

Iago and the Ambiguity of His Motives in Shakespeare's Othello

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Abstract

Iago's motives for vengeance are problematic as Iago offers different motives throughout the play. Shakespeare scholars have attempted to explain some probable answers for the problem. Yet, none of the answers is definite that Iago's motives remain vague. This paper explores the ambiguity of Iago's motives by negating Iago's explanations, as they do not correspond to his actions. He plays his role skillfully that he can act as a confidante to all of his victims that he masters them and pushes them to helplessness and desperation. His skillful mastery over his victims' lives can be compared to that of a devil who destroys the lives of his victim and that of a skillful artist who decides on the fates of his characters. If an artist creates a work of art, then Iago creates destruction.

Keywords: *vengeance, ambiguity of motives, Janus, devoid of conscience, bestial qualities, devil, demi-devil, artist.*

Of all of Shakespeare's "evil or demonic" characters, Iago is the most memorable one. He is a character who has a role, but at the same time he is also a director who directs the actions of the other characters' and decides on the development of the plot of the play. He is a confidante, but at the same time he is also an enemy. He serves his master, yet he also controls his master. He plans his action and ensures the outcome, yet he has no visible motives. The duality that he constantly shows throughout the play, confirms the complexities of Iago's characters that he is not simply a man seeking vengeance. His demonic qualities can be perceived from the ambiguity of motives for vengeance that he provides and from his frequent references to the animalistic qualities in a man.

Iago professes that his intention for vengeance to Othello is the driving force of his demonic actions. This raises the question of the seriousness of the injustice that Othello has inflicted upon Iago that he deserves such vengeance, because normally there is no vengeance without a motive. Even though Iago does offer motives causing him to take his vengeance on Othello and the other characters, but as he keeps altering and modifying his motives, he appears to be indecisive to his real motive. He seems to compose a motive at the spur of the moment as if he suddenly remembers that he has to provide a motive for his desire for his evil action. He acts as if he has to satisfy his audience by giving them an explanation for his action rather than confessing his real motive. Critics like Rosenberg (1961) and Heilman (1976) still disagree with each other in their attempt to provide satisfactory explanations for Iago's motives for his vengeance. The ambiguity of his motives results from the way his motives do not logically correspond to his actions. And in executing his revenge, he shows himself to be devoid of any emotions that might show resentment, ambition, hatred or professional and sexual



jealousy, which he acclaims to be his motives. His detachment from emotions raises another question, that is, whether Iago is truthful in revealing his motives; or whether he really has a motive.

From the beginning of the play we are conscious of Iago's hatred of Othello and his jealousy of Cassio because he is denied the position of lieutenant. The very first step of his scheme against Othello is staying to be Othello's ensign with the intention "to serve my [Iago's] turn upon him [Othello]" (1.1.44). By proclaiming, "I am not what I am" (1.1.66), Iago has become Janus (a Roman god represented with two opposite faces). In that way, he can easily deceive Othello:

IAGO. The Moor is of a free and open nature,
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
 And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
 As asses are (1.3.400-3).

His keen observation of Othello's nature enables him to recognize Othello's unsuspecting nature. Othello's honesty will blind him from one's deceit because he always uses his principle of honor to judge a one's action that he fails to judge Iago's motives behind his action. He is unlike Iago who is able to judge a person's character beyond the person's actions. Far from admiring Othello's quality, Iago sees Othello's honesty to be a flaw that he can easily manipulate. Iago's ability to judge a character will make it easy for him to exercise his plan. He will manipulate Othello's nature for his gain so that he can easily lead Othello to believe whatever he says. Besides revealing his plan, Iago also shows his contempt for Othello by putting himself to be above his master whom he will treat as an "ass" who will believe everything Iago tells him as truthful.

The other motive that Iago offers is because he suspects Othello has deceived him by making him a cuckold that he needs to take a vengeance on Othello. He utters his suspicion on Othello's deceit in two different occasions, beginning with:

IAGO. I hate the Moor;
 And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
 Has done my office. I know not if't be true;
 But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
 Will do as if for surety. (1.3.387-91)

In another soliloquy, Iago reconfirms his suspicion that Othello has deceived him. And this has spurred him to repay Othello's deceit by having an affair with Desdemona, partly because he has some feeling for her and partly for his revenge:

IAGO. Now, I do love her [Desdemona] too,
 Not out of absolute lust, though peradventure
 I stand accountant for as great a sin,
 But partly led to diet my revenge,
 For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
 Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
 Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
 And nothing can or shall content my soul
 Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife . . . (2.1.290-8)

In these two different events, Iago expresses his suspicion of Othello's honesty when previously he abhors Othello because of his honesty. Iago seems to realize the impossibility of Othello to cheat on him, as Othello is a very honest person and Iago is much cleverer and cunning compared to Othello; therefore there is not even the

remotest possibility that Othello is sleeping with Emilia behind his back. Iago also reveals that Othello's dishonesty is merely his suspicion, not a fact that he stumbles on. Despite this contradictory argument, Iago is willing to turn his suspicion to be a solid fact and that he will believe in his made belief fact and that he will take actions accordingly. It is as if he is trying to set up a logical and believable excuse for his revenge. His making up a motive for his action to get even can be further explored when he claims that he loves Desdemona, but nowhere in the play has Iago expressed even the slightest interest as a man to a woman in Desdemona (Auden, 1971, p. 201). As he has never shown himself to be physically attracted to her, he has never made any attempt to seduce her. The interest he has shown in her is always in her role as Othello's wife; in how he can turn Othello against her. Therefore, Iago's "wife for wife" revenge is not supported by any other action that might confirm his motive for the revenge. Iago's determination "to diet my [Iago's] revenge" is more acceptable as his reason to inflict pain on Othello. His feigned explanation of the "wife for wife" motive reflects more on Iago's inability to offer a motive that might justify his intended vengeance.

As he has professed that he also hates Cassio because of his jealousy over Cassio's lieutenantancy, Iago also decides to exercise his demonic intention on Cassio. He believes that the position should be his and Cassio has stolen the position; therefore, he plans to abuse him to make him lose favor from Othello. This motive is a very reasonable one considering that Iago is Cassio's senior, yet, Iago seems to find this motive to be unreasonable that he has to make up another motive as his reason to hurt Cassio. Iago declares that he suspects Cassio to have made him a cuckold that he will "Abuse him [Cassio] to the Moor, in the rank garb-/ For I [Iago] fear Cassio with my [Iago's] night-cap too- . . . (2.1.304-6). Like his suspicion on Othello's deception, he also suspects that Cassio has deceived him by having an affair with Emilia, even though he confesses that he is not certain about this suspicion. . As Iago never mentions this suspicion again, we can safely assume that he is only looking for a reason to justify his jealousy and hatred on Cassio.

Iago's other reason of his hatred to Cassio is because he believes that Cassio has an affair with Desdemona, even though he has never found any proof to support his belief.

IAGO. That Cassio loves her, I do well believe't;
That she loves him, 'tis apt and of great credit.
The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not,
Is of a constant, loving, noble nature,
And I dare think he'll prove to Desdemona
A most dear husband. (2.1.285-90)

Again, Iago's belief in the affair is based on a mere suspicion of his demented mind. The affair between Cassio and Desdemona is something that Iago has created as part of his scheme to destroy Othello, but this made up affair transforms into a fact because Iago wills it to be so, that he sincerely believes in his own fantasy. Later on, Iago constructs the reality based on this non-existing affair. Surprisingly, despite his hatred of Othello, Iago defends him from Cassio whom Iago thinks has cheated on Othello. Iago also praises Othello as a "constant, loving, noble" husband who does not deserve to be cheated. His defense on Othello shows how Iago really believes in his own made up story on the affair between Cassio and Desdemona; and his mixed feelings toward Othello. Iago also hates Cassio because Cassio makes him look ugly by comparison, so much so that he wants to destroy Cassio. Iago keeps adding on one motive to the other that he has created a heap of motives that convince him that his need to avenge on



Cassio can be justified. Considering what he has done, Iago seems to be indecisive in providing a motive that we come to wonder whether he really has a motive.

At first, his grudge against them is based on his lack of promotion, then on sexual jealousy and finally on the belief that his own made up affair between Cassio and Desdemona is true. In spite of these motives, his actions do not logically correspond to them. If he wants to destroy Cassio's reputation, he has already done so when he manipulates Cassio to drunkenness, but he does not stop here. He finds yet another way to inflict pain on Cassio with his other devious action. If he is really jealous of Emilia, he never shows it like how Othello shows his jealousy to Desdemona. Throughout the play, he never once shows his husbandry feeling on Emilia that might confirm his jealousy. If he loves Desdemona, he never acts on this feeling.

Iago never shows his compassion to others' miseries that he seems to be immune from any emotions. His being devoid of feelings corresponds to his theory that "any man has the right, and the power, to control his inner life so that, because he can simply choose what to feel, he does not have to suffer anything" (Adamson, 1980, p. 92). Yet, the question is that does he have any compassion? Or does he simply refuse to feel anything to prevent his feeling from controlling his action? Iago's lack of compassion can be either derived from his will to choose what to feel or his lack of compassion. Without compassion he is immune from injury - he can injure others without being injured. He will not be moved by others' pains or sufferings and he will not show mercy to the people he has hurt, as he is incapable of committing himself to others. Because of this, Iago has contempt for a person like Roderigo, who allows himself to be overwhelmed by emotions and be injured as a consequence of allowing his feelings to guide and control his being. He rebukes Roderigo who complains that he suffers from his unrequited love to Desdemona, because Iago thinks that "It is merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will" (1.3.337-8) that causes Roderigo to be so.

And without feelings, Iago does not have conscience either. Different from other Shakespeare's other villainous characters like Macbeth and Claudius who suffer from their guilty conscience, Iago is perfectly free from it. Iago's view of human wills might explain his being devoid of any emotion.

IAGO. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manur'd with industry why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. (1.3.323-9)

He is the gardener of his own body, so he can plant whatever emotion, feeling or action he chooses to nurture. In his decision to hurt Othello, Cassio, Desdemona as well as Emilia, Iago has chosen to plant and nurture the evil intention to hurt others as others have chosen to plant and nurture kindness, mercy, generosity or other positive feelings and emotions. For him it is just a choice that each of us has to make concerning what we want to do with ourselves. We can control our wills either to do good or evil, as this is simply a choice. Iago is evil, but in his view, what he has done is not evil, for he has no conscience or morality that bothers him (Spivack, 1985, p. 35). And he is not bothered with his lack of consideration either on conscience or morality. . His evil is a pleasure to him. After he succeeds in ruining Cassio's reputation as he says, "Pleasure and action make the hours seem short" (2.2.373). Obviously, he enjoys watching every moment of his scheme workings. And the problem is that he also desire to be the gardener for the others' gardens, so that he plants whatever plants he wants in the others' gardens and nurtures whatever he has planted to destroy whatever plants the

other gardeners have planted in their gardens, like he has planted jealousy in Othello's mind.

Iago is a master in planting suspicion in others' minds that he also uses this skill in several other occasions. Despite his unwillingness to expose his heart for "daws to peck at," he often revels in this evil nature when he encourages Roderigo to provoke Barbantio. He wants to upset Barbantio by informing him of Desdemona's elopement with Othello.

IAGO. . . . poison his delight, . . .
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,
Plague him with flies. Though that his joy be joy,
Yet throw such changes of vexation on 't
As it may lose some color. (1.1.69-74)

His main intention is to rattle Barbantio's peacefulness and to turn his world upside down in knowing that Desdemona, his beloved daughter, and Othello, his most trusted general, have betrayed his trust. Iago does not even supply us with any explanation why he also wants to hurt Barbantio. In another occasion, he feels superior over the innocent whom he calls the fools who have become his victims that he proclaims, "Any medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught;/ And many worthy and chaste dames even thus, / All guiltless, meet reproach" (4.1.45-7). So when he wants to destroy Desdemona, he vows, "So will I turn her virtue into pitch;/ And out of her own goodness make the net/ That shall enmesh them all" (2.3.354-6). Clearly, Iago also wants to ruin the innocent. He will enmesh all the people around him. His evil nature shows further in his desire to see that his victims get the most pain for he tells Othello to "Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.206-7). From these several speeches, Iago really intends to ruin the innocent in general, not just Cassio and Othello whom he accuses to have deceived him.

His evil nature is reflected further in his other speeches when Iago draws easily upon the animal world in his exclamation, definition and comparison (Heilman, 1986, p. 105). He reduces other people down to the level of animals; he compares Othello to an old black ram, a Barbary horse and an ass; Cassio to a dog and a fly; Roderigo to a hunting dog; and Desdemona to a white ewe. He describes the sexual relationship between Othello and Desdemona as that of animals'; "an old black ram/ Is tugging with your white ewe" (1.1.89-90); "your daughter covered with a Barbary horse" (1.1.112); and "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.117). Not only does Iago compare these people to animals, but also pushes them into such a desperate condition that their baser nature, which is often compared to that of an animal's, emerges out of their control. Thus they become more like animals in their desperate reactions. Cassio exclaims desperately that he has, "lost the immortal part of [himself] and what remains is bestial" (4.3.257-8). Cassio is referring to the common belief in that era that only the human soul is immortal unlike that of the animals. He laments over the loss of his human side and that he has lowered himself to the level of an animal. And Othello also experiences such desperation when the suspicion planted by Iago begins to eat into him that without realizing it his baser nature emerges in his attempt to deal with a condition that he is unable to handle as a man of honor. He feels the pain and like an animal, he strikes back when he shouts, "I'll tear her [Desdemona] all to pieces," (3.3.436). Othello has been transformed into a wild animal and he acts accordingly. Iago has consciously dehumanized these people and placed them all in an inferior position. It shows his contempt over his victims' weakness, desperation, and helplessness to save themselves that they have to seek their baser nature to deal with



their conditions and at the same time, Iago also celebrates his triumph and raises himself into a superior position.

When Iago lowers the others to the level of an animal, it is an action that he does it very consciously. He expresses very vividly that he is a superior being who does not have his baser nature when he says that he is not "his master's ass," and he tells Roderigo that they have "reason to cool . . . [their] unbitted lusts" (1.3.332-4), a quality that differentiates man from animal. The human being listens to reason and only the animal that is controlled by lust. Despite his refusal to lower himself to the baser nature, ironically, he compares himself to a spider that with "as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (2.1.167-9). Iago regards himself a master over his victims whom he has dehumanized, yet he cannot suppress his embedded inclination to compare a human being to an animal that unconsciously he confesses that his victims are in a higher position than he is and that he has lowered them to the level where he actually belongs.

Later on when he is called monster, dog, viper, villain and slave, the names can be justified because they all are him. He becomes both man and animal, but at the same time he is not both either. Keith Thomas explains in his book Man and the Natural World that during the Tudor time man already had many theories distinguishing man from animal. Two of the qualities that separated man from animal were his possession of conscience and reason. Iago has reason, maybe too much, but he obviously does not have conscience. His inability to have conscience explains much of his demonic actions that are devoid of any compassion. He feels no pity to others' sufferings and miseries and he feels no conscience that he is guilty of causing them in those desperate conditions. Iago is obviously not an animal, as he possesses all the human qualities minus conscience. Therefore, Iago does not fit into category, man or animal. So, what or who is he? Thomas explains further that "the Devil was regularly portrayed as a mixture of man and animal (1983, p. 36-7). Is he then a devil incarnated?

These mixed qualities in Iago make him deserve the name of "devil" or "demi-devil." After he realizes Iago's evilness, Othello exclaims, " I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable./ If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (5.2.294-5). And his inability to understand Iago is expressed in other occasion when he says that "Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil/ Why he had thus ensnar'd my soul and body?" (5.1.309-10). Othello compares what Iago has done as the work of a devil whose main interest is to possess a human's soul and body, and he does not have to have a reason for doing so. It is simply for the satisfaction of doing evil to others and to be able to master over them.

Every one is disillusioned when they treat him as a confidante. Othello takes Iago as his loyal servant who will help him to kill Cassio; Cassio puts his trust in Iago to plea for his innocence; Roderigo depends on Iago's help to win Desdemona; Desdemona consults Iago for Othello's unreasonable jealousy; and Emilia never once suspects him of villainy when she helps him to get Desdemona's handkerchief. All of them refer to him as "honest" Iago while actually he is the "devilish" Iago. Iago is a master of disguise. This raises the question of whether Iago is really the Devil himself in the disguise of a man or whether he is a man with a devilish nature.

Spivack (1985) and Bradley offer another explanation of Iago's behavior, "he is an artist. His action is a plot, the intricate plot of a drama, and in the conception and execution of it he experiences the tension and the joy of artistic creation" (Bradley, 1960, p. 230). As an artist, he is pleased by what he has considered as an artistic achievement. He is like a skillful writer who has the power to decide on the lives of his characters and to devise any plot that might intricate his story. He masters all the skill and his

characters are all willing characters that put their fates in his hands to be molded on his will; that is why Iago refuses to offer any explanation for his action. In his understanding, there is nothing to explain. As an artist, it is his job to create. His being an artist, also explains his inconsistency of motives, whereof he has no motives for his action. His final words are, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak a word" (5.2.311-2). He just cannot explain why he does what he does. He does not even defend himself with the motives he has offered before. As an artist, Iago's concern is only in creating his masterpiece of evil, therefore, his lack of emotions and motives suit his profession. He rejoices in his work and he does not have to have a motive to create his art. The real artist does his work of art for art's sake and Iago does his evil scheme for evil's sake.

Iago's behavior reflects these qualities of a devil and of an artist. He becomes the symbolic representation of what the devil stands for - of destructiveness and of nothingness (Rosenberg, 1961, p. 170). He is also an artist. The way he creates evil - the destruction of the people around him is like an artist who creates his masterpiece. Iago creates "destruction" and his materials are the people around him, like an artist who creates his work from the materials around him.

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