

Victim or Villain?

- The Racist and Homoerotic Corruption of the Anti-Hero, Iago in *Othello*

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I. Introduction

“Honest Iago” sits among the pantheon of villains who stands prominent across the annals of literary history. However, beyond the façade of a malicious creature bent on carnage and mischief lies a victim cowering in the corner. Underneath all his scheming, Iago was once a loveable and honest man, as proven by the devotion and camaraderie shown by his comrades. However, because of love and the machinations of a racist society, Iago is driven to madness. Within the pages of *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, William Shakespeare paints Iago to be carrying the recognizable traits

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of a classic villain: hateful, malicious, and delusional.¹⁾ He is, as Brabantio calls him at first glance, a villain: “Thou art a villain” (Shakespeare, 2008, 1.1 118). Yet upon further scrutiny, his ambiguities are more fundamental to his character than his malevolence. His motives are never clear, the source of his hatred persistently vacillates, and his clever mind is an even greater mystery. However, if one thing is clear, it is that Iago has a relationship with Othello; one that comes to define the entirety of his identity and sits as the centrifuge of this villain and victim debate.

There are many instances throughout the play where Iago seems to dismiss his wife and the concept of (heterosexual or traditional) marriage in general. Instead, he seems to be enamored, obsessed with his Moorish general. He does not work his clever endgame to simply ruin Othello and bring about his death, but Iago specifically targets Othello’s *marriage* to Desdemona. If he had a mere hatred toward the general for promoting Cassio over him or fears his racial Otherness, Iago could simply bring about Othello’s death or his banishment from Venice. Instead, Iago focuses on rousing Othello’s jealousy and subsequently murdering Desdemona, emphatically declaring at his demise that he will not reveal his motives.

More puzzling however than this concept of homoerotic love between the Venetian Iago and the Moor Othello in a Renaissance English play are the *motivations* behind Iago’s corrupt love. What could have turned his passion into such an obsession? Look no further than the traditional, rigid society that is Renaissance Europe. In a society where working- and middle-class mobility and interclass relationship stories are considered comedies; where the love

1) In Medieval England, the word *villein* meant “a free common villager or village peasant of any of the feudal classes lower in rank than the thane” (“Villein”). Its class-related meanings seem to suggest that class (and in turn society) could also have had a role in Iago’s villainy.

between two destined to be together is cleaved apart by the acrimonious rivalry between two households; where racism prevents the foreign Other from ever becoming a part of society, what could happen to the love a white European man has towards a black Other? This paper seeks to argue that it is by the combined forces of a repressed homoerotic love from the pressure of a racist society, that “Honest Iago” is corrupted and victimized into the anti-hero that we come to know today.

II. Racist Origins: Society as Catalyst

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, and England, from where Shakespeare was crafting his tales, was a rigid and traditional society. Often bound by capitalistic and religious notions, anything or anyone against the norm was forbidden or shunned. One such example is illustrated in Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* where an interclass marriage is acted against by the upper class. Another is shown through anti-Semitism in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*. Among these, the most pertinent example of an unbending society that I will be examining comes in the form of this idea of the racial Other. While not set in England, these texts coupled with *Othello*’s Venice and Cyprus act as the keystone in illustrating an unyielding society. If examined closely, the geographic locations of these various locations paint a clear image: Shakespeare, Dekker, and Marlowe’s London, Malta, Venice, and Cyprus. The significance of English and Italian cities, and two Mediterranean islands lies in the fact that they are located across the mainland and islands of continental Europe. Each setting is *disparate* and *separated*, and yet lies *across* Europe. To that end, they

represent not simply the society of one country or region, but the entirety of Europe. Restrictive cultural opinions and that of race, therefore, are not simply found in one location, but throughout European society, transcending historical, geographical, and national differences. As Alan Bray (1995) notes in *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, “[O]f all the figures we might expect to see in seventeenth-century England, is it not surprising that the prisoner in the county goal should have been black? A black face would have been an unusual sight indeed in England in 1647” (Bray, 1995, 41).²⁾ As such, a homogenous England, and also a homogenous European society where the foreigner and racial and ethnic Other is considered an outsider and against the norms of society makes logical sense.

An additional piece of crucial evidence to consider in the setting of continental Europe and the role it plays in constructing the villainous corruption of Iago is the function the setting and its cultural tendencies, like a personality, perform as a character. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, while discussing a legend of Charlemagne and his love of a young girl, an archbishop, and a lake, Italo Calvino (1993) says, “The real protagonist of the story, however, is the magic ring, because it is the movements of the ring that determine those of the characters and because it is the ring that establishes the relationship between them” (Calvino, 1993, 32).³⁾ The magic ring in the story

2) According to historical records by Migration UK, “The Census began to record people’s country of birth from 1851” at which point, less than one percent of the English and Wales population was considered “foreign” (“A Summary History of Immigration to Britain”). This is in contrast to today, where The University of Oxford’s The Migrant Observatory, fourteen percent of the UK population is considered “foreign” (“Migrants in the UK: An Overview”). Given such a small number in the mid nineteenth century, during Shakespeare’s time, a foreign Other would have been just as or even rarer.

3) This book contains a series of lectures by Calvino, which he was supposed to present before his death. Within these lectures, he discusses, many concepts, ideals, and values on literature

is what establishes the link between these characters. The ring, an object, like the location of continental Europe is not a living, breathing character. However, according to Calvino, it serves as the *protagonist* of the tale, being a driving force that affects the human characters around it. Similarly, in drama, “[e]ach dramatic character has a function or a need. A character without function is not valued. Every character can be analyzed in every scene for its function in terms of the play parts. The character helps to further the plot, to express idea and contribute to spectacle” (Arjunan Vidhya, 2015, 76). The role the location of continental Europe serves in the plot of these novels and ultimately this era of Renaissance drama is the one of a character, perhaps even *the* character that shapes and molds various characters we see in the text. While only being a set piece or backdrop, “[t]he stage creates the definite physical shape for acting. Set designing and lighting on stage produces a visual environment for the play’s actions” (Ibid., 76). Like Calvino’s magic ring, the setting, the narrative structure, and the racist tendencies of the times act as forces for the other characters’ motivations and personalities.

William Shakespeare’s *Othello* presents a similar racist world to that of Renaissance Europe. This racist society is represented through myriad characters, the first of which is Iago himself who, manipulates Brabantio to expose society’s underlying feelings of fear toward Othello (Adelman, 1997, 126). Brabantio’s initial response is to see his daughter as being stolen by some force of evil, saying “It is too true an evil,” that it is a “treason of the

that he wished to leave behind. This particular moment comes from a lecture on “Quickness” where he discusses the value of quickness or tempo in narrative. In this story of Charlemagne that Calvino references, the old king is first drawn to a young girl, then a priest, and eventually a lake depending on who possesses a magic ring. Within the narrative structure, the ring acts as the catalyst, almost like the protagonist of the story that drives the plot forward and links the characters within the narrative.

blood,” and eventually to the Duke of Venice that “She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted / by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (Shakespeare, 2008, 1.1.161, 1.1.170, and 1.3.60-61). Hearing his daughter is “with a knave of common hire, a gondolier, / To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor” as Roderigo describes the Moorish general, Brabantio’s true feelings toward foreigners, especially those of a darker skin tone manifest (Ibid., 1.1.126-127). According to Philip Mason in “Othello and Race Prejudice,” Brabantio, is at first intrigued and charmed by Othello, when he has no association with him. However, as soon as Othello’s life becomes directly intertwined with that of him and his family, his fears of the Other are put on display: “bubbl[ing] up from the Id or the Shadow” (Mason, 1962, 159). The Duke of Venice stands as another character who demonstrates these racist undertones of society. He immediately orders the punishment of whoever bewitched Desdemona, believing Brabantio without any proof or trace of evidence: “Whoe’er he be that in this foul proceeding / Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself / And you of her” (Shakespeare, 2008, 1.3.65-67). However, upon learning Desdemona married Othello, he quickly reverses course and becomes understanding. Had the accused been a black who had not saved Venice more than once, what would have been the Duke’s response?

Even Desdemona, who loves and marries Othello seems to be unable to ignore Othello’s skin color. In her defense she only ever states she is attracted to Othello’s mind, rather than his physical features, failing to mention his race or any physical features of attraction saying, “I saw Othello’s visage in his *mind*”, illustrating that perhaps she too has an underlying racial bias (Ibid., 1.3.251; emphasis added). What these characters all point to is a racist European society that will never accept an Other, let alone an interracial marriage: a society where purity must never be compromised. As Kiernan

Ryan (2015) notes in “Racism, Misogyny and ‘Motiveless Malignity’ in *Othello*,” “Othello and Desdemona find unleashed upon them, in the shape of Iago, the venomous rage of a society whose foundations are rocked by the mere fact of their marriage” (Ryan, 2015). A racist society, therefore, corrupts the homoerotic love of Iago into an anti-hero or a weapon to try and purge it of a marriage, of an outsider it does not and cannot tolerate.

III. The Homoerotic Bond of Iago and Othello

Immediately from his introduction, Iago’s hateful and malevolent nature is revealed. In his first soliloquy after laying the foundations for his plans to ruin Othello’s marriage, Iago says vehemently that “I do hate [Othello] as I do hell pains” (Shakespeare, 2008, 1.1.155). However, this is not a simple hatred. Rather, he loathes the Moorish general, so much so that being around him is like withstanding the tortures of hell. Assiduously, being the bitter and calculating puppeteer that he is, Iago plans his revenge against Othello, using all people around him, not giving a care as to whether he ruins that person’s life in the process of his machinations:

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.
 After some time to abuse Othello’s ears
 That he is too familiar with his wife;
 He hath a person and a smooth dispose
 To be suspected, framed to make women false.
 The Moor is of a free and open nature,

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
 And will as tenderly be led by th'nose
 As asses are.

I ha't. It is ingendered. Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light. (Ibid., 1.3.374-386)

To Iago, Cassio, his wife Emilia, Othello, and Desdemona are all toys he can break, characters he can kill off, and ants he can psychopathically torture. He meticulously plans to “abuse Othello” with utter lies about Desdemona and Cassio so that his will can be satisfied, and his pleasures meet delight. On the surface, Iago is, as Brabantio saw, a villain, the physical manifestation of evil.

Below the surface, however, like the notions of black and white, Iago is more than he lets on. At first, he says he wants to take revenge on Othello for his overlooked promotion: “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place. / But he, as loving his own pride and purposes, / Evades them with a bombast circumstance” (Ibid., 1.1.11-13). But this fact never gets mentioned again by Iago or any of the other players who might have known about such a promotion, such as Cassio, Emilia, and Othello. Instead, it appears to be an excuse, among the many, that he alludes to because Iago, at the exposure of his malevolent deeds states, “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word” keeping his motives to himself even at his demise (Ibid., 5.2.309-310). He elects to reveal nothing as his true motivations contradict the previously mentioned lies, insinuating there are greater secrets at work. Also, throughout the play, Iago is embraced by a multitude of contradictions that point to a past where he was respected and honorable. The most prominent of these is his moniker “Honest Iago” when in fact, Iago’s identity lies as the antithesis to God. (Ibid., 2.3.26). In the *Bible*,

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” while Iago says to Roderigo, “I am not what I am” (*The Holy Bible*, 2011, Exodus 3.14; Shakespeare, 2008, 1.1.65). In other words, while Iago may have been honest in the past, the Iago presented within the text has already fallen. Just as Lucifer sits as the antithesis of God in his fallen state, Iago is no longer Iago but is the Satan to “Honest Iago’s” Lucifer. Yet, Iago’s comrades perceive him to be honest and reliable. In Act 2 Scene 3 alone, Iago is called honest by Othello, Cassio, and himself. On top of that, Iago is also praised by Othello: “A man he is of honesty and trust” and “I know thou’rt full of love and honesty” (Shakespeare, 2008, 1.3.283; 3.3.123).

While entirely likely that Iago was always this devilish, malignant creature, there also exists the likelihood that society and the circumstances of life broke him into a bitter shade of himself. In his “Iago—An Extraordinary Honest Man,” Weston Babcock (1965) says, “I am convinced that Shakespeare conceived of Iago as a man who, endowed with a cold shrewdness and intelligence, was constantly embittered by recognition of his social inferiority in a rank-conscious society” (Babcock, 1965, 298). Thomas D. Bowman (1943) makes a similar claim in “A Further Study in the Characterization and Motivation of Iago” stating, “Iago’s habitual manner of speech reveals a profane and hard-bitten cynic” (Bowman, 1943, 460). I tend to agree with such claims that before the acrimonious poison of resentment enshrouded Iago, he truly was honest like Milton’s Lucifer. While the Iago we meet is Chaos’ lover, the Iago Othello and others around him remember is someone different, someone they trusted, someone they loved.

It is this very love between brothers at arms, comrades, and friends that led to “Honest Iago” evanescing into this deceitful manipulator. However, this love appears to be more than simple brotherly love, particularly towards

Othello. Rather, Iago seems to have harbored a homosocial love that developed into a homoerotic love for him. Alan Bray (1995) notes, “It should not therefore come as a surprise when, as we try to piece together the place homosexuality occupied in society, its social expression appears hemmed in by the size of the villages and towns within which the great mass of people lived” (Bray, 1995, 43). Bray, in other words, is stating that because the communities in England during this era were so small and contained, people turned to homosexuality to satiate their thirsts for pleasure. These communities were “where the relationship between society and homosexuality began” (Ibid., 44). However, more important than the local community appears to be the even narrower scope of the household, according to Bray. Particularly, *masters* and *servants* happened to find comfort within each other’s arms: “For an unmarried servant living and working under the close discipline of a master . . . [within] the confines of the household might be expected to have put a severe limitation on the available sexual contacts” (Ibid., 47). To that end, in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, homosexual relations were likely to have arisen from closely confined master-servant relationships.

While homosexuality may have been common during Renaissance England due to close-knit local communities, there are other confined, masculine spaces where these master-servant relationships could have flourished: the military, just like the Venetian army Othello and Iago served as superior and subordinate. Bray notes in his research that “[t]here is also considerable evidence . . . of homosexual as well as heterosexual being common between masters and servants, to the extent that this seems to have been a widespread institution” (Ibid., 49). Throughout the play, Iago repeatedly demonstrates his hatred toward Othello, but Othello does the opposite. When talking to Iago and Cassio after his drunken fight at the feast, Othello says Iago’s “honesty

and love” makes this situation hard for him (Shakespeare, 2008, 3.3.136). He even goes so far as confirming a particularly potent attachment between the two when he says to Iago after raising his doubts about Desdemona and Cassio, “If thou [Iago] dost love me, / Show me thy thought” with Iago confirming that he does love Othello (Ibid., 3.3.119-120). Othello specifically asking Iago to confirm his love is indicative of not only his trust toward his ensign but the strong, homosocial bond that they shared. In *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics*, Bruce Smith (1995) finds this “concentration of aggression, male bonding, and homoerotic desire” within Shakespeare’s works, *Othello* being one of them (Smith, 1995, 59). Iago too feels, or at a point in the past felt, this love toward Othello; but for Iago, this homosocial bond became something more.

Bray (1995) mentions that for servants and masters in Renaissance England, these relationships were not simply possible, but likely (Bray, 1995, 47). Iago seems to be one of these servants who found romantic attraction toward his master. However, Iago could not be with Othello because as Jonathan Goldberg (1984) states, “In *sodomy*, English society saw its shadow: the word expressed sheer negation, an absence capable of taking root in anyone, and necessarily to be rooted out” (Goldberg, 1984, 371). In the case of Iago, this male bond is so vital to his view of his identity that when it got repressed by the society he lived in that it becomes misogynistic, which Smith points out: “Iago belongs to an all-male world in which women have no place” (Smith, 1995, 63). This is demonstrated during the whole of the play through Iago’s relationship with all the female characters, but most noticeably with Emilia. Iago calls Emilia “a foolish wife,” commands her around like a slave, “A good wench! Give it [the handkerchief] to me,” and eventually kills her for ruining his plan after calling her a “Villainous whore” (Shakespeare,

What bloody business ever. [*They rise*]

O thello: I greet thy love,
 Not with vain thanks, but with acceptance bounteous,
 And will upon the instant put thee to't:
 Within these three days let me hear thee say
 That Cassio's not alive.

I ago: My friend is dead;
 'Tis done at your request . But let her live.

O thello: Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn
 her!

Come, go with me apart; I will withdraw,
 To furnish me with some swift means of death
 For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.

I ago: I am your own forever. (Ibid., 3.3.521-546)

Of course, Iago is painting his masterpiece before Othello's eyes, but his own fantasies, his own homoerotic desires for Othello are also manifesting, sneaking their way into his web of lies. This scene, while inundated with rage, deception, and murderous intent mirrors that of a marriage scene. Particularly with the vows Othello and Iago share to murder Cassio and Desdemona, Iago's desires for such a setting, such a vow with Othello becomes a palpable, tangible moment. Additionally, when Iago first plants his lies, Othello demands to know Iago's thoughts, but Iago replies "You cannot [know my thoughts] if my heart were in your hand; / Nor shall not whist 'tis in my custody" (Ibid., 3.3.167-168). He seems to be implying that even when Othello had his loyalty and his love, he was blind to his homoerotic feelings, how could he know Iago's thoughts now that he is hiding his heart. While not obvious at first glance, the misogynistic and repressed Iago felt a homoerotic bond towards

Othello, and when learning that this relationship, this trust has been breached by a woman, his love slowly corrupts into his own personal, bitter jealousy.

IV. The Machinations of a Corrupted Heart

What warps this jealousy into a heinous revulsion and desire for revenge, however, is not solely on the shoulders of what Iago perceives to be Othello's betrayal, but a coalescence of the sense of betrayal he feels toward Othello and the racist cultural stanchions of his society. Thus, Iago, the manipulator, under the control of society, launches a two-pronged attack against Othello's marriage and his race. In an aside after the confrontation with the Duke, Iago lays out his plans to take revenge against Othello. He, rather than wanting to kill Othello or create circumstances in which he can be banished, wants to specifically ruin Othello's marriage: "Let's see. / After some time to abuse Othello's ears / That he [Cassio] is too familiar with his [Othello's] wife" (Ibid., 1.3.376-378). Nothing will please him more than seeing Othello's bond with the woman who ruined his bond with Othello, the woman who interfered with his homoerotic bond, become frayed in a fit of jealousy. After arriving in Cyprus with Desdemona, Emilia, and Cassio, Iago says in his soliloquy:

But partly led to diet my revenge
 For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
 Hath leapt into my seat, the thought whereof
 Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
 And nothing can or shall content my soul
 Till I am evened with him, wife for wife—
 Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor

At least into a jealousy so strong

That judgment cannot cure, which thing to do. (Ibid., 2.1 280-288)

While Iago attributes his jealousy to the rumors about Othello sleeping with Emilia, could these thoughts be more than fantasies of Iago's mind? Just as with Iago's supposed looked-over promotion to lieutenant, there is no mention of such infidelity before or ever again. In fact, Iago's negligent attitude towards his wife throughout the play suggests he would feel no jealousy even if she did break their marriage vows. To him, she seems more like a dim-witted object for him to use. However, in stark contrast, his obsession with Othello is peppered throughout the play. In other words, his homoerotic desire for Othello manifests repeatedly and acts as the true point of jealousy that he harbors within his heart. He promptly settles on a plan to make Othello feel "the green-eyed monster" of jealousy, attacking the marriage bed, and, as he sees Desdemona to be, the cause of disturbance in his relationship with the Moorish general (Ibid., 3.3 170).

However, his attack does not simply stop there. For Iago, it is not just that Desdemona came into the picture and ruined his homoerotic bond with Othello. As Bray (1995) notes, a homoerotic love between two white men was always possible in the master-servant relationship in a mostly homogenous England (Bray, 1995, 47). So, had Othello been white, a homoerotic love between the two men could be feasible. But Othello, as we know, is not white. He is a Moorish African, shunned and animalized within this European society where even his *heterosexual* marriage is also looked upon with scorn. Therefore, in Iago's eyes, even if Desdemona had not been in the frame, because of the racist society around him, his love with Othello would have been doomed from the start. Hence his animosity toward Othello's race. Conjointly with the jealousy he feels, Iago's racism kindles his fire of hatred.

Multiple times in the play, Iago targets and points out Othello's race, revealing, not only his racist perspective but more importantly, his disgust at Othello's skin color. When describing Othello's union with Desdemona to Brabantio, Iago says that "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe. Arise, arise!" (Shakespeare, 2008, 1.1.88-89). Through this exchange, Iago is revealing what he sees Othello as: nothing more than a black, old, timeworn, and savage beast that is debasing (almost raping with the choice of "tuppung") the purity of Brabantio's whiteness.⁴⁾ Also repeatedly, he does not refer to Othello by his name, but by his ethnicity: "And I—God bless the mark!—his Moorship's ensign" and "Whether I in any just term am affined / To love the Moor" (Ibid., 1.1.32 and 1.1.39). What is interesting here is that while other characters also note Othello's skin color, Iago's references always carry a layer of virulence that illustrates his incensed feelings. Iago wants Othello to be tormented for his skin color, using it in concert with his attack on Othello's marriage, to make *race* the source of Othello's insecurities, jealousy, and eventual demise.

Time and again, Iago hints to Othello about Desdemona's supposed infidelity: "Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof. / Look to your wife. Observe her well with Cassio. / Wear your eyes thus: not jealous, nor secure" (Ibid., 3.3.199-201). Through these indirect hints, Iago begins to scatter into Othello's mind ideas of Desdemona's supposed betrayal of their marriage. Benjamin V. Beier (2014) says in "The Art of Persuasion and Shakespeare's Two Iagos" that "it becomes clear that twisted *pathos* appeals will be powerful

4) It's interesting to note the contrast between ram and ewe in this exchange. Rams seem to be associated with power and masculinity while ewes with purity and chastity. Iago's deliberate decision to call Othello a black ram and Desdemona a white ewe is therefore more indicative of how he sees this as pure whiteness being violated in a way.

means of persuasion by which to plague the Moor” (Beier, 2014, 41). Because of Iago’s eloquent weaving of words, Othello comes to accept this story as truth; and once these foundations are laid, Iago makes sure Othello believes his race is the cause of Desdemona’s duplicity. When Othello begins to doubt his wife’s fidelity, Iago cleverly says he hopes she would never compromise their marriage but adds:

Ay, there’s the point; as, to be bold with you,

Not to affect many proposèd matches

Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,

Whereto we see in all things nature tends.

Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank,

Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural! (Shakespeare, 2008, 3.3.233-238)

He specifically positions the idea of her white “complexion” in juxtaposition with the dark and “unnatural” desires within her. Similar to his machinations in planting the idea of infidelity in Othello’s mind, he now adds the dimension of race to the image and Othello falls for the bait.

To Iago, Othello admits that Iago’s sowing can now be reaped by saying, “I’ll have some proof. My name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (Ibid., 3.3.391-393). He now truly believes within his core that his skin color has corrupted Desdemona, turning her clear, white, goddess-like face into one as black, or as sinful as his.

In fact, this manipulation is a torturing of sorts, putting Iago in the position of the psychological executioner, or a weapon against the Other. In “Othello, Stranger in a Strange Land,” Alberto Cacicedo (2016) mentions that “[Othello] is less and less able to control himself, to maintain agency, precisely because of the social space that Iago shapes for him” (Cacicedo, 2016, 23). In essence, Iago gets to play God, or rather, Satan, shaping Othello in his corrupted image

Othello's weakness, which, according to Mason (1962), Othello has been masking his entire life: "[Iago] could never have poisoned Othello's if Othello had not all his life struggled with this prejudice and overcome it by building up a persona, a mask to front the world, of the calm, resolute and modest commander, unaware of prejudice," making Othello his personal puppet. (Mason, 1962, 158). Thus, Iago succeeds in his desire to draw the Moor apart, making him accept the dark-skinned image of an ass he enshrouded him with, tearing apart both his mind and his marriage. Othello, in the end, becomes the very image that Iago saw as the source of his own suffering and revulsion. His masterpiece and his possession.

V. Conclusion

Simply a malevolent villain on the surface, Shakespeare's Iago is a character that possesses layers upon the multiple dimensions that coexist within his character. Of these, his corruption from the "Honest Iago" known to his comrades into the devil who manipulates those around him is the most complex. His homoerotic feelings towards Othello, repressed feelings of betrayal, along with the racist ideals he's been raised with coincide to drive him down a much-maligned path of revenge and destruction. No matter who Iago was before the curtains are drawn, the Iago encountered on the pages is no honest man. Rather, his honesty and the affection shared between Iago and his comrades are debased to such an extent that it corrupts Iago to a path of malevolence. Whatever honesty he previously had is perverted by society's traditions and racism into a virulent bitterness while Iago's homoerotic love devolves into contempt.

For all his machinations and scheming, Iago too only ends up as a puppet, a weapon used by society to maintain a homogenous, white society. However, even though Iago plays to the tune of society's traditions, ultimately it would be more fitting to see that Iago fought against society's machinations and succeeds in making Othello his. Unfortunately, he will never find atonement, but by some cruel twist of fate, in the end, Iago is able to bring Othello *back* to him. By turning Othello into his puppet and remaking (or drawing) him in his image, Iago reclaims Othello not as a homoerotic lover, however, but as a manifestation of his own corrupted love: a reversal of the master-slave relationship. As such, Iago is more than just a simple villain. While he will never be a hero, perhaps he can even be labeled a tragic villain or more fittingly, an irredeemable, Machiavellian anti-hero.

【주제어】 『오셀로』, 이아고, 반영웅주의, 동성애, 인종차별

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[국문초록]

윌리엄 셰익스피어의 『오셀로』는 눈에 보이는 것 이상의 많은 이중성으로 구성되어 있다. 무엇보다 다층적인 성격을 가지고 있는 이아고의 이중성이 가장 두드러진다. 오셀로와 병사들에게 정직하고 사랑스러운 모습을 보이지만, 관객들은 연출로 가려진 그의 진짜 모습을 알 수 있다. 악당을 다루는 문학 장르와 문학사를 통틀어서 이아고는 최고의 악인 중 한 명이다. 그러나 흑백 또는 선/악이라는 자기 분열적 개념처럼, 이아고는 선과 악을 나누는 경계선의 끝자락에 위태롭게 서 있는 위험한 인물이다. 요컨대 반 영웅인 것이다. 이아고는 억압된 동성애적 사랑과 인종 차별주의 사회에 의해 악당이 될 수밖에 없었던 '정직한 이아고'의 변형된 모습이다. 인종 차별과 계층 간의 관계가 정형화되었고 엄격한 전통적, 문화적 이상이 지켜졌던 시대에, 이아고의 오셀로에 대한 수치스러운 동성애적 사랑을 설 자리가 없다. 커튼이 올라 연극이 시작되기 전에 그리고 이아고가 누구였든지간에, 『오셀로』에 등장하는 이아고는 이미 정직한 사람이 아니다. 이아고의 정직함과 동지애는 사회적인 편견과 차별 때문에 이아고를 악의 길로 들어서게 하고 경멸할 정도로 타락시키는 것이다. 자세히 들여다보면, 이아고의 영리하고 악마 같은 계략의 순간들은 오셀로에 대한 동성애적 사랑을 억압하고 왜곡시키는 인종 차별주의 사회의 감춰진 면을 보여준다. 이 논문은 이아고의 몰락을 연구하려고 한다. 특히 인종과 사랑에 관한 사회의 경직된 관습과 정형화된 사고의 해로운 영향력을 고찰하려고 한다. 궁극적으로, 이 논문은 이아고와 그의 오셀로에 대한 사랑을 마키아벨리적인 악당, 또는 반영웅으로 타락시키는 인종차별주의와 동성애적인 사랑 간의 역동성을 구체적으로 들여다볼 것이다. 이아고는 모든 교묘한 책략과 음모를 사용하게 됨으로써 자기 동질적이고 백인 중심 사회의 폭력을 극복하지 못하는 꼭두각시로 끝나게 된다. 요컨대 이아고는 오셀로에 대한 로맨틱하고 동성애적인 사랑을 자신의 질투로 타락시키고 자신을 증오와 파괴를 향해 나아가는 전형적인 반영웅으로 변화시키게 되는 것이다.

[Abstract]

Victim or Villain? The Racist and Homoerotic Corruption of the Anti-Hero, Iago in *Othello*

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William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* consists of numerous dualities that are more than meets the eye. However, among these stands the duality of Iago. To Othello and his soldiers, Iago presents himself as honest and lovable, but to the audience, beneath the theatrics, we see him for what he truly is. In the annals of literary history and villainy, Iago is among the most prominent characters. However, like the fissiparous notions of black and white or good and evil, Iago is a multidimensional character who goes beyond common labels, throwing him on the precipice of the precarious line that separates good from evil. He is, in other words, a perversion of "Honest Iago" driven to nefarious menace by his repressed homoerotic love and a racist society. In an era when strict traditional and cultural ideals were upheld, there was no place for a scandalous homoerotic love between Iago and Othello. Examining the text, moments of Iago's brilliant and devilish scheme are seen to carry undertones of the racist society he was raised in, which perverts his repressed homoerotic love for Othello. In this paper, I lay a foundation by examining the rigid notions of society, particularly regarding race and love, to explore Iago's fall. Ultimately, this paper seeks to examine the interplay between racism and homoeroticism that corrupt Iago and his love for Othello. They distort Iago's romantic, homoerotic love toward Othello into his own corrupted *jealousy* and force him into the role of an epitomic Machiavellian villain or anti-hero, fated, destined on a path to hatred and destruction.

[Keywords] *Othello*, Iago, Homoeroticism, Racism, Anti-heroism

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