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Arresting figures: Reading and theorizing Renaissance texts

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ARRESTING FIGURES:
READING AND THEORIZING RENAISSANCE TEXTS

by

YUH-JYH LIN

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ABSTRACT

Arresting Figures:
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Yuh-jyh Lin

This dissertation analyzes three Renaissance texts vis-à-vis critiques of the theories that enable some readings of those three texts. The Introduction to the dissertation offers a critique of Stephen Greenblatt's "cultural poetics" through a close reading of a passage from his Renaissance Self-Fashioning. His "cultural poetics" is instigated as much by his anxiety about the text as by his concern with cultural patterns.

The opening chapter deals with the problem of the narrative voice in the first episode of The Faerie Queene. Patricia Parker resolves the problem of reading this episode by treating the narrator's reading of the landscape as a vantage point above and beyond the text. This chapter, however, explores the way in which the text resists his reading and the way in which his reading becomes a kind of self-defense mechanism, betraying his anxiety about, and his self-estrangement from, the landscape.
The next chapter takes up the question of male selfhood and its relation to female sexuality in *Othello*. While Marguerite Waller divests the play of its multiple perspective by installing Othello as a reference point and by taking Iago's malice as the answer to Othello's treatment of Desdemona, this chapter treats Othello's selfhood as an object of inquiry and analyzes the tension between his selfhood and Desdemona's sexuality.

The last chapter opens with a critique of Stanley Fish's theory about the reading experience of *Samson Agonistes*. Fish postulates that the play encourages certain responses from the reader only to frustrate him. But this postulation betrays the critic's self-alienation from the text. While his desire for closure leads him to trivialize the reading experience of the play, this chapter proposes a mode of close reading that explores both the way language conveys a complex attitude toward every issue Fish tries to resolve and the way language generates psychological, ethical, and ontological ambiguities which persist throughout the play.
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I am fortunate to have had Margaret Wong, Faye Walker-Pelkey, Kate Massengale, Zhihong Tang, and Wen-jia You as friends. Their encouragement and concern have been a sustaining force for me in my graduate career.

This dissertation is fondly dedicated to my wife, Kuo Shur-nuee. I could not have gotten through my graduate years without her understanding, support, and love.
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Introduction

This dissertation was originally entitled "Exploring Some Renaissance Texts: Against Theorizations." As that title suggests, my initial attempt was, first, to do a close reading of every chosen text—to explore the complexities of, and the complications in, the text—and, second, to challenge both some readings of the texts I have chosen and the theories that enable those readings. Like those new historicists who manage to see the interplay between different kinds of texts, I wished to see the interplay between the literary text and the critical or theoretical text. Unlike the new historicists, however, I was not concerned to demonstrate or prove any block theory of Renaissance literature and culture by my readings; on the contrary, I was concerned to examine any theory—to see how the critic raises issues, how he takes a stance toward the issues he has raised, and how his theory regulates or fails his reading of the text under consideration.

Part of my initial conception still survives in this dissertation. As the reader will see, in every chapter my approach to the text is situated against the background of some other critic's approach, and I still remain interested in confronting specific instances of the critic's argument, in locating unconscious assumptions, and in calling into question hidden critical agendas. In the course of writing the dissertation, however, I have come to feel that the issue is
not so much reading versus theory or textual exploration versus theorization as the difference between two approaches to reading, which implies the difference between two attitudes toward the text.

In my contact with any of the texts discussed in this dissertation, at the center of my concern has been the question: how can we do justice to the text? My approach to this question is by way of reading the text slowly and patiently, cautiously and respectfully, by way of listening to what is going on in the language of the text or, for that matter, what is going on in the words of any speaker. This approach involves a loosening of our rigid cognitive grid of understanding and a willingness to follow the lead of the text in its ever-changing complexities. In this sense, it is not so much that we read the text as that the text reads us.

What I have been resisting then is the attitude that sees the text as an object to be mastered or domesticated by the reassuring certitude of any prior frame. When Patricia Parker takes the narrative voice of The Faerie Queene as a given and then observes that the problem for the characters and the reader is learning how to read, reading becomes a process whereby one learns to recognize the authority of the narrative voice, which guarantees a vantage point above and beyond the text. In the same manner, Marguerite Waller virtually divests Othello of the multiplicity of its perspective when she installs the play's eponymous hero as a reference point and
seizes upon Iago's malice melodramatically as the answer to Othello's treatment of Desdemona. Sometimes, the need for a prior frame can betray not only the critic's impatience with the text but a touch of self-estrangement from the text as well. Thus, when Stanley Fish postulates that Samson Agonistes encourages certain responses from the reader so as to frustrate him, he is apparently alienating the poem from the reader. And when he goes on to offer the "standard" which will allow the reader to avoid frustration, that standard sounds like an anxiety-allaying device serving to rescue the reader from the threat of a disruptive force.¹

From this point of view, what I initially termed "theory" need not manifest itself in an elaborate system of conceptual principles; it can take the form of any predetermination or presupposition about the text and may have something to do with the need to cope with one's own anxiety about the text. Consider, for instance, the following remarks made by Stephen Greenblatt in the Introduction to his Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, a pioneering work in what comes to be called "New Historicism" and a seminal book for much of current Renaissance studies:

In attempting to glimpse the formation of identity in the English Renaissance, we cannot rest content with statistical tables, nor are we patient enough to tell over a thousand stories, each with its slight variants. The problem is not only lack of
patience but a sense of hopelessness: after a thousand, there would be another thousand, then another, and it is not at all clear that we would be closer to the understanding we seek. So from the thousands, we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns.

That they do so is not, I think, entirely our own critical invention: such at least is one of the enabling presumptions of this book. . . .2

Greenblatt says that he is not patient enough to "tell over a thousand stories," because each story can only have "slight variants." The phrase "slight variants" implies that the thousand stories are at bottom similar in kind; if they are different in any sense, they are simply different versions of the same story, namely, the same story about "the formation of identity." One wonders then what a boredom or even torture the reading experience is for a reader who can only see "slight variants" of the same theme in "a thousand stories"; or what a depressing prospect awaits the reader who has already foreseen that all he will see in "a thousand stories" is merely "slight variants" of the same theme.

A question suggests itself: how does Greenblatt know that each of the thousand stories can only have "slight variants"?
Before he tells over a thousand stories, he has already predetermined that all stories are the same story. That predetermination thus circularly justifies his own impatience. To put the matter otherwise, his impatience seems "prior" to his "foreknowledge" about the "slight variants" in the sense that the "slight variants" may have been invented to defend his impatience. He apparently feels that there must be a "cause" for his impatience and, in attempting to account for it, he ascribes it to the fundamental monotony and similarity that mark all stories. Edward Pechter has observed that "New-historicist is a criticism of recognition, of knowing again what one knew before." But the instance of Greenblatt here suggests that his "cultural poetics" may be a poetics of impatience as well; he does not even take the trouble to "recognize," to identify what he knows now as something he has known before; instead, he considers what he has known before as something "we" will "know" in the future and invites us to share his impatience. Once his impatience convinces him that there is nothing new in the stories he has not yet told, he can feel justified to turn his back on them and to encourage us to follow suit.

In this respect, note that Greenblatt says "tell over" instead of "read," and "stories" instead of "texts", "poems," or "plays." His language suggests that he is impatient not only with sheer quantity ("a thousand") but with the process of reading and with the text itself. Reading a text for him is
tantamount to telling a story, and telling a story is tantamount to telling it "over," that is, getting it over and done with--fast. Furthermore, the adverb "over" can mean not only "through"; it can also suggest a kind of movement above something so as to pass across it. The text can exist for him only in so far as it is related to "what we need" (i.e., what he needs). Having decided that the thousand stories are fundamentally the same story about "the formation of identity," the critic apparently regards anything unrelated to "the formation of identity" as a barrier to be passed across. The attempt to "glimpse the formation of identity" condemns the observer to view the text from a distance, to move over it from one end to the other, and to be always back where he has begun--with what he needs and little else. Since the critic attempts only to "glimpse," to give a brief, passing look at, the theme of "the formation of identity," one even wonders whether he is interested in the theme per se or whether the theme is a mere device allowing him an easy shortcut out of the text.

Yet, if all stories are fundamentally the same story, if each story can only have "slight variants," why does Greenblatt go on to say that "The problem is not only lack of patience but a sense of hopelessness," that "it is not at all clear that we would be closer to the understanding we seek"? He apparently apprehends that the "variants" are perhaps not so "slight"; they are perhaps great enough to hinder him from
being "closer to the understanding [he seeks]." Right after he says, "each with its slight variants," impatience suddenly gives way to "a sense of hopelessness." The Greenblattian project, we might say, is an attempt to convert the "variant" from the sense of "something exhibiting variety and diversity" into the sense of "something fundamentally identical" as if the "variant" in the former sense were what elicits the feeling of hopelessness and hence what must be overcome in the quest for self-identity, for a union of the self and "the understanding" it seeks. The phrase "be closer to the understanding [he seeks]" indicates that the relationship, or rather the struggle, between the self and the text is conceived in spatial terms. In this formulation, the "understanding" is posited as a self-alienating, projective goal to be achieved by the self, and the text comes to embody the intervening space, as it were, separating the self from the "understanding" it seeks as if, in encountering the text, the self were (re)experiencing the inner division between desire and fulfillment.

Thus, when Greenblatt says, "after a thousand, there would be another thousand, then another," the implication is not only that he is simply overwhelmed by a massive amount of stories but that the attempt to "slight" the textual "variants" immediately evokes "a sense of hopelessness" and a subliminal dread of losing the self in the ocean of the thousand "variants," as it were, that keep on diversifying and
multiplying themselves. This diversified and diversifying excess generates uncertainties and ambiguities which are perceived as a threat to the anticipated marriage of the self and the "understanding": "and it is not at all clear that we would be closer to the understanding we seek." The endless "anotherness" of this excess is apparently what makes it appear as an other, an alien force, to the self.

The "understanding" Greenblatt seeks can suggest an attempt to get thoroughly acquainted with the nature of the object of his study. Yet, since that "understanding" is invoked to overcome his despair, his "sense of hopelessness," it can also have a homeostatic function serving to protect him from the "sense of hopelessness." If the "variants" generate ambiguities and uncertainties that may call "the understanding" he seeks into question, those ambiguities and uncertainties are nonetheless suppressed in favor of his need to take refuge in that "understanding." Under the auspices of that "understanding," he can dismiss those "variants" as "slight" and render them incapable of upsetting his psychic economy. To "understand" the object of his study is simultaneously to master his "sense of hopelessness" by rendering an alien force non-threatening. His "cultural poetics" may be a poetics of despair as well as a poetics of impatience.

"So from the thousands," Greenblatt concludes, "we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within
themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns." We cannot find "what we need," however, unless we have predetermined, in advance of inquiry, "what we need"; we cannot know what will "promise access to larger cultural patterns" unless we have predetermined what those "larger cultural patterns" are. Here we get to the core of what I initially named "theory." Greenblatt posits "the understanding we seek" as the telos for the enterprise of his "cultural poetics." Once he is resolved to seek such an "understanding," he destines himself to reach the destination (or pre-destination?) which he is resolved to arrive at; once he has decided that such an understanding is always already there, he is bound to see it everywhere. Where there's a will there's a way: his (pre)determination apparently overcomes the obstacle of his inkling that he may not be "closer to the understanding [he seeks]."

But the telos of "the understanding" he seeks is self-defeating as well as self-fulfilling. When Greenblatt says, "In attempting to glimpse the formation of identity in the English Renaissance, we cannot rest content with statistical tables," the attempt to "glimpse the formation of identity in English Renaissance" is perhaps not "one of the enabling presumptions of this book" but a disabling or inhibiting presumption ("cannot"="be unable to" or "be not permitted to"). For as soon as such an attempt becomes a regulating
principle, it so limits the scope of inquiry as to trivialize his critical activities. The critic is all too willing to place over himself a censorship that supervises his critical conduct, telling him what he can do and what he cannot do. Earlier in the Introduction to his book, in speaking of "the intellectual, social, psychological, and aesthetic structures that govern the generation of identities," Greenblatt observes: ". . . if we say that there is a heightened awareness of the existence of alternative modes of social, theological, and psychological organization, we must say that there is a new dedication to the imposition of control upon those modes and ultimately to the destruction of alternatives" (pp. 1-2). "Dedicated" to the belief that the individual's behavior is "governed" by "a set of control mechanisms" (p. 3), Greenblatt has already in his own way reproduced "a set of control mechanisms" that "govern" his critical activities and what he must say and thus has himself prepared the ground for "the imposition of control upon" the "alternative modes" of his investigations.

"So from the thousands, we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns": the connective "So" signals Greenblatt's resolve to secure himself against the "sense of hopelessness" by achieving the "understanding" that will master the "variants" of the text. The
phrase "seize upon" can mean "make use of something as a last resort" or "resort to something in desperation" as well as "take hold of something forcibly (with the hands)." The handful of arresting figures he seizes upon become simultaneously a kind of desperate measure against a threatening force and a kind of refuge for a self faced with, and besieged by, danger and hostility from all sides. The word "handful" thus can mean not only "a small number" but both "as much or as many as the hand will grasp or contain" and "as much as one can control or manage with all one's efforts." On the one hand, attempting to avoid anxiety-producing confrontation with the intractable textual "variants" which cannot be organized into "larger cultural patterns," Greenblatt restricts himself to "a handful of arresting figures" whom he can seize upon--can take control of and take hold of forcibly--with the "hand," the forceful grasp, of the "understanding" that serves to "arrest" and "contain" them. On the other hand, he carefully structures and stabilizes the constricted realm of the handful of arresting figures in accordance with "larger cultural patterns" as if, without those patterns, that constricted realm could not be held together but would instead collapse into a chaos which threatens to overwhelm the self.

If what I originally called "theory" may manifest itself in the desire to achieve a telic understanding, that understanding may also be pressed into the service of psychological needs (as if this were what that understanding
means to Greenblatt when he says that those "arresting figures" "seem to contain within themselves much of what we need"); it may function as an anxiety-relieving or anxiety-controlling mechanism and serve as a device to keep at arm's length the threat posed by the textual "variants." Greenblatt's "cultural poetics," then, can be a poetics of self-defense as well as a poetics of impatience and despair; it can simultaneously be a safety device for stabilizing the self in the face of danger, a way of secluding the self in a restricted realm from the forces that threaten to engulf it, and a complicated system of self-protection against the upsetting indeterminacies and ambiguities which the textual "variants" generate.

When Greenblatt speaks of the "arresting figures ... who ... reward intense, individual attention," it is possible to take "arresting" to mean primarily "attracting attention." But the connotative interplay between "seize," "handful," "arresting," and "contain" also implies that those "figures" are "arresting" not only because they are capable of attracting "intense, individual attention" but because they serve to "arrest"--to "contain," to hold, to keep under control, to forestall, to foreclose, etc.--the endless generation and multiplication of the thousand "variants" that threaten to overwhelm the critic's inner being (as though this were their "reward" for his "intense, individual attention). Even if we take "arresting" to mean "attracting attention,"
the intimation that the critic anticipates a "reward" for his attention to those "figures" nonetheless points to his narcissistic investment in them—in their relevance to "what [he needs]" psychologically. In this regard, when he says that they "promise access to larger cultural patterns," those "cultural patterns" apparently function to organize and structure the textual "variants" so that the latter can be rendered predictable, controllable, and less anxiety-producing.

If Greenblatt were more at home with the textual "variants," then the "arresting figures" that engage his attention might open up a generative and fluxional realm of creative, rich ambiguities and complexities, instead of condemning him to arrive repeatedly at the predetermined "cultural patterns" that freeze those "figures" into "slight variants" of the same theme. Seen from this point of view, "figure" need not—as it does for Greenblatt—signify a static, hypostatized subject that authors the text; it can be understood as an on-going fluid movement of textual figurations in their ever-changing, ever-varying complexities. Just as "figure" can suggest process rather than entity, flowing rhythm rather that predictable pattern, so "arresting" can be understood as our gratuitous fascination with, surrender to, and absorbed participation in, the dance of the textual "variants" that characterizes the non-telic play of textual figurations. Instead of arresting the text with goal-
oriented understanding, then, we can still let it arrest us with its capacity for an excess of endless "variants"; instead of starting with a block theory about Renaissance literature and culture and then seeking to "demonstrate" or "prove" it by our readings, we can still choose to follow the lead of the textual "variants" and let them weave us into their dance; instead of mastering with our "understanding" the indeterminacies and ambiguities those "variants" generate, we can still take a more relaxed attitude toward them, allowing them to figure, refigure, and transfigure us. The object of reading a text need not be one of telling over it as a story and arriving at the end of it so as to achieve the predetermined goal of a telic understanding. The "point" of reading a text can be discovered in any moment when we let in the "new areas of experience" and "unfamiliar ways of being" the text opens up.

*

Each of the three chapters of the dissertation discusses a single text. The first section of each chapter delineates my disagreement with a certain critic. The remainder of the chapter is then devoted to an alternative reading of the text in question.

The opening chapter deals with the problem of the narrative voice in the first episode of The Faerie Queene.
While Patricia Parker resolves the problem of reading this episode by invoking the authority of the narrator, I propose to consider the narrator as a reader of his own text. How does he read his own text? How does his reading become a way of grappling with his anxiety about, and his self-estrangement from, the landscape? How does the text resist his reading? How does it provide possibilities of rereadings that elude his frame of reference? These are some of the questions I ask in this chapter.

The next chapter takes up the question of male selfhood and its relationship to female sexuality in Othello. It begins by calling into question Marguerite Waller's notions of "self," "other," "insider," "outsider," and "difference." Unlike Waller, I suggest that we treat Othello's selfhood not as a given but as an object of inquiry. My reading explores the tension between Othello's selfhood and female sexuality manifested in and through Desdemona. Particular attention is paid to the language of sexual pathology and the way in which female sexuality becomes a threat to the stability of the male world.

The last chapter opens with a critique of Stanley Fish's theory about the reading experience of Samson Agonistes. While his desire for closure leads him to moralize the play and its reading experience, my reading suggests that every issue which arises in the course of the play remains open-ended. For all the power of Fish's theory, I remain interested in a mode of
reading that can acknowledge and cherish what escapes his theory. I propose to look at the way language functions in the play, the way language conveys a complex attitude toward every issue of the play, the way language generates psychological, ethical, and ontological ambiguities that persist in every issue.

The dissertation concludes with a few retrospective remarks.
Notes

1. For the discussions of Parker, Waller, and Fish, see the opening sections of the three chapters of this dissertation.
Chapter One:

"This is the wandring wood, this Errors den":

Reading and Rereading Landscape

The very first episode of The Faerie Queene is a story about both the "wandring" of "A Gentle Knight" (I.i.1.1) and "A louely Ladie" (4.1) in "A shadie groue" (7.2) and their subsequent encounter with "A monster vile" (13.7).¹ The lady's revealing pronouncement, "This is the wandring wood, this Errors den" (11.6), immediately joins the two events together. The first "This" slides into the second "this" as if "the wandring wood" and "Errours den" were identical. The den is, in fact, "a hollow caue" (11.6) inside the wood. But what brings the two phrases together is apparently the semantic link between "wandring" and "Errour." Here, semantics coincides with allegory as well. Allegorically, their "wandering" already implies "Errour," and "Errour" the "monster" is merely a named embodiment of the "error" they have committed.

The problem is that such an allegorization tends to encourage an "andro-centric" point of view; it is the knight, not the lady, who must confront the error they both have made. Above all, it invites our complicity in a kind of moralistic anthropocentrism as well. The wood, of course, has not
"wandered." Neither has the creature in the cave committed any error. The notions of straying from the right path and committing an error are patently human inventions. But the allegorization makes the wood and the creature responsible for the kind of human deed moralistically condemnable and hence facilitates the economy of atoning for the deed and purging away its moral blemish at their expense. In the process of scapegoating them, it also countenances a hostile attitude toward whatever remains unfamiliar in them. Instead of inspiring awe and wonder, their unfamiliar aspects are perceived to be threatening, and the ground is prepared for treating them as objects to be brought into subjection by the human will.

Some critics, however, choose to take such a world view for granted. Patricia A. Parker argues, for instance:

The straying of Red Cross and Una in this plenitude (10.3-9) frequently prompts a purely moral interpretation, the kind of approach that begins by asking "What did Red Cross do wrong?" Yet what seems more crucial here is the romance experience of not knowing where lines are until they have been violated or crossed. Except for the random hint to the wary reader, the famous catalogue of trees does not suggest anything but the "delight" with which "they thus beguile the way" (10.1), until its meaning is perceived too
late and something seemingly innocent suddenly entraps. Augustine speaks in The Confessions of the way in which wandering at will (deviasse sponte) may suddenly be frozen into "error" as punishment (poena errare), and the straying of Una and Red Cross into a place where "They cannot finde that path, which first was shwone" (10.4) introduces early into Spenser's poem the danger of potential trespass. . . . 2

Later in the canto, the knight both defeats and kills "Errour." If "wandering at will may suddenly be frozen into 'error' as punishment," it is hard to consider his victory over, and his murder of, "Errour" as "punishment." If the question of "punishment" should ever arise, it is "Errour," not the knight, who is "punished" as a scapegoat for the knight's "error." Nor is it clear to me that, even though the lady "names" the grove "the wandring wood" and the cave "Errours den" (13.6), either of the couple has ever perceived their "meaning." Even more suspect is Parker's distinction between "a purely moral interpretation" and "the romance experience of not knowing where lines are until they have been violated or crossed." Isn't what she tries to do here an attempt to establish "not knowing where lines are until they have been violated or crossed" as the "moral" of the episode? Is to call it a "romance experience" capable of making it any the less a "moral interpretation"?
Where are the "lines" actually? Who "knows" and who does not "know" where they are? Who prescribes them? Whose "lines" "have been violated or crossed"? In the preceding paragraph, she says:

The Wood presents immediately the archetypal locus of romance, the *selva oscura* "Whose loftie trees y clad with sommers pride, / Did spred so broad, that heauens light did hide" (I.i.7.4-5). Perception of this fact, however, is delayed and the reader, like Una and Red Cross, moves first in a landscape of only potential significances and disjunctive signs, where "shroud," "shade," and "pride" (i.6-7) are polysemous attributes, and the problem, from the beginning, is learning how to read. . . .3

If it is the narrator who prescribes the "lines," must we take them for granted? The two lines Parker quotes from the text are not the "fact" of the landscape but the narrator's description, characterization, or interpretation. But the need to perceive them as the "fact" seems to betray her own anxiety about "how to read," about "not knowing where lines are." It is as if the critic were "wandering" inside the "labyrinth" (11.4) of the text, unsure where to locate herself because unsure where the narrative authority stands, until she finally comes upon "that path" (10.4) where the narrative authority unequivocally announces the oracle in its own voice and thus
puts things "in perspective," giving a total vantage point from which to see them "as they are." If "learning how to read" is "the problem," the perception of those two lines as the "fact" nonetheless self-reassuringly provides an economy of reading, an easy shortcut out of "the problem." On the other hand, "learning how to read" may be a "problem" for the characters and Parker's reader, but it is hardly a "problem" for Parker's narrator. For he is the one who prescribes "this fact," which has resolved or, shall we say, dissolved the "problem" a priori, before the "problem" is allowed any chance to fulfill itself--to become a "problem" for him.

While critics of Spenser frequently take the narrator's presiding frame of reference as a "given" and thus let it off the hook, I propose to shift attention away from a reading based on it to an exploration of the way in which the narrator's language betrays himself and the kind of psychology that contributes to his view of the landscape. When the lady and the knight go into the "shadie groue," what we see is not only the natural world in its multifarious relations to the human world but the geography of the narrator's psychology, as it were. If we pay close attention to the way he interprets the landscape and the acts of the characters and the creature in the cave, then the self-estrangement from the landscape, the anxiety about the unfamiliar, and the fear of losing one's rational self in an alien environment are already latent in
his language. Narration and interpretation eventually begin to seem anxiety-allying devices and self-defense mechanisms.

This is not to deny allegory as a literary genre but to suggest that allegorization is a way of looking at things, that there are alternative ways of allegorizing, alternative ways of looking at things. Indeed, when we read carefully, there are already some moments in the episode itself that seem to elude the narrator's frame of reference altogether. Although they neither confirm nor deny his frame, he seems anxious to disown them, bar them from consciousness, or simply interpret them out of existence. For this reason, it is all the more necessary to find a mode of reading that can acknowledge and cherish their existence. The mode of reading thus proposed will consider the narrator as a reader of his own text and engage itself in reading his text afresh, in rereading a text at once familiar and strange, a text appearing to be dominated by his reading and yet continuing to surprise us with possibilities of rereadings.⁴

II

Before the titular hero of Book I seizes the first opportunity to prove his "strength on a strong enimie" (i.26.7.), a rain-storm "enforces" him and his "companions"⁵ to take refuge in "A shadie grove" (7.1-2). When the narrator
describes the storm, his language glances at his attitude toward sexuality:

Thus as they past,
The day with clouds was suddeine ouercast,
And angry Ioue an hideous storme of raine
Did poure into his Lemans lap so fast,
That every wight to shrowd it did constrain,
And this fair couple eke to shrowd themselves were fain. (6.4-9)

A. C. Hamilton glosses the middle two lines as "Suggesting the marriage of the Earth and Sky, which is the beginning of creation." But the sky becomes "angry Ioue"; the earth, "his Lemans lap"; the relationship, not so much a marriage as a liaison; and the sexual act, not so much an impregnation as an aggression or, rather, an aggression by impregnation. The word "hideous" suggests that what "angry Ioue" "pours into" "his Lemans lap" without her consent is something that he or the narrator himself is disgusted with. The word can mean both "revolting to the senses or feelings" and "revolting to the moral sense." As we shall see later, what upsets the narrator's aesthetic sense—what he sees as "ugly"—is usually also what upsets his moral sense. Here, it is apparently the moral sense, the "sex-hating superego," as it were, that is governing the aesthetic sense, that is reacting to a sexual scene and to male sexuality itself. This disgust with sexuality is again intimated in the word "fast." Read in
the retroactive "context" of the following two lines, "fast" may describe the promptness of the rain and thus explain (be explained by?) the urgent need to take shelter. But it can mean "finished in little or no time" as well and suggest that the ejaculated matter is so "hideous" that the sooner it is rid of and "poured into" the "Lemans lap," the better.

What exists between "angry Ioue" and the "Leman," then, is perhaps not even a liaison, still less a genuine relationship. To call it a liaison would be to agree with the narrator that the nameless female is Jove's "Leman" and to disregard whatever may be suspect about the sexual act. For one thing, the sexual act is peculiarly one-sided; it is an act done by him not with her but to her. For another, the seminal discharge is confused with the venting of anger as if he were "taking it out on" her through the "hideous" discharge. In other words, she is scarcely regarded as a sexual mate but rather used as a kind of receptacle for the confused discharge of his anger-semen. For still another, the word "lap" indicates that the nameless female who is named Jove's "Leman" by the narrator is imagined to play a double role--at once a mistress and a care-giver. OED defines "lap," among others, as "The front portion of the body from the waist to the knees of a person seated, considered with its covering garments as the place in or on which a child is nursed or any object held." That Jove should "poure into his Lemans lap" may look as if the ejaculation or impregnation were falling "wide
of target." But the discharge into the "lap" rather than anywhere else may also imply an acting out of the subliminal desire to be nursed or held by the "Leman"—so that Jove's anger appears to be a displacement of his discontent, and the apparently aggressive "pouring" of something "hideous" into her becomes a confused attempt at securing the comfort of a "lap" or a displaced gesture of seeking such a comfort.

To be sure, the lady and the knight are not aware that the storm has been sexualized. Although the conjunction "That" logically connects the last two lines with the two lines that go before, what bears upon their action is not the peculiar sexuality of the storm but its "fastness." Indulging himself in "poeticizing" it sexually, the narrator "wanders" momentarily from the urgency of the situation in which the couple find themselves. In spite of the "suddene" weather change, he "walks" through the temporal space of two lines at leisure. The phrase "so fast," we note, occurs at the very end of line 7. If "fast" describes the promptness of the storm, the "fastness" does not make itself felt until after he has finished the digression about the sexuality of the storm. Even before the couple "get lost" in stanza 10, the tendency to "wander" is already there in the narrator.

The sexual turmoil of a storm notwithstanding, "A shadie groue" imperturbably emerges or "fades" into view in the first two lines of the following stanza:

Enforst to seeke some couert nigh at hand,
A shadie groue not far away they spide,
In an uncharacteristic moment of the episode, the natural
world comes to abide in the poem as something external and yet
"nigh at hand," something separate and yet intimate, something
always out there and yet capable of impressing its viewer as
if for the first time. For a moment, the human world and the
natural world share the same existential space without
conflict. For a moment, the seeing and what is seen are not
alienated by each other but become coterminous in a serene
visual field.

On the other hand, part of the narrator's language seems
to counteract what may be called the gestalt of this moment by
subjecting the couple's action to a rational process of
control where one thing follows as a consequence of another.
The word "seeke" signals a deliberate attempt to reach
something placed at a distance in time as well as in space.
Even though "nigh at hand," "some couert" becomes an alien
object and remains the point of destination for the "seeking."
The word "spide," furthermore, implies a purposeful and
strenuous effort to see and echoes the deliberateness of
"seeking." Finally, the phrase "Enforst to seeke" seems to
derive from the circumstances of the couple's action an agent
that enforces the "seeking." The "spying" of "A shadie groue"
thus becomes a willed consequence of the "seeking," which in
turn is dictated by some external agent.
Nonetheless, the couple's action is instantaneous and suggests the instinctual capacity of the body to respond to the elements rather than a series of deliberate controls or the cogitative process that infers the "cause" of an agent from the "effect" of an act. And this bodily instinct for "some couert nigh at hand" is immediately, but quietly, and yet miraculously answered by "A shadie groue not far away." For a moment, the natural world appears neither a malicious force to be brought into subjection by the human will, nor a threat against which man must guard himself with incessant feverish vigilance, but becomes a source readily available for accidental human needs; for a moment, the human and the natural come into contact with each other and exist in continuum; for a moment, the need of the former and the capability of the latter to provide happen to coincide. If there is any sense of providence in the poem, it tends to come through here more strongly than anywhere else, all the more so because of its apparent inconsequentiality.

In this respect, syntax is perhaps more revealing than sense. If, in its manifestation to the human vision, the grove appears as "suddeine" as the "cloudes" (6.5), the inverted syntax of the second line indicates that it is always there before the couple happen to see it. The line reads "A shadie groue not far away they spide" instead of "They spide a shadie groue not far away" as if to imply that the grove becomes manifest prior to the conscious and concentrated effort to see
it. While its presence verges on becoming the consequence or accomplishment of the couple's "seeking," it is found to have already been there of itself before they set out to "seeke." Moreover, the regular syntax suggests that, by making the second line run symmetrically parallel to the first, the volitional process is still in control; that the presence of "A shadie groue" originates from the act, "spide," which in turn originates from the subject, "they"; that what happens or exists in the natural world and in man's relationship to it conforms to conventional grammatical regularity. The inverted syntax, on the other hand, conveys the immediate perception that "A shadie groue" is indeed "nigh at hand," so much so that, as we move from the first line to the second, the first thing that meets our eyes is "A shadie groue"; so much so that, "some couert" and "A shadie groue" seem to share the qualifier "nigh at hand"; so much so that, by the time the narrator adds "not far away" to negate the distance, he is already a step behind or "far away" from the instantaneous manifestation of the grove; and by the time he goes on to add "they spide," the "spying" becomes a "hindsight" rather than an immediate perception. If the addition of "not far away they spide" sounds like a belated attempt to account for the perception of the grove, it speaks all the more for the immediacy of the perception. For a moment, the narrator's capacity for experience escapes into the open from the rational control; for just such a moment, he reveals his
ability to open himself to, and participate in, the characters' experience in spite of his tendency to stand beyond and above their experience and comment on it from a distance.

In the very next line, however, the narrator's rationality assumes control, and things begin to appear in sharp boundaries:

That promist ayde the tempest to withstand: (7.3)

Donald Cheney observes:

In fleeing the shower, [the couple] have abandoned one kind of nature for another. . . . To see how far this is from the "tempest" of epic or tragedy—in the sense of the hostile environment which tests man's capacity to endure—one need only compare this shower with the storm which confronts Aeneas in Book I of the Aeneid. . . . the abruptness of the rain is such that everyone has fled before the question of any possible resistance to it can arise.¹⁰

In spite of Cheney, the sense of environment as "hostile" and the will to "resist" "the rain" are evident in this line. While Cheney sees nature as divisible into different "kinds," the narrator goes a step further to oppose "one kind of nature" against another. When the grove, by pure accident, provides "some couert" for the two lovers, the narrator interprets that as a sign that it "promist ayde the tempest to
withstand." Consider the semantic "contextualization" of "hand" by "ayde" and the phonetic coupling of "hand" and "withstand." Something "nigh at hand" is read as its "promise" to give a "hand" ("ayde") in "withstanding" some antagonistic force as if its being "nigh at hand" could be intelligible only when translated into those terms. If the couple go into the grove, it is not because they seize upon it as a readily accessible source that meets their accidental bodily needs, but because it leads them to expect ("promist") that it will participate in their attempt to withstand the tempest. The instinct to preserve the body from the tempest is transformed into the will to "withstand" the tempest; the tempest into a hostile agency; the grove into willing ally against the tempest; and taking shelter from the tempest into the display of a drama of offense and defense. Instead of offering peace and rest, the "ayde" the grove "promist" feeds the restless will to withstand the enemy of an atmospheric agency. Instead of getting in tune with natural environment, the human will becomes its center, structuring it according to the logic of mutually exclusive and antithetical alternatives. If, as Cheney implies, "the question of any possible resistance to [the rain]" does not arise for the couple, it does arise for the narrator. If "the sense of the hostile environment" and the will to resist the tempest mark an epic hero, the narrator becomes a potential, if not the actual, epic hero of the poem.
This line, of course, apparently describes what goes through the couple's mind when they see the grove. Yet, as the first line of the next stanza—"And foorth they passe, with pleasure forward led,"—indicates, to withstand the tempest with the "ayde" of the grove is precisely what they do not do. In addition, as Cheney comments, "the abruptness of the rain is such that everyone has fled before the question of any possible resistance to it can arise." That is, "everyone" except the narrator. And it is his language, not the couple's, that describes what goes through their mind. Thus, the line has much to do not only with what they think but with how he interprets what they think. Notice that, whereas the first line of this stanza is a participle and hence a mere sentence fragment if without the second, the first two lines constitute a grammatically complete sentence even if without the third. It is as if the narrator had completed the first two lines in one breath but paused at the end of the second line and then added the third as an afterthought; as if he had moved continuously along with the couple from the first line to the end of the second but stayed there for a moment to resolve some questions in his mind while they can hardly wait to take shelter. Why is the grove there? What does it mean for the grove to be "nigh at hand"? Why do they "spy" "A shadie grove not far away" as soon as they are "Enforst to seeke some couert nigh at hand"? Then, in the third line, he finally comes up with an answer, a meaning, or an interpretation that
makes it comprehensible to him what the couple (and he to some degree) have experienced in the first two lines. The narrator is as much an interpreter, a reader of his own text as the critic.

If the third line appears like a reading of the first two lines, the following two lines seem to repeat the process and read the first two lines all over again:

Whose loftie trees yclad with sommers pride,
Did spred so broad, that heauens light did hide,
(7.4-5)

The word "hide" looks back not only at the word "couert" in the first line but at the words "shrowd" and "shroud" in the last two lines of the preceding stanza. There is a discrepancy, however, between what these words mean for the couple on the one hand and what they mean for the narrator on the other. The "shadie groue" is primarily a "couert," a shelter for the couple, because it happens to fulfill their need to "shroud" themselves, i.e., to protect and shelter themselves. If the need for "some couert" involves the need to "hide," "hiding" is here related to "protecting and sheltering" (cf. OED. def. 1b) the body, to a care for the comfort of one's own body. But the narrator transfers the need to hide to the grove in these two lines and, in the process, transforms the benign sense of "hiding" as protecting and sheltering into the pejorative sense of "hiding" as keeping something from view or concealing it from knowledge. The place
where the couple takes a "couert" becomes the agent "who" hides "heauens light" from them; the shelter of a covert becomes the concealment of a covert; to "shroud" themselves from the rain entails to have themselves "shrouded" from "heauens light." In this respect, although they have "spide" the "shadie" grove in the second line, the "hiding" of "heauens light" apparently supplies the "cause" for the "shadiness" of the grove and retroactively delimits what can become visible to them. A disjunction thus exists between what they can see and what the narrator knows to be true. What for them is protective envelopment becomes for him an entrapment; what for them is an innocent and uncomplicated act of protecting themselves becomes for him an ominous foreshadowing of the grove's act of hiding "heauens light"; what for them is a vision that brings relief becomes for him an ironic indication of their inability to see what he sees retrospectively.

Taken as a whole, what these two lines describe is in a sense the natural phenomenon in which the trees grow so tall and flourish so much in summer that, with sunlight, their abundant foliage forms dense shade. But the narrator's language is expressive less of a mind appreciating the organic process of growth in nature than of a self-estranged moralistic sentiment stigmatizing the process from a distance. Thus, while "loftie" in line 4 may describe the imposing height of the trees, he apparently interprets their height as
a sign of their haughtiness. Again, in the second half of this line, their abundant foliage is moralistically "metaphorized" into their "pride." The word "yclad," furthermore, suggests that "sommers pride" is a mere clothing, something superficially and vaingloriously put on rather than something inseparable. The word thus adds to the "sommers pride" of the trees an implication of their pretense. The sense of putting on something discrete is reinforced in the phrase "sommers pride." Summer is here less a part of the continuous seasonal cycle than a hypostatized entity that possesses "pride." What the trees are "yclad with" therefore is not something that grows out of themselves but a prosthetic piece, as it were, that belongs to summer. Instead of being integrated wholes that grow, the trees become separate from the foliage which is not theirs and yet remains attached to them as a moral stigma.

In spite of the moral stigmatization that masks the biological process of growth, the first half of the next line, "Did spred so broad," conveys a sense of unfolding and spanning, a sense of active expansion and fanning-out in all directions. Here, the sense of growth in action breaks through into expression almost unpredictably. And it is rendered all the more powerful after we have been made to plod through the preceding line in a singsong manner, looking for the verb which is not there. When we move on to this line, we are suddenly renewed, as it were, with the vivacity which the verbal phrase carries. An impulse or at least a feel for
growth inside the narrator seems to have life of its own and
escape into the open from the grip of his repressive
moralistic tendency. For a moment, it makes itself felt,
strangely unaffected by his moral mystification.

Yet, no sooner has such an experience of growth emerged
than the narrator manages to counteract it. The comma and the
pause after it create an anticlimactic, introspective,
brooding effect that blocks up the sense of continuous
expansion, as if the narrator were resisting a force that may
carry him away and had to impose an arbitrary and premature
boundary upon the expansion. The phrase that follows, "that
heauens light did hide," enervates the preceding phrase,
"forecloses" the "spreading," and makes it external by
positing an extraneous consequence that conclusively "sums it
up." Thought the word "so" in the first half of the line may
communicate a sense of wonder and awe, this sense vanishes
with the appearance of the word "that." In addition, "That"
causally "aligns" "Did spred so broad" by postulating "heauens
light did hide" as the destination which the "spreading" must
arrive at in a lineal fashion. "Heauens light" is not the same
thing as sunlight. Nor is "heauen" the same thing as sky. It
is rather a disconnected transcendental realm reigning over
"the world below." What is more, the rhyming of "hide" with
"pride" suggests that hiding "heauens light" is a
presumptuously transgressive act of hubris, to which the
"spreading" of the trees eventually leads. In the narrator's
cosmology, the universe is hierarchically structured, and the boundary sharply defined; everything must be fixed into place and stay where it belongs. In this cosmology, change and flux can only signify the disruption of established order; the expansion or increase of one thing can only result lineally in the deprivation of another; and the biological phenomenon of the trees' growth can only be interpreted as a transgression of boundary and a violation of cosmic order.

Parker, we remember, reads these two lines as the "fact." What encourages this reading is perhaps the sense of authority that comes from the predominant presence of the narrator's moral and rational self. The display of his moral and rational sentiments is evinced by his ability to see and expose what the "shadiness" of the grove, the growth of the trees, and their "spreading" "mean," what they are all about. If, with the hindsight of these two lines, the couple's "spying" in the second line turns out to be a superficial look from without, the narrator here seems to get inside the grove ahead of them and take an in-depth look into it with the eyes of an experienced viewer. Although the trees "heauens light did hide," although they are, as he says in the very next line, "Not perceable with power of any starre," he nonetheless acquires the "power" that heaven and stars alike lack—the power to see the grove inside out and to detect the immanent principle at work or the "noumenon" underlying the "phenomena" of shadiness, growth, and expansion, as it were. While his
viewing here is apparently a "hindsight," it has the combined quality of a "foresight" and an "insight" in the sense that it penetrates the "fact" or principle predicated of, and "prior" to, the particularities of shadiness, growth, and expansion.

But the need to ascertain the "fact" underlying the "phenomena" of "shadiness," growth, expansion is the correlative of the need to see those "phenomena" as questions to be explained by the "fact." Why is the grove "shadie"? Why do the trees grow so "loftie"? Why do they "spred so broad"? Even if the "fact" is capable of explaining or "deciphering" those "phenomena," it is nevertheless both self-justifying and circular. For it is the desire to get at the "fact" that necessitates the conversion of them into questions or problems calling for explanations; there is no need for the "fact" unless there is the need to see as problems what exists positively out there and what happens of itself.

There is a sense, however, in which "heauens light" and "the power of any starre" are glorified or sublimated projections of the narrator's desire to pierce, to penetrate the grove through and through. In this sense, what lines 4-6 express is the narrator's psychological condition rather than the "fact" of the landscape. Consider the feel of retardment in the first two words of the sixth line:

Not perceable with power of any starre:

Even before we translate "Not perceable" into "Unpierceable" and perceive the resistance of the trees to the gaze, it is
hard not to feel the ominous effect of blockage in pronouncing "Not perceable." Notice that "perceable" is the only three-syllable word in the whole stanza. Phonetically extended, the word feels like a check upon the rhythmic flow from the preceding line to this, and the negative "Not" seems to function as an intensifier at the level of sound. The phonic difficulty then reinforces the visual difficulty. While vision in the second line is imperturbably receptive to the "shadie groue" in all the unexpectedness of its manifestation, the gaze here seems frustrated and self-alienated by the "shadiness" of the grove, by its impenetrability and opacity. While vision there involves a trust in and a surrender to what becomes manifest out there in its totality, the gaze here redefines what can be "spide" from what is hidden and transforms what becomes manifest into an unpierceable surface. Even before the couple "get lost" and "wander too and fro in ways vnknowne" in stanza 10, the narrator here already betrays his self-estrangement from the landscape and his vague anxiety about the unknowability of the grove, about his inability to see through its surface and fathom its ultimate depth.

The sense of self-alienation is implicit too in the way he moralizes and explains the landscape and the couple's experience. When he exploits their fresh and immediate perception for an exercise of cognition in moral and rational terms, he is apparently unable to trust their inner signals to respond spontaneously and thus feels compelled to check, edit,
and revise their experience according to conventional moral codes. When he tries to ascertain what the "shadiness" of the grove, the growth of the trees, and their "spreading" "mean," he is apparently unsettled by the absence of moral purpose and motive in the landscape. Moralizing and rationalizing experience and landscape in this way take on the appearance of protective and homeostatic devices for rendering them comprehensible, familiar, and predictable. What looks like an ability to make sense of them or an ability to organize, abstract, understand, or familiarize according to a preexisting conceptual frame may be an inability to be ego-transcending, an inability to open and yield oneself to their unfamiliar aspects. Despite his ability to "decipher" them, what he discovers in them is what he has already known all along. Despite the appearance of his getting inside the grove ahead of the couple, he still remains an outsider, encapsulating or "shrouding" himself inside his own conceptual frame and thus securing himself from the alien inside of the grove.

It is all the more unexpected, then, that the next two lines should testify to an altogether different perception of the inside of the grove:

And all within were pathes and alleies wide,
With footing worn, and leading inward farre:

(7.7-8)

When the trees "heauens light kid hide," when they are "Not perceable with power of any starre," the last thing we would
expect is that we will be able to see anything "within" the
grove. Our surprise is elicited even at the level of syntax.
The conjunction "And" signals that what line 7 will be about
is a continuation of what he narrator has said in lines 4-6.
(In this respect, the colon at the end of line 6 has already
suggested that an explanation or a further development of
lines 4-6 will follow.) Proceeding to the phrase "all within,"
we may then expect him to go on describing what remains within
the grove as something related to its impenetrability, to its
"hiding," or at least to its "pride." But the line seems to
grow and generate itself of its own accord, regardless of our
expectation, regardless of what goes before. As we move along,
"pathes and alleies wide" unfold before our eyes as if to lead
us into a realm not fully imaginable in advance, as if to
imply that, in reading this line, we are engaged in an
adventurous process of discovery. To bring the special quality
of this line into focus, let us rewrite it in a different
form: "And wide pathes and alleies were all within." The
paraphrasable meaning is intact, but not the sense of
unfolding. This is of course a Spensieran stanza, and some
word must rhyme with "hide." But in addition to complying with
the stanzaic form, the original line—in a way its varied form
does not—evokes our curiosity even as it suspends our
expectation. At the time when we arrive at the end of the
line, we wonder whether we do not feel more refreshed than
disappointed by its power to surprise us.
In contrast to the blockage of "Not perceable," this line also communicates a sense of leading and breaking through and the inner spaciousness ("wide") opened up by the leading and breaking through. Though this sense appears to be interrupted in the next line by the phonetically inner-directed "worne" and "inward" and by the comma and the pause that come between, it is reaffirmed at the end by the adverb "far." Both "footing" and "leading" indicate motion and in a sense make explicit what is already implicit in the preceding line. But at the level of sound both "worne" and "inward" tend to coil up the motion and turn it back upon itself (as if this were what "the labyrinth" [11.4] would feel like phonetically). In contrast, the word "far" suggests, again at the level of sound, a relaxation and an undoing of the constriction of "inward." At the same time, it replaces direction ("inward") with extension. Like "wide" in the preceding line, it seems to acquire the force of a verb. "Wide," we note, appears at the very end of the line. So does "far." But each word seems to pass over the terminal point of the respective line and open up new horizons for our vision. At the moment when we come to the end of each line, we reach a point where things begin to expand or extend as if unendingly. As "worne," "inward," the comma in the middle of the line, and the pause following it echo and reenact the blockage of "Not perceable," so "wide" and "far" echo and reenact the continuous increase of "Did spred so broad."
Since the dominant perception in these two lines is so at odds with that in the preceding three lines, it is all the more curious that the conjunction linking these two lines to those three should be "And" rather than "But." Yet, the conjunction may signal the co-presence of two seemingly contradictory impulses inside the narrator although the positive side of the perception described here is not what we would expect from the same self so alienated from the landscape. Despite the trees' "hiding" of "heauens light," despite their impenetrability, he is still able to see effortlessly what unfolds before his eyes. And he remains able to see so far as he does not let the "fact" which he projects onto the grove "hide" or cancel "all" that is "within" it.

Nevertheless, the issue, as usual, is to what extent he admits into his self what gratuitously happens in his experience. Almost always there is tendency in him to disown, resist, or edit from a safe distance what he has unforeseeably experienced:

Faire harbour that them seemes; so in they entred arre. (7.9)

Although the conjunction "And" in line 7 indicates that it is the narrator's perception that is being described in lines 7 and 8, the first half of this line immediately establishes that the perception in those two lines are the couple's rather than his. It is possible that, since the positive quality of the perception there is so incompatible with both the
moralistic sentiment and the sense of self-alienation in lines 4-6, that perception may indeed belong to them rather than to him. After all, it is much in accord with their action in the first line of the succeeding stanza ("And foorth they passe, with pleasure forward led"). Even so, the conjunction is undeniably there and may in this regard signal an unpremeditated or inadvertent plunge into an area of intersubjective experience where his self intermingles with theirs. Yet, in identifying the perception as theirs in the first half of this line, he immediately extricates himself from the fascination the perception may hold for him and wanders like an exile who feels compelled to regulate and interpret their experience from a distance.

The couple, we recall, urgently need a shelter from the storm. The urgency of the situation notwithstanding, it is not until the very end of the stanza that they have made up their mind to take refuge in the grove. The syntactic order of "in they entred arre," however, expresses a strange transformation of the act of entry itself. Once the decision to enter is made, they are impatient to act. The semi-active adverb "in" is placed before the subject "they" and the verb "entred." The act of entry has already been on its way even before the subject and the actual verb cause it to happen. The verb "entred" then belatedly confirms the act already initiated by "in" even as it points to the voluntary aspect of the action. The addition of "arre," however, "neutralizes" or "deacti-
vates" from behind the otherwise active "entred." In addition to rendering the act of entry passive, "arre," as the "final word" of the stanza, freezes the process of being entered at the mid-point, keeps it there in a lasting standstill, and hence displaces the spectacle of movement with the sense of stasis. The entry then is not so much a process or an act as a state, a condition, or even a plight where "they" are kept "in."

The syntactic arrangement then implies a foreboding on the narrator's part that something wrong is going to happen once the couple enter the grove." At the same time, it points to the ever-widening gap between two different attitudes toward the landscape. Although the decision to enter is based on the judgement that the grove "seems" a "Faire harbour," the word "seems" apparently means one thing for the couple and another for the narrator. Whereas it implies their willingness to commit themselves to what they see is unfolding before their eyes in lines 7 and 8, it implies simultaneously both his reservation about a naive and ready acceptance of one's sense experience and his need to distinguish between what the grove "seems" and what it truly is. (That is, it "seems" "Faire" to "them" but not necessarily to him.) What "seems" "Faire" may be deceptive appearance designed to "hide" something hazardous from the naive viewer. What pleases the senses may not bear the scrutiny of the experienced viewer.
In spite of the narrator's foreboding, in spite of the grove's otherness and opacity that alienate him, the first line of the next stanza testifies to the couple's anxiety-free responsiveness to the pleasure the grove affords:

And foorth they passe, with pleasure forward led,

(8.1)

Though the phrase "with pleasure forward led" seems to characterize the couple's action here as passive and thus echo the word "arre" which ends the preceding stanza, their pleasure nonetheless bespeaks their trust both in their uninhibited inner capacity for experience and in the whole external world that opens up with that capacity. Although what the couple need is a temporary "couert," the grove is obviously more than a "couert" or "harbour" here; it is also the source of pleasure—something to be enjoyed for its own sake. This ability to be responsive to the new aspect of the landscape that emerges speaks for a fluid, roomy self in which what unforeseeably happens in one's experience is comfortably received. In this connection, compare "so in they entred arre" and "And foorth they passe." As in the former, the couple's movement in the latter is triggered by a semi-active adverb. Yet, while the former suggests fixity, stasis, and a circumscription or a clogging up of movement, the latter suggests flowingness and a sense of release as if from the cramp of the former. While the conjunction "so" suggests a process of self-conscious decision-making where logical
judgement dictates action, the conjunction "And" suggests an experiential continuum where one act flows into another. The couple's motion here is simultaneously a measure of their inner mobility.

Actually, the logical conjunction "so" tends to make the faculty of decision-making a watchman, as it were, over the impulse to enter; the grove, though "nigh at hand," still remains a foreign object, and the impulse to enter must be withheld until the rational faculty has examined it carefully. The mind that works this way is more compatible with the mind that speaks in lines 4-6 of the preceding stanza than with the mind that opens itself with pleasure to the landscape here. On the other hand, the "And" that begins this stanza calls attention to the "And" of the seventh line of the preceding stanza. Each "And" introduces a contrast to what immediately goes before; each occurs at the precise point where logic would ask for a "But" in its place. Nonetheless, while neither "And" negates or rejects what immediately precedes it, each one establishes a relationship with something that occurs before the interruption of what precedes it. As the "And" of this line points to the continuity and connection between this line and lines 7 and 8 of the foregoing stanza, so the other "And" in turn points to the continuity and connection between those two lines and the first two lines of that stanza. Apparently, the couple have by-passed the narrator's interruption in lines 3-6 and line 9 of the last stanza and
gone directly from the first two lines to lines 7 and 8 of that stanza and then from lines 7 and 8 of that stanza to the first line of this stanza while the narrator, inhibited by his foreboding and by the "fact" he "sees" in the landscape, is left behind to "wander" outside the threshold of the grove.

III

In the whole framework of the knight's heroic quest, seeking shelter from a raining storm and taking delight in the landscape are perhaps no more than trivial and inconsequential interludes. Yet, it is little moments such as these that reveal him in his most human aspect,¹² that provide a dialectical alternative to the megalomaniacal restlessness to which the heroic quest condemns him. The knight, as the narrator says, is "Vpon a great aduenture . . . bond." And the double goal of the "great aduenture" is: first, "to winne him worship, and [Gloriana's] grace to haue, / Which of all earthly things he most did craue"; second, "To proue his puissance in battell braue / Vpon his foe, . . . a Dragon horrible and stearne" (3.1-9). Instead of integrating his self, such a goal-oriented adventure tends to subject him to a division between the self that he is and the self that he strives to be. Since the self that he is is seen as somewhat deficient, somewhat lacking, and since the self that he strives to be is located as the goal, as the destination at
the end of his adventure, the knight, unable to fully inhabit either self, seems suspended in the void of the gap between the two selves. And to the extent that he remains suspended in this ontological void, the world he sees will be populated by the allegorical phantoms created to serve his needs and wants. Not only does his need "To prove his puissance in battell braue" circularly perpetuate the self-justifying definition of the "Dragon" as "his foe," but the "Queene" called "Gloriana" is reduced to a gratifier of the desire for glory. (Etymologically, "Gloriana" can mean a female supplier of glory as well as a "Glorious Queene" [3.3]. Even if we take the latter meaning, there is a sense in which the queen is "glorified" only to serve the need for glory. In either case, female plenty may be a projective inversion, and hence a symptom, of male lacking.) The world he moves in becomes the world of his own megalomaniacal fantasy where creatures and "earthly things" are created out of his hunger for glory, where they can relate to him only as the means of "winning him worship" or as the raw material for the grandeur of an ego filled with, or rather emptied out by, needs and wants.

Against the background of the "great adventure," those inconsequential interludes gain special significance precisely because of their inconsequentiality. When, instead of confronting the tempest, the knight goes to shelter himself in the grove, he may, as Cheney implies, fall short of an epic
hero. Yet, in so doing, he is responding to the tempest at the level of flesh and blood like "euer wight" (6.8); and, through that response, the physical realities of both the tempest and the body are tacitly affirmed. As the tempest ceases to be what Cheney calls the tempest of epic or tragedy, so the knight is freed from the world of epic or tragedy; he does what "euer wight" does, inhabits the common world in which "euer wight" is rooted, and becomes, if only for a brief moment, immune from the compulsive need "To prowe his puissance in battell braue," the need to prove himself a hero by fighting against a hostile force of his own making.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, the moment when the "hero" is least heroic, least occupied with the need of proving himself and winning himself "worship," is also the moment that generates a sense of his sane relationship with himself and with "earthly things." If the "great aduenture" condemns him to live a constricted life of a constricted person, he can nevertheless liberate himself temporarily from the "great aduenture" "Vpon" which he "was bond" when he takes a pleasant stroll in the grove. Here, if you will, is another adventure. But it is an adventure that frees rather than an adventure that binds, an adventure that happens rather than an adventure dictated by will and purpose. There is no battle to be fought and no victory to be won, no ideal to be striven after and no goal to be attained. For a moment, he is able to take sight of the natural world in all its mere externality without feeling the need to organize it
into his desire for "worship" and glory. Instead of aiming at a future destination, he lives "an expanded present" in which he is his experience, in which the split between the self that he is and the self that he strives to be is temporarily resolved.

IV

To the narrator, however, the couple cannot take delight in the landscape without suffering consequences. When he describes how they "beguile the way," his language suggests a guilty conscience about delight itself:

Led with delight, they thus beguile the way,
(10.1)

Barbara L. Estrin speaks of this line: "The syntax of the opening line is deliberately unclear; logically it should read 'led with delight they were beguiled of the way.' But Spenser uses the verb 'beguile' in a transitive sense; the characters are personally responsible, have made the forest into a wandering wood by forgetting their purposes." But what is perhaps even more peculiar here is the emphatic addition of the logical connective "thus" which establishes a causal relationship between "Led with delight" and "beguile the way." If "the characters are personally responsible," it is "delight" itself that is "responsible" for their "responsibility"; if they "beguile the way," it is because they are
"Led with delight." "Delight" becomes the virtual subject; it remains not only separated from the "they" experiencing it but externalized as a disembodied force acting upon the "they" from without. Actually, the process of hypostatizing and disowning "delight" has already begun in the second half of the first line of stanza 8 ("with pleasure forward led"). But here the narrator "foregrounds" "Led with delight" as the "cause," and "delight" becomes the agent "responsible" for what happens to the couple afterwards, as if keeping "delight" at arm's length would have prevented them from "beguiling the way." In the narrator's consciousness, "delight" is already equated with "error." That the couple turn out to have "beguiled the way" merely serves to vindicate his belief that "delight" inevitably leads to "error."

As the narrator goes on to elaborate how they "beguile the way," the issue of delight shifts to the issue of knowledge:

When weening to returne, whence they did stray,
They cannot finde that path, which first was showne,
But wander too and fro in ways vnknowne,
Furthest from end then, when they neerest weene,
That makes them doubt, their wits be not their owne: (10.3-7)

The words "vnknowne," "weene," "doubt," and "wits" suggest that the problem of "weening to returne" is intertwined with
the problem of epistemology. Note that, while the word "weening" in line 3 means "intending" or "wishing," the word "weene" in line 6 means "think" or "suppose"; while it is the wishing that gives rise to the thinking, it is the thinking that works to fulfill the wishing. Both the wishing and the thinking, however, are situated in a texture of denial ("cannot finde," vnknowne," "Furthest from . . . when they nearest weene," "their wits be not their owne"). And both are defined within the epistemological hierarchy where the "wits" dictate the thinking and lead it toward knowledge and discovery (the "finding" of "that path"), where the thinking must be empowered by the "wits" so that it can convert the "vnknowne" into the known and thus fulfill the wishing. ("Weene" is here contrasted with "wits"; cf. def. 1f of "ween" in OED.) Yet, since "their wits be not their owne," the thinking is incapacitated; the couple may "weene," but they "cannot finde" ("cannot"="do not know how to"). Conversely, to find "that path," they have to find "their wits" first. The path they have to find is ultimately the path to knowledge.

Nonetheless, if we pay attention to their situation itself, then the hierarchical distinction between knowing and thinking becomes suspect. Apparently, they do not stop trying simply because "They cannot finde that path." Or, rather, the issue is not so much that "They cannot finde that path" as that, given the difficulty of the situation in which they find themselves, they still try to make the best of it. From this
point of view, their "weening" here implies their reliance on intuitions and hunches, on conjectures and probabilities; every path they take is "a "trying out" of a "hypothesis," a trying out of what they "feel" to be right; and every trying out becomes part of their experience and constitutes the basis for making further choices. From this point of view, their "wandering" here may be both an exploration and a learning experience; and their "weening," though not yet sure knowledge, may nonetheless be a kind of "proto-knowledge," as it were. The difference between thinking and knowing is a matter of degree rather than a sharply demarcated boundary.

The sixth line, however, furnishes a symmetrical formulation that at once exposes the "error" of the couple's "weening" and testifies to the "truth" of the narrator's "knowing." The line reads: "Furthest from end then, when they nearest weene." The logical connective "then" establishes this line as the conclusion that sums up in a neat formula the couple's efforts to "finde that path." Yet, this line is apparently a non sequitur or, at least, a premature conclusion. For, if the couple "wander too and fro in ways vknowne," it does not necessarily follow that "Furthest from end . . . , when they nearest weene." It is as if the narrator were impatient of the ongoing process of their "weening" and learning, as if he were anxious to impose a premature conclusion and thus prevent the process from running its course. Alternatively, the connective "then" can also suggest
that "Furthest from end" is the "fated" conclusion "when they nearest weene." That is to say, the conjunction "when" functions like the conjunction "if," and "Furthest from end" is the necessary consequence of "they nearest weene"; however hard they try and in whatever direction they go, the couple will always and must perforce arrive at the exact point "Furthest from end" if or "when they nearest weene." In any case, the narrator's condescension to the way they "weene" is implicit: "They think they have come close to the 'end' they are looking for. But that is pure fantasy. The fact is: just when they complacently think they are nearest to the 'end,' they are actually furthest from it." Accordingly, their "weening" comes to acquire a pejorative connotation; it means not only "thinking" but "wishful thinking." Although the "weening" in the sense of "wishing" gives rise to the "weening" in the sense of "thinking," the wishing also biases the thinking so that the thinking becomes a kind of "wish fulfillment."

On the other hand, this line simultaneously consolidates the narrator's "omniscience." To know when the couple are furthest from, or nearest to, the "end" requires a vantage point--a "bird's eye view," as it were,--from which one can see everything in the grove at a glance and thus can tell the distance of any given point from the "end." And this vantage point is possible only for one who stands securely outside the grove, who is not implicated in the situation of those inside
it; those who "wander too and fro in ways vnknowne" can never have access to this vantage point and the knowledge it guarantees. If the inadequacy of the couple's "weening" involves them in danger, the narrator's knowledge stabilizes him in security. If "their wits be not their owne," his "wits" are clearly his own.

The very next line, "That makes them doubt, their wits be not their owne," turns the inadequacy of the couple's "weening" into an intrapsychic drama. "Doubt" can mean "fear" or "dread" as well as "be uncertain." Epistemology involves psychology, and the latter half of this line thus acquires ontological resonance. The phrase can mean "they lose the wits they have once possessed." But the investment in the "wits" as the faculty that centers the self in an alien environment also points to the ontological insecurity and vulnerability of the self. The feeling of uncertainty evokes the fearful prospect of losing the self through losing its "wits" (as if this were what "getting lost" means). The self here seeks to identify not with the process of "weening" that engages it but with the "wits" that are separating from it. The emphasis on "owne" suggests that "their wits be not their owne," not because someone else has a share in the "wits," but because the self feels an inner division between itself and its "wits." The alienation the self feels toward the grove changes into the alienation it feels toward its "wits." Evidently, the "wits" are not an integral part of the self but something that the
self possesses to stabilize itself or, rather, something that stabilizes the self by containing it. It is not so much that the self here loses something it has once possessed as that the self is abandoned by something that exists independently of the will and control of the self. If, for such a self, the alien inside of the grove poses the threat of displacement, it is because this self can only hold itself together and keep itself in place by attaching to something that it fears may leave it behind at any time.

Discussing lines 4-6 of stanza 7, I have suggested that there exists a disjunction between what the couple can see and what the narrator knows to be true; that the narrator has betrayed his self-estrangement from the landscape and his vague anxiety about the unknowability of the grove, about his inability to see through its surface and fathom its ultimate depth; and that he remains an outsider, encapsulating himself inside his own conceptual frame and thus securing himself from the alien inside of the grove. All those implications come to a head in this stanza. While it is the couple who "weene," it is the narrator who "knows." While it is their loss of "wits" that involves them in danger, it is his access to knowledge that holds him in safety. The couple thus come to function as the agency mediating between the narrator and his anxiety about the landscape. And his relationship to them is that of a spectator who (over)sees them enacting an intrapsychic drama to which he is liable, but from which he is secure by virtue
of his (fore)knowledge. What begins as the experiencing of the inner unfolding and expansion of the landscape ("And all within were pathes and alleies wide") and as the opening up of the self to the pleasure the landscape affords turns into a verification of the narrator's apprehension and foreboding and, as the episode progresses, into both the lady's psychic disorientation and the knight's ruthless aggression.

V

When the knight is about to enter "a hollow caue / Amid the thickest woods" (11.6-7), the lady immediately admonishes him for being "too rash." An unhappy transformation of the relationship between self and landscape occurs:

Be well aware, quoth then that Ladie milde,
Least suddaine mischiefe ye too rash prouoke:
The danger hid, the place vnknowne and wilde,
Breedes dreadfull doubts: ... (12.1-4)

"Aware" can suggest the admission into one's consciousness of what one experiences. Awareness in this sense may well characterize the kind of receptive perception they show in stanza 7 when they see the grove and the unfolding of its inside; it can describe a self feeling secure enough to let in what is external to it. But it changes here into something almost opposite; it becomes a defense mechanism rather than receptive perception, a watchman over impulse ("rash") rather
than a friend to it, a guarding against, rather than a letting in of, the "suddaine" or the unpredictable. The unknown place is now the anxiety-producer. (The lady's formulation, "the place vnknowne and wilde / Breedes dreadfull doubts," transforms "the place" into the agent or, more accurately, the culprit "who" is responsible for the "doubts" that "cause" her "dread.") Whatever remains "hid" or "vnknowne" becomes the cause or the unmistakable sign of its "danger." What affords pleasure and delight changes into what threatens; the protective space that harbors the body into an enemy territory where "suddaine mischiefe" lies in ambush, ready to attack as soon as the self lowers the level of tension, vigilance, and apprehension, as soon as it lets down the armor of "awareness."

Thus, when the lady subsequently pronounces, "This is the wandring wood, this Errours den" (13.6), the pronouncement itself acquires no explanatory force at all except insofar as it unwittingly points to the ontological insecurity of its speaker. Like "awareness," the act of naming the place is primarily a defensive attempt to maintain the status quo and psychic equilibrium in the face of something "vnknowne and wilde." I have briefly discussed the allegorical import of her pronouncement at the beginning of this chapter. Nonetheless, what the pronouncement means to its speaker is not its allegorical import but its self-calming and self-stabilizing function. "This" obviously refers to where she is. But, as she
says in the preceding stanza, where she is is "the place
unknown and wilde," which "Breedes dreadfull doubts." And the
act of naming the place is apparently a panicky and distraught
attempt to suppress "the dreadfull doubts" in her—an attempt
to rationalize the prior psychic disorientation of the namer
herself.\textsuperscript{19} Note the repetition of the linguistic shifter,
"this." After her first attempt to locate herself by locating
the shifter in a name, she immediately makes a second attempt
to relocate herself by relocating the shifter in another name—
with increasing emphasis. At the very moment when she says
"the wandring wood," the name suddenly loses its function of
stabilizing herself but elicits instead the sensation of a
wood that is actually "wandring," a wood actually in motion.
The name employed to locate herself and the shifter only
exacerbates her sense of dislocation and reinforces the
"shiftiness" of the shifter. And she has to make another more
strenuous attempt. But the more emphatically and strenuously
she attempts to stabilize the shifter with one name and then
another, the more resistantly "shifty" it feels, and the more
desperate she sounds.

It has been a commonplace of \textit{The Faerie Queene} criticism
that the dwarf is the voice of prudence, reason, or common
sense.\textsuperscript{20} But here it is the lady who represents a most
elaborate version of that voice. The first words she speaks to
the knight are words of caution ("Be well aware"). And it is
she who reproves him for being "too rash," who deduces from a
piece of conventional knowledge a plan of action for him to perform: "Oft fire is without smoke, / And perill without show: therefore your stroke / Sir knight with-hold, till further triall made" (12.4-6). More specifically, she comes to function as the spokeswoman for the part of the narrator's psyche that feels compelled to employ prudence or the rational faculty to allay the prior anxiety about the landscape. She echoes the narrator's "so in they entred arre" (7.9) when she says "therefore your stroke / Sir knight with-hold, till further triall made"; and "Yet wisedome warnes, whilst foot is in the gate, / To stay the steppe, ere forced to retrate" (13.4-5). His words are spoken right before the couple enter the grove, and hers before the knight enters the cave. Each entry elicits anxiety, apprehension, and foreboding that occasion the utterances of both the narrator and the lady. Both his "so" and her "therefore" signal the volitional process of decision-making where logical judgement governs future action, where the rational faculty takes control of the impulse to enter. Furthermore, her "whilst foot is in the gate, / To stay the steppe" provides a perfect gloss on the effect of the word "arre" in his "so in they entred arre": the effect of that word is precisely that of "staying the steppe" "whilst foot is in the gate." (The word "arre," as I have observed, freezes the process of being entered at the mid-point, keeps it there in a lasting standstill, and hence displaces the spectacle of movement with the sense of stasis.
That is to say, the word bespeaks the narrator's attempt to arrest or "stay" the couple's "steps" while they are in the process of crossing the threshold of the grove, while their "feet" are still "in the gate"—though, again as I have mentioned, the first line of the stanza 8 suggests that they have by-passed the narrator's attempt at interruption.) Though the lady's high-sounding appeals to the external authorities of conventional knowledge and "wisedome" may encourage the perception of her as the voice of "Wisdom" or "Truth in the absolute,"

those appeals, like the need for awareness and the act of naming, are primarily homeostatic; they are attempts to maintain psychic stability in response to a disruptive situation, to "The danger hid" and "the place vunknowne and wilde."

Despite the lady's attempt to "stay the steppe" of the knight, he goes right into the cave. The narrator then proceeds to describe how he sees "the vgly monster." While the lady's need for awareness is primarily defensive, the knight's gaze verges on visual aggression:

But forth vnto the darksome hole he went,
And looked in: his glistening armor made
A little glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the vgly monster plaine, (14.3-6)

The displacement of the kinetic in line 3 by the visual in the first phrase of line 4 activates for a moment an implication of voyeurism about the gaze that exposes "the vgly monster."
The "hollow cave" (11.6) becomes "the darksome hole" here, and what the knight goes "vnto" becomes what he "looked in" through at the object inside. Although, in line 3, the hole is the destination the knight approaches, at the beginning of the next line that destination gives way to the object at which the look is directed, with the subject, "he," behind the look, willing it and at a distance from its object. The hole becomes the passageway for the look, and our attention is drawn to the object located at the end of the look. At the end of line 6, however, this voyeuristic gaze is invested with the power to expose what it looks at. The word "plaine" can be an adverb modifying the verb "saw." But it can also be an adjective indicating the change the object (i.e., "the ugly monster") suffers as a result of the seeing. That is to say, the verb "saw" functions grammatically like the verb "made"; it is the seeing that causes "the ugly monster" to become "plaine." In this respect, note the pause at the end of line 3 and the conjunction "And" at the beginning of line 4. The "kinetic energy" gained though the momentum of the thrust in line 3 is gathered at the end of line 3 and then transmitted by "And" to "looked in," as if the subject, "he," were "knitting all his force" (19.7) for a gaze with the "running start" of line 3. Although the "darksomeness" of the hole and the resemblance of the "little glooming light" to "a shade" may make the object of the gaze ambiguous and elusive, the gathered force of the gaze nonetheless renders its object "plaine," divesting it of any
ambiguity, annihilating whatever may be fugitive or obscure about it.

Thus, it does not really matter how "darksome" the hole is or how "much like a shade" the "glooming light" is. For the emphasis of line 6 is on the exposing power of the gaze itself. Maureen Quilligan observes:

The Redcrosse Knight's naivete about language is in fact a large part of his problem. For instance, at the threshold of Error's cave he readily repeats the proverb, "Virtue gives herself light, through darkness for to wade," taking it primarily in the etymological sense of virtus, or manly strength. Spenser undercuts this notion by showing that when the knight confronts Error before her den, it is his armor that gives some illumination, but it is only a "little glooming light," which is, in fact, "much like a shade" (1.1.14)."^{22}

While the line which Quilligan quotes may support her observation, the line that follows—"By which he saw the ugly monster plaine"—suggests the narrator's complicity in, rather than his undercutting of, the knight's complacent self-assertion in the proverb. The word "wade" in the proverb can mean "to move or get forward with difficulty or labor" or, specifically, "to walk though water or any liquid or soft substance which impedes motion" (OED, def. 3). The movement can be difficult, because the medium (i.e., "darkness") in or
through which "Virtue" moves offers resistance. Nonetheless, what the rhythm of the proverb as a whole conveys is less the difficulty of motion than the sense of triumphant strides, the sense of successfully overcoming difficulties. This sense is echoed in the sixth line of this stanza. As an adjective, the word "plaine" in this line can mean "free of impediments to view" or "free of ambiguity." Since, as I have suggested above, it is the seeing that causes the object seen to become "plaine," the word also calls attention to the prior resistance and ambiguity which the viewer feels is there in the object before it is seen. Note, however, that the word is placed at the end of the line and hence receives an additional emphasis it would otherwise lack. If this line obliquely recalls a drama of the struggle between the seeing and what is seen, its final gesture nonetheless stresses the triumph of the former over the latter. The gaze here apparently embodies the light endowed with "manly strength" by the knight's self-professed "Virtue." What he complacently asserts in the proverb is here corroborated by the narrator.

The narrator joins the knight in another way as well. Definition 1b of "wade" in OED reads: "Of inanimate things, esp. of a weapon: To go through, to penetrate into something." In this sense, the "light" which "Virtue gives herself" is metaphorically the weapon that goes through or penetrate into "darkness." Even if the narrator is undercutting the knight's assertion of "manly strength" when he says, "his glistring
armor made / A litel glooming light, much like a shade," the following lines make it evident that he is anything but questioning the aggressive penetrating power of the "weapon" of "light" itself:

She lookeft about, and seeing one in mayle
Armed to point, sought backe to turne againe;
For light she hated as the deadly bale,
Ay wont in desert darknesse to remaine,
Where plaine none might her see, nor she see any
plaine. (16.5-9)
The light which the knight's "glistring armor made" is no longer "much like a shade." Instead, according to the narrator, it is what makes the creature "Errour" seek "backe to turne againe." Furthermore, while what the knight sees in stanzas 14 and 15 instigates him to attack the creature in stanza 17, the last line of this stanza suggests that what the creature tries to avoid is not only what is seen but the very act of seeing itself, whether the seeing comes from the knight or from the creature herself; the seeing is installed almost as an impersonal entity which can make common cause only with him but never with her. If the knight's attack in the next stanza is an extension of his visual aggression, the "light" here is in turn a mere extension of the gaze. Although he gives his "needlesse spere" to the dwarf (11.9) before he enters the cave, the spear is apparently replaced by the
"light" which his "glistring armor made." In this respect, the armor is a weapon as well as a protection.

Note, however, that the last three lines of this stanza are preceded by the logical conjunction "For," which signals the narrator's attempt to explain why the creature "sought backe to turne againe" lest the motive behind her action should remain ambiguous or obscure. On one level, the narrator is of course acting as her interpretive voice here, since she is created mute. ("Mute"? Because she does not make any noises which we can understand and define as "language"?) But the fact that his interpretation is put in entirely negative terms also points to his attempt to show the reader how not to read, as if he were aware that his text may yield other interpretations than his, and he had to intervene to impose a preferred interpretation against the grain--an interpretation, most of all, which is also an attempt to alienate the reader from the creature. The need to explain the motive behind the creature's action occurs at the precise point where the narrator encounters ambiguity and resistance to understanding. To explain her motive is to explain away its undecidable and elusive aspects and thus to foreclose other interpretive possibilities. Interpreting in this way the motive of the creature whom he himself detests begins to seem neurotic self-defense.

From this point of view, when the narrator goes on to say,
. . . light she hated as the deadly bale,
Ay wont in desert darknesse to remaine,
Where plaine none might her see, nor she see any
plaine[,] he is apparently forcing the creature to play a part in his
intrapsychic drama. Note that the words "see" and "plaine" are
each repeated here twice more. Although the knight already
"saw the vgly monster plaine" in stanza 14, the narrator here
nonetheless accuses her of allowing "none" to see her plain.
The repeated insistence on seeing her plain makes the desire
for visual penetration appear like a compulsion and an
obsession on the narrator's part. Her fear of the gaze is
really the creation of his desire to intimidate the object of
his gaze; in order to prove the power of his gaze, he must
invent a corresponding fear on her part as the necessary
antithesis of his visual dominance (in much the same fashion
as the knight must create an enemy out of the Dragon so that
he can "proue his puissance in battell braue / Vpon his foe"
[3.7-8]). Thus, it is not so much that she is slow to react to
the knight's gaze and the "light" of his "glistring armor" as
that the narrator is trying to come to terms with his desire
for visual penetration by interpreting her behavior as her
vulnerability to the gaze; not so much that she is evading the
gaze as that the narrator needs to ensure himself that the
power of his gaze is always answered and confirmed by the fear
of its object.
Nevertheless, to the degree that the narrator must insist repeatedly on seeing the creature plain, his anxiety about the threat of the vaguely perceived becomes only the more painfully apparent. This need to see the creature plain is analogous to his need to explain— that is, to make plain—the motive behind her behavior in the sense that both are attempts to rationalize the prior anxiety about the vague, the mysterious, the not fully known; both are ways to come to terms with this anxiety by making that which evokes anxiety into something predictable and plain. Just as the lady's appeals to external authorities of conventional knowledge and "wisedome" convey not lucidity but a struggle to maintain psychic equilibrium, so the narrator's seeing and interpretation here bespeak not an interest in the nature of the independently existing reality out there but an attempt to master anxiety. If, in stanza 7, he has already betrayed his anxiety about the shadiness of the grove, about his inability to see though its surface and fathom its ultimate depth, that anxiety is not only mastered there by the moralization that exposes the "meaning" of the landscape but remastered here by the gaze that exposes what it looks at and by the interpretation that divests the creature's motive of its ambiguity, its "shadiness," as it were.

When the knight sees the creature seek "backe to turne againe," he "[leaps] / As Lyon fierce upon the flying pray" (17.1-2), "[forces] her to stay" (17.4), engages her in a
battle, and finally kills her. But what is the reality about her that can justify the killing? When the knight first "saw the vgly monster plaine," the narrator describes her as "Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine" (14.9). Yet, what attitude toward the unfamiliar, the enigmatic, or the strange and foreign can be more "disdainful" than that shown here in this description of the creature? Right before the knight launches his attack on her, what he sees is a maternal scene: "Of her there bred / A thousand yong ones, which she dayly fed, / Sucking vpon her poisonous dugs, eachone / Of sundry shapes, yet all ill fauored" (15.4-7). In spite of the narrator's strenuous attempt to counteract the positive aspect of this scene by converting what nurtures into what "poisons" and the various and diverse ("sundry") into the ugly ("all ill fauored"), one can still sense in these lines a cherishable atmosphere of creaturely family loving and unself-conscious, quiet, private motherly gentleness. On seeing this scene, however, the knight immediately starts to attack. To the creature and her offspring, his violence is nothing short of terrorism.

This episode begins with the lady's and the knight's receptive perception of the grove and an affirmation of the congenial coexistence of the natural and the human in the same existential space. It continues with the couple's uninhibited response to the unfolding of the grove's inside and to the pleasure the grove affords. But their positive experiences
obviously have no influences at all on their later acts. Instead, as the episode moves on, they seem increasingly "infected" with the anxiety about the landscape that possesses the narrator from the start. At the same time, the narrator's disquiet and apprehension about the landscape gain more and more control over the development of the episode until finally the knight kills the creature to atone for the "error" of his and the lady's "wandering"--a wandering, according to the narrator, which is "caused" by their delight in the landscape. The narrative development then suggests that the creature is made the scapegoat whose death serves to "cleanse" the couple from their "guilt" of taking delight in the landscape. The creature thus become the vessel of their "guilt" in much the same fashion Jove's "Leman" becomes the vessel of his anger.

What is more, the "ritualistic" killing of the scapegoat also serves to unify the narrator, the lady, and the knight in their "dialectical opposition to the sacrificial offering."²³ Although the lady initially reproves the knight for being "too rash" and strives to overcome his will to enter the cave, although the narrator apparently takes her part by describing the knight as "full of fire and greedy hardiment" (14.1), they both end up applauding his murder of the creature. Right after the murder, the lady "Approocht in hast to greet his victorie" (27.2). And, in the stanza that concludes the episode, the narrator "rewards" him by installing him as the one in charge
and by virtually transforming the topography of "the labyrinth" (11.4):

That path he kept, which beaten was most plaine,
Ne euer would to any by-way bend,
But still did follow one vnto the end,
The which at last out of the wood them brought.

(28.3-6)

If stanzas 10 and 11 mark the turning point of the episode, where the lady's and the knight's delight in the landscape suddenly results in their "wandering" from the right path, this concluding stanza conveniently provides a denouement, where the knight's murder of the creature named "Errour" by the lady and by the narrator (18.9) suddenly eliminates the problem of "wandering." "That path he kept, which beaten was most plaine" echoes "That path they take, that beaten seemd most bare" (11.3). But "they" is changed to "he." Except for the last two and half lines of stanza 11 ("the Champion stout / Eftsoones dismounted from his courser brave, / And to the Dwarfe a while his needlesse spere he gaue"), where the description can apply only to the knight, the narrator uses "they" or "them" throughout stanzas 10 and 11. In contrast, he uses "he" or "his" for the most part in this stanza even where the description is also applicable to the lady (e.g., "on his way" [7] instead of "on their way"; "he trauelled" [9] instead of "they trauelled"). When a disruptive situation occurs, it involves them both. Once it is passed, however, the knight is
promoted, as it were, by the narrator to the position of the one in control while the lady is half forgotten by the narrator.

Again, note that "take" is changed to "kept," and "seemd" to "was." Technically, the path "which beaten was most plaine" is evidently identical with the path "that beaten seemd most bare." Yet, the path "that beaten seemd most bare" is the path that "brought them to a hollow caue [i.e., 'Errours den']" (11.6) whereas the path "which beaten was most plaine" becomes the path that "out of the wood them brought." Indeed, a close attention to the verbal changes shows that these two paths are not the same. "That path they take" suggests that the situation is hazardous, and the choice uncertain. The word "seemd" reinforces the sense of indeterminacy and the sense of risk-taking involved in the choice by pointing to the opacity of "that path." The knight's murder of the creature, however, apparently effects a transformation of the nature of "that path." The uncertainty of "seemd" is replaced by the positivity of "was"; "That path" is no longer opaque but becomes transparent. In this regard, notice the change of "bare" to "plaine." The later word also appears in stanzas 14 and 16, as already mentioned: it is associated—in a way the word "bare" is not—with the transforming power of the gaze to free its object of ambiguity and opacity. Though this association may not be readily apparent here, there is nonetheless an implication that "That path" is "beaten" so as
to be freed of its "shadiness," of its ambiguity and opacity and thus to allow a full, unobstructed view of it. Since "That path" is purged of its ambiguity and opacity, the need of making a choice and taking a risk no longer exists. All that is required of the knight is to show a firm purpose ("still") of "keeping" that newly transformed path. Even those "many pathes" and "many turnings" which have caused him and the lady to be "in diuerse doubt" in stanza 10 (ll.8-9) conspire with him here by dividing themselves dutifully into "by-ways" and the "one" way that will bring them "out of the wood." The transformation of the topography of the wood at the end of the episode thus acquires a transcendental character. Although the narrator disapproves of both the couple's delight in the landscape and the knight's entry into the cave, the murder of the creature named "Errour" wins the knight not only the friendship of God ("with God to frend" [28.7]) but, more importantly, the friendship of another transcendental being, the narrator.
Notes

1. All quotations from Edmund Spenser refer to Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr., with the assistance of C. Patrick O'Donnell, Jr. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981)
3. Parker 64-65.
5. This term may be inaccurate. For one thing, the company on the journey is a trio; there is the Dwarf in addition to the knight and the lady. But when the narrator says, in one of the lines quoted below, "this fair couple eke to shroud themselues were fain," he evidently excludes the Dwarf from the company. Consequently, whenever he says "they" in the following stanzas, it is hard to know whether the Dwarf is one of "them." For another, even if I use "companion" instead of "companions," it seems to me that companionship hardly exists between the knight and the lady, as we shall see later. In the case of the knight, a sense of companionship comes, interestingly enough, only when he is in Duessa's (Fidessa's) company.


9. Donald Cheney also notes "the instinctive nature of the lovers' flight from [the storm]" in Spenser's Image of Nature: Wild Man and Shepherd in "The Faerie Queene" (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966) 24. But "instinctive" seems a negative term in his reading, because he is evidently deriding the couple when he says, "On the plain they are exposed to the elements and almost ludicrously unprepared to confront them" (23). Such a reading tends to antagonize the elements and regard as "ludicrous" what is both sensible and human.


12. To my knowledge, only Jan Karel Kouwenhoven notes that "Taking shelter from a thunderstorm in forest is not erroneous: it is very sensible." See his Apparent Narrative as Thematic Metaphor (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1983) 31. His point, however, is to depersonalize the knight. He urges that "We
should take the knight not as an individual . . . but as a personification" (31). If "Taking shelter from a thunderstorm in a forest is not erroneous," it is because "Red Cross cannot be a person and thus cannot commit any "particular error" (31).

13. Part of our difficulty here is that, like many other "evil" creatures (e.g., the "monster" "Errour") and characters (e.g., Acrasia in Book II) in The Faerie Queene, the "Dragon" is never allowed to speak throughout the whole Book although, from the start, the author and the narrator have told one-sided stories about him. The narrator calls the "Dragon" an "infernal feend" and says that he "Forwasted all [the lady's parents'] land, and them expel" (i.5.7-8). In his letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser also says that the lady's parents "had bene by an huge dragon many years shut vp in a brasen Castle. . . ." Curiously enough, everything remains perfectly intact in their "Forwasted" land. In canto xii, no sooner has the knight killed the "Dragon" than they and their subjects are surprisingly well-prepared to receive and entertain the knight with every kind of due ceremony (4.1-15.1); "... they find purveyance meet / Of all, that royall Princes court became (13.5-6); and they feast him "with meates and drinks of every kinde" (15.1). They even have their own "watchman" (2.6), and the king can freely "[bid] to open wyde his brazen gate" (3.6). The fact that the "brazen gate" is "his" rather than the "Dragon's" indicates that perhaps the "Dragon" is
ostracized; it is not so much that the king and queen are "shut vp in a brasen Castle" as that the "Dragon" is "expeld" or shut out.

14. In the letter to Sir Walter Raleigh, Spenser says that the knight, "falling before the Queen of Faeries," "desired a boone (as the manner then was) which during that feast she might not refuse." The "boone" the knight desires turns out to be the "great adventure" he embarks upon in Book I. But it is not so much that the Queen gives the adventure to him, as the narrator says (3.2); rather, she is forced into giving it to him, because, bound by "the manner" that "then was," she cannot choose but comply with his "desire."

15. The compulsive need "To proue his puissance in battell braue" is also characteristic of Guyon. Near the beginning of Book III, as soon as he sees "a knight," he starts to attack "him" without even exchanging any words with "him" (i.4.1-i.6.9). That knight turns out to be "the famous Britomart" (i.8.6).

16. The narrator, however, exploits this moment for a display of his conventional knowledge about trees (8.6-9.9). Cheney remarks that the catalogue of trees "reflects man's confident moral dissection of his universe" (24). In his edition of *The Faerie Queene*, Hamilton notes that the trees are characterized "by their usefulness or stock associations" (32). The tree cannot become visible unless the narrator can find a stereotypical use or a "stock association" for it. What is
more, the name of each tree is capitalized. The tree he "sees" is not so much a "tree" as a preexisting category in his own mind. It is possible that the he may describe here the way the couple "prayse the trees" (8.5). But he says "Much can they prayse" rather than "Much did they prayse." And when he proceeds to catalogue the trees, he is not so much describing how they praise the trees as supplying the reason why "Much can they prayse the trees." More importantly, as Hamilton says in his edition of the poem, "The familiar epic catalogue announces [Spenser's] relation to Chaucer . . ., Virgil . . ., Ovid . . ." (32). In this respect, the narrator/author seems too self-conscious of his place in the poetic tradition to take part in the couple's pleasure and to see what they see. For a discussion of the way the narrator/author distinguishes himself from the couple in this passage, see Anne Ferry, The Art of Naming (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 148-52.


19. Augus Fletcher observes that "Una, the embodiment of Truth, at once recognizes the labyrinth for what it is: 'This is the wandring wood, this Errors den . . .'." (The Prophetic
Moment: An Essay on Spenser [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971] 26). But the naming is not an immediate recognition but a belated defensive attempt to "detoxify" "the place vnknowne and wilde." When she and the knight first "spide" "A shadie groue" or when they take a walk in the grove later on, it never occurs to her that the grove is "the wandring wood," Nor has the creature in the cave ever called itself "Errour." Actually, she names the creature even before she sees it. That she should "know" the names of the "vnknowne" place and the yet-unseen creature out of the blue is enough to inspire suspicions about the "Truth" of her "recognition." In this case, there are no names; there is only naming.


Chapter Two:

Reopening the Question of Male Selfhood in Othello

I

The relationship between self and other in Othello has come under scrutiny in Marguerite Waller's critique of Stephen Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning. She remarks:

As we have seen, the self-fashioner is a closed work. He is formed in relation to, and in the image of, a hierarchically organized political system which cannot, fundamentally, be challenged. The self-fashioner's only freedom is the freedom to compete for more favorable positions within that system, a competition open, furthermore, only to those who are not defined as "other" by the powers that be. These "others," in whom I am obviously interested, generally make up a numerical majority, and, it must not be lost sight of, are as crucial to the illusion of self-fashioning as the self-fashioner's submission to the principle of absolutism.²

If Greenblatt's "self-fashioner" "is formed in relation to, and in the image of, a hierarchically organized political system which cannot, fundamentally, be challenged," it remains to be seen whether and to what extent Waller "forms" or
"fashions" her "others" otherwise. Earlier in her essay, she has observed: "The figure of the self as an autonomous, self-identical, ontologically grounded being who knows what he sees and knows how he feels about it disintegrates again and again in Petrarch's poetry . . ." (9). Interestingly enough, when she comes to read Othello in the fourth section of her essay, she manages to secure the "outsiders" in the play from such a disintegration. She calls Othello, Cassio, and the female characters "outsiders" (13, 17, and passim), observes that "the objectified 'other' can also take the form of an 'outsider'" (13), and accuses Greenblatt of "a refusal or inability to analyze the 'Venetian' male self from any of the several reference points provided by the play, including, most obviously, the play's eponymous hero and, just as importantly, the female characters" (14). While Waller affirms that "It is Iago whose identity is unfashioned" (17), she seldom questions what the "outsiders" in Othello "see" and "know" as she does with the "figure of the self" in Petrarch's poetry; instead, they are installed as "the reference points" and saved from undergoing any disintegration or unfashioning of selfhood. At the beginning of this section, she writes: "Though the mapping of a public and private distinction onto male and female has made it particularly easy to sacrifice woman to the cause of the male illusion that he is the principal maker of his identity, the objectified 'other' can also serve to threaten and therefore to consolidate the self-fashioner's sense of his
own identity" (13). If, for her, Greenblatt "barely acknowledges that Othello occupies the position of just such an outsider" (13), she seems to go to the other extreme. As long as she can find in any character any kind of "difference" from "Venetian white male selfhood" (14) -- whether it is a sexual, racial, or national difference, that character is automatically, unconditionally, and indiscriminately granted a kind of absolute selfhood. "Otherness," "outsider," and "difference" function in her essay not as relational terms but as reified or hypostatized entities. For instance, near the end of this section, she writes:

The genius, as I read it, of [Iago's] elaborate subversion of Othello is not that he taps into a previously existing sexual anxiety in Othello, but that he seems to offer something previously unavailable to Othello that brings the distrust of women (especially an independent woman like Desdemona) in its wake. What Iago offers is membership in the club. . . . It might be more accurately be called a seduction than an unfashioning. Iago's strategy works against the grain of Desdemona's inclination fully to inhabit her and Othello's differences, offering instead the prospect of a utopian completeness and self-sufficiency, predicated, of course, on the denigration of woman. (18)
Here, Waller plays the "differences" of the "outsiders" off against the "utopian completeness and self-sufficiency" of the Venetian club. Yet, since Iago's identity is itself "unfashioned," since the selfhood of the "outsiders" is seldom put into question, and since "the several reference points" include the "outsiders" but exclude the "insiders" of the club, the "outsiders" actually entertain the privilege of being "inside" the "reference points." The "utopian completeness and self-sufficiency" is apparently relocated, neither in the Venetian club, nor in the differences between the "outsiders" and the "insiders" of the club, but in the differences of the "outsiders" from the "insiders," namely, the differences intrinsic to the "outsiders" and yet extrinsic or alien to the "insiders." Othello's failure to inhabit the "outsiders' differences," his "fall" from the "Eden," as it were, is caused by "Iago's malice" (16) or "seduction." Iago becomes the arch-tempter, the "outsider," the "Other" to Othello's and Desdemona's "prelapsarian" relationship. Waller opens this section with the observation that "Woman is not, of course, the only 'other' who can be pressed into service as the guarantor of a self modeled on sovereignty" (13). But here Iago apparently becomes not only the "other" but the "Other" who is being "pressed into service as the guarantor of a self modeled on" the "sovereignty" of the "outsider's difference" and "otherness."
It may be true that the only freedom of Greenblatt's "self-fashioner" is "the freedom to compete for more favorable positions within [the hierarchically organized political system], a competition open... only to those who are not defined as 'other' by the powers that be." It may also be true that Greenblatt fails to attend to "the positions of certain key female figures" and "thereby misses what could be a central--perhaps the central--insight into the fashioning of the male self" (3). Yet, "positioning" her "others" or "outsiders" outside the system, Waller apparently endows them with an aura of "apriority" in the sense that they inhabit a kind of "center," standing above and beyond the circumstances involving those inside the system, and yet constituting the "transcendental" "reference points" that precondition the "insight into the fashioning of the male self." To be positioned outside the system is indeed to be unconditionally favored and privileged; or, perhaps, to be unconditionally favored and privileged, Waller's "others" or "outsiders" must be positioned outside the system.

Although Waller says that the membership Iago offers is "something previously unavailable to Othello," Othello himself has actually attained that membership before the marriage. He tells the Venetian senators that Brabantio "lovd" him and "oft invited" him (I.iii.128). But his marriage with Desdemona not only ruins the male bond he has established with Brabantio but endangers the senators' esteem for him, which he
has earned by the "services" "[he has] done the signiory" (I.ii.18). If those "services" win him the Venetian acceptance, the way Venetian society views the marriage also indicates how precarious that acceptance is. Although Brabantio "lov'd" him, his contempt for him comes to the surface as soon as he is informed of the marriage. In his well-intentioned attempt to "help these lovers / Into [Brabantio's] favor" (I.iii.200-01), the Duke betrays in his language his complicity with Iago's slandering of the marriage as Othello's robbery of Brabantio's property ("'Zounds, Sir, y' are robb'd!" [I.i.86]): "The robb'd that smiles steals something from the thief" (I.iii.208). Even Othello himself feels compelled to defend himself against the threat the marriage poses to the "serious and great business" with which the signiory entrusts him: "And heaven defend your souls, that you think / I will your serious and great business scant / For she is with me" (I.iii.266-28).

4

If, as Waller suggests, the membership Iago offers is more attractive to Othello than the relationship Desdemona presses for, it is not only that "Iago's strategy works against the grain of Desdemona's inclination fully to inhabit her and Othello's differences," but that Othello himself has come to regard the Venetian state as his "second, metaphorical father" and accept the attitude of Venetian society toward his "otherness," viewing his "otherness"—his "difference" from Venetian male selfhood—as something undesirable or even
damaging to his self-image defined by Venetian society. When Waller suggests that Othello desires the membership Iago offers--the membership that ensures "a utopian completeness and self-sufficiency," that desire itself already implies his sense of his "otherness" as lacking and hence his need to compensate for the lack by the membership. Because of the lack, he is already predisposed to act in complicity with Iago. His relationship with Desdemona merely heightens his consciousness of his "otherness" and makes it all the more necessary to ingratiate himself with Venetian society and to repair the damage done by the relationship to his self-image as perceived by Venetian society. Instead of exempting him from the anxiety about female sexuality that besets the male world of Venice, his "otherness" only exacerbates it and makes him all the more liable to the patriarchal, male attitude toward sexuality--an attitude manifested in and through Brabantio and Iago.

II

If, as Waller says, "The more Iago seemingly acknowledges Othello as confere, the less reason Othello has to recognize himself in the relationship that Desdemona continues, unilaterally . . . to press for" (18), there is perhaps a
"difference" between Othello's "difference" and Desdemona's--a difference that simultaneously inclines him to be Iago's "confrere" and disinclines him to "recognize himself" in his relationship with Desdemona. Perhaps there are differences between these two "outsiders"--differences within, rather than without, the "outsiders'" "differences." Perhaps, we need to reconsider the notions of "difference," "outsider," and "otherness."

Take for example the following "exchange" between Desdemona and Othello:

Desdemona: That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdu'd
Even to the very quality of my lord.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . Let me go with him.

Othello: Let her have your voice.
Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat (the young affects
In me defunct) and proper satisfaction;
But to be free and bounteous to her mind.
And heaven defend your good souls, that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
For she is with me. No, when light-wing'd toys
Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dullness
My speculative and offic'd instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base adversities
Make head against my estimation! (I.iii.248-74)\textsuperscript{5}

Let us start with Desdemona's speech. What is celebrated in her speech as a whole is the exuberance of being in love. The passionate vitality which love generates in her enables her both to transcend any social distinctions between self and other, between insider and outsider, and to embrace a whole range of sexual experience that such love opens up: "That I did love the Moor to live with him." The epithet "the Moor" conveys both a gentle regard for Othello's feeling about his "Moorishness" and an affectionate embracement of what Venetian society is apt to feel alienated from. Before Desdemona appears in this act, few people in the play refer to him as "the Moor" in his presence. When they do, the epithet tends to signal contempt and generate the feeling of "he is not one of us."\textsuperscript{6} Desdemona's use of the epithet, however, is both intimate and provocative, and what the first half of the line expresses is consolidated in the second half: "You may think 'It is a judgement main'd, and most imperfect' [I.iii.99] that I fall in love with 'the Moor.' You may think my love for him will 'incur a general mock' [I.iii.69]. You may even think my love for him cannot be sincere. Think whatever you will, I do
love him, and I am eager to give myself over to the erotic experience that such love entails: I want to live with him."⁷ "To live with him" introduces less an action to be projected into the future than a passionate response to the imperative of her love for Othello as if "to live with him" were a mere unfolding and flowering of "I did love the Moor." And what is remarkable is that all this is, as she tells the Duke, only her "simpleness" (I.iii.246).

As if in direct response to the "general mock" which her marriage with Othello may "incur" and to Brabantio's portrait of her as "A maiden, never bold; / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blush'd at herself" (I.iii.94-96), in the next two lines she stresses her active part in the marriage in spite of the social order that contrives to deny her sexual autonomy and independent will. When she says, "My downright violence, and storm of fortunes, / May trumpet to the world," her words carry a note of radical challenge to the way "the world" looks at the relationship between her and Othello. While Othello can defend the relationship by his reliance upon the "services which [he has] done the signiory" (I.ii.18), for Desdemona the relationship itself is its own justification; it stands on its own terms and does not require any prior and external ground to uphold it. In this respect, the word "trumpet" can mean "bring into awareness something previously unperceived" as well as "proclaim," and the phrase "May trumpet to the world" can suggest an invitation as well
as a challenge; it urges "the world" to rethink its whole institution of marriage and take a fresh, unconventional look at the relationship that has emerged between her and Othello.

On the other hand, the "trumpet" also points to the word "unfolding" in her preceding speech to the Duke: "Most gracious Duke, / To my unfolding lend your prosperous ear, / And let me find a charter in your voice / T' assist my simpleness" (243-46). Patricia Parker associates Desdemona's "unfolding" with another use of the word in Othello's "This honest creature, doubtless, / Sees and knows more, much more, than he [Iago] unfolds" (III.iii. 242-43). She thus takes Desdemona's "unfolding" to mean "an 'unfolding' of something at first hermetically 'wrapt up' or closed." I would add that what Othello desires to "know" from what Iago "unfolds" involves a repression of what he does "know" from what is "unfolded" in Desdemona, whereas Desdemona's "unfolding" here involves an attempt undo the repression of her "downright violence," the repression, by the male world, of whatever in her is disruptive to the male order of things. Before she speaks in this act, everything told by Brabantio and Othello about her perpetuates the dominant impression of her as unassertive, weak-willed, and incapable of acting contrary to the patriarchal will and social convention. Othello's apology, "That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter, / It is moat true" (I.iii.78), betrays his conception of her as a passive object under the ineffectual protection of an "old
man." Even when he tells the senators "How [he] did thrive in this fair lady's love, / And she in [his]" (I.iii.124-26), he portrays her as someone who can be easily manipulated by a distant, detached viewer ("Which I observing . . . found good means / To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart . . ."
[I.iii.150-52]). (In fact, Othello's "These things to hear / Would Desdemona seriously incline" [I.iii.145-46] is echoed by Iago's "For 'its most easy / Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue / In any honest suit" [II.iii. 239-41]).

In the pervasive atmosphere of repression and denial, Desdemona's "unfolding" acquires special resonance. "My unfolding" can simultaneously mean "a disclosure by me," "making myself known (to you all)," "my unwrapping of what has always been repressed," and "an opening up of myself or my self or both." If "trumpet to the world" sounds like a protest against, and a defiance of, the texture of disavowal in the male discourse, "unfolding" nevertheless suggests that what the male discourse tries to suppress or "smother" (V.ii.83, S.D.) is what has already been opened up in her. If the texture of disavowal in this act looks toward Othello's "smothering" of her in the final act, her ability to "unfold" and to "trumpet to the world" also looks toward Emilia's ability to speak in defiance of all the forces that conspire to make her "hold her peace": "Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak" (V.ii.219-22)." Iago's response to Emilia's ability
to speak ("Villainous whore" [V.ii.229]; "Filth, thou lies!" [V.ii.231]) recalls Othello's "Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her, when they belie her. Lie with her! 'Zounds, that's fulsome!" (IV.i.35-37). Both instances suggest that male anxiety about female sexuality is inextricably connected with the male fear of the power of female voice. Othello's act of "smothering" Desdemona thus appears to be a desperate attempt to suppress with one strode both her sexuality and the power of her voice, to put to rest what in her is doubly disruptive to the male world.

What follows in Desdemona's speech suggests a radical ontology of her love and her self in love: "My heart's subdu'd / Even to the very quality of my lord." If the preceding lines stress her active part in her relationship with Othello, these one and half lines suggest an elusive relation between active and passive, between self as subject and self as object, between willing and surrendering, between desiring and self-relinquishment. Notice that she does not say "My heart's subdu'd / Even by the very quality of my lord." Her very formulation leaves the agency unspecified as if her heart's being subdued were a response to some impersonal force from beyond the self. In answering to this force, her self comes to merge with whatever Othello embodies. The word "Even" signals her all-inclusive embracement of, and fearless plunge into, a whole mode of life and experience entirely foreign to her. One recalls her earlier double wish, expressed after she hears
Othello's story: "She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd / That heaven had made her such a man" (I.iii.161-62). If the first wish is her response to the "strangeness" of the story ("'twas strange, 'twas passing strange" [I.iii.160]), the grammatical ambiguity of "make her such a man" nonetheless suggests her eagerness to embrace in all its strangeness the whole world of experience the story presents and to become the active agent in it rather than a detached onlooker. Being subdued to "the very quality" of Othello is simultaneously a process of self-empowerment through which she "makes" herself the "man" she wishes to become.¹³

In the Quarto, Desdemona says "utmost pleasure" instead of the Folio's "very quality." The Quarto reading tends to make her, not "such a man," but a docile wife who is all too willing to please or "satisfy" her husband. It also misses the Folio's implication of her ability to admit into her self whatever is "strange" in Othello and cherish it as an intimate element of her love for him. But the Quarto reading can also suggest her ability to make the anticipated consummation of their marriage present in her imagination (the emphasis is on "utmost pleasure" as well as on "my lord"). Note the enjambment and pause after "subdu'd." The pause communicates, however momentarily, a lingering sensation of letting go, of being wholly immersed in experiencing, and this sensation is sustained even as it culminates, orgasm-like, in "the utmost pleasure" that totally claims her. In this sense, these one
and half lines signal an almost immediate experiencing of "the utmost pleasure" which her self-surrender to "the erotic principle" opens up for her and for Othello—at least the Othello thus generated in this experience. From this point of view, the crux generates two sides of Desdemona which complement each other and together provide a touchstone for her character in the early scenes.

Before we turn to Othello's speech, let us dwell for a moment upon the situation of the "dialogue." Desdemona has just asked the Duke: ". . . let me find a charter in your voice / T' assist my simpleness." But before the duke has any chance to give his "voice," Othello intervenes: "Let her have your voice." Apparently, Othello anticipates a moment of silence, which he may interpret as the Duke's reluctance or hesitancy. Yet, the Duke's brief and perfunctory reply to Othello suggests his impatience instead: "Be it as you shall privately determine, / Either for her stay or going; th' affair cries hast, / And speed must answer it": "Why did you make so much fuss defending yourself? Don't you realize the urgency of the state affair? I don't give a damn about your motive for seconding her request. Dispose of her request any way you want and attend to the state affair immediately."

Although it is Desdemona who makes the request to the Duke, it is Othello who is given the authority to dispose of her request. The Duke's disregard of the request points to the difficulty a woman may encounter when she tries to give her
own voice to her desire in public. Previously, her voice has been pivotal in resolving the central conflict of this act—the conflict between Othello and Brabantio. Othello asks the Duke: "And let her speak of me before her father. / If you do find me foul in her report, / The trust, the office I do hold of you, / Not only take away, but let your sentence / Even fall upon my life" (I.iii.116-20). And Brabantio echoes him when he says: "I pray you hear her speak. / If she confess that she was half the wooer, / Destruction on my head if my bad blame / Light on the man" (I.iii.175-77). In spite of their irreconcilable difference, both Brabantio and Othello agree that there is a "charter" in Desdemona's voice, as it were. But when Othello intervenes to "help her out," he apparently feels (not altogether wrongly) that his words carry more weight with the Duke and senators than her words; that, without his "help," she cannot "find a charter" in the Duke's voice. Insofar as she is asked to settle the dispute between a powerful ruling member of the state and its indispensable commander, her voice is granted a place of central importance. But when it comes to speak her self and her desire, it can hardly reach the Duke's ear without the "help" of her husband's voice; and yet, with such a "help," she is perfunctorily subjected to his jurisdiction.

On the other hand, the rest of Othello's speech suggests not so much his support for her as his self-defence against the threat her speech poses to his self-image. In a line not
quoted above, Desdemona has just said: "I saw Othello's visage in his mind."
But what matters to him is apparently not his "visage" as seen by her in his mind but his "visage" as seen by his audience in their mind. Where she views with intimacy, tenderness, and understanding, he views with estrangement, anxiety, and defensiveness. It is as if he were saying to the senators, "Please don't think I am the kind of man she sees. Please don't believe her." And his speech is largely an attempt to reinterpret and clarify her words, to counteract their radical implications and revise them out of existence, lest the "ambiguities" of her words should implicate his "visage" in their "mind."

In contrast to Desdemona, Othello responds to the "general mock" not with defiance but with anxiety. His "Let housewives make a skillet of my helm, / And all indign and base adversities / Make head against my estimation" elaborates and expands both Brabantio's "Destruction on my head " (I.iii.175) and Iago's "Abhor me" and "Despise me" (I.i.6 & 8). In both Brabantio's case and Othello's, the threat of the "general mock" has to do with the internalized public censure of sexuality itself. Iago's strategy for making Brabantio react against his daughter's newly "unfolded" sexuality is to activate, "call up," or "rouse" the public censor in him: "Call up her father. / Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight, / Proclaim him in the streets" (I.i.67-69). When Othello turns abruptly from his support for
Desdemona to a strenuous denial of his sexual potency, he is apparently trying to appease an inner censor who is outraged by the expression of Desdemona's forthright sexuality: "Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with heat (the young affects / In me defunct) and proper satisfaction." The prospect of her going with him evokes both the threat of her sexual demands on him and his latent anxiety about his ability to "satisfy" such demands. And he can keep the threat and anxiety at bay only by taking a censorious attitude toward sexuality itself—an attitude subliminally directed at Desdemona: "Don't think that, because I second your request, I will satisfy your sexual appetite and comply with your young affects. Let me make it clear to you: my own young affects are already 'defunct' so that, although your sexual demands are 'proper,' I am glad I don't have to satisfy you any more."

When Othello goes on to say, "And heaven defend your good souls, that you think / I will your serious and great business scant / For she is with me," his apprehension of the senators' distrust suggests how obsessed he is with their "estimation" of him and yet how insecure he feels about it, in spite of all the services he has done the signiory. Desdemona has just said: "And to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." While his "honors" and "valiant parts" are an intimate and essential element of her love for him, Othello himself considers her love for him not only alien
but detrimental to his "honors" and "valiant parts." And her profession of her "consecration" only makes him all the more tormented with what they "think" of him.

Alternatively, since the senators have not yet said anything about their "thoughts," the fantasized consequence of "she is with me" is the focal point in Othello's own "thought." The emphatic "No" that immediately follows "she is with me" is an agonized outcry precipitated out of his fantasy about what Desdemona's sexuality will do to him: "No, when light-wing'd toys / Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dullness / My speculative and offic'd instruments, / That my disports corrupt and taint my business . . . ." The more emphatically and desperately he asserts his contempt for sexuality, the more painfully apparent his compulsive fear of its emasculating effects becomes; the more strenuously he tries to assure himself (rather than the senators) of his whole-hearted and unswerving dedication to their "serious and great business," the more it sounds like a neurotic self-defense erected against the threat of sexuality itself.

III

From this point of view, in spite of his repeated avowal to hate Othello ("I have told thee often, and I retell thee again and again, I hate the Moor" [I.iii.364-66]), Iago actually does Othello a service by mediating between him and
his sexual anxiety. What is "Probal to" Iago's "thinking" (II.iii.338) is also "probal to" Othello's.17 When Iago says, "His soul is so enfetter'd to her love, / That she may make, unmake, do what she list, / Even as her appetite shall play the god / With his weak function" (II.iii.345-48), he is voicing the threat of emasculation Othello has already felt when he fantasizes apprehensively how Desdemona's sexuality will jeopardize the "serious and great business." In III.iii, after Iago "Utter [his] thoughts" (136) to Othello, Othello begins to ponder the possible reasons of Desdemona's "betrayal":

    ... or for I am declin'd
    Into the vale of years (yet that's not much),
    She's gone. I am abus'd, and my relief
    Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage!
    That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
    And not their appetites! ... (265-70)

But the threat of Desdemona's "appetite" and the anxiety about his age as a condition for sexual performance are already latent in his speech discussed above. And Iago is merely echoing Othello's own "thoughts" when he tells Roderigo: "Her eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years,
manners, and beauties—all which the Moor is defective in"
(II.i.225-31).

What Iago does with Othello, then, is bring out what is already there in Othello's psyche:

Iago: She did deceive her father, marrying you,
And when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks,
She lov'd them most.

Othello: 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;

I humbly do beseech you of your pardon
For too much loving you.

Othello: I am bound to thee for ever.

(III.iii.206-13)

"She that so young could give out such a seeming / To seel her father's eyes up" echoes Othello's "when light-wing'd toys / Of feather'd Cupid seel with wanton dullness / My speculative and offic'd instruments." Othello is all too willing to accept Iago's words, because he is already convinced that Desdemona's sexuality is apt to incapacitate the faculty where the male self is located and centered; that her active part in the
marriage can only be construed as her "deception" (as if "marrying you" were the "proof" of "She did deceive her father"); that, if she can "deceive" her father, she can also "deceive" her husband. Once convinced of her "deception" of her father, he translates that "deception" into the totalizing attribute of "deceptiveness" that "sums up" her and whatever she does with him and for him.

What underlies this logic is a "built-in" self-contempt and self-doubt on Othello's own part. Just a moment earlier, he has told Iago:

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes, and chose me. No, Iago,
I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;

...(187-90)

What he strives desperately to assert here is Desdemona's ability to choose and hence her ability to see. Yet, his self-contempt forces him to take her very choice of him as the "proof" that she has deceived not only her father but Othello himself. Under the pressure of this self-contempt, her ability to see him differently from the way Brabantio "sees" him is translated into her failure to "see" what both he and Brabantio "see" in himself, and this failure is in turn translated into her deliberate attempt at "deception." When Brabantio says of Desdemona, "To fall in love with what she
fear'd to look on!" (I.iii.98), he is expressing, among other things, his contempt for Othello. But when Othello himself agrees with Iago that "when she seem'd to shake and fear your looks / She lov'd them most," one feels that he has internalized this contempt. Brabantio's contemptuous view of him has ironically become part of his "self-knowledge."  

An early "exchange" between him and Brabantio has already indicated that the possibility of Desdemona's "deception," though strenuously disavowed, is really part of his preoccupied consciousness:

Brabantio: Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.

[Exeunt Duke, Senators, Officers, etc.]

Othello: My life upon her faith! Honest Iago,
My Desdemona must I leave to thee.
I prithee let thy wife attend on her,
And bring them after in the best advantage.
(I.iii.292-97)

Othello means to stress Desdemona's "faith" in opposition to Brabantio's warning of her "deception." But the phrase "My life upon her faith" is spoken after Brabantio has left. So it takes on the appearance of a belated response to a troubling thought as if Brabantio's warning had become an inner voice that lingers in Othello's mind, as if the phrase were addressed by an isolated consciousness attempting to argue
against itself. Thus, when he turns to speak to Iago, he is apparently making a second attempt to fend off the disturbing thought generated by Brabantio's warning: "No time to think about it right now. Excuse me, but I must attend to some urgent business at hand."

Othello's rejection of Brabantio's warning notwithstanding, he actually shares with him a common male attitude. The narcissistic investment in Desdemona's "faith" amounts to a denial of her sexual autonomy and independent will. ("Her faith" means "her epistemological, as well as sexual, faithfulness to me.") What constitutes Desdemona's "deception" for Brabantio is that her sexual behavior does not accord with his "thought" ("O, she deceives me / Past thought" [I.i.165-66]). What underlies Othello's "My life upon her faith!" is the demand that she must act in conformity to the way he thinks she should. The cynicism and disillusionment in Brabantio's warning are merely the necessary counterpart and consequence of Othello's brittle self-investment in Desdemona.

IV

"Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee": Brabantio's warning at once befriends Othello and ensures his unrest with the male bond. Brabantio's is a disillusioned voice speaking to an inexperienced "successor," urging him to learn from his
"negative example," lest the "successor" should suffer the same fate and become another victim of Desdemona's "deception." Although the male bond was once disrupted by her elopement, he now feels once again close to Othello because of their comradeship against a common enemy if nothing else. His warning is simultaneously a ridicule, an imperative, an expectation, and a seduction. It suggests: (1), "I don't think you have eyes to see. Otherwise, you would not marry one who has deceived her father"; (2), "Keep your eyes wide open all the time, or you will be deceived"; (3), "Since her capacity for deception is so self-evident, you will be able to find out by yourself. All you need is have eyes to see, which I believe you do"19; (4), "Now, if you really want to show me that you do have eyes to see, you must discover her deception. Unless you do so, I won't believe you." In any case, Othello's ability to "see" will depend on whether he is able to "see" what the father "sees." And although the father's warning is denied, his perspective has taken hold of Othello's psyche. For, as I have suggested, it is through the father's perspective that Othello construes Desdemona's "deception" as such when Iago first broaches the subject with him.

Here and elsewhere in the play, male vision is almost invariably associated with sexual anxiety and invoked in the context of imminent or fantasized sexual event.20 "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see" re-elicits the fear of the emasculating effects of sexuality on the perceptual
faculty in Othello's "when light-wing'd toys / Of feather's Cupid seel with wanton dullness / My speculative and offic'd instruments." It also recalls the vigilant vision which Iago tries to "awake" in Brabantio ("Awake! what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags" [I.i.79-80]) so as to make him "see" "an old black ram ... tupping [his] white ewe" (88-89). Although Brabantio's warning of Desdemona's "deception" is anxiously rejected, the value of its insinuations is never irrelevant to Othello's psychic system:

   Othello: Good Michael, look you to the guard to-night.

   Let's teach ourselves that honorable stop,
   Not to outsport discretion.

   Cassio: Iago hath direction what to do;
   But notwithstanding with my personal eye
   Will I look to't. (II.iii.1-6)

Othello is here cautioning Cassio about the night watch. But this dialogue occurs right before Othello goes to the wedding bed, and the plural pronoun "ourselves" suggests that the caution applies to his own wedding night as well as "the guard to-night." On one level, the double echoing in the exchange of Brabantio's "Look to her" implies that Othello is assuming Brabantio's part, instructing his inferior "what to do" while Cassio is assuming Othello's part, ready to carry out his superior's "direction" and thus proving himself worthy of his
superior's expectation, as if "with my personal eye / Will I look to 't" were Othello's hearty response to Brabantio's "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see." (In this respect, the hierarchical relationship between Cassio and Iago here seems to reproduce that between Brabantio and Othello.) On another level, Othello's "Let's teach ourselves that honorable stop, / Not to out sport discretion" is reminiscent of his own earlier "And heaven defend your good souls, that you think / I will your serious and great business scant / For she is with me" and "my disports corrupt and taint my business." Since the latter two quotes from I.iii. are addressed not so much to the senators out there as to the senators inside himself, since his speech here can be a subliminal reference to what he should do and how he should act on the wedding night, there is a sense in which the "thinking" of the senators takes the form of the superego's injunction here, directing him "what to do" and overseeing his sexual performance on the wedding night. Note that, like his speech here, his speech to the senators in I.iii. is spoken right before the "hour / Of love." And, as if to insist on the connection, the word "direction" appears both in his "Come, Desdemona, I have but an hour / Of love, of wordly matter and direction, / To spend with thee" (I.iii.298-300) and in Cassio's speech here. In both instances, there is an almost compulsive need to invoke the authority of some "business" to put an "honorable stop" on sexuality, to prevent it from taking its course of its own accord—so much so that
the two interruptions of the wedding night (one by the "serious and great business" in I.iii. and the other by the "barbarous brawl" [172] in this scene) seem but the responses of the outraged superego to the threat of sexuality itself.32

Thus, "the ocular proof" (III.iii.360) Othello demands from Iago is actually located in Othello's psyche. When he tells Iago, "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; or woe upon thy life!" (III.iii.364-66), he is not so much defying him to "prove" that Desdemona has really committed adultery as demanding his complicity in what he wishes to "see."33 The question for Iago is how to make what Othello wishes to see take place in what Othello himself already "knows" (as if Iago's "Demand me nothing; what you know, you know" [V.ii.303] were the answer to what Othello demands of him here):

Othello: ... . Would I were satisfied!

Iago: I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion; I do repent me that I put it to you.

You would be satisfied?

Othello: Would? nay, and I will.

Iago: And may; but how? How satisfied, my lord?

Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?
Behold her topp'd?

Othello: Death and damnation! O!

Iago: It were a tedious difficulty, I think, to bring them to that prospect; damn them then, if ever mortal eyes do see them bolster more than their own. What then? How then? What shall I say? Where's satisfaction? It is impossible you should see this, were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, as salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross as ignorance made drunk . . . . (III.iii.390-405)

"Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topp'd?": Iago here stages the copulation scene in Othello's imagination by utilizing Othello's carnal knowledge of his sexual act with Desdemona. The Clown's answer to Desdemona's inquiry about Cassio's whereabouts may serve to indicate obliquely how Iago's strategy can work on Othello: "I know not where he lodges, and for me to devise a lodging and say he lies here, or he lies there, were to lie in mine own throat" (III.iv.11-13). Iago likewise does not "know" where the "satisfaction" "lodges." But he can "devise a lodging" for a kind of "pseudo-satisfaction" by locating it in what Othello "knows" through "lying" with Desdemona. On the one hand, in invoking the image of her being "topp'd," he both tantalizes and intensifies Othello's desire to "see" by at once eliciting ("Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on?") and
forbidding it ("It is impossible you should see this"). On the other hand, Iago's strategy here recalls his earlier one in the opening scene of the play, where he similarly invokes the image of "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (88-89) in Brabantio's imagination. Right before he invokes this image, he calls: "Awake! what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! / Thieves, thieves!" And the stage direction reads: "Enter Brabantio above at a window." It is as if Iago here were literally "awakening" the father's "super" perspective in Othello to make him [Othello] gaze on or peep at the scene of his own sexual act with Desdemona from "above" and respond to it with disgust, guilt, and punitive sentiments; as if the father were reasserting his right simultaneously to "supervise" the sexual act with his gaze and to participate vicariously in it as an outraged, disgusted voyeur.³⁵

Later in IV.i., Othello reenacts this scene in his fantasy with greater intensity when he visualizes it as a confession to his prurient, punitive superego, as it were, that is at once possessed and repulsed by what is imaginatively confessed:

Othello: What hath he said?
Iago: Faith, that he did--I know not what he did.
Othello: What? what?
Iago: Lie--
Othello: With her?

Iago: With her? On her; what you will.

Othello: Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her, when they belie her. Lie with her! 'Zounds, that's fulsome! Handkerchief--Confessions--handkerchief! To confess, and be hang'd for his labor--first to be hang'd, 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!

[Falls in a trance.]

(31-43)

The word "Lie" immediately triggers Othello's imaginary reenactment of the copulation scene in which he is simultaneously the participant and the detached judicial onlooker. Iago's "I know not what he did" generates a sense of guilt which the faint disavowal attempts hopelessly to suppress. Instigated by the judicial interrogator's thirst for punishment, the "I" is apparently forced to satisfy such a thirst by admitting (through the very attempt to conceal guiltily or suppress what is "Too hideous to be shown" [III.iii.108]) the guiltiness of what the "he" did, as if the "I" and the "he" were two roles necessitated by Othello's
intrapsychic drama. The Cassio of his fantasy functions merely as a surrogate onto whom he displaces his sexual guilt and from whom he is extorting a confession to himself of "the vices of [his] blood" (I.iii.123). (Note that, right after he "falls in a trance," Iago calls: "What ho! my lord! / My lord, I say! Othello!" And Cassio immediately enters as though he were conjured up as Othello's alter ego.) The pressure of his own sexual knowledge of Desdemona leads him to equate the epistemological lie with the sexual lie that bespeaks his post-coital, self-contemptuous disgust with the experience of "lying" with her ("Lie with her! 'Zounds, that's fulsome!"). The image of copulation invokes for him the image of confession, because his sexual disgust is inextricably intertwined with his moral disgust. That he can readily supply the image of copulation needed for the confession suggests the pathological obsession of his judicial self with what it seeks to punish. By the end of the play, the judicial executioner will cast himself self-contemptuously as a lecher who is to act out the fantasy of copulating with a strumpet at the very moment of executing her ("Strumpet, I come" [V.i.34]).

VI

When Othello enters to kill Desdemona in the final scene of the play, his hyperbolic rhetoric manages to undo the threat of whatever is in Desdemona:
It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul;
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars,
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light reume, When I have pluck'd thy rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again,
It needs must wither. I'll smell thee on the tree.
O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee
And love thee after. One more, and that's the last.
So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly,
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes. (1-20)
Evidently, Othello feels compelled to justify his murder of Desdemona to various entities (first to "my soul" and then to
"chaste stars") in this monologue. But the repeated clarifications of the pronoun "you" or "thou" suggest that he is as much concerned with the audience's response as he is with the "cause" of the murder. And this moment is as funny as it is horrifying: "When I say 'Let me not name it to you,' by 'you' I don't mean 'my soul' but 'chaste stars.' Yet, when I say 'If I quench thee,' I don't mean I quench 'chaste stars' but the 'flaming master.' And yet when I say 'put out thy light,' I don't mean 'put out the light of the flaming master' but 'put out the light of the cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,' which is of course Desdemona. I am sorry to confuse you. But you see I have to use apostrophe to achieve the rhetorical effect of immediacy, and there are simply too many 'you's' I must address before Desdemona wakes, or she certainly will interrupt me." What underlies this poetic sentiment, however, is the fear of making contact with the Desdemona of flesh and blood.37 Note that, in the second half of the monologue, he addresses her as "thou," but as soon as she wakes, he refers to her as "She" at the end of the speech. Apparently, Desdemona can exist for him only in his narcissistic idealization and as a passive object for the exercise of his poetic sentiment. Once she "wakes," once she can move, he must keep a safe distance from her as though her conscious, physical self were a threat. And once she becomes a speaking subject, he starts commanding her to "Think on [her] sins" (40) as though her speaking self had shattered his
"poeticized" Desdemona and become an embodiment of what he thinks is "sinful."

Lines 3-5 suggest that the threat she poses to him is her sexuality. The rhetoric of "Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster" implies an attempt to "detoxicate" her sexual appeal, to "fossilize" her body, to "unsex" or "de-sexualize" her. "Be thus when thou art dead," he both commands her "de-sexualized" body and negotiates with it, "and I will kill thee / And love thee after": "Even when you are dead, I still fear that your sexuality will not die with you although I have tried to purged you of it with my poetry. So make sure that, when you are dead, you will be non-sexual in the way I have told you to be in my poetry so that I can 'smell' you asexually and experience myself as a romantic, pure lover; so that I can preserve you in my memory as a chaste object of my pure love. If you promise to 'be thus' when you are dead, I will reward you by killing you and loving you after. Otherwise, I cannot think of any other way in which I can kill you and still love you." Though "I'll not shed her blood" can at first glance be a gesture of generosity—a way to preserve his self-image as a "merciful" murderer ("I that am cruel am yet merciful" [87]), the punning association of "dying" with orgasm suggests his fear that killing her by shedding her blood may not make her sexuality disappear but rather arouse what he tries to keep at arm's length by the killing. "Be thus when thou art
dead" is an attempt to ensure that this dreadful prospect will not happen. Only "thus" can he keep his love for her separate from, and uncontaminated by, her dangerous sexuality; only "thus" can he rest reassured when he proceeds to serve the cause of all men by killing her ("Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men").

Despite the apparent antagonism between Brabantio and Othello at the beginning of the play, they both share a fundamental male attitude toward female sexuality. Each experiences female sexuality manifested in and through Desdemona as a "treason of blood" (I.i.169), not only to himself, but to the larger male social order. For Brabantio, her newly unfolded and unfolding sexuality bespeaks a betrayal of the patriarchal order: "Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds / By what you see them act" (I.i.170-71); "The Duke himself, / Or any of my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own" (I.ii.95-97). For Othello, it is an imminent threat to the male world: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men." If Desdemona's "deception" makes Brabantio feel close once again to Othello and serves to restore the once disrupted male bond between them, Othello's own conception of her "betrayal" also circularly and self-servingly draws him close to the community of all men and consolidates his relationship with them. As Othello proceeds to execute Desdemona "upon just grounds" (V.ii.138), the "honorable murderer" (V.ii.294) can think of
the murder as "a sacrifice" (V.ii.65), apparently because he
is serving the cause of all men as a minister of their justice
and thus once again proving himself capable of living up to
the Venetian "estimation" of him (I.iii.274) at his personal
cost. When he testifies before the senators, he is all too
eager to "sacrifice" his "proper satisfaction" (I.iii.263) in
response to the Duke's mandate that he "must . . . be content
to slubber the gloss of [his] new fortunes with this more
stubborn and boist'rous expedition" (I.iii.226-28). By the end
of the play, the anticipated but delayed "proper satisfaction"
in the marital intercourse of the wedding night is to be
displaced by, and ironically to be consummated in, the
gratification he is to derive from acting as the minister of
all men's justice: "Good, good; the justice of it pleases;
very good" (IV.i.210). The autoerotic cathexis invested here
in the "justice" of the murder also charges Iago's sadistic
sexual fantasy: "Very good; well kiss'd! an excellent
courtesy! 'Tis so indeed. Yet again, your fingers to your
lips? Would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!" (II.i.174-
77) 39 This connection suggests how the perfect form of
justice Othello will carry out takes its innermost root in a
place of sexual pathology that is also the ground of Iago's
villainy. It is a terrible irony that, as Othello becomes
pseudo-sexually aroused with the prospect of wringing
satisfaction from the execution of Desdemona ("Strumpet, I
come" [V.i.34]), the tension between sexuality and his self-
image as an honorable servant of the Venetian state is temporarily resolved. For a moment, he can have it both ways; for just such a moment, he can allow himself to "come" with the murder while serving the honorable cause of justice for all men.
Notes


2. All references are to The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. B. Evans et al. (Boston, 1974). All emphases are added.

3. William Empson remarks: "To put the matter somewhat coarsely, the marriage is only satisfactory to [Othello] if it is admittedly perfect and a feature in his cap; once it is causing trouble among his officers it is already disagreeable, and he is prepared to accept the moral view of Iago that all sex is disgusting as such." See The Structure of Complex Words (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1989) 243-44. I would only add that the marriage can also be disagreeable when it interferes with the services which he wishes to do the signiory and when it causes trouble to the self-image he tries to maintain before Venetian society.

4. See Peter Erickson, Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama (Berkeley: U of California, 1985) 81. Erickson also observes that "The first father, Brabantio, is easily dismissed . . ." (81). But I will argue that "the first father" does not go away; his perspective keeps a tenacious hold over Othello's consciousness throughout the play.

5. Waller observes: "It is in the wake of Brabantio's crude and violent language that Othello first denies that his
interest in Desdemona has any sexual dimension" (14). Waller has just quoted Brabantio's speech in I.II.62-71, and her observation sounds as if Othello were responding immediately to Brabantio. But Othello is here responding immediately and primarily to Desdemona's speech.

6. The only exception may be Brabantio's "Come hither, Moor" (I.iii.222-24). But he is apparently patronizing Othello, as if Othello should feel honored when some social superior like Brabantio can address him as "Moor" with an intimate tone.

7. Brabantio has actually experienced the threat and the reality of the "general mock" when Iago and Roderigo arouse him from his bed in the opening scene.


9. I am indebted to Edward A. Snow for calling my attention to the pervasive texture of denial and repression in the play. See his "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things," English Literary Renaissance 10 (1980) 384-412. My reading of Othello is largely informed by his article.

10. Brabantio's speech to Roderigo is symptomatic of his disavowal of what he does know of Desdemona:

    O heaven! how got she out? O treason of the blood!
    Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds
By what you see them act. Is there not charms
By which the property of youth and maidhood
May be abus'd? Have you not read, Roderigo,
Of some such thing? (I.i.169-74)

Attempting to seek a "cause" for his daughter's "betrayal,"
for the "treason of the blood," he comes up with the
explanation that her "youth and maidhood" must be "abus'd" by
"charms." "The blood" may refer to Desdemona's newly
"unfolded" sexuality as well as her tie to Brabantio as a
daughter. Brabantio's status as a father can be sustained and
subserved only by his conception of daughterhood as asexual,
by his notion of her as "A maiden" (I.iii.94) or "a maid"
(I.ii.64). Her sexuality is thus itself a "treason" to his
fatherhood. However, when he brings a charge against Othello
before the other senators, he insists on Othello's use of
"charms," and the issue of "treason of blood" is never
broached until after Desdemona testifies against him. If to
call her behavior "treason of the blood" is to acknowledge
obliquely the existence of her sexuality and her capability to
act contrary to his will, this acknowledgement is immediately
canceled by the explanation he comes up with. If what is "Past
thought" (I.i.166) is actually what he has been aware of all
along ("This accident is not unlike my dream" [I.i.142]), that
awareness is nonetheless repressed by the explanation. The
explanation appears to be a defense mechanism of
rationalization.

12. This connection is already intimated in Iago's association of Desdemona's love for Othello with her "fantastical lies" when he interprets her "My downright violence, and storm of fortunes, / May trumpet to the world": "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" (II.i.222-24).

13. I am indebted to Edward A. Snow for this reading. See his "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things" 407, note 27.

14. The phrase is Snow's (408).

15. This line has generated much critical speculation as to what Desdemona actually sees. Attempting to condone Othello's "blackness," Arthur Kirsch cites this line in support of "the notion that all men are black in their sinfulness, but become white in the knowledge of the Lord . . ." (*Shakespeare and the Experience of Love* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981] 20). But such a notion is both circular and self-serving; there is no need for "the knowledge of the Lord" unless one regards what is natural as "sinful." On the other hand, after characterizing Kirsch's reference to "evangelically tinted voyage" as "too close for comfort to colonializing condescension," Erickson observes: "... a residual racism cannot be totally ruled out of Desdemona's remark. . . . She
means to praise Othello's mind, but a negative reflection on his actual black face lingers as one of the potential multiple effects of the line . . ." (188, note 10). In "spiritualizing" what Desdemona sees, Kirsch betrays some nervousness about Othello's "visage" whereas Erickson is bent on overdetermining Desdemona's vision by attributing "a residual racism" to it.


16. I am thus in fundamental disagreement with Max H. James when he says: "... Othello and Desdemona exemplify as ideally as any couple in Shakespeare the love-match of compassionate marriage . . ." in "Our House is Hell": Shakespeare's Troubled Families (New York: Greenwood P, 1989) 86. See also Kirsch (19) for a similar view.

18. Even more ironically, he seems immensely delighted with, and much brightened by, this "self-knowledge" ("And so she did"; "I am bound to thee for ever").

19. This possibility is most explicit in the Quarto reading: "have a quick eye to see" (in place of the Folio's "if thou hast eyes to see").

20. For a discussion of the "scopic economy" in Othello, see Newman 152-53.

21. What I am suggesting here is that II.iii. may be considered as an elaborate externalization of Othello's intrapsychic drama in his speech to the senators in I.iii. The connection between the wedding night and the "barbarous brawl" is most explicit in Iago's "Friends all, but now; / In quarter, and in terms like bride and groom / divesting them for bed" (179-81). Cassio's "I am infortune in the infirmity, and dare not task my weakness with any more" (41-42) is reminiscent of Othello's "the young affects / In me defunct" and offers a gloss on Iago's "[Desdemona's] appetite shall play the god / With [Othello's] weak function" (II.iii.347-48). The following dialogue between Iago and Cassio seems two voices in Othello anticipating the wedding night:

Iago: . . . . He hath not yet made wanton the night with her; and she is sport for Jove.

Cassio: She's a most exquisite lady.

Iago: And I'll warrant her full of game.
Cassio: Indeed she's a most fresh and delicate creature.
Iago: What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.
Cassio: An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.
Iago: And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?
Cassio: She is indeed perfection. (16-28)
The prurient fantasy and the "de-sexualizing" idealism that must deny it seem but two manifestations of a single male attitude toward female sexuality.
22. Cf. Stanley Cavell's comment: "... [Othello] had demanded of Iago 'the ocular proof,' a demand which was no purer a threat than it was a command, as if he does indeed wish for this outcome, as if he has a use for Iago's suspicions, hence a use for Iago that reciprocates Iago's use of him" ("Epistemology and Tragedy: A Reading of Othello," Daedalus 108 [1979] 35).
24. I am much indebted to Snow for this reading. See "Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things" 394-96.
25. Cf. the following dialogue:
Iago: Hah? I like not that.
Othello: What dost thou say?
Iago: Nothing, my lord; or if—_I know not what._
Othello: Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
Iago: Cassio, my lord? No, sure, _I cannot think it._
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing you coming.
Othello: I do believe 'twas he.

(III.iii.35-40)

26. Cf. Cavell's comment: "[Othello is] Surprised, let us say, to find that [Desdemona] is flesh and blood. It was the one thing he could not imagine for himself . . ." (40).
27. Orkin, however, seems to advocate whatever Othello does to Desdemona in the final scene when he observes: ". . . Othello's language in that final scene, often commented on, shows, side by side with his agonized awareness of the light he is to extinguish, his concern for release, for justice and punishment, his painful, enduring sense of love which ensures that Desdemona, as Christian, be permitted to confess—not merely to confirm her guilt but also to ensure her salvation" (180). I am personally horrified by this comment.
28. Yet one more connection: after each speech, a trumpet sounds, announcing the arrival of some public official figure or figures. Both Iago and Othello respectively react to the trumpet as though they were being "caught in the act." In each
case, the morbid fantasy seems but a twisted counterpart of a guilty conscience about sexuality itself.
Chapter Three:
Language and Motive in *Samson Agonistes*

I

Stanley Fish challenges the regenerationist reading of *Samson Agonistes* when he writes:\(^2\)

For a while, critics answered Dr. Johnson by substituting for the conventional 'middle' the middle of an interior plot--Samson's regeneration--and in doing so they tended to assume a linear progression, more or less visible, from accusation of God to acceptance of responsibility to rejection of temptation to a reaffirmation of faith. But an examination of the text will not support this reading. Specifically, the movement from accusation of God to acceptance of responsibility is a movement downward, drawing Samson toward despair and involving him, more than any angry accusation, in the appointing of heavenly disposition.\(^3\)

What makes "the movement from the accusation of God to acceptance of responsibility" "a movement downward" is not only that it draws Samson to despair but also that it involves him "in the appointing of heavenly disposition." Like the regenerationist reading, Fish's reading presupposes some kind of theology. If the linear progression the regenerationist
reading assumes ends up with "a reaffirmation of faith," his own reading ends up the same way when he says at the very end of his essay: "Somehow the play immerses us in [the pain of experiencing problems] without shaking our faith in something which is ultimately--but for the moment unhelpfully--more real; we are made to feel simultaneously that God is always with us and that in moments of crisis we are, for all intents and purposes, alone. And so we learn finally, that the choice is not between informed action and precipitate action, but between action taken on the basis of inadequate information--faith professing action--and paralysis" (263). When Fish says "we," he evidently assumes that the readers of Samson Agonistes are all Judeo-Christian readers who must be edified ("so we learn finally") or, may I say, "regenerated" lest they lapse or relapse from faith. The challenge to the regenerationist reading of the play turns out to be an attempt to justify the ways of Fish's God to Judeo-Christian readers.

Fish begins his essay by asking the question: "... what is the relationship between Samson's spiritual regeneration--now discovered to be the middle Dr. Johnson found wanting--and the act of pulling down the temple?" His answer is: "none, necessarily." Throughout his essay, he is concerned to distinguish between these two actions or "the play's two plots":

What we have in Samson Agonistes are two plots and two climaxes, an 'outer' or 'public' plot, with its
denouement in the temple scene, and an 'inner' plot, which has run its course by line 1377, when Samson learns how to move about in a world where action is required, but where explicit guidelines for action are unavailable. It is tempting, literally, to assume an intimate connection between these two plots, especially at those points where they coincide temporally; but to do so would be to mistake contiguity in time for causality . . . and to fall into Samson's old error of appointing heavenly disposition by making his regeneration a condition of his fulfilling the prophecy. The fact that a regenerate Samson pulls down the temple is important—for Samson; but despairing Samson would have also pulled down the temple, if God had willed it; there are many paths to the temple, and in terms of God's prophecy . . . one is as good as another. God is not limited by the moral status of the instruments he chooses to use. As far as we know, the intersection of God's plan—foretold by the angel—and Samson's victory over himself is accidental. This is not to say that God has nothing to do with the recovery of Samson's faith—heavenly disposition should not be appointed in any direction . . . merely to point out the danger of
reading the universe fatalistically. (260, Fish's emphasis)

The distinction between the two plots ends up again with the attempt to defend God—to justify the ways of God to readers. Fish thus seems to echo the Chorus when they defend "the ways of God" in lines 293–325 of the play. Commenting on those lines, Fish interprets the Chorus as asking rhetorically, "who are we to 'confine th'interminable'?" (246) If he is somewhat patronizing the Chorus when he says, "Still, the effort of excusing God has proved wearying for the Choral intellect . . ." (246), his remark--"God is not limited by the moral status of the instruments he chooses to use"--nonetheless echoes the rhetorical question which he says is asked by the Chorus. If "the effort of excusing God has proved wearying for the Choral intellect," one wonders whether the same effort is wearying for Fish's intellect. Like the Chorus, who exhorts Samson, "Tax not divine disposal" (210),4 Fish urges: "heavenly disposition should not be appointed in any direction." To connect the two plots of the play by "making [Samson's] regeneration a condition of his fulfilling the prophecy," Fish says, is "to fall into Samson's old error of appointing heavenly disposition." Yet, while Samson's "regeneration" cannot be "a condition of his fulfilling the prophecy," God's will is invoked as the condition of Samson's pulling down the temple ("if God had willed it"). If there is no necessary connection between the two plots, between
Samson's "regeneration" and his act of pulling down the temple and if, again, there is no necessary connection between God and "the recovery of Samson's faith," still there is a necessary connection between God's will and the destruction of the temple; that is to say, there is a happy self-coincidence between God, his will, his words or prophecy, and the event happening at the end of the play.

If by God's prophecy or plan Fish means the pulling down of the temple, then some problems arise. Although God's plan is foretold by the angel, the angel has never foretold that the temple shall be pulled down. According to Samson, he (she?) has only foretold Samson's birth (23). Even Samson himself can only claim: "Promise was that I / Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver" (38-39). It is questionable whether Samson has actually "delivered" Israel by pulling down the Philistian temple at the end of the play. For there is a wide gap between Samson's conception of "deliverance" and that of the Israelites; Samson says that Israel's governors and heads of tribes "not at all considered / Deliverance offered" (245-46), that Israelites "despise, or envy, or suspect / Whom God hath of his special favour raised / As their deliverer" (272-74). Furthermore, even if we grant that the angel has foretold that Samson shall "Israel from Philistian yoke deliver," he does not stipulate that Samson must "deliver" Israel by tearing down the temple. In ascribing the destruction of the temple to God's prophecy, Fish is falling
"into Samson's old error of appointing heavenly disposition" by making the destruction "a condition of his fulfilling the prophecy." And Fish is "reading the universe fatalistically" when he says that, in destroying the temple and killing the Philistine spectators, "Surely Samson does God's will (he could do no other) . . ." (259, emphasis added). At the beginning of the third section of his essay, Fish writes: "In the universe the characters inhabit—that is, in our universe—one becomes aware of two kinds of related uncertainties: an uncertainty as to the springs (or motivations) of human action, and an uncertainty as to the connection between events in the world of man and the will of God" (252). But here the connection between the event happening at the end of the play and the will of God is no longer uncertain; instead, it becomes a priori and self-evident.

Throughout his essay, Fish has been trying to establish the thesis of "uncertainty" as the principle at work in the play. When he begins his reading, he asks the question—"why did Samson betray himself to Dalila?"—only to find Samson's "self-betrayal" "inexplicable" (242) and "causeless" (242, 244). But that is only one of the many unanswered questions, says Fish (242). Both "Samson's motivation in the matter of his marriages" and Dalila's motivation in "betraying" Samson are mysteries too (243-44). He sums up his point thus: "If the questions I have raised could be answered, the universe of Samson Agonistes would be one in which the phenomena of
experience open themselves up to the organizing power of discursive reasoning. That the opposite is true is what the reader comes to realize by joining with the characters in an attempt to account for the case of Samson" (244). Indeed, he states at the beginning of the essay:

The equivocation in 'none, necessarily' is deliberate. I am not asserting the absolute independence of the two actions and thus of the play's two plots; rather, I am admitting that I am unable to construct a formula which links them in a cause and effect relationship. And I do not believe that this is a failure on my part, but a true response to the experience Milton provides for his readers, an experience structured so as to leave unanswered the questions it itself raises. (237)

In the next section of the essay, after arguing against the reading of "Samson's regeneration" as a "linear progression" (248), he concludes:

What are we to conclude from these observations? Should Samson have continued to accuse God? Is he wrong to blame himself for violating his pledge? What questions like these serve to illustrate is the impossibility of determining exactly the connection (if any) between Samson's gesture at this point (or at any point) and the equilibrium he finally achieves. . . . and the dissatisfaction my
readers are probably feeling at this moment is not unlike the dissatisfaction Milton wants his readers to feel as their attempts to discover a logical pattern in Samson's spiritual history--attempts the poem encourages--are frustrated. (249)

If "Samson's motivation in the matter of his marriages" and Dalila's motivation in "betraying" Samson are uncertain or mysterious, the "motivations" or "intentions" of Milton and his poem are nonetheless quite transparent to Fish. If Fish is "unable to construct a formula which links [the two plots] of the play in a cause and effect relationship," he is nonetheless able to construct a formula which accounts for the reading experience of the play, a formula which links Milton's "intention" and the reading experience in a cause and effect relationship. There may not be any "formulaic construct" (254), any "logical pattern" in the play, and "the universe of Samson Agonistes" may not be "one in which the phenomena of experience open themselves up to the organizing power of discursive reasoning." But, to Fish, "the experience Milton provides for his readers" is itself "organized" or "structured," and it is "structured" with a purpose and in a cause and effect manner: "so as to leave unanswered the questions it itself raises."

When Fish suggests that "dissatisfaction" and "frustration" are what Milton wants his readers to feel, he seems to postulate a Milton with a punitive and somewhat
sadistic superego, as it were, a Milton who "encourages" his readers to respond in a certain way so that he may "satisfy" his desire to "dissatisfy" and "frustrate" them. Nevertheless, if "dissatisfaction" and "frustration" are indeed what Milton wants his readers to feel, it is pitiful that his own desire or "intention" has been "frustrated." When Fish says that the poem "encourages" the attempts of Milton's readers to "discover a logical pattern in Samson's spiritual history," the "logical pattern" apparently refers to the "lineal progression" which the regenerationist reading of the play assumes. Yet, so far as I can tell, critics who espouse the regenerationist reading have seldom betrayed any signs of "frustration." Neither have they felt "dissatisfied" by the poem or by their readings of the poem. And I doubt that Milton—-that is, Fish's Milton—has even succeeded with Fish himself; since Fish's Milton can only "frustrate" the reader who attempts to discover the "logical pattern" in question, and since Fish himself is not such a reader, how can Fish's Milton "frustrate" Fish himself? The very attempt to discover a logical pattern in the reader's response, a pattern that links the authorial intention and the reading experience in a cause and effect relationship, has itself escaped such a pattern.

Halfway into the second section of his essay, Fish calls into question again "the intelligibility of the universe" and "our" understanding of the play:
We are told by some that the doubts expressed by Manoa, the Chorus and Samson concerning the intelligibility of the universe are to be attributed to their ignorance: if they knew, as we do, the end of the story, they would be less inclined to assert the unreasonableness of God's ways; for when the play is over and the divine plan has unfolded, everything is perfectly understood. But, in fact, do we truly understand anything, either in the course of the play, or when all its passions have been spent? (247)

I take the last question to be a rhetorical question: namely, "we do not truly understand anything, either in the course of the play, or when all its passions have been spent." The word "truly" implies both that the understanding of "some" critics is false, inaccurate, or imperfect and that we can never have a "true" understanding of the play.

But the following passage compels me to rethink what Fish is trying to suggest in the passage above:

To say that God acts without reference to reason is not to say that he is unreasonable. The first is a description, largely negative, of his ways, the other a judgement in which reason is still assumed to be the standard of behaviour. . . . In the course of Samson Agonistes, everyone has a turn at protecting the independence of the deity—'Tax not
divine disposal,' 'Appoint not heavenly disposition'--but in context these statements constitute a warning against trying to outguess God--you never know what he's going to do--rather than a recognition of man's inability to reason about him at all. The distinction may seem slight, but it is all important, and the reader must understand it, if he is to understand what it is that Samson finally does. (264, note 6)

Fish's exhortation notwithstanding, I still fail to "understand" why the two alternatives are mutually exclusive. But what troubles me most is his "rhetoric of authority."

The problem is not only that he contradicts himself, or that he calls into question the "understanding" of "some" critics only to establish his own "understanding" as "all important," but also that his own "understanding" is dogmatized as a mandate to "the reader." The word "understand" in ". . . do we truly understand . . . ?" can mean "to grasp or perceive clearly and fully the meaning or nature of." If "understanding" in this sense is rejected in the rhetorical question, it is recovered, safeguarded, and "sanctified" as a telos when Fish says, "if [the reader] is to understand what it is that Samson finally does." Moreover, the word "if" implies that this telic "understanding" requires another "understanding" as a precondition: "the reader must understand [the distinction]"--the distinction Fish himself has made. Here, "understand"
means something entirely different: "to accept as true without questioning," that is, whether "the reader" agrees with Fish or not. Consequently, this "understanding" comes to acquire the status of a religious decree requiring unquestioning "faith" from "the reader." It is as if Fish were telling "the reader": "Tax not my divine disposal."  

Dwelling upon this "rhetoric of authority," I cannot help sensing an undertone of intimidation when Fish asks, "But, in fact, do we truly understand anything, either in the course of the play, or when all its passions have been spent?" As the passage quoted above suggests, Fish is trying to defend the ways of God against the "impiety" of "reason." Hence, the word "understand" in the rhetorical question is to be distinguished from another use of it in "if [the reader] is to understand what it is that Samson finally does"; it means not only "to grasp or perceive clearly and fully the meaning or nature of" but "to grasp with reason" or "to grasp the reasonable character of." Since "reason" functions as a negative term in its binary relation to the term "God" or anything "divine," the insinuation that any attempt to "understand" anything is involved with the "impiety" of "reason" serves not only to reject the "understanding" of "some" critics but to discourage and paralyze all attempts at further inquiries. The rhetorical question seems to enact some kind of religious censorship ready to punish those who harbor "dangerous thoughts."
For all Fish's insistence on the "uncertainties" of the play, he finally offers a "standard" that resolves all "uncertainties":

In the end, the only value we can put on Samson's action is the value he gives it in context. Within the situation, it is an expression, however provisional, of his reading of the divine will; and in so far as it represents his desire to conform to that will, it is a virtuous action. No other standard for evaluating it exists—this is what the reader learns when his attempts to apply other standards are frustrated—and no other explanation of it can be maintained without distorting the experience of the play. (260, Fish's emphasis)

Earlier in his essay, he says that "[In the universe the characters inhabit], obviously, it is difficult, first, to know what to do, and second, to evaluate what has been done" (252). But here the problem of evaluating Samson's action turns out to be not so difficult at all, because Fish already "knows" the value Samson gives his action "in context." And all "we" need to do is apply that value to his action. But why is the value Samson himself gives "the only value" "we" can put on his action? And does he give any value at all? What is the "context" Fish is referring to? If by "Samson's action" Fish means his act of pulling down the temple, after that action Samson immediately kills himself and gives no speech,
let alone any value. Although, right before that action, he says, "Now of my own accord such other trial / I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater; / As with amaze shall strike all who behold" (1644-46), it is hard for me to see this speech as an unequivocal expression of "his reading of the divine will" and then to convert that expression into a value. I wonder whether Fish is evaluating Samson's action by the value Samson gives or whether he is imposing his own value on Samson's action.

By "context" or "situation" Fish may also refer to the Messenger's report in lines 1636-38:

. . . with head a while inclined,

And eyes fast fixed he stood, as one who prayed,

Or some great matter in his mind revolved.

This moment, as Fish suggests, is "the hero's abiding uncertainty" (256). What is Samson doing here? The phrase "with head a while inclined, / And eyes fast fixed he stood" recalls the Chorus's description of Dalila: "Yet on she moves, now stands and eyes thee fixed, / About t' have spoke, but now, with head declined . . ." (726-28). Is Samson thinking of the moment when Dalila visits him? If this is a possibility, the words "as," "Or," and "some" also point to not only the "abiding uncertainty" of Samson but that of the Messenger as well. The word "some" leaves unspecified what it is that Samson is revolving in his mind. The word "revolved," moreover, connotes a continuous and undetermined thinking
process as though he were turning over the unspecified "great matter" in his mind again and again and trying to see it from all points of view without reaching any definite conclusion for the moment. The word "Or" suggests, however, that this is only one possibility; Samson may be "praying" too. But what is he praying for? Whom is he praying to? Finally, the word "as" suggests that even the Messenger is not sure what Samson is doing actually; the Messenger can only approach it cautiously, from a distance, and by analogy as if out of a respect for the uncertainty and mystery of this moment. If this is the "context" Fish refers to, he is explaining away the "abiding uncertainty" of this moment when he suggests that Samson is giving a value to the action he is to perform.7

Although Fish offers a possible interpretation of this moment when he says, "... or perhaps he prays that the action he is about to take is answerable to the divine will" (256), still that possibility is translated into a "standard" for evaluating Samson's action: "Within the situation, it is an expression, however provisional, of his reading of the divine will; and in so far as it represents his desire to conform to that will, it is a virtuous action. No other standard for evaluating it exists--this is what the reader learns when his attempts to apply other standards are frustrated--and no other explanation of it can be maintained without distorting the experience of the play." It seems as if Fish were telling "the reader": "You must not apply any other
standard. If you do, you ought to feel frustrated. And if you are not frustrated, you then distort the experience of the play. The only way out of the dilemma is, of course, to apply the standard I provide for you, which will allow you to avoid both frustration and the charge that you distort the experience of the play." If Milton or the poem "encourages" certain responses from "the reader" only to "frustrate" him, what Milton or the play "learns" here is: not to frustrate "the reader" when he applies the "standard" Fish provides for him. "Provisional" as it may be, that "standard" is an exception or, rather, the only exception to the rule and comes to acquire an exceptional "value," not for Samson, but for Fish and "the reader" (who does not exist or who exists only as an unquestioning recipient of Fish's own "understanding" and "standard"). For Fish, that "standard" is bound to win him the gratitude of "the reader" especially after he has obligated him to feel frustrated again and again by the poem. For "the reader," that "standard" is an anxiety-allaying device--a device to get him out of the situation that produces his frustration. What "the reader" "learns" eventually is that he will be constantly frustrated by the poem unless he conforms to the "divine will" of Fish.

II

For all Fish's attempts to resolve them, the questions the play raises about Samson's relationship to God remain
open-ended. Every time the play raises the issue of his relationship to God, it does so in a way that draws attention to the ontological and moral ambiguities of that relationship. In answer to his father's suggestion that he bring his "off'rings, to avert / [God's] further ire, with prayers and vows renewed," Samson says:

His pardon I implore; but as for life,
To what end should I seek it? when in strength
All mortals I excelled, and great in hopes
With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts
Of birth from heaven foretold and high exploits,
Full of divine instinct, after some proof
Of acts indeed heroic; far beyond
The sons of Anak, . . . (521-28)

The acts he claims to be "heroic" actually consist of a series of massacres. Although he alleges that those acts are performed in the name of "God's proposed deliverance" (292), the Hebrews simply refuse to buy his excuse (241-76). No less questionable is the "instinct" he claims to be "divine." The phrase "Full of divine instinct," we notice, is qualified by the next phrase "after some proof / Of acts indeed heroic." The emphasis on "indeed" suggests that the heroicness of his deeds is invoked to confirm the divinity of his instinct. If his instinct is divine, that is, if it is a "given"—something from "heaven"—why does it need to wait upon the confirmation, the "proof" of his heroic deeds? Does he come to realize that
he is "Full of divine instinct" only after the proof of his heroic deeds? Is his "divine instinct" a priori or a posteriori? Is it a motivating force of his heroic deeds? Or is it a retrospective construct? These are some of the questions that grow around Samson's relationship to God. And, as I will argue, the questions that surround it eventually extend to other issues of the play--Samson's identity as the deliverer of Israel, his marriages, and his views about the law.

The story of Samson's life consists largely of a series of retrospective narratives designed to explain his past--to make intelligible why he did what he did. In virtually every instance, there is a tension between Samson's attempt to impose a preferred interpretation, to tell his audience how to read the story of his life, and the tendency of language itself to complicate that interpretation, to raise more questions, and to register the textual complexities of the story along the way. This is a case, then, for paying close attention to how language functions in the play, how it tells about the consciousness of its speaker, and how it generates a complex attitude toward various issues that arise in the course of the play.

Consider, for instance, Samson's defense of his first marriage:

Chorus: Yet truth to say, I oft have heard men wonder
Why thou shouldst wed Philistian women rather
Than of thine own tribe fairer, or as fair,
At least of thy own nation, and as noble.

Samson: The first I saw at Timna, and she pleased
Me, not my parents, that I sought to wed,
The daughter of an infidel: they knew not
That what I motioned was of God; I knew
From intimate impulse, and therefore urged
The marriage on; that by occasion hence
I might begin Israel's deliverance,
The work to which I was divinely called; (215-26)

Samson's "intimate impulse" is usually taken as the indication
that God has intended the first marriage to be a means of
beginning Israel's liberation. But this is only one aspect
of Samson's "intimate impulse," and we arrive at this reading
only after line 225. If we pay close attention to the textual
complexity of his speech, this aspect may not be "a familiar
and hard fact," and there may be other ways of looking at the
impulse which this reading tends to reject.

The Chorus has just insinuated that Samson has no reason
to marry outside his own tribe or nation since there are women
in his own tribe and nation who are no less fair and noble
than the two Philistian women he has married. The implication
is that he can justify his marriages only if his wives are
fairer and nobler than Hebrew women. But the first three lines
of Samson's reply signal both a rejection of the criterion of nobility and a redefinition of the criterion of fairness. Whether his first wife is fair or not does not depend on how she looks to other people (or other men?). What matters is that she pleases him. The emphasis on "Me" indicates that his choice is a purely subjective feeling. In this connection, note that he does not say "The first was from Timna" or "The first lived at Timna." Nor does he identify her immediately: "The first was the daughter of an infidel." His own phrasing conveys the spontaneity of his response to the Timnian woman at the sight of her. (Is he recalling their first "date"? Or has this all happened without her knowledge?) Again, compare the regular syntax of "I saw the first at Timna" with the inverted syntax of "The first I saw at Timna." The inverted syntax gains a special emphasis on "I saw," and the conjunction "and" suggests that his seeing her and her pleasing him happen simultaneously (whereas in the regular syntax the same conjunction suggests that the one happens after the other)--as though the mere sight of her had afforded him a kind of pleasure arising spontaneously from the innermost of his being. In this sense, that pleasure may well be described as a response of "intimate impulse," a response welling up from the depths of his being.

The pleasure the sight of the Timnian woman affords Samson generates a motive force that enables him to defy parental will and the social and religious rule of endogamy.
At the same time, his parents' involvement in his marriage choice immediately transforms the nature of his relationship with her. The word "that" in line 220 is a conjunction, meaning "so that" and indicating outcome. It suggests that "I sought to wed, / The daughter of an infidel" is already implicit in "she pleased / Me." The intervening phrase "not my parents," however, erects an obstacle, so to speak, between "she pleased / Me" and "I sought to wed." The word "sought" means "endeavored" and suggests that the obstacle he has to overcome is parental disapproval. Although the word "please" means primarily "to afford pleasure to," it can also mean "to comply with the wish or will of" or "to behave in a manner satisfactory to" when Samson's parents are implicated in his marriage choice. Thus, "she pleased / Me" can mean "she gave me pleasure" (if the emphasis is on "I saw," on his visual experience of, or his visual sensation about, her) or "she behaved in accordance with my will": (if the emphasis is on "not my parents" as well as on "Me," thus implying that Samson's attitude toward his parents defines his attitude toward the Timnian woman). Likewise, "she pleased / . . . not my parents" can be interpreted as her failure to afford them pleasure or her refusal to act in a way that meets their expectations. In any case, that "she pleased / . . . not my parents" apparently becomes part of the reason why Samson seeks to marry her. In this regard, his identification of her as "The daughter of an infidel" suggests that the marriage has
become two children's joined efforts to rebel against parental will (although she may not be aware that he has enlisted her in the rebellious gesture).

The next two lines make it evident that Samson has made the battle between him and his parents into a battle of knowledge. As a consequence, the appeal to "intimate impulse" begins to take on the appearance of self-defense. There is a complacent and triumphant note when Samson declares his parents' stupidity ("they knew not") only to arrive in the very next line at the conclusion of his intelligence ("I knew"). The triumph over his parents is decisive for him especially when "they knew not" and "I knew" are each placed at the end of the respective line for contrast. If his parents object to his marriage, it is because, he says, "they knew not /
That what I motioned was of God." On one level, he is trying to prevail over them by invoking the hierarchy in which God's will must take precedence over parental will. But the cards are stacked against them, because they cannot possibly "know" what Samson "knows." How does he know? From "intimate impulse." The word "intimate" suggests some kind of absolute interiority. The impulse is thus his sole prerogative, accessible to no one else. As God's will can be "known" only from his intimate impulse, the impulse becomes the source of a secret relationship between his private God and him alone. Likewise, his "knowledge" is a kind of personal experience which cannot be shared (cf. def. 5c of "know" in OED). Since
the emphasis on "I knew" gives the phrase a sense of self-assertion, his "knowledge" comes to be invested with the status of unquestionable truth (cf. def. 10 of "know" in OED), and "they knew not" can suggest not only their lack of access to his private knowledge but their inability to recognize his knowledge as true, as beyond doubt, or their failure to acknowledge or admit the authority of his knowledge (cf. def. 2 of "know" in OED) as though this were what constitutes their stupidity.

Given the word "impulse," it is tempting to read the words "motioned" and "urged" as puns. "Impulse" can mean some inner, non-rational propensity or some "Sudden or involuntary inclination or tendency to act, without premeditation reflection" (OED. def. 3c). But it can also mean some kind of impulsion or, shall we say, some "urge" that produces "motion" (cf. OED. defs. 1 & 4), as if what Samson has "motioned" or "urged . . . on" were impelled by some inner necessity or some inner drive. 22 Consequently, one may think that Samson has attempted to justify his first marriage entirely on the subjective ground. But no; what follows in his speech—"that by occasion hence / I might begin Israel's deliverance, / The work to which I was divinely called"—is a shift to some external justification. Like the "that" of line 220 ("that I sought to wed"), the "that" here is a conjunction and means "so that." But unlike the other "that," which indicates outcome or result, this "that" signals some purpose yet to be
fulfilled, some plan of action projected into an anticipated future. If his appeal to his private God in line 222 is a means to justify the marriage as an end in itself, the marriage in turn becomes a means which must be justified by the end of the work imposed upon him from the realm above.

Apparently, Samson feels that his appeal to a private God whom his parents do not "know" is not enough to convince them, and he has to make another attempt by invoking the work "to which [he] was divinely called"—a work whose fulfillment will eventually justify his first marriage. But the work can only be fulfilled in the future—if it can be fulfilled at all. And somewhere in the course of his speech, one wonders whether the "divine calling" is an end in itself or whether he is merely invoking it as a desperate measure, an opportunistic means, or a last resort to justify his own marriage choice.

In any case, Samson employs a different strategy to defend his second marriage:

She proving false, the next I took to wife
(O that I never had! fond wish too late.)
Was in the vale of Sorec, Dalila,
That specious monster, my accomplished snare.
I thought it lawful from my former act,
And the same end; still watching to oppress
Israel's oppressors: . . . (227-33)

Like the preposition in "I knew / From intimate impulse," the same preposition in "I thought it lawful from my former act"
indicates source, origin, cause, or basis. Yet, while the phrase "I knew / From intimate impulse, and therefore urged /
The marriage on" implies a hierarchy where impulse leads to knowledge and knowledge to act, the phrase "I thought it lawful from my former act" implies a different order where the former act leads to thought and thought constitutes the "lawfulness" of the latter act. What makes him think the second marriage "lawful"? In marrying "The daughter of an infidel," he is violating the social and religious rule of endogamy. But he seems to "think" that, since he has violated the law before, it is "lawful" to violate it again; the former violation establishes a legal precedent, as it were, for any future violation.23 Or, shall we say, since his "intimate impulse," "from" which he "knew" that "what [he] motioned was of God," has authorized him to violate the law, the self-authorized violation has retroactively become its own "law," which serves expediently to establish the "lawfulness" of the second violation.

There are, however, some qualms on Samson's part as the cocksure and smug "I knew" in line 222 changes into the provisional and apologetic "I thought" here. Why the change? Because God is not involved in the second marriage so that he is not quite sure that he is in the right? Or because with hindsight he now "knows" the second marriage to be a disaster so that he must not implicate God in this second marriage and thus he can only say "I thought" instead of "I knew"?24 In
either case, if the second marriage turns out to be a disaster because God is not involved, what about the first? Since Samson claims that "what [he] motioned was of God," that the first marriage provides the "occasion" for beginning "The work to which [he] was divinely called," the last thing one would expect him to say is that his first bride should "prove false." The word "prove" means "to be shown or found by experience or trial to be (so and so)" (OED. def. 8). But it also implies that what is shown or found has already preexisted, and "experience" can merely confirm or verify what has been already there. What his "experience" finds here then puts into question what he has "known" before. The conjunction "that" in "that by occasion hence / I might begin Israel's deliverance" suggests, as I have remarked, a plan of action projected into an anticipated future. Thus, when he says "I knew," his "knowledge" also partakes of "foreknowledge" or, more accurately, "foresight." But his "foresight" is apparently "shortsighted,"25 because it fails to "foresee" what his "experience" finds to have already preexisted.

On the other hand, his relationship to the second wife, Dalila, also makes us wonder what that "experience" means. Consider the enjambment at the end of line 227—"she proving false, the next I took to wife." The absolute construction "She proving false" functions as an adverbial clause modifying the sentence that follows. Thus, pausing at the end of that line, we may expect that his "experience" with the first wife
will "modify" the way he chooses a second wife; perhaps, this time he will "take to wife" someone totally different from the Timnian bride lest he suffer the same consequence; perhaps, the second wife will "prove" "true." But the parenthetical line which immediately follows—"(O that I never had! fond wish too late)"—indicates that he actually suffers the same fate, only worse. (Though parenthetical and sandwiched between two lines which comprise a seemingly "factual" statement, this line belies the composure with which he speaks the two neighboring "factual" lines, as though there were two Samsons—one telling the story to his audience and the other living it.) Only when we arrive at the next line do we realize that perhaps he has indeed made some effort to change the way of choosing the second wife; the first was "at Timna," but the second "was in the vale of Sorec" as if the change of location would make a difference: "Since the woman of Timna proves false, I will choose my second wife from a different location. Maybe the reason the first wife proves false is that she is from Timna. Maybe all women of Timna will prove false after marriage. Therefore, if I take to wife someone from a different place, maybe everything will turn out differently."

Does everything really turn out differently? In the very next line, the second wife is called "That specious monster." "Specious" means "Fair or pleasing to the eye or sight" (OED. def. 1). The word thus recapitulates and neatly condenses Samson's description of the way he meets his first wife: "The
first I saw at Timna, and she pleased / Me." But the word can also mean "Having a fair or attractive appearance or character, calculated to make a favourable impression on the mind, but in reality devoid of the qualities apparently possessed" (OED. def. 2). The word thus also recalls his "experience" with the first wife after marriage: "She proving false." His post-marital "experience" retroactively transforms her from a woman who pleases him into a "false" woman; after marriage, he discovers her to be not what she "appears"; her capability to please him is a mere "appearance," a mere "facade," and his "experience" exposes her for what she is--a "false" woman. Hence, the verbal interplay between the characterization of the first wife and that of the second suggests that, in marrying Dalila, he is repeating his own "experience" with the woman of Timna all over again as though he had married the same woman twice. In this respect, consider his other characterization of Dalila: "my accomplisht snare." Dalila is his "accomplisht snare," not only because she is "completely versed in" (OED. def. 3) the skill or, shall we say, the "art" of ensnaring him, but because the work of "ensnaring" him is "accomplisht" by her, as though she continued where the first wife had left off, as though she had perfected the work the first wife has initiated, as though she were the maturation of her.
Samson says that the wife of Timna "proves false." Elsewhere he also uses the words "false" and "falsehood" to characterize Dalila (749, 824, 901, 955). Why do the two women he has married both become "false"? In what sense are they "false"? His speech to his father indicates that different kinds of "falsehood" are mixed up in his mind:

... if aught seem vile,  
As vile hath been my folly, who have profaned  
The mystery of God given me under pledge  
Of vow, and have betrayed it to a woman,  
A Canaanite, my faithless enemy.  
This well I knew, nor was at all surprised,  
But warned by oft experience: did not she  
Of Timna first betray me, and reveal  
The secret wrested from me in her height  
Of nuptial love professed, carrying it straight  
To them who had corrupted her, my spies,  
And rivals? In this other was there found  
More faith? who also in her prime of love,  
Spousal embraces, vitiates with gold,  
Though offered only, by the scent conceived  
Her spurious first-born; treason against me?  
Thrice she assayed with flattering prayers and sighs,
And amorous reproaches to win from me
My capital secret, . . . (376-95)

Samson's two wives are of course not "faithless"; they believe in Dagon. But Samson considers any person "faithless" if he or she believes in a different God. Once judged to be "faithless," that person automatically becomes his "enemy." What follows in his speech suggests, however, that his two wives are "false," not only because they are religiously "faithless,"26 or because they are sexually "unfaithful," but because their sexuality is the source of his anxiety.

The secret the first wife "reveals" refers to "the answer to the riddle he has set the young men of Timna"27 whereas the "capital secret" Dalila wins from him refers to the secret of his miraculous physical strength. But the revelations of the two secrets are each in their turn confused with the disclosure of sexuality itself, because each revelation occurs at the precise moment when each marriage is consummated. Samson's anxiety about "betraying" or "revealing" the secrets is really the anxiety about his own ability to reciprocate each wife's disclosure of her sexuality with the disclosure of his own sexuality.28 The word "betray" in line 383 means primarily "To be or prove false to (a trust or him who trusts one)" (OED. def. 2). But when we get to the word "reveal" at the end of the line, "betray" can also mean "To disclose or reveal with breach of faith (a secret, or that which should be kept secret)" (OED. def. 5). Again, as we move on to the
phrase "carrying it straight / To them who had corrupted her,
my spies, / And rivals," the meaning of the word becomes "To
give up to, or place in the power of an enemy, by treachery or
disloyalty" (OED. def. 1). On one level, the interplay between
these meanings tend to associate the self (the "me" in line
383) with the secret published by his wife. On another level,
the semantic interplay in the context of sexual consummation
suggests that Samson is entertaining the fantasy of being
sexually displaced while still engaged in the very sexual act
with her; it is not so much that she reveals the secret and
carries it to his enemies after the sexual act as that all
three acts take place simultaneously in his imagination. (Note
the emphases on both "in her height / Of nuptial love" and
"straight.") To "know" a woman sexually or to "experience"
sexuality with her is simultaneously to "betray" himself and
to "prove" her "false," "faithless," or (less evasively)
"promiscuous." Female sexuality is itself a "betrayal."

Although the phrase "a woman" in line 379 refers
specifically to Dalila, it can also refer generically to all
women, because his "knowledge" and "oft experience" compel him
to conclude that all women are the same woman, that, having
"known" one woman, he "knows" what all women are like. (Why
does he marry again then?) Before he marries Dalila, the only
"experience" of "betrayal" he has is the "betrayal" by the
wife of Timna. But when he says that he is "warned" of
Dalila's "betrayal" by "oft experience," his "experience" with
the wife of Timna seems to have automatically multiplied
itself so that what he has married is not so much a particular
woman as the epitome of the whole class of women; to have
"experience" with the Timnian bride is to have "oft
experience" with all women in her.

On the other hand, as we move from line 382 to the
following lines, Samson's "experience" begins to acquire some
kind of strange "apriority." Although "experience," strictly
speaking, is "a posteriori," the "experience" gained from his
hindsight suddenly becomes "foresight" in this retrospective
narrative. When he says, "This well I knew, nor was at all
surprised, / But warned by oft experience," and then proceeds
to exemplify his "knowledge" and "experience" by citing the
"betrayals" of his two wives as instances, his "knowledge"
actually changes into "foreknowledge," the word "warned"
actually means "forewarned," and his "experience" becomes
temporally (or "atemporally"?) as well as logically "prior" to
the instances that exemplify it.

Thus, when he asks rhetorically, "did not she / Of Timna
first betray me . . . ?" the implication is that his
"experience" constitutes the basis of her behavior; she must
perforce act in accordance with the "law" of his "experience."
While the phrase "She proving false" suggests, as I have
remarked, that her "falsehood" has preexisted his "exper-
ience," here his "experience" has acquired the capability to
predict or, rather, to preordain her "betrayal"; while "She
proving false" suggests that "experience" can only verify her preexisting "falsehood," here her "betrayal" not only serves to verify his "experience" but conforms to the "law" of his "experience"; while the word "prove" means "to be found by experience or trial to be" and suggests that, when he "finds" her to be "false," her "falsehood" is something of a surprise, here he has "foreknown" all along how she will behave and hence is not "at all surprised" by her "betrayal." Although he has previously felt an agony of remorse for the second marriage ("O that I never had! fond wish too late"), the complacency with which he puts the two rhetorical questions here implies that he actually takes pride in the "betrayals" of his wives, because their "betrayals" bespeak his (cynical and disillusioned) insight into the way of all women. In the retrospective narrative here, story-telling eventually becomes at once a kind of neurotic self-defense designed to protect the story-teller's self-esteem and a kind of compensation mechanism or, shall we say, overcompensation mechanism whereby the source of humiliation is converted into the source of pride, and sexual anxiety into epistemological superiority.

As in Samson's choice of the first bride, God is here implicated again in his sexual "betrayals" by his wives:

    ... if aught seem vile,
    As vile hath been my folly, who have profaned
    The mystery of God given me under pledge
    Of vow, and have betrayed it to a woman,
A Canaanite, my faithless enemy.

"The mystery of God" refers to the "high gift of strength" (47). Although the "gift" is given to Samson, it does not become his private possession. Rather, it serves to obligate him; it is given "under pledge / Of vow" as if, without the pledge, he could be trusted neither by God nor by himself. On the one hand, the pledge functions to consolidate the otherwise precarious male bond, as it were, between him and God. At this level, to betray (disclose) the "mystery" "to a woman" is simultaneously to betray (be unfaithful to) the male bond by introducing "a woman"--specifically female sexuality--into the bond. On the other hand, the betrayal of the male bond in the context of (hetero)sexual betrayals gives the homosexual bond an obscurely erotic undertone. Although "The mystery of God" refers to the gift of strength, the word "mystery" can also mean a sacramental rite, and the "pledge / Of vow" sounds like a marriage vow as though the giving of the "mystery" were an enactment of the marriage ceremony. In this respect, when he says that the first wife "betrays" him "in her height / Of nuptial love," that the second "betrays" him "in her prime of love, / Spousal embraces," their "betrayals" apparently consist in their sexual displacement of God in the marital relationship between him and God. They "betray" him not only because, as I have suggested, he is entertaining the fantasy of being sexually displaced while still engaged in the sexual act with either of them, but because they make him
"betray" his role as a bride to God the bridegroom; they compel him to "betray" God in the "height of nuptial love," to consummate with them the conjugal relationship he should consummate with God, and hence to play, so to speak, Dalila the "unfaithful" wife to God the wronged husband.\(^29\)

IV

Why is God always implicated in almost everything that has happened to Samson? With regard to the first marriage, he says that he "urged/ The marriage on; that by occasion hence / [He] might begin Israel's deliverance, / The work to which [he] was divinely called"; with regard to the second, he says that he has "the same end" in mind: "still watching to oppress / Israel's oppressors" (223-33). But has he found the "occasion"? And if he has, has he fulfilled the "work" of "Israel's deliverance," the work "to which [he] was divinely called"?

The Chorus's response to his speech in lines 210-36 evades the question whether his first marriage and his "work" have anything to do with God. At the same time, they insinuate that there is a disjunction between what he professes to do and his actual performance; that he has an ulterior motive when he invokes the "end" of delivering Israel as the justification for both marriages:

In seeking just occasion to provoke
The Philistine, thy country's enemy,
Thou never wast remiss, I bear thee witness:
Yet Israel still serves with all his sons. (237-40)

The first three lines are merely perfunctory; the last one is
the point: "For all your appeal to Israel's deliverance as the
justification for both marriages, you are not really
interested in Israel's deliverance per se, are you? I know
that what you really want is someone who can appreciate and
admire your hard work. Since this is the role you like me to
play, all right I will give you the recognition you have been
seeking; you request, 'Look how hard I have been working,' and
my courteous reply is, 'Yes, I bear thee witness.' But what I
really want to say is that there is too great a gap between
intention and execution. In spite of all your hard work, you
have achieved absolutely nothing; Israel still serves with all
his sons."

The Chorus is not the only one to call into question the
whole notion of "Israel's deliverance." At the beginning of
the play, Samson himself speaks ironically of the "Promise":

... Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke; (38-42)
The joke which Samson is apparently playing on his audience hinges on the word "find" and the effect created by the enjambment that follows. He invites the audience to "Ask for this great deliverer" and then immediately satisfies them by presenting "him" at the end of the line. As they pause there momentarily, they may think they have "found" what he invites them to ask for. Only at the very next line do they "find" out that what they have "found" is not exactly what is expected. As a result, the sense of "find" changes from one line to the other. When line 40 is taken in isolation, the word means "to come upon what one searches for" whereas in the next line its sense becomes "to realize as being" or "to perceive someone to be in a certain plight." Since this speech is also a soliloquy, he is in a sense addressing himself as the other. The note of self-alienation and psychic disintegration is conveyed in the use of pronouns too. The "I" placed at the end of line 38 becomes "him" at the end of line 40.\(^2\)\(^1\): Added to the split between the "I" and the "he" is the "you" presupposed by the use of the double imperative in line 40 ("Ask for this great deliverer now, and [you] find him").\(^3\)\(^1\) His identity as a "great deliverer" only results in self-fragmentation, in the intrapsychic drama played out by the "I," the "you," and the "he."

Although Samson speaks ironically of the "Promise," his disillusionment with it and the cynicism that ensues nevertheless point to his prior investment in it as a means to
secure the recognition of his spectators. "Eyeless" as he is, he is very self-conscious of "the scorn and gaze" (33). As soon as he hears "the tread of many feet steering this way," his immediate reaction is: "Perhaps my enemies ... come to stare / At my affliction" (111-13). Since he is "Now blind" (563), one of the most fearful prospects the future has in store for him is that he shall be "to visitants a gaze, / Or pitied object" (567-68). Later, he complains to God that, while "Under [God's] special eye / Abstemious [he] grew up and thrived amain" (636-37), God now has "Left [him] all helpless with the irreparable loss / Of sight, reserved alive to be repeated / The subject of [his enemies'] cruelty, or scorn" (644-45). All the references made by his spectators to the disparity between his past and his present states (117-76; 340-50) only render him all the more obsessed and persecuted with the idea that he has been constantly looked at, admired, judged, and accused. Thus, when he asks the audience or himself to "find him / Eyeless in Gaza," there may be a pun on "Gaza" as though the place had become the locus of the gaze that has incessantly tormented him. In this connection, "Eyeless in Gaza" seems to sum up in a phrase the paradoxical relationship between what makes him "blind" and what makes his spectators "see"; even before the loss of his sight, he has already displaced his eyes onto the gaze of the other and therefore can see himself only in and through the gaze of the
other. His self-consciousness of the gaze apparently has made him "eyeless."

Apart from the Chorus's perfunctory acknowledgement, Samson apparently has never gained any genuine recognition he has been seeking through the work of "delivering" Israel. Manoa's response to his son's marriage choices suggests that he is aware of Samson's desire for parental praise, but he is reluctant to offer it:

I cannot praise thy marriage-choices, son,
Rather approved them not; but thou didst plead
Divine impulsion prompting how thou might'st
Find some occasion to infest our foes.
I state not that; this I am sure; our foes
Found soon occasion thereby to make thee
Their captive, and their triumph; thou the sooner
Temptation found'st, or over-potent charms
To violate the sacred trust of silence
Deposited within thee; . . . (420-29)

I have observed that, in seeking to wed "The daughter of an infidel," Samson is attempting to rebel against parental will, that Samson's "they knew not" (221) suggests not only his parents' lack of access to his private knowledge but their inability to recognize his knowledge as beyond doubt or their failure to acknowledge the authority of his knowledge. But "they knew not" is apparently Samson's resentful response to Manoa's "I cannot praise thy marriage choices." From this
point of view, what looks like a rebellious gesture may be a frustrated desire for parental praise and approval, and Samson's complacent and triumphant "I knew" (222) may be an overcompensation for the parental praise he has never attained. In this regard, when Manoa calls him "son," the word signals simultaneously an apology and a verbal hug as if the father were trying to make up for the praise he cannot offer by stroking the son on the head and saying to his wounded ego: "For all your gestures of defiance, I know that what you want deep inside is my praise. I am sorry. I just cannot offer it. But I don't mean to disown you. You are still my son. Do you understand? You don't have to rebel to get my attention. Now, does this make you feel better?"

The tone of Manoa's remaining speech alters to some degree; sympathetic, gentle regard changes into skepticism and even irony. The emphatic use of "didst," along with the word "but," in "but thou didst plead" conveys a note of protest, insinuating that, in the quarrel over his marriage choices, Samson wins unfairly by employing the argument of "Divine impulsion." Once Samson "didst plead / Divine impulsion," there can be no further debate, and the father can do nothing but throw up his hands in despair and say, with Dalila, "what had I / To oppose against such powerful arguments?" (861-62).

Though Manoa may not be able to oppose against such powerful arguments, he apparently refuses to acquiesce. "I state not that" bespeaks his reservations. Citing this line as
the only instance, *OED* defines "state" thus: "To assign a value to, have an opinion upon" (def. 2b). But "I state not that" can also be understood as "I cannot corroborate that" or "I cannot testify to that"; the contrast is between "this" and "that," between something he is sure of and something he is not, between something he can bear witness to and something he can't, or between something he does see and something he just can't. Although Samson takes his "Divine impulse" as a "given," the ironic stress on the word "that" suggests that Manoa is looking askance at it as something remote and irrelevant to his own "experience." Thus, when he goes on to say, "our foes / Found soon occasion thereby to make thee / Their captive . . . thou the sooner / Temptation found'st . . . ;" he seems to put Samson's "foresight" ("how thou might'st / Find some occasion to infest our foes") in quotation marks. The phrase "Find some occasion" implies sustained efforts to obtain something desired which is located at a distant and uncertain future whereas "Found soon occasion" points to the ease and immediateness with which Samson's foes make him their captive. Again, in contrast to the word "Find" in "Find some occasion," the word "found'st" in "thou the sooner / Temptation found'st" means something close to "be instantly overtaken with surprise by something undesired." Intent on looking ahead, Samson just fails to see what is close at hand.
Furthermore, Samson's "that by occasion hence / I might begin Israel's deliverance, / The work to which I was divinely called" (224-26) is here abridged as "how thou might'st / Find some occasion to infest our foes." The abridgement brushes aside the claim to the divine calling which Samson makes for his "work." Manoa thus seems to imply that such a claim has no place in the debate over the issue of Samson's marriage choices. At the same time, as if to deflate his son's bravado, he reduces Samson's grandiose program of "Israel's deliverance" to a mere attempt to "Find some occasion to infest our foes." "Deliverance" means "liberation." But the verb "delivered" is given an ironic twist when Manoa tells his son near the end of his speech:

A worse thing yet remains,
This day the Philistines a popular feast
Here celebrate in Gaza; and proclaim
Great pomp, and sacrifice, and praises loud
To Dagon, as their god who hath delivered
Thee Samson bound and blind into their hands,
Them out of thine, who slew'st them many a slain.

(433-39)

The elliptical construction "Them out of thine" means "Dagon hath delivered them out of thine hands." In this construction, "delivered" still retains the sense of "liberated." The irony is that Samson's program of "Israel's deliverance" serves only to bring about the deliverance of his foes. Manoa's irony,
however, goes further. As we move from line 437 to the next line, "delivered" means primarily "handed over." But the ironic stress Manoa places on "Thee Samson" also glances at Samson's own view of himself as the "great deliverer" of Israel (40, 249). The father thus once again debunks the self-proclaimed "great deliverer," who has now become the "delivered" as if Dagon were a mailman "delivering" the package called "Samson" into the "hands" of the Philistines. "Now, no more of that big talk about yourself as the 'great deliverer' or about the grand mission of 'Israel's deliverance,'" the father seems to tell the son, "Let's get down to business and try to find some means to 'deliver' yourself."

Throughout his speech, Manoa appears a pragmatic father attempting to cure his son of conceit. Though he may seem at times indulgent in puncturing his son's conceit, his irony and skepticism are directed not so much at the person of his son as at his son’s appeal to some "transcendental" ground for his marriages, specifically, his son's appeal to "Divine impulsion." And even though he does not fly in the face of his son's "Divine impulsion," his speech nonetheless registers some doubt about it. Where does it come from? What does it consist of? A moment later, when Samson speaks of his "divine instinct," his language suggests that what he calls "divine instinct" may be a medley of his view about his heroic acts and other various sentiments in himself:
His pardon I implore; but as for life,
To what end should I seek it? when in strength
All mortals I excelled, and great in hopes
With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts
Of birth from heaven foretold and high exploits,
Full of divine instinct, after some proof
Of acts indeed heroic; far beyond
The sons of Anak, . . . (521-28)

I have already raised some questions about this passage at the beginning of section 2. Here I would like to focus on language and syntax. In line 526, "from heaven" can modify "birth" or "foretold." Although Samson's birth from his mother was foretold by an angel to his parents, the ambiguity creates the impression that he is the son of heaven, and his mother is a mere agency through whom the son of heaven is born. Hence his self-justified claim to "divine instinct." But "divine" can also mean "Of more than human or ordinary excellence" (OED. def. 5). And what he describes as "divine" may have something to do with what he regards as more than human or ordinary—for instance, his "excelling" strength or his heroic acts which are "far beyond / The sons of Anak." Moreover, if, as I have commented, what confirms the divinity of his instinct is the heroicness of his deeds, the grammatical relationship between "acts indeed heroic," "far beyond / The sons of Anak," and "famous now and blazed" also suggests a reasoning on Samson's part: "Because the sons of Anak are famous now and blazed and
because my acts are far beyond theirs, my acts are indeed heroic." At this level, the divinity of his instinct is the end product of a step-by-step confirmation process that has nothing to do with the heavenly.

On the other hand, the syntax of lines 522-25 suggests that his "divine instinct" may be related as well to other attributes with which he describes himself. The various attributes listed in those lines are connected one after another by the same conjunction "and," of which the phrase "Full of divine instinct" is independent. Again, while the syntactic flow of lines 523-25 runs uninterrupted until the very end of line 525 where a comma signals a pause, the relatively short phrase "Full of divine instinct" is introduced as a separate unit, enclosed by two commas which divide it from both what goes before and what comes after. The syntax thus lends a special emphasis to the phrase and suggests that the phrase functions to recapitulate the hodgepodge, as it were, of Samson's superior physical strength, his "youthful courage," "hopes," and "magnanimous thoughts." His "divine instinct" may come from heaven, but it may just as well come from a confused mixture of various sentiments in himself. Given that he is also full of "youthful courage," his "hopes" and "magnanimous thoughts" smack of adolescent megalomania, which "divine instinct," though or rather because inscrutable in itself, is apparently invoked to justify, to hallow, and to mystify.
I return to the "standard" Fish provides for "the reader." "Within the situation," Fish says, Samson's action "is an expression, however provisional, of his reading of the divine will; and in so far as it represents his desire to conform to that will, it is a virtuous action." Later in the same essay, he says again: "... Samson's act is praiseworthy because he intends it to be answerable to the divine will ..." (262). Samson, as William Empson has observed, "regularly gambles on knowing the purposes of God ... ."33 And the question is: if Samson's act is "praiseworthy" and "virtuous" simply because "he intends it to be answerable to the divine will," to whom is it "praiseworthy" and "virtuous"? In choosing the woman of Timna, Samson also "intends" his marriage to be "answerable to the divine will." But his father simply "cannot praise [his] marriage choices" although he has pleaded "Divine impulsion." In undertaking the work of "Israel's deliverance"--the work "to which [he] was divinely called," Samson again "intends" his act "to be answerable to the divine will." But does any Israelite consider it "praiseworthy" and "virtuous"? Samson tells the Chorus:

... Israel's governors, and heads of tribes,
... seeing those great acts which God had done
Singly by me against their conquerors
Acknowledged not, or at all considered
Deliverance offered: . . .

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

But what more oft in nations grown corrupt,
And by their vices brought to servitude,
Than to love bondage more than liberty,
Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty;
And to despise, or envy, or suspect
Whom God hath of his special favour raised
As their deliverer; if he aught begin,
How frequent to desert him, and at last
To heap ingratitude on worthiest deeds?

(242-46; 268-76)

Having made a business, a vocation, or a life-career out of delivering Israel, he converts Israelites into people who must depend on and accept his "deliverance." For him, "deliverance" is a heavenly-sent gift to be bestowed on them whenever he wants, however he wants, and whether they like it or not. Believing that "Israel's deliverance" is the work to which he was divinely called, he treats the "deliverance" as his monopoly, finds in them the objects he needs for his "deliverance," and refuses to "acknowledge" that they have their own way of doing things and get along well without his "deliverance." Instead, he overrides their protest, insisting on solving the problem his way. And when he finds out that they do not want or need his "deliverance," he is in a
position to get self-righteously angry at them for rejecting his "generosity."

If they can be exploited as objects of his "deliverance," their rejection of his "generosity" can also be exploited to consolidate his "theory" that people will always turn out to be disappointing and ungrateful. The phrase "at last" at the end of line 275 signals an inevitable outcome of a familiar and predictable process. Furthermore, the phrase "what more oft" in line 268 and the phrase "How frequent" in line 276 suggest that this process has acquired the status of a timeless, universal "law." Thus, the pronoun "he" in line 274 refers not only particularly to Samson the self-proclaimed "deliverer" but generically to all "deliverers," and this "law" can be applied not only to the conduct of Israel but to the conduct of all "nations." Like his "oft experience" and his "knowledge" about the way of all women (381-82), his "theory" here is a kind of neurotic self-defense designed to protect his self-esteem.

If we pay close attention to the ethical and psychological ambiguity and complexity of the play, we may then begin to regard with suspicion the whole doctrine of "the divine will" and the whole notion of motive or, in Fish's terminology, "intention." Although Fish says that "From the human vantage point, only intention is capable of being unambiguous . . ." (261), the question of "intention" is anything but unambiguous in the play. In embarking on the work
of "Israel's deliverance," is he "intending" to serve "God's will" or is he exploiting the authority of "God" to compel "acknowledgement" from Israelites? When he decides to wed the "daughter of an infidel," he also claims to "know" that "what [he] motioned was of God." Does his choice of the Timnian bride represent "God's will"? Or is the invocation of God a desperate attempt to triumph over parental opposition (which, as it turns out, may be an inverted symptom of his frustrated desire for parental praise)? Does he "intend" to do what God "intends" him to do or does God "intend" to do what he "intends" God to do? Who is serving whose will?

More is implicated in Samson's relationship to God than the use or abuse of "the divine will." When the sexual relationship with his wives poses a threat to his narcissistically invested relationship with God, sexual intimacy is apparently perceived as a hostile force assailing the ontologically insecure self. God and his will are so repeatedly involved in Samson's self-defenses against what he perceives as threatening, treacherous, and antagonistic forces in his world ("I perceived all set on enmity" [1201]) that these forces begin to seem random projections of his inner demons preying on his ontological insecurity, and "God" and "the divine will" begin to seem free-floating signifiers expediently invoked to stabilize the self and to give it a (precarious) sense of belongingness. It would follow that to evaluate Samson in terms of his "intention" to serve "the
divine will" would be to gloss over the radically questioning nature of the play and to fudge the ontological, ethical, and psychological ambiguities at its core.
Notes


3. All quotations from *Samson Agonistes* refer to John Carey's edition. All emphases are added.


5. In this connection, the title of Fish's article is revealing. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines "question and answer" thus: "alternation of questions and answers, as in catechism." All Fish's references to "the reader" sound like attempts to instill his own "understanding" as a religious doctrine in "the reader." For his use of catechism as a model for the structure of George Herbert's *The Temple*, see his book *The Living Temple: George Herbert and Catechizing* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978).

6. In his second article on the play, "Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*," Fish interprets this passage somewhat differently: "There is at this moment an inverse relationship between information and revelation. The more we are told the less we know because there is a hole at the center that has the effect of distributing its absence over the field of facts designed to fill it" (567). But, as in the first article, he seems anxious to justify the ways of God when he says, "... for Samson, God's power to dispense means that one can never figure out exactly (without doubt) what God is doing or what he wants us to do ..." (578, Fish's emphasis). In both articles, he seems to feel a need to be on God's side. And it
should be noted that Fish's God may or may not be Samson's God; but he is certainly not Dalila's God or Philistian God although Fish assumes that he is the God of all readers.
8. Stein 145.
9. The male demand for women to act as docile figures and the attendant male fear of "female usurpation" are central issues of Samson Agonistes. In the play, the Chorus is the chief advocate for the doctrine of male dominance in marriage:

    Therefore God's universal law
    Gave to the man despotic power
    Over his female in due awe,
    Nor from that right to part an hour,
    Smile she or lour:
    So shall he least confusion draw
    On his whole life, not swayed
    By female usurpation, nor dismayed. (1053-60)

Radzinowicz fully endorses the Chorus's position when she remarks: "Because true virtue depends upon overcoming difficulties, God therefore made a law intended to prevent some foreseeable difficulties, a law giving despotic power to husbands over wives so that husbands should 'least confusion draw' upon themselves 'not sway'd by female usurpation'. . . . The 'law' of despotic power is a biblical 'law' and a
seventeenth-century 'law,' and it is useless to discredit the Chorus for having accepted not only its existence but its necessity and its reason" (41, Radzinowicz's emphasis). She apparently believes that the only desirable marital relationship is the one based on the male subjugation of women. The world she envisions is a male, patriarchal world in which paranoid husbands can put their minds at rest only by making their wives suffer the pernicious effects which the misogynistic God and his "law" produce. For a contrasting view and a subtle psychoanalytic discussion of the gender issue in the play, see Jim Swan, "Difference and Silence: John Milton and the Question of Gender," The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 142-68. For an attempt to deal with the gender issue of the play by combining regenerationist reading with psychoanalysis, see Jakie DiSalvo, "Intestine Thorn: Samson's Struggle with the Woman Within," Milton and the Idea of Woman, ed. Julia M. Walker (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 211-29.

10. I am taking the elliptical construction "she pleased / Me, not my parents" to mean "she pleased me but she did not please my parents." But I wonder whether it is also possible to place the emphasis on "she," in which case the construction can also mean "it was she, not my parents, who pleased me."
11. For a discussion of Samson's "intimate impulse" in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis, Calvinist theology, and "the familial interests of the contemporary bourgeoisie," see John Guillory 159-66.

12. Cf. Guillory's comments:

   The problem of the iterability of the "intimate impulse" arises crucially in the recounting of Samson's decision to marry a second Philistine woman: "I thought it lawful from my former act" (231). The absence of any narrative confirmation of divine guidance leaves the impulse stranded in the psyche, reduced merely to a feeling. . . . Samson does not attempt to assimilate his second marriage to the earlier impulse, which he "knows" to be from God, but rather elevates that impulse into a principle of legitimation. The "feeling" remains inaccessible but the concept of the impulse functions as a legal precedent, and so displaces the epistemological problem of a private experience onto an already legitimimized social structure. In this way the act that needed to be justified because it transgressed the law itself becomes the justification of future transgression.

   (160, Guillory's emphasis)

If, in Samson's second marriage, the impulse is "reduced merely to a feeling," I fail to understand why "The 'feeling'
remains inaccessible"? Again, "the earlier impulse" is not something "which he 'knows' to be from God," as Guillory states; rather, it is something "from" which he "knew" that "what [he] motioned was of God." Furthermore, Guillory seems to confuse Samson's "former act" with the "intimate impulse." Samson himself does not say: "I thought it lawful from my former intimate impulse."

13. Radzinowicz observes, however, that Samson "chose Dalila as his second wife in the same manner he chose his first, from among the overlord, unclean, and forbidden tribe, because of the earlier divine guidance and its recognized intention" (30). Gallagher also remarks that the "intuition of the divine will" "motivates Samson's marriage to Dalila" (155). For a discussion about the problem of "the Inner Light," see William Empson, Milton's God (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961) 217-18.

14. Cf. Fish's comment: "Whom are we to believe? Samson, who uses hindsight (which we happen to know is shortsighted) to label / one motion 'of God,' the other, not? . . ." ("Question and Answer in Samson Agonistes," 243).

15. Fish condemns Dalila precisely on the ground of her different religious faith. Commenting on the passage where Dalila compares herself to Jael, he says: "Jael's superiority to Dalila is to be located in the manner of her acting, in the extent to which her deed is a manifestation of her wish (intention) to serve God ." ("Question and Answer in Samson Agonistes," 261). Jael's God is also Samson's God, but her God
is not Dalila's God. Why does the wish to serve one's God make one superior to another who does not manifest the wish to serve the same God? Virginia Mollenkott also condemns Dalila on the same ground when she says: "On the natural level of the drama, she has much truth on her side; but on the supernatural level, inasmuch as by her allegiance to Dagon she has been one of those who 'band them to resist' God's 'uncontrollable intent,' she is clearly wrong." See her "Relativism in Samson Agonistes," Studies in Philology 67 (1970): 100. For an attempt to "rescue" Dalila by applying "the principle of Christian charity" to her case, see John C. Ulreich, Jr., "'Incident to All Our Sex': The Tragedy of Dalila," Milton and the Idea of Woman, ed. Julia M. Walker (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 185-210. The precondition of Ulreich's "rescue" is of course a superimposed conversion of Dalila.

16. See Carey's note on line 227 in his edition of the play (352). See also lines 1996-1200 of this play.

17. Cf. the confusion of his sexual potency with his miraculous physical strength and the relationship between his post-coital impotence and his anxiety about Dalila's sexual betrayal in the following passage:

   Then swoll'n with pride into the snare I fell
   Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains,
   Softened with pleasure and voluptuous life;
   At length to lay my head and hallowed pledge
   Of all my strength in the lascivious lap
Of a deceitful concubine who shore me
Like a tame wether, all my precious fleece,
Then turned me out ridiculous, despoiled,
Shaven, and disarmed among my enemies. (532-540)

John Guillory has also noted: "... [the passage] tells this story as if the phallus were the protagonist. The movement of the phallus through the passage blatantly imitates the trajectory of coition." See his "Dalila's House: Samson Agonistes and the Sexual Division of Labor," Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1986) 117.

18. In this respect, when the Chorus refers to the vow of "this heroic Nazarite" as the "vow of strictest purity" (318-19), that vow sounds like a vow of both the bride's virginity and the wife's chastity.

19. See Radzinowicz's comment on this passage: "Heavy stress upon the contrasting I and him at the line ends gives the whole game away: Samson protects his innermost 'I' by using it to condemn and even to taunt the failed Samson, 'him.' Within Samson is played an inner drama in which 'I' mocks and disowns 'him'" (18).

20. The original version of the play has capitalized the word "deliverer" and thus reinforced the sense of irony when Samson pronounces "great Deliverer."
21. The only exception may be Dalila's gaze: "But conjugal affection, / Prevailing over fear and timorous doubt, / Hath led me on desirous to behold / Once more thy face, and know of thy state" (739-42). The gaze here is intimate, loving, and tender. It is also non-evaluating and non-judgmental, and hence it leaves its object intact. Unfortunately, this is the gaze Samson strenuously rejects.


23. To be fair with Fish, I should point out that he immediately adds: "(although we can never be sure that it is)." But the parenthesis is telling: in the last four pages of his essay, he literally brackets the whole question of how to interpret the "intention" of any given character. In those pages, he assigns—apparently without any qualms—various intentions to various characters and then proceeds to "evaluate"—to praise or condemn—each character according to the assigned "intention." To him, no matter what each character does, he or she has one "intention" and only one—namely, either to or not to serve God's will. God's will means, among other things, God's "intention." But what is God's "intention"? How does each character interpret God's "intention"? Fish has passed over these two questions.
Concluding Remarks

I started to work on the dissertation in the Spring of 1991, while I was a teaching assistant for English 252. In my dissertation prospectus, I proposed to begin the dissertation with a reading of "To His Booke," the proem to The Shepheardes Calender. But I was distracted from the proem by Thomas Wyatt's poetry—or perhaps I should say I was so attracted to his poetry that I temporarily became oblivious of the proem—when I was preparing to teach a class on one of his poems. After some considerations, I decided to start the dissertation afresh with a reading of a sonnet by Wyatt called "Who so list to hounte." In the midst of writing on the sonnet, however, I had a vague sense that there was something in the sonnet which was missing in my reading, and I felt I was not ripe for that sonnet although I was unable to put my finger on what that "something" was.

But in some strange way the legacy of my work with that sonnet seems still present in this dissertation. When I wrote on that sonnet, I was drawn to the uncanny presence of the female voice at the end of the poem. How does the speaker of the poem understand the otherness of that voice, and its presence? How can we make contact with, and do justice to, the elusiveness, the "undecidability," and the "difference" of that voice? How does the speaker read the feminine such a voice bespeaks? What are we to make of his "understanding" and
"reading" of the female Other, as it were? How does his audience function in the poem? These are some of the questions I asked myself when I wrote on that poem. and these questions seem to bear, directly or indirectly, upon the works covered in this dissertation.

In the chapter on Othello, for instance, I have discussed male responses to the otherness and difference of the feminine, particularly, the otherness and difference of female sexuality manifested in and through Desdemona. Time and again, the male discourse presents "readings" of the feminine that betray an anxiety about the threat of its otherness. When Brabantio advances the "theory" that Desdemona is "A maiden, never bold" and thus could not possibly "fall in love with what she fear'd to look on" unless "with some mixture pow'rfull o'er the blood, / Or with some dram (conjur'd to this effect) / [Othello] wrought upon her" (I.iii.94-106), that "theory" bespeaks not only his contempt for Othello but an attempt to fashion a Desdemona whose behavior is predictable and controllable and hence an attempt to cope with his anxiety about the threatening otherness of a Desdemona whose behavior is "Past thought" (I.i.166). Again, right after Othello has murdered Desdemona, he tells his audience: "Tis pitiful; but yet Iago knows / That she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed" (V.ii.210-12). Othello means to say that Iago can bear him witness. But he says "she with Cassio hath" instead of "she and Cassio have." His very
formulation suggests that Desdemona has taken the initiative in the sexual act. The focus of the speech then shifts to his fantasy about her vigorous, incessant ("A thousand times"), and "shameless" sexual demands—demands which he feels no longer able to satisfy. (In this regard, when he says, "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" [V.ii.6, emphasis added], the implication is that the only way to put an end to her ceaseless sexual demands is to kill her.) At this level, Othello is here invoking and exploiting Iago's "knowledge" as a screen for, and a rationalization of, his need to put his sexual anxiety at rest by murdering her.

Male anxiety about female sexuality is also one of the major issues of Samson Agonistes. As for Othello, "knowledge" for Samson functions as a device of self-defense against the threat female sexuality poses. I have remarked on the way in which Samson converts his sexual anxiety into epistemological superiority when he says: "This well I knew, nor was at all surpris'd, / But warn'd by oft experience: . . ." (381-82). But, like Brabantio and Othello, Samson is a story-teller as well as a "reader," an interpreter, of his wives' behaviors. In one sense, their shared anxiety about the threatening otherness of female sexuality is simultaneously an anxiety about the integrity of a self-image they each try to maintain in the eyes of an audience. For Brabantio, fatherhood is a status quo which can be sustained only when the daughter acts in accordance with the father's will; to retain his dignity
vis-a-vis the audience of the other senators, he must suppress
his awareness of his daughter's capacity for acting contrary
to his will ("This accident is not unlike my dream" [I.i.142])
and advance the "theory" that her behavior can only be con-
strued as an effect of Othello's witchcraft. For Othello,
Desdemona's sexuality poses a threat to his self-image as an
honorable servant of the Venetian state, and he has to defend
against such a threat by assuring the senators of his contempt
for sexuality itself (I.iii.260-74). For Samson, retrospective
story-telling serves to protect his self-respect by providing
an opportunity for him to "theorize" the way of all women, to
impose a preferred reading of his wives' acts, and to tran-
slate the source of humiliation into the source of pride.

In the first Book of The Faerie Queene, the male attitude
toward female sexuality finds its perhaps most pathological
expressions in two scenes which are not discussed in this
dissertation—one occurs in canto two where Fradubio describes
his voyeuristic reaction to Fidessa's/Duessa's naked body; the
other occurs at the end of canto eight where the narrator
describes his own reaction again to Fidessa's/Duessa's body
after it has been stripped bare. But the narrator's descrip-
tion of the rain-storm at the very beginning of the first
episode already intimates his disgust with sexuality itself.
In this episode, his attitude toward sexuality eventually
extends to his attitude toward the pleasure which the
landscape affords the knight and the lady. His reading of the
landscape witnesses a self-estrangement from, and a neurotic self-defense against, what becomes imperturbably manifest out there. In his reading, the natural world is seen as the Other, as an alien and hostile force that threatens to engulf the self. His narration and interpretation of the landscape thus take on the appearance of an attempt to stabilize an estranged self by mastering a threatening and anxiety-producing object with his allegorical, moral "under-standing" and "knowledge."

The foregoing observations are of course an attempt to sketch out some of the ways in which the texts discussed in this dissertation may seem to be in dialogue with each other. As a reader who steps back and comments on my own readings of those texts in retrospect, I view the foregoing observations with some ambivalence. On the one hand, since the questions I have asked with regard to Wyatt's sonnet seem to bear upon the three texts covered in this dissertation, I am tempted to say that those questions may apply to other Renaissance texts as well. But my contact with the three texts also tells me that reading is a process that grows of its own accord—so much so that I wonder whether I can unscrupulously call the readings of those texts "my own readings." Indeed, when I was deeply engaged in the process of reading itself, what looked like an innocent statement or description could contain so much complex and rich material that I was simply powerless to turn my back on it; what looked like a small detail could become so roomy upon close contact that I was delightfully seduced into
the expanded realm it opened up. So what I am trying to say is perhaps that something inside me simply would like to make further contact with the textual figures that have arrested me and to continue the endlessly ongoing process of reading this dissertation has just initiated.