A Queer Reading of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Argument</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although William Shakespeare lived, wrote and died four centuries ago, he has enjoyed immortality as the intellectual ancestor of generations of English scholars and students of the human psyche. Shakespeare’s works escape the confines of a particular historical time and place, by delving into the depths of human emotions and focusing on the universal mystery of what truly motivates people to act as they do and make the choices they make. Human nature and human curiosity about that nature remain timeless themes, and no play better encapsulates their complexity and darkness than the tragedy Othello. In this play - where the enigmatic protagonist, Iago, weaves a convoluted and tragic web of deceit and death – Iago’s final words are: “What you know, you know. /From this time forth I never will speak word.” (V.ii.355-6). In denying the poor, doomed Othello any explanation for why he has been made to suffer so greatly, Shakespeare offers a mystery to his audience – to decipher the true motivations behind Iago’s immense hatred. I would like to accept Shakespeare’s challenge and, by using a queer lens and historical contextual references to examine the text, answer the research question: how can Iago be read as a queer character?

Throughout the play, Iago makes various attempts to justify his ill-intent and hatred towards Othello. Yet, upon closer examination, these reasons prove to be unconvincing. Firstly, Othello has named Cassio as his lieutenant despite his lack of military experience, by-passing the long-serving Iago. At the beginning, this may seem a plausible motive for Iago’s loathing. However, even after Cassio loses his position (II.iii.265) and Othello makes Iago his lieutenant (III.iv.545), Iago still desires to wreak destruction. Secondly, Iago claims to have heard rumours that Othello has had sexual relations with Iago’s wife Emilia. However, these rumours form a doubtful support for such intense hatred, especially as
Emilia implies that they are baseless (IV.ii.171-173) and Iago himself states that he “know[s] not if’t be true.” (I.iii. 431).

The unconvincing nebulousness of Iago’s declared motives - described by Coleridge as “the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity” in his manuscript discussing the play, entitled The Dramatic Works of Shakespeare – has led some English scholars to consider Iago a kind of archetypal character of pure hate and evil (British Library). However, Shakespeare did not write for esoteric scholarly review, but rather created plays to be performed. The imaginative power of actors to understand and interpret their roles is a crucial part of the theatrical process. Over the last century, a number of actors have deeply pondered the question of Iago’s true nature and have come to the conclusion that only great love could result in such great hatred. According to the Westword newspaper, legendary actor Sir Laurence Olivier “concluded that Iago was maddened by suppressed homosexual desire for Othello; he therefore kissed Richardson [playing Othello] on the mouth”, startling Richardson into remonstrating: “Oh, my dear boy” (Wittman). Olivier’s decision elicited surprise in the conservative 1938 theatrical world; it seemed unexpected that the play’s most pivotal character could be interpreted as homosexual. In her renowned work Gender Trouble, queer theorist Judith Butler states that the public’s shocked response to homosexual interpretations is due to society treating gender identities and sexualities that “fail to conform” to norms as only “developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (24). Any individuals with genders or sexualities against the norm are deemed to be anomalies of the system, as opposed to crucial elements of the social structure and greater community. Shakespeare wrote for
real people, exploring the vast spectrum of human experience, which arguably encompasses all of Butler’s “failures” just as vividly as any other identities.

Nevertheless, it cannot be determined with any certainty if Shakespeare intended his actors to interpret their roles with homosexual undertones, as the term “homosexuality” was only introduced in the 19th century; the concept did not exist in Shakespeare’s time. What did exist then was a widely accepted understanding that love and same-sex desire can exist between two men.

Stephen Greenblatt, in his definitive work *Will in the World*, notes that this kind of affection made logical sense in Shakespeare’s England: “That men were inherently superior to women was widely preached; why then wouldn’t men naturally be drawn to love other men?” (253). This implies a flexibility of thought that resonates with contemporary queer theory, even if Shakespeare did not possess those sociological labels at that time. Furthermore, the setting of the play enables the creation of exotic and alternative characters. The full title - *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice* - highlights the play's location, which also hosts *The Merchant of Venice*, another play testing the limits of social boundaries. Shakespeare’s version of Venice is a city where anything can happen – a black man can be honoured and promoted, a young white noblewoman can choose an elderly black soldier, a Jew can have his day in court (Shylock, *The Merchant of Venice*), women can engage in cross-dressing (Portia and Nerissa, *The Merchant of Venice*), and in both plays, men openly express and demonstrate love for other men. None of Shakespeare's other works contains such a racially and sexually varied cast. Shakespeare’s choice of setting offers all types of possibilities.

Shakespeare also uses symbols and references to homosexuality, which imply that Iago has amorous intent towards Othello, such as Iago exclaiming “by
Janus” (I.ii.38). The allusion references the Roman deity who is “guardian of
doorways and gates and protector of the state in time of war” (Oxford).
Shakespeare subliminally suggests that Iago is homosexual as Janus is depicted
as a god with two male faces, which could suggest two men being close together
and intimate. Additionally, the faces look in opposite directions, potentially
referring to his sexuality, which is more liberal than societal norms. The only
other character in the Shakespearean universe associated with Janus is Antonio
in The Merchant of Venice; Antonio is distinctly and arguably homosexual as well.
Apart from this, Janus is often used to describe someone deceitful, which
represents Iago’s lies and dishonesty, not only in his plans to fool Othello, but
also in his sexual expression.

Shakespeare uses dialogue to explore alternative sexual behaviour,
selecting Iago’s wife Emilia as a spokesperson for these liberal views. She is
given an intense monologue about intimate relations, saying: “Let husbands
know/Their wives have sense like them. They see, and/smell,/And have their
palates both for sweet and sour” (IV,iii,104-107). Shakespeare uses a metaphor,
likening tastes to sexual preferences, with the opposing flavours representing
women and men respectively. By alluding to three of the five senses, the
playwright suggests a physical and sensuous experience. The use of commas
places emphasis on the verbs “see” and “smell”, directing the actor to give slight
pauses between them. These forced hesitations slow down the pace of the scene,
as if Emilia is relishing the lascivious details, thus heightening the overall sexual
imagery. The strength of Emilia’s convictions is evident in her choice of words,
using the strong, directive verb “let”, which ends with a short and harsh plosive,
giving it a tone of finality and strength; she seems to be commanding womankind
to embrace their love for both men and women, regardless of their biological sex. Gender and sexuality are not “as seemingly fixed as [biological] sex”, with both placed on a spectrum consisting of a host of erotic opportunities and romantic experiences (Butler, 9). Emilia boldly states that she has sexual desires for both men and women, and as she claims to have learnt from her husband, her views become evidence of Iago’s strong homoerotic tendencies.

Iago confirms Emilia’s arguments through a retelling of his private homoerotic desires, vividly depicted in the fictional account of an erotic experience he claims to have had with Cassio. As part of his scheme to persuade Othello of Cassio’s affair with Desdemona, Iago invents a scenario where he observes Cassio having an erotic dream about her, one so powerful and realistic that slumbering Cassio makes actual physical overtures towards Iago, his sleeping companion, “kiss[ing] [him] hard” (III.i.478). In Kiernan’s book *Filthy Shakespeare: Shakespeare’s Most Outrageous Sexual Puns*, she states that, in Shakespeare’s time, the term “kiss” was a common colloquialism for sexual intercourse (185). Furthermore, “kiss” was also “a term in billiards denoting the brushing of one ball against another,” and thus suggestive of the interaction of male genitals during homosexual activity (Kiernan, 185). The adverb “hard” suggests physical strength and intense passion, highlighting Iago’s desperation for further sexual action. This coital homosexual imagery may shock audiences who expect Iago, as a male, to desire women. Butler argues that the general assumption of biological sexuality dictating sexual preferences is a result of the false belief in the “mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex” (Butler, 10). However sex, gender and sexual desire are not always aligned; Iago’s biological male identity does not correlate to his sexual orientation.
According to this theory, no longer can modern audiences treat this risqué scene purely as a deliberate fabrication for Iago’s nefarious scheme, but also must perceive it as a genuine expression of his lust. In addition to describing Iago’s vision of homosexual love as intense, sexual and provocative, Shakespeare also presents it as tender and soft. Iago tells Othello that Cassio kissed him “as if he plucked up kisses by the roots” (III.iii.479). Through the use of this simile, Shakespeare sketches an image of picking flowers, which adds a tone of whimsicality and tenderness, portraying a romantic aspect to the otherwise sexual encounter. Shakespeare offers the spectacle of Cassio choosing kisses like flowers, as if each kiss is its own unique experience, thus reinforcing the impression that Iago is savouring every detail of the elaborate illusion he is concocting.

Although Iago ostensibly fabricates this fantasy as part of his devious scheme to torment Othello, by the elaborateness of the description and the magnitude of passion displayed, Shakespeare implies that this is also a way to release homoerotic desires. The playwright uses structure to highlight the intensity of Iago’s longing, such as when Cassio purportedly places his leg over Iago’s thigh “and sighed, and kissed, and then / Cried...” (III.iii.481-2). The repetition of the determiner “and” suggests constant and continual physical movements, as well as a longing for the action to continue endlessly. Iago appears to be relishing the evocative vision that he has created. Shakespeare uses caesuras not only to reinforce the idea of limitlessness, but also to increase the speed of the sentence. The audience senses the heightening tension and anticipation, in both the actions themselves and in Iago’s physical and emotional response. Moreover, as the audience knows that Iago is creating this fiction, the
caesuras make each new phrase seem like an unplanned statement, as if he finds so much personal pleasure in his imaginary experiences that he spontaneously looks for new ways to describe them. This reveals Iago’s attraction to other men. Shakespeare then suggests that this love is solely for Othello when Cassio apparently cries: “Cursèd fate that gave thee to the Moor!” (III.iii.482). With this line, Shakespeare artfully inserts Othello into this homosexually-charged fantasy, thus revealing the true focus of Iago’s lust and affection. Iago, who is the pseudo-Desdemona in this dream sequence, now imagines himself taking her place with Othello: it is he, Iago, who has been given to the Moor.

Othello’s ready acceptance of the normality of homoerotic relations is most tellingly shown in his response to Iago’s fictional account. Iago claims: “I lay with Cassio lately”, a statement rich with sexual ambiguity (III.iii.470). However, Othello does not respond, seemingly unsurprised and unperturbed by the idea that two men sleep together, and only reacting to the mention of Desdemona’s name. As the Moor is a respected and powerful general, his beliefs are arguably indicative of social and military norms of Shakespeare’s time, and therefore it is conceivable that homosexual desires were commonly accepted. This idea is furthered by the notion that Othello had his own sexual experiences with other men, with references to his military life implying such relationships. Since joining the military, Othello claims that his arms have used “their dearest action in the tented field” (I.iii.100). The “tent field” suggests the resting place for sleeping soldiers during military campaigns. The phrase “dearest action” is particularly evocative. The adjective is suggestive of tenderness and affection, rather than war, and according to Partridge’s Shakespeare’s Bawdy, the word “action” is an allusion to sexual intercourse (69). It is therefore reasonable to
speculate that in the all-male military world that Othello inhabited for almost all of his life, the existence of homoerotic love and relationships could have been considered normal and natural.

As a professional soldier, this military sub-culture may well have influenced Iago’s sexual preferences. Butler argues that when it comes to gender and sexual desire, “not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (12). As such, Iago’s experience in the military – where homoerotic relations are conceivably acceptable - would have shaped his gender and sexual orientation, leading to his queer characteristics. Shakespeare strongly suggests that Iago has seniority and power in the military, fighting alongside Othello for many years and becoming an obvious contender for the lieutenancy. As the Moor’s “ancient”, Iago is the most likely candidate to have shared a sleeping tent and intimate relations with the general. When Othello marries Desdemona, homoerotic relations between him and Iago would have naturally come to an end, possibly prompting a deep hatred when that bond was lost.

Shakespeare casts an unflattering light on marriage, especially the connubial relationship between Iago and Emilia. Iago is clearly unhappy in his marital state. It is plausible that his homoerotic inclinations dull his interest in her and in the success of the union, resulting in him ill-treating her. When Cassio kisses and compliments Emilia, Iago remarks that: “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.112-114). Iago mocks his wife with a rude and offensive tone, speaking of her in third person while she is present and never addressing her by name. As her sole tormentor, Iago takes no responsibility for her or to defend her reputation, suggesting hostility between the two characters and a total lack of
emotional investment from Iago. Shakespeare uses this strained relationship to indicate Iago’s lack of interest in women, and how he fails in his role as a husband. According to queer theorists, marriage is a social obligation, trapping people in binary identities and genders. Feminist theorist Monique Wittig believes that the “overthrow of compulsory heterosexuality will inaugurate a true humanism of “the person” freed from the shackles of sex” (Butler, 26). This applies to Iago, who, restricted by the rigours of marriage and unable to openly express his sexual desires, is emotionally tortured and imprisoned in a heterosexual bond. His frustrations make it impossible to feel any real affection for Emilia, and as a result, he treats her with patent hostility and disdain.

Although Iago is socially and legally bound to Emilia, he is willing to spiritually and emotionally bind himself to Othello. In a mock marriage ceremony, Shakespeare uses structure and physical action to suggest intimacy between the two men. Shakespeare’s works primarily consisted of iambic pentameter, a structure of ten syllables with alternating emphasis on every second syllable. However, Shakespeare uses phrasing to present different meanings to the audience and the actors. As Othello vows to kill Cassio, he is directed by Shakespeare to kneel. Iago tells Othello not to rise in a very meaningful interaction:

OTHELLO I here engage my words.

IAGO Do not rise yet. <lago kneels>

(III.iii.524-525)

In this scene, the playwright shares the classic pentameter between the two characters without any audible break between them. According to Ben Crystal in his book Shakespeare on Toast: Getting a Taste for the Bard, Shakespeare would
use “metrical gaps and nuances to actually orchestrate the pace of the scene”; “he was directing them” (159). The playwright is instructing Iago’s actor to immediately follow Othello’s, which rushes the pace of the scene and gives it a sense of urgency, illustrating Iago’s desperation to be heard by Othello. The result is that their dialogue intertwines to fulfill the iambic pentameter perfectly, suggesting a strong spiritual intimacy and underlying emotional bond. This sharing of lines forms a melodic rhythm, suggesting a harmonious and balanced relationship.

The scene also presents the success of Iago’s plans to gain a position of superiority over Othello. In this iambic pentameter sequence, Othello has the longer part – taking up six of the ten syllables. However, the four short syllables granted to Iago have greater potency and aural impact. The plosives in the terms “not” and “yet” form harsh sounds, which give Iago’s directive the emphatic effect of a command. By obeying, Othello surrenders dominance to Iago and renders himself vulnerable. Despite the fact that Othello takes up more of the line, Iago still overpowers the Moor with his use of language. With four short words, Iago can emotionally overwhelm Othello, in spite of the general’s superior military and social status. Additionally, Shakespeare uses blocking to show how Othello is at the will of Iago, as the Moor’s actor is physically lower than Iago’s. This is a visual symbol of Iago’s power over Othello’s mind and the success of his deceit. However, Iago’s choice to join Othello kneeling suggests that his ultimate goal is not to have power over Othello, but rather to share a bond with him and to be with him in time of need. Othello experiences emotional trauma and needs Iago, but Iago does not choose to raise Othello up or maintain his own superior position and influence. Instead, Iago kneels and joins him on the ground. Othello
will not choose Iago when Othello is at his best, but will choose Iago when Othello is at his worst, and Iago is willing to keep Othello at his worst in order to maintain Iago's indispensability.

Kneeling on the ground, Iago monopolises the emotional energy to give himself to Othello. He asks God to “Witness that here Iago doth give up/The execution of his wit, hands, heart,/To wronged Othello’s service!” (III.iii.528-530). Iago offers all parts of himself - mind, heart and body - to Othello, and is mentally, emotionally and physically prepared to give himself to the Moor. His earnestness is reflected in the playwright’s choice of punctuation. The exclamation mark suggests Iago’s readiness to commit to Othello. Shakespeare uses caesuras to suggest that Iago’s love and what he is willing to offer to Othello are endless, enhancing the spiritual bond that they are forming and adding a sense of authenticity and emotional investment. On the other hand, this speech strongly mirrors wedding vows, which is ironic as both parties already have wives. Othello's kneeling position is submissive and has connotations of a marriage proposal, indicating a closeness and trust between them. Shakespeare alluding to God implies that, in Iago’s eyes, this bond is beyond the eyes of the law, but is holy and spiritual, superseding his commitment to Emilia. The entire mock marriage is rich with ardent devotion and homoerotic dedication.

Beyond offering himself to Othello, Iago surrenders his own emotional freedom to the Moor. Iago pledges to Othello: “I am your own forever” before exiting the stage (III.iii.546). Shakespeare uses hyperbole to portray the depth of Iago’s attachment to Othello and his wish to be romantically involved with him. The longevity of his promise highlights a personal desire that is more powerful that any social or legal contract. Shakespeare structures Iago’s declaration as an
extremely short line, giving it a bold and dramatic tone. The atmosphere becomes more amorous and the audience senses that Iago’s words are sincere. This is furthered by the fact that Shakespeare places the line right before the end of the scene, making it linger with the audience during the scene change, and in contrast to the various lies Iago sprinkles throughout the scene, this line seems more truthful and potent. Because of this, it suggests that Iago truly craves for Othello, and his homosexual inclinations become more plausible.

It is possible that because he cannot possess Othello, Iago’s original strong passion for the Moor has morphed into an intense loathing. In one speech, Iago says: “I hate the Moor” (I.iii.429). Although this is a soliloquy - which the audience expects to be a personal and honest account – Iago lies, not only to the audience, but also to himself. Shakespeare intentionally presents Iago as a liar, not even offering a truthful explanation of his motives at the end of the play. The motives suggested by Iago – the unconfirmed rumour that Othello has slept with Emilia and Cassio’s promotion over Iago – are nothing more than excuses. Iago may also have sought justifications for his hatred in order to hide his lack of heterosexual interest and maintain the masculine facade that society requires of him.

Iago spends much of the play hiding his homosexual intentions. However, when his sins are brought to light, he chooses to keep quiet in the final scene. He begins by telling Othello: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.” (V.ii.355). Despite his predicament, Iago still uses a commanding tone, putting himself in a position of power and control. Although Othello does not address Iago himself, instead asking Lodovico to question Iago (V.ii.352-354), Iago’s answer is a direct response to Othello’s question and appears to be a personal
challenge to him. The repetition of “you know” gives a sense of finality, as if there
is a limit to the information Iago is willing to impart to Othello and the audience.
It also suggests that Iago feels that Othello subliminally recognises the bond
between them, and hopes that Othello will acknowledge it. He then continues:
“From this time forth I never will speak word” (V.ii.356). Through Iago’s vow of
silence, Shakespeare confirms that the motives that have been put forward by
Iago in the play are not the true reasons for his actions and that there is much
more that has not been shared. The audience understands that they do not have
the full picture and have been given the latitude to consider other purposes and
motivations, including the possibility that Iago romantically desires Othello. By
refusing to speak, Iago sends a strong message to Othello: that Othello no longer
needs Iago’s guidance in understanding his motives and that Iago has done
enough throughout the play to demonstrate his yearning for Othello’s love. The
time has come when Iago has exhausted his resources, played out his sinister
ploys and now faces the dire consequences, and although loquacious throughout
the play, at the end, he refuses to speak at all, leaving the audience and Othello to
reflect upon the enigma of silent Iago’s character and intentions.

Despite the evidence, this interpretation does have counterclaims – Iago’s
stated hatred for the Moor, the fact that Othello makes almost no comments
suggestive of homosexuality and that Iago appears to be genuinely angry at the
idea that Othello has had sexual interactions with Emilia. However, in the frame
of Judith Butler’s queer theory, these counterclaims become uncertain, and due
to this lack of certainty, it is impossible to dismiss or disprove the queer
interpretation. All in all, in spite of Iago’s various stated motives, his physical
interests, emotional desires and the contextual evidence all lead inevitably to
one conclusion: Iago is motivated by a deep love and homoerotic desire for the Othello who needs and loves Iago, which have been thwarted and twisted into an equally powerful hatred for the Othello that does not.
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