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»I Am Not What I Am«: Iago and Negative Transcendence

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Abstract: One of the perennial questions in Shakespeare studies concerns what Coleridge called the »motiveless malignity« of Iago. Instead of looking at Iago as an individual, however, I will argue that he is best understood as a representation of the »social character« of early modern bourgeois man. Iago's denial of spiritual values and his mercenary nature can be understood in this light. Fromm's theses concerning the interconnections among anal libido, the death instinct, malignant aggression, and necrophilia all find support in Shakespeare's supreme villain.

»Thus, the ultimate choice for man, inasmuch as he is driven to transcend himself, is to create or to destroy, to love or to hate.« (Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 1955, p. 37.)

1

Together with Hamlet and what, at least since the nineteenth century, has seemed to readers his puzzling delay in carrying out his revenge on Claudius for the murder of his father, no character in Shakespeare's plays has aroused more controversy and bewilderment among critics than Iago, whose soliloquy at the end of Act 1, Scene 3, Coleridge (1822–1827) indelibly described as »the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity« (p. 190). The problem is not that Iago lacks motivation for his all-consuming hatred but that, both here and in his ensuing soliloquy in Act 2, Scene 1, he furnishes too many

reasons for it. Not only has Cassio been promoted by Othello over Iago to the position of his lieutenant, but Iago voices fleeting and implausible suspicions that both Othello and Cassio may have cuckolded him with his wife Emilia, not to mention the claim that he himself does »love« (2.1.289) Desdemona, though this is in part simply to get even with Othello for what he has supposedly done to him with Emilia.

Perhaps the most convincing psychological reading of Iago is Harold Bloom's (1998) insistence that his »only true motive« is his »evidently sickening loss of being at rejection« by Othello, against whom he rebels out of what Satan, his literary epigone in *Paradise Lost*, calls »a Sense of Injured Merit« (pp. 434–35).¹ To be

¹ In his recent monograph on Iago, Bloom (2018) merely restates his earlier view that Iago, like Satan,



sure, a psychic injury of this magnitude, where Iago is traumatized by Othello's elevation of Cassio as Satan is by God's anointing of the Son as the ruler of Heaven, does appear to go some way toward rendering comprehensible the havoc he wreaks, and Kohut's (1972) concept of »narcissistic rage« is therefore not wholly valueless in trying to make sense of Iago's words and actions.

The insurmountable stumbling block to all such readings, however, is that they fail to take into consideration the lack of any sense of inwardness that would be necessary to account for Iago's character in realistic terms. In diametric opposition to Hamlet, who has »that within which passes show« (1.2.85), Iago's one-dimensionality stands in marked contrast not only to Othello but also to Desdemona, Cassio, and even subordinate characters such as Roderigo, Brabantio, Emilia, and Bianca, all of whom seem to feel recognizably human emotions. Coleridge is therefore fundamentally correct in ascribing to Iago a »motiveless malignity,« and all attempts to refute this view, from A. C. Bradley's at the dawn of the twentieth century to Bloom's at its close, are conversely misguided. According to Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), »there is no mystery in the psychology of Iago,« whose »longing to satisfy the sense of power is [...] the strongest of the forces that drive him on« (p. 214). In countering Coleridge, Bradley maintains that to imagine an Iago who is animated by »a disinterested delight in the pain of others« is, »if not a psychological impossibility, at any rate not a human being,« and »in a purely human drama like *Othello*« such a character »would be a ruinous

suffers from »a Sense of Injured Merit« and that being passed over for promotion has »devastated his sense of being« (p. 4). Stanley Edgar Hyman (1970), in the final book of his distinguished career, rejects »any single critical method« in favor of a »pluralist criticism« in which all approaches to the question of Iago's motivation »are equal, cooperating partners in a critical symposium,« though he acknowledges his own predilection for a »theological reading« in which »the figuration of Satan [...] is Iago's richest and most resonant meaning« (pp. 139–140).

blunder« (p. 197). Hence, Bradley resolves to »look more closely into Iago's inner man« (p. 204) and finds it inconceivable that he could be impelled by the »love of evil simply as evil« to take »pleasure in the pain of others simply as others,« rather than inflicting pain as a way of achieving some ulterior purpose such as harming a competitor or satisfying a »thwarted sense of superiority« (pp. 212–213).

From Augustine's theft of the pears as an adolescent in his *Confessions* to Raskolnikov's murder of the pawnbroker in *Crime and Punishment*, however, the orthodox Christian understanding of evil is that it is in its essence a *gratuitous* act, something done purely for its own sake, rather than springing from a motive that, however base, renders the deed comprehensible and thereby less horrifying. For Bradley to assert that »there is no mystery in the psychology of Iago,« consequently, could not be more mistaken since, if he is the incarnation of evil, then it follows that he must be an unfathomable mystery. The same goes for Bradley's assumption that it is possible to »look [...] into Iago's inner man,« since that illusion of interiority is just what Shakespeare deprives us of in Iago's character. Finally, Bradley's belief that »a disinterested delight in the pain of others« is a »psychological impossibility« is contradicted by the gallery of sociopaths adorning the museum of human history, who attest that the possibility of repudiating all fellow feeling is an existential virus that has always lurked in the heart of man.

On a more mundane level, in arguing that a thoroughly evil Iago would not be »a human being« and that such an aberration would ruin »a purely human drama like *Othello*,« Bradley discounts the extent to which Shakespeare's tragedy, as Bernard Spivack (1958) has shown in a classic study, is indebted to the morality-play tradition going back to *Everyman* and *Mankind*, and Iago the descendant of the Vice figure dominating many of these fifteenth-century spectacles for whom evil is »solely an organic function and an artistic pleasure« and whose »total euphoria leaves [...] no room for



conscience« (p. 45). Indeed, Spivack classifies *Othello* as a »hybrid« drama in which its modern psychological realism fleshes out the allegorical skeleton that Shakespeare inherited from his medieval forebears. Because of this lineage, Iago is not, in fact, a completely »human being,« and *Othello* mesmerizes audiences in no small measure because it is *not* »a purely human drama.« Bradley (1904) is on much more solid ground when he observes that a »fit companion« for Iago is to be found not in Milton's poignantly humanized »archangel ruined« but rather in that spirit of pure negation, Goethe's Mephistopheles, who exhibits »something of the same deadly coldness, the same gaiety in destruction« (pp. 195–196) of which Shakespeare distills the essence in Iago. Bradley's animadversions on Iago's »deadly coldness« and »gaiety in destruction« likewise underscore the justice of W. H. Auden's (1962) comparison of Iago to a practical joker who is »without motive« in any positive sense but is »certainly driven« by the negative »fear of lacking a concrete self, of being nobody,« and whose malice takes the form of a »projection of his self-hatred onto others, and in the ultimate case of the absolute practical joker, this is projected onto all created things« (p. 257).

2

If Iago, as both Coleridge and Auden have concluded, is »without motive« that would render his character comprehensible in ordinary human terms, then all attempts at grasping his psychology as an individual are bound to founder. Neither his indiscriminate sexual jealousy, nor his supposed »love« for Desdemona—the passion that propels the Ensign in the 1566 novella by Giraldi Cinthio that is Shakespeare's source for *Othello*, but of which Iago makes only the barest mention—nor even his rage at being slighted by Othello suffices to account for his cascading sequence of evil deeds. And if Iago's smorgasbord of avowed motives must be deemed unsatisfactory, still more is this true of the more speculative interpretations habitually favored by psychoanalytic readers, such as that Iago's paranoia follows

Freud's script and can be attributed to his unconscious homosexual love for Othello.

It is not that this last explanation is implausible or that no evidence can be found to support it. As part of his scheme to arouse Othello's jealousy, Iago, in Act 3, Scene 3, recounts an incident—whether real or fabricated is immaterial—in which he shared a bed with Cassio, who, while calling out in a dream that he loved Desdemona, pressed kisses on Iago's mouth and »lay his leg o'er my thigh« (426). Similarly, when Iago cites as one of his grounds for enmity against Othello the suspicion that »the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat« (2.1.293–294), the phrase »leapt into my seat,« in addition to insinuating that Othello has copulated with his wife Emilia, conjures up the image that Othello has anally penetrated Iago himself. Homoerotic motifs are, accordingly, incontestably present in the play, but they give us only one more straw at which to clutch in seeking to unravel the enigma of Iago.

In view of the dead end at which we arrive in trying to analyze Shakespeare's archvillain using the tools of a purely individual psychology, I propose that we take a different tack and consider Iago instead with the aid of the ideas of Erich Fromm, beginning with his seminal concept of the »social character,« which Fromm (1947) defines as »the core of a character structure common to most people of a given culture« (p. 60) or social class. If we do so, many otherwise puzzling features of Iago's character—both in the sense of his distinctive qualities and of his function in the play—fall into place. More specifically, since Shakespeare not only writes the play in the early years of the seventeenth century but takes over from Cinthio its mercantile Venetian setting, let us examine what Fromm has to say, in *The Sane Society* (1955), about the defining features of early modern capitalism. »Briefly,« Fromm writes, »these common features are«:

»1—the existence of politically and legally free men; 2—the fact that free men (workers and employees) sell their labor to the owner of capital on the labor market,



by contract; 3—the existence of the commodity market as a mechanism by which prices are determined and the exchange of the social product is regulated; 4—the principle that each individual acts with the aim of seeking a profit for himself.« (p. 83)

At the same time, Fromm cautions, in this incipient phase of capitalism, unlike its full-blown form in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, »the practices and ideas of medieval culture still had a considerable influence on the economic practices of this period« (p. 84).

With these statements in mind, Iago comes into focus as a paradigm of capitalist man driven by the profit motive. What is his incessantly repeated advice to Roderigo, »Put money in thy purse« (1.3.340), but a pithy summation of the ethos of capitalism? When Iago commends those in subordinate positions who throw »but shows of service on their lords« in order to »well thrive by them« and »Do themselves homage« (1.1.51–53), he reiterates the principle that all behavior should be guided by this narrow conception of self-interest. Similarly, when he tells Roderigo, concerning his qualifications to be Othello's lieutenant, »I know my price, I am worth no worse a place« (10), he takes for granted »the existence of the commodity market as a mechanism by which prices are determined and the exchange of the social product is regulated.« At the same time, Iago still lives in a partially feudal world, since he complains that »Preferment« no longer goes »by old gradation, where each second / Stood heir to th' first,« but rather »by letter and affection« (35–37)—that is, by favoritism—although he admits to Roderigo with characteristic inconsistency that he himself had dispatched »Three great ones of the city« (7) to plead his case for promotion to Othello.

Despite having the profit motive as its engine, Fromm (1955) emphasizes that the attitudes inculcated by the capitalist system, including the privileging of »quantification and abstractification,« transcend »the realm of economic production, and spread to the attitude of man to things, to people, and to himself« (p. 113).

Iago's proclivity to engage in »quantification and abstractification« is everywhere apparent in his discourse. When Roderigo contemplates drowning himself over his unrequited love for Desdemona, Iago chastises him: »I have looked on the world for four times seven years, and since I could distinguish betwixt a benefit and an injury I never found a man that knew how to love himself« (1.3.312–315). A footnote in the latest Arden edition of *Othello* asks in puzzlement: »Why does Shakespeare make such a point of Iago's precise age?« But Fromm has already supplied the answer. Iago gives his age using the multiplication table because, as the embodiment of capitalist man, this is simply how he thinks. When Iago extolls knowing the difference between a »benefit« and an »injury« and exhorts Roderigo to »love himself,« he again subscribes to the principle enunciated by Fromm that, in a market-based society, »each individual acts with the aim of seeking a profit for himself« and, as »politically and legally free men,« they owe loyalty to none but themselves.

The anal imagery in the play to which I have already alluded in connection with the conventional psychoanalytic interpretation of Iago's paranoia as stemming from repressed homosexual love for Othello likewise takes on additional meaning in light of Fromm's ideas. As Fromm argues first in *Man for Himself* (1947) and again in *The Sane Society* (1955), the character types that Freud developed in the context of his drive theory can be reformulated in interpersonal terms so that they are understood as manifestations not of »various types of libido organization« but rather of »specific kinds of a person's relatedness to the world« (1947, p. 58). Fromm distinguishes between »productive« and »nonproductive« orientations, the latter of which he breaks down into the »receptive,« »hoarding,« »exploitative,« and »marketing« orientations.

Most directly relevant to Iago is the hoarding orientation, which Fromm (1955, p. 91) equates with Freud's »anal character« and for which »fill thy purse with money« (1.3.348) serves as



the perfect slogan. But insofar as capitalism is based on the principle of »the use of man by man« (Fromm 1955, p. 94), Iago is equally a representation of the exploitative orientation, which implies »a sadistic kind of relationship« (Fromm 1947, p. 111), such as Iago displays most blatantly with Roderigo and Othello but in actuality governs all his dealings with others; and, as Fromm (1955) notes, the hoarding is »blended with the exploitative orientation« (p. 136) when capitalism reaches its full bloom in the nineteenth century. Finally, insofar as the marketing orientation is characterized by the absence of a »specific and permanent kind of relatedness« apart from a »changeability of attitudes« in response to whatever may be demanded by the immediate situation, a byproduct of which is an essential »emptiness« and »loneliness of man« (pp. 75, 77), it is surely justified to see in the chameleon Iago also the traits of the marketing orientation—and thus of at least three of Fromm’s four nonproductive orientations.

Underlying Fromm’s typology of orientations is the dichotomy between humanistic and authoritarian ethics he introduces in *Man for Himself*, as well as the »normative humanism« he further expounds in *The Sane Society* (1955, p. 12). A key ingredient of Fromm’s conceptual armamentarium is what he designates as the »pathology of normalcy,« which is not an »individual pathology« (p. 6) but is rather the consequence of the realization that »the very person who is considered healthy in the categories of an alienated world, from the humanistic standpoint appears as the sickest one—although not in terms of individual sickness, but of the socially patterned defect« (p. 203). Could there be a better description of »honest« Iago, who is seen by everyone in the play as the paragon of reliability and helpfulness and who gives the crudest expression to the racism and misogyny that are the ideological underpinnings of the Venetian state, than that he is the exemplar of the »pathology of normalcy,« that is, the one who is »considered healthy« by this »alienated world« but is in reality »the sickest« because he

is the most virulent carrier of its »socially patterned defect«?

3

As early as *The Sane Society* (1955), Fromm posits a desire for transcendence as one of the cornerstones of a humanistic psychoanalysis. If a person, confronted with »the passivity and accidentalness« of his existence as a created being, is incapable of love, and therefore of living with a sense of »purposefulness and freedom,« he writes: »*There is another answer to this need for transcendence: if I cannot create life, I can destroy it. To destroy life makes me also transcend it.* Indeed, that man can destroy life is just as miraculous a feat as that he can create it, for life is the miracle, the inexplicable« (p. 37). This argument, which hearkens back to the antithesis between positive and negative responses to the dilemmas of modernity brilliantly explicated by Fromm in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), in turn looks ahead to the overtly metaphysical concerns of his later works from *The Heart of Man* (1964) to *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973). Although I owe the phrase »negative transcendence« not to Fromm himself but to the commentary of Daniel Burston (1991, p. 70), it captures the essence of Fromm’s idea and opens new vistas for our analysis of Iago as a »social character« who comprises an amalgam of the »unproductive orientations« spawned by early modern capitalism.

If, as Fromm (1955) maintains, »man, being torn away from nature, being endowed with reason and imagination, needs to form a concept of himself, needs to say and to feel ›I am I‹« (p. 60), then the choice between creation and destruction faced by every human being is likewise one between achieving a »sense of identity« by »developing the unique and particular entity which is ›he‹ to a point where he can truly sense ›I am I‹« and, conversely, an alienation that »tries to solve the problem« of how to relate to the world »in a different way, namely by conforming« (p. 197). The alienated man, therefore, is »estranged from himself«



(p. 120); and in modern society, Fromm adds, such alienation »is almost total; it pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he consumes, to the state, to his fellow man, and to himself« (p. 124). It follows that the most thoroughly alienated man suffers from the »pathology of normalcy,« and »since he experiences himself as a thing, an investment, to be manipulated by himself and by others, he is lacking a sense of self.« This condition »creates deep anxiety« and can lead a person not only up to but beyond the »border of madness« because, when confronted with the »vision of nothingness,« he or she »cannot say ›I‹ any more« (p. 204).

Here I think we are as close as it is possible to come to plucking out the heart of Iago's mystery. While preaching his gospel of selfishness in his opening exchange with Roderigo, Iago engages in head-spinning double talk:

»It is as sure as you are Roderigo,
Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:
In following him I follow but myself.« (55–57)

Then, after vowing never to wear his heart on his sleeve, Iago concludes: »I am not what I am« (1.1.64). In both instances, the Arden editor is again at a loss. He arbitrarily changes the final period of the former passage, found in both the Quarto and Folio texts of the play, to a colon in order to »make the lines slightly less baffling,« while he opines that »I am not what I am« »appears to mean ›I am not what I seem,« although he rightly notes the allusion to God's declaration to Moses in Exodus, »I am what I am« (3:14; KJV), echoed by St. Paul in I Corinthians, »By the grace of God, I am what I am« (15:10). But to reduce Iago's metaphysical paradoxes to platitudes—appearance may not correspond to reality, and were he in Othello's position, he would not let a servant get away with what he himself is now doing—is to show oneself incapable of grasping Shakespeare's language. Not only is it true, as Fromm observes in *Man for Himself* (1947), that »the selfish person does not love himself too much but too little,« and »in fact he hates himself«

(p. 131), but Iago, the radically alienated man, is unable to even to say »I am I.« Consequently, he can solve the problem of existence only by inverting God's »I am,« an annihilation of personal identity that is bound to result in an orgy of destruction.

As with the hypothesis that we approach Iago as a »social character,« many more things fall into place once we have recourse to Fromm's concept of »negative transcendence.« Whether or not we agree with Bloom (1998) that Iago's »only true motive« is his rejection by Othello, he ends up in the right place when he speaks of Iago's »loss of being,« for this is precisely what Fromm, in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), means by the »*existential failure*« of »man the destroyer,« who has »failed to become what he could be according to the possibilities of his existence« (p. 296). When Bloom disparages Auden's interpretation of Iago as »the apotheosis of the practical joker« as an attempt to »restrict Iago's genius« because he »is a great artist and no joker« (p. 435), he misses the ontological dimension of Auden's argument, and thus the degree to which it anticipates his own. Indeed, when Auden discerns in Iago the »fear of lacking a concrete self, of being nobody,« and explains his behavior as a »projection of his self-hatred [...] onto all created things,« he not only spells out what it means to experience the »loss of being« but he also gives what can fairly be described as an illuminating Frommian reading of Iago's character, although Auden himself nowhere acknowledges his affinity with Fromm.²

To speak of Iago as a »great artist« is not incompatible with seeing him as an embodiment of what Fromm (1973) calls »destructiveness

² As Rollo May points out in *The Age of Anxiety* (1950), »there is a remarkable similarity between the picture of our culture« given by Auden and Fromm, inasmuch as they are »both impressed by the same characteristics of [...] automaton conformity, the alienation of man from himself and his fellows, and the destruction of individuality and originality resulting from the apotheosis of commercial values« (p. 173, n. 59).



and cruelty« in their purest form, which results from »the only true perversion« of »*life turning against itself in the striving to make sense of it*« (p. 31). When Iago concludes his first soliloquy by exulting, »I have't, it is engendered! Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light« (1.3.402–403), he employs metaphors of conception and pregnancy to describe his newly hatched plot, since only by perverting the language of life can he capture what it feels like to destroy life. As Fromm recognizes, sadism possesses a »devotional« quality because it has »no practical aim,« but is essentially »*the transformation of impotence into the experience of omnipotence,*« or, in other words, »the religion of psychical cripples« (p. 323). Fromm's analysis of sadism shows once again why Bradley is mistaken in doubting that Iago could be driven by the »love of evil simply as evil« to take »pleasure in the pain of others simply as others,« and in failing to comprehend why the absence of any positive motivation makes it impossible for readers to »look more closely into Iago's inner man.«

That the »loss of being« propelling Iago's sadism is a form of »impotence« that makes him a »psychical cripple« can be seen most clearly in his aggressive banter with Desdemona in Act 2, Scene 1, after they have both landed in Cyprus and are awaiting the arrival of Othello. When Desdemona seeks to pass the time by asking Iago how he might praise her, he prefaces his mock encomium in rhymed couplets with an apology for the slowness of his wit:

»my invention
Comes from my pate as birdlime does
from frieze.
It plucks out brains and all; but my muse
labours
And thus she is delivered.« (125–128)

Here, too, as his use of the words »labours« and »delivered« indicates, Iago resorts to the language of pregnancy as a tactic to deflate his listeners' expectations concerning his poetic gifts. But though such expressions of humility are a literary convention, there is nothing commonplace about how Iago describes what

emerges from his head. As Janet Adelman (1997) has explicated in her scintillating Kleinian reading of the play, »birdlime« is a »soiling agent« that cannot be peeled off without also removing the nap of the coarse woolen cloth to which it adheres, so what he produces is a »dangerous evacuation« that amounts to a »vindictive fantasy of a fecal pregnancy [...] that can project Iago's inner monstrosity and darkness into the world« (p. 141).

Thus, the anal imagery that suffuses the play, which I have linked to Iago's »hoarding orientation,« surfaces once again to infect and besmirch the idea of childbirth. As his exchange with Desdemona continues, Iago runs through the permutations of four categories of women—fair and wise, foul and wise, fair and foolish, foul and foolish—the upshot of which is that they are all sluts.³ When Desdemona then asks what Iago would say about a truly virtuous woman, after a lengthy preamble in verse, he declares that she would be good for nothing save mindless domesticity—»To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer«—to which Desdemona responds, »O, most lame and impotent conclusion!« (2.1.160–161). Beneath the banter, Iago vents his misogynistic stereotypes of women as either whores or drudges, while Desdemona strikes back by diagnosing him as at once »lame«—that is, a »psychical cripple«—and »impotent.«

Desdemona's language converges uncannily with Fromm's, and by pairing »lame« with »impotent« in her rebuke of Iago she lends credence to Fromm's (1973) contention that »sexual impotence is only a small part« of the con-

³ To cite only one instance, Iago says of the ugly but intelligent woman, »If she be black, and thereto have a wit, / She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit« (2.1.132–133), where »white,« in the sense of »fair-complexioned man,« echoes »wit« and puns on »wight« or »creature,« while »blackness« means not only »foulness« but also the woman's »pussy,« which the penis of the man will »fit« (or, in the Quarto version, »hit«). The wordplay on blackness and whiteness in the lines evokes the theme of interracial sexual union in *Othello*.



dition that he calls »complete vital impotence,« which a man »will do almost anything to overcome,« including in extreme instances »cruelty and murder« (p. 266). Contemporaneously with Kohut, Fromm notes that when a narcissistic person is wounded by an injury to his self-esteem he »usually reacts with intense anger or rage« (p. 228), and it draws Fromm's thought closer to Bloom's if we apply to Iago what he says in *The Heart of Man* (1964), namely, that »revengeful violence« frequently has its origin in a »shattering of faith« (p. 28) that can cause »the deeply deceived and disappointed person« to »begin to hate life« (p. 30). This hatred of life leads to the desire to destroy it, which brings us back to negative transcendence because »to destroy life also means to transcend it and to escape the unbearable suffering of complete passivity« (p. 31).

Although it would be pointless to dispute that Iago suffers from a narcissistic pathology ignited by his »shattering of faith« in Othello, my concern is not to reconstruct the etiology of Iago's rage or with pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of his motives. It is rather to demonstrate that his malignity is, as Fromm (1973) writes of aggression, but one component of a »syndrome« that includes such features as »strict hierarchy, dominance, class division, etc.,« and is thus »to be understood as part of the *social character*, not as an isolated behavior trait« (p. 193). Building on his opposition between productive and the various unproductive orientations, Fromm (1964) in his later works contrasts the »syndrome of growth« with the »syndrome of decay,« or what he also calls »biophilia« with »necrophilia.« The latter is fueled by a »malignant narcissism« that »prompts men to destroy for the sake of destruction« (p. 23) and constitutes »the most morbid and the most dangerous among the orientations to life of which man is capable« (p. 45). Just Fromm had earlier reformulated Freud's theory of character types in interpersonal terms, so too, in his final period he offers a humanistic counterpart to Freud's mythic duality of Eros and the death drive by postulating that »there is no more fundamental distinction between men, psycho-

logically and morally, than the one between those who love death and those who love life« (p. 38).

Fromm's recasting of anality as a manifestation of the hoarding orientation evolves into the proposition that necrophilia is »*the malignant form of the character structure of which Freud's ›anal character‹ is the benign form,*« and that such psychically crippled individuals »have a deep interest in and affinity to feces as part of their general affinity to all that is not alive« (1964, pp. 54–55). Our insight into Shakespeare's characterization of Iago unfolds in tandem with Fromm's ideas. The »fantasy of a fecal pregnancy« that Adelman has discerned in Iago's repartee with Desdemona becomes more fully intelligible in light of Fromm's analogy (1973, p. 407, n. 36) that necrophilia is to anality as biophilia is to genitality, as well as his observation that »just as sexuality can create life, force can destroy it« (1964, p. 40). Iago is driven to destroy both Othello and Desdemona, as well as everyone else who crosses his path, because their incandescent love represents the positive transcendence that he can never hope to experience, and thus his only recourse is to the use of force, which, quoting Simone Weil, Fromm defines as »the capacity to transform a man into a corpse« (p. 40).

Immediately after Desdemona humiliates Iago by mocking his »lame and impotent conclusion,« she converses with Cassio, who takes her by the hand and, in a courteous gesture, kisses his fingers. In an aside, Iago murmurs, »would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!« (2.1.176). Again Adelman's (1997) commentary is masterful. By transforming Cassio's fingers into enema tubes, she submits, the latest iteration of Iago's fantasy »violently brings together not only lips and feces, mouth, vagina, and anus, but also digital, phallic, and emetic penetration of a body [...] imagined only as a container for feces« (p. 132). The common denominator is Iago's necrophilia, or his obsession with feces as »part of his general affinity to all that is not alive.«



One of the most puzzling features of *Othello* is the Clown, whose character is so feebly drawn—by comparison with such scene-stealers as the Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, Lear's Fool, and the Porter in *Macbeth*—that he is frequently bypassed altogether by critics. But when he approaches the musicians who have been hired by Cassio to serenade Othello and Desdemona, the following dialogue ensues:

Clown: Why, masters, have your instruments been in Naples, that they speak i'th' nose thus?

1 Musician: How, sir? How?

Clown: Are these, I pray you, wind instruments?

1 Musician: Ay marry are they, sir.

Clown: O, thereby hangs a tail.

1 Musician: Whereby hangs a tail, sir?

Clown: Marry, sir, by many a wind instrument that I know. But, masters, here's money for you, and the general so likes your music that he desires you, for love's sake, to make no more noise with it. (3.1.3–13)

The reference to Naples is due to the association of the city with syphilis, one of the most grotesque symptoms of which is damage to the nose, which the Clown uses to mock the »nasal« sound of the musicians' instruments. His interlocutor's inability to follow his witty logic leads the Clown to ask if they are playing »wind instruments,« following which he puns on the phrase »hangs a tale« by saying that tails hang »by many a wind instrument« that he knows, a joke about farting. »Tail,« moreover, is slang for »penis« while also alluding to the tails of animals, so the passage that begins with an image of phallic disease then collapses genitality into anality, a microcosm of the larger movement of the play in which Iago's necrophilia destroys the biophilia represented by the sexual passion of Othello and Desdemona.

Since this seemingly irrelevant scene between the Clown and the Musician thematically re-

flects Iago's dominance of the world of this tragedy, it becomes significant that money is exchanged, and the repetition of the word »instruments« can be interpreted as a symptom of Iago's personification not only of »*the malignant form of the anal character*« but also of the »marketing character,« the modern type of capitalist man for whom, as Fromm (1973) writes, »everything is transformed into a commodity—not only things, but the person himself, [...] and whose principle it is to make a profit by favorable exchange« (pp. 387–388). Whereas both Iago's hoarding and marketing orientations are epitomized by the maxim »Put money in thy purse,« his instantiation of the even more alienated being whom Fromm labels »cybernetic man« is encapsulated in his avowal to Desdemona before launching into his diatribe against women, »I am nothing if not critical« (2.1.119). As Fromm elaborates, cybernetic man could also be called »*monocerebral man*« because his »approach to the whole world around him—and to himself—is cerebral«; and »this cerebral-intellectual approach goes together with the absence of an affective response« (p. 391), a combination evinced in Iago. No less pertinent is Fromm's observation that »*monocerebral man*« is also characterized by »a special kind of narcissism that has as its object himself—his body and his skill—in brief, himself as an instrument of success« (p. 391). Iago's gloating is seen in such exclamations as »I have't, it is engendered!« or the resolution to »plume up my will / In double knavery« (1.3.392–393), and in boasting of how he uses his »will« as an »instrument of success« Iago may be said to compose the score for the »wind instrument« to which the Clown jocularly adverts in his banter with the Musician.

Iago's most fulsome paean to the will occurs as he berates Roderigo for his thoughts of suicide over his hopeless infatuation with Desdemona. When Roderigo laments that it is not in his »virtue to amend« his feelings of despair, Iago responds:

»Virtue? a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to



the which our wills are gardeners. [...] If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts; whereof I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or scion.« (1.3.319–333)

According to Iago, it is solely up to the will to choose what to plant in the »gardens« of our bodies, and it is incumbent on reason to restrain »the blood and baseness of our natures.« But all the energy of his language goes into spelling out what lies on the irrational side of the scale, and his claim that what is popularly known as love is nothing but a »sect or scion« of lust brings his view of human nature into conjunction with that of Freud, for whom love is likewise merely an illusory sublimation of sexual desire.

In pondering »the connection between the anal-hoarding character and necrophilia,« Fromm (1973) delineates a continuum that goes from the »normal anal character« at one end, through the »sadistic character« in the middle, to the full-blown »necrophilous character« on the other. The severity of the pathology »is determined by the increase of narcissism, unrelatedness, and destructiveness« (p. 387) as one moves along the spectrum. Although sadism is for Fromm »a perverse kind of relatedness,« he points out that »sadists are still *with* others; they want to control, but not to destroy them,« whereas the aim of necrophiles »is to transform all that is alive into dead matter; they want to destroy everything and everybody, often even themselves; their enemy is life itself« (p. 387).

If we apply Fromm's schema to the play, the Clown may be said to represent the »normal« anal character, which resembles the oral and genital characters in that it »belongs to a period before total alienation has fully developed,« and is possible only »as long as there is real sensuous experience of one's body, its func-

tions, and its products« (p. 388). Iago, by contrast, despite his use of corporeal metaphors in »clyster-pipes,« »leapt into my seat,« »monstrous birth,« and the like—not to mention his obsession with Othello and Desdemona »making the beast with two backs« (1.1.114–115)—is, in fact, totally alienated from his body, which »he experiences [...] only as an *instrument* for success« (p. 388). And while he might appear to engage in that »perverse kind of relatedness« that »wants to control, but not destroy« others—as when Iago professes to Roderigo to be »knit to thy deserving with cables of perdurable toughness« (1.3.338–339)—even this pretense of advancing the interests of his victim as a means of exploiting him financially is merely a façade that screens the complete lack of relatedness that makes Iago the »inhuman dog« (5.1.62) that Roderigo discovers him to be only in the moment when his purported benefactor plunges the knife into his chest. Iago sums up the sociopath's creed in the last line of his second soliloquy, »Knavery's plain face is never seen, till used« (2.1.310).

In Iago, Shakespeare illustrates Fromm's (1964) definition of evil as »*man's loss of himself in the tragic attempt to escape the burden of his humanity*« (p. 148). Iago's rage for negative transcendence combines an insatiable will to power with an absolute loss of being and, with it, a sense of self. Always improvising while endlessly repeating his »no« to life, Iago lacks the inner core of personality that is for Fromm (1947) »the reality behind the word ›I‹ and on which our conviction of our own identity is based« (p. 206). It is for this reason that he is likewise devoid of the »primary imagination« that Coleridge, in Chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), holds to be »a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM« (p. 167), and can only utter in its place, »I am not what I am.«

4

It is an abiding paradox of Fromm's thought that the originator of the concept of »social character« also espoused a »*normative human-*



ism« that unapologetically sought, as he wrote in *The Sane Society* (1955), to »arrive at a correct description of what deserves to be called human nature,« and »is based on the assumption that, as in any other problems, there are right and wrong, satisfactory and unsatisfactory solutions to the problem of human existence« (pp. 13–14). Although originally founded on a philosophical anthropology in the tradition of Spinoza and the early Marx, Fromm in his later writings increasingly made his case also on the grounds of natural science and evolutionary biology. Fromm's critique of Freud for claiming that his theories were universal truths without recognizing the degree to which they were extrapolated from culturally bound assumptions is the obverse of his own lifelong undertaking to mount a genuinely compelling and credible version of the same psychoanalytic project.

In this analysis of Iago through the lenses of Fromm's binocular vision, I have striven to forge a synthesis between an exegesis of Iago as a »social character« in what Marjorie Garber (2004) has described as Shakespeare's supreme tragedy of »race, class, and gender« (p. 588) and Bloom's (1998) homage to Iago as a »negative ontotheologian, a diabolical prophet who has a vocation for destruction« (p. 464). Like Shakespeare himself, Iago is—to vary Ben Jonson's tribute in the First Folio—both of his age and for all time. He is at once the apotheosis of early modern capitalist man and the archetype of all those, from Caligula to Hitler, and now also Trump, for whom, as Fromm (1973) has written, »madness is a way of life [...] because it serves the illusion of omnipotence, of transcending the frontiers of human existence« (p. 323). Indeed, when Fromm remarks that »what is special in Hitler's case is the disproportionality between the destruction he ordered and the realistic reasons for it« (p. 446), he could equally well have been describing Iago, whose »motiveless malignity« forever eludes our comprehension not because there are too few reasons for it but because there are too many.

In the final scene of *Othello*, after he has murdered Desdemona, the Moor confronts Iago overwhelmed by the horror of the deed his treacherous confidant had induced him to perpetrate: »I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable. / If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee« (5.2.283–284). The absence of a cloven foot means that Iago is not literally the Devil, yet when Othello manages to attack his pinioned adversary, he succeeds only in wounding but not killing him. As Fromm (1973) observes, »it is man's humanity that makes him so inhuman« (p. 149). »Hence, as long as one believes that the evil man wears horns, one will not discover an evil man« (p. 480).

After begging Cassio's pardon for his unjust suspicions, Othello implores his maimed lieutenant to »demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?« To this Iago responds with defiance: »Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word« (5.2.298–301). Othello's use of the word »demi-devil,« which Shakespeare here coins in the English language, confirms Iago status as the hybrid descendent of the Vice figure who bestrode the medieval stage while also sealing the oxymoron of his inhuman humanity. He cannot be killed, which means he is a devil; but he bleeds and his feet are intact, so he must be a man. Like the outwardly nondescript gambler Stephen Paddock, who, on October 1, 2017, from his Las Vegas hotel room carried out the largest mass shooting in modern American history, Iago leaves us with nothing to attenuate the mystery of his iniquity. And since Iago's character rivals only Hamlet's as a conundrum for critics, it is fitting that his closing vow of muteness mirrors that of the Danish prince: »the rest is silence« (5.2.365). But whereas flights of angels and the soldier's music accompany Hamlet to the undiscovered country, Iago is surely destined for the other place.

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