

Iago's

control over the play

The horror of Othello





Actor Simon Bubb argues that Iago's lack of humanity is what Shakespeare is most interested in sharing with the audience – we have far more access to his thoughts than those of Othello. And to what purpose? To horrify his audience, suggests Bubb, analysing closely the linguistic and dramatic qualities that cause us such revulsion.

First performed around 1604, William Shakespeare's *Othello* showcases a dramatist reaching the zenith of his powers in plotting, characterisation and use of language. One noteworthy aspect of the play is the fact that the title character, Othello, actually has fewer lines (880) than the antagonist, Iago (1088). It is unusual for an anti-hero to be given such prominence. Why does Shakespeare give Iago so much to say?



When exploring any play, it is always worth stopping to ask what effect the dramatist might have been looking to have on the audience watching. Live theatre is perhaps the most powerful medium for eliciting emotions in people. It is a flesh-and-blood experience: the story is not unfolding in our imaginations, but right before eyes, and it is one that we witness with dozens of other people in the same shared space, so that their responses and ours will combine to create a magnified, communal response. With good writing and acting, that experience will send a shiver down your spine. Done well, *Othello* is likely to create such a feeling. I would argue that one of the primary sensations Shakespeare was hoping to evoke in this play was horror, and it is his presentation of Iago that is central to achieving this.

Soliloquies

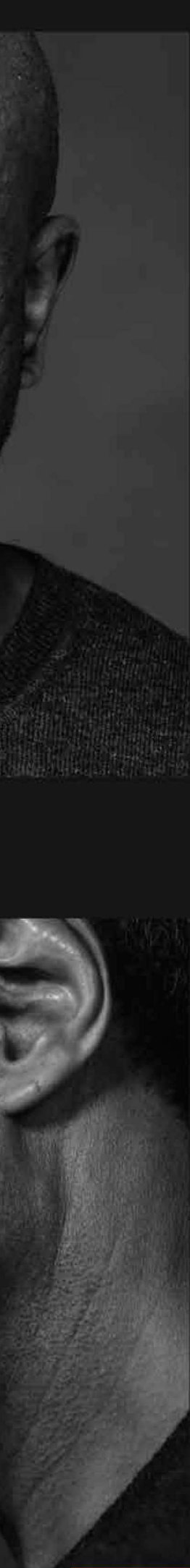
I have counted seven soliloquies by Iago in the play. Othello himself has only one (or two, if you include the start of Act 5, Scene 2, when he speaks while Desdemona is asleep). Note that a soliloquy is distinct from a monologue. It is not just a long speech, but one delivered directly to the audience, with no other characters on stage. A shorter version of the soliloquy is the aside, where a character briefly breaks out of a scene with other characters to speak a line or two to the audience. Iago has these too. Soliloquies and asides can have a very powerful dramatic effect. It is misleading to think of them as the character simply speaking their thoughts, with the audience happening to overhear. Instead, they should be considered as the speaker directly addressing the audience as if they were another character.

The effect of this is to create a bond between that character and the audience. He has shared thoughts and feelings with us to which nobody else has been given access. The fact, then, that Shakespeare gives Iago so much more time alone with the audience than he gives to Othello is thus very telling as to the playwright's dramatic purpose. Normally we might expect a soliloquy to be the place where we see a character's humanity, as they allow themselves to reveal their hopes and fears. The horrific thing about Iago, however, is that what he reveals about himself is his utter lack of humanity. Yet, by sharing his villainy with us, he draws us into the darkness and somehow makes us part of it. Giles Block, the text expert at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre puts it well:

Iago's plan takes place as we watch him; and as he watches us watching him, we become complicit in his devilry. By listening to him, it's as if we



Othello at the RSC, 2015-16. Photo © Keith Pattison



encourage him to tell us more.

Part of the thrill of watching a play comes from the conventions by which you have to abide. As an audience member you are not supposed to get up on stage and interrupt the character speaking, or get involved in the action. You have to stay put and witness events as they unfold. The horror of *Othello* is that we already know what will happen to the unfortunate characters, because Iago has told us, and us alone, how he will trap them in

the net

That shall enmesh them all

Act 2 Scene 3, lines 367-8

and yet we are powerless to stop it happening. In this, we see Shakespeare using dramatic irony to devastating effect.

A Study In Villainy

Notice Block says that

Iago's plan takes place as we watch him.

Good soliloquies are not just static speeches where a character tells us what they feel about something. The best ones have a dramatic quality to them because the character is thinking as they speak, reacting to what has just happened and deciding what to do next. This is most obvious in Iago's first soliloquy:

**Cassio's a proper man: let me see now;
To get his place, and to plume up my will
In double knavery – How, how? – Let's see:**

Act 1 Scene 3, lines 398-400

The repetition of 'how' and 'let me see', 'Let's see' captures the sound of a brain working overtime. Before our eyes, Iago is hatching the plan that will drive the plot of the play from this point. I think this gets to the heart of what might have most interested Shakespeare in his decision to focus so much of the play on Iago. It seems the playwright wanted to spend time examining the nature of villainy. In Iago, he presents a character who likes to comment on his own malevolent plans even as he forms them.

Today we would call Iago a psychopath (the term was first coined in the 19th century). He seems to be entirely unable, or unwilling, to feel empathy and remorse. What clearly fascinated Shakespeare was the question of what happens when those qualities (or the lack of them) are combined with both a ferocious desire to harm others and an utterly brilliant mind. Shakespeare gives Iago so many soliloquies because through them he can explore the workings of a mind bent on evil. It is notable that Iago does not have

any soliloquies in the final act. By that stage, all his scheming is complete. He has spun his web, his victims are trapped, and the focus switches to Othello as we see the tragic results of Iago's machinations.

Words as Weapons

Iago's verbosity is not just evident in the planning of his schemes. It is an essential part of their execution, too. Iago is able to wreak such terrible havoc in the world of the play because of his ability to use language better than anyone else. To quote Giles Block again:

'Honest' Iago will poison the atmosphere of the play [...] – not by his actions, but by what he'll say, the suggestions he'll make to Othello, Cassio and Roderigo. The very words he'll use will turn this love story into a bloody tragedy.

Firstly, we might note the way Iago speaks to Roderigo. Iago needs Roderigo as an ally to achieve his ends, but really Roderigo is merely a tool in his hands (Iago twice calls him a 'fool' in soliloquies). In most of their conversations, Iago has long speeches, with Roderigo often only having a few lines in between. Roderigo is actually of a higher social class than Iago (who does call him 'sir'), but Iago assumes the higher status in the relationship in two ways. First, he often verbally slaps him down with short imprecations, such as "Sblood, but you will not hear me" (1.1.4), and "Why, thou silly gentleman!" (1.3.308). Then he overwhelms him with words, creating a clear sense that he is the one in charge, he is the one directing events.

Verse and Prose – Iago's 'Insincere Sincerity'

Iago speaks in both verse and prose. Through this, Shakespeare signals Iago's facility with language and his cunning in how he uses it. Verbal communication is not just about the words we use, but the rhythm and tone that go with them. With Cassio, Iago has to present himself as someone trustworthy whose advice should be followed. Giles Block points out that

Shakespeare frequently uses prose when he's capturing the way soldiers talk to each other, who tend to hide their true feelings behind a mask of witty, worldly toughness.

So in conversation with Cassio, Iago uses a chatty, everyday prose that enables him to come across as a fellow-soldier that Cassio can trust:

You or any man living may be drunk at some time, man. I'll tell you what you shall do

Act 2 Scene 3, lines 318-19

Prose tends to reflect the sound of people talking on the surface of things. Because verse, however, has the regular rhythm of iambic pentameter running through it, which mimics our heartbeat, it is usually employed by characters sharing their true feelings. We might expect, therefore, that Iago would rarely speak in verse as he spends so much time covering his real intentions. But this is where his devilry lies. In fact, Iago uses the heartfelt rhythm of verse in order to deceive others – Othello especially – into feeling that he is sincere and emotionally sensitive. This enables him to come across as honest and credible, while he pours poison into people’s minds. Act 4 opens with an excellent example of this, where Iago pretends to play down the idea of an affair between Desdemona and Cassio, while actually planting images in Othello’s mind that are designed to enflame his jealousy:

IAGO: Or to be naked with her friend in bed
An hour or more, not meaning any
harm?

OTHELLO: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm!
It is hypocrisy against the devil:
They that mean virtuously and yet do so,
The devil their virtue tempts and they
tempt heaven.

IAGO: So they do nothing, ’tis a venial slip:
Act 4 Scene 1, lines 3-9

Iago is playing a dangerous game here. If Othello realises that Iago is trying to make him distrust his wife, Iago will have failed and may pay with his life. Fortunately for Iago, he plays the game brilliantly. A close inspection of the first two lines above reveals that Iago is speaking in perfect, regular iambic pentameter. Each line sticks neatly to the weak/strong rhythm and has exactly 10 syllables. The regularity of the line has a calming effect. Thus the form his words take fits his intention – to come across as feeling but reasonable; torturing Othello with the image of Desdemona naked in bed with Cassio, while at the same time seeming to dismiss it as nothing to worry about.

Unsurprisingly, Othello takes the bait and is enraged. Look what happens to his verse. It is completely irregular. The weak/strong rhythm is disrupted and the lines all spill over beyond 10 syllables. This captures the sound of someone losing their equilibrium and failing to contain their emotions. This is just what Iago wants, but he mustn’t let that show. So he again pretends to be the voice of reason, with another line of perfectly regular verse: ‘So they do nothing, ’tis a venial slip’ (‘venial’ would be said as ‘veen-yǝl’). Iago continues in this vein for much of the conversation, becoming ever more audacious in his ability to feed Othello’s jealousy while

simultaneously presenting himself as a calming, neutral presence.

The Terrifying Power of Language

Othello is a play in which Shakespeare explores the terrifying ways in which someone can use language to manipulate and control others for their own evil purposes. It is no surprise, then, that the character with the most lines is the villain whose words bring such dreadful destruction to those around him. In the end, of course, even he cannot outrun the consequences of his actions. Once the tragedy has unfolded, his plot is uncovered and he is captured. He can do no more damage. Yet he gives one final insult. Having showered the stage with his words, when Othello demands that he now use them to explain himself, Iago chooses...silence.

From this time forth I never will speak word.
Act 5 Scene 2, line 304

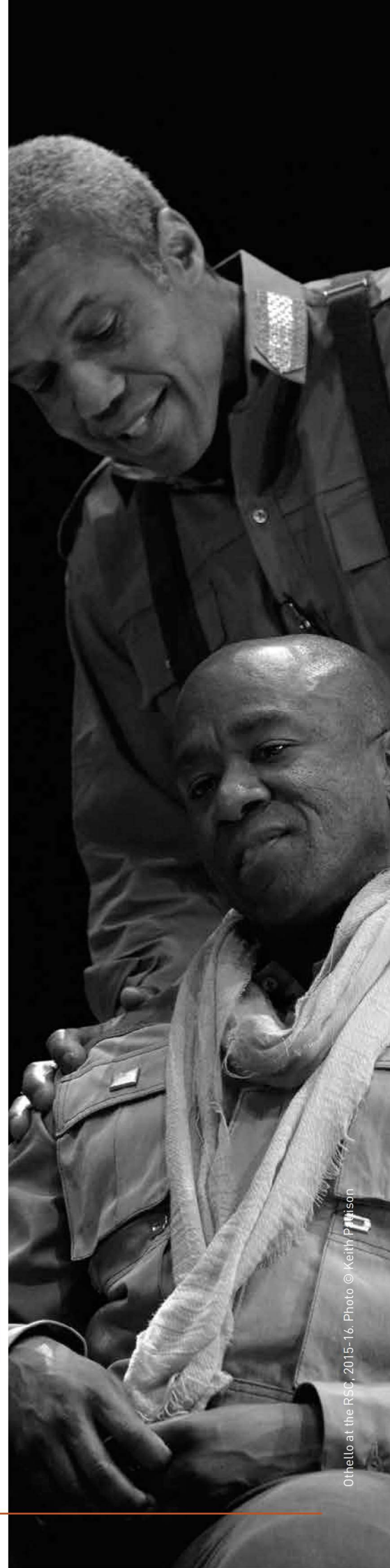
Simon Bubb is an actor with a first class degree in English. He has performed at the RSC, the National Theatre, the Old Vic and Shakespeare’s Globe.

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