Deception and manipulation are common practices implemented in the destruction of others with the outcome beneficial to the one administering the lies. Through these tactics an individual is subjected to increasing doubt that leads to a cycle of continual mistakes and their eventual downfall. The perpetrator of this manipulation gains personal gratification in the success while reaping the benefits of watching the spiral continue. It becomes an act of revenge and a personal vendetta toward their destruction as an all-consuming plot to persuade and subdue. Shakespeare explores this idea of manipulation and persuasion through his play *Othello* and the character of Iago. Iago is the central antagonist that schemes against Othello and his companions to destroy his life due to a perceived injustice against his person. He creates doubt in Othello’s mind over whether his wife, Desdemona, is faithful to him or if she and his lieutenant Cassio are having an affair. But, the success of Iago is not based on chance as he strategically implements his hatred of the Moor through deception. Iago is the embodiment of a master manipulator that centers his success not in the flaws of Othello’s character, but in his ability to utilize his own skills to facilitate his victory.

Rhetorical devices are central to his mastery of language as it allows for subtle nuances in the structure of his dialogue, creating a vessel for uncertainty leading to misunderstandings in interpretation. Speaking to Othello on the notion that Cassio is pursuing Desdemona in a sexual relationship, Iago mentions the idea that Cassio lies with her causing Othello to demand a further explanation. Iago states, "With her, on her, what you will” insinuating a larger implication to his constructed rumor without explicitly speaking to the meaning of his words (Shakespeare 4.1.33). Othello promptly replies, “Lie with her? Lie on her? We say 'lie on her' when they belie her! Lie with her? 'Swounds, that's fulsome!” (Shakespeare 4.1.34-36). The language structure utilized by Iago is equivocation, or word-play. R.M Christofides explains this word-play in his article “Iago and Equivocation: The Seduction and Damnation of Othello” as word-play “exploits the ambiguity of meaning, inviting misconstruction or uncertainty by an utterance that lends itself to more than one reading” (para. 1). The ambiguity offers a vague understanding of interpretation, allowing for misconstrued ideas to the situation. Iago’s use of equivocation and constructing instability in the language then leads Othello into an unstable mindset capturing the attention of his target while trapping him in his thoughts. Haim Omer and Marcello Da Verona further explain Iago’s use of word-play and its effects as “Iago’s invisible net is spun from insinuation, confusion, and reversed meanings” (104). This drives Othello to doubt his version of events and to be misled into believing the lies presented by Iago. His ability to recreate the thought process of others permits him to expertly shift beliefs and perceptions that would otherwise stay constant. The manipulation created in these circumstances alters the viewpoint of situations to become muddled in deception. Iago’s recreation of dialectic structure is applied and Othello becomes the victim.

Paired with this word-play usage is Iago’s manipulation of traditional dialogue structures in formulating questions of doubt. He admits openly that his perceived character is not wholly true in his simple statement, “I am not what I am” (Shakespeare 1.1.64). This assertation redirects the audience into questions of doubt. “Iago’s technique of insinuation works also by word pairing” (Omer and Verona 103). The dialogue indicates the pairing of repetition and a placement of doubt. It is believed that Iago is one idea, yet he is not. The doubt from this reconstruction of dialogue creates confusion. He complicates this restructuring of ideas through his presentation of ideas. Iago speaks on the love Desdemona holds for Othello to create a sense of doubt in her fidelity to her husband. “Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies. To love him still for prating? Let not thy discreet heart think it. Her eye must be fed” (Shakespeare 2.1.230-34). Rather than explicitly stating his beliefs of adultery, Iago restructures the passage. In the article “When Chaos Is Come Again: Narrative and Narrative Analysis in Othello,” Maria Macaulay explains the grammatical structure of Iago’s sentence format as “he commences with an imperative, follows with a question that he himself answers, and ends with a bold assertion” (para. 13). The reconstruction of the dialogue formulates an air of doubt by first concentrating on Desdemona’s love, questioning whether this love is true, then answering with the definitive idea of doubt. Iago’s manipulation works from within the dialogue as a strategy to control language. This control allows him to reconfigure the presentation of ideas that will lead to a misleading deception as it is received. Others then formulate their own questions of doubt in their minds and follow the pattern presented by Iago. This doubt leads to their manipulation as the doubt is controlled by Iago.

Iago’s character adds to his mastery of language and dialectic reconstruction as characters view him and his reputation as pure. The idea that Iago is an honest man is continually presented throughout the play by various characters at different stages of the plot. Benjamin Beier writes in his article “The Art of Persuasion and Shakespeare’s Two Iagos” that “the play resounds with the refrain of ‘honest Iago,’ issuing forth from the mouths of Othello and Cassio” (p. 40). Othello directly mentions this idea during a conversation with him as he states, “Honest Iago, that looks dead with grieving, Speak: who began this?” (Shakespeare 2.3.177-178). This is not the first instance Othello identifies Iago in this manner as he uses this phrase and idea multiple times as he believes that “Iago is most honest” (Shakespeare 2.3.6). Cassio also holds this sentiment as he bid “Good night, honest Iago” (Shakespeare 2.3.335). This reputable status of being known as an honest man by many characters offers him an edge in manipulating others and is expressed through the article “Iago’s Art of War: The ‘Machiavellian Moment’ in Othello” by Ken Jacobsen. “Iago carefully cultivates a reputation appropriate to both orator and general” (508). As he is an honest man, Iago’s perception of events and carefully made doubt in the structure of his presentation. The major characters of the play rely on him for an honest view of the situations they are placed. His input is valuable as honest and true advice that is for their benefit and their best interests. This unique positioning created through a protected reputation crafted in the idea of honesty permits his ideas to circumvent reason by applying it as a manipulative means. If Iago’s intentions are honest, as is his character, all manner of dialogue, which is manipulated to his benefit, is viewed as true. These characters are subjected to his manipulation and succumb to the lies.

His honesty and perceived high standing of character masks a satanic quality in his character. His intentions to destroy Othello and others who become involved in his mission reveals the inherent motives of his plot. He declares, “I know my price, I am worth no worse a place” as his self-worth is met with the notion “I hate the Moor” (Shakespeare 1.1.12; 1.3.387). These underlying reasons for his pursuit to destroy Othello emulates the idealistic image of Satan. In the article “Shakespeare’s Iago” by George Geckle, the author explains “Iago’s motives, and they appear as Pride, Envy, and Anger, all sins traditionally associated with the Devil” (68). This idea is an accepted one by the 16th century writer and audience that would immediately recognize the insinuations of these characteristics and the intrinsic uncertainty of the time the play was performed. The parallel with the deadly sins and the idea that Iago has taken the identity of Satan coincides with a supernatural ability to persuade and manipulate. Timothy Turner in his article “Othello on the Rack” furthers this idea as “the coercive agency he exercises demonstrates his mastery of an invasive form of sovereign power as adept at assaulting the mind as the body” (129). This understanding that Iago is Satan allows for a demonic presence in his abilities. Satan, the master of deception, utilizes manipulative tactics in changing the thoughts and perceptions of others. “[Othello] accepts the satanic Iago's lies as honesty and Desdemona's truths as dissimulation and dishonesty” (Christofides para. 11). Iago’s ability is then associated with a demonic and supernatural entity that he has become. Satan is a master of lies and deceit and holds the ability to mislead and force people to be led astray. As such, Iago’s parallel to Satan creates an illustration of this same ability and the reason for how the characters easily submit to the manipulation. He is the Devil and therefore holds the innate ability to alter the minds of others to his bidding. This allows him to be successful in altering minds and influencing the progression of the play.

The idea that Iago is from demonic origins then allows for an understanding of his knowledge of human nature and his ability to command how his enemy with respond from a military perspective. The characters of the play hold Iago in high regards of his intimate understanding of the human psyche. It is attributed to him that he holds “all qualities with a learned spirit, Of human dealings” (Shakespeare 3.3.250-60). He has declared a personal vendetta against Othello and takes his powers of human nature and uses them to his advantage. “If a general knows his own strength and that of the enemy perfectly, he can hardly miscarry” (Jacobsen 507). But having the knowledge of how Othello will react to his manipulation of rhetoric and the structure of his dialogue is only beneficial if he knows how to utilize this information in a manner that changes behaviors and thinking. “He astutely adapts the content and manner of his address to particular auditors” (Jacobsen 507). His tactical pursuit of his enemy is grounded in his knowledge of him and how different methods of attack will force Othello into believing his lies. As Iago is intimately familiar with the minds of humans and the emotional responses that are created, the characters of the play are placed at a disadvantage against his deception and persuasion. This creates the avenue in which Iago garners his characteristic of understanding human nature to his benefit and persuades and misleads others.

But despite the evidence that Iago is the instigator for Othello’s downfall and his manipulation is vital to this process, the character flaws of Othello himself are often cited as the core reasoning for these events. He is described as “a free and open nature, That thinks men honest that but seem to be so” and holds “of a constant, loving, noble nature” (Shakespeare 1.3.336-337: 2.1.214). His trusting nature becomes problematic to his belief in Desdemona’s infidelity. “He exists to do has already been done for him by a self-doomed victim” (Geckle 73). This trusting feature includes the complication of how Cassio involved himself in the wooing of Desdemona. It is mentioned that Cassio “came a-wooing with [Othello], and so many a time” as an intermediary between the couple (Shakespeare 3.3.71). This detail is crucial in understanding the dynamic between Cassio and Othello’s relationship regarding Desdemona. In the article “Othello’s Jealousy: From Textual Crux to Critical Conundrum” by Michael L. Hays, the author describes how the relationship between commander and intermediary complicates the marriage between Othello and Desdemona as “the tradition of the intermediary enables Iago's sexual innuendos based on Cassio's role” (para. 17). The relationship is intimate in that Othello would trust Cassio’s position in helping him win Desdemona, as an intermediary does, but the thought of his betrayal is not unfounded. “As a knight who wooed a lady with the aid of an intermediary, Othello trusted Cassio but would accept insinuations of his betrayal from Iago, a trusted source” (Hays para. 19). The jealousy exhibited from this relationship also extends to Desdemona’s character. Desdemona is of noble heritage as she addresses Brabantio “my noble father” (Shakespeare 1.3.181). This level of nobility creates discontent and fear within Othello. Rebecca Olson in her article “Too Gentle’: Jealousy and Class in Othello” speaks on Othello’s character flaw as “jealousy was the fear of cuckoldry, or losing exclusive possession of one’s wife to another man” (4). Othello attempts to position himself in the same status as his wife, but unsuccessfully. “He not able to mitigate the disparity in their social positions before Othello’s jealousy escalates to murder” (Olson 11). These character flaws in Othello lead him into a jealous state has he readily believes the lies Iago tells. Through these flaws that Othello’s downfall is made rather than the insertion of Iago’s manipulation.

However, this argument fails to recognize the importance of Iago’s character in manipulating Othello into disbelief. Othello validates Iago’s use of manipulation through the torture he presents. He declares, “thou hast set me on the rack!” as Iago has placed a level of torturous ideas in his mind (Shakespeare 3.3.335). The torture is then mentioned overtly as Othello tells Iago, “If thou dost slander her and torture me, Never pray more” (Shakespeare 3.3.368– 69). The representation of torture through the manipulative tactics of Iago hold a power over Othello that causes the doubt and change. “This transformation results from Iago’s assault on and manipulation of Othello’s mind…and involving mechanisms of psychological (as opposed to physical) coercion” (Turner 118). Though the characters may have a predisposition for failure, Iago evokes this failure through manipulation. Without his interference in the relationships and furthering the doubt that may have been present, the outcome of the play would not have ended in tragedy.

The mastery of manipulation and the persuasive nature of Iago allows him to abuse the characters in the play through influential tactics. By understanding Iago’s infiltration of the characters’ minds, the entirety of the play is grounded on his authority of circumstances. He implements an offensive and covert strategy of rhetorical devices combined with his intimate knowledge of characters and how they will react to alter the views of Othello. By cultivating a reputation of honesty and his innate evil nature that is comparable to Satan, his plot of destruction is possible. Through these methods, Iago successfully persuades his peers into believing his lies. Without these influences, Othello’s subliminal jealousy would not be exploited to the extent of murder nor would he readily believe the lies presented. This, in turn, creates a high level of importance to the character of Iago and the viewpoint of the play’s focus on the tragedy that befalls Othello and Desdemona. But the idea that the play is centered on Othello’s journey into destruction is shifted to emphasize Iago himself. The play is not a narrative of Othello’s downfall and his readiness to fall victim to Iago’s trap, but instead the play is fixated on Iago’s sequence of manipulating characters to his own devices. Iago becomes the central character and his plot against Othello the theme Shakespeare provides to his audience.

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