

# Iago and the Problem of Evil in William Shakespeare's *Othello*

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In this address I shall explore some of the questions raised by Shakespeare's exploration of the nature of evil in his tragedies, focusing on the portrayal of Iago. The battle between good and evil is a recurrent motif in the bard's major plays. The tensions between the forces of 'good' and those aligned with 'evil' are central in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and *Richard III*. Binary oppositions abound in Shakespeare's plays, especially the tragedies and 'history' plays.

One can argue that Iago eclipses Othello as the protagonist in the play, as he orchestrates the tragic events that occur in it. His malevolence and gratuitous viciousness highlight his obnoxious nature. There seems to be no reason underpinning his evil personality and behaviour, whereas in *King Lear*, Edmund's illegitimacy rankles and triggers his malicious conduct. In *King Lear*, the satanic trinity of Goneril, Reagan and Albany are cruel, callous and remorseless. The same can be said of Richard III, the chip on his shoulder stems from his deformity. Macbeth, on the other hand, initially quashes his conscience in order to assassinate his King, Duncan, who also happens to be his kinsman, whilst hosting him at Macbeth's castle. Although plagued by his conscience, Macbeth eventually tosses moral considerations aside, in his endeavour to consolidate his position as King.

Iago, on the other hand seems to manipulate people for the fun he derives from tormenting others. He leads Othello by the nose, preys on his insecurity and bleeds Roderigo dry figuratively and literally. He despises Othello, is jealous of Casio and as a misogynist, delights in ruining Desdemona's life. His depraved misconduct raises theological and moral issues, as Bernard Spivack succinctly summed up:

Long before Othello St Paul addressed the Thessalonians on the *mystery of iniquity*. Applied to the play, the apostle's phrase is a haven of comprehensive explanation compared to all the others that have been advanced to account for the nature of its agent. Having pursued the meaning of Iago by ingenious and labyrinthine ways, critics and scholars are left, like his greatest victim, "perplex'd in the extreme". It would be ungenerous to the literature on *Othello* not to acknowledge that it affords deep and sensitive insight into the meaning of the play. And in this literature Iago has been rationalized to the last inch of his human similitude. But the hard and literal enigma of Othello's fatal ancient remains intractable. There is still no successful mediation between his terrible vividness, as we *feel* it on one hand, and the blank he presents to our scrutiny on the other. To his bad eminence above all other figures of evil in the Elizabethan drama he is elevated not only by the shock of his turpitude, the pathos of his victims and the poetry of his role, but also, and in no small measure, by his mystery. "Qui est-ce qu'Iago?" asked the Duc of Broglie in a penetrating critique on *Othello* in 1830. The question came after half a century of criticism had already tried to answer it, and the attempts have been legion ever since. But the question abides, and in 1945 Granville-Barker hopelessly threw up his hands at it: "Behind all

the mutability there is perhaps no Iago, only a poisoned and poisonous ganglion of cravings after evil”<sup>1</sup>

Spivack also states that Iago:

is *homo emancipatus a Deo*, seeing the world and human life as self-sufficient on their own terms, obedient only to natural law, uninhibited and uninspired by any participation in divinity. In addition to his animal nature, man possesses the equipment of will and reason with which to fulfil or regulate his natural appetites. He is the king of the beasts, crowned by his superior faculties. And society, by the same token, is an arena of endless competition, more or less organized between the appetites of one man and another, success attending him who knows “how to love himself” and how to manipulate the natures of other men. Nature is Iago’s goddess as well as Edmund’s, with the articles of the ancient’s faith even more explicit and wider in their application.<sup>2</sup>

Spivack further argues that “He is wonderfully opposed to the theme of the play as its anti-theme, and is, in fact, the most astonishing product of the Shakesperean technique of contrast.”<sup>3</sup>

I would add that there are strong hints that Iago is paranoid. He does not believe in love and suspects that not only Othello, but Cassio has also slept with Emilia. The romantic notions of love that are associated, however briefly, with Othello, Desdemona and Roderigo are scorned by Iago.

I suggested earlier that Iago drives the story, as he is the play’s most prominent character. The title foregrounds Othello, but he seems to be a minor character. It is not often that the notion of the “suspension of disbelief” figures prominently in the Shakespearean plays that I have studied. Othello is difficult to place, besides the pervasive references to issues of racial discrimination. The leaders of Venetian society ‘tolerate’ him as a distinguished mercenary as they need his services, hence they suggest that Brabantio should accept the loss of his daughter as the survival if Venice is at stake.

I think a General should be made of sterner stuff. In his defence, one could say that his career has taken its toll on him. Othello’s speeches suggest that he is a religious person, but the fact that he becomes unhinged because of a handkerchief diminishes his stature and its alleged supernatural powers are difficult to believe. They smack of superstition, a stereotype that is often associated with black people, rather than a “noble warrior”.

There is a saying that there is no fool like an old fool in love, as is evident in the portrayal of Mark Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Furthermore, stereotypes abound in the representation of women in *Othello*: Bianca epitomises the archetypal loose woman; Desdemona is cast in the mould of the “innocent”

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Spivack, in Alfred Harbage, ed., *Shakespeare the Tragedies A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964, p. 85). Source: Bernard Spivack, “Iago Revisited”. From *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), by, pp. 3-4, 423-30.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Harbage, ed., *Shakespeare the Tragedies A Collection of Critical Essays*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964, p. 87)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 88.

maiden; Emilia is presented as weak, as she could have 'saved' Desdemona, by revealing that she had found the handkerchief.

Lady Macbeth is the wife from hell, a worthy partner for Iago, ironically. Cleopatra is a siren who destroys a powerful man; she is also a drug addict: "Give me to drink mandragora .../ That I might sleep out this great gap in time / My Antony is away." (V. iv. ,). She is also cruel given the experiments undertaken at her behest on easy ways to die.

The stereotypical characters reinforce patriarchal attitudes which we should sensitise our pupils to, given the toxic levels of gender-based violence that prevail in African countries as well as the around the globe, these spiked during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to highlight issues that resonate with the local issues when we teach our pupils. The relevance of literature is reinforced by challenging students to relate the texts they read to the environment in which they live.