

Iago: Deception as Catalyst for Truth

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The audience will achieve a more complete understanding of Iago in *The Tragedy of Othello* if Iago is viewed as a complex character and not simply as a conventional “villain.” Iago’s devious schemes destroy lives both literally and figuratively, but they may also serve to reveal the character of others in intricate ways. A critical interpretation of Iago reveals that although he is principally a deceiver, he is also a dramatic agent of truth. Even though his acts are malicious and deceitful, the title “honest Iago” is fitting in the sense that he reveals the true nature of his victims, as well as the propensity for human beings to act in accordance with their inherently dark natures. While based in deception, Iago’s machinations expose the truth of Brabantio’s hidden racism, Cassio’s inner vanity, and Othello’s repressed sexual possessiveness.

Iago cleverly emphasizes the issue of race and its association with devilry when he and Roderigo announce to Brabantio that Desdemona has eloped with Othello. Iago is the first to emphasize the biracial nature of the marriage, by referring to Othello as an “old black ram” and to Desdemona as a “white ewe” (1.1.85-86).¹ Iago then associates Othello with the image of “the devil” (88) because he is black, warning Brabantio that he has “lost half [his] soul” (84) now that Desdemona is married to Othello. It is Iago who initially suggests that Othello exemplifies the stereotype that a black person is inherently evil and likely to be a practitioner of witchcraft. Granted, it is unlikely that Iago’s few brief statements give birth to Brabantio as a racist; yet by plaguing Brabantio’s thoughts

with a dialogue that feeds his natural tendency towards racism, Iago helps to expose Brabantio's true character.

Perhaps it is Iago who has allowed the idea finally to surface, but Brabantio's double standard for Othello has apparently always existed. Brabantio may have respected Othello as a military general, as a close acquaintance, and perhaps even as a friend, but it is clear that he never considered Othello good enough to be a husband for his daughter. Brabantio seemingly laments the fact that his daughter has married a black man, falling in love "with what she feared to look on!" (1.3.98), more than the fact that she has betrayed him. While Iago's statements are strong enough to precipitate the release of Brabantio's true feelings in a stressful situation, the ease with which Brabantio vocalizes racist remarks about Othello suggests that he has always been secretly prejudiced and has never considered Othello a true friend.

In his defense speech to the council of Venice, Othello discloses his belief that he and Brabantio were previously friends: "Her father loved me; oft invited me; / Still questioned me the story of my life..." (1.3.127-28). Yet rather than attack Othello's character, Brabantio develops the stereotype that Iago presents to him in the beginning of Act 1, Scene 1 in order to launch a vicious, race-based, verbal assault against Othello. In much the same manner as Iago, Brabantio begins his attack by citing Othello's color in the image of a "sooty bosom" (1.2.69). Unlike Iago, Brabantio never directly calls Othello the "devil," but he does take Iago's lead by associating the trait of being black with witchcraft and devilry. He strongly alludes to the idea that Othello, on the basis of his color, is the devil when he accuses him of witchcraft, saying he is "damned" (62) as an "abuser of the world" (77) who uses "practices of cunning hell" (1.3.102). Brabantio's

appeal that Desdemona must have been tricked into marriage with a “dram” (105) that demonstrates Othello’s satanic power shows that he thinks that Desdemona never would have been able to overcome the hurdle of Othello’s color. In actuality, Iago’s ability to provoke Brabantio’s true nature suggests that it is Brabantio who has never been able to overcome the issue of Othello’s race.

Even though Iago’s devious intrigues are not the origin of Cassio’s vanity, his remarks and obscure songs are precisely calculated to appeal to and to demonstrate Cassio’s egotistical tendencies. Some prompting by Iago reveals Cassio’s desire for popularity and reputation, and his constant boasting attests to the fact that he is naturally vain: “For mine own part—no offense to the general, nor any man of quality—I hope to be saved” (2.3.103-104). Were Cassio not narcissistic to begin with, Iago’s manipulations would never have provoked him to become drunk or start a brawl, actions that both hold negative consequences for Cassio’s position as a lieutenant.

Cassio first reveals his vanity when he is convinced by Iago to drink, presumably in order to prove that he is “a man.” Iago appeals to Cassio’s desire to be liked by all, saying that Othello’s wedding guests “are our friends”(2.3.35) and that “the gallants desire” (40-41) Cassio to drink in celebration. Even though he admits he has “very poor and unhappy brains for drinking” (31-32), Cassio begins to drink. He is quickly swayed by Iago’s lyrics suggesting that drinking makes one a proper man in the eyes of his peers; the song implies not only that a “man’s life’s but a span” (69), but also that a proper soldier should drink: “Why then, let a soldier drink” (70). Iago even suggests that drinking makes a fellow a better Englishman, because a true Englishman “drinks you with facility” (79). Iago does the prompting, but Cassio eagerly takes the bait,

announcing that Iago's songs and statements are "excellent" (72) and "exquisite" (95) because they appeal to his vanity.

Cassio's desire for popularity may be questionable as evidence of an egotistical nature, but once he becomes drunk and his true character is revealed, his boasts clearly demonstrate his vanity. Cassio confirms that he has a high opinion of himself not only by insisting "I hope to be saved" (104), but also by reminding Iago that he will be saved "by your leave, not before me" (106). In his drunken state Cassio cannot help but speak his true thoughts. He haughtily believes himself to be of greater spiritual value than Iago, and that he will be "saved" first by God simply because he is lieutenant, while Iago, as an ancient, is below him in the social hierarchy. The significance Cassio places on social rank above the state of his immortal soul clearly argues for his predisposition towards vanity.

It is strange that after he is stripped of his office as lieutenant, Cassio hardly mentions feeling regret because he has lost his position and his friendship with Othello. His greatest concern seems to be the loss of his "reputation," a word that he mentions six times in quick succession (261-64). Rather than denoting a concern for the loss of his honor, his emphasis seems to be placed on restoring his bruised ego. As Iago so clearly states, "Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving" (267-269). Again, though, Cassio is superficial in that he considers his reputation to be the "immortal" (262) portion of himself. Through the employment of Iago's clever devices, Cassio's high opinion of himself and the need for others to affirm this opinion quickly reveals itself, suggesting that it is inherent in his nature.

Brabantio and Cassio have relatively small roles in the play. Yet as the primary

character, Othello is also vulnerable to Iago's ability to intensify inherent negative traits. Othello's words of love to Desdemona in early portions of the play, calling her his "fair warrior" (2.1.179) and "soul's joy" (182), appear to be genuine. However, Othello's original speech about her as he defends their courtship, and his reasons for wanting her to join him in Cyprus, reveal that he is sexually motivated from the play's beginning.

Othello does speak of his love for Desdemona, but only as it is connected to raw sexual desire: "She'd come again, and with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse" (1.3,148-49). Even as he professes not to value Desdemona's presence in Cyprus to satisfy his lust, his detailed sexual description reveals that this is his driving motivation. By overstating his denial of his driving lust—"I therefore beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with heat—the young affects / In me defunct—and proper satisfaction" (1.3.256-259)—Othello exposes his tendency to be sexually possessive. Seemingly out of respect, he does refer to wanting to be "free and bounteous" (260) to Desdemona's mind (showing his appreciation for her mental attributes); yet in comparison to the length and intensity of his sexual statements, it seems a mere afterthought.

Iago's sexual imagery merely draws Othello's original sexual preoccupation into a fever, revealing something that appears to have had its origin within the devious mind of Iago but actually results from Iago's manipulation of Othello's innately sexual nature. Iago sets the ball rolling by administering the lie that Desdemona has been false. Othello then promptly shows that what he desires is not his wife's faithfulness as much as to control and possess her sexually, when he laments "That we can call these delicate creatures ours / and not their appetites!" (3.3.268- 269). Act 3, Scene 3 is crucial in understanding Iago's ability to goad Othello into a more heightened state of sexual

possessiveness. Othello is finally pushed to the point that he would rather kill his wife—“Down, Strumpet!” (5.2.79)—than lose control of her sexually. Iago’s bestial sexual reference to Desdemona and Cassio as being “prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt wolves in pride” (3.3.400-401), and the alleged dream where Iago graphically describes Cassio as having “laid his leg o’er my thigh” (421), play upon Othello’s sexual suspicions. Othello’s interrogation of Desdemona and her hand as being sexually liberal—“Hot, hot, and moist” (3.4.39)—is a direct result of Iago’s provocations in the previous act. Yet, in light of Othello’s original speech about Desdemona in Venice, the audience sees that Iago has merely drawn Othello’s sexual possessiveness closer to the surface. Othello does appear to have concern for Desdemona’s unfaithfulness. On closer analysis, however, one finds that this concern is rooted in Othello’s fears that he does not have sole possession of her body (as symbolized by his claim over her “moist” hand), as when he later declares, “I had rather be a toad / And live upon the vapor of a dungeon / Than keep a corner in the thing I love / For others’ uses” (3.3.269-272). His fever to possess Desdemona is reinforced by Iago’s devious “med’cine” (4.1.47); nevertheless, his sexual perception of her infidelity, seen in his statements, “Cuckold me!” (202) and “I took you for that cunning whore of Venice” (4.2.88), reveals that Iago indeed has great persuasive powers, but only insofar as he is able to tap into the dark vices that already exist within his victims.

The *dramatis personae* simply lists Iago as “a villain,” and this description seems fitting as the audience witnesses his ability to deceive nearly every other character as to his true motivations. Yet from the beginning, Iago warns the audience that he is not what he appears to be, stating outright in the first scene, “I am not what I am” (1.1.62). Is there

a possibility that, as the audience, we too have been deceived? Just as the other characters in the play are deceived into viewing Iago as too honest, perhaps we have judged him to be too false. As a narrative device, Iago's calculated deceptions have revealed the true natures of Brabantio, Cassio, and Othello. The dark truth revealed in our inability to perceive Iago completely is the natural human tendency to deny that which is abhorrent in our own natures, and to find scapegoats on which to place the blame for our darker sides. As a conventional villain, Iago becomes an easy scapegoat; we place the responsibility for the moral failings of others on his ability to manipulate and deceive. Yet as an agent of truth, Iago's most meaningful revelation is that we tend to deny the reality that, as human beings, we all possess the propensity to judge what is foreign to us in racist ways, to esteem ourselves too highly, or to be sexually motivated and possessive. Indeed, Iago has the "last laugh" in being "honest Iago" as an agent of truth—for he manipulates not only the characters, but the audience as well.

Note

1. All references to *Othello* are from the Signet Classic Edition (New York: Penguin, 1998).

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