
THE HONEST VILLAIN

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Othello is one of the most notable works in the Shakespearean canon, interesting as well for its affinities with some of the other plays as for its differences. In having for protagonist a great and noble soldier of mature years who is at once deeply in love and through that love is driven to degradation and ruin, for instance, it recalls *Antony and Cleopatra*. In that the mainspring of the action is the onset of jealousy leading to a kind of madness and having fatal consequences, the similarity is to *A Winter's Tale*. The subtle Italian schemer who wilfully slanders an innocent wife to her lord, producing circumstantial evidence to back his accusation, and whose machinations are only exposed after much sorrow and suffering, is to be seen again in *Cymbeline* — even Iago and Iachimo are merely variants of the same name. The wholly amoral philosophy of the villain, coupled with a parallel gift for improvisation and characterised by an earthy humour, had appeared in as early a play as *Richard III*, the eponymous hero of which is identically motivated by a desire to 'check Such as are of better nature than myself'. The same reductivist view of the human animal and a cynical readiness to take advantage of it were to reappear in Edmund as he intrigues his way through *King Lear*. Examples could be multiplied: even the Venetian setting of the first act had been used before in *The Merchant of Venice*, where moreover a princely and magniloquent Moor had briefly made an appearance. The laws of the Signiory had even in that play been seen to bow a little to expediency: ominous precedent.

The most striking point of difference, at least where the tragedies of Shakespeare's maturity are concerned, is perhaps that though *Othello* is beyond question a tragedy in any accepted sense of the word, there rest on its outcome no great issues of human empire or spiritual regeneration: the scheme of things entire has not been threatened, and even the security of the Venetian dominion has been assured before the events unfold which constitute the action of the play; the tragedy then is private and poignant. We are left, when all is over, with the sentiment summed up by *Othello* himself: the pity of it. The scale is intimate, domestic.

Another and a seemingly minor difference, but one which affords scope for discussion and is largely the basis of this paper, is what might almost be called a quirk of procedure, though its dynamic function in

the play is considerable. All the great tragedies, and not a few of the comedies, make use of structural images and a linked series of key words: 'nature' and the unnatural in *Macbeth*, with the attendant motifs of darkness and blood, or the unrestrained and cruel bestiality of *Lear*; the opposed elements of solid and liquid in *Antony*, and so forth. But it is seldom that a dominant epithet is repeated with such frequency, and never is it attached so invariably and with such dramatic irony to one particular person, as the word 'honest' is in *Othello*. There are, to be sure, other loaded words used, and a series of images independent of, as well as some which support, the theme of honesty. The seas which gave Venice her eminence and her very streets are those that wash around Cyprus: sea imagery and the terms of shipping intimately connected with it thus provide an imaginative as well as a historical and geographical link between the two settings and further emphasise the continuity of action. Iago's curt complaints of being 'be-lee'd and calm'd' and the highly wrought Othello's sonorous invocation of 'the Propontic and the Hellespont' both derive from the same ductile source. Then there are the antithetical pairs, white and black, purity and grime: simple, obvious and dramatically valid contrasts. At a more complex level, 'super-subtle' Venetians and 'extravagant' barbarians are held up as foils, each to other, and the differences between the life of camp and city and, more starkly, the possible incompatibility between maturity and youth, have their own cluster of images: the tapestry is as closely woven and as richly coloured as in any of the great plays.

It is the concept of honesty however which is harped on so insistently, with a cumulative effect of irony not dissimilar to Antony's use of 'honourable' in his rabble-rousing oration in *Julius Caesar*, though far more subtly and over a considerably larger period. For those who cherish statistics, adjective and abstract noun are used some fifty-two times in the course of the action. And it is an essential part of the strategy of deception that both should be most often applied to, and sometimes by, the one man whose flagrant villainy works through a sustained pretence of honesty, and so successfully (for a while) that 'honest Iago' becomes as much an invariable and defining epithet as *pivs Aeneas* in Vergil, or 'swift Achilles' and 'wily Odysseus' in the Homeric epics: the effect, to an audience equipped to appreciate it, is richly, bitterly ironical. As of course it was in Shakespeare's mind that it should be.

Hypocrisy has been memorably defined as the homage which vice pays to virtue. It was a commonplace, particularly in the Elizabethan age, that many who practised public morality might well be villains in their hearts; merely, they found it more profitable to conform in their outward behaviour to received norms of ethical conduct. It was this awareness that underlay the preoccupation with Appearance and Reality which surfaced so often in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; and in

Shakespeare, who in so many ways saw deeper and felt more keenly than his contemporaries, it often colours much of his tragic vision of fallen man. It is as central to his view of society in constant danger of disruption as are the stabilizing principles of Order and Degree to his political thinking; that is, to his concept of the hierarchical structure which alone, as he saw it, could preserve that society from individual human evil and the innate tendency to chaos which such evil inevitably enhanced. This pattern is unmistakable in the mature dramas: villainy for a time masked as virtue slowly eroding the bonds of human community in family and state, and the restabilization of that community through the eventual exposure and punishment of the source of evil, very often at extreme cost to the virtuous and the innocent. In this last lies the tragedy.

Iago is the villain in *Othello*. To the Romantic critics, he was the Shakespearean villain *par excellence*, and they were inclined to invest him with as much factitious grandeur as they did Milton's Satan, and even more nonsensically: one might call it the Promethean (or She'leyesque) Fallacy. Even Coleridge, who had more insight than most, babbled of Iago's 'motive-hunting of motiveless malignancy' in terms suggesting almost the Satanic. Shakespeare, one would have thought, had gone out of his way to reject just such hysteria — 'but that's a fable'. Certainly critics less cloistered and rather less given to hyperbole take a simpler view. Shakespeare — his works offer abundant confirmation — was not the man to overlook that evil is in itself petty, small-minded, notwithstanding the enormity of harm it may cause. In his world, where a decaying Mediaevalism had still left much power in the gift of a few great lords and their households, he must have had daily experience of unscrupulous place-seekers scrabbling for position, fawning obsequiously on their superiors and adroitly back-stabbing their rivals. In any case, the text makes it very clear that Iago, far from being the far-sighted and malignant mastermind who has already at the outset plotted the destruction of his general, the general's wife, his lieutenant, his dupe and (for luck) his own wife, is essentially no more than that (to an Elizabethan) excessively familiar petty scoundrel, the 'coney-catcher': that is, a small-time confidence trickster who lived by exploiting unsophisticated and often foolish provincial visitors to London, rich young gentlemen usually, acting as their guide to the supposedly exotic pleasures of the capital, and spending their money for them. Shakespeare's London was full too of discharged and often disgruntled veterans of the Dutch wars, hard-living and hard-drinking men with no more scruples than such men usually have. Iago, living off Roderigo and temporarily between wars, is just such an amalgam as one might expect Shakespeare to make from his experience. Iago is in fact a professional (ie: a mercenary) soldier, an officer. When the play opens, he conceives he has a grudge against his own C.O., Othello, since he believes that he has been passed over for promotion in favour of a

less experienced man. He chooses to believe (or half-believe) that that same C.O. has seduced his wife; added to the other, this is external motive enough to set him going, and the nasty little man grinds into action, reviewing any possible means to gratify his injured vanity and vent his spite: it hardly amounts to more than that at first. What is more, he is repeatedly in danger of being seen through even by his notably foolish 'gull', Roderigo, who has to be fobbed off with more empty promises and hearty encouragement. Improvising hastily, hurried from shift to shift, instinctively adapting circumstances to his purpose, adding with each expedient a further tottering storey to the ramshackle edifice of his plot, the entire makeshift structure threatening to come down on his head at any moment, he bustles on: mere action keeps him going for a while. But he is the victim of his own momentum, and the situation soon snowballs beyond his direction or control; and for all that he can stand by and derive mean-souled satisfaction from the spectacle of degradation and death he has somehow contrived, he is as inexorably caught up in it as any of his hapless victims. Nor, when all is revealed at the end, can he make any sort of statement to explain himself. No: in his own small way a brilliant pragmatic tactician undoubtedly, making full use of the initiative that is traditionally the ambusher's: but by no manner of means a grand strategist of evil. Othello had his measure from the start: competence without imagination, decidedly not officer material.

It is his technique however with which we are concerned here. Like all confidence tricksters anywhere and at any time, his chief stock-in-trade is the projection of an aura of absolute reliability, of integrity, such that all sorts of people will be ready to swear blind to his honesty. Usually this is done in one of two ways, though there may be minor variations: there is the assumption of a child-like innocence, a guilelessness so convincing that all thought of duplicity becomes inconceivable. At the other extreme, one might adopt an air of cynical hard-bitten directness, as of one who has seen the corruption of the world and become outwardly disillusioned, though retaining a basic code of honour. Shakespeare played the changes on these two attitudes often enough: Richard of Gloucester at different times essays both, affecting to be a plain man who thinks no harm even if he is outspoken, and later a simple soul like 'the infant that is born tonight', and thanking his God for his humility. Of the alternatives, a veteran soldier who had knocked about the world could scarcely opt for a child-like simplicity; rather he chooses to exaggerate a certain professional coarseness of grain, a callousness of manner and hardening of conscience — short, to be sure, of 'contrived murder'. The very self-accusation, in this light, becomes a warranty of his rugged 'honesty'. The manner was not uncommon, even in genuinely honest men: Aenobarbus in *Antony* is one such, a faithful war-hardened soldier with a sardonic tongue and a jaundiced eye, but his honour — though he falls from grace for a time — is strong enough

to kill him. The loyal Kent in *Lear*, adopting it as a disguise, is wrongly accused of being what Iago in fact is. The passage is worth quoting:

This is some fellow
Who, having been prais'd for bluntness, doth affect
A saucy roughness and constrains the garb
Quite from his nature. He cannot flatter, he;
An honest man and plain — he must speak truth.
An they will take it, so; if not, he's plain.
These kind of knaves I know, which in their plainness
Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends
Than twenty silly ducking observants
That stretch their duties nicely.

This kind of 'honesty', then, depends to some extent on an avowal of venial faults, and often on a declaredly soured view of human activity. It is only a partial 'self-revelation', made with the intent of deceiving; even so, it may vary in degree. Roderigo, Iago's dupe, is also made in some measure his confidant. No doubt this is partly a stage convention, rather more plausible than the simple soliloquy, whereby the audience may be kept informed of the true motivation of the character onstage; but it has the added function of involving Roderigo as intimate, and later as accomplice, of the plotter. But even to Roderigo, only so much can be revealed; and even then his is an inconvenient knowledge which makes his death inevitable when things come to a head. It is questionable whether Iago *could* reveal himself fully; shallow as his character is, his self-knowledge is all surface. It might be thought that his reductive philosophy has effectively reduced his own intellect: he has simplified himself below humanity.

But the word 'honesty' in Elizabethan times, and particularly in Shakespeare and in this play, embraced rather more than even this large concept of 'integrity', with its branching virtues of loyalty, trustworthiness, truthfulness and responsible action. One aspect of it has already been adumbrated: the blunt forthrightness which can so easily become censoriousness; Iago claims he is nothing if not critical. That is, he expects to find faults in his fellow-men, and find fault he constantly does — whether it is there or not. This shading of the word 'honest' must, I believe, be given its full consideration in any reading of Iago's character. For this facet of his 'honesty', though he plays it down till it seems a mere quirkiness, corresponds to something which is genuinely Iago. To Roderigo he professes to believe — he does believe — in the falsity of all human claims to virtue; he is sceptical of all ethical behaviour. Yet while he mockingly rejects the possibility that any of his fellow-men (and women) could seriously be motivated by principle, or pay it more than lip-service (fools apart, that is), he paradoxically resents and hates, to the point of willing their destruction, those around him whom he must acknowledge to be so motivated. For all his sneering at 'honest knaves' and 'free and open' natures — at anything that savours of the noble

and the generous — he must concede that they exist: and it is unendurable that people with such virtues should survive. They show up his meanness. Thus, Cassio must die because 'he has a daily beauty in his life That makes me ugly'. It is why he is so willing to believe that Othello has bedded Emilia, and that Desdemona would very likely soon tire of her lord and look elsewhere: it would confirm his reassuring view of mankind as selfish, greedy and amoral. In short, himself writ large. Anyone who is not as corrupt as he, threatens his *raison d'être*. The mask of affected cynicism is thus seen to hide the hideous reality of a total and annihilating cynicism: as a disguise, not without subtlety, and easier than most to maintain.

Yet another meaning of the word which Elizabethan English still retained is that yet current in most Romance languages: honesty as sexual fidelity or (in the unmarried) as chastity. In this sense it was most frequently (though by no means exclusively) used of women. In a play where three women at some time have their sexual conduct queried, this aspect cannot of course be ignored. Bianca, identified as a courtesan, is clearly not 'honest', though she may claim at one point to be more honest than Emilia. Iago's wife seems honest enough — she indignantly reproaches her husband for crediting reports of her alleged affair with Othello. On the other hand, she is 'honest' (ie: candid) enough to admit in confidence to her mistress, to whom she is devotedly loyal (honest again), that, with the world offered as an inducement, she would unhesitatingly cuckold her husband, if only for his own good. There is an obvious humour in the idiomatic 'for all the world'; it is all remotely hypothetical, and no more than a jest, no doubt. Nonetheless there are echoes of profounder things here: as, what shall it profit a man if he gain all the world, and lose his soul? Fanciful? I think not. Biblical echoes are to be heard more unmistakably in a short while. Desdemona, whose real and unassailable 'honesty' is so vilely and so fatally slandered, finds it inconceivable that there should be such women; she wonders at Emilia. But how does this affect Iago, except as a means of entangling Othello? The fact is that he is irredeemably foul-minded, not merely in that he sneers at female virtue as he sneers at male honour, but in that the very cast of his mind is smutty: his natural mode of self-expression is the brutally graphic and the obscene, beyond the licence granted to a rough soldier and roistering boon companion. In his view, man is never more typically bestial than when coupling: he relishes each grunt and groan. In Iago, sexuality itself is corrupt.

There are more nuances yet to the word, and one particularly that, just forming in idiomatic usage at the end of the Sixteenth Century, was to establish itself as one of the favourite epithets of the late Seventeenth in the ruffianly *milieu* of Restoration London. Shakespeare seems especially to have loathed its implications, as we know he loathed spariels. As with many idiomatically extended words, it is easier to recognise the complexity it refers to than it is to define it. The *datum*

is that if a man is no better than he should be — coarse, aggressive, self-seeking, envious, whatever — it is, in this sense of the word, 'dishonest' to try and behave as if he were not. To act according to these basic impulses is therefore to be 'honest'. Or so it was felt at the time. It follows that when Iago talks to Roderigo about his guiding principle in life, he is being true to these characteristics and therefore 'honest'. The use has about it a jeering hearty 'that's the way I am, like it or lump it' air that sorts well with his temperament.

Even the basic connotation of honesty — that of integrity discussed above — is extended to cover, and not only in metaphor, parallel concepts like 'honour'; itself an elastic word in Shakespeare. Iago, when he shams a reluctance to sneak on Cassio for brawling, seems to suggest a sort of honour among colleagues: he will not betray a fellow in the mess and a superior officer: or that is the impression he tries to convey. Again he affects a similar unwillingness to expose the possibly (!) tainted workings of his mind to Othello when questioned about his suspicions of Desdemona; here honesty might mean something like 'decency'. Elsewhere it takes on shades of meaning to suggest respectability or even reputation. At its most fundamental, it need mean no more than a refusal to steal. But even in this sense, Iago is not honest; by proxy, and then in his own person, he steals the fatal handkerchief and plants it where it will do the most damage. But this is merely a detail: his entire relationship with Roderigo is an extended 'cozenage' — a creating of expectation compounded with a repeated extraction of money under a series of false pretences. In a word, lies. Lies come readily to Iago: Cassio's sole act of drunkenness, Othello's unprecedented harshness, are multiplied into habitual action by the 'sorrowful' Ancient. (I wonder, incidentally, whether the title stirred memories in Shakespeare's richly allusive mind: perhaps that of the two elders, grown ancient in sin, who slandered Susanna almost to her death, but as it turned out to their own undoing. No timely Daniel to discover all, here). Iago's career in the events of the play is a living lie, of course, built up of wilful and increasingly mischievous misrepresentation of what he sees. The essential lie is in Iago himself, in his deliberate acceptance that the values of humanity are as warped as are his own; that, because he is villainous, there shall be no more faith and truth.

It is in the light of all these interpretations that the deeply ironic qualifying epithet of 'honest' Iago is seen to be mordantly appropriate. And it seems possible to argue further that Shakespeare was representing in Iago one kind of Renaissance man, then new, since become almost a stereotype. I mean the sort of personality that later ages would call, depending on the context, a free-thinker or an anarchist: one who prided himself ('plumed' if we accept the reading of the Folio) on despising the established social, moral, and religious values and the structures which embodied them, and assumed a posture of sturdy independence. Hobbes was to be such a man in England; Machiavelli was considered the proto-

type, if only through the distorted view that the Elizabethans had of him. The Romantics were to exalt the type as the heroic rebel; our own more cautious age might use words like nonconformist or, at most, 'outsider'. Many of these men have been malcontents; some were sincere in a negative and obstinate way; few have been man of any stature — the ill-tempered and stubborn Galileo was nothing like Brecht's dramatic presentation of him, for instance. Be that as it may, and it is a subjective view, what is not I think to be disputed is that Iago is, in the last analysis, an exceedingly shabby creature: a low trickster armed with a degree of cunning and some practical psychology, hag-ridden by a consuming contempt for human worth which somehow co-exists with an envy of that worth and a consequent compulsion to degrade and destroy it. Since hierarchy is one of the stabilizing factors in the society he professes to despise, there is in him too an element of envy towards his superiors in rank and class, and a delight in his ability to outwit them, for however short a time. Adapting his habitual social *persona* of bluff hard-headed man of the world, sceptical but basically sound enough, he contrives to enmesh his victim — as he blunders on, his victims — in the toils of a hastily improvised net, yet is himself caught up in its folds. To vary the metaphor, the situation very soon gets out of hand, developing beyond his control and in a direction other than his intention had directed it. What he destroys is infinitely beyond his capacity to understand, but the destruction is itself beyond his petty malice, almost accidental. He is intent even in his villainy. True, he is irresponsible enough to gloat over the ruin he has somehow engineered, but his was only the original impulse to harm; the dimensions of the tragedy are beyond his resources deliberately to compass. A small stone shifting underfoot precipitates a landslide and, in that vast mass of rubble, is buried without trace. Faced with his guilt, believing in nothing, he can say nothing to justify himself; his future is the imposed silence of one who has corrupted language, the medium of truth. In that he is consistent: his is to be, not the stoical silence of the hero in adversity, but the vacuum of human meaning that is his philosophy, the vast nothing of the petty nihilist. He is, after all, honest: true to the void within.