

“Iago is cynicism incarnate. He stands for a ‘devil world’; he is limited, formless, negative with nothing to merit.” – Maud Bodkin.

To what extent do you agree with Bodkin’s view of Iago?

– Sophie YM

COMMENTS: REQUIRES A BROADER RANGE OF CRITIC SOURCES.

It has been implied that Iago collectively represents the destructive, xenophobic views of Elizabethan society. Iago hates the Moor, and provides racial slurs such as ‘black ram’ and rarely utters the name of Othello in favour of referring to him as ‘the Moor’; however these views do not reflect the same society in which Iago resides – his fellow Venetians, such as the Duke and Desdemona, or arguably Brabantio prior to Iago’s interference (as Othello describes how ‘[Desdemona’s] father loved me, oft invited me’) suggests Iago’s views are simply a hyperbolic misrepresentation of views in his society, or ‘cynicism incarnate’. Tacitly, this could be Shakespeare’s identification of the destructive views of Elizabethan society given Iago’s attitude is juxtaposed with those of his fellow Venetians.

Nevertheless, this chaotic, ‘negative’ energy provides Iago with a great power – the ability to amalgamate and manipulate the worst fears of the other characters, such as Othello’s insecurities about race and his wife’s fidelity. However, does this power to change the course of events truly lie with Iago, or is he simply taking credit for the power which lies within the other characters?

Iago acts as the ‘orchestrator’ or ‘puppet-master’ of various scenes throughout the play, ensnaring different characters in his trap in order to work his way towards his biggest target, Othello. In Act 2, Scene 3, Iago begins to manipulate Michael Cassio, by supporting him as a seemingly loyal friend. Following Cassio’s lament about his loss of reputation, Iago advises: ‘Reputation is an ideal and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving.’ A subtle yet dark irony is presented here in that Iago is describing his own menace whilst criticising Cassio, all under the guise of support. A ‘most false imposition’ denotes how the villain’s own reputation as ‘honest Iago’ could not be further from the truth, with the noun ‘imposition’ implying it was forced upon him, and perhaps not gleefully accepted. His addition ‘oft got without merit’ could be an allusion to the creation of Iago’s incorrect pretence of honesty, but it more harrowingly echoes Iago’s first grievance with Cassio, in Act 1, Scene 1, about how ‘preferment goes by letter and affection, And not by old gradation’. In both incidences he refers to an undeserved reputation, but in Act 2, Scene 3 he has construed his negativity as ‘advice [that] is free...and honest’.

Cassio innocently follows Iago’s advice in this scene to seek out Desdemona to try and restore his ‘reputation’ but Iago’s subtle negativity will infiltrate again. In Act 3, Scene 3, we witness Cassio and Desdemona conversing whilst Iago and Othello enter from further away. Upon noticing them, Cassio takes his leave, for he is embarrassed by his previous actions and cannot yet face Othello – a reasonable excuse. Yet, before Othello has a chance to intervene or confront either Desdemona or Cassio, Iago interjects with the exclamation: ‘Ha! I like not that.’ Well aware of Cassio’s innocence and Desdemona’s ‘honest suit’, Iago uses Othello’s insecurity about Desdemona’s fidelity and to initiate a doubt in Othello’s mind before Desdemona has a chance to stop it. Traub notices this also, given that ‘Iago is successful in manipulating Othello because he takes advantage of real, male, social concerns.’ This advantage he takes is the manipulation of positivity into negativity, and taking the male priorities of ‘reputation’ or one’s wife’s honesty and making them hyperbolic to destroy the respective characters.

The nature of Iago’s manipulations are always tacit, or ‘formless’, which could be attributed to his puppet’s naïveté or his own mastery. Again in Act 2, Scene 3, Iago utilised his supposed honesty to

subtly manipulate Othello. When Othello has been roused from his bed chamber, he is angered and makes rash decisions, which is a contrast to the calm, reasonable Othello we saw addressing the Senate in Act 1. Even Othello's language alters: 'My blood begins my safer guides to rule, And passion, having my best judgment collid', with a semantic field of red, rage and passion enforcing a stereotype of a 'lascivious Moor'. When Othello demands to know about the disturbance, he eventually calls on Iago, who appears reluctant to answer: 'I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth Than it should do offence to Michael Cassio; Yet, I persuade myself, to speak the truth'. An audience would recognise this façade of reluctance as Iago is secretly eager to gloat about the predicament he has placed Cassio in through his own orchestrations. The analogy of 'have this tongue cut from [his] mouth' is almost sycophantic in nature, reinforcing Cassio's preconception of Iago's loyalty to him and Othello. Iago is leading Othello 'by th' nose' to get Othello to come to his own conclusion about Cassio's inadequacy, instead of Iago directing him. Here we see the ultimate incidence of Iago's 'formless' power – Iago does not directly intervene, but allows Othello to see his view of thinking almost independently. This detached, emotionless manipulation is typical of a Machiavellian villain, two-faced but intelligent enough not to jeopardise his stature. Iago's feigned honesty seems to permeate 'many acts of cruelty which evidently do not spring chiefly from ill-will, and which therefore puzzle and sometimes horrify us most.' (A.C. Bradley) This is particularly pertinent in Act 2, Scene 3, where Iago speaking the truth would have been seen by Othello as honourable, and possibly expected of him by Cassio. The juxtaposition between the audience's understanding of Iago's directions and the character's understanding is what 'horrif[ies] us most'.

On the contrary, Iago's masterful power could also be seen as very limited. There are several moments where Iago's apparent control could be interpreted as a mere illusion of power, where he is in fact taking credit for the power of other characters. The most obvious representation of this is Iago's cruel manipulation over Roderigo, who is paying Iago bountiful sums of money for Iago to 'set him up' with Desdemona. An Elizabethan audience, with strong, Catholic views against divorce and a society which does little to purvey the rights of women, would have identified Roderigo's situation as fruitless: Desdemona is married, and in the eyes of God and society, would not be permitted to leave his side unless at the death or discretion of her husband. Hence, Roderigo is a character that could incite pathos or comedy, however neither view undermines the fact that Iago is using Roderigo's almost pathetic power of desperation and determination to his own means. Iago admits: 'Thus do I ever make my fool my purse', with the repeated pronouns 'my' objectifying Roderigo. Again, one could refer to Act 2, Scene 3 and Iago's feigned reluctance at incriminating Cassio, as another of Iago's uses of someone else's power. Iago is aware that upon coming to the conclusion of Cassio's incompetence, Othello would make him 'no more an officer of [his]', yet Iago would never be able to unseat Cassio by himself. The power he uses here is not his own but Othello's: Othello's rage and military status is shown at full force in this scene. Therefore, with the evidence of Act 2, Scene 3 and Roderigo, one could imply that Iago is a mere catalyst. If the true power to alter the events of the play lies with other characters, one could speculate that events would unfold as they have, albeit much slower, without Iago's intervention. When Iago manipulates Othello with the small line of 'Ha! I like not that', Othello immediately begins jumping to conclusions; his first line following the conversation with his wife is 'excellent wretch', a negative adjective 'wretch' had never been used by Othello to depict his wife before. This quick revelation of Othello's self-doubt implies it was already there. Given the play begins in media res, with the audience unaware of prior events to the play, one could easily speculate this.

Thus, Iago may indeed have 'nothing to merit' as he belies the fact that none of his supposed power is his own. Yes, his orchestration of events is masterful, including the Machiavellian way in which his interventions are tacit and formless; but these interpretations do not supersede the fact that, alone, Iago has nothing. Without the other characters, Iago has no independent power to achieve his desire lieutenant position nor take down the 'valiant Othello' (who has accumulated military achievements

that dwarf Iago) and nor does Iago have the means 'to satisfy the sense of power...the strongest of the forces that drive him on' (A.C. Bradley). His only concrete power is his ability to forge an allegiance with the audience in order to display his 'powerful' manipulations that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.