

Iago the Quintessence of Capitalism: An Inquiry into Shakespeare's Othello



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ABSTRACT: “*Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus*” so claims Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. His character compresses multiple complex versions, soliciting a large assortment of deliberations. He is the concentration of evil who thrives in breaking moral imperatives. He is a reflection of bigoted racism, or hegemonic patriarchy. In other instances, his repressed homoerotic desires are at the origins of his hatred and violence towards Othello. Interpretations of Iago converge and diverge into a timeless maelstrom of critical scrutiny. Beyond the ethical, cultural, social, sexual, and political boundaries, Iago can be read within an economic girth.

Shakespeare’s *Othello* is entrenched in a world of social struggle and political upheaval. Iago’s pursuit of happiness is contingent not on changing fortunes but rather on avid individualism. His intentions and motivations might be an expression of a nascent Renaissance entrepreneurial values. Instead of a struggling proletariat, Iago stands for hostile and aggressively ambitious capitalism. The purpose of this article is to show that Iago’s character is a manifesto of an emergent Early Modern capitalism. His ruthlessness foreshadows a similar merciless modern economic ideology. Concepts such as servitude, desire, and individualism will be patterns that attempt to break down the conundrum that is Iago within a capitalist dialectic.

KEYWORDS: Iago, service, desire, individualism, revolution, Renaissance capitalism

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare’s dexterity on stage resides in his ability to tilt the world of his characters and spectators on its axis introducing convoluted realities where antagonists outshine protagonists, love is repaid with carnage, and honesty is mendacity. In such stories, little or no space is left for forgiveness, redemption, or justice. *Othello* ends with a stage littered with corpses. A tempest of violent desires and disgruntled ambitions shoves the peaceful world of the heroes - Othello and Desdemona - into the steep slope of hatred, betrayal, and murder. This engrossing spectacle of death was precipitated by the dubious actions of one man, Iago.

In Shakespeare’s tragedy, professional animosity spurs a private quarrel that unravels identities and interpersonal relationships in the play. Othello is a general in the Venetian army. He elopes and marries Desdemona, the daughter of a renowned Venetian senator. Their racial difference, a black man and a white woman, becomes the source of outrage for a scandalized Venice. Meanwhile, Iago, an ensign under Othello’s command, is enraged when his general overlooks him for a promotion. Iago starts plotting for the downfall of Othello. He destroys the reputation of his rival Cassio. He instigates the death of his accomplice Rodrigo and then his wife Emilia to silence her. Ultimately, he convinces Othello that his wife is cuckolding him with Cassio leading to her death at the hands of her husband.

As we watch the play unfold, we wonder where to place Iago among Shakespeare’s “survivors of the heroic age” (Bradley)? Imploding critical history and spectatorial conjectures, Iago rises perplexing questions; are we dealing with “*motiveless malignity*” (Bradley)? repressed sexuality? “paranoid psychopath” (Pechter)? Cynical pragmatism? In parallel to these complex readings of Shakespeare’s villain, this article proposes to examine Iago in light of economic imperatives. Engles claims that “the ultimate causes of social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in the mind of men ... but in the economics of the epoch concerned”. Thus, Iago might be understood as a primitive replication of the values of a nascent capitalism in the Renaissance. He is in pursuit of a more aggressive and self-serving increase of personal profit that is not meant to be shared but exclusively relished. The ambitions and intentions of Shakespeare’s villain augur a world where the individual reigns supreme, where the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of profit, and where desire is wealth. It tries to depict the features of a Renaissance world that foretells the eminent birth of the spirit of capitalism. Within a dialectic of service, individualism, and desire, the study, eventually, will try to show how the Shakespearean stage was the onset of the pecuniary questions of the age.

The Renaissance and The Ghost of Capitalism

Historically, the Renaissance predates capitalism, however, Marx talks about a “primitive accumulation of wealth” that started simultaneously with the deterioration of longstanding feudal edicts. According to Halpern “certain early forms of capital

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[...] were already firmly entrenched by the beginning of the sixteenth century [...] certain political, legal, or cultural domains were able to anticipate those of a capitalism formation even in advance of capitalism as such" (9). Accordingly, concerns with wealth creation and accumulation was an emerging interest in the early modern period. For instance, Thomas More's *Utopia* reflects on how "wealth" can disrupt and dislocate the harmonious equality of Utopian social and political fabric. One intriguing stance in *Utopia* is its stark denouncement of private property. It implies a certain degree of social malaise towards the nobility and gentry who are held responsible for malfunctioning economic relationships in Renaissance England.

Politically, Halpern adds that "in its crudest exercises of power the Tudor state anticipated in certain respects the characteristics of the capitalist state" (10). When king Henry VIII abolished the monasteries, he deracinated hereditary wealth. The selling and redistribution of the church's lands created a new gentry who had commoner origins and was more devoted to the prosperity of their estates than state affairs. These transactions between crown and subjects allowed for a significant portion of revenues for the country's treasury and for the appearance of a new category of investors.

Culturally, theatres in England were the crucible of new economic values. Dowd and Korda advance that "midst a proto-capitalist economy stood London's public theatres, a cultural institution indebted both to traditional guild structures and the innovations of a burgeoning consumer society" (1). The didactic and moralistic functions of drama in the previous ages were shifting into a more entertaining and public-oriented stage in the Renaissance. This sensibility to the importance of spectators' reactions and responses to produced performances paves the way for a 'consumer-profit' dynamic. A paying audience that was mostly composed of commoners became a crucial drive for the development of theatres. Likewise, Theatre was witnessing its own structural transformation. The role of patronage was waning in favour of more flexible business ventures through joint-stock ownership. Actors, dramatists, directors and others became more involved in the lucrative aspect of drama. Shakespeare himself when he left London in 1613 was a shareholder in his theatre company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men and a part owner of The Globe and Blackfriars theatres.

Drama's interest in economic issues expanded from form to content. Shakespeare's stage is populated with ambitious men and women who were irked by the limited economic chances offered to them for success and achievement. The characters palette boasts a multitude of individuals who come from all life venues, retainers, soldiers, grave-diggers, servants, actors, merchants, sailors, prostitutes and so on. The masses were absent present stories embedded into the body of the text. One of these men is Iago. Within an economic girth, Iago might be read as a primitive replication of the values of this nascent capitalism in the Renaissance. However, unlike the socialist aspirations of Utopia's citizens, he is in pursuit of a more aggressive and self-serving increase of personal profit that is not meant to be shared but exclusively relished. This study will be grounded in a capitalist theory within a dialectic of service, individualism, and desire. Eventually, it will try to show how the Shakespearean stage was the onset of the pecuniary questions of the age.

Iago "Tis the curse of service"

The definition of the concept of 'service' in the Renaissance is at the heart of entangled interpellations between the ideal and the real among critics. In the *Servants Dutie*, Thomas Fossett (1613) advances that "even if treated with malice and perverseness [servants] have not power of their own selves, they covenanted with their maisters, tyed and bound themselves to serve them so long and in such sort". Accordingly, the covenant between humans is turned into an extension of the primordial biblical covenant between men and God. Servitude gains a divine scope where obedience is not a choice but a solemn duty. Therefore, Iago and Othello's tie turns into a unilateral connection where the master is ordained to thrive on the toils of the servant:

*"Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,
Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,
For naught but provender, and when he's old, cashiered"* (1.1).

The quintessential servant is a symbiotic entity grafted onto the master's body and will. Within a sanctified hierarchy of a superior to an inferior, loyalty and fidelity bind the 'doting' servant into an elevated state of unconditional compliance that transcends necessities like social fairness and economic indemnity.

However, Iago refuses to abide by the ideal. His first rebellion in the play is against service and servitude. In the first scene, he reveals his intension to refashion an existence outside the ordainments of the Venetian society of order and hierarchy *"We cannot all be masters, nor all masters/ Cannot be truly followed"* (1.1). What follows is a crusade to become masterless: an act of insurrection that fragilizes normative social and political denominations. For Iago, Renaissance values of service enforce a discourse of control that ensures the powerful hold of the upper class over the working masses. In order to unmask these ideological distortions, he shatters lofty affiliations of service and redefines it within a system of abuse and exploitation as he rages:

*"Tis the curse of service.
Preferment goes by letter and affection,
And not by old gradation, where each second
Stood heir to th' first"* (1.1).

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By demystifying the servant-master relationship into employer employee conflict, Iago's opening speech in the play becomes a manifesto that aspires to erode the foundations of a society ruled by privilege and hereditary elitism. With Iago, service is transformed into a form of labour breaking from the drudgery of obedience into the realm of self-advancement.

Suhr maintains that "capitalism is also characterized by adequate rewards for economic risks and performance" (1989). Iago's major grievance in the play is the system's disregard for his input:

Mere prattle without practice

Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had th' election;

And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof

At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds

Christened and heathen, must be beled and calmed

By debtor and creditor" (1.1).

Iago has substantiated the material and moral 'value' of his labour through military services. The lack of promotion puts Iago in dire financial circumstances while Venice and Othello capitalize on his efforts. Within Iago, it mandates a sobering awareness of being subjected to an indignity that nullifies his social identity primarily and that is sustained by an indifferent political economy. The demand for calibrated recompense for rendered work reflects the speaker's desire for an economic exchange that is just and beneficial to seller of labour and buyer of labour alike. When his call for justice is ignored, the only way to recuperate his humanity and his 'soul' is by embarking on a journey of self-interest:

and when they [servants] have lined their coats

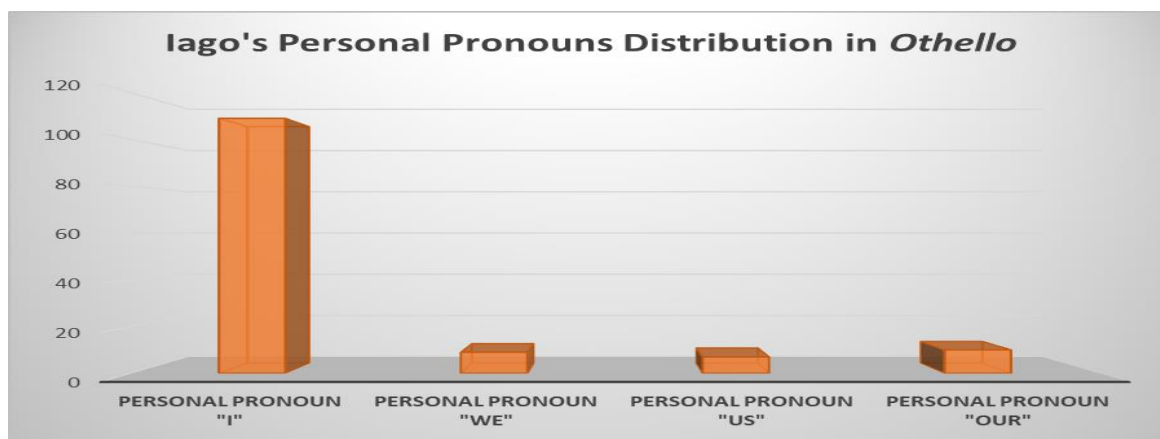
Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,

And such a one do I profess myself" (1.1).

More than this, benefit must flow back to Iago's person 'an active producer' who accomplished concrete successes rather than a falsely extolled Othello whose merit is the outcome of "bombast circumstance" (1.1) and a slew of "Horribly stuff'd ... epithets of war" (1.1). Within this economic scope, Othello holds the role of an 'idle capital owner' who has the unjustified authority and capacity to determine the destiny of competent subordinates independently of their efficiency.

SEEDS OF INDIVIDUALISM

Elizabeth Rivlin, in *The Aesthetics of Service in Early Modern Period*, argues that during English Renaissance "as neo-feudal, patriarchal forms of service began to yield to emerging capitalist forms [...] service became the basis for a subjectivity that was self-determining and, even, in contrast to older ideas of the servant subject, self-possessing" (3). For many critics, there is a tendency to place individualism as a pillar for the inception of capitalism. Renaissance Humanism is founded on the axiom that "Man is measure of all things" (Protagoras). Naturally, this shift towards Man inducts a higher sensibility to subjectivity, agency, and the conscious mind. By consequence, the 16th century marks the immergence of the self and its struggle to unburden itself from legal and linguistic unanimity. Indeed, it is noted in opencourceshakespeare.org that among all the characters of *Othello*, Iago is the highest user of the first personal pronoun "I" in his speech. Iago's "I" occurs 109 times, more than half are referenced in the first act of the play only, while Othello's "I" appears 96 times in total. The discrepancy denotes Iago's aggrandized concept of individualism. In fact, ulterior studies in linguistics (Oyserman and Lee 2008; Twenge et al 2013) show that there is a synergy between psychology, culture, language, and the use of personal pronouns. Cai et al advance that "individualism emphasizes agency and cultivates people's independence, whereas collectivism underscores communion and fosters people's interdependence [...] the use of the first-person singular words (I, my, me, mine) and first-person plural words (we, our, us, ours) have been used to capture individualistic and collectivistic orientations, respectively" (2019).



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According to the figure, the emphatic use of the “I” in Iago’s speech in the play reflects his desire to stand-apart from the collectivism of the masses. By putting the self at the centre, everything else becomes displaceable, replaceable, and disposable of. Loyalty towards a person or a community is a hinderance to self-development. In a Nietzschean manner, Iago regards the public space as dissonant with his personal ambitions. His true value is fulfilled despite and not through social consent.

In *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism*, Turner et al maintain that “individualism advocates rationality in activity in the world. Free activity is not irrational but is planned and calculating and is the more effective for being so” (82). Iago single-mindedly reverses the fortunes of his master. Othello who is “of a constant, loving, noble nature,” (2.1) becomes a raging man tormented with “bloody thoughts, with violent pace” (3.3) and who “Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love” (3.3). He loses his lucidity and spirals into a vicious cycle of self-doubt due to Iago’s speculations about his wife’s fidelity. The handkerchief’s disappearance, orchestrated by Iago, turns into an ocular proof of guilt and shame instead of a paltry domestic incident. It is a manifestation of the speaker’s faith in his ability to change the world to suit the word. Iago’s purposeful course of action while self-serving, it shakes the foundations of monolithic social mores. Othello’s military superiority, eloquence, and prowess do not withstand Iago’s insinuations. Desdemona’s noble origins and nature are tainted with Iago’s slander. Cassio’s promotion turns to be meaningless when he is one-sidedly cashiered by his Lord. Emilia’s status as a wife does not insulate her from her husband’s machinations and violence.

Iago’s Pre-capitalism and Desire

According to De Munck and Dries “it is now generally agreed that value has an economic and cultural dimension in which the two elements are never entirely distinct” (1). Within the patriarchal institutions of the Renaissance, Desdemona’s value manifests in her systematic objectification. In Cyprus, Othello proclaims:

Come, my dear love,

The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;

That profit's yet to come 'tween me and you.” (2.3)

Her value is determined within a discourse of economic transactions. Hallmarks such as her noble origins and social standing are instruments that guarantee the quality of ‘the product’ and ensure the buyer’s satisfaction. Indeed, for all the men in the play, Desdemona is an object of desire. In *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion and Desire*, David Graeber explains that “objects of desire are always imaginary objects, and usually, imaginary totalities of some sort- since most totalities are themselves imaginary objects” (63). Brabantio needs his daughter to be “A maiden never bold;/Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion/ Blush'd at herself” (1.3). Rodrigo wants Desdemona to be “full of most blessed condition” (2.1) and Othello craves to “thrive in [the] fair lady's love, / And she in [his]” (1.3). Each perception contains her into a distilled completeness of the ideal but inexistent woman. They built their identities and the validity of their existence on the authenticity and exactitude of their expectations of her.

One of Iago’s stratagems to maintain his equilibrium as a successful schemer and ensure his continuous growth is by producing and reproducing Desdemona for multiple consumers. In her book *Explorations in Renaissance Drama*, Mary Beth Rose argues that “the sphere of commodity circulation works under capitalism to mystify the social relationships that underlie and feed into it, even as it fragments and atomizes the individual subjects down into its web” (9). Iago integrates Desdemona into a production logic that erases her humanity and reshapes her into a commodity. His acumen allows him to detect the father’s, husband’s, and suitor’s self-defeating assumptions. Realizing that by controlling their desires he will control their fates; he constantly delays and prevents them from possessing their surmised object of desire.

Halliburton states that “to go to market is to negotiate prices, and all prices are in modern parlance representations” (1997). Therefore, Iago speculates the value of his commodity -Desdemona- based on his understanding of the other’s needs. Hence, he manages to transpose different portraits of her in his consumers’ fantasy space to further his self-promoting plans. For Brabantio, he presents the disobedient daughter narrative laying ground for Othello’s distrust of his wife. For Rodrigo, he promises a pliable Desdemona to ensure endless monetary funding for his enterprises “*thou, Iago, who hast had my purse As if the strings were thine*” (1.1). For Othello, he slowly demolishes his faith in his beloved steadfastness gambling that the trauma that ensues at the subject’s loss of his object of desire will destroy him. As an object, Desdemona is presented in profusion with multiple and striking qualities.

In *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith separates value into: value in exchange and value in use. “The things which have the greatest value in use have frequently little or no value in exchange; and on the contrary, those which have the greatest value in exchange have frequently little or no value in use” (1776). For Iago, if Desdemona is value in exchange, then honesty is value in use. Honesty has the highest worth in human dealings and relationships, as without it, corruption will rot the foundations of the community. But this supreme utility is devoid of any purchasing power. It does not grant Iago the recognition and advancement, he craves. In the play, Iago challenges “*if you dare do yourself a profit*” (4.2). Daring in this context entails a callous entrepreneurial distribution of self and others. His honesty is a pre-assembled self-image that is advertised to affect and modify the desires of a consuming audience. Self and other are turned into things that seduce the gaze of the consumer enticing him into buying it as “*honest*” Iago makes Othello’s wife into “*that cunning whore of Venice*” (4.2). To borrow from Baudrillard’s expression in *Consumer Society*, Iago lives “by object time [...] at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession” (26) not as a mesmerized buyer but as a canny seller.

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CONCLUSION

Ultimately, When Iago declares “*by the faith of man, / I know my price, I am worth no worse a place*” (1.1), he becomes a pristine figure that illustrates the unstitching of the feudal servant and the up rise of the capitalist employee scheme. Disenchanted, cynically detached, he pursues his objectives with a callous professionalism “*I follow him to serve my turn upon him*”. As he emancipates himself from the superior will of the master, Iago’s charade of true-service becomes an act of self-claiming. Instead of being owned and owed, he is a master of his own whose loyalty is self-reflexive and whose toil must prevent others from encroaching upon his individuality. In this play, Iago invokes the seeds of free will and free enterprise with the right of the subject to direct one’s labour into increasing one’s profit. In “*the Ethics of Capitalism*”, Laurent Bibard advances that “capitalism ... tends to be exclusively future oriented. Ideally, time is reversible, i.e. the past is nothing to humans and everything is indefinitely malleable” (14). There is a correlation between capitalism’s ethics and Iago’s ethics. He is adamant in his pursuit of the future “never being at fault or having to forgive” (Bibard, 2005). His disregard for his friendship with Othello and Cassio, coalition with Rodrigo, and above all his marriage to Emilia echo the disruption between past and present that characterizes the capitalist spirit. The past with its relationships and responsibilities is an obstacle to his rationality and freedom. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, he unequivocally confesses “*Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty / But seeming so for my peculiar end*” () In fact, Iago’s actions and thoughts are not guided by the evil-virtue binary. Instead, it is the desiring self, at the foremost of the capitalist adventure, that animates Iago. He is the forerunner of capitalism and embodies its anticipated liberation from the burden of ethics and morality. While Iago’s pre-capitalist inclinations salvage a selfhood that is self-aware and self-conscious, they also birth a subjectivity that is a quantifiable entity calculated in terms of wage-labour-price balance. In his pursuit of profit, Iago’s latent investment failure is the loss of his humanity. Emotions and ethical values are discarded. Neither mercy nor moral doubt come to cloud his unwavering economic agenda. With an omnipotent will, Iago bends people and events to his advantage and when the stage is drenched in blood, he is the last man standing. Iago’s economic ambition is self-centred. His struggle to redress the issue of service does not carry collective resistance purposes. It remains central to individual achievement and reforming the system is self-serving and self-limited.

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