“And what’s he then that says I play the villain”: Understanding Iago as a Histrionic

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Abstract
Despite the extensive scholarly research conducted on the debatable topic of Iago’s motives in Shakespeare’s Othello, the debate has not yet been convincingly resolved. Following the method of psychoanalytical interpretation, this paper attempts to reconcile the puzzling contradictions between what Iago cites as his motives, on the one hand, and his inexplicably evil deeds in the play, on the other. It argues, thus, that Iago’s behaviour displays major symptoms of a mentally disordered personality. Relying on various sources that cite the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA –DSM-5), the study attempts to identify Iago’s conduct and deeds in the play with the salient features of two related “Cluster B Personality Disorders,” namely, ‘Histrionic’ and ‘Narcissistic’ Personality Disorders. Shakespeare’s Iago is portrayed as an egotistical young adult who has an obsession with self-esteem and who constantly seeks to be the centre of attention. His behaviour is overly dramatic, and he relishes role-playing and manipulating others as means of making him the centre of attention. Suddenly feeling underrated, underprivileged, and his self-esteem damaged, Iago develops into a victim in the grip of these personality disorders which transform him from the “honest Iago” his acquaintances used to trust and appreciate, into a “demi-devil,” whose deeds are, to the same acquaintances, baffling and appalling.

Keywords: Attention seeking, evil, histrionic personality disorder, Iago, motives, narcissistic personality disorder

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One of the major challenges literary interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* usually has to grapple with is the intricate issue of Iago’s real motivation behind his malevolent deeds. The intricacy of the subject arises from the premise that Iago’s deeds do not seem to accord rationally with the motives he cites as the prime reasons for his acrimony towards the protagonist and other characters in the play. Nor is Iago’s extreme revenge proportionate to the injury he claims he has incurred primarily from his allegedly unfair general. Indeed, Iago’s conduct in the play poses several curious contradictions that ultimately baffle readers and audiences alike. His attitude towards most of his acquaintances is odious, but they, abstrusely and teasingly call him, much to the audience’s curiosity and discomfort, “honest Iago”. Besides, though an outright misogynist, Iago claims to feel a sexual urge towards Desdemona and, though ostensibly, exhibits curious jealousy for his wife, Emilia. Most astonishing of all, perhaps, is Iago’s overstated frustration and subsequent rage for having been overlooked for a military rank he clearly craves and claims to deserve, but which he bafflingly discounts when it is later within his reach, and starts pursuing an opaque revenge against those who did not even intend to harm him.

The topic under discussion has long fuelled extensive and conflicting debates of interpretation. On one extreme, Iago is viewed as a symbol – a Machiavel, a Devil, a Vice figure of Morality plays, or even a latent homosexual. Such approach has practically failed to identify the source of Iago’s evil deeds and to detect his real motives. Attempts by such critics as Hazlitt (1817), Coleridge (1935), Gardner (1988), and Feldman (1952), to name but a few, ironically end up focusing more on the nature of Iago’s consequent action than on the motives from which the action springs. On the other extreme, a number of Iago’s ‘apologists’ have viewed him as an essentially kind and benevolent human person, who was simply provoked to take revenge against those who had wronged him. Such critics as Brooke (1918) and Draper (1932), tend to overlook the deliberate psychological complication intended by a dramatist who was clearly fascinated by the intricate workings of the human mind. Between these two extremes, rises a third group of critics who have clearly taken heed of Bradley’s (1905) early apt and legitimate proposal to “look more closely into Iago’s inner man.” (p. 178) Consequently, critical attempts by significant figures like Rosenberg (1955), West (1978), Paris (1984), and Raatzsch (2009), among others, have focused attention on Iago as a complex psychological portraiture, seeing the antagonist as “a psychopath,” a “sociopath,” or as “a striking example of Horney’s arrogant-vindictive personality.” (Paris, 1984, p. 504) Such approach is more in line with Shakespeare’s inclination of constructing his major characters, particularly those of the four ‘great tragedies,’ as portraits of psychopathic types. Though such psychological studies have much enhanced readers’ understanding of Iago’s ‘inner self’ and lit dark zones in his psyche, they nonetheless tend to be too general and leave several tricky questions about this convoluted character still unanswered. The present paper navigates in the same psychological domain and attempts to explicate Iago’s deeds in terms of his dysfunctional personality. The paper will argue that Shakespeare’s antagonist is subtly controlled and pushed into wicked action by psychological factors that are salient features of what is known in psychology as ‘Cluster B Personality Disorders.’ A complex personality that combines various standards of egocentrism, an inclination to manipulate others, and an obsession to act dramatically in order to ultimately attract approval and be the centre of attention, Iago fits
the diagnosis of histrionic personality disorder, which is also closely related to Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD).

Personality disorders are categorized into three ‘clusters,’ with HPD as one of ‘Cluster B,’ which also includes Narcissistic, Antisocial and Borderline Personality Disorders (Mayo Clinic). According to Mayo Clinic, citing the American Psychology Association APA (2013), individuals who have symptoms of one personality disorder may also have symptoms of another, and it is not essential for a personality disorder individual to exhibit all symptoms to be diagnosed as a patient. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to go through all criteria (which number over fifteen) and their applicability to Iago’s case; the interested reader/critic may pursue this strenuous but amusing task further. It is also commonplace that HPD shares several traits with NPD. (Rivers 2014) However, to be diagnosed as having one (or more) personality disorder, a person has to demonstrate only five or more of its major features.

The American Psychology Association (APA-DSM-V) (2013), defines Histrionic Personality Disorder as a long-term pattern of dysfunctional behaviour characterized by excessive emotionality and attention seeking. Various sources on HPD, quoting APA-Diagnostic classification DSM-V-TR, provide the standard criteria of individuals diagnosed as HPD people. Cleveland Clinic, for instance, cites the following main distinctive symptoms: First, people with histrionic personality disorder are attention-seekers and may be uncomfortable when they are not the centre of attention. They may use physical appearance to draw attention to themselves or have rapidly shifting or exaggerated emotions. Further, they “[c]onstantly seek reassurance or approval,” and are “excessively sensitive to criticism or disapproval.” Third, they are also likely to “act very dramatically—as if performing before an audience—with exaggerated emotions and expressions.” Fourth, histrionics are self-interested and show little concern for others. Fifth, HPD patients often make rash decisions and do not think well before acting. Lastly, HPD people have difficulty maintaining their relationships; their dealings with others are often fake and shallow.

There are also many minor features associated with HPD individuals. Those may include the following: histrionics may have high IQs and may even assume responsibilities in high government offices. (Rivers, 2014, Chapter 1) Individuals with HPD are generally described as dramatic, high-functioning, excited and even playful. They “can take jobs that involve high levels of responsibility and do it excellently.” (Rivers, 2014, Book 1, Chapter 1, P. 74). Also, individuals with HPD unreasonably expect to be favourably treated. They manipulate others, disregard their feelings and have little empathy with them. They also envy others and have an attitude that is clearly arrogant. (Psychology Today) The afore-mentioned symptoms, and several more, strikingly fit Shakespeare’s antagonist.

Shakespeare introduces Iago as an Ancient in the Venetian navy in his early adulthood (he tells the dupe Roderigo he is twenty-eight – I. iii. 307-308) From the start of the action, Iago displays impressive charisma and an obviously high IQ, and establishes himself as very intelligent, competent, high-functioning and trustworthy. If his words to Roderigo (I. i. 25-28) are honest, Iago had proved his military merits and professional competence to his superior. Cassio seems to
confirm Iago’s competence as a soldier; he says of Iago to Desdemona: “You may relish [i.e., ‘appreciate’ him more in the soldier than in the scholar.” (II. i. 160-61) For histrionics, like Iago, “self-esteem depends on the approval of others and does not arise from a true feeling of self-worth.” (Cleveland Clinic) As for the tendency of HPD people to overdress to attract attention, there is no reliable evidence on whether the actor who played Iago in the debut performance of Othello was made to dress provocatively, but Shakespeare definitely knew that the Ensign in Cinthio’s tale was “of fine presence” (Ridley, 1958, p. 239) It is worth noting, though, that “[s]ome research has suggested that the connection between HPD and physical appearance holds for women rather than for men.” (Arthur 2006).

Before embarking on the task of identifying Iago’s attitudes in the play with the core features of histrionic personality disorder, it is essential to evaluate the motives, both overt and covert, that Iago cites as his reasons for his flaming hatred towards his General. The only one fact in Iago’s attitude towards Othello is the former’s well-established animus towards the latter. Minutes after the commencement of the action, Iago asserts to Roderigo: “Despise me if I do not [i.e., hate Othello].” The reason he gives is personal but plausible. Iago sent three influential Venetians to recommend him to the Moor to promote him as lieutenant. Othello ignores the men’s recommendation and appoints someone else instead. Like all average young people, Iago is likely an ambitious professional who aspires to improve his prospects in life. He realizes in the savage realm of competition for jobs there is little room for honesty and decency since, as he cynically remarks, “[p]referment goes by letter and affection /and not by old gradation” (I. i. 33). Is Iago’s rage the result of his loss of the post of lieutenancy, because the General flouted Iago’s mediators, or because the post went to the undeserving Cassio, whose qualifications, according to the angry Ancient is “[m]ere prattle without practise” (I. I. 23)? This is a key concern to address when attempting to analyse Iago’s motivation for hatred.

In his first soliloquy, significantly concluding Act One, Iago reaffirms his hatred of Othello: “I hate the Moor.” (L. 371) This time, he ascribes a new, but implausible, motive for his hatred. The disgruntled Ancient claims he suspects the Moor of having slept with Emilia, Iago’s wife (I. iii. 371-373). He repeats the claim at II. ii. 286-287. He later discloses he suspects Cassio has disgraced him too by sleeping with Emilia (II. i. 298). Further, Iago precipitately alludes to his passion for Desdemona (II. i. 282). In addition, Iago has a few implicit reasons. He hints at his hatred of Othello on a racist basis, at his jealousy of the Moor’s happy marriage (279-282), and at his envy of Othello’s high position in the army: (“Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.” (I. i. 54)) To such reasons one may add Iago’s jealousy of Desdemona’s goodness (II. iii. 320-325), his snobbish feeling towards Cassio, “a Florentine,” (I. i. 17) or his envy of Cassio’s “daily beauty” that would make Iago, by comparison, ugly (V. i. 18-19).

Though, according to Bradley’s reasonable warning (1905, p. 172), the reader must not readily accept Iago’s statements before they are carefully analysed, it is irrational to presume Iago is deceiving Roderigo (and the audience) with false motives. It is feasible to suggest that Iago is truly unaware of the real force(s) that make(s) him hate Othello to the extent that he experiences and the audience observes. Of the overt reasons already mentioned, the only plausible reason is
that Iago’s frenzy for having being overlooked for promotion, especially, in his own words, the post went to a mere “arithmetician.” (I. i. 16). This, as will be demonstrated below, is the prime motive that ignites Iago’s hatred and propels his evil deeds against his adversaries. As for the suspicion that both Othello and Cassio have cuckolded Iago with Emilia, Iago himself does not take it seriously enough but says he entertains such a thought because he distrusts women (I. iii. 374-375). Iago also admits that he makes his impulsive claim of having a desire towards Desdemona simply “to diet [his] revenge” against the Moor (II. ii. 285). Interestingly, however, one of the associated features of HPD persons is that they consider relationships to be more intimate than they are in reality (Mayo Clinic). Iago confesses to his General, perhaps unwittingly, such flaw in his personality: “it is in my nature’s plague /To spy into abuses, and of my jealousy /Shape faults that are not” (III. iii. 146-147). Very often in the play, Iago voices statements about himself that happen to be facts unknown to him. As for Iago’s covert reasons for malevolence, they are not in themselves, even in Iago’s personal conviction, real motives but mere pretexts to justify his hatred of Othello. At best, they are awakened prejudices against the Moorish General, as a result of the latter’s preference of Cassio to him.

Arguably, the loss of the promotion is not as much the reason for Iago’s burning rage against Othello as it is probably the fact that the Ancient was overlooked for the promotion. Iago is enraged because he has lost the attention and the approval he, as an alleged HPD individual seeks. In other words, the fact that he was overlooked for promotion and the consequent failure to be the centre of attention is the stone that disturbs the stillness of Iago’s routine life (prior to the time of the promotion issue), and causes ripples of evil deeds against the Moor and others in the play. This is why the reader of Othello may be advised to draw a sharp line between the antagonist of the play as “honest Iago” in the antecedent action, on the one hand, and the “demi-devil” (V. ii. 298) of the dramatic action.

The first and central symptom from which all other HPD traits diverge and which Iago seems to demonstrate in his attitude is his high need for attention and his feeling uncomfortable or unappreciated in situations in which he is not the centre of attention. Histrionics, Rivers expounds, “have this relentless need for approval from other people. When the approval they seek is not given to them, they respond unpredictably and [are] likely to have an outburst.” (2014, Book 1, Chapter 2, Location 160) Moreover, most HPD people, according to psychologists, feel insecure. Their constant wish to be the centre of attention is “their way of hiding their insecurities. It is their way of getting a sense of validation that can help them feel better about themselves.” (Rivers, Book 1, Chapter 1, Location 207) According to Psychology Today, attention-seeking behaviour is a “kind of drama,” to which individuals resort because of “insecurity or self-esteem issues.” This does not mean the individual is “bad, broken, or evil,” but that the individual has a problem that needs to be taken care of. (Psychology Today) Moreover, “extreme attention seekers go to unhealthy lengths that are driven by emotional desperation” (Psychology Today). Throughout Othello, Iago seizes every opportunity that comes his way, or he even creates opportunities, in order to make himself in the spotlight and the centre of events. On various occasions, he makes his presence felt, not only by means of his wit and quick thinking, but also by his remarkably lengthy speeches which he often exploits as orations to present himself as an authority on many
significant subjects. Despite his relatively young age, Iago presents himself as an expert in military matters (I. i.16-30), an authority in career ascendency (I. i. 37-62), a sage about women’s nature (II. i. 107-110); an expert about human development (I. iii. 307-312; 315-327), and, most importantly, an experienced analyst of human personalities and human nature (336-350). That in itself makes him much observed and constantly sought and consulted by many of his acquaintances like Roderigo, Cassio, Othello, and Desdemona, and certainly much acclaimed by the audience.

The archway that further leads to the uncovering of the inner, secretive world of Iago’s motivation for evil and to suggesting that he is an HPD sufferer is his initial speech with the rich dupe, Roderigo. (I. i. 7-62) Instead of justifying to Roderigo the heartbroken lover why Iago did not tell him about Desdemona’s elopement with Othello, Iago, (whose name is Shakespeare’s creation and is aptly associated with ‘ego’) (Raatzsch 2009), seizes the moment to make himself the central topic of the talk. Out of the first sixty-four lines of the opening scene, Iago speaks fifty-eight lines about his own concerns, drawing attention to himself, allowing the incensed Roderigo to interrupt him briefly and only three times. As an obvious narcissist, Iago uses the pronoun ‘I’ and its various related forms (me, my and the plural we) twenty-eight times. The significant and deliberately intended association between Iago and ‘egotism’ cannot escape the attentive reader.

Like average histrionics, Iago manipulates others to reach his own goals. As the action makes evident, he is a person constantly in pursuit of power. Power (with its implications of authority, privilege, and control), is a primary goal in his existence. Occasionally, wittingly or otherwise, he projects himself to his confidante unashamedly as a narcissist, a self-interested opportunist: “I follow [Othello] to serve my turn upon him.” (I. i. 39) He adds: “In following him, I follow but myself, /... not I for love and duty, /But seeming so, for my peculiar end.” (I. i. 55-57) Iago makes “heaven” his witness that he will no longer be his ‘former’ self, since in the world which he inhabits, it is foolish and scornful to make one’s outward (“extern”) behaviour a true guide to one’s inner feelings (“native act and figure of [one’s] heart.”) (L. 59) Iago is arrogant in his attitude to the “duteous and knee-crooking” servants who are not opportunistic like himself and serve their masters only for provender” (i.e., food and drink). Moreover, Iago’s manipulation of Roderigo, the rich dupe, is another piece of proof that Iago is an HPD person who is ready to take advantage of other people to achieve his goals.

Thematically, Iago’s long initial (but interrupted) speech to Roderigo yields clear evidence that the Ancient has the symptoms of an HPD person. First, he is established as a narcissist and histrionic who has a high sense of his self-esteem: “and by the faith of man, I know my price; I am worth no worse a place.” (Ll. 9-10, italics added) This line best defines Iago’s personality and delineates the entire plot development. Iago evidently coveted and much craved this post, perhaps not merely to improve his financial situation, as it is legitimate to presume (he is married, while Cassio is not), but primarily because, as he clearly makes clear, it boosts his self-worth. As a histrionic, he is much affronted when his self-esteem is wounded. Had he secured the promotion, his ego would certainly have been satisfied, his self-esteem boosted and the reassurance and approval, which typical histrionics seek, gained. In Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, H. Bloom (as cited in Raatzsch, 2009, p.26) argues that being overlooked and slighted by Othello is
the “only true motive” of Iago’s evil. Bloom (Raatzsch, 2009, p. 27) describes the impact of Othello’s passing Iago over as an “ontological shock … the trauma that truly creates Iago, no mere wicked Ensign but rather a genius of evil who has engendered himself from a great Fall.” Shakespeare leads the audience to infer from the opening of Act 1 that Iago’s dishonesty and deception result from his feeling of resentment for having been passed over for promotion. It is hard to believe Iago could have conned all the other characters over a considerable time into thinking he was honest.

In his detailed analysis of Iago’s character, Bradley (1905) accidentally but succinctly refers in Iago’s disposition to a major trait of a personality disorder: “[Iago’s] thwarted sense of superiority wants satisfaction.” (187) Consequently, argues Bradley, Iago attains personal satisfaction in gaining power by proving to himself, as well as to others including his audience, that “he is the master of the General who has undervalued him and of the rival who has been preferred to him ...” (p. 187) In terms of HPD symptoms, that means Iago forces those around him to centre their attention on him and to give him affirmation of his self-esteem.

Despite his alleged belief in his own “worth,” Iago obviously expected some favouritism from his superior. One of the major tenets a HPD individual has is that he/she feels they are entitled to special treatment from people close to them, though this feeling of entitlement is both unrealistic and inappropriate. Such ‘entitlement,’ though, is not due to their genuine merits but because of who they are. (Rivers, 2014, Book 2, Chapter 1) This may explain why, though claiming to have military valour and experience in his record (I. i. 25-28), Iago resorts to employing “[t]hree great ones of the city” (I. i.7) to plead Othello on his behalf to appoint him his lieutenant. When, however, the post goes Cassio’s way, Iago resorts to a game commonly practised by HPD individuals – “the blame game.” HPD individuals, notes Rivers (2014, Chapter 3), never admit their faults and always consider themselves the victims. Iago categorically blames his General for such a loss: “But he, as loving his own pride and purposes, /Evades them with a bombast circumstance, /Horribly stuffed with epithets of war, /Nonsuits my mediators.” (I. i. 11-15). The play, however, gives no hint or suggestion of Othello’s prejudice against his Ancient or of his bias towards Cassio in the matter of promotion. Histrionics, as in Iago’s case, “feel like they have been wronged. They often feel a sense of being a victim. It is also typical for them to feel abused and neglected. And more often than not, these feelings of unresolved anger are exaggerated.” (Rivers, 2014, Book 1, Chapter 1, Location 199) “And I,” Iago bemoans his bitter luck to his dumb listener,

[...] must be beleed and calmed
By debtor and creditor. This counter caster,
He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,
And I – God bless the mark! – his Moorship’s ancient. (I. i. 25, 27-30)

Iago noticeably exaggerates his own importance, and he gets passionately overblown with phantasies of greatness and success. He boasts to have valiantly fought with Othello “At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds...” (L. 26) Noticeably, Iago is uncomfortable at this point because
Cassio, not him, is the centre of attention. Again, Bradley (1905), though he does not identify Iago as a histrionic, is convincing when he remarks:

Iago is keenly sensitive to anything that touches his pride or self-esteem […..] Whatever disturbs or wounds his sense of superiority irritates him at once; and in that sense, he is highly competitive. This is why the appointment of Cassio provokes him. (1905, 180)

It is intriguing that, as the action progresses, and the Moor demotes Cassio (II. iii. 234-35) and offers the post of lieutenancy to Iago (“Now art thou my lieutenant,” - III. iii. 477), the latter, who characteristically captures every available opportunity to exult in his superiority over his adversaries, displays no joviality, nor any sense of victory to celebrate this supposed triumph. The point of interest for the Ancient is, perhaps, not the post per se as much as it is Iago’s strong belief that, because of who Iago is, he deserves “no worse a place.” (Line 10) As a histrionic, and the plot development supports that, Iago is eagerly seeking reassurance and approval from others of his own ‘merit.’ Iago is equally enraged of Cassio, it may be argued, not because the latter has deprived him of the promotion, as much as he has deprived him of the reassurance and approval that the histrionic in Iago passionately seeks. It is not, therefore, surprising that Iago should speak of Cassio in such derisive terms (II. 15-24).

The nature of Iago’s relationship with Roderigo also serves to expose another tenet of HPD individuals that Shakespeare’s antagonist displays. Histrionics “tend to crave an impossible level of attention and overwhelming dependency on another individual. They seem to believe the other person only exists to serve them.” (Rivers, 2014, Book 1, Chapter 1, Location 278) Iago clearly defines his relationships with those around him in terms of personal benefits and material gains. This is why he keeps pressing Roderigo to “make money” (I. iii. 355) to “put money in [his] purse,” and to “fill [his] purse with money.” (I. iii. 341) He also brags he follows Othello because that helps him achieve his ends. Similarly, he admits he befriends the rich dupe, Roderigo, for his own financial gain: “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse” (I. iii. 368) Realistically, greed for money is not suggested or hinted at as one of Iago’s vices in the play, nor is it why he needs Roderigo. The narcissistic Ancient essentially needs an audience to grant him attention, approval and affirmation, from which he derives profit and excitement: “For I mine own gained knowledge should profane /But I would time expend with such a snipe /But for my sport and profit. (Ll. 369-371) Iago also needs Roderigo as a stepping stone to discredit Cassio in the drinking scene (II. iii. 123) He manipulates his wife and prompts her to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief. Equally, he abuses Cassio’s need to be reinstated as lieutenant to disgrace him and Desdemona in Othello’s eyes. These are examples that serve to highlight Iago’s passion, not for evil deeds, but for dramatic and risky events that bring him attention and satisfy his passion for excitement. “The most delightful thing to [Iago],” comments Bradley (1905), “would be something that gave an extreme satisfaction to his sense of power and superiority; and if it involved […] the excitement of danger, his delight would be consummated.” (P. 186)

One of the distressing associated features of a person with HPD is their attempt to hurt and control those who enrage them, not by attacking them directly, but by using symbolic
representations, especially possessions they hold dear. (Rivers, Book 2, Chapter 1) A case in point in Othello is the handkerchief Iago has his wife Emilia steal and which he later uses to undermine Othello’s trust in Desdemona. Because Iago knows that the handkerchief was the first token of love the Moor gave his wife, he vows to use this symbolic possession to harm Othello where it most hurts – his trust of his wife: “Trifles light as air/ Are to the jealous confirmations strong /As proofs of Holy writ.” (III. iii. 319-322). That would satisfy Iago in his revenge against his superior. (II. ii. 289-290) It is little wonder that ‘wayward’ Iago has “a hundred times” pressed Emilia to steal the handkerchief.

Another characteristic of HPD that fits Iago as a histrionic is his problematic relationships, especially his peculiar attitude to his wife. HPD individuals, especially married couples, usually have awkward relationships, as problems soon come to the surface when the histrionic spouse would soon relentlessly pester their partner, seeking approval, reassurance and reaffirmation. (Rivers, 2014, Book 1, Chapter 1). This probably helps to explain Iago’s negative attitude to women in general and to his wife, Emilia, in particular. His retort to Cassio, when the latter kisses Emilia in “a show of courtesy” (II. i. 98) is expressive of a disturbed marital relationship between the couple: “Sir, would she give you so much of her lips /As of her tongue she oft bestows on me, /You would have enough.” (II. i. 98-101) To Iago, Desdemona is merely “a guinea hen,” (I. iii. 311) with his intended connotation of ‘a prostitute.’ His ribald remarks to Desdemona, “You are pictures out of door,/ Bells in your parlours, wildcats in your kitchens, […] / devils being offended, /Players in your housewiferies, and housewives in your beds,” (II. i. 107-110), serve to underlie the disharmony with Emilia as much as to draw attention to himself. To his wife Emilia, Iago is a “wayward husband” (III. iii. 291). This explains why Iago is presented as a misogynist who treats Emilia in a pejorative way. When, for instance, Emilia secures the handkerchief for him and announces “I have a thing for you” (III. iii. 300), he insultingly pretends to take the word ‘thing’ in its Elizabethan sense of ‘female sexual organ’ (Salgādo p. 101 n. 300) and retorts “It is a common thing – […] /To have a foolish wife.” (III. iii. 300; 301; 303) At best, even when she has done favours, like securing Desdemona’s handkerchief for him, he calls her “A good wench.” (III. iii. 312) In addition, Emilia’s protest to Desdemona about the way some men neglect their women highlights Iago’s little sexual interest in his wife: “But I do think it is their husbands’ faults /If wives fall.” (IV. iii. 87-88) Emilia perhaps insinuates that her husband fails to perform his marital duties or reduces his wife’s sexual satisfaction “in despite” (IV. iii. 87-94). According to Rivers (1914), “When a histrionic gets into a relationship, it has nowhere to go but down hill.” For a newly married couple, “problems surface as the histrionic would pester his or her partner, seeking approval, reassurance and affirmation.” (2014, Book 1, Chapter 1, Location 166) Histrionic Personality Disorder, it is believed, “can affect a person’s social or romantic relationships and how a person reacts to losses or failures” (Cleveland Clinic) Further, “Multiple regression analyses showed […] Histrionic personality disorder symptoms to be consistently and positively associated with [a] number of divorces,” according to a study by K. L. Disney et al. (2012). The study also found that HPD, among other PDs assessed, “was associated with a significantly increased occurrence of marital disruption.” A study on the sexual attitudes of HPD individuals also found that they “have significantly lower sexual assertiveness, greater erotophobic attitudes toward sex, lower self-esteem, and greater marital dissatisfaction.” (Apt & Hurlbert, 1994, p.125) Another
study found that HPD symptoms “were also associated with an increased occurrence of marital dissolution.” (Disney et al. 2012, p. 959) As suggested earlier, Iago’s claim that he desires Desdemona (in Cinthio’s tale it is the real motive behind the Ensign’s hatred of, and subsequent revenge against, the Moor) is only a fake motive made up to stimulate and justify his hatred against Othello.

Being overly emotional and socially engaging is also another symptom associated with HPD people. “Most histrionics have a charming and engaging personality. This trait allows them to blend in well with everyone else,” reveals Rivers (2014, Book 1, chapter 1, p. 146). “The innate qualities of histrionics,” adds Rivers, “allow them to be the centre of attention effortlessly. [They] are emotionally expressive.” (2014, Book 1, Chapter 1, P. 150) Iago has a charming and engaging personality, a trait that allows histrionics to blend in well with people around them. (Rivers, 2014) Those who have known the Ancient well and long enough call him “honest Iago” and seek his help and advice in serious and personal matters; it is hard to believe that he could have managed to deceive them all, or that he has been a confidence trickster for so long. Desdemona, for instance, seems to be entertained by his conversation and cynical remarks on women (II. i.) and she jestingly calls him “a most profane and liberal counsellor” (l. 159) Othello also has great trust in his Ancient, telling Cassio “Iago is most honest,” (II. iii. 6); using the epithet ‘honest’ to mean ‘reliable’ (Salgādo, p. 56, n. 6) A. C. Bradley (1905) is right in suggesting that

Iago, though thoroughly selfish and unfeeling, was not by nature malignant, nor even morose, but that, on the contrary, he had a superficial good-nature, the kind of good-nature that wins popularity and is often taken as the sign, not of a good digestion, but of a good heart.” (p. 177; emphasis added).

As already pointed out, HPD individuals make rash decisions and do not think well before acting. Characteristically, Iago displays this symptom in most of his deeds. Because he is always obsessed with the need to attract attention and win others’ approval (including the audience’s in the theatre), he tends to improvise plans and make overhasty decisions. In his first soliloquy (I. iii. 368-388), rapt in finding justifications for his hatred of Othello and how to take revenge against him, he suddenly announces the birth of a sinister plan: “I have’t! It is engendered!” (L. 387) Similarly, in Act 2, scene i., when Desdemona is greeted at her arrival in Cyprus by Cassio, who “takes her by the palm,” (l. 162), Iago promptly thinks of a plan to implicate and destroy Cassio: “With a little web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio.” (l. 163-64) Seeking approval and attention, Iago shares his plans with the audience, driven to make overhasty decisions as the plans arise in his mind, mainly to extract his audience’s acknowledgment of his uniqueness. The critic Hazlitt inadvertently spots this trait in Iago. He remarks that Iago “runs all risks for a trifling and doubtful advantage; and is himself the dupe and victim of his ruling passion—an incorrigible craving after action of the most difficult and dangerous kind.” (1818, p. 43) Hazlitt also contends that Iago is one who “plots the ruin of his friends as an exercise for his understanding, and stabs men in the dark to prevent ennui.” (1818, p. 43)
Perhaps the most important attribute of a histrionic that Iago clearly demonstrates and zealously practises throughout the action is that of a ‘drama king.’ ‘The life of a histrionic person revolves around drama […] If there is no drama, they feel like they have to create one.’ (Rivers, 2014, Book 1, Chapter 1, Location 348) “For the histrionic,” Navarro notes, “theatrics is their natural mode of living (modus vivendi)” (Navarro, 2011, Book 1, Location 63) This is their way of gaining attention and being the centre of it.

In Othello, Shakespeare takes great pains to make his antagonist a virtuoso, a person whose very existence revolves around scenario improvisation, stage management and role-playing. Iago utilizes acting as a means of deception, a kind of metamorphosis from reality to dissimulation. At the outset of the action, the Ancient expresses his plan to project a substitute self that would help him advance his “peculiar ends” (I. 1. 57) by seeming to serve his master Othello:

For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement 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. (I. i. 58-62; italics added)

The statement “I am not what I am” is traditionally understood as an admission by Iago of his deceit and villainy. It may perhaps be better interpreted as a declaration by the antagonist to assume, from this moment on, a new self, a semblance, underneath which he would both conceal his frustration at having been slighted by Othello’s oversight and safely plan his revenge against his influential superior. The new self for Iago is an opportunity that would put him in the centre of attention as he most desires. For a skilled playwright like Shakespeare, a disguised self is also an ingredient that forms the basis of theatrical illusion, a component necessary for drama to be successful, an idea the playwright put into good practice that proved meritorious as in Hamlet’s “antic disposition,” Portia’s disguise in The Merchant of Venice, and other instances. By resorting to adopt a new self, different from his real one, as line 62 (quoted above) implies, Iago may wish to prove to himself (and to the audience) that, if, in this world, where promotion depends on favouritism, ‘honesty’ does not pay, dishonesty may. There is conspicuous bitterness in Iago’s words that reflect profound regret that his honesty and real worth both went unappreciated.

For Iago, role-playing would, arguably, place him back in the spotlight and gain him the approval and affirmation he cherishes. The uniqueness of his role in Othello is that he acts in most parts of the action as a surrogate dramatist, improvising scenarios, setting the stage, and stage-managing both events and characters so that the result is the fulfilment of his will, the entertainment of his audience and, subsequently assertion of his self-worth. The Ancient repeatedly demonstrates his mastery of stage-managing little plays within the play and he impressively performs various roles and manipulates his ‘dupes’ into playing roles that would undermine their stability. He ingeniously invents dramatic situations and extemporizes scenarios and shows in which his real-life characters are forced to play roles under his direction. Iago’s soliloquy concluding Act II, scene i. after Roderigo has left, (“That Cassio loves her, I do well believe’t…” (I. 276 ff.)), does not reveal a soldier
downcast over the loss of a post he covets, but a histrionic clearly obsessed with devising scenarios that would create for him a performance that would simultaneously boost his own ego and procure for him both personal ecstasy and the audience’s acclaim.

One of Iago’s points of strength lies in his ability to use his three dupes, Roderigo, Cassio and Othello, as a ventriloquist’s dummies to play the roles he has in mind for them. The first instance of Iago’s great histrionic talent is introduced at about sixty-five lines of the play’s beginning. A skilled stage manager and prompter, Iago, as if addressing a novice actor, prompts Roderigo to wait in the right spot underneath the balcony of Brabantio’s house to scandalise Desdemona’s elopement with Othello, and cues Roderigo to play the inciter: “Call up her father, /Rouse him, make after, poison his delight …” (I. i. 64-65) Again, when he meets Othello in Act One, Scene Two, Iago devises a dramatic scene around a false claim that someone has spoken insultingly of Othello and that he (Iago) did his best to maintain his patience as not to attack the transgressor. (Ll. 1-5) The Ancient expresses himself in an exaggerated state with a high level of theatrics and self-dramatization in this and other interactions with other characters. This kind of exaggerated theatrics and self-dramatization is a characteristic trait of histrionic personality disordered individuals. (Rivers, 2014, Chapter 2) By so doing, Iago succeeds in making himself the centre of attention and in winning Othello’s trust, an important step towards the execution of the fiendish plot that will later hatch in Iago’s mind. One such moment is Iago’s skilled performance of the role of the honest friend when Othello asks him how the brawl started and who began it (II. iii. 130 ff.). Not only is Iago brilliant at staging such an event into this desired climactic point; he is also proficient at looking “dead with grieving” (l.163) He can also bring his performing abilities to the best effect when he makes up a story to the already suspicious Othello about Cassio allegedly speaking while asleep and revealing his burning desire for Desdemona (III. iii. 411-423). Iago employs his performance talents (gestures, voice pitch and pace) to transform an improvised narrated story into a fully animated performance, until he directs it to the desired climax, with Othello’s disturbed mind, bordering madness, seeing the fiction as reality: “O monstrous! Monstrous.” (L. 424)

An exquisite instance of Iago’s obsession with and exploitation of theatrics as means to attract attention and win acclamation occurs in Act IV, Scene i. Having craftily succeeded in his deftly devised stratagem to topple Cassio from the much-coveted post of lieutenancy, and having inveigled him into seeking Desdemona’s help to win back Othello’s favour, Iago now impishly and exultantly turns to the passive and spellbound audience, demanding cunningly they acknowledge his unique intellectual superiority and great acting skills:

And what’s he then that says I play the villain,
When this advice is free I give, and honest,
Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? (II. iii. 315-18)

This is a great theatrical juncture in the drama, highly remarkable for the emphasis it puts on Iago’s fervent desire to play roles and dupe more victims. The move does not necessarily prove Iago’s villainous inclinations, though, as much as it demonstrates his intellectual advantage over his unsuspecting adversaries and his virtuosity as an expert performer. The uniqueness of this dramatic moment is that it mixes high dramatic tension with a touch of dark sarcasm. Iago’s glee for having
given a uniquely impressive soliloquy, with him alone on stage to deserve the audience’s ovation is unmistakable. If Othello fails to mark Iago’s pre-eminence and to acknowledge his merits, the audiences certainly do not. If the audience had come to the theatre to watch a good entertaining performance, Iago certainly provided them with that. Acting such a vindictive role against his dupes enables Iago to indulge in his desire to prove his supremacy over people, particularly Othello, who have been blinded by their deficiencies to recognize and acknowledge his competence. It painfully annoys Iago that Othello, whose “eyes had seen the proof” (I. i. 25) of Iago’s aptitude to the post, should have chosen instead of him Cassio, who “never set a squadron in the field.” (I. ii. 19) Iago’s attempt to involve the audience in his web of villainy and satire would likely boost his ego and compensate for his loss, undeserved in his view, of the lieutenancy. This moment of winning a round in the war of wits against his gulls is likely to give Iago the pleasure, the “sport” he says in his first soliloquy he is looking for (I. 3. 369; 371).

To complete the analysis of Iago’s motives, one legitimate question still demands a serious thought: “Is Iago aware of the real motives that push his hatred towards Othello and the others?” The present paper has attempted to give the answer. As has been argued, the only fact the thwarted Ancient knows as truth is he hates the Moor. It is not clear to him, though, how this hatred became so monstrous and destructive. Like most personality disordered people, Iago is a victim of a hidden psychological or mental malady unknown to him. He feels its consequences, surrenders to its force, but it is not easy for him to diagnose the illness or recognise its causes. “An important and characteristic challenge of all personality disorders,” a treatment centre discloses, “is that the individual exhibiting the symptoms often does not see that his or her thoughts and behaviours are abnormal. They often think that other people are to blame for their problems and that they are doing nothing wrong or unusual.” (Bright Quest) Literary critics on this point are not very different from the psychiatric ones. For Philip Edwards, “Iago, possessed by paranoia, hardly knows why he hates, feeling himself (Satan-like) impaired by others whose mere existence seems to taunt him with ugliness.” (1986: 101) Likewise, F. West (1978), relying on Harvey Cleckley’s landmark analysis of the psychopath, The Mask of Sanity (1941), rightly remarks: “As a psychopath, [Iago] has no real insight into his true nature; hence, it would never occur to him to inquire if he were evil or malignant… [H]e has no reason for making an unfavourable evaluation of himself against anyone else. (1978: 30). At the end of the play (V. ii. 300-301), Iago is unable to give an explanation for what he did.

Conclusion

To conclude, the antagonist in Shakespeare’s Othello has long been misunderstood for a devilish villain, a ruthless Machiavellian, or a repressed homosexual, and his malevolent conduct misinterpreted as “motiveless malignity,” or ‘evil for evil’s sake.’ This study has attempted to shed light on the possible concealed forces that may have ruled and dictated the behaviour of this uniquely captivating antagonist among Shakespeare’s creatively drawn characters. It is a further step towards understanding Iago’s bewildering motives in Shakespeare’s Othello. In portraying Iago as a personality disordered character, Shakespeare demonstrates an impressively intimate knowledge of human psychology and the invisible mental influences that shape and determine human behaviour. How Shakespeare had access to such accurate and detailed information about
the symptoms of personality disorders is a challenging enquiry for scholarly research to pursue. When, as the last moments conclude the play, the awestruck protagonist entreats his equally astounded spectators on stage to “demand that demi-devil /Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body” (V. ii. 298–299), Iago tellingly retorts: “Demand me nothing. What you know you know. /From this time forth I never will speak word.” (Ll. 300–301) Iago’s silence may be interpreted as the futility to make up more justifications for what he did, or as the impossibility of how his own rejection has led to such human destruction. Significantly, the play closes with Iago’s fate undecided. He is not punished, probably because his deeds, no matter how malicious and malevolent, do not spring either from premeditated evil, or from an intrinsic evil. Iago remains truly one of the most exquisitely inspiring creations of Shakespeare’s imaginative mind and a remarkable landmark among dramatic characters. Hidden mental forces have tragically destroyed both Iago’s ‘honesty’ and the souls and bodies of his innocent victims. This is why the tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice is as much the tragedy of Iago, the histrionic.

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Endnote:
i This and all subsequent references to Othello are to William Shakespeare. (1976). Othello. (Gāmini Salgādo, Ed.). London: Longman. Quotations will follow the pattern “Act. Scene. Line(s)”

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