

SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO* AND FREUD'S MOST PREVALENT FORM
OF DEGRADATION IN EROTIC LIFE

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Although Othello criticism has occasionally focused on sexuality in the play – and more specifically on the potentially homosexual resonance of Iago and Othello's relation – the episode of IV.1 in which Othello collapses has been traditionally explained away as a common case of epilepsy. Stemming from Freud's "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" (1912), this work suggests an interpretation that emphasizes Othello's disintegrating psyche in the context of the condition known as psychological impotence.

Much of the academic criticism on William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello* (ca. 1603-1605) (together with theatrical approaches to this play by a diversity of directors and actors) from the late 1970s onwards has proved to be increasingly concerned with the presence of an erotic and sexual subtext that is linked to most of the play's negotiations: namely, the construction of identities, of gender, and of ethnicities.¹ However, the episode of IV.i in which Othello collapses in front of Iago has been traditionally explained away (both from literary and medical perspectives) as a common case of epilepsy – the "sacred disease" –, a diagnosis that somehow seems to place it away from the erotic discourse of the play. As we will see, there certainly is dramatic evidence that sustains this kind of explanation for Othello's fit. However, I am persuaded that this episode can also be fruitfully linked to the aforementioned sexual subtext, as

1. A succinct although representative sample of this criticism – with various different emphases on feminism and patriarchy, and heterosexual or homosexual love – should include Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975); Snow's "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*" (1980); Stallybrass's "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed" (1986); Neely's "Women and Men in *Othello*" (1987); Callaghan's *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (1989); Röhl's "Othello and the Body in Transformation" (2002); Saunter's "Purgation, Analogy, and the Civilizing Process" (2004). For an excellent and comprehensive account of the theatrical and performance history of the play see Neill's "Introduction" to his 2006 edition of *Othello* (esp. 36-113).

the play seems to address Othello's breakdown from a – simultaneously – social, psychological and – more specifically – sexual dimension. In this essay I will stem from Sigmund Freud's "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life" (1912) in order to question the privileged status of the "epilepsy interpretation" of IV.i as the only acceptable reading, suggesting instead an additional (and complementary) approach to this episode that – paying attention to what I will call the early modern *semiosphere* –² emphasizes Othello's disintegrating psyche and conflicting identity in the context of the condition known as psychological (or psychic) impotence.

The increasing concern with sexuality in the play mentioned above has historically focussed on a restricted number of motifs, latent or repressed homosexuality on the part of either Othello, Iago, or both, being one. Indeed, the potentially homosexual resonance of Iago and Othello's relation as presented at the end of the so-called "temptation scene" (III.iii),³ when both characters kneel in a grotesque pseudo-betrothal, has acquired a new centrality in *Othello* criticism (III.iii.456-472).⁴ Previous to this concern with homoeroticism in the play (evidently encouraged by the development of queer studies), influential and relatively canonical approaches to sexuality in this tragedy had addressed the less controversial issue of Othello's "jealousy", which having been diagnosed as a pathology has been interpreted – within so-called "realist" psychological criticism – as having a narcissistic fixation or failure at its root (Holland 1964:251). Norman Holland in the 1960s emphasized other (to him also pathological) dimensions of marital infidelity, suggesting that Othello could be projecting "his own impulses towards heterosexual infidelity onto an innocent partner" (Holland 1964:250-251). Outside any specifically psychological critical approach the late Tony Tanner emphasized in the 1990s in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (only published in 2010) the "invisibility" of Othello's actual marriage to Desdemona in the play, a ceremony which took place off-stage before the dramatic action begins and which is barely mentioned at all; as additional evidence of this invisibility, Tanner argues that Iago's and Cassio's questions ("Are you fast married?", I.ii.11; and "To who? [is Othello married]", I.ii.52) are not answered, or – at best – given vague explanations. For Tanner, the actual "marriage" in the play is the one that we *do* see (that of which we have an "ocular proof"), that is, the one evoked by Othello and Iago's kneeling act (2010:532-533). Tanner goes even further by suggesting that "it is not clear that

2. I borrow this term from the cultural semiotic work of Jüri Lotman, who developed it in the 1980s: "By analogy with the biosphere [...] we could talk of a semiosphere, which we shall define as the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages" (Lotman 1980:123). In other words, the semiosphere is the abstract but real space outside of which semiosis (that is, the production and transmission of meaning) is not possible.

3. All quotations and references from this and other Shakespearean plays are from Stephen Greenblatt's *The Norton Shakespeare*.

4. See Edward Snow's seminal "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*"; see also Rolls 2002. On homosexuality in the play see Saunder 2004. Before them, Gordon Ross had already interpreted the temptation scene as one modelled in the form of a ritual of courtship (1959:155-167); see also Holland 1964:248-250.

he [Othello] is, in fact, drawn to her [Desdemona] sexually" (*ibid.*:532). It must be incidentally noted that Tanner emphatically rejects a reading of Iago and Othello's relation as homosexual (*ibid.*:532-533).

Although this is just a very succinct account of some relevant criticism dealing with sexuality in the play in the last fifty years, I think that it effectively shows to what extent Shakespeare's *Othello* has been amenable to an interpretation that places sexuality as an important subtext. However, and as I already mentioned, the equally disturbing episode of IV.i, in which Othello collapses before Iago and seems to lose his self-control for some time, has been either relatively overlooked or simply explained away, following Iago's pseudo-diagnosis, as a common case of epilepsy.⁵ As we know, this episode is given a clear prominence (as suggested by its physical centrality within the play), and surprisingly enough (since it has rarely been linked to any sexual subtext) it follows Othello's *visualization* of Desdemona and Cassio's intercourse, as pictured by Iago's evil falsification of reality. Indeed, immediately before that vision (IV.i. 1-18), Iago insinuates a clearly eroticized picture of Desdemona into the General's mind: the "unauthorized kiss" between Cassio and Desdemona (IV.i. 1-2); the tragically comic image of both naked in bed "not meaning any harm" (IV.i. 3-5), which makes Othello produce the paradoxically subversive notion of "hypocrisy against the devil" (IV.i. 6); or the problematization of an essential notion of female honour (IV.i. 16-18). Thus, right after the apparently nonsensical speech in which Othello puns on "lie" ("Lie with her? Lie on her? We say 'lie on her' when they belie her" IV.i.34-35), epistemologically confuses cause and effect (IV.i. 38-40), and considers various types of revenge (IV.i. 41-42), we witness the falling down of the man "whom passion could not shake" (IV.i.263):

[He falls down in a trance]
 IAGO. What ho, my lord!
 My lord, I say. Othello!
 [Enter Cassio]
 How now, Cassio!
 CASSIO What's the matter?
 IAGO My lord is fallen into an epilepsy.
 This is his second fit: he had one yesterday.
 CASSIO Rub him about the temples.
 IAGO No, forbear.
 The lethargy must have his quiet course.
 If not, he foams at mouth; and by and by
 Breaks out to savage madness. Look, he stirs.
 Do you withdraw yourself a little while:

5. According to the OED online "epilepsy" is a "disease of the nervous system, characterized (in its severer forms) by violent paroxysms, in which the patient falls to the ground in a state of unconsciousness, with general spasm of the muscles, and foaming at the mouth". This being the standard definition of epilepsy, it may adopt different forms, to the extent that medical episodes such as fainting under strong emotion, vasovagal syncope, or myoclonic jerks are frequently misdiagnosed as epilepsy (Heaton 2006:1338).

He will recover straight. (IV.i. 43-54)

To be sure, Shakespeare had already made dramatic (and semiotic) use of “epilepsy” in at least two other plays, namely *King Lear* (ca. 1606; II.ii.75) and *Julius Caesar* (ca. 1599; I.ii.246-252). In the former, although it has been presented as the first reference in English to “a person affected with epilepsy” (OED), what we very likely have is a form of metaphorical epilepsy, as no character is actually presented as suffering from this condition and Cornwall simply shouts to Oswald: “A plague upon your epileptic visage!”, very probably meaning just a distorted, or grimacing visage, as the Norton Shakespeare editors inform us (Shakespeare 1997b:2369). Indeed, T. Betts and H. Betts have explained that this is “a reference to the pock-marks of syphilis, endemic in Elizabethan England, and is not actually a reference to epilepsy itself.” (1998:407).

In *Julius Caesar*, on the contrary, Shakespeare’s Caesar appears to suffer an actual epileptic fit offstage, which is described by Casca to Cassius in detail: Caesar collapsed after refusing for the third time the crown (or ‘coronet’) offered to him by Mark Anthony in front of the crowd (I.ii.235-267). Brutus and Cassius make an explicit and unambiguous reference to Caesar’s condition, to which they refer with its medieval and early modern English term, the “falling sickness”. As it seems, epilepsy fulfils an important semiotic function in this Roman tragedy, as it both metonymically alludes to the greatness of the sufferer (rather than pointing to the nature of the disease, or its causes and consequences), and it also proleptically suggests Caesar’s imminent (metaphorical and physical) downfall at the hands of the conspirators. Evidently, we must assume that for this episode Shakespeare necessarily drew both on Julius Caesar’s historically documented epileptic fits, and also on the ancient description of this condition as the “sacred disease” which was believed to affect dignified and great-souled men.

Interestingly, one of Shakespeare’s great-souled men *par excellence* – the Aristotelian *megalopsychòs* – is Othello, “the nature/whom passion could not shake” (IV.i.262-263). As we know, in the case of *Othello* there seems to be a general consensus regarding the nature of the Venetian General’s collapse both from literary scholars and psychologists approaching Shakespeare’s work: a diversity of critics (Heilman 1956:95-98; Hecht 1987:135-138) and therapists and psychoanalysts (Blumberg 1996:407; Breuer 2002:5-19; Jones 2000:169-172) have identified this collapse of IV.i as a case of epilepsy that could be explained by the situation of Othello’s psyche, dangerously bordering madness by the end of the “temptation scene” of III.iii. This approach is again reinforced by some textual references that seem to suggest some kind of psychological disorder; namely, Desdemona’s description of Othello rolling his eyes (V.ii.40), and Othello’s references to a “pain upon [the] forehead” in III.iii.288, and his mentioning “a salt and sorry rheum” in III.iv.48. All these elements, namely, Iago’s apparently informed medical opinion, the historical and semiotic function of epilepsy (and the presence of epilepsy in Shakespeare’s work), and finally the

relatively minor dramatic details mentioned by both Desdemona and Othello, all of them have sustained, with little disagreement and reasonably solid textual evidence, the epilepsy explanation of Othello's collapse in IV.i.34-56.

However, plausible as this general consensus seems, it must be noted: that the "diagnosis" of that episode comes from the ensign Iago, whom we know to be absolutely unreliable; that – surprisingly enough – we would have to assume that Othello's lieutenant and best friend Cassio⁶ ignores that his general suffers (or has recently suffered) from that condition (IV.i.46); and that there are no other specific references to Othello's epilepsy from any character in the play. In this sense, I would like to note that Othello's aforementioned "pain upon [the] forehead" and "rheum", although conventionally offered as evidence of the first uncertain symptoms of an epileptic fit (Shakespeare 2005:299, n.287) may actually serve very different dramatic functions, such as – respectively – that of announcing the apparition of a cuckold's horns (conventionally thought to be betrayed by a headache)⁷ and an excuse not to receive Cassio. From a cultural semiotic approach, this semiotic density of signs would simultaneously fulfil various functions, that of sustaining the epileptic fit possibility being only one of them. Yet, that no single character (Brabantio, the Duke, or Gratiano), when referring to his personality, greatness, unmoved passions, or eventual moral degradation, makes any reference to that supposed condition, so fitting to the Aristotelian *megalopsychós* persona that Othello appears to embody for much of the play, seems as an unlikely unwilling omission, one which would allow or call for an alternative and/or complementary explanation of Othello's psychic state.

As early as 1959 the therapist John Emery seriously questioned the epileptic nature of Othello's collapse: in his pioneering "Othello's Epilepsy" Emery claimed that this fit should rather be related to some psychological disorders of a sexual kind, which would have been intensified by both Iago's and Othello's bluntly voyeuristic references to Cassio and Desdemona in act IV.i.1-33 (1959: 30-33). Interestingly, Emery mentions that he was not the first to raise serious doubts on Iago's diagnosis of Othello's fit, as a similar questioning of the "official" explanation had already been raised as early as 1860 in *The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare* by J.C. Bucknill, who questioned that Othello's collapse could be attributed to epilepsy (*ibid.*:30).⁸

6. That Cassio is closer to Othello than any other character is not only based on Othello's evident sadness when he demotes him (II.iii.231-232), or on Desdemona's description of their friendship when she tries to appease Othello (III.iii.48-51), but on the information – disclosed by Desdemona herself – that Cassio served as a go-between in Othello's wooing of Desdemona: "Michael Cassio,/ that came a-wooing with you, and so many a time,/ When I have spoke of you disparagingly,/ Hath ta'en your part" (III.iii.71-75). Also, Othello confirms that Cassio knew of his wooing of Desdemona "from first to last" (III.iii.98).

7. Indeed, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* explains that headaches follow, not precede, an epileptic fit (I.iii.II.i).

8. Bucknill wrote in 1860: "Iago's designation of this as an epilepsy, of which it is the second fit, appears a mere falsehood" (274).

In his 1912 essay “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life”⁹ Sigmund Freud developed a concise but illuminating reflection on the condition known as “psychical impotence” and on the psycho-sexual processes involved. For Freud, this special type of sexual dysfunction was caused by an inhibition in the developmental history of the libido, which causes that the affectionate and the sensual currents, both present in all human beings and whose union is necessary to ensure a completely normal attitude in love, fail to combine. According to Freud, two factors determine whether these two currents will or will not split:

First, there is the amount of frustration in reality which opposes the new object-choice and reduces its value for the person concerned. [...] Secondly, there is the amount of attraction which the infantile objects that have to be relinquished are able to exercise, and which is in proportion to the erotic cathexis attaching to them in childhood. (Freud 1997:51)

In *Othello* we soon learn that there exists an actual interdiction over Desdemona (developed by Brabantio and – indirectly – by Iago), based on the class (or rank), age and ethnic differences between herself and Othello, as Othello himself makes explicit:¹⁰

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years. (III.iii.267-270)

Actually, the play in more than one way seems to revolve around the dramatization of the various mechanisms of exclusion of Othello from white, Christian, high-class Venetian society, as several authors have noted (Bartels 1990; Neill 1998).

With respect to Freud’s second condition, significantly the only allusion to Othello’s family in the play clearly involves some childhood token related to his mother (and later indirectly to his father) and invested with – precisely – an erotic significance, namely the handkerchief, which appears right when Othello suspects Desdemona’s sexual behaviour (Kirsch 1979:736):¹¹

9. “Über die Allgemeinste Erniedrigung des Liebeslebens”, also translated into English as “On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love”.

10. There are abundant references to Othello’s own interiorization of his “difference” in terms of ethnicity or age, although Iago’s “clime, complexion and degree” speech of III.iii.32-42, in which he alludes to “natural” differences between Othello and Desdemona which would make her an indicted object of desire for Othello, encapsulates these ideas (Hadfield, 1998: 227-228; 230).

11. According to Kirsch it would be unreasonable to describe Othello as lustful or impotent, as – for this author – he truly desires to consummate his marriage with Desdemona and very probably does according to I.iii.257-262; II.ii.246-47; and III.iii.75-76 (Kirsch 729-730). However, there is not a consensus on this, as for some authors one of the keys of the play resides in Othello and Desdemona never actually consummating marriage (Shakespeare 2005: 35, n.2; 137, n.2). One of these authors is Tony Tanner, who – as we saw above – has recently given some textual evidence that apparently

[...] that handkerchief
 Did an Egyptian to my *mother* give;
 She was a charmer and could almost read
 The thoughts of people; she told her, while she kept it,
 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my *father*
 Entirely to her love – but if she lost it,
 Or made gift of it, my *father's* eye
 Should hold her loathèd and his spirits should hunt
 After new fancies. She dying gave it me
 And bid me, when my fate would have me *wived*,
 To give it her. I did so; and, take heed on't,
 Make it a darling like your precious eye:
 To lose't or give't away were such perdition
 As nothing else could match. (III.iv.54-67; my emphasis)¹²

Othello's magical narrative not only establishes an association between his parental origins and his present marriage (through the *topos* of marital jealousy, infidelity and trust, and punishment), but directly connects his mother with the very object that stands for female sexuality and the loss of virginity, an object transmitted right before Othello's birth, namely, the handkerchief (Boose 1975:361; Snow 1980:390-393).

For all the above, I am persuaded that the play seems to suggest the existence of a sexual disorder in Othello's behaviour towards Desdemona which strongly resembles the one described by Freud as a form of degradation of erotic life. Firstly, and according to Freudian theory as exposed in "Degradation", an inhibition in the development of the libido prevents males from relating to women both physically and psychically in a healthy manner, to the extent that sensuality can only be freely expressed and pleasure experienced through the debasement or degradation of the female "to the level of a prostitute" (Freud 1997:53), which leads to episodes of impotence with women to whom males feel sentimentally attached. Significantly, critics have largely discussed whether the play offers clear evidence of the consummation of the marriage or not, and whether this bears any relevance to Othello's increasing degradation of the image of Desdemona from saintly wife to depraved prostitute (the "cunning whore of Venice" of IV.ii.93) that has so significantly disturbed audiences and critics. Thus, Desdemona is categorized by Othello as "whore" (III.iii.364; IV.ii.74;89), "devil" (IV.i.235;239), "false as hell" (IV.ii.41), "public commoner" (IV.ii.75), "strumpet" (IV.ii.84), and "cunning whore" (IV.ii.93). Indeed, Freud explains that this disturbance (ie. the aforementioned failure to combine the affectionate and the sensual currents) leads males to the "psychical

contradicts that provided by Kirsch above: II.iii.10, and V.ii.13-14 (529). On the psycho-sexual implications of the handkerchief, see Boose 1975.

12. Although it must be noted that in V.ii.223-224 Othello seems to diminish the importance of this item by describing it as "an antique token / My father gave my mother", this may well be a consequence of dramatic economy once the actual magical explanation of the handkerchief and its importance in the play has been well established.

debasement of the sexual object” (Freud 1997:52) of the kind that Othello, as we have seen, progressively shows towards Desdemona throughout the play. Significantly, given the abundance of animal imagery shown in the play, and especially in light of Iago’s racist allusions to animal coition in I.i, Freud explains that

the whole sphere of love in such people [ie. those unable to combine the two currents] remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (or animal) love. (*ibid.*)

As long as the object chosen to avoid incest (i.e. Desdemona) leads to the object intended to avoid (a function fulfilled by the eroticized handkerchief of Othello’s mother given to and lost by Desdemona) no full erotic union will be achieved (remember the uncertain consummation of marriage in the play noted above, or Tanner’s emphasis on its “invisibility”). In these cases we find a degradation or debasement of erotic love, and a quest for “a debased sexual object, a woman who is ethically inferior” to whom the other partner can “devote his sexual potency” (Freud 1997:55). According to the play’s evolution, Othello – for the abovementioned reasons: interdiction over Desdemona and erotic attachment to objects related to his mother – seems to proceed to an unwilling and unconscious degradation of Desdemona in order to be able to satisfy his (very likely) delayed sexual appetite. The episode that most criticism of the play has traditionally considered Othello’s epileptic fit appears right after the General’s “visualization” of Desdemona with Cassio, who would be “lying on her” and “with her”, all this interspersed with inarticulate references to the handkerchief, to confessions of infidelity and promiscuousness, and to “unnatural” passions:

OTHELLO Lie with her? Lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her. Lie with her! Zounds, that’s fulsome! Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief! To confess and be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged and then to confess! I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus! Pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is’t possible? – Confess? Handkerchief! O devil!
[He falls] (IV.i.34-42)

In short, I suggest that Othello experiences an uncontrollable sexual arousal before the degradedly erotic image of Desdemona created by Iago throughout act III and in IV.i, and that this leads not necessarily to an epileptic fit (although this is the standard explanation that Iago has at hand) but to an episode that resembles an orgasm. Significantly, and although he does not relate it to Freud’s disorder, John Emery concludes that Othello’s collapse “seems to imply an image of coition”, while he reminds us that in neurological sciences one symptom of epilepsy is “seminal ejaculations” (1959:31). Emery explains the relations between epilepsy and orgasm:

The extreme rigidity which develops in the build-up to orgasm [...] provides an especially close parallel to the states of tension in epilepsy. On at least some [...] occasions orgasm may occur during epilepsy. The electroencephalograms which are now available show a striking resemblance between sexual response and epileptoid reaction. (*ibid.*)

Norman Holland coincides that “an epileptic seizure resembles a sexual ecstasy”, and holds that Othello’s fit seems to suggest some kind of sexual arousal after having visualized Desdemona with Cassio (Holland 1964: 257). Interestingly, Bucknell already noted in the 19th century how Iago applies to Othello’s state a more appropriate “designation of his morbid state” (1860:274), namely the sexually charged term “ecstasy” (IV.1.77). Actually, and although suffering from epilepsy was not a dishonourable condition, Iago explains to Othello that the “epilepsy explanation” was an excuse to send Cassio away and hide Othello’s “ecstasy”: “Cassio came hither. I shifted him away,/And laid good ‘scuse upon your ecstasy” (IV.i.76-77).

Already in 1953 A. B. Feldman had alluded to Othello’s “jealousy” as stemming from doubts of his own virility, which were a consequence of the racist abuses we may assume he had suffered at least since he first tried to integrate within Venetian society judging from Iago’s comments (Feldman 1953:147-163). Although Feldman does not allude to the epileptic fit, he considers that the key to Othello’s conflict has to do with – in Norman Holland’s words – “the split of affectionate and sensual aspects of love” (Holland 1964: 252). Likewise, for Holland, “Othello’s jealousy proceeds from some inner weakness, a fear of impotency, homosexuality, castration or a lack of self-esteem” (Holland 1964:253). Later, in the 1980s, Stanley Cavell also focussed on this sexually-related disgust or fear on the part of Othello: “Othello, the immaculate soldier, dreads sexual ‘contamination”” (1987:133). Equally, in his *Prefaces to Shakespeare* Tony Tanner very significantly concentrates on desire and sexuality in the play, which – he believes – revolves to a great extent around this weakness:

[I]f anything, Othello seems to dread the idea of the sexual act (he gives the impression that he regards copulation as something which loathsome toads do) [...] Part of him responds to the ‘jewel’ which is Desdemona, but not to the female, sexual body. (Tanner 2010:531)

Furthermore, for Tanner, “what he [Othello] ‘loved’ in Desdemona [...] was the way she listened to his adventures and her ‘pity’ (I.iii.167); it is not clear that he is, in fact, drawn to her sexually” (*ibid.*:532).

To be sure, the occasional perception of the erotic or sensuous as degraded was a commonplace in biblical exegesis: indeed, for Augustine, intercourse within marriage for the satisfying of lust was considered a venial sin, and for Aquinas sex was only accepted if it had procreation as its goal (Fitzgerald 1999:10, Aquinas 2010:II-II, 153, 2). Also, we find a similar approach to the erotic in early modern medical and proto-psychological treatises, and in much

scholarly thought, as Montaigne's essay *Upon Some Verses of Virgil* (which almost certainly Shakespeare knew) seems to prove.¹³ Most notably, a diversity of classical authorities to whom Shakespeare very likely had access (as T.W. Baldwin's *William Shakespeare's Small Latin and Lesse Greeke* indicates) had already suggested a close connection between epilepsy and sex. Clementius of Alexandria (an author included in King James' library) describes coition as "small epilepsy"; also, Areteus of Capadocia compared epilepsy with orgasm, and the sophist Democritus of Abdera described coition as an attack of apoplexy (Emery 1959:31-32; Baldwin 1860:532). Without necessarily discarding the epilepsy explanation, the sexual implications of Othello's fit (epileptic or not) in IV.i.34-57 appear to be evident.

Freud emphasizes that this psychological disorder "is much more widespread than is supposed", and that "a certain amount of this behaviour does in fact characterize the love of civilized man" (Freud 1997:54). Likewise, for Arthur Kirsch, Iago "attacks in Othello not just his frailty but the frailty of all men" (1978:737). In my view, Kirsch's "frailty" coincides with Freud's "degradation" in being part of the psyche of the unconscious life of certain men. This vulnerability, namely Othello's frailty and his degraded erotic life, basically underlines what recent approaches to this play have emphasized: the simultaneously social and personal process of destruction of Othello's identity (as Venetian, white – or *more-fair-than-black* – Christian), monitored and executed by Iago and eventually accepted by Othello himself, and which now also affects Othello's masculine role in the play.

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13. Montaigne wonders: "what has rendered the act of generation, an act so natural, so necessary, and so just, a thing not to be spoken of without blushing and to be excluded from all serious and regular discourse?", only to add that "it is a kind of incest to employ in this venerable and sacred alliance, the heat and extravagance of amorous license, as I think I have said elsewhere. A man, says Aristotle, must approach his wife with prudence and temperance, lest in dealing too lasciviously with her, the extreme pleasure make her exceed the bounds of reason" (Montaigne 2011).

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