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Eric B. Song

Swarthmore College, esong1@swarthmore.edu

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ERIC SONG

Othello and the Political Theology of Jealousy

Even as attention to political theology has energized Renaissance studies, that category has proven nebulous enough to require repeated clarification. That politics and Christian theology have informed one another in Western history goes without saying. To provide a more useful working definition of “political theology,” Graham Hammill and Julia Reinhard Lupton appeal to “a crisis in religion” as revealed “in the moments where religion is no longer working—but neither are the secular solutions designed to replace it.”¹ Under this definition, the term designates a pattern of breakdowns and renegotiations that links ostensibly secular modernity to a religious past. Carl Schmitt’s dictum, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” has circulated widely because it justifies a certain kind of genealogical investigation against the possible charges of anachronistic thinking.² Yet Schmitt’s political leanings (including his ties to the Nazi party and to fascism more broadly) have motivated scholars to show that politico-theological inquiry does not amount to an intellectual alibi for modern authoritarianism.

Literary writings serve as an important conduit through which older religious and political modes—of thinking, venerating, and feeling—have

1. Graham Hammill and Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Introduction,” in *Political Theology and Early Modernity* (Chicago, 2012), 1.

2. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, tr. George Schwab (Chicago, 2005), 35–36. For a taxonomy of so-called “weak” versus “strong” appeals to political theology, see Anselm Haverkamp, “Richard II, Bracton, and the End of Political Theology,” *Law and Literature* 16.3 (2004), 313–26; Jennifer R. Rust, “Political Theology and Shakespeare Studies,” *Literature Compass* 6 (2009), 175–90. Whereas the “weak” version of political theology is primarily historicist in orientation and tends to be affiliated with the work of Ernst Kantorowicz, the “strong” view discerns latent connections between earlier political theology and modernity, in the way that Schmitt underwrites. I find this kind of taxonomy unhelpful to the extent that it participates in not just the recuperation but also the elevation of Schmitt as a singularly brilliant anti-liberal thinker.

been transmitted into modernity. In *Hamlet or Hecuba* (1956), Schmitt himself turned to literature as a focus of politico-theological inquiry, attempting to conscript Shakespearean tragedy for his view of history. Schmitt grounds *Hamlet's* aesthetic value squarely in political reality. The tragedy can remain durably powerful long after its time because of the “genuine intrusions [Einbrüche]” of history in the play.³ These intrusions refer to incendiary topics concerning James’s legitimacy as the future English monarch; the scandalous past of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots; and her eventual execution as authorized by Queen Elizabeth I. Such matters could not be handled directly, but their presence is nonetheless felt as taboos that energize the play. By advancing a political understanding of taboo while rejecting a psychoanalytic one, Schmitt claims that historical matters serve as the “objective reality of the tragic action.”⁴ Because this objective reality is expressed but also occluded as taboo, it does not become inert over time as overt topical allusions might. By reading *Hamlet* in this way, Schmitt works to subordinate the play’s tragic power to a supposedly objective historical narrative—one that looks ahead to the inadequacies of Stuart kingship and, beyond, to the advent of modern state power.

Scholars have worked to show that the politico-theological significance of artistic creativity should not be subordinated to such a tendentious view. Graham Hammill, for example, argues that Moses’ transmission of Yahweh’s laws to the Israelites serves as a paradigm for “the constitutive role of imagination,” which is indispensable for establishing and maintaining any form of political authority.⁵ Hammill details how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers explore this constitutive role—and not merely to affirm the legitimacy of power but rather to express conflicting values, including republican freedom versus monarchical authority, and toleration versus religious exclusion. Victoria Kahn argues (in part through a critical engagement with Schmitt’s *Hamlet or Hecuba*) for a more decisive break with religion in the name of a secular poesis. Fantasy and illusion remain indispensable for governance and social cohesion, but art, Kahn argues, is a more salutary form of making

3. Carl Schmitt, *Hamlet or Hecuba: The Intrusion of the Time into the Play*, tr. David Pan and Jennifer R. Rust (Candor, 2009), 25.

4. Schmitt, *Hecuba*, 45.

5. Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology from Machiavelli to Milton* (Chicago, 2012), 11.

when freed from its politico-theological entanglements. A challenge that both Hammill and Kahn confront is to explain how an understanding of political theology might remain not just relevant, but relevant in a way that disrupts the modern state's ability to arrogate religious energies for its own purposes. Hammill, even while embarking on a study of what he calls the Mosaic constitution, acknowledges that "[w]hether or not Hebrew scripture plays a similar role nowadays" as it did for earlier thinkers "may be an open question."⁶ Both Hammill and Kahn eventually turn to Freud as a central figure in transmitting the politico-theological concerns of the Hebrew Bible into modernity. As Kahn advances her argument that secular poesis is valuable because it "interprets our fantasies in a form that liberates rather than constrains," she must work around the fact that neither modern art nor Freud's attempt to demystify religious illusion managed to break the spell of twentieth-century fascism.⁷

This essay seeks to advance our understanding of how the aesthetic and affective work of early modern tragedy communicates politico-theological meaning, but in a way that disrupts the claims of state power. More specifically, this essay revisits *Othello* as a work that reshapes the biblical concept of jealousy into a plot that retains its air of religious profundity even while upending a supernatural understanding of causation. Jealousy persists within the supposedly universal claims of Christian love to exacerbate tensions between exclusivity and inclusivity, between personal intimacy and communal belonging. In *Othello*, jealousy serves as the dramatic vehicle of a politico-theological problem that neither religion nor the state can resolve. My argument builds upon the readings of *Othello* offered by Julia Reinhard Lupton and Christopher Pye.⁸ For Lupton, Othello's status as a circumcised convert locates on his body a resistance to full assimilation. This incomplete assimilation reveals not just the typological problem of relating spirit to flesh but also the contradiction between Christian universalism and narrower citizenship. Whereas Lupton focuses on Othello's particularity as a residual problem, Pye argues that Othello's anomalous standing in Venetian society looks to the future

6. Hammill, 7.

7. Victoria Kahn, *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* (Chicago, 2014), 177.

8. See Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago, 2005), 105–23; Christopher Pye, *The Storm at Sea: Political Aesthetics in the Time of Shakespeare* (New York, 2015), 105–24.

by anticipating the modern aesthetic subject. Othello, like the modern subject, claims for his own experiences a privilege apart from law. In Pye's account, jealousy motivates Othello to confuse what are really aesthetic experiences for empirical evidence of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. The tragic outcome, however, reveals that the so-called aesthetic subject is always truly enmeshed in the workings of state power and the law.

While engaging with the insights of these readings, this essay proposes that the full politico-theological significance of *Othello* has remained partly hidden in plain sight. *Othello* likely remains the single most influential depiction of conjugal jealousy in the English language. By revisiting the multilayered portrayal of jealousy as a problem for Othello, for Christian marriage in general, and for the interlace of personal lives and state power, I aim to show how the tragedy locates politico-theological meaning within intimate experiences. I take up Eric Santner's proposition that "there is more political theology in everyday life than we might have ever thought."⁹ It would be beyond the scope of this essay to trace the ways that *Othello* and its adaptations have shaped our understanding of jealousy as a phenomenon in everyday lives. This essay concludes instead with a discussion of one specific way that *Othello* looks ahead to our concerns with political theology. *Othello*, I argue, resists Schmitt's attempt to conscript Shakespearean tragedy for his view of political history. Othello's fate suggests that the harmonization of personal intimacy and communal belonging requires the auspices of state power; the state, by contrast, can flourish even when personal love becomes untenable. By registering this conclusion as a tragedy, however, *Othello* works to deny the state any affectively binding celebration of its own perpetuation and future development. *Othello* teaches us that the artistic work of shaping a politico-theological impasse into an artistic encounter can thwart a teleological narrative of state power precisely when that narrative claims to speak in the name of historical reality.

II

At the end of *Othello*, the tragic hero recounts the error that led him to murder his wife. Othello likens himself to "the base Indian" (according to the 1622 First Quarto edition of the play) or to "the base Iudean"

9. Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago, 2011), 46.

(according to the First Folio) who “threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe” (5.2.347–48).¹⁰ This well-known crux has presented two related ways—religious and ethnic—in which Othello understands his descent into murderous jealousy.¹¹ If Othello likens himself to the “base Indian,” he appeals to a form of ignorance affiliated with racial difference; the effects of that difference have persisted in spite of his conversion and admission into Venetian society. The First Folio’s “Iudean” locates Othello’s downfall within a scriptural framework, likening him either to Herod the Judaeen or to Judas Iscariot. Only an allusion to the story of Herod would offer a direct link to an earlier conjugal tragedy. Herod is lured by Salome into suspecting his wife Mariamne and ordering her execution. Early editors such as Alexander Pope and Lewis Theobald preferred this interpretation as they continued to rely on the Fourth Folio text and the “Iudean” variant.¹² The other readings, which have since gained prominence, do not allude to an earlier conjugal narrative. Instead, they describe wrongheaded or venal judgment concerning value: the Indian cannot fathom the worth of the pearl, while Judas Iscariot betrays Christ for thirty pieces of silver.

These interpretive possibilities can all speak to Othello’s condition because his marriage exhibits a highly specific version of a general problem concerning personal worth—not the worth of a Christian wife but rather that of a Christian husband in his wife’s esteem. In the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul redefines marriage as an index of Christ’s love for the Church. This teaching places a burden upon husbands to love their wives “even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5.25).¹³ Yet Paul’s exhortation leaves it unclear how or why any wife should esteem a particular would-be husband—who is himself imperfect and in need of salvation—in this way. Unlike any mere husband, Christ renders his bride worthy of marriage by sacrificing his own body to redeem her. William Gouge, in the 1622 treatise *Of Domesticall Duties*, upholds husbandly prerogative by emphasizing the metaphorical quality of Paul’s teaching:

10. Qtd. from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1996), 1288–96. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are taken from this edition and will hereafter be cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line numbers.

11. See Arthur Freeman, “‘Base Indian’: V.ii.347,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13 (1962), 256–57; Richard Levin, “The Indian/Iudean Crux in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982), 60–67; and Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 118–20.

12. See *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, Vol. VI: Othello*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia, 1886), 327n421.

13. All quotations from the Bible are from the 1611 Authorized Version.

“The note of comparison (**Even as*) requireth no *equality*, as if it were possible for an Husband in that *measure* to loue his wife, as Christ loued his Church.”¹⁴ Gouge admits that husbands are not truly Christ-like only to insist that wives should submit nonetheless. Because Paul’s teaching relies on a simile, the relationship between husband and wife does not need to reflect Christ’s redemptive love in any perfect way. When it comes to the metaphorical or even fictive core of Pauline marriage, Gouge warns his reader to “conceive no carnall, no earthly thing of it, because it is a mysterie.”¹⁵

Othello, however, desires to manifest real rather than mysteriously imputed merit; from beginning to end, he wishes to be revealed as he truly is. After Iago’s machinations render him unfit as a husband, Othello struggles to reconcile his lack of merit with his sense of heroic self-worth. Insofar as Othello likens himself to an ignorant Indian, he deflects the central question of his own worth by emphasizing Desdemona’s inestimable value. If Othello likens himself to Judas Iscariot, the implied comparison of Desdemona to Christ emphasizes how un-Christ-like Othello has been. In either case, Desdemona’s greater worth has ended up stymieing Othello’s quest to be honestly good. His final recourse is an act of self-sacrifice. Yet even if Othello narrates his suicide as an act of service to Christian Venice, he reaffirms his inability to make himself worthy of Desdemona’s love by redeeming her. Ideally, the irresolvable problem of personal merit within Pauline marriage should energize a dynamism between individual and collective identities. A wife should esteem her husband as being like Christ so that their imperfect marriage can point towards a higher truth. A husband should occupy his Christ-like role even while thinking of himself, paradoxically, as a member of Christ’s corporate bride. Even if such teachings are mysterious, they are—as a homilist like Gouge advises—meant to be tenable. Jealousy, however, is the vehicle that drives Othello and Desdemona’s Christian marriage to catastrophe. Even though marriage should have completed Othello’s assimilation into the Christian community of Venice, it ends up exposing that incorporation as imperfect.

The persistence of jealousy within Christian marriage contains a politico-theological potential; this is the potential that *Othello* activates for its dramatic purposes. In the Hebrew Bible, jealousy binds intimate and theological

14. William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises* (1622), 44.

15. Gouge, 125.

concerns together within a political formation. In the Second Commandment, Yahweh forbids Israel from the worship of idols by declaring himself a jealous God. John Calvin's commentary on this passage (as a 1561 English translation renders it) likens God's "feruently burnyng ialousie" to the anger of a husband "yf he see his wiues minde encline to a strang louer."¹⁶ Within the broader context of the Hebrew Bible, the liberty that Calvin's gloss takes is certainly not unwarranted. "Monotheistic theology," Regina M. Schwartz observes, "is obsessed with the possibility and actuality of betrayal," in such a way that "desire for God and human desire are made analogues of one another."¹⁷ In the Book of Hosea, to cite one memorable example, the prophet's experience of marriage to an unchaste woman reflects Yahweh's love for his chosen but wayward nation.

Christian teaching would go on to develop an endorsement of exclusivity while distancing itself from the forms of polygamy and concubinage described in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁸ Normative monogamy turns the dynamism between individual experience and corporate truth (as contained within the Pauline definition of marriage) into a more pronounced tension between exclusivity and inclusivity. For Calvin, Christians should apply divine jealousy towards an affirmation of God's exclusive relationship with an elect Church. John Donne's *Holy Sonnet XVIII* offers a memorably different view, one that favors inclusion at the expense of mandated exclusivity. For Donne, the existence of embattled Christian denominations is cause for indecision and lament. His sonnet expresses this lament by widening the disparity between the earthly experience of marriage and the higher meaning of Christ's love. Jealousy lies at the heart of this disjunction. When Donne describes Christ's bride as "most true, and pleasing to [him], then, / When she is embraced and open to most men," he scandalizes the sense that Christian marriage should be based on sexual fidelity.¹⁹ Even though exclusivity remains a central feature of marriage, Donne renders jealousy inappropriate for conveying the highest meaning of Christian love.

16. John Calvin, *The Institution of the Christian Religion*, tr. Thomas Norton (1561), 2.51.

17. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, 1997), 140.

18. For a recent discussion of the possibility of sanctioning polygamy resurfacing during the Reformation, see Carmen Nocentelli, *Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity* (Philadelphia, 2013), 95–101. Nocentelli argues that contact with polygamous cultures in Asia led Europeans to reinforce Christian monogamy.

19. Qtd. from *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne: The Holy Sonnets*, ed. Gary A. Stringer and Paul A. Parrish, vol. 7, part 1 (Bloomington, 2005), 19.

The tension between exclusive marriage and inclusive Christian love becomes more directly political in any society that confers legitimacy through birthright. In Jacobean England, marriage's function in regulating reproduction was restored to its highest level. James, in contrast to his unmarried predecessor, ascended to the English throne married and the father of heirs. He soon worked to harmonize the political utility and the spiritual meanings of marriage. As Ernst Kantorowicz has reminded us, James declared before parliament in 1603, "What God hath conjoined then, let no man separate. I am the husband, and all the whole island is my lawful wife."²⁰ Kantorowicz describes James's rhetoric as adapting a belief in the *corpus mysticum*, the union between Christ and the Church. Yet James's actual, earthly marriage did not necessarily help to promote a view of him as an exemplar of Christian love. As Alan Stewart recounts in his biography of James, the Scottish King had candidly described his decision to marry in 1589 as a practical matter, a political choice designed to refute what he called the "great jealousy"—not of infidelity but rather of his "inability" to produce an heir.²¹ As the Queen consort, Anna had been suspected of playing a role in the Gowrie conspiracy, which led to reports of "an open diffidence" between the royal couple as well as their "very evil menage."²² Once James and Anna became English monarchs, rumors intensified about Anna's Catholic leanings, political machinations, and sexual infidelities. James's own dalliances were also widely rumored.

III

Othello was likely composed in 1603, the same year as James's English coronation. Yet the play does not concern the functions of marriage in hereditary monarchy but is rather set in republican Venice. Shakespeare's second great play of jealousy would go on to treat monarchy directly: *The Winter's Tale* (1610/11) dramatizes a king's concern for the legitimacy of his heirs lapsing into a mad jealousy that imperils both his marriage and his dynastic future. We have long recognized *Othello* and King Leontes as characters linked by their descents into jealousy. Pye offers a specific way to understand *Othello* as anticipating the politico-theological exploration of jealousy in *The Winter's Tale*. As mentioned at the outset of this

20. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, 1957), 223.

21. Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King: A Life of James VI & I* (New York, 2011), 111.

22. Stewart, 158.

essay, Pye's reading relies on a strategic anachronism whereby Othello is described as a proto-aesthetic subject. Othello privileges his subjective experiences—the real basis of his mounting certainty of Desdemona's unfaithfulness—over juridical fact and state power. Like Othello, Leontes also confuses what amounts to aesthetic impressions for binding empirical proof. Yet as a monarch, Leontes has a different relationship to the law. Pye examines Leontes' authority in the light of Schmitt's well-known definition of sovereignty around the power to decree states of exception.²³ Leontes possesses the power to suspend even the oracular pronouncement of his wife's innocence, but his jealousy generates a register of experience that undermines his sovereign power. Precisely when Leontes exercises his decision-making power, he is exposed as deluded and tyrannical. Whereas Othello's jealousy, in Pye's reading, reveals that the subject is always bound up by state power despite its claim to autonomy, Leontes' jealousy exposes the sovereign subject as still relying on subjective knowledge. To avert the full implications of tragedy, a transcendent power must be available to call the sovereign into account.

Tracing the politico-theological meaning of jealousy reveals how, exactly, *Othello* can anticipate something like an aesthetic subjectivity. The point is not merely to avoid anachronistic terminology but rather to describe how the tension between inclusive love and exclusion embeds politico-theological content in affective and dramatic patterns. These patterns, in turn, reveal how *Othello* disrupts the ability of state power in claiming religious energies for its own perpetuation. According to Pye's reading, we can find *Othello*'s clearest expression of a proto-aesthetic sensibility in Montano's description of waiting for the general's arrival in Cyprus: "As to throw out our eyes for brave Othello, / Even till we make the main and th' aerial blue / An indistinct regard" (2.1.37–39). Montano's words reveal, according to Pye, how reality (in this case, Othello himself as an object of perception) can vanish or dissolve into a subjective experience—not through inattention but rather through an intensity of focus.

When Othello does finally arrive on the shores of Cyprus, he describes his own experience of the sea voyage. Although Othello has undergone duress, he begins to translate the horizontal crossing of the seas into a vertical ascent and descent between absolutes: "And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas / Olympus-high, and duck again as low / As hell's from

23. See Pye, 125–41.

heaven!” (2.1.187–89). Othello has also translated his recent voyage into a hypothetical scenario (described in the subjunctive) in order to affirm his present satisfaction upon being reunited with Desdemona. Othello desires to arrest time in the name of a consummated love: “If it were now to die, / ’Twere now to be most happy” (2.1.189–90). This intensity of feeling generates within Christian marriage an imbalance between personal experience and shared, corporate reality. Othello’s desire for loving permanence serves as an early precondition of jealousy. Even before jealousy takes hold, his love contains the kernel of a disruptive and antisocial effect. Othello ignores the political and military realities of the sea voyage—and everyone else involved other than Desdemona—in order to fantasize about fixity. Such solipsism clearly contrasts with Cassio’s behavior, which manages to express joy over Turkish defeat, deep concern for Othello, and admiration for Desdemona all at once. Even Othello comes to admit that he “prattle[s] out of fashion” (2.1.198).

We can look outside of *Othello* for confirmation that Shakespearean drama draws forth declarations of subjective, proto-aesthetic experiences from the distortions that arise from frustrated conjugal love. In *Cymbeline*, after being divided from her new husband Posthumus, Imogen describes how she would have seen him off as he involuntarily set sail:

I would have broke mine eye-strings, crack’d them, but
 To look upon him, till the diminution
 Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
 Nay, followed him till he had melted from
 The smallness of a gnat to air, and then
 Have turned mine eye and wept. (1.3.17–22)

This description serves as the later counterpart to both Montano’s and Othello’s accounts of the sea voyage. Within Imogen’s experience, in fact, Montano’s aesthetic sensibility and Othello’s desire for permanent love converge. Imogen longs to have fixed Posthumus in her perception as long as possible until his disappearance. The perceptual reality of this disappearance merges seamlessly with Imogen’s affective condition: in her eyes, his melting away gives way to her weeping. Only after a long series of romance digressions will Posthumus and Imogen be reunited. At the very end of the play, husband and wife are finally able to embrace and to freeze themselves into a visual emblem of fidelity.

When Othello longs for fixity on the Cypriot shore, he resorts to a metaphorical language of succession to describe the fixity of his love:

“My soul hath her content so absolute / That not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate” (2.1.191–93). In the dynastic plot of *Cymbeline*, the tension between permanence and succession proves more literal. The triumph of static fidelity can be achieved only because the romance narrative has rendered the marriage of Imogen and Posthumus unnecessary for the continuity of British sovereignty. Imogen is no longer Cymbeline’s sole surviving heir. She is, instead, a “piece of tender air,” or *mulier*—a woman whose destiny is to be a “most constant wife” (5.5.446–49). In the handling of the Soothsayer, the motif of fixed love giving way to a vanishing but then being restored as a new fidelity is reshaped into a specifically political metaphor. Just as “the Roman eagle . . . / . . . Lessen’d herself, and in the beams o’ th’ sun / So vanish’d,” so should “our princely eagle / Th’imperial Caesar” reunite with “the radiant Cymbeline” (5.5.470–75). The play concludes with this image of dynamic political union. Yet Imogen and Posthumus themselves are free to remain static in their love because they can exist at a partial remove from dynastic history.

Imogen’s story ends happily after a romance plot magically restores her identity and clarifies her personal and political roles. Othello, by contrast, begins his story as a hero whose new marriage should harmonize his personal merit with his communal belonging. Recent scholarship has attended to the way Othello and Desdemona’s marriage mirrors Ruggiero and Bradamante’s in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*.²⁴ In the Italian romance epic, marriage had crowned the conversion of the Saracen hero to Western Christendom; Shakespeare’s tragedy subsequently upends marriage as a vehicle of closure. This renewed attention to the literary, religious, and racial underpinnings of Othello’s inverted romance narrative adds historical specificity to Stanley Cavell’s claim that *Othello* anticipates the tragic possibilities of Cartesian skepticism. For Cavell, Othello spuriously tries to overcome all doubt by placing “a finite woman,” Desdemona, “in the place of God”—or, as it turns out, in the place of Christ.²⁵ Cavell does

24. See Benedict Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature: The Politics of Romance from Spenser to Milton* (New York, 2007), 71–81; Dennis Austin Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York, 2014), 112–41.

25. Stanley Cavell, *Disavowing Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, updated ed. (Cambridge, 2003), 35, 126. Cavell reads Othello’s predicament against Descartes’ appeal to God as a guarantor of knowledge beyond the *cogito*. Cavell believes that Descartes puts God in the place of an external other in order to deflect the need for a human other whom we can only believe (not know for certain) possesses a mind like our own. Cavell finds that for both Descartes and Othello, “the human problem in recognizing other human beings is the problem of recognizing another to be Christ for oneself” (127).

cite A.C. Bradley to refer to Othello as “the most romantic of Shakespeare’s heroes” and Norman Rabkin to call Othello “the most Christian of the tragic heroes.”²⁶ Yet Cavell only glances at the cultural histories that enable Shakespeare to channel theological and philosophical meaning into the drama of a husband’s overreliance on his wife.

Othello, I argue, turns the supposed triumph of romance into the grounds of an epistemological tragedy by exacerbating familiar tensions within Christian marriage. Othello’s reliance on Desdemona is an acute version of the problem whereby a husband is called to be Christ-like even while knowing that this is largely untrue. The slippage between Othello’s claim to merit and his awareness of insufficiency registers early in the play, when Othello appears before the Senate to account for his clandestine wedding. Othello testifies how, upon hearing his stories of heroism, Desdemona “wish’d / That heaven had made her such a man” (1.3.162–63). If Desdemona had desired to be a man like Othello, she indirectly fulfills such desires by becoming his sweet warrior. Yet Desdemona may have articulated a desire not to be a man but rather to be wooed by a man like Othello—a hypothetical (and presumably white) friend of Othello’s. Othello explains that he interpreted Desdemona’s remark as a coy hint and then wooed her. Even by his own account, however, love contains the possibility of self-estrangement. The role of beloved husband may be an open-ended office that Othello has come to occupy.

This fleeting admission eventually gives way to Othello’s fuller realization that he is not Christ-like even though he is a new Christian husband. Othello’s dependence on his wife’s love reveals not merely the universal defect of sin but also the pressures that beleaguer him as a black, Moorish convert. We eventually learn alongside Iago that Cassio had played a key role in the formation of Othello and Desdemona’s love. Cassio may have functioned in the gap that Othello’s testimony had only suggested as a grammatical placeholder—between Othello and “such a man” as him. Iago overhears Desdemona describing how Cassio “came a-wooing” with Othello and took his part when she had spoken “dispraisingly” of him (3.3.71–72). Othello may have needed an active intercessor to win Desdemona’s love all along; the occlusion of this fact in Othello’s earlier testimony reveals the anxieties that Iago is able to exploit. As Harry Berger observes, Cassio’s mediation in Othello and Desdemona’s love exposes

26. Cavell, 129.

two overlapping triangles—“one formed around the practice of courtship” and the other “around a question of military discipline.”²⁷ By the time Iago learns of Cassio’s earlier role, he has already initiated a plot to turn him into a target of Othello’s jealousy.

Jealousy operates in the slippage between Othello’s sense of meriting Desdemona’s love, on the one hand, and his claim to worth as a soldier and a Venetian citizen, on the other. The Venetian Senate does confer legal sanction upon Othello and Desdemona’s union. The Duke is sympathetic enough to deem that his own daughter would have been won over by Othello’s tales. Yet Shakespeare imagines Venice as lacking an essential stake in marriage and thus lacking the affective force to provide closure to the union it legitimizes. We can discern how *Othello* portrays the Venetian government as relatively indifferent to marriage by turning to one of Shakespeare’s source texts, Lewes Lewkenor’s 1599 English translation of Contarini’s *Commonwealth and Government of Venice*. Contarini describes ducal marriages as so important that laws prevent the Doge from marrying the daughter of a foreign prince or of a “straunger” who has since “obtained the right and tittle of a Venetian gentleman.”²⁸ Although a republic theoretically does not rely on dynastic marriage for its continuity, the exclusivity of ducal marriage is, in reality, a crucial matter. *Othello* dramatizes a form of marriage to an assimilated foreigner that does not concern the Duke directly. Brabantio objects to Desdemona’s choice of a stranger, but this is a personal concern that is deemed an interruption of the Senate’s legitimately public business. In Contarini’s account, the Venetian nobility consider marriage to be a practical affair, arranged “for the most part alwaies by a third person, the bride being neuer suffered so much as to behold her future husband” until contractual matters are settled (194). Othello and Desdemona’s marriage does not conform to the practices of the Venetian nobility. Or, more accurately, Othello wishes to narrate his marriage as having arisen purely from Desdemona’s personal choice; only later do we become aware that Cassio might have brokered their union as a kind of “third person.” In this light, Othello’s initial desire to suppress Cassio’s role and his later lapse into

27. Harry Berger, Jr., *A Fury in the Words: Love and Embarrassment in Shakespeare’s Venice* (New York, 2013), 133.

28. Gasparo Contarini, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, tr. Lewes Lewkenor (1599), 197. All quotations from this text will hereafter be cited parenthetically by page (or, in the preliminaries, signature) number.

jealousy both manifest an impulse to privilege individual love over fully public concerns.

The framing of the scene at the Venetian Senate underscores the disparity between personal and state affairs. In the brief set piece that opens act 1, scene 3, the Duke and the senators see through a Turkish naval ruse. Venetian power expresses itself through an ability to discern rational motives behind pretenses. Yet perhaps for this very reason, this state cannot underwrite conjugal love as an enabling fiction mediating between Christ's love and its imperfect earthly manifestations. The aftermath of this set piece reveals the Venetian state's lack of affective sway when it comes to intimate and familial matters. After the Duke offers Brabantio rhyming commonplaces of comfort, Brabantio openly mocks the Senate's ineffectiveness when it comes to intimate rather than tactical affairs: "So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile, / We lose it not, so long as we can smile" (1.3.210–11). Even though Brabantio officially accepts his daughter's marriage, he still bequeaths unhappy jealousy to his new son-in-law: "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (1.3.292–93). Although Brabantio has just disparaged the Senate's lack of wisdom in personal matters, he exhorts Othello to apply the Venetian mode of shrewd skepticism within married life. The advice to weave the experience of love and the rational tactics of statecraft together in this way turns out to be a form of sabotage. In the course of exploring the tension between Christian universalism and Venetian citizenship, Lupton describes Brabantio as "a type of the Jewish Christian, uneasy with the universal fellowship promised by his faith" and desiring to uphold "national brotherhood."²⁹ Brabantio's desire for exclusivity is not rendered obsolete by the triumph of a Christian marriage but is rather communicated effectively to his foreign son-in-law.

IV

Under Iago's influence, this seed of regressive suspicion grows into jealousy. The reemergence of a sensibility that should have been rendered obsolete at both the civic and religious registers exposes the limits of Shakespeare's imagined republican polity. In this way, jealousy does not merely translate a biblical concept into a dramatic plot but rather communicates a fully politico-theological impasse. Venetian authority unwittingly allows the residue of paternal jealousy to stain Christian marriage.

29. Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 107–09.

According to Andrew Hadfield, *Othello* follows republican theory by dramatizing how “individual virtue . . . can only flourish if nurtured and protected by powerful state institutions.”³⁰ Jealousy is the vehicle through which Iago manifests himself as an “antirepublican villain.”³¹ Yet *Othello*’s tragedy does not simply reaffirm republican values but instead reveals the contradictions within Venetian republicanism. In response to the developing body of criticism linking *Othello* to early modern republicanism, Andrew Sisson has called for more attention to the “specifically republican problematic of the citizen’s other as the *functionally specialized professional*”—that is, the professional soldier or mercenary.³² Sisson traces a dichotomy between the ancient Roman citizen-soldiery (as championed by Machiavelli) and the Venetian separation of citizenship from a military establishment (advocated by Contarini). In Sisson’s account, *Othello* suffers from a distinctively Venetian inability to perfect the transition from being a professional soldier to being a citizen. In the terms of my argument, jealousy uncovers the religious pattern underlying the Venetian republic’s inability to assist *Othello* after marriage, even though his marriage should affirm his merit as a soldier-turned-citizen. *Othello* cannot perfectly translate his military valor—the basis of his civic identity—into a conviction of Christ-likeness with regard to his wife. Defined primarily by skeptical reason, Venetian authority is ill-equipped to provide the spiritual and affective assistance that *Othello* needs to maintain the partly fictive status of a Christ-like husband.

If Iago’s assault on *Othello*’s marriage makes him a recognizably anti-republican villain, he succeeds by turning *Othello*’s insecurities as an assimilated foreigner into an acute case of the discrepancy between any husband and Christ. Nobody in the play is more aware of the question of genuine merit than Iago. The play opens with Iago’s complaint that Cassio has been unjustly promoted ahead of him. As Bradley has reminded us, we have no clear way to prove or disprove Iago’s initial claim to be more deserving than Cassio.³³ Rather than making his own merit conspicuous, Iago finds ways to translate his potentially groundless professional envy into *Othello*’s sexual jealousy. *Othello*’s sense of his own merit has

30. Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge, Eng., 2005), 216.

31. Hadfield, *Republicanism*, 219.

32. Andrew Sisson, “*Othello* and the Unweaponed City,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 66 (2015), 139.

33. See A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 4th ed. (London, 2006), 158.

already linked military standing and a claim to love; by fostering a jealous need for singularity within Desdemona's affections, Iago produces a discord between these private and public registers. This discord manifests itself when Othello decries the breakdown of his vocation even before receiving so-called proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Othello feels that he can no longer occupy the role of general when he can simply imagine "the general camp" having sex with her (3.3.345).

Iago trains Othello's jealousy on Cassio, his lieutenant and erstwhile intercessor in love. In act 2, scene 2, Cassio unwittingly speaks to the religious logic that allows Iago to turn otherwise petty envy into the grounds of a grave travesty. Cassio confuses his military standing for the condition of his soul. When Iago expresses his desire to be eternally saved, Cassio gratefully insists that "the lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient" (2.2.10). Even as a drunken quip, this remark reveals how Iago has reshaped professional envy into a confusion between one's military office and one's spiritual condition. This travesty becomes tragic rather than farcical when Iago brings it to bear upon marriage. Pauline teaching confers upon marriage a soteriological dimension by defining it around Christ's sacrificial love. Christ atones for the members of his mystical, corporate body (his bride) by exposing his literal flesh to divine punishment. Iago gives the audience special access to the way he perverts this link between atoning sacrifice and love. In his second soliloquy, Iago reveals a plan to exact revenge either by cuckolding Othello or by implanting jealousy in him:

And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife;
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure. (2.1.298–302)

The "wife for wife" retribution that Iago imagines is never actualized but its logic haunts the play nonetheless. Iago imagines wives as interchangeable in an economy of displaced vengeance: an innocent wife is imagined as being corrupted in a form of recompense for a perceived violation committed by her husband. This misogynistic attitude is initially localized in Iago but proves powerful insofar as it perverts the meaning of redemptive Christian love. Ultimately, killing will prevail over sexual vengeance as the way to distort the soteriological meaning of Christian

marriage. Under Iago's influence, Othello tries to think of killing of Desdemona not only as erotically charged violence but also as a righteous sacrifice. He realizes too late that his actions expose him as an unworthy husband while elevating the innocent Desdemona to a more Christ-like station.

In a final irony, Othello's excessive desire for both singular merit and love costs him not only his marriage but also his civic and military standing. At the end of the play, Cassio "rules in Cyprus" (5.2.331). The promotion may be just recompense for what Cassio has suffered, but it is also of a piece with the way state power prevails even when love is untenable. Nothing in the play (not even Iago's inexplicable description of Cassio as "almost damn'd in a fair wife") suggests Cassio's commitment to love outside of his professional bonds (1.1.21). Cassio's dealings with the courtesan Bianca—and his willingness to mock her affections for him—suggest that he views women as instruments for satisfying his desires. Even Cassio's interactions with Desdemona tend to confirm his instrumental view of women as they serve his needs. Cassio's final promotion reveals that Venetian power (as the play depicts it) exists a remove from the demands of Christian love and marriage. Venice is not attached to individuals through durable bonds of love but can replace them with facility. The Senate, as we learn in act 4, had already decided to put Cassio in Othello's seat as governor of Cyprus. From the Senate's viewpoint, Othello's tragedy may amount to a curiously unfortunate twist in a pre-ordained replacement.

v

A form of state power relatively indifferent to love allows the tensions within Othello's Christian marriage to lapse into tragic jealousy. Focusing on this particular interlace of the theological, the political, and the personal allows us to shed new light on some of the most fundamental interpretive problems concerning the play. As we have seen, the Judaeon/Indian crux in Othello's final speech crystallizes the way jealousy links religious and ethnic registers of meaning. Within this crux, the invocation of the biblical "Judaeon" points to figures—Herod and Judas—who participate in the bloodshed involved in the typological imposition of new meanings upon older ones. Herod's massacre of the innocents reveals the new meaning of the prophetic declaration, "In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her

children” (Matt. 2.18, quoting Jer. 31.15). Judas’ deadly betrayal of Christ occasions multiple slippages in typological redefinition. The gospel of Matthew describes the thirty pieces of silver that Judas receives as the fulfillment of a Hebraic prophecy. Yet Matthew seems to misattribute to Jeremiah a passage from Zechariah, in which Israel values Yahweh’s prophet at a mere thirty pieces of silver (Matt. 27.9–10; cf. Zech. 11.12–13). Whereas Matthew suggests that the Israelite priests purchased the potter’s field, the Book of Acts describes Judas as having done so himself (Acts 1.18–19). Taken together, the roles of Herod and Judas in the New Testament suggest that the typological imposition of new meaning is not only a bloody but also a textually untidy affair.

The variants in Othello’s last speech reveal additional slippages in translating biblical content into a different form—in this case, into a drama of interracial romance. By the end of his speech, Othello likens himself both to the “circumcised dog” who was Venice’s enemy and as the Venetian servant who killed the enemy (5.2.353). Lupton shows how questions of typology underlie the tensions among Othello’s past, his new Christian identity, and his narrower Venetian citizenship. Lupton relates Othello’s circumcision and his suicide to the textual transmission of Christian truth. Othello’s circumcision serves as a “reinscriptive cut” that “does not disappear into its typological sublations, instead reinstating the Hebraic function of a signature.”³⁴ Othello’s body bears the marks of an older register of meaning that serves as the medium of a new, ecumenical truth but still resists full conversion. For Lupton, Othello’s final act of bloodshed-as-narration completes his incorporation into Christian Venice, but at the expense of his life.

These potentially abstruse matters concerning bodily and textual inscription can serve as the grounds of a brisk dramatic plot because of the politico-theological meanings already contained within jealousy. In the terms of Northrop Frye’s well-known definition of comedy, Othello’s initial achievement should allow for the reorganization of a more capacious society.³⁵ This triumph of comic marriage should retain, in turn, the ritualistic rhythms of renewal after death. Yet Iago keeps alive in Othello’s mind Brabantio’s jealousy: “She did deceive her father,” Iago reminds Othello, “marrying you” (3.3.206). *Othello* offers demystified reasons for the protagonist’s susceptibility to such enticement. Yet here as elsewhere, a sense of religious

34. Lupton, 121.

35. See Northrop Frye, “The Argument of Comedy,” *English Institute Essays*, ed. D.A. Robertson, Jr. (New York, 1949), 58–73.

profundity still manages to persist. Othello and Desdemona's uniquely tragic fates play out the conflicting meanings of biblical marriage—the Hebrew Bible's conceit of Yahweh as a jealous husband as well as the Pauline redefinition of marriage as a sign of Christ's love.

The meanings that converge on jealousy help to explain two very familiar problems arising from *Othello's* plot: why Iago should be so effective in swaying Othello and why the play appeals to different and incompatible time schemes. Iago succeeds at insinuating jealousy into Othello's mind by offering him an alternate way to occupy a Christ-like role, within male-male bonds rather than in marriage:

Oth. If thou dost love me,
 Show me thy thought.
Iago. My lord you know I love you (3.3.115–17).

Othello invites what Iago completes: an echo of Peter's declarations to Christ in the final chapter of the Gospel of John. In that vignette, the resurrected Christ appears to his disciples without disclosing his identity. When Christ asks, "Simon Peter, Simon son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" he insists that Peter affirm his love in a leap of faith rather than in certainty (John 21.15). Peter repeatedly insists that Christ already knows he loves him. Othello, however, is deluded into thinking that his role as Iago's general confers upon him a Christ-like position. From a position of seeming subservience, Iago has actually made himself the placeholder of Othello's belief. The effects of this reversal become apparent when Othello asks Iago to show him his thoughts as proof of his love. In the Gospel of John, Peter has faith in Christ, who alone can affirm his love. Othello's misplaced faith in Iago is accommodated by a different form of transference. Whereas the putative object of this transference remains male love ("you know I love you"), the thinly concealed awareness is suspicion of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. For Iago, the production of this suspicion allows him to satisfy his professional envy of Cassio. Yet Othello's primary concern is his wife's unfaithfulness rather than Cassio's disloyalty. By the end of act 3, scene 3, the chiasmic pattern—between Othello and Iago, between military loyalty and conjugal love—is fulfilled in an exchange of oaths (echoing marriage vows) that promote Iago to lieutenant.

Even though Iago presents himself as primarily coveting military office, he may have always been working through his own problems with

merit in relation to marriage. As Emilia suddenly discloses in act 4, Iago's discontent may have originated out of his own sexual jealousy. Emilia's revelation undercuts Iago's presentation of sex and marriage as mere instruments for expressing his professional envy. We have no way of confirming Emilia's claim; the placeholder figure of "some eternal villain" who allegedly made Iago jealous leaves the ultimate source of tragic causation mysterious (4.2.130). My argument suggests that this source lies not in some villain but rather in the "eternal" (or, at least, persistent) effects of jealousy within Christian marriage. Iago does not generate but rather merely foists existing problems of husbandly merit upon Othello. Cavell has argued that Othello falls for Iago's lies even though "somewhere he also *knows* them to be false"—in order to avoid recognizing his dependence on Desdemona.³⁶ To this we can add that Othello and Iago may both be escaping the demands of Christian marriage in order to maintain their senses of manly worth—publicly affirmed in Othello's case, both affirmed and slighted in Iago's.

The interpretive question of Iago's rapid success is linked, in turn, to the exhausted and yet seemingly inexhaustible problem of *Othello's* contradictory time scheme. When the play refers to an impossibly long duration, that duration is the time necessary for suspicion to be made plausible in a jealous mind—or, in Pye's terms, in the subjective, aesthetic experience of jealousy. When Othello's longing for an impossible fixity in love gives way to jealousy, the entire play undergoes a temporal distortion. In the final act, Othello declares in the midst of his murderous madness that Desdemona has committed "the act of shame / A thousand times" with Cassio (5.2.211–12). The logical time scheme of the play does not make these repeated violations possible, but jealousy creates the dilation that makes its suspicions plausible. In Desdemona's handkerchief, the jealous mind finds not only a sign functioning as evidence, but also a vehicle for translating the impossibility of repeated transgression into the possibility of rapid circulation. It is almost as if the handkerchief triggers in others a desire to circulate and to replicate it in symbolic breaches of fidelity. If the audience is led to wonder when and why, exactly, Iago had "a hundred times / Woo'd" Emilia to steal the handkerchief, that question is not so much answered as it is deflected (3.3.292–93). Emilia initially plans to "have the work ta'en out" so that she can reproduce the handkerchief, but

36. Cavell, 133.

this task is eventually given to Bianca, the courtesan who embodies the circulation of female sexuality (3.3.296).

When Cassio gives Bianca the handkerchief with the request, “Take me this work out,” the two are in the midst of a quarrel (3.4.180). Bianca laments that Cassio has kept away from her for “seven days and nights,” which she calculates as “[e]ightscore eight hours” (3.4.173–74). Cassio accuses Bianca of jealousy; his later, misogynistic banter with Iago suggests that he finds it ludicrous that a courtesan might also have a proprietary sense of love. Yet the jealousy he attributes to Bianca converts the rational time scheme of the plot into the impossible span of a week. Bianca quickly abandons her impossible but precise reckoning of time, declaring that subjective experience overwhelms any literal accounting: “and lover’s absent hours, / More tedious than the dial eightscore times? / O weary reck’ning!” (3.4.174–76). Bianca—deemed a merely sexual object by Cassio but still desiring to be beloved—gives voice to the unresolvable contradiction between objective reality and subjective distortions. For Bianca as for Othello, an impossible time scheme exists to the extent that the fantastical desire for permanence secured by love can lapse into the experience of jealousy.

VI

I close this essay by describing one way that *Othello* looks ahead to our own concerns with political theology as a mode of relating the past to the present. The play, I argue, can help us pinpoint the deficiencies of Schmitt’s claims about Shakespearean tragedy in relation to history. In the course of dramatizing the personal experience of jealousy as well as its politico-theological effects, *Othello* presents the sea as a geographical reality, as an imaginative or affective construct, and as something in between. This presentation of the sea exposes what Schmitt must deliberately ignore in his reading of *Hamlet* in order to arrogate the force of tragedy for his view of so-called objective reality. Schmitt’s responses to his interlocutor Walter Benjamin make clear some of the basic distortions involved in the reading of *Hamlet* found in *Hamlet or Hecuba*. Benjamin had argued in his study of allegory and *trauerspiel* that “Hamlet alone is a spectator by the grace of God,” and that “Shakespeare was capable of striking Christian sparks from the baroque rigidity of the melancholic.”³⁷

37. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, tr. John Osborn (London, 1985), 158.

Reading *Hamlet* as Benjamin does would locate the source of its tragic force in the tension between transcendence and the immanence of human power. Schmitt subsequently works to strip Hamlet of the partially transcendent outlook that Benjamin attributes to him via Christian grace.³⁸ In order to reaffirm a historical narrative aiming towards modern, secularized sovereignty, Schmitt explicitly declares that neither *Hamlet* nor Hamlet are Christian in any meaningful sense. Conspicuous evidence to the contrary within the play must be denied or ignored.

Schmitt's reading thus entirely overlooks Hamlet's momentous sea voyage—the interrupted voyage towards England that allows him to return to Denmark with a belief in providence. This oversight is not accidental. It serves to subordinate the drama of *Hamlet* to Schmitt's claims about historical reality, which rely on the ocean as an important explanatory device. As an island backwater, England lagged behind the Continent in the transition from a so-called barbarism to genuine politics. Only in this context, Schmitt argues, could *Hamlet* have arisen as a tragedy of the monarchical sovereign's legitimacy. Yet England's belatedness ultimately affirms the forward thrust of history; England would cast off its belated status by emerging as a global engine of modernity as an "over-seas empire."³⁹ Before turning to *Hamlet*, Schmitt had already founded his expansive study of the origins of modern European sovereignty (the 1950 *Nomos of the Earth*), on the distinction between the land and the anarchic sea. Schmitt bases his entire political history on the way "the solid ground of the earth is delineated by fences . . . and other constructions" whereas the "sea knows no such apparent unity of space and law."⁴⁰ In this opening gambit, we can discern how the sea operates as a kind of mythic source of causation upon which Schmitt can base his historical claims—including claims about English sovereignty as shaped by England's maritime existence. When, in *Hamlet or Hecuba*, he turns to Shakespearean tragedy and its relationship to history, Schmitt maintains the validity of his mode of interpretation by ignoring one of the most famous sea voyages in literary history—a criss-crossing not just between Denmark and England but also between an avowedly providential view of the world and a proto-modern subjectivity. Schmitt's understanding of political history and his reading of *Hamlet* work together to

38. See Schmitt, *Hecuba*, 26n15.

39. Schmitt, *Hecuba*, 65.

40. Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, tr. G.L. Ulmen (Candor, 2006), 42.

suppress the fact that mythic and affective appeals anchor his supposedly objective understanding of political history.

Othello does not let us forget that the sea is both a geographical reality and a dramatic vehicle of experiences that are not reducible to national history. On the shores of Cyprus, as we have seen, *Othello* transforms his sea-crossing into a personal mythology of love frustrated and perfected. Yet this dynamism between social fact and personal fiction is not contained by a supposedly objective reality defined around state power. Earlier, this essay mentioned some differences between the Venice depicted in *Othello* and the Venice described by Contarini. These differences underscore how the play generates a tension between love and the political functions of marriage. These distinctions illustrate how Shakespeare's depiction of the sea resists a state mythology built upon geographical reality. The *Sposalizio del Mare*, the celebration of Venice's marriage to the sea, was an important civic ritual. By the 1260s, the annual blessing of the Adriatic Sea on Ascension Day (the *Sensa*) had evolved into a ceremony celebrating the marriage of the Doge and the sea. By the sixteenth century, as Edward Muir puts it, "the marriage of the sea was the carefully orchestrated apogee of the state liturgy."⁴¹ Contarini describes how the "prince" (as Lewkenor's translation refers to the doge) "throwing a ring of golde into the sea . . . doeth betroth himselfe to the sea" (47). This ceremony turns the tenuous balance of love and subservience within Christian marriage into a public affirmation of the doge's benevolent dominion.

The relevance or irrelevance of the *Sposalizio del Mare* for *Othello* is an old question among the play's editors.⁴² Yet Lewkenor's volume suggests what might have been more important to an English readership than the details of the pageant itself: Venice's relationship to the sea reimagined as a way to describe the transmission of knowledge back to the British Isles. In a prefatory poem, John Astley depicts Venice not as the husband of the sea but rather as a sea nymph whose "virgin state ambition nere could blot"—at least for the time being. Now, Astley continues, "I prognosticate thy ruinous case / When thou shalt from thy Adriatique seas, / View in this Ocean Isle thy painted face" (Contarini, *4v). Lewkenor's own dedicatory epistle likens Venice to "a beautifull virgine" who might take umbrage at having her image depicted by "an unskilfull painter" (a stand-in for the self-abasing translator) (Contarini, *2). Unlike Astley, Lewkenor

41. Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, 1981), 121.

42. See Furness' *Variorum* edition, 34n31.

does not describe England as a cosmetically enhanced version of Venice. Instead, Lewkenor hopes that his dedicatee, Lady Anne (Russell) Dudley, Countess of Warwick, might be the patroness of this abashed virgin so that “she may have free and quiet passage” (Contarini, ★2v). Perhaps Lewkenor presents virginal Venice as a metaphorical adoptive daughter for Lady Anne, whose real-life marriage to Ambrose Dudley had produced no offspring. In the process of translation, marriage has been transformed from a mythic celebration of Venetian power to a metaphor for importing knowledge of the Venetian republic back to England.

Between England and Venice, the sea functions as both a real and an imaginative medium, with gendered or conjugal tropes transforming it into a medium of cultural fictions. Regardless of whether Shakespeare specifically had the Marriage of the Sea in mind, we know that the sea voyage was an original addition to the sources of *Othello*’s plot. The play depicts the sea in a way that sunders political triumph from personal love. Somewhere between the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, the sea wipes out the Turkish fleet and confers upon Venice a decisive victory. Yet this same sea sunders Othello from Desdemona. After the perilous crossing, Othello does not celebrate Venetian triumph but becomes solipsistic in his desire for permanent love. Long after the plot of *Othello* moves away from the shore, the metaphorical meanings of the sea persist in an internalized and affective form. In a study of the range of meanings associated with the sea in Shakespeare’s writings, Steve Mentz labels Iago “the anti-God of the sea,” whose disruptive and wicked effects on Othello are aligned with the “dissolving force of salt water.”⁴³ In my own reading, Iago nurtures a form of jealousy that heightens Othello’s antisocial reaction against what the sea has meant personally for him—for him as a husband rather than as a Venetian general and governor.

The resulting catastrophe is not durably tragic because of the intrusions of historical reality as Schmitt seeks to define them. Rather, *Othello* achieves its tragic power by channeling theological patterns into a plot of love entangled in profession, citizenship, and social belonging. Within this unmistakably Christian tragedy, the sea begins to drive a wedge between shared political realities (a victory for Venice and Christendom) and personal experience. Jealousy reveals the politico-theological contradictions that will make it impossible to restore a dynamic balance between

43. Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean* (London, 2009), 26.

the two registers. At the end of this tragedy, no political catharsis promises to re-assimilate personal love into the expression of state power.

The central question is not, in other words, whether *Othello* invites the newly crowned James I to perfect the synthesis of marriage's political functions and its spiritual and personal meanings. Schmitt's account of Shakespearean tragedy is located in a teleological narrative whereby James's attempt at divine kingship is doomed to fail—a failure that helps to bring about the eventual shift towards modern power. Shakespeare would go on in *The Winter's Tale* to treat jealousy as a problem arising out of and imperiling hereditary monarchy. Yet as Pye shows, this problem does not affirm Schmitt's political history but rather embeds a problem for his theory of the sovereign decision. My own reading has suggested that *Othello* shares with *Cymbeline*'s Imogen a desire for individual permanence within love—a desire that the threat of the sea intensifies. Imogen's story ends in comedy rather than tragedy because her marriage is freed from the demands of succession and of political history. For both *Othello* and Imogen, a sea crossing divorces individual feeling from state triumph. The results can be tragic or tragicomic, but there is no recourse to a state that can arrogate the enabling fictions of personal love for its own myths of perpetuation. *Othello* constructs upon Christian marriage and biblical jealousy a dramatic structure in which the supervenience of state power is felt as tragic. This is not tantamount to the kind of breakdown that advances a linear politico-theological narrative. The fact that intimate experience is not the same as communal truth—that the personal is enmeshed in but not identical to the political—contains a tragic potential, yet tragedy also preserves this slippage by elevating it. *Othello* does not allow our impression of Othello and Desdemona to dissolve into an affirmation of the continuity of Venetian power. The New Testament's redefinition of Christian marriage contains within it tensions between the individual and the collective, between love and sacrifice, between the literal and its higher meaning. Through jealousy, *Othello* shapes this religious structure into a dramatic and affective encounter that no story of state power can claim for itself.