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Nothing if Not Critical: Stanley Cavell's Skepticism and Shakespeare's *Othello*

STANLEY CAVELL'S ESSAY, "Othello and the Stake of the Other,"¹ can be difficult and unsettling to read. The arguments in Cavell's account of Shakespeare's play are curious and strange, yet are also frighteningly familiar.² Cavell recounts actions and scenes from *Othello* which readers are sure to recognize, yet are also sure to question. My purpose is to explore why Cavell's reading of *Othello* provokes a dual response; although my argument is much indebted to Cavell's reading of the play, I attempt to redirect his approach in ways that will become apparent. Cavell is famous for his notion that texts read us as much as we read the texts. How does Shakespeare's play read Cavell? How are Shakespeare's arguments concerning knowing and skepticism opposite and/or apposite to Cavell's conception? And, of course, I must proceed carefully, because if Shakespeare is reading Cavell, then he is also reading me.

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 125–42. Subsequent references are to this edition. The essay originally appeared as the final chapter in Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

² I am not the only reader to register this kind of response to Cavell's arguments. See the critical debate that occurred among Gerald Bruns, James Conant, and Jonathan Crewe over Cavell's readings of Shakespeare: Gerald Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare," *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (1990): 612–32, and "Reply to Crewe and Conant," *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991): 635–38; James Conant, "On Bruns, on Cavell," *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991): 616–34; and Jonathan Crewe, "Gerald Bruns' Cavell," *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991): 609–15.

Cavell's reading of *Othello* specifically, and tragedy in general, is guided by his concern with a "kind of epistemological problem" (126) which he identifies as skepticism. Cavell's notion of the "skeptical problematic" is defined as "the question [of] whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it" (3). He holds that Othello's form of knowing is analogous to (and anticipates) Descartes' attempt, in the third Meditation, "to know beyond doubt that he is not alone in the world" (126). He summarizes Descartes' *Meditations* as being "about the finding of self-knowledge after all; of the knowledge of a human self by a human self" (127). From this understanding of Descartes' philosophical project, Cavell argues that the basis of the skeptical problem is

that the integrity of my (human, finite) existence may depend upon the fact and on the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence, an existence conceived from my very dependence and incompleteness, hence conceived as perfect, and conceived as producing me "in some sense, in [its] own image...." (127-28)

The problem of "proving" the integrity of one's own existence through the "proving" of the other's existence takes Cavell to *Othello*. The problem is then whether *Othello* corroborates Cavell's claims, or whether Shakespeare's play resists such a reading of itself and the characters that embody the action of the plot. To borrow Graham Bradshaw's formulation, does Cavell's reading "allow the play to test, and not merely 'instantiate,' the theoretical or assumptive basis"?³

Certainly Shakespeare is exploring the problem of knowing the self and the other through the action of *Othello*. The problem of Shakespeare's play may be phrased in several ways: What is "self" and what is "other"? How do we know, or come to distinguish, these two things? Do we know the self and the other only through difference or also through identity? What would constitute

³ Graham Bradshaw, *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993) 32.

this knowledge (of differences, of similarities)? Othello's question to Desdemona, "Why, what art thou?" (4.2.23),⁴ is phrased in a plain style, but compresses and compounds the most basic and difficult problems of knowing another, of engaging in human relations: What are you? Why are you? What do you mean? Why are you significant to me? Desdemona's question, "Am I that name, Iago?" (4.2.119), is also phrased in a plain style, but directly confronts the question of knowing oneself when threatened by the confusing or contradictory claims of the other upon the self. Am I the idea I have of myself? Am I the idea that others have of me? Am I still myself when known by others? Can I remain myself when confronted with another? When questioned by another? The question of the reading self in relation to the other of Shakespeare's text is also a part of this series of questions. How do readers (am I) know themselves (myself) through reading the play?

Cavell describes tragedy as the "place" where "we are not allowed to escape the consequences [of] ... the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other" (138). "Best case" is defined as representing the imaginary major premise "if I know anything, I know this" (128). The best case is the knowing upon which the self stakes its own existence. Cavell argues that the best case, the unquestionable knowing, depends upon the "fact" of another being's existence and that existence being constituted as perfect. Shakespeare's play complicates Cavell's formulation, because the major premise, "if I know anything, I know this," is constituted within Othello's relation to himself. The problem Shakespeare proposes is that Othello does not want to know his existence is dependent on or bound to another; he "knows" that his existence is perfect prior to knowing the other—in this case, Desdemona. He is his own best case. Shakespeare argues in *Othello* that the best case is precisely what must be allowed to fail; that the best case must be given over, and the self must be willing to acknowledge the other for itself to survive. The failure to know the other, to acknowledge the other, will lead to disaster and death. And the failure to know the self as imperfect, to acknowledge the self in relation to others,

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E.A.J. Honigmann (Surrey: Arden, 1997). Subsequent references are to this edition.

and the failure to acknowledge the claim of the other upon the self, will also lead to the same end. Cavell argues:

Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial. According to me further, his professions of skepticism over her faithfulness are a cover story for a deeper conviction; a terrible doubt covering a yet more terrible certainty, and unstateable certainty. (138)

It is through the course of the play that Othello comes to know Desdemona as "flesh and blood," and "other." The possibility that tortures Othello is contained within the "idea of two becoming one in marriage" (131). The problem is not, as Cavell claims, that Othello's self will be proved imperfect if he realizes that Desdemona is flesh and blood; Othello suffers from the idea that he must relinquish his perfect self by becoming interdependent with Desdemona. Othello suffers from Desdemona's claim as an other on his self; to accept that claim is to relinquish the notion of one's own perfection and embrace the responsibility and dependence which come in acknowledging the other. I agree with Cavell that readers must think of *Othello* as the story of a marriage, and more specifically, as the story of a wedding night (131).⁵ Othello's problem of knowing, both himself and Desdemona, is directly related to the beginnings of the marriage; the problem is, in effect, created by the marriage. Othello is a man whose self is threatened by the existence of Desdemona, who is now also a "self" consisting of two bodies through the sacrament of marriage; through the ceremony in which two become one. Shakespeare asks us to consider what it means to secure one's self to another. What does it mean to allow oneself to be defined by relationships with others? What must the self change and relinquish to acknowledge the other as more than simply outside and strange?

⁵ Helen Gardner makes a similar argument in "The Noble Moor," *Othello: Critical Essays*, ed. Susan Snyder (New York: Garland, 1988) 176.

Othello is tortured not only by the problems of skepticism, but by the problems of faith and trust. He is tortured by a fear of faith which causes him to murder Desdemona and murder his love of her through doubt. He cannot submit to the idea contained within "My life upon her faith" (1.3.295). His life is staked upon her trust, and the trust he must reciprocate. Othello is a man threatened by his wife, a man who does not embrace faith but instead chooses to escape through doubt. But what should cause the idea of two becoming one in marriage to be torturous for Othello? Cavell reads the "great opening speech" of 5.2 as a case of "massive denial" (133), but I would argue that Othello's speech is also a revelation: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars / It is the cause" (5.2.1-3). What is Othello actually saying here? As Cavell would remark, "you always tell more and less than you know" (201). What does Cavell know? Reading the penultimate paragraph of Cavell's essay makes the problem evident, while also making Cavell's reversal apparent:

So they are there, on their bridal and death sheets. A statue, a stone, is something whose existence is fundamentally open to ocular proof. A human being is not. The two bodies lying together form an emblem of this fact, the truth of skepticism. What this man lacked was not certainty. He knew everything, but he could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it. He found out too much for his mind, not too little. (141)

How could Othello know everything? How could he know Desdemona completely? It is difficult enough for each of us to know ourselves, let alone to know everything about another. Othello fails to know Desdemona because he fails to know himself; that is, Othello fails to understand how his perception of Desdemona as a threat to himself causes him to hold her apart as separate and other. That distance is caused by a failure of faith and trust. The problem is not that Othello "could not yield to what he knew," but that he could not trust in the idea that his wife could not be completely "self," that she must remain in some way "other," that as long as they are married he must live with the paradoxical problem of two becoming one while remaining two. Is this paradoxical problem not beyond any form of proof? What is too much for

Othello's mind is the idea of surrendering some part of his selfhood in being married to Desdemona. Again, I ask, what does Othello reveal about himself in the "It is the cause" speech? The first line is a declamation: "It is the cause, my soul!" Othello is speaking to his soul and about his soul simultaneously. His soul is the cause. Othello reveals his soul as the cause while not wanting to name it to the chaste stars.

Cavell argues that Othello needs Desdemona to complete himself, to affirm the integrity of his self. My argument is that Othello imagines himself as complete and perfect prior to knowing Desdemona, and cannot acknowledge his relation with her, cannot relinquish his sense of being complete.⁶ The problem Shakespeare offers is one of knowing, for Othello is unwilling to know Desdemona as having a claim on his self, the self for which he is responsible. Is anything else possible in a Christian marriage? In using the word "know" throughout this paper, I intend the word to carry the fullest possible range of meanings: to be aware, to recognize, to identify, to have experience of, to have understanding, and to have sexual intercourse with. Othello's inability to know, or violent opposition to knowing Desdemona, becomes manifest in his unwillingness to have sexual intercourse with her. This is not to reduce their marriage simply to sexual intercourse, but to suggest how their conversations must differ from the time of wooing to the time once married: the two forms of intercourse are related in a very problematic way. How are sexual intercourse and verbal conversations like and/or unlike? Does one allow Othello a safety the other does not afford? To invoke Cavell's most often raised question: is this more than we know? Does the play substantiate the reading proposed here? In order to demonstrate the problems in Cavell's reading, the first question to ask might be: Who represents the skeptical imagination in *Othello*?

In Cavell's reading, Othello is the skeptic; his is the mind that suffers from the tortures of doubt. But why does Cavell choose Othello? Consider, for a moment, Cavell's description of the relationship between Othello and Iago:

⁶ I am indebted to Brian Crick for this part of my argument, in particular to his paper "Shakespeare's Negative Grammar: The Fear of Emotion in *Othello*," *North-eastern Modern Language Association* (Buffalo, NY: 8 April 2000).

The single fact between Othello and Iago I focus on here is that Othello fails twice at the end to kill Iago, knowing he cannot kill him. This all but all-powerful chieftain is stopped at this nobody. It is the point of his impotence, and the meaning of it. Iago is everything that Othello must deny, and which, denied, is not killed but works on, like poison, like Furies. (136)

The observations in this passage actually work against Cavell's reading of the play, if only one change is made. Othello "fails twice at the end to kill Iago," but Cavell fails to recognize what Iago represents and what it means that Othello cannot kill what Iago represents. Othello is not the voice of doubt in the play; Iago is the voice of doubt, the voice of skepticism. Cavell is right to call Iago "nobody," but in doing so he does not recognize why. First, consider Iago's response to Desdemona's request:

Desdemona: What wouldst though write of me, if thou
 shouldst praise me?
Iago: O, gentle lady, do not put me to't,
 For I am nothing if not critical.
(2.1.117–19)

As Cavell suggests, it is Iago who is "critical" (136), and indeed, Iago knows himself to be that. But if Cavell recognizes Iago as critical, why does he not identify him as the skeptic? Cavell uses the word "nobody" in meaning to reduce Iago's necessity in the plot to being nothing more than the one who passively holds the poison which Othello craves to drink. This critical manoeuvre recalls Leavis' claim that Iago was merely a "mechanism necessary for precipitating tragedy in a dramatic action."⁷ And whereas Leavis eliminates Iago because he himself is taking the role of being Othello's critic, Cavell eliminates Iago because his character is inconvenient if readers are to believe that Othello is the skeptic.⁸

⁷ F.R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero," *The Common Pursuit* (1952; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993) 141.

⁸ Kenneth Gross suggests that Cavell names Othello as a skeptic because of his "deep, troubled identification with Othello" (844). See "Slander and Skepticism in *Othello*," *ELH* 56.4 (1989): 819–52.

This is not to suggest that Cavell (or Leavis) diminishes Iago's importance to confound or trick readers; Cavell's argument makes Iago unnecessary, and eliminates him rather than allowing his character to test the hypothesis which Cavell hopes the play will substantiate. Cavell is ignorant of the problem and does not consciously avoid it. Admittedly, identifying Iago as critical is not the same as identifying him as skeptical; however, can Iago's criticism be read as synonymous with doubt and skepticism? Does criticism arise from some doubt, some skeptical question which is asked?

The answer is affirmative in that Iago's doubt is manifest in his inclination to disbelieve others, and in his constant suspicion and fear of others. Shakespeare reveals how skepticism and doubt can be motivated by suspicion and fear of others through the character of Iago, through his delight in the form of knowing which primarily questions and suspects others. His form of knowing is represented in passages such as the following:

I do beseech you,
 Though I perchance am vicious in my guess—
 As I confess it is in my nature's plague
 To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy
 Shapes faults that are not—that your wisdom
 From one that so imperfectly conceits
 Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble
 Out of his scattering and unsure observance (3.3.147-54)

In his honesty, Iago reveals more than he knows. Iago's knowing and reading of others, like the other characters in *Othello*, is a form of vicious guessing: faulty readings based upon inadequate knowledge. How often are our own readings a form of "vicious guessing"? But Iago's form of vicious guessing is unlike the other characters' in being exceptionally active, violent, and severe. While all the characters will "shape faults that are not" to fulfil their own hopes, desires, and needs, Iago does so with a vengeance. Iago will "spy into abuses" with a "scattering and unsure observance" to form the knowledge which most satisfies his hatred and fear of others. Iago satisfies his knowledge by building himself troubles, by questioning and denigrating anything and anyone. He constructs himself in an antipodal relation with his world, and all of the others who inhabit it with him.

Shakespeare shapes Iago's grammar and mode of speech to emphasize his manner of thought. Iago's characteristic and most readily identifiable lines and passages are all constructed in a negative grammar. These are examples from the first act alone: "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago. / In following him I follow but myself: / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty ..." (1.1.55–58); "I am not what I am" (1.1.64); "By Janus, I think no" (1.2.33); "I know not if't be true / But I for mere suspicion in that kind / Will do it as if for surety" (1.3.387–89). Iago's basic grammar reveals his relation to others and the world: his negativity must be opposed to the positivity of others. Iago is certainly the only character in *Othello*, and perhaps in all of Shakespeare's plays, who could have uttered the phrase "I think no." Iago defines himself in that phrase; his thought and being is constructed in the form of "no." One way of reading his silence at the end of the play is to recognize that in *Othello* and *Desdemona* being dead, Iago has nothing left to define his being against. In being "nothing if not critical," Iago requires others to criticize to maintain his identity, and when those others no longer exist, he loses his being as well. Iago is nothing but criticism; and in being so, becomes critically nothing. Does Shakespeare mean to suggest that skeptics can argue themselves out of existence? Or perhaps that a skeptic's existence is precarious because it depends upon the very existence of the world and/or reality it opposes? One observation I have concerns which one of the characters is critical of Iago. Shakespeare offers one moment where *Desdemona* reveals the truth about Iago, that is, uncovers his relation to the world, and that occurs at the end of the banter between them as they wait for *Othello*'s arrival in Cyprus (2.1.100–64). To *Desdemona*, Iago produces nothing but a "most lame and impotent conclusion!" (2.1.161). Iago's criticism makes him, in the larger sense of the word, impotent. That Shakespeare gives this line to *Desdemona* is significant, and will become increasingly so as my discussion progresses.⁹

⁹ Although I disagree with much of her argument, Naomi Scheman's essay concerning how skepticism is gendered is worth consideration. See "Othello's Doubt/Desdemona's Death: The Engendering of Skepticism," *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honour of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Lubbock: Texas UP, 1993) 161–76.

Readers should also recognize Iago's skepticism in one other way, which leads directly back to the problem of whether the self can know others. Iago's extreme form of doubt is embodied in his response to Othello's demands to know his thoughts: "You cannot, if my heart were in your hand / Nor shall not whilst 'tis in my custody" (3.3.165-66). The passage continues Iago's negative grammar and suggests that his negative relation to others makes him unknowable. The lines are also significant in revealing what an extreme skeptical position means in relation to being known by others: Iago is the character who will not believe that he can be known even if an other holds his heart. Could there be a more plain expression of skepticism? Could a man, in his negative relation to others, possibly be more empty and devoid of being? So Cavell is unknowingly right in arguing that Othello is stopped by "this nobody"; however, Othello cannot kill Iago because it is impossible to kill the doubt that Iago represents entirely. Shakespeare's play does not propose that one *must* eliminate doubt, nor does it argue that it is *possible* to eliminate doubt. That is another way to read Othello's inability to kill Iago in the end. Othello cannot kill Iago and/or doubt but must learn to subdue or subordinate it to his faith. This Othello does not learn.

Yet surely Shakespeare does not mean for readers to understand Iago simply as the voice of doubt and skepticism in the play. What else does he represent? Cavell's suggestion is that Iago is the "conventional where [Othello] is original; imagines flesh where [Othello] imagines spirit; the imager and manager of the human guise; the bottom half of the world" (136). What does it mean for Iago to be conventional, to imagine only flesh? Iago represents a particularly ugly form of the conventional in articulating a degraded and degrading view of human sexuality and love. Iago can only speak about human sexuality as base and bestial: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe!" (1.1.87-88); "I am one, sir, who comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.114-15); "It is impossible you should see this / Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys / As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross / As ignorance made drunk" (3.3.405-8). Certainly no form of love can exist between human beings if this were the truth about human sexuality. Can any form of human sexuality be meaningful in such language?

Not content with slandering human sexuality, Iago attacks love as well in his "Virtue? a fig!" speech to Roderigo (1.3.320–34). Iago's sermon on the degradation of love is persuasive only if we fail to recognize how Iago represents human sexuality: as "raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts" (1.3.331–32). The argument in this passage depends upon a construction that opposes reason, will, and authority to sensuality, blood, and lust. Certainly, unmediated sexual lust can become violent, but Iago can imagine no other kind of sexuality than what is bestial. Nor can Iago imagine a loving human relation which is not the product of a "preposterous conclusion" (1.3.330). The danger in not resisting Iago's rhetoric is that it leads to an understanding of love as simply base, rather than as an important part of human sexuality. Another danger of not resisting Iago's rhetoric is to become complicit in his position of "not I for love and duty"; Iago's skepticism can place no value in either of these things, both of which require trusting someone other than himself. Admittedly, love is perhaps outside the control of human will and reason, yet love should not simply be conceived of as a "sect or scion," as something that can be cut away and disposed of. Iago's version of sexuality and love is opposed to the possibilities represented by the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. Shakespeare wants readers to recognize the danger of being infected by Iago's idea of the (im)potentiality of human sexuality.

Iago is "conventional" in another manner, and this is apparent in his exchanges with Desdemona and Emilia (2.1.100–64), Cassio (2.3.12–29), and Othello (3.3.232–42; 4.1.1–48). Without examining these passages in detail, it is necessary to recognize that along with his degrading view of sexuality and love, Iago also has a degrading view of Desdemona and women in general. For Iago, women are merely "wild-cats" (2.1.110), "players," and "housewives" (2.1.112), prone to "foul pranks" (2.1.142) and "full of game" (2.3.19) for men. What is conventional in Iago is represented by the combination of the three degraded and degrading arguments. Iago's views are also interdependent: the degradation of any one of sexuality, love, and women cannot help but have a negative effect on the others. The views represented by Iago's character are also intimately connected with his skeptical stance: the idea he holds that there is no knowing of the other. And his ideas are dangerous for all human relationships because those relations depend, at least in

part, upon such basic ideas as “love and duty.” To denote all of these things—Iago’s skepticism, negativity, and degradation of sexuality, love, and women—I will retain Cavell’s term “conventional” for clarity.

In (mis-)identifying Othello as the voice of skepticism in the play, Cavell obscures another argument, which is embodied in the marriage of Othello and Desdemona: the proving (testing) of faith and the boundaries of knowledge through the tortures of doubt. Can this be an argument if Othello so willingly succumbs to Iago’s manipulations? That objection holds true only if one simply reads the play in terms of Othello’s marriage to Desdemona and not in terms of the marriage as two becoming one while remaining physically two. It is necessary to consider Desdemona’s knowing of Othello as much as Othello’s knowing of Desdemona.

Cavell recounts Othello’s knowing of Desdemona in terms of “having been surprised by her, at what he has elicited from her . . . Surprised, let me say, to find that she is flesh and blood . . . For if she is flesh and blood then, since they are one, so is he” (136). Othello is indeed surprised, or perhaps to use another of Cavell’s words, astonished, at what he has “elicited” from Desdemona. But using the word “elicited” suggests that Desdemona’s action is of Othello’s making. The question should be: how does Desdemona make herself known to Othello? Cavell suggests, in an obscure way, that Desdemona has made herself known as potentially sexual to Othello, as evidenced in “the dimension of her that shows itself in that difficult and dirty banter between her and Iago” (136). Cavell is right to acknowledge Desdemona’s sexuality towards Othello, but he is wrong to exclude the rest of her being in the argument. Unlike Cavell, Desdemona is clear and forthright in her idea of Othello and their marriage:

That I did love the Moor to live with him
 My downright violence and scorn of fortunes
 May trumpet to the world. My heart’s subdued
 Even to the very quality of my lord:
 I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,
 And to his honours and his valiant parts
 Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate,
 So that, dear lords, if I be left behind,
 A moth of peace, and he go to war,

The rites for which I love him are bereft me,
 And I a heavy interim shall support
 By his dear absence. Let me go with him. (1.3.249–60)

Here Shakespeare offers the opposing view of human sexuality, love, and knowing which is unavailable to Iago's skepticism. Shakespeare offers, if only for a brief moment in the play, a speech in which the negative grammar is completely absent; Desdemona's style is an example of the anti-type to Iago's style. Desdemona's speech opens with a declaration of independence: she has been the one that in loving the Moor chose to marry and live with him. Desdemona is the one willing to "trumpet" her "downright violence and scorn of fortunes." Her declaration makes Othello's tale of wooing, though wonderful, pale in comparison. Indeed, though Othello's stories first attracted Desdemona, he admits that it was Desdemona who first revealed her love for him and began their relationship (1.3.164–67). She has been active. Desdemona's declaration also combines an appreciation of Othello's mind—"I saw Othello's visage in his mind"—with the open acknowledgement of the body and sexuality in the "rites for which [she] love[s] him." Shakespeare wants readers to recognize Desdemona's astonishing public pronouncement embracing both components of marriage. Do readers ever hear a similar proclamation from Othello? His reply to Iago's question "Are you fast married?" is hardly remarkable except in its form as a hesitant and reserved admission:

For know, Iago,
 But that I love the gentle Desdemona
 I would not my unhoued free condition
 Put into circumscription and confine
 For the sea's worth. (1.2.24–28)

Othello's expression is weak compared to Desdemona's. And it is also spoken in a negative grammar. It is hardly the rousing declaration of love Desdemona makes.

It is also necessary to call attention to Desdemona's use of the word "consecrate." One meaning is simply that Desdemona has conjoined her "soul and fortunes" with Othello's in their marriage; she has devoted her self to him. The word "consecrate" is also almost synonymous with the miracle of transubstantiation,

which is the conversion of the Eucharistic elements wholly into the body and blood of Christ, remaining only in appearance as bread and wine. Desdemona's use of the word is then profound in its suggestion that her self (her soul, her very being) has undergone some form of transformation analogous to the miracle of transubstantiation through the sacrament of marriage. She remains who she is, retaining the same appearance, but is no longer the same person in having been conjoined with Othello. Desdemona is the only character who has embraced, acknowledged, and perhaps understands, the meaning of marriage as two becoming one in acknowledging a claim upon one another. Desdemona is able to embrace faith and trust. Desdemona acknowledges the simultaneous independence of her own self and her newly defined relation with Othello: the two remain self yet are now partly defined by the other. Othello is never able to acknowledge or accept this meaning, and therefore never able to share Desdemona's form of knowing.

After the two lovers are reunited in Cyprus, the distance separating them becomes surprisingly apparent (2.1.178–96). The passage is short, being only nineteen lines, but crucial for understanding how both Desdemona and Othello think of their marriage. Shakespeare certainly meant for readers to recognize the wonderful and troubling conversation as the first real exchange (intercourse) they share in the play. Until this moment, the substance of their conversations have been recounted through Othello's tale of wooing, instead of actually enacted before the audience. Othello's language is dominated during this scene by the word "content." The word appears three times, and its use carries the full weight of Othello's satisfaction and happiness in the temporal present of their reunion. The problem begins in noticing that the word slips into a further significance which suggests that Othello is content about the fulfilment of his desires. There is no satisfaction beyond his present content because the present content is established as an absolute good or end against which other things will be measured: "wonder as great as my content" (2.1.181); "My soul hath her content so absolute / That not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate" (2.1.189–91); "I cannot speak enough of this content, / It stops me here, it is too much of joy" (2.1.194–95). Othello's declamatory style is exaggerated and hyperbolic throughout the passage, with words such as "great" (2.1.181), "most"

(2.1.188), "too much" (2.1.195), and "greatest" (2.1.196). The negative grammar also works towards over-valuing the present at the expense of the future, as Othello denies the possibility of future increase: "not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate." Othello's language insists upon the temporal present in phrases such as "if it were now to die / Twere now to be most happy" (2.1.187–88) and the repetition of "here" (2.1.183; 2.1.195), which refers to both the here and now of time and space. Othello's final response to Desdemona is telling because he "cannot speak enough of this content," as if unwilling to let it pass or move past into something which waits in the future; however, their reunion is also "too much of joy." What can Othello mean that the content is too much? Would Othello not be content if he knew more of Desdemona's contents? What does Othello mean by wishing that the two kisses (represented by the two appearances of "this") will remain the "greatest discords ... that e'er our hearts shall make" (2.1.196–97)?

Othello's rhetoric places his mind firmly in the present of the scene, but also reveals an unwillingness to contemplate their future lives. What is in their future that Othello does not, or cannot, want to imagine? Desdemona's language reveals her own notion of their reunion, and also exposes the shortcomings of Othello's thought. Desdemona hopes "that our loves and comforts should increase / Even as our days do grow" (2.1.192–93), demonstrating no attachment to the present. Certainly Desdemona is filled with wonder at the arrival of her love, but she does not understand Othello's insistence upon the moment or his "fear" (2.1.188) of what the future is to bring. Desdemona's response to Othello is both an assertion and a rebuttal, in a sense gently chiding her husband for his forgetfulness. Desdemona forbids the thought of being content with the present, because their "loves and comforts should increase"; their married lives have yet to experience all the fruits of marriage. Or in other words, Desdemona is aware that their knowing of one another should grow in future days; the marriage rites for which she has accompanied Othello to Cyprus are yet to come.

One last scene of great importance comes early in 3.3 as Desdemona is making the suit on behalf of Cassio to her husband. What does Desdemona say when she responds to Othello's admission that "I will deny thee nothing" (3.3.76)? She argues,

Why this is not a boon,
 'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves,
 Or feed on nourishing dishes, or keep you warm,
 Or sue to you to do a peculiar profit
 To your own person. Nay, when I have a suit
 Wherein I mean to touch your love indeed
 It shall be full of poise and difficult weight
 And fearful to be granted. (3.3.77-83)

In this passage, the conversation has ceased to be concerned with Cassio's suit. Here readers are witnessing Desdemona and Othello's married life, and in a sense, a minor quarrel. Desdemona objects to Othello quickly conceding the argument about Cassio, because in doing so, he has merely allowed "a peculiar profit / to [his] own person." In Othello saying, "whatever you want, dear," Desdemona knows she has not carried the argument, but is merely being put aside (with condescension). Desdemona is arguing that Othello's denial of Cassio would merely be a denial of his own best interests. What is the significance of the latter half of Desdemona's speech? In the last three and a half lines, Desdemona's suit is decidedly personal. What does she mean in being "fearful" that her suit to touch Othello's love will not be "granted"? Or, as Honigmann glosses the passage, why should the decision granting a suit concerning Othello's love be of such momentous importance? Desdemona is revealing an increasing sense of unease with her husband at this moment. Desdemona's parting remark, "Shall I deny you? No, farewell, my lord" (3.3.86) emphasizes the importance of Othello's use of "deny." What could Othello deny Desdemona to cause the scene to pass? Why did Desdemona originally brave a voyage to Cyprus? To be with her husband, and to ensure she would not be denied her marriage "rites." Othello's imagination becomes, as Cavell remarks, "enchafed" by returning repeatedly to the question of knowing his wife, but it is not necessary for Iago to remind Othello again and again (132). Desdemona's presence is sufficient for Othello to be tortured by what he is denying her. Desdemona confronts Othello's unwillingness to know her, so readers need not look to Iago for an explanation of that problem.

Cavell calls attention to the significance of the wedding sheets in the play. He explains that the meaning of the "the exhibition of the wedding sheets in this romantic, superstitious, conventional

environment can only refer to the practice of proving purity by staining" (135). However, Cavell mentions the sheets only because of their importance for Othello. Are they not important to Desdemona as well? Cavell explains Desdemona's request to Emilia to "Lay on my bed my wedding sheets" (4.2.107) in terms of the fulfilment of Othello's fantasy:

she obediently shares his sense that this is their final night and that it is to be some dream-like recapitulation of their former two nights... as if knowing, and faithful to, Othello's private dream of her, herself preparing the scene of her death as Othello, utilizing Iago's stage directions, imagines it must happen... as if knowing that only with these sheets on their bed can his dream of her be contested. (134)

Cavell's conclusion is questionable at best. Cavell mistakes the design of Shakespeare's play for the contents of Othello's "private dream" in reading the play backwards and forwards. In doing so, he mistakes Desdemona's continued faith in their marriage and her belief in her husband as a strange desire to be an accomplice to Othello's murderous dreams. In laying the sheets on their bed, Desdemona does not hope that Othello will finally enact his dream, but that her husband may capitulate and finally end his denial of the marital rites, end his denial of knowing her, and thereby acknowledge their marriage and her as his wife. Her request, "Will you come to bed, my lord?" (5.2.23), in the final scene expresses a sincere, if final, hope that the possibility of their mutual acknowledgement and sexual union still remains.

Before leaving Desdemona, I wish to call attention once again to the manner in which Shakespeare structures *Othello*. My contention is that if Iago represents skepticism, then Desdemona represents faith and trust. I would also contend that Shakespeare does not simply glorify the latter and demonize the former; Shakespeare also reflects upon the necessity and inevitability of skepticism and the dangers of unquestioned faith. While feeling increasingly uneasy about Othello, Desdemona never completely breaks from her belief in her husband. Following the brothel scene in 4.2, Desdemona prays to regain Othello's favour, and is clear about the unconditional nature of her love for him: "Unkindness may do

much, / And his unkindness may defeat my life / But never taint my love" (4.2.156–58). The wondrous and dangerous innocence of her belief in her relationship with her husband, and in herself, is also apparent when one considers Desdemona's promise to Cassio:

My lord shall never rest,
I'll watch him tame and talk him out of patience,
His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift,
I'll intermingle everything he does
With Cassio's suit. (3.3.22–26)

Desdemona has no reason to undertake this action on behalf of Cassio, as Emilia has just explained to Cassio that Othello "needs no other suitor but his likings / To take the safest occasion by the front / To bring you in again" (3.1.50–52). Desdemona acts upon her belief that she can do well for Cassio, never doubting for a moment in her power over Othello. Her faith is complete and she does not question as much as she should. Nietzsche might argue that her belief in Othello is a form of not wanting to know, but Desdemona does not suffer from a form of self-delusion. Her innocence causes some blindness in her knowing of Othello, in her vision of him.

The idea of vision is connected with the problem of skepticism, as Shakespeare continuously places doubt and "ocular proof" (3.3.363) together throughout the play: "Make me to see't, or at least so prove it / That the probation bear no hinge nor loop / To hang doubt on, or woe upon thy life!" (3.3.367–69). Othello speaks of knowing and seeing together almost compulsively; seeing is knowing and knowing is seeing. Shakespeare upsets the idea that seeing is knowing through the eavesdropping scene where Othello's seeing constructs his knowing of Cassio's story largely through a process of projection and wish-fulfilment (4.1.75–212). And Othello's "watching" the conversation is analogous to the audience viewing the play, implicating us in the problem. Of course, Othello's demands for proof are complicated in 3.3 by his unwillingness to "behold her topped" (3.3.399), then making the demand for a "living reason" (3.3.412). What is a living reason? The living reason turns out to be Iago's dream-story about Cassio, hardly a credible form of knowing. As I argued earlier, Shakespeare offers all of these problems as forms of "vicious guessing" (3.3.148) which

plague the characters in the play; the characters continuously misread one another through conjectures, speculative assertions, and conscious and unconscious skepticism. However, Shakespeare implicates his audience in the problem of vicious guessing; we too are prone to misreading his play. Shakespeare also inscribes the problem of skepticism within the structure of the play, making it impossible for readers to escape the question of faith and doubt. The problem involves the question of whether Othello and Desdemona have consummated their marriage. If we ask of the couple, "Are you fast married?" (1.2.11) then we re-enact Iago's skepticism. If we simply assume that the lovers have had sexual intercourse, then we are guessing because there is no "ocular proof," concrete evidence, or unquestionable form of knowing available in the text that we have. Shakespeare will not allow his readers to avoid the problem of skepticism, so whether we ask the question or assume the answer we cannot escape the position that Iago represents. My best guess, judging from the language of the play, the relations between Othello and Desdemona, and the structure of the plot, is that the marriage is not consummated. The denial of knowing is the structure upon which *Othello* is constructed.¹⁰

Having (mis)identified Othello as the skeptic and missed the powerful insistence of Desdemona's belief, Cavell also misreads the importance of perfection and virginity in *Othello*. In doing so, he mistakes the trajectory of Othello's character. Cavell's misreading is strange because he identifies good textual evidence and deduces remarkable ideas from the passages to which he points, but fails to recognize one of the possible conclusions. Cavell's argument rests upon the assumption that Othello's self-integrity and self-knowledge are dependent upon his perception that Desdemona shares that perfection with him; her perfection ensures, or determines, his own perfection. Shakespeare's play, on the contrary, reveals that Othello's notion of his own perfection eliminates the possibility of his knowing Desdemona, eliminates the possibility for him to acknowledge her claim on him. Even if she were perfect, Othello's knowing of her requires that he acknowledge him-

¹⁰ In making my guess that the marriage is not consummated, I support the reading Bradshaw offers in the second chapter of *Misrepresentations* entitled "Dramatic Intentions: Two-Timing in Shakespeare's Venice" (125–222).

self as imperfect, that he allow himself to have sexual intercourse with her. Cavell repeatedly draws attention to the question of whether Desdemona is a virgin, and argues that for Othello to take her virginity is to ruin her perfection as well as his own. Cavell understands Othello's logic of human sexuality as follows:

Either I shed her blood and scarred her or I did not. If I did not then she was not a virgin and this is a stain upon me. If I did then she is no longer a virgin and this is a stain upon me. Either way, I am contaminated. (I do not say that the sides of this dilemma are of equal significance for Othello.) (135)

What is interesting about Cavell's formulation of Othello's thinking is the limited scope of the word "virgin." Why does Cavell assume that the primary question concerns Desdemona's virginity alone? Consider the following passage two pages later:

To what did [Othello] sacrifice her? To his image of himself and of her, to keep his image intact, uncontaminated So he becomes conventional, sacrificing love to convention. But this was unstatable; it could not be said. Yet better thought than the truth, which was that the central sacrifice of romance has already been made by them: Her virginity, her intactness, her perfection, had been gladly forgone by her for him, for the sake of their union, for the seaming of it. It is the sacrifice he could not accept, for then he was not perfect. (137)

What does it mean for Othello to keep his image intact? The answer to that question would depend upon what constitutes his image of himself. Cavell's verbs are in the past tense, suggesting here that he is willing to accept that Desdemona's virginity has been forgone. He is asserting a conjecture which he himself has been unwilling to subscribe to, confessing earlier that "of course we have no answer to such questions" (135). Should readers also make the assumption that Cavell is not willing to express as definite knowledge? I would suggest that the passage be changed to read: "Her virginity, her intactness, her perfection, would have been gladly forgone for the sake of their union, for the seaming of it."

Desdemona is not only willing, but publicly demands that she not be denied the opportunity for the "rites" of her marriage. Othello does not accept the sacrifice because then he himself could not keep his perfection. To return to Cavell's limited use of the word/idea "virgin," I ask again, why assume that the question of virginity concerns Desdemona alone? The answer should be clear by now: it does not.

Cavell remarks that Othello wants desperately, enough to drive him to murder, to "keep his image intact, uncontaminated." To use the idea of "contamination" is to think like Othello. The problem is not a contamination of self but an unwillingness to allow oneself to be imperfect, dependent, and defined, at least in part, by relations with some other(s). If one accepts Cavell's observation as true, then it must follow that Othello is already perfect. Instead, Cavell's argument rests upon the notion that Othello achieves perfection only with Desdemona, through the integrity of her soul affirming his own. The problem lies in understanding the manner in which Othello conceives of himself as perfect. Othello himself stakes his life upon the fact that "My parts, my title and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.31–32). Is Othello's perfect soul contingent upon his knowing? Is Othello's perfect soul contingent upon whether he has known his wife? From one line alone, there is insufficient evidence, but Cavell draws his reader's attention to another:

My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face. (3.3.389–92)

Honigmann changes the pronoun "my" to "her," refusing to concede Ridley's argument that "Othello is maddened by the defoulment of his own honour" (quoted by Honigmann). Honigmann argues that "the comparison with Diana (the moon goddess, patron of chastity) points to a woman and *her* chastity, not to a man" (234; his italics). Honigmann's claim suffers from a similarly narrow notion that the idea of chastity applies only to females. The pronoun "my" is correct, and Othello is referring to himself; he perceives or constructs or knows himself as "Dian's visage." Cavell misdirects his reader's attention away from the importance of this statement by commenting that "Diana's is a name for the visage Desdemona

saw to be in Othello's mind" (137). There is no evidence for this claim, not even in the passage which I quote above (from 1.3.249-260), with which I assume Cavell is hoping to make a connection. Othello knows himself to be like Diana, chaste and perfect.¹¹

Perhaps it would be instructive to draw on a passage from after the murder in which Othello describes himself as the "honourable murderer, if you will, / For nought I did in hate, but all in honour" (5.2.300). The significant word in the passage is undoubtedly "honour." Honour has several meanings, some or all of which are present when the word is used throughout the play: respect, good name, nobleness, chastity, and virginity. Cavell and Honigmann's argument would have readers assume that the latter two meanings must drop away when Othello refers to himself as an "honourable murderer." Indeed, Othello has killed Desdemona for his own good name, but also because he was desperate to preserve his own perfection. Othello turns to murder to protect his honour. Cavell is indirectly correct to argue that Othello is "rendered impotent and murderous ... by having aroused, female sexuality" (137). He is correct in that Othello's sense of self is threatened by his wife: Othello's self-knowledge is threatened by the potentiality of knowing his wife. At the opening of the final scene, Othello invokes the idea that the sacrifice/murder he is about to commit is an act of justice:

I'll smell thee on the tree;
O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! (5.2.15-17)

Othello thinks his action is just. Nietzsche's argument concerning justice and the individual is relevant here: "Justice goes back naturally to the viewpoint of enlightened self-preservation, thus to egoism"¹² The act of the "just" murder is an act of self-preservation, and Nietzsche would argue that Othello "has fundamentally been thinking, not of [Desdemona] ... but only of [him]self: we act

¹¹ Once again, I am indebted to Brian Crick for emphasizing the importance of Othello's reference to his name "that was as fresh / As Dian's visage."

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader*, ed. and trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 74. Subsequent references are to this edition.

thus without wanting to do harm in return, but only so as *to get out with life and limb*" (153; his italics). Othello is desperate, and the act of murder is an act of self-preservation meant to ensure he does not know his wife, sexually or otherwise. Othello's action makes knowing his wife impossible, and in his mind makes it impossible for his "perfect soul" to be contaminated. Othello remains a virgin and he retains his perfection. He remains as chaste as Desdemona. If Othello's self-revelation as an "honourable murderer" is insufficient, the conclusion is reinforced by a passage just moments earlier:

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. (5.2.271-74)

The focus is again on Othello's soul. The "it" at the end of the first sentence refers back to "soul." I would argue that "cold, cold" not only refers forward to Desdemona's chastity, but also back to "it," and therefore "soul." The grammar and syntax break down in the passage. The stop creates an artificial clarity which the construction of the phrases does not support. Othello's soul is, and will be "cold, cold" like Desdemona's chastity, because his soul is also chaste. Doubting Desdemona's honour provides a cover for Othello's real motives in wanting to murder her. Othello's doubts allow him to remain ignorant of the real problem, which lies in his self-knowing. Othello cannot consciously recognize his responsibility in the murderous act. Returning for a moment to the beginning of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, one might remark that the intercourse of words is safe for Othello's self-knowing, whereas sexual intercourse is not. The latter would require Othello to relinquish some measure of control over the intercourse. Or one might argue that Othello's desire to retain control over the sexual intercourse (in this case by denying the possibility of it), as he did with the story-telling, allows him to refuse to acknowledge or to know Desdemona, and is the cause of the murder.

So why does Othello kill Desdemona? I would argue that the reason is partly the failure of Othello's faith in Desdemona and their marriage and partly Othello's failure of knowing. Othello fails by doubting the possibilities of marriage and the possibilities of

knowing within that relationship. But what fuels his failure? Cavell is right to argue that Othello is eager in the "slaking of his thirst for knowledge with [Iago's] poison," in "his devouring need of it" (133). However, Othello does not deny Desdemona for failing to confirm his perfection, for failing to be perfect herself. Othello's denial of Desdemona is a move towards self-preservation: it is a preservation of the self against the knowing of others, of being, in his mind, "contaminated" by knowing others in anything more than a superficial manner. Surely marriage involves knowing on a scale which is perhaps more intense and more intimate than most other human relations. Therein lies the importance of understanding Iago's role as the skeptic in the play, and his simultaneously representing the degradation of human sexuality, love, and women. Does skepticism inevitably lead to Iago's dangerous position? No, but perhaps in an extreme form it does. It is Iago's conventionality, as opposed to the faith represented by Desdemona, that Othello falls prey to. Othello's marriage of faith is replaced by a marriage of conventionality with Iago at the end of 3.3 as the two men share "sacred vow[s]" (3.3.464). What if faith is a form of acknowledgment of our limited knowledge? How easy is it to secure oneself from doubt and suspicion in order to keep one's faith? Can belief not be understood as an acknowledgement that the self cannot know absolutely, but continues to proceed in living with others, knowing others perhaps as much as one knows one's own self? With that problem in mind, I would ask if the repeated puns on the word "die" are related to the problem of acknowledging one's imperfection in acknowledging the claim of the other. In knowing the other, does some part of the self "die," to make space for him/her? Is some part of our self relinquished in acknowledging the significance of the other? Does the knowing of sexual intercourse become the space in which this limiting of the self is repeated, emotionally and physically, throughout life?

Shakespeare's problem is more difficult than the one offered by Cavell. Shakespeare reveals that suspicion is difficult, but faith and trust in the other are just as torturous, if not more so. Faith means that the self must recognize the other without perfect knowledge, accept his/her imperfection along with the recognition of one's own, and be willing to accept the claim of the other.