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Approximations: Iago as a Plautine *leno*
--KJ Gilchrist

After Coleridge's comment on his "motiveless malignity" (Gardner, 359), Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* has been considered extensively. His motivations have been disputed, on occasion heatedly, and the character's origins have been traced to numerous possible sources. Such studies are, indirectly, helpful in determining Shakespeare's familiarity with Roman and medieval drama. More centrally, such studies allow us to follow the craft of Shakespeare's elaborate layering of traits in his character creation—the layering of a papier-mâché mask ending often in virtual-reality, as it were. Robert Withington compared Iago to the Roman parasite and to the "Vice" of the mystery play, illustrating how the "witty slave" and parasite from classical drama became the "rascally-slave" of Elizabethan comedy, becoming a more serious figure in his evolution (743). According to Withington, who points to Iago's soliloquy in the first act, Iago *suggests* the parasite (747) but is closer to the "Vice" of the mystery play, albeit without its "clownish buffoonery" (747). E. P. Vandiver, Jr. found in a similar study that the "ancestry" for Iago's character may be better traced to the morality plays and the Senecan tragedy (416), which makes Iago suitable, without evolution from the comic parasite, for serious plays, though only "sometimes tragedy" (416). Vandiver especially concentrated on Iago's relationship with Roderigo, comparing Iago to Jonson's Mosca and Machiavellian types (421-422). Crucial in both studies is the point that Iago is not seen as an exact type:

Surveying all the Shakespearean parasites, it is evident that, although none of this dramatist's creations exactly resembles the Plautine or Terentian parasite, *approximations* to the type occur...(Vandiver 422, emphasis mine)

Vandiver echoes Shelley's comment that "the rigidly-defined and ever-repeated idealisms of a distorted superstition' are not to be found in a play which abound in 'living impersonations of the truth of human passions'" (Gardner 350-351). Similarly, Vandiver remarks that

In Shakespeare's great creations the stock character disappears, becoming an indissoluble part of a new figure that escapes the bounds of rigid classification. (427)

Paul Jorgensen, as well as these others, finds of the influence of the devil of the mystery cycles and the "Vice" in the morality play: "But there is no reason that Shakespeare could not have both traditions in mind" (61).

However, in the Plautine figure of the *leno*, the pimp, we find another character whom Iago approximates. Iago is, in addition to his other ancestors, an *agelast-leno*—*agelast*: a "non-laughers" (one who cannot enjoy life or bliss, whether his own or another's) and *leno*: a pimp. While Iago displays aspects of the classical parasite and aspects of the medieval "Vice" and devil, he is also, as seen in his diction and his relations with other characters, a figure derived from the Plautine pimp. Randolph Splitter has recently observed that Othello mistakenly thinks that Cassio and Iago discuss "Desdemona rather than the prostitute Bianca" (197), but goes no farther with possible correlation between Iago, Desdemona, and prostitution. Iago, as an *approximate* figure of the Plautine *leno* is, however, of the utmost importance to the play. Iago's role as the *leno* is that which brings about, is the catalyst of, Othello's fall as well as, of course, Desdemona's death. The *hamartia* is Othello's; that which moves Othello toward awareness of his flaw is chiefly Iago as the Plautine *leno*, and for this reason Iago's similarities to the *leno* are more central to his ancestry than perhaps are the other traditions.

Before turning to the points of correlation between Iago and the *leno*, we may consider the numerous and significant aspects of Iago's character which are parallel to the *agelast* as distinct from those aspects which are parallel to the *leno*. *Agelasts* are, as seen by Erich Segal, a group of "'spoilsports,' incapable of play, [who] constitute the antagonists to the comic spirit. In one way or another, but usually in a literal sense, they remain 'on the job'" (70). This statement is significant in two ways. First, the "antagonist to the comic spirit" is precisely what Iago constitutes. What makes *Othello* a tragedy is, in larger part, not merely Othello's *hamartia*, but Iago's antagonism to his marriage among other prospects of festivity. The play, without Iago as antagonist, might well have been a comedy along the lines of the *Mostellaria*:

Othello, with a comic slave "Iago," plays hide-and-seek with Desdemona's father while attempting to imbibe in his nuptial. In such a comic plot, Iago would figure as a character like Tranio in the *Mostellaria*, who *works*, but to a festive end: "That's the spirit. Have a good shout and enjoy yourself" (Plautus 55). But in a tragedy, the antagonist to the nuptials cannot enjoy the eventuality of the marriage, which even Desdemona's father finally accepts.¹ In Plautus' *Curculio*, the character Cappadox cannot enjoy the celebrations at the end of the play, which being double celebrations are a "*sororia* (1. 660) and *nuptialis* (1. 661)" (Segal 92). Likewise, there is the double celebration in *Othello*, (announced in II.ii) in part, to celebrate the ruin of the Turkish fleet, and "besides these beneficial news,/it is the celebration of his (Othello's) nuptial" (II. 6-7).

Second, Segal's definition of an *agelast*, that he is always "on the job" (70), is significant to Iago's character: in a literal sense, Iago, unlike Cappadox, joins the celebration with Cassio and Montano. He pledges happiness to Desdemona's "sheets," presses Cassio to get wine, and then becomes the entertainment, singing songs, telling tales of drinking in England, and calling for more wine (2.3.26-90). Yet while Iago, true to his deceptive nature, appears to be festive, he is at his work. He plies Cassio with tempting words of Desdemona who has gone to bed with her husband:

IAGO He hath
Not yet made wanton the night with her, and she is sport for love.

CASSIO She's a most exquisite lady.

IAGO And I'll warrant her full of game.

CASSIO Indeed, she's a most fresh and delicate creature.

IAGO What an eye she has! Methinks she sounds a parley to provocation.

CASSIO An inviting eye, and yet, methinks right modest.

IAGO And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to love?

CASSIO She is indeed perfection.

IAGO Well, happiness to their sheets.
(2.3.15-26)

His next work is to get Cassio drunk before the arranged meeting with Roderigo where they will fight. But we see the effect of the above lines, and of Iago's plan, contrived in II.i where Cassio takes Desdemona's palm: "Ay, smile upon her, do. I will/Gyve thee in thine own courtship" (2.1.72-73).

The result of the fight between Roderigo and Cassio was better than Iago had hoped, entangling Montano. The result is one that a Plautine *agelast* would appreciate—if he cannot himself be festive, no one should be; Othello's nuptial is disturbed, the groom having to arise and settle the matter between Cassio and Montano. That is, Othello must, even now, do some work. An *agelast* could not be better pleased. These scenes lead us to take Segal's point, not only about the *agelast*, but about the *leno*: "the pimp...makes a business of pleasure. What is play to others is work to him" (80). Iago works to accomplish his business while others try to enjoy themselves. It is their enjoyment which he turns into his business.

The *agelast* in Plautus is excluded from festivities at the end of the play. In *Othello* there is no merry-making at the end, but there is what Segal observes: "the festive stage is purged of these sober types" (97). Just so, Iago is carried off at the end, where the audience at least feels some relief that he gets his due. Even in the *Rudens*, Labrax, the *agelast-leno* in that play, has suffered great loss. He is invited to the dinner, yet it is small consolation to the avaricious figure who must celebrate what is in part a nuptial—to him merely sex—from which he will derive no profit.

Iago is also like the Plautine *agelast-leno* in his attitudes; Segal defines the type as one who, "displays the worst anti-comedy attitudes, namely ill humor and greed" (79). As we have seen, he cannot enjoy Othello's good fortune in

securing Brabantio's consent to allow the marriage to remain; he cannot celebrate love. Neither can he feel congratulatory when Cassio is made lieutenant (1.1.7-33). He fumes on this theme for considerable space. If there is a question as to Iago's motivation, the failure to secure lieutenant's rank is as important to Iago as his suspicion that "twixt my sheets/He [Othello] has done my office" (1..3.79-80), which, mentioning only twice in the play, is a lesser concern to him than is the missed lieutenantry. He is, then, full of ill-humor. And even when Iago sings his festive songs, he sings with the aim of getting Cassio drunk, getting him, literally and metaphorically, off his guard.

What of the *agelast-leno's* greed? Iago is greedy in more ways than for mere money. He seeks position—the lieutenant's rank, *coveting* it. While greedy for the position, coveting Cassio's rank, Iago is jealous as well. For greed is, after all, not more than an insatiable jealousy for things one believes are (or ought to be) one's own. Jealousy and greed: both operate by persons being discontent with what is. Jealousy, not merely suspicion, he inspires in Othello. But it is jealousy—a greediness even—for Desdemona he hopes to inspire in Cassio and Roderigo, and this jealousy approximates coveting, though of an impecunious sort. He inspires a discontent all around, but he is himself the most greedy in terms of money. He uses Roderigo's money so readily that Roderigo is forced to admit Iago holds his purse "As if the strings were thine" (1.1.3).

In Plautus there is another aspect of the *agelast's* greed which Iago approximates. As Segal illustrates (83), in the *Persa*, Dordalus harps after his money:

My money please, give me my money, nasty man.
I must demand my money from you. Money please.
Will you deliver money please? Oh, shame on you!
The pimp demands his money. (II. 422-425)

And in the *Mostellaria* we have much the same with Misargyrides seeking his money from Tranio:

MISARGYRIDES My interest—I want my interest—give me my interest. Are you going to give me my interest, here and now?

TRANIO Interest, interest, interest—it's the only word he knows.
(II. 630-634)

This discussion has continued for numerous lines before these. Similarly, Iago (I.iii), holding the strings to Roderigo's purse, repeatedly admonishes Roderigo to fill his purse with money. He advises Roderigo variously to "put money in thy purse" (II. 39, 41, 42-43, 45, 46-47, 51), "make all the money thou canst" (I. 53), "make money" (II. 57, 63), "provide thy money" (I. 70), and "We will have more of this tomorrow. Adieu" (II. 70-71). He then remarks to himself,

Thus ever do I make my fool my purse. (1.3.375)

Here his character seems to suggest more the parasite than the *leno*. Yet we must consider the relationships behind the banter in order to see how Iago approximates the *leno*. Iago is, metaphorically, selling Desdemona to Roderigo—or at least the promise of her carnal favors, the "idea" of having her. Within this context, his words take on a double meaning when he says next,

For I mine own gained knowledge should profane
If I would time expend with such a snipe
But for my *sport* and *profit*. (1.3.376-378, emphasis mine)

A more detailed consideration of Iago's diction must wait. Here it should be emphasized that Iago postures, *approximately*, as a pimp between Roderigo and Desdemona. This is also true of Iago's involvement between Cassio and Desdemona. While Iago watches Cassio kissing Desdemona's hand, he finds their mingling and dallying profitable to his own purposes and finds ways to further exploit the appearance, if not the reality, of their mingling. Iago does not seek monetary gain from Cassio's relations with Desdemona. Since his finances are arranged with Roderigo, as we have seen, he seeks another end, an infernal one, from Cassio: Iago's business, his work, is revenge.

Another point of approximation is seen in Plautus' *leno* Labrax who, in the *Rudens*, "has desecrated the temple of Venus" (Segal 162) as well as having lied and cheated. In a very real sense, Iago, by means of lying and cheating, albeit indirectly, desecrates Venus' temple in the play: Othello and Desdemona's bed. In 4.2.107-108, Desdemona instructs Emilia to lay her "wedding sheets" out on the night she will be killed upon them. Again, significantly, in this instance Iago approximates the *leno*. The Plautine characters most often "prefer love without marriage, *komos* without *gamos*" (Segal 165). Segal points to Don Armado's words in *Love's Labour's Lost* as representative of the Plautine idea: "'The catastrophe is nuptial' represents not merely a pun but a philosophy" (165). With tragic irony these words apply to Iago as he promotes unmarried love between Roderigo and Desdemona, as well as between Cassio and Desdemona, while at the same time indirectly destroys the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, desecrating the temple of Venus with their blood. It is darkly ironic that the blood is not that of a virgin, given in nuptials; yet it remains blood spilled from a chaste woman. And it is more than dramatic justice that Iago ruins his own marriage in destroying another's, for ruin of marriage is the one result a pimp accomplishes for others, if not in actuality, at least in essence, undermining vows. Altogether, Iago's character and his relationships approximate those of a *leno* in these ways, which makes him the character that Trachalio in the *Rudens* describes when asked to enumerate, briefly, Labrax's qualities:

TRACHALIO He's a most accomplished trickster, criminal, parricide, perjurer, the most infamous, insolent, impudent, indecent—well, he's a pimp, that's the long and the short of it. (II. 652-655)

Aspects of Iago's diction further reveal his approximation to the *leno*. From the beginning of the play, Iago's language is not approximately but precisely a pimp's. He cannot refer to the consummation of love in any terms but by those which are merely carnal. In act I, when Roderigo considers suicide, Iago appeals to his reason in an attempt to persuade Roderigo of his error. And while Iago discusses reason, in the Elizabethan mind that faculty which lifts the human above the animal, he nonetheless dwells more on the carnal elements of our nature, not the higher faculty of reason:

IAGO If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most prepost'rous conclusions. But we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts, whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion. (1.3.329-335)

Earlier, when Iago awakes Brabantio to tell him of Othello and Desdemona's elopement, he uses the metaphor of robbery:

Awake, what ho, Brabantio, thieves, thieves, thieves!
Look to your house, *your daughter*, and *your bags*.
Thieves, thieves! (1.1.79-81 emphasis mine)

His metaphor fittingly describes his two main concerns throughout the play: carnality and money. He could have better used the metaphor of a fire (saying perhaps "your house is being burnt by the lust of a sooty Moor"), which would likely get Brabantio out of bed more quickly than the threat of a burglar. We have noted already Iago's greed, and his corresponding diction reflects it. In this case we note not his greed but that, in this same act (I.i), his diction reveals his carnal concerns:

An old black ram
Is tugging your white ewe (II. 88-89);
You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse (II. 113-114);

And

Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs. (II. 117-119)

Iago's diction spreads to others in the play, as we will see momentarily, but at this point in the play, Roderigo picks up the theme next, connecting flesh with wealth: "Tying her duty, *beauty*, wit, and *fortunes*/In an extravagant and wheeling stranger/Of here and everywhere" (1.1.137-139, emphasis mine). In the next scene Iago continues his linking of flesh with profit when he describes Othello's marriage to Desdemona: "Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carrack/If it prove lawful prize, he's made forever" (1.1.50-51). A land carrack is a merchant vessel, which is what a prostitute would approximate a pimp.

The use of "carrack" is not pornographic, as are the earlier lines spoken to Brabantio. Yet the fact that Iago's terms are pornographic we may take literally as connected to Iago's approximation of the *leno*: *porneuo* and *graphein*—writing of prostitution. It is not just that Iago's diction is carnal and avaricious. He uses, and gets others to use, carnal terms of prostitution when their speech concerns Desdemona; this success is a significant part of his approximation of the Plautine *leno*. He *makes* Desdemona a prostitute, if not literally, at least in the sight of Othello. He also, in a sense, sells her, or at least the prospect of her, to Roderigo. He, further, presses Cassio to pursue her so that his "business" of revenge will prosper (even as he pressed him to go get the wine in act 2).

An interesting passage along these lines is where Iago watches Cassio kiss Desdemona's hand and says, as has been related previously, "Ay, smile upon her, do; I will/Gyve thee in thine own courtship" (2.1.168-169), lines which reveal an implicit sense of ownership, a sense that he "possesses" Desdemona in some capacity or administers to whom she will give her attentions. Prior to this point in the play, Iago describes to Desdemona the praise of a deserving woman who "never was so frail/To change the cod's head for the salmon's tail" (2.1.154), which David Bevington notes as perhaps carrying a sexual connotation, an exchange, in that case, of sexual favors for something else (1136n). While observing Cassio and Desdemona, Iago says to himself,

If such tricks as these strip you out of your
lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kissed
(2.1.170-171)

The question here is if "trick" can mean a prostitute's service for a fee. The *O.E.D.* does not offer much help on this point, citing the word as basically meaning only treachery and pranks in Shakespeare's time, a meaning, in itself, not insignificant when considering Iago. Even considering the age of the profession, Iago's carnal tongue, and the context of his other statements, we can only speculate whether this sense of "trick" may have stood in Shakespeare's streets. One other place the word occurs in this play is where Desdemona says, "this is a trick to put me from my suit" (3.4.89).

Other passages, not employing the word *trick*, carry significance. We have noted in Act I Iago's words indicating that he would not put up with Roderigo if not for "sport and profit" (1.3.387). Where Iago most often uses "sport" is in describing what he imagines to be Desdemona in bed. To Cassio he says, "she is sport for love" (2.3.16-17), and "I'll warrant her full of game" (2.3.19). To Desdemona, in contrast to sport, Iago says, "you [women] rise to play, and go to bed to work" (2.1.4), a view only a pimp could take.

The idea of prostitution comes explicitly and literally into the play from Iago when he says he will

Question Cassio of Bianca,
A huswife that by selling her desires
Buys herself bread and clothes. It is a creature
That dotes on Cassio, as 'tis the strumpet's plague
To beguile many and be beguil'd by one.
(4.1.94-98)

On another level, it is Desdemona, by Iago's ploy, who has also beguiled many while she is herself beguiled by Othello's love. Iago in the above passage, is arranging Othello to overhear Cassio as he describes Bianca—Othello thinking he describes Desdemona:

CASSIO I marry her? What? A Customer?
(4.1.120)

Thus Iago fulfills Othello's injunction: "Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore!" (3.3.363). It is important here to notice that the terms of prostitution spread increasingly to other characters, to Cassio, as show already, and to Emilia, as speaking of jealousy; her words recall to the our mind Iago's words to Brabantio of the two-backed beast (1.1.117-119):

EMILIA It is a monster
Begot upon itself.

DESDEMONA Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind!
(3.4.161-163)

Bianca only uses the language of her profession, but it reinforces what Iago has begun in the play. She says to Cassio, "there; give it your hobby-horse. [Gives him the handkerchief]" (4.1.153-154). Iago successfully creates a pervasive subtext of prostitution among the characters, a sense which builds and eventually applies to Desdemona. Desdemona alone will not use the carnal terms that have infected other characters, but will only allude:

EMILIA He call'd her a whore. A beggar in his drink
Could not have laid such terms upon his callet.

IAGO Why did he so?

DESDEMONA I do not know; I am sure I am none such.
(4.2.122-125)

Othello's vocabulary is most overtaken with the terms of prostitution. In Act 4 we read "impudent strumpet" (2.81), "are you not a strumpet?" (2.83), "what, not a whore?" (2.86), and in Act 5, "strumpet, I come" (1.34 and 2.80,82), and "she was a whore" (2.136).

Segal sees a similar linguistic pattern in the *miles gloriosus*. He explains how Palaestrio puts his words in the mouth of the soldier. After Palaestrio's instructions on how to get rid of his girl, Philocomasium, to obtain another, the soldier "parrots his slave's advice as if it were his own idea" (264,n.55). Likewise, the situation is one accomplished by Iago, as we have already noted. Segal adds another instance of its occurrence in *Othello*. That is,

When Iago tortures Othello with animal images of his wife's supposed infidelity, "were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys..." (3.3.403), his description so overcomes the Moor that later, in greeting Lodovico, he suddenly blurts out, "Goats and monkeys!" (4.1.256). (264,n.55)

Iago has infected his victim with not merely the terms of prostitution, but of the pornographic, and after festering, it seeps from Othello as it does from Iago.

Othello's fall, if inevitable, is nonetheless precipitated by Iago's role as a pimp. Iago, as much a parasite as he is an image of "Vice" in the morality plays and the devil in the mystery cycles, is also the figure of the *Plautine agelast-leno*; taken from comedy, he has been approximated on a sinister level as a tragic villain. As Jorgensen said of this character, "there is no reason that Shakespeare could not have both [or various other] traditions in mind" (61) when creating him. Yet more central to his character than the devil, "Vice," and the parasite is the *leno*. Jorgensen relates that Shakespeare "never duplicates a major character" (58). In this case, Iago is a compilation and approximation of various traditions centering on the *leno*, and as such is not a duplication.

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Notes

1In a Plautine comedy, if a father opposes a love affair, it is because he vies for the same girl (Segal 93), which approximates Desdemona's dilemma with her father and Othello: a father and a lover vie for a woman's loyalty. That the father in Shakespeare's play is related not to the groom but to the bride is little change from Plautus.

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