

[Critical paper written for my 2009 Shakespeare course at Messiah College.]

Although it may be highly unorthodox, I must admit that of all of Shakespeare's characters Iago is one of my all time favorites. I understand that to many this may seem a horrible opinion to hold since Iago is the villain of *Othello*, a malevolent puppeteer who not only orchestrates Othello's tragic fall but also the deaths of Othello, Desdemona, Roderigo and Emilia. I won't argue that Iago *isn't* a reprehensible character. However, I will argue that Iago's talent as an actor and manipulator make him one of Shakespeare's finest villains.

Shakespeare has a habit of creating characters who are talented actors in their own rights: Portia, Rosalind, Hamlet, etc. Although in many cases these actor-characters are protagonists, in *Othello* the role of master actor falls to the villain. Iago admits to his disguise in the opening scene of the play, telling Roderigo:

...Others there are
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords
Do well thrive by them...
And such a one do I profess myself.
...I am not what I am. (1.1.48-52, 54, 64)

Iago admits to play-acting his duties in order to gain the trust of Othello. Indeed, Iago's ruse works; throughout the play Othello (and others) comment that "Iago is most honest" (2.3.6) and trust Iago's words and actions almost unquestioningly.

Iago uses the trust he gains as a result of his acting skills to manipulate those around him. Although he uses it for evil ends, I do admire Iago's ability to appear as though he is serving the interests of other characters when in actuality he is working them for his own means. Iago's advice to Cassio makes a great deal of sense: at any other time, the best way to win Othello's favor would be through his beloved wife, Desdemona. Once again Iago admits this point to the audience, saying:

And what's he then that says I play the villain?

When this advice is free I give and honest,

Probal to thinking and indeed the course

To win the Moor again?...

...How am I then a villain

To counsel Cassio to this parallel course

Directly to his good? (2.3.325-328, 337-339)

In fact, much of Iago's advice to the characters makes sense when taken on its own; it is only when all of Iago's dealings are taken together that the trouble arises. Iago knows that he is trusted by the other characters and can so manipulate them to action (Roderigo, Cassio, Desdemona), to jealousy (Othello) or to silence (Emilia) under the guise of love and friendship.

Through he is rotten to the core, I cannot help but admire Iago's skill as an actor and manipulator; in fact, I still admire Iago even though I cannot help but feel that I, as an audience member, am being manipulated by Iago. Although some have argued that Iago is a villain lacking in proper motivation, I would argue that Iago treats the audience as he

treats the other characters: he appears to be honest, but only shows us what he *wants* us to see.