

Shakespeare's *Othello* – Iago's manipulation skills **The particular blend of character traits that enable Iago's manipulation of Othello**

Although the play is named *Othello*, and although this character's position and deeds are the center of the story, it is the character of Iago that expedites the action within the play. As in *Macbeth* where actually the character of Lady Macbeth gets into the center of attention, it is not so much the protagonist Othello, but rather Iago with his particular (negative) character traits who becomes intriguing for a reader or an audience.

The reason of Iago's success in manipulating Othello is based on the social differences of these two characters. As Iago states at the beginning of the play, not everybody can be a leader, and not every leader can have a good servant. His position as Othello's servant is the premise and fundament on which his character traits can flourish. If Iago had been in a superior position, he would not have been able to lead or advance the actions in *Othello* the way he does.

While there are many theories about whether Iago needed motives for his actions or not, I follow the idea of a primarily motiveless Iago who seems to be generally close to enviousness and destruction without necessarily needing particular motives. The way he seems to enjoy and focus on his destructive intrigues supports the idea of Iago being rather satisfied by the successful particular results his misled intellect is able to gain than by the supposed pragmatic goal of eventually getting promoted. Iago is an intelligent character who uses his tactical deftness to manipulate others. He is clever, eloquent, charismatic, strongly talented in improvising, and always has a clear feeling for timing. He is able to create an exact analysis of other people's constitutions and weaknesses. All these tactic placement of his talents, while being able to keep his actual intentions hidden, certainly helped to perpetuate his reputation of being an honest man. The most important talent he has in this sense is certainly his acting ability. Iago is a perfect actor. In the right moments he is able to believably pretend compassion, loyalty, or friendship.

His self-evaluation and his conscious commitment to reason certainly make him feel superior to others. He knows that Othello, who is not easily jealous, can get in rage once he gets suspicious. Thus, Iago plants this suspicion step by step by making ambiguous comments and by supplying "evidence" when it is needed.

He always pretends to be a moral and loyal friend with good advice. He makes Othello believe that Cassio talked about Desdemona, while he was actually talking about Bianca and his sexual relationship with her, to mention just one example. In that scene, it becomes apparent how Iago is able to use other people's thoughts and suspicions against themselves. Iago takes advantage of other people's trust, especially the trust Othello assigns him with. This irony is simply being overlooked or ignored by other characters because of Iago's good reputation. Iago would be transparent if his reputation was different. It's not so much *his* behaviour which leads characters into wrong directions, it has a lot to do with what others want to see or believe. Iago is smart enough to use other people's actual weaknesses and to let *them* draw wrong conclusions themselves.

For the knowing audience, Iago sometimes seems to be brazenly honest with others while his utterances are simply being misunderstood because of his good reputation, that is again other people's views on him. In his soliloquies that take the audience into confidence, Iago reveals himself as being absolutely self-reflective without regret, sometimes cynical, and maybe even nihilistic. It might be a hint of a fundamental disappointment in the past, maybe in the sense of love. Thus, his own wife Emilia is the one who eventually exposes him as what he really is. Focussing on jealousy as a key element of the play *Othello*, Iago seems to be the only one who does not get lost (anymore?) in emotional rage, but who is able to intellectually control the petty jealousy of others for his personal advantages.