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Honest Iago

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Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Jul., 1922), pp. 336-344

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27533566>

Accessed: 16/11/2014 21:58

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## “HONEST IAGO”

I do not believe that I am abnormally sensitive or æsthetically perverse, yet whenever I read or hear the play of *Othello* my soul is tormented by the endless iteration of the word “honest”. The monotonous recurrence of “honest Iago” arouses my sense of artistic propriety to an emphatic, even belligerent resentment. The irritating phrase distracts attention from the main issues of the plot with which the mind should be absorbed, jars upon the nerves like a discord in music, transgresses the rules of dramatic consistency, and detracts from the dignity of tragic drama. Such an excessive and peculiar use of the word looks like an obvious device to tickle the intellects of the groundlings. Certainly it indicates some deliberate and specific purpose. What was this purpose? Did Shakespeare regard it merely as a means of emphasizing Iago’s duplicity? This would be undramatic, as well as uncomplimentary to the intelligence of the audience. Did he regard it as a fundamental structural element of the play? The problem has haunted me somewhat as the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* haunted De Quincey, and it challenges investigation.

In its two forms of adjective and noun, *honest* and *honesty*, the word occurs fifty-one times. In only one other play does it occur as many as twenty-eight times, and similar words such as *brave*, *violent*, *just*, never occur more than fifteen times in a single play. It is used twenty-six times in reference to Iago, ten times by Iago himself, thirteen times by Othello, twice by Cassio, and once by Desdemona. In all of these applications it expresses, and often summarizes, just those qualities that Iago does not possess. It thus constitutes a strain of irony running throughout the play. Iago uses the word of himself with an acidulous smile or diabolical grin, or, when the occasion requires, with the sangfroid of a brazen-faced lie. Othello’s manner of using the epithet indicates a deep-seated confidence, expressed with the simplicity and guilelessness of a child. The irony in his case is of the unconscious kind, recognized only by the spectator.

In the construction of the play two leading motives are employed,—Iago’s mendacity and Othello’s credulity, and these motives are inseparably connected, forming a single stream of influence, from which flow all the action and all the passion of the plot. Othello’s jealousy is not a constructive motive, for it is the product of the action controlled by Iago. Incidentally it should be noted that although Othello may be the “tragic hero”, the real hero of the play is Iago. He is the centre of interest, the mainspring of the machine. He is the only character who exercises creative power and initiates movement in the plot; all other characters are his puppets, servants of his purposes, tools used in fabricating his diabolical schemes. Of the two constructive motives the word “honest” is the keynote: when used by Iago it signifies his own falseness and love of deviltry; when used by Othello it signifies his own simplicity and capacity for being fooled. The continuous sounding of the note seems to serve as a perpetual reminder to the auditor, as if he might sleepily forget what the play is about. It is in this unusual method of employing a keynote and its dominant motive that *Othello* differs widely in its construction from the other great tragedies.

A fundamental principle of dramatic construction, about which there is no essential disagreement, is the necessity for growth and development of character in and through action. The personages of the plot must expand with the succession of events, unfold themselves as by a law of inherent necessity. Our interest in such characters as Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, and Brutus is a profound curiosity, an eager anticipation of soul-revelations, which is satisfied at each step in the progress of the plot by new spiritual developments, surprises, and discoveries. In *Othello* there is not, and cannot be, any such profound interest. From the first scene of the play Iago’s character remains stationary; there is development only in the action. His creative machinery works busily in constructing new devices of wickedness, but the dynamics of his soul never change; his “motiveless malignity” is a fixed, static force, uniform and consistent in its operation. From first to last he is merely, as Professor Schelling says, “the shameless egoist who proudly avows his

villainy and bawls it to the gallery". This generalization, however, must be justified by closer contact with the text.

At the very opening of the play the word "honest" is first used, and fittingly by Iago, constituting a dramatic keynote, a hint as to his character that we should expect to see developed in the action. But as a keynote it is immediately abandoned, for Iago at once takes pains to characterize and classify himself. With sneering contempt he describes the class of honest servants to which he does not belong: "knee-crooking" knaves who dote on their "obsequious bondage" to their masters. "Whip me such honest knaves", he says, and then proceeds to describe the class to which he himself does belong, men who—

". . . . throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
Do well thrive by them, and when they have lin'd their coats  
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul,  
And such a one do I profess myself",

closing the speech with the cogent epitome of himself,—

". . . . I am not what I am."

Here is a cold-blooded avowal of all the qualities of which his black soul is composed. He does not wait to be explained by the action, but fully and accurately explains himself. His deeds after this in no way modify the character he attributes to himself; they merely illustrate it. The passage, therefore, instead of serving as a premonitory hint of what we are to look for in the subsequent development of Iago's character, serves to introduce that character already completely developed. We now know all about the man; henceforth he is just a stage villain, living up to the character he has given himself, as Hazlitt saw him, in the acting of Kean, "a gay, light-hearted monster, a careless, cordial, comfortable villain".

Turn now to Othello. In the third scene he first uses the word "honest", in introducing Iago to the Duke:—

". . . . So please your grace, my ancient;  
A man he is of honesty and trust."

This singularly malapropos compliment is the first announcement of Othello's blind faith in Iago, and should serve as the keynote of his credulity, an interesting moral and psychological hint.

But the tragic end is foreordained in our minds; our already complete knowledge of Iago preëmpts speculation; nothing is left in doubt but the physical instruments that he will employ in accomplishing his purpose. Hence in these opening words Othello tells us plainly and simply that he is fooled, and every time he uses the word “honest” afterwards he tells us the same thing. From this point interest is concentrated in the plot, not motives of the plot. That crabbed critic, Thomas Rymer, was more than half right:—

“Iago now can only *actum agere*, and vex the audience with a nauseous repetition.”

We watch the clever knavery of Iago as we watch the clever tricks of a conjurer. His mechanical deviltry is stimulating, exciting, but it arouses no deep emotions either against his own hideousness or in favor of his victim’s innocence. Indeed, this placidity of feeling, the absence of quick interplay of intense sympathy between actor and auditor, is perhaps the most striking fact of one’s experience with *Othello*.

The play now drops from a drama of character to a drama of intrigue. Says Professor Bradley:—

“The fact that Shakespeare can make a play succeed, does not show that the plan, abstractly considered, is a good plan.”

His suspicion of this fact, in relation to *Othello*, as well as his consciousness of danger to the dignity of the tragedy, leads him to warn us that—

“we must not call the play a tragedy of intrigue as distinguished from a tragedy of character. Iago’s plot is Iago’s character in action.”

This is evasive differentiation. Tragedy of the highest type presents character in evolution. A “character in action” is no more than one of Ben Jonson’s ‘humors’, and of such stuff great tragedy is not made. After the third scene, there is little or no development in the two leading motives; but the keynote of both motives, the word “honest”, goes on sounding indefinitely, like the clapper of a bell. What little dramatic sig

nificance it had in the beginning is lost by repetition; it arouses no curiosity; it suggests nothing to the imagination; it explains nothing that was not fully explained at the outset. It becomes a mere tag or label, affixed to the two leading characters. Every time Iago appears, he wears this tag, which plainly reads: 'I am a villainous hypocrite'; and every time Othello appears he wears the same tag, and it reads: 'I am Iago's fool'; just as in the old copper-plates a scroll issuing from the mouth of an important figure announces his name and character.

This is the method of modern caricature; each important figure in the cartoon bears a label, lest the identity of the personage be mistaken, and the force of the satire be lost. As an instrument of humor, ridicule and satire, this device is highly effective. But two things about it must be noted: so far as it is intended to give information, it appeals only to children and the dull-witted populace; so far as it is used to emphasize personal qualities, it always lowers the dignity of its subject, it being the established province of the comedy of caricature to trail nobility in the dust. Such a tag, or conspicuous sign-board cannot be intended to convey information and keep the mind of the hearer straight as to the characters, for this would be a gross affront to the intelligent hearer. Is it not possible, therefore, that Shakespeare was aiming at certain effects that lie more properly within the domain of comedy, induced thereto by a thrifty consideration for the receipts of the box-office? Such a dramatic contrivance as the tag "honest" is exactly the kind of simple satirical joke that pleases the gods of pit and gallery; and a cleverly labelled and satirized character is sure to attract wide popular interest.

To an open mind, free from prepossessions of tradition and assumption, it is obvious enough that there are many strong comedy elements in this play. For instance, the chief element of the plot, the idea of the hoodwinked and jealous husband, is not a highly heroic motive out of which we should expect a profound tragedy to spring, but it is the stock material of comedy, and became in the eighteenth century the common, almost the constant comic motive. Again, the character of Iago is filled with comic possibilities; it is almost entirely humorous,

the humor being of the grim, sardonic variety, and commands many excellent situations for comic action. Indeed, Iago is the full consummation of the old Vice, the refined and fully developed mischief-maker of the type of Diccon the Bedlam, in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. One can easily imagine an actor in this part establishing a confidential intimacy of by-play with the audience through sly asides of gesture and facial expression, with Mephistophelian grins and leers, tongue in cheek, fingers at nose, eyes rolled to heaven after a specially choice falsehood, and other similar tricks of the comedian. Indeed, so much is there of this comic element, we are fairly justified in believing that the character of Iago was at first, and perhaps frequently, presented as a comic character. Certainly it must be admitted that there is a strong inherent possibility of such a conception.

This somewhat adventurous suggestion is not entirely without historic warrant. Halliwell-Phillipps mentions a “curious tradition” to the effect that the part of Iago was “originally undertaken by a popular comedian”, and that Shakespeare “adapted some of the speeches to the peculiar talents of the actor”. In Gildon's *Reflections*, one possible source of the tradition, it is stated that—

“Shakespeare put several words and expressions into his part, perhaps not so agreeable to his character, to make the audience laugh.”

Incidental but more positive evidence is contained in Rymer's famous critique:—

“There is in this play some burlesque, some humor and ramble of comical wit, some show and mimicry to divert the spectators.”

This must refer to the part of Iago, and seems to indicate pretty clearly the conception of the part prevailing at about 1693, founded quite likely on already established tradition. But without giving undue weight to this evidence, and considering only the peculiar qualities of the play itself, we are reasonably constrained to give to *Othello* a position somewhere between lofty tragedy and pure comedy, a name for which we might have to seek, perhaps, in Polonius's fantastic catalogue.

Such disparagement of the dignity and rank of this play is justified by the application of a rigid test with regard to the common laws of nature and human experience. By almost universal judgment, avowed or implicit, there is something inherently irreconcilable in the dominant features of *Othello*, something sharply provocative of resentment and protest on the part of our common humanity; and, in the case of no other play, not even the enigmatical *Hamlet*, has such energetic critical effort been expended in the attempt to rationalize the action and bring it into the realm of probable or possible human experience. "The subtlest and strangest work of Shakespeare", says Swinburne. In spite of this assurance, one is inclined, while admitting the strangeness, to harbor a lurking distrust of the subtlety. It is Shakespeare's transcendent merit to be true to nature. Is this play the truth of nature emphatically expressed, or is it a cleverly contrived libel on nature, and thus a conspicuous exception among his plays? On the side of its moral content, the play baffles analysis, assails the reason, flouts common-sense. The fact that there is no rational explanation of Iago's diablerie and Othello's credulity is fair warrant for disbelieving both. Such characters transcend human experience, as we know it; they are essentially monsters, vast repudiations rather than exemplifications of human nature; pathological exhibits of perverted nature, of the insanity of jealousy and the insanity of malignity. Marvellous creations they are, but monstrous creations, Frankensteins of a high order that produce shuddering and horror.

Of the four great tragedies *Othello* is unquestionably the least satisfactory as regards those demands and expectations which great tragedy is supposed to awaken. It neither elevates nor consoles, in accordance with Aristotle's requirement. It leaves the mind with a sickening sense of human degradation; the quickening impulses to lofty idealism are absent; the atmosphere of the play is heavy with impurities, an atmosphere that Prince Hamlet could not possibly have breathed,—

“ . . . an unweeded garden,  
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely.”



Nothing sweet and wholesome can live here. Every character but one is tainted, and even the innocent Desdemona falls a victim to the poisonous air she is compelled to breathe. Our interest in such characters is at most only intellectual; try as we may to be generously sympathetic, it is the action, not the passion, that holds our interest.

The culmination of the tragedy produces no equipoise of feeling, no calm resignation to cosmic justice, no recognition of a Providence working in mysterious ways toward good; but it produces rebellion, disgust, a flaming conviction that the universe itself should be moved to avenge Desdemona's death. The conclusion of *Lear* is terrible, but not intolerable; the conclusion of *Othello* is unmitigatedly horrible. The grand tragic movement of *Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* is controlled by a deep current of necessity, fate imposed by the Infinite, like the underlying fatalism of Greek tragedy, only more profound and more true to human life and destiny. In these plays the tragic end is justified; the mind of the hearer is conciliated and rests satisfied; the necessity for the end has been demonstrated. In *Othello* there is no such necessary conclusion, and therefore no such reconciled conviction is experienced. The progress of the action is full of irreconcilable contradictions of the natural law of human experience; the logic that leads to Desdemona's death is the logic of demons.

It would be fatuous to question the greatness of *Othello* as a work of dramatic art, considered with regard to its technique. If it is less abundantly supplied with some of the finer poetic aspects that greet us so familiarly in the other tragedies—golden riches of thought, aspiring idealism, profound soul revelations, winsome delicacies of expression, astonishing impulses of imagination—it may be because Shakespeare intended primarily to make the play, what it veritably is, a perfect acting play. Interpretative criticism, like a *post hoc* Providence, has been imperitously prolific in providing Shakespeare with lofty intentions. We moralize his mind too confidently, exalt the poet and philosopher, rapt with gazing at man's weak mortality, above the thrifty dramatist diligently watchful for coigns of economic vantage. We are apt to lose sight of the man of business behind

the "subtle-souled psychologist". Stopford Brooke would have us believe that while writing *Othello* Shakespeare was struggling to "purge his spirit of the black choler which possessed it", persuaded to this purgation by realizing "how dark, grim and inexplicable is the cruel irony of life". On the contrary, when he was sharpening his quill to begin *Othello*, it is more rational to assume that his soul, instead of being dark with tempest, was in a state of warm self-complacency, induced by the discovery of material in old Cinthio's novel so admirably suited to the making of a sensational stage success.

"From all the tragedies on our English stage", wrote Rymer in 1693, "*Othello* is said to bear the bell away." This was testimony to the popularity of the play from an unwilling witness, and for more than two hundred years *Othello* has continued with a fair degree of uniformity to bear the bell away as a popular stage presentation. Its transcendent merits as an acting play are indisputable; its concentrated, direct, swift action, its continuous chain of exciting events, its common and easily comprehended passion, are elements that insure popular success. Says William Winter:—

"Viewed exclusively as a dramatic fabric, that is to say, with reference to the element of action, and that only, *Othello* is not only the best of Shakespeare's plays, but the best play in the English language."

In other words, its supreme excellences are dramaturgic, rather than profoundly poetic; its triumphant feature is a masterly technique; its appeal is scenic, objective, intellectual. It is not a play that "reaches through the mind to pluck the heart". With *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Lear*, by reason of these limitations, *Othello* cannot claim fellowship.

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