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POISONOUS THOUGHTS: THE "DISSEMINATION" OF LANGUAGE IN OTHELLO

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Poisonous Thoughts: The "Dissemination" of Language in Othello

At first glance Othello may seem like a stagy, heavy-handed melodrama, and in fact critical commentary on the play has centered on the question of Iago's confused motivation, as if his perverse, spiteful malevolence violated the norms of plausible human conduct. By the same token, Othello seems to violate realistic canons by his self-contradictory combination of credulity and suspicion and Desdemona, by her unquestioning submission to Othello's irrationality. Some critics try to justify the mimetic plausibility of the characters on psychological grounds, while others, impressed by the interdependence of these characters, discover the allegorical pattern of a morality play -- with Iago as Vice to Desdemona's Virtue, the bad and good angels of Othello's soul -- behind the seemingly realistic trappings of mimetic representation.¹ But in psychological terms as well Iago seems like Othello's alter ego, his evil demon, who "infects" him with (his own) morbid suspicion and jealousy. Or, as Stephen Dedalus says in Joyce's Ulysses, Iago and Othello seem like two parts of one mind, Shakespeare's: ". . . in Othello he is bawd and cuckold. He acts and is acted on. . . . His unremitting intellect is the hornmad Iago ceaselessly willing that the moor in him shall suffer."²

Certain psychoanalytic critics, attempting to interpret the close relation between the "Vice" and his victim, explain Iago's hatred for Othello in terms of repressed homosexual desire.³ The

intense ambivalence of love masked as hate should not surprise us, but this interpretation, though justified, is too narrow and limited. Iago's desperate, confused ambivalence about human relationships may manifest itself in envy, paranoid hostility, cynicism, selfish greed, misogyny, a fear of bodily passion, as well as a fleeting revelation of homosexual desire -- in short, his own version of the seven deadly sins -- but all these characteristics are simply different aspects of a deepseated need for -- and fear of -- other people, whether male or female. And he does infect Othello with his own paranoid jealousy, so that Othello comes to share some of Iago's attitudes and to reveal, in himself, some of the same fundamental fears and desires. I don't think we have to choose between "realistic" or "allegorical" views of the play, any more than for any other Shakespearean play: whether or not people as extreme or perverse as the characters in Othello do in fact exist, Iago and Othello do appear as interrelated "doubles"; each character helps to explain the others and the motivations of each character are revealed in the interrelations between them; and, indeed, the central question of the play is the problem of relationship, the seductive but frightening possibility that the boundaries between people might be breached, destroying the separate, autonomous identity of each individual self. As Iago says (rather ambiguously) in the opening scene of the play: "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago./ In following him, I follow but myself./ . . . I am not what I am." (I.i.54-5, 62)⁴ In addition, if the boundaries of the self can be transgressed and violated, the dangerous pathogenic agent that penetrates these boundaries turns out to be words, images, or simply thoughts -- that is, "things" heard or seen or merely imagined. Thus uncertainties

about personal relations correspond, in Othello, to uncertainties about the relation between words and "things," between images and "objects," between fantasy and reality. Which uncertainty derives from which is difficult to say, but the play implies that our idea of reality is always a "play," a fiction, something that exists only in our own minds or only in language. And yet these fictional, verbal realities are not purely solipsistic: what separates Othello from Desdemona joins Othello and Iago together, as if one person could be swallowed up in the fantasies of another, becoming merely a character in a play written by someone else.

I

Iago, who describes sex in animalistic terms -- "now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tuppung your white ewe"; "your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs" (I.i.85-6, 113-4) -- establishes a conventional contrast between reason and passion, between mind and body: "Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. . . . If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most prepost'rous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings or unbitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion." (I.iii. 315-28). Iago is advising Roderigo not to surrender to his emotions, not to drown himself because his love for Desdemona is hopeless, but this advice is paradoxical because it means that Roderigo should pursue his passion for Desdemona, should not abandon his sensual desires. Presumably Iago means that one should satisfy one's desires without

being carried away by them; they should always be kept under control, but only because this is the most effective method of getting what one wants. Ironically this applies most to Othello, who loses control of his emotions and becomes the victim of his own jealousy (just as Cassio, in a momentary lapse, gets drunk and loses his job). Moreover, Iago's "rationality" is in fact an exaggerated, irrational defense against the reckless impulses that it seeks to control. He wishes to control others as well as himself, and this manipulation of other people is his "passion," rational in name only. Like Othello, who wants to see his wife in bed with Cassio (if only to confirm his paranoid suspicions), Iago takes pleasure in inventing scenes of illicit passion, in destroying people indirectly, in manipulating events from behind the scenes, even in staging scenes that are not what they seem, as if he were the author or director of a melodrama dealing with adultery and revenge. As an actor he plays the part of "honest Iago" and refuses to "wear my heart upon my sleeve" (I.i.61), but as a "playwright" he makes up things, tells lies, and pulls other people's strings as if they were his puppets. Detached and involved at the same time, he can enjoy adultery in the safety of his own imagination -- and make other people believe what he himself has created.

As critics have noted, Iago has his reasons for acting the way he does -- he gives several of them -- but these reasons are unconvincing, in part because there are too many of them.⁵ He resents the fact that Othello has made Cassio his lieutenant instead of himself, but he also claims, in a soliloquy, that Othello has committed adultery with his wife: "I hate the Moor,/ And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/ H'as

done my office. I know not if't be true,/ But I, for mere suspicion
 in that kind,/ Will do, as if for surety" (I.iii.377-81). He does not know
 if the rumor is true; the mere suspicion is enough for him. Indeed, he
 does not hate the Moor because he has gone to bed with his wife: the
 rumor (if in fact there is a rumor) is only an excuse, a pretext, for
 hating Othello. There is no evidence for this suspicion in the play and
 no indication of it in the scenes between Othello and Emilia. In a later
 soliloquy Iago insists that the thought of this adultery "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" (II.i.297-9).

Although he immediately backs down from this resolution -- deciding to
 make Othello jealous instead -- he claims that he wants to pay Othello
 back by committing adultery with his wife: "Now I do love her too;/
 Not out of absolute lust" (II.i.291-2) but because he wishes to satisfy
 ("diet") his desire for revenge. Besides, Iago, who seems to believe
 that adultery is universal, wonders if Cassio, the man he puts in the
 role of illicit lover, has also cuckolded him: "For I fear Cassio with
 my nightcap too" (II.i.307). This paranoid multiplication of lovers
 suggests that Iago, jealous like Othello, inevitably imagines persecution
 as a sexual betrayal. In fact, these ambiguous reasons raise more
 questions than they answer: Does Iago hate Othello because of Cassio's
 preferment or because of his wife's supposed adultery (with Othello)?
 Does he imagine going to bed with Desdemona merely because he wants to
 hurt Othello or because he does in fact desire her, out of "absolute
 lust" or not? Or does he desire Desdemona because she is Othello's
 wife, not only for the sake of revenge but because he identifies himself

with Othello: "In following him, I follow but myself"? Is it for this reason that he imagines Othello in bed with his wife, because he wishes to share his bed (and his wife) with Othello?

In short, Iago seems to illustrate what René Girard calls "triangular" or "mimetic" desire, whereby one desires what one desires because someone else desires it, so that -- as in the oedipal triangle described by Freud -- the someone else is a model as well as a rival.⁶ In wishing to take his father's place, a wish which may give rise to antagonism, a son may be expressing love rather than hatred for his father, a desire to be like him. Iago's passionate hatred for his "master" Othello may conceal a similar kind of love. By the same token, Othello's willingness to believe that Cassio is having an affair with his wife may reflect a desire for a rival, a need to reproduce the oedipal situation in which one always has to share one's love (for one's mother) with a father or with siblings. There is no explicit reason, in the play, to explain Othello's jealousy in oedipal terms, but the lost handkerchief that seems to prove Desdemona's infidelity is a token of the marriage bond between Othello's mother and father: "while she kept it/ 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father/ Entirely to her love; but if she lost it/ Or made a gift of it, my father's eye/ Should hold her loathèd" (III.iv.58-62). And, as Iago tells Othello, Desdemona "did deceive her father, marrying you" (III.iii.206), so that faithfulness to a father (hers or his) appears as the paradigm by which Othello judges Desdemona.

If the difference between love and hate dissolves in the ambivalent identifications of triangular, mimetic desire, if Othello's

love for Desdemona can be transformed into hatred, then Iago's hatred for Othello can also be a perverse, distorted expression of "love." At the very beginning of the play Iago has to protest to Roderigo that he does not love Othello -- "If ever I did dream/ Of such a matter, abhor me" (I.i.4-5) -- and later he pretends to swear loyalty to Othello in words that suggest amorous devotion more than military duty: "I am your own forever" (III.iv.476). But this suggestiveness is inconclusive. More revealingly, Iago recounts to Othello a surprising episode which (presumably) he invents in order to make Othello jealous: "I lay with Cassio lately,/ And being troubled with a raging tooth,/ I could not sleep" (III.iii.410-2). That Iago is lying in bed with Cassio, even if the influx of soldiers has created a shortage of beds on Cyprus, is already surprising, but Iago goes on to say that Cassio, in a dream, mistook him for Desdemona: "In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,/ Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!'/ And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,/ Cry 'O sweet creature!'/ Then kiss me hard,/ As if he plucked up kisses by the roots/ That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o'er my thigh,/ And sigh, and kiss, and then cry, 'Cursèd fate/ That gave thee to the Moor!'" (III.iii.416-23).

Of course the "manifest content" of this dream is Cassio's alleged desire for Desdemona, but Cassio's dream is actually part of Iago's waking "dream"--his made-up story -- of lying in bed with Cassio. In this story, Iago himself plays the part of Desdemona while Cassio makes sexual advances to him, pulling up kisses from his mouth as if they were the "raging tooth" that was keeping him awake. Ironically, when Cassio cries, "Cursèd fate/ That gave thee to the Moor!" he is

speaking to Iago. But fate has given Cassio, not Iago, to the Moor, and Iago could just as well have given this line (which he has "written") to himself: Iago curses the fate that gave thee (Cassio) or thee (Desdemona) to the Moor, not only because he wants Cassio or Desdemona for himself but because he wishes that he had been given to Othello instead of them ("I am your own forever."). Of course the interpretation of dreams -- particularly ones that are, like this one, not dreams at all but conscious, deliberate inventions, whether Iago's or Shakespeare's -- is a tricky business, but let us recall Iago's line at the opening of the play, when we do not yet know what he and Roderigo are talking about: "If ever I did dream/ Of such a matter, abhor me." The word abhor is used again, by Desdemona: "I cannot say 'whore.'/ It does abhor me now I speak the word" (IV.ii.160-1). The pun on whore in abhor implies that if Iago ever did dream of "loving" Othello, this love would not be an innocent figure of speech, a rhetorical display of devotion, but an illicit sexual desire.

II

Needless to say, however, Iago's "love" for Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, or anyone else is buried in a general mistrust of human relations. For the most part, he views men as enemies who would like to cuckold him and women as whores who are always cuckolding their husbands. Of his own wife Emilia he says: "Sir, would she give you so much of her lips/ As of her tongue she oft bestows on me,/ You would have enough" (II.i.100-2). In other words she gives him a great deal of her tongue, but not to bestow kisses on him, and in the same vein

he accuses women in general of being "Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds. . . . You rise to play, and go to bed to work" (II.i.111, 114). Thus they play the wrong roles in the wrong situations, confusing work and pleasure, sex and wifely duty, either because they are too cold and practical in bed or because they work as "housewives" -- that is, prostitutes, as Iago says of Bianca, "A huswife that by selling her desires/ Buys herself bread and cloth" (IV.i.96-7) -- either in bed or out. In Iago's cynical view, women may appear virtuous, may even act virtuous (chaste) toward their husbands, but are nonetheless prostitutes underneath. The truth about women is one of the key problems in the play, and Iago's attitude is soon shared by Othello, who, fearful of preserving the virginal purity of his young wife, ultimately accuses her of being a whore. Desdemona, a model of purity, virtue, innocence, fidelity, and, to be sure, thoroughly submissive self-effacement, a patient, self-sacrificing Griselda who does not turn against her husband even when he murders her, cannot believe that "there be women do abuse their husbands/ In such gross kind" (IV.iii.63-4). The wordly, realistic, strong-willed Emilia, who eventually defends her mistress and attacks her husband Iago, defends adultery in terms of earthly, profit-and-loss morality. She herself would do it not for any simple prize but for "all the world," because "The world's a huge thing; it is a great price for a small vice" (IV.iii.70). Having the world in one's power, one could easily "undo" the wrong that one had done, and in an interesting variation of this moral accounting she would betray her husband in order to give him all the world: "Why, who would not make her husband a

cuckold to make him a monarch?" (IV.iii.77-9).

Emilia appears as a sane and rational figure, in this play, beside the insane jealousies of the men and the almost suicidal saintliness of the heroine, and her defense of women, coupled with a veiled warning against men, seems like an island of good sense in a sea of paranoid delusion and suspicion, at least to modern readers: "And have we not affections?/ Desires for sport? and frailty? as men have?/ Then let them use us well; else let them know,/ The ills we do, their ills instruct us so" (IV.iii.103-6). This is a plea for human recognition, for the recognition that women are not animals or monsters but subject to the same human frailties as men. Or as Shylock says in The Merchant of Venice, in somewhat similar terms: "Hath not a Jew eyes? . . . If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (III.i.51, 57-8)⁷ Despite their common bond of humanity, women and men, like Jews and Christians, are still enemies, and Emilia's "economic" morality, though milder than her husband's, still values money, power, and worldly goods over the virtues of love. Unlike the virtuous but submissive Desdemona, Emilia is no saint.

Moreover, the "truth about women," the question of whether they are virtuous or not, is a problem that obsesses Iago and especially Othello. Iago, who tries to murder Cassio, attempts to pin the blame for his death on the prostitute Bianca, who in fact is genuinely concerned about Cassio and cares more for him than he does for her. In his misogyny Iago tries to make a scapegoat of her: "I do suspect this trash/ To be a party in this injury"; "This is the fruits of whoring" (V.i. 85-6, 116). Bianca (whose name means white) claims that she

leads an honest life, and this word honest, the ironic epithet that clings to the false-seeming, deceiving, dishonest Iago, which Othello repeatedly applies to him as if to assure himself that it is true, is a crucial word in the play. Emilia assures Othello that Desdemona is "honest, chaste, and true" (IV.ii.17), where honesty means virtue and faithfulness in love, as in the phrase "an honest woman," which does not mean the same as "an honest man." Moreover, the "sexual" meaning of honest becomes more clear in the light of a similar word honor, which has a common etymological root (in Latin). Iago tells Othello that a woman may give up -- to another man -- anything that belongs to her, even if it is a gift that her husband gave her, even a handkerchief. Othello says, "She is protectress of her honor too./ May she give that?" and Iago replies that honor is not a tangible possession: "Her honor is an essence that's not seen;/ They have it very oft that have it not" (IV.i.14-7). In other words, honor or honesty, being invisible or at least capable of concealment, may exist in appearance without necessarily existing in reality, as in the case of Iago who does not wear his heart upon his sleeve. Moreover, a woman's sexual honor or honesty -- in the sense of chastity, modesty, and fidelity -- is an idea, a moral virtue, perhaps even an unattainable ideal, which again because it is not visible and tangible may be feigned by those who do not really possess it.

In a more specific sense, however, the unseen essence that a woman can give away is her sexual favors, the "property rights" to her "private parts," which (Othello implies) are a possession that a woman may not give away because they ultimately belong to her husband,

like the magical, symbolic handkerchief which a husband (receiving it from his mother) bestows upon his wife. The context refers to married women, but in the most literal sense, the unseen, invisible, hidden sign of chastity -- which a woman "owes" to her husband and is not supposed to give to any other man -- is her virginity. Of course virginity has a certain literal reality (the unbroken hymen), but it also seems to be a kind of magical quality which virgins possess and "fallen women," unfaithful wives, and prostitutes do not. Married women, even faithful ones, are in an ambiguous position, because they lose their virginity but are supposed to retain their "chastity," their "virtue." Thus in one sense honor/honesty is an idealized essence that has no ultimate reality, a mere word, as in Falstaff's soliloquies in Henry IV, Part One: "What is honor? A word. What is that word honor? Air -- a trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday" (V.i.133-5). Over Sir Walter Blunt's dead body Falstaff protests: "I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath. Give me life; which if I can save, so; if not, honor comes unlooked for, and there's an end" (V.iii.57-60). Here, the empty, airy, abstract, and ultimately sterile concept honor, which dead men possess, is opposed to the irrepressible, almost inexhaustible life of Falstaff. In Othello, however, sexual honor/honesty/virginity may be "an essence that's not seen" (1) because it is so insubstantial, so hard to be sure of; (2) because it is literally kept hidden, by those who are chaste and by those who deceive their husbands; (3) because it does not really exist, a woman's sexual organs being (in Iago's mind) only an empty space rather than a visible, tangible possession; and (4) because it does exist, because it is (in

Iago's mind) so valuable, so desirable, and so dangerous a possession that it must be kept hidden. This last point may refer to a woman's sexuality in general, but it also refers, more precisely, to a woman's "virginity" -- that is, not simply an invisible essence (honor) but a literal, tangible, hidden possession which a woman tries to "keep" and a man tries to "steal."

In an earlier scene "honest Iago" tells Othello that a person's "good name" is likewise an "unseen essence" that is worth more to him than mere money: "Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,/ Is the immediate jewel of their souls./ Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;/ 'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;/ But he that filches from me my good name/ Robs me of that which not enriches him/ And makes me poor indeed" (III.iii.155-61). Although Iago does not believe that his purse is trash, he knows the value of an "honest" reputation, whether or not the reputation is deserved. And at least in this speech, he claims that money is worthless because it passes through so many hands that it never really belongs to anyone: since it has been "slave to thousands," it is in a sense worn-out and tarnished, soiled by so much handling, and since it has only a "symbolic" exchange-value, it is intrinsically, in itself, worthless. Ironically, in this argument, the tangible, material money in one's purse is "something, nothing," while one's good name -- an abstract idea or simply a word like the name "honest Iago" or like Falstaff's "word honor" -- is a valuable "jewel." One's good name has no "exchange-value," although it depends on the opinion of others, because it is worth nothing to anyone except oneself: "he

that filches from me my good name/ Robs me of that which not enriches him/ And makes me poor indeed." Beneath all his hypocritical moralizing, Iago may "secretly" believe that the good opinion of other people is important; all his hatred and envy imply that it is not only money that he seeks. But this is "psychologizing," assuming that there is a deeper consistency behind all Iago's -- or his texts' -- contradictions.

However, the very phrase "good name in man and woman" may acquire a "deeper" meaning if we associate it with a woman's "honor" or "virtue," which is also often compared to a jewel (Othello's "threw a pearl away" [V.ii.343]). A man who robs a woman of her virtue, her virginity, takes something which (under the prevailing social dogma, the dominant ideological interpretation) is valuable to her but does not enrich him, at least not permanently. Moreover, virginity is "something" while it lasts but then it is "nothing." Of some women's virtue, as of Iago's purse, it may be said: "'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands." This is precisely what Iago argues and what Othello fears. Indeed, if Iago calls his purse "trash," he also calls Bianca, the prostitute who sells her favors for money, by this name, as if she were worthless trash because she too had become shop-worn and soiled: she no longer has her virtue or her virginity, the only thing of value that a woman (in Iago's eyes) owns. Again, a woman's virtue seems like something tangible and "real" but also ephemeral, elusive, and illusory. By the same token, words or names seem as real as the "things" they signify: a woman who has lost her "good name" is called by a bad name "trash," which is as "something" or "nothing" as the money for which the good name is bought and sold. In the very act of saying it Desdemona says she cannot say the word

"whore," as if the word itself would tarnish her lips.

Des. Am I that name, Iago?

Iago. What name, fair lady?

Des. Such as my lord did say I was. (IV.ii.117-8)

Othello asks, "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,/ Made to write 'whore' upon?" (IV.ii.70-1), as if writing or naming were the same as making it so, as if having (adulterous) sexual relations with a woman were the same as writing the (foul) word whore upon her fair body. Is virtue (honor, honesty) only a word, a name, or does it really exist? If it does exist, can it be seen or touched? How can one tell if it is there? Can one find it by looking at a woman's naked body, or will one find nothing? And can one conjure it into existence simply by naming it, by writing it down, by writing a play about it?

"Thieves! Thieves!/ Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!" (I.i.76-7), Iago cries to Brabantio, as if his daughter were merely an economic possession, a commodity to be traded on the marketplace like a prostitute, and near the end of the play Othello, treating Desdemona as if she were a whore in a brothel, throws some money at her. In his harangue against Roderigo for not continuing to pursue Desdemona (I.iii), Iago repeats the phrase "Put money in thy purse" like an obsessive, ritualistic, slightly insane incantation, seeming to belie his later claim that one's purse is trash. In giving this advice to Roderigo, Iago is of course trying to fatten his own purse: "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse" (I.iii.374) or, in Roderigo's words, Iago "hast had my purse/ As if

the strings were thine" (I.i.2-3). But Iago is also implying that one needs money in order to woo women, as if (again) they were commodities to be bought and sold. Indeed, if purse and prostitute (both "trash") are identified in Iago's mind (or rather in the text of his speeches), perhaps the ultimate meaning of "putting money in a purse" is giving money to a prostitute and putting something else inside her, in that empty pocket where her "good name" should be written. For Iago, who seems to believe that all women are whores, putting money in a purse is a cynical, calculating, materialistic metaphor for sexual intercourse.

Iago is, after all, a cynical materialist, despite his speech to Othello on the importance of his "good name." When Cassio, having gotten into a drunken brawl, bemoans the loss of his reputation (his good name), Iago, always ready with practical, hard-headed, realistic advice, replies: "I had thought you had received some bodily wound. There is more sense in that than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all unless you repute yourself such a loser" (II.iii.265-70). As of honor, "They have it very oft that have it not." But Cassio feels that in losing his reputation he has "lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial" (II.iii.262-3). In other words, his honor is a kind of spiritual, immortal essence and his mortal body is subject to the irrational passions that turn men into beasts: "O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths [wine] to steal away their brains! that we should with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause transform ourselves into beasts!" (II.iii.288-92). Like Iago in his advice to Roderigo, Cassio opposes reason and emotion, mind and body, except that Iago puts his faith in conscious will rather than in any immortal spirit.

But if reputation, like a woman's honor, is an invisible essence rather than something physical and "sensible," Iago's comparison to a bodily wound nonetheless hints that a woman's loss of reputation, the loss of her virtue, is (in the eyes of a man) like a bodily wound: as if, in a bloody intercourse, a virgin lost the quasi-phallic fetish of her virginity and became, in effect, "castrated." The sexual passion that transforms human beings into beasts, into the "beast with two backs," seems to result in a violent, bloody struggle in which they (both men and women) lose their reason, their virtue, or, more literally, some vital part of themselves. Just before this dialogue, Iago wishes that he "had lost/ Those legs that brought" him to the scene of Cassio's quarrel (II.iii.185-6) and claims that he "had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth/ Than it should do offense to Michael Cassio" (II.iii.220-1). Indeed, he describes the participants in the quarrel "in terms like bride and groom/ Devesting them for bed . . . tilting one at other's breasts/ In opposition bloody" (II.iii.179-80, 182-3). (Remember Cassio fiercely plucking up kisses by the roots, as if he were pulling teeth, stealing kisses instead of giving them.) The implication of this language is that any sort of violent passion, including sexual desire, is dangerous; in turning men into beasts, passion deprives them of whatever (in a different sense) makes them men. When Roderigo is grief-stricken in his love for Desdemona, Iago urges him to "be a man" (I.iii.331) and, criticizing Othello for a "passion most unsuited such a man," he advises him to be patient: "Or I shall say you're all in all in spleen,/ And nothing of a man" (IV.i.79, 90-1). Grief, spleen, and lovesickness may be "effeminate" passions, but perhaps even sexual passion,

which would seem to corroborate one's "manliness," may cause one to lose one's manhood, to suffer a bodily wound, and to become, in Iago's fantasy of sexual violence, castrated. In this version of the battle between the sexes, both sides risk losing the ambiguous, symbolic, quasi-literal, and possibly imaginary possession that gives them a sexual value.

III

Possibly imaginary: the multiple, shifting, ambiguous identifications of certain key words -- the "chain of signifiers" in the text -- reveal fantasies that may contradict ordinary reality, but words, thoughts, and mental images are represented in the play as "real," literal, and potentially dangerous "things." "I cannot say 'whore,'" says Desdemona, but early in the play Brabantio, mourning the loss of his daughter, says, "These sentences, to sugar, or to gall,/ Being strong on both sides, are equivocal./ But words are words. I never yet did hear/ That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear" (I.iii.213-6). In other words, words are merely words, without much power to pierce through the ear to the injured, wounded heart, either to sweeten the wound or to embitter it. Cassio imagines (drunken) passion as an enemy that invades a man's body in order to steal his brains, as sexual violence may cause one to lose one's honor, virtue, virginity, or manhood, but the very thought of Othello's reputed adultery inflames Iago's passions and invades his body, "the thought whereof/ Doth like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (II.i.296-7). Turning the pathogenesis of paranoid obsession to his own devices, Iago frames a plan "to abuse Othello's ears" (I.iii.386) with the information that

Cassio is too familiar with his wife. Feeding him the lies, doubts, and suspicions that will infect him with morbid jealousy as if it were an almost physical disease, Iago will "pour this pestilence into his ear" (II.iii.356). Significantly, this is the mode by which the adulterous Claudius poisons his brother in Hamlet -- "And in the porches of my ears did pour/ The leperous distilment" (I.v.63-4) -- a modus operandi repeated in the dumb show and the play-within-the-play. Iago's poisonous words, poured into Othello's ear, may well reach the "bruised heart" or brain, and, according to the metaphor, they are the pathogenic agents that will bruise, contaminate, and infect it. As Iago himself says, "The Moor already changes with my poison:/ Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons" (III.iii.322-3). After Othello falls into a quasi-epileptic trance Iago takes credit for it: "My med'cine works!" (IV.i.47), as if he were a shaman or medicine man who "cured" his patients by means of homeopathic agents -- small quantities of the disease -- that turned out to be simply poisons.

Moreover, if Iago's metaphor for his own process of invention seems like commonplace rhetoric -- "my Muse labors,/ And thus she is delivered" (II.i.125-6) -- he also hatches his plots in more diabolical, more deadly serious language: "It is engendered! Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (I.iii.394-5). At the turning-point of the play Othello complains that Iago is hiding from him "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" (III.iii.107-8, 114-6). Leading Othello on, like a puppet on a string, Iago says that everyone's imagination

sometimes harbors "foul things" even if they are "vile and false" (III.iii.136-8): "As I confess it is my nature's plague/ To spy into abuses, and of my jealousy/ Shape faults that are not" (III.iii.146-8). The "abuses" that he spies into are also the dangerous, horrible, or monstrous conceits with which he poisons ("abuses") Othello's ears. Indeed, if he could spy into Othello's mind, he might be able to watch the monstrous thoughts being "engendered," taking shape, ready to be born. According to Emilia, jealousy has no reason, no true cause -- "It is a monster/ Begot upon itself, born on itself" (III.iv.160-1) -- as if it were a self-sufficient, self-sustaining, self-propagating disease, as if its monstrous births issued only from itself. But Iago calls jealousy "the green-eyed monster, which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on" (III.iii.166-7), a comparison which evokes the triangular relationship of "mimetic desire," except that here the rival or model who provokes the jealous desire is allegorized as jealousy itself, mocking its victim and also feeding on him (emotionally) like a parasite. In a more complicated sense Iago, the purveyor of poisonous jealousy who is jealous himself, mocks his jealous victim Othello even as he feeds off him. The conspirators Iago and Othello are bound by ties of jealousy, suspicion, and mistrust (toward others), and the image of the one pouring his poison into the other's ear suggests a paradoxically close relationship between them, where revenge becomes an instrument of "love" as well as hate. In "The Madonna's Conception Through the Ear," the psychoanalyst Ernest Jones claims that the impregnation of the Virgin Mary by the Word of God -- through her ear -- is a displaced and highly "sublimated" version of sexual relations.⁸ In Othello, as in Hamlet, the image of one man

"abusing" another's ear, pouring poisonous, contaminating words into it, and thereby "piercing" to the other man's mind or heart, is also an indirect, displaced image of some sort of sexual relations, one that might serve to replace the bloody, violent struggle of men and women. Except that Othello appears then in the role of the Virgin Mother, still pure and virginal in his relations with the opposite sex (Desdemona), but, impregnated by Iago's false, insidious poisons, forced to deliver the "monstrous birth" that Iago predicts.

If Iago's poisonous words embody the information that Desdemona is committing adultery with Cassio, it is the visible image of this relation that Othello wants Iago to provide for him. Indeed, Othello plays the role of spy, eavesdropper, and voyeur as Iago plays the role of conspirator and, in effect, pretended pander to Othello's tastes. Iago arranges for Othello to eavesdrop while he gets Cassio to discuss his love life, Othello mistakenly thinking that they are talking about Desdemona rather than the prostitute Bianca. In his verbal report of Cassio's alleged dream, Iago gives Othello an imaginary vision of Cassio in bed with his wife, which is, on closer inspection, a vision (also imaginary) of Cassio in bed with Iago; but Othello sees what he wants to see and remains blind to the existence of Iago in the bed. This vision, which Othello calls "monstrous," is the horrible conceit, the monster in Iago's thought too hideous to be shown. But the monster is, equally, in Othello's thought and it is hard to say whether Iago put it there or simply found it, latent, potential, unconscious, waiting to be made conscious. Othello demands "ocular proof" that his wife is a whore (III.iii.356-7), and to this demand for "satisfaction" Iago responds: "How satisfied, my lord?/ Would you, the supervisor, grossly

gape on?/ Behold her topped?"; "Where's satisfaction?/ It is impossible you should see this" (III.iii.391-3, 398-9). Instead of being the husband in bed with his own wife, Othello is in the position of a child wishing to observe the disturbing, confusing, and sexually exciting "primal scene" of his parents making love. Denying his own wish in the very act of naming it, he says that he would have been happy if all the soldiers in the camp "had tasted her sweet body" (III.iii.343), as long as he had not known about it. Othello's image of sexual relations is so ambiguous, so obscure, that it hardly matters whether Cassio is making love to Desdemona or to Iago: in the "beast with two backs," the sexual identity of each partner is hidden from sight, lost in the merger of the two figures into one beast. If effect, Iago "impregnates" Othello not in any literal sense but with the potent and poisonous image of a primal scene, an image of two people of indeterminate sex doing something passionate, violent, and bloody to each other. In this second-hand version of sexuality, the mere image of sexual relations is enough to impregnate a man -- on this symbolic sexual level, a man can be impregnated -- and though this impregnation ultimately leads to a bloody miscarriage, one can imagine it as a child's substitute version -- possibly less satisfying but also less dangerous -- of the sexual union he witnesses or wishes he could witness.

The violence that contaminates sexual relations in Othello is made manifest in the last scene of the play, where murder becomes a substitute for sex. "Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (V.i.36), says Othello, confusing the different fluids that may be spilled in sexual relations and confusing as well the different ways

blood may be spilled, as if he were murdering a virgin by sexual means. Othello and Desdemona, whose wedding night is interrupted by the voyage to Cyprus and the threat of war, seem to spend the rest of the play trying to consummate their marriage; whether they ever do is not absolutely clear. Indeed, although Iago imagines Othello as the adulterous, "lusty Moor," the Moor himself claims that he wants to take Desdemona with him "not/ To please the palate of my appetite,/ Nor to comply with heat -- the young affects/ In me defunct -- and proper satisfaction" (I.iii.256-9). On her last night alive Desdemona asks Emilia to put her wedding sheets on her bed, as if the marriage were still not consummated. Othello realizes that a dead Desdemona would be lost to him forever -- "When I have plucked the rose,/ I cannot give it vital growth again;/ It needs must wither" (V.ii.13-5) -- but his words have another meaning: when he has robbed her of her virginity, "deflowered" her, the "flower" will not grow back again. She is desirable only if she remains a virgin, and this belief coexists in Othello's mind (or again, in the texts of his speeches) with the contradictory belief that she is a "whore" who has lost her virginity many times over. He tries to preserve her virginity, in effect, by killing her: "Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,/ And love thee after" (V.ii.18-9).

But killing is also a substitute for sex, a way of consummating their marriage that destroys her life as well as her virginity, thus ensuring that she will not live to have sexual relations with anyone else. Othello, under the influence of Iago's poisonous thoughts, asks him for some actual poison with which to murder Desdemona, but he (as if unwilling to give up his monopoly on the method) suggests he do it by

strangling. Instead of giving her a potion to drink, Othello stops her breathing directly, but both of these "oral" methods of murder are, in a sense, subsumed in the fatal kisses that he gives her: "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,/ Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (V.ii.354-5). By embracing her too hard, too passionately, it seems, he "smothers" her to death.⁹ When Othello kills himself with the weapon worn "Upon a soldier's thigh" -- "naked as I am, I will assault thee" -- thereby loading the marriage bed with dead bodies, he might be implying that he himself is the unchristian, "circumcised dog" that he claims to kill: "And smote him -- thus" (V.ii.258, 255, 351-2). But this association of words suggests, further, that he is using the naked, circumcised weapon on his thigh against himself, that even his suicide is a kind of sexual act. As Lodovico says: "Look on the tragic loading of this bed./ . . . The object poisons sight;/ Let it be hid" (V.ii.359-61). The scene of sexual relations that Othello has so much wished and feared to see has become a scene of violent death, but the whole context of the play implies that it is impossible to separate one from the other, to distinguish sex from violence. The visual "object" -- of two people ambiguously loving or killing each other -- is so disturbing that it must be hidden. Indeed, this is the very image, real or imagined, that (with Iago's help) poisons Othello's thoughts, and now, in a startling, synaesthetic metaphor that virtually sums up the entire play, this image poisons sight. The image itself is violent, dangerous, but insidious, like poison, perhaps because it is seductive as well as frightening.

The sense of vision, like the metaphor of poison, dominates

the play. Othello's desire to spy upon his wife, under the influence of the green-eyed monster jealousy that "feeds" on what it sees, becomes a voyeuristic passion that demands satisfaction in its own right. But if the ambiguous "object" that one sees is finally the scene of violent passion in which one glimpses nothing more than two backs, then perhaps what one ultimately wishes to see (if one is a man) is a woman's genitals, even while one is afraid of the disturbing possibility that one will find "nothing" there. The concept of feminine "honor," of virginity itself, makes the vital spot both sacred and taboo, creates the reassuring fiction that "something" is there after all, and helps to ward off the violent, bloody confrontation in which "something" is lost forever -- in which one might lose "something" of one's own. The idea that a woman's "honor" is "an essence that's not seen" implies that one should not look for it in a woman's anatomy, that it should remain hidden, and also that it is disturbingly invisible, unlike a man's own sexual organ. Needless to say, a woman's genitals are not invisible, but, coupled with the blood of menstruation and (first) intercourse, the contrast with a man's own genitals may make one think (at least in fantasy) that a vagina is an empty space or even a bloody wound, where something has been lost. The magical, symbolic handkerchief that is given by one lover to the other (and by mother to son) as a sign of sexual fidelity -- like the quasi-phallic "fetish" of virginity that a woman surrenders to a man or even the money (in his "purse") that a man gives to a prostitute -- is also (among other things) an ambiguous, multivalent sign of female sexuality: white for virginal innocence but also "spotted" (III.iii.432) with strawberry red as if with the telltale blood of intercourse.

I have suggested that the ambiguous, obscure scene of violent passion implied by the language of the play is like a primal scene, toward which Othello has the same confused, ambivalent feelings as a child in relation to the mysterious activity that his parents perform. The division of all women into virgins and whores, the need to preserve one's faith in a woman's virginity, and the fear that a woman is an unfaithful "whore" who inevitably betrays her rightful lover -- this constellation of feelings may derive, as Freud explains, from a child's ambivalent attitudes toward his mother's sexuality.¹⁰ Thus Othello's "triangular" jealousy of a possible rival seems to repeat the oedipal jealousy toward father or sibling. However, Iago's paranoid jealousy, which seems to make all men into his enemies, leads to a thorough confusion between enemies and friends, between himself and the enemies that he desperately needs to hate, so that "In following him, I follow but myself. . . . I am not what I am." This is not simply oedipal jealousy, and I venture to suggest that the anxieties about sexual relations raised in this play are not merely or simply sexual at all. In the paradigmatic image of the beast with two backs, the two figures almost merge into one, and the metaphor of poisoning -- through the mouth, the ears, or the eyes -- suggests that the boundaries of the self may be crossed or penetrated. Poisoning may link two people together in a quasi-sexual relation, but the relaxation of boundaries, the merger of two people into one, and the confusion of identity between oneself and others all suggest the (hypothetical) "symbiotic" relation of a newborn child to its mother, in which the child does not yet clearly distinguish between its mother and itself.¹¹ The passionate, paranoid, and intensely ambivalent feelings about human relations in this play

reflect an ambivalence not only about sex and the sexual role of women but, more fundamentally, about identity, the boundaries of the self, and the ego-destroying engulfment that may be the outcome even of a mother's love.

Indeed, both Iago and Emilia describe sexual attraction in oral terms which suggest that one lover "swallows" the other, making him a part of herself or vice versa, like a baby feeding at his mother's breast or imagining his mother eating him up in return. But they are cynical enough to feel that this merger is only temporary and that eventually the infant lover vomits up his sweet love (or the mother her child). Iago says that Desdemona's "eye must be fed" with ever-new objects of visual pleasure: "her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor" (II.i. 223-4,230-2). And Emilia characterizes men, in turn, as hungry babies: "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/ They eat us hungrily, and when they are full,/ They belch us" (III.iv.104-6). More subtly, Iago, whose words are virulent poisons, resents his wife's sharp tongue and refuses, at the end of the play, to answer any questions: "From this time forth I never will speak word," he says, and Gratiano responds: "Torments will ope your lips" (V.ii.300, 302). Words are a powerful "oral" weapon, but an open mouth is a dangerously vulnerable breach in defenses. Thus Cassio laments that "men should put an enemy into their mouths to steal away their brains!" (II.iii.289-90). In short, childlike fantasies of "oral fusion" carry with them childlike fears of oral attack, of poisoning (by all available routes), and of the "oral," poisonous power of words. Words are so powerful because, being immaterial,

they can cross physical, corporeal boundaries so easily, and it is just this childlike conception of magical, immaterial agents crossing physical barriers that makes the sense of self so precarious. In the fictional, verbal world of the play, where problems of personal relations are formulated in the metaphorical (symbolic) terms of childhood fantasies, it is not surprising that Iago can "infect" Othello with the jealousy that they both (already) share, that they can be, in effect, split versions (in different shades or different keys) of the same character.

IV

In "La Pharmacie de Platon," Jacques Derrida investigates the identification of language (in Plato's Phaedrus) with the word pharmakon, which means a drug or medicine or magic potion, whether poisonous or life-sustaining, harmful or beneficial.¹² As pharmakon, language may be either "good" or "bad," either "true" or "false," either an interior presence or an alien, invading foreign substance, and it is impossible to resolve these dichotomies in the meaning of the term. This pharmakon, a homeopathic agent that may turn out to be poisonous, a foreign substance that penetrates the body's defenses, may also be identified with the fertilizing, lifegiving substance that enters the body in sexual relations. But the analogy here is to homosexual relations, and the seminal agent that passes from one man to another is fertilizing or lifegiving only in an idealized, "sublimated" sense, as if the "wisdom" or "truth" that an older man possessed could be given to a younger one by quasi-sexual means. In the myth of the Immaculate Conception, the divine logos, the word of God, the holy spirit impregnates Mary in an ambiguously sexual way, enabling her to remain

a virgin, uncontaminated by the magically potent "word." In Finnegans Wake, where these myths of the word return, words (identified with a woman's urine) are represented as a quasi-sexual substance poured into a person's ear. In Othello as well, words, images, and "thoughts" appear as poisonous, sexual, magically powerful agents, but in Joyce's version the man who receives the fertilizing logos can then give birth to a work of art -- a surprising, miraculous, perhaps even virginal birth but not (as in Othello) a "monstrous" one -- as if the words were his own.

In Shakespeare's play there is, despite "internal" contradictions, a certain coherence, a certain repetitive consistency in the texts assigned to individual characters, as if they really had minds of their own. As we have seen, however, these minds may invade each other, these selves may overlap, and the text of one character may "repeat," in certain subtle ways, the text of another. One character may pour words into another's ear, but even beyond this "literalized," pharmakon-like representation of the power of language, the actual words of the play create a network of interrelated meanings, an implicit symbolic structure, that transcends and transgresses the texts of each individual character. Othello receives, from Iago, the poisonous, seductive words that he wishes to hear, but he does not thereby possess them, determine whether they are true or false, master their insidious power. He can hear them but he cannot see them, that is, see what they signify, see what they purport to be true. In particular, he cannot see whether Desdemona is a virgin or a whore, honest or dishonest, though he knows the words -- has heard them and will repeat them -- that say she is one

or the other. Only Desdemona herself possesses this secret, and her secret possession -- the "unseen essence" signified by the word honor or perhaps by the word whore, the secret "truth" about women, whether it be a possession or something she does not possess, an invisible essence or a visible though ambiguous sign -- becomes, for Othello, for men, for others in general, a magically powerful and valuable pharmakon, like Iago's poisonous "conceits" which are, in effect, false imitations or representations of that secret truth. And yet Desdemona, victimized by the either/or logic of the virgin/whore dichotomy, by the inherent contradictions in the word honor, does not possess or control her own supposed "essence," which is in fact imposed on her by others, by men, by the familial and social structure into which she is born. Moreover, there is no final or original "truth about women," only an anatomical sign "inscribed" in the differences between men and women, parents and children, virginity and sexuality.¹³ When, at the end of the play, Othello and Desdemona become (on their marriage bed) the bloody image of quasi-sexual union which, like the beast with two backs, seems to be the reverse, double sign of the anatomical sign that it hides, the last speaker in the play orders the poisonous, bloody "object" of sight hidden from view, as if this sign of sexual violence revealed too much. But even the anatomical sign which the words of the play implicitly refer to, hidden by those very words, reveals nothing in itself; it must be "read" in the context of sexual differences and family relationships, of all images and explanations of sexual relations, of all such texts from Othello itself to this text "upon" Othello.

Shakespeare's plays, typically, contain much self-reflexive reference to plays, acting, dramatic illusion, the possibilities of

language, and writing itself.¹⁴ In Othello, the problem of illusory visions and "ocular proof" is implicitly repeated in the framing structure of an audience watching a play. Iago himself is, as we have "seen," not only a role-playing actor who is confused about who he really is but also the author or at least director of a play-within-a-play that is never actually performed: namely, the scene of Desdemona's adultery with Cassio. If this is a play about "ocular proof" (the play-within-the-play that we never actually see), it is also a text upon "verbal proof," whose texts-within-the-text include: the text of Cassio's reported dream, which Iago "writes" for the occasion and in which he plays all the parts; the text of the "poisonous" words that Iago pours into Othello's ears, which suggests that words, even "false" words, may be an effective substitute for ocular proof; and all the ambiguous, contradictory texts upon honor/honest/good name/ purse/ trash/whore/etc. which, if one pursues all the shifting significations of these terms, seem to make up virtually the entire text of Othello. It may be that Shakespeare's final solution to the unresolved problems of the play -- the "truth" about women, the difficulty of finding an honest man (or woman), the disturbing "otherness" of other people, the even more disturbing possibility that those others will infect or invade or engulf oneself, and the fact that words are no guarantee of truth -- is simply the act of writing the play, whereby he becomes not the victim of language but the possessor of its magical, quasi-sexual power. Instead of possessing (1) a woman (wife or mother), (2) whatever it is that makes a man a man, (3) whatever makes a woman "honest," (4) money in one's purse, or (5) truth, the writer possesses simply language. But as the career of Iago (who will be forced to swallow his own words) suggests, no one can

make language his own private possession, completely subordinate to his control. The "dissemination" of language (in Derrida's pun) is unlimited, uncontainable, not because words really have a magical, sexual power but because their meanings are multiple, contradictory, symbolic rather than literal, merely links in an open-ended chain of signifiers: How is an honest man different from an honest woman? Would we know either one if we saw one? What is honor? A word. What is that word honor? 'Tis something, nothing.

NOTES

1. See esp. Howard Felperin, Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 74-86; Robert B. Heilman, Magic in the Web: Action and Language in "Othello" (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956); and Norman N. Holland, Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 246-58.
2. James Joyce, Ulysses (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 212.
3. See Martin Wagh, "Othello: The Tragedy of Iago," and Gordon Ross Smith, "Iago the Paranoiac," in The Design Within: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Shakespeare, ed. M. D. Faber (New York: Science House, 1970), pp. 155-82. See also Holland, Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare, pp. 249-50, and Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of Othello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 158-9.
4. All quotations from Othello, cited in the text, are from the Signet Classic Shakespeare edition, ed. Alvin Kernan (New York: New American Library, 1963).
5. Cf. Heilman, Magic in the Web, pp. 30-4.
6. See René Girard, Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,

1965), and Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

7. The Complete Pelican Shakespeare, general ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969). Quotations from Shakespeare's plays other than Othello are from this edition.
8. Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis (London: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1923), pp. 261-359.
9. But just as Falstaff, who rejects honor, springs back to life after playing dead, Desdemona, who has preserved her virginal "honor" despite Othello's suspicions, regains breath and speech after seeming dead (as Cordelia appears to, in King Lear), as if to prove that the invisible "essence" of her purity is after all (in Cassio's term) an immortal spirit that will survive bodily degradation. Indeed, both Cassio and Roderigo seem to return from the dead, to speak from beyond the grave -- "even but now he spake/ After long seeming dead" (V.ii.323-4) -- suggesting that words, at least, can survive physical attack, even if cut off from the person who speaks them. And yet, if "virgin" and "whore" are only words, incorporeal essences, these words can kill, destroying body and soul together: the voice that speaks these words and the mind that makes these divisions as well as the body that simply suffers the consequences.
10. Sigmund Freud, "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" and

- "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 11, 165-90. Cf. Stephen A. Shapiro, "Othello's Desdemona," in The Design Within, pp. 185-92.
11. On "symbiosis anxiety," cf. Robert J. Stoller, Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred (New York: Dell, 1976), pp. 135-62.
 12. La dissémination (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 69-197.
 13. Cf. Jacques Lacan, "The signification of the phallus," Ecrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 281-91. Lacan places great emphasis on the crucial symbolic role of the phallus, especially the "missing" maternal phallus, but this "fetishistic" theory of symbolic meaning seems to reverse the priority of a child's experience (of mothers and fathers). The quasi-phallic "unseen essence" that a woman does or does not possess may also be whatever it is a mother "possesses" and a child does not.
 14. See Felperin, Shakespearean Representation, and, on the role of writing in Hamlet, Avi Erlich, Hamlet's Absent Father (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 207-59.