



Blue Science Publications

United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in ujmreditor@gmail.com Vol-1, Issue-3 (Oct-Dec), 2024

Analyzing Iago's Speech in Shakespeare's Othello

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Article Received: 03-11-2024

Article Modified: 05-12-2024

Article Accepted: 10-12-2024

Article Published: 11-12-2024

Abstract

One of Shakespeare's most notorious villains, Iago, uses language significantly in Othello. Examining the complexities of Iago's speech, this analysis examines how his deceitful rhetoric shows his Machiavellian character and helps the tragedy progress. The study highlights Iago's mastery of manipulation, hypocrisy, and irony by analyzing pivotal monologues and dialogues. It looks at the psychological depth and complicated motives of Iago and how his comments influence the views and behaviors of other characters. Ultimately, this analysis highlights how Iago's speech is crucial to establishing the moral ambiguity and dramatic tension in Othello, providing a more complex view of evil and the shadow side of human nature portrayed by Shakespeare.

Keywords: Analyzing, Iago, rhetoric, characters, Othello

1. Introduction

Iago is the dorsal fin of Othello - the machinations and manipulations of this infamous character have mesmerized countless critics and readers alike since the multifaceted drama was first performed nearly 500 years ago. In Othello, by the great playwright William Shakespeare, Iago's devilishness and downright evilness are put on bright display, so much so that it stuns the reader's mind. (Palmer, 2005) The play is about a beautiful, fair Venetian lady named Desdemona and her deep love for Moor Othello. Iago is the antagonist of the play who, due to his lifelong jealousy-fueled grudge against Othello, destroys everything his noble-hearted counterpart has. He manages to do this through sheer manipulation and cunning and without personally lifting a finger to do so. This text seeks to understand some of Iago's motives and character through the analysis of one of his texts.

One of Iago's most revealing speeches can be found in Act 1, Scene III, lines 370-381. In very simple terms, there are three things that Iago wants due to his warped sense of order: power, revenge against Othello, and making Othello a puppet for his schemes. Iago's desire for more power comes from the belief that he is not treated as the superior lieutenant "as loving his own pride and purposes." There is a bit of a Nietzsche-like bend when Iago points out that he's older in terms of experience and ability than Cassio, yet Cassio is officer-



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hood through rank only (what some today would call a 'pencil pusher'), not ability and especially not experience, which is more important than any. (Waller, 2007)

1.1. Background and Context of the Play

According to R. B. Parker in the play: 'Setting-Time is probably 1570 to 1571; place is Venice and Cyprus', where Venice is the powerhouse of all time and the relatively wealthy mecca of the Mediterranean, and Cyprus was one of the Italian outposts and a comparatively well-off colony. These cities are still considered the hub of international culture. Othello, the protagonist, is sitting at the apex of an international army, which is dominant in the Mediterranean. The time and place are influenced by cultural amalgamation and discriminatory demeanor, which appear to have historically occurred. There are diverse characters in the play of different races and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. (Nardone, 1953) These heterogeneous features provide ample opportunities to achieve the antagonistic stances of major characters. Nothing is racist or ethnocentric in the mindless rhetoric of an Iago.

A father kills a daughter out of xenophobia or revenge. The play invokes essential problems, together and apart from its context, which is still assumed today. In every character's mind in such forms and in such action exclusively exists occasional and different motivations. Iago is sometimes diabolically compulsive, superfluous, knowledgeable, and acting regardless of worldly implications. It is evident from Iago's disposition that his speeches are meant to be gender biased, ethnocentric, and stereotyped.

1.2. Key Traits and Motivations of Iago

There is no doubt that Iago has a black, manipulative nature, which makes him responsible for a number of sufferings in the play. His villainy may be associated with material greed caused by his wish to get the lieutenantcy. Iago can also be motivated by personal jealousy towards Cassio, who got the position he would rather have taken. Although his utterances about his real motives give the impression of the villain being a destructive force for its own sake, lieutenantcy and jealousy are the most frequently assumed motivations. He has an absolutely calculated plot and, at the same time, seems to be possessed by unaccountable destructive poison. Treating Iago variously as a man who can plan and calculate the destruction of others makes immediate sense only if we try to discover and hold in mind his motives and goals.

The sources Iago draws on to destroy the lives and minds of others at more or less control are a blend of many elements. He seems to have a compulsive character that becomes obsessed with people and the urge to bring about their downfall. Anyone who contradicts him or gets in his way becomes the target of his cunning. It is significant that Iago instigates



the innocent Roderigo into becoming scheming and dishonest. In the opening scene, Roderigo wants to pick a quarrel with the servants to trust them for not warning him about Desdemona's elopement with Othello (DeVane, 1969).

2. The Role of Manipulation in Iago's Speech

In the context of William Shakespeare's play Othello, the previous analysis of Iago's speech in four soliloquies and in three dialogues has relied on the essential role of manipulation in Iago's communication with the other characters of the tragedy. Gunther Kress writes that "persuasion is a kind of management of will," based on the paragraph semantic coherence of meaning to which people make sense. Further, Aristotle's Classical Rhetoric, as mentioned by Corbett and Connors, aims "to identify the principles of effective persuasion." Decoding of these principles in Iago's language shall bring to light the letter's persuasive skills.

It is essential to specify that the main argumentation and sub-arguments within will be enunciated with reference to the written text of the play. "Manipulation involves controlling or redirecting the behavior and intentions of other people, whether individuals or large organizations. Individuals must be manipulated to safeguard personal interests or further a course or project, enhancing the predominance or superiority of the manipulator. Manipulation goes beyond reliable three-part rhetoric (involving sender, receiver, and message) to include the needed gusto (appeal to emotions) and manipulation (convincing the receiver that the message or issue is good, acceptable, right, or all of these)". (Miyoshi, 1886) Iago uses a variety of manipulative techniques to get what he wants by the end of the play. Edgar Allan Poe, a master of manipulative techniques in the detective story, discussed control and the psychological relationship of the server and served in "The Man of the Crowd..." Patanjali R. Vishwakarma discusses control of information from a grammatical position... merely meant to confuse and demonstrate in concrete fashion how easy it is to "manage" people once one learns how to manage perceptions, knowledge, and information...." Smiley Egoff discusses control of discourse, presented primarily in a written form... Oddly, or perhaps unsurprisingly, none of these papers discuss how people are controlled or how they control/discourse when it comes to the manipulation of conversation of spoken language. Iago's version of manipulation is peculiar because of its focus on accidentally revealing truths in intense sound-out monologues and duels of wits that continually force other characters to think... The increasingly violent shifts in his narratives, once they fail, must also be addressed as a language of control... Man-as-character manipulates the other characters of Othello much as Iago manages the sound of his voice to manipulate his fellows.

2.1. Definition and Types of Manipulation



Manipulation is exploitation using finesse and subtlety; control by artful or devious means, especially to one's own advantage. It is the act of controlling one's mind by indirect or dishonest methods. Iago uses several ways to manipulate others. Though varying further, they generally fall into the domains of lies and deception, jealousy and playing against his confidantes, and racial discrimination (Kirschbaum, 1962).

In Shakespeare's "Othello," Iago exemplified all these manners of deceit and opportunism. He first tells Roderigo that Othello and Desdemona's marriage was hidden from her family: "Enter into a jealousy so strong/That judgment cannot cure" (I. iii. 389-390). Then, he convinces Othello that Cassio has intentions to charm his wife in the most direct way. When Othello asks him what to do upon that, Iago's cynical reply includes: "Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy!/It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock", directly contradicting his other statement to Roderigo in the beginning "Or failing so, yet that I put the more/should tongue out of this mouth and wrong his usual jest" (V. ii.148-149).

The answer is "And his unbookish jealousy must construe poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behavior quite in the wrong"; again, he is able to manipulate the person from two different fields of relationship (III. iii.153-155). Jealousy, in fact, has caused Othello's downfall in Shakespeare's "Othello". (Kirschbaum, 1962)His jealousy peeks in front of the audience, and Othello commits himself to killing Desdemona and her lover, Cassio. Dogging in the third Act, Iago has probably caused a developing race tension when he says to Roderigo about Othello, "I know the cause tonight may hit my wife;/and in her youth, there is a world of men," mistrusting Desdemona as a lady highly capable of ousting him and another distended innuendo disguised as a compliment, "I do suspect the lusty Moor hath leaped into my seat." By constantly underplaying his own persuasive ability, Iago actually convinces his listeners even more. The "proof" that he presents to Othello is the story of an old man who believes that husbands show men "A cleft stick—th' fellow comes into the wife, and there are two pence gone to the tax; you are robbed" (IV. i. 65-67). Iago gets him to imagine this happening. In doing so, Iago gets Othello to think sexually about his wife and in a less respectful way. In other words, Iago uses racism against Othello to inflame his jealousy and trick him into believing that Desdemona is unfaithful.

2.2. Examples of Manipulative Techniques in Iago's Speeches

In his dedication to Othello, M. R. Ridley (1904) advised his reader that an attempt to scan the notes made throughout and to compose a list of the ways Iago employed to talk Othello into jealousy would not be a bad plan to follow. In order to aid potential readers in effectively scanning Iago's speech, I dedicated the previous section to characterizing his speech with six important statements. (Nicholi, 1968) This structural approach will help to locate instances in the tragedies of Shakespeare when Iago uses consensus, connotation, figure of speech, irony, and other manipulation techniques. In this section, I will present



examples of manipulation employed by Iago in his I.1 and II.1 speeches. Additionally, I identify instances when Iago specifically echoed Shakespeare's known paradoxes.

There is Iago's manipulation technique, which I characterized as consensus in three of his utterances yesterday. Iago says, "Indeed" (II.1.38, 42), and "Othello's occupation's gone" (II.1.36-40), which consensus is threaded with connotations of mutability (III.1.461-62). The connotation technique is used in his passing comment on Cassio, "I think Cassio's an honest man." Oth. The Moor! However, I believe that it would be welcome. Iago continues, "ergo, Adieu; I'll watch thy looks; I'll construe it stands me." (III.3.212-216) (I find it meaningful that the diagnosis "O, now, forever Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content! Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars That make ambition virtue!" is omitted.) I.3.376-382. I chose to exclude the lines, "I hate the Moor; And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets, He has done my office," from my active concern because Iago uses it to incite jealousy in Roderigo.

3. Themes and Motifs in Iago's Speech

Through the examination of Iago's speech in Othello, various themes and points can be unearthed. A principal theme attributed to Iago is the idea that he operationalizes jealousy and the way he uses knowledge and surveillance. The features of this theme and emotion in Iago can be distinctly separated as his capricious, chameleonic capabilities in fashioning a persona that is 'compulsive' and 'underhand' and having primarily immense qualities of 'misogyny.' Jealousy, as defined by Mayer, gets activated for Iago when he observes Othello regarding 'Desdemona with trustful love.' In ascertaining this fact, he becomes rather astounded by the revival of the emotions of agony and unattainability of intimacy; Sigmund Freud also labels it as envy or grudge. (LEAVIS, 2004) Similarly, over her lilies turning black, Iago refers to transferring his own jealousy onto Othello by calling him a 'hideous lily' – the capability of feeding the 'green-eyed monster' of another illustrates an immense capacity of surveillance and consciousness even for irrelevancies he holds no stake in.

Another dominant part of Iago's speech is the notion of betrayal. More frequently than not, a prime illustration of betrayal seems to emanate from his own mind, relating back to the overarching subject of 'deception'; as a prime initiator of chaos and vice in Othello, Iago overtly confesses to deviously bringing down Roderigo, who 'Thou needs must be sure' in uncalled zeal at Bianca. Like jealousies, the retaliation of betrayal as a concrete term mostly sworn by Robson appears lame before so many examples of the concept. Retention of trust in Shakespeare appears eternally short-lived prior to and after cases of clear betrayal. This is the reason why Iago is able to scent out a 'shifting used' lieutenant in his husband's Sense Prejudice. The subject of betrayal and deception also coalesces with or departs from the notion of humans coining truths of their circumstance in line with their own self-accrued slants on life as Iago deftly indites Cassio as a 'bookish theorist'. (Hart, 2007) He



hysterically denounces the characters and their subjugation to entangled psychologies in disdain, which signifies how he curates antipathy and exemplifies retributive justice.

3.1. Deception and Betrayal

Deception lies at the very core of Iago. He is essentially a deceiver who conceals truth in his tongue and uses clever wits to confuse and influence his victims. In the first scene of the play, Roderigo asks Iago for information about the secret marriage of Othello and Desdemona and demands the truth from him. The question is no sooner asked than Iago lies: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him" (I.i.42). When the two are convinced that Cassio has been preferred over Iago, Roderigo worries about the Moor's possible possession of Desdemona. Iago reassures Roderigo but admits to himself that he is devious in this technical garden scene. Iago's evilness manifests even at this early stage in the play when he curses his wife for having deceived him.

For all clear analysis and despicable intentions of Iago, he often makes it difficult for the reader to know whether or not he is lying because the effects of sincerity are very deceptive in themselves. Iago tells us that he is deceiving the Moor. The evil of Iago is no less than his deceptiveness: his betrayal. Said another way, Iago is like a two-sided coin with deception on one side and betrayal on the other. Iago betrays almost everyone in the play to promote his end goal. (Clifford, 1930) Initially, he betrays Othello by planting the seed of jealousy in his mind. And in utilizing Othello's trust, Iago is indirectly, in a sense, betraying himself because he uses Othello's confidence to his advantage.

3.2. Jealousy and Envy

Emilia's speech on the nature of women is not unique in Othello, and it is an echo, an imposture of another discourse. The episode of The Handkerchief, for example, speaks of multiple and alternate sexual realities by sampling several discursive formulations (Othello to Emilia, Iago to Othello, Desdemona to Othello to Emilia). Moreover, Emilia's speech cannot be easily dismissed, simply labeled as an internalization of hate, nor by arguing the contrary. She is pointing to something crucial in the sex/gender debate. By speaking of Othello's blackness as something already conspicuous, something on the surface of his behavior, she is pointing to the relationship between both sexual and racial differences and envy. This one speech also points to two discursive contexts that must be of central concern to feminists: the relationship between female speech and presumed orality, and the extent to which socialization affects the elaboration of gender in general and envy in particular.

In sociolinguistics, Harris-Butler suggests that the woman question is a language question because women control speech in a different way and because the issue is central to women's issues of denial of subjectivity and access to the symbolic. The question of



women's language, however, has a complex relationship to the question of the other, just as Emilia's speech on envy has a complex relationship to this issue. Recall that Emilia is an interlocutor in the debate over Desdemona; she first appears at the street corner calling for sanctuary. She is also Iago's wife. Thus, the issues I am raising are relevant not only to feminist discursive discourse but also to the projects of discourse in general. The model for this act lies squarely before us: Iago, his speech different from Emilia's, though similar, also stresses in Billingsgate imagery Desdemona's sexual appetite.

4. Literary Devices in Iago's Speech

Many of the ways Iago manipulates other characters in *Othello* are accomplished through precise rhetorical strategies. This section explains the use of three key rhetorical devices in the plot of the play: irony, dramatic irony, soliloquy, and asides.

Irony

Irony is a literary device in which the reader or audience is aware of something that the character is not. In one example, we know that the handkerchief planted by Iago has fallen into Cassio's mistress's (Bianca's) hands, while Othello, who gave the handkerchief to his wife, hasn't any idea about where the handkerchief is.

What is the effect of these interruptions of speech, soliloquy, and asides? First of all, let us think about the musical effect of the drumming on Iago's speech. It serves as an ironic musical accompaniment for the demonic and deadly plan he has just set up. All the noise emphasizes the subterranean strategies going on in Iago's brain. His plotting is rhythmical and structural, and he thinks it is unobserved.

We might also think about some of the effects of Iago's soliloquies (his several self-revealing speeches) and asides in the play in general. The soliloquies are long speeches in which an actor alone on stage reveals his/her most secret thoughts to the audience. Most of Iago's thoughts reflected in his speech are not known by any other character. So these soliloquies are confessions. He sometimes assumes the audience (his confessor-figure) to be under his indirect tutelage. In the privacy of his own monologues, we learn how he relishes not merely controlling others but controlling their perceptions; he is aware of turning their beliefs against others.

Iago's other device is the aside. As an aside, an actor says something on stage that is supposedly inaudible to the other characters but is meant to be heard by the audience. It is a kind of counterfeit soliloquy, a fragment of Iago's more extensive private self-revelation. Unlike the soliloquy, the aside is not silent; it occurs in the presence of others, but its potential hidden wisdom emanates out of a unique moment of privacy.



4.1. Irony and Dramatic Irony

Irony occurs when a character says something that conveys a different message from what is said based on the situation, the context, and the characters involved in the conversation. In other words, irony is the difference between the literal meaning of what we say and our actual intention. An ironic or sarcastic saying can be invented.

Iago's speech is characterized by minute attention to detail that makes it sound truthful. Whalley interprets an "insistence on unnecessary detail" as a mark of untruth, but the textual situation suggests the opposite. By taking care to create a sublimely realistic impression, in complete accordance with his contriving nature, Iago ties his audience to his world where he struggles to work out his perfidies. By that means, he also binds the poet – and Iago's fair copy, Edmund Kean – to his master, this Judas of a Shakespearean older servant, patterned in the unequaled malefic Archbishop of Induction IV to Henry V.

One might say that Iago means what he says about the wine bottle "stuffed," about the aquatic herbs' "virtuous properties," or about the contaminants of the "bulk and the pond." This might be true, but the ultimate analysis of who Iago is as a character on and off stage is not conditioned upon the exact interpretation of what additional information in his assertions can be taken as a fact. One should rather look at Iago's full communication with Othello and his Verbal Art in its multiple contexts and then appreciate why dramatic irony, identification, and suspense make Othello such an interesting play to watch or at least read. As an alternative to textual indicators, we can look at the cause-effect relation between Iago's devotion to details and their function of confirming most of his manipulations.

4.2. Soliloquies and Aside

A soliloquy is the act of a character speaking directly to the audience without any of the other characters around. It is often used by Shakespeare to reveal the character's inner thoughts and reflections to the audience. Asides work in much the same way but may or may not refer directly to the character's preservation to an audience. When the giant fears being too conspicuous, he is gl.

2.1. Building up an atmosphere of evil: In the play, we often glimpse the evil that is hidden behind Iago's dissemblance and words. Sometimes, we even venture as far as to say that this bad person actually manipulates poor folk around him into carrying out his deeds. We already know what Iago has been complaining about during the whole play: that he feels he is underpaid. Let us look into the soliloquy in question. In order to look at this soliloquy, we need a good edition, making it clear where his speech starts and ends.



5. Comparative Analysis of Iago's Speeches

Iago's speech is peculiar in the play because he is the only one who is presenting grudges at a larger scale against so many people. Some critics have elaborated that a reader should appreciate how Iago is a master in the rhetoric of manipulation. To elaborate and to clear prevailing ambiguities about Iago, it is pertinent to compare his speeches with the dialogues of others in the play. This comparative analysis will provide guidance to explore Iago's unique and distinct style of communicating with everyone.

The close analysis reveals that Iago's speech when in communication with every other character, provides evidence of his grudges. Every time he speaks, he convinces other characters how deeply he is opposed to his victims. His rhetoric has a deep grudge and an unending hatred. He is filthy in using incantations – toasts, oaths, vows, and above all, the most effective arguments. His feigning embarrassment over the natural baseness in man adds logic to his hatred of others. Additionally, he genuinely disbelieves in everyone's love. This implies that self-love is part of the ego feature that believes in everyone's selfishness at the very first place of confrontation. However, he repeatedly talks about his object of hatred. So, Iago's speeches are always like he is intoxicated with his vices, which intoxicate him more and cannot convince him to be destructive. Moreover, when Iago speaks, he uses vulgar words—the language of Iago is full of sexual, bodily, moral, or metaphysical filth, which does not let him give any form to his objection. His unsuitable metaphors and repulsive puns extend and record his personal revulsions.

5.1. Contrasting Iago's Speeches with Other Characters' Dialogues

Iago's speeches are rather perplexing. This is true in part because his speech contrasts, and is contrasted to, those of the other characters who inhabit the Shakespearean world. Iago's remarks, in contrast to those of his teammates, are pointed, about substance, and, whenever the need arises, pungent and biting; nobody worries that Iago might be engaging in oratory or rhetoric. This can actually be compared to the way in which other characters deliver their speeches (like Brabantio, Roderigo, Cassio, and even Othello): these are exploratory, speculative, and concerned with devices or rhetorical schemes that feel ("So please your grace, my ancient; Ae(t) clean"). Even Othello has a propensity towards such non-conclusive statements, employing querulous aphorisms in the conversation with Desdemona over his intended career path. As Pierre Macherey has suggested, Iago's speeches, which thus constitute a rupture, operate on a more local level; they are quite different from the speeches of other characters as they introduce opacity and ambiguity.

Significantly, Iago's speeches are marked by a palpable absence of such devices of thought which would position his ideas as one among a number of possible interpretations. He would say, with a noticeable lack of forethought, exactly what he thinks. When they



describe forms of less direct and more furtive oratory, I think that this kind of oratorical immediacy has led many to see Machiavellianism at work in Iago's speeches. However, we argue instead that Iago's speeches can be understood dichotomously (like those of Caliban) to reveal again the ideological horizon of both play and speech, in subordinating such oratory and the idea that speech could be so expressive to the independent will or motives of the subject. Of course, there is some truth in the way ascribed to Iago: namely, on the question of the topicality of the text, that it would in some ways be misconstrued in the atmosphere of the present, democratic society, which is more ready, through the stutter of hedonist interpretation, to judge a character's worth than his or her speech. The understanding of Iago's discourse could gain, in this sense, from a careful return to contemporary discussions of so-called "Literary" ethics, which intricately intertwine the reading of a character with the reading of a period. I have suggested some of the implications of this with reference to Marx and Althusser below. In this sense, I also concur with Christine Buci-Glucksmann's recent contention that scaffolded oppositions of hegemony and what lies "outside" it are often two sides of a radical liberal, anti-historical stance fearful that violent means could be used to oppress a pluralistic minority.

6. Critical Interpretations of Iago's Character

Iago's motivations have been examined by scholars employing psychological, historical, and social criticism, among other interpretive tactics. Some of the characters appear to hate Iago based on his mercurial moral canon, which shifts primarily around authenticity as well as the unadulterated joy of misbehaving. The aforementioned characters frequently hate him for his unabashed immorality, but this is questionable since Othello, for instance, doesn't reveal any outright grudge towards him. A more probable trend is hatred. Given that Iago focuses on "Twixt my sheets he has done my office," it now seems apparent that Iago is also driven by a more unconstructive, depraved hatred, contributing to the arguments against Joseph Ward's thesis.

Some argue for psychological justification, citing reasoning as such of the Elizabethan age, where pathological hatred of this kind was grasped in an essential manner of innate evil. Given current views on social constructs of hatred, these conclusions appear progressively unreasonable. Iago's well-drawn, if wrongheaded, authenticity is probably more an effect of an increasingly materialistic society that has more respect for sincerity than for intrinsic goodness, as G. Wilson Knight (1930) mentioned. He has been seen through the adverse effects of society in character study. Schlegel (1834) believes that Iago goes further, "When the devil is cited, he's ever seen at Iago's house," as a full reflection of immoral vengeance. His thesis is, unfortunately, important as a psychological reflection of society's influence. R. D. Laing provides a more present-day psychoanalytical view of Iago as a philosophical power.



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ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in ujmreditor@gmail.com Vol-1, Issue-3 (Oct-Dec), 2024

6.1. Psychological Perspectives

In psychoanalysis, dreams, acts, word associations, or any other material have to be decoded to reveal the hidden meaning behind them. According to cognitive science, signals of activation can be inferred by deeply analyzing the speaker's word choices.

Iago's speech is a singular case, not just another synecdoche of madness. He crafts scenes consciously, effortlessly, and sometimes with glee to affect his imagination: he hears the whispering of "Virtue! a fig!" on Cyprus at the beginning of Act 2, is warned by the grieving and "gentle Desdemona" at the end of Act 4 to "Kill me to-morrow: let me live tonight!", and celebrates his next successful "poison" just two hundred lines later.

I will first summarize Jacobson (Irr Irrain—Kingly Doubles), Stage (Your Daughter and Your Bags), Cavell (Othello and the Stake of the Other), and Viswanathan ("The Counterformat"). Jacobson is indispensable because his analysis of Iago's repetitive speeches is succinct, almost pithy, and introduces a recognition of text as code. Jacobson creates codes examining the outer's use of synecdoche, repetition, and periphrasis, all of which are idiosyncratic rhetorics for one person. Focusing more on periphrasis and naming synecdoche parts as a motif of skin, stage believes that Iago is trying to hyper-Babbellize people or make them always change their names, which have the capacity for creating new, imaginative communities through unforeseen communicability. Several memorable lines of poetry depict various levels of sadness. I notice here the sub-performances of non-villains and their own stagings of sadness as major liabilities; my interest is in underspecifying the kind of nonvillainy and sadness that we're dealing with in these quotes.

6.2. Societal and Historical Contexts

Personal matters, like Iago's love life, play a role in his characterization. However, beyond Iago's speech, there are other broader contexts: societal and historical. When we look at history and society, Iago's constant, circuitous suspicions of Othello's infidelity appear in a different light. In 17th-century England, especially in the court, violent feelings were discouraged or disguised, often leading to gossip and slander instead of direct confrontation that might infer passionate, uncontrollable emotions. We see this latter type of emotion in a negative light in Othello, which tells us that the opposites are positive. That is to say, if hypothetically such a person does exist in Othello and was to directly engage Othello in battle, Othello might, in fact, be won over by Iago's openness and honesty. But as Iago himself says, "In following him, I follow but myself" (1.1.60). Psychologically, if Iago's direction of following or leading will not lead him back to Othello or to any other Englishman, we must re-imagine Iago's love.



We may not have enough evidence to say that Iago loves Othello and that his love is positive rather than contingent. That Iago would be self-reliant on account of a lack of positive use for anyone else may, in fact, point to the central quality of the character. Powerful in his own right, Iago resists enacting his inmost thoughts and suggesting a direct personal connection to anyone, even, or perhaps especially, to Othello. Like Shakespeare, whose works leave no record of psychological self-analysis, Iago does not discuss his motivations, and it is from his words and actions that we must learn of his desires and aims. His motivations revolve around suspicion, suggesting that he is the result of inward-directed self-control shaped by his society and the psychological vocabulary available to him. As such, any psychological investigation of his character is inherently historical and sociopolitical.

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Blue Science Publications

United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 3048-6726 www.ujmr.in ujmreditor@gmail.com Vol-1, Issue-3 (Oct-Dec), 2024

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Citations

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Zaki Mohsen obaid alsarraf. **Analyzing Iago's Speech in Shakespeare's Othello.** *United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)*, www.ujmr.in.

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Zaki Mohsen obaid alsarraf (2024). **Analyzing Iago's Speech in Shakespeare's Othello.** *United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)*, 4(3) www.ujmr.in

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Zaki Mohsen obaid alsarraf. " **Analyzing Iago's Speech in Shakespeare's Othello.** *United International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (UIJMR)*, 4(3) www.ujmr.in