

Iago As A Devil

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In the play Othello, there is much evidence to confirm that Iago is related to the power of darkness and has devil-like characteristics. Dr. Johnson described Iago as a man who is silent in his resentment, subtle in his designs, and studious at once of his interest and his vengeance.¹ Harley Grancillo-Barker sees Iago as a man personifying the power of evil,² which suggests to us that he partakes of nature of the Devil. E. E. Stoll points to the ambiguity of his motivation:

One of the motives at which Iago glances--the grievance in the matter of the promotion, or his lust for Desdemona, or his fancy that Othello or Cassio may have played him foul with Emilia--is sufficient for the vast villainy of his nature.

and concludes that:

He is a son of Belial, he is a limb of Satan.³ Maud Bodkin sees Iago as an archetype of the Devil, defining "Devil" as "our tendency to represent in personal

form the forces within and without us that threaten our supreme values'⁴, and S. L. Bethell, analyzing the diabolic imagery in the play, concludes that:

The play is a solemn game of hunting the devil, with, of course, the audience largely in the know. And it is in this game that the diabolic imagery is bandied about from character to character until the denouement: we know the devil then, but he has summoned another lost soul to his side.⁵

R. B. Heilman, discussing Iago's loss of humanity and the function of the serpent imagery in this respect, has suggested the way in which Iago's diabolism functions in the play:

As Iago's diabolism thus emerges distinct from the interwoven texture of action and language, we see how the myth of the devil enters into the play--not as a formula which squeezes out the individuality of Iago, nor as a pure idea of which the dramatic parts are an allegorical projection, but as an added dimension, a collateral presence that makes us sense the inclusiveness of the fable.⁶

In order to analyze the diabolic element in the play, it is necessary to summarize very briefly the evidence in support of the view that the myth of the

devil does enter into the play. From the very opening of the play, Iago's relationship with the powers of darkness is continually emphasized—it is toward hell that he looks constantly for inspiration, hell and the Devil are for ever in his mouth, continually invoked by him; compare

Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light

(I,iii,401-02)

with

Divinity of hell!

When devils will the blackest sins put on,

They do suggest at first with heavenly shows.

As I do now:

(II,iii,403-06)

and

I do hate him as I do hell pains (I,i,154)

Where his very tones suggest familiarity with the pains he speaks of. Examples could be multiplied. As Heilman points out, when Othello falls a victim to Iago's temptation, he catches from him not only his debased view of life but his field of reference:

Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!
Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw
To furnish me with some swift means of death
For the fair devil.

(III,iii,482-85)

Naked abed, Iago, and not mean harm!

It is hypocrisy against the devil.

(IV,i,5-6)

Fire and brimstone!

(IV,i,228)

The word 'devil' is passed constantly from mouth to mouth. Much of the action of the play seems to take place in the darkness and horror of hell itself--the confusion and darkness of the night scene before Brabantio's house, the quarrel during the night watch, the attempted murder of Cassio--scenes of darkness and mischief over which Iago presides like an evil genius. But it is the final scene of the play that provides the most convincing evidence for Iago's diabolism when the accumulated reference of the play is finally crystalized and centered on him as Othello realizes the truth in a sudden awareness:

I look down towards his feet--but that's a fable.

If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee.

(V,ii,287-88)

His failure to do so and Iago's derisive reply

I bleed, sir; but not kill'd

(V,ii,289)

surely provide a comment on Iago's ultimate nature. Othello, at least, has no doubts about the nature of the deception that has been practiced on him:

Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?

(V,ii,302-03)

Indisputably Iago is engaged in the elaborate seduction of a representative of mankind and the destruction of the values that he represents. But although he undertakes this attack with joy, even almost light-heartedness, he reveals that, however gleeful he is in pursuing the downfall of his victim. His hatred of him, of the virtues he possesses, is malevolent in the extreme. We have a clear picture of the intensity of the hatred in the following:

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.

(I,i,42)

So will I turn her virtue into pitch;
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

(II,iii,351-53)

If Cassio do remain,
He hath a daily beauty in his life
That makes me ugly.

(V,i,18-20)

There are the scents of a moral being impolled by a burning desire to feed fat a consuming hatred with revenge.

Since Iago is regarded as a Devil, his motives must be functional. It is his nature to envy those whose character or situation is in any way superior to his.

own, to suffer from a sense of injured merit and to seek to destroy anything which by its very superiority threatens his self-love. For example, he feels he has been slighted by Othello in the promotion of Cassio, he asserts that Othello and Cassio have cuckolded him from his conviction that they cannot be as virtuous as they appear, and from his diseased belief that he is being constantly slighted. His love for Desdemona is his desire to possess that object which is clearly highly desirable and belongs to someone else. But the ultimate motive for his hatred of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is his denial of the values they affirm, and his habitual opposition to the virtues they represent.

It is clear that the characteristics displayed by Iago could suggest a personification of the Devil. Iago is quite aware of human nature and uses his 'pretending honesty' to destroy his friends and his general Othello. He does not die at the end of play, he is not to be put rapidly to death. He lingers in pain and continues to be a seducer of mankind.

Notes

- 1) W. K. Wimsatt, ed., *Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare* (U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 143.
- 2) Peter Alexander, selected & introduced, *Studies in Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 87.
- 3) E. E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 97.
- 4) Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1963), p. 223.
- 5) S. L. Bethell, 'Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in Othello' in *Shakespeare Survey* 5 (? , 1952), p. 92.
- 6) R. B. Heolman, *Magic in the Web* (Lexington, 1956), p. 96.
- 7) William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London: The Auden Shakespeare, 1958), p. 46. All textual quotations in this study are taken from this edition, and will be noted parenthetically with act, scene and line numbers.