

Spring 2003

# Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Evil

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## Citation

Schapiro, B.A. (2003). Psychoanalysis and the problem of evil: Debating Othello in the classroom. *American Imago*, 604, 481-499.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2004.0010>

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Schapiro, Barbara A.

American Imago, Volume 60, Number 4, Winter 2003, pp. 481-499 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/aim.2004.0010](https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2004.0010)

AMERICAN  
**IMAGO**

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND  
THE HUMAN SCIENCES  
VOLUME 60 • NUMBER 4 • WINTER 2003

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BARBARA A. SCHAPIRO

## **Psychoanalysis and the Problem of Evil: Debating *Othello* in the Classroom**

Since “evil” has become a term much in vogue in our current political climate, it seems ever more important to explore its psychic meanings and origins. What, first of all, do analysts and therapists mean by the word “evil”? The grandiosity of the term, as well as its traditionally religious connotations, perhaps make it unsuited to the therapeutic context. As Ruth Stein (2002) has commented, “‘Evil’ may sound too allegorical or too concrete, too essentialist or too objective for psychoanalytic ways of thinking that are oriented towards the study of individual subjectivity” (394). In an article entitled “Evil in the Mind of the Therapist” (2001), Robert Winer surveyed a number of practitioners and found a general consensus that “an evil person is someone who knowingly deeply hurts innocent people” (613). The emphasis here, he says, is on the “knowingly”—conscious deliberateness is key—as it is on the extremity of the hurt inflicted: “negating the other person’s soul, . . . destruction as an end in itself” (613). Winer discusses how his own psychological engagement with a patient works against his ever seeing that patient as evil, “no matter how outrageous his crimes” (614). The social psychologist Roy Baumeister (1997) has observed that even serial killers never see themselves as evil but “regard themselves as victims” (47). Winer suggests that it is easier to experience characters in books and movies as evil because we know them only through their evil actions. Even so, he concludes, “Our inability to identify with a character we understand to be evil seems connected for me to our inability to acknowledge our own destructiveness” (621).

This paper was presented at a panel, “The Classroom as Psychoanalytic Space,” at the October 2002 conference of the International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

*Othello* (1604) is a text that forces us to consider the nature and problem of evil, as well as the difficulty of acknowledging our own destructiveness. The play is also enjoying a sort of renaissance in our present time, as several recent film and television adaptations attest.<sup>1</sup> The vexed questions that *Othello* raises, I believe, are particularly timely: How do we understand Iago, for instance, as a representation of evil? Is he a figure of irrational destructiveness for whom we can find no motivation, no understanding based on reason or cause? Does he suggest an instinctual basis of evil, a destructiveness intrinsic to the human psyche, as Freud or Melanie Klein would have it? Or should he be interpreted as inextricable from Othello and his anxieties about his race and Desdemona's love for him? Can Iago be interpreted as a projection of Othello's enraged but disavowed destructiveness, a destructiveness that is in fact rooted in the terrors of humiliation and disintegration that narcissistic injury and erotic dependency can arouse? This paper will consider these questions, along with various responses of students in my classroom, as they speak to current debates in the play, in psychoanalysis, and in our culture.

Critics have long pondered the issue of why Shakespeare deliberately stripped the Iago character of clear motives when he reconceived Giraldi Cinthio's original story from the *Hecatommithi*, a collection of tales printed in Italy in the sixteenth century. In Cinthio's story, the Iago figure, known as the Ensign, is himself passionately in love with Desdemona. He is also convinced that Desdemona is secretly in love with the Captain (Cassio), and thus the Ensign's wicked machinations are spurred by genuine sexual jealousy. Shakespeare removes this motive, mentions Othello's promotion of Cassio over Iago, and leaves only a few vague, passing references to possible sexual jealousy. Iago alludes twice to his suspicions that both Othello and Cassio may have slept with his wife: "I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat" (2.1.295–6); and only parenthetically, "(For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too)" (2.1.307). When Iago first refers to the rumor about Othello and his wife, however, he adds oddly, "I know not if it be true, / But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do, as if for surety" (1.3.379–381)—lines that remind us of Coleridge's

(1814) famous alliterative description of the “motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity” (315).

In a recent talk entitled “Psychoanalysis after September 11” (2002), Jonathan Lear referred to Iago as a representation of such motiveless malignity in unconscious life. Iago embodies, Lear argued, a hatred that cannot be rationalized, an evil not based on reasons. Lear drew a distinction between jealousy and envy; while the jealous Othello attacks because he believes he has lost the good object or been betrayed by it, the envy that Iago represents “attacks the good because it is good.” Lear shares the Kleinian view of an innate, instinctual destructiveness. This perspective indeed offers one possible interpretation of Iago. The text also allows, however, for an alternative reading that I would like to pursue. I wonder as well about the social implications of construing destructiveness or evil as acausal and uncontingent. I am especially wary because my students of late seem to be increasingly comfortable with such a view as they voice current cultural attitudes. I happened to be teaching *Othello* in the fall of 2001, a few weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>. I noticed a real difference from previous years in the class discussion of “motiveless malignity”: students embraced it far more readily and unquestioningly. Many expressed the view that Iago represented the reality of evil, an evil all the more powerful and terrifying because it was not based on reasons and could not be understood. The student who spoke most eloquently on this matter was also the one who had taken the most aggressive, militaristic stance in an earlier discussion on terrorism and the war in Afghanistan.

This past fall, when I taught the play again, I asked my students to respond in writing to the issue of motiveless malignity. More than twice as many students as not wrote that they believed in such a phenomenon. “I do believe in motiveless malignity,” one stated. “All you have to do is watch the 6 o’clock news every night. Society is full of people who do evil things just because the opportunity is there.” Several referred to 9/11 and the terrorists. A female student declared, “Yes, I believe in such a thing. Just check the hallways in any middle school or high school.” Another student wrote about coming out of a Wendy’s restaurant to find “a punky guy” sitting in the

car parked next to hers, “just spitting over and over into my car. Where was the motivation in that? I didn’t do anything to initiate such a mean and nasty thing for him to do to my car.” A number of responses referred to Iago and evildoers in general as simply being “crazy.” Some of the more thoughtful responses, however, expressed doubts. One student wrote that although we may not see it explicitly expressed in the play, Iago’s malignity had to arise, he believed, “out of feelings of inferiority.” Another asserted, “Just because we cannot see the motive does not mean a motive does not exist.” And finally, one wrote, “We, as humans, are all complex, unique, and sometimes imbalanced individuals. ‘Motiveless malignity’ is incorrect, in my estimation. To me, some people operate under their own set of rules which the rest of us just can’t understand.”

Psychoanalysis can support a view of Iago’s evil as deeply contingent and bound up in a relational history and narrative, a narrative that can indeed provide a motivational base. This view also draws on Klein, though on the concept of splitting rather than the death instinct. The fact is that Iago would have no power over Othello were Othello not in love; Iago’s destructiveness can best be understood, I believe, within the context of Othello’s love. Perhaps the play enacts not the psychic reality of destructiveness as an innate, irrational force, but the psychic reality of splitting. As Klein and Fairbairn have theorized, in the immature psyche, enraged, bad, destructive feelings are split off and projected in order to protect the self and its good, loved object—a primitive defense that can always be remobilized. The very purity of Desdemona’s goodness and the absoluteness of Iago’s evil support a view of the play as a dramatization of splitting. It is possible to understand Iago, in psychic terms, as representing a split-off, repudiated destructiveness within Othello himself.

The interpretation of Iago as a symbolic manifestation of a spirit within Othello in fact has a long critical history. F. R. Leavis (1937), for instance, claimed that Iago “represents something that is in Othello—in Othello the husband of Desdemona: the essential traitor is within the gates” (141). The Jungian critic Maud Bodkin (1934) also considered Iago to be the “shadow-side of Othello” (245). More recently,

Arthur Kirsch (1981) writes that Iago “is a projection of at least a part of Othello’s own psyche” (28), and Janet Adelman (1992) too views Iago as the “psychic repository for Othello’s own unrecognized doubts” (269). In an interesting oedipal reading of the play, Edward Snow (1980) interprets Iago “not as the dark, impulsive id but the punitive, sex-hating superego” (409). Most persuasive is Snow’s point about the entire play’s “texture of disavowal” (385) and the pervasiveness of repression throughout the text. Richard Wheeler (1985) similarly discusses the “excluded violence” and “unintegrated disruptive tendencies” (205) that characterize this play. He suggests that “in making Iago into a scapegoat for Othello’s guilt, [Shakespeare] is still partly in need of a detachable villain to blur the clarity of the tragic impossibility of joining Othello’s heroic manhood with Desdemona’s sexual and nurturant womanhood” (205).

What is significant about such perspectives in our consideration of the psychoanalysis of evil is that they allow us to conceive of Iago’s destructiveness as responsive rather than as purely instinctual. Iago’s destructiveness is inseparable from Othello’s destructiveness, and that destructiveness is a response to the intolerable vulnerability and self-endangerment that Othello’s love for Desdemona, and his status as a black man in relation to a white aristocratic woman, involves. As Stephen Mitchell (1993) has argued, aggression need not be understood as an instinct or drive, but as a “pre-wired potential that is evoked by circumstances perceived subjectively as threatening or endangering” (161). Among many contemporary Kleinians, Mitchell explains, “envy and aggression are recontextualized as reactions to and flights from dependency and its attendant anxieties. It is the desperate effort to ward off depressive anxiety consequent to the dependent object relation that is regarded as the well-spring of destructiveness” (1997, 127). The relational theorist Sue Grand expands on this view in her study, *The Reproduction of Evil* (2000). She explicitly links evil with trauma and what she calls “catastrophic loneliness.” Trauma, she believes, “induces death anxiety; this death anxiety is metabolized and redissociated through pathological, narcissistic modalities” (69). The traumatized personality, she argues, is “perennially rooted in narcissistic terrors and narcis-

sistic forms of defense” (69), of which splitting is among the most prominent.

Harold Bloom (1998) offers an intriguing interpretation of Iago that indeed posits traumatic narcissistic injury at the root of Iago’s destructive nature. Bloom compares Iago to Satan, with Othello in the role of God: “Othello was everything to Iago, because war was everything; passed over, Iago is nothing, and in warring against Othello, his war is against ontology” (435). Bloom discusses Iago’s “sickening loss of being” as a result of Othello’s passing him over for promotion (the motive the text emphasizes most, though most critics find it insufficient). “The ontological shock of that rejection,” Bloom continues, “is Shakespeare’s original invention and is the trauma that truly creates Iago, no mere wicked Ensign but rather a genius of evil who has engendered himself from a great Fall” (436). Although Bloom eschews psychoanalytic language, his reading can nevertheless be understood in psychoanalytic terms. Bloom’s Iago is the traumatized figure facing the “ontological devastation” or, in Grand’s words, the “catastrophic loneliness” pursuant to an overwhelming narcissistic blow.

Christopher Bollas (1995) has discussed Milton’s Satan in quite similar terms. Bollas sees Satan as “having experienced not simply a loss of a paradisaical place but a catastrophic annihilation of his position. Ruptured from the folds of nurturance, the Satanic subject bears a deep wound and good is presented now as an enviously delivered offering” (184). In the figure of Satan, Bollas claims, Milton reveals “the nature and effect of trauma” by “illuminating how loss of love and catastrophic displacement can foster an envious hatred of life mutating into an identification with the anti-life” (184). This interpretation parallels Grand’s discussion of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and her view of the monster as “filled with the desolation and grief that Frankenstein has disavowed in himself” (137). Shelley’s novel, Grand argues, “is an elucidation of love repudiated becoming hatred; of the humiliation that transmutes tenderness into vengeance” (135).

This conception of narcissistic trauma as the structural origin of evil in fact governs Tim Blake Nelson’s 2001 film adaptation of *Othello*, entitled *O*. The film is set in a contempo-



rary private high school, and the Iago character (Hugo) is more at the psychic center of the drama here than Othello (O). In this version of the story, Iago/Hugo is given a dominating, high-powered father, the school's basketball coach, who ignores his son and has transferred all his paternal affection to O as the team star. The movie presents several scenes that effectively portray Hugo's bitter sense of emotional abandonment in relation to his father, as well as his feelings of isolation and humiliation. The film gives explicit representation to psychological dynamics that perhaps implicitly inform the original Shakespeare text.

Bollas's argument about the traumatic structure of evil also suggests a way to understand Shakespeare's deliberate stripping away of motives and the lack of personal complexity in the characterization of Iago. In a discussion of the serial killer, Bollas describes him as "someone who has been allegorized: he is squeezed into an identification with one quality, evil, that obliterates other psychic qualities. . . . He identifies with the force of trauma and out of this fate develops a separate sense of the work of trauma, which, like Lucifer, he turns into his profession: squeezing others into his frame of reference" (218–19). Iago's allegorical status, in other words, can be interpreted as representing a distillation of the force of trauma in which other psychic qualities have been obliterated. We can all still recognize the Iago within ourselves not because he is a part of our instinctual nature but because, as Bollas argues, "we all have experienced shocking betrayals in an otherwise trustworthy parental environment" and because "we all have transformations to the allegorical plane when we identify with the force of a feeling—in the case of evil, the force of emptiness sponsored in our selves by the shock *and* its unconscious marriage with the destructive sides of our personalities" (220).

*Othello* as a whole, I believe, is about narcissistic trauma or self-endangerment in the context of dependency, a pattern enacted on several levels. The play demonstrates, moreover, the defensive destructiveness and splitting that result from such trauma. Women are inextricable from this context of dependency, as the original dependency is maternal. Othello's narcissistic anxieties—his fears of "ontological devastation"—

are bound up with fantasies of female betrayal and rejection. Feminist critics have indeed alerted us to the frequency in Shakespeare's plays of humiliation and breakdown fantasies in relation to women and female sexuality. Madelon Sprengnether, for instance, has argued persuasively that the general structure of male dominance and violence against women throughout Shakespeare's plays "may be seen to obscure deeper patterns of conflict in which women as lovers, and perhaps more important as mothers, are perceived as radically untrustworthy" (1980, 161). In Shakespeare's world, a man betrayed by a woman represents the greatest humiliation, for it places him in a position of weakness, a "feminine" posture. "To recover his honor," Sprengnether observes, "he must destroy the man or woman who is responsible for his humiliation, for placing him in a position of vulnerability" (154). Valerie Traub (1992) has also recognized an essential paranoia in the representation of female bodies and masculine desire in Shakespeare's plays. The idealization of women cloaks an underlying mistrust. "Othello's belief in woman's power of deception," she states, "lies just under the surface of his idolization" (33). The demonic Iago, in other words, is inseparable from the angelic Desdemona, and both are part of a single story about self-endangerment in relation to women.

Adelman (1992) suggests a socio-historical context for understanding the distrust of women, the fantasies of a contaminating femaleness, and the fears of maternal abandonment that so infuse Shakespeare's plays. She considers the custom of wet-nursing prevalent during Shakespeare's time: "Wet-nursing merely gave the child two psychic sites of intense maternal deprivation rather than one: first, the original maternal rejection signaled by wet-nursing itself; and then the weaning—routinely by the application of wormwood or another bitter-tasting substance to the nipple—and abrupt separation from the nurse-mother he or she might have known for two or three years" (5). Othello's relationship with Desdemona, Adelman contends, is steeped in anxieties around maternal dependency. She points out how Othello initially responds to Desdemona precisely for her "maternal pity" (64)—"She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd, / And I lov'd her that she did pity them" (1.3.167–68). By becoming susceptible to

Desdemona's pity, Adelman argues, "Othello unmakes the basis for his martial identity, exchanging it for one dependent on her," and this dependency "reawakens the sense of vulnerability that Othello had managed to conceal from himself through his identity as a soldier" (65).

From the beginning of the play, Othello's language—the metaphors of turbulent seas and storms—when referring to the intensity of his love for Desdemona betrays potential threat and a danger of disastrous boundary loss: "For know, Iago, / But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / for the seas' worth" (1.2.23–27). When reuniting with her in Cyprus, he can barely contain himself: "O my soul's joy! / If after every tempest come such calms, / May the winds blow till they have wakened death. / And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas / Olympus-high, and duck again as low / As hell's from heaven" (2.1.182–87). And of course, the famous lines, "And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.91–2), suggest an engulfing disintegration deeply linked for Othello with love and its potential loss. Several critics have interpreted the frequent associations of death with Othello's expressions of passion for Desdemona as connected to the regressive fusion fantasies of primary narcissism.<sup>2</sup>

Othello's anxieties in relation to women are also bound up with the issue of race: the Moor's outsider status as a black man in a white, Christian society is crucial to appreciating the extremity of his narcissistic vulnerability. As Stephen Greenblatt (1980) asserts, Othello's "blackness—the sign of all that the society finds frightening and dangerous—is the indelible witness to Othello's permanent status as an outsider, no matter how highly the state may value his services or how sincerely he has embraced its values" (240). Marianne Novy (1984) has argued that "Othello's desire for a love that is total fusion is, in part, his attempt to escape from his underlying sense of separateness" (133). In addition, the text reveals how Othello internalizes the cultural associations of blackness with dirt, pollution, and sexuality, and that dynamic contributes to a self-contempt that is defended against by the idealization of Desdemona. As Snow explains, Desdemona's chastity "is significant to Othello only as a mirror for his own idealized self-

image. . . . The possibility of Desdemona's infidelity causes him to see himself (as if for the first time) as black, and to regard that blackness as a measure of sexual corruption as well as social disgrace" (401). Snow points to Othello's lines, "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face" (3.3.443-44), as evidence.

Novy (1984) has discussed how the racial stereotype of the Moor overlaps with the gender stereotype of the woman in the play: "conventional Renaissance European views would see both as excessively passionate" (130). Cassio's prostitute Bianca, as Joyce Green MacDonald (2000) has argued, is "racialized as black, assigned a set of negative sexual characteristics associated with Africa and Africans" (196). Cassio calls her a "monkey" and a "fitchew," both of which, MacDonald points out, are animals associated with strong sex drives. Bianca, she explains, "is racialized as black because of her sexual activity outside of patriarchal controls over the disposition of her body" (197). MacDonald also notes the tradition of casting the role of Bianca with a black actress in stage productions of the play. In *Othello*, the racial anxieties and the sexual anxieties reinforce each other.

A number of critics have stressed the importance of Othello's race while also arguing for his character's psychological universality. Adelman states, "Shakespeare does not 'other' the psychological processes explored in the play by making them only the consequences of Othello's race; instead, he uses Othello's blackness to bring particular poignance and intensity to dilemmas commonly shared" (275). While I agree with that statement, some critics generalize Othello's severely split condition to a degree I find unconvincing. The Freudian Snow, for instance, sees the superego as a universal alienating force in the human psyche, and thus he claims that "Othello's Moorishness merely forces him to live out with psychotic intensity the metaphors of self-contempt that every civilized white man can be brought to experience in his sexual relations with a woman" (400). Does every man really harbor self-contempt in his sexual relations with a woman?

From a different perspective, Lacanian critics also universalize splitting in their view of subjectivity as always threatened and disrupted by the alien other within. In a thoughtful article

on racism and “the other,” Stephen Frosh (2002) argues that the Kleinian view of otherness—the projection of unwanted aspects of the self onto the denigrated other—is too limited. Following Laplanche and Lacan, he stresses “the *essential* alienness of human subjectivity” (395) and the way in which the unconscious itself functions as an “internal other” that “radically disturbs the rather homely sense that each of us is ‘master’ of himself or herself, and in doing so it opens the way to a collapse of confidence in the self, to a sense that however robust it might seem, it has already been infiltrated by something subjectively inexplicable, something that the ‘self’ is not” (394). This perspective, I believe, can indeed help us to understand Othello’s unstable, divided condition—the way in which, as Greenblatt has argued, Othello’s identity has been infiltrated by the norms of white Christian culture—but I do not see it as normative in general. Why is the other always and necessarily such a threatening presence to or in the self? Winnicott (1969), in his discussion of “object use,” for instance, has shown how recognition of otherness can be a liberating, even joyous discovery. The internalized other can also serve a soothing, comforting function within the self. Threat and anxiety are certainly inherent to the condition of infantile dependency on the other, but the specific nature of that first dependent relationship (usually with a woman), the social and cultural stresses on it, along with the infant’s genetic temperament and tolerance for frustration, all determine the degree of narcissistic anxieties that will develop. *Othello* dramatizes the effects of traumatic narcissistic injury—extreme anxieties in relation to mother/woman and a radical, defensive splitting.

Othello’s sexual anxieties and narcissistic vulnerability are also involved in one of the more interesting critical debates about the play—the question of whether Othello and Desdemona ever actually consummate their marriage, and accordingly, whether sexual consummation would render Othello’s character more or less emotionally vulnerable. The dispute arises out of the following textual elements: at the end of Act 1, Othello says that he has “but an hour / Of love” to spend with Desdemona before he must depart for the Turkish wars; then reunited with her in Cyprus, he states, “The

purchase made, the fruits are to ensue, / That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you" (2.3.9–10); and finally, he is aroused from the connubial bedroom soon after by the drunken brawl between Roderigo and Cassio. Bloom believes that the marriage is never consummated and that "Othello literally does not know whether his wife is a virgin, and is afraid to find out, one way or the other" (457). In addition, Bloom contends, "Iago's first insinuations of Desdemona's supposed relationship with Cassio would have no effect if Othello knew her to have been a virgin. It is because he does not know that Othello is so vulnerable" (459).

Adelman, on the other hand, points out that "if Iago has had time to get three lads of Cyprus drunk before he begins on Cassio, then the lovers have had time for their intimacies" (272). Moreover, she notes that "consummation is followed by revulsion in three of the plays written in close proximity to *Othello*—*Troilus*, *All's Well*, and *Measure*" (272), and that "since Shakespeare revises Cinthio's more plausible temporal arrangement, he must have wanted the juxtaposition of consummation and debasement enough to be willing to put up with the risk of absurdity: in Cinthio, Iago's insinuations begin only after Othello has been married for some time" (274). Snow's argument about Othello's intense sexual guilt also depends upon the assumption of consummation. He points to the handkerchief "spotted" with red strawberries as unconsciously evoking for Othello "the blood-stained sheets of the wedding-bed and his wife's loss of virginity there" (390).<sup>3</sup> Greenblatt stresses Othello's anxieties over his own sexual pleasure as well. He discusses how orthodox Christian doctrine at the time held that, in the words of Saint Jerome, "An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife" (248). As a result, Greenblatt claims, "pleasure itself becomes for Othello pollution" (251). Stanley Cavell (1987) too believes Othello is "horrified by human sexuality, in himself and in others" (137). Though Cavell thinks the question of consummation is left ambiguous, "either answer is, for Othello, intolerable: 'Either I shed her blood and scarred her or I did not. If I did not then she was not a virgin and this is a stain upon me. If I did then she is no longer a virgin and this is a stain upon me. Either way I am contaminated'" (135).

Traub believes there is textual evidence to suggest that Othello is involved sexually and that this involvement only exacerbates his emotional instability. She points to the lines in which Othello says he would have been “happy if the general camp / Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known” (3.3.343–4). The ambiguous syntax, she suggests, implies that Othello too has lost his repose from having himself “tasted her sweet body.” As a result, he is as Iago describes him (continuing the oral metaphor), “eaten up with passion” (39). I also find the fountain and current metaphors in the following passage from Act 4 to be suggestive of sexual engagement. Explaining to Desdemona why he is weeping, Othello says that he could have endured sores and affliction, as well as the scorn of society, “But there where I have garnered up my heart, / Where either I must live or bear no life, / The fountain from the which my current runs / Or else dries up—to be discarded thence, / Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in” (4.2.56–61)—that, he says, he cannot abide. The imagery here implies that it is his sexual connection with Desdemona that constitutes the deepest and most vital source of his entire being.<sup>4</sup>

My students were fairly evenly split on the consummation issue, with slightly more believing that Othello would be more vulnerable if he had not yet had sex with Desdemona. “As a man myself,” one wrote, “I know that the chase and pursuit are when a man is always most vulnerable.”<sup>5</sup> A female student thought that if Othello “had not yet been with Desdemona sexually, then that fact would just make him all the more insecure.” Several felt that if he did not yet “possess” her himself, the thought of others having her would be even more intolerable. On the other hand, many believed that if he had had sexual relations with Desdemona, his feelings about her would have been all the more intense and volatile. As one female student wrote, “Relationships seem to get more complicated and intense once sexual relations are involved.” Interestingly, a couple of female students thought that Desdemona’s sexual engagement with Othello would have reduced or corrupted her in Othello’s mind: “He might think that because she was willing to have sex with him, she would be willing to have sex with someone else.” These students believed that

sexual relations would render Desdemona “less ideal” and therefore more open to suspicion. Another female student spun that idea, however, in a different way, commenting that sex with Desdemona would have made her “less ideal and more real” to Othello. If she was closer and more real to him, this student argued, he would have been more willing to trust her. Regardless of one’s position on this question of sexual consummation, the point is that the very ambiguity in the text around the issue suggests anxiety. Othello is exceedingly insecure and vulnerable from the beginning in his erotic relationship with Desdemona, and Iago’s destructive energy which ultimately consumes him emerges from this context. In Mitchell’s words, it is “a reaction to and flight from dependency and its attendant anxieties.”

Even if one maintains a belief in an instinctually based destructiveness, perhaps the most important problem psychoanalysis can help us address is the difficulty of locating and accepting responsibility for that destructiveness within the self. From an object relational perspective, one can ask whether Othello ever achieves the depressive position by fully recognizing Iago’s evil as his own. This leads to another much debated issue in the play: critics, along with my students, disagree about whether Othello ever truly experiences a catharsis and acknowledges his own culpability. The debate dates back to T. S. Eliot’s (1932) view of Othello as only “cheering himself up” and “not thinking about Desdemona, only himself” (111) in his final speech. Leavis (1937) echoed this position, arguing that the “habit of self-approving self-dramatization is an essential element in Othello’s make-up, and remains so at the very end” (142). Othello’s final assessment of himself as “one that loved not wisely, but too well; / Of one not easily jealous” (5.2.340–41) certainly gives one pause and may uncomfortably remind us of O. J. Simpson’s self-justifying statement in relation to Nicole that he “loved her too much.” Bloom sees some genuine pathos, despite the self-justifications and self-deception, in Othello’s final soliloquy. Kirsch too believes that Othello’s dying recognition that Desdemona was true enables him “genuinely to recover a sense of his former being, just as his delusion that she was faithless had caused him to lose it” (35). Neely, on the other hand, stresses Othello’s grandiosity



through to the end, observing that “even while acknowledging his unworthiness, he is taking credit for punishing himself” (226).

I find students generally divided in terms of their sympathy for Othello as a tragic hero. Those who are most focused on the threat of external evil in the world are usually most sympathetic. Two female students this fall also wrote about the vulnerability of being in love. “Othello never lost my sympathy,” one stated, “because no matter how strong a person you are, you are most sensitive when you are involved with the greatest love of your life. When that area is touched or threatened, it is easy to act in ways you would never have imagined.” Another commented, “I think everyone at some time or another questions whether or not someone they love has done something dishonest, only to find out it is not true. That is why I maintain some sympathy for Othello.” Two years ago, on the heels of 9/11, many students seemed to identify with Othello’s helplessness in the face of Iago’s evil and expressed sympathy. A year later, the majority of students in my class were back to what had been the more common pre-9/11 attitude: they felt in the end mainly disgust and contempt for this tragic hero. The following colorful response was typical: “What a schmuck! Othello kills himself more out of hubris than out of any remorse. It is this same pride that drives him throughout the play. The prospect of having a strumpet for a wife was just too much for his big-bad-war-hero ego to stand. I do not feel any sympathy for Othello. In fact, I wish he *hadn’t* died but was forced to live some horrid existence.”

Although I agree with most of my students that Othello never fully takes responsibility and identifies Iago’s destructiveness as his own, the language and metaphors of the play do recognize such an identification. This is evident in the erotic associations of union in Othello’s line to Iago, “I am bound to thee forever” (3.3.212), and in Iago’s even more chilling line to Othello, “I am your own forever” (3.4.476). Such recognition is also apparent in the explicit echoing of Iago’s phrases and imagery in Othello’s own language as the play progresses. The text as a whole enacts a subjective drama that includes multiple voices, positions, and points of view. As Neely comments, “The play develops out of the opposition of attitudes,

viewpoints, and sexes. As in the comedies, no single character or viewpoint prevails" (214). It is useful to think of the play in terms of the psychic space of an individual consciousness in which multiple versions of self and other interact and conflict. This space is also one in which different modes or levels of psychic functioning compete and co-exist in tension. The paranoid-schizoid mode is apparent in the split between idealized goodness and absolute evil; in the terrors of engulfment and disintegration, particularly in relation to women; in the manic pursuit of vengeance; and in Othello's seesawing at the end between grandiosity and self-loathing.

Othello is stuck in a narcissistic modality that is, as Mitchell says of characterological aggression, "embedded in and sustained by an enduring sense of internal and external danger" (1993, 163). Furthermore, Mitchell adds, "Much of the political aggression and violence in the world today is connected with nationalistic and ethnic identifications that are rooted in a collective sense of endangerment and past humiliations" (163). Ruth Stein finds similar dynamics in the language of September 11 terrorist Mohammed Atta's letter to his fellow terrorists, written in preparation for the hijackings. She too discovers defensive idealizations, splitting, and a murderous aggression emerging out of a massive sense of helplessness and masculine failure. Women are once again associated with shameful weakness, with engulfment and emasculation, and thus are banished from the terrorists' "hypermasculine" culture. The "shift from women to paternal homoerotic bonding," she argues, "marks a specific regressive-transcendent trajectory. . . . The frightful sliding downward toward the feminine and maternal can be replaced . . . by an ecstatic soaring upward, toward the Heavenly Father" (402-3). Atta's letter, Stein observes, does not speak about hatred but "absurdly and perversely, it is about love"—love of God, the father: "everywhere you go say that prayer and smile and be calm, for God is with the believers. And the angels protect you without you feeling anything. . . . You should feel complete tranquility, because the time between you and your marriage . . . is very short" (398). The terrorists' plans of mass murder, Stein concludes, contain a fantasy of magical solution to one's inner terrors: "Killing the subversive, disturbing part of oneself that

has been projected outward, will, it is hoped, silence once and for all the confused tumult and bad feelings about the self” (412).

As Shakespeare’s *Othello* immerses us in some analogous patterns, it indeed proves particularly timely and relevant. Yet the play also presents us with alternatives, with other levels of psychic functioning, and other versions of self. The text, for instance, includes a character like the unidealized, pragmatic Emilia (Iago’s wife), who combines a basic goodness with a flawed or imperfect humanity, a character who could not exist in a purely paranoid-schizoid universe. And as mentioned, although Othello may not recognize it, the play as a whole acknowledges the depressive reality that Iago does indeed belong to Othello—“I am your own forever.” Or perhaps more precisely, Iago’s demonic destructiveness belongs to Othello just as Othello’s narcissistic rage over betrayal and abandonment belongs to Iago—they’re of a piece, along with the idealized/denigrated woman. Adelman also believes that the play is not wholly immersed in its primitive maternal/sexual fantasies. Although she argues that *Othello*, like *Troilus and Cressida*, enacts a “morning-after fantasy in which the madonna is transformed into the whore,” unlike *Troilus*, *Othello* locates that fantasy “not in the unstable female body but in the diseased male imagination” (64). Adelman senses an attempt at dissociation from the pathological male fantasy: “Shakespeare’s portrayal of the love-death, like his portrayal of Desdemona throughout, marks his attempt to dissociate himself from this fantasy” (73).

Finally, the fact that at the end of the play Iago does not die but is only silenced suggests a recognition that the regressive, destructive response is forever a potential threat in human life and relations. We must be particularly vigilant in times when external circumstances, like the terrorist acts, evoke anxiety and insecurity and can provoke collective narcissistic defenses. If we understand the malignity that Iago represents—the aggressive envy that attacks the good because it is good—as more responsive than instinctual, then our attention is directed to the social conditions that ignite and sustain such regressive fury.

The very debates that *Othello* inspires may, in the end, be a reflection of the conflicting positions or self-states operating within the drama itself. In discussing the play, the classroom too becomes a space for holding in tension, for tolerating diverse feelings and opposing points of view. As it holds and contains conflict and difference, the classroom in fact works against destructive, narcissistic defenses and itself models a vital goal of psychic development.

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### Notes

1. Besides the Oliver Parker-directed film version of *Othello* in 1995, two updated screen adaptations appeared in 2001: the film *O*, set in a private high school, directed by Tim Blake Nelson, and a British ITV production, set in an urban police force, directed by Geoffrey Sax.
2. See, for instance, Novy (1984, 129), Kirsch (1981, 25–26), and Wheeler (1985, 202). Greenblatt (1980) also notes the tempestuous imagery and the references to death in the Cyprus reunion scene. He believes these associations reflect Othello's ambivalence about desire because his "erotic intensity" conflicts with "Christian orthodoxy" (242).
3. See Rudnytsky (1985) for a wide-ranging psychoanalysis of the handkerchief as a symbol of all the "displacements of affect" (185) in the play. Rudnytsky examines the handkerchief as a "floating signifier" (171), a symbol for what is missing or absent, including unconscious fantasies of the primal scene, merger with the mother, castration anxiety, and oedipal conflict.
4. Several critics have also noted, in Adelman's (1992) words, the "maternal valence" (274) of this passage. See, for instance, Snow (1980, 404) and Novy (1984, 132). Kirsch (1981) finds in the imagery here a "conflation of images of the breast and of the womb," and he believes it suggests "the tragic vulnerability of a love so absolutely rooted in, and dependent upon, the exaltation of symbiotic union" (33).
5. As there were only five male students in this class of twenty-four, I found it difficult to make any generalizations about the responses along gender lines. The five males, in fact, differed quite substantially from one another in their individual responses. Nevertheless, I do think gender plays a role in these students' responses, and thus I have indicated the gender of the respondent when it seemed relevant.

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