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Iago's Power of Rhetoric

In William Shakespeare's *Othello*, one can truly see the power of words and their delivery, and the tremendous effect that they can have on other people. Iago's rhetorical style captivates many characters and leads them to arrive at conclusions that he wants them to reach, and it is the ultimate driving force behind Othello's transformation from a calm and imperturbable general to a monstrous and furious puppet. Through his manipulation of other characters, Iago is nevertheless able to remain in their good graces while achieving his own ends, which makes his malicious behavior all the more formidable, for the most terrible evil is that which cannot be detected. While Iago uses imagery, reverse psychology, and indirect allusions to deceive others and bend them to his will, during his soliloquies he is honest to himself and to the audience, but never quite seems to reveal the true reason for his hatred of Othello.

Iago often employs vivid imagery to evoke passion and strong reactions from other characters. From the very beginning, he uses lewd descriptions to vulgarly compare Desdemona and Othello to sheep copulating to incense Brabantio: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.97-98). He continues the theme of animal sexuality when he says to the Venetian senator, "You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans" (1.1.124-127). These repulsive comparisons of his dear daughter having sexual relations with an animal plant in Brabantio's mind what Iago wants: a view of Othello as a barbaric savage. Iago

continues to taunt him, telling Brabantio, “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.129-131). Iago persists in connecting sexual intercourse with bestial words, and his descriptions successfully invoke strong emotional reactions of anger, disbelief and shame. His powerful language compels Brabantio to ignore logic and reasoning and charge Othello of bewitching his daughter, despite the fact that he likely viewed Othello before as the composed, respectable general he was. Through the power of his rhetorical style, Iago overrides Brabantio’s rationality and appeals to his basest emotions. Later on, Iago further exploits similar imagery to deceive Othello into thinking that Desdemona has been an unfaithful wife. He refers to Cassio and Desdemona as being “as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride” (3.3.460-461). Ultimately, the build-up of vivid descriptions of the two together pushes Othello over the edge. Rather than simply telling him of the affair, Iago paints scenes in Othello’s mind that haunt and infuriate him. His use of intense imagery makes his rhetorical style even more efficacious, as it complements his words with pictures that his victims visualize in their mind and become deeply distressed by. The effect of Iago’s words is so deep that Othello later unwittingly begins to imitate his language: after he strikes Desdemona, he angrily exclaims, “Goats and monkeys!” (4.1.295-296) before he exits. Not only do Iago’s words infect his mind, but they infect his tongue as well.

Iago’s use of reverse psychology captivates others’ attention and serves as a tool to make himself appear honest and unwilling to implicate others. On the surface, he appears to be a loyal and worthy friend, but his wording and tone always imply the opposite of what he says. When Othello asks whether it was Cassio that was talking with his wife, Iago responds, “Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it / That he would steal away so guiltylike, / Seeing your coming” (3.3.41-43). Superficially, he says that Cassio is honest and good while actually insinuating that

he is acting guiltily. Thus he seems to be praising Cassio's character, but in reality the remark is intended to instill doubt in Othello, which he succeeds in doing. Iago also expresses an unwillingness to reveal what he thinks to Othello, which captures Othello's attention all the more. Furthermore, after each indirect or direct reference to Desdemona's adultery and betrayal, Iago counteracts with a remark urging Othello not to take his assumptions too seriously, yet he compels Othello to do exactly that. Before he reveals his suspicions to Othello, Iago admits, "Though I perchance am vicious in my guess— / As, I confess, it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not" (3.3.171-174). By distancing himself in such a way from his words, he appears to be an honest friend who wants to see the best in others. He entreats, "I am to pray you not to strain my speech / To grosser issues nor to larger reach / Than to suspicion" (3.3.255-257). However, in saying this, Iago leads Othello to do the exact reverse while expressing his apparent hope that the rumor is untrue. Similarly, after he describes Cassio's supposed behavior during his sleep, Iago says, "Nay, this was but his dream" (3.3.484-485), which leads Othello to argue for the other side as he responds, "But this denoted a forgone conclusion" (3.3.486). On several other occasions, Iago urges Othello to be patient and calm, and asserts that he may be mistaken, but these comments only feed Othello's rage and his belief that the rumors are true, which is precisely what Iago desires.

By using indirect allusions and questions rather than direct accusations, Iago lets Othello believe that he is reaching his own conclusions. Iago leads Othello to accept as truth what he wants him to, but knows that the idea of Desdemona's infidelity will be manifest itself much more powerfully in Othello's mind if he believes it without it being explicitly told to him. Iago's murmured insinuation of "Ha, I like not that" (3.3.37) upon seeing Desdemona and Cassio together first plants the idea in Othello's mind that there is reason to be suspicious of the two.

When Iago asks him, “Did Michael Cassio, / When you wooed my lady, know of your love?” (3.3.105-106), and subsequently acts surprised to learn that Cassio had been involved, he seizes Othello’s attention. Even with his one-word response “Indeed?” (3.3.113), Iago’s tone of voice indicates his qualms without directly implicating Cassio. In addition, he repeats Othello’s questions rather than answering them, sowing doubt and misgivings in Othello’s mind: Iago replies “Honest, my lord?” and “Think, my lord?” (3.3.116-120) when Othello asserts his belief in Cassio’s honesty. Thus with his leading questions and subtly surprised reactions, Iago implies Cassio’s guilt without explicitly accusing him of being Desdemona’s lover, compelling Othello to second-guess Cassio’s character. If Iago had, in fact, directly incriminated Cassio, Othello would have rejected the notion due to his firm belief in his wife’s goodness of character. However, through his indirect method and tone of voice, he first introduces uncertainty that merely implies the possibility of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, but he feeds these suspicions with supposed evidence until they have become complete and indisputable truths to Othello. By simply planting the seed of doubt in Othello’s mind, Iago allows Othello to imagine that the idea came from himself rather than others. Consequently, Othello’s firm belief in his wife’s adultery is even more powerful, as Iago has lead him to believe that he has reached this conclusion on his own.

However, Iago’s manipulative rhetorical style in his speech others directly contrasts to his rhetoric in his soliloquies, the only times in which he is truly “honest Iago”; nevertheless, while the soliloquies appear to provide motives and reasons for his loathing of Othello, they never seem to address a sufficient cause for his antagonism. In his first soliloquy, he reveals his apparent incentives for his hatred of Othello and formulates his plan to destroy him: “I hate the Moor, / And it is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / ’Has done my office” (1.3.429-431). He

is not sure whether the suggestion is true, but decides to act on it as if it were. Given that he beguiles others with rumors, it would be foolish and incongruous if he committed such terrible acts spurred by one. Other possible reasons suggested by Iago's speeches are his inherent racism and his bitterness that Othello made Cassio his Lieutenant rather than Iago. Although Iago continues to speak in iambic pentameter, his language is much more direct and straightforward. For example, despite his animosity towards other characters, when he is alone he even recognizes their positive traits: "The Moor, howbeit that I endure him not, / Is of a constant, loving, noble nature" (2.1.310-311). He also directly refers to his plans and tricks, suggesting honesty in his soliloquies: "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear: / That she repeals [Cassio] for her body's lust; / And by how much she strives to do him good, / She shall undo her credit with the Moor" (2.3.376-379). Yet despite his honesty to the audience about his deceptions, he is not completely honest about his main reason for hating Othello. In addition, Iago also speaks ironically when he is alone; after he gives advice to Cassio, he acts as if he does not see himself as a villain at all: "And what's he, then, that says I play the villain, / When this advice is free I give and honest How am I then a villain / To counsel Cassio to this parallel course / Directly to his good?" (2.3.356-370). However, he then immediately compares himself to the devil, for "when devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now" (2.3.371-373). This demonstrates that Iago is not simply acting on revenge, but that he is an inherently evil person. Therefore, although the honesty in his soliloquies serves to clarify his plans and actions, it never reveals his genuine motive for wreaking such havoc. It truly appears as though Iago has no human motives, as he does not seem to care about power, money, or sex; there is only a void in his soul where there should be human desires, impulses, and

incentives. Contrasting God's intention for order, beauty, and love, Iago reflects Satan: he does not want to create anything, only to utterly destroy and create havoc.

At one point, Othello ironically tells Iago, "It is not words that shakes me thus" (4.1.49-50). However, Iago's words are precisely what have induced his transformation. Iago's mastery of different methods of manipulation gives him the power to take advantage of others' weaknesses and make their fears seem real. It is not only the words that hold importance, but also their delivery and who they come from; Iago's lies are only believable partially due to his credibility as an honest man, unwilling to implicate others. However, he is not fully honest with himself in his soliloquies. While Iago does present a few reasons and motives for his hateful actions, they are too superficial to be the real root cause of the catastrophe he creates. Therefore, as he deceives others so skillfully, he also seems to be deceiving himself of the true explanation for his evil behavior.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks. 2009. Print.