

SHAKESPEARE, SELF-DECEPTION, AND THE MORAL PLAY*

John D. Cox

All other swindlers upon earth are nothing to the self-swindlers, and with such pretenses did I cheat myself.—*Great Expectations* (1861)

Self-deception came of age as a way of understanding Shakespeare with the advent of postmodernism. As Paul Ricoeur points out, Descartes's "modern" affirmation of consciousness through rational analysis eventually led to the doubting of consciousness by Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, who favored "postmodern" analyses of economics, the self, and the history of philosophy (especially ethics) that privileged unconscious motivation over rational deliberation (Ricoeur 32-36). The latter was too easily tricked or deceived by the former to be trustworthy, so patterns of self-trickery or self-deceit were more important to identify than logical argumentation. "False consciousness" is Engels's term for such a pattern, and the phrase nicely conceptualizes the difference between the real self, which motivates social action, and the false self that denies what the real self is up to—a denial believed even (or especially) by the person involved. So fruitful is this central insight of postmodern analysis that it has become the basic hermeneutical assumption in most writing about Shakespeare in the last thirty years, since it provides the underlying rationale for "reading against the grain." What I want to suggest in this essay is that self-deception has a history (or as Nietzsche might call it, a "genealogy") that postmodern understanding of self-deception has largely, if not entirely, ignored, and that this history includes the Tudor "moral play."¹ Recognizing the medieval genealogy of self-deception not only sheds new light on Shakespeare but also clarifies where we find ourselves in the ongoing enterprise of understanding his plays.

1. Self-Division and Self-Deception in the Moral Play

Crucial to seeing continuity between pre- and postmodern conceptions of self-deception is the seemingly obvious point, observed by others, that self-deception necessarily depends on a conception of the self as divided (Fingarette 85-91). Whether it is a false self and a real self or a conscious self and a subconscious self, one part of the same person is imagined as deceiving another part, and for this to happen, the self needs to be divided, so to speak, against itself, with one part suppressing (or as Freud would say *repressing*) another. The idea of self-division, however, did not originate in the nineteenth century, when the three forefathers of postmodernism all lived and wrote. Much earlier ideas about the divided self arose in late antiquity and remained influential well into the modern era. The apostle Paul famously describes himself as divided: “For I wolde, that I do not: but what I hate, that do I” (*Geneva Bible*, Rom. 7.15), and perhaps the most thoughtful and influential development of Paul’s insight appears in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where self-division also involves self-deception.² Describing the process of his conversion to Christianity, Augustine says to God:

You were wrenching me back toward myself, and pulling me round from that standpoint behind my back which I had taken to avoid looking at myself. You set me down before my face, forcing me to mark how despicable I was, how misshapen and begrimed, filthy and festering. (197-98)

What Augustine construes in this passage as his “true” self is not the unconscious motive, as it is for postmodern thinkers, but rather the self that he willfully created by distorting the self that God had created him to become. Having brought this “despicable” self into being, Augustine had hidden it behind his back, to use his own figure of speech, or to use more familiar terms, he had suppressed it beneath his conscious mind, which assured him he was smart and successful in his commitment to daring ideas and a patrician career. In other words, he had deceived himself: “I had been aware of it all along, but I had been glossing over it, suppressing it and forgetting” (198). Ancient and postmodern

thinkers use different metaphors for acting as if part of the self does not exist, but both understand self-deception as dependent on self-division.

The early Christian perception of self-division reached Shakespeare in numerous forms. An obvious one is the Elizabethan *Book of Common Prayer*, which follows Cranmer's version of the General Confession, used twice daily, once in every morning and evening service (49). Cranmer's prayer virtually paraphrases Paul's theology of the self in Romans 7.8-25, as is clear in the prayer's central admission: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us" (50). Recent speculation links Augustine's *Soliloquies*, written as explorations of interiority before the *Confessions*, to the popular pseudo-Augustinian *St. Augustine's Soliloquies* and its possible influence on the soliloquies of Hamlet (Staykova). For a late-sixteenth-century English dramatist, however, the most influential vehicle for notions of the divided self came from the moral play, with its well-established debt to Prudentius's *Psychomachia* (Spivack 60-95). A slightly older contemporary of Augustine, Prudentius also followed Paul in imagining the self as divided, but he wrote a pseudo-epic poem about spiritual warfare between virtues and vices battling for possession of the soul, rather than a philosophical dialogue like Augustine's.³ Though Prudentius was far from realizing the sophisticated interiority of Augustine, Prudentius's way of imagining self-division was, if anything, more influential than Augustine's.

Self-division all but defines the moral play, as the principal character confronts aspects of himself (or of herself, in the case of Anima in the fifteenth-century play called *Wisdom*), as separate characters in the play, inclining now to the worse part, now to the better, as Augustine does in the *Confessions*.⁴ But the self is not autonomous in the moral play, because original sin requires the assistance of divine grace in the form of a character with more than human qualities, variously called Mercy, Charity, Perseverance, Good Hope, or Wisdom, depending on the play in question. These redemptive characters are not imagined as aspects of the self but enter the play to restore the better parts of the self to their proper function—in effect, to take the despicable self from behind the self's back, in Augustine's

image, so the self can see what it has become. As a character called Adversity says of John Skelton's title character, Magnificence, in his downfall:

This losel was a lord and lived at his lust;
And now like a lurdan he lieth in the dust.
He knew not himself, his heart was so high;
Now is there no man that will set by him a fly.
(1887-90, my emphasis)

Skelton's description of Magnificence in his despair amounts to recognition of moral self-deception: Magnificence thought he knew himself, but in thinking so, he deceived himself. "He knew not himself, his heart was so high."⁵ Among moral plays, *Magnificence* is particularly important for Shakespeare, because it was available in print, having been published by John Rastell in 1530. Shakespeare seems not merely to have known it but to have been so impressed by it that he took from it a specific plot device that he used in plays as diverse as *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *2 Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.⁶

2. Twelfth Night

Where self-division and self-deception are concerned, Shakespeare's debt to the moral play can be illustrated in three very different plays from his mid to late career: *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Othello*, the last of which is a particularly useful play in contrasting classical and early Christian ideas of self-deception with their postmodern counterpart. *Twelfth Night* imagines the protagonist's self as divided between two other characters in the play. The Lady Olivia's household includes two servants with suggestively symbolic names, Feste and Malvolio. They are clearly distinguished characters apart from her, but they are rivals for her attention in a way that is strongly reminiscent of the earlier moral play, insofar as they appeal to opposing tendencies in Olivia herself. Committed to ostentatious mourning because of her brother's death, Olivia initially rejects Feste: "Go to, you're a dry fool. I'll no more of you" (1.5.38).⁷ Feste succeeds

in drawing her out of her sober mood, however, and when Malvolio objects to Feste, Olivia reproves Malvolio: "O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite" (1.5.87-88). At just the point when Olivia is back in a mood to favor him—"Where's Malvolio? He is sad and civil, / And suits well for a servant with my fortunes" (3.4.5-6)—Malvolio's fellow servants play a delicious trick on him to make him think Olivia is in love with him. When Malvolio appears, he has therefore transformed himself according to her supposed instructions into the opposite of what she wishes for in him, and she thinks he has fallen victim to what she calls "very midsummer madness," ordering him into the care of the same characters who had tricked him in the first place (3.4.57-65).

Establishing Olivia's self-division as imagined by means of two other characters is important for understanding how self-deception works in *Twelfth Night*. When Olivia tells Malvolio that he is "sick of self-love," she seems to recognize in him something that she fails to recognize in herself: that *she* is sick of self-love, and that what she is really drawn to in Malvolio is precisely this quality. Her self-love is manifest in her determination to remain in mourning for seven years, refusing to engage the world and thus committing herself, in effect, to solipsism, sterility, and death, as Feste suggests in his satirical song, "Come away, come away death" (2.4.51-66), with its cloying imagery and mocking self-pity. At the same time, however, Olivia is young, rich, and eminently eligible, as she quickly reveals by falling in love with Orsino's messenger, Cesario. Thinking she knows herself as a dutifully grieving sister, she both knows and does not know that she is young, passionate, and eager for a suitor. In short, she is self-deceived, and her mourning attire is the symbol of her ambivalence. As David Bevington facetiously remarks, "She must know that she looks stunning in black" (Introduction 334).

Shakespeare clarifies Olivia's self-deception by creating a parallel character, Viola, who also loses a brother to death (or so she believes), but who immediately collects herself and recognizes the necessity to move on with her life, determining to take service with Orsino in order to recover her fortunes if she can. Viola, in short, is not self-deceived. She is the first person in the play to address the discrepancy between

behavior and inner character, when she speaks to the captain who rescued her:

. . . though that nature with a beauteous wall
Doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee
I will believe thou hast a mind that suits
With this thy fair and outward character. (1.2.48-51)

Her decision to adopt a false appearance for herself immediately follows and seems even to be inspired by what she has just said to the sea captain. The contrast between witting and unwitting “disguise” (self-concealment and self-deception) is thus made clear. Strategic self-concealment is what we see in Viola and Feste; self-deception, in Orsino and Olivia from the main plot and in Malvolio from the subplot. Neither strategy concerning the self is completely satisfactory for dealing with the world, *Twelfth Night* suggests, but they are clearly contrasted in their deliberateness and self-ignorance, respectively.

Paralleling Viola in the subplot is Feste, who is the second character, after her, to observe the discrepancy between outer appearance and inner reality: “*cucullus non facit monachum*; that’s as much as to say as I wear not motley in my brain” (1.5.52-54). His point is that he is not the fool he appears to be. Since he says this when he is in the process of proving that Olivia herself is a fool for mourning excessively, his implication is that *she* is not what she appears to be as well—that is, wise, self-knowing, and appropriately devoted to grief. He thus penetrates her self-deception and successfully (at least for a moment) enables her to see Malvolio for what he is and thus potentially to see *herself* for what *she* is. As Feste uses his folly as a stalking horse for his wit, so Viola uses masculine disguise as a stalking horse for her courtship of Orsino, and Olivia’s falling in love with Viola disguised as Cesario is what eventually brings Olivia out of her self-deception and self-preoccupation.

To be sure, the divided and deceived self that Shakespeare explores in *Twelfth Night* has more to do with romantic self-fulfillment than with moral self-recognition and the acknowledgment of divine grace. It is therefore easier and more appealing to refer the play forward, so to speak, to Freud than backward to medieval drama,

especially to the moral play, which seems schematic, one-dimensional, and—let us face it—moralistic.⁸ Rejecting Shakespeare's native tradition, however, in favor of something more fashionable is a move that Shakespeare refused to make himself, not only in the oft-cited Chorus of Time in *The Winter's Tale* (4.1) but in *Twelfth Night* as well.⁹ As if in response to reservations about his native dramatic heritage, Shakespeare lets us know unequivocally that the moral play was on his mind when he wrote *Twelfth Night*, because he alludes to it—even suggesting some kind of audience *need* for it (italicized below)—in the ditty Feste sings after farcically attempting to exorcise Malvolio for his madness:

I am gone, sir,
And anon, sir,
I'll be with you again,
In a trice,
Like to the old Vice,
Your need to sustain;

Who, with dagger of lath,
In his rage and his wrath,
Cries, "Aha!" to the devil;
Like a mad lad,
"Pare thy nails, dad?
Adieu, Goodman Devil!"
(4.2.121-32, my emphasis)¹⁰

3. Julius Caesar

Moreover, and more importantly, Shakespeare imagined self-deception without reference to sexual motivation in a play he wrote shortly before *Twelfth Night*. This play is *Julius Caesar*, which has no hint of a love plot on anyone's part, nor does it imagine self-division by creating characters who are, in some sense, aspects of another character's mind, as Malvolio and Feste are of Olivia's. Nonetheless, *Julius Caesar* shows us two divided and self-deceived characters—Caesar himself and his principal competitor, Brutus—and in doing so, it comes remarkably close to the moral play in its moral imagining of

character.¹¹ For both of his principal characters, Shakespeare selected details from Plutarch and invented others to create decidedly faded impressions compared to those in his source. Whereas Plutarch proceeds chronologically from Caesar's valiant young manhood, for example, Shakespeare shows us Caesar only in his final days and mostly through the eyes of those who are his competitors for power in Rome, especially Cassius. Shakespeare invented Cassius's emulous description of Caesar's bravado and failure in a swimming contest, his near collapse of fever in Spain, and his deafness. Shakespeare also invented Caesar's belief in his wife's barrenness (1.2.6-9), a detail that could as easily reflect Caesar's disability as his wife's, though Caesar characteristically fails to see the situation that way.

Shakespeare weakens Caesar physically in several ways in order to suggest that his bodily vulnerabilities exemplify and reveal his self-division and self-deception. The swimming episode is a good example. Cassius says Caesar at one time called out pitiably to Cassius to help him, but he now treats Cassius as "a wretched creature," who "must bend his body / If Caesar carelessly but nod on him" (1.2.117-18). In short, Caesar has become so arrogant that he has conveniently forgotten what he owes to Cassius, or in other words, he has deceived himself on this point. Because Cassius himself is ambitious, and because he is trying in this speech to solicit Brutus's aid in the conspiracy, it is impossible to know how accurately he is reporting the event, or even if it happened at all, but his report of it nonetheless initiates a detracting pattern of self-deception in Shakespeare's portrait of Caesar.

A surprising part of that pattern is Shakespeare's repeated suggestion that Caesar has to work hard to suppress fear—a suggestion with no hint in Plutarch.¹² On the morning of his assassination, Caesar patronizingly tells his wife, Calpurnia, that he is not afraid, in response to her expressed fear of wonders reported in the streets of Rome:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come. (2.2.32-37)

The passage may have been inspired by Plutarch's brief comment that on the day before his death, when Caesar was discussing with friends "what death was best, he preventing their opinions, cried out aloud, 'Death unlooked for'" (524). In Shakespeare's version, however, Caesar has no sooner assured Calpurnia that death holds no fear for him than he demands of an entering servant what the augurers have said. In other words, Caesar is more afraid of the uncertain future than his bold words suggest, and his fear is confirmed by his vacillation about going to the senate. Moreover, his declaration to Calpurnia that he is not afraid is complemented by three other similar declarations on Caesar's part that have no precedent in Plutarch (1.2.198-214, 2.2.10-12, 41-48). Repeatedly insisting on one's possession of a particular virtue (in this case courage) can be a clue to internal tension over that very virtue, as Shakespeare would famously suggest by means of Queen Gertrude in the next play he wrote: "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.228). Gertrude's perception that the player queen declares her fidelity to her husband too strongly is itself a hint of Gertrude's own struggle with her conscience regarding her dubious fidelity to old Hamlet.

Shakespeare conveys this kind of self-division and self-deception even more strongly for Brutus, Caesar's principal competitor, than for Caesar himself. In Brutus's case, the issue is not fear but deep-seated agitation that continually disrupts his belief in his own stoic calm, and since Brutus is more introspective than Caesar, he often seems more than half aware that he is deceiving himself.¹³ Early in his conversation with Cassius, Brutus frankly acknowledges that he is "vexèd . . . / . . . with passions of some difference, / . . . Which give some soil, perhaps, to my behaviors" (1.2.39-42), but as the competition grows keener, and events surrounding the assassination become more agitating, he seems to suppress this self-insight in favor of expressed belief in his own stoic imperturbability. Plutarch again provided the hint in saying that Brutus "framed his manners of life by the rules of virtue and study of philosophy, and having employed his wit, which was gentle and constant, in attempting of great things, methinks he was made and framed unto virtue" (813). Plutarch also supplied the suggestion that

Brutus did not so consistently practice the stoic virtue of controlling his inner turmoil as he wanted to and as he wished others to believe he did:

He did so frame his countenance and looks, that no man could discern he had anything to trouble his mind. But when night came that he was in his own house, then he was clean changed. For, either care did wake him against his will when he would have slept, or else oftentimes of himself he fell into such deep thoughts of this enterprise, casting in his mind all the dangers that might happen, that his wife lying by him, found that there was some marvelous great matter that troubled his mind. (823)

Acting on this intimation, Shakespeare wrote the wakeful night-time scene in Brutus's orchard (2.1), when Portia begs him to tell her what is troubling him, and he at first denies that anything is. Brutus's refusal to listen to his wife is one of many parallels that Shakespeare created between Brutus and Caesar in 2.1 and 2.2, respectively, as Norman Rabkin points out.

But Shakespeare goes beyond Plutarch in suggesting that a divisive struggle with himself consistently underlies Brutus's façade of noble philosophic serenity. The extent of his self-knowledge is the very topic raised by Cassius at their first meeting, when Brutus admits to being vexed with passion. In spite of this admission, Brutus increasingly acts as if his great-souled nobility puts him above every human foible, including Caesar's ambition and Cassius's obvious envy of Caesar: "I love / The name of honor more than I fear death" (1.2.88-89). Moreover, he is unaware that his pride in patrician self-possession is the very means Cassius is using to persuade him to join the conspiracy, as Cassius pointedly remarks to himself when Brutus leaves him: "Well, Brutus, thou art noble. Yet I see / Thy honorable mettle may be wrought / From that it is disposed" (1.2.308-10). Cassius's inability to lead the conspiracy without Brutus undoubtedly makes Cassius the lesser man of the two, yet Cassius's ability to manipulate Brutus by means of Brutus's misplaced confidence in his own judgment is a devastating irony in their relationship, and especially in Brutus's character, when we first meet the two of them.

Sometimes borrowing from Plutarch and sometimes inventing, Shakespeare repeatedly shows Brutus overruling Cassius (often disastrously) because of belief in his own superior assessment of every situation. Brutus instantly rejects Cassius's urging that the conspirators take an oath together, insisting that honesty, virtue, and "th'insuppressive mettle of our spirits" make an oath ignoble (2.1.114-40). Brutus seems not to realize that his harangue against oath-taking is an insult to Cassius, and Cassius seems so anxious to retain Brutus's approval that he does not object.¹⁴ Brutus overrules Cassius's suggestion that Cicero be included in the conspiracy (2.1.150-52), and he preemptorily objects to Cassius's urging that Antony be assassinated with Caesar: "Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius, / To cut the head off and then hack the limbs, / . . . Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius" (2.1.163-66). Allowing Antony to live is one of Brutus's most momentous political miscalculations, as subsequent events make clear, and his insistence that the assassination can somehow be a sacred act, when it is in fact a plain political murder, is typical of his unresolved division between stoic idealism and the reality that constantly agitates him, both externally and internally.

With no hint from Plutarch, Shakespeare most trenchantly explores Brutus's lack of self-knowledge in his quarrel with Cassius after the assassination, when they are encamped with their armies near Sardis (4.3).¹⁵ Like his original, Shakespeare's Cassius is "choleric" and "hot stirring" (Plutarch 819-20, 838), as Brutus is well aware. When Cassius objects that Brutus has treated him dishonorably, Brutus immediately counters with an accusation that Cassius is dishonest (4.3.1-12), thereby speaking either out of obtuse self-righteousness or with the design to make Cassius even angrier—or perhaps both. Openly priding himself on his patrician self-control, Brutus mocks Cassius for his "rash choleric" and urges him to "Go show your slaves how choleric you are, / And make your bondmen tremble" (4.3.40, 44-45). Thus goaded into impotent rage and frustration, Cassius draws his dagger, apparently intending to stab Brutus. Seemingly cowed yet again by his co-conspirator, however, he demands that Brutus use the dagger against him, urging that Brutus might as well kill him in fact, since he is already killing him with his words. Brutus replies by ordering Cassius

to calm down and then reiterating the difference between them, as he sees it:

Sheathe your dagger.

Be angry when you will; it shall have scope;
Do what you will, dishonor shall be humor.
Oh, Cassius, you are yokèd with a lamb
That carries anger as the flint bears fire,
Who, much enforcèd, shows a hasty spark,
And straight is cold again. (4.3.107-13)

Brutus uses his façade of self-restraint to dominate Cassius, though apparently without consciously intending to. If Brutus truly cared as little for external events as his stoicism counsels him, he would not show so much as a hasty spark, but even more, he would not boast of his power over himself, nor would he care so deeply to agitate and humiliate his co-conspirator, whom he treats as if he were his keenest rival.

The end of the quarrel between these two has been much admired—"the contention and reconciliation of Brutus and Cassius is universally celebrated," remarked Samuel Johnson as early as 1765 (8.836)—but the tense resolution actually resolves nothing, because, among other things, it confirms Brutus's continued dominance of Cassius by Brutus's resourceful insistence on his own moral superiority. When Brutus unguardedly admits his inner turmoil—"O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs" (4.3.143)—Cassius twits him for his stoic inconsistency: "Of your philosophy you make no use, / If you give place to accidental evils" (144-45), only to have Brutus come back with his hardest-hitting comment thus far: "No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead" (146). Brutus has to know that this information, conveyed in this way, will make Cassius completely submissive out of concern for him, as in fact it does, and Brutus presses his advantage by urging that Cassius "Speak no more of her" (157). Having drawn Cassius in with the announcement of Portia's death, Brutus immediately shuts him out again by ordering him not to talk about it anymore. The two comments in rapid succession keep Cassius off balance and maintain Brutus's dominance. Confirming this strategy is

Brutus's odd solicitation of news about Portia from the newly-arrived Messala—as if Brutus did not already know of her death.¹⁶ When Messala reports it, Brutus responds with perfect stoic rectitude:

Why, farewell, Portia. We must die, Messala.
With meditating that she must die once,
I have the patience to endure it now. (4.3.189-91)

These pious affirmations about himself elicit astonished admiration for his godlike endurance from Messala: “Even so great men great losses should endure” (192). This is surely the very reaction Brutus had counted on, as Geoffrey Miles suggests in his analysis of Brutus's stoic constancy as “a genuinely noble ideal which nevertheless rests on unnatural suppression of feeling and on ‘artful’ presence, both directed toward satisfying the opinions of others” (143). Cassius makes exactly the response to Brutus's effortful pose that Brutus is looking for: “I have as much of this in art as you, / But yet my nature could not bear it so” (4.3.193-94).

The feelings that Brutus tries to suppress are strong suggestions of his self-division, and they are aroused in domestic settings, as well as political ones, as Shakespeare makes brilliantly clear in Brutus's relationship with the boy Lucius, who has no precedent in Plutarch. Lucius is the only person who consistently defers to Brutus, and Lucius therefore seems to call forth feelings of solicitude in Brutus that Brutus shows to no one else, even his wife, who challenges him to be more candid with her (2.1.238 ff.). Yet as a stoic idealist, Brutus believes he should give way to no feeling, as the stoic and ex-slave, Epictetus, recommends:

In the case of everything attractive or useful or that you are fond of, remember to say just what sort of thing it is, beginning with the least little things. If you are fond of a jug, say “I am fond of a jug!” For then, when it is broken you will not be upset. If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset. (12)

In keeping with stoic admonition of this sort, Brutus suppresses his affection for Lucius with peremptoriness, calling sternly for the lad's prompt attention in the small hours of the morning and demanding that he fetch a taper (2.1.1-8). When they are encamped near Sardis, Brutus shows his ambivalence in a brief scene of extraordinary imaginative insight on Shakespeare's part. Brutus again demands the boy's attention late at night, insisting that Lucius play his lute while Brutus reads. Yet noticing Lucius's tiredness, Brutus is irresistibly drawn to care for him: "What? Thou speak'st drowsily! / Poor knave, I blame thee not; thou art o'erwatched" (4.3.242-43). When Lucius falls asleep while trying to play, Brutus tenderly removes the lute, so Lucius will not accidentally damage it (4.3.273-74).

These gestures of solicitude, however, are accompanied by momentary glimpses of Brutus's stoic effort to suppress his affection for Lucius with harsh self-control. When Brutus finds a book he had been looking for in the pocket of his gown, Lucius's response makes clear that Brutus had blamed him for the book's disappearance: "I was sure Your Lordship did not give it me" (4.3.256). When Brutus calls out, after the ghost's departure, Lucius suddenly wakes, and, assuming that Brutus had scolded him, he blames his lute: "The strings, my lord, are false" (4.3.292). Lucius would not instinctively defend himself if he were not in the habit of needing to, and Brutus seems to treat him with alternate tenderness and severity in order to correct the former in himself with the latter. As if commenting unconsciously on his own actions toward Lucius (to say nothing of Cassius), Brutus urges the conspirators: "And let our hearts, as subtle masters do, / Stir up their servants to an act of rage / And after seem to chide 'em" (2.1.176-78).

Perhaps Shakespeare's most important insight from Plutarch concerns patrician competitiveness. Caesar and Brutus are the principal rivals in *Julius Caesar*, though by no means the only ones, and Shakespeare's incisive characterization of these two as alter egos in their stoic ambition and vulnerability is a comment on their aristocratic emulation, which motivates all the main characters in *Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare encountered this kind of contest in Plutarch, who tells the famous story of the young Alexander's controlling an unmanageable horse as an instance of Alexander's fierce rivalry with his father, Philip, because Philip had declared the animal to be unbreakable (389-90). In

other words, Alexander was determined to conquer something his father could not. Plutarch repeats this motif in his story of the young Caesar, who wept in frustration when he read of Alexander's deeds, because Alexander had conquered so much more than Caesar had at the same age (476-77). The parallel episodes point to a similar conception of aristocratic warrior rivalry in both Greece and Rome. The difference, Gordon Braden argues, is that when Rome's territorial ambition produced ever-diminishing returns, the patrician fighter was compelled to turn inward for something to conquer, as Plutarch wrote of Caesar, whose desire for "glory" made him discontented with what he had achieved: "This humour of his was no other but an emulation with himself as with another man" (519). This distinctively Roman development helps to account for the widespread ideal of stoic perfectionism in Roman culture. The stoic sage, Braden concludes, "is so far ahead in the competition that he can never be caught" (23). Shakespeare seems to have drawn the same conclusion about stoicism from his reading and conceivably from what he knew of competition at the Elizabethan court, where neo-stoicism was the height of fashion in the 1590s (Baker 301-12).

Shakespeare had a more familiar source, however, than Plutarch for the keen sense of self-deception that accompanies patrician competition in *Julius Caesar*. Long before he read Plutarch's *Lives*, Shakespeare had explored in an early satirical comedy, *Love's Labor's Lost*, the way noblemen compete and deceive themselves. In this play, four aristocratic young men take an ascetic vow to live in stoic self-denial for a year, only to find themselves incapable of keeping their promise. Shakespeare refers this failure not to classical sources but to the Bible. When Berowne catches the King scolding Longaville and Longaville scolding Dumaine for doing what each has done himself, Berowne exclaims to Longaville: "You found his mote; the King your mote did see; / But I a beam do find in each of three" (4.3.157-58). He is alluding to an oft-cited biblical statement regarding self-deception in Matthew 7.3-5:

And why seest thou the mote, that is in thy brothers eye, and perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how sayest thou to thy brother, Suffer me to cast out the mote out

of thine eye, and behold a beam is in thine owne eye?
Hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and
then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy
brother's eye.¹⁷

Both *Love's Labor's Lost* and *Twelfth Night* allusively acknowledge the Christian tradition from which Shakespeare derived his acute sense of how people deceive themselves. The idea that Berowne alludes to had been influential in centuries of Christian drama before Shakespeare, especially the moral play, which used personified abstraction to imagine the self as divided against itself in the process of temptation. This tradition of dramatizing the inner life underlies Brutus's description as "with himself at war" (1.2.46) and Cassius's rhetorical question "can you see your face?" (1.2.51), which he goes on to explain:

. . . it is very much lamented, Brutus,
That you have no such mirrors as will turn
Your hidden worthiness into your eye,
That you might see your shadow. (1.2.55-58)¹⁸

Extrapolating from the moral play's use of self-division as necessary to the process of self-deception, and alluding again (as he had in *Love's Labour's Lost*) to biblical imagery of sight and self-blindness, Shakespeare not only imagines the process at work in Brutus but also introduces a clever seducer in Cassius, who explicitly refers to the process while he is deceiving a man who is excessively proud of his self-knowledge and unusually deceived about its limitations.

4. Othello

Given Shakespeare's repeated acknowledgment of precedents for the kind of self-deception he revitalizes and re-imagines in his own plays, it is worth asking why his continuity with earlier tradition has received so little recent critical attention, and here, I think, the genealogy of criticism of *Othello* is instructive. *Othello* is another play, like *Twelfth Night*, in which a central character, in this case Othello

himself, is divided in consciousness between two other characters in the play: Iago and Desdemona. Arthur Kirsch refers this “fertile and suggestive” division to the moral play (6), and Spivack long ago traced the ambiguities of Iago to the standard fixture of Tudor moral plays that Feste calls “the old Vice” (Spivack, 3-22, 29-32, 276-77, 432-49). Ann Wierum points out that Iago is especially close in strategy to the vice called Cloaked Collusion in Skelton’s *Magnificence* (200), suggesting Shakespeare’s possible debt to this play in still another way. John Velz argues that *Othello* reverses the dynamic of medieval conversion plays like the Digby *Conversion of St. Paul* from the late fifteenth century. Whereas St. Paul moves from Jerusalem to Damascus as he undergoes a dramatic conversion, Othello moves from Venice to Cyprus as he undergoes a tragic “de-conversion,” involving a destructive shift of allegiance from his better self to his worse one.

It is worth noting that the latest date of the criticism just outlined is 1981, and that since then very little of the kind has been published.¹⁹ A principal contributor to the difference was the publication in 1980 of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which effectively established the critical dominance of postmodern assumptions (as Ricoeur describes them) in Shakespeare studies, to the virtual exclusion of other ways of thinking about the plays—including other ways of thinking about self-deception in them. Principally to Greenblatt’s book, for example, can be traced a years-long critical pursuit of how and when interiority originated in early modern England.²⁰ “In the early sixteenth century,” writes Greenblatt, “there is not yet so clearly a fluid, continuous inner voice—a dramatic monologue—to be recorded” (86). Accepting this claim at face value, critics sought the reason for it in the advent of bourgeois culture and the secularization of society in the wake of the Protestant reformation. Despite David Aers’s whisper in the ear of early modernists, no one paid serious attention to precedents and especially to Augustine’s extended dramatic monologue (it’s hard to know what else to call it) in the *Confessions*. Greenblatt quotes Augustine (2) on the self from Peter Brown’s biography: “Hands off yourself. Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin,” as if the quotation proves that Augustine had no sense of self to be fashioned. *Tolle lege* Augustine’s *Confessions*.

In Greenblatt's chapter on *Othello*, the link between a putatively innovative subjectivity or interiority and a postmodern conception of self-deception is explicit; in fact, one might say that the latter depends on the former. The chapter begins by laying out an analogy to *Othello* that Greenblatt eventually explains several pages into the essay (232). He evokes a sociologist, Daniel Lerner, and an early New World travel writer, Peter Martyr, regarding European explorers' way of understanding (or misunderstanding) the people they encountered in the Americas. By improvising a narrative based on another people's perception of the world, Europeans tricked those they met in the New World into cooperating in their own defeat and destruction. Greenblatt describes the European procedure in quasi-Marxist terms of exercising power through false consciousness: "the ownership of another's labor conceived as involving no supposedly 'natural' reciprocal obligation (as in feudalism) but rather functioning by concealing the very fact of ownership from the exploited who believe that they are acting freely and in their own interest" (229).²¹ The analogy with New World exploitation that "seems virtually to force itself upon us," Greenblatt continues, is Iago's exploitation of Othello (232). Iago improvises, as colonialists did, and he uses his understanding of his intended victim to trick him into doing what Iago wants, finally to Othello's self-destruction. Iago's understanding of Othello's interior life makes his victimization of Othello an instance of "*submission to narrative self-fashioning*" (234, Greenblatt's emphasis).

The quasi-Marxist analysis in Greenblatt's argument is complemented by a quasi-Freudian analysis of the particular way Iago proceeds.²² Citing three Elizabethan theologians (241), Greenblatt argues that Protestant Christianity in the sixteenth century had made everyone in England believe that sexual pleasure between marriage partners was equivalent to adultery. Accordingly, while Othello consciously celebrates his romantic attachment to Desdemona, "the erotic intensity that informs almost every word is experienced in tension" with orthodoxy, so that his language reveals the pressure of passion against "the boundary of the orthodox, the strain of its control, the potential disruption of its hegemony" (242). To summarize Greenblatt's point, Desdemona's passionate attachment to Othello makes him unconsciously suspect her of adultery, and this underlying suspicion of her is easily exploited by Iago to make Othello suspect her

of adultery with others. Simply put, Othello deceives himself in his conscious belief that he loves Desdemona; in reality, he subconsciously suspects her from the outset.

My point is not to dispute Greenblatt's analysis but to emphasize how exclusively it makes Shakespeare look ahead to postmodern conceptions of self-deception, so that the pre-existing ideas of self-deception I have outlined are left entirely out of account.²³ One does not have to moralize *Othello* to see how it fits patterns of moral self-deception that appear elsewhere in Shakespeare. If regarded with a measure of sympathy, the narrative Othello reports to the Venetian Senate of his romance with Desdemona tells us a great deal about his inner life, beginning with repeated references to his experience as a child soldier (1.3.85, 134, 159-60). Though he speaks descriptively, not self-pityingly, the experience he refers to was presumably involuntary—as a captive, for example—since he fetched his life and being from men of royal siege (1.2.21-22), who would not have exposed a seven-year-old prince to the hazards of combat. The detail adds poignancy to the story he tells later about the handkerchief, which has assumed talismanic proportions in his mind because it is a unique physical remnant of his lost childhood: his mother gave it to him as she was dying (3.4.65). In addition to child soldiering, his narrative includes his enduring a lifetime of endless hardship (“little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broils and battle” [1.3.88-89]), and his having learned to endure by means of long-cultivated stoicism:

The tyrant custom, most grave senators,
Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war
My thrice-driven bed of down. I do agnize
A natural and prompt alacrity
I find in hardness . . . (1.3.232-36)

Othello as stoic fits a conception of self-deception based on an elevated idea of one's self-control that Shakespeare had explored satirically in comedy, beginning with *Love's Labor's Lost*, and politically in *Julius Caesar*, and that he would go on to explore

tragically again in *Coriolanus*.²⁴ Bernard McElroy points out that Othello's alacrity in hardness is complemented by a characteristic stoic credence in "unknown fate" (2.1.192), and that this "belief in a malignant fate and pitiless heavens is quite consistent with the life of broil and battle he has endured," in that Othello "imposes emotional distance between himself and his dreadful experiences," thereby achieving a remarkable "imperturbability, a stoic patience and absolute self-confidence never more majestically in effect than when we first see him" (124).²⁵ "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them" (1.2.60) is a striking expression of the "perfect soul" (1.2.31) on which Othello has learned to rely in threatening situations—including the situation in which he finds himself as a north African in a hostile and racist Italian society that nonetheless depends on him for his extraordinary military skill: "the state," as Iago points out to Roderigo, "cannot with safety cast him" (1.1.151-53) and therefore tolerates him.²⁶ To fall unabashedly in love with a noble white woman in these circumstances is to confront the racist threat about as boldly as one can.

To fall in love, however, is to abandon self-control, as Othello has done—presumably for the first time in his life—when we first meet him. He remembers being captivated by Desdemona's sympathy for his youthful distress: "I did consent, / And often did beguile her of her tears / When I did speak of some distressful stroke / That my youth suffered" (1.3.157-60). Her identification with his suffering—her "pity"—is what Othello repeatedly emphasizes, with complete frankness, in acknowledging that he fell in love with her (163, 170).²⁷ In complementary fashion, she fell in love with him for his magnificent self-command, in spite of the suffering his life had imposed on him. "She wished / That heaven had made her such a man," reports Othello (1.3.163-64), and shortly thereafter she confirms his report:

I saw Othello's visage in his mind,
And to his honors and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate. (1.3.255-57)

Her love for Othello and his for her require a major voluntary breach of his stoic self-discipline—a willing and joyful surrender to deep and overwhelming feeling that he had always resisted before in order

literally to preserve his life. Repeated references to his childhood speak directly to his recovery of emotional freedom and innocence that he had long contained and that Desdemona helped him recover (Kirsch 23-25). Desdemona thus enters Othello's life both as a kind of grace—turning him around in a way that he had never imagined possible—and simultaneously as an entirely benign threat to his “perfect soul.”²⁸

If his “conversion” happens in Venice, as Velz points out, his “de-conversion” in Cyprus happens very swiftly in 3.3, and it is directly linked to the fragility of his stoic self-conception in at least two ways. First, deeply convinced from a lifetime of experience that surrendering to passion is the greatest threat to his self-preservation, Othello responds all too credulously to Iago's “honest” suspicion, and in light of it he tries to fall back on the resource that has sustained him through previous threats and hardship—his stoic imperturbability: “Away at once with love or jealousy” (3.3.206); “All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. / 'Tis gone” (3.3.460-61); “My heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand” (4.1.184-85). No matter how important his stoic reserve may have been to his self-preservation in the past, however, he cannot recover it where Desdemona is concerned: no sooner has he struck his stony heart in a gesture of determined self-control than he groans aloud, “Oh, the world hath not a sweeter creature! She might lie by an emperor's side, and command him tasks” (4.1.185-87). His self-division is palpable, and it points directly to self-deception about the extent of his stoic control, now that his love for Desdemona has overwhelmed his inner defenses. His attempt to deal with the latest perceived threat to himself peremptorily and with perfect self-control—in short, in the same way he has dealt with every other threat—therefore inevitably fails, because he is not the same person he was. He not only sees Desdemona as a threat he cannot overcome but also sees himself in reductively racist terms as the monster that Venetians have always imagined him to be (Kirsch 30-34). Othello recognizes his own collapse in a passage of agonized self-analysis in which he recalls threats of both literal destruction and social rejection:

Had it pleased heaven
To try me with affliction, had they rained
All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head,

Steeped me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience. But, alas, to make me
The fixèd figure for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving finger at!
Yet could I bear that too, well, very well.
But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from the which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence!
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in! Turn thy complexion there,
Patience, thou young and rose-lipped cherubin—
Ay, there look grim as hell! (4.2.49-66)

Shakespeare had explored a similar spectacle of tragic self-division in *Julius Caesar*, where the strains of maintaining stoic control reveal themselves at every turn in Brutus, and Shakespeare would explore Roman self-division again, even more trenchantly, in *Coriolanus*. But *Othello* is not a Roman play, and Shakespeare does something with Othello's "de-conversion" that he does nowhere else: he tells Othello's story in such a way that Othello discovers the absolute trustworthiness of the faith that had delivered him from the need for stoic self-control only after he has destroyed the source of that faith. "The tragic irony of this play is that truth can be believed only after it has lost its power to save and has assumed devastating power to torment" (McElroy 133). Shakespeare links the torment of Othello's soul with salvation history in the language of damnation that Othello uses to describe himself, when the horrific truth of what he has done is finally clear to him:

..... O ill-starred wench!
Pale as thy smock! When we shall meet at compt,
This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,
And fiends will snatch at it. Cold, cold, my girl?
Even like thy chastity. Oh, cursèd, cursèd slave!

Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulfur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
Oh, Desdemona! Dead, Desdemona! Dead! Oh! Oh!
(5.2.281-90)

This tormented conviction of himself as damned reinforces the “conversion” that he underwent in Venice. The division of himself between Iago and Desdemona is revealed to him in such a terrible way that the revelation itself is unrelieved torture, and Othello experiences it as damnation because it marks the loss of the transforming effect that Desdemona had had in his life, coming to him so unexpectedly and with such unanticipated deliverance of himself from himself that she might indeed have been grace itself.

The second reason for Othello’s rapid de-conversion is Iago, who understands Othello’s self-division and uses it to destroy him, thus taking Cassius’s strategy with Brutus to new lows of strategic manipulation.²⁹ Iago commends Othello’s stoic reserve to Emilia and Desdemona in feigned surprise that sardonically undercuts what it confirms:

Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon
When it hath blown his ranks into the air,
And like the devil from his very arm
Puffed his own brother—and is he angry? (3.4.136-39)

After Othello collapses with the agony of struggling vainly to regain his lost composure, Iago twits him with the loss of it, even as he sets up the next assault on it: “Whilst you were here o’erwhelmèd with your grief— / A passion most unsuited such a man— / Cassio came hither” (4.1.78-80). As an emulous officer, a self-hating racist, and a misogynist, Iago represents these things in Othello himself, and Iago readily understands that Othello is inclined to trust a fellow officer before any woman he has ever met. Iago uses this trust in him, “honest Iago,” to erode Othello’s trust in Desdemona in innumerable ways, finally equating her in Othello’s mind with a flirt like Bianca, so that

Othello will perceive Desdemona as a treacherous threat to himself, rather than the source of his liberation from a lifelong habit of imposed self-control. Shakespeare lets us hear enough of Iago's thoughts to know that Iago himself is not subject to stoic self-deception, because he controls himself in nothing except in deceiving others, yet his consuming envy of Othello's moral superiority is evident in a revealing comment about Othello—"The Moor . . . is of a constant, loving, noble nature" (2.1.289-90)—and in another about Cassio, a much lesser man than Othello: "He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly" (5.1.19-20).

Iago's strategy is all too successful, and it is undoubtedly based, as Greenblatt argues, on Iago's understanding of the man he strives to control and betray. Finding New World analogies to Iago's strategy ties it to sixteenth-century innovation and therefore makes it seem definitively and wholly new in European experience. As Spivack argues, however, Shakespeare refers Iago to centuries of dramaturgy that involved moral self-division and self-deceit on the English stage, acknowledging a native theatrical tradition generously, even as he gives it powerful and unforgettable new life on the London stage. "Double-dealing and I be all one," boasts Cloaked Collusion in *Magnificence*; "Crafting and hafting contrived is by me" (696-97). Moreover, he bases his craftiness on what he knows of his victims' moods:

When other men laugh then study I and muse,
Devising the means and ways that I can
How I may hurt and hinder every man.

"Every man" is generic, of course, and Othello is specific, but his tormentor nonetheless proceeds according to well-established theatrical precedent:

And craftily can I grope how every man is minded.
.....
To flatter and to flery is all my pretence, *fleer, smile*
Among all such persons as I well understand *obsequiously*
Be light of belief and hasty of credence;
I make them to startle and sparkle like a brand;

I move them, I maze them, I make them so fond
That they will hear no man but the first tale;
And so by these means I brew much bale. (725-44)³⁰

The bale brewed by Iago is based on exactly the same strategy as Cloaked Collusion's: tricking a victim into self-destruction by means of what the tricker understands about the victim's own soul. Skelton's character is satirical and topical; Shakespeare's, terrifying and sublime; but both playwrights draw unabashedly on a shared sense of humankind's destiny, evident in *Othello* in Iago's repeated allusions to hell and in Othello's belief in his own damnation for what he has done to Desdemona. Elizabethan belief in that destiny may well have been hegemonic, as Greenblatt asserts, but it was not uniquely Protestant, and England's official church was far from exercising total mind control—much as it may have wished to. Skelton, after all, was a pre-Reformation playwright, and the dramatic tradition on which he and Shakespeare both drew was shaped by centuries of late medieval theology and before that by Christian thinking going back to St. Paul. Attending to what Shakespeare himself generously acknowledged in his dramatic heritage would seem to be an appropriate critical procedure, without exclusively privileging what we have learned most recently. The freshest things now reigning sometimes stale most quickly, as the Chorus of Time recognizes in *The Winter's Tale*. The wiser course might therefore be not to accord them our only attention.

Hope College

Notes

*I am grateful to Alan Dessen for reading a draft of this essay and to Cynthia Valk for inviting me to present a preliminary version of the argument at the 44th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, in May, 2009.

¹ As Alan Dessen argues, “moral play” or simply “morall” was the term used by Shakespeare’s contemporaries to refer to what has since been called the “morality play” (Dessen, *Shakespeare and the Late Moral Plays* 11-13). He points out that a lost play called “A morall of Cloth breeches and velvet hose” was in the Chamberlain’s Men’s repertory as late as 1600 (12-13), and that a rival company, Pembroke’s Men, performed one of the plays Dessen discusses, Ulpian Fulwell’s *Like Will to Like* (1562-68), as late as 1600 (Dessen 163; Henslowe 164). Another such play, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, now extant only in assigned players’ parts, still belonged to the Chamberlain’s Men in 1597-98 (Kathman).

² On self-division in *The Confessions*, see Brian Stock 104-05, 229, 255.

³ The difference is that Augustine was drawn to Paul’s suggestion of inward struggle, whereas Prudentius was more interested in Paul’s metaphors of spiritual warfare (Smith 127-29, 139-40).

⁴ As Dessen points out, the moral plays that registered most strongly with Shakespeare and his contemporaries no longer retained the feature of a divided principal character (*Shakespeare and the Late Moral Plays* 21-22), which is more typical of pre-Reformation moral plays. Dessen also acknowledges, however, that the features he identifies were not present in all the plays he discusses (36), and memories were long, as Dessen notes in the case of R. Willis, who vividly remembered a moral play from his youth when he was an old man (35). Dessen suggests that the late moral plays may have been seen rather than read (162), and it is worth adding that acting traditions would have remained alive even longer for performers than for their auditors.

¹² Georg Gervinus noticed this point as early as 1883: Caesar “speaks so much of having no fear, that by this very thing he betrays his fear” (720), and M. W. MacCallum commented in 1910 that Caesar’s fear of supernatural signs suggests “a touch of self-deception as well as of superstition in Caesar, and this self-deception reappears in other more important matters,” such as Caesar’s repeated insistence that he is not afraid (220-21).

¹³ The issue of Brutus’s stoicism has been inconclusively debated. See John Anson, Miles 125-27, Gilles Monsarrat 139-44, and Marvin L. Vawter. Plutarch remarks that of all the Greek philosophers, Brutus “loved Plato’s sect best” (814), but the stoics drew heavily on Plato’s descriptions of Socrates’s amazing self-control. They argued that one can do nothing to change events, which happen according to destiny, so one needs to control feelings, desires, and wishes in response to events, as Socrates does when anticipating his own death in the *Phaedo*.

¹⁴ Plutarch reports that the conspirators took no oath, but he says they were all agreed on the matter, reporting no conflict between Cassius and Brutus (822).

¹⁵ Plutarch reports the quarrel (843), but Shakespeare’s interpretation of it is entirely his own.

¹⁶ The double announcement of Portia’s death has long been considered a textual crux in *Julius Caesar*, though the evidence adduced for it as a problem has been strongly challenged. For a summary of the issues, see Wells and Taylor 387. For another interpretation that ignores the presumed crux, as mine does, see Miles 143.

¹⁷ Horace offers a close parallel to the saying in Matthew in *Satire* I.iii.25-27: “When you look over your own sins, your eyes are rheumy and daubed with ointment; why, when you view the failings of your friends, are you as keen of sight as an eagle or as a serpent of Epidaurus?” If Shakespeare knew both the classical and biblical sayings, as seems likely, he clearly chose one over the other.

¹⁸ Cassius’s argument uses the same imagery of sight that John Davies uses in *Nosce Teipsum* to describe self-deception as a fact of fallen human nature, and Davies’s editor speculates (331) that Shakespeare drew on these lines in *Julius Caesar*:

Is it because the mind is like the eye,
(Through which it gathers knowledge by degrees)
Whose rays reflect not, but spread outwardly,
Not seeing itself, when other things it sees? (105-08)

It would seem more likely that both Davies and Shakespeare were drawing on well-known biblical imagery, noted above.

¹⁹ Even Kirsch's book, published in 1981, is mostly a collection of revised essays he had published earlier in other forms. Alan Dessen is an important exception to the relative neglect of Shakespeare's medieval dramatic heritage, and Dessen's forthcoming book pays particular attention to that heritage from a performance standpoint.

²⁰ Katherine Maus helpfully summarizes the discussion, beginning with Catherine Belsey, and contributes substantially to it herself (1-34). More recently the topic has been addressed by Hugh Grady 1-25, 109-25.

²¹ "Quasi-" is intended here descriptively, not dismissively, to refer to Greenblatt's approximation of a set of ideas, using their language and general schemes but without citing sources or particular theoreticians. Greenblatt's "cultural poetics" has deliberately been less precise and source-oriented than its counterpart in Britain, "cultural materialism."

²² Greenblatt acknowledges his indebtedness to two other readings of *Othello*, by Stanley Cavell and Arthur Kirsch respectively, that are more or less Freudian (298n15, 306n66).

²³ Greenblatt cites Spivack once on *Othello* only to dismiss his argument (305-06n63).

²⁴ T. S. Eliot's dislike of *Othello* prompted him to argue that stoicism is satirical in *Othello* as well. For a discussion of stoic self-division in *Coriolanus*, see Cox, 176-81.

²⁵ McElroy (122) points to two other references to "fate" by *Othello* (3.4.66 and 5.2.274). I would add *Othello*'s reference to "destiny unshunnable, like death" (3.3.291) and "ill-starred wench" (5.2.281).

²⁶ Recognizing racism is a twentieth-century innovation and therefore even more recent than the forefathers of postmodernism. I invoke it deliberately, nonetheless, in an analysis of what Shakespeare

might have learned from his own experience, because Shakespeare was keenly responsive to social outsiders—probably because he was a social outsider himself. Shylock and Caliban come immediately to mind, but Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* is an important early example.

²⁷ Kirsch is especially good on Othello's use of "pity" (13-14).

²⁸ The ambivalence of Othello's love for Desdemona is noticed by both Cavell and Greenblatt, who attribute it in various ways to Othello's inability to believe that Desdemona can be both passionate and a faithful wife.

²⁹ Iago as Vice has little about him of the merry jesting figure the Vice had largely become by the late sixteenth century (Dessen, *Shakespeare and the Late Moral Plays* 18). In framing Iago, Shakespeare reverted to an earlier tradition, represented by the likes of Cloaked Collusion in Skelton's *Magnificence*. Iago's destruction of Othello is a variation of the pattern Skelton originated (above, n. 6).

³⁰ Paula Neuss's gloss of line 743 describes Othello precisely: "they will not believe the truth, once they have been told a lie."

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