Othello: 
Subjecting the Self

The most concentrated, most tightly constructed, and fastest-moving of Shakespeare's tragedies, Othello has a kinetic unity that derives in large part from the impetus given to the action by Iago, who, although not the hero of the tragedy, is its prime mover. He is the controller and transformer of the characters and personalities of the others, particularly of Roderigo, Cassio, Desdemona, and Othello. It must be said, of course, that to move some of these he requires little effort because of an overt weakness in them and that circumstances and unconscious cooperation by his victims aid him. Roderigo is a born gull. Cassio has a low resistance to alcohol that makes it easy for Iago to compromise him and have him ousted from his office. The change of Desdemona from a self-assured Venetian lady and loving wife into a frightened little girl is only indirectly Iago's work, for it is effected by Othello's apparently inexplicable passion and cruelty, which are in turn fed by her kind solicitations to the Moor for the reinstatement of Cassio. It is the transformation of Othello from a calm and composed man, "whom passion could not shake," into a gull, a slave of jealousy, and the murderer of his wife that is Iago's hardest task, the one he accomplishes, with some help from others and from accidents it is true, essentially by himself. He convinces a man who has just married a woman who deeply loves him that she is a strumpet. This man is Iago's superior, a Moor with a romantic background and military distinction, a famous general of royal lineage, appointed by the Venetian state, which relies on him, to be governor of Cyprus, a man whose self Shakespeare heightened externally and internally.

There is a modern school of interpretation that would de-psychologize the influence Iago exerts on Othello and would attribute it to the stage convention of the "calumniator believed." Iago would thus
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come primarily a theatrical mechanism, a traditional evil, tacitly accepted by the audience. According to Bernard Spivack, he belongs to the family of the medieval Vice and carries on the function of seduction common to this type.¹ But whatever few touches Iago may owe to the Vice, he is surely not merely a type on whom a conventional human nature is grafted; he is a complex character, almost incredibly evil and yet totally believable, and his subjection of Othello is a subtle and accomplished performance. It is the play and not merely our interest in psychology that makes us ask the question what it is that gives him the strength to change and finally to destroy the initially calm and self-composed Othello.

The answer to this question is surely not that Iago has a superhuman intelligence because, as a reasoner, Iago does have limitations.² He lives in a lower world of the intellect, completely devoid of all feeling for the higher qualities of mankind: love, generosity, kindness are unknown to him. He has no full comprehension of a world in which husband and wife are faithful to each other and handsome young men do not habitually go to bed with other men's wives; his is a world in which animal instincts predominate. He believes, or appears to believe for a while, that it would be possible for him to seduce Desdemona and that she might fall in love with Cassio—even Roderigo finds that hard to accept! Nor is Iago a great strategist. At the outset, he has no very clear idea of what to do except to harm Othello, and he plays with two alternatives—either to seduce Desdemona or to make Othello insanely jealous. His success in the latter plan can be ascribed more to superior tactics than to strategy, to improvisation and clever exploitation of accidents rather than to a master plan. His best stroke, the use of the handkerchief, is due to Desdemona's accidentally dropping it at the time Othello demands an "ocular proof," and nothing could demonstrate Iago's weakness in strategy better, considering that the handkerchief becomes the incriminating evidence that brings him down. That he involves his wife in procuring it proves him to be less than a totally competent judge of people, for he underestimates her loyalty to Desdemona.

But yet the skill with which Iago makes his world, his thoughts, and his imagination dominate Othello is masterful. The process is not primarily an intellectual one, for neither agent nor victim are strong thinkers. Professor Jorgensen has pointed out that the two characters' deficiency in quality of thought is highlighted by the ironic use of keywords denoting knowing and thinking and that this
motif illuminates the mind-control Iago exerts. Iago, who uses words with cognitive meaning more than anyone else, understands how to make what he knows of others, incomplete as it is, the starting point of his design, and to create for them a pseudo-knowledge that they are not able to contradict. The first words of the play indicate how he uses what he knows in order to exploit Roderigo, and they hint that he may have used this method earlier. Says the latter:

Tush, never tell me; I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who has had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

In duping Othello, Iago uses a similar technique of making the most of bits of true knowledge he has about the Moor and others and of having these true items serve to support the putative knowledge he seeks him to accept. Thus, in the persuasion scene, he intimates, by references to Cassio’s role in the wooing of Desdemona and to Brabantio’s earlier prediction of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, that there has been a long, amorous relationship between her and the lieutenant and that she has a bent toward disloyalty.

Yet this clever technique is hardly sufficient to explain by itself the power Iago can achieve over the minds of others. And it does not account for his genius of destruction. We must look for other facets in his make-up. We may, I think, rule out supernatural sources. Iago, it is true, shares with all Shakespeare’s villains something of the eternal spirit that denies goodness and truth; he is a mocker, a cynic, who sneers at honesty as the weakness of fools. But he lacks the incandescence of mind that makes Goethe’s Mephistopheles a believable antagonist of the deity, and he is surely not an allegorical figure representative of the Jacobean’s idea of the devil. Occasionally he glories in being of the devil’s party, swears by the divinity of hell, and feels at home in the infernal darkness that will bring the monstrous child of his brain to light. But this self-elevation to the ultimate evil is belied by the pettiness of his personal grievances. His glorying in the imagery of damnation and hell demonstrates not his greatness in evil but his littleness as a person, his need to bolster his ego. Neither is the “diabolical” imagery associated with him alone; Othello uses it even more after he adopts Iago’s habits of thought.

It is true that, in his final moments, Othello temporarily entertains the notion that Iago is a devil and that he looks for Iago’s cloven
foot. He charges at him and cries, “If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee,” and he cannot. But the reason for this failure surely lies in the Moor’s physical exhaustion. When, just after his futile attempt at Iago’s life, he speaks metaphorically of Iago as having ensnared his body and his soul, he calls his seducer merely a “demi-devil” (V.ii.289–305).

Iago is too small a man to be the devil incarnate, as much as he would like to be. He is a man of multiple and petty resentments, a malcontent who sets himself apart from the social order and delights in the disorder he creates. He is an envious man with an ingrained contempt and hatred for all that is worthy and good, one who resents the success of others. It is characteristic of him that he gives as one of the reasons why Cassio must die that “He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly” (V.i.19–20). The reader or spectator is not likely to find such extraordinary beauty in Cassio’s life and must conclude that its evocation by Iago is a symptom of his envious disposition.

Iago’s motives are those of an envious man who must have subjects and objects for envy. As Thomas Rogers put it, “It is part of this envy like as fire to covet the highest places and to bark at those worthiest preferred.” He hates Cassio, whom he thinks “a mere arithmetician,” but who is highly regarded in Venice, as his appointment as Othello’s successor demonstrates. Most of all he hates the Moor, as we learn in the first lines of the play and hear again afterward. When he sneers at Roderigo’s stupidity, he quickly reproaches himself for spending too much thought on this gull and reasserts his hatred of Othello (I.iii.376 ff.). This primacy of hatred, as Lily Campbell has pointed out, is quite characteristic for an envious man because envy was, in the thinking of the Renaissance, a species of hatred. When Iago explains his hatred of the Moor in the instance just noted, he gives as his reason his fear of having been cuckolded by Othello, a rumor, he says, he has heard. But he does not even care whether it is true; he says that he, “for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety” (I.iii.383–84). Iago’s sexual jealousy is part of his all-inclusive envy of others; in Renaissance psychology, jealousy was generally considered a subspecies of envy and in Shakespeare’s English, “jealous” could be used as synonymous with “envious.”

Iago’s jealousy, which has been taken too seriously at times, is sig-
significant not really as a motive for his malignity, whose ultimate origin is probably as undiscoverable as the ultimate reasons for the existence of evil in the universe, but on other grounds. His search for motives, no matter how petty and specious, demonstrates his small, calculating mind. Moreover, his acquaintance with jealousy, slight as it is, gives him some familiarity with the passion he decides to produce in the Moor. One might even say that Iago's "jealousy" (in both the general and the specific sense of the word) furnishes him with the design for Othello's destruction. He ponders whether he should get even with the Moor, "wife for wife," but then he decides that he will put him into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure it (II.i.293 and II.i.295). Iago's own jealousy can be cured by judgment. He does not writhe in passion as the moralists said an envious or jealous man does. Once, it is true, he says that he is tortured, that is, when he professes suspicion that Othello has cuckolded him, "the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards" (II.i.290–91). But this statement comes immediately after he disclaims interest in Desdemona, whom he "loves" merely because she will "diet" his revenge. The context gives his statement a peculiar flavor; it appears that in attributing a gnawing jealousy to himself, he is, as it were, trying out and heating up the emotion so he can transfer it to his victim.

Iago has a constitutional, but controllable, inclination to jealousy because of his endemic envy. The devouring effect of jealousy, which Iago claims he feels in himself, is very much the one that moralists like Thomas Rogers attributed to envy:

This envy is compared unto the canker; for as the canker eateth and destroyeth iron, so doth envy eat and consume the hearts of the envious. . . . For another's prosperity is their poison, and another's adversity their comfort.9

And when Iago later inoculates Othello with jealousy, he gives him an imaginary picture of the tortures of this passion, a picture quite in the tradition of the moralists' warnings against envy:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.

(III.iii.169–71)
In the central part omitted from the passage previously quoted from Rogers’s tract, envy is described similarly: “The poets feign Envy to be one of the Furies of hell and to be fed with nothing but adders and snakes to show that envious persons do swallow down poison and likewise vomit up the same again.” The *topos* of envy-jealousy as a monster that makes the food it mocks was common. Iago knows the trait and produces it in Othello, in whose poisoned imagination Desdemona becomes “a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!” (IV.ii.62–63). Thus Iago is the preceptor of Othello; he teaches him a jealousy that has the worst features of envy and makes him eat out his heart. Othello is Iago’s obedient disciple, who in turn applies ideas suggested to him most inappropriately—or, from Iago’s point of view, appropriately—to Desdemona.

If Iago’s “jealousy” is the primary one and Othello’s the secondary, as Professor Heilman has said, Othello’s is also the manifest, explosive passion, Iago’s the submerged and controlled one. In fact, one forgets during the play that Iago is capable of hate, envy, and jealousy because he appears practically passionless. On his conscious-ness of self-control Iago builds much of his assurance of self-knowledge, an arrogant assurance, but one that is, in a sense, justified. In the second speech he has in the play, he asserts that he knows his “price.” This knowledge makes him feel superior to others; he says sneeringly of Roderigo that “I mine own gain’d knowledge should profane / If I would time expend with such a snipe / But for my sport and profit” (I.iii.378–80). Until his exposure in the end, he never loses the assurance that he can master all situations. He is the only one of Shakespeare’s major villains who has not a single moment of remorse. And in the end, when he is exposed and his knowledge of others is shown to be faulty, he still takes pride in his self-control: he announces that henceforth he will never speak another word. It is not important whether we believe him or Gratiano, who says that torture will open his lips; Iago’s assurance matters, and what he says with it: “What you know, you know” (V.ii.306). His knowledge of himself, a knowledge synonymous with trust in the strength of his will, remains with him to the end.

In the sense in which the Christian humanists or the fideistic skeptics spoke of self-knowledge, Iago cannot be said to possess it, for he totally lacks any moral commitment or faith. Moreover, such presumption of self-knowledge was outrageous to them even when ethically or religiously oriented. Erasmus said in the sixth chapter
of *Enchiridion* that nobody should hold the fantastic opinion that he knows himself well enough; even Paul did not dare judge himself. Iago’s self-estimation is not only arrogant but also egotistic and immoral; he compounds the sin of pride with the sin of self-love. He never yet found a man who knew “how to love himself” (I.iii.315)—except, of course, himself. By following Othello, he follows but himself, and, in glaring perversion of the concept “soul,” the first and primary object of self-knowledge, he declares those who act like him to be fellows that “have some soul.”

In equally conspicuous contempt for the doctrine of moral *decorum*, which the humanists had thought central to self-knowledge, Iago espouses a philosophy of seeming:

> For when my outward action doth demonstrate  
> The native act and figure of my heart  
> In compliment extern, ’tis not long after  
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

(I.i.62-66)

This is a self-declaration underneath the surface meaning intended for Roderigo that Iago must disguise his true feelings for Othello. Iago’s concluding boast, “I am not what I am,” denies both the self-reflexive identification, “I am what I am,” and the identification with the human race, “I am a man in the sense of a moral being.” He feels that he is a man apart, outside human and divine laws.

By standing outside, or believing to stand outside, the human race, Iago finds it possible to manipulate the others without really involving anything but his will in his contact with them. The student and teacher of jealousy is also a student and practitioner of the science of the will, and it is here that he is most competent. He observes the use of will-power by himself and by others, seeing himself as possessing a strong and effective will that gives him self-direction, aggressiveness, energy, and determination, and he finds the will of the others to be submissive, determined by wishful thinking, and dominated by appetite and lust. This attribution of weakness to others, however, is often merely another side of his inability to understand the higher provinces of thought and emotion. He has a consistently low opinion of Othello’s will because Othello loves, an emotion that he equates with softness:
His soul is so enfetter'd to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function.

(II.iii.334-37)

Iago has no such fetters. The "love" that he confesses for Desdemona is the attraction of the villain to the victim, the satisfaction of finding a human being whose destruction serves to destroy another. Although Iago's failure to understand man's nobler nature and his lack of capacity for love makes him an incomplete human being, it also gives him a liberty and scope denied to those who are ethically superior to him.

Thus we may say in answer to the question posed earlier, what quality enables Iago to be the powerful and destructive agent of Othello's tragedy, that this quality is his will. He succeeds because of his effective use of a strong, morally uninhibited will for the subjugation of the morally oriented and restricted wills of the others. For Iago, the exercise of his will is, as Bradley saw, the main motivation—if one can speak here of motivation. Joy in the triumph of his will is what he primarily gets out of doing what he does: he chuckles about making Roderigo his purse, and he anticipates turning Desdemona's virtue into pitch and leading Othello by the nose like an ass. The prospect of "pluming up" his will, not the desire for the lieutenancy, is the subject of his first soliloquy. Mere ambition, the main driving force of Shakespeare's earlier Machiavellian villains, is only a minor motive for him. He evinces no joy when he becomes Othello's lieutenant, and he goes forward without stop on his destructive path.

Iago understands how to estimate the quantity and quality of the wills of others, and he foresees what happens when different wills come together to reinforce or to oppose each other. He recognizes that by creating in the doting Roderigo's mind the hope of obtaining Desdemona he also has fashioned a completely subservient tool who does not shy away even from murder. He realizes that Cassio's low resistance to alcohol can be used to bring about disorder and thus to provoke Othello's will to preserve order. From the beginning, Iago is convinced that he can mastermind Othello. "These Moors," he says, "are changeable in their wills" (I.iii.348). This remark is to give Roderigo hope that Othello may stop loving Desdemona, but it
is also symptomatic of Iago's confidence in his ability to control the Moor.

Even more than on the control of Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello, Iago counts on making Desdemona his tool. "Out of her own goodness," he says, he will make "the net / That shall enmesh them all" (II.iii.350–51). It is a matter of his counting not on the weakness of Desdemona's will but rather on its strength, strength for the achievement of good purposes. Desdemona's strength of will is, in fact, stressed repeatedly; by it, she, rather than Othello, appears to be at times Iago's opponent. This strength, which proved itself in her unconventional choice of a husband, permits Iago with a semblance of truth to argue that she is fundamentally perverted:

Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
But pardon me—I do not in position
Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear
Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
May fail to match you with her country forms,
And happily repent.

(III.iii.236–42)

The argument can make the by-now weakened Othello feel that Desdemona must be unfaithful according to a kind of natural law. But Iago is right about the strength of her will although not about its perversion. When she takes up Cassio's cause, it is with an unfortunate tenacity: "I will have my lord and you again / As friendly as you were" (III.i.6–7). She pledges to do more for Cassio than for herself: "What I can do I will; and more I will / Than for myself I dare" (III.iv.131–32). Her extraordinary energy shows itself most excruciatingly in her physiologically improbable revival from strangulation and in her pathetic last words that nobody killed her but herself, the white lie with which she attempts to help her husband. Her determination to do good has a symbiotic effect on Emilia, who, at the crucial moment of the action, acquires an obstinacy that even overcomes Iago's when she refuses to be silenced by him. It is ironic that Iago, who masterminds everybody else, finds it impossible to restrain his own wife, intent on salvaging her mistress's reputation. This is the only miscalculation Iago makes in judging the will of others; he succumbs here to his inability to understand higher emotions and loyalties.
An interest in the manipulation of the will, as we have noted, was in Shakespeare's air at the time he wrote Othello. Will and its triumphs were widely admired from the Machiavellians to the devout Catholics. Iago's view of man, as much as it differs from these movements in other respects, resembles them in seeing man's character as primarily a product of his will. Iago is, of course, much more extreme in this belief. This feature gives him his look of total emancipation from Christian humanism and makes him a "new man." Most revealing for this seventeenth-century "modernity" is his speech to Roderigo that precedes the soliloquy in which he expresses pleasure in "pluming up his will." This carefully worked-out speech constitutes a new pattern of self-knowledge in Shakespeare, one that travesties the old in some important aspects. Iago reacts to the simpering Roderigo's lament that it is not in his "virtue," that is, power, to amend his "fondness." Answers Iago:

Virtue? a fig! 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manur'd with industry—why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion.

(I.iii.320-31)

Iago proclaims here the need for psychic balance and does so by means of the field-garden imagery with which humanistic philosophy underlined the importance of education. A passage in La Primduaye's French Academy is similar enough to be suspected as Shakespeare's source:

The nature of man is like a pair of balance. For, if it be not guided with knowledge and reason unto the better part, of itself it is carried to the worse. And although a man be well born, yet if he have not his judgment fined and the discoursing part of his mind purged with the reasons of philosophy, it will fall often into gross faults and such as beseem not a prudent man. For in those men that are not induced with virtue ruled by certain knowledge, nature bringeth forth such fruits as naturally come from the ground without the manuring and helping hand of man.
Iago's speech appears to carry the idea of balance even further than La Primaudaye by including the flora of the garden that is man: the two sets of plants, hyssop and nettle versus thyme and lettuce, balance each other, for according to the herbalists' botany the former were hot and dry, the latter cold and moist. However, Iago's choices for the will are not the moral qualities of the humanistic use of the figure, good and evil, but the psychological ones, control and lack of control of desire. It may even be more significant that Iago equates will and reason; in effect, will is Iago's balancer or gardener rather than reason and knowledge as in La Primaudaye. In the latter's system, will is the agent, even the servant of reason, not its master; reason or (elsewhere) God is the gardener. Nowhere in Renaissance moral literature have I found will designated as balancer or gardener; if either role is assigned to man, it is always because he is divinely endowed with reason. Thus Iago's speech does not have the true Renaissance balance; rather, it advocates the supremacy of the "rude will" that in Romeo and Juliet Friar Lawrence calls the enemy of "grace." Iago's particular use of the garden imagery and the microcosmic analogy proclaims not the virtue of temperance but the gospel of the iron will, a gospel that the humanistically educated in Shakespeare's audience must have recognized as false, but that to some advanced thinkers of the time sounded sweet.

Iago's "Virtue! a fig!" disparages goodness and puts in its stead a concept of "virtue" as innate ability and powerful exertion of the will. Iago's speech has thus a general allusiveness to the intellectual trends in Shakespeare's time that in various ways emphasized the significance of will power. It may have made some in Shakespeare's audience uncomfortably aware of the evils of the acquisitive spirit that was around them and in themselves. To others it may have suggested the Machiavellian virtù in its vulgarized interpretation as the power to manipulate people and get ahead. For still others of Shakespeare's contemporaries, the argument may have cast Iago in the role of a "Jesuitical Machiavel" given to the machinations associated with a sinister brotherhood. Perhaps some may have seen him as applying to psychology the new scientific rationale with its empirical methods and step-by-step procedure. Others may have identified him with one of the "new Stoics" about whom they had heard from the pulpit, men who were also sometimes, with that loosely applied term, called atheists.

The speech, in fact, does make this latter identification evident.
When, in conclusion, Iago denounces love as "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will," he associates himself with the rigorous Stoics, censured by Saint Paul as men "without affection" (2 Tim. iii:3). As Bullinger said, "We Christians have nothing to do with the ironlike philosophy, since our Lord and Master hath not in words only but with his own example also utterly condemned it." Iago's classification of love as lust would have struck Renaissance theologians as the worst kind of such Stoicism. Even the admired Cicero was thought to have erred in this matter when in Tusculan Disputations he declared amor to be an irrational emotion that fell under libido and was subject to voluntary control (III.12-13; IV.57, 65, 72). Cicero's method of devaluing love was so similar to Iago's that it may well have been in Shakespeare's mind: libido was, just like "lust," originally a neutral word, meaning desire in a general sense; but both words, by their authors' times, had depreciated in meaning. For Iago, new man and new Stoic, "love" is merely a raging and stinging lust of the blood and a permission of the will, just as libido was for Cicero.

Iago's affinity with the new Stoics also shows in his fondness for the word "patience," which is used more often in Othello (thirteen times) than in any other play of Shakespeare. Iago mocks those who, like Roderigo, are poor because "they have not patience" (II.iii.358). When Iago victimizes Othello, the sneer shows in his hypocritical advice: "Patience, I say; your mind perhaps may change" (III.iii.456). "Patience" here counterpoints "passion," for immediately after this advice Othello's jealousy rises like "the Pontic Sea." Desdemona's method, innocently adopted to help Cassio, to "watch him [Othello] tame, and talk him out of patience" (III.iii.23), has the same effect. Iago's repeated admonitions to Othello to preserve patience are intended to kindle the latter's passion while giving him the delusion of control.

This is certainly Iago's technique as he makes Othello observe the confidences of Cassio and Bianca and induces him to believe that they concern an assignation between Cassio and Desdemona. Othello has just risen from a lethargy and acquired a new fury in demanding "ocular proof" of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. As Othello's passion rises, Iago admonishes his victim to confine himself "but in a patient list" (IV.i.75) and appeals to his sense of manhood: "Marry, patience; / Or I shall say you are all in all in spleen, / And nothing of a man" (87–89). Whereupon Othello chimes in with a bitterly
ironic play on “patience”: “I will be found most cunning in my patience; / But—dost thou hear?—most bloody” (90–91). Thus Iago, like a hypnotist, imprints on Othello a concept of manhood founded on a perverse and inhuman idea of patience while stirring his mounting passion.

We may note here how the idea of the victory of patience over passion becomes an ironic movement in the symphonic structure of Othello as the Moor, imagining himself to be an interrogating judge, “examines” Desdemona, who understands only the fury in his words but not their sense. The deluded Othello fancies that his habitual and exemplary patience has been lost because of the magnitude of Desdemona’s “crime”:

Had it pleas’d heaven
To try me with affliction, had they rain’d
All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steep’d me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience.

(IV.ii.48–54)

Othello’s model for self-comparison is the biblical Job, who lost his possessions and contracted boils and sores, and yet remained patient: his story in the words of the preamble in the Genevan Bible was “the example of a singular patience.” But Othello goes even further by claiming that not even an angel’s patience could endure his suffering:

Turn thy complexion there,
Patience, thou young and rose-lipp’d cherubin—
Ay, here, look grim as hell!

(63–65)

This personification of patience evokes, in a highly ironic manner, the allegorical Christian portraits and descriptions of this virtue. Bullinger, for instance, when redrawing Tertullian’s “lively image of Patience,” sketched her with

her countenance . . . calm and quiet, her forehead smooth without furrowed wrinkles, which are signs of sorrow or anger. Her brows are never knit, but slack in cheerful wise, with her eyes cast comely down to the ground, not for the sorrow of any calamities, but only
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for humility's sake. . . . Her color is like to theirs that are nigh no danger and are guiltless of evil. . . . For she sitteth in the throne of that most meek and quiet spirit, which is not troubled with any tempest nor overcast with any cloud but is plain, open, and of a goodly clearness.¹⁸

The hellish grimness with which Othello endows his Patience is incongruous with such serene portraits; it fits this virtue as little as the accusation of adultery does Desdemona, who listens uncomprehendingly. Indeed, the maligned Desdemona is an image of the patience extolled by Tertullian-Bullinger, but refurbished for grim times. The sources of her fortitude are old, but her strength of will makes this fortitude commensurate to times of exceptional tribulation. If Iago is a new man, she is something of a new woman. She is certainly a new kind of heroine in Shakespeare, heightened as she is by her signal patience; and she foreshadows the heroines of the romances: Marina, “Like Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling / Extremity out of act” (Pericles, V.i.137–38), or Hermione, who teaches the guilty Leontes a lesson in expiation by remaining in hiding for sixteen years before revealing herself to him as a seeming statue—a living monument to patience. Othello’s grotesque image of Patience with her clear brow darkened to look as grim as hell, points up the exemplary patience of Desdemona—who takes her place among the suffering and patient women in Shakespeare’s later plays—and it is also an ironic caricature of the changed self of Othello.

Iago’s relatively easy success in achieving this distortion of Othello’s vision points to some weakness in the Moor that facilitates the villain’s task. Perhaps we should say that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, Othello’s character has an affinity with Iago’s or, at least, that there is something in Othello that desires such affinity. Othello’s subjugation by Iago is, in a sense, a seduction, and a seduction requires not only a seducer but also a person who can be seduced.¹⁶ Surely it is not true that under Othello’s circumstances any man would become jealous, and Shakespeare provides occasions where Othello very simply could test Iago’s insinuations. Not that Othello is naturally jealous or even, at first, notably passionate; his calmness and composure at the beginning are extraordinary, and so is the eloquence with which he demonstrates them. Such phrases as “I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege” and “my parts, my title, and my perfect soul” ring in one’s ear. Yet there is something in these assertions that makes one distrust their confi-
In a more melodious and elevated key, they echo Iago's protestations of self-knowledge, and they are, like his, underlined by repeated uses of the word "know." And it is ironic that Othello's claim of having a "perfect soul" follows Iago's declaration that those fellows who, like him, do not follow their masters "have some soul." Of course, Othello's perfect soul is one free from wrongdoing, Iago's soul is one that gives him power to deceive the world; but in either case there is a lack of humility. The humanists and, even more strongly, the skeptics had enjoined this virtue as a prerequisite for whatever self-knowledge a man can achieve, and Othello is almost as conspicuously shown deficient in humility of mind as is Iago.

There is a hint at self-delusion in Othello's assertion that amorous emotions are "defunct" in him as he supports Desdemona's request to accompany him to Cyprus. The idea that her presence might distract him from his military duties is, to him, absurd:

No, when light-wing'd toys  
Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dullness  
My speculative and offic'd instruments,  
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,  
Let huswives make a skillet of my helm,  
And all indign and base adversities  
Make head against my estimation!  

(I.iii.268–74)

Apart from the low estimate of the power of passion that these lines betray, they are sound as theoretical psychology of the humanistic kind: Othello's distinction between the speculative and the active mind shows his awareness of the mental processes that the humanists thought involved in moral action. But the lines also indicate Othello's trust in his will, the one faculty in which Iago thinks him deficient.

Othello has, like Iago, a penchant for self-dramatizations. Othello's, it is true, ring sonorously in one's ear; Iago's grate on it. I do not think that self-dramatization is per se a tragic weakness; it is rather a demonstration of the tragic hero's heightened self that makes us feel his glory and suffering as extraordinary. Yet Othello's manner of self-dramatization is different from Hamlet's or Lear's. The sensual lilt, the "Othello music," as Professor Knight has called it, points to a sentimental temperament, and the subject matter is generally Othello's romantic past. Not that he exaggerates its glamor. As one listens to his account of his travels, one thinks of
Elizabethan adventurers’ voyages to faraway lands. But it is notable that he dramatizes himself almost always in terms of his past. Iago, who practically never talks of the past, is his very opposite here; he has no romantic vein. He is colder, more efficient.

It may be natural for an older man to try to establish his identity by reference to the past, to define what he is in the present by what he has been before; but there is often something in Othello’s recapitulations that inspires apprehension about his ability to cope with the present. The most notable example is his eloquent retrospective self-assessment in which he says farewell to the soldierly profession (III.iii.351 ff.). It is a hasty farewell, as precipitous as the despair of Richard II; Iago has not yet played his trump of the handkerchief. The premature defeatism is as unwise as his earlier boast of rational control; the speech bears some resemblance to those of earlier dramas in which erstwhile confident conquerors confess the subjugation of their souls by love, but Othello’s ruination is more painful because it is due not to light-feathered Cupid but to the green-eyed monster of jealousy.

It will be said that the important difference between Iago and Othello is not that the one represents the present and the other the past, but that the one is a Negro and the other a Venetian. This, of course, is true; but the difference matters only because of what Iago makes of it. At the decisive moment of the seduction, he hints that he knows such supersubtle Venetians as Desdemona, and Othello does not. It is after having made Othello insecure that Iago suggests the significant difference between himself and Desdemona on the one hand and Othello on the other: the dissimilarities of “clime, complexion, and degree” (the first two imply race) make Desdemona’s choice of Othello “unnatural” (III.iii.205–37). Iago’s argument for the seduction of Othello hinges on an old commonplace of the mutual attraction of like natures and the repulsion of unlike ones.

As previously noted, Iago’s method of arguing was paralleled in the procedures recommended for the “passion mover,” that is, the person engaged in controlling other people’s reactions, by Thomas Wright in The Passions of the Mind, which had its second, enlarged edition in the year Shakespeare presumably composed Othello (1604). We may recall that Wright takes a similarly protective attitude toward his well-meaning but naive countrymen as Iago hypocritically does toward Othello: they must be shielded from the
sleights and deceits of sophisticated foreigners (specified as Italians and Spaniards by Wright). Of course, Wright wanted his book to serve the defense of virtue; Iago’s arguments are used in its defeat. But in the employment of psychological means, Wright and Iago have something in common; they have been to a new school, whereas Othello is “unbookish.”

If Othello is overly trustful, he is certainly not a born dupe like Roderigo; even Iago does not call him an ass but predicts that he will, egregiously, make him one. Othello’s trust is the abundance of a good quality and, as such, a fault, large enough for an Iago to exploit, small enough to warrant our sympathy. There is a subtle dramatic irony in Othello’s speaking of Iago as a man “of honesty and trust” (I.iii.284) just after declaring his imperviousness to passion. Othello’s confidence in himself thus becomes associated with a mistake of judgment of others. In his conversation with Roderigo, Iago has just blatantly demonstrated his unworthiness of the trust Othello puts in him, and one must conclude therefore that Othello’s knowledge of himself and of other people is faulty. When it later becomes evident that his judgment of Iago is shared by others, one is not likely to judge that Othello really knows more of people than it appeared, but that Iago is an even more clever villain than it seemed.

The skillful transfer of envy and jealousy from Iago to Othello requires a peculiar closeness, almost a melting of the one into the other. The two become friends who swear eternal brotherhood; they are now, in an old humanistic commonplace, “one soul in bodies twain.” In Wright’s terms, the two form a “union of haters,” which reinforces their strength. But in this combined organism, they are still differentiated; Iago supplies the will and Othello the passion. Iago is thus, in Wright’s term, the “passion mover.” In one of his analogues Wright calls this agent the “doctor” who administers doses of passion or moderation according to the condition of his “patient”—the old metaphor of the passion as a disease thus assumes a new meaning: “The passion mover must look narrowly to this point and imitate herein the common practice of prudent physicians who apply their medicine to the same maladies with particular respect and consideration of the patient’s temper.”

This is exactly the treatment Iago administers to Othello; he provides at all stages just the right dose of poison to stimulate Othello’s passion and the right amount of a lenitive to keep it from
exploding prematurely. He produces in Othello a progressive series of cumulative reactions, each of which is calculatingly determined and controlled by Iago, until Othello loses all self-direction and collapses. The first incident in this series is Iago’s instigation of Cassio’s drunkenness, which strains Othello’s sense of discipline to the breaking point; the confusion of Cassio and Montano about the reasons for the disorder and the seeming reluctance of Iago to reveal them prevent Othello from making a rational inquiry, and passion threatens to overcome reason (II.iii.196 ff.). This is a prelude to the future turbulence. When Iago slowly injects jealousy into Othello’s mind, the effect becomes audible and visible, and Iago himself registers the progress on the Moor’s face, bearing, and speech. Othello now gyrates between love and hate, and between violence and exhaustion. In one sentence, he pities Desdemona and recalls her sweetness, in the next, he wants to tear her all to pieces; in one scene, he shouts at the perplexed Desdemona in highest passion, and in the next, he enters so fatigued and exhausted as to make it possible for Iago to anesthetize him with a few obscene insinuations.

The continued vexations engineered by Iago do not allow Othello to return to his former, composed self. Just before his epileptic breakdown, he does, however, make something of an attempt to shed the character imposed upon him by Iago. The latter’s question, “Will you think so?” with which the fourth act opens, suggests that Othello has objected to Iago’s report of a kiss between Cassio and Desdemona or tried to give it an innocent interpretation; but when Iago evokes the picture of Cassio and Desdemona naked in bed, Othello’s passion rises again. Iago reminds him now of the handkerchief, and the memory of it comes over Othello’s mind “as doth the raven o’er the infected house.” When Iago now insinuates that Cassio has confessed to lying with Desdemona, the word “lie” hits Othello like a dagger, and his puns turn it around in his heart. His mind disintegrates, he stammers disjointed and incoherent phrases, trembles and shakes, sees in the darkening of his vision a foreshadowing of nature, loses consciousness, and falls to the ground.

This is the moment of Othello’s greatest physical passion. Iago calls it “epilepsy” when Cassio appears on the scene. The fit is, I believe, modeled on Hercules’s breakdown and madness in Seneca’s Hercules Furens, which in the Renaissance was interpreted as epilepsy. But the question whether it is this particular disease is of
secondary importance; Othello's sprawling on the ground is certainly pathological, and represents the ultimate in the physical expression of passion. Only the presence of Iago, who stands triumphantly over his fallen master, makes this tremendous outbreak credible; the incident of Othello's highest passion is also the moment of the complete subjection of his self to Iago's will. Passion and will attain here a powerful baroque intensity. Iago can suggest now to Othello that self-knowledge requires the murder of Desdemona. Othello's case, he says, is better than that of those cuckolds who do not know they have been deceived:

No, let me know;
And knowing what I am, I know what she shall be.

(IV.i.72-73)

Othello accepts this monstrous idea as wisdom: "O thou art wise; 'tis certain."

This, the climax of the action, falls into the fourth act, as is usual in Shakespeare's dramatic structure. In Othello, the impact is intensified by the three episodes in which the Moor is visibly blinded by passion; besides his collapse, there are his maddening commentary, accompanied by violent gestures, on Cassio's conversation with Bianca and his striking of Desdemona in Lodovico's presence. In each case, the provocation is great, but in each case it is also based on delusion—on the fantasy image of Desdemona and Cassio in bed, on a misinterpretation of the subject of Cassio's discourse, and on a misunderstanding of Desdemona's innocent remark that she is glad to see Cassio made governor of Cyprus for "the love" she bears him. By showing Othello so totally deluded, Shakespeare lessens the painfulness of his decision to kill Desdemona for the sake of "justice." The Othello who goes to kill Desdemona has been brainwashed by an expert and is no longer in control of himself. Lodovico's amazement about the change of the man whom passion could not shake draws attention to the accomplished change.

The answer to the question whether Othello ever emerges from his subjection to Iago is a difficult one. It seems sentimental to claim that there is always something in Othello that resists the ultimate subjugation. But I think it is also not true that he remains in the end completely submerged. The crux is Othello's last, most important, and most problematic self-assessment in his charge to
Lodovico to report to the Venetian Senate the story of his life: "Speak of me as I am" (V.ii.345). The present tense should not blind us to the fact that this is another retrospective self-dramatization. However, it is not, I think, merely an exercise in Bovarysm, as T. S. Eliot claimed. Bovarysm implies an ironic incongruity between the ideal and the actual arising from a congenital inability to face the truth about oneself; and as much as Othello may dramatize himself, he is not anywhere shown to be merely a romantic liar. He appears to be intent on telling his story aright to Lodovico so that it can be told to the unsatisfied in Venice—"nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice":

Then must you speak
Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme.

(V.ii.345-49)

But this is too simple a formula. That Othello loved not wisely, one agrees; but that he loved too well is hardly true: surely the greatest kind of love is not one that leads to precipitous jealousy. When Othello calls himself "not easily jealous," he denies what in the course of little more than a day has taken place. But yet, the speech is not merely rationalization or self-pity. It is possible to read Othello's words in the explanatory way some critics do: "loving too well" may mean to be doting; it may be the kind of all-absorbing passion that, as does Othello's, becomes an obsession. "Not easily jealous" may mean "not naturally jealous," and Othello certainly is not a naturally jealous man in the sense in which Iago is one. Still, this interpretation is not immediately suggested by what Othello says, and, without it, Othello's self-explanation falls short of total illumination.

After all, it would be surprising if Shakespeare, after writing plays that demonstrate man's difficulty in attaining a true picture of himself, would have given one of his least intellectual heroes a clear and rational view of his situation. Moreover, the dim and partial recognition of the truth he gave to Othello is psychologically and dramatically appropriate. The man who once more looks back at his life has just murdered his wife and has experienced the chaos in himself that he ironically predicted would be the end of love. He
Othello: Subjecting the Self

has realized that both the nonjealous and the jealous Othello have ceased to exist. "That's he that was Othello—here I am," he says as his pursuers take him captive. In this simple phrase is contained perhaps a better anagnorisis—and note the juxtaposition of past and present tense—than in his last retrospective self-assessment, which cannot be totally successful if it is to be plausible. The words are those of a man who drops tears as fast as the "Arabian trees their med’cinable gum," who is still in the grip of passion although of a nobler one than that which motivated him to kill. And the words are the prelude to another passionate act: suicide. It is probably impossible ever to recapture the past completely; for Othello to formulate a rational self-explanation at this moment would be quite unconvincing.

If the intellectual truth of Othello's words is incomplete, there is something in the imagery of the speech that adds a glow of emotional, "fideistic" truth, to which the allusion to Othello's Christianity contributes. He now senses the value of the pearl that he, like the base Indian (or, should we read "Judean" with the Folio?), threw away. And his concluding description of the incident in Aleppo when he slew the Turk that "beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state" recalls that Othello hit another Venetian, Desdemona; and if he did not traduce the state, he certainly scanted its "serious and great business." Past and present merge in the magnificent metaphor in which Othello takes his own life: the hand that leads the knife is now, just as in Aleppo, Othello's; the same hand that killed Desdemona kills now himself. Othello is not only the executor of justice but also a criminal; he is the "dog" whom he once slew.

Although Othello's conscious judgment of himself is defective, it is nevertheless true that he is a victim who deserves pity. As he says, he was, "being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme." Even granted the imperfections in Othello's character—his overconfidence, his rootedness in the past, his excessive trust, his premature defeatism, his obsessive love—without Iago's extraordinary skill of engendering jealousy in him, the Moor could not be thought to turn from an honorable general into what he grotesquely calls an "honorable murderer." One gets the impression that Othello's self-knowledge, defective as it is, would have been sufficient for all situations except the one in which Iago involves him. The subjection of Othello's self requires the skillful and relentless ministrations of a master deceiver. Iago's machinations interlock with Othello's reac-
tions so that the latter always appear a plausible result of the former. In contrast to other Jacobean dramatists who also strove for strong effects, Shakespeare understood how to make great passion humanly credible: Othello’s jealousy and violence strike us as plausible and awe-inspiring because of the strength of the begetter Iago. The effect is commensurate to the cause. The dynamic subjection of Othello’s self is so masterfully treated that the intensity of Othello’s passion produces not merely amazement but also compassion. Othello inflicts suffering; but he himself also suffers excruciatingly. It is primarily his capacity for suffering that, in spite of his lack of intellectual strength, makes him the powerful tragic hero he is.