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Dangerous Conceits: Audience, *aporia*, and Ambivalence in *Othello*¹ by Roman Briggs

The predominant anatomical “lore” of Renaissance Europe (Babb “Scientific” 502²) postulates a warmed-over Galenic understanding of bodily humors where the physical and the psychical are “conceptually fused” (Paster “Passions” 50).³ Succinctly, the mind and the body are said to function interdependently at the behest of four tiding humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile).⁴ Each of these is produced by, subsequently discharged from, and then (re-)absorbed by some porous organ(s).⁵ Insofar as equilibrium among the humors can be maintained, one remains psychically well. Unfortunately, the necessary ratio for equilibrium is inherently volatile, as the composition of each fluid and its proportion relative to the others is susceptible to the influence of both internal and external factors.

Among the latter are environmental considerations which agitate the passions—the passions, according to the model, being those material “spirits” which “flock from the brain to the heart,” signifying some “object”, either imagined or accurately perceived, and upsetting,

¹ I thank Dr. Shelby Richardson for extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, submitted for her seminar, ENG 6520: The Performance of Madness and Melancholy in Shakespeare's Drama (University of New Orleans, Fall 2019); and I thank both Dr. Richardson and Dr. Les White for generously agreeing to serve on my portfolio committee.

² While drawing primarily from recent scholarship is generally preferred, throughout I cite various works published in the 1940s by Lawrence Babb, and for two primary reasons: (1) I believe it can be helpful in coming to better understand a topic to consider a scholar's research on that topic which has kept her or his attention over a sustained period of time—given, of course, that the reading offered has not been demonstrated to be flawed in some important way. Babb offers just such a sustained look at humoralism in Shakespeare in a series of articles, a project which culminated in the publication of his survey *The Elizabethan Malady* in 1952. (2) Related to (1), after having reviewed much of the more recent literature on the topic, there do not seem to be significant marks of divergence between Babb's research and that of contemporary critics as far as the generalities germane to this study go.

³ While commentators such as Babb write of a ‘lore,’ this is misleading. It would be more accurate to say that early modern medicine consists of a brood of discrete theories regarding the physical and psychological better made sense of in terms of family resemblance (Wittgenstein's *Familienähnlichkeit*) than in terms of consensus. For the sake of utility, however, the sketching of a garden variety account involving the most common features expressed by these theories will be provided here. In outlining, I draw from the work of contemporary readers who have pored over more influential medical texts of the period and I draw directly from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

⁴ In order to sufficiently appreciate the mind-body holism which underpins the theory, we must untether ourselves from conceptualizing humor as essentially or even primarily non-corporeal. Danijela Kambaskovic provides a linguistic marker to this end, noting that “the Latin noun *umor* denotes moisture,” the root of our English “humid”; Heeding this, she continues, can help us to “conceptualize the fundamental link between the fluids in our bodies and our health and our health and disposition” (39).

⁵ Blood, imbued with *vital spirit* (or *spirits*), shepherds around the body's natural heat and moisture, each of which is a necessary component of health and vitality (Babb “Scientific” 503).

altering, and proliferating some humor(s) (Burton 252).⁶ Even the most “minute environmental . . . changes” can have “transforming effects on the humoral subject” (Kern Paster “Love” 103). The efficacy afforded to one’s surroundings is explained in part by the positing of an omnipresent *aether*, “a fifth essence,” which forms a reciprocal causal network between persons (Roach 27). Whatever the effect on some person’s constitution, it is important to note that such disturbances are believed to largely happen *to* the subject.⁷

“Love,” in order to illustrate, “enters [passively] through the eyes and it is spontaneous, irresistible, and absolute” (Charney 9). Assuming that the lover’s affection is returned by the love-object in due course, she or he becomes constitutionally “hot and moist”; this results from the proliferation of blood, the bodily fluid associated with a sanguine temperament (Babb “Love” 1025). On the other hand, the spirits may communicate the presence of some “bad object” (Burton 252), in which case the heart contracts, the physique is cooled, and the blood congeals, becoming material melancholy—itself a generator of psychological melancholy. This mind-body interaction can produce a self-sustaining loop for the disordered. As Hippocrates poetically observes: “[Sorrow is] the mother and daughter of melancholy, her epitome, symptom, and chief cause” (Burton 259).

Shakespeare was well-versed in this physio-psychology.⁸ Many of his plays are furnished by humoralist considerations to such an extent, in fact, that one cannot adequately appreciate their inner workings, much less the otherwise puzzling actions performed by certain characters populating them, without possessing at least a rudimentary understanding of the theory. Assuming that Shakespeare took humoralism seriously, his readers might reasonably wonder how this affected his own self-perception as playwright and producer—and so, as influencer of society. After all, Shakespeare had no dearth of critics, many of whom took him and dramatists, in general, to task for ‘unbalancing’ the already feeble minds of those who attended productions

⁶ It would be difficult to overstate the influence and importance of Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. While I have suggested in footnote (3) that there is no singular humoralist story to draw from, Burton’s *Anatomy* comes as close as any other text of the period to establishing a touchstone. As Stanley Jackson observes, the book makes for “a comprehensive presentation of medical-psychological thought on melancholia up to and into the second quarter of the seventeenth century” (95). And Judith Kegan Gardiner goes so far as to recommend that the *Anatomy*, on its own, makes for the best initiating point in coming to understand Elizabethan psychology: “I suggest . . . starting an investigation of that psychology with the one comprehensive psychological text of the English Renaissance generally considered representative of the period” (376). I draw from Burton’s *Anatomy* here and throughout.

⁷ This does allow for nuance. Mary Floyd-Wilson writes: “Although passibility [i.e., human vulnerability to ‘outside’ conditions] entails subjection to the inconstancy of one’s surroundings, it does not preclude the dynamic direction of one’s will, particularly in monitoring those . . . six Galenic ‘non-naturals.’ As health manuals and medical treatises of the period repeatedly state, temperance was achieved by properly managing the non-naturals: air, diet, sleep and waking, rest and activity, excretion and retention, and the passions” (134). Still, there are questions about the extent to which this ‘will’ is in any sense free from the effects of the humors—and so, in any significant *free* at all.

⁸ Roxana Cazan suggests that Shakespeare likely learned much of what he knew about humoralism from his son-in-law, John Hall, who was a physician (511).

of the plays. A cursory survey of the condemnatory responses to Elizabethan-Jacobean dramatists demonstrates that these artists routinely and knowingly stood trial within the court of public opinion.

While we have no extant response authored by Shakespeare, I believe that a piecemeal recognition of these criticisms can be extracted from his later plays as, no pun intended, a corpus. Since a study of the mature works as a whole would require a much larger venue, I propose to demonstrate that a close reading of *Othello* provides *prima facie* evidence that Shakespeare was working through such concerns. Here, I offer an interpretation of the play framed by this contention. In making the case, I provide analysis of the significant effects of external stimuli on the psyches of Desdemona (enchanted by the storytelling of Othello, and falling into a consequent love state) and Othello (bewitched by the misdirection of Iago, and falling into consequent states of love melancholy and irascibility), each according to humoralist assumptions. In each case, I draw attention to the potency of spoken word with respect to significant changes made within the auditor's psyche, later connecting this idea with conjecture regarding Shakespeare's own likely self-assessment.

Many discerning critics, Kenneth Gross (2001) and Marjorie Garber (2005) among them, have emphasized the litigiousness of the play (citing, for a few instances, Brabantio's indictment of Othello, Othello's defense, and Othello's 'indictment' of Desdemona). Building on this fruitful accentuation, I suggest that Shakespeare is presenting a mock trial of his own with *Othello*, where—through different characters, and with respect to various aspects of plot—he simultaneously assumes the positions of the interrogator (the creditable prosecutor, motivated by uncovering the truth about what can result from exposure to dramatic performance) and the interrogated (the transfixing sophist who, equipped with a disarming nature but uniquely potent 'charms,' practices a particularly malignant form of manipulation). In order to tease out certain aspects of this reading, I provide commentary informed by the presence of a certain gadfly whose restless spirit seems to buzz about the whole of it: Socrates.

Othello opens *media res*, amid a conflictual exchange taking place between the play's antagonist, Iago, and one of a number of his dupes, Roderigo. As we listen in, it quickly becomes clear that Shakespeare is not merely extending a sample of the villain's manner of operation—rhetorical sleight of hand—but is doctoring this with several of the play's motifs. In his very first line of dialogue, Roderigo informs us that Iago is under his employ. Shakespeare's choice of phrasing indicates that the latter is actually orchestrating the actions of the former: "thou, Iago, has had my purse / As if *the strings were thine*" (1.1.2-3; emphasis mine). In responding, Iago manipulates his dull captive by way of asserting, compellingly, that his allegiance lies with Roderigo and by exploiting a third character, Brabantio, apparently in order to achieve the end most desired by his 'friend': the undoing of Desdemona's recent marriage to Othello.⁹

From the outset, Iago is depicted as a skilled sophist: one who rhetorically "constructs false appearances that cannot be penetrated [such that his interlocutors cannot] see [through to]

⁹ Iago also divulges to Roderigo—and, more importantly, to the audience—that, all appearances to the contrary, he works exclusively in order to realize his own "peculiar end" (1.1.60). Roderigo fails to entertain the possibility that, ultimately, his end and Iago's might be incompatible.

the reality of the matter” (Beier 35).¹⁰ Here, I would like to merge Beier’s apt characterization with Millicent Bell’s suggestion that “Iago is a playwright” (103). For both, Iago is essentially the director of the actions of others and comes to realize the *mis-en-scène*—in this context, the reality that he would most like to actualize—by way of verbal direction and unsaid misdirection. This is so much the case, Bell contends, that “Iago is . . . the only character [i.e., agent] in the play. All others are [merely] materials to be worked on and shaped by his imagination” (103). This two-pronged sophist-playwright characterization of Iago will be further explored and fortified below, before being discussed, with due consideration and careful qualification, in conjunction with Shakespeare himself.

Aside from Roderigo’s telling allusion to puppetry, the initial scene of the initial act includes reference to “eyes” having seen “proof” of something otherwise questionable (1.1.28), unreliable appearances *vis-à-vis* fact (1.1.65), “poison” (1.1.68), “distemp’ring draughts” (1.1.99), disturbing dreams (1.1.142-143), potent “charms” (1.1.172-172), and contrastive *Others*—including Moors, “the devil,” and non-human animals (1.1.91). Each of these is thematically important to the play’s narrative form, and each, in its way, is broached in the yawped conversation which takes place between Roderigo and Brabantio. Here, Iago manipulates his auditor, Brabantio, through another of his auditors, Roderigo, in order to pull the strings of yet *another*, Othello. Iago’s proclivity for nested manipulation provides one of several ways that he is able to maneuver covertly.

Iago (through Roderigo) calls out to a vulnerable, slumbering Brabantio: “Awake! . . . / Look to your house, your daughter, your bags! (1.1.79-80) . . . Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe (1.1.88-89) . . . Awake . . . or else the devil will make a grandsire of you” (1.1.91). As always, Iago’s choice of words (and so, Shakespeare’s at the level of imparting subtext) demonstrates careful deliberation. Aside from alerting Brabantio to Desdemona’s elopement, Iago is reconfiguring the action as an act of larceny committed by *something* essentially inhuman. In addition, Iago is demonstrating his talent for implanting anxiety-inducing images within the minds of auditors: “your / daughter and the Moor are [now] making the beast with two backs” (1.1.115-117). The proposed image is as distressing as it is vivid, each by design. Meanwhile, Shakespeare uses these same lines in order to forecast Othello’s devolution from virtuous to morally vicious, from rational human to humors-broken brute. He also writes Brabantio as a harbinger of things to come: the elder melancholic is faced, he believes, with “an accident . . . not unlike [his] dream” involving Desdemona being seduced (1.1.142-143). Later, of course, a dispirited Othello will find himself oppressed by similar ‘sibylline’ visions.

Having lit the fuse, Iago steals away in order to ‘warn’ Othello of the imminent conflict with Brabantio, and we come to the first significant lines of dialogue spoken by the soldier: “Let him do his spite; / My services . . . / Shall out-tongue his complaints” (1.2.17-19). It is

¹⁰ Compare this with Socrates’ own assessment of sophistry in the *Apology* as making “the worse argument into the stronger argument [from the perspective of the auditor]” (Plato 20). The idea that sophists are motivated by the ‘purse’ is also touched on here, as sophists, Socrates suggests, “undertake to teach people [the art of rhetorical manipulation] and [to] charge a fee for it” (Plato 20).

conspicuous that Othello does not plead his innocence here. Instead, he suggests that the military achievements he has earned on behalf of Venice will ‘speak for’ him—a foreshadowing of a final request that he be remembered not only for his horrendous misdeeds but for his service to the city,¹¹ as well as a hint pertaining to his consequentialist bend which will come full flower in later self-rationalizations immediately preceding the killing of Desdemona. These lines are also interesting due to Othello’s inclusion of the phrase “out-tongue,” which brings to mind effectual speech. Othello is quick to repudiate the notion that he is a polished orator, however. In his first substantive speech, spoken in response to Brabantio’s accusation that he had “enchanted” Desdemona (1.2.63), Othello contends:

. . . Rude I am in speech,
And little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace;
.....
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broils and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself. Yet (by your gracious pa-
tience)
I will a round and unvarnish’d tale deliver
Of my whole course of love— . . . (1.3.81-82, 86-91)

This effusion parallels the opening of the defense offered by another tragic wordsmith: Socrates. In responding to his accusers, Socrates informs the members of his jury that he is no refined rhetorician: “Of the many lies that [my accusers] told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me” (Plato 18). Socrates goes on to suggest that he possesses no noteworthy ability to persuade, unless the gifted persuader, he quips, is to be equated with “the man who speaks the truth” (Plato 18).¹² Ironically, both Socrates and Othello go on to develop their rebuttals by explaining that the ‘youths’ supposedly ‘corrupted’—Desdemona for Othello, Plato and other young, affluent

¹¹ Just before he expires, Othello reminds all within earshot: “I have done the state some service, and they know’t— / [. . .] . . . in Aleppo once, / Where a malignant and turban’d Turk / Beat a Venetian and traduc’d the state, / I took by the throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him—” (5.2.339, 352-356).

¹² Both Othello’s speech and that given by Socrates should also be compared with dialogue said by Antony in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “I am not orator, as Brutus is, / [. . .] For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth, / Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech / To stir men’s blood. I only speak right on” (3.2.229, 233-235).

Athenians for Socrates—were affected by speech, but by neither sophistry nor preternaturally-charged charms.¹³

In offering his protest, Othello recounts that he was routinely summoned to the home of Brabantio due to the latter's fascination with his storytelling: "[He] oft invited me; / Still question'd me the story of my life / From year to year— [. . .] I ran it through, even from my boyish days / To th' very moment that he bade me tell it" (1.3.128-130, 132-133). At some point, Desdemona came to hear bits and pieces of these stories, and, like her father, she became seduced by the heard word, habitually approaching her raconteur "with greedy ear / [to] Devour up [his] discourse" (1.3.149-150).

The testimony which Othello provides here is of interest for a number of reasons. What is related by Othello seems to undermine his assertion that he is "rude . . . in speech," and in at least two distinct ways: First, what he says to the Duke and others, he says gracefully, even—to poach G. Knight Wilson's well-worn description—*musically* (109). Second, his defense centers on his acknowledging the force with which he can tell a tale.¹⁴ If Othello can mesmerize Brabantio and Desdemona, sophisticated Venetians of leisure, his speech is likely much more cultivated than he claims, or, at least, than he knows. In addition to this conspicuous self-subverting, Shakespeare informs us that Othello is given to taking liberties in engaging an auditor.¹⁵ Perhaps he did encounter "Anthropophagi" at some point in his escapades, but those "men whose heads / [Do grow] beneath their shoulders" are obviously an invention introduced in order to retain Desdemona's attention and, very likely, to win her admiration (1.3.144-145). No one can say what images of the mythically intrepid Othello placed within the mind of his beloved auditor.¹⁶

¹³ Socrates recounts his Apollonian mission to epistemically humble Athens. As he encountered politicians, poets, craftsmen, etc., each of whom claimed to own a certain understanding, Socrates performed *elenchoi*, demonstrating to each that he did not, in fact, possess this knowledge (Plato 21-22). The 'corruption' involves chiefly the Athenian youths' imitation of what they heard in these encounters: "the young men who follow me around of their own free will, those who have the most leisure, the sons of the very rich, take *pleasure* in hearing people questioned; they themselves often imitate me and try to question others. I think they find an abundance of men who believe they have some knowledge but have little or nothing. The result is that those whom they question are angry, not with themselves but with me" (Plato 22-23; emphasis mine). I think it is interesting that Socrates notes the pleasure the youth take in experiencing his spectacle; this ties the manner in which they are affected by the experience to the passions, and not merely, as one might expect, to rationality.

¹⁴ While Socrates was not telling stories, his own following resulted from his unique speaking abilities.

¹⁵ We come to additional evidence of this later on as Othello quizzes Desdemona regarding the whereabouts of her handkerchief. Marjorie Garber observes: "Othello tells the story of the handkerchief more than once, and the details differ in each telling. In one version it is a gift from his mother, woven by an Egyptian charmer, and said to have the power of guaranteeing love . . . In another version it has been given by Othello's father to his mother. (These variations suggest that Othello's storytelling abilities are more sophisticated—and dangerous—than previously thought)" (611).

¹⁶ Iago sees through this, noting Othello's tendency for "bragging and telling . . . fantastical / lies . . ." to Desdemona (2.1.222-223).

Given these things—that Othello seems to speak ‘musically’ strategically, with success, and with an openness to exaggerate in order to captivate an audience—he doubles Iago’s sinister rhetorician. Like Iago, Othello agitates the passions of Brabantio and Desdemona by way of spoken word, just as he does with the Duke and his retinue in this very scene: “I think,” the Duke declares to the nonplussed father, “this tale would win my daughter too” (1.3.171).

Upon hearing Othello out, and upon hearing Desdemona offer her own testimony, Brabantio begrudgingly concedes that Desdemona was “half the wooer” (1.3.176). The affair is not the product of “spells and medicines” after all (1.3.61). Or is it? Having already converged sophistry with stage direction, I would now like to underscore an overlapping of these with witchcraft.¹⁷ Considering that references to witchcraft pervade Brabantio’s indictment, and that Othello’s defense hangs on his having beguiled Desdemona solely by way of storytelling, Shakespeare seems to recommend that we interpret certain instances of spoken word as quasi-magical.¹⁸ While Shakespeare would never have chosen to incorporate so loaded a concept without intending to elicit within the minds of his spectators ideas associated with the genuinely supernatural,¹⁹ invoking witchcraft also functions as an invitation to more learned contemporaries to consider the unjust trials being conducted in England and throughout Europe at the time—and, I suggest, the ‘trial’ being conducted against Elizabethan theater by its detractors. Shakespeare invites all to ponder the uncanny allure of the spoken word, and the culpability of those who choose to utilize speech in an “unethical” way in order to realize purely selfish ends (Cazan 506). But, what does any of this—stagecraft, sophistry, magic—have to do with humoralism?

As stated prior, humoralism holds that the human body is comprised of a community of porous organs, each of which is permeated with (some combination of the four) humor(s). Between these organs, there is “seepage, percolation, and general sloshing about” of the humors (Roach 39). So long as there remains an approximate balance, psychic health is preserved. This is an extremely difficult state of affairs to maintain, however, as there exists “a constant and dynamic interchange between self and environment, with the passions [one of the six Galenic

¹⁷ Compare with what Shelby Richardson observes about the conflation of actors and witches: “According to their critics, the power of both the witch and the actor resided largely in the ability of each to maintain control over what their ‘audiences’ saw and heard. It was their skill in manipulating ‘the truth’ through the use of sight and sound that was perhaps most greatly feared by those who wrote against the theater during the Early Modern period” (11); and later, “In the minds of their adversaries, the trouble with both actors and witches is that because they are both engaged in similar projects—the manufacture of illusions and the subsequent ‘bewitching’ of their various audiences—both are dangerously subversive” (22).

¹⁸ This linking of magic with the spoken word has historical precedent in early modern thought regarding witchcraft. Lauren Kassel asserts that “[true] magicians spoke of words, and common men made them into charms,” suggesting that incantation, broadly construed, preceded magical fetish, where the latter is an attempt on the part of the misguided to crystallize the former.

¹⁹ G. Blakemore Evans observes, “the ‘fact’ of witchcraft . . . was generally accepted by many of the best minds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (262). See also Winfred Overholser (338).

‘non-naturals’] engendered by and engendering the humors” (Paster “Love” 93).²⁰ Environmental influences have the capacity to upset one’s humoral balance, causing the subject to become “ill-tempered,” owing to an expansion of any of the humors (Overholser 342). In extreme cases, this can lead to the humor “overheating,” causing it to become “adust” (Overholser 344). Once in the throes of this process, the now-overabundant humor—blood, say—can flood various regions of the body, become dispossessed of vital spirit, and then become “cold, dry, and sluggish” (Babb “Grief” 503-504). Finally, blood can thicken, in extreme cases becoming material melancholy. This may occasion any number of physical and psychical ailments, “sometimes” leading to “death” (Burton 250).

When we contemplate the faculties of witches, we often attribute to them fantastical abilities that, however mysteriously, defy the known laws of nature. Interestingly, contemporaries of Shakespeare—believers in actual witches—seemed to hold that even witches were forced to work within the constraints of hard humoralist fact. In other words, it was believed that magical intervention requires a witch to work *through* the humors, not beyond them. Mary Floyd-Wilson notes this: “Witches . . . were widely understood to have the powers to . . . stir or dull the body’s spirits” (143).²¹ Given this, the divide, which separates the witch from the sophist, is somewhat misplaced—at least with respect to the conduit. Both the witch and the sophist work toward realizing their end by agitating some subject’s humors in order to manipulate their thoughts and actions.²² To return to *Othello*, in deliberately pairing the magician with the fabulist in the initial defense scene, Shakespeare seems intent on commingling these types, rhetorician and magician, within the minds of his own spectators. Taking this into consideration, let us wonder just a bit more about how Othello and Desdemona ‘bewitched’ one another before moving on to consider Iago’s uniquely entrancing tactics.

Having established that Othello successfully courted Desdemona through his way with storytelling, a natural connection between this practice and Renaissance conventions regarding love comes to the fore. It is no surprise that Desdemona is portrayed as sanguine throughout

²⁰ As with Lawrence Babb, Gail Kern Paster—Director Emerita of the Folger Shakespeare Library—has researched humoralism in Shakespeare extensively. And as with Babb, I draw from multiple works published by her.

²¹ Even “evil spirits,” themselves, were believed to “influence . . . behavior . . . by manipulating the non-naturals, especially the passions” (Floyd-Wilson 144). It was believed, Floyd-Wilson goes on to say by quoting Stuart Clark, that Satan “acted on the ‘animal spirits’ in the human body, thus interfering with the imagination, other mental functions and motor activities” (144). Compare this with testimony provided in the 1665 trying of an accused witch by Sir (Dr.) Thomas Browne, whom Winfred Overholser describes as “one of the best known physicians in the Stuart period”: “that the devil . . . did work upon the bodies of men and women upon a natural foundation . . . to stir up and excite such humors superabounding in their bodies and to great excess, whereby he did in an extraordinary manner afflict them with such distempers as their bodies were most subject to” (339). See also Jacqueline Van Gent (290-292).

²² Interestingly, Socrates was accused of being both a sophist and a magician. The former accusation was famously documented in the *Apologies* of both Plato and Xenophon. Both accusations were leveled satirically in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. The latter charge was perpetuated at least up through the first half of the seventeenth century as, Lauren Kassell notes, a Frenchman named Gabriel Naudé took it upon himself to clear the name of Socrates and others (including Virgil and Roger Bacon) with his *Apologie pour tous les grands personages fausement soupçonnez de magie* (107-108). Writing about *Othello*, Kenneth Gross writes: “Slander’s myriad disguises make it a moral threat . . . Its protean nature and quasi-magical efficacy add to its allure” (2). Socrates understood this better than perhaps anyone.

much of the play, as she is newly in love.²³ It is also fitting that Shakespeare chose the foremost avenue by which her blood was inflamed to be by hearing Othello recount his harrowing experiences across the globe; as Maurice Charney informs us, according to standard belief of the [Renaissance] period, “women . . . fall in love with maleness as a generalized property” (17). Nothing, I think, would have seemed more essentially masculine to the sixteenth century Venetian than incredible tales of the swords and sandals variety.²⁴

Connected with Othello’s having aroused “aural desire,” Desdemona was likely also taken ‘visually’ with the mental image implanted by her chevalier and with his exoticism (Gail Kern Paster “Love” 108). Paster surmises that “[Desdemona’s] appetite for an exotic narrative is only a slight displacement of her appetite for the exotic subject in the narrative” (“Love” 108). Whatever came to sustain her overall attraction, Desdemona certainly seems to have capitulated first to intoned “love magic” (Van Gent 292). While Jacqueline Van Gent does not discuss this in terms of *Othello* specifically, she does assert that within the early modern period, it was believed that “magic [was sometimes] employed in . . . winning someone’s love” (291). Brabantio relented much too quickly, it seems. In a way, Othello’s speech was magical.

By contrast, Shakespeare provides ample indication that Othello became enamored with Desdemona principally by perceiving her physical beauty. Late in the play, just before Desdemona is murdered, Othello fetishizes her body even as he steels himself to take her life: “I’ll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.2.3-5). In the preceding scene, Othello describes her eyes as “charms” (5.1.34), suggesting that these, and other enticing aspects of Desdemona’s appearance, were the means by which he initially became absorbed.²⁵ This is a callback to Brabantio’s earlier invocation of charms. Reference to the eyes also returns our attention to the abiding exhortation issued by him to Othello: “Look to [Desdemona], Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceiv’d her father, and may thee” (1.3.292-293). The suggestion is that Othello plainly ‘has eyes’ for Desdemona, but, ironically, this distorted perception may blind him to an objectively real threat in the form of betrayal.

Shakespeare culls from the standard physio-psychological thinking of his day in implying that Othello falls in love with Desdemona chiefly by perceiving her beauty. In his *Anatomy*, Robert Burton writes, “Sight . . . is the first step of this unruly love [i.e., lust] . . . The most

²³ While we cannot, with certainty, determine Desdemona’s disposition prior to courtship, assuming that she was temperamentally sanguine even then, the speed with which she comes to love Othello is also supported by humoralism. Lawrence Babb writes: “Falling in love, especially for a sanguine person, may be a swift and headlong process” (1023).

²⁴ Othello’s recollection of his courtship of Desdemona includes telltale signs of love according to the humors theory, including her sighing (1.3.159) and weeping (1.3.154) (Burton 280). Later, as Othello suspiciously takes Desdemona’s “frank” hand, he observes that it is “hot, hot and moist” (3.4.39), each an indication that one is in love. Othello assumes this love-object is Cassio, failing to consider that this somatic response might be the result of the affection that Desdemona feels for him.

²⁵ Earlier still, Othello expresses worry to Iago that Desdemona’s beauty could break his resolve to kill her: “Get me some poison . . . this night. I’ll not / expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty / unprovide my mind again” (4.1.204-206).

familiar and usual cause of love is that which comes by sight, which conveys those admirable rays of beauty . . . into the heart” (65). This explains why in Elizabethan prose fiction it is conventional for “a young man who sees the lady of his fate . . . [to] commonly [be] smitten dumb and for some moments [to gaze] at her wide-eyed” (Babb “Sorrow” 141).²⁶ We can imagine Othello first encountering Desdemona with ‘greedy’ eye, troublingly stripped of his prized *savoir faire*, and—to return just once more to Brabantio’s injunction—this physical perfection of Desdemona “instill[ing]” within the mind of Othello “an inward idol whose existence colors [future] experience” (Roychoudhury 36). The exaltation of this idol, the mental impression, anticipates Othello’s idolatry of Desdemona’s beauty as he lurks menacingly around their marriage bed for the first and the last time. It is through the eyes, then through the humors, and finally through the heart that men typically become “infected by lovesickness” (Bernard 162)—an impairment which, Carol Thomas Neely notes, can “rapidly [corrupt] the subject” (101).

So, Othello loves Desdemona, and Desdemona loves Othello. Although this state of affairs owes its actuality to each party having affected the humors of the other, things are serene at this stage in the play. While having been “overtaken” by love, in coming to earn the embrace of his and her love-object, Othello and Desdemona share in the sanguine disposition, their runnels foaming warmly within (Bernard 156). Unfortunately, the humoralist contends, human beings are inherently physiologically and psychologically “brittle” (Burton 381). Irrespective of the degree of “present happiness,” we may suddenly become “dejected . . . [having incurred] . . . a little sorrow and discontent . . . How many sudden accidents may procure [our] ruin”? (Burton 381). If Iago is anything, he is an “accident” patiently waiting to happen. And the channel by which he will raze our happy couple’s contentment is alluded to early and often in the opening acts of the play: again, the humors.

This motif is occasionally referenced explicitly, as when as Brabantio assumes that an overbold Roderigo disturbs his sleep due to being under the thumb of “distemp’ring draughts” (1.1.99).²⁷ More often, though, humorism is gestured to by reference to liquid or liquidity. To provide a few instances, there are turns of phrase, such as Othello’s use of “flood and field” (1.3.135), and there are hollow threats, such as Roderigo’s promise that we will “incontinently drown” himself since he cannot obtain Desdemona’s hand (1.3.305).²⁸ More than perhaps any

²⁶ Here (141) and elsewhere (“Physiological” 1023, 1032), Babb also discusses eyes and love specifically in conjunction with the Elizabethan understanding of “love at first sight.”

²⁷ Compare this with Brabantio’s accusation that “with some mixture pow’rful o’er the blood / Or with some dram (conjur’d to this effect) / [Othello] wrought upon [Desdemona]” (1.3.104-106).

²⁸ Iago responds appropriately: “we [human beings] / have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal / stings, [our] unbitted lusts” (1.3.330-331). Roderigo is on the verge of allowing his humors to ‘drown’ him, but he can, being a rational entity, resist this. Oversimplifying things in his proto-existentialist way, Iago continues: “It is merely a lust of the blood and a per- / mission of the will. Come, be a man! Drown / thyself? drown cats and blind puppies!” (1.3.134-136).

other aspect of the drama, though, the settings and the circumstances that motivate movement of the *dramatis personae* from one to the other keep the humoralist theme afloat.

The play opens in Venice: a commonwealth consisting of 118 islands, separated by myriad murky channels. This community, like Othello, just *is* a socially-constructed totality carved up by dozens of lengths and pools of fluid; like Othello, the well-being of the city hinges on the unpredictable temper of these rivers and their tributaries. Just as we begin to settle in here, we learn that Othello and Desdemona's honeymoon will be postponed indefinitely, as the Duke announces that a Turkish fleet is headed for Cyprus—an outpost possessed at the time by the Venetians (1.3). As state officials charge Othello with the task of leading a campaign against these invaders, the action of the play moves from a humid location to one that is wetter still: the open sea, and the Morphou Bay. This “geographical shift” is also significant in that it involves “the movement from a civilized place to a wild one, from a locale of order and law to [Cyprus] a place of passion and confusion” (Garber 589). Reason is threatened, the geographical shift suggests, by undulating humors.

The motif is reinforced in the next scene, as Montano discusses with unnamed Cypriots the extreme weather—the “high-wrought flood” (2.1.2)—and the effect that this will likely have on the impending battle. It is impossible that the vessels can remain intact “when [such] mountains [of water] melt on them,” he observes (2.1.8).²⁹ The helpless Moors mirror Othello, and their ultimate fate represents his also: “The desperate tempest hath so bang'd the Turks / . . . / [that most of their fleet has succumbed to] a grievous wrack” (2.1.21-23). At this point in the action (and figuratively, throughout the play), Othello remains “at sea” (2.1.28), as a concerned Cassio prays that “the heavens / Give him defense against the elements” (2.1.44-45).³⁰ His orisons will be to no avail, however, as one of Montano's companions reports that the surge “[s]eems to cast water on the Burning Bear” (2.1.14).³¹ In addition to being a reference to thundering waves encroaching upon the sky's domain (the heavens, rationality), the Burning (adust) Bear seems also to act as an emblem of Othello, which, being flooded by the humors, represents the distempered lover as essentially bestial.³²

As with any deluge of this magnitude, the wind also plays a role. Montano observes: “Methinks the wind hath spoke aloud at land, / A fuller blast ne'er shook our battlements” (2.1.5-6). Like the rains, the wind has a humoralist analogue: the passions. Gail Kern Paster writes:

²⁹ Within the same line, Montano makes mention of the “ribs of oak” which integrate the ship's components; this could be a reference to an earlier exchange which takes place between Othello and Iago, the latter reporting that “I had thought t' have yerk'd him here under the ribs” (1.2.5).

³⁰ Shakespeare's use of *elements* is, itself, a reference to humoralism, as, Danijela Kambaskovic reminds us, “each bodily humour was related to one of the four elements, earth, fire, water, and air . . . and each . . . was characterized by a unique combination of heat and moisture” (40). See also Winfred Overholser (341-342).

³¹ Othello revisits this image later on, reporting to Iago that Desdemona can “sing the savagness out of a bear” (5.1.189).

³² Compare with Cassio's regretful self-appraisal following his carousing and subsequent fight throughout 2.3.

“The passions [were believed to have worked] on the body very much as strong movements of wind . . . operate upon the natural world” (“Body” 45³³). Like fluid more generally, the wind reappears at key moments. To provide a pair of examples, as Desdemona sings pensively, she hears a knock at the door; Emilia reassures her that “it’s [just] the wind” (4.3.54). And, likely homage to Dante, there is the *contrapasso* which Othello courts following his tardy realization that Desdemona was innocent: “Whip me, ye devils! / From the possession of this heavenly sight! / Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur! / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire” (5.2.277-280) In contriving a just punishment for himself, Othello merges unrelenting winds with flaming waters.³⁴

To return to 2.1, Othello miraculously survives the ordeal, landing with celebrated confirmation that the “wars are done; the Turks are / drown’d” (2.1.2). Now the die has been cast. If the foreshadowing of the destruction of the Turkish fleet is not sufficient to demonstrate this, Cassio alerts us that “our captain’s captain, [has been] Left in the conduct of the bold Iago” (2.1.74-75). Cassio informs Montano, in other words, that Desdemona is under the immediate care of Othello’s ancient, and here, Shakespeare informs the reader that Othello’s heart—his “captain,” having usurped reason’s proper place as locus of deliberation—is under the influence of Iago, who is waiting in the wings with “birdlime” in hand (2.1.126). A confident Iago announces to the audience, Othello “is of a free and open nature” (1.3.393), and besides, he “holds me well” (1.3.390). Most importantly, Othello is “changeable / in [his] will,” and so, the circumstances are also (1.3.346-347). The key is Othello’s *passibility*: his “vulnerability” qua auditor (Floyd-Wilson 134).

Iago will manipulate Othello by upsetting the passions—in this particular case, by “abusing” his “ear” (1.3.395). He will destroy Othello by destroying his confidence in Desdemona, which will, in turn, destroy their marriage. He will promote suspicion, effectuating an epistemological crisis. This will result in Othello’s becoming irredeemably distempered. Alongside Othello’s misgivings about his ‘place’ within proper Venetian society, Iago will use as a tool his own perceived ‘usurper,’ Cassio: “I [will] put the Moor / At least into such a jealousy . . . / That judgment cannot cure [it]” (2.1.300-302). This begins with an ironically inarticulate “Hah?” (3.3.35). Seeing Cassio part abruptly with Desdemona, and seeing that Othello has seen this, the spellbinder continues, passing judgment:

IAGO. Ha, I like not that.

³³ See also Gail Kern Paster “Love” (103)

³⁴ Control of the weather in order to agitate the humors is also connected with witchcraft. Mary Floyd-Wilson notes that “witches (and the evils who spurred them on) were widely understood to have powers to control the environment . . . Witches purportedly [King James] directed winds and manipulated air . . . [to] stir or dull the body’s spirits” (143). Robert Burton, himself, endorses this view by signing off on the following account: “Erricus, King of Sweden, had an enchanted cap, by virtue of which, and some magical murmur or whispering terms, he could command spirits, trouble the air, and make the wind stand which way he would, insomuch that when there was any great wind or storm, the common people were wont to say, the king had on his conjuring cap. But such examples are infinite. That which [magicians] can do, is almost as much as the devil himself, who is still ready to satisfy their desires, to oblige them the more unto him. They can cause tempests, storms, [etc.]” (203).

OTHELLO. What dost thou say?

IAGO. Nothing, my lord; or if—I know not what. (3.2.35-36)

Just this quickly, Iago “darkens Othello’s ear,” inviting him, indirectly, to doubt both Desdemona’s fidelity and Cassio’s loyalty (Gross 107).³⁵ At the heart of Iago’s approach lies an erosion of perceived certainty on the part of Othello. Othello arrives on the island supremely confident in his wife and in his lieutenant—if not in himself. Understanding the utility of the latter, Iago contrives an aural cocktail comprised of baseless insinuation and ‘well-intended’ frankness regarding certain facts, personal and social. He poisons the ear of Othello by underscoring the significance of divergence of “clime, complexion, and degree” between Othello and his bride (3.3.230).³⁶ And Iago enthralls Othello by engaging him in a kind of call-and-response loop crafted to invert the sense of certain words and their relations to some significant object:

OTHELLO. Is [Cassio] not honest?

IAGO. Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO. Honest? ay,

IAGO. My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO. What dost thou think?

IAGO. Think, my lord?

OTHELLO. Think, my lord? (By heaven,) thou echo’st

me,

As if there were some monster in thy thought

Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean some-

thing.

³⁵ This is a recurring theme in Shakespeare. In *Hamlet*, the King’s ear is literally poisoned by Claudius; earlier in the play, the former’s ghost suggests that Claudius has poisoned “the whole ear of Denmark” (1.5.36). And, Mary Floyd-Wilson reminds us, “Lady Macbeth makes her husband a man of ‘mettle’ by pouring her ‘spirits’ in his ear—spirits that ambiguously give her rhetoric both natural and supernatural effects” (153).

³⁶ This, in particular, affects Othello in an overwhelming way. Once Iago exits, Othello observes in soliloquy: “. . . for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have, or for I am declin’d / Into the vale of years . . . / She’s gone. I am abus’d, and my relief / Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage!” (3.3.263-268).

.....

[Thou] didst contract and purse thy brow together,
 As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
 Some horrible conceit. If thou dost love me,
 Show me thy thought. (3.3.103-108, 113-116)

Here, we return to Socrates and to the Attic Greek *aporia*: a term often attached to the early Platonic dialogues which refers to the unique species of puzzlement experienced when one's most securely held-to beliefs (and most securely held-to beliefs about why *those* beliefs were previously thought to be candidates for things known) are undermined.³⁷ To provide a familiar example, in the *Euthyphro*, the titular cleric is engaged by Socrates in discussion regarding the essence of piety—a profound understanding of which Euthyphro claims to possess. After performing a series of scaffolded *elenchoi* in order to investigate various proposals, Euthyphro is shown that he does not, in fact, have authentic knowledge of piety, and that his beliefs about it are irremediably inharmonious. Rather than coming to any resolution, a humiliated Euthyphro abandons the argument, leaving a 'despondent' Socrates at the *agora* in search of his next auditor: "What a thing to do, my friend. By going, you have cast me down from a great hope I had, that I would learn from you" (Plato 16).

Iago operates similarly, but, in interesting ways, inversely.³⁸ Like Socrates, he encounters his auditor, Othello, presently *believing* that he *knows* that his loving wife is faithful to him. And like Socrates, Iago initiates removal of the attendant feeling of certainty by subtly suggesting that what has been declared requires a closer look—in Iago's case, by *implicitly* raising questions about what has been taken for granted: "Honest, my Lord? [...] Think, my Lord?" (3.3.103, 105). Merely by recasting Othello's affirmations regarding the character of Cassio as foci of investigation, Iago plants feelings of doubt within the mind of his superior. Similarly, in employing the *elenchus*, Socrates induces within his own auditors a kind of queasy irresolution regarding those things which they earlier claimed to know. In the dialogues, Socrates—in part,

³⁷ Stephen David Ross describes *aporia* as involving "moments in the movement of thought . . . in which [thought] finds itself faced with unconquerable obstacles resulting from conflicts in its understanding of its own intelligibility. Such conflicts cry for a resolution that cannot be achieved within the conditions from which they emerge" (3-4). Given this, it might be better described as a meta-epistemological issue rather than as an epistemological issue. And, I concede, of course, that the Socratic endeavor involves conceptual analysis pertaining to the universal (Can I know the *eidos* of Love?), not the particular (Can I know that Desdemona loves me enough to remain faithful to me?). But, for my purposes, I think there is enough overlap to link Socratic *aporia* with Iagoan skepticism without doing too much damage to either, and which might enrich an understanding of both.

³⁸ Interestingly, the very first lines of the play involve reference to a failure to know what, according to Roderigo, should be known: "thou, Iago . . . / . . . shouldst know of this [marriage]" (1.1.2-3). This atmosphere of knowing, not knowing, and merely considering, but always acknowledging the difference, seems to follow Iago. For instance, at 1.3.390-393, he remarks that there is negligible reason to believe that Othello had had an affair with his wife, Emilia—but, that while he cannot know if this is true, the suspicion will do.

because his stated desire to explore understanding via conceptual analysis is genuinely unfeigned—is left *by* his auditors. Conversely, once he has planted the seed of suspicion, the “honest” Iago abandons Othello, leaving him to stew in *aporia* (3.3.242)—but not before he sews an additional seed, regarding what *can* be believed by Othello: “My lord, you *know* I love you” (3.3.117; emphasis mine).

After the poison has taken effect, Othello returns to Iago, as, having been “set . . . on the rack” of distrust, he is eager to further consider the possibility of Desdemona’s infidelity in order to come to terms with this (3.3.335). Iago is more than willing to foster this obsession. As Othello demands “ocular proof” (3.3.360), Iago obliges by verbally conjuring within the mind of his auditor that “monster in thought” (3.3.107), which was only gestured to before. ‘Hesitant’ to harm his ‘friend’ and commander, Iago ‘reluctantly’ draws “prime . . . goats,” “hot . . . monkeys,” and “wolves in pride” from his cauldron (3.3.403-404).³⁹

Kenneth Gross interprets the effect in terms of the power that suggestion can have, given a pliable subject: “[Iago] keeps the Moor terrified by his own ‘thought’ as well as putative ‘facts’ . . . [He] invites Othello to share a concrete and vicious language of moral disgust . . . which evokes not just the lovers’ unseen copulation but their animal ignorance and folly” (112).⁴⁰ Millicent Bell describes the scenario, and Shakespeare’s own spectators’ participation with it, in these terms: “The more we [members of the audience] see him and hear [Othello] the more we almost share the madness that mounts in his mind until it reaches a point in which he appears to hallucinate . . . writhing before the inner vision of his wife’s betrayal” (80).⁴¹ With Othello, spectators take part in ‘seeing aurally’ what is absent and in coming to disbelieve what is present and clear. This involves, according to humoralism, an agitation of the passions.

In a moment of ironic honesty, Iago raises this very issue, remarking to Othello that he is clearly “eaten up with passion” (3.3.391), and in a later moment of affected reasonableness, he ‘comforts’ his auditor by reminding Othello that “we [actually] see nothing done; / [Desdemona] may be honest yet” (3.3.433-432). This observation, issued in order to determine the extent to which his suggestions have taken hold, is met almost immediately with a demand from the lovesick Othello for “black vengeance” (3.3.446)—a call for “blood, blood, blood!” (3.3.451).⁴²

³⁹ We find evidence of this particular image haunting Othello as late as 5.1.263.

⁴⁰ Compare with Marjorie Garber: “[Iago] has suggested all of this [which Othello] ‘sees’] . . . He is a voice in the dark . . . [He] uses language to insinuate, to imply, to pull out of people’s imagination the dark things that already there” (606).

⁴¹ See also Kenneth Gross (111-113).

⁴² According to Burton, the lovelorn is already primed for this sort of reaction: “Of all the passions . . . love is most violent, and of those bitter potions which this love-melancholy affords, the bastard jealousy is the greatest . . . For besides fear and sorrow, which is common to all melancholy, anxiety of mind, suspicion, aggravation, restless thoughts, paleness, meagreness [sic], neglect of business . . . these are farther yet misaffected, and in a higher strain. ’Tis a more vehement passion, a more furious perturbation, a bitter pain, a fire, a pernicious curiosity, a gall disquieted, they lose [peace] . . . [and are] more sad . . . [and] more ordinarily suspicious . . . [The lovelorn] sigh, weep, sob for anger . . . [Jealousy will cause one to] drag her [his lover] out of doors, send her home, he will be

However, this clamoring for retribution should be read in connection with the next lines of dialogue spoken by Othello. Wanting to *seem* to urge patience, Iago suggests that Othello might change his mind about things. Othello's response brings us back to bodies of water and their anatomical analogues:

. . . Like to the Pontic Sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Nev'r [feels] retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my blood thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall nev'r look back, nev'r ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Shall swallow them up. (3.3.453-460)

This signals an alteration in Othello which Iago first notes to the audience in process—"The Moor already changes with my poison" (3.3.325)—and much later, to Lodovico, in product—"He is much chang'd" (4.1.268). The metamorphosis is the upshot of Iago having surreptitiously undermined the security of the "passible" choleric, placing within his mind graphic images which are abhorrent to him. Using Othello's imagination as his medium, Iago embeds an *idée fixe*, which, with the aid of supporting suggestion, only becomes more loathsome as the play progresses.⁴³

In the passage just cited, Othello mentions the Pontic Sea, which, a footnote in *The Riverside Shakespeare* informs us, is the Black Sea: a symbol of unalloyed material melancholy. In explaining Othello's transformation at the level of the humors, we need only consider how the choleric was believed to be affected once one was made sufficiently insecure about his partner's affections: "When subjected to the great humoral perturbation of jealousy, [his] temperature would increase so much that the yellow bile would burn (it would become 'adust') and turn into a form of black bile worse than simple melancholy. This dreadful perturbation would not allow [him] to reason any more [sic]" (Stelzer 222).⁴⁴ So, Othello's change in temperament results

divorced forthwith, she is a whore, etc. . . . so he continues . . . the object moves him . . . accusing and suspecting not strangers only, but brothers and sisters, father and mother, nearest and dearest friends" (280-281).

⁴³ "Great is the force of imagination," Burton observes, "and much more ought the cause of melancholy to be ascribed to this alone, than to the distemperature of the body" (253).

⁴⁴ There is also a racist component to take into consideration here. In here survey of race in *Othello*, Ania Loomba notes: "Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* informed its readers that Turks were prone to 'jealous outrages' of the political kind . . . Richard Knowles, whose popular and enormously influential *General History of the Turks* (1603) was consulted by Shakespeare while writing *Othello* . . . detailed instances of Turkish sexual

from a change and simultaneous expansion of his most plentiful humor.⁴⁵ Once the bile floods the brain, it cools and clots, alongside the ensconced image which induced the change: “A notion which has found lodgment in a melancholy brain [was thought to be] very tenacious, for the melancholy brain is dry and hard . . . Melancholy men, therefore, are peculiarly subject to hallucinatory obsessions” (Babb “Grief” 510).

In severe instances, this was believed to lead to epilepsy: “if the stream of both air and humors in the brain became congested, the consistency of the brain matter would change fundamentally, causing seizures . . . Various [early modern] medical scientists . . . explained that the occurrence of epilepsy was caused by a blockage of the cold humors—phlegm and black bile—in the brain” (Cazan 508). We find Othello *seized* in just this way in 5.1, as he finally collapses under the weight of his imagination.⁴⁶ Following recovery, a significantly devolved Othello prepares to take action. His animalism brings to mind a much earlier assertion which a rational Othello made to Iago: “Exchange me for a goat, / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such [exsufflicate] and [blown] surmises, / Matching thy inference” (3.3.180-183). But in giving in to these very unfounded “inferences,” Othello has participated in his own dehumanization. Here we have another usurper: the goat.

It is informative that Shakespeare chooses the goat here, as, perhaps, he means to connect the loss of humanity with Baphomet and related occult imagery—a connection which, again, couples sophistry with magic. While the temptation to reduce Iago to a satanic archetype should be resisted, it is interesting to note the ways in which he is similar to that greatest of all unholy whisperers and to trace those characteristics shared by the innocents, Eve and Othello. Given these equivalences, it is especially intriguing that the early moderns believed the melancholic to be “particularly subject to demonic influence” (Overholser 343).⁴⁷ (Socrates also heard ‘a voice,’ a *daemon*.⁴⁸)

jealousies and strict control over women’s lives, implying that sexual and political power were somehow related” (94). Learning about such works of ‘nonfiction’ and the dramatic works which they informed, Loomba goes on to say, can “help us to gauge the various ways in which *Othello* might have played upon the beliefs, anxieties, or desires of its audiences” (101).

⁴⁵ Joseph Roach writes: “Conventional wisdom dictated that once the humours course through the body, they cannot be balanced again without the passage of time or the intervention of a psychic to restore *eukrasia* . . . The passions are easily summoned from the lower regions, but, like devils, once summoned they are not so easily put back” (47). For this reason, prevention was often thought to be among the best of medicines; and so, temperance was encouraged for all.

⁴⁶ As Roxana Cazan informs us, *seizure* is derived from the Greek word “‘*epilambano*’ meaning ‘overtaking or seizing a person’” (508).

⁴⁷ Lawrence Babb mentions this as well: “‘the Devil’s Bath’ [i.e., material melancholy] invites demonic visitation. The devil works primarily upon the imagination, which ‘he moves . . . by meditation of the humours’” (“Hamlet” 121).

⁴⁸ In the *Apology*, Plato’s Socrates informs the members of the jury: “I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city. You may have heard my reason for this in many places. I have a divine or spiritual sign . . . This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to

As we trace Iago's demonic speech to its endmost consequence, we find three persons dead and a bewildered Lodovico exhorting the responsible party to take in the sight of this atrocity: "Look at the tragic loading of this bed; / This is thy work" (5.2363-364). Through suggestion and the presentation of a "trifle" (Desdemona's 'magic' handkerchief), Iago introduced "conceits" sufficient to upset the passions of Othello (agitating his humors), which led to his murdering Desdemona and to his committing suicide (3.3.322-326). While Iago is unable to bring his plan to completion without being found out, it is understandable why some readers might interpret him as a stand-in for the playwright—and, I have argued, simultaneously the sophist and the witch. Shakespeare seems to have had this in mind as he designed the character. In closing, I explore what this suggests regarding Shakespeare coming to terms with his own influence as a writer and producer of plays.

Parsing this issue, I raise and provide speculative responses to three questions: (1) Did Shakespeare believe that his plays had the capacity to affect members of audiences in the manner in which Iago's speech acts affect his auditors? (2) If so, and stipulating that Shakespeare intended for Iago to serve as a proxy for the playwright, why was the character written as an agent of barren *aporia*? Finally, (3) did Shakespeare view his own work as having a more positive than negative effect on the members of audiences? This trio of questions brings us to self-litigation on Shakespeare's part.

Question (1), I believe, can be answered affirmatively. While I have not allocated space for standalone arguments intended to demonstrate that Shakespeare accepted (much of) humoralism, I believe a strong and cogent inductive case can be made for this based exclusively on the fact that humoralist ideas prevail over his plays in a way that references to more dubious preoccupations do not. There simply exists too much connective tissue affixing to the plays the schema(s) advanced by Burton, Thomas Wright, and others, to accept that the overlap is apparent. Moreover, there seems to be no indication that Shakespeare intended to hold the theory up for ridicule in including aspects of it. Coupling the pervasiveness of these elements with the fact that competing theories of mind-body interaction had yet to gain traction across Renaissance Europe, there is good reason to believe that Shakespeare gave credence to at least the basics of the theory.

Accepting this, since humoralism predicates that audience members would be affected significantly by witnessing performances, we can also safely assume that Shakespeare appreciated what he would have perceived to be the remarkable length of his reach (Prince 92). He would have believed that, through the actors and their *pronuntiatio*,⁴⁹ and through the

do, but it never encourages me to do anything" (29). References to Socrates' 'voice' are also found in Plato's *Euthyphro*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Theages*. (The authorship of this last work is in dispute; however, it is often attributed to Plato and published alongside his known works.)

⁴⁹ In discussing the unique power of theatrical speech and performance in terms of its effect on both the actor and the spectator, Shelby Richardson writes: "The transliminal state, which encompasses the being or becoming of the other that is necessarily the realm of the actor, can . . . be likened to a trance state. Early twentieth century discourse on the subject . . . describes this condition as one that [quoting John Duncan Quackenbos] 'supposes a dividing line (limen) between the everyday waking and working mind, conscious of its own acts and states, and an extended realm of spirit beyond the region of sense and remote from man's objective ken.' When in this state, the subject is

spectacle on stage as a whole, he possessed the ability to “transform the air” in the auditorium, “[with the] passions [experienced by his actors during performance] irradiating the bodies of spectators through their eyes and ears . . . transfer[ing] the content of [the actors’] heart[s] to theirs, altering their moral natures” (Roach 27). He would have believed himself to be “powerful enough to influence the spirits of others at a distance” (Roach 45),⁵⁰ and able to “literally transform the spectator” into something else, virtually at will (Stelzer 218).⁵¹ This is ascendancy. The person of character will feel the extraordinary responsibility that this warrants and the accompanying call for a distinctive self-examination. I believe Shakespeare was a person of character, and so, remained heedful in creating his art.

Looking within, Shakespeare likely would have considered the importance of intention in judging the possible merits of his theatrical undertakings, in contrast to Iago’s sophistry.⁵² But

highly suggestible. It is such a sense of psychic vulnerability that those writing against theater in the seventeenth century were most afraid of. They feared that the audience, like the actors onstage, would enter a trance state, bewitched by the sights, sounds, and powerful language of the theater, and could be made to believe almost anything. They were convinced that through theater, the world of the imagination would intersect the physical world, and almost anything might happen” (77-78).

⁵⁰ Once again, this description suggests the connection between theater and witchcraft, the witch’s offenses being “done-at-a-distance crimes” (Bell 121).

⁵¹ Compare this transformation with Millicent Bell’s assessment of the ‘magic’ practiced by Iago: “In the perceptions of Othello, the loyal Cassio is *turned into* the seducer of his general’s wife. The honorable gentleman *becomes* an unprincipled fornicator. In its action on Othello’s mind, Iago’s transformative magic is capable of effecting a change in Desdemona that seems real to him—as real as Othello’s own schizophrenic breakdown” (101; emphasis mine).

⁵² While, for the sake of space, I will not argue for this position, I believe a case can be made that Shakespeare intended for (some of) his plays to be therapeutic in ways not unlike Aristotle interpreted the plays of the tragedians to be therapeutic. Writing about *As You Like It*, J. F. Bernard observes: “The notion of a physical space as melancholic [e.g., Arden Forest] . . . suggests a significant shift in comic depictions of melancholy in Shakespeare, from an inner state to an externalised [sic] mood, which can ultimately go beyond the state and into the audience” (136). By itself, this sounds no different from other descriptions of the effects that performances can have on spectators, and just as troubling. But Bernard continues: “Arden loosens the binds of social realities, allowing maidens to become boys, court jesters to congregate with shepherds and banished dukes to set up a Utopian society” (140). So, Arden—or, real-world spaces like it, such as the Globe—provide a safe space where artificial expectations forced from the top downward can be safely subverted, at least for a time. More importantly, as performances work to purge the negative effects of the humors, the space, itself, can function as a sort of psychosurgical sponge. “Both [Orlando and Rosalind] enter Arden under the pangs of melancholy, and their encounters with Jaques [in the case of the Globe, with the actors portraying this character and others] effectively drain them of their unwarranted humours” (145). Again, this might be compared with catharsis. Finally, the plays are also often implicitly normative: “[Jaques’] excessive display of melancholy serves as a warning to Orlando not to yield to his own melancholic preoccupations” and, ideally, the plays operate in much the same way for members of the audience (147). Of course, there is always the worry that the performance could have the opposite effect. Gail Kern Paster describes Hamlet’s ‘production’ of *The Murder of Gonzago* as resulting in “a failed purging for Claudius, an uncathartic catharsis—an aggravation of his cholera rather than the agent of its release . . . [The performance induces] a change in the materialized consciousness [of Claudius] brought about by the provocative images of the play” (“Body” 47-49). Bernard concludes: “The play [*As You Like It*] ending in Arden signifies that the melancholy ambience remains on the stage after all” (153). But Shakespeare realized that he could not know this with any certainty.

would have and should have this consideration of objective informed Shakespeare's final assessment of his work? Questions (2) and (3) call for finesse. In initiating exploration of each, we need to recall that Elizabethan playwrights were routinely told that their plays consisted of "nothing but profane fables, lascivious matters, cozening devices, and scurrilous behaviors, which . . . move wholly to imitation and not to the avoiding of those faults" (Evans 5).⁵³ Some denigrators, seeming to crib from charges brought against Socrates, even argued that the plays were "a special cause of corrupting [the] youth" (Evans 5). Echoing Lodovico: 'Look at the hive of sin that is the West End, Shakespeare. This is *thy* work.'

Digesting this censure would invite even the most confident artist to raise questions about the consequences of exposing those 'of a free and open nature' to his work. Add to this the charge that the plays foster "*transgressive* transformation of identity"—an accusation which Shakespeare might have accepted in the cases of some plays produced by his peers—and things become weightier still (Howard 40; emphasis mine). This, I believe, is partly why Shakespeare wrote Iago as he did. Understanding that performances *can* have pernicious effects on spectators, he wanted to furtively play with the idea of the willfully wicked playwright, amplifying the potency of theater for causing harm when malice is operating backstage.⁵⁴ As much as anything else, this might have been an attempt at a quasi-psychoanalytic *working-through* with regard to worries pertaining to social influence.

Shakespeare, of course, means for his audience to reproach Iago for his fatal misdirection and general baseness. This indictment brings us back to the ancient Greeks and their anxieties regarding the sweeping influence of sophists such as Protagoras and Gorgias—and Socrates. While Plato goes out of his way to depict his teacher as the epitome of the virtuous philosopher—the wise, dignified, committed servant of reason and rectitude—Nietzsche reads through this characterization, offering us what Ricœur refers to as *hermeneutic of suspicion pace* Plato: Nietzsche's Socrates represents a "symptom of decay" among the laudable Athenians ("Twilight" 39). Socrates was a *décadent* whose 'mission' was propelled almost exclusively by

⁵³ Even contemporary critics note the attractiveness of Shakespeare's villains. Stephen Purcell writes: "Shakespeare's most seductive figures . . . are often his most despicable. In several of his plays, Shakespeare developed on the medieval tradition of morality drama, in which personified 'Virtues' and 'Vices' would battle for the soul of 'Everyman.' The Vice characters . . . were enormously fun: they would confide their plans to the audience, make jokes, encourage participation, and attempt to trick the protagonist into sinning . . . Dramaturgically, the audience would become temporarily aligned with the forces of evil" (110).

⁵⁴ Shelby Richardson takes a correspondent stand about the Elizabethan playwrights' use of witches, generally: "To my mind, Early Modern playwrights were engaged in a conversation about the nature of the theater. These playwrights wanted to respond to critiques of the theater, but they could only do this indirectly onstage. Moreover, they understood that the theater had both the capacity for great good and the potential to profoundly destabilize the social order, and in this sense their critics spoke the truth. The figure of the witch offered them a means of carrying out the conversation in a covert yet mutually intelligible way, a means of exploring this dilemma, of making sense of it in so far as it could be made sense of" (30). And later, Richardson makes this point about Shakespeare's Iago, specifically: "Through the use of theatrical means, both rhetorical and visual, as well as through the various performances he stages throughout the play to entrap Othello and Desdemona, Iago becomes not only a practitioner of black magic, but also a symbol of the worst of what the theater could theoretically be and could do: through language, he is able to transform Othello into a monster, a beast" (89).

the *ressentiment* he felt in the face of the young, wealthy, and beautiful [sic] (43-43). “What?” Nietzsche asks, pilfering Iago’s rhetorical cache, “Is dialectics only a form of *revenge* in the case of Socrates?” (“Twilight” 42).⁵⁵

Nietzsche argues that doing philosophy was Socrates’ chosen way—because it was his only *viable* way—of avenging himself, the “ugly,” in a society where “ugliness [was] an objection in itself” (“Twilight” 40). Importantly, Nietzsche implies that Socrates’ response was, to an extent, unconsciously motivated. Perhaps Socrates was not aware that he intended to corrupt the youth around him. It might have seemed, to Socrates, that he was, as it is claimed in Plato’s *Apology*, completing the tasks assigned by Apollo. But at some level, Socrates did *intend* to corrupt the youth. As with the works of other ‘magicians,’ this corruption demonstrates Socrates’ ability to bring about transformation at a distance. And, like Shakespeare’s, his ‘magic’ had range, affecting us all: “With Socrates, Greek taste undergoes a change in favor of dialectics: what is really happening when that happens? It is above all the defeat of a *nobler* taste” (Nietzsche “Twilight” 41). Tragedian Athens—and consequently, the Western world—was ‘poisoned’ by Socrates, unbeknownst to Socrates. ‘Is it possible,’ Shakespeare must have asked himself, ‘that I’m unwittingly poisoning the audience that I mean to benefit?’

One need not be aware of the desire to cause harm in order *to* desire to cause harm. Nor, it follows, need he be aware of the desire to cause harm in order to, in fact, cause harm. Shakespeare understood this. Iago certainly acknowledged his desire to ruin Othello. But it is likely that even he, the picture of the student of human motivation, failed to unearth the true source of his hatred for Othello and “for good reason”: “We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers . . . [because] we have never sought ourselves” (Nietzsche “Genealogy” 1). Uncertainties regarding motivation and moral constitution would have gnawed at the conviction of Shakespeare. Since dramatic performance can injure spectators, coming to know what motivates the writing and production of plays is important. But there is no way for the playwright to determine the extent to which, if to any, his feelings of certainty about what motivates him to create and to share art are truth-tracking. As this epistemological predicament—the problem of knowledge of self—haunts so many of Shakespeare’s plays, there is good reason to believe that it haunted their author.

One promising rejoinder to this worry has to do with the faith that the playwright places in the audience. In considering this, I return to *Othello*. Benjamin Beier’s reading of the play underscores the thematic importance of Iago’s sophism, with descriptions of his inimical activities which could very well have been said about unscrupulous early modern playwrights by their critics: “Iago is very aware of his audience and how to ‘abuse’ his ‘ear’ . . . Othello is

⁵⁵ Nietzsche’s portrayal of Socrates as a world-weary agent of destruction parallels what Millicent Bell says of Iago in interesting ways: “Iago . . . has no interest in effecting reform. He has no moral aim . . . His scorn is directed against all idealism—love and honor . . . [and other false ideas] by which mankind deceives itself . . . [He is] the complete skeptic . . . [He] has no dreams. He both disbelieves in the essences of persons, and is, himself, without inner qualities . . . [He fancies himself] free of illusions . . . His is the special bitterness of the man who seems himself as endowed with a superior freedom of mind, which makes him admire only the few who are like himself” (91-97). If we conjoin this with what Thrasymachus says to, *against*, Socrates in Book I of the *Republic*, and interpret it through a Nietzschean lens, it almost reads as another set of charges brought against Plato’s beloved instructor. And it puts a cynical spin on what is often referred to as ‘Socratic wisdom’ regarding knowing what all one does not or cannot know.

vulnerable to [Iago, who succeeds in] corrupting Othello's ability to judge both what he hears and sees" (Beier 40-41). Renaissance actors—and so, playwrights—were disapprovingly described as “arch counterfeiters” too (Howard 34). Beier contrasts the passible Othello with Shakespeare's Imogen (*Cymbeline*), suggesting that she exhibits “prudential judgment” in the face of Iachimo's rhetorical onslaught (53). Imogen slows “each of [Iachimo's] proofs” by posing questions of her own and suspending his “poisonous words in the air and confront[ing] them, judging them in a way that Othello did not” (Beier 53). “The difference,” Beier maintains, “is not in the sophist but in the audience” (53). Unlike Othello, who is essentially passive, Imogen is an “audience-turned-orator”: an agent responding in critical ways to her interlocutor's attempts at instilling *aporia* (Beier 55).

Whether the intent to do harm is consciously acknowledged by the playwright or is buried within the recesses of his psyche, potentially deleterious effects of attending the plays can be forestalled, given that audience members possess adequate discernment. The alert spectator can retain what is edifying and discard the remains, but, of course, this ideal spectator is exceptional. We can imagine Shakespeare comparing these auditors, downcast in his recognition that for every Imogen visiting the Globe, there are any number of Othellos. Thus, the concerns remain intact: Since there is no counting on what motivates the playwright, and since there is no counting on the mental acuity of spectators, significant harm remains possible, if not likely. Even if spite on the part of the playwright could be ruled out completely—it cannot—there is simply no way of forecasting how certain performances would affect certain spectators. The prospect of harm hovers. So, what might have been Shakespeare's final assessment?

One of the most compelling moments of, in my opinion, one of Shakespeare's most compelling plays is Iago's astonishing last response—or lack thereof—to a beaten Othello: “Demand me nothing; what you know, you / know” (5.2.303). First, it revisits for a final time the theme of epistemology. Second, and connected to this in important ways, the non-response provides a synthesis of Shakespeare qua accused and Shakespeare qua accuser. Defensively, the accused remains silent. But, what *does* the accuser *know*? Nothing—nothing about the effects of theater on the members of an audience—or, at least nothing conclusively. Even when forced to consider firsthand the bodies arranged on the bed—doubling, I think, for a stage—the playwright, Iago, remains speechless. In the face of his Puritan critics, Shakespeare, likewise, remains speechless as he looks upon the dramatic spectacle and the reality which it mirrors (and vice versa). At this point in his career, then, I believe that Shakespeare is thoughtfully ambivalent, but desiring knowledge. Fortunately for us, this means he is not yet ready to break his staff or to burn his book (*The Tempest* 5.1).

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