

Responsibility for tragedy in othello and macbeth

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The tragedy in both Othello and Macbeth is found not so much in the scattering of bodies covering the stage at the end of each play, but instead in the degeneration of the plays' respective protagonists. Men championed by Shakespeare at the beginning of the plays as "valiant" (I. iii. 48, Othello) and "noble" (I. ii. 67, Macbeth) emerge by the end as "the blacker devil" (V. ii. 130, Othello) and a "tyrant" (V. viii. 27, Macbeth). Shakespeare tracks the deterioration of these characters by presenting us with a number of different causes for the actions that eventually bring about the protagonists' downfalls. Although both Othello and Macbeth have innate negative qualities that indubitably contribute to the erosion of their stability and moral character, these traits do not appear to be fully expressed before a number of malignant forces act upon the characters. These traits appear in the forms of other characters, and are the consequence of fatal misunderstandings and coincidences that arise out of deceptive appearances. However, Shakespeare was in control of his texts at all times, and to suggest that the vicissitudes in these plays are mere coincidences denies this control. Indeed, the playwright indicates that all actions – the characters and the disastrous confusion – are controlled by a sort of malevolent divine force. This force appears to designate the outcome of events before they happen and then allows the characters to reach this destination principally through their own chosen actions, but also with some supernatural assistance. There are therefore a number of "levels" of responsibility in these plays – while the protagonist may have inherently dangerous instincts that allow him to behave in a certain manner, a trigger in the form of other earthly influences is needed to spur him to such extreme measures. In addition, the implication

is that Fate sets into motion and watches over each play's entire plot, stepping in where necessary to mushroom mere destruction into full-blown tragedy. Shakespeare indicates a number of aspects of the protagonists' personalities that, when exploited, contribute to their demise. In both plays, the playwright examines distorted notions of manhood and shows how these notions have acted as a destructive force on the characters. In Macbeth, Shakespeare links together the themes of masculinity and cruelty from the very first Act, where Lady Macbeth suggests that her womanhood impedes her from violence, spurning her feminine qualities and calling upon "spirits" to "unsex" her (I. v. 40-1). She calls for these "murth'ring ministers" (48) to "Come to my woman's breasts, / And take my milk for gall" (47-8), filling an image that is traditionally associated with the nurturing of infants with bitterness, and in doing so revealing that her own desire for evil has totally consumed her. This intense passage incites an almost inhuman passion in Lady Macbeth, and yet it is the effect on Macbeth of this supposed relationship between masculinity and violence that propels the rest of the plot. Lady Macbeth's appeal to the spirits resounds distinctly with her fear that Macbeth will not have the strength of will to murder Duncan, utilising the same symbolism of femininity: "Yet I do fear thy nature, / It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (16-7). Later, she goads her husband by implicating his manhood in his failure to kill the King – "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I. vii. 49) – and her sexual taunting compounds her admonishment as she likens Macbeth's inability to complete the act of murder to an inability to perform the sexual act (35 ff.) In the face of such passionate castigation, Macbeth's weak argument "If we should fail?" (59)

only flounders in his inability to resist his wife's sexually-charged manipulation, and from this point onwards it is evident that Macbeth is slowly overcome by evil (in the following scene he has the guilt-inspired hallucination and murders Duncan). It is, however, interesting to note that the woman's strength of will and evil essence eclipses that of the man; even though Lady Macbeth is trying to reject the traditional connotations of femininity, this only makes her appear all the more evil. Nevertheless, it is possible to see that this conceptual association between manhood and violence, does partly energise Macbeth's actions: in Act III, scene i, he uses the same rhetorical tactics to persuade the murderers, " Now if you have a station in the file, / Not I' th' worst rank of manhood, say't" (101-2). In Othello, Shakespeare presents similar notions of masculinity's ability to fuel jealousy, indicating that Othello expresses his manhood through military prowess, but that this tendency is incompatible with love. His address in Act I, scene iii about his military heroism is so descriptive and elaborate that it is clear that Othello enjoys telling stories of his valour and success in war. However, in Act II, the Turks are drowned – " News, lads! our wars are done" (20) – and with this eradication of the military opposition, the play quickly loses its political focus and becomes a domestic drama. It is evident that Othello himself is unable to function outside of a military capacity, and while he once survived by proving his manhood in public, it appears more difficult for him to do so in a private setting. The positive aspects of his personality, those that he previously used as a captain, are exploited and perverted by Iago, who channels them towards jealousy and revenge. For example, Othello's decisiveness is reduced to a tendency to quickly jump to

conclusions with only circumstantial “evidence”. He rashly declares “She’s gone” (III. iii. 267) before Iago has even produced the “proof” of the handkerchief, and thus we see how “to be once in doubt / Is [once] to be resolv’d” (180); while judicious as a soldier, Othello is foolish as a lover. In addition, his clear focus on a task morphs into a narrowness of opinion that prompts him to dismiss Emilia’s worthy evidence in Act IV, scene ii; he rejects the evidence as dishonest because it does not align with his pre-conceived views. Furthermore, Othello’s recognition of his justified high status and reputation is transformed into an unhealthy self-obsession and paranoia, leading to the developments in Act III, scene iv, which transpire even without even the assistance of Iago. While he sets the turmoil in motion by planting the handkerchief, the stichomythic screaming match of lines 75-98 is prompted by Othello’s obsessive fixation on the gift he gave Desdemona. His forced triple repetition of “The handkerchief!” indicates once again that Othello still regards Desdemona as a military problem to be solved – in the army to lose an important object may well be regarded as sedition – and not as his new wife. His confusion between his rôle as a military man and as a husband is also evident in Act III, scene iii, when he forms his rage and grief about Desdemona’s supposed infidelity into an extended military metaphor. His farewell declarations to “The spirit-stirring drum, th’ ear-piercing fife, / The royal banner” are to both his military life and to Desdemona, and the passion of the military vocabulary combines with the anaphora to emphasise his confusion between his dual roles of soldier and lover. However, Othello is clearly different from Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*; his jealousy is so deeply ingrained and ravaging that it needs no-one

else's suggestion to prompt an unprovoked, violent reaction. In comparing the causes of action in Othello and Macbeth, it is perhaps fair to assert that Iago and Macbeth are the most similar, as they are the characters who are most obsessed with power. Macbeth's "vaulting ambition" (I. vii. 27) immediately comes to bear when the Weird Sisters deliver their prophecy, and Shakespeare tracks Macbeth's descent into tragedy from that point onwards. Banquo says that his friend is "rapt" (I. iii. 142) and that his trance-like state is evident in his speech: My thought, whose murder is but fantastical, Shakes so my single state of man that functions smother'd in surmise, and nothing is but what is not. (I. iii. 139-142) It seems that these "horrible imaginings" (138) are already beginning to consume his person, and with the steadily increasing death count that follows due to Macbeth's determination to permit nobody to stand in between him and the crown; it is easy to see how his "ambition" leads to his tragedy. However, Macbeth's obsessive desire to be king is unlike Iago's desire for power and his subsequent malicious actions. Of course, Iago does have a number of minor grievances against Othello and Cassio – he desires revenge for Othello's decision to make Cassio his lieutenant over him, and, since Cassio was probably promoted on the basis of class, Iago resents those characters who mock him as a lower-class ensign: Let it not gall your patience, good Iago, That I extend my manners; 'tis my breeding That gives me this bold show of courtesy. (Cassio, II. i. 97-9) However, even the money with which Roderigo is bribing him and his suspicions that Othello has slept with Emilia (II. i. 95) are by no means the primary motivators behind Iago's malevolence and hunger for power. Iago's degenerate world-view of men as debauched animals leads

him to believe that anything that contradicts with this concept must be conquered and suppressed. This is evident in his frequent use of vulgar, animalistic vocabulary: Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross As ignorance made drunk. (III. iii. 403-5) This gross description is demonstrative Iago's inability to perceive the beauty of man or of love, and subsequent incapability of tolerating anything that seems to rise above depravity. His opinion that love is "merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" and further instruction to Roderigo to "Come, be a man!" (I. iii. 334-5) unite his cynicism with a rather twisted view of manhood that forbids him to fall in love. "He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes my ugly" Iago says of Cassio (V. i. 19-20), emphasising again his cynicism and hatred of beauty, out of which his plan to destroy Othello rises. Another of Iago's animalistic, bestial images, his description of Othello and Desdemona as "the beast with two backs" (I. i. 115), reveals another of Iago's perverse obsessions: he not only totally despises love, but seems fixated on sex, and desires power even over Othello's private sex life. Showing an unhealthy attention to sexual detail in his closely observed speech (for example "in terms like bride and groom / Devesting them for bed") (II. iii. 180-1), Iago also constantly interrupts Othello's conjugal efforts. There is also a suggestion of a homosexual attraction to Othello: more than once, Iago tells Othello that he loves him (e. g. III. iii. 116), and it seems possible that such an attraction might prompt a resentment of Desdemona, and a desire to have power even over their happiness. Like Iago's manipulation, Macbeth's violence also transcends his ambition. While Lady Macbeth becomes less potent in her ambition and ability to influence him, as

soon as he commits Duncan's murder, Macbeth is stained with an evil that goes beyond anything that he possessed beforehand. His torment that he "could not say "Amen," / When they did say 'God bless us'" (II. ii. 26-7) symbolises his subsequent damnation, which sets in and becomes a habit. In Act iii, scene ii, he indicates his impossible position – "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (III. iv. 135-7). This is later supported by his redundant and merciless murder of Macduff's wife and child, the effect being Macbeth's eventual failure to find any meaning in life. When the message arrives that his wife has died, he responds with nothing but numb indifference: "She should have died hereafter" (V. v. 17). This strangely muted response quickly transforms into utterly nihilistic despair. In "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day" (19), Macbeth's forceful triple repetition emphasises his hopelessness. However, "It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (26-8) not only indicates Macbeth's view of the meaningless of life, but also reveals his desire to somehow justify the crimes he knows were so heinously unnecessary.

Deception is a prolonged cause of action in both plays. Duncan's fateful error in thinking "There's no art / To find a mind's construction in the face" (I. iv. 11-2) is made all the more ironic by the frequent references to false impressions. Lady Macbeth chastises Macbeth for doing exactly this: "Your face, my thane, is as a book, where men / May read strange matters" (I. v. 61-2). Her order to "look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under it" (64-5) draws on the image of Satan, the deceiver, in Genesis, highlighting to the audience the way deception will be a contributing factor in the

trajectory of terror. The frequent allusions to darkness metaphorically covering truth contribute to this idea. Macbeth says “ Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (I. iv. 50-1), which is soon reiterated by Lady Macbeth. “ Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell” (I. v. 50-1) does not simply enhance the sinister atmosphere of mystery, but is particularly interesting because Lady Macbeth goes on to announce, “ keen knife see not the wound it makes” (52). From this, we infer that she wishes to even shelter herself from the truth of her deeds. Macbeth says “ The eye wink at the hand; yet that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (53-4): this seems to be an allusion to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, in which he calls for unity in the early Church, an institution characterised by the fact that every member (every part of the body) is open to each of the others: “ And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee.” Twisting the words of Saint Paul, Macbeth’s words are also significant in that the “ hand” is the performer of action, the executer of the murder, whilst the “ eye” shows Macbeth’s desire to himself be deceived about the reality of his actions. Just as Macbeth’s denial of reality spurs him on towards his impending doom, so does deception in Othello consign the protagonist’s ruin. Iago’s duplicity is shrouded from all of the other characters, and the multiple ironic references (such as “ honest Iago” (II. iii. 335), “ You advise me well” (II. iii. 325) and “ I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest” (III. i. 40)) emphasise his adroit dishonesty. However, the less obvious but arguably more interesting illusion that traps Othello is that of the place itself. Cyprus, although still under Venetian law, was situated outside of Venice itself, and was thus a territory outside of the

immediate control of the state. In the first act of *Othello*, the cast is sent to Cyprus on a matter of state, but it is possible to argue that by sending the main cast away to the island, Shakespeare is parodying the pastoral ideal. This concept is frequently found in his comedies when a company is placed in a (usually) forest scene devoid of social norms. There, they must undergo some sort of education in order to return to the urban sphere by the end of the play. However, in *Othello*, when the Turkish threat is quelled the island begins to lose its Venetian connections and political significance, and with celebratory revelries and drunken brawls it soon becomes clear that the island initially resembling, for example, Illyria, is far from benign. The plot of *Othello* also parodies some of Shakespeare's comedies, as it is full of misinterpretation. However, while in the comedies the deception and confusion fade away by the end of play (which usually concludes in marriage), in this case the play finishes with the deaths of Othello and Desdemona, their marriage having barely been consummated. Cyprus is therefore a trap: it seems to be a place of new beginnings, separated from the trouble with Brabantio, but in fact it is not completely disconnected from Venice. When Lodovico arrives and highlights the change that has taken place in *Othello*, we are reminded of this. Othello seems to act as if Cyprus is the pastoral setting devoid of social rules that we see so often in Shakespeare's comedies, but the characters in *Othello* soon begin to re-emanate and imprison anyone crossing them; the façade is deceptive. However, it is arguably the presence of some divine force, such as Fate, that predetermines at least the outcome of events in these plays. This is quite obvious in *Macbeth*, and slightly less so in *Othello*. This classical idea of the “

principle, power, or agency by which, according to certain philosophical and popular systems of belief, all events, or some events in particular, are unalterably predetermined from eternity” is clearly evident in Macbeth, and the question of the true identity of the witches haunts the play throughout. Shakespeare suggests that they may be sinister, independent figures, harnessing supernatural forces for their cruel desires, or perhaps agents of fate itself. They bear a striking resemblance to the Ancient Greek and Norse “Fates”, and the etymological origin of “weird” is the Anglo-Saxon “wyrd”, meaning “fate”. Certainly, the witches’ inscrutability, beyond the bounds of human comprehension, not only adds an atmosphere of dark mystery to the play, but more importantly indicates a sort of divine justice or order that is being exerted over Macbeth and his world. Macduff was unaware of the witches’ prophecies, but his part was fulfilled nonetheless; indeed, it seems almost as though the prophecies were actually designed to wreak so much havoc on Macbeth that he himself would cause them to become self-fulfilling. Macbeth’s rash complacency due to his belief in his invincibility is what fulfills the witches’ malevolent scheme – it is his foolishness that contributes to his downfall. In contrast, in Othello, the indications of a divine presence are far less obvious. The irony of Othello’s cry just before he kills Desdemona of “you chaste stars, / It is that cause” (V. ii. 2-3) is highlighted by the final scene’s bedroom setting, since Othello and Desdemona spent a great deal of the play attempting to leave the stage to consummate their marriage. However, despite references to “fate”, it does not quite seem as though the individual events in Othello were set down in stone from the beginning of the play. Instead, the playwright’s

implication is that while the conclusion may or may not have been predetermined, the characters are acting primarily under their own control, or are being controlled by others. There are, however, a number of biblical references in *Othello* that hint at the inevitability of a tragic outcome. At the beginning of the play, Othello is implicitly compared to Christ when the officers come with burning torches to collect him, just as was done to Christ (described in John 18: 3). Furthermore, Othello echoes Christ when he quietly stalls the fight, telling them to “Keep up your bright swords” (I. ii. 59). Later, Shakespeare directly references the time when Jesus asks Simon Peter three times if he loves him in order to atone for the three times he denied him. Peter answers, “Yea Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.” Othello asks Iago “If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought,” to which Iago answers, “My lord, you know I love you” (III. iii. 115-7). By alluding to the moment when Christ was arrested, and later referencing the period following the Resurrection, Shakespeare compares the two figures in an ironic fashion. The Old Testament prophets’ foretelling of Christ’s coming and of his sacrifice draws the audience’s attention to the destiny that Othello will share; but while Christ came to bring redemption and salvation, Othello’s suicide thrusts him poignantly and ironically into the darkest tragedy. However, a paradigm shift occurs when Desdemona begins to emerge as the Christ-like character: her unflagging love for Othello (despite his abuse of her) clearly mirrors Christ’s love for the Church: My love doth so approve him, That even his stubbornness, he checks, his frowns...have grace and favour [in them] (IV. iii. 19-20) This comparison to Christ, coupled with Desdemona’s request that if she dies, Emilia might use her wedding sheets as her shroud, both

foreshadow her impending death. By the end of the play, Othello has been compared to the “ devil”, as well as to Judas, the betrayer of Christ: in the First Folio he pronounces himself “ Judean”. It is as though his fate has finally been realised when he uses the vocabulary of Revelation in his pleading for eternal damnation: Whip me, ye devils, From the possession of this heavenly sight! Bow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur! Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! (V. ii. 277-81) Spiritual allusion in Othello is more than just clever intertextuality of character comparisons. It tracks the divine state of Othello and Desdemona in particular, with implications of a spiritual force that is being exerted over them. The audience is certainly reminded of Faust, who was tempted by Mephistophiles but secured his own fate, and cried out hysterically as the devils dragged him down to hell. Ultimately, there are a number of causal factors behind the tragedies of Othello and Macbeth, and thus a number of different levels of culpability. Characters simultaneously act out of their own free will, under the control of others (Iago and Lady Macbeth), and under the control of divine forces, or Fate. Shakespeare indicates in the absence of any one of these factors, the conclusions to each tale might have been far different. What seems obvious to the audience is obscured from the characters, and so tragedy creeps up on both Othello and Macbeth so gradually and deviously that it consumes them even before they are aware of its presence. Shakespeare indicates a number of aspects of the protagonists’ personalities that, when exploited, contribute to their demise. In both plays, the playwright examines distorted notions of manhood and shows how these notions have acted as a destructive force on the characters. In Macbeth, Shakespeare links together the themes of

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opinion that love is “merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will” and further instruction to Roderigo to “Come, be a man!” (I. iii. 334-5) unite his cynicism with a rather twisted view of manhood that forbids him to fall in love. “He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes my ugly” Iago says of Cassio (V. i. 19-20), emphasising again his cynicism and hatred of beauty, out of which his plan to destroy Othello rises. Another of Iago’s animalistic, bestial images, his description of Othello and Desdemona as “the beast with two backs” (I. i. 115), reveals another of Iago’s perverse obsessions: he not only totally despises love, but seems fixated on sex, and desires power even over Othello’s private sex life. Showing an unhealthy attention to sexual detail in his closely observed speech (for example “in terms like bride and groom / Devesting them for bed”) (II. iii. 180-1), Iago also constantly interrupts Othello’s conjugal efforts. There is also a suggestion of a homosexual attraction to Othello: more than once, Iago tells Othello that he loves him (e. g. III. iii. 116), and it seems possible that such an attraction might prompt a resentment of Desdemona, and a desire to have power even over their happiness. Like Iago’s manipulation, Macbeth’s violence also transcends his ambition, as it takes on other causes to propel it. Whilst Lady Macbeth becomes less potent in her ambition and malign influence on him, as soon as he commits Duncan’s murder, Macbeth is stained with an evil that goes beyond anything that he possessed beforehand. His torment that he ‘could not say “Amen,” / When they did say “God bless us”’ (II. ii. 26-7) symbolises his subsequent damnation, which sets in and becomes to Macbeth a habit. In Act iii, scene ii, he indicates his impossible position – ‘I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were

as tedious as go o'er' (III. iv. 135-7). This is later supported by his redundant and merciless murder of Macduff's wife and child, the effect being Macbeth's eventual failure to find any meaning in life. When the message arrives that his wife has died, he responds with nothing but numb indifference – 'She should have died hereafter' (V. v. 17) – this strangely muted response segueing into utter nihilistic despair. In 'To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day' (19), Macbeth's forceful triple repetition emphasises his hopelessness. However, 'It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing' (26-8) not only indicates Macbeth's view of the meaningless of life, but also his attempt to somehow justify the crimes he knows were so heinously unnecessary. Deception is a prolonged cause of action in both plays. Duncan's fateful error in thinking 'There's no art / To find a mind's construction in the face' (I. iv. 11-2) is made all the more ironic by the frequent references to false impressions – Lady Macbeth chastises Macbeth for doing exactly this – 'Your face, my thane, is as a book, where men / May read strange matters' (I. v. 61-2). Her order to 'look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under it' (64-5) draws on the image of Satan, the deceiver, in Genesis, highlighting to the audience the way deception will be a contributing factor in the trajectory of terror Macbeth traces. The frequent allusions to darkness metaphorically covering truth contribute to this. Macbeth says 'Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires' (I. iv. 50-1), which is soon reiterated by Lady Macbeth. 'Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunest smoke of hell' (I. v. 50-1) does not simply enhance the sinister atmosphere of mystery, but is particularly interesting in the way she continues. Lady Macbeth desires that

her 'keen knife see not the wound it makes' (52), and from this we infer that she wishes to even shelter herself from the truth of her deeds. Macbeth says 'The eye wink at the hand; yet that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see' (53-4). This seems to be an allusion to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in which he calls for unity in the early church, a church characterised by every member (every part of the body) being open with each of the others: 'And the eye cannot say vnto the hand, I haue no neede of thee'. Twisting the words of Saint Paul, Macbeth's words are also significant in that the 'hand' is the performer of action, the executer of the murder, whilst the 'eye' shows Macbeth's desire to himself be deceived of what he is doing. Just as Macbeth's denial of reality spurs him on towards his impending doom, so does deception in Othello consign the protagonist's ruin. Iago's duplicity is shrouded from all the characters, and the multiple dramatically ironic references such as 'honest Iago' (II. iii. 335), 'You advise me well (II. iii. 325) and 'I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest' (III. i. 40) emphasise his adroit dishonesty. However, the less obvious but arguable more interesting illusion that traps Othello is that of the place itself. Cyprus, although still under Venetian law, was situated outside Venice itself and so was a territory outside the immediate government of the state. In the first act of Othello, the cast is sent to Cyprus on a matter of state, but it is possible to argue that by sending the main cast away to the island, Shakespeare is parodying the idea of pastoral. This concept he used in his comedies to some extent when a company is sent into a (usually) forest scene devoid of social norms in order that they undergo some sort of education to take back to urbanity at the end of the play. However, in

Othello, when the Turkish threat is quelled the island begins to lose its Venetian connections and political significance, and with celebratory revelries and drunken brawls it soon becomes clear that the island initially resembling, for example, Illyria, is far from benign. The plot of Othello also to some extent parodies that of some of Shakespeare's comedies, full of misinterpretation. However, whilst in the comedies the deception and confusion fade away at the end of play (usually concluding in marriage), in this case the play finishes with the deaths of Othello and Desdemona, their marriage barely consummated. Cyprus is therefore a trap – it seems to be a place of new beginnings, away from the trouble with Brabantio, but in fact it is not completely disconnected with Venice, and when Lodovico arrives and highlights the change in Othello, we are reminded of this. Othello seems to act as if Cyprus were the pastoral setting devoid of social rules that we see in Shakespeare's comedies, but they soon begin to re-emanate and imprison anyone crossing them; the façade is deceptive. However, it is arguably the presence of some divine force, such as Fate, that predetermines at least the outcome of events in these plays, quite obviously in Macbeth, though less so in Othello. This classical idea of the 'principle, power, or agency by which, according to certain philosophical and popular systems of belief, all events, or some events in particular, are unalterably predetermined from eternity' is clearly evident in Macbeth, and the question of the true identity of witches haunts the play throughout. The suggestions are that they may be sinister independent figures, harnessing supernatural forces for cruelty, or alternatively they may be agents of fate themselves. They bear striking resemblance to the Ancient Greek and Norse 'Fates', and the etymological

origin of 'weärd' is the Anglo-Saxon 'wyrð', meaning 'fate'. Certainly, the witches' inscrutability, beyond the bounds of human comprehension, not only adds an atmosphere of dark mystery to the play, but more importantly indicates a sort of divine justice or order exerted upon Macbeth and his world. Macduff was unaware of the witches' prophecies but still his part was fulfilled, and it seems the prophecies were actually designed to wreak so much havoc on Macbeth, that he himself would cause them to be self-fulfilling. Macbeth's rash complacency due to his belief in his invincibility is what fulfils the witches' malevolent scheme – it is a foolishness that contributes to his downfall. In contrast, in Othello, indications of a divine presence are far less obvious. Othello's cry just before he kills Desdemona of 'you chaste stars, / It is that cause' (V. ii. 2-3) is highlighted as even more ironic by the final scene's bedroom setting, since Othello and Desdemona spent a lot of the play attempting to leave the stage to consummate their marriage. However, despite references to 'fate', it does not quite seem as if individual events in Othello were set down in stone from the beginning of the play. Instead, the playwright's implication is that whilst the conclusion may or may not have been predetermined, characters act primarily under their own control or the control of others. There are, however, a number of biblical references in Othello that imply that Othello's outcome will inevitably be one of tragedy, however that may come to pass. At the beginning of the play, Othello is implicitly compared to Christ when the officers come with burning torches to collect him, just as was done to Christ (described in John 18: 3). Furthermore, Othello echoes Christ when he quietly stalls the fight, telling them to 'Keep up your bright swords' (I. ii. 59) and later, Shakespeare

makes direct reference to the time when Jesus asks Simon Peter three times if he loves him in order to atone for the three times he denied him, Peter answering 'Yea Lord, thou knowest that I love thee.' Othello asks Iago 'If thou dost love me, / Show me thy thought', Iago answering, 'My lord, you know I love you' (III. iii. 115-7). By alluding to the moment when Christ was arrested, and later referencing the time after the Resurrection, Shakespeare compares the two figures ironically. The Old Testament prophets' foretelling of Christ's coming and of his sacrifice draws the audience's attention to the destiny that Othello will also have; but whilst Christ came to bring redemption and salvation, Othello's suicide is thrust poignantly and ironically into darkest tragedy. However, a paradigm shift occurs when Desdemona begins to emerge as the Christ-like character. Her continual love for Othello despite his abuse of her clearly mirrors Christ's love for the church: My love doth so approve him, That even his stubbornness, he checks, his frowns..... have grace and favour [in them] (IV. iii. 19-20) This comparison with Christ, coupled with Desdemona's request that if she dies, Emilia might use her wedding sheets as her shroud, both indicate her impending death. By the end of the play, Othello is compared to the 'devil', as well as to Judas, the betrayer of Christ when (in the First Folio) he pronounces himself 'Judean'. It is as if his fate has finally been realised when he uses the vocabulary of Revelation in his pleading for eternal damnation: Whip me, ye devils, From the possession of this heavenly sight! Bow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur! Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! (V. ii. 277-81) Spiritual allusion in Othello is more than just clever intertextuality of character comparisons. It tracks the divine state of Othello and Desdemona in

particular, with implications of a spiritual force exerted upon them, partly through Iago as the enactor of this. The audience is certainly reminded of Faust, tempted by Mephistophiles, but securing his own fate and in the final hysterically crying out as devils drag him down to hell. Ultimately, there are a number of causal factors behind the tragedy in Othello and Macbeth, a thus a number of different levels of culpability apparent. Characters simultaneously act in their own free will, under the control of others (Iago and Lady Macbeth), and under the control of divine forces, or Fate. Shakespeare indicates that without any one of these factors, the conclusion would at least not have been effected in quite the same way. What seems obvious to the audience is obscured from the characters, and so tragedy creeps up on both Othello and Macbeth so unsuspectingly that it consumes them even before they are aware.