

Richard Raatzsch. *The Apologetics of Evil: The Case of Iago*.

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If philosophy is back, as appears to be the case, in Renaissance studies generally and in Shakespeare studies specifically, then this short monograph on Shakespeare's *Othello* is a sign of how thoroughly it has returned. It was published in the excellent Princeton Monographs in Philosophy series, and author Richard Raatzsch is not a literary critic like Tzachi Zamir seeking to use traditional categories of moral philosophy as a template to interpret Shakespearean drama. Instead, he is a professional philosopher reading *Othello*, specifically the character of Iago, as a means to elucidate certain philosophical ideas about evil. He makes little use of the protocols typically found in literary scholarship: there is nothing about historical context, practically no close reading of the play's language, and references to Shakespeare's contemporaries appear sparingly. His citation of Shakespeare scholarship includes only the largest swells, and no ripples: Samuel Johnson, A. C. Bradley, Stanley Cavell, Harold Bloom, and Stephen Greenblatt. For Shakespeare scholars willing to overlook these absences, however, this book provides an invigorating and challenging account of the significance of Iago.

Raatzsch's two interrelated concerns are to demonstrate that we cannot morally justify Iago's actions but we can "defend" his character, and that Iago represents a pathologically extreme determination to separate himself from other human beings and the concerns that typify human relations. The behavior of even the worst villains structurally depends on a relation to the wills and dispositions of others. Egoists need others to gratify their egos. Schemers lay plans to achieve purposes involving their own place among others. Pretenders seeking to inveigle a good reputation must rely on others to grant them their wish. For Raatzsch, Iago resembles but does not quite coincide with the egoist, the schemer, or the pretender, whose motives become intelligible precisely as efforts to manipulate their place within a community. Iago does not see himself as having any place in a community: "The difference between Iago and the others is, for Iago, the quintessential boundary. . . . for him there is no essential difference between the different kinds of things, human and nonhuman, that are not himself" (73). Ordinary schemers mix their pleasure in scheming with community-dependent practical purposes; Iago is a pathological derivative of the ordinary — a pure schemer.

Herein lies Raatzsch's defense of Iago. Ordinary schemers, dependent on relations to others, sometimes moderate the impetus of their scheming character when this character interferes with the pursuit of other goals: when they scheme they

choose it, and so cannot be defended. Iago is different: he can only act vis-à-vis scheming. His pure character has the force of natural law, albeit in the realm of human action. He does not so much choose to act as he expresses the nature of his being. His behavior deserves moral censure, to be sure, but his character cannot be otherwise than it is: “the moment Iago appears as a moral subject, like each of us, he proves to be what he is. That alone is what concerns and enables us to defend Iago without justifying him” (100). It almost seems as if Raatzsch is claiming that Iago is a personification, but his interests are finally philosophical rather than literary. For Raatzsch, Iago is a concept more than a character, and the play provides us with a series of images — he calls it a panopticon — that successively produce an understanding of this concept. The concept of Iago reveals that evil is a pathological derivative of ordinary human practices, that it depends on the good and is secondary to it. In its pure form evil can hardly be understood as a human practice.

Although this is a short book, the discussion proceeds at a leisurely pace, and at times the digressions impede rather than promote the reader’s explicit understanding of the thesis. Readers may likewise be dissatisfied with the argument as a reading of *Othello* as a whole. The constant focus on Iago can’t help but leave out many things, and tends to exaggerate the lack of agency exercised by the other characters. In the terms of a panopticon, Raatzsch prefers the iconic image of Iago standing behind Othello’s shoulder whispering in his ear; he ignores the iconic image of Othello standing over Desdemona’s sleeping body. Nonetheless, it would take a cold eye to find no interest in Raatzsch’s ideas and the way he enlists *Othello* to explore them. There is always more to say about evil, but what Raatzsch proffers is often fascinating. Philosophy is back, and in this case it’s a good thing.

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