Discoveries in Marriage and Power Dynamics in *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*

Philip Hohol, for Dr. Ted McGee

If we look at power relations in *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*, especially between the husbands and wives populating these two plays, we find that in both Shakespeare’s ancient Rome and Britain, men and woman act in similar ways to get what they want. Their actions, though, require some unpacking. Despite a great amount of power vested in the women, all of them coming from powerful political dynasties, masculinity confers more power in both public and private spaces on the men, and femininity weakens all the women, with the notable exception of Cordelia. Thus, gender takes a base starting point of inherent power for men and inherent weakness for women. However, despite these base starting points, we find that masculinity and femininity are not wholly defined by physical gender. Men are not only masculine and women are not only feminine. To display or perform masculinity makes a character powerful; to display or perform femininity makes a character weak (again, with the notable exception of Cordelia). We cannot, however, state that “feminine weakness” is an absolute negative value, or that “masculine power” is an absolute positive. In some circumstances women display weakness in order to gain power over their husbands, or actively denigrate their husbands’ masculinity in order to weaken them. What does not change in any case is the fact that in *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, the inherent weakness of women and power of men guides character choices in the power dynamics of their marriages.

We cannot explore every exchange between husband and wife in each play, but we can approach several key scenes and take them as representatives of the whole. *Caesar* is the easier play to engage with and Caesar’s public display of masculine power during the feast of Lupercal is a good place to start. He displays his masculine dominance over Calphurnia by drawing
attention to her femininity in public when he calls upon Anthony to “Forget not in your speed . . .
/ To touch Calphurnia, for our elders say / The barren, touchèd in this holy chase, / Shake off
their sterile curse” (I.ii.8-11). It is significant that the only words Calphurnia utters are “here, my
lord” (4). In a public exchange, Calphurnia defers to her husband. In comparing different
silences in Caesar, Esther Schupak notes that Calphurnia’s is the “silence of the weak” (108).
We note further, that since Caesar has drawn attention to his wife’s femininity by way of her
barren womb, Calphurnia has been signified as feminine, and Caesar as the opposite and
dominating gender, displays masculinity. In this exchange, Calphurnia the woman is dominated
by her husband the man and has no choice but to submit. Since there is no other public scene
with women, we are forced to conclude that in Caesar, the men act to dominate their wives in
public, and the women display submission.

In private, it is another matter. Calphurnia exerts far more effort to exercise power over
Caesar in an effort to stop him from going to the capitol. Caesar, for his part, listens and debates
and finally relents. How does Calphurnia accomplish this? Where in public her femininity
demonstrated complete weakness, in private her performance of feminine weakness turns into a
power move. When she kneels to Caesar as a final bid to persuade him to stay in, she appeals to
the nature of her marriage to Caesar. She acknowledges that Caesar is her guardian and that she
owes loyalty to him. Janette Dillon writes, “This tableau of a woman kneeling to a man to whom
she owes obedience is to / be often repeated in the tragedies, with a range of different
inflections” (60). In Caesar it is a display of the female pietas or “duty, devotion, and loyalty”
(Kamm 111) a woman owes not only to the state, but especially to her husband. Calphurnia’s
submissive display forces Caesar to acknowledge Calphurnia’s devotion and he relents. The
point we make here is two-fold. Calphurnia achieves power over Caesar, if only for a moment.
She kneels and Caesar agrees not to go out; however, by kneeling, Calphurnia performs a symbol of the submissive feminine. It would be unthinkable for Caesar to kneel in front of Calphurnia. She frames the power that she holds within the Roman concept of masculine dominance and feminine submissiveness and we cannot say completely that Calphurnia in any way subverts the Roman ideal of masculine dominance. She has influence over her husband, to be sure, but she gains this influence by playing to the hegemonic idea that males dominate and females obey. The paradox of Calphurnia attaining power through a display of weakness is encapsulated by her final, pleading statement, “Let me, upon my knee, prevail in this” (II.ii.58). Through submission, Calphurnia seeks to win.

We cannot tell exactly how Caesar’s response is intonated: “Mark Antony shall say I am not well / And for thy humor I will stay at home” (59-60). An actor could make it loving or frustrated, or any number of emotional notes. However, the stage directions include, “he lifts her up” (79), which suggests at least some compassion, in that he relieves Calphurnia from the position she has put herself in as he relents. It is a moment of intimacy between them. Interestingly, even in this intimate moment, Caesar applies humours, or (in this case) fancies or dreams, to Calphurnia, and agency or “will” to himself, thus neatly making his acquiescence to Calphurnia a masculine choice. He continues to insist on making this choice by his own will, as when Decius Brutus interrupts this private scene to take Caesar to the Capitol: “. . . tell them that I will not come today. / Cannot is false, and that I dare not, falser. / I will not come today” (66-68). Decius Brutus persuades Caesar to change his mind again partly by chiding the emasculated nature of his decision: “it were a mock / Apt to be rendered, for someone to say / “Break up the Senate till another time, / When Caesar’s wife shall meet with better dreams” (101-104). Where Calphurnia can perform feminine weakness as a power move, femininity only effects a loss of
masculinity for Caesar. There are many ways in which Caesar faces feminization in his play, but it will suffice here to say that part of Caesar’s decision to go to the Capitol is because he is in danger of losing face in front of Decius Brutus. He admits as much when he says he is “ashamèd [he] did yield to [Calphurnia’s fears]” (111) in an attempt to place the weakness upon his wife.

In contrast to Calphurnia, Portia displays both femininity and masculinity. She appeals first to her feminine qualities, her “once commended beauty” (II.i.292), and “charms” (292) Brutus by the ideals of their marriage and the fact that she is his wife and thus deserves to know all of his thoughts. Portia underlines her feminine appeal with the same symbolic performance of submission as Calphurnia: kneeling in front of her husband. Portia, however, continues to challenge Brutus by displaying manly qualities in addition to feminine. It is a famous moment in the play when she reveals that she has stabbed herself in her own thigh:

Tell me your counsels; I will not disclose ’em.

I have made strong proof of my constancy,

Giving myself a voluntary wound

Here, in the thigh. Can I bear that with patience,

And not my husband’s secrets? (321-325)

Portia separates this act from her femininity. She “grants” (315) that she is female, but she appeals to the fact that the man Brutus is her husband, and that a powerful man is her father. She proves her “constancy” (322), a masculine trait, by stoically bearing the pain of sustaining a stabbing wound in her thigh. The point is that in order to exert power over Brutus, she performs gender. Her feminine performance is encapsulated by a symbolic gesture of submissiveness, keeling in front of her husband. Her masculine performance is encapsulated by a symbolic gesture of fortitude, stabbing herself in the thigh. Portia’s gender performances align with the
Roman societal concept of the weak feminine and the powerful masculine. Portia gains power over her husband by negotiating the weakness of femininity and the strength of masculinity.

The scene is very much Portia’s. Brutus has only just been left by his fellow conspirators and spends his time trying to get Portia to go back to bed. He appeals to the feminine, “good” and “gentle” (II.i.280, 300) Portia and, like Caesar, he physically lifts Portia out of her kneel in a moment of intimacy. The difference between Calphurnia and Portia’s scenes, however, lies in the fact that Brutus begins to demonstrate great respect for Portia after she performs masculinity. He prays to the gods to render himself “worthy of this noble wife” (327). Portia’s venture into masculine performance earns her respect from her husband. Calphurnia, though momentarily successful in her feminine plea, is derided for her femininity. Although femininity achieves power in both scenes, it is masculinity that remains more respectable and more honoured.

We turn to Lear to find it is clear that Cornwall and Albany stand to gain from their matches. Even though Goneril and Regan will be queens of their respective domains, land has been given to them according to Lear’s approval of their husbands. As Gloucester observes, “it appears not which / of the dukes [Lear] values most, for equalities are so / weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice / of either’s moiety” (I.i.4-7). It is the men who appear to determine the gift of land, not the women. However, Lear’s daughters are forced into the strange circumstance of giving speeches proclaiming their love for the king. In a sense, they are ceremonially courting their father. A male is supposed to court the female. For example, sonnets in their earliest forms in England (imported from Italy) were emblems of male love for women (Abrams & Harpham 369). Regan and Goneril do not go into raptures over King Lear's attributes, but they still sue competitively for his attention. No matter the importance of the ceremony to the women’s dowries, Lear has positioned himself as the receiver of persuasive
appeals, the feminine in the equation, and he has positioned Goneril and Regan in the male position of having to demonstrate and prove their worthiness to him, the male of the equation. It is not the only time Goneril and Regan will embody masculine characteristics in order to gain or wield power.

Cordelia is made into a more stereotypically feminine character by Burgundy and France. Burgundy sees only her land as her power: “I crave no more than hath your Highness offered” (221), he says, turning Cordelia into a vessel whose value has to do with what is inside. Emptyed of her dowry, Cordelia is nothing to Burgundy, an instance of the objects women were turned into in order to confer power on men by joining political dynasties. France, however, makes interesting rhetorical moves in pursuit of Cordelia. He makes the rejected Cordelia “herself a dowry” (278), and, like a hero, rescues her from her predicament. However, in doing so he also refers to Cordelia as “queen of us, of ours and our fair France” (299). Unlike any of the men we have seen in either play, he willingly places himself in a subordinate position to Cordelia, thus elevating her public power.

When compared to the other husbands in the play, France achieves a successful union with Cordelia through his public statement of submissiveness. Has he surrendered any of his masculinity? We propose that in this case he does not. All declarations of love in the opening scene are couched in poetry and eloquence, and France becomes truthfully what Goneril and Regan only perform: a poetic suitor, an emissary of courtly love into Lear’s bleak world. Rather than emasculating himself, France endows Cordelia with power, which she demonstrates clearly by her armed return to Britain to wage war on the houses of Cornwall and Albany, and rescue her father.
Power as a strictly masculine performance finds two prominent modes of display in Goneril’s treatment of Albany and Regan’s competition with Cornwall. When Albany attempts to defend Lear during the act one altercations about Lear’s retinue, out of a sense of service to the old monarch, Goneril cuts her husband off and calls for her servant Oswald, basically stopping the conversation. Goneril, of course, wants nothing to do with service. She is in the process of whittling down Lear’s retinue, and as a woman of action she will not be held back by her husband. Goneril chastises Albany’s “milky gentleness” (I.v.364), feminizing his wishes to do service to Lear and steamrolling his attempts to discuss the matter. Compared to either of the marriages in Caesar, there is no discussion in this marriage, no negotiation of power, however tenuous, only conflict and domination.

Though there are many more examples of Goneril and Albany’s exchanges, we add only that even as Albany tries to feminize Goneril and make himself more masculine when he says he would tear Goneril limb from limb if “a woman’s shape did not shield thee” (IV.ii.83), Goneril will simply have none of it. She is dismayed that Albany is not ready to go to war against France’s armies, led by Cordelia, calling him a “milk livered man” (62) and when Albany talks of not hurting her because she’s a woman her response is vicious emasculation: “Marry your manhood – mew” (83). Goneril reduces Albany’s attempts at masculine performance to that of kittens meowing. Goneril evinces a will to power and in her emasculation of her husband she endows herself with a masculine spirit of action. We might observe, using gendered terms, that Goneril wears the pants in the family. Albany might nominally have power, but it is Goneril who dominates the proceedings through emasculation of her husband and active moves to gain more power.
When Regan and Cornwall arrive at Gloucester’s house (evading Lear’s arrival at theirs), Regan quickly takes control of the opening conversation. Cornwall opens with salutations and a report that they have heard of the apparent betrayal of Edgar, however Regan jumps in, echoing Cornwall’s statement and Gloucester proceeds to talk to her. By the end of the exchange, Regan has this to say of Lear’s retinue: “That if they come to sojourn at my house / I’ll not be there” (II.i.119-120). By claiming ownership of Cornwall’s house, Regan draws on her royal lineage, familial ownership of all of England, but more importantly she publicly demonstrates dominance in her marriage. Cornwall is forced to catch up to her in his interjection, “Nor I, assure thee, Regan” (121). Regan again takes control of the conversation when Cornwall attempts to get down to the business of why they have come to Gloucester’s house. Cornwall begins, “You know not why we came to visit you-” (139). Regan picks up the line and finishes it, “Thus out of season, threading dark-eyed night” (140). From here she begins to lay out the developing situation between Lear, his knights, and Kent’s journey to Gloucester’s house. By the end of her speech, Gloucester replies, “I serve you, madam” (130), and though he welcomes both Regan and Cornwall inside, it is clear that Regan has dominated the conversation, and thus, her husband.

R. A. Foakes calls attention to this trait in Regan’s character in the Arden *King Lear* Third Series, with the observation, “Regan typically intervenes, asserting her authority” (233). Regan’s authority takes authority away from Cornwall, and though there is no overt use of gendered language, her behaviour is clearly blocking Cornwall’s supposed masculine authority to be the ruler of the house. We can speak in terms of masculinity and femininity since the opening scene, with debates over Cordelia’s dowry and talk of the king’s preferences for the men, has demonstrated that men stand to gain power and men expect to rule. Regan, however,
draws on her royal heritage and acts as the queen of her land. Regan competes to assume the male role in the marriage, and thus the power.

Regan and Goneril’s marriages are emblematic of conflict and refusal to negotiate any power when total power is the prize. However, we see in Regan and Goneril’s competition for Edmund where their wills to power are attracted and we see the destination in gendered terms. Goneril gives context to her attraction, speaking after Edmund’s exit: “[O, the difference of man and man!] / To thee a woman’s services are due; / My fool usurps my body” (IV.ii.33-35).

Edmund quests for control of his household and Goneril (and Regan) see in him a more effective partner for gaining control of the entire realm. More to the point, Edmund’s will to power, and his claim to be a natural man, attract Goneril to him and persuades her to her speech defining the kind of man to whom she is willing to give her services, including her body. Albany is a “fool” in comparison to Edmund. The point is that Goneril is willing to be a wife to a man who deserves her service. She is willing to act a more feminine way with a man whom she deems to be more masculine. Thus, in the absence of a suitable male partner for Goneril and Regan, the sisters perform the roles that are traditionally expected of men. Femininity is placed in a submissive position to masculinity, and successful masculinity, whether performed by men or women is deemed the more powerful mode of behaviour.

Surprisingly, there is little commentary that speaks directly to the power negotiations we have been discussing that might provide more context for what Shakespeare is exploring. For *Caesar*, Dillon points us to Plutarch’s concept of virtue in his *Lives*: “‘in those days, valiantness was honoured in Rome above all other virtues: which they called virtus, by the name of virtue itself, as including in that general name, all other special virtues besides’” (Plutarch quoted in Dillon 59). Coppélia Kahn too, discusses “the manly independence of the early republic” (85).
Caesar, at the end of the Republic, exemplifies the pursuit of virtue when he declaims, “Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once” (Caesar II.ii.34-35), thus tying his virtue, his manhood, to bravery yes, but more importantly, to his decision to carry through with his journey to the Capitol and his potential to rule the state. It is Caesar’s masculinity that Cassius argues against when he characterizes him as a “sick girl” (I.ii.135). Part of Cassius’s argument against Caesar as any form of ruler is that he is no longer man enough. Kahn makes the astute point that in the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar, even “Brutus competes to distinguish himself as the Roman most devoted to the republic. His character no less than that of Cassius, and that of Caesar, is conceived and shaped in terms of the contradiction between republican virtue and Roman emulation” (96). Emulation here refers to the spirit of manly competition to see who can be the best Roman, the best exemplar of virtue. Manhood, then, becomes tied up in ruling the state.

Scholars such as Leslie Kordecki and Karla Koskinen have provided valuable feminist revisions on Goneril and Regan’s motivations, arguing “that the actions of all three daughters, like those of most of the men in the play, are a result of Lear’s erratic and irresponsible behavior in the first scene” (2); however, we have no specific discussion of the power dynamics between the royal husbands and wives. Stephen Greenblatt gives us a possible point of entry when he writes of the nameless servant’s intervention into Cornwall and Regan’s torture of Gloucester: “Though his act has important political consequences, the servant is not acting out of political motives, and still less out of personal ambition. He has an ethically adequate object – the desire to serve the duke his master by stopping him at all costs from performing an unworthy action” (76). We have mentioned in our discussion Regan and Goneril’s wills to power. Greenblatt gives
us the other end of the spectrum: a will to service. It is this service that Albany wishes to argue with Goneril that gets him emasculated by her.

Masculinity is therefore, on a political level as well as the social level of families, linked to the ability to rule. Femininity is linked to the instinct for service. That being said, Shakespeare presents masculinity and femininity in highly ambivalent forms. The two women of Caesar both achieve power in their relationships partly through displays of submissiveness. Though they do not subvert the hegemonic power structure of Rome, they do achieve power over their husbands through submission, thus introducing irony into the constant displays of dominant masculinity by the men. The women of Lear are made villainous by their masculine pursuits of power, and monstrous in their dominance over their husbands. Cordelia, on the other hand, endowed with power by France, becomes a power of an altogether different sort, as she embodies an avenging angel in pursuit of the rescue of her father. What Shakespeare has done is subvert the stereotype of masculine dominance.

We find, then, in Julius Caesar and King Lear, a subtle exploration of masculine and feminine value in Shakespeare’s treatment of power dynamics in marriage. In both plays, men are compelled to display masculinity in public situations and are chastised if they do not. In Julius Caesar, the men will be affected by femininity and even act in ways that could be called feminine, behind closed doors. We find also that since masculinity is the more worthy trait in these societies, it endows both male and female characters who display masculinity with power. However, the fluid nature of gender display introduces ambivalence to any conclusions we can draw about the ultimate value of masculinity or femininity. Albany tries on masculinity in front of Goneril and is soundly rejected. Edmund the villain cannot be a good role model for masculinity. Nor can the men of Julius Caesar be good role models who all contribute to the
downfall of the Roman republic through an obsession with public displays of masculinity. Not even Portia is invulnerable to gender ambivalence, for when Brutus does go to the Capitol she becomes extremely anxious and attributes her feelings to her weak femininity, thus undermining any conclusive observations we can make about the power of femininity in Rome.

The odd couple out is France and Cordelia. France’s act of endowing Cordelia with power cuts through power dynamics. He does not emasculate himself and he does not claim anything for his own. Cordelia has nothing to say to him in reply, but she does go with him when he beckons her and they exit together, retaining her dignity and without submission. King Lear is not only about gender performance and display, of course, and neither is Julius Caesar, but Shakespeare seems to make a profound discovery about power dynamics. When they are shared and not fought over, they transcend traditional notions of gender.
Works Cited


Excerpt from “Shakespeare’s Othello and Epideictic Tradition: The Play, Its Source, and Subsequent Adaptations”

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INTRODUCTION

In Othello & Interpretive Traditions Edward Pechter tells the story Sprague made immortal and eminently citable about an audience member reacting to a production of the play:

Sprague tells . . . of a Macready performance in Liverpool: during the ‘collaring’ episode of the Temptation Scene, when Othello takes Iago by the throat on ‘Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore’ (III.iii.411), “‘a gentleman in the upper boxes” is said to have “started up and exclaimed, loud enough for all around to hear, ‘Choke the devil! Choke him!’” (13)

The gentleman’s implicit judgement of Iago is fascinating. Anyone who has seen or read the play will not hesitate to call Iago a villain, but perhaps different people would have different reasons to prove why. Conversely, there is sure to be great discussion about what makes Othello a hero, or tragic hero. Furthermore, judgements of Iago’s villainy and Othello’s heroism would no doubt begin to implicate larger elements of the production and its place in society, both Shakespeare’s and the production’s. These discussions would be fascinating, because they would provide illuminating answers as to why audiences still attend a play written approximately 416 years ago.

Perhaps the number of answers to these questions are as numerous as the number of people who choose to address them; however, the fact that a judgment is inherent in the gentleman’s reaction to the “temptation scene” suggests that something about that performance persuaded the gentleman that action needed to be taken, persuaded him to stand up and call for
Iago to be murdered. Why should Iago be murdered? What is it about Iago that warrants this gentleman’s judgment? The same judgements take place within the play as well. Othello changes from perceiving Desdemona as “my fair warrior” (II.i.197) to striking her in public and calling her a “devil” (IV.i.270). Iago is responsible for Othello’s change in thinking, but the point is, Othello feels he has grounds to change his behaviour or he would not do it. It is no mystery that persuasion is an essential aspect of Othello. For one thing, it is how Iago works. However, it is apparent that rhetoric is at work in both Othello’s change of feeling toward Desdemona and the gentleman’s exclamation during the performance.

Rhetoric means different things to different people at different times. When dealing with English early modern drama and literature, rhetoric becomes wrapped up in eloquence and style. An investigation into eloquence and style would definitely help to understand the English early modern mind, but it might be too close to the subject of a general audience member’s judgement of the characters, too close to the painting to see the entire picture. That the gentleman called out for Iago to be murdered might lead to the conclusion that an instance of forensic rhetoric had occurred: the gentleman found Iago guilty of specific acts, and was speaking as a judge, or a juror. This conclusion ignores the fact that the instance of rhetoric occurred during a theatrical performance. The theatre is not the explicit venue of forensic rhetoric, or deliberative for that matter. As a place of entertainment, and as a place where audiences go to see plays about heroes and villains and an infinite variety of stories about themselves and other people, the theatre is a venue of epideictic rhetoric. The gentleman’s exclamation carried with it an implicit blame of Iago, because Iago’s character pushed against the gentleman’s own value system. Therefore, to gain a more comprehensive view of what was happening when Shakespeare wrote Othello and how that text has stayed alive and travelled through time to the present day, it is necessary to
draw upon the implications of theatre at large as epideictic rhetoric and, furthermore, the process of adaptation that occurs whenever Othello is revived and performed by different theatre companies or film production houses. This larger scale investigation will shine light on how Shakespeare’s plays still impact today’s societies and why today’s societies continue to look back to Shakespeare’s plays as valid forms of contemporary expression. In rhetorical terms, today’s societies see in Shakespeare’s plays, such as Othello, valid argumentative proofs pertaining to contemporary societal conditions. In other words, Othello is a topos.

As a topos, or place to base an argument upon, or example to use in order to provide proof for an argument, Othello begins to reveal itself as a tool for the use of an orator, a rhetorical appeal. Director Nigel Shawn Williams uses Othello to address issues of misogyny in his 2019 production at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, Canada. Director Tim Blake Nelson, working off a screenplay by Brad Kaaya, adapts Othello into the 2001 movie O to address the issue of class in the US Southern States. Stuart Burge adapts for the screen John Dexter’s National Theatre Company production of Othello, which ran from 1964-1966 and starred Laurence Olivier as Othello and Frank Finley as Iago in a 1965 interpretation that focusses on the clash between good and evil. Shakespeare himself adapts his play from a short story, a pseudo-moralistic fable, by Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio. The explanations provided here for the existence of these adaptations are, necessarily, simplified. One does not approach only one variable when creating art. There are many and deep reasons why directors and artists are drawn to a text. However, the fact remains that as finished pieces of art, as texts, these performances and adaptations of Othello reflect what has been observed above. Othello is a topos to be appealed to in order to put forward an argument. The orators’ arguments exist in the venue of epideictic rhetoric, and Othello itself is not only an example of Shakespeare’s epideictic
oratory, but it is simultaneously a *topos* for successive orators’ epideictic oratory praising or blaming specific aspects of their own societies.

If *Othello* is an example of epideictic rhetoric, then a proper analysis of the play requires two short preliminary discussions. *Othello* was conceived in the mind of Shakespeare, who operated under the influence of not only his political moment, which would have influenced his conception of how *Othello* might be perceived to affect his contemporary society, but also his own culture’s understanding and use of rhetoric, which would have influenced how he approached his ideas and the ways in which he used his ideas to produce effects on his audience. A discussion on Shakespeare’s political and rhetorical moment is in order. Furthermore, the evolution of classical epideictic rhetoric into today’s tradition of theatre as epideictic rhetoric is necessary, because twenty-first century epideictic rhetoric is still influenced by the ideas Aristotle set down in “Rhetoric” and “Poetics,” his treatises, respectively, on rhetoric and theatrical storytelling. With political, rhetorical, and theatrical background in place, the scene will be set for an analysis of *Othello* as epideictic rhetoric. Shakespeare’s play forms the centre of a system of influence, expanding chronologically through the many performances and adaptations that have come down to the twenty-first century, and expanding backward to Cinthio’s short story and beyond. Shakespeare’s use of the Othello story has superseded Cinthio’s. Therefore, an understanding of Shakespeare’s play is required in order to inform an understanding of some of the ways Shakespeare used Cinthio’s story. Thus, after the historical background is in place, discussion will move to the centre, *Othello*, then backward to Cinthio’s story, and finally, forward to the adaptations already mentioned. This analysis, from Shakespeare’s time to the present, will reveal the epideictic nature of *Othello*, and the play’s status as *topos* in twenty-first century drama.
“Othello” in the Elizabethan Political Environment

Top-most in many a person’s mind at the tail-end of Elizabeth I’s reign was the succession of the monarchy, and what was going to happen to England. Shakespeare’s plays and poetry reflected this anxiety. Shrank points out, “the theme of succession permeates Shakespeare’s oeuvre” (108). Shrank mentions Shakespeare’s early “sonnets of succession” which would have “had a particular edge in the last years of Elizabeth’s reign, when the fact that the Tudor dynasty faced extinction was all too worryingly apparent” (108). For Shakespeare, the succession theme morphed into the difference between a king and a tyrant, and the division of kingdoms, in his later plays. Thus, the continued stability and quality of England’s monarchy was a key concern for Shakespeare. However, he also lived during the Age of Discovery, when a new and exotic world opened up to England. Audiences were keen to experience in any way they could the world beyond their borders. Loomba points to material history in which houses of expatriate businesspeople were found to be filled with items picked up on their travels (14-15). A delegation from Morocco led by the Moroccan ambassador made an extended visit to London in 1601 (Hadfield Routledge Sourcebook 17) making the African continent even more of a hot topic than it might already have been. Indeed, as Honigmann writes, “Not long before [Shakespeare] began Othello he had the opportunity of observing a Moorish embassy at first hand . . . being Muslims and strange in their ways, he and his retinue caused a stir” (2). The exotic locations and characters of Othello (both Othello the Moorish general and the different Italians), speak directly to Othello’s engagement with the new world and all that came with it.

As a growing nation in the Age of Discovery, another line of political thought developed, led by writers such as Thomas More in Utopia, in which people debated what was the best form
of government for a state. As Nelson writes, quoting Cicero, “Political thought in Shakespeare’s Europe organised itself to a significant degree around the question of what constituted, in Cicero’s words, ‘the best state of a commonwealth’” (253). Shakespeare took part in this fascination with the political success of societies. Outside of a dramatized history of the Tudor heritage in his history plays, and the nature of a good ruler in plays such as King Lear and The Tempest, he also approached the subject of republics and empires in Julius Caesar and Titus Andronicus. Shakespeare engaged with the Venetian republic twice with The Merchant of Venice, and of course, Othello. Venice was idealized as a successful republic, one that fostered a thriving commonwealth without recourse to a monarch. In fact, one of the sources Shakespeare used for Othello was Lewkenor’s translation of Contareni’s The Commonwealth and Government of Venice (Riverside 85) which functioned not only as a travel guide, but also a glowing treatise on the Republic’s enduring success. Othello reflects Shakespeare’s fascination with different kinds of governments in its close depiction of political affairs in Venice, especially in Act One where the senate is discovered deftly handling competing reports on the actions of the Turkish fleet.

Perhaps, though, what is most vital to an understanding of political expressions in Shakespeare’s plays was that they took place in the midst of a period of anxiety felt across England about its status as a nation (Loomba 13, Scanlan 3). As England became a nation, its forays into the New World and exposure to the continent became influences on its development, as evinced in the above discussion about the presence of foreigners, exotic locales, and the engagement with different forms of government. Simultaneously England began to exert its own influence on the world stage, for example, with its defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and its first probes of the North American continent. From this back and forth negotiation with the rest
of the world, England incurred a paradoxical anxiety about the stability and effectiveness of its state when compared to the examples of different states and different struggles on the continent. Shakespeare’s plays reflect the English state’s anxiety over a national project through their ambivalence toward their heroes, such as the varying qualities of Brutus and Julius Caesar in the twilight of the Roman Republic, and indeed the ability of Venice to exert control away from the centre on the island of Cyprus in Othello. Anxiety over growth of nationhood will return below as Shakespeare’s political environment is folded into the overarching influence on his art.

“Othello” in Tudor Drama

Where English political thought existed in a growing international arena, English theatre arrived on London stages from a highly local history of religious performances designed to be as didactic as they were entertaining (Betteridge and Walker 3). Religious performance coexisted with religious plays into the final third of the sixteenth century, indicating a multifaceted culture of theatre. Just as many or more people would have connected the idea of theatre to the idea of religious edification. On the other hand, the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, though full of intellectual vigour, though integral to the system of courtly influence that dominated politics at the time (Hadfield Renaissance Politics 106), still occupied a grey region of morality (Betteridge and Walker 10-11), so that even professing moral lessons was something of an irony considering performances shared a neighbourhood with questionable entertainment such as bear-baiting, and questionable relations such as houses of prostitution. Elements of a shocking or spectacular nature were actually a sign of this process of separation from the church. The behaviour of Iago and the shock of Othello’s exotic character could not necessarily have been handled in the heavily moralizing and religious milieu earlier in the century and could just as
easily have been viewed as a sign of the moral depravity of the theatre as a sign of any sophisticated ability to engage with edgy subject matter.

However, largely as a reflection of the overall Renaissance fascination with Antiquity and English educational philosophy, Elizabethan/Jacobean theatre found great inspiration in the classics and a perfect venue for the fruits of an education system heavily influenced by the study of Roman rhetoric. One of Shakespeare’s greatest influences was that of Seneca’s plays. *Othello* deals with grave themes, depicts violent events, uses highly amplified language, and engages with fury and madness, all of which are hallmarks of Seneca’s style (Halpern 24-32). Classical education as a factor of humanism, and as a theme in and of itself, came from the mind of Erasmus (Baldwin 77), himself highly influenced by the Renaissance philosophy of humanism and wishing to form an educational curriculum based on an education in the classics (Matthews et al. 357). There is more to say about Shakespeare’s education as an influence on his own rhetoric. Here it is sufficient to conclude that Elizabethan/Jacobean drama was England’s great contribution to the Renaissance. Shakespeare’s plays remain some of the most influential and surely the most visible examples of England’s humanist discourse, though there is more to say on that topic, as Shakespeare’s use of theatre, like his political environment, is rolled into the overarching influences on his art, below. First, however, having discussed Shakespeare’s theatre, it will be wise now to locate theatre in the tradition of epideictic rhetoric.

**THEATRE AS EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC**

A period-specific understanding of Shakespeare’s political and theatrical environment helps to establish how his plays fit into his own time. In order to understand his plays as epideictic rhetoric, however, the perspective must be widened even more in order to see a basic progression from rhetoric’s origins in Ancient Greece, through the schoolrooms of Elizabethan
England, and onto today’s stages. The key idea to remember is that epideictic rhetoric concerns itself with forming judgements about people, whether to praise or to blame them.

*Moral Reactions to Shakespeare*

Christy Desmet points to the essays of William Richardson, an early nineteenth century professor, who analyzed Shakespeare’s characters in part according to the moral lessons they imparted to their audience. In Richardson’s words, “The genuine and original Poet . . . displays the workings of every affection, detects the origin of every passion, traces its progress and delineates its character. Thus, he teaches us to know ourselves, inspires us with magnanimous sentiments, animates our love of virtue, and confirms our hatred of vice” (1). Of Falstaff’s speech on honour, Richardson says, “The speaker . . . affords a curious example of self-imposition, of an attempt to disguise conscious demerit, and escape from conscious disapprobation” (252). Richardson writes according to a moral rulebook, which Desmet picks up on, saying, “Richardson reduces Falstaff’s multiplicity to ethical unity” (46) and points out how Richardson has, in fact, “rewritten” Shakespeare’s character in competition for “control of the text” (47). Richardson draws a moral lesson from the text and attempts to produce a definitive interpretation.

Desmet is in the process of claiming that many character critics, those critics who were concerned with discussing the motivations of Shakespeare’s characters, had the tendency to perform their criticism through impersonation of the characters they were addressing in order to convince their readers of their claims. Aside from being an imaginative observation that turns Shakespeare’s critics into competing performers of the roles they are discussing, part of the interest in the history of character criticism is in its distance from current Shakespearean critical methods. There is enough perspective for Desmet to make the diachronic observation, “Whereas
neoclassic critics blamed Shakespeare for his characters’ lack of consistency, later writers responded by praising the characters” (177). Desmet’s observations provide an instance in Shakespearean criticism where opinions on the same subject matter change over time. Moreover, Richardson himself forms a judgement of Falstaff the character in the same way as the gentleman from Liverpool formed a judgement of Iago. In Richardson’s discussion of Falstaff’s speech on honour lies an implicit blame of Falstaff for not being honourable. Richardson appeals to a moral norm when he makes his judgements. Desmet herself writes from a 1990s American perspective, appealing to the notion that Richardson’s criticism is antique and outdated, which is to say, implicitly praising the better or more effective ways of studying Shakespeare that have arisen since Richardson’s time. In all cases, the critic or audience member appeals to a contemporary value system, or tries to define a value system worth appealing to. It is not surprising that Desmet pursues this discussion in a book on epideictic rhetoric in Shakespeare, because what she brings to light is the use of epideictic rhetoric not only in Shakespearean criticism, as per her proposal (177), but also epideictic ritual in responses to Shakespeare’s theatre. People respond to Shakespeare’s plays by locating within them appeals to morals and value systems that are to be praised or blamed. This is not the only way to read Shakespeare’s plays, of course, but it appears to be the way the Liverpool gentleman read the play when he called for the death of Iago. The dramatic situation outraged him, not because he disapproved of the costumes, but because Iago’s methods were so morally degraded and so embracing of villainy that the gentleman had to speak out.

The subject of epideictic rhetoric begins with the Ancient Greeks. Aristotle makes the key statements. To begin with, “ceremonial oratory of display [epideictic rhetoric] either praises
or censures someone” (“Rhetoric” Roberts 1358b). Epideictic rhetoric is not concerned with proving guilt or innocence as forensic rhetoric is, nor is it concerned with making decisions about a course of action as deliberative rhetoric is. Epideictic rhetoric is concerned with praise or blame. Aristotle continues, “the ceremonial orator is, properly speaking, concerned with the present, since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time” (“Rhetoric” Roberts 1358b). Gorgias’s “Encomium of Helen” sums up Aristotle’s ideas. Gorgias has written a speech in order to “free [Helen of Troy] of blame” (44); Helen, of course, has been blamed for the fall of Troy. The details Gorgias uses to free Helen of blame (fate, rape by violence or by word, and love) all constitute subjects and values that were of concern to Gorgias’s audience.

Aristotle’s mention of “Display” (“Rhetoric” Roberts 1358b) provides an important word to understand. Gorgias hints at display when he says that he has written his speech “as a diversion to [himself]” (46). Epideictic rhetoric contains an element of entertainment, both for the orator as well as the audience. It provides a space of time in which all parties enjoy themselves. The source of enjoyment is the orator’s speech. Furthermore, Aristotle specifies, “Speaking generally, of the topics common to all rhetorical arguments, amplification is most suitable for epideictic speakers, whose subject is actions which are not disputed, so that all that remains to be done is to attribute beauty and importance to them” (“Rhetoric” Freese 1.9). Amplification on a compositional level is any and all means with which to raise an utterance above the everyday register, any and all figures of speech. The display of amplification improves not only the entertainment value of epideictic rhetoric but it can also meaningfully inform the oratory’s content. Shakespeare’s various methods of amplification are many and detailed; however, for a largescale view of the epideictic structure of his plays, only amplification with
regard to character development will be discussed below. Important here is how epideictic rhetoric, as it was understood by the Ancient Greeks, evolved (one evolutionary path among many) into today’s experience of theatre.

Aristotle again provides the starting point, this time in his “Poetics,” stating plainly that humans enjoy seeing representations of things. Furthermore, “The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, ‘that is so and so.’ If we have never happened to see the original, our pleasure is not due to the representation as such but to the technique or the color or some other such cause” (“Poetics” 1448b). Walker summarizes Aristotle’s views succinctly, describing the poetry Aristotle is thinking about as “arguments by example” (93), meaning the presentation of a story which will arouse feelings of emotion and identification in the audience. Hundreds of years before Aristotle, theatre was already an art form enshrined in competitions in honour of the god Dionysus (Fischer-Lichte 8). The plays of Aeschylus (Aristotle “Poetics” 1449a) Sophocles and Aristophanes (Aristotle “Poetics” 1448a) are examples of poetry Aristotle refers to. As “arguments by example,” plays are implicitly acts of rhetoric. They are not speeches, per se, since there are usually more than one person taking turns making speeches, but they are rhetorical constructs. Plays are made up of a number of speakers, all contributing to a larger argument encapsulated in the plot.

The term rhetorical construct needs unpacking. The word rhetoric, rooted in rhetor finds its way back to an Ancient Greek ablaut construction which includes, ἐρέω, meaning, “I shall say” (Oxford English Dictionary). The rhetor makes a speech, and his or her speech (plus the methods used to construct and deliver that speech) is rhetoric. A rhetor is more commonly understood as an orator, which goes back to classical Latin, meaning, “speak, plead, or pray” (OED). Furthermore, the word oracle, also stemming from orate or “speak” refers to the place
where the gods, or person speaking for the gods, speaks. The oracle is a metaphorical mouth of the gods, whether place or person. The playwright, though not a god, is an author of oratory. The play, the words of the human oracle, is the orator. The theatre is akin to the oracle, the place.

Audiences go to the theatre to hear the play which imparts to them the words of the author. Unlike an oracle, or a classical oration, the speech of the playwright is not one speech out of one mouth, but composed of different characters with many different speeches all coming together in one macro-speech. This macro-speech, organized according to plot and character, is the rhetorical construct. When in action, this construct is an epideictic performance for the purpose of persuading audiences to judgements of praise or blame. The origins of Shakespeare’s engagement of epideictic rhetoric on the London stage can be found in his classroom.

ELEMENTS OF SHAKESPEARE’S EPIDEICTIC RHETORIC

Education

No discussion of Shakespeare’s knowledge or use of rhetoric would be complete without addressing how Shakespeare would have been exposed to rhetoric during his grammar school days. Lanham characterizes the Elizabethan schoolroom effectively in The Motives of Eloquence. As he opens his work about rhetorical perspectives on style down the ages, he pictures an Elizabethan student: “Start your student young. Teach him a minute concentration on the word, how to write it, speak it, remember it. Stress memory in a massive, almost brutalizing way, develop it far in advance of conceptual understanding . . .” (2). Lanham goes on to detail the intense education in classics, and the practice of impersonating classical figures delivering famous speeches (a practice which recalls Desmet’s discussion of character critics performing their criticism, as if a convincing performance is indicative of proof). He also stresses the agonistic element of Elizabethan rhetoric: “Let the student re-enact fictional or historical
The spirit of rhetorical debate lives in Elizabethan education, arguing for one position over another, but more importantly, the system of memorization and impersonation seems not only to be the basis of a grammar school education, but a preparation for a career in the theatre.

McDonald highlights Latin translation exercises in his discussion of the influence of grammar school education on Elizabethan theatre: “Given a passage from Cicero or another approved ancient writer, the student translated the Latin into English. Then, after an hour or so, the master required the student to translate the passage again, this time rendering his own English” (451). Ben Johnson’s smirking reference to Shakespeare’s “small Latine, and lesse Greeke” (Riverside 97) has contributed to fundamental misunderstandings of just what Shakespeare was exposed to in the schoolroom. In fact, his “small amount” of Latin amounted to a comprehensive education in Latin composition, speaking, and grammar, taken from classical Roman writers, including Aesop for the children, Ovid, and Virgil for the older students as well as the writing of Julius Caesar and Cicero (Baldwin 80, 413, 614-615). Shakespeare’s school reading provided an exhaustive repertoire for Shakespeare of methods of ornament and amplification, not to speak of opportunities to reference the statements of the classical authors in his own plays.

T.W. Baldwin, in a study published in 1944, pored over almost all extant evidence possible to determine that Shakespeare’s education was the standard education any schoolboy in the country would have received, whether in London or Stratford-Upon-Avon, and that though there is no hard and fast proof that Shakespeare attended grammar school, the evidence of Shakespeare’s education in his plays in addition to the presence of a Stratford grammar school and evidence in support of the education the teachers would have imparted to their students in
that institution makes “the inference . . . an inevitable one, amounting almost to certainty” (Baldwin 662). Shakespeare’s education in the classical texts, with a sharp focus on rhetoric, was, if not appropriate to present-day pedagogy, deeper and far more comprehensive than anything twenty-first century high school students would receive today.

Finally, Enterline points to Shakespeare’s progress through Aphonius’s “progymnasmata . . . a series of general and then practical instruction” (20) which leads boys from learning and reciting fables to pleading cases as if a lawyer and defending theses. All of this, as Lanham points out, was done with an eye toward performance. Shakespeare’s education alone was enough to prepare him for a career in the theatre, and to engage with the topics he did. Most importantly, Shakespeare’s education stressed the use of rhetoric and the knowledge of rhetoric as a mode of communication with which he made ample use of in his plays. From his education can be drawn two important structural elements of his drama, especially with regard to Othello *Dissoi Logoi*

An important feature of Elizabethan rhetorical education was the practice of *dissoi logoi*, or arguing on both sides of the point. Using the Latin term, McDonald describes, “*argumentum in utramque partem,* in which the student was assigned a debating topic and required to write persuasively on the affirmative and the negative sides” (451). This surely contributed to the competitive atmosphere of social discourse referred to by Lanham. It also contributed to one of Shakespeare’s major rhetorical maneuvers in his plays: that of injecting *dissoi logoi* into his discourse. *Argumentum in utramque partem* was a fundamental element of Shakespeare’s education and it produced a highly adept talent in Shakespeare at placing multi-faceted perspectives of single themes in front of his audiences. Shakespeare’s ability in this was a virtuoso element of his epideictic rhetoric. The very act of making a character like lago the prime
reporter of Othello’s character, speaking against Othello’s actions, not to speak of the idealism of the love between Othello and Desdemona, is an act of dissoi logoi. The contrast between Iago’s extreme, yet highly effective pragmatism and Othello’s tragically ineffective majesty and valour is also an act of dissoi logoi. Venice as the centre of a successful state placed in opposition to its colonial outpost, a place where its government is supposed to work just as successfully, is another act of dissoi logoi, proposing that Venice is both effective and ineffective. Dissoi logoi becomes an important structural element of Othello. To use the terms established in the introduction, as a rhetorical construct Othello makes use of dissoi logoi to present continually changing perspectives of one sequence of events.

Ornament

Elizabethan ideas of rhetoric developed from Cicero and Quintilian’s ideas of rhetoric, which were highly concerned with its practical application. Quintilian, for example, spends five chapters in his “Institutes of Oratory” on the importance of learning effective skills for declamation (379-384). Shakespeare’s concern with this element of rhetoric is reflected most visibly in his early plays, such as Love’s Labor’s Lost, which displays a preoccupation with the effect of rhetorically elevated words on truth. However, Williamson’s discussion of Elizabethan stylistic evolution and debate points to Francis Bacon’s definitions and discussions of rhetoric and style which reveal the insight that

rhetoric as the illustration of tradition or the doctrine of ornament is not Aristotelian; nor is it merely stylistic. It involves all that may be added to bare argument or logic in order to make it persuasive, including the turn or shape of the argument itself; ornament is not decorative, but persuasive; it is, or gives, a persuasive form of proof. Hence the office of rhetoric is to illustrate reason by imagination for the better moving of the will. (163)
In a very real way, ornamented speech was forcefully demonstrative of truth, and an evolution of rhetoric particular to the Elizabethan period with its prehistory in Roman rhetoric. Shakespeare’s own plays enter into debate with this notion, and the clash between the ornamentation of his own verse and his ambivalence to that ornamentation reflect, perhaps, not that Shakespeare’s plays mistrust rhetoric, but that they distrust humans to always use rhetoric virtuously.

Othello channels Shakespeare’s education and educational experience when he makes his defense in front of the Venetian senate. The words he uses and how he arranges them are as important to his case as its content. On the other hand, Iago subverts Shakespeare’s education: as the best rhetorician on the stage, Iago eschews overt ornament and fools everyone until the very end, with his plain, bluff, “honest” style, employed to serve his own interests. A lifetime experience with rhetoric, starting from school, and engaged in a society that lived, breathed, and debated its rhetorical education, is reflected in the spectrum of rhetorical engagement displayed by Othello and Iago as well as the other characters in Othello.

SHAKESPEARE’S RHETORICAL MANOEUVRES

Dissoi Logoi, Ornamentation, and their Relation to Character

Ornamentation, dissoi logoi, and the entire field of an education founded in Elizabethan rhetorical methodology form the basic elements of Shakespeare’s rhetoric. As part of an epideictic rhetorical construct, these elements spin together to create an element of oratorical debate between the different characters.

For example, Othello makes use of different forms of eloquence to delineate character, as will become apparent in the analysis of the play. The epideictic quality of Iago’s and Othello’s use of language operates by turning them into meta-orators sending their own world views to the audience. By the end of the play, each character has argued a case. The point is not only that Iago
is finally found out, or that Othello might have redeemed his terrible acts by killing himself. The point is that the events happened, and Iago stood on one side of the stage and Othello stood on the other.

Shakespeare’s use of *dissoi logoi* provides many examples of the internal debate existing within *Othello*. Consider the entrance of the courtesan, Bianca, late in the play. She has been characterized as a courtesan, but she insists that she is no such thing. Bianca has a right to her own identity and she insists Cassio treats her and speaks to her respectfully. She values her relationship with Cassio. Now, she may or may not be a courtesan, and from a technical point of view one might be able to prove it, but her words make it impossible to form a simple understanding of the relationships in *Othello*. How do Bianca’s claims affect the larger oratory of the play? How do they affect the themes of the play? How do they affect the audience’s judgement of the characters she is involved with? They complicate the audience’s awareness of the opinions Othello is forming of what women are, and what Desdemona is. Furthermore, they complicate the play’s discourse on women in a heated atmosphere that is tainted with misogyny already. Bianca stands up for her own integrity when she becomes implicated in Cassio’s late-play injury: “I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / As you that thus abuse me” (V.ii.143-144). Bianca takes her place in the meta-oratory, arguing her point of view into the varied perspectives of the play. In effect, the play becomes a group of characters competing for control of the discourse.

To sum up these discussions on the political and theatrical environment of Shakespeare’s time, as well as the various elements and foundations of Shakespeare’s own rhetoric, perhaps one of the widest angle views to take of this discourse is of how Shakespeare fit into the ongoing Renaissance on the European continent. As mentioned, Shakespeare was one of England’s most
visible and influential commentators on Renaissance humanism. However, his characters do not necessarily exemplify the human individual as the measure of all things. On the contrary, and to borrow from the words of a certain Danish prince, humans are supposed to be “the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals – and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me” (Shakespeare Hamlet II.ii.330-333). Shakespeare’s view of humanity might conceive of wonders, as many of his plays demonstrate, and his work might be the example of an extraordinary individual, but his worldview is also jaded.

Shakespeare’s worldview reflects an entire continent’s continuing struggle with the collapse of the authority of the Catholic Church and the controversy of the Reformation, not to speak of the various conflicts between states and within states, such as the Spanish attempt to invade England in 1588. The invasion was repulsed, and surely became an occasion for pride in the developing English State, but the invasion also reflected the ongoing threat of foreign power and Catholic dominance. England itself had suffered trauma within its borders as its religion flipped from Henry VIII’s and Edward VII’s Church of England to Mary Tudor’s Catholicism, and back to Elizabeth I’s Protestantism.

On the continent, humanistic ideals of the Renaissance exemplified by Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man and symbolized by perfect mathematical perspective in paintings were replaced with expressions of anxiety, such as Michelangelo’s late-period paintings and sculptures. Shakespeare’s expressions of anxiety, exemplified by Hamlet’s words, not only reflect England’s national anxieties, or the inherent anxieties of multiple perspectives produced by dissoi logoi, but they also take their place in the general continental artistic push against Renaissance ideals that became Mannerism. Shakespeare is not interested in creating perfectly unified plays, or expressions of the perfection of humanity. Shakespeare’s rhetorical constructs
are designed to destabilize previously held convictions and to ask questions. Destabilized or deconstructed societies are one of the main epideictic goals of Shakespeare’s rhetorical constructs. He is not providing answers, but seeking questions. This is one reason why there is no definitive answer to the issues raised in Shakespeare’s plays. As Honigmann says, “In Shakespearean tragedy uncertainty is of the essence” (20). This does not, however, mean that Othello provides no one to be praised or blamed. On the contrary, by destabilizing society, Shakespeare presents a multifaceted panorama with many elements deserving of either praise or blame. That being said, there is a centre to Othello and that is the conflict between Othello and Iago. The following analysis of Othello will focus on how Shakespeare delineates the hero and the villain, thus creating Othello’s two prime orators whose agonistic contest for control over the discourse of Othello forms the backbone of Shakespeare’s epideictic construct.
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