The Modern Relevance of a Master's Villains
Shakespeare explored some of the most powerful and real antagonist-protagonist relationships, and his portrayals have given us great insight into human nature. Many men have left villains behind as the dregs of society, but Shakespeare shied not away from the Shylocks and Iagos. Rather than just good or bad, Shakespeare painted his characters with subtle shades of emotion, hues of past oppressions and wrongs, and brushed them with desire and human folly. In other words, Shakespeare made them real. As the Editorial Board of *Shakespeare Today*, we have hand-selected each submission and thoroughly reviewed it for its quality of writing and analysis. From Caliban and Shylock to the infamous Iago, we present to you works on some of Shakespeare’s finest villains explored by some of English 314’s finest writers. Even if you feel intimidated by Shakespeare we hope you will be able to better understand his works through the analysis of his villains through the eyes of people just like you.

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What makes a villain? When introduced in films, the antagonist is often given tell-tale, gloomy music and shadowed lighting. They scowl and sneer and laugh in derision, and we know they are the opposition. In William Shakespeare’s plays, the villains often introduce themselves as such, stating their macabre intentions or hateful jealousies. From a psychological point of view, their thoughts are simple enough to understand. Occasionally, however, The Bard introduced characters so complex they could be analyzed in many different ways. In *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare, it may not be very hard to guess who the antagonist is, but the reason for his role as villain becomes muddled by distracting, humorous dialogue, strong lead protagonists, and conflicting statements about religion and social status. Shylock is one of the most complex villains in all of Shakespeare’s plays, even to the point of confusion among the best scholars (Smith). This is because Shylock takes on some of the most intricate human characteristics, and he represents those negative traits that make a villain more than just a plot point. Looking into his psyche is a pleasure for those who prefer the psychoanalytic lens, especially because that particular method of analysis “attempts to explain the hows and whys of human nature” (Bressler 124). By taking a close look at Shylock’s character through this lens, his motives can be broken into three more or less simple categories every person identifies with: discrimination, revenge, and greed.

To first understand why discrimination makes Shylock a villain rather than a victim, it is necessary to examine the discrimination brought against him. Shylock is a Jew. Other characters, protagonists even, jab at his religion and paint a negative picture about him through their snide remarks. Antonio, often referred to as the kindest of souls, refers to him as a devil, a dog, and an outcast (Shakespeare 1.3). When Shylock agrees to give Bassanio a loan, Antonio remarks that “The Hebrew will turn Christian: he grows kind” (1.3). This would imply that because Shylock is a Jew, he is not ordinarily a kind person. Taking on that kind of abuse over an entire lifetime would be enough to make anyone bitter, and Shylock makes no secret about the negative effect it has on his character. Another attack comes when Shylock’s servant debates within himself whether or not to leave his master—not because Shylock is an unkind man, but because he is a Jew and might taint the servant’s reputation (2.2). The servant even admits “Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnal” (2.2). And if the servant’s view of Shylock is not traitorous enough, Shylock’s own daughter leaves him to elope with her love because she does not wish to be associated with the Jewish religion:

Alack, what, I shall end this strife, heinous sin is it in me To be ashamed to be my father’s child!
But though I am a daughter to his blood, 
I am not to his manners. O Lorenzo, 
If thou keep promise, I shall end this strife. 
Become a Christian and thy loving wife. (2.3)

Notice in that quote she speaks of his blood and the fact that she is ashamed to be his daughter. In this case, manners refer to his religious views and actions based on them, rather than any cruel actions from her father (Sparknotes Editors). There is no evidence that Shylock is anything but a normal father for the time, and no evidence that he has wronged his daughter in any way other than who he was at birth (Sparknotes Editors).

These examples alone would make Shylock an object of pity and not a villain. However, it is Shylock’s return of discrimination, even in response to the negative social status he endures, that makes him just as bad or worse. Shylock says of Antonio, “I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3). In that same scene, he goes on to say, “O father Abram, what these Christians are, / Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect / The thoughts of others!” (1.3). Just as he has been accused of being less of a human for who he was at birth, Shylock believes that people are inherently bad based on their beliefs or what parents they were born to. He refers to the Christians almost as mindless partiers when he warns his daughter not to look out into the streets when Christians are passing and making merry (2.5). He openly mocks the Christians in the trial scene when he equates his taking of Antonio’s heart with the slaves that Christians keep (4.1). Psychologically, Shylock has turned a slight against his character into an unhealthy hate that far outweighs the patronizing, if still hurtful, behavior brought against him. This sheds light on the darker side of his nature, and lets the reader see the villainous turn discrimination can take.

Shylock is further made into an unsavory character by his greed. Readers are first introduced to this part of his character when we discover that his motives for revenge are based on someone taking profit from him (1.3). Antonio frequently gives out loans without interest, which steps on Shylock’s business which is based on loans with high interest rates (1.3). If Antonio is giving out interest-free loans, then business is taken from Shylock, who relies on the interest to make his living. He is so obsessed with money that after a few lost customers he develops a hate for Antonio that carries so far he is willing to actually act on his ridiculous stipulation of a pound of flesh for an unpaid loan that he gave to Antonio. If that did not illuminate the greedier aspects of his character, then his reaction to his daughter’s elopement certainly does. Shylock is upset that he has lost a daughter, but, amazingly, he is equally (or perhaps even more) upset about the loss of jewels Jessica took with her:

‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter! 
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! 
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter! 
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, 
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter! 
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones, 
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;

Psychologically, Shylock has turned a slight against his character into an unhealthy hate that far outweighs the patronizing, if still hurtful, behavior brought against him.”
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.‘ (2.8)

Shylock even remarks later on: “I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! / would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!” (3.2). Although Shylock might love his daughter, it becomes clear from his reaction about her elopement that he values his money more. As complex as Shylock’s character might be because of his role as a victim in social standings, one cannot help but conjure the image of a villain furtively counting his gold coins alone in a dark room. His greed could be attributed to his lack of social standing. He feels that without his money and property, he is worth nothing. To lose his daughter (a slight to his pride based on his ability to control his own offspring) and then a significant portion of his money, Shylock becomes more determined than ever to make Antonio pay him, whether with money or the pound of flesh. Greed alone is an undesirable trait, but Shylock is shown to be a true villain when he allows the greed to take him so far as to harm another human being.

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Finally, and most importantly, Shylock is recognized as a villain because of his inability to forgive. The reader is first introduced to Shylock’s hatred of Antonio when he says, “If I can catch him once upon the hip, I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (1.3). He does not explicitly admit that he is a bad person, and in fact it can be noted that Shylock is a unique Shakespearean character because he genuinely believes it is his right to exact revenge on Antonio, but Shylock does openly tell the audience that he plans on getting even with the wealthy and successful merchant of Venice. His thirst for revenge only gets worse, especially when he begins to lose tangible things. When asked why he would want a pound of flesh from Antonio and why it was so important to him, Shylock responds, “To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge” (3.1). While some of the need for revenge stems from his annoyance at Antonio’s success and meddling in Shylock’s trade in loans, most of it probably originates from the social abuse he suffered in his life, and his desire to right those wrongs in some way. He reveals the inner core of his hatred during his most famous speech about his religion and the discrimination against him. About Jews, Shylock challenges:

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? (3.1)

In other words, Shylock believes he is entitled to right the wrongs against him through whatever means necessary. In his eyes, it is justice. It is that mentality that makes him so bad; it is the belief that revenge and justice are one and the same, and that he has the right to take a life if it means the redemption of his pride:

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (Shakespeare, 3.1)

The proverbial nail in the coffin that proves once and for all that Shylock has given all of himself to the decay of revenge, is when his daughter testifies this of him:

I have heard him swear…
That he would rather have
Antonio's flesh
Than twenty times the value of the sum
That he did owe him (3.2).

His daughter has left him, his money is dwindling, and he has no social status to speak of. Shylock moves past greed when he refuses monetary compensation, and instead insists on taking Antonio's heart. He is out for revenge because he believes he deserves it, and it is then that the audience is given a solid impression that Shylock truly is the antagonist, and no matter what the cause for his twisted actions, it cannot be refuted that Shylock was created to be a villain.

There are still those who would argue that Shylock is a victim. In the end he loses his servant, his daughter, a cherished ring, his estates, and even his religion. Some might say that he was driven to his acts by the discrimination against him, and that the protagonists, the unfeeling Christians, deserved at least a lesson in humility. While all that may be true, the simple fact of the matter is that Shakespeare created Shylock to be the villain, and there were specific characteristics that author found to be sins of character. Like a master craftsman, he sculpted Shylock with discrimination, greed, and revenge to form a perfect, yet complex villain. Shylock is a man who would rather retaliate than turn the other cheek, who would kill and even give up his own daughter for money, and he is a man who would have his revenge at any cost. The motives behind his actions are intertwined into the sad knot that makes up the cortex of his psyche, but, no matter what his past, it is Shylock's actions that make him a villain. Heroes overcome their challenges, and villains, like Shylock, allow them to degrade their character.

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Image(s):
One of the most prominent themes of Shakespeare’s play, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, is cowardice. This theme has often been examined in terms of how it is reflected by Prince Hamlet, but it is important to also look at the cowardice of the villain in this play, Claudius, the king. The theme of cowardice is built up through the use of tension between Claudius and his heir.

Claudius clearly fears the young prince. Hamlet may be Claudius’s heir, but he is also the son of the man Claudius murdered to become king. If not for the hasty wedding, it is possible that Hamlet would have actually taken the throne instead of Claudius. This possibility is voiced by Hamlet. He calls Claudius, “He that hath kill’d my king and whored my mother, / Popp’d in between the election and my hopes” (5.2.69-70). The prince is a danger to his throne from the very beginning. Claudius’s fear of Hamlet is what motivates his attempts to get into his heir’s good graces. In Act I, Scene II, Claudius petitions Hamlet to cease mourning and to think of him as a father and twice refers to him as “my son.” However, it later becomes very clear that this was merely an attempt to secure his throne. When he suspects that Hamlet is a threat, he turns to Gertrude and speaks of him as “your son” (4.1.3).

It is obvious how great a danger to his crown Claudius believes Hamlet is based on when he begins to treat the prince as dangerous, and the tension between the king and the prince begins to build. It is not danger to others that Claudius is concerned with, but danger to his ambition or to himself. The most direct action Claudius takes as a result of the tension between himself and Hamlet is the prince’s exile and intended execution in England, so it is important to explore when this plan is first established. It is impossible to know at what point the letter demanding Hamlet’s execution was written, but we can look at when the first aspect of the plan is set in place. The idea of sending Hamlet to England begins, not after the murder of Polonius, an act which would give any man reason to be afraid, but at the moment that Claudius does not think Hamlet is mad with love. After watching Hamlet’s confrontation with Ophelia, Claudius states:

> Love! his affections do not that way tend;
> Nor what he spake, though it lack'd form a little,
> Was not like madness. There's something in his soul, O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
> And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose will be some danger: which for to prevent,
> I have in quick determination Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England, (3.1.141-148)

A closer look at what was said here will help reveal what the danger is. He has just said that Hamlet’s speech did not seem to be madness, and he has not made any kind of threat or taken violent action. The only danger that Hamlet could present, then, is a threat to the stability of Claudius’ rule. While
Claudius might not think Hamlet is mad here, Polonius disagrees, stating “but yet do I believe / The origin and commencement of his grief/ Sprung from neglected love.” (155-157). Having his heir appear mad would certainly be a destabilizing force to the throne, but the tricky metaphor used by Claudius is key to understanding his sudden burst of cowardice. The first piece of the metaphor is “something in [Hamlet’s] soul” (3.1.141). The king does not know what the something is, but he says that on this something Hamlet’s melancholy “sits on brood” (141), meaning that it sits on it like a bird would sit on an egg. However, the king doubts that this mysterious egg will hatch, and that the bird will then move on. The disclose, or revelation, of whatever it is that Hamlet’s melancholy is based on is the danger. Claudius is afraid of whatever it is that Hamlet is hiding through his act of madness.

The tension is built and Claudius’s cowardice is made clear when we see his reaction to Hamlet after the play within the play. Speaking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Hamlet he says, “I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range” (3.3.1-2). Once again, Hamlet has taken no direct action, and has done little but act mad. However, the threat is now much greater than just a mad heir. The king now knows that Hamlet knows of his treachery, or at least that Hamlet suspects it. The need to get rid of his nephew is now much greater, both because of the potential danger to himself if Hamlet desires revenge for his father’s murder and the guilt caused by Hamlet reminding him of his crime by showing this particular play.

The king clearly does feel guilt. His guilt torments him at several points in the play. However, it becomes clear that although he feels terrible about his crime, he is more concerned with maintaining its secrecy than he is with absolution. This is not a proper guilt but rather a fear of God. This is most obvious in his internal dialogue in Act III, Scene III, where he attempts to pray for forgiveness, but states, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below”(100). Knowing he is not to be forgiven of his guilt he instead takes the more cowardly route by seeking to remove the force reminding him of it.

However, Claudius not only fears the punishment of God, but the distaste of man. He knows Hamlet is popular with the people. Even at the peak of the tension between himself and Hamlet, when Polonius has been killed and Claudius realizes that the blade was meant for him, Claudius stops himself from taking direct action, saying, “Yet must we not put the strong law on him: / He’s loved of the distracted multitude” (4.3.4). Even as Hamlet’s cowardice has begun to fade, Claudius’s fear takes on new strength. So, in his cowardly way, the king sends Hamlet to his death, but puts just as high a priority on keeping face. With the letter already written, sealing Hamlet’s fate, he still calls himself Hamlet’s “loving father” (4.3.43).

His fear of the people and refusal to reveal himself as a murderer, leads to his most ironic and cowardly act: his failure to save his wife. He does tell her not to drink from the poisoned cup intended for Hamlet, but is unwilling to admit his treachery. Even after she had dies, his concern is primarily for himself. When Hamlet strikes him with the poisoned sword, he cries to those assembled for help, “Oh, yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt” (5.2.324). He knows the blade is poisoned and that he is dying, making his last words a terrible understatement, but even in his final moments he chooses to act innocent of any involvement. In the end, it is the king’s cowardice, his fear of Hamlet and the people, which results in so much death, including the loss of his
wife, one of the reasons for his original murder.

This powerful irony once again clarifies the overall theme of cowardice. If it were not for Claudius’ three-part cowardice: his fear of his nephew, his people, and his God; Claudius could have saved the life of his queen. In the end, Hamlet’s cowardice leaves him entirely, but Claudius finds more and more to be afraid of. Through these developments we see that to set cowardice aside is to be heroic, but to embrace it is to be a villain. ✨

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James Morris as King Claudius. Taken from http://dwighttheconnoisseur.blogspot.com/2010/03/met-hd-hamlet-strips-down-to-bare.html.

“Through these developments we see that to set your cowardice aside is to be heroic, but to embrace it is to be a villain.”
Shakespeare’s *Othello* is an engaging story of deceit and betrayal. As is typical of a Shakespeare tragedy, many of the characters lead tumultuously interwoven lives and eventually face heartbreak at their lives’ sudden end. What is the driving force behind the death and misery? There is a man behind the curtain who pulls the strings in this story. They call him Iago. He is one of the most ominous characters in literature. Iago leads a life of contradiction. He is foul speaking, yet smooth-talking. He is prone to hold grudges, yet he is widely trusted and wields influence. Iago is truly an expert manipulator. In this tragic tale, Shakespeare uses dramatic irony, imagery, and symbols to portray this memorable character.

Throughout the story, Iago is often referred to as being honest, brave, and just. Most of the other characters know nothing of his dastardly intents, while there are many instances where the audience is given greater insight into what really lurks in Iago’s heart. Shakespeare uses this dramatic irony to fuel the audience’s dislike for Iago. However, Brabantio is not fooled. He sets the stage early on with his blunt assessment, “Thou art a villain” (*Othello*. 1.1). Here the audience is given an early clue of what to expect from Iago; the subsequent use of the terms honest or brave Iago work in contrast to that statement. This creates tension within the story as we wonder if Iago’s lies will ever catch up to him, and when he will be revealed as the dishonest creature that he is.

As a master manipulator, Iago often allows his jealousies to get the best of him. His life is fueled by an undying desire to seek revenge on others, yet he relies on his superior smooth-talking capabilities in order to preserve his influence over them throughout the story. Iago often treats the other characters as marionette-like figures to fulfill and satisfy his evil ambitions. He alludes to his ability to control others when in conversation with Roderigo as he says, “’Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to which our wills are gardeners; . . . to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry” (*Oth* 1.3). This imagery of a garden paints a picture to describe Iago’s role throughout the story. Just as a farmer nurtures and controls the growth of a plant, Iago nourishes his relationships in order to keep himself in a favorable position with others, allowing him to maintain his influence and control. Whether it’s persuading Roderigo to continue to seek after Desdemona, or convincing Emilia to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief, Iago is constantly baiting others to unknowingly do his dirty work. Each character represents a different row in Iago’s garden, a place where he is always at work in hopes of reaping the results of his efforts.

Iago often compares the other characters in the story to animals in a symbolic way. These symbols usually reveal Iago’s true feelings about the person whom he is talking about. In the first scene, Iago refers to Othello as both “an old black ram” and a “Barbary horse” (*Oth*. 1.1). These two references
are symbolic not only because they highlight that Othello is, in fact, black; but, he is also linking him to animals that are known to be stubborn. This serves to underline the notion that Othello exhibits his own streak of stubbornness which Iago obviously finds irritating. In another instance, Iago persuades Cassio to have another drink in hopes that he will become “full of quarrel and offense as my young mistress’ dog” (Oth. 2.3). To compare Cassio to a dog shows that Iago is trying to unleash a playful, canine-like energy from Cassio in hopes that it leads to behavior that becomes destructive. These symbols give the audience the idea that those around him are like animals in the fact that they are weak-minded. By labeling them as such, he is able to advance the notion that he can manipulate their actions to his benefit.

As he attempts to lay the groundwork for his revenge, Iago demonstrates that he is an expert at setting traps for the other characters to stumble into. At one point, he refers to himself as being spider-like with his manipulative skills, “with as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” (Oth. 2.1). Here, a spider’s web is used as a symbol that shows the planning and forethought given to Iago’s actions. Once the plan was made, Iago hoped to sit back with patience, and wait for Cassio to stumble into the trap the way a spider waits to attack a fly until after it becomes entangled by the web.

Events generally proceed according to Iago’s script for much of the story; however, his wife, Emilia, eventually pieces together an understanding of the situation, foils his plans at the last moment, and begins to expose his heartless deeds. Feeling as though he has no other option, Iago stabs her. In her dying moments, Emilia calls herself a swan, “Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan, and die in music” (Oth. 5.2). This is one of the strongest symbols used in the play and it shows the darkest shade of Iago’s character. A swan is symbolic of one who is loyal and loving. The fact that Iago would kill this symbol of a true and pure love only cements the storied status of Iago’s villainy.

In Othello, Iago is portrayed as a smart, cerebral character. Despite the fact that all of his evil expectations are not met, Iago must still be considered a villain extraordinaire. His efforts to cultivate the other characters throughout the story as they grow to blindly do his bidding must surely be admired by modern-day farmers and villains alike. Iago’s ability to pull the strings and control the actions of others to advance his own agenda is astonishing. His manipulative ways drive the story and are the cause for the unfortunate demise of most of the other characters. Obviously, Shakespeare is legendary for creating complex, memorable characters. In this story, his use of dramatic irony, images, and symbols all work together to show the deeply sinister side of this intriguing and entertaining villain, Iago. ✿

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Divinity of Hell: The Guise of Iago
By Eric McClean

Othello, The Moor of Venice, which is arguably Shakespeare’s most tragic play, contains one of the most enigmatic and devilish characters ever created in the modern English tongue. In the opening scene, Iago delivers a self-declaration to his servant and the reader as to his role in the story that will soon unfold. In chilling words that echo throughout the rest of Othello’s downward spiral into the depths of what humans can do to one another, Iago plainly declares, “I am not what I am” (1.1.65). The declaration that Iago is not what he seems echoes and contradicts the biblical declaration by the God of the Old Testament, the great I AM. Through the use of ironic diction and imagery, Iago establishes himself through his own words and the words of others as a supernatural representation of the devil, the antithesis to God.

Many of Iago’s self-references and monologues stand in direct opposition to the Biblical idea of God and His ideals. Iago is unmoved by the virtue of being good and declares this emphatically throughout the play. He mocks the ideas of virtue and, in the same token, connotes that he favors the exact opposite: immorality, vice, and evil. He says:

Virtue? A fig! ‘Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners…If the beam of our lives had not one scale of reason to pose 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 or unbitted lusts; whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion. (1.3.321-34)

Looking closely at the choice of words here further demonstrates how he is directly contrasting himself to God. The use of the word garden alludes to the Garden of Eden where man and woman were created in perfect harmony. He also includes the word natures, implying a double meaning to suit his double-mindedness. On the one hand, nature symbolizes purity, cleanliness, and freshness. On the other hand, as Iago follows his statement by referring to carnality and lust, it refers to the nature of humans to err and follow after their own desires. In this context it is not at all ambiguous as to what Iago is saying, but the diction does imply a hypocritical and underhanded subtlety on the part of Iago. His choice of words carries multiple implications and furthers his own image as a devilish figure. In his own words, virtue isn’t worth a fig, the leaves of which Adam and Eve covered themselves with after they sinned in
the Garden. The doublespeak and guile with which Iago speaks is much like the serpent who tricked mankind’s first parents.

Iago’s representation as a devil is a result of his hatred for Othello and carries on through every word and action that he carries out. Cassio, one of Othello’s trusted advisors, has returned from the wars and goes out for a night of drinking and celebration. Cassio knows that if he drinks too much he will regret it. Iago urges him to continue drinking and Cassio exclaims to Iago, after falling into trouble, “O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devi!l” (2.3.278-80). The diction in this instance is an indirect reference to Iago, the devil who has convinced Cassio to continue drinking, as well as a direct reference to the alcohol. Cassio uses these words unknowingly, thus bringing a sense of dramatic irony to the stage. First, Cassio refers to wine as an invisible spirit. The denotation of spirit is a “supernatural, incorporeal being, especially one…having a particular character” (“spirit”). Of course, this particular character is one of evilness as expressed by Cassio’s own words to call this spirit the devil. The ambiguity and irony come from the connotation that Iago is a supernatural spirit that resembles the devil and Cassio has unwittingly referred to him as such.

Taking a moment to step aside from his scheming and plotting, Iago begins a soliloquy that is rich with the motif of the devil. He says:

How am I, then, a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now. (2.3.350-53)

It seems from his words that he may be feeling sorry for himself, but as he continues to talk it becomes clear that he is simply orchestrating the downfall of those around him. The phrase “divinity of hell” poses some interesting connotations. Divinity means “a divine being” or “God” (“divinity”) and hell means “the power of evil” (“hell”). This creates a paradoxical image, one of a God or divine being that is in control of the power of evil and creates a tension between righteousness on one side and evil on the other. This representation of Iago being a supernatural devil is enforced by the idea of a divine being (the supernatural) and hell (the devil). He goes one step further in another self-reference when he says that he is masking his black sins with heavenly shows. Again, this contrasting nature of his language conjures the image of a devil, or in this case Iago, committing his evil acts under the guise of being a good person.

This guise is kept up to the point of Othello making a pact with Iago that implies the occult. Othello, bowing before Iago, says, “Now, by yond marble heaven, / In due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words” (3.3.462-64). The irony is that Othello is kneeling before Iago as he states this, inadvertently making a pact or vow with the devil. Othello’s positive language and word choice, such as heaven and sacred, is contrasted with Iago’s response. He says:

Witness here that 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. (3.3.486-71)

Execution, remorse, and bloody set the dark backdrop for the words of Othello’s which shine brightly. This image and continued action by Iago cement him as a devil, even though the blood oath is with another man who is seemingly good. This “heavenly show” is a sly attempt to bring Othello in closer by a vow but the words indicate something much more sinister, even more than Iago representing the devil.

In Iago’s false and cloven-footed words to Othello, he states plainly that “Men should be what they seem; / Or those that be not, would they might seem / none!” (3.3.125-27). This usage of language is ironic considering what Iago said in the opening scenes of the play, that he is not what he seems. This choice of words helps to frame the play and encourage the enigmatic and devilish nature of Iago as he continues on his path to destroy Othello. The organic unity that is created by the contrast of these two statements only furthers the fact that Iago is an enigma and set purely on being evil. The use of ironic diction and imagery in Othello anchor the idea and portrayal of Iago as a supernatural devil.


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