神學與人性之探討
以《奧賽羅》為例

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摘 要
莎士比亞最著名的四大悲劇：《馬克白》、《李爾王》、《奧賽羅》、《哈姆雷特》，是現今社會上擁有廣大學者討論的四本名著。其中當代評論家在探討《奧賽羅》一書的社會現象以及文化意識時，大多數都以種族、性別、階級等主題來加以深入分析研究。本文將嘗試以科尼利厄斯恩斯特的「人是上帝所創，且最終只會成為神或尋找邪惡的人性」的觀點，來探討《奧賽羅》時代的宗教觀念以及當時人類之天性。歸結莎士比亞時代的人性意識以及基督宗教的人性觀。

關鍵詞：《奧賽羅》、科尼利厄斯恩斯特、人性、基督信仰

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Theology and Human Nature in *Othello*

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ABSTRACT

*Macbeth, King Lear, Othello* and *Hamlet* are among the four best tragedies by Shakespeare. *Othello* has been much studied in the light of social and cultural consciousness, especially on the topics of race, class and gender. Based on Cornelius Ernst’s theory – “God creates Human Nature, and human being will be the image of God or only seek of evil in the end” to exam the Christianity and human nature in *Othello*. This thesis aims to study Shakespeare’s consciousness of human nature, and Christian view of human nature.

Keywords: *Othello*; Cornelius Ernst; Human nature; Christianity
Theology and Human Nature in *Othello*

Arguments of Human Nature

As Robert West has noted, “Many critics of *Othello* have stressed the ‘Christianness’ of it, and certainly they have much ground. Shakespeare wrote for a Christian audience, was himself Christian by rearing, and gave his play a Christian setting” (1).

Human Nature, according to *OED*, means “The inherent character or nature of human beings; the sum of traits, characteristics, and predispositions attributed to or associated with human beings.” Human Nature can also mean personality and background, here we can see the invisibility part of human nature. On the visibility part of human nature St. Augustine gave us another definition. “As for St. Augustine, the human will is free only to sin, not to choose the good. Without the grace of God, man is the slave, not the master, of his will” (Stempel 254). Similarly, if humans have free will to choose according to Hooker,

Wherefore to come to the law of nature: albeit thereby we sometimes mean that manner of working which God hath set for each created thing to keep; yet forasmuch as those things are termed most properly natural agents, which keep the law of their kind unwittingly, as the heavens and elements of the world, which can do no otherwise than they do; and forasmuch as we give to intellectual natures the name of Voluntary agents, that so we may distinguish them from the other. (155)
The Christian view, then, is that God created human nature, and this human nature in each person involves laws for us. The true dimensions of the problem become clear if we reflect that salvation depends on, and in a sense, the acceptance by man of God’s will and design for him. Hence this will and design must be known to man, and the importance of the matter demands that this knowledge be exact and certain. Christianity says that God has in fact revealed His will and design, and that He has moreover ensured the proper and accurate transmission of this revelation to all successive generations, from “Jerusalem …unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Indeed, if He has revealed it at all, He must have ensured the accurate transmission of the revelation, for otherwise its whole purpose might be frustrated. The Catholic Church believes that there are two modes, or channels, which serve this transmission: Scripture and Tradition. They can be distinguished from each other, but not separated: they are intimately connected and both “control” and illuminate each other. The Scriptures must be read and interpreted in the light of Tradition, while Tradition is recognized as such by its conformity with the Scriptures. Thus, human nature distinguishes us from one another. God creates human beings and human nature to be morally tested.

Moreover, if we consider angels is associate with God, and as we are angels, because God makes angels just like God makes human being, Hooker gives us a statement,

Consider angels each of them severally in himself, and their law is that which the prophet David mentioned, “All ye his angels praise him.” (Ps. Cxlv3i. 2) Consider the angels of God associated, and their law is that which disposeth them as an army, one in order and degree above another. Consider finally the angels as having with us that communion which the apostle to the Hebrew noteth, and in regard whereof angels have not disdained to profess themselves our ‘fellow–servants’ (163).
Angles are God’s fellow-servants just like human being can be God’s fellow-servants because Human being can communion with angles. Therefore, we have to praise God as angles.

Now, I want to discuss about the particular human mention in Hooker’s arguments,

The first degree of goodness is that general perfection which all things do seek, in desiring the continuance of their being. All things therefore coveting as much as may be to be like to God in being ever, that which cannot hereto attain personally doth seek to continue itself another way, that is by offspring and propagation. The next degree of goodness is that which each thing coveteth by affecting resemblance with God in the constancy and excellency of those operations which belong to their kind. (165)

Hence have arisen a few of axioms in philosophy, this showing how the works of human nature to always aim at that which cannot be bettered. Richard Hooker claims: “The man’s soul therefore being capable of a more divine perfection, hath a further ability, whereof in them there is no show at all, the ability of reaching higher than to sensible things.” (68)

So far we know man is almost perfect as his Maker, therefore, man can have their own free will just like God himself. To illustrate, Hooker claims:

Man is perfection of nature being made according to the likeness of his Maker resembles him also in the manner of working; so that whatsoever we work as men, the same we do wittingly work and freely; neither are we according to the manner of natural agents any way so tied, but that it is in our power to leave the things we do undone. The good which wither is gotten by doing, or which consist in the very doing itself, cause not action, unless apprehending it as good we so like and desire it: that we do
to any such end, the same we choose and prefer before the leaving of it undone. (168)

God created human being, but there is one thing that God cannot make a decision for human. That is every man has their own free will, and each of them can make their own decision. Therefore, there will be two kind of man. The first is become the image of God. And the second one will be seek of evil. And Richard Hooker gave us evidence,

Choice there is not, unless the thing which we take be so in our power that we might have refused and left it. But one thing we have special care, as being a matter of no small moment; and that is, how the Will, properly and strictly taken, as it is of things which are referred to the end that man desire, differ greatly from that inferior natural desire which we call Appetite …Therefore, needs, in those things Reason is the director of man’s Will by discovering in action what is good … Reason, whereby good may be known from evil, and which discovering the same rightly is termed right … there is no particular evil which has not some appearance of goodness nearby to insinuate itself. For evil as evil cannot be desired, goodness does not move by being, but by being apparent; (205-06)

Moreover, Richard Hooker gave us a short conclusion,

Men do both, as the Apostle teaches; yea, those men which have no written law of God to show what is good or evil, carry written in their hearts the universal law of mankind, the Law of Reason, whereby they judge as by a rule which God has given unto all men for that purpose. The law of reason does somewhat direct that men how to honor God as their Creator; but how to glorify God in such sort as is required, to the end he may be an everlasting Saviour, this we are taught by divine law,
which law both ascertains the truth and supplies unto us the want of that other law. So that in moral actions, divine law helps exceedingly the law of reason to guide man’s life; but in supernatural it alone guides. (33)

Hence we know man’s free will might leads them become an evil per se. Thus Cornelius Ernst states:”If Reason err, we fall into evil… in moral actions, divine law helps exceedingly the law of reason to guide man’s life” (225).

Christianity in Othello

Before adding one more to the stock of existing interpretations, some reference is in order to the so very much more considerable scholars who have already offered theirs. Indeed, an academic dissertation may not be conceivable which did not include such reference. Since, moreover, the interpretation offered in this dissertation will be worked out in at least implicit dialectical tension with some earlier ones, some mention at least of that earlier work may be necessary to the proper understanding such a critical review of past work on interpreting Richard Hooker with the present modest contribution, a definite methodological choice has been made: This is to concentrate the critical references to those earlier studies in a chapter apart, rather than weave them into the proper “discourse” of this dissertation itself. Admittedly, the procedure has some rather obvious disadvantage: It generates a certain amount of repetition, and makes comparison of our varying interpretation somewhat more difficult to achieve.

The time has now come to introduce a new, extremely disturbing element into the discussion, the limits of Human Nature. According to Cornelius Ernst there are two ways to discuss it,

In the first place, it is a matter of historical fact that the concept of nature has played a part in Christian theology, and, again as a matter of
historical fact, Christian theology has helped in the past to shape many of our ways of thinking today. In the second place, a Christian theologian might attempt to go further by trying to extend the Christian tradition of thought about nature so as to bring that tradition to bear on current discussions about nature. (225)

Hence Cornelius Ernst gave us another way to rethink human nature from Hooker’s theory. Based on Ernst’s theory, it is a fundamental tenet of Christianity that creation is a gratuitous act made by God in freedom, without either necessity or possibility of benefit to Himself, who is Pure, Infinite and infinitely perfect. Creation is summed up in Man, as in conscious, free personal subject.

Cornelius Ernst says: “First, ‘nature’ is an object of understanding, not immediately evident, but prior to the activity of understanding. The world has its definite character or nature, which needs to be explored and can be ascertained progressively.” (226)

Moreover, if we take Christianity as a Western civilization, we will find that Christian has already influenced the human society; therefore, we can see human nature through society into Christian theology. Ernst gives us a statement:

If Christian reflection has helped to shape reflection in the West, then the meeting of Jew and Gentile which is the proper setting of early Christianity, is going to offer a privileged instance of the debate about the questionable “nature” of man, where a search for understanding guided by a schema of nature has to try to come to terms with insights, revelation, about man and the world transmitted in quite other categories. It is certainly possible to examine the process of interdiffusion of cultures from the point of view of a sociology of knowledge, as a social anthropologist might try to present in a field study the categories of a preliterate society; only we should have to note that the sociology of
knowledge itself is an instance of a historically–conditioned schema for 
the study of man. (228)

Then, the human nature between Greek and Rome is very different. 
Roman’s human nature is about personality, which means there is no God and it 
is also the theory from Plato. And Plato’s philosophy is human is infinite and 
inner I. On the other hand, Greek human nature, they believe man can become 
God or imagine of God; nature is our servant. They believe they can find the 
answer in God but not nature. Thus, according to Genesis, “We are the nature of 
God, glory of God” (Ge 1. 2). Man is a master of nature and is also the outside 
world.

Cornelius Ernst states “Created man is endowed by God the Creator with a 
proper finality, that of being created man, according to the design of the Creator, 
to the (“external”) glory of God” (243). St Irenaeus also hold the same argument 
with Cornelius Ernst, his speeches in a celebrated phrase, “The glory of God is 
man alive.”

That design of the Creator is fully equipped to grasp it – through right use 
of his divinely given Intelligence – and to follow it – through right use of his 
divinely given will. Creatureliness is the over–all term for man’s true 
relationship to God. It means that while man, like God, he has only 
“participated” in a contingent, absolutely dependent sense in his own existent 
and being, or being precisely as any given moment between man’s being and 
nothingness (cf. Psalm 104:29–30). It is, just as “borrowed” concrete 
endowments are all “borrowed” being, especially the intelligence or reason, 
according to John Dryden: Dim as the borrow’d beams of moon and stars / … / 
Is Reason to the soul; … / (1, 3). Compared with the source of the light which it 
reflects, which is but “participated” to it, reason’s light is dim indeed: First of all, 
it is entirely “borrowed” – it is “borrowed” from God’s Infinite Intelligence. It is 
therefore radically dependent upon it, so that – just as man has being only by 
virtue of God’s infinite being participated to him in finite measure, so man has
intelligence only by virtue of God’s Infinite Intelligence participated to him in finite measure. Considered “by itself” though, in relation to its proper object, human reason has been created by God and is – while contingent and “borrowed” and “rolling” – entirely real, indeed “fires.” The proper object of man’s finite – embodied – intelligence is the finitely intelligible, creation. Yet in this understanding of the finitely intelligible precisely as such, i.e. as finite, there must be included the understanding that is must have an infinite ground.

Hence, man’s reason, or intelligence, while starting always from the consideration of the finitely intelligible, is bound by its nature to point to its infinite ground and cause, reasoning, John Dryden claims: “From cause to cause, to nature’s secret head; / …… that one first principle must be:” (13–14).

Thus, if we accept Ernst’s statement, we will know God designed man only in good ways. To illustrate, Ernst states:

God, then made man without evil, upright, virtuous, free from pain and care, glorified with every virtue, adorned with all that is good, like a sort of second world or microcosm within the great world, another angel capable of worship, compound, surveying the visible creation and initiated into the mysteries of the realm of thought, king over the things of earth, but subject to a higher king, of the earth and heaven, temporal and eternal, belonging to the realm of sight and to the realm of thought, midway between greatness and lowness, spirit and flesh. (230)

Here, that is, in the present life, his life is ordered like that of any living thing, but elsewhere, that is, in the age to come, he is changed; and this is the utmost bound of the mystery, he is deified by merely inclining himself to God; becoming deified by participating in the divine radiance, not by being changed into the divine substance. Cornelius Ernst says:

Therefore, man is presented as a paradoxical compound of two natures.
This last point is perhaps the most important: paradisal, archetypal man is in the image of God because he can freely choose to share in the deifying glory. It is God above all who is autexousios, free with unbounded power; man is autexousios only in a limited sense, free with limited power, free to choose a destiny offered him by God. It is the paradox of his divided natures, the riddling essence of man is a finite freedom called to be transformed into a divine glory which transcends him, called to a transcendence which he must receive as gift. (238)

And yet the entire gratuitousness with which the supernatural state—grace—supervenes over nature, implies neither a violation of nature, nor a mere extrinsic addition to it. Here indeed we have touched upon a central to identify and express the harmony of all that is. The possibility, indeed, the necessity of such harmony, derives from the unity and therefore “harmony” of God himself. The harmony of the natural and supernatural orders necessarily derives from the fact that they have one and the same author, from whose infinite wisdom and is whose infinite power they are both brought forth.

The key concept in achieving this is called by the scholastics man’s “obediential potency” for supernaturalisation: As a “potency for grace” that is already, in some sense, in man, it provides for a harmonious “link–up” between nature and grace. Yet it in no way resembles “potency” in the proper, ordinary, metaphysical sense, namely, in the sense of something already belong to the nature, or due to it, which is waiting to be actualized only. The classic definition of it is as a simple “freedom from contradiction” between nature and grace. A more imaginative explanation is that “man, as a creature … is, by his very dependence on God, inherently open to fresh and unpredictable influxes of the Creator’s activity” (i.e. elevation tpto the supernatural order), and not the kind of “rounded off finished essence” that might be violated by such new “influxes.”
Christianity in *Othello*

The internal conflict of *Othello* is polarized into a more obviously dramatic opposition between the Moor and his envious lieutenant Iago. *Othello* is one of a series of Shakespearean heroes whose sufferings are explicitly related to failing in themselves, but who manage in spite of this to attain tragic dignity. The dramatic construction of the play turns, accordingly, upon the close, intricate dovetailing of the two contrasted characters of Othello and Iago. Othello stands at the centre of the action, a tragic compound of nobility and weakness. It is not seriously open to question that the Othello of the early scenes is truly and worthily a hero, who dominates his surroundings by the consistent simplicity of his attitudes and behaviour. A leader in the war of the armies of the republic to which, as an alien stranger, he has sworn allegiance, saviour of Venice from her traditional Turkish enemy, his merits are beyond question at first, akin to Oedipus’ exalted stature. We can see his first utterance is a round assertion – full, splendid, rhetorical – of his royal lineage and “My services, which I have done the signiory.” (1. 2. 18)

These limitations are scarcely important for as long as Othello is confined to the field of action. In war, indeed, where confidence and self-affirmation are the order of the day, they may be positively advantage; but in personal relations, more particularly in an alien society and in the unfamiliar complexities of love, this situation is very different. Othello’s nature has so far found expression, that even the encounter with Desdemona, whose love can easily become for him a cause of “circumscription and confine,” merely underlines the possibility of tragedy. For Othello, his happiness in the opening scenes is genuine and moving; but it is also, like everything else in his character, self-centred, naïve, even egoistic in its expression, and his account before the Venetian senate of his manner of wooing makes this clear.

To illustrate, Othello is a soldier. In the earliest moments in the play, his married life is in conflict with his role as a general. It is the classical conflict
between Eros and Mars. Asking “fit disposition” for his wife after being ordered to Cyprus (1. 3.), Othello notices that “the tyrant custom … / Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice–driven bed of down” (1. 3. 230–32). While Desdemona is used to better “accommodation,” she nevertheless accompanies her husband to Cyprus (1. 3). Furthermore, she is not nervous in regard to the tempest or Turks that threatened their crossing. She is also really curious rather than irate when she is roused from bed by the drunken brawl in Act 2, scene 3.

Desdemona is, indeed, Othello’s “fair warrior,” and he is happiest when he has her by his side in the midst of military conflict or state business (2. 1). The military venue also provides Othello with a method to gain acceptance in Venetian society. In the play, while the Venetians are generally fearful of the prospect of Othello’s entrance into Christian society through his marriage to Desdemona, all the Venetians nevertheless honour and respect Othello as a soldier. Mercenary Moors were, in fact, very common at the time. Othello based his success in love on his success as a soldier: wooing Desdemona with tales of his battles and military travels. In case the Turks are drowned, by natural rather than military might, Othello is left with nothing to do: in the last act of military administration, his performance is reduced to viewing the defenses, in the extremely short second scene of Act 3. No longer having a means of proving his honor or manhood in a public setting such as the battlefield or the court, Othello begins to feel uneasy with his footing in a private setting, the bedroom. Iago enhances this uneasiness, calling Othello’s epileptic fit in Act 4, scene 1, “[a] passion most unsuiting such a man.”

Othello is totally preoccupied with his identity as a soldier. His glory lies in the public’s memory, and he tries to balance his past greatness with his perceived grievous marital failure.

Moreover, the action of Othello moves from the cosmopolitan Venice to the island of Cyprus. Protected by the forces of nature as well as by the military fortification and an apt general, Cyprus faces little threat from the Turks. Once
Othello, Iago, Desdemona, Emilia and Roderigo have arrived in Cyprus, they have nothing to do but to interact or prey upon each other. Isolation is behind many of the play’s most important effects: Iago frequently speaks in monologues; Othello stands aside while Iago talks with Cassio in Act 4, scene 1, and is left alone onstage with the bodies of Emilia and Desdemona for a few moments in Act 5, scene 2; Roderigo seems affiliated to no one in the play except Iago. And, most highlighted, Othello is visibly isolated from the other characters by his physical nature, the colour of his skin. Iago is professional in manipulating the distance between characters, isolating his victims so that they fall prey to their own obsessions. Iago, of necessity, always standing apart, falls prey to his own stubborn obsession with revenge. The characters cannot be islands, the play seems to say: self-isolation as an act of self-preservation leads ultimately to self-destruction.

Thus, he begins, by asserting his ignorance of life as lived beyond the narrow circle of soldiery: “Little of this great world can I speak, / More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.” (1. 3. 86–87)

We can see that not only of Othello’s intensely imaginative nature, but also an age in which adventures and discoveries have married fantasy to daily life; it should not prevent us from seeing in his words the exposure of a decidedly one-sided conception of love. In fact, Othello won Desdemona, taking her from her aristocratic surroundings and introducing her to a world at once strange, elemental and full of possible misunderstanding. We could take it that it is because the conquest ministered to his self-esteem that he valued her: “She loved me for the dangers I had pass’d / And I lov’d her that she did pity them” (1. 3. 167–68).

Here we can see that Othello’s estimate of his situation is nothing if not simple, but events show that this simplicity is tragically vulnerable, and terrible. Thus, we can never forget that Othello is, after all, a foreigner in Venice.

In view of the fact that the despised elements of sensuality are shortly to force their way into Othello’s mind till his utterances are saturated with them, we
are justified in allowing them even at this early stage more importance than he is ready to concede to them. If Othello’s “nobility” provides one of the main conceptions upon which the closely knit structure of the play rests, the “critical” scepticism of Iago is certainly the other. For Iago is that poison, no longer hinted at or obscurely present in minds never fully conscious of it, but turned to destructive activity. Iago’s acts present themselves as the consequences of a “philosophy” – if we may call it so which treats Othello’s downfall being as inevitable, as rooted in the nature of things, as his love. However, according to Iago, the “permission of the will” can be nothing other than physical satisfaction; the attainment of this becomes the only imperative which the will can recognize.

Moreover, based on Iago’s “philosophy,” there is nothing in the world of “nature” to prevent desire from passing easily and meaninglessly from one object to another. Therefore, Iago builds something like a destructive “philosophy” of love, wherein the transient nature of all physical passion will do more than incline Desdemona to be unfaithful, and once the original impulse toward Othello has been exhausted, to choose again. To illustrate, we shall not understand fully the implications of Iago’s reading of love unless we appreciate not only the extent to which they echo prejudices actually present in what we may call the “Venetian” atmosphere of the play, but also the nature of the bond which, beneath every surface appearance, unites him to the object of his envy and hatred. At first sight, the Ancient is everything that his general is not: cynical, “intellectual” and detached, as Othello is passionate and trusting to the point of folly. And if Othello’s passion tends to express itself, as we have seen, with a certain remoteness from the realities of sexual attraction, though uttered from his mask of worldly common sense and “honest” plain speaking, are saturated with the feeling of “blood.” “Blood,” or sexual emotion, is the driving force of his intelligence, although it is a force always controlled and criticized by that intelligence. In the light of this situation, much of the dramatic action of Othello acquires a deeper meaning. That is, Iago’s “philosophy” gives a clear logical expression to the doubts and reservation which, from the first, accompany the
hero’s love in the minds of those who surround him. Brabantio had believed that his daughter’s choice was against the rule of nature; Iago, on the contrary, believes not only that the choice was natural, but that “nature,” which had brought her to it, would drive her inevitably to change. The facts appear to bear him out, in so far as he succeeds in undermining Othello’s love for Desdemona; but before the beginning of the destructive process that he foresees and makes it his business to bring about, we are given on brief glimpse of Othello’s happiness. Already Iago has been present to observe this reunion and to colour Desdemona’s forthright declarations of devotion with the insertion of his own worldly and persistently disparaging comment.

Venice needs Othello to defend them against the enemy, and after Othello defeated them Othello’s own failure begins. Othello is an honest man; he believes that good men do not need to fear anyone and that people are what they appear to be. Othello is not a Venetian and many wanted him to fail. His choice of entering Venetian society may have been naïve and overly ambitious. His military success may have made him over–confident.

Iago invariably pushes his own interpretations of human motive to the extreme, which his peculiar logic demands and in so doing falsifies it. Moreover, we shall only understand Iago’s part in this tragedy if we realize that he plays throughout upon the real weaknesses of his victims. These weaknesses he exacerbates, following his “philosophy,” into consistent principles, reading the positive tendency to embrace evil; but his observations, though they do not account fully for the behaviour of his victims, and indeed consistently pervert their underlying motives, invariably find what is really vulnerable in them.

When we deal with Cassio we should not forget Iago, because Iago is the one who leads Cassio’s destiny; Cassio is by inclination a courtier, proud of his ability to respond easily to beauty and to give the pleasing compliment; he is also, as his susceptibility to drink suggests, something of a sensualist. His imagination, stirred by Iago, lingers upon Desdemona with intense but passing approbation. She is “exquisite,” “a fresh and delicate creature,” with an
“inviting,” though he hastens to add, “a right modest eye.” In spite of his reference to modesty, he does suggest a belief that Desdemona secretly desires him. Iago, considering Cassio in the light of his own jealousy and of his disparaging convictions about life, sees him as one who puts on “the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection” (2. 1. 242–44). Having observed in Cassio just sufficient “loose affection” to make his accusations plausible, he uses him to bring out Othello’s unconsidered sensuality, to ruin his judgment and destroy his peace. As the drunken revelry, prevailing, takes the mind prisoner, jealousy creeps into Othello’s mind through Iago’s action upon the instability which makes his will, unknown to himself the slave of passion. For the first time, Othello admits that his anger may be powerful enough to poison his judgment, his “safer guides” as he ominously calls them, carry him into ill–considered courses. Iago has already begun to work his weakness. Othello, as we have seen, tends to neglect the part played by physical desire in a love in the conduct of which he needs to feel himself “free and bounteous,” at once truly generous and flattered in his vulnerable self–esteem; Iago, for whom all love is simply the gratification of this desire, gives a very different interpretation of his victim’s character,

His soul is so enfetterd to her love,  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetite shall play the god  
With his weak function. (2. 3. 344–47)

Iago’s forte is using insinuation.

I cannot think it
That he would steal away so guilty–like
Seeing your coming. (3. 3. 36–38)
It was precisely this idea of being “enfettered” by his love that Othello had so confidently rejected in bringing Desdemona to Cyprus; it had offended his belief in himself both as a warrior and, more intimately, as a man.

He recognizes his weakness:
Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee: and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again. (3. 3. 90–92)

His words are ironic and prophetic. It is because Othello is ready to believe the worst that he continues to prod Iago regarding his hesitations and implications:

As if there were some Monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown…. 
Some horrible conceit…
Give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words. (3. 3. 107–33)

Iago refers to the “green–ey’d Monster” jealousy. Iago’s action, based as always on the rationalization of affection as “appetite”, aims at the dissolution of this heroic simplicity, seeks to subdue Othello by rousing the bestial instincts which slumber beneath the surface of his personality. For Othello, once placed in doubt, is quite incapable of suspending judgment. Suspense affects his self–confidence, contrasts with the capacity for quick and firm decision upon which he prides himself. He demands an immediate resolution, which can in practice be nothing but an acceptance of Iago’s insinuations:

To be once in doubt
In once to be resolved; exchange me for a goat,
When I shall turn the business of my soul
To such exsufficate and blown surmises,
Matching thy inference. (3. 3. 179–83)

Few things in Othello are more revealing than this habitual tendency to protest rhetorically against the presence of the very weakness that is undoing him. He refers contemptuously to the “goat,” the most notorious symbol of sensuality, just as Iago is engaged in poisoning his mind through his “blood”—inspired imagination; and the reference, strengthened by the sense, in “exsufficate,” of the beast breathing heavily in the external signs of passion, is at once grotesque and significant, recalling “love’s quick pants.” On the other hand, Iago recalls the persistent misgivings that have from the first surrounded this marriage: “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3. 3. 204) and stresses the inequality of “clime, complexion, and degree” in a way at once calculated to hurt Othello’s pride and to emphasize his ignorance, as a foreigner and a man of an alien race, as signifying Desdemona’s true motives. Above all, he insinuates that her apparent purity of purpose may conceal a sensual corruption of the will: “Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank, / Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.” (3. 3. 232–33)

The last assertion is really the important one. The others do little more than prepare the ground for it. Iago’s purpose is, his own words, to “act upon the blood” (3. 3. 326), to make the sensual basis of Othello’s passion come to the surface, not to give body and content to the reality of love, but in the form of passionate and destructive jealousy. And it is worth nothing that Iago has begun to act upon Othello by throwing doubt upon the purity of his own thoughts. The Moor believes that men “should be what they seem” (3. 3. 128); his whole life has been founded on the assumption that our motives are few and our spiritual needs simple, our actions completely and unequivocally under our control. Iago implies that the assumption is dubious, that not only the motives of others, but even our own are open to obscure and scarcely apprehended reservations: “Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false; / As where’s that palace where
into foul thoughts / Sometimes intrude not?” (3. 3. 136–38).

This is a typically sophisticated “Venetian” conclusion, and one which perfectly fits Iago’s purpose. It is because his “philosophy” enables him to establish contact with the lower, unconsidered elements of his victim’s emotional being that he is able to destroy Othello’s simplicity and to reduce him to a mass of contradictions and uncontrolled impulses. Having once deprived him of the certainly which his nature craves, he plays upon his sensual fancy, re-creating Cassio’s “dream” with obsessive insistence, the product, perhaps, of a certain thwarted “appetite” in himself, upon the grossness of physical contacts, makes him visualize the sin by which Desdemona is offending his self-esteem. Iago leads Othello on with a sneer that works like poison on his fantasy: “How satisfied, my lord? / Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topp’d?” (3. 3. 404–06).

Ironically “topp’d” reminds us of Othello in the same position: “An old black ram is tupping your white ewe.” (1. 1. 83–84)

Here, Iago touches Othello at a most vulnerable point; he offends him intimately in his personal respect. The reaction is a characteristic mixture of pathetic bewilderment and defiant self-esteem. Conscious of the racial difference which separates him from the Venetians around him and vaguely aware of a mortifying social and physical inferiority: “Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation, / That clamberers have. Or, for I am declined / Into the vale of years.” (3. 3. 263–66)

Othello cannot consider forgiveness or mercy: “I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loath her.” (3. 3. 267–68)

Iago’s very boldness has won his point. He must have been very sure of the Moor’s blindness to work upon him with so gross a caricature, but his confidence has been justified by the event. A few ambiguous suggestions from Iago have been enough, with Cassio’s invented intrigue, Desdemona’s entreaty that Othello forgive Cassio and a handkerchief fallen and found by chance, all reduce Othello to an absolute slavery to passion. Iago himself, in a solitary
The Moor already changes with my poison:
Dangerous conceits are in their nature poisons:
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
But with a little act upon the blood,
Burn like the mines of sulphur. (3. 3. 326–30)

The relation of poison to taste, and of both to the action of the “blood,” is by now familiar. It has marked Othello’s barbaric egoism descent to incoherence, his heroic rhetoric to a grotesque echo of his enemy’s cynicism. First of all, he has been induced to see himself as betrayed, and it is typically the knowledge, rather than the betrayal, which affects him: “I had been happy, if the general camp, / Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known.” (3. 3. 345–47)

The form of this confession is highly revealing. Othello’s problem is revealed here as a problem of consciousness, of the relationship of instinctive life to critical detachment. It has become a matter of reputation and pride; others will know and pity or worse, laugh at Othello the cuckold. By the end of this scene, Othello’s new “knowledge” has had two consequences. It destroyed his heroic simplicity of judgment, upon which his real nobility has been based, and it has roused his own sensual impulses to destructive fury. From now on, sensual passion and prowess in action are, in Othello, mutually exclusive; the entry of the one implies the dissolution of the coherence and self-confidence necessary to the other. It is obvious that, when Othello becomes aware that his peace is undermined beyond hope, he refers to his loss, not first of Desdemona, but of his integrity as a warrior: “Farewell, the tranquil mind, farewell, content! / Farewell, the plumed troop; and the big wars / That make ambition virtue.”(3. 3. 348–50)

At the end, Othello looks back in this speech to his former greatness. From now on, he is a man under two main influences, both equally destructive: on the
one hand, the loss, so intimately felt, of his military glory; on the other hand, that
sense of Desdemona’s supposed promiscuity which grows upon his imagination
until Iago can gloat: “I see, sir you are eaten up with passion!” (3. 3. 392).

The end is marked by an exchange which, in another context, would strike
us as a piece of grotesque parody, but which here, confirming Othello’s
consecration to self–deception, conveys an appalling irony which is all its own.
Prompted by Iago’s deliberate sneer: “your mind perhaps may change”, the
barbaric warrior vows himself, finally, once and for all, in the name of the very
consistency he has always prized, to destruction:

Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne’er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont;
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,

I here engage my words. (3. 3. 444–54)

The pitiless “marble” heaven reflects the motion of an “icy” current, answers to
a will petrified or frozen, caught in the savage and unreasoning thrust of its own
egoistic and “blood”–inspired purposes. Thwarted in a love which he has never
really understood in its mutual dedication, Othello’s egoism announces itself as
consistent in revenge, irresistible, decisive; all the intensity of personal feeling
which was never fully gratified in his relations with Desdemona to be exercised
in exacting retribution for the ruin of his integrity. Perhaps the irony reaches its
climax when the plotter makes his victim stand aside and assist in silence at
what he imagines to be Cassio’s account of Desdemona’s infidelity (4. 1). Every
word is a mortal wound for Othello’s pride. Iago sneers, and disclaims the sneer
with a phrase that is itself an affirmation of contempt: “Othello: Dost thou mock
me? / Iago: I mock you! No, by heaven, / Would you would bear your fortune
like a man!” (4.1. 72–74).

He roundly and ironically taxes the heroic Othello with a lack of manliness:
Whilst you were here o’erwhelmed with your grief—
A passion most unsuiting such a man—
Cassio came hither
…
Or I shall say your are all in all in spleen;
And nothing of a man. (4. 1. 91-105)

Iago has verbally castrated Othello, removing his ‘manhood’. Nothing could do more than this savage element of caricature in Iago’s treatment of Othello to convey the degradation of the victim; no better foil to the Moor’s earlier rhetoric, rhetoric which stands in the closest relationship to the subsequent tragedy, could be conceived.

In the last scene, in which dignity and weakness are blended in the process of awakening to the extent of his disaster, in which he kills Desdemona and falls dead by his own hand, across her body, the nearest approach to an impartial comment is made in terms of common realism by Emilia when she calls him “dull Moor” (5. 2. 261) an accusation to which he can only answer. And once the enormity of his error has come home to him with the simplicity of truth: “O fool, fool, fool!” (5. 2. 373). Yet, in spite of this, Othello retains a good measure of tragic dignity. His weakness and his tragedy are, indeed, closely united to the last. Here is Othello’s last speech, both a splendid expression of self-centred poetry and a final attempt at self-justification in an irrelevant pose:

I have done the state some service, and they know’t …
… then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme. (5. 2. 389–96)
We recognize that this speech, as we follow it, takes us with the speaker to the culminating moment in which he kills himself, to fall, as in a final gesture of expiation, over the body of his murdered wife. Like Oedipus, he takes on the role of the gods in punishing himself for his crime. If we are not mistaken in finding here the last words of a hero of true tragic statue, we should nonetheless not allow this to blind us, those to which Othello has so painfully awakened in the course of this same scene. For all the declamatory splendour of his final words, much of what is said has nothing to do with the burden of responsibility that rests so heavily upon him. For the real point, or a great part of it, lies in the presence of Desdemona’s body, killed by the speaker himself in his blindness, wantonly and unnecessarily sacrificed. “Perplexed,” by his own admission, betrayed by emotions he has never really understood, Othello’s last words are a pathetic return to his original simplicity. Some may say with some justification that the spectacle of Othello’s fall is excessively painful. The prevailing spirit of the tragedy tends undoubtedly to destruction, so much so that it possibly lacks balance and fails to satisfy completely as a reflection of human experience. However, also emerging from a balanced view of the play, Iago, so triumphantly in charge of his intrigue, loses control of it at last and is faced unexpectedly, in the person of his wife, whom he has consistently used and despised, with the reaction of elementary human decency. It will destroy Othello, who has contributed to his destruction by his own folly, but it will also reduce Iago from wonted command of events to a final enigmatic silence.

In spite of all his shortcomings, we feel at the last that Othello has been somewhat re-connected with natural emotion and love; nor is there anything grudging about the nobility conferred upon him at his best moments. On the other hand, Iago, for all his claim to superior “intelligence,” is finally evil limited. His attitude, repellent as it is, represents truth in so far as it answers to flaws truly present in the characters of his victims; but there is no suggestion in the play that his acceptance of these flaws is anything other than a perverse interpretation of human reality, against which it is necessary to fight by gaining
that degree of self-knowledge which Othello so conspicuously lacked.

It is commonly said, and true, that the best men otherwise are not always the best in regards of society (Hooker 224). The laws differ if they are respected only as men, or as part of a body politic. There are many men who are commendable when they are single; yet in society with others deemed less fit to answer their duties. In my opinion, the disposition of some men is so unframed in regard to the societies in which they live, is, for that they discern not aright what place and force these several kinds of laws ought to have in all their actions. With Othello the contrary is true: he is commendable on the social level as a general defending his country but needs to be condemned on the personal level as a man.

In many ways, Desdemona is the mirror of Othello. It is part of Shakespeare’s acknowledge to mix goodness and weakness. She did reject the counsel of her father and the mores of her culture. She showed some naivety in marrying an older man from another race, culture and background because she pitied his suffering. Pity does suggest a Christian virtue. However, neither Desdemona nor Othello really knew or understood each other. She could not help but be flattered by the attentions of a young handsome Cassio, was unaware of how the flirtation might be perceived, denoting a total lack of understanding of jealousy aroused by a young beautiful woman married to an older man, the material of countless tales of cuckoldry. Similarly, she cannot communicate with her husband when he is overcome by emotions. She makes several errors, pleading Cassio’s suit to a degree which arouses suspicion and lying about the handkerchief instead of trusting to truth.

Emilia, the obedient traditional wife, rises to the occasion. She loves Desdemona and finally sees the true nature of her husband. Like Desdemona, she had been blind to his real character. “I will not charm my tongue; / I am bound to speak / My Mistress here lies murthered in her bed.” (5. 2. 214–15)

When Iago orders her to be silent and then to go home, she refuses. “Tis proper I obey him, but not now.” (5. 2. 227)
Like Desdemona, she is conscious of a divided loyalty. She chooses truth and reveals: “That handkerchief thou speak’st of / I found by fortune, and did give my husband” (5. 2. 261–62).

Iago the deceiver is outraged that his wife has destroyed him, not by infidelity but by truth. “Shakespeare probed beyond mere diabolical plotting to its metaphysical source. For him, Iago embodies that principle of evil which unites the Jesuit and the Machiavel: not simply the sacrifice of morality to expediency, but the arrogant claim of the insatiable ego to be free of all limitations except those imposed by its own will, a freedom beyond good and evil” (Stempel 262). He rants: “Villainous whore”. The irony is palpable. Like Othello, his only recourse is to kill her. Iago will now face the pains of torture but defiantly proclaims: “Demand me nothing; what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word.” (5. 2. 348–49)

Thus, Stempel claims,

The play offers no solution; it gives us Iago, and, despite his disclaimer, he is what he is—we must accept him. Nevertheless, that acceptance must rest on something more substantial than the romantic admiration of a colossus of iniquity. Iago embodies the mystery of the evil will, an enigma which Shakespeare strove to realize, not to analyze. And if we follow, as best we can, Shakespeare’s shaping of the mind and heart of Iago, we shall discover a profound unconscious irony beneath the conscious dissimulation of Iago’s speeches, an irony whose significance is symbolized, paradoxically, by the final silence of Iago. (252)

The Christian and tragic elements in Othello clearly overlap. In Greek tragedy, when the play unfolds, we, the audience, see ever deeper into the characters who reflect the wide gamut of human nature. Layer by layer is peeled away until we confront the titanic forces struggling for dominance in the souls of
men. This is the true stage which every Christian must face, gaining salvation or losing one’s soul. Shakespeare, ever the consummate dramatist allows us to watch and share in the agony. The terror and fear in Aristotelian terms results from viewing the characters as possible reflections of ourselves in the battle between the divine and satanic forces for the possession or liberation of the human soul.
Works Cited


