

USING THE EXAMINATION OF IAGO'S CONTROL OVER  
OTHER CHARACTERS TO DETERMINE WHETHER  
HE IS A VICTIM OR VILLAIN IN  
*SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO*

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In a previous play of William Shakespeare's, two characters, Romeo and Juliet, experience tragedy as a result of their families having conflict with each other. *Othello* is similar in its tragedy. One character has a problem with other characters and uses manipulation to get even with other individuals. *Othello*, like *Romeo and Juliet*, presents the outcome of what the want for being socially elite does to other folks. In *Othello*, Iago's outrageous manipulation of other people leads to the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona, the downfall of Cassio, Emilia, and Roderigo, and from this information Iago is either a victim or a villain.

The most important outcome of Iago's ploy against separate mortals is the disaster of Othello and Desdemona. Iago is angry with his commander, Othello, for not choosing him as lieutenant. Instead, Othello decides on Michael Cassio. "This counter-caster,/he, in good time, must his lieutenant be,/and I--God bless the mark!--his Moorship's ancient." (p. 40) Iago is not one to sit around and take what someone shoves in his face. Iago is the type to assume action when Iago sees something he doesn't like very much. Iago knows that the "evil" Moor, Othello, and Desdemona are husband and wife. Iago also recognizes that Brabantio, Desdemona's father, is unaware of his daughter's marriage with a Moor for all things! Iago discerns that Brabantio is a feeble-minded, racist redneck, and will react unfavorably to his flesh and blood's marriage. So, being the "great guy" he is, Iago persuades Roderigo to awaken Brabantio.

"Make after him, poison his delight,/proclaim him in the streets,  
incense her kinsmen,/and though he in a fertile climate  
dwell,/plague him with flies." (p. 41) Roderigo follows through,  
like a good little soldier. Iago proclaims that Desdemona and  
Othello are "making the beast with two backs." (p. 43) This is  
an outrage to Brabantio, and Brabantio calls for the citizens of  
the town to be at one with Brabantio in his mighty crusade to  
lift his sweet and innocent Desdemona out of the wicked clutches  
of Othello. Everyone meets at the council chamber, Othello and  
Desdemona validate their love for each other, and Brabantio  
accepts the marriage. Since, Iago's first scheme for getting  
revenge on Othello fails, he will try another way, by irritating  
Othello's jealous heart. Iago realizes Cassio and Desdemona's  
good friendship. Iago yearns to make Cassio and Desdemona seem  
"painfully" close to Othello. Iago advises Cassio to pursue the  
assistance of Desdemona, after Cassio drinks too much, is in a  
fight with Montano, and loses his position as officer to Othello.  
"Confess yourself freely to her; importune/her help to put you in  
your place again." (p. 87) Cassio does use his "friend's tip"  
and goes to Desdemona to have "some brief discourse/with  
Desdemona alone." (p. 92) Desdemona agrees to aid her chum  
Cassio. So, Desdemona asks Othello to restore Cassio to his  
place. Othello evades putting a time frame on reinstating  
Cassio, but Desdemona persists to "let it not/exceed three days."  
(p. 95) Othello and Desdemona continue to clash over a date, and  
Desdemona just abandons Othello. After Desdemona's exit, Iago

warns Othello to pay close attention to the interactions between Cassio and Desdemona. In doing this, Iago arouses some suspicion in Othello, and starts Othello on the path towards uncontrollable rage. Later on in this same scene, Othello accidentally knocks Desdemona's handkerchief out of her hands. Othello later explains the significance of the napkin. "That handkerchief/did an Egyptian to my mother give. /She told her, while she/kept it/ 'twould make her amiable and subdue my father/entirely to her love; but if she lost it/or made a gift of it, my father's eye/ should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt/after new fancies. She, dying gave it me,/and bid me, when my fate would have me wived,/to give it her. I did so; and take heed on't;/ make it a darling like your precious eye." (p. 113) Emilia snatches up the handkerchief and turns it over to Iago as he instructs her to do. Emilia inquires about Iago's use of the handkerchief, but he refuses to reveal his plot. Iago plans to plant the handkerchief in Cassio's quarters, let Cassio discover the cloth, and then have Othello see Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's hands. This will make Othello rage with envy. Othello then requests Iago to derive an example for Desdemona being disloyal. Iago informs Othello that Cassio mutters in his sleep, "Sweet Desdemona,/let us be wary, let us hide our loves!" (p. 108) Then, Iago torches Othello's heartburn. Iago questions Othello about Desdemona's napkin. "I gave her such a one; 'twas my first gift." (p. 109) Iago replies that he sees "Cassio wipe his beard with" it. (p. 109) Othello is ready to give Desdemona

what she deserves, and Iago vows to take care of Cassio's fate. Othello commands Desdemona to hand over the handkerchief. Desdemona does not have it, of course, and Othello leaves in a frenzy. In act four, Iago lies about Cassio sleeping with Desdemona. Othello is very upset now, and he slugs Desdemona. Emilia defends Desdemona, when Othello has a discussion with Emilia. "I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest,/lay down my soul at stake." (p. 130) Othello disbelieves Emilia. "She says enough; yet she's a simple bawd/that cannot say as much." (p. 131) Later on, Iago maintains his spotless alibi, when conversing with Desdemona and Emilia. Desdemona and Emilia are gossiping about some "insinuating rogue" who is filling Othello's noggin with awful thoughts about Desdemona. Iago declares, "Fie, there is no such man! It is impossible." (p. 135) No one suspects Iago of being the corrupt rascal. Desdemona even seeks a prescription from Iago on how to win her lord back. Iago recommends, "Go in, and weep not. All things shall be well." (p. 136) After supper, Othello commands Desdemona to go straight to bed, while he and Lodovico go out for a walk. Meanwhile, Iago and Roderigo conspire to kill Cassio. They nearly succeed. Othello drops by and thinks Cassio is lifeless, so he goes to do his part of the stratagem. Othello slips into the bedroom where Desdemona sleeps. Othello starts prattling about death to Desdemona, and that it is time for her extermination to happen for being Cassio's partner in bed. Desdemona denies the accusation, and she has no chance to explain her side or for one

last prayer. Othello rages, "Down, strumpet! /It is too late." (p. 153) Othello smothers Desdemona, but does not complete his work, because Emilia arrives. Emilia hears Desdemona claim her false slaying. Emilia is going to report the violent death that Othello commits. Othello breaks the news that it is Iago who is the dispatcher of Desdemona and Cassio's affair. Othello precedes to keep Emilia from tattling on him, but others enter into the scene. Emilia unravels Iago's design in front of everyone. Iago cautions Emilia to remain silent. She doesn't. Othello, realizing the truth, darts at Iago, intending to destroy. Montano disarms Othello, but Iago decimates Emilia. Iago escapes, but the others bring him back. Othello attacks Iago and injures him. Iago retorts, "I bleed, sir, but not killed." (p. 161) Othello takes his own life and falls over Desdemona. A disgusted Lodovico comments, "Look on the tragic loading of this bed. /This is thy work." (p. 164) To conclude, the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona is the major mishap in Othello, but it is not the only misfortune.

Othello and Desdemona are not the only souls to taste disaster from the wrath of Iago. Cassio, Emilia, and Roderigo also encounter a catastrophe, but only one lucky winner will score on the lottery of life. The first contestant is Cassio. Iago is furious with Othello's appointment of Cassio as Othello's officer. According to Iago, Cassio is nothing but a "great arithmetician" and Cassio has "never set a squadron in the field." (p. 40) Iago goes on to say that Cassio is all talk

without action. Iago trusts his seniority and experience should qualify him more for the advance than Cassio, and he has a point. "But he, sir, had th' election;/and I of whom his eyes had seen the proof/at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds/Christian and heathen, must be beleee'd and calmed/by debtor and creditor."

(p. 40) Iago interprets the choice of Cassio as a slap in the face and will not take it lying down. Iago guarantees revenge on not only Cassio, but Othello as well. Iago must consider retaliation against Cassio to be a leisurely thing. Iago moves in swiftly for the kill, like a cat on the hunt. Iago has three objectives to accomplish with Cassio: humiliate Cassio in front of Othello, make Othello sizzle at the mention of Cassio's name, and finally end Cassio's existence. The first item on Iago's agenda is to get Cassio drunk. Cassio is hesitant at first. "I have drank but one cup tonight, and that was/craftily qualified to; and behold what innovation/it makes here. I am unfortunate in the infirmity and/dare not task my weakness with any more."

(pp. 78-79) Iago persuades Cassio at last to loosen up and have a few brews. Iago is alone and considers, "If I can fasten one cup upon him/with that which he hath drunk tonight already,/he'll be as full of quarrel and offense/as my young mistress' dog."

(p. 79) The other fellows pop in and have nightcaps. Everyone has a grand old time. Cassio, being under the influence, turns hostile. "A knave teach me my duty? I'll beat the knave/into a twiggen bottle." (p. 82) Cassio thumps Montano, and Montano tries to calm Cassio, "Come, come, you're drunk!" (p. 82)

Montano and Cassio squabble, and Othello appears during the clash. It astounds Othello that two leaders, like Montano and Cassio would quarrel. "Honest" Iago, who wishes to "rather have this tongue cut from my mouth/than it should do offense to Michael Cassio," must "persuade myself to speak the truth/shall nothing wrong him." (p.84-85) Iago only wishes to do his best to "benefit" Cassio. Iago announces that it is Cassio who is the culprit. Othello confiscates Cassio's promotion. "I'll make thee an example." (p. 85) Now, in the emotions of disgrace, failure, and hopelessness, Cassio feels he must reclaim his lord's confidence. So, he looks to his "loyal friend" Iago. Iago suggests Cassio to endeavor for Desdemona's guidance. Iago is longing "to draw the Moor apart/and bring him jump when he may Cassio find/soliciting his wife." (p. 89) Iago falsely reports to Othello about Desdemona and Cassio sleeping together. Othello is, of course, in a furor over his wife's supposed unfaithfulness. Meanwhile, Desdemona persistently asks Othello to reinstate Cassio. Iago places Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's quarters. Cassio does not know where it comes from. Iago gets Cassio into more hot water, by mentioning to Othello the handkerchief is in the possession of Cassio. Othello is more rabid with Desdemona for going behind his back, than he is with Cassio. This is alright with Iago, though. Iago will gladly liquidate Cassio. "My friend is dead. 'Tis done at your request." (p. 110) Iago finally gets what he desires. "Now art thou my lieutenant," Othello announces. (p. 110) Othello will

dispose of Desdemona. Knowing Iago, he will not get his hands dirty to bump off Cassio. Instead, he convinces Roderigo to shed blood. Roderigo and Cassio have conflict and impair each other. Lodovico, Gratiano, and Iago arrive. Iago seizes the moment to be leader. "O treacherous villains! /What are you there? /Come in, and give some help." (p. 147) Iago sounds out the instructions for everyone and things gets moving. The attempt on Cassio's life is a failure. After Othello eliminates Desdemona and Emilia disentangles Iago's contrivance, Cassio faces Othello. Othello feels remorse for his distrust of Cassio, and Othello admits to conspiring to slay Cassio. "Dear general, I never gave cause," replies a disappointed Cassio. (p. 161) In the end, Iago does embarrass Cassio, makes Othello rave about Cassio, but does not finish off Cassio. After having the wrong ambitions to dethrone Cassio, Iago is the one who loses his throne, but not without casualties. The next being to focus on is Emilia, Iago's "beloved" wife. One must have to be wondering what in the world goes through this poor girl's mind. One must ponder how Iago gets someone to marry. Most women will rather abandon subsistence than survive under Iago's thumb, like Emilia does. She is a tough cookie, because anyone that can absorb Iago's slander and still be able to defend themselves, must be as strong as steel. It is easy to understand her dislike for men and their treatment of women. "'Tis not a year or two shows us a man. /They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;/they eat us hungerly, and when they are full,/they belch us." (p. 114)

Othello shows respect for Desdemona, until he runs into the problem with Iago. Iago shows no courtesy to Emilia. He treats Emilia like a piece of meat. Emilia retrieves the handkerchief for Iago. "A good wench. Give it me." (p. 104) Emilia wishes to know Iago's intentions. Iago doesn't have the decency to tell her, after she did his filthy duty for him. Iago just glimmers all over with affection for Emilia. Iago's love for Emilia shines through especially when his moment of reckoning appears. Desdemona is dead, and Emilia is in the process of eradicating Iago's plot. Iago warns Emilia to shut her mouth about his death warrant. "What, are you mad? I charge you get you home." (p. 157) Emilia insists on unearthing the scheme and Iago continues to caution her to keep quiet. So, Iago makes sure that Emilia will repose forever, and he knocks her off. Who could love another person as much as Iago savors Emilia? The last character to take a fall in Iago's ploy is Roderigo. To Iago, Roderigo is nothing but a moving block that he can position anywhere to help with his diagram. Roderigo is the one that Iago comes to, so that he can vent his anger about Othello's election of Cassio. Sympathetic Roderigo comments, "By heaven, I rather would have been his/ hangman. (p. 40) Iago has no care in the world for Roderigo's blows. Iago talks Roderigo into awakening Brabantio, Desdemona's father, and to break the news to Brabantio of his daughter's "wonderful" marriage. This eventually leads to the council chamber, where Desdemona and Othello express their love for each other. It is essential to understand that Roderigo

wants Desdemona for his wife. Brabantio recalls that Roderigo is a frequent visitor of Brabantio's home, because Roderigo has a crush on Desdemona. "--O, would you had/had her!--/Some one way, some another." (pp. 45-46) After the trial of Desdemona and Othello, Iago and Roderigo have a conference. Roderigo feels the situation is hopeless, because he believes now that he will never acquire Desdemona from that vicious Moor Othello. Iago urges Roderigo to not worry about it, and to join Iago in his game of vengeance on Othello. Later on, Iago assures Roderigo of Cassio and Desdemona's affair. "I cannot believe that in her; she's full of/most blessed condition," utters a shocked Roderigo. (p. 74) Iago eventually charms Roderigo into slaughtering Cassio. "So/shall you have a shorter journey to your desires by/the means I shall then have to prefer them." (p. 75) By inspiring Roderigo with this lie, Iago will have much of his work done, without blemishing his own hands. In act four, Roderigo drops by to demonstrate his disgust with Iago that nothing is happening. "I have heard too much, and your words/and performances are no kin together." (p. 137) Iago forewarns Roderigo to be patient, because time is of the essence. Iago and Roderigo position themselves on a street to prepare for Cassio's arrival. Iago preaches to Roderigo to "be bold, and take thy stand." (p. 144) Iago vows to back up Roderigo to make sure Cassio dies. Cassio makes his magical entrance and scraps with Roderigo. Both men injure each other, but only one dies. Iago is not around when others enter, but then he returns. Iago

immediately takes charge of the scene and demands others to help. Iago requests to know who the malefactors are that cause Cassio pain. Then, Iago looks to Roderigo. "O murd'rows slave! O villain!" (p. 147) Iago stabs Roderigo, who retorts, "O damned Iago! O inhuman dog!" (p. 147) That is the end of Roderigo as the story goes. Instead of backing up Roderigo, Iago turns his back on Roderigo. It shouldn't seem surprising to see Iago do this, because he treats everyone else with this fairness. Iago does not discriminate about who he wishes to destroy. This puts Iago's death total at four for five. Cassio is the big winner of the lottery of life. From this information and other data, the judgement of Iago's quality arises.

Now it is time to judge Iago's inner nature, as either villain or victim. It is possible to make a case for both dispositions. For crook, there is more than a sufficient amount of models. The former two paragraphs support the argument for Iago to be a transgressor, but more examples are there. By just allowing Iago to speak, many more representations pop up. "I hate the Moor,/and it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets/h'as done my office." (p. 63) "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." (p. 64) "For whiles this honest fool/plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,/and she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,/I'll pour this pestilence into his ear: /that she repeals him for her body's lust;/and by how much she strives to do him good,/she

shall undo her credit with the Moor." (p. 88-89) While there is overwhelming evidence of Iago's iniquity, Iago must have a chance to prove himself as an unfortunate. One can make a case that Othello treats Iago unfairly. Othello promotes Cassio, a younger and more unexperienced soldier. Certainly, Iago deserves some recognition for his knowledge and dedication to the military's cause. One must marvel at what Cassio might do if he is in Iago's spot. Thumbs up can to Iago for wishing to spare Desdemona. Iago and Othello contrive to take the life of Cassio, but Othello also wants Desdemona's head. Iago beseeches, "But let her live." (p. 110) It is no use, because Othello is set about the task. One can maybe squeeze something good out of the aftermath of Cassio's attack. The location is in utter chaos, and people don't know what is going on. Along comes Iago, riding in his white horse, to save the day. "Who's there? Whose noise is this that cries on/murder?" (p. 146) Iago can just disregard Cassio and leave him to bleed to death, but instead he provides relief to Cassio. In this, one must give credit to Iago for saving Cassio's life, although it is Iago who is mostly responsible for Cassio nearly passing away. After hearing the debate, a decision is in order. One opinion is for naming Iago as a gangster and the opposing view is for the calling Iago a sufferer. While the victim side offers a fair argument, there is no way that anyone is able to call Iago a man down on luck. There happens to be so much overpowering details that indicate Iago is a villain.

In *Othello*, Iago's excessive management of other characters directs the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona, the descent of Cassio, Emilia, and Roderigo, and from this factual base Iago is either the prey or the hunter. *Othello* is similar to *Romeo and Juliet* in that tragic deaths occur because of someone else's conflict. The two plays are different, because only one character in *Othello* has this conflict.