



Holbein, "The Ambassadors" (National Portrait Gallery, London).

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# RENAISSANCE SELF-FASHIONING

*From More to Shakespeare*

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STEPHEN GREENBLATT

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## The Improvisation of Power

Spenser and Marlowe are, from the perspective of this study, mighty opposites, poised in antagonism as radical as that of More and Tyndale in the 1530s. If Spenser sees human identity as conferred by loving service to legitimate authority, to the yoked power of God and the state, Marlowe sees identity established at those moments in which order—political, theological, sexual—is violated. If repetition for Spenser is an aspect of the patient labor of civility, for Marlowe it is the means of constituting oneself in an anonymous void. If Spenser's heroes strive for balance and control, Marlowe's strive to shatter the restraints upon their desires. If in Spenser there is fear of the excess that threatens to engulf order and seems to leave an ineradicable taint on temperance itself, in Marlowe there is fear of the order that threatens to extinguish excess and seems to have always already turned rebellion into a tribute to authority. If Spenser writes for an aristocratic and upper-middle-class audience in a self-consciously archaizing manner, thereby participating in the decorative revival of feudal trappings that characterized Elizabethan courtly ritual,<sup>1</sup> Marlowe writes for the new public theater in a blank verse that must have seemed, after the jog-trot fourteeners of the preceding decades, like reality itself. If Spenser holds up his "other world" to the gaze of power and says, "Behold! This rich beauty is your own face," Marlowe presents *his* and says, "Behold! This tragi-comic, magnificent deformity is how you appear in my rich art." If Spenser's art constantly questions its own status in order to protect power from such questioning, Marlowe undermines power in

order to raise his art to the status of a self-regarding, self-justifying absolute.

There is not, of course, anything in Spenser or Marlowe comparable to the violent polemical exchange between More and Tyndale, but there is at least one resonant moment of conjunction that will serve to exemplify the opposition I have just sketched here. In book 1, canto 7 of *The Faerie Queene*, dismayed by the news that Redcrosse has been overthrown by the giant Orgoglio, Una providentially encounters Prince Arthur, the embodiment of Magnificence—the virtue, according to the letter to Raleigh, that "is the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it them all." This is Arthur's first appearance in the poem, and there follows an elaborate description of his gorgeous armor, a description that includes the following stanza on his helmet's crest:

Vpon the top of all his loftie crest,  
A bunch of haire discolourd diuersly,  
With sprinkled pearle, and gold full richly drest,  
Did shake, and seem'd to daunce for iollity,  
Like to an Almond tree ymounted hye  
On top of greene *Selinis* all alone,  
With blossomes braue bedecked daintily;  
Whose tender locks do tremble euery one  
At euery little breath, that vnder heauen is blowne.  
(1.7.32)

As early as the late eighteenth century, a reader records his surprise to find this passage almost verbatim in part 2 of *Tamburlaine*.<sup>2</sup> It occurs in the scene in which Tamburlaine is drawn on stage in his chariot by the captive kings, "with bits in their mouths," the stage direction tells us, "reins in his left hand, in his right hand a whip, with which he scourgeth them." Exulting in his triumphant power, Tamburlaine baits his captives, hands over the weeping royal concubines to satisfy the lust of his common soldiers, and—his own erotic satisfaction—imagines his future conquests:

Through the streets with troops of conquered kings,  
I'll ride in golden armor like the Sun,  
And in my helm a triple plume shall spring,  
Spangled with Diamonds dancing in the air,  
To note me Emperor of the three-fold world,  
Like to an almond tree ymounted high,  
Upon the lofty and celestial mount,

Of ever green *Selinus* quaintly decked  
 With blooms more white than *Hericina's* brows,  
 Whose tender blossoms tremble every one,  
 At every little breath that thorough heaven is blown.  
 (4.3.4094-4113)

What is sung by Spenser in praise of Arthur is sung by Tamburlaine in praise of himself; the chivalric accoutrement, an emblem of Arthur's magnanimous knighthood is here part of Tamburlaine's paean to his own power lust. Lines that for Spenser belong to the supreme figure of civility, the chief upholder of the Order of Maidenhead, the worshipful servant of Gloriana, for Marlowe belong to the fantasy life of the Scythian Scourge of God. Marlowe's scene is self-consciously emblematic, as if it were a theatrical improvisation in the Spenserean manner, but now with the hero's place taken by a character who, in his sadistic excess, most closely resembles Orgoglio.<sup>3</sup> And even as we are struck by the radical difference, we are haunted by the vertiginous possibility of an underlying sameness. What if Arthur and Tamburlaine are not separate and opposed? What if they are two faces of the same thing, embodiments of the identical power? Tamburlaine's is the face Arthur shows to his enemies or, alternatively, Arthur's is the face Tamburlaine shows to his followers. To the Irish kern, Spenser's Prince of Magnanimity looks like the Scourge of God; to the English courtier, Marlowe's grotesque conquerer looks like the Faerie Queene.

How shall we characterize the power that possesses both faces and can pass from one to the other? In a famous passage in *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes that a prince must know well how to use both the beast and the man, and hence the ancients depicted Achilles and other heroes as educated by Chiron the centaur. This discussion is an early instance of the celebration of psychic mobility that has continued to characterize discussions of Western consciousness to the present time. Thus in his influential study of modernization in the Middle East, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, the sociologist Daniel Lerner defines the West as a "mobile society," a society characterized not only by certain enlightened and rational public practices but also by the inculcation in its people of a "mobile sensibility so adaptive to change that rearrangement of the self-system is its distinctive mode."<sup>4</sup> While traditional society, Professor Lerner argues, functions on the basis of a "highly constrictive personality" (51), one that resists change and is incapable of grasping the situation of another, the mobile

personality of Western society "is distinguished by a high capacity for identification with new aspects of his environment," for he "comes equipped with the mechanisms needed to incorporate new demands upon himself that arise outside of his habitual experience" (49). Those mechanisms Professor Lerner subsumes under the single term *empathy*, which he defines as "the capacity to see oneself in the other fellow's situation" (50). In the West, this capacity was fostered first by the physical mobility initiated by the Age of Exploration, then confirmed and broadened by the mass media. "These," he writes, "have peopled the daily world of their audience with sustained, even intimate, experience of the lives of others. 'Ma Perkins,' 'The Goldbergs,' 'I Love Lucy'—all these bring us friends we never met, but whose joys and sorrows we intensely 'share'" (53). And the international diffusion of the mass media means a concomitant diffusion of psychic mobility and hence of modernization: "In our time, indeed, the spread of empathy around the world is accelerating" (52).

To test the rate of this acceleration, Professor Lerner devised a set of questions that he and his assistants put to a cross-section of the inhabitants of the Middle East, to porters and cobblers, as well as grocers and physicians. The questions began, "If you were made editor of a newspaper, what kind of a paper would you run?" and I confess myself in complete sympathy with that class of respondents who, like one shepherd interviewed in a village near Ankara, gasped "My God! How can you say such a thing? . . . A poor villager . . . master of the whole world" (24). Professor Lerner invariably interprets such answers as indicative of a constrictive personality incapable of empathy, but in fact the Turkish shepherd, with his Tamburlainian language, reintroduces the great missing term in the analysis of modernization, and that term is *power*. For my own part, I would like in this chapter to delineate the Renaissance origins of the "mobile sensibility" and, having done so, to shift the ground from "I Love Lucy" to *Othello* in order to demonstrate that what Professor Lerner calls "empathy," Shakespeare calls "Iago."

To help us return from the contemporary Middle East to the early seventeenth century, let us dwell for a moment on Professor Lerner's own concept of Renaissance origins: "Take the factor of physical mobility," he writes, "which initiated Western take-off in an age when the earth was underpopulated in terms of the world man-land ratio. Land was to be had, more or less, for the finding. The great explorers took over vast real estate by planting a

flag; these were slowly filled with new populations over generations" (65). It didn't exactly happen this way. Land does not become "real estate" quite so easily, and the underpopulation was not found but created by those great explorers. Demographers of Mesoamerica now estimate, for example, that the population of Hispaniola in 1492 was 7-8 million, perhaps as high as 11 million. Reduction to that attractive man-land ratio was startlingly sudden: by 1501, enslavement, disruption of agriculture, and, above all, European disease had reduced the population to some 700,000; by 1512, to 28,000.<sup>5</sup> The unimaginable massiveness of the death rate did not, of course, go unnoticed; European observers took it as a sign of God's determination to cast down the idolaters and open the New World to Christianity.

With the passage from the sociologist's bland world of ceremonial flag-planting in an empty landscape to violent displacement and insidious death, we have already moved toward Shakespeare's tragedy, and we move still closer if we glance at an incident recounted in 1525 by Peter Martyr in the Seventh Decade of *De orbe novo*. Faced with a serious labor shortage in the gold mines as a result of the decimation of the native population, the Spanish in Hispaniola began to raid neighboring islands. Two ships reached an outlying island in the Lucayas (now called the Bahamas) where they were received with awe and trust. The Spanish learned through their interpreters that the natives believed that after death their souls were first purged of their sins in icy northern mountains, then borne to a paradisaal island in the south, whose beneficent, lame prince offered them innumerable pleasures: "the souls enjoy eternal delights, among the dancings and songs of young maidens, and among the embracements of their children, and whatsoever they loved heretofore; they babble also there, that such as grow old, wax young again, so that all are of like years full of joy and mirth."<sup>6</sup> When the Spanish understood these imaginations, writes Martyr, they proceeded to persuade the natives "that they came from those places, where they should see their parents, and children, and all their kindred and friends that were dead: and should enjoy all kind of delights, together with the embracements and fruition of beloved things" (625). Thus deceived, the entire population of the island passed "singing and rejoicing," Martyr says, onto the ships and were taken to the gold mines of Hispaniola. The Spanish, however, reaped less profit than they had anticipated; when they grasped what had happened to them, the Lucayans, like certain German Jewish communities during the Crusades, undertook mass suicide: "becoming desper-

ate, they either slew themselves, or choosing to famish, gave up their faint spirits, being persuaded by no reason, or violence, to take food" (625).

Martyr, it appears, feels ambivalent about the story. He is certain that God disapproves of such treachery, since many of those who perpetrated the fraud subsequently died violent deaths; on the other hand, he opposes those who would free enslaved natives, since bitter experience has shown that even those Indians who have apparently been converted to Christianity will, given the slightest opportunity, revert to "their ancient and native vices" and turn savagely against those who had instructed them "with fatherly charity" (627). But, for our purposes, Martyr's ambivalence is less important than the power of his story to evoke a crucial Renaissance mode of behavior that links Lerner's "empathy" and Shakespeare's Iago: I shall call that mode *improvisation*, by which I mean the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario. The spur-of-the-moment quality of improvisation is not as critical here as the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established. Indeed, as Castiglione and others in the Renaissance well understood, the impromptu character of an improvisation is itself often a calculated mask, the product of careful preparation.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, all plots, literary and behavioral, inevitably have their origin in a moment prior to formal coherence, a moment of experimental, aleatory impulse in which the available, received materials are curved toward a novel shape. We cannot locate a point of pure premeditation or pure randomness. What is essential is the Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the preexisting political, religious, even psychic structures of the natives and to turn those structures to their advantage. The process is as familiar to us by now as the most tawdry business fraud, so familiar that we assume a virtually universal diffusion of the necessary improvisational talent, but that assumption is almost certainly misleading. There are periods and cultures in which the ability to insert oneself into the consciousness of another is of relatively slight importance, the object of limited concern; others in which it is a major preoccupation, the object of cultivation and fear. Professor Lerner is right to insist that this ability is a characteristic (though not exclusively) Western mode, present to varying degrees in the classical and medieval world and greatly strengthened from the Renaissance onward; he misleads only in insisting further that it is an act of imaginative generosity, a sympathetic appreciation of the situation of the other fellow. For when

he speaks confidently of the "spread of empathy around the world," we must understand that he is speaking of the exercise of Western power, power that is creative as well as destructive, but that is scarcely ever wholly disinterested and benign.

To return to the Lucayan story, we may ask ourselves what conditions exist in Renaissance culture that make such an improvisation possible. It depends first upon the ability and willingness to play a role, to transform oneself, if only for a brief period and with mental reservations, into another. This necessitates the acceptance of disguise, the ability to effect a divorce, in Ascham's phrase, between the tongue and the heart. Such role-playing in turn depends upon the transformation of another's reality into a manipulable fiction. The Spanish had to perceive the Indians' religious beliefs as illusions, "imagination" as Martyr's English translator calls them. Lucayan society, Martyr observes, is based upon a principle of reverent obedience fostered by a set of religious fables that "are delivered by word of mouth and tradition from the Elders to the younger, for a most sacred and true history, insomuch as he who but seemed to think otherwise, should be thrust out of the society of men" (623). The Lucayan king performs the supreme sacral functions and partakes fully in the veneration accorded to the idols, so that if he were to command one of his subjects to cast himself down from a precipice, the subject would immediately comply. The king uses this absolute power to ensure the just distribution, to families according to need, of the tribe's food, all of which is stored communally in royal granaries: "They had the golden age, *mine* and *thine*, the seeds of discord, were far removed from them" (618). Martyr then perceives the social function of Lucayan religious concepts, the native apparatus for their transmission and reproduction, and the punitive apparatus for the enforcement of belief. In short, he grasps Lucayan religion as an ideology, and it is this perception that licenses the transformation of "sacred and true history" into "crafty and subtle imaginations" (625) that may be exploited.

If improvisation is made possible by the subversive perception of another's truth as an ideological construct, that construct must at the same time be grasped in terms that bear a certain structural resemblance to one's own set of beliefs. An ideology that is perceived as entirely alien would permit no point of histrionic entry: it could be destroyed but not performed. Thus the Lucayan religion, in Martyr's account, is an anamorphic representation of Catholicism: there are "images" carried forth with solemn pomp on "the holy day of adoration"; worshipers kneel reverently before

these images, sing "hymns," and make offerings, "which at night the nobles divide among them, as our priests do the cakes or wafers which women offer" (622); there are "holy relics" about which the chief priest, standing in his "pulpit," preaches; and, as we have seen, there is absolution for sin, purgatory, and eternal delight in paradise. The European account of the native religion must have borne some likeness to what the Lucayans actually believed; why else would they have danced, singing and rejoicing, onto the Spanish ships? But it is equally important that the religion is conceived as analogous to Catholicism, close enough to permit improvisation, yet sufficiently distanced to protect European beliefs from the violence of fictionalization. The Spanish were not compelled to perceive their own religion as a manipulable human construct; on the contrary, the compulsion of their own creed was presumably strengthened by their contemptuous exploitation of an analogous symbolic structure.

This absence of reciprocity is an aspect of the total economy of the mode of improvisation that I have sketched here. For what we may see in the Lucayan story is an early manifestation of an exercise of power that was subsequently to become vastly important and remains a potent force in our lives: the ownership of another's labor conceived as involving no supposedly "natural" reciprocal obligation (as in feudalism) but rather functioning by concealing the very fact of ownership from the exploited who believe that they are acting freely and in their own interest. Of course, once the ships reached Hispaniola, this concealed ownership gave way to direct enslavement; the Spanish were not capable of continuing the improvisation into the very mines. And it is this failure to sustain the illusion that led to the ultimate failure of the enterprise, for, of course, the Spanish did not want dead Indians but live mineworkers. It would take other, subtler minds, in the Renaissance and beyond, to perfect the means to sustain indefinitely an indirect enslavement.

I have called improvisation a central Renaissance mode of behavior, but the example on which I have focused is located on a geographical margin and might only seem to bear out Immanuel Wallerstein's theory that Western Europe in the sixteenth century increasingly established its ownership of the labor and resources of those located in areas defined as peripheral.<sup>8</sup> But I would argue that the phenomenon I have described is found in a wide variety of forms closer to home. It may be glimpsed, to suggest two significant instances, in the relation of Tudor power to Catholic symbolism and the characteristic form of rhetorical education.

The Anglican Church and the monarch who was its Supreme Head did not, as radical Protestants demanded, eradicate Catholic ritual but rather improvised within it in an attempt to assume its power. Thus, for example, in the Accession Day celebration of 1590, we are told that the queen, sitting in the Tilt gallery, "did suddenly hear a music so sweet and so secret, as every one thereat greatly marvelled. And hearkening to that excellent melody, the earth as it were opening, there appears a Pavilion, made of white Taffeta, being in proportion like unto the sacred Temple of the Virgins Vestal. This Temple seemed to consist upon pillars of porphyry, arched like unto a Church, within it were many lamps burning. Also, on the one side an Altar covered with cloth of gold; and thereupon two wax candles burning in rich candlesticks; upon the Altar also were laid certain Princely presents, which after by three Virgins were presented unto her Majesty."<sup>9</sup> This secular epiphany permits us to identify two of the characteristic operations of improvisation: displacement and absorption. By displacement I mean the process whereby a prior symbolic structure is compelled to coexist with other centers of attention that do not necessarily conflict with the original structure but are not swept up in its gravitational pull; indeed, as here, the sacred may find itself serving as an adornment, a backdrop, an occasion for a quite secular phenomenon. By absorption I mean the process whereby a symbolic structure is taken into the ego so completely that it ceases to exist as an external phenomenon; in the Accession Day ceremony, instead of the secular prince humbling herself before the sacred, the sacred seems only to enhance the ruler's identity, to express her power.<sup>10</sup>

Both displacement and absorption are possible here because the religious symbolism was already charged with the celebration of power. What we are witnessing is a shift in the institution that controls and profits from the interpretation of such symbolism, a shift mediated in this instance by the classical scholarship of Renaissance humanism. The invocation of the Temple of the Vestal Virgins is the sign of that transformation of belief into ideology that we have already examined; the Roman mythology, deftly keyed to England's Virgin Queen, helps to fictionalize Catholic ritual sufficiently for it to be displaced and absorbed.

This enzymatic function of humanism leads directly to our second instance of domestic improvisation, for the cornerstone of the humanist project was a rhetorical education. In *The Tudor Play of Mind*, Joel Altman has recently demonstrated the central importance for English Renaissance culture of the *argumentum in ut-*

*ramque partem*, the cultivation of the scholar's power to speak equally persuasively for diametrically opposed positions. The practice permeated intellectual life in the early sixteenth century and was, Altman convincingly argues, one of the formative influences on the early drama.<sup>11</sup> It is in the spirit of such rhetorical mobility that Erasmus praises More, as we have seen, for his ability "to play the man of all hours with all men" and that Roper recalls the young More's dazzling improvisations in Cardinal Morton's Christmas plays.

The hagiographical bias of Roper's and most subsequent writing on More has concealed the extent to which this improvisational gift is closely allied to a control of power in the law courts and the royal service: the mystification of manipulation as disinterested empathy begins as early as the sixteenth century. As a corrective, we need only recall More's controversial works, such as *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, whose recurrent method is through improvisation to transform the heretic's faith into a fiction, then absorb it into a new symbolic structure that will ridicule or consume it. Thus Tyndale had written: "Sin we through fragility never so oft, yet as soon as we repent and come into the right way again, and unto the testament which God hath made in Christ's blood: our sins vanish away as smoke in the wind, and as darkness at the coming of light, or as thou cast a little blood or milk into the main sea." More responds by maliciously improvising on Tyndale's text: "Neither purgatory need to be feared when we go hence, nor penance need to be done while we be here, but sin and be sorry and sit and make merry, and then sin again and then repent a little and run to the ale and wash away the sin, think once on God's promise and then do what we list. For hoping sure in that, kill we ten men on a day, we cast but a little blood into the main sea." Having thus made a part of his own, More continues by labeling Tyndale's argument about penance as "but a piece of his poetry"—an explicit instance of that fictionalization we have witnessed elsewhere—and concludes, "Go me to Martin Luther. . . . While that friar lieth with his nun and woteth well he doth nought [i.e., knows he does evil], and saith still he doth well: let Tyndale tell me what repenting is that. He repenteth every morning, and to bed again every night; thinketh on God's promise first, and then go sin again upon trust of God's testament, and then he calleth it casting of a little milk into the main sea."<sup>12</sup>

Improvisation here obviously does not intend to deceive its original object but to work upon a third party, the reader, who might be wavering between the reformers and the Catholic

Church. If the heretic speaks of sin redeemed by God's testament as milk, More returns that milk to sin, then surpasses the simple reversal by transforming it to semen, while he turns the sea that imaged for Tyndale the boundlessness of divine forgiveness into the sexual insatiability of Luther's nun.

These perversions of the reformer's text are greatly facilitated by the fact that the text was already immersed in an intensely charged set of metaphorical transformations—that is, More seizes upon the brilliant instability of Tyndale's prose with its own nervous passage from Christ's blood to sin conceived progressively as smoke, darkness, blood, and finally milk. More's artful improvisation makes it seem that murder and lust lay just beneath the surface of the original discourse, as a kind of dark subtext, and he is able to do so more plausibly because both violence and sexual anxiety are in fact powerful underlying forces in Tyndale's prose as in More's. That is, once again, there is a haunting structural homology between the improviser and his other.

I would hope that by now *Othello* seems virtually to force itself upon us as the supreme symbolic expression of the cultural mode I have been describing, for violence, sexual anxiety, and improvisation are the materials out of which the drama is constructed. To be sure, there are many other explorations of these materials in Shakespeare—one thinks of Richard III wooing Anne<sup>13</sup> or, in comedy, of Rosalind playfully taking advantage of the disguise that exile has forced upon her—but none so intense and radical. In Iago's first soliloquy, Shakespeare goes out of his way to emphasize the improvised nature of the villain's plot:

Cassio's a proper man, let me see now,  
To get this place, and to make up my will,  
A double knavery . . . how, how? . . . let me see,  
After some time, to abuse Othello's ear,  
That he is too familiar with his wife:  
He has a person and a smooth dispose,  
To be suspected, fram'd to make women false:  
The Moor a free and open nature too,  
That thinks men honest that but seems to be so:  
And will as tenderly be led by the nose . . .  
As asses are.  
I ha't, it is engender'd; Hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.  
(1.3.390–402)<sup>14</sup>

We will try shortly to cast some light on why Iago conceives of his activity here as sexual; for the moment, we need only to observe all

of the marks of the impromptu and provisional, extending to the ambiguity of the third-person pronoun: "to abuse Othello's ear / That he is too familiar with his wife." This ambiguity is felicitous; indeed, though scarcely visible at this point, it is the dark essence of Iago's whole enterprise which is, as we shall see, to play upon Othello's buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous.<sup>15</sup>

What I have called the marks of the impromptu extend to Iago's other speeches and actions through the course of the whole play. In act 2, he declares of his conspiracy, "'tis here, but yet confus'd; / Knavery's plain face is never seen, till us'd," and this half-willed confusion continues through the agile, hectic maneuvers of the last act until the moment of exposure and silence. To all but Roderigo, of course, Iago presents himself as incapable of improvisation, except in the limited and seemingly benign form of banter and jig.<sup>16</sup> And even here, he is careful, when Desdemona asks him to improvise her praise, to declare himself unfit for the task:

I am about it, but indeed my invention  
Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze,  
It plucks out brain and all: but my Muse labours,  
And thus she is deliver'd.

(2.1.125–28)

Lurking in the homely denial of ability is the image of his invention as birdlime, and hence a covert celebration of his power to ensnare others. Like Jonson's Mosca, Iago is fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims, to lead them by the nose like asses, to possess their labor without their ever being capable of grasping the relation in which they are enmeshed. Such is the relation Iago establishes with virtually every character in the play, from Othello and Desdemona to such minor figures as Montano and Bianca. For the Spanish colonialists, improvisation could only bring the Lucayans into open enslavement; for Iago, it is the key to a mastery whose emblem is the "duteous and knee-crooking knave" who dotes "on his own obsequious bondage" (1.1.45–46), a mastery invisible to the servant, a mastery, that is, whose character is essentially ideological. Iago's attitude toward Othello is nonetheless colonial: though he finds himself in a subordinate position, the ensign regards his black general as "an erring barbarian" whose "free and open nature" is a fertile field for exploitation. However galling it may be to him, Iago's subordination is a kind of protection, for it conceals



his power and enables him to play upon the ambivalence of Othello's relation to Christian society: the Moor at once represents the institution and the alien, the conqueror and the infidel. Iago can conceal his malicious intentions toward "the thick-lips" behind the mask of dutiful service and hence prolong his improvisation as the Spaniards could not. To be sure, the play suggests, Iago must ultimately destroy the beings he exploits and hence undermine the profitable economy of his own relations, but that destruction may be long deferred, deferred in fact for precisely the length of the play.<sup>17</sup>

If Iago then holds over others a possession that must constantly efface the signs of its own power, how can it be established, let alone maintained? We will find a clue, I think, in what we have been calling the process of fictionalization that transforms a fixed symbolic structure into a flexible construct ripe for improvisational entry. This process is at work in Shakespeare's play, where we may more accurately identify it as *submission to narrative self-fashioning*. When in Cyprus Othello and Desdemona have been ecstatically reunited, Iago astonishes Roderigo by informing him that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. He has no evidence, of course—indeed we have earlier seen him "engender" the whole plot entirely out of his fantasy—but he proceeds to lay before his gull all of the circumstances that make this adultery plausible: "mark me, with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging, and telling her fantastical lies; and she will love him still for prating?" (2.1.221–23). Desdemona cannot long take pleasure in her outlandish match: "When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be again to inflame it, and give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners and beauties" (2.1.225–29). The elegant Cassio is the obvious choice: "Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand?" Iago asks. To Roderigo's objection that this was "but courtesy," Iago replies, "Lechery, by this hand: an index and prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts" (2.1.251–55). The metaphor makes explicit what Iago has been doing all along: constructing a narrative into which he inscribes ("by this hand") those around him. He does not need a profound or even reasonably accurate understanding of his victims; he would rather deal in probable impossibilities than improbable possibilities. And it is eminently probable that a young, beautiful Venetian gentlewoman would tire of her old, outlandish husband and turn instead to the handsome, young lieutenant: it is, after all, one of the master plots of comedy.

What Iago as inventor of comic narrative needs is a sharp eye for

the surfaces of social existence, a sense, as Bergson says, of the mechanical encrusted upon the living, a reductive grasp of human possibilities. These he has in extraordinarily full measure.<sup>18</sup> "The wine she drinks is made of grapes," he says in response to Roderigo's idealization of Desdemona, and so reduced, she can be assimilated to Iago's grasp of the usual run of humanity. Similarly, in a spirit of ironic connoisseurship, he observes Cassio's courtly gestures, "If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kiss'd your three fingers so oft, which now again you are most apt to play the sir in: good, well kiss'd, an excellent courtesy" (2.1.171–75). He is watching a comedy of manners. Above all, Iago is sensitive to habitual and self-limiting forms of discourse, to Cassio's reaction when he has had a drink or when someone mentions Bianca, to Othello's rhetorical extremism, to Desdemona's persistence and tone when she pleads for a friend; and, of course, he is demonically sensitive to the way individuals interpret discourse, to the signals they ignore and those to which they respond.

We should add that Iago includes himself in this ceaseless narrative invention; indeed, as we have seen from the start, a successful improvisational career depends upon role-playing, which is in turn allied to the capacity, as Professor Lerner defines empathy, "to see oneself in the other fellow's situation." This capacity requires above all a sense that one is not forever fixed in a single, divinely sanctioned identity, a sense Iago expresses to Roderigo in a parodically sententious theory of self-fashioning: "our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners, so that if we will plant nettles, or sow lettuce, set hyssop, and weed up thyme; supply it with one gender of herbs, or distract it with many; either to have it sterile with idleness, or manur'd with industry, why, the power, and corrigible authority of this, lies in our wills" (1.3.320–26). Confident in his shaping power, Iago has the role-player's ability to imagine his nonexistence so that he can exist for a moment in another and as another. In the opening scene he gives voice to this hypothetical self-cancellation in a line of eerie simplicity: "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago" (1.1.57). The simplicity is far more apparent than real. Is the "I" in both halves of the line the same? Does it designate a hard, impacted self-interest prior to social identity, or are there two distinct, even opposing selves? Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago, because the "I" always loves itself and the creature I know as Iago hates the Moor he serves or, alternatively, because as the Moor I would be other than I am now, free of the tormenting appetite and revulsion

that characterize the servant's relation to his master and that constitute my identity as Iago. I would be radically the same / I would be radically different; the rapacious ego underlies all institutional structures / the rapacious ego is constituted by institutional structures.<sup>19</sup>

What is most disturbing in Iago's comically banal and fathomless expression—as for that matter, in Professor Lerner's definition of empathy—is that the imagined self-loss conceals its opposite: a ruthless displacement and absorption of the other. Empathy, as the German *Einfühlung* suggests, may be a feeling of oneself into an object, but that object may have to be drained of its own substance before it will serve as an appropriate vessel. Certainly in *Othello*, where all relations are embedded in power and sexuality, there is no realm where the subject and object can merge in the unproblematic accord affirmed by the theorists of empathy.<sup>20</sup> As Iago himself proclaims, his momentary identification with the Moor is a strategic aspect of his malevolent hypocrisy:

In following him, I follow but myself.  
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,  
But seeming so, for my peculiar end.

(1.1.58–60)

Exactly what that "peculiar end" is remains opaque. Even the general term "self-interest" is suspect: Iago begins his speech in a declaration of self-interest—"I follow him to serve my turn upon him"—and ends in a declaration of self-division: "I am not what I am."<sup>21</sup> We tend, to be sure, to hear the latter as "I am not what I seem," hence as a simple confirmation of his public deception. But "I am not what I am" goes beyond social feigning; not only does Iago mask himself in society as the honest ancient, but in private he tries out a bewildering succession of brief narratives that critics have attempted, with notorious results, to translate into motives. These inner narratives—shared, that is, only with the audience—continually promise to disclose what lies behind the public deception, to illuminate what Iago calls "the native act and figure" of his heart, and continually fail to do so; or rather, they reveal that his heart is precisely a series of acts and figures, each referring to something else, something just out of our grasp. "I am not what I am" suggests that this elusiveness is permanent, that even self-interest, whose transcendental guarantee is the divine "I am what I am," is a mask.<sup>22</sup> Iago's constant recourse to narrative then is both the affirmation of absolute self-interest and the affirmation of absolute vacancy; the oscillation between the two incompatible positions suggests in Iago the principle of narrativity itself, cut off

from original motive and final disclosure. The only termination possible in his case is not revelation but silence.

The question remains why anyone would submit, even unconsciously, to Iago's narrative fashioning. Why would anyone submit to another's narrative at all? For an answer we may recall the pressures on all the figures we have considered in this study and return to our observation that there is a structural resemblance between even a hostile improvisation and its object. In *Othello* the characters have always already experienced submission to narrativity. This is clearest and most important in the case of Othello himself. When Brabantio brings before the Signiory the charge that his daughter has been seduced by witchcraft, Othello promises to deliver "a round unvarnish'd tale . . . / Of my whole course of love" (1.3.90–91), and at the heart of this tale is the telling of tales:

Her father lov'd me, oft invited me,  
Still question'd me the story of my life,  
From year to year; the battles, sieges, fortunes,  
That I have pass'd:  
I ran it through, even from my boyish days,  
To the very moment that he bade me tell it.

(1.3.128–33)

The telling of the story of one's life—the conception of one's life as a story<sup>23</sup>—is a response to public inquiry: to the demands of the Senate, sitting in judgment or, at the least, to the presence of an inquiring community. When, as recorded in the fourteenth-century documents Le Roy Ladurie has brilliantly studied, the peasants of the Languedoc village of Montaillou are examined by the Inquisition, they respond with a narrative performance: "About 14 years ago, in Lent, towards vespers, I took two sides of salted pork to the house of Guillaume Benet of Montaillou, to have them smoked. There I found Guillemette Benet warming herself by the fire, together with another woman; I put the salted meat in the kitchen and left."<sup>24</sup> And when the Carthaginian queen calls upon her guest to "tell us all things from the first beginning, Grecian guile, your people's trials, and then your journeyings," Aeneas responds, as he must, with a narrative of the destiny decreed by the gods.<sup>25</sup> So too Othello before the Senate or earlier in Brabantio's house responds to questioning with what he calls his "travel's history" or, in the Folio reading, as if noting the genre, his "traveler's history." This history, it should be noted, is not only of events in distant lands and among strange peoples: "I ran



A maiden never bold of spirit,  
So still and quiet, that her motion  
Blush'd at her self,

(1.3.94-96)

yet even this self-abnegation in its very extremity unsettles what we may assume was her father's expectation:

So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd  
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation.

(1.2.67-68)

And, of course, her marriage choice is, for Brabantio, an act of astonishing disobedience, explicable only as the somnambulistic behavior of one bewitched or drugged. He views her elopement not as a transfer of obedience but as theft or treason or a reckless escape from what he calls his "guardage." Both he and Iago remind Othello that her marriage suggests not submission but deception:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;  
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,  
She lov'd them most.

(3.3.210-11)<sup>29</sup>

As the sly reference to Othello's "looks" suggests, the scandal of Desdemona's marriage consists not only in her failure to receive her father's prior consent but in her husband's blackness. That blackness—the sign of all that the society finds frightening and dangerous—is the indelible witness to Othello's permanent status as an outsider, no matter how highly the state may value his services or how sincerely he has embraced its values.<sup>30</sup> The safe passage of the female from father to husband is irreparably disrupted, marked as an escape: "O heaven," Brabantio cries, "how got she out?" (1.1.169).

Desdemona's relation to her lord Othello should, of course, lay to rest any doubts about her proper submission, but it is not only Brabantio's opposition and Othello's blackness that raise such doubts, even in the midst of her intensest declarations of love. There is rather a quality in that love itself that unsettles the orthodox schema of hierarchical obedience and makes Othello perceive her submission to his discourse as a devouring of it. We may perceive this quality most clearly in the exquisite moment of the lovers' reunion on Cyprus:

OTHELLO It gives me wonder great as my content  
To see you here before me: O my soul's joy,

If after every tempest come such calmness,  
May the winds blow, till they have waken'd death,  
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,  
Olympus-high, and duck again as low  
As hell's from heaven. If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute,  
That not another comfort, like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

DESDEMONA

The heavens forbid

But that our loves and comforts should increase,  
Even as our days do grow.

OTHELLO

Amen to that, sweet powers!

I cannot speak enough of this content,  
It stops me here, it is too much of joy.

(2.1.183-97)<sup>31</sup>

Christian orthodoxy in both Catholic and Protestant Europe could envision a fervent mutual love between husband and wife, the love expressed most profoundly by Saint Paul in words that are cited and commented upon in virtually every discussion of marriage:

So men are bound to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife, loveth himself. For never did any man hate his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord doth the congregation: for we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This mystery is great, but I speak of Christ and of the congregation.<sup>32</sup>

Building upon this passage and upon its source in *Genesis*, commentators could write, like the Reformer Thomas Becon, that marriage is a "high, holy, and blessed order of life, ordained not of man, but of God, yea and that not in this sinful world, but in paradise that most joyful garden of pleasure." But like the Pauline text itself, all such discussions of married love begin and end by affirming the larger order of authority and submission within which marriage takes its rightful place. The family, as William Gouge puts it, "is a little Church, and a little Commonwealth... whereby trial may be made of such as are fit for any place of authority, or of subjection in Church or Commonwealth."<sup>33</sup>

In Othello's ecstatic words, the proper sentiments of a Christian

husband sit alongside something else: a violent oscillation between heaven and hell, a momentary possession of the soul's absolute content, an archaic sense of monumental scale, a dark fear—equally archaic, perhaps—of “unknown fate.” Nothing *conflicts* openly with Christian orthodoxy, but the erotic intensity that informs almost every word is experienced in tension with it. This tension is less a manifestation of some atavistic “blackness” specific to Othello than a manifestation of the colonial power of Christian doctrine over sexuality, a power visible at this point precisely in its inherent limitation.<sup>34</sup> That is, we glimpse in this brief moment the *boundary* of the orthodox, the strain of its control, the potential disruption of its hegemony by passion. This scene, let us stress, does not depict rebellion or even complaint—Desdemona invokes “the heavens” and Othello answers, “Amen to that, sweet powers!” Yet the plural here eludes, if only slightly, a serene affirmation of orthodoxy: the powers in their heavens do not refer unmistakably to the Christian God, but rather are the nameless transcendent forces that protect and enhance erotic love. To perceive the difference, we might recall that if Augustine argues, against the gnostics, that God had intended Adam and Eve to procreate in paradise, he insists at the same time that our first parents would have experienced sexual intercourse without the excitement of the flesh. How then could Adam have had an erection? Just as there are persons, Augustine writes, “who can move their ears, either one at a time, or both together” and others who have “such command of their bowels, that they can break wind continuously at pleasure, so as to produce the effect of singing,” so, before the Fall, Adam would have had fully rational, willed control of the organ of generation and thus would have needed no erotic arousal. “Without the seductive stimulus of passion, with calmness of mind and with no corrupting of the integrity of the body, the husband would lie upon the bosom of his wife,” and in this placid union, the semen could reach the womb “with the integrity of the female genital organ being preserved, just as now, with that same integrity being safe, the menstrual flow of blood can be emitted from the womb of a virgin.”<sup>35</sup> Augustine grants that even Adam and Eve, who alone could have done so, failed to experience this “passionless generation,” since they were expelled from paradise before they had a chance to try it. Nevertheless, the ideal of Edenic placidity, untried but intended by God for mankind, remains as a reproach to all fallen sexuality, an exposure of its inherent violence.<sup>36</sup>

The rich and disturbing pathos of the lovers' passionate reunion

in *Othello* derives then not only from our awareness that Othello's premonition is tragically accurate, but from a rent, a moving ambivalence, in his experience of the ecstatic moment itself. The “calmness” of which he speaks may express gratified desire, but, as the repeated invocation of death suggests, it may equally express the longing for a final *release* from desire, from the dangerous violence, the sense of extremes, the laborious climbing and falling out of control that is experienced in the tempest. To be sure, Othello *welcomes* this tempest, with its charge of erotic feeling, but he does so for the sake of the ultimate consummation that the experience can call into being: “If after every tempest come such calmness . . .” That which men most fear to look upon in the storm—death—is for Othello that which makes the storm endurable. If the death he invokes may figure not the release from desire but its fulfillment—for *death* is a common Renaissance term for orgasm—this fulfillment is characteristically poised between an anxious sense of self-dissolution and a craving for decisive closure. If Othello's words suggest an ecstatic acceptance of sexuality, an absolute content, they suggest simultaneously that for him sexuality is a menacing voyage to reach a longed-for heaven; it is one of the dangers to be passed. Othello embraces the erotic as a supreme form of romantic narrative, a tale of risk and violence issuing forth at last in a happy and final tranquillity.

Desdemona's response is in an entirely different key:

The heavens forbid  
But that our loves and comforts should increase,  
Even as our days do grow.

This is spoken to allay Othello's fear, but may it not instead augment it? For if Othello characteristically responds to his experience by shaping it as a story, Desdemona's reply denies the possibility of such narrative control and offers instead a vision of unabating increase. Othello says “Amen” to this vision, but it arouses in him a feeling at once of overflowing and inadequacy:

I cannot speak enough of this content,  
It stops me here, it is too much of joy.

Desdemona has once again devoured up his discourse, and she has done so precisely in bringing him comfort and content.<sup>37</sup> Rather than simply confirming male authority, her submission eroticizes everything to which it responds, from the “disastrous chances” and “moving accidents” Othello relates, to his simplest demands,<sup>38</sup> to his very mistreatment of her:

my love doth so approve him,  
That even his stubbornness, his checks and frowns, —  
Prithee unpin me, — have grace and favour in them.  
(4.3.19–21)<sup>39</sup>

The other women in the play, Bianca and Emilia, both have moments of disobedience to the men who possess and abuse them—in the case of Emilia, it is a heroic disobedience for which she pays with her life.<sup>40</sup> Desdemona performs no such acts of defiance, but her erotic submission, conjoined with Iago's murderous cunning, far more effectively, if unintentionally, subverts her husband's carefully fashioned identity.

We will examine more fully the tragic process of this subversion, but it is important to grasp first that Othello's loss of himself—a loss depicted discursively in his incoherent ravings—arises not only from the fatal conjunction of Desdemona's love and Iago's hate, but from the nature of that identity, from what we have called his submission to narrative self-fashioning. We may invoke in this connection Lacan's observation that the source of the subject's frustration in psychoanalysis is ultimately neither the silence nor the reply of the analyst:

Is it not rather a matter of frustration inherent in the very discourse of the subject? Does the subject not become engaged in an ever-growing dispossession of that being of his, concerning which—by dint of sincere portraits which leave its idea no less incoherent, of rectifications which do not succeed in freeing its essence, of stays and defenses which do not prevent his statue from tottering, of narcissistic embraces which become like a puff of air in animating it—he ends up by recognizing that this being has never been anything more than his construct in the Imaginary and that this construct disappoints all of his certitudes? For in this labor which he undertakes to reconstruct this construct for another, he finds again the fundamental alienation which made him construct it like another one, and which has always destined it to be stripped from him by another.<sup>41</sup>

Shakespeare's military hero, it may be objected, is particularly far removed from this introspective project, a project that would seem, in any case, to have little bearing upon any Renaissance text. Yet I think it is no accident that nearly every phrase of Lacan's critique of psychoanalysis seems a brilliant reading of *Othello*, for I

would propose that there is a deep resemblance between the construction of the self in analysis—at least as Lacan conceives it—and Othello's self-fashioning. The resemblance is grounded in the dependence of even the innermost self upon a language that is always necessarily given from without and upon representation before an audience. I do not know if such are the conditions of human identity, apart from its expression in psychoanalysis, but they are unmistakably the conditions of theatrical identity, where existence is conferred upon a character by the playwright's language and the actor's performance. And in *Othello* these governing circumstances of the medium itself are reproduced and intensified in the hero's situation: his identity depends upon a constant performance, as we have seen, of his "story," a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture. It is this dependence that gives Othello, the warrior and alien, a relation to Christian values that is the existential equivalent of a religious vocation; he cannot allow himself the moderately flexible adherence that most ordinary men have toward their own formal beliefs. Christianity is the alienating yet constitutive force in Othello's identity, and if we seek a discursive mode in the play that is the social equivalent of the experience Lacan depicts, we will find it in *confession*. Othello himself invokes before the Venetian Senate the absolute integrity of confession, conceived, it appears, not as the formal auricular rite of penitence but as a generalized self-scrutiny in God's presence:

as faithful as to heaven  
I do confess the vices of my blood,  
So justly to your grave ears I'll present  
How I did thrive in this fair lady's love,  
And she in mine.

(1.3.123–36)<sup>42</sup>

The buried identification here between the vices of the blood and mutual thriving in love is fully exhumed by the close of the play when confession has become a virtually obsessional theme.<sup>43</sup> Theological and juridical confession are fused in Othello's mind when, determined first to exact a deathbed confession, he comes to take Desdemona's life:

If you bethink yourself of any crime,  
Unreconcil'd as yet to heaven and grace,  
Solicit for it straight . . .  
Therefore confess thee freely of thy sin,

For to deny each article with oath  
 Cannot remove, nor choke the strong conceit,  
 That I do groan withal: thou art to die.

(5.2.26–28, 54–57)

The sin that Othello wishes Desdemona to confess is adultery, and her refusal to do so frustrates the achievement of what in theology was called “a good, complete confession.”<sup>44</sup> He feels the outrage of the thwarted system that needs to imagine itself merciful, sacramental, when it disciplines:

thou dost stone thy heart,  
 And makest me call what I intend to do  
 A murder, which I thought a sacrifice.

(5.2.64–66)

We are at last in a position to locate the precise nature of the symbolic structure into which Iago inserts himself in his brilliant improvisation: this structure is the centuries-old Christian doctrine of sexuality, policed socially and psychically, as we have already seen, by confession. To Iago, the Renaissance skeptic, this system has a somewhat archaic ring, as if it were an earlier stage of development which his own modern sensibility had cast off.<sup>45</sup> Like the Lucayan religion to the conquistadors, the orthodox doctrine that governs Othello’s sexual attitudes—his simultaneous idealization and mistrust of women—seems to Iago sufficiently close to be recognizable, sufficiently distant to be manipulable. We watch him manipulate it directly at the beginning of act 4, when he leads Othello through a brutally comic parody of the late medieval confessional manuals with their casuistical attempts to define the precise moment at which venial temptation passes over into mortal sin:

IAGO To kiss in private?  
 OTHELLO An unauthoriz’d kiss.  
 IAGO Or to be naked with her friend abed,  
 An hour, or more, not meaning any harm?  
 OTHELLO Naked abed, Iago, and not mean harm?  
 It is hypocrisy against the devil:  
 They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,  
 The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.  
 IAGO So they do nothing, ’tis a venial slip.

(4.1.2–9)

Iago in effect assumes an extreme version of the laxist position in such manuals in order to impel Othello toward the rigorist version that viewed adultery as one of the most horrible of mortal sins,

more detestable, in the words of the *Eruditorium penitentiale*, “than homicide or plunder,” and hence formerly deemed punishable, as several authorities remind us, by death.<sup>46</sup> Early Protestantism did not soften this position. Indeed, in the mid-sixteenth century, Tyndale’s erstwhile collaborator, George Joye, called for a return to the Old Testament penalty for adulterers. “God’s law,” he writes, “is to punish adultery with death for the tranquillity and commonwealth of His church.” This is not an excessive or vindictive course; on the contrary, “to take away and to cut off putrified and corrupt members from the whole body, lest they poison and destroy the body, is the law of love.”<sup>47</sup> When Christian magistrates leave adultery unpunished, they invite more betrayals and risk the ruin of the realm, for as Protestants in particular repeatedly observe, the family is an essential component of an interlocking social and theological network. Hence adultery is a sin with the gravest of repercussions; in the words of the great Cambridge Puritan William Perkins, it “destroyeth the Seminary of the Church, which is a *godly seed* in the family, and it breaketh the covenant between the parties and God; it robs another of the precious ornament of chastity, which is a gift of the Holy Ghost; it dishonors their bodies and maketh them temples of the devil; and the Adulterer maketh his family a Stews.”<sup>48</sup> It is in the bitter spirit of these convictions that Othello enacts the grotesque comedy of treating his wife as a strumpet and the tragedy of executing her in the name of justice, lest she betray more men.

But we still must ask how Iago manages to persuade Othello that Desdemona has committed adultery, for all of the cheap tricks Iago plays seem somehow inadequate to produce the unshakable conviction of his wife’s defilement that seizes Othello’s soul and drives him mad. After all, as Iago taunts Othello, he cannot achieve the point of vantage of God whom the Venetian women let “see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands” (3.3.206–7):

Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on,  
 Behold her topp’d?

(3.3.401–2)

How then, without “ocular proof” and in the face of both love and common sense, is Othello so thoroughly persuaded? To answer this, we must recall the syntactic ambiguity we noted earlier—“to abuse Othello’s ear, / That he is too familiar with his wife”—and turn to a still darker aspect of orthodox Christian doctrine, an aspect central both to the confessional system and to Protestant self-scrutiny. *Omnis amator feruentior est adulter*, goes the Stoic

epigram, and Saint Jerome does not hesitate to draw the inevitable inference: "An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife."<sup>49</sup> Jerome quotes Seneca: "All love of another's wife is shameful; so too, too much love of your own. A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment, not affection. Let him control his impulses and not be borne headlong into copulation. Nothing is fouler than to love a wife like an adulteress. . . . Let them show themselves to their wives not as lovers, but as husbands."<sup>50</sup> The words echo through more than a thousand years of Christian writing on marriage, and, in the decisive form given them by Augustine and his commentators, remain essentially unchallenged by the leading continental Reformers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, by Tudor ecclesiastical authorities, and even by Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritans who sharply opposed so many conservative Anglican doctrines. There is, to be sure, in all shades of Protestantism an attack on the Catholic doctrine of celibacy and a celebration of married love, a celebration that includes acknowledgment of the legitimate role of sexual pleasure. But for Reformer as for Catholic, this acknowledgment is hedged about with warnings and restrictions. The "man who shows no modesty or comeliness in conjugal intercourse," writes Calvin, "is committing adultery with his wife," and the *King's Book*, attributed to Henry VIII, informs its readers that in lawful matrimony a man may break the Seventh Commandment "and live unchaste with his own wife, if he do unmeasurably or inordinately serve his or her fleshly appetite or lust."<sup>51</sup>

In the Augustinian conception, as elaborated by Raymond of Peñaforte, William of Rennes, and others, there are four motives for conjugal intercourse: to conceive offspring; to render the marital debt to one's partner so that he or she might avoid incontinency; to avoid fornication oneself; and to satisfy desire. The first two motives are without sin and excuse intercourse; the third is a venial sin; the fourth—to satisfy desire—is mortal. Among the many causes that underlie this institutional hostility to desire is the tenacious existence, in various forms, of the belief that pleasure constitutes a legitimate release from dogma and constraint. Thus when asked by the Inquisition about her happy past liaison with the heretical priest of Montaillou, the young Grazide Lizier replies with naive frankness, "in those days it pleased me, and it pleased the priest, that he should know me carnally, and be known by me; and so I did not think I was sinning, and neither did he."<sup>52</sup> "With Pierre Clergue," she explains, "I liked it. And so it could not displease God. It was not a sin" (157). For the peasant

girl, apparently, pleasure was the guarantee of innocence: "But now, with him, it does not please me any more. And so now, if he knew me carnally, I should think it a sin" (151). A comparable attitude, derived not from peasant culture but from the troubadours, evidently lies behind the more sophisticated courtship of Romeo: "Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purged."<sup>53</sup>

It should not surprise us that churchmen, Catholic and Protestant alike, would seek to crush such dangerous notions, nor that they would extend their surveillance and discipline to married couples and warn that excessive pleasure in the marriage bed is at least a potential violation of the Seventh Commandment. "Nothing is more vile," says Raymond's influential *summa*, "than to love your wife in adulterous fashion."<sup>54</sup> The conjugal act may be without sin, writes the rigorist Nicolaus of Ausimo, but only if "in the performance of this act there is no enjoyment of pleasure."<sup>55</sup> Few *summæ* and no marriage manuals take so extreme a position, but virtually all are in agreement that the active *pursuit* of pleasure in sexuality is damnable, for as Jacobus Ungarelli writes in the sixteenth century, those who undertake intercourse for pleasure "exclude God from their minds, act as brute beasts, lack reason, and if they begin marriage for this reason, are given over to the power of the devil."<sup>56</sup>

Confessors then must determine if the married penitent has a legitimate excuse for intercourse and if the act has been performed with due regard for "matrimonial chastity," while Protestants who have rejected auricular confession must similarly scrutinize their own behavior for signs that their pleasure has been too "spacious."<sup>57</sup> "Lust is more spacious than love," writes Alexander Niccoles in the early seventeenth century; it "hath no mean, no bound . . . more deep, more dangerous than the Sea, and less restrained, for the Sea hath bounds, but it [lust] hath none."<sup>58</sup> Such unbounded love is a kind of idolatry, an encroachment upon a Christian's debt of loving obedience to God, and it ultimately destroys the marital relationship as well. Immoderate love, another Puritan divine warns, "will either be blown down by some storm or tempest of displeasure, or fall of itself, or else degenerate into jealousy, the most devouring and fretting canker that can harbor in a married person's breast."<sup>59</sup>

These anxieties, rich in implication for *Othello*, are frequently tempered in Protestant writings by a recognition of the joyful ardor of young married couples, but there remains a constant fear of excess, and, as Ambrose observed centuries earlier, even the



most plausible excuse for sexual passion is shameful in the old: "Youths generally assert the desire for generation. How much more shameful for the old to do what is shameful for the young to confess."<sup>60</sup> Othello himself seems eager to ward off this shame; he denies before the Senate that he seeks

To please the palate of my appetite,  
Nor to comply with heat, the young affects  
In me defunct . . .

(1.3.262-64)<sup>61</sup>

But Desdemona makes no such disclaimer; indeed her declaration of passion is frankly, though by no means exclusively, sexual:

That I did love the Moor, to live with him,  
My downright violence, and scorn of fortunes,  
May trumpet to the world: my heart's subdued  
Even to the utmost pleasure of my lord.

(1.3.248-51)<sup>62</sup>

This moment of erotic intensity, this frank acceptance of pleasure and submission to her spouse's pleasure, is, I would argue, as much as Iago's slander the cause of Desdemona's death, for it awakens the deep current of sexual anxiety in Othello, anxiety that with Iago's help expresses itself in quite orthodox fashion as the perception of adultery.<sup>63</sup> Othello unleashes upon Cassio—"Michael Cassio, / That came a-wooing with you" (3.3.71-72)—the fear of pollution, defilement, brutish violence that is bound up with his own experience of sexual pleasure, while he must destroy Desdemona both for her excessive experience of pleasure and for awakening such sensations in himself. Like Guyon in the Bower of Bliss, Othello transforms his complicity in erotic excess and his fear of engulfment into a "purifying," saving violence:

Like to the Pontic sea,  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,  
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,  
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,  
Till that a capable and wide revenge  
Swallow them up.

(3.3.460-67)

His insupportable sexual experience has been, as it were, displaced and absorbed by the act of revenge which can swallow up not only the guilty lovers but—as the syntax suggests—his own "bloody thoughts."

Such is the achievement of Iago's improvisation on the religious sexual doctrine in which Othello believes; true to that doctrine, pleasure itself becomes for Othello pollution, a defilement of his property in Desdemona and in himself.<sup>64</sup> It is at the level of this dark, sexual revulsion that Iago has access to Othello, access assured, as we should expect, by the fact that beneath his cynical modernity and professed self-love Iago reproduces in himself the same psychic structure. He is as intensely preoccupied with adultery, while his anxiety about his own sexuality may be gauged from the fact that he conceives his very invention, as the images of engendering suggest, as a kind of demonic semen that will bring forth monsters.<sup>65</sup> Indeed Iago's discourse—his assaults on women, on the irrationality of eros, on the brutishness of the sexual act—reiterates virtually to the letter the orthodox terms of Ungarelli's attack on those who seek pleasure in intercourse.

The improvisational process we have been discussing depends for its success upon the concealment of its symbolic center, but as the end approaches this center becomes increasingly visible. When, approaching the marriage bed on which Desdemona has spread the wedding sheets, Othello rages, "Thy bed, lust stain'd, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (5.1.36), he comes close to revealing his tormenting identification of marital sexuality—limited perhaps to the night he took Desdemona's virginity—and adultery.<sup>66</sup> The orthodox element of this identification is directly observed—

this sorrow's heavenly,  
It strikes when it does love—

(5.2.21-22)

and on her marriage bed / deathbed Desdemona seems at last to pluck out the heart of the mystery:

OTHELLO Think on thy sins.

DESDEMONA They are loves I bear to you.

OTHELLO And for that thou diest.

DESDEMONA That death's unnatural, that kills for loving.

(5.2.39-42)

The play reveals at this point not the unfathomable darkness of human motives but their terrible transparency, and the horror of the revelation is its utter inability to deflect violence. Othello's identity is entirely caught up in the narrative structure that drives him to turn Desdemona into a being incapable of pleasure, a piece of "monumental alabaster," so that he will at last be able to love her without the taint of adultery:

Be thus, when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,  
And love thee after.

(5.2.18-19)

It is as if Othello had found in a necrophilic fantasy the secret solution to the intolerable demands of the rigorist sexual ethic, and the revelation that Cassio has not slept with Desdemona leads only to a doubling of this solution, for the adulterous sexual pleasure that Othello had projected upon his lieutenant now rebounds upon himself.<sup>67</sup> Even with the exposure of Iago's treachery, then, there is for Othello no escape—rather a still deeper submission to narrative, a reaffirmation of the self as story, but now split suicidally between the defender of the faith and the circumcised enemy who must be destroyed. Lodovico's bizarrely punning response to Othello's final speech—"O bloody period!"—insists precisely upon the fact that it was a speech, that this life fashioned as a text is ended as a text.

To an envious contemporary like Robert Greene, Shakespeare seems a kind of green-room Iago, appropriating for himself the labors of others. In *Othello* Shakespeare seems to acknowledge, represent, and explore his affinity to the malicious improviser, but, of course, his relation to the theater and to his culture is far more complex than such an affinity could suggest. There are characters in his works who can improvise without tragic results, characters who can embrace a mobility of desire—one of whose emblems is the male actor playing a female character dressed up as a male—that neither Iago, nor Othello, nor Desdemona can endure. Destructive violence is not Shakespeare's only version of these materials, and even in *Othello*, Iago is not the playwright's only representation of himself. Still, at the least we must grant Robert Greene that it would have seemed fatal to be imitated by Shakespeare. He possessed a limitless talent for entering into the consciousness of another, perceiving its deepest structures as a manipulable fiction, reinscribing it into his own narrative form.<sup>68</sup> If in the late plays, he experiments with controlled disruptions of narrative, moments of eddying and ecstasy, these invariably give way to reaffirmations of self-fashioning through story.

Montaigne, who shares many of Shakespeare's most radical perceptions, invents in effect a brilliant mode of *non-narrative* self-fashioning: "I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it."<sup>69</sup> Shakespeare by contrast remains throughout his career the

supreme purveyor of "empathy," the fashioner of narrative selves, the master improviser. Where Montaigne withdrew to his study, Shakespeare became the presiding genius of a popular, urban art form with the capacity to foster psychic mobility in the service of Elizabethan power; he became the principal maker of what we may see as the prototype of the mass media Professor Lerner so admires.

Finally, we may ask, is this service to power a function of the theater itself or of Shakespeare's relation to his medium? The answer, predictably, is both. The theater is widely perceived in the period as the concrete manifestation of the histrionic quality of life, and, more specifically, of power—the power of the prince who stands as an actor upon a stage before the eyes of the nation, the power of God who enacts His will in the Theater of the World. The stage justifies itself against recurrent charges of immorality by invoking this normative function: it is the expression of those rules that govern a properly ordered society and displays visibly the punishment, in laughter and violence, that is meted out upon those who violate the rules. Most playwrights pay at least professional homage to these values; they honor the institutions that enable them to earn their keep and give voice to the ideology that holds together both their "mystery" and the society at large.

In Marlowe, as we have seen, we encounter a playwright at odds with this ideology. If the theater normally reflects and flatters the royal sense of itself as national performance, Marlowe struggles to expose the underlying motives of any performance of power. If the theater normally affirms God's providence, Marlowe explores the tragic needs and interests that are served by all such affirmations. If the Elizabethan stage functions as one of the public uses of spectacle to impose normative ethical patterns on the urban masses, Marlowe enacts a relentless challenge to those patterns and undermines employment of rhetoric and violence in their service.

Shakespeare approaches his culture not, like Marlowe, as rebel and blasphemer, but rather as dutiful servant, content to improvise a part of his own within its orthodoxy. And if after centuries, that improvisation has been revealed to us as embodying an almost boundless challenge to the culture's every tenet, a devastation of every source, the author of *Othello* would have understood that such a revelation scarcely matters. After all, the heart of a successful improvisation lies in concealment, not exposure; and besides, as we have seen, even a hostile improvisation reproduces the relations of power that it hopes to displace and absorb. This is not to dismiss the power of hatred or the significance of

distinctions—it matters a great deal whether Othello or Iago, the Lucayans or the Spaniards prevail—only to suggest the boundaries that define the possibility of any improvisational contact, even contact characterized by hidden malice.

I would not want to argue, in any event, that Shakespeare's relation to his culture is defined by hidden malice. Such a case can no doubt be made for many of the plays—stranger things have been said—but it will sound forced and unconvincing, just as the case for Shakespeare as an unwavering, unquestioning apologist for Tudor ideology sounds forced and unconvincing. The solution here is not, I suggest, that the truth lies somewhere in between. Rather the truth itself is radically unstable and yet constantly stabilized, as unstable as those male authorities that affirm themselves only to be undermined by subversive women and then to be reconstituted in a different guise. If any reductive generalization about Shakespeare's relation to his culture seems dubious, it is because his plays offer no single timeless affirmation or denial of legitimate authority and no central, unwavering authorial presence. Shakespeare's language and themes are caught up, like the medium itself, in unsettling repetitions, committed to the shifting voices and audiences, with their shifting aesthetic assumptions and historical imperatives, that govern a living theater.

Criticism can legitimately show—as I hope my discussion of *Othello* does—that Shakespeare relentlessly *explores* the relations of power in a given culture. That more than exploration is involved is much harder to demonstrate convincingly. If there are intimations in Shakespeare of a release from the complex narrative orders in which everyone is inscribed, these intimations do not arise from bristling resistance or strident denunciation—the mood of a Jaques or Timon. They arise paradoxically from a peculiarly intense *submission* whose downright violence undermines everything it was meant to shore up, the submission depicted not in Othello or Iago but in Desdemona. As both the play and its culture suggest, the arousal of intense, purposeless pleasure is only superficially a confirmation of existing values, established selves.<sup>70</sup> In Shakespeare's narrative art, liberation from the massive power structures that determine social and psychic reality is glimpsed in an *excessive* aesthetic delight, an erotic embrace of those very structures—the embrace of a Desdemona whose love is more deeply unsettling than even a Iago's empathy.