

The elusive ensign: towards a “grammar” of Iago’s motives

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Of all Iago’s gestures few are more unsettling than his defiant final words to his captors: “Demand me nothing; what you know, you know: /From this time forth I never will speak word” (5. 2. 300-1)¹. And so his part in *Othello* concludes, the real reasons for his “fault” being left for his torturers’ ears —and to the audience’s imagination. No one would “demand” him anything, were it not for that endless dialogue between work and interpreter which has been the hallmark of post-early modern critical practice. Just as art is seen to begin at the edges of the author’s “existential reality”, so the disappearance of the player is regarded as the *condition* of his re-birth as a character. In the case of Iago, this re-birth tends to hinge on the recovery of that most elusive element: the ensign’s motives.

The concept of character would then seem inseparable from an account of motivation. After all, both concepts emerge at the same historical moment. *Elizabethans*, it seems, explained action in terms of a taxonomy of humours or the equally venerable dichotomy of virtue and vice (Scragg 1968). The “motiveless malignity” which Coleridge found lurking in Iago would mean little to an audience which, as Bradbrook noted, “did not expect every character to produce one rational explanation for every given action” (1983, 59-60). Iago’s silence would thus be an adequate response for an audience which failed, or simply refused, to see beyond the deed.

Iago the *character* appears once science learnt to fix concrete motives to such actions, motives which in many cases (and Iago’s is one) are undisclosed or even unknown to the agent. As Bradley put it: “[The] question Why? is *the* question about Iago, just as the question Why did Hamlet delay? is *the* question about Hamlet” (1981, 181). The modern “will to know” (Foucault 1981) is no longer content with the visible *effects* of an agent’s behaviour. Unlike Lodovico, who pulls the curtain on the sight-poisoning object of the dead Desdemona and Othello, the latter-day hermeneut, like the post-Renaissance physician, defines his science by that which remains invisible or unspoken (Wilson 1993, 162). To keep the theatrical metaphor going, the final curtain spells the start, not the end, of his enquiry.

An important premise of the hermeneutic project is always to ignore the obvious or explicit. Iago’s silence is in this respect deemed far more eloquent than the earlier “motive-hunting” denounced by Coleridge. Peevishness at Cassio’s promotion, an obscure desire for Desdemona (Cinthio’s prime motive), the suspicion that ‘twixt his sheets Othello’s done his “office” (1. 3. 381-82), tend to be discarded for the psycho- and socio-pathological impulses of insecurity, racism or a kind of sensual delight in the *acte gratuit*. In performance actors and directors have found further “motives” to give flesh to Iago’s manipulations. The most suggestive of these is a repressed desire for Othello himself.

The list could no doubt be extended — the Iago file is far from closed and it would be presumptuous to attempt that here. My main concern is the notion of “motive” itself, as well as

¹ This and all subsequent references to *Othello* are to the New Penguin Shakespeare edition by Kenneth Muir (1968).

the relevance of such a discussion to such a complex and pivotal work as *Othello*. I don't want to gloss different interpretations of the play; simply to establish the rules by which we make sense of what, from the mid-seventeenth century, came to be called "character". *Othello*, written between 1602 and 1604, pre-dates that process but, in the figure of Iago, anticipates some of its problems.

In "The Dynamics of Interactions" McCall and Simmons highlight the relativity of the concept of action:

If we are to understand a person's behavior, to discern a role through it, we must try to discover for which audience he [*sic*] is avowing and imputing motives, and whether or not the vocabulary in terms of which he does so is an acceptable one to that particular audience. Once we decide whom he is playing to, so to speak, we can usually discern the motives or purposes that are organizing his line of action. If we do not share the vocabulary of motives held by that particular audience, however, we may be totally unable to make sense of [his] actions. (1983, 165)

This quote from recent sociology is relevant, not just because of the analogy it establishes with the theatre, but because of the light it sheds on the hermeneutic project as a whole. The attribution of motives is in actual fact a negotiation (an "interaction") between interpreter and agent. The analysis of action relies on a shared "vocabulary" between the social or theatrical actor and the patient or spectator. Iago's "what you know, you know" would thus seem like a "Keep Out" sign to those who speak in other tongues, i.e., who reject the concept of pure action or the (related) casuistry of fiends and devils. Granville-Barker expresses some of the baffled rage of the modern motive-hunter when he re-poses Othello's question to his ancient:

Why, indeed! The true answer, spuriously qualified, he has long ago given us [...]. 'I hate the Moor' — there has been no more to the whole elaborately wicked business than that. (1982, 116)

Yet, and here I would like to take McCall and Simmons' idea one step further, the absence of a shared vocabulary with the "original" audience doesn't preclude the possibility of further interactions. In *Meaning by Shakespeare* T. Hawkes alludes to the "literary pragmatism", by which plays such as *Othello* are assumed to "always 'take part' in historical milieux, whenever and however they are realized" (1992, 6). For Hawkes this means the abandonment of the essentialist humanist notion of a context-free meaning or "truth" behind or beneath the play, and the invitation to endless re-productions (appropriations) of the work in the idiolects of successive audiences. As far as the concept of character is concerned, it spells the dismantling of the (anachronistic) notion of a transcendent ego, of a more or less coherent "subjectivity" informing and guiding each of the agent's actions (Barker 1984, 31, 58; Belsey 1985, 48), and the translation of agency in terms "acceptable" to various publics.

This sounds liberating but actually, as Hawkes himself implies, it isn't. The expropriation of the agent from the grip of essentialist notions of subjectivity ushers in new models of coherence, models that may sound depressingly familiar. The re-presentation of Iago as devil-worshipper, skeptic or homosexual may actually play into the hands of a reactionary politics of character, tends, in Sinfield's words, to "activate regressive aspects" of the cultural formation in which the play is produced (1992, 51). Students of *Othello* are no doubt familiar with the attempts to make Iago our "contemporary". To adopt Sinfield's dichotomy, these range from Hazlitt's "conservative" identification of the ensign as "a sort of prototype of modern Jacobinism" (1969, 14) to more "liberal" categorizations such as Empson's (Iago the *déclassé* and so socially maladjusted individual [1979, 218-49]) and Muir's (Iago the pathologically jealous sadist [1968, 20]). Such translations or (more accurately) *socializations* of Iago's motives successfully avoid the essentialist confusion of character with individuality, but only in the name of the dusty old ideals of political, social and sexual "normality".

This doesn't have to be the case of course, and more "oppositional" responses to the characters' behaviour can show how *Othello* may "expose", rather than merely "promote", regressive ideologies (Sinfield 1995, 106). In his book *Shakespeare* (1989) Kiernan Ryan voices what, amongst more radical theatre critics and producers, seems to be the prevailing interpretation

of the play: the insanity of racism. Central to Ryan's account is the re-interpretability of the text from the standpoint of the present, the idea that "a text from the past is not a final product of its age, but a productive practice of both its moment and our own" (13; for fuller statements of this view see Williams 1977, 115-16; Bennett 1990, 75-7). This insight encourages what Ryan calls a "dialectical or two-way procedure", whereby the present re-interprets itself in the light of the past and the past is re-examined in the light of the present (1989, 13).

Yet rather than challenge humanist ideals, all this could be said to do is to reinforce them. Significantly citing G. M. Matthews' essay "*Othello* and the Dignity of Man" (1964), Ryan presents as the result of his "dialectical" engagement with the text, the revelation of the barbarity of a culture "whose ruling preconceptions about race and sexuality deny the human right of such a love to exist and flourish" (51). Focusing on Iago's motives, he simply reiterates the Coleridgean thesis that the reasons Iago adduces for his action are a smokescreen, that their "transparent inadequacy ... provokes us to search beyond them", to discover the "racist source of his malignity" (53; for similar responses see Salway 1991, Andreas 1995). The hermeneutic circle seems unavoidable, as does the connected idea that theatrical characters require some motivation for their action. This may, and frequently does, mean going against the grain of what is actually said or done. But no one, it seems, can resist the urge to treat the actor as a person, "a real human being who has become a sign for a human being" (Esslin 1994, 56). And like all human beings, they must have reasons for acting as they do.

The problem with Iago, as so many critics have complained, is not exactly a dearth of possible motives, but simply that the "evidence" we have to go on is mainly circumstantial. The inevitable impression we get from the play is, in Katherine Eisaman Maus's words, that what we see on stage "is only part of the truth, an evidence of things not seen, or not entirely seen" (1995, 177; see also Pujante 1991). Iago's soliloquies may, like Hamlet's, strike us as indices of a nascent subjectivity, but the real "clues" to his behaviour remain primarily on the "surface" level of the action itself. Does this then invalidate the Bradleian quest for motivation? If the question Why? points to some underlying psychological cause(s) of Iago's acts, criticism is indeed hard-pressed to provide explanations. The so-called "inner life" was in early modern times a relatively undeveloped concept and, as Margreta de Grazia and other theorists have maintained, the mere fact that a character reveals his or her secret thoughts to an audience on stage or in poetry, isn't necessarily proof of a kind of interiority *avant la lettre* (de Grazia 1995, 86-7; see also Ferry 1983, Greenblatt 1986). The concept of motive has a range of applications, only one of which pertains to the agent's psyche.

A less "psychologistic" grid for explaining human conduct was outlined by Kenneth Burke in *A Grammar of Motives* (1969). Burke proposed a "pentad" of motives, involving an account of not just why something was done (purpose), but what was done (act), when and/or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent) and how (agency) (xv). Thus, to take a couple of examples Burke himself cites, the *machine* can be constitute both an agency (i.e., an instrument to be used) and, in the vast accumulation of machinery, the industrial "scene". Similarly, *war* may be interpreted both as agency (a means to an end), an act and, in schemes proclaiming a cult of war, a purpose, etc.

This goes beyond Bradley in allowing us to show how, in a play laden with secrets and false reports, characters respond to more "manifest" stimuli, such as the events of the plot themselves, the classic theatrical elements of time and place, the question of an agent's function and an overt concern with method or technique. This is not to ignore wider concerns, such as the issues of race or class rightly stressed in various appropriations of the play. Rather, it is to deal with them *through*, instead of *despite*, the scant evidence of the text.

In the case of Iago, the motives offered at the end of Act 1 are not so much clues (whether false or otherwise) to an underlying malignity, as an instance of the process by which the interpreter-agent seeks to "catch up" with events that have in certain respects already got under way without him. Iago is in this respect the "patient" of a system in which "Preferment goes by letter and affection, /And not by old gradation" (1. 1. 36-7) and, in terms of the "plot", his demotion to the post of ancient. The secondariness involved here is evident in the appraisal of his

strategic relation both to Othello and to himself: “In following him, I follow but myself” (1. 1. 59). Iago’s determination to “act” is then dependent on the acts of others. This doesn’t make him a victim or parasite, but does mean his “revenge” on Othello will mainly be effected through others (Roderigo directly; indirectly Cassio, Bianca and Desdemona).

Iago’s “patience” is also clear in his relation to “scene”, the where and when of the action. Like Othello, Iago is out of place in Venetian society. But while the Moor Othello retains some use-value to the state, Iago has suffered a further displacement — his being barred from the rank of *lieutenant* (literally, “place-holder”). When the action shifts to Cyprus, to a “town of war/Yet wild” (2. 3. 207-8), Iago finds “the time, the place and the condition” conducive to his aims (2. 3. 290-1). His first act is, significantly, to re-place Cassio. As for the temporal factor, for Iago time or, more accurately, *timing*, is a growing concern. On the one hand, wit must, as he assures Roderigo (2. 3. 362), depend on “dilatatory time”; on the other, the concatenation of events in Cyprus forces him to act more quickly than he might have wished. Though he consoles Othello in Act 3 with the commonplace “Leave it to time” (3. 3. 243), time is something he struggles to keep in step with. The struggle comes to a head in Act 5 scene 1, as Iago informs the audience: “This is the night/That either makes me, or fordoes me quite” (5. 1. 130).

The final motive I want to consider is agency, the how of Iago’s acts. Hazlitt described Iago as an “amateur of tragedy in real life”, who rehearses his part “in downright earnest, with steady nerves and unabated resolution” (1969, 207). The theatrical analogy is reiterated by Granville-Barker, who attributes to Iago the “artist’s faculty for doing well whatever he takes pleasure in doing” and describes him as “something of a melodramatic actor in real life” (1982, 112, 115). The appeal to “real life”, a clear attempt to socialize this aspect of Iago’s “character”, is curiously enough made through the analogy of the theatre. For Hazlitt Iago’s acts have “tragic” proportions, whereas for Granville-Barker they tend towards the “comic”: his “confession” to Roderigo (“I hate the Moor”) would, repeated amid the “holocaust” of later events, “sound even to him so incongruous as to be all but comic” (1982, 116; see also Greenblatt 1980, 234).

The obsession with agency links Iago to other Jacobean schemers, such as Jonson’s Volpone or Middleton and Rowley’s De Flores. As well as serving as indices of the moral and social decadence of turn-of-the-century English society, such characters invite audiences to reflect on the mechanics of characterization itself. Iago’s “motives” are at best obscure, but only if the term is used in the psychologistic sense of purpose, of a reason or set of reasons which somehow precedes or transcends the work itself. This is not to discredit socializations of Iago’s behaviour which link his actions to forces at work in the cultural formation in which the play is produced and received. Instead, it is to make explicit the grounds on which those socializations are made, grounds which, as Robert Weimann has suggested in relation to Hamlet, are inseparable from the “existential realities of theatrical representation” (1985, 276) itself. The hermeneutic principle tends to ignore those “realities” in the (largely) decent appeal to “real life”, but then defeats its own purpose by re-classifying “life” in terms directly relating to the theatre (comic, tragic, melodramatic, etc.).

This inability to break out of the paradigms which condition any such socialization is a mirror-image of Iago’s own subjection to the strictly dramatic criteria of time, place and action. The concern with the *how* of his revenge, which quickly replaces the motive-hunting of earlier soliloquies, is symptomatic of the absence of such motives, or at least of the non-identity of motive with *purpose*. Instead, as we have seen, the “reasons” for his acts are to be traced to the “external” factors of scene and action. Iago “acts” (and speaks) as he does because the “conditions” in which he operates — the loss of military and so social status, a hostile, war-like environment, etc. — are the inevitable “motives” for such behaviour. That, adapting Keats, is all we know and all we *need* to know.

The kind of approach I’m proposing would then indeed begin with the dismantling of the notion of an inner conscience or subjectivity determining or controlling the characters’ acts. Such psychological imponderables as wounded pride, pathological jealousy or racism, etc., are attributable less as causes or (worse) justifications of particular behaviours, than as the effects or products of particular circumstances, circumstances which the play reflects in precise ways. The “grammar” of motives I’ve outlined takes account of those circumstances, as well as the ways in

which the play inverts “ordinary” causality to expose the spuriousness of our own rationalizations of a given character’s conduct.

When Francis Throckmorton was tried for treason in 1584, the official report claimed he told his torturers: “He that hath falsed his faith, hath lost his reputation”. This daring refusal to renounce his religion was interpreted as “proof” of his decision to give “his faith to bee a Traitor, and not to reveile the treasons” (Kinney 1990, 156). Throckmorton was duly “encouraged” to sign a confession in which he not only recognized his fault but actually demanded a “trebling of the torment” (158). I’m not suggesting the figure of Iago owes anything to Throckmorton, or that *Othello* the play was inspired by this report. The point of the comparison is simply to show how easily interpretation can usurp the “truth” of what’s actually said or done; how such usurpations are inspired by particular interests and how a vow of silence is almost always the invitation to speak under duress.

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