

The Selfish Ambitious Road to Self Destruction

Comparing the villainy of Iago and Shylock in
Othello and *The Merchant of Venice*

Name: Yashika Vahi
Student no.: 21039024
Course no.: ARTS 190
Assignment: 2
Date: March 6, 2024

Outline

I. Thesis

Uncovering the villainous nature of Iago and Shylock

II. Iago's Villainy in *Othello*

Motivations Behind Iago's Villainy

-Ambition for promotion

1. Iago's desire for Cassio's position
2. Frustration at being overlooked for promotion

-Manipulative Tactics

A. Deception and manipulation of characters

B. Use of language and insinuations

1. Iago's persuasive and cunning speech
2. Exploiting the characters' weak spots

-Consequences of Iago's Villainy

A. Ultimate death because of his actions

B. Maintaining his mysterious essence even in his downfall

III. Shylock's Villainy in *The Merchant of Venice*

Shylock's Motivations for Villainy

-Personal grievances against Antonio

1. Historical mistreatment and insults

- Societal biases and prejudices

1. Shylock's status as a Jewish moneylender in a Christian society
2. Discrimination faced by Shylock due to his religious identity

-Shylock's Actions

1. The pursuit of Antonio's flesh
2. Shylock's insistence on the fulfillment of the deal

-Consequences of Shylock's Villainy

A. Legal implications

1. The trial and legal proceedings
2. Shylock's forced conversion and loss of wealth

IV. Common Themes in Shylock's and Iago's Villainy

- A. Desire for revenge
- B. Lack of Empathy for others
- C. Obsession with material wealth and selfish pursuit of power

V. Contrasts in Shylock's and Iago's Villainy

A. Motives

1. Sadistic vs societal motivations

B. Actions

1. Insider manipulation vs. outsider law tactics

VI. Conclusion

- Interesting insights from the villains' characters
- Moral lessons from their storylines

This essay sets out to uncover the villainous nature of Iago in *Othello* and of Shylock in *A Merchant of Venice*. Both these characters have been written as a cunning and malevolent addition to the plots of the plays. They craft the foundation of the stories with their evil ambitions, selfishness and their unquenchable thirst for power. Through their clever influence, they navigate the complexities of the plays, shaping outcomes of the scenes and immensely influencing the perspectives of other characters. This leaves a lasting impression on the story's dramatic aspect and leads to the characters' ultimate destruction in the end, caused by their own deceitful actions.

In *Othello*, the character of Iago is written as the central link to all the tragedies and chaos that advance the drama in the play. The beginning starts with Iago's motivations to take over the role of lieutenant and the injustice he feels over Othello's decision to choose the inexperienced Cassio for the promotion, despite his lack of military expertise.

“For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.” (1.1.65)

With this declaration by Iago, I would like to stress that his villainous nature is rooted in his character as simply a mindset of a realist. He is motivated solely by his own personal interests and ambitions and is not willing to remove his mask of loyalty and service until it is absolutely necessary. He is only motivated by the pursuit of selfish power and as realists often

do, he only shows his true colours and engages in violence when he doesn't have any choice and once in that state of revelation, he takes any measures, including killing his own wife, to ensure that his plan doesn't fall apart. He doesn't stick to a fixed identity or moral code and his ability to adapt and take on various roles considering the circumstances display a lack of clear principles.

Iago's unclear identity allows him to handle various situations without sticking to a consistent self-image. This makes Iago a complex and mysterious character, keeping both the characters in the play and the audience uncertain about his true intentions. His lack of a clear motive makes him unsettling and hard to predict. His delight in manipulating others and creating tragic events just for the thrill make him stand out, highlighting the pure wickedness that defines his character.

The lines "Our bodies are gardens to which our will are gardener's." (1.3.355) and "For I mine own gained knowledge should profane if I would time expend with such a snipe but for my sport and profit." (1.3.410) show that Iago's wisdom which was evident through his words was all a false façade meant to win over people and not true wisdom that he felt within himself as a virtue. His villainy was in his ability to effectively manipulate people through his words. Using different tactics for manipulation with each of the characters, he first understands the nature of their personalities, studies the core depth of their souls and then crafts a doubt or fear in their mind. He understands that the characters themselves are insecure so he exploits their weak spots, using his words as a mirror to make them face those insecurities that they already feel. In this

way, he remains truthful, or atleast maintains his mask of remaining truthful, making the characters feel as if the thoughts they're having are of their own and not smartly planted in their mind by Iago.

It's fascinating how his façade doesn't ever seem false at all and his ability to create chaos and disorder without letting anyone see through his schemes is the essence of what makes him such a good malefactor. For example, the third scene of act two in which he subtly introduces the topic of the Desdemona's beauty to Cassio, unconsciously drilling the idea of her into his brain, by making this idle conversation, he makes it seem as if he is truly Cassio's friend or at-least a good enough acquaintance who does not have any ill motives. However, when Cassio is gone, he subtly lets Montano know about his concerns about Cassio's 'supposed' drinking habit. By further declaring his love for Cassio to Montano, he once again gives the impression that he is only concerned about Cassio out of friendship and does not bear any evil intentions. In this way, his façade is practically impossible to see through.

Moreover, after the drunken fight between Cassio and Roderigo, when asked by Othello about what happened, Iago acts hesitant before telling the truth, leaving out key details and acting like he doesn't know much. He turns the tables and makes people think that he actually cares about Cassio through his words and would not want any harm inflicted on him. By appearing to be on no one's side through his version of the fight's story, he cleverly gives out the illusion that he is merely a spectator in the whole thing, all the while being the mastermind behind the chaos that keeps magnifying in the play.

“Though I am bound to every act of duty, I am not bound to that all slaves are free to. Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false.” (3.3.155) By coming off as such an inferior and loyal servant through his words, Iago makes Othello feel as if he’s just an advisor who is only scared and concerned about such sensitive matters because of his service to Othello, which in turn makes him more and more curious about what Iago is thinking. This makes Othello completely blind to Iago’s true intentions and even if he questions them, he disregards them due to the topic of conversation being of greater importance to his heart, that is, his wife and her intentions towards him.

Lastly, when his wrongdoings are finally revealed in the end and Othello stabs him with his sword, Iago's statement, "I bleed, sir, but not killed," (5.2.335) becomes a powerful symbol revealing the cunning nature of his villainy. This metaphorical admission acknowledges the harm Iago has endured during the unfolding events, signifying his resilience and determination even when exposed. Yet, it is Iago's subsequent declaration that truly emphasizes the depth of his villainous nature. When confronted with the consequences of his sinister actions, he coldly declares, "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. From this time forth, I shall never speak word." (5.2.350) This firm refusal to offer additional explanations reveal Iago's commitment to maintaining a veil of mystery around his motives.

By deliberately cutting off communication, he carries an air of ambiguity, denying closure to those ensnared in his psychological traps. This calculated decision also serves as a

final act of manipulation, forcing Othello and others to struggle with the aftermath of their actions without the satisfaction of a complete understanding. It solidifies Iago's role as a masterful and enigmatic villain, showcasing a villainy that goes beyond mere deception, creating a deliberate confusion that lasts for a long time within the characters and the audience of the play.

Simultaneously, In *The Merchant of Venice*, the character of Shylock is another complex portrayal of villainy whose vengeful nature becomes an important aspect in the progressing of the conflict in the play. Exploring themes of prejudice, revenge, and the consequences of unrestrained bitterness, initially, Shylock's villainous traits are evident in his relentless pursuit of a pound of Antonio's flesh as collateral for a loan. His character is further influenced by a historical backdrop, where being a Jewish moneylender subjects him to societal biases and discrimination.

The lines “If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.” (3.1.50) and “The villainy you teach me I will execute – and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.” (3.1.65) clearly indicate that Shylock's desire for revenge is a response to the deep emotional wounds inflicted by a community that despises him solely based on his religion - it serves as a psychological defense mechanism. It acts as a way for him to cope with the ongoing disrespect and degradation he endures. Seeking revenge becomes a means for Shylock to regain control over his life and restore a sense of pride systematically stripped away by a prejudiced society.

Therefore, Shylock's ravenous desire for revenge is complicated. It extends beyond seeking personal justice, transforming into a defiant stand against the unfair societal practices preserving discrimination. His actions challenge the established norms, compelling the audience and the society in the play to confront the consequences of prejudice and his bloodthirsty nature leads to contemplation on the lengths to which an oppressed person may go in an attempt to reclaim their dignity.

Further, through the line "I would my daughter were dead at my foot and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot and the ducats in her coffin!" (3.1.80), Shylock uses degrading remarks toward his daughter Jessica, demonstrating his complete lack of empathy. The desire for her death is combined with a reduction of her life to that of mere property, speaking about her as though she were a lifeless piece of jewellery studded with diamonds and ducats. This presents him as a person motivated by a vicious desire for money, even at the expense of his own family members' lives and well-being. This lack of empathy adds to the idea that Shylock is a villain who is unaffected by the core principles of human morality and attachment to family. The coffin's symbolism of death and finality serves to highlight the lengths Shylock will go in order to obtain wealth, referring to a deep void inside him, where the endless chase of financial gain triumphs over the genuine value of interpersonal connections.

Additionally, Shylock's declaration in court that he would prefer to bear the weight of carrion flesh rather than accept three thousand ducats highlights his intense resentment and desire for revenge. The choice of "carrion flesh" suggests something rotting or decaying,

emphasizing the extreme lengths to which Shylock is willing to go to satisfy his thirst for retribution. This imagery also reflects the toxic and vengeful nature of Shylock's character, as he is willing to maintain bitterness and hatred even at the cost of his own well-being.

The reasoning he gives for this demand, "But say it is my humour. Is it answered?" (4.1.40) to the judge in the court trial suggests that Shylock is aware of the unconventional and evil nature of his demand. He acknowledges that his actions may be perceived as unusual or cruel, but he associates them to his personal mentality. This adds a layer of self-awareness to Shylock's character, portraying him as unapologetic and resolute in pursuing what he believes is justice, despite social norms. He is not affected by anyone's pleading for mercy or rationality and is stubborn and firm on his decision of extracting his revenge.

However, as the play progresses, Shylock's relentless pursuit of his deal with Antonio in the courtroom trial, eventually makes the legal system turn against him, and he is forced to renounce his faith and convert to Christianity. This outcome serves as a punishment for Shylock's spiteful intentions and highlights the consequences of his single-minded pursuit of compensation.

At last, Shylock loses not only his wealth but also his identity, as he is compelled to abandon his Jewish heritage. The play addresses themes of justice and goodwill throughout but, in the end, it invalidates Shylock's extreme hatred and depicts the disastrous consequences of letting one's thirst for vengeance take priority over humanity and reason.

When comparing both these characters and evaluating their villainous traits, there is a lot of commonality that can be found in their natures. Both Shylock and Iago are driven by a deep-seated desire for revenge. Shylock's resentment towards Antonio stems from previous mistreatment linked to his Jewish identity, while Iago's revenge plot is rooted in feelings of jealousy and a supposed betrayal by Othello. This intense thirst for vengeance compels both characters to resort to cruelty and manipulation in the pursuit of their own interpretations of justice for themselves. Their willingness to harm others, often at the cost of their own moral integrity, is another common thread between the characters. A major moral defect in them is brought out by their common lack of empathy towards people they damage, as seen in Shylock's determination on getting Antonio's pound of flesh and Iago's manipulation that ultimately leads to Othello's terrible demise.

However, there are also a variety of differences that separate these characters as individual villains with their unique separate identities. While Iago is a dependable soldier in Othello's army and an insider, since his defection originates from within the ranks, his acts are more damaging. His villainy is made more sophisticated by his capacity to control and take advantage of his position as a confidant. In contrast, because of his Jewish ancestry, Shylock is an outsider in Venetian society. Although his employment as a moneylender to Christians puts him in a useful position, it also exposes him to prejudice and abuse. Being an outsider affects both Shylock's behaviour and how other people see him.

Moreover, Iago bases most of his motivations for chaos on perceived slights and personal grievances so they are mostly unjustified. He has no moral high ground in his actions, and his sadistic enjoyment in inflicting hurt is what motivates him to manipulate other people. Yet despite his harsh intentions, Shylock is motivated by the discrimination that he endures because of his religious beliefs. In this way, the audience may sympathize with Shylock's grievances, even if they disapprove of the extreme measures he takes.

In conclusion, both the plays offer interesting insights into these villains, depicting the more darker realm of humanity and an understanding into some of their cruel behaviours and actions. By going into the psychological depth of such villains through their dialogues and helping us see eye to eye with them regardless of their bad nature, their ultimate downfall in the end serves as a great moral lesson to learn the consequences of indulging our inbred darker desires of being cruel to others.

Bibliography

1. Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by Cedric Watts, Wordsworth Editions, 1997.
2. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. *The Merchant of Venice*. Harlow, Essex, England: Longman, 1994.