

“Moral Enigma” in Shakespeare’s *Othello*? An Exercise in Philosophical Hermeneutics

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“polla ta deina kouden anthropou deinoteron telei”
 [“Many are the wonders, but nothing walks stranger than man.”]
 --Sophocles, *Antigone* (332)

*“When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice.”*
 --Shakespeare, *Othello* (5.2.340-341)

Abstract

Literary criticism of Shakespeare’s *Othello* since the early 20th century leaves us with various complaints that Shakespeare fails to achieve poetic justice therein, or that this work leaves us, in the end, with a moral enigma—despite what seems to be Shakespeare’s intent to represent a plot and characters having moral probity and, thereby, to foster our moral edification through the tragedy that unfolds. Here a number of interpretive views concerning the morality proper to *Othello* are reviewed. Thereafter, it is proposed that Heidegger’s thought about the relation of appearance, semblance, and reality enables a novel interpretation of the moral significance of this tragedy, thereby to resolve the question of moral enigma.

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Writing recently in a review of a volume engaging the theme of moral agency in Shakespeare's dramatic works, Colin McGinn lamented, "I am often visited with the thought that ignorance of philosophy is the curse of the modern age."⁹⁷ Thus, "Misconceptions of philosophy abound, conceptual confusion is rampant, and a whole continent of vital human thought is left in the shadows." And, when it comes to drama as a mode of literary expression in particular, McGinn writes,

In drama, we are confronted by agents performing actions for reasons...Fictional agents are no different from real agents in this respect: they are beings with human psychology, and designed by their makers that way. Just as we understand our friends and enemies by reference to their psychological states, so we must understand the agents of fictional narratives by reference to their states of mind. This is particularly true of the moral dimension of human action: all the varieties of culpability and responsibility that apply to actual people also apply to fictional people.⁹⁸

Accordingly, McGinn advises us, "To understand human action we must take the measure of all this complexity—and for that we need philosophy."

But, if we agree with McGinn that we need philosophy, then it follows we may ask: What parts of this august discipline are to

⁹⁷ Colin McGinn, "Book Review: Michael D. Bristol, ed., *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*. New York. Continuum Press. 2009." *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 40, 2012, 222-226, *Academic OneFile*, Accessed 11 January 2017.

⁹⁸ McGinn, "Book Review," 222.

speak to us in our engagement of a work of art such as that of Shakespeare's *Othello*? Is it merely *formal aesthetics*, such that we are enabled to form a proper aesthetic judgment, discern the beautiful and the ugly, the artful and the obscene? If it is to aesthetics that we appeal, then perhaps we will speak as does Stanley Cavell, when he considers that, "Othello's ugliness was to have gone the limit in murdering his love and his hope, the hero in his soul. But his beauty was to have had such a love and such high hopes."⁹⁹

Or, are we to look to *philosophical anthropology*, that informs us of human nature, of "human vulnerabilities" as well as the "invulnerable pretenses" that are present in our human "all-too-human" action, including what troubled Montaigne, "appalled" as he was "by the human capacity for horror at the human"?¹⁰⁰ Moral agency in works of literature in that case present us with the task of discerning humanity's predispositions to good or wickedness.

Perhaps we should turn to *epistemology*, as it speaks to us of the possibilities and limits of what we can know, and of moral knowledge, including that knowledge of self (*gnōthi sauton*) such as Socrates and Plato would have us achieve if we are to have a life of excellence (*arête*), thus to avoid vice and, worse, what Aristotle understood as "simply evil," that wickedness that is "beyond the limits" of vice?

Or, because of the insistence that a poet deliver his or her "poetic justice" in the structure and presentation of the play, we are directed to find our counsel in *ethics*, concerned as it is with human character (Aristotle); or with human rights and duties that respect the dignity of all persons (Kant); or with the consequences of moral

⁹⁹ Stanley Cavell, "Epistemology and Tragedy: A Reading of *Othello* (*Together with a cover letter*)," *Daedalus*, Vol. 108, No. 3: Hypocrisy, Illusion, and Evasion, Summer 1979, 27-43, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Cavell, "Epistemology..." 28 and 31.

decision that depend on calculations of utility and disutility (Mill); or with what is universal moral truth in contrast to what is morally and culturally relative; or with what is merely historically contingent, but which nonetheless contributes to multifarious opportunities for coexistence and convergence that work in favor of human solidarity (Rorty)?

In all of the foregoing it is clear, as Martha Nussbaum argues, literature one way or another projects a morality, such that an artist thereby manifests a “social function,” in which case, following Henry James, Nussbaum reminds that “the aesthetic is ethical and political.”¹⁰¹ Hence, it is reasonable, in encountering a work of literature such as Shakespeare’s *Othello*, that one discerns this linkage of the aesthetic, ethical, and political. Such is the opportunity and task of ethical criticism.¹⁰² Accordingly, one can concur with Nussbaum in her argument that, (1) “moral philosophy needs certain carefully selected works of narrative literature in order to pursue its own tasks in a complete way,” and that, (2) “literature of a carefully specified sort can offer valuable assistance to [the conduct of public deliberations in democracy] by both cultivating and reinforcing valuable moral abilities.”¹⁰³

In short, we may hold that a work of art such as Shakespeare’s *Othello*, through its narrative discourse, is also a work of moral probity and moral edification.¹⁰⁴ However, this claim presupposes a question long subject to contestation within the field of literary

¹⁰¹ Martha Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism,” *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1998, 343-365.

¹⁰² By contrast to Nussbaum, see Richard Posner, “Against Ethical Criticism,” *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 21, 1997, 1-27, and Richard Posner, *Law and Literature: The Relationship Rethought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

¹⁰³ Nussbaum, “Exactly...,” 346.

¹⁰⁴ See here Michael D. Bristol, “Is Shakespeare a Moral Philosopher?” in M.D. Bristol, ed., *Shakespeare and Moral Agency* (New York: Continuum Publishers, 2009).

criticism and the philosophy of literature. Consider, e.g., that in the early 20th century, Alexander W. Crawford¹⁰⁵ published a number of essays contributing to the interpretation of Shakespeare's dramas, among them *Othello*. Given the range of interpretive approaches to *Othello*, Crawford opined, "The very intensity of the passion [represented in the plot] has doubtless confused our notions and clear thinking."¹⁰⁶ Crawford observed, accordingly, that "Admiration for the 'noble Moor,' compassion for the 'divine Desdemona,' and scorn for the intriguing Iago, have misguided our judgments, have obscured the story of the play and the very words that should reveal the true character and actual deeds of the persons." Pressing his complaint, Crawford premised, "In some cases both artistic sensibility and moral judgment have been paralyzed, until Othello has become a perfect hero, Desdemona a spotless saint, and poor Iago a fiend incarnate." Concluding his argument here, Crawford accused, "Instead of appreciating the play as it is written, and perceiving the informing thought of the dramatist, this emotional criticism has made the injurer noble, his chief victim a saint, the injured a devil, and Shakespeare foolish."

It seems Crawford took issue primarily with moral judgments elicited by the play, such that one should reconsider one's response to the presentation of the main characters, thus not to find Othello a perfect hero, Desdemona a spotless saint, and Iago a fiend incarnate. Presumably, if one *were* to perceive Shakespeare's "informing thought" in the play, then one *would* arrive at moral judgments that are consistent with *Shakespeare's intent* and, thereby, moral judgments that are consistent with the mode of writing that is tragedy. But, apparently, for Crawford most critics of *Othello*—

¹⁰⁵ At the time, Crawford was Professor of English at the University of Manitoba.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Crawford, *Hamlet, an ideal prince, and other essays in Shakespearean interpretation: Hamlet, Merchant of Venice; Othello, King Lear* (Boston: R.G. Badger/Toronto: The Copp Clark Co., Limited, 1916); <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/othelloessay1.html>

up to his time of writing—*did not* perceive Shakespeare’s informing thought and, therefore, they *did not* deliver correct moral judgments proper to this tragedy. Given this sort of proposition (logically, a subjunctively structured conditional), Crawford reminded of a statement in the *Edinburgh Review* published in 1850, which expressed “only the truth when it said that ‘all critics of name have been perplexed by the moral enigma which lies under this tragic tale.’” In short, for those writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Shakespeare’s *Othello* presented its audience with a *moral enigma*: “The solution of a play that is a ‘moral enigma,’” Crawford wrote, “must come if it comes at all from a solution of the moral aspects of the play, which can be reached only by a due consideration of all the moral relations of the various persons of the drama.”

Crawford here was concerned with what later literary criticism understands as the principle of “poetic justice,” i.e., in this case what is to be accounted Shakespeare’s structuring and representation of “the moral aspects of the drama.” The problem for Crawford was that, for some interpreters, it may be argued that Shakespeare “ignored this principle altogether.” Thus, Crawford provided us with the historical note, “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when criticism was almost entirely didactic, it was all but unanimously agreed that Shakespeare paid no attention to moral subjects or to ethical forces.”

In the intervening period since Crawford wrote, however, there has been ongoing effort among literary critics to interpret Shakespeare tragedies in general, and also to engage this issue of morality that bears upon this seeming problem of moral enigma.¹⁰⁷ One such as

¹⁰⁷ Robert Ornstein, “Historical Criticism and the Interpretation of Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter 1959, pp. 3-9. Here Ornstein speaks of Shakespeare scholarship having advanced “far beyond the Romantic criticism which confused literature and life,” but he allows that “it is possible that future generations will in their turn smile at the naïveté of some...particularly

Eugene Hnatko (writing in 1971), shifted the focus from Shakespeare himself to a more general failure in the writing of tragedy in the 18th century relative to audience demands of the time, hence to the demise of tragedy: “tragedy died,” Hnatko argued, “because, of all types of literature, it seems so admirably suited to what the age saw as the purpose of all writing—moral instruction—and the fulfilling of that purpose was inimical to the very nature of the genre in that it led to a simple poetic justice which allowed no room for tragic questioning or cosmic resolution.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, this interpretive view is reasonably to be juxtaposed to that of Marvin Rosenberg, who writes that *Othello* as presented on stage in 1604 was in the context of “a London theater invaded by skepticism and sensuality,” a time “ripe for the play, with its pervasive sexual atmosphere and byplay, its erotic and despairing language, its bold, anguished image of man and woman contending in love and jealousy.”¹⁰⁹

Notwithstanding, writing some five years after Hnatko, Jane Adamson remarked that, “the growing mass of commentary about *Othello* in recent decades seems to have become stuck in old ruts, old debates and circularities.”¹¹⁰ Adamson therefore argued for a return to the play itself, thereby to engage several seemingly unresolved questions among the critics—“*why* has it proved hard for critics to reach even a rough general agreement about its basic

those concerned with the ethics of the plays.” See here also, Lawrence W. Hyman, “Literature and Morality in Contemporary Criticism,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Autumn 1971, 83-86.

¹⁰⁸ Eugene Hnatko, “The Failure of Eighteenth-Century Tragedy,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1971), 459-468.

¹⁰⁹ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics* (Cranbury NJ: Associated University Presses, 1961), 1.

¹¹⁰ Jane Adamson, *Othello as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1

tenor, about what we make of its hero, and about the kind, depth and scope of the demands it makes on us?"¹¹¹

Similarly, as part of a new set of critical essays on the play published in 2002, John Gronbeck-Tedesco took note of Edward Pechter's "masterful" *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*¹¹² and commented on "the 'impossible demands of responding at once to Othello's and Iago's voices'"—again, what seems to be a problem of poetic justice in the presentation of the two persona.¹¹³ But, if so, it would seem the demands here concern the religious sentiments of the play's audience in their sociopolitical and historical context. And, in that case, as Daniel J. Vitkus argued, "The tragedy of Othello is a drama of conversion, in particular a conversion to certain forms of faithlessness deeply feared by Shakespeare's audience. The collective anxiety about religious conversion felt in post-Reformation England focused primarily on Roman Catholic enemies who threatened to convert Protestant England by sword, but the English also had reason to feel trepidation about the imperial power of the Ottoman Turks, who were conquering and colonizing Christian territories in Europe and the Mediterranean."¹¹⁴

On Vitkus's reading, Shakespeare thereby delivers to his audience a problematic play that brings to the fore the Elizabethan era's *problem of identity*. Othello the man is discerned as a "demonized"

¹¹¹ Adamson, *Othello as Tragedy*, 2

¹¹² Edward Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999)

¹¹³ John Gronbeck-Tedesco, "Morality, Ethics and the Failure of Love in Shakespeare's *Othello*," in Philip Kolin, ed., *Othello: Critical Essays*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 255-270, at 255.

¹¹⁴ Daniel J. Vitkus, "Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer 1997, pp. 145-176, at 145. See here also, "Moors in Early Modern England," 1-5, <http://2015.playingshakespeare.org/download/file/fid/93>, accessed 12 January 2017.

representation of the foreign Other from “Muslim culture,”¹¹⁵ and a figure calling to mind “the power of Islamic imperialism to convert Christians...” As Pechter put it, Othello as protagonist “is an alien to white Christian Europe, what we would now call an immigrant, whose visible racial difference seems to be the defining aspect of his identity, the source of his charismatic power to excite interest and to generate horror.”¹¹⁶ The setting of Venice is thereby perceived to represent multiple alienations, Othello himself suffering from “identity crisis,” culturally other such that he “neither can understand Venetian culture nor can adjust to it and so the tragedy happens.”¹¹⁷ This speaks, then, to Shakespeare’s intent: “In Othello, Shakespeare does not simply present a portrait of intercultural relations as conceived by an English Renaissance artist, and therefore his portrait is subjected both to the ideological field of the author and to the exigencies of his art.”¹¹⁸ This, as Mohssine Nachit argues, highlights the “challenge of multiculturalism” that is present in this play and which resonates with contemporary challenges in which religious overtones and

¹¹⁵ Granted, it is arguable that Othello is a Muslim. The Shakespeare Company’s production of *Othello* in March 2016 represented Othello as an “assimilated” Arab Moor, a “Muslim immigrant” to Venice. See here, Antoun Issa, “Othello—a Timely Reminder on Racism and Islamophobia,” Middle East Institute, 28 March 2016; <http://www.mei.edu/content/othello—timely-reminder-racism-and-islamophobia>, accessed on 15 January 2017. Also see, Kate Havard, “Othello’s Wicked Magic,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, 12 March 2016, <http://freebeacon.com/culture/othellos-wicked-magic/>. Yet, the text of the play itself seems to allow for Othello’s conversion from Islam to Christianity—Iago (Act 2, Scene 3, 342-44) referring to Othello’s baptism (“And then for her, To win the Moor, weren’t to renounce his baptism, All seals and symbols of redeemed sin...”).

¹¹⁶ Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Sandeep Kumar Dubey, “‘Identity’ and ‘Culture’ as Postcolonial Issues in Shakespeare’s Othello,” *Ars Artium*, Vol. 3, January 2015, 92-98.

¹¹⁸ Ferial J. Ghazoul, “The Arabization of *Othello*,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 1, Winter 1998, 1-31, at 2.

undertones contribute causally to interpersonal and intercultural relations.¹¹⁹

Thus, Paul N. Siegel wrote of “the Christian overtones” present in *Othello*, Othello’s “noble soul” related to a “diabolically cunning” Iago, each having a “symbolic force” that contraposes “Christian values” to “anti-Christian values”—e.g., the ecstatic love of Desdemona versus the Satanic malice of Iago.¹²⁰ Hence, it is not surprising that Coleridge would opine, “It would be something monstrous to conceive this beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable negro”—a problematic disposition from the point of view of Karen Newman, who engages “the problem of female subjectivity in the drama of early modern England.”¹²¹ Newman clarifies that for one such as Coleridge, a veritable negro counts as “a figure of ridicule unworthy of tragedy who would evidently appear ‘sub-human’ to European eyes,” precisely monstrous in the context of a possible “miscegenation” that is “against all sense and nature.”

Such Christianized interpretation one finds likewise in S. L. Bethell’s focus on the “diabolic images” of the play.¹²² Bethell’s

¹¹⁹ Mohssine Nachit, “Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the Challenges of Multiculturalism,” *Arab World English Journal*, Special Issue on Literature, No. 4, October 2016, pp. 97-107,

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2872975, accessed 11 January 2017.

¹²⁰ Paul N. Siegel, “The Damnation of *Othello*,” *PMLA*, Vol. 68, No. 5, December 1953, pp. 1068-1078, at 1068.

¹²¹ Karen Newman, “‘And wash the Ethiop white’: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*,” in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor, eds., *Shakespeare Reproduced: The History and Ideology* (Abingdon: Routledge/Psychology Press, 2005), 143-162, at 143.

¹²² S.L. Bethell, “Shakespeare’s Imagery: The Diabolic Images in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Survey Online* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), <http://web3.apiu.edu/researchfile/Research%20Materials/Macbeth-Teaching%20Values%20Through%20Imagery/Shakespearean%20Imagery/Shakespeare's%20imagery-the%20diabolic%20images%20in%20Othello.pdf>

approach is one that shies away from treating the play as representing “purely...a domestic tragedy” and instead attends “to its profoundly theological structure.” For Bethell, Shakespeare “prefers to show belief in action and express philosophy in its poetic equivalent.”¹²³ Thus, e.g., Bethell points to beliefs ascribed to Iago and asserts that these “are made with sufficient point for him to be recognized by an Elizabethan audience as an ‘atheist.’” But, if Iago is to be found an atheist, Bethell writes, “We might find credible the character of an evil man who, though an unbeliever, likes to dwell on that aspect of religion which fills others with dread and to model himself upon a Devil in whom he does not objectively believe. Alternatively, we could accept Iago as a ‘practical atheist’, one who lives by an atheistic code without making any deliberate intellectual rejection of religion.” Thus, for Bethell one makes sense of *Othello* only in sorting out the diabolical imagery of the play.

But, setting aside the diabolical imagery, by contrast, one such as Jean Porter retains the Christianized interpretive view and speaks instead of “moral mistakes” in relation to virtue and sin.¹²⁴ Porter refers to Aristotle in sorting through a reasonably correct assessment of Othello the man as the “eponymous hero” who “acts out of a combination of factual and moral errors which are intertwined with his character.” In this respect, Porter accounts for Aristotle’s position (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, 1110a1 to 111b5) that “someone who acts out of a mistaken belief about a relevant matter of fact may not be morally culpable for what would otherwise be a bad action.” Thus, here one who reads Shakespeare’s *Othello* with a view to sorting out its adherence or failure to deliver on critical expectations of poetic justice would have to consider the relation between Aristotle’s ethics and Aristotle’s understanding of the purpose and function of tragedy, as articulated in his *Poetics*; but

¹²³ Bethell, “Shakespeare’s Imagery,” 70

¹²⁴ Jean Porter, “Moral Mistakes, Virtue and Sin: The Case of Othello,” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2005, 23-44.

consider also whether the same Aristotelian moral and aesthetic interpretative strategy applies reasonably to (a) the Elizabethan context, (b) a judicious reading of Shakespearean tragedy in general and (c) of *Othello* in particular.

In contrast to Crawford's insistence on moral enigma in *Othello*, there are all too many readers who find moral lessons consistent with any number of positions in practical rationality, be they philosophical or religious.¹²⁵ But, even so, one must be clear here whether Shakespeare is to be construed as an artist wittingly didactic in the composition of a play such as *Othello*. As Sneh Lata Sharma put it, "when moral lessons are derived from Shakespeare's tragedies, it does not mean that Shakespeare intended to impress upon his audience or readers some principles to guide them in their life. He is the least didactic of all writers."¹²⁶ Yet, Sharma would have us focus on the elements of mismatch structured into the drama, Othello and Desdemona mismatched such that the man's "rash and impetuous temperament" is related to the woman's "blind love" that "cannot see the faults and foibles" of the man she loves, Othello thus shown under the circumstances to be "a credulous fool," jealousy, the "venom of suspicion," at the heart of the tragic loss of life in murder and suicide.¹²⁷ Quite simply, "*excess of anything is bad*," and so it is with excess of passion that intrudes upon Othello's thought in the form of the monstrous he intuited first in his nemesis.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ For a recent publication, see for example, Michael D. Bristol, ed., *Shakespeare and Moral Agency* (New York: Continuum Press, 2009).

¹²⁶ Sneh Lata Sharma, "Moral Lessons in Shakespearean Tragedies," *International Journal of English Language, Literature, and Humanities*, Vol. II, Issue V, September 2014, 410-420, <http://ijellh.com/papers/2014/September/40-410-420-sept-2014.pdf>, accessed 11 January 2017.

¹²⁷ Sharma, "Moral Lessons," 416

¹²⁸ Ambreen Shahriar, "Othello, a Jealous Barbarian or a Noble Fool," *Al'adab wa Llughat* (Arts and Languages), Vol. 6, 2013, 189-198, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ambreen_Shahriar/publication/295539503_OTHELLO_A_JEALOUS_BARBARIAN_OR_A_NOBLE_FOOL/links/56caf8

It is precisely the derivation of this kind of supposedly moral injunction that is problematic, however, from the view of philosophical criticism. Charles Altieri raises an important caution in the face of a mode of criticism he finds “imperious” for being philosophical, e.g., in his review of Tzachi Zamir’s *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*.¹²⁹ Altieri “resists” Zamir’s “assumption that the richest readings” of the plays “bring out the audience’s capacities for making moral judgements about dense situations for which analytic philosophy has limited resources.” For example, Altieri is concerned that “Zamir will not honour Shakespeare’s interest in creating particular agents who challenge morality rather than being subsumable under general ideals of rationality.” Thus, Altieri would have us avoid any imperious reductive reading such as philosophical criticism might advance: “Perhaps to reduce these imagined lives to the terms of moral education or moral dilemma is to deny them precisely what matters in them—the vision of possible lives that we can identify with only in imagination.”

But, is it really so that Shakespeare presents Othello, Iago, and Desdemona as characters with whom we may identify only in our imagination and not in terms of our daily realities of interpersonal relations? Pechter is more likely to be correct when he points to the play’s elicitation of questions concerning “the nature of belief, the fraught and problematic process by which convictions are settled in

2d08ae5488f0dad2ac.pdf. My reference here is to the passage of text (3.3.109-110) in which Othello and Iago converse about Cassio, Othello intuiting, “By heaven, thou echo’st me, As if there were some monster in thy thought Too hideous to be shown.”

¹²⁹ Charles Altieri, Book Review: *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*. By Tzachi Zamir. Princeton University Press, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 101-103,

<http://m.bjaesthetics.oxfordjournals.org/content/48/1/101.full.pdf>. See in relation to this perspective, Paul A. Kottman, ed., *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

the mind,” indeed how belief can be oppressive to the point of doing harm to oneself even as others are wronged.¹³⁰ And here, both moral philosophy and moral psychology link to the task of epistemological clarification whereby reason finds itself overpowered by a monstrous passion. Thus, Pechter opines, “Whatever our intuitions or advantages in knowledge, we wind up like [Iago’s] victims inside the play, trapped inside the reproduction of his contaminated and contaminating malice. There seems to be no effective critical purchase on Iago, no judicious higher knowledge by means of which we can eliminate his prejudiced opinions. As Iago himself puts it in his final speech, ‘What you know, you know’ (5.2.300).”¹³¹

However, if we take the foregoing concern with the nature of belief as a central feature of Shakespeare’s construction, then we are given yet another conditional proposition: “It is as if Shakespeare knew that our inability to fully justify a protagonist’s actions was in fact crucial to the drama’s ethical claims upon us and as if the dramatic stakes and ethical claims were raised in more or less direct proportion to the extent to which someone’s actions appear morally defensible.”¹³² It is moral psychology, then, that contributes to the moral assessment, Richard Raatzsch accordingly pointing to “Iago’s wickedness as a ‘pathological case of the human.’” But if, as Raatzsch would have it, Iago is a “paradigmatic embodiment of evil,” such that “A model of evil itself cannot be evaluated and therefore cannot be justified,” then, on an Aristotelian assessment Iago is an instance of a wicked man, his actions manifesting his character, his wickedness thereby beyond the limits of *vice per se*. Paul Kottman understands Raatzsch to mean “not simply that Iago acts in a manner that is wicked in the extreme, but that by virtue of its pathological character, his wickedness eludes any evaluative

¹³⁰ Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 4

¹³¹ Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 5-6

¹³² Paul A. Kottman, “The Apologetics of Evil: The Case of Iago (review),” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 1, Spring 2012, 130-132.

judgment”—“Trying to ‘understand’ Iago does not entail doubting morality or abandoning moral standards of judgment altogether; rather, understanding Iago in his pathological essence, as one who can be neither simply justified nor condemned, ‘draws our attention to the limits of the moral.’ ‘Iago,’” Raatzsch concludes, “teaches us our moral limits by transcending them.”¹³³ But, on this interpretive view, it seems we are returned to Crawford’s complaint of moral enigma and the lack of poetic justice in *Othello*; for as Kottman put it recently, “ethicality appears in a ‘negative’ form, as it were, through the experience of its resounding lack or defeat.”¹³⁴

This moves us then to Cavell’s engagement of *Othello*, i.e., tragedy understood as an epistemological problem.¹³⁵ Othello’s conflicted thoughts are explicitly those of paradox in his engagement of Iago’s deception: “I think,” he says, “my wife be honest, and think she is not. I think that thou art just, and think thou art not. I’ll have some proof.” (3.3.394-396) Othello’s counsel to Iago is to be honest; whereas Iago’s retort is that honesty is a fool, that it is better to be wise. But here we have yet another deception, since ‘wise’ in Iago’s sense is the equivalent of Machiavellian *virtù*, a calculating cleverness; and this calculative thinking is never the equivalent of Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). Yet, perhaps the paradox in Othello’s mind is merely apparent: “...however far he believes Iago’s tidings,” Cavell asserts, “he cannot just believe them; somewhere he *knows* them to be false.” But, what does Cavell mean by this? He answers: “I am claiming...that we must understand Othello to be wanting to believe Iago, to be trying, against his knowledge, to believe him.”¹³⁶ Cavell’s judgment here seems counter-intuitive; but there is reason

¹³³ Kottman, “The Apologetics...”, 132

¹³⁴ Paul A. Kottman, *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 7

¹³⁵ Cavell, “*Epistemology and Tragedy*,” 33

¹³⁶ Cavell, “*Epistemology and Tragedy*,” 38

to agree that such is the “torture of logic in [Othello’s] mind”—a “crazed logic” that moves “Othello’s rage for proof.” In the end, if Cavell is correct, we are to say that, “What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little.”¹³⁷ Thus, Othello in the end admits to being “perplexed in the extreme” (5.2.345).

Yet, are we to account this perplexity as Othello’s singular fault and thus the key impediment to his self-understanding, such that we declare Othello thoroughly morally blameworthy for his manifest deed? One who engages the text in terms of Orientalist discourse reminds us: “Othello’s mode of action dose [*sic*: does] not arise from his character, it was imposed and practiced upon him by Iago”¹³⁸—Iago whose “Spanish name...recalls Sant’ Iago Matamoros (Saint James, the Moor Slayer),” as Michael Neil observed.¹³⁹ Thus, Charles Campbell interprets the suicide scene: “the Muslim he kills becomes, by the metonymy of his mirroring action, himself”—and so, one might say, by implication, that the *Christian* “Othello” performs his last soldierly deed, as he kills the *Muslim* “Utayl,”¹⁴⁰ who dared to love too much, the excess to be

¹³⁷ Cavell, “*Epistemology and Tragedy*,” 43. For further engagement of Cavell’s interpretive approach, see his *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹³⁸ Jamil Y. Al-Asmar, “Othello and the Discourse of Orientalism,” https://www.alaqsa.edu.ps/site_resources/aqsa_magazine/files/60.pdf. See here also, Charles Campbell, “Iago’s Orientalism: Imperial Discourse in Othello,” *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, Vol. 12, 2011, 9-24. http://www.ijaes.net/images/ijaes/IJAES2011/Full_Text_PDF/2.%20Campbell.pdf, accessed on 15 January 2017.

¹³⁹ As cited by Charles Campbell, 10

¹⁴⁰ See here, Fariel J. Ghazoul, “The Arabization of Othello,” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 1 Winter 1998, 1-31; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1771217.pdf>, accessed 15 January 2016. Ghazoul refers here to Khalil Mutran’s translation/*Arabization of Othello* in his *Utayl (Othello)* (Cairo, Dar al-ma‘arif, 1976).

located not merely with reference to his own passion (*pathos*), but as contrary to the cultural conventions of Christian Venice.

Campbell's choice of word here—metonymy—refers us to the Greek *metonymia* from which it originates, which is twofold in meaning: “to call by a new name” or “to take a new name.”¹⁴¹ The word functions, we can argue reasonably, as an element of Shakespeare's structure, insofar as Othello the converted Muslim tacitly calls himself by the name of the “malignant and turbaned Turk,” through this act surrendering his Christian name ‘Othello’ for the unspoken Muslim name that, in Arabization, is ‘Utayl.’ The religious subtext thus is expressed in this death scene. But it still leaves us with the question whether we are to account Othello blameworthy, even as one finds Iago's calculative cleverness a manifest expression of his wickedness. And, on this question we can refer to Aristotle.

In his *Poetics* (Ch. 6),¹⁴² Aristotle characterizes tragedy as a form of imitation of life, presented through the actions of the characters, appealing to one's pity and fear, thereby to bring about the purgation of these emotions. In Chapter 11, Aristotle clarifies that “our pity is awakened by undeserved misfortune, and our fear by that of someone just like ourselves—pity for the undeserving sufferer and fear for the man like ourselves.” It is important to note here Aristotle's focus on *action* first and foremost, and only secondarily on the characters as agents of action. Thus, Aristotle opines, “tragedy is a representation not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness.” Accordingly, he adds, “it is their characters, indeed, that make men what they are, but it is by reason of their actions that they are happy or the reverse.”

¹⁴¹ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com>; accessed on 15 January 2017.

¹⁴² Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. T.S. Dorsch (no publication data)

To the extent one examines the actions of men and women, in this case the actions of characters in a tragedy, one must also bear in mind, as Aristotle informs us in Chapter 9 of the *Poetics*, one should discern the universal truths to be found therein—i.e., “the kinds of things a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation.” But, even then, what is to be discerned is a universal not merely in terms of what is possible; it must be an agency that is both possible and credible, and credibility depends on an action that accords with “the laws of possibility and probability.” A tragedy such as the *Othello* is both possible and credible, Aristotle (*Poetics*, Chapter 11) would hold, in the representation of calamity (“an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as death openly represented, excessive suffering...”). *Othello* is to be understood through his actions as well as his character. However, *Othello*’s actions seemingly elicit both pity and fear, unless we understand, as does Aristotle (*Poetics*, Chapter 13) that, “There remains a mean between these extremes. This is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error...”

One must consider that *Othello* is not “in possession of the facts” that are necessary to a correct judgment. His trust in Iago is misplaced, *Othello*’s word manifesting the error of his thought when he speaks of “honest” Iago (1.3.292)—Iago who swears by the god Janus (1.2.33) and shows himself duplicitous in his actions—even as we know *Othello* struggles in the paradox of his thought, thinking Iago *seemingly just* and also *possibly unjust*, but perhaps *not credibly* unjust though Iago is indeed *incredibly* wicked. *Othello* falls into misery, granted; but, despite the attributed valor that is “conspicuously” present in his “great skill and prudence” in war, in his “noble rank and well-tried faith,”¹⁴³ etc., there is reason

¹⁴³ The reference here is to Cinthio’s “The Moor of Venice,” which is, of course, recognized as a source-text for Shakespeare’s *Othello*. See here Giraldi Cinthio,

to suppose Othello nonetheless the type of man *not conspicuous for virtue and justice*—which explains his fall into error. For, as he himself judges, “...little of this great world” can he speak. (1.3.86)

And, it is in this way that one may point to a resolution of the moral enigma that so troubled Crawford. Iago is as much the equivalent of the “Ensign” in Cinthio’s “The Moor of Venice”—one of “the most depraved [in] nature” yet “in great favour with the Moor,” “who had not the slightest idea of his wickedness.” How could this be so? Cinthio explains by way of the Ensign’s calculating cleverness: “for despite the malice lurking in his heart, he cloaked with proud and valorous speech, and with a *specious presence*, the villainy of his soul, with such art, that he was *to all outward show* another Hector or Achilles.”¹⁴⁴ It is this specious presence, the overwhelming power of *semblance* in Iago, that overcomes Othello: The General, for all his prowess and valor in war, is bested by the lesser ranked Iago, whose cleverness, armed with its formidable *pathos*, clandestinely works its defeat upon the Moor.

On this point, it is not Aristotle but the 20th century existential phenomenologist Heidegger who assists us in our discernment. Heidegger reminds us of “the fundamental precariousness” of the human as a political being, whose existence requires him, i.e., necessarily, to *discriminate* (to *decide*) among being, appearance, and non-being:

...the man who holds to being as it opens round him and whose attitude toward the essent [the particular being] is determined by his adherence to being, must take three paths. If he is to take over being-there [i.e., his place, *topos*, in the *polis*] in the radiance of being, he must bring

“The Moor of Venice,” in Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Edward Pechter, Norton Critical Edition, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 151-161.

¹⁴⁴ Cinthio, op. cit., p. 153; italics added.

being to stand, he must endure it in appearance and against appearance, and he must wrest both appearance and being from the abyss of nonbeing.

Man must distinguish these three ways and accordingly he must decide for them and against them...¹⁴⁵

Othello, as with all men, is faced with the terrible task of discerning reality, of disclosing the real (*nooúmenon*) and enduring the real in the face of appearance (*phainómenon*) and against appearance, especially when the latter presents itself as semblance (*eidólon*). In this Othello did not succeed, hence the error of his judgment. But, Othello is not, therefore, a wicked man, in the way in which Iago is. Othello's actions and his thoughts disclose his character, to be sure; but, what his actions and thought first and foremost disclose are (1) his ignorance of—his failure to apprehend—reality and (2) his entrapment by semblance. This is an *involuntary* action, even as eventually his passion gets the better of him. His, as Aristotle would say, is an unjust *act*; but he is not, therefore, an unjust *man*, though he is to be accounted responsible for his unjust deed. Hence, it would be an incorrect moral judgment to assert, as many a critic has, that "Othello ought to have been able to avoid or overcome the particular circumstances that led to his destruction," that "his suffering must be more pathetic than terrible."¹⁴⁶ Like all men, in any given moment, one may find oneself overwhelmed by a torturous logic, and *that*, as Aristotle might say, tinged with the fire of madness. Othello's is a madness driven by the power of semblance, overwhelming reason's apprehension of being, of reality as it is and not as it seems to be.

¹⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 110

¹⁴⁶ Derek Gottlieb, "The Art of World-Collapse: Othello, Heidegger and the Veils of Illusion," *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 3. No. 4, 2009, 34-51, at 36 and 38.

The question with which we began was that of Crawford in his concern for the moral enigma of *Othello*. However, whatever literary critics may have to say about Shakespeare's intent and our ability to discern it, the text will speak to us in our day only on the basis of what Hans-Georg Gadamer means when he speaks of a "fusion" of horizons of understanding—that of the text as it speaks to us from its time and that of our own self-understanding in our historical present. All readings of Shakespeare's *Othello* will be productive in the interpretation and never merely reproductive of authorial intent. And, therefore, it is only in such productive interpretation that the moral enigma of the play is reduced; but our perplexity, like Othello's, is never indefeasibly eradicated. Hence, it would be more correct to say of Othello that, to our own "ocular proof," he is more "terrible" than he is "pathetic," that the *terror* of discrimination of the threefold path of being, appearance, and nonbeing is much more decisive than is the *pathos* that motivates one's action.

Perhaps, then, one should pose the question differently from that troubling Crawford. At base, the question *Othello* elicits is not that of moral enigma but of *the enigma of the human being in his being*, in his "essence," as Heidegger might say. But, this means here, an essence to be comprehended otherwise than in terms of (1) essence (*essentia*) contraposed to existence (*existentia*), or (2) possibility (*potentia*) contraposed to actuality (*actualitas*), or (3) the "*humanitas*" ("civility") of the "*homo humanus*" (e.g., such as identifies the Englishmen or the Venetians *qua* "nobility") contraposed to the "*homo barbarus*" (such as identifies the Ottoman Turks or the Moors *qua* "barbarians"); or (4) the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* that, for the Christian, distinguishes the human from God (*Deitas*), i.e., from what is divine.¹⁴⁷ Heidegger

¹⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger. "Letter on Humanism" (1949), trans. Frank A. Cappuzi, online version at http://www.pacificinstitute.org/pdf/letter_on_%20Humanism.pdf; accessed on 22 January 2017.

understands the significance, and the need, of poetic insight when he opines: “The tragedies of Sophocles—provided a comparison is at all permissible—preserve the *ἦθος* [*ethos*] in their sayings more primordially than Aristotle’s lectures on ‘ethics’.”¹⁴⁸ One may argue, so do the tragedies of Shakespeare, in present case the *Othello*, which, through Othello’s being discloses the *ontological liability* of the *homo humanus* that is inescapable, for better or for worse.

Given current events that indeed highlight “the challenges of multiculturalism” (as noted earlier)—i.e., the entire *problematique* of “coexistence” or “coalescence” of what is proper to Islamic identity and what is proper to European identity—there is reason to appreciate the instruction in productions of the play that account for this contemporary disquiet. Thus, as Antoun Issa put it recently in his commentary on The Shakespeare Theatre Company’s production of *Othello* in Washington D.C. in March-April 2016 (as directed by Ron Daniels), “The glaring concern that sprung out of the stage—as if a shocking realization to one’s senses—was the direct application of this 16th-century view of Western-Islamic relations on today’s discourse. Have we progressed so little in all this time that we are still engaged in the same debates, the same fears, the same prejudices so eloquently portrayed, and rebuked, by Shakespeare centuries ago?...The somber view of Othello is the resignation that the Western and Islamic worlds are irreconcilable, and animosity and mutual fear will remain the norms that characterize the relationship.”¹⁴⁹

Yet, beyond that, Issa concludes, “Othello...serves as a timely reminder that behind the key markers of humanity, such as race, religion and nationality, lies a universality of human characteristics

¹⁴⁸ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” 269

¹⁴⁹ Antoun Issa, “Othello—a Timely Reminder on Racism and Islamophobia,” Middle East Institute, 28 March 2016; <http://www.mei.edu/content/othello—timely-reminder-racism-and-islamophobia>, accessed on 15 January 2017.

shared by all.” And it is because of our continuing need to discern the universal in the particular—as the Greeks of antiquity understood, even as contemporary philosophers recognize the same in our time—that we have need of literature such as Shakespeare’s *Othello*, of the humanities, that speak to us of what is universal in the human condition.¹⁵⁰ But, more important, what Shakespeare’s *Othello* discloses for all to witness, as Heidegger would say, is our being-there (*Dasein*) wherein we, severally and jointly, might, but also might not, disclose the being that is most our own, discriminating on the threefold path of being, appearance/semblance, and nonbeing; for, of reality we are to say, as does Shakespeare, “Tis a pageant, to keep us in false gaze” (1.3.18-19). That is the inescapable manner of our being in the world.

With this insight, Heidegger refers us to Sophocles’s *Antigone* (332), wherein we are told, “Many are the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man” (*polla ta deina kouden anthropou deinoteron telei*). Shakespeare and Sophocles both understand, I submit, that “Nothing surpasses the human being in strangeness;” in which case, as Heidegger intuits, “Man, in *one* word, is *deinotaton*, the strangest.” Indeed, “Such being is disclosed only in poetic insight.”¹⁵¹ It is thus, therefore, that we must say of Othello, as he exhorts us in the end, “Speak of me as I am” (5.2.340-341), nothing to extenuate by circumstance or to explain away by malicious cause. Othello “is,” in *his* being, as *we* “are”—not “pathetic,” but the most “terrible” (*deinotaton*) indeed. It is for the human, in the very condition of his and her existence, to have an ontological liability ever at the ground of an all-too-human *angst*, and hence as the ground of all possibility of moral responsibility.

¹⁵⁰ See here, William Casement, “On Defending the Humanities: Setting the Record Straight,” *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1984, 87-104.

¹⁵¹ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 149

In the end, therefore, there is but one judgment that is to be passed for all to hear, to be heard as the unceasing “judgment” of this tragedy. It is spoken aptly by none other than the Duke (1.3.200-207), though this “sentence” installs a *proverb* “equivocal,” in the disquietude of our minds:

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
 By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.
 To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
 Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
 What cannot be preserved, when fortune takes,
 Patience her injury a mockery makes.
 The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief;
 He robs himself that spends a bootless grief.

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