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Iago's Art of War:  
The "Machiavellian Moment" in *Othello*

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In the first scene of *Othello* Iago complains about the shabby treatment he believes he has received from his general. Despite having petitioned "three great ones of the city" to speak on his behalf, Iago loses the lieutenantancy to a man he considers his inferior in both qualifications and experience:

But he (as loving his own pride and purposes)  
Evades them with a bumbast circumstance  
Horribly stuffed with epithites of war,  
And in conclusion,  
Nonsuits my mediators; for, "Certes," says he,  
"I have already chose my officer."  
And what was he?  
Forsooth, a great arithmetician,  
One Michael Cassio, a Florentine  
...  
That never set a squadron in the field,  
Nor the division of a battle knows  
More than a spinster—unless the bookish theoretic,  
Wherein the [togaed] consuls can propose  
As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice,  
Is all his soldiership.

(1.1.12–20, 22–27)<sup>1</sup>

Iago criticizes Othello and Cassio, respectively, on two points where he believes himself to be their superior: rhetoric and strategy. He

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1622, 1623), in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al., 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). All subsequent quotations are from this edition, and references are to act, scene, and line number. For the sake of readability, I have removed the square brackets used by the textual editors.

dismisses Cassio (in the same soliloquy) as a mere “counter-caster” or accountant, an armchair general whose military knowledge comes exclusively from texts, not experience. Similarly, with the air of an oratorical connoisseur, he mocks Othello’s inflated, militaristic rhetoric, just as he later characterizes Cassio as a slippery sophist, “A knave very voluble, no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection” (2.1.239–42). These representations are ingeniously hypocritical, products of Iago’s mendacity and his compulsion to project his own characteristics onto others.<sup>2</sup> Iago, arguably Shakespeare’s most accomplished rhetorician,<sup>3</sup> speaks far more “volubly” and disingenuously than Cassio and uses language more deeply imbued with militarism than Othello’s. Iago also proves to be an assiduous student of the military strategy or “bookish theoretic” he ostensibly rejects.

Iago’s rhetorical performance is deeply informed by the doctrines of Niccolò Machiavelli, Florentine armchair general par excellence, particularly as these doctrines are articulated in *The Art of War* (1521).<sup>4</sup> Despite the current revival of interest in the Machiavelli-Shakespeare connection, critics have generally ignored this allegedly “noncontroversial” treatise, focusing almost exclusively on *The Prince* (1532); correspondingly, in recent treatments of Shakespeare’s Machiavellism, *Othello* receives little attention.<sup>5</sup> I here argue both for a more sub-

2. Iago’s assertion of Cassio’s military inexperience is not well founded (3.4.91, 93–95). See John W. Draper, *The “Othello” of Shakespeare’s Audience* (New York: Octagon, 1966), 119.

3. This is a critical commonplace. See, for example, Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 234; Marion Trousdale, *Shakespeare and the Rhetoricians* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 162; Brian Vickers, “‘The Power of Persuasion’: Images of the Orator, Elyot to Shakespeare,” in *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 434.

4. See Felix Gilbert, “Machiavelli: the Renaissance of *The Art of War*,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton University Press, 1943), 3–25; Michael Mallett, “The Theory and Practice of Warfare in Machiavelli’s Republic,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sidney Anglo, “Machiavelli as a Military Authority,” in *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein*, ed. Peter Denley and Caroline Elam (London: Westfield College, 1988), 321. Machiavelli admits near the beginning of *The Art of War* that he is writing about “an art which [he] never professed,” and, as such, the publication of his treatise may be seen as presumptuous (Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War* [1521], trans. Ellis Farnsworth [New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1965], 5). All subsequent references to *The Art of War*, hereafter designated by *War*, are from this edition.

5. See Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford University Press, 2002); and John Roe, *Shakespeare and*

stantively Machiavellian reading of the play and for the importance of *The Art of War* to an adequate account of Shakespeare’s engagement with Machiavellian thought.<sup>6</sup>

Readers of the play regularly invoke the metaphor of verbal warfare when discussing Iago’s speech.<sup>7</sup> In the following discussion I regard this trope literally rather than figuratively: the contiguous theoretical

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*Machiavelli* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002). Roe’s book, which makes no mention of *The Art of War*, discusses *Richard II*, *Henry V*, *King John*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* as substantially Machiavellian plays but implies that in Iago Shakespeare does not progress beyond a limited, melodramatic “Machiavillainy” (Roe, *Machiavelli*, ix–x). Grady deals with the *Henriad* and *Hamlet* that, appropriating the title of J. G. A. Pocock’s famous study, he terms Shakespeare’s “Machiavellian Moment” (see n. 11 below); in these plays, coinciding with the glory years of the Earl of Essex, Shakespeare takes for granted and does not condemn a realpolitik understanding of political power. These plays, Grady argues, are set apart from the first tetralogy by virtue of their substitution of a secular historical framework for a providentialist one and differ from the plays subsequent to the earl’s downfall (like *Othello* and *Lear*), which explicitly reject Machiavellianism (Grady, *Montaigne*, 38, 43–44).

6. Neither Roe nor Grady argues for the direct textual influence of Machiavelli on Shakespeare. Following previous critics (e.g., Mario Praz, *The Flaming Heart: Essays on Crashaw, Machiavelli, and Other Studies in the Relations between Italian and English Literature from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958], 97–103; and Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* [Princeton University Press, 1994]), Grady leaves the door open by recapitulating the case for the dissemination of *The Prince* among Elizabethan and Jacobean England intellectuals. Ultimately, though, Grady takes the fallback Foucauldian position: since Machiavellian ideas circulated discursively, independent of the original texts, it is irrelevant whether Shakespeare read Machiavelli or not; all that matters are the “discursive parallels” between the two (Grady, *Montaigne*, 20, 29–30). Similarly, Roe admits that, since it is impossible to decide whether Machiavellian influence was direct or not, his argument will proceed by observing analogies between the dramatic situations depicted by the two writers (Roe, *Machiavelli*, ix–x). While I essentially agree with Grady and Roe on this point, it is worthwhile to mention that *The Art of War* was the only work of Machiavelli’s published in his own lifetime and was by far the most highly esteemed and widely disseminated of his works in England during the sixteenth century, where Peter Whitehorne’s 1560 translation was reprinted twice (1573, 1588). The text’s relatively noncontroversial reputation, combined with the popularity and early date of Whitehorne’s translation (before the influential *Contre-Machiavel* [1576] of Gentillet), make *The Art of War*, despite its relative neglect by literary scholars, a more promising candidate for direct textual influence than either *The Prince* or *The Discourses*. For a discussion of the excellence and popularity of Whitehorne’s translation, see Anglo, “Authority,” 321–34.

7. See, for example, Paul A. Jorgensen, *Shakespeare’s Military World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 3; Michael Neill, “Changing Places in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 37 (1984): 118; Julia Genster, “Lieutenancy, Standing In, and *Othello*,” in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare’s “Othello,”* ed. Anthony Gerard Barthelemy (New York: Hall, 1994), 218; Alessandro Serpieri, “Reading the Signs: Towards a Semiotics of Shakespearean Drama,” trans. Keir Elam, in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London: Routledge, 1985), 135.

fields of rhetoric and military strategy are coextensive in the play, conflated into a strategic supercode by which ordinary discourse becomes a theater of war. This homology, I would argue, is prefigured in the rhetorical tradition itself, particularly in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, which frequently observes analogies between the arts of war and of persuasion.<sup>8</sup> Barbara Spackman argues that *The Art of War* approaches warfare primarily as a discursive activity analogous to and at times homologous with rhetoric, and only secondarily as physical conflict.<sup>9</sup> In characterizing Iago, Shakespeare participates in this discursive matrix and exploits its dramatic potential. To adapt an observation made by Victoria Kahn in her book *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, one might say that Shakespeare read Machiavelli as Machiavelli read Livy's *History of Rome* in *The Discourses* (1531), reducing Machiavelli's texts "to a series of fragments" that could then be put to new uses.<sup>10</sup> This essay explores these transpositions under four rhetorical categories—ethos, pathos, invention, and arrangement—each of which corresponds to elements in Machiavelli's military theory. Undoubtedly, some of the analogies between rhetorical and military tactics are incidental, by-products of the play's rhetorical style and military milieu, but their pervasiveness suggests Shakespeare's conscious engagement with the homology.

By approaching the play from this perspective, I wish to go beyond the well-worn observation that Iago is an ingenious villain or stage Machiavel, although that is true enough. Rather, his behavior represents an authentic application of the inner logic of Machiavellism to a particular set of contingent circumstances. In this sense, *Othello* as a whole dramatizes what J. G. A. Pocock, in his landmark study, calls the "Machiavellian Moment," the birth of modern, secular, historical self-consciousness.<sup>11</sup> We see this in the persistent clash between a traditional commitment to universal moral laws and a "modern," secular pragmatism rooted in the circumstantial, temporal, and material, "a Hobbesian world in which men pursue their own ends without regard

8. Marcus Fabius Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (1920; repr., London: Heinemann, 1969), 2.5.15; 2.10.8; 2.13.3, 4; 5.10.109; 6.4.14–18; 7.10.13; 8.Pref.15; 8.3.2, 5, 13; 8.6.42; 9.1.20; 10.1.29, 30, 33; 10.4.17; 12.1.1, 28, 35; 12.3.5; 12.9.2, 3, 5, 21. References are to book, chapter, and section. In subsequent references, this work will be designated as *Institutio*.

9. Barbara Spackman, "Politics on the Warpath: Machiavelli's *Art of War*," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 180.

10. Kahn, *Rhetoric*, 48.

11. J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975), viii.

to any structure of law."<sup>12</sup> This clash is dramatized, for example, in the following exchange between Emilia and Desdemona:

- DES. Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?  
 EMIL. The world's a huge thing; it is a great price  
 For a small vice.  
 . . .  
 DES. Beshrew me, if I would do such a wrong  
 For the whole world.  
 EMIL. Why, the wrong is but a wrong i' th' world; and  
 having the world for your labor, 'tis a wrong in your  
 own world, and you might quickly make it right.

(4.3.67-69, 78-82)

Playful and facetious, the passage nevertheless precisely reproduces the logic of the Machiavellian innovator who seizes power through audacious, nonmoral action that disrupts the customary order but then goes on to legitimize the coup d'état through further innovation. Iago, as the prophet of this new creed, demonstrates its efficacy by succeeding along the same lines as the political and military innovators catalogued by Machiavelli in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, skillfully deploying rhetorical and military strategy, two disciplines essential to the agent who would wrest control of the world from *Fortuna*. Iago's ascendancy, however, proves unstable and brief, undermined by the very forces he has unleashed and sought to master. Yet neither his fall nor the ostensible restoration of civil and military order at the end of the play is ultimately reassuring, for Iago's demonstration of the delegitimization of the social order, the frailty of love, and the ubiquity of war stands unrefuted. Moreover, in relying so heavily on the discursive resources of rhetoric and strategy, Shakespeare's play stands in an ambivalent relation to this "Machiavellian Moment," mourning its arrival while energetically exploiting its dramatic potential. Unlike Machiavelli, Shakespeare registers profound misgivings about the delegitimized secular present. At the end of the play, the prospect of the world made battlefield and the word made weapon constitutes an object that "poisons sight" (5.2.364).

*Othello*, like *The Art of War*, demonstrates a pervasive awareness of the relevance of rhetorical performance to military command.<sup>13</sup> The

12. *Ibid.*, 5, 165.

13. On the military context of *Othello*, see John W. Draper, "Honest Iago," *PMLA* 46 (1931): 724-37; Henry J. Webb, "The Military Background in *Othello*," *Philological Quarterly* 30 (1951): 40-51; John Robert Moore, "Othello, Iago, and Cassio as Soldiers," *Philological Quarterly* 31 (1952): 189-95; as well as the articles by Neill and Genster mentioned in n. 7. Discussions of the use of rhetoric in *Othello* include Kenneth Palmer,

play can be read as an agon between traditional and emergent models of oratory, as embodied by the general and his ensign. Contrary to his self-description as “rude . . . in my speech, / And little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace” (1.3.81–82), Othello is highly articulate and eloquent, although his speech is also mannered in a way that marks it as old-fashioned and anachronistic—“horribly stuffed with epithites of war” (1.1.14). He inhabits a world that is skeptical about rhetorical performance. As Brabantio says scathingly, “words are words” (1.3.218); even the dull-witted Roderigo notes of Iago, “Your words and performances are no kin together” (4.2.183). In such a world, Othello’s Ciceronian discourse—rotund, florid, hyperbolic—may win the hearts of Desdemona and the senators but is relatively feeble in comparison with the persuasive power of Iago’s versatile, muscular Senecan plain style.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in *Othello*, the possession of polished eloquence, “those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have” (3.3.264–65), is characteristically seen a sign of potential duplicity, while plain, blunt, “soldierly” speech is regarded as inherently “honest.”

The play can likewise be characterized as a struggle between a traditional conception of warfare and an emergent, highly rationalized military “science,” the former being displaced by the latter. A telling sign of this displacement is the fact that, while many of the principal characters are military personnel engaged in an armed occupation, there is curiously little representation of collective military action (such as battle). Instead, the strategic dimensions of war, which Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* calls its “still and mental parts” (*Troilus* 1.3.200), are foregrounded. For example, in the senatorial council of act 1, scene 3, the Venetian senators recognize that the Turkish navy’s feint toward Rhodes is a “pageant / To keep [them] in false gaze” (1.3.120–21). The First Senator accurately discerns the enemy’s strategy:

We must not think the Turk is so unskillful  
To leave that latest which concerns him first,  
Neglecting an attempt of ease and gain  
To wake and wage a danger profitless.

(1.3.29–32)

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“Iago’s Questionable Shapes,” in *Major Literary Characters: Iago*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1992), 220–33; Trousdale, *Rhetoricians*, 62–71; Giorgio Melchiori, “The Rhetoric of Character Construction: *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 34 (1981): 62–63; Patricia Parker, “Shakespeare and Rhetoric: ‘dilation’ and ‘delation’ in *Othello*,” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Routledge, 1985), 54–74; Serpieri, “Reading,” 119–43; and Trevor McNeely, “Supersubtle Shakespeare: *Othello* as a Rhetorical Allegory,” *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* 4 (1989): 243–63.

14. See Melchiori, “Construction,” 62–63; and Serpieri, “Reading,” 142.

Both the Turkish tactics and the Venetian interpretation of them correspond to precepts in *The Art of War*. Machiavelli recommends that those who have a design upon one territory make a feint of invading another (*War*, 174), but he also trains prospective generals to read such tactics as deceitful: "If the enemy suddenly runs away, without any apparent cause, it is reasonable to imagine there is some artifice in it and that he knows very well what he is doing; so, the weaker and more remiss he seems to be, the more it behooves you to be upon your guard, if you would avoid falling into his snares" (143).

The contestation between the traditional and emergent military codes is most pointedly represented in the contrast between Othello and Iago as military types. Othello, with his descent "from men of royal siege" (1.2.22) and his quasi-mythical exploits in "flood and field" (1.3.83–87, 130–45), seems more like the Greek epic heroes than the condottieri of sixteenth-century Italy. Ostensibly a mercenary general, Othello is better understood as a Homeric *agathos* interpellated, somewhat incongruously, into early modern Europe, as suggested by the epithets with which he is celebrated: "valiant" (1.3.48), "free and open" (1.3.399), "warlike" (2.1.27), "noble" (2.2.1), and "great of heart" (5.2.361).<sup>15</sup> His elegiac utterances about his "occupation"—"Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars / That makes ambition virtue!" (3.3.349–50)—suggest that he conceives of war as an arena of honor and glory, where heroic individuals compete for the foremost place and single-handedly shift the tides of war:

Behold I have a weapon;  
A better never did itself sustain  
Upon a soldier's thigh. I have seen the day  
That with this little arm, and this good sword,

15. See M. S. Silk, *Homer: The Iliad* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 29–30, 70–77; John E. Rexine, "The Concept of the Hero," in *Approaches to Teaching Homer's Iliad and Odyssey*, ed. Kostas Myrsiades (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1987), 71–76; James Redfield, "The Hero," in *Homer: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 177–81; Michael Clarke, "Manhood and Heroism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74–90. As Clarke puts it, "The Homeric warrior is driven to action by a need for social validation: status, respect, honour in the eyes of other men" ("Manhood," 77). Throughout the play, Othello manifests qualities typical of the Homeric warrior: aristocratic individualism ("My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" [1.2.31–32]); pride ("My services which I have done the signiory / Shall out-tongue his complaints" [1.2.18–19]); merit/excellence ("the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient" [4.1.264–65]); manly virtue ("the man commands / Like a full soldier" [2.1.35–36]); his "solid virtue / The shot of accident nor dart of chance / Could neither graze nor pierce" [4.1.266–68]); honor ("An honourable murderer, if you will; / For nought I did in hate, but all in honor" [5.2.294–95]); and a kind of classical fatalism ("Who can control his fate?" [5.2.265]).

I have made my way through more impediments  
Than twenty times your stop.

(5.2.259–264)

But in the emergent Machiavellian strategic paradigm, Othello's Homeric stature and his confidence in his personal valor are anachronistic and obsolete. In part, this obsolescence is attributable to widespread changes in technique and technology. As Machiavelli points out, successful modern armies rely primarily on proletarian infantry rather than aristocratic cavalry (*War*, 47–55), while developments in firearms and artillery have neutralized, if not negated, individualistic martial prowess.<sup>16</sup> More important, Machiavelli argues, modern battles are won not by “the natural courage of men . . . but order and good discipline” (*War*, 64): that is, collective actions that are planned, coordinated, and unified by a central commander. According to the standards of *The Art of War*, Othello, despite his martial eminence and glamour, simply lacks the acumen for calculation and strategy required of a modern general. While he may speak proudly of his “speculative and offic'd instruments” (1.3.270), Othello is insufficiently rational, susceptible to be led by his “blood” and “passion” rather than his “safer guides” and “best judgment” (2.3.205–7).

Habitually reliant on the “witchcraft” of his personal charisma rather than his “wit,” he is also insufficiently skeptical of appearances, thinking “men honest that but seem to be so” (1.3.400). A good Machiavellian general must be “politic,” aware of the interpenetration of politics and warfare and ready to exploit strategic opportunities, but Othello seems largely oblivious to such considerations. His marriage to the daughter of a Venetian magnifico is a good example; for a Machiavellian innovator or one of the real-life condottieri, such an alliance would be a strategic coup, an excellent means of obtaining power and political legitimacy, but for the Homeric Othello it is a love match plain and simple. Similarly, his only major exercise of “policy”—delaying the restitution of Cassio's lieutenantcy to appease the Cypriots (3.1.44–50; 3.3.10–13)—looks decidedly amateurish beside Iago, who literally and figuratively deploys his forces according to strategic criteria: “Now whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my gain” (5.1.12–14). Iago, as I will demonstrate below, is a compelling embodiment of the emergent Machiavellian military type.

16. See Gilbert, “Renaissance,” 28. There may be a subtle recognition of this technological shift in Iago's remark about Othello's composure in battle: “I have seen the cannon / When it hath blown his ranks into the air, / And like the devil from his very arm / Puff'd his own brother” (3.4.134–37).

In both *The Art of War* and *Othello*, rhetoric and military strategy cohere in the concept of rhetorical generalship. The analogy between the general and the orator has persisted since the classical period and was proverbial in the sixteenth century;<sup>17</sup> Quintilian’s use of the trope, for instance, strongly implies that rhetorical conflict is an only partially sublimated expression of deadly aggression. Correspondingly, Machiavelli argues that “it is necessary that a general should be an orator as well as a soldier,” one who addresses his army to change its resolution and “mold it to his purposes” (*War*, 127–28). The implication is that military strategy and rhetoric are overlapping discourses of power by means of which the trained practitioner’s will can impose order on recalcitrant human and material resources. As Machiavelli observes in book 3 of *The Discourses*, “it is essential to discipline that a good general should depute men to take note of his verbal instructions and to pass them on to others; that he should accustom his troops to pay no heed to anyone else, and his officers not to depart from what they have been commanded by him to say.”<sup>18</sup> The general then, like the orator, vies for total control of the semantic environment, exercising power through the coordination of expressive forms (most often words but also a range of nonverbal signals like facial expressions, gestures, battle formations, banners, trumpet blasts, and so on) and the exploitation of appearance and probability. *Othello* employs this notion of rhetorical generalship but gives it a surprising twist: Iago the “ancient” is the master orator/strategist, while Othello, the putative general, is treated as Iago’s subordinate and enemy.

But Machiavelli and Shakespeare share a countervailing recognition that, while rhetoric and military strategy may produce impressive results, the order that they impose is unstable, vulnerable to the forces of dissolution and chaos from both without and within. Machiavelli’s works are suffused with a pessimistic recognition of the effects of chance, necessity, and entropy on human affairs, as well as the inevitability of corruption and human error.<sup>19</sup> While one might manage on occasion to wrestle *Fortuna* to the ground or extend the duration of the state through *virtù* and prudence, ultimately “time waits for no

17. Quintilian, *Institutio*, 12.1.28. See also Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), ed. Peter E. Medine (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 35. In subsequent references, this work will be designated as *Rhetoric*.

18. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (1531), trans. Leslie J. Walker and Brian Richardson, ed. Bernard Crick (London: Penguin, 1970), 447. Similarly, Machiavelli urges generals to control the use of threatening and taunting speeches among the troops because, in their capacity to motivate the enemy, they become “weapons which turn against you” (361–63).

19. *Ibid.*, 123, 217, 386, 505–6.

man . . . goodness alone does not suffice . . . fortune is changeable," and "the life of all mundane things is of finite duration."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the achievement of order is continually threatened by the appetitive instability of the human subject: "human appetites are insatiable, for by nature we are so constituted that there is nothing we cannot long for, but by fortune we are such that of these things we can attain but few. The result is that the human mind is perpetually discontented, and of its possessions is apt to grow weary."<sup>21</sup>

Further, both the treatise and the play portray the disconcerting tendency for discursive strategies to become detached from an intentional human subject. Hugh Grady, in *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, makes a compelling argument that a number of Shakespeare's mature plays offer a prescient critique of both instrumental reason and reification, that is, the domination of subjects by systems and structures of their own collective making (commodity fetishization, power politics, technology, and so on), which take on an impersonal, autonomous, self-perpetuating, and inevitable character.<sup>22</sup> Reification, an alien will-to-power without subject or name, is portrayed in these plays as the conjunction of power, will, and appetite, and figured by the metaphor of monstrosity (as in Ulysses' "universal wolf," Albany's "monsters of the deep"). Grady's observations are suggestive for a discussion of militarized rhetoric in *Othello*. For both Machiavelli and Shakespeare, I would argue, rhetoric and military strategy are manifestations of instrumental reason—rational tools through which the subject attempts to control the fields of human consciousness and the nation-state, respectively. Such rational, purposeful intervention is undermined, however, by two important considerations. First, the instrumentalization of rhetoric and military strategy makes them alarmingly mobile discourses, readily appropriated and adapted to any cause. Second, the means by which the orator and the general seek to impose their will—language and warfare—are not merely neutral instruments but are themselves reified systems that function according to an impersonal, autotelic logic of domination.<sup>23</sup> These interlocking reified power systems take on a monstrous life of their own, violently subverting both the intentions of the subject/practitioner and the fields over which control is sought. Language and tactics spin out of control, and total war engulfs strate-

20. *Ibid.*, 385, 487.

21. *Ibid.*, 268.

22. Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 22, 34, 38, 42, 44, 67–68, 122, 143. Grady discusses *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *As You Like It*.

23. See Machiavelli, *War*, 20, and *Discourses*, 224, 341.

gist, enemy, and civilian alike. In the words of Othello, "Chaos is come again" (3.3.92).

#### IAGO AND THE *PISTEIS*

Iago's rhetorical and strategic mastery can be illustrated under the headings of traditional rhetoric: the *pisteis*, or means of persuasion, and the canons. Fundamentally, knowledge of the *pisteis* consists of the orator's understanding of individual and general human nature, and of the techniques that will persuade particular audiences and judges and defeat rival advocates.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the Machiavellian commander requires detailed knowledge of his enemy's character: "It is of great importance to know the qualities and disposition of the enemy's general and of those about him, for instance, to know whether he is bold and enterprising, or cautious and timid" (*War*, 124). *The Art of War* repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowing the enemy intimately and tailoring one's battle plan according to "the quality of the man: whether he were like to do such a deed or no, and what should move him to attempt such an enterprise" (102, 125). In the end, argues Machiavelli, "If a general knows his own strength and that of the enemy perfectly, he can hardly miscarry" (203). Iago too is reputed for this kind of insight, knowing "all qualities with a learned spirit, / Of human dealings" (3.3.259–60). And he astutely adapts the content and manner of his address to particular auditors.

*Ethos* is persuasion through the speaker's character, particularly, as Cicero defines it, the discursive impression of "amiability of character," as well as "integrity, memory, truth in speech and loyalty in conduct."<sup>25</sup> Correspondingly, Machiavelli sees the foundation of a unified army as "the reputation of a general," and he holds that the resolution of troops depends largely on their esteem for their commander, notably their belief in his *virtù* (*War*, 129, 175). Yet *ethos*, as Aristotle points out, is a function of discourse, and the decisive factor in oratory is the discursive performance of virtue, not its actual possession.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Machiavelli argues in *The Prince* that "it is not necessary for a prince to have all of the above-mentioned qualities [such as generosity,

24. See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 39; and Quintilian, *Institutio*, 2.13.4; 6.1.33; 11.1.43, 45.

25. Cicero, *De Partitione Oratoria*, in *De Oratore*, trans. H. Rackham, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 2:329, 337. References are to volume and page number.

26. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 38.

mercy, and integrity], but it is very necessary for him to appear to have them. . . . Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are.”<sup>27</sup>

Iago likewise dissociates identity and *ethos*. Reputation, he tells the recently demoted Cassio, is not “the immortal part of [oneself]” (2.3.263–64) but simply the public reception of one’s *ethopoesis*, the rhetorical construction and projection of the self: “Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser” (2.2.268–71). Despite this dismissive comment, Iago carefully cultivates a reputation appropriate to both orator and general: “A man he is of honesty and trust” (1.3.284); “I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest” (3.1.40); “a very valiant fellow” (5.1.52); “An honest man he is, and hates the slime / That sticks on filthy deeds” (5.2.148–49). One crucial element in this persona is the impression of devotion; this is conveyed both through speech—“I humbly do beseech you of your pardon / For too much loving you” (3.3.212–13)—and though *pronunciatio* or delivery, the nonverbal language of gesture, facial expressions, and tone of voice: “Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving, / Speak: who began this?” (2.3.177–76).

The second means of persuasion is *pathos*, which Quintilian defines as “stirring the emotions of the judges, . . . moulding and transforming them to the attitude which we desire” (*Institutio*, 6.2.1). Machiavelli likewise recognizes the need for emotional appeal in a general’s discourse to his troops. Employing the topics of epideictic oratory, he is to “avail himself of all . . . arts that can either excite or allay the passions and appetites of mankind” (*War*, 128). The peculiar force of *pathos* is its tendency to throw auditors off balance, paralyzing their capacity for rational judgment. As Quintilian observes, “the judge, when overcome by his emotions, abandons all attempt to enquire into the truth of the arguments, is swept along by the tide of passion, and yields himself unquestioning to the torrent” (*Institutio*, 6.2.6).

Iago exploits *pathos* in a manner that mirrors both classical rhetorical theory and Machiavellian precept. One of his habitual discursive modes is vituperation, which Machiavelli recommends as a means of cultivating contempt for the enemy (*War*, 129). Knowing that soldiers are likely to be diffident if they think the enemy invincible, generals are encouraged to speak contemptuously of opponents, masking their

27. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1532), trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (Oxford University Press, 1984), 100–101.

real estimation: "Although you ought not to be without your private apprehensions of the enemy, yet outwardly, in all your words and actions, you should seem to undervalue and despise him" (143). The vituperative mode is evident when, for example, Iago persuades Roderigo of the certainty of victory against "an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian" (1.3.358–59) or speaks of Cassio as "a slipper and subtle knave, a finder-out of occasion" (2.1.241–42), contrary to his private estimation that "he hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly" (5.1.19–20).

A complementary technique for producing passion is exhortation. Machiavelli insists on the absolute necessity of haranguing soldiers. By doing so, a general can breed courage, "confirm their resolution, point out the snares laid for them, promise them rewards, inform them of danger and of the way to escape it; he may rebuke, entreat, threaten, praise, reproach, or fill them with hopes" (*War*, 128). In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Thomas Wilson recommends a comparable method of motivation that appeals to a traditional code of masculinity: "In praising a man, we shall exhort him to go forward, considering it agreeth with his wonted manhood, . . . requiring him to make his end answerable to his most worthy beginnings, that he may end with honor" (*Rhetoric*, 101). Iago exhorts his "soldiers" along similar lines, calling their manhood into question through emotional exclamations and rhetorical questions: "Come, be a man!" (1.3.335); "Are you a man?" (3.3.374); "Good sir, be a man" (4.1.65); "Would you would bear your fortune like a man!" (4.1.61); "I shall say you're all-in-all spleen, / And nothing of a man" (4.1.86–87).<sup>28</sup> But he also praises them, holding out the hope of reward if they persist in valorous behavior: "Why, now I see there's mettle in thee, and even from this instant do build on thee a better opinion than ever before. . . . But, Roderigo, if thou hast that in thee indeed, which I have greater reason to believe now than ever (I mean purpose, courage, and valor), this night show it" (4.2.204–6, 211–14). This alternation between blame and praise cultivates a sense of camaraderie and confidence in his "troops," as do Iago's promissory vows and assurances of constancy, assistance, and support: "Quick, quick, fear nothing; I'll be at thy elbow. / It makes us, or it mars us,

28. For definitions of particular tropes and figures, such as exclamations, I have consulted and conflated several sources: Brian Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970); Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); and notably Gideon Burton's excellent Web site, *Silva Rhetoricae* (<http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm>), 1996–2006.

think on that, / And fix most firm thy resolution" (5.1.2-4).<sup>29</sup> According to Machiavelli such rhetorical acts of exhortation are appropriate not only to the general, the status to which Iago aspires, but also to the corporal or ensign, his literal rank: "This corporal should be a man of more spirit and courage . . . than the rest in order to inspire them by both his words and his example; he should continually exhort them to hold their ranks firm and conduct themselves like men" (*War*, 75).

The orator and the general must also carefully manage the affect they generate, for *pathos* is notoriously capricious. Passions, once raised, may rage out of control. As Wilson notes, when an orator encounters auditors overcome by "extreme heaviness and vehement sorrows . . . much wariness ought to be used . . . lest we rather purchase hatred than assuage grief" (*Rhetoric*, 52, 102-3). Similarly, Machiavelli suggests that "great care is . . . to be taken not to reduce an enemy to utter despair," for, as Caesar discovered in his conflict with the Germanic tribes, "when they were hard pressed and could not run away, they would fight most desperately" (*War*, 178). Iago's project comes close to failure when a desperate Othello threatens his ensign's life and nearly identifies the real source of his torment (3.3.368-69). In a move consonant with rhetorical precept and Machiavellian psychology, Iago deftly deflects this hostility:

God buy you; take mine office. O wretched fool,  
That lov'st to make thine honesty a vice!  
O monstrous world! Take note, take note, O world,  
To be direct and honest is not safe.  
I thank you for this profit, and from hence  
I'll love no friend, sith love breeds such offense.

(3.3.375-80)

Thrust suddenly into the role of the accused, Iago feigns indignation and wounded virtue, a simulation of emotion that Quintilian calls exclamation (9.2.26-27). Othello is dissuaded from close scrutiny of the possibility that Desdemona is being slandered, not by a formal defense of Iago's integrity but by ritualized expressions of complaint (*mempsis*) in the form of apostrophe ("O monstrous world") and *conduplicatio* ("Take note, take note"). Intuiting that direct denial or counteraccusation could make him look guilty, Iago resigns his office, bemoaning his

29. Similar passages include "I'll not be far from you" (2.1.266); "I will be near to second your attempt, and he shall fall between us" (4.2.237-39); "Here, at thy hand; be bold, and take thy stand" (5.1.7).

“foolish love and honesty.” It is a passive-aggressive strategy, analogous to Machiavelli’s advice for subduing the enemy’s rage: “Most prudent generals have chosen to receive the enemy [i.e., absorb the force of the enemy’s attack] rather than to attack him, because the fury of the first shock is easily withstood by men standing firm, resolute, ready, and prepared in their ranks; when that shock is over, their fury commonly subsides into languor and despair” (*War*, 123). Indeed, after this speech, Othello’s anger dissipates immediately: “Nay, stay. Thou shouldst be honest” (3.3.381).

Precise timing is essential to affective appeals. The effective speaker must be sensitive to shifts in audience mood, mitigating or augmenting emotion at appropriate moments. Quintilian argues that shrewd debaters observe the judge’s emotional reactions with great care, deciding, on the basis of his looks, actions, and utterances, which points to advance (*Institutio*, 6.4.19). Similarly, Machiavelli insists that the commander must read the mood of his army carefully in order to know precisely when to excite his soldiers’ ardor for battle, when to repress it (*War*, 126). At particular moments, it is expedient for Iago to mitigate Othello’s grief and rage, for if they are indulged too openly, a direct confrontation with Desdemona and Cassio could result in his exposure: “the Moor / May unfold me to him—there stand I in much peril” (5.1.20–21). Accordingly, Iago reads Othello’s moods closely:

IAGO. I see this hath a little dash’d your spirits.  
 OTH. Not a jot, not a jot.  
 IAGO. I’ faith, I fear it has.  
       I hope you will consider what is spoke  
       Comes from my love. But I do see y’ are mov’d.  
       I am to pray you not to strain my speech  
       To grosser issues nor to larger reach  
       Than to suspicion.  
       . . .  
       My lord, I see y’ are mov’d.  
 OTH. No, not much mov’d:  
(3.3.214–24)

Here, the recognition of passion serves as a reproach meant to shame Othello into restraining himself or at least masking his feelings, a strategy reinforced elsewhere: “I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion; / I do repent me that I put it to you” (3.3.391–92); “Nay, yet be wise” (3.3.432); “Yet be content” (3.3.450); “Patience, I say; your mind perhaps may change” (3.3.452).

At the appropriate moment, however, the orator should pull out all the stops, bringing the audience to an emotional climax (*Institutio*,

6.2.23).<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Machiavelli argues that the general should occasionally deprive his troops “of all means of saving themselves except victory; this is certainly the best method of making them fight desperately,” for “it leaves men no other alternative but to conquer or die” (*War*, 129). Iago employs a comparable tactic when he convinces Roderigo that unless Cassio is murdered, Othello and Desdemona will be leaving for Mauritania (4.2.224–30). Even more striking is the manner in which Iago suddenly stirs the rage he previously appeared to deplore in Othello, channeling it toward Cassio and Desdemona. This is made more difficult by Othello’s sudden fit of remorse: “A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman! . . . But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!” (4.1.178–79, 195–96). Under such circumstances, argues Quintilian, it is “the duty of the accuser to divert the judge from all temptations to pity . . . and to incite him to give a strong and dispassionate verdict. It will also be his duty in this connexion to forestall the arguments and actions to which his opponent seems likely to have recourse” (*Institutio*, 6.1.20). This corresponds closely to Iago’s method: “Nay, you must forget that” (4.1.180); “Nay, that’s not your way” (4.1.186); “She’s the worse for all this” (4.1.191); “Ay, too gentle” (4.1.194).

#### IAGO AND THE CANONS

Iago also demonstrates his mastery of the canons of rhetoric, the first of which is invention, the ability to generate discursive matter and discern the best available means of persuasion. Quintilian defines invention as “a wise adaptability . . . to meet the most varied emergencies” (*Institutio*, 2.13.2) and “a certain innate penetration and a power of rapid divination” that directs the mind straight to the relevant arguments (*Institutio*, 5.10.123).<sup>31</sup> Correspondingly, Machiavelli uses the rhetorical term “invention” to characterize the intellectual resourcefulness required in military command: “I cannot choose a more proper man than one who . . . has abilities to strike out something new of his own occasionally. . . . If a ready and quick invention is necessary and honorable in any profession, it must certainly be so in the art of war above all others” (*War*, 205–6). Carefully monitoring a conflict, the general must be prepared to improvise and seize the moment of advantage, for “nothing is of greater importance in time of war than knowing how to make the best use of a fair opportunity” (202).

30. See also Wilson, *Rhetoric*, 146.

31. See also Quintilian, *Institutio*, 2.13.3.

Invention for both orator and general involves adapting to exigencies so rapidly and effortlessly that one appears to possess total foresight. Quintilian places great store on "the gifts of the moment," preferring rash inspiration to the labored coherence of premeditation, even as his ideal speaker constantly ranges ahead, anticipating the total shape of the argument (*Institutio*, 10.6.6; 10.7.10). Machiavelli likewise advocates improvisatory techniques, such as that of concealing dispiriting information from the troops or, if concealment is impossible, giving "it such a turn as may serve to produce quite a different effect" (*War*, 118). As Spackman argues, *The Art of War's* improvisatory strategist manipulates the perceptual and interpretive frames of ally and enemy alike.<sup>32</sup> Effective generals seize control of the interpretive frame even under the most unpropitious circumstances, so that necessity is re-defined as choice: "Let me recommend a general rule to you: *to frustrate any of your enemy's designs, it is best to do of your own volition what he endeavors to force you to do.* Then you may proceed in a cool and orderly manner to turn to your advantage what he intended as the means of your ruin" (*War*, 121–22).

We are discussing improvisation in essentially the same sense Stephen Greenblatt gives the term in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, where he defines it as "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario." Iago, says Greenblatt, is the avatar of this mode of self-fashioning.<sup>33</sup> Like a skilled orator, Iago thinks on his feet, spontaneously discerning which arguments and figures to employ, never losing sight of the strategic end he is trying to accomplish.<sup>34</sup> One of the most striking features of Iago's soliloquies is the impression of mental agility and resourcefulness they convey, through what Greenblatt calls "the marks of the impromptu."<sup>35</sup> A number of expressions create the illusion that we are witnessing cognition, that Iago is generating his strategy before our very eyes: "Let me see now" (1.3.393); "How, how?—Let's see" (1.3.395); "I have't. It is engendered" (1.3.404); "'Tis here; but yet confus'd" (2.1.311). So too, Iago's habit of announcing the content of his speech prior to delivering it (*propositio*) suggests that he is thinking several moves ahead, evolving a master strategy (1.3.395–96; 2.1.308–11; 2.3.353–62).

32. Spackman, "Warpath," 186–88.

33. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 227–28.

34. See Quintilian, *Institutio*, 5.10.109, 125; 6.4.13.

35. Greenblatt, *Renaissance*, 233.

Iago's exercise of invention is most impressive when dealing with unforeseen human responses and counterpressures. As Quintilian observes, in the heat of debate an orator requires "a quick and nimble understanding and a shrewd and ready judgment" because "there is no time to think; the advocate must speak at once and return the blow almost before it has been dealt by his opponent" (*Institutio*, 6.4.8). Superbly reactive, Iago capitalizes on sudden developments, such as Emilia's acquisition of the handkerchief or a particular turn of phrase:

OTH. And yet how nature erring from itself—  
 IAGO. Ay, there's the point; as (to be bold with you).

(3.3.227-28)

He also reveals remarkable self-possession when circumstances prompt him to wrest victory from potential defeat. For example, when Roderigo fails to kill Cassio in the ambush, Iago not only stabs his accomplice but also manages to displace the blame for this onto Bianca, another potentially incriminating witness (5.1.62-125).

Iago controls the perceptual framework of those he wishes to subordinate, making particularly effective use of what Wilson calls "anticipation," the skill exercised "when we prevent those words that another would say and disprove them as untrue, or at leastwise answer unto them" (*Rhetoric*, 213). Wilson's "anticipation" corresponds to the way Machiavellian strategy exploits the moment of "speechlessness," the interval in which one's adversary attempts to interpret the offensive move and find an appropriate response.<sup>36</sup> For example, Iago regularly stuns the weak-minded Roderigo by anticipating his objections, dictating the context in which recent events are to be understood:

How poor are they that have not patience!  
 What wound did ever heal but by degrees?  
 Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft,  
 And wit depends on dilatory time.  
 Does 't not go well? Cassio hath beaten thee,  
 And thou, by that small hurt, hast cashiered Cassio.  
 Though other things grow fair against the sun,  
 Yet fruits that blossom first will first be ripe.  
 Content thyself a while.

(2.3.370-78)

Iago checks Roderigo's fear that his suit to Desdemona is floundering with a speech that appeals to the codes of conventional experience to

36. Spackman, "Warpath," 185.

make the circumstances seem natural and inevitable. Similarly, Iago renames events in order to diminish their importance, persuading Roderigo to accept a counterintuitive and false conclusion: that the beating at the hands of Cassio has significantly advanced his suit to Desdemona. Roderigo has not been “exceedingly well cudgelled” (2.3.359–60), as he thinks, but has simply received a “small hurt.”

After *inventio*, the second canon of rhetoric is *dispositio*, or arrangement. While this traditionally refers to the formal organization of an oration into its constituent parts, the term can refer more generally to the large-scale ordering of discourse.<sup>37</sup> Quintilian defines arrangement as “the distribution of things and parts to the places which it is expedient that they should occupy” (*Institutio*, 7.1.1) and again illustrates his definition with a military analogy: “This gift of arrangement is to oratory what generalship is to war. The skilled commander will know how to distribute his forces for battle, what troops he should keep back to garrison forts or guard cities, to secure supplies, or guard communications” (7.10.13).<sup>38</sup> Analogically, arrangement corresponds to Machiavelli’s description of the “order of battle that . . . is most likely to insure us a victory when we engage an enemy” (*War*, 82). This “order of battle” involves not just troop movements but a comprehensive organizational vision, a coordinated approach to the management of human and material resources: “Men who have any great undertaking in mind must first make all necessary preparations for it, so that, when an opportunity arises, they may be ready to put it in execution according to their design” (13).<sup>39</sup>

A key to *dispositio* in both oratory and military strategy is a sense of coordination and pace, the ability to deploy arguments or resources at an appropriate rate. Wilson argues that the wise orator does not expend his resources fully but reserves some strong arguments for the end, “that the hearers should have them fresh in their remembrance when they should give judgment” (*Rhetoric*, 185). Similarly, Machiavelli warns prospective commanders against expending their resources too quickly, for “the greatest error . . . that a general can be guilty of, in drawing up an army for battle is giving it only one front, thereby binding it to one conflict and one *fortuna*” (*War*, 84). A complex, diversified attack is generally the wisest strategy.

*Divisio* is an apt metaphor for Iago’s timely coordination of words and actions:

37. Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae* (see n. 28 above).

38. For more analogies between *dispositio* and, as Wilson puts it, “good order of battle,” see Wilson, *Rhetoric*, 49, 183; and Quintilian, *Institutio*, 12.3.5.

39. See also Machiavelli, *War*, 206.

Two things are to be done.  
 My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress;  
 I'll set her on;  
 Myself the while to draw the Moor apart  
 And bring him jump when he may Cassio find  
 Soliciting to his wife. Ay, that's the way.  
 Dull not device by coldness and delay.

(2.3.376–82)

Iago's assault on Othello in the temptation scene is executed in accordance with an integrated and multidimensional strategy that relies on successive waves of attack rather than a single knockout blow. He begins casually and tentatively, effacing the signs of premeditation. Wilson advises that "the beginning be not overmuch labored nor curiously made . . . and so to be devised as though we speak altogether without any great study" (*Rhetoric*, 138). This tentative approach is dictated by the fact that those whom Iago wishes to discredit stand high in Othello's estimation, for when one's targets are generally well esteemed or favored by the judge, says Wilson, it is best to "enter by little and little into the matter" (137). Accordingly, Iago begins his attack with a seeming digression that has a hidden bearing on the case:

IAGO. Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,  
 Know of your love?  
 OTH. He did from first to last. Why dost thou ask?  
 IAGO. But for a satisfaction of my thought,  
 No further harm.

(3.3.94–98)

In the last two lines Iago purposefully holds back information, laying the groundwork of suspicion instead of risking open accusation. This accords with Quintilian's teaching: "the orator frequently prepares his audience for what is to come, dissembles and sets a trap for them and makes remarks at the opening of his speech which will not have their full force till the conclusion" (*Institutio*, 10.1.21).

The main function of the tentative "order of battle" is to encourage Othello to "discover" the adulterous betrayal for himself. By employing various modes of verbal withdrawal, Iago makes Othello pursue elusive hidden meanings: "Show me thy thought" (3.3.116); "Nay, yet there's more in this" (3.3.130); "Zounds, what dost thou mean" (3.3.154); "By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts" (3.3.162). Quintilian advocates rhetorical practice that aims at the same effect: "luring on our adversary when he has once committed himself to error, . . . forcing him to commit himself as deeply as possible" (*Institutio*, 6.4.1).

This verbal strategy is analogous to Machiavelli’s literal precept: “when the battle is begun, let your main body retire little by little, and let the wings extend themselves; thus the enemy will find himself surrounded and entangled before he is aware of it” (*War*, 113–14). For example, in tantalizing phrases like “Men should be what they seem, / Or those that be not, would they might seem none” (3.3.126–27), Iago excites Othello’s suspicion through ambiguous diction (*emphasis*),<sup>40</sup> understatement (*litotes*), and the tactic of breaking off suddenly in the middle of a sentence (*aposiopesis*).<sup>41</sup> Cumulatively, these tropes and figures convey the impression that Iago “sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds” (3.3.243), and his apparent diffidence conjures up in Othello’s mind the impression of vast quantities of secret and shameful information (3.3.107–8). Their use corresponds analogically to Machiavelli’s tactic of throwing the enemy into confusion and terror by “spreading a report that you have supplies coming up, or by making a false show of such supplies at a distance—this has often occasioned such consternation in an army that it has been immediately defeated” (*War*, 116).

Once Othello has advanced his forces, so to speak, Iago continues to draw him deeper into error through a medley of techniques deployed concurrently rather than in a linear sequence. One such tactic is offering weak or generalized assertions that, although easily refuted, provoke Othello into taking imprudent positions. Analogically, this could be compared to a general concealing his forces by putting up a weak front, a practice repeatedly endorsed by Machiavelli: “when they know where the enemy placed the main strength of their army, instead of employing the flower of their own forces, they appointed the worst of their troops to oppose them in that quarter and appointed the best of their troops to oppose the worst of the enemy” (*War*, 112–13).<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Quintilian argues, “It is . . . wise to conceal some of our weapons: for our opponents will often press their attack and stake everything on some imagined weakness of our own” (*Institutio*, 6.4.1). For example, in refuting the vague *paradigma* “Poor and content is rich” (3.3.172ff.), Othello exposes crucial flaws in his epistemological defenses—an inflexible absolutism and a naive commitment to empirical proof:

40. Quintilian describes *emphasis* as a figure “whereby we excite some suspicion to indicate that our meaning is other than our words would seem to imply; . . . a hidden meaning which is left to the hearer to discover” (*Institutio*, 9.2.64–65).

41. See, for example, *Othello* 3.3.35–36.

42. Machiavelli recommends other tactics of a similar nature, such as leaving a flank exposed and concealing part of one’s forces (*War*, 113–14, 117).

No, Iago,  
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;  
And on the proof, there is no more but this—  
Away at once with love or jealousy!

(3.3.189–92)

He also commits himself to decisive action should the putative evidence indicate that Desdemona has betrayed him: “No! to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolv'd” (3.3.179–80).

Iago knows, however, that the “ocular proof” Othello demands is unavailable (3.3.360, 397–98), that, as Marion Trousdale points out, the question of Desdemona’s adultery can only be settled by conjecture, not proved by evidence.<sup>43</sup> Thus, while Othello continues to demand epistemological certainty—“be sure thou prove my love a whore; / Be sure of it” (3.3.359–60)—the ground of reliable knowledge steadily erodes:

Make me to see't, or (at the least) so prove it  
That the probation bear no hinge nor loop  
To hang a doubt on

(3.3.364–66)

Othello is now willing to accept probability in place of “ocular proof,” for which Iago swiftly substitutes “imputation and strong circumstances / Which lead directly to the door of truth” (3.3.406–7). This degradation of evidential standards proceeds swiftly until equivocal testimony (Cassio’s alleged dream) comes to denote a “foregone conclusion” (3.3.428), and circumstantial evidence (Desdemona’s inability to produce the handkerchief) becomes the equivalent of a *tekmarion*, or infallible sign of guilt. As Cicero observes, “even if [probabilities] seem to be slight in themselves [they] nevertheless go a long way when combined together.”<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, Iago is able to marshal trivial details “to thicken other proofs / That demonstrate thinly” (3.3.430–31).

Another tactic by which Iago draws Othello into error is temporary retreat or yielding. Machiavelli argues that one way to reduce an enemy’s strength is to allow him to occupy one’s towns, enervating his forces and dividing his attention (*War*, 174). Analogously, it is sometimes wise and advantageous in debate, according to Wilson, to “fly and give place” in order to buy time to prepare a counterattack, “or at the least weary [the opponent] with much lingering and to make him with oft such flying to forsake his chief defense” (*Rhetoric*, 52). Iago’s

43. Trousdale, *Rhetoricians*, 163.

44. Cicero, *Partitione*, 2:341.

weak retractions about Desdemona’s guilt wear down Othello’s resistance, for although he technically backs down, the accusations continue to hang in the air with some force: “Let me be thought too busy in my fears / . . . And hold her free, I do beseech your honor” (3.3.253, 255); “Nay, this was but his dream” (3.3.427); “Nay, yet be wise; yet we see nothing done; / She may be honest yet” (3.3.432–33). Quintilian remarks that the device of feigning regret for what we have said gives the speech a natural quality that makes “the judges more ready to accept our statements without suspicion” (*Institutio*, 9.2.59–60). Moreover, by yielding ground in argument, one can force the adversary to choose between alternatives “neither of which he can select without damage to his cause” (*Institutio*, 6.4.18). This use of *dilemma* mirrors Iago’s argumentative tactics in the following passage:

OTH. And yet how nature erring from itself—  
 IAGO. Ay, there’s the point; as (to be bold with you)  
 Not to affect many proposed matches  
 Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
 Whereto we see in all things nature tends—  
 Foh, one may smell in such, a will most rank,  
 Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.  
 But (pardon me) I do not in position  
 Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear  
 Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
 May fall to match you with her country forms,  
 And happily repent.

(3.3.225–38)

While ostensibly (although weakly) denying that his observations apply to Desdemona, Iago forces Othello to choose between two agonizing alternatives, both of which devastate his faith in his wife’s fidelity: either her good nature (expressed in her love for Othello) has become corrupted through unnatural lust for Cassio, or her attraction to an African like Othello was the unnatural product of “a will most rank” and has been succeeded by the “better judgment” of a fellow Italian. Othello accedes to the second explanation, accepting its racist logic—“Haply, for I am black” (3.3.263)—and consequently, in Wilson’s terms, forsakes his “chief defense”: “For she had eyes, and chose me” (3.3.189).

Having lured Othello into a position of vulnerability, Iago employs the argumentative equivalent of “opening the first line to make room for the second to advance” (*War*, 115). Concealed behind Iago’s “exsufflicate and blown surmises” (3.3.182) are unexpected reinforcements:

IAGO. Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof.  
 Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio,

- ...  
 I know our country disposition well:  
 In Venice they do let God see the pranks  
 They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience  
 Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.
- OTH. Dost thou say so?
- IAGO. She did deceive her father, marrying you,  
 And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,  
 She lov'd them most.
- OTH. And so she did.
- IAGO. Why, go to then.  
 She that so young could give out such a seeming  
 To seel her father's eyes up, close as oak,  
 He thought 'twas witchcraft—but I am much to blame.

(3.3.196-97, 201-11)

The strategic qualities of this exchange are aptly expressed by a passage from Quintilian: “Suddenly introducing into the debate arguments which were deliberately concealed in our set speech . . . is a procedure which resembles a surprise attack or a sally from an ambush. The occasion for its employment arises when there is some point to which it is difficult to improvise an answer, though it would not be difficult to meet if time were allowed for consideration” (*Institutio*, 6.4.14). Iago’s main argumentative assault is a *sorites*, or concatenation of enthymemes (i.e., syllogisms in which one’s premise is not explicitly stated) aspiring, by means of quasi-logical signifiers, to syllogistic status. A *sorites* is used by Iago a number of times in the play (1.3.341-51; 2.3.314-26) and is arguably the key figure in his arsenal, for it permits him to transform doubtful premises into “a most pregnant and unforc’d position” (2.1.236). As Gideon Burton argues, *sorites* are rightly suspected to be fallacious but difficult to scrutinize, “since the rapidity of claims and reasons does not allow the unstated assumptions behind each claim to be examined.”<sup>45</sup>

#### SHAKESPEARE’S “MACHIAVELLIAN MOMENT”

While I hope I have shown how rhetorical and military strategy are entwined in Iago’s verbal technique, one might well ask to what end this strategic code is employed in *Othello*. To address this matter, I return to Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment*, particularly his discussion of the birth of historical self-consciousness in the early modern subject. At the beginning of *Othello*, Iago, in contrast to the other principals,

45. Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae*.

views the social order to which he belongs, including the military order, as a delegitimized, arbitrary realm of fortune and contingency rather than a stable universal hierarchy. As he says to Roderigo, "Preferment goes by letter and affection, / And not by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to th' first" (1.1.36–38). In this "chaos of unreconciled and conflicting wills,"<sup>46</sup> calculation, fraud, and force prevail, not justice. In Machiavellian terms, the only means of imposing form upon fortune is *virtù*, the manipulation of human behavior through innovative action,<sup>47</sup> and the two discourses most conducive to innovation within the realm of contingency are rhetoric and military strategy. In a desacralized, delegitimized world, the individual agent is obliged to dissemble rhetorically, and war is a ubiquitous, inescapable condition.

Like all successful Machiavellian innovators, Iago masters the temporal realm by anticipating and exploiting the fluctuating contingencies of history: "There are many events in the womb of time which will be deliver'd" (1.3.369–70); "Thou know'st we work by wit, and not by witchcraft, / And wit depends on dilatory time" (2.3.372–73); "scan this thing no farther; leave it to time" (3.3.245). In Pocock's terms, the greater part of Iago's *virtù* is "his ability to discern what time was bringing and what strategies were required to cope with it."<sup>48</sup> In order to sustain his power in this temporal flux, the innovator seeks to impose a kind of ideological conditioning on his subjects, replacing old customs with new forms that legitimize, as far as possible, the new regime.<sup>49</sup> Iago persistently attempts this, spreading the gospel of delegitimization by recasting the eternal in terms of the temporal, the ideal in terms of the base. For example, he counters Roderigo's spiritualized estimation of Desdemona ("she's full of a most bless'd condition" [2.1.249–50]) with a reflection on her corporal and appetitive nature: "The wine she drinks is made of grapes" (2.1.250–51). Literally speaking, of course, he is correct, but his contempt for the category of blessedness per se ("Bless'd fig's-end! . . . Bless'd pudding!" [2.1.251–53]) and assertion of the primacy of carnal appetite are characteristic of his cynical view of human beings as mere bodies acted upon by entropic material forces: "When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th' incorporate conclusion" (2.1.261–63). Iago repeatedly subverts conceptual and moral norms, replacing them with alternative universals that support his radically temporal, materialist, and power-centered perspective.

46. Pocock, *Moment*, 160.

47. *Ibid.*, 185.

48. *Ibid.*, 177.

49. *Ibid.*, 175.

Love, for example, is represented as nothing but appetite misrecognized and therefore unstable: "These Moors are changeable in their wills. . . . The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coliquintida. She must change for youth. . . . She must have change, she must" (1.3.346–52). As a result of this manipulation, Iago's auditors are plunged into uncertainty and anomie, becoming even more manipulable.

The idealist Othello is particularly vulnerable to this method because he and Desdemona initially see each other as immutably virtuous ("If she be false, O then heaven mocks itself" [3.3.278]; "my noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are" [3.4.24–26]) and their love as pure and timeless: "when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (3.3.91–92). In their mutual plea to the Senate that Desdemona be permitted to travel to Cyprus, the word "mind" figures prominently; Desdemona perceives Othello's "visage in his mind" (1.3.252), while Othello, denying the motive of sexual desire ("the young affects / In me defunct" [1.3.263–64]), wishes only "to be free and bounteous to her mind" (1.3.265). This idealistic conception of married love makes Othello's realization of temporal finitude, contingency, and mutability excruciating. Indeed, Othello seems poised on the edge of recognizing his vulnerability even before Iago begins his work:

If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(2.1.189–93)

Iago unweaves the lovers' magic web by stressing love's ephemerality, its origin in a temporal and unstable verbal realm: "Mark me with what violence she first lov'd the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies. To love him still for prating—let not thy discreet heart think it" (2.1.222–25). His logic is compelling: a love begun in violent haste and rooted in a rhetorical performance of dubious veracity is (who can deny it?) unlikely to last. Even if this were not the case, the relationship is embedded in an unfavorable racial, social, and cultural context, a conspiracy of "clime, complexion, and degree" (3.3.230). Predictably, Othello changes with the poison of delegitimization. A love that initially appeared rarefied and "passing strange" (1.3.160) comes to seem eminently corruptible, and female infidelity a "destiny unshunnable" (3.3.275).

But the implications of this “Machiavellian Moment” transcend the collapse of romantic idealism, undermining the very bonds of civility. *Othello* is, among other things, a reflection on the subversive, anti-social implications of Machiavellian thought. For Machiavelli, the fall into temporality, a world of hostile competitive agency, was a source of vitality, yet it also entailed profound social alienation. As a counterweight to this, he advocated participatory citizenship and patriotic service to the state; the political innovator, for example, accepts the isolation that comes with power because his exercise of *virtù* contributes to the overall stability and good of the social body to which he belongs.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in *The Art of War*, Machiavelli justifies military training by arguing that it teaches civic virtues—honor, order, and discipline—producing law-abiding citizens who know their duty and their social station, avoid faction, love one another, and “prefer the good of the public to any private interest” (*War*, 12, 40, 64, 68).

This optimistic prospect, however, is contradicted by Machiavelli’s recognition of the paradoxical relationship between the military sphere and civil society. On the one hand, “No state . . . can support itself without an army” (*War*, 30); the army is the only instrument by which the state can control its external environment and is therefore the foundation of its internal stability.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, Machiavelli admits, military personnel are a primary cause of civil strife. In contemporary Italy, for example, the employment of highly corruptible mercenary and auxiliary troops has led frequently to conspiracies and coups d’état (30–31). For this reason, Machiavelli passionately advocates citizen militias over foreign mercenaries. The former, eager to return to civilian life, are apt to fight passionately, while the latter have little motivation to end conflicts quickly and, during peacetime, are “forced to resort to ways of supporting themselves that generally bring them to the gallows” (16). As Pocock puts it, “Because the citizen has his own place in the body politic, he will understand that the war is being fought to preserve it; a mercenary with no home but the camp may become the instrument of tyranny over the city he was hired to defend.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Machiavelli advises rulers to prohibit professional soldiership altogether, since those who follow war as an occupation are “ready-equipped for any sort of violence” (*War*, 3) and constitute a perpetual threat to the state’s security:

50. See William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden, *The Idea of the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 57.

51. Pocock, *Moment*, 197.

52. *Ibid.*, 200–201.

no one can be called a good man who, in order to support himself, takes up a profession that obliges him at all times to be rapacious, fraudulent, and cruel as of course must be all of those—no matter what their rank—who make a trade of war. War will not maintain them in time of peace, and thus they are under a necessity either of endeavoring to prevent a peace or of taking all means to make such provisions for themselves in time of war so that they may not lack sustenance when it is over. But neither of these courses is consistent with the common good; whoever resolves to amass enough in time of war to support him forever must be guilty of robbery, murder, and many other acts of violence toward his friends as well as his enemies; and in endeavoring to prevent a peace, commanders must have recourse to many mean tricks and artifices to deceive those who employ them. (*War*, 14–15)

In this passage, Machiavelli goes beyond the criticism of mercenaries, contradicting his earlier statements about the army as a school of civic virtue. Military life, far from being a benign civilizing institution, appears here as a school of vice and antisociality for the citizen soldier no less than the mercenary. The art of war, as Machiavelli demonstrates repeatedly, necessarily instructs its participants in violence, coercion, cruelty, and deception.

Machiavelli tries to mitigate this contradiction by stipulating that the art of war “be practiced in time of peace only as an exercise, and in time of war, only out of necessity” (*War*, 19). In other words, the art of war may serve the public good as long as those who participate do so infrequently or intermittently, alternating military service with civilian occupations; they must also conform to a strict grammar of appropriate role and use. Yet this circumscription is grounded on two assumptions that are ultimately, in this framework, untenable. First, Machiavelli treats peace and war in this instance as distinct conditions, and the civic and the military as discrete yet complementary spheres.<sup>53</sup> However, as Machiavelli’s works amply affirm, the root motives for warfare—envy and ambition—do not abate in peacetime but are merely redirected toward other objects: “For, whenever there is no need for men to fight, they fight for ambition’s sake; and so powerful is the sway that ambition exercises over the human heart that it never relinquishes them, no matter how high they have risen.”<sup>54</sup> For Machiavelli, the boundaries between war and peace, civic and military life,

53. For Machiavelli, military strength constitutes the necessary precondition for civic prosperity and cultural development: “there is a very close, intimate relation between these two conditions [the civilian and the military spheres], and . . . they are not only compatible and consistent with each other, but necessarily connected and related” (*War*, 4).

54. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 200.

are eminently permeable, particularly for the enterprising man of *virtù*. As Neal Wood observes, Machiavelli, contra classical political theory, recognizes that every social body, whether polis or army, is made up of competing and mutually exclusive interests. This understanding, Wood contends, anticipates a concept akin to what later theorists like Carl von Clausewitz call "absolute" or "total" war: "The ways of peace are in many ways now like the ways of war because peace is no longer thought of as the natural condition of man. . . . Civic peace to Machiavelli is an interlude between wars in which overt conflict and violence diminish but do not disappear, in which tensions accumulate below the surface to erupt anew."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Machiavelli's observation that prosperity itself breeds war became a commonplace in sixteenth-century military discourse. Peter Whitehorne, for example, in the dedicatory epistle to his Elizabethan translation of *The Art of War*, envisions peace and war not as antithetical conditions but as a volatile, unstable compound, each component ever threatening to "worke and induce, the others obliuion and vtter abholicion."<sup>56</sup>

The second weakness in Machiavelli's attempt to separate war and peace is his assumption that soldiers returning to civilian life will readily "turn off" their aggression and "forget" the coercive tactics in which they have been trained, happily embracing the ways of peace and a subordinate role in the social order. This assumption seems odd in that Machiavelli's own works authorize the instrumentalization of politics and warfare, publicizing and disseminating value-free techniques adaptable to any cause. For example, he affirms that quasi-military strategies not only could be used but have been employed by ambitious private citizens seeking to aggrandize themselves.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, war, however praiseworthy as a princely art, is also a reified system operating autonomously in the world. Participation in its "economy" is neither free nor voluntary, and this applies to citizen, prince, and general alike. As Machiavelli writes in his most famous work, "A prince . . . must not have any object nor any other thought, nor must he take anything as his profession but war"; in other words, the ruler qua ruler must function within the warfare system, for the arts of ruling and war are indistinguishable.<sup>58</sup> This system dictates

55. Neal Wood, introduction to *The Art of War* (New York: Da Capo, 1965), lvix.

56. Peter Whitehorne, "To the most high, and excellent Princes, Elizabeth, by the grace of God Queene of England, Fraunce, and Ireland, defender of the Faith, and of the Church of England, and Ireland, on Earth next vnder God, the supreme Gouvernour," in Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Arte of Warre*, trans. Peter Whitehorne (London: 1588), a.iii.

57. See, for example, Machiavelli, *Prince*, 49.

58. Grady, *Montaigne*, 65.

individual and collective behavior with the force of necessity, and the military commander must conform to its exigencies as an investor adapts to fluctuations in the market. Moreover, the preservation of civil society by military means paradoxically requires the wholesale inversion and violation of society's legal, moral, and religious values: "For when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious."<sup>59</sup> As Spackman argues, the art of war is a game without rules, for here "only those who change the rules can win. War is the continuous creation and violation of the rules of the game."<sup>60</sup>

In *Othello*, Shakespeare brilliantly adapts this cluster of Machiavellian insights and subjects it to critical scrutiny. In some ways, he paints an even bleaker picture than Machiavelli, demonstrating the extreme susceptibility of social bonds among citizens, soldiers, spouses, and friends to the corrosive influence of the warfare system. Venice and its colonial frontier on the "warlike isle" of Cyprus constitute a fortuitous setting for the exploration of this theme. The Venetian state, proverbially the most stable of early modern Italian republics, is depicted as painfully vulnerable to social division and dissolution. Paradoxically, Venice is weakest where it considers itself strong: its highly successful mercenary army, the instrument by which it maintains its economic and political hegemony, is poised to implode. The army is commanded by the anachronistic figure of Othello, a "stranger" who nevertheless fights for honor and maintains unwavering loyalty to his "very noble and approv'd good masters" (1.3.77). But this idealistic disposition, however admirable, is fundamentally incommensurate with the prevailing ethos of the mercenary institution Othello commands, an ethos most fully embodied in Iago:

Others there are  
 Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,  
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,  
 And throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
 Do well thrive by them; and when they have lin'd their coats,  
 Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,  
 And such a one do I profess myself.

(1.1.49–55)

Othello, in other words, is fundamentally mistaken about the nature of the military body of which he is the nominal head, and this mis-

59. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 515.

60. Spackman, "Warpath," 186.

perception is ultimately disastrous. The army is a "Machiavellian" entity, an unstable compound of competing interests and desires whose customary signs of hierarchical order—"forms and visages of duty"—should not be accepted at face value. In contrast, Iago, a Venetian citizen devoid of patriotism, understands the prevailing mercenary spirit and exploits it to the fullest. No ideal of civic virtue or social solidarity animates the innovator's pursuit of power; he cares only to achieve "peculiar" or private ends, and he inflames the private resentments of the other characters, turning them against one another. Iago embodies the worst fears of the rhetorician; he is a bad man speaking well, disproving the complacent assertion of Quintilian that "no one can be a true orator unless he is also a good man" (*Institutio*, 1.2.3). He is likewise the bane of Italian republics as envisioned by Machiavelli: the career soldier who continues to practice the "trade of war" during peacetime, extending the war zone into the civic and domestic realms.<sup>61</sup> Iago uses metaphor to collapse the domestic and military spheres, exposing the interpenetration of military and civilian life: "What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation. . . . And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?" (2.3.22–23, 26–27); "Our general's wife is now the general" (2.3.314–15). Othello, who initially resists the mercenary spirit and tries to dissociate military activity and domestic life, eventually comes to see reality, Iago-like, as total war: one's dearest allies may be conspirators and covert enemies against whom martial law and summary justice may be invoked. Thus, the play demonstrates that rhetoric and military strategy, widely considered pillars of civic life, are instruments available for the most subversive, antisocial ends.

But the warning note in *Othello* goes well beyond the dangers of foreign mercenaries or a few bad apples in the citizen militia. The problem, as Shakespeare depicts it, is more deeply pervasive. In addition to his other functions, Iago embodies *Invidia*, or envy, which Machiavelli identifies as the root motive of war: "Nature has so constituted men that, though all things are objects of desire, not all things are attainable; that desire always exceeds the power of attainment, with the result that men are ill content with what they possess and their present state brings them little satisfaction. Hence arise the vicissitudes of their fortune. For, since some desire to have more and others are afraid to lose what they have already acquired, enmities and wars are begotten, and this brings about the ruin of one province and the exaltation of its rival."<sup>62</sup> For Machiavelli, envy, an irrational compulsion

61. See Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 452.

62. *Ibid.*, 200.

arising from the fundamental misalignment of desire and reality, constitutes the very spirit of war, while the envious person is the bane of any state, an implacable enemy who seeks vengeance even though it entails his own destruction and that of his country.<sup>63</sup> Shakespeare's analysis cuts deeply because he demonstrates, through the homology between rhetoric and military strategy, the process by which primal envy comes to permeate both civil society and individual consciousness. Iago achieves his comprehensive subversion by introducing *Invidia*, hypostasized as sexual jealousy, into Othello's consciousness through the reified medium of language. This autonomous, autotelic function of discourse is expressed through the imagery of poison; "Dangerous conceits," scarcely detectable when administered, gradually "act upon the blood" and "Burn like the mines of sulphur" (3.3.26–29). More significantly, as Hugh Grady has pointed out, it is conveyed through the metaphor of monstrosity.<sup>64</sup>

EMIL. But jealous souls will not be answer'd so;  
 They are not ever jealous for the cause,  
 But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster  
 Begot upon itself, born on itself.  
 DES. Heaven keep the monster from Othello's mind!

(3.4.159–163)

Here and elsewhere,<sup>65</sup> we observe the image of a reified Jealousy, a monstrous entity that invades Othello's mind and ravages his consciousness.

*Othello* does not flinch in its harrowing representation of the "Machiavellian Moment." As we watch the play unfold, we recognize that its delegitimized sociopolitical world is substantively our own and that Iago's powerful deconstructive logic is an all-too-familiar component of that world, if not of our own consciousness. Iago speaks a tongue with which we are familiar. War, as Clausewitz tells us, is the great game, "a free activity of the soul" because of the play of probability and chance, a crucible in which a special kind of genius—courage, resolution, presence of mind, energy, and self-command—is revealed.<sup>66</sup> In *Othello*, military genius of this kind is manifest in Iago, largely

63. *Ibid.*, 368–69, 485–87.

64. I am indebted here to Grady's discussion of reification in *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, particularly his illuminating account of reification in *Troilus* and *Lear*. He does not treat (with the single exception of [1.3.403–4]) the image pattern of monstrosity in *Othello*.

65. See also *Othello*, 3.3.107–8, 114–15, 165–67.

66. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832), trans. J. J. Graham, ed. Anatol Rapoport (London: Penguin, 1968), 116, 121, 138–47.

through his rhetorical performance, and it has a certain glory of its own.

Yet the play ultimately leaves us profoundly unreconciled to the modern, desacralized condition as conceived by Machiavelli and his disciple Iago. As John Roe argues, Shakespeare in a number of his plays imaginatively posits a world that functions according to amoral Machiavellian principles, yet also registers his opposition to such a world "by producing at the height of the crisis, a strong counter-thrust, which affirms his belief in the efficacy of the traditional, ethical scheme."<sup>67</sup> This is certainly the case in *Othello's* final scene, where the Machiavellian innovator overreaches himself, demonstrating that even the most accomplished tactician cannot prevail against the capricious flux of the reified power systems in which he functions. The effective cause of Iago's downfall—Emilia's loving and courageous self-sacrifice—is an element incommensurate with a Machiavellian calculus, and thus unanticipated.<sup>68</sup> This failure of temporal innovation thrusts into prominence the moral norms Iago has either debunked or disregarded: truth, fidelity, honor, loyalty, and selfless love. At the play's end our sympathies lie squarely with the defeated, whose affirmations of value, although perhaps naive and untenable in a Machiavellian world, do not, nevertheless, ring hollow: "O, she was heavenly true" (5.2.135); "For nought I did in hate, but all in honor" (5.2.294); "one that lov'd not wisely but too well" (5.2.344); "For he was great of heart" (5.2.361). Yet the affirmation of value, like Othello's partial recovery of his "noble" self, remains tentative and ambivalent; value is a rumor in the mouths of the dead and the dying, fading before our very eyes. We are left, in Machiavellian terms, "perpetually discontented," desiring release from the nightmare realm of contingency and longing for the return of the lost universals.

67. Roe, *Machiavelli*, xi.

68. See Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 404–5, 410, 412–13, 417. Machiavelli's discussion of the pitfalls that attend conspiracies is illuminating with respect to both Roderigo and Emilia, the latter whom he enlists to steal Desdemona's handkerchief. Iago overestimates both his influence on her and her affection for him, precisely the errors Machiavelli claims are routinely made by would-be conspirators (*Discourses*, 405).