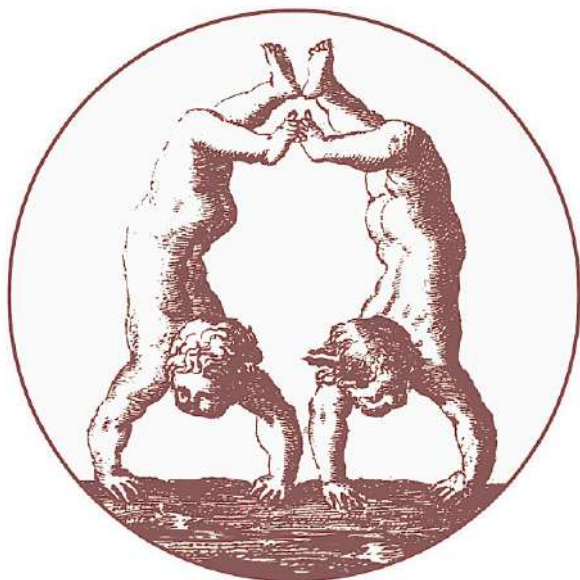




Skenè Texts DA • 3

**A Feast of Strange Opinions:  
Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes  
on the English Renaissance Stage**

Edited by Marco Duranti and Emanuel Stelzer



**Skenè Texts DA - CEMP**  
**Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England**  
General Editor Silvia Bigliuzzi



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Edizioni ETS

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[info@skeneproject.it](mailto:info@skeneproject.it)

Edizioni ETS

Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa

[info@edizioniets.com](mailto:info@edizioniets.com)

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## **CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England**

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (<https://dh.dlss.univr.it/bib-arc/cemp>). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (<https://dh.dlss.univr.it/en/>).



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# The Backshop. Honesty as Paradox in *Othello*

ROCCO CORONATO

## Abstract

This article explores the paradox of honesty in *Othello*, arguing that the most interesting paradoxes are the barely visible ones that challenge not simply general consensus but the norm of sincerity itself. The article also delves into the relationship between lying and intention, with falsehood often being coupled with not-being: lying depends not only on the truth or falsehood of the things that are expressed but on the intention of the mind. While most of Iago's paradoxes are similar to the liar's paradox and therefore antinomies, the article discusses the use of paradoxes focusing especially on the Aristotelian concept of honesty as a virtue that consists of a mediocrity, whose two extreme violations are the boaster (Othello) and the dissembler (Iago). Iago thus creates a space of self-retreat, the *arrière boutique* (the backshop) of inwardness invoked by Montaigne as personal sanctuary and identity. The article also explores the concept of defamation and slander in early modern law and how it related to perjury, investigating the final paradox of (self-)posthumous slander. The article eventually argues that, by way of using the paradox of mediocrity, Iago brings into existence the non-being that was conventionally associated with lying.

KEYWORDS: paradox; *Othello*; mediocrity; inwardness; slander

## 1. Visible and Invisible Paradoxes

Early modern authors variously defined paradox as an intermingling of extremities, “a maruellular, wonderfull and strange thing to heare” (Florio 1611, 257). This concept, also termed the “Wondrer”, portrays the poet as one who “is caried by some occasion to report of a thing that is maruelous, and then he will seeme not speake it simply but with some signe of admiration” (Puttenham 2007, 311). Paradox is



an illustration of how “in things of most difficultie, consisteth most excellencie and admiration” (Guazzo 1925, 1: 91). To this end, it commonly uses the extremity of opposites to challenge orthodoxy: it is “an oblique criticism of absolute judgement or absolute convention” and “contains opposites without necessarily resolving them” (Platt 2001, 123).

However, what happens when the paradox challenges not just the general consensus but the very norm of sincerity – or, to quote the Renaissance keyword with all its vast range of connotations, honesty? Quine categorized paradoxes into three types: the veridical, which eventually resolves into truth; the falsidical, which collapses due to flawed assumptions and logic; and the antinomy, which harbors “a surprise that can be accommodated by nothing less than a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage” (1962, 88). In the context of *Othello*, the paradox of honesty appears to align more closely with the third type.

This discussion aims to prove that the most interesting paradoxes in *Othello* are those that remain barely visible, hidden in the *arrière boutique* of back-shop, where, as Montaigne observed, the modern self-retreats, seeing there, to quote honest Iago, “[a] mass of things, but nothing distinctly” (2.3.284).

## 2. The Double Heart: Lying and Intention

Falsehood is often associated with not-being. The Greek term *pseudos* signifies both error and the deliberate intent to deceive others. Yet, discourse also has its non-being, as Plato’s *Socrates* ponders in the *Sophist*. Since non-being “is one of the classes of being, permeating all being”, one should inquire “whether it mingles with opinion and speech”. If it does not, “all things are true, but if it does, then false opinion and false discourse come into being; for to think or say what is not – that is, I suppose, falsehood arising in mind or in words”. If falsehood exists, deceit exists, “and if deceit exists, all things must be, henceforth, full of images and likenesses and fancies” (Plato 1921, 260c).

The modern concept of sincerity, defined by Lionel Trilling (1971, 2), as the “congruence between avowal and actual feeling”,

still bore the vestiges of this ancient tradition that equated lying with not-being and championed truth as the mirroring of thought through speech: as Achilles says (*Iliad* 9.312-13), “hateful in my eyes, even as the gates of Hades, is that man that hideth one thing in his mind and sayeth another” (Homer 1924). While the Bible strongly condemned outright lying, particularly when accompanied by the intent to deceive (*voluntas fallendi*), it allowed for white lies in cases where the intention was benign, as exemplified in the episode involving Peter and Barnabas (Gal. 2:11-16). Augustine, in what is arguably the most foundational definition of lying, characterised it as the act of thinking one thing and expressing something different in words or other forms (*De Mendacio* 3.3). While it is impossible to do any good by lying, Augustine contended that lying depends not simply on the truth or falsehood of the statements made, but on the intention of the mind:

Whoever gives expression to that which he holds either through belief or assumption does not lie even though the statement itself be false . . . He lies . . . who holds one opinion in his mind and who gives expression to another through words or any other outward manifestation. For this reason, the heart of a liar is said to be double, that is, twofold in its thinking: one part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be true, yet does not so express it; the other part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be false, yet expresses as true. As a result, it happens that a person who is lying may tell what is untrue, if he thinks that things are as he says, even though, in actuality, what he says may not be true. Likewise, it happens that a person who is actually lying may say what is true, if he believes that what he says is false, yet offers it as true, even if the actual truth be just what he says. For, a person is to be judged as lying or not lying according to the intention of his own mind, not according to the truth or falsity of the matter itself. (Augustine 1952, 55)

Augustine introduces a crucial distinction between falsehood and error. For instance, believing in false gods metaphorically signifies living in a falsehood, yet a genuine lie technically involves thinking one thing and saying another. An error is not necessarily always a sin, whereas a lie, even if seemingly harmless, is always considered

a sin (Wilhelm 2018, 10-16; Bettetini 2003, 26). Medieval notions of truth also insisted on this harmony and agreement (*concordia*) between one's mind and intention, between the inner self (*homo interior*) and one's words and actions (Martin 1997, 1327; Williams 2018). In his commentary on Psalm 15, 2, Calvin argues that, just as the Psalmist David sings about his concord and symphony between heart and tongue ("cordis et linguae consensum et symphoniam"), our speech should vividly reflect the lively image of the inward affection ("viva latentis affectus effigies"): "*To speak in the heart* is a strong figurative expression, but it expresses more forcibly David's meaning than if he had said *from the heart*. It denotes such agreement and harmony between the heart and tongue, as that the speech is, as it were, a vivid representation of the hidden affection or feeling within" (Calvin 1845, 206).

Echoing Augustine, Aquinas warns that a moral act's nature is determined by its object and its end. The virtue of truth pertains to a manifestation made through specific signs. When this manifestation is a moral act, it must be voluntary and depend on the intention of the will. Falsehood arises when three elements concur: falsehood of what is said, the will to tell a falsehood, and the intent to deceive. In this case, lying is directly and formally opposed to the virtue of truth, as *mendacium* derives from its opposition to the *mens* (*Summa Theologiae 2a-2ae*, Quaestio 110). Montaigne similarly emphasizes the deliberate intent to deceive. He views truth not only as the outcome of good education but as a own condition that enables the self-education of judgement (Foglia 2010; Mathieu-Castellani 2000). In grammatical terms, *mensonge* is defined as the act of stating something false that one believes to be true, while *mentir*, derived from the Latin *mens*, means to go against one's conscience and pertains to those who say something contrary to what they know (Montaigne 1965, 1.9, 35).

Edward Hoby's 1586 translation of Mathieu Coignet's *Instruction aux princes pour garder la foy promise* (1584) stands perhaps as the only substantial treatise on lying to appear in seventeenth-century England. In this work, truth is conventionally hailed as "the most praise worthie" of virtues. It is described as "an inward integritie, and a rule teaching to liue well according to the holye will of God"; truth "conformeth words, according to the meaning of the hearte"

(Coignet 1586, 4). Rhetoric is also seen as favoured by truth, as it dwells within the speaker much like the soul does within the body. This is expressed through the formal alignment of the inner and outer selves: “Since therefore that speech is but a shadow of deedes, there must be such an vnitie as that there be founde no difference at all, for it is a verie great guile to speak otherwise then the heart indeede thinketh” (12). This unity facilitated by truth allows the speaker to create coherent speech: it “causes vs to speake assuredlie without chaunging of oughte which hath beene, is, or shall bee”; it is a “true signification of the voice” (4). This harmony extends to binding words and subject together: “All discourse consisteth in wordes and the subject: the wordes haue no place at all if you take away the subject, nor the matter of substance hath any shewe without the speech” (8). In contrast, lying involves a “contrary signification(n) vnto the truth whe(n) one speaketh of things vncertain, contrarie to that which one knoweth, making the(m) seeme other then they are”. Lying leads to injustice and the ultimate betrayal of trust and faith, “since that speech is giuen vnto vs, to make manifest what we thinke” (127).

However, despite the seemingly stringent requirements for truthful agreement, there were numerous exceptions and nuances – enter dissimulation. In the pre-Kantian early modern world, “lying is not usually discussed in terms of a progress from mendacity to honesty or from childhood to adulthood”, but focuses instead on “equivocation, about how to evade the hostile enquiries of curious authorities”, that is, on dissimulation (Berensmeyer-Hadfield 2016, 3). Questions also arose about rhetoric and the nature of public speaking. Quintilian, for instance, pondered whether a rhetorician was justified in lying, depending on whether the speaker held false beliefs (thus deceiving themselves) or sought to persuade others (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 1: 385-7). Aquinas introduced more exceptions and qualifications than Augustine, countering the statement that every lie is a mortal sin (Hadfield 2017, 126). Since lying implies the deliberate intent to deceive others, Aquinas (1947) argued that “it is more in opposition to truth, considered as a moral virtue, to tell the truth with the intention of telling a falsehood than to tell a falsehood with the intention of telling the truth” (*Summa Theologiae* 2a-2ae, Quaestio 110).

The first paradox explored in *Othello* revolves around the character of “honest” Iago, a term repeatedly used by Othello. In this context, honesty is likely to be interpreted as a reference also to Iago’s rhetoric, in line with Cicero’s definition of *honestum* (all that is morally right). Cicero (*De officiis* 1.15.5) described it as stemming from one of four virtues: “the full perception and intelligent development of the true”, “the conservation of organized society”, “the greatness and strength of a noble and invincible spirit”, and especially the last one, “the orderliness and moderation of everything that is said and done, wherein consist temperance and self-control” (Cicero 1913). Honesty also implied rhetorical decency and restraint, qualities that Iago appears to possess and which seem to have been his rhetorical and behavioural trademark in the recent past.

However, the term “honest” underwent a shift at the turn of the sixteenth century. It transformed from indicating a plain-speaking critic to someone who affected this kind of humour and disguised a villainous nature (Jorgensen 1973, 376). Amidst the tension between the apparent requirement to harmonise one’s heart and speech and the numerous loopholes discretion offered to cautious speakers who preferred not to reveal their inner thoughts (not wanting to wear their hearts on the sleeve for daws to peck at, as Iago says, *Othello* 1.1.64), Iago’s usage of paradoxes often appears unfathomable. His veridical paradoxes appear to comply with the primary tenet of lying as “a false significatio(n) of speech, with a wil to deceiue” (Coignet 1586, 128). These paradoxes maliciously deceive the other characters, especially Roderigo and Othello, leading them into contradictory actions. Furthermore, they prompt the jealousy-consumed Othello to resort to paradoxes himself.

Iago’s honesty, or rather, his half-honesty or half-dishonesty, is evident in many of his arguments. They often rest on contemporary stereotypes about Moors, women, Venetians, yet they are uttered with the intent to deceive. For example, he is honest when he confesses to Roderigo that he hates the Moor and uses dissimulation to advance himself, concealing his true motive of sexual jealousy (1.3.385-7). Iago frequently shares conventional truths of Renaissance discretion, including the need to dissemble

his intentions: “In following him I follow but myself” (1.1.57).<sup>1</sup> A bit like the infamous “beast with two backs” (1.1.115), this kind of dissimulation involves openly reporting one thing while secretly practicing something else at the listener’s expense. In this skewed sense, Iago is also honest when he reports to both Roderigo and Brabantio the racist slurs against Othello (1.1.109-12, 1.3.347-50). He is unapologetically true to a blend of misogynistic and ethnic stereotypes about Venetian women when he claims that “they do let God see the pranks / They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience / Is not to leave’t undone, but keep’t unknown” (3.3.205-7). His honesty extends to trading sexist slurs against women with Desdemona in the harbour scene (2.1.109-60), which she astutely perceives as “old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i’th’ alehouse” (2.1.138-9). *Honestas* implied such an ideal theatricality beneath the very social skills and practices exemplified by Iago in this witty flirt (Whittington 2013, 530). His jests generate mutual laughter while concealing his misogynistic tendencies and seemingly upholding public ideals of honesty in a witty construction of laughable deformity (Derrin 2016, 367). Iago’s brand of honesty, therefore, overlaps with truth, in the sense of decorum and self-restraint. It involves participating in society, engaging in civil conversation, humouring others, and tolerating their discordant points of view (Richards 2003, 26; cf. Matz 1999, 267; Wood 2009).

Iago’s manipulative tactics in Othello extend to causing other characters to become increasingly paradoxical in their expressions. For instance, Desdemona playfully teases him by pretending to be someone different from herself – essentially being dishonest in jest: “I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise” (2.1.122-3). Alongside stoking jealousy in Othello, Iago’s intent appears to lead him to adopt formal paradoxes based on mock encomium, such as the idea that a cuckold “lives in bliss” and is therefore preferable to one who “dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves” (3.3.169, 172). In this process, the student surpasses the master: Othello denounces the curse of calling “these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites”, and paradoxically claims that it is better to be a

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from Shakespeare 2007 and are parenthetically inserted in the text.

toad and “live upon the vapour of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others’ use” (3.3.273-4, 74-7). Another mock encomium involves the desire for the “general camp” to taste her body, “[s]o I had nothing known” (3.3.348, 350). Cefalu (2013, 266-7) observes a contrast between Othello’s mindblindness and Iago’s “robust theory of mind”, which however turns into an “obsessive tracking of other minds”. It marks, in fact, an absolute defeat of Othello’s mind, signaled by yet another formal paradox: “’tis better to be much abused / Than but to know’t a little” (3.3.339-40).

Adding to the confusion, Iago interweaves his statements with moral remarks that were indeed supported by conventional consensus, especially given the early modern reception of Stoicism. Thus, he argues that “’tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus” (1.3.320), that “the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills” (1.3.326-7), that “[w]e have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts” (1.3.330-2). With the same dubious mix of absolute moral truth (the vagaries of reputation) and his dissembled intent to deceive, he warns that “reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving” (2.3.264-6), and that Desdemona’s “honour is an essence that’s not seen, / They have it very oft that have it not” (4.1.16-17). In a logical self-contradiction that Othello, almost unconsciously eavesdropping the scene, will later adapt to his own process of self-recognition as an imperfect thinker, Iago recalls that Othello’s free and open nature “thinks men honest that but seem to be so” (1.3.399).

Most of Iago’s paradoxes resemble the liar’s paradox, and they consequently form an antinomy. Their truth or falseness depends on the context rather than the content of what is being said. The concealed intent to deceive prevails on the alogical absurdity of what is said, making them a significant variation on the early modern paradox. Hovering above Iago’s art of the hidden paradox, there seems to lurk a more general paradox that may have escaped our ears but was universally recognized by early modern thinkers, not secondarily because it drew its momentum from the authority of Aristotle: honesty as mediocrity.

### 3. The Paradox of Honesty as Mediocrity

If honesty is a virtue, it should consist not of extremities, but of a mediocrity, argues Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.13.1127a-b, Aristotle 1934). Both the boaster and the dissembler are liars. Aristotle insists on falsehood when confronting these two figures, who both engage in dishonesty but in different ways: “the boaster is a man who pretends to creditable qualities that he does not possess, or possesses in a lesser degree than he makes out, while conversely the self-depreciator disclaims or disparages good qualities that he does possess” (3). The good mean between them is “the straightforward sort of man who is sincere both in behavior and in speech, and admits the truth about his own qualifications without either exaggeration or understatement” (4). The sincere person, situated between the two extremes, is deserving of praise. Conversely, those who engage in insincere behaviour of both kinds (especially the boaster) are to be blamed. The sincere man “will diverge from the truth, if at all, in the direction of understatement rather than exaggeration” (8). The liar who tells lies “for no ulterior object seems . . . to be a person of inferior character, since otherwise he would not take pleasure in falsehood, . . . he appears to be more foolish than vicious” (10). Liars are divided “into those who like lying for its own sake and those who lie to get reputation or profit” (12). Again, it is the intent to deceive that introduces a distinction between folly and vice.

Aristotle’s notion of honesty as mediocrity is faithfully reported by Coignet:

Since that this trueth is approued to be a virtue, she ought to hold a mediocritie, & to be set between two vitious extremities of either too little, or too much, as it is saide of the rest of the vertues; which make them selues more apparaunt in gaining vnto themselues by those actions which consist in the middest of two contrarie vices, as doeth the true tune among discords. The excesse and ouerplus shal proceede of arrogancie, pride, vaunting, disdain, & insolencie. The defect in dissembling, when one speaketh lesse then in deede is, & so wandreth from the trueth, which reckoneth things such as they are in deede, without causing any variance between the heart and the tongue, as if one should fit himself with a garment which is neither bigger, nor lesse then it ought to be. (1586, 8)



The true man thus holds “a middle place between the presu(m)ptuous & the dissembler” (175). The two extremes go from the too much of the boaster, so typical also in (self)praises, which are “portractions ill proportioned” (74), to the “[o]uerlitle extremitie” (8) of the dissembler. Both varieties of lying are coupled with non-being: “it is called fayning to make that to be which is not, or that which is, not to bee, or to be greater than in deede it is. And it is dissembling, to make that which is not to bee, or lesse then it is” (11). Being a good Christian means shunning “the two extremities of too much or too little, and followe the meane which is to do well, and speake accordingly, vsinge our wordes, as garments well befitting the bodie” (13).

The Aristotelian distinction between the two liars, the boaster and the dissembler, or the “too much” versus the “too little”, sheds an intriguing light on Iago and Othello. Iago initially presents himself with understatement and self-diminution, suggesting that that Othello’s eyes had seen “the proof” of him (1.1.27). In contrast, Othello engages with “bombast circumstance” (1.1.12) in hyperbolic exaggeration when boasting about Cassio “loving his own pride” (11), a behaviour that diverges from the mediocrity proposed by Iago’s “mediators”: “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place (10). During the temptation scene, Iago employs a manifold paradox to make Othello believe that he is dissimulating something (which is lying), while doing exactly so by dissimulating his observational skills as “[o]ne that so imperfectly conceits” with “scattering and unsure observance” (3.3.152-3).

The status of dissimulation was a moot question. It was especially focused on the false and pretended conformity used as a response to religious or political persection, especially if the alternative was injury or death (Zagorin 1996, 866-9). Many turned to biblical passages, such as the story of Namaan (2 Kings 5:17-19, 4 Kings 5:17-19 in the Vulgate), to find evidence of virtuous dissimulation. Gregory the Great’s *Moralia* (1844-185, vol. 76, col. 357) provided an influential distinction between what human ears and diuine ears might respectively hear (the passage was known as *Humanae aures*): “The ears of men judge our words as they sound outwardly, but the diuine judgement hears the words they are uttered from within. Among men the heart is judged by the words; with God the words are judged by the heart”.

Yet, few shared Machiavelli's enthusiasm when he argued that rulers should be great simulators and dissimulators (*The Prince*, chapter 18; *Discourses* 2.13; see Zerba 2004). Dissimulation played a vital role in establishing the early modern culture of secrecy, driven by the growth in the size and complexity of states and societies (Snyder 4). However, even Machiavelli used the word "secret" sparingly, as secrecy seemed more related to a mode of action than thought (Senellart 1997). Aquinas recommended prudence rather than outright trickery for those who needed to conceal themselves (*Summa Theologiae* 2ae 2ae, qq. 68, 89, 110, 111). Bacon saw dissimulation as "but a faint kind of policy or wisdom", practiced by "the weaker sort of politiques" (Bacon 1996, 349).

The question of dissimulation was topical in England after the Protestant Reformation, particularly through equivocation (ambiguity of language) and mental reservation (*mentalis restrictio*, uttering a false statement that was completed in the mind to make it true). Dr Navarrus (Martin Azpilcueta) claimed that the usage of amphibology was permissible for the sake of safety of soul, body, honour, yet the lie consisted not in a false attement with the intention to deceive, but in the contrariety to the speaker's mind. Lawful dissimulations were theoretically possible, if sparingly, for the Jesuit Henry Garnet (*A Treatise of Equivocation*, 1593), in the absence of any obligation to reveal the truth and as a protection against self-accusation under questioning. Equivocation was practiced by another Jesuit, Robert Southwell, perhaps prompting his chief judge to recall Gregory's *humanae aures*: "for we are men, and no Gods, and can judge but according to [men's] outward actions and speeches, and not according to their secrete and inward intentions" (Janelle 1935, 291; see Wilson 1997).

Othello, who also indulges in dissimulation by using false modesty, false pretenses, self serving lies, and self-contradiction (Roebuck 2008, 190-5), appears to reference mental reservation at the beginning of the temptation scene. He asks Iago to reveal his thoughts, the missing pieces that would make his statements whole and true. In response, Iago employs the false ethos of honesty, confessing that he does not like having to disclose what he knows (Beier 2014, 43). In reality, this dissimulation seems to be another facet of Iago's technique, one aimed at making Othello imagine

what may be undecidable to argue. Othello contemplates the missing information that Iago keeps hidden in his mind, while Iago uses this implication to sow doubt in Othello's mind. This doubt is then applied to Desdemona. Shakespeare plays with dissimulation as a deceptive explanation for Iago's reticence, thereby setting the stage for further situational paradoxes.

Othello, in contrast to Aristotle's middle ground, tends to err on the side of excess, which he often poorly dissembles. Initially, he claims that he is not going to boast about his past services for the Senate, unless "I know that boasting is an honour" (1.2.19). According to Aristotle, boasting is acceptable if used to gain glory or honour (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4.13.1127a-b 11). However, Othello displays excessive confidence when he boasts that "[m]y parts, my title and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.31-2). Othello commits both truth violations: he says too little with the apparent diminution (*tapinosis*) of his "round unvarnished tale" (1.3.91), based on the unwarranted claim to be "rude" in his speech "[a]nd little blest with the soft phrase of peace (1.3.82, 83). And he engages in deceptive self-diminution: "little shall I grace my cause / In speaking for myself" (1.3.89-90). Othello also resorts to the too much. His pursuit of Desdemona was based on what honest Iago, perhaps not mistakenly, later calls "bragging and telling her fantastical lies" (2.1.221). In a dubious scene of shared persuasion where the intent to deceive, if for amorous ends, is evident, Othello observed Desdemona and caused her to ask him to "dilate" his pilgrimage (1.3.154). Furthermore, his tales to Brabantio and Desdemona, including accounts of cannibals and other outlandish fictions, resemble the typical traveller's fibs that especially thanks to the enduring popularity of Mandeville's *Travels* had created a genre explicitly based on lying for wonder's sake (Hadfield 2017, 286-89).

When viewed from this hidden Aristotelian perspective, Othello appears as much of a liar as Iago. It can also be noted that well before the temptation scene Othello typically expresses himself using paradoxes. For example, he boasts about his stoic resistance to the joys and perils of love, claiming that he will not let the "light-wing'd toys/ Of feathered Cupid . . . seal with wanton dullness / My speculative and officed instruments" (1.3.269-71). This assertion of well-rounded Stoicism is quickly contradicted when he succumbs to

anger, with his “best judgement collid” (2.3.202), during the brawl scene in Cyprus. Paradoxes are also evident when Othello suggests with the boaster’s typical hyperbolic exaggeration that dying after the end of danger would make death preferable:

If after every tempest come such calms  
 May the winds blow till they have waken’d death!  
 And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas  
 Olympus-high and duck again as low  
 As hell’s from heaven. If it were now to die  
 ’Twere now to be most happy  
 (2.1.183-8)

In the throes of jealousy, Othello vents his sense of violated honour and identity through boastful paradoxes of exaggeration. He states that he would embrace all kinds of affliction save this discovery of inwardness, “the fountain from which my current runs” (4.2.60). A similar image of violated inwardness devours Iago from the inside: “the thought whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards” (2.1.294-5). In both cases, paradoxes lead the two characters to discover an inner, hidden place, where notions of honour and honesty are turned into their paradoxical opposites, an “index and obscure prologue” (2.1.255-6) that foreshadows “th’incorporate conclusion” (2.1.360-1).

#### 4. In the Backshop

Amidst his frequent contemplations on truth and lying, Montaigne (1965, 2.12, 561, 601) half-despairingly notes that, since we have no real communication with being (“aucune communication à l’être”), truth is engulfed in such deep abysses that human sight cannot penetrate (“la vérité est engouffrée dans des profonds abîmes où la vue humaine ne peut pénétrer”). In modern terms, the dichotomy between truth and lying is no longer binary but complex and multifaceted. The (unattainable) truth has only one face, while lying can have one hundred thousand faces, being an indistinct field: “Si, comme la vérité, le mensonge n’avait qu’un visage, nous serions en meilleurs termes. Car nous prendrions pour certain

l'opposé de ce qui dirait le menteur. Mais le revers de la vérité a cent mille figures et un champ indéfini" (1.9, 37). While lying is an indistinct field ("champ indéfini"), truth also exhibits its own indistinct nature, with various forms of constraint, incommodity, incompatibility with us. We often have to deceive ourselves in order not to be deceived, and blind our eyesight and silence our ears to impose order and correction upon their faculties: "Il nous faut souvent tromper afin que nous ne nous trompons, et siller notre vue, étourdir notre entendement pour les dresser et amender" (3.10, 1006). Dissimulation serves the purpose of concealing the self within a necessary free, autonomous space – the *arrière boutique*, or backshop – all our own, entirely free, where we can exercise genuine liberty and find refuge and solitude. Coignet also cautions against the risks of excessive candour and suggests that some forms of deceptive caution can be used; as Iago implies, it is unwise to speak one's mind openly in the challenging arena of Renaissance public discourse and action:

It is not meant for al that, that euerie one, nor at al times, nor of euerie matter, should speake what he thinketh. For it is wisdom not to discouer, but for some good respect, what we would not haue knowen; as if a man would preach all the giftes hee hath receiued from God, or the vice or fault which by infirmitie hee is fallen vnto, or discouer to euerie one the secrete of his minde, he should be counted but a dizard. Euereie counterfeiting done to the ende to deceiue an other is reprooued; but if it be to conceale a good counsel, fearing least it might bee preuented, then is it not to bee blamed, neither is it always requisite to make manifest what wee doe conceaue . . . hee who cannot dissemble, shall neuer raigne prosperously – whatsoever is in the heart of a sober man, is founde in the tongue of a drunkard (Coignet 1586, 11)

Iago explicitly acknowledges the concept of an interior reserve, or 'backshop', when speaking with Roderigo and Othello. In his conversation with Roderigo, he argues that dissimulation primarily arises out of the necessity for self-defense, which is essentially a form or an outward convention: "Yet for necessity of present life / I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign" (1.1.153-5). From an early modern perspective, hypocrisy

often emerges in relationships of dependence among people with conflicting interests (Grant 1997). Iago intensifies this conflict to the point of internal deflagration: interiority becomes darkly visible, or at least guessable, precisely because of this grey area of indistinction. For Iago, not-being does not equate to lying but rather refers to his inner self when it becomes exposed:

... when my outward action doth demonstrate  
 The native act and figure of my heart  
 In complement extern, 'tis not long after  
 But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
 For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.  
 (1.1.60-4)

As usual, the paradox lies in the situation itself: Iago tells Roderigo that he employs dissimulation and conceals his true intentions to elicit Roderigo's own intentions, thereby never practicing such dissimulation himself. He is honest in acknowledging he must be dishonest to maintain his honesty. A similar pragmatical nature of paradoxes can be found in *Hamlet*, where "it is the pragmatics of the exchange, the intention of the speaker and the nature of the context and the situation which define the quality of the agency inherent in contradictions. Provoking nothing may in fact be exactly what the paradox wants to *do*" (Bigliuzzi 2022, 43).

Iago denies Othello any insight into what, to borrow Coignet's words (1586, 11), he would not otherwise have known, "the secretes of his minde"; this leads Othello to believe that he is rightly concealing "a good counsel, fearing least it might be preuented". As Iago correctly states, "[t]o be direct and honest is not safe" (3.3.381), a claim that would have sounded both honest and prudent. In a technical and paradoxical sense, Iago is being honest when emphasising the necessity for such inner retreat (Montaigne's backshop) itself, regardless of the actual nature of the truths concealed within, which are multiple and potentially false:

Though I am bound to every act of duty  
 I am not bound to that all slaves are free to —  
 Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false?  
 As where's that palace whereinto foul things

Sometimes intrude not? who has a breast so pure  
 But some uncleanly apprehensions  
 Keep leets and law-days and in session sit  
 With meditations lawful?  
 (3.3.137-44)

By pretending to be honestly and correctly hiding secrets which an honest man is supposed to virtuously conceal in his inner self, Iago persuades Othello about the importance and sanctity of that backshop full of “[c]lose delations, working from the heart” (3.3.126). Iago earns recognition for his honesty by prompting Othello to imagine the unimaginable, “some monster in thy thought / Too hideous to be shown” (3.3.110-11). Yet another paradox: monstrosity implies demonstration, and a monster becomes hideous only when it is revealed rather than simply surmised. Even more paradoxical, in the sense of being impossible and contrary to truth, is Othello’s absolute demand for agreement between heart and speech: “Show me thy thought” (3.3.119).

Iago’s paradoxes neither contradict common opinion (he often uses it) nor offer mock praise (those are instead favoured by the enraged Othello). They revolve around the indistinction of all statements and, ultimately, of hidden truths – if any truth can be found down there at all. Iago draws paradoxes out of Othello, especially antinomies that declare how the boundary between truth and lying has become blurred:

I think my wife be honest, and think she is not,  
 I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.  
 (3.3.387-8)

Arguably, the most divinely embedded paradox of the play is not a union of extremes or a mock encomium, but a hard-earned truth about unconscious lying, presented in a perfect, never-ending antinomy:

Men should be what they seem,  
 Or those that be not, would they might seem none.  
 (3.3.129-30)

In this mind-boggling interplay of reflections, an imperfect liar (Iago) tells a perfect liar (Othello) that truth should be unmistakable

from its appearances, or at the very least, those who are not honest should not seem so, which brings us back endlessly to the first clause. A sincere liar suggests that truth and lying are so indistinguishable that one probably ends up with a proposition about the decidability of truth and lying, which is itself undecidable.

Even more undecidable is the ultimate hidden paradox in *Othello*: how to slander somebody (including oneself) after death.

## 5. Posthumous (Self-)Denigration

In early modern law, perjury was often linked to slander, which included defamation and libel in spoken form. Being an act that could damage one's reputation, especially a woman's, slander was heavily punished. Slander often revolved around rhetoric ability "to divorce thinking and speaking", exploiting the gap between heart and tongue: "Slander insinuates itself into the gap between words and things which enables the flexibility of translated speech with its corresponding tropes and figures" (Habermann 2003, 23, 25; cf. Kreps 2015, Navitsky 2012). The English legal system aimed to make, by way of punishment, the criminal infamous "as a type of institutionalized slander, in both the punishment and the indictment of criminals"; this was particularly true because distinguishing between a valid accusation and defamation was challenging without an impartial judicial procedure to initiate criminal proceedings (Kaplan 1990, 25).

As social networks abundantly show today, defamation results in character assassination, "the deliberate destruction of a person's reputation or credibility", which is all based on perception (Shiraev-Keohane-Icks-Samoilenko 2021, 11): "the goal of the attacker is to influence the way others see a particular persona", distinguishing between horizontal attacks (attacks between people with approximately the same status) and vertical attacks (with different levels of power). In tort law, where someone sues another person over an injury, individuals can be held legally liable even "when they neither intended harm nor were negligent"; blaming someone means identifying "a counterfactual that she should have pursued and that would have prevented your injury" (Herzog 2017, 40, 35). Ironically,



*Othello* demonstrates various forms of denigration: the concern “with blacking faces” in the play can also be seen as a “direct extension of the play’s concern with blackening names” (Gross 2001, 105).

But can one actually denigrate the deceased? Defamation typically concerns living individuals, while defaming the dead is “contrived to say that living agents intend not to be defamed after their deaths” (Herzog 2017, 61). A long tradition disapproved of speaking ill of the dead (*de mortuis nihil nisi bonum*). One ought to attack only those who could defend themselves: as a 1611 divine wrote, “[c]alumny should end with the carcase of her subject, and not haunt the graue till the last bone be consumed” (Stafford 1611, 137). These defamers are “*Cannibals* . . . delight[ing] to feed on dead mans flesh, by tearing of their Fame” (Basire 1673, 32-3). Yet, the oblivion thesis as an application of the *supersedeas* (the cessation of the legal duty to pursue an accusation) was often seen as a limitation of the deterring power of the earnest discussion of the dead. The point was hotly debated after the death of Charles I:

I am not ignorant what senselesse maxims and ridiculous principles have gotten credit in the World . . . as that *de mortuis nil nisi bona*, but by no means to tread on the sacred Urne of Princes, though living never so vicious and exorbitant, as if death had bequeathed unto them a supersedeas for the covering over their faults and licencious reignes, and to close them up in the Coffin of Oblivion. (An. 1651, Preface, sig. A4r).

Defamation could occur not only through openly blaming others but also by impersonating them: “Libels are of several kinds; either by scoffing at the person of another in rhyme or prose, or by personating him, thereby to make him ridiculous” (Hudson 2008, 2.200).

In *Othello*, slander is indeed present, but it is voiced rather subtly. Iago never explicitly slanders Desdemona in public; instead, he cautiously relies on general stereotypes about Venetian women and fabricates circumstantial evidence when speaking to Othello. Slander is more prevalent in Othello’s words; coming from a husband, they would have been interpreted as accusations rather than defamation. Moreover, slander entails knowingly spreading falsehoods, while Othello genuinely believes that Desdemona has been unfaithful.

The ultimate paradox in *Othello* is that slander gets more

rampant after death. Othello's accusations become explicit after he kills Desdemona, a "whore" (5.2.130), "[f]alse as water" (132), who committed "the act of shame" a thousand times (209). He sincerely believes that Desdemona was dishonest because she attempted to exculpate him after apparently dying: "She's like a liar gone to burning hell" (127). In contrast, after Desdemona's death, Iago claims to have been honest, both in expressing his thoughts to Othello (which he had paradoxically denied doing earlier), and in adhering to the Aristotelian laws of probability and likelihood: "I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true" (172-3).

Iago's final vindication of honesty pushes Othello further into another paradox. He begins to slander himself as if he were already dead, using the exaggerated imagery of the dishonest boaster in depicting his otherworldly encounter with the defamed Desdemona:

When we shall meet at compt  
 This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven  
 And fiends will snatch at it.

...

Whip me, ye devils,  
 From the possession of this heavenly sight!  
 Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,  
 Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!  
 O Desdemon! dead, Desdemon! Dead! O, O!  
 (5.2.271-3, 275-9)

Othello engages in the paradoxical act of dishonestly slandering himself through boastful exaggeration, as if he were already dead. He brings his dying moment into alignment with a past act of stabbing, effectively turning himself into an enemy of the state. Characteristically, Othello still boastfully asks for an unmitigated portrayal, in a final display of mediocrity: "Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.340-1).

In *Othello*, paradox is notably the art of revealing and creating the invisible, bringing it into existence. Augustine argued that we cannot truly love something entirely unknown to us (*De trinitate* 10.1). Perhaps – but Iago argues that we can learn to hate something we know nothing about. By leading Othello to argue for the

existence of the non-existent and then posthumously living within that falsehood through self-slander, Iago has created the ultimate undecidable paradox: how to transform non-being into being.

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