Positions

The Burdens of Mind Reading in Shakespeare’s Othello: A Cognitive and Psychoanalytic Approach to Iago’s Theory of Mind

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There is a long tradition among Shakespeare scholars of attributing canny psychological powers to Iago. For A. C. Bradley, Iago’s most remarkable gift is his insight into human nature, a gift that, according to Stephen Greenblatt, manifests as improvisational power, the “role-player’s ability to imagine his nonexistence so that he can exist for another and as another.”¹ Iago’s evil seems to lie in his talent for what cognitive theorists would describe as mind reading, the relative ability to access imaginatively another’s mental world and, in Iago’s case, to manipulate cruelly that world. Inversely proportional to Iago’s mind-reading ability would be the mindblindness or at least metacognitive deficits of Othello, who seems too obtuse and closed off from others to fathom Iago’s unimaginable designs.²


Cognitive theorists and evolutionary psychologists tell us that mind reading or having a robust theory of mind (ToM) confers natural fitness: to plumb the intentions of others is to be able to detect cheaters, manipulate truth telling, and track the past actions and predict the future behavior of those around us. But what if thinking too much about what others are thinking strikes at our very sense of contentment, an elusive quality that the play itself ascribes not to Iago but to Othello (at least before Iago’s fabulations take hold)? Contentment is a perishable commodity that confers on us peace of mind to the degree that we are not bothered too much to mind the business of others; it is akin to a private and uninterrupted mode of attention that contemporary psychologists would call psychic flow. What if, despite our marveling at Iago’s terrific intuitive powers (and his own blustering rationalizations aside), his adept mind reading is a psychological handicap?

Such an approach to understanding Iago’s character involves rethinking the causal nexus among cruelty, motive, and character in the play. Iago’s evildoing does not follow from his mind reading but gradually displaces it, which in turn provides him (in theory, if not practice) with the contentedness of which he is constitutionally bereft. The ontological gain of Iago’s negation of his hyperattunement to others is the construction of his own self-narrative, a shift of attention from other to self that involves some prominent sadomasochism along the way (with an emphasis on the masochism cognate of the portmanteau notion). Cognitively overloaded, Iago is as much the victim as he is the exploiter of the imagined intentions and beliefs of those around him, his hyperbolic mind reading not a manipulable talent as much as the unavoidable cause of his seemingly motiveless evil.

The stubborn case of Iago reflects both the virtues and limitations of the new cognitive style of literary criticism and the extent to which a psychoanalytic approach to understanding character can be gainfully, if surprisingly, allied with cognitive literary criticism. ToM provides us with an opening critical gambit with which to evaluate not only Iago’s multilevel, recursive intentionality (he can impressively keep several layers of third-person intentionality in his mind at once), but also the extent to which his overmentalizing belies a parallel first-
person ToM aberration: Iago's obsessive tracking of other minds has much to do with his inability adequately to track his own mind, since third-person attributions of intentions are generally held to be modeled on first-person attributions. Yet I will argue that the way in which Iago works through this underlying problem with self-attribution is more understandable from the perspective of philosophical and psychoanalytic accounts of masochism. If cognitive theory has the advantage of explaining Iago's strange mentalizing by weighing it against normative cognitivist assumptions about ToM attunement, psychoanalytic theory has the virtue of explaining Iago's bid at resolving that problem—without making recourse to a neurodevelopmental model—the technical, physiological discourse of which is too remote from the language of the play. What follows is an argument for an integration of cognitive and psychoanalytic criticism. My guiding belief is that, while the former is better equipped phylogenetically to explain how characters think, the latter is better equipped ontogenetically to explain why, in their embedded story worlds, particular characters think the way that they do.

IAGO'S SERVITUDE TO CRUELTY

On the face of it, Iago does seem to be a talented and complacent mind reader. Not only does the success of his project rest on his belief in Othello’s “free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so” (1.3.388–89), but he also intuits Roderigo’s gullibility (and so easily convinces him of Desdemona’s

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5 Several attempts, mostly by cognitive theorists and philosophers of science, have been made to integrate cognitive psychology and the psychoanalytic process. See, for example, Wilma Bucci, Psychoanalysis and Cognitive Science: A Multiple Code Theory (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), esp. 36–43, which provides an extensive critique of Freudian metapsychology; Freud and the Neurosciences: From Brain Research to the Unconscious, ed. Giselher Guttmann and Inge Scholz-Strasser (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 1997); and Louis Cozolino, The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain (New York: Norton, 2010).

6 For an account of the use of ToM to understand intentionality in storyworlds, see Alan Palmer, “Storyworlds and Groups,” in Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies, 176–92. I use the terms “phylogenetic” and “ontogenetic” in keeping with the cognitivist (rather than Freudian) use of these terms in ToM research. An ontogenetic approach allows us to imagine that fictional characters’ ToM capacities are revisable and contingent on their very development within plots, their storyworld embeddedness. An ontogenetic understanding of ToM in fiction warrants a supplementary psychoanalytic approach, since psychoanalytic theory can help explain not only underlying reasons for ToM impairments, but the way in which characters work through those impairments. For an evolutionist defense of the ontogenetic nature of ToM, see Cecilia Heyes, “Four Routes of Cognitive Evolution,” Psychological Review 110 (2003): 713–27: “The ontogenetic construction hypothesis suggests that the potential to conceive of, or represent, mental states arises in the course of development through experience of one’s own behavior and that of others, including and in conjunction with the mentalistic language of those who have already developed mature theory of mind” (720).
fickleness). He capitalizes on Desdemona’s purity—“For ’tis most easy / Th’ inclining Desdemona to subdue / In any honest suit” (2.3.324–26). The reach of Iago’s evil is partly contingent on the predictive accuracy of his estimation of the characters of those about him: the dull honesty of Othello, the pliancy of Desdemona, and Cassio’s “rash” and “choler”-filled nature (2.1.263), which he knows will respond violently to Roderigo’s incitements.

Yet these characterizations are so reductive as to be types or caricatures, which is what Hazlitt was getting at in his much-cited remark in 1817 that Iago is “an amateur of tragedy in real life,” one who, in James Calderwood’s words, is a portrait of Shakespeare himself “in staging scenes and manipulating people, in creating illusions, [and] in improvising to meet occasions.” Iago is indeed a playwright, but we grant him oversubtle talents when we compare him to Shakespeare. Iago does not conjure anything more than stock types in his own play. The distance between Iago and Shakespeare is measured in the generic language that Iago uses to characterize Othello from the outset. Consider critics’ favorite Iagoism, the “free and open nature” of Othello. In various locutions, these attributes are repeated throughout the play and attached to a complement of characters, not simply Othello. Iago tells Cassio that Desdemona “is of so free a disposition” (2.3.309), and then underscores the point in his monologue, describing her as “framed as fruitful / As the free elements” and “inclining” toward “any honest suit” (ll. 326–27, 329–30). Cassio thinks it “freely” (2.3.315) when he refers to Iago’s insistence that Desdemona loves him. Iago describes his own advice as free and open—as if parodying everyone’s erroneous opinion of his own honesty, as well as his very overuse of these terms.

The truest irony is that we embrace Iago’s caricatured version of Othello when we see the latter as a hopeless innocent and gull. If Othello were so easily duped, why would he demand veridical evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity? In his diatribe against critics like A. C. Bradley, who seemed to sentimentalize Othello by exalting Iago’s unrivaled power to bring down such a great-souled man, F. R. Leavis reminded us of Othello’s noble egotism and heroic self-dramatization, represented by the Moor’s pompous diction, his belief that “big wars” “[make] ambition virtue” (3.3.351, 352), and his sense of Desdemona as a trophy wife. His love of her stems from self-centeredness and is mingled with pride, sensual possessiveness, a “love of loving.” Leavis concludes that a “habit

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7 All citations from *Othello* are taken from William Shakespeare, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. Michael Neill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), and cited in the text by act, scene, and line.


of self-approving self-dramatization is an essential element of Othello's make-
up, and remains so at the very end.”

Iago's dilemma lies between theory and practice. He has the unrelenting
inclination, even ethos, for mind reading, but he cannot easily or accurately do
so in practice (improvisation is certainly one of his manifest talents, but his very
need for it belies his inability predictively to gauge how his projects will unfold).
His challenge is the inescapable, generic problem of other minds, a challenge
that in the world of the play transmutes into a curse. Iago's outsider status
derives from thinking too much about what others are thinking, from never
being in the moment. The play has its own notion for this malady: discontent-
ment. When Iago foments Othello's jealousy, he strikes at Othello's enviable
sense of contentment, the latter's most valued and self-proclaimed quality,
implicitly described in the play as self-satisfaction, ease, invulnerability, or self-
fulfillment. Here is Othello's swan song to the unperturbed life:

Farewell the tranquil mind; farewell content;
Farewell the plumèd troops, and the big wars
That makes ambition virtue—O, farewell!
Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,
The royal banner, and all quality,
Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war;
And O you mortal engines, whose rude throats
Th'immortal Jove's dread clamours counterfeit,
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone.

(3.3.350–59)

This is when Othello realizes that his world has been withdrawn from him. In
Stanley Cavell's description of Antony in Antony and Cleopatra, “Everything
known to him as the world recedes.” Loss of contentment follows when his
precious self-narrative, his telos and “occupation” as a self-possessed soldier, loses
meaning. This helps to uncover one of Iago's principal motives that has been
overlooked by critics, namely, his constitutional discontentedness before he has
even settled on his stratagems:

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leapt into my seat—the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife;

10 Leavis, 107.

Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure.

(2.1.286–93)

Critics have frequently compared the fractured or compromised ontology of Iago to the fullness of Othello’s being: Iago has been described as self-divided, empty, a forlorn nobody, while Othello seems, at least in the early scenes, to be unified, solid, a veritable somebody. Janet Adelman remarks that “Othello—and particularly in relation to Desdemona—becomes Iago’s primary target in part because Othello has the presence, the fullness of being, that Iago lacks. Othello is everywhere associated with the kind of interior solidity and wholeness that stands as a reproach to Iago’s interior emptiness and fragmentation.”12 Such a critical view approaches an important ontological divide between the two characters but is articulated in residual postmodern jargon. Just what does it mean to claim that one person is “empty” or another is “full,” and how do these terms converge with discontentment? Fullness, for example, aligns more closely in the play with honesty and naïveté, as when Roderigo denies the charges of fickleness and libidinousness that Iago levels at Desdemona: “I cannot believe that in her: she’s full of most blest condition” (ll. 242–43).

Contentment as defined in the play has much to do with the cognitive aspects of the mind reading—mindblindness continuum. To be absolutely content is to be entirely secure and invulnerable, qualities inversely proportional to jealousy, as Othello quickly intuits. As Iago comments,

Poor and content is rich, and rich enough,
But riches fineless, is as poor as winter,
To him that ever fears he shall be poor:
Good God the souls of all my tribe defend
From jealousy!

(3.3.175–79)

And what aspect of jealousy in particular strikes at peace of mind? Iago also provides an answer: “Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul / To such exsuffilate and blown surmises” (ll. 183–85). To be rendered jealous but uncertainly so; to be overcome with surmises about the genuine feelings and motives of others not only toward oneself, but toward a third party: these are the preoccupations that force one to unravel and predict another’s intentions and actions. About mind reading, Jesse Bering concludes that “people cannot turn off

their mindreading skills even if they want to. All human actions are forevermore perceived to be the products of unobservable mental states, and every behavior, therefore, is subject to intense sociocognitive scrutiny.”13 At what point, though, does obsessive behavioral and intentional scrutiny become a psychological handicap? The threshold in the play that separates discontentment from mind reading is as thin as the fabric of a handkerchief or the veil of a foredoomed Desdemona. Recall Othello’s exclamation upon seeing Desdemona once he returns from war:

It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me . . .
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.
(2.1.178–79, 186–88)

Contentedness is the calmness that follows the duplicitous stratagems and competitiveness of war; contentedness is silence, the hard-won pause in Othello’s inflated rhetoric designed to impress and cover over his soldierly imprecision with words; contentedness is attunement to the unspoken rhythms Othello now enjoys with Desdemona, those “well tuned” reveries for which Iago will “set down the pegs” (ll. 195–96), displacing quietude with mindful noise. “Practising” upon Othello’s “peace and quiet” is simply to fill Othello’s head with disconcerting ideas (l. 301). This isn’t primarily (or even necessarily) a process of self-alienation, fracturing, or deconstructive loss of selfhood (whatever those heavy terms might mean); it is less complicatedly a process of making Othello too involved in the secret lives of others. And this ranges from the minimally attentive, for example, Iago’s ability, through Montano, to begin to see beneath the prized virtue of Cassio to the latter’s drunkenness—“It were well / The general were put in mind of it” (2.3.122–23)—to the maximally attentive, the cuckolding itself.

The source of Iago’s discontentment is the motive for his evil. Just what is that source? Much of Iago’s perturbations stem from envy, even paranoia, directed at Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona. Yet to ascribe discontentment to envy or paranoia is to mistake a symptom for a cause. What leads to such uneasiness and thence to envy is his consuming tracking of others, as if he is discomposed by the very process of mindfulness rather than any particular content or intentional object. Consider his comments to Roderigo on Cassio’s character:

“a knave very voluble, no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compass of his salt and most hidden

loose affection? Why none, why none—a slipper and subtle knave, a finder of occasion, that has an eye can stamp and counterfeit advantages” (2.1.231–37). The occasion for this invective, of course, is to prompt Roderigo’s gall against Cassio. But this is also a continuation of Iago’s opening monologue in which he ruminates on the undeserved promotion of Cassio, that prattling arithmetician who, if only in Iago’s mind, is a scheming opportunist whose every action belies a hidden intention to be ferreted out by someone like Iago. Iago’s vexation is not even paranoia, since these are perceived qualities in Cassio that, if realized, would affect Othello (and Roderigo) rather than Iago himself.14 Drawing on theories of altruism and the evolution of cooperation, William Flesch has recently suggested that readers like narrative fiction because the heroes are typically strong reciprocators: they are adept at tracking villains, and they punish wrongdoers at significant cost to themselves.15 Iago has all of the traits of a strong reciprocator except that he uses these traits for noncooperative pursuits, the personal gains of which are not readily apparent.

Consider Iago’s cogitations on the doubleness and secret aspirations of Othello and Desdemona: “It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor—put money in thy purse—nor he his to her . . . These Moors are changeable in their wills . . . She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body she will find the errors of her choice” (1.3.336–44). Not only is there no evidence on which to base either of these predictions, but Iago is consumed by his predictive accuracy regarding Desdemona’s nature in particular, and later embellishes on the theme. After adducing Othello’s limitations, including his defective manners and approaching age, Iago predicts, “Now, for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor; very nature will instruct her in it, and compel her to some second choice” (2.1.225–29).

Iago formulates plausible theories about his peers’ behavior— theories based partly on intuition, partly on past experience and tracking such actions—but such theories seem to spin quickly out of control. It is one thing to recognize that Cassio puts his manners to good effect, but another to surmise that he is an immoral timeserver; one thing to assume that Desdemona might long for a younger man, but another to posit that she will eventually abhor Othello and cuckold him. Not only does Iago embellish too much on his theories about others; he firmly believes such theories stem from something natural about

15 Flesch, 147–54.
people, their “second natures” over which they have no control. One way of describing these sensitivities to the pathologies of others is to call Iago a cynic, as does G. Wilson Knight, who comments about Iago’s disbelief in the continued love of Othello and Desdemona: “He is cynicism loathing beauty, refusing to allow its existence. Hence the venom of his plot: the plot is Iago—both are ultimate, causeless, self-begotten. Iago is cynicism incarnate and projected into action.”

But this ascribes yet another world view to Iago, an identity and way of organizing his perceptions that offers him the stable self and peace of mind that he envies in others.

Iago’s mind reading and fine attunement typically work him up into a hostile, vengeful state; these abilities do not provide any measure of uncomplicated pleasure (more on his masochism later). While Iago expects the worst in people and is intuitively attentive to their hidden selves, his expectations have two results: they become so exaggerated as to be counterintuitive, and they unsettle him and make him hypervigilant. Iago swears to exact revenge on Othello because he just “knows” that he has been cuckolded; his frenzied ire against women is guided by his acute (mis)perception of their practiced infidelity. Iago’s mantra “I am not what I am” (1.1.65) is an antidote to a much more corrosive, if unspoken and disturbing, belief—that people are not what they seem to be.

Iago’s case legitimates an influential criticism of ToM, namely, the claim made by simulation theorists that people don’t routinely spin theories of other minds, theories that are based on anticipated behavior and tacit algorithms or rules of acting. David Premack and Guy Woodruff underscored the theoretical component of ToM in their original conceptualization: “A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory, first, because such states are not directly observable, and second, because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behavior of other organisms.” If ToM marginalizes the role of empathy in cognitive tracking (for Premack and Woodruff, empathy is restricted to the perceived purpose of a target, and is not linked to inferences about another’s knowledge), simulation theorists reject the “theory” component of extrapolating from unobservables and argue instead that people reenact third-party behavior based on the contents of their own minds: “Ordinary people,” Alvin Goldman remarks, “fix their targets’ mental states by trying to replicate or emulate them.”

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18 Goldman, Simulating Minds, 4.
theory holds that people read other minds not by having a theory about what those minds are like but by running in their own minds the mental states experienced by the person who is the target of their mind reading.”¹⁹ Iago's mind reading is an exaggerated version of ToM: nothing of what he predicts of others is based on extrapolations from his own mind, that is, of mental simulations that typically follow empathy or simply putting oneself in another's place. As if he were a ToM zombie, Iago is controlled almost wholly by his predictive knowledge of others.²⁰

But this begs the question of why Iago would persist in the very mind-reading practices that, despite appearances, unsettle him. Here, cognitive literary criticism provides a clarifying response. The prevailing view of why we enjoy fiction is that it provides not passive pleasure, but pleasure yielded from “intellectual workouts,” in Lisa Zunshine's term, from teasing and testing our ToM capabilities in order to provide us with the confidence that our mental modules are running efficiently: “It is possible, then,” Zunshine notes, “that certain cultural artifacts, such as novels, test the functioning of our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading while keeping us pleasantly aware that the ‘test’ is proceeding quite smoothly.”²¹ Reading narratives is a mode of “cognitive play” that, as Brian Boyd points out, renders art and narrative adaptive in that stories are “designed to engage human attention through their appeal to our preference for inferentially rich and therefore patterned information” (art is thankfully not what Steven Pinker has called intellectual “auditory cheesecake” or a mere byproduct of natural selection).²² The pleasure we gain from tracking multiple levels of intentionality among fictional characters is like the boost we experience from scoring high on an intelligence test. But Zunshine issues an important caveat: the pride and pleasure that cognitive tracking affords readers can become exasperating because we are inclined to treat fictional personae as real people. We overspeculate about the states of mind of fictional characters (beyond what the author has suggested) and lose the sense of cognitive mastery that fiction pro-

¹⁹ Vermeule, 39.

²⁰ The second-generation cognitivist assumption that ToM is always situated or embodied does not help to explain Iago’s peculiar disembodied cognition, at least with respect to his other-regarding ToM. The literature on embodied cognition is now extensive, but for a good phenomenological critique of ToM and domain specificity, see Shaun Gallagher, “Understanding Interpersonal Problems in Autism: Interaction Theory as an Alternative to Theory of Mind,” Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology 11 (2004): 199–217. According to interaction theory, “The mind of the other is not entirely hidden or private, but is given and manifest in the other person’s embodied comportment” (Gallagher, 204).

²¹ Zunshine, Why We Read Fiction, 40, 18.

vides as an escape from our messy, intention-laden social world: "Our Theory of Mind allows us to make sense of fictional characters by investing them with an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind, but the price that this arrangement may extract from us is that we begin to feel that fictional people do indeed have an inexhaustible repertoire of states of mind."23

Recall that Hazlitt and subsequent critics typically describe Iago as a stand-in for Shakespeare, his entire plot akin to a script (however faulty) written by a playwright. Extend the analogy a bit: as playwright and reader of his own narrative, Iago, methodologically tracking his characters' intentions and actions through the creation of complex patterns of behavior with nuances he is privileged to understand, can test and theoretically plume himself on his ToM prowess. And to some extent, he proves himself to be cognitively adept. But we have also seen that his interpretations of others' intentions are as disconcerting as they are gratifying. He creates the circumstances under which he can test his ToM capabilities but fails to process the behavioral and intentional results of those tests (A. C. Bradley shrewdly remarked that Iago couldn't even stop the plot once it had gotten underway).24

How do we explain the persistence of Iago's overmentalizing, despite the psychic costs? ToM is usually described as a domain-specific, inferential adaptive ability. As part of our cognitive "adaptive unconscious," it typically works for us without our having consciously to put its other-regarding energy into motion.25 Iago's incessant tracking of and then obsessive ruminating on others' hidden plans suggests a wholly noninferential application of ToM, as if his overmentalizing were due to some other cognitive impairment. An apt analogy is to the pathology of obsessive-compulsive disorder, as it is understood by evolutionary psychologists: avoiding germs is an otherwise self-preservative trait that becomes a handicap in the too-conscious rituals of the obsessive hand washer.26

23 Zunshine, Why We Read Fiction, 20.
26 For an interpretation of the etiology of obsessive-compulsive disorder from the vantage point of evolutionary psychology, see Riadh T. Abed and Karel W. de Pauw, "An Evolutionary
What might fuel Iago's overblown mentalizing to such an extent that his very indulgence of it causes as much cognitive dissonance as it does gratification?

One recurring idea in cognitive studies is that people have as little direct awareness of their own minds as they do the minds of others. Since many of us are anti-Cartesians, we would likely agree that unmediated private access is an illusion, but what makes private access counterintuitive is the assumption that just as we can only model theories of other minds, so we can only fashion theories of our own minds, that a deficit in third-person ascriptions would signal a corresponding deficit in first-person attributions: “Even though we seem to perceive our own mental states directly, this direct perception is an illusion. In fact, our knowledge of ourselves, like our knowledge of others, is the result of a theory.”27 The implication of this bidirectional ToM is that we can only make inferences about our own minds by turning a ToM spotlight inward. Peter Carruthers offers the most recent formulation of what he describes as an “interpretive sensory-access theory”: “Our access to our own propositional attitudes is almost always interpretive (and often confabulatory), utilizing the same kinds of inferences (and many of the same sorts of data) that are employed when attributing attitudes to other people.”28 A deficit in third-person mentalizing will entail comparable deficits in self-awareness. The etiology of autism is frequently invoked as an example of such dual-processing impairments: “The logical extension of the Theory of Mind deficit account of autism is that individuals with autism may know as little about their own minds as about the minds of other people. This is not to say that these individuals lack mental states, but that in an important sense they are unable to reflect on their mental states.”29

To what extent can we extrapolate a cognitive impairment in self-awareness from Iago’s hypermindedness? We have seen that his exaggerated mind reading often misleads and disconcerts him and that rational intuitions about others turn into tortuous theories. ToM would predict that he suffers similar problems of self-attribute, that despite his frequent and overt pronouncements of the multilayered complexity of his ego (“I am not what I am”), such overestimations are confabulated theories about himself (as if he were as uncertain about his own motives as about his peers’ intentions). I believe that this is the case, and that our cognitivist speculations should direct us back to the text in order to test

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29 Carruthers, 3.
our theory of Iago’s theory of his own mind, this time with a focus on his manifest cruelty and the manner in which his cuckolding plot not only provides him with a missing self-narrative, but also has as its telos the very contentment that his mind reading places out of his reach.

**PUTTING CRUELTY FIRST**

What separates Iago’s discontentment from Othello’s eventual discontentment is that, while Othello’s is responsive, Iago’s is constitutional. But how does cruelty, in particular, serve Iago’s purposes to unsettle Othello and, in that insidious process, find the satisfaction that I am suggesting a degree of mindblindness affords? Acts of cruelty do not merely elicit a range of responses, some anticipated, from the victim. Nor do they simply draw out latent aspects of the victim’s personality (in this case, Othello’s own penchant for envy and rage, despite his frankness). Cruelty manufactures a space for an improvisational dialogue between agent and victim. The tortured victim who asks, “Why are you doing this to me?” is forced to inhabit the heads of those whose conduct he suspects (and so formulate some theory of the other’s mind).30 Othello’s equanimity is lost when he is forced to turn his attention to the motives of Cassio, Desdemona, and eventually Iago.

Another way of saying this is that Othello becomes discontented when he is compelled to leave the comforts of his relative mindblindness. This is a process of losing the self in the other. Conversely, in his cruelty, Iago finds a small measure of satisfaction because that cruelty provides him with a compensatory self-narrative and a belief system that in turn provides him with a theory of his own mind. Cruelty is the means by which he finds value in himself, and cruelty creates a safe distance between himself and Othello. Such distance results in the negation of the very mindedness that drives the process in the first place. Cruelty toward others projects the agent’s mind onto the victim (as the victim attempts to explain why he is being victimized), but the agent can in turn theorize about his own mentalizing by getting inside the victim’s head: cruel agents can study their own intentions by reading the narrative effects of their actions on the victim.

Consider that there is no direct correlation between Iago’s knowledge of others and his knowledge of himself. (By “knowing” I mean simply having a

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confident sense of how one’s self or another will act based on guiding perceptions of one’s own or another’s patterns of thinking and behavior.) That Iago doesn’t clearly know why he hates Othello is some evidence that he doesn’t read himself as well as he does others. While all of Iago’s motives for hating Othello (plain greed, being passed over for the lieutenancy, believing he has been cuckolded) have been questioned by the play’s best critics, it is worth looking at some of Iago’s most revealing comments regarding his hatred of Othello:

I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets
He’s done my office. I know not if ’t be true,
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety.

(1.3.375–79)

Iago’s suspiciousness of the truth of such claims makes him seem less naively trusting than Othello, but his leap from suspiciousness to certain belief is irrational. Is this not the kind of epistemological leap one would make if one didn’t trust oneself, didn’t quite know one’s own motives for hating someone else? That Iago does not reflect any more trenchantly on why he has such a motive, or which motive is the decisive one, suggests that he remains opaque to himself despite his talent for knowing others, and that the problem of other minds is both an intrasubjective and intersubjective one.

That Iago acts cruelly in the play needs no special elaboration. Soon after the plotting has begun, he relishes in the pleasures of cuckolding Othello: “let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him. If thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport” (ll. 360–62). Later, Iago marvels at his own mounting stratagems:

Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me
For making him egregiously an ass
And practising upon his peace and quiet
Even to madness.

(2.1.299–302)

Whether or not we call him a sadist, Iago’s pleasure in others’ pain presupposes cruelty: it is no wonder that Verdi, in his variation on this theme in Otello, has Iago unashamedly announce “Credo in un Dio crudelis” (I believe in a cruel God).31

But does Iago’s cruelty afford him any self-discoveries along the way? One

thing Iago does learn is the nature of his own capacity for evil. Consider his musings on the devilish quality of his tactics:

And what’s he then that says I play the villain,
When this advice is free I give, and honest,
Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? For ’tis most easy
Thinclining Desdemona to subdue
In any honest suit . . .
Even as her appetite shall play the god,
With his weak function. How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!

(2.3.321–26, 332–35)

It seems reductive to claim that Iago simply rationalizes here; more likely, he is reviewing his conduct and its effects, taking stock of the inclinations of his several dupes in order to gauge the reach of his evil and derive the source of it. He proves to himself not the fact of his villainy (that is never in question in his mind) but the full extent of his diabolical nature. A penchant for cruelty initiates the process, but his awareness of the bottomlessness of his own cruelty impels the process once underway. Cruelty is self-fulfilling, both the cause and result of Iago’s actions.

Iago learns something about his own mind through the process of exploiting other minds. Consider his last monologue:

I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense,
And he grows angry. Now, whether he kill Cassio
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
Every way makes my gain. . . .

If Cassio do remain,
He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly.

(5.1.11–14, 18–20)

This is a simple prediction based on his perception of Roderigo’s anger; how things will unfold is unclear to Iago. What is more important is what he realizes about himself in contrast to Cassio. Iago discovers about himself unintended consequences of his plot, as if his monitoring of others inescapably forces him to monitor himself, his mind reading forcing upon him a measure of mindfulness that he adjusts by fine-tuning his tragedy, which in turn provides more self-information to continue the cycle. The content of what Iago might learn about himself is beside the point. What he gains from the cruel acts toward Othello is a kind of alienation effect: the more Othello suffers, the less attuned Iago becomes, and so the distance between the two widens as the play unfolds.
What seems to happen, then, is that Iago’s overmentalizing, a symptom of a ToM aberration at the level of third- and first-person attributions, gradually works to his own benefit. This is an example of a problem that functions as its own cure, at least to the extent that it provides him with the self-narrative the very absence of which his mind reading had been a symptom. And when we think about the complex psychic processes through which Iago attends to his attributional problems, the cognitive explanation yields to a psychoanalytic one. As a hypothesis of the way in which people inferentially fashion theories about the opaque notions of others and themselves, ToM can be interpretively productive. But it is not as hermeneutically valuable when assessing the ways in which, through fantasy and intersubjective engagement, fictional characters construct their own therapies (often through disavowal). Nor is it as valuable when we ironically know more about such characters than they do and so, as readers and critics, reconstruct psychic processes that underlie manifest symptoms (arguably, the psychoanalytic critic, like the cognitive critic, likes to test his or her mental agility). And although we don’t need to argue that Shakespeare invented the unconscious, the irreducibly dynamic sense of Shakespeare’s characters warrants a psychoanalytic supplement to cognitive theorizing: “What is interesting about Shakespeare’s characters,” Meredith Skura aptly remarks, “is not their diseases but their movement through disease to some kind of curative reorganization. Their proper parallel is not the neurotic but the neurotic in analysis.”32 It is precisely this allegorization of the reorganization of disease—think not just of Iago, but also of Leontes, Hamlet, perhaps Macbeth—that cognitive literary theory cannot yet track as compellingly as psychoanalytic theory.

Imagine extending the cognitive approach in order to account for the play’s working through of Iago’s pathology. Consistent with the protocols of diagnostic psychiatry, a cognitive explanation would tally Iago’s symptoms and perhaps place him along the autism spectrum, with one subtle modification: autistics are held to have ToM deficits. Their low scores on false-belief tests represent their mindblindness, yet I have suggested that Iago overmentalizes. This would place him on an extreme end of the autism scale as an example of a high-functioning autistic who perhaps suffers from “intense world syndrome”; on the pervasive developmental spectrum, these unfortunate individuals experience hyper-rather than hypo-attunement: “The lack of social interaction in autism may . . . not be because of deficits in the ability to process social and emotional cues, but because a sub-set of cues are overly intense, compulsively attended to, exces-

sively processed and remembered with frightening clarity and intensity.” 33

Autistic people may, therefore, neither be mindblind nor lack empathy for others, but be hyperaware of selected fragments of the mind. One can imagine making some such argument about Iago, if only because it helps to explain his obsessive but faulty mindfulness. But other cognitive personality disorders are equally explanatory: Iago may exemplify the traits of the trendy new personality disorder described as the “dark triad” of “Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy,” which, aptly, has been tied to very high scores on ToM tests but relatively low scores on emotional intelligence tests. 34 Or one might describe him as an overmentalizing paranoid schizophrenic (although I have already cautioned that paranoia is an etiological red herring when it comes to understanding Iago’s hyperattunement).

The problem is that, given the dynamic nature of the psychic processes that Iago displays (his character’s exemplification of Skura’s “neurotic in analysis”), such static cognitive diagnoses would lead to an interpretive dead end. How does one treat, according to the protocols of diagnostic psychiatry, some of the disorders described above? Usually with pharmacology supplemented by a cognitive behavioral regimen. Cognitive behavioral therapy assumes that, through mindful exercises—consciously turning irrational into rational beliefs—and aversive conditioning and habitual training, one can reconstruct one’s cognitive architecture, a process that offers little in terms of a critical hermeneutic for understanding Iago’s intractable self-deceptions. 35 Whatever its limitations, the psychoanalytic process parallels, as so many critics have noted, the very structure in motion of a play like Othello. The movement from symptom to insight that is the goal of therapy is recapitulated in the plot line of the play itself.

Iago and Masochism

Iago’s cruel behavior has often been described as sadistic. 36 In keeping with Freud’s notion of a radically sexualized will, David Pollard argues that Iago’s

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“behavior is sadomasochistic. This is apparent in his paralleled relationships with Cassio, Desdemona, and Othello. In each case, the tormented Iago—a ‘poisonous mineral’ gnawing his innards—identifies with a victim and achieves pleasure from the recognizability of the pain he has caused.” 37 Sadism is reflected in Iago’s scripting of the “erotomania” of Desdemona, with whom Iago identifies “through the fiction of Cassio’s dream”: “The sadomasochistic implications are clear. Thereafter, the inventor of a feminine criminal self who has enjoyed forbidden pleasures—a self with which he has identified—Iago proceeds to devise the appropriate punishment.” 38

Such interpretations of Iago’s sadism omit extended discussions of his masochism even when noting the convertibility of the terms. Although Freud first posited sadism as primary, the terms and concepts imply one another throughout his work. 39 Not only is masochism sadism turned upon oneself, but sadism cannot afford its peculiar pleasures if the sadist cannot identify with the masochistic desires of the victim (hence, Lacan’s dictum that “sadism is merely the disavowal of masochism”). 40 Masochists, according to Freud and Lacan, stage elaborate scenes in order to contrive separation from others who have nominal power over them. 41 Although they seem to render themselves passive, they coax, even bully the other into establishing boundaries through the imposition of paternal law; masochists are always pulling the strings. Such actions elicit anxiety (not simply pleasure) in the sadist who is pressed to establish punitive sanctions. 42 The quest for pain is not the primary motivation of the

38 Pollard, 92.
41 It should be noted that, although Freud eventually elevated masochism to a primary, even primordial, state (linked to thanatos or the death drive), Lacan insisted that masochism is secondary to sadism: “Masochism is a marginal phenomenon and it possesses something almost caricatural that moral inquiry at the end of the nineteenth century has pretty much laid bare.” See The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 239.
42 The performative and reciprocal aspects of masochism underlie the contractual nature of the sadomasochistic fantasy, a quality that is applied compellingly to Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice in Drew Daniel’s “‘Let me have judgment, and the Jew his will’: Melancholy Epistemology and Masochistic Fantasy in The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare Quarterly 61 (2010): 206–34.
masochist: “Though it is often thought that the masochist is in search of pain, this is not what is essential; pain is merely a sign that the Other has agreed to impose a condition, limit, toll, penance, or loss upon him.”

To what extent might we describe Iago as a masochist, and what peculiar gains, especially with respect to his hypermindedness, does masochism afford him? In what manner can the psychoanalytic interpretation be integrated with the cognitivist framing that we have put in place? To seize too quickly on Iago’s hatred of Othello passes over the former’s fantasy of desiring and imagining being desired by Othello: “It is indeed Othello and not Desdemona,” Robert Matz writes, “who is the primary object of Iago’s and Cassio’s desire. Othello, as has frequently been noted, is a play in which everyone stands in for, or represents, someone else, and because the person who stands in for you may also take your place, this exchangeability makes highly fraught the erotic/political suits constantly pursued in Othello.” This fungibility of desire is conveyed in Iago’s invented dream in which he establishes a homosocial relationship between himself and Othello: “In sleep I heard him say ‘Sweet Desdemona, / Let us be wary, let us hide our loves’” (3.3.420–21). That Iago and Desdemona are confused in Othello’s mind is represented in the twinned rhetoric later used to describe the two characters: “By the world, / I think my wife be honest, and think she is not; / I think that thou are just, and think thou art not” (ll. 385–87), the question of honesty projected away from Iago and toward Othello.

The thrill that Iago gets from working up Othello’s passions against him most suggests Iago’s masochism: Act 3, scene 3 traces the ascendance of Othello’s anger, culminating in his threats to Iago, which allow Iago to play the victim. To Othello’s demand for “ocular proof,” or else Iago “hadst been better have been born a dog / Than answer my waked wrath” (ll. 362–64), Iago petitions:

O grace! O heaven forgive me!
Are you a man? Have you a soul or sense?
God buy you, take mine office—O wretched fool . . .
To be direct and honest is not safe!
(ll. 375–77, 380)

At this point, Iago has not simply cruelly manipulated Othello; he has also propped up Othello as a volatile threat to himself, his pleasure unmistakable. But the culminating masochistic moment occurs at the end of the scene, when Othello establishes himself as law to challenge the heavens: “Now, by yon

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marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow, / I here engage my words” (ll. 460–62). In response, a kneeling Iago pledges to relinquish all self-agency and offer himself up to Othello’s command:

Witness that here Iago doth give up  
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,  
To wronged Othello’s service. Let him command,  
And to obey shall be in me remorse,  
What bloody business ever.
(ll. 465–69)

Iago achieves the masochist’s fantasy of having the other arbitrarily implement a law that sanctions a boundary between self and other.

Despite so much critical attention to the handkerchief as fetish object, critics have not linked that object to the very masochism it underwrites.45 The distinguishing mark of masochism as opposed to sadism is, for Deleuze, at least, the masochist’s primary disavowal and secondary attachment to fetish objects (the psychoanalytic presupposition is that “perverse” subjects disavow castration anxiety, itself prompted by the failure of paternal law to allow for the subject to separate from the other).46 Emilia notes that Iago has asked for the handkerchief one hundred times, presumably before Iago’s script has been written, implying that Iago wants the “gift” (l. 437) from Othello that the latter has given to Desdemona. The handkerchief would serve to sever, not narrow, the relationship between Iago and Othello, which assumes that what bothers Iago about Othello is not primarily the fear of being cuckolded by Othello; it is more basically Iago’s perception of being ontologically overwhelmed by Othello.47 The fetishized handkerchief is a Freudian / Lacanian object avant la lettre, described literally as a “thing” [das Ding] (l. 304), which creates a “lack” (l. 319) when lost, and is used to wipe Cassio’s “beard” (l. 440),


46 Deleuze remarks that disavowal is common practice among masochists: “Fetishism, as defined by the process of disavowal and suspension of belief belongs essentially to masochism. . . . [Masoch] does not believe in negating or destroying the world nor in idealizing it: what he does is to disavow and thus to suspend it, in order to secure an ideal which is itself suspended in fantasy.” See Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty,” in Masochism: “Coldness and Cruelty” by Gilles Deleuze and “Venus in Furs” by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 32–33.

47 The impulse of Iago to disavow and separate from Othello is another way of describing the common critical view of the doubling of the two characters. From a psychomachic point of view, Marjorie Garber provides the most sensible recent account of such doubling in Shakespeare After All (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 588–616.
fur and hair typically working similarly to allow disavowal. Iago's elaborate sadomasochistic fantasy, the cuckolding plot, becomes necessary because he is unable to secure the appropriate fetish object before his elaborate play gets under way.

What is it about Othello's treatment of Iago that restricts Iago's bid for psychic autonomy? Othello inscribes Iago as a caricature, a one-dimensional instantiation of the virtues of honesty and patience, a caricature that does not seem to be its own desiring agent. Another way of saying this is that Iago has no biographical self, only the one contrived for him by Othello. It is this absence of self-narrative that makes Iago vulnerable to the hypervigilance that I ascribe to him. In a wonderful reading of Othello's vulnerability to love, Tzachi Zamir remarks that Othello's self-definition is determined by his willingness to serve; this self-conceptualization is a tool that is threatened by Desdemona, who loves Othello too naturally and noninstrumentally: "The erotic mismatch in Othello consists of Desdemona's penetrating loving gaze as unbearable for Othello, since it brings out something that resists reduction to the instrumental, a reduction that is what he is about." Othello's withdrawal from Desdemona's love has everything to do with her loving more than his biographical, caricatured military identity, the only identity to which he is accustomed.

As an extension of Zamir's argument, we can say that Iago's case is an inversion of Othello's: it is the instrumentalized, biographical self, the self defined by service as Othello's honest and reliable ensign, against which he rails and which ideally would have been displaced by something more authentic, namely, the very soldierly identity that he admires in Othello. Iago's tragedy is that Othello projects his own values of service onto Iago—Iago serves Othello well, just as Othello serves Venice well—without realizing the precise type of service to which Iago would have himself put. When Iago cryptically remarks "I am not what I am," he is making more than a stock comment on being versus acting; he is suggesting that he is not what he is because he is or has been simply what Othello has dictated that he be. We need to see Iago's pride in his duplicitous life as a reaction formation, for example, when he confesses to Roderigo, "In following him, I follow but myself— / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end" (1.1.58–60). There is no evidence that, before having been passed over for the lieutenancy, he had been guilty of the dissembling that he now embraces and that he has just attributed to Cassio. Harold Bloom reminds us of the ontological profundity of Iago's having been passed over militarily: "Othello was everything to Iago, because war was every-

thing; passed over, Iago is nothing, and in warring against Othello, his war is against ontology.”49 Yes, but what is left in the wake of that slight is not a zero-degree identity or “nothing,” but rather an identity constructed wholly out of the perceived excesses of everyone else.

Perhaps we have overlooked the extent to which, for Iago, sadism is really a precipitate of a more primary masochism, primary because, in keeping with Freud’s late theorizations of masochism, it is linked to thanatos or the death drive. By the time he had written Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1919) and The Ego and the Id (1923), Freud had decided that “primary masochism,” a “turning round of the instinct upon the subject’s own ego . . . is a return to an earlier phase of the instinct’s history, a regression.”50 Such a regression is directed away from the pleasure principle and guided by an instinct to return to “an earlier state of things,” which Freud cautiously described as follows: “The dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli.”51 These internal tensions were linked to Freud’s undertheorized account of chemical tensions and biological processes, but might we not argue by analogy that it is Iago’s overstimulated mentalizing that needs to be negated via masochism if the primordial, even mythical, contentedness so valued in the play can be approached?52 And is not this ever-receding peace of mind or cognitive stasis perversely linked with Iago’s imminent censure and “torture” (5.2.369), most probably death, that is represented in his eerie, Bartleby-like avowal of silence: “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know; / From this time forth I never will speak word” (ll. 301–2).

A Deleuzian and Freudian interpretation of Iago’s motives alerts us to his bid for contentment amid the very chaos that he introduces into the Venetian court. Because ToM helps us to see that Iago’s seemingly canny inferential abilities belie his self-confabulations and discontentedness, it partly clarifies why and how he thinks the way that he does. But ToM provides only an interpretive starting point, since it points to but leaves unresolved Iago’s motives for his mental ambush of Othello. Such motives masochistically alleviate his discontentedness by providing him with some semblance of a theory of his own mind. ToM helps

51 Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 67.
us to see that Iago’s obsessive mind reading is a symptom of some other cognitive misfire that is better approached from a psychoanalytic vantage point.\textsuperscript{53}

To sum up the way in which the cognitive approach mingles with, or even presupposes, the psychoanalytic: Iago’s ToM tracking, which enables both his cruelty and his attunement to his own mind, helps him to separate from Othello (call this his sadism). However, the pleasures afforded by ToM tracking are simultaneous with its psychic pains (discontentment caused by overthinking), a necessary persistence if Iago is to achieve fully his separation fantasy and prop Othello up as threatening master over him (call this his masochism). ToM and masochism work toward the same end, with ToM a manifest symptom of the masochism operating beneath Iago’s conscious awareness. It is as if Iago’s masochistic fantasy has hijacked his capacity for ToM by bringing the latter too closely into contact with his conscious and noninferential thinking.

The claim that Iago’s ToM impairment emerges as a psychoanalytic symptom assumes from a strictly cognitivist view an unholy integration of the cognitive adaptive unconscious (sometimes described as the “nonconscious”) and the Freudian unconscious. Cognitivists explain that the adaptive unconscious is the seat of learned, automatic behavior, a nonconscious filter that modulates the amount and type of sensory information that enters into conscious awareness. This sort of implicit learning, of which ToM is an example, affords us the ability unconsciously to shift gears while driving, or to play a Bach fugue from memory. The adaptive consciousness is not repressed or topographically beneath consciousness as much as parallel with it, more the hyperrational guardian angel of consciousness than the irrational usurper of our mental awareness: “Cognitive models of nonconscious mentation depict the processes of attention, sensation, perception, memory, and related functions all interacting in a logical fashion. This picture stands in direct contrast to the Freudian notion of an irrational unconscious driven by an id.”\textsuperscript{54} But while there may be sufficient empirical evidence supporting the executive role of an evolutionarily stable adaptive consciousness, there is no compelling evidence that proves that the Freudian unconscious, or a comparable site of repressed impulses, is little more than a psychoanalytic construct. One eloquent cognitivist, after dismissing Freud’s account of the unconscious in favor of the adaptive unconscious as “myopia,” grudgingly accepts that repression has a place somewhere in our cognitive makeup: “This is not to deny that some thoughts are quite threatening.


and that people are sometimes motivated to avoid knowing them. Repression may not, however, be the most important reason why people do not have conscious access to thoughts, feeling, or motives.\textsuperscript{55}

Given this bogey of repression for cognitive theorists, might we not supplement, rather than displace, the Freudian unconscious with the adaptive unconscious?\textsuperscript{56} ToM, presumably a universal, adaptive, cognitive module, provides us with a hermeneutic tool with which to measure Iago’s obsessive overthinking, but because this otherwise adaptively unconscious mechanism seems maladaptive for Iago (it loses its automatic nature) we look for something else that will explain his behavior. Rather than function here as an interpretive \textit{a priori} or cognitive presupposition, ToM, in its manifestation as Freudian symptom, serves more like the return of the repressed, a recurring “slip of the mind” that evokes, rather than displaces, whatever repressed impulses might guide Iago’s intentions. What we find are not parallel conscious and unconscious interactions, but an underlying masochistic proclivity causing an off-line process (Iago’s ToM attunement) to overtake an on-line mode of thinking (Iago’s brittle consciousness).

By attributing not one but two forms of unconsciousness to Iago, have I not transgressed the literary dictum that literary characters are not realistically drawn people but nonnaturalistic functions in texts bounded by the constraints of genre?\textsuperscript{57} Here, I think cognitivism has actually reopened the possibility of character criticism for both cognitive and psychoanalytic literary criticism. Cognitivists have compellingly argued that we naturally focus our evolved sense- and inference-making abilities like cognitive simulation and ToM on literary characters in the same manner that we train such abilities on the intentions of familiar or unfamiliar people. Noting the propensity to use literary characters to engage, test, and modulate a range of our cognitive skills, Blakey Vermeule describes literary characters as “the greatest practical-reasoning

\textsuperscript{55} Wilson, \textit{Strangers to Ourselves}, 9.

\textsuperscript{56} In the same spirit, although arguing for the virtuality of the symbolic unconscious, Žižek asks (regarding Benjamin Libet’s notion that unconscious, “neuronal” processes are the sites of “free” will): “What if, prior to our conscious decision, there already was an unconscious decision that triggered the automatic neuronal process itself?” See Slavoj Žižek, \textit{Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences} (New York: Routledge, 2004), 138.

\textsuperscript{57} I join Bernard J. Paris and others in assuming that, because Shakespeare’s principals, especially in the tragedies, are mimetic characterizations, they are amenable to psychoanalytic theorizing. Freudian approaches become problematic when they are too diachronizing, for example, when they ascribe to Hamlet hypothetical infantile Oedipal fantasies turned into symptoms after his father’s murder. An early example of this approach is Ernest Jones’s belief that Hamlet’s delay is caused by his identification with Claudius as the murderer of his father in \textit{Hamlet and Oedipus} (New York: Norton, 1976). On the weaknesses of such an approach, see Bernard J. Paris, \textit{Character as a Subversive Force in Shakespeare: The History and Roman Plays} (Newark: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1991), 21.
schemes ever invented,” concluding that “the reasons that we care about literary characters are finally not much different from the question of why we care about other people.” For Alan Richardson, the identification of the literary and the naturalistic depends precisely on the extent to which characters represent ToM capabilities: “Austen’s Emma demonstrates that one of the ways to make a character’s consciousness seem real or ‘plausible’ is to represent that character putting his or her own theory of mind to work.” Such characters acquire an even heightened realism when their ToM practices mislead them, or when such practices point to underlying problems with self-identity.

None of this is to suggest that Iago has an adaptive or Freudian unconscious he only (technically, he only has what Shakespeare has given us of him); as a hypothetical but mimetic construct, Iago represents intentions and motives that are hidden to himself (and others). Given our evolved, readerly propensity to track such intentions, we will naturally attach to him thoughts, emotions, and motives that our available discourses would describe as sourced in different forms of conscious and unconscious mentation. In doing so, we will uncover some of the limitations of cognitive theory to account for the elusive motives of a character like Iago. Ellen Spolsky has recently called for more attention to the ordinary failures of people and their literary representations: “The cognitive theories, for their part, in developing an account of embodiment to explain how our evolved physiology allows us to understand ourselves and to infer the beliefs, emotions, and intentions of others, is still missing examples of the ordinariness (as opposed to the brain pathology) of failure.” We no doubt need to pay heed to the representation of common irrationalities or “bounded rationality” among our fictional characters, but I argue here that cognitivists should also be mindful of what lies between ordinary failures and brain pathology—in this case, Iago’s neurotic deceptions and self-deceptions. Such “soft” psychological aberrations are neither as generic in nature as ordinary lapses of logic and perception, nor as “hard” in nature as cognitive or developmental pathologies.

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58 Vermeule, xii–xiii.
60 Drawing on recent findings in neurolinguistics, Norman N. Holland points out that the irresoluble problem of the realism of literary characters derives from the fact that our brains have “separate what and where systems,” allowing us to intuit what constitutes a literary character, filling in missing details as notes (such as Hamlet’s “big toe”). See “Hamlet’s Big Toe?: Neuropsychology and Literary Character,” PsyArt (17 October 2012), http://www.psyartjournal.com/article/show/n_holland-hamlets_big_toe.
61 Spolsky, 516.
But to what extent is Othello, in terms of a ToM, a foil to Iago in Othello’s seeming mindblindness? Unable to discern, for example, what Iago “think[s]” about Cassio (3.3.107), Othello exclaims in frustration,

“Think, my lord?” By heaven, thou echo’st me,
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown . . .
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit. If thou dost love me,
Show me thy thought.

(ll. 109–111, 117–19)

The success of Iago’s inveigling depends on his convincing Othello that he knows more than he lets on: “This honest creature doubtless / Sees and knows more, much more than he unfolds” (ll. 246–47). Iago does not simply exploit Othello’s credulousness; he exploits Othello’s inability to read anything at all in Iago’s mind, including the basic narrative of infidelity. It is not that Othello cannot intuit that Iago is lying; it is that he cannot even construct for himself the hypothetical narrative of infidelity at which Iago hints. Othello’s mind-blindness, with respect to Iago’s duplicity, implies a related metarepresentational cognitive deficit: intimately linked to episodic memory, metarepresentations are “agent-specifying source tags,” allowing us to keep track of who said what, of the sources of information that are typically taken “under advisement” until that information is proven to be reliable. It follows from Othello’s inability to model Iago’s mind that he would not, beyond his uncritical refrain of Iago’s honesty, seriously consider the characterological intentions behind that mind.

Whether we call such artlessness a virtue or vice, it is one quality among several that renders Othello strange and “defective” in the minds of his peers (2.1.225). Iago believes that, when compared to Cassio, Othello lacks “loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties” (ll. 223–24); as a “lascivious Moor” (1.1.125), he is a gross outlier, an “extravagant and wheeling stranger” (l. 135). Roderigo reminds Brabantio, who is certain that Othello is a “damned” enchanter (1.2.63). Othello, for his part, describes himself to be “rude” in “speech” (1.3.82), his perceived barbarisms duly assessed and contextualized by critics; and he is of course too easily convinced of Iago’s virtue and honesty.

Assuming that Othello is a touchstone in the play for everything anathema to early modern European values, we might ask, prior to the last act, why he is not

62 On metarepresentation and fiction, see Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, 51, 50.
demonized as cruel, something we might expect, given that cruelty during the period is again and again linked to barbarism. By his own testimony, he has survived the cruelty of others during his military successes. He regales Desdemona with tales of his ability to survive “Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (ll. 143–45). If cruelty presupposes mind awareness, and the strange and alien Othello is so patently mindblind, it makes sense that he would be a stranger to cruelty itself.

How, though, can we explain the curious turn in the play, namely, that the least cruel character initially turns out to be the only character who owns the cruelty of which he eventually becomes capable? “Cruel” and its cognates are used four times in the play, three instances of which describe Othello’s actions, the last a promise of the cruelty that awaits Iago. Othello’s self-avowed cruelty frames his murder of Desdemona. After the third kiss, just before Desdemona awakes, he remarks: “So sweet was ne’er so fatal. I must weep, / But they are cruel tears: this sorrow’s heavenly, / It strikes where it doth love” (5.2.20–22). And just after he has attempted to smother Desdemona, alert to her stirring, he exclaims,

What noise is this? Not dead? Not yet quite dead?
I that am cruel am yet merciful:
I would not have thee linger in thy pain—
So, so.

(ll. 88–91)

If cruelty is predicated on a ToM, then Othello’s discovery of his own cruelty should be contingent on his attribution of a ToM to Desdemona. Othello’s baseless notion that Desdemona is full of duplicity suggests that he ascribes to her too robust a mental world, as if he were overcompensating for attributing to Iago too thin a mental fabric (again, Othello’s refrain of Iago’s honesty implies that, for Othello, Iago might as well be a two-dimensional embodiment of a discrete virtue). If Othello is too mindblind when it comes to Iago—he begs Iago to “show” him his thoughts—he veers in the opposite direction of obsessive mind reading (doubling with Iago) when he finally confronts Desdemona.

But if Othello’s ascription of a complex mental world to Desdemona explains his assignation of cruelty to himself, it does not explain why he does so in a Christian context, invoking as he does “heavenly” sorrow (l. 21) and then pledging to temper his cruelty with mercy. One way of thinking about divine cruelty as against human cruelty is that the former is the obverse of, even antidote to, the latter. When God acts cruelly he does so to the deserving; cruelty is bound up with retributive justice, however impenetrable the immediate designs of such a deus absconditus might seem. Human cruelty is most effective when it is meted out to the undeserved (which helps to explain why cruelty to animals and children is an especially heinous form). Othello intuits this much when, in
his final expostulation with Desdemona before her murder, he compares her
treatment of him to being afflicted by God:

Had it pleased heavens
To try me with affliction, had they rained
All kind of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steeped me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience; but, alas, to make me
The fixed figure for the scorn of time,
To point his slow and moving finger at!
Yet could I bear that too, well, very well:
But there, where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in!

(4.2.47–62)

Othello could bear afflictions (read here as heaven’s cruelty), but what
Desdemona has done to him is beyond cruelty’s pale. When he arrogates the
office of divine cruelty to himself, he ranges licit cruelty against illicit cruelty. Yet
when he stages such a drama he does so still with no complex theory of (God’s)
mind. As cognitive theorists of religion have suggested, one reason we anthropomorphize is because we tend naturally to attribute a ToM to anything that
exhibits external agency: “We automatically and involuntarily perceive the
world as alive and Person-like, interpreting even the faintest cues in terms of
human traits. That anthropomorphism is so often mistaken does not negate its
role or power as the fundamental default assumption.”64 Othello’s God is nothing
more than the generic heavens, which might be explicable given that a pagan
Moor would not pray to anything like an accommodated or anthropomorphized Christian deity. Yet given Othello’s clear conception of the Christian
notion of justice tempered with mercy, it would seem that his generic use of the
heavens corresponds to his mindblindness coupled with his metarepresentational impairment: heaven is a mysterious (unsourced) but effective retributive
agent the power of which he appropriates when murdering Desdemona.

But this assumes an asymmetry between Othello’s cognizance (however
faulty) of Desdemona’s secret machinations and the way in which his cruelty

toward her is mitigated for being Christianized: we seem to have an excess of mentalizing in the recipient of cruelty (Desdemona), but a deficiency of mentalizing in the agent of cruelty (Othello). Othello’s very staging of cruelty serves to blunt cruelty’s effects. At the moment Othello can be cruel, at the moment he believes he has access to all of Desdemona’s misperceived maneuverings, he opts for a Christian rather than secular notion of cruelty. For Othello to have a personalized or anthropomorphic God dispense punishment would be to implicate himself in the circuit of cruelty by which he himself has been victimized by Iago. If Iago is a cruel but merciless God to Othello, then Othello is a cruel but merciful God to Desdemona. If this is the only form of cruelty of which Othello is capable, it makes sense that Othello does not seem especially concerned with dispensing cruelty to Iago.

Othello’s final gestures toward mitigating cruelty’s effects are as staged and romantically overblown as Iago’s secret tragedy has been all along. Mindblindness is of a piece with Othello’s solipsistic, romantic notion of himself, and it is his lack of empathy born of his mindblindness that explains his staging of cruelty’s undoing and pluming of his own will by the play’s end. As T. S. Eliot concludes, “Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself.”65 I would underscore, against Stanley Cavell’s influential reading of the play, that Othello’s solipsism or extreme skepticism, fueled by his mindblindness, is what allows him to imagine that he sacrifices Desdemona. Cavell argues that Othello’s exaltation of Desdemona, his “placing of a finite woman in the place of God,” serves as a bulwark against Cartesian skepticism (to render Desdemona a perfect match with Othello is to render his existence secure, invulnerable to existential doubt).66 Not Iago’s rumors, but Othello’s physical and psychological acceptance of Desdemona, her very creatureliness, renders him skeptical in fostering “the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial.”67 Cavell reasons that when Othello sacrifices Desdemona, he compensates by putting himself in her place as God. But rather than say that Othello puts sacrifice to use as an antidote to skepticism, I would say that Othello puts skepticism to use in order to justify sacri-

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66 Cavell, 126.
fic. Othello doesn’t passively move in and out of skeptical paralysis, but his context-sensitive mindblindness fortifies him against such skeptical despair. It is Othello, too, not simply Iago, whose improvisational, defensive skills are subtly displayed for us. He is a character who cannily turns his metarepresentational blunders into rationalized virtue.

What does this suggest, finally, about the relationship of mind reading to mindblindness? Evolutionary psychologists tell us that mind reading is eminently self-preservation: to be able to anticipate people’s actions based on the formulation of a working theory of their mental processes enhances inclusive fitness. Mindblindness is something of an evolutionary handicap: to be mindblind is to be susceptible to the duplicity of others. But perhaps we can use Shakespeare to provide a more nuanced understanding of such a fashionable theory. What the examples of Iago and Othello show is that mind reading can be startlingly similar in its effects to mindblindness. Othello’s lack of empathy is not fundamentally different in kind from Iago’s negative empathy. Having a complex theory of another’s mind, as Iago does, can make one’s well-being too parasitical on another’s misfortune: his local successes aside, Iago’s tragic downfall, especially his inability to stop the action once it gets fully underway, suggests that he remains in some sense in servitude to Othello. On the other hand, Othello’s mindblindness not only fortifies him against experiencing remorse for his actions; it allows him to stage his own melodrama in which he emerges as the divine leveler of his own prior acts of cruelty.