This essay considers Shakespeare’s *Othello* as having at its core a focus on the process of interpretation and the role it plays in human relations. Markowski emphasizes how Iago uses the word *bookish* in connection with the word *theoric* as mere prattle without practice. If jealousy is *unbookish*, Markowski argues, it should be seen as something which exceeds a theoretical, contemplative, disinterested and distanced view. Markowski further argues that jealousy sheds light on what is going on in the process of reading or interpretation, how the Other places us under an obligation that is at the same time a doublebind: we are forced to either distance ourselves or annihilate the Other by stripping away difference.

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O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
*William Shakespeare*

From heresy, jealousy and frenzy, good Lord, deliver us.
*Robert Burton*

The aim of this essay is to join jealousy and hermeneutics in a reciprocal relationship. Jealousy should be considered as a form of hermeneutics and hermeneutics—and this may appear somewhat out of the ordinary—as a form of jealousy. Moreover, hermeneutics is, at least in its traditional form, a peculiar form of paranoia, which sheds a suspicious light onto the whole legend of Western hermeneutics. Interestingly enough, in this double discourse of hermeneutics and jealousy there is a certain madness (or delirium) present in both cases, which stems from the human incapacity to deal with the traffic of signs. The dilemma is simply this: either we are sentenced to jealousy because of our exclusion from the desired, or we have to affirm our jealousy, stripped of its violent aspect, because of our contingency. On the one hand, we do not know the meanings of other wor(l)ds, and thus we are—in a way—*jealous* of them; on the other hand, the distance between the other and our awareness of that distance cannot be bracketed off, and we must continue interpreting, because otherwise we would be caught in the trap of egological consciousness. This is the very
essence of the well-known problem of hermeneutics, and it may be useful to reshape it in the context of jealousy, and, what is more surprising, in the context of paranoia.

**Othello’s Madness**

“So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief!” (Rymer 1956, 265).

For obvious reasons *Othello* is the focus of this essay, because jealousy in Shakespeare’s play helps us understand some problems connected with the mysterious relationship between passion and interpretation. Thus, we learn the origin of jealousy:

> Desdemona. Alas the day! I never gave him cause.
> Emilia. But jealous souls will not be answered so;
> They are not ever jealous for the cause,
> But jealous for they’re jealous. It is a monster
> Begot upon itself, born of itself.† (III: 4)

Jealous souls are “jealous for they’re jealous,” says Emilia, referring to the surprising essence of jealousy. Jealousy is not concerned with external reality, it does not have its source in the behavior of other people (“I never gave him cause”), but it stems from the inner space of a human being where it is born—and then it is “[b]egot upon itself, born of itself.” Jealousy is a perfectly autonomous passion, for it is not subject to any external power, and it grows according to its own rules. But is Othello jealous simply because he is jealous, and not because there are suspicious signs which suddenly appear in his world, signs which he cannot understand, and thus turns them round and round desperately looking for their “true” sense? Othello seems to be jealous because he does not know what all the signs around him mean—what the handkerchief in Desdemona’s hands points to, or what Cassio’s laughter signifies. But the fact is that he does know their significance and this is precisely that upon which Iago builds his stratagem:

> As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad;
> And his unbookish jealousy must conster
> Poor Cassio’s smiles, gestures, and light behaviors
> Quite in the wrong. (IV: 1)

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