

HONEST IAGO

In the very first scene of Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago tells us (he is speaking to Roderigo, but what he says is for our benefit) what kind of man he is. 'I am not what I am,' he says. In the first recorded use of the expression, he asserts that he is not one to wear his heart on his sleeve 'for daws to peck at'. Only we and Roderigo (until he kills him) get to see what he calls 'the native act and figure' of his heart, which he keeps well hidden from everyone else. The men he admires are those who, 'trimm'd in forms and visages of duty, keep yet their hearts attending on themselves. These fellows,' he adds, 'have some soul'.

In the popular imagination, *Othello* is a play about jealousy. But jealousy is only one of its themes and a secondary one at that. The action of the play revolves around Iago. Othello is the object of his hatred. Cassio, Emilia, Desdemona and the rest matter to him only insofar as they play a part in satisfying his hatred of Othello. 'The native act and figure' of Iago's heart is what the play is really about. Iago's heart, hidden to everyone else, is visible to us from start to finish.

He talks about it constantly. Iago is all that Iago is interested in. He is as self-obsessed and introspective as Hamlet. 'Were I the Moor,' he says, 'I would not be Iago: in following him, I follow but myself.' His hatred of Othello is a facet of his own self-love. That is what drives him and that, more than Othello's jealousy, is what drives the action of the play.

Everything Iago does is done on the spur of the moment. In this too he is like Hamlet, whose periods of brooding lead to impulsive acts, his rejection of Ophelia, his murder of her father. Iago does not know – how could he? – what will be the consequence of his informing Desdemona's father that 'your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs'. What he says to Roderigo (and to us) is that he wants to make life unpleasant for Othello, to 'poison his delight', to 'plague him with flies'. That's all he wants to begin with. 'Though that his joy be joy,' he tells him, 'yet throw such changes of vexation on't, as it may lose some colour.' Only when that doesn't work does he get the idea of using jealousy as a better way to spoil Othello's fun.

Iago's fallibility, foreshadowing his eventual defeat, should not be overlooked. Iago as controlling puppet-master is a misreading of his character. He is not a brilliant general like Othello, but an opportunist, an expert in guerrilla warfare. He takes his chances when he can. His first attempt to discomfit Othello fails altogether. Expecting a brawl in which he will pretend to be on Othello's side, he is treated instead to a master class in diplomacy. 'Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them,' Othello says, not even bothering to draw his own. His natural authority is enough to disarm his opponents.

Iago remains silent for the rest of this scene and for most of the scene that follows. His silences are always worth noting, whether on stage or off. His mind is always at work, taking stock, revising his plans in the light of events. Only when Othello has won the Duke's approval ('I think this tale would win *my* daughter too') and he is left alone again with Roderigo, does he break his silence. When he does, almost the first thing he says is that he 'never found man that learned to love himself'.

He goes on to give Roderigo (and us) a lesson in moral philosophy, in which he argues that a man must use his reason to control his passions. '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.' He mocks Roderigo's irrational threat to drown himself for love of Desdemona, advising him instead to 'put money in thy purse'.

The interest of the play lies in the working of Iago's mind. With Roderigo's threatened desertion averted ('I am changed: I'll go sell all my land') he dismisses him ('Go to, farewell! put money in your purse') and remains alone on stage, thinking aloud. 'Cassio's a proper man: let me see now... How, how? Let's see...' Suddenly, he has an idea. 'I have't!'

If he were less human, he would be a villain of the kind that Webster specialised in. He knows how to work on Othello because he has the self-knowledge that Othello lacks. He knows jealousy so well that he is able to warn him what he is in for if he gives way to it. 'O beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on: that cuckold lives in bliss who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger; but, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves.' Like the rest of us, Iago has felt jealousy, but unlike most of us he has the ability to stand outside himself and watch how it works.

Lodovico is shocked when he sees Othello strike Desdemona. 'Is this the noble Moor,' he asks Iago, 'whom our full senate call all-in-all sufficient? Is this the nature whom passion could not shake?' Iago's reply, 'He's that he is,' recalls what he said about himself in the first scene: 'I am not what I am'. Othello acts on what he believes to be true. He is to that extent honest. 'Honest Iago,' as everyone calls him, is the only one who acts on what he knows to be true. Othello wears his heart on his sleeve, Iago knows better. It all depends what you mean by honest.

Emilia is the first to come close to the truth. 'The Moor's abused,' she says in Act IV, 'by some most villainous knave, some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow,' whose identity as yet she has not guessed. In Act V, when she realises that the knave is her own husband, she is the prototype of Paulina in *The Winter's Tale* berating Leontes. 'Thou hast not half the power to do me harm,' Emilia says, when Othello threatens her, 'as I have to be hurt.' When Leontes threatens Paulina, 'I'll ha' thee burnt,' her answer is, 'I care not: it is an heretic that makes the fire, not she which burns in't.' The similarity is as striking in form as it is in sentiment. Shakespeare seems always to have been preparing for the next play. Some of them are masterpieces, some are the stepping stones that lead up to them.

Coming after Emilia's honest anger, Othello's attempt at self-justification ('one that loved not wisely, but too well') seems at best feeble, at worst dishonest. 'Speak of me as I am,' he says, but we know already how slippery that form of words is. We know by now who has the monopoly on self-knowledge in this play. Iago's last words are plain and to the point: 'Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: from this time forth I never will speak word.' Nor does he. Honest Iago.