



# **The Improbability of Othello: Rhetorical Anthropology and Shakespearean Selfhood**

*Joel B. Altman*

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Shakespeare's dramatis personae exist in a world of supposition, struggling to connect knowledge that cannot be had, judgments that must be made, and actions that need to be taken. For them, probability—what they and others might be persuaded to believe—governs human affairs, not certainty. Yet negotiating the space of probability is fraught with difficulty. Here, Joel B. Altman explores the problematics of probability and the psychology of persuasion in Renaissance rhetoric and Shakespeare's theater.

Focusing on the *Tragedy of Othello*, Altman investigates Shakespeare's representation of the self as a specific realization of tensions pervading the rhetorical culture in which he was educated and practiced his craft. In Altman's account, Shakespeare also restrains and energizes his audiences' probabilizing capacities, alternately playing the skeptical critic and dramaturgic trickster. A monumental work of scholarship by one of America's most respected scholars of Renaissance literature, *The Improbability of Othello* contributes fresh ideas to our understanding of Shakespeare's conception of the self, his shaping of audience response, and the relationship of actors to his texts.

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