Domestic disturbance and the disordered state in Shakespeare's *Othello*

As the opening Act of *Othello* heats up, with a Turkish invasion threatening the isle of Cyprus and elopement or rape threatening the domestic sphere, the Venetian Senate convenes to consider what actions are necessary to maintain the stability and authority of the rational state. Iago, having roused Brabantio against Othello as the ravisher of his daughter, confides that he knows full well the Senate will not prosecute its most valued general for his domestic transgression in Venice's moment of military vulnerability. ‘For I do know the state,’ Iago tells Roderigo,

> Cannot (with safety) cast him; for he's embarked  
> With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars,  
> Which even now stands in act . . .  
> Another of his fathom they have none  
> To lead their business.

(I.1, 146–52)

Despite this early assertion of his distrust of state interests, Iago has generally not been recognized as a representation of disenfranchisement and disenchantment, nor has the play's critique of the social changes wrought by the shift towards modernist rational pragmatism received significant attention. Through Iago's assertion of the disruptive impact of state interests on paternal rights in his projection of the upcoming Senate chamber scene, Shakespeare obliquely establishes tensions between state and family concerns that develop throughout the play. These tensions suggest both that his 'domestic tragedy' resonates beyond the confines of the private space of the family, and that its character representations exceed the boundaries of individual psychological distress and personal disintegration. In this play, the personal and the political violently collide, and the early modern family/state homology collapses.

*Othello* seems to reinforce hegemonic notions of a Christian moral order in its assertion of Venetian rule as preferable to Turkish rule, and in
its representation of Desdemona as the idealized moral centre of the domestic sphere, and thus of Venetian society. In this sense it is a conservative play. However, it also voices an implicit critique of sociopolitical transformations driven by and supportive of capitalism and imperialism, and thus can be fruitfully read as a play which, despite its somewhat conservative dominant themes, radically challenges the model of pragmatic statecraft and social organization associated with these early modern developments. The sociopolitical conditions represented in the play are aspects of modernity which had begun to emerge in England and Europe during this period. While the development of the modern rational state produces and relies on the myth of a citizenry and state unified in their goals and interests, which are directed outward in competition with other nations, the play implicitly denies that unity. Othello represents disunities and disjunctions within the male-dominated social structures of family and state, stages the instrumental use of the citizenry by the state apparatus, and problematizes the viability of the state's goals and rational processes by representing them as disruptive to the social institutions upon which it relies. Venice, despite its embodiment of elements of emergent modernity in this play, is not a unified space.

That disunity is most clearly evident in the play's representations of visibly distinguishable 'others'. Othello undoubtedly relies on race and gender as categories of social organization – and it seems to reify the sociopolitical subordination of these categories. Yet, to see its representation of 'women' simply as a critique of transgression and a reassertion of subjugation, or conversely, as a challenge to patriarchal order, is to miss the complex refiguring of the relationship between women and the state represented in this play. As Iago intimates in his above cited observation to Roderigo, Desdemona's agency is supportive of, and supported by state interests. Thus, the radical disruptions of patriarchal order represented in this play involve both men and women, and arise in the nexus of reconfigured privilege, access and self-interest that defines the mystified and mystifying category of the 'general good' associated with Machiavellian pragmatic statecraft.

Similarly, to see the play's engagement with race only in terms of 'blackness' or 'marginalized colour' is to miss its representation of whiteness as an important and troubled category. Indeed, Othello considers the relationship between visible and invisible difference, staging the threatening agency of unrecognizable, internalized 'others' – like Iago – as the most significant destabilizing social force. And the primary sites of destabilization are the domestic space of the family and its corollary, the bounded space of the nation. I am indebted to those who have actively resituated this play within postcolonial discourse, calling attention to the negative implications of the racist and racialized representations of the play's tragic
hero. Undeniably, the play includes ‘racist’ responses to and a vexed characterization of Othello – its only representative of blackness. But these aspects of Othello’s character representation can be understood as directly linked to the representation of Iago as disenfranchised and isolated – as a figure existing at odds with his own social expectations. In shifting attention to the frequently ‘naturalized’ racial category of whiteness, embodied by Iago, I seek to extend the analysis of race by assessing the play’s uses of race, racism and perceptions about racial identity as a means of critiquing the emergent modern sociopolitical formation, with its myth of a unified polity. By moving beyond the notion of his pathology, I examine Iago as typical of the alienated and disruptive subject produced by the state’s demands for adherence to its programme of international expansion and power consolidation. Visually indistinguishable from Venice’s idealized, privileged social groups, Iago embodies the self-destructive potential within the state’s unstable, disunified social structure.

Act I, especially the scene in the Senate chamber analysed below, establishes the terms in which the pragmatic governmental sanctioning of Desdemona’s transgressive gender identity and Othello’s disruptive racial identity may be understood. It represents conflicts among the Venetian nobility through Brabantio’s disagreement with the governing body of which he is a member, and it reveals the presence of invisible disruptive agency through Iago’s speculative plotting before the audience. These fractures suggest that there is no solid basis to the notion of a united and unifying Venetian identity, no philosophical, social or moral basis to claims of superiority. While race operates to establish Othello’s visible difference from the Venetians in the play, this racial difference functions primarily to render discernible the fissures within the apparently unified Venetian polity – those between Brabantio and the other senators, and those between Iago and the larger sociopolitical order that has produced his alienation. Thus, the play both triggers common perceptions of racial difference, and disrupts those perceptions in support of its challenge to the Venetian state’s reliance on rational order. Similarly, by supporting Desdemona’s rejection of her father’s conventional defined authority, the Senate establishes its willingness to reconfigure conventional models of domestic social organization in the pursuit of Venice’s international strength and viability. Ultimately, Othello overwrites the threat of visible alterity with an implicit argument that the emergent modern state, engaged in a rationalist, pragmatic, self-interested agenda, produces the seeds of its own destruction.

**Machiavelli and the emergence of modernity**

Several theoretical and historical points need further consideration before we turn to the play itself. As suggested above, the transition from feudalism
to the nation-state may be understood as a shift from the idealized sense of
government as a form of responsibility for the subjects of the realm, to a
sense of government as a representative of national interest in an inter-
national context. This shift from husbandry to representation, and from
isolated domesticity to internationality, entailed a changing perception of
the relationship between subjects or citizens and government. Briefly, while
it would be ludicrous to claim that feudalism or earlier monarchical models
privileged subjects' interests over state interest, a husbandry model was
often invoked retrospectively in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as
a critique or defense of the policies of the monarchy and the shifting
conditions of political and economic participation. As the English mon-
archy and the economy of the English nation came to rely more strongly
on merchandizing, trade and venturing, there was evidence of a gradual
privileging of national stability and capability over the needs of less
privileged social groups.\textsuperscript{4}

Such tensions suggest that modernity, at its most basic level, may be
understood in economic terms: it has as its basis the emergence of
capitalism.\textsuperscript{5} Nevertheless, ethical issues were inextricably linked to eco-
nomic issues, and the \textit{processes} of governmental policy-making were as
important as the policies themselves. This link between ethics and eco-
nomics arises in the Machiavellian focus on necessity rather than morality
as the basis of state decisions and actions. The Prince must reject socially
supported moral imperatives in order to ensure the strength and stability
of the state – figured by Machiavelli as the source of generalized benefit –
ignoring subjects’ needs, interests or desires. Machiavelli thus posits a
necessary consolidation of authority, and the displacement of disparate
interests by unified objectives. Necessity, as the antithesis of morality, is
central not only to Machiavelli’s rational principality, but to modernity
more generally. Necessity-driven choices establish the privileging of prag-
matic over ethical values. The successful achievement of targeted ‘ends’
supplants the judgement of ‘means’, and thus excludes ethical judgement
of those means.\textsuperscript{6} While other exigencies, such as individual ambition or
self-interested desire, may motivate and justify action, the ability to abandon
or reject moral limits girds up the pragmatic philosophy associated with
non-ironic readings of \textit{Il Principe}.\textsuperscript{7}

Elizabeth I’s deployment of a rhetoric of husbandry in her speeches
may accordingly be understood as a Machiavellian reframing of her
pragmatic and capital-driven policies as care for the populace. Thus, in her
1601 ‘Golden Speech’ she assures her Parliament that her policies have
always been shaped by care for the people, never by her own interests:

\begin{quote}
I was never any greedy scraping grasper, nor a straight, fast-holding
prince, nor yet a waster. My heart was never set on worldly goods, but
\end{quote}
only for my subjects' good. What you do bestow on me, I ... but receive it to bestow on you again. Yea, my own properties I count yours, and to be expended for your good.  

She adds, 'There will never queen sit in my seat with more zeal to my country, [or] care for my subjects.' By disparaging acquisition and presenting state-supportive policies as beneficial husbandry, she misrepresents pragmatism, directed at achieving her subjects' willing self-sacrifice, as morally motivated – a perspective shored up by her frequent turn to providentialist intervention which allowed for the abdication of direct responsibility. The husbandry model thus becomes a naturalized moral model, replicating God's guidance and divine 'husbandry' of the queen and nation. It was both an idealization of the eroding social formation and a mystification of the emergent one.

Despite such rhetoric, the English nation was in a state of profound economic and social transformation throughout the Tudor period. During the last half of the sixteenth century, the idealized model of husbandry and insularity became less viable as the English merchant class, connected with the changing interests of the aristocracy, pursued international trade relations. At the same time, from at least the early 1570s, factions of the aristocracy pressed for military intervention on foreign soil under the guise of purely religious concerns, while actually negotiating a reconfiguration of their interests, from domestically centred to internationally linked trade and manufacture. Such economic exigencies transform not only the fiduciary aspects of social relations, but the governmental aspects as well. The English monarchy became less dependent on a feudal model of economic support by the aristocracy, and more dependent on the merchant class, and on manufacture and trade more generally. This gradual shift supported – and indeed, necessitated – a shift in concerns that typifies emergent modernity. However she might represent her relationship with the 'people', Elizabeth's reign was marked increasingly by this shift.

The Queen's rhetoric of husbandry in the face of changing socio-economic conditions establishes the context of inscription, performance and reception for Shakespeare's play. The central components of the emergent modern state associated with the changing economic situation in England that impact on my reading of Othello include the emergence of pragmatics framed as morality in the public sphere; a focus on external or international interests as more significant than internal or domestic concerns; a shift in the state's economic reliance, from the aristocracy to mercantile groups, supportive of and supported by upward mobility; the privileging of state needs over those of subjects/citizens; the self-sacrifice of private interests to state interests; and the state's perpetuation of and reliance on a myth of unity – unified goals, interests, values, perceptions –
that elides differences in social class, access, benefit and privilege. These conflict with traditional, idealized notions of social organization invoked in the play, including the necessity of the economic and political influence of aristocracy, a reliance on a moral basis for political decisions and actions, a husbandry model of government formulated as ‘care’ for subjects or citizens, a perception of the state’s strength as dependent on stable and well-cared-for citizenry/subjects, and a patriarchal structure for both family and state which is relatively fixed and includes only limited social mobility. It is important for this analysis to recognize the deployment of the idealized tradition as a response to the pressures of the emergent.

Finally, the transformations under consideration in the preceding discussion may be understood as both the implicit systemic force behind, and the explicit theoretical site for social disruption. These transformations are implicated in the frequent violent eruptions of common resistance to changing conditions in the late sixteenth century, and in the representations of abusive monarchy, economic deprivation, and articulated criticism in a wide range of early modern literary artefacts. They are also central to an understanding of racialized social relations in our own historical moment, which frequently erupt in violence, and which invariably are shaped by systemic mechanisms, not merely by individual perceptions and experiences. My engagement with Shakespeare’s Othello assesses, through current materialist theories, Shakespeare’s allegorical, philosophical consideration of visible and invisible difference, and of the displacement of ethics by pragmatism, both made evident in the tension between residual and emergent state structures in this play.

Iago, facing systemic transformations of national policies and interests associated with emergent modernity, enacts the rewriting of privilege as victimization in ways similar to those evident in our current social formation. Capitalism, universally but differentially oppressive, relies to a great extent on the systemic naturalization of privilege and disprivilege. It thereby reinforces the structures of its own support mechanisms, inscribing subjects within a myth of merit-based success, and thus within a competitive model that encourages them to see themselves as threatened or displaced by ‘undeserving’ others. This theory of the misperceived alienation of the privileged but disenchanted subject within the exigencies of the emergent modern nation-state grounds my reading of Shakespeare’s play.

The Senate chamber: the site of reason and judgement

The hard-won territory of the inductive method, followed by Machiavelli in his prescription for princely conduct, is depicted in this play as the vale of confusion rather than ‘the vantage ground of truth’. Evidentiary details –
material, constructed and invented – lead to actual or potential false conclusions. From the opening scene, the play depicts a world in which such details function to incite passion and to misdirect action. The presentation of evidence, either offered guilelessly or deployed as a strategy of deliberate deception, destabilizes social order and threatens the putative harmony of the Venetian republic. In the early moments of this play, visual evidence in the form of imaginary perceptions, brought into being through Iago's bestial copulatory assertions, incite Brabantio's paternal ire. This response to Iago's goading undermines Brabantio's ability to function in his capacity as a Senator in the moment of his republic's need, and reveals the inextricable links between domestic and state concerns. Iago's imaginary real-time representation of the sexual encounter between Othello and Desdemona resonates at the visceral level, verbally replicating the imagined sexual ravishment of Brabantio's daughter through its punctuated rhythm, and situating Desdemona's absence as a transgression against nature through the articulation of explicitly sexual, bestial, racist imagery. Iago establishes his method of destabilizing reason through inflammatory images as he identifies himself, a few lines later, specifically through the distorted tidings he bears: 'I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs' (I.1, 115). His character hides behind such methods, thwarting enquiry into his motives, and presenting him in the eyes of others as a bearer of truth. These techniques will serve as Iago's tools for exacting his revenge – a revenge which manipulates the macrocosmic politico-military order through the destabilization of the microcosmic domestic order, eventually depriving Othello of his sanity, Desdemona, Othello, Emilia and Roderigo of their lives, Cassio of his leg, and perhaps most significantly, Venice of its sense of solidarity and rational order.

In Act I, scene iii, the action shifts from the volatile street, where Iago has attempted to orchestrate a sword fight between Brabantio and Othello, to the Senate chamber, the site of rational order. The scene is carefully structured to establish the relationship between empirical evidence and rational judgement as the centre of statecraft, which it then renders as problematic in regulating the domestic realm. As the scene opens, the Senators deliberate over conflicting reports on the size of the Turkish fleet, said to be bearing down on Cyprus – a Venetian holding. They determine that, although the reports conflict in detail, they contain a seed of consistency which renders them reliable as a general depiction of conditions, despite their inexactness. Advised by the Senate, the Duke acknowledges that such reports reveal a version of reality evident under the rational consideration of their implications and consistency.

The role of rational judgement in assessing empirical evidence is reinforced as a new report arrives from a trusted captain, Signor Angelo,
stating that the Turkish fleet is heading not for Cyprus but for Rhodes. Here there is virtually no deliberation – the report is quickly assessed and dismissed as a 'pageant/To keep us in false gaze' (ll.18–19). This evaluation rests on the recognition that military skill embodies both power and strategy, but also requires experience. One Senator, warning that Cyprus is clearly the Turks' first interest, asserts that their enemy would not forgo 'an attempt of ease and gain/To wake and wage a danger profitless' (ll.27–30). His assessment suggests that the key to successful conquest is judgement: the Turks must recognize the presence of an advantage and act on that advantage to ensure their victory.18 The Senate's interpretation of incoming reports suggests a gap between the rational and the evidentiary that will become the centre of the unfolding tragedy – a gap navigated in this scene through experience.

The unreliability of empirical evidence is emphasized when another report quickly follows Signor Angelo's, coming from Signor Montano, a 'trusty and most valiant servitor' (l.40), confirming the Senate's evaluation of Turkish intentions. Through these conflicting reports, the play introduces the problem of the unintentional threat from a trusted source, which occurs when insufficient experience interprets empirical evidence, as in the report by Signor Angelo. In this scene, the interactions between senators and messengers establish the Senate's trust in these two conflicting sources. This representation works to locate the decisive aspect of information, not in the ethos of the source, but in the judgement of the recipient. That evidence which aligns with the reasoned, experiential, practical and theoretical judgement of the Senators is deemed accurate, and the Senate bases its understanding of the current military exigencies on this alignment. Significantly, good intentions, parallel ethics and shared interests do not eliminate the potential for misdirection by an informant. This scene's brief attention to the difficulty of evaluating empirical evidence, even that offered by well-meaning sources, provides a key to interpreting the larger action of the play. When Othello, a trusted and trusting servant of the state, confronts Iago's duplicitous representations of reality, his inexperience in matters of the heart allows him to be deceived by a 'pageant' created by Iago, causing him unintentionally to act against the interests of the state, and against his own interests, in response. The Senate chamber scene helps to establish that the difficulty does not lie within Othello, but in the interpretation of evidence more generally. He is no more vulnerable to Iago's manipulations than are others in the play – virtually every character falls victim to Iago's lies, and most of these deceptions have drastic effects. In each case, the inability to recognize Iago's motives renders the victims vulnerable. They succumb to his appearance of honesty, his assertions of honesty, and his apparent lack of cause for complaint. His anger and duplicity thwart traditional modes of assessment, foreground the tensions between visible
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and invisible difference, and challenge empirical knowledge, building on the challenge offered in the Senate chamber scene.

Disjunctions of family and state

With the Senate's rational methods of judgement firmly established, with the pressure of the military situation revealed, and with the tension between the apparent and the actual clearly articulated, the play problematizes the rational approach represented in the first part of the Senate chamber scene through the Senate's response to Brabantio's accusations against Othello. Brabantio, normally a participant in the Senate's rational statecraft, enters the Senate chamber unaware of the pressing issues under consideration and incapable of bringing his emotions under the control of his reason. He explains that the 'general care' cannot displace his 'particular grief' (11.54, 55), introducing what will develop into one of the central themes of this play, most fully realized in the actions of Iago and in his effect on other characters: the detrimental privileging of personal interest over 'public good', state concerns and political priorities.

Brabantio's complaint — that Othello has stolen his daughter from him — which he insists must take precedence over the military and political concerns of the Senate, is based on a perceived transgression against his patriarchal and paternal authority. Yet his turn to witchcraft as the explanation shifts the focus away from his culturally defined rights as a father, and towards the 'unnaturalness' of Desdemona's response to Othello's suit. All parties involved in the hearing focus on the method of seduction, rather than on Brabantio's 'rights of possession' over Desdemona — on how, not whether, a transgression has occurred. In effect, as Iago predicted, widely accepted paternal rights receive no support. Here, the staged tensions between paternal rights and state interests emphasize the breakdown of the domestic realm and of the family/state homology, produced by the state's focus on nationalist concerns.

Not only does Brabantio privilege his personal concerns over those of the political body of Venice, but in articulating his complaint, he also shows himself to be at odds with the methods of evaluation modelled by the Senate prior to his arrival. 'My daughter,' he informs the Duke, 'is abused, sto'n from me, and corrupted/By spells and medicines', adding that nature could not so err 'Sans witchcraft' (11.59-64). Rather than presenting a case against elopement, or demanding his rights and benefits as the controller of Desdemona as property to be bartered in exchange for wealth and power, Brabantio presents a case based on assumptions about Desdemona's lack of sexuality and desire — a 'natural' condition he supposes to have been corrupted through necromancy and its effects.19 These
accusations suggest that he realizes Desdemona’s cooperation in the elopement was necessary, but denies her agency. Iago’s initial bestialized, demonized depiction of Othello, which emphasized and dehumanized the physical act of copulation, feeds and supports Brabantio’s conclusion that Desdemona was seduced through unnatural means. The play’s staging of this intersection of imaginary acts and physical marks of difference again calls attention to the unreliability of the empirical and the evidentiary, this time in the domestic realm.

The Duke’s response suggests a strong revulsion for witchcraft, and a concern for the disruption of paternal rights. Upon first hearing the accusation, the Duke vows that Brabantio may read ‘the bloody book of law/... in the bitter letter/After your own sense... though our proper son/Stood in your action’ (11.67—9). This response, framed against witchcraft as a disruption of paternal authority, is to be enacted against whomever has ‘beguiled your daughter of herself,/and you of her’ (11.66—7). The vehemence and focus of this response suggest that witchcraft itself might have been understood as a system of power directly threatening to the rational order of the state, despite the separation of political from Christian values and authority central to the method of statecraft modelled earlier in the scene.20 Here, the Duke’s concern for protecting the state from such threats dovetails with his concern for Brabantio’s patriarchal authority, to the point of his willing vow to sacrifice his own son – and thus his own paternal authority – in pursuit of the perpetrator.21 In a play focused on tensions between state interests and individual interests, the Duke’s assertion models self-sacrifice in support of larger concerns.

However, with the discovery that the accused is the highly valued Othello, the Duke changes his view, just as Iago has predicted. He brings to a halt Brabantio’s accusation that Desdemona’s seduction was a result of ‘some dram conjured to this effect’ (1.104). Cautioning ‘To vouch this is no proof/Without more wider and more overt test’ (11.106—7), he condemns Brabantio’s reliance on ‘thin habits and poor likelihoods/Of modern seeming’ (11.107—9).22 The Duke, unwilling to take what is apparent, inferential, or commonly believed as proof against this valued General, calls for more extensive testimony or evidence, and emphasizes reasoned judgement in the face of apparent truth. He thus returns to the rational method that directed interpretation earlier in the scene as the Senate discussed the military threat to Cyprus. In effect, despite his racial and cultural differences from them, the Senators do not simply assume that Othello is guilty. Significantly, however, this response is based on their recognition of Othello’s value as a servant to the state, not on a tolerance for alterity per se.

In defending himself, Othello acknowledges that he has won Desdemona’s heart and married her, but denies the use of unnatural means to do
so. Were paternal rights at issue in the eyes of the Senate, this would be the moment for the trial to turn to the fundamental question of the action itself, rather than remaining focused on the method. The play, then, allows the concern with method to dominate, and stages the state as failing to uphold the domestic authority to which Brabantio lays claim. This concern with method aligns with pragmatic rationalism, which ignores ethical issues – in this case, the failure to recognize the ‘inherent rights’ of the father – in pursuit of the most effective means to an end.

Nevertheless, through Iago’s prediction and Brabantio’s accusations and challenges, the play raises a significant question about how the state deals with a conflict between its own interests and those of its citizenry. In this matter, the Senate’s response is absolutely clear: the military and political agenda has more weight than the concerns of private citizens. This point is made even more explicit as Brabantio concedes to Othello and the Senate, recognizing that he cannot exercise what he takes to be an inherent right – the determination of his daughter’s destiny. The Duke attempts to mollify Brabantio, encouraging him to bear his loss well, and thereby acknowledges Othello’s transgression: “The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief; He robs himself that spends a bootless grief” (II.206–7), he counsels the angry father. In his reply Brabantio makes explicit his view of the disruptive effects of Othello’s action. He emphasizes the parallels between martial and marital conquest, and situates Othello as an enemy whose actions are comparable to those of the Turkish fleet, and comparably threatening to the stability of the Venetian state. ‘So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile,’ he tells the Duke, ‘We lose it not so long as we can smile’ (II.208–9). Through the juxtaposition of domestic and military concerns in the Senate chamber, the problems of the domestic sphere are made to resonate with the politics of war. The scene poses two views of state interest: one, held by the Senate, focuses outward towards international strength and territorial expansion, to be enacted at the expense of domestic concerns; the other, held by Brabantio, focuses on the domestic sphere as the centre of stability, and suggests that the domestic microcosm, reliant on patriarchal authority, is the base upon which the macrocosmic state enterprise is built.

Desdemona plays a significant role in this building of tension between family and state, asserting a new role for women in the state’s pragmatic project. Called upon to corroborate Othello’s tale of seduction, she asserts her autonomy and self-determination even as she declares her subordination to her new husband. On the one hand, as Brabantio puts it, she has ‘shunned/The wealthy curled darlings of our nation’ (I.2, 67–8), refusing to be traded as a commodity in the aristocratic marriage market of Venice; on the other, she has chosen to marry, selecting a husband acknowledged by most to be honourable, brave and worthy, and thereby has ensured both

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the continuation of the reproductive order and of Othello's commitment to Venice – two potentially significant contributions to the state interest in military expansion and international stability. She denies Brabantio's authority over her, reminding him that his moment of control has passed – that just as he displaced the authority of his wife's father through marriage, so Othello has displaced his (1.3, 178–87).

Through Desdemona's justification of her actions, the play invokes a central paradox of the family/state homology based on patriarchal order. Her reply indicates that, while both family and state rely on male-dominated hierarchy, the father's reign is temporary. The viability of the institutions of both family and state relies on the displacement of his position by another male – one capable of siring offspring and providing the state with the human resources it requires for continuation and expansion. Desdemona disrupts the tradition of male-controlled exchange, in which women serve as the objects through which men forge bonds and maintain their authority, circumventing her father's authority and claiming agency in her own negotiation rather than remaining an object of negotiation between father and husband. She naturalizes her actions by invoking the appropriate behaviour of a wife towards her husband and her father after their negotiation is sealed, defining her uxorial obedience by choice and by precedent, despite the fact that her married state is the result of a transgression against traditional paternal authority.

Desdemona, asserting 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind/and to his honours and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate' (1.3, 248–50), demonstrates that, unlike her father, her rational capacity to see beyond the surface explicitly aligns her judgement with that of the Duke and Senators earlier in the scene, and implicitly aligns her actions with the internationalist, expansionist agenda of the state. Brabantio's rational incapacity and his notions of Desdemona's transgressions against nature are made operative through the visible difference embodied by Othello and Desdemona. The appearance/essence conflict, centrally important to the play's sociopolitical commentary, and emphasized in the earlier deliberation of the Senate, is enacted through – but not delimited by – Desdemona's gender and Othello's racial difference. This self-determining woman thus reveals tensions between patriarchal, domestic and political orders – the latter endorsing her right to act in her own behalf, so long as her actions support the interests of the state.

Further, her desires coincide with the state's support of social mobility: her acceptance of Othello, despite his visible difference and lack of social standing in Venice, reinforces the shift away from blood-based hierarchy and 'natural' social order. In its place, and in the service of emergent modern political interests, a new system of merit-based social advancement begins to assert itself. In this way, the traditional family formation is
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antithetical to the emergent state formation, and rather than asserting the homology between these two institutions, the resolution of the scene in the Senate chamber suggests that they cannot comfortably coexist. Thus, while the role of a self-determining woman can be understood as threatening to traditional patriarchal order, and threatening in its coherence with the agenda of the emergent nation-state in this particular representation, agency itself is not destabilizing. Rather, the state's support of such agency in the tension between traditional and emergent social systems operates as the fundamentally disruptive action in this scene. As the play develops, the domestic co-opts the centre, revealing the family as the basis of social order, and suggesting that the real threat to state authority is not foreign invasion, but internal dissonance. The particular problem of displaced patriarchal authority, invoked by Brabantio's suit against Othello, is generalized in the ensuing scenes, revealing the submerged shoal of domestic discord upon which the ship of state will inevitably run aground.

The threat from below

Through the character of Iago, Shakespeare develops these concerns with the threat posed by the emergent modern nation-state to the traditional ordering systems of society, and with the burden this threat places on individual citizens. Iago's complaints — the loss of patriarchal authority and career opportunity — parallel Brabantio's, but his sense of sociopolitical disempowerment far exceeds that of the thwarted father. Staging the motives and effects of Iago's emotionally twisted rational pragmatism, or 'instrumental reason', the play melds state and domestic issues through this character's perceptions of his own condition, and through his experimental manipulation of the conditions of other characters by way of the production of false empirical evidence and false rational judgements. Iago's logic, actions and interests raise questions not only about the viability of rationalism, empiricism and pragmatism, not merely about the gap between appearance and moral essence, but most centrally about the incapacity of a state to regulate itself and to mitigate the destabilizing effects of personal angst and ambition in the context of changing social organization and economic conditions. Othello stages moral corruption and personal desire as fundamentally disruptive to social hierarchy and its ordering institutions, and thus locates destabilization within the individual. Yet the state's project of consolidation, dependent on a model of pragmatic rationalism, and predicated on the self-sacrifice of citizens or subjects to state interests, implicates the state in the processes of its own destabilization. The play is of interest specifically because it addresses problems raised by systemically
structured social relations, and considers the impact of resistant subjectivity within such systems.²⁸

Because Iago is typically identified as a Machiavel, deciphering this play's sociopolitical critique requires understanding Iago in relation to Machiavelli's perspective on rational pragmatism. In Il Principe, Machiavelli argues that, faced with the necessities of statecraft, a prince must be willing and able to choose an amoral course of action if it will stabilize his authority and ensure the viability of the state. However, far from representing a shift away from ideological presuppositions about morality, Machiavelli's rational pragmatism relies on those very presuppositions both to define the ideal system of governance and to advocate a necessary, deliberate and controlled disruption of the mores supporting that ideal. The point I wish to make here, in connection with Iago's character and function in the play, is that such a disruption was to be the sole provenance of the Prince, who undertook these actions fully cognizant of their potential for inflicting long-term harm on his own soul. Machiavelli specifically does not support amoral action undertaken in the interest of an individual's self-promotion, or against the state's drive towards unity and the 'general good'. Thus, Iago is, and is not, a Machiavellian villain. Like many characters constructed as 'Machiavels' by early modern writers or contemporary critics, he embodies the most radical extreme of Machiavelli's formulation — the quality of pragmatic and self-serving amorality — a quality identified by Machiavelli as disruptive to, not the basis of, rational statecraft.

Iago, rather than being understood as driven only by the 'motiveless malignity' of the literary Machiavel, should be recognized as caught in the transition between modes of advancement, and aware that the state's privileging of international interests over Brabantio's claims is parallel to his own imagined condition as cuckolded by Othello. He is incensed by the personal impact of the disrupted patriarchal model, and by his failed attempt to manipulate the new system for his own benefit. Both factors drive his plot against Othello.²⁹ He is thus directly at odds with Machiavelli's advocacy of the need for self-sacrifice in the face of political or national instability. Invoking the disintegrating privileges of the aristocratic patronage system in the face of an emergent capitalist bond between the state and the tradesmen of the middle class, Iago complains that 'three great ones of the city, In personal suit to make me his [Othello's] lieutenant, Off-capped to him but were unsuccessful' (I.1, 8–10). Othello 'Non-suits' them with his pre-emptory selection of Michael Cassio. The play thereby introduces the tension between what Iago calls 'the old gradation' (I.1, 37) — the steady advancement through the ranks — and the current method, in which advancement 'goes by letter and affection' (I.1, 36) — that is, by personal recommendation and favouritism.³⁰ By his own account, however, Iago's
advancement is thwarted, not by ‘letter and affection’, but by Othello’s unilateral decision, which ignores the influence of the aristocracy.

Iago describes Othello’s choice, Michael Cassio, as ‘a great arithmetician’, and ‘a Florentine’, who ‘never set a squadron in the field,/Nor the division of a battle knows/More than a spinster’, concluding that ‘Mere prattle without practice/Is all his soldiership’ (I.1, 19—27). These references to Cassio’s background explicitly situate Iago’s dissatisfaction in the tensions between theoretical and practical knowledge, formal education and apprenticeship or experience, and old and new systems of advancement, all related to early modern social transformations. In this context, Iago represents an invisible but deeply frustrated, disaffected group of potentially dangerous citizens whose alienation is supported by raison d’etat.

His plot challenges Machiavelli’s vision of social relations, which locates rational pragmatism only at the top of the hierarchy, in the person of the Prince. Shakespeare imagines and represents the disruptive agency of a figure like Iago, far removed from the apex of power, but as capable as ‘the Prince’ of deceptive self-presentation and amoral action in his own interests. Iago’s apparent rationalism, functioning at the level of the personal and in the service of self-interest, counters Machiavelli’s assertion that pragmatic rationality is conducive to maintaining order. Not only is the rational state inherently and inadvertently dangerous to the traditional domestic order, as the interactions with Brabantio in the Senate chamber suggest, but as Iago demonstrates, rationalism as a credo is not limited to state use or state interests, and can, in fact, be used for deliberately disruptive purposes.

Iago’s articulation of his dissonance with the ordering mechanisms of the state emerges in the action that follows the Senate’s resolution of its domestic and military concerns. The scene shifts from the inner space of the Senate chamber to the exterior space of the street – from the controlled locus of statecraft, where rational order stabilizes sociopolitical conditions and state interests, to the fluid, unpredictable and destabilizing realm of the personal. Here, the legal and political order cannot mitigate the desires, discontents and disaffection of its citizens. Iago, who operates from within the ranks of the insignificant citizenry, employs rational methods to disrupt the authority of the Venetian state, the institution of the reproductive family which supports that state, and the military system which protects both the domestic and the political realms. The state’s conviction that such citizens are insignificant and dispensable renders Iago invisible and thus invincible, if not as an individual, then as a representative of the dispersed force of disenfranchised citizens who might, undetected and from a wide spectrum of social loci, take up the disruptive project he enacts in this play. Through Iago, Shakespeare extends Machiavelli’s explication of the effects
of amoral rational pragmatism beyond the centre of power and into the periphery, in the service of individual interest.

Iago first articulates rational control as a form of self-management. Critiquing Roderigo's lamentations on love, he distinguishes humans from animals through reason directed by human will: 'Ere I would drown myself for the love of a guinea-hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon', he chastises Roderigo (I.3, 309–10). To check the passions, emotions and desires that threaten the rational capacity, reason must be deployed by the will as a gardener tends his plants, he lectures, to thwart 'the blood and baseness of our natures' (I.3, 320–1). In Iago's formulation, a 'permission of the will' allows 'a lust of the blood' to be mistaken for love, and 'we have our reason to cool our raging emotions, our carnal stings, our unbit-ted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion' (II.322–4). Iago's vengeance plot becomes the sign of rational power as he distinguishes between the lust, imaginary love, the unchecked passions of 'natural man', and the capacity to control and manipulate, through the experimental method, those 'animal' qualities of human nature he despises. Through this plot, he elevates himself above those whose passions leave them vulnerable, and places himself in opposition not only to state-located rationalism, but also to the externalized moral order into which Desdemona, and eventually Emilia and Othello, are inscribed.

Iago's confession to a 'hearted' hatred of Othello (I.3, 351) suggests that the problem lies not in experiencing emotion, but in allowing emotion to disrupt rational control. This is precisely the effect he seeks to produce in Brabantio, Roderigo and Othello, with his efforts against Othello's requiring the most concerted, complex and dangerous actions. 'Control', then, is in actuality a rechannelling of passion into vengeance. Reason is brought into play against those who are perceived as threatening to the patriarchal control of the home and family, or to the socioeconomic security of the male subject. The political shift towards the abstract notion of the nation-state putatively replaces individuated vengeance or retribution, as well as the notion of comitatus, with the reasoned capacity to pursue the best course of action for long-term power, stability and order. For Iago, on the other hand, reason serves as the basis for establishing both his right to vengeance and the method he will pursue. He is, in this sense, embedded in the old order. His plot is specifically one of traditional – almost biblical – vengeance, as he seeks to return in kind the wrongs he imagines to have been perpetrated against him: the loss of a position he believes to be his due, and the loss of control over his wife.

The economy of his plan is admirable. Cassio, his military rival, becomes the unwitting agent of a double vengeance, through which Iago orchestrates the disruption of the realm of the family as a means to disrupt the order of the state. Unlike the rational order depicted earlier in the play,
which requires the sacrifice of individual interests to the interests of the state, Iago's version co-opts and undermines *raison d'état* in the pursuit of personal satisfaction. Like Brabantio's claims, Iago's are based on a traditional sense of privilege, but Iago reconfigures the terms of the subject/state relationship, taking up new methods in the pursuit of those traditional privileges. He demonstrates the possibilities for disruption opened up by the values associated with this new order, and reveals a profound discomfort on the part of the playwright with the ideological implications of a state driven by amoral reason.

**Domestic disruption**

The play develops from Iago's first articulation of his plot, through his description of Cassio's sleep-talking and possession of the handkerchief, towards the breakdown of Othello's resistance to Iago's manipulations. These plot elements coalesce when Othello is duped, through false empirical evidence, into the 'rational' conclusion that Desdemona has cuckolded him. His view contrasts explicitly with the role of moral guide Desdemona articulates as the proper one for women. In response to Emilia's claim that men should model fidelity, or be prepared to accept that 'The ills we do, their ills instruct us so' (IV.3, 98–9), Desdemona asserts that women should serve as a corrective to men's amorality through patient guidance, 'Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend' (IV.3, 101). Yet, despite acknowledging this guiding function, she indicates that women should neither resist nor attempt to usurp men's authority, but should instead operate from within their subjugation to reform men through virtuous example. Desdemona thereby asserts female morality as a means of countering both the general perception of threatening female sexuality and the specific accusations levelled against her in the upcoming scene. There, in contrast to what Desdemona articulates as her ideologically defined function, Othello justifies her murder as the salvation of the world from his wife's destructive, seductive power, 'else she'll betray more men' (V.2, 6). Through Desdemona's recommendation of submission and rectification through moral influence, and her earlier linkage to state interests, the play suggests a tension between the state-supported role of a female moral model and traditional male privileges supported by patriarchy. The implications of this positioning quickly become evident in the development of the plot, as her moral rectitude and submission to Othello lead to her murder.

The tensions between morality and patriarchy made visible through her murder suggest that Desdemona functions as a figure who disrupts traditional ordering mechanisms, but who nevertheless serves as the centre of moral order – an order that the play privileges, and that the political
system of Venice supports but does not embody. Her death is a transgression against the values which are explicitly privileged by the state, but which are nevertheless ironically undermined by its own actions. The representation of this character is pivotal, in that it gives imaginative play to the possibility that women are to become the arbiters and upholders of moral order – a possibility opened to them by the male alignment with rational pragmatism as pursued by the Machiavellian state. Her death, instigated by Iago's manipulations, suggests that such a reconfiguration may not, in fact, be viable, given the larger repercussions of the effects of emergent modernity, including the privileging of instrumental reason over moral choice. Indeed, Desdemona's death shuts down the idealized possibility of an externalized moral order born of and fostered by women, who are axiomatically excluded from participation in the pragmatic judgements of the rational state, but centrally important to its Machiavellian project.

The murder scene, in which a passive and submissive Desdemona succumbs to her deluded husband's invocation of his duty to the larger social order, reinforces the play's challenges, both to the patriarchal precept of female subjugation, and also to the opposing, disruptive Machiavellian privileging of male-centred, militaristic state interests over the domestic order. Othello, mad with grief and shame, replicates the pragmatic judgements critiqued in the Senate chamber scene through Brabantio's final warnings, and undermined through Iago's appropriation of the method for his own purposes. In the guise of a prototypical victim of women's abusive agency, Othello represents Desdemona's murder as a 'personal loss' and a form of self-sacrifice, enacted to protect men, and thus society at large, against threatening female sexuality. Othello insists that he is motivated by a devotion to the protection of patriarchal authority in general, and not merely by a desire to protect his own position or reputation. In this scene, Othello may be understood to embody, not the Christian, the 'white' or the European identity that conflicts with his own 'actual' identity as a Moor, a Christian convert and a servant of the Venetian state, but the logic of Machiavellian duty to the larger social order – figured here as a bizarre articulation of domestic violence as social benefit. Ironically, his character fails to recognize the conflicts between state interest and patriarchal interest through which the action of the play develops, and he is caught blindly in the net of redefined interests that Iago actively identifies and deploys.

When the revelation of Iago's duplicity forces Othello's recognition that he has been manipulated into destroying the embodiment of the order he imagines he has been defending, an order that has made possible his own position, power and acceptance by the policy-brokers of Venice, he draws a parallel between his suicide and the murder of a Turkish 'other' – an other who 'in Aleppo once/.../Beat a Venetian and traduced the state' (V.2, 352–4). This reconfiguration of Othello's self-perception, through
the actions of the manipulative Iago, suggests that Brabantio's critique of the state's policies in the Senate chamber accurately articulated the threat to the domestic as directly destabilizing to the larger political order. Yet, despite this accuracy, Brabantio's perspective misrepresents the nature of that destabilization, positing Othello himself as the threat, rather than recognizing that the Machiavellian state's policies, based on pragmatic necessity, constitute the fundamental disruptive force.

Thus, severe though the critique of pragmatic rationalism is, the play does not resort to traditional patriarchal order as an alternative. Both Brabantio's and Iago's motives emerge from their dissatisfaction with their own condition—a condition produced through the state's policies and decisions. Iago's manipulations, directed at the preservation of traditional patriarchal social privileges, bring about the collapse of the new rational order that has relocated Othello and Desdemona, shifting them from periphery to centre in the pursuit of its international expansionist project. By enacting the destruction of the figures most closely aligned with the interests of the state—Desdemona, Emilia and Othello—but doing so in the name of the rights and privileges of patriarchy—the play raises questions about the moral viability of both the pragmatic state and patriarchal order, suggesting that neither the new order nor the old holds the promise of stability.

Sympathy for the Devil

Both Brabantio and Iago serve as exemplars of the effects of consolidating state authority, and for both, the sense of the transgressions against them is twofold, located within their respective families, but also within the privileging of a social and political other—Othello—whose actions are condoned in the name of national interest. Unlike Brabantio, however, Iago has no political site wherein to voice his accusations, no political clout to wield, and no socially legitimated means through which to mitigate the effects of these transgressions. As the play depicts him, his alienation and marginalization are total. Iago represents a component of the citizenry which appears to be the foundation of the state's stability, but which in fact operates counter to the state's goals. His realpolitik of self-interest rejects, and nearly undoes, the idealized model of statecraft offered up for scrutiny in the Senate chamber. His presence and actions suggest that the rational judgement of the Senate and the reasoned application of law have severe limitations in mitigating the personal dissatisfactions of private citizens. Iago, representative of an only partially coherent rejection of the state's goal of idealized unity—a unity predicated on Machiavellian precepts of self-
sacrifice for the benefit of the state — is surreptitious, undetectable and potentially devastating to that goal.

The irony of Othello arises, in part, from the conjunction of Machiavellian pragmatism and the assertion of Venetian moral superiority to its enemy, the Turks. The exigencies of a consolidation of state and merchant interests, connected theoretically to the emergence of raison d'etat, and present as a site of critical interest in numerous late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century plays, arise only obliquely here. Yet the rational model for statecraft represented in the Senate chamber invokes the Machiavellian emphasis on reason and practicality over morality, and suggests the destabilizing effect of actions focused on international power and economic interests rather than on domestic concerns. The play’s engagement with the repercussions of state-interested actions, made available through Iago’s discontented ruminations on the erosion of the traditional model which he believes would have ensured his success, suggest that this nexus of capitalist, militarist, expansionist exigencies form the backdrop for the play’s specific critiques. The irony is made operative in Othello’s final lines, as he asserts the Christian moral order as the only feature distinguishing the Venetian from the Turk — a distinction that the disruption of moral order, implicated in the Senate’s rational judgements, instigated by Iago’s malignant pursuit of justice, and embodied by Desdemona’s death, collapses. The play’s warning centres on the specific threat to the social order represented by this turn away from the ideals of Christian morality and traditional sociopolitical order — a turn which is made to seem reasonable and unthreatening in the deliberations of the Senate, but which establishes a precedent for amoral action taken up at the level of the private citizen — Iago, in this case — and rendered pathological. In the context of this commentary on a transcendent moral order, neither Othello nor Desdemona may be seen as justifiable victims of the conflict between domestic and state interests. Desdemona serves as a model of virtuous self-sacrifice, which mitigates the threat implied by her alignment with state interests that disrupt paternal authority; Othello, whose murder of Desdemona eradicates the moral order to which he devoted his life, reveals the inadequacies of empiricism and the ironies of rational pragmatism, in which ends justify means. While his suicide fails to rectify the destructive force of his actions, and ironically fails to eliminate the truly threatening ‘other’ from the social order, Othello is situated as himself a victim of an intentionally amoral, self-interested figure — Iago — who has misled almost every character in the play.

In contrast, because Iago fails to embrace the ideal of self-sacrifice necessary to state unification and stability, choosing to act in his own interests and for his own benefit, he is fundamentally alienated from the dominant ideology of Venetian state unity. He is more ‘other’ than either
Othello or Desdemona, shaped by the process of disenfranchisement that has transformed him from a cooperative to a subversive citizen. Iago's own assertion, 'I am not what I am' (I.1, 66), contextualizes his actions not only as reliant on the capacity to dissemble and appear to be what he is not, but as emblematic of the gap between expectation and fulfilment – a motor of capitalist production and consumption, and a tenet of the condition of modernity – that has driven him to these choices. Iago's situation as a common citizen, unmarked and unremarkable save for his intense rejection of the ideology that he believes directly threatens his place and reputation, defines his response as morally reprehensible from within the ideology he rejects, but as socially comprehensible within the system to which he is subject. Indeed, contextualized by Venice's gradual descent from its apex of merchant-based economic power, and England's still-emergent merchant-based economy, this play may be understood as implicitly about the costs of the transformation towards the rational order associated with capitalist-supported modern statecraft.

I have sought here to move beyond current interests in reading this play as centrally racist and sexist, in order to examine the hegemonic process of state consolidation, shifting economic interests, and the larger social repercussions associated with such changes. It has been necessary to distinguish between the play's representation of racist and sexist views that may be theorized as systemic effects of such state formation, and its critical recognition of these effects. This critique may be understood in terms of the specific conditions of individual alienation within the emergent modern state – an alienation not only of those marked as 'other', but also of those who resist the exploitation and self-subjugation upon which the developing system relies. Such a critique cuts both ways. The play invokes and repudiates resistant action as represented through Iago, simultaneously constructing a morally untenable position from which he draws his agency as well as his disruptive power, and revealing the disjunction between virtue and self-determination that drives his choices. It is not against subversion per se, but against subversion as self-interested malignity, that the play militates. However, the alternative to Iago's choice is made explicit through the characters who 'load the bed' at the play's conclusion, each of whom is destroyed by a reinforcement of the hegemonic model of personal virtue and state service. Othello stages the individual and social costs of adherence to the ideological presuppositions that Iago disrupts. In doing so, it foregrounds the state's insistence on self-sacrifice towards the 'greater good' as the basis, not only of Iago's alienation, but of the destruction of those who embody the very values it claims to uphold. The play, then, represents a central contradiction in the emergence of modern statehood.

Further, the state's reliance on a theory of rational pragmatism establishes the means of Iago's manipulation of his social superiors, and
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figures in the play as the fundamental flaw in the state’s self-construction. Iago’s absence from the political scene, his invisibility within the masses of generalized state subjects, allows for a kind of social movement and agency that would be impossible were he more visible and significant in the eyes of the state. Thus, searching for visible signs of Iago’s demonic nature, Othello ‘look[s] down towards his feet’ for cloven hooves, and then observes ‘that’s a fable’ (V.2, 283), emphasizing the indecipherability of internalized others. Iago’s mocking response after being stabbed, ‘I bleed sir, but not killed’ (V.2, 285), further suggests that Iago is a single representative of a larger social condition – not an anomalous individual, but a member of a disenfranchised, untraceable, intractable and ineradicable group. He is led off silently to suffer his punishment, the play having acknowledged the impossibility of purging his disruptive resistance from the system, simultaneously recognizing his threatening ubiquity, and asserting the state’s complicity in creating such alienation.

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Notes

1 All references to Othello come from The New Cambridge Shakespeare’s 1997 reprint of their 1984 edition of the play (ed. Norman Sanders).
2 The elements of modernity pertinent to this analysis are discussed below. This rhetoric of unity is addressed in Richard Helgerson’s ‘Two versions of Gothic’ in his Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
6 See F. Smith Fussner’s The Historical Revolution: English Historical Writing and
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7 However, I understand Machiavelli’s project in this treatise as an ironic one—a possibility generally ignored in early modern and contemporary analyses.


10 This is a frequent mode of self-reference for Elizabeth I (e.g. her 1559 address to the House of Commons regarding their petition that she marry, recorded in Sir John Hayward’s *Annals*, pp. 30–3, quoted in Smith, pp. 26–7, and her 1586 address to a delegation of both houses, responding to a request to permit the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, recorded in Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Vol. IV, pp. 933–5, quoted in Smith, *Elizabeth I*, pp. 33–5).


13 George Lipsitz’s analysis of racism as a systemic effect in ‘The possessive investment in whiteness: racialized social democracy and the “White problem” in American Studies’, *American Quarterly* 47:3 (September 1995), pp. 369–87, is central to my interpretation of the sociopolitical dynamics of *Othello*.


15 1.1,89–90.


17 I,3,5–9.


19 Brabantio bases this view on his mistaken interpretation of Desdemona’s behaviour prior to and during Othello’s visits. See II, 94–106.

1957), pp. 260-5, names ‘seven ways in which malefici injure others’, including ‘by depriving of reason’ (p. 261). The potential conflict with the rational state is clear in this mode of injury.

21 See II, 65-70.

22 Here, the play aligns the empirical and the modern through the Duke’s rejection of Brabantio’s reliance on the ‘apparent’, and questions the reliability of such evidence.

23 Significantly, the Turkish conquest of Cyprus in 1571 represented the beginning of the collapse of Venetian power. Venetian interest in Cyprus was economic and territorial, and its loss compromised their position on both fronts. The play represents an unsuccessful attempt on Cyprus, but historically the collapse of Venetian power was already recognizable by the time the play was written, in approximately 1603 or 1604. Thus, the importance of Othello’s role in the defence of Cyprus, and the severity of the threat posed to the stability of the state by the concerns of the domestic, must be recognized as central to the interpretation of this play.

24 In both England and Venice, political and economic power was directly consolidated through marriage.

25 Indeed, ‘domestic’ is a term that resonates in multiple ways in the play. It invokes the paternal authority over the household, and the state’s internal concern with the nation itself, as opposed to its international, imperial interests.


27 Grady’s discussion of the term ‘instrumental reason’, which links modernity, science and capitalism as elements of a complex system which suspends all values in the pursuit of desired ends (p. 52), informs my analysis.


29 Iago is not represented as cognizant of the terms of emergent modernity pertinent to this analysis. Rather, his anger and his vengeance plot develop out of a specific and explicitly articulated set of observations about the ‘current’ choices of the state and its servants, beginning with the ‘prediction’ of the Senate’s actions regarding Othello, discussed above (n.1), and building in the course of the play.

30 On this development, see Clay, esp. pp. 203-50.

31 In his Discourses Machiavelli argues that while ‘the cruelties of the multitude are (directed) against those whom they fear will oppose the common good, those of a Prince are (directed) against those whom he fears will oppose his own good.’ See ‘The discourses on the first ten books of Titus Livius To Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai’, The On-Line Books Page, http://www.constitution.org/mac/disclivyl.htm.

32 This problem is articulated in The Discourses, XXXIII, where Machiavelli states that ‘nature has created men so that they desire everything, but are unable to attain it; desire being thus always greater than the faculty of acquiring, discontent with what they have and dissatisfaction with themselves results from it.’ The play frames this discontent in quite specific ways.
That is, love is grafted on to the natural response, which is lust or desire; it is not, in this presentation, itself a natural condition.

This resonates with and reinforces the issue of tensions between the old and new modes of advancement about which Iago complains.

Desdemona's passive response to Othello's homicidal intentions reasserts her non-threatening status and subjugation. The play focuses her disruptive agency specifically against the figures represented as themselves threatening: Brabantio, through his self-interested, irrational accusations, and Iago, through his self-serving rational pragmatism. Her agency, while not capable of liberating her from gender-based subjugation, functions in opposition to those who threaten the rational state, suggesting a powerful, if conservative, political role for women.
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