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“Pierced Through the Ear”: Poetic Villainy in *Othello*

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### “Pierced Through the Ear”: Poetic Villainy in *Othello*

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The paper examines *Othello* as metapoetry. Throughout the play, key points of comparison between Iago and Shakespeare’s methodologies for employing allegory, symbolism, and mimetic plot and character construction shed light upon Shakespeare’s self-reflexive use of poetry as an art of imitation. More specifically, the contrast between Shakespeare and Iago’s poetry delineates between dynamic and reductive uses of allegory, emphasizes an Aristotelian model of mimesis that makes reason integral to plot and character formation, and underscores an ethical function to poetry generally. In consequence of the division between Iago and Shakespeare as unethical and ethical poets respectively, critical contention concerning the play’s representation of race and gender receive commentary. While Iago authors reductive narratives that lead to stereotypes, Shakespeare’s narrative critiques and condemns the works of his villain to argue against common opinion and customs which deny justice by replacing individuality with generalizations about groups of people. Moreover, as he demonstrates Iago’s conscious, manipulative creation of such reductive narratives for his own purposes, Shakespeare draws attention to the construction of narratives both within and without poetry, and, in so doing, he defends poetry against the Puritan condemnations from his day by showing that these condemnations cannot be restricted to poetry alone. Ultimately, reading the play as metapoetry offers a perspective on Iago’s characterization which blurs the typical classifications made by modern critics, challenges the notion of a reason/ imagination dichotomy wherein reason stands outside of or even in opposition to poetic imagination, and exposes the shortcoming of the critical view that Iago represents reason and the play Shakespeare’s own concerns about its limitations.

Keywords: *Othello*, Shakespeare, Iago, allegory, mimesis, metapoetry, race, gender, reason

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Pierced Through the Ear”: Poetic Villainy in *Othello*

That Shakespeare works beyond and below the surface level of his plays goes undisputed. Critics often turn to metatheatre to articulate this self-reflexive tendency. As James L. Calderwood summarizes, “dramatic art itself . . . is a dominant Shakespearean theme, perhaps his most abiding subject” (5). Louis Montrose draws the same conclusion when he argues that “the professional theatre” offers the only “stable ideological position in the corpus of Shakespeare’s plays” (209). Costuming, disguise, and theatrical or ceremonial performance within the dramatic action of a play characterize Shakespearean metatheatre as they bring the conventions of theatre to the fore. According to Martin Puchen, metatheatrical plays “are ‘about’ the theatre . . . their primary frame of reference is not the world but their own theatricality” (17). In consequence of metatheatre’s re-presentation of the theatrical world, the barrier between the real and the illusory dissipates. Lionel Abel embellishes Jacques famous line, “All the world’s a stage,” to explicate his idea of metatheatre. He writes that in a metaplay, “the world is a stage, life . . . a dream” (83). Metatheatre, or metadrama, realizes the illusory world of the play and consequentially de-realizes the “real” world.

*Othello* is one play Shakespeare immerses in theatrical self-consciousness. Performance, disguise, spying, directing, and staging or scenery make theatre itself a thematic subject of study. Iago constantly performs before his audiences, cloaking his villainy with a guise of honesty on the one hand, and announcing his devilishness on the other. Also, Othello fulfills and adopts various roles. John Bernard argues for Othello’s “theatricality” inasmuch as he “exchanges” his first role as “the exotic outsider” for “mysoginistic defender of the patriarchy” and “the universal justicer,” and finally for that of “unmanned coward” (942). Moreover, the spying scenes within the play recreate and dramatize the audience-to-performer relationship wherein an audience sees

without (supposedly) being seen. Herein the audience members receive an invitation to reflect upon their own position as spectators. Identifying with Othello as the observer, the audience members may be unsettled by the notion that they too only imagine themselves on the outside of the dramatic action.

An argument for seeing Iago as a director and dramatist orchestrating a play also supports metatheatrical analysis of the play. In a manner of speaking, a play-within-a-play takes place on a grand scale in *Othello*. In his book *When the Theatre Turns to Itself: The Aesthetic Metaphor in Shakespeare*, Sidney Homan argues that Iago produces a play of first “visual” and then “verbal artistry” wherein characters act consciously and unconsciously on a “makeshift stage” (105, 106). Iago’s directorial control also extends over the scenery. He limits Othello’s understanding by framing and containing the events and actions his victim will observe and overhear.

Yet, though Shakespeare clearly reflects upon the conventions of theatre in *Othello*, in some ways, *Othello* is not metatheatre. Abel claims that *Othello* fails as true metatheatre because it does not de-realize the real world, because it lacks the essential metatheatrical component of fantasy: “In the metaplay ... fantasy is essential, it is what one finds at the heart of reality” (79). Homan too notes this deviation from typical metatheatre: “*Othello* does not so much question the line separating reality” from illusion “as show the manner in which a wholesome reality can be supplanted by an obscene illusion” (104). Rather than blurring the lines between the real and the illusory in typical metatheatrical fashion, theatricality within *Othello* reinforces their separation.

In fact, *Othello* works to the opposite effect as metatheatre: it reaffirms the real. Abel writes that metatheatre is “a dramatic form for revealing characters whose self-consciousness creates their dramatic situations,” or in other words, characters “are aware of their own theatricality” (*Tragedy* vi). Othello’s theatrical self-awareness, however, remains perpetually

bound within Iago's production and results in the hero's painful unawareness. He unknowingly performs in a play directed and produced by Iago. Until Othello learns the truth, he, like a character in a play unaware of the "real" world, engages a false one; artifice, not reality, aids in the generation of his thoughts, words, and actions. Furthermore, though Iago knows he "plays a villain," he also knows he really lies, confesses as much before the audience, and thereby inhibits the merging of the illusory and the real for himself or the audience. The illusion never takes place for the audience, and for Othello it comes to an end when he experiences a kind of enlightenment. Revealed truth negates Iago's production and the curtains close prematurely on his play.

Metapoetry offers a better angle for studying Shakespeare's self-conscious art in *Othello* than does metatheatre. Calderwood introduces the term "metapoetry" in his work *Shakespearean Metadrama* as poetry about poetry, or a "slightly diluted version" of the argument that in his plays Shakespeare theorizes about poetry itself through the medium of poetry (8). Though Calderwood does not include *Othello* in his analyses of Shakespeare's works as metapoetry, the play exemplifies the form. From Othello's wooing of Desdemona by the telling of his stories, to the villain's use of words as his principal weapon for attack, the characters' language contains a poetic capacity for powerful persuasion. Shakespeare exploits that poetic use of language to comment on poetry itself. Moreover, as he attracts attention to acts of creative imagination, he takes two central ideas of renaissance poetry—allegory and imitation—and, instead of merely employing these tools in his poetry, he turns them into subject matter within the dramatic plot. Shakespeare's audiences watch not only the unfolding of an allegory, but also the consequences of allegorical thinking, and instead of merely hearing the poet's moral tale, they witness the effects of such tales. Examining the play as metapoetry will show that in *Othello*, Shakespeare



critiques contemporary understandings of poetry and in so doing argues for a dynamic use of allegory, purports an Aristotelian view of *mimesis* which privileges reason as the poetic vehicle for imitating the laws of nature, and demonstrates the act of poetic authorship as intrinsically ethical.

### ALLEGORY

Allegory holds a primary position in Shakespeare's day as the ethical backbone of poetry. As Donald Leman Clark explains, the "unanimous judgment of the middle ages that the purpose of poetry is to teach spiritual truth and inculcate morality under the cloak of allegory was perpetuated far into the renaissance, especially in England" (130). The primacy of allegory stems from the need to defend poetry against its assailants. Sir John Harington lays out the "chiefe objections" against poetry: "it is the nurse of lies, a pleaser of fooles, a breeder of dangerous errors, and an inticer to wantonness" (209). Harington denies these allegations by presenting poetry as allegory. Allegory encourages morality by exposing vice and promoting virtue through, in part, the embodiment of qualities such as justice, virtue, charity, and pride. "Allegorie," he defines with a nod to Plutarch, "to be when one thing is told, and by that another is vnderstood" (210-11). Thus, a poem necessarily operates on a literal and figurative level of signification. The figurative narrative overarches the poem in, to borrow Cicero's term for allegory, a "string of metaphors." The condemnation of poetry, then, ensues from understanding the literal and superficial meaning of a poem while missing the deeply moral purposes concealed within the fable: "[T]he men of greatest learning and highest wit in the auncient times," writes Harington, "did of purpose conceale these deepe mysteries of learning, and ... couer them with the vaile of fables and verse for sundrie causes" (211). Recognition of a poem's allegory exposes this "purpose" or "cause." Consequently, in response to the backlash against poetry as inferior

because it does not conform to fact or correct moral error as history and philosophy do, the apologists elevate poetry as the most fit for the cause.

Other apologists likewise enlist allegory in the defense of poetry with the claim that readers savvy enough to understand the allegory will in essence sit at the table with the wisest of men and the best of philosophers. As the “right popular *Philosopher*,” according to Sir Philip Sidney, poets offer “food for the tendrest stomachs” (16). Disguising medicine with palatable food, poets “give us all knowledge” “under the vaile of Fables” (53). Allegory provides both the meat and the medicine, but only those with the strongest stomachs, according to Harington, “will digest the Allegorie” (212). In *The Arte of Rhetorique*, Thomas Wilson too claims that poets write “darkly” for a purpose. The “saying of Poetes, and all their fables,” writes Wilson, “wer not fained of soche wisemen without cause,” for poets “wished in harte the redresse of thinges;” however, because they “durste not openlie rebuke” either for fear or because “the wicked wer unworthy to heare the truthe,” they veil their true meaning in “shadowes” (467). According to these arguments, then, proper understanding of the merit of poetry, the meaning of a poem, and the goodness of the poets, ensues only when one reads allegorically.

The presence of allegory saturates *Othello*, suggesting that Shakespeare accepts the definition of poetry as allegory. For example, the play’s motif of judgment culminates in the final scene with a concentration on the characters’ eternal souls, calling to mind Judgment Day. The scene begins with Othello’s reflection on the finality of death, for not even repentance can “thy light relume” (V.ii.13). With concern for Desdemona’s soul he offers her the chance to pray, but upon learning the truth that concern transfers onto himself: “when we shall meet at compt,/ This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven, / And fiends will snatch at it. ... Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight ... roast me in sulphur! / Wash me in

steep-down gulfs of liquid fire” (V.ii.267, 72-80). Though Othello imagines a future scene, when they “meet at compt,” it is the look *now* upon her face that will torment him, torment he experiences already. The present action illustrates a future scene. The important point here is not if Othello will face hellfire, for this question cannot receive answer. Rather, the dramatic action merits attention as it points allegorically toward the concept of accountability and final judgment—the final judgment Othello passes upon himself and Desdemona, the finality of death, and the Judgment to come.

References to the characters as abstract, ideal qualities also invite an allegorical reading of the play by constructing a “string of metaphors.” Although, ultimately, Shakespeare challenges these constructions, at first glance Othello is Justice and Nobility, Roderigo Foolishness, Desdemona Virtuousness, and Iago Devilishness. Othello depicts himself as Justice. Kissing the sleeping Desdemona, he sighs, “Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword!” (V.ii.16-17). Others hold Othello up as an exemplary figure of nobility: “Our noble general Othello!” “our noble and valiant general,” “the noble Moor,” and Desdemona’s reference to Othello as “my noble Moor,” offer a sampling. One might disregard these as tokens of respect. In soliloquy, however, Iago refers to Othello as “constant” and “noble” (II.i.288-89). Emanating from the mouth of the enemy, the praise becomes impossible to set aside.

The text invites allegorical figuration of the other characters also. Obeying Iago, Roderigo sells his land and gives Iago the proceeds. The villain scoffs, “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse” (I.iii.383). He proves susceptible to Iago’s cunning because “love hath turn’d [him] the wrong side out,” rendering him Iago’s “sick fool Roderigo” (II.iii.51). In friendship, financial stewardship, and love, Roderigo fills the part of the fool. With Desdemona, no one

finds fault. “Virtuous,” “exquisite,” “modest,” “divine,” “perfection,” and “the riches of the ship” to whom the men of Cyprus should kneel, the characters nearly worship the “sweet Desdemona” (II.iii.30, 18, 25; II.i.73; II.i.83-84; II.iii.27). She gives life to the virtuous woman from the Bible whose “price is far above rubies” and like heaven itself she is a ‘pearl of great price,’ which a rich man values above all his worldly possessions (Prov. 31:10; Matt 13:46). Othello says, “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.143-46). She was true. So, her worth exceeds the richest jewels on earth. Moreover, when Emilia guesses that some “cozening slave” has “devis’d this slander” against Desdemona to “get some office,” the lady responds, “If any such there be, heaven pardon him!” (IV.ii.132-34). Emilia’s reply contrasts Desdemona’s Christian appeal for forgiveness sharply, thereby emphasizing the meekness and goodness of the first: “A halter pardon him! and hell gnaw his bones!” (IV.ii.135). Selfless, mild, loving, faithful, meek, and quick to forgive, Desdemona aligns with Christ.

The following account elevates Desdemona while condemning Iago. Desdemona asks, “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.144-47). Later, the conspiring villain finds himself compelled to do just that, to speak Desdemona’s praise: “And many worthy and chaste dames even thus,/ All guiltless, meet reproach” (IV.i.46-47). “Worthy,” “chaste,” and “guiltless,” Desdemona becomes the “deserving woman” from her anecdote, Iago the “very malice itself,” and the play an answer to the heroine’s question.

Both direct and indirect references to Iago as a devil incriminate him. Called viper, devil, villain, demi-devil, dog (a common form the devil assumes in folklore), and a host of other unsavory names, the villain tells Roderigo he will work to undo “sanctimony and a frail vow”

between “an erring barbarian and a super-subtle Venetian” (I.iii.355-57). In laboring for the base goal that Roderigo might “enjoy” Desdemona, and in seeking to undo a holy vow, Iago flaunts his villainy. In devilish fashion, he delights in undermining the individual, the family, and society. Likewise, when Othello calls Desdemona a “fair devil” because he can discern no material evidence of her guilt, the dramatic irony of the situation invites a redirection of the affront onto Iago: it is he who is the “fair devil” (III.iii.479). Cassio’s diatribe against alcohol also condemns Iago as it retells the larger dramatic action. The lieutenant condemns alcohol for its ability to detach people from their proper, natural frame of mind: “To be now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast! O strange! Every inordinate cup is unblest’d, and the ingredient is a devil” (II.iii.305-08). Wine’s unnatural effect on the mind and actions of “sensible men” parallels Iago’s influence upon others. Himself the devilish ingredient, Iago acts as the catalyst for the transformation of sensible men into beasts. With Othello, the transformation occurs gradually; with Cassio it happens instantaneously, and with Roderigo, the play begins mid-action, with him as a fool.

Read allegorically, then, the play signifies both literally and figuratively. On the literal level, Iago goes about successively betraying each of the characters in the play for his own pleasure and gain. Figuratively, at least in accordance with a surface-level reading of the allegory, Iago is a devil that facilitates the crucifixion of the Christ-figure, Desdemona, exploits the separate weaknesses of the various characters, and seeks their utter ruin, temporally and spiritually: “Will you, I pray,” says Othello, “demand of that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnar’d my soul and body?” (V.ii.301-02). On the play’s literal level, the audience watches the tragic demise of a noble character. Allegorically, the plot re-constructs to show the devil’s attempt to capture souls.

Yet, in *Othello*, Shakespeare challenges allegorical thinking when he shows that the trope can work to two separate ends: dynamically to expand understanding or reductively to confine or trap meaning. He does so by writing Iago as an allegorist and contrasting his own methodologies with Iago's. While Iago uses allegory reductively, Shakespeare uses it dynamically. Granted, almost every character reduces the others. Othello, particularly, has a propensity to see the world allegorically, but Iago stands apart because he does not merely use reductive language, he authors it.

When C. S. Lewis differentiates between symbolism and allegory, he ascribes an allegorical function to symbolic interpretation. He writes, "for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory. We are the 'frigid personifications'; the heavens above us are the 'shadowy abstractions'; the world which we mistake for reality is the flat outline of that which elsewhere veritably is in all the round of its unimaginable dimensions" (45). Iago views others as "frigid personifications," and he invites them to trade their view of the world for a false projection of an unseen reality. In this way, he uses symbolism and personification to promote allegory.

Iago reduces events, objects, and people to symbols to convince others of allegorical, hidden meanings lurking beneath the material world. In the palm-paddling scene between Desdemona and Cassio, the ensign stirs the passions of the disappointed suitor, Roderigo:

IAGO: Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Didst not  
mark that?

RODERIGO: Yes, that I did; but that was but courtesy.

IAGO: Lechery, by this hand; an index and obscure prologue to the history  
of lust and foul thoughts. They met so near with their lips that their  
breaths

embrac'd together. Villainous thoughts, Roderigo! (II.i.253-60)

Iago uses his hand to swear against Desdemona and Cassio's hands. Referring to his own as an emblem or sign of truth brings to mind the culturally accepted symbolic connection between one's hand and his/ her fidelity while inviting Roderigo to consider the interaction of the pair's hands as evidence of their trustworthiness. As Morton Bloomfield says, "allegory is ... the interpretive process itself" (301). Iago interprets the encounter as a physical story of an immaterial relationship, immaterial because, after all, only their "breaths embrac'd" and only their thoughts are foul. However, with Desdemona being what she is (a carnal, sensual being whose "eye must be fed"), Cassio what he is (young, handsome, and "of manners and beauties"), and Othello what he is (an old "devil" which she can have no "delight" "to look on"), the future becomes inevitable (II.i.221; I.iii.392; II.i.222).

Certainly, in the handkerchief, the audience witnesses Iago's greatest and most tragic success as an allegorist. Iago shapes a devastating course of events when he persuades Othello to see an object as a visible token of Desdemona's fidelity:

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?

IAGO. Her honor is an essence that's not seen;

They have it very oft that have it not.

But for the handkerchief—

OTHELLO. By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it. (IV.i.10-19).

Iago teaches Othello to divine immaterial knowledge from the token. Playing upon Othello's fear that honor, or virtue, is an "essence that's not seen," he tempts Othello to materialize his wife's virtue. Othello need not see Desdemona in the act of adultery, for the absence of the token from her possession gives material proof of divorcement from her virtue. As such, Iago's "aural pestilence" satiates Othello's demand for "ocular proof."

Iago's symbolic narratives supposedly disclose the reality of an unseen world. He buries his insinuations under coded language so that the process of discovering his meaning will pass for revelation of truth, replacing the need for proof.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think my lord!

OTHELLO: Think my lord!

By heaven, he echo'st me,

As if there were some monster in his thought

Too hideous to be shown. (III.ii.103-08)

Othello obsesses with uncovering the meaning behind Iago's words: "By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts" (III.iii.162). Once he understands Iago's meaning, before he even sees Cassio with the handkerchief, Othello dispenses with his love for Desdemona: "Now do I see 'tis true. ... All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. / 'Tis gone" (III.iii.444-46). Othello identifies the monster in Iago's thoughts. The revelatory process of understanding Iago's encrypted language stands in for revelation of Desdemona's guilt: "Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!" (III.iii.476).



In his symbolic reduction of the characters, Iago plays a game of name substitution. He describes Cassio as “a proper man,” “fram’d to make women false,” Othello as being of a “noble” nature that “thinks men honest that but seem to be so,” Roderigo as a “fool,” and Desdemona as “chaste” (I.iii.392, 98; II.i.399; I.iii.382; IV.i.46, 47). Lastly, Iago writes himself in as a devil. Reduced, the characters become pawns in his allegories and when it suits his purposes he converts them into their antithetical types: Cassio becomes a philanderer, Othello a “lusty Moor,” Desdemona a carnal whore, and himself, an angel of light or Honest Iago. He oscillates his voiced opinions about the characters willfully, not because he changes his mind, but because, in a very literal way, he changes his story.

The qualitative reductions Iago makes substitute names for individuals and create stereotypes about race and gender. Brabantio hears of the elopement through Iago, who conceals himself in the street below Brabantio’s window and bellows, “Awake! what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! ... ye are robb’d” (I.i.79-80; 85). Conflating “house,” “daughter,” and “bags,” all as material objects vulnerable to thieves, Iago reduces Desdemona to property and Othello to a thief. Also, Iago describes Othello as “an old black ram” “tupping” his “white ewe” and as “the devil” and a “stranger” (I.i.85, 86, 136). Brabantio accepts and adopts Iago’s symbol-allegory. He charges Othello, “[F]oul thief where hast thou stow’d my daughter?” (I.ii.62). The enraged father accuses Othello of witchcraft and laments Desdemona’s rejection of the “wealthy curled darlings of our nation” (I.ii.68). Brabantio articulates his anguish with Iago’s symbolic narrative. The story reads: through the exercise of evil powers, Othello—a Moor, an aggressor, a foreigner, a stranger, a pirate—has stolen and “stow’d” away Brabantio’s “jewel” (I.iii.195). When Brabantio discovers Desdemona’s willing part in the elopement, the logic of Iago’s narrative leads him to conclude that his “white ewe”

has gone against nature by welcoming the black ram, and that in marrying a thief, she unites with lawlessness.

Like the handkerchief, then, Desdemona's gender and Othello's blackness become token signifiers. One is property within an established social patriarchy and the other is outside civilization and humanity itself, threatening to (in both senses of the word) spoil social stability and order. Of course, other characters too make racially derogatory remarks. Roderigo, for example, calls Othello "thick-lips" in the same scene Iago refers to him as a "Barbary horse," but when Roderigo exits, Iago disavows his proclamations concerning Othello's character: "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" (II.i.288-91). Unlike Roderigo's manifest prejudice, Iago purports stereotypes not according to prejudice but craft.

Gender too becomes Iago's tool. The narrative of theft and property crops up again in this short but poignant tale, packed with moral application:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,  
 Is the immediate jewel of their souls.  
 Who steals my purse steals trash ...  
 But he that filches from me my good name  
 Robs me of that which not enriches him,  
 And makes me poor indeed. (III.iii.155-57, 159-61)

The good names of Othello and Desdemona are on the line. Once Othello knows Iago looks at him as the cuckolded husband, Desdemona becomes a thief stealing his rightful property—his good name and her soul: "O curse of marriage! / That we can call these delicate creatures ours, / And not their appetites!" (III.iii.268-70). If Othello cannot fully possess

Desdemona, then like Brabantio, his jewel can be stolen from him. Iago exploits that gap of ownership to cast doubt upon Desdemona's good name, to diminish "the jewel of her soul," and thereby, her worth to Othello. Her name holds a veiled meaning, and Othello, unsure of the purity of her hidden jewel, languishes in doubt: "By the world, / I think my wife be honest and think she is not; ... Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face" (III.iii.383-88). Doubt is enough. The word Desdemona once meant heavenly perfection, but now, her name blackened, her jewel filched, the name Desdemona falls. Indeed as Feste says in *Twelfth Night*, "Why, sir, her name's a word; and to dally with that word might make my sister wanton" (III.i.19-20). Fearing Iago sees the horns he cannot see himself, the loving husband takes the bait and mistakes a token, a name, for the lady herself. Othello accepts Iago's symbolic tale. To reclaim his property he sends her soul prematurely to face judgment, and, good keeper that he is, he first offers his charge the chance to pray.

Looking collectively at Iago's use of allegory, it can be seen that the very tool the apologists use to defend poetry becomes a catalyst for tragedy. Iago's symbolic narratives do exactly what the antagonists charge poetry with doing: they breed dangerous errors. More specifically, they fan lust, entice drunkenness, provoke murder, incite civil unrest, and undermine familial relationships. The pattern Iago uses to dupe others encapsulates this problem: allegory can create and fix meaning, sidestep the need to exercise proper judgment, and reduce objects, events, and people to symbols, and in so doing, form a separate, distant narrative from that of the literal action. In summary, allegory can reduce people, events, actions, and objects to symbolic signifiers, thereby inhibiting the richness and complexity inherent to each.

By contrast, Shakespeare challenges reductive thinking as he uses allegory dynamically. In *Othello*, the figurative meaning of symbols neither replaces the potency of the literal story nor

denies the individuality of the characters. On one hand, the literal story means everything. If, for example, Othello had full knowledge of the history of the handkerchief, tragedy would have been averted. On the other hand, the figurative proves integral and the handkerchief becomes powerfully symbolic. For one, Othello's willingness to accept token proof of Desdemona's infidelity stems from his unwillingness to remain in doubt. Consequently, the handkerchief symbolizes the difficulty of obtaining absolute knowledge. For another, as Harold Goddard points out, Desdemona's loss of the handkerchief attests to her great love for Othello (471-72). Desdemona drops the handkerchief while tending to a pain Othello complains of on his forehead. The stage direction reads, "He puts the handkerchief from him and it drops" (III.iii.287). He then tells her to "let it alone," meaning perhaps the handkerchief or perhaps his forehead, but whatever the case, he, not she, makes the handkerchief drop. Desdemona loves the gift so much that "she reserves it evermore about her / To kiss and talk to," yet she disregards the love token in favor of the man himself (III.iii.295-96). Symbolically, then, the token shows the inconsequentiality of symbols and tokens.

As a symbol, the handkerchief also demonstrates the persuasive power of language and its susceptibility to misuse, to false signification. Iago says, "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ" (III.iii.322-23). Like handkerchiefs, words are intermediary between the tangible and immaterial worlds, they are "trifles light as air," and both can provide false evidence while seeming almost sacredly true. Lastly, the handkerchief signifies the potential danger in endeavoring to fix meaning arbitrarily or universally to material signifiers. When Iago forces an association between the handkerchief and virtue, the symbolic meaning ensues from a mind game that, by inference, would render any lady inconstant who does not guard sufficiently a token gift from her husband. The symbolic significance becomes

fixed and universal and the handkerchief, in effect, ceases to be a handkerchief at all. The figurative story replaces the literal one.

By contrast, no one would infer from Shakespeare's narrative that any woman who drops a handkerchief loves her husband. Rather, what we know is Desdemona loves Othello. The several meanings of the handkerchief emerge contextually rather than by imposition, and the their importance continually circles back to the token's literal history. Thus, Shakespeare uses symbolism without being reductive or subverting the literal tale. The handkerchief matters precisely because it is merely a trifle and also precisely because it is not.

Without compromising the characters' individuality, Shakespeare uses allegory to critique symbolic reduction. Othello tries two tests to prove Iago a devil. First, he looks for an external identifier of evil, but his expectant glance toward Iago's feet fails to reveal the anticipated identifiers, so he denounces as fable the notion of a cloven-footed devil (V.ii.286). Next, he tries revenge and establishes new criteria for determining what Iago is: "If thou be'st a devil," he says before stabbing the traitor, "I cannot kill thee" (V.ii.287). Had the ensign died on the spot the question would have been definitively answered, but the indisputable fact remains: Iago bleeds but he does not die. That Iago lives fails to unequivocally deem him human; that he bleeds rescues him from unqualified devilishness. Othello settles upon the label "demi-devil."

If Iago's devilishness or lack thereof could be established by such a test, it would undermine the thematic critique of token signifiers that runs through *Othello*. Throughout, symbolic identifiers not only fail to reveal the reality of things, they also help to conceal truth. The Ensign deludes the senses by waving an ensign—meaning a flag or banner—of loyalty and good character and thereby cloaks "knavery's plain face" with little more than the repetition of the word "honest," spoken by himself and others. This token disguise suffices because unlike

Richard III, whose deformity signals an inward corruption, Iago bears no distinctive mark that either indicates or rationalizes his wickedness. Iago does not metamorphose into the devil, and nature obscures rather than attests to the presence of his treacherous soul. In a very literal way, Iago does not embody Evil. Shakespeare does not use symbols to reveal Iago's corruptness, or, for that matter, Desdemona's virtue or Othello's nobility.

Popular conceptions of the Devil from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance depend heavily upon the kind of external identifiers Othello seeks. Jeffrey Burton Russell summarizes:

Often the Devil appears monstrous and deformed, his outward shape betraying his inner defect. He is lame because of his fall from heaven; his knees are backward ... [he is] blind ... [has] horns and a tail ... [and] cloven hooves. ... The Devil's color is usually black, in conformity with Christian tradition and almost worldwide symbolism. His skin is black, or he is a black animal, or his clothing is black. (68-69)

Yet Othello, though black, is "fair," while honest Iago—a white devil, a male witch, wreaks havoc on stage. Villain and victim outwardly exchange typical symbolic colors, and the material world of the play turns up unreliable. Othello's blackness proves as insignificant to the integrity of his character as does the whiteness of either Iago or Desdemona. Iago's immaterial devilishness helps to undo the false narratives and stereotypes he authors.

Shakespeare's dynamic characters develop a kind of allegorical realism, making them irreducible to symbols. Jeremy Tambling's description of Giotto's painting of seven virtues and seven vices in the Scrovengi chapel in Padua (1305) explains well the seemingly contradictory idea of allegorical realism. "Prudence," he writes, "looks across at Folly, Fortitude at Inconstancy, Temperance at Anger, Justice at Injustice, Faith at Infidelity, Charity at Envy and

Hope at Despair” (50). The nature of this faceoff, Tambling continues, suggests that “a personification cannot represent a single state; it will suggest or contain its ‘other’” (52-53). Consequently, realistic allegory emerges to “support and suggest plural and highly realistic meanings” (53). Shakespeare’s use of allegory works to similar effect in *Othello*, though instead of personifications the play presents the literal details of a realistic story with individual characters that contain the contrary elements within themselves.

Contrasts like those in Giotto’s work take place repeatedly in *Othello*. For example, hope confronts despair in Othello, who exclaims, “Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again” (III.iii.90-92). As his words foretell, he swings from the height of hope and happiness to colossal despair. By the end of the play, Othello disbelieves the possibility of forgiveness or mercy for himself. His hope gone, he epitomizes Christian despair, denying for himself the possibility of redemption. These passions are complete, opposite, and absolute—allegorical even.

Each character confronts within themselves the extremity of an opposing virtue or vice. Herein, the characters’ realism surfaces. Othello’s fallible judgment, his infuriating refusal to give Desdemona or Cassio opportunity to defend themselves—an opportunity he receives early in the play—and his great capacity for injustice undermine his self-portrayal as an agent of justice. At Othello’s trial, the Duke says, “To vouch, this is no proof” (I.iii.107). Yet Othello accepts little more than Iago’s word as proof of Desdemona and Cassio’s guilt, and so he has Cassio’s mouth “stopp’d” without charging him, and he never investigates Desdemona’s claim, “I never gave him token” (V.ii.71, 61). Although his jealousy manifests itself previously, it is only moments before he kills Desdemona that he names Cassio as her supposed lover. She can

call nothing to her defense but a few desperate words and a brief petition for mercy. Hardly the allegorical figure of Justice, Othello denies justice by hastening to enact it upon others.

The unsettling passion that periodically erupts from Othello complicates any reading of his character as Nobility. Convinced of Desdemona's infidelity, he exclaims, "Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne / To tyrannous hate ... O blood, blood, blood!" (III.iii.448-49, 451). When possessed of great fury, Othello embodies the extremity of that emotion: "Arise black vengeance from thy hollow hell!" (III.iii.447). At the play's end, Othello initially hesitates and struggles with the killing he believes he has to do. Once overcome by passion, however, he shows no reluctance: "Weepst thou for him to my face? ... Down strumpet!" (V.ii.77, 79). After this outburst of anger, he speaks only ten words before stifling her. Such passion, Lodovico comments, cannot coincide with nobility: "Is this the noble Moor ... 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). Piercingly, Iago responds, "He is much changed" (IV.i.268). Lodovico as well as the audience receive invitation to view Othello as a beast. Even if Lodovico had known what Othello suspected about his wife, would a noble man strike a woman? Even if Desdemona had been unfaithful, would Nobility kill her? Othello's actions contradict his former, noble, nature. Even so, the play ends with praise for Othello: "for he was great of heart." The dynamism between his greatness and cruelty, justice and injustice, interact in a manner unique to Othello and refute a cohesive reading of his character as a pure abstraction.

Impediments to reducing the other characters to symbols also come forward. Roderigo displays great wisdom as he becomes the first to see through Iago's disguise: "Faith, I have heard too much; for your words and performances are no kin together" (IV.ii.182-83). Here, his insight trumps his foolishness, rendering him a "gulled gentleman" (as the *dramatis personae* explains)



rather than a symbolic type. Also, Desdemona's humanity impedes her perfection. The "violence" of her love for Othello, the losing of the handkerchief, and an act of disobedience convince Othello of a pattern of unfaithfulness: "She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (I.iii.293).

Truly, as A. D. Nuttall says, "It is Shakespeare's way to take an archetype or a stereotype and then work, so to speak, against it, without ever overthrowing it" (124). To take a similar point from Montaigne: "We are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapelesse and diverse a contexture, that every peece and every moment playeth his part. And there is as much difference found betweene us and ourselves, as there is betweene our selves and other" (8). Within each character, a play of sorts takes place. For example, with Othello, at one moment Justice plays its part and at other times, Wrath, Vengeance, and Injustice take the stage. In the final scene, we see them all together, and consequently, the complexity of life itself.

Shakespeare writes dynamic characters whose individuality rescues them from symbolic reduction. Othello says, "[B]ut, alas, to make me / A fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at!" (V.i.53-55). Though Othello refers to the mockery a cuckold receives, the idea of being a type, a "fixed figure," frightens him. Shakespeare, however, redeems Othello. This redemption comes neither physically on the earth nor spiritually in heaven, but poetically within the text. Though Iago too depicts the characters in terms of one and then another allegorical abstraction, he *replaces* the characters with names and moral qualities. No such replacement takes place in Shakespeare's work. Instead, the capacity for grand but varying passions adds complexity, realism, and individuality to the characters. Shakespeare reclaims Othello from Iago's narrative and from allegorical reduction generally. In so doing, he triumphs not only over Iago but over reductive narratives generally.

In addition to the characters, the play as a whole also transcends allegorical reduction. Shakespeare's references to Judgment Day, for example, participate in a larger thematic critique of justice and the spillover of poetic justice into the real world. The frightful account of the punishment of an adulterous woman in Boaistuau's *Histories Tragiques*, which scholars presume Shakespeare read, illustrates this point. The work, initially written in 1559, underwent numerous publications until the expansion of these immensely popular stories into seven volumes in 1597. In the story of an adulterous woman, a husband receives the "ocular proof" of his wife's infidelity. Surprising the offenders who "were as ashamed as Adam and Eve when their sin was revealed before God," the husband demands justice. To his wife, he says,

See here, vile and detestable she-wolf, since you had a heart so treacherous and disloyal as to ... rob me of my honour ... I now desire that with your own hands, with which you gave me the first testimony of your faith, he should now be hanged and strangled in the presence of all, not knowing how to find another greater punishment to match your crime than to compel you to murder him whom you preferred to your reputation, my honour and your life. (qtd. in Muchembled 122)

This alone, proving unsatisfactory to "diet his revenge," to use Iago's words, the husband strips bare the bedchamber, leaving only enough straw "for two dogs to sleep on," and abandons his wife to no "other company" than the corpse of her lover (Muchembled 121-22). Such stories, according to Robert Muchembled, are not without precedent in real life, for similar cases are found in the judicial archives across Europe. "The terrible vengeance of the husband," Muchembled summarizes concisely Boaistuau's position, "was in proportion to the magnitude of the offense" (122). In other words, she deserved it.

The overt parallels between Boaistuau's report and *Othello* need little commentary. In both cases, the insult at the loss of reputation and honor fuels the demand for poetic justice—for a death that symbolically matches the crime. George Puttenham assigns to tragedy the responsibility to teach through poetic justice. Tragedy, he says, should lay tyranny open to the world, reproach wickedness, and thereby “shew the mutabilitie of fortune, and the iust punishment of God in reuenge of a vicious and euill life” (27). The husband of Boaistuau's account, like Othello, takes upon himself the responsibility of making an example of the adulterous woman, to mix justice with poetic justice. With a sense of appropriate justice that resembles Bouistuau's husband who wants his wife to take the life of her lover with the very hands she used to offer “the first testimony of [her] faith,” Othello responds with satisfaction when Iago prompts him to see the bedchamber Desdemona “hath contaminated” as the best stage for her death: “Good, good: the justice of it pleases: very good” (IV.i.210). Both take it upon themselves to satisfy the demands of justice and they do so symbolically. The condemnation in *Othello* for Iago's narrative could extend to such historical narratives as Boaistuau's, which encourage atrocities in the name of justice. Perhaps by a stretch of the imagination, we might hear Iago's words ring out in testimony against such impacting and influential narratives: “Thus credulous fools are caught,/ And many worthy and chaste dames even thus/ All guiltless meet reproach” (IV.i.45-47).

Of course, Desdemona was innocent. This fact diverts attention away from the merited punishment of an adulterous woman to the villainy inherent in the promotion of such a narrative and the criminality of the retributive act. In Othello's search for poetic justice, he accepts the narrative that the cuckolded husband has the right to kill his wife, but an unspoken question haunts *Othello*: if Desdemona had been guilty, would Othello have acted justly in killing her?

Othello accepts all too readily the idea of Desdemona's feminine duplicity—that her fair exterior conceals her devilishness, and so in killing his Eve, he hopes to protect mankind—"Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.6). Perhaps, one could say, the question of Desdemona's faithfulness puts the audience into a "false gaze." The questions should interrogate the validity of Othello's mock trial and pursuit for poetic justice.

Poetic justice, historical justice, and divine justice, then, share the common link of creative authorship: the social narratives of each interpret the physical world symbolically. The Burlesque concept of *theatricum mundi* depicts the world as a literal stage with God as the audience and leads to narratives of poetic justice in daily life. In Pierre Boaistuau's *The Theatre of the World* (1558), he writes, "Sinners should fear both [God and Satan] ... because God, too punishes" (qtd. in Muchembled 121). Historian Jeffrey Burton Russell notes that according to the general perception of the time, Satan's active role in the punishment of sinners had an overtly didactic message: "He carries off Sabbath breakers, kills a clergyman who plays cards on Sunday, and punishes vain women and naughty children. He hunts the souls of sinners as well as their bodies" (Russell 73). Neither God nor Satan needs to wait for a soul to cross over into eternity to mete out blessings or torment; punishment and reward begin on earth. Sin brings physical afflictions such as birth defects, sickness, plagues, wars, famines, and drought upon individuals and societies. Herein, we hear the recapitulation of the cause for tragedy in *Othello*. The body and the physical world come to witness symbolically to the virtue of souls, and the future Day of Judgment becomes a present reality.

In *Othello*, however, Shakespeare's exploration of marks, identifiers, and symbolic reduction challenges the supposition that the material world will symbolically attest to an immaterial reality. Instead, these symbols construct social narratives, or tyrant customs, that

mislead characters to hasty judgments about race, color, nationality, and gender. Like the cloven-foot Othello looks for on Iago, these tokens are meant to identify evil to society, but anyone who presumes that these tokens tell a story of God's, the devil's, or nature's punishment for sinners misreads by reducing the world to symbolic allegory. When Shakespeare alludes allegorically to the concept of Judgment Day, then, he does so dynamically. He expands the play's thematic critique of justice and judgment as he critiques social narratives about justice.

Thus, while the assailants of poetry elevate history as factually true and demean poetry's contribution to the moral improvement of society, Iago's role as an allegorist demonstrates the presence of allegory in the historical and religious social narratives of the day. Iago's reduction of the characters, alongside Othello's search for poetic justice and external evidence of evil, finds parallel in Boaistuau's writings and in the social narratives that read the physical world as evidence of sin. Richard A. Carr summarizes Boaistuau's characterization in his historical tragedies. "If the characters are to be exemplary humans," writes Carr, "they are ... so closely allied to the moral truths their actions illustrate that we are presented with a gallery of types if not ... allegorical representations of vices and virtues in historical or contemporary dress. ... His characters seem nothing more than illustrative symbols of predetermined ideas" (92).

Boaistuau's allegorical tales, cloaked as tragical histories, and the symbolic interpretations of the physical world made in the name of religion, then, deceive because they present poetic interpretation as fact. They (not poetry) corrupt society by urging injustice disguised as Justice.

A perplexing problem remains. While the characters in *Othello* obtain a fair degree of realism by containing within themselves opposing qualities of virtue and vice, what besides Iago's false projection of himself as an angel of light and as an honest man serves as a contrast to his allegorical association with the Devil? Iago cannot simply be set aside as an immaterial devil.

A few pieces of textual evidence support classifying him as human: he references the presence of a heart, professes to have “some soul,” bleeds at the play’s conclusion, and reveals his age as twenty-eight. These facts thwart any endeavor to definitively relegate him to the domain of pure abstraction.

However, it is not the arduous search for Iago’s humanity that will sufficiently counter his devilishness. The dynamism and even the realism of Iago’s character come principally through the comparison of his works with Shakespeare’s. Iago’s craft aligns succinctly with poetic art. Though supposedly proven in battle, he uses mere words to incite tragedy. “I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear,” says Iago, in a figurative mirroring of the literal attack on Hamlet’s father (II.iii.356). Iago’s poison brings into full effect the irony of Brabantio’s words: “But words are words; I never yet did hear / That the bruis’d heart was pierced through the ear” (I.iii.318-19). Iago, a poetic villain, uses words, allegory and symbolism to “abuse Othello’s ear.”

When Iago says, “I am not what I am,” he echoes Jehovah’s claim, “I am that I am,” setting himself up as an anti-Christ (Exodus 3:14). However, Iago more aptly aligns with a dramatist, an allegorist, a poet even—a kind of anti-Shakespeare. Shakespeare defends poetry by opposing its devil-like adversary, Iago. The contrast between their works re-creates the familiar allegorical battle between good and evil, this time as a metaphor for authorship. In a manner evocative of the *Psychomachia*, the devil-poet Iago, and the beneficent creator, or god-Shakespeare contend for the soul of poetry.

Shakespeare uses allegory to critique allegory. Just as expounding upon the nature of evil necessarily purports a view about goodness, by figuring unethical allegory in Iago, Shakespeare

illustrates the nature of good allegory. What then opposes Iago's figuration as the devil? In short, Shakespeare does. In one, we see the other.

### Allegory and the Critics

Reading *Othello* as metapoetry demonstrates the inadequate and reductive application of allegory to readings of the play, contests the supposition that allegory precludes realism, and argues for a view of Iago's character that blurs typical classifications. Critical contention surrounding Iago's characterization centers on a dispute concerning the make-up of his soul. *What*, not *who*, critics ask, is Iago. Little debate surrounds the "who" of the Ensign's character: he is, first, a nasty, despicable villain and, second, a married man, a soldier, and a Venetian. Classifying his being proves stickier. The first in a long line of commentators, Othello asks what Iago is in hope of understanding why he orchestrates such horrific treachery. If a devil, Iago's actions would have answer already in religious terminology. As Bruce Clarke writes, "the figure of Satan is already a moralized trope" (18). Only after Iago's blood refutes his status as a pure devil, then, does Othello command, "demand of that demi-devil *why*" (V.ii.301-02; *emphasis added*) The questions "what" and "why" go hand in hand. Patterning Othello's methodology, scholarly inquiry seeks understanding through classification (the *what* will answer the *why*).

Three classifications dominate the scholarship: Iago is either demonic, human, or a theatrical type. Critics who figure Iago as the devil see his motives (when they grant him any at all) as secondary contributors to his evil. The real answer lies not inward but cosmically outward, determined by what rather than who he is. Such endeavors frequently translate the name or signifier, "Iago," to that of "Devil" or "Evil." John J. Chapman, for example, writes that Iago "is not a human being at all," but a "demon," "a black angel," and "the very Spirit of Evil" (46-47).

Allegorists reduce not only Iago's character but also the play itself to allegory. Imposing moral significance on the play, these scholars read the characters as personifications of biblical figures and the play's tragedy as a recounting of the Fall, Christ's atonement, or the Judgment. Familiar to each is a categorical condemnation of Iago as the Devil. Paul N. Siegel presents one of the most absolute allegorical interpretations. With Desdemona as Christ and Iago, Satan, Siegel concludes that Othello "traded divine goodness" to bring perdition to his soul, and that the play warns the audience of the evil within mankind (1078).

In a somewhat more sophisticated but equally symbolic reading of the play, R. N. Hallstead's article "Idolatrous Love: A New Approach to *Othello*" adds idol worship to the list of damnable and tragedy-producing sins, depicts Desdemona as illustrative both of Christ and the kingdom of heaven, casts Iago as representative of external forces of Evil, and seeks to reclaim Othello from damnation by demonstrating his final speech as evidence of true and acceptable repentance. Seeing, then, the action and themes of Shakespeare's work as a coded replication of his theatrical predecessor, the morality play, Hallstead concludes by stating, "[Shakespeare] 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" (124).

Allegorical readings of the play excite no small critical backlash and understandably so, for the allegorists, like Iago, use the trope reductively. Fueled by the presumption that allegory necessarily diminishes aesthetic merit, however, this censure aims not at correcting the limited application of allegory, but at defending Shakespeare against the charge that he wrote allegory. Perhaps favoring instead what John Keats refers to as "negative capability," or Shakespeare's willingness to immerse himself in the ambiguous, mysterious or unanswerable aspects of life, these critics oppose allegorical readings of *Othello* because of their distaste for allegory



generally, which they see as a predominantly religious imposition upon literature (133). Robert H. West articulates concisely this critical distaste: “To make *Othello* a stamped and certified *exemplum* of Christian sin and punishment is to take half of the art out of it and much of the honesty and most of the mystery” (343). Fitting *Othello* into the framework of a morality play or a biblical story invites formulaic interpretation, restricts the color of the play’s individual voice, and reduces the overall potential for meaning—inscribing the play within a story already told, repeatedly, and with its meaning fixed. The criticism targets reductive allegory without acknowledging the possibility for a dynamic use of the trope.

Classifications of Iago as Vice remove the religious connotations without setting aside allegorical figuration. Herein, history becomes the reductive force behind the allegory. Frank Kermode writes, “Over the ancient figure of the Vice—a familiar shape for abstract evil—Iago wears the garb of a modern devil” (1248). As a removable “garb,” Iago merely projects an image of devilishness. Vice animates his core. Likewise, in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains*, Bernard Spivack merges two classifiers. Iago is simultaneously Vice and an individual, not both at once, rather each in turn, and his motives prove half-truths (true to only half of his being) aimed at satisfying an audience that secretly wants, though intellectually cannot accept, an inhuman villain:

It is only such a character—circumstantially related to the other characters of the play, individualized as a person in time and space, and impelled by the conventional motives of human nature—that the Elizabethan playgoers of 1604 were prepared to accept in tragedy. That was why he was draped on top of a primordial figure of the stage who still titillated them powerfully, but in himself was no longer either fashionable or completely intelligible. (30)

Spivack subjects Shakespeare to an almost inevitable process—a historical, cultural, theatrical process that mandates rather than informs the creation of Iago. What is Iago? The product of an evolutionary chain of stage-villains and a medley of competing emotional and intellectual spectator demands. Why does he behave as he does? It was 1604.

Though the historical moment in which Shakespeare writes his play influences the creative work, Spivack's answer to the puzzle of one of Shakespeare's most famous villains comes, problematically, not from within the text, but entirely from without. In terms of reductive classification, then, he may as well call Iago a Devil. Spivack greatly minimizes Shakespeare's conscious role in the creation of his character. Ignoring the possibility that Shakespeare works not only within but also against the larger paradigm, Spivack rightly connects Iago and Vice, but incorrectly assumes that he, Spivack, not Shakespeare, highlights this connection.

While Spivack uses the slightly more secular figure of Vice to sidestep the condemnation against Christian allegory, a more general objection to allegorical readings arises in consequence of the misconception that allegory precludes realism. Much of the highest praise laid at Shakespeare's feet comes as adulation for his ability to write realistic characters. The "great intellect" of Shakespeare, Thomas Carlyle writes, "is a calmly *seeing* eye ... the most marvelous of all creators of souls ... the one most capable of ... placing living beings before us" (157-58). George Santayana calls Shakespeare's works "the truest portrait and best memorial of man" (158). Likewise, E. E. Stoll writes, "To [Shakespeare] man is not a fiddle with one string ... but a harp provided with many; and he fingers and sweeps them all" (175). Abstraction thus looms large, threatening (or so many critics fear) to minimize Shakespeare's poetic accomplishment of holding a mirror up to humanity.

Problematically, allegory seems to exclude realism. Edwin Greenlaw accounts for the decided difference between the works of Shakespeare and Spenser as follows: “Spenser’s Guion, like Lyly’s *Endymion*, is, for all the art of the poet, a type, a personification, not a person. But Hamlet is a person, and Lear, and Macbeth, and Othello” (qtd. in Dunlap 41). Not only do the characters’ status as people elevate the poetic work for Greenlaw, but also the achievement of personhood essentially excludes the possibility of allegory. Or, as Dunlap writes of Greenlaw’s analysis, “If Hamlet cannot be an allegorical figure because he is a person, it must follow as a general principle that any attempt to allegorize a humanly convincing piece of fiction is fallacious” (41). With criticism fearful of allegory, the task becomes to humanize Iago.

Setting aside Iago’s allegorical significance in favor of his humanity, however, is not the answer—not because the search for complexity or humanity is itself a fruitless endeavor, but because Iago’s metaphorical associations with abstract evil remains viable in spite of them. Critics who focus on Iago’s humanity pick him apart from the inside out to expose buried nobility, as Goddard does, or, like A. C. Bradley, to impose feelings of shame upon his brief encounters with Desdemona. Other defenders engage in “motive-hunting,” as they hold up one and then another of the motives the villain touts as inscrutable evidence of his individuality and realism. Yet even if taken as a whole, Iago’s pile of motives—hate, jealousy, sport, profit, lust, revenge, and most commonly, lack of preferment—do not necessitate an exclusion from devilish abstraction. Biblically speaking, all of the so-called human motives Iago offers likewise animate Lucifer. The effort to find a motive comes in reaction to a notion of motiveless evil, or pure evil, which Georges Bataille defines as “evil without a purpose, evil in which harm is caused for the sheer pleasure of witnessing hurt and destruction”—or, in other words, sport (qtd. in Smith 16).

*What* critics ask, is Iago, and so they hunt for a name other than Iago with which to fix, reduce, or confine understanding. Perhaps instead, we should reverse Othello's methodology and investigate the "why" to answer the "what." Iago cannot be altogether rescued from abstraction because Shakespeare, in his allegory about creative authorship, intentionally and metaphorically associates Iago with the devil. Seeing Iago as a devil-poet allows for an atypical classification. A devil-poet is not a devil, but a man, the creator of "devilish" works. Understanding of Iago's character cannot come by setting aside individual characterization or from doing away with allegorical figuration. In the end, it is quite reasonable that the attempts of some to allegorize Iago lead others to defend Shakespeare's reputation. After all, Iago does very literally oppose Shakespeare's genius.

### *MIMESIS*

Just as the apologists for poetry use allegory to point to the wisdom of the poets and the moral purpose of poetry, they likewise enlist imitation in the defense of both poetry and poets. Ideas of *mimesis* in literature usually concentrate on the sensible world—humanity's impulse to mimic either nature's material image or human actions. Plutarch articulates this view with his famous "speaking picture," and Plato's condemnation of poetry stems from this idea of representation. "A tragic poet," according to Socrates, "like all other imitators," "is thrice removed" from "the truth" (598). Itself corrupted, poetry will corrupt others, for "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers" (595). Poetry proves dangerous and inferior because, as a copy of a copy, it is outside of the philosophical realm of reason and truth.

Aristotle's reactionary view adopts Plato's definition of poetry as an art of imitation but contends for poetry's philosophical merit. Aristotle proposes to "treat poetry in itself" as its own system. The system should imitate natural process, as he does himself in his *Poetics*: "Following,

then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first” (1446a11). The functionality of the poetic body depends upon internal conformity, not its exact, external correspondence to the “real” world:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude. ... A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles. (1450b24-33)

(As a side note, cause here refers to a relationship of contingency, not the scientific idea of cause and effect.) Aristotle’s plot model emphasizes reason in the crafting of a causally structured, unified plot. It is in the artifice and not the surface realism of the artistic creation that poets imitate nature when, as the “maker of plots,” they create an organic body that becomes a new object in nature, fashioned after nature’s immaterial image.

Herein, Aristotle justifies poetry’s deviation from material fact. Poetry “is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (1451b7). Not bound by fact, poetry can express universal probability. “By the universal,” explains Aristotle, “I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability and necessity” (1451b9-10). Regrettably, Aristotle’s assertion that poetry aims at the universality of an eternal probability can lead to generic types. For this misconception, Aristotle must take partial blame. His claims that slaves are “worthless,”

women “inferior,” and that bravery is inappropriate to female characters, muddle the principles backing his idea of poetic imitation (1454a24). Probability does not mean according to type or common opinion; it means reasonable or likely according to the logic of the action and characters represented. A character can be in imitation of an inconsistent person, for example, but “he should be inconsistent in a consistent fashion” (1454a28). Also, it should be noted, probability does not refer to quantitative, mathematical models, which might suggest deterministic, mandated action. Rather, as a contingency based upon likelihood, probability within plot and characterization requires the author to attend to patterns of behavior and action to ensure believability.

For the plot to conform to the laws of probability and necessity, poets must write out the improbable by avoiding chance, “the irrational,” and intervention by machine, or the *Dues ex Machina*. “The tragic wonder,” Aristotle writes, will “be greater” without such aids, for “even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design” (1452a5). Chance involves a moral agent, one who can impose desire or fulfillment upon a situation, and is, therefore, external to the processes of nature. In nature, there is not chance, only spontaneity. The poet will better succeed, then, at making a “living organism” “which is true to life and yet more beautiful,” by—according to Aristotle—writing chance out of the plot so that the artistic work will function like nature rather than to merely look like nature (1454b11).

Though Sidney incorporates Aristotle’s creative view of *mimesis*, he institutes an ethical model for poetic imitation and replaces Aristotle’s emphasis on reason with an emphasis on the imagination. Sidney ascribes to poetry an ethical function—the responsibility to promote virtuous action in society. He says, the poets “imitate both to delight and teach, and delight to move men to take the goodness in hand” (10). Ethical poetry, then, does not depend on authentic

reproduction of material objects or fact; poets, in fact, cannot lie because they do not pretend to fact. Instead of a past relationship between poetry and the world, ethical poetry points to a future relationship between text and reader.

Sidney goes a step further than Aristotle when he claims that poets need not hold a mirror up to nature. The poet, he says, “doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh a matter for a conceit” (29). Derived from the Greek, the word poetry means “maker.” While Aristotle and Sidney both acknowledge the creative potential of the poet, Sidney differs from his predecessor because, for him, through the exercise of the imagination, the poet imitates the pattern of divine authorship:

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man’s wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man in his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the work of that second nature. Which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when *with the force of a divine breath* he brings forth things far surpassing her doings. (8)

Almost mystically, the poet materializes thought. Just as the Earth was without light before God said, “Let there be light,” so the poet, through words, transforms immaterial thoughts into creative reality, into genuine matter. By imitating God’s ways, mankind honors its creator, and by deviating from material fact he does not lie but creates a “second nature” and thereby touches the highest Truth. The poet does not imitate things as they are, but as they ought to be, and can thereby come nearer to the truth by deviating from material fact. Thus, poetry is an art of imitation, representing for Aristotle the universal and for Sidney the ideal.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare adopts even as he critiques Sidney's ethical model for poetry when he identifies an intrinsic consequence of the divine metaphor for poetic authorship. If the poet imitates the Supreme Creator, could the poet not also imitate the Father of all lies? As a devil-poet, Iago patterns his methods after the demonic, as we see when he extols "the divinity of hell":

Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on,

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,

As I do now. (III.iii.350-53)

Iago does not profess himself an actual devil. Rather, he *imitates* devils as they imitate heaven, and he revels in his capacity to give birth to monsters. If poetry can reflect the image of godliness, Shakespeare shows, it can also bear the image of the Devil. Poetry, then, can lie.

Problematically, if the poet can, like Iago, hide the true character of his work behind an outward show, discerning between a teacher worthy of emulation and liar can prove difficult. Shakespeare answers the dilemma with an Aristotelian approach to poetry. By combining Aristotle's organic theory of *mimesis* with Sidney's ethical model for poetry, Shakespeare institutes a measure of accountability for the mimetic creation. Inasmuch as he removes chance from his plot, poetic artifice—controlled by reason—guides the construction of the text. Like the battle between Shakespeare and Iago on the ground of allegory, another ensues on the field of *mimesis*. While Iago crafts unethical narratives saturated with illogicality and improbability to materialize his own imagination and will, Shakespeare writes an ethical narrative, governed by reason and probability to materialize an unseen reality.



To promote his narratives, Iago relies on chance and a false idea of probability. Not all of his meddling proves fruitful. He tries in vain to provoke Cassio to an actual indiscretion with Desdemona: “What an eye she has! methinks it sounds a parley to provocation” (II.iii.21). When that fails, he alters course, hoping to increase his probability for success by enlarging his opportunities to exploit chance occurrences. He plants seeds and pours poison, but time must deliver. Consequently, he fails to craft an artificially controlled, contingently structured plot model. Iago initiates the beginning, capitalizes upon the middle, and merely waits to see what happens in the end. Sometimes he gets lucky, as with the dropped handkerchief. In the end, though, all goes sour because ultimately he can influence but not control outcomes.

That Iago’s artifice depends upon a false notion of probability establishes his narratives as illogical. As has been shown, his allegories produce stereotypes by replacing a name or quality for an individual. He also uses the opposite movement to the same effect. While claiming to work in the province of the probable and the rational, Iago substitutes illogicality for reason and improbability for probability. The ruse hinges on a movement from whole to part, upon categorical assumptions about groups of people meant to inform the actions of an individual.

Iago’s logical constructions break down at their dependence upon types. “These Moors are changeable in their wills,” Iago generalizes to encourage Roderigo to deduce that the relationship between the newlyweds must end, and more preposterously, that in due course Roderigo will win a suit he already failed in (I.iii.346-47). Improbable at best, the claim requires the illogical replacement of whole for part, of type for individual. Also, Iago supplants Othello’s faith in his wife’s appearance of goodness with a claim about Venetian women generally: “In Venice they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience / Is not to leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown” (III.iii.201-03). Venetian ladies deceive their

husbands, and Desdemona deceived her father: “She that so young could give out such a seeming / To seal her father's eyes up close as oak,/ He thought 'twas witchcraft” (III.iii.209-11). From these claims, Iago intends Othello to conclude that because Desdemona could deceive her father, she must, like all other deceitful Venetian women, be hiding immoral acts from her husband. The leap in logic requires only that Othello associate Desdemona with a group of presumably deceptive people. The movement from whole to part creates an illogical improbability conveyed as a logical probability that from here forward will witness against Desdemona’s goodness and, truly, become the “net” that enmeshes “them all” (II.iii.361-62). Yet, Iago’s narrative is entirely improbable. As Emilia says, “What place? what time? what form? what likelihood?” (IV.ii.138).

Rather than imitating nature’s laws to manifest unseen truth, Iago’s lies materialize his own will and imagination as he crafts a “second nature,” as Sidney praises poets for doing, wherein he plays god. The world around him like the words on his tongue is malleable, vulnerable to interpretation, and subject to his will. Sir Francis Bacon says, “The imagination, not being tied to the laws of matter, may join what nature has severed and sever what nature has joined” (44). Iago takes such poetic license, but not in order to better represent the ideal or the universal, but to exert his own will. “Virtue? a fig!” says Iago, materializing and diminishing the ideal. His weak correlation between virtue and a fig hinges not on a relationship between the two things, but upon his concept of the ideal as insignificant. These signifiers could interchange without consequence because ultimately, for Iago, neither actually means anything. His ideas need not conform to either the natural, physical world, or to a philosophical or divine ideal. They need only coincide with his own will: “’tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. . . . why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills” (I.iii.319-21). Thus, like Sidney’s poets, Iago creates and materializes his

imagination, but he does so unethically, without accountability to reason or the material or immaterial reality of things, and he does so while pretending to author ideal, moral narratives.

By contrast, Shakespeare's rational and probable narratives materialize an unseen reality. Some of the alterations Shakespeare makes to Cinthio's narrative illustrate this point.

Shakespeare works decidedly against Cinthio's unrealistic and inconsistent characterization. He not only places the reductive types of his predecessor (Cinthio titles rather than names his characters) into the narratives of his villain, but he also renders his characters more believable.

Cinthio's story begins with the account of the marriage and great love of a "valiant" Moor and a "virtuous" and "noble lady," Disdemona: "they lived in such harmony and peace in Venice that no word ever passed between them that was not affectionate and kind" (2). Yet this account of great love contradicts almost every word and action that comes from the mouths of these characters. Disdemona fears she has made the wrong choice in marriage, and she categorically condemns Moors as being of "so hot a nature that every little trifle moves you to anger and revenge" (4). This disparaging remark comes from a woman who supposedly falls in love with a Moor, a man with whom she has previously never had a conflict. Moreover, the hot nature of the Moor emerges from a valiant man who has seemingly never been stirred by anger before.

The reader of Cinthio's plot learns of several other inconsistencies: the Ensign, despite falling "passionately in love" with Disdemona, never pauses at bringing about her complete destruction or at wielding himself the instrument of her death (he beats her with a sand-filled sock); the Ensign's wife, though intimately acquainted with the virtuous Disdemona, keeps her husband's plot concealed; and a reportedly loving husband participates in his wife's gruesome death, hides his part, and even after learning the truth, shows no evidence of repentance or

remorse. In Shakespeare's vastly more complicated characterization, these problems receive answer.

Shakespeare refutes Iago's and Cinthio's reductive and unbelievable characterizations together. Emilia understands Desdemona as an individual and sees through Iago's preposterous accusations: "I will be hang'd if some eternal villain, / Some busy and insinuating rogue, / Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office, / Have not devised this slander. I will be hang'd else" (V.ii.130-33). Emilia does not defend women in general—she acknowledges to Desdemona's incredulity that some women do commit adultery. She defends Desdemona. Likewise, Othello's noble nature and sincere love for Desdemona distances him from Cinthio's Moor, making categorical condemnations about Moors inconsequential to his character.

The dependence upon chance to promote the plot also troubles Cinthio's tale. Cinthio's Ensign capitalizes upon three chance moments: it merely happens that the Captain strikes a soldier; Desdemona acts without provocation in the course most perilous to her own good when she pesters the Moor for the Captain's re-instatement; the Moor chances to come home at the precise moment the Captain tries to return the handkerchief and so he interprets the Captain's hasty departure as proof of guilt. Regarding the Ensign's great luck and Desdemona's misfortune, Cinthio writes, "It seemed as if fate conspired with the Ensign to work the death of the unhappy Desdemona" (6). The role of chance to advance the plot bolsters this frightening conclusion.

Initially, two moments in Shakespeare's play seem to depend completely upon chance rather than to contain an air of design. First, the acquisition of the handkerchief, though a lucky stroke for Iago, in Shakespeare's narrative, as was noted previously, carries far deeper significance than if Shakespeare had left his source unchanged. Moreover, Iago acts more consistently when he uses his words to get Emilia to take the handkerchief for him than if he had,

like Cinthio's Ensign, stolen the item himself. Secondly, it may seem mere chance that Emilia knocks at the door only a second too late to save Desdemona. Yet what would have been improbable, really, is if she had arrived in time. For, Aristotle argues, chance events happen for the sake of something, but not for "the sake of their result." Had Emilia prevented murder by coming to brush her lady's hair, for example, she would have intervened by chance.

Shakespeare removes from his plot the chance events of Cinthio's tale. Cassio does not merely happen to fight; he engages in quarrel once intoxicated, a condition he arrives at after crafty provocation from Iago. Also, Desdemona does not just happen to adopt the course most perilous to her life and marriage. Iago not only persuades Cassio to seek the lady's help, but he also puts on a dramatic ruse at home that enlists Emilia in the same cause: "Good madam, do," Emilia says, pleading with Desdemona to take up Cassio's suit; "I warrant it grieves my husband / As if the cause were his" (III.ii.3-4). With these petitions, Desdemona makes an almost formal vow to pester Othello incessantly: "[B]efore Emilia here, / I give thee warrant of thy place. Assure thee, / If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it / To the last article. My lord shall never rest" (III.ii.19-26). Later, when preoccupied, Desdemona forgets about Cassio's suit, but Iago again prompts the lieutenant to seek Desdemona's help. Thus, to honor both friendship and her own word Desdemona proceeds at the worst possible moments. Herein, we see not chance but cunning and design. Shakespeare also uses Iago to remove Cinthio's third improbability. Rather than happening upon Cassio as he steals guiltily away from Desdemona's bedchamber, Iago plots a scene wherein Othello can "encave" himself and witness Cassio laugh about Bianca as though he talks of conquest with Desdemona. While hidden for this purpose, the jealous husband sees Cassio with the handkerchief. Though he did not come specifically to see the handkerchief, he did come to obtain proof of Desdemona's infidelity.

By writing his villain as a more calculating, willful scoundrel, then, Shakespeare absents his play from Cinthio's improbabilities. Iago's villainy within the play establishes him—and more particularly his false narratives—as (in large part) the source or cause of the action. Allan Gotthelf explains Aristotle's idea of a source: “each natural thing has within itself ‘a source of being moved-or-changed by another’ ... which is to say that ... each natural thing has *potentials*—potentials to change certain other things ... and potentials to be changed by certain other things” (211). Iago cannot claim full responsibility for the play's events, but he can take blame for activating the potential within others to act in certain ways. The logical cohesion and progression of the play depends upon Iago's role as a source or cause.

As a source, Iago is the beginning of a chain of causally linked actions; he sets the plot into action. Cinthio's tale begins by telling of the marriage between Disdemona and the Moor, Shakespeare's with a meddling rogue in the streets of Venice. Looking at each work as an organic whole, then, the logic of Cinthio's narrative circles back to the story's beginning to explain the chance events that take place. As a result, he concludes that Fate conspires in the death of Disdemona because of her disobedience to her parents and her unnatural pairing with a foreigner. Cause for the tragedy in *Othello* also circles back to the beginning of the play, but here we see not the elopement, but the *telling* of the elopement. Throughout the play, Iago's narratives set in motion a chain of events, and in a very literal way, cause tragedy. As Aristotle says in the *Physics*, where he expounds upon his idea of chance and probability presented in the *Poetics*, “either some natural or some intelligent agent is always the cause” (*Physics* 2.6, 198a4). *Othello* does not begin with a natural cause, with a storm as several of the plays do. Instead, Shakespeare inserts an “intelligent agent” into his narrative as the uncaused beginning.

According to the logic of Shakespeare's narrative, the idea that Desdemona needs to be sacrificed in order to restore order proves fallacious. In contrast, in Cinthio's false narrative the disobedient girl who weds unnaturally must be given up to pacify the gods. Shakespeare condemns this narrative by encompassing it within a villain's devil-like poetry. Cinthio's narrative endeavors to substitute Fate for artifice in the reader's mind, and thereby to present the tale as divine orchestration, as an object produced by nature itself, rather than as an object in nature, produced by a craftsman. In this way, Cinthio deceives, like Iago deceives. Both endeavor to conceal their artifice.

As Shakespeare inscribes Iago's narratives into the fabric of his plot, he reflects upon Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*. Othello accepts Iago's narrative about Desdemona's infidelity and therefore misreads the truth by falsely identifying the cause. Othello repeats the word "cause" three times when he enters Desdemona's bedchamber to kill her: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul, / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars, / It is the cause" (V.ii.1-3). Othello sees adultery as the cause of an inevitable chain of events in which he must now participate. In his mind, the logic of her crime mandates her death: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (V.ii.6). Were Othello tried for Desdemona's murder, jealousy or revenge would be posited as motives, but in his mind he does not participate in a crime. An external cause, not an internal motive propels him forward. He believes he acts harmoniously with the demands of a just and lawful universe, restoring order, not setting in motion new consequences attached to a new crime. In other words, the nature of her actions—more specifically, the nature of the act of adultery—causes him to kill her, but he is not himself a cause. Othello cannot see the whole picture, his magnitude is off, because he believes Iago's narrative. Eventually he recognizes his folly and the verity of Desdemona's defense (which she speaks to Emilia), "I never gave him

cause” (III.iv.157). Upon learning the truth, he reconstructs the story into proper order, placing Iago’s lies at the beginning and his own act of murder in the middle.

Shakespeare’s causal narrative materializes an unseen reality. Iago’s immaterial depravity becomes a *physical* reality. In the play’s final scene, Lodovico says, “O Spartan dog ... Look on the tragic loading of this bed; / *This is thy work*: the *object* poisons sight; / Let it be hid” (V.ii.361-65; *emphasis added*). Symbolically, the nuptial bed becomes the lovers’ deathbed and instead of bringing forth life, bears the villain’s unnatural creation delivered by “wit” and “dilatatory time” (II.iii.372-73). Iago labors to bring this “monstrous birth” into “the world’s light” throughout the play, and this work—not token signifiers of evil—reveals his unnatural thoughts and his monstrous existence (I.iii.404). His works become an object in nature that witnesses to the depravity of his mind.

While Shakespeare makes Iago’s monstrousness a physical reality, his illogicality he displays symbolically. Iago cannot effectively conclude his narratives. Desdemona and Iago’s banter early on displays a progressive disintegration of Iago’s verbal capacity. The longer he talks, the worse he does. After the initial praise he invents for a “fair and wise” woman, Desdemona responds favorably, “Well praised!” Next, his praise for one who is “black and witty,” evokes from Desdemona a groan, “Worse and worse.” His following comments on one who is “fair and foolish” lead Desdemona to denounce his wit as “old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh in the alehouse,” and the “miserable praise” he gives to one “that’s foul and foolish” causes her to exclaim, “O heavy ignorance!” Finally, heavy condemnation comes for the praise he offers “a deserving woman.” Desdemona calls him out on his most striking failure as a poet: he cannot conclude effectively. She says, “O most lame and impotent conclusion” (II.i.161). Like this short expostulation of Iago’s cleverness, the play itself offers a prolonged test of the villain’s



wit. Throughout the text, his rhetorical power dwindles noticeably until the final scene when he can do little more than shout and stomp in hopes of quieting down his wife. The scene concludes with his silence, with his complete verbal incapacity. Iago's plotting comes to a "lame and impotent conclusion." His inability to conclude the narratives he constructs, his dependence on external factors and chance, and his ultimate failure in bringing about the ends he desires, not only bring about his defeat, but they also underscore his illogicality and therefore his ultimate failure as a poet.

To look at *Othello* as an organic whole, then, one must see the effect of Iago's narratives within the larger dramatic structure, and the ways in which Shakespeare does what his poetic villain fails to do—carry the work through to its logical conclusion. Iago uses his rhetorical power, his witchcraft, to temporarily alter the nature of the characters as they react to imaginary circumstances. Shakespeare uses his power to expose these lies by allowing his characters to face their ugliest sides while under the influence of a drug or catalyst, but he restores them to their proper frame of mind by the play's conclusion. Iago's creations must fail. Aristotle says that in art and nature, "monstrosities will be failures in the purposive effort" (*Physics* 2.8, 199b4). Iago does not model natural processes, and so his creations do not have within them the germ of life, so to speak; they must be monstrous and exposed as such over time. *Othello* begins with the villain's monstrous, unnatural narratives and concludes with his silence. These narratives, not Desdemona and Othello's marriage, disrupt the natural order, an order Shakespeare restores when hero and heroine die with an avowal of love for the other.

Shakespeare gives proper perspective to Cinthio's narrative and demonstrates that poetic *mimesis* is an ethical act. Cinthio does what only seems contradictory: he writes an unethical moral tale. To merely imitate Cinthio's plot and characters falls short of imitating the work as a

whole, as an influential object in nature. Shakespeare enables the audience to attain proper perspective, to see not only Cinthio's tale retold but also the effects of his creation. By writing Iago as a cause, Shakespeare condemns Iago and Cinthio together. After all, it is Iago who articulates Cinthio's moral of disobedience and miscegenation. "[A]nd much I fear," says Cinthio's heroine, "that I shall prove a warning to young girls not to marry against the wishes of their parents, and that the Italian ladies may learn from me not to wed a man whom nature and habitude of life estrange from us" (Cinthio 28). Significantly, Shakespeare includes these teachings in his play, but Iago not Shakespeare purports them—they are among the villain's lies. Because Iago and Cinthio's narratives alike act as a source for change in their surroundings, it can be seen that for good or ill, poetry has ethical consequences.

#### *Mimesis and the Critics*

The application of Aristotle's theory of *mimesis* to *Othello* promotes a kind of realism largely foreign to modern criticism and challenges the general consensus that Iago's logic reveals Shakespeare's thematic critique of scientific reasoning. Both the presence and the absence of chance in the play perturb critics. Thomas Rhymer condemns *Othello* centuries ago as an "improbable lye" "fraught . . . with improbabilities" (134). Joel B. Altman echoes Rhymer to praise Shakespeare for escaping the confines of the probable to exploit "the erotic and improbable energies of the imagination" (151). Rhymer and Altman both note the lack of sufficient time for the alleged infidelity to have occurred, mistaking Iago's improbable narrative for Shakespeare's.

Other critics note the absence of chance in the play. Trevor McNeely summarizes the long-standing frustration at the role of chance in the play with these words from Bradley:

Again and again a chance word from Desdemona, a chance meeting of Othello and Cassio, a question which stars to our lips and which anyone but Othello would have asked, would have destroyed Iago's plot and ended his life.  
(235)

McNeely answers by calling attention to Shakespeare's artifice. He writes, "The meeting does not take place and the question is not asked because Shakespeare does not *let* them take place or be asked! There is no such thing as 'chance' in this play!" (235). Othello, after all, is not really a man and, as a fictitious character, Iago does not have control over his plot for he must "obey the whims of his creator" (235). These observations lead McNeely to conclude with Rhymer that *Othello* truly is a farce. He recalls our attention to the play's fictionality, but offers no explanation for the poetic significance of the absence of chance or its mimetic implications. *Othello* does draw attention to poetic artifice, but it is hardly a farce.

As Bradley laments, chance could prevent the tragedy. However, that chance could have averted the tragedy is exactly the point. Othello never makes inquiry or statements that exonerate Desdemona precisely because he does not seek to dismiss her from guilt. He never sets out to prove her innocent and therefore (according to Aristotle's logic), discovering her innocence could only happen by chance. From the outset, Othello tries to prove her guilty: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore; / Be sure of it" (III.iii.359). Even in the most exasperating of circumstances, that Othello does not realize his error prior to the murder accords with the reason and logic internal to his character. Othello acts with the conviction of absolute certainty, has a tendency to allegorize and see the world in absolutes, and views himself as an agent of justice. It is not chance that could have averted the tragedy, but proper judgment, real justice, and undistorted narratives about women and Moors.

No one mistakes *Othello* for reality or history in action. Why then does McNeely see fit to recall our attention to the play's unreality? He does so because critics, himself included, separate realism and artifice. The frustration Bradley expresses, and the answer McNeely gives, hinge on the idea that detecting the poet's artifice diminishes the play's realism or believability. McNeely rightly points our attention to Shakespeare's hand in the creation of *Othello*, and he rightly exclaims that "there is no such thing as 'chance'" in the play. However, it is precisely in the elimination of chance that Shakespeare conforms to an idea of realism largely foreign to modern criticism, an idea that depends on the presence and not the absence of poetic artifice. The goal of Aristotle's *mimesis*, after all, is not raw realism, where characters say just the kind of thing they might say in real life whether or not it has any bearing on the action of the play; that is not what he means by probability. Nuttall praises Roland Barthes for articulating well such realism in his essay, "L'Effet de réel." Barthes discusses a barometer in Flaubert's description of a room. Nuttall explains that the barometer's "sole function is to suggest reality" (55). "The barometer, he continues, "is not there because of truth (there is really no barometer ...) but, so to speak, because of its true-ish-ness" (55-56). The only purpose of the barometer, then, is to affect the reader with the impression of a real scene.

The script of *Othello* does not promote the kind of natural realism Barthes discusses. In Shakespeare's play, every word is in place, and every *trifle* bears deep significance. Each second of the play attests to the presence of a highly skilled craftsman working with his materials in imitation of nature's ways: according to purpose, design, and a cohesive internal logic. Shakespeare works deliberately to ensure that chance plays no part. Not, as McNeely claims, because *Othello* is a farce, but because Shakespeare follows Aristotle's theory of imitation. "For a thing," says Aristotle, "whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an

organic part of the whole” (*Poetics* 1451a35). The skilled poet puts everything in place according to design; *mimesis* depends entirely upon artifice. Knowing that most people would have said something to avert the tragedy is not enough. What matters is that Othello could only have made such a statement by chance. According to Aristotle’s *mimesis*, then, by writing chance out of the play, Shakespeare better represents the reality of things, the nature of nature so to speak.

Partially because Shakespeare uses Iago to write chance out of the play—the villain is, in effect, the reason for the disruption of order—the claim that Iago is illogical finds little support in criticism. As the critics discuss the nature of Iago’s reason and the failure of Othello’s, they mean to express Shakespeare’s own trepidation about the limitations of reason. Hardin Craig concludes that Iago “offers a grand perversion of the theory that good is the end and purpose of reason” (27). Likewise, Philip C. McGuire uses Iago to point to the general failure of reason. Iago himself cannot be understood through reason, McGuire argues, for he is “the reality of rationally inscrutable human evil” (209). Consequently, while reason fails in the play, our own reason also fails because it cannot answer the “why” of Iago’s actions. Also critiquing the limitations of reason, Terence Hawkes uses Thomas Aquinas’ division between two orders of reason, *ratio superior* and *ratio inferior*, to align Iago with lower, scientific reasoning. Unlike higher reason—which has an “angelic quality,” “no ratiocination,” and which infuses knowledge in an “intuitive flash”—the lower reason “involves the logical, almost syllogistic progression of the mind from fact to fact in a discursive movement towards the contingent truths of the world” (162). Hawkes argues that like Adam, Othello sins in his quest for knowledge, and when he asks for proof, he falls into Iago’s world of lower reasoning (169). Expanding upon Hawkes’ division, Jared R. Curtis contrasts reason with love to condemn Iago because he can only understand love

rationally. Truly, E. K. Weedin's assessment that "*Othello* does finally present a bleak estimate of the efficacy of any sort of reasoning," encapsulates the trend in criticism to view the play as Shakespeare's denouncement of reason (307).

Yet *Othello* does not condemn reason generally. Reason triumphs early on in the play when the exercise of reason leads the Duke of Venice to announce with confidence that the Turks are "not for Rhodes" (I.iii.31). Reason is not the problem. Rather, it is the emotional appeals that overcome reason, the assay of reason, and the unwillingness to remain in doubt long enough to exercise good judgment that cause Othello to apply poor reason. *Othello* does not portray the failure of reason so much as show the consequence of its absence. Iago's illogicality means that at any time his claims could have been rationalized away.

Shakespeare aims not at challenging the value of reason and probability so much as to reclaim them as the proper domain of poetry. Probability and reason are not confinable to the sensible world or to the domain of science, for the poetic imagination can better represent the reality of things by looking beyond the material world. The division between science and poetry on the basis of reason is a fictitious imposition. The inadequacy of the sensible world to attest to truth—the sensible misperceptions that lead Othello to judge poorly—cannot be said to manifest Shakespeare's suspicion of science (nor his acceptance). The central issues at hand pertain to poetry: the bifurcation between reality and appearance traces to classical disputations about poetry. Plato denies the role of reason in poetry, and Aristotle, like Shakespeare, defends it. Shakespeare's imagination and his reason function together, making the separation between them irrelevant. In fact, reason becomes, effectually, a subset of the imagination. The critics who align Iago with rationalism misread because they do not distinguish Iago's capacity to assay reason from his truly unreasonable narratives.

## CONCLUSION

As Shakespeare reflects self-consciously on allegory and *mimesis*—a poetic tool and a poetic theory that both confront directly the gap between appearance and reality—he offers a powerful defense for poetry. Through his villain, his devil-poet, he embodies the main attacks launched against poetry—that it corrupts society and that it is the mother (or here Father) of lies—and then supersedes these assaults by demonstrating first, the presence of allegory and poetic interpretation in the social world outside of poetry, and second, the power of an ethical poet to expose villainy. Thus, Shakespeare goes a step beyond the defenders of poetry because he accepts the attacks on poetry but turns them outward to expose symbolic and unethical narratives in both poetry and society. While the artifice of the poet is undeniable, those who interpret and represent reality in poetic fashion, but like Iago conceal their artifice behind the mask of authority, history, Fate, or divine mandate, prove to be the real liars and the ones responsible for societal corruption. These persons remain dangerous only until they are exposed by the inadequacy of their logic or else the monstrosity of their works, at which point they face the torture most appropriate and exacting for their unethical authorship—silence. In contrast to these two-faced representations of truth (within and without poetry), ethical poets can use allegory dynamically, acknowledge their artifice, and join the reason and the imagination together.

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