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Sacrificial figures in "Romeo and Juliet", "Othello", and "Lear"

Grosh, Joanna R., Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1990

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SACRIFICIAL FIGURES

IN

ROMEO AND JULIET, OTHELLO, AND LEAR

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

Joanna R. Grosh, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Because "blood will have blood" and "sin will pluck on sin," in Shakespearean drama there are those tragic heroes who ultimately meet destruction as a result of their own cognitive choices. In some cases their bloody trail to power and ascension is strewn with those innocent victims who are just that—victims, vulnerable people who stand too close to the onslaught. Innocent of any wrongdoing, the young princes in Richard III and Lady Macduff and her brood in Macbeth are slaughtered in a senseless waste of life, indicative of the depravity to which the tragic hero's mind has fallen. Macbeth presents a particularly striking list of victims because it represents a wide range of individuals who populate Macbeth's private and public world. Collectively, these victims demonstrate the extent to which this tragic hero will go in his quest for position and power. In spite of the double trust of kinsman and subject and the additional responsibilities as a host, Macbeth, with full awareness of his moral and social obligation, kills Duncan and destroys the lives and reputations of two chamberlains. The death of Duncan brings Macbeth to the question, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (II.ii.60-1). The haunting question has no efficacy. Instead, the general becomes consumed with seizing and maintaining position and power. Spurred on by his own "Vaulting ambition" (I.vi.27)
and by Lady Macbeth's urging, the newly crowned king takes life after life in a futile effort to assure his ill-gained position. His friend and fellow nobleman Banquo, Lady Macduff and all her brood, and countless named and unnamed soldiers are slaughtered heedlessly.

After Macbeth's unnerving experience at Duncan's death, prompted by both guilt and fear of discovery, the man who would be king gives no further pause for reflection at the deaths of his victims. The audience watches horrified, especially when we are asked to witness the slaughter of innocent children. We have little time to contemplate the meaning of their deaths, particularly because Macbeth does not do so but also because the bloody action of the play moves us continually forward. Although the tragic hero suffers as his life begins to unravel, Macbeth largely remains unaffected and uninformed by the individual lives and deaths of his victims. In his last hours he realizes his "way of life / Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf" and "those comforts which should accompany old age, / As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (V.iii.23-6). Macbeth expresses his losses in abstractions, reflecting the larger principle he articulates at the outset: "We still have judgment here" (I.iv.8). Even after Macbeth receives word of his wife's death, like a man numbed and inured to life's events, Macbeth's response does not reflect the personal agony over the loss of a particular individual or of the finality of such a person's death. Instead, the tragic hero's mind turns to the general emptiness of his existence and he views life as "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.iv.26-8).
For the driven king the victims become part of the collective weight of guilt and accountability that finally topple him. Macbeth does not dwell on the individual innocence or suffering of Lady Macduff and her chicks. And while the audience admires Lady Macduff's brief moment of bravery and cringes at her slaughter, we have little time to contemplate the specific meaning of her life and death. Although the slaughter of innocents at the Castle of Fife stays with us to the play's conclusion, we are more preoccupied with the question, "Why does man do evil?" than the question "Why do the innocent suffer?" The question of suffering innocence remains largely unexplored as such in Macbeth. Were we to ask to what end the innocent suffer, there would be no clear answer or sense of purpose for the deaths except in the minds of a paranoid tyrant trying futilely to ensure his power and position. We have little hope that some good will come of this senseless shedding of blood which would in any way ameliorate the starkness of the tragedy. The victims remain just that—victims.

The deaths of Romeo and Juliet, Desdemona, and Cordelia, however, stand apart from the deaths of other tragic heroes and victims. They do not lose their lives as a natural result of wading knee-deep in blood nor simply because they are victims of a power struggle, heedlessly eliminated. Compared to the cross-currents of the Capulet-Montague feud, the treacherous malignity of Iago, and the monstrous horrors in Lear's divided kingdom, these characters are relatively innocent and guiltless. They perish primarily not as a result of their wrong-doing but as a consequence of the crimes or grievous errors of others, and with their deaths comes
some measure of gain through loss. Unlike those lives of victims snuffed out and soon forgotten, the radical shock and revelations associated with the deaths of these sacrificial figures, the sudden awareness of something of value irretrievably lost, jar their loved ones significantly in a way no other event has. In the case of Romeo and Juliet the young lovers uniquely serve as both tragic heroes and sacrificial figures. Consequently, the impact of their deaths is absorbed by those who are not central to the tragic force of the play—the two feuding families and the community of Verona—in contrast to the more intensified loss for the tragic heroes of Othello and Lear. The sacrificial deaths of Desdemona and Cordelia heighten the dramatic moment of self-realization and affirmation for the tragic heroes and contribute to the degree and type of suffering each endures. The intensity that these deaths provide influences the kind of knowledge gained through the tragic experience in Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and Lear.

As distinct from our experience with most victims of tragic upheaval, we become engaged with the sacrificial figures as individuals as we watch their lives unfold. Early on in each play our attention is directed to the importance of those characters who will become the play’s sacrificial figures to those whose lives will irreversibly be altered by their deaths. At the beginning of Romeo and Juliet the Chorus appears on stage and directly informs the audience of the meaning of what we are about to witness. Because the Montagues and the Capulets have continually allowed their "ancient grudge" to spill over into Verona’s streets, they face the deaths of their only children, their hope for the continuance of the
family lineage. "Nothing," the Chorus declares, but "their children's end" will "bury their parents' strife,"² and bring peace to the city. Informed, we watch the tragic heroes move toward that moment when they will become the "Poor sacrifices" of their parents' "enmity" (V.iii.304). Without the benefit of the overt declaration of the Chorus, in Othello and in Lear we only gradually come to see that Desdemona and Cordelia will serve as sacrificial figures. But at the outset of both plays an event catches our attention and vividly impresses on our minds their importance to the tragic heroes whose actions bring about their sacrificial deaths. Through the late night ruckus Iago instigates in the opening scenes of Othello we learn of the elopement of Othello and Desdemona. Quickly we detect that the young bride has become the center of Othello's psychological and emotional being and her love and devotion are as vital as life and breath to the general. Privy to Iago's vitriolic hatred and machinations against Othello, we anticipate disaster for the general and his Desdemona. Iago rightly perceives and uses Othello's emotional attachment and dependency on Desdemona and uses them to accomplish the destruction of both. The scene which directs our attention to Cordelia's place in Lear begins with trumpets and fanfare. As the king begins to parcel out his kingdom to his daughters, what has been evident to the members of court becomes obvious to the audience. Above all others Lear loves and favors his youngest daughter. When Cordelia fails to participate in her father's test of love, her importance to him may be measured by the intensity of his wrath toward her. Because of his injured pride, Lear starts down a disastrous path leading to tragedy for all.
Since the lives of the Montagues and Capulets and to a greater degree the lives of the tragic heroes Othello and Lear are inextricably bound to their loved ones, those characters who become sacrificial figures influence the tragic experience as nothing else. The pattern of these three plays suggests that there are two "experiences which Shakespeare felt to be tragic above all others: one is the realization of having irrevocably lost, through one's own blind deed, the person or object on which all one's happiness on earth depends. The other is the experience of disillusion, whether justifiable or not, with such a person or object."³

The degree to which we find this disillusionment justifiable or not shapes our perception of both those initiators of tragedy and those whose lives are sacrificed because of it. The relative innocence of the sacrificial figure, weighed against the awful price exacted by their deaths, is essential. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet, Desdemona, and Cordelia lack import and impact if we judge them to be suffering from the natural consequences of their own shameful acts. The innocence of the sacrificial figures acts as a standard and a rebuke for both the behavior and rationale of those whose actions precipitate their deaths. Although Romeo and Juliet are tragic heroes while Desdemona and Cordelia rather gain importance in their plays because of their effect on the tragic figures, the two young lovers stand in vivid contrast to many Shakespearean heroes because their deaths for the most part are not precipitated by a series of willed choices with broader moral and ethical implications. Surely the most Romeo and Juliet can be faulted for is the immaturity and impatience of young love and an understandable failure to communicate properly,
hardly capital crimes demanding the death penalty. In the case of Desdemona and Cordelia the image of the spotless sacrificial figure is clearer yet. That his wife's character is impeccable is clear to all but the jealous Othello. Likewise from the opening scene of King Lear, Cordelia's worth and virtue are unquestionable, but the blinded Lear will not see.

Because those who initiate tragedy are unjustifiably disillusioned with those they most treasure, all parties suffer unnecessarily. The pain of the disillusionment differs for the Montagues and the Capulets, who remain relatively unaware of how their ancient feud will prompt the destruction of their children. Nonetheless, they experience disappointments of their own. Romeo is publicly banished and Juliet becomes isolated in her own home, placing each into a situation which proves fatal. For Othello and Lear, the more sharply defined sense of betrayal and disillusionment precipitates a series of choices that yield agony and bring down destruction on all.

In all three plays the initiators of tragedy through their shameful deeds destroy those individuals who give the most meaning and affirmation to their own lives. The Montagues and the Capulets perpetuate a hostile environment where love such as that Romeo and Juliet share cannot survive. To a greater degree Othello and Lear become more directly entangled in the events building toward the moment of sacrifice. The dramatic potency is strengthened by the purity of the sacrificed figures by contrast to the fouled hands of those who destroy them. Because the feuding families, the jealous general, and the angry king are guilty of destroying what is
ultimately most precious to them, tragic suffering occurs. This suffering is "properly tragic," in Dorothea Krook's terms, because "it generates knowledge, in the sense of insight into, understanding of man's fundamental nature or the fundamental human condition."4

How the moment of insight or the process of acquiring insight ties to the actual moment of sacrificial death in each play presents an instructive pattern in terms of understanding the tragic experience. According to Krook, knowledge is "not properly tragic unless it issues in some kind of affirmation, or reaffirmation, of the dignity of the human spirit and the worthwhileness of human life."5 In the case of the Montagues and Capulets, it is not until they witness the scene at the Capulet's tomb that they comprehend what has transpired. Through his pronouncement the Prince leaves no doubt regarding accountability for and the significance of the lovers' deaths. In a public confession the parents articulate their responsibility and affirm and commemorate the love of their children. Interestingly, the suicides of Romeo and Juliet, who are slightly more blameworthy than either Desdemona or Cordelia, effect the greatest overt, measurable gain, one that is more societal than personal. In contrast to the civil turmoil of Verona, the tragedies of Othello and Lear are more personal.

In Othello's case Desdemona repeatedly challenges her husband's misperceptions, but not until Othello forever silences her voice does he begin to grasp what he has destroyed. While the audience understands Othello better than he understands himself, Desdemona's sacrificial death
brings Othello to greater knowledge of himself and causes him to reaffirm his lost faith in Desdemona and her love.

In Lear Shakespeare alters the order and pattern of events found in Romeo and Juliet and Othello, suggesting that the playwright intends to show us something of import regarding the relationship between the sacrificial death of Cordelia and the tragic suffering of Lear. Before Cordelia's death the confused Lear acknowledges his guilt and reaffirms the value of love, restoration, and forgiveness. Yet Lear still must face the death of his innocent daughter. Since Lear has already come to some realization about himself and his situation, the sacrificial death, coming when it does, raises several questions regarding the purpose of such a death, the necessity of such suffering, and the kind of knowledge gained by the tragic hero and the audience. These issues will be explored in Chapters Four and Five.

While the idea of ritual sacrifice—a scapegoat, a sacrificial lamb or sacrificial offering—may be found in both pagan and Christian tradition, this paper will focus upon the sacrifice as it influences and relates to the human experience, life within the present order, rather than trace analogies or correspondence to either of these religious traditions. Several critics discuss the idea of sacrifice using Christian premises as a starting point. For example, Roy W. Battenhouse sees Desdemona as a Christ figure and G. Wilson Knight, exploring the formal aspect of the ritual of sacrifice, interprets Desdemona's deathbed as an altar and the candle flame as an altar-flame. Stating Romeo's and Juliet's sacrifice in terms of expiation for their parents' sins, Paul
Siegel describes Romeo's visit to the tomb as an inverted Easter story. And the mixture of pagan and Christian allusions in Lear does invite comment. While the correspondence between the Christian concept of sacrifice and the sacrificial deaths in Shakespeare's tragedy is striking, the focus of this dissertation will not be on the eternal in terms of expiation, atonement, and salvational regeneration. The emphasis, instead, will be on the temporal existence, on how the distinctive characteristics of each sacrificial figure touches and shapes the human dimension and influences our understanding of human experience. The plays themselves emphasize the temporal human experience and the suffering that humanity endures when tragedy occurs.

An interesting exploration by R. S. White of innocent victims and poetic injustice in Shakespearean tragedy looks at some of the same issues as does this dissertation. White, however, makes no distinction between victims and sacrificial figures, placing Lavinia, Lucrece, Cordelia, Ophelia, Desdemona, and Lady Macduff and her children all in the same category. White sees these victims as having "no situational power" and unable to change the course of events. While White's description applies to victims, in the case of the sacrificial figures, each one does make a choice that voluntarily places himself or herself at risk, and as a result we learn something of value. What their willingness to risk all indicates about their relationship to the initiators of tragedy or how it influences the tragic hero's self-perception and the audience's view of him becomes crucial to our understanding.
In his study of the suffering innocent White poses the age-old question, "Why do the innocent suffer?" This dissertation focuses more closely on the question, "Since the innocent do suffer, how do the deaths of the sacrificial figures influence the nature of the tragic experience?" Taking Dorthea Krook's treatise on the fundamental elements of tragedy as a starting point, this paper will explore the relationship, influence, and impact of the sacrificial figures on each element: the act of shame or horror, the suffering itself, the knowledge generated through suffering, and the affirmation or reaffirmation resulting from that knowledge.

While surely characters in other tragedies may be suggested as sacrificial figures, these three plays were selected for the clarity and significance of the pattern each demonstrates. Because Romeo and Juliet directly declares the two lovers to be sacrifices, the play becomes both a foundation and a foil for studying Othello and Lear. The complications involved with having the protagonists of Romeo and Juliet act as both tragic heroes and sacrificial figures contrast with a more focused picture of innocence and accountability in Othello and Lear. Using the distinctive contributions of the sacrificial figure in these three plays, Shakespeare weaves a rich tapestry of the tragic experience.
ENDNOTES


4*Elements of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967) 8. Whether or not Kook's thesis about "affirmation" is universally true of tragedy or not, the idea does hold true for these three plays, and the roles of the sacrificial figures are crucial in making it so.

5Krook 8.


7Offering an opposing view to those who trace religious significance and symbolism, Harold S. Wilson in *On the Design of Shakespearean Tragedy*, Richard Sewall in *The Vision of Tragedy*, Sylvan Barnet in "Some Limitations of a Christian Approach to Shakespeare," in *E.L.H.*, 22 (1955): 81-92, and others address problems that arise if theology is used as a consistent framework for judging the action of characters and the meaning of tragedy. Although Roland Mushat Frye acknowledges in his *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* that Shakespeare's tragedies are certainly influenced by the doctrines of the day, he places the plays in a secular, not a sacred, realm.

8E. K. Chambers in *Shakespeare: A Survey* and Irving Ribner in *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy*, among others, discuss the death of Romeo and Juliet as necessary sacrifices for a greater social good, a gain through loss. How the more overtly predicted sacrifice of Romeo and Juliet differs from those of the later tragedies deserves more attention.


10David D. Raphael also explores the doctrine of the suffering servant in *The Paradox of Tragedy*. Robert B. Heilman argues in his *Tragedy and Melodrama* with Raphael's emphasis on the suffering of the innocent, holding the position that studies which emphasize "ideas of innocence and victims confuse the pathetic and the tragic."
CHAPTER II

ROMEO AND JULIET: "POOR SACRIFICES" OF THEIR PARENTS' ENMITY

When the chorus appears at the outset of Romeo and Juliet, it sets the scene in the streets of Verona near two households where "new mutiny" springs daily from an "ancient grudge" and then reveals what we are to witness. From the "fatal loins" of the feuding foes "a pair of star-crossed lovers" (Pro.5-6) will take their lives, and their deaths, the chorus declares, are the only means to stop their parents' rage. The very fact that the chorus appears and talks with us in an intimate tone about what we are to see, offers us its interpretation of these events, and directs our attention to the play itself as "the two hours' traffic" (Pro.12) on the stage creates a sense of distance and provides a perspective that is external to the action. The outside point-of-view of the voice of the Prologue gives the audience a larger framework unbound by time and the limitations facing those people who play out their lives in the world of Verona. In the world of Verona "where civil blood makes civil hands unclean" (Pro.4), the action that culminates in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet may seem to those in the framework of the events to be "misadventured piteous overthrow"s (Pro.7) of the tragic heroes, but the chorus offers the audience a larger perspective, a sense of purpose that gives meaning to the "fearful passage of their death-marked love" (Pro.9).
Clearly, the chorus asserts, nothing but the death of the children will "bury their parents' strife" (Pro.8) and thus they serve as sacrificial figures. The two hours traffic on the stage has a greater significance than those on the stage may know. Some of the characters may sense, some may know in part, but the audience alone has the fuller knowledge proffered by the chorus and knows the young lovers will be both the play's tragic heroes and the sacrificial figures. In this play Shakespeare has so overtly declared the young people to be sacrifices that the play consequently provides both a foundation and a foil for examining the concept of sacrificial deaths in Othello and Lear.

Thus, the idea of a sacrificial death is attached in the audience's mind to the young lovers before either takes the stage. It is not an idea that evolves or a pattern that comes to be associated with the characters solely as we reflect in retrospect on the events that have occurred in their lives. By contrast, for those whose lives are intertwined with the great loss of the youths, it is only after the lovers' deaths that the idea of sacrifice occurs. Standing near the bodies of Romeo and Juliet, the Prince chastises the feuding families, declaring that heaven has laid a scourge on them because of their hate and has found a way to "kill your joys with love" (V.iii. 293). Echoing the words of the chorus, the grieving Capulet comes to recognize in the play's final moments that the lovers are "Poor sacrifices of our enmity" (V.iii..304). What those who grieve in Verona realize too late to effect any change or to avert a tragedy, the audience has known all along. Although the sense of tragic inevitability reverberates through the play, ultimately we must feel that tragedy could have been averted had the principals had the foresight to act early
enough, decisively enough. Otherwise we might view the tragic heroes-sacrificial figures more as victims of forces entirely outside themselves. But at the time the play opens, by their own choices the parents have set a blaze that smolders below the surface beyond their present control.

After the chorus’s pronouncements a sudden shift occurs. The scene comes to life and we move from the outside point-of-view established by the chorus to the concrete world of Verona, where we learn from observing the actions and words of those people on stage. And there in the banquet room, amid festivities, outside Juliet’s window and within the orchard walls, we come to see the young lovers and would-be sacrifices as warm, passionate human beings. Their fate becomes all the more poignant because we celebrate the fresh, unsoiled quality of their love. We smile at their youthful playfulness and eager anticipation, and we see them try to establish their identity together against insurmountable odds. While we view them as individuals and not merely as a means toward a peaceful resolution, their destiny is never far from our minds. While we may soon become engaged with the bickering servants on the street and the dynamics of the Capulets’ feast, the informed audience watches the story unfold with a sense of the inevitable to come made all the more painful because we come to know Romeo and Juliet as warm, vibrant human beings.

The level of awareness awakened by the chorus’s observations shapes our perceptions and provides criteria for judging the events that lead inexorably to the sacrificial deaths of the young lovers. The Prologue’s focus on the necessity of the sacrifice of Romeo and Juliet sways our view of the young lovers’ personal responsibility for their own deaths and shapes our sense of their relationship to each other and to their parents.
It predisposes how we judge parental accountability in creating a world where such a sacrifice is necessary. The simple, dispassionate analysis of the Prologue declares "the continuance of their parents' rage, / Which, but their children’s end, naught could remove" (Pro.10-11) is the subject at hand. While Romeo and Juliet are the tragic heroes of the play, the parents are clearly the initiators of tragedy. Over the years they have perpetuated a shameful condition and as a result they will suffer the fatal loss of their only children.

Unlike some other tragic heroes, Romeo and Juliet do not die because of their own shameful acts or because of destructive characteristics such as a thirst for power or consuming anger or jealousy, but because they love each other. Although their blood links them directly to those who have perpetuated the "ancient grudge," to those who will both suffer and benefit the most from their deaths, Romeo and Juliet die trying to break away from their past. Since they are tragic heroes, however, and do take their own lives, we are faced with questions that do not occur with either Desdemona or Cordelia. Because of their dual role, the relative degree of the young lovers' innocence is essential in judging the meaning of their fatal outcome. If we see them more as part of rather than apart from the on-going fray, then we view them other than as sacrifices for the sins of others. Instead, we would judge them more as culpable, reaping the natural consequences of their actions, doomed by their self-destructive behavior.

While we might view the deaths of the two youths differently were we to draw our conclusions without the larger framework provided by the Prologue, the plot itself suggests a certain innocence. This sense of
innocence, made brighter, more vivid against the dark backdrop of the feud, is seen at the lovers' first encounter. Romeo's rapturous "I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (I.v.53) is juxtaposed against Tybalt's contentious "Fetch me my rapier, boy" (I.v.550) as he recognizes his enemy's voice. As the older Capulet attempts to restrain his nephew, he reminds Tybalt that all of Verona finds Romeo to be a "virtuous and well-governed youth" (I.v.68), but Tybalt will not be placated. Promising to turn what is "Now seeming sweet" into "bitt'rest gall" (I.v.92), Tybalt leaves. Immediately after his vitriolic exit our attention is turned to the gentle repartee between the two lovers, who evoke a picture of the innocence and purity. The stark contrast in tone is telling. Juliet is Romeo's "holy shrine" and his lips "two blushing pilgrims." The young man declares that through her kiss his "sin will be purged" (I.v.94-107), and then he playfully insists on another kiss so that he might take his sin back again. While religious images abound in the passages, to conclude that they "idolize each other, and in doing so make a religion of their passion" does not do justice to the delightful banter of the passages or to the scene in its context.² Theirs is a youthful innocence responding to the emerging passion they feel. Later, in the balcony scene, when each has full knowledge of the other's identity, Romeo sees his would-be enemy as a "bright angel . . . a winged messenger of heaven" (II.ii.28). And Juliet is truly guileless. When she learns that her passionate declarations of love have been overheard, she blushes but will not deny what she has said. Although she is afraid that she might appear to be too quickly won, she will not mask her feelings with pretense or coquettish cunning. Inexperienced, without doubt, but desiring the
appropriate characteristics in their relationship, Juliet cautions that their vows of love might be "too rash, too sudden." Apprehensive lest their love be "Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say 'It lightens'" (II.ii.118-20), Juliet advises a measure of restraint, a stance seldom taken by either family. Even the later, passionate "Gallop apace" speech of the eager bride on her wedding night reflects a sense of the purity of playing for a "pair of stainless maidenhoods" where "love acted simple modesty" (III.ii.13, 16). Here Juliet is the understandably "impatient child that hath new robes/ And may not wear them" (III.ii.30-1).

Countering the lightning speed of their courtship, Romeo's and Juliet's bonding at its inception is stated in terms of permanence, reflecting values we would applaud, values that should be fundamental to stabilizing their society. Juliet does not want Romeo to swear by the "inconstant moon," but rather she will place her trust in his word if he will "swear by thy gracious self" (II.ii. 109,114). Likewise, Romeo asks for an "exchange of love's faithful vows" (II.ii.127). Theirs is a commitment stated in terms of a sanctified marriage relationship. If Romeo's "bent of love be honorable" and "his intention marriage," then Juliet will follow her "lord throughout the world" (II.ii. 143-8). When Romeo asks Friar Laurence to be bound in "holy marriage" to a Capulet, it startles his old friend. There is a purity, a passion beyond a physical one, in Romeo's words to the friar. "Do thou but close our hands with holy words, / Then love-devouring death do what he dare— / It is enough I may call her mine" (II.vi.6-8). When Friar Laurence witnesses the force of the emotion expressed, the holy man hurries to make "short work" of the rite,
determined that the two innocents "shall not stay alone / Till Holy Church incorporate two in one" (II.iv.35-37). As a symbol of the authority of the church, the holy man's reaction to their love lends credibility to its sincerity and their marriage vows give sanctity to their union. Although he offers a word of caution against haste in his plea for moderation, the friar's hopes are for a "long love" (II.v.14).

Not only is there a sense of purity about their "death-marked love" (Pro.9), but the basis for their relationship and their union itself holds significant promise for establishing a better community in such a way that would make their sacrifice unnecessary and does make it more poignant. The reason Friar Laurence accedes to Romeo's wishes and performs so hasty a nuptial is his hope that this alliance may turn the feuding households' rancor to pure love" (II.iii.92). We know what the holy man does not—that his intent to bind the wounds of the ancient grudge will be thwarted. The friar's plan, like the marriage of the youths, represents what might have been—an alternative to the hostility of the feud. Thinking aloud in the balcony scene, Juliet is the first to attempt to assert an identity as an individual apart from the family name and the entanglements of the feud. While she may wish that Romeo would refuse his father's name, Juliet, because of a force that she finds stronger than kinship, is willing to deny her own parentage and disown her name. While the audience may recognize the naivete and the impossibility of what she proposes, nonetheless, we admire her resolve to assert her own identity and dissociate herself from the foment of the ancient grudge. Similarly, Juliet refuses to generalize about Romeo as a Montague and instead separates the person from the name. Recognizing Romeo's personal
worth, Juliet perceives that the "dear perfection" of Romeo's person and his "title" (II.ii.46-47) are not one and the same. "'Tis but thy name that is my enemy" (II.ii.48). "Through the irony of Juliet's casual 'but thy name,' Shakespeare suggests both that it is impossible for Romeo to separate himself from his public identity as a Montague and that his public identity is nonetheless extraneous and accidental, no part of which he really is." Juliet raises questions that had the Capulets before her honestly confronted, the feud might have been averted or quelled. After all, "What's Montague?" and "What's in a name?" (II.ii.40,43). But neither family faces these issues nor questions the assumptions that are the basis of its prejudice. Likewise, neither household is even aware of what its child's thinking process has been until each confronts the final choices the lovers make at Capulet's tomb when all chance of reconciliation is gone. The concept of the sacrificial figure is being developed dramatically before its final evocation becomes fact.

Were solid communications between the two generations possible, the basis for the lovers' relationship as a couple could suggest to the parents a means to negotiate a peaceful solution. Were they to follow their children's model, the parents would turn from placing destructive familial identity and partisanship over the worth and well-being of each individual and the peace of the community. In an uncustomary approach, Juliet asks the unseen Romeo to "doff thy name" (II.ii.47). Romeo, were he thinking of his own ego, might rather wish that Juliet had simply left matters as they stood in her earlier declaration, "be but sworn my love, \ And I'll no longer be a Capulet." Instead, he is willing to be "new baptized" and henceforth never to "be Romeo" (II.ii.51-52). It is their
love for each other as individuals and their commitment to their new identity as a unit that holds preeminence. Outside the orchard walls the feud smolders, fed by a family solidarity that disregards individual identity and is antagonistic to any who call themselves Montague or Capulet. Although he does not realize the full meaning of his statement until later, Romeo makes a clear choice of values that he follows with consistency to the end: "My life were better ended by their hate/Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love" (II.i.77-8). Their youthful determination to set up a world of their own apart from the feud where they can maintain their individual and shared identities fails.

Ultimately, the curse of the family identity and the responsibilities to that family ascribed by that society overpower Romeo and Juliet as individuals and as a unit and lead to tragedy. Neither one is successful in taking to the world outside the orchard walls the values that they share or the perspectives that set a pattern for the possible resolution of the feud. In the face of Tybalt’s direct provocation, the new bridegroom responds based on his new identification with Juliet and the Capulets. Instead of resorting to the code of the feud, Romeo tries to assuage Tybalt’s wrath with a soft answer and by walking away from the potential brawl. When Tybalt refuses to let matters lie, Romeo again tries to break the vicious cycle of the feud by reasoning with Tybalt. Not only has he not done injury to Tybalt, Romeo argues, but he has more reason to love Tybalt than Tybalt might suspect. In a gesture that is astonishing to by-standers long accustomed to embittered verbal clashes and the clanging of weapons, Romeo dares to call his life-time enemy "good Capulet," a name he now holds as dearly as his own. Fully believing, if
Tybalt were to know what Romeo knows, peace would be possible, Romeo asks for trust until he can reveal "the reason of my love" (III.i.69-70).

Romeo responds to Tybalt's challenge on two levels and, both reflect guilelessness. The first appeal, a personal as well as a moral one, is ultimately the only positive means to settle the feud and to turn rancor into love. Romeo's action is one of sacrifice. He stands as one man who returns good for evil, one man quietly turning the other cheek instead of retaliating. Romeo is even willing to forgo the fellow-feeling and goodwill of Mercutio, who sees the young Montague's answer as "calm, dishonorable, vile submission!" (III.i.72). Even as Mercutio draws his rapier against Tybalt, Romeo attempts peace, ignoring the insult to his honor that Mercutio has leveled. While Tybalt might justifiably question why Romeo should claim to love him better than he can fathom, his actions leave little chance to reflect, even if he would. Romeo's second appeal--to civil law--proves even less persuasive as he reminds the two combatants that the "Prince expressly hath / Forbid this bandying in Verona streets" (III.i. 86-7)). Had Romeo's efforts at peace begun with this appeal, we might have judged him as merely self-protective, wishing to avoid a clash with the law. Instead, we see him as a man willing to sacrifice his self-image, to risk a degree of humiliation before his friends and former enemies to promote peace-for-peace's sake and for the sake of his new bond with the Capulets. Because Romeo defines himself differently than those who have promoted the feud so long, he, along with Juliet, offers the best possibility of a peaceful resolution, thus averting tragedy. Unfortunately, he confronts a shameful condition too long entrenched to be easily countered.
Romeo, who "thought all for the best" (III.i.103), observes his best intentions wilt in the face of smoldering hostilities. Just when it appears that Tybalt might walk away from the fray, Mercutio intrudes, taking on a fight that is not his and giving renewed life to the feud. Mercutio's behavior, like that of the bickering servants, is indicative of the insidious nature of the cancer eating away at the citizenry. While we may applaud Romeo's effort for peace, the enormity of the task facing the ambitious youth becomes more obvious. Ironically, the very steps Romeo takes to avert a clash between his friend and his new cousin precipitate Mercutio's death, Romeo's subsequent banishment, and the lovers' eventual deaths. The hostile climate snuffs out any flicker of hope for a peaceful resolution and a circumvention of tragedy. Were the families to stand together in unity using the union of their children as an impetus, tragedy could be averted. Instead, Romeo stands alone against overwhelming odds.

In his reaction to Mercutio's death Romeo compromises his stance of innocent peacemaker, but he does so under the extreme pressure of the moment. Instead of depending upon the law as he had earlier, Romeo fails to leave the appropriation of justice to the ordained minister of the law, the Prince. He does so largely because he assumes the false guilt that Mercutio has laid at his feet. He succumbs to Mercutio's accusatory "Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm." Instead of reflecting on just why he did act and why he "thought all for the best" (III.i.100,103), Romeo forgets the greater good he had desired to achieve in his attempt to defuse the brawl. Eventually Romeo dies unaware that his death, not his life, will bring peace. Had Mercutio not been so
successful in deflecting blame to Romeo with his repetitive "A plague on both of your houses" (III.i.69), Romeo might have maintained equilibrium with the steady support of Benvolio. But the possibilities of a resolution are cut short by the return of a "furious Tybalt" (III.i.117-9). Indifferent earlier to Tybalt's insult, Romeo now becomes involved because he thinks his friend has died for him in defense of Romeo's reputation. It is his identity as a man, not as a citizen of Verona, nor as a husband to a Capulet, and not even as a son of a Montague, that he questions. What it means to be a man in his culture is threatened because he mistakenly holds himself responsible for Mercutio's death and because he fails to hold Mercutio accountable for his own actions. Instead, he castigates himself, plagued with the idea that Juliet's "beauty hath made me effeminate" and has "soft'ned valor's steel" (III.i.112-3). While he is willing to give up his family name, Romeo appears unable to redefine those terms by which he identifies himself as a man. Romeo is not so much "fortune's fool!" (III.i.134) when he slays Tybalt as he is made to feel like a fool by the dying Mercutio's rhetoric. Although he risks appearing the fool before his enemy on "knees humbly bowed" (III.i.154) in an act of reconciliation, Romeo now feels compelled to act because he misperceives Mercutio's death as substitutionary and because he feels humiliated as a man. Had he left Tybalt's judgment to the designated minister of justice, Romeo would have had the chance to advance a peaceful settlement and to come nearer averting tragedy.

Benvolio's point-of-view on the fray reinforces our perception of Romeo's accountability. And the degree to which we hold Romeo directly responsible for setting off the dire chain of events that culminates in
the lovers's deaths influences our understanding of the meaning of the sacrificial deaths. Benvolio, whom we have seen as the voice of moderation and restraint, becomes Romeo's advocate before the angry Prince. Recapitulating events, Benvolio accurately articulates Romeo's attempts at peace and his effort to conform to the Prince's edict. The weight of breaking the truce falls assuredly on Tybalt and Mercutio. Young Romeo is more sinned against than sinning. It is the extremity of the circumstances that precipitates Romeo's "newly entertained revenge" (III.i.169). Taking Benvolio's cue, the older Montague honestly concedes his son's error but reasons, "His fault concludes but what the law should end, / The life of Tybalt" (III.i.183-84). To meet the conditions of his edict and yet to answer the father's logic, the Prince condemns Romeo to exile rather than to the prescribed death. The banishment of Romeo, punitive in intent yet merciful in degree, is definitely more than personal retribution for one man's action. Because the Prince's kinsman lies dead in the brawl's aftermath, the Prince levies "so strong a fine" that all "shall repent the loss" (III.i.188-9). Romeo's banishment comes as retribution, punishment levied against him to make him an example to all. Later, his death achieves restoration, bringing about repentence and peace for all. Romeo, less blameworthy than either Mercutio or Tybalt, must live outside the community in exile as a constant reminder of the consequences of accumulated years of turmoil and strife. Ironically, what the Prince hopes to accomplish in Romeo's banishment is what the Friar had prayed for in the union of Romeo and Juliet—a resolution of the conflict. Threatening the efficacy of Romeo's exile, however, is the fact that while Romeo's punishment may serve as an example to all of what it means to
violate law and order, only his new bride and his family suffer the penalty. The banishment of her husband devastates Juliet. "There is no end, no limit, measure, bounds, / In that word's death" (III.ii.125-6). It is a tearing asunder of what God has joined together. Perceiving the matter of vengeance to be yet unresolved, Lady Capulet, unaffected by the rigor of the law applied against a Montague, plans to send a messenger to Mantua to poison Romeo. It becomes more painfully obvious why the omniscient Prologue asserts that nothing less than the death of a child from both families will quell their parents' rage. At this point we are left wondering about possibility of peace at any price.

Facing the challenge of stealing "love's sweet bait from fearful hooks," the two lovers ultimately fail in "temp'ring extremities with extreme sweet" (II. Cho.8,14). "Where love becomes all their world, they put themselves in jeopardy, for the loss of such a new-found centre . . . reduces all to chaos." Even then the extremity of the circumstances sways our judgment of the two. While their culpability, real and perceived, is often attributed to the passion of their young love, their perspective is understandably narrow in focus. Because they cannot function openly, honestly in the world around them, they make each other and their relationship a world unto itself. Romeo is the center of Juliet's world, but to fault Juliet for the sin of worshipping a mortal is to miss the actual meaning of why she calls Romeo "the god of my idolatry" (II.ii.113-4). Here she suggests the standard that they both maintain through their relationship. If Romeo is to swear constancy, it must be by a standard internal to their relationship--his own self. The startling allegiance that she gives to her foe's off-spring stems from the
basis of his person. Breaking precedent, Juliet confesses her reverence and swears allegiance to her would-be foe. It is an allegiance that she takes seriously even in the face of conflicting loyalties at the news of cousin Tybalt's fate. Distressed over the shocking news of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, Juliet in her immediate reaction charges Romeo with being the opposite of what he seems. While Juliet declares him to be "A damne'd saint, an honorable villain" (III.ii.79), the moment her nurse denounces Romeo, wishing to heap shame upon him, Juliet flies to her husband's defense. Chiding herself for her brief moment of disloyalty and for speaking ill of her husband, Juliet quickly defines her world in terms of a wife. Tybalt becomes the "villain cousin that would have killed my husband" (III.ii.101). Were we to believe that blind loyalty to family had been replaced by blind loyalty to her husband, Juliet's focus would appear as narrow as the rest of the feuding families' and the young couple's marriage would offer no hope for a change in society. But while absorbing the double shock of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment, Juliet deals realistically with the raw facts. Had Tybalt lived, he would have been Romeo's murderer. In her double grief Juliet performs the unusual—a Capulet holding another Capulet responsible. And the audience remembers what Juliet cannot know—Tybalt stands more to blame than Romeo. The bride's one comfort is that Romeo, whom Tybalt would have slain, lives. Ranking all possible griefs, Juliet finds the one word "banished" to be a lamentation so strong that "to speak that word / Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet, / All slain, all dead (III.ii.122-4). Without Romeo, Juliet's life ceases to have meaning. When Juliet speaks
of death rather than Romeo's taking her maidenhead, the nurse flies to find at least some temporary comfort for her ward.

While not insensitive to his young friend's calamity, the friar levels the strongest criticism of Romeo and thus prevents him from committing a rash suicide. Interestingly, later when Romeo does make a choice of a different kind to end his life by affirming his love, the friar does not condemn either Romeo or Juliet. But in Act III the holy man appeals to higher values than the emotions of the moment, and offers the groom broader perspective on events. When Romeo declares he would rather have his head lopped off than to suffer a living death apart from Juliet as the "world's exile" (III.iii.20), the friar's rebuke is sharp. Romeo's "rude unthankfulness" amounts to "deadly sin!" (III.iii.24) and reflects a narrow perspective. Romeo fails to see that the Prince has exercised mercy in pronouncing banishment instead of death. The friar, who takes it on the chin from Romeo and later from some critics for offering philosophy as comfort, attempts to enlarge Romeo's thinking beyond the desperate moment. The holy man appeals to Romeo on several bases. The friar's first appeal--to Romeo's sense of manhood--is ironically the appeal that entangled him in the duel with Tybalt. Inherent in what it means to be a man in that culture is to be assertive rather than to shed "womanish" tears (III.iii.110). More importantly, the friar expects Romeo to act as a reasonable man rather than with the "unreasonable fury of the beast" (III.iii.111). What should separate Romeo from "ill-seeming beast" is his role as image-bearer and husband. Echoing Job's cursing the day he was born, Romeo has, in Friar Laurence's opinion, wrongly railed against "his birth, heaven" (III.iii.119) and his purpose
on earth. But it is the nurse's "For Juliet's sake, for her sake, rise and stand!" (III.iii.89) that brings Romeo to his feet, thinking of his wife rather than himself. Appealing to the oneness of their union, the holy man forestalls Romeo's suicide. "Wilt thou slay thyself? And slay the lady in thy life lives, / By doing damned hate upon thyself?" (III.-iii.116-8). Challenged to act on his vows that transcend the moment, to think in larger terms than those of the present, Romeo behaves more maturely, realizing his life is inextricably bound to Juliet's. Ironically, the basis for Romeo's response on this occasion establishes a pattern that on the one hand causes him to put aside his intended suicide but on the other hand provides the framework for and foreshadows the death to come. Likewise the friar's censure in this scene sets a standard for judging the final reality. While the friar sharply rebukes Romeo for carelessly contemplating a mortal sin, when the thought becomes reality, it is the parents of the two who are held most accountable by both the friar and the Prince.

To characterize Romeo as pouting "like a misbehaved and sullen wench" (III.iii.153) would erode our sympathy for him and trivialize the tragedy to come. From the friar's initial astonishment we gather as the holy man observes that Romeo's behavior in this scene is out of the ordinary. "Thou hast amazed me . . . . I thought thy disposition better tempered" (III.-iii.114-5). Romeo concludes the scene differently, however. He has taken chastisement, has listened to counsel, does as he is asked by the friar, and appears hopeful and grateful for the friar's interventions on his behalf. Were Romeo not rushing to Juliet, it would be "a grief to be so
brief" (III.iii.74) to part with his old friend. That Romeo does bear correction sets him aside from the Tybalts of the feud.

While the friar presents a lofty basis for the union of the two lovers consistently pointing to a higher order and the greater good of the community, throughout the play secretiveness and duplicity mark their interaction with the outside world. Our view of their innocence would be threatened were it not for the circumstances of their lives and the holy Friar's role in those events that transpire. A desire for privacy commonly found in young lovers becomes a necessity for these two from the start. Juliet, bubbling over with the joy of her new love, chafes against the imprisoning need for silence. "Bondage is hoarse . . . . Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies / And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine / With the repetition of 'My Romeo'" (II.ii.161-4). Not only do both families lose the opportunity of sharing in their children's newly-found joy, but the environment created by their years of stubborn adherence to the laws of the feud also makes duplicity seem imperative for their children. The two are virtually forced into secrecy that ultimately dooms them not simply because they choose the privacy of a lover's retreat but because one is a Montague and the other a Capulet. Juliet must devise a means to steal away to Friar Laurence's cell, but her purpose is honorable. She must go presuming that Romeo has gained the holy man's acquiescence if not his approval. Interestingly, the audience is not left struggling over the age-old question of whether the end justifies the means partially because of Friar Laurence's stance. While he cautions the anxious bridegroom repeatedly to move "Wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast" (II.iii.94), it is the pace not the path that he wishes to
curb. He is not only privy to their secret plans, but he acts as an initiator.

In terms of the innocence of the sacrificial figures the feigned death of Juliet raises some indicting ethical questions because of the duplicity's great potential to harm others. The ruse on its face might be judged at best as insensitive to the grief inflicted on Juliet's parents and the hopeful, innocent Paris on his wedding day. The scene, however, mutes the anguish of Juliet's loved ones—partially because of the level of awareness on the part of the friar and the audience. Thinking his plan will accomplish a greater good and believing the Capulets' sorrow to be short lived, the friar attempts to cut short the grief process and hurry the drugged Juliet to the safety of the crypt. The friar knows what the parents do not—that their daughter lives. Perhaps because the cause for grief, from the friar's perspective, does not in truth exist, he can lecture, "The heavens do low'r upon you for some ill; / Move them no more by crossing their high will" (IV.v.94-5). The audience knows, however, what those on stage do not—the grief we witness is a rehearsal for the deaths to come. Were the grief of this scene to echo the heart-rending lament of Othello's grief or the soul-wrenching wail of Lear's agony, we would react quite differently. Instead, the action of the play carries the audience forward, and we agree in part with the Friar that the family is reaping what they have sown.

The actual suicides of Romeo and Juliet present the greatest potential problem to our perception of their innocence. That the lovers assume power over their own lives and deaths could threaten our judgment were it not for the context and the focus of the death scene. "... Though the
spectators may well sense the moral dilemma involved in one's succumbing to inordinate haste. Shakespeare achieves a "sympathetic relationship between the spectator and Romeo and Juliet . . . to minimize any sense of guilt that might attach to the young lovers."5 We share the friar's alarm over the waylaid message to Romeo and sense all haste will be in vain because we know what he does not--Romeo has already left the apothecary shop. But in spite of the sense of inevitable that the audience has known from the outset, caught up in the action, we are very much engaged in what is happening to this young husband whose whole world has collapsed. Were Romeo's actions to reflect his earlier impulsive urge toward self-destruction with Friar Laurence, we would judge Romeo immature and self-centered. But his more deliberate action reflects a partial understanding, a coming to terms with his life, a self-knowledge limited to the confines of the immediate--all issues to be discussed later. Had Romeo and Juliet in a lovers' pact agreed to a double suicide to escape the cares of this world, we would view their deaths quite differently. "Any suggestion of cowardice or of irresponsibility and delusion, any feeling that they are choosing to die rather than to continue to fight for what they have claimed is the supreme value in their lives, is carefully avoided by the device of misreported death."6 While we may wish Romeo and Juliet had taken time to be more informed before forming an eternal union in death, they ultimately "seek after good. They are not deliberate or even unknowing sinners."7 The scene highlights the affirmation of their love, not the assertion of their guilt. The friar provides a more objective perspective on the meaning of their deaths. While the friar interprets events as some "ill unthrifty thing" (V.iii.136) and as "lamentable
chance," he does not condemn the lovers who have taken their own lives. Even though he places events in the theological context of "a greater power than we can contradict / Hath thwarted our intents" (V.iii.153-4), the holy man does not judge the death by the same criteria he earlier applies to Romeo's threatened suicide. Instead the "untimely" death of Romeo is a "work of heaven" to be borne with "patience" (V.iii.262). Although the friar as well as the audience does not excuse the self-destructive acts of the tragic heroes, their deaths as we will see have a redemptive quality.

From the Prologue on the play appropriately focuses on parental accountability. We judge them guilty not so much for the actions we directly witness but rather for their role in creating a shameful condition created by stubborness, pride, and hot blood. Theirs is a world so caught up in hostility that only drastic actions with dire consequences catch the attention of the two households. Although the families are not the tragic heroes, they absorb the impact and foster the circumstances that precipitate the deaths of the sacrificial figures. While their accountability, the nature of the suffering they endure, and the kind of knowledge they gain do not have the same impact on our sense of tragedy as does the experience of the tragic heroes Othello and Lear, we learn from their situation. Our perception of the parents' experience becomes vital to our discerning that Romeo and Juliet die not merely as victims of the feud but as unique sacrifices to stop it. Because the patriarchs of the families fail to contain their animosity toward each other, their hatred has long ago become a societal problem, a disruption of civil peace. Interestingly, at the start of the play the two old warriors seem
to be mellowing and on the verge of making peace, a peace that would negate the necessity of a sacrifice. Capulet sees a fairness in the Prince’s edict that would equitably bind Montague and Capulet alike to a peace-keeping task force. And it should not be so difficult "For men so old as we to keep the peace," (I.ii.3) he reckons. County Paris senses Capulet’s conciliatory tone and observes, since both men are honorable, "pity 'tis you lived at odds so long" (I.ii.5). The irony, we know, is that with peace so close it remains unattainable without the high price of Romeo and Juliet. If Capulet is "unwilling to let the feud interrupt a dance," H. B. Charlton argues, "a quarrel which is of less moment than a galliard is being appeased at an extravagant price, if the price is the death of two such delightful creatures as Romeo and Juliet." Peace is not a possibility, however, not so much because of fate but because of the fatal loins of the two foes. "The feud in a realistic social sense is the primary tragic force of the play--not the feud as agent of fate, but the feud as an extreme and peculiar expression of patriarchal society, which Shakespeare shows to be tragically self-destructive."

When Romeo intrudes uninvited into Capulet’s feast, the old man is effusive in his praise. Since "Verona brags of him / To be a virtuous and well-governed youth" (I.v.68-9), Capulet will be the gracious host and Tybalt had best fall in step. Capulet must pull rank with Tybalt in his attempt to restrain his impetuous nephew. "He shall be endured . . . . I say he shall . . . . Am I the master here or you?" (I.v.76-8). But Capulet acts much too late and ineffectively asserts his authority; the blood feud has too long been promoted. To be a Capulet is to hate a Montague and vice versa. Romeo’s immediate response upon learning Juliet’s identity, "My life is my foe’s
"debt" (I.v.118) parallels Juliet's initial reaction, "My only love, sprung from my only hate!" (I.v.138). Inherent in being heirs of the households is inheriting the family's "ancient grudge," a product of "fatal loins." As much as Capulet and Montague may wish for peace, they have long sown the seeds of hatred and are reaping the harvest. At the slightest provocation the servants of the two families draw swords because of their masters' quarrel. The silly bickering and provocative thumb-biting of the opening scene dissolve into a more serious encounter between the members of the two families. In "these hot days is the mad blood stirring," especially in Tybalt, who hates the word "peace" and all Montagues to boot. Angered at Romeo's appearance at the feast, Tybalt, rapier in hand, delineates the historical and philosophical basis for his response. "By the stock and honor of my kin, / To strike him dead I hold it not a sin" (I.v.58-9). In his familial interpretation of morality Tybalt articulates his personal code of conduct, one he has learned as he has learned what it means to be a Capulet. Tybalt places himself above moral and civil law and becomes a law unto himself. The code he espouses, that he lives and dies by, defines honor in terms carrying on the traditions of the family feud, leaving little doubt as to why the Prologue clearly places the heaviest weight of responsibility on the parents. "Instead of providing social channels and moral guidance by which the energies of youth can be rendered beneficial to themselves and society, the Montagues and the Capulets make weak gestures toward civil peace while participating emotionally in the feud as much as their children do." And the parents are the ones against whom the ultimate fine is most heavily levied. Because
the feud has so permeated society, only a radical action, the sacrificial deaths, can excise the intrenched hatred.

Besides allowing the personal conflicts to spill over and pollute society around them, the warring fathers cultivate an environment that thwarts the natural course of love. Old hatred blights the young love of Romeo and Juliet and gives reason for Juliet's lament, "Prodigious birth of love it is to me / That I must love a loath'ed enemy" (I.v.140-1). The lost potential the marriage might represent as redemptive agent in society stems from the recalcitrance of the patriarchs, especially Capulet. Faith that the alliance of the two families will turn the "house-holds' rancor to pure love" (II.iii.92) prompts the friar to join the lovers in matrimony. Since the two families in his parish have not chosen to apply the principle of forgiveness, the friar hopes the sacrament bonding the two families together will force them to a position conducive to the common good of all. When he sends Romeo away to Mantua, Friar Laurence does so, hoping time and calm reason will work toward a peaceful conclusion for all. If word of the marriage reconciles the brawling families, the Prince, the friar conjectures, will be ready to pardon the offender since the banishment is designed to bring about the desired end—peace. Sadly, the lovers cannot confide in their parents prior to their marriage, and the friar does not insist on the parental right to know, perhaps because he realizes it will take an irrevocable bond to force the families to negotiate a peace. And as it happens only the irrevocable loss of their only children brings the two proud patriarchs to think beyond themselves.

"While they fail to exercise authority over the younger generation in the streets, they willed it stubbornly and selfishly in the home."
Capulet's impatience and his unreasonable responses counters the friar's hopes and plans. Interestingly, Capulet appears more responsible than Montague, partially because we scarcely see Montague at all and certainly not interacting with Romeo. We do witness the way Capulet functions with his daughter. The rejection of this sacrificial figure by those who are most affected by her death adds to the poignancy of that loss. Miffed because his efforts on his daughter's behalf do not bring the thankful response he wishes, Capulet berates Juliet because she does "not count her blest / Unworthy as she is . . . " (III.V.145-6). As an initiator of tragedy Capulet, like the tragic heroes Othello and Lear, does not see himself as we do. Unable to see in himself the faults he so readily finds in his daughter, Capulet is irked at Juliet for demonstrating a mind of her own. Annoyed because "God had lent us but this only child," Capulet decides this one is more than enough and they "have a curse in having her" (III.V.165-8). That he is ungrateful for a less valid reason is not clear to Capulet. Unfortunately, old Capulet, who feels he is short on time, proves to be short of reason and patience and rushes his grieving daughter toward the altar. Demonstrating a testiness that partially accounts for the on-going, simmering feud, Capulet asserts his will because it is his will. He delivers decrees and ultimatums while turning a deaf ear as Juliet begs on bended knee for a moment to speak with her father. With an acrimoniousness that must leave a bitter aftertaste that causes the informed audience to wince, Capulet declares Juliet to be a "wretched puling fool" (III.v.185). If Juliet does not bend to his will, she may well "hang, beg, starve, die in the streets" (III.v.194), but Capulet will never acknowledge her. The stubborn father does not appropriately value
what he is destined to lose. Not until later as the man suffers the loss of his daughter does he confront in part the nature of his loss.

The audience detects what the father, sadly, does not—that his daughter resists his plans not out of willful disobedience to her father's authority but because she yields to a higher authority. Since her "faith is in heaven" and her "husband is on earth," Juliet is not free from her vows until her husband sends back her faith to her "from heaven / By leaving earth" (III.v. 207-10). Juliet's vows bind her to Romeo until his death, and at his death she in fact dies affirming her love.

For Juliet the predicament is exacerbated by her inability to communicate candidly with her parents. Although Juliet's double entendres—"Would none but I might venge my cousin's death" (III.V.87)—communicate with clarity to the audience, they create an understandable misunderstanding and frustration on the part of her parents. Nevertheless Juliet on bended knees begs for a moment so her father can hear with patience what she has to say. What she would have told her father if given the chance stirs the imagination, but Capulet's imperial "Speak not, reply not, do not answer!" (III.V.164) squelches communications. Capulet's irrational rejection of the play's sacrificial figure is echoed later in Othello's painful alienation of Desdemona and Lear's rash banishment of Cordelia. The man's excoriation of his only child, his declaring it a curse to have her is so scorching that we agree with the nurse's reproof. "You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so" (III.V.170). While Lady Capulet censures her husband for being "too hot" (III. V.176) in his response to Juliet, the woman totally rejects Juliet's reasoned, moderate plea for a delay in the marriage for a month or even a week. She fails
to grasp the depth of her daughter's desperation and the seriousness of Juliet's request to make her bridal bed in the family monument. Her response reflects her annoyance with and lack of understanding of her daughter's state: "Do what thou wilt, for I have done with thee" (III.V.205). Perhaps because she is intimidated by her husband, Lady Capulet follows his example, cutting off lines of communication and reducing even further Juliet's viable options for a rational resolution. Because they do not treat Juliet in a caring, loving manner, the Capulets will soon face her loss.

Slowly the sacrificial figure is being forced into a place of increasing isolation as the family unit fractures. Alienated from both parents, Juliet turns to the nurse, her confidante of old. Arguing pragmatically that Romeo is as good as dead and that Juliet has "no use of him" (III.V.218), the nurse proposes her young mistress accept a second marriage since it would be most advantageous. Judging her nurse to be "Ancient damnation!" whose advice is "sin" (III.V.237-8), Juliet perceives that both the sacredness of her marriage and the nurse's loyalty to Romeo have been betrayed. The gulf separating Juliet and her household is never more great or obvious than at this moment. Isolated by her parents' refusal to communicate and by a conflict in values with those of her nurse, Juliet becomes an exile in her own house much like Romeo in Mantua. In her hour of great need Juliet stands alone, doubting that "heaven should practise stratagems / Upon so soft a subject" (III.V.207-12). One and all stand accountable for placing Juliet in an untenable position. The father squares off in a head-to-head battle with his daughter,
reflecting the same pride that must have fueled the on-going feud, placing all in a no-win situation.

Capulet’s anger in this scene, however, must be countered with earlier scenes with a more mellow Capulet if we are to understand both the value he places on his daughter and therefore the nature of the subsequent loss experienced at her death. All of Capulet’s hopes center on his only living child, he confides to Paris. And he asks Paris to woo her with care since his "will to her consent is but a part" (I.i.17). Continuance of the family line depends on Juliet, and her marriage takes on heightened importance. Capulet knows that without Juliet this branch of the family tree withers, but what he does not comprehend is that it is already blighted. That Juliet early demonstrates a willingness to consider Paris, deferring to her parents' wishes, should prompt them to probe more deeply into the cause for her later reluctance. But the opportunity for understanding dissolves into decrees and denunciations. Admittedly Capulet stands at a disadvantage with the audience. We have little opportunity to observe the man in any situation but that of conflict. The degree to which Capulet recognizes his own culpability in the breakdown of communication that results in Juliet's death is minimal. He does not see himself as we do or as Juliet does.

In part we may judge the depth of Capulet's love for Juliet as we watch him confront what he believes to be the death of his daughter. The scene presents problems for the playwright who must walk a fine line between presenting an appropriate amount of sorrow on the part of the parents, and avoiding placing the informed audience and the knowing friar in an uncomfortable position of coping with an overwhelming torrent of
anguish. Were we to feel more engaged with the grieving parents, the distance necessary to judge events at hand would be minimized. Even if we take into account that necessity moderates the level of despair depicted by the Capulets, the focus of the anguish expressed is limited and the self-knowledge derived, minimal. Although Capulet laments that "an untimely frost" has taken "the sweet flower of the field" (IV.v.28-9), a measure of self-concern marks his grief. His personal hopes and aspirations are dashed. "Death is his heir" (IV.v.38). From Lady Capulet's perspective, "Death" has snatched from her sight the "one thing to rejoice and take solace in" (IV.v.47).

Capulet anticipates what his life will be: "With my child my joys are buried!" (IV.v.64). He is not, however, able to place his immediate loss within the larger framework of life. He understands correctly the final, all-encompassing nature of his loss for "Life, living, all is Death's" (IV.v.40), but he fails to see that death has surrounded him all along and that Juliet's death only brings the funeral procession to his front door. Even though the Friar bluntly states affairs in terms of retribution, "The heavens do low'r upon you for some ill" (IV.v.94), neither set of parents questions, challenges, or comprehends his indictment, their culpability, or reality. Lady Capulet's self-destructive cry, "I will die with thee!" (IV.v.20) and Capulet's "I will die and leave Death all" (IV.v.39-40) suggest a continuing desire to escape reality, not a comprehension of it.

When the feigned death of Juliet becomes actuality and both lovers lie dead, the scene reveals little about the personal grief or the self-knowledge of either the Montagues or the Capulets. For the most part
the controlling force of the scene and the final articulation of accountability lie with the Prince as he deals once again with the feuding families. Abruptly the Prince cuts off the grieving Montague. Interestingly, we get but a glimpse of Montague, who has suffered the most with the exile of his son, the recent loss of his wife, and then the startling, imminent discovery of his son’s death. The potential force of the torrent of Montague’s grief is deflected by the Prince’s rebuke as he takes charge of the situation, functioning as the minister of justice. With little recognition of or tolerance for the personal grief at hand, the Prince assumes a stance reminiscent of the outside point-of-view of the Prologue. Bluntly put, it is divine retribution that necessitates pain and suffering. "See what a scourge is laid upon your hate, / That heaven finds means to kill our joys with love". The Prince even assumes a fair measure of liability himself "for winking at your discords too" (V.iii.292-4). Although the audience is hard pressed to remember just when the Prince winked, the over-all message is inescapable. "All are punished" (V.iii.292-5) because all are guilty. "The closing scene offers the sacrifice of innocents to wipe out in blood the cursed strife of the old partisans. Church and state combine . . . to arraign the hate-filled families."12 After the friar recounts events for the Prince, the old man declares if he be at fault for the slightest miscarriage of events, his life should be sacrificed "Unto the rigor of severest law" (V.iii.269). Ironically, Capulet, who garners little self-knowledge, most succinctly sums up the significance of the tragic deaths as "Poor sacrifices of our enmity!" (V.iii.304).
But Capulet's observation seems more of an overview of the situation rather than an intense, personal recognition of the nature of reality and his place in it. When Capulet offers his hand in reconciliation, he comes the closest to accepting personal responsibility for the circumstances at hand. "Oh brother Montague, give me thy hand./ This is my daughter's jointure, for no more / Can I demand" (V.iii.296-8). But the self-knowledge gained by the tragedy is more intellectually stated than emotionally comprehended, especially by contrast to the agony of Othello and the heart-rending cry of Lear. The final effect seems almost formulaic, the natural outworking of some great principle--the sins of the fathers will be visited on their children, and only through their deaths will the families find restoration and peace.

Because the tragic events are told rather than represented, the final moments of the play also distance the parents from the full impact of the drama. Ignorant of what the audience has watched transpire in their children's lives, both families learn through the Friar's brief outline of events rather than from firsthand observation. Even Montague's one chance to hear in his own son's words what has occurred vanishes as the Prince seizes the letter and tersely summarizes it. The Prince addresses the patriarchs not as grief-stricken citizens but as warring "enemies" (Viii. 291) who are reaping what they have sown. The Prince's denunciation speaks pointedly of the necessity of pain and leaves little room for the grief process. At the play's conclusion the parents seem to function more as figures in a larger story, the fulfillment of a moral principle, than as grieving individuals. Their instantaneous reconciliation seems impossible otherwise. The monuments that the fathers plan to build become
objective correlative of a story of woe. Lying by his lady’s side, Romeo with Juliet serves as a permanent reminder that they served as "poor sacrifices" for their parent’s enmity.

Although Romeo and Juliet will lie memorialized in equally valuable statues of gold, below the surface of the play there is a sense of inequality in the degree of loss suffered by the two families. Ironically, Montague, who suffers the greatest series of losses, seems less culpable. As a supportive father with whom Romeo intends to communicate in his final letter, Montague presents a contrast to Capulet, who will not listen to his daughter on bended knee. Montague’s guilt springs more from his failure to the community at large. Citizen Montague stands judged, more for the civic climate he has helped to create rather than for his own indifference or misunderstanding as a father.

Self-realization for both families, limited as it is, is more stated than actualized. No heart-rending cry or agonizing lament over what-might-have-been marks the conclusion as we see later on Othello and Lear. The distance between the parents and the actual death scene, the fact that the parents who are not the tragic heroes but the recipients of retribution, deflects some of the emotional impact of the concluding scene. There is a sense of a "story" (V.iii.310) as the Prince calls events, a story whose awful outcome and purpose the Prologue has revealed, a story more didactic than dramatic at its conclusion, a story to be discussed in the days to come.

The audience has a greater understanding of the magnitude of lost potential, the possibilities for a peaceful reconciliation in the melding of the two families that makes the final loss so poignant. We have seen
what they have not—the strength and nature of Romeo's and Juliet's bond, the promise of the two sole heirs' fusing a new family lineage, a "blood-feud reconciled in [a] blood match," easing tensions and bringing a vibrant, living peace to the city. Instead, the morning brings a "glooming peace" and time to "talk of these sad things" (V.iii.305-8).

While a relatively uninformed Capulet distills the complexity of human affairs into an abstract, somewhat detached statement declaring the children to be "Poor sacrifices of our enmity" (V.iii.304), the audience has just freshly witnessed the death scene and has a clear understanding of its import. The scene intricately weaves together the threads spun throughout the play into a tapestry of Verona's on-going feud, reminding the audience of the need for of the imminent sacrifices. Indicative of the cancerous nature of the feud, Paris, till now the peaceful suitor, draws his sword on a "vile Montague!" (V.iii.54) in spite of Romeo's attempts at appeasement. In lines reminiscent of Romeo's response to Tybalt, Romeo declares to Paris, "I love thee better than myself" (V.iii.64). But as before, a family member or would-be family member contributes to the disaster, and heedless action prevents discussion and precipitates Paris' death. Because Romeo through his love for Juliet has truly learned to love his enemy as himself, he breaks from the destructive tradition that has been his heritage. In his one line at Tybalt's grave, "Forgive me, cousin!" (V.iii.101) Romeo sets aside the code of the feud, reaffirms his identity with Juliet and Juliet's family, and reveals a more active sense of awareness of his own responsibility than does either family. He perceives his death in part as a "favor" (V. iii.99), an even-handed justice—the hand that took Tybalt's life will take Romeo's. Because
Romeo takes his own life, providing no cause for revenge, his death could terminate the cycle of the feud. Were it not for the tone of this scene we might feel that in actuality Romeo and Juliet die victims of their inability to break from the feud. Instead, Romeo anticipates an "everlasting rest," united with his wife in Capulet's tomb. For Romeo it is a "triumphant grave," yet not a grave but a "lanthorn" that Juliet's beauty fills with light. For Juliet, as her life is inextricably bound to Romeo's, so is her death. To kiss the poison from his lips is to "die with a restorative" (V.iii.166). It is the depth of the young lovers' commitment to their union and their desire to live and die that becomes the powerful "scourge" on their families. The Prince aptly describes the scene's significance: "...heaven finds means to kill your joys with love" (V.iii.293). The play's final moments focus on parental accountability that necessitates such a sacrifice.

The idea of sacrificial death, of gain through loss established in the Prologue, influences our sense of tragedy in Romeo and Juliet. But from the point of view of the lovers, Romeo and Juliet do not die as willing sacrifices or unwilling sacrifices; they die rather because each chooses not to live without the other. Part of the problem here is that the young lovers are simultaneously the tragic heroes and the sacrificial figures by contrast to Desdemona and Cordelia, whose involvement with the tragic figures shapes the nature of their tragic experience, a point best seen in contrast to Othello and Lear in later discussion.

Because the families by design absorb the tragic loss, the kind of knowledge garnered by Romeo and Juliet indicates no understanding on their part of their role as sacrificial figures. Romeo dies uninformed and mis-
informed as to his place in the larger framework of the play. In fact, even his moment of death is sparked by a misperception that Juliet lies dead. The closest Romeo comes to articulating his place is in the unknowing assertion early on, "My life were better ended by their hate / Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love" (II.ii.77-8). He now takes Juliet’s "hand / One with me in sour misfortune’s book!" (V.iii.81-2). He comes to join his wife and to "seal with a righteous kiss / A dateless bargain to engrossing death." (V.iii.114-5). Juliet dies aware that the Friar’s intentions have been thwarted and that Paris and her beloved lie dead. With the world outside closing in, Juliet refuses to rejoin it and chooses rather to share Romeo’s "timeless end" (V.iii.162) by kissing the poison drops on his lips. Earlier, Juliet has been understandably fearful of taking the Friar’s sleeping potion and realizes "I needs must act alone" (IV.iii.19). Now she acts decisively, willing to risk all as she has before to be reunited with Romeo. What the two tragic heroes do know, do affirm--the depth of commitment and love for each--becomes the link to the larger design that makes them as the Prince declares, the "means to kill your joys with love" (V.iii.292-3). For the audience the young lovers have become more than the "means" to destroy hatred and bring communal peace. We have seen the beauty and intensity of the love they die affirming, and the sacrifice of their young lives and all the rich possibilities they embody heightens the magnitude of the loss. Appropriately, as the morning dawns, it brings a "glooming peace" (V.iii.304) over Verona.
ENDNOTES


6Marsh 79.


8Charlton 60.

9Kahn 171.

10Kahn 172.

11Kahn 172.


CHAPTER III

DESDEMONA: OTHELLO’S WILLING SACRIFICE

Unlike the audience of Romeo and Juliet, whose perception of the sacrificial deaths of the young lovers is shaped at the play’s beginning, we come to view Desdemona as Othello’s sacrificial figure as the tragedy culminates. Unaided by the outside point-of-view and the overall design provided by the Prologue’s declaring the children in Romeo and Juliet to be the necessary sacrifices of their parents’ strife, Othello’s audience comprehends the meaning of Desdemona’s death more through dramatic action than overt declaration. Desdemona, as does Cordelia later in Lear, gains her importance in the play’s exploration of the tragic experience because of the impact of her life and death on the tragic hero. A shift in focus has occurred. The idea of sacrifice has become associated not with the tragic hero as in Romeo and Juliet, but with a character who unwittingly becomes intricately involved with the tragic events. Desdemona dies not as a result of her own tragic decisions but as a result of the act of a deceived and disillusioned tragic hero. And since Desdemona is not a tragic-hero/sacrificial figure, we are not plagued with questions of accountability that surround the deaths of the young lovers. Desdemona’s innocence and purity remain unsullied in spite of Iago’s insinuations and machinations. When Desdemona dies smothered by the enraged general, we
could perceive her to be simply an innocent victim of injustice. But her murder eventually takes on heightened significance because her death and the subsequent revelation of her innocence intensifies and defines the tragic experience for Othello. For the audience who has been aware of her purity all along, the fact that Desdemona becomes in the end a willing sacrifice reinforces dramatically the nature of the relationship and the strength of the love she has shared with her husband. Her death and events precipitating her death dramatically shape our view of Othello and his view of himself.

Part of what distinguishes Othello's tragic experience from either Romeo's or Juliet's is his direct accountability for his lover's death. Thus, Othello lives to face the consequences of what he has done and to absorb the blow of Desdemona's sacrifice. While the sacrificial figures of both dramas share in their deaths a relative innocence that evokes an awareness of tragic loss and promotes a greater degree of self-realization and a measure of affirmation for their loved ones and the community at large, Shakespeare uses the concept of a sacrificial death to weave distinctive patterns in each play.

Although we are unable to anticipate the nature and the full significance of Desdemona's final destiny as we do in Romeo and Juliet, we detect early on the precarious situation facing both Othello and Desdemona. Boasting a vitriolic hatred for Othello, Iago has taken us into his confidence, declaring unashamedly his expertise in duplicity: "I am not what I am." Because of the importance Iago attaches to the unsuspecting Moor's downfall and consequently to Desdemona's demise, we
sense the events we are watching are weighty. Although Iago's explanation scarcely accounts for the magnitude of his hatred for Othello, in Iago's perverted mind he views the vengeful destruction of Othello's marriage and the undoing of Desdemona as a "wife for a wife," an even-handed justice, he reasons. Suspecting that "the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat" (II.i.289-93) and "twix't my sheets / H'as done my office" (I.iii.381-2), Iago depicts Desdemona as even payment for what Iago speculates to be Othello's sin. Even though Iago offers no evidence for his judgment and his case is unconvincing, the very thought of such an offense, whatever the offense may be, "Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (II.i.29). Although the specific plan and the totality of the destruction awaiting Othello and Desdemona have yet to be revealed, we detect Iago will not rest until the two lovers fall victim to his vengeance. If Iago fails to achieve a "wife for a wife," he plans to "put the Moor / At least into a jealousy so strong / That judgment cannot cure" (II.i.294-6). At the least, Iago threatens to destroy the equanimity of the two.

Even though we may continually hope for the best, our first inkling that Desdemona might in fact perish comes from the unsuspecting woman herself. To reassure the alienated Cassio that his place at Othello's right hand will not be filled in the lieutenant's absence, Desdemona offers intervention and steadfast commitment to his cause. "Assure thee, / If I do vow a friendship, I'll perform it / To the last article." Certain of the rightness of Cassio's case and confident of Othello's love for both Cassio and herself, Desdemona promises that Cassio's "solicitor
shall rather die / Than give thy cause away" (III.i.20-8). While we admire the unflinching strength of Desdemona's pledge, as audience we become uncomfortable with her commitment because we know that she unknowingly plays into the hands of Iago. We have just witnessed Iago easily dupe Roderigo and cleverly manipulate Cassio. In spite of and because of her spunk and determination, Desdemona may not fare well, we fear, against Iago's all-consuming, evil cunning. We have heard Iago's private boast that he will turn Desdemona's virtue against her, "And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (II.iii.-345-6). Correctly assisting Desdemona's character, Iago relies on her commitment to a worthy cause. ". . . So free, so kind, so apt," Desdemona holds "it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested" (II.iii.305-7).

Because of the attention paid to Desdemona and her character, we watch with interest to see just how she fits into the pattern of the play. Iago continually focuses his attention and ours on the importance of Desdemona and her virtue to the tragic undoing of Othello. At no point does Desdemona's role threaten merely to become like that of those many innocent victims who are lost or caught up in the machinery of events to become part of a greater, nameless weight that bears down eventually on the tragic hero. Shakespeare, it seems, intends to show us something of import through Desdemona. While Iago intends to use Desdemona in Othello's downfall, the efficacy of her sacrifice is on Othello's behalf, and thus her redemptive force eventually counteracts Iago's destructive force.
Iago considers Desdemona’s predictable goodness key to his success. Ironically, in proportion to Desdemona’s effort to do good on Cassio’s behalf, "She shall undo her credit with the Moor" (II.iii.343). Were Desdemona’s character less impeccable, we might view her death as a natural result of her own errors in judgment, a reaping of what she has sown. Were she deceitful, had she played false, we might view her as being undone by her own doing. Her death, however, does not depict the triumph of a greater evil over a lesser evil, but it is the temporary dominance of evil over a sense of goodness that cannot in the final analysis be destroyed or diminished, and her goodness has a redeeming quality for Othello finally and sacrificially. Because Desdemona’s virtue, so important to the emotional and psychological well-being of Othello, is ultimately confirmed, we learn more about the nature of the tragic experience for Othello through Desdemona’s sacrificial death.

From the play’s outset Iago’s observations as well as life’s events highlight Desdemona’s all-important impeccable character. Although we are first introduced to Desdemona through Iago’s lascivious bellowing under Brabantio’s window ("an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" [I.i.88-9]), the image, as we come to see, that dominates through the play is one of white innocence. The audience’s perception of the woman we have not met is influenced by the tone of the opening scenes. We have heard Iago’s plotting against the lovers and we brace ourselves for the onslaught on guard against what Iago might say and do. In his attempt to "Incense her kinsmen" (I.i.69), Iago’s provocative language depicting Othello as an "old black ram" only serves eventually to accentuate
Desdemona's unsullied maidenhood. Like Juliet, Desdemona has lived under the protection and domination of her father and has by all accounts been a dutiful daughter. In spite of the consternation and confusion that Desdemona's elopement generates, Brabantio's disbelief suggests he has in the past expected or assumed the best from his daughter. So great is Brabantio's trust in Desdemona's "Being not deficient, blind or lame of sense" (I.iii.63) that he presumes she must be influenced by witchcraft's "foul charms," "drugs or minerals" (I.ii.73-4) to have married Othello. And so before Desdemona appears on the stage we are faced with what Roderigo with all the objectivity of a rejected suitor deems her "gross revolt" (I.i.133).

She has broken with tradition, the familial structure and society's expectations. For Desdemona, and to a lesser degree for Romeo and Juliet, the decision they make not only breaks with what is expected of them; it is considered against nature. As unlikely as it seems in Verona's environment that a Capulet could love her mortal enemy, a Montague, so does Desdemona's choice of a lover appear to her father more unlikely because "unnatural." Perplexed, Brabantio marvels "and she—in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit everything-- / To fall in love with what she feared to look on!" Because her marriage seems "against all rules of nature," Brabantio suspects the practices of cunning hell," of some "dram," (I.iii.96-105) have charmed his daughter.

Since the marriage has already taken place, we do not witness as yet the thinking process that brings Desdemona to her decision and cannot as yet judge her actions on the basis of what she reveals. What we do
observe in Brabantio's reaction, however, causes the audience to hold our judgment of Desdemona in abeyance. Since Iago later uses Desdemona's deception of her father to shake Othello's doubt in her integrity, our sense of Brabantio's reaction to Desdemona's elopement is important. Were he a more rational, grieving father, were we to see him as Gratiano later describes him—a man who dies of a broken heart—we might more readily share his perspective that "she deceives me / Past thought!" (I.i.164-5) and censure Desdemona's actions. Because Brabantio over-reacts, however, the audience smiles knowingly, slightly amused at his ranting, his excessive hand-wringing, and his inflated, fluctuating emotions. To Roderigo, whom he has rejected categorically, Brabantio now cries, "O, would you have had her! / Some one way, some another". The distressed man's universal exhortation to all fathers, "trust not your daughters' minds / By what you see them act" we do not take as reasoned, serious advice. Most significantly, we are reluctant to share in the old man's conclusions and we become increasingly uncomfortable when his suppositions move to accusations. At first he finds it "probable, and palpable to thinking" that Othello has "practiced on her with foul charms, / Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals" (I.ii.73-6). But his assumptions become stated as factual assertions moments later before the Senate. "She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted / By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks" (I.iii.63-4). We share the Duke's opinion: "To vouch this is no proof / Without more certain and more overt test / Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods" (I.iii.106-8). Brabantio's melodramatic approach to the senate that prompts the concerned
query regarding Desdemona's welfare, "Dead?" and his woe-is-me answer, "Aye, to me" (I.iii.59) provides insight that might help to explain Desdemona's action. Perhaps Desdemona understands her father and partially anticipates his response to a proposed marriage and, therefore, chooses instead to present her father with a fait accompli.

Interestingly, before Shakespeare brings Desdemona on stage, we have heard enough to understand in part her decision to marry Othello. The general, we learn, is a frequent visitor to Brabantio's home and seems to have received his tacit approval on one level at least as an entertaining dinner guest. Othello remembers that Brabantio "loved me, oft wanted me" (I.iii.128). With Brabantio's prodding, Othello repeats those accounts of his life's exploits, thereby charming the attentive Desdemona. If Othello, inexperienced where women are concerned, notes that Desdemona reluctantly breaks away from his narratives to dispatch "with haste" her household responsibilities to return with "greedy ear" and "Devour up" Othello's discourse (I.iii.148-50), surely Brabantio should be expected to have noticed a change in his daughter's demeanor. That the young girl who has shunned a host of "wealthy curle'd darlings" (I.ii.68) displays such an altered response to Othello should give pause for thought. The father has either missed or refused to see the nature of their relationship and has allowed the relationship to flourish in his absence or to develop in his presence undetected or unacknowledged. Failing to come to terms with what he feels to be the unpleasant turn of events, the disappointed father admonishes Othello as they leave the senate chamber,
"Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.292-4).

For the audience the issue Brabantio raises becomes vital to our perception of Desdemona's responsibility in placing herself in what turns out to be a vulnerable position in a volatile situation. If we deem Brabantio's evaluation to be precise and perceptive, then we interpret Iago's allegations regarding Desdemona's integrity as well as Othello's destructive rage differently. If we believe Desdemona should have responded in another fashion, our view of what precipitates her death becomes altered. Desdemona sees what her father does not and chooses to break with tradition for the sake of a valued loved one. To the end of her life in the face of trying circumstances, Desdemona sustains her commitment. Later, as Iago begins to tamper with Othello's peace of mind, he echoes Brabantio's ominous warning. Reconstructing events to suit his own purposes, Iago reminds the general that his wife "did deceive her father, marrying you" (III.iii.206). Pointing to the only potentially questionable aspect of Desdemona's deportment, Iago reinterprets the situation to his advantage. With feigned amazement, Iago marvels how one "so young, could give out such seeming / To seel her father's eyes up" (III.iii.209-10). Iago suggests that Brabantio believes his daughter has practiced witchcraft to seal up her father's eyes. Unfortunately, Othello remembers Brabantio's warning but fails to recall that it is Othello, not Desdemona, that Brabantio has accused of using "foul charms" (I.ii.73) to cast a spell over his daughter. Othello fails to reason that if Brabantio stands incorrect in his accusation of Othello, he also might be erroneous
in his ill-boding prediction. Falling into Iago's trap, Othello does not challenge the accuracy of Iago's facts and, therefore, his interpretation of them. In the face of Iago's insinuations, Othello neglects to assume equal responsibility for the elopement and for his failure to inform Brabantio of his intentions in regard to Desdemona. It is, after all, Othello and not Desdemona, that Brabantio wants to haul before the Senate.

When Othello with obvious pride and confidence calls Desdemona to the Senate chamber to tell her side of the story, the young woman exonerates herself as a dutiful daughter and wife. Winsome in her straightforwardness, Desdemona in her first appearance engages the audience immediately, and we catch a glimpse of an assertiveness that later on works against her, moving her closer to death. In the face of her father's query, "Where most you owe obedience?" Desdemona avoids being skewered on the horns of the dilemma presented by the either-or nature of his question with a quiet, logical assertion of her "divided duty." A grateful daughter, Desdemona recognizes on one hand her father's part in her "life and education," and that life and education, she argues, have taught her to respect her father as "the lord of duty." On the other hand, Desdemona owes loyalty to her husband, and she cleverly attributes her new sense of duty to her husband to her following a parental, marital model. Just as her mother had shown deference, "preferring you before her father" (I.iii.180-9), Desdemona owes duty to the Moor.

In our first glimpse of the bride, Desdemona so candidly and passionately affirms her love for Othello that we later wonder at Iago's skillful manipulation of events to bring about Desdemona's destruction.
In spite of her father's earlier description of Desdemona as "a maiden never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" (I.iii.94-6), Desdemona unashamedly speaks of her absolute love, devotion, and desire for Othello. By contrast to Juliet, characterized by a more private, emerging sexuality, Desdemona appears a sexually mature, vibrant woman. To Othello's "honors and his violent parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." Bold in her public declaration, Desdemona stands ready to "trumpet to the world" that she "did love the Moor to live with him." Reluctant to endure the Moor's absence in war, Desdemona maintains her right to go with her husband, unwilling to forgo "The rites for which I love him" (I.iii.248-57). Desdemona uses a public forum to declare her allegiance to her spouse, an opportunity Romeo and Juliet can ill afford in their circumstances. While Desdemona shares with Juliet that desire for public identification with her lover, Juliet finds "Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud" else Echo would be made hoarse with the reception of "'My Romeo!'" (II.ii.161-4). Neither Juliet, who seems more vulnerable and less experienced than Desdemona, nor Desdemona successfully shares with her father her anticipated marriage. Instead, alienation and isolation from the family patriarchs become their common plight. In evident favor and deference to Desdemona as well as Othello, the Duke of Venice intercedes on Desdemona's behalf, suggesting she reside at her father's home while Othello fights in Cyprus. But Brabantio "Will not have it so" (I.iii.240). Quick to agree, Desdemona understands that her presence would only annoy her father more. Instead, Desdemona's decisive action places her totally in Othello's keeping as she voluntarily
moves away from her father’s protection and guidance. Desdemona "will not sacrifice her life or happiness on the altar of Authority, however willing she is to sacrifice both on the altar of Love". That she sacrifices the good will of her father and the security of her home to follow the general indicates her trust and confidence in the man she loves and makes her fate all the more poignant. Ironically, this break with her father in favor of her husband becomes the tool Iago later uses to undermine Othello’s trust.

Because the play opens as Desdemona’s elopement becomes a public matter and we observe her acting in the role of a wife, we come to view Desdemona as somewhat more experienced and assertive and seemingly less vulnerable than Romeo and, more particularly, Juliet. Although Romeo and Juliet consummate their marriage, the young innocents, especially Juliet, seem virginal in death. By contrast to the closely guarded secret of the Capulet-Montague union, the public disclosure of her marriage enables Desdemona to shed the shroud of secrecy and to be bold and straightforward. Her transparency would seem sufficient to rule out any insinuations that would cloud her reputation. No matter how candid Desdemona may be, she nonetheless ultimately becomes sacrificed in her attempts to live fully with her love. And her very innocence and youth become her undoing partly because she cannot anticipate or imagine the web Iago weaves.

When Iago begins his machinations, using Desdemona’s youth and spirit as points of attack, the reaction of Roderigo and Cassio confirms our initial response to Desdemona, and it would seem that Iago will succeed
only with difficulty. Iago, who has already declared, "I am not what I am" (I.i.65), describes Desdemona in such a manner that we conclude that she is not what he says. Dangling the possibility of requited love before the lovelorn Roderigo, Iago paints Desdemona as fickle. "She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice" (I.iii.347-8). Iago later renews his attack by suggesting that Desdemona's youthful appetites must needs be satiated with younger, more lovely flesh. Desdemona's "delicate tenderness will find itself abased, begin to heave and gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice" (II.i.229-32). As much as Roderigo pines for Desdemona, he "cannot believe that in her; she's full of most blessed condition" (II.i.245-6). Cassio, likewise, speaks of Desdemona in near reverential tones. When his general and his new wife go off to bed, Iago uses the moment to his advantage. With a poke in the ribs he chuckles to Cassio that Othello has "not yet made wanton the night" with Desdemona, who is "sport for Jove." Countering Iago's tone, Cassio proves more respectful. "She's a most exquisite lady." Cassio finds her a "fresh and delicate creature" rather than being "full of game." Instead of having a "provocative eye," she has an 'inviting eye" but yet proves "right modest." Cassio declares his general's wife to be, finally, "indeed perfection" (II.ii.16-25). Iago's slurs reflect his own corruption and emphasize for the audience Desdemona's virtue by contrast to his malignance.

Most importantly, Othello holds Desdemona's virtue and love paramount. Although we do not have a firm sense that his love is as soundly
based on understanding as Desdemona’s love for him, when he comes to believe she has lost her virtue, her seeming unfaithfulness proves catastrophic and brings Othello to tragedy. This “disillusion, whether justifiable or not,” this “desertion or betrayal,” whether real or perceived by the “one person” on which all one’s happiness on earth depends,” comprises part of the tragic experience that is distinctly Shakespearean. When we first observe the two lovers, however, their love and trust in each other seem unbounded, and the richness of potentialities Othello eventually destroys with his own hands makes his suffering all the more excruciating. Standing before the Senate and an angry father, Othello sends for Desdemona to speak for herself, obviously confident in her ability and her love. Before she appears on stage for the first time, Othello declares that if he is found to be "foul" in her report, then all he values, "The trust, the office, I do hold of you / Not only take away, but let your sentence / Even fall upon my life" (I.iii.117-20). Much like the young lovers in Romeo and Juliet, Othello inextricably links his life and happiness to Desdemona’s love, and therein lies the fatal danger. When Brabantio takes his parting shot at Othello, warning him that a daughter who deceives her father may well deceive her husband, Othello instantaneously responds, "My life upon her faith" (I.iii.294). "His own words predict, even predicate, his fall, but while he retains his oneness with Desdemona—or his sense of it—he is impregnable." After braving a threatening storm at sea, Othello finds Desdemona safely ahead of him on Cypress. In her arms his soul rests peacefully. "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy." Interestingly in light of the tragic
events yet to unfold, Othello frequently states his love for Desdemona in
terms of his soul. His wife is his "soul's joy" and in her presence
Othello's "soul hath its content so absolute / That not another comfort
like to this / Succeeds in unknown fate" (II.i.181-9). In his plot to
destroy Othello, Iago counts heavily on the bonding he has witnessed.
With his vivid physical images Iago later turns Othello's attention away
from Desdemona's soul to her body. In Iago's concept of love, he deems
Othello's "soul so enfettered to her love" that he believes Othello would
"renounce his baptism / All seals and symbols of redeemed sin"
(II.iii.326-8) if necessary for Desdemona. This enslavement that Iago
pictures, when threatened, brings such anguish that Othello commits a
heinous crime to find relief, leaving him later to doubt any possibility
of redemption. While Cassio warmly sums up the love he has observed,
calling Desdemona "our great captain's captain" (II.i.74), Iago describes
her in less favorable terms as the general's general. "Our general's wife
is now the general," censoring Othello for having so totally "given him­
self up to the contemplation . . . of her parts and graces" (II.ii.300-
3). And this total absorbtion becomes the key to Othello's undoing in the
hands of Iago.

Indeed, Desdemona has become the axis of Othello's world, and his
emotional and intellectual being dissolves in chaos without her.
"Perdition catch my soul / But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
/ Chaos is come again" (III.iii.90-3). Othello's view of himself, his
reality, and his equanimity hinge on the love and trust he has placed in
his wife. "When he begins to doubt Desdemona, he must doubt himself as
well, and begins to commit the moral suicide typical of the Shakespearean betrayer. The older warrior, inexperienced in love, has so thoroughly given himself to this relationship that he leaves himself vulnerable to Iago's evil intentions. Desdemona's trustworthiness becomes all the more crucial to her husband because of the totality of Othello's commitment. And the totality of his commitment defines for Othello the tremendous price he pays in the eventual "sacrifice" of his beloved.

In many ways the familiar story of Othello chronicles the destruction of virtue, innocence abused. Because we witness the unjustified erosion of Othello's confidence in Desdemona and follow step by step the path to disaster, we become more aware of how Othello could be brought to such an act of shame, to destroy Desdemona. Just as Iago depends on Desdemona's predictable virtue to catch them all, he also counts on Othello's "free and open nature / That thinks men honest that but seem to be so" (I.iii.390-4). Ironically, Othello's marriage and Desdemona's life become sacrificed because Othello presumes Iago to be an honest man. When Iago first raises doubts in Othello's mind, he takes advantage of the general's "constant, loving, noble nature" (II.i.283), twisting the knife to penetrate the center of his love for Desdemona. The cuckold who loves not the offender, Iago philosophizes to Othello, lives in bliss, but a special agony is in store for the man who loves and doubts. "But O, what damned minutes till he o'er / Who dotes, yet doubts--suspects yet strongly loves'" (III.iii.169-70). Were it not for the depth of Othello's love for Desdemona, his tragedy might not otherwise occur. And because he destroys the one person he cherishes above all others, his course is poignantly
ironic. When his belief in Desdemona begins to waver, Othello's universe begins to shake at its foundations. One moment Othello cries out in impotent, misdirected anger, "O curse of marriage, / That we call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!" while the next moment he relents in her presence, deciding, "If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself! / I'll not believe't" (III.iii.268-79). The more extreme Othello's fluctuations become, the more we anticipate disaster. Soon "Othello plunges almost directly from his total belief in Desdemona to a new belief just as total that she is false. The journey is a passionate plunge . . . ."6

Tragically, ironically Othello finds himself on the rack of Iago's cunning because of two virtues--his compelling love for his wife and his basic trust in the goodness of his fellow man. Othello properly concludes that a just man weighs his words carefully, reluctant to voice doubts or accusations, but improperly judges Iago's hesitancy as a token of integrity. Because he believes Iago knows more than he is revealing, Othello finds "these stops of thine fright me the more" (III.iii.120). And this fear soon takes a strong hold on Othello's mind and heart. Othello neglects to differentiate between truth and half-truth, valid inferences and specious insinuations, proper assumptions and misapplied information. That Othello falls into Iago's well-laid trap so unconsciously elicits compassion from the audience. His devastating failure to function properly as a husband and friend, and as a general and minister of justice, springs from a soul tormented by what he comes to believe is an unbounded love betrayed in the extreme degree. Iago has reduced Desdemona to a
thing, "a net" to catch the general. Othello suffers because he allows Iago to change his conception of Desdemona into a "thing" perceived in purely physical terms.

Oblivious to Iago's intentions, Othello at the outset does not challenge Iago's first insinuations that Cassio has stolen away "so guilty-like" (III.iii.39) as the two approach. Instead, the general focuses his attention on Cassio's identity rather than on Iago's innuendo. Rather than cutting to the heart of Iago's comments and leading questions, Othello allows their implications and Iago's graphic physical images to accumulate in his mind until they become reality of their own. Later, as Othello moves closer to the tragic bedroom scene, Iago wonders aloud if a woman could "be naked with her friend in bed / An hour or more, not meaning any harm?" Othello falls into Iago's trap by accepting the validity of Iago's question and failing to challenge the veracity of its implication. Othello rightly argues, "They that mean virtuously, and yet do so, / The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven" (IV.i.3-8). In Othello's mind the hypothetical assumes a life of its own and he comes to grief because he does not check the accuracy of Iago's implications.

Just as Iago knows how to turn Desdemona's predictably good nature into a net to catch his prey, so does he understand how to use the general's propensities against him. Iago dangles before him just enough information to cause Othello to pursue what Iago appears to be withholding. Using truths and half-truths, Iago establishes his credibility with Othello. Iago disarms Othello with his disclaimers, reminding him that
the ancient "imperfectly conjects" and questioning the wisdom of building "trouble / Out of his scattering and unsure observance" (III.iii.149-51).

Othello fails as general and a minister of justice to gather and weigh properly the evidence at hand before acting as judge and executioner of Desdemona. Initially, Othello fluctuates between belief and unbelief in regard to the accused and the accuser. "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not; / I think that thou art just, and think thou art not" (III.iii.384-5). But already Othello has given the suspicions aroused by Iago's insinuations the status of facts. "I swear 'tis better to be much abused / Than but to know't a little" (III.iii.335-6). Unfortunately, Othello fails to take inventory of what he does or does not know, partially because to confirm his doubts would be excruciatingly painful. The general adopts an ignorance-is-bliss mindset that would herald disaster were he to apply the same logic in battle. "I saw't not, thought it not, it harmed not me." As Othello gropes for peace of mind by denying the importance of honestly confronting reality, the general reflects a limited perspective that places him at the center for determining the nature and boundaries of reality. Ignoring the importance of accurate perception, Othello claims "he would have been happy if the general camp . . . had tasted her sweet body / So I had nothing known." Although Othello defines her body as an object to be shared, his audience on and off the stage knows if only one person has shared Desdemona's delights, it would most certainly matter. While Othello rationalizes a man "that is robbed, not wanting what is stol'n, may not be robbed at all" (III.-iii.339-43), Desdemona's virtue is not a trifle which is neither not
wanted nor not missed. Othello's attempts to shrug off the importance of Desdemona's virtue in order to protect himself from the pain of discovery and acknowledgement prompts calamity.

Unfortunately, Othello has already arrived at what he considers a noble basis for enduring the suffering he presently confronts rather than pressing for full disclosure with Desdemona that would eliminate his pain. This kind of unnecessary torment Othello experiences produces confusion, frustration, and rage and leads to tragedy. Only after Othello in a tragic, irreversible act offers up his wife as what he would believe is a "sacrifice" does he face the searing pain, the tragic suffering which eventually leads him to a better understanding of himself. At this juncture Othello suffers self-delusion and self-deception. He adopts a mindset that later manifests itself in the bedroom scene as he claims to act out of lofty motives. Othello declares he would "rather be a toad / And live upon the vapor of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others' uses," but then decides "'tis the plague of great ones." In his delusion and disillusion Othello defines Desdemona as a "thing" and himself as a "great one" and in doing so he sets up the basis for the murder/sacrifice to come. When the general resigns himself to the situation defining his predicament as "destiny unshunnable, like death," part of "this forked plague" (III.iii.270-6) fated to him, he precludes the possibility of open interaction and discovery with Desdemona. Like Capulet, an initiator of tragedy, who stops communication with Juliet, isolating her in her own home, Othello, the tragic hero, fails to communicate his doubts, leaving Desdemona unaccountably alienated.
Besieged by doubt, Othello's cry, "Thou has put me on the rack," marks the pivotal point for Othello's faith in his wife's innocence. While Rabkin suggests, "It is Othello's tragedy that he tries to validate his faith" in his wife, citing Iago's comment "honor is an essence that's not seen," Othello searches for tangible evidence of guilt, not innocence. Inflamed and "eaten up with passion" (III.iii.391) as Iago observes, Othello calls for "full disclosure." "Would I were satisfied!" (III.iii.390), but satisfaction on any level seems an illusive goal. Already, Othello finds, "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage," is now "begrimed and black / As my own face" (III.iii.386-8). Cloaking himself in the trappings of justice, Othello demands Iago's incontrovertible evidence. "Make me to see't; or at the least so prove't / That the probation bears no hinge nor loop / To hang a doubt on—or woe upon thy life!" (III.iii.364-6). When the general relies solely on what he observes, he places enormous faith in his ability to decipher accurately with no outside verification. But in fact his call for observable proof follows Othello's wail over a world already collapsed by the weight of whispered inference, relegating "proof" to a substantiation of bias. Revealing his predilection, Othello orders, "Villain be sure thou prove my love a whore!" Iago knows what Othello does not--Desdemona stands condemned already before her husband, the general. As Iago observes, "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ" (III.iii.322-4). By limiting himself to "ocular proof" without other witness or evidence, Othello places himself in the precarious position of being the sole discerner of truth and the dispenser
of justice. While claiming ocular proof an impossibility, even if the two lovers were "as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys" (III.iii.403), Iago paints so vivid a mental picture, the image that he creates has its effect.

When confronted with Iago's provocative account of Cassio's purported dream, Othello responds on the basis of attribution and circumstantial evidence. Even Iago manipulatively, yet accurately, labels the information offered only "imputation and strong circumstance," reminding the enraged general, "Nay, this was but his dream." Cassio's dream "may help to thicken the other proofs / That do demonstrate thinly." Although Iago may argue "Yet we see nothing doing," the subversive picture incites the violent reaction, "I'll tear her to pieces!" (III.iii.427-32). Thus Othello stifles any chance that he might sort through the emotionally entangled evidence to arrive at the truth in a reasonable fashion. Even as Iago hypocritically calls for moderation and restraint, both he and the audience know Othello stands on the other side of reason. Iago has already launched Othello's bark on an "icy current and compulsive course" that leaves no room for moderation or fair hearing. Even Othello comprehends his "bloody thoughts" propel him forward at a "violent pace" until "wide revenge / Swallow them up" (III.iii.457-60). The earlier interaction between Othello and Iago highlight Iago's duplicity and Othello's simplicity. But Othello reaches a point where his sins of omission--his failure to defend his faith in Desdemona and his failure to pursue truth properly--threaten to become sins of commission. Later, he attempts to rationalize what he calls the sacrifice of his wife for the good of all,
but he fails to perceive correctly the larger picture because his vision is clouded with misinformation.

In the past Othello has deemed it conspiracy against a friend "If thou but think'st him wronged, and mak'st his ear / A stranger to thy thoughts" (III.iii.142-4). Othello does not, however, speak his mind openly to either his friend or his wife until he has already found them guilty and his precipitous actions leave no room for honest dialogue. The general will not confront Cassio when he comes to believe his lieutenant carelessly uses and discards Desdemona as though she were an object. Instead, Othello reduces himself to lurking about, eavesdropping on Cassio to garner information. The picture is not a pretty one, and our engagement wanes. If only Othello had stepped forward for clarification or confrontation, tragedy might have been averted. Once again the audience of Othello, as with Romeo and Juliet, confronts the near-miss quality of the two tragedies and we wonder "What if . . . ." Had Brother John not been detained by a plague, had Balthasar not so precipitously departed for Mantua bearing false news, had Friar Laurence been able to quicken his pace to the tomb, the outcome might have been different. The audience senses a certain inevitability, however, in the manner in which factors outside the direct control of the two young lovers move them toward their deaths. In Othello it is not fate or a destructive climate but a specific agent, Iago, that works in a very personal, deliberate way to poison the mind of the tragic hero. Consequently, Othello holds his and Desdemona's fate more clearly in his own hands. As deviously cunning as Iago may be, and as understandable as Othello's pain and confusion may be, Othello
stands more immediately culpable for the series of choices he makes that lead to disaster. Part of what defines the tragic experience for the audience are those nagging questions of what-might-have-been. We dread the final outcome as we watch Othello, especially as he relates to his wife. The story of Othello’s deception and downfall is by now quite familiar, but the way in which his guilt shapes the fate of Desdemona heightens our awareness of her innocence, the process that brings her to her fate, and the meaning of her sacrifice.

Not only as a minister of justice but as a husband Othello falters. He breaks his pattern of conferring with Desdemona and of allowing her to speak for herself. Earlier he willingly stakes his life on Desdemona’s opinion of him and delights in her ability to speak for herself before the senate. When Brabantio cautions that his daughter who deceived him might turn the tables on her husband, Othello instantly fires back, "My life upon her faith!" (I.iii.294). Ironically, Othello possesses more evidence of Desdemona’s deception of her father on Othello’s behalf, yet he trusts his wife, relying upon her love for him and his for her. It is not until Desdemona lies smothered to death that Othello begins to perceive the dangers of his all-consuming love reduced to an all-consuming jealousy. He has not seen that Desdemona, cherishing the love of her husband, has provided a model for proper thinking which, if followed by Othello, could have changed the course of their lives. Desdemona’s interactions with Othello appeal to a cognitive basis for trust. Pursuing her suit on Cassio’s behalf, Desdemona insists that logic and fairness, not love, be the basis for her interaction with Othello. But Othello does not hear the
logic of her appeal or discern her transparent goodwill. Instead, he responds on an emotional rather than a cognitive basis. Charmed by his wife's persistent entreaty, Othello concedes, "I will deny thee nothing" (III.iii.76). Desdemona rightly counters that fairness, not love, should establish the merits of the case. Reconciliation with his long-time friend Cassio is, after all, in Othello's best interest, as are warm gloves and nourishing food. Intrigued by her spunk but obviously preoccupied by his unfinished conversation with Iago, Othello fluctuates between love and chaos because he has no sure anchor. Othello proves unable to hear his wife because he busily sorts through the emotions of the moment. Although Othello vows "fresh suspicions" will not wreak havoc with his peace of mind for "To be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved," he does not act in a straightforward manner that makes resolution attainable. It is not long afterward that Othello, obviously shaken by Iago's whisperings, brushes aside his wife's handkerchief and solicitations as inadequate, claiming a headache as an excuse for his state. Were there sufficient evidence to warrant suspicion, we might view Othello's silence as a judicious attempt not to alert his wife that she is being watched. But to place Desdemona under surveillance rather than to take her into his confidence demonstrates an early presumption of guilt.

Othello's insensitivity and apparent need to punish the uninformed Desdemona precipitates the loss of the all-important handkerchief. He rejects the handkerchief and her efforts with the demeaning "Your napkin is too little" (III.iii.287), belying the significance he later attaches to the handkerchief. He does not recognize or admit his part in its
disappearance or remember that it was Desdemona's concern for her husband that prompts the loss of the treasure. Strangely, Othello has not shared the story attached to the heirloom with the one he considers his soul's mate until he begins to quiz Desdemona. Considering Othello's claims of emotional attachment to the handkerchief as well as his propensity to share intricate details of his past with Desdemona, it seems strange that his story, if it were true and not more of a test of Desdemona's response, would not have been shared at its presentation to the new bride. As though he is trying to read Desdemona's thoughts, he tells how an Egyptian charmer who "could almost read / The thoughts of people" gave the handkerchief to his mother. Love, so the legend goes, depends on his mother's possession of the cloth. "But if she lost it / Or made a gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathed" (III.iv.60-2). Threatening in tone for the informed audience, the story reverberates with the sound of love turned into defensive loathing. If the story be true, it certainly is freshly tinged with the vow Othello just minutes before has made to dethrone love and to let "tyrannous hate" (III.iii.449) rule. Stunned by the story and her husband's startling and "rash" speech, Desdemona rightly wonders, "Is't possible?" If to lose the handkerchief or to give it away brings "perdition / As nothing else could match, "understandably Desdemona wishes "to God that I had never seen't!" (III.iv.67-79).

In the face of an irrational husband, Desdemona attempts to deflect the impact of her husband's persistent questions about the handkerchief's whereabouts. Believing Othello attempts to distract her from Cassio's suit and perhaps hoping to buy time to locate the lost heirloom, Desdemona
maintains it is not lost and rejoins, "But what an if it were?" Her tenacity in pursuing Cassio's case and her final, double-edged counter-charge, "I' faith, you are to blame" presents a view of Desdemona that later gives further meaning to her final position as a sacrifice. While Desdemona may eventually become a willing sacrifice, she does not thoughtlessly or willingly allow herself to be victimized. Astounded at her husband's behavior, she scarcely knows who he is. "My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him, / Were he in favor as in humor altered." But the woman does know herself and her own motives. By "every spirit sanctified" she has spoken her best on Cassio's behalf, yet she stands "within the blank of his displeasure" (III.iv.124-8). While we might wish that Desdemona had been more assertive with her husband, owning that her own grief at the loss of the handkerchief is punishment enough, undoubtedly Othello would not have been pacified or enlightened. Othello's failure to be candid with his wife and his punitive response communicate a sense of anger and hostility that confuses rather than clarifies. Desdemona sees little meaning in the displeasure she encounters. "Alas, what ignorant sin have I committed?" she challenges. Maintaining that Othello wrongs her by calling her "Impudent strumpet!", she contends as a Christian she has preserved "this vessel for my lord / From any other foul unlawful touch (IV.ii.81-4). Both Desdemona's demeanor and her charge center our attention on her purity and Othello's error in judgment.

In a spirit consistent with past decisions and anticipatory of her actions at her death, Desdemona gives her husband the full benefit of the doubt that he does not accord her. Affairs of state, she reasons, must
have "puddled his clear spirit" and caused him to "wrangle with inferior things." Reminding Emilia that Othello is indeed human—"Nay, we must think men are not gods"—Desdemona chides herself for "Arrainging his unkindness with my soul." With more evidence at hand than Othello possesses about his spouse's behavior, Desdemona proves more charitable, chiding herself for the frustration she feels with her mate. With an observation which unknowingly and ironically describes her own situation, she comments, "But now I find I had suborned the witness, / And he's indicted falsely" (III.iv.143-54). Yet Desdemona does not obsequiously assume unwarranted guilt but emphatically declares to Emilia, "I never gave him cause" (III.iv.158) for his jealously. In response, Emilia places responsibility for Othello's demeanor on Othello's nature. Jealous souls "are not jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous" (III.iv.160-1). Later, when Othello's rage spills over and he strikes Desdemona before a shocked Lodovico, Desdemona quietly maintains her equanimity: "I have not deserved this." Although pained at Othello's ridicule and his condemning dismissal, Desdemona maintains a self-composure, stating her exit in terms of a choice. "I will not stay to offend you" (IV.i.233-40). Obviously, Desdemona does not willingly play the role of passive victim or self-made martyr.

The placement and rapid progression of the last scenes highlight Desdemona's unspoiled innocence and forgiving nature in the face of Othello's tainted, vengeful mindset. The great gulf between the truth as we witness it and reality as Othello perceives it makes the impending catastrophe seem so unnecessary. Yet those last hours before Desdemona's
death prepare us for her final act of love and forgiveness. Stunned over Othello's behavior, Desdemona ironically turns to Iago, her "good friend," for counsel. Gently censuring Othello for his abrasiveness, Desdemona declares Othello should use "gentle means and easy tasks" (IV.ii.112) if he needs to chide her. Even though she knows Othello's response is unjustified, still on bended knee she pleads for Iago's intercession on her behalf. She laments, "I know not how I lost him" and is eager to learn what "trespasses" in "thought or actual deed" (IV.ii.150-3) have prompted this alienation. Were it not for the reminder of Desdemona's abiding love for, and to a lesser degree Cassio's admiration for, Othello, the decision Desdemona makes to become a willing sacrifice would seem pointless, trivialized because such an offering seems unwarranted. Discussing Othello's hostility with Emilia and Iago, Desdemona cannot even comprehend the possibility of such an evil that would prompt "some cogging, cozening slave" to have "devised this slander." Incredulous, Desdemona responds, "If any such there be, heaven pardon him!" (IV.ii.133-5). Her predisposition to pardon such an offender provides a glimpse into the aspect of her character manifested at her death. Even though Desdemona remains puzzled and uninformed as to how she lost her husband, she reaffirms her abiding love for him. Desdemona's devotion reminds the audience of the man she originally found worthy of her love, and our minds are jarred with just how greatly he has been co-opted. Although he may "shake me off / To beggarly divorcement," Desdemona still loves "him dearly." Foreshadowing events to come, she declares, "his unkindness may defeat my life, / But never taint my love" (IV.ii.157-61). In the face
of Emilia's injunction regarding husbands, "The ills we do, their ills instruct us so," Desdemona hopes that God will grant her the ability "Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (IV.iii.104). Before the fatal moment of crisis she has articulated the governing principle of her life.

Just before the catastrophe we see Desdemona in a poignantly human scene as she unknowingly prepares herself for her deathbed. In anticipation of her husband's return and in hopes she can bring about reconciliation, Desdemona has Emilia make up her marriage bed with special sheets in a warm gesture of innocence and love. She identifies herself closely with her union and requests that "one of those same sheets" should be her shroud, unaware of just how soon she faces death. So steadfast is she in her love for Othello that "My love doth so approve him / That even his stubborness, his checks, his frowns . . . have grace and favor in them." But those frowns have had their unsettling effect, and Desdemona cannot help but sing the haunting lyrics of Barbary's "Willow," a song of "he she loved proved mad." When she reaches the line, "Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve," (IV.iii.18-50), Desdemona becomes suddenly aware that she is not remembering the lines correctly. But the line reflects what she has expressed to Emilia and points toward her self-sacrifice. Because we see a warm, passionate creature, who cannot conceive of hurting Othello "for the whole world" (IV.iii.78), we grieve at her loss.

The stark contrast between Desdemona's unwillingness to return evil for evil and Othello's vengefulness makes his path seem all the more bloody and unnecessary. For the audience who has not been informed by a
Prologue of the necessity of the death to come, we have no assurance that any good can come from what we are about to witness. To call the woman who "cannot say 'whore'" and who "would not do such a wrong / For the whole world" (IV.iii.77-8) a "strumpet" (V.i.34) hits a raw nerve with the audience, for Desdemona's purity is never so dazzlingly white as in the concluding scenes.

Ambivalent to the end, Othello struggles because either course he takes will be painful, and the audience catches fleeting glimpses of the possibility of tragedy averted. And tragedy nearly averted heightens our sense of both the awful waste of missed opportunities and the weight of guilt resting on the tragic hero who could, but does not, choose another path. Othello vacillates between a consuming desire for Desdemona and his consuming desire to inflict enormous pain, reflecting the intensity of his own. One moment he cries, "O, the world hath not a sweeter creature!" and the next he threatens, "I'll chop her into messes!" (IV.i.180-1, 196). As Iago maneuvers the general toward final commitment to action, Othello cries, "But yet the pity of it, Iago! / O, Iago, the pity of it, Iago" (IV.i.180-93). Othello apparently recognizes his own vulnerability and opts to poison Desdemona, refusing to confront her, fearful "lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again" (IV.i.201-2). It is her body, not her mind or her virtue or her innocence, that Othello contemplates. We only wish that Othello would listen to Emilia, who has ample opportunity to observe her mistress's private moments, and finds her the epitome of circumspection. "For if she be not honest, chaste, and
true, / There's no man happy; the purest of their wives / Is foul as slander (IV.ii.17-9).

Othello's ambivalence might spark false hope on the part of the audience were we not so informed regarding the cunning Iago. Forcing the general into a position of direct, intense involvement and culpability, Iago proposes that Desdemona be strangled in "the bed she hath contaminated." The vivid picture feeds Othello's smoldering jealousy and provides a psychological justification for the general, who finds "The justice of it pleases" (IV.i.203-5) and forges a link with the earlier vows he and Iago have taken. In an earlier scene with ceremonial proportions Othello and Iago kneel with the stars of heaven as their witnesses and offer up a formal declaration of intent. In a self-deception which becomes even more pronounced in the fatal bedroom scene, Othello in "sacred vow" before heaven pledges to "ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love" (III.iii.458) but to execute revenge. The aura of ceremony adds a false sense of dignity, elevating murder to the higher level of a noble mission. Later still, struggling with what he has come to believe and what he wants to believe, Othello steels himself as he approaches his sleeping wife to carry out his pledge.

When the sleeping Desdemona awakens to comprehend the magnitude of the charges leveled against her and to face impending death, fearfully she argues her case. That she maintains her innocence and her love for Othello so passionately challenges the validity of Othello's act, denouncing what he intends as "murder" and not "sacrifice." To understand the distinction Othello articulates between sacrifice and murder and to
understand his perceptions of events and himself, we must consider the scene that immediately precedes and ultimately precipitates the final bedroom scene. Inspired and instructed by what Othello believes is the "honest and just" Iago's execution of Cassio, a death motivated by "Iago's noble sense" of his "friend's wrong" (V.i.31-2), the Moor leaves the bloody street scene to administer what he considers even-handed justice on his wife. The same failure to be fully informed that precipitates his downfall earlier plagues him again. Cassio, Othello believes, has already paid for his sin with his life, and the Moor hurries to bring Desdemona to her "unblest fate" (V.i.34).

At first when he enters the bed chamber the honorable Othello rationalizes to himself, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (V.ii.1) that impels him, that justifies his act. Acting in his role as general and minister of justice and not the injured husband, Othello attempts to cast his actions in an objective, honorable light reminiscent of his ceremonial vow of vengeance before the stars of heaven. "Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars! It is the cause" (V.ii.1-6). To avoid future dishonor, Desdemona "must die, else she'll betray more men. Othello purports to offer Desdemona as a sacrifice on the altar for "the cause" as propitiation for what he believes to be her certain sin.

But for Othello the idea of sacrifice becomes more a personal one as he agonizes at the bedside of his beautiful wife. Standing at the edge of darkness, he realizes the finality of extinguishing "the light." The magnetic force of her physical presence almost persuades "Justice to break her sword" (V.i.17). Echoing the idea that his suffering is part of the
plague of the great ones, Othello sees his anguish not as self-inflicted by misperception but as righteous and loving. "This sorrow's heavenly; / It strikes where it doth love" (V.i.17-22).

But blind rage and not blind justice propels Othello and precipitates Desdemona's sacrifice. Fired by Iago's cunning deception and misled by appearance and assumptions, Othello fails to determine Desdemona's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Thinking himself magnanimous, Othello exhorts her to confess her sins and make peace with heaven. While he may kill her body, he would not kill her "unprepared spirit" or her soul (V.i.31). Othello's would-be generous moment changes abruptly in the face of the "never's" of Desdemona's passionate self-defense. And that Desdemona will not be maligned, that she will not play the passive victim, shapes our response to Desdemona later as a willing sacrifice. Desdemona's categorical denial so threatens Othello's view of reality that he becomes irrational, despite his futile attempt at rationalization. A "bloody passion" (V.ii.46) shakes his frame. So fixed is that "strong conception" (V.iv.55) of Desdemona's sin that her very defense, her assertion of truth, condemns her, and she becomes a "perjured woman" in her husband's eyes. Incapable by now of an accurate perception of himself and others, the proud Othello becomes offended. Ironically, Othello views himself as victim: "thou dost stone my heart." And the murder Othello plans reflects his attempt to gain control. "It is Desdemona's power to hurt which Othello seeks to eliminate by ending her life." Desdemona's claims of love and innocence impugn his judgment and motives, making him call what he intends to do "a murder," rather than a "sacrifice" (V.ii.63-5).
If Othello does kill her in passionate anger, it would be in his view a "murder" and not the selfless "sacrifice" he wants to believe he is performing as judge against his will. Whether or not Othello's comprehension of the definition and requirements of a sacrifice reflect his Christian wife's world-and-life-view or that of any other, Othello reflects self-delusion in his applying the term to what he intends. Were Desdemona truly as tainted as he asserts, then she would hardly qualify as a spotless sacrifice to keep others from sin or to pay penance for it. He must view her death at best as an execution, retribution and contamination control, perhaps, but certainly not a substitutionary sacrifice. Perhaps "her death would be a sacrifice if she repented, a sacrifice that would keep her from further sin, a sacrifice of her life to save her soul." But she has nothing to repent as the murder scene unfolds no opportunity to do so. Othello never thinks of Desdemona as a sacrifice but likes to think of himself as acting sacrificially. Given his anger and passion, we see him as a murderer.

What Othello "thought a sacrifice" for the greater good of the community and for the sake of a balance of justice becomes threatened by Desdemona's truth claims. Even though she ultimately functions in the larger perspective as a sacrificial figure whose death finally brings the tragic hero to a sense of himself, nevertheless, Othello stands guilty of murder. It is an incensed, not a righteous, Othello, blinded by jealousy and pride and haunted by the truth, that rushes down his predisposed path to smother his wife's pleas in a pillow. The picture of a struggling sacrifice pleading for time—for banishment, a day, a half an hour, a
moment for prayer—sears the mind. Had Desdemona's pleas for banishment been granted, the nature of the play would have been altered. The play becomes a tragedy when Othello, ignoring his pleading wife, destroys the one person he has held dearest in the world. Impatient to be done with it, Othello grants no time for even a prayer. The urgency of the moment stems from what Othello believes to be Cassio's certain death. If Cassio be dead, there is no honorable alternative, Othello reasons. With the haunting cry "It is too late" (V.ii.83), Othello smothers his wife and with his own hands irrevocably changes their destinies. At the opening of the scene Othello on the cognitive level understands the finality of what he intends; "But once put out thy light..." "there is no power to "relume" (V.ii.10-3) it. Once he faces the cold reality, Othello finds himself in total darkness.

The ever-so-bold general never appears so weak as he does in his brief attempt to shift responsibility for Desdemona's death to his wife. "You heard her say herself, it was not I." The denial undercuts his earlier claim to an honorable murder. But confronted with Emilia's adherence to truth, Othello comes closer to owning his culpability: "She's like a liar gone to burning hell!" (V.ii.128-30). In the face of Emilia's scathing denunciations Othello clings tenaciously and recklessly to his position, attempting to justify his actions. His wife was false, a whore who was topped by Cassio. Even as he hears the finality of Emilia's "Perchance, Iago I will ne'er go home" (V.ii.198) and as the general collapses on the bed in anguish, he still maintains Desdemona is foul. To do otherwise is to stand naked in the face of a shattered world
that is crumbling around him. Instead, Othello, who has given Iago’s insinuations the status of truth, now distorts those allegations to support his faltering position. Desdemona and Cassio "have the act of shame a thousand times committed" (V.ii.112-3) in what must have been the most creative use of spare time imaginable.

When the news that Cassio lives reaches a startled Othello, suddenly "murder’s out of tune, / And sweet revenge grows harsh" (V.ii.116-7). He catches a glimpse of his present and future reality. While Desdemona lies dying because of events unknown to her, she grasps in part the significance of Othello’s response and rightly judges she has been "falsely murdered" (V.ii.118). Desdemona, who knows she dies a guiltless death, attempts to become a propitiation for Othello's certain sin by absorbing his guilt. Reflecting her earlier prayer, "God me such usage send, / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (IV.iii.103-4), Desdemona returns good for evil. In her final act of forgiveness she becomes a willing sacrifice, taking upon herself her husband’s sin. Interestingly, Desdemona, who challenges Othello’s illegitimate use of "sacrifice" for the death he imposes upon her, gives meaning to her death by becoming a sacrifice of her own volition. "Nobody--I myself" have done the deed, and the woman facing eternity perjures herself in a final gesture of love toward her "kind lord" (V.ii.125-6). Perhaps she senses that events larger than Othello’s present scope of control have shaped their destinies. Romeo and Juliet, by contrast, neither intend nor realize that the choices they make to forfeit their lives rather than to live in a world without their loved one will serve as an instrument of peace.
The sacrifice Desdemona makes influences our perception of Othello. Although we see his glaring error in wrongly judging his wife’s impeccable character, we also observe that while Desdemona does not know what prompts Othello’s behavior, she understands something momentous has occurred to change his usual demeanor into inexplicable rage. And in her last moments she learns that Othello has been misinformed regarding Cassio’s death and her innocence. She has been unnecessarily and falsely murdered, and her husband’s life begins to unravel before him. In one final gesture she attempts to bridge the gulf between them. Desdemona’s forgiveness reaffirms her love for Othello, reflects her faith in him, and reminds the audience, who has seen the worst side of Othello, of his worth. Her last breath describes what she has known Othello to be under most circumstances—"her kind lord" (V.ii.126).

Othello, however, fails initially to understand or to appreciate the significance of his dying wife’s communication even though Emilia tidily sums it up: "O, the more angel, she, / And you the blacker devil!" (V.ii.131-2). Emilia repeatedly hammers away with the truth at the false image Othello has constructed in his mind. But Othello has irrevocably committed himself to a position that he all the more must now emphatically reinforce in order to justify his deed. The final shattering blow comes when Emilia names Iago as the link between the all-important handkerchief and the accused wife.

Only when Emilia sacrifices her life to speak the truth does Othello begin to grasp the nature of reality and his place in it. Perhaps the heinous sight of Iago’s killing his wife allows Othello to see his own
guilt more vividly through projection. Montano's shocked pursuit of the "notorious villain" and "damned slave" prompts Othello to confess, "I am not valiant neither" (V.ii.249-53). The most "shameful" of the "acts of shame" that a tragic hero might commit appears to "belong to the category of acts of betrayal or rejection," and Othello has rejected and eliminated Desdemona.

Desdemona's death brings Othello face-to-face with the overwhelming losses he has brought upon himself. As he struggles to come to terms with reality, he focuses at first on his failure as a general before he is able to confront his culpability as a husband and lover. Stripped of his weapons and his pride, his sense of himself as a man is lost. With an air of resignation Othello asks, "But why should honor outlive honesty?" (V.ii.246-7). Painfully, Othello reminisces of more honorable days of bravery and power when with "this arm and this good sword" he could make his way through overwhelming odds. More important, than Othello's loss of honor or public esteem is the loss of honor or personal integrity. When he wonders why honor should outlive honesty, "A conscious self-debasement (not unlike Lear's 'I am a very foolish fond old man') is involved." But now, Othello confronts his loss of strength and ability to control his own destiny. "Who can control his fate? Tis not so now" (V.ii.263-6). His lament in part reflects that he realizes too late that he has forfeited his right to that control by allowing Iago to do so.

Othello, however, never fully recognizes his enemy or comprehends the motives and machinations working against him, and neither do we. Just as Othello's attempts to revenge himself on Iago are thwarted, so are his
efforts to understand why Iago, the "demi-devil," has "ensnared my soul and body." Although Roderigo's letter confirms Iago's guilt and provides him with sketchy details of the plot to undo the general, Othello never fully understands the bitter passion eating away at his ancient's heart. While we have heard Iago's resentment over being passed over as Othello's lieutenant, and we have heard his vow "a wife for a wife" (II.i.293), Iago's extreme hatred has no simple answer except in his depraved mind. Othello eventually dies uninformed that Desdemona, partly because of a vague suspicion on Iago's part but more because of Iago's evil nature, has become a sacrifice to satisfy the ancient's twisted notion of even-handed justice. In fact, a measure of the perverted joy in which Iago revels lies in the control he maintains to the last over the information Othello seeks. "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know" (V.ii.301-3). Iago refuses to say another word.

As a general who has plotted the death of a subordinate, Othello quickly owns his guilt and asks pardon of Cassio. Cassio's warm, "Dear general, I never gave you cause" reminds us of the esteem in which the lieutenant holds his general and speaks of what Othello has lost. Functioning more like the honorable man Cassio has known, Othello asks forgiveness of Cassio, a pardon he cannot entreat from his dead wife. As a warrior Othello observes that he should no longer be feared because he has no honor left to defend. "Let it go all" (V.ii.247) for there is nothing left.

As a husband and lover, Othello finds life without Desdemona to be meaningless, without definition. Here at his "journey's end," Othello
appears a stranger to himself. As a shell of a man that once was, the tragic hero describes himself as "he that was Othello" (V.ii.284). When he smothers Desdemona, Othello destroys his life and his sense of identity. Not only has he lost all earthly happiness and reason for living, but Othello believes he has forfeited heaven as well. When he meets his wife in death, certainly her look will "hurl my soul from heaven, / And fiends will snatch at it" (V.ii.275-6). Certainly neither the look Desdemona might give nor Desdemona's sacrifice become atonement or damnation for Othello's soul. While Desdemona's forgiveness cannot determine Othello's eternal destiny, her kindness makes an enormous impact on his remaining present hour.

The awful realization of the unspeakable loss Othello has brought upon himself makes life unbearable. The fact that with his own hands he has destroyed someone of immeasurable value makes his situation all the more painful. The moment becomes all the more poignant because Othello recaptures what he believes he had lost when the prize is beyond his reach. His wife's lips are already cold when he longs "to die upon a kiss" (V.ii.359). The "heavenly sight" (V.ii.276) of his pure wife lying dead, unnecessarily, painfully sacrificed on her unstained marriage bed torments Othello. As a relief from his present agony, he may well wish to be roasted in sulphur and washed in "steep-down guls of liquid fire!" (V.ii.280-1) to quench the torments of his soul. Considering the mental anguish Othello experiences, death promises relief from the present pain. "Tis happiness to die" (V.ii.290), Othello concludes.
Othello exemplifies the kind of tragic suffering that comes from "the realization of having irrevocably lost, through one's own blind deed, the person or object on which all one's happiness on earth depends." While Romeo in his final hours confronts a world meaningless without his Juliet, he is not plagued by disillusionment with his bride nor with the anguish of having destroyed with his own hands his love and happiness. In his soul-wrenching final moments Othello grieves that he, "Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (V.ii.347-8). Although Othello's sees in part his responsibility, his vision at first seems impaired by the blinding pain he experiences. While he answers to "a rash and most unfortunate man" (V.ii.283), Othello mistakenly describes himself as an "honorable murderer" who did nothing "in hate, but all in honor" (V.ii.295). We remember, however, Desdemona's apt description of "the bloody passion that shakes" (V.ii.44) her husband's frame. When the cause of the passion motivating Othello to murder what he loves most proves unwarranted, the pent-up, irrational anger diffuses and fades from his recollection. With the reaffirmation of his wife's love, the chaos of Othello's world dissipates, and semblance of order returns, but it is a world reconfigured and redefined.

The shift which occurs in Othello's response stands as a final testament to the power of the love Othello and Desdemona have shared. As Othello first begins to grasp the truth of what has transpired, the enraged general directs his hostility toward Iago's monstrous duplicity. But when he cannot escape the guarded chamber and Emilia's haunting reminder, "Moor, she was chaste / She loved thee cruel Moor," (V.ii.250),
he turns his wrath upon himself. Understandably, Othello wants to punish himself, perhaps to pay some sort of penance but certainly to find release from his present agony with an all-consuming, purging fire. After his bitter wail, "Oh Desdemona! dead Desdemona! dead! Oh! Oh!," Othello responds more quietly to his circumstances, as if the reassurance of his wife's love brings a return of Othello's lost equanimity. It is a pattern we have seen before with Othello, one he articulates in his early days of uncertainty: "when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again" (III.iii.91-2). With Desdemona's love reaffirmed, Othello functions more as we wish he would have earlier. He listens to Cassio's declaration of loyalty and asks for pardon for doubting him. At last, Othello asks Cassio the all-important question of how the handkerchief came into his possession. Although he sees evidence too late, Othello hears the truth and sees himself a fool blindly misled. Even with his power and command stripped away, the general, reassured by his wife's love, speaks with a measure of renewed confidence. Solemnly, he reminds those around him of the service he has performed for the state and requests a balanced accounting of events. "Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate. Nor set down aught in malice." In the final analysis Othello only partially perceives the truth. We agree he "loved not wisely" but challenge the perception that he loved "too well." And the man Desdemona found incapable of jealously by nature, now understands that he is "one not easily made jealous, but, being wrought, / Perplexed in the extreme" (V.ii.344-6).

The kind of knowledge of himself and his wife and her love Othello gains through the tragic suffering he endures have been purchased at too
high price. In his final moments Othello discerns that the pearl he has thrown away is indeed "Richer than all his tribe." In her love Desdemona prompts that recognition through her sacrifice. Othello's last act both confirms his love for Desdemona and his culpability in her death. "I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss" (V.ii.359). Appropriately, he falls on the bed where he has mistakenly sacrificed Desdemona, now aware that his act was neither noble nor necessary. What Othello has lost in his unjustified disillusionment with his bride, he gains after the death of his devoted Desdemona. The knowledge Othello gains cannot compensate for the value of what is lost and therein lies the tragedy. In response to the many questions surrounding Othello's suicide, whether it speaks of salvation or damnation, Champion asserts, "It may well be either." "The essential thrust is the self-knowledge concerning *this* life which the protagonist gains (through the acquisition may well cost him his life)." 13 Tragic though his plight may be, Othello's tragic suffering is short-lived as he finds release in death. His story is limited to the grievous errors and personal affirmations of a man not plagued by those discomforting questions about man's place in the universe posed later in *King Lear*. Appropriately, Shakespeare devotes the final lines of the play to Iago's punishment. Lodovico points Iago's and our attention to the death bed and Iago's guilt. "Look on the tragic loading of this bed. This is thy work." Unlike the golden statues erected in Verona to commemorate the tragic story of Romeo and Juliet, the symbol of Othello's tragedy remains more private. "The object poisons sight; Let it be hid" (V.ii.264-5),
Lodovico orders. While Montague and Capulet intend the statues to serve as enduring reminders of love and lives lost by their destructive enmity before the community who witnessed it, Lodovico takes back to Venice a state report to those directly concerned of a general duped by his ancient. With a "heavy heart" (V.ii.264-71) he will relate one man's story, the account of a fallen general "who loved not wisely" (V.ii.349) and of one who may have loved him all "too well."
ENDNOTES


5Coursen 220.


7Rabkin 72.


12Schanzer 59.

13Champion 152.
CHAPTER IV
CORDELIA: LEAR'S SELFLESS SACRIFICE

At the beginning of Romeo and Juliet the Chorus catches the audience's attention by formally announcing the significance of the impending deaths of the young lovers, the play's sacrificial figures and tragic heroes. Informed, we watch expectantly to see just how the events of the "two hours traffic" on stage will build to the culminating moments and their sacrificial deaths. While our attention has been focused with a direct pronouncement in Romeo and Juliet, in Lear and more so in Othello we only gradually come to see the meaning of the deaths of the sacrificial figures as the pattern evolves. What we do immediately perceive, however, is the overwhelming importance of Desdemona and Cordelia to Othello and Lear, who absorb the blow of their deaths. Again in Lear, as in Othello, the idea of sacrifice is associated not with the tragic hero but with the person whose life brings the greatest joy and meaning to his life and whose death brings the greatest pain and definition to his tragedy.

Early on in Othello and in Lear a specific event dramatically directs our attention to the characters who become the plays' sacrificial figures and to their relationships with the tragic heroes so affected by their eventual deaths. Iago bellows under Brabantio's window to disclose the elopement of the fair Desdemona with the older general. Soon we meet the young bride and become engaged with her defense before the Senate. Her
open declaration of love for her husband and her sense of duty to her father make her attractive. With his early focus on Desdemona, Shakespeare signals the importance of Desdemona to Othello and consequently to the tragic experience ahead. Appalled, we watch Iago in his self-declared hatred for his general seize the slightest thread of Desdemona’s deception of her father and add his own twists and knots to create a net to ensnare Othello and bring Desdemona to her untimely death. We watch the swift disintegration of a marriage as trust erodes. Sickened, we witness Othello, blinded by his jealous rage, march down the path to certain tragedy to see the truth only after destroying the one person who gives meaning to his life.

In Lear we have scarcely been introduced to the major characters when a seemingly peaceful gathering erupts, sending shock waves throughout the newly divided kingdom. In the scene our attention and Lear’s is riveted upon his youngest daughter as she interacts with her father, the king. While no outside choral voice prophesies Cordelia’s sacrificial death, the intensity of those early moments registers with the audience. We witness power and authority fragmented, loyalty and integrity banished, and innocence betrayed. Compressed in those early moments are all the signs of imminent tragedy that unfold more gradually in both Romeo and Juliet and Othello. Although we can neither foresee Cordelia’s death nor anticipate its full meaning, the force of Lear’s immediate reactions to Cordelia, much like Othello’s eventual reaction to Desdemona, highlights her importance to the old king and his well-being.

In the face of Lear’s irrational rejection of his daughter and her love, we wonder if she can escape the consequences of her father’s tragic
decisions and the all-encompassing decay of his crumbling kingdom. In this kingdom where father turns against child, child against father, brother against brother and sister against sister, Cordelia might be viewed as another of the several victims to suffer the natural consequences of order dissolving into chaos. But from her principled refusal to comply with her father's manipulation to the occasion of her ill-fated hanging, the innocent Cordelia's life, banishment, and death shape and heighten the prolonged agony of Lear's tragic experience as nothing else can. Part of what makes this tragic experience so regrettable and painful for Lear and the audience is that he banishes the light of his life unnecessarily, leaving himself in abysmal darkness. While he has not snuffed out the light as Othello has, Lear stands culpable for making a series of unwise decisions and thus creating a world where evil beyond his control dominates. Sadly, Lear later, when the exiled Cordelia returns, confronts the truth of his situation when his mind is too clouded for him to see clearly or completely, and the audience, more aware than Lear of his situation, is left with lingering questions about the experience and the sacrifice we have witnessed.

Our first glimpse of Cordelia comes as we see her react to her father's test of love. This brief encounter is important to our sense of what, if anything, Cordelia contributes to the misunderstanding prompting her banishment. If she were to prove to be of the same "mettle" as her sisters, we would view her exile, her return to her homeland, and her death differently. When Regan and Goneril fatally turn on each other, we are reminded of Macbeth's reflection that an "even-handed justice / Commends th' ingredient of our poisoned chalice / To our own lips"
(I.11.10-2). But the overwhelming impact of Cordelia's death on Lear and the audience, in part, stems from our understanding of her innocence and Lear's culpability in this first scene.

Before we hear from Cordelia, we listen to her oldest sister's self-ingratiating speech, filled with claims of love stated in the superlative. Goneril contends that her love for her father is "Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty" and valued "No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor." Failing to take into account love Regan or Cordelia might offer, the eldest asserts her love as definitive. "As much as child e'er loved, or father found." It is to Goneril's last claim of "A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable" that Cordelia addresses her thoughts. Her aside reveals to the audience the basis for interpreting her genuine reluctance to speak. If love be measured by "poor breath" and "speech unable," what then may be said that is befitting? Better that she "Love and be silent" (I.1.56-62), she concludes. Lear, who is not privy as we are to Cordelia's thoughts at this moment, must rely on what he knows of his daughter in the past to interpret her silence properly. Her silence should speak more eloquently to him as it does to us of her love than her sister's empty pronouncements.

By contrast to Cordelia's aside, and in a competitive spirit generated by the situation Lear has created, Regan adroitly places Goneril at a disadvantage to advance her own interests. Owning that she shares "that self mettle as my sister," Regan plays a game of one-upmanship by declaring her sister comes "too short" of the expansive love Regan bestows on her father. Whether Regan's boast, "I am alone felicitate / In your dear Highness' love," means "I am only happy in loving you" or "I am the only
one made happy by loving or being loved," the exclusivity of her statements leaves Cordelia little room unless she attempts to unseat or discredit her sister. Since Cordelia truly loves her father, she would consider herself to be "poor Cordelia" were her love deemed inconsequential. But she remains assured that her devotion speaks for itself. "I am sure," she declares in a second aside, "my love's more ponderous than my tongue" (I.i.76-8). Before the opening scene Cordelia's love has apparently found its expression in ways other than what Lear demands at the moment. Lear's love and preference for his youngest daughter motivate him to reserve the choicest portion for "our joy, / Although our last and least" (I.i.81-3). Before the scene opens, Kent and Gloucester know how the kingdom will be allocated. While they both thought Albany to be a favorite over Cornwall, the earls discover Lear has given them equal portions. So when Lear dispenses two portions to Goneril and Regan, he has already chosen to leave the third most opulent to Cordelia, yet he challenges her to earn what he already intends to give. Undoubtedly, Goneril's observation, "He always loved our sister most" (I.i.123) must be apparent to all. That he believes he loves her dearly and yet casts her off becomes a poignant part of his tragic experience and calls into question his knowledge of himself and his daughter. Unfortunately, Lear, who has no Iago to mislead him, falls into the trap that ensnares Othello when he allows present circumstances and misguided perceptions to define the character of his loved one instead of relying on what he has known to be true in the past. Counting upon what Lear should know of her character and her love, Cordelia refuses to participate in her sisters' charade. Clearly, Cordelia is not of the same mettle as her sisters, and as the
play unfolds, Regan's and Goneril's behavior leaves Cordelia looking all the more unblemished.

The stark contrast between Cordelia's quiet asides and the ingratiating rhetoric of her two sisters provides the background for the portentous exchange we are about to witness. Were it not for these two brief and candid asides, we might judge Cordelia's silence as a proud stubbornness modeled on her father's, drawing the line on some narrow principle to protect her public image. Lear places his daughter in the position of clamoring for her father's love and besting her sisters in order to succeed. "What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak," he commands (I.i.84-5). To answer her father in terms of his question would be to barter expressions of love for material gain. If words are to be the coinage for obtaining a greater dowry, then Cordelia must be silent. To do otherwise is to discredit herself and her love for her father. Had Lear been in need of reassurance and simply asked for a token or public profession of love, Cordelia's response might have been different. Lear's request, however, places Cordelia in a no-win situation. If she speaks, she risks appearing to be of the same "self mettle" (I.i.69) as her avaricious sisters. If she remains silent, she risks being misunderstood by Lear and skeptical critics in years to follow. Cordelia "has resisted the lessons of expediency, and almost as a direct consequence she does not survive. It cannot be held against her that she is so consistent and integrated in her beliefs. The result can instead be turned against her society" and more particularly her father, the king.
When Cordelia refuses to compete for her father's munificence, she speaks from a position of dignity and integrity rather than arrogance and hypocrisy. Because we hear from her first in two asides, we learn what she truly thinks without the possibility of posturing. The two asides provide a view of the woman that Lear has raised and should know. Were it not for those brief flashes of insight, we might well ask why Cordelia should begrudge her father a public show of affection if it is reassurance the old man needs. But to do so under the prescribed circumstances would be to compromise the essence of the love Cordelia feels. In a scene reminiscent of Desdemona's "divided duty" speech before the senate, Cordelia in a reflective, quiet way speaks to her father before a watching court. Rather than being cold and indifferent, Cordelia's reply suggests a measured, carefully controlled response in the midst of effusive claims of unbounded love. Because she has been loved by her father, Cordelia pledges to "Return those duties back as are right fit." She promises to "Obey you, love you, and most honor you" as she has in the past. The qualifier "right fit" and her stress on honor help explain her silence. While on one hand she could help the old king out of the embarrassing power play in which he has entangled himself, were she to do so, her action would be ultimately demeaning to both. Preserving the integrity of her relationship with her father proves more important than helping him to save face. Cordelia's appeal to her father demonstrates logic and an appeal to order and proper allegiance. If her sister's declarations of absolute love designed to please the old king's vanity were truly valid, then Cordelia raises an important issue. "Why," she queries, "have my sisters' husbands if they say / They love you all?" While Cordelia's...
question rightly exposes her sisters’ hypocrisy, its thrust is aimed more at establishing the boundaries of relationships than exposing her sisters’ hypocrisy. In a balanced division of affection for her father and for her future husband, Cordelia pledges "Half my love" and "half my care and duty" to the man who will share her life. Lear, however, fails or refuses to grasp the entitlement she offers to the man who gave her life—the other half of her love, care, and duty. Cordelia even stops short of the stance Desdemona takes in preferring her husband before her father. Had Lear mind been less clouded by injured pride, he might have been won by the logic of Cordelia’s candid assertion, "Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, / To love my father all " (I.i.99-104). Instead of taking satisfaction in his daughter’s system of priorities that clearly delineates the kind of love she will give to her father and to her future husband, Lear harbors injured pride. Cordelia’s love for her father suggests an appropriate balance for a stable relationship without the dangers of over-commitment. She loves "According to my bond, no more, no less" (I.i.93). While Cordelia intends to make a distinction between the "all" of her sister’s love and her more proportionate, genuine affection, her delineation should have a positive side effect. By establishing legitimate, reliable, reasonable boundaries Cordelia should provide Lear with a sense of security, especially since Cordelia has promised also to love "no less" than her bond demands. Rather than seeing Cordelia’s promised love as defined and measurable, and, therefore, reliable, Lear acts out of frustration because Cordelia does not give him what he wants. Lear comes to see tragically too late that Cordelia’s love knows no boundaries when the opportunity for sharing is short-lived.
Were Cordelia smug or "So intent on ... proving her virtue that she breaks her poor father's heart"\(^3\) as she has been described, in our first encounter we might conclude that the stubbornness and arrogance that run rampant through the Lear family might have spurred Lear's response and her banishment. On the contrary, while Cordelia might speak less bluntly, she takes no delight in the situation Lear has created for himself and for her. Neither does she gloat over being his obvious favorite and, therefore, in a position of potential influence. Even threatened with "Nothing will come of nothing," Cordelia remains silent. "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth (I.i.90-2). If we attribute Cordelia's behavior to a willful self-centeredness inherent in being a Lear, then we must conclude that she cannot or will not seize the moment and turn events around to her own advancement. Lear offers her a second opportunity to adjust her stance so that they might both save face and she might receive the "more opulent third" of the inheritance. If pride, not principle, were Cordelia's motivation, all the young woman must do to accommodate the old king and secure her dowry would be to "Mend your speech a little" (I.i.94). Lear does not ask her to reconsider her thinking, to reevaluate how her actions might betray her inward feelings, but to alter "a little" her speech so she might alter her fortune. On that basis Cordelia will not participate in a charade unworthy of her father and her love for him. Cordelia shares the plight of Desdemona, who speaks the truth only to find she "stood within the blank of his displeasure / For my free speech!" (III.iv.128-30). Neither tragic hero properly perceives the true character of the one he loves, and therefore each loves imperfectly and fatally.
The responsibility for the events that erupt in the opening scene and spill over into the kingdom lies squarely on Lear's shoulders. If what the old king looks for is love and reassurance, he sets himself up for frustration and failure, and he places himself and, more importantly, his innocent daughter at risk. By establishing the "largest bounty" as the prize for the daughter who professes to love him the most, Lear promotes avarice and hyperbole. Lear's action invites a competitive spirit and places his daughter in a contest where each may win only at the expense of another. Regrettably, he pits daughter against daughter, reinforcing the pattern that manifests itself in future strife and fatal rancor. Were Lear using his daughters' love as the basis for reward, he should have been capable of using the knowledge he has garnered over the past years as a determiner rather than parading his daughters' private affections before the court. Instead of assuming the responsibility for being analytical, he shifts the burden of proof onto his daughters to be convincingly effusive. Public demonstration of love, not knowledge, seems to be his true objective. Since Lear has already parceled out the land before the play starts, the illegitimate contest jeopardizes his credibility with his daughters and those who witness the scene. "Since love cannot be quantified, the test is meaningless, an empty shell of pretense and flattery designed to justify giving the largest share of the land to Cordelia and to gratify Lear's desire for love and self-worth." When Lear reveals he has saved the choicest piece for Cordelia, the older daughters know, if they did not before, that they have participated in a sham unnecessarily. Lear leaves himself and the favored Cordelia exposed to possible resentment and alienation by Regan and Goneril. Then when in
his anger he redistributes the portion reserved for Cordelia, giving more
power to Goneril and Regan, he leaves himself much more exposed.

The greatest resentment and rejection of Cordelia, however, comes
from the angered king who proves incapable of discerning the truth. Lear,
who has reduced an expression of love to a tool to barter for self-
aggrandizement, does not perceive that if Cordelia participates in the
exchange, she cheapens herself and the love she has maintained in the past
for her father. Instead of appreciating the integrity and reliability of
Cordelia's carefully articulated love which provides him with "half my
love," "half my care and duty," the stubborn father chooses to view the
portion offered him as delimiting. Missing the bounty of even half of her
love, Lear finds Cordelia calloused. "So young, and so untender?" he
quips, refusing to acknowledge that she is "So young, my lord, and true"
(I.i.102-7) as she asserts.

When Lear answers Cordelia's clarification with the threat, "Let it
be so, thy truth then be thy dower!" he devalues both truth and his
truthful daughter. Overcome with resentment and anger, Lear fails to
comprehend what France later so eloquently expresses, "She is herself a
dowry" (I.i.241). Here Lear attempts to engage Cordelia in a struggle for
power over her dowry and thereby threatens her marital options. His
acrimony against the sacrificial figure echoes the ire of another incensed
father, Capulet, who exerts pressure on his daughter, the tragic hero/
sacrificial figure, with threats and decrees.

Because they are frustrated and stymied over thwarted wishes and
shattered dreams, each man brings heedless suffering down upon himself and
others. Naturally, we bear witness to Lear's pain as tragic hero to a
greater degree. His disappointment and alleged rejection wound him unnecessarily and excessively, and he deflects that pain to others. An angry Lear roars at Kent's attempted intervention, "Come not between the dragon and his wrath. / I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (I.i.122-4). Unfortunately, Lear again measures love by the benefits accrued. Had he been more reasonable and expected less from Cordelia, he might have been able to come to some understanding of his daughter's position. Had he truly loved her more, he could scarcely have required her to compromise herself for her material gain or his creature comforts. While Capulet rejects Juliet because her true feelings contradict Capulet's wishes and authority, Lear unnecessarily banishes Cordelia, whose true feelings do not contradict Lear's desires or his authority were he able to "see better." Once again the person who is to become the play's sacrificial figure is condemned to some form of isolation. Cordelia joins Juliet and Desdemona in an emotional, psychological rift from the father who will taste the bitter dregs of their actions. Capulet threatens to cast out Juliet; although she "beg, starve, die in the streets" (III.v.194-5), he will never acknowledge her if she will not acquiesce. To register his disapproval because his daughter acts independently and elopes, Brabantio will not allow his married daughter to return to her childhood home. And now Lear quickly stands to "disclaim all paternal care" (I.i.113) and to cast his daughter out of the kingdom.

More significant to our exploration of the tragic experience and what the sacrificial figure contributes to the concept is what happens between Desdemona and her husband the tragic hero and Cordelia and her father the tragic hero. When Lear suddenly banishes Cordelia, the scene carries the
weight of a personal vow and an irrevocable, royal decree. All eyes focus on the young woman Lear declares to be henceforth "a stranger to my heart and me" and now "my sometime daughter" (I.i.115-20). Both Lear's outrage and Cordelia's predicament direct our attention to the importance of the role she plays even though she is to remain absent for most of the action of the play.

Because of what Lear believes to be a personal affront on the part of his youngest daughter, he becomes punitive. His clenched-teeth warning to Kent, "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" carries the intensity of injured pride turned into a hostility akin to Othello's. With the same formality as Othello's sacred vow before the heavens, Lear swears by "the sacred radiance of the sun," by "the mysteries of Hecate and the night: and by "all the operation of the orbs" (I.i.109-11) hereby to disclaim Cordelia forever. Both tragic heroes make it a deliberate act to reject their loved one. Othello cries, "All my fond love thus do I blow to heavens / 'Tis gone" (III.iii.445-6). And Lear commands, "Hence and avoid my sight! / So be my grave my peace as here I give / Her father's heart from her!" (I.i.124-6). A note of finality rings in their voices, leading to the irreversible loss which intensifies their tragedies beyond their ability to endure. Othello swears he "Shall ne're look back, ne'er ebb to humble love " (III.iii.461). As Lear disclaims all "paternal care," he declares to Cordelia "as a stranger to my heart and me / Hold thee from this for ever" (I.i.113-6). Even the barbarian who "makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite," will be as welcomed "As thou my sometime daughter" (I.i.116-20). Interestingly, Lear, who does not voice his anger in terms of bodily harm, comes close to describing Othello's jealous fury
when the king describes the barbarian. Othello threatens, "I will chop her into messes!" (IV.i.196). While both men wrongly believe they have been betrayed by the one they hold dearest, as a husband Othello vents his rage in word and deed upon the body of his wife, reflecting the more acutely personal nature of Othello’s tragedy. Lear’s experience becomes more universal in scope as his anger, his improper handling of power, his inability to discern truth obvious to virtually everyone but Lear, and his rejection of those who speak it create an environment ripe for tragedy.

Quickly Lear becomes committed to his interpretation of Cordelia’s actions and rejects out-of-hand any other interpretation that might diminish his suffering and avert tragedy. Kent’s willingness to speak the truth to Lear in spite of the ominous warning, his intervention on Cordelia’s behalf provides outside verification of Cordelia’s behavior and affirms for the audience our view of both Cordelia and Lear. Ready to answer with his life if necessary, the king’s friend and faithful follower rightly maintains, "Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least (I.i.152). Indicting the older sisters by contrast, Kent argues for the integrity of Cordelia’s silence. Although Lear refuses to listen to his daughter, Kent, who has witnessed with greater objectivity Cordelia’s demeanor, grasps her genuine intent. Cordelia’s measured speech and careful silence indicate substance and solidity. Kent reminds the old king, "nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / reverb no hollowness" (I.i.153-4). Willing to confront Lear regardless of personal risk, like a prophet of old, Kent stands before the king to speak the truth and sound a warning. "Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check / This hideous rashness." Then as Lear banishes Kent for his
honesty, Kent admonishes, "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" (I.i.149-59). To "see better" means more than discerning the truth. Kent ties clearer sight with seeing each individual with fairness, compassion, and love. And the death of the sacrificial figure gives focus to Lear's tragic vision as no other event can.

In the face of the old king's menacing sword, Kent leaves no doubt about his opinion of events at court. In harshest condemnation of Lear, Kent addresses the king's abrogation of duty and responsibility. In a punitive gesture as a backlash against Cordelia, Lear jeopardizes the well-being of the state by giving away Cordelia's portion and power to her sisters. At the very least Lear's action is "hideous rashness," majesty "fallen" to "folly." At its worst, it is no less than what Kent bluntly describes it to be: "I'll tell thee thou dost evil" (I.i.149-65). Kent leaves no doubt in the audience's mind of the importance to Lear and the kingdom of what we have witnessed.

Again as before when he faced an unpleasant message, Lear banishes the messenger. Kent well understands that his banishment, like Cordelia's, is symptomatic of Lear's state and, therefore, the state of the kingdom. Given the frame of Lear's mind, "Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here," and banishment becomes not a curse but a mercy. At his parting Kent gives Cordelia the blessing her father withholds. He commends her to the gods and "their dear shelter" for Cordelia "Justly think'st and hast most rightly said" (I.i.181-3). Although Kent ties the two concepts together--right thinking and just reward--on one level his banishment and Cordelia's leave us wondering how Lear's acts can in anyway promote good. Lear intends banishment as a means of retribution; Kent,
as a means of restitution as we come to see. He does not allow himself to be banished but stays to aid Lear in spite of Lear's threats.

Before Lear reaches the point of no return, he once again is given another chance by France to adjust his perspective on his daughter and to back away from his recalcitrance and thereby to avoid tragedy. Even the King of France, Lear's equal, fails to elicit moderation and reason. Shocked that Lear could so quickly dismiss his "best object, / The argument of your praise, balm of your age, / The best, the dearest," France questions the old king. Sensing the extremity of Lear's reaction, France attempts to jar Lear's thinking by challenging its basis. Either Cordelia's behavior has been "so monstrous" and of such an unnatural degree as to warrant such disfavor or else Lear's previous claims of love and affection are "Fall'n into taint: (I.i.214-20). For France to believe Cordelia capable of such an odious act would require a "faith that reason without miracle / Should never plant in me" (I.i.222-3). Unfortunately, Lear, who has had ample opportunity, knows his daughter so little. Unlike Lear's, France's appreciation for Cordelia stems from what he thinks of her as a person rather than how she makes him feel. Properly, France sees love as separate from issues of property and gain. He loves Cordelia for herself and without hope of any gain; Lear, for how she bolsters his sense of his own worth. Indirectly, France's statements to Burgundy call into question the quality of Lear's love. "Love's not love / When it is mingled with regards that stand / Aloof from th' entire point." In France's estimation, "She is herself a dowry" (I.i.238-41). If Lear, like Othello, carelessly throws away a pearl richer than all his kingdom, France
eagerly retrieves the discarded treasure. Not all of Burgandy's riches "Can buy this unprized precious maid of me" (I.i.259).

Part of what motivates France's admiration is undoubtedly the exchange he witnesses between the exiled Cordelia and her father. Although she may be unjustly banished, Lear cannot diminish her spirit. She will not be reduced to the object of filial or marital bartering, nor will she play the part of a passive victim. Her view of herself and her actions shape our perception of the role she later assumes and that brings her to sacrificial death. While Cordelia is unhappy that she cannot accommodate her father's wishes and "cannot heave / My heart into my mouth" (I.i.91-2), she will not stand idly by and be misrepresented before France and Burgundy. Demanding the same honesty from her father that she offers him, Cordelia insists Lear "make known / It is no vicious blot, murder or foulness, / No unchaste action or dishonored step" which brings her disgrace. Even though her reserved silence has deprived her of Lear's "grace and favor," Cordelia deems herself nonetheless "richer" for not having a "glib and oily art" and a "still-soliciting eye." Again Cordelia refuses to be defined by Lear; she may be disinheritied but she is not impoverished. Faced with Burgundy's reluctance to take her as a bride without her dowry, Cordelia, her own sense of self-worth intact, settles the matter assertively. "Since that respects of fortune are his love, / I shall not be his wife." That "this unprized precious maid" has been so recklessly discarded by Lear and now by Burgundy inspires France all the more. He finds, "'Tis strange that from their cold'st neglect / My love should kindle to inflamed respect" (I.i.225-56). France's glowing declarations of love reinforce the importance of Cordelia as a person.
Although Cordelia suffers rejection and exile, we might agree with Kent that the greatest banishment would be to stay.

Our final view of Cordelia before her exile shapes our perception of the significance of her banishment and of the meaning of her eventual return. With a flourish Lear has just left the stage, taking with him his love and blessing. He has sworn he shall never "see / That face of hers again." Stung by Lear's final denial, "we / Have no such daughter," Cordelia stands before her sisters with "washed eyes." There is no sense of bitterness or retaliation in her voice. Yet Cordelia has an accurate grasp of the present situation and her realistic, straightforward approach suggests that when she does return to her homeland, she does so with a clear understanding of the state of the kingdom. She knows her sisters for what they are, yet "like a sister," she is "most loath to call / Your faults as they are named." Cordelia grieves for her father's circumstances. Instead of reckoning that Lear deserves what he might receive at the hands of his favored heirs, Cordelia "would prefer him to a better place" (I.i.263-74). Were it within Cordelia's sphere of influence, were she "within his grace," the aging king would have better than his action merits--Cordelia's own grace. If Cordelia, still stinging from her father's rebuke can be so forgiving, the sacrificial nature of her return fits her character with consistency. Cordelia joins Romeo and Juliet in providing for the community a model of reconciliation and forgiveness that should make their eventual sacrifices unnecessary were their parents to emulate them. Unfortunately, Lear has already set off a chain reaction with dire consequences. Cordelia's last comment points toward an uncertain future. "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides, / Who covers
faults, at last with shame derides" (I.i.280-1). Although Cordelia knows that truth will out, her words do anticipate the high price of truth exposed. The apprehensions of Cordelia's leave-taking become our apprehensions as well. Although she may wish her sisters well, we have seen enough of their inability to function fairly with their father to anticipate disaster. And disaster is precipitously at hand. Scarcely has Cordelia left the stage than Goneril and Regan begin plotting to take advantage "in th' heat" (I.i.306) of the moment, reinforcing what Cordelia's absence portends. Even Goneril, who makes the most of her father's deteriorating state of mind, recognizes that Lear has capriciously thrown away the daughter he has loved the most. Lear's enormous error in discernment prompts Goneril's observation, "With what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly." According to Regan, Lear's impetuousness stems from his disposition, which "in the best and soundest of his times hath been but rash" (I.i.290-4). Even Lear's old friend Gloucester marvels, "All this done / Upon a gad?" (I.ii.26). Though "the infirmity of his age" may exacerbate the situation, Regan offers the opinion, "Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I.ii.292-3). Instead, Lear's injured pride over an unjustifiable disillusion with his favorite daughter and his unwarranted disinherition and banishment of her make him directly culpable for the onslaught that leads to tragedy for all.

With Cordelia's portion of land and power given away in a punitive gesture, all possibilities of preserving or redeeming the kingdom go with Cordelia into exile. Gone are the public vestiges of truth and honor. Kent and Edgar, as well, must hide their identities in order to survive
in their benighted land. Ironically, Gloucester, himself deceived by one heir and falsely disillusioned with another, paints a vivid picture of a kingdom in decay. "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide." Ringing a sobering knell that sounds to the play’s conclusion, Gloucester laments, "We have seen the best of times. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us quietly to our graves."

That Cordelia and "the noble and true-hearted Kent" are banished and their "offense honesty" (I.ii.104-14) is symptomatic of the diseased land.

While Cordelia lives safely in France as Lear’s downward spiral accelerates, her absence, as did her silence, speaks eloquently of her importance to the characters and to the pattern of the play. Even though we may become caught up in the plots and counterplots, the duplicity, the heinous crimes and awful pain ravaging the kingdom, Cordelia in her absence is ever-present. Lear has altered his life immeasurably and as yet does not sense how. Inquiring of his fool’s absence, he learns the fool "hath much pined away" (I.iv.71), finding little mirth in life since Cordelia embarked for France. Sacrificing his own well-being, the fool will "foolishly" stay by Lear and in Cordelia’s place tend the old man and impress unwelcome truth upon him. Chastising Lear with impunity granted no other, the fool offers to top Lear’s head with his coxcomb, dubbing him a professional fool for his actions. Reminding us of Kent’s comments on the inversion of banishment and freedom, the fool mocks Lear for banishing two daughters and "blessing" the third "against his will" (I.iv.97-8). Shakespeare will not let us or Lear forget Cordelia and her importance to the pattern of the play. For the audience "the antithesis with her sisters ... brings her to mind whenever they are on stage."
Although Lear denounces his daughter forevermore, he cannot expunge her from his thoughts. When Goneril and Regan begin shuttling their father back and forth, Lear's mind turns to Cordelia. After the old king finds his relationship with Goneril deteriorating, Lear reverts back to his previous behavior and disowns yet another daughter. Confronted with Goneril's duplicity and ingratitude, Lear mistakenly compares her behavior with Cordelia's. "O most small fault, / How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!" Obviously, the memory is a festering sore that "drew from my heart all love / And added to the gall" (I.iv.257-61) and we again are reminded of how Cordelia weighs on Lear's mind and, consequently, on our own as well. In the midst of his mounting disillusionment with his daughters, Lear confesses to his fool, "I did her wrong" (I.v.21). Later, when Regan would send him back to Goneril and attempts to reduce his train of followers, Lear thinks of "the hot-blooded France that dowerless took / Our youngest born." The likelihood of Lear's return to Goneril reduced in strength is as probable as his humbling himself to "kneel squire-like" and "pension beg" (II.iv.207-9) before France's throne. He makes a mockery the very idea of kneeling before Goneril confessing, "I am old. / Age is unnecessary" (II.iv.149-50). The stubborn, proud man cannot conceive of humbling himself thus.

Perhaps the most important link to Cordelia is the appearance of the banished Kent, now in disguise. Kent serves as a constant reminder of the banished Cordelia, the cause of Kent's exile. Both share an understanding of Goneril and Regan. Likewise, they speak the truth to their king, knowing they will pay a penalty for their honesty. Ready to "serve" where he "dost stand condemned," ready to return good for evil to his "master"
(I.iv.4-6) whom he loves, Kent becomes a precursor to the role Cordelia plays. Although irrationally rejected, both act with forgiveness and self-sacrifice born of abiding love for Lear. Like Cordelia, Kent does not become a passive victim but rather holds his own with Lear and later Kent strongly protests his treatment at the hands of Cornwall and Regan. Eventually the parallels between Cordelia and Kent will raise questions in regard to the meaning of their respective fates. At the present Kent in the stocks reads a letter from Cordelia and eagerly anticipates her return. Counting on Cordelia's predictable good will, Kent takes hope, believing Cordelia comes to bring order to chaos, "seeking to give / Losses their remedies." Cordelia, much like Desdemona, cannot stand idly by if peace and restitution are within her power to perform. Kent enjoins "Fortune" to "Smile once more; turn thy wheel" (II.ii.165-9). Later, a confident Kent rests assured that "from France there comes a power / Into this scattered kingdom" (III.i.30-1). Warmed by the knowledge he will soon see Cordelia, Kent with a "Fie on this storm!" (III.i.49) goes out into the wind to find his wandering, beleaguered king. We soon begin to see that Kent's optimism reflects how the world ought to be, not how it is. In the cyclical nature of events the wheel of tragic destiny Lear has set in motion now moves beyond Lear's control.

 Appropriately, it is to Kent that Gloucester carries the word of Regan's and Goneril's plot to take Lear's life and brings the first news that the army of France has landed. Gloucester sends his master and his friend in disguise to "welcome and protection" (III.vi.91) in Dover. Reflecting his premise that good deeds are rewarded, Kent blesses Gloucester: "The gods reward your kindness" (III.i.5). Within the hour,
however, Gloucester is branded a traitor and his eyes are brutally plucked out. The horror of this scene and its ramifications are unsettling. We are appalled at such raw violence and apprehensive that a man can suffer such excruciating pain in retaliation for his merciful deed. Such awful waste builds to the play's conclusion and the culmination of Lear's tragic experience.

All the while Lear, with little awareness of the chaos and conspiracy in his kingdom, grapples with his own personal crisis. Battling the storm, the old king echoes Othello's soul-wrenching agony--"Blow me about in winds! Roast me in sulphur! / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire" (V.ii.280-1). Lear cries out, "Blow winds . . . Rage, blow . . .," asking for executing fires to "Singe my white head." Although both heroes call down self-destruction, when he does, Othello is at the end of himself and his life, confronting his dead Desdemona and his overwhelming guilt. Othello's disillusion focuses on Desdemona and then on himself; Lear's disillusionment eventually extends to all mankind. For Lear this moment reflects only a partial knowledge and frustration in extreme over his present predicament. He has little understanding of why he faces the storm alone and certainly no inkling of future pain. As a father Lear suffers from the consequences of his actions, specifically of his treatment of Cordelia. She is not present to act as a buffer or a protection, and so Lear stands exposed to the ravages of his older daughters. Incapable of clear thinking, Lear assumes little responsibility for his plight and misperceives the cause of his suffering. At first he uses what he perceives to be Cordelia's overwhelming disloyalty to measure his other daughters' behavior. Goneril's lying and ingratitude are compared to
Cordelia's "ugly" traits. Even when he finds himself rejected by Goneril and Regan, he reasons, "those wicked creatures yet do look well-favored / When others are more wicked; not being the worst / Stands in some rank of praise" (II.iv.251-33). Reinforcing the pattern of behavior he has demonstrated with Cordelia, Lear disowns one daughter, then another. When he disowns Goneril, he foolishly clings to Regan, believing "I have another daughter..." and threatens "When she shall hear of this..." (I.iv.296-97), unaware that he has rejected the only daughter who will fly to his defense. Although Lear declares while bartering with his daughters, "do not make me mad" (II.iv.213), the old king has given way or cast away all that empowers him. At his wit's end, Lear finally laments, "I gave you all" for nothing (II.iv.245). All along he has given so he might receive, counting on "the dues of gratitude" (II.iv.174), but he now finds himself the one cast out. At last the pain and frustration Lear suffers forces him to see the true character of his older daughters. Goneril and Regan as "two pernicious daughters" (III.iv.22) are guilty of "filial ingrati-tude" (III.iv.14). Lear does not reason that if he were wrong at the start about Goneril and Regan, he might have misjudged Cordelia as well. In the press of his current anger, however, he has stopped focusing on Cordelia. He rightly holds his two eldest accountable, stung because he amply gave to receive so little in return. His unjustifiable disillusionment with Cordelia becomes a very real disillusionment with his other daughters as he gradually stumbles closer to the truth about Cordelia.

In the midst of his frustration and impotent rage Lear occasionally chances on the truth of his accountability, but for the most part he
deflects blame and grieves only for giving his daughters the power to hurt him. It is not until later when Cordelia comes bringing forgiveness and restoration that Lear comes closer to accurate self-perception. For the most part he sees himself as "So kind a father" (I.iv.28) who has been abused. While he strikes his head, crying, "Beat at this gate that let thy folly in / And thy dear judgment out" (I.iv.261-6), he measures his folly by the rejection he receives from his ungrateful daughters. Looking outside himself for the source of his trouble, he wonders of the gods, "If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts / Against their father . . ." (II.iv.269-70). Lear sees himself as a victim, a "poor old man, / As full of grief as age, wretched in both" (II.iv.267-8). He thinks, "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning" (III.ii.59-60). While we may agree that Lear has certainly been sinned against, it is not until Cordelia returns and Lear encounters the one he has most sinned against that he admits to any culpability. Projecting his feeling onto Tom o'Bedlam's plight, Lear asks if his daughters have brought him to his dejected state. "Nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters." Describing Tom's situation, and indirectly his own, Lear sees it as "Judicious punishment -- 'twas this flesh begot / Those pelican daughters" (III.iv.63-73). Lear's overwhelming disillusion with his two odious "pelican daughters" extends to all of mankind, and he sees man and himself as no more than a beast: "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated dated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art." As he attempts to disrobe, and face the "naughty might," he has stripped himself and humanity to bare, naked beastliness
Later, he wonders to Tom, "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III.vi.75-6).

What the old king in his pain and disillusionment does not completely know or comprehend is the havoc he has wreaked when he unleashed the two furies upon his kingdom. "When majesty falls to folly" (I.i.149), the state falls into chaos and decay. In this kingdom marked by betrayal and conspiracy, families and friendships shatter and honest men hide their identities to preserve their lives. An old man stumbles, eyes plucked out of their sockets; a servant lies dead, discarded on a dung heap for resisting violence; and a naked king who "smells of mortality" (IV.v.132) babbles in madness. The messenger who arrives bringing news from Cordelia to Kent finds his distraught king's condition "a sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch, / Past speaking of in a king." While Lear is at fault for giving power to his corrupt daughters, he cannot be held accountable for the extent to which their "hard hearts" have abused that power. But into this kingdom comes the "one daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to" (IV.vi.200-3).

From the messenger we learn that Cordelia, with full knowledge of the dangers at hand, voluntarily sacrifices her own safety and comfort to tend the father who has banished her, unaware of what price will be exacted of her. Because Cordelia makes cognitive choices regarding her return, we do not see her as the victim of circumstances. Instead, she knowingly faces risks of her own volition, valuing her father's well-being above her own. What we see of Cordelia confirms our early perception of her character and her love and influences our response to her final sacrifice. Upon receiving word of the turmoil in her homeland, Cordelia struggles
between grief and disbelief. "A queen / Over her passion," she is moved "Not to rage," but to "Patience and sorrow." With the same aversion to public display of emotions which brought her father's rage down upon her head, the weeping Cordelia leaves court "To deal with grief alone" (IV. iii.13-32). Although she may agonize in private, Cordelia moves publicly and decisively with France to launch troops to rescue her father. And when France is recalled, Cordelia marches on her own with a sense of purpose, a high calling. "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about." It is "No blown ambition doth our arms incite, / But love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (IV.iv.22-8). The young woman disinherited by her father willingly gives "all my outward worth" to the one able to restore her father's "bereaved sense" (IV.iv.9-10). Accused falsely of ingratitude, Cordelia finds words inadequate to thank Kent for his unswerving loyalty and devotion. To match his goodness, Cordelia unwittingly prophesies, "My life will be too short / And every measure fail me" (IV.vii.2-3). With dignity Lear does not accord Cordelia, she refers to him reverently as the King and sees that he is appropriately arrayed even though his majesty has turned to folly. In spite of the fact that Lear's love may turn into bitterest gall, Cordelia prays that "restoration hang / Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss / Repair those violent harms" (IV.vii.26-8) inflicted by her two sisters. In every way Cordelia gives unreservedly to her father's restoration, both physical and spiritual, as she becomes the balm for his troubled mind.

While she is forgiving of Lear, Cordelia is not sentimentally acquiescent where her sisters are concerned. Rightly she judges her sisters' evil. Looking at Lear's aged face and hoary hair, Cordelia
becomes angered at the treatment he has received at the hands of her sisters. Even "Mine enemy's dog, / Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire" (IV.vii.36-8). Amazingly, Cordelia takes no satisfaction in being correct in her earlier prediction: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides" (I.i.280). Instead, she hopes for the future and encourages Kent to give up his tattered disguise. "These weeds" are "memories of those worser hours" (IV.vii.78). But as Cordelia comes to see, there are hours of unspeakable grief yet ahead.

For Lear, life is more painful than death. He feels "bound / Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears / Do scald like molten lead (IV.vii.46-8). Uncertain if he moves between life and death, and confused as to whether Cordelia is a spirit or indeed flesh and blood, Lear pricks his finger with a pin to determine his condition. Interestingly, Lear, who all along has used pain and discomfort as a stimulus for action, uses pain to verify his existence. Lear correctly fears, "I am not in my perfect mind," yet he senses the lady before him is his daughter Cordelia. Impressed upon his subconscious are the memories of Goneril's and Regan's abuse, and he presumes Cordelia will function as her sisters have. "I know you do not love me; for your sisters / Have (as I do remember) done me wrong." Remembering Cordelia has "some cause, they have not," (IV. vii.63-75), Lear will gladly drink whatever poison Cordelia offers him. Even in his bewilderment, Lear concludes he must pay penance for his wrongs. Cordelia comes, however, not in a spirit of retribution but of restoration, asking only for his long denied "hand in benediction o'ver me" (IV.vii.58). Before, Lear has made a mockery of humility by kneeling before Goneril, but now the old king kneels humbly before his daughter.
Because she has already forgiven her father, she comforts Lear with "No cause, no cause" (IV.vii.75). The magnitude of her spirit of forgiveness parallels Desdemona's last gesture of forgiveness to her husband: "I myself" (V.ii.125). While integrity has been the keystone for Cordelia's and Desdemona's characters, forgiveness becomes a higher value than absolute honesty.

Unlike Othello, who sees his error too late to ask forgiveness of Desdemona, Lear directly pleads for forgiveness in time for the request to have meaning. "Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (IV.vii.84). Although Cordelia may grant Lear personal forgiveness and a temporary reprieve from suffering, it is not within Cordelia's power to grant absolute forgiveness or impunity. Lear remains "bound / Upon a wheel of fire," and the wheel grinds slowly onward. Before the day is done the two have been taken prisoner and we hear Edmund's menacing intentions. The scene provides our last glimpse of the sacrificial figure's life and heightens our sense of sadness over the tragic events we must witness.

Knowing their fate rests on the "greater pleasures" of her sisters, Cordelia approaches imprisonment realistically, expecting the worst. Describing her present circumstances and future fate as well, Cordelia observes, "We are not the first / Who with the best meaning have incurred the worst." Although quite willing to come face-to-face with her sisters at last, Cordelia's overriding concern is for Lear's fragile well-being. "For thee oppressed king, I am cast down; / Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown." Slipping into the safety of delusion, the old king describes dank prison in less than realistic terms. Although Lear
may be confused about the nature of their situation, he "sees better" with
greater compassion and concern than before. In an escape from the cares
of his kingdom no longer important to him, the two will "sing like birds
i' th' cage." In a state of eternal restoration Lear dreams, "When thou
dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness."
Shunning the world outside and insulated from shifts in power, Lear will
laugh at the "gilded butterflies" of court. Together he and Cordelia will
chat of court news -- "Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out --."
For the forgiven king his prison will be much like a Christian monastery
where the two will discuss eternal issues isolated from temporal concerns.
With insight Lear has not yet demonstrated, he will with Cordelia "take
upon's the mystery of things / As if we were God's spies." Unbound by
time and earthly considerations, "we'll wear out, / In a walled prison,
packs and sects of great ones / That ebb and flow by th' moon." Intrigued
by the possibilities, Lear takes heart: "Upon such sacrifices, my
Cordelia, / The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee?" Lear
has no grasp of the world outside nor of the kind of sacrifice which will
be exacted of him. More aware of the possibilities for evil, the weeping
Cordelia gives no reply and silently goes to her destiny. Offering
comfort and consolation not warranted by the circum-
stances, Lear
reassures Cordelia, "Wipe thine eyes," believing their enemies will be
destroyed "Ere they shall make us weep! We'll see 'em starved first"
(V.ii.3-24). That events beyond Lear's present ability to control
overtake the tragic hero just as he hopes to enjoy solitude with his
beloved Cordelia adds to the terrible poignancy and horror of the scenes
to come.
Cordelia's wanton death, no longer willed even by Edmund, depicts the unspeakable waste and finality associated with the tragic experience. When Lear staggers onto the stage, carrying the body of Cordelia, the sight is excruciatingly painful for all. Howling in his abject grief, "She's gone for ever," Lear looks vainly for a hint of life, the faintest breath. In his despair Lear hopes for the slightest chance. "If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt." The haunting prospect of what might have been tears at his heart. "I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever." To have "killed the slave that was a-hanging thee" is his only consolation when the power to effect change is outside his grasp. Wanting desperately to undo what has been done, Lear groans, "Cordelia, stay a little." Cordelia's death, heart-rending and excruciatingly painful as it is, demonstrates Lear's restored vision of humanity and intensifies his sense of her worth by her loss. For him nothing is now more important than the faintest sign of life. Looking desperately for breath, Lear sees any chance as "a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt" (V.iii.266-8). In his agony Lear wonders why the lesser creatures of this earth have life and his precious daughter has no breath at all. But as he comes to see she will "Never, never, never, never, never" come again, he asks, "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat" have life / And thou no breath at all?" In his disconsolation Lear affirms the value of human life and sees man as more than a naked beast, but at what price such vision! The sound of irreversible tragic loss rings in Lear's "never's." Lear's mind cannot comprehend nor his heart contain the grief he faces, and he dies, looking
for breath that will never come. "Look on her! Look at her lips, / Look there, look there--" (V.iii.11-2).

Faced with the spectacle of Lear's suffering any longer, with Kent we cry, "Break, heart, I prithee break!" For "He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer (V.iii.311-6).

Lear's travail is beyond our sense of even-handed justice. There is "no simple correlation between the degree of moral responsibility of the tragic hero and the tragic suffering and catastrophe. The 'punishment' is . . . in excess of the 'crime.'"¹⁶ That such an overwhelming payment should be extracted from Lear and that innocent Cordelia suffer such an ignominious end leaves us wondering with Kent, "Is this the promised end?" or with Edgar, "Or image of that horror?" If it is the role of the tragic hero "to suffer, to the utmost capacity of a human being . . . to register in his body and blood the horror, the cruelty and shame of the wheel of fire upon which he is bound,"¹⁷ then Lear is Shakespeare's quintessential tragic hero.

And what of the role of the sacrificial figure? We may wish as even Edmund finally does, to stay the hangman's hand, but were we to do so would be to redefine Lear's experience, making it less than the tragedy and monumental work it is. In Lear, Shakespeare separates the moment of restoration from the moment of sacrifice and in doing so emphasizes the importance of the sacrificial figure to the fabric of tragedy. In Romeo and Juliet peace and reconciliation come to Verona as a direct result of and after the deaths of two sacrificial figures. In Othello the tragic hero confronts the truth of his situation, to the degree that he does, only after he has forever lost his Desdemona and all opportunity for
restitution. But in Lear we see the old king humbling himself, kneeling before Cordelia, aware to a limited degree of his culpability but basking in the warmth of her forgiveness. If restoration and acknowledgment of guilt were the only objectives of the tragic suffering, then Lear has reached his goals from the suffering he faces with his enormous disillusionment with Cordelia and his treatment at the hands of Goneril and Regan. But in losing Cordelia, Lear must confront the most agonizing experience of all through "the realization of having irrevocably lost, through one's own blind deeds, the person or object on which all one's happiness on earth depends." It is as if Lear fulfills his own earlier prophecy, "Woe that too late repents" (I.iv.248). Nothing in Lear's life could so powerfully bring him to such enormity of tragic experience as the death of Cordelia. When Lear hears of the deaths of Goneril and Regan, he is already in such shock that the news scarcely registers. Remembering their execrable behavior and the malice with which they treated Gloucester as well as Lear, we are neither surprised nor horrified that they should throw each other under the moving wheel of the tragic events.

When the carnage and cruelty of Lear's kingdom begin to subside, however, Kent still lives, part of "the oldest" who "hath borne most" (V.iii.326). And why Kent and not Cordelia? Kent, as did Cordelia, boldly speaks the truth and is banished for doing so. Loyally, lovingly, Kent places himself in a vulnerable situation and provides "service / Improper for a slave" (V.iii.221-2). Through the storm Lear's old friend functions with such goodness that Cordelia asks, "... How shall I live and work / To match thy goodness?" (IV.vii.1-2). To the end Kent sacrifices all but his life and honor. Cordelia does not live not because she
is not good enough or because she is too good to survive, but rather because her sacrificial death heightens Lear's tragedy as nothing else could. The beloved Cordelia is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. When she is destroyed, Lear is destroyed. We are left with "the weight of this sad time" (V.iii.324), reminded of the profound utter waste associated with tragedy.
ENDNOTES


4Dreher 63.


7Krook 45.

Inherent in the concept of sacrifice is the idea of the surrender of something of value to gain a greater good. As we trace the concept of sacrifice in Romeo and Juliet, Othello, and Lear, part of our response to the fate of those who serve as sacrificial figures is shaped by our knowledge of them as fellow human beings. They become more than names on the casualty list of victims of tragedy. Because we hear their inner thoughts and motives and share private moments of love and anguish, it is no wonder that we question whether any gain accrued by their deaths is sufficiently worthwhile. We see them not as martyred saints but as passionate human beings subject to discouragement, frustration, and pain. Sometimes these characters act not in their own best interests but in the interest of others, and we often wonder if the sacrifice they make is wise or warranted. Because we see the virtue and value of these individuals, we wonder why those who initiate tragedy or perpetuate a tragic environment do not see their loved ones as we do and cherish them accordingly. The very virtue and worth of the sacrificial figures accentuate the wrong done against them. Ironically for those who initiate tragedy, the sacrificial figure is the one individual of greatest value and importance them. Sadly, through their own blind deeds, directly or indirectly, they destroy
the trust, the relationship, and ultimately the life of the one person who brings the most meaning and joy to their existence.

In *Romeo and Juliet* the Prince articulates to the feuding families the irony of the tragedy they foster: "heaven finds means to kill your joys with love" (V.iii.293). And it is for that love and the fresh exuberance which will delight us no longer that we grieve. Their love has been a lightning flash against the black background, making both its fresh innocence so powerful and the encroaching hostility so regrettable. As tragic heroes as well as sacrificial figures, Romeo and Juliet bear more responsibility for their fates than either Desdemona or Cordelia. Unlike most tragic heroes, however, they act not out of destructive qualities such as consuming ambition, injured pride, or blind jealousy but out of love for each other. Using the outside point-of-view of the Chorus, Shakespeare shapes our perspective on their innocence and lays the responsibility for the tragedy at the feet of the Montagues and Capulets. As an informed audience we anticipate the sacrificial role Romeo and Juliet will play, but we do not view their lives and deaths as simply a means to an end, the solution to Verona's domestic strife. The "star-crossed lovers" (Pro. 6) become warm, vibrant people, not merely two pieces in some larger design of which they are unaware. In spite of the fact that the informed audience knows what will happen, we wish them well and become very much caught up in their anticipation, their ecstasy, and their total absorption with each other.

Without the benefit of the Prologue's direct assertion, in *Othello* and in *Lear* we become engaged in the drama unfolding before us, unaware of the meaning of the sacrificial deaths until the catastrophe. Because
Desdemona and Cordelia do not play the dual role of tragic hero and sacrificial figure, our attention is not distracted by the questions of accountability associated with Romeo and Juliet. Instead, we become intensely focused on the dynamic interaction between the tragic hero and the one person who makes the greatest impact on his life and tragic experience.

In Othello we move beyond an "untimely frost" that kills "the sweetest flower of all the field" (IV.iv.28-9) as it buds to observe Desdemona's love for Othello as it blossoms only to be cut off. As a young bride Desdemona's wit, beauty, and self-confidence engage our attention as she stands ready to defend herself before the Senate and to "trumpet to the world" (I.iii.250) her love for her husband. Desdemona presents a contrast to the more private, emerging passion of Juliet, who describes herself as "an impatient child that hath new robes / And may not wear them" and who asks the night to teach her "how to lose a winning match, / Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods" (III.ii.12-31). A more mature, sexually awakened woman, Desdemona publicly declares her spiritual and physical attraction for her lord. "I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / and to his honors and valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." She will not bear quietly the forfeit of the "rites for which I love him" (I.iii.252-7). As with Romeo and Juliet, the totality of her commitment both explains her final sacrifice and makes it all the more tragic. As we watch Desdemona's playful interaction with her husband, catch a glimpse of her spirit, and sense the camaraderie which makes her Othello's "fair warrior" (II.i.180), we see her innocence and importance to Othello. We understand how Iago can count on her
predictable "goodness" to "make the net / That shall enmesh them all" (II.iii.345-6). What we do not understand is why Othello allows Iago to reduce Desdemona to the level of an object, a means to an end, defined in physical rather than spiritual terms.

In Cordelia's case the love in question is paternal, not marital. In the exchange that transpires at the opening of Lear, Cordelia's integrity and Lear's irrational behavior become apparent to all, even to Goneril and Regan, who witness his test of her love. Cordelia will not participate in the empty rhetoric of her sisters, nor will she barter her expressions of love for material gain. Although the precision of her speech as she allocates half of her love and duty to her father might make her seem unnecessarily frank and diminish our view of her warmth and humanity, it is with "washed eyes" that Cordelia leaves. Rather than being coldly principled, Cordelia's asides reveal that she deeply loves and cares for her father. From France's perspective Cordelia is very much a desirable "unprized precious maiden" whose virtues have kindled his love to "inflamed respect" (I.i.255-69). The integrity which Cordelia's silence establishes, especially by contrast to the sycophantic rhetoric of her sisters, places the onus of the misunderstanding on Lear's shoulders.

The humanity and innocence of Romeo and Juliet, and to a greater degree that of Desdemona and Cordelia, influence our perception of those who fail to see their worth and value, who interpret or reinterpret their characters not in light of experience or the evidence we have witnessed but because of their enmity, jealously, or injured pride. Failing to take into account the individuality and character of the sacrificial figure,
those who initiate tragedy prescribe and delineate the terms and conditions of love and interaction in order to accommodate their own selfish interests or limited perspectives. Over the years the feuding parents of Verona have fueled a smoldering hostility and have set up a society that defines family identity in terms of the feud. To be a Capulet or a Montague is to be the enemy of the other. Although Romeo and Juliet try to forge a new identity with their love and union, the world they create for themselves does not survive beyond the orchard walls. When Juliet in her new identity as Romeo's bride balks at her father's marriage plans, Capulet misinterprets her reluctance and the "hopeful lady of my earth" (I.ii.15) become "a wretched puling fool" (III.v.185), an ungrateful daughter.

Unfortunately, both Lear and Othello also allow present circumstances and appearances to define or redefine the character of the play's sacrificial figure instead of relying on what each has known of her character in the past. As a result, the tragic hero suffers a bitter, unwarranted disillusionment and brings upon himself and others needless pain. Othello allows Iago's insinuations and allegations to carry more weight than what the general himself witnessed of her own character and spirit. Swayed by Iago's false but vivid mental picture of illicit passion, Othello comes to define Desdemona's character in physical terms. The gentle virtuous Desdemona, "my soul's joy!" (IV.ii.81) becomes "a subtle whore" (IV.ii.21), and "Impudent strumpet!" (IV.ii.81) and he, a cuckold. In Lear's case there is no Iago to distort the image of his loved one. Lear's vision becomes clouded by his own injured pride and frustration over not having things his way. The old king's "joy" becomes his "untender,"
ungrateful "sometime daughter" (I.i.82-120). Because those who initiate tragedy do not see their loved ones as we do or value them or care for them as they should, we judge them accordingly.

The disappointment, or more precisely in the case of Othello and Lear the acute disillusionment each suffers, may be measured by the importance of the sacrificial figure to the emotional well-being of the initiators of tragedy. The death of the innocents in each play is not determined as much by the kind of relationship—familial, marital, or paternal—but more by the quality of that relationship. As we watch the dynamics between the characters unfolding on the stage, some event at the outset directs our attention to the significance of what we witness—the Prologue's pronouncements, the elopement of Othello and Desdemona, and the division of Lear's kingdom.

While our attention in Romeo and Juliet centers on the tragic heroes, where their parents' lives intersect with their children's, we observe the importance of their offspring to their families, especially to the Capulets. The continuance of the family lineage and Capulet's hope to perpetuate himself depend completely on Juliet, since "Earth has swallowed up all my hope but she" (I.ii.14). And Romeo, it would appear, is the only Montague heir. Part of the intensity of the more personal nature of Othello's tragedy hinges upon the overwhelming nature of his love for Desdemona. Othello's happiness depends solely upon Desdemona and his "life upon her faith!" (I.iii.294). For the general inexperienced in love, Desdemona has become his soul's mate. She is his "soul's joy" and in her presence Othello's soul "hath her content so absolute" (II.i.181-185) that all other joys pale by contrast. Othello's psychological
equilibrium depends on Desdemona and his assurance of her love. In the case of Lear the aging king stakes his future rest on the good graces and hospitality of his favorite daughter. While Cordelia is not his only daughter, Lear, instinctively if not consciously, counts on the only daughter on whom he can truly rely.

Because the sacrificial figures are vital to those who initiate tragedy, the ingredients of high human drama are in place. Since the initiators of tragedy depend on someone outside their immediate power to control for their sense of well-being and happiness, they make themselves vulnerable. What they each want most rests in the hands of the sacrificial figures, and when trust and communication break down, the personal universe of the initiators shakes at its foundations. The family patriarchs, the general, and the king find their accustomed sense of power and control threatened, and as a result their responses and their acts of shame precipitate tragedy.

Even though the Montagues and the Capulets alike perpetuate the feud, we see more of Capulet and therefore are more aware of his accountability. When Juliet challenges her father's authority by refusing to comply with his marriage arrangement, Capulet counters with ultimatums and more decrees. He fails to listen to his daughter, who on bended knee pleads a moment of his time. Focusing on his own feelings and injured pride rather than trying to understand his daughter, Capulet decides, "we have a curse in having her" (III.v.168).

Since Othello and Lear center on the experiences of the tragic heroes, we witness more of their anger and displeasure when their sense of control over others as well as their own self-control falter. Othello,
with an impotent frustration because he wrongly believes he no longer possesses exclusively his wife's body and love, cries out over his loss of control, "O curse of marriage, that we call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!" (III.iii.268-70). When Cordelia's silence thwarts her father's wishes, Lear does not take kindly to having his power checked. Although Lear does not hurl at Cordelia the vitriolic imprecations he later heaps on his other daughters, the angry king threatens, "Better thou / Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better" (I.i.234). Lear attempts to wield control over Cordelia's future, thinking no one will have her: "Unfriended, new adopted to our hate, / dow'red with our curse, and strangered with our oath" (I.i.203-4).

Because the initiators of tragedy unjustifiably feel threatened or betrayed, each lashes out at the sacrificial figure first with formal rejection and denunciation, then with threatening circumstances. Speaking with remarkably similar vehemence, each man sounds a note of finality, committing himself emphatically to a path marked by irreversible losses. Challenged by Juliet, Capulet declares his daughter "a green sickness carrion," a "hilding" (III.v.-157,169), or a worthless creature. Capulet's vow, though not as formal, as dramatic or as significant as either of the tragic heroes', is made with hand over heart. Juliet may "hang, beg, starve, die in the streets," but "For my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee, / Nor what is mine shall never do thee good." To emphasize the finality of his statement, Capulet declares he will "not be forsworn" (III.v.192-7), and he ignores Lady Capulet's appeal for moderation.
Convinced of Desdemona's adultery, Othello does not confront her directly but, kneeling before heaven and in the presence of Iago, Othello formally vows revenge. So committed is he to his course, he swears he "Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love" (III.iii.45-8). So great is his rage and injured pride, the general promises, "I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!" (IV.i.196). He brushes aside Iago's hypocritical call for restraint and heads down the path toward disaster.

Although Lear snarls at Kent's attempted intervention ("Come not between the dragon and his wrath" [I.i.122]), the old king's response to Cordelia is not as personally scathing as either Capulet's or Othello's. In a more coldly quiet tone, he finds Cordelia to be "so untender" (I.i.105) and calloused a daughter to be "a wretch whom Nature is ashamed / Almost t'acknowledge hers." Humiliating her before others, Lear declares he would not ask Burgundy to love "where I hate" (I.i.208-13).

Verbal excoriation soon leads to a dramatic event affecting the fate of each sacrificial figure. In the case of the Montagues and Capulets, we do not witness a cataclysmic moment or a direct act of shame as we do with Lear and more so Othello. Instead, we witness the consequences of a shameful condition generated by both families. Because of the pervasive quality of the feud, Romeo in spite of his well-intentioned intervention during a street brawl is banished by the Prince. Then with an unreasonable, dominating spirit which has undoubtedly fueled hostility for years, an angry Capulet banishes his daughter from his sight with "Out on her, hilding!" (III.v.169). Juliet's banishment, not the literal banishment that either Romeo or Cordelia faces, is a psychological isolation akin to the more sustained alienation which Desdemona experiences. Although
Capulet does not physically harm his daughter, by his refusal to listen he alienates Juliet, thoughtlessly placing her in a desperate situation which prompts eventual disaster.

Of these initiators of tragedy Othello, as a tragic hero, is the most directly involved with and most clearly culpable for the death of the sacrificial figure. The general fails to establish Desdemona's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and refuses to listen to her claims of innocence. While Othello demands "ocular proof" (III.iii.360), his ability to see and care for Desdemona as we do is already severely impaired. Blinded by his jealousy, Othello asserts his own physical power over Desdemona to gain final control over her. Othello has purposed in his heart to wipe out the source of his pain. "Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight; for she shall not live (IV.i.178-80). In a premeditated act Othello with his own hands smothers his pleading wife with her pillow.

While the audience watches the process of Othello's trust erode and anticipates disaster, Lear's outburst occurs without warning or forethought in the early moments of the play. Like Othello, he fails to "see better" (I.i.158), to understand Cordelia's perspective or to see Cordelia through loving, caring eyes because injured pride and stubborn willfulness blind him. With the coldness of a royal decree, he disclaims "all paternal care / Propinquity and property of blood." As though he can wipe out her memory, from this point on she will no longer exist. She is now his "sometime daughter" (I.i.109-20). While the tragedy in Verona is communal and the action on Cyprus is personal and more limited in scope, Lear's action becomes more universal, spilling over into his kingdom. In
part Kent anticipates the disastrous results when "majesty falls to folly." He warns, "Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check this hideous rashness" (I.i.149-51). But Lear will not listen nor will he see. As the Capulets and Montagues ignore the Prince's admonition and as Othello refuses to hear the truth from Emilia or Desdemona, so Lear rejects Kent's intervention, failing to weigh his actions until their consequences come crashing down upon him.

Part of what makes the human drama unfolding before the audience so painful is our awareness of the unnecessary suffering the initiators of tragedy bring upon themselves and those with whom their lives are inextricably bound. Understandably, we catch only brief glimpses of the suffering of the Montagues and Capulets but witness the prolonged agony of Othello and Lear. When Lady Capulet believes Juliet to be dead, she sums up the comprehensive nature of her grief, "My child, my only life!" (IV.iv.19). Sustaining the greatest loss, Montague just prior to finding Romeo's body faces the loss of his wife. "Grief of my son's exile hath stopped her breath (V.iii.210). Before Othello and Lear agonize over the deaths of Desdemona and Cordelia, they each suffer the pain of being disillusioned with their loved ones. Eaten up with jealousy, Othello is ever on the rack of suspicion and doubt. Because his life revolves around Desdemona, his world is shattered and rational thinking dissolves into chaos. "When I love thee not, Chaos is come again" (III.iii.90).

The very personal disillusionment Othello faces with one individual becomes a more universal one for Lear. Although Lear is too proud to show the pain he might feel with what he considers to be Cordelia's ungratefulness, his feelings show in his anger over not being pleased better.
As Goneril and Regan begin to shuffle Lear back and forth, stripping away his dignity and power, the unjustifiable disappointment he feels with Cordelia becomes a justified disillusionment with his other two daughters. Because he has given away his kingdom to receive so little, Lear battles the storm alone and confused. "The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else / Save what beats there." And it is "filial ingratitude" that tortures his mind. With impaired vision he sees himself as "Your old kind father; whose frank heart gave all—0 that way madness lies (III.iv.12-21). Projecting his anguish and despair upon those around him, the disillusionment he feels with all of his daughters becomes a disillusionment with all mankind. In his confusion his personal plight becomes the plight of all. "Nothing could subdue nature / To such lowness" as that he witnesses except for "unkind daughters" (III.iv.68-71). Questioning the very nature of man, Lear asks, "Is man no more than this?" Concluding that "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal" (III.iv.97-102), Lear reduces human behavior to beastliness, and his disillusionment becomes all encompassing.

While the suffering associated with their disillusion brings frustration and pain, the greatest tragic suffering comes to the initiators of tragedy when they realize they have irrevocably lost through their own shameful actions the one person who gives joy and meaning to their lives. The radical shock and the revelations associated with the deaths of the sacrificial figures heighten that moment of tragic suffering and bring a measure of self-knowledge and affirmation or reaffirmation, especially for the tragic heroes.
The dramatic impact of the conclusion of *Romeo* and *Juliet* centers on the deaths of the tragic heroes, and consequently we see less of the response of the Montagues and the Capulets to the sacrificial deaths than we see in *Othello* or *Lear*. The parents have been largely unaware of the events that have transpired in their children's lives and learn only through the Friar and the Prince what has happened. Leaving little room for grief, the Prince speaks of the necessity of the sacrificial deaths and reinforces the manifest design of the Prologue. Because they will not live in peace, "a scourge is laid upon your hate!" It is "Heaven," he reasons, that "finds means to kill your joys with love." Divine retribution extends beyond the immediate families to the community as "All are punished." Although Capulet gains little self-knowledge of his role in the deaths of the young lovers, he acknowledges the responsibility of the two families when he sums up the significance of the tragic deaths as "Poor sacrifices of our enmity!" (V.iii.295-304). Capulet's response, however, seems more descriptive than reflective or analytical, an overview of the situation rather than the intensely personal upheaval of *Othello*. With Capulet extending his hand in reconciliation to Montague and each erecting statues to commemorate the other's child, the patriarchs take the first step to long-awaited communal peace.

Standing over the body of Desdemona, Othello finally confronts the enormity of his delusion. With Emilia's haunting "Moor she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor" ringing in his ears, Othello realizes that with his own hands he has destroyed the center of his world. He may well wish "roast me in sulphur! / Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!" (V.ii.280-1). More reflective than Capulet but less analytical than Lear,
Othello sees himself as "one whose hand, / Like the base Judean, threw a
pearl away / Richer than all his tribe" (V.ii.347-8). In the anguish of
his loss Othello concludes he has "loved not wisely, but too well" (V.ii.-
344-6). We may rightly challenge just how "well" Othello has loved
Desdemona, but his admission reflects greater insight than he has pre­
viously demonstrated. What he wrongly believes he has lost, he now
regains in Desdemona's sacrificial death. As Romeo and Juliet have before
her, Desdemona has died reaffirming her unqualified love for her husband.
Unlike Romeo and Juliet, who have no sense of their role as sacrifices,
Desdemona has become a willing sacrifice, taking upon herself Othello's
guilt. "Nobody--I myself" (V.ii.125) have done the deed. But Othello has
misjudged the situation and the woman. Therein lies the greatest agony
of his tragedy. He gains a greater insight into himself and his Desdemona
when all possibilities of reconciliation of loving wisely and well have
been irrevocably lost. Understandably for Othello "'tis happiness to die"
(V.ii.290).

On the other hand Lear does experience the opportunity to ask for
forgiveness and to enjoy brief moments of restoration at Cordelia's
return. Sacrificing her safety and comfort, Cordelia comes back from
exile, bringing consolation and forgiveness. Before the "one daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse" (IV.vi.207), Lear confesses he
has done wrong: "Pray you now, forget and forgive." While in his state
of mind he may not see clearly or completely, he realizes "I am old and
foolish" (V.vii.84). Previously too proud to humble himself, the old king
will now gladly kneel, ask forgiveness, and offer his blessing. With care
and concern we have not yet seen, Lear in his confused state offers
comfort and consolation to Cordelia as they are marched off to prison. Awful as the concluding scene may be, the old king overwhelmed with grief affirms his love for Cordelia and regains his lost faith in humanity. When Lear in excruciating pain looks for the faintest breath, some sign of life, he reaffirms the value of Cordelia's life. If there be a chance she lives, "It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt" (V.iii.267-8). Lear, who had reduced man to the level of a beast, now sees human value and life above that of an animal. "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" But Lear's tragic vision comes at such an awful price, for Cordelia will "come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never." With Kent we agree that Lear "upon the rack of this tough world" (V.iii.307-15) has been stretched long enough.

Lear's conclusion leaves us asking with Kent, "Is this the promised end?" and with Edgar, "Or image of that horror?" (V.iii.265-6). There is no comforting reassurance about gain through loss. We do not sense as we do in the conclusion of Romeo and Juliet that overt good will come from such a great loss. Neither the Capulets nor the Montagues question the purpose of the deaths of their children; they die as "poor sacrifices of our enmity!" We see communal peace and order restored. While Verona will be filled with talk of "sad things" and a "story" of "woe" (V.iii.307-10), it is a story with a distinct design and a measure of resolution. At Othello's end, we see a more personal rather than communal story. The tragic "loading of this bed" is a private "object" that "poisons sight; Let it be hid" (V.ii.362-5). Othello, himself, provides a sense of closure and inevitability. There is "No way but this, / Killing myself,
to die upon a kiss" (V.ii.369-70). But for Lear there is no such resolu-
tion. Lear dies hoping vainly for breath on Cordelia's lips, "Look her
lips, / Look there, look there--" (V.iii.311-2).

Through the crucial role of the sacrificial figures the starkness of
tragedy has been softened by the beauty of the love and the affirmation
and reaffirmation of human worth and the value of life that their loves
and deaths inspire. Because we have seen the humanity of the sacrificial
figures and have witnessed their intimate thoughts and moments, with their
deaths comes a sense of tragic, irrevocable loss intensifying the experi-
ence for all. Whether it is Verona's "glooming peace" (V.iii.305), one
man's "heavy act" that leaves all who watch with a "heavy heart," or the
"weight of this sad time" (V.iii.324) in Lear's kingdom, the audience
grieves over so great a sacrifice of human life that has been made in each
situation. And we are left with Edgar to "Speak what we feel, not what
we ought to say" (V.iii.325), and what we feel keenly is the terrible
waste and destruction of life, made all the more painful by our sense of
the value of what is lost.
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