

Exploring Shakespeare's characterisation of The Villain  
in the plays *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing*

Though both *Much Ado About Nothing*'s Don John and *Othello*'s Iago fulfil the role of The Villain in their respective plays, the disparity in their characterisation places them at opposite ends of the spectrum of Shakespearean evil. At one end, we have Don John the Bastard, whose 'villainy' is merely the random and unsustainable lashing out of a social pariah, and at the other, Iago, the 'motiveless malignity,'<sup>1</sup> whose meticulous schemata form the scaffolding upon which Shakespeare constructs an entire tragedy. In examining the proportion of speech, motives and impact that Shakespeare attributes to each of these villains, and how this corresponds to each play's outcome, it becomes clear that in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello*, the nature of the villain determines the genre of each play - comedy and tragedy, respectively.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello*, Shakespeare uses motive as a device to establish the comic/tragic potential of each play from the outset. In *Much Ado*, Don John's 'black sheep' status precedes even his speech when, in Act 1, Leonato greets him as 'the prince [his] brother's' awkward tag-a-long; one only worthy of such a greeting by association with his legitimate brother, Don Pedro. A Shakespearean audience would have been very aware of the stigma that a bastard son inherited, meaning that no matter how senseless it may appear, Don John's villainy is at all times rooted in a sympathetic social context. In characterising said villainy, Shakespeare uses instinctual language to assert that Don John's actions are very much a *response* to his situation - yes, he 'eats when [he] has stomach,' but that 'stomach' for unrest was predetermined by his parents' indiscretion. Ultimately, Don John's role as the 'canker in [the] hedge' of relationships in *Much Ado* is a generic plot device planted to establish the crisis/resolution trajectory of a comedy.

Iago, however, is no canker. In all of his most famous tragedies, Shakespeare employs an element of the implausible to establish a sense of horror and powerlessness in his audience, ranging from *Hamlet*'s spectres to witchcraft in *Macbeth*. However, *Othello*'s Iago is by far Shakespeare's most ingenious tragic device because unlike the supernatural, his actions are very easily assimilated into the logic of human behaviour. In stating 'I hate the Moor/and it is thought that 'twixt my sheets/He's done my office,' Iago appears to justify his malice with situational jealousy. However, the phrasing of this line leaves a distinctly bitter aftertaste. In this 'I hate the Moor/and...' syntax, we see a clear pattern of primary evil and secondary motive emerging, showing that Iago's villainy is completely innate and opportunistic, unlike Don John's, which is borne of circumstance. Motive, then, is a crucial factor in determining a villain's capacity for destruction in Shakespearean plays, with Iago's lack thereof setting him apart from the very human Don John as a mutation of human character; one capable of orchestrating *Othello*'s great tragedy.

The means by which Shakespearean villains achieve conflict is also telling. Throughout *Much Ado*, Don John ignores Conrade's advice that he 'frame the season for [his] own harvest,' (1.3.18) choosing, instead, to languish in discontent without employing any of the tactics that Iago actively uses to conjure it in *Othello*. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Lectures on Literature 1808-1819*.

Don John is often described as ‘Shakespeare’s most passive villain,’<sup>2</sup> because he contributes to the play only the *energy* of discord, allowing Borachio to co-ordinate it in the staged affair. Indeed, when asked to channel his discontent, Don John responds ‘I make all use of it, for I use it only’ (1.3.29). In this use of the focusing adverb ‘only’, we see that discontent is the only tool in Don John’s villainous repertoire, and that for all his pent-up hostility, he lacks the initiative required to inflict tragic levels of chaos. Thus, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Shakespeare characterises the comic villain as one whose jaded self-indulgence far exceeds his capacity for evil.

*Othello*’s tragic villain, Iago, can then be seen as Don John’s photonegative - a subversive who finds reason to cool his ‘raging motions’ in calculated, havoc-wreaking schemes. In his assertion that ‘our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners,’ Iago defies the instinctive behaviour to which others around him (Roderigo, Othello) succumb and in doing so, claims a sort of pathological control of the play’s events. Without passion clouding his judgement, Iago can make clear observations - for example, that Othello is of a ‘free and open nature’ (1.3.381) - and then ‘plant nettles’ to sting his victims (in this case, a rumour to provoke Othello’s jealousy) accordingly. Such meticulous planning is characteristic of a tragic villain because it transcends, and therefore threatens, the messier and more human behaviour witnessed in the play. The mechanism by which Shakespearean villains conjure turmoil thus predetermines the resolution of a play, with comedies requiring only a haphazard, opportunistic evil to ‘stir things up’ a little whilst tragedies like *Othello* depending on something far more nuanced and intricate.

Perhaps the most fundamental distinction that can be made between *Much Ado*’s Don John and *Othello*’s Iago, however, lies in the way they evolve as villains throughout the course of each play. Although both retreat from the chaos they have inflicted, Don John does so before its full potential has been actualised - in fact, the last we hear him speak is at the wedding when, having witnessed the initial conflict, he is the first to withdraw from the situation by saying ‘come, let us go,’ (4.1.103) thus leaving the other characters to deal with the aftermath of his actions. Indeed, Don John’s lack of commitment to his villainy is clear from the outset when he states ‘I am not of many words’ (1.1.116) - a premise that he fulfils with his incredibly low proportion of speech throughout the play and total absence after Act 4 Scene 1. It is this feature of Don John’s character that marks him out as a purpose-built comic villain - he serves only to unsettle the water; to stimulate the ‘much ado’ that, left untended, will inevitably resolve itself according to the pattern of a typical Shakespearean comedy. Aside from this function, he stagnates, remaining completely underdeveloped as anything more than a plot device throughout the remainder of the play.

In stark contrast, *Othello*’s Iago is entirely organic, and not only evolves with, but moulds the play’s action to his own villainous ends. Furthermore, thanks to frequent asides and soliloquies, the audience witnesses Iago’s evolution onstage as he reacts to each situation: upon witnessing the fondness with which Cassio welcomes Desdemona to Cyprus, he sparks rumours of an affair between them; upon Cassio’s assertion that he has ‘poor and unhappy brains for drinking,’ (2.3.28) Iago vows to ‘fasten but one cup upon him,’ and when Othello demands proof of his wife’s infidelity, Iago obtains and plants the handkerchief that condemns Desdemona. In

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<sup>2</sup> Richter, Natasha. *A Second Look at Don John*. [www.studentpulse.com](http://www.studentpulse.com), 2013

many ways, this level of dexterity is even more appalling than the concept of an omniscient villain because we are forced to acknowledge Iago as a *person*, who despite having to adhere to circumstance like everybody else, is capable of such unthinkable devastation. As Fred West argued in his essay 'Iago the Psychopath,' 'it is not sufficient to simply drape Iago in allegorical trappings and proclaim him Mister Evil or a Machiavel or a Vice'<sup>3</sup> - what makes Iago so terrifying as *Othello's* tragic device is precisely that he appears so convincing; so *human* throughout.

The fundamental difference between Shakespearean comedies and tragedies is the way in which conflict is resolved. By comparing *Much Ado About Nothing's* Don John with *Othello's* Iago (bearing in mind the outcomes of each), we can see that Shakespeare uses his characterisation of The Villain to regulate the genre of his plays. From the outset, it is clear that *Much Ado's* Don John is a comic villain - his 'displeasure' is socially coherent, his methods are convenient but impulsive, and he does nothing to sustain what conflict is achieved. In essence, Don John is crucial as a plot device, but fairly trivial as a character because comedies like *Much Ado* are not studies of pure conflict, but of love, humour and wit - themes that Shakespeare goes on to explore in relationships such as that between Beatrice and Benedick. However, Iago, Don John's villainous antithesis, lies at the centre of *Othello's* 'little web,' (2.1.179) spinning deception and conflict into every situation that he perceives. It is Iago's *otherness* - his insincerity, his restraint; the relentlessness with which he pursues discord - that sets him apart from Don John as a tragic villain. It has always been the case that Shakespearean tragedy occurs when conflict overwhelms; thus, Iago's position as a more compelling villain than *Much Ado's* Don John can be attributed to his function as *Othello's* 'Spartan dog' (5.2.58) - one who must flood the play with more tragedy than 'anguish, hunger, or the sea' (5.2.59).

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<sup>3</sup> West, Fred. *Iago the Psychopath*. South Atlantic Bulletin Vol. 43, 1978

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