CHAPTER 6

“Ocular Proof” and the Dangers of the Perceptual Faith

Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ.

Shakespeare, Othello, 3.3.322–24

Merleau-Ponty begins The Visible and the Invisible, naturally enough, by interrogating the notion that “we see the things themselves, the world is what we see.” Of such commonsense statements, Merleau-Ponty asserts that “if we ask ourselves what is this we, what seeing is, and what thing or world is, we enter into a labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions.” Rather than confront these difficult questions, the natural temptation is to retreat into the safety of what Merleau-Ponty termed “the perceptual faith,” a belief in the existence of the material world ostensibly confirmed through the senses. In Othello, Shakespeare dramatizes how something like Merleau-Ponty’s “labyrinth of difficulties and contradictions” complicates the relationship of ethics and vision. The play specifically foregrounds the early modern struggle over the contradictory nature of vision as both the most direct conduit to the world as it is and the sense most susceptible to illusion and misinterpretation. In the following pages, I examine how Othello’s ethical failure stems in large part from his inability to understand the problematic relationship between vision and truth, and ultimately vision and ethics. If, as I argued in the last chapter, Measure for Measure represents one of Shakespeare’s most significant meditations on the conflict between codified morality and individual ethical decision making, in Othello the playwright turns his attention to the question of what constitutes an acceptable ground for moral judgment. While Measure for Measure demonstrates the inadequacy of moral law to account for the singularity of
ethical experience, *Othello* examines the difficult epistemological problems raised by the ethical demand. Concentrating on how what we see (and have seen) impacts how we act when confronted with the ethical decision, the play suggests that the process of reasonable deliberation by which Othello arrives at his moral conviction is as problematic as any moral law on which he might have based his judgment. While the clarity of abstract moral law fails to accommodate the particularity of human experience in *Measure for Measure*, *Othello* demonstrates that moral reasoning has significant limitations in the face of epistemological uncertainty.

The “ocular proof” of my title refers, of course, to Othello’s demand that Iago supply hard evidence to prove Desdemona’s guilt. The demand comes at the height of his transformation from loyal husband to jealous victim. The centrality of vision in the process of this transformation makes the play particularly instructive for the present attempt to examine the relationship between ethics and vision in early modern England. Martin Jay has playfully reminded us that “if we actively focus our attention [on the ubiquity of visual metaphors], vigilantly keeping an eye out for those deeply embedded as well as those on the surface, we can gain an illuminating insight into the complex mirroring of perception and language.”

*Othello* highlights this mirroring to the point that linguistic visual figurality is taken for visual experience. Specifically, the stories Shakespeare’s characters tell in hopes of establishing the truth betray a special reliance on the visible as the category most closely allied with the language of objectivity, grounded in a material, empiricist epistemology. At the same time, however, the play reveals the visual to be a category discursively constructed to suit the narrative logic of the particular situations in which the characters find themselves. The appeal to the language of vision as the language of proof relies on what might be more properly termed rhetorical or aesthetic characteristics for its power—the certainty of the “eye witness” compared to the untrustworthiness of “hearsay,” for example.

What is crucial to the present discussion is the continuous rhetorical invocation of the visible as the ground for a collectively witnessed reality in the play. The language of the visual serves to underwrite the authority of the account even when there is an overt appeal to something immaterial beyond visual perception, such as Desdemona’s “honesty.” In conversation with Othello, Iago raises the issue of visual perception in confirming a lady’s honor: “Her honour is an essence that’s not seen; / They have it very oft that have it not” (4.1.16–17). David Michael Levin highlights the problem as it persists in philosophy; he argues that

the ‘nature’ of the visual perception (vision, sight, seeing) about which philosophers talk, and which they claim to be ‘describing’ and critically