delayed marriage consummation. This matter of the delay can hardly be overemphasized. It is Shakespeare's own invention, being quite incompatible with anything in his source. So startling is Othello's reaction to his hasty dispatch to Cyprus that the audience and reader are surprised at Desdemona's calm acceptance of it. Furthermore, there is no practical necessity for the haste. Time, when sailing ships were involved, was not the desperate matter of minutes or hours that it is today. We must, therefore, seek for Shakespeare's intention for introducing the separation, which he has an obligation to make clear in the ensuing scenes.

The dialogue between Iago and Roderigo which closes the first act brings back the Iago focus with a new emphasis. The dreadful animal imagery of the first scene is absent. Lust and sensuality are spoken of in solely human terms. Against them are suggested the control of reason. It is interesting that many critics attribute to Shakespeare the acceptance of the power of reason and its place in life which they find in much of the thinking of his age, though how any one who has read King Lear can do so is something of a mystery. Here reason is offered to Roderigo, a great fool. Against the satiety of sex, the impulses of sensuality and lust, the only protection suggested for Desdemona is “sanctimony and a frail vow”. It will prove in the working out
that these *are* the only protection, and that the tragedy is the result of their failure.

The first scene at Cyprus is a masterpiece of careful writing. Shakespeare uses the dialogue here with a skill that is like that of the juggler who keeps many balls spinning in the air at once. The audience is interested, as the scene opens, in the consummation of the marriage. Or if it is not, the playwright arouses the interest. The arrival of Cassio provides an anticlimactic interruption to the suspense concerning the safety of the protagonists. The “divine Desdemona” that Cassio refers to in his first speech is the Desdemona that Othello created in the first act. She is unassailable, above the things of the body. But is this so? Only for Othello. Cassio reminds us that the truth of earth is gross and bodily. Othello is to come to “Make love's quick pants in Desdemona's arms”. The image is as graphic as if it were Iago's. Its juxtaposition with the word *divine* implies the theme of the play and the more interesting tension which will exist at a subdued level throughout the scene. The theme is further suggested by Cassio's reference to “Our great Captain's Captain”.

Desdemona's first words when she arrives are of inquiry for Othello's safety. Her role until his arrival is a compound of worry and eagerness. To Iago she says, “What wouldst thou write of me, if thou shouldstst praise me?” Does she not want, at least subconsciously, to hear, as she anxiously awaits her husband's arrival, that she is the most attractive of women? She is hardly woman if she does not. Iago's improvisations are outrageous. They should be offensive to Desdemona, but they do not seem to be. Their subject is sex. Even the praise of a good woman (surely meant to be applied to Desdemona) allows her to say “Now I may …”. The characterization is decorously if wittily handled, but virtue is brought to confront the fact of the body, to know its carnality. Desdemona is amused by the conclusion. She knows how far it is from the truth of her own life. The comment of Iago on the chat between Desdemona and Cassio which follows serves not only to advance his plotting but also to keep the sexual focus of the whole scene.

Othello's first words are “O my fair warrior!” Surely the word “warrior” here suggests not only Othello's account of his courtship but the minds of the hero and heroine in the first act. It reminds the audience that “she loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them.” It tells us that Desdemona is no “moth of peace”. At this level of interpretation it looks backward to the first act. But in its sexual implications, which can hardly be ignored in this context, it looks forward. The moment of encounter between these “warriors” is imminent. The same sexual implication must be attached to the word *die* in “If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy.” The Elizabethans were accustomed to this connotation of *die*, and would hardly have missed it in this context. But the structure of the scene is as significant as the language. Certainly on the arrival of their new Governor, Montano and other officials of the island have stepped forward to meet him. His disregard for protocol in speaking first to Desdemona amounts to a failure in his office. And a very serious one, in view of the situation in Cyprus. But only after a romantic interlude with his new bride does the great general turn to the officials of Cyprus to say, “News, friends! Our wars are done.” The officials of the besieged island do not, to Othello's knowledge, know anything of the present state of the war. Yet the General who has been so highly praised in both Venice and Cyprus sees no urgency in the news of the island's safety. The impropriety of Othello's conduct is so glaring that the general critical silence concerning it is amazing. To try to imagine a modern equivalent is impossible. Admittedly the scene can be staged so that nothing unnatural appears. But it should not be so. Shakespeare is carefully preparing for some of the most devastating scenes in English tragedy, and he is working toward them with care. The sexual emphasis in the whole scene is deliberately augmented by what amounts to gross neglect of duty on Othello's part. It is the first unimpeachable evidence that Othello will not, cannot, keep the vow made to the Senate when he furthered Desdemona's request that she be allowed to accompany him. It is meant to show that a great change has taken place in Othello, that his marriage will affect the General in ways he has not foreseen at all, that the marriage is, indeed, producing a new man. To emphasize this, Desdemona is again at once the center of Othello's attention, and he says himself, “O my sweet, / I prattle out of fashion, and I dote / In mine own comforts.” Could anything be clearer?
The dialogue between Iago and Roderigo which follows does more than advance the plot. It is an enlightening discussion of the sex question. Iago condemns lechery and lust, but what he means is not lechery and lust at all but sanctified love. He can see it as coming to nothing but satiation and the need for variety. The intensity of Desdemona's devotion is condemned: “Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor ...”. It was, indeed, with violence, as her whole action before the Senate attests; but it was that kind of violence which Shakespeare has commended in his presentation of such women as Juliet and Helena; it is a most desirable quality in human love. The glory of Desdemona is that “The wine she drinks is made of grapes”. She is utterly human, of the body, eagerly a woman. And she finds the control of this violence to lie not in reason, as Iago thinks it does, but in a “frail vow”. On her death bed her only argument for her life is that she has kept her vow.

If the sexual focus of the scene just discussed has been clear, it should come as no surprise that in the brief herald's scene a public proclamation is made that Othello will celebrate his nuptials. The playwright is determined that we shall have the marriage's consummation in mind, for Othello and Desdemona enter immediately, ostensibly so that Cassio can be assigned the watch, but more significantly so that the audience can be informed again of what is about to happen. That this is true is borne out by the precision of Othello's words and Iago's reference to the fact immediately upon Othello's departure. What we have then is: first, Cassio's very specific reference to the consummation of the marriage when he arrives in Venice; second, Othello's concern for Desdemona to the temporary neglect of duty; third, the herald's proclamation of what is to happen; fourth, Othello's reference to it; and finally, Iago's unseemly words about it, with the information that the bridal couple have retired early enough to cause notice. Such iteration can hardly be without purpose, and I hope to show that this purpose is to make clear to the audience that when Othello appears on the scene again, a very different man from the Othello of the first act, the cause of the change is the consummation of his marriage.

The interchange between Iago and Cassio about Desdemona is intended in part to advance the Desdemona-Cassio love-affair plot. But it serves also to illustrate the control of a sensual man. Cassio is certainly that. It seems possible that Shakespeare may originally have intended him to be happily married. Later the concept of the mistress must have seemed more dramatically viable. This sensual man displays, in talking to Iago of Desdemona, the restraints that society imposes on sensuality, the inhibitions which religion, law, and custom establish as proper. It cannot be said that reason has any part in his control in this interchange.

After such careful emphasis on the wedding night, Othello's reaction to its interruption should be significant; and it is. Granted that the whole brawl has been most carefully planned, that it is a very malicious scheme, that all Othello says of its barbarousness is true, yet the immediate discharge of Cassio is rash and misguided. It is the action of a new man. Critics have commended Othello's action as decisive, but how arbitrariness and haste can be so judged is hard to see. Judgment on the man is not a matter of the moment; the brawl has been stopped and peace restored. A further hearing in the morning is the obvious course of action. But Othello is disturbed, angered, and annoyed. He confesses:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion, having my best judgment collied,
Assays to lead the way.

(II. iii. 194-197)

Shakespeare carefully displayed the self-control of Othello in the encounter with Brabantio and before the Senate in order that we should at this moment recognize a new man. His lack of passion has been shown so that we might see how significant the appearance of passion in this scene is meant to be.
And the cause for it is made clear in one of the strangest figures of speech in any play of Shakespeare. Iago speaks of Cassio and Montano as:

Friends all but now, even now,
In quarter, and in terms like bride and groom
Devesting them for bed. ...  

(II. iii. 179-181)

Was there ever a more unlikely, a more outrageous figure of speech? Yet it serves its author very well in a triple purpose: it shows again the mind of Iago; it reminds the audience of the recent consummation of the marriage; and it acts as a goad to Othello's annoyance. The daring of it is justified by the way in which it fulfills its function. But to disregard it is to ignore a most careful and significant bit of writing. It is not an accident but a shrewdly conceived way of achieving a complex end.

When Desdemona enters, Shakespeare again writes with meticulous care:

Look if my gentle love be not raised up!
I'll make thee an example.

(II. iii. 240-241)

Surely we should add an exclamation point after the last sentence. The clear implication is that Cassio is therefore to be made an example. He has already been discharged forever. The speech is redundant unless it refers to the disturbance of Desdemona. If it does, and is read with proper force, it clarifies Shakespeare's intentions. And why should it ever be read differently?

Iago sees what has happened. To Cassio when they are alone, he says:

Our general's wife is now the general. I may say so in this respect, for that he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces.

(II. iii. 300-304)

He is saying that Othello's sensuality has led him to a madly excessive love for Desdemona. This is a very serious charge, but it is a true one. It is the fact which will inevitably lead to the tragedy. But Iago makes it a broader, more serious, charge in his soliloquy:

To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,  
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—  
His soul is so enfettered to her love  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetite shall play the god  
With his weak function.

(II. iii. 324-331)

This charge is also true. Its meaning is that Othello's love has become idolatry, and the consequences will affect the depth of his being, the whole of his life; as they do. The audience of Shakespeare's time were probably more theological than that of today. If they read at all, they certainly were. But even failing that, their knowledge of the religious persecutions of the times would make them view the renunciation of baptism with such alarm as this age can hardly imagine. The effect of the statement must have been so ominous that
Iago’s exclamation, “Divinity of hell!”, a moment later would have sent cold chills up the spine. Anything can happen now. The threat that Iago will “turn [Desdemona’s] virtue into pitch” will be taken as certain accomplishment. Indeed, the wiser will know that Othello has already accomplished it! Viewed in the fullness of these implications, the scene is one of Shakespeare’s greatest. It not only makes clear and understandable all that follows; it makes it certain. What is more, it puts the blame for subsequent events where it belongs, on Othello’s shoulders. But it does this without making him a strange and dangerous barbarian, an oversexed Oriental, or any other desperate creature such as puzzled critics have invented. It leaves him, instead, merely what each of us is: a human being whose body is in constant conflict with his higher aspirations. He is the unhappy, wonderful man of Hamlet’s soliloquy on Man. He is every man in the audience.

One of the wonders of this play is its structure. With only enough action to keep interest, Shakespeare has created two characters at a leisurely pace, and so created them that they win our admiration and love. Against them he has seemed to pose the threat of Iago’s malice. And it has seemed an adequate danger. Now it is clear that Othello is the danger. Iago was right; he is “an old black ram”. But he is so only in the sense that we all are. The implications are theological, existentialist, if you will, either within a Christian framework or in the broader (or different) framework of Greek tragedy. The working out must be in religious terms; no other method can be satisfactory.

II

All idolatry of a human being is doomed. It is doomed by carnality; not alone the carnality of the being who is worshipped, but equally, or even more, by the carnality of the worshipper. Desdemona is called divine, and assuredly she is very close to it; but Othello’s carnality can easily “turn her virtue into pitch”. It must be granted that she is a very satisfactory wife; the evidence throughout the play is more than adequate. But this is to say, among other things, that she is a satisfactory sexual partner. This is underlined by Iago’s remark, “Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor. …” As with so many of Iago’s remarks, this contains an important truth. It is a truth that can make the marriage successful but which can also wreck it.

The clear inference from Othello’s action during the brawl is that Desdemona’s sexuality came as a surprise to him and that it worked a profound change. His attitude of respect for this lovely creature has not prepared him at all for her carnality. It is at first a blessing unlooked for. But it also is the source of the greatest danger. It is to lead Othello to say:

That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites!

O curse of marriage,

(III. iii. 268-270)

Goddesses should not have appetites.8

If the preparation for the temptation scene has been more careful than is generally noticed, some aspects of the scene itself are treated with more skill and precision than have been acknowledged. Most of the problems that have been discovered in trying to understand Othello’s action disappear once the dialogue is read intelligently and it is granted that Shakespear knew exactly what he was doing. This will mean that Othello must be kept in the position of the central figure of the tragedy and too much must not be attributed to Iago’s machinations. The least satisfactory of all Othellos created by critics is Othello the dupe. The Moor must be accepted as the master of his own tragic destiny.

When Desdemona and Othello encounter each other at the beginning of the scene, she is at her most feminine. With the best of causes, the welfare of Cassio, she will test the power of her love over Othello. This power she
would have instinctively known as any woman would. Her teasing persistence in Cassio's cause has the
delightful charm of a woman on her honeymoon; and, with the superior knowledge of the audience, it is
frightening almost beyond endurance.

That Othello has enjoyed the sparring is evident from his remark on her departure: “Excellent wretch!” Could
it be bettered? But what he says further contains the central truth of the tragedy, though Othello does not know
it.

Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

(III. iii. 90-92)

Nowhere in any play of Shakespeare is there a more perfect, more painful, piece of dramatic irony. I quote a
dictionary definition of *perdition*: “Eternal damnation; the utter loss of a soul.” Even so! And Shakespeare's
audience would have known and felt this meaning as we do not today. To reduce the phrase to a mere playful
remark is to make the play a piece of hack work. The full implication is intended by the playwright. This is
clear from the precision of the rest of the speech, from the use of the word “chaos”.

Mircea Eliade says:

> Every existential crisis brings once again into question both the reality of the world and the
> presence of man in the world. The crisis is, indeed, “religious” because at the archaic levels of
culture, “being” is fused together with “holy.” For all primitive mankind, it is religious
> experience which lays the foundation of the World. It is ritual orientation, with the structure
> of sacred space which it reveals, that transforms “chaos” into “cosmos” and, therefore,
> renders human existence possible—prevents it, that is, from regression to the level of
> zoological existence.”

This observation by one of the foremost authorities on comparative religion might very well be taken as a
comment on the play. It makes clear the timelessness of truth and underscores the profundity of Shakespeare's
understanding of man. It makes clear why Othello had to be a Moor, an “erring barbarian”, why he descends
to the animal imagery of Iago in the torment that follows. The crisis that approaches is “existential”, and it is
“religious”. It must be dealt with in those terms.

Othello never ceases to love Desdemona. True, and insofar as he loves her, he retains possession of his soul.
But when he worships her, when she is exalted as a goddess and fails inevitably in her godliness, “chaos”
comes indeed. When he loves her, he can say:

> ’tis not to make me jealous
> To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
> Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well;
> Where virtue is, these are more virtuous. …

(III. iii. 183-186)

This is to accept Desdemona's humanity and to ask no more of her than that she be good in human terms.

But it is not enough. The body betrays by being body:

I had been happy if the general camp,
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body, 
So I had nothing known.

(III. iii. 345-347)

The concept outrages both the real Desdemona and the idol Othello has created. But Othello's anguish comes not from this imagining, but from his own carnal knowledge. This is implied in his question, "Why did I marry?" Marriage imparts the full knowledge of the body which he is not ready to cope with. It brings forward the tension between man's spiritual aspiration and the animal fact. For the idealizing temperament, like Othello and Hardy's Angel Clare, it is easier to love at a distance. The consummation of his marriage has enabled Othello to entertain in his imagination the vilest of Iago's slanders. They can achieve a reality in his mind that is unbearable, that makes Iago's account of Cassio's dream become "ocular proof" of Desdemona's guilt. It is Iago's function in the last three acts of the play to serve as the catalytic agent to hasten the dramatic working out of the fall of the idol. It is the service of this function that has caused the reality of his character to be questioned, that has caused him to be likened to the Vice of the old Morality Play.¹¹ The comparison is legitimate, for Othello is a Morality Play, contrived on so sophisticated and realistic a level that its essential nature is obscured. Beginning with the temptation scene and to the end, Iago serves the role of the Vice; and Othello's love, that of his Good Angel. The great irony of the play lies in the fact that by making an idol of Desdemona, Othello has made this love effective in opposite directions, alternately toward good and then toward evil.

The progress of the fall of his idol leads Othello through the successive renunciation of those forces which have given his life purpose and order. The end is the Chaos he foresaw.

The renunciation of the first source of order is so violent that it surprises Iago, who does not see the implications. After the "plumed troop" speech, he says, "Is't possible, my lord?" But the implications are made clear by the wording of the renunciation, "Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!" War and battle are hardly associated with tranquility or even very often with content. Yet here they are because for Othello his military career had long provided order and meaning to life:

For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith 
Till now some nine months wasted, they have used 
Their dearest action in the tented field.

(I. iii. 83-85)

Is it not clear from this, and from the many other references to his military career, that his soldiery has been Othello's religion, i.e., "that point of reference, external to himself, which serves the individual as both his criterion of truth and his standard of value"?¹² This "religion", which with his acceptance of Christianity and Desdemona's love, has become his "occupation", is the first to be lost of those forces which ordered his life. But the harrowing effect of this speech, certainly one of the most moving in the play, arises from its being the first step toward chaos. The pathos of the renunciation lies not so much in the sorrow of the backward look as in the horror it shows to lie ahead. Its force is further intensified in the audience's immediate realization of the fact that men have so often fled to war to escape the ravages of disappointed love.

Othello's Christianity is assumed rather than explicitly discussed in the play, and this has led to some critical confusion as to its validity and extent. One fact about it has been seriously neglected: this is that to Shakespeare's audience the marriage of a Christian white woman, especially one of so highly placed a family, would have contained not only the clear implication of a conversion but some cause for wonder about it. There are many persons still alive in the Anglo-Saxon world who, having lived outside the metropolitan centers, can recall the wonder and speculation that the appearance of a Chinese, Japanese, or Indian aroused, and will recall clearly that in the early years of the century this included religious speculation. How much
truer this certainly was in the seventeenth century. What is more, within the play itself there are frequent references, in the speeches both of Othello and of Iago to Othello, which assume Othello's Christianity. The restrictions on religious language and the discussion of religious matters on the stage confine the wording sometimes to an indefiniteness which makes it possible to miss the implication. However, the crucial statement of Iago, which points the direction of the play's development, suffers no such vagueness:

To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—
His soul is so enfettered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function.

(II. iii. 325-331)

This passage from Iago's soliloquy has been mentioned before because it is a key to the play's meaning. Iago has just previously told Cassio that “Our general's wife is now the General”, and this carefully extends the meaning of that statement. The redundancy of “all seals and symbols of redeemed sin” is conspicuous and significant. To it is added that “His soul is so enfetter'd to her love”, which could hardly be more specific in its meaning. Yet to make assurance sure, we are told that “her appetite shall play the god”. To Shakespeare we must grant at least the modicum of theology that is granted to every minor poet of the period. If we do grant it, this becomes a clear statement of idolatry, in terms of Christian theology. Othello's Christianity, whatever its specific character, is so closely linked to Venetian civilization that it is attacked by Iago's words about Venetian women:

I know our country disposition well:
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands. ...

(III. iii. 201-203)

As Iago has predicted, Othello renounces his baptism with his heathen vow, “by yond marble heaven”.13 It is the second renunciation in this scene, and it is emphasized by Iago's joining in the unholy rite. And Iago has been peculiarly perceptive in seeing the very course by which Othello would come to this destination. By reference to “her appetite” he has brought into focus Desdemona's sexuality as anything but a desirable quality in the marriage, but it must be clear that this very sexuality, especially insofar as it may be described as “appetite”, assures the failure of Othello's idolatry.

The third and final renunciation is prepared for with care. In the striking of Desdemona and the exclamation “Goats and monkeys!”, Othello's life is reduced to what Professor Eliade has called the “level of zoological existence”. What Othello has seen to be the public and unashamed exposure of Desdemona's carnality is the final turn of the knife; the renunciation follows inevitably.

The locus of the Brothel Scene must surely be the most private portion of Othello's quarters in the citadel, the temple of his idolatry. Thus the place of worship is transformed to a brothel, and the sanctity of the love is repudiated. Othello's long speech to Desdemona is the clear statement of what it is he renounces:

Had it pleased heaven
To try me with affliction, had they rain'd
All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steep'd me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience. But, alas, to make me
A fixed figure for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving finger at!
Yet could I bear that too; well, very well.
But there where I have garner'd up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence!

(IV. ii. 47-60)

Othello says first that this is no ordinary crisis, this loss of Desdemona, no matter such as physical suffering or the outrages of fortune, however great. Nor is it a matter of the public loss of honor, a thing of grave concern within the original ordering of Othello's life. The crisis is central, is religious. Are not the words “The fountain from which my current runs / Or else dries up …” meant to be a cautious but clear reference to Christ's words to the woman of Samaria: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John iv:14)? Does it not even suggest the reference to God as Him in Whom “we live, move, and have our being” (Acts xvii:28), a phrase from St. Paul's Mars Hill sermon against the idolatry of the Greeks? In any case, whether it prove an allusive statement or not, its essential religious character remains indisputable. To suggest that it may be so only by accident is to suggest that Shakespeare was writing carelessly at a crucial moment of one of his most carefully written tragedies. What the passage says is that Desdemona has been the object of idolatrous worship. Now that she has fallen, chaos must come. To make certain that no other interpretation be made, Othello is made to turn to Emilia in a moment and address her as:

You, mistress,
That have the office opposite to Saint Peter
And keep the gate of hell!

(IV. ii. 90-92)

This hell of which Othello speaks is, though he does not perceive it, not the chamber in which the action has taken place, but the hell within him, the chaos, which has “come”. With the fall of “god”, Othello is left without direction, purpose, or meaning. After the last renunciation, there is only chaos.

In the last act, Othello has become the servant of Satan as he moves with Iago toward the destruction of Cassio and Desdemona. Yet he recognizes this fact only at the last when he looks down at Iago's feet. Before that moment, all is clouded and confused. But he moves through confusion to a new ordering of his life. It is this confusion of mind that is expressed in the difficulty of the phrase “It is the cause. …” Othello cannot, at this moment, clearly define any purpose. “Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.” The word “betray” serves two meanings. It refers first to sexual betrayal. But more significantly it refers to the betrayal of Othello's idolatry.

The disclosure of meaning in this final scene proceeds in the most intricate pattern, through action, imagery, and direct statement. Often two opposing movements meet together in a paradoxical effect. Only the careful writing of the earlier part of the play makes it possible to move with any assurance through the maze of implication. It may, indeed, be the most carefully wrought of any scene in Shakespeare, and it is little wonder that critical discussion of it has often been sadly confused. The murder of Desdemona, for example, contains two opposed forces working together. It is, first of all, as Othello says a ritual murder:

... thou dost stone my heart,
And mak'st me call what I intend to do
A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.
This “sacrifice” is, of course, a ritual propitiation, a move to placate the forces which have brought chaos to life and to restore order:

For all primitive mankind, it is religious experience which lays the foundation of the World. It is ritual orientation, with the structures of sacred space which it reveals, that transforms “chaos” into “cosmos” and, therefore, renders human existence possible. …\(^{14}\)

Othello’s crisis is religious, and he seeks necessarily to reestablish order, to make life possible again. But his effort is unconsciously taking place simultaneously on a higher religious level. Of Desdemona he had earlier said:

Her name, that was as fresh  
As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black  
As mine own face.

(III. iii. 386-388)

This is to say that she became joined to those forces of evil which have throughout been symbolized by the Moor’s own blackness. But now she is “the light”; she is becoming again for him the force of good, which she has in actuality been throughout the play. As such a force, she comes near to averting the catastrophe of the play:

Have you pray’d tonight, Desdemona?  

(V. ii. 24)

I would not kill thy unprepared spirit.  
No, heaven forfend! I would not kill thy soul.  

(V. ii. 31-32)

The mood of these speeches produces that tension, which in the best tragedy provides a memorable moment. It is one of the great ironies of the play that Desdemona’s own innocent words when she hears of the supposed death of Cassio determine her fate.

Othello’s immediate reaction to the murder establishes its broad significance:

O, insupportable! O heavy hour!  
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse  
Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe  
Should yawn at alteration.  

(V. ii. 97-102)

This is true, not because she was Othello’s beloved wife, but because she represented the forces of good in the world of the play. Her murder can be made even momentarily bearable to Othello only if “She’s like a liar gone to burning hell!” Emilia will not allow him this comfort. She puts the matter in its true light, “O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!”

As the moral implications of the drama work out, Iago is brought in as the personification of the evil motives that have driven Othello, so that in the revelation of the truth Othello may come to a higher illumination.
total illumination comes when Iago is returned as prisoner: “I look down towards his feet—but that’s a fable.”
It is indeed a fable. The devil is no such real creature as the unsophisticated mind imagines; he is the “fable”
which represents those forces both within and without which lead a man to evil. His death is unnecessary,
would be superfluous, because at the level of real meaning he has no existence. By facing the truth, Othello
accepts responsibility for his own actions.\textsuperscript{15} He can now redeem himself only by taking his own life.

Othello's death must somehow reveal the proper resolution of this morality play without violating the
naturalistic framework in which it functions, and it does this by the most intricate organization that
Shakespeare has ever achieved in a short space. Two related patterns are made to work together to disclose the
meaning of the act. At the same time the language carefully provides dramatic retrospect; i.e., it suggests the
significant actions in the earlier scenes that lead to the final revelation of meaning.

The first pattern is that of the triple renunciation. “I have done the state some service, and they know’t.” This
refers, of course, to his soldiery, the first organizing element in his life, and the first renounced. It carries the
mind back to the first act of the play. The words echo his statement to Iago, “My services which I have done
the signiory / Shall out-tongue his complaints”, but it also suggests most effectively the story of his courtship.
Othello, however, recognizes that this is a matter of secondary importance: “No more of that”. The second
renunciation is covered by the phrase “a pearl richer than all his tribe”. The word \textit{pearl} obviously refers to
Desdemona, and it is a term most apt. But it also just as certainly refers to the “pearl of great price” of
Matthew xiii:46, which is the kingdom of heaven, i.e., his Christian faith, which he renounced when he took a
pagan oath. His third renunciation is obliterated as he dies “upon a kiss”, not the kiss of idolatry but of
sanctified love. It should be noted that this pattern works through the renunciations in the order in which they
occurred in the play.

The second pattern is the more significant one, and it clears away the confusion about the suicide speech
which has plagued critics such as T. S. Eliot.\textsuperscript{16} It is the pattern of the sacrament of Penance, which has started
earlier. Indeed, it may be said to be adumbrated at the beginning of the scene when Othello says to
Desdemona:

\begin{quote}
Have you pray'd tonight, Desdemona?
\end{quote}

(V. ii. 24)

and

\begin{quote}
If you bethink yourself of any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace,
Solicit for it straight.
\end{quote}

(V. ii. 26-28)

The concern shown in these speeches marks the return of Othello's Christianity, though it may be, as G. R.
Elliott says, “with formal belief but slight reality” (p. 241). One may well feel that this matter of the final
accounting with God will not have disappeared from Othello's mind when he approaches his own death so
short a time after.

As a matter of fact, with the approach of Othello's death, the whole form of the sacrament of Penance is
implied. The first step, contrition, occurs before the suicide speech. The Council of Trent had said:
“Contrition, which holds first place among the penitent's actions, is grief of soul and detestation of the sin
committed, together with the resolve not to sin again in the future. This process of contrition has been
necessary at all times for obtaining pardon from sin. …”\textsuperscript{17} Is not such “grief of soul and detestation of the sin
committed” clear in the lines

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.

(V. ii. 273-276)

and

Whip me, ye devil,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!

(V. ii. 278-281)

It can hardly be denied that this is the statement of contrition, though it still lacks the element of grace, which prepares the contrite to accept the forgiveness of God.

With these words fresh in their ears, Shakespeare's audience might well have been quite prepared for his confession seventy lines later, especially as the precise word “compt” has been mentioned. The confession consists of three parts. First, when he says he is “one that loved not wisely but too well”, he confesses to the idolatry of his love. Granting that the terms are not ecclesiastically precise, one must also grant that they express Othello's sin in the very terms of his commission of it. The rest of the confession is also couched in terms which may be described as experiential. His description of himself as “perplex'd in the extreme” refers to the chaos that results from his error. When he speaks of

... one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe ...,

(V. ii. 347-349)

he confesses at once to the murder of Desdemona and the renunciation of his Christian faith. The confession is complete.

Othello then speaks of himself as one

... whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their med'cinable gum. ...

(V. iii. 349-352)

The word “subdued” here is certainly meant to imply the true penitential state suggested by his weeping, but the most brilliant accomplishment of the whole speech is that the word “med'cinable” in the context suggests that the sinner now knows the grace of God's forgiveness.

The act of penance, or satisfaction, is the only possible one: Othello kills the “turban'd Turk”, the heathen that sin has made of him. No priestly absolution is possible either in the framework of the play or on the stage of
Shakespeare's day. But the pattern is completed: Othello dies “upon a kiss”, a kiss that is not only once more within the sanctity of marriage but which is placed upon the lips of Desdemona, who has forgiven the murder—even as Christ has.

It should be clear even from this brief study that Othello is one of Shakespeare's most carefully constructed plays. Its texture is an inexhaustible source of wonder. Yet so rich a texture may be partially self-defeating, since, so far as I am able to discover, no critic has noticed the pattern of penance, which makes clear the meaning of the end of the tragedy. The playwright can hardly be held responsible for the failure: he twice introduces penance before it is presented; and, when it is presented, it follows an exact and familiar pattern. Perhaps we have yet to learn to submit ourselves to the author's words and works more completely than we customarily do.

For the present reading it may be claimed that it shows the play to be the wonder of writing and construction that audiences and readers have always, at least unconsciously, felt it to be. The dramatist is shown to hold his theme in firm grasp and to make his statement concerning it quite unequivocally. He is shown to have written the play which perhaps he has been striving to write since the creation of Richard III, a morality play in a completely realistic framework.

Notes

3. Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization (New York: Random House, Inc., 1962), p. 69. For further discussion of this interpretation, see The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud (New York: Modern Library, 1938), “Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex”, Chap. III, passim. If one is reluctant to accept the Freudian interpretation, it still remains impossible to deny that mature love combines the contradictory elements of sensuality and a tenderness that may well be described as desexualized.
5. It is interesting that the Soviet film of Othello recognizes the religious implications of the marriage by opening with the wedding scene in a magnificent cathedral.
6. It seems clear to me that the word “dote” is used here in its primary meaning: “to act or talk foolishly or stupidly” (O.E.D.). No object is provided or implied for this verb here.
7. “The general will ‘Make … an example’ of his chief officer for causing, supposedly, a riot that has broken the post-nuptial slumbers of the general's wife!” G. R. Elliott, Flaming Minister (Duke U. P., 1953), p. 92. Although Elliott here recognizes the cause and quality of Othello's action and goes on to discuss his “confused emotional violence”, he does not recognize the broader implications of the incident.
8. “There is of course no reason for any ‘defence’ of [sic] ‘mitigation’ of Desdemona's nature. There is nothing wrong in her being human, unless one insists in earnest that Othello's wife should have been a saint. Why should she suppress her ‘appetito donnesco’? Cinthio disavows it in his heroine. Not so Shakespeare. He plainly wished to show—and he shows it plainly enough—that his Desdemona is not without that appetite. Of that, Othello must by now be aware; and it is that silent admission that in his wife there is perhaps really such ‘a will most rank’ that opens the door to his suspicion.” Richard Flatter, The Moor of Venice (London: William Heinemann, 1950), pp. 101-102. I think only Flatter calls attention to this departure from Shakespeare's source. His interpretation of Othello's character,
however, is a very sad misreading of the play.


11. For a detailed description of the development of the Vice into a real dramatic character, see Bernard Spivack, Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil (Columbia U. P., 1958).

12. Cherbonnier, p. 177.

13. Olivier’s Othello appeared after this was written. Of this Othello Robert Speaight says: “No one could be more secure in his universe until it falls about him. Olivier marks the transition memorably at the end of the jealousy scene when he throws away the crucifix hanging round his neck and relapses into the pagan chaos from which baptism had delivered him.” “Shakespeare in Britain”, SQ [Shakespeare Quarterly], XV (1964), 379.


15. Shakespeare never makes the mistake of reducing the play to a mere allegory. In this scene, as throughout, even as the moral significance is revealed, the action proceeds on a naturalistic level. The tensions between symbolic and naturalistic levels in the play are often very intricate.


Criticism: Character Studies: Estelle W. Taylor (essay date December 1977)


[In the following essay, Taylor examines Iago as the initiator of the play’s central irony: that illusion is mistaken for reality. The critic notes that Iago himself becomes victimized by this misconception, as do most of the other characters in Othello.]

Shakespeare rivals the Greek playwrights in the extent to which he is able to show man grappling with, trying to understand or capitalize on, conquer or evade the ironies of life. He was endowed with the genius to use with the greatest effectiveness, especially in the tragedies of Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Macbeth, combinations of ironic devices: dramatic irony, irony of expression, irony of situation. What is so striking, however, what makes each of these tragedies “work” century after century, for a variety of actors and audiences, is the forceful manner in which he succeeds in revealing the very souls of his characters pitted against the greatest irony of all: man's tendency, almost child-like helplessness, willingness and need to accept shadow for substance, illusion for reality. Through his genius Shakespeare convinces us that often man destroys himself and others by accepting for a fact or a reality that which is only an imitation, that which insinuates itself for the passing moment upon the mind. In this respect, then, Shakespeare succeeds in elevating irony to more than just a literary device. It becomes a force, a substantive element of life to be dealt with in much the same manner as any other elemental drive, with the rational mind rather than the emotions. Thus, both viewing and reading audiences that themselves are no less susceptible to this force, nevertheless marvel that men, Shakespeare’s “heroes,” innately good and in almost all things else preeminently or reasonably wise, can succumb to that which to even the ordinary man is so obviously unreal. While the heroes or anti-heroes fall from glory, respectability, or power because for the moment they confuse shadow for substance, appearance for reality, or because they become trapped while luring others into this confusion, the Shakespeare audience is expected to be ever-mindful of the world of reality and substance. Perhaps, the very essence of Shakespeare's genius is that he pays his audiences this singular compliment of expecting them to be wiser or at least to believe themselves wiser than the characters presented. This interaction—this rational link—that the author establishes between the audience and the dramatic action is the Shakespearian twist, his
special use of dramatic irony. Depending, therefore, upon the degree of wisdom and experience that particular audiences bring to the drama, an Othello or a Macbeth, a Hamlet or a Lear will emerge as either a stupid, bungling, unbelievable fool or a pitiable, understandable tragic figure trapped and overcome by some powerful irony.

One of the mature tragedies in which Shakespeare makes effective use of the ironic equation, that is, the fusion and confusion of shadow and substance, appearance and reality to the outer and inner eye of each of the major characters, is Othello, the Moor of Venice. The agent or tool through whom he achieves this literary feat is Iago, from whom the meaningful actions in the drama emanate and around whom they revolve. Iago from the very start of the dramatic action becomes not only the representative, the symbol and embodiment of the dualism or the ironic equation, but also the real active controlling force that will motivate the other major characters or character types—including Othello, the hero—and determine the extent to which, and even the manner in which, each of them in turn will be so manipulated or, in modern terminology, so brainwashed or programmed as to be literally “fascinated” into accepting shadow for substance, appearance for reality. Thus, every other character in Othello becomes a foil to Iago.

In Act I Shakespeare carefully establishes the multi-dimensional patterns or levels through which will emerge the ironic equation on which all dramatic elements in Othello will be fashioned. First of all, he involves his audience on both an emotional and intellectual level to reveal the various facets in the personality of the controlling element in the play—Iago. After all, the success of this drama and the successful working out of the ironic equation will depend on the extent to which the audience fulfill the literary contract or partnership with the author of remaining in the world of reality and keeping their heads while one by one the characters in the play are losing theirs. Thus, from the start Shakespeare makes use of special words, special character types, and special situations to reveal Iago to the audience for what he really is and to dispel any tendencies toward misplaced sympathy for, empathy with, or misunderstanding of his true intentions and nature. Therefore, in Act I, the clarifying and expository act, Iago emerges on one level as a real flesh and blood character who has been forced by circumstances to grapple with a human problem, a reality. He is twenty-eight years old, “four times seven years,” he tells Roderigo (I.ii. 312). It is a fact that he, the professional soldier, the successful practitioner in matters pertaining to battle and the battlefield has, at this ripe age, been overlooked for promotion in favor of Cassio, one whom he considers not only his professional inferior, a mere military theoretician and technician, but also an “outsider,” a Florentine. In his revelatory conversation with Roderigo, Iago compares his own worth as a soldier with that of Cassio (I. i. 26-33):

—mere prattle without practice
Is all his soldiership. But, he, sir, had the election.
And I, of whom his eyes [Othello's] had seen the proof
At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds
Christian and heathen, must be beled and calmed
By debitor and creditor. This countercaster,
He, in good time, must his Lieutenant be,
And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship's Ancient.

On this level, Iago's hurt pride, his resentment, jealousy, and even considerable anger are human reactions that a rational audience can understand, even relate to. It is obvious that the kind of anger that consumes Iago is that which Aristotle understood so well and defined so analytically more than 2,000 years ago in these lines from the Rhetoric:

… an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends. … It must always be attended by a certain pleasure—that which arises from the expectancy of revenge.
In the very first scenes of the play, the audience learns from Iago's words and deeds that he considers Othello's preferment of Cassio a “conspicuous slight.” He himself cannot justify it, especially when he compares his experiences with that of Cassio. “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place,” he tells Roderigo in the initial dialogue (I. i. 11). In addition, he recalls that even suits, special pleas, in his behalf from three outstanding Venetian citizens had been ignored out of hand by Othello. Yet, Othello demonstrates in other ways early in the play that he does value the worth of the man: He seeks his counsel (I. ii.); he entrusts his bride, Desdemona, to his care during the voyage to Cyprus; he praises him for his “honesty” and “Trust” (I. iii. 285); and later in the play, after Cassio's drunken brawl in Cyprus, he elevates him to that very position of lieutenant which he had formerly denied him in favor of Cassio. There is no doubt that what consumes and sustains Iago from the start of the play is the desire for, as well as the expectation of, revenge. Equally clear to the audience is that no real, organized plan has yet been formulated by Iago. Shakespeare allows only the audience to witness and understand the progressive phases through which Iago moves toward the fulfillment of his revenge and the circumstances that propel him inevitably toward his own self-destruction. For example, at the end of Act I he invites the aid of the powers of evil in much the same manner of a Dr. Faustus:

I have't! It is engendered! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

Again at the end of scene ii, Act II, Iago confesses to the audience that he has not yet worked out the plan for revenge, that it is still a torment of his mind:

'Tis here, but yet confused.
Knavery's plain face is never seen till used.

It is not until the last scene in Act II that a definite scheme and plan of action take firm shape in Iago's mind. The audience is privy in scene 3 (ll. 342-367) to the plan by which Iago will capitalize on the innocence and goodness of Desdemona to avenge himself. Calling his scheme the “Divinity of hell” (l. 356), he revels in the thought that the more earnestly Desdemona petitions Othello in behalf of Cassio, the more suspicious of her motives her husband will become:

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

(II. 365-367)

Thus, by the time we meet Iago he is no longer operating on the “human” level. He has lost the human capacity for understanding, compassion, concern for others, forgiveness. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of all in Othello is the extent to which Iago is unaware of the extent to which he himself has accepted as equals that which seems—appearances and shadows—and that which is—substance and reality. For all his talk to Roderigo about the compensatory “scale of reason to poise another of sensuality” (I. iii. 331) and the power of “reason to cool our raging motions” (I. iii. 333-334), he has adapted his mind to accept as realities and added incentives for revenge the suspicions that both Cassio and Othello have cuckolded him. In the soliloquy at the end of Act I, for example, he reveals his suspicions of Othello:

I know not if't be true,
But I for mere suspicion in that kind
Will do as if for surety.

By Act II his suspicion has become not only a greater reality lodged in his mind but also a more obsessive motive for revenge:

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor.
Hath leaped into my seat, the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards.
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife.
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure.

(ll. 304-311)

Then, almost as an afterthought (l. 316) the diseased mind of Iago rationalizes a motive for including Cassio in the grand scheme of revenge: “For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too. …”

In Iago the normal emotion of anger has already turned to rancor, to an all-consuming, unbridled, indiscriminate passion. His choice of words in dialogues with Roderigo and Brabantio, the father of Desdemona, certainly further substantiates this assessment of his emotional state. In urging Roderigo to rouse the ire of Brabantio against Othello, Iago links together this series of explosive imperatives (I. i. 67-69; 71):

Call up her father.
Rouse him. Make after him, poison his delight,
Proclaim him in the streets. Incense her kinsman …
Plague him with flies. …

(Italics are mine.)

Then, he himself appeals to the racial and class prejudice of Brabantio:

... For shame, put on your gown,
...... Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe, Arise, arise …

Later in the soliloquy following the stirring up of Brabantio in which he reviews his status (I. ii. 155), Iago reveals the venom he feels toward Othello: “… I do hate him as I do Hell pains. …” In conversation with Roderigo (I. iii. 371) and again in the soliloquy that closes Act I, he repeats the words “I hate the Moor” (iii. 39). In fact, the rage and the desire for revenge in Iago have become so excessive, obsessive, and erratic a driving force within his brain and his being that from the beginning of the action he is too repulsive for the audience outside the drama to accept as a sympathetic figure. Thus, from the start of the drama Shakespeare carefully exposes the inner rage of Iago, his wide-ranging capacity for evil and destruction of others, to his audience through a number of techniques and patterns so that the ironic equation—appearances equal reality, shadow equals substance—becomes not only the powerful literary device but also the substantive force on which the drama will be built and around which all action will revolve. To this end, then, Shakespeare introduces to us in Iago a character who represents a “real” personality who through circumstances has been transformed into an illusion—the embodiment and symbol of the dissembler, one who is in reality the shadow of evil, in appearance the representative of honor.

The most significant self-revelatory lines spoken by Iago occur in the first scene of Act I, as he performs the all-important task of allaying the doubts and fears of his dupe Roderigo and of programming his mind to accept fully the idea that it is to their mutual advantage to be “conjunctive in our revenge against him” [Othello] (I. iii. 372-373):

Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.
In following him, I follow but myself.
... I am not what I am.
If the drama is to “work” through the ironic equation and through combinations of irony, the sinister implications of this confession, as well as the possibility of the multiple levels of meaning and interpretation inherent in it, must be obvious from the start of the play to a sophisticated audience.

These words of Iago provide the initial clue to our understanding the nature of the relationships that will exist between him and every other active character in the drama. Reminiscent of those enigmatic words of the witches, which lull Macbeth into complacency, they are the key to our understanding in particular the basis of Iago's success in completely duping and brainwashing not only the foolish Roderigo but also every other character of consequence in the drama into accepting him on his terms for what he appears to be. The words “I am not what I am” are also the key to our understanding the basis of Iago's power to work his will on the major characters in such a way as to entice them into unwittingly accepting the “illusion” of others, that is, seeing in other characters whatever he wishes them to see. Indeed, these significant words provide an insight into, a foreshadowing of, Iago's singular ability and power to determine what psychological approach or appeal to make—words or twist of words to use—to woo each of his victims to self-destruction or the destruction of others. Thus, Shakespeare more than adequately prepares us to watch with fascination and fear the manner in which Iago makes use of the pious pronouncement that “Men should be what they seem, / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!” (III. iii. 126-127) to begin the brainwashing process and the path to destruction of Othello and to fulfill the commitment he makes to himself and the audience at the close of Act II, scene ii:

I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,  
Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb—  
For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too—  
Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me  
For making him egregiously an ass  
And practicing upon his peace and quiet  
Even to madness.

Even at the end, after the destruction has been wrought, after Iago has made the ironic equation work for himself, a stunned Othello still seeks an explanation of what has happened to him in this final request of Cassio:

Will you, I pray, demand that demidevil  
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

(V. ii. 301-302)

We understand and sympathize with the Othello who utters these words which represent, all-too-late, a partial return to reality in a way that we cannot sympathize with the Roderigo, who upon realizing the treachery of Iago, condemns him with the words “Oh, damned Iago! Oh, inhuman dog!” (V. i. 6).

Iago's pronouncement that “I am not what I am” serves, then, a number of valuable dramatic functions. First among them is that it prepares us for the important multi-level dramatic roles of Roderigo. He is within the drama an audience-confidant for Iago, as well as an active confederate, the equivalent of the present-day “hit” man or “enforcer.” Roderigo is privy to words and confessions that a major character—especially the villain—usually shares only with the audience outside the play by means of soliloquies or asides. Thus, Roderigo is the “sample” through whom Shakespeare lets us experience the cunning, the evil, and the manipulative power over others that Iago possesses. Dull of wit, no match for Iago, as is no other character in the play, Roderigo hears the same words that the audience outside the play hears, but ironically he only partially understands the significance of Iago's telling confession that he is not what he is. The implication that
Iago is not what he is and that he is not what he seems to be even to Roderigo leaves its full sinister impact on
the audience well before Iago confides in the soliloquy that closes Act I (ll. 389-392) his utter scorn for
Roderigo, his dupe and his tool, through whom he plans to implement his acts of revenge:

Thus I do ever make my fool my purse,  
For I mine own gained knowledge should profane  
If I would time expend with such a snipe  
But for my sport and profit.

How closely these words resemble later lines (IV. i. 45) of self-satisfaction after he has deluded the virtuous
Othello into believing he has been cuckolded by Cassio!:

Work on  
My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught,  
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,  
All guiltless, meet reproach.

Thus, Iago's confession that he is not what he seems to be brings sharply into focus throughout the drama the
impression he has already made, as well as the impression he will be capable of making, on the other
characters whose lives he will destroy, attempt to destroy, or change in some substantial way. Shakespeare
wastes little time, then, in letting his audience see that just as Iago has beguiled the unprincipled Roderigo into
trusting him to be a loyal partner in evil, he has also beguiled or will beguile each of the other virtuous or
fundamentally decent characters into believing him to be a loyal and honest partner in working the good.
Immediately following the scenes in which Iago plots against and vilifies Othello, the Moor commends his
ancient to the Duke of Venice with these words: “A man he is of honesty and trust” (I. iii. 285). From this
point on Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona in turn establish a pattern of making the name of the villainous Iago
a synonym for—a personification and symbol of—the virtue of honor or honesty. In the first act Othello, for
example, commends his bride into the ancient's care with the words “Honest Iago, / My Desdemona must I
leave to thee” (iii. 295-296). In the final act (ii. 148-150; 154), he tells a distraught, disbelieving Emilia that
through her husband Iago he has learned of Desdemona's “infidelity”:

Ay, 'twas he that told me first.  
An honest man he is, and hates the slime  
That sticks on filthy deeds.  
.....My friend, thy husband, honest, honest Iago.

To add to the irony and to strengthen the focus on the force of illusion that pervades Othello, Shakespeare has
Iago cynically refer to himself repeatedly as “honest.” Just a few outstanding examples follow. In an aside (II.
i. 202-204), he says of the happy couple Othello and Desdemona, “Oh, you are well tuned now, / But I'll set
down the pegs that make this music, / As honest as I am.” He pacifies Cassio, whose reputation and favor with
Othello he has just succeeded in destroying through a drunken brawl he has initiated, with a brazen statement:
“As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some bodily wound” (III. iii. 266-267). Using skillfully
the power of suggestion and the “tricks of custom” (III. iii. 122) of the “false disloyal knave” (III. iii. 121) to
condition and poison the mind of Othello against both Cassio and Desdemona, he resorts to the use of
histrionics and feigns the injured pride of an honorable man:

O wretched fool,  
That livest to make thine honesty a vice!  
O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O world,  
To be direct and honest is not safe.

(III.iii. 375-378)
Then, in a later act (IV. i. 288-291), he condemns Othello to Lodovico, a kinsman of Desdemona, without seeming to condemn—or to wish to condemn—him:

Alas, alas!
It is not honesty in me to speak
What I have seen and known. You shall observe him,
And his own courses will denote him so
That I may save my speech.

(IV.i. 288-291)

Indeed, the unifying element in Shakespeare's Othello is that of the power of illusion, of what seems rather than what is, to determine the thoughts and actions of each of the major characters. Through Iago, the major central figure, a representation and symbol of illusion, the audience learns that one of the great ironies of life is that often man destroys himself and others by accepting for a fact or a reality that which is only an imitation, that which insinuates itself for the passing moment upon the mind.

Notes

1. Citations from Shakespeare in my text are to Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. by G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. [Cop. 1952]).

Criticism: Character Studies: Anthony Gerard Barthelemy (essay date 1987)


[In the following essay, originally published in 1987, Barthelemy traces the transformation of Othello within the course of the play. The critic notes that although Othello begins as the antithesis of the stereotypical black characters presented on stage in the late 1500s and early 1600s, by the play's end Othello has tragically relapsed into “the stereotypical Moor.”]

I kiss the instrument of their pleasures.

—William Shakespeare, Othello

During the seventeenth century, a few black characters appeared on the stage who, against their nature and kind, demonstrated that virtue stood not completely out of their reach. However, like their female counterparts, these virtuous few are clearly derived from the more commonly represented stereotype of the villainous Moor and are, more accurately, versions of that type rather than absolute departures from it. By demonstrating virtue, these few honest Moors offer further validation of the more common, harmful, and denigrating representations of black Moors because they prove that it is possible to resist the call of evil, though most unusual.

The earliest nonvillainous Moors to appear on the stage were Morocco in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice (1596) and Porus in Chapman's The Blind Beggar of Alexandria (1596).¹ Morocco, by far the more interesting of the two, comes to Belmont to participate in the lottery for Portia's hand. In the two brief scenes in which he appears, he evokes from the play's heroine only ironic contempt. Her relief at the departure of the
vanquished suitor reveals her disdain for him: “A gentle riddance / Let all of his complexion choose me so” (II, vii, 78-79). Perhaps Portia means more than skin color by “complexion” here, yet because Morocco is identified as a “Tawny Moor,” her choice of words intends to call some attention to his color. But more than Morocco's complexion casts an unfavorable light on him. His long speech before the caskets undermines any dignity he may have possessed, and his choice of the wrong casket proves him foolish. Morocco also presents an obvious and unwelcome sexual threat to Portia, and he makes known his desire for her before he chooses:

“Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.”
Why that's the lady! All the world desires her;
From the four corners of the earth they came
To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint.

(II, vii, 37-40)

Only by leaving immediately and quietly does Morocco maintain any honor or dignity, as his earlier professions of valor are forgotten by the relieved mistress of Belmont.

Porus, the King of Ethiopia, fares better in love than does Morocco, but the circumstances surrounding his triumph with the Lady Elimine deny him a totally honorable victory. Present only in the last scene of The Blind Beggar, Porus comes to offer obeisance and tribute to his conqueror, Cleanthes. While there, the humbled Porus sees Elimine, who has come to plead for assistance from Cleanthes. She and her child have been deserted by Count Hermes, who, unknown to Elimine, is really Cleanthes disguised. Porus proclaims his love for Elimine as does the defeated King of Bebritia, Bebritius. Allowed by Cleanthes to choose a spouse from among the several defeated kings, Elimine chooses Porus. She chooses him, however, not out of love but to highlight her perverse fortunes: “In my eye, now, the blackest is the fairest, / For every woman chooseth the white and red. / Come, martial Porus, thou shalt have my love.”

Elimine invokes here the paradoxical “Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” and by choosing with this in mind, she expresses both her expectations and her hopes. She expects Porus to be foul; she only hopes that he proves to be fair. Bebritius, angered by his rejection, reminds Elimine of the traditional and, of course, seemingly more reasonable expectation: “Out on thee, foolish woman, thou hast chose a devil” (x, 164). By focusing on the risks involved in marrying a black man, both Elimine and Bebritius do much to disparage further the already humbled Porus, who cannot escape the traditional prejudice toward blackness and black men. However, because the play ends just fifteen lines after Elimine chooses, we have no way of knowing if she chooses wisely when she ignores the widely known risks.

Bebritius' comment, though, points out how every representation of a black person necessarily remains colored by his blackness. The conqueror Cleanthes may freely allow the vanquished Porus to marry a cast-off, former mistress; however, the conquered and again defeated Bebritius sees the danger. Portia too sees the danger, but she luckily escapes. It is important to note that in both these plays the danger is sexual and consequently social. Neither Morocco nor Porus commits any crime other than seeking to marry a white woman, but it is this ambition that brings down upon them racial abuse. No matter how innocent or noble, black men, once they attempt to involve themselves sexually with white women, become personae non gratae in the community. And we see in the similarity between these two minor characters how closely related vilification and villainy are to the fear raised by incursions into the community.

It is such an incursion by the valiant Moor Othello that first alarms Venice and later provides Iago with an exploitable situation on which to build his diabolic plot. It is this same sexual relationship that ultimately leads to Othello's and Desdemona's undoing. However, in Othello (1604), Shakespeare manipulates the stereotype of the Moor and, consequently, the expectations of the audience. In so doing, he animated for the stage possibly the most popular and important representation of a black man until the twentieth century. On
the most obvious level, Shakespeare reassigns roles in what could be a rather conventional secular psychomachia. Rather than playing the villain, a role that should be Othello's by dramatic convention and popular tradition alike, the valiant Moor becomes the center of the psychomachia struggle between good and evil. Shakespeare alters things further by redistributing in a somewhat startling manner various aspects of the stereotypical Moor among the principal characters, each in some way becoming what Othello alone ought to be. The audience, as it becomes more and more uncomfortable with the reassignment of roles and characteristics, finds itself finally forced to reevaluate the validity of interpreting real life through allegory.

No feature has proven more important in characterizing blacks than the traditional belief in their venery, and as we have seen, in all but the two Alcazar plays, villainy finds expression in sexual desires or intrigues. In Othello, frank and unencumbered sexual desire is not confined to the villains; rather, it is distributed among most of the major characters including Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Cassio, and, of course, Iago and Rodrigo. But the sexual interplay between the three principals, Othello, Desdemona, and Iago, defuses the sexual center of the play away from its expected and traditional location, the Moor, and focuses instead on two rather distinct and antithetical views of sex.

That Iago rather than Othello is obsessed with sex is startling because sex is conventionally the black man's preoccupation. In some ways, Iago's obsession helps to explain why it is blacks who are represented as lascivious and sex-obsessed, for Iago never ceases to project onto others his own overriding sexual interests as he reveals his own sexual anxieties. But we know it is Iago who is so obsessed, not Othello. Iago seizes every opportunity to incite others to accept the traditional view of the Moor as lecherous, and as licentious any woman who could love such a man. But the obscenities Iago shouts under Brabantio's window reveal more about himself than anyone else. In his soliloquy at the end of Act I, Iago again lingers on sexual themes, exposing the prurience of his mind as well as his sexual anxiety. A similar soliloquy in Act II reveals Iago to be almost monomaniacal:

That Cassio loves her [Desdemona], I do well believe it;
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.
    ... now I do love her too,
Not out of absolute lust, (though peradventure
    I stand accountant for as great a sin)
But partly led to diet my revenge,
For that I do suspect the lustful Moor
Hath leaped into my seat.(4)

Iago returns again and again to his own prurient musings, obsessions, and anxieties to feed his plot, and finally he succeeds in engendering in Othello's mind a similar obsessiveness and anxiety.

On the opposing side in the battle for Othello's mind and soul stands Desdemona, the loving wife who offers her beleaguered husband redemption. But Desdemona is no innocent virtue; though chaste, she frankly acknowledges to the duke, her father, and the assembled lords of Venice her total devotion to her husband.

"My heart's subdued / Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord" (I, iii, 250-51), she tells them. When she later asks permission to accompany Othello to Cyprus, she again openly expresses her sexual desire for her husband:

    ... if I be left behind,
A moth of peace, and he go to the war,
The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
And I a heavy interim shall support,
By his dear absence

(I, iii, 255-59)
In so unlikely a place as Desdemona's embrace Shakespeare places for Othello safety from sin, temptation, and, ultimately, damnation.

Uncomfortably set between these odd permutations of lust and chastity stands Othello. Perversely for him, lust demands abstinence while chastity and salvation require entering Desdemona's embrace. When Othello refuses Desdemona's final invitation to her bed, he rejects virtue and chooses evil. By opposing honest sexual desire to obsessive prurience and sexual manipulation, Shakespeare disperses and relocates these sexual and dramatic tensions away from one of their traditional sources, the Moor. In *Othello*, the Moor comes to be uniquely motivated, not by the usual desire for sexual gratification and power but by all-consuming sexual anxiety.

Othello most powerfully and explicitly articulates his anxiety when he assures the signory of Venice that he wishes Desdemona to join him for reasons other than sexual gratification. In his request for permission to take his wife to Cyprus, Othello employs a rhetoric of negation:

Your voices, Lords: beseech you, let her will
Have a free way; I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Not to comply with heat, the young affects
In me defunct, and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous to her mind;
And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant,
When she is with me; ... no, when light-wing'd toys
Of feather'd Cupid, foils with wanton dullness
My speculative and active instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my reputation!

(I, iii, 260-74)

Speaking here, just after Desdemona's rather frank avowal of her sexual desire, Othello attempts to diminish the impact of his wife's argument. However, Othello goes so far as to deny himself even the desire of “proper satisfaction,” a phrase that jars against Desdemona's request for the “rites for why I love him.” Whereas Othello will later incorrectly choose abstinence and, paradoxically, damnation to defend his honor, here he chooses abstinence to prove his manhood.

Of course, Othello's sexual anxiety is an intrinsic component of his larger fear of being a stereotypical stage Moor, and his attempt to deny his interest in “proper satisfaction” is an attempt to deny his kinship to his immediate predecessors Aaron and Eleazar. Characterized by their lechery and villainy, Aaron and Eleazar achieve power and overmaster their masters through a display of real sexual power. Aaron cuckolds the emperor; Eleazar whores the king's mother and “boys” the king. Othello seeks no such power over his masters, and though he retains real military power, he does not translate that power into a metaphor for sexual prowess. In fact, Othello humbly denies himself parity with the signory in terms that imply sexual and social submission. When he is accused of having “corrupted” Desdemona by “spells and medicines,” Othello begins his defense by saying, “Most potent, grave and reverend signiors, / My very noble and approv'd good masters.” He continues with his self-deprecation, saying, “Rude am I in my speech, / And little blest with the set phrase of peace” (I, iii, 76-77 and 81-82). Even in the most immediate circumstances of the play, Othello's humility seems excessive, but in contrast to his precursors, his behavior is remarkable. To imagine a typical stage Moor saying these words is but to witness him dissemble. However, Othello, unlike his predecessors, *sincerely* means what he says, as he demonstrates by his attempts to diminish whatever threat he may pose to
the state. But his marriage itself compromises the state's security; he was called before the signory to begin defending Venice, not himself. And although Othello intensely wishes not to be a typical stage Moor, he finds himself in exactly that position. He is the black man who provokes a crisis by his sexual relationship with a white woman. He must, therefore, immediately and uncompromisingly identify his state of subservience and remain there; by so doing, he at least can assuage one fear and dismiss one threat. With that done, he is then free to move against the Turk, who is after all not a totally different sort of threat.

Yet in spite of his best efforts to the contrary, Othello cannot escape the role fated to Moors on the stage, and as he moves to free himself of the confines of the role, he moves inexorably closer to it. The irony of his fate finds no clearer emblem than Othello as dupe to the play's villain, the most atypical role in which Othello finds himself. And Iago's intentions as villain directly counter Othello's, for Iago wishes to ensnare Othello in the confines of the stereotype that Othello struggles so desperately to escape. As the playwright of Othello's demise, Iago directs Othello toward the traditional role of villainous Moor, toward making Othello fit the maxim that Iago himself will not fit: “Men should be that they seem, / Or those that be not, would they might seem none!” (III, iii, 130-31). By provoking Othello to jealousy, an attribute believed not uncommon to Moors and earlier witnessed in Eleazar, Iago achieves his goal.7

Othello, as Iago points out and as the audience would immediately recognize, has ample reason to be jealous of Cassio, for unlike himself, “Cassio's a proper man” (I, iii, 390). “A fourth eminent cause of jealousy may be this,” Burton determines in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: “when he that is deformed … will marry some fair nice piece … [he] begins to misdoubt (as well he may) she doth not affect him. … He that marries a wife that is snoutfair alone, let him look, saith Barbarus, for no better success than Vulcan had with Venus, or Claudius with Messalina.”8 Othello's blackness is deformity enough for Brabantio and Iago, and they both press this fact on Othello's mind as they remind him to be wary of his wife.

Once planted in Othello's mind, the seeds of jealousy take root quickly and swiftly bear fruit. Preoccupied with the alleged wantonness of his wife, the gullible and jealous man sees signs of guilty love everywhere:

What sense had I of her stol'n hours of lust?
I saw't not, thought it not, it harm'd not me,
I slept the next night well, was free and merry;
I found not Cassio's kisses on her lips.

(III, iii, 344-47)

Othello's jealousy and the fear that it promotes, as well as his response to Iago's lies, precisely match Burton's description of the impotent man: “More particular causes [of jealousy] be these which follow. Impotency first, when a man is not able of himself to perform those dues which he ought unto his wife: for though he be an honest liver, hurt no man … and therefore when he takes notice of his wants, and perceives her to be more craving, clamorous, insatiable and prone to lust than is fit, he begins presently to suspect, that wherein he is defective, she will satisfy herself, she will be pleased by some other means.”9

The relationship between impotency and jealousy seems clear to Iago, who seizes upon the irony of Othello's steadfast denials of sexual interest and perverts them. Fixed and full of his own prurient musings, Othello now moves closer toward being the stereotypical Moor. But he is not consumed by lust and desire for gratification; instead, he fears that someone else performs his office. Nor does Iago let slip an opportunity to press this point home, until finally Othello is convinced that Cassio plays the role of lecher, the role Othello so steadfastly rejects. Once Othello, under Iago's direction, has cast Cassio in the role which by tradition should be his own, the tragic irony for Othello follows because he loses his sense of who he really is and begins to reclaim the role that he has rejected. Now maddened by jealousy, Othello, like his predecessors, becomes obsessed with sexual desire, but this time with Cassio's and Desdemona's rather than his own. From here Iago
can easily persuade Othello to dissemble, yet another mark of all Moorish villains.

Othello himself records his fall to that previously rejected role in his comments on his own blackness. Although the allegory of blackness and its characteristic language surround him throughout the play (Iago uses it, as do Brabantio and the duke), when Othello succumbs, saying, “Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have,” he identifies himself with the outsider his enemies have cast him as (III, iii, 267-68). He quickly completes his metamorphosis when he calls forth “black vengeance, from thy hollow cell” (III, iii, 454). (Here the folio reads “the hollow hell.”) Calling down on himself the spiritual blackness of his theatrical forebears, Othello identifies himself finally with the devil.

The success of Othello’s transformation finds quick confirmation when those who knew and loved the former Othello fail to recognize him as the jealous, raging Moor. Emilia, Lodovico, and Desdemona all comment on the change in Othello and use a similar trope to express their confusion. Desdemona says of Othello: “My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him, / Were he in favour as in humour alter’d” (III, iv, 121-22). Lodovico, equally puzzled by Othello’s behavior, asks: “Is this the noble Moor, whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient?” (IV, i, 260-61). Othello no longer seems to be Othello.

But the discrepancy between what Othello thinks he has become and what he has become tragically becomes clear to him only when it is too late. The role he attempts when he comes in to murder Desdemona is Justice, but Iago is much too good a stage director, for we recognize the Moor, finally, for what he is. Othello becomes the villain, reclaiming at that crucial moment over Desdemona’s bed the role he has so long sought to avoid. And although there is a discrepancy between his perception of himself and the audience’s perception of him, that distance collapses as Othello, welling with sexual desire, comments on Desdemona’s beauty:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars:  
It is the cause, yet I’ll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth, as monumental alabaster.

(V, ii, 1-5)

Othello tries our sympathies for him even further when he bends over Desdemona’s bed to kiss his doomed wife before he exacts his price:

... when I have plucked the rose,  
I cannot give it vital growth again,  
It must needs wither. I’ll smell it on the tree,  
A balmy breath, that dost almost persuade  
Justice herself to break her sword: once more:  
Be thus, when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,  
And love thee after: once more, and this the last,  
So sweet was ne’er so fatal: I must weep,  
But they are cruel tears; this sorrow’s heavenly,  
It strikes when it does love.

(V, ii, 13-22)

Surely these are chilling moments for any audience as it watches the determined murderer linger over kisses stolen from the sleeping Desdemona. Each additional kiss calls to mind those other black Moors who sought to abuse other innocent women, for who can forget Othello’s purpose for approaching Desdemona’s bed? His final hint at necrophilia, and in this context Othello surely means physical love, captures the prurience of this scene. Othello’s protestations of sorrow and love may be real, but his kisses are not kisses of tenderness of
forgiveness. Were they, he would not, could not, reject Desdemona's offer of connubial love and, ironically, redemption.

When Othello finally discovers the disjunction between what he supposes he has done and what he actually has done, he learns his tragedy. And what exactly he learns is something that the audience has witnessed; he learns that the noble Moor, the adversary of a stereotype, has collapsed into that now victorious stereotype. When he sees this, the noble Moor calls down justice on the villainous:

Whip me, you devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight,
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulfur,
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!

(V, ii, 278-81)

The Moor now condemns himself with the language commonly used to damn black fiends, as though he has assumed not only the role of the tormented but also of the tormentor, the damned and the damning.

In his final assault upon himself, Othello continues to apply to Othello the murderer the language and character of the typical Moor:

... I pray you in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of them as they are; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice; 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.
.....And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him thus.

(V, ii, 341-49, 353-57)

Now fully cognizant of the discrepancy between what he thought himself to be and what he is, Othello speaks calmly of the man duped by the villain, of his honor and sense of being wronged. However, none of this extenuates his guilt. The “base Indian,” the “circumcised dog,” committed a crime, and Othello, who once served Venice well, executes justice for the state and finally merges his two roles. He is both villainous Moor and, at last, Justice. His ability to destroy one role by using the other helps win for him our sympathy.

Several other important factors contribute to eliciting a sympathetic response from us. Cast as the villain, and even having effected his and Iago's policy, Othello, however, is never fully and resolutely a villain; he lacks the love of evil that underlies the villain's every act. Othello is the misguided victim, as much sinned against as sinning, and this fact alone moves us to pity. This fact also points to the irony of Othello's tragedy; he falls victim to his own struggle. He struggles to destroy evil as he struggles to escape the identity of a Moor. But he escapes neither and becomes both. Othello, in fact, fulfills the worst suspicions that his worst enemies hold of him. Gratiano reminds us of this when he comments sadly:

Poor Desdemona, I am glad thy father's dead;
Thy match was mortal to him, and pure grief
Shore his old thread atwain: did he live now,
This sight would make him do a desperate turn,  
Yea, curse his better angel from his side,  
And fall to reprobation.  

(V, ii, 205-210)

Brabantio's nightmare has come true, and were he alive, this would provoke him to disclaim all faith. But the real horror here is that Brabantio's nightmare is also Othello's, and Othello becomes what he was most loath to be. We sympathize because he fell not for pride's sake but for honor's and because he remains vulnerable to that which he is and is made to be, no matter how that differs from what he wishes to be. In the end we, like Othello, wish he had not fallen victim to himself, victim to his fate.

Our sympathy for Othello, however, is sympathy for his struggle to escape his fate, not sympathy for what he is fated to be. For that there is no sympathy. Thus Brabantio can sympathize with Othello until he sees only the typical stage Moor, the man who bewitched his daughter. Those who sympathize see Othello as a brave warrior in control of his own destiny. Is not this the moral of his tale to Desdemona, who he says “lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd” (I, iii, 167)? Brabantio himself was once beguiled by Othello's ability to overpower fate:

Her father lov'd me, oft invited me,  
Still question'd me the story of my life,  
From year to year; the battles, sieges, fortunes,  
That I have pass'd.  

(I, iii, 128-31)

Othello's repetition of “pass'd” is deliberate and gives explicit expression to both the trials he conquered and the dangers he escaped. Brabantio loses respect immediately and irrevocably when he no longer sees Othello as the Moor who defies fate but instead as the Moor who threatens family and state. Brabantio, after all, is incredulous that Othello could at this time be called by “special mandate for the state affairs,” and Brabantio's vulgar and bitter suggestion about Desdemona exemplifies again his changed perception: “Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see: / She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee” (I, iii, 72, 292-93). Angered by Desdemona's change in loyalty from father to husband, Brabantio holds her to be entirely faithless.

Those who, like Brabantio, in the end see only the Moor, surrender judgment to prejudice. Surely the most articulate spokesman for this point of view is Thomas Rymer, who finds much of Othello, including the status of the hero, ludicrous: “With us a Black-amoor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but Shakespear would not have him less than a Lieutenant—General. With us a Moor might marry some little drab, or Small-coal Wench; Shake-spear would provide him the Daughter and Heir of some great Lord, or Privy-Councillor; and all the town should reckon it a very suitable match.”

Rymer's comments point to a problem that is not unique to Othello but is still of great significance. In the end, we can only be sympathetic to Othello's plight if we are first open to Othello himself. If we are immovable in our contempt or incredulity, the play is then all that Rymer says it is. The problem of sympathy for Othello is doubly important when we recall that of all the plays in English dramatic history, no other play until the twentieth century offered a black hero of Othello's stature. And always there to undermine the most positive aspects of Shakespeare's representation of a noble black is Othello's lapse into the stereotype. Justice smites a Moor. Fate seems to control not only Othello but his representation. However successful Shakespeare's manipulation of the stereotype may be, Othello remains identifiable as a version of that type. We may see Shakespeare's hand more subtly, if we see Othello's and Desdemona's tragedy as a personal tragedy. After all, chaos does not come again; order always exists in Venice and even its outposts. Shakespeare's black Moor never possesses the power or desire to subvert civic and natural order.
Shakespeare comments with similar subtlety on Othello through the internal playwright Iago. In the hands of this malicious playwright, characters must be what they seem; black men must be villains. The irony here, of course, is that villains must seem to be what they are not and vice versa. How differently from Iago Shakespeare represents Othello is witnessed in part by the sympathy Shakespeare evokes from us for Iago's victim. But this points to the basic duality of Othello's character, a duality that is constantly at work in the play. In the end, however, the separate parts become one in Othello, and the good becomes inseparable from the evil, Justice from the Moor, the playwright from the dissembler.

The importance of Othello as the dominant representation of an African on the stage cannot be overestimated. Unlike any of the other plays discussed in this or the previous chapter, Othello seems to have been always in revival. Not until Oroonoko was staged in 1695 was there a close rival to Othello for putting a dramatic representation of a black character before English audiences. Between 1604 and 1687, Othello was in production not less than fourteen times. No generation of seventeenth-century playgoers could not have seen the play in several revivals. The publication history of Othello also indicates significant popularity. Although the first publication did not occur until 1622, almost twenty years after its first performance, Othello was published in quarto seven times in the seventeenth century and was included in the four seventeenth-century folios. In spite of the remarkable endurance of Othello, its ability to influence positively the portrayal of Africans on the stage is, not surprisingly, almost negligible; the stereotype remains vigorous even into the Restoration, as the adaptations of Titus Andronicus and Lust's Dominion suggest. While a single play could not be expected to reverse centuries of tradition, one senses that Othello had virtually no effect on the representation of Moors in the seventeenth century. How much of this is due to Othello's own tragic relapse to the stereotypical Moor cannot be determined, but surely that must be a factor. Indeed, audiences may have learned other lessons from this play as they remembered the sight of the black Moor murdering the innocent and white Desdemona. Perhaps too, Emilia's stinging charge, “O gull! O dolt! / As ignorant as dirt!” (V, ii, 164-65), lingered in their ears. Or perhaps when Emilia cries, “O, the more angel she, / And you the blacker devil!” (V, ii, 131-32), the age-old conflict between black and white, between good and evil, received an all-too-believable and terrifying reconfirmation. For some, like Rymer, the belief that Othello was even high enough to fall was merely fabulous anyway. Perhaps Othello, like its hero, simply could not replace everywhere the long-held perceptions of black men.

Notes

1. Another character, Alcade, the King of Africa, in The Thracian Wonder (1599), may be relevant here; however, I am uncertain that he is black. Tokson holds the opposite opinion; he writes that it “is quite clear that King Alcade is dark skinned” (93). He bases his judgment on Alcade's comment that in Europe “Men have livers there / Pale as their faces” (The Thracian Wonder, in The Works of John Webster, ed. Alexander Dyce [London, 1830], Vol. IV, III, iii, 209). This, however, could be a reference not to blackness but to sun exposure, much like Cleopatra's: “Think on me, / That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black” (Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, I, v, 27-28). Tokson also sees a reference to Alcade's daughter as a “white Moore” (V, ii, 249 and 250), as further corroborative evidence for his opinion. While we do know for certain that the daughter is white, I believe her whiteness raises questions about Alcade's supposed blackness rather than solutions. In a few medieval romances some black parents do miraculously have white offspring. (See Heliodorus, An Aethiopian History, Book IV.) Could Alcade be from this tradition? Although it is possible, I have been unable to locate an example in drama. A dramatization of An Aethiopian History entitled The White Aethiopian (1650?) exists in manuscript, but there is no record of performance. Alcade and his daughter seem to be more closely related to the King of Africa and his daughter, Angelica, in Greene's dramatization of Orlando Furioso, first published in 1594 and then again in 1599. Alcade also makes a rather curious statement that adds to my uncertainty. When he first appears in the play, he says to Sophos and Eusanius, the real heroes of the play:
In Africa, the Moors are only known,  
And never yet search’d part of Christendom;  
Nor do we levy arms against their religion,  
But like a prince, a royal justicer,  
To patron right and supplant tyranny.

(III, iii, p. 204)

Is Alcade claiming to be other than a Moor? If so, does he mean he is not a Muslim, or not black or neither? We have no way of knowing. Finally, many other white Africans exist in dramatic literature, most notably in plays about Rome and Carthage. It seems to me more likely that Alcade belongs to this tradition. My uncertainty about him, however, requires that he remain outside of this discussion.

It is difficult to say how dark Morocco really is. The stage direction at the start of Act III, scene i, reads: “Enter Morocco, a tawny Moor all in white.” Tawny offers its own difficulties because Shakespeare uses it synonymously with black in Titus Andronicus. (In Act V, Aaron calls his son, who several times earlier is called black, a “tawny slave” [V, i, 27].) Morocco himself speaks of his complexion in figurative language that fails to provide accurate information. I am inclined to believe that Morocco is fully black, primarily because of the visual contrast his black skin would make with the white and presumably exotic clothes.


5. A variant reading found in the 1623 folio has Desdemona saying here: “My heart's subdued / Even to the very quality of my lord” (I, iii, 245-46).

6. Although this line is frequently construed to refer to the “rites of war,” I read it as meaning the “rites of love.” (See Romeo and Juliet, III, ii, 8, and Ridley's note to this line.) In the line immediately following this, Desdemona says that during Othello's absence “I a heavy interim shall support.” Shakespeare, as well as other Renaissance playwrights, frequently uses the figure of women bearing weight as a metaphor for coitus. It seems reasonable to assume that Desdemona speaks frankly and as a sexually mature adult.

7. Lois Whitney suggests in her article “Did Shakespeare Know ‘Leo Africanus’?” that Shakespeare while writing Othello relied heavily on Pory's 1600 translation of Leo Africanus. On the subject of Othello's jealousy she writes: “In the matter of love, jealousy, and wrath Leo's characterization has a bearing also.” (PMLA, XXXVII, 1922, p. 482.) See also Tokson, Popular Image of the Black Man, 17.

8. Burton also cites Leo as his source for “Incredible things almost of the lust and jealousy of his countrymen of Africa, and especially such as live about Carthage.” Burton then points out that “every geographer of them [Moors] in Asia, Turkey, Spaniards, Italians,” reports of the lust and jealousy of Moors. It should be noted that The Anatomy of Melancholy was not published until 1621, and hence could not have been known by Shakespeare. However, as a copious amalgamation of fact and lore, the book codifies opinions that were in currency long before its publication. Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London, 1977), Part 3, pp. 264, 270-71.

9. Ibid., 266-67.

10. The folio reads “Judean” here.

The main tragic protagonists in *Othello* and *King Lear* are static characters of heroic proportions who experience a profound mental crisis caused by a disintegration of values and norms, which before the crisis ensure the stability and balance of their characters and behavior. As I noted earlier in relation to other static if less heroic characters such as Laertes, Horatio, or Ophelia, static people are generally well adapted to particular circumstances of life, as long as they can follow the rules that they have accepted as guidelines for their behavior. These rules are of course subject to cultural and historical change, but what is unchangeable in the behavior of static people is their usually uncritical, unquestioning, and often rigid adherence to whatever rules and norms are laid down for them in a particular sociocultural context. Thus for old Hamlet the moral guidelines are provided by the concepts of marshal honor, fair play, respect for treaties, marital fidelity, and kin loyalty as defined by the medieval heroic society. The life of Laertes too remains unproblematic as long as external circumstances allow him to follow his conventional rules: obedience to his father and to the king, brotherly love, and family honor. As I also discussed in the previous chapter, Ophelia can live a quiet if unexciting life adapted to the conventional role of a daughter in a noble household, as long as she has a brother and a father to lean on, and as long as the stability of her life is not upset by volatile and unpredictable people such as Hamlet. Horatio too can maintain his mental equipoise and his uninvolved and distanced intellectual vantage point of a scholar, chronicler, and the prince's confidant, as long as the world of Elsinore, for all its corruption and political crises, continues to exist.

Largely unproblematic and even dull in the normal, routine run of life, static characters nonetheless become psychologically interesting in times of crisis, that is, when the external situation changes to such a degree as to enable a static person to follow the rules and norms that normally ensure mental balance and stability. Once the external pillar supporting the inner balance is removed, the personality structure based on this balance collapses, leaving the mind in a state of profound shock. Old Hamlet even after death remains so upset by the sacrilege of marital infidelity and fratricide that he returns from beyond the grave to settle his scores with this world, using his son for the purpose. Laertes is so outraged by the apparently undeserved killing of his father that he obliterates in his mind all other norms and moral values, as long as he can settle his account with his father's killer and fulfill the conventional role of the avenger. Even the usually unmoved and stoic Horatio has his moment of existential crisis prompted by the destruction of the world of Elsinore, when he contemplates committing suicide. After a sudden and tragic disappearance of the father figure and in the absence of the supportive brother, the mind of Ophelia goes even beyond the point of temporary crisis and disintegrates completely, never to regain balance of any kind. Only the static Gertrude does not appear to experience any major crisis (beyond the momentary breakdown in the closet scene), but only because she is too weak to confront and handle the terrible truth that Hamlet is trying to convey to her: the repression of the fatal knowledge keeps Gertrude's mind in a state of self-deluding balance to the very end.

There is also to be observed another regularity in the behavior of static characters in a situation of crisis. After the violent and stormy mental shake-up following a drastic change in external circumstances, the mind finally regains its equilibrium by adapting to a new set of norms and values. Static character requires above all inner balance, that is, agreement between the believed rules and the situation in which these rules are respected. Once a static person perceives (as in *King Lear*) or becomes persuaded (as in *Othello*) that the sacred rules he
or she abides by are belied by external evidence, the situation becomes unacceptable and intolerable, so that
the only way to regain mental balance is either to accept with honesty and humility the new situation or to
embrace a new set of values. The former possibility is realized by Lear, who after a tempestuous mental crisis
finally accepts the reality of his daughters' ingratitude and his own mistake about them, becoming also
reconciled with the initially rejected Cordelia. Shortly before he dies Lear regains mental balance based on a
new set of principles: he no longer sees himself as a proud and all-powerful king but as a humble and weak
old man. The second possibility in turn is realized by Othello, who after a period of profound crisis caused by
Iago's skilful manipulation finally calms down and regains mental equipoise, having accepted as truth the
image of his wife as a whore. In act 5 the formerly “mad” Othello is chillingly calm, self-possessed,
and—typical for statics—obsessed with justice. In times of crisis static characters can only experience a
complete psychological U-turn, a full reversal of attitude and behavior, rather than a partial adjustment. This
is why static people are good material for religious and political conversions: after a temporary crisis of faith
they embrace the new conviction with the same uncritical zeal as that which characterized their former faith,
now violently rejected.

**OTHELLO**

Critics have often stressed the essentially static and heroic quality of Othello's character in the sense defined
above. For Bradley the Moor from the early part of the play is “grave, self-controlled … at once simple and
stately in bearing and in speech, a great man naturally modest but fully conscious of his worth, proud of his
services to the State, unwavering by dignitaries and unrelented by honors, secure … against all dangers from
without and all rebellion from within.”¹ There is an aura of conventionality about Othello, also a static trait,
and for example G. Wilson Knight finds the character a “very much the typical middle-aged bachelor entering
matrimony late in life.”² Jan Kott too considers the figure in the context of typical feudal heroics found in
knightly epic and romance, seen especially in Othello's royal blood and the heroic stereotypes inherited from
Roman rhetoric, fairy tales, and legends.³ Nicholas Grene also emphasizes the static quality of the values
represented by Othello: for the critic the play “expects us to share belief in a heroic order of harmony,
integrity, stability,” where even Othello's vision of war is “a ceremonialized stasis,” consonant both with the
character's “serene and heroic strength” and with his role of “the order-figure re-imposing peace.”⁴

Othello is introduced in the play by Iago (1.1), whose description of the general is slanted by hatred, primarily
motivated by being passed over for promotion by Othello (1.1.6-8). But for all their resentfulness and
bitterness Iago's remarks reflect, however distortedly, Othello's real heroic and charismatic qualities: for
example, Iago speaks scornfully of the general's “own pride and purposes,” of his “bombast circumstance
[circumlocution]” and “epithets of war” (1.1.11-13). When Othello appears in person for the first time he is
accompanied by Iago, whose hatred of his master has already been impressed on us in the preceding scene,
both in Iago's diatribes before Roderigo and even more forcefully in the grossly offensive racial slurs shouted
at night before Brabantio's house (1.1.110-12, 115). In this context Iago's sudden change of tone before
Othello and his hypocritical talk of conscience and absence of iniquity in himself (1.2.2-3) establish Iago
firmly as a scheming and resentful endodynamic figure. Othello for his part appears totally unsuspecting of
his ensign's insincerity, takes Iago's words at face value, and treats him practically as a confidant, his trust
betraying a straightforward, even gullible static disposition from the start.

But here we encounter an interesting and important dramatic incongruity, in that Othello's and Iago's
dynamisms of character appear to disagree with the roles assigned to them in the play. Normally, that is, in
real life, positions of command (as in the army) require at least an endostatic disposition, involving as it does
a pragmatic attitude toward life and the ability to act efficiently in new, unexpected situations. Endostatism
also entails a certain degree of opportunism, a readiness to cut corners and bend the rules, which clearly do
not square with Othello's admirable integrity, principled stance, and chivalry. As a static person, especially of
heroic proportions, a person like Othello could be realistically expected to perform spectacular individual
deeds of martial valor (as is indeed attested in Othello's own story of his romantic adventures, 1.3.129-70), but
a person of static character is psychologically unsuited for positions of command and government. Still, military authority is clearly the main role of Shakespeare's black general and the main reason why the Moor is reckoned with at all by the Venetian oligarchy: they cannot afford to do without his services as an able and tried military commander. There is no doubt that Othello's military reputation is well deserved (2.1.35-36), as is confirmed even by the resentful Iago (1.1.145-51), and the general himself rests confident in the fact that his services to Venice will “out-tongue” (1.2.18-19) before the duke the complaints of Brabantio, whose daughter Othello secretly married.

Interestingly, however, the only time in the play when Othello has a chance to display his military skills, during the sea battle with the Turks, the victory is won not by Othello's generalship but spectacularly by the elements. The sea storm (2.1.1-6) may have its importance as a poetic anticipation of the “storm” wrought in Othello's mind by Iago in Cyprus, but it also helps to emphasize how dependent the general is on chance and circumstance rather than on his own military skill and command. The text makes it clear that the Turkish fleet is defeated by “the wind-shaken surge” (2.1.13) and by “the desperate tempest” (2.1.21), and not by the “warlike” and “valiant” Moor, who is himself lost at sea (2.1.28) and is the last to arrive in Cyprus, having first raised serious fears for his safety in Cassio and other Venetians (2.1.32-34, 44-46, 89-93). Othello's high rank and respect in the eyes of the Venetian oligarchy may also have been aided by the Moor's royal lineage (1.2.21-22), so that notwithstanding the apparent discrepancy between his position as general and his static character, for dramatic reasons it was necessary to create a picture of an honorable, principled, dignified but gullible man as the victim of Iago's intrigue. An endostatic Othello would simply have been too cautious and too guarded to be so easily led. Psychological realism is thus artistically bent by Shakespeare to achieve a dramatic effect of the tragic fall of a heroic, charismatic man whose honesty, nobility, and trusting nature are unscrupulously exploited. In Iago in turn Shakespeare created an incongruous alignment of an endodynamic character with a socially inferior and subordinate role: given his innate disposition a person such as Iago can only feel satisfied in positions of command and leadership (traits he is surreptitiously displaying throughout the play), but he is deeply frustrated, resentful, and embittered in auxiliary and dependent positions, where his organizational talents cannot be fully realized.

The two incongruities are thus responsible for a peculiar and paradoxical relationship between Othello and Iago: the socially superior general is inferior to his subordinate in respect of dynamism of character, and despite his stateliness, dignity, and commanding position Othello is psychologically dependent on his ensign. From the first time the two characters appear together it is obvious that the trusting Othello is totally unaware and unsuspecting of Iago's insincerity, and of being manipulated by him into a potentially compromising and damaging confrontation with Brabantio and the duke on account of Desdemona. Iago's “friendly” advice to Othello about how to deal with the Venetian Council (1.2.11-17) also betrays a patronizing and contemptuous attitude toward the Moor and exploits the latter's sense of insecurity as a foreigner of inferior race, less familiar with Venetian power relations than the insider Iago. However, Iago's malicious plan to compromise the general before the Council miscarries on this occasion, both because the honorable Moor is prepared to face the music, confident in his military reputation, noble lineage, and the honest love he bears Desdemona (1.2.30-32), and because the new and urgent matter of the state (the Turkish threat) that requires Othello's services will overshadow Brabantio's more private suit against the Moor. Iago may fail to harm Othello this time round, but his attitude and intention with regard to the Moor are clear to the audience: the endodynamic ensign, deeply frustrated with his subordinate role, will not rest until he brings the static, and in Iago's view, naive, and foolish general to ruin in order to advance his own career.

Othello's static honesty and truthfulness are admirably displayed in his readiness to answer openly any charges related to his secret marriage, and he even welcomes the inevitable public confrontation as a way of restoring balance between his private and public lives, disturbed by the elopement with Desdemona: “I must be found. / My parts, my title and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly” (1.2.30-32). A responsible man, he knows that he will not allow his married life to get in the way of his public duties, an argument that no doubt will carry some weight before the Senate requiring Othello as a soldier: “But that I love the gentle

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Desdemona / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth” (1.2.25-28). After he patiently and tactfully withstands the racial insults of the outraged Brabantio, now his father-in-law, Othello offers a calm, composed, and dignified self-defense before the Senate, confident both in his innocence of any dishonorable action and in Venetian justice (1.3.118-21). Given Othello's static and honest character, we must also accept that his confession before the Senate is frank and truthful (1.3.124-26), “a round unvarnished tale” (1.3.91), and that his narrative is not “unreliable as evidence” because of the Moor's alleged “ulterior purpose” in editing his past, as the critic E. A. J. Honigmann and others have suggested. Still less is Othello's story full of “bragging and fantastical lies” (2.1.221), according to Iago's envious and hateful account. Even Othello's impression that Desdemona's father “loved” him must be accepted as genuine, and although Brabantio certainly did not envisage the Moor as his prospective son-in-law, the straightforward Othello may be forgiven for overinterpreting the civility and friendliness shown by a Venetian senator to an exotic visitor. Nor is Othello's life story an example of “narrative self-fashioning,” and even the Moor's selective insistence on moments of danger and survival rather than on victories betokens true modesty and self-effacement of someone given neither to boastful and vainglorious (exostatic) exaggerations, nor to purposeful and opportunistic (endostatic) distortions of facts. If Othello's story does sound romantic and exotic, it is by the very nature of his experience than by the alleged “self-fashioning” habit of the teller: the cannibals and the “men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (1.3.145-46) mentioned by Othello sound fantastic only to today's audience, but were believed as actually existing in Elizabethan times.

Despite its initial secrecy Othello's marriage with Desdemona, however shocking to Brabantio and in all likelihood also to the other senators (diplomatically silent as they are about it), appears to be a matter of propriety, emotional maturity, and mutual respect—exactly what can be expected between two static partners. Neither the Moor nor his white wife appear to be drawn to each other by sensuality and passion alone, the point often overstated by critics, as that would indicate a more dynamic disposition. Rather, their relationship appears to be mature, sober, balanced, and responsible, more psychological than physical. Desdemona's feelings for the Moor did not spring from a sudden, youthful infatuation but matured by degrees, motivated by pity for Othello's dangers and suffering rather than by any physical attraction (1.3.157, 160-62, 168). Othello for his part was moved by Desdemona's kindness rather than excited by her physical attractiveness (1.3.169), and he reciprocated her feelings only when invited by her (1.3.164-67). Once married, the responsible Othello will not allow his private life to interfere with his official duties, and he is even prepared to leave his wife in Venice for the duration of the Turkish expedition (1.3.237-40), the fateful idea to accompany him on the campaign being Desdemona's alone (1.3.260). Othello then allays the Senate's understandable concerns by openly disclaiming any desire to “please the palate of [his] appetite, / Nor to comply with heat,” the young affects in him being defunct at his mature age (1.3.263-65). With his private and public duties strictly separated, the “serious and great business” of the war will not be neglected with Desdemona by Othello's side (1.3.267-69).

But Othello's static honesty, frankness, and trusting disposition, coupled both with his responsible position as a military commander and with his sense of insecurity as an outsider in Venice, leave him potentially vulnerable. In fact, the weakness coming from the incongruity between his character and his social role is only waiting to be exploited by the envy of some clever opportunist—exactly what happens in the play. Othello's blindness to Iago's unabashed and contemptuous, patronizing attitude is obvious from the start, as is the general's dependence on his ensign in a practical sense. As observed by critics, the aging Moor appears to suffer from failing eyesight and on a number of occasions has to rely on Iago's eyes. It is Iago who helps Othello recognize the approaching Cassio and other officers (1.2.28-30), and when Brabantio arrives to arrest Othello, Iago is the first to notice the danger (1.2.55). Othello's impaired vision in an obvious way increases his psychological dependence on Iago, later adding extra sting into taunts such as “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see” (1.3.293), and “Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio” (3.3.200). Eye symbolism culminates in Othello's ironic insistence on the ocular proof of his wife's infidelity (“Make me to see’t,” 3.3.366), as if to emphasize that Othello can only see—that is, understand—what Iago wants him to see.
As all people tend to judge others according to the criteria defined by their particular dynamism of character, so the static Othello applies his standards of honesty and plain dealing to everyone else, with ultimately disastrous consequences. More precisely, static people give others an advance credit of trust until someone visibly betrays that trust through dishonest actions. In other words, static people treat other people as if they too had static characters. Iago is perfectly right when he says that “the Moor is of a free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so” (1.3.398-99), although in the mouth of the endodynamic villain the remark is not a compliment but a contemptuous acknowledgment of Othello's naïveté and foolishness. It is clear that Othello trusts his ensign completely (“A man he is of honesty and trust,” 1.3.285), which only shows how cleverly and for how long Iago was able to hide his true character before the general. Othello extends the same unconditional trust toward his wife, and it is clear that the stability and integrity of his mind depend entirely on this trust (“My life upon her faith,” 1.3.295, and “when I love thee not / Chaos is come again,” 3.3.91-92).

As a static man of principles Othello reacts with outrage and righteous anger whenever a principle he personally abides by is broken or violated, and he demands justice, that is, appropriate reparation from those responsible for breaking the rule. When Othello finds his officers guilty of causing an unseemly drunken brawl, his reaction is first of all emotional, “My blood begins my safer guides to rule / And passion, having my best judgement collied, / Assays to lead the way” (2.3.201-3), before he reacts in a more formal way by demoting Cassio in an apparent act of justice. However, the main principle whose alleged violation causes not just righteous anger but a profound mental crisis and a “radical and irreversible metamorphosis” of Othello's personality is the wife's fidelity to her husband. It is the particular nature of this principle coupled with Othello's static character that accounts for the murderous intensity of his crisis. Feminist critics have tried to explain Othello's reaction to Desdemona's supposed infidelity in terms of his “repressed sexual feelings” and a “rejection of sexuality,” which in him take the displaced form of murder, and also in terms of the Moor's “neurotic misogyny,” springing from his “contempt for maternal femininity”—all sentiments allegedly characteristic of men in a traditional patriarchal society. There is no doubt that Venice in Shakespeare's play is a decisively patriarchal place (vide the Senate scene) that legitimizes woman's subordinate position to man (cf. 1.3.180-89), including the “sacred” duty of sexual fidelity to the husband and the husband's equally “sacred” right to jealousy and severe punishment for the wife's infidelity. Feminist critics usually ascribe this unfair relationship between the sexes to widespread male conspiracy against women, organized through unjust and oppressive patriarchal institutions such as marriage. However, the fact that male sexual jealousy is so widespread and historically persistent suggests also a strong genetic motivation underlying this anti-feminine prejudice. As argued by the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, male sexual jealousy is found in all cultures because the emotions of jealousy, in concert with other emotions and pressures on the woman, increases the probability that man would be the biological father of his wife's child. As a man can never be certain of paternity, because fertilization happens out of sight inside the woman's body, a cuckold risks both having his wife's reproductive efforts tied up by a rival and investing with his energy and resources in another man's genes. Genetic interests explain therefore why in considering long-term partners men tend to subscribe to the infamous madonna-whore dichotomy, which divides the female sex into loose women, who may be dismissed as easy conquests, and coy women, who are valued as potential wives. This mentality is often called a symptom of misogyny, but it is not a patriarchal myth; rather, from an evolutionary point of view the sentiment is “real” in the sense that it has always been adaptive for men to be jealous of their wives.

Women too feel jealousy, but for different reasons: as the woman is always certain of maternity, and as her partner's adultery does not diminish his capacity to inseminate her, she may risk little by way of biological investment if her husband engages in extramarital sex. As the anthropologist Donald Symons observes, women are adapted to learn to discriminate between threatening and nonthreatening adultery in men, and especially in polygamous marriages it has not been adaptive for women to be sexually jealous of their husbands. For the wife, her husband's love child is first of all another woman's problem, unless the adultery is followed by the man's social investment in the love child, in which case the wife's and the legitimate child's security and well-being may be threatened. The wide difference in genetic interests and parental investments...
between the sexes thus explains the evolutionary trend whereby the woman is, on average, disinclined toward marital infidelity and more tolerant toward her husband's infidelity, while a man is generally more inclined toward extramarital relations and more jealous about his wife. This evolutionary mechanism lies at the root of the infamous “double standard,” in which female adultery is condemned while male adultery is tolerated, but not because of the alleged patriarchal conspiracy against women, but because sexual intercourse exposes men and women to very different risks and different reproductive costs and opportunities.

At the same time it must be emphasized that while evolution can explain the origin of the double standard and the reasons for the universality and persistence of sexual jealousy in men, genes and biology do not provide an excuse for the injustices arising from legitimizing these innate trends in social institutions, customs, and law. In fact, men's attitude toward women is as much a function of the genetic motivations described above as of cultural norms, which may either endorse or mitigate a particular innate behavioral tendency. It is therefore ultimately up to culture to decide whether male adultery is to be praised as an expression of healthy machismo or condemned as a breach of marital loyalty, and whether sexual jealousy is man's “sacred” right and a justification for harassing women or an urge to be controlled as unworthy of man's respect for himself and his partner. In the latter case it is a man's duty to exercise his volition to suppress his natural tendency toward adultery and jealousy in the name of decency, marital equality, and partnership, but it is clear that a cultural norm condemning male infidelity and antifeminine prejudice will not eliminate many a man's innate tendency toward promiscuity and sexual jealousy. In a traditional patriarchal society such as Renaissance Venice, and even more so in Othello's original Muslim background, the existing cultural norms strongly condemn the wife's infidelity and excuse the husband from any drastic measures he might undertake to punish the unfaithful wife. The effect of a strong cultural norm is thus compounded with a strong genetic disposition in men, creating as a result a behavioral pattern, dramatized in Othello and in The Winter's Tale, involving a husband's powerful negative emotions toward the alleged adulteress and his murderous aggression sanctioned by severe law and custom. In other words, because of the intensity of the underlying innate motivation, the murderous passion that often accompanies sexual jealousy is easily provoked in a traditional society in otherwise decent and noble men such as Othello or Leontes, whose negative emotions are not mitigated but actually enhanced by social sanction.

Othello's jealousy appears to be even easier to provoke than usual because of the presence of additional factors: his race, advanced age, lack of urban sophistication, status as an outsider, and apparent inexperience in the private, intimate sphere (it is his first marriage), which all contribute to Othello's sense of insecurity and undermine his confidence as a man. What the white and urbane Venetians thought of the dark Oriental races is more than sufficiently illustrated by Iago's uninhibited slurs and insults directed at the Moor behind his back: his talk of “an old black ram” (1.1.87), “a Barbary horse” (1.1.110), and of Othello as the devil (1.1.90), all in the context of the supposed lasciviousness and animalism of non-European races. The shocked and outraged father of Desdemona does not even try to hide his racial prejudice, shouting to Othello's face what other Venetian senators and noblemen most certainly shared but diplomatically kept to themselves: accusation of sorcery and treachery, physical repulsion, and disdain (1.2.62-81, 1.3.61-65). Othello swallows these racial insults without responding to them (1.2.81-85), as he no doubt did on similar previous occasions, but the confrontation with Brabantio only shows that despite his aristocratic lineage the Moor is keenly aware of his inferior status in Venice (“Haply for I am black,” 3.3.267). Iago later plays on the general's inner insecurity by reminding him that Desdemona had rejected many suitors “Of her own clime, complexion and degree” (3.3.234), implying that Othello, “an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere,” (1.1.134-35), does not satisfy these important racial and social criteria. If Othello's advanced age is not necessarily a handicap for a husband in a patriarchal society, it does nonetheless become a cause of concern (“for I am declined / Into the vale of years,” 3.3.269-70) once Othello realizes that his “defunct” affects and lower sexual appetite (1.3.263-65) may not satisfy his young wife, allegedly insatiable in her lust (3.3.272-74). Othello's lack of refinement and sophistication (“Rude am I in my speech,” 1.3.82, also 3.3.267-69) and his inexperience with Venetian women, reputed for their sexual licentiousness (4.2.91), in due course deepen Othello's inferiority complex (“mine own weak merits,” 3.3.190) and are exploited to deadly
effect by the “knowing” Iago.\(^{18}\) The sole principle supporting the stability and integrity of Othello's personality, his trust in Desdemona's fidelity, is thus dangerously threatened by the highly emotive and explosive nature of male sexual jealousy in general, as well as by a number of circumstances in Othello's life, character, and status that weaken his self-confidence and make him vulnerable to Iago's manipulation. The seeds of Othello's crisis and of the subsequent tragedy are therefore present in *potentia* in Othello's life and mind following his marriage with Desdemona, so that all a determined person such as Iago has to do is to set fire to the powder keg. As observed by J. I. M. Stewart, “the mind that undoes [Othello] is not Iago's but his own; the main datum is not Iago's diabolic intellect but Othello's readiness to respond.”\(^{19}\) Bernard McElroy also notes perceptively that Iago does not even have to convince Othello of Desdemona's infidelity, because the Moor already has a predisposition to believe it. Iago only gives the Moor a few suggestive nudges in that direction and lets Othello convince himself.\(^{20}\)

The change of location from civilized and safe Venice to the less secure frontier of the civilized world that is Cyprus provides a fitting context for the transformation of Othello from a dignified man of admirable self-control and civility to a pitiful ruin of his former self, at the mercy of murderous passions: in the words of the critic John Holloway the Renaissance Complete Man becomes a complete monster.\(^{21}\) As an immediate consequence the arrival in Cyprus contributes another factor to Othello's sense of insecurity: he is now completely in charge, under the pressure of duty and responsibility to maintain order and safety in the Venetian garrison, the only man to control violence and defend civilization—the Moor Othello, himself of savage origins and a converted Christian.\(^{22}\) The arrival in Cyprus has also a private dimension of a delicate nature: Othello's marriage appears not to have been consummated until now, which explains why the general gives up the pleasure of celebrating the victory over the Turks with his officers, repairing to his private quarters with Desdemona instead (2.3.8-11). Both his present public duties and his intimate life put therefore extra pressure on the already insecure and vulnerable Othello, eager to please his Venetian superiors and satisfy his young wife.

But the irony of Othello's government in Cyprus is that he is, in fact, no longer in control of the situation. The peace and intimacy of his bedchamber are disrupted by the brawl provoked by Iago, and without realizing it Othello restores order on Iago's terms: he demotes the innocent Cassio and promotes the actual perpetrator, Iago, to be his right hand and trusted adjutant (2.3.251-52). Nominally in charge, Othello has become a puppet in Iago's hands, as has everyone else for that matter. As a frustrated endodynamic, Iago will not rest until he exploits all available opportunities of self-advancement, which in his present situation means continuing to compromise Cassio to eventually take his place, as he wanted from the beginning (1.1.7-10). Luck holds for Iago, because the disgraced Cassio, now without access to his general, has asked Emilia, Iago's wife and Desdemona's chamberwoman, to speak with her lady so that she can plead with Othello to restore his lieutenant. Dramatically Cassio's move brings both Emilia and Desdemona directly into the plot, but psychologically it provides Iago with a perfect opportunity to compromise Cassio even more, by suggesting to Othello that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona. By another stroke of Iago's good luck Othello notices his wife speaking with Cassio, who, embarrassed to see the approaching general (“I am very ill at ease,” 3.3.32), quickly departs, laying an ideal ground for Iago's promptly following insinuations. Despite Othello's defective vision (“Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?” 3.3.37), the first “ocular proof” of something improper going on has been supplied and immediately exploited by Iago's innuendo about Cassio stealing away “so guilty-like” (3.3.39). The next perfectly timed chance event playing straight into Iago's hands is Desdemona's rather too insistent and importunate suit on behalf of Cassio (3.3.41-89), visibly irritating to Othello, who—interestingly—begins to feel ambivalent and doubtful about his wife even before Iago's unfolds fully his insinuations: “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! and when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (3.3.90-92).

Iago strikes while the iron is hot by continuing his suggestions about Cassio and Desdemona, and within about 170 lines of a single scene (3.3.93-261) he practically convinces Othello that his wife is indeed unfaithful to him. Iago also succeeds in winning even more trust from the general, who now becomes
psychologically totally dependent on his ensign (“I am bound to thee for ever,” 3.3.217). The speed and ease with which Othello is won over by Iago only confirm the Moor's lack of confidence, insecurity, and vulnerability discussed earlier. Iago's understatements do not in fact tell Othello anything definite but succeed in bringing to the surface of his consciousness already existing but hitherto repressed doubts and anxieties. Othello is the first to suspect Cassio's dishonesty (3.3.103-5), before this possibility is half-confirmed after teasing delay by Iago in his warning against the green-eyed monster of jealousy (3.3.167-68). Far from planting any ideas in Othello's mind Iago only releases them from his unconscious: “By heaven, thou echo'st me / As if there were some monster in thy thought / Too hideous to be shown” (3.3.109-11). However hideous the monster in his and Iago's minds, Othello cannot wait to hear the “horrible conceit” shut up in Iago's, or rather, in his own mind (3.3.117-18), insisting to be told what he both fears and masochistically desires to know: “I prithee speak to me, as to thy thinking, / As thou dost ruminate, and give thy worst of thoughts / The worst of words” (3.3.134-36).

Othello's insistence on hearing the “truth” is a function of his static character here: his unbending honesty will not permit any doubt or uncertainty about the important principles he believes in, and his moral inflexibility, similarly to Laertes's, will not tolerate any compromise. If he loves Desdemona, his happiness is infinite, and his “soul hath her content so absolute / That not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate” (2.1.189-91), but if he does not love his wife, then literally “Chaos is come again” (3.3.92). For static people there is no middle ground between two opposite and in their view mutually exclusive possibilities, and so Desdemona can only be either a chaste wife or a whore. Nor will Othello tolerate in himself any doubt or uncertainty in the matter, the static inflexibility of his character allowing only for a clear and unequivocal interpretation one way or the other. That is why in a brief moment of sanity he demands a definite proof of Desdemona's infidelity to support Iago's “exsufflicate and blown surmises” (3.3.185): “I'll see before I doubt, when I doubt, prove, / And on the proof there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy!” (3.3.193-95). The motivation toward sexual jealousy may be strong in Othello for reasons discussed earlier, but as an honest man he will only believe and act in a fair and just way, upon objective evidence, not upon his whims or fantasies. And the same applies to Othello's attitude toward Iago: until proven otherwise by objective evidence, Iago will remain to him a “fellow of exceeding honesty” (3.3.262) to the end.

For some time, from the moment of noticing Cassio parting from Desdemona with a look of shame on his face (3.3.34) to the moment of seeing Desdemona's handkerchief handled between Cassio and Bianca in a compromising context (4.1.156), Othello experiences a profound and painful mental crisis, in which his personality is being literally flipped over and turned inside out (“the seamy side without,” 4.2.148), eventually to regain a psychological balance of sorts in act 5 based on a new set of convictions about his wife and his whole life. The change of attitude in Othello is so complete that critics often speak of “two Othellos,” one a man of essential nobility and the servant of Venice, and the other a monster debased by “a barbaric crazed fury of physical jealousy.”23 J. I. M. Stewart speaks of Othello as a noble, free, and open character on the one hand, and of “an obtuse and brutal egotist” on the other, and for E. A. J. Honigmann Othello changes more completely than other tragic heroes, so that “we must not confuse his earlier and later self.”24 Terence Hawkes states simply that “metaphorically, the play chronicles the transformation of one man into another,” while Bernard McElroy offers the following description of the dramatic collapse of Othello's world:

When the tension between value systems is so taut in the mind of the hero the precipitating factor may be quite unequal to the cataclysmic effects produced. Doubt of one thing implies doubt of another, and then another and another, until the entire structure of the hero's subjective world comes down in ruins like a building from which one small but crucial stone has been removed.25

However drastic the change of Othello's outlook upon his wife, upon women in general, and upon himself and his life, if his metamorphosis is to be psychologically credible it must be accounted for in terms of a mental crisis within the same personality, and not as a transformation of one personality into another. Despite the
radical change of attitude and the temporary disturbance of his mental equilibrium, Othello remains essentially a static person to the last, except that after the crisis his mental equilibrium is founded on the opposite principle: what was only an unconscious possibility, the view that Desdemona is fickle and unchaste, has now established itself as a “fact” in Othello's consciousness, while his earlier unshaken belief in Desdemona's honesty has become repressed in his unconscious as falsehood. Tragically wrong as he is after this psychological U-turn, in act 5 Othello nonetheless regains his earlier static calm, self-possession, and self-control, able to act again in the name of justice, however false and perverted.

Othello's static integrity, an otherwise admirable quality and a source of his great satisfaction and happiness in ordinary circumstances, that is, when the perceived reality agrees with the held convictions, becomes for the Moor a source of acute suffering once doubt creeps in. His uncompromising character will not allow doubt to be ignored or dismissed without challenge, nor will it allow Othello to continue living pretending that nothing has happened: “to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved” (3.3.182-83), that is, determined on a course of action that will free him from doubt. Uncertainty means intense mental pain for someone who will not tolerate self-delusion, which is why the devilishly intelligent Iago not only causes Othello's suffering but aggravates it further by making the Moor fully aware of his present misery:

O beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,
But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!

(3.3.167-72)

But Iago also knows that he cannot keep Othello in doubt indefinitely: he can only deepen the Moor's anxiety up to a point. As a realist Othello demands a proof, “a living reason” (3.3.412), of his wife's infidelity, vacillation and uncertainty being intolerable for his static temperament: “I think my wife be honest, and think she is not, / I think that thou [Iago] art just, and think thou art not. / I'll have some proof” (3.3.386-88). For a time Iago continues twisting the knife in the wound by reminding Othello of the ill repute of Venetian women, who “do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands,” and whose “best conscience / Is not to leav't undone, but keep't unknown” (3.3.205-7). Iago also quotes Desdemona's “deception” of her father in marrying Othello (3.3.203) as a precedent of her present alleged deception of her husband: “She that so young could give out such a seeming / To seel her father's eyes up” (3.212-13). Iago even goes so far as to tactlessly remind Othello of his inferior race (3.3.234) and to grossly insult Desdemona before her husband for her supposed “will most rank, / Foul disproportion,” and “thoughts unnatural” (3.3.236-37), as evidenced by her inexplicable choice of the Moor before other, more acceptable suitors. Othello's lack of response to this slander sadly shows the extent to which he is now won over by Iago's version of events: “This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more—much more—than he unfolds” (3.3.246-247).

Before the demanded “proof” of Desdemona's disloyalty is finally supplied and Othello recovers his balance, the painful disturbance of his mental equilibrium leads to a complete reversal of the psychological perspective, where appearance takes the place of reality and truth becomes substituted by falsehood. Thus the honest and innocent Desdemona is branded as a virtue-pretending whore (3.4.38-44), while the insincere and ill-willed Iago is praised for his alleged honesty and good intention. In Othello's topsy-turvy but nonetheless static view, true honesty is penalized while hypocrisy and deceit are rewarded. This psychological U-turn is so complete that by the time the “ocular proof” of the handkerchief is provided, it is practically no longer needed: “trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ” (3.3.325-27).

Without even waiting for any material evidence Othello accepts as proof of his wife's infidelity Iago's preposterous ad hoc fabrication of Cassio's dream about Desdemona (3.4.416-28), and he is too upset to notice blatant inconsistencies and logical leaps in Iago's arguments (vide the latter's unsubstantiated reference to
“other proofs,” 3.3.443). Nor are any material proofs needed at this stage: Cassio and Desdemona are subsequently condemned to death solely on the strength of Othello’s unshaken belief in their alleged guilt (3.3.475-81).

Together with the altered moral perspective, other consequences of this psychological turnover gradually rise before Othello. With his marriage and private happiness apparently over, affection gives way to hate: “Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate” (3.3.451-52), a reversal emphasized metaphorically by the replacement of heavenly imagery by references to hell: “All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven: / ’Tis gone! / Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell” (3.3.448-50). Gone too are the pride and joy of Othello’s military life, as evidenced in his powerful “farewell” speech (3.3.351-60) ending with a crushing realization of the end of his public life: “Othello's occupation's gone” (3.3.360). The Moor’s earlier admirable self-possession and dignity also yield before undignified loss of temper and of self-control, his “waked wrath” (3.3.366) indicating the mental chaos he inwardly feared all along (3.3.91-92). The structure of Othello's static personality is shaken to its foundations and is irreversibly collapsing, and nothing short of unrelenting and bloody “justice” will allay the storm and restore order in Othello’s upset mind: “my bloody thoughts with violent pace / Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love / Till that a capable and wide revenge / Swallow them up” (3.3.460-63).

The disintegration of Othello's former psychic constitution culminates in an epileptic fit (4.1.43), after which Othello's temper begins to settle down and his static personality is beginning to reconstitute itself on a new set of convictions: that Desdemona is a whore, that his lieutenant Cassio is disloyal, and that his ancient Iago is brave, honest, and just (5.1.31). The reversal of attitudes is complete, but Othello's new perception of reality still has to be aligned with his static sense of justice: the evildoers must be punished and the honest must be rewarded. Accordingly, Iago is promoted to be Othello's lieutenant (3.3.481) and is ordered to kill Cassio (3.3.475-76), while Desdemona is sentenced to death, because “the justice of it pleases” (4.1.206). In Othello's eyes therefore the killing of Desdemona is not murder but execution, carried out “to save the moral order, to restore love and faith.”26 Jan Kott and other critics have aptly captured the static character of Othello, who “kills Desdemona to be able to forgive her, so that the accounts be settled and the world returned to its equilibrium.”27 Terence Hawkes too stresses that while Iago murders Roderigo and Emilia, Othello executes Desdemona: “he does so on the basis of rational 'proof' by whose profane calculation the act seems both necessary and just.”28 Similarly, for Irving Ribner Othello's vengeance on Desdemona is converted into “a lawful justice, his hatred into duty,” in which Othello sees himself as “the instrument of justice executing his duty in a solemn ritual.”29 As Nicholas Grene also observes, Othello the general administers justice in the summary fashion of the court martial acting as the agent of divine retribution, associating himself with the icon of justice holding her sword.30 In a word, critics appear to be unanimous in viewing Othello's actions in terms of general justice and moral laws, however perverted in his mind, a view consistent with Othello's statism of character and the resulting insistence on balance in social relations, on the observance of accepted norms and conventions, and on righteousness and retribution.

With justice still to be served, Othello's regained mental equilibrium acquires a sinister quality. He may appear “gentler than he did” (4.3.9), but his calm betokens a grim determination to “strangle [Desdemona] in her bed—/ even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.204-5), as is no doubt implied in his command to his wife to go to her bed and dismiss her attendant (4.3.5-7). In the final scene Othello is no longer a husband mad with jealousy but, in his perverse imagination, the judge, the executor of God's will, solemn and dignified, about to perform a ceremonial act of sacrificial justice. The “cause” that provides the reason for Othello's punitive action has a judicial ring about it and emphasizes a public, no longer private, nature of the case: Desdemona must die for the general good, “else she'll betray more men” (5.2.6).31 With the last remnants of his intimate feelings suppressed after smelling Desdemona's breath for the last time (5.2.15-19), Othello proceeds in a formal and official manner as the judge appointed to establish the defendant's guilt (5.2.46-51), as the priest administering the last rites and absolution (5.2.25-28, 53-57), and as the executioner-sacrificer carrying out the court's verdict.
The convention of dramatic tragedy requires that this grotesque travesty of justice and religion be exposed too late, after Desdemona's innocent death. And when the truth is finally revealed by Emilia's spirited testimony (5.2.223-24), Othello experiences another psychological turnover, this time instantaneous, as he instinctively runs at Iago, now the “precious villain” (5.2.233), to execute true justice on the spot and correct his own tragic mistake. What is also immediately clear to the law-abiding Othello is that the gross injustice that he has unwittingly committed must be amended by nothing short of an equal retribution in the form of his own execution: “why should honour outlive honesty” (5.2.243), with “honour” referring to his own static adherence to law and justice, and “honesty” to Desdemona's uncompromising loyalty. Othello now stoically resigns himself to the inevitable (“Who can control his fate?” 5.2.263) and completes his role as the judge-priest-executioner by admitting his guilt, sentencing himself, doing his last soul reckoning, and taking his own life. There is also an element of public penance to satisfy Othello's static need of expiation, when he openly admits his responsibility before the Venetian noblemen Lodovico and Montano, but not without balancing his guilt with honorable motives: “An honourable murderer, if you will, / For nought I did hate, but all in honour” (5.2.291-92). To settle all scores with this world Othello admits consenting to Cassio's death and now asks the lieutenant's pardon (5.2.294-97). He is also formally stripped of his office and responsibility (5.2.329), but again not before his demotion is balanced with a reminder of the service done by Othello to the state (5.2.337). Preoccupied with justice to the end, the departing Othello insists on a fair report of himself after his death, one that will balance his merits with his faults:

Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme.  

(5.2.340-44)

His last words return to his dead wife whom he owes most in this life, and with whom he must now settle his accounts by paying with his own life for hers. The tragic themes of love and death that unite Othello and Desdemona resonate in the Moor's final rhyming couplet, whose chiastic construction balances “kiss” and “kill,” love and death, in an epitaph that aptly captures the particular nature of Othello's static character:

I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this,  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.  

(5.2.356-57)

Notes

5. Of course the honorable Othello himself would soon have openly disclosed the fact of having secretly married Desdemona, but Iago had precipitated the disclosure by using Roderigo to prejudice and inflame Brabantio against the Moor (1.1.118-35).  
9. Cf. Jan Kott calls Desdemona “the most sensuous” of all Shakespeare's female characters, and while she does remain faithful to Othello for the critic she “must have something of the slut in her. Not in
“actu but in potentia” (Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, 94).
11. Othello calls Iago “honest” about fifteen times in the play.
16. Ibid., 312.
17. In the absence of any definite textual indication Honigmann tentatively places Othello between forty and fifty, that is, nearer to Brabantio than to Desdemona in age (Introduction to Othello, 17).
18. In Shakespeare’s time Venice was regarded as the pleasure capital of Europe, especially in its sexual tolerance. Its courtesans were widely celebrated, and—according to Sir Henry Wotton, English ambassador to Venice in the last years of the sixteenth century—they were indistinguishable from gentlewomen in clothes and manners (Honigmann, Introduction to Othello, 9-10).
27. Ibid.
30. Grene, Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination, 120.
31. According to Brents Stirling the word cause derives from common law, where it connoted a legal process or a matter put before the court for decision (Stirling, Unity, 133).

Bibliography


**Criticism: Production Reviews: Geoffrey Bent (review date summer 1998)**


[In the following essay, Bent focuses on two motion-picture adaptations of Othello, from 1952 and 1995, and a filmed version of the 1964 National Theatre of Great Britain production. The critic analyzes the impact that different actors have had on the play's meaning through their portrayals of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona.]

“O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!”

Although the end result of an actor's labor is called an “interpretation,” the scholarly dimensions of that word are rarely intended. If someone wants to know what a Shakespearian play is “about,” they turn to heavily footnoted dissertations in university journals. Scholars seem sage, while actors are compromised by their greasepaint and fright wigs.

But, as a hermeneutic, acting shares many of the virtues of scholarship and even adds a few to the pile. While the academic critic can occasionally bolster an outlandish interpretation with a few quotes taken out of context, an actor is forced to make his case to a live audience through the bulk of the text. While illuminating a work as clearly as any scholar, the actor also transcends this ancillary function: a play can easily do without critics, but a play without actors is incomplete, a blueprint lacking plaster and lumber. The cohesiveness and consistency of an actor's interpretation must sway the audience; it must edify as well as clarify. This is
particularly true with the theatrical texts of Shakespeare, who never collected his plays in his lifetime and rarely included stage directions. One could make a case from this that the Bard of Avon viewed his plays as experiences restricted to the domain of performance.

If, then, the actor has the job of critically interpreting a text (and the tougher the text, the greater the interpretive challenge), there can be no greater challenge than Shakespeare's *Othello*. Of all his tragedies, *Othello* is Shakespeare's most relentless and excruciating, in part because the focus is the most narrow and sustained. *King Lear* leaves the entire world in ashes; *Othello*, on the other hand, concentrates on the systematic immolation of one man. Iago attaches himself to his general with the single-mindedness of a lamprey. Even at the very end when the truth is finally revealed, Iago can't resist stoking his victim's pain with frustrating silence: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word.” At some deep level, Shakespeare seemed to recognize that torture is essential to the play because jealousy is a very sado-masochistic emotion. In contrast to *Macbeth*, where the witches directly influence their prey only in two brief scenes, Iago is constantly at Othello's side, unsettling him with his hints and barbs. Even after the general has resolved to kill his wife, his tormentor can't resist the coy flippancy of describing Cassio lying “with her, on her; what you will,” as if Desdemona's infidelity has been so broad as to cover any specific. The overall language of the play is unusually coarse, both in its racial slurs and salacious euphemisms, which adds to the general discomfort. The audience partakes of this masochistic dynamic as if it is helplessly watching some protracted nature special that shows a lion killing a water buffalo for hours.

*Othello* is as unorthodox as it is elemental. Like a great general who defies strategic convention, Shakespeare populates his play with not one but two main characters, thus running the risk of confusing the allegiance of the audience. Richmond is as distinctly secondary in a play about a villain as Claudius is in a play about a tragic hero. When the character with the most lines in *Othello* isn't Othello but Iago, the latter can easily dominate the play. Conversely, an Othello who spends most of the play as Iago's dupe could end with the pity of Aristotle's famous recipe, but none of the terror. To switch the focus from Iago to Othello in the brief span of a few hours is dangerous unless the two are clearly linked, and Shakespeare does this by presenting them as cause and effect. The two lead actors in any production of Othello must achieve a mano a mano parity for this precarious dramatic balance to hold.

As an acting vehicle, Othello gives the strongest cards to Iago. Not only does Iago have more lines than almost any other character in Shakespeare's oeuvre, he is also the most intriguing. As A. C. Bradley succinctly put it in *Othello: Critical Essays*, “This question Why is the question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? is the question about Hamlet.” The motivation of any villain is usually the most obvious and mechanical part of a work of fiction because it is tied to the plot; it supplies the impetus for everything that follows. Shakespeare himself showed an appreciation for this in all his other plays: from Richard's hump to Edmund's heredity, he reveals what makes his villains tick as clearly as if they were bell jar clocks. For someone with such facility to produce “the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, can only be a deliberate deviation. Even in the original source for Shakespeare's play, a novel by Giraldi Cinthio, Iago's motivation is clear and simple: he lusts after Desdemona, and when she spurns him he turns Othello against her for revenge. Only after the murder do Iago and Othello have a falling out.

The multitude of motives that Iago offers can only throw them all into question. Does he act out of hatred for the Moor, jealousy of Cassio's rank, the rumor that Othello cuckolded him, or to further the romantic ambitions of his patron Roderigo? Add to this Iago's assertion that he also suspects Cassio of sleeping with his wife and that he partially lusts for Desdemona himself, and you have enough possible scenarios to baffle the Warren Commission.

To complicate the veracity of any of these motives is Iago's view of his own actions: in this evil ensign Shakespeare created the first self-delusional villain in literature. As Robert Heilman has noted in his book on
Othello, *Magic in the Web,* “The self-revelatory technique of the soliloquy is uniquely used: Iago reveals himself as he gradually slides away from the initial revelation.” Often Iago is as candid in assessing his contemptible behavior as Richard III. At other times, however, Iago seems to believe his own lies. In an interesting exchange in which Shakespeare adds yet another motive, class resentment, to the equation, the common Florentine's attempts at humor are met with disdain by the two Venetian nobles. Desdemona rails, “These are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh in th’ alehouse” and “O most lame and impotent conclusion!” while Cassio tells her, “You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar.” Within fifty lines of these put-downs, Iago is telling Roderigo, “Desdemona is directly in love with” Cassio. And while he goes on to manufacture the proof of this liaison, he seems to believe in its intent. For someone so adept at fabricating rumors, one would expect Iago to question the rumors of his own's wife's infidelity. “Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety” shows Iago as capable of inflating the significance of an absent handkerchief as is his general.

What Iago hopes to achieve is as muddled as why he hopes to achieve it. For almost every other villain in Shakespeare, treachery is a form of career advancement; Iago, however, attains Cassio's lieutenancy relatively early in the play. At first, his revenge requires nothing more than annoying Othello and possibly disrupting his marriage. Success, however, escalates this goal to murder. The stakes become so high that Iago cannot hope to extricate himself from the fate of the others, yet he persists in playing the game. Iago frequently characterizes his own machinations as “sport,” and indeed he has a genius for intrigue, which, like all genius, can produce virtuosity for its own sake. This, however, creates a challenge for actor and audience. As Alfred Harbage has observed in *Shakespeare without Words and Other Essays,* “The most obvious objection to intrigue in tragedy … is that it amuses us, makes us wish momentarily for its success, and creates in us a certain admiration for the intriguer and tolerance for his aims.” The performer must relish this trait even while he tempers it, because Iago appalls as much as he delights. The performance must have opacity as well as transparency; when Iago famously asserts, “I am not what I am,” the audience must perceive both factors in the equation.

The role of Othello presents its own unique challenges to any performer who tackles it. Murderer as victim is a difficult plea in any courtroom, and many critics have voted to convict. Scholars as diverse as Eliot, Hirsh, and Catterson have all expressed doubts about Othello's innocence in the proceedings. As F. R. Leavis has noted, “Othello yields with extraordinary promptness to suggestion, with such promptness as to make it plain that the mind that undoes him is not Iago’s but his own. …” If “honest” Iago is anything but, is the “noble” Moor no better? Iago incites Othello to murder, but some of the cruelest confrontations in all of Shakespeare occur in Acts IV and V when Othello is flying solo. Othello's culpability need not destroy an audience's sympathy: bad things that happen to virtuous people produce only melodrama. Bad things that happen to flawed people because of their flaws produce tragedy. Tragedy doesn't excuse the failings it reveals; rather it punishes them, and the capital sentence Othello executes through his suicide is an admission of guilt. When he speaks “of one whose hand, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe,” he is describing not Iago but himself. To produce genuine sympathy for a man who so cruelly murders his wife is one of the chief challenges for any actor.

There is also the dilemma of Othello's race. Almost from the first performance on, critical debate has raged over whether a Moor is Arab or African. Those who prefer their Othello as a knight in ebony armor tend to lighten his origins. As Emlyn Williams once observed about such a performance, “I suppose the day will come when they'll have a black Iago and a white Othello!” Race is too singular a feature in the play to ignore, and any attempt to diminish it is only another form of avoidance. All the characters seem to view Othello's color as a physical liability: Brabantio and Roderigo are horrified by it; Iago views it as unappealing; the Duke of Venice can offer Brabantio only, “If virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black,” which isn't exactly saying “Black is beautiful.” Even Desdemona defends her choice with “I saw Othello's visage in his mind,” which privileges who he is at the expense of what he is. Othello's racial separateness is essential to his marital insecurity. Othello's race is clearly a case where less is not Moor.
While Othello is the most famous black in Shakespeare's work, he is not the only one; other Moors appear in other plays, and the way he uses them may resolve the role he intended race to play in Othello. In The Merchant of Venice, the first line of the Prince of Morocco, one of Portia's suitors, is, “Mislike me not for my complexion,” and when his suit fails, Portia strains the quality of her mercy with “Let all of his complexion choose me so.” Aaron the Moor in Titus Andronicus is presented as someone whose physical darkness reflects an inner darkness. His illicit affair with the degenerate Tamora produces a bastard who is so physically threatened because of his color that Aaron rhetorically asks, “Is black so base a hue?” Earlier in the play, he echoes a line that Othello will use “Aaron will have his soul black like his face.” The echo is apt; close examination of this character reveals him to be a conflation of Iago and Othello. While scholars continue to argue over how much of Titus Andronicus Shakespeare wrote, there can be no doubt about the influence it had later on in the forming of Iago. A summary of Aaron's actions should make the relation to Iago clear: a villain in a secondary position of power who delights in the sport of his schemes; several of his victims don't perceive this and call him “gentle Aaron”; he counsels the rape of Lavinia, engineers the mutilation of Andronicus, and stabs a nurse to keep her quiet; when he is captured he threatens to speak no more, and at the end of a play notorious for its carnage, Aaron is still alive but under sentence of torture. Aaron has only one redeeming feature: the love he develops for his illegitimate son. Shakespeare later resolved what appears an anomaly in Aaron by dividing his traits between two characters: the warlike black with a streak of noble love on the one hand and the conniving villain on the other. Only when Othello and Iago are plotting Desdemona's murder are the two halves reunited.

The racial stereotypes of Shakespeare's day are more problematic in our own. Even though the slurs in the text are uttered by angry characters, the actor portraying Othello must distance himself from anything that might corroborate the underlying prejudices.

The release of another filmed version of the play, starring Laurence Fishburne and Kenneth Branagh, and the recent refurbishing of Orson Welles's 1952 production afford the opportunity to compare, with Laurence Olivier's 1964 filmed performance, several different interpretations. The only enduring reality most stage performances have is in the judgmental summaries found in reviews. Filmed versions, on the other hand, preserve the performance and offer anyone the objective opportunity to “see for themselves.”

As a detached preface to his film, Orson Welles once explained, “In Othello I felt I had to choose between filming the play or continuing my own line of experimentation in adapting Shakespeare quite freely to the cinema form. … Othello the movie, I hope, is first and foremost a motion picture.” Even though he trimmed the play to just over an hour and a half, enough of the text is here for our purposes. Welles's presence as director as well as actor expands his opportunities to reveal his interpretation through the production. Financial straits may have contributed to some of the interpretation as well: in discussing the four-year struggle to finish the film, Charles Higham wryly observes, “Welles is known to have engaged—and dismissed—three Desdemonas, four Iagos, two Lodovicos, three Cassios, and countless bit players” (The Films of Orson Welles). The finished product, however, is marked by an unusually consistent visual style, and it won the Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival of 1952.

Welles compensated for the cuts in the text with the condensation of visual images, and this is nowhere more effective than at the beginning of the film. The camera tracks up from the back of Welles's head to reveal the rigid figure of the dead Othello on a bier, as austere as an ebony icon except for the fact that he is upside down. Visually, Welles immediately establishes the tragic inversion of jealousy. The funeral procession appears again briefly at the end of the film, a framing device also used in Laurence Olivier's Hamlet. But the effect in the two films is entirely different: in the Olivier movie the procession is stately, dignified, and as British as the changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace; in Welles's film the procession resembles a Spanish religious festival, with the bodies of Othello and Desdemona bobbing on a sea of cowled monks like so many sacred relics, accompanied by a dirge-like wailing of voices (which was much more effectively shrill in the original soundtrack). Iago, in chains, is pulled in the opposite direction of the procession and hoisted
high above the proceedings in a cage, thus establishing two recurring motifs: confinement and an aerial perspective.

The confining patterns that are repeatedly stressed give the play the inexorable, claustrophobic feel of fate. Desdemona often views her husband through the interlocking pattern of an iron grille. Othello locks himself in his bedroom after killing Desdemona and converses with the other characters through barred windows. The redundancies of the architectural facades amplify the impression of implacable patterns by overwhelming the small human figures scurrying before them in long shots. Othello and Desdemona frequently view each other from opposite ends of a room cluttered with pillars, the supports transformed into visual obstacles. Even Iago is not exempt from this visual coercion: several times after furthering his scheme with Roderigo, he is seen walking down an alley with the iron cage he will ultimately be confined in hanging ominously over his head.

The aerial perspective creates an odd emotional distance that corresponds to the physical distance and makes the human struggle against fate seem puny and ineffectual. The skirmish that costs Cassio his rank in the third scene of act 2 takes place in an underground canal witnessed from above by impassive spectators. Similarly, when Othello has his seizure, the camera suddenly takes on Othello's perspective and veers up to the sky as the general collapses, taking in the edge of the ramparts where soldiers idly stare down at him. Othello's final moments as he falls on the bed with Desdemona are viewed by the remaining members of the cast from a hole in the ceiling.

Welles's peculiar preference for the melodrama of fate dilutes the tragedy of the play. Personal flaws or virtues can offer little resistance to such an overwhelming cosmic design; the devastation of personal responsibility is consequently belittled. At the same time, this ploy achieves one of the difficult goals we initially identified: with Othello the victim of impersonal fate rather than of personal failing, he comes across as far more sympathetic. Welles opts for a heroic Othello, and consequently he plays down the racial aspect of the character. The audience's first sustained look at him occurs when Brabantio refers to Othello as "such a thing as thou." The camera shifts to a dashing and exotic Arab in a turban. The old man's racism seems the byproduct of his wounded vanity, and the audience gives it as little credence as does the Venetian Senate. For the rest of the movie, Welles uses Othello's blackness less as race than as an opportunity for visual contrast, a contrast only enhanced by the black and white film used in the shooting. As murderous doubt crowds his mind, Othello is no longer seen in the bright, Cyprian sunlight; more and more he becomes a creature of the castle's shadows, blending in with the darkness, with only his large, pleading eyes the last distinctly human feature discernible.

Welles tempers his Moor's rage with regret; he is more anguished than angry when eavesdropping on Iago and Cassio in act 4, scene 1 (Welles brilliantly obscures their words under the galling squall of the sea gulls overhead) or the frightened look of resolve when he says "Get me some poison, Iago—this night." As Jack Jorgens wrote, "Though Welles' usual effect is of stoically contained passion, he has moments of great pathos, when, for instance, imagining his 'fountain' Desdemona as a cistern of foul toads, he runs his hand slowly down her body with a look of profound sorrow" (Shakespeare on Film). Here is an Othello that visibly continues to doubt even while he acts, and a divided Othello retains some vestige of his frequently mentioned nobility.

Welles's choice of a Iago supports his sympathetic view of the general. With his pudgy, sullen face and his spindly arms and legs, with his lank Florentine curls and his purring, mincing Irish brogue, Michael MacLiammoir creates a Iago as obscenely voluptuous as an angora cat in heat, the last man in the world on whom anyone would waste the adjective "honest" (indeed, Welles cuts most of the appearances of this mantra in the film). Here is a Iago who would do well to replace his famous self-distancing remark from act 1, scene 1 with a quote from Popeye: "I yam what I yam." By excising Iago's soliloquies, Welles also excises his complexity; Iago in this production is a standard villain, a tempter as archly portrayed as any in a medieval morality play. While exaggeration diminishes the play's subtlety, it is the subtlety that creates equivocation in
the audience. By making Iago a standard villain, Welles makes Othello a standard victim. Many of the play's potential problems are flattened out through broad characterization.

Although the text of the play clearly identifies Iago's age (“I have looked upon the world for four times seven years”), Welles chooses to make both the ensign and his wife, Emilia, much older than that, and the shift gives veracity to a number of disparate traits. An ancient Ancient is distanced from passion by more than cynicism. The jaundiced, belittling views of sex and women he utters aren't the sage posturings of a Mercutio who is only slightly older than his audience, they come steeped in the bitterness of one who has outlived his own desires; the passivity of spite is the only form of ardor he can muster. Emilia's own cynical remarks to her mistress about men proceed less from anger than weariness. When Iago and Emilia are seen together they show nothing more than a depthless familiarity; theirs is a union of habit rather than sentiment. With Welles's sensitivity to visual balances, he creates the perfect foil for the young newlyweds: the misunderstandings of excessive passion flanked by the entropy of spent desire.

With his extensive search for the perfect Desdemona, one would think Welles would have found one who was at least adequate, but Suzanne Cloutier does little more than read her lines. It is one of the peculiar things a performance adds to a theatrical text, but Cloutier's presence (performance might be too strong a word here) makes one realize a weak Desdemona is not only a negligible fault, it can even unintentionally add something to a production. Particularly with an uncertain Othello like Welles's, Desdemona's lack of affect increases her ambiguity and facilitates the Moor's confusion. The confrontation between the two in act 4, scene 2 is a case in point. Here is a clash so acrimonious it makes Hamlet's behavior with his mother seem like coddling in comparison. Welles is all bellowing brimstone, while Cloutier remains as passive as a plaster Madonna in a hail storm. Her unconvincing avowals of innocence are more than a specimen of bad acting; they deepen the doubts they are meant to banish.

At the expense of some of the means, Welles achieves Shakespeare's end and creates a genuinely sympathetic Othello. Iago and Desdemona may come up short, but there can be no question that Othello is clearly a play centered on Othello. F. R. Leavis might even have considered modifying his opposition to the character if he had seen this production.

The most famous and controversial traversal of Othello in this century would have to be Laurence Olivier's 1964 performance with the National Theatre of Great Britain. Luckily, a film record of the performance exists. Although at the time it was considered an overwhelming success, critical response ran from hailing to railing: John Osborne found it “dreadful” and “unspeakably vulgar,” while Franco Zeffirelli called it “an anthology of everything that has been discovered about acting in the last three centuries.”

What, exactly, is the bone that produced so much contention? Olivier took Othello's most distinctive aspect, his blackness, and made it the most distinctive aspect of his interpretation. No Arabic evasions here, no Victorian gentleman in cocoa butter declaiming pretty verse while holding a silken pillow inertly over his wife; Olivier's Othello is as African as Lake Tanganyika. Othello represents one of the notoriously external actor Olivier's most elaborately burnished surfaces. If God lies in the details, Olivier's singular worship of this deity qualifies him as pope. Extensive voice coaching enabled him to lower his voice a good six notes below his normal range. His makeup took two and a half hours to apply. The mannerisms Olivier employed were as elaborate as his appearance as he leered and swaggered, rolled his hips, and occasionally lapsed into the cadence of tribal ritual as when he shrieked “O Desdemona! Dead! Desdemona! Dead! O! O!” Such extensive attention to surface runs the risk of preventing an audience from going any deeper than the surface. By making race the salient feature of the interpretation, much that would be legitimately Othello is taken as a characterization of blacks in general. As an impersonation of a race, this Othello could easily seem a travesty; as an interpretation of a specific personality, however, the performance reveals great depth, variety, and pace. It is therefore important to identify what in the interpretation is aimed at Othello's character by justifying it with the text.
The outstanding characteristic of this Othello is the emotional scale: Olivier suffers spectacularly. As Christopher Fry remembered, “The rage was elemental, the pain so private that it seemed an intrusion to overhear it. … ‘But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it. Iago!’, was whispered, face to the wall; and yet it was as large as torment itself” (quoted in Logan Gourlay's Olivier). There is a pragmatic reason for presenting so high-strung an Othello, which has nothing to do with racial stereotyping or ham acting: it explains the murderous shift from loving to loathing within a single scene (act 3, scene 3). A volatile Othello would require only a few insinuating sparks to explode in the opposite direction. Othello's occupation is violent and his emotions correspond to that occupation. When he attacks Iago (“Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore”), it is with as much violence as he later directs against his wife. Olivier's performance brings out all the emotional extravagance in the character; the act 4, scene 1 epileptic fit for once seems a natural consequence of the exhausting upheaval that precedes it. The sheer volume of this performance is frightening, yet it also makes the quiet moments that much more effective, as when Othello pitifully gasps, “If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! I'll not believe it,” or in the bleak stillness of his final speech.

These outbursts come from wounded pride as much as damaged love. Unlike Welles, who presented the Moor as a melodramatic hero, Olivier sees the character rife with all the flaws of tragedy. As he said of Othello in an interview, “… when he says ‘Not easily jealous’ it's the most appalling bit of self-deception. He's the most easily jealous man that anybody's ever written about. The minute he suspects, or thinks he has the smallest grounds for suspecting, Desdemona, he wishes to think her guilty, he wishes to” (quoted in Kenneth Tynan, Great Acting). There is something willful in Othello's emotional excess, and Olivier wanted the audience to see it. Even while the character is writhing in pain, a part of him is also luxuriating in it. There's a narcissistic sheen to the poetic platinum that seems suddenly appropriate; the soaring abandon and bitter exaltation with which Olivier delivers the “Farewell the tranquil mind!” speech presages his whole course of revenge. Olivier avoids the romantic victim to reveal a far more ambivalent, culpable Othello. Little glimpses of the complacency and vanity of his interpretation are there from the start: the easy, chuckling delivery of the “Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors” testimony before the Senate, the obsequious fussing over the Duke's train as the latter leaves at the end of the scene that shows the ostentatious deference only a vain man indulges in. The odd sequence where Othello produces his “sword of Spain” and elaborately threatens Gratiano with it, only to abandon it, suddenly makes sense with this Othello: even though Iago has escaped and Desdemona's innocence has been established, the general's pride is galled at the thought of being confined to his room, and he has to make a gesture of independence to his guard. This critical distance accounts for much of the interpretation's controversy: a flawed Othello who is so flagrantly projected as black makes the flaws appear racial. Like his Othello, Olivier could blame only himself for the resulting uproar.

But there is more than bile and bluster to this performance. Othello's infatuation with his young bride is palpable. The fair warrior was never more lovingly and lingeringly greeted by her general in act 2, scene 1. Olivier is significantly older than his Desdemona and this gap is borne out in the text. Othello says, “I am declin'd into the vale of years—yet that's not much”: the decline is enough to make the telling of his life story an extensive courtship. An older Othello gives an added inequality to the relationship; it also accounts for the smitten quality of this Othello, of someone who can't believe his amorous luck. Like most May/December romances, there is more than lust at work here. The old soldier seems to find something redemptive in the love of this young woman, and there is a mellow tenderness in his reading of the line, “She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd; and I lov'd her that she did pity them,” a fatherly doting as he clucks and chortles while Desdemona pushes Cassio's suit for the first time in act 3, scene 3. All this amplifies the devastation of the young woman's imagined infidelity when it comes. Olivier was accused of overpowering the rest of the cast, but his scenes with Iago reveal what a marvelous straight man he could be. In the great give-and-take of act 3, scene 3, Iago seems all the more masterful in setting down the pegs for the responsive music his Moorish instrument produces.

Frank Finlay's performance provides an interesting gambit for bridging the split in Iago's character: here is a rough, unadorned commoner, his “honesty” coming less from excessive sincerity than from an unvarnished
frankness. Finlay narrows the extremes between Iago's two halves and reveals their connections. Iago's sarcastic remarks to the other characters on love and honor are but a half step from contempt; he sneers at these subjects with Cassio and Roderigo, only to sneer at Cassio and Roderigo later. By not seeming to ingratiate himself, he ingrates himself without detection. The contrast in acting styles between the two leads also contributes to the effectiveness of their relationship: as Jack Jorgens has shrewdly noted about this performance, “The measure of Iago's inroads on Othello's integrity, faith, and sanity is the degree to which his dry, mundane, ‘modern’ style triumphs over Othello's archaic, grand, heroic one.”

This National Theatre production uniformly demonstrates what first rate performances can add to a theatrical text. Maggie Smith gives depth to a role that normally requires little beyond innocence. She is just flirtatious enough in her pleading for Cassio to substantiate aroused suspicion. Her handling of act 4, scene 3 reveals how much these one hundred lines add to the total effect of the play: the inert foreboding that shows from her large eyes as she sings her willow song and asks Emilia to shroud her in her wedding sheets if she should die creates a drop of pity that emulsifies all the surrounding terror. Joyce Redman's Emilia is an earthy, blunt woman, what would later be termed “a tough cookie,” every bit a match for her husband Iago, but someone whom inexperience rouses to sympathy. This makes the bond between maid and mistress feel surprisingly genuine. Many critics faulted Derek Jacobi's Cassio because his effete, slightly effeminate, white noble seemed no match for Olivier's virile Moor. But by playing the character as Othello's exact opposite, Jacobi created the perfect imaginary rival (how can one compete with someone who is everything he is not?). Even Michael Rothwell contributes a wonderfully comic Roderigo by playing the part not with the usual buffoonery, but rather as a figure of grave ineptitude. The tiara of this cast is no less precious for the ostentatious jewel it supports.

Which brings us to the most recent filmed version of Othello. While it might not equal the brilliance of its distinguished predecessors, the production displays much insight, novelty, and conviction. If the interpretive input of actors is as vital as I maintain, a good production can add to our understanding of a play as well as of a great production. The most striking feature of this rendition is that Othello is played by a black actor. When a nonblack actor attempts the role, race becomes a self conscious ingredient, something that falls short or exceeds the mark, but either way gives the subject an exaggerated and distracting prominence. As in the case of a female impersonator, success is achieved not in the suspension of disbelief but in an appreciation of the extent to which the original is transcended. In a peculiar way, a black Othello deemphasizes the subject by putting it in perspective. The Moor's race no longer needs to be established; it becomes an obvious factor an audience assumes. Marital relations can now take precedence over race relations; the who of Othello can be stressed over the what.

The film begins promisingly with a glimpse of Othello in a gondola gliding to his clandestine marriage while holding a porcelain Venetian mask before his face. The prominent black hand holding the white mask in place negates its capacity to disguise and implies that only Othello believes in his ability to evade detection. Laurence Fishburne's Moor is a commanding presence, a tall, good-looking man who exudes confidence and seems to take his difference as a distinction rather than a disability. He is completely uncowed in act 1, scene 2 when challenged by Brabantio and his men; indeed, he holds his sword within inches of his former host's throat as if perfectly willing to resolve their dispute in combat. This is an Othello who does not take a slight, either verbal or sexual, passively. In his defense before the Senate, he shows none of Welles's modesty or Olivier's humbug; he states his case without the slightest fear of misapprehension. This is confidence that goes beyond hubris; courting Desdemona was his right, and he acknowledges no impropriety. With Fishburne, what you see is what you get, which positions him as the exact opposite of Iago.

Othello's attraction to Desdemona is obviously physical: the act 2, scene 1 meeting of the couple in Cyprus contains much unabashed groping as everyone else waits patiently to be noticed; these are not only newlyweds but individuals who haven't spent much time together. This limitation gives the misunderstanding that will follow a certain credence: such a misreading would be impossible with a couple who have become
familiar with each other over years. We see Othello and his wife naked together in bed, and this suddenly gives Desdemona a new dimension: a sexual Desdemona can create sexual worries. When Othello is deep in the throes of jealously, we once again see a naked Desdemona, but now frolicking with Cassio. Emphasizing the carnal connection between these two makes jealousy no longer dependent exclusively on plot twists; but there is a down side. Despite the obvious attraction, Fishburne shows little fondness for his bride. He wears a handful of rings, only one of which signifies marriage. Sour lust is not enough to produce the awful ache of tragedy.

Iago's innuendos produce nothing but anger in Fishburne; again this approach is both consistent with his interpretation and believable (how can an Othello who is only infatuated with his wife feel more than rage at her betrayal?), but it achieves consistency at the expense of simplifying the character. Fishburne's Moor is not the type to doubt any doubt he entertains, consequently he plays down the role's suffering—but suffering is what makes Othello a figure ambivalent enough to be tragic. A performance that only shifts between a haughty smile and a hateful glare may pass for the figure of a jealous man, but a tragedy, even a tragedy about jealousy, requires more. The audience must see the flaws in Othello that Iago manipulates, otherwise the Moor is reduced to a hulking beast who responds to a hankie as if it were a matador's cape. Occasionally Fishburne's aloof approach can capture moments of real poignancy, as when he strangles Desdemona: the audience hears the muffled struggle while it sees Othello's head held at a proud angle, the impassive features compromised only by the tear tracks that reflect the room's candle light. But moments like this are rare. Even a lapse in a performance can help an audience appreciate the elements that must be stressed in the text.

Fishburne's monolithic Moor is counterbalanced by a Iago of irreconciled pieces. Kenneth Branagh completely separates the public and private sides of Othello's ensign, which more fully enables the audience to appreciate the artifice of that public side. As Harley Granville-Barker once observed in his preface to Othello, “The medium in which Iago works is the actor's; and in the crude sense of pretending to be what he is not, and in his chameleonlike ability to adapt himself to change of company and circumstance, we find him an accomplished actor from the beginning.” Branagh projects a guileless, even sunny disposition: one can see why Cassio would waver in his abstinence under such friendly urging, or how the pleading concern in Iago's eyes as he says “O, beware, my lord, of jealousy” might sway a more dubious Othello. Branagh is ingratiating even in his chiding: in the “Put money in thy purse” speech to Roderigo, the racial slurs against Othello are delivered without heat, as if to comfort a friend by insulting his enemy. Even the sarcasm he uses seems no more than a medicinal attempt to rouse the young man's spirits. Thus, Branagh heightens the treachery by heightening the hypocrisy: the poison of this Iago is more deadly because of his protective coloring. A more seductive Iago also takes on more of the responsibility for what transpires, which is important when he is playing against an unresponsive Othello. A tragic hero who hides his tragic flaws can be led astray only against his will: if the prey has no weaknesses then the predator must be twice as strong.

Another aspect of Iago's character that Branagh catches nicely is the impromptu nature of much of his chicanery. Most of the time Iago is winging it, and this is borne out in the text: at the end of act 1 he is sorting through his options, in act 2 he says of his plan, “’Tis here, but yet confus'd,” and in the last act he is still undecided if either Cassio or Roderigo must be killed. Branagh conveys this with a fleeting look of suppressed panic when confronted by the unexpected, as when Bianca storms in with Othello's handkerchief; and when Iago swears his allegiance to Othello's revenge, Branagh embraces the general and we the audience see he has tears in his eyes—only an improviser could be so moved by his own improvisation.

But the more one separates the elements of Iago's personality the more he must justify them individually. By such a convincing portrayal of the convivial exterior, Branagh only makes the misanthropic interior appear unrelated and unconvincing. He abruptly looks sullen before beginning the soliloquies, but this transformation is a poor substitute for characterization. Branagh's Iago is a mask without a face behind it, and the lack brings up all the old questions about motivation from Coleridge and company. While an actor can no more “explain” Iago than a critic, he must at least imply enough of a rationale to make the character plausible; Iago should be
The film ends as strongly as it began. Instead of ending with the couple dead in bed, the locale switches back to Venice. A gondola makes its way to the middle of a canal. The two bodies in it are wrapped in white sheets that completely obscure the troublesome distinctions of race and sex that have plagued the course of the drama. The bodies are slipped over the side, and we see the two forms sinking together yet forever separated, in an ending that seems infinitely sad and oddly appropriate.

All three productions we have studied attempt to make sense out of one of the most daunting plays in world literature. Although the approaches were often radically different, all confronted the problematic aspects of the text and sought to validate their interpretations by consistently matching the details with an overall grasp of the part and the play. Literary critics have attempted to do much the same thing through the remote medium of print. While this is perfectly fine in dealing with other genres, theatrical texts present a unique challenge to the procedure. Performance is the true medium of a play, just as performance is the true medium of a musical score, an element so essential to the end result that eliminating it renders the experience incomplete. Actors are the living tissue of a theatrical text, making connections literary critics can only guess at, as they argue their cases before the arbitration of a live audience. Critics can do more than judge a performance, they can learn from it. It's enough to make those of us who are confined to print justifiably jealous.

Criticism: Production Reviews: Katherine Duncan-Jones (review date 14 May 1999)


[In the following excerpted review of the 1999 Royal Shakespeare Company staging of Othello directed by Michael Attenborough, Duncan-Jones praises the liveliness and clarity of the production, particularly the “assured and charismatic” performance of Ray Fearon as Othello.]

The play [Othello] opens as a lively Jonsonian comedy, with the fascinatingly manipulative Iago running rings round the idiotic Roderigo (Aidan McArdle, something of a Roberto Benigni lookalike). As in a Jonson comedy, the audience are given no emotional option but to respond to the trickster's juicy cleverness. Then the play rapidly becomes a different kind of comedy: the kind in which, in the face of fierce parental opposition, a young couple in love are allowed to marry. This Othello is by no means “descended / into the vale of years”, and a few lines have had to be cut to accommodate his youthfulness. But the thirty-one-year-old Ray Fearon's performance is so assured and charismatic, and his verse-speaking so consistently excellent, that in practice little seems to be lost. A surprising consequence of his assurance is that race seems scarcely an issue. This Othello has poise, control, natural authority, and an instinctive ability to impress the middle-aged men in grey suits here known as the Venetian Signory. Not only does Iago detest Othello for his manifest “promotability”, he also resents his capacity to control others with a light touch (“Keep up your bright swords …”) and, furthermore, he is strongly attracted to him physically, though this doesn't fully appear until the horrible blood-bonding that seals their pact, “I am your own for ever”, with the joining of slashed and bleeding hands. Neither Iago's resentment nor his attraction seem much connected explicitly with Othello's racial difference. There may be good reasons for this. In 1999, aware of such men as Nelson Mandela and Kofi Annan, we are starting to take it for granted that “white” wars may require “black” moderators. The Venetian state's need for Othello seems now almost a truism, not a paradox.

Comic values are maintained after the arrival at Cyprus, not in the embarrassing backchat between Iago and Desdemona about the nature of a good wife, which is cut, but in the soldiers' drinking party. The “sport and revels” for the General's wedding are made enjoyably festive, with fireworks, trays of cocktails and military drinking rituals, and the happily kittenish enthusiasm of Desdemona (Zoe Wanets) for her new husband. This
visually crisp production uses the new depth of the stage effectively for scenes of half-heard and misunderstood exchanges. When Othello urgently asks, entering back stage, “Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?” we want to yell out, as in a pantomime, “Yes, we've just seen him”. But, of course, this is no pantomime, in spite of some Demon King-like stunts from Richard McCabe. Ray Fearon enacts Othello's collapse into disordered thinking and manic violence with terrifying cogency. The production's unusual clarity both of action and speech ensures that nothing is lost, and that even when tragedy risks slipping into melodrama, in lines such as “O Desdemon! Dead Desdemon! Dead! O! O!”, it does not do so. This is the best interpretation of a Shakespeare tragedy that I have seen at Stratford this decade.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Alastair Macaulay (review date 10 January 2000)**


[In the following review of the 2000 Royal Shakespeare Company staging of Othello directed by Michael Attenborough, Macaulay praises the production, noting that although Ray Fearon's performance as Othello was good, there was “no greatness about this Moor.”]

I love the way that Shakespeare's plays are never just “about” one thing. Even when there is not a double plot, each single plot contains its own several strands. Othello is about race; about jealousy; about malice; about motive … so that, while we watch all these things coming together in the great scenes between Othello and Iago, we see a single situation from multiple angles.

And Shakespeare keeps turning his focus on every other character: on Desdemona sighing “O, these men, these men!”, on Cassio's affair with the temperamental Bianca, on the duped and fretful Roderigo, on the mettlesome Emilia, gossiping to her mistress about the handsome Lodovico (“I know a lady in Venice would have walk'd bare-foot to Palestine for a touch of his nether lip.”)

In the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of Othello—which has just arrived in London—it is easy to love all this about the play and more. The production (set about 100 years ago in Robert Jones's designs) has matured handsomely since it was new last April in Stratford-upon-Avon, and it shows the RSC as a true company. Othello and Iago are both sensitively and strongly played by Ray Fearon and Richard McCabe, but it is fascinating how keenly one also pays attention to the supporting players.

As Cassio, Henry Ian Cusick cuts a marvellously dashing figure. The brimming eyes of Richard Cordery's Brabantio, as he bitterly resigns himself to losing his daughter, make a burning impression. Zoe Waites makes Desdemona both a great lady and an artless girl in the first flush of marriage; she brings off the Willow Song affectionately. The simple chatter and the heroic indignation of Emilia hit home in the hands of Rachel Joyce.

Best of all is Aidan McArdle as the foolish Roderigo—and his performance is even more enjoyable if you have recently seen him as Puck and Philostrate in the RSC's Dream. Wearing a little Charlie Chaplin moustache, he can stand motionless, chest puffed and eyes fixed, and listen to a scene—and, as he does, he not only shows you Roderigo's stupid obsessiveness, he also, by his attention, make the whole scene doubly real. He listens better than most actors speak, and he speaks with absolutely characterful naturalness.

The director is Michael Attenborough. His whole production abounds in keenly human details: if you happen, for example, to notice how beautifully Waites's Desdemona listens to Emilia, it tugs at the heart. The only problems occur—and these only occasionally—in making the play work in a big theatre. There are 12 musicians involved in playing George Fenton's music offstage, but I would rather hear two of them playing
visibly, and I would rather the music did not sound like film music (the way it underlines Othello's jealous fit is especially irritating).

As Othello, Fearon never once rants or roars, but his locution is often a little too deliberate, hugging certain consonants, and the husky throatiness of his voice makes for a limited range in a big theatre. It is a good performance, but there is no greatness about this Moor.

Richard McCabe's Iago, with his huge angry eyes and his tense, unyielding face, is sometimes too emphatic. But his is a witty, original conception. When he plants the words “Divinity of hell!” upon the air, it is softly and slowly—innocently even, like a schoolmaster gently explaining to us the way of things.

**Criticism: Production Reviews: Owen Gleiberman (review date 7 September 2001)**


[In the following review of the 2001 film adaptation O, set in a contemporary prep school, Gleiberman contends that the movie captures the mood and emotions of Shakespeare's play but that it fails to reach the level of true tragedy.]

Doing a Shakespeare play without the pesky inconvenience of Shakespeare's language sounds a bit like trying to drive a car without gasoline. Add to that the prospect of *Othello* set within the confines of an elite Southern prep school, complete with up-and-coming Hollywood stars making the Bard “relevant” for a new multicultr millennium, and the whole thing, at a glance, may look as if it reeks of opportunism, of the ultimate in cynically chic teen-niche pandering. The first thing to say about *O*, therefore, is that the movie doesn't just appropriate characters and situations from *Othello*, updating them to the gossipy hothouse atmosphere of a contemporary high school. To an astonishing degree, *O* gets the tragic Shakespeare mood, that somber stentorian passion born of hidden slivers of ambition and betrayal.

Some of the movie, admittedly, is labored. Minus the treacherous eloquence of Shakespeare's words, the business of the stolen handkerchief now plays like the hoariest of hoary devices. Yet the central triangle retains its fevered racial-sexual ambiguity. Mekhi Phifer as the charismatic and forthright yet secretly vulnerable basketball star Odin, Julia Stiles as his ardent girlfriend Desi, Josh Hartnett as the weak and bitter Hugo, who out of a tangle of envy and self-hatred tries to bust their relationship apart—all three actors perform with a liquid contempo naturalism that's as intimate as it is unforced. As the drama comes to its gradual boil, they reveal their emotions with utter nakedness as well.

Directed by Tim Blake Nelson, from a script by Brad Kaaya, *O*, which has finally arrived in theaters after over a year of controversial buzz and delay, turns out to be something far more rare than another novelty spin on Shakespeare (as exciting as some recent reinterpretations, notably the Ethan Hawke *Hamlet*, have been). It's a teen movie that jettisons all irony, inviting us to sink, with an earnestness that feels nearly lush, into the drive and clash of its characters. Odin, the only black student at Palmetto Grove Academy in Charleston, S.C., is a budding superjock, popular for his slam-dunk bravura and also for the casual charm of his off-the-court camaraderie. He's devoted to Desi, and though it's hardly a color-blind romance—he shares erotic jokes with her about being a “buck” who sneaks into the “big house”—the deep-feeling bond that they share, at parties and in her dorm-room bed, makes their relationship look like the essence of a youthfully sophisticated, post-jungle-fever love affair. Phifer and Stiles ground the movie in their playful sensual rapport; they make adoration look sexy. Odin and Desi see each other's race, but mostly they see right past it.
Hugo, too, is on the basketball squad, and the fact that he's not talented enough to be a star is just one of his problems. He's the son of the head coach (Martin Sheen, bellowing like an all-too-believable prep-school Bobby Knight), and he feels passed over by his father, who was responsible for getting Odin a scholarship and who treats him like a saintly, favored second son. As a director, Nelson, who made the disturbingly authentic murder-in-the-Bible Belt drama *Eye of God*, lets his camera swoop and dive on the basketball court, but he stages the rest of the movie with a no-fuss quietude and force, letting the drama emerge from the actors' intensity. Previous Iagos, from Christopher Plummer to Kenneth Branagh, have seethed with private malice, but Hartnett, in a daring performance, plays Hugo as shy, moody, and all too easily wounded—a maliciously overdelicate James Dean who schemes out of impotence, coveting Odin's success with a poison brew of admiration and envy. Hugo is one of Odin's inner circle of chums, and when he decides to plot against him, you wonder, for all of his cunning, how his convoluted plan could possibly succeed. He seems outclassed at every level.

That's where the racial politics of *O* grow at once powerful and, to me at least, a little dicey for comfort. When Hugo tells Odin that white girls like Desi are “horny snakes,” he's playing on the paranoia about otherness that everyone in America knows. Phifer shoots bolts of accusation out of his wary dark eyes. He reveals the spectacle of intelligence working against itself: As Odin begins to suspect his lover of infidelity, the reality of his past—the fact that he didn't grow up with these privileged white kids—starts to overheat and bend his judgment.

The motivation is laid out with meticulous care, and Nelson stages one extraordinary moment of primal anger: Odin, his roiling soul stoked by cocaine (he's a recovering user), smashing the basketball so hard at a dunking contest that it shatters the backboard, much to the ignorant delight of the crowd. Yet the movie, from this point on, has little choice but to escalate Odin's rage even further, and the effect, in its very overstatement, carries uncomfortable—if unintentional—racist overtones. The violent climax of *O* that resulted in all the distribution ruckus turns out to be the worst part of the movie, not because it echoes Columbine but because in the context of a modern American high school, it turns Odin into a junior O. J. Simpson, a young black man whose civilized facade is merely cover for an intrinsic and bottomless rage. Unlike Othello, he withdraws, in his very vengeance, from the audience, and the movie, for all of its feeling, recedes from tragedy.

**Criticism: Themes: Michael C. Andrews (essay date spring 1973)**


[In the following essay, Andrews examines the different accounts that Othello gives of the handkerchief's origins in Othello, maintaining that the first account is true and that the second account is false. The critic contends that Othello changes his story in order to downplay his superstitious beliefs, which would have been viewed negatively by the Venetians.]

The fact that Othello gives two different versions of the history of the fatal handkerchief has, predictably, not passed unnoticed. In his first and more elaborate account (III.iv.53ff.), Othello tells Desdemona that the handkerchief is a love-controlling talisman his mother received from an Egyptian “charmer”:

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'twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
Entirely to her love: but if she lost it,
Or made a present of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies: she dying, gave it me,
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she told her, while she kept it
And bid me, when my fate would have me wive
To give it her; I did so, and take heed on't,
Make it a darling, like your precious eye,
To lose, or give't away, were such perdition
As nothing else could match.

(ll.55-66)

Desdemona, shocked and at least momentarily incredulous, asks “Isn't possible?” Othello then continues:

'Tis true, there's magic in the web of it:
A sibyl, that had number'd in the world
The sun to make two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sew'd the work;
The worms were hallow'd that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserve of maiden's hearts.

(ll.67-73)

At the end of the play, however, when Othello is pathetically attempting to justify Desdemona's murder, he merely refers to the proof of guilt afforded by Cassio's possession of “the recognizance and pledge of love, / Which I first gave her; I saw it in his hand, / It was a handkerchief; an antique token / My father gave my mother” (V.ii.215-218).

Although critics have offered ingenious interpretations whereby the substitution of Othello's father for the “Egyptian” and the omission of any mention of the magical properties of the handkerchief become fraught with significance, it seems to me that all attempts to explain Othello's words to Desdemona as prevarication are liable to the same criticism Nevill Coghill so devastingly levels at T. S. Eliot's reading of Othello's suicide speech. To Eliot, of course, Othello's final speech is an “exposure of human weakness” rather than an expression of “the greatness in defeat of a noble but erring nature.” After quoting the speech (V.ii.339-357), Eliot offers his influential analysis:

What Othello seems to be doing in making this speech is cheering himself up. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself … Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his envirronment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself.

“I do not believe,” Eliot concludes, “that any writer has ever exposed this bovarysme, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare.” To this Professor Coghill replies, with I think unassailable logic, that Eliot's interpretation is unworkable in the theater: “What tones of voice, what move or gesture, can an actor use to suggest a Bovarist cheering himself up?” And how is the audience supposed to determine “whether Othello is cheering himself up for being so gross a fool and a failure, or whether he is cheering his audience up by showing once again, and at the last moment, a true flash of that nobility for which they had first honoured him?” Moreover, as Professor Coghill points out, Eliot's Shakespeare would have to be considered a remarkably clumsy dramatist:

For if Shakespeare had wished to convey the “terrible exposure of human weakness” that Eliot sees in Othello's speech, he could very easily have made this single purpose plain, unless he was a bungler, or quite indifferent to the effect he was creating. For if Mr. Eliot is right, the better this speech is spoken and acted, the more it must deceive the audience; and this is, in effect, conceded by Mr. Eliot, who says Othello “takes in the spectator.”
The handkerchief speech seems to me an analogous instance. How are we to know that Othello is fictionalizing? For whether one says that Othello is speaking symbolically and is really “asking Desdemona to restore to him the sacredness of love,” or simply trying “to cover up the real reason for his disproportionate passion over such a trifle,” the lines are designed, in Eliot's phrase, to take us in. To adopt Professor Coghill's argument, “the better this speech is spoken and acted, the more it must deceive the audience”; the more, in short, we are willing to accept the handkerchief as an authentic element from Othello's exotic and fabulous past.

To say that Othello is concocting a horrific primitive legend is symptomatic of modern skepticism with regard to the heroic, and is perhaps more revealing of our age than apposite. Once on this road, it is easy to push onward—to suggest, for example, that Othello is also lying when he assures the senate that physical desire plays no part in his eager support of Desdemona's request that she be allowed to accompany him to Cyprus (I.iii). And this, of course, has happened. Othello, we are told, knows Moors are considered lustful, and consciously attempts to “side-step” such an imputation: “But the fact is that Othello is not nearly so indifferent to the physical aspects of love as he makes out. In Cyprus, where the strains of his position are more relaxed, his behaviour is perfectly natural and warm.” This seductively plausible psychologizing is perhaps inevitable today, since we tend to forget that Shakespeare is neither a novelist nor, after all, our contemporary. From a less modern point of view it should be obvious that Shakespeare is effectively (if not “realistically”) emphasizing Othello's lack of self-knowledge, later an essential aspect of the play. One thinks, for example, of the difference between Othello's conception of Desdemona's death as a “sacrifice” and his actual conduct in V.ii. Surely Othello is not lying to us when he speaks of the abstract justice of his “cause.”

As a general principle of his dramaturgy, Shakespeare is at considerable pains to alert us to the deceptiveness of those who “lie like truth.”

The reductio ad absurdum of skepticism concerning the credibility of Othello is easy enough to imagine, and is in fact to be found in that John the Baptist of the debunking critics, Bernard Shaw, whose Hesione Hushabye is not only confident Othello fabricated a portion of his romantic past, but suspects that he killed Desdemona to prevent her discovering that some of his fine-sounding stories were lies.

It is interesting how few critics have attempted to argue that Othello's first account of the handkerchief should be taken as the literal truth. There is some piquancy in the fact that, starting from opposite directions, modern skeptics and idealizing traditionalists back into each other, and find themselves in agreement. The traditional view, as expressed in the Variorum, is presumably based on the assumption that Othello simply cannot harbor such primitive notions: he must remain a civilized European gentleman if he is to be worthy of our regard. One thinks of the artless confession of the immortal Miss Preston: “In studying the play of Othello, I have always imagined its hero a white man. It is true the dramatist paints him black, but this shade does not suit the man … Othello was a white man.” On a somewhat higher level, the Prestonian refusal to accept what the play gives us is still to be encountered. We see Othello's visage in our minds, and if it is not white it is (despite Roderigo's “thick lips” I.i.66) at least un-Negroid. Discussing what he calls the “confusion of colour and contour,” M. R. Ridley speaks of the kind of black man the role requires:

One of the finest heads I have ever seen on any human being was that of a negro conductor of an American Pullman car. He had lips slightly thicker than an ordinary European's, and he had somewhat curly hair; for the rest he had a long head, a magnificent forehead, a keenly chiselled nose, rather sunken cheeks, and his expression was grave, dignified, and a trifle melancholy. He was coal-black, but he might have sat to a sculptor for a statue of Caesar, or, so far as appearance went, have played a superb Othello.

(p. li)
Ridley is correcting Miss Preston, so the unconscious irony of this passage is particularly delightful: one is especially grateful for the “keenly chiselled nose.” Surely the contrast between Othello's appearance (by the standards of the play, not only unlikely to inspire love but even frightening) and his inner worth is one of Shakespeare's basic points. Appearance belies reality: Iago, after all, is the sort of man who inspires confidence. I do not go so far as Laurence Lerner, who infers that “Shakespeare suffered from colour prejudice,” and sums up the play as “the story of a barbarian who (the pity of it) relapses.” But I am certain that Othello's personal and racial background are vital to the play. Paul Robeson insists that Othello's “color is essentially secondary—except as it emphasizes the difference in culture.” But this is only partially true. Iago's temptation of Othello depends upon the kind of naiveté Robeson has in mind; but his impassioned behavior when Iago's “medicine” works (e.g., his speech at IV.i.31ff. and passion-induced trance) reflects Shakespeare's acceptance of the popular notion that blacks are more passionately emotional than whites. This does not seem to me to be the same thing as prejudice, provided that the view is not dramatized with prejudicial intent. In Othello it is not; and the protagonist's more than European capacity for violent emotion once his defenses are down is an example of the same attention to decorum—to cite an opposite extreme—which led Shakespeare to characterize Brutus as a Stoic. Othello is a type; he is also an individual, whose terrible suffering Shakespeare presents with imaginative sympathy and absolutely no condescension.

I see, then, no reason to doubt that Shakespeare intended Othello to have some beliefs in keeping with his background. But I also see no reason why belief in the efficacy of magic should, in itself, render Othello any the less noble or imposing as a tragic hero. But we still do not fancy a superstitious Othello—superstition being for us (though not for Shakespeare's audience) far less acceptable than untruthfulness—and the tendency is to give credence to the speech without taking account of its implications, or to reject it and avail ourselves of whatever evidence this debunking furnishes that Othello is really “one of us.”

The speech cannot mean what it appears to mean; therefore it must mean something else. But must it? Setting aside the matters of dramatic representation and dramatic convention, one may attempt to answer the skeptical critics on their own grounds. What evidence does a close reading of the text provide that Othello really regards the handkerchief as a potent love-charm?

The first phase of the temptation scene (III.iii) ends when Desdemona's appearance momentarily counteracts the poison of Iago's words: “If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself, / I'll not believe it” (ll.282-283). Almost immediately after this Desdemona drops the handkerchief; Emilia, remarking that Othello “conjur'd [Desdemona] she should ever keep it,” gives it to Iago. (At this point Othello's great concern that his wife keep the handkerchief with her strikes one as surprising: first gifts have their sentimental value, but Othello seems to be overdoing it.) The next phase—which is decisive—follows. Othello's occupation's gone—but he still demands “the occular proof” (1.366). Iago promises to lead him to “the door of truth”; Cassio's dream, and the handkerchief, are his two means of clenching his case. To the dream (in which Cassio is said to have embraced Iago, bemoaning “Cursed fate, that gave thee to the Moor!”) Othello reacts with untrammeled ferocity: “I'll tear her all to pieces” (1.438). But it is the gift of the handkerchief that is directly associated, in Othello's mind, with the perdition of love:

IAGO.

Nay, but be wise, yet we see nothing done,

She may be honest yet; tell me but this,

Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief,

Spotted with strawberries, (20) in your wife's hand?

OTH.
I gave her such a one, 'twas my first gift.

IAGO.

I know not that, but such a handkerchief—
I am sure it was your wife's—did I to-day
See Cassio wipe his beard with.

OTH.

If't be that,—

.....

Now do I see 'tis true; look here, Iago,

All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven, ...

'Tis gone.

Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell,

Yield up, O love, thy crown, and hearted throne,

To tyrannous hate. ...

(ll.339-346; 451-456)

The sacred vow of vengeance follows.

It is in this context, then, that Othello speaks, revealing for the first time (and too late) the full significance of the handkerchief, whose loss directly symbolizes the loss of love.21 He is addressing Desdemona, by whom the amulet must be guarded. For him to have given her such a charm does not mean that Brabantio was right in suspecting that Othello won his daughter through witchcraft; it is plain enough that Othello regards the handkerchief as ensuring the continuance of his love for Desdemona, not hers for him.22 His first gift to Desdemona, it was given after the inception of love in order to render it perpetual. Till this instant, perhaps, neither Desdemona nor the audience is aware how remote Othello is from the world in which he is a sojourner.23 He comes from the ancient places of the earth; prophetic sibyls and magic in the web need not be alien to one who has traveled among the Anthropophagi. Desdemona, who seems convinced for one horrified moment (“Then would to God that I had never seen it!”), soon pushes this knowledge from her. Her unwillingness to accept the story indicates her rejection of an aspect of Othello's character that is real enough to us, and is no less naive than her failure to detect jealousy; for the handkerchief is in harmony with what we know of Othello. It was given, he tells Desdemona, when his fate would have him wive; even at the end of the play he retains this sense of fated action: “O vain boast, / Who can control his fate?” (V.ii.265-266).24 Human resolve matters little. Like Oedipus, he sees his terrible error as forced upon him from the outside, not simply his own responsibility; and he justly punishes himself for the act he committed in ignorance. It would not be in accord with Othello's character to emphasize his own role. He is “wrought” by Iago; this too is part of his fate.

At the end of the play, Othello is speaking in a public rather than an intimate context, and is on the defensive (“I know this act shows horrible and grim” [V.ii.203]). He speaks of the handkerchief to Gratiano,
Desdemona’s uncle. We should scarcely exhibit anything but a natural reluctance to allude to the handkerchief’s magical powers before an audience for whom his belief in such a talisman would be further evidence of his barbarism. And if it is not simply a careless error on Shakespeare’s part, the same thing may be said of the substitution Othello’s father for the Egyptian “charmer” of the first version. Certainly it is hard to believe that Shakespeare intended this one half-line (“My father gave my mother” [V. ii. 218]), virtually always overlooked by readers and spectators alike, to serve as a dramatic revelation of the truth. And it would have been a serious (and most un-Shakespearian) error to have attempted anything of the sort: the less Shakespeare he. More is involved here than the question of Othello’s earlier honesty: our minds should not be deflected from the main business at hand, Othello’s tragic realization of the meaning of what he has done. For the truth is that the talismanic significance of the handkerchief is no longer relevant. The idea does not require repetition now. Desdemona is dead.

The handkerchief, then, is a crucial element in interpreting Othello. My reading seems to me in accord with the impression conveyed by the play as a whole, before it has been subjected to the sort of too-curious scrutiny that reverses a powerful initial response—one that in this case, as Helen Gardner argues, “contradicts that immediate and overwhelming first impression to which it is a prime rule of literary criticism that all further analysis must conform.” Much recent criticism, in assiduously striving to save us from being duped by Othello’s grandiose image of himself, exhibits, from this point of view, what Edward Hubler has called “the triumph of sophistication over sense.” We do not, in fact, see Othello precisely as he sees himself; but this does not mean that Iago’s angle of vision is closer to the truth, or that we should confidently proclaim that the play’s deceptiveness is such that the most rigorous study is necessary to counteract our initial sense of Othello’s nobility.

The dangers of criticism divorced from both the practical realities of theatrical presentation and historical perspective are evident enough, but nowhere more than with Othello. In the case of handkerchief, historical scholarship may provide a vital service by placing the play in the context of Shakespeare’s time. At the end of his learned but strangely neglected essay, Fernand Baldensperger concludes that “Rymer was right: Desdemona had to die because of a handkerchief; but a token of supernatural powers is not a mere trifle, as Shakespeare seems to have understood it—in spite of the trend of post-Baconian times, more and more adverse to beliefs which have now to be reconstructed in their proper connotations” (p. 14). I do not have any notion what Shakespeare himself believed. But the relevant question is Othello’s view of the handkerchief, and the audience’s understanding of that view. The handkerchief must be reckoned with; it earns a place in the story.

Notes

1. See Variorum Othello, 2nd ed. (1886), p. 317. The interpretations offered here, and those of subsequent writers, will be dealt with later in this paper.
3. Desdemona asks a second time if the story is true; being assured that it is “most veritable” she declares: “Then would to God that I had never seen it!” (III. iv. 75). After Othello departs in a jealous rage she appears perplexed but unconvinced: “Sure there’s some wonder in this handkerchief …” (1. 99).
4. There are other brief references to the handkerchief in the play, none mentioning magic. Too much, I think, has been made of this.

7. “O hardness to dissemble!” (Othello's aside at III.iv. 30) calls attention to how difficult it is for Othello to pretend nothing is the matter. Indeed, his early responses show that he dissembles very badly. Nor—for reasons to be mentioned later—should Desdemona's apparent skepticism be construed as Shakespeare's way of alerting us to the “truth.”


10.Coghill, p. xv. Professor Coghill's conclusion is also relevant here: “It follows … that what begins as an attack on Othello's character turns out as undermining Shakespeare's craftsmanship.”


12. Jones, p. 96. Cf. his assertion that Othello, in the murder scene, “shows an enthusiasm for Desdemona's body which he had deliberately concealed from the senate” (p. 97).


15. Variorum, p. 395; quoted by Ridley, Arden *Othello*, p. 1i.


E.g., Jones, *Othello’s Countrymen*, pp. 101-103. Jones retains the belief that Othello is essentially noble; one imagines what someone less charitable—say Dr. Leavis—would have done with this reading of the speech. A third possibility remains: to take the passage, as Elliott does, as “an indirect confession that from the very beginning Othello was predisposed to mistrust his wife and, far more fatefully, to hide that mistrust” (*Flaming Minister*, p. 145). McPeek argues for a more sinister variation of this position, finding Othello guilty of necromancy, “the original sin of his mother”—though he raises the possibility that Othello is dissembling (“The ‘Arts Inhibited’ and the Meaning of *Othello*,” pp. 143-144). Both Elliott and McPeek proceed on the assumption that the handkerchief is supposed to keep Desdemona faithful; see n. 21 below.

19. See Laurence J. Ross, “The Meaning of Strawberries in Shakespeare,” *SRen* [Studies in the Renaissance], VII (1960), 225-240. David Kaula, to whom I am indebted for this reference, notes that the two iconographic meanings of the strawberry—righteousness and hypocrisy—are deftly exploited: “The former meaning is appropriate to Desdemona as she really is, the latter to Desdemona as Iago is making her appear …”. “Othello Possessed: Notes on Shakespeare’s Use of Magic and Superstition.” *Shaks.* II (1966), 123. See also P. G. Mudford, “Othello and the ‘Tragedy of Situation,’” *English*, XX (1971), 4-5. Mudford, whose study appeared after my own essay had been completed, views the handkerchief as Othello’s “sacred” love-charm; he notes that “Thy bed, lust-stain’d, shall with lust’s blood be spotted” (V.i.36) echoes the description of the handkerchief.

20. Cf. Evans, pp. 134-136. Evans is uncertain whether to accept or reject Othello’s account of the handkerchief, but argues that Othello’s “mind reverts … to a magical world in which he has always faintly believed, despite his professed Christianity. He comes to accept that only magic made his extraordinary marriage possible …” (p. 134).

21. Cf. Elliott, pp. 145-146; Lerner, “The Machiavel and the Moor,” p. 358. In addition to what Othello says in III.iv, see II.iii.91-93: “Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul, / But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again.” It is hard to see that Othello’s “That handkerchief which I so lov’d, and gave thee, / Thou gavest to Cassio” (V.ii.48-49) is designed to contradict the meaning established here.

22. Cf. W. H. Auden on Desdemona's refusal to admit she has lost the handkerchief: “she is frightened because she is suddenly confronted with a man whose sensibility and superstitions are alien to her” (*Encounter*, August, 1961, p. 13).

Criticism: Themes: Martin Orkin (essay date summer 1987)


[In the following essay, Orkin considers attitudes toward race in England at the time Othello was written, focusing on the way that Shakespeare treated the subject and concluding that the playwright opposed racism. Orkin also offers a survey of other critics’ opinions of the play's treatment of race and pays particular attention to the way Othello has been received in South Africa.]

Solomon T. Plaatje did not come to Shakespeare's plays with the same perspective as those held, no doubt, by most of his contemporary counterparts within the white ruling group of South Africa. But he responded to significant aspects of Shakespeare more reliably than they. Plaatje, who translated several of the works, including Othello, into Tswana, observed that “Shakespeare's dramas … show that nobility and valour, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any colour.”

Before Plaatje's time, Othello had been, during the nineteenth century, one of the most popular plays at the Cape. But a personal advertisement taken out before an 1836 performance suggests the gulf that lay between Plaatje's sentiment and what is likely to have been the opinion of inhabitants in 1836:

In frequenting the Theatre, do not professing Christians pointedly violate their baptismal vows? … In listening to Othello, do they not necessarily contract a horrible familiarity with passions and deeds of the most fiendish character … and give up their minds to be polluted by language so gross? Is not the guilt of such persons great, and their danger imminent?

The absence or presence of racist attitudes inevitably determines one's response to Othello, as the difference between Plaatje's remark and the comment of the above writer demonstrates. In the following pages, after discussing attitudes to color in Shakespeare's England and in Othello (Sections I-V), I will examine instances in which racist mythology inscribes critical responses to the play (Section VI), focusing finally (Section VII) on how, in South Africa, silence about the prevailing racist tendencies in Othello criticism actually supports racist doctrine and practice.

I

The English encounter with Africans began from about the mid-sixteenth century. Native West Africans had probably first appeared in London in 1554; certainly, as Eldred Jones points out, by 1601 there were enough black men in London to prompt Elizabeth to express her discontent "at the great number of 'Negars and blackamoors' which are crept into the realm since the troubles between her Highness and the King of Spain." In turn, Englishmen visited Africa in significant numbers in the second half of the sixteenth century, primarily for reasons of trade.

As such scholars as Eldred Jones and Winthrop Jordan have taught us, there is ample evidence of the existence of color prejudice in the England of Shakespeare's day. This prejudice may be accounted for in a number of ways, including xenophobia—as one proverb first recorded in the early seventeenth century has it, "Three Moors to a Portuguese; three Portuguese to an Englishman"—as well as what V. G. Kiernan sees as a general tendency in the European encounter with Africa, namely, to see Africa as the barbarism against which European civilization defined itself:

Revived memories of antiquity, the Turkish advance, the new horizons opening beyond, all encouraged Europe to see itself afresh as civilization confronting barbarism. … Colour, as
well as culture, was coming to be a distinguishing feature of Europe. Furthermore, as Winthrop Jordan argues, the Protestant Reformation in England, with its emphasis upon personal piety and intense self-scrutiny and internalized control, facilitated the tendency evidenced in Englishmen to use people overseas as “social mirrors.” Referring to the “dark mood of strain and control in Elizabethan culture,” Jordan highlights too the Elizabethan concern with the need for “external self discipline” in a context of social ferment and change. “Literate Englishmen … concerned with the apparent disintegration of social and moral controls at home” were on occasion inclined to project their own weaknesses onto outsiders, to discover attributes in others “which they found first, but could not speak of, in themselves” (Jordan, pp. 23-24).

These tendencies were coupled with a tradition of color prejudice that scholars identify in the literature and iconography of Shakespeare's day and earlier. As the OED indicates, the meaning of the word “black” includes, before the sixteenth century, a whole range of negative associations. Such factors may help to account for the white impulse to regard black men in set ways. English ethnocentrism fastened upon differences in color, religion, and style of life. Eldred Jones has assembled material that shows that Elizabethan Englishmen saw the natives of Africa as barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous. An account of the inhabitants along “the coast of Guinea and the mydde partes of Africa,” for example, observes that they

were in oulde tyme called Ethiopes and Nigrite, which we nowe caule Moores, Moorens or Negros, a people of beastly lyvynge, without a god, lawe, religion or common welth, and so scorched and vexed with the heate of the soone, that in many places they curse it when it ryseth.

The treachery of black men was popularized in George Peele's play, The Battle of Alcazar (1588); their libidinousness was exemplified in William Waterman's Fardle of Facions of 1555, which noted of the Ichthiophagi that, after their meals, “they falle upon their women, even as they come to hande withoute any choyse …” (Jones, p. 8). And John Leo's History and Description of Africa (trans. 1600) presents the somewhat conflicting claim that black men are extremely jealous:

[W]homsoever they finde but talking with their wives they presently go about to murther them … by reason of jealousie you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, … they will by no means match themselves unto an harlot.

(quoted by Jones, p. 22)

II

What evidence exists in Othello that Shakespeare shared the color prejudice apparent in his age? I would argue, first, that there is racist sentiment within the play, but that it is to an important degree confined to Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio. Both Iago and Roderigo use racist insinuation during their attempted putsch against Othello's position and reputation. Iago, as we know, calls up to Brabantio that “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (I.1.88-89) and that

... you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you;

(I.i.111-13)
Roderigo, too, is proficient at racist insult, referring to Othello as the “thicklips” (I.i.66) and falling upon the racist stereotype of the lust-ridden black man when he calls to Brabantio that his daughter has given herself to the “gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (I.i.126). Furthermore, the language of these two men ignites a similar tendency to racism lurking within the Brabantio who has in the past invited Othello to his home as a guest. Provoked, Brabantio laments in anger that if Desdemona's bewitchment—as he construes it—is to be permitted, then “Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be” (I.ii.99). Othello is of course neither a slave (although, as he tells us, he had once been one) nor a pagan, but Brabantio projects both roles onto the general, referring also to the “sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” (I.ii.70-71).

This racism makes no impact upon the Venetian court as a whole. Even where Brabantio is concerned, although Iago and Roderigo successfully manage to expose an element of hidden racism, the father's grief is mixed. His problem is as much to come to an understanding of the fact of his daughter's disobedience as it is to cope with his misgivings about his son-in-law's color. The immense authority that parents claimed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries explains at least a part of the father's rage. When he is told of his daughter's elopement, Brabantio's first cry is, “Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds” (I.i.170), and his insistence that the marriage goes against nature at least includes the suggestion that the unnaturalness lies in part in the flouting of loyalty. Certainly, Desdemona, when called upon for an explanation, offers one that deals with the issue of parental authority (I.iii.180-89). Brabantio's final expression of grief communicates anger at her deception and betrayal rather than at the “inter-racial” nature of his daughter's marriage:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.  
(I.iii.292-93)

The Venetian court ignores the racism implicit or explicit in Brabantio's remarks; they have, after all, elected Othello general and he is, as we learn later in the play, esteemed by them as the “noble Moor” whom they consider “all in all sufficient” (IV.i.265). Certain critics argue that it is only the imminent crisis with the Turks that determines their restraint in the accusation brought against Othello. However, although the emergency clearly dominates their thinking, as would be the case for rulers of any state under threat, no evidence emerges in the detail of the language to suggest that they share a hidden racist disapprobation of Othello. Brabantio's initial accusation, with its racist asides, might well have been taken up by one with racist predilections; instead, the Duke asks only for concrete proof to replace the “thin habits and poor likelihoods / Of modern seeming” which “do prefer against him” (I.ii.108-9). The first senator attempts, it is true, to ascertain whether Othello did “by indirect and forced courses / Subdue and poison this young maid's affections” (I.iii.111-12), but, even before the evidence has been fully heard, he also acknowledges, in a way that negates any suggestion of racism, that the relationship between Othello and Desdemona might well be based upon “request, and such fair question / As soul to soul affordeth” (I.iii.113-14). When, finally, the truth has been heard, the Duke responds, “I think this tale would win my daughter too” (I.iii.171), and his ensuing attempt to console Brabantio—although it obviously suggests, in its platitudinous ring, a desire to move on to the emergency facing Venice—argues for reconciliation and acceptance.11

Furthermore, the racism displayed by Iago, Roderigo, and, in his uglier moments, Brabantio, contrasts with others in Othello. Cassio, the Florentine, clearly loves and respects his general; deprived of office by Othello, he does not resort to the resentment that characterizes the response of the ensign who considers he has been passed over. Yearning only to win again his superior's favor, Cassio blames himself:

I will rather sue to be despis'd than to deceive so good a commander with so slight, so drunken,  
(II.iii.277-79)
And Desdemona, also like Iago a Venetian, not only loves Othello but remains consistently in love with him throughout the play, never, despite that to which she is subjected, impugning either that love or her husband.\textsuperscript{12}

Nevertheless, at times in the play speakers besides Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio appear to refer to or to draw upon racist discourse. These include the Duke, Desdemona, and even Othello himself. Before examining such remarks, however, it is necessary for us to consider the overall presentation of Iago and Othello in the text.

III

Winthrop Jordan argues that \textit{Othello} loses most of its power and several of its central points “if it is read with the assumption that because the black man was the hero English audiences were indifferent to his blackness. Shakespeare was writing both about and to his countrymen's feelings concerning physical distinctions between peoples. …”\textsuperscript{13} The observation is an important one. Shakespeare is writing about color prejudice and, further, is working consciously against the color prejudice reflected in the language of Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio. He in fact reverses the associations attached to the colors white and black that are the consequence of racist stereotyping. It is Iago, the white man, who is portrayed as amoral and anti-Christian, essentially savage towards that which he envies or resents, and cynical in his attitude to love—for him “merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will” (I.iii.334-35).

Iago's tendencies are exposed to the audience from the start. In reacting to his own failure to secure promotion he attacks both the system that he serves and the man who has won the position he coveted. He voices the time-serving bureaucrat's objection that promotion goes not by the “old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to th' first” (I.i.37-38) and denigrates the abilities of his successful rival as “Mere prattle, without practice” (I.i.26). Moreover the viciousness in Iago's seething resentment at having to remain in a condition of subordination, his restless barrack-room malice, flashes out in his cynicism towards Cassio and in his dislike of the alien implicit in his reference to his rival as “a Florentine” (I.i.20). Iago's scorn for social bonds or any concept of duty, his assertion, “Not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end” (I.i.59-60), identifies his ruthless hypocrisy and self-interest. When he asserts his intention to deceive (I.i.61-65), he describes society as predatory—ready to “peck at” any exposure of feeling. This negative projection onto society produces an overtly stated intention to be himself a predator. His picture of society as ready at the appropriate moment to cashier the “kneecrooking knave” (I.iii.45) is not borne out by the play in either Cassio's or indeed Othello's experience. Iago's projections result patently from a sense of failure and rejection, which, as Jane Adamson observes, he fails to acknowledge:

\begin{quote}
Iago's significance … centres on his unremitting efforts to deny or suppress the feelings that consume him, and to transform them into other feelings that might at once allow and justify a course of retributive action, instead of his having impotently to suffer fear, loss and self-disgust and negation.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

\textit{Othello} is about love and also about its absence. Iago, in rejecting a social conscience, eschews Christian values asserting the importance of a positive and loving commitment to one's fellows and one's society. Moreover, the consequences of Iago's rejection of communication and commitment extend beyond mere escape from the inevitable vulnerability and risk that the action of love to a degree always involves. Iago also loses the capacity to comprehend love. The irony in his racist brooding—especially in his soliloquies about Othello's alleged sexual license—is that his own mechanistic and cynical view of love (as he outlines it at the conclusion of Act I, and as he claims it for the Venetians), approximates closely the penchant for lust of which black men were accused in racist accounts. Perhaps nowhere else in drama is Jordan's point about the Elizabethan faculty for projection onto the other so well illustrated as in Iago's imaginings about Othello's alleged promiscuity.
On at least two occasions in the text, Iago's amoral and anti-Christian attitude appears to be directly indicated. William Elton has identified in I.iii.320-26 an instance of Pelagian heresy: in extolling man's complete freedom Iago propounds a philosophy that St. Augustine labored to eradicate. Then, when Othello takes his terrible vow (III.iii.453-62), Iago pledges:

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

(III.iii.463-69)

The text here echoes Desdemona's earlier language of love to Othello, but, in kneeling and twisting the sentiment into a promise to serve his general in “what bloody business ever,” Iago perverts the First Commandment, thus desecrating his own morality. In terms of the Christian context of the play, destructiveness emanates from Iago: it is his savagery that, as the play unfolds, tears at the fabric of his society.

In his presentation of Othello as the antithesis of the stereotypical “Blackamoor,” Shakespeare runs counter not merely to Cinthio's treatment of the Moor in Hecatomithi, but also to the currents of color prejudice prevalent in his age. Shakespeare's Othello is invested with the prerequisites of nobility—he is born of “royal siege” (I.ii.22), he is a great soldier, he possesses a lofty vision, and Shakespeare gives to him the richest language in the play. Moreover, as Christian general best suited to defend Cyprus against the Turks, Othello would have had special heroic resonance for his Jacobean audience. Repeated battles over Cyprus occurred during the sixteenth century, with the famous and symbolically important battle of Lepanto occurring in 1571.

Othello's capacity for love is intimately bound up with his sense of honor, a sense that includes the public as well as the private being. His understanding of marriage does not admit infidelity. Nor is he unique in this. Certain commentators in the sixteenth and seventeenth century viewed adultery with extreme seriousness. As Stephen Greenblatt observes, it was held to be one of the most horrible of mortal sins, more detestable, in the words of the Eruditorium penitentiale, “than homicide or plunder,” and hence formally deemed punishable, as several authorities remind us, by death. Early Protestantism did not soften this position. Indeed, in the mid-sixteenth century, Tyndale's erstwhile collaborator, George Joye, called for a return to the Old Testament penalty for adulterers. “God's law” he writes, “is to punish adultery with death for the tranquillity and commonwealth of His church.” This is not an excessive or vindictive course; on the contrary, “to take away and to cut off putrified and corrupt members from the whole body, lest they poison and destroy the body, is the law of love.” When Christian magistrates leave adultery unpunished, they invite more betrayals and risk the ruin of the realm. …

The moral laxity at the court of King James, too, perturbed commentators, one of whom wrote of

the holy state of matrimony perfidiously broken and amongst many made but a May-game … and even great personages prostituting their bodies to the intent to satisfy and consume their substance in lascivious appetites of all sorts.
Othello's detestation of adultery sets him amongst the moralists, at the opposite pole from Iago's savage
cynicism about sex and love.

Furthermore, Othello's sense of honor is intimately bound up with his belief in justice, evident in the first act
not only in the context of his knowledge of the service he has done Venice, which will “out-tongue”
Brabantino's complaints (I.ii.19), but also in his confidence that the evidence he offers will exonerate him. In
Act II he dismisses his own appointee when the evidence convicts him, despite his personal love for Cassio,
and in Acts III, IV, and V he applies judicial procedures in an attempt to handle the crisis into which he is
plunged. His suicide is also for him an act of justice in which he provides for himself suitable punishment for
what he now understands to have been the murder of his own wife.

In his presentation of Othello, then, Shakespeare appears concerned to separate his hero from the fiction that
the racist associations attached to his color allege. We may recall here that Ernest Jones cites instances from
Shakespeare's earlier work to maintain that, although Shakespeare may have begun with unthinking
acceptance of the color prejudice of his age, he started to move beyond this before Othello. Whereas the
portrayal of Aaron in Titus Andronicus largely conforms to the negative Elizabethan racial stereotype, by the
time of The Merchant of Venice Shakespeare offers a more dignified Moor. 18 More important than this
perhaps is the evidence that G. K. Hunter provides in order to identify a current of writing in the literature of
the seventeenth century and earlier which endeavors to abandon the use of the colors black and white as
reliable signs of personality and moral fiber. To illustrate this tendency Hunter quotes from Jerome's
commentary on Ephesians 5.8 (“For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as
the children of light”) that “He that committeth sin is of the devil. … Born of such a parent first we are black
by nature, and even after repentance, until we have climbed to Virtue's height. …” He then cites Bishop Hall,
who, encountering a black man, opines:

This is our colour spiritually; yet the eye of our gracious God and Saviour, can see that beauty
in us wherewith he is delighted. The true Moses marries a Blackamoor; Christ, his church. It
is not for us to regard the skin, but the soul. If that be innocent, pure, holy, the blots of an
outside cannot set us off from the love of him who hath said, Behold, thou art fair, my Sister,
my Spouse: if that be foul and black, it is not the power of an angelical brightness of our hide,
to make us other than a loathsome eye-sore to the Almighty. 19

There is, admittedly, residual racism in such writing: the color black still attaches to the concept of evil.
Nevertheless a separation of the sign black from the essential goodness or evil of human beings also takes
place.

IV

It is partly in such contexts that we need to consider certain remarks made by Desdemona, the Duke, and even
Othello himself. In some lines, the characters speak in ways that appear to acknowledge the currents of racism
in Shakespeare's day; further, they speak in ways that play off their actual responses towards each other
against awareness—which it is impossible in terms of literary tradition easily to escape—of current or
traditional attachment of (racist) values to these colors as signs. Thus Desdemona speaks of having seen
Othello's visage “in his mind” (I.iii.252), the Duke tells Brabantio that

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black

(I.iii.289-90)
while Othello himself, in bitterness, is at least partly alluding to the patristic significance of his color when he cries out at what Desdemona's “adultery” has done to him:

Her name, that was as fresh  
As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black  
As mine own face.  

(III.iii.386-88)

In contrast to these instances, Emilia, torn by grief and anger at the death of her mistress, cries

O, the more angel she,  
And you the blacker devil!  

(V.ii.130-31)

drawing directly upon the racist tendency in patristic and literary tradition. But earlier, when Emilia asks Desdemona whether she thinks her husband jealous, Desdemona's reply suggests an equally direct rejection of this tradition:

Who, he? I think the sun where he was born  
Drew all such humors from him.  

(III.iv.30-31)

Desdemona here takes the darkness of her husband's skin as a positive sign of virtue.

In addition, Othello, as his sense of betrayal intensifies, intermittently refers to the racism that, present in his world, must lurk at the edges of his consciousness or identity. Iago, aware of precisely this, attempts to penetrate the integrity of Othello's sense of self and encourage his acceptance of a version of himself and his interaction with others drawn from the discourse of racism. In Act I Shakespeare presents the love of Othello and Desdemona as extraordinary; the destructive wave that Iago, exploiting racist impulses, tries to bring against the two, fails. But in Act III, Iago tries again when he bears witness against the integrity of Desdemona. After his first warning about Desdemona (III.iii.197), and after his deliberate reference to Venetian “pranks” that postulates a shared ethical system from which Othello is excluded, he makes a fleeting reference to the possibility of color prejudice—“And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks, / She lov'd them most” (III.iii.207-8). Then, a few lines later, as Othello ponders Iago's remark—“And yet, how nature erring from itself” (III.iii.227)—Iago takes a direct step into the explosive subject of color:

Ay, there's the point; as (to be bold with you)  
Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereo we see in all things nature tends—  
Foh, one may smell in such, a will most rank,  
Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.  

(III.iii.228-33)

Othello's line prompting Iago's interruption may suggest that he entertains, in a fallen world, the prospect of the decline of his and Desdemona's exalted love from its true nature into an adulterous and ordinary plane. However, the line echoes the phrasing of Brabantio's attack upon him at I.iii.60-64 and it encourages Iago to intervene with racist insinuations. But although Iago works for the substitution of Othello's view of himself by a narrative drawn from racist discourse, he treads on dangerous ground and must, when he goes in the present
instance too far, withdraw:

But (pardon me) I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgement,
May fall to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent.

(III.iii.234-38)

The word “form” in the *OED* has as its sense not only “A body considered in respect to its outward shape and appearance” but also “manner, method, way, fashion (of doing anything)” (first citation 1297). Elsewhere Iago remains careful to keep his allegations within the bounds of differing social conventions, as when he exploits Othello's position as outsider to Venetian custom at III.iii.201-3. Moreover Othello himself comments on the fact that he is to an extent a stranger to the intimacies of Venetian social life. Attempting to understand the possible reason for Desdemona's supposed infidelity, he refers again to his color, indicating at once what this signifies for him:

And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or. ...  

(III.iii.263-65, my italics)

As soldier as well as “stranger” Othello is well aware of the difference in behavior between himself and the “wealthy curled darlings” (I.ii.68) of whom Brabantio speaks.

Nevertheless the possibility or danger of racism, which Iago in this exchange attempts to convert into “fact,” occasionally surfaces elsewhere in the language of the Othello who was once a slave. Thus at III.iii.189 he reflects “For she had eyes, and chose me.” Endeavoring to dismiss Iago's hints that he might have cause for jealousy, Othello recalls that as suitor he was one of presumably a number of wooers Desdemona might have chosen and sets against an assumed deficiency of merit the fact that Desdemona preferred him. However his words give at least partial credence to the racist fictions Iago attempts to encourage, to the possibility that Desdemona herself incorporates in her “revolt” an element of racism. Such anxiety about the possibility of racism, when it surfaces, remains occasional, inevitably ambiguous, and only one element in the unfolding of Othello's crisis.

V

Despite Shakespeare's separation of the “real” Othello from the racist fictions associated with his color, the fact remains that in Act V Othello smothers or strangles his wife. How are we to take this image of violence? Or, to put the question differently, what is the reality that lies behind his action, the appearance of which—in its collocation of violence with a certain color—has been so inviting to racist interpreters of the play?

The act of desperation presented in the text does not confirm in Othello a special form of “barbarism” from which, say, certain European peoples are immune, nor, indeed, does the partial corruption of the Othello-language by the Iago-language in Acts IV and V ever include complete acceptance of Iago's racist (as opposed to his socio-cultural) thrust against the general. The murder of Desdemona presents to the audience the most terrible version in the play of the tragedy of human action in its aspect of error. Moreover, the play does not trivialize this recognition by proposing that it is the consequence of a particular—and therefore avoidable—susceptibility to weak judgment. Towards the end of the play, Emilia, ironically in the presence of the husband whom the audience knows to be the very “villainous knave” of whom she complains, yearns for
extra-human powers of perception:

O heaven, that such companions thou'rtst unfold,
And put in every honest hand a whip
To lash the rascals naked through the world
Even from the east to th' west!

(IV.i.141-44)

Such powers, the play continually asseverates, are denied to human beings. The final image of a black man stifling or strangling a white woman, it might be argued, deliberately courts a racist impulse, which we know was likely to have been present in certain members of Shakespeare's first audiences. But it does so only to explode any such response. The play, before this moment, has presented multiple acknowledgments of the different factors that vitiate any hope of perfect perception or judgment in a postparadisal world. I have already noted that color, as surface indicator of identity, is shown to be totally inadequate. Again, from the start of the play, in the extended exposure he gives to Iago, together with his presentation of the ensign throughout, Shakespeare concentrates on the problem of the inevitable vulnerability of human judgment to hidden malice. Moreover, in the various “trial scenes” in the play, Shakespeare demonstrates the extent to which the judicial process itself is subject to abuse because of the unreliability of testimony. These issues underlie the portrayal of Othello's dilemma and they help to register a human problem that is most intensely and painfully presented in that final image of suffocation.

When Shakespeare makes the audience Iago's confidant at the play's beginning, he endows the audience with a position of omniscience that no member of that audience outside the theatre can possess—and that the members of the Othello world cannot possess either. The audience is invited to realize, accordingly, the danger of concealed antisocial behavior and, too, its power, for Shakespeare also bestows upon Iago the greatest reputation of anyone in the play for honesty. Paul A. Jorgensen has stressed the frequency with which the word “honest” is appended to Iago's name and he has also suggested that Iago's official function as ensign may have been to expose knaves. Again, the fact that Cassio and Desdemona, as well as Othello, trust Iago cannot be overemphasized. None has the god-like vision—the lack of which Emilia laments—that would enable him or her to penetrate the surface honesty of Iago to discover the reality. Thus Cassio, dismissed from office largely as a result of Iago's skillfully devious manipulation, turns nevertheless to the “honest” ensign for advice. And Desdemona, in her hour of greatest need, which also results from the work of Iago, kneels to the “honest” friend of her husband to beg for help. One of the most strident accusations against Othello has been that he is too gullible, but granted the care with which Shakespeare emphasizes, in his presentation of Iago, the potency as well as the effectiveness of concealed malice, Othello's only protection against his ensign would be extra-human powers of perception—an X-ray vision granted to no person.

Through his presentation of Iago, Shakespeare demonstrates that in an imperfect world human judgment can never penetrate beyond the opacity of deliberately deceptive discourse. Moreover, Shakespeare explores this problem in the specific context of the process of justice. The narrative fictions a man may weave about himself or others become in the legal context the testimony he offers. And it is most interesting that the vulnerability of testimony to distortion was a particular talking point in the legal discussions of Shakespeare's time and later. Amongst other commentators, Robert Boyle, for instance, stressed the crucial role of the witness:

You may consider … that whereas it is as justly generally granted, that the better qualified a witness is in the capacity of a witness, the stronger assent his testimony deserves … for the two grand requisites … of a witness [are] the knowledge he has of the things he delivers, and his faithfulness in truly delivering what he knows.
Barbara Shapiro, who argues that reliance upon testimony was increasing during this period because of the growing mobility and complexity of society, emphasizes that the issue was particularly crucial in the matter of witchcraft:

The fact that witchcraft was a crime as well as a phenomenon and thus had to be proved to a learned judge and an unlearned jury, … provides an unusual opportunity to observe theories of evidence at work. For the courts, witchcraft was a matter of fact and, like all questions of fact, turned on the nature and sources of the testimony. … [Reginald] Scot's [Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584)] exposed one type of trickery and fraud after another and denounced Continental legal procedures which, in cases of witchcraft, permitted excommunicants, infants, and “infamous” and perjured persons to testify, and allowed “presumption and conjectures” to be taken as “sufficient proofes.”

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries prosecution for witchcraft increased rapidly throughout Europe and laws against it were passed in 1542 and 1563 and again in 1604, the probable date of Othello. Side by side with the legal offensive against witchcraft, however, the debate about the credibility of witches intensified. In 1616 John Cotta wrote with extreme caution about the use of testimony:

The concern with justice in Othello clearly relates to these issues. It may be remarked that where doubt about any situation arises the only way in which society may attempt to ascertain the truth after the event is through the process of law. The series of “trial scenes” that, critics have noted, take place in Othello all depend in the main upon testimony. Moreover, the first of these “trial scenes” centers specifically upon the charge of witchcraft.

Brabantio maintains that Desdemona “Sans witchcraft” (I.iii.64) could not have chosen Othello—a fact of which Iago is not slow to remind his general (III.iii.211). Furthermore, Othello himself, during his account of the courtship, explicitly dismisses the charge of witchcraft (I.iii.169). Othello and Desdemona offer reliable testimony in this scene and the general is “acquitted.” In this scene and those that follow, the debate about the judicial process and the complexities associated with reliance upon testimony must certainly have been evoked for those members of Shakespeare's first audiences interested in the law. In the two subsequent “trial scenes,” Iago is chief witness against Cassio and then Desdemona; not only his false testimony but his opportunistic exploitation of various situations prove crucial. Shakespeare emphasizes too that the problem posed for the judicial system by the potential unreliability of testimony is not reducible to explanations of extra-human (satanic) propensities for evil. Thus Shakespeare lets Iago boast to his audience that his fabrication of evidence or his alert opportunism, which subverts the law, results from the application of intellect, partly from what Greenblatt has identified as his talent for “improvisation”:

Thou know'st we work by wit, and not witchcraft,
And wit depends on dilatory time.
Does't not go well?

(II.iii.372-74)
The final “trial scene” in Act V results from the successful abuse of justice which occurs in Acts II and III. The guilty man in that scene is Othello, the one who has cared most about morality and justice during the play. This posits a skeptical and troubled view of the efficacy of the process of justice as an instrument to achieve the ordered identification and administration of the right and the good. The implications about the inadequacy of the judicial system—the susceptibility of legal processes to deception and manipulation—remain at the close of the play.

What is Othello to do when his trusted friend, the Iago who also has an impeccable reputation for honesty in his society, tells him that his wife is an adulteress? In the increasing conflict that Othello experiences after Iago has alleged the adultery of Desdemona, Shakespeare presents in its most acute form the problem of human perspicacity and its limitations—posed in both the personal and the public or legal contexts in the first two acts. For Othello, as Christian commander of Cyprus, the sanctity of his marriage, the defense of the island, and the maintenance of order are inextricably linked. Just as he will not earlier be seen to neglect his public role because of his private marriage to Desdemona, he cannot prevent the dishonor he imagines to exist in his private life from permeating his whole existence. Yet his most trusted source has identified Desdemona for him as an adulteress. Placed upon the wrack he continually struggles against what he cannot at the same time refute—without the power of omniscience Shakespeare has granted only to the audience.

For one thing, he demands evidence—

Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore;
Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof

(III.iii.359-60)

—evidence that does not ease the struggle because of his love of Desdemona. Iago, we may recall, obliges. After offering him inflammatory images—“Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topp'd?” (III.iii.395-96)—he follows with his account of the dream, depending upon the traditional medieval and Renaissance authority of certain dreams as an index to reality. The handkerchief for Othello has similar importance not in itself but because of the vital “magic” Iago has wrought upon it as a piece of evidence. In the practice of justice such objects are vested with special significance precisely because man is unable to perceive perfectly either past events or present identities. Othello also seeks to communicate with Desdemona directly, but Shakespeare portrays not only how the manipulation of a hidden deceiver may further diminish the normally fallible powers of human perspicacity but also how accidental misunderstanding of the situation affects her powers of judgment so that in her advocacy of Cassio's cause she unwittingly exacerbates the situation and makes Othello's chances of reaching her even more difficult.

Winifred Nowottny, in what is still one of the most helpful essays on the play, describes the ways in which Act IV offers the “dreadful spectacle of Othello's attempts to escape” the tension within him between his own image of Desdemona and that which Iago has given him:

The pitch rises as his ways of seeking relief draw, horribly, ever nearer to Desdemona and to the deepest intimacies of love. The falling in a fit is a temporary way of not bearing the tension. That, shocking as it is, affects only himself. The next way is the striking of Desdemona. His striking her in public (for in their private interview there is nothing of this) is a symbolic act: a calling the world's attention to the intolerableness of what he suffers by the intolerableness of what he does. The treating of Emilia as a brothel-keeper is an expression of the division in him at its deepest level: to go to his wife as to a prostitute is to try to act out what the situation means to him.
The evidence Othello receives continually fails to satisfy him for, as Nowottny also points out, what he wishes to discover is Desdemona's innocence. Moreover, the great truth underlying Othello's violence in all this is clear: it has been precipitated not by any innate barbarism of his own but by the barbarism of Iago. The one thing his violence confirms is that if nobility and valor, like depravity and cowardice, are not the monopoly of any color, then neither is the angry destructiveness that is born of hurt and betrayal.

Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio seek only love and honor in the play. The horror of Act V results partly from the fact that, even as Othello kills Desdemona, he still loves her, whilst Desdemona's love, too, remains constant—in dying she blames no one but herself. Othello's language in that final scene, often commented on, shows, side by side with his agonized awareness of the light he is to extinguish, his concern for release, for justice and punishment, his painful, enduring sense of love which ensures that Desdemona, as Christian, be permitted to confess—not merely to confirm her guilt but also to ensure her salvation.

It may be true that Othello does acknowledge at its end that antisocial and destructive members of society such as Iago have no more control over their imperfect visions of the world and their actions than anyone else. Iago, despite his attempts at secrecy, finds himself exposed. But the justice of his undoing means far less than the errors of those who in the play are good. Their fates result from the danger of language which, because of its opacity, may lend itself to distortion. The inevitable limitations of human judgment, furthermore, make error possible, rendering the good and the just inescapably prey to the actively evil and malign.

VI

South African critics generally avoid Othello; when they do write about it they hardly touch upon its concern with color, and seek refuge instead in a focus upon idealist abstractions or upon interiority. Thus one critic sees the play as a “tragedy of love overcome by cynicism”—Othello, only briefly referred to in this article, has a “magic” love whereas Desdemona's love is superior, suggesting something “more mature, a human grace humanly worn, not supernatural” and she manifests throughout the play “integrity” and “higher possession of self.” And another critic, claiming that the play offers a “demonstration of one of the frightening possibilities of human love” observes that “for Shakespeare, as for any literary artist, the story is clearly partly an artifice—not a realistic account of the way human events would be likely to turn out in everyday life, but a convincing image of the way things might essentially be: an image created in the process of distilling an insight into, or a revelation of, human nature.”

Such emphases—upon the essence of love itself (with Othello inevitably coming out second best)—or upon the “truths” of human nature, in the South African situation, encourages, by a process of omission and avoidance, continuing submission to the prevailing social order. That in the play which challenges existing relations of domination and subordination—the play's concern with the unreliability of racist stereotyping, the difficulties in human interaction, the limitations (rather than the essence) of justice and human judgment—remains ignored.

It is important to recognize too that this practice in South African criticism of the play offers, inevitably, a narrow and attenuated version of certain European and American perspectives. Moreover, in these approaches as well dangerous ambiguities may be detected which perhaps ought not to be fleetingly noted in passing (with superior amusement) but more directly addressed. Such approaches tend to ignore the play's concern with the tragic problems attendant upon human judgment and perception. They choose instead to focus, often obsessively, upon Othello himself. Whilst Bradleyan notions encourage this tendency, it is difficult in most cases to avoid the conclusion that, finally, the attribution to Othello of certain characteristics on the basis of his color provides the springboard for the ensuing interpretations. And such criticism often includes not only a series of personal attacks upon Othello's nature, it also infers or implies reservations about his adequacy.

F. R. Leavis's somewhat notorious essay on Othello provides an example. In the course of presenting his case against Bradley's view of Othello as a “nearly faultless hero whose strength and virtue are turned against him” (p. 137), Leavis lets slip some singular observations. For instance, discussing Othello's marriage to
Desdemona, he comments that “his colour, whether or not ‘colour-feeling’ existed among the Elizabethans, we are certainly to take as emphasizing the disparity of the match” (p. 142, my italics). This insistence on Othello's blackness as a sign of the “disparity” in the marriage is accompanied later by another, at best ambiguous, remark that, under Iago's pressure, “Othello’s inner timbers begin to part at once, the stuff of which he is made begins at once to deteriorate and show itself unfit” (p. 144, my italics). Moreover, despite his apparently sarcastic reference to Othello's relatively mature age when he writes of the “trials facing him now that he has married this Venetian girl with whom he's ‘in love’ so imaginatively (we're told) as to outdo Romeo and who is so many years younger than himself” (p. 142), Leavis still manages, later in the argument, to find Othello guilty of “self-centered and self-regarding satisfactions—pride, sensual possessiveness, appetite,” and “strong sensuality with ugly vindictive jealousy.” These defects are compounded with a series of other telling weaknesses: “an obtuse and brutal egotism,” “ferocious stupidity,” and an “insane and self-deceiving passion” (pp. 145-47). Earlier in the century T. S. Eliot accused Othello of lack of insight when he asserted that he had “never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness … than the last great speech of Othello,” where the hero could be seen to be “cheering himself up” and “endeavouring to escape reality.”

Leavis develops this accusation in a somewhat tortuous observation that links up, no doubt, with the “unfitness” of his Moor’s “inner timbers” when he concludes that Othello's last speech “conveys something like the full complexity of Othello's simple nature” (p. 151, my italics).

Small wonder perhaps that Sir Laurence Olivier’s tour de force in the National Theatre's production of Othello during the mid-1960s (subsequently filmed) disappointed some—despite its disturbing popular appeal. The program notes accompanying the performance of the play offered liberal extracts from Leavis's essay, perpetuating the notion, already prevalent in Shakespeare's day, of the black man as savage, as sensual, and vindictively jealous, and also of course, as simple.

To notice such peccant ambiguities (at best) in Leavis's writing is not to offer a gratuitous slur. Apart from the fact that the subject matter of Othello demands that we recognize the matter of color and the possibility of prejudice, this mode of regarding Othello stretches far back in English criticism. Thomas Rymer, one of the most famous of the play's detractors, is best known for his censure:

So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief? Why was not this call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief?

But the quality of his criticism is perhaps better represented by another of his adjurations deserving as widespread notoriety:

This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors.

(quoted in Vickers, p. 27)

No less a commentator than Coleridge had this to say:

[I]t would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro. It would argue a disproportionateness, a want of balance, in Desdemona, which Shakespeare does not appear to have in the least contemplated.

Thus, Coleridge shares a tendency noticeable in nineteenth-century criticism to make Othello an Arab rather than an African. And A. C. Bradley, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflects as follows on Othello's color:
Perhaps if we saw Othello coal-black with the bodily eye, the aversion of our blood, an
aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would
overpower our imagination and sink us below not Shakespeare only but the audiences of the
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.39

Even more shocking than the presence of such notions in the minds of earlier critics writing about the play is
the fact that they appear to be shared by one of the most influential of the relatively recent editors of Othello.
Tellingly, the Arden edition is still repeatedly set for the use of South African students. Its Introduction
contributes to the particular strain of racism that accompanies so much of English writing about the play. M. I.
Ridley, the editor, appears at one point to dismiss a typical nineteenth-century racist response manifest in the
ruminations of “a lady from Maryland” quoted also in the New Variorum edition of Othello. But a passage
from Ridley’s purported dismissal of her comments is enough to indicate the flavor of his own attitudes. He
takes the lady to task in the following way:

Now a good deal of trouble arises, I think, from a confusion of colour and contour. To a great
many people the word “negro” suggests at once the picture of what they would call a
“nigger,” the woolly hair, thick lips, round skull, blunt features, and burnt-cork blackness of
the traditional nigger minstrel. Their subconscious generalization is … silly. … There are
more races than one in Africa, and that a man is black in colour is no reason why he should,
even to European eyes, look sub-human. One of the finest heads I have ever seen on any
human being was that of a negro conductor on an American Pullman car. He had lips slightly
thicker than an ordinary European’s, and he had somewhat curly hair; for the rest he had a
long head, a magnificent forehead, a keenly chiselled nose, rather sunken cheeks, and his
expression was grave, dignified and a trifle melancholy. He was coal-black, but he might
have sat to a sculptor for a statue of Caesar, or, so far as appearance went, have played a
superb Othello.40

The preference for the Ridley text in South African universities is unlikely to be purely coincidental.
Interestingly, however, at secondary level, where South African students are exposed to little more than the
text itself, Othello is rarely taught. The South African educative authorities clearly sense something in the play
itself sufficiently inimical to racist ideology and practice to discourage its use in high schools.

More recently than Ridley, Laurence Lerner, in arguing that we should not “sentimentalise” Othello,
participates in the tradition of criticism developed by Eliot and Leavis.41 We may be certain that, as an
ex-South African, Professor Lerner eschews racism of any kind and his article presumably attempts to avoid
not merely overt racism but the covert inverted racism that might be detected in an unsubstantiated overeager
defense of Othello. But having respectfully quoted both Eliot and Leavis, he cannot—whatever we may wish
to speculate about his motives and however generous we need to be towards them—for long remain on the
sidelines. Lerner presents Othello as an amalgam of the noble and the jealous, the soldier and the fool, the
Christian and the barbarian who is reduced to “stammering bestiality” in the course of the play (p. 352). There
is, however, no need to linger over the ambiguous comments that punctuate his article, for its tenor becomes
clear towards the end—

… Othello is a convert. Noble and upright as he is, he seems all the nobler when you consider
what he was—a Negro, a barbarian. … Everyone remarks in the first act that Othello is black,
that the environment he grew up in is one where passions rule. … When Othello falls there
comes to the surface just this black savage that everyone in the first Act was so pleased that
he wasn’t. … I am afraid Shakespeare suffered from colour prejudice. Othello is seldom
played in South Africa, where it is not thought proper for white women to marry black men. I
am never sure that the South Africans are wise about this: for if one can put aside the
hysterical reaction that any play depicting inter-marriage must be wicked, one should be able
to see quite a lot of the South African attitude present

(pp. 357-60, my italics)

—*Othello* as a public relations exercise for apartheid!

Equally distressing in much critical writing about the play is the fact that certain associations attached to the colors black and white in literary and iconographic tradition appear to have remained embedded in, and affected the attitudes of, twentieth-century critics towards the dramatic characters in *Othello*. Lerner's observation—

Blackness is the symbol, in the imagery, not only for evil but for going beyond the bounds of civilisation: in the end, the primitive breaks out again in Othello. The two Othellos are one: the play is the story of a barbarian who (the pity of it) relapses …

(p. 360)

—provides a clear instance of this. The dangerous insistence on blackness as the “heart” of “darkness,” so pressingly present too in Conrad's famous story—blackness as strongly linked with the primitive, the savage, the simple—lurks within many ostensibly non-racist articles as well.42 Thus, in a well-meaning article which is nevertheless of this kind, K. W. Evans is unable to shake off racist overtones in his use of the terms “blackness” and “whiteness.”\(^43\) He observes:

Othello's blackness, the primary datum of the play, is correlated with a character which spans the range from the primitive to the civilised, and in falling partially under Iago's spell Othello yields to those elements in man that oppose civilised order.

(p. 139)

Despite his recognition of “those elements in man that oppose civilised order,” Evans fails to stress the fact that the destructive impulses in the play emanate primarily from Iago whilst earlier in the article appearing to confuse traditional literary color denotations with overt racial categorization. He describes Desdemona and Othello in this way:

Desdemona dies … because of naivete that exceeds her own. … *Considering the factors of age, race and above all, the lovers' simplicity, ordinary realism suggests that this marriage was doomed from the start.* … For much of Othello's second phase, a picture of the violent, jealous, credulous, ‘uncivilised’ Moor reverting to type dominates the play. … The *darkness* in the bedroom is not complete but is broken by an enduring vision of Desdemona's *whiteness*.

(pp. 135-36; p. 138, my italics)

As I suggested earlier, such interpretations of *Othello* result partly from the tendency to treat Othello as a character in isolation from the context in which Shakespeare sets him in the play, and in isolation from the problems identified by the language of all those who speak besides, as well as including, the general. Whenever this is done, something has to be found to explain the character and actions of the hero. Whilst Shakespeare himself sees the tragedy as primarily lying elsewhere than in Othello (as a “black” man), such analyses, ignoring this in their attempt to arraign the hero, recently appear to have become more and more desperate. One fairly new article, which quotes with apparent approbation both Lerner and Leavis, not only finds Othello to be strongly sensual, vindictively jealous, and ferociously stupid, but contorts the character at
the same time into someone both sexually frustrated and sexually unsuccessful!\textsuperscript{44}

VII

None of these critics, it may be claimed, was necessarily desirous of being racist when he wrote. But the danger is that we leave unidentified, except perhaps in passing, these undercurrents and their implications in such work—as if to register them would be an exercise in bad taste. Whatever the case may be elsewhere, in South Africa, silence about so tenacious a tendency in \textit{Othello} criticism has the effect of a not-too-covert expression of support for prevailing racist doctrines.

For those in South Africa who abhor the dominant apartheid ideology and its practice, \textit{Othello} has special importance. Indeed, Othello's reference to his being “sold to slavery” and to his “redemption thence” (I.iii.138), during his account of his early life, cannot be taken by a South African audience as a purely incidental remark. Like the extensive concern with color in the play the brief mention of slavery directs us to that faculty in man for destruction and exploitation. And, in South Africa, slavery was one of the crucial factors contributing to the growth of racist ideology. The South African historians du Toit and Giliomee describe the impact of slavery upon Cape society in this way:

As the number of slaves increased in the eighteenth century, the effects of slavery began to permeate the entire social order. The belief became entrenched that the proper role of the white inhabitants was to be a land- and slave-owning elite, and that manual or even skilled labour in the service of someone else did not befit anyone with the status of freeman. Slavery, then, came to inform the meaning of other status groups as well. Cardozo remarked that in a slave society freedom is defined by slavery; thus everyone aspired to have slaves. With respect to the Cape an observer remarked in 1743: “Having imported slaves, every common or ordinary European becomes a gentleman and prefers to be served than to serve. … The majority of farmers in the Cape are not farmers in the real sense of the word … and many of them consider it a shame to work with their hands.\textsuperscript{45}

The quotation from a nineteenth-century South African response to \textit{Othello}, with which I began this article, was actually published when the Great Trek, which was at least in part a response to the abolition of slavery, had just begun. Some of the Trekker leaders resisted the abolition precisely because it removed forms of social discrimination. Karel Trichardt, for instance, noting his people's reactions to the abolition, emphasizes that “the main objection to the new dispensation was the equalisation of coloured people with the whites,” and Anna Steenkamp, the niece of another Voortrekker leader, protested that the emancipation of slaves involved their equalization with the Christians, in conflict with the laws of God and the natural divisions of descent and faith, so that it became unbearable for any decent Christian to submit to such a burden; we therefore preferred to move in order to be able the better to uphold our faith and the Gospel in an unadulterated form.\textsuperscript{46}

Such distasteful attitudes are likely to have resulted from the loss of that position of exploitation which du Toit and Giliomee identify. Indeed the theorist Harold Wolpe has stressed the importance of the connection between racism and the context in which it occurs:

The failure to examine the changing, non-ideological conditions in which specific groups apply and therefore interpret and therefore modify their ideologies results in treating the latter as unchanging … entities. By simply ascribing all action to generalised racial beliefs, prejudices or ideologies, the specific content of changing social relations and the conditions of change become excluded from analysis.\textsuperscript{47}
Many factors may have contributed to the growth of racism in South Africa, but the use of racist mythology to justify or mask exploitation seems to be one of the society's most consistent features. To take only one further instance: the exploitative classes who came to South Africa in the last years of the nineteenth and early twentieth century found racism convenient in a context from which they too were materially to benefit enormously. In an address to the South African Colonisation society, one Sir Matthew Nathan, for instance, had this to say on the subject of black nurses:

Just as the natives had a peculiar exterior so they had a peculiar character, and it was obvious that the British colonist did not want his child imbued with the ideas of a lower civilisation.48

Other recorded observations, then and since, from those who stood most to profit from the “implications” of racism, communicate attitudes often almost identical to those Shakespeare gives to Iago.49 To a degree, too, Iago's mode of operation anticipates what later social historians and theorists identify in racist behavior. Iago's and Roderigo's color prejudice is recognized as sordid, the resort of men who in one way or another feel mediocre and overlooked. Iago uses racism against an individual whose skills, ability, and success in crucial ways exceed his own. And he uses it as a tactic—when he believes it may afford him some material advantage over the man whom he wishes to control and if possible destroy.

Certain English and sometimes American responses that reflect color prejudice stand as a warning as to the ease with which many of the central concerns in Othello may be obscured. In South Africa, the so-called Immorality Act, which forbade relationships between people of different colors and which was only in 1985 apparently abandoned, was peripheral in its impact upon the majority of South Africans as compared with the many other more crucially destructive laws which have shaped the present socio-economic and political dispensation. Yet because of the attempt it made to interfere with, legislate upon, and exploit for purposes of control human desire and love, it retains a symbolic repugnance. For the South African audience, Othello must still be experienced within the shadow of this Act and the larger system of which it formed a part. Athol Fugard's Statements is one of the many attempts made in the literature of South Africa to portray the way in which racism utilizes the law in order to shatter the private relationship of two people in love. Othello, too, presents the destruction of a love relationship in which, in ways specific to its own context, racism and the abuse of the legal process play a terrible part. Nevertheless, in its fine scrutiny of the mechanisms underlying Iago's use of racism, and in its rejection of human pigmentation as a means of identifying worth, the play, as it always has done, continues to oppose racism.

Notes

6. G. K. Hunter's “Othello and Colour Prejudice” is excellent, as is Eldred Jones's highly informative Othello's Countrymen. See also Jones, The Elizabethan Image of Africa (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1971).


9. It might be argued that the term “color prejudice” is more appropriate for the sixteenth and seventeenth century than the term “racism.” However, equally, it may be argued that from the perspective of the twentieth century the term “color prejudice” is not profitably to be distinguished from the modern sense of racist practice. The one implies, if it does not always lead to, the other. As early as the sixteenth century, active exploitation/persecution on the basis of color was, in any event, under way. Oliver Cromwell Cox, “Race and Exploitation: A Marxist View,” Race and Social Difference, eds. Paul Baxter and Basil Sansom (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 205-20, describes Sepulveda, who in 1550 attempted to justify the right of the Spaniards to wage wars against the Indians as “among the first great racists; his argument was, in effect, that the Indians were inferior to the Spaniards, therefore they should be exploited” (p. 210). In the present article, the terms “color prejudice” and “racism” and their variants are used interchangeably.

10. All references to Othello are from The Riverside Shakespeare, gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), with square brackets deleted.

11. The Duke's comment at I.iii.289-90 is discussed below.


18. Othello’s Countrymen, pp. 49-60, 68-71. We may note here a possible irony registered during the presentation of Portia's color prejudice. The OED cites for the word “complexion”—“4. The natural color, texture, and appearance of the skin esp. of the face”—Morocco’s “Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun” (The Merchant of Venice, II.i.1-2). In view of this citation it is possible that there is hypocrisy in Portia’s polite flattery of the Moor’s appearance (II.i.20-22) when set against her privately stated opinion at I.ii.129-31.


26. According to Greenblatt, “improvisation” is “the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario” (pp. 227 ff.). Ruth Cowhig, “The Importance of Othello's Race,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2 (1977), 153-61, argues that the audience witnesses in part “the baiting of an alien who cannot fight back on equal terms” (p. 157).

27. “Justice and Love in Othello,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 21 (1952), 339. Ruth Cowhig observes: “Othello was very closely followed by King Lear, and in both plays Shakespeare seems to be exploring the basic nature of man, and especially the effect on that nature of the subservience of reason to the passions” (p. 159).

28. The natural vulnerability of goodness to hidden malice is underlined as a central concern in the play in the account of Desdemona's escape from the storm, when Cassio speaks of “The gutter'd rocks and congregated sands, / Traitors ensteep'd to enclog the guiltless keel” (II.i.69-70).


31. I have explored another, equally important dimension to the play in “Civility and the English Colonial Enterprise: Notes on Shakespeare's Othello,” *Literature in South Africa Today, Theoria Special Issue*, 68 (December 1986), 1-14.

32. We may recall here the observation of Charles Husband, the social psychologist, that “it is the deterministic association of category of person with type of behaviour that is at the core of race thinking”:

[R]acism refers to a system of beliefs held by the members of one group which serve to identify and set apart the members of another group who are assigned to a “race” category on the basis of some biological or other invariable, “natural seeming” characteristic which they are believed to possess, membership of this category then being sufficient to attribute other fixed characteristics to all assigned to it.

(‘Race’ in Britain—*Continuity and Change*, pp. 18-19, cited in note 4)


35. The program note to the National Theatre production of *Othello* (London: The National Theatre, 1964)—with Sir Laurence Olivier as Othello and Frank Finlay as Iago, production by John Dexter, performed at the Old Vic during the 1964-65 season—quotes extensively from Leavis's essay and includes most of the passages to which I refer in my discussion, together with many others, germane to the present point, which I do not quote.


38. The beginnings of the great debate about Othello's color go back to the late eighteenth century. In a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 61 (1791), Verbum Sat (pseud.) writes,

He is a Moor, and yet is always figured as a Negro. I need not tell that the Moors, or people of the North of Africa, are dusky, but with very agreeable features, and manly
persons, and vigorous and ingenious minds; while the Negros have features remarkably unpleasant, mean persons, and little power of mind. I suspect that this ludicrous mistake proceeded from Shakespeare’s speaking of the blackness of Othello’s complexion, and indeed face, compared with the European: and I am convinced that is not older than the revival of the theatres in 1660.

(pp. 225-26)

In “Some Notes on Othello,” Cornhill Magazine, 18 (1868), 419-40, J. J. Elmes is one of the nineteenth-century writers who disagrees with Coleridge. Even so, he quotes Schlegel at one point—

We recognize in Othello the wild nature of that glowing zone which generates the most ravenous beasts of prey and the most deadly poisons, tamed only in appearance by the desire of fame, by foreign laws of honour, and by nobler and milder manners.

(p. 438)

—and he underlines later the “repugnance, more generally felt than expressed, to a Negro being the hero of a love story” (p. 438). See also Francis Jacox’s opening remarks in Shakespeare Diversion, Second Series: From Dogberry to Hamlet (1877), pp. 73-75, and Cumberland Clark, Shakespeare and national character. A study of Shakespeare’s knowledge and dramatic and literary use of the distinctive racial characteristics of the different peoples of the world (London: Hamlin, 1928):

In spite, however, of his intercourse with the polite world which had produced that westernised veneer so easily assumed by the coloured races, Othello is still barbarian bred with instincts that suddenly break forth in ungovernable impulse.

(p. 134)

The debate about a tawny or black Othello lingers on as recently as Philip Butcher, “Othello's Racial Identity,” SQ, 3 (1952), 243-47, who argues: “Brabantio is not merely annoyed because his consent was not asked. Only a black Othello can serve as adequate motivation for his attitude towards his daughter's marriage to a man of exalted rank and reputation” (p. 244). Arthur Herman Wilson’s letter to SQ, 4 (1953), 209 contests this. Ruth Cowhig, “Actors, Black and Tawny, in the Role of Othello—and their Critics,” Theatre Research International (Glasgow), 4 (1979), 133-46, provides an historical survey of changing attitudes to the color of Othello from the late eighteenth century on. I am most grateful to the late Professor John Hazel Smith for alerting me to the writers mentioned in this footnote.

39. Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 165. Sanford E. Marovitz, “Othello Unmasked: A Black Man's Conscience and a White Man's Fool,” Southern Review (Adelaide), 6 (1973), 108-37, identifies a similar tendency towards racist innuendo in the writing of Harley Granville Barker. However, the article itself goes on to display ambiguity: the author identifies a conflict within Othello between a civilized self and a “savage consciousness” (p. 124): “The emotionalism and barbarity characteristic of the black stereotype at last wholly prevail over the cool, rational behaviour of the white Christian world which the alien Moor had adopted” (p. 125), “Othello's rational soldier's mind, the mind of a white Christian, is overwhelmed” (p. 130), etc.


In the following essay, Young argues that Othello “highlights the danger of racial categorization” by presenting a nonwhite protagonist who embodies both noble qualities and human vulnerability.

More than any other writer, Shakespeare embodies the distinctive principles of Western Civilization. Men and women of the West are drawn to Shakespeare because his plays and poems continue to express their aspirations, to articulate their concerns, and to confront the tensions and contradictions in the Western vision itself. He is admired not as an uncritical encomiast of his own culture and society, but rather as an exemplum of the spirit—both critical and conservative—that is among the West’s most enduring legacies to the world. It is, therefore, no surprise that academic literary critics, who owe their very existence to Shakespeare and other great writers, have cast doubt upon Shakespeare’s exalted position at exactly the moment in history when the societies of the West have become most anxious about their own integrity and probity.

No issue has proven more vexatious than race in the assessment of the moral stature of Western Civilization. The drive toward multiculturalism, which is especially vigorous in the academic world, rests on the proposition that the culture of the West, in virtually all its manifestations, is an elite hegemony of white European males, which routinely marginalizes, represses, and generally victimizes women, the poor, adherents to non-Christian religions, and—above all—the dark-skinned races indigenous to other continents. While the chief playwright of the Western world is, according to this view, fully implicated in the crimes of his culture, The Merchant of Venice and Othello, plays that offer characters and incidents with a plausible relation to contemporary concerns, undermine any such judgment. Both plays unsettle assumptions and disturb the conscience—these are among the effects of great works of art, which are strengthened by the inquiring spirit of Western Civilization. Nevertheless, the disturbance arises from an essentially Christian
vision of human nature and the human condition that, while affirming their reconciliation in God, acknowledges the tension between justice and mercy in this world.

*The Merchant of Venice* can be an extremely troubling play for contemporary audiences. While commentators of an earlier generation sought to save Shakespeare and the Christian characters from the charge of intolerance and anti-Semitism by turning the play into an allegory, more recent readings often maintain, to the contrary, that Shakespeare in fact lays the groundwork for the racialist anti-Semitism of a later era in the character of Shylock. Now *The Merchant of Venice*, although it involves significant symbolic elements, is not an allegory; and although it has certainly had an impact on European culture, the play has not—among reasonable persons—contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism. Such provocation for anti-Semitism as it provides has been there in the culture all along, and the principal effect of *The Merchant of Venice* is to disrupt any ideological complacency deriving from the apparent Jewish stereotype presented by Shylock. This disruption does not entail Shylock's romantic transmogrification into a tragic hero; in fact, it is his stubborn villainy that generates the uneasy tension that runs through the drama. Shylock is certainly a more malicious individual than Antonio, Bassanio, or Portia, yet there can be no question that the Jew suffers ill use at the hands of the Christians. Shakespeare's critical spirit is nowhere more manifest: in literature as in life, the individual whom we find pleasant or engaging is not always good, not always fair; and justice is not always served by just any action taken against a malefactor. It is precisely because Shylock is so cruel and repellent that his appeal to our common humanity is so poignant.

Regarded as a depiction of a Jew, *The Merchant of Venice* stands out because there is nothing else like it. Villainous Jews are not unusual in medieval literature. Indeed, Jews who compel our attention as suffering human beings are virtually unheard of before Shakespeare. It is generally agreed that Shakespeare takes most of the plot from the tale of *Gianetto*, which appears in a fourteenth-century Italian collection, *Il Pecorone* (the “blockhead” or “dolt”). Shakespeare adds depth of meaning and richness of texture to every element of plot and character that he has imitated, but especially in his creation of Shylock, who is a nameless, dimensionless figure in *Il Pecorone*. Shakespeare not only provides the Jewish usurer with a name, but also with a daughter who elopes with a Christian, as well as with a history of hostility and abuse from the Christian merchant Antonio. Above all, Shakespeare gives Shylock an intense bitterness and sense of humiliation that certainly explain—although they do not excuse—his murderous intentions toward Antonio.

To be sure, Shakespeare had in Christopher Marlowe a more formidable competitor in the dramatization of a villainous Jew than the anonymous compiler of *Il Pecorone*. Still, in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas is a caricature out of medieval mystery and miracle plays. He gives an account of himself in close accord with the superstitious folk image of the Jew as ritual murderer, poisoner, and ruthless enemy of humanity—but especially of Christians. “Be mov’d at nothing,” he urges his servant, “see thou pity none, / But to thyself smile when the Christians moan.” To this image of mythical terror out of the Middle Ages Marlowe adds a very “modern” Elizabethan fear of the amoral Machiavellian schemer—“Machavill” speaks the prologue to the play and claims Barabas as his follower. The title character of *The Jew of Malta* is thus an Elizabethan archetype of villainy.

When *The Merchant of Venice* was first performed, probably in 1596 or 1597, *The Jew of Malta* had enjoyed an extraordinarily successful revival, having been staged at least thirty-six times between February 1592 and June 1596. What may have kept interest in the subject alive and even provided an occasion for the composition of Shakespeare's play was the notorious affair of Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew who had served as physician to Queen Elizabeth. Jews had been officially banished from England in 1290 by King Edward I, and Lopez, like the rest of the handful of Jews living in London in the sixteenth century, was at least nominally a Christian convert. Such conversions were, however, always suspect among Christians throughout Europe, and when Lopez became implicated in an alleged Spanish plot to poison the Queen in 1594, old fears of Jewish duplicity and cruelty were seemingly confirmed.
The trial and execution for treason of Roderigo Lopez thus furnished a sensational backdrop for *The Merchant of Venice*. But in sharp contrast to the model he had in *The Jew of Malta*, Shakespeare mutes the sensational possibilities in the material. Both Barabas and Shylock have only daughters who, their fathers feel, betray them by becoming Christians. Abigail, the daughter of Barabas, having counterfeited a religious vocation in order to help her father recover his money, eventually becomes a nun. Barabas responds by poisoning her, along with all the nuns in the convent. Shylock’s daughter Jessica, unhappy at home, elopes with a prodigal Christian, Lorenzo, and steals money and jewels from her father. Shylock is enraged at the loss of his ducats, but he is also heartbroken over his daughter’s heartless betrayal of him. He cries out in his rage and frustration, “I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hears’d at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!” The discrepancy between Barabas’ atrocity and Shylock’s malevolent but perfectly understandable human exclamation could hardly be more pronounced. The one is a monster, the other a man.

From the outset Shakespeare sets about providing Shylock with powerful motivation for his hatred of Antonio. When Antonio offers Shylock surety for a loan of 3,000 ducats to the improvident Bassanio, the aggrieved moneylender reminds the merchant that he has called the Jew “misbeliever, cut-throat dog” along with a host of other insults. “Hath a dog money?” Shylock asks, “Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?” Antonio is unmoved by Shylock’s indignant response to such humiliations and tells him to lend the money “to thine enemy, / Who if he break, thou mayst with better face / Exact the penalty.” Antonio is, in modern parlance, asking for it, and we may suspect that a modern playwright with this plot on his hands would make the long-suffering Jew first conceive his hatred here, when his genuine longing for reconciliation is rebuffed one time too many. Shakespeare, however, has already let us know, in an aside earlier in the scene, that Shylock hates Antonio because “he is a Christian” and because “He lends out money gratis, and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice.”

But Shylock’s studied malice no more justifies Antonio’s self-righteous complacency than Antonio’s insults justify Shylock’s premeditation of murder. In fact, the Christian merchant is more of a Pharisee in his self-assured moral and spiritual superiority than is the Jewish usurer, and this ironic tension adds bite to the gaiety of this romantic comedy. Antonio’s acceptance of the “merry bond” of a pound of his flesh to be granted Shylock in the unlikely event of forfeiture allows Antonio to avoid entering an agreement involving interest, to which he was willing to agree “only to supply the ripe wants of my friend.” It is important to note that Antonio’s complete condemnation of any taking of interest is an extreme view for Elizabethan England during Shakespeare’s time. Although usury was theoretically forbidden, in practice it was allowed at rates of no more than ten percent per annum. Francis Bacon probably expresses the common attitude in his 1625 essay “Of Usury,” where he maintains that lending at a profit is so necessary that “to speake of the Abolishing of Usury is Idle. All States have ever had it, in one Kinde or Rate, or other. So as that Opinion must be sent to Utopia.”

What turns Shylock from a petty, circumspect miser into a ruthless avenger is his daughter’s elopement. It is this betrayal by his own flesh and blood, and the jeering of the minor Christian characters Solanio and Salerio, that render Shylock implacable, not the mythical Jewish bloodlust of medieval fantasy. Salerio and Solanio do not, at first, take Shylock seriously; they cannot believe that he will go through with his threat. Shylock, for his part, has indeed become remorseless in his murderous intention toward Antonio, but it is strictly a matter of personal hatred growing out of a sense of wounded pride. If the Christian Venetians would only look at him with unbiased eyes, they would see that he acts with a human, perfectly understandable motive.

In a masterstroke of irony, Shakespeare has Shylock claim his common humanity most poignantly in the course of justifying his most inhuman act. In one of the play’s two most famous speeches, Shylock berates the Christians for failing to acknowledge his equally human status even as he is bent upon shedding it: “Hath not a Jew eyes?” he cries. “Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions … ?” He is like them in his faculties, he maintains, and the moral corollary follows inevitably: “And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” It is significant that Shylock makes his plea on a very basic level, and that he is not a very good
man himself. A man ought not to be required to appeal to others on an exalted spiritual plane in order to have
his fundamental humanity acknowledged. Essential human dignity should not be contingent upon a winsome
personality.

Hence the trial scene in Act IV, which so unsettles modern audiences, manifests not the failure of
Shakespeare's art, but rather its triumph. In fact, the success is a direct result of the tremendous tension it
generates in readers and theatergoers. While it is a mistake to attempt to save the play's gaiety and romance by
turning its turbid religious conflict into an abstract allegory in which the feelings and experiences of the
individual characters do not count for much, an equal error is made by critics who diminish or dismiss the
importance of religion for the Christian characters. The trial scene is constructed from a Christian perspective,
which highlights the Pauline dichotomy of Old Testament legalism opposed to the New Testament gospel of
grace. Before Portia, disguised as Balthasar, enters the scene the issue is framed in an exchange between the
Duke and Shylock. “How shalt thou hope for mercy,” asks the former, “rend'ring none?” To which the Jew
replies, “What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?” Shylock is persistent in his demand that the legal
contract be carried out exactly as it is written, confident in the justice of his cause: “My deeds upon my head!
I crave the law, / The penalty and forfeit of my bond.”

Having uttered one of the most moving speeches in all of Shakespeare's plays, he is deaf to another, Portia's
“quality of mercy” speech, which closes with a reminder of universal human fallibility: “Therefore, Jew, / Though
justice be thy plea, consider this, / That in the course of justice, none of us / Should see salvation. We
do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy.” Some critics are
skeptical about the sincerity (or at least the depth) of Portia's Christianity, because they see little that is
specifically Christian in her plea to Shylock—clemency was, of course, an important Stoic theme. But in fact
the prayer that “doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy” is the “Our Father,” and the notion that we
cannot be saved by our own justice is the heart of the gospel, especially as preached by St. Paul. The
opposition between the covenants of law and grace, which comes to the fore in the trial scene, is central to the
play as whole, and there is no reason to presume that this understanding of moral and spiritual reality is not
integral to the minds of Shakespeare's Venetian Christians.

Even so, these are not fervent or exemplary Christians. Fervent, exemplary Christians are called saints, and
their number is regrettably small. As is so often the case in Shakespeare, the irony is doubled: Shylock gives
utterance to an impassioned plea for the common humanity in all men even as he is hardening his heart to
exact a terrible vengeance; Portia eloquently extols the virtue of mercy in the hearts of kings and seems
promptly to forget her own speech when she comes to exercise power herself. The Duke, Bassanio, and
Antonio—once the threat is past—are all willing to allow a chagrined Shylock to walk away with his money;
it is the iron-willed Portia who demands that he be held to the strict letter of the law, just as he himself has
insisted. The end of the play would be much more comfortable for us if we could treat the Portia of the trial
scene as an allegory of the Divine Judge who forces Shylock (the allegorical sinner) to relinquish all his
wealth with the conditional restoration of a part of it upon his baptism—that is, he must throw down
everything he has and follow Christ. But this will not work because we already know Portia as the
high-spirited, self-possessed mistress of Belmont and also as a tender, longing young bride. She has no
business playing God.

Here again is Shakespeare's critical spirit at work: Portia provides a fine account of mankind's universal need
for the grace of forgiveness but then fails to be gracious and forgiving herself. Even she, “a Daniel come to
judgment,” is fallible and in need of forgiveness. If we miss the point, Shakespeare underscores it with a
further irony. The character who immediately begins jeering at Shylock when Portia turns the tables on him,
the character who offers Shylock only “A halter gratis—nothing else for God's sake” (emphasis added), is
named Gratiano, which of course suggests grazia, the Italian word for “grace.” The character contradicts the
name, and this is the man who most avidly seconds Portia in her complete humiliation of Shylock, though the
others join in readily enough. The Christian principle of gracious forgiveness is, then, a good one, but it is
extremely difficult for Christians themselves to observe it. Shylock is prevented from cutting away a pound of Antonio's flesh from very near his heart, but in a sense the Christians cut Shylock's heart out of his body without shedding a drop of his blood. And they do so with clear—if blinded—consciences. In thus dramatizing the doctrine of grace by showing how those who profess it often fail to fulfill it, Shakespeare highlights a distinctive and specifically Christian element of Western Civilization: its inability to live up to its own finest insights, which are always too exalted to be grasped by mortal men and women.

The devastated Shylock slinking off the stage casts a shadow over the comedy and romance of *The Merchant of Venice*, but we cannot suppose this effect to be inadvertent on Shakespeare's part, because he does the same thing in other plays. Falstaff certainly ought to be banished from the royal court at the end of *II Henry IV*, but his dismissal still disrupts the solemnity of the coronation. Even more striking is the storming off the stage of the "much abus'd" Malvolio at the end of *Twelfth Night*. As his name indicates, Malvolio is a man of ill will. His genuine grievance against Olivia's other servants, however, dampens the gaiety of the play's conclusion. Moreover, the parallel with Malvolio assimilates Shylock to another category: in *Twelfth Night* Maria calls Malvolio "a kind of Puritan." Shakespeare's audience, which would have had little chance to associate with Jews, would have found Shylock's disapproval of plays and revelry familiar enough: "What, are there masques? Hear you me, Jessica: / Lock up my doors, … / Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter / My sober house." Everything in Shakespeare's plays—not to mention his profession as playwright—suggests that he was not fond of Puritans. Yet as a man who was surely reared a Catholic and who may have died a Catholic in the ferociously anti-Catholic England of Elizabeth and James, he may well have sympathized with anyone under the pressure of religious conformity. This fact may well explain the poignancy of Shylock's forced conversion, troubling the penultimate act of this comedy. Shylock is thwarted, but we cannot forget him and his demand to be recognized as a man, not a monster.

In *Othello* Shakespeare develops the ambiguous status of the dark-skinned African in Renaissance European society. As in *The Merchant of Venice*, religious issues complicate considerations of race and ethnicity, but Shakespeare's drama again leaves an attentive audience or reader with a powerful realization of the essential humanity of the racial "other." Othello is not, then, an expression of an established racism; rather, it highlights the danger of racial categorization at a point in European history when it was soon to become a problem. The danger is apparent in several disdainful references to Othello's black skin, African features, and general foreignness; these are mingled with brutish sexual images after Othello, the hired commander of Venice's military forces, has secretly won the hand of a prominent senator's beautiful daughter. "What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe," exclaims Roderigo, a rejected suitor, "If he can carry't thus!" Iago rouses the father, Brabantio, by shouting under his window, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe," and soon adds, "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs." When Brabantio first confronts Othello, he denies that his daughter without magical compulsion "Would ever have, t'incur a general mock, / Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou."

In the face of such scurrility, the dignity and calm of Othello emerge with great force when he takes the stage in the second scene. More than any other Shakespearean tragic hero, he commands respect and radiates authority as the drama begins, and also embodies the values of aristocratic chivalry. Iago attempts to ruffle the Moor's magnificent self-possession to no avail. "You were best go in," Iago warns, when he thinks that Brabantio and his retainers approach. "Not I; I must be found," Othello tranquilly replies. "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly." He is supremely confident in his virtues, his standing in the city, and his clear conscience. When the outraged father's party does finally confront Othello and the officers who have come to summon him to the Duke's council chamber "upon some present business of the state," and the blades of drawn weapons are gleaming in the torchlight, the Moorish general quiells the threatened tumult with a relaxed yet magisterial authority: "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them." Only a man accustomed to being obeyed could utter these words with such self-assurance. After the vile slanders of Iago and Roderigo, who would paint Othello as a lecherous savage in the play's first scene, Shakespeare is at
pains to present the Moor as a gentleman of fully heroic stature.

Othello's stature is confirmed when the Duke and his council consider Brabantio's accusation that his daughter "is abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks." Othello gives an account of wooing Desdemona by means of the stories he told of perilous adventure and suffering in exotic lands: "She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them. / This only is the witchcraft I have us'd." The Duke himself affirms Othello's conclusion: "I think this tale would win my daughter too." For her part, Desdemona dispels the aspersions cast upon her bridegroom's appearance and supposed barbarism with an exemplary assertion of the spiritual transcendence of human dignity: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate."

When we consider the racial or ethnic dynamics of the play, two points stand out: First, racial difference is a source of animosity, suspicion, and disdain; second, despite the animosity, suspicion, and disdain, not even Shakespeare's fictionalized Venice can be described as a racist society in the modern sense of the term. Brabantio's denigrations are the response of a man who has lost a daughter on whom he doted to a foreigner who was welcome as a guest but not as a son-in-law. Roderigo, who refers to Othello as "the thick-lips," is apparently a wastrel whom both Desdemona and Brabantio have scorned as a suitor. And then there is Iago, who is an officer on Othello's staff. Surely he is the most wicked of Shakespeare's villains, a man who seems to delight in evil for its own sake to such an extent that he inspired Coleridge to his famous phrase, "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity." Over against the malicious slanders of these men is the nearly universal admiration for Othello. Plainly, the Duke and Venetian senators regard him as their best general and only hope against a Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Even Iago is constrained to admit to Roderigo, "that, for their souls, / Another of his fadom they have none / To lead their business." Finally, and most important, there is the generic evidence: Othello is a tragic hero, and although a tragic hero necessarily has a flaw, he cannot be despicable or inferior. Tragedy, Aristotle observes in the Poetics, is "a representation of men better than ourselves."

The significance of Othello's status as a tragic hero may be easily gauged from a criticism of the play made by Thomas Rymer at the end of the seventeenth century. Othello was one of the more popular tragedies on the English stage throughout the century, and in 1693 Rymer complains that it "is said to bear the Bell away." He is quite evidently incensed at the changes Shakespeare has made in the source, a novella by Giraldo Cinthio, all of which serve to ennoble the characters and elevate the action: "He bestows a name on his Moor, and styles him the Moor of Venice—a Note of preeminence which neither History nor Heraldry can allow him. Cinthio, who knew him best, and whose creature he was, calls him simply a Moor."

Rymer will grant to a black African not even the "dignity" of a name, much less the nobility of a soldier or the grandeur of a heroic figure. He scornfully quotes a few lines of Othello's account of the "magical" wooing and remarks, "This was sufficient to make the Black-amoor White, and reconcile all, tho' there had been a Cloven-foot into the bargain"; and he is outraged that a white Venetian like Iago should be depicted as a conniving liar: "He is no Blackamoor Souldier, so we may be sure he should be like other Souldiers of our acquaintance."

Clearly something has happened that enables or impels white Englishmen (and other Europeans) in Rymer's time to regard black Africans as naturally inferior. When Othello was first performed in 1603 or 1604, it was rare for slavery to be seen as an institution exclusively imposed by Europeans and Arabs upon black Africans, but this would soon change. Less than ninety years later, Thomas Rymer finds it intolerable for a noble black man to win the love of a noble white woman and marry her. The power of this viewpoint is displayed in the less-than-edifying spectacle of various critics in the course of the next two-and-a-half centuries attempting to make Othello merely swarthy or "tawny," and not a sub-Saharan African. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who ought to have known better, will serve as an example: "it would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro." Coleridge is apparently unaware of how much
he sounds like Brabantio.

Postmodern efforts to “save” the play—to make it “relevant” to contemporary audiences—are often equally unsatisfactory and substitute patronizing pity of Othello for Rymer's unvarnished contempt. Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), the foundational work of the New Historicism, reads *Othello* as a virtual allegory of the European conquest of the New World. Greenblatt maintains that the dominance of the “mobile society” of the modern West is characterized by a sinister “empathy” that enables a man to enter into the situation of another and beguile him. Iago, according to this view, is the embodiment of Western Civilization in its aggressive essence.

Now there are two major problems here, even if we only consider the play and not the implications of the schema as a definition of Western Civilization. First, there is the problem that Iago is the villain of the play and not its hero: far from looking like the complete Renaissance man, he resembles nothing so much as the unstable, decentered postmodern subject. “I am not what I am,” he confides to Roderigo. Like so many of Shakespeare's tragic antagonists—think of Edmund in *King Lear*—Iago is best regarded as a threat to traditional Western Civilization, not as its exemplar. Second, the “empathetic” relationship that Greenblatt proposes between Iago and Othello reduces the latter to little more than a “noble savage”—precisely Iago's “erring barbarian” out of his depth in a marriage to a “super-subtle Venetian.” Yet everything in the text of the play tells us that while Othello is certainly noble, he is not in the least savage. Greenblatt would make Othello's vulnerability to deception by Iago no different from Roderigo's, but Iago plays on the passions of the latter. It is just his nobility that makes Othello vulnerable, and in this he is very much like Hamlet. When Claudius is planning to have Laertes murder Hamlet with a poisoned foil in what is ostensibly a friendly fencing match, he tells Laertes that Hamlet, “Most generous, and free from all contriving, / Will not peruse the foils.” In a soliloquy at the end of Act I of *Othello*, Iago informs the audience that Othello has a similarly ingenious character: “The Moor is of a free and open nature, / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.”

But Greenblatt sees Othello as the victim of another aspect of Western Civilization, the tension between “erotic intensity” and “Christian orthodoxy.” Othello's blackness becomes a symbol of the sexual guilt that torments a man who must be forever proving his claim to a place in society: “This tension is less a manifestation of some atavistic ‘blackness’ specific to Othello than a manifestation of the colonial power of Christian doctrine over sexuality, a power visible at this point precisely in its inherent limitation.” Greenblatt's alarm about the “colonial power of Christian doctrine over sexuality” is based on Othello's response to Desdemona when she asks to accompany her new husband on the campaign in Cyprus; if she cannot, then “the rites for why I love him are bereft me.” Othello certainly wants her company, but he is anxious lest the senators take the wrong impression from her impassioned plea: “Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite, / But to be free and bounteous to her mind.” Now the obvious interpretation of this passage would stress both Othello's interest in reassuring his employers that he will in no way “scant” their “great business” and his modesty in wishing to deflect any general speculation about the sexual ardor of the newlyweds.

For Greenblatt and other postmodern critics, however, this passage suggests that Othello is a sexual cripple captured by “a still darker aspect of Christian orthodoxy,” which Greenblatt illustrates by quoting St. Jerome (out of context): “An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife.” Certainly the sexual standards of both Shakespeare's era and Jerome's were generally sterner than what we encounter at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but it is another question whether husbands ought to treat their wives as they would an adulteress. In any event, the postmodernist interpretation of Othello as a psychologically crippled victim of Christian sexual morality depends, again, upon making Iago the exemplar of Western Civilization. In this view, the man who is identified simply as a “Villaine” in the list of characters in the first folio edition defines the norms that govern the play. After Roderigo has witnessed the expressions of love that pass between Othello and Desdemona in the presence of the Duke and the senators, he is ready to give up his hopes of ever possessing her; but Iago rekindles his ardor by assuring him that “love” is a mere illusion of carnal passion.
“It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will.” Postmodernist interpreters join Iago in scorning the protestations of Othello and Desdemona that their love is actually something more than mere sensual attraction, and only by this great negation can they deny that Othello, like all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, is the embodiment of a Western ideal who fails and suffers catastrophe.

*Othello*, like *The Merchant of Venice*, is both an affirmation of the principles of the Western world and a daring challenge to that civilization to embody its principles with more constancy. *The Merchant of Venice* sets a concept of justice tempered with mercy over against unbending legalism and self-righteousness, but it reminds us—in the troubling figure of Shylock as well as in the failure of the Christian characters to integrate him into the comic conclusion—that even expressions of mercy can be tainted with self-righteousness. The challenge is all the greater—and Shylock's eloquent denunciation of the way he has been dehumanized is all the more poignant—because he is in many ways such an unattractive individual. It is, after all, sinners who require grace. In still more daring fashion, Othello exemplifies the highest virtues of Western Christendom—fortitude, courtesy, devotion to duty, and sexual delicacy—in a character who seems, to some observers, their antithesis: a black African who could routinely be associated with Islam or with barbarism. Shakespeare thus reminds us that the essence of Western Civilization is a matter of the mind and the heart, not of outward appearance or blood inheritance. In Othello's tragic fall—a tragedy deepened by the loftiness of his nobility at the play's outset—we see the fragility of virtue and honor, especially their vulnerability to betrayal by those, like Iago, who seem to be their champions. Anti-Semitism and racial prejudice against black Africans are two of the uglier maladies in the history of the West, but in the work of its greatest dramatist we see that these evils are not integral to its civilization, and that in the West's critical spirit lie the means of its continual reform.

### Othello (Vol. 89): Further Reading

#### CRITICISM


*Argues that Othello shares elements with pornographic literature, noting the play's emphasis on voyeuristic watching and the way in which Desdemona is silenced by erotic violence.*


*Maintains that Othello belongs to the genre of romance and that its protagonist's actions can best be understood by viewing him as a chivalric knight—‘a fighter for state and church, for justice and faith, and a lover.’*


*Discusses the representation of jealousy in Othello.*

Emphasizes the manner in which Othello is shaped by the playwright's expectations of audience reaction and focuses in particular on Desdemona's actions, which do not conform to audience's expectations of conventional female behavior.


Investigates Iago's ability to dominate the other characters in Othello by linguistic means.


Probes the ideology of Venetian culture, which set the parameters for the racism and sexism expressed by the characters in Othello.


Comments on a 1999 Royal Shakespeare Company staging of Othello directed by Richard Attenborough. The critic finds that actor Ray Fearon was too young to make a convincing Othello but praises the production's energy.


Views Othello as an expression of British concerns about the power of the Islamic Ottoman Empire and discusses the fear of religious and military conquest that was common in post-Reformation England.

Critical Essays: That's She That Was Myself: Not-So-Famous Last Words and Some Ends of Othello

'That's She That Was Myself': Not-So-Famous Last Words and Some Ends of Othello

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I

To those for whom Shakespeare's plays still have value as works of dramatic and poetic art that move and enlighten the receptive, the last words of his tragic protagonists and other major characters should be of special interest and importance as momentous and definitive, because they evidently were for Shakespeare, whether composing or revising, and beginning quite early on, in Richard III and Richard II, for example; but they seem to take on special resonance and significance in the later tragedies, notably A. C. Bradley's Big Four, and also Antony and Cleopatra and Timon of Athens.¹

II

Shakespeare constructed the ending of Othello in such a way that Desdemona and Othello both expire on the terminal note of a single heroic couplet, each concerned primarily and affectionately with the other. Othello's last lines have been noticed often enough, and Desdemona's, too, especially in recent years; but they have seldom been attended to in any detail and their significant complementarity has apparently gone unnoticed, no doubt partly because 'Soft you, a word or two … And smote him thus'—Othello's 'last great speech', in T. S.
Eliot's phrase—has come so to dominate almost every kind of commentary on the endplay. But the complementarity was evidently deliberate, not fortuitous, and this seems to be Shakespeare's first dramatic and dialogical expression in extremis of special endplay effects of the kind inchoate in Hamlet and extended further in Othello and further still in King Lear and Antony and Cleopatra, the latter three of which match a dying protagonist with a dead loved one. It is of interest also because in Othello the lines speak for themselves in a way almost independent of variations in performance. In the later plays the same intense yearning is expressed in ways that must be conveyed substantially in action as well as, perhaps as much as, in words: the actor's Lear himself must somehow, somewhere, 'look there, look there'; and Cleopatra must make her way between the world of worms whose kingdoms are clay, and the real or fancied Elysium 'where souls do couch on flowers' and Antony had anticipated that their 'sprightly port [would] make the ghosts gaze' (4.15.51, 52).

At least since Thomas Rymer, two conflicting Othellos have persisted, the sympathetic Noble Moor that I take to be Shakespeare's, and the other one, 'loving his own pride and purposes' and given to evasions 'with a bombast circumstance', an Othello malformed and perpetuated by racial bigotry beginning in the play itself with these phrases of Iago's. In the nineteenth century, when travesties were in high fashion, there was at least one mocking minstrelshow Othello and a lame and lengthy travesty of this popular target. Subsequently liberated from overt racial bias, Othello has more recently been condemned as a militarist and patriarch, occasionally with necrophiliac tendencies. Such negative judgements seem gratuitous, sometimes downright ethnocentric; but my purpose here is not to argue the case of character yet once more, as such, but to concentrate on details of the endplay, notably Desdemona's and Othello's last lines, their context, content, and reference. Evidently these were—are—important components of Shakespeare's design, whatever the qualities of Othello the (critic's) man. But if these terminal couplets taken together mean as they appear to mean, then a rereading of Shakespeare's tragedy in modified perspective necessarily follows: of a play in which the tragedy of a sympathetic Moor must be the action intended, and as such is subtly, potently, and movingly concluded. Recognizing intentional design does not compel concurrence, of course, but it reasonably invites reflection and might give pause.

III

In September 1610, when the King's Men performed Othello in Oxford, Henry Jackson of Corpus Christi College was affected as deeply by a motionless player as by the dialogue and kinetic action. In a letter, he wrote (in Latin) that 'assuredly that rare Desdemona, killed in front of us by her husband, although she consistently pleaded her cause eloquently, nevertheless was more moving dead, when, as she lay still on her bed, her facial expression alone implored the pity of spectators'. It is striking, as Julie Hankey has written of Jackson's account, that 'there is no mention of Othello's blackness. He is simply a "husband", and she (though a boy, "she" enough) his victim.' It is also shakespearean: Desdemona herself says that the 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' (1.3.252), where colour is as colour does. Only a spectator could respond to the eloquence of silence in quite this way, but even the terminal dialogue of the lovers waited upon time for critical attention. As late as 1957 it could be noted that, though 'the full import of the story is made clear in Othello's last speech' that speech 'is seldom given the attention it merits'; that is, the 'Soft you, a word or two' speech. By now, that 'last speech' has been much written on, usually with reference to Eliot's famous assessment of 1927: 'I have always felt that I have never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness—of universal human weakness—than the last great speech of Othello … What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this speech is cheering himself up.. I do not believe that any writer has ever exposed this bovarysme, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare.'

'The last great speech' is where critics' contending Othellos rise or fall. In 1984 Norman Sanders wrote in his New Cambridge edition that 'the greatest disagreement' is between those for whom the 'last great speech' (5.2.334-52) re-elevates the hero to his former grandeur and nobility' and 'those who consider the Moor merely credulous and foolish', for whom 'T. S. Eliot may speak in his notorious condemnation of the death speech' (p. 24, italics mine). Discussion of Othello's 'last speech' has not seldom been bedevilled by
ambiguity, though 'Othello's last great speech' is obviously enough 'Soft you, a word or two'. It is not his 'final lines', however, although at least one recent critic apparently believes they are, because that is what he called them in 1989. Othello's entire last utterance is the heroic couplet, 'I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this: / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss', followed in the New Cambridge edition by the stage direction, 'He [falls on the bed and] dies' (5.2.354-5); and in the Oxford edition by 'He kisses Desdemona and dies' (5.2.369). In both, only 'He dies' comes from a substantive text (Q; 'Dyes' F), but the couplet implies Oxford's stage direction, and the reference to 'the tragic loading [F; lodging Q] of this bed' justifies the New Cambridge expansion.

The usually scant attention paid to these lines by critics who discuss them at all may be due not only to the lightning rod of the preceding 'great speech' but also to the history of performance and the received impression conveyed by earlier reviews and criticism. Writing recently on Othello 5.2 in performance,"11 James R. Siemon notes that during the years 1766-1900 'Othello appears almost never to have been allowed to die upon a kiss', because, in forty-five of fifty-two promptbooks of the period (86.5 per cent), 'the lines about having kissed Desdemona be-fore he killed her are missing, either through cutting or omission' (p. 49). Nearly half (23 of the 52, 44 per cent) 'end the play on some version of his suicide lines—"I took by the throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him thus"—adding sometimes an invented exclamation—"O Desdemona"—to this rather abrupt end.' Although this personal exclamation is an emaciated substitute, it is fair to note that it has at least the right focus, direction, and potential spirit.

Since the Procrustean practice of truncating the play thus is no longer common, that cannot account for critics' scant attention to Othello's last words, so the relative silence may well be due to a pervasive sense that the play is over, or ought to be, when he stabs himself at 'smote him thus'—because (it may be thought) whatever follows is redundant if not anticlimactic. Leslie Fiedler is partly of this turn of mind, writing that Othello's is a world whose central symbol is the sword, the phallic significance of which Shakespeare takes pains to make clear … [K]nowing himself his own dearest enemy, his potency was magically restored, though only long enough for him to die and, dying, kiss the cold lips of a corpse. 'To die upon a kiss', he says, … evoking the pun, which Shakespeare so much loved, on 'die' meaning 'come' as well as 'go'. What stays in our minds, however, is not Othello's closing erotic couplet, but the longer speech, … a speech whose central images come from politics and war.12

Fiedler could be right, but 'our' minds suggests the confidently supposed unanimity of a collective reader's perspective, not the auditor-spectators' for whom the plays are especially designed; and in performance Othello's last moments and lines are often powerfully moving and therefore memorable, like Desdemona's mute and monumental eloquence for Henry Jackson in 1610; for some, at least as affecting and memorable as the longer speech preceding.

To the sympathetic, Othello's 'last great speech' is a reasoned, self-possessed, and earnestly purposeful as well as ineluctably 'rhetorical' appeal—by a frank and honest, honourable, and responsible man, even a hero, eloquent by custom or even nature—for just judgement of himself that is made no less to the outer audience of the play than to his immediate audience in Cyprus. It is thus doubly a public as well as personal speech, an extemporaneous and thoroughly natural 'oration' very like his first public speech, beginning 'Most potent, grave, and reverend signore', which led to his account of his courtship (1.3.76-94, 127-69). Having appealed for others' justice in 'Soft you', he concludes with his own by executing himself. Surviving the first cut like Antony in the later play, he turns forever from public speech and the world to the private vein of personal intimacy to address his last words, a heroic couplet, to the body of the wife he had loved not wisely but too well, had killed, and loves again. Jealousy is not a 'mature' emotion, but it is a painful fact of amatory life at one time or another for most who live and love.
M. C. Bradbrook has written that 'the ending must be felt as triumphant; the ritual of the kiss is spousal', and the late Helen Gardner that 'the close of Othello should leave us at peace', and she quotes The Phoenix and Turtle (1601): 'Death is now the phoenix' nest, / And the turtle's loyal breast / To eternity doth rest' (lines 56-8). These readings share a king of 'dramatic optimism', which might well be called for and I should not deplore, but it is a dire strait of mind from Brecht's agitprop-oriented perspective. There remains a tenable position neither alienated nor uplifted, dark, perhaps, but no less sympathetic. In tragedies of this kind a balance is characteristically struck between the irreversible loss and the glory of what might have been, which is known as such for what it has been. What was great and potentially greater, once lost, holds good for what it was and memorially remains.

IV

Donne and Shakespeare—in his extreme vein as metaphysical poet in The Phoenix and Turtle just quoted—afford access to what the playwright has provided formally and emotionally by way of endplay in Othello, where he has first wife, then husband, dying separately yet together not only by the force of thought and feeling for the other, but—beyond character—by form, the heroic couplet of terminal expression that Shakespeare makes them share. In answer to Emilia's 'O, who hath done this deed?' Desdemona's first-line-abbreviated couplet is of course 'Nobody, I myself. Farewell. / Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!' (5.2.133-4). Each speaks last of the other in his and her own way, the same way.

The terminal heroic couplets are bound together—by prosodic form, by the loving concentration of each speaker on the other, and by the implication of mutual affection not physically reciprocated but restored finally in mortality by the force of like minds and hearts expressing something understood, not strictly comprehensible but apprehensible by the imagination shared by lovers, lunatics, poets, spectators suspending disbelief. If this design goes unnoticed, obviously there will be no such mortal and delicate convergence. Anything may be dismissed or smirked out of court, of course, but once seen in this light, the design will not easily be forgotten. It consists further and especially in the shared use of 'myself' to invoke an ancient, Judeo-Christian, and proverbial idea about the unity of friends and lovers that goes back through Cicero to Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics (9.4.5/ 1166a.32), where 'the friend is another self, even to the Iliad in one tradition; and to the Old Testament, where husband and wife are supposed to become one flesh, in another.

V

The sharing of 'myself with the other is a key element in the complement of terminal couplets. Both lovers are made to use prominently and emphatically the personal pronoun 'myself—or possessive pronoun 'my' with noun 'self as it was in the Quarto of 1622 and the Folio of 1623. The identification of friend or lover as a second self, or of two as being a single, compound self, was a commonplace in Shakespeare's day. A dramatic use close in time to Othello is Henry Porter's in Two Angry Women of Abingdon acted by the Lord Admiral's Men in 1598, the year before Porter died: 'O my wife, you are my selfe' (sig. C4, 3.520 f.). And very close in time to the composition of Othello, John Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay 'Of Friendship' (1603) says that

In the amitie I speake of, they [friends] entermixe and confound themselves one in the other, with so universali a commixture, that they weare out, and can no more finde the seame that hath conjoyned them together. If a man urged me to tell wherefore I loved him, I feel it cannot be expressed, but by answering; 'Because it was he, because it was my selfe.'

Mystical vision, philosophical conception, metaphysical conceit are almost as much a matter of degree and direction as of kind. Given these ranging variations on a theme common from antiquity, it is not surprising to find in The Two Gentlemen of Verona a sentiment and expression that, though expanded and explicit instead of condensed and allusive, is very like that in Othello. Valentine in soliloquy, banished on pain of death by

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Silvia's father, asks,

And why not death, rather than living torment?
To die is to be banished from myself,
And Silvia is my self. Banished from her
Is self from self, a deadly banishment …
She is my essence, and I leave to be
If I be not by her fair influence
Fostered, illumined, cherished, kept alive.
I fly not death to fly his deadly doom.
Tarry I here I but attend on death,
But fly I hence, I fly away from life.

(3.1.170-3, 182-7)

VI

The plot of Othello is captured well by its notorious archcritic Thomas Rymer himself:

Othello, a Blackmoor [sic] Captain, by talking of his Prowess and Feats of War, makes Desdemona a Senators Daughter to be in love with him; and to be married to him without her Parents knowledge; and having preferred Cassio, to be his Lieutenant, (a place which his ensign Jago sued for) Jago in revenge, works the Moor into a Jealousy that Cassio Cuckolds him: which he effects by stealing and conveying a certain Handkerchief, which had, at the Wedding, been by the Moor presented to his Bride. Hereupon, Othello and Jago plot the Deaths of Desdemona and Cassio, Othello Murders her, and soon after is convinced of her Innocence. And as he is about to be carried to Prison, in order to be punish'd for the Murder, He kills himself.

What ever rubs or difficulty may stick on the Bark, the Moral, sure, of this Fable is very instructive.

First, This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors.…

Secondly, this may be a warning to all good Wives, that they look well to their Linnen.

Thirdly, This may be a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical, the proofs be Mathematical. 

The morals are heavily facetious, but Othello is in its way a casque-to-cushion domestic tragedy, and commonplaces of the kind are indeed present—though they are assumed and more or less marginal, hardly the heart of the matter. The art of the design is that on the one hand it achieves simultaneously the building of a strong foundation in a plausibly intuitive mutual understanding and deep affection both sexual and otherwise personal between an inexperienced but perceptive and forceful young woman, and an older, black military officer of North African royal 'siege' (1.2.22), of high station by both birth and achievement, and of wide experience of wars and diplomacy but not of domestic affairs of the heart. And, on the other hand, it enables their destruction by the agency of a relentlessly machinating malefactor of universally acknowledged 'honesty' who uses the trust he has earned in military service, his observation and understanding of human vulnerability, and the very virtues of his victims the lovers as the leverage to destroy them. Raised to the scale of tragedy, but otherwise just like 'real life': How To Win Friends …
The inclusive tragedy is, then, that lovers extraordinarily well suited to each other and capable of the greatest mutual love, despite appearances to the contrary and obvious but superficial obstacles, are forced into separation—permanent or temporary but mortal—by death almost as soon as they begin to reap the marital harvest of their goodness and compatibility. Goodness revealed proclaims its vulnerability unawares and invites attack—in Othello by the redoubled force of its eternal opposite in a form, a person, least likely to be recognized as such. It is surely a fact not only that if Iago were the Moor, he would not be Iago; but that, if Iago were not Iago, there would be no tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice.

VII

The final moments of the endplay follow hard upon Desdemona's dying. Having cried out that she has been 'falsely, falsely murdered!' (5.2.126) and then assured Emilia who has come to her that 'a guiltless death I die' (132), she replies to Emilia's 'O, who hath done this deed?' in her terminal couplet extemporized immediately though in some confusion to exonerate Othello. His innocence of culpable design would seem to have been somehow on her mind, since in the Willow Song (in F, not in Q) she had sung "Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve"—; then quickly reflecting, 'Nay, that's not next.' In her terminal couplet, 'Nobody' is an instinctive deflecting of Emilia's question and an impossible answer, though it obviously has a tacit, unintended application to an Othello not himself. Her second answer, 'I myself, is all but impossible, yet the only option open to her without naming Othello, making false accusation, or inventing a suspect even as she dies. It is supremely apt and ironical precisely because, insofar as she is wife, friend, lover, she is Othello as he her; she herself did kill herself, through his corporal agency. Her next 'move' can most reasonably be taken as a natural continuation of her thinking singlemindedly of Othello from the moment she has uttered 'Nobody'.

Desdemona dies true to her word, to herself, to Othello: as she had said, prophetically as is seen in retrospect, 'his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love' (4.2.164-5).

Othello at bay and near the end, 'Enter Lodovico' (5.2.288+), who asks the generically and thematically epic and tragic as well as contextually practical question, 'Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?' (289). Othello's answer: 'That's he that was Othello. Here I am' (290), I, nobody. There are many ways of explicating this, but even a modest gloss would note that the diminished and isolated Othello feels himself unmanned and sees Desdemona as though bearing his sometime manhood into death, so much in consonance with the independent spirit she displayed in 1.3, the Court Scene, especially in the speech beginning, 'That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm [F; scorne Q] of fortunes / May trumpet to the world' (1.3.248-50). Such public forthrightness, there, is of a piece with her earlier hinting privately to Othello of her feelings for him when she 'bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story, / And that would woo her' (1.3.163-5). Thus there was aptness as well as affection in Othello's greeting her on his arrival in Cyprus as 'my fair warrior' (2.1.183), of which we see more when she promises Cassio to cham-pion his cause: 'Assure thee, / If I do vow a friendship I'll perform it / To the last article' (3.3.20-2).

If Desdemona shows—an engagingly—youthful impetuousness in some ways, she shows maturity and even wisdom in others, here also epitomizing on behalf of the playwright, as it were, the tragedy of Othello himself:

Something sure of state,
Either from Venice or some unhatched practice
Made demonstrable here in Cyprus to him,
Hath puddled his clear spirit; and in such cases
Men's natures wrangle with inferior things,
Though great ones are their object. 'Tis even so;
For let our finger ache and it indues
Our other, healthful members even to a sense
Of pain. Nay, we must think men are not gods,
Nor of them look for such observancy
As fits the bridal. Beshrew me much, Emilia,
I was—unhandsome warrior as I am—
Arraigning his unkindness with my soul;
But now I find I had suborned the witness,
And he's indicated falsely.18
(3.4.138-52 recalling 2.1.183, italics mine)

These lines look forward to Desdemona's first 'falsely murdered' and subsequent revision in defence of Othello; she did not know it, nor did 'we', but in extremis and in retrospect that is seen to be the case.

Disarmed and nearing his end, Othello continues to express his sense of lost manhood: 'I am not valiant neither, / But every puny whisper gets my sword. / But why should honour outlive honesty? / Let it go all' (5.2.250-3). For a moment, he would even have Iago 'live; / For in my sense 'tis happiness to die' (5.2.295-6). Desdemona dead, how could it be otherwise for him, especially to live in knowledge of his guilt? The earlier lines' suggesting a kind of transmigration of soul between lovers who share it informs Othello's last words and his agonized awareness of lovers' union violently sundered by him: 'I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this [of kissing and killing]: / Killing myself [i.e., killing, now, my own self; having killed myself already, the self you were—that's she and he that was Othello—and (here) I am], to die upon a kiss'—as though, having killed the better part of himself in Desdemona, he now justly executes the worse part—Iago's—in himself, in his own way, himself the kisser and the kissed, honour following honesty in death, his life upon her faith. Othello rises by his falling, if his tragic movements are read aright. At least that is how Shakespeare seems to have intended them by their design.

VIII

If this reading of complementary terminal couplets in the endplay and the context of the whole is true to the overall dialogue and its significance, and to what may reasonably be taken to be the feelings of the principals as they would be performed by actors in an unforced reading, then on such accounts it may be taken to express in some measure the meanings intended by the playwright. The design of the earlier part of the play will adjust itself in critical perspective to this conclusion accordingly. Unstrained productions tend to confirm this reading by presenting both Desdemona and Othello sympathetically—as they were presented with great success in Trevor Nunn's 1989 studio production first at The Other Place and then at the Young Vic, with the black opera singer Willard White as Othello, and Imogen Stubbs as a youthful and very forceful Desdemona; and as they were in an effective London fringe production, also with a black Othello (Gary Lawrence, with Louise Butcher as Desdemona), by the Court Theatre Company in mid August 1992.

One must agree with Fiedler that Othello's 'potency' is restored as he kills himself, and there is a sense in which his utterance and sentiment are undoubtedly 'erotic'. But it is doubtful whether his last couplet is fraught with the explicitly sexual sense of 'kill' and 'die' occasionally employed in Jacobethan usage, including Shakespeare's, though it may easily be argued thematically into place in several interpretative dialectics. Whatever the comprehensive particulars of meaning and significance of the terminal couplets, a finally positive resonance seems designed for each, and their correspondency 'unites' Desdemona and Othello—before an audience—in still life and by death forever and absolutely, in their own way like Romeo and Juliet, and Antony and Cleopatra.

The question whether Othello achieves 'adequate' recognition of his guilt and some profound insight into the Meaning of Things—so well understood by post-Victorian critics requiring no less of tragic heroes—is in the play not so much answered unequivocally as benignly begged in the ineluctable irony and pathos of the
endplay. The lovers are united in peace only at the violent end of a fleeting married life in which they were able to be together undisturbed virtually for moments only, from the beginning of the action to the end. The irony is made almost unbearable by the survival of the lovers' destroyer, whose shadow cast over the life of the play extends beyond the end of the action in the BBC-TV production (1981), where Bob Hoskins' mocking laughter continues to echo through the screen credits even after he has been led down a corridor and out of sight. The script, so far from translating the horror of the spectacle into terms even of solace, much less of transcendence, frames it before its makermarrer, Iago, a tale tolled once and for all.

And yet, Desdemona and Othello are at last beyond the reach of envious malice, and theirs is implicitly some version of a peace that passeth all understanding, whether heavenly bliss secured or in prospect, or the nitrogen cycle not yet even dreamt of. So much for the irony. The play's plenitude of Christian reference—more in its own day than in ours—may shed prevenient grace upon the endplay and imply a hope of resurrection and reunion. But even if death is seen as final, there is the sweet oblivious antidote of nothingness, the pain of which is only in the spectacle, the eye of the beholder, the present the dead have passed beyond.

The pathos of the persons is simplicity itself. There can hardly be a greater human loss to death than that of spouse by loving, living spouse, a loss beyond enduring when the living spouse has brought about the death. That is the ultimate tragedy of Othello the Man. How indeed could Honour outlive Honesty?

Notes

1 I am indebted to R. W. Dent, Jay L. Halio, Jongsook Lee, George Sheets, Kari Steinbach, and Virginia Mason Vaughan for valuable comments and suggestions; and to the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota for a grant in aid of research.


3 For discussion of related terminal dialogue and action in King Lear and Antony and Cleopatra, see Thomas Clayton, "Is this the promis'd end?" Revision in the Role of the King, The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear', ed. by Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (Oxford, 1983), pp. 121-41; and "Mysterious by This Love": The Unregenerate Resurrection of Antony and Cleopatra', Jadavpur University Essays and Studies III, Special Issue: Festschrift in Honour of S. C. Sengupta, ed. by Jagannath Chakravorty (Calcutta, 1982), pp. 95-116.


5 'At verò Desdemona ilia apud nos a marito occisa, quanquam optimè semper causam egit, interfecta tamen magis movebat; cum in lecto decumbens spectantium misericordiam ipso vultu imploraret.' Corpus Library's Fulman Papers, vol. 10, ff. 83'-84', printed by Geoffrey Tillotson, together with detailed comments on Othello and The Alchemist at Oxford in 1610', in the TLS, 20 July 1933, p. 494, whence the Latin is quoted here.


Critical Essays: The Adaptation of a Shakespearean Genre: Othello and Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore

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Othello's popularity in the early seventeenth century is indicated both by the frequency of its revival and by its influence over many of the dramatists of the period. It seems to have exerted a lasting hold over Ford's imagination, the effects traceable in three plays written at different stages in his career: The Queen, published anonymously in 1653 but now generally reckoned to be an early work, Love's Sacrifice (1633), and The Lady's Trial (1638). The extent and significance of the influence of Othello on Love's Sacrifice has been much

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8 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', p. 111, italics mine.


10 The 1793 (+ 1803, 1813) variorum edition of Shakespeare's Works, vol. 15, contains Stevens's acute citation of antecedent lines by Marlowe's dying Zenocrate that is not in Furness's New Variorum Othello (1886) or in many if any subsequent editions: 'So, in the Second Part of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, 1590: "Yet let me kiss my lord before I dye, / And let me dye with kissing of my lord" (2.4.69-70).


15 Iliad 18.89-92 (Achilleus of the dead Patroklos, 'even as mine own self, 'ison erne kephale'); Genesis 2.23-4 (Geneva translation).


18 These lines and 3.3.193-6 strongly reflect (on) each other, and on the resort of each speaker to notions of justice, trial, and proof: 'No, Iago, / I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove; / And on the proof, there is no more but this: / Away at once with love or jealousy.' Desdemona is more trusting than Othello, but it is also not she but he who is driven to disbelief and jealousy as 'abused by some most villainous knave, / Some base, notorious knave, some scurvy fellow' (4.2.143-4).

discussed. In the words of one commentator, "So close are the parallels with Othello in the middle scenes of the action that it is tempting to imagine that Ford wrote with a copy of the play at his side."\(^3\) Ford's Shakespearean borrowings are not, however, confined to Othello, and there is even more general acknowledgment of the influence of Romeo and Juliet on the structure, characterization, and detail of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.\(^4\) What I want to argue here is that 'Tis Pity owes some of its distinctive qualities not merely to Romeo and Juliet but also to the Shakespeare play that occupied Ford's mind throughout his career, and that 'Tis Pity received from both plays an important creative stimulus. In the progression from Romeo and Juliet to Othello, Shakespeare greatly enlarged the scope of the tragedy of love, emphasizing the tendency in romantic love to an unbalanced destructive excess. In taking the visible imprint of both plays 'Tis Pity became both a record and an extension of what Ford had learned from Shakespeare.

Evidence of a line running through from Romeo and Juliet and Othello to 'Tis Pity She's a Whore can be detected in Ford's presentation of the relationship of Annabella and Putana. This portrayal, it is often pointed out, derives from that of Juliet and her Nurse. What needs adding is that in Othello Shakespeare, with his characteristic economy, reworked his earlier creations; as a result the relationship of Annabella and Putana looks back not merely to Juliet and the Nurse—and since these are stock characters, more distantly to a host of earlier versions—but also to Desdemona and Emilia. There is a similar contrasting pattern in all three: between, on the one hand, a high-minded, self-authenticating romantic idealism that defies both worldly prudence and the constraints of family and social position, and, on the other hand, the voice of a coarser-grained, pragmatic realism in varying degrees sympathetic, skeptical, and compromised.

Elsewhere the influence of Othello is traceable in the characterization of Bergetto and Vasques and, with greater significance for the play as a whole, of Giovanni and Annabella. Bergetto, as well as deriving in part from the gross and simple-minded Ward of Women Beware Women,\(^5\) has a clearer origin in Shakespeare's Roderigo. Like his predecessor, Bergetto is shallow and foolish, but he is both more comic and more gently humanized than Roderigo; for all his gaucheries he seems genuinely to win the love of Philotis, and his death prompts from Donado the tearful comment, "Alas poor creature, he meant no harm, that I am sure of (3.9.8-9). The main structural similarity between Bergetto and Roderigo is that each is linked with ludicrous inappropriateness to a woman who, even without the counter-attraction of respectively Othello and Giovanni, would scarcely have favored him with a second glance. The situation is one with considerable potential for comedy of social embarrassment that, although no more than hinted at textually in Othello, is often exploited in performance; Robert Lang's lugubrious face and Andrew Aguecheek-like wig in Olivier's film version is a memorable example. Ford develops Shakespeare's sketch of a comically inept suitor in Bergetto's unconsciously self-revealing narration of his first meeting with Annabella, an account that leaves Donado holding his head in his hands ("O gross! … This is intolerable," 1.3.64, 68). Both dramatists dismiss them to the same fate: each is killed ignominiously in a brawl.

Vasques's malignity, although not motiveless, is something of a puzzle, and its origin lies in the not-fully-absorbed influence of Shakespeare's Iago. Vasques is set apart from Soranzo, Hippolita, and Grimaldi, all of whose murderousness is readily explicable in terms of sexual jealousy. His dominating passion, by contrast, as he himself tells us in the final scene, is his devotion to Soranzo and before that to Soranzo's father (5.6.115-21). A combination of loyalty to Soranzo and some excessive zeal may explain much of what he does on his master's behalf; it does not account for the evident pleasure he takes in his ingenious stratagems and the gleeful self-hugging delight in what they reveal ("Better and better … Why, this is excellent," 4.3.217, 236). The dominant impression is less that of devoted loyalty than of a man who, like Iago, is shrewd, without scruple, and above all self-contained. He keeps his own counsel, confides in no one, and, like Iago, his greatest pleasure derives from the fact that he is an extremely deft, plausible, and successful manipulator. Just as Iago wins the confidence of those he seeks to entrap, so too does Vasques, with the result that Hippolita is betrayed to her death and Putana to a vicious blinding. The pleasures of the puppet-master seem to affect even his exertions on Soranzo's behalf. He instructs his master how to feign reconciliation with Annabella; and later, as part of his plan to "tutor him better in his points of vengeance" (4.3.240), he inflames
Soranzo's imagination against his wife in exactly the same way that Iago does Othello's. There is even the suggestion of a malicious pleasure in goading his master further than his purposes strictly require:

Vasques: Am I to be believed now? First, marry a strumpet that cast herself away upon you but to laugh at your horns? To feast on your disgrace, riot in your vexations, cuckold you in your bride-bed, waste your estate upon panders and bawds?

Soranzo: No more, I say no more!

Vasques: A cuckold is a goodly tame beast, my lord.

Soranzo: I am resolved; not another word.

(5.2.1-8)

Vasques is not an entirely satisfactory dramatic creation, less successful on the whole than Ford's unambiguous Iago-figure D'Avalos in Love's Sacrifice, for whom in some respects Vasques may have constituted a preliminary sketch. The reason is that Iago calls into play the tradition of the murderous machiavel, scheming, self-delighting, wittily inventive in his villainy; and such a conception is difficult to harmonize with the even more familiar but dramatically less arresting stereotype of the virtuous, loyal servant. Iago's devotion to Othello is a façade, a part of his comprehensive wickedness; Vasques's to Soranzo is meant to be genuine. Because Vasques's dedication to his master's wellbeing is never more than an inert donnée of the plot, the theatrical emphasis is all on his monstrous villainy, and he departs the play on what is, in the circumstances, a justified note of triumphant self-assertion: "this conquest is mine, and I rejoice that a Spaniard outwent an Italian in revenge" (5.6.145-46). If Vasques was indeed motivated all along by no more than a disinterested concern for his master's best interests, all one can say is that his concern proved to be a means of achieving an enviably high level of job satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

It is in the handling of the love theme, where the effect of Romeo and Juliet has long been acknowledged, that the further influence of Othello is detectable. There are suggestions, mainly though not exclusively in the closing movement of the play, of a correspondence between Giovanni and Othello and between Annabella and Desdemona. The last scene contains several verbal echoes, the clearest one accompanied by a partial correspondence in terms of physical action. Giovanni's words when he stabs his sister echo in syntax, rhythm, rhyme—indeed in choice of rhyme—those of Othello when he stabs himself:

Giovanni: One other kiss, my sister.
Annabella: What means this?
Giovanni: To save thy fame, and kill thee in a kiss.
(5.5.83-84)

Othello: I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this—
Killing my self, to die upon a kiss.
(5.2.361-62)

The correspondence here is sufficiently strong to lend weight to others in the same scene which might otherwise seem tenuous or coincidental:

Giovanni: Fair Annabella, should I here repeat
The story of my life …
(5.5.52-53)

Othello: Her father lov'd me, oft invited me;
Still question'd me the story of my life.
(1.3.128-29)

Giovanni: Give me your hand; how sweetly
life doth run
In these well-coloured veins! how constantly
These palms do promise health!
(5.5.73-75)

Othello: Give me your hand. This hand is
moist, my lady …
This argues fruitfulness and liberal heart.
(3.3.33, 35)

Verbal correspondences of this closeness point to a deeper level of connection between the two protagonists:
both, in their different ways, love not wisely but too well. The phrase is, of course, a benign understatement of
the nature and consequences of Giovanni's passion, but that is precisely the point. With its connotations of
excess and imbalance, loving not wisely but too well was the initial stimulus that Ford derived from Othello
and exploited and enlarged in 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.9

Othello's manhood, life as a soldier, and deepest sense of self now rest on the absolute nature of the love
between himself and Desdemona. "When I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.92-93), and if not
Chaos, then at least the certainty that "Othello's occupation's gone" (3.3.361). Giovanni's feelings for his sister
are not just inherently unbalanced; they are also of such all-consuming intensity that nothing else merits
attention, least of all his studies. Both protagonists believe themselves betrayed, and the effect on them of this
realization is as extreme as their earlier love. After a descent into a temporary distraction in the case of
Othello, or as part of a deeper and more lasting derangement in the case of Giovanni, they each decide to kill
the woman they love. The circumstances of the killing are similar in both cases. They both pause,
momentarily affected by her beauty.10 Both indeed weep at what they feel constrained to do, and both seek to
conduct the murder at a level of high-minded disinterestedness ("To save thy fame" [ 'Tis Pity 5.5.84]; "else
she'll betray more men" [Othello 5.2.6]). The reality is very different. Othello's invocation of "Justice"
conceals only briefly a craving for personal vengeance, and though he claims he "would not kill your soul"
(5.2.33), he in fact smothers Desdemona before she has time to pray. Giovanni's mind is darkened in even
greater moral confusion, and his motive for murder seems less that of saving Annabella's fame than the
combination of a desire to preserve eternally in death their early love ("If ever aftertimes should hear …"
[5.5.68-73]), of bitterness at her proving "treacherous / To your past vows and oaths" (5.5.4-5), and of a
triumphant fore-stalling of his hated rival ("Soranzo, thou hast missed thy aim in this, / I have prevented now
thy reaching plots" [5.5.99-100]). Finally, the element of posturing and self-dramatization, arguably present in
Shakespeare's depiction of Othello, is a discernible feature of Giovanni's view of himself at the close ("this act
/ Which I most glory in … and boldly act my last and greatest part" [5.5.90-91, 106]). His "last and greatest
part" turns out to be his entrance into Soranzo's feast with the heart of Annabella impaled on his dagger.

In his portrayal of Annabella, Ford seems to have taken over from Othello the heroine's rejection of the social
conventions and expectations that bear upon an unmarried, attractive, well-born young woman. Desde-mona
has turned down all the eligible Venetian bachelors—just as Juliet, though with rather more reason, turned
down Paris—and in the end, prompted by her own judgment and feelings, she contracts a clandestine marriage
with a black man. As an act of social defiance based on love, it is surpassed only by Annabella's love affair
with her brother. The difference is that Desdemona's act is an affront to propriety and fatherly authority, whereas Annabella's is a defiance of morality and religion. In one respect at least the effect is the same. Both daughters' actions eventually cause their fathers' deaths of a broken heart, Brabantio's unobtrusively reported (5.2.207-209), whereas Florio's takes place on stage in the final scene.\footnote{For the bulk of the play Desdemona and Annabella's paths diverge, and while one remains a chaste and loving wife, the other progresses from incest to adultery. At the end of the play, however, Ford's treatment of Annabella seems to have the purpose of preparing for a death scene that will echo Desdemona's both in its manner and in the emotions aroused.} For the full significance of all these apparently opportunistic and ad hoc echoes and borrowings from Othello, one needs to view *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* in the context of the rest of Ford's work. What sets him apart from his contemporary dramatists is an interest in genres and their potential for transformation. Anne Barton has discussed *Perkin Warbeck* and *The Broken Heart* as modifications and reconstitutions of, respectively, the history play and the revenge tragedy.\footnote{In *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* Ford, drawing upon Othello as well as *Romeo and Juliet*, appears to be rethinking the Shakespearean tragedy of love. He is doing more than effecting a shift from an idealized romanticism to a love that is corrupted and sinful, a view that is generally accepted as the main significance of his reworking of *Romeo and Juliet*. What seems to have struck him about the depiction of romantic love in both Shakespeare plays—the later even more than the earlier—is its fragile instability, the way its narrow intensities can so easily be diverted into hysteria, derangement, and destructive monomania.} The nature of the progression from *Romeo and Juliet* to *'Tis Pity* can be traced most economically by looking backwards and forwards from Othello's lines, quoted earlier: "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this— / Killing my self, to die upon a kiss" (5.2.361-62). In these lines Othello recalls the beginning of the final scene when he kissed the sleeping Desdemona ("O balmy breath" [5.2.16]), a kiss he repeats now as his final act. Romeo, too, had kissed Juliet as he killed himself: "Here's to my love! [Drinks] O true apothecary! / Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die" (5.2.119-20). The poignancy of this moment, however, is that although, like Othello, Romeo believes his wife to be dead, in reality Juliet is still alive. She is sleeping, just as Desdemona is when Othello kisses her at the beginning of the last scene. Romeo here kisses his wife simultaneously alive and "dead," whereas in Othello's farewell to Desdemona, what the earlier play had concentrated in one stage action is now expanded into two, linking the beginning and end of the final scene. The similarities and differences go further. Othello's death, like Romeo's, is a suicide, and he too flings himself in despair across the body of his dead wife. But it is the body of a wife innocent and chaste like Juliet whom he has murdered. His own death expresses not just grief but also belated horror, remorse, and the need for self-punishment to expiate a terrible wrong. What meager consolation this act of restitution may represent for the audience is completely absent from the corresponding scene in *'Tis Pity*. Othello's repeated kisses on
the sleeping Desdemona occur here too, but Giovanni's are received by the now-penitent Annabella in a different spirit from that in which they are offered, and the coercive insistence that informs them causes her increasing apprehension about what they portend. Romeo's—and Othello's—lines undergo their final transformation, this time as an accompaniment not to suicide but to murder:

### Giovanni: One other kiss, my sister.  
### Annabella: What means this?  
### Giovanni: To save thy fame, and kill thee in a kiss.  

(5.5.83-84)

Unlike Othello's, this killing leads to no remorse; Giovanni is triumphant to the end in the absoluteness of his sexual conquest and control; and Annabella's / "sad marriage bed" (5.5.97) becomes the site of the final atrocity of her evisceration.

There is one final aspect of the murder that is perhaps worth briefly remarking on. Ford took from Othello a hint of what was to become a familiar theme of seventeenth-century tragedy, the conflict of love and honor. As he kills Annabella, Giovanni asserts that "honour doth love command" (5.5.86), and in this he is echoing Othello's claim to be an "honourable murderer" (5.2.297). Othello's blend of self-deluding moral elevation and savagery is grotesquely magnified in the circumstances of Giovanni's murder and mutilation of Annabella. As in Othello, it is both the notion of honor and the quality of that love that Ford's play calls in question.

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**Notes**

1 Frost, 110. See also "Ford's admiration for [The Duchess of Malfi] is a matter of record: he contributed encomiastic verses upon its publication in 1623; and that it was among the many plays in his mind as he worked on *Tis Pity* has already been demonstrated through the various verbal echoes noted by Dorothy Fair." Neill, 169. It is possible, therefore, that *Othello*, in addition to bearing directly on *Tis Pity*, may have had a second, more indirect effect as a result of its earlier absorption by Webster. See note 14 below.

2 Sargeaunt, 127; Oliver, 80-81; Leech, 78, 110, 119; Stavig, 89, 133; Frost, 160-63; Anderson, 110-11; Farr, 58-78; Putt, 161-63; Butler, 216-19.

3 Farr, 67.

4 In addition to the critics above passim, see also ; ; The fullest discussion is contained in Smallwood, 49-70.
Noted by Roper in Ford, xxxiii. Smallwood, 52, sees Bergetto as a reworking of Mercutio, "the principal comic character of Romeo and Juliet." In presenting "the horrible accident of the death of Bergetto, the principal comedian of his drama, [Ford] removes the comic element from the play and points unequivocally toward its tragic conclusion." Although there is a parallel here in terms of dramatic structure, Mercutio (as Smallwood later acknowledges) is no buffoon, unlike Roderigo and Bergetto; and the tragic outcome of Othello and 'Tis Pity scarcely requires the removal of either Roderigo or Bergetto to signal something that is apparent from the very start.

An example of someone who is trapped into marrying a prostitute and is gleefully mocked for his pains is Old Hoard in Middleton's A Trick to Catch the Old One. A less genial instance of malicious taunting, which conceals itself behind a mask of servantlike concern, is that of Mosca in Jonson's Volpone.

Dating is still to some extent uncertain, but Gurr, 93, has made a strong case for 1630 as the date for 'Tis Pity and 1631 as that for Love's Sacrifice.

Recorded without comment by Roper in Ford, 114. Lomax, 171, suggests "Ford fuses metaphor and stage action in a reversal of Othello's 'Killing myself, to die upon a kiss' (V.ii.360). In 'Tis Pity, Giovanni stabs Annabella 'To save thy fame, and kill thee in a kiss' (V.v.84) which recalls the friar's words to Annabella, describing hell: 'Then you will wish each kiss your brother gave / Had been a dagger's point,' (III.vi.27-8)."

Brodwin provides an extensive treatment of the tragic confusions of romantic love from Romeo and Juliet to 'Tis Pity. While her categorization of love tragedies in terms of Courtly Love, False Romantic Love, and Worldly Love makes possible certain suggestive connections, the terminology used, involving three different modes for each category, forms a complex schema which is not readily transferable to the discussion pursued here.

There is a transformation here of a common source: Romeo's final pause as he contemplates Juliet's beauty for the last time before he kills himself. An echo of a different sort, which has nevertheless a greater direct kinship with that of Othello and Giovanni, is Tarquin's delay before his assault on Lucrece: "Here with a cockatrice' dead-killing eye / He rouseth up himself, and makes a pause" (The Rape of Lucrece, 540-41).

Lomax, 173, relates the death of Florio to those of Romeo and Juliet. "The discovery of their forbidden relationship also occurs when it is too late to save it, but their deaths bring about understanding and reconciliation between the two families. In 'Tis Pity the opposite occurs—a previously loving father dies renouncing his children in horror."

"In that scene Annabella's wry reference to her 'gay attires' (V.v.20) makes it clear that she faces death in the bridal robes which Soranzo commanded her to put on (V.ii.10-11); like Desdemona's wedding sheets, they provide a bitterly ironic visual commentary on a murder." Neill, 163.

Bradbrook, 259, has argued, not entirely convincingly, that Annabella's dying words here are an inversion of the last words of Desdemona, "Commend me to my kind lord." More plausibly, she draws attention to the way that variations of this striking phrase occur in The Broken Heart and The Lady's Trial, the significance of which is further developed in Gurr, 92.

This moment in Othello may have been recalled by Ford directly. It is equally possible, however, that its effect may have been transmitted indirectly through a work which had been itself influenced by Othello, Webster's The Duchess of Malfi. "Bradbrook notes that the improvised marriage ceremony in The Duchess of Malfi might have been the model for Ford's ritual. She does not comment further, but in both cases the couples kneel, the ritual is quickly improvised in an atmosphere of tension, and a kiss plays a significant part in the ceremony. If Ford is deliberately recalling Webster's scene, the kiss with which Giovanni and Annabella seal
their relationship can also be seen as a Quietus est—not only sealing their relationship, but also their doom.” Lomax, 170.


16 These lines constitute a link in a process of influence from Romeo and Juliet to 'Tis Pity that would not otherwise be readily apparent, and it is therefore unsurprising that Smallwood, the fullest and most assiduous commentator on the relation of Romeo and Juliet to 'Tis Pity, makes no mention of them.

17 The characteristic form of the conflict between love and honor in seventeenth-century heroic drama involved a generally different emphasis in terms of plot from that in either Othello or 'Tis Pity. Nevertheless, the theatrical fate of Othello suggests that with only modest editing it could readily gratify the taste of the time as a play about a man of absolute honor experiencing the tragic consequences of passionate love. The cuts in the one surviving Restoration text have the consistent purpose of emphasizing the hero's dignity, nobility, and poise. Rosenberg, 24-25, notes, 'After Othello has killed Desdemona and learned how wrong he was, in his volcanic outburst, after 'Cold, cold my girl' (338), lines are cut that we know offended a century later by their 'extravagance,' and apparently were already in bad taste: 'Even like thy chastity. O cursed, cursed slave! Whip me, ye devils! Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! …' (339-43) … The altered text tries to make him die as it made him live: somewhat less human than Shakespeare's Othello, even greater of heart, closer to Decorum's idea of a hero." That this conception of Othello survived well into the eighteenth century is indicated by the following comment in Gentleman, 149: "There is something very noble in reminding the state of Venice with almost his last words, that he finished his life in the same manner, which he had once used to vindicate the public honour of his masters."


Critical Essays: The Humiliation of Iago

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What does Iago want and why does he do what he does? These questions, endlessly fascinating, often discussed, stand no greater chance of being definitively answered today than they did two hundred years ago, when Coleridge spoke of the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity. In the final analysis, Iago, like all of us, does what he does because he is what he is: "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know" (V.ii.303). Yet if Iago's motives must ultimately remain inscrutable, particular strands of his behavior may yet be explored and understood. Looking closely at how Iago interacts with individual characters, what he wants from each of them, what he wants to do to each of them, how his desires change as the play advances, can illumine much, even if not all, of his mystery.

Among these interactions, the one with Desdemona is second only to the one with Othello in complexity and interest. Beginning with nearly entire inattention to Desdemona in his first soliloquy, moving next to desire to be "even'd with [Othello,] wife for wife" (II.i.299)—that is, to sleep with Desdemona as he imagines Othello has slept with Emilia—Iago moves finally to desire for Desdemona's death, or, more precisely, for a specific kind and location of death: "Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.i.207-208). How does Iago arrive at this final attitude? What, other than a reflexive opportunism, a convenient fueling of Othello's jealousy, leads him to call for Desdemona's death by strangulation in the marriage bed? This essay seeks to answer these questions. It argues that the immediate cause for Iago's murderous rancor lies within the play itself, in an episode where Desdemona, all inadvertently, places Iago in a situation in which he humiliates himself. It argues further that themes evoked in
this scene, of speech and silence, verbal competence and incompetence, resonate throughout the play (as they do throughout Shakespeare's career), in ways that should significantly influence our understanding both of Iago's behavior in Acts III and IV and of the fifth-act climax.

I

The episode in question is II.i.83-181, the interlude in which Desdemona "beguile[s]" the time before Othello's arrival at Cyprus by asking Iago how he would praise various sorts of women. Often in Shakespeare the incon-sequentiality of an episode relative to a play's plot alerts us to its significance in other terms. There is no plot reason, for example, why Borachio in Much Ado about Nothing should discuss fashion for thirty lines before revealing that he wooed Margaret under the name of Hero; but there is sufficient thematic reason, in the play's repeated concern with issues of true and false perception, for including the episode. So also here. Othello's ship need not arrive later than Desdemona's for any plot reason (it in fact left Venice earlier); so Shakespeare must have had other reasons for including the delay—perhaps to allow time to develop nuances of character, theme, and motive that he could not conveniently develop elsewhere.

The primary issues explored in the time between Desdemona's and Othello's arrivals are the nature and limits of Iago's verbal fluency and his attitudes toward women. In discussing these issues, it will be helpful if we first reflect on related depictions elsewhere in Shakespeare's drama—particularly in the romantic comedies, which form such a large part of Othello's immediate dramatic ancestry. Throughout the romantic comedies, Shakespeare links the maturation of the romantic hero (less frequently of the romantic heroine) toward a capacity for conjugal love with his becoming verbally fluent. At times, as in the instance of Claudio and Hero in Much Ado about Nothing, this movement proceeds straightforwardly, from an opening inarticulateness to a final fluency.2 More frequently, as in the instances of Helena and Demetrius in A Midsummer Night's Dream, Orsino in Twelfth Night, and Romeo in Romeo and Juliet, the movement is double, away from a false—because conventional, doting, self-regarding, or anger-laden—fluency toward one based on, and expressing, mature affection.

Nowhere is this double movement more transparently depicted than in As You Like It, the most optimistic of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. When Celia and Rosalind congratulate Orlando after his triumph over Charles, the Duke's wrestler, Orlando twice fails to speak, first saying, "Can I not say, I thank you? My better parts / Are all thrown down" (I.ii.249-50), then saying,

I cannot speak to her, yet she urg'd conference.
O poor Orlando! thou art overthrown!
(I.ii.258-59)

Significantly, this inability to speak extends only to the language of courtesy and affection, for scarcely sixty lines earlier Orlando had spoken fluently to Celia and Rosalind. But in this earlier instance, as in his eloquent playopening diatribe (spoken to Adam) and his subsequent quarrel with Oliver, Orlando's verbal facility originates in self-regard and a sense of grievance:

But let your fair eyes and gentle wishes go with me to my trial; wherein if I be foil'd, there is but one sham'd that was never gracious; if kill'd, but one dead that is willing to be so. I shall do my friends no wrong, for I have none to lament me; the world no injury, for in it I have nothing. Only in the world I fill up a place, which may be better supplied when I have made it empty.

(I.ii. 185-93)
In its form—its graceful, artificial, Euphuistic balance and periodicity—as in its content, this speech encapsulates the values of the opening court world of the play, where not only Orlando but almost every (male) character exhibits an anxious concern over gaining or preserving personal advantage and over repelling real or fancied assault.

The central action of *As You Like It* consists in developing its characters away from this initial fluency in a language of anger toward a final fluency in a language of affection. For Orlando, this development occurs most obviously in the mock courtship conducted by Rosalind in the guise of Ganymede, which refines his inchoate first gestures toward affectionate expression—the verses he hangs on the trees in the Forest of Arden—into a relatively sophisticated language of love. Accompanying this transformation is a parallel physical movement, centered on the act and metaphor of wrestling. Orlando's opening fluency of grievance is accompanied by a physical "fluency" in wrestling, as a self-aggrandizing form of violence. But as Orlando's comments about his having been "overthrown" and Celia and Rosalind's later jokes about Rosalind's need to "wrestle with [her] affections" (I.iii.21) both suggest, "wrestling" is also a metaphor in this play for feelings of affection and their physical expression.

Orlando's development along this axis occurs first in his voluntary, trusting sheathing of his sword in his initial encounter with Duke Senior, later in his killing of the lion that threatens his brother's life—presumably, given the Herculean overtones of Oliver's description of the event, by wrestling with it.\(^3\) This later use of wrestling reverses the significance wrestling held at the outset of the play, transforming it from self-aggrandizing violence into an expression of fraternal affection. Once this stage in Orlando's development is reached, the way is clear for a further, metaphoric transformation of wrestling. Orlando's education into a verbal language of affection reaches its climax when he tells Ganymede, "I can live no longer by thinking" (V.ii.50), where "thinking" signifies all alternatives to direct physical experience. The play's fifthact movement beyond "thinking" visually transforms the metaphor of wrestling, by replacing the violent grappling of Act I with the erotic embraces of the final nuptial dance. And this transformation foreshadows, we may assume, yet a further one, outside the temporal limits of the play, when the four couples engage in the marriage-night "wrestling" that is the primary language of conjugal affection.

*As You Like It* thus expresses in paradigmatic form a central emphasis of Shakespearean romance, on maturation as double growth, in affection and fluency of expression. Although Shakespeare's other romantic comedies depict the resolution of this double movement with a greater leaven of skepticism than is found in *As You Like It*, none challenges its essential validity. "The rarer action," says Prospero, "is / In virtue than in vengeance" (V.i.27-28). But in the tragedies, and particularly in *Othello*, the triumph of affection and of affectionate fluency is by no means so certain. The final silence toward which the arc of comedy moves is plenary, a state of emotional fulfillment arrived at through language but beyond any further need for it. By comparison, the final silence of Shakespearean tragedy—indeed, of all tragedy—is privative, the stillness of the grave, and the power of language to resist or overcome this silence is everywhere in doubt.\(^4\)

Doubt about the regenerative and transformative power of language takes on special urgency in *Othello* because the play so deliberately turns romantic themes and assumptions to tragic account. This doubt assumes two main forms. The first is skepticism about the independence of language in relation to society, about its ability to transcend the inequities of a fallen world. In *As You Like It*, the contrast between the court and the forest is understood allegorically as a contrast between "Fortune" and "Nature" and the play assumes, in Rosalind's words, that "Fortune reigns in gifts of the world, not in the lineaments of Nature" (I.ii.41-42). Although the play certainly does not suggest that all characters possess these lineaments equally, it does suggest that all can develop their share of them—their share in the language of affection—to an adequate extent, if freed temporarily from the vexations of fortune. *Othello* offers no such assurance. No other major tragedy emphasizes so relentlessly the relation between social rank and verbal style. Here Cassio's command of a rhetoric of courtly compliment, Desdemona's ability to be "free of speech" (III.iii.185), and Othello's devotion to an orotund, passionate, military idiom are all reflexes of their positions in the world, not...
acquisitions available to all—perhaps least of all to someone of Iago's background and social status.

The second, more important way the play renders doubtful the triumph of affectionate fluency is in the nature of the challenge Iago mounts to the dependence just described, and, more generally, to the dependence of language on reality itself. In every dimension of his identity—metaphysical, psychological, social—Iago asserts an absolute separation between language and meaning. In contrast to the notion of a "natural" language, in which signifiers are bound to, and partly determined by, their signifieds (Duke Senior's "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones" [II.i.16-17]), Iago asserts his complete freedom to make any signifier mean anything. "Were I the Moor," he says, "I would not be Iago" "I am not what I am" "I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign" (I.i.57, 65, 156-57). In a sense, then, Iago is the antitype of the romantic dream of growth through and beyond language. Where the arc of comedy moves toward an interfusion of self and other beyond the need for verbal mediation, Iago defies language's mediatory function at its source, by asserting an absolute ability of the human will—of his will—to separate words from their expressive and communicative functions.

A question posed throughout Othello is how far this willful appropriation of meaning can extend. How completely can Iago commandeer the word "love," that is, and for how long? Construed more generally, this question is about the nature and limits of language itself—as reference to a present-day critical context can help us to see. The doubt that Jacques Derrida has taught people to entertain regarding a metaphysics of presence of course extends to romantic love. From a deconstructionist point of view, the dream of an entire interfusion of lover and beloved must fail of realization—because, as Derrida says, "pure presence itself, if such a thing were possible, would be only another name for death. … 'Cohabitation with women,' hetero-eroticism, can be lived … only through the ability to reserve within itself its own supplementary protection." Hence Iago's treatment of his own seeming language of love as "but sign" can be interpreted as an act of deconstruction, an assertion of the inability of any language—and of any asseveration of love in any form—ever to arrive at a condition of pure presence.

A moment's reflection, though, reveals that Iago is only incompletely a deconstructionist; for he does not separate signifier from signified in the service of the free play of language but of an alternative dream of presence. As Derrida also says, a decisive moment in the history of metaphysics comes in the middle of the seventeenth century, when "the determination of absolute presence is [re]constituted as self-presence, as subjectivity." Iago anticipates this moment. His attempt to subordinate language to will substitutes "self for "other" as the presence beyond language that language is assumed to serve. So a central struggle in the play is between opposed ideas of the ultimate purpose of language. In their furthest extension, the romantic comedies shadow forth a cosmic optimism, a quasi-Aquinian sense that the "virtue" (to use Roderigo's term) toward which all human expression moves is love. Iago challenges this optimism, by assuming that his own anger-driven discourse—associated throughout the play with the devil and ultimate evil—can successfully simulate all forms of loving expression. If he is right, then the teleological authority of the comedies will be overthrown, and anger will replace love as the goal (and motive) of human discourse. This possibility is at the heart of the play's tragic questioning. Which is it, the play seems to ask—fluency in anger or fluency in love—whereto we see in all things language tends?

II

The issues broached above are joined with full force for the first time in Othello in the exchange between Desdemona and Iago now awaiting discussion. The episode results in intense temporary discomfiture for Iago, by momentarily exposing the inability of his manipulative rhetoric fully to masquerade as a language of affection; but it does so at no little cost, for it also increases the virulence of his rage and settles that rage for the first time on Desdemona as its object. Interestingly, the episode begins with byplay centered on issues of social status, speech, and silence. Cassio's condescending explanation to Iago, that his "bold show of courtesy" in kissing Emilia is an effect of his "breeding" (II.i.98-99), assumes Iago's ignorance of this style of
greeting; while Iago's reply—"Sir, would she give you so much of her lips / As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, / You would have enough" (II.i.100-102)—shifts attention from his presumed lack of social poise to Emilia's supposed facility at angry speech. And his next statement briefly adumbrates a privative view of the relation between speech and silence, by claiming that even Emilia's silence expresses anger, because when "she puts her tongue a little in her heart," still she "chides with thinking" (II.i.106-107).

This byplay, if bumptious, is yet harmless. But the episode begins to reveal its darker purpose when Desdemona asks, first, "What wouldst write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?" and, later, "But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed—one that in the authority of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?" (II.i.117, 144-47). The distinctiveness of the situation Desdemona here creates deserves emphasis. In posing her challenges, Desdemona places Iago in a situation he encounters nowhere else in the play, of being required to express affection at someone else's request. Further, she makes two assumptions, neither remarkable were her audience anyone other than Iago. The wit game she proposes is essentially a courtly pastime, like the word games in Love's Labor's Lost, the wit combats in Much Ado About Nothing, or the game of substantives and adjectives in Ben Jonson's Cynthia's Revels. But Desdemona assumes, in a fashion consistent with her boundary-dissolving ability to fall in love with Othello, that anyone, even a déclassé professional soldier like Iago, must command a sufficiently genuine language of affection to allow him or her to play the game adequately. And she also assumes that everyone, even Iago, would agree that the putative object of this affectionate language, a "deserving woman," must indeed exist.

In the face of both assumptions, Iago fails abjectly. Shakespeare underscores the first failure—Iago's lack of command of a genuine language of affection—by placing his comments midway between Cassio's and Othello's speech of greeting to Desdemona. As an example of a language of affection, neither Cassio's nor Othello's speech is unproblematic. Cassio's "Hail to thee, lady! and the grace of heaven, / Before, behind thee, and on every hand, / Enwheel thee round!" (II.i.85-87) hovers on the edge of rodomontade, as does his earlier description of Desdemona as

a maid
That paragons description and wild fame;
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
And in th' essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener.

(II.i.61-65)

And Othello's speech beginning "It gives me wonder great as my content / To see you here before me" (II.i.183-84) displays, as many commentators have observed, a disturbing tendency to link thoughts of love with thoughts of death. But however problematic these speeches may be, both surely highlight the stylistic inadequacies of Iago's severely end-stopped rhymed couplets. In comparison to Cassio's fluid, if florid, expansiveness and Othello's over-flowing intensity of emotion, Iago's brief, labored couplets indeed resemble, as he himself says, "birdlime" plucked "from frieze" (II.i.126).

That Iago is resentfully aware of the failure of his language to equal Cassio's and Othello's is evident from his reaction after the exchange with Desdemona ends. In his first aside, spoken before Othello's entry, Iago tries to repair the damage his self-esteem has suffered by demeaning Cassio's "courtesy": "Ay, well said, whisper. … You say true, 'tis so indeed" (II.i.167-71). As his slightly later characterization of Cassio as "a knave very voluble" (II.i.238) suggests, Iago here engages in sour-grapes social criticism, seeking to diminish Cassio's language of affection to the level of a mere courtly affectation, a way of "play[ing] the sir" (II.i.174). And after Othello speaks, Iago engages in a similar fury of denial. His initial response—"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)—acknowledges that he has just heard "music," even while promising to transform this harmony into discord. But within twenty lines, Iago closes off even this slight amount of acknowledgement of the genuineness of Othello's
affectionate language, by supplanting the word "music" with "prating." "Lay thy finger thus," he says to Roderigo, "and let thy soul be instructed. Mark me with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies. To love him still for prating—let not thy discreet heart think it" (II.i.221-225).

In these reactions, we see an essential dynamic of Iago's character at work—a momentary recognition of inadequacy, followed by anger, followed by denial. This same dynamic operates, even more vehemently, in Iago's reactions to Desdemona. In all his responses to Desdemona's question "Come, how wouldst thou praise me?" (III.124) he belies her second assumption that everyone must believe in the existence of truly deserving women. His comments on women "fair and wise," "black and witty," "fair and foolish," and "foul and foolish" all assume the existence of a ubiquitous female manipulative intention similar to his own: "fairness and wit, / The one's for use, the other useth it" (II.i.129-30). And his response to Desdemona's final request, for praise of "a deserving woman indeed," belies her assumption directly, by elaborating an apparently positive description for twelve lines, only to conclude that the woman so described would be suited merely "to suckle fools and chronicle small beer" (II.i.160).

Yet the disproof of this misogyny stands listening even as Iago speaks. Desdemona's speeches throughout this scene are too brief to constitute a distinctive language of affection. But the comment she makes in response to Othello's "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy" (III.189-90) is nonetheless significant. "The heavens forbid," she says, "But that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow!" (III.193-95). In emphasizing duration (in contrast to Othello's "content so absolute") and in coupling "loves" with "comforts," Desdemona invokes an image of marriage (and of wives) directly opposed to the one Iago has just offered. This image is fully consistent with her behavior elsewhere in the play. Perhaps more than any other character in Shakespeare, Desdemona envisions quotidian marriage as a proper arena for the achievement of human happiness. Frank in laying claim to the "rites" of marriage, eager to advise her husband to "wear [his] gloves, / Or feed on nourishing dishes" (III.iii.77-78), vehement "to the last article" (III.iii.22) in advancing the cause of friendship, capable of using the word "love" in reference to every other major character in the play, she is the "deserving woman indeed," imagined as wife, that Iago fails to praise. (She is even this woman revised in one crucial regard, for she presumably would not find suckling a child or keeping household accounts unworthy uses of her energies.)

Desdemona's request that Iago praise women thus exposes a limit on his capacity to simulate love, even as her being exposes the lie of the misogyny he speaks instead. In the dialogue with Roderigo beginning "lay thy finger thus" (II.L221), Iago works furiously to occlude the self-knowledge he has just inadvertently been offered. He does so characteristically, by verbally besmirching Desdemona. Earlier in the play, when arguing that Desdemona "must change for youth" (I.iii.349-50), Iago shows little or no rancor toward Desdemona herself. Her presumed impending infidelity is merely a convenience of his argument, a way of convincing Roderigo to "follow … these wars" (I.iii.340). But after the episode of the mispraise of women, Desdemona emerges as a distinct object of Iago's hatred, and his language describing her takes on a new vehemence: "Her eye must be fed" "her delicate tenderness will find itself abus'd, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor" "Bless'd flg's-end! The wine she drinks is made of grapes. If she had been bless'd, she would never have lov'd the Moor" (II.i.225, 232-33, 251-53).

III

Anger at Desdemona vies with anger at Cassio and Othello as Iago's primary motive in the remainder of Othello; and this anger, even more than Othello's warrior-like propensity toward violence, decides Desdemona's fate. Our long familiarity with the outcome of the play can lead us to assume that Desdemona's death is always Othello's objective, once he becomes convinced that his jealousy is justified. But in fact he first intends divorce, not murder. "If I do prove her haggard," he says, "… / I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind / To prey at fortune" (III.iii.260-63). Furthermore, once he begins to think in terms of
murder, he wavers back and forth between Desdemona and Cassio as his intended victim. Only at the end of the seduction scene, after Iago insinuates a mock plea on Desdemona's behalf, "But let her live," does Othello say, "Damn her, lewd minx! ... / ... I will withdraw / To furnish me with some swift means of death / For the fair devil" (III.iii.475-79). And later, whenever Othello again wavers, Iago works to rekindle and refocus his anger. "Nay, you must forget that," he says, when Othello says, "A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman!" "Nay, that's not your way" (IV.i. 178-86).

Yet however hard Iago works to destroy Desdemona, his ultimate objective seems less her death than her and Othello's silence. As many have noted, Iago's seduction of Othello redefines certain key terms, so that "wisdom" comes to mean "suspicion" "love," "folly" "honor," "reputation" and so forth.13 These redefinitions constitute an extended act of revenge for the discomfiture Iago offers during the Act II interlude with Desdemona. They con-duct Othello down a ladder of verbal facility, from the romantic grandeur and openness of "It gives me wonder great as my content / To see you here before me" to an Iago-like angry vehemence. "It is not words that shakes me thus," says Othello with unconscious irony, at the moment when he descends most fully into this Iagoesque language: "Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!" (IV.i.41-43).

As with Othello, so with Desdemona. There is no sense given in the play that Iago particularly wants Othello dead. He would presumably allow Othello to live indefinitely in torment, were this possible. But Othello's nobleness of manner combines with Desdemona's beauty and virtue to cause him to ascend repeatedly (if only momentarily) back up the ladder of language, toward the sort of fluency in affection he had commanded before his jealousy was aroused. "Hang her, I do but say what she is. So delicate with her needle! an admirable musician! O, she will sing the savageness out of a bear. Of so high and plenteous wit and invention!" (IV.i. 187-90). Hence Iago can only en-sure Othello's continuation in torment by destroying the provocation of his momentary ascents out of it—by destroying, that is, Desdemona.

So from a double motive, Iago arrives at the speech in which he makes his only direct demand for Desdemona's death: "Do it not with poison; strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.i.207-208). Othello's reply—"Good, good; the justice of it pleases"—responds to only one dimension of Iago's twisted symbolic logic, by seeing in the proposed site for Desdemona's death the "justice" of a punishment that fits the crime.14 But in the terms we are pursuing here, the Iago's proposal reveals further resonances. His substitution of a direct physical form of murder for Othello's poison suggests a grisly reversal of As You Like It's paradigmatic romance plot, wherein violent wrestling is transformed into erotic "wrestling." Similarly, his call for death by strangulation suggests a direct assault on Desdemona's voice, as if silencing her would destroy not only her capacity for affectionate speech but her ability to provoke this sort of speech in Othello. And we may if we wish also understand this call for strangulation as internal—as an attempt by Iago to silence the Desdemona inside himself, the voice that says "Now I do love her too" (III.ii.291) and "she's fram'd as fruitful / As the free elements" (II.iii.341-42), the voice that speaks of "that sweet sleep" which Othello and Desdemona "ow'dst yesterday" (III.iii.332-33).15

Thinking of the murder of Desdemona as an act of attempted silencing gives particular salience to the odd sequence of her death, in which she "dies," revives, speaks, and dies again. Speech from beyond the grave—from beyond, that is, the foreknowledge of death—is a repeated motif in the conclusions of Shakespeare's major tragedies. One thinks, for example, of Hamlet's, Antony's, and Cleopatra's death speeches, all of which are spoken from within a certain knowledge of impending death. Or in a different vein, one thinks of Lear's urgent claim that he has heard the dead Cordelia speak. All these speeches mitigate our sense of tragic woe. They affirm the triumph of life over death, even in the most extreme moment of tragic loss, by demonstrating their speakers' continued concern with the affairs of life. Only the fear of some-thing after death keeps one alive, says Hamlet in the midst of his suicidal world-weariness; but at the time of his actual death, as he says, "I am dead, Horatio," his attention turns back urgently toward life and the affairs of the world—toward his concern that his story be told "aright" and that the nomination for king come to
Fortinbras (V.ii.333, 339).

The conclusion of Othello tests in the sharpest possible way this power of tragic affirmation. Some years ago, G. R. Hibbard described Othello as a "play of contraction." The central actions of the other major tragedies, Hibbard argued, expand outward, gaining in social and metaphysical amplitude as they develop. "Is this the promis'd end?" asks Kent; "Or image of that horror?" replies Edgar (V.iii.264-65). But Othello narrows as it advances, moving from the relative amplitude of the opening concern with the "wars against the Ottomites" (I.iii.234) to the closing "tragic loading of this bed" (V.ii.363). The goal of this movement—in a sense, of all of the second half of the play—is silence: Desdemona dead, Emilia dead, Roderigo dead, Othello dead, Iago promising that "From this time forth [he] never will speak word" (V.ii.304). As Hibbard says, the surviving characters contribute to this silence, as if thereby avoiding something "monstrous and obscene." "There is no formal praise of the hero," he says; "no interpretation of the events that have led up to the disaster is given, or even promised. Faced with actions which they find shocking and unintelligible, the surviving characters seek, with a haste that is almost indecent, to put them out of sight and out of mind."16

Yet poised against this pervasive silence is some amount at least of tragic affirmation. In two instances, first with Desdemona, then with Emilia, Shakespeare allows speech in the service of love to emerge from certain death. "Unkindness may do much," says Desdemona earlier in the play, "And his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love" (IV.ii.159-61). Indeed so. For when Desdemona revives momentarily, she attempts to divert blame from Othello, answering Emilia's "O, who hath done this deed" with "Nobody; I myself (V.ii.123-24). And as if to underscore the significance of this affirmation (and to remove from it any imputation of mere submission to male authority), Shakespeare repeats it later in the scene, when Emilia struggles, against Iago's resistance, to state the truth about Desdemona's murder. When Emilia persists, affirming her intention to "speak as liberal as the north" (V.ii.220), Iago stabs her; then she too speaks from beyond the grave. Already "kill'd," as Gratiano twice says, she speaks a death speech associating language with music, love, and bliss:

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan,
And die in music. [Sings.] "Willow, willow,
willow."
Moor, she was chaste; she lov'd thee, cruel
Moor;
So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;
So speaking as I think, alas, I die.
(V.ii.247-51)

Considered as a response to these speeches, Iago's "From this time forth I never will speak word" displays a grim inevitability. By all evidence, Iago has been a slyly tyrannous husband to Emilia, as if to gain thereby a modicum of compensation for his sense of social and psychic inadequacy.17 When Emilia rebels against this tyranny, saying "'Tis proper I obey him; but not now" (V.ii.196), Iago's social resentment, misogyny, and desire to silence the language of affection emerge once more, this time in ironic diminuendo. From the moment he acknowledges his deception of Othello to when he stabs Emilia, Iago speaks six speeches, none longer than a line. These begin as reiterated attempts to silence Emilia by imposing upon her his husbandly authority: "Go to, charm your tongue" "'I charge you get you home" "'Zounds, hold your peace" "Be wise, and get you home" (V.ii.183, 194, 219, 223). When these efforts fail, there follow two brief speeches distilling to its essence Iago's entire method of assault on Desdemona, and on women in general: "Villainous whore!" he says to his own wife; "Filth, thou liest!" (V.ii.229, 231). Then Emilia responds, "By heaven, I do not, I do not, gentlemen" (V.i.232), and the play moves beyond Iago's calumny to her final speech, in which she speaks truth, and dies.
Thus defeated a second time, what further silence can Iago seek to impose, except upon himself? His characteristic movement, from awareness of inadequacy to anger to denial, here reaches its logical conclusion, in a denial so complete that it blocks access even to a language formed from pain or anger. Here at last, it would seem, Iago has found a fully invulnerable way of repudiating the language of affection as present in the world and latent in himself. And this repudiation might also seem to prevail over all the play's attempts at affirmation, to be Shakespeare's final statement about the relative power of love and anger, speech and silence. For even the play's one remaining attempt to articulate the power of love, Othello's death speech, ends in silence. And Lodovico's and Gratiano's responses to that speech—"O bloody period!" and "All that is spoke is marr'd" (V.ii.357)—resonate beyond their immediate context, suggesting an indictment of language itself, as tragically incapable of encompassing the pain of experience.

Yet we should not conclude too quickly that Iago's retreat into silence succeeds, or that it completely overrides the play's gestures of tragic affirmation. Iago's attempt to subordinate language to the power of will is directed at language's expressive (as well as its communicative) dimension. He not only believes that he can "show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign" (I.i.156-57), he believes that he can perfectly conceal the anger out of which this hypocrisy arises. So also with his final silence. His promise that "From this time forth [he] never will speak word" (V.ii.304) is a last attempt to impose an entirely willed meaning on an act of communication, in this instance on one that is gestural rather than verbal. In response to Lodovico's and Gratiano's urgent demands that he be wrenched, through torture, back into the arena of human speech, Iago promises a perfect and indifferent silence.

But if Iago's effort to subject language to the power of will fails in the play at large, so also does this final attempt to impose his will on silence. This is so because the meaning of silence, no less than that of speech, lies out-side the power of its human embodiment entirely to control. Few would agree with Gratiano's expectation that "Torments will ope [Iago's] lips" (V.ii.305). But "silence," like any negative term, cannot independently describe reality; it necessarily evokes the positive term whose absence it names. Only in relation to some form of sound—some form of speech—is silence "silence," and not something quite literally unthinkable and unnameable.18 So even if Iago succeeds, he fails. A tense and unyielding silence in the face of torture—"O, enforce it!" (V.ii.369)—must inevitably signify an inner resistance and a denied need. Whether Iago's lips open or not, that is, he cries out. And in this cry, this fissure, this free play of signification, we hear expressed his final humiliation, his final failure to gain mastery over language and over the love it has the power to communicate.

Notes

1 All citations of Shakespeare's plays are to The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). I have omitted the brackets used to indicate emended readings. The Arden edition, often the text critics choose for citation, is not to be preferred in the case of Othello. The editor, M.R. Ridley, used the 1622 quarto, not the folio, as his primary copy-text, and his arguments in favor of the choice are not compelling.

2 Claudio displays his initial inarticulateness when called upon to speak to Hero for the first time, after Don Pedro has succeeded in wooing her. "Silence is the perfectest heralt of joy" (II.i.306) he says, then says nothing more. Hero's corresponding silence, as suggested by Beatrice's "Speak, cousin, or (if you cannot) stop his mouth with a kiss" (II.i.310) betokens an equivalent romantic immaturity. At the end of the play, the ability of Claudio to "labor … in sad invention" in writing epitaphs for Hero's tomb (V.i.283) and of Hero to speak forthrightly (if briefly) in defense of her virtue signals their relative maturation.


Iago's style is to run up flags and signs that can be switched at a moment's notice. In fact his signs are really "designs" in a double sense, a kind of deconstructive scheming, inasmuch as they "de-sign" or divest signs of meaning in order to fulfill his villainous designs.


Iago's instruction to Roderigo, "Lay thy finger thus," suggests a desire to silence Roderigo and, by extension, the language Iago has just heard. As often with Shakespeare's major figures, Iago's first sentence in the play—"'Sblood, but you'll not hear me" (I.i.4)—introduces a central element of his characterization. Iago often plays the pedagogue, lecturing his listeners, as if eager to re-place their speech with his own.

This characterization of Desdemona runs counter to some feminist commentary, which sees her loyalty to Othello and her devotion to marriage as excessive, even sedulous. See, e.g., Irene G. Dash, *Wedding, Wooing, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1981); and Gayle Greene, "'This That You Call Love': Sexual and Social Tragedy in Othello," *Journal of Women's Studies in Literature* 1, 1 (1979): 16-32. In response, one might contemplate what the word "obedience" means to Desdemona, as compared to Iago. Iago insinuates into Othello's mind the notion that "obedience" should mean "submission."
But it clearly does not mean this to Desdemona. Her promise to Cassio to "watch [Othello] tame, and talk him out of patience" (III.iii.23) is not hyperbole. Cassio learns from Emilia that even before he and Desdemona meet, "The general and his wife are talking of [the dismiss] / And she speaks for you stoutly" (III.i.43-44). Subsequent to her meeting with Cassio, Desdemona four times broaches the issue of the dismissal to Othello. Until the scene in which Cassio is named as Othello's replacement, in fact, Desdemona and Othello are never on stage together without Desdemona raising the question of Cassio's return to favor. Even in the deathbed scene, with her own life at hazard, she weeps when she hears of Cassio's supposed death. For a similar interpretation, see W.D. Adamson, "Unpinned or Undone? Desdemona's Critics and the Problems of Sexual Innocence," *ShSt* 13 (1980): 169-86.

11Iago's claim that Desdemona will "begin to heave the gorge" is suggestive. Eructative imagery occurs fairly frequently in this play, usually in association with Iago. Iago uses the word "cast" three times, for example, always with the overtone of "vomiting" and Emilia, after describing men as "stomachs" and women as "food," says, "They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us" (III.iv.104-106). In Iago's comment about Desdemona, the image of "heaving the gorge" enacts his dynamic of anger and denial. He vomiting his anger onto Desdemona, while at the same time vomiting away the need and desire (construed as demand) to speak praisingly of women.

12Desdemona contemplates a similar outcome when she says "though he do shake me off / To beggarly divorcement" (IV.ii.157-58).

13For studies of this process, see Heilman, chap. 4; and William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words*, 3rd edn. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), chap. 11, "Honest in Othello."

14Othello states this understanding near the beginning of Act V, when he says, "Strumpet, I come. / … / Thy bed, lust-stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (V.i.34-36).

15In the murder itself, Othello softens the brutality of Iago's suggestion: the Folio stage direction, supported by stage tradition, has him murder Desdemona by smothering, not strangulation. (The Quarto stage direction, although less explicit, also implies death by smothering.)


17See III.iii.300-319, the episode in which Iago obtains Desdemona's handkerchief. As A.C. Bradley notes, the exchanges between Iago and Emilia in this episode (the only one in which they appear on stage alone together) bespeak a habitual rancorousness (*Shakespearian Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth" [1904; rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960], p. 215). See also For an insightful discussion of Desdemona's and Emilia's death speeches, see Grennan.

18For an excellent discussion of this point in relation to *Hamlet*, see James Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in "Hamlet"* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 55-58. See also and


**Theatricality and Textuality: The Example of Othello:**

**Introduction**

**Theatricality and Textuality: The Example of Othello**
Uncle Hilaal pulled at your cheek and teasing you, said, "Askar, where is the third? Where's the other?"

You looked about yourself, looked here, looked there, looked there and then at the two of them, but remained silent. In the quiet of your daydreams, you asked yourself, "The third—who's that?" One, Hilaal. Two, Salaado. Three? What does the third mean?

—Nuruddin Farah, Maps

**Theatricality and Textuality: The Example of Othello: I**

Is life a game, a stage, or a text? If, as Clifford Geertz has observed, these are the chief paradigms by which the academic discourse of our time has tended to define its agon, no intellectual terrain has proved more receptiveto such "refigurations" than the Renaissance. Under the first of these rubrics, studies of courtly behavior have invoked a Burkean or Bourdieuvian practice as the model of both discourse and action in the competition for the favor of princes and patrons. At the same time, critics of a Foucauldian or late-Barthesian bent have investigated how, owing in part to the spread of printing, a consciousness of the possibilities of textual self-construction and self-projection enhanced the authority of the emergent early modern "author." Not surprisingly, the middle branch of Renaissance academic discourse has largely referred itself to the late-Elizabethan and Jacobean public theater, as "metatheatrical" investigations of the art/life ratio in Shakespearean or English Renaissance drama have resonated with sociologically oriented analyses of everyday life.

The links between theater and play are fairly obvious, and those between games and textuality have a special appeal to critics taken with the pleasures of the text. But the kinship of text-centered and stage-centered approaches, both in general and with reference to the Renaissance, has been less well acknowledged. On the whole metanarrative and metatheater remain separate if equal games, though each has come to levy increasingly large claims on our understanding of Renaissance discourse. Yet homologies between theater and text (or stage and page) as modes of discursive production in the Renaissance deserve greater attention than they have received. This is so not only because the material conditions governing productive practices in the two media are often similar, but because those conditions generate analogous consciousnesses—even subjectivities—among producers of discursive and theatrical texts. As Shakespeare studies have lately been emphasizing, the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama betrays an awareness of the theater as a vehicle for the critical evaluation of dominant ideologies, as well as the possible adumbration of emergent ones. This self-consciousness is conveyed especially through the theatrical texts' conscious deployment of space and the attendant antimimetic conventions of the platform stage in constructing a relationship between players and audience. An analogous theatricality has long been noted in Renaissance writers as diverse as Erasmus, Rabelais, and Cervantes, all of whom in different ways seem to willfully defy the logical self-contradictions implied in reifying the metaphor of a textual "audience."

An interesting test of this observation arises in Montaigne, whose distrust of theatricality has been repeatedly noted. I have tried elsewhere to demonstrate a unique aspect of Montaigne's textual construction of his "audience," the practice of representing it within his text, thereby putting into relief the textual act of representation itself, a kind of mimesis of mimesis. Under the pressure of a perceived need to open channels of communication with his anonymous reader, Montaigne's *Essays* perform the textual construction of the modern author-as-subject. What is significant about this achievement is the number of explicitly theatrical passages in which Montaigne posits a specular relationship with his reader. This theme is borne out by his somewhat eccentric use of the word tiers or "third." On the most basic level, this motif serves to inject a sense
of alterity into an original configuration between a subject and an "other" who, in Benveniste's terms, shares a "correlation of personality" with the subject. In contrast to an original relation of self-presence, the self or moi becomes a displaced third party objectified so that the subject can speak of it "as a neighbor, as a tree." In more explicitly theatrical passages Montaigne invites his reader to enter as spectator into a three-sided relationship with the speaker (or book) and another, or is encouraged to view such a triangular situation as an analogue to his own relation to the speaker. Hence Montaigne's reader functions less as a voyeur than as a kind of ghost writer of the Essays, the indispensable "third" without whom the text cannot mean. Such a conception of the system of author, reader, and other has important implications for the contemporary theater. In the present essay I will try to show that the productive economy of meaning fostered by Montaigne's constructed relationship to his reader is closely paralleled in Shakespeare's Othello. Without advancing any claims of source or influence, I will argue that textual and theatrical production are functions of the same cultural situation.

Theatricality and Textuality: The Example of Othello: II

Before turning to Shakespeare I want to situate these analogies both in the historical debate about the Renaissance and in the theoretical one about representation. Let me begin by considering briefly the concept of "theatricality" employed in this discussion and to indicate some of its provenances in literary theory. In a series of books and articles on Shakespeare's theater, Robert Weimann has argued for a new kind of theatrical authority in the Renaissance centering on the tension between traditional Aristotelian mimesis and a more subjective form of imitation rooted in a general self-consciousness about representation itself, specifically the actors' representation of the act of appropriation. In his earlier work Weimann examines the distribution of space in the late-medieval theater inherited by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, a division that permitted players to break with the mimetic illusion of character and foreground theatrical productivity, that is, "representivity" itself, as a praxis including both actors and audience in the process of creating meaning. Weimann grounds his argument in his own and other scholars' researches into the material conditions of the Elizabethan theater, situated as it was on the margins of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century London. But his theoretical model of the theatrical transaction is based on the Marxist concept of Aneignung or "appropriation," a reciprocal process whereby the modern bourgeois subject is constituted precisely in the act of making the conditions of his productive labor, in the cultural as well as the material sphere, his own. Applied to literary history, Aneignung is "both a text-appropriating … [and] a world-appropriating activity," which, "even while it precedes ideology and signification, is not closed to the acts of the historical consciousness of the signifying subject." Appropriation in this sense clearly transcends the theater. In the fluid social conditions of Elizabethan England, Weimann argues, such acts of "self-authorizing appropriation of language and its media of circulation" reflect a crisis in the authority of traditional vehicles of representation, including literary genres. Out of this crisis is generated a revision of the "modes and aims of representation." Rising in opposition to traditional mimesis, in which actors on the stage transparently represent mythological or historical characters, or narrators in fiction operate as neutral conduits for well-established stories and their meanings, the new mode of appropriation presupposes a representation "not reducible to its mimetic dimension." Instead,"representation (in this historicizing sense) appears as an agency of production and performance, in that it involves such performative action on the level of what is representing as cannot adequately be defined as a mere 'reflection' of the historically given circumstances and ideologies which the act of representation helps to transcribe." Weimann is careful to acknowledge that such appropriative acts "do not serve the free expression of subjectivity" but are conditioned by "discursive usage." Nevertheless, in his quarrel with the poststructuralist tendency to deny all subjectivity in the name of a rigid synchronicity that dissolves representation in "signification" and reduces writing to a subjectless textuality, he locates the limited freedom of the author in this diachronic and "dialogic (or theatrical) dimension in discourse." In the social and historical context of the Renaissance, then, theatricality may be provisionally identified with the (individual or
collective) interpretive axis that intersects with language conceived as a fixed and hegemonic system autonomously producing new cultural meanings. In the context of current academic debates, it functions as a counterforce to "textuality," suggesting how appropriating agents query, contest, and sometimes subvert established ideologies, thus effecting cultural change.24

This fruitful contamination of textuality by theatricality is exploited by Marie Maclean's performative approach to narrative, which stresses the function of "the reader as spectator." Tracing the traditional enmity of theater and narrative to their common origin—oral narrative at some point splits into theatrical performance and written narrative, ultimately the silent discourse of narrative in print—she identifies the "double nature of speculation, the double bind of spectatorship." By this she means that, like the play-audience, the reader is "tempted by the specularity, the mirroring of identification" with a character in the text addressed directly by the narrator, while retaining the awareness that spectatorship—that is, "the realization that one is a spectator"—entails "critical estrangement, and with it the penalties and pleasures of speculation."25 For our purposes Maclean's work is most helpful when she comes closest to the psychoanalytic categories of reading, especially those of Jacques Lacan and René Girard. Here Maclean focuses on reading as transgression. Reflecting on the excluded reader and the enforced reader, and their various revenges on their violation by the text, she observes: "Since the reader is always an outsider to the consensus of the text, just as the audience is always an outsider to the consensus of the stage, we must ask if he or she is not always a transgressor, a breaker of boundaries and an intruder into the world of the other. Since the reader's desire is always the desire of the other, which wants what the other wants as much as it wants what the other is, and can never attain either, it must always involve the transgression implicit in the desire of the other." Citing Barthes's The Pleasure of the Text, she proposes that to "understand the reader's part in the production of the text" we must analyze his/her "libidinal input," a task she undertakes with respect to Baudelaire.26

The view of historians and cultural critics that theatricality is a corrective to textuality is reenforced by theater semioticians.27 In the present context, what is significant about their approach is the attempt to apply the narratological theory of the récit (Propp, Bremond), and specifically actantial theory (Greimas), to the theater. Especially fruitful in this regard is the work of Anne Ubersfeld.28 If Maclean posits the reader-as-spectator, Ubersfeld's anatomy of the theatrical transaction as a text foregrounds the role of the spectator-reader. For her, theatrical discourse is never constative: it "says" nothing about the real, only the imaginary within the mise-en-scène; hence, "the discourse of the play-wright makes sense only as theatricality." In this view theatricality implies a lack of textual subjectivity: the one who speaks is always a personage, embedded in a complex communicative network whose author is always at best a destinataire (addressee) is diffuse, dialogic, and plurisubjective.29

Ubersfeld devotes special attention to the role of the spectator in the theatrical transaction. In a sequel to her first essay she reiterates a structuralist/semiotic "reading" of theater with a view toward the spectator, analyzing both représentation théâtrale30 and représentation comme texte (ES 27) on the discursive, narrative, and semic levels (ES 37). Like the reader of written texts, the spectator is "the coproducer of the spectacle" (ES 304), both before, in that it is aimed at her response, and after, in that, even more than the reader, she has the task of making sense of it—that is, sense happens only in her (ES 305f.).31 As either a witness or the subject of a communication witnessed by others, the spectator is implicated in an "always triangular" relation with various combinations of actor, character, or other spectators.32 One may quarrel with these particular paradigms, but however this triangulation of theatrical discourse is configured, "the public is the guarantor at one and the same time of the reality of the scenic figuration and of the non-verity of the scenic fiction" (ES 311). Ubersfeld's semiotics supports and implements Weimann's historicism in treating representation as involving equally the represented and the representing. Her narratological analysis gives a specific theoretical spin to the way in which "the totality of the theatrical representation is inscribed in a psychosocial consensus" (ES 311).
Ubersfeld’s understanding of the position of the theater spectator, like Maclean's view of the reader-spectator’s role as the third party or "outsider" in reading, evokes the familiar Freudian hermeneutic. In his book on jokes, Freud's interest in the role of the "third person" is related primarily to that of the first, the aggressor in a particular kind of social transaction. Freud distinguishes jokework from dreamwork by its social dimension, but ultimately the apparently social nature of the joke triangle—sexual aggressor, target, audience—projects the internal economy of the subject: "The process in the joke's first person produces pleasure by lifting inhibition and diminishing local expenditure; but it seems not to come to rest until, through the intermediary of the interpolated third person, it achieves general relief through discharge." In short, the third person is a catalyst, a cipher or instrument in a circuit of exchange. As such, it is related to the analyst in the transference, a necessary intermediary between the subject and his unconscious. Since it is axiomatic that the subject cannot directly access his unconscious—the residue of his true "self"—through the dreamwork, in the joke as in the dream the execution of the psychic economy by which the inhibitions and potential neuroses resulting from this ban may be overcome always demands this mediation by a third person. As a "reader" of his self, the subject can be constituted only by way of the circuitous interpolation of an other. He can recognize his desire only as the desire of another. His pleasure must be received at the other's hands.

It is this specular element in Freud's "theater of the unconscious" that inspires Lacan's adaptation of Freudian theatricality. In adopting the common economic element of Freud's "dreamwork" and "jokework" Lacan interprets Freud's *Darstellbarkeit* (representability) in explicitly theatrical terms as an "égards aux moyens de la mise en scène" (consideration of the means of staging). Emphasizing the element of distortion (*Entstellung*, or dis-placement), Lacan foregrounds "the intervention of a third party—which Freud calls 'censorship'—in the figuration of the dream, a party that plays the role both of spectator and of judge in the dream-representation." Here again, the explicitly theatrical feature is the triadic structure of dreamer, third party, and addressee, in Lacan's version accompanied by a shift in emphasis from a phonetic to a "scriptural" notation of the dream. In a note explaining how Lacan's theory of enunciation goes beyond the notion of text, Samuel Weber writes: "What in Lacan's writings takes the place of textuality is theatricality, and in this respect it anticipates Derrida's own 'pragrammatological turn': each utterance localized in the text, 'in its place,' is determined, post facto as it were—and in this, very much like the dream—by addresses that it did not necessarily intend." Weber links this theatricality with Freud's comments on the third person "upon which the joke depends, and which endows it with its social character."

Psychoanalytic theory, then, supports the semiology of the subject in foregrounding the essential triangularity of both theatrical and textual representation. Both theories, moreover, usefully supplement and revise the materialism of Weimann's account of Renaissance appropriation by narrowing if not annihilating the gap between theatricality and textuality. For Weimann (as for Keir Elam), theatrical *performance always transcends textuality*: the "performance text" includes but supersedes the "dramatic text." Hence the representationality of a Shakespeare play dissolves into a "posttextual future" beyond the play's closure, based on the supplantation (and supplementation) of represented authority in the text's fiction by "the authority of the actor … [which] is not that of the text but that of performance itself."

Buttressed by the findings of semiotic and psychoanalytic theorists, we may reasonably assume that in looking at *nondramatic* representations we can identify mediating elements of theatricality in printed texts analogous to those of Weimann's *plataea*-occupying mediators between fiction and audience. Such features would serve the same function of centering the neoclassical subject as is achieved by Shakespeare's actors as self-conscious representatives, or later by Brecht's "alienation effect." Thus Montaigne, for example, is explicitly committed to a nonrepresentational version of mimesis: the unimpeachable flow of time and corresponding multiplicity of perspectives that constitute his shifting "I" contest the representational authority based on a textual monologism parallel to the fixed perspective of High Renaissance art. Specifically, his stagings of audience intrusion into *locus*-like fictions break the representational illusion of textuality by shifting the reader's consciousness from the represented (fiction) to the *act* of representing and to the representing *agent* within the text. Theatricality thus challenges textuality; the dramatic-fictional text becomes...
a "performance text." In this respect, Montaigne's representations of representation anticipate the metatheatricality of Shakespeare less than a generation later.

**Theatricality and Textuality: The Example of Othello: III**

In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Rainer Maria Rilke meditates on the writer's need for "a third person … who passes through all lives and literatures," especially drama. In a passage fascinating for its gendering of the various theatrical roles, Rilke speculates that "every playwright up to now has found it too difficult to speak of the two whom the drama is really about":

The third person, just because he is so unreal, is the easiest part of the problem; they have all been able to manage him; from the very first scene you can feel their impatience to have him enter; they can hardly wait. The moment he appears, everything is all right. But how tedious when he's late. Absolutely nothing can happen without him; everything slows down, stops, waits. Yes, and what if this delay were to continue? What, my dear playwright, and you, dear audience who know life so well, what if he were declared missing—that popular man-about-town or that arrogant youth, who fits into every marriage like a skeleton-key? What if, for example, the devil had taken him? Let's suppose this. All at once you feel the unnatural emptiness of the theatres; they are bricked up like dangerous holes; only the moths from the rims of the box-seats flutter through the unsupported void. The playwrights no longer enjoy their elegant townhouses. All the detective agencies are, on their behalf, searching in the remotest corners of the world for the irreplaceable third person, who was the action itself.\(^{40}\)

Even without the half-suppressed wish that the devil might take him, this "irreplaceable third person" who both catalyzes and in a sense *is* the play's action might well evoke the powerful presence of Iago.

Iago is the very type of the Rilkean catalyst of the action (or the action itself) and mediator of others' desire. His orchestration of Roderigo's pursuit of Desdemona frames most of the play's action, whose burden is his perversion of Othello's desire for Desdemona. As Edward Snow has noted, through his efforts to thwart the prosperity of the mismatched couple, Iago too "has done the state some service," for that marriage challenges all the ideological hierarchies—of race, class, and gender—of the social system represented in the play.\(^{41}\) This social role finds its dramaturgical counterpart in the improvisational nature of his stage function. In Weimann's terms, Iago represents precisely the crucial social agency in the self-authorizing appropriation of language by an emerging bourgeois subject. Witness his coy, distorting iterations of common signifiers—"thought," "indeed," "think," "honest"—which Othello mistakes for "close dilations, working from the heart" of a received fund of fixed significations.\(^{42}\)

As for Weimann's "media of circulation," Iago's dominance of the nonrepresentational mimesis of the *plataea* gradually emerges over the first three acts of *Othello*. From the moment in the first scene when, under cover of darkness, the conspiracy with Roderigo breaks out into furtive appeals to Brabantio's suppressed fears of miscegenation, Iago lurks on the margins of the play's action as both its prime shaper and its interpreter to the theater audience, a position he will retain right down to the threshold of the play's catastrophe (cf. 5.1.11-22 and 128f.). Both in his famous "motive-hunting" soliloquies and in a dozen brief asides, Iago occupies a psychological space belonging as much to the theatrical agency of representation as to the represented social world of the fiction. The asides are especially germane to the present argument. When Iago comments on Cassio's paddling of Desdemona's palm in the "clyster-pipes" speech (2.1.167-78) or the "well tun'd … music" of Desdemona and Othello (2.1.199 201), he is clearly not only inviting the audience to view the ensuing action from his own quasi-directorial perspective but also miming their potential role in constructing the meaning of the dramatic action, a key issue that will peak in the final scene of the play.
The role of the audience is a crucial factor in Othello as a theatrical event. And it is mainly through lago's *plataea* function as presenter and interpreter that the play includes that role in its overall representation. As more than one commentator has noted, the central *anagnorisis* of the play turns on the seemingly unmotivated manifestation by the protagonist of the audience's ideological assumptions. When in the temptation scene Iago wins Othello's concurrence in Desdemona's initial deceit ("And so she did" [3.3.208]) and then elicits his voluntary outburst on "nature erring from itself in her choice of a black mate (3.3.227), he succeeds in putting into play an anxiety about such social transgressions that embraces all of the principals (except perhaps Desdemona herself) and seems to arise as much from the collective psyche of players, characters, and spectators as from his own discrete subjectivity. This is the fear (and desire) that erupts in the long-deferred scene of the black man and the white woman in the nuptial bed with which the audience as well as Brabantio have been teased since the opening scene.43 Othello's own internalization of this fear explains both the stern pose of a justicer in the execution scene and the strangely split subjectivity of his final psychomachy, in which the internalized Christian defender of the Venetian state executes vindicative justice against the transgressive Turkish Other.

In the murder scene (5.2), both the protagonist's delusion and its bloody consummation on the conjugal bed are presented without onstage mediation.44 No one contests lago's interpretation of Desdemona's conduct, now appropriated by Othello himself, till Emilia enters the scene; and so the theater audience is left briefly to confront directly its own complicity in the communal "bewhoring" of Desdemona. In contrast, through its serial mediations the public finale takes a distinctly metatheatrical turn. From the moment Emilia voices the audience's resistance to lago's construction of the heroine, the stage in the denouement becomes the site of a contest for the play's meaning. The platform is overrun with interpreters vying to fill the signifying vacuum left by lago's vow of silence, Iago himself having become at last Rilke's "third person who has never existed, has no meaning and must be disavowed," a theatrical variant on Lacan's purloined letter as floating signifier.45 The spectators, in turn, are challenged to surrender the unmediated confusions of the murder scene to one or another of the contestants fretting and strutting, in full interpretive regalia, on the stage.

The active judgment demanded of the audience in the finale is not unprepared for in the text. As early as the council scene, a Venetian senator commenting on Turkish obliquity obliquely alerts us to the play's designs on its audience: "'tis a pageant / To keep us in false gaze" (1.3.18-19). Shakespeare's plays from the time of Othello on are, of course, full of such pageants: *Troilus and Cressida, Measure for Measure,* and *King Lear* from roughly the same period, and *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* a few years later furnish only the most obvious analogues.46 Through the first half of *Othello,* this metatheatrical tag may seem to apply solely to the machinations of Iago. In the temptation scene, for example, he skillfully displays his repertory of facial feints and vocal "stops" as an earnest of his interpretive authority regarding the invented pageant of Desdemona's duplicity. But as the play approaches its climax, the phrase's application to the theatricality of the play itself—that is, to the audience's part in the production of its meaning—emerges ineluctably.

This process begins in act 4, scene 1, where Iago sardonically makes good on his promise of "ocular proof," plying Pandarus's instruments of mimetic desire to reduce Othello to murderous infatuation. Unlike the temptation scene, here Iago deploys the basic triangularity of all theatricality, enlarging the pageant to include its audience. As in the notorious scene in the Grecian camp in *Troilus* (5.2), the staged scene with Cassio focuses our attention on the normally unrepresented mediation of meaning by the theatrical producers—playwright, actor, director—to a (normally) equally unrepresented audience. The calculated effects of this pageant on its on-stage spectator, Othello, are duly noted by Iago—who, unlike Pandarus, will also play a part in the pageant—on the threshold of his performance:

Now will I question Cassio of Bianca
… . . It is a creature
That dotes on Cassio (as 'tis the strumpet's plague
To beguile many and be beguil'd by one;
He, when he hears of her, cannot restrain
From the excess of laughter. Here he comes.

Enter CASSIO.

As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad.

(4.1.93-100)

The speech of course is not without its ironies. Iago's allusion to the beguiler beguiled not only echoes
Othello's word in describing his own ultimately self-destructive persuasion of Desdemona ("I … often did
beguile her of her tears" [1.3.155-56]) and foreshadows his own situation at the play's end; it also foregrounds
the misogynistic construction of women that underwrites the pervasive violence of the action.

This point too is metatheatrically represented in the scene, in a more public sequel to its central mimesis of
mimesis. From the outset, the "bewhoring" of Desde-mona in her husband's eyes has been the linchpin
of Iago's plot. It is the theme of the brothel scene (4.2), one that the women ironically share with Iago afterward:
"He hath so bewhor'd her … that true hearts cannot bear it" (4.2.115-17). And it motivates Othello's execution
of justice: "Strumpet, I come" (5.1.34). But it is in the confusion following the attempt on Cassio that we see
how the purely private or personal construction of woman as "strumpet" transcends the individual subject and
suffuses the social structure represented in the play—as well, implicitly, as that of the players and audience
doing the representing. Iago's scapegoating of Bianca here is based on his persistent construction of her as a
whore. Almost immediately on her entrance, he pronounces her a "notable strumpet" to the assembled crowd
(5.1.78), confides to the "gentlemen" his suspicion of "this trash" as a party to Cassio's injury (5.1.85), and
finally moralizes it as "the fruits of whoring" (5.1.116). So powerful is this argument that even Emilia, a
sometime protofeminist who has herself been bewhored by Iago's suspicions of her with Othello, is moved to
proclaim, "O fie upon thee, strumpet" (5.1.121). Thus, under the force of Iago's suggestion the patriarchy's
severest critic in the play turns against its most blatant victim. My point in this seeming digression is that,
like his maddening of Othello through the representation of Desdemona's supposed liaison with Cassio, Iago's
public bewhoring of Bianca utilizes the neutral onstage audience—in this instance Emilia in particular—to
represent to the theater audience its own susceptibility to false pageants. These scenes lend a metatheatrical
twist to the action that prepares the audience for the ultimate challenge of the finale.

Othello's construction of the murder of his wife appropriates and extends Iago's construction of her (and every
woman) as a notorious strumpet. The theatricality of this appropriation of his own identity, however, is not
created by Iago. Indeed, the warring interpreters of the finale are competing first of all with Othello himself,
whose highly theatrical self-representation has earlier persuaded Desdemona to transgress the prevailing code
figuratively cross-dressed as his fellow "warrior." Throughout act 5, scene 2, Othello struggles to keep his
grip on the version of himself that has been implicit in his character from the outset. In his account of his
wooing of Desdemona, for example, Othello betrays a strong sense of theatricality, not only in his pitching his
story to the assembled Senators—even the Duke avers that "this tale would win my daughter too" (1.3.171) as
it has clearly won himself—but in the calculated effects of what he calls his "process" (1.3.142) on the
receptive Desdemona, whose "greedy ear [would] / Devour up my discourse. Which I observing, … found
good means / To draw from her a prayer" to tell her more (1.3.149-52). In the interim, this self-conception
having been subverted by Iago's improvisations, Othello exchanges his role as the exotic outsider whose
marginality has convinced her she can break with the norms of Venetian society to share his profession for
that of the misogynistic defender of the patriarchy who must sacrifice his strumpet wife lest she "betray more
men" (5.2.6). Othello's consciousness of a role asserts itself to the very end, as within a hundred lines the
universal justicer who had initiated the scene is transmogrified to an unmanned coward subject to the whim of
"every puny whipster" (5.2.244), and again to a loyal patriot who has "lov'd not wisely but too well" (5.2.344).

Vying with Othello's self-definition in the finale are those of Emilia, Gratiano, and Lodovico. It is these public
mediators of its meaning who keep the play from executing the simple mimetic function of representing the
hero's delusion and downfall. The action transcends the represented character, Othello, and embraces the representing theatrical apparatus itself, that is, the entire panoply of production, including the audience, that constitutes the play's ultimate interpretive authority. Othello's interpretive hegemony is first challenged by Emilia's redefinition of his sacrifice of Desdemona as merely another in a succession of "foul murthers" and "filthy deeds" rending the social fabric of Cyprus (5.2.106, 149), and of his noble self as an ignorant "gull," "dolt," and "villain" (5.2.163, 172). Then, as the private site of transgression opens onto a quasi-public determination of a verdict in both the juridical and the characterological sense, Emilia is supplanted (as she must be, her modest authority as a woman being socially limited to the domestic and the erotic) by a chorus of noblemen whose readings of the scene constitute the final agon in the play's self-construal. First Gratiano, whose role in the finale as an homme moyen sensuel is signaled twice by an uncomprehending "What is the matter" (5.2.171, 259), registers in a series of banalities the action's openness to interpretation even down to its last hundred lines: "'Tis a strange truth" (5.2.189), "Poor Desdemon" (5.2.204), "[S]ure he hath killed his wife" (5.2.236). It is only in the final lines that this openness is, predictably, foreclosed by Lodovico as the representative of authority in Cyprus-Venice. Lodovico's reconstruction of the events mirrors that of Fortinbras in the last forty lines of Hamlet, displaying the same tendency to yoke the dying hero's urge to "tell my story" to the more pressing demands of a political recuperation of meaning. Echoing Othello's self-(re)definition as a man "once so good [but subsequently] / Fall'n in the practice of a [damned] slave" (5.2.291-92), Lodovico (like the triumphant Portia in The Merchant of Venice) produces the documentary evidence of Iago's plotting, manna to a starving populace in need of order, and dismisses the private catastrophe while quickly consigning Cassio to the governorship of Cyprus, Iago to a slow and torturous death, Gratiano to the inheritance of Othello's "fortunes," and finally himself to the duty of "relat[ing] to the state / This heavy act" (5.2.370-71).

As at the end of Hamlet, the final rhyming of state and relate, in which the former "dilations" (or "delations") of Othello's contested subjectivity yield to the more public relations or mediations of shared communal discourse, leaves the theater audience in something of a dilemma. As erstwhile spectators to the bloody catastrophe whose identification with the on-stage audience of Cypriots and Venetians is nevertheless strongly solicited, they may be feeling a certain discomfort at the erasure by Lodovico's official version of the more complicated and disturbing one imbricated in the scene they have witnessed. Challenging their potential to be "coproducers of the spectacle" represented in the play's metatheatrical scenes, Lodovico arrogates to himself the function of ideologically authoritative purveyor of meaning found in traditional narrative. For the theater audience to submit to his version of the spectacle is to surrender their part in the production of meaning, which has been foregrounded by the play's persistent theatricality. Conversely, to resist such a surrender is to embrace a metatheatrical subtext of Othello, analogous to that in the Essays of Montaigne, whose very construction depends on a "sufficient reader" of the theatrical text being interpreted on-stage.

Theatricality and Textuality: The Example of Othello: IV

The old chestnut of Montaigne's supposed "influence" on Shakespeare is scarcely germane to the present argument. What is relevant, and deserves to be taken more seriously by cultural critics, are the analogous material conditions of these writers—one writing principally for the printing press, the other for the theater—with the expanding horizons of discourse in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Drawing on parallels with the practice of nontheatrical writers like Montaigne, the present study has tried to argue that the Shakespearean text, like the printed one, must be considered with respect to "the printing press and the public theater as unofficial media … of self-authorized performance and utterance" at a time when these instruments of cultural production were undergoing rapid and radical change. Within this context Othello, like the Essays, reveals the textual effects of this change, and of the larger social evolution these texts are part of, in their self-conscious representations of that production. To be sure, the triangular motif of the "third" is but a minor if revealing aspect of this new self-consciousness. But the results of even so preliminary an investigation as this bear out the thesis of a resurgent nonmimetic representation (or nonrepresentational
mimesis) and of the increasing sense of literary and cultural authority it implies.

Notes


11 Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, tr. Dawn Eng (1949; Berkeley, 1991), sees Montaigne's confusion about the identity of his audience as confirming his extreme self-orientation and desire to preserve an authentic inner life; hence even the inescapable "communication function of language" is viewed as a "constraint" on his solitary self-exploration (p. 332). For a recent reiteration of Montaigne's distrust of theater, see Joan Lord Hall, "'To play the man well and duely': Role-playing in Montaigne and Jacobean Drama," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 22 (1985), 173-86. Hall asserts that though Montaigne "admires histrionic talent on the stage," he "is not prepared to make a virtue of theatricality" in life and in society (pp. 174, 175). She does, however, concede a "gradual" recognition of its necessity by the author when "writing for the public" (p. 181). Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981), p. 112, is one of the few who deny that Montaigne holds such a prejudice.

12 John Bernard, "Montaigne and Writing: Diversion and Subjectification in the *Essais*," *Montaigne Studies*, 3 (1991), 131-55. This is close to what Linda Hutcheon calls "process mimesis" (as opposed to "product mimesis"), in her *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ont., 1980), pp. 36-47. In a different context, Anthony Wilden has argued that the subject of the *Essais* suffers a "double bind" resulting from the competing demands of an emerging bourgeois notion of autonomy and a residual awareness that the self is capable of definition only within "the collective praxis of human kind." Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London, 1977), pp. 108f.


15 Bernard, "Montaigne and Writing."

16 The sources on these debates are both too numerous and too familiar to rehearse here. Besides the works cited elsewhere in this paper, I have found especially illuminating Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire* (Paris, 1977) and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Mimesis and Truth," *Diacritics*, 8 (1978), 10-23. In the course of critiquing René Girard's view of "representation" (in the theatrical sense of *Darstellung*, presentation/exhibition, as opposed to the philosophical one of *Vorstellung*), Lacoue-Labarthe stipulates a nonrepresentational, self-reflexive conception of theatricality, observing that rather than "covering up or masking mimesis" it always "reveals" it, that is, "defines and 'presents' it as that which … it never is on its 'own'" (p. 21).

17 The most important works in English include Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*; "Society and the Uses of Authority," in *Shakespeare, Man of the Theater*, ed. Kenneth Muir et al. (Newark,


23 Weimann, "History and the Issue of Authority," 450. Weimann sets his historicizing concept of appropriation between "the classical romantic view of the text as the purely referential activity of some reflecting subject and the (seemingly opposite) view of the text as some autonomous locus of self-determining differentials or epistemes," what he characterizes as the competing hegemonies of "the subject" and "of language itself in his "Text, Author-Function, and Appropriation in Modern Narrative: Toward a Sociology of Representation," Critical Inquiry, 14 (1988), 432. Roger Chartier, Cultural History, tr. Lydia G. Cochrane (Cambridge, 1988), drawing on epistemology and the sociology of knowledge to update the traditional French histoire des mentalités, arrives at a conception of "representation" and "appropriation," specifically in the textual production of earlier historical periods, that complements Weimann's Marxist approach. Following Norbert Elias and Lucien Febvre, Chartier too rejects "the universal and abstract subject" of both phenomenology and reception-aesthetics in favor of historically grounded "appropriations" of texts' meanings (p. 12).

24 For a parallel discussion of mimesis and representation that draws on social theorists to define a new nonrepresentational mimesis based on self-alienation and "identification through estrangement" (461), see Luiz Costa Lima, "Social Representation and Mimesis," tr. J. Laurenio de Mello, New Literary History, 16 (1985), 447-66.

25 Maclean, Narrative as Performance, p. 34; hereafter cited in text.

26 Compare Ross Chambers's historically grounded explanation for the shift from "narrative" to "narratorial" authority in Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction (Minneapolis, 1984): "When narrative ceases to be (perceived as) a mode of direct communication of some preexisting knowledge and comes instead to figure as an oblique way of raising awkward, not to say unanswerable questions, it becomes necessary for it to trade in the manipulation of desire (that is, the desire to narrate must seek to arouse some corresponding desire for narration) to the precise; extent that it can no longer depend, in its hearers or readers, on some sort of 'natural' thirst for information" (p. 11). Though he locates this shift definitively in nineteenth-century narrative texts, Chambers acknowledges earlier adumbrations.
27 Besides the work of Anne Ubersfeld discussed below, see esp. Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (New York, 1988).

28 Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le Théâtre* (Paris, 1977); hereafter cited in text. Translations of quotations from this and other works by Ubersfeld are the author's.

29 Ubersfeld somewhat naively asserts that theatrical discourse is a "discours sans sujet" in that the author cannot speak in his own voice (p. 264), ignoring the fact that this is equally true of any fictive discourse (or perhaps of any discourse).


31 There is an obvious analogy with, or debt to, Barthes's "writerly" text as aiming to "make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text" (Roland Barthes, *S/Z* [Paris, 1970], p. 10).

32 For example, the actor addresses the spectator, with the other actors and spectators as witnesses; a character is superimposed on the actor, the spectator being witness; the spectator becomes a character himself, with other characters as witnesses to their communication; or, finally, the spectator is the subject of the communication, this time with other spectators, "objectifying" the actor(s) and/or character(s) (ES 308-11).


36 An analogue in the "sociology of discourse" is Volosinov's "third participant" ("the topic of speech" or "hero") in any spoken discourse, who along with the speaker and "listener as ally or witness" imparts to communication its "objective and sociological" character. See V. N. Volosinov, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art," in his *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, tr. I. R. Titutnik (New York, 1976), pp. 104ff. Applied to written discourse specifically, this function is partly shifted to the internal or textual "listener" of a discourse, or "authoritative representative" of the speaker's social group (p. 114), akin to the "implied reader" of narratology. Compare Paul Ricoeur, "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader," in his *Time and Narrative*, tr. K. Blarney and D. Pellaner (Chicago, 1988), 3:157-79.


39 For an exposition of Brecht as an anti-Aristotelian, anti-Freudian, antitheatrical political critic of the mimetic category of catharsis, see Bernard Pautrat, "Politique en scène: Brecht," in *Mimésis des articulations*, pp. 341-59.

Edward A. Snow, "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in Othello," English Literary Renaissance, 10 (1980), 411. In the paragraphs that follow I am especially indebted to this essay and to Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, pp. 232-54.

Act 3, sc. 3, 123. Citations of Othello are from The Riverside Shakespeare (Boston, 1974), hereafter cited in text by act, scene, and line.


On the question of its bloodiness, and the significance of blood both in this scene and with respect to Desdemona's handkerchief, see Lynda E. Boose, "Othello's Handkerchief: 'The Recognition and Pledge of Love,'" English Literary Renaissance, 5 (1975), 360-74.


On the range and function of pageants in Shakespeare see the essays collected in Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theater, ed. David M. Bergeron (Athens, Ga., 1985), as well as the earlier works by Withington, Venesky, Orgel, Wickham, Anglo, and Bergeron himself cited in them.

Bianca's spirited defence—BIANCA: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you that thus abuse me"—evidently provoked only by this betrayal by her fellow victim, and its provoked response—EMILIA: "As I? [Fough,] fie upon thee!"—foreground the mistress/wife dichotomy by which the patriarchy divides its victims (5.1.122-23).

That it is "the story of my life" (1.3.128) quâ story that "beguiles" her is underscored by the word's occurrence three times—not counting its variants "history" and "discourse"—in the forty-four-line speech. Ross Chambers, Story and Situation, pp. 4-6, sees the passage as a locus classicus of the "performative function of story-telling," though he concedes that in the theater words always necessarily occur in a represented context. Hart (see n. 6) distinguishes four functions of narrative in drama: exposition, suggestion, compression, and address (pp. 117f. and 152-62). While all four entail the relation of playwright to audience, the last would seem to be the thrust of most theatrical metanarrative.

Alan Sinfield acknowledges Lodovico's role in telling the official version of Othello's story in Faultlines (Berkeley, 1992). As he notes, "The state is the most powerful scriptor" of the stories believed in any society (p. 33). On the relation of Shakespeare's "pageant moments" throughout his oeuvre to the perspectival structure of offstage Elizabethan public ceremonies in which the audience "watched royalty or nobility watch the pageant" (p. 244), see Bruce R. Smith, "Pageants into Play: Shakespeare's Three Perspectives on Idea and Image," in Pageantry in the Shakespearean Theatre, pp. 220-46.

For the possibility that "dilations" might also have been heard as "delations" or judicial accusations, see Patricia Parker, "Shakespeare and Rhetoric: 'Delation' and 'Dilation' in Othello," in Shakespeare and the Question of Theory, pp. 54-74.

basis of Venice's "incapacity for criticism" and judgment, though not that of Shakespeare's audience.

52 See, most recently, Serena Jourdan, *The Sparrow and the Flea: The Sense of Providence in Shakespeare and Montaigne* (Salzburg, 1983). Jourdan's list of her precursors in the field on pp. 201-4 can be supplemented from Friedrich, *Montaigne*, p. 406. The studies I have personally consulted include Elizabeth Rollins Hooker, "The Relation of Shakespeare to Montaigne," *PMLA*, 17 (1902), 312-66; Alice Harmon, "How Great Was Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne?" *PMLA*, 57 (1942), 988-1008; Margaret T. Hodgen, "Montaigne and Shakespeare Again," *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 16 (1952), 23-42; and Robert Ellrodt, "Self-Consciousness in Montaigne and Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey*, 28 (1975), 37-50. Most of these have been inconclusive, the only hard evidence being still the allusions to "Of cannibals" in *The Tempest*. Friedrich, *Montaigne*, pp. 405f., is particularly skeptical about Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare, concluding that Shakespeare clearly read the Florio translation but that Montaigne functions for him chiefly as a "vehicle" of "commonplace things" that he could have gleaned from other sources. Indeed, Friedrich goes even further and adds that sixteenth-and seventeenth-century readers read Montaigne primarily "as a compiler of what was in general circulation" (p. 406).

53 Weimann, "History and the Issue of Authority," 453.


**Critical Essays: Voice Potential: Language and Symbolic Capital in Othello**

*Voice Potential*: Language and Symbolic Capital in *Othello*

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Before Brabantio complains to the Venetian senators of Othello's marriage, Iago warns Othello that 'the magnifico is much beloved, / And hath in his effect a voice potential / As double as the Duke's'. Brabantio's words will exert power—the power to 'divorce you, / Or put upon you . . . restraint or grievance' (1.2. 12--5). Their power, however, will depend not upon Brabantio's rhetorical skill but instead upon his social position—that is, both on his aristocratic status ('magnifico') and on the accumulated credit he has with his auditors ('much beloved'). How his speech is received will depend less on what he says than on the social site from which it is uttered. Othello rebuts Iago's position, but he does not dispute Iago's pre-supposition that linguistic competence counts for less than rank or otherwise attributed status in this matter of 'voice potential': 'My services which I have done the signory', he responds, 'Shall out-tongue his complaints' (1.2.18-19). In the event, Othello's voice does outweigh Brabantio's, with an unanticipated element affecting the reception of their discourse and the outcome of the scene: that is, the exigency of the military threat to Cyprus.

In 'The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges', the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu develops a market analogy to explain how utterances receive their values in particular contexts and how, in turn, the conditions of reception affect discourse production. Giving discourse pragmatics a sociological turn, he asks questions critical to the Senate scene and to other situations in *Othello*: whose speech is it that gets recognized? whose speech is listened to and obeyed? who remains silent? and whose speech fails to gain attention or credit? In Bourdieu's account, language in any situation will be worth what those who speak it are deemed to be worth: its price will depend on the symbolic power relation between the speakers, on their respective levels of 'symbolic capital'.1 The price a speaker receives for his or her discourse will not, however, be an invariable function of class position or relative status, even in a rigidly hierarchical society. Instead, as Othello's positive reception in the context of the Turkish threat suggests, the price will vary with varying market conditions.
Focusing on a reading of the Senate scene (1.3) and other public situations, in this paper I will sketch out the complex and variable linguistic market that shapes and refigures 'voice potential' in *Othello*. Gender, class, race, necessity, linguistic ingenuity and a number of other competing measures enter into the moment-by-moment relations of symbolic power that affect discourse value—that affect, for example, how Brabanzio's charges against Othello or Desdemona's request to accompany Othello to Cyprus are heard. This paper will explore not only discourse reception in *Othello*, but also the force within Shakespeare's play of Bourdieu's hypothesis that a person's discourse production is conditioned by anticipatory adjustments to discourse reception. Finally, I will focus on Iago as a rhetorician and argue for a new perspective on Iago's rhetorical performance in terms of his efforts to manipulate the linguistic market in *Othello*.

In enunciating a sociology of speech in opposition to formal linguistics, Bourdieu argues that 'Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power. A person speaks not only to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished.' One main event in Act I of *Othello* is the contest of voices between Brabanzio and Othello. What is at issue between them is whose voice will be given credit, whose voice will have power to shape the ensuing course of events. This criterion for evaluating a particular discourse is foregrounded even before Brabanzio and Othello enter the Senate chamber, as the Senators endeavour to digest the news of the Turkish fleets: the Duke observes that 'There is no composition in these news / That gives them credit' (1.3.1-2; emphasis added). As the discursive contest between Brabanzio and Othello proceeds, the verbal performance of each speaker receives a summary evaluation from the Duke. Whereas Brabanzio's accusation draws the caution that 'To vouch this is no proof (106), the Duke responds with approval to Othello's colourful account of wooing Desdemona: 'I think this tale would win my daughter, too' (170). Although the Duke apparently evaluates intrinsic features of the linguistic performance of each speaker, it is situational context, as I have already suggested, more than verbal competence that accounts for Othello's profit and Brabanzio's loss.

The carefully staged entrance of senator and general provides a vivid theatrical emblem for the dynamic variation in relative power. First, the significance of the entrance is prepared by the Duke's order to write 'post-post-haste' (46) to Marcus Luccicos, a character not otherwise identified except by his unavailability at this time of crisis. The verification of his absence heightens the importance of 'the man', in Brabanzio's words, 'this Moor, whom now' the Duke's 'special mandate for the state affairs / Hath hither brought' (71-3). A stage direction signals the arrival of a large group of characters, including 'Brabanzio, Othello, Roderigo, Iago, Cassio, and officers'. The First Senator announces the arrival selectively, singling out 'Brabanzio and the valiant Moor' (47) and relegating to lesser importance those left unnamed. The structure of the Duke's greeting encapsulates the power dynamic of the situation, articulating the priorities of the moment:

> Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you  
> Against the general enemy Ottoman.  
> *(To Brabanzio)* I did not see you. Welcome, gentle signor.  
> We lacked your counsel and your help tonight.

(48-51)

Othello is greeted first; the need for his military skills accounts for his precedence. Brabanzio is greeted in second place, with the conversational repair work nonetheless signalling a recognition of his claim, based on rank, to first place.

This account of how Othello's voice gains ascendancy within the immediate situation in no way exhausts the complexity of the linguistic market depicted in the Senate scene. Another principal speaker whose voice power is at issue in the scene is Desdemona. Answering the Duke's summons, she speaks first to confirm Othello's account of their courtship and later to make a request of her own, to accompany Othello to the war zone. In both cases her speech wins credit, in the first instance solidifying the Duke's acceptance of the
marriage and silencing Brabanzio's complaint and in the second instance gaining her permission to go with Othello. In making the request to accompany Othello, Desdemona does show her devotion to Othello, but she also asserts her separate and independent voice, her own claim to have her wish heard even after he has already publicly requested accommodation for her in Venice. Desdemona shows herself by Renaissance standards a bold and self-confident speaker in a setting whose formality and importance would silence most speakers, especially—one might expect—a woman. Her verbal behaviour in the scene and in the play as a whole is not consistent with any simple stereotype of feminine speech, especially not with the Renaissance commonplace concerning silence as woman's eloquence. In her initial appearances in the play, Desdemona is an assured and self-confident speaker. This is not to say that stereotyped gender roles do not come into play here. Consider, for example, Othello's embedded narrative of the courtship as 'mutual' recognition: 'She loved me for the dangers I had passed, / And I loved her that she did pity them' (166-7). What could better exemplify the standard clichés about male and female roles in cross-sex conversation prevalent even today than Othello's account of how he talked and she responded? When Othello told over 'the story of my life' (128), Desdemona 'gave me for my pains a world of sighs' and 'swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange, / 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful' (158-60). And yet, whatever we are to make of the accuracy of Othello's report, such self-effacing speech behaviour is not Desdemona's predominant manner in the play.

Traditional readings of Othello have often focused, as I am doing now, on the complex speech patterns of the characters. In such readings, the **raison d'être** for an utterance is the speaker's character, or essential nature. Dramatic language is said to construct character: whereas in life language expresses character, in his plays Shakespeare shapes language to make it seem that language expresses pre-existing character. In this view, the divergence from received stereotypes of female speech evident in Desdemona's self-assured and eloquent public speaking is to be explained as a particularizing and richly complicating mark of her essential character. But in a play so insistently dialogic as Othello—a play so intently focused on how one character's conversational contributions shape and direct the words, thoughts, and actions of another—it seems particularly pertinent to argue a different case, to take up Bourdieu's thesis that '[t]he **raison d'être** of a discourse .. . is to be found in the socially defined site from which it is uttered'. Bourdieu's account of the social production of discourse emphasizes anticipatory adjustment, and offers a fruitful way to account for the speech patterns of Desdemona and other characters in Othello.

'[O]ne of the most important factors bearing on linguistic production', Bourdieu argues, is 'the anticipation of profit which is durably inscribed in the language habitus, in the form of an anticipatory adjustment (without conscious anticipation) to the objective value of one's discourse'. What one says, how one says it, and whether one speaks at all in any given situation is strongly influenced, in this view, by the 'practical expectation . . . of receiving a high or low price for one's discourse'. An utterance, then, inscribes an expectation of profit, an estimate of the likelihood that the speaker will be believed, recognized, obeyed. This expectation will not, in most instances, derive solely or even in the main part from an assessment of the immediate social situation; it cannot be entirely accounted for by the immediate relation of speaker to listener. The context of reception which shapes a speaker's linguistic production has a history, and it is that history Bourdieu tries to account for by positing the 'language habitus' of the speaker. That language habitus is a practical memory, built up through the accumulated history of speech contexts in which a speaker has functioned and received recognition or censure. The language habitus is shaped by the history of a person's most sustained social connections, by a person's cumulative dialogue with others.

But let us begin with Desdemona and class. Desdemona does not enter the play as the stereotypical silent and modest woman, but rather as an aristocratic speaker whose discourse is full of the assurance and self-confidence of her class habitus. This can be seen not only in the remarkable ease with which she speaks before the Duke and Senators, but also in the basic facts that she speaks at all and that she initiates speech topics. If we consider how it could be that speech patterns inscribe a speaker's expectation of profit, we need to look not only at the internal constitution of the speeches but also at turn-taking and access to the floor. '[T]he linguist', Bourdieu remarks, 'regards the **conditions for the establishment of communication** as already
secured, whereas, in real situations, that is the essential question. To read the power relations of the scene one needs to observe the access to speech in this formal Senate setting of those who speak. Furthermore, one needs to consider what shapes the silence or non-participation of Roderigo, Cassio, the soldiers—and, most important for the developing action, the silence of Iago. Of course, in a play, considerations apart from those of real life will affect the access of speakers to the floor. The distinction, for example, between major and minor characters within any plot structure will help account for who speaks at length and whose speech is sparing. Nonetheless, one can still reasonably argue that the configuration of speakers Shakespeare represents in the Senate scene primarily reflects the power dynamics of the urgent situation as played out in a formal setting of the kind that regulates speaker access to a very high degree. Desdemona's confidence in her access to the floor, borne out by the Duke's solicitous question—'What would you, Desdemona?' (247)—suggests a history of access, the history of her class habitus.

This discourse history is also emphatically suggested by Desdemona's conversation with Cassio in 3.3 regarding her commitment to mediate on his behalf with Othello. 'Be thou assured' is the opening phrase and repeated motif of her talk:

*Be thou assured, good Cassio, I will do All my abilities in thy behalf.*

(1-2)

... *Do not doubt, Cassio,*
But I will have my lord and you again
As friendly as you were.

(5-7)

... *and be you well assured*
He shall in strangeness stand no farther off
Than in a politic distance.

(11-13)

*Do not doubt that. Before Emilia here*
*I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee.* . . .

(19-20; emphasis added)

When she moves Cassio's suit to Othello, her whole manner bespeaks this assurance of a ready acquiescence to her request—her repeated insistence that he set a time to see Cassio, her understated persuasion tactics, her assumption that she has a role to play in Othello's public affairs, her low assessment of the speech act risk involved in making the request, and finally her minimizing of her suit:

*Why, this is not a boon.*
*Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,
Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm . . .
... *Nay, when I have a suit*
*Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed,*
*It shall be full of poise and difficult weight,*
*And fearful to be granted.*
This assurance is not simply the naïvety of a new wife about her power to sway a husband she scarcely knows. Desdemona's assurance inscribes the history of her prior speech reception, the ease that marks the dominant classes and exempts them from speech tension, linguistic insecurity, and self censoring. The crisis for Desdemona in this play comes as a surprising alteration in how her speech is received, specifically by Othello. The change in speech reception, it is possible to argue, also makes for a change in Desdemona.

If Desdemona's 'voice potential' in the Senate scene and later bespeaks her class habitus, to what extent can be read a history of voice inscribed in Othello's speech? Othello's long speeches in Act 1 can be distinguished partly by their amplitude, by a high degree of elaboration and embellishment. Characteristic are the nominal and adjectival doublets, in some instances marked by syntactic strangenesses bearing some relation to hendiadys: Othello speaks of 'circumscription and confine' (1.2.27), 'the flinty and steel couch of war' (1.3.229), 'A natural and prompt alacrity' (231), 'such accommodation and besort' (237), being 'free and bounteous to her mind' (265), 'serious and great business' (267), 'speculative and officed instruments' (270), 'all indign and base adversities' (273). In what George Wilson Knight called the 'Othello music', there is, E.A.J. Honigmann has suggested, a complicating note of bombast. It is an eloquence that displays its eloquent performance, not—like Desdemona's—an eloquence that bespeaks its adequacy. Apparently at odds with this high performance speech is Othello's familiar disclaimer:

Rude am I in my speech,
And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace,

And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle.

And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,
I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love . . .

(1.3.81-2; 86-91)

While I argued earlier that it is not primarily the distinction of Othello's verbal performance that accounts for his voice power in the scene, it is nonetheless untrue that he delivers 'a round', or plain, 'unvarnished tale' (90). Verbal virtuosity, and not plainness, marks his tale. Othello's discourse style, then, blends linguistic insecurity and linguistic effort. Not, as with Desdemona, ease and assurance, but instead some degree of tension characterizes Othello's discourse production. And, by the logic of Bourdieu's hypothesis that discourse production is shaped by anticipated discourse reception, it is not the aristocratic insider who will feel a performance compulsion, an impulse to linguistic overreaching, in the accustomed formality of the senate chamber. Hence we can see how Othello's distinctive speech patterns may have a social motive: a man of great talent without so consistent and homogeneous a history of speech-making and speech reception as the dominant speakers among the Venetians may well overreach in his speech, and a highly formalized, institutionalized setting will increase the likelihood of speech tension. As Bourdieu argues in his efforts to characterize the speech of aspiring groups, 'the greater the gap between recognition and mastery, the more imperative the need for the self-corrections aimed at ensuring the revaluing of the linguistic product by a particularly intensive mobilization of the linguistic resources, and the greater the tension and containment that they demand'. This helps to explain why Othello, as a person of colour and an exotic outsider, might—even without making conscious adjustments—tend to mobilize his verbal resources more fully than Venetian speakers of the dominant group. In language terms, what he does is to try harder.
As we have seen, trying harder to produce well-crafted discourse may not always pay off, since a discourse's value depends on the power relations obtaining in a particular market. Not all the characters in the play respond in the same way to a felt gap between the recognition they commonly receive and their verbal mastery. Consider Iago, who early on in the play registers his perception of a gap between recognition and mastery in the assertion: 'I know my price, I am worth no worse a place' (1.1.11). Iago is keenly aware of a gap between his own considerable skills—including his verbal skills—and the limited advantages that readily come his way through their deployment. This shows in the extreme contempt he expresses for the linguistic accents of other characters—a contempt bound up in his recognition that the limited verbal repertoires of some others nonetheless garner them easy profits that his own greater rhetorical expertise cannot attain. At the start of the play, Iago derides the 'bombast circumstance' (1.1.13) of Othello's talk, but the intensity of his resentment against the speech of others is most strongly illustrated in his reaction to Cassio's conversation with Desdemona upon their arrival in Cyprus. Shakespeare takes great care to draw his audience's attention to the courtier-like politeness of Cassio's speech here and elsewhere. When Iago derogates Cassio's style, delivering sarcastic asides about his gestural and verbal courtesies, he is not, I think, voicing resentment that his lower-class position excludes him from the verbal finesse of a gentlemanly discourse. Iago is a verbal chameleon; he knows how to speak like Cassio. What Iago resents is how easily Cassio's speech gains credit with his auditors, a credit Iago could not earn by employing the same speech patterns. Iago devalues the products of civil conversation not because he cannot replicate them but because he is not socially positioned to receive advantage from them. Cassio, Iago remarks to Roderigo, has 'an eye can stamp and counterfeit advantages' (2.1.243-4). What Iago expresses is a keen awareness that different people can draw different profits from the same discourse—that Cassio's gentlemanly status and good looks make even the very motion of his eyes able to garner an advantage his own finest verbal performance could not attain in situations like the conversation with the aristocratic Desdemona. In Othello, Iago is—as many scholars have previously noted—a consummate rhetorician. But he is a rhetorician keenly aware that the prize for best speaker cannot be won with polished verbal skills.

The significant fact about Iago's discourse in the senate scene is that he does not speak. His silence signals his slight chance of profit in that formal public setting. Whether with full consciousness or not, Iago as rhetorician assesses the conditions of the linguistic market in which he operates and chooses tools and timing that will work to gain him profit. Adapting Bourdieu's suggestions, we can generalize that rhetorical mastery consists not merely in the capacity for discourse production but also in 'the capacity for appropriation and appreciation; it depends, in other words, on the capacity .. . to impose the criteria of appreciation most favourable to [one's] own products'. This helps to explain Iago's preference for private conversational settings, for in the less restricted discourse conditions of talk between friends he can more readily capture the floor and win an appreciation for his speech products.

In the concluding movement of this paper, however, I will concentrate on Iago's rhetorical expertise as exercised within the constraints of public occasions, where he exhibits rhetorical strategies substantially different than in conversation. One of his key strategies for public situations is voice mediation. Where his own voice has little chance of success, Iago appropriates other voices to his use. The play opens with Iago commenting on how he (like a typical Elizabethan suitor) negotiated through mediators for the place, lost to Cassio, as Othello's lieutenant: 'Three great ones of the city, / In personal suit to make me his lieutenant, / Off-capped to him; . . . / But he . . . / Nonsuits my mediators' (1.1.8-15). But Iago by no means restricts his tactics of voice mediation to this institutionalized form. Act 1, scene 1 also provides, in the role Iago constructs for Roderigo, a characteristic example of how Iago appropriates the credit of an intermediate voice. In the effort to fire Brabanzio up against Othello, Iago uses his own voice in chorus with Roderigo's. To arouse Brabanzio's emotions, Iago—keeping his personal identity obscure—takes on the voice of a 'ruffian[ ]' (1.1.112), a voice from the gutter, whose lewd conceits prompt Brabanzio to ask, 'What profane wretch art thou?' (116). A ruffian's voice has power in public to stir up trouble, but little chance within the verbal economy of the polite Venetian society to elicit belief. Iago therefore deploys the different accent of Roderigo's voice to the end of shaping Brabanzio's belief. Roderigo speaks as a gentleman, and calls upon
Brabanzio to 'recognize' his voice ('Most reverend signor, do you know my voice?' [93]). He calls upon Brabanzio not merely to recognize that it is Roderigo who speaks but also to recognize that the speaker's social status guarantees his credit: 'Do not believe / That, from the sense of all civility, / I thus would play and trifle with your reverence' (132-4). Shrewdly calculating his slight chances of gaining such credit through his own voice in making this public disturbance, Iago appropriates to his own purposes the Cassio-like politeness and the matching status of Roderigo's voice. Iago tells the audience of how he makes 'my fool my purse' (1.3.375), but we never actually see Iago spending Roderigo's money. What we see instead is how he deploys the symbolic capital of Roderigo's voice.

Fundamental, then, to Iago's rhetorical mastery is his manipulation of what Bourdieu claims linguists long ignored: social context, understood here as the conditions for speech profit. While many public occasions tend to restrict his own access to speech and his opportunities for speech profit, Iago is what he ironically calls Cassio—'a finder of occasion' (2.1.242-3). The riotous street scene is his public occasion of choice, the scene in which he most profitably draws speech credit away from others and toward himself. As I have suggested, Bourdieu distinguishes sharply between the communication conditions obtaining in situations of high formality and in situations of lesser formality. In situations of high formality the reproductive role of politeness is most pronounced, scripting in the language of the participants a mutual recognition and acknowledgement of their relative social stations: 'Politeness', as Bourdieu explains it, 'contains a politics, a practical, immediate recognition of social classifications and of hierarchies, between the sexes, the generations, the classes, etc.'¹⁵ In our analysis of the Senate scene, we have seen how the combination of formal scene and disruptive urgency made for a kind of re-ranking: the urgency of the moment meant that forms of symbolic capital apart from static social rank could more readily take on importance. But the adjustment in power relations was still strictly contained by the formal setting, keeping lesser ranking characters like Iago in their silent—and inferior—places. Lessen the formality and intensify the disruptive urgency of a scene, and Iago can make occasions in which even his speech can prevail over those of higher rank. Provide an outdoor setting, street fighting, darkness—as Iago does both when Cassio is discredited (2.3) and when Roderigo is murdered and Cassio badly hurt (5.1)—and restrictions on speech roles are relaxed or overturned.¹⁶ As the murder scene in 5.1 draws towards its conclusion, Iago himself articulates this principle which has released his speech, at least for a short space of time, from the perpetual obligation to 'recognize' his subordinate relation to others: 'Signor Graziano', he exclaims, pretending only then to make out who his interlocutor is and adjust his language to their prescribed relation: 'I cry your gentle pardon. / These bloody accidents must excuse my manners / That so neglected you' (5.1.95-7). Hence we see that Iago's instruction to Roderigo—'do you find some occasion to anger Cassio' (2.1.266-7)—is as supreme a rhetorical act as any virtuoso speech of persuasion he makes in the play. It is through this construction of a favourable context that Iago can set up a contest of voices in which he is able to secure the floor ('Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving, / Speak.' (2.3.170-1)) and to disable the voices of his superiors Cassio and Montano ('I pray you pardon me. I cannot speak.' (182); 'Your officer Iago can inform you, / While I spare speech—which something now offends me' (191-2)). Iago has full scope to elaborate his version of reality at extended length before important people. What he seeks and what he gains is not the hearers' simple belief in the facts as he represents them. What he is after is an enhancement of his 'voice potential', or—in Bourdieu's terms—an accumulation of his symbolic capital, which is registered in the personal approbation of Othello's response: 'I know, Iago, / Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter, / Making it light to Cassio' (2.3.239-41).

Furthermore, Iago has engineered the loss of Cassio's lieutenancy with—perhaps more important—the loss of his annoying expectation that he can easily profit from the 'show of courtesy' (2.1.102) characteristic of his discourse: 'I will ask him for my place again. He shall tell me I am a drunkard. Had I as many mouths as Hydra, such an answer would stop them all.' (2.3.296-8). A rhetorician able to understand the mechanisms by which the polite Venetian social order, instantiated in its typical speech situations, stops talented voices and gives credit to the incompetent, Iago manages, if only for a short time,¹⁷ his own correction of the gap between linguistic capital and credit.
In this paper, I have used Bourdieu's economic model for linguistic exchange as a heuristic to explore speech reception and speech production in some public scenes of Othello. This enabled, first, an examination of how variable power relations affect discourse reception in a particular setting and, second, an account of how the history of a person's speech reception functions together with immediate context to shape speech production. This reading has allowed me to offer a different perspective on the interrelation Shakespeare represents between character and language than is usual in Othello criticism—a perspective that links linguistic performance not to essential character but instead to character as the locus of social and power relations. Bourdieu's economic model for linguistic exchange also provided the foundation for assessing Iago's rhetorical artistry, an artistry founded on manipulating speech context, or the conditions for 'voice potential'.

Notes


4 Here I quote Q1's 'world of sighs' instead of F's 'world of kisses'. While still a non-verbal response, the Folio's version gives a significantly different turn to Desdemona's portrayal here. If Desdemona is so forward here with her kisses, it is hard to reconcile with Othello's remark later in the speech that he spoke of his love upon a 'hint' (1.3.165) from her. I am grateful to Paul Werstine for drawing my attention to this variant.


7 Ibid., p. 653.

8 Ibid., p. 655.

9 Ibid., p. 648.


12 Clearly, with Othello, this linguistic overreaching, with its exotic touches, has become a habit that has itself received a positive reception in various settings (e.g., in Brabanzio's household), thus adding a motive beyond linguistic insecurity for Othello to reproduce the style. Hence, this encoded discourse history may even be consistent with a proud and apparently selfassured delivery in 1.3, but it nonetheless anticipates Othello's
susceptibility to Iago's persuasions.


16 Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 95-6 and p. 282, make the point that in situations of urgency and desperation, when maximum efficiency of communication is required, the face-redress work of politeness is unnecessary.

17 The rough and improvisatory nature of Iago's rhetoric of situation makes his a particularly high risk performance. In the end he loses control of the play's speech outcomes when he fails to anticipate that circumstances very much like those that gained him speech access and credit—a public disturbance coming as the aftermath of street violence—could contribute to Emilia's speaking out against him and being heard.


Analysis: The Role of Race in Othello

The historical development of racial relations between Shakespeare's time and our own has virtually compelled twentieth-century critics of Othello to consider the title character's status as a black man in a predominantly white society. Some modern interpreters of the play have focused on Othello's race as a causal or, at the very least, aggravating factor in the tragedy that befalls him. Others have gone so far as to assert that Shakespeare's Moor is the victim of racial discrimination, if not directly at the hands of Iago's, then indirectly at the hand of the play's author. This, in turn, has generated substantial historical research into the racial attitudes of Shakespeare and of Elizabethan England at large. The results of this effort have been ambivalent: in all probability, white Englishmen of the early seventeenth century (including the Bard) saw themselves as inherently superior to non-Europeans, but they were not racial bigots in our contemporary sense of that word. What can be said for certain is that instances of actual contact between Elizabethan Englishmen and non-whites were exceedingly rare, that the New World slave trade had not yet emerged, and that Shakespeare (and his audiences) looked upon Africans (and other racial "minorities") in a decidedly different light than we do.

Othello is not the only or even the first black character in Shakespeare's stage works. Prior to his composition of Othello, Shakespeare wrote Titus Andronicus, an early Roman tragedy in which the character of Aaron, described like Othello as a Moor, acts as a secondary villain to Titus himself in a work so bloody that its attribution to Shakespeare has occasionally been questioned. But Titus Andronicus was undoubtedly written by Shakespeare and the Moor Aaron is unquestionable evil. Indeed, on the cusp of his execution, Aaron repents of any good deed that he might have inadvertently done! There is a strong implication here that Aaron's evil has a genetic basis. The child whom he sires through Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, is described by the Nurse who acts as midwife as being "as loathesome as a toad" among the fair-faced race of ancient Rome. The strength of the blood connection between Aaron and his offspring is underscored by his exceptional fondness toward his infant son and the scheme to substitute a white baby for the Moor's progeny.

Despite having a black forerunner in Aaron, Othello's presence on the stage as the main character of a Shakespearean tragedy represented something new to Elizabethan audiences. Unlike Aaron, Othello is the chief protagonist of the play in which he appears, and we are forced by its narrative structure to see things
through his eyes while knowing that he is being deceived by Iago. The first mention of Othello's race occurs
before his initial entrance on stage with Roderigo pejoratively calling him "thick-lips" (I.i.66), a slur that is
also applied to Aaron's baby by the Nurse who conveys the infant to him. Iago is even more offensive in his
inflammatory remarks to Desdemona's father, telling Brabantio, "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
/ Is tupping your white ewe" (I.iii.89-90). Iago's polarity establishes skin color and its mixture through
miscegenation as an immutable standard for discriminating natural from unnatural acts.

Shakespeare's primary source for Othello was a mid-sixteenth century novella by the Italian author Cinthio,
and while Othello is depicted sympathetically in this work, Cinthio's Moor differs from Shakespeare's in that
the Bard emphasizes Othello's Christianity while his prototype is a Muslim. Othello is at least functionally
integrated into Venetian society. His importance to the state as its military champion and bulwark against the
Turks confers status on Othello that is equivalent to that of Brabantio, a senator with a double voice, and, as
the Duke's decision makes clear, greater than that of Desdemona's distinguished father. Prior to Othello's
affair with his daughter, Brabantio invited the Moor to his home, treating this black man as his peer.

But while Othello is an indispensable arm of the Venetian body politic, he is nonetheless an outsider, and
Othello is very much aware of his position as such. Thus, in Act I, scene iii, Othello notes that he is a
mercenary on a "tented field" (I.iii.85), having served Venice for seven years and having gone nine months
without seeing action, military exploits being essential to his identity within Venetian society. On the surface,
Othello's black skin color is less of a racial than a cultural discriminator, it marks Othello as an alien who does
not fully understand the mores (and corruptions) of his adopted homeland.

Nevertheless, strands of racial stereotyping, rather than simply a division between Venetians and
non-Venetians, do surface in Othello. Brabantio accuses Othello of witchcraft, contending that the Moor must
have used "drugs and minerals" to overcome Desdemona's natural aversion to his "sooty bosom." In Act III,
scene iv, Othello's explanation of the missing handkerchief's provenance implies that his mother engaged in
charms that she acquired through traffic with other non-whites, in this case, an Egyptian. In the minds of
Shakespeare's audiences, blacks were identified with witchcraft and other non-Christian superstitions.

Race plays less of an overt, direct role in Othello than many twentieth-century critics of the play assign to it.
Othello's complexion is emblematic of his status as an outsider in a society that has carved out an exception
for him that is nonetheless conditional on his usefulness to Venice. Underneath this, Othello's association with
witchcraft and his eventual devolution into a bestial frenzy reflect highly-biased stereotypes of blacks that
were commonly-held in Shakespeare's England but by no means identical to those imposed upon blacks in
subsequent historical periods, including our own.

Analysis: The Villainy of Iago

Shakespeare assigns the final say in Othello to the relative minor character of Lodovico, a representative
Venetian nobleman, a blood relative to Desdemona, and the moral arbiter of the play. He turns directly to
Iago, places full responsibility for the carnage at hand (including Othello's suicide) upon the "Spartan dog"
before him whom he then characterizes as a "hellish villain" (V.ii.368). Throughout the tragedy, Iago himself
uses figurative language that connects him to Hell, the demonic and the archfiend Satan. He promises that
Roderigo will enjoy Desdemona "for my wits and all the tribe of hell" (I.iii.357), expounds upon the "Divinity
of hell!!" in Act II, scene iii (II.350ff), and remarks that the poison of his dangerous conceits "burn like the
mines of sulphur" (III.iii.329). And, right before he wounds Iago, Othello cries out, "If thou be'st a devil, I
cannot kill thee" (V.ii.288). This strand of Satanic imagery magnifies Iago and the enormity of his crimes to
mythic proportions, furnishing him with a stature akin to Shakespeare's Richard III, for example.
Nevertheless, upon close scrutiny, we find that Shakespeare deliberately undercuts Iago's implicit claim to being a great villain. There are, to begin, other characters and even inanimate substances that evoke the language of the demonic. In Act IV, scene i, the raging Othello curses out "Fire and brimstone" at his wife and calls Desdemona "Devil" as he strikes her (I.240). Earlier Cassio rues his bout with the "invisible spirit of wine" (II.iii.273), saying of it "I call thee devil" (II.iii.274). Iago, then, is not the only "devil" in the play, and is, in fact, more a villain of words than of substance.

In the play's first scene, Iago spells out his grounds for hating Othello to Roderigo (and the audience) and they seem comparatively petty. Iago explains that his ill will toward the Moor stems from Othello's decision to pass over Iago and name Michael Cassio as his second in command. Iago gives some point to his grudge by contrasting the "bookish theoretic" nature of his rival's qualifications with his own credentials as a proven military officer. He tells Roderigo that three "great ones" of the city pressed his suit to Othello, but that their petition was of no avail, Iago stooping to mimicry of the Moor's replay, "I have already chose my officer." He then denounces the "modern" (and presumably corrupt) Venetian system of career advancement, "Preferment goes by letter and affection / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to the first." (I.i.36-38). As a motive for his hatred of Othello, Iago's complaint is weak, amounting to a labor dispute. Moreover, while he focuses upon the Moor's rejection of his suit for advancement, Iago also tells us that Othello's choice is consistent with the whole civil culture of Venice, with the system so to speak. In fact, while railing against favoritism, Iago himself has used the agency of special pleading through great ones. On the surface, the source of Iago's animus toward Othello is a mere career problem, and this is not the stuff that moves great villains.

Customarily, Shakespeare's great villains, Richard III or Edmund the bastard of King Lear are given the opportunity to identify themselves as the evil force at work. Iago makes it plain that he has a reason to resent Othello, but the first reference to him as a villain comes in the form of a mundane curse by Brabantio responding to the lewd remarks of a "profane wretch" (I.i.117-118). Iago is given a second bite at the "I am the villain" soliloquy toward the first scene's conclusion, saying of Othello and his behavior toward him, "Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains, / Yet, for necessity of present life / I must show out a flag and a sign of love / Which indeed is but sign" (I.i.154-157). What is striking about this speech is its redundancy: it simply reiterates what Iago has already said to Roderigo. It lacks both the stature and the dramatic punch of an opening "villain" soliloquy in Shakespeare's other tragedies.

Then there is the quality of the opposition that Iago faces. It too is weak, consisting of an insecure, boy-like Othello, a susceptible Cassio, and Desdemona, a mere girl at the time of her marriage to the Moor. The reason that Othello is no match for Iago's evil wits is that the Moor is a "credulous fool" (IV.i.46) as Iago notes, who is, in Emilia's words, "as ignorant as dirt" (V.ii.165). We are reminded of just how gullible Othello is each of the several times in which he refers to Iago as a "most honest" man. As for Cassio, Iago is able to induce the Lieutenant to drink (despite Cassio's acknowledgment that he cannot hold his wine), simply by singing a couple of soldier's drinking ditties to him. And, as for Desdemona, Iago sidesteps her altogether, confining this misdirection to the Moor and his second in command. The poor quality of Iago's unsuspecting adversaries reduces our sense of his greatness as a villain.

But it is the makeshift opportunism of Iago's modus operandi that distinguishes him as a decidedly lower-case villain. At the very outset of the play we learn that Iago is dependent upon Roderigo's purse, and in Act I, scene iii, Iago "sells" the youth a bill of goods in his "put money in thy purse" speech (I.336-363). The question becomes: if Iago is so bad, why isn't he rich? The truth is, Iago has no master plan for Othello's undoing, but is constrained to use whatever circumstances provide as the material for his schemes. In Act II, scene i, Iago watches as Cassio takes Desdemona by the hand and asserts, "With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (II.168-169). In fact, this incident has no part in Iago's deception of Othello. Looking back, Iago's successes are conditional upon mere circumstance, the ocular proof of the handkerchief coming into Iago's possession by a combination of its accidentally dropping to the floor and then being
discovered by an Emilia who is essentially indifferent toward her husband Iago's plans for it.

Rather than the grand design of a great villain, Iago's actions are spur of the moment affairs, as when he stabs Cassio in the leg and then pins the deed upon Roderigo. In that incident (Act V, scene i), Iago considers the possibilities at hand, saying that he cannot lose because either Roderigo will slay Cassio or the two will kill each other. He completely fails to foresee the third (and logical) alternative that Cassio prevails, the outcome that compels him to act. It is, moreover, in a fit of rage that Iago stabs Emilia, thereby affirming his culpability for past crimes and committing a new transgression before official witnesses.

All of this suggests that Iago is more of a dog than a devil. As Emilia guesses at the cause of Othello's rage toward her mistress Desdemona, she, Emilia, says that "some eternal villain / Some busy and insinuating rogue, / Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office/Have not devis'd this slander" (IV.ii.130-133). Iago replies that that there is no such man, and, in doing so, undercuts his own claims to being an "eternal villain." In his wife's eyes, Iago is more slave than devil, and here we observe that the text contains intimations that Iago is the very thing that he uses to provoke Othello's rage, a cuckold. Iago alludes to his suspicions about his wife's infidelity with Othello (I.iii.385-386), that subject is broached again in Act IV by Emilia (IV.ii.149), and she later says to Desdemona that she is willing to commit adultery (IV.iii.70). In the end, the horns that Iago sports are more like those of a cuckold than those of Satan.

**Analysis: Why does Desdemona Marry Othello?**

In the last scene of *Othello*, Desdemona recovers long enough from the smothering that her jealous husband has inflicted upon her to pronounce her complete innocence, and with her last breath tells Emilia, "A guiltless death I die" (V.ii.120). Plainly, Iago has deceived Othello into believing that his beautiful young wife has committed adultery with his once-trusted second in command, Cassio. That being so, Desdemona is clearly innocent of the charges embodied in Iago's cunning innuendos, and is a victim who does not deserve the tragic end that she suffers. Nevertheless, Desdemona has put herself in a position to be a victim by virtue of her decision to marry the Moor and to go with him to the isolated, embattled post of Cyprus, where Othello possesses not only the moral authority of a spouse but also the legal powers of a governor. The question naturally arises: Why does Desdemona make these tandem choices?

By the time that we first see Desdemona in the middle of Act I, scene iii, we have been told that she is a young Venetian noblewoman, the beloved daughter of Senator Brabantio, who has married the military hero of the city-state without her father's consent or foreknowledge. Desdemona certainly realizes that her elopement with Othello and her sharing of honeymoon quarters with this "Barbary horse" at the unsavory sounding Sagittary Inn is bound to evoke her father's wrath. Indeed, when we first hear Desdemona speak her "divided duty" defense (I.iii.180-189), she appears to have anticipated the need to make her case to both Brabantio and the ruler(s) of Venice. Her plea is tightly reasoned and pivots upon a straightforward analogy between her own situation and that of her mother. Desdemona's speech is largely devoid of emotional appeal and rests upon the natural precedent of married women transferring their first loyalties from fathers to husbands. What she conveniently omits is that she has chosen to wed outside her station, to a man who is much older than she, of an entirely different race and, despite the accolades he has received, very much an outsider in Venice. Moreover, she has done all this under the pretense of being a mere listener to the stories of her father's invited guest. Realizing that the Duke will follow the expedient course and rule in favor of the newlyweds, Brabantio utters his warning to Othello: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292-293). This admonition surfaces again in the "deception" scene as Iago uses it to spur Othello's suspicions, Brabantio's prominent reference to "eyes" resonating with the Moor's demand for "ocular proof" of his wife's infidelity. We are told in Act V that Brabantio has died of grief over his daughter's betrayal. Desdemona does not deserve to be murdered by Othello, but her father's curse has a firm basis, for she has in fact deceived her father.
What does Desdemona see in Othello that would cause her to take the rash step of choosing him as her husband? Following his recitation of the exotic adventure tales that he has related to Desdemona before their marriage, the Moor recalls Desdemona's response to these stories, "yet she wish'd / That heaven had made her such a man…. / And bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her, / I should but teach him how to tell my story / And that would woo her" (I.iii.162-166). What Othello fails to realize here is that Desdemona's reaction not only furnishes him with an opening to woo the girl, it implies that she is more in love with his renown than with his person. Having already decided by dint of circumstance that he will not oppose the marriage, the Duke then considers the issue of whether Othello's bride should travel with him to the front. The Venetian ruler abdicates his decision-making authority and leaves the matter in Desdemona's hands, asking her what she wishes to do. To this, Desdemona says, "That I (did) love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence, and storm of fortunes, / May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdu'd / Even to the very quality of my lord. / I saw Othello's visage in his mind / And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate" (I.iii.248-254). Desdemona claims to have gotten inside Othello's psyche and to have fused her soul with his in a spiritual ceremony over which she has officiated in deliberate opposition to the world at large. The Duke accepts all this without inquiry and allows Desdemona to follow Othello to Cyprus, even though the Turkish fleet continues to threaten the island.

Desdemona and Othello spend their honeymoon in the war zone of Cyprus, and the intimacy between the martial and the marital is underscored by the Moor's first order as the outpost's governor, Othello calling for a celebration of both victory over the Turks and his marriage. Upon their reunion, Othello instinctively taps into the bond that ties Desdemona to him, addressing his wife as "my fair warrior!" (II.i.182). This, in turn, highlights the girl's motivation in marrying Othello as one of sharing in his self-made glory and the power that this has conferred upon him.

"Our general's wife is now the general" (II.iii.315), Iago says to Cassio as he steers him toward petitioning Othello for leniency through Desdemona's good offices. In the midst of the corruption scene, Desdemona is confident of her ability to restore Cassio to his position, assuring the crest-fallen Lieutenant, "Do not doubt Cassio, / But I will have my lord and you again / As friendly as you were" (III.iii.5-7). She claims, then, to know how to work her husband to her will and even sets forth a strategy of attrition, telling Cassio that she will not let her husband rest until he grants her petition on his behalf: "I'll intermingle everything he does / With Cassio's suit" (III.iii.25-26). Desdemona takes it upon herself to overlook Cassio's dereliction, and her confidence in pursuing his suit with her husband is confirmed when Othello says that "I will deny thee nothing" (III.iii.76).

In the end, Desdemona is innocent of the proximate charges against her, but while she has not been unfaithful to her husband, she has gone well beyond the role of a wife into that of a partner in a single identity based upon heroic fame and political power. Her desire to be associated with Othello in this deep and unnatural manner has moved Desdemona into a position in which she is vulnerable to the victimization that she eventually receives. Thus, her protestations of being guiltless at the hour of her death are technically true but spiritually suspect.

**Analysis: Why Does Othello Change His Mind About Desdemona's Fidelity?**

Until the midpoint of Othello, the title character comports himself in a dignified manner and expresses unbounded faith in the transcendent love that he shares with Desdemona, a bond that reaches over differences in race, age, and social status. Nevertheless, Othello begins to change his mind about his young wife in the corruption scene of Act III, scene iii, and by the start of Act IV he literally collapses at Iago's feet in a babbling trance. From this point forward, Othello is completely preoccupied with the mission of avenging himself on Desdemona and Cassio for an adulterous affair of which they are entirely innocent. The proximate
cause of Othello's change of heart is the poisonous deceits that Iago pours into his ear. But Othello's insecurity about his marriage is rooted deeper than Iago's machinations. Upon realizing that he has been deceived by the honest Iago, Othello loses his sense of self, his identity, and refers to himself as "he that was Othello" (V.ii.285). It is not the power of Iago's magic that transforms Othello into a jealous, raging beast, but the Moor's own shortcomings masked by his role as the military hero of Venetian society, a status that is subject to sudden reversal.

Long before he so quickly succumbs to Iago's treachery in the corruption scene, Othello displays fatal chinks in the armor of his social identity. Othello exhibits an unlimited self-confidence in his civic role, asserting that his name can "out-tongue" Brabantio's complaint to the Duke. But when we compare the two characters, we realize that the Moor is actually insecure about his identity in Venetian society and uncertain about its ways. As a representative of the Venetian aristocracy's old guard, Brabantio naturally looks askance on the credibility and the motives of those beneath him. Hence, he actively challenges and insults the reports of his daughter's elopement with Othello as they are relayed to him from the street by Iago and Roderigo in Act I, scene i. This stands in sharp contrast to Othello, who is all too willing to believe the word of his subordinates and whose status in Venice is not a matter of hereditary class but of military prowess. Othello takes his cues about the marital customs of Venice from others, being an outsider who must rely upon feedback from native Venetians to operate within that culture.

This feedback, however, is cut off when Othello moves to Cyprus, an island that is beyond the scope of Venice's (corrupted) values and placed under the full control of the Moor, a man who has no experience in governance. The two orders that he gives in his capacity as governor, to jointly celebrate his victory over the Turks and his recent marriage to Desdemona (Act II, scene ii) and his inspection of the island's fortifications (Act III, scene ii) are those of a military commander rather than a civil authority. On Cyprus, Othello is all-powerful, but he is deprived of signals about the meaning of events in Venetian culture.

In the corruption scene (Act III, scene iii), after first advising Othello to look to Desdemona and Cassio, Iago reminds him of Brabantio's lot and words: "She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks / She loved them most" (III.iii.207-209). In his highly uncritical manner, Othello readily assents to this, saying, "And so she did" (III.iii.210). Iago then expresses a disingenuous empathy toward Brabantio: "She that so young could give out such seeming / To seal her father's eyes up close as oak / He thought 'twas witchcraft" (III.iii.211-213). As a middle-aged husband who has a quasi-paternal relation to his wife, the memory of Desdemona's betrayal of Brabantio plainly taps into the suspicions and insecurities of Othello. Not only is Iago his primary source of (false) reports about Cassio and Desdemona, Iago is his sole guide as to what these events mean within the cultural framework of Venetian society.

Looking back we find that as a general, Othello is accustomed to assessing the meaning of a situation and making a decision based solely on his own judgment. Once that decision is made, Othello pursues its logical consequences. Outside of the military sphere, however, Othello is not able to appraise the meaning of situations and must rely upon others to lead him to it, most notably Iago. Once they have done so, however, Othello is committed to a course of action from which he cannot veer. Although, Desdemona provides him with a highly plausible explanation for the loss of the handkerchief, Othello, a man of action who lacks critical faculties, does not pause to consider this alternative account of how the handkerchief came into Cassio's possession and what his possession of the item actually means. Iago works his designs upon Othello and is the active agent behind the Moor's jealousy, but the long-standing defects of Othello's social identity are essential to the villain's machinations.

**Analysis: The Women of Othello**
Shakespeare's *Othello* presents us with a male world in which women have an especially rough time. Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca are all rejected by their respective partners, and all three love their men unselfishly and unreservedly, even when confronted by behavior that we would deem grounds for divorce at the very least. All the women are engaged in unbalanced partnerships: they feel more for their self-centered men than the men are capable of reciprocating. However, the women also display genuine emotions toward each other that is not reflected in any of the male-male relationships.

Emilia and Desdemona are both wives to men that have made the military their lives. Desdemona is the new wife, innocent and inexperienced in the ways of the world despite being raised in one of the most sophisticated and cosmopolitan of the Italian city-states, Venice. By contrast, Emilia has been married for some time. She is wise to the habits of soldiers, yet she will believe only so much of what her husband tells her. Although Emilia has been with Desdemona since the first Act, we do not get an intimate view of her psychology or her relationship with Desdemona until the Willow Scene in Act Four.

During this scene, Emilia shows genuine concern for Desdemona and the problem she is having with Othello. Desdemona tells her that even when Othello is angry with her, she still finds "grace and favour" (IV.iii.21) in his looks. She adds that if she should die before Emilia, Emilia should wrap her body in the wedding sheets now on the bed. Of course, Emilia thinks this is only a bit of girl-talk, but Desdemona continues to tell her about a song she has learned from her mother's maid, the Willow Song. This is a moment of intense personal inter-reaction between the two women. Emilia is unpinning Desdemona's hair and her dressing gown, preparing the girl for bed as if she were a surrogate mother. Such tenderness and tactile expressions of affection are a strictly female domain in this play. It is the men, not the women, who perpetrate the violence.

The conversation maintains this tender, maternal tone through to the end of the scene, but it is most noticeable when Desdemona exclaims, "O these men, these men!" (IV.iii.59). Desdemona cannot believe that women cheat on their husbands and asks Emilia, "Wouldst thou do such a thing for all the world?" (IV.iii.67). Although she tries to offer a light-hearted answer, Emilia knows full well that Desdemona's view of love is a romantic view, and hence, it is not a laughing matter. What follows in blank verse is not unusual for Shakespeare. Emilia speaks for female equality, as Shakespeare's heroines often do. Knowing that both her fate and that of Desdemona are tied up in that of their husbands in social and financial terms, Emilia appeals to the intangible qualities that lie just beyond her grasp: fidelity in love and sensitivity to women's feelings. According to Emilia, if women do not get these things from their partners, then their partners cannot be surprised when women behave as they do.

In effect, Emilia is asking for relief from the double standard, echoing Ophelia's advice to her brother Laertes when he leaves for France in *Hamlet*. However, Emilia does so completely aware of the implications for her and her mistress. Both women are away from home without support systems and without status or financial security. There is little likelihood that they can survive without their husbands, despite being ill-treated. Their only consolation is confiding in each other, a luxury that does not exist for Bianca, the third woman.

Bianca is a courtesan who has travelled, like Desdemona, from Venice to Cyprus to be with Cassio. Venetian courtesans were famous throughout Europe for the richness and style with which they conducted themselves. So refined were they that occasionally they would be mistaken for noble wives. Therefore, in a sense, there would be no discernable visual difference between Desdemona and Bianca, whose very name implies purity. Although Hollywood is often credited with the creation of the "good-hearted bad girl," Shakespeare created Bianca centuries before.

Like Emilia, Bianca is worldly and will love Cassio without reservation. Yet she has a clear definition of who she is and what place she holds in this male-oriented society. After Iago kills Roderigo, Iago attempts to implicate Bianca to the attack, probably brought about by a fit of jealousy when he went to have dinner with her. Because Cassio is wounded, Bianca is understandably upset, but she replies angrily to Emilia's calling her
a "strumpet":

I am no strumpet, but of life as honest
As you that thus abuse me.
(V.i.122-123)

In a sense, Bianca is in fact more honest than Emilia whose lie to Desdemona about the handkerchief provides the catalyst for her murder. In any event, Bianca is definitely more truthful than the "honest Iago" who accuses her.

Bianca is also more sexually honest. Her relationship with Cassio is based on their mutual knowledge that they are uncommitted to each other and nothing more will come of their liaison. Cassio does not confide to Bianca that he has been dismissed as Othello's lieutenant, nor does he tell her the owner of the handkerchief when he knows very well that Desdemona kept it "evermore about her / To kiss and talk to" (III.iii.295-296). When he asks her to copy the handkerchief's strawberry design, he quickly tries to get her to leave so that Othello will not see him with her. This request may be Cassio's attempt to protect what is left of his shattered reputation, since, according to Iago, Cassio is married, "almost damned in a fair wife" (I.i.21). Whatever Cassio's motives may be, Bianca does not object very strongly, since she knows what the rules are for the game she and Cassio are playing. She is willing to compromise for a bit of his time. Or so it seems.

Iago says that Bianca is

A housewife that by selling her desires
Buys herself bread and clothes; it is a creature
That dotes on Cassio.
(IV.i.95-97)

We already know Iago to be unreliable, but yet we must question if Bianca has been driven to prostitution to survive. Would this be the fate of Desdemona and Emilia should they decide to leave their abusive husbands? In addition, the conversation between Iago and Cassio that follows not only leads Othello to think that Desdemona is unfaithful with Cassio, but also shows that Cassio has no respect for Bianca. In front of his friends, Cassio is not married, but does not want to be associated with Bianca, and he treats her so. When she comes to return the handkerchief, Bianca tells Cassio in no uncertain terms that she will have nothing to do with it (IV.i.149-157).

It is here that as Othello becomes convinced of Desdemona's guilt, Bianca is linked to her. Bianca and Desdemona could quite possibly be taken as Venetian noble women, but their men treat them like subhumans. These men will not allow escape from the label "prostitute." In a way, Desdemona has prostituted herself in her relationship with Othello. Like a prostitute, Desdemona has provided Othello with a pleasant diversion from his activities as a soldier. Like Bianca, she has followed him from Venice to Cyprus, refusing to stay home like other wives. Unlike a prostitute, however, Desdemona has refused to face the sexual problems she and Othello have had since their marriage began, and, unlike Bianca, Desdemona has not been "honest" with Othello, has not confronted him about real issues.

It is no wonder, then, that these three women face a bleak future: two die, one simply fades. However, before that happens, Shakespeare presents us with images of strong, non-stereotypical individuals who exhibit extraordinary goodness without compromising their moral strength—real women.
Analysis: Geography's Role in Othello

While the focus of Shakespeare's *Othello* is often on the domestic conflict of Othello and Desdemona, these events are purposefully fixed in specific geographic locations: Venice and Cyprus. Shakespeare creates a comparison of Venice with Cyprus that permeates the play, and the influence that geography has on the play can be vital to understanding why the plot progresses the way it does.

The comparison begins, oddly enough, with the title of the play, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. "Othello" as a name is neither Italian (which would be "Otello") or Moorish. In addition, while Othello could possibly be "the Moor of Venice," the title does not identify him as the only Moor from Venice. It fixes him through geographical identification as a definite part of Venice, not as a native Venetian, but as a stranger in and of the city. Othello has adopted Venice as his city, their Christian code of behavior as his code, his marriage to a white woman as his bond to this place. Nonetheless, Othello does not "belong" to this culture, nor can he ever be considered a Venetian. Interestingly, the nationalism of the Venetians surfaces during Iago's opening comments about Cassio. Cassio is a Florentine, a fact that Iago takes as extremely distasteful. The comments cause us to wonder that if Iago can so hate a fellow Italian, then his antipathy towards a Moor is indeed frightening.

The play opens in Venice, one of the most powerful city-states of 16th century Italy. Located in the northwest corner of the country on the Adriatic Sea, Venice was a thriving port and a very important exchange point for goods between Europe, north Africa, and the Near and Far East. It is without doubt a formidable naval power to be called in to protect an island some distance away. In addition to trade, Venice was noted for the pleasures it offered travellers in the way of arts, music, and freely available sex. From Shakespeare's point of view, Venice was part of his own familiar world (the West), a world that did not include Cyprus (the East).

Venice's government is headed by a Duke and a council (or senate) comprised of nobles and wealthy merchants who brought their complaints and their squabbles to the Duke for resolution. The Duke's double function as leader and judge is succinctly presented in I.iii, where Brabantio, Desdemona's father, presents his charges against Othello while the Duke is commissioning Othello to fight the Turks.

Furthermore, Venice is a city within certain, clearly defined boundaries (city walls). As long as Othello and Desdemona remain within these walls, their marriage will be influenced by the culture within. As the action of the play breaks these boundaries and moves to Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean, the relationship of this couple will reflect the upheaval such a move brings, only so intensely that neither can survive. The dislocation of Venetian culture from West to East will ultimately prove to have tragic consequences for all the participants in the move. Geographically, they are moving away from the closed structure of Venice to a more open structure of society, and where the rules will change.

Although the play emphasizes Cyprus's role by mentioning it more than twenty-four times, it does not give many details about the place. According to widely known legend, Venus (Aphrodite) rose from the sea near Cyprus's west coast, earning it the designation as the island of Venus. Shakespeare mentions the birthplace of Venus in *Venus and Adonis* (line 1193) and in *The Tempest* (IV.i.93), but there is no mention of the goddess in *Othello*. This omission, therefore, focuses our attention not on love as personified in the Goddess of Love, but on love as a human frailty having more to do with human deception than divine intervention. Such a view is reflective of the humanist concerns of the late Renaissance.

Shakespeare could not have known that eventually in 1669 the Turks would invade Cyprus, forcing the Venetians to withdraw and effectively ending their role as a major naval force. What Shakespeare does do, however, is clearly establish Cyprus as an alternative to Venice. For Shakespeare's audience, Cyprus, as well as Barbary, Egypt, Rhodes, and Aleppo among others, would have defined a foreign, strange, exotic place.
about which they could only dream. With no frame of reference in their everyday lives for these places, just
the names would make the events of the play very plausible. The persistent mention of other foreign places
contextualises Cyprus as the midway point between civilization and barbarism, a point made flesh in the
character of Othello. Furthermore, unlike Venice, militarism is the stable mechanism of the behavioral code.
Cassio is dealt with according to this code, as is Iago, and it is the Venetian nobles who see to its
implementation. Most notable is the lack of any Cypriots in the play while everyone is in Cyprus. It is as if
they have all travelled to a different planet.

This Cyprus, however, is different in that it is under the protection of Venice. It is almost an Italian colony,
but it is not essentially an appendage to Venetian culture. Although it does hold to a Christian code for the
behavior of its residents, it remains a place of extreme violence and the almost constant breaking of that code
by the Venetians who have become the outsiders.

The government is by a governor appointed by the Duke, and the Turks (also foreigners) threaten Cyprus with
invasion. This incursion of non-Christian into Christian space will not be tolerated, regardless of Venice's
hypocritical stance. In Venice we see how business and other matters are conducted within city walls. In the
relatively open spaces of Cyprus, things change. Othello is not so foreign in this environment nor is he totally
secure. It can be argued persuasively that being in the open spaces of Cyprus allows Othello's insecurities to
surface, insecurities about himself and Desdemona that he had successfully suppressed in Venice.

This viewpoint may be justified when we consider the effect of geographical change on Othello and
Desdemona's marriage. In Venice, they secretly eloped, and the council, despite Brabantio's passionate
pleading, retains its focus on political events. Once in Cyprus with the war finished before it began, the focus
reverts to Othello and Desdemona, and political events are reduced to a series of inspections and state
banquets.

Shakespeare's audience could have readily believed Othello capable of such intense passion because they held
that the Four Humours (those bodily fluids that sustained the body) were influenced by the weather. The warm
climate of Italy was supposed to render the blood warm with desire (much like the effect of Italian wine), and
Italians were notorious for being "hot-blooded." How much more would the warmth of Cyprus affect Othello!

Also to be considered is Venice's reputation as a sexual paradise where courtesans were the normal marital
addition. When Iago hints to Othello about Desdemona's infidelity, it would not be thought unusual for
Othello to arrive at a perfectly reasonable (though erroneous) conclusion:

    I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
    That married with Othello
    (IV.ii.89-90).

The entire geography of the play and its blatant breaks in locale serve not only to gloss the dissolution of
Othello and Desdemona's marital problems, but also the "otherness" of the two lovers. Othello has no place in
Desdemona's world, no matter how many victories he wins, no matter how much he is trusted by the Duke, no
matter how assimilated he thinks he may be. Alternatively, Desdemona can never be part of Othello's world:
she does not understand the demands of a soldier's life; she only has Othello's version of his military exploits;
she has been raised in the shelter of Venice. Desdemona has been insulated from the man's world that is
Venice, and is now isolated by Cyprus. Although she has the dreams and hopes normal for a young
newlywed, she is, in the eyes of the men, a property for barter. Failing to recognize this about herself leads
Desdemona to other serious misjudgements about men, their motives, and their tenacity. The play begins in
Venice, moves to Cyprus, and ends with a return to Venice by Montano. Yet it would be unfair to assume that
this geography imposes itself on the play to the exclusion of the other motifs. The geography is the canvas on
which Shakespeare will fashion an absorbing tale, and it stays there, in the background, supporting, coloring,
and subtly influencing our interpretations.

**Analysis: Opposites Attract: Othello and Desdemona**

Frequently drama teachers will explain to their students that the essence of drama is conflict. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, conflict on the social and political levels are an essential part of the story. Yet within the relationship of Othello and Desdemona, one that should be conflict-free, we find the most important and the deepest rifts. The difference that has received the most attention in recent years is their interracial marriage. During the trial of O. J. Simpson, media used the play as a comparison. But there are other factors at work in their relationship that go beyond racial difference, for example, age, experience of life, and a lack of knowledge about sex, love, and each other. The convention of an older man in love with a much younger love interest had been a staple of comedy since the days of Aristophanes, and had survived through much English literature, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* for instance. Shakespeare, however, takes the theme and twists it, affixing it as tragic motif to this mismatched couple.

In the play's opening act, Othello relates how he and Desdemona began their relationship. Brabantio had invited Othello to his house and during those visits, Othello told stories

> of most disastrous chances,  
> Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
> Of hair-breadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,  
> Of being taken by the insolent foe  
> And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence  
> And portance in my travailsome history  

(I.iii.134-139)

and other marvellous adventures. A young, motherless girl in charge of her father's household must have been impressed by this man who had lived such a risky, exciting life outside Venice. In addition to be physically different from "the wealthy, curled darlings" (I.i.68) that made up her social circle, Othello is older than Desdemona and undoubtedly a father figure for her. It would not be unreasonable for her to feel the security she had with her father with this man. It is perhaps this comfort that allows Desdemona to declare her love for Othello because of "the dangers I had passed" (I.iii.167). Logically, an experienced general like Othello should have known better than to mistake hero worship for true love, but possibly because he had denied himself a meaningful and committed relationship to pursue his military career, he was more than susceptible to Desdemona's pure and sincere emotion.

The difference in their ages means that there are significant differences in their backgrounds. Desdemona's mother has died and is now a vague memory. As the daughter of a wealthy merchant, Desdemona would have had a very protected upbringing, and she would have been taught how to be a good and dutiful wife to a man of her father's choosing. Her father would have negotiated this marriage for her, and she would have been escorted to many feasts and banquets. In this sense, Desdemona has been prepared to handle the social occasions that Othello's position in Cyprus requires. It is an indication of Brabantio's lack of consideration of Othello as a marriage prospect that he allows Othello to spend so much time with Desdemona.

Her elopement, however, without her father's consent or consultation, underscores Desdemona's impetuosity and propensity to act without regard for the consequences wither to herself or those around her. This behavior does not correct itself after her marriage. In Cassio's suit she is relentless to the point of annoyance. On the other hand, Othello is a career soldier. He has worked hard and suffered much discomfort to reach the rank and status of general. In this leadership position, he is unaccustomed to challenges to his authority. Such a practice in the army would lead to chaos. As long as Desdemona sits adoringly at his feet and hangs on every
word of his stories, offering tears as a compassionate reaction, Othello is not threatened. Her insistence to the Duke that she accompany Othello to Cyprus contradicts Othello's request that she be cared for and given companionship fit for her social position. This will be the first of many such challenges that Othello is unequipped to deal with. Othello knows first-hand the horror and physical difficulty of war; Desdemona negates this opinion by inserting herself, again without thought, into Othello's mission.

Desdemona arrives in Cyprus before Othello and engages in a childish and dangerous game of double entendre with Iago, behavior entirely inappropriate for the wife of an arriving general, but especially in public. Here Desdemona further corrects Othello's "unknown fate" to "the heavens" (II.1.193-194). This is a small, irksome thing, but in this play, it is the little things that have greatest consequence.

When she first confronts Othello about Cassio's dismissal, she says she is just being an interested wife. Othello cannot hide his aggravation at her seeking his reversal of an irrevocable public order: "never more be officer of mine" (II.iii.240). Yet Othello will not come out directly and tell Desdemona that she is out of line. He pretends to have a headache. She begins to give him unsolicited aid with her handkerchief. The loss of the handkerchief at Othello's rejection of her help is much less important to either of them than the challenge that Desdemona keeps throwing at Othello's authority.

When Desdemona persists in Cassio's cause, a frustrated Othello reverts to non-verbal violence, since he cannot summon the language he feels he needs to stop her youthful exuberance. Finally realizing that Othello is upset, but failing to understand or recognize her part in it, she becomes the docile and submissive girl she had been at the beginning of the relationship. But it is too late. Othello's reason has been poisoned by the one person who, he thinks, knows and understands him—Iago. When in the final scene Desdemona protests her innocence, there is no reason why Othello should believe her because she has pursued all her other challenges with the same fervor. This is one head-to-head challenge that Othello intends to win.

Both Othello and Desdemona suffer from a common trait which paradoxically leads them to confrontation: a lack of knowledge of sex, love, and each other. Both are surrounded by sex in the play. Iago speaks of it in several contexts; Cassio frequents Bianca's house of prostitution. Yet Othello and Desdemona speak of love, not sex. Desdemona is in love with love, and Othello defines love as that amity and fraternity among soldiers. This view would explain his violent reaction to Iago's story about sleeping with Cassio, and Cassio's dream. Both Othello and Desdemona are hoping for a mating of their souls that will fulfill the great fantasy of romantic love: lasting through eternity. Othello's "love" has as its extreme antidote violent hate, which clearly is the result of his loving Desdemona because she pitied his past trials. Othello feels he is justified in his violent actions as a soldier would, but Desdemona is willing to die for love and take the full blame for the breakdown of the marriage, a romantic notion.

The communication, if it ever existed, has irretrievably broken down because neither knows the other as well as they should. They only know, and seem to only want to know, the idealized person they have created, and they hold on to that vision to the exclusion of the reality. Desdemona does not remain the dutiful, obedient daughter once she marries, nor is she Othello's "biggest fan." She seeks to become a partner, an equal sharer in Othello's career. Furthermore, his stories do not come true for her. There are no cannibals, or warriors, or narrow escapes on Cyprus. The Turks are defeated by the weather, not her husband. There is no globetrotting, only an assignment to a Venetian outpost, an island. The world she had seen through his eyes does not materialize. While Desdemona tries to make the transition to role of wife, she is without a role model and can only guess if she is getting it right. She is quietly disillusioned and unable to speak about it to anyone but Emilia.

On Othello's part, Desdemona has shown herself to be the direct opposite of the girl he thought he married. Desdemona apparently does not want to hear any more of his tales of adventure. He is busy with the affairs of state and cannot make an accurate assessment of how she spends her time. When they were in Venice, he was
probably well acquainted with her routine. In Cyprus, he is not. Although Desdemona does demonstrate an interest in his work, she does so because she is apparently intent on getting him to reverse himself on an administrative decision that has nothing to do with her.

In a modern climate, Othello and Desdemona would probably be referred to a marriage counselor. But they seek advice from a married couple who appear to have an understanding. Iago and Emilia's marriage is actually no better because of its longevity. Iago's sudden and deliberate murder of Emilia is by far more violent, more shocking, and more decisive than Othello's smothering of Desdemona. Iago is only protecting himself; Othello is protecting mankind.

Overall it can be said that race was probably the least of the problems facing Othello and Desdemona. Their expectations of marriage coupled with their age and inexperience could only end disastrously.

**Analysis: The Use of Humor in Othello**

By the time *Othello* was produced, Elizabethan theater-goers were accustomed to the conventional elements of comedy and knew what to expect from a comic play: a story of love and courtship with some deceptive twist of plot, all worked out to a happy ending through good fortune and human ingenuity. But in *Othello*, comedy appears as a precursor to tragedy. It presented the audience with the expected comic conventions gone awry.

Although *Othello* is a tragedy, a miniature comedy is played out until Act II, scene i, where the reunion of Desdemona and Othello takes place. First we are given the frustrations of Roderigo, who is paying Iago to convince Desdemona that she should love Roderigo. Apparently Roderigo has already failed to do this for himself, so he comes across as a fool. This impression is compounded by the fact that Iago is taking Roderigo's money but doing nothing in return. Next we are given the villain Iago and his own set of frustrations. At this point in the play, the extent of Iago's evil is not known; he appears to be an example of another comedic element familiar to Elizabethan audiences: the Vice, one who caused mischief but was essentially a fool. Roderigo and Iago carry their grumblings to Desdemona's house, hoping to cause trouble by telling her father, Brabantio, of her elopement with Othello.

This elopement introduces another set of comic elements. The marriage is considered a mismatch, since there is a vast difference in age, race, and cultural backgrounds between the lovers. Such mismatches were common targets of Elizabethan comedy, with special emphasis put on the image of the cuckolded husband, betrayed because he is too old to satisfy his wife's needs. An additional comic touch is the response of the irate father of the bride, in this case, Brabantio, who flaps hysterically about the street in his nightshirt when he learns of the elopement. He continues his ravings at the emergency meeting of the Senate, where he asks for punishment for Othello. Good fortune comes through, however, in the form of the suspected Turk attack on Cyprus. The Senate finds it more expedient to stand behind Othello in hopes that he will defeat the Turks.

Good fortune comes through again when a storm averts the necessity for battle, destroying the Turks' ships, but leaving Othello's and Desdemona's ships safe so they can reunite in Cyprus. A happy ending—another comedic requisite—but of course the play does not end here. At this point the mischief begun by Iago starts to flourish, and the play transforms into tragedy.

Shakespeare, who had a series of successful comedies before he mastered tragedy, used the basic romantic comedy structure as a departure point for tragedy in *Othello*. According to critic Susan Snyder:

> … traditional comic structures and assumptions operate in several ways to shape tragedy …

comedy can become the ground from which, or against which, tragedy develops. By evoking
the world where lovers always win, death always loses, and nothing is irrevocable, a
dramatist can set up false expectations of a comic resolution so as to reinforce by sharp
contrast the movement into tragic inevitability.²

The general situations set up for comedy turn into tragedy when affected by the unique characteristics of the
individuals involved. Thus, for example, while the image of the hysterical father bemoaning his daughter's
elopement is humorous, it ceases to be funny when the scene is played out according to Brabantio's
personality: he gives up his daughter and soon dies of a broken heart.

This transformation into tragedy is especially true with the character of Othello. While he is set up in a
traditionally comedic situation, he brings about tragedy by refusing to fit himself into that mold. He
recognizes that the cuckolded husband is an object of ridicule:

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but, alas, to make me
the fixed figure for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving finger at!
(IV.ii.53-55)
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but he chooses to reject such a role. As a result, what could have been played out as humor is transformed into
tragedy when he murders Desdemona.

Iago, who through his diabolical manipulations of the characters is at the heart of the transformation of the
comic structure into tragedy, ironically is the source of most of the humor in the play. In this way, he fits the
part of the traditional Vice, a bawdy mischief-maker who used foul language but generally did no real damage
and was always shown to be the fool in the end.

Much of Iago's humor works on two levels: to provide comic entertainment in itself and to give ironic
commentaries on the plot. We first see Iago in this role in Act I, scene i, where he uses racial slurs to taunt
Brabantio about Desdemona's elopement:

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Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
is tupping your white ewe.
(88-89)
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You'll have your daughter covered with
a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews
neigh to you; You'll have coursers for
cousins and gennets for germans.
(110-113)
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Racism is not the least of Iago's comedic repertoire; he also has a collection of sexist barbs, as witnessed in
Act II, scene i, when Cassio kissing Emilia's hand starts Iago on a general defamation of the female sex. His
jests, probably shared by the audience, work to entertain the crowd while giving insight into his feelings
toward women. His scheme for revenge against Othello is based on the sexist attitude that women are fickle.

Iago plays the clown in other parts of the drama, singing comic songs at the party where he gets Cassio drunk,
making fun of Othello chastising the soldiers in the same scene. In fact, Iago seems to be the only character
who enjoys himself in the play. But unlike the traditional clown in comedy, Iago is not just a low-life
entertainer; he is an adept manipulator who succeeds in directing the course of the tragedy toward his own
ends.
Iago's comedic talents include the use of deadpan humor, as he shows on at least two occasions. In Act II, scene iii, when Cassio cannot remember what happened while he was drunk, Iago exclaims with a straight face, "Is't possible?" (278). He uses the same line later in Act III, scene iii, after Othello's speech about giving up his profession. This sarcastic humor in the face of other people's misery highlights Iago's cruelty.

To have the main source of humor be the main source of evil in the play sets up an interesting conflict within the audience. On one hand, as Iago's cruelty sends the story irrevocably toward tragedy, the audience must be developing hatred for him. However, as they laugh at his humor, especially that which is directed toward the people he is helping to destroy, they are in danger of becoming complicit in his evil.

The final comedic element discussed here is the use of the Clown, another tradition in Elizabethan theater. The Clown seems to perform two functions generally in theater. His puns and burlesque antics were designed to appeal to the "lower classes" in the audience who would not pick up on the more subtle forms of comedy directed to the literate audience. Also the Clown passes through the play immediately after times of emotional torment, providing "comic relief," a chance for the audience to rest and gear up emotionally for the next scene. The Clown appears twice in Othello but has very little to offer. His first appearance is in Act III, scene i, when he taunts the musicians Cassio has hired to play for Othello. After a few word plays, he tells them that Othello only likes music that cannot be heard, and sends them on their way. (One source has said that this scene is in fact so lacking in humor that modern productions often leave it out entirely.) The Clown's second part is even briefer, when he plays on words with Desdemona. The Clown seems out of place in this play, as though he has walked onto the wrong set and can't find a part for himself.

It seems that the only humor that works in the play is intimately tied up with the tragedy, from the misdirecting of the traditional elements of romantic comedy into tragedy, to the major source of humor being the major source of evil. As critic Edward Dowden has written, the humor in Othello "is the grin of a death's head, the mirth of a ghoul."3

Notes
1The concept of Iago as Vice is developed later in this essay.


Bibliography


Analysis: Motivations for Characters' Actions in Othello

In a discussion of the causes or motivations of the play, it is helpful to understand the primary motifs of the great tragedies. Shakespeare emphasized the problems of good and evil, sin and redemption. He was not particularly interested in the public sides of people, but whether they were good people inside. This can be easily seen in Othello, for all the action revolves around successful deception. Even Othello, a basically noble and honest public figure, shows an irrational and violent side to his nature at the end.

Shakespeare seemed interested in how the characters responded to certain situations. He believed that the action of tragedy occurred in the soul. The characters in this play are sensitive: morally, philosophically, and aesthetically. They all have imaginative consciences, and are able to step out of their situation and reflect on their behaviors. They realize they are involved in a moral structure and must evaluate. They are engaging in this evaluative process when they speak about their causes, reasons, explanations, rationalizations, or motivations in the play.

In Othello there is metaphysical poisoning going on. Minds and characters are being destroyed and corrupted with the poison of jealousy—what Shakespeare refers to as "the green-eyed monster." Iago is jealous of Cassio's new promotion, and vows to seek revenge on Othello for granting it to him. Iago uses the natural jealousy between men and women, and gives Othello a very bitter pill—one that threatens his pride and his manhood. When a person's pride is severely threatened, they can be driven into desperation and will do irrational and harmful actions. The use of the theme of jealousy places characters in situations where they must respond to it. Each character shows a different response, and each response determines what happens to each character.

Othello is completely naive about his relationships with women. As for love, he is stupid and good-hearted, and falls head over heels in it, unthinkingly. Unfortunately, he falls "out of love" just as quickly and thinks with his heart instead of his head. When he runs into trouble, he never meets it head-on, but allows it to ferment and rot his character.

It is his hurt pride that eventually causes his downfall, but he doesn't see it as such. Othello believes himself to be a rational person who judges situations based on facts. He does not see himself as one who could be deceived, and falls right into Iago's trap. Even when jealousy infects him beyond all reason he believes he is acting reasonably—when he kills Desdemona. He rationalizes that his killing her is a duty. The "cause" is Desdemona's alleged infidelity, but he is not possessed by a jealous rage when he does his deed. He convinces himself that he must do his duty and kill her so that she won't betray other men.

Othello's major error which leads to his downfall was believing himself to be a logical, rational, duty-driven man, above the jealous passions of ordinary men. He means to act righteously, but abandons his reasoning abilities. His interpretation of his "cause" is wrong. The cause is his damaged pride.

Iago is a cynic, and believes that people are evil like himself. He is realistic, and able to detect what motivates each person. He is evil and malicious, and will stop at nothing to avenge himself. Yet, he does not deceive himself as to his primary motivations and causes. His injured pride and his jealousy is the prime motivation for ensuing actions. He expected to get the title of "lieutenant," and probably deserved it. Othello's passing him up was the motivation for Iago's hatred of Othello and his jealousy toward Cassio.

Iago also has the insight to state "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (I.iii.385). Besides the pleasure of revenge, he has the passion for financial gain and is under the control of money. He isn't deceiving himself on this point. His "cause" (I.iii.368) or causes are his hatred of Othello, his envy of Othello's power, and his desire for Roderigo's wealth.
Yet Iago is not completely incapable of deceiving himself. He is able to convince himself that Othello has also seduced his wife. Although there is no justification for this, he accuses Othello of this offense to further fuel his hatred of him and justify destroying him. Also, Iago asks how anyone could call him a villain (II.iii.343) to counsel Cassio and Desdemona in his particular way. He really can't be seriously questioning this charge.

Cassio is a good and honest man, and is not deceiving himself when he tells Othello, "Dear General, I never gave you cause" (V.ii.300). Cassio is a gentleman and is knowledgeable in the matters of the world. When it comes to sex he knows how to handle himself. He went to Bianca when he wanted sex, and always treated Desdemona with great respect. His particular weakness was not with women but with liquor. Except when drunk, he is in control of his thoughts and actions. He is rewarded by Shakespeare for his clear thinking and rationality, for he is still alive at the end of the play while others with extreme views die.

However, Cassio does lose Othello's favor and is stripped of his rank because he doesn't see his inability to control his drinking as a weakness.

Desdemona surely gave Othello no reason to suspect her loyalty and devotion to him. Her loyalty was proven over and over again, when she chose Othello over her father, when she spoke up for Othello, in her conduct with Cassio, and her placing the blame for her death on herself at the end. She, though, is irrationally, insanely in love with Othello. When something goes wrong, she doesn't know what to do but has the tendency to over look the symptoms. Her main problem is blind love. She is also blind to Iago's faults and continually sees him as an honest man.

Desdemona is also the victim of bad timing and poor planning. She allows Cassio to persuade her to speak on his behalf, and she is pressured by him several times to speak to Othello immediately to plead his case. In Act III, scene iii, she mentions Cassio’s name to her husband at the worst possible moment, and also refers to Cassio as a suitor. This clearly works against her.

Both Desdemona and Othello used poor judgment and allow themselves to be brainwashed by Iago. Both failed to think for themselves or to use reason in assessing each other's actions. Both acted in extremes and failed to take a more moderate course. Both loved with all their hearts, and Othello sought vengeance with all his heart.

Probably the most serious of Othello's faults was his extreme sexual jealousy and inability to recognize it as such. As he even stated himself, he was naive in the ways of the world. Othello could not handle love and sex, and this drove him mad and to suicide. He overestimated his powers of self-control, however, and saw his "cause" as a just and righteous one. He was mistaken. Shakespeare pointed out that sexual jealousy destroys people and illustrates this very well in Othello.

**Analysis: An Analysis of Four Shakespearean Villains**

Shakespeare's plays have been the focus of critical analysis for centuries. Part of the reason that his works are so widely read is that his characterization of both protagonists and antagonists is well developed. In the course of this essay, four of Shakespeare's villains will be compared: Macbeth, King Claudius, Iago and Edmund. Finally, some general conclusions will be drawn.

Some Shakespearean critics attempt to justify Macbeth's evil behavior by contending that his actions were forced on him by an external power. However, A. C. Bradley argues that Macbeth was not controlled by the Witches, their "masters," or Hecate. He continues to explain that the prophecies of the Witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal.
Bradley states that when Macbeth heard the first prophecies he was not an innocent man. He contends:

"Precisely how far his mind was guilty may be a question; but no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of fear at the mere prophecy of a crown, or have conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder."\(^2\)

Upon analyzing *Macbeth*, it becomes evident that the natural death of an old man could have fulfilled the prophecy any day. The idea of fulfilling it by murder was Macbeth's idea entirely.\(^3\)

When Macbeth sees the Witches again, after the murders of Duncan and Banquo, a significant change can be detected in his character. They no longer need to seek him out, rather, he seeks them out. "He has committed himself to his course of evil."\(^4\)

Unlike many villains, Macbeth experiences a profound sense of guilt after committing his evil deeds. Bradley states that the "consciousness of guilt is stronger in him than the consciousness of failure." As a result, Macbeth is in a perpetual state of agony and restlessness. "All that is within him does condemn itself for being there."\(^5\)

Macbeth suffers from a distorted sense of logic when he begins his plot against Banquo. He develops a strange idea in his mind that Banquo's murder will not haunt him if the deed is done by other hands. Unfortunately, for Macbeth, this deed haunts him as much as his other, evil actions.

Unlike Macbeth, who feels guilt after committing his crimes, Claudius (a character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) enjoys his sinful life. He commits crime after crime for lust and power. The satisfaction that Claudius receives from his actions is aptly described in one of his lines: "That one can smile ... and be a villain."\(^6\)

Weilgart notes that Claudius is able to remain benevolent and reasonable "after murdering his brother for crown and wife." He is proudly able to stand up against his avenger, Laertes, by saying: "There's such divinity doth hedge a king, that treason can peep to what it would...."\(^7\) While Macbeth tries to justify some of his evil deeds, he is not able to maintain the same level of pride and contentment that Claudius does in *Hamlet*.

Bradley asserts that Claudius was not a villain of force, rather, he was a "cut-purse who stole the diadem from a shelf and put it in his pocket." He possessed the inclination of "natures physically weak and morally small towards intrigue and crooked dealing." Although Bradley argues that Claudius showed no cowardice in times of danger, his first thought was always for himself.\(^8\)

Claudius refused to change his thinking even as he is about to die. Bradley concludes:

"Nay, his very last words show that he goes to death unchanged: "Oh yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt (=wounded)," he cries, although in half a minute he is dead. That his crime has failed, and that it could do nothing else, never once comes home to him. He thinks he can over-reach Heaven. When he is praying for pardon, he is all the while perfectly determined to keep his crown; and he knows it."\(^9\)

In *Othello*, Shakespeare presents his audience with perhaps his most diabolical of villains: Iago. J. H. E. Brock explains that Iago's evil nature is depicted from the very beginning of the play as he is shown "dipping his fingers into Roderigo's purse, with as great freedom as if it were his own."\(^10\)

Bernard Spivak observes that Iago is completely insensitive to the feelings of other people. Throughout the play he is cruel and indifferent to the sufferings he causes others. A careful analysis of *Othello* reveals that Iago does not effect one generous or thoughtful action.\(^11\)
Iago confesses that his outward behavior is no guide to his real thoughts. This facet of his personality is certainly borne out in his subsequent behavior. Brock contends that Iago must have been "a profound hypocrite to have imposed on his associates and superiors for so long; and he must have been a man of extreme self-control, who never betrayed himself by fear, nervousness, emotion or an unguarded action."\(^\text{12}\)

Iago's unscrupulous behavior also becomes apparent as he passes disagreeable and dangerous jobs on to others (i.e. asking Roderigo to provoke Cassio when drunk). Although he is brave on occasion, Iago does not like to take any unnecessary chances when committing evil deeds.\(^\text{13}\)

Shakespeare presents Iago as a habitual liar. Brock states that while he plundered Roderigo, he kept him quiet with a series of lies. In addition, his entire plot against Cassio was without foundation. Finally, Iago "invented for Othello's consumption a series of episodes between Desdemona and Cassio which were blatant falsehoods." Without feeling any shame or guilt, Iago creates facts to suit the occasion.\(^\text{14}\)

Weilgart believes that interesting distinctions exist among Macbeth, Claudius, and Iago in their reactions to gaining power. Macbeth seems less satisfied after his success than he was before. He committed the deed in order to be king; however, once he assumes this position, he seems to have no other goal but "to sleep in spite of thunder." Claudius, on the other hand, enjoys in royal dignity his happiness after killing Hamlet. Finally, Iago seems unchanged after he achieves his goal: Cassio's position. "He goes on and on plotting. There is no satisfaction corresponding to his desire."\(^\text{15}\)

Edmund's villainy is a result of his rebellion against the disqualifications of bastardy. Brock explains that Edmund poisoned his father's mind against Edgar "by informing him that he had tried to win him over to a plot to murder him." Edmund claimed that when he refused to participate in the plot, Edgar wounded him with a sword. However, while Edmund did have a wound to show his father, he inflicted it on himself. Unfortunately, Gloucester believed his bastard son and outlawed Edgar.\(^\text{16}\) Thus, like Iago, Edmund uses lies to achieve his goals.

The evil nature of Edmund's character once again becomes evident as he is taken into the Duke of Cornwall's service. After receiving his new appointment, he immediately betrays his father. Gloucester's eyes are put out by Cornwall and Regan, and Edmund is made the Earl of Gloucester.\(^\text{17}\)

Brock observes that Edmund manipulates the feelings of others to achieve his ends. When both Regan and Goneril fall in love with him, "he played one sister off against the other and pretended to be devotedly in love with both."\(^\text{18}\) Edmund will stop at nothing to gain the power that he thinks is rightfully his.

Toward the end of Lear, Edgar challenges Edmund to single combat to answer for his many crimes. When Edmund is mortally wounded, he acknowledges "his enormities, and expresses remorse for his brutal action towards Cordelia."\(^\text{19}\) In a sense, Edmund can be compared to Macbeth, since both characters experience guilt after committing their vicious actions.

Bradley explains that Edmund possessed a lighter and more superficial nature than Iago. "There is nothing in Edmund of Iago's motive-hunting, and very little of any of the secret forces which impelled Iago." However, both characters are adventurers who actively pursued their goals regardless of who is harmed along the way.\(^\text{20}\)

While certain similarities undoubtedly exist among the characters discussed above, each pursued their villainous goals in different manners. Perhaps one of the reasons that Shakespeare has remained so popular over the centuries is that audiences are never quite sure how his villains are going to pursue their goals. Shakespeare should certainly be praised for the variety of characters he developed in his plays as well as for the intensity of his plots.
Notes

2 Bradley, p. 344.

3 Bradley, p. 344.

4 Bradley, p. 345.

5 Bradley, pp. 359-360.


7 Weilgart, p. 122.

8 Bradley, p. 169.

9 Bradley, p. 171.


12 Brock, pp. 3-4.

13 Brock, p. 7.

14 Brock, pp. 7-8.

15 Weilgart, p. 117.

16 Brock, p. 46.

17 Brock, pp. 46-47.

18 Brock, p. 47.

19 Brock, p. 47.

20 Bradley, pp. 300-301.

Bibliography


Analysis: Deception in Othello

Othello is, at heart, a play about deception, and the emotional turmoil and mental anguish it can cause. Although Iago aptly demonstrates all that is evil through his malevolent manipulation of others, he is not the only practitioner of deception in the play. Othello himself can also be regarded as a study in deception, albeit of a much more subtle variety than that of the gleefully fiendish Iago; for Othello engages in self-deception – less obvious, but eventually just as destructive. Indeed, the only character above reproach is the guileless Desdemona; enmeshed in a web of steel through the deception of others, she nevertheless continues in her sweetly innocent way, ultimately attaining a heroic stature through her refusal, in sharp juxtaposition to Othello and Iago, to blame others for her suffering.

Othello is an outsider in Venetian society. He is a black man among white men, and a soldier among civilians. To the Venetians, he is simply 'the Moor' (I,iii,47), a description that neatly encapsulates his state as a foreigner. The term is indelibly associated with negative racial connotations – Iago describes Othello as 'an old black ram' (I,i,88) and 'the devil' (I,i,91), while Rodrigo calls him 'gross' and 'lascivious' (I,i,126). Othello, while unaware of the slanders of Iago, is only too aware of his precious position in the Venetian power structure. Hence, he creates for himself a new identity, a new sense of self that transcends the one-dimensionality of 'the Moor'. He cannot change his origins – although as he lets Iago know (I,ii,19-24) he is descended from 'men of royal siege' - but he can fill his persona with something uniquely Othello, to lose the negative connotations of 'the Moor' and create for himself a unique identity. He attempts this in his wooing of Desdemona – his new identity is the 'story of (his) life' (I,iii,129), and it is so intensely moving and personal that Desdemona is entranced. Ironically, there is a sense that Othello feels threatened by Desdemona's enthusiasm: she would 'listen with a greedy ear' to devour (his) discourse' (I,iii,150), and Othello feels compelled to concoct even more fantastical tales: 'of the cannibals that each other eat, /the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads/ do grow beneath their shoulders' (I,iii,143-145). Othello's attempt to break the shackles of being 'the Moor' has resulted in the construction of an elaborate façade of self-deception; he has constructed a new identity, but one somewhat removed from the flesh-and-bone Othello. This dissonance is evident if we compare his proposed 'round unvarnish'd tale' (I,iii,90) with the elaborate travelogue he finally delivers in lines 128-170. He is insistently self-dramatising, but curiously uncertain of his true worth; and it is this uncertainty that allows Iago to breed the 'green-eyed monster' of jealousy in his mind.

Iago is a master of deception. He appears frank and honest to all the other characters and it is only to the audience that he reveals his innermost thoughts. Roderigo knows some of what Iago plans, and supposedly why he plans it; but his knowledge is kept limited by Iago. Iago works through subtle hints and allusions, and exploits his 'honest' reputation ruthlessly. However, even the seemingly cocksure Iago is not immune to the 'monster' of jealousy; indeed, he too is infected by it 'like a poisonous mineral' (II,i,292). Unlike Othello, however, Iago recognises his infection and the effect it has on himself. He does not delude himself about what he is, or what he plans to achieve. Ultimately, his peculiar brand of evil comes to nothing, his plans destroyed by the unforeseen courage of his wife Emilia. His deception turns back on him and he is exposed as the petty man he is. The malevolence is still there, but the grand scale of evil is reduced to the flailing of an embittered human being.

On another level, the play deals with the deception of the senses – both of sight and sound. Othello demands from Iago 'ocular proof' (III,i,366) of his wife's infidelity, but his vision, corrupted by the 'green-eyed monster' (III,i,170), is satisfied by mere 'imputation and strong circumstance'(III,i,412). Iago's trickery in convincing Othello that his conversation with Cassio (followed by the fortuitous arrival of Bianca) in IV, i,
97-157 concerns the seduction of Desdemona, illustrates the extent to which Othello’s senses have been deluded and corrupted. Othello eavesdrops over the conversation between Iago and Cassio, but interprets the words to suit the state of his diseased mind: 'Do you triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?' (IV,i,118). He cannot see or hear for himself, and must rely on the false information 'fed' to him. And this occurs shortly after his body has been reduced to the fit (IV,i,43) in which all his senses are confused and jangled. Indeed, his greatest fear has been physically realised: 'perdition catch my soul/But I do love thee, and when I love thee not/Chaos is come again.' (III,iii,91-93) When Emilia vouches steadfastly for her mistress' chastity, the poison in Othello's ears dismisses her evidence as the ignorance of a ' simple bawd' (IV,ii,20). The ultimate deception takes place in the soft, slow death scene of Desdemona. Othello is instinctively drawn towards Desdemona's beauty, but in a perverse self-delusion, comes to see himself as a personification of 'justice', killing Desdemona 'else she'll betray more men' (V,ii,6). Iago's slanders have poisoned Othello's senses, and the evil of the deception results in the tragedy of Desdemona's death.

If Iago is a portrait of evil, then Desdemona must be the definitive embodiment of chaste beauty. She forsakes friends, family and wealth in Venice to spend her life with the man to whom she 'consecrated' her 'soul and fortunes' (I,iii,254). She loves Othello with all her mind, body and soul. Despite Othello's fears, she loves him, not an exotic image of the 'extravagant and wheeling stranger of here and everywhere' because she claims that she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' (I,iii,252). She is innocent, and completely without sophistication, and ultimately, a pawn to be exploited in Iago's obsessive plans. She bears all her tribulations with meekness, patience and without complaint, and remains committed to her husband even as she dies: 'Commend me to my kind Lord, O farewell!' (V,ii,126). She, alone, of all the characters, eschews intrigue and deception; her life is as pure and honest as her love for Othello. Some though, will take the side of Brabantio and see her treachery to him and his family. She does after all, deceive her father (I,iii,293), and elopes, escorted only by 'a knave of common hire' (I,i,125) to the arms of her beloved Othello; and there has been no inkling of the love suit Othello has pursued within Brabantio's own house. It is, perhaps, the weak point in Desdemona's character, but it may be excused by the overwhelming power of her love for Othello.

**Analysis: The Relationship Between Othello and Iago**

At the start of *Othello*, Iago makes very clear to Roderigo the apparent cause for his hatred of the general. His lack of promotion to lieutenant leads him to declare:

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… be judge yourself,
Whether I in any just term am affin'd
To love the Moor.
(I,i.38-40)
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Such a motive is not a grand-scale one, nor one which might cast Iago as the Universal Villain. His secondary motive, however, provides a different insight into his character, and provides the first instance of the theme which will dominate this play—sexual jealousy:

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I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
He's done my office;
(I.iii.384-386)
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More than this, however, it is the very fact that he acknowledges the nature of the suspicion (rumor) and then dismisses it from his mind that shows the inherently insecure nature of this villain. He has fallen into the same trap over Cassio ("For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too" [II.i.302]), and his jealousy is attested to even by his wife:
Some such squire he was,
That turn'd your wit, the seamy side without,
And made you suspect me with the Moor.
(IV.ii.147-149)

The deep—rooted cause for this combination of insecurity and jealousy lies deep within his psyche. We must remember the shared history of Othello and Iago, which in fact far transcends that shared by Othello and Desdemona. Othello makes much of the fact that,

… since these arms of mine had seven years' pith
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field.
(I.iii.83-85)

He also states that he does "agnize / A natural and prompt alacrity / I find in hardnes" (I.iii.231-233). The Duke and his court all acknowledge Othello's military experience and command, and Lodovico recognizes solid virtue

[which] The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce.
(I.ii.267-269)

This consistent military service of over thirty years (given Othello's own description of himself as "declined /Into the vale of years" [III.iii.265-266]) has left Othello without those " soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have" (III.iii.264-265). We are also told, and have no reason to dispute it, that Iago has served with Othello at "Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds / Christian and heathen" (I.i.29-30). Iago is twenty-eight years old (I.iii.312) and is clearly a career soldier, since he is chaffing over his lack of promotion. As Harold Bloom points out², the inevitable comradeship between soldiers of this nature is both intense and binding. Although many of the characters throughout the play call Iago "honest" and refer to his "honesty," it is Othello who uses the epithet more frequently than anyone else. And against the background of protestation from Emilia, Desdemona herself and, eventually, Cassio, Othello is prepared to take the word of his "Ancient" above all others. We might well ask why, apart from dramatic necessity, this should be the case.

The answer lies in the extraordinary comradeship which military service in the face of death can bring. No specific mention is made, but we might assume that Othello and Iago have fought side-by-side. It is, after all, where the General and the Ancient would be found. Iago reports the detail of how Othello has remained unmoved while those around him have been killed, with a veracity which indicates first-hand knowledge:

I have seen the cannon,
When it hath blown his ranks into the air;
And (like the devil) from his very arm
Puff'd his own brother….
(III.iv.131-134)

The friendship and obligation brought about by this kind of service cannot be overlooked, and it provides a powerful shared history.

Rejection, therefore, by the General whom Iago has followed and served, is a blow which a man, insecure in other ways (his sexual jealousy of his wife) would find hard to shoulder. The fact that he had apparently been supported by three great ones of the city" (I.i.7) in his quest for promotion is another indication, possibly, of not only his reputation within Venice, but of his disbelief in his fate. The disappointment is compounded by
the selection of a Florentine (when the rivalry between the city states of Venice and Florence was intense) who is unhardened by military experience and "That never set a squadron in the field" (I.i.22). It is consequently not such a great step from loyal and honest companion to "villainous knave" and "scourvy fellow" (IV.ii.140-141) as Emilia ironically calls the unknown defamer of Desdemona's virtue. Scorned and overlooked by the great leader, Iago is left with nothing but his anger and his sense of abandonment. Despite his initial claims, he is not that interested in reclimbing the ladder of military promotion. It has, after all, rejected him, and the days of "old gradation" (I.i.37) based upon "honest" service are gone. And, he is promoted to the position of Lieutenant at the end of III.iii. What is left to Iago is the sheer pleasure of destroying all that he had believed in, and which is reflected in Othello's eulogy over himself:

Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars
That make ambition virtue—O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, th'ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance, of glorious war!
(III.iii.348-354)

As Iago gloats at the loss of Othello's "sweet sleep" displayed in the speech above, he fails to recognize the ironic reflection on himself. Iago is losing exactly what Othello is, for, as a career soldier, his links with Othello's experiences are inextricable.

Against this friendship and comradeship, forged in the hardships of war, the relationship between Othello and Desdemona does indeed show as something insubstantial. It is based clearly upon a misconception:

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
And I loved her that she did pity them. (I.iii.167-168)

Each has fallen in love with the romantic image of the other, not the physical reality. Again, as Bloom has pointed out, their courtship, marriage, and their short time together after that event, leaves them very little opportunity either to get to know each other properly or, perhaps, even to consummate their marriage. Iago carefully marginalizes Othello from his new wife by emphasizing the differences in their background and cultural experience:

I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands.…
(III.iii.205-207)

He also reinforces the unnaturalness of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona who rejected "many proposed matches / Of her own clime, complexion, and degree" (III.iii.233-234). The more Iago drives the wedge between Othello and his love, the more dependent Othello becomes on Iago, for, indeed, there is no-one else to whom he can turn. His lieutenant Cassio is suspected with Othello's wife, and on Cyprus, Othello is not in a position to explore his fears with relative strangers. Their past joins Iago and Othello, and their present enmeshes them even more firmly. For Othello, there is only Iago in whom he can trust and upon whom he can rely. "Honest" Iago takes order for the death of Cassio; and "honest, honest Iago" (V.ii.155), Othello's "friend" provides the circumstantial and "occular" proof of Desdemona's treachery. As Iago has planned, he has made Othello
... thank me, love me, and reward me,
For making him egregiously as ass.
(II.i.303-304)

and Othello declares "I am bound to thee forever" (III.iii.218). In the blackest of ironies, Iago returns the compliment after the sacrilegious oath-taking at the end of III.iii: "I am your own for ever" (line 486). Like an incubus, Iago now cannot exist without Othello, as it is Othello's destruction which gives purpose and direction to Iago's life. As Othello recognizes that the mere appearance of the dead Desdemona will "hurl my soul from heaven" (V.ii.275), so he is even at the end of the play linked to the demi-devil" (302) and "hellish villain" (369) who has "ensnar'd [his] soul and body" (line 303). In planting the seeds of doubt and destruction in Othello, Iago planted the very seeds of his own fall:

"for what soever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." 3

Notes
1This, and all other textual references to Othello are from "The Arden Shakespeare" edition, ed. M. R. Ridley (New York: Methuen, 1985).


3Epistle of Paul to the Galatians, vi, 7.

Analysis: Historical Background

The primary source for Othello is a short story from Gli Hecatommithi, a collection of tales published in 1565 by Geraldi Cinthio. The story from the collection dealing with “The Unfaithfulness of Husbands and Wives” provides an ideal place for an Elizabethan dramatist to look for a plot. Since no translation of this work is known to have appeared before 1753, scholars believe that Shakespeare either read the work in its original Italian, or that he was familiar with a French translation of Cinthio’s tales, published in 1585 by Gabriel Chappuys.

In Cinthio’s tale, the wife is known as Disdemona, but the other characters are designated by titles only. There are also significant differences in the length of time over which the drama takes place, details of setting, and characters’ actions.

Commentators have also suggested that Pliny’s Natural History provided Shakespeare with details to enhance Othello’s exotic adventures and his alien origins. It has even been suggested by Geoffrey Bullough that Shakespeare consulted John Pory’s translation of Leo Africanus’ A Geographical History of Africa, which distinguishes between Moors of northern and southern Africa and characterizes both groups as candid and unaffected, but prone to jealousy. Shakespeare was also familiar with fifteenth and early sixteenth century accounts of wars between Venice and Turkey, during which time Venice regained temporary control of Cyprus.

It is agreed by most scholars that Shakespeare wrote Othello in 1604, but some have suggested a composition date as early as 1603 or even 1602. The earliest recorded performance of the play was that by the King’s Men “in the Banketinge house at Whit Hall” on November 1, 1604. However, it is also possible that the play was performed earlier that year in a public theater.

Othello was first printed in quarto form in 1622, and then in the First Folio of 1623; however, there are many variations between the texts of Q1 and F1. The First Folio contains approximately 160 lines that are not in the
First Quarto, but it has notably fewer stage directions. In contrast, the First Quarto contains about 13 lines or partial lines not found in the First Folio. Despite the differences, textual commentators generally agree that the folio edition was printed from a copy of the First Quarto, together with corrections and additions from some reliable manuscript, such as an acting company prompt-book.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shakespearean tragedy was revived with leading actors such as Thomas Betterton and Barton Booth playing the role of Othello. Betterton was noted for the “moving and graceful energy with which Othello had addressed the Senate.” When Booth “wept, his tears broke from him perforce. He never whimpered, whined or blubbered; in his rage he never mouthed or ranted.”

In the nineteenth century, Edmund Kean was described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as having brought “flashes of lightning” to the interpretation of Shakespeare. Ira Aldridge, the most famous figure in black theater history, played Othello with Edmund Kean as his Iago. However natural a black Othello seems, at that time, it was a novelty to audiences for whom the tradition of a Berber chieftain went virtually unchallenged. Aldridge’s performance made a deep impression in America and abroad.

The twentieth century includes notable performances by Paul Robeson, whose “tenderness, simplicity, and trust were deeply moving.” In 1964 Lawrence Olivier “took London by storm” with his portrayal of Othello. John Gielgud’s portrayal of “the disintegration of [Othello’s] character was traced with immense power and excellent variety.” Iago’s role as played by Christopher Plummer and Ian McKellen has been acclaimed.

Cinematic versions of Othello are impressive, as is Orson Welles’ 1952 interpretation, which has been described as “one of the screen’s sublime achievements” by Vincent Canby of The New York Times. The most recent interpretation of Othello is a film that includes Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago.

Analysis: Places Discussed

*Venice

*Venice. Northeast Italian seaport on the Adriatic that is the setting of the three scenes of the play’s first act. This affluent Renaissance city was greatly admired by Elizabethans, and utilized by William Shakespeare in his earlier play The Merchant of Venice (c. 1596-1597). Ruled by a duke and a senate, Venice was an autonomous, powerful republic at this time, with a flourishing commercial economy. Venetian ships plied the seas from the Adriatic through the Mediterranean, trading wool, furs, leather, and glass. In the play, Iago cynically describes Venice as a place of moneybags, treachery, and promiscuity, and insinuates that a black man can never be other than an outsider. Playing upon Othello’s sense of alienation, he suggests that Desdemona’s choice of him was unnatural and thus temporary.

Before Brabantio’s house, Iago and Roderigo call out with shouts of alarm and obscene insinuations about his daughter Desdemona, which escalate almost into a brawl, until Othello appears to calm the fray. This outdoor setting, dark and noisy, creates a feeling of unrest and tension.

Duke’s council chamber

Duke’s council chamber. Awe-inspiring room to which Othello is summoned before the Duke and the special session of Senate. In this Venetian crisis, with the Turkish fleet now bearing down on the island of Cyprus, a possession of Venice, Othello’s services are necessary. However, he must defend himself first from the accusations of Brabantio, who claims that he has stolen Desdemona by witchcraft. Although alien to Venetian culture as a Moor, Othello has previously proven his worth to the state and he defends himself from
Brabantio’s charges persuasively. Into this solemn chamber peopled with the powerful hierarchy of Venice, Desdemona appears to declare her love for Othello, which convinces the Duke to support the marriage and enlist Othello in the war against the Turk.

*Cyprus*

*Cyprus*. Important island trading post in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and a Venetian possession from 1489 to 1571. It provides the setting for the last four acts of the play and, symbolically, represents the edge of the civilized world; beyond is the Ottoman Empire, the enemy infidels. The second act of *Othello* opens at an open place near the quay of a Cyprus seaport. The tempest-tossed, Venetian seafarers reach safety. The location emphasizes the distance from their familiar world. Although the Turks have now drowned, Cyprus is a barren military outpost, a citadel, lacking many of the comforts of Venice. It is a masculine world, isolated and contained; Desdemona is at the mercy of the men around her.

**Cyprus citadel**

Cyprus citadel. Governor’s castle within whose soldiers’ quarters, orchard, and halls the remainder of the play unfolds. This citadel is the spot where civility and barbarity merge. There, Iago is free to advance his plans for Othello’s destruction, first by making Cassio drunk, leading to his dismissal, and then by using lies and insinuations to increase Othello’s jealousy. At a distance, Othello sees the encounter between Cassio and Bianca and his handkerchief pass between them; he is then convinced of the falseness of Desdemona. The isolation of the island from the civilized world contributes to the absolutism of the play.

The setting of Desdemona’s murder in her citadel bedchamber is cruelly appropriate. “Strangle her in her bed,” says Iago. The room brings together the sexual possessiveness of Othello, Desdemona’s innocence, and Iago’s passion for destruction. But it also represents a place in which the truth is revealed, where Venice, in the person of Lodovico, brings civility once more, and where Othello can feel remorse.

**Analysis: Modern Connections**

While there are a number of issues in *Othello* that twentieth-century audiences can connect with (crimes of passion are not new to today's society; just turn on the evening news), modern audiences often come away from *Othello* feeling uncomfortable with the racism they see in the treatment Othello receives from the other characters in the play. And just as we are well aware of the racism in our own society, it may be that Shakespeare was writing about the racism in his own society, not just the racism in the Venetian society depicted in the play. Shakespeare's *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus, but the Venetian society's fear of cultural difference, manifested in its racism, may be viewed as an indicator of Elizabethan England's concern to maintain its cultural identity in the face of extensive exploration and initial colonization of the New World. The Turk and the Moor, two traditional symbols of cultural values different from those of Western culture, threaten Venetian society but may be read as the embodiments of Elizabethan England's fear that its cultural values will be lost through colonization and the intermingling of different cultural values. In the same way, the depiction of Desdemona as the flower of Venetian society, the ideal of virtuous fidelity, is perhaps less a description of Venetian gender expectations than it is a depiction of woman designed to allay English fears that miscegenation (procreation between a man and a woman of different races) would threaten the order and culture of English society.

On one level, adultery in *Othello* can be seen as an individual infidelity that destroys both Iago and Othello as jealousy is incited in Othello by the promptings of his only confidante, "honest Iago." On another level, adultery may be viewed by some as destructive to a whole society. As some people in Shakespeare's time may have felt, and as some people in modern times may feel, the society that fails to limit the sexual activity of
women runs the risk of losing a paternal identification—we can never be certain who the father is in cases of infidelity—but also losing cultural identity in miscegenation. Iago claims to hate Othello because Othello has passed him over for promotion and slept with his wife, Emilia, but a third motive for his behavior is, perhaps, one that he does not or cannot explicitly state: the motive to preserve the racial and cultural identity of his society. Or, perhaps, Iago is motivated by his own more personal feelings of racism (rather than his society's), which come to the fore as Iago deals with the fact that his superior is a black man.

When Iago's schemes have been revealed by Emilia, he is encouraged by the others to reveal his motives. This would certainly seem to be the perfect opportunity to reveal his anger at the loss of promotion and his jealous suspicions of Othello. But instead, he says, "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word" (V.ii.303-04). In one sense, this exclamation continues his power and control to the end. But in another sense, perhaps he cannot articulate his motives because they are the deep and unidentified racist feelings of his society in general. He is a functionary agent of a state that has irreconcilable misgivings about the marriage of a black Moor to a white woman.

Iago is arguably the voice of racial intolerance: he cries out to Brabantio, "your daughter and the Moor are [now] making the beast with two backs" (I.i.116-17) and "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (I.i.88-89). These are metaphors calculated to alarm Brabantio and arouse his most primal fears. Racism and woman's unchecked sexuality are themes that resonate throughout the play and ignite the most confusion and fear when they are conceptualized as the offspring of a union between Desdemona and Othello. Thus, Iago makes his fiercest appeal when he cries out to Brabantio: "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans" (I.i. 111-13). Although Iago takes it upon himself to repair the grievous cultural rupture caused by the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, he is not alone. Desdemona's own father cannot believe his daughter would be one

To fall in love with what she fear'd to look!
It is a judgment maim'd, and most imperfect,
That will confess perfection so could err
Against all rules of nature….
(I.iii.98-101)

Brabantio believes that Othello has caused her to stray from such perfection by using magic potions and witchcraft to sway her affections.

Iago confesses that he, too, loves Desdemona (II.i.295). But it is a love constituted by neither lust nor an attraction to inner beauty. What he loves is the construction of Desdemona as the "perfect" woman, a perfection of sensibilities that must not be allowed to err. The audience knows full well that Desdemona has not been unfaithful to Othello. However, in the eyes of Iago and the others, she is guilty of a greater betrayal: her marriage to Othello.

Othello brings us closer to an understanding of Greek tragedy than any other of Shakespeare's plays. Othello perhaps never fully realizes how he has erred. What he has blundered into in ignorance is swiftly avenged by powerful and unstoppable forces. What excites fear and pity in the modern reader is an identification with Othello's frailty and the suspicion that those unstoppable forces are produced by the fears and ignorance in society.

**Analysis: Media Adaptations**


• *Othello*, UFA, 1922. Silent version of Shakespeare's tragedy featuring Emil Jannings, Lya de Putti, and Werner Krauss. Distributed by Video Yesteryear and Discount Video Tapes Inc. 81 minutes.

• *Othello*, United Artists, 1952. Film adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy directed by Orson Welles. The cast featured Welles as Othello, Michael Mac Liammoir as Iago, and Suzanne Cloutier as Desdemona 91 minutes.


**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

**Sources**


**Further Study**

Adamson, W. D. "Unpinned or Undone? Desdemona's Critics and the Problem of Sexual Innocence," in *Shakespeare Studies XIII* (1980): 169-86. Asserts that Shakespeare has drawn Desdemona as "legally innocent of adultery, morally innocent of idly considering it, and psychologically innocent of even being capable of it."

Auden, W. H. "The Joker in the Pack," in his *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, pp. 246-72. New York: Random House, 1948. Compares Iago to a practical joker who himself has no personal feelings or values, but contemptuously uses the very real desires of other people to gull and manipulate them. Auden also claims that Othello prizes his marriage to Desdemona not for any great love he holds for her, but rather because it signals to him, mistakenly, that he has fully integrated into Venetian society.


Gregson, J. M. "Othello," in his *Public and Private Man in Shakespeare*, pp. 156-76. London: Croom Helm, 1983. Maintains that the characters Othello and Hamlet are opposites, and argues that the true tragedy of *Othello* is the Moor's inability to separate his public conduct as military leader from his private judgments as husband.

Grudin, Robert. "Contrariety as Structure: The Later tragedies," in his *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety*, pp. 119-79. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Finds that Desdemona's "type of lamblike femininity" is compelling to Othello but not to Shakespeare and thus the dramatist demonstrates that her passive helplessness is implicitly ironic, for it "sharpenes the impulse to aggression in others." The ambiguities of her virtue are comparable, Grudin maintains, to the complexities of Iago's wickedness.
Hallstead, R. N. "Idolatrous Love: A New Approach to Othello," in *Shakespeare Quarterly* XIX, No. 2 (Spring 1968): 107-24. Argues that after the consummation of Othello and Desdemona's marriage in Cyprus, the Moor's love for his wife becomes so excessive that it is theologically idolatrous. Asserting that *Othello* is a "morality play in a completely realistic framework," Hallstead contends that the Moor is shown renouncing Christianity when he swears a pagan vow with Iago at the close of Act III, scene iii, but the critic also discovers in the final scene of the drama a clear pattern of Christian penance, concluding that Shakespeare has portrayed the "return of Othello's Christianity."

Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation*. New York: Atheneum, 1970, 180 p. Assesses Iago's motives from five different critical perspectives, alternately questioning whether the ensign should be viewed as "a stage villain, or Satan, or an artist, or a latent homosexual, or a Machiavel." A pluralistic approach to this issue, Hyman argues, demonstrates the "tension, paradox, and irony" in Shakespeare's portrayal of Iago, while a single line of inquiry can only produce one perspective that is "inevitably reductive and partial."

Kott, Jan. "The Two Paradoxes of Othello," in his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, translated by Boleslaw Taborski, pp. 99-125. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1964. Maintains that the struggle between Othello and Iago is a dramatic representation of a "dispute on the nature of the world" and an enquiry into the purpose of human existence. Kott focuses specifically on two paradoxical events in the play: Iago's own victimization by the evil he himself sets in motion and Desdemona's delight in the erotic aspects of love, which leads Othello to believe her capable of betraying him.


Murry, John Middleton. "Desdemona's Handkerchief," in his *Shakespeare*, pp. 311-21. London: Jonathan Cape, 1936. Argues that Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief symbolizes the perfection of her love for Othello, for she became heedless of it only "when Othello was sick and her concern for the man she loved drove out all concern for the token of their love."


Rice, Julian C. "Desdemona Unpinned: Universal Guilt in Othello," in *Shakespeare Studies* VII (1974): 209-26. Argues that although Desdemona is apparently the most virtuous of women, she shares with Othello and all the other characters in the drama the frailties, imperfections, and moral vulnerability that are inherent in human nature. Rice maintains that Desdemona is partially responsible for her own murder through her "overconfidence in the power of virtue to triumph."

Rosenberg, Marvin. *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961,313 p. An overview of the interpretations of the drama's main characters by actors from the Restoration to the mid-twentieth century. Seeking to synthesize the commentary of literary critics with the interpretations offered by leading...
performers, Rosenberg emphasizes the essential humanity of the play's three central figures.

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**Bibliography**


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Nevo, Ruth. Tragic Form in Shakespeare. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972. Chapter on Othello describes the two primary ways of looking at the Moor of Venice: as a man blinded by love, and as a man blinded by his tainted vision of that love. Chronicles the events leading to the protagonist’s downfall.


**Quotes**

Iago is most honest (II.iii.7) Othello, unaware of Iago's evil plans, comments on his honesty. This is most ironic, of course, since Iago is the furthest thing from it. Shakespeare is able to increase the tension of the plot with short, simple statements like this one.

Who steals my purse steals trash (III.iii.157) Iago has gotten Cassio drunk, and Cassio has gotten himself fired as Othello's lieutenant. He mourns the loss of his reputation, which, if compared to the theft of a purse, is more valuable than gold.

green-eyed monster (III.iii.166) Iago gives Othello very true advice in a sarcastic vein. Jealousy is compared to a "green-eyed monster." In the modern sense, the phrase is "green with envy."

dale of years (III.iii.266) Some critics believe this to be a reference to the 23rd Psalm: "Yea though I walk through the of the shadow of death." In the modern sense, it has been corrupted to vale of tears," meaning a
Men should be what they seem; / Or those that be not, would they might seem none (III.iii.126-127)

Probably the most bitingly ironic words in the play, Iago plants the idea in Othello's mind that Cassio might be cavorting with Desdemona, and is not "what he seems." Of course, it is plainly Iago who is not what he seems. Shakespeare adroitly uses this technique of having his villains describe what is in reality their own treachery, even when they are apparently referring to someone else. This only adds to the chilling, calculating nature of Iago.

foregone conclusion (III.iii.428) To Shakespeare, this phrase meant "a previous experiment." In the modern sense, it refers to something that has already been decided.

pomp and circumstance (III.iii.354) These are the celebrations that would be held in Cyprus for the victory over the Turks. In the modern sense, it is frequently used to describe a very formal event, such as an inauguration or graduation.

so sweet was never so fatal (V.ii.20) Othello is contemplating murdering Desdemona to save other men from her "deceit." Knowing how sweet Desdemona actually is means the real or spiritual death of a man.

Some bloody passion shakes your very frame (V.ii.44) In the play's final scene, Othello, broken and defeated by his complete submittal to Iago's plan, prepares to kill Desdemona and demands she admit her unfaithfulness. Of course, she has no idea what he is talking about, and says as much in this quote—hoping in vain that his rage is not to be imminently directed at her.

loved not wisely but too well (V.iii.345) Othello realizes too late that he was wrong about Desdemona's infidelity, but the only fault he admits is that he listened to Iago.

'tis the curse of service, / Preferment goes by letter and affection (I.35-36) In the first scene of Othello, we learn that Iago has been passed over in favor of Cassio for the position of Othello's lieutenant. This slight provides the motive for Iago's diabolical plan to wreak revenge on Othello. Here Iago complains that Cassio's elevation was based on favoritism, rather than traditional values of service and succession.

And will as tenderly be led by the nose / As asses are (I.iii.403-404) At the close of Act I, Iago hatches his plan against Othello. The theme of appearance and reality figures prominently throughout the play; here Iago notes that Othello is not adept at distinguishing between the two—making him more likely to fall victim to Iago's scheme.

Quotes in Context: "A Divided Duty"

Context: Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator, Brabantio, elopes with a Moor, Othello, a military commander in the service of Venice. Her father, incensed, brings his grievance and Othello before the duke who is sitting late in council. The senator accuses Othello of using charms, potions, magic, and witchcraft in his courtship. Othello denies the charges and sends for his bride. He then relates to the duke, Brabantio, and the council how he courted the lady. He concludes as Desdemona arrives. Brabantio immediately puts her to a test: to choose "in all this noble company where most you owe obedience."

DESDEMONA: My noble father, I do perceive here a divided duty. To you I am bound for life and education; My life and education both do learn me How to respect you; you are the lord of duty. I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband; And so much duty as my mother showed To you, preferring you before her father. So much I challenge that I may profess Due to
the Moor my lord.

Quotes in Context: "A Fellow Almost Damned In A Fair Wife"

Context: In the opening scene of the play—in conversation with Roderigo—Iago berates Othello, his military superior, for failure to promote him to second-in-command. Instead, the lieutenancy has been awarded to Cassio, a young Florentine whom Iago denounces as bookish and inexperienced. In his tirade against this new appointee, Iago makes a remark about Cassio's wife which has frequently puzzled readers of the play. "Damned in a fair wife" reflects, of course, a proverbial attitude that a beautiful wife is a source of trouble for her husband. But Shakespeare does not provide Cassio a wife in the play. Perhaps he had originally intended to do so and failed to delete this line when he decided otherwise; in the Italian work by Geraldio Cinthio which served as Shakespeare's source, the captain is indeed married, though not cuckolded. Or perhaps Iago is making a snide remark about the courtesan Bianca and her unsuccessful matrimonial pursuit of the lieutenant. In any case, the immediate context is clear. According to Iago, Cassio has neither the experience nor the manliness for his new position. The following lines set the stage for Iago's open declaration of villainy—that he follow Othello but to serve his turn upon him. His subsequent determination to prod Othello into mad jealousy on circumstantial evidence concerning Desdemona's fidelity forms the main action of the plot.

IAGO. . . Forsooth, a great arithmetician, One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, A fellow almost damned in a fair wife, That never set a squadron in the field, Nor the division of a battle knows More than a spinster, unless the bookish theoret, Wherein the toged consuls can propose As masterly as he. Mere prattle, without practice In all his soldiership. But he, sir, had th' election; And I—of whom his eyes had seen the proof At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds Christian and heathen—must be be-led and calmed By debitor and creditor. This counter-caster, He, in good time, must his lieutenant be, And I God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient.

Quotes in Context: "A Foregone Conclusion"

Context: Othello, a Moor, is the military governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice. He chose Michael Cassio as his lieutenant in preference to Iago, whom he made his ancient (or ensign), a lower ranking officer. As a result, Iago hates Othello, is envious of Cassio, and determines to destroy them both. By means of brilliant machinations, evil dissimulation, and luck, he implants in Othello's mind the thought that Desdemona, his bride, is unfaithful to him with Cassio. While seeming to be solicitous for Othello's sensitivities, in reality he cultivates the seed of jealousy in Othello's mind until the latter is racked with doubt and anguish. The Moor turns on his tormentor and demands proof of his wife's frailty. Iago, resourcefully and falsely, relates how he recently slept in Cassio's room and how Cassio talked and acted about Desdemona in a dream. Othello believes Iago's lies, and his distraction is complete.

OTHELLO monstrous! Monstrous! IAGO Nay, this was but his dream. OTHELLO But this denoted a foregone conclusion. IAGO 'Tis a shrewd doubt, though it be but a dream. And this may help to thicken other proofs. That do demonstrate thinly. OTHELLO I'll tear her all to pieces.

Quotes in Context: "A World Of Sighs"

Context: Desdemona, daughter of Brabantio, a Venetian senator, elopes with a Moor, Othello, a military commander in the service of Venice. Her father, aroused in the dead of night and informed of the elopment, is
incensed. He bring his grievance and Othello before the duke, who is in late council. He accuses Othello of
using witchcraft in his courtship, for black magic would be necessary, he says, "for nature so preposterously
to err." Othello, called upon to speak, denies the use of charms, witchcraft, magic, and drugs. He relates the
story of his courtship; how he pictured for Desdemona the story of the battles, sieges, fortunes, narrow
escapes, and wonders of his life. He speaks of Desdemona's reaction:

OTHELLO. . . .My story being done, She gave me for my pains a world of sighs. She swore, in
faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange, 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful. She wished she
had not heard it, yet she wished That heaven had made her such a man. .

Quotes in Context: "Chaos Is Come Again"

Context: Cassio, friend and former lieutenant to Othello, the Moor of Venice, is out of favor with his lord
because of a drunken brawl engineered by Iago, the jealous ensign who had hoped for the position to which
Cassio has been appointed. At the suggestions of Iago, who intends to destroy Cassio, the repentant officer
pleads with Desdemona, wife of the valiant Moor, to speak for him. She consents, but, in the course of her
persistent pleading, becomes mildly annoying to Othello, who loves her so much that he cannot really find
fault with her. He compares life without her love to the disorder before the creation of the world.

DESDEMONA. . . What, Michael Cassio, That came a-wooing with you; and so many a
time, When I have spoke of you disparagingly, Hath ta'en your part; . . . . . . . . . . OTHELLO! will
deny thee nothing. Whereon, I do beseech thee, grant me this, To leave me but a little to
myself. DESDEMONA Shall I deny you? No. Farewell my lord. . . . OTHELLO Excellent
wretch! Perdition catch my soul But I do love thee; and when I love thee not, Chaos is come
again.

Quotes in Context: "Farewell The Tranquil Mind"

Context: Othello, the honest and honorable Moorish military governor of Cyprus who is in the service of
Venice, chose Michael Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago, an ancient (or ensign), a lower rank, hates Othello and is
envious of Cassio because he thinks he should have been preferred. He determines to destroy them both. By
means of brilliant machination, evil dissimulation, and luck, he implants in Othello's mind the thought that
Desdemona, Othello's bride, is unfaithful to him with Cassio. While seeming to be solicitous for Othello's
sensitivities, in reality he nurtures that seed of jealousy in Othello's soul until the latter is now nearly
convinced and wholly distracted. He pours out his anguish to Iago in a magnificent speech.

OTHELLO I had been happy, if the general camp, Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet
body, So I had nothing known. O now, for ever Farewell the tranquil mind; farewell
content; Farewell the plumed troops, and the big wars. That makes ambition virtue. O
farewell. Farewell the neighing steed, and the shrill trump. The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife. The royal banner, and all quality, Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious
war. And o you mortal engines, whose rude throats Th' immortal Jove's dread clamours
counterfeit, Farewell. Othello's occupation's gone.

Quotes in Context: "He Hath A Daily Beauty In His Life"

Context: Iago, ancient (or ensign) to Othello, Moorish governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice, hates him
because the Moor has made Michael Cassio his lieutenant in preference to him. Iago determines to destroy not
only Othello but Cassio as well. By means of brilliant machinations, evil dissimulation, and luck, he not only
convinces Othello that his wife, Desdemona, is unfaithful to him with Cassio, but persuades the Moor that both must die. Cassio is to be dispatched by Iago. However, Iago is encumbered by a dupe, Roderigo, a young Venetian whom Iago has bilked of gold and jewels, falsely encouraging him in a hopeless pursuit of Desdemona, who hardly realizes he is alive. He plans to use Roderigo to ambush Cassio, then speaks to the audience of his intentions.

IAGO have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense, And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio, Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, Every way makes my gain. Live Roderigo, He calls me to a restitution large Of gold and jewels that I bobbed from him, As gifts to Desdemona; It must not be. If Cassio do remain, He hath a daily beauty in his life That makes me ugly; and besides, the Moor May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril. No, he must die. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Horribly Stuffed With Epithets Of War"

Context: Iago, at the opening of the play, complains to Roderigo that Othello, his military commander, has passed over him in naming the second-in-command. Thus, Cassio "... must his lieutenant be./ And I God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient." Here are the seeds of rancor which will shortly produce Iago's devastating hatred for the Moor and his bride Desdemona. These seeds spring from the perennial competition between the enlisted man with long years of service and practical experience and the young officer commissioned after a relatively brief period of specialized training. Iago, much of his twenty-eight years spent in the military is now to be commanded by "one Michael Cassio, a Florentine," "a great arithmetician, . . . that never set a squadron in the field," one who knows nothing of the "division of a battle" except by "bookish theoretic." "Mere prattle, without practice is all his soldiership." Iago's failure to receive this promotion is all the more galling because he has actively sought it; he personally had secured the good offices of various important men of the city to speak to Othello in his behalf. But to no avail, for the Moor rebuffs them, according to Iago, with the specious bombast of military rhetoric. In the remaining portion of the scene, Iago, in order to gain a measure of revenge upon Othello, persuades Roderigo to go with him to Brabantio–Desdemona's father–in an attempt to destroy the Moor's recent marriage.

IAGO... Three great ones of the city, In personal suit to make me his lieutenant, Off-capped to him–and by the faith of man, I know my price, I am worth no worse a place. But he, as loving his own pride and purposes, Evades them, with a bombast circumstance, Horribly stuffed with epithets of war. And in conclusion, Nonsuits my mediators. For certes, says he, I have already chose my officer... .

Quotes in Context: "How Poor Are They That Have Not Patience"

Context: Roderigo, a gentleman of Venice, sick with frustrated love of Desdemona, Othello's wife, and with hatred of the Moor, is leagued with Iago in a plot to undo Othello. Iago has to play a double role of trying to make Roderigo think that he (Iago) is interested in his petty affair when in reality Iago is after the head of the Moor. To keep up pretenses, Iago must seem to side with Othello against Roderigo. Roderigo makes a pest of himself by alternating between slight hope and bleak despair, and Iago must bolster his morale in order the better to use him. Now Roderigo is especially despondent. He has been buffeted around, his money is gone, and he fears that all he has is experience for his pains. Iago, however, again tries to talk him into more patience.
IAGO

How poor are they that have not patience. What wound did ever heal but by degrees? Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft; Though other things grow fair against the sun, Yet fruits that blossom first will first be ripe; . . .

Quotes in Context: "I Will Wear My Heart Upon My Sleeve"

Context: This saying, usually heard today as "he wears his heart on his sleeve," describes a person who does not or cannot hide his emotions, or is overly sentimental. In the play, Iago, ancient (or ensign) to Othello, a Moor who is a military commander in the service of Venice, is deeply envious because he was not made Othello's lieutenant. He is pouring out his grievance to Roderigo, a young Venetian gentleman who fancies himself in love with Desdemona, the bride of Othello. Roderigo tells Iago that if he hates the Moor he should not serve with him. Iago then explains that he follows Othello only to achieve his own ends, and allows his pride to expose his deviousness.

IAGO. . . In following him, I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, But seeming so, for my peculiar end; For when my outward action doth demonstrate The native act and figure of my heart In compliment extern, 'tis not long after But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve For daws to peck at; I am not what I am.

Quotes in Context: "It Is The Very Error Of The Moon"

Context: Because of a plot of vengeance laid by the Machiavellian Iago, Othello, the noble Moor of Venice, smothers his new bride Desdemona, whom he believes to have been unfaithful to him with Cassio, his former friend and lieutenant. The murder, says Othello, is so horrible that one might expect even an eclipse. When Emilia, maid to Desdemona, reports another murder, Othello attributes the acts of man to the irregularity of the moon.

OTHELLO. . . My wife? My wife—what wife? I have no wife. O insupportable! O heavy hour! Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse Of sun and moon, and that th' affrighted globe Did yawn at alteration. . . . [Enter EMILIA] What's the matter with thee now? EMILIA O my good lord, yonder's foul murders done. . . . OTHELLO It is the very error of the moon; She comes more nearer earth than she was wont, And makes men mad.

Quotes in Context: "Men Should Be What They Seem"

Context: Iago, ancient (or ensign) to Othello, a Moorish military commander in the service of Venice, is angry at Othello for preferring Michael Cassio, a Florentine, as his lieutenant instead of himself. He determines to bring about the downfall of both the Moor and Cassio. Othello, appointed governor of Cyprus, moves his troops to the island. A storm delays their arrival but also drives off a threatening Turkish fleet, and Othello orders a general rejoicing, which Cassio is to keep within bounds. Iago gets him drunk, pricks him on to a quarrel with a henchman, arouses Othello, and has the satisfaction of seeing Cassio reduced to the ranks. Shamed, Cassio acts upon Iago's crafty suggestion that he seek the aid of Othello's wife Desdemona to regain his position. Cassio talks to Desdemona. Then, seeing Othello and Iago approaching, he, still shamefaced, steals off. Iago then insinuates to Othello that Cassio is behaving guiltily as if there were something illicit between Desdemona and Cassio. Othello shakes off the suggestion, but Iago skillfully and subtly persists.

IAGO For Michael Cassio, I dare be sworn, I think that he is honest. OTHELLO I think so too. IAGO Men should be what they seem; Or those that be not, would they might seem none. OTHELLO Certain, men should be what they seem.
Quotes in Context: "My Heart Is Turned To Stone"

Context: Othello, Moorish military governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice, chose Michael Cassio as his lieutenant in preference to Iago, whom he made his ancient (or ensign), a lower ranking officer. As a result, Iago determines to destroy them both. By means of clever and evil machinations and luck he convinces Othello that his bride, Desdemona, is unfaithful to him with Cassio. To clinch his case, Iago places the Moor where he overhears Cassio discussing and deriding Bianca, his mistress, but Othello believes he is talking about Desdemona. Now, thoroughly persuaded that his wife is false with Cassio, Othello is torn between hate for them both and love for her. Iago's plot is working well.

OTHELLO: I would have him nine years a-killing. A fine woman! A fair woman! A sweet woman! IAGONAY, you must forget that. OTHELLO: Ay, let her rot and perish, and be damned tonight; for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O the world hath not a sweeter creature; she might be by an emperor's side, and command him tasks.

Quotes in Context: "Not Poppy, Nor Mandragora"

Context: Iago, ensign to the Moor of Venice, Othello, determines to take revenge against Cassio for gaining the lieutenancy, under Othello, and against the Moor for having made the appointment. He entangles Cassio in a drunken brawl and then sets out to destroy Othello's peace of mind by suggesting that Desdemona, Othello's new bride, and Cassio are more than friends. The seed of jealousy planted, Iago observes the agonizing Othello.

IAGO: ... The Moor already changes with my poison. Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, Which at the first are scarce found to distaste, But with a little, act upon the blood, Burn like the mines of sulphur. I did say so. Enter OTHELLO: Look where he comes.

Not poppy, nor mandragora, Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep Which thou owedst yesterday. OTHELLO: Ha--false to me? IAGO: Why how now general? No more of that. OTHELLO: Avaunt, be gone! Thou hast set me on the rack. I swear 'tis better to be much abused, Than but to know't a little.

Quotes in Context: "O Lago, The Pity Of It"

Context: In his plot to destroy Cassio, friend and former lieutenant of Othello, and Othello himself because of Cassio's appointment by Othello to the lieutenancy that he had hoped for, Iago, the Machiavellian villain, discredits Cassio and suggests to Othello that Desdemona, his new bride, is more than a friend to Cassio. Presented with seeming proof of his wife's infidelity, Othello declares his hate and love at the same time.

OTHELLO: Ay, let her rot and perish, and be damned tonight; for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O the world hath not a sweeter creature; she might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks. ... O she will sing the savageness out of a bear--of so high and plenteous wit and invention. IAGO: She's the worse for all this. OTHELLO: A thousand thousand times--and then of so gentle a condition. IAGO: Too gentle. OTHELLO: Nay that's certain--but yet the pity of it, Iago. O Iago, the pity of it, Iago.
Quotes in Context: "One That Loved Not Wisely, But Too Well"

Context: This famous line is now usually heard as "He (or she) loves not wisely but too well" but means precisely the same as when penned by Shakespeare: to describe a love affair between obviously unsuitable partners. In the play, Othello, a Moorish military commander in the service of Venice, has been victimized by Iago, his ancient (or ensign). The latter hates the Moor because he has made Michael Cassio his lieutenant and not Iago. The ancient determines to destroy both of them. The evil Iago not only convinces Othello that his sweet bride Desdemona is unfaithful with Cassio but that she must die. Othello smothers her in her bed. No sooner does he do so than Iago's entire plot is unraveled, and the Moor realizes that he has been diabolically duped. About to be removed to Venice for trial, he tries to exculpate himself:

OTHELLO. . . I pray you in your letters, When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, Speak of me, as I am. Nothing extenuate, Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak Of one that loved not wisely, but too well; Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought, Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand, Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away, Richer than all his tribe; . . .

Quotes in Context: "Put Money In Thy Purse"

Context: Roderigo, a young gentleman of Venice, loves Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator. But it is hopeless because she loves her husband, Othello, a Moor in the military service of the city. Roderigo turns to his friend, Iago, for advice. Iago, Othello's ancient (or ensign) hates the Moor for not making him his lieutenant. When Roderigo speaks of drowning himself, Iago scoffs at him and advises him to employ his reason rather than be subject to his emotions. Iago stiffens Roderigo's spine and encourages him, not merely for the latter's sake, but because Iago, crafty and dissembling, intends to use Roderigo to achieve his own designs on Othello.

IAGO. . . I have professed me thy friend, and I confess me knit to thy deserving with cables of perdurable toughness. I could never better stead thee than now. Put money in thy purse; follow thou the wars; defeat thy favour with an usurped beard. I say, put money in thy purse. It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor–put money in thy purse–nor he his to her. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Put Out The Light, And Then Put Out The Light"

Context: Iago, ancient (or ensign) to Othello, a Moorish military governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice, hates him because the latter has made Michael Cassio his lieutenant in preference to him. The ancient determines to destroy both of them. By means of clever dissimulation, evil machinations, and luck, he not only convinces the gullible Othello that his young wife Desdemona is unfaithful with Cassio but that both must die. Now Othello approaches Desdemona, who is asleep in her bed, with intent to smother her.

OTHELLO. . . Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. Put out the light, and then put out the light. If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can again thy former light restore. Should I repent me. But once put out thy light, Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature, I know not where is that Promethean heat That can thy light relume. . . .
Quotes in Context: "That Men Should Put An Enemy In Their Mouths, To Steal Away Their Brains"

Context: Cassio, lieutenant to Othello, the noble Moor of Venice, has gained the position that Iago, ensign to Othello, had hoped for. The jealous Iago plans for the removal of Cassio by involving him in some deed which will turn his just lord against him. In the merriment over the destroyed Turkish fleet, Iago succeeds in getting Cassio, who does not hold his liquor well, to drink more than he should and then to create a scandal by beating, as planned, Roderigo, and stabbing Montano. Removed from office by Othello, Cassio laments his experience with liquor:

CASSIOI remember a mass of things, but nothing distinctly; a quarrel, but nothing wherefore. O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away their brains; that we should, with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause, transform ourselves into beasts.

IAGOWhy, but you are now well enough. How come you thus recovered? CASSIOIt hath pleased the devil drunkeness to give peace to the devil wrath; one unperfectness shows me another, to make me frankly despise myself.

Quotes in Context: "The Green-eyed Monster"

Context: Iago, evil and dissembling ancient (or ensign) to Othello, Moorish military governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice, hates him because the Moor has made Michael Cassio his lieutenant in preference to himself. Iago, who trades upon a reputation for honesty, determines to destroy both Othello and Cassio. By crafty maneuver and strokes of luck, Iago plants in Othello's mind the thought that Cassio is having an affair with Desdemona, Othello's bride. By cleverly intimating that he knows more than he reveals of this affair, he leads Othello on. The Moor impatiently desires to know Iago's thoughts. Iago pretends solicitude for Othello's sensitivities, but busily nurtures the seed of jealousy in Othello's soul.

OTHELLOBy heaven I'll know thy thoughts...

IAGOO beware my lord of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss, Who certain of his fate loves not his wronger; But o, what damned minutes tells he o'er, Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves.

Quotes in Context: "The Robbed That Smiles, Steals Something From The Thief"

Context: Othello, a Moor and a military commander in the service of Venice, elopes with Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator, Brabantio. Brought before the duke by the irate father, and accused of using witchcraft to win the girl, Othello denies the charge, sends for his bride, and relates how he courted Desdemona. She comes to the duke's council chamber. Brabantio immediately puts her to a test of affection—she must choose between her husband and him. She chooses Othello. To comfort the grieving father, the duke offers sage advice.

DUKE...When remedies are past, the griefs are endedBy seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended. To mourn a mischief that is past and goneIs the next way to draw new mischief on. What cannot be preserved when fortune takes, Patience her injury a mockery makes. The robbed that smiles, steals something from the thief; He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief.
"Tis Pride That Pulls The Country Down"

Context: Enraged over the appointment of Cassio as lieutenant to Othello, Iago jealously sets out to blacken the name of Cassio and thus cause his removal from his preferred place. Knowing that Cassio does not hold his liquor well, Iago, under the pretense of celebrating the destruction of the Turkish fleet and with high good humor, prevails on Cassio to drink. There follows a planned brawl in which Cassio degrades himself and is removed from office. In the course of Cassio's temptation to drink, Iago sings a jolly song for the purpose of establishing the merriment of the moment:

IAGO [Sings.] King Stephen was and a worthy peer, His breeches cost him but a crown, He held them sixpence all too dear, With that he called the tailor lown. He was a wight of high renown, And thou art but of low degree. 'Tis pride that pulls the country down, Then take thine auld cloak about thee.

"To Suckle Fools, And Chronicle Small Beer"

Context: Desdemona, fair bride to Othello, the Moor of Venice, awaits the arrival of her husband on Cyprus. Iago, ensign to Othello, entertains Desdemona and Emilia, his wife, by displaying his wit in the form of couplet praise for various types of women. Desdemona asks how he would praise the woman whose virtue would disprove the proof of evil itself. He describes the lady and then concludes by saying that her role in life will be that of the mother of fools and the keeper of small household accounts (small beer).

DESDEMONA . . . But what praise couldst thou bestow on a deserving woman indeed, one that in the authority of her merit, did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself? IAGO She that was ever fair, and never proud, Had tongue at will, and yet was never loud; Never lacked gold, and yet went never gay, Fleed from her wish, and yet said, now I may; . . . She that could think, and ne'er disclose her mind, See suitors following, and not look behind; She was a wight, if ever such wight were -- DESDEMONA To do what? IAGO To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer.

"Trifles Light As Air Are To The Jealous Confirmations"

Context: Iago, an evil and dissembling ancient (or ensign) to Othello, Moorish military governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice, hates him because the Moor has made Michael Cassio his lieutenant in preference to him. Iago determines to destroy both Othello and Cassio, and plants in Othello's mind the thought that Desdemona, Othello's bride, is having an affair with Cassio. Diabolically, Iago pretends solicitude for Othello's sensitivities, but is really nurturing the jealous seed in his soul. Desdemona comes, sees Othello distraught, and offers him her handkerchief, a special gift from Othello. He discards it, and it falls to the floor forgotten. After they leave the room, Emilia, wife of Iago, finds it, but Iago snatches it away from her. She wishes to return the handkerchief to Desdemona, but he dismisses her. He has use for it.

IAGO . . . I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin, And let him find it. Trifles light as air Are to the jealous confirmations strong As proofs of holy writ. This may do something. The Moor already changes with my poison. Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons, Which at the
first are scarce found to distaste. But with a little, act upon the blood, Burn like the mines of sulphur.

Quotes in Context: "'Twas Strange, 'twas Passing Strange"

Context: Othello, the Moor of Venice, having taken the fair Desdemona to wife, is accused by her father, Brabantio, of having won her love through spells or potions. Othello declares that he has gained Desdemona's love only by relating the whole of his adventuresome life to the fascinated girl.

OTHELLO. . . My story being done, She gave me for my pains a world of sighs. She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange, 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful. She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me, And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her, I should but teach him how to tell my story, And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake. She loved me for the dangers I had passed, And I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used. . . .

Quotes in Context: "Unvarnished Tale"

Context: This saying means the bare, unelaborated facts of a matter—"the unvarnished truth." The original from which it is derived, however, does not convey such a stark image, but includes some truthful elaboration or interpretation. In the play, Desdemona, daughter of Brabantio, a Venetian senator, elopes with Othello, Moorish military commander in the service of Venice. Her father, aroused in the dead of night and informed of the hasty marriage, is incensed. He gathers some armed followers and starts to search out Othello. The latter, independently summoned by the duke on an affair of state, encounters the irate father and accompanies him and his followers to the council chamber where the duke is holding a late session. Othello is accused by Brabantio of bewitching his daughter, and stealing her. Witchcraft would be necessary, says he, "for nature so preposterously to err." Called upon to speak, Othello denies the charge of witchcraft, admits to the marriage, and asks pardon for his rude speech. He continues:

OTHELLO. . . Yet, by your gracious patience, I will a round unvarnished tale deliver Of my whole course of love, what drugs, what charms What conjuration, and what mighty magic— For such proceeding I am charged withal— I won his daughter.

Quotes in Context: "We Cannot All Be Masters"

Context: Iago, ancient (or ensign) to Othello, a Moor in the military service of Venice, is angry and envious because he was not made Othello's lieutenant. He is pouring out his wrath to Roderigo, a young gentleman of Venice, who fancies himself in love with Desdemona, bride of Othello. Roderigo suggests that if Iago is so disgruntled, he should not sign on with Othello, to which suggestion Iago replies:

IAGO. Sir content you. I follow him to serve my turn upon him. We cannot all be masters, nor all masters Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave, That doting on his own obsequious bondage, Wears out his time, much like his master's ass, For naught but provender, and when he's old cashiered, Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are Who trimmed in forms, and visages of duty, Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves; . . . These fellows have some soul, And such a one do I profess myself. . . .
Quotes in Context: "Who Steals My Purse Steals Trash"

Context: Iago, evil and dissembling ancient (or ensign) to Othello, a Moorish military governor of Cyprus in the service of Venice, hates him because the Moor has made Michael Cassio his lieutenant in preference to himself. Iago, who has a reputation for honesty, determines to destroy both Othello and Cassio. By crafty maneuvers and luck, Iago plants in Othello's mind the thought that Cassio is having an affair with Othello's wife, Desdemona. Iago intimates that he knows more of this affair than he admits, a device calculated to lead Othello on. Othello impatiently desires to know Iago's thoughts, but Iago exquisitely stretches him upon the rack of doubt.

IAGO. . .It were not for your quiet nor your good, Nor for my manhood, honesty, or wisdom, To let you know my thoughts. OTHELLO What dost thou mean? IAGO. Good name in man, and woman, dear my lord, Is the immediate jewel of their souls. Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing; 2'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands; But he that filches from me my good name Robs me of that which not enriches him, And makes me poor indeed. OTHELLO By heaven I'll know thy thoughts.

Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Theme: Reputation

IAGO:

I do beseech you—

Though I perchance am vicious in my guess, 

As, I confess, it is my nature's plague 

To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy 

Shapes faults that are not—that your wisdom yet, 

From one that so imperfectly conceits,

Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble 

Out of his scattering and unsure observance. 

It were not for your quiet nor your good, 

Nor for my manhood, honesty, or wisdom, 

To let you know my thoughts.

OTHELLO:

What dost thou mean?

IAGO:
Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,

Is the immediate jewel of their souls:

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;

'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;

But he that filches from me my good name

Robs me of that which not enriches him

And makes me poor indeed.

Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 166-182

**m>Summary**

Iago’s plan to inspire jealousy in the heart of Othello is proceeding swiftly. As Cassio is pleading with Desdemona to speak to her husband on his behalf (on the suggestion of Iago), Othello enters. Cassio leaves quickly, and Iago makes the most of this, indirectly insinuating to Othello that such behavior is indeed suspicious. Despite Iago’s false insistence that Cassio is honest and trustworthy, Othello begins to suspect that Desdemona is unfaithful to him. Iago states, “Men should be what they seem,” a direct contrast to what he has previously confessed is his nature in Act 1. Othello presses him to speak his thoughts, but Iago demurs, saying his thoughts might not be the most fair to Cassio. But Othello insists, so Iago confesses a tendency to be suspicious and jealous. Remarking that Othello does not tend toward jealousy, Iago insists that he will not say what he thinks of Cassio, lest it inspire jealousy in Othello and injure Cassio’s good name. Iago then hypocritically speaks of the importance of having a good name. Reputation, he says, is more important than money. Riches can be taken away easily, yet their loss is recoverable. But if one’s reputation is taken away, one is the poorer, and the person who has taken one’s reputation is not enriched at all.

**Analysis**

This passage targets the foundation at which Iago chips away—a person’s reputation. Iago does indeed believe that a reputation is a treasure to be guarded. However, he guards his own good name at the expense of those of others.

His reputation has been damaged by Othello in two separate instances. First, Othello passed him over for promotion in favor of someone whom Iago regards as less deserving and less capable. In the process, his stature in the eyes of society has either been lowered or not been raised to the level at which Iago esteems himself. In addition, there is another revelation that seems to be haunting Iago: the rumors of his wife’s infidelity with Othello. It is not so much the possibility that he has indeed been cuckolded that upsets Iago; instead, it is that his reputation is so low as to invite rumor. People seem willing to believe that Emilia would stray, which shows Iago incapable of keeping his wife by his side. If she had been unfaithful yet only Iago knew it, Iago would be less troubled. It is not the marriage bed that he regards as sullied, but his reputation.

In a clever move, Iago states that he is prone to be suspicious and jealous. This allows him to speak of his “suspicions” of Cassio’s inappropriate relationship with Desdemona, thus planting the seeds of jealousy in Othello’s mind. By reverse psychology, Iago drives the thoughts deeper into Othello’s consciousness, giving them greater credence, while attempting to dismiss them as merely a product of his flawed nature. He manages to commit a greater sin by confessing to a lesser one.
Iago has artfully cast doubt in Othello’s mind. Minus the hard facts of Desdemona’s supposed infidelity, Iago points out the opportunities. He reminds Othello that, during the latter’s courtship of Desdemona, Cassio had many instances of being alone with her. Though Othello knew well that this was so, Iago manages to retroactively paint them in a different light. It is only by hindsight that Othello now sees the possibility of unfaithfulness. It is the possibility alone that is enough to open the door to thoughts that, without Iago’s assistance, would not have entered into Othello’s mind.

Iago has paved the way well for Othello’s move toward a tragic end. At this point, Othello does more than half the work. By insinuations, half-veiled remarks, and strong negations, Iago has sown the field of Othello’s mind to accept the seeds of jealousy that he is now spreading. Iago has once again taken on the role of Lucifer, reminiscent of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The temptation of jealousy is there. All that Iago has to do is walk along beside him.

Having successfully brought Othello to the point of doubt, Iago now builds up his own innocence. He is naturally suspicious, and many times has seen things that were in fact totally innocent. His remarks, he implies, are not to be given too much weight. Iago points out that to question someone’s good name would require more substantial justification than the petty jealousies that Iago is prone to. Rather than trust Iago, Iago implies, Othello should trust his own observations.

Desdemona herself, though innocent of Iago’s charge, has contributed to the predicament. As Iago points out, she was unfaithful to her father in marrying Othello without his consent or knowledge. This small act of untrustworthiness opens a small wound that allows the germ of doubt in. She is not totally innocent. She has shown that she can dissemble if need be, especially in the matter of love. By pointing this out, Iago effectively opens the gate for the “green-eyed monster,” jealousy, to walk in. Once trust is broken, Iago knows, it is rarely confined to one area.

However, Iago warns that Othello must be careful when it comes to jealousy. It is a “green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.” More damage can be done by jealousy than by infidelity. And it is this that Iago is counting on. While his primary purpose is to destroy Othello, he is perfectly willing to destroy Desdemona in the process. While he may not envision physical destruction, he would be satisfied with the destruction of Othello’s reputation. As stated, he holds reputation to be of greater worth than gold, even though it may not profit the one who destroys that reputation. Iago says this with insincerity, since he expects to profit handsomely by the irreparable damage that he intends to inflict on the reputations of his enemies.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Iago**

**IAGO:**

I follow him to serve my turn upon him:

We cannot all be masters, nor all masters

Cannot be truly follow’d. You shall mark

Many a duteous and kneecrooking knave,

That doting on his own obsequious bondage

Wears out his time, much like his master’s ass,
For naught but provender; and, when he's old, cashier'd.

Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are,

Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,

Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,

And throwing but shows of service on their lords

Do well thrive by them; and when they have lined their coats

Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,

And such a one do I profess myself.

For, sir,

It is as sure as you are Roderigo,

Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.

In following him, I follow but myself;

Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,

But seeming so, for my peculiar end.

For when my outward action doth demonstrate

The native act and figure of my heart

In complement extern, 'tis not long after

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve

For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

*Act 1, Scene 1, Lines 43-68*

**Summary**

As the play opens, Iago has been passed over for promotion by his commander, Othello, in favor of an untried Michael Cassio. Despite his military experience, Iago says, he has been deemed of lesser worth than a mere “arithmetician,” and Iago must take the lesser position of “ancient” (ensign). When Roderigo states that he would rather be Othello’s hangman than to be humiliated by being placed in a lower position, Iago says that it is the “curse of service.” It is in response to Roderigo’s view that it would be better not to serve Othello at all that Iago makes the above speech. He confesses he does not serve Othello out of duty to Othello but rather out of self-interest. Iago professes disdain for those who serve out of “duty,” such a course being obsequious and
fawning. Iago holds the view that there is a better class of servants—those who give the mere appearance of self-denying service but are in fact in service to themselves above all. Iago professes himself to be of this class. Although he may seem to be serving out of devotion to Othello, Iago would consider himself reproachable for submitting to the whims of any other person, no matter how noble that person may be. He confesses freely, “I am not what I am.”

Analysis

Iago is one of the most disingenuous characters in the works of Shakespeare. He never presents his true self to anyone, nor does he reveal the true motives for his actions. The one exception is in this section, in which he is transparent to Roderigo about his non-transparency. He flatly states that he is not what he appears to be. With this confession, the audience is warned not to take anything he says at face value. This sets the stage for the observation of continuous irony in many instances and many conversations. Knowing him to be false, the audience can see through his words although the other characters are blind.

Iago states baldly, “I follow him to serve my turn upon him,” which means that he follows Othello to use him for Iago’s own ends. There is no sense of duty involved; it is pure self-interest and self-advancement. Iago’s sole virtue is the “virtue of selfishness,” to borrow a phrase from the author and founder of the philosophy of Objectivism, Ayn Rand. Self-interest is the only foundation that one’s life should be built on. Altruism is a lie, because even in aiding another, one is expecting some form of reciprocity, either from the individual, others, society, or God. There is no truly unselfish person. Iago is the epitome of pure selfishness.

Iago then goes on to say, “We cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly followed.” In the first phrase, Iago is being a bit disingenuous because he expects that he, and indeed all men, are to be masters of their own fate. In stating that not all masters can be truly followed, the insinuation is that not all masters (in this case, specifically Othello) deserve to be followed. Iago expected to be rewarded by an advance in rank. Othello has denied him, and thus Othello has proved himself not worthy of his leadership role.

Iago denigrates those servants who claim they serve out of love of their master. He is sickened by the fawning manners of those who seek only the advancement of their leader. Such service is unworthy of any decent human being. Being a servant is one thing; to be a “slave” is totally reprehensible. To Iago, there is no virtue in being virtuous, especially in unselfish devotion to a leader. Yet Iago freely chooses to appear to be virtuous, for without this dissemblance there is no chance of advancement. But to be so in truth would make him too vulnerable, “wearing his heart upon his sleeve for daws to peck at.”

“I am not what I am,” Iago says, a very bold and significant statement. On the surface, he plainly warns Roderigo not to believe what he sees in Iago. His message to his friend is, “Don’t trust anyone, especially me.” But on a larger scale, this statement portrays the character of Iago as one of pure evil. Contrast this statement with that of Jehovah in the Book of Exodus: “I am what I am.” Jehovah is presenting himself to Moses with total transparency, the very nature of God. In stating the negative of this pronouncement, Iago takes upon himself the role of Lucifer, particularly as related in John Milton’s Paradise Lost. Lucifer has been slighted by God, and put down into a lower position, in a very literal way. Because of this humiliation, Lucifer proclaims himself the enemy of God and vows revenge. Yet he does not personally place himself in the battle. Rather, he uses Adam and Eve as tools to bring about his revenge. In the same way, Iago has been brought low and takes revenge on Othello (his master and commander, one might say his “god”), not by personal action, but through the manipulation of others. His sin is knowingly and purposefully causing others to sin. As Othello is a tool for Iago’s own advancement, other people are tools for his revenge.

In many ways, Iago has sold his soul to the devil. He has no virtue that is not a mask of vice. He has no contemplation of the benefit of others, but only for his own, and he bartered away his soul for the good of himself. In the words of Milton’s Lucifer, “Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven.” The only good is
good to himself. Therefore, in this passage, Iago sets up the play’s plot structure and conflict; all the action stems from Iago manipulating other characters and wreaking havoc in their lives so that his own life may be what he feels is owed to him.

**Character and Theme Quotes: Essential Passage by Character: Othello**

**OTHELLO:**

Soft you; a word or two before you go.

I have done the state some service, and they know't.

No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,

Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak

Of one that loved 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,

Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,

I took by the throat the circumcised dog

And smote him, thus.

**LODOVICO:**

O bloody period!
GRATIANO:

All that's spoke is marr'd.

OTHELLO:

I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this,

Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

*Act 5, Scene 2, Lines 387-409*

Summary

Roderigo is dead, killed by Iago. Emelia is dead, also killed by Iago. Desdemona has been killed by Othello. Iago himself, though wounded, still lives. Gratiano, Desdemona’s uncle, and another of her kinsmen, Lodovico, have arrived in Cyprus to witness the multiple tragedies. Iago is apprehended and will surely face the ultimate punishment—death. He has confessed to instigating the crimes of others, which will likely play a large part in his punishment. In the meantime, Othello is to be held as a closely guarded prisoner until he can be returned for trial to Venice. Cassio, already named as his successor, will rule in his stead.

Othello is concerned how this will be reported abroad. He is concerned about his reputation, but he is more concerned with the truth. He humbly points out that he has done “some service” to the state of Venice, a mild understatement. As far as his crime, he wishes it to be told fully, without toning down his flaws or making him more of a monster than he feels he is. His simple statement is that he “loved not wisely, but too well.” Although not easily given to jealousy, he was provoked by “the green-eyed monster” to commit this terrible deed. He threw away his “pearl of great price.”

Othello goes on to tell a story of one of his past adventures, but it is merely a ruse to distract the gathered company from his true purpose. Having a hidden weapon, he demonstrates his actions in his story by stabbing himself. Kissing Desdemona one last time, he dies.

Analysis

In his final speech, Othello numbly accepts his fate, though it will be an acceptance of his own choosing and device. His decision to commit suicide rather than face the dishonor of a trial is reminiscent of the ancient Romans, who willingly sacrificed their lives once they knew that they had brought shame into those lives. The loss of honor is, to Othello, a capital offense, and the execution is his own responsibility.

The concern for one’s *reputation* is a major theme throughout the play. Iago’s reputation is slighted, both by being passed over for promotion and by being the subject of rumor concerning Emelia’s infidelity with Othello. Brabantio is concerned not just for the safety of his daughter but how such a marriage will affect his standing in the Venetian community. Desdemona is perplexed that Othello would have such suspicion against her character when she has carefully guarded her reputation in marital fidelity. Cassio, in *Act 2, Scene 3*, cries out, “Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.” Othello’s guilt in murdering his wife, as well as being a part of the situation in which Emelia also lost her life, has damaged his heretofore unsullied reputation. Iago, though duplicitous in regard to Othello’s reputation yet genuine in regard to his own, states in *Act 3, Scene 3*: “Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, is the immediate jewel of their souls.” A good name was the “credit score” of the Renaissance period. It was on one’s reputation alone that money, career advancement, and even marriage proposals were offered. Without a good name, you were hampered socially, financially, and spiritually. It is
for this reason that Othello wants the story told accurately.

Othello points out that he has “done the state some service.” At this point he is being especially humble. His reputation as a military commander is without parallel. He is trusted explicitly in any engagement undertaken. Venice is the richer for there being Othello. Yet, in his modesty, he understates his own importance to Venice.

In regard to the unfortunate end to his life and career, Othello wants the facts to be told plainly yet honestly. He does not want any “spin” put on his actions. He has been dishonorable, not only for committing murder, but even for sinking to the level of jealousy. Though he is concerned about his act being thought better than it is, he is also adamant that he does not want to be thought worse than he is. He does not want to be portrayed as a monster purely out of malice. The deed is bad enough without embellishment. The simple message he wants understood is that he was “one who loved not wisely, but too well.”

But who is the object of this overabundant, unwise love? The obvious answer is Desdemona. Was he unwise to have chosen someone of a different race, a different generation? If the racial element did play a part in this tragedy, it was a part created by Iago. Race is not the primary cause of the death of Desdemona, nor of the suicide of Othello. Perhaps Othello is characterizing his jealousy in the light of an “unwise love,” a love that goes beyond the norm into an obsession. Yet Othello does not seem to be abnormally obsessed with his wife.

From another point of view, his loving “not wisely, but too well” could be a reference to his trust in Iago. Iago’s mercenary spirit must have been at times obvious to his commander. Othello did not seem to show discernment in keeping Iago in his company, but perhaps he did have some idea of Iago’s character, thus leading Othello to bypass Iago in the matter of promotion. Yet still he listened to Iago too closely in the matter of Cassio’s attentions to Desdemona. He placed too much trust in a completely untrustworthy man. With more wisdom, Othello could have avoided putting too much weight on the insinuations that Iago made against Desdemona.

The life and death of Othello follow the path of the archetypal tragic hero. From a place of honor, the hero has fallen through some tragic flaw. In this case, the fatal flaw is jealousy, the “green-eyed monster.” The tragedy, the loss, is well exemplified in the closing remarks of Cassio: Othello was “great of heart.”

Teaching Guide: Introduction

So you’re going to teach *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. Whether it’s your first or hundredth time, this classic play has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While the play may have its challenges—deceit, elevated language, murder—teaching *Othello* to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. It will give them unique insight into critical thinking and analytical reading skills, as well as important themes surrounding jealousy, loyalty, betrayal, and love. This guide highlights the text’s most salient aspects to keep in mind before you begin teaching.

Facts at a Glance

- Publication Date: Written c.1603
- Published: 1622
- Author: William Shakespeare
- Country of Origin: England
- Genre: Tragedy
- Literary Period: The Renaissance
- Conflict: Person vs. Person; Person vs. Society; Person vs. Self
- Setting: Venice and Cyprus, 1500
History of the Text

**Humanism and the Early Modern Renaissance:** Shakespeare wrote in the late 16th and early 17th centuries when humanism was a dominant philosophical ideology in England. The humanist movement—part of the broader Renaissance sweeping across much of Europe—turned away from medieval religious scholasticism to revive ancient Greek and Roman literature as sources of wisdom. Compared to works of medieval thought, these classical texts emphasized human thoughts, feelings, and motivations over divine or supernatural matters. Like his fellow Renaissance artists and thinkers, Shakespeare considered the individual to be the center of human experience.

- *Othello* reflects humanist perspectives in several ways. The soliloquies throughout the play attempt to convey the complex individual experiences of the various characters. The characters are ultimately answerable to one another for their actions rather than to a divine doctrine. Finally, the play makes multiple allusions to the Greco-Roman world, a common source of inspiration for Renaissance humanists.

**Disreputable Early Modern Theaters:** In Shakespeare’s time, theater was considered low-brow entertainment. The Globe Theater and Blackfriars, the two main theaters where his plays were performed, were located outside the city walls of London. This meant they were able to challenge and subvert the crown’s laws more securely. Audiences could be rowdy and disruptive, and other disreputable forms of entertainment, such as prostitution and bear baiting, surrounded the theaters.

- Like many of Shakespeare’s plays, *Othello* features a combination of the high and the low: elegant speeches as well as bawdy slang, philosophical meditations as well as insouciant punnery. Shakespeare approached the dramatic form as an opportunity for both serious artistry and broad entertainment.

**Shakespeare’s Source Text:** Shakespeare based *Othello* on Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio’s short story collection *Gli Hecatommithi*, published in Italian in 1565. The only character given a name in the short story “Disdemona and the Moor” is Disdemona, whose name means “ill-fated or unfortunate.” The villain in Cinthio’s story is driven by his lust for Disdemona, but Shakespeare’s Iago holds no desire for Desdemona. This motivation is shifted onto the character of Roderigo, an example of how Shakespeare altered and expanded the plots of his sources to better suit his needs. The plots of many of his other plays also have literary sources, both contemporary and historical.

**Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches**

**The Destructive Force of Jealousy as Theme:** Jealousy is a major theme that drives the plot of *Othello*. Iago is jealous of Cassio because Othello has promoted him to second lieutenant, and he is jealous of his wife Emilia’s rumored affair with Othello. Fueled by jealousy, Iago propagates even more jealousy—and ultimately ruins lives—by convincing Othello that Desdemona is being unfaithful to him with Cassio. Othello’s jealousy is piqued and he threatens to kill Cassio and Desdemona for their affair. Even secondary characters like Emilia, Bianca, and Roderigo are motivated by jealousy at certain points of the play.

- For discussion: Who are the characters most affected by jealousy? How does jealousy advance the action of the play?
- *For discussion:* How does the plot either validate or invalidate the jealousy in the play? Can Shakespeare’s opinion of jealousy be inferred by his treatment of it as a theme?
- *For discussion:* How do the blameless suffer at the hands of the jealous?
- *For discussion:* Shakespeare has Iago figure jealousy as a “green-eyed monster.” What does that mean? What does it mean that Iago says it?

**Identity and “Otherness” as Themes:** *Othello* explores the various permutations of identity—in the dimensions of race, sex, age, and class—as well as the sense of “otherness” that arises for individuals isolated by their identities. While the intersection of Othello’s race and social class might not have been terribly surprising or offensive to Shakespeare’s audience, characters in the play frequently invoke Othello’s darker skin in a negative context, and it is successfully used as a wedge to drive him further from his wife. In a different way, Desdemona also finds herself alone in her situation, isolated from friends and family by her decision to marry a Moor. As Othello’s violence against her escalates, a societal unwillingness to intervene in domestic affairs prevents any of the men who witness her plight from coming to her aid.

- *For discussion:* In what specific ways is Othello an outsider in Venetian society? What does Othello think about his status as an outsider? How is he viewed by his peers?
- *For discussion:* How central is Othello’s racial identity to the plot? To what extent is *Othello* a play about race? Explain your reasoning.
- *For discussion:* What barriers and challenges does Desdemona face? In what ways are they defined by her sex? How does she describe her situation to herself and to others?

**Alternative Approaches to Teaching *Othello***

While the main ideas and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving *Othello*, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experience and understanding of the play.

**Focus on friendship and loyalty.** Othello believes that Iago is his friend. He believes what Iago says and acts accordingly, only to belatedly recognize the web of lies Iago has woven around him. Roderigo and Cassio also fall under the false spell of Iago’s friendship, only to serve as his pawns and suffer the consequences.

- What does Othello reveal about relationships between friends? About loyalty?
- How can friendships become destructive relationships? How does one know if a friend is loyal?

**Focus on military life and civilian life.** Othello is a general with an excellent record in battle, the respect of his men and his superiors, and a position of power. He is comfortable in the world of military and masculine hierarchy. The world of women and love, by contrast, is foreign to him. He relies on others to help him navigate his love for Desdemona and his marriage to her.

- In what ways does Othello show his skill in military life? How do others recognize his skill?
- How does this transition into the world of love and marriage challenge and change Othello? What potential themes does this contrast illuminate?

**Focus on reputation and personal integrity.** Iago and Cassio both deliver speeches about reputation and its importance. Iago, Cassio, Desdemona, and Othello all experience unique fluctuations in their reputations as the play unfolds. In many cases, a character’s outward reputation does not precisely reflect her actual level of integrity.

- How important is reputation? Can one have a good reputation if one has no personal integrity? How
Short-Answer Quizzes: Act I, Scenes 1-3 Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. What reason does Iago give for his hatred of Othello?

2. What information do Roderigo and Iago give to Brabantio regarding Desdemona’s whereabouts?

3. How does Iago make himself look favorable in Othello’s eyes?

4. What news does Michael Cassio bring when he enters?

5. To what does Brabantio attribute Desdemona’s affections for Othello?

6. What is the military issue that the Duke of Venice and his senators discuss?

7. What accusation does Brabantio make against Othello to the duke?

8. What explanation does Othello give as cause for Desdemona’s affection for him?

9. To whom does Desdemona pledge her duty?

10. In the final speech of Act I, what does Iago plan to do to further his plot against Othello?

Answers

1. Iago tells Roderigo that he hates Othello because “Michael Cassio, a Florentine / … that never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows,” has just been chosen by Othello as his lieutenant. His bitterness is evident when he tells Roderigo that “’tis the curse of service” that promotion is made by personal liking not by seniority.

2. After Roderigo calls out in the night that thieves have robbed Brabantio’s household, Iago tells Brabantio, in gross images of animal lust, that “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe.” When he refers to Othello as the devil, he incites Brabantio further against the Moor. Roderigo then informs Brabantio that Desdemona has been “Transported … / To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor.”

3. Iago makes himself look favorable in Othello’s eyes by telling him how Brabantio’s “scurvy and provoking terms” against Othello made him want to attack Brabantio. He also suggests that Othello watch his marriage because Brabantio might invoke the law against it, thus playing on Othello’s trust in him.

4. Michael Cassio tells Othello that the duke requires his service because of some military action, “a business of some kind,” in Cyprus.

5. Brabantio attributes Desdemona’s affection for Othello to his having “enchanted her” because this attraction is so opposite her nature and breeding. He emphasizes Othello’s exotic nature in order to minimize the plausibility that Desdemona could choose someone who is not amount “the wealthy curled darlings of our nation.”
6. The duke and the senators are in the process of determining the validity of reports that say “a hundred and seven,” “a hundred forty,” and “two hundred” Turkish galleys are approaching Cyprus. A sailor enters with a false report from Signor Angelo that the Turks are making for Rhodes, but a messenger from Signor Montano, governor of Cyprus, reports that the Ottomites have joined the Turkish fleet and are bearing toward Cyprus.

7. When Brabantio arrives at the duke’s he says that Desdemona has been “abused … stolen … and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” in order to accuse Othello of entrapping his daughter.

8. Othello explains that he has taken Desdemona away, but not in the way Brabantio accuses him. His “round unvarnished tale” explains how, as a guest in Brabantio’s house, he told his adventures of danger and world experiences. At such times, Desdemona would hear his stories “but still the house affairs would draw her thence” and then she would return to hear more. When he filled in the details of his stories, Desdemona “swore, in faith, ’twas strange, ’twas passing strange; / ’Twas pitiful, ’twas wondrous pitiful,” and loved him for the dangers he experienced.

9. Desdemona perceives “a divided duty” between her father and her husband, and as her mother had shown allegiance to her husband, so Desdemona professes “Due to the Moor.”

10. After Iago has successfully entrapped Roderigo, he convinces Roderigo not to drown himself and fills Roderigo with anticipation that Desdemona may tire of the Moor and turn to him. Iago then sees a way to “plume up” his “will in double knavery” by suggesting to Othello that Michael Cassio is secretly enamored of Desdemona and that they are on a too familiar basis with each other.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act II, Scenes 1-3 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. What dramatic function does the conversation between Montano and the two gentlemen serve?

2. Why does Iago carefully observe the way Cassio greets Desdemona?

3. What information does Iago use to spark Roderigo’s interest in his plan to discredit Cassio?

4. What “proof” does Iago use to convince Roderigo that Cassio and Desdemona are lovers?

5. Why does Iago instigate Roderigo to provoke Cassio to a fight?

6. Why does Iago urge Cassio to drink to Othello?

7. What happens when Cassio enters chasing Roderigo?

8. How does Iago plan to bait Othello into doubting Desdemona’s fidelity?

9. What does Iago tell Cassio to do to restore the reputation he has sullied in Othello’s eyes?

10. How does Iago plan to intensify Othello’s doubt about Desdemona?

**Answers**
1. The conversation between Montano and the two gentlemen serves several functions. It provides a vivid description of the storm as a substitute for staging which would be difficult to accomplish in the Elizabethan
theater. It also makes the news of the destruction of the Turkish fleet more credulous. In addition, it provides a reason for Cassio’s concern for Othello’s safety. Moreover, it points out the irony of Othello’s surviving war and the elements only to be destroyed by one whom he trusts most.

2. Iago’s careful observation of Cassio’s greeting of Desdemona points out how he uses situations to his advantage. He takes this friendly greeting and plans “[w]ith as little a web as this … [to] ensnare as great a fly as Cassio.”

3. Iago tells Roderigo that “Desdemona is directly in love with [Cassio]” in order to stir Roderigo’s jealousy toward Cassio so that Roderigo will easily comply with a plan to get Cassio out of the way. As a manipulator, Iago uses Roderigo to suit his own purposes with no concern for Roderigo.

4. When Roderigo finds it incredulous that Desdemona and Cassio could be lovers, Iago adds that “they met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together.” Iago’s lascivious nature motivates him to give their cordial greeting a lecherous overtone.

5. Iago urges Roderigo to provoke Cassio to a fight so that with “the impediment most profitably removed” Roderigo will “have a shorter journey to [his] desires.” Iago says that he is helping Roderigo, when in fact he is working against him.

6. Iago tells Cassio to drink “to have a measure to the health of black Othello” because “‘tis a night of revels.” However, Iago’s true motive is to get Cassio drunk so “He’ll be as full of quarrels and offense” and get involved “in some action / That may offend the isle.” Iago says one thing but means another.

7. Cassio threatens to beat Roderigo, and when Montano intercedes on Roderigo’s behalf, Cassio verbally threatens to “knock [him] o’er the mazzard.” This suits Iago’s plan for Montano to witness Cassio in a compromising position.

8. Iago plans to tell Othello that Desdemona pleads for Cassio because of “her body’s lust” and that the strength of her plea indicates the intensity of her lust.

9. Iago tells Cassio to go to Desdemona and “entreat her to splinter” the rift between him and Othello. Iago appears to be motivated to help Cassio, but in actuality, he wants to further his own plan to discredit him to Othello.

10. While Cassio is pleading his case to Desdemona, Iago plans to bring Othello at the very moment “when he may Cassio find / Soliciting his wife.” In this way, he can nurture the seed that he has already planted in Othello’s mind concerning Desdemona’s infidelity.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act III, Scenes 1-4 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**

1. What function do the musicians and clown serve?

2. How does Iago’s duplicity become evident when he speaks to Cassio?

3. What does Emilia’s remark about the rift between Othello and Cassio suggest about their relationship?

4. Identify and explain two examples of irony found in Act III, Scene 3.
5. Explain how Iago manages to arouse Othello’s suspicion in the conversation between Cassio and Desdemona.

6. How does Iago use Othello’s racial differences against him?

7. How is the dropping of the handkerchief ironic?

8. What literary device is used to ease some of the dramatic tension that has been established?

9. How is the conversation about jealousy between Emilia and Desdemona ironic?

10. Explain the significance of the handkerchief to Othello.

Answers

1. The musicians and the clown serve as comic relief after the dramatic events of Act II. The musicians’ serenade depicts an Elizabethan custom of awakening people of rank with music on special occasions. The clown’s comment on the musicians’ instruments provides bawdy humor for the audience and commentary on the health conditions of sixteenth century Naples.

2. Iago pretends to be acting on Iago’s behalf when he tells him he will keep Othello away while Cassio and Desdemona speak. His real motive is to set up the circumstance in which Othello can find Cassio and Desdemona together for Iago to use as additional “ocular proof” of their infidelity.

3. When Emilia says that Iago is as upset by the rift between Cassio and Othello “as if the cause were his,” she demonstrates how she too has been fooled by Iago’s pretense. Emilia is also unaware that Iago is not what he presents himself to be.

4. Dramatic irony in which characters are not aware of the full impact of their words can be found in Emilia’s statement that Iago is as upset as if he were the cause of the rift between Othello and him. She lacks the awareness that Iago did in fact instigate Roderigo to provoke the incident leading to Cassio’s dismissal. In addition, Desdemona’s statement “that’s an honest fellow” points out her lack of awareness that Iago is anything but honest.

5. Through a series of thoughts in half statements, innuendos, and facial gestures, Iago prompts Othello to think that Iago knows more than he is saying. As a result, Othello asks him to reveal his thoughts as vile as they may be. This is exactly what Iago wants in order to win Othello’s trust even more.

6. First Iago points out that Othello’s exotic nature isolates him from knowing Venetian culture as well as he himself does. He tells Othello that Venetian women are deceptive and uses Desdemona’s elopement to support the fact that “she did deceive her father marrying you.” He also plays upon Othello’s cultural belief in magic when he reminds Othello that Brabantio thought his daughter was bewitched or she would never have forsaken all for Othello.

7. Irony of situation involves the occurrence of events that are opposite of the expectation of the character, audience, or reader. When Emilia picks up the handkerchief after it falls, Iago snatches it quickly when he comes in. This unforeseen event provides Iago with the object needed to eliminate Othello’s uncertainty regarding Desdemona’s infidelity with Cassio.

8. The pun, which depends on the multiple meanings of words, is used to create comic relief in the discussion between Desdemona and the clown. The word lie is used by Desdemona to ask where Cassio lodges, but the clown responds as if she were calling Cassio a liar. The comic use of the pun is also ironic because Iago’s
whole scheme depends on the many lies he tells.

9. Their conversation about jealousy is ironic because it follows Iago’s attempts to provoke that emotion in Othello. It is also ironic because neither of them is aware of the depth to which Iago has played upon that emotion with Othello.

10. The handkerchief was given to him by his dying mother who instructed him to give it to his wife. Othello believes that the handkerchief is imbued with special powers to insure a happy marriage. The loss of the handkerchief “were such perdition / As nothing could match.” This belief becomes an obsession with Othello when he learns that Cassio has it, and the handkerchief becomes the object of his undoing.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act IV, Scenes 1-3 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. How does Othello react to Iago’s images of infidelity?

2. Why does Iago speak to Cassio about Bianca?

3. Explain how the handkerchief has increased in significance.

4. How has Othello changed up to this point in the play?

5. Explain the difference in the relationship between Desdemona and Othello compared to when they first arrived in Cyprus.

6. Why is Emilia’s belief about what is causing Othello’s behavior ironic?

7. What clue does Emilia offer about Iago’s own jealousy?

8. Why is Roderigo annoyed at Iago?

9. What is the dramatic significance of the “willow” song?

10. To what does Emilia attribute the fact that women betray their husbands?

**Answers**
1. When Iago suggests that Desdemona and Cassio “kiss in private” and lie naked together, Othello falls into a trance.

2. Iago carefully contrives to have Othello eavesdrop on a conversation between Cassio and him. When Iago elicits responses from Cassio about Bianca, Othello thinks he is speaking disparagingly about Desdemona. Iago does this to convince Othello more conclusively of their secret love.

3. When Bianca enters, she jealously berates Cassio for having given her “some minx’s token” and instructs him to “give it to your hobbyhorse.” Of course Othello believes the hobbyhorse to be Desdemona and is indeed convinced of the clandestine affair between the two.

4. Before Iago began to instill ideas into Othello’s head, Othello did not suspect Desdemona of any wrongdoing. In fact, jealousy is not part of his inherent nature. Iago has so goaded him that he now talks of
killing Desdemona for what he believes is an act of adultery.

5. When they first arrived in Cyprus, each was overjoyed to see the other, and they talked in terms of endearing love. After Iago’s instigation, Othello became so unlike himself that he was easily angered and even struck Desdemona in the presence of Lodovico and others.

6. Emilia affirms Desdemona’s innocence to Othello and tells him to remove any thoughts of her infidelity “if any wretch have put this in your head.” This is ironic because the very cause she suggests for his behavior is the truth. What makes this even more ironic is the fact that the “wretch” she speaks about is her husband.

7. When Emilia suggests that “some eternal villain, / Some busy and insinuatory rogue” devised a plot, Iago tells her “Fie there is no such man!” She continues, and he tells her to keep quiet. However, she alludes to “some such squire he was / That turned your wit the seamy side without / And make you to suspect me with the Moor.”

8. He is tired of being promised access to Desdemona and never receiving it at Iago’s whims. Iago has solicited jewels from Roderigo, promising to give them to Desdemona as gifts. Consequently, Roderigo threatens to ask for the jewels back, give up his pursuit, and confess the scheme.

9. The melancholy nature of the song foreshadows the final scene of the play, and it creates an atmosphere of foreboding.

10. Emilia believes that when men “slack their duties / … pour our treasures into foreign laps; / … break out in peevish jealousies” they don’t think that women are capable of resentment and have feelings. Therefore, women are pushed to the point of betrayal by their own husbands’ insensitivities to them.

**Short-Answer Quizzes: Act V, Scenes 1-2 Questions and Answers**

**Study Questions**
1. Explain Iago’s attitude toward Roderigo and Cassio.
2. How does Othello come to think that Iago has kept his vow?
3. What function does the presence of Lodovico and Gratiano serve?
4. Why does Iago stab Roderigo?
5. How does Iago cast aside suspicion of his own part in the plot to kill Cassio?
6. When does Othello show a change of heart towards Desdemona?
7. Why does Othello mention the handkerchief so often?
8. Why does Othello kill Desdemona?
9. How are all the plots and schemes revealed at the end of the play?
10. Why does Othello kill himself?
Answers
1. Iago demonstrates a callous attitude toward Roderigo and Cassio. Up to this point, he has used them to achieve his goals, so to him their deaths would be more valuable than their lives. If Roderigo is dead, then Iago would not have to compensate him for the jewels he tricked from him. If Cassio is dead, there is no risk of his being informed about Iago’s plan by Othello.

2. When Othello hears Cassio cry out after being wounded by Iago, he believes that Iago has kept his vow to kill Cassio.

3. Lodovico and Gratiano enter the street at the cries for help. Lodovico’s comment “Let’s think’t unsafe / To come into the cry without more help” suggests the danger that exists. Their presence also provides an “audience” for Iago’s scenario to cast off all suspicion from himself.

4. Iago stabs Roderigo to unsure that he will not reveal any of Iago’s scheming.

5. As soon as Bianca enters the confusion, Iago says, “I do suspect this trash / To be party in this injury.” He uses Bianca as a scapegoat to pretend that an investigation will reveal her complicity in the attempt to kill Cassio.

6. When Othello sees Desdemona sleeping, he begins to doubt his suspicions. The “whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as alabaster” tempt him to “not shed her blood.”

7. The handkerchief was a significant gift from Othello’s mother for what it represented and for the charms it supposedly held. It was the “ocular proof” he requested to believe Iago’s accusation. Furthermore, his belief that Desdemona gave it away wounded him deeply and became an obsession because he never knew how Cassio really got the handkerchief until Cassio himself revealed the information.

8. Othello kills Desdemona because he is enraged by jealousy; he believes her to be a liar when she denies having given the handkerchief to Cassio; and she expresses grief at the news of Cassio’s death.

9. At the end of the play, Gratiano reveals that Brabantio has died. Othello learns that Emilia gave the handkerchief to Iago. Iago confesses his part in the plan to kill Cassio. Letters found with Roderigo reveal his part in the plan to eliminate Cassio. Another letter found on Roderigo reveals his discontent with Iago and his scheme to provoke Cassio to argument.

10. Othello kills himself because he recognizes the full weight of his crime. “He that was Othello” is already destroyed because he has lost all honor and respect and is now no better than the “malignant and turbaned Turk” he once killed in Aleppo. The disgrace of having all revealed would hurt more than his own suicide.