Theorising Early Modern Jealousy

A Biocultural Perspective on Shakespeare’s Othello

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In the third act of Othello, Desdemona complains to Emilia that she has given her husband no cause for jealousy. Emilia’s response is a mysterious one:

But jealous souls will not be answer’d so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: “tis a monster,
Begot upon itself, born on itself.
(3. 4. 159-62)

As Mark Breitenberg has observed in his study of anxious masculinity, this lack of a viable referent is a typical feature of Shakespeare’s jealousy plays. There were other writers in the early modern period that would have supported this view; according to a contemporary student of the passions, Thomas Wright, emotions could indeed come from nowhere. Robert Burton, on the other hand, listed eight different causes of jealousy in his Anatomy of Melancholy, from melancholy and impotence to a desire for sexual variety or simply opportune circumstances. He also noted that people in certain countries seemed more jealous than others, which would suggest that different customs were also partly responsible.

Although there was no consensus about the causes of jealousy in this period, most writers seem to have agreed that it was a very strange and inordinate passion. Burton, for example, was so puzzled by its vehemence that he regarded it as a “Species apart” from other passions. According to Edmund Tilney, the author of the domestic manual The Flower of Friendship, there was “no greater torment, than the vexation of a jealous minde.” On the continent, Montaigne saw this affliction as “the most vaine and turbulent infirmitie that may afflict man’s minde.” What is more, Shakespeare and his contemporaries also had strong classical precedents to fall back on for such a view. In Ovid’s The Art of Love, for example, where the author generally takes a detached and humorous view of sexual matters, the tone changes drastically when we reach the subject of jealousy. While Ovid urges his readers to be reasonable, he also admits to being totally confounded by his own jealous pangs: “In this art, I confess, I am not perfect; what am I to do? I fall short of my own counsels ...” So what shall we make of this explosive emotion that flies so completely in the face of common sense?

Anyone who reads up on modern accounts of sexual jealousy in English Renaissance literature is soon struck by the predominance of a single mode of explanation, which we have come to know as social constructivism. Most recent books or articles on the subject begin with an assertion that gender and sexuality are “constructions” (as if this were an interpretive axiom) and then spend the rest of the discussion demonstrating the truth of the assertion. A representative example is Mark Breitenberg’s book, where it is assumed that men’s anxieties in this period are “historically rather than essentially constructed” (7). Since he has defined early modern men as products of their historical situation, Breitenberg explains their worries as symptoms of “specific social tensions that are endemic to the early modern sex-gender system, the very tensions that produce the masculine subject in the first place” (13). Furthermore, since the act of worrying reproduces the existing sex-gender system, the result is a circular situation where male anxiety is “both cause and effect” (5). Culture generates culture, which generates culture. But what generates that first instance of culture? The answer can only be more culture,
since there is no essential self, no human nature, from which it might emerge. Like Emilia’s view of jealousy, Breitenberg’s patriarchal culture becomes ‘a monster begot upon itself, born on itself.’

I should stress that there is some agreement between Breitenberg’s perspective on jealousy and the one I want to unfold here. Both of us are keenly aware that normative ideals and codes tend to produce anxiety when people do not fit the bill, and that the best account of jealousy must take its specific social and historical context into account. Neither of us thinks jealousy is a particularly positive phenomenon. But the point where our interpretive paths must bifurcate, with important consequences for how we read early modern representations of jealousy, is precisely the social constructivist premise that excludes all other forms of causal explanation. I find it exceedingly doubtful that culture can be its own ultimate cause, any more than humans can give birth to themselves or rabbits appear mysteriously from hats. In the final analysis, however complex the situation may be, human culture must come from somewhere. So if we want to arrive at a better understanding of early modern jealousy and how it is reflected and recast in literature, we must combine historical explanation with the one thing that is anathema to social constructionism because it seems to smack of essentialism. I am, of course, referring to the fact that we are biological as well as cultural creatures.

I will begin with a brief discussion of some problems with the social constructivist account of an emotion like sexual jealousy, and then put forward a biocultural alternative that fuses evolutionary and historical explanation. On the basis of this discussion I will then perform a brief reading of Othello that questions some received dogma regarding this play and stresses the importance of avoiding overly reductive determinism (either biological, social, or otherwise) in the study of literary texts.

Throughout my discussion I will focus specifically on male jealousy because we cannot take for granted that this affliction will be experienced in exactly the same way, or even for the same reasons, by men and women. Modern self-report studies tend to show an equal proclivity to jealousy, but also a tendency for men and women – even in countries that are comparatively egalitarian – to respond differently to threats involving sexual and emotional infidelity. Even if we should leave aside compelling evolutionary arguments for such psychosexual dimorphism, we can hypothesise at least small variations wherever social conditions for men and women have differed.

Is jealousy a construction?

As Sue Laver and Mette Hjorth have explained, the central premise in the social constructivist account of the emotions is a commitment to cultural particularism and diversity. This diversity is then explained socio-politically rather than psychologically, in that cultural variation is seen as the effect of differing social power structures and conceptual systems. People in different cultures have different emotions because they have internalised different social pressures to have these emotions. It is held that an emotion that exists in one culture can be completely absent from other cultures, or even that there are no universal emotions.

Of course, to simply say that something is a “construction” is to make an exceedingly vague statement. This is why it has become a commonplace in the social sciences to distinguish between two different kinds of constructivism. First, there is a weak version that does not dispute the agency of non-linguistic realities and simply argues that human perceptions, emotions, and identities are deeply shaped by particular languages, conceptual systems, and social practices, and so forth. Since even a primal emotion like fear is often dependent on some sort of cognitive appraisal (what is this thing before me? is it dangerous? should I become afraid?) this is something of a truism. But truisms do not make interesting (or even identifiable) theoretical perspectives.

This leaves us with a strong constructivism that is usually deeply influenced by
poststructuralist theory and therefore regards conceptual systems as basically self-contained entities. According to this brand, which is the one that is usually at work in literary and cultural studies, emotions are constructed in the sense of being social inventions: “societies can shape, mold, or construct as many different emotions as are functional with the social system.” This sense is what is usually intended when people say that something is ‘only a cultural construction.’ As internalised social inventions, emotions are arbitrary and can be expected to disappear if the dominant social and conceptual structure is altered significantly. This latter point also betrays the political motivation that generally underpins the constructivist edifice: if everything is a social construction, then there is no human nature. If there is no human nature, then all humans are infinitely malleable, which is a good thing for those who think they have better constructions at hand. For Mark Breitenberg, for example, the idea that male anxiety is a construction makes it “free of the necessity to re-enact itself in the same ways.”

There are many unflattering things that could be said about strong constructivism, including its subordination of intellectual inquiry to political instrumentalism; the ad hominem arguments, genetic fallacies, and contradictions that tend to crop up whenever descriptive and normative statements are conflated; and the tendency of binary distinctions like (good) constructivism versus (evil) essentialism to produce straw men and resurrect an obsolete conflict between nature and nurture. But since space is limited, I will instead turn to the more specific problems with the strong constructivist account of early modern jealousy.

The first problem is methodological. Since they are looking for some sort of “dominant” discourse that might shape the literary treatment of sexuality, many constructivists have (for example) turned to the household manuals that were written by clergymen in the seventeenth century. In one of the best examples to date, Mary Beth Rose uses such material to trace “two dominant forms of sexual discourse” which she applies to literary texts with some interesting results. But as many historians have opined, there are major problems with seeing household manuals as representative of what people actually felt or did in this period. In some cases, even these texts themselves show clear traces of active dissent. William Gouge, the author of a frequently cited collection of sermons called Of Domesticall Duties (1622), was even forced to modify the published text since he had taken some flak for insisting that women needed their husbands’ consent when disposing of family goods: “This just Apology I have been forced to make, that I might not ever be judged (as some have censured me) an hater of women.” In other words, not everyone seems to have agreed with even such a basic patriarchal assumption.

Since it normally fails to heed such warnings, and since it accepts no cause that is not sociocultural, literary constructivism comes perilously close to an inflexible social deterministic. While its proponents might defend themselves by defining statements like “the subject is produced by the sex-gender system” in the ‘weak’ sense – that is, that they do not preclude other determinants – the conspicuous absence of such determinants in their own analyses is an obvious weakness. It is also methodologically questionable to suppose that literary texts faithfully reproduce social constructions, for at least two reasons. Even if we should accept the constructivist position, it is an obvious truth that literary texts often depend on surprise effects and inversions of audience expectations for their effect, and the element of make-believe always makes radical departures from reality possible. Any literary theory that does not concede these points can hardly be convincing.

The second major problem with the constructivist account of early modern jealousy is a more serious one: it advances a particularistic explanation of a phenomenon that seems to be universal to human societies. Although the anthropologist Margaret Mead made a famous attempt to uncover an idyllic, jealousy-free culture during her sojourn on Samoa, anthropologists have so far failed to uncover a single culture that is free of this affliction. Jealousy has been recorded in most societies all over the world, from tribes in the Amazon
region to the Tiwi islanders of Australia, and it even exists in cultures whose worldviews seem diametrically opposed to the idea of jealousy.\textsuperscript{18}

Given the universality of jealousy in human cultures, it would be better if constructivists defined it as a “plastic” phenomenon, that is, something that is universal but also individually, culturally, and situationally variable in both nature and degree. It is important to realise that we are talking about statistical universals here, and not absolute or normative universals (that every single human being is or should be jealous). The term “construction” could then be reserved for truly arbitrary social inventions. It would also be a good idea to shelve the incoherent and one-sided obsession with “difference” that still characterises so much literary and critical theory, and which is clearly a remnant of deconstruction.

Of course, strong evidence for the universality of sexual jealousy does not automatically demonstrate the need for a biological or evolutionary explanation. As the philosopher Daniel Dennett points out, “showing that a particular type of human behavior is ubiquitous or nearly ubiquitous in widely separated human cultures goes no way at all towards showing that there is a genetic predisposition for that particular behavior.”\textsuperscript{19} This is a simple and important point. But Dennett would also be the first to stress that sooner or later, any social constructivist explanation must come to terms with biology and evolutionary theory for the simple reason that emotions and behaviours are not simply immaterial bundles of free-floating signifiers. They are, to the best of our knowledge, material phenomena that emerge from intricately designed brains and bodies. A theory of emotions that does not acknowledge this fact is like a theory of interior decoration that takes itself for a theory of architecture.

The psychologist Ralph Hupka is one of many social scientists who have realised the necessity of making this move. More specifically, he attempts to grant biology and evolution some explanatory force and yet preserve the social realm as the exclusive constituent of jealousy. In his view, “our genetic heritage enables us to experience jealousy, but all else is learned,” and jealousy is “an inevitable consequence of the solutions to the problems of living in a society.”\textsuperscript{20} This is clearly a step forward compared to the circular arguments of strong constructivism, since Hupka both accounts for the ubiquity of jealousy and recognises its biological foundations. But since practically all humans are born into some kind of society, we have reason to ask ourselves whether Hupka has really evicted the idea of a biological function or motivation. Living in some sort of society is, in Melford Spiro’s formulation, a “biological requirement of the human organism.”\textsuperscript{21} In other words, Hupka’s stance pretty much amounts to saying that jealousy is an inevitable consequence of being human, which would make jealousy part of human nature. (If Hupka should define “society” more narrowly to exclude smaller units like, say, hunter-gatherer tribes, he would run into trouble since he must explain why these social formations have jealousy too). But we still have no answer to the question why jealousy should exist in societies all over the world.

**Is jealousy an evolved emotion?**

Before we consider the peculiarities of Shakespeare’s own society and then proceed to his treatment of jealousy in \textit{Othello}, we need to zoom out even further from the level of human universals and consider humankind as one species among others. In my view, one of the most important theoretical insights of the previous decade, across a wide range of disciplines, was that the human and social sciences need the life sciences. After all, it makes no sense to expound complicated and convoluted doctrines about the existence or non-existence of something called human nature without ever considering the similarities and differences between humans and other animals. But in the humanities there is still considerable hostility towards biological and evolutionary explanation which, it is felt, will inevitably lead to a strange regime called “genetic determinism” which sees people as
“lumbering robots” and will trivialise or corrupt everything we deem valuable. Since I am one of the growing number of literary critics who do not share this biophobic stance, I will simply proceed with my discussion.

In this necessarily brief and oversimplified sketch I will assume, as most biologists do today, that there is a dynamic and reciprocal relation between any organism and its environment. Hence there can be no clear-cut distinction between nature and nurture. The genome itself may be fixed, and it is fully possible to investigate the genetic foundations of behaviour on several different levels, from molecular biology to population genetics, but as soon as we consider a living organism and its developmental process we confront an intricate interplay between the evolved genotype and a host of environmental factors. In the case of humans, we are talking about hormonal levels during gestation, the number of siblings, social structure, ecology, and blind chance, to name only a few of these factors. The matter is further complicated by the tendency of human and animal traits to require environmental input in order to develop. In other words, the slur ‘genetic determinism’ normally makes little sense even when it is hurled at those investigators who seek to discover innate psychological mechanisms for things like jealousy.

The most obvious biological reason why humans become jealous is that we are sexual beings, and as such we tend to be selective about whom we mate with. As Geoffrey Miller puts the matter crisply, the “discriminatory nature of sex undermines all egalitarian utopias.” This may seem like a trivial and slightly unpleasant point, but it is also one that strikes at the heart of the constructivist edifice.

When we take a broad sweep of the natural world, it also becomes clear that the males of many different species go to great lengths to prevent their mates from having sex with others. Zoologists call this phenomenon “mate guarding,” and it takes a wide variety of shapes in different species. Since claus tration practices have developed independently among humans on all five continents, and still survive in parts of the Islamic world, it would appear that humans have not been entirely averse to such tactics either. But two other human phenomena – that males invest much more in their offspring than other primates do, and that females have concealed ovulation – provide particularly important clues to the nature of jealousy.

One of the most astounding breakthroughs in modern evolutionary thinking came in 1972 when Robert Trivers formulated his theory of “parental investment.” Put simply, his theory predicted that animal courting patterns would correlate with the amount of effort each sex expended on raising the offspring. Typically, a sex that invested a lot in its young had reason to be more selective when it came to choosing partners, while a less committed sex would increase its fitness by copulating with as many partners as possible. As it turns out, this holds true for practically all species that have been studied. Females are generally more selective than males because they have the greatest reproductive burden, whereas males pursue females with more vigour and less discrimination. But what is especially compelling is that parental investment theory is further corroborated by those rare species – such as sea horses and some bird and fish species – where the sex roles are reversed and males make the greatest contribution to the offspring. Among these animals it is instead large, aggressive females that court choosy child-rearing males.

A second and perhaps more familiar issue is that women are automatically assured of their maternity while men can hardly be equally certain. Like approximately sixty percent of their primate relatives, human females do not advertise their period of oestrus openly by means of sexual swellings. As most prospective parents are aware, this makes it hard to time copulation with ovulation, and it also makes mate guarding more difficult. Since female primates have never been troubled by Victorian attitudes to sex – remember, being choosy is not the same thing as being coy – their male counterparts have responded to this problem in two basic ways. On one side of the spectrum, male gorillas have grown large enough to dominate a harem of females, exclude potential rivals, and thus ensure a reasonable chance of paternity. Among the relatively promiscuous chimpanzees, on the
other hand, where the average female will mate “138 times with some thirteen males for every infant she gives birth to,”26 males have instead grown extremely large testes whose copious ejaculations increase their competitive chances inside the female’s reproductive tract. The price paid for these strategies, predictably, is that gorillas have ridiculously small testes while the male chimp is almost the same size as the female.

And then, placed on his isthmus of a middle state, we find the human male – about fifteen per cent larger than the female, and with a moderate scrotum. We are most likely looking at the result of ancestral mating systems that were fairly competitive but neither characterised by gorilla-style harems nor the intense sperm competition of chimpanzee groups. Even if the minimum reproductive contribution of men still remains roughly five minutes, as opposed to the nine months or even several years for women, the average male parental investment has probably been fairly high throughout our history as a species. So compared to close relatives like bonobos and chimps, who could not care less about their individual offspring, human males are notable for their high investment in children they cannot safely call their own. By the cold logic of natural selection, that only commemorates genetic fathers and disregards those who actually changed the diapers or brought home the bacon, that spells trouble.

It could, I suppose, be argued that such problems belong to a distant past and that modern women are all paragons of faithfulness. But worldwide studies of blood groups actually demonstrate that “roughly nine per cent of children have genetic fathers who are different from those who believe they are the father.”27 This is a very high figure, given the fact that the vast majority of human cultures are characterised by sexually exclusive monogamy or polygyny. So at least when it comes to philandering we have good reason to embrace Montaigne’s suggestion that it is “much more easy to accuse the one sex, then to excuse the other.”28

Now that we have looked at some of the biological traces of sexual conflict in the biosphere, the question arises whether male jealousy itself can be regarded as an evolved psychological trait. The most daring reply to this question comes from some sociobiologists and exponents of Evolutionary Psychology, a research programme that attempts to map the evolved architecture of the human mind. Given their acceptance of the complexity I discussed earlier regarding the organism/environment equation, the latter have set themselves an extremely difficult task.29 According to evolutionary psychologists Margo Wilson and John Daly, the ubiquity of mate guarding, castration, and legally codified sexual double standards in human civilisations suggests that we may be dealing with an evolved component of the male psyche: “the repeated convergent invention of castration practices around the world and the confining and controlling behaviour of men even where it is frowned upon … reflect the workings of a sexually proprietary male psychology”30 Another evolutionary psychologist, David Buss, has even gone so far as to contend – in my view, very problematically – that jealousy is a necessary component of human psychology whose absence “portends emotional bankruptcy.”31

As we saw earlier, to demonstrate the universality or ubiquity of a phenomenon is not to demonstrate that it can be attributed to an evolved psychology. It is still possible to object, as Ralph Hupka and many others have done, that this “discriminatory attitude toward women can be accounted for more reasonably by social structures – such as the fact that economic and political power has traditionally been in the hands of men, who then promulgate laws that are consistent with their position of power.”32 (The problem with this assertion, of course, is that we are still left with the vexing problem of having to account for the existence of male economic and political power, and this new question will sooner or later land us in the realm of biology anyway). The view of jealousy as a specific psychological adaptation also remains conjectural in spite of a wealth of supporting evidence from the human and animal world. There are too many gaps in the explanation, and the “massive modularity” hypothesis that underpins it remains controversial among cognitive scientists. But the question of an evolved component in jealousy hardly stands or
falls with the fortunes of a single research programme and its particular theoretical apparatus. Since the mating game is such a central component of evolutionary fitness, and since the problem of ensuring sexual access to the other sex has been a consistent scenario in the history of our species, it is by no means inconceivable that human males (or females for that matter) should gradually have evolved a predisposition for sexual jealousy.

Most importantly, we must resist the dualistic tendency to treat ultimate (evolutionary) and proximal (social, psychological) explanation as mutually exclusive alternatives, since this leads to an incoherent opposition between nature and nurture. Humans are not either biological or culturally constructed beings. It is not that we have either evolved by means of natural selection or have been born into a particular social context. To begin with, historicists and constructivists who want to avoid circular arguments must at some point concede that human behaviour is both an expression of, and a response to, biological realities. (One obvious example I have already discussed is the non-egalitarian nature of sex). We can also reverse Daniel Dennett’s earlier argument about universals; if there is no evolved basis whatsoever for jealousy, then it would seem reasonable to expect some cultures to be free of jealousy and to exhibit radically different arrangements. We would expect to find at least one culture where, for example, men responded joyfully to their wives’ extramarital affairs and threw parties to honour the new copulation. Such cultures have not exactly been forthcoming in the anthropological record.

Conversely, few evolutionists would (or at least should) deny the immense significance of proximal explanation, including economic and other social factors, since this is a logical outcome of the organism/environment equation. After all, parental investment theory shows that investment of any kind (resources, time, etc.) is a reliable clue to mating patterns in most species. For humans, to marry and have children is to make a substantial investment that is at once sexual, emotional, and economic. Drawing on this insight, Mildred Dickemann has shown that where claustrophobia practices occur they are status-graded: “the higher the socioeconomic status of the family, the greater the intensity of the practice.”\(^{33}\) There is also a correlation between this practice and social stratification, since it receives its most extreme expression in those societies that exhibit the greatest extremes between the rich and the poor. In other words, the evolutionary perspective on jealousy is not opposed to the widespread assumption that paternity anxieties or jealousy have sociocultural causes. But it does suggest that such considerations are not the whole picture, and that human beings are not reducible to empty containers for cultural content. Our desires and our fears are rooted equally in biology and culture.

**Early modern jealousy**

Now that we have provided some evolutionary background to the problem of jealousy, we can zoom forward again to the early modern age and enjoy the benefits of a larger perspective. What is immediately striking after such mental time-travel is how close this period suddenly seems. For many people like myself, who have previously approached Shakespeare from a strictly historical perspective, four hundred years seems a very long time. But for someone who has just contemplated evolutionary time, where humans are the products of two billion years of evolution and have been equipped with the same brains for at least one hundred thousand years, a mere four hundred suddenly seems like a split second.

Historians now believe that the monogamous nuclear family had been the typical base of English social structure since at least the fourteenth century.\(^{34}\) Since the English economy was largely home-based, the family was simultaneously a reproductive and economic unit. Most children left home around the age of fifteen, usually to work in another household, and then spent between ten and fifteen years in a sort of liminal phase before they established a new family. Marriage, when it happened, normally took place between the ages of twenty-five and thirty, and men usually married a few years later than
women did. But getting married and having children were not things to be taken for granted, since around ten per cent of the population never married and no less than 42 per cent of men did not leave surviving children. Although a high mortality rate was obviously partly to blame, it is also clear that some men preferred the freedom of a single life while others lacked the resources to set up a new household. Marriage was also a fundamental decision in life since there was practically no turning back once the vows had been made. While a form of separation could be granted in extraordinary circumstances, such as adultery or extreme cruelty, the system of lifelong monogamy—with its rigid codification of sexual proprietary attitudes—may well have added to the intensity of sexual jealousy. And although the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw an increasing valorisation of sex as a sanctified component within marriage, the general Christian stigmatisation of sexuality clearly did not help either.

A widespread model for married life in England was, as Susan Amussen puts it, that of “benevolent patriarchy, not authoritarian government.” While the division of labour tied English women more closely to the home, they enjoyed much greater freedom than women in southern European countries like Spain and Italy. The majority of women “left home as early as men and experienced an equal if not greater degree of mobility as they moved from household to household,” and England was also notable for its “relaxed attitude towards young men and women spending time together, often in the absence of any chaperone.” This is why English plays of the period, like Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women (1622), typically associate claustration of women with (Catholic) southern Europe. But if English women thus enjoyed relative freedom compared to those in other countries, the nation was also characterised by a fairly rigid sexual double standard that matched the cross-cultural tendency described by Wilson and Daly. Whenever men broke the marriage vows the act was defined legally as fornication, while women were guilty of the more serious crime of adultery. This double standard was actively justified with reference to the risk of illegitimacy. The same concern was also mirrored in the legal view of sex itself; whenever sexual misconduct was concerned, officials focused on full intercourse and turned a blind eye on other sexual activities. Of course, this did not prevent either religious moralists like William Gouge or dramatists like Shakespeare—from, for example, see Emilia’s rejection of the double standard (4. 3. 85–102)—from formulating sharp critiques of such injustice.

If one should look for the most important social factors that contributed to male jealousy in this period, the best candidates might be a legal and a biological one. The legal candidate can be found in English civil law, which pragmatically defined all children born to a married woman as legitimate, regardless of who had fathered them—indeed, even if “everyone knew that they had been procreated by another father.”

By the Common Law, if the husband be within the four seas, that is, within the Jurisdiction of the King of England, if the Wife hath issue, no proofe is to be admitted to prove the Child a bastard (for in that case, Filiato non potest probari) unless the Husbond hath an apparent impossibilitie of procreation ... if the Issue be borne within a moneth or a day after marriage, between parties of full lawfull age, the childe is legitimate.

This definition has two important consequences for our understanding of male jealousy in this period. First, the typical constructivist argument that jealousy was economically motivated—that it is about property rather than love—becomes slightly dubious since the law actually precluded that practical consequences might arise from illegitimacy. For the minority of English men who had substantial property to pass on, and who did not care too deeply whether their children were actually ‘their own’ or not, the rightful succession would be protected by law. Of course, the law might not protect these men from slander or social shame, which were serious problems in this period, or indeed the more personal
chagrin of discovering that someone else had slipped between the marital sheets. The model of benevolent patriarchy probably added insult to injury in this area, and dealt a serious blow to men’s sense of manhood, since extramarital liaisons on the part of the wife suggested that the husband could not control her sexuality – or as Othello puts it with respect to Desdemona’s supposed unfaithfulness: “O curse of marriage / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!” (3. 3. 272–74). But as I have suggested, it would be reductive to regard this anxiety simply as an effect of social strictures and norms.

Secondly, and even more importantly, a law that automatically defined all children born to a married woman as legitimate may have had important psychological consequences for their husbands. Since it probably did matter a great deal to most men whether their children were their own or not, this system (which presented them with an impossible burden of proof, and even forced them to acknowledge children that had been fathered before the marriage) must have exacerbated male jealousy considerably. It may well be an important factor, together with the more general importance of honour and reputation in this period, behind the obsession with cuckoldry that characterised early modern England. In the light of this situation, it seems plausible to suggest that the innumerable jokes about cuckoldry in early modern ballads and plays resonate with a historically specific urgency.

The other historical phenomenon that must have contributed dramatically to early modern anxieties about adultery is one that can hardly be written off as some sort of social construction but falls squarely under the rubric of biology. I am thinking of syphilis, the gruesome and potentially lethal venereal disease that was almost as frequent a source of black humour as cuckoldry in this period. Of course, syphilis and adultery must also have been deeply intertwined in the popular imagination. Since the first stage of syphilis could go undetected by the afflicted person – especially in women, where the small, painless sore it caused would typically appear inside the reproductive tract – a single act of adultery could have disastrous consequences. If we combine this hideous disease with the aforementioned dictates regarding legitimacy, we can piece together the following worst-case scenario for a cuckolded husband: besides personal contagion from his wife he would also be forced to care for a syphilitic child that was not of his own making. In fact, since syphilis did not require actual sexual relations to spread, and sometimes made do with simple physical intimacy, whole families could succumb to the same disease due to one parent’s philandering.47 Even in less extreme circumstances than these, spousal fidelity would have been more than a matter of Christian morality, honour, or even love for the early moderns. It could become a matter of life and death.

“One not easily jealous”?

Let us now turn to Shakespeare’s Othello and briefly consider the problem with which I began my discussion: Emilia’s contention that jealousy has no cause.48 I hope by now that the reader will be suspicious of the following causes of jealousy: genetic determinism and social determinism. Of course, we still have one obvious cause left, and that cause is Iago. But even if emotional manipulation is an equally central theme in this play as jealousy, there is no getting around the central paradox that Othello is clearly not a jealous person, and that his descent into murderous jealousy seems so out of character. Towards the end of the play he describes himself as “one not easily jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme” (5. 2. 345–46). This self-report is borne out earlier in the play by Desdemona’s assertion that “my noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are” (3. 4. 26–28). When Emilia presses her – “Is he not jealous?” – Desdemona thinks “the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him” (30–31). What, then, leads to this drastic change?

The typical interpretation of Othello’s jealousy, which comes right out of the standard social science handbook, is that it arises from low self-esteem. Jealousy is the symptom of
a personal defect, namely, that people do not think highly enough of themselves, and this is because they have been bruised by social pressures. A long row of critics have applied this diagnosis to Shakespeare’s protagonist. In Mark Breitenberg’s analysis we even found a culture that thrived on low self-esteem as a means of social control, and where male anxiety was a somewhat paranoid prerequisite for the social status quo. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Arthur Kirsch thinks Othello’s tragedy is “that he fails to love his own body, to love himself, and it is this despairing self-hatred that spawns the enormous savagery, degradation, and destructiveness of his jealousy.”  

New Historicist Karen Newman likewise suggests that Othello is subject to a “complicitous self-loathing” because his own blackness is “loathsome” to him. Similar ideas suffuse the critical canon on Shakespeare’s play.

There are, however, a number of problems with such positions. First of all, it seems extremely unlikely that adequate self-esteem or self-love will automatically protect you from abandonment or betrayal by your loved one and thus make jealousy superfluous. The reason why both humans and many animals tend to get worked up about infidelity is that things do not quite work that way. Since an extremely attractive and self-esteeming person is likely to have attracted a very attractive partner, the risk is high that others will find that person equally attractive and look for ways to untangle the conjugal bond. It can also be asked whether massive self-esteem might not make a person more jealous, since he would be prone to take himself much more seriously?

Secondly, the attempt to explain jealousy by means of social determinism (that Othello’s jealousy is fully explicable in terms of social pressures and inadequacies, from old age to wrong race) is just as risky within literary texts as it is outside them. A literary character is not simply an effect of his or her setting, any more than a human being is the straightforward result of social conditioning (which is one reason why classical behaviourism has lost much of its prestige as a psychological theory). To assume that Othello must become jealous because he is black, for example, is to deny him a substantial part of his humanity, namely the capacity to engage self-consciously, critically, and actively with his environment. (The fact that he fails to see through Iago’s expert manipulation does not automatically make him a social determinist puppet who always believes everything he hears). But the most damaging blow to such readings of Othello’s self-image, and the idea that his jealousy must be the result of insecurity, does not come from such abstract discussion. It comes from textual evidence that points emphatically in a different direction.

One thing that Shakespeare takes considerable pains to establish in this play is how loved and admired his main protagonist is. Of course, there are two persons in the play who dislike Othello intensely and have large axes to grind – Brabantio and Iago. It is they, and only they, who vomit forth the racist abuse that contemporary students of ‘race, gender, and politics’ tend to focus on. Other characters (not just Desdemona) actually seem to flush with admiration as soon as they talk about the Noble Moor. As they wait for Othello to return to the campaign against the Turk, Montano expresses his admiration (2.1.34–36). Later in the play, when Lodovico is confronted with Othello’s horrendous abuse of Desdemona, he cannot reconcile what he has seen with the person who was everyone’s darling in Venice:

> Isthis thenoble Moor, whomour fullsenate
> Call all in all sufficient? This thenoble nature,
> Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
> The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
> Could neither graze, nor pierce?
> (4.1.264-68)

These are strong words. Othello’s reputation has been no less than that of a complete man, one who fully embodies such central Renaissance ideals as virtue, constancy, and martial
prowess. That he is capable of genuine love and affection is also suggested elsewhere. Even Iago, his sworn enemy, admits to himself in private that the Moor has a “free and open nature” (1. 3. 397), indeed, a “constant, noble, loving nature” which suggests that he will prove a “most dear husband” to Desdemona (2. 1. 286, 288). Of course, since Iago firmly believes that other people’s beauties exist only to make him ugly, these noble traits are not to be admired but resented.

It is also clear that Othello is deeply aware of the love and admiration that surrounds him. When he lands on Cyprus he remarks that “I have found great love amongst them” (2. 1. 204) and he therefore expects his wife to receive the same good treatment. It is, in fact, the same self-confident awareness of his own worth that has enabled him to steal the daughter of one of the most influential men in Venice – a remarkable social transgression – without fear of punishment: “Let [Brabantio] do his spite; / My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue his complaints” (1. 2. 17–19). In other words, the text does not support the conventional view that Othello is feeling insecure prior to Iago’s onslaught on his mind. In fact, a brief consideration of Act 3, scene 3, where Iago manages to inspire Othello with jealousy for the first time, will demonstrate that it is actually the other way around; jealousy leads to insecurity. It is only when Othello has already become jealous that he looks for personal faults that might explain his wife’s supposed adultery:

Haply for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years – yet that’s not much …
(3. 3. 267-70)

For early modern lovers, these were indeed potential risk factors. In *The Art of Love* (the closest thing Shakespeare had to the Kinsey Report), Ovid had stressed that eloquence was a crucial factor for prospective lovers. Household manuals tended to emphasise that too much difference in social rank or age were negative predictors of marital bliss. And there were probably few English people in this period who thought that ‘black is beautiful.’ But Othello writes off these intimations as unconvincing, and it will be Iago’s supreme achievement to gradually turn his emotionally stable, loving, and self-confident commander into the howling murderer that confronts us at the end of the play.

Of course, it is always possible for psychoanalysts and other negative hermeneuticians to circumvent this problem by arguing that Othello’s sociosexual insecurity has been repressed until this point in the play. He is now in denial, and his summary dismissal of age, skin colour, and insufficient eloquence is the very opposite of what it appears to be. But like all interpretations that turn the absence of something into an argument for its actual presence, this reading is no more than a substantial critical inference that depends on two rigid a priori assumptions: a prefabricated notion of what jealousy is, and an assumption that nothing in Shakespeare’s text can ever contradict this assumption. The current state of literary theory would improve considerably if interpreters were less prone to such theoretical narcissism, which assumes that one’s a priori assumptions must always be mirrored back by the literary text.

The tenuous nature of the “insecurity” reading becomes even clearer if we compare this drama to *The Winter’s Tale*, where Shakespeare depicts an even more shocking descent into jealous rage. Like Othello, Leontes is an extremely unlikely victim of jealousy as long as we persist in regarding this passion as the effect of insecurity. But what we can say for certain is that both characters are married to a true nonpareil – a woman who is both extremely beautiful and has a great personality, and whom they are deeply in love with – and that it is this good fortune that leads them into trouble. This is basically Iago’s analysis of this malady in *Othello*:
Poor and content is rich, and rich enough,
But riches fineless is as poor as winter
To him that ever fears he shall be poor.
Good God, the souls of all my tribe defend
From jealousy.

(3. 3. 174-78)

Othello is not slow to pick up on this suggestion. After rejecting skin colour, lack of eloquence, and age difference as explanations for his wife’s supposed transgression, he refers to cuckoldry as “the plague of great ones” (3. 3. 277). This again suggests to us that the noble Moor, at least, does not subscribe to the modern critical commonplace that he is an inferior and inherently insecure being. His problem is rather that he has been sufficiently attractive to attract a very attractive woman who is likely to attract a substantial number of other attractive men.

The jealous man, in other words, is the privileged man who has something very precious to lose. I think the word “riches” in Iago’s formulation above can be taken both figuratively (in the sense of requited love) and quite literally (as possession of money and property). For what does the jealous man stand to lose? Everything that he has invested in his loved one; his passion, his love, his trust, his resources, his time, his dignity, his health, and the hope for a common future that will never happen. As social constructivists point out, being part of a culture that places a high premium on honour will naturally exacerbate this situation. From a biocultural perspective it is fatuous to try and choose between these threads since they are all part of a concrete human experience, where love or jealousy are neither immaterial substances that ‘transcend’ social reality or reducible to some sort of crass cost-benefit analysis, social determinist dictate, or ‘sexual economy.’ When we say, as I think we should, that Othello presents us with a timeless theme in the history of our species, it is important to get all the prepositions right in this formulation. The drama of jealousy has always unfolded in history, not outside it.

In this brief reading I have actually elided the most important question of all regarding this play, and which was probably equally disturbing for Shakespeare’s contemporaries as it is for us:51 why is Othello transported so far beyond everyday pangs of jealousy into this murderous rage? Personally, I don’t think this question has an answer. If there were a clear answer, it would probably make the play less unsettling, and Othello is a brilliant tragedy because it is extremely unsettling. As Robert Storey observes, tragedy educates its readers in three ways: it invites empathetic identification, it creates ambivalence about the emotional allegiance that results, and it enables a vicarious experience of catastrophe.52 So while a moralist stands on the outside looking in, or rather, looking at the tragic protagonist, a tragedian or tragic reader explores how it feels on the inside. This vicarious experience enables us to explore deeply troubling things that we might well have to moralise heavily about in our everyday lives. What is more, since this inner world is a world of make-believe, it is not fully reducible to the theories we put forward to explain it. In the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, “it is part of the reality of a play that it leaves an indefinite space around its real theme. A play in which everything is completely motivated creaks like a machine. It would be a false reality if the action could all be calculated out like an equation.”53

If there were a clear answer to Othello’s madness it would also deny the extraordinary complexity, both biological and social, that creates human universals as well as immense individual and cultural variation. As human beings, we have an innate desire to explain atrocities like Desdemona’s innocent death in order to render our experience intelligible and manageable. As readers of literature, we can certainly enhance and enrich our understanding of the play by considering the best explanations we can find. We can provide illuminating accounts of the play’s social context and ways to understand its larger thematic relevance in terms of human nature. But in the final analysis, the truly scary thing about Othello is that its deepest mystery cannot be explained away. We cannot assign it to
a barbaric and unenlightened past, to a pathological insecurity that can simply be eradicated by equal doses of therapy and social change, or to some inflexible genetic programme for mate elimination. And therein, I suppose, lies the perennial horror and fascination of this tragedy.

NOTES

1 All reference to Othello are taken from The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works, eds. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998).
5 Burton 273.
14 Breitenberg 7.
16 As Peter Laslett points out, it seems “rather hazardous to judge the relative prevalence of sexual deviation from changes in the tone of admonitory literature, confessional handbooks, or any source emanating from the respectable themselves, especially the ecclesiastics … ” See “Introduction: Comparing Illegitimacy Over Time and Between Cultures,” in Bastardy and its Comparative History (London: Edward Arnold, 1980) 59. Modern historians of emotion have also stressed that we must distinguish between so-called “feeling rules” (that is, normative emotional standards) and “emotional experience itself” – see Peter N. Stearns, “History of Emotions: Issues of Change and Impact,” in Handbook of Emotions, eds. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones. 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford, 2000): 16–29: 20.
19 Daniel Dennett, Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life (London: Penguin, 1995), 486. Conversely, it is just as mistaken to suppose, as Rom Harré and other constructivists do, that cross-cultural variation is evidence that a trait is cultural and cannot be subjected to evolutionary explanation (See Griffiths, 160, and my discussion in section two of this essay).


22 This phrase, culled from Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene* (1976), is probably one of the most intractable metaphors in the history of popular science. It is still frequently recycled by critics of ‘neodarwinism’ in a manner that strikes me as both distorting and unfair. For some notable examples, see the recent collection entitled *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology*, eds. Hilary Rose and Stephen Rose (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), which contains many diatribes and sarcasms directed at an ‘ultradarwinist’ straw man (Mary Midgley’s essay is one welcome exception).


29 Some, like the feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, would carry the organism/environment equation so far as to declare such problems insoluble; see, for example, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: BasicBooks, 2000). But Fausto-Sterling’s conclusion that we “need to stop looking for universal causes of sexual behavior and gender acquisition and instead learn more about (and from) individual difference” (246) seems incoherent; how can we ever hope to explore difference meaningfully without simultaneously exploring sameness? Like her earlier *Myths of Gender* (1992), this politically inflected argument wavers precariously between two contradictory commitments: scientific realism and strong constructivism.


31 Buss 207.

32 Hupka 257.


37 Marriage was not an obvious option for the great majority of young men and women “who had no secure expectation of property, and whose chances of founding an establishment were so much affected by economic vicissitudes.” (Laslett 58). For other considerations, see Francis Bacon, “Of Marriage and Single Life,” in *The Essays or Counsels, Civill and Morall, 1575–1625*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985).


40 Amussen 39, 149.

41 Gillis 34.

42 Macfarlane 297.

Ingram 130.

Maclaren 147.


This discussion is indebted to the expertise of Urban Morén, who is currently conducting doctoral research at Uppsala University on sexual subtexts related to syphilis in *The Winter’s Tale*.

A more comprehensive reading of jealousy in *Othello* will be offered in chapter four of my forthcoming study, “Shakespeare and the Nature of Love: A Biocultural Approach”, which examines different forms and aspects of love – parental love, romantic love, jealousy, etc. – in Shakespeare’s plays.


It should perhaps be pointed out that such crimes of passion were not common in the early modern period, and that homicide rates were not extremely high compared to some modern Western countries. According to J. A. Sharpe, homicides in Essex fell from 7 per 100,000 inhabitants in the late sixteenth century to 2.8 in the late seventeenth century – see *Early Modern England: A Social History 1550–1760* (London: Edward Arnold, 1987) 111. In comparison, rates in the USA have averaged between 5 and 10 in the second half of the twentieth century.

Storey 138.
