

BODY-MIND APORIA IN THE SEIZURE OF OTHELLO

Abstract. One of the most curious events in *Othello* is the titular character's epileptic fit, which does not appear in the story by Cinthio that is the accepted source of the play's plot. Why does Shakespeare invent such an incident? The easiest direction to take is the equation of epilepsy with demonic possession, a common belief in the early modern period. In this essay, however, I argue from textual and critical evidence for a philosophical interpretation of Othello's epilepsy: namely, that his seizure, particularly in relation to the play's conflict of reason and emotion, can be seen as a challenge to early modern orthodoxy concerning the mind-body problem, in that it conflates the distinction between body and soul.

And wheresoeuer he taketh him, he teareth him, and he
fometh, and gnasheth his teeth, and pineth away.

—Mark 9:18 (Geneva Bible)

TWO EPILEPTICS APPEAR IN the Shakespearean corpus, Caesar and Othello. But in regard to his sources, Shakespeare assumes Caesar's condition on the wide testimony of the Ancients,¹ while the Moor's affliction has no precedent in the *barbaro* of Cinthio's *Un capitano Moro*. Though critics have long relegated this episode to the periphery of their inquiries—perhaps because its peculiar intensity is more easily ignored on the page than on the stage—Othello's seizure, as such a violent deviation from its source material, entreats us, like the death of Cordelia in *King Lear*, to interrogate its function. Here, I shall present a reading of Othello's epileptic fit as a point of aporia that challenges early modern orthodoxy concerning the mind-body problem.

Othello's last utterance before his seizure is the cry "O devil!" (4.1.43),² which recalls the common association, even identification, of epilepsy with demonic possession.³ The imagery of possession recurs when Othello later insists that his wife falsify her fidelity, "lest, being like one of heaven, the devils themselves / Should fear to seize thee" (4.2.37–38), and when he finally laments before the tragically loaded bed, "Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight" (5.2.275–76).⁴ Recognizing that *possession* or *seizure* implies some power without, it is tempting to defer to Iago's stereotype as the stock Vice: as one scholar puts it, "if the body is the Devil's empire, as Luther maintained, and Iago is a devil, then Othello is now fully within His Satanic Majesty's dominion."⁵

As a kind of ownership, this invites comparison to Othello's "being taken by the insolent foe / And sold to slavery" (1.3.139): the lord-and-servant relation between the Moor and his ensign inverts, as the former becomes the slave, the latter the master. The word *slave* functions as an epithet of abuse throughout the play, a use that appeals to a certain Elizabethan ethic; specifically, "a Cartesian ideal of rational control in which one's desires are objectified and strength of will is the central virtue."⁶ By this code, Othello's hamartia is his clear capitulation to the "the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (3.3.168)—this "meat" being the bodily baseness to which the person is reduced without proper assertion of will—just as Roderigo should cool his love for Desdemona, for it "is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.335–36).

"Nature," Othello says in the most coherent, if still enigmatic, sentence of his pre-seizure monologue, "would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction" (4.1.39–40), which Dr. Johnson reads as indicating some higher power that "superintends the order of nature and of life";⁷ yet it rather echoes Iago's early reduction of Desdemona to the carnal body, predicting that she will fall into promiscuity, that her "nature will instruct her" (2.1.231–32). Instead of supernatural charge, then, it is Othello's body, his physical nature, that instructs his convulsion, yet it is done by his own volition, at Iago's suggestion—"what you will" (4.1.34). Here, the will does not stand outside the body as a mediator of the passions: less a case of demonic possession than dispossession of the body from the rule of the will, Othello allows himself to descend into frenzy, and his seizure is his failure to abide by his adopted Venetian ideal of stoic self-mastery.

Nor yet does cunning Iago evade such dispossession. The ensign, despite his disdain for such "raging motions" (1.3.331)—"To plume up

my will," he marks his aim—similarly gives in to his own overwhelming passion, his unreasoned hate: "I hate the Moor / And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He's done my office" (1.3.385–87). As Robert Heilman appraises this passage, "Rarely is a conjunction used so effectively: the hate is prior, and a motive is then discovered."⁸ Iago rationalizes his hate and attempts to define a cause, so as to deny the hold of his emotions and thereby maintain belief in his own self-government: what Coleridge called "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity" is only an exercise in self-deceit. And if the passions, then, enslave Iago as much as they do Othello, the simple equation of the ensign as possessor and the Moor as possessed collapses.

At the heart of the relevant ethic of self-control is the dualistic division of body and mind, the latter being the station of the will, or the Christian soul.⁹ It is the same dichotomization of self that resounds in Iago's happy credo, "Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners" (1.3.320–22): there is a difference in substance. Yet congruent with the actual neurological disorder,¹⁰ as a state of disturbed perception often precedes a seizure, so Othello breaks out of the practiced verse in which he has thus far contained himself and rants in prosaic confusion. Throughout the monologue, mind and body intermingle: "Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her! Lie with her, zounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief! confessions! Handkerchief!—To confess, and be hanged for his labour! First to be hanged, and then to confess: I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips. Is't possible? Confess! Handkerchief! O devil!" (4.1.35–43).

The sexual "lie" becomes the epistemic "belie," while confession remains inseparable from physical objects, the evidential handkerchief and the punitive noose. Though "shadowing" certainly asserts the darkness of his passion, as well as the *overshadowing* of his will, it is also the darkening of the border between his thought and his body. "Noses, ears, and lips" indicate the inadequacy of his senses, the very mediation between his conception of the world and his involvement in it. Othello's mental energies, his stress and distress, provoke the physical onset of his epilepsy. Thus, Othello's seizure problematizes the notion of a substantial difference between body and mind, ultimately calling into question the existence of the eternal soul.

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1. Suetonius, for example, says in *De vita Caesarum* I.45 that Caesar “was afflicted by the disease of the assembly” (*comitiali morbo correptus est*), an idiom that, like the French *mal comitial*, denotes epilepsy.
2. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Nelson, 1997). Text references are to act, scene, and line of this edition.
3. For historical background, see Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 137–95.
4. F. W. Brownlow, “Samuel Harsnett and the Meaning of Othello’s ‘Suffocating Streams’,” *Philological Quarterly* 58 (1979): 107–15, relates the possibility of some influence from Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a contemporary account of purported exorcisms that influenced the later *King Lear*.
5. James L. Calderwood, “Speech and Self in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 (Autumn 1987): 298.
6. Camille Wells Slight, “Slaves and Subjects in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (Winter 1997): 384.
7. Samuel Johnson, in *A New Variorum Edition of Othello*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1886), p. 236.
8. Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in “Othello”* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1956), p. 31.
9. The notion of such a body-mind divide is evident in Christian theology and the thought of medieval Scholasticism especially, as epitomized by the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. René Descartes later presents a similar secular elaboration in the *Meditationes de prima philosophia*.
10. J. P. Emery, “Othello’s Epilepsy,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 46 (1959): 30–32, first demonstrated the likeness of actual epileptic symptoms to this dramatic depiction.