Doubt is intrinsic to our situation as beings immersed in a world that connects us to people at the same time that it renders impossible the certainty of knowing their minds. It is involved with matters of trust and belief and often arises when the risk we assume in committing ourselves to others is realized as danger. Much hangs upon warrants: what are the grounds on which I trust or believe? As this formulation suggests, doubt has both an affective side that is linked with such kindred emotions as fear, anxiety, and suspicion, and a cognitive side that is engaged with questions about whether the things we perceive can lay claim to being knowledge. It is central to some of the most persistent concerns of Western philosophy, including the distinctions between surface and depth, appearance and reality, act and motive. In such contexts, which range from the Socratic elenchus and Aristotelian first philosophy to the Cartesian dubito and Kierkegaardian irony, doubt is an instrument of rational exploration that enables us to think clearly and live the examined life. Yet in literary texts these uses can give way to deliberative quandaries and states of inner turmoil that threaten psychic stability to the point of despair and dissolution, something we find, for example, in the tragedies of Shakespeare. The epistemic and emotional registers of doubt thus have a long history, but it is also a history that has not yet been plotted. The purpose of this essay is to stake out some parameters for such a study. We begin by observing that the earliest texts in our tradition, the Homeric epics, involve forms of doubt that develop along the lines of what would later become the genres of comedy and tragedy. If we take these genres as orientations in the structuring of experience, what would comic and tragic modalities of doubt look like?

Consider the Odyssey. Defined by adjectives compounded from polu-, Odysseus is famously “much-enduring” (poluitas), “full of devices” (poluméchanos), “capable of many turns” (polutropos) and “exceedingly cunning” (polumétis). (All translations throughout this essay are my own.) His capacity for suspending belief and adapting to a mutable world makes him our first skeptic, provisional in his outlook and
invested in the probable rather than the necessary. From the first time we see him on Calypso's island gazing out upon the sea with which he is frequently identified, he is anxiously turning things over in his mind. In his wanderings, he deliberates repeatedly over what to do and how to do it. The same is true of Penelope, the wife left behind, who manages the many uncertainties of her life with a cleverness that matches her powers of endurance. Husband and wife, in this respect and others, exhibit what the epic calls "like-mindedness" (*homophrosune*). Their shrewdness, their ability to manipulate disguise, and their willingness to refrain from premature conclusions about the conflicting reports they receive about each other during the long period of their estrangement make them the bearers of an enabling and comically mediated doubt that is essential to their survival.

The heroic paradigm I have just sketched differs from the one developed in the *Iliad*, a work whose preoccupation both with the destructive effects of anger and communal violence and with the finality of death makes it a precursor of tragedy (Redfield 69–159; Rutherford; Whitman 195–220). Here, Achilles becomes the prototype of a conflicted engagement with a world in which difference translates quickly into hostility and the pursuit of excellence unhinges the society that gives it expression. In its tendency to highlight social and psychic stress, the vying for honor in a zero-sum game, and the search for transcendence, the *Iliad* testifies to how the tragic character is first the heroic character. The poem gives form to what Friedrich Nietzsche calls in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* "the pathos of distance" (das Pathos der Distanz), a phrase that describes the outcome of an historical process in which political and social superiority resolves into psychological and moral superiority (258–59, 371). As representations of the "noble, powerful, high-placed, and high-minded" (Vornehmen, Mächtigen, Höhergestellten und Hochgesinnten, 259), aristocrats define the content of the "spiritually" (seelisch) good and thus seem the natural heirs of all that has value. Even in a traditional society such as that of the *Iliad*, however, value is not monolithic, and critique can emerge from within the epistemic closure. When this happens, it does so as doubt, which takes shape as a kind of incipient "foreknowledge" or "shadow of intelligence" (Barlow 1–9), a cognitive intimation of what lies beyond the horizon of the normative, and which has the potential to break away into a challenge of the warrants enabling trust and belief. In such cases, we are confronted with a second-order dramatization of the *Pathos der Distanz*, one in which the ideological character of the first order emerges as such, and with violent effects.

The aim of the present essay is to approach this subject by establishing Homer's *Iliad* as an exemplary text. Despite recent work on early Greek notions of "personality" and "the self," we still require a more focused examination of the relationship between doubt and portrayals of subjectivity. A study of Homer will help us elucidate these problems and extend our inquiry into two plays, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Shakespeare's *Othello*, which share with the *Iliad* an interest in the unraveling of heroism in a world torn by friendship, love, and the obsession with masculine honor. The bond between the *Iliad* and *Philoctetes* is close, since Sophocles is exploring the limitations of the Achillean paradigm in this play. In doing so, he helps shape the Greco-Roman heroic ideal that is later embodied in medieval romance, a tradition on which Shakespeare draws in *Othello*. 
Several interrelated theses guide this reading. First, in relation to *das Pathos der Distanz*, we observe that the tragic action takes shape in a context of localized values and dispositions—a *habitus* (Bourdieu, *Esquisse* 256–58)—embodied in a figure who becomes alienated from the group that confers status upon him. Within such a liminal context, doubt arises either as cause or consequence, and its movement follows a common pattern. Each protagonist is flanked by both an antagonist who functions as the catalyst of the split from communal norms and a friend or beloved who occasions a fuller awareness of the possibilities inherent in that split. Thus, Achilles is bound in the first instance with Agamemnon and in the second with Patroclus; Philoctetes with Odysseus and Neoptolemus; and Othello with Iago and Desdemona. Within the dynamics of these units, the hero emerges as a hybrid self by turns numinous, prodigious, and monstrous, an effect intensified by his association with a daemonic charged object—the shield crafted by Hephaestus in the case of Achilles, the bow of Heracles in the case of Philoctetes, and the Egyptian charmer's handkerchief in the case of Othello. In the crucible of tragic circumstance where potentialities of being are worked out, the dissolution of a primary heroism gives way to a higher type, which reveals that the "natural" order of aristocracy is socially constructed and therefore manipulable rather than simply lived. Ironically, the hero is distanced from the values to which he has subscribed by appearing to enact them: Achilles returns to battle, Neoptolemus and Philoctetes sail for Troy, and Othello kills Desdemona, then himself, in accordance with a heroic identity to which he has already bid farewell. The shift to a heroism-at-one-remove, however, is never definitive, and negotiations between two or more frames of reference remain at the heart of the tragic action. This oscillation constitutes the pulse of doubt, which has its own rhetoric. It may be agonistic and confrontational or passive and brooding; it may inhabit the self or invade the relationship between self and others. In any case, the capacity of such rhetoric to test and penetrate shapes our sense of the high stakes of the tragic universe, its entanglement with questions that go to the heart of human existence and striving.

It was a critical commonplace of the mid-twentieth century to regard Homer's heroes as incapable of decision making because they lack an internal center of agency, in particular, a will (see, for example, Snell, Fränkel, and Dodds). All significant action in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, according to this view, occurs as the result of divine intervention. Because humans have not yet evolved into creatures who can deliberate and initiate action on their own, the poems also lack a concept of personal responsibility. Shame, or *aidos*, is the emotion that keeps people under control, and it relies upon an external set of standards by which the culture evaluates and rewards behavior. Because action and result, not intention, are the focus in such a world, its heroes lack an internal life. It thus makes no sense to look for evidence in Homer of doubt and the dilemmas of decision making, since the faculties necessary for such processes had purportedly not yet emerged.

Such a view has been challenged over the past few decades, and with it the tendency in older treatments of Greek values (Adkins's, for example) to reduce
moral dynamics in epic to the pursuit of honor within a shame culture that does not yet know the force of guilt or the power of reflection (Cairns 14-47). More recent studies, many of them spawned by Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, continue to recognize the force of shame, but with a greater appreciation for nuance. Such revisionist tendencies have led to a differentiation between a “subjective-individualist” model of the self oriented toward internality, self-consciousness, and moral autonomy and an “objective-participant” model oriented toward the formation of moral identity within shared forms of social life, particularly roles governed by rule-based practices that yield publicly agreed upon standards of excellence (MacIntyre 121–30, 181–87; Gill, *Personality* 1–28; Williams 1–49). These are not mutually exclusive paradigms, of course, since even inwardness is socially constructed. But they express alignments that protect against anachronism. Introspection for the Homeric self is not impossible, though the forms in which it is rendered tend to be conventional; when they are not, the break from convention is marked.

The latter happens repeatedly in portrayals of Achilles: first in the embassy scene of Book 9, when three of his peers, Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax, approach him with Agamemnon’s offer of compensation after the quarrel of Book 1, which has forced his withdrawal from the war; and later from Book 16 through 22, as he re-engages in battle. As a result, Achilles’ reactive posture becomes an occasion for clarifying heroic values in the act of calling them into question. Doubt intervenes in two forms: 1) as a suspicion that the warrants governing fair compensation in a competitive context are not being fulfilled by Agamemnon, and thus that as head of the Greek allied forces he is not to be trusted; and 2) as scrutiny of the ideology of compensation, which opens to critique the collective belief in its value as a status-granting system. The naturalization of arbitrary social structures as intrinsic to the order of things is submitted to a process whereby the “misrecognition,” or *méconnaissance*, of the arbitrariness is exposed (Bourdieu, *Esquisse* 348–62; Langage 273–75; cf. Wilson 20, 71–108). To put it, again, in Nietzschean terms, das *Pathos der Distanz* and the morality it entails appear as a fiction of superiority exposed by one whose initial “distance,” by virtue of being among the *aristoi*, transmutes into a secondary “distance,” which calls into question the legitimacy of the primary order. This constitutes the tragic matrix of the *Iliad*. But doubt is not always a corrosive force in the epic, and its power as such needs to be formulated against a backdrop of normative heroism.

*Doubt, decision making, and speaking-from-within.* These may be found in moments when a character under pressure of battle must make a difficult choice about how to act (Russo and Simon; Fenik 68–90; Gill, *Personality* 29–93). Before Book 11, such moments are described in the voice of the third-person narrator, but thereafter, and especially in Books 17 through 22, narration gives way to internal monologues, the directness and emotional intensity of which are a response to the growing brutality of battle once Patroclus and Achilles enter the ranks (Scully 11–18). Of these four such monologues, the most developed is Hector’s in Book 22.98–130 as he prepares to face his death at the hand of Achilles, and perhaps the simplest is Odysseus’s after both Agamemnon and Diomedes have been injured and carried back to the ships. Finding himself alone and inadequately defended, Odysseus takes stock of his situation:
Vexed, he then spoke to his great-hearted spirit:

"Ah me, what's going to happen to me? It will be a great evil if I take flight fearing their numbers, but it will be more horrible if I am caught alone; and the son of Cronus has already put to flight the other Danaans. But why does my heart argue this way? For I know it's the worthless men who walk away from the fighting, but he who would excel in battle, he most of all must stand his ground strongly, whether he is struck or strikes another."

(Ilid 11.403-10)

Addressing his "heart" (thumos), one of the sites of thought and feeling in Homeric characters, Odysseus engages in an internal dialogue between two sides of himself, one inclined toward self-protection, the other toward life-threatening engagement in a fight where honor may be won. The rhetoric of doubt is spoken from within a *habitus* whose values are not pondered as such. Forms of the verb meaning "to be anxious and thoughtful, to be in doubt" (mermērizein), or "to turn over or revolve anxiously in the mind, to debate, to ponder" (hormainein), are used to signify this self-division, sometimes in conjunction with a formula containing the participle *oxthesas*, which conveys frustration and distress (Scully). Because the phrase "whether to do this or that" streamlines the conflict into two alternatives, Odysseus's internal debate resembles interpersonal discourse of the sort that is common between the most excellent of men in the *Iliad* (the aristoi in council), as well as between mortals and divinities. The monologue, in short, follows the structure of *euboulia*, or "good counsel," the standard context for deliberation in the *Iliad* (Schofield). By virtue of the psychic stress that attaches to moments of self-address, both narrated divisions of the heart and monologues express the vulnerability of warriors who pursue honor under risk of death, and, as such, they capture a sympathetically rendered human fear. Corrosive forms of doubt are kept at bay by *aidos*, which directs the agent away from dishonorable action.

*Aidōs, timē, and speaking-from-above.* Like all internalized psychic prompts or inculcated dispositions, *aidōs* operates as an automatic and socially functional inhibitory emotion in warriors whom the poet privileges with an *aristeia*, one of those moments in the sun of the bard's narrative attention when everything fades to allow the illumination of a single man's exemplary acts. Sometimes, however, this immediacy is qualified by a more reflective form of dialogue that comments on why heroes conduct themselves as they do. At such moments, a character achieves a momentary transcendence that reveals the ground for action and therefore has about it the quality of speaking-from-above. This happens in the much-discussed speech by Sarpedon, the Trojan fighter and son of Zeus, to his comrade Glaucus (12.310–28). The *timē* that a warrior wins by fighting nobly—*timē* immortalized in song and recognized in the accrual of material wealth—is a compensation, Sarpedon says, for the threat of death; death, in a fashion, is overcome through fame won in acts of valor. No one would fight if he were immortal, nor would there be reason to fight if *timē* were not the prize. The speech takes seriously "the spirits of death" that swarm "in their thousands," spirits "no man can turn aside nor escape" (12.326–27), but in the urgency of imagining them it also creates a forward momentum into battle: "Let us go on and extend the boast of victory to someone else," Sarpedon says, "or let him grant it to us" (328). Sarpedon
thus makes visible the social order that explains why the warrior's life warrants the risk of death: fighting converts into “prestige wealth” (Wilson 18–19) and wealth into the “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, *Esquisse* 348–76) that is naturalized as “nobility.” *Doxa*, or the closure of a *habitus*, which agents enact in the conformity of their words and deeds, mutates here into “the orthodox,” a “right” belief that is not merely enacted, as in the case of Odysseus above, but conceptualized and expressed. In doing so it opens a field of discourse in which potentially competing opinions can emerge.

Unmasking *doxa* and speaking-as-a-foreigner. Achilles brings Sarpedon’s insight to a more radical conclusion in Book 9, thereby exposing the *aristoi* as an elite driven by a mystified view of reality. For both character and audience, the hero’s antagonistic stance comes into view through a process that may be likened to psychological “retroactivation,” or *Nachträglichkeit*, as an actualization of the “foreknowledge” or “the shadow of intelligence” already implicit in the orthodox (cf. Pucci, *Odysseus* 86). The distancing from the normative, which does not have to be articulated subsequent to, but simply in relation with, conformity, guides the reading of what is latent in the original configuration. Achilles has taken himself out of the war because his honor has suffered at the hands of Agamemnon in just the way that, as Sarpedon’s speech makes clear, would nullify the grounds for heroic striving. (For various accounts of Achilles’ relation to “the heroic code” see Whitman 181–220; Redfield 3–29, 69–127; Claus; Taplin, *Homeric Soundings* 66–73; Zanker 47–113; Gill, *Personality* 94–154; Wilson 1–39, 71–108.) The details are well known. Having labored more intensely and at greater hazard to his life than any of his peers, he has had to endure the theft of his war prize—a “bride” who is close to his heart (341–43). Status is predicated upon property, particularly women as property, but by referring to his concubine Briseis as a wife for whom he feels affection, Achilles transfers her to a sphere of value that makes Agamemnon’s violation even more egregious (on Achilles’ language in Book 9 see, especially, Parry; Reeve; Scully; Arieti; Martin 146–239). We find a comparable situation in *Othello*: the transgression that initiates the tragic turn involves an illicit action (or one that is perceived as such) connected to traffic in women with an attendant slight to masculine honor. Agamemnon’s *hubris* toward Achilles ironically duplicates the transgression with which the Trojan War begins (337–39). In responding to it as he does, Achilles is doing no more—in fact, a great deal less—than the sons of Atreus did in leading an expedition against the wrongdoers. Up until Book 9, then, Achilles is isolated but not alienated from his peers, because he has acted in a manner that conforms to honor and the revenge ethic. The embassy counts on this.

From the outset, Achilles’ response is aggressive. Meeting Odysseus’ smooth presentation with distrust, he declares that hateful to him as the gates of hell is the man who hides one thing in his heart but says another (313). Who is hiding what? Agamemnon, in dispatching the assembly, has characterized his compensation as “unlimited ransom” (*aperissi' apoina*, 120) whereby he, a father-figure, is “buying back” Achaian lives that would be lost because of Achilles’ withdrawal (Wilson 75–96). Though he admits he was struck by *ató* (“delusion”) in his quarrel with Achilles and does not challenge Nestor’s view that he dishonored a very great man (9.115–20), he also seeks to mitigate the damage to his symbolic capi-
tal that would come from admitting he did wrong. What is appropriate, however, is not that he stage a face-saving "ransom" by unleashing a "gift attack" (Donlan), but that he acknowledge that Achilles was right to take "revenge" (poïête) for an offense and that he will provide recompense for the harm he has done, in part by admitting to it. Odysseus finesses the problem by dropping the term ἀφοίνα from his presentation and omitting Agamemnon's assertion that Achilles should yield to him as "the kinglier" (basileuteros, 160). But the maneuvering is not lost on the hero, and Achilles emphatically states three times (315, 345, 386) that he will neither be deceived nor persuaded. This is the rhetoric of frontal assault. It is war by other means.

"There was no gratitude [charis] given / for fighting incessantly forever against your enemies" (316–17), Achilles says of Agamemnon's theft of his war prize and more general approach to the distribution of booty. The head of the expedition has undermined the principles on which nobles risk their lives in battle. Fate now appears to hold a common end for all men (318). It is the same whether one holds back or fights fiercely, is brave or cowardly, does nothing or does much (319–21). The triple elaboration in three whole-verse statements is forceful. While Achilles makes this pronouncement on the basis of a specific offense, he draws a generalizing conclusion that exposes the illusoriness of the relation between excellence and both compensatory reward and honor. The values of heroic culture appear to him as ideological bromides whose purpose is to render palatable the hard truth that "a man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much" (320). Achilles' claim that we are all held "in a single honor" (319) usurps both the ground of ἀιδώς and the motivation that Sarpedon's speech offers for lordly pride of place. What good is ἀιδώς in a world where the values it sanctions are lies? The passion builds. Lines become increasingly enjambed; strong breaks appear in mid-verse (325–45), culminating in a set of four rhetorical questions that drive home the irony of Agamemnon's transgression in a war waged for a woman. Do the sons of Atreus alone among men love their wives (340–41)?

While Odysseus seeks to overcome divisiveness by appealing to an assumed common morality, Achilles seizes hold of the dialectical wrangle and strives to impose upon it an "ultimate" order of which he, not Agamemnon, is the apex. His dissent is a consequence of reflection upon ethical value in the context of a major social upheaval. It carries the weight of a liminal experience in which heroic identity is at stake and introduces a choice between competing possibilities for action. In form and substance it is heterodox and arises from an order of thought more extreme than Sarpedon's in his speech to Glaucus; that is why he speaks like the "disgraced foreigner" (αἵμητος μεταναστῆς, 648) Agamemnon has made him. In the most notorious section of the great reply, he claims that Agamemnon's impressive gifts are hateful, that he holds him "light as a chip" (378) and would accept no amount of wealth from him, "not if he gave . . . not if gave . . . not even if he gave . . ." (379–87). By using another triple-headed offensive, in this case a series of denials, Achilles makes clear that no amount of material goods alone will do. These famous lines are as rhetorically hyperbolic as the list of gifts is materially extravagant. One grand gesture is met and topped by another. The act has about it the art of brinksmanship except that Achilles goes for broke. He would refuse persuasion, he says, "until [Agamemnon] had made
good to [him] all this heartrending insolence" (387). The last phrase, *domenai thumalgea lôbên*, is a rare combination of words that emphasizes not the material slight to his honor, but the anguish of being reduced to the status of a nonentity (Hainsworth 114; Arieti 6–7, 10; Griffin 121).

It is a question whether the other members of the embassy are alert to the problem Odysseus finesses. Before telling his cautionary tale about Meleager and the risk of turning down compensation, Phoenix remarks, "If [Agamemnon] were not offering you gifts . . . I would not bid you to cast away your anger / and to protect the Argives, though they need you. / But he offers you many gifts [dôra], and more to come" (515–18). Ajax corroborates the view when he introduces the example of blood money paid in compensation (*poine*) to the family of a murdered man as an appropriate form of redress (632–36). Whether they suspect, as Achilles does, that Odysseus is deceptive in his presentation of Agamemnon’s offer is something the text leaves ambiguous, although it is unlikely that either Achilles’ surrogate father, Phoenix, or the blunt Ajax would embrace such a tactic. They think the offer good; Achilles does not. The difference now alienates him from his peers. We may choose to consider his refusal an expression of his view that material goods are a necessary but insufficient condition of his returning to battle (Claus); that an apology for transgression and the return of Briseis, unmolested, in addition to compensatory gifts, is what is needed (Donlan; Gill, Personality 144–48); or that he is “coming off the gold standard” altogether (Taplin, Homeric Soundings 72). What seems clear is that the disruption of social order caused by Agamemnon’s high-handedness forces Achilles to scrutinize the principles by which Homeric warriors live. Nor is he groping toward a higher existential or metaphysical meaning (Whitman 189–94). Rather, he now regards the honor ethic as a system whose elements may be arbitrarily manipulated to produce results that are, effectively, cooked, and this recognition rankles his soul.

In response to Achilles the members of the embassy sit stupefied, “stricken into silence” (430) by a *muthos* the narrator describes as “uncompromising” (*krateros*). The disaffected hero has opened a space in collective belief wide enough to admit a harsh critical light but not so wide as to effect his own exit from the poem. This is apparent in the softening of his opposition in response to the speeches of Phoenix and Ajax, who speak after Odysseus and make use of appeals to mythological family ties (*paradigmata*) and loyalty to peers. He will depart for home tomorrow, he tells Odysseus (357–60); he will decide tomorrow about staying or going, he tells Phoenix (618–19); he will stay until Hector reaches his tent, he tells Ajax (650–55). His second thoughts assume the form of sequentially expressed alternatives, each of which appears absolute when uttered. Having seen the foundations of the honor-based system in which he has been a chief player, he can neither be fulfilled by the concept of the best life as that system configures it nor escape it. If he were to withdraw in a more radical way, he would be involved, as one critic puts it, “in the enterprise of making himself disappear” (MacIntyre 126). As it is, he remains sufficiently in place to be an inassimilable presence.

In Book 11 Achilles not only shows ambivalence toward the fighting (he watches and cares), but also dispatches his friend Patroclus into a situation that culminates with Nestor’s proposal that Patroclus rescue the Greeks by donning Achilles’ armor as a disguise (794–800). The bard marks the irony: “this was the begin-
ning of [Achilles'] evil" (11.604). We thus encounter a structure that resembles an Aristotelian plot marked by hamartia and peripeteia (Redfield 69–98). Achilles, the warrior least given to delusion on the battlefield, lacks self-knowledge in a crucial respect. Sending Patroclus alone into the field, Achilles enjoins him both to win great honor for his friend in the sight of the Danaans "so that they will send back... / the beautiful girl, and offer shining gifts [dōra] as well" (16.85–86) and not to fight so valiantly as to transfer Achilles' honor to himself. Although the bard does not comment on this shift back to the time-standard, the shift suggests that Achilles does not see how much he still responds to the peer group from which he has turned away. This back and forth is the rhythm of doubt, and we will find it again in Philoctetes and Othello. He thus regards as an aloof gesture of surrogacy what turns out be an act of unforeseen investment. Enacting a double-mindedness the consequences of which he remains unaware, he believes he controls a situation that in two respects controls him. First, Patroclus, being the extraordinary warrior he is, will be unable to hold back as commanded. Second, once Achilles learns of Patroclus's death, he will not choose revenge; revenge will choose him. The generation from doubt of a second-order heroism that corrodes a primary type is not an all-or-nothing affair: the hero's "monologizing" discourse, with its tendency to cannibalize everything around it into the absoluteness of the present as reprised in a single consciousness, expresses an assumed cohesiveness of character that never strictly holds.

The fault lines are clear in Book 18 when Achilles receives news of Patroclus's death. Achilles is eager to meet his own death, since he was "no light to Patroclus" and now feels himself "a useless weight on the earth" (103–04); he laments that he "has ceased too long from the fighting" (125) and wishes to go forth immediately into battle to avenge his friend. The emotion he feels, in short, is not shame but guilt. What pains him is not the negative judgment of his peers, but the harm done to a beloved friend by his mistake: "Now I shall go," he says to Antilochus, "to overtake the murderer of a dear life, / Hector; then I will accept my own doom whenever / Zeus wishes to bring it about, and the other immortals" (18.114–16).

Raging across the plain of Troy in the numinously charged armor crafted by a god, Achilles burns a wide swath through traditional models of heroic excellence. The Pathos der Distanz that is dramatized in his assault reveals, once again, the movement of the plot to a heroism-at-one-remove; the first-order distance that typifies Homer's heroes collectively gives way before the demiurgic force of a figure who continually exceeds traditional standards of areté. As much as his actions, his immunity to the constraints imposed by the shame-ethic mark him as a man apart who does not respond, until forced by the gods, to the inhibitions of aidōs.

From this perspective, the "excessiveness" of Achilles is a misnomer: the term assumes as a point of reference the order that has been destabilized as the source of epic value. That destabilizing is itself the result of an ambiguous presentation of Achilles' larger-than-life might. Similes, one-on-one combat, encounters with opponents, rescues by divinities of their loved ones—the trappings of epic storytelling remain in place during Achilles' aristeia, while the hero, conceived as a force of nature, a beast, and a god, creates as he destroys. He does battle with a river (21.214–399), threatens to punish Apollo (22.14–20), says no to pity (21.74–135), charges like the most savage of wild animals (20.164–75), blazes like a wild fire...
stares death in the face with unmatched lucidity and does not balk—and he does so bearing a shield on which is depicted the cosmos, a significance the audience is allowed to ponder in a way that the hero immersed in bloodlust cannot. The enormity of the slaughter that follows his decision to re-enter the war involves a breach of every standard of "appropriateness"—what is kata kosmon and kata moiran—in the epic (Long). As a result, we witness a spectacle whose motivation, execution, and consequence differ not in degree but in kind from other aristeiai in the poem. Ariste is thus reconfigured through a narrative that renders the normative as deficient and the deviant as the raison d'être of an epic poem that cannot provide it a home. Ironically, Achilles gains kleos by not fighting for it. From this perspective what is especially remarkable about the Iliad is that, despite its standing as the first literary work in the Western tradition, it is already self-reflexive in its treatment of heroic value, and this in a way that responds to the dynamics of tragic doubt.

The impact of Homer's depiction of heroic self-reflexivity on his poetic inheritors is perhaps nowhere so apparent as in Sophocles' exploration of the Achillean mode in Philoctetes. In his treatment of the hero who was abandoned on a desolate island by fellow Greek warriors because of the festering wound on his foot, but who is destined to take Troy with the bow given him in friendship by the dying Heracles, Sophocles turns his mythic material into a drama of doubt and decision making that surpasses in complexity what we find in Homer or, for that matter, in any of the other extant Greek tragedies. He does so by creating an entirely male cast of characters whose interactions constitute a focused treatment of the relationship between heroism and masculine friendship or philia—something adumbrated by Homer in his handling of Achilles' love of Patroclus and reworked by Shakespeare in his pairing of Othello and Iago. Structured around an embassy that evokes its Iliadic prototype, Philoctetes overlays epic form and style onto the play's tragic material at key moments, particularly in the deus ex machina, adapting Homeric precedent to an exploration of moral value that begins where the earlier poem leaves off (Beye; Blundell, "Physis"; Pucci, "Gods' Intervention" 31–44; Rabel). Achilles is dead, but the Trojan War is not yet over. Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, has been dispatched to the island of Lemnos to retrieve the forsaken hero without whom, and without whose great bow, the city of Priam cannot be taken. So says a prophecy delivered by the Trojan Helenus, whose precise contents the tragedy unfolds in accord with a pattern of "thwarted clarity." The theatricalized form of this spiritual process is to be found in the characters' carefully scripted turns and counter-turns, which are themselves aligned with the emplotted structures of peripeteia and anagnorisis.

The "panurgic" drive and the proto-Machiavel. Because the tragedy begins with an isolated Philoctetes whose wound has both "ensaved" him (1321) and alienated him from his peers, the dramatic action takes as its point of departure a situation where heroic values are already under partial erasure as a result of the brutality to which they have led. They will be further compromised in the prologue by a character who initially appears as disguised antagonist, but who gradually becomes valued other. The young Neoptolemus enters the stage overshadowed
by Odysseus, a character Sophocles transforms from the master of persuasion in the Homeric embassy into a hard-boiled pragmatist given to sophistic argument and prepared to do whatever is necessary to capture the bow (Blundell, “Moral Character”; Rose 305–19; Tessitore 63–72). Deceit is his preferred strategy, since he believes the long-suffering hero will stonewall persuasion and be impossible to take by force given “the arrows none may escape that carry death” (105). The debilitated state of Philoctetes, who has lived for nine years in bleak solitude, makes no claims upon him, even though he was the one who marooned him. “What the situation requires of a person, / such a one am I,” Odysseus asserts later in the play. “When there is a judgment regarding just and good men, / you will find no one more pious than me. / In every place, it is my nature to want to win” (1049–52). Morality is not an end in itself, but a means to seize the upper hand, and disgraceful action performed for the benefit of the group is a kind of “service” (hypoourgia, 53). It is in such opportunistic terms that Odysseus frames his “clever plot” (sophisma, 14) in which Neoptolemus becomes “a thief of the weapons that have never been conquered” (78). Anticipating the qualms of his young follower, he tries to minimize the offense: “For one short, shameless part of a day / give yourself to me, and then for the rest of time / you may be called most pious of men” (83–85).

Sophocles’ Odysseus thus manipulates the shame-ethic for his own ends, and his pretense to service (hypoourgia) is transformed into an amoral panourgia (408), a scheming willingness to say or do anything. Measured against an Achillean paradigm, this trait marks Odysseus as one who is immune to tragic experience, a point already prefigured in the Homeric tradition itself. The “necessity” for which he rhetorically argues in the prologue (11, 50, 54, 77) is the weak necessity of action directed toward personal profit (he never mentions the prophecy), not the tragic necessity of moral imperatives. In his willingness to play fast and loose Odysseus is thus the prototype of the Machiavel whose “panurgic” drive is implemented without scruple. Iago is one of his descendents.

Critics have been inclined to judge this proto-Machiavellianism against the characteristics of intransigence, grandeur, and intensity that are integral to the Achillean “heroic temper” (Knox 1–61). But this is only part of the story. Equally important is the influence exerted by the formation in the Iliad of a heroism-at-one-remove, but in Sophocles’ play that doubt is now aimed at the Achillean model itself. It is not Philoctetes, however, who functions as chief inquisitor. Although he seems to be the character in the play who would be most at home in the Iliad, his injury, incurred when he unknowingly entered a sacred precinct and was bitten by a snake, provides a constant visual reminder of an important difference between epic and tragic forms of suffering. There are no such degrading wounds in the violent world of the Iliad, and the poignant isolation that Philoctetes’ wound enforces upon him differs markedly from the chosen isolation of Achilles. It is also an image central to Sophocles’ thematizing of the idea of “divine chance” (theia tuche, 1326), an oxymoronic phrase that signifies the random agency of the gods in human affairs.

Psychomachia and straying from “nature.” Through Neoptolemus’s interactions with Philoctetes we are presented with a dialectically constructed revision of epic value that distances itself from the hierarchically “ultimate” posturing of the
Homer's Achilles, which Othello will repeat. It is a process that reveals the importance in this late fifth-century play of communicative exchange, an activity central to life in the polis. By way of affiliation with his paternal roots, which make him “noble by descent” (gennaios), Neoptolemus initially professes, “I am not one by nature [phusei] inclined to act from base trickery” (88), and again, “I prefer to err by acting honorably / than to win dishonorably” (94–95). In balking at the task put before him, the son reveals that he has been inducted into a “naturalized” heroic habitus, but only imperfectly, since his youthfulness is emphasized in the repeated use by both older characters of the words “child” (pai) and “son” (teknon) to address him. And like a child, he quickly changes his mind: within the first hundred lines he trades aidos at the prospect of defiling his late father’s memory for aidos at the prospect of disappointing his father’s peers.

From one angle, then, the drama takes on the character of a psychomachia, a struggle in and for the soul of Neoptolemus, who is caught between two paternal surrogates—Philoctetes and Odysseus—whose values diverge. Formally, the struggle is enacted as a double peripeteia and anagnorisis: Neoptolemus “falls,” in the prologue, under the pressure of a “recognition” guided by Odysseus. Yet as the play moves to correct the damage by drawing Neoptolemus into the sphere of Philoctetes, it does not, in any simple sense, return to the law of the father. Deceit is rejected, and that is of course an Achillean gesture, as is the generation of a heroism-at-one-remove. But Achillean anger and the revenge to which it leads, along with the system of compensation that underpins them, are here transformed by pity and the bonds of cooperative philia. It is this entire dialectical structure that is then set against the deus ex machina with its analogical rendering of Heracles as the divine father dispensing the will of the gods to a man who has shown every sign of not intending to yield to it. Among the many sophisticated aspects of this remarkable play, one is especially important to the thesis argued here: the dramatist mobilizes a plot of “recognition” so as to expose the social “misrecognition” of nobility as “natural.” As in the case of the Iliad, the exposure acts as a condition for the emergence of the heterodox, which once again appears as the actualization of a retroactively charged foreknowledge or shadow of intelligence.

Comic matrix/tragic action. The consequences of the play’s first peripeteia and anagnorisis are developed paradoxically: as the effectiveness of Neoptolemus’s confidence trick increases, the trust of the suffering hero grows. Shakespeare implements similar uses of identification in the machinations of Iago; in both cases we are dealing not with liars but with deceivers who improvise upon facts. From a generic point of view, the tragic action unfolds within structures that are recognizably comic. Odysseus ensnares the soul of Neoptolemus as Neoptolemus ensnares the soul of Philoctetes (the verb is ekklepto, 55); one sophisma leads to another; technē answers technē. Neoptolemus doubles Odysseus and is then himself doubled by the pseudo-Trader who backs up and elaborates on his story (542–627). Neoptolemus also doubles Philoctetes by telling a tale about himself that mimics the offense the wounded man has endured at the hands of the Greeks, and he doubles his father by pretending to have suffered the theft of a prize (Achilles’ armor) that has forced him to abandon the war and go home (343–90). The text does not provide independent corroboration of how much, if any, of what Neoptol-
emus tells Philoctetes is actually true (Roisman 156–57; Tessitore 79–80). In any
case, we are left with the corrosive effects of a deception built upon “persuasion-
based force” or “forceful persuasion,” a coalescence whose perfidy is signified by
Philoctetes’ Achillean fury when he castigates Neoptolemus after his confession
of wrongdoing: “You fire, you terror, you most hateful masterpiece of / monstrous
villainy!” (927–28). Since peitho (persuasion) has appeared in the prologue as a
civilized alternative to force and deception, the collapse of the former into the lat-
ter acts as a critique of civilization in a play that consistently reveals the reciprocal
contamination of one by the other (Segal 300–14).

Counterfeiting of the sort we have been examining is a comic strategy. In com-
edy, identity is fluid, personae are interchangeable, and mistakes can be undone.
By dropping their disguises characters facilitate the achievement of a happy end-
ing in which misunderstandings are clarified and obstacles to human harmony
removed. Tragic figures, on the other hand, disavow traditional wisdom, stand
apart from others, and by being “self-same” infuse the dramatic action with a sense
of inevitability. Offenses to their sense of honor incur wrath. By incorporating
comic structures, Sophocles adopts in Philoctetes a dramatic technique that we will
encounter again in Othello. In both cases, early hints of a favorable outcome are
played out ironically in the action, which becomes more desperate and closed-
ended as the human drama stumbles toward impasse. Disguise and deception
introduce obstacles that cannot be removed except by divine fiat or its secular
proxy, the edict of a head of state.

Error and the shadow of intelligence. The second movement of the play begins when
the deception has proved successful and Philoctetes acknowledges Neoptolemus
as a philos who, because of the goodness he exhibits in agreeing to rescue him
from Lemnos, may touch the bow of Heracles. “I myself came into possession of
it,” he says, “for having shown kindness” (670). This movement contains its own
paradox: as Neoptolemus comes to grips with what he has done and tries to make
amends to Philoctetes, the latter becomes more intransigent, more Achillean.
Before the ravaged hero, afflicted by a sudden bout of extreme pain, passes out,
he enacts the most visually powerful moment in the play: the transfer of the bow,
a sacred object of trust, to the person with whom he believes he has formed a
new bond of philia. “Keep the bow,” he says to Neoptolemus, “guard it safely”
(766). Then, recalling the agony of his friend Heracles, he asks his new “friend”
to end his suffering by burning his body on the Lemnian fire just as he burned
Heracles’—a gesture Heracles remunerated by giving Philoctetes his bow. The
bond between weapon and philos is thus reaffirmed, if disjunctively, for Neopto-
lemus is never more successful in his deceit than at this moment.

The Chorus composed of sailors under Neoptolemus’s command sing a short
and broken song to the god of Sleep, Hupnos, and urge their master to take advan-
tage of an opportune moment to make off with the weapon (827–64). The admo-
nition elicits from him an observation about the prophecy regarding the conquest
of Troy: “I see we have taken our quarry, / the bow, vainly if we sail without this
man. / The victory crown is his, him the god said we must conduct” (839–41).
This affirmation of the prophecy, which clarifies what has previously been vague—
that both the man and the bow must go to Troy—is spoken not in iambic but
hexameter, the meter of epic poetry and oracular response. The metrical change
is significant: Neoptolemus is able to state more precisely the terms of this oracle and the "language" of its message because he has distanced himself from Odysseus (Gill, "Bow" 141). Yet the moment is also marked by dissonance. The voice of the god speaking through the human has about it something foreign, and its intrusion obeys a divine agency that is at odds with the psychological and moral teleology that the play continues to develop. The young man now confronts what the Chorus calls "insoluble difficulties" (apora, 854), and the next scene opens with the literal awakening of Philoctetes and the spiritual awakening of Neoptolemus. The dynamic of thwarted clarity has begun, and it is linked with the device of "delayed exit" (Taplin, "Significant Actions" 26).

Lifting from the ground the spent hero who praises his supposed protector for his "noble nature" (eugenēs phusis, 874), the son of Achilles, bound for departure again, begins his moment of reckoning with a question that echoes through the remainder of the play: "From here, what shall I do?" (895). He asks the question again a few lines later, calling on Zeus for help (908), and repeats it after a newly informed Philoctetes rails against him for his treachery even as he begs Neoptolemus to return his bow (969). As Neoptolemus continues to vacillate, asking for direction from the Chorus (974), we encounter the rhetoric of self-division staged not as soliloquy but as halting dialogue. Central to the action is a willingness to submit to self-scrutiny, an assumption of responsibility for error, and a loosening of the compulsory force of "the natural." The interrogative mood is the grammatical corollary of the moral strain that engulfs the young hero and into which Philoctetes will be drawn as well (1350). The intrusion of Odysseus, who intercepts Neoptolemus as he turns to hand the bow back to Philoctetes, presents us with a tableau that visually represents the psychomachia being staged. With a question—"what are you doing?" (974)—that ironically echoes the play's refrain, the sophist master of deception tells his former acolyte to give him the bow. Neoptolemus does not respond (971–1073) as the older men pick up the war of words and turns to leave with the leader of this grim embassy.

_Doubt, double teleology, and the incommensurable._ When Neoptolemus returns to the stage, it is on his own terms. He now controls the action. Confessing emphatically that he has made a "shameful mistake" (tēn hamartian / aischran hamartōn, 1248–49), he directs attention to the question of justice. "I do not fear you," he tells the man of many wiles, "with justice on my side" (1251). Odysseus leaves the stage to inform the assembled Greeks of what is coming to pass—a possible bluff—but his second ambush of Neoptolemus as he attempts, once more, to pass the bow back to its rightful owner is foiled (1293). Philoctetes raises the never-erring weapon to kill him. Odysseus rushes offstage as a half-comic missed mark, visually punning on the sense of hamartia, and is seen no more. When Neoptolemus attempts to persuade the man he has deceived to let go his anger, Philoctetes lapses into questions about what he should do (1348–57), his doubt constituted as an intransigence in the Achillean mode that is crossed by a vague awareness that friendship may lead to a higher good. Recalcitrance marks the grip of a psyche brutalized by pain; the impulse to give way is the intimation that something other than pain is possible. The cooperative bent of philia that now draws both Philoctetes and Neoptolemus signifies the emergence of a new yet ironic heroism, for the action continues to move away from Troy and a cure and toward continuing alienation and anger in Oeta.
From the moment Neoptolemus begins his spiritual awakening, the divine necessity contained in the prophecy, which dictates the willing return of Philoctetes and the bow to Troy, and the human claims of sympathy and justice, which lead to the ultimate surrender of the young man's attempt to move Philoctetes with his bow to Troy, travel different paths and form opposed teleologies. That neither Neoptolemus's "terrible pity" (οικλὸς δείνος, 965) nor Philoctetes' primitive heroism, fueled by continuing hatred and fear of abuse, ultimately triumphs is the result of the dispensation passed down ex machina by Heracles, who is now the immortal adjudicator of what is to be. As a divinized hero who has known the kind of suffering Philoctetes has endured and who can claim entitlement in the restoration of the bow to a heroic context, Heracles intervenes not in a fashion that is probable given the preceding order of events, but in a way that contradicts the inner necessity of that order (cf. Knox 139–41; Segal 348–61; Rose 324–27; Tes- sitore 82–85). Philoctetes, he tells them, must go with Neoptolemus to Troy, where he will not only find a cure for his wound but also win fame for conquering the city. Furthermore, since neither man can capture Troy without the other, "like two lions consorting with each other, you must guard him as he you" (1436–37). There is no mistaking the visualized tableau of service in the exode that grimly enacts the argument Odysseus makes about service, or hypourgia, in the prologue. Nor is it easy to deny the affiliation of Heracles' forceful persuasion with the forceful deceit that has been practiced on Philoctetes. Moreover, the epic character of the god's dispensation in the tragedy does not mesh with either the language or emotional direction the play has taken. It has been remarked that Heracles characterizes his speech as a muthos rather than a logos (Rabel 301–02). The former term, used only three times in the play and only of Heracles' speech, in epic typically suggests (unlike logos or epos) power and authority (Martin 16–26) and functions as a vehicle through which Zeus transmits his will to humans. This is the word the Homeric narrator uses in Book 9 (430–31) to describe Achilles' speech and its forbidding majesty. The terminological difference marks the fact that the language of the god in the play transmits a meaning that is foreign to the tragic logos itself. Sophocles produces a gesture toward metaphysical order and the "care" (meletè) of the gods that is "external to the subjectivity of the characters," who cannot read it (Pucci, "Gods' Intervention" 43). The theia tuchè ("divinely ordained accident," 1326) of the wound is now matched by the theia tuchè of deliverance. The mood turns elegiac as the hero delivers his final farewell to "the cave that kept [with him]," to "the sea-drenched nymphs and meadows," to "the springs and Lycian drinking water" (1453–63). These elements of the physical world have been his constant companions, and he speaks to them as if they know his pain. The doubt that pervades the world of Philoctetes is present even when Heracles tells Neoptolemus in the last lines of the play to remain pious toward the gods after he returns to the war (1441), for everything that we have learned seems to suggest that it is impossible to be holy and honorable at the same time. Moreover, Heracles' call for piety cannot suppress an allusion to the future transgressions of Achilles' son, who will one day savagely murder Priam and Hecuba. This last ironic turn confirms what we have already been allowed to conclude: moral certitude assumes a simplicity of experience that does not exist. Odyssean relativism would seem to elude this problem, but it appears by turns tyrannical and anemic. The doubt felt by both Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, the only characters who change
their minds in the drama, thus emerges as the richest response to the difficulty of trying to calibrate action in terms of a single supreme good.

In the works we are exploring, doubt takes the form of an emotional and cognitive latency that, once it surfaces, bears a potential for conversion. When this happens, the latency assumes the status of retroactivated foreknowledge and as such gives way to a heroism-at-one-remove, which carries with it the power of undoing the méconnaissance of a naturalized order. This is not a matter of contestants meeting on a site where presuppositions are held in common, but of a change in the ground of action itself. Doxa shifts to an awareness of orthodox and heterodox interests, which appear as competing possibilities. From this perspective, the reconstructed heroism of Sophocles' play allows us to see that Philoctetes is implicit in Neoptolemus as the condition of pity and that Neoptolemus is implicit in Philoctetes as the condition of a non-alienated, heroic philia, even though the composite that emerges cannot survive on its own merits. It is in this way that Iago is implicit in Othello as his foreknowledge, since what he brings to awareness for Othello is the Moorishness of the Moor in Venetian society.

It has long been a commonplace of criticism to treat Othello's vulnerability as a consequence of the play's villain being, in some sense, already within the hero (Auden 266; Burke 166; Leavis 141; Warnken 2). Calling this structure of embeddedness foreknowledge emphasizes the play's investment in the epistemic problems that attend doubt, an investment that has been recognized at least since Stanley Cavell offered his reading of the play in Disowning Knowledge (125–42). Although that title is connected in Cavell's argument with the skepticism of Othello, who is "hauled back and forth across the keel of his love...[in] the most extraordinary representation...of the 'astonishment' in skeptical doubt" (128), it is arguably Iago who relativizes knowledge in the play and disavows anything more certain than opinion or belief (DiSanto). A panurgic improviser, he argues repeatedly in utramque partem and turns and turns as contingencies require. He is shrewd, capable, and measures his hate. Othello believes he "knows all qualities with a learned spirit / of human dealings" (3.3.263–64), but the imputed knowing says as much about Iago as it does about Othello's limitations as a foreigner and soldier. The key point to note at this juncture, however, is that foreknowledge is constituted in the play as a potential version of identity that takes on necessity when it is embraced as a master narrative, which is what Othello does with Iago's insinuations in the temptation scene when he concludes, "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—yet that's not much— / She's gone" (3.3.267–71). This story, so different from the romance—with its "disastrous chances," "moving accidents," and "hair-breadth escapes" (1.3.133–35)—that he weaves before the Senate in Act 1, locks the hero in a fatal self-conception. How is this self-conception related to doubt and skepticism? And is skepticism a term we want to import into discussion of a play that repeatedly exposes the vise-grip that jealousy holds over its subjects? By way of addressing these questions, we will investigate the following assertions: that the tragedy lies not in being split but in being one, not in the equivocal but the absolute, not in doubt but certitude.
Not in being split but one. Between “the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” (1.1.127) and the “full soldier” (2.1.37) whose parts, title, and perfect soul manifest him rightly (1.2.31–32) lies a divide mediated, prior to the opening of the play, by the “services [Othello has] done the signory” (1.2.18) and, in the dramatic present, by the “traveller’s tale” (1.3.138) he recites before the Senate, which earlier had enabled Desdemona to consecrate her soul “to his honours and his valiant parts” (1.3.252–53). Words and deeds: as an outsider become insider, a Muslim become Christian, a Moor become Venetian general, Othello must negotiate between them in narrative, since the bridge they form is tenuous and in need of continuous reaffirmation (Greenblatt 232–54). To frame it in the terms employed above, he is a teller of _logoi_ striving for the authority of a _muthos_ that will silence doubts and equivocations; alternatively, he is a heterodox character whose attempt to become orthodox has succeeded to the extent that, when the play opens, he can entertain fantasies of being “naturally” part of the world he inhabits.

Thus the bifurcation of Othello signified by the opposing valuations of him in Acts 1 and 2 appears, first, as an external state of affairs verbalized in the competition between Iago’s dyslogistic and the Duke’s eulogistic rhetoric. The division, however, does not disrupt Othello’s sense of his own integrated oneness (Neill, “‘Mulattos’” 361–63). That he fetches his “life and being / From men of royal siege” (1.2.21–22) is a shorthand for wholeness of self as he perceives it, a “solid virtue” (263) that lets him occupy the same public stage as the other players with a mastery that replaces implied racial inferiority with observed military and moral superiority. A strong undercurrent of Achillean directness and contempt for deception, which we have already seen in Philoctetes, flows in Othello, as does a propensity to idealize, which manifests itself in an all-or-nothing kind of thought. These traits are integral to the profile of the hero-as-warrior (Council 113–35; Wells 86–116; Sadowski 164–82). For such a figure to be complete is to be wholly so; to lose honor is to lose it utterly in a zero-sum game. As in the _Iliad_, we find gestures that replace dialectical terms with ultimate ones. But it is a mistake to brand this kind of rhetorical upgrading as arrogant or egotistic. The inflated storytelling is the most powerful instrument Othello has to assimilate himself into Venetian society. “The self he shapes for his audience is that to which he aspires” (Berry 326), and it is a self that tries to reduce strangeness—but only so far. His rhetoric also engages _das Pathos der Distanz_: he conducts himself as if military excellence signifies aristocratic rank, which in turn equals moral virtue. He is, in his own eyes, heroically set apart, an extraordinary individual who breathes the air of a rarified life. Naturalization within distance, then, is the totalizing gesture he enacts. And yet, in the process of presenting the simultaneously elevating and degrading context of Othello’s monolithic self-naturalizing, Shakespeare lets us see the conditions of self-division.

These conditions unfold around questions of property (Burke 166–70; Calderwood). Desdemona begins the play as both Othello’s intimate beloved and her father Brabanzio’s possession. As the former, she provides a mirror in which her husband sees an idealized image of his visage; as the latter, she is valued property liable to exchange. Her importance to Othello’s acquisition of symbolic capital objectifies her, yet, because the Moor as Venetian depends upon her freely choosing to marry him, she mediates his internal sense of self. In the play,
then, female property is both a supplement to what is supposed already to be whole and an essential attribute of the dependent male. Therein lies the problem. While Othello speaks a language of autonomous subjectivity, ostensibly valuing Desdemona's freedom just as he values his own "unhoused free condition" (1.2.26), he remains psychically aligned with an older social system associated with the amassing of status via property. Elopement is the catalyzing event. The free woman, whose active choice is in the private realm first valued and then degraded into an instance of "nature erring from itself" (3.3.232), is converted in the public realm to the woman-as-damaged-goods, at least in the world of Iago and Othello. The reversal, which takes the better part of Act 3 to effect, also passes through doubt, but the degradation it entails is the reverse of the ennobling pity in *Philoctetes*, and it lacks the divinized dimension of Achilles' avenging rampage, a point to which I will return.

Let me recapitulate. To himself, Othello is natural; to others, exotic, a term that expresses the partial assimilation of strangeness. To Iago, he is monstrous, and he is so from the beginning. For Iago the natural and the exotic are "misrecognitions" of Othello's monstrosity, his hybrid unnaturalness as expressed especially in miscegenation, and it is under Iago's influence that Othello comes to see himself this way, too. This is not a view in which the playwright is complicit. What Shakespeare shows is that the supposed unmasking of the "savage black barbarian" is an expression of self-hatred turned outward. That is, Othello *the Moor* is as much a projection of Iago's rancorous sense of his own inferiority, of being passed over, as Iago *the maledictory demon* is a projection of Othello's vulnerability to believing the worst about himself (Adelman). The hero's descent is comprehensible only in terms of this perverse symbiosis, which entails a movement into a master narrative alternative to the one with which Othello begins, yet also implicit in it. Generically, the play configures tragedy as emerging from the matrix of a self-narrated romance in which difference is mediated along comic lines by a marriage that appears to overcome the law of the repressive father. As in the case of *Philoctetes*, however, an arbitrary social construction, here of female "nature," is laid bare by the fact that errancy is a projection of male anxiety. Caught between trust and suspicion, as embodied in Desdemona and Iago, respectively, Othello undergoes a *psychomachia* more degrading than Neoptolemus's.

*Not in the equivocal but the absolute.* "My soul hath her content so absolute / That not another comfort like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate" (2.1.187–89), says Othello upon arriving safely on Cyprus after having navigated one storm and before facing another more treacherous one. For a brief moment, however, strung between the night of the elopement and the night-arrival on an island at the margins of empire, Othello finds himself in a state of bliss. This has led some critics to speculate that, with one nocturnal sojourn already interrupted and another about to be, the marriage is never consummated. Non-consummation, according to this view, is prerequisite to the bliss of a hero who has been, depending on the critic, "colonialized" by the Christian animosity toward sexuality (Greenblatt 242–43), tyrannized by a superego that gives impetus to a "pathological male animus toward sexuality" (Snow 388), or horrified by the sexuality he has opened in Desdemona (Cavell 136). Although the play is in fact equivocal on the matter of consummation, the dramatic action does set our imaginations to work on what exactly is
happening offstage in the bed (Neill, “Unproper Beds” 127–45; Boose, “Let It Be Hid” 36–43), and by doing so it encourages us to engage in something like the movement Othello undergoes in searching for evidence of his wife’s dishonesty. The problem lies in the absolute—another expression of the desire for transcendence. What is properly a theological concept migrates to a human relationship, and Desdemona becomes what Cavell calls the stake: “My life upon her faith,” Othello declares as he ironically turns over to Iago care of Desdemona’s passage to Cyprus (1.3.293), and later, “Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee, and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again” (3.3.91–93). The inflationary rhetoric breaks out elsewhere as well. To Cassio, she is “divine Desdemona” (2.1.74), “paragons description and wild fame” (2.1.63), and “is indeed perfection” (2.3.24). Iago’s observation that Desdemona is “framed as fruitful / As the free elements” introduces sexual innuendo into her cosmic expansiveness, as does his claim that “her appetite shall play the god / With ... [Othello’s] weak function” (2.3.315–16, 321–22). In a world lived sub specie aeternitatis, absolutes degrade into equivocation, the linguistic equivalent of ambiguity at the moral level: Othello’s “absolute content” (does it have a sexual register?) easily drifts into Iago’s “absolute lust” (does it have a theological register?) (2.1.279). The idealizing character of the former is closely linked with the cynicism of the latter.

The world of Othello is not Hamlet’s, where equivocation will undo us. What undoes us in the world of this play is the erroneous ascription of god-terms to beings who are not gods. This happens not only on the part of Othello, as he first turns Desdemona into a holy mystery and then into an obscene one (4.2), but also on that of Desdemona, as her elevation of Othello in the act of falling in love with his demiurgic story makes it impossible for her to appreciate that his visage in fact inhabits a socially situated body and that “the sun where he was born” did not draw “all such humours” as jealousy from him (3.4.28–29). The drama never looks much beyond this fatal construction of human identity. The sexes remain bound in a paralyzing hell where “exsufflicate and blowed surmises” never match inferences (3.3.186–87) and where what is hidden is some monster in thought too horrible to show (Newman; Neill, “Unproper Beds”). By linking “close dilations working from the heart” (3.3.128) with thoughts vile and false, Iago creates a fertile ground for suspicion (Parker 60–72). Monstrosity and its derivatives, which are always used in the context of what cannot be seen or seen only in prurience, appear so often in the play as to become incantatory, magically producing what they name or, conversely, refrain in dread from naming.

Othello’s fall from noble hybrid (the Moor of Venice) into Iago’s cankered world (the Moor of Venice) marks the dissolution of the first-order heroism associated with the epic-as-romance. In the state of increasingly violent hypervigilance that Iago calls forth from Othello, the protagonist’s drama emerges as a darkly ironized version of an idealizing heroic paradigm. Invested in a cult of honor from the beginning to the end of the play, Othello’s need for closure perversely requires that he exact revenge on Desdemona for her presumed adultery, strangling her “in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.197–98), in a murder he calls a “sacrifice” (5.2.70), for “she must die, else she’ll betray more men” (6). Standing over the bed where she lies sleeping, he is caught by equivocation in the attempted absolution of “it is the cause” (5.1.1), just as his effort to secure
purity in “death” brings sexual equivocation into the utterance even as he stifles it. The ground of Othello’s *hamartia* is a yearning for the absolute in an ambiguous and contingent world. The error itself is the enactment of murder as righteous revenge.

*Not doubt but certitude.* The tragic node here is contained in a simple line: “No, to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved” (3.3.183–84). “No” is Othello’s response to an imagined life lived with “fresh suspicions” (183), but it also designates the repression required to attain certitude. “No” blocks out, refuses, and nullifies. But by tagging its object, it creates a fascination with the hidden that becomes obsessive, as in the case of the sexual acts Othello fantasizes happening behind closed doors. The madness into which the hero falls in Act 3 is induced by the contradictory sway of “Nay, and I will” (398). It is this that transforms certainty into violence, and to violence Othello submits, first by requiring a “prohibition” that bears “no hinge or loop / to hang a doubt on” (370–71), and then by seeking a punishment that satisfies his need for “blood, blood, blood” (454). Having always inhabited a realm of either/or, he suffers a precipitous breakdown in the grip of which his expressed need for “ocular proof” becomes vulnerable to manipulation from the moment it is named (365).

This brings us to the handkerchief. When the play opens in the confusion of night and Brabanzio learns his daughter is gone, he imagines that Desdemona has been “enchanted” by “chains of magic” (1.2.64–65) and that Othello has “Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals / That weaken motion” (75–76). When it becomes clear that Othello has done no such thing, the taint of “foul charms” (74) passes away. But an important association has been made. Enchantment is an element integral to the white patriarchal construction of exotic otherness, and, as such, its position on the spectrum of agency lies on the other side of deliberation and choice. When, therefore, the much-changed Othello of Act 3, the Othello who has previously dissociated himself from spells and incantations, explains to his wife that the handkerchief she cannot produce has “magic in the web of it” (3.4.67), he signifies a superstitious recourse to a form of “Egyptian” binding from which he has previously distanced himself and submission to a sphere of mysterious female powers where wives control the wayward passions of men through instruments unique to their sex. For it was a charmer who gave Othello’s mother the embroidered napkin, and she passed it on to her son, who was to give it to his wife that she might subdue the man she loved. It is, of course, true that the story changes somewhat in the dénouement of Act 5 when Othello says of the handkerchief that “it was an antique token / My father gave my mother” (5.2. 223–24). But in both cases we are dealing with a fetishized and therefore quasi-magical object whose symbolic logic links it to absoluteness and moral purity. “To lose’t or give’t away,” Othello says, “were such perdition / As nothing else could match” (65–66). With this rhetoric of ultimate things comes a belief that the lost handkerchief woven with red strawberries that are at once a pledge of love and a token of the wedding sheets (Boose, “Othello’s Handkerchief”), whether or not they have actually been stained, is a signifier of lapsed chastity and the prostituted female body. As such, from Othello’s perspective it is the most potent of several confirmations “strong as proofs of holy writ” (3.3.328) that Desdemona is a whore. From ours, on the other hand, it is a numinous object that focuses the tragic hero’s need to elim-
iniate doubt and to reintegrate the divided self around the "justice" of revenge for fantasized acts of adultery.

Achilles' shield and Philoctetes' bow operate in a similar way. As male implements of war, they are symbols that integrate the hero and his actions with the divine. But each bears an ironic relationship to the integrative function it assumes. As Achilles charges into battle, the shield is most obviously a weapon that channels grief into violence. But it is also a consummately crafted artistic object that situates human activities and conflicts, including one between contenders for fair compensation that hearkens back to the quarrel in Book 1, within a cosmic order. As a work of poïësis, of divinely inspired making, the shield stands in an analogical relationship with the Homeric poem itself, a poem that transcends the particular with its universalizing aspirations. This is a perspective denied the heroic agent, although he approaches it in his challenge-from-above in Book 9. Thus the generation of a heroism-at-one-remove, even if always related to the reflective power of doubt to work changes upon a primary model, remains relationally situated in such a way as to emphasize human limits. The daemonically charged object signifies, then, the ultimate impossibility of transcendence, a point emphasized by the fact that in bearing it the hero also descends to the bestial.

This is true of Philoctetes as well. Both a symbol of technological power and a magical talisman of a dead king (Segal 294), the bow embodies the story of an apotheosized culture-hero whose weapon overcame monstrosities in the march of civilized life toward more enlightened forms. Yet the divinity of the bow is squandered by its use on Lemnos as a mere tool for survival. Philoctetes understands its relationship to the basic biological needs of man as animal, and beyond them he appreciates its significance as a token of heroic philia. But, even in the end, he is unable to conceive the divine dimension of its power, and the deus ex machina, which compels without explaining, emphasizes the gulf between mortals and immortals even in the act of crossing it.

The irony is sharper in Othello, where the handkerchief carries with it associations of a domestic world the hero knows little about, a world where the private escapes the ordering force of military command. Entering the play as it does after Othello has bid farewell to "the plumed troops and the big wars / That makes ambition virtue" (3.3.354–55), the handkerchief is bound up with delusion in its most life-stealing form: it contracts the world into an object that can bear no such weight, thereby ironizing the need for certitude that evolves around it. Unlike the shield, which only Achilles can manage, it passes through the hands of nearly everyone in the play. This connects it with Philoctetes' bow, also an object that changes hands, but only those of two people who move through its exchange from a relationship of deception to one of honesty, precisely the opposite of the movement in Shakespeare's play. Most importantly, recourse to the handkerchief, a domestic object tied to a female genealogy, marks a false resolution to the problem of Othello's tragically divided self as he tries through its "testimony" to force a commensurability between the divergent values of love and war. The divinity in the handkerchief appears in the end to be the contrivance of a man whose desire for transcendence grows as he moves in the opposite direction.

The tragic consequences of wringing certitude out of a world that can never produce it are apparent to the very end. With the exception of Coriolanus,
Othello's *anagnórisis* is more partial than that of any other Shakespearean tragic hero. He learns he has been wrong about Desdemona, but proceeds no further on the path of self-knowledge than saying to the Venetian lords who surround him in the last scene, "Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my body and soul?" (5.2.307–08). Othello continues to see evil as something that comes from without. It is of a piece with this view that in his last monologue Othello says "Speak of me as I am" (351), an assertion of a self-identical personality that echoes Iago's ironic "I am not what I am" (1.1.65). The point is underscored by Othello's recollection of a past event that demonstrates the same commitment to soldierly action, justice, and revenge that has characterized him from the beginning: he casts himself as both the "turban'd Turk" who "beat a Venetian and traduced the state" and the defender of that same state who "took by th' throat the circumcised dog / And smote him thus" (5.2.352–56)—that is, as both offender and judge. Unlike Achilles, who poses the problem of incommensurability by looking death without fame squarely in the face, or Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, who feel its force in the violence of an epiphany, Othello does not see incompatible moralities at work in his killing of Desdemona. He continues to understand revenge as a suitable punishment for the crime of adultery; his only error, as he sees it, was in mistaking Desdemona as unfaithful. In other words, his major premise (the moral universal) remains intact; only the minor premise (the particular based on sense perception) is rejected.

It is not surprising that Othello's backward glance at time in the final moments of the play ("in Aleppo once," 361), his resigned acceptance ("Soft you, a word or two before you go," 347), and his appeal to sadness ("the melting mood," 358) all convey the elegiac. Although the mood may initially recall the conclusion of *Philoctetes*, the elements are here immersed in a structure that controls Othello and speaks through him rather than being spoken by him. A minimally realized self-reflexivity remains a shadow of intelligence, more palpable than in the scenes that precede the killing of Desdemona, but nonetheless suspended between the first and third person, between interiority and its external projection. The heroism-at-one-remove in this play, then, signifies a movement from the morally simple world of romance into the complex irony of suffering that deepens the character of an Othello who nevertheless continues to "recognize" himself through a lens of "misrecognition" because he never gives up the commitment to honor that led him into error. That his all-too-human limits become the chosen horizon of belief for Desdemona, who begins the play with a forthrightness that conjures the confidence of Shakespeare's comic heroines, makes it understandable why the shocked Lodovico commands that their bed "be hid" (375) in the final scene. But hiding the tragic loading of the bed only prolongs the fascination with secret knowledge. If we look for skepticism in the play, we will not find it in Othello, who is a believer to the core. As for Iago, he does not live, like skeptics, in a state of suspended belief about what we can know. Motivated by jealousy, which looks always for confirmation of infidelity rather than fidelity, he moves repeatedly from doubt to the worst-case assumption that those around him are involved in illicit sexual activity in a way that personally discredits him. His hard-bitten fears send him twitching after specters, latencies, dream images, anything to save him from the torture of a life in soliloquy except when soliloquy can yield a hate-mongering, diabolical design.
He is more the dogmatist than Othello and more the metaphysician, too, with developed positions about reason, passion, reputation, and human nature, which he essentializes as bestial. His panurgic drive is the embittered will to power in a world where everyone has a price and no one is immune to the suggestibility born of insecurity. We see glimmers of his profile in the image of Agamemnon in Book 9 of the Iliad and a more fully realized form in the character of Odysseus in Philoctetes. Without such inciters, the tragic foreknowledge or shadow of intelligence that surfaces in the main character, or a pair of characters, would remain latent. That it does not, that it rises and mutates into a process of recognition, or recognition thwarted, whose effect is to denaturalize, at least in part, das Pathos der Distanz, testifies to the insistence with which the search for warrants for belief and the desire for transcendence are essential to the heroic enterprise.

Louisiana State University

Works Cited


