*Tragic Cognition in Shakespeare's "Othello": Beyond the Neural Sublime*. Paul Cefalu.
Shakespeare Now! London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015. viii + 124 pp. $22.95.

Iago is a unique challenge for the psychological critic: no character is so effectual when manipulating other minds while being so inwardly obscure, even to himself. There is a vertiginous feeling when we realize that a character's resourceful ways of shielding himself from others may be working on him too—or perhaps even that there is nothing to be shielded after all. Paul Cefalu takes this extreme case as a test of what cognitive theory can do, and finds that this critical approach faces an explanatory gap. The book's subtitle plays on a phrase used by Alan Richardson. The "neural sublime" is said to be achieved at moments in literature when the foundations of thought, the characteristics of the enabling and constraining neurons, seem to become manifest in the reading of a text. Cefalu casts this as "the neuroreductive sublime" (75) because it misses something crucial. It is not enough to say that something remarkable or strange about the way we think rises to the surface in literary experience. What a cognitive approach cannot do, but should, he says, is explain or address underlying motives and causes. It needs a "more robust . . . supplement" (31), which is psychoanalysis.

Cefalu has many interesting insights into the workings of Iago (and, in the final chapter, Othello as well). He writes well about theory of mind and mindblindness, about the recurring wish for contentment in the play, and about the extended mind and countertransference. There are acute insights into characters: it works particularly well, for example, to draw out the way in which Othello (by distant analogy with Thomas Nagel's famous question "what is it like to be a bat?") does not seem to know what it is like to be himself. He writes more contentiously about Stoicism as a kind of cognitive behavioral therapy, and there is at times a slightly belittling attitude toward the aspirations of cognitive science and its application in the humanities. The turn to Lacan, masochism, and homoeroticism does prove quite illuminating on the terms of this study, but it also seems like a well-tried technique, a turn back rather than a move forward. To most people who have decided to learn from the insights of cognitive science, the practitioners of which often see

psychoanalysis as very little like what they do, it is by no means an obvious move to follow Cefalu in that direction.

He is aware, of course, that it is not easy to subject characters to the same analytical processes that real people might undergo, but I don't think he sidesteps the problem entirely when he passes it over to the cognitivists themselves (22). It is an interesting question as to which side, the cognitivist or the psychoanalytic, is more bedeviled by the problematic aspects of what may be underlying (problematic in that there is nothing actually underlying) the tangible evidence of a character. Psychoanalysis has therapy as its goal and has pretty much always, from the start, been applied to literary characters; the affinity between psychoanalysis and literature goes very deep. The same cannot be said of extended-mind theory, for example, which comes into a different sort of interdisciplinary conversation with literary criticism. Nor is it always the goal of cognitive theory to address characters in this way, as if they had problems to be solved and a critical approach should offer answers. This limited appreciation of the diversity of cognitive approaches may be the book's most significant weakness, but then again it may be the most significant weakness in the field being addressed, that it has not coalesced, perhaps, into prominent and visible key achievements and goals.

The Shakespeare Now! series has proved successful in enabling authors to make polemical or left-field arguments, and that is true here too. *Tragic Cognition in Shakespeare's "Othello"* fulfils the series brief of finding "life" in both text and critic. Disciplinary tension may be a good way of releasing new questions and answers in texts that have been thought over and rethought so often. It may be true that cognitive approaches to literature would have more purchase if they took an extra explanatory turn. Nevertheless it remains problematic, for me at least, that the underlying goal preferred in Cefalu's book is not questioned more, or justified more, as the proper task for any critical approach.

Raphael Lyne, *Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge*