Iago as a Projection of Othello

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[Warnken examines the relationship between Iago and Othello, determining that while Iago's evil corrupts Othello, the potential for evil already lurked within the Moor— Iago merely frees his capacity for evil Iago's strengths—his ability to quickly exploit situations, his knowledge of human nature, and his innate cunning—exploit Othello's weaknesses—sensitivity, pride, insecurity, and short sightedness. The critic finds that Othello gradually adopts Iago's speech patterns and world view, and by the play's end Iago "penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing as he does so, the evil already present within Othello." Thus, Othello ends the play dominated by the emotions over which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he had control. By succumbing to these emotions, he destroys himself. For further commentary on the character of Iago, see the excerpts by A. C. Bradley, D. R. Godfrey, Ruth Cowhig, and Wyndham Lewis.]

Iago is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest villain. He is hate and evil made physical the most fully developed member of a group of characters that includes Richard III, Edmund [in *King Lear*], and Goneril and Regan [in *King Lear*]. Bernard Spivack, in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, has suggested that Iago is the medieval Vice given new life by Shakespeare [the Morality Play character Vice would tempt the protagonist].

Such a judgment is correct; but it would be misleading to conclude that Othello is the embodiment of goodness and trust, and therefore, nothing more than the innocent foil for the other's wickedness. Othello is, in fact, the source of Iago's diabolical inspiration. He contains within himself the potential for evil. Iago could never have succeeded in his designs were it not for Othello's dark suspicions, his predisposition to mistrust and the sense of inferiority it breeds.

Iago repeatedly tries to justify his actions with the same kind of superficial self-righteousness manifested by Othello. He feels and thinks that he has been cheated, betrayed, made a fool of by others—but he has no proof. His arguments for revenge are built on suspicion, feeling, emotion, and impulse. He has no proof, for example, that Othello—or Cassio—has committed adultery with Emilia; he acts merely on suggestion and rationalization. In this he is remarkably similar to Othello, who also has a habit of accepting things at face value, acting- on impulse and suspicion rather than on proof. Because he acts and thinks in this manner, Othello—like Iago—comes to accept the notion that mankind is moved only by the most selfish motives. Desdemona herself assumes this aspect in his eyes. Othello comes to see her with the same warped and corrupted imagination displayed by Iago.

Iago is clearly evil; but as the play progresses, Othello appears less good, less innocent than the public image of the opening scenes may lead one to suppose. Iago may manipulate Othello, but Othello is no mere puppet. By the middle of the play, his thoughts and feelings echo Iago's. He is the medium through which Iago works his diabolical plans—but he is a willing medium, responding to Iago's suggestions with the same kind of pseudo-rational justification Iago has insisted on as an excuse for his own actions. Iago thus emerges as a projection of Othello, the full embodiment of the weaknesses and limitations of the other. Iago feeds on the errors that result from Othello's self-deception; but he himself is deceived in his vision of the world. For him, mankind is corruptible; love is
a mere illusion; women are inferior beings. He acts on these assumptions in the same way that Othello acts on his warped vision of love, trust, and honor. Both act on a false set of premises. The relationship thus established is reflected and magnified, as will be seen, in the imagery and verbal patterns of the play.

One of the most striking of Iago’s characteristics is his uncanny ability to take advantage of the situations and opportunities presented to him. His strategy, of course, does not succeed completely: Cassio remains alive, and Iago himself is captured and his plot revealed. On the whole, however, he is unbelievably successful. In his hands, the slightest shred of gossip, hearsay, or overheard conversation becomes a dangerous catalyst, a catalyst that intensifies Othello’s reaction to the facts and situations Iago places before him.

Othello is easy prey for Iago because he is extremely sensitive and prone to anger. So long as his confidence remains unshaken, he has complete command of a situation. This is clearly seen when Brabantio, Roderigo, and others, threaten to attack him:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

Good signior, you shall more command with years

Than with your weapons.

[I i. 59-61]

When moved to anger, however, he tends to ignore reason—as when he comes upon the drunken Cassio, following the street fight engineered by Iago:

Now, by heaven,

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,

And passion, having my best judgment collied,

Assays to lead the way.

[II. iii. 204-07]

Iago has already understood Othello’s tendency to react without reason to a situation which touches him personally. He understands well that Othello’s emotions feed and wax violent on doubt, that he seems to have a built-in capacity for self-deception, which can be utilized by Iago, for his own ends. He works especially on Othello’s doubt—planted in him by Brabantio’s statements early in the play—that perhaps his marriage to Desdemona is a perversion of nature; he plays on Othello’s ignorance of life and people, especially in Venice, and on his inability to distinguish between
appearance and reality.

The Moor is of a free and open nature

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.

[I. iii. 399-400]

Othello's judgment, of Iago is, of course, the best illustration of this. "He holds me well" [I. iii. 390], Iago reminds us, but he himself is a much severer judge:

... little godliness I have...

[I. ii. 9]

... oft my jealousy

Shapes faults that are not...

[III. iii, 147-48]

I am a very villain...

[IV. i. 125]

The recognition of the contradiction between appearance and reality in his own case gives Iago the confidence he needs to turn fiction into fact and convince Othello that fair is foul. He correctly evaluates Othello's love for Desdemona:

   Our General's wife is now the General ... for... he hath devoted and given up himself to the contemplation, mark, and denotement of her parts and graces.

   [II. iii. 314-15, 316-18]

   His soul is ... enfetter'd to her love

   [II. iii. 345]

—but he has no doubt about his ability to undermine that reality. He succeeds very often with a mere hint—as, for example, the suggestion that Desdemona can not possibly escape the corruption for which the Venetian women (he implies) are notorious:

   In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands.

[III. iii. 202-01]

In the eyes of others, Iago is understandably "brave," "honest," and "just," for he invariably calls upon the virtues of others to effect their fall. It is the soldier's fearlessness, his impulsive response in critical situations, which he plays upon to bring Othello to ruin. Defending his marriage to Desdemona before the Duke and others in a council chamber, Othello reminds them that

... since these arms of mine had seven years' pith

Till now some nine moons wasted, they have us'd

Their dearest action in the tented field;

And little of this great world can I speak

More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.

[I. iii. 83-7]

He has known the battlefield and war since early youth. He is a soldier, and therefore accustomed to hardship and cruelty. He himself admits that he can withstand hardship, and may even be stimulated by it:

I do agnize

A natural and prompt alacrity

I find in hardness.

[I. iii. 231-33]

He is also accustomed to acting quickly and making decisions rapidly, concentrating on the present state of affairs, rather than future consequences. In Act II Scene 3, when he puts an end to the drunken brawl going on when he enters, Othello immediately demands the name of the man who started it. The first man he asks is Iago. Iago lies, saying he does not know. Finding no answer here, he turns to Cassio himself. Again, no answer, so he turns to Montano. But he, too, refuses to point a finger, and consequently, Othello learns nothing. He knows what he wants, but he lacks the reason to show him the means to obtain it. It never once enters his mind that he could see each man personally and perhaps in this manner arrive at something reasonably close to the truth. But as the situation stands at that moment, he cannot understand it; his "passion" begins "to lead the way" and his "best judgment" is obscured, [II. iii. 206-07]. The whole matter is "monstrous." The proof he finally does
accept is Iago's; he makes no real attempt to hear Cassio. Othello's actions here reflect his military manner of thinking. On the field, when danger and uncertainty threaten, one must gather facts as quickly as possible, reach a decision, and implement it. Such a method of handling things may succeed brilliantly when employed on the battlefield; but when used in every-day life, when used with respect to one's wife and friends, the results may be disastrous. Physically, Othello is living like a civilian; mentally, like a soldier. When a domestic problem arises he tries to solve it as if he were on the battlefield. Cassio is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Cassio is dismissed. Desdemona is accused; Othello faces the situation, accepts Iago's "evidence," makes a decision, and Desdemona is murdered.

Othello is quick to make decisions and act upon them, and so is Iago. Although Iago makes some attempt to reason out his plans, his reasoning nevertheless comes in flashes; a moment's reason for a moment's advancement. As soon as his plan "is engendr'd," he acts quickly so that he will "Dull not device by coldness and delay" [II. iii. 388]. Later in the play, going to plant Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room, Iago senses that "this may do something" [III. iii. 324]. Like Othello, Iago also knows war. He has served with Othello at Rhodes and Cyprus and has, of course, "...in the trade of war... slain men" [I ii. 1]. Although Othello seems to seek understanding rather than destruction, he emerges, in the course of the play, as the image of Iago even in this respect; in his very attempts to understand Desdemona, he will destroy her.

The focal point of the entire play is Act III Scene 3, and it is here that Othello begins to show most clearly his Iago-like traits, attitudes, and verbal patterns. Watching Cassio leave Desdemona, Iago sets things in motion by exclaiming, "Hal I like not that" [III. iii. 35]. Iago speaks it but Othello thinks it, for he adds, "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" [III. iii. 87]. Iago answers that it could not have been Cassio, for he would never "steal away so guilty-like" [III. iii. 39]. And Othello replies, "I do believe 'twas he" [III. iii. 40], beginning to confirm the doubts he has in his own mind.

Later, defending Cassio (and trying to help him regain Othello's friendship), Desdemona describes him as the one "that came a-wooing with you" [III. iii. 71]. Iago catches this and quickly makes use of it:

\textit{lago}. Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,

\textit{Know of your love?}

\textit{Oth}. He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?

\textit{lago}. But for a satisfaction of my thought;

No further harm.

[III. iii. 94-8]

Iago here is the doubt in Othello's own mind. Othello suspects Desdemona and Cassio, and although Iago asks the questions, they are merely "echoes" of Othello's own thoughts. He does not realize how
closely Iago's words match his thoughts, but he does recognize that what is in Iago's mind is a "monster," a thing "too hideous to be shown" [III. iii. 108]. Whenever Othello cannot understand something it is "monstrous"; he describes the drunken brawl in Act II Scene 3 in the same way; and later, when Iago tells him of Cassio's supposed dream (in which he makes love to Desdemona) that, too, is "monstrous." Whatever Othello cannot comprehend he sees as some hideous creation; but the creation, in a very real sense, is his own. It is his because in demanding proof, he has already accepted the implications in Iago's veiled accusations. He will accept anything that seems like proof, or rather, anything that "honest" Iago offers him as proof. Interestingly enough, he always demands proof from others: he never seeks it on his own initiative.

Iago is very close to Othello in the sense that he, too, never really obtains proof for the thinks he fears or believes others have done to him. He lacks proof, for example, that Othello and Cassio have committed adultery with Emilia. And he obviously lacks proof for many of the things he tells Othello about Desdemona. It is perhaps this tendency to accept things blindly, on a kind of perverted faith, that enables Iago to reach Othello so readily with the most far-fetched insinuations and concocted stories.

The more twisted and perverted the information Iago gives to Othello, the more Othello seems to believe it. He still fails to understand Iago: "I know thou'rt full of love and honesty" [III. iii. 118]. Iago, true, honest friend that he is, warns Othello to "beware ... of jealousy" for it is a "green-ey'd monster" [III. iii. 165-66]. His thoughts are running parallel to Othello's and he uses one of the words Othello originally borrowed from him when he denotes something as monstrous.

Othello, constantly hindered by his limited understanding of others, cannot determine where he stands:

I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;

I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.

I'll have some proof ... 

Would I were satisfied!

[III. iii. 384-86, 390]

And Iago answers:

I see, sir, you are eaten up with passion.

[III. iii. 391]

He has seen Othello like this before, in Act II Scene 3, when he could not comprehend the reasons for the street fight:
My blood begins my safer guides to rule.

[II. iii. 205]

The Moor's passion runs over his reason, and he asks Iago:

Give me a living reason she's disloyal.

[III. iii. 409]

Once again he wants proof, but asks for it, instead of trying to obtain it on his own. Instead of using his own reasoning, he lets Iago do it for him. Iago now goes on to describe how he heard Cassio murmuring in his sleep about his love-making to Desdemona. Othello, still incapable of understanding fully what is happening, utters his old cry "O monstrous! monstrous!" and Iago replies, "Nay, this was but his dream" [III. iii. 427]. But in Othello's mind this dream "denoted a foregone conclusion" [III. iii. 428]. Othello accepts the dream partly because in his aroused emotional state he will believe virtually anything, and partly because Iago, by describing the dream, makes audible the thoughts in Othello's own mind. Though Iago may tell the dream, Othello has already thought it: the dream, in sense, is his own. Iago confirms Othello's own doubts and suspicions.

Iago can easily strengthen such doubts because the two men are so similar. For example, Iago often speaks in a brusque, harsh manner; now Othello speaks in the same way:

I'll tear her all to pieces.

[III. iii. 431]

I would have him [Cassio] nine years akilling!

[IV. i. 178]

Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damn'd tonight; for she shall not live.

[IV. i. 181-82]

Othello can speak this way of Desdemona, because he is ready to "see" that what Iago has been telling him is "true." What Iago tells him merely reinforces his own doubts and fears; proof is not really necessary since Iago's words merely echo Othello's own dark judgments. As the identity between the designs of Iago and the conclusions of the Moor becomes more explicit, Othello comes to sound like Iago more and more. In Act I, Iago had exclaimed:

I have't! It is engend'red! Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

[I. iii. 403-04]

And later:

Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on.

[II. iii. 350-51]

Othello soon swears revenge in much the same terms:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!

[III. iii. 447]

Othello, full of "bloody thoughts," now demands "blood, blood, blood" [III. iii. 457, 451], the very word used by Iago on a number of earlier occasions.

Othello's thoughts are now as evil as Iago's, and to think like Iago is to speak like him. Now, in his bewilderment and the confusion brought on by his lack of reason and discrimination, Othello takes evil for good and good for evil. Desdemona has become a "devil" and Iago is now Othello's "lieutenant." And when Iago utters, "I am your own for ever" [III. iii. 479], he echoes the earlier words that Othello spoke to him: "I am bound to thee for ever" [III. iii. 213].

Iago continues to work upon Othello, and in Act IV Scene 1, he plans to have Cassio talk about Bianca, and Othello, hiding and listening, will think that he is speaking about Desdemona. But before Othello goes behind his hiding place, Iago urges him to "mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns that dwell in every region of his [Cassio's] face" [IV. i. 82-3]. Othello accepts Iago's words because they reflect what he has already conceived in his own mind. He agrees with Iago's picture of Cassio because he himself pictures the former officer in the same way. After the conversation between Iago, Cassio, and later, Bianca, Othello emerges from his hiding place completely convinced of Cassio's guilt: "How shall I murther him, Iago?" [IV. i. 170]. His emotions are so intense and his desire for vengeance so strong, that he forgets that Iago has already promised to kill Cassio:

Oth. Within these three days let me hear thee say That Cassio's not alive.

Iago. My friend is dead; 'tis done at your request.

[III. iii. 472-74]
He has, for the moment, lost all love for Desdemona, for his "heart is turn'd to stone" [IV. i. 182]. Iago at this point reinforces practically everything Othello says. The two seem in perfect accord. Iago's success is assured; all he does from this time on is to elaborate the evil Othello has come to acknowledge within himself. The following dialogue is, in a sense, the workings of one mind:

Oth. I will chop her into messes! Cuckold me!

Iago. O, 'tis foul in her.

Oth. With mine officer!

Iago. That's fouler.

Oth. Get me some poison, Iago, this night. I'll not expostulate with her, lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again. This night, Iago!

Iago. Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.

Oth. Good, good! The justice of it pleases. Very good!

[IV. i. 200-10]

Parallels such as this between Iago and Othello are reinforced by the imagery and verbal echoes found in the play. One of the primary patterns of imagery is that of animals, and more than half of these images are Iago's. The animals which he mentions are usually small and repellent in some way, whether it be for their ugliness, filth, cunning, or some other quality the reader normally associates with them. Iago's use of such images can be seen when he and Roderigo come at night to awake Brabantio in order to tell him that his daughter has eloped with Othello and is by now married to him. Othello's happiness must be destroyed by constant irritation, and he tells Roderigo:

Plague him with flies.

[I. i. 71]

Animal and sexual images are combined in his conversation with Brabantio:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram

Is tupping your white ewe.

[I. i. 88-9]

... you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse.
... your daughter and the Moor are

now making the beast with two backs.

With such terms Iago reveals his firm conviction that all love is lust. By using imagery of this kind he provides a powerful emotional accompaniment for his arguments, which are designed to convince Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago plays upon Othello's fear that Desdemona might some day deceive him as she did her father. He manages to twist Othello's view of his own marriage until it appears to be nothing more than a perversion of nature, and corrupts his image of Desdemona, until she seems to be nothing but a prostitute.

These patterns of animal, sexual and other images are highly important, because they underline the close similarities that exist between the two apparently different personalities. It is perhaps even more significant to note that such patterns of imagery abound in Iago's speech, initially, but are gradually absorbed and taken over by Othello as his mind and speech become twisted and corrupted by the evil rising up within him. Throughout the early part of the play, Iago makes repeated references to animals, most of them possessing cruel and despicable traits. He mentions the fox, with its selfish cunning, the ass, with its stupidity, the baboon, the locust, the spider, the wolf, the fly, the goat, and others. Through images such as these, he suggests stealth and evil, lechery, disease, and disaster. Such imagery reinforces Iago's view of life and people as things governed by animal instinct. Iago's world is similar in this respect to that in King Lear, where human beings are reduced to nothing more than a dog-eat-dog relationship. From Act III Scene 3 onward Othello joins Iago in the habit of seeing and describing things in terms of repulsive or dangerous animals. He echoes the earlier references to the goat, toad, dog, asp, worm, raven, bear, crocodile, monkey, and fly ... The progression is clear: the images used by Iago are gradually taken over by Othello. Words such as monster, monstrous, and beast, follow a similar pattern, as does another group of images which refers to parts of the human body—blood, arms, ear, heart, lips, brain, legs. In the beginning of the play it is Iago who uses these images most frequently. But in the third act, Othello becomes their chief spokesman, and remains so for the rest of the play. (pp. 1-12)

Readers of the play cannot help noticing the fact that Iago very often speaks of things in terms of imagery that contains connotations of, or outright references to, sex, lust, lechery, and prostitution. Iago is the first to use terms such as these, but when Othello begins to see and value things as Iago does, he, too, begins to use these images and, when he does, uses them with greater frequency than does Iago. The frequency and the shift of these images from one character to the other reinforces the pattern we have already defined... In Shakespeare Survey 5, S. L. Bethell discusses the shift in the use of diabolical images such as hell, devil, fiend, and damn, noting that Iago introduces these references, but Othello takes them over as evil increases its hold upon him. (pp. 12-13)

All of these patterns of imagery and verbal echoes elaborate and stress the change in Othello and the
release of the latent evil within him, Iago being the spark that ignites it. But whereas Iago recognizes evil for what it is, Othello must regard it as a good in order to accept it; for him it becomes a means for obtaining justice and destroying those whom he considers corrupt—Cassio and Desdemona.

By the end of the play, Othello has become a man dominated and possessed by the very emotions which, in the opening scenes, he had insisted he was not subject to. He thought he had perfect control over his emotions; he felt he could handle any situation, and often said so with colorful imagery:

Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it

Without a prompter.

[I. ii. 82-3]

He proclaimed himself free from the heated passions of youth:

— the young affects

In me defunct—

[I. ii. 263-64]

But his actions in the course of the play show that he does not have control over his emotions, and that he does not have the ability to handle any situation. The image he has of himself is as erroneous as his understanding of others. His ability to weigh and evaluate character and action is limited; and when caught in the mire of something he cannot comprehend, he often asks a series of questions, begging assistance, and ends with a half-pleading,

Give me answer to't.

[II. iii. 196]

And, of course, Iago is always ready to trigger Othello's buried passion and evil. Iago, like Othello, gropes about and makes hasty use of the materials he finds—gossip, hearsay, rumor—and with these tries and succeeds in giving direction and assistance to Othello's stumbling thoughts. He is a diabolic crutch, providing the assistance and direction that Othello craves. It is only at the very end of the play that Othello comes to have some insight into his own hidden motivations:

[A man] not easily jealous, but, being wrought,

Perplex'd in the extreme.

[V. ii. 345-46]
By succumbing to the emotions he thought he could control, he destroys himself, of course; by yielding to passion and weak reasoning he murders Desdemona, whose death shatters his "soul's joy." But his realization that he had "lov'd not wisely, but too well" [V. ii. 344] applies to the trusted, "honest" friend, Iago, as well as to Desdemona. His passions aroused, his reason fled and left him "perplex'd in the extreme." When he did try to rationalize, he built his arguments on the trusted words of Iago, which merely reinforced the suspicions and fears which he had already admitted into his own heart. He found true what Iago said about Desdemona because he himself thought it before Iago uttered it. Thus, he took Iago's words as a confirmation of truth. Iago understood this perfectly well, for as he himself explains:

I told him what I thought, and told no more

Than what he found himself was apt and true.

[V. ii. 176-77]

Iago's powerful hold over Othello is proof of Othello's own potential for evil. Iago penetrates Othello's character, and plays upon its weaknesses, nourishing, as he does so, the evil already present within Othello. As Iago's weakly conceived ideas and convictions are given expression, Othello accepts them as his own, alienating himself more and more from the human and the rational. In his failure to understand himself, Desdemona, and Iago, he paves the way for his own ruin in the same way that Iago comes to destroy himself through his self-absorption. The destruction of one signals, in fact the destruction of the other. Having destroyed Othello, Iago promises that he "never will speak word" [V. ii. 304] of what he has done, much less why it has been done. With Othello dead, the rich field upon which Iago's malice and hate had taken root and flourished now lies wasted and destroyed. The public, dignified, military figure presented to us at the beginning of the play has fallen prey to what it tried most to believe was never there, conquered in large measure by its own weaknesses and delusions. And Iago, the forger of the perfect phrase, the subtle lie, the devastating hint, the man to whom language was both a mirror and a tool of personality, sentences himself to eternal silence. (pp. 13-15)


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