Michael Nolan

Later Shakespeare paper 1

2/28/13

# The Devil you think you Know

The villain Iago from Shakespeare’s *Othello* is fascinating for us to study because he is a renaissance man of wickedness. Iago is equal parts soldier and thief, patient and wrathful, manipulative and trustworthy. He is a man of deadly sins, a breaker of commandments, a traitor to all who love him, and a master of the art of lying. His motives are never clearly established, and we are mesmerized by his mystery. Certainly, Iago’s massive capacity for vileness is impressive—almost impossible—for a man, but to me Iago is more than a man. He is a symbol, an allegorical representation of the devil appearing as a man; and I believe that if we consider Iago as such, he begins to make more sense.

Before I go deeper into this essay, I will say that it is entirely possible that Shakespeare simply meant for Iago to have extraordinary powers of corruption and murky-at-best motives because he is an evil genius. Iago can be interpreted many different ways, and since Shakespeare almost never included direct intervention by divine Christian figures in his plays, there is little precedent for this analysis. On the other hand, the fact that Shakespeare shied away from serious Christian references can also reinforce the idea that Iago is meant to be a more subtle devil symbol, which is why I believe this theory deserves analysis.

## Iago, Father of Lies and Corrupter of Men

“An honest man [Iago] is, and hates the slime that sticks on filthy deeds.”

– Othello, *Othello* Act 5 Scene 2

There is probably no better liar in all of Shakespeare than Iago; perhaps no better liar in all of Elizabethan drama. Iago’s ability to successfully lie and manipulate everybody and anybody he meets borders on supernatural. In the span of only a handful of days, he manages through lies alone to usurp Cassio’s position as Othello’s Lieutenant, swindle Roderigo out of his money, convince Othello of unfaithfulness on Desdemona’s part, cause a duel between Roderigo and Cassio, and finally convince Othello to murder his chaste and loving wife. He operates from the shadows, pulling the heartstrings of those who trust him to achieve his ends. In fact, the only time Iago actually steps in to perform any evil deed himself is to wound Cassio during his duel with Roderigo, and this was to aid in a greater scheme already set in motion by his lies.

The figure that most readily comes to mind when thinking of the ultimate liar is Lucifer himself. The devil is called the father of lies, and it is thought that one may never trust a word the devil says, just as one should never trust a word Iago says. Just like the devil, Iago uses his lies to subtly steer men towards evil acts that go against their morals; he is a corrupter.

Iago’s ability to corrupt with his lies is best seen in how he ruins the relationship between Desdemona and Othello. When on trial for stealing away Desdemona from her father, Othello trusts Desdemona’s love for him so completely that he says “If you do find me foul in her report . . . let your sentence Even fall upon my life” (1.3.119), showing that he is willing to put his very life in Desdemona’s hands. Their love is so powerful that Desdemona is willing to deceive her father to marry Othello, which shows a great deal of commitment to Othello on her part. Cut to mere days later, and Iago’s influence has Othello calling Desdemona a whore, striking her in public, screaming at her, and finally murdering her with his bare hands. And all the while Othello believes that what he is doing is the right thing. He does not enjoy killing Desdemona, but since he wholeheartedly believes that she is unfaithful, to him it is the virtuous course of action to kill his unfaithful wife.

Roderigo’s actions are another good example. While he may have wished for Desdemona’s hand in marriage himself, without Iago’s influence it is likely Roderigo would have simply fallen by the wayside. But the devilish Iago manages to take a lesser man such as Roderigo and shape him into a valuable tool for Iago’s plans, give Iago a large sum of money without anything to show for it, and finally put his own life in danger in a duel against Cassio. Even when Roderigo appears to be fed up with Iago’s manipulations, saying “Every day thou daffest me with some device, Iago; and rather, as it seems to me now, keepest from me all conveniency than suppliest me with the least advantage of hope” (4.2.176), it only takes moments for Iago to have Roderigo back to eating out of his palm.

It is as if Iago is the classic devil on the shoulder to all of the characters in the play, while appearing to them as if he were in fact the angel. The devil is said to be attractive, and his corruption never appears obvious. Iago is certainly seductive in this fashion, and his words are like a honeyed poison that takes away the mental blocks that stop men from committing atrocities.

In fact, one of the greatest parallels that can be drawn between Iago and the devil is the complete trust that is put in them before their betrayal is revealed. Everybody who knows of Iago knows him as the paragon of honesty; Othello constantly refers to Iago as “Honest Iago” and takes everything he says as pure truth simply because of his well-established reputation as an honest man. Before the fall, Lucifer is often depicted as the favorite, the most beautiful and beloved of all angels. This is why his betrayal is so particularly awful. For Iago to be proven a complete liar—a manipulator whose honest reputation was a complete farce—is a betrayal comparable in emotional magnitude to Othello as Lucifer’s fall is to God and the heavenly host.

## Direct References to Devil Symbolism

“I am who I am.” – God, Exodus 3:14

“I am not what I am.” – Iago, *Othello* Act 1 Scene 1

While not completely obvious, there are several key points in *Othello* where Iago is directly or indirectly compared to the devil. The clearest comparison comes at the moment when Iago’s betrayal is revealed: Othello says “I look down towards his feet; but that’s a fable. If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee” (5.2.289). This is referring to the classic myth that devils have cloven hooves rather than feet, but Iago clearly does not. Therefore Othello tries to slay Iago with his sword, because if he is a devil he cannot be harmed, but if he is simply a man he will be killed. Therefore, this attack will either reveal Iago as a devil or enact justice upon him for his crime. And although Iago is wounded, he does not die from his wound, which may in fact suggest Iago is more of a devil than a man by the end of the play.

In the same scene, when Othello demands to know why Iago has ruined his life so completely, Iago states “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak a word” (5.2.307). While this can be interpreted as Iago simply refusing to cooperate with Othello in any capacity out of spite, I considered that Iago at this point may actually be incapable of telling the truth to anybody. Like the devil, he is completely given to falsehoods, and he simply does not have the capacity to speak truthfully anymore.

A more subtle comparison between the devil and Iago is made by the man himself. During a soliloquy in Act 2 Scene 3, Iago comments “When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows, as I do now” (2.3.323). Referencing his skill to corrupt by making his temptations and lies appear as heavenly virtues and truths, Iago is directly comparing himself to the devils that tempt men in the same fashion. He says something similar in the same act about corrupting Desdemona in Othello’s eyes, stating “So will I turn her virtue into pitch” (2.3.332). Most men do not speak of corrupting people’s minds so directly, and it evokes images of Satan poisoning Othello’s reason and Desdemona’s image.

But to me the subtlest and most diabolical image in *Othello* is one that does not rely on dialogue. In Act 3 Scene 3, when Othello is finally turned by Iago and believes Desdemona to be a whore, he decides to make a bond with Iago to take revenge on Desdemona and Cassio. Othello then kneels before Iago, as if to pray, sealing this pact. The mere fact that Othello kneels first may not be indicative of anything significant; however, for me this symbolizes a man kneeling before the devil in a classic deal with the devil scenario. It is the posture of a servant kneeling before a master, which suggests that Iago has finally reversed his role with Othello; Iago is now the master who holds control over Othello’s mind and soul. When Iago kneels with Othello and completes the pact, it seals Othello’s final damnation.

## Iago’s Motives

“Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?”

– Othello, *Othello* Act 5 Scene 2

Iago’s motives are one of his greatest mysteries and one of his most crucial assets as a character. Over the course of *Othello* Iago states many motives for his crimes, always changing his story. At first he says that he hates Othello because he is envious of Cassio’s promotion, that Cassio was not as good a candidate for promotion as Iago (1.1.8). The idea that Iago refuses to acknowledge Cassio, a battle theorist, as his superior also suggests pride as a motivator. However, Iago explains this motivation to Roderigo, and since Iago cannot be trusted to ever be speaking the truth to another human being, it is suspect whether this is truly one of Iago’s reasons for hating Othello.

But if envy and pride are accepted as one of Iago’s primary motivators, then it does connect thematically with Lucifer and his motivations for corrupting humanity. Modern interpretations of the devil often list his primary reasons for hating mankind as pride, refusing to bow down to what he believes to be inferior creatures, and envy at the preference and love God showed for humanity. Cassio, who (supposedly) is receiving preferential love from Othello and (according to Iago himself) is not as worthy a lieutenant as Iago, is a surrogate for all mankind in the Iago/Lucifer parallelism.

However, Iago later says “And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets he 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” (1.3.384). While this motive is not as symbolic as the previous one, it does show jealousy on Iago’s part to be willing to ruin Othello simply because he may have slept with Emilia. Iago also expresses a desire to sleep with Desdemona as vengeance, which suggests that lust may be a motivator for Iago. The wish to corrupt Desdemona again may symbolize Lucifer tempting Eve in Eden.

But Iago’s later tells Roderigo, “I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him: if thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport” (1.3.364). This suggests that outside of personal reasons, Iago may have simply come to enjoy causing Othello anguish. Certainly Iago may consider torturing Othello a sport because of how deeply he hates him. But to enjoy causing pain and suffering is above and beyond simple revenge. It implies that Iago has transcended normal motives, and that he simply enjoys being horrible to people. Some people may see this as similar to some interpretations of Satan as a force of evil personified, a being that is evil simply *because it is evil*.

On the other hand, many modern interpretations of the Devil shy away from classifying him as enjoying causing torment simply because he is evil and that is what evil does. Often nowadays the devil is more calculating. He has goals and works towards them. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* was published just half a century after Shakespeare died, so this more sympathetic and logical interpretation of Lucifer may not have been unheard of in Shakespeare’s time.

Rather, finding sport in being a horrible, evil monster is usually thought of as a human trait. It is how sociopaths behave, not fallen angels. Iago indeed does resemble the modern definition of a sociopath: he cannot relate to anybody, he hates people, he loves to cause pain, yet he can perfectly mimic natural behavior and manipulate everybody. Perhaps this is meant to show that while Iago is a devil allegory, he is also still just a man. Or it may be meant to show that the devil is not some external force of evil, but an internal tendency towards darkness within every man. Or perhaps none of the motives are what truly drives Iago. His ultimate motivation remains a mystery to us.

## What, Ultimately, is Iago?

Iago is a fascinating character. He is equal parts genius, soldier, advisor, comedian, and sociopath. His mystery and his mastery of vile deeds is something that most men could never hope to match. It may be that Iago is simply the culmination of Shakespeare’s idea of what the perfect villain would be like. Perhaps Shakespeare always intended Iago to just be the greatest evil man in any of his plays—the master of evil on the top of a long list of candidates. A wicked man, but just a man. But I think that Iago may be something more than just a man. I think that Iago may truly be a personification for everything the Elizabethans believed to be true about the devil. He is a representation of the ultimate spiritual evil made into a flesh and blood man.