By accusing their wives of sexual infidelity, Othello and Leontes give themselves a desperately needed motive for expressing in words what they both love and fear—the image of their wives making love to other men. They transform sexual agony into an instrument of passionate blame in a kind of narcissistic adventure that enforces a transcendence of their known selves by actualizing a secret fear. They then transform the imagined sexual infidelity of their wives into a fear of chaos. Because patriarchal social formations invest female sexual fidelity with the responsibility for familial stability, Othello and Leontes comprehend chaos in gendered terms that fortify the ties between misogyny and patriarchy. Kathleen McLuskie has argued that patriarchy, the institution of male power in the family and the state, sees itself “as the only form of social organization strong enough to hold chaos at bay.”

The patriarchal power structure, however, supports only the illusion that men possess its security: the examples of Othello and Leontes demonstrate that in a patriarchy the fidelity of wives is the major prop and condition of social order.

The other man in each case is a potential threat to the sexual security and social status of the hero, a threat that is made more real by his being endowed with virtues well known to the hero’s wife. Both Cassio and Polixenes possess known and demonstrable sex appeal that makes them appropriate figures in the fantasies of

the jealous husbands. Those fantasies are made more vivid by the fact that Othello and Leontes identify with and have admired their counterparts. This identification is not accidental. Edward A. Snow has strongly made the point that "Iago's plan is to get Othello to imagine Cassio in his (Othello's) place." And he notes that the plan "is abetted by the language of a hierarchical, status-conscious society that thinks more in terms of positions than of the persons who temporarily occupy them: 'Although 'tis fit that Cassio have his place— / For sure he fills it up with great ability' (III.iii.246-47)." 1 Leontes imagines his wife's infidelity all by himself, without the help of an Iago. His fantasy, nevertheless, is rooted in an impulse to passionate romanticizing of love relationships through the intersecting agency of memory/language and desire. René Girard reminds us that jealousy occurs when a second desire focuses on the object the jealous individual feels should be desired by no one but himself, because he was first on the stage, he was the first to desire that object. Any desire interfering with his desire, he regards as illegitimate. 2

Leontes is a case in point. He encourages Hermione to persuade Polixenes to stay through the use of—what else?—her womanly arts. Her success, paradoxically, is her undoing. The proof of her ability confirms his misogyny, which is exacerbated by a homoerotic memory that is shared by the two men and given voice by Polixenes: "We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' th' sun" (I.ii.67). 3 This innocent youthful male friendship, juxtaposed with Leontes' memory of Hermione's three "crabbed months" (I.ii.102) of resistance to his wooing, indicates her relative impurity.

The heroes' suspicions regarding the impurity of their wives are confirmed by the terrified recognition of the women's sexual desirability—real or imagined—to others. In his discussion of the discovery of the subjective, Stanley Cavell says that fright

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4 Coppélia Kahn notes that this passage indicates that Leontes sees Polixenes as his double, that it implies a homosexual fantasy, and that it indicates Leontes' desire to escape his mature sexuality (Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981], p. 215). All quotations of Shakespeare are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974)
remains the basis of the knowledge of the existence of others; only now we no longer interpret the threat as a function of the other's bulk or body. We seem left with the other's sheer otherness, the fact that he, too, is an I, hence can name and know us.  

The other in these two dramatic situations is a well-known and trusted friend, the image of whose body is substituted by the hero for his image of himself. The relationship between these imagined selves takes the form of a transference of known feeling—emotional and physical—to an unexperienced or unknown idea of another. That is, Leontes and Othello are impelled to imagine Polixenes and Cassio in postures in which they have not known them, but in which they can imagine them because of their own sexual experience with their wives. The transference becomes an erotic fusion of the images of self and other. Thus the limited idea of self is extended not so much by self-debasement—a moralistic notion that suggests a narrowing of those limits—but rather by a prizing open of the mind through articulated erotic detail. Erotic detail is used in these narratives as a way out of confusion. Inchoate sexual passion is delineated by a plethora of precisely imagined details.

In describing their feelings, Othello and Leontes tend toward the diminutive. We generally associate precision with the minuscule, and Othello's toad in "the vapor of a dungeon" (III.iii.271) and Leontes' spider in a cup (II.i.39-40), for example, may be seen as details meant to define feelings precisely rather than as symbols of debasement. The relation of the human self to that which is small implies an ability to control and contain the object of the relation. Othello's and Leontes' images may provoke disgust or fear, but their relative smallness allows the heroes to contemplate them without any fundamental sense of danger. Furthermore, the relation of the observer to the smaller object seems to conform to notions of a hierarchical and patriarchal political structure from

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6 Cavell, pp. 478-82. In addition, Cavell notes that the human body of the other is evidence both of the separate existence of the other and of the self. "Nothing could be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists; is flesh and blood; is separate from him; other. This is precisely the possibility that tortures him. The content of his torture is the premonition of the existence of another, hence of his own, his own as dependent, as partial" (p. 493).
which the conceptions issue. The impulse toward control implied by the images encapsulates in a deliberately disgusting or disgusted manner the power relationship that prevails between the men and women of the plays.

As sexual jealousy grows, it changes form as it changes the mind of the man suffering from it. In each play there is a clear process by which, over time, the characters reveal the development of this feeling. In each play there comes a dynamic moment at which the protagonist suddenly thinks he knows with dreadful certainty that his wife has betrayed him sexually. From this moment, until the equally dynamic discovery of his wife's innocence, the certainty of betrayal charges his life. The first discovery in *Othello* is slow in coming, and the audience must watch the hero's gradual entrapment by Iago. Leontes, on the other hand, takes the audience entirely by surprise. In a sudden outburst to himself, he reveals that he is sure of his wife's infidelity and that all is wrecked in his life.

In *Othello*, certainty is signaled by the lines, "She's gone. I am abus'd, and my relief / Must be to loathe her" (III.iii.267-68). The sentence comes in the middle of a speech that begins in doubt and ends in the assertion of Desdemona's infidelity. The nature of Othello's doubt explains his susceptibility which, once articulated, becomes a means toward his confirmation of the essential reasonableness of Desdemona's betrayal. In his explanation to himself of her unfaithfulness, Othello acknowledges his wife's superior judgment. He declares himself to be, at least on a social and sexual level, an unfit husband: "Haply, for I am black, / And have not those soft parts of conversation ./ That chamberers have; or for I am declin'd / Into the vale of years" (III.iii.263-66). The argument implicit in these lines is that she has found him out, that her clearer judgment has triumphed. Thus the struggle in his mind is between his knowledge of his unworthiness and his passion for Desdemona. In discussing the contradictory bases of Othello's jealousy, Cavell describes the "structure of his emotion as he is hauled back and forth across the keel of his love" (p. 484). We might note in the speech above the opposing characterizations of his wife and himself. Desdemona is a wild hawk, a haggard, free and flying above; Othello is lower than a toad: "I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapor of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love . . ." (III.iii.270-72). Although the self-
image Othello expresses in these lines is at terrific odds with the self-perceptions he offers in public, as when he proclaims his own greatness, the image's spontaneity argues that it is closer to his true view of himself. His public claims, sometimes described as Othello's "real self," reflect, however, the unreal and uncertain fictional public self. The senate speech is a tour de force of heroic narrative, but it has little to do with the self Othello seems really to believe in. His "loss of himself" arises, as Stephen Greenblatt has put it, from "his submission to narrative self-fashioning." The spontaneous and private expressions that reflect that loss and that are "depicted discursively in his incoherent ravings" (p. 244) possess greater conviction: the man who sees and knows himself as old, black, and a stranger, not really capable of winning the love of the beautiful Venetian virgin, is the man Othello formulates from his conflicting, intrasubversive selves.

For Leontes, the certainty of his wife's infidelity comes with a dynamic suddenness, catching the audience and, more decidedly, the reader, unawares. In an explosive aside he shows his rage and exposes his motive:

To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.  
I have tremor cordis on me; my heart dances,  
But not for joy; not joy. This entertainment  
May a free face put on, derive a liberty  
From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,  
And well become the agent; 't may—I grant.  
But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,  
As now they are, and making practic'd smiles,  
As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere  
The mort o' th' deer—O, that is entertainment  
My bosom likes not, nor my brows!  
(I.ii.108-19)

The "tremor cordis" is a brilliant dramatic stroke: it identifies with wonderful specificity Leontes' feelings by lending a clinical name to sensation. The feeling is conveyed by the broken, hard-breathed syntax that follows: "my heart dances, / But not for joy;

not joy.” Whereas Othello develops his feelings through a rational process, a careful working out of the reasons for what he senses to be true, for Leontes, feeling is paramount, reason pursuant. Othello takes his cue from his otherness, his social marginality; Leontes is inspired by purely erotic sensation brought on by a kind of visionary voyeurism. Having instructed his wife to play her role as wife and woman (i.e., obedient to his wish and seductive of his friend), he becomes stricken by her success. Carol Thomas Neely has observed that as Leontes speaks, malice erupts “from beneath the surface of the style: passion does not merely overthrow reason but corrupts it and is incited by it. Leontes’ jealousy springs from a pre-rational, pre-linguistic state of consciousness, characterized by its ‘indeterminacy.’” He sends Hermione from him to win his friend by the use of her female art and steps away from them to watch her prowess. But he steps away too far and in doing so places between himself and his wife a chasm of jealousy. The speech is intensely self-centered, its content the self-torturing details of pseudo forensic evidence. Its tension comes from the heavy weight of details that stifle the abstractions of friendship and “not joy.” The details that drive Leontes further into himself are human, personal, precise, and, in a sense, inarguable; they are the tangible facts: heart, face, palms, fingers, smiles, bosom, brows.

Like Othello, Leontes here is seen wrestling with an idea. He is caught by a compulsive need to interpret what he sees, to decode the evidence of his eyes into terrible visions the details make real. Leontes actually sees physical contact between Hermione and Polixenes, a sight that makes the image of sexual contact a near leap. Howard Felperin has proposed the radical and deliberately unretroactable notion that “Leontes’ jealous and destructive passion is not quite so flimsy and fanciful, so unfounded and ‘out of the blue’ as is often casually assumed.” He adds that “it is impossible to ascertain just what basis there is for Leontes’ jealousy. . . . We see enough to know it has some basis, but not enough to say how much.” Othello, on the other hand, relies only on Iago for evidence. Iago’s most brilliantly successful stroke is to postulate Desdemona’s infidelity with vivid precision:

IAGO. Lie—

Othello. With her?

IAGO. With her? On her; what you will.

(IV.i.34)

That slight but devastating substitution of prepositions gives immediate form to the euphemism. The idea becomes a fact. Othello probably has lain on top of Desdemona; he knows what it is like. And his mind is made to see Cassio in the same position. Arthur Kirsch argues: "What has clearly become insupportable for Othello in this scene is the fulsome ness of his own sexual instincts and, as his verbal and physical decomposition suggests, his jealous rage against Cassio is ultimately a rage against himself which reaches back to the elemental and destructive triadic fantasies which at one stage in childhood govern the mind of every human being." 12

The shock that follows the discovery of female infidelity stems from a cultural form that contrasts with those cultures in which the height of masculine hospitality is sharing one's wife with a male friend. The response, in each instance, however much a "learned" one, lies deep in the traditions of each culture and provokes what seem to be powerful "natural" instincts. However, as Snow has said, "The underlying male fear is thrall dom to the demands of an unsatisfiable sexual appetite in woman. It is crucial to realize, however, that the threat appears not when something intrinsically evil emerges in Desdemona's will, but when the conventional boundaries of marriage close in upon it" (p. 407). In both cultures the male response is prompted by possessiveness. The jealous language of Othello and Leontes reverberates with the phrase "my wife"—significant in its juxtaposition of personal pronoun with generalized noun. The perceptions of Desdemona and Hermione in their typical roles, and the selves of Othello and Leontes in their individual, strike at the core of the dilemma of jealousy. The treacherous woman has betrayed her function in betraying me. Othello, far less than Leontes, is guilty of overwhelming his wife through the ideological agency of stereotyping. His

greatest distress derives from the compulsive equation of Desdemona’s function as wife with her individuality as Desdemona. Leontes, somewhat more solipsistically than Othello, concentrates his jealous rages upon the damage done to himself by Hermione’s female, wifely act of sexual treachery: “I have drunk, and seen the spider” (II.i.45; my italics).

King-Kok Cheung has written about the Kierkegaardian notion of dread as an act of recognition of the terrifying imagination of the unimaginable. The act both seduces and frightens the actor, speaking as it does to a desire that society and ethics have declared to be appalling while at the same time, by implication, urging its possibility. Othello and Leontes are driven to the extremes of passion only by virtue of the discovery of their wives’ infidelity, and each almost basks in the illuminations the extremity of emotion affords. Not capable of merely acknowledging their jealousy, they seek relief and solace in their imagination of the horror the discovery provides. Othello claims that his relief must be to loathe Desdemona, and yet his relief derives from self-loathing. Why, we may inquire, must Othello’s relief be to loathe her? His words admit of no possible alternative; they present instead an instinctually understood ideology. Othello’s tendency to overstatement and social conformity dictates his response and tellingly indicates his passion for imagination.

Not content with an abstract notion of infidelity, Othello is subject to powerful mental pictures of the terrifying act that increasingly discompose him. His language indicates a compulsive urge to describe the thing he simultaneously proclaims himself trying to avoid. His attempt to avoid it is the very thing that gives his mind the ineluctable energy to think the unthinkable. He is trapped by his feeling for Desdemona, and as he desires to separate himself from her crime, so his imagination brings him more powerfully close to it:

What sense had I in her stol’n hours of lust?
I saw’t not, thought it not; it harm’d not me.
I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry:
I found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips.

(III.i.iii.338-41)

Repeatedly recalling Othello's own locus in the triangle, the first-person pronouns proliferate as the language moves toward the climactic moment of damning details: "Cassio's kisses on her lips." Even in his farewell speech, Othello moves away from the general and abstract to immediate sexual detail. "Othello's occupation's gone" (III.iii.357), a pun that critics have recognized as both a vocational and a sexual allusion, brings the vivid pageant of the great soldier's life back to the sensual details of penis and vagina.

Iago's brilliance lies in his perception of the uncontrollability of Othello's sexual imagination—his inability to keep his mind from being flooded with pictures both horrible and tempting. Iago's descriptions go as far as they dare but successfully initiate the torrents of ecstatic pain. "Would you, the [supervisor], grossly gape on? / Behold her topp'd?" (III.iii.395-96) he inquires, with a phrase that contains the image of Cassio lying on top of Desdemona and rings with the sound of the demotic "tupping" so forcefully employed to disgust Brabantio in I.i. Skillfully narrating the events of the night of Cassio's dream, Iago provides some of the details of Cassio's lustful groaning whereby Othello compulsively implicates his wife.

And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand;
Cry, "O sweet creature!" then kiss me hard,
As if he pluck'd up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; [then] laid his leg
[Over] my thigh, and [sigh'd], and [kiss'd], and then
[Cried], "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!"
(III.iii.421-26)

Hands, legs, lips, and thighs are difficult enough ideas for Othello to bear; to this Iago adds the cruelest detail of all. He reports Cassio referring to Othello as "the Moor" in order, no doubt, to force Othello to recur to his otherness, to exclude him from the small circle of lust to which he has now become a voyeur—though, we must note, a willing voyeur. It is he, not Iago, who insists that the dream accurately reflects life. Indeed, Iago speciously but surely reminds him that "this was but his dream" (III.iii.427).

Othello's responses to Iago during these moments deserve close attention. It is inadequate to represent Othello as being under Iago's spell. His listening is too eager, his explosive and inarticulate
outbursts are too passionate for him to be seen as a puppet in the villain's hands. His mind is working hard, though words seem sometimes to fail him. In response to Iago's "topp'd" he cries, "Death and damnation! O!" (III.iii.396). To Iago's "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!" he exclaims, "O monstrous! monstrous!" (III.iii.426-27). And this last exclamation follows a speech made at his own request: "Give me a living reason she's disloyal" (III.iii.409). Thereupon Iago recounts in detail Cassio's dream, which, amazingly, provides Othello with a "living reason."

Othello's apostrophe to vengeance ("Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!" [III.iii.447]), followed by his expressed lust for blood and violence ("O blood, blood, blood!" [451] and "my bloody thoughts, with violent pace, / Shall nevr' look back . . ." [457-58]), is a conscious reorganization of the more spontaneously expressed lust for violence. These expressions aggrandize the powerfully felt decision to "tear her all to pieces" (431) in which the sensual, immediate, and concrete mental image derives force from the urge to plunge his hands into her blood. His unprovided mind (cf. IV.i.206) urges him to acts of vengeance that exemplify a thirst for sexual violence. Othello’s need to anatomize his wife, repeated in his threat to "chop her into messes" (IV.i.200), is informed with sexual connotations in his expressed fear of the power of her "body and beauty" (IV.i.205) and given added sexual strength by his pleasure in the very realism of Iago’s plan—to "strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.i.207-8). The sinister delight Othello takes in the poetic beauty and rightness of this exaction savors of sexual excitement. The thoughts the image arouses center on Desdemona’s sexuality, the contaminated bed and the lying throat being encircled by his strong hands, the surrender of that body to the greater power of his own. Othello’s mind is filled with the ultimate inseparability of Desdemona’s sexual role from any other she may try to play; her most innocent remark is seen by him to be related to her sexual identity. Thus his response to Iago is an example of distorted delight because it expresses a reattainment of control of her sexuality: "Good, good; the justice of it pleases; very good" (IV.i.209-10). The line lingers with its repetitions and argues by its pace an inverted but sure perception by Othello of the possibility of a new kind of happiness born not of "justice" but of the renewed control of the sexuality of the woman he has lost.
Even more obsessively than Othello, Leontes metonymizes his wife. In a violent tirade he reduces Hermione to a vagina. Indeed, his uncharacteristic sexual vocabulary insistently draws attention to himself and, as events prove, has nothing at all to do with Hermione except as she has been transformed by his uncontrollable imagination:

There have been
(Or I am much deceiv'd) cuckolds ere now,
And many a man there is (even at this present,
Now, while I speak this) holds his wife by th' arm,
That little thinks she has been sluic'd in 's absence,
And his pond fish'd by his next neighbor—by
Sir Smile, his neighbor. Nay, there's comfort in't,
While other men have gates, and those gates open'd,
As mine, against their will. Should all despair
That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind
Would hang themselves. Physic for't there's none.
It is a bawdy planet, that will strike
Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis pow'rful—think it—
From east, west, north, and south. Be it concluded,
No barricado for a belly. (I.ii.190-204)

The harsh demotic euphemisms in this speech are a means to relief. Leontes' concentrated use of obscenity consists of obsessive variations on the idea and image of sexual organs. The speech takes its energy from the implications of “sluic'd,” “pond fish'd,” “gates,” “belly.” Just as Othello sought relief through loathing, so Leontes describes himself as deriving comfort from the commonness of his lot. This is a palpable self-deception: his comfort comes not from the fact that other men have unfaithful wives but, instead, that femaleness is a moral concept, that women betray men. Leontes' images signal his attempt to simplify the sexual relationship of men and women and to reduce it to a controllable proportion. Do not the words “sluic'd” and “fish'd” in the present context connote pornographic images specifically intended to reduce the woman to her sexual function? Is there not in this reduction also a kind of pleasure denoted in the speaker's discovery of the simple “truth”?

Like Othello, Leontes reveals simply that he possesses a pornographic imagination. His language, which some critics refer to as
tainted, shows him almost incapable of seeing Hermione as more or less than a vagina. The vocabulary that keeps driving to the surface of his speech is that of sexual abuse, the language he uses that of passionate obsession. Felperin proposes, on the contrary, that “Leontes’ suspicion of the word” is one that “thrives upon the verbal mannerism, sophistication, even preciosity that dominates the language of Sicilia from the play’s initial dialogue, and that works to obscure as much as it reveals” (p. 10).

Until he reveals his jealousy, Leontes is a relatively silent character who displays little of himself except a rather laconic, stolid side. The vocal and unreserved characters in I.ii are Polixenes and Hermione. Their speeches denote their senses of freedom, ease, and pleasure, and both find expression simple and relaxed. The longest speech Leontes utters in this early part of the scene is the brief description of his courtship of Hermione and his winning of her “white hand” (I.ii.101-5). In addition, as Neely points out, “Leontes depersonalizes Hermione and Polixenes from the moment jealousy emerges. . . . He scarcely calls them by name again [after I.ii.109] in the first act” (p. 327). In contrast, Polixenes and Hermione make speeches more than twice this length, frequently in response to the slightly mordant challenges and questions of Leontes, whose very silence in the context of their garrulousness exhibits a considerable control of the direction of the action. When Leontes finally does reveal himself, it is through his language of sexual jealousy. To talk, then, as so many critics have, of his debasement is to invert the chronology of the play. He is debased by sexual jealousy only in comparison to the self he reveals after he discovers that Hermione and Polixenes are innocent—after he has undergone the transforming suffering of guilt. Until this discovery, we know nothing of this spirit within him except through palpably flattering references to it by his wife and friend.

Both Othello and Leontes express jealousy in part through abuse and name-calling, often, as has been noted above, explicitly reducing their wives to sex objects. When Leontes asks, “Ha’ not you seen, Camillo, . . . my wife is slippery?” (I.ii.267-73), he is, I think, obliquely referring to her vagina—to sexual secretions—deriving a kind of masochistic pleasure from the charged, textured word slippery. I wonder if this reading is not widely shared, though it is not much written about. Eric Partridge enters
this use of *slippery* as an example of bawdy, with the following euphemistic explanation: "The semantics may perhaps be explained by *greasy* or by the fact that Leontes thinks that she is preparing to *slip from virtue to infidelity*" (p. 184). But Leontes already is certain that she has slipped from virtue to infidelity, and he uses the adjective as a means of reducing Hermione to something less than a wife, in perfect accord with the harsh, sexually anatomizing language that has been his mode up to now. The gross remark is consistent with the abusive characterization of Hermione as a "bed-swerver" (II.i.93) and the agonized reference to the bed sheets, "which being spotted / Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps" (I.ii.328-29).

But no words Leontes speaks are as violent and deliberately intended to debase Hermione as the speech in which he appears almost to efface his wife's very existence:

> Is this nothing?
> Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
> The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
> My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
> If this be nothing. (I.ii.292-96)

The evil of the world is distilled into the single idea of female sexual infidelity, a concentration that provides Leontes with a mad impetus. The force of his passion almost overwhelms his power of speech as he seems to be on the verge of losing the ability to articulate in the driving and explosively repeated word *nothing*. He seems unable to avoid the word, try as he might with his desperate plunging in other directions.

Terry Eagleton reminds us that "nothing" is an Elizabethan euphemism for the vagina. With some overstatement, he perceptively notes that the "woman's nothing is of a peculiarly convoluted kind, a yawning abyss within which man can lose his virile identity."14 Harriett Hawkins recalls a joke that applies here: "Try to count to ten without thinking of a rabbit."15 Leontes, obsessively thinking of Hermione as a sexual entity, is himself as caught

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the euphemism as those who hear him. Nothing is not merely an absence of matter; it is the material evidence of femaleness, and it is this aspect of femaleness that has come to dominate his vision of the world. The intimations of nihilism in this speech, the passionately destructive energy it unleashes, are given weight and conviction by the presence of the ironic countermeaning of the repeated word.

As Leontes turns his attack on Camillo, a few lines later, he again repeats a word that not only defines the “other” but also demonstrates his method of deriving consolation and perverse pleasure: “It is: you lie, you lie! / I say thou liest, Camillo, and I hate thee . . .” (I.ii.299-300). One of the functions of abuse, in evidence here and in Othello, is to increase the distance between the abuser and the abused. By degrading another through name-calling, the self is exalted. At the same time, a direct relationship is established—at least in the mind of the abuser—through a symbiosis established by language. By describing Hermione as nothing, Leontes is effectively describing himself, and her innocence makes the self-definition the more palpable to the audience. Shakespeare offers here, more even than in Othello, an entire drama staged within the mind of a character, a drama that, while unreal and insubstantial, utterly transforms the world he inhabits. The transformation is accomplished through an implicit narrative of his own creating. This is a story of which he is the hero, a wronged innocent, gulled and betrayed by others. How Leontes views his relation to the imagined infidelity is nowhere more tellingly revealed than in his reaction to Polixenes’ hasty departure. With a voice of deep relief, he recognizes the vindication of his suspicions with the strange exclamation, “How blest am I / In my just censure!” (II.i.36-37). In the word blest is concentrated a perverse fulfillment of his wishes. The word, though exactly the wrong one in the context, signifies a sense almost of spiritual achievement. His abuse of those around him is a way of asserting the absoluteness of his innocence and the criminality and evil of the world in which he himself is an offending part. The reduction of others to one-dimensional elements of that world is a form of passionate asseveration of his moral distance from it. Leontes is acting from a need for which his imagination provides the pretext and circumstances provide the context. That need seems to be the transcendent
pleasure of relief. Othello, in contrast, falls into the hands of a narrator other than himself, one who takes captive his imagination.

Leontes and Othello are drawn by self-torturing voyeurism to the details of their wives' infidelity. Each hero is fascinated by his own reaction to the abhorrent idea, and each finds the idea more fascinating as he fleshes it out with terrible precision. As readers of sex literature know, pornography depends largely upon the inclusion of detail in the narrative. Without detail, the sexual fantasy is romance, feeding the imagination with mere outlines.

The so-called "brothel scene" in Othello is a similar attempt by the hero to regain his status through abuse. It has often been noted that in this scene Othello treats Desdemona as though she were a prostitute (the implication being that it is acceptable to treat a prostitute in this appalling way). As this reading further implies, Othello's treatment of his wife is justified by the fact that he is an innocent victim of the play's villain—Iago has led him to it. If we set aside the ideological concomitants of this reading, we may more easily see what Othello is doing to himself in the scene. He identifies what he believes is the worst thing a woman can be and in doing so discovers the word by which to brand his wife. He has discovered that the means to relief is to excise those parts of her that he has not hated and to concentrate his whole knowledge of her on the part he fears. The sexual obsession of Othello, ripened into direct language—"a cestern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!" (IV.ii.61-62)—is most powerful in his abuse of Desdemona as a whore and gains force by virtue of his repetition of the crude but wholly defining words. He has found her out; she is the "cunning whore of Venice" (IV.ii.89), and he is again Othello the warrior hero—not Othello the husband. Othello's abuse of Desdemona is a means of separating himself from her, of reconstituting the innocent Othello, gulled, like so many other men, by a wily woman, Othello the hero who knows a whore when he sees one.

Unwittingly, Desdemona plays into Othello's hands by using the language her husband deems appropriate to a treacherous whore, invoking heaven and her faith to bear witness to her truth. These expostulations are meat and drink to the warrior, who displays a genuine relish in uncovering his wife's deception. His speech, expressing in its sarcasm a new distance between them, demonstrates a histrionic, if tortured, delight:
I cry you mercy then.
I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
That married with Othello.—[Raising his voice.] You.
mistress.

Enter Emilia.
That have the office opposite to Saint Peter.
And keeps the gate of hell! You, you! ay, you!
We have done our course; there's money for your
pains.
I pray you turn the key and keep our counsel.

(IV.ii.88-94)

Othello’s sarcasm implies a control that stands in sharp contrast to the ravaging self-pity of his earlier Job-echoing speech. Now that he has discovered a subject other than himself—Desdemona, his opposite, his betrayer—he rises to a different kind of eloquence. Othello, in this passage, suddenly is not “I” or “me,” but “Othello,” that ironically observed character who plays a part in the narrative he relates. The offer of money is a sudden conflation of “Othello” and himself, of narrative and life; as a self-dramatizing and artful act it seems to possess not a little self-congratulation.

In each play, the hero’s perception of his wife’s infidelity begins a process of adaptation to the “fact.” Initially, the discovery creates moral and emotional confusion in Leontes and Othello. Each character thinks he has discovered an evil act, yet each reacts to the discovery with a certain amount of ambivalence that partially meliorates the evil. Othello’s desire to kill his wife takes the form of a spontaneous and bloodthirsty sexual desire. Notwithstanding the absurd pieties of his “It is the cause” speech (V.ii.1-22), Othello finally strangles his wife. As Cavell has noted, “Othello’s mind continuously outstrips reality, dissolves it in trance or dream” (p. 484), an idea that explains how the motions of this speech transform it into an astonishingly self-deluding homage to rationality and bourgeois morality. The whole, so lush with the famous “Othello music,” is an extended rationalization of murder that derives its central argument from a huge self-aggrandizing lie. The logic of “Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (V.ii.6) is that Othello is about to murder his wife lest she do to Cassio’s successors in her bed what she has done to Othello himself. The words and idea are Othello’s, and to try to make something beautiful out of them (though undoubtedly they are constructed out of
words and images that cultural convention declares to be “beautiful”) is to deny the ugly logic of their construction. Shakespeare himself seems to have recognized the fraudulence of Othello’s “sacrifice” by having Desdemona awaken and by making, finally, not a murder out of a sacrifice but a murder out of a murder, refusing—dramatically, logically, or linguistically—to allow the distinction. The speech, deservedly famous, is a fascinating example of verbal self-pleasuring. Othello’s decision to kill his wife beautifully has brought back to him the absolute control over her body that he had felt to be lost. He sees, smells, and feels Desdemona; he satiates himself upon her living presence. Marianne Novy remarks, “The more he imagines her guilt, the more he feels his own attraction to her. . . . He plans to kill her as a way to control his own unruly passion for her body as he punishes her passion.”

Leontes also seems driven by an impulse to regain control through sacrifice. Several times he speaks of destroying Hermione by fire as if to efface her through a rite of purification:

... say that she were gone,
    Given to the fire, a moi’ty of my rest
    Might come to me again. (II.iii.7-9)

The desire for relief through destruction is here, as in Othello, a logical consequence of the sexual fury that manifested itself in imagined details. Here, too, the murderous impulse is more controlled, aggrandized by reference to self-justification: rest, relief, and social order will be achieved by sacrifice. Each hero, then, seems to have reconstituted his sexual pleasure in the idea of his wife’s infidelity, to have restored his sanity by a resolution of his fragmented imagination. The process of anatomization has found an acceptable expression, the details of her infidelity have been resolved into a larger scheme that accords with the ethos of the world each inhabits.

York University, Toronto
