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Daniel Clayton Schario  
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AN INTERPRETATION OF IAGO

by

D. Clayton Schario, S.J.

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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## LIFE

Daniel Clayton Schario, S. J., was born in Canton, Ohio, April 15, 1923.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

"Evil has nowhere else been portrayed with such mastery as in the character of Iago," says A. C. Bradley in his Shakespearean Tragedies.<sup>1</sup> Even Richard the Third is less repellent than Iago, in as much as physical deformity gives some excuse for a compensating egoism. Besides, as representative of the great House of York, Richard retains, in spite of his ruthlessness, certain noble traits of manner and bearing, of courage and courtesy, that are lacking in Iago; and though a capable actor, he prefers, unlike Iago, force to fraud. Nor is he as negative a character as Iago seems to appear: Richard has strong passions, he is capable of admiring virtue, and his conscience disturbs him. Iago, on the other hand, seems to have suppressed all his passions; he admires nothing, and his conscience seems not to exist. Because of this positiveness in Richard's character there is no illusion as to his true nature in the world about him, whereas Iago seems completely to deceive everyone with whom he comes in contact.

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<sup>1</sup> Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, London, 1926, 207.

Nor can Iago be fitly compared to Milton's Satan because Satan, as Milton conceived him, still knew loyalty to comrades and pity for his victims. Perhaps it is only in Goethe's Mephistopheles that a fit companion for Iago can be found; but then, Mephistopheles has "Iago for his father,"<sup>2</sup> not only because he comes after Iago, but more especially because Goethe was influenced by Shakespeare in his writings. Though Mephistopheles resembles his father Iago, and would be a fitting companion, still it must be remembered that Mephistopheles is half symbol, half person. A metaphysical idea speaks through him, and consequently he remains ever abstract even when he is most earthy. Iago, on the contrary, precisely because his earthiness is embodied in a living person is not only earth-born but also very plainly a human inhabitant of this planet.

The general lines of criticism, opposing Iago the human being and Iago the devil, have made his character a much disputed point. The apparent impossibility of reconciling this double aspect of Iago for many years discouraged extensive treatment of his character. The conflict seems to stem from misplaced emphasis which has distorted the facts from their true meanings. Consequently, "the majority of interpretations

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 208.

of his character are inadequate not only to Shakespeare's conception,"<sup>3</sup> but also to the satisfaction of most readers who are confused and bewildered by so many varying analyses.

Because of these two aspects of Iago's character, two fallacies have become common in interpreting him. The first fallacy was to consider Iago as an ordinary, melodramatic villain possessing an ordinary intellect. Thomas Rymer gives us the basis for such an interpretation, for he read the play much as he might have read a medieval morality play. After having read it several times and having puzzled long over its meaning, he concluded that

one of three morals might be drawn from the play: first, that it might be a warning to all maidens of quality not to run away with Blackmoors without their fathers' consent; second, that it might be a warning to all good wives that they look well to their linen; third, that it might be a warning to husbands that they seek mathematical proofs of infidelity before they give in to their wrath.<sup>4</sup>

Any one or all three conclusions can be justified by over-emphasizing the moral aspects of the play, but all three ignore the importance of Iago who has a dynamic personality of his own.

Nor is this idea completely antiquated. G. R. Elliot considers Othello as a Love-Tragedy and consequently insists

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3 Ibid.

4 Thomas Rymer, cited by Wm. R. Mueller, "The Class of '50 Reads Othello," College English, November, 1948, 92.



that the dramatic conflict is between Othello and Desdemona. Iago, therefore, is to be regarded as a mere instrument used to bring about this dramatic conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Stopford A. Brooke, however, is perhaps the most clear exponent of the position which considers Iago as an ordinary villain, whether that villain be the instrument of a just God or a human agent driven on by Fate or blind Chance. For Mr. Brooke, blind Chance is the only thing which governs the action of the play. There is nothing extraordinary about Iago nor is his plot cleverly conceived. A mere chance happening would cause the whole affair to collapse about him, which, in fact, happens in the last act. As proof, he offers the specious argument that Iago appears clever only in comparison with Desdemona, Othello, and Roderigo. "Had Iago met ordinarily intelligent folk," he adds, "he would have been found out in a day."<sup>6</sup> It is only because Othello is so simple, so stupid, so devoid of any intuitive sense that he trusts Iago and distrusts his wife. Only thus does Iago appear intelligent. Furthermore, Mr. Brooke says,

the notion that Shakespeare meant Iago to be an imperial force of evil, a monarch of the pit, an

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<sup>5</sup> G. R. Elliot, "Othello as a Love-Tragedy," American Review, January, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> Stopford A. Brooke, Ten More Plays of Shakespeare, Oxford, 1927, 185.

embodiment of masterly intelligence, subtle and powerful to destroy, or an artist in evil, is not in the play. Not intellectual power, then, but the power of base cunning in a greedy nature, was of the essence of the man.<sup>7</sup>

That Iago is a mere personification of evil is most certainly not in the play. On the other hand, to conclude that Iago does not have outstanding intellectual powers and does not use these with telling force is not borne out by the evidence of the text. Mr. Brooke himself would seem to be inconsistent in his opinion, for several pages further in his discussion he says

There are plenty of Iagos in the world but there are not many, fortunately, who combine with a foul and loveless nature a base but keen intellect.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, his position in general is that Iago is not an intelligent agent, nor is he one who uses his mind and mental abilities to further his plot. This is the main point of difference between Mr. Brooke's position and that which will be defended in the present study: Mr. Brooke believes that Iago is an ordinary man with an evil twist. Actually, it would appear from the text of the play that he is really a clever individual who plots and plans and takes advantage of every little chance happening.

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7 Ibid., 185-186.

8 Ibid., 189.

The second fallacy about Iago's character is to consider him as the devil incarnate, worse than Milton's Satan, worse than Mephistopheles, worse than any character created by pen. Yet unlike Mephistopheles, Iago is not a metaphysical abstraction; and he is not Evil Personified. Coleridge and his followers would interpret Iago to be a person who loves evil for its own sake. Iago has absolutely no motive for his action and all his actions are intended merely to torment and to torture innocent people. He is not prompted by revenge, jealousy, or ambition. He is driven to act from "motiveless malignity,"<sup>9</sup> or a disinterested delight in the pain of others. Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona become little more than mere materials requisite for the full attainment of this delight. Evidently, this Iago is no ordinary villain and it would seem that he is much closer to Shakespeare's Iago than the Iago of Mr. Stopford A. Brooke. On further consideration, however, such an interpretation would appear to make him either a complete madman or an inhuman monster, either of which is quite unlikely.

Mr. Tucker Brooke attempts to avoid this difficulty in his essay "The Romantic Iago." He would have us believe that Iago starts out as an ordinary individual who soon becomes

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<sup>9</sup> S. T. Coleridge, Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare Other Dramatists, Section IV, London, 1931, 228.

possessed by the Devil and acts

under a diabolism thrust upon him early in the play, when seeking to convince Roderigo of his hate for Othello he convinces himself likewise, and suddenly finds himself head and ears in the depths of his own egoism, vaguely conscious that he is being used for the devil's purposes but incapable either of shaping the direction or checking the progress of his drift.<sup>10</sup>

Though Mr. Brooke attempts to account for the alleged motives of Iago, he still clings desperately to Coleridge's notion that Iago acts from a "motive" of pure evil. As a result, he reduces natural motive and emotion in Iago to mere occasions for introducing an evil power which steps in and guides the action.

It seems evident, now, that between the two extremes of Iago the stupid and Iago the psychotic or possessed there is a middle course, namely, that Iago is a villain most extraordinary, with a keen, sane intellect leading him on. It is this middle course, the course which seeks to explain the seemingly pure evil found in Iago by something within his character and thus save his humanness, that Professor A. C. Bradley follows.<sup>11</sup> He calls attention to the fact that Iago acts coldly, that he is not stirred by his passions. It is true that he acknowledges his hatred of the Moor, but this is done with cold malice and almost as an after-thought. This

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<sup>10</sup> Tucker Brooke, Essays on Shakespeare and Other Elizabethans, "The Romantic Iago," New Haven, 1948, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 209.

expression of hatred merely emphasizes his self-control. The intellect is predominant in his character and he cannot, then, be motivated by hatred of Othello or jealousy of Cassio.<sup>12</sup> These are factors in Iago's character but they are by no means important factors,<sup>13</sup> for they depend upon his desires and emotions which are comparatively moderate and upon his ambition which is weak.<sup>14</sup> At the bottom of his nature, however, is a base of extreme pride and self-esteem together with an uncompromising contempt for others. He fails to see why such a man as Cassio is preferred in his stead; the high position of the Moor galls him; that others manifestly inferior to himself are given precedence is an unsufferable outrage. The frustration of his overweening pride serves only to heighten his utter contempt for his superiors. He will show them who is the better man; in winding both Cassio and Othello around his littler finger he will prove his superiority to all.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Bradley is undoubtedly correct in finding Iago's nature one of extreme pride and self-esteem coupled with an uncompromising contempt of others. But he admits these only

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12 Ibid., 220.

13 Ibid., 227.

14 Ibid., 220.

15 Ibid., 229.

as very remote motives. According to Professor Bradley, Iago is unconscious of his real motives. Certainly, he expresses his reasons for his action as his hatred for the Moor, his desire of Cassio's lieutenancy, and his desire to be evened "wife for wife" with Othello. But really he acts because he has a subconscious desire for power like

the boy who torments another boy, as we say, "for no reason," or without any hatred for frogs tortures a frog, is pleased with his victim's pain, not from any disinterested love of evil or pleasure in pain, but mainly because this pain is the unmistakable proof of his own power over his victim.<sup>16</sup>

In effect, Professor Bradley wants to explain away the emotional motives of Iago by insisting that he has a subconscious motive instead. In this, he disagrees with Professors J. W. Draper and E. E. Stoll who show that the subconscious drive is, first of all, not Elizabethan,<sup>17</sup> and secondly, that "[t]here is no reason at all for positing self-deception, or the subconscious, but there are reasons against it."<sup>18</sup> This thesis will attempt to prove that there is textual justification for counting Iago's emotional motives as genuine but that these motives are later over-shadowed by the more intellectual motives.

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16 Ibid.

17 E. E. Stoll, Shakespeare Studies, New York, 1927, 126 and 338; J. W. Draper, "Honest Iago," PMLA, New York, XLVI, September, 1931, 727.

18 Stoll, Shakespeare Studies, 387.

It should be made clear that in attempting to prove this dynamic development of Iago's character, Professor Bradley's position is not disregarded or rejected. It is merely developed. Professor Bradley wanted one motive to predominate throughout the entire play. However, since the publication of Mr. Bradley's work, Moody E. Prior has showed that there is a definite relation between character and action.<sup>19</sup> Once this relationship had been established, a new light was thrown on the action and the characters of the play. By using Mr. Prior's principle of action and character, this thesis will attempt to develop the real dynamism of Iago and thus extend, not reject, Professor Bradley's position.

From the examination of the opinions discussed above, Iago must be considered as a human being possessing a strong, active intellect, and a solid emotional constitution. Once these two points have been established, a real difficulty in explaining Iago's own character development while he activates the plot, while he moves the action forward, presents itself. This is the problem to be solved.

A more detailed statement of the thesis is this: Iago leads Othello to his downfall not so much because of his hatred of him nor because of jealousy arising from Cassio's

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<sup>19</sup> Moody E. Prior, "Character in Relation to Action in Othello" Modern Philology, XLIV, May, 1947, 225-237.

being chosen lieutenant instead of himself. Rather, he acts because of the intellectual pleasure which he derives from controlling the destinies of others. This statement of the thesis does not deny to Iago the emotions of hatred and jealousy. There is hardly any question about it; Iago did want Roderigo's money, he did want Cassio's lieutenantcy, at least in the beginning, and he did hate the Moor. But Iago is not static; his emotions, his plot, and consequently, his character, as we know them, change and grow only as his clever schemes gradually take shape and completely captivate his mind. With the development of his schemes, his interest in their success grows and the emotions of hatred and jealousy are ultimately subordinated to the intellectual element which is so predominant in Iago throughout the play.



## CHAPTER II

### A BRILLIANT INTELLECT

The character of Iago presents a difficult problem to the casual reader and to the careful student alike. Iago is evil incarnate to some; he is a common, criminal type to others. At times, he seems to have a very clever, criminal mind; sometimes he seems to be the pawn of a wrathful god or a mere tool of the devil. One no sooner decides that Iago cannot be a love-able individual when, suddenly, he seems to be a model of kindness and generosity and to be over-flowing with a warm-hearted sympathy for others in their troubled moments. Iago is a complex character, and in analyzing such a character we must begin with the evident facts.

Two facts about Iago's character are evident and these must be considered carefully. They are the relationship of Iago's outstanding powers of intellect to the action of the play and the effects of his emotions on his plan of action. This chapter will treat only of Shakespeare's efforts to bring out Iago's intellectual traits.

Shakespeare, by a skillful use of dramatic characterization, brings out three characteristics which emphasize the

cleverness of Iago's villainy. First, by constantly playing the knowledge which the audience has of Iago from his soliloquies against the knowledge which the other characters in the play have of him, Shakespeare emphasizes Iago's supreme and unsurpassed ability to appear what he is not. Secondly, by making the leading protagonists at least ordinarily intelligent people, he shows us Iago's ability to seize upon the weak points of their characters. And finally, by a realistic use of incident, Shakespeare brings out Iago's ability to size up a situation without previous planning and turn it to his own advantage.

Iago's ability to "keep his best face forward" is all but perfect.<sup>1</sup> In his own way, Iago was apparently a loveable and trusted fellow; one who attracted others to himself and who could inspire in them a confidence which more noble men could not inspire even in those nearest to themselves. Roderigo trusted Iago with the strings of his purse as though the purse were Iago's own.<sup>2</sup> Not once does it occur to him the the delay in his suit might be the result of Iago's duplicity. Emilia, his wife, saw in him a deep sympathy for the sufferings of others, for in speaking of Cassio's disfavor she declares, "I

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1 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 218.

2 I, 1, 3.

warrant it grieves my husband, as if the case were his."<sup>3</sup> And even when faced with proof beyond question of his part in arousing Othello's rage, she cries out:

Disprove this villain (Othello), if thou be'st a  
man.

He says thou told'st him that his wife was false:  
I know thou didst not, thou'rt not such a villain.  
Speak, for my heart is full.<sup>4</sup>

Iago's ability to deceive his wife about his real capabilities for crime would, of itself, prove Iago a brilliantly clever individual; but it could be objected that no intelligence is required to deceive a simple person. Such an objection is easily answered from the text of the play for Emilia and Roderigo were not the only ones who saw in Iago a man who was to be trusted, a man who would help gladly in the hour of need.

Cassio, the man whom the representative of the great Venetian state chose as his aid, speaks of Iago only in the highest terms of praise: "I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest."<sup>5</sup> And when he has incurred Othello's displeasure, he goes to Iago for help, for he was sure that Iago could and would give him the advice which would gain him back his position.

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3 III, 111, 3.

4 V, 11, 172-175.

5 III, 1, 42.

his honor, and his reputation--his most prized possessions.<sup>6</sup>  
 When Desdemona was so upset by the tongue-lashing which Othello gave her, accusing her of having relations with Cassio, her first thoughts turn to a counselor, Iago. She says to Emilia,

Prithee, tonight  
 Lay on my bed my wedding sheets: remember;  
 And call thy husband.<sup>7</sup>

When Iago arrives, she asks him the question she could not bear to mention to her maid:

Am I that name, Iago?  
 What name fair lady?  
 Such as she says my lord did say I was.<sup>8</sup>

Iago's ability to appear what he is not is an essential part of his character. We find it in his dealings with the secondary characters and even with Othello. This last deception, perhaps more than all the others proves Iago's brilliance as an actor for Othello is presented to us as a cautious general and a careful student of human nature, as the man on whose judgment Venice rests its fate. Yet Othello sees in Iago only a man to be given implicit trust.

Though he does not choose Iago as his second in command of the military forces, still he thinks enough of his ability to make him his personal representative. As Othello pre-

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6 II, 111, 262-277.

7 IV, 11, 103-106.

8 IV, 11, 117-119.

pires to depart for Cyprus, he assigns Iago to a position of great trust. Othello replies to the query of the Duke regarding his officer,

So please your Grace, my ancient;  
A man he is of honesty and trust;  
To his conveyance I assign my wife,  
With what else needful your good Grace shall  
think  
To be sent after me.<sup>9</sup>

Again, at Cyprus, when Cassio and Roderigo disturbed the marriage celebrations, Othello asks for Iago's version of the disturbance. After Iago has delivered a well-varnished tale, Othello concludes, and rightly, that some of the facts are true but he adds,

I know, Iago,  
Thy honesty and love doth mince this matter,  
Making it light to Cassio.<sup>10</sup>

And then, certain of his love for Cassio and Cassio's regard for Othello's own love and respect, yet even more certain of Iago's honesty, Othello acts: "--Cassio, I love thee; But never more be officer of mine.--"<sup>11</sup>

Othello, the hero of so many campaigns, could hardly be so blinded in his estimate of an individual as to see honesty

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9 I, 111, 284-288.

10 II, 111, 246-248.

11 II, 111, 248-249.

and trustworthiness where it is evident to the audience at least that there is none unless Iago were an extraordinarily clever actor. Secondly,

Does Shakespeare...wish us to understand that this chilly egoist, this monster of "deadly coldness," has impressed a diametrically false conception of his nature upon his entire circle of acquaintances--upon the observant and the unobservant, upon men and women, upon the most intimate and the most casual associates alike? If so, the less Shakespeare he.<sup>12</sup>

Iago was a great actor; he could lead two lives as it were, the one that his fellow men could see and the one that he and the audience could see. He did have the great ability "to appear what he was not."

*Quote* Iago was indeed clever, but his cleverness is not limited to being loveable and trustworthy and honest before those around him while he really is deceiving them and turning their disadvantages to his own advantage. In his cleverness, he also has the ability of seizing upon the weak points of others' characters and of using these for his own ends. *end quote*

Iago sees through Roderigo's love for Desdemona and evaluates it for the shameful and almost irresistible passion it is in order to turn his insight into spending money. He sees Cassio's kind and courteous manner with the ladies and immediately forms a plan to make Othello jealous; on the other

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12 Tucker Brooke, Essays, 48.

hand, when he wanted Cassio cashiered, he played upon his inability "to hold his wine" and his quick temper. Iago will seize upon the slightest flaw in a person's character and turn it to his own advantage.

But Iago is most clever (and most base and almost diabolical) when he discovers a flaw in Othello's love for Desdemona. To turn this to his own advantage, Iago stoops to a betrayal of Othello's faith in him. Note the scene in the garden of Othello's house the morning after Cassio has been cashiered. Cassio, on Iago's advice, had gone to seek Desdemona's intercession in his behalf. As Desdemona gives her promise to help him, Othello and Iago enter the garden. Cassio, not wishing to put his chances for reconciliation in jeopardy by being seen by Othello, takes his leave--but a moment too late. Iago sees him and drops the remark "Ha! I like not that."<sup>13</sup> Iago was brief but "brevity is the soul of wit." He accomplished his purpose. These five little words are enough to start Othello into an inquiry which will ultimately force him to believe "honest Iago" and to doubt "the sweet Desdemona."

Iago knows that Othello trusts him implicitly and he also knows that Othello, in spite of his age, is abominably ignorant of the ins and outs of his own wife's character. This

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<sup>13</sup> III, 111, 34.

of course, is no reflection on Othello for he had an unusually difficult courtship and was primarily a man of action, a man who spent practically all of his time on the field of battle.

Though it is not a culpable fault, it is a weakness in Othello's character which Iago is quick to spot. Iago seizes this weakness and although he must betray the trust of his friend, he uses his knowledge for his own personal gain.

Besides these two great intellectual powers of appearing to be something other than he is and of adroitly turning any situation to his own advantage, Iago has a third ability. It is rooted in a keen, analytical mind which is capable of analyzing, with a high degree of accuracy, the strengths and weaknesses of his fellowmen's characters. Given such a type of critical mind, there naturally follows Iago's third outstanding mental ability. He can judge men's actions and form an almost certain judgment of their reactions, for a man's action and his reaction to a situation is nothing more than the concrete expression of his character. Of itself, this ability to judge character is useless but Iago puts it into the field of practical action and governs his own actions in such a way that he can carry almost any situation through to his own advantage without any apparent previous planning. This ability to judge men's reactions and to act accordingly emphasizes Iago's quick wit and shows itself constantly throughout the play.



The audience first sees it before the house of Brabantio when Iago incites Roderigo to arouse the family because the Moor has eloped with Brabantio's fair daughter and cheated Roderigo out of his prize.<sup>14</sup> Again it shows itself in his duplicity when Brabantio's men and the Duke's soldiers both meet to call Othello to the emergency session of the Council.<sup>15</sup> It becomes especially striking in the second and third acts of the play when Iago is successfully attempting to have Cassio removed from office. Here he takes advantage of an unforeseen appearance of Othello to tell the truth, yet to tell that truth in such a way that he will not be believed.<sup>16</sup> Later, when Roderigo was supposed to have been killed in a little scuffle with Cassio, Iago feigns protection of Cassio in order to mortally wound Roderigo since Cassio failed to accomplish his purpose for him.<sup>17</sup> As soon as the guards arrive, he immediately blends himself into the forces of law and order; while seeming to render assistance, he uses them to further his own dark ends.

Perhaps the clearest example of Iago's use of his

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<sup>14</sup> I, 1, 66-106.

<sup>15</sup> I, 11, 1-55.

<sup>16</sup> II, 111, 178-246.

<sup>17</sup> V, 1, 22-26.

knowledge of men's characters is found in the famous Temptation Scene.<sup>18</sup> Othello and Iago are walking in the garden. Othello has been experiencing severe headaches caused by his suspicions about Desdemona's fidelity; Iago is apparently trying desperately to ease those suspicions and so put Othello back into good health. During the faint Cassio comes hoping to move his case with the general. Cassio is sincerely concerned about the general's condition and wants to give him immediate aid but Iago opposes this. His quick mind sees a few implications which are not apparent even to the audience. Instead of allowing Cassio to give aid, he suggests that Othello will be much better if the fit wears itself off. But Cassio had better be a little distance away for Othello does not want anyone to know of his illness. As Cassio withdraws, Othello comes to himself again. Iago immediately tells Othello that Cassio has come into the garden; and if he wishes the full confession of Cassio's part in the affair, it would be well to conceal himself in the bushes while he, Iago, talks to Cassio. Then follows Iago's masterpiece of double meaning--he and Cassio talk about Bianca but Othello believes they are talking about Desdemona. Thus we see again that, even when events and others' reactions are not what Iago had expected, he is still alert enough to adapt himself to

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18 18 III, 111, 92-480.

the exigencies of the moment.

Neither in the play itself nor in the general trend of the action is there anything which would have told Iago that Cassio would come onto the scene just as he was planting his "poison" in Othello's soul. Therefore, Iago's brilliant and extraordinary cleverness is more emphasized not only by the fact that he can conduct himself in such a way as to further his ends in circumstances which he may have foreseen and perhaps planned, but also by the fact that he is equally ready and able to carry on in unforeseen situations. It may be safely said that

...Iago is a consummate master of villainy; but he shows it not so much by subtlety of intrigue as by astuteness in diagnosing the situation and in daring then to put his whole trust in a device appropriate to that occasion alone, knowing full well that what will infallibly trap Othello would be ineffective against any other man.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently,

Iago's insight, within certain limits, into human nature; his ingenuity and address in working upon it; his quickness and versatility in dealing with sudden difficulties and unforeseen opportunities, have probably no parallel among dramatic characters.<sup>20</sup>

Only once before his final destruction does Iago falter. He had underestimated the tremendous emotional attachment

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19 H. B. Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy, Cambridge, 1948, 140.

20 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 218.

Othello had for a trifling handkerchief. He wanted merely to put Othello into "a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure."<sup>21</sup> He most certainly did not wish or even think for a moment that Othello would demand blood as the price of his jealousy. But this Othello did and Iago was able, at least for the moment, to meet the situation. He had just finished his lying tale about the dream Cassio was supposed to have had about the "sweet Desdemona." He was conscious that this would rile up Othello's blood and was exulting in his success. But in his attempt to make the story a little more substantial--for when a liar sees that he is successful he cannot refrain from adding a few more details--he adds the wrong item; he mentions that little handkerchief which was the first gift of Othello to his wife. Othello's visage darkens; his muscles tense; and Iago says

--but such a handkerchief--  
I'm sure it was your wife's--did I to-day  
See Cassio wipe his beard with.

Othello begins, "If it be that,--" and Iago cuts him short, not suspecting what Othello had in mind. He is too interested for the moment in carrying through this last detail.

If it be that, or any that was hers,  
It speaks against her with the other  
proofs.

This is too much for Othello. His anger rises; he will have

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21 II, i, 310.

revenge and from the depths of his soul he cries:

Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow of  
Hell!  
Yield up, O Love, thy crown and hearted  
throne  
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy  
fraught,  
For 'tis of aspics' tongues!<sup>22</sup>

Iago tries to quell this rage but Othello shouts, "O blood, blood, blood!" Iago makes one more desperate effort. "Patience, I say; your mind perhaps may change." But for the moment he has no success and yields, hoping to find some way to cool the Moor's enraged temper.

That Iago was not completely successful in this instance does not argue against his general ability. Rather, it shows that Shakespeare, as usual, took his character's greatest gift of nature and by allowing him to press it too far brought about his downfall. Consequently, this "slip" is only a sign of Iago's coming destruction.

Shakespeare brings out Iago's second notable intellectual trait by giving him a "creed" and remarkable powers of the will. "Not Socrates himself," notes Professor Bradley, "not the ideal sage of the Stoics, was more lord of himself than Iago appears to be."<sup>23</sup> He seems to be complete master of all the motions which would affect his will. When the slightest slip

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<sup>22</sup> The quotations just given are from III, 111, 437-449.

<sup>23</sup> Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 218.

would mean complete failure of his plan, he betrays no sign of nervousness. And when he is finally trapped in his evil, he clenches his teeth and spits out, "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: From this time forth I never will speak a word."<sup>24</sup> And we know that not even the worst torture will induce him to open his mouth again.

Professor Bradley continues commenting upon Iago's unassailability to the temptations of indolence or of sensuality. Hamlet was inactive but not Iago. And though Iago's mind is obscene, and though he took his pleasures when and where he pleased, "he certainly took them by choice and not from weakness."<sup>25</sup> But if pleasure interfered with his plans, the holiest ascetic would not put it more resolutely by. Yet

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are 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 manured with industry; why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions: but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> V, 11, an interpolation of Mr. Bradley.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 218.

<sup>26</sup> I, 111, 321-338.

It takes a man of strong intellectual convictions to exercise such control over his emotions that he can will to do only that which he sees will help him. Professor Bradley sets down Iago's intellectual convictions in the form of a creed.

His creed--for he is no sceptic, he has a definite creed--is that absolute egoism is the only rational and proper attitude, and that conscience or honour, or any kind of regard for others is an absurdity.<sup>27</sup>

Iago does not deceive himself about his creed. It is his and he does not for a moment think that others believe in this selfish notion even though they seem to practice a much more generous way of life. They can be generous but they are simple fools. Iago will be practical; if he does not look out for himself, who will? He compares himself to the servants

Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,  
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves;  
 And, throwing but shows of service on their  
     lords,  
 Well thrive by them, and, when they've lined  
     their coats,  
 Do themselves homage: these fellows have  
     some soul;  
 And such a one do I profess myself.<sup>28</sup>

This self-centered out-look on life is so much a part of Iago that even when he gives others advice he hopes to gain something for himself. He advises Roderigo to put money in his

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27 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 218.

28 I, 111, 314-330.

purse and wait until Desdemona tires of the Moor for there is no sense in drowning oneself and loosing all. It is much better to be hanged in seeking one's joy than to give the joy up entirely.<sup>29</sup> Selfishness certainly is Iago's creed, "For," he says after he has duped Roderigo,

...I mine own gain'd knowledge should profane  
If I would time expend with such a snipe  
But for my sport and profit.<sup>30</sup>

This creed of Iago does not, it is true, show him to be a particularly brilliant fellow. Many very stupid people have followed it, and perhaps there are still individuals who look only to their own gain. But without taking his creed into account, a person cannot fully appreciate the manifestations of Iago's brilliance that have been considered earlier. His pragmatism enables him, for example, to take notable advantage of his analytical powers; his pragmatism enables him to be ready and willing to change his plan as circumstances demand. Though, considered in itself, his creed is not particularly brilliant or even very unusual, it has a definite influence upon his powers of action and thus is a contributing factor in making Iago a brilliant and extraordinarily clever criminal.

This brings the discussion to the group of critics who

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30 I, III, 390-392.



have denied that there is any sign of a brilliant intellect at work in the plans which Iago lays. Mr. Stopford Brooke, for example, dismisses the plot of Iago against Roderigo with the remark that "a fox can easily outwit a rabbit."<sup>31</sup> But the fox displays a great deal of finesse in dealing with the rabbit, and Iago is quite clever in dealing with Roderigo. Then, too, it must be remembered that the rabbit is not the only animal upon which the fox preys. Iago began to prey upon Othello who has more of the qualities of the lion, for he is great-souled and intelligent as well as peaceful and gentle until his anger is aroused.

Mr. Brooke finds that Iago's plot against Othello and Desdemona is skillfully worked out, but they had no defense against Iago's scheming since his plan is founded upon their noble characters.<sup>32</sup> Iago is not a man of fine intelligence; he is a man of low cunning. But it has been shown that Iago's brilliance lies precisely in the fact that he can deceive others, can discover the weak points in a noble character, and does make this the point of a carefully planned attack. Since Iago attacks the weak point in a person's character, Othello's and Desdemona's defense against him must be the correction of the

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31 Stopford Brooke, Ten More Plays of Shakespeare, 185.

32 Ibid.

defect which is in their characters. One cannot deny the established fact that Iago is clever simply because his victims did not, or were not able to, correct their own faults.

Mr. Brooke also maintains that Iago's plot is not so cleverly worked out that the slightest chance would not cause the whole thing to collapse about his ears. He would seem to be right for it does collapse because of the trivial fact that Emilia knows about the handkerchief.<sup>33</sup> Again, we say Iago is not perfect; this "slip," as already noted, is Shakespeare's way of making an essential trait the reason for a character's downfall. Besides, were Iago to close off completely every possibility of error, he would lose many of his human traits and become a devil incarnate for among mortals there is no "perfect crime."

Finally, it is necessary to note two main features of Iago's plot: a certain explicitness; and yet a definite implicitness--a form of a provision. Keeping this in mind, a definite element of chance can be involved in the plot which Iago lays, yet the whole plot is still definitely under his direction even when the circumstances are decidedly adverse. Iago actually finds an intellectual thrill in having to pit his wits against changing circumstances and seemingly superior intellects. It is this which prompts him to carry his plans to an

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33 Ibid.

extreme conclusion and at the same time causes him to underrate the importance of a small and seemingly insignificant detail. It seems unfair to deny to Iago the brilliance which is his merely because he underrated one small factor.

In summary, Iago's brilliance stands out throughout his plot against Othello, not because he plots to conquer unbelievable odds or to do a great and noble deed. He does not. He plans a very base and ignoble course of action. He is brilliant in this that he knows exactly what he wants to accomplish, what precise weakness in his victim he must use, and in general, what will be his means. He is careful not to become too detailed in expressing his methods precisely because he knows that unforeseen events will arise and must be taken into account. And this, the fact that he does allow for the unforeseen, is based on his ability to seize upon a situation and turn it to his own advantage.

Iago does not wish to profane his knowledge of human nature by passing it out free of charge to all the stupid people who come to him; he will sell his knowledge to Roderigo and so bring about an opportunity to exercise, for his own amusement, his powers of duplicity. He suspects that the Moor has "cuckolded" him; he will use his knowledge of human nature to make Othello suffer the same fate, if not in deed, at least

in the mental suspicion that Iago himself has had to suffer. That is only in keeping with his selfish, materialistic "creed." Iago's powers of analysis of a character and his knowledge of men tell him that Othello is most jealous of his wife. Iago knows, perhaps from personal experience, that, though Othello may not be aroused to jealousy by any other means, he will become extremely jealous of his wife's fidelity to himself.

So Iago conceives his plan. He has a definite plan and a means by which that plan can be accomplished. Exactly how he will make Othello jealous is somewhat indefinite; the turning of events will give him leads and his adaptability will allow him to develop his schemes more definitely as he actually works toward his goal. Iago's pragmatism and his careful watchfulness over his own selfish aims will not allow him to be too rigidly definite in his plan of action.

Iago's intelligence is certainly many-faceted. Shakespeare makes a point of showing it as an innate, practical cleverness as well as a cultivated, pragmatic, egotistical outlook on life, buttressed by an indomitable will to succeed in his plans. All are at work to guard him from failure, to guide him to success. In this success Iago finds, above all, that keen intellectual enjoyment of intellectual superiority characteristic of men of a mental stamp.

## CHAPTER III

### HUMAN EMOTIONS

The reader has a clear view of Iago's intellectual abilities and now must study Iago's human qualities before he can begin to consider Iago's changing motivation as the action of the play progresses.

The immediate problem in this chapter is to prove that Iago is a human being and not merely a devil incarnate. Obviously, a human being has more than spiritual qualities; he has more than an intellect and a will. A human being has a body also, and therefore, he must have emotions; for the emotions in the ordinary sense are merely the sensible reactions of a person subject to the intellect for the attainment of a sensible good. These sensible reactions or desires can be motives for the man which influence the will to direct the man to strive for the sensible good to be attained. Were a man to lack emotions and yet use his intellectual powers to achieve an end, he would not seem to be human. Thus, if a person committed murder without a motive of hate or revenge or some other emotion, he must be said to be acting from a motive of pure evil. He would be a devil.

But it can be proved that Iago does have emotions which influence his will. Such being the case, he must be a human being. The proof of Iago's humanity lies in the evident facts that Othello, as good drama, represents men in action; and that a man in action is, above all, a human being.

The object of drama is to "represent man in action."<sup>1</sup> It must give us a picture of men's characters through actions which are typical of that particular type of character and which are true to life.<sup>2</sup> Othello certainly "represents men in action" for it is a display of the terrible destructiveness of Othello's violent passion suddenly loosed on a defenseless Desdemona. But Aristotle's remark that drama must represent men in action never meant that every character in a play was a human being and certainly not all of Shakespeare's characters are human.<sup>3</sup> Since Shakespeare does introduce spirits in human form, before any character in Othello can be considered a real, life-like person, he must exhibit in his make-up the qualities of a human being, of a man in action.

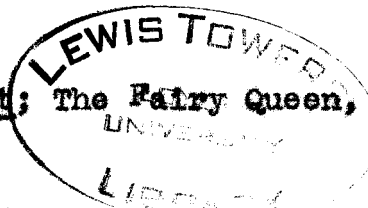
A man must have an intellect for without this faculty

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<sup>1</sup> Poetics of Aristotle, edited by S. H. Butcher, 4th. edition, London 1936, I.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., XV.

<sup>3</sup> The character, Ariel, the Tempest; The Fairy Queen, Mid-summer Night's Dream; and others.



he would be no better than an animal, driven by forces outside of and superior to himself in all ways. He must also have a body which makes itself felt through the emotions. Before a person can use any of his powers, spiritual or physical, he must will to use them. However, the will, as a faculty, is strange. It must be influenced by something outside itself which says "this is good" before it will move a man to act. The emotions are frequently enough this power which indirectly influences the man to act.

Cardinal Newman, in his Grammar of Assent, explains very clearly how the will in the concrete is influenced to move a man to action. Speaking of notional and real assents, he notes that it is not only the knowledge or the imagination which causes a man to act, "but hope and fear, likes and dislikes, appetites, passion, affection, the stirrings of selfishness and self-love."<sup>4</sup> Notional assents are common to all men. Every one can reason about an idea, study it, and assent to its logicalness. This is only the mind contemplating its own creations instead of things, whether they be an unreasoned opinion or a mathematical speculation.<sup>5</sup> But this assenting to an idea is

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<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Newman, Grammar of Assent, ed. Charles F. Harrold, New York, 1947, 42-74; Harrold, John Henry Newman, London, 1945, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Harrold, J. H. Newman, 146.

not enough to induce a man to act. There must be real assent for it is superior to notional assent as being "stronger, more vivid and forcible, and as stimulating the emotions and will to act."

This real assent is something personal to the individual.<sup>6</sup> It is a complex thing composed of his whole background. Newman illustrates this by citing the boy who did poorly in school and who, later, engages in a particular work. Much that was theory to the boy rapidly takes on concreteness and the man becomes highly successful. He gives another example. Europe had long recognized the iniquity of the slave trade; but only after Wilberforce's organized agitation had deeply affected the imaginations of men, were active efforts made to stamp it out. In short, real assent must have not only the intellectual knowledge, but it must have the imagination made active through experience. The imagination then presents pictures vividly enough to arouse the emotions. Once the emotions have been aroused, then is "given to the world of men one idea of immense energy, of adamantine will, of revolutionary power."<sup>7</sup> Thus, unless there are emotions in a character's make-up, he cannot be a "man of action" in the fullest sense of Aristotle's mean-

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<sup>6</sup> Newman, Grammar of Assent, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 88.



ing.

Unless Iago has emotions as well as an intellect and a will, as a man, he probably would not act. He could have heard about the little affair between Emelia and Othello, assented to it, but unless his past experience supplied him with images which would stimulate his emotions, he could not change that notional assent into real assent. In the ordinary course of everyday life, he probably could not and would not have acted. Iago could have believed that he should have been given the lieutenancy; but unless he felt deeply that he had been wronged, he normally would have done nothing. In other words, if there are emotions in Iago which can be stimulated by his experiences, then, no matter how violent and evil his actions may be, he is only a man using his talents to their fullest capacity.

But Iago does have genuine, human emotions which are revealed in his actions. The warmth of Iago's kindness, the intensity of his hatred, the keenness of his jealousy are the emotions which move him to violent action. These are the emotions which are common to men and which Iago portrays for us in his actions. Some critics have been at great pains to explain away these human traits but Shakespeare has put them in Iago none-the-less. His emotions are more evident than the chilly, almost passionless egoism that many critics see. Here an attempt will be made to point them out clearly but without any

reference to the emotions as a motive force driving Iago forward in his seemingly diabolical actions.

If a person makes even a little effort to sympathize with Iago as he reads the play, he cannot help but notice that Iago has little traits which touch him personally. There were nasty rumors going around the army camp that Iago was being made a fool by his wife and the general. Who would not resent that! Add to such rumors, the fact that Othello passed over Iago who should have been given consideration because of his past record. Anyone would resent the injustice of this. And Iago did, even though at first he was at least partially resigned to the situation.

Why, there's no remedy; 'tis the curse of service  
 Preferment goes by letter and affection,  
 And not by old gradation, where each second  
 Stood heir to the first.

But this was only a partial resignation for he continues

Now, sir, be judge yourself  
 Whether I in any just term am affin'd  
 To love the Moor.<sup>6</sup>

Most individuals will say, "Oh, let it go!" when they can do nothing immediately about the situation. It does not take much effort to sympathize with Iago here for who has not been passed over at one time or another? To complain about such a situation is a trait of weak human nature.

For the more staid individuals, perhaps the bantering Iago gives Emilia and Desdemona on their arrival at Cyprus is a little too flippant. But it is true that most of us cannot pass up a "wise-crack" when given a harmless opportunity. Cassio had arrived before the rest of the Venetian fleet and was on hand to greet Desdemona, Iago, and Emilia when they docked. His effusive Italian nature prompted him to forget the formalities. He speaks with a definite tendency toward persiphlage, knowing his action will not gall Iago.

Good ancient, you are welcome. Welcome, mistress.--  
 Let it not gall you patience, good Iago,  
 That I extend my manners. 'Tis my breeding  
 That gives me this bold show of courtesy.

Iago reacts to the bantering immediately and Emilia is made the subject of the joke, for, after all, she did receive Cassio's kiss!

Sir, would she give you so much of he lips  
 As of her tongue she oft bestows on me,  
 You would have enough.

It is only human for a man jokingly to ridicule his wife by exaggerating the harmless prerogative of women of talking too much. Desdemona interjects her pleasant protest: "Alas, she has no tongue!"<sup>9</sup> Who would not be encouraged to carry it further, especially while the half-galling complaints of his wife about the recent voyage were still clear in his mind?

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<sup>9</sup> The quotations just given are from II, 1, 97-120.

Emelia, smilingly, rises to the defense of her kind. "You have little reason to say so." Iago joyfully takes the challenge and gives a ridiculously funny picture of wives and their "wifery."

Desdemona thoroughly enjoys the fun but she is also worried about Othello. This persiflage is a welcome relief to her mind. She encourages Iago to be explicit. "If your wife doesn't want her virtues praised by you, Iago, at least tell me what you think of me, you slanderer." He hedges. "I am nothing if not critical." After all, one does not poke fun at the general's wife when she is troubled even if she encourages the farce. But Desdemona wants entertainment. "Come on, assay." So Iago continues with his "Ale house" praises until the Moor's ship arrives. Iago was too human to pass up the "wise-cracks" to Emelia or the pleasantly cynical praise of Desdemona.

There are other human traits in Iago, many good and one rather mean. He has an innate kindness and an honesty for which every character in the play vouches. Roderigo sincerely believed in Iago's interest in others and in his honesty in dealing with them. So much so, in fact, that he felt hurt that Iago "who hast had my purse As if the strings were thine"<sup>10</sup> should know that Othello and Desdemona were to be married and

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<sup>10</sup> I, 1, 4.

yet should say nothing. But his belief in Iago's honesty and sincerity were not diminished by the present failure.

Cassio, not knowing Iago's connection with Roderigo's attack upon him at Cyprus, could still go to Iago for consolation after he was cashiered by Othello. Later, he could still say of Iago "I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest."<sup>11</sup> Speaking of Iago's part in attempting to have Cassio re-instated, Emilia could say "I warrant it grieves my husband As if the cause were his own." And Desdemona confirms her; "That's an honest fellow."<sup>12</sup>

Even Othello believes utterly in Iago's honesty for when he must choose a representative to act for him, he chooses Iago.<sup>13</sup> Would anyone trust his newly wedded wife to a man of "light morals," unless he knew that the man was, deep down, honest and trustworthy? Emphatically not! In Cyprus, Othello listens to Iago's straight-forward narration of events for Iago does relate his knowledge as any by-stander would know the situation. Othello had to bring the story from him by saying "Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving, Speak."<sup>14</sup> Later on

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11 III, 1, 43.

12 The quotations just given are from III, 11, 2-4.

13 I, 111, 284-288.

14 II, 111, 177.

he still says "This fellow's of exceeding honesty."<sup>15</sup>

Iago's compatriots unanimously and almost continually testify to his honesty. Unquestionably, he does convey that impression for it is not Iago the intellectual working only, but Iago the whole man working as Cardinal Newman would explain. Furthermore, he reveals his basic honesty in his straight-forward approach, at least in the earlier scenes, to everyone with whom he has any dealings.

He very openly admits to Roderigo that he hates Othello and he gives his reason immediately and plainly.

Despise me if I do not. Three great ones of  
the city,  
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant  
Off-capp'd to him;...  
And in conclusion, (Othello)  
Non-suits my mediators; for 'Certes,' says he,  
'I have already chose my officer.'  
And what was he?  
Forsooth, a great arithmetician . 16

But for the moment, "there's no remedy," but "I follow him to serve my turn upon him."<sup>17</sup> After he has aroused Brabantio and be-rated him with vulgar language, he states plainly his mission. "I am one, sir, that come to tell you your daughter and the Moor

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15 III, iii, 258.

16 I, i, 6-19.

17 I, i, 34 and 39.

are now making the beast with two backs."<sup>18</sup>

At Cyprus, even after he had engineered Cassio's dismissal, his honesty would not allow him to make a mis-statement. As was noted above, he spoke the truth with convincing clarity, omitting nothing that, as a mere passer-by to the incident, he could have known; adding nothing he should not have known. What he said was the honest truth but not the whole truth, that is all.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps there is no better scene than Act IV, ii, to show the kindness and understanding honesty of Iago as the characters of the play saw him. Emilia and Cassio have said that Iago is kind, that he is understanding and always willing to help others. Here, we see him helping others. The delicacy with which he helps Desdemona in her troubles cannot be equalled.

Desdemona has been treated most miserably by Othello. He has mercilessly accused her of being a common strumpet and refuses to listen to any reason. Othello continues in a tone of mock belief:

What, not a whore?

.....  
Is't possible?

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<sup>18</sup> I, i, 116-118

<sup>19</sup> Granville-Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare, 4th Series, London, 1945, 26.

I cry you mercy then.  
 I took you for that cunning whore of Venice  
 That married with Othello.--You, mistress,  
 That have the office opposite to Saint Peter  
 And keep the gate of hell!

You, you, ay, you!  
 We have done our course. There's money for  
 your pains.  
 I pray you turn the key, and keep our counsel.<sup>20</sup>

After this rebuke and total dis-illusionment, Desdemona can think of only one counselor. She says to Emilia, "call thy husband hither." When Iago comes, he is completely forgetful of himself or any other thing but helping Desdemona. He is calm and considerate and ready with the proper advice to quiet her worries and ease her mind.

Iago. What is your pleasure, madam?  
 How is't with you?

Desdemona. I cannot tell. Those that do  
 teach young babes  
 Do it with gentle means and easy tasks.  
 He might have chid me so.

.....  
Iago. What is the matter, lady?

Emilia has to express Othello's accusations, for Desdemona is too broken to speak.

Iago. Why did he so?"

Desdemona. I do not know. I am sure I  
 am none such.

Iago. Do not weep, do not weep.<sup>21</sup>

The talkative Emilia must interpose here. But the by-play that

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20 IV, ii, 85-93.

21 The quotations just given are from IV, ii, 109-114;  
 122-124.



follows between her and Iago only serves to strengthen Desdemona's confidence in Iago's understanding of the situation.

Desdemona. O good Iago,  
 What shall I do to win my lord again?  
 Good friend, go to him; for, by this light of  
 heaven,  
 I know not how I lost him.

Iago. I pray you be content. 'Tis but  
 his humor.  
 The business of the state does him offense,  
 And he does chide with you.<sup>22</sup>

Iago's advice is only what one would expect from a kind and understanding friend.

Furthermore, the way in which Iago conducts himself even in his most sinister acts belie an interpretation that he is all cold, calculating malice. There is a joy and an abandon in his actions, but it is different from the joy and abandon of a devil seeking the ruin of a soul. C.S. Lewis, in his Screw-tape Letters,<sup>23</sup> has admirably portrayed the joy and abandon of action which would characterize the devil. There the devil sets out to populate the Kingdom of Hell. But Iago is aiming at a purely worldly, human end; he aims at his own satisfaction and gain. Personal gain is an impossible object for the devil whose aim must always be the perversion of good.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 148-151; 165-167.

<sup>23</sup> C. S. Lewis, Screw-tape Letters, New York, 1943, especially, Preface, 9; and Letter VI, 34.

In the first act, Iago stirs Roderigo to cause a little disturbance at the house of Brabantio. "Call up her father, Rouse him.--" Once Roderigo has begun to "rouse" Brabantio, Iago chimes in.

Awake! What, ho, Brabantio! Thieves! thieves!  
 thieves!  
 Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!  
 Thieves! thieves!<sup>24</sup>

Iago's playful tormenting of Brabantio continues throughout the rest of the scene. Then Iago slips out to be with Othello so that he can watch the "fireworks" from the other side.

Later, at Cyprus, we see Iago entertaining the soldiers in the tavern. He can sing the drinking songs which touch the heart of any good Englishman. Only one with more than a passing acquaintance with night revelry could be so joyous and carefree. In this respect, Iago is very reminiscent of another of Shakespeare's characters, Falstaff. He, also, was vulgar and even risqué in his language. He, too, was happy and carefree about his low morals and petty betrayals of his friend. Falstaff was at his peak in the ale house; and so is Iago. This coupling of the fatty, degenerate Falstaff with the active, alert Iago may seem bizarre, a kind of Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde affair. None-the-less, Shakespeare saw a connection and each throws a welcome light upon the character of the other. We need only note the

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<sup>24</sup> I, 1, 66; 78-80.

similarity of their joviality, for the exigencies of plot multiplied the merry making in the Falstaff plays and reduced to the minimum the treatment of the corresponding traits in Iago.<sup>25</sup> The important point is that Iago can be as jovial and harmless as Falstaff.

Iago has an unpleasant side as well. His meanest emotion, the emotion that is repeated frequently, is his hatred of Othello. With each repetition, his hatred increases. Each increase occurs because one more reason, one more emotion comes into play. Othello has refused to give him the lieutenantcy that he felt belonged to him. This injustice rankled in his soul; it was fed by the suspicion that Othello had also cuckolded him. His jealousy of Cassio wedded his suspicion of Othello and begot Hate. "I hate the Moor,"<sup>26</sup> broke from his lips most spontaneously.

Though Iago certainly conveys the impression of being a warm, sympathetic human being, he has an intense hatred which he proceeds to revenge with deadly coldness. But because this coldness seems to stand out more vividly, does Shakespeare wish the audience to believe that this chilly egoist, this monster of deadly coldness, impressed a completely false notion of his

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25 T. Brooke, Essays, 49.

26 I, iii, 392.

nature upon his entire circle of acquaintances? Does he want the audience to understand that Iago has deceived the observant as well as the unobservant, the men as well as the women, his closest associates as well as his most casual friends? "If so, the less Shakespeare he," for "Lincoln's adage that you cannot fool all of the people all of the time is no more fully verified in life than in the plays of Shakespeare."<sup>27</sup>

Since Shakespeare has allowed all Iago's acquaintances to see and express this warm humanness and even made the success of Iago's plot dependent upon their perceiving it, evidently, he imagined Iago as a man of bitter hatred but also of warm and sympathetic qualities which would beget friendship in his acquaintances as easily and as universally as Don John's coldness beget distrust.<sup>28</sup>

Kittredge, in his introduction to Othello, insists that Iago is "a passionate and revengeful Italian....It would be strange, indeed," he continues, "if Iago, of all men were left without a motive...."<sup>29</sup> Motives and emotions, as has been pointed out, are frequently so united in inciting a man to action that they are one and the same thing considered under two

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27 T. Brooke, Essays, 49.

28 Ibid., 48.

29 G. L. Kittredge, "Othello," Sixteen Plays of Shakespeare, Boston, 1946, 1216.

different aspects--emotions in so far as they are feelings within the person, and motives in so far as they move him to perform an action.

H. B. Charlton, another well-known Shakespeare critic, stresses Iago's humanity. He says,

Iago has to enter the community of the human race. To be an embodied self-consciousness, he has to have his own personality; his separate identity must assert its own autonomy. He can no longer be a merely satanical agent of evil; he must be an artist in his own evil creations. He must enjoy the human emotions which accompany their making.<sup>30</sup>

Iago has to have warm, human qualities as well as the cold, cynical, planning intellect before any tragedy can result.

It is interesting to note that it was not until "that revolution of interest not always happily called the Romantic Revival"<sup>31</sup> that Shakespeare's Iago began to lose his humanity. Coleridge helped to build the idea that Shakespeare was a god and with his unfortunate phrase, "the motive hunting of a motiveless malignity," dubbed Iago Devil Incarnate.<sup>32</sup> Critics, both sage and pedantic, previous to the Nineteenth Century, were

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<sup>30</sup> H. B. Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy, Cambridge, 1948, 139.

<sup>31</sup> G. B. Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare, New York, 1947, 7.

<sup>32</sup> S. T. Coleridge, Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other Dramatists, Section IV, London, 1931, 228.

unanimous in maintaining all the characters, Iago included,<sup>33</sup> were "the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find."<sup>34</sup>

Coleridge, however, in stressing the fact that Iago does seem to act without a motive, brought to the fore a true impression given by Iago and an objection to his humanness.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Iago does convey the idea that he has no motive. This makes him seem to be a devil incarnate. The impression is so strong that, if its origin cannot be at least partially explained, one would be forced to deny the dynamic development of Iago's character.

If one were to put himself in Iago's position, would that person do anything other than conceal his emotions? Iago is a pragmatist and has a strong will; for certainly "[n]ot Socrates himself, not the ideal sage of the Stoics, was more lord of himself than Iago appears to be."<sup>36</sup> He is capable of controlling the external signs of his emotions. Moreover, he has more than sufficient reason for such a procedure. Were

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33 Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare, 1-6.

34 Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare, cited in Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare, 7.

35 Coleridge, Lectures, 228.

36 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 218.

Roderigo ever to suspect that Iago was using him to get Cassio "on the hip," he would have no more to do with Iago. So would end a pleasant source of income! Or if Othello suspected that Iago wanted Cassio's position, Othello certainly would not have been so ready to listen to the statements made at Cyprus. And if the camp ever got wind of the fact that Iago suspected Othello and Emilia, Iago's fellow soldiers would make him the "laughing stock" of the camp. That was the most dreaded evil of the Elizabethan, for the people of Shakespeare's time were merciless in their fun-poking at a man who suspected that he was cuckolded.<sup>37</sup> Anyone with even a little pragmatic sense would immediately avoid any kind of display of his emotions on those points and build up others. This, in fact, is what Iago has done.

Professor Sedgewick<sup>38</sup> approaches Iago's seeming devilishness as being an "irony of reminiscence." It is part of the dramatic irony, he says, that the audience see the real meaning and the intended meaning of an ironical situation. In this case, however, the irony is twofold: the audience must see that Iago is acting like a devil but appearing to those of his own world as a kind, generous, and loveable, if somewhat cynical "good fellow"; but it must also after a time become aware of the irony

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37 J. W. Draper, "The Honest Iago," PMLA, XLVI, 728.

38 Sedgewick, "Of Irony," Chapter IV, Philology and Literature, Series 10, 1935.

against itself. The audience must suddenly realize that Iago is not a pure devil. The motives which he adduces are not mere rationalizations to cover over his evil or mere gropings for an expression of some hidden, subconscious motive of "Power" as Professor Bradley indicates.<sup>39</sup>

A statement by Iago such as "I am not what I am" has a double meaning. First of all, it means that Iago is not the good fellow he appears to be; and secondly, that he is not the devil which the audience at first believes him to be. When he spits out "What you know, you know," the audience suddenly becomes aware of the fact that Iago was playing for "keeps," that he really wanted the lieutenantcy and that he really did hate Othello. This sudden awareness of the complete situation after the action has taken place is what Professor Sedgewick calls the "irony of reminiscence." Because of the effect of this type of irony, the appearance of a devil incarnate can be maintained without destroying Iago's humanity.

Some critics, among them Professor Bradley,<sup>40</sup> have objected to the validity of Iago's soliloquies and his confidences to Roderigo. Once these are not accepted, the critic is free to range almost anywhere and the result is that Iago again

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39 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 226; 229-230.

40 Ibid., 211.



becomes a lover of pure evil. In the soliloquies Iago expresses the reasons for his actions, and it is only in them that we can get a complete picture of his character. The soliloquies are most important and must be accepted "for such material in Elizabethan drama is generally accepted as sincere."<sup>41</sup> This opinion J. W. Draper establishes with his own arguments and substantiates with such authorities Professors L. L. Schucking, A. H. Tolman, and E. E. Stoll. The latter, speaking expressly of Iago's soliloquies, says,

the soliloquy, as I have elsewhere shown, or the confidence imparted to an accomplice, is the clue given to the audience, and must be the truth itself. There must even the liar speak true, and it is to knock the props from under Shakespeare's dramatic framework to hold that Iago's soliloquies are lies--that he lies to the audience, to himself.<sup>42</sup>

In summary, a man of action must have emotions. And Shakespeare has been careful to give the audience a full compliment for Iago. Some of these he shows us in Iago's dealings with his fellowmen; some in Iago's musings. He even allows Iago to range from the deepest sympathy for the griefs of others to the most intense hatred of others. Iago is a being not only human in his goodness but human in his sins.

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<sup>41</sup> J. W. Draper, "The Honest Iago," PMLA, XLVI, 725.

<sup>42</sup> E. E. Stoll, Shakespeare Studies, 388.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHANGING MOTIVATION

The reader now has two very clear facts about Iago which are the foundation of his character. Iago is a brilliant individual; and he is human. Iago is not merely a clever criminal or a pawn of circumstances. Nor can the ultimate reason for his actions be explained by claiming that he is driven to his base course of action by powers beyond his control or that he is a devil in human form. Iago is first and foremost a human being. His motives, as with most human motives according to Cardinal Newman,<sup>1</sup> are as complex and changing as his emotions. The indications and proof of the dynamic development of Iago's intellectual motivation must be found in the text of the play.

Because Iago has a strong intellect and will and because he also has strong emotions, he cannot be moved to act because of either one of these alone. He is a composite of both; his emotions and his intellect play a part in his motivation. Both Professor Bradley and Mr. Stoll realized the inadequacy of an interpretation which listed only the traits and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Chapter III, 2-4.

twists of Iago's character without considering the relationship of these traits to the whole action of the play. However, it was not until Moody E. Prior published his article "Character in Relation to Action in Othello" that the exact cause of this complexity was clearly expressed. Mr. Prior says,

This impression of complexity...arises, in part, from the fact that each significant incident introduces a new element, however small, into our knowledge of the character, which enhances the probability of the episode that follows.<sup>2</sup>

These new elements may not be pigeon-holed and so separated from following elements. They must be fitted into the story so that one character trait or action not only follows another but is caused in some way by the preceding elements. Thus, when the new elements of the following episode are properly chosen,

the impression of unity arises from the fact that no new factor introduced, no action of the character however surprising, does violence to what is already known about it....<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, then, in studying any piece of drama, the reader must be on his guard not to pigeon-hole the analysis of the character under the heading of "character traits" and under the heading "plot incidents" file the action neatly away. For,

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<sup>2</sup> Prior, "Character in Relation to Action in Othello," Modern Philology, XLIV, 225.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

there is a reciprocal relationship between character and action, so that the character is continually being revealed by the course of the action and the action, in turn, is continually being restricted and governed by revelations about the character which increase the probability of subsequent episodes.<sup>4</sup>

Thus by studying Iago's character traits and his actions in relation to one another, reader of the play will get a truer picture of Iago's character and have a clearer understanding of the complexities which go to make him the extraordinarily clever villain that he is.

To put this idea more concretely, by merely noting that Iago hates Othello or that he is jealous of Cassio, one misses completely the meaning of Iago's character, the aspect of that character which Shakespeare wished the audience to perceive. There would be no evident relation between the main plot of Iago's schemes to accomplish the over-throw of his superior officer and the sub-plots of Iago's meddling in Roderigo's illegitimate love affair and his desire to displace Cassio. Shakespeare did not wish to portray Iago's jealousy or hatred in an episodic manner. He was very practical. Iago's dallying with Roderigo and his jealousy of Cassio were means to a further end; they were the means by which the gradual development of Iago's nature from petty vice to a tragic fault could be artistically portrayed.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Moody E. Prior used the character of Othello to establish his principle of the inter-relationship of character and action, but was careful to point out that the principle could be applied to all leading characters of any dramatic story.<sup>5</sup> This being the case, though Iago is not necessarily the tragic hero of Othello, it is the purpose of this thesis to point out that Iago's character develops and changes in some respects as the action of the play progresses. This dynamic development is evident not only in the individual conflicts but clearly present as well in the over-all development of the whole play.

Iago's character develops from one of an ordinarily intelligent human being who practices the usual petty deceits upon his associates to one who finally plays for great stakes. As he grows in the cleverness of his trickery, the human elements of love and hate tend to become less noticeable and less active in governing his actions. The reader is not to think, however, that because his predominant trait is one of keen intellectualism, Iago, therefore, becomes less a man and more of a devil. This is not the meaning of Iago's character development. The meaning of his dynamic development is this--that the predominant outlook on life which Iago shows throughout the play

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

changes. It changes from an ordinary smallness in the ends which he wishes to attain to a greater and more nearly pure intellectual end. He eventually uses his cleverness to attain the intellectual pleasure which comes from overcoming an adversary simply because one is more clever and keen witted than the adversary, not because there is some earthly gain to be obtained in the conquest.

This is a normal development of any human character. The child of five or six years will exert his powers to get a sucker or a candy bar. As he advances in his education, he learns that the abilities which he possesses can be used to obtain pleasures which are greater than the candy bar. He learns the thrill of solving mystery stories, of guiding others to happiness and well-being. So with Iago, Shakespeare brings out the growth and development of a clever intellect which first learns the pleasure of gaining money and soon learns the greater pleasure to be obtained from guiding another's intellect and will through the exercise of a keen, quick-shifting wit.

Shakespeare brings out this development in two ways. First of all, he allows the audience to see a development within each conflict. Iago, in his dealings with Roderigo has only one clear motive. He wants to get his hands on easy spending money, but he also very indistinctly realizes that his powers are much greater than this. When Iago sets out to have Cassio cashiered,

he uses the same methods that he used against Roderigo; but they are used to better advantage. Having perfected his knowledge of the characters, and his methods of obtaining his own ends, Iago is ready to try his luck with Othello. Here certainly is the clearest example of the development of Iago's motives from ones of ordinary material gain to ones which give him a supreme intellectual pleasure.

This is only part of the dynamic development of Iago's character; it is the development which occurs within each episode. Shakespeare, however, never meant to give a disconnected sequence of actions; he wanted a complete story for he maintained a unity in his plot. These plots or "conflicts" are united in an over-all development which is made evident by a careful application of Prior's principle of the inter-relation of character and action.

In the first conflict, between Iago and Roderigo, there is practically no change of motive. As the first scene opens, Roderigo is perturbed that Iago has not told him of the Moor's love for Desdemona and their coming marriage. Roderigo from the very beginning accuses Iago of not dealing fairly with him. Iago is quick to react to the situation. He has taken Roderigo's money and there should be some results for his efforts even for the poor dupe. Iago gives him a plausible solution of creating a scene with the lady's father and Roderigo accepts it.

Iago's reason for stringing Roderigo along is made quite clear in this act: "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse;" but his whole reason is not money. Iago gets a definite enjoyment from leading Roderigo on. "

For my own gain'd knowledge should I profane  
If I would time expend with such a snipe  
But for my sport and profit.<sup>6</sup>

Iago's machinations against the leading characters of necessity over-lap; and as his affairs have proceeded, he has need of Roderigo to destroy Cassio. In Act IV, scene ii, Iago meets Roderigo and is again accused of double dealing. He admits only the appearance for he sees now that he has a way of removing Cassio from the scen completely. He persuades his "fool" of the necessity of his killing Cassio if he is ever to have Desdemona. At the same time, he cleverly arranges matters so that the useless dolt, Roderigo, will be eliminated also. Iago has bobbed all the money he can from Roderigo; and since circumstances connected with Othello and Cassio are involved, Roderigo must not attempt to claim just retribution. Therefore, he must see that Roderigo is killed and that, for strictly financial reasons.

The development of Iago's pleasure in leading others is not primarily brought out in this episode. The conflict serves more as a point of reference in Iago's character. Here

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<sup>6</sup> The quotations just given are from I, iii, 388-391.



the audience can, at the close of the play, contrast the first motives of Iago in his dealings with Roderigo with his last motives in his dealings with Othello.

There is an intermediate development of Iago's motives evident in the conflict with Cassio. Iago resents the fact that "a great arithmetician, ... That never set a squadron in the field"<sup>7</sup> should be given preference over himself. He begins to analyze Cassio's character and ability. He finds him "a proper man.... He hath a person and smooth dispose to be suspected-- fram'd to make women false."<sup>8</sup> Upon this feature of Cassio's character Iago builds his plot. In Act I, Iago is in fact after Cassio's lieutenantancy and he carefully lays his plans. Othello will be turned against Cassio by insinuations regarding Desdemona and Cassio. But Cassio must be forced to incur openly Othello's disfavor. Iago negotiates the situation. Iago's expressed reason now for wanting Cassio degraded at the end of the first scene of Act II is that he fears Cassio has been making free with Emilia. But as soon as Cassio has been cashiered, Iago exults not in the fact that Cassio has been displaced but that he has succeeded in proving himself superior in intellect and he enjoys his present position.

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7 I, i, 19-21.

8 I, iii, 398 and 403-404.

And what's he then that says I play the villain,  
 When this advice is free I give and honest,  
 Probal to thinking,...How am I then a villain  
 To counsel Cassio to this parallel course  
 Directly to his good?

Iago rejoices in his supremacy and at the same time shows that his reasons for engineering Cassio's defeat were no longer to get his job and settle a suspicion but rather something more dreadful.

Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on  
 They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
 As I do now.<sup>9</sup>

Iago, in his exultation, is planning further devilish deeds; but it is not the baseness of the plan or the fact that the results will seem to be the direct work of the devil himself which intrigues him but the cleverness which he can display.

The full development of Iago's motivation in his desire to have Michael Cassio "on the hip" comes in the last act, first scene. Circumstances have so arranged themselves with Iago's help that Cassio and Roderigo must be killed if Iago is to survive. The Moor is going to leave the island in command of the re-instated Cassio. This must not happen for

If Cassio do remain,  
 He hath a daily beauty in his life  
 That makes me ugly; and besides, the Moor

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<sup>9</sup> The quotations just given are from II, iii, 341-359.

May unfold me to him; there stand I in much  
peril.<sup>10</sup>

Iago's main reason is an intellectual one. Cassio's character is a thing which Iago's double-dealing, crooked outlook on life cannot stand. He at last realizes that real pleasure is not to be found in leading others into difficulties but rather must be found in leading an upright, honest life.

In the third and major conflict of the play, the change and development of Iago's motives from ones of gross physical emotions to the finer, more intellectual ones of pleasure derived from the exercise of his intellectual abilities is most evident.

The initial dialogue with Roderigo and their earlier soliloquies make it clear that he (Iago) wished two things, Cassio's lieutenantcy and revenge, and chiefly for two reasons: Othello refused him the advancement that, with some justice, he felt he deserved; and, even more serious, he tells us himself that "it is thought abroad"--that Othello has made a cuckold of him.<sup>11</sup>

These are the grosser reasons for Iago's actions as we have them at the end of the first act. Nevertheless, they are sufficient reasons for a normal man of Elizabeth's time to set out to get revenge, for the Elizabethan gentleman knew no worse disgrace. Once the people on the Commons got hold of such a rumor, the

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<sup>10</sup> V, 1, 18-22.

<sup>11</sup> J. W. Draper, "Honest Iago," PMLA, XLVI, 727; I, 1, 383ff.; I, iii, 393.

ridicule from men, women, and even small boys was intense. So the common practice was to keep any hint of such a situation extremely secret. Iago, feeling unable to get any sound evidence, had only one course of action open to him. He must abuse Othello of what was said of himself.<sup>12</sup>

Though Iago's humanness prompted him to begin his plot against Othello, still his intellect is the predominant feature in his make-up and that controlled his emotional exhibitions. Therefore, Iago plans a careful, clever method of evening the score with Othello. His plan advances in each succeeding soliloquy; and likewise, in the soliloquies, Iago is constantly expressing his immediate reason for adopting his given plan of action.

Throughout the first act, Iago gives as his main reason for wanting to be evened with Othello, the fact that he suspects Othello and Emilia. However, by the time the action has been moved from Venice to Cyprus, a new motive begins to grow. Its growth is exactly parallel with the growth of his plan against Othello. At the end of the first scene of Act II, Iago gives us two motives for his designing.

Now I do love her too;  
Not out of absolute lust (though peradventure  
I stand accountant for as great a sin)

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<sup>12</sup> Draper, *ibid.*; J. W. Draper, "The Jealousy of Iago," Neophilologus, October, 1939, 50-52.

But partly led to diet my revenge,  
 For that I do suspect the lusty Moor  
 Hath leap'd into my seat .

This is a motive which Iago has given us earlier. But now he is suffering an interior turmoil. His emotions are not completely quiet for

the thought whereof

Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;  
 And nothing can or shall content my soul  
 Til I am even'd with him, wife for wife;  
 Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor  
 At least into a jealousy so strong  
 That judgment cannot cure.<sup>13</sup>

Iago works for a little on his plan of attack and at last comes up with an exuberant idea. He must so annoy Othello that he will be thanked, loved, and even rewarded for making Othello an "egregious ass." Iago's very way of expressing himself betrays his exultation. Here is the beginnings of the emotions which will dominate Iago during the rest of the action against Othello, but it is still confused.

As we follow Iago through the rest of the play we can see the enjoyment that he is getting from making a fool of Othello. From this point on there is no longer in Iago's mind any notion of getting even with Othello; he has one purpose, to make Othello thank him for his efforts and he strives for this end because he enjoys the pleasure he gets from exercising his

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<sup>13</sup> The quotations just given are from II, i, 296-321.

abilities.

The next day Iago gets his chance to begin the planting of his poison in Othello's mind. Cassio is seen slipping away from Desdemona in the garden; this gives Iago his opportunity. He works slyly; and when Othello leaves to keep a dinner engagement with the islanders, Iago muses over the results: "The Moor already changes with my poison."<sup>14</sup> Before he actually began to play upon Othello's jealousy, he always gave reasons for his actions; now, he never mentions a reason.

Iago does not leave; he remains for a while, and Othello returns. Here is another opportunity to work up the Moor. Othello vows that he must have blood for this deception, Desdemona's blood! And Iago in a mock serious tone tells Othello to remain kneeling while he also kneels to pronounce his vow.

Witness, you ever-burning lights above  
 You elements that clip us round about,  
 Witness that here Iago doth give up  
 The execution of his wit, hands, heart  
 To wrong'd Othello's service! Let him  
     command  
 And to obey shall be in me remorse  
 What bloody business ever.<sup>15</sup>

There is not the full driving force in Iago's words that are found in Othello's vow; for Othello has the constant, onward

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<sup>14</sup> III, i, 325.

<sup>15</sup> III, i, 463-469.

drive of the Hellespont while Iago invokes no more than the flickering, changing lights of heave. His words, likewise, give the audience the same light-hearted twinkle. When Othello gives command, what is Iago's response? It is a cheery "My friend is dead; 'tis done at your request."

From this point to the end of the play, all of Iago's efforts as far as Othello is concerned, are directed toward accomplishing Cassio's destruction so that he can be thanked and rewarded by Othello for his part in helping Othello justify himself. Iago succeeds in killing Roderigo, but Cassio still lives after the fight in the dark. Iago has had his fun; he either succeeds completely or is caught in his deeds. At the end of Act V, scene i, he has a presentiment of this; and he governs his actions accordingly. In the bedchamber, Iago begins to realize how far he allowed his interest in the outcome of his plot carry him away, for Emilia knew the key to the whole plot; she knew of the simple, trifling handkerchief. It was a small detail; but as we have seen in Chapter II, Iago's cleverness in ordinary circumstances would not overlook even the smallest of details. The fact that he did overlook a small, but important detail can be explained only if his interest and enjoyment in working out his plan took such a strong hold on him that his ordinary powers were impeded. Such, as the text indicates, was the case.

The text is quite clear that the motives of Iago change as the action proceeds. However, there still remains the more important question of how his motives change. As Mr. Prior pointed out, this can be discovered only by a study of the complete action. Shakespeare did not intend to portray merely the change in Iago's character; he wanted to show the audience exactly how this change took place; otherwise there would have been no need for the closely knit theme which he has used. Shakespeare always pictured life as he saw it; and in life, there is no such thing as a disconnected sequence of incidents.

An individual can perform an action for a particular reason which in itself seems to be quite harmless. But if that action is repeated time after time, the reason for the repeated action has less and less relationship to the first reason. Take the boy in school who does not do his assigned homework for the first time. Usually, there was insufficient time to complete the task. The second failure is due to the fact that time was a little short and besides the fellows had organized a ballgame for that evening. The homework is left undone. After a while, homework is not considered if there is something more interesting to be done. If the reader will look at the situation a little more closely, he will find that the school boy was not too interested in the assigned task in the first place and did something he liked better. Such a motive is his remote motive,



for he was sincere in not having enough time which was his real immediate motive--the proximate motive. However, over a long period of time, the remote motive, that he preferred to do something more interesting, becomes predominant and finally the proximate motive for the series of actions.

This is precisely what Shakespeare wished to show the audience in Iago's character. When one considers the whole series of Iago's actions, this is the type of development found. It is the change from a proximate motive of hatred of Othello to the remote motive of enjoyment found in leading others on. This change is accompanied by the complete forgetting of his original proximate motive. This is the substitution of the remote motive as the main motive for his actions. Though Tucker Brooke and Granville-Barker do not explain the change in this fashion, at least both noted that there is a definite growth and change in Iago's motives.<sup>16</sup>

Now is the time to study the action of the play and trace that change as the story proceeds. The scene opens in Venice where the audience learns Iago's immediate motives for desiring the downfall of Cassio and Othello. Iago chooses Rod-erigo as his instrument to accomplish this purpose. Here Shakespeare carefully shows all the techniques which will be used by

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<sup>16</sup> T. Brooke, Essays, 52-53.

Iago to accomplish the destruction of Cassio and Othello. Iago goads Roderigo to call up Desdemona's father by telling him a probable story. Roderigo reacts, and Iago feels that he has satisfied his dupe for the moment. Then the scene shifts to Cyprus where Iago will have an opportunity to encompass the downfall of Cassio. Iago has been brooding over his plan for some time, and each time he has become a little more bitter in expressing his emotions. Finally, at Cyprus Iago sees Othello and Desdemona reunited and quite happy in one another's company. He can only snarl,

O, ye are well tun'd now!  
 But I'll set down the pegs that make this music  
 As honest as I am.<sup>17</sup>

Iago arranges to meet Roderigo at the harbor after dark so that they can bring some kind of disgrace on Michael Cassio and start "setting down the pegs" for Othello. There is no specific plan as yet; the time and place will have to supply that; but Iago feels confident that his cleverness in using any situation to his own advantage will not fail him.

He is not mistaken, for he finds Cassio just leaving the tavern for his night's watch. Iago manages to persuade poor Cassio to take one more drink, even though Cassio has "a very poor and unhappy brains for drinking."<sup>18</sup> As a result, Cassio

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17 II, 1, 202-204.

18 II, 111, 34.

is very irritable; and Roderigo, with a bit of prompting, manages to create a scene. Cassio is cashiered by Othello for being drunk on the watch.

All through the episode, Iago is enjoying himself. He is happy and jovial and makes a congenial companion by singing the drinking songs of England especially to the delight of Cassio. In his soliloquy near the end of the second act, Iago does not have the bitterness previously observed in him. There is a jubilant tone in his voice; he is confident and has thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

And what's he then that says I play the villain,  
When advice is free I give and honest,  
Probal to thinking...How am I then a villain  
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course  
Directly to his good.<sup>19</sup>

At the close of the second act, when

he looks up into the coming dawn and reviews the doings of the night, he is simply grateful for the anodyne he has ministered to himself. "By the mass," he exclaims, "'tis morning. Pleasure and action make the hours seem short." Be the future what it may, five hours have been saved from dullness.<sup>20</sup>

Quite clearly, throughout the night Iago was not primarily interested in furthering his purposes. Those seemed secondary to the enjoyment he was experiencing at the moment.

It must be noted that though his motives change, his

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19 II, iii, 342 et seq.

20 T. Brooke, Essays, 54.

basic plan does not. The more he enjoys exercising his talents, the more careful he is to see that he has a plan which will enable him to practice his deceits on Othello. During his musings in the early morning, Iago's keen perception of the relationship of Cassio and Othello tells him that the very cashiering of Cassio will be the opportune stepping stone to make Othello "egregiously an ass."

For whiles this honest fool  
 Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes,  
 And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor  
 I'll pour this pestilence into his ear--  
 That she repeals him for her body's lust;

.....  
 Two things are to be done,  
 My wife must move for Cassio to her mistress;  
 I'll set her on;  
 Myself the while to draw the Moor apart  
 And bring him jump when he may Cassio find  
 Solliciting his wife.

Iago has formed his plan and, though he still has some bitterness against Othello and Cassio--

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
 And out of her own goodness make the net  
 That shall enmesh them all<sup>21</sup>

--he no longer harps on his original motives. These have begun to change.

Iago does not waste any time. The next morning he has an opportunity to make Othello "jump" when he finds Cassio solliciting Desdemona. Iago uses his chance. "Ha! I like not

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21 II, iii, 359 et seq.

that." Now he begins teasing Othello. There is no direct accusation; that would be too crude for Iago. He prefers dropping little remarks which have a double meaning.

Iago. Did Michael Cassio, when you woo'd my lady,  
Know of your love?

Othello. He did, from first to last, Why dost thou ask?

Iago. But for the satisfaction of my thought,  
No further harm.

Othello. Why of thy thought, Iago?

Iago. I did not think he had been acquainted with  
her.

Othello. O, yes, and went between us very oft.

Iago. Indeed?

Othello. Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou aught  
in this?

Is he not honest?

Iago. Honest, my lord?

Othello. Honest? Ay, honest.

Iago. My lord, for aught I know.

Othello. What dost thou think?

Iago. Think, my lord?

Othello. Think, my lord?

By heaven, he echoes me,  
As if there were some monster in this thought  
Too hideous to be shown.<sup>22</sup>

Iago thoroughly enjoys his little trick of mischievously teasing the complaining Othello, of drawing him on from irritation to positive anger. He allows half-derisive confessions of abuse to accumulate until Othello is ready to strike and then with a turn of a phrase jumps clear and leaves Othello the more completely in his power.<sup>23</sup>

Iago continues to tease Othello with these half-truths.

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<sup>22</sup> III, iii, 94-107.

<sup>23</sup> T. Brooke, Essays, 50.

Othello by this time is quite wrought up over the whole affair and would have proof. Unquestionable proof cannot, of course, be given, but Iago manages to persuade Othello that he can give facts which can have but one meaning. So he tells a barracks' story of a dream which Cassio was supposed to have had. Throughout, he seems to enjoy the relating of it. Othello, like the obedient puppet that he is rapidly becoming, bellows, "O monstrous! monstrous!" To Othello, this one story was more than enough proof; but Iago still teases, "And this may help to thicken other proofs that do demonstrate thinly." Thinly, yes, to any one but Othello.

Iago has certainly lost sight of his original motive of merely making Othello jealous. This he has certainly done beyond all hope of repair. Rather Iago is enjoying the fun, for there is no other reason which would prompt him to continue to push his advantage. The very tone, also, of his remarks reveals his pleasure. We have noticed the mock sincerity of the oath which Iago takes to be devoted entirely to Othello's demands. As the act closes Othello damns his wife and Iago leaves the stage with the remark, "I am yours for ever."<sup>24</sup>

At this point, Iago has completely forgotten his original motive and pushes his enjoyment of the situation as far as

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<sup>24</sup> III, 111, 480.

he can. Once more by mischievously suggesting ideas rather than by making outright statements Iago plies Othello until he drives him into a faint. He rejoices: "Work on, My medicine, work!"<sup>25</sup> However, Cassio comes on the scene; and Iago's cleverness must go to work again. Cassio is put off while Iago sets the stage for some real fun which will satisfy his base nature. With Othello, he is quite serious; but with Cassio, Iago lets his humorous nature range quite freely. Othello mis-interprets the conversation; and when it is all over, Iago further teases Othello about the method of doing away with Desdemona. However, when the trumpets sound at the docks, Iago is quite ready to drop the matter with a light-hearted "Something from Venice, sure."<sup>26</sup> He is certain that no desperate harm will come to Desdemona.

There is still some unfinished business which must be attended to. Iago has the commission to see that Cassio is killed. Now he has an entirely different motive from that of wanting the lieutenantancy. Cassio might reveal Iago's little joke to Othello, and besides Iago has had time to think over his actions and sees that they are not very pleasant in their aftermath. Cassio is a reproach to him. This cannot be. Cassio

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25 IV, 1, 45-47.

26 IV, 1, 227.

must die.

It is this decision which is the undoing of all of Iago's work. For once he decides to live out the joke to the extent of killing Cassio, he is forced to carry the whole thing through. However, this is not evident to Iago until the meeting in Othello's bedchamber. Here he finds that Othello has killed Desdemona and that Emilia is quite upset. She is determined to find out why Othello was driven to such lengths. About the time that Othello tells her the story and the reason that he was certain Desdemona was a whore, Iago comes in with the messengers from Venice. Iago faces up to Emilia and admits straight off that he incited the Moor. But first he tries to quiet her busy questioning. "Go to, charm your tongue." There is no anger in his voice at first; but as Emilia continues to rant and rave, Iago begins to lose his temper. "I charge you get you home." "Zounds, hold your peace!" By this time, Iago realizes that he can keep the affair secret no longer if his wife will insist on making a scene. He draws his sword to strike at her and rushes from the room.

Though Iago is led onto the stage again, he is silent throughout the remainder of the scene. He at last realizes fully to what lengths he has pushed his pleasurable teasing of Othello.

Iago is not a born devil. He might have gone on



singing and drinking and consuming the wealth of many Roderigos until he grew old and fat like Falstaff. But unlike Falstaff, Iago liked to toy with the deeper emotions of others; and with Othello, he went too far. He was carried away by his ability. His actions, if we look at their tragic results, are diabolical. But if we look at them as the results of human fallibility and indiscretion, they are as human as any sin man commits. Tucker Brooke would have us believe that Iago's

diabolism is an accident, thrust upon him early in the play, when in seeking to convince Roderigo of his hate for Othello he convinces himself likewise, and suddenly finds himself over head and ears in the depths of his own egoism, vaguely conscious that he is being used for the devil's purposes but incapable either of shaping the direction or checking the progress of the drift.<sup>27</sup>

The text of the play does not bear this out. Iago himself was always sincere about his motives; but, as has been shown, they do change. Consequently, Iago is not purely diabolical but has wrongly developed a pleasing enough side of his character.

Likewise, one cannot admit with Professor Bradley that these actions are merely external manifestations of a long-established "unconscious" motive of a desire for power.<sup>28</sup> In the first place, an "unconscious" motive is an impossibility; for before anything can move a person toward itself it must be

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27 T. Brooke, Essays, 52.

28 Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, 228-230.

known. If we don't know what we want, we will not and cannot act. Probably, Bradley is using the term in a loose sense and simply means a remote motive. As a remote motive, this was not Iago's; for the text clearly indicates Iago's motives from first to last. Iago's final motive is best expressed as a certain pleasure derived from inciting others regardless of the first reason for his actions against either Othello or Cassio.

Since Iago is not only a brilliant intellectual but also is very definitely a human being, he must be accredited with the natural developments of a human being. And a textual analysis of the drama itself bears out the fact, Iago's motives go through a dynamic development in the course of the action.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

There are two general positions with regard to Iago's character which are certainly false. The first is that he is an ordinary villain. According to this opinion, all of his actions are possible only because of the material with which he has to work. Othello and Desdemona are so stupid or unobservant that they cannot see through the most simple of plots. It is this contrast of extreme stupidity and ordinary cleverness that produces the apparent brilliance of Iago and so makes him appear to be more devilish than he really is. The second fallacy in analyzing Iago's character is to consider him to be the devil incarnate. Thus Iago becomes the master villain, a motiveless malignity which seeks to do evil for evil's sake. Consequently, Cassio, Othello, Desdemona, all have no defense against him. His will must sway, and Othello must go to his destruction.

Iago is not an ordinary villain. Shakespeare has repeatedly shown the audience Iago's intellectual brilliance. He wanted Iago endowed with more than ordinary abilities of intellect and will. Iago's cleverness in acting a part is truly remarkable. To the audience, regardless of his motive, Iago is

definitely against Cassio and Othello. Yet, whenever he meets either of them, he is the model of devotion. He is honest, straight-forward, kind, loving, and generous. In taking advantage of any situation, Iago would seem to be unsurpassed by any other character of Shakespeare or even of life and literature. Cassio happened to be near the tavern on his first night in Cyprus. That was his downfall. Othello and Iago saw Cassio leave Desdemona rather quickly and secretively. One short sentence was sufficient to set Othello on his quest for information and proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Shakespeare also endowed Iago with a third trait of cleverness. Iago could almost unfailingly pick out the weak point of another's character and use that weakness to further his own ends. He spotted the gullibility of Roderigo and made himself spending money. He knew of Cassio's weakness for drink and so had him cashiered. He successfully relied on Othello's implicit trust in himself to lead Othello to violent jealousy. In the use of these special powers of his intellect, Iago was guided by a materialistic creed. He looked on life with a cultivated attitude of superiority and believed that unless he foraged for himself no one would help him. Consequently, he displayed a certain selfishness in his actions which led him to begin using underhanded and apparently devilish means to attain his ends.

Certainly, Iago is no mere ordinary individual.

Neither is he the devil incarnate. Iago is as human as any man. He has emotions; he feels slighted and resentful; he can be generous; he will help others even though at times there is a catch in the help given; Iago is jealous. To deny these emotions to Iago is to accuse Shakespeare of deliberately mis-leading not only the characters of his play but also the audience. Mr. E. E. Stoll and most of the better known critics of Shakespeare insist that this is not Shakespeare's method nor could he possibly use it and still have any drama left.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, one is forced to grant that Iago has emotions. Then no matter how satanic his actions may seem, he is still a human being and all his actions can be explained by ordinary psychological processes.

To explain Iago's action, two facets of the character given by Shakespeare must be kept in mind. However, neither his brilliant intellect nor his utter humanity may be over-emphasized. The touch-stone which infallibly gives the proper emphasis to these two traits is, according to Mr. Prior, the action of the play itself. Iago clearly indicates the motives for his actions. Even though a number of very notable critics refuse to accept these as true motives because Iago says things which in view of his character they cannot believe; nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> Stoll, Shakespeare Studies, 387-388; T. Brooke, Essays, 49; Charlton, Shakespearean Tragedy, 139.

these are the real incentives of his action in the early stages of the play.<sup>2</sup> He states that his ambition has been wounded by the preference shown to Cassio, that his jealousy and desire for revenge have been aroused by the suspicion that the Moor has seduced his wife; further, that he loves Desdemona and wishes to possess her, that he also thinks it possible that she loves Cassio, and lastly, that he fears Cassio's attentions to his wife. These are some of Iago's more prominent motives.

As the play progresses, these motives yield to another motive. Toward the end of the second act, Iago begins to enjoy his plotting against Othello and Cassio. By the end of the third act, Iago enjoys inciting Othello and has completely forgotten his first motives. Looking back over the action, the remote motive in all of Iago's actions becomes apparent. He always derived a certain enjoyment from his natural cleverness. This enjoyment became predominant by the end of the third act. Thus a substitution of the remote for the proximate motive took place, a development which is quite natural in the course of repeated actions which have the same object.

This very dynamism of Iago's character explains the diabolical element which is so evident in all his actions. The audience realizes that Iago has extraordinary powers of intel-

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2 L. L. Schucking, Character Problems in Shakespeare, New York, 1922, 205.

lect and will. However, the end to which he directs his powers is so base and evil that he creates the impression of being literally a devil. Yet, when Iago muses over his plans he reveals himself as a normal human being possessed of normal standards of morality. But for the moment, he is not willing to follow these standards.<sup>3</sup> Again, it is the problem not only of accepting Iago's own word for his motives and standards but also of seeing them in relation to his developing and changing motivation. Consequently, though the acts themselves verge on the preternatural, still from Iago's point of view--the point of view that the audience must accept if it is to judge Iago at all--these actions do not have a purely diabolical object. They are merely the means by which he can, for the moment, relieve the boredom of quiet inactivity.

In conclusion, though there is much that is true in the commonly accepted critical positions, they cannot be received at their face value. The character traits which Iago exhibits in the play must be associated with his actions. Once this is done, the audience cannot over-emphasize either the character or the action nor will they conclude that Iago is an ordinary villain or the devil incarnate. Likewise, they will

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3 J. W. Draper, "Honest Iago," PMLA, XLVI, 727.

more fully understand Iago's character and therefore will not attribute to him and unconscious or concealed emotion or motivation. When the audience or the reader approaches Iago from such a point of view, he will see Iago as Shakespeare intended-- a dynamic character with outstanding abilities which he permitted to be led astray and so brought tragic death on all who knew him.



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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by **Daniel Clayton Schario, S. J.** has been read and approved by three members of the Department of

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

July 31, 1952.  
Date

Rev. John B. Conrath, S. J.  
Signature of Adviser