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An Ontological Transgression

Iago as representation in its pure form

This paper attempts to present various approaches to Iago's function and position in Shakespeare's *Othello* in order to show different cultural-dramatic levels and layers of contrasting interpretations that are present in the drama. The suggested hypothesis of the paper is that the peculiar ontology of this figure can be explained by the late-Renaissance epistemological crisis and the basic change in the logic of representation that took place at the beginning of the 17th century. A painting by Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, is examined as a parallel to Iago's paradoxical existence and as another example that, similarly to Iago's, reflects and comments on the changed modes of representation of the age.

Through Shakespeare's Iago I will examine a change which may be dated to the turn of the 17th century, a change which brought a radical turn in the representational logic of our culture. I will suggest that from the perspective of this change it is possible to draw a parallel between Iago and a mid-17th century painting. The painting is as witty, nuanced and complex in its reflection on the problems of representation as Iago is. Both the character and the painting are radically new forms of representation made possible by the historical, cultural and epistemological changes often grouped under the term early modern. I will also examine the ways Iago and the painting display this new means of representation; on the one hand, they themselves are examples of theatrical and pictorial representation and thus they demonstrate how signs are produced; and on the other hand, because they are self-referential with regard to the problem of representation.

The existence of Iago is unique for several reasons. First, he is "present" both in the drama and on the stage on several levels, with roles of different kinds. He is Othello's ensign or flag-bearer; he is the intriguer who concocts the plot of the play; he is the director who makes the show go on; and he is the mas-

ter of ceremonies who moves easily between the world of the play and the world of the audience. Indeed, the number of Iago's roles is dazzling. Second, within the structure of the drama, it is possible to attribute different "roles" or functions to him regarding his relationship to the other characters. Third, he is the product of a period in the development of drama in which a transition between two epistemological models is taking place. Since this transition also takes place in the theatrical tradition, it calls into play residual and emergent theatrical models at the same time. From one point of view Iago is a villain, while from another he is doing nothing but what is necessary for all play and theatre: he is creating a world. And to make him even more intriguing, he is willing to comment on his machinations.

I will now map the elaborate context in which it is possible to interpret the multitude of roles and selves in which Iago is realised.

It is beyond dispute that we are dealing with a villain who intentionally misleads his master, infects him with false jealousy, which leads to Othello's killing of Desdemona, and his subsequent suicide. The investigation of Iago's motives has been a basis for a number of interpretations of the play since Coleridge. My concern, however, is not so much the detectable motives and drives of the villain in his intrigue, but rather the forms or perhaps "types" of evil that appear on stage during this period in English drama. These forms should provide us with a wider context for examining Iago's villainy than the plot of the play or the "hidden psychological motivation" of the characters. A major element in this wider context is the theatrical tradition in which the drama has its roots.

According to Rosalie Colie, Iago represents the kind of moral privation that Augustine attributed to the devil. Iago's devilishness is indisputable.[1] The most obvious explanation is the structure of the play, which might be compared to the traditional structure of moralities, a psychomachia, the combat of an angel and a devil for the human soul. In this design the pole opposite to Iago is the innocent Desdemona, described within the text as a near saint.[2] As Robert Grudin also observes, the play ascribes a number of Christian epithets to Desdemona, including "heavenly sight" (V.ii.348) and "heavenly true" (V.ii.135). Grudin even goes

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1. Rosalie Littell Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 246.

2. Robert Grudin, *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 126.

further in opposing the two characters, Iago and Desdemona, defining them as pure opposites standing in mutual necessity with each other and both being universal psychological presences: "If Desdemona embodies the lure and agony of an absolute morality, Iago embodies the natural result of this civilising influence, the rude will chafing against moral law." [3]

With reference to other character-types within the English dramatic tradition, Iago is the successor not so much of the fallen angel or devil, as of another figure from the morality plays. He may be said to descend from a companion to the devil called Vice, who, although villainous, enjoyed the sympathy of the audience thanks to his mischievous but funny tricks and shrewdness. Since the Vice usually played a dramaturgically central role in the moralities, and since this function was passed over from the Tudor dramatic tradition to Elizabethan theatre, we should take a closer look at him.

It is important to note the relationship of this type to the rest of the characters as well as to the audience. The Vice was usually "performed by the leading actor and 'director' of the troupe." [4] The two functions, namely that of the Vice and the director, were clearly related, and the player of Vice had a distinguished position in the hierarchy of actors, his role in the hierarchy of roles. This is supported by the fact that in the case of moralities, where we are sometimes provided with the distribution of roles among players, the Vice appears as either the first or the last. Moreover there is usually no doubling required in his case because of the importance and complexity of his role. [5] Robert Weimann describes the fool and the Vice acting as a kind of Master of Ceremonies or as figures who constitute a link between play and community. [6] The multi-faceted nature of the Vice is explicit in *Mankind*, one of the first plays written for a professional troupe – it this case a troupe of six. The play was written around 1470. One of

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3. Grudin, p. 132.

4. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 43.

5. David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 81.

6. It is impossible to make a clear distinction between the two characters because in both cases we are dealing with a trickster. In the 16th century the term "Vice" also worked as a synonym for the fool, and there are clear references that their costumes could be identical as well. Cf. David Wiles, *Shakespeare's Clown: Actor and Text in the Elizabethan Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 4–5.

the characters, *Mischief* informs the audience in his entrance that he came in order to entertain: "I am come hither to make you game" (l. 68). According to David Wiles, he is "at once a villain, whom the audience learn to shun, and the welcome game-maker who makes the play possible." [7] Wiles claims that Mischief as a game-maker and master of ceremonies is central to the dramatists' conception, and introduces an intriguing idea: although we cannot be sure about which "other" character doubled Titivillus, the chief devil – a character who is advertised as a major attraction to the audience before he actually appears on stage – we have good reason to suppose that the actor playing Mischief was the one to put on the devil's mask in the play-within-the-play, that is, the character who originally introduced himself to the audience as the prime mover of the "game." [8] Wiles points out that the Vice is the chief comedian, and he is the one who dominates the play whenever he is present. Likewise he has the power to juggle layers of reality. "He plays at one and the same time the devil, the allegorical person Mischief, and a crooked actor organising robberies from houses that are empty because everyone has come to see the play. At the same time, the player is himself, gathering real money to fund the itinerant troupe in which he is the

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7. Wiles, pp. 1–2. Not everyone has given so distinguished a dramaturgical position to Mischief. For example Jean-Paul Debax in his essay entitled "Vices and Doubledeckers," Mischief is performing his "duties" with three other characters: Newguise, Nowadays and Nought, and Debax does not make a distinction between them (*The Show Within: Dramatic and Other Insets. English Renaissance Drama [1550–1642]*, ed. Francois Laroque [Montpelliér III: Publications de Université Paul Valéry, 1990]). Still, I find David Wiles's argument convincing, taking into consideration that the Vice had minions in other moralities as well.

8. Wiles bases his argument on the fact that before the appearance of Titivillus there are only three other players visible. Actually, they are collecting money from the audience before the big spectacle. He suggests that the exit of Titivillus may be interpreted as the entrance of Mischief. It also seems appropriate that the *par excellence* showman doubles the part (Wiles, p. 3). Still, there is a lot of evidence that would support the notion that Mercy played Titivillus instead of Mischief. Because of the limited number of actors the two poles of psychomachia were frequently played by the same actor. It is difficult to decide who is right, but regarding the complexity of the Vice and the multiplicity of dramatic layers he is involved in, we cannot rule out Wiles's suggestion. The other solution is more characteristic of moralities where it is not the mischievous evil character who rules the stage, but rather the allegory of mankind. In the latter case, the allegorical mankind-figure would be the protagonist, and the other characters would be doubled by the same actor(s) (Bevington, p. 87 – although he relates the same to *Mankind* as well).

principal. There is no fixed boundary between actor and role – for to perform a play is in a sense necessarily to create 'mischief.' "[9]

The multitude of the Vice's roles is interesting not only because it lends a highly complex existence to the player/character, but also because this complexity is present in his relationship with the audience. Since he is capable of shifting the boundaries of the action between the fiction of the play and the real world of the audience, the latter is put in a peculiar situation, "on the move between the polar position of observer and participant."[10] The audience of the game, play, and mischief, of the carnival's disturbance of order, become an accomplice when they pay to see the devil, or when they witness how the vices organise the robbery of the empty houses. Titivillus, the chief evil makes this explicit when he suggests that the audience not warn Mankind of the perils that are ahead of him. J. A. B. Somerset points out lines which suggest that although we are in a position to warn Mankind, we do not do so, since "[w]e enjoy a 'good sport' instead, performed by a villain who reminds us of vaudeville in his close rapport with us, playing upon dramatic illusion":[11] "And ever ye did, for me keep now your silence; / Not a word, I charge you, pain of forty pence" (590–1). Temptation in the play is clearly parallel to the play as temptation, and the devil is a director not only of the play but of the audience as well.

If we add to the already mentioned characteristics of the Vice that he was frequently a servant, or a person whose goal is upward mobility, we find new parallels between the Vice and Iago, whose wish was to become a lieutenant. Another character trait of the Vice can be detected in Iago's behaviour: in spite of his horrible deeds and his iniquity he enjoys the sympathy of the audience. His intelligence and the wide range of his tools and styles of behaviour he employs in carrying out his tricks while he directs the steps of other characters deserve our admiration. We can assume that he enjoys his game, and he concentrates not so much on the outcome, as on the pleasure of the game itself. Iago's tool for "making the game" is clearly language, with which he manages to screen a fake reality to Othello in the famous scene when they are supposedly eavesdropping to Cassio and Bianca, and with this fake reality he will manage to blur the vision of Othello. But we should also keep in mind that his method, namely picturing,

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9. Wiles, p. 2.

10. Wiles, p. 3.

11. J. A. B. Somerset, *Four Tudor Interludes: Introduction* (London: Athlone Press, 1974), p. 9. The line numbers of the play *Mankind* refer to the same edition.

creating a reality with words, is dangerously similar to the one of the Renaissance actor when he was inviting the audience to enter the distant and exotic reality of the play-world.

The weight of words on the Renaissance stage was different from the one we are used to, and there was a simple practical reason for that, namely, the small number of props. The single fact, for example, that there was no significant artificial lightning and the plays were performed for the most part in daylight – including the night-scenes – is perhaps a good illustration of how different the function of words, gestures or props was in creating a proper atmosphere for a scene, since these were the only tools with which the actors were able to plunge the stage into darkness. For present audiences, there is only one acceptable way of experiencing this, when the lights really go out. Alan Dessen's examples for tools that were used to create the illusion of darkness are the dialogues, candles, night-gowns and situations when the characters act as if they did not see each other on stage. [12] At that time different methods were used for creating illusion and words were more significant for this reason. Dessen also points out that there was a greater need for the imagination and active participation on the audience's part. [13]

Returning to the similarities between the Vice and Iago, the latter is continuing the tradition of his ancestor by establishing a typically direct relationship with the audience. Although Grudin does not mention a generic relationship between the two characters, he points out those attributes of Iago which are characteristic of the Vice as well. He describes Iago as the liaison between action and audience, since Iago confides in the audience, explains what is happening and why he is making it happen. "He not only conceives and directs the action, but also is the play's chorus, satirist and fool . . . he obviously delights in his own schemes and artfully ornaments them in their execution. In short, he thoroughly reflects, on one level, the values of the dramatist." [14] Thus it is not only that he wins the sympathy of the audience with his wit and stagecraft, but similar to Mischief, he is making the audience his accomplice by revealing his plans to it. No matter how much he is the embodiment of evil (or perhaps the chief evil)

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12. Alan C. Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 92.
13. Dessen, p. 89.
14. Grudin, p. 125.

according to a religious moral scale, [15] he is a necessary driving force behind the game. His function as director and dramatist is discussed by Patricia Parker as well. Counterfeit representation and the juggling with time when precipitating and delaying events are interpreted as tools of Iago's in manipulating his environment, making the others see a reality which he wants them to see. [16] An objection could perhaps be raised against Iago's function of director and dramatist, since in the end he is incapable of controlling events and finds himself enmeshed in his own web. This objection is answered if we look at it through the Vice tradition, since similar characters are able to be present in the play on several levels at the same time. We have to acknowledge his failure if we suppose some sort of revenge to be behind Iago's intrigue, since although he achieves a bloody goal, he is consumed by it. Iago as the master of ceremonies, however, may account the play to his credit, since he successfully manipulates both the characters and the audience throughout the play.

Note here that no matter how similar the functions of the two characters are, in the case of Iago we clearly have to deal with a more complex character than the Morality's vice. In the case of Iago, the creation of disorder is not confined to simple mischief. The main reason for this is perhaps that in the case of moralities there was a fairly stable world order behind the play, which served as a context for the devilry thus allowing the audience to laugh at the roughness and topsy-turvidom, and even take part in the game without risking their certainty of the world order and their own place in it. I term the world order which served as a context for the moralities the 'Renaissance order' following Foucault, who claims that it was succeeded by what he calls the 'Classical model' at the turn of the 17th century. [17] In the case of Elizabethan drama, we can witness the interplay of the two models: the stability of the hierarchical medieval world view

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15. The parallel between Mischief and Iago may offer a possible answer to the frequent question of Iago's devil-like existence. As we have seen, Colie is inclined to interpret Iago as the devil. But as we will see in the following, Serpieri, for example, finds that we are missing the very essence of Iago's existence in seeing in him anything particular, including the devil. If we accept Wiles's argument according to which it is the master of ceremonies who puts on the mask of the chief devil, then Iago is and is not the devil at the same time. The devil is just one mask in Iago's collection.

16. Patricia Parker, "Shakespeare and Rhetoric," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London and New York: Routledge, 1985) 54–74, p. 65.

17. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 17–45.

is passing; the new model is still being formed.[18] With the advent of Iago, the coherent, all-encompassing Christian world-view gave way to the uncertainty of opposing epistemological models.

I will now suggest a change in the perspective from which Iago's misbehaviour takes on greater power with respect to his predecessor. This change primarily concerns the audience. If Iago is regarded as the Bad Angel of the Moralities, his benign *pendant* is Desdemona. The soul of man will be damned or saved depending on the outcome of their fight. From the perspective of the psychological drama in which characters are not allegories as in the moralities but are much more complex, having personal psychological motives and doubts, Iago's opposite is Othello himself. The dialectics of these two characters and their interdependence can be traced on several levels.

Serpieri in his semiotic analysis of the play shows some points where this duality governs the meaning of the two identities.[19] He describes Iago as not being able to identify with any situation or sign or *enoncé*, which is Serpieri's term for something that represents the definiteness of being. Since we can attribute anything more easily to Iago than a stable identity, his identity is indeed but a simulacrum. Facing the emptiness of his own self, in his envy of the others' *énonciations*, he deconstructs them and transforms them into simulacra.[20] Serpieri explains that the characteristic rhetorical figure of this scheme is *litotes*, a figure which persuades by denying. The other side of the coin, the lord of the *enoncé* is Othello, who is always able to represent himself. The rhetorical figure that is characteristic of his way of affirming his identity is *hyperbole*. Othello defines – and perhaps finds – his identity through the tales he tells about himself. But to do so, he has to transform the present into past, into the stability of his role, as he did in the tale with which he won Desdemona. In opposition to

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18. Timothy Reiss attributes a special role to the tragedies of the age in creating the discourse which was formed at the beginning of the 17th century, which he terms analytico-referential discourse. Timothy J. Reiss, *Tragedy and Truth: Studies in the Development of a Renaissance and Neoclassical Discourse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 2–7.

19. Alessandro Serpieri, "Reading the Signs: Towards a Semiotics of Shakespearean Drama," in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 119–143.

20. Serpieri does not define the term simulacrum. In Baudrillard's use simulation is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality," it is "substituting signs of the real for the real itself." Cf. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 166–7.

Othello's *enoncé*, which finds its validation in the past, Iago's activity of depriving the *enoncés* of the others of their meaning and transforming them into simulacra is always linked to the present. In Serpieri's words: "While Iago is condemned to a continuous mental present – of thinking, projecting, of seducing – Othello tends to elude the present in symbolic certainties." [21] The two extremes, however, are also parallel, and express the two opposite images of the same cultural mask, presenting the opposed modes of unreality. The closely-knit relationship and dependence of the two extremes is formulated by Serpieri: "There is, between these two rhetorical modes, a hidden resemblance that constitutes an important key to the understanding of the complementary relationship between the two characters. Iago is imprisoned in negation . . . and in the void and envy of being, which he translates into litotic form in order to attack and punish the 'other.' But Othello is likewise imprisoned, in hyperbolic affirmation." [22]

In this scheme, one in which Iago is not Desdemona's but Othello's opposite, the intriguer is a much more dangerous agent to the world of the audience than in the morality-model. They have to face that the character who lacks a normal self is capable of destroying the identity of the play's hero – an identity that was functioning well in the social context. [23] I imagine that the smile of the audience left on their faces by the moralities might turn into a grin, [24] since Iago's bustling and his success may suggest that any identity is questionable, and

21. Serpieri, p. 140.

22. Serpieri, p. 142.

23. Howard Felperin in his analysis of *Othello* also finds that the drama may be interpreted from both sides of the boundary between different theatrical traditions: on the one hand it is possible to detect the allegorical structure of the moralities, but only in order that the allegory lose its validity later on. Cf. Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 77–8. He finds that the characters become obviously human in their distancing from the allegory (p. 85), and that the allegorical structure is created by Othello and Iago together (pp. 76–80).

24. Charlotte Spivack describes medieval laughter as the victory of the soul over the inferiority of the mortal, material body. "To put it metaphysically, laughter is the response on the part of Being to the exposure of non-Being. In other words, then, laughter occurs when that which is real perceives the absence of reality, and when that which is good becomes aware of that absence of good which we call evil" (Charlotte Kesler Spivack, *The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare's Stage* [Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978], p. 26). In this sense laughter is morally condemning. But even in the case of moralities the situation is less clear-cut: "While various pieces of comic business may have originally had some symbolic or homiletic function, they apparently came to be elaborated for their humour alone" (Somerset, p. 5).

although it may not be obvious that man has irrevocably lost the ground beneath his feet, "the play makes it clear that with some artfulness it is not that difficult to undermine the world's ostensible stability. In a conventional morality the good Christian, after admitting the mistake of temporarily giving in to evil, would cry out for and get mercy. The evil was just a transitional threat to the eternal bliss of the good Christian with whom the audience identified. In *Othello*, however, the situation is more complicated. No matter that there is no "reality" behind the intrigues of Iago's lies, he is still capable of attacking the *enoncé* of the others. The loss of the secure sense of reality is a genuine threat in *Othello*, while this was utterly inconceivable in early moralities. This change is a consequence of a development which started with the splitting of the allegorical everyman-protagonist of the morality in two. Such a constellation provides as little threat of damnation to the good character, as it is clear that the evil one will surely not repent – the influence of Calvinism is unambiguous in the scheme.[25] This episode, however, serves as a major turning point in the development of the kind: a character is born who is not redeemed at the end of the play. And when the obvious difference between the good and the bad, the former to be saved and the latter to be damned, disappears, the temptation may pose a genuine threat of damnation.

Taking into consideration the available representational models of the age the character under scrutiny is most interesting regarding its *way of* existence. Clearly the plurality of roles detected so far lends a peculiar plurality to his existence – and perhaps it is possible to venture at this point that the multiplicity of the character's dramatic layers and the plurality of his position in the dramatic design all contribute to the play's structural tautness and richness of interpretive horizons. Still, if we continue examining the uniqueness of the existence of the character, I think it is possible to detect more than one aspect of the structural duality. On the one hand, the interplay of the two contexts, that of the morality play and the one of the rising psychological drama exemplifies that the old functions of Vice have a new meaning in Iago's new context. On the other hand, Iago's non-being also has two aspects: from Colie's perspective it is one that points backwards to the medieval paradigm, while from Serpieri's perspective it is one that points forward to the early modern. In other words, Iago's non-being is inherited from a previous tradition, but it means something else.

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25. Bevington, pp. 152–3.

Next I will examine Iago not in his relation to other characters from the play or compared to the his character's prototypes, but from a different point of view. In other words, I am interested not in Iago's position in the play, but his function in the age of competing epistemological models; an age when, due to the disappearance of the security given by a coherent world-picture, the act of representation and understanding lost its reference. In trying to understand Iago's identity, critics with different theoretical orientations and different tools of interpretation have come to the remarkably similar conclusion that it is not his *identity* that defines Iago as a character, but rather his *lack of identity*, not his *being* a somebody, but his *not being* a somebody or his being precisely *nobody*. We have already seen how Serpieri points out that Iago lacks the *enoncé*, the definiteness of being. He formulates this in another way: "Iago, in fact, is a prisoner of his own *imaginaire*, and thus condemned to *not being* in reality: his manifest desires and motives are only the slidings of an *unspeakable* desire. If criticism considers him at the level of *being* (and identity: jealous, Machiavellian, diabolic etc.), it is in danger of missing his actual dramatic depth." [26]

Relying on Colie's argument, Iago's existence may be approached from two directions. One is that he is a nobody in the social hierarchy. Colie defines Iago as a man left to his own devices in a society where everybody else has a recognised station and origin, thus a recognised identity. Iago must try to "make" himself through promotion into as an officer. In the context of the disrupted social order of the age and the arrival of new men in every social group, Iago is a nobody. Colie summarises her other approach to Iago's non-existence: "[Iago] is fundamentally false to being, the bearer of the contagious disease which Augustine had defined as evil, spread by him amongst those in whose midst he lives. Iago is the carrier of not-being, and his not-being invades the being of being to destroy it." [27] The similarity with Serpieri's suggestion that Iago's simulacra destroy the others' *enoncé* is remarkable. In my opinion, however, here we are facing two different things: from Colie's perspective Iago's non-being is actually the non-being of the Augustinian evil, which is denied a share of even the smallest particle of Good. According to Serpieri, as quoted above, Iago's non-existence is due to his confinement to his own imagination. While in a previous model a stable hierarchy would banish Iago from the realm of being, in this case it seems that the very stability of being is questioned. Iago has too many ties to the world

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26. Serpieri, p. 136.
27. Colie, p. 249.

for us to identify him with the allegory of evil and so we cannot confine him to the position of an evil where he embodies no threat to the existence of the system. [28]

Thus the world has changed, we are facing a different mode of representation, a different theatre. New ways of non-being have been revealed; the notion that Iago and the play in which he appears may be seen as a comment on the problem of representation finds support in the play's frequent references to the problem of appearance and how it is evaluated. In the scope of this paper I will examine one of these examples. There are several parts in *Othello* which refer to the problem of appearance and value or the authenticity of representation. Iago is especially generous in hints on the hidden and the visible, the real and the fake. [29] The most interesting example of these is perhaps a twenty-five-line

28. I do not want to disregard the fact that at the end of the play Iago's intrigue is revealed, the truth uncovered. Still we should note Moretti, who criticises Tillyard, according to whom radical destruction in Elizabethan tragedy confirms the power of what is to be destroyed. "It is as though it were argued that in strangling Desdemona, Othello paid tribute to her importance. No doubt he does, but he strangles her all the same, and similarly, tragedy, in its destruction of the medieval world picture, recognises its importance, but destroys it nonetheless" (Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders* [London: Verso, 1988], p. 49). If we remained in the context of the medieval world-view, Grudin's model would be the only valid one for mapping the relationship of the characters of the drama. The angelic Desdemona and the devilish Iago presuppose and complement each other. We have to see, however, that the same Iago can be said to match Othello as well according to a different tradition, and this is the one from where the other has to fall.

29. Although I am expanding a single example in the present paper, let me just mention a few related passages: II.i.305–12 (here Iago talks about iniquity as being detectable when in action. It sounds as if he is thinking that iniquity is realised through action. The quotation is really significant because in the major part of the play the audience are the only one able to identify iniquity); III.iii.127 (Iago is assuring Othello that people should be identical with what they seem to be. This means on the one hand that we should not look good if we are not good, but on the other the reverse of it is equally possible: those who seem evil should become the same); III.iii.135–151 (Part of Iago's devilish technique is that he is not simply lying but he is telling the truth and makes Othello believe that he is not telling the entire truth because of his admirable modesty. Here the case is not simply that he is generating signs that do not correspond with reality, but he is creating a context where reality is envenomed, since Othello does not accept the face value of his words. Still he believes him); 155–61 (Iago's words may have an indirect meaning according to which he admits that the whole evil game does not bring him any profit, i.e. he is annihilating the others for the sheer pleasure of the game); IV.i.16 (He is attacking the ideal of chastity by saying that those who can't have it may possess it too, since its essence is invisible).

speech by Iago, at the end of which he utters a most paradoxical self-referential remark: "I am not what I am" (I.i.65). This sentence may be interpreted on several levels. First, as the textual variation of A≠A, it is opposed to a basic law of Aristotelian logic. Second, Iago may mean that he is not what he seems to be to the others on the stage. The first "I" of the sentence, the one who is speaking is, therefore, not the one who he appears to be, i.e. the second "I." Had Roderigo been wise enough to get even this message of the sentence, he would not have believed him afterwards.

The sentence is also a variation of two other paradoxical sentences. One is the classical example of self-contradiction known as the "Liar": Epimenides, the Cretan said, "All Cretans are liars." It is impossible to define the truth of this sentence for similar reasons as make it impossible to define that of Iago's, since even if he is speaking the truth about his being not what he seems to be to other characters, or what he seems to be in the eyes of the audience, he is undermining his credibility on every level and every stage at the same time. On the other hand, there is an even deeper truth in this paradoxical sentence, as Rosalie Colie observes: "Iago lies and does not lie; for he *is* in fact what he is not, since he is, and proves himself by the action of the tragedy to be, not really a man, a member of human kind."[30] Colie is referring here to the devilish being of what he is not, but again, Iago is not what he is if his "existence" is compared to the emptiness of pure representation.

The other sentence of which Iago's is a variation, is a tautological sentence of the Lord of the Old Testament: "I am that I am." This, as a mirror image, leads to infinite oscillation between the thing and what it reflects. Therefore Iago in his utterance of this sentence not only identifies his position as the opposite of God's, but blurs his position so that it loses its referent no matter from which side we are examining it. He is a thing that was probably not conceivable in a Renaissance world view. Not merely a nobody with its hideous non-existence, but a representation without a referent.

It is the same line that Robert Weimann uses to show the two sides of representation. He claims that they both were characteristic of the Renaissance stage. He is borrowing the terminology of Jean Alter to describe the inherent duality of codes. The two different types of sign and behaviour on stage are the following: one is a performative statement ("I am acting") and the other is a representational code ("I am not acting" – "I am another person"). Weimann ex-

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30. Colie, p. 243.

plains that "as opposed to the modern proscenium stage, where a representational mode strongly predominated, the Elizabethan stage tended to project both these codes in intriguing patterns of entanglements." [31] He finds that Iago's aforementioned sentence is an example of his introducing his *own* inherent duality.

The next step will be the examination of Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas* and the way it contributes to our understanding the question of Iago's non-being. The picture is analysed by Foucault as describing the altered modes and possibilities of representation at the beginning of the 17th century. By comparing the two works I would like to support my argument according to which the character under scrutiny, in spite of all the links that tie him to a previous theatrical model, is offering itself as representation in its pure form – something that was utterly unimaginable in a previous world system. It is interesting that Velazquez's painting is discussed by Colie in a different chapter of her study already cited on Renaissance paradoxes. Colie also notes that paradoxes appear in periods of competing intellectual systems. [32] She regards both Iago and the painting to be paradoxes although they appear in different contexts. I would like to expand this so that in both cases we are faced with paradoxes which apart from being self-reflective (as all paradoxes are) also reflect on themselves as representations: they are pointing to the way representation "works," they are in a sense revealing or at least commenting on its logic.

What is represented by the picture? According to its title, "Las Meninas" is about the young Infanta's maids and courtiers. According to the central position of the Infanta Margarita – probably a familiar representation to the spectator, since it is similar to other paintings about her – she could be the primary subject of this one as well. However, the diagonals structuring the painting cross at a mirror hanging in the back of the room, which reflects the royal couple, thus giving a possible clue to the whole situation: the Infanta and her retinue are looking at the couple while the couple is being painted by Velazquez. And here we may suppose that on the other side of the canvas in front of the painter, King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana are being painted. So, the painting is, after all, not about the royal couple, but about the royal couple being

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31. Robert Weimann, "Playing with a Difference: Revisiting 'Pen' and 'Voice' in Shakespeare's Theater," *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1999) 415–432, p. 425.

32. Colie, p. 33.

painted by Velazquez – which includes the self-portrait of the painter, a self-referential remark.

The inner structure of the painting, with almost everybody gazing outwards, looking at something which is clearly not the spectator, excludes us from the view according to the inner rules of the painting. But as Foucault points out, the three positions in front of *Las Meninas*, in relation to the picture, are the starting point making representation possible: the gaze of the model, of the painter and of the spectator, who are all present in the picture at the same time: the royal couple in the mirror, the painter in front of the canvas and the spectator in the right corner of the room, standing on the threshold of the door leading to the hall.

The problem is not merely the multiplicity of positions viewing the picture (namely that of the painter, the model, and the spectator), but the impossibility of imagining this scene represented *in reality*. In other words: the *original* of the painting is inconceivable. The original *view* is conceivable, though, from the perspective of the royal couple, and the whole setting is conceivable with the royal couple present in it, but again, it was not the original of the painting, of which it is the representation, since Velazquez cannot see himself while painting the royal couple if he is actually recording the event of the couple being painted.

Catherine Belsey comes to a similar conclusion, analysing the painting and its original in reality:

> The event the painting depicts is possible as an event. But its depiction is not possible in this painting, because the painter is not in the right place to paint it *from*. Or, to put it differently, it is possible as a painting, on condition that it is not an event, because the painter cannot see *this* scene from *there*. What we see is not what the artist sees. The painting triumphantly imagines an impossible set of spatial relations, and convinces us that we have seen *that*. [33]

If we wished to put an edge on the question of impossibility, we could try to extend the triple position defined by Foucault with a fourth one, the position of another mirror, in which Velazquez is reflected while standing exactly in his position depicted, and sees exactly the scene depicted, painting a double to the reflection in the mirror, thus fulfilling both the function of the painter and of the spectator, enabling the existence of the original of *Las Meninas*, which would pre-

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33. Belsey, p. 53.

sent the reflection of the other mirror. Both Colie and Belsey suggest the use of another mirror. Colie considers this picture to be the example of self-portraits insisting on "speculation" because they are indicating the mirrors in which they were painted and force the beholder into thinking about what reality "really" is. [34] She claims it is not probable that Velazquez should have painted the scene from one single perspective: "The likelihood is that Velazquez did not paint the whole scene from its mirror reflection, but painted the Infanta and her retinue straight, as usual; then he painted himself in, of course from a mirror, as it is usual for the portrait." [35] The inclusion of two points of view could suggest Velazquez's comments "on different levels of reality, but also his own power . . . to manipulate that reality, to present the royal family as it 'should' be presented." [36]

Belsey ventures to say it is possible that there were several mirrors placed in front of the scene (she points out that Velazquez was known for having ten of them) and these mirrors enabled the painter to realise what is seemingly impossible. She has to reject the hypothesis because of the presence of the mirror at the back of the wall which, she suggests, may be the reflection of the unseen side of the canvas; it is, after all, the couple that is being painted, not *Las Meninas*. [37] A mirror in the place of the model may also make that reflection impossible, but then one may jocularly add: the position of the spectator is no less impossible, and yet we are convinced that we see the painting.

The equivalent of Foucault's triple position *outside* the picture is Colie's explanation with the double perspective *within* the picture. Foucault's triad is the models (the royal couple), the one who represents (Velazquez, the painter) and us, the audience of the painting. The two perspectives within the painting discussed by Colie reveal a different kind of stratification in the process of representation: the one that is present in the painting, and the one that may be deduced from it. Foucault, however, points out the elements that he considers essential for making representation possible. It is necessary to note that only Colie gives more probability to double perspective than to the mirror-solution. But actually the (at least) double perspective is the only one possible, since the mirror in the place of Foucault's triple function of model-painter-spectator, if placed in front of the model, would disallow their reflection in the mirror at the far end of the

34. Colie, p. 385.
35. Colie, p. 359.
36. Colie, p. 359.
37. Belsey, p. 53.

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room, or if placed behind, it would also reflect their backs, which should have, in that case, become an element of the composition.

No matter how faithful to reality the painting is at first glance, what we arrive at in the end is a multiple reference to the impossibility of representation and at the same time a reference to the power of the painter, who is governing if not the impossible, then the possible within it. The plurality of the spectator-position, of the painting's perspective and of the model, and the actual *impossibility* of the original of which the painting is a representation, hide something similar to the nothing of Iago, the non-existence of his being. The origin of both nothingnesses is a void exemplified by Foucault through the analysis of *Las Meninas*. Foucault in his analysis shows how the painting presents to us the post-Renaissance disappearance of the foundation of resemblance: the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance. Or, in Foucault's own words: "representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form." [38] This is exactly the freedom of representation that appeared in the early 17th century. The epistemological change, and the crisis that characterised it, an inalienable context of Shakespearean drama. The residual and emergent models made a single perspective impossible in the same way as Iago's unfathomable and shifting references, since they offer at least two different traditions as contexts of interpretation and create a unique situation where it is possible to reflect on the operation and relativity of the systems of reference. Similarly to the painting, Iago contains only an absence of what he is representing, but he is equally burdened with this emptiness as the painting. Both Iago and the painting have power over the reality they represent and they are capable of juggling with different layers of it, and both of them are able to create themselves in their respective games, that is, in the worlds which their spectators are inevitably drawn into. They both play with the difference between truth and illusion, and their authors (created and included in these transitory worlds) place themselves in a context, in an ontological position where non-being turns into being, where the reality represented is conceivable both as pure reality and as a created illusion at the same time.

The picture that Iago the director is screening for Othello is an indisputable lie in the world of the drama. The truth value of the play that Iago is directing at the audience depends on the audience's attitude towards the play as pure illusion

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38. Foucault, p. 16.

or a game which is perhaps at an unbridgeable distance from reality. The question is whether the audience interprets the phenomenon as the freedom of representation, the way Foucault describes it, or they perceive the human creation of any kind of reality as a crucial moral question. [39] The contemporary (first of all Puritan) opponents of theatre found faults with the institution of theatre precisely for this reason. At the peak of the anti-theatrical bias, in 1633, Prynne in his *Histriomastix* burst out vehemently against any kind of theatre, summarising the themes that started to emerge a generation earlier. According to Barish, Prynne "expresses, one might say in most agonized form, the fears of impurity, of contamination, of 'mixture,' of the blurring of strict boundaries." [40] A fearful consequence of the mixture is, clearly, that the world would collapse, as in a nightmare. Iago perhaps shows that yes, the world *is* capable of collapsing in a nightmarish fashion. The nightmare's threat is real. But it is only so if we approach it from a perspective where we believe in the stability of our own attitude. We may even be excluded from the position where we can decide, since when we notice that we have become the participants of a work like *Othello* or *Las Meninas*, it may be too late.

I therefore think that the existence of Iago may be compared with the existence of the painting if we take into consideration that on the one hand they are primarily saying something about representation and it is perhaps only secondary that they are representations themselves. On the other hand, they both are paradoxes of representation, since they are "purely" representations, representations it its pure form. They do not offer anything as a content which they would stand for in its absence. Still, it seems that they describe representation as having this "content," or at least they do not rule it out: in the painting, although in a mirror, there is a model, and the duality of signifier and signified is present even behind Iago's "I am not what I am." It is a fact, however, that the painting *Las Meninas* has no proper model, and it is just as difficult to imagine that Iago is a faithful image of anything outside him – game and improvisation are much more char-

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39. The moral ambiguity of these characters is supported by the fact that although they were the devil's minions and the champions of temptation, their aim was not exclusively evil. F. H. Mares in his article on the dramatic origin of the Vice explains that this character was carrying out good and evil deeds haphazardly. See Francis Hugh Mares, "The Origin of the Figure Called 'the Vice' in Tudor Drama," *Huntington Library Quarterly* XXII (1958–59) 11–29, p. 14.

40. Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 87.

acteristic of him than imitation. It seems that both the painting and the character are sustained by their own dynamism, the way they talk about their own possibility and impossibility, and the way they reflect both on how representation is possible and on what makes it impossible. The wall of the room depicted in the painting is covered with paintings and an additional canvas is in the process of emergence. In the drama a lot is said about role-playing, story-telling, and acting; an illusory reality accepted as valid by the Moor is conjured up in front of us during the play. The painter and the master of ceremonies are both talking about their role and their machinations, and they tell a lot more to the audience than to the others in the drama or in the painting. Although they appear to be different within and without their work, the borderline between the two worlds is also blurred. And by the time, after following them along the path of their dynamism and logic, we finally think we can identify them as representations without a referent, or as the empty operations of the mechanism; the very non-existence of what they stand for seems to have such a dense and unique meaning that with their obvious non-being they are capable of thumbing their nose at the audience, who may have lost their security, but hopefully not their good humour.