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The Implications of Psychopathy and Sociopathy in Shakespeare

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The term “psychopath” tends to bring up images of bloody knives and swinging axes, or of well-known villains like the Joker and Hannibal Lecter. A “sociopath,” alternatively, does not necessarily conjure these types of images, but rather highly intelligent and reserved people, usually in positions of power. In Shakespeare’s plays *Othello* and *Richard III*, both of the villains—Iago and Richard—display sociopathic and psychopathic tendencies, respectively. These tendencies are present in famous speeches from both Iago and Richard as well as obvious character traits that appear throughout the plays. The implications of mental disorders behind these characters bring up interesting questions about villainy as well as how much knowledge Shakespeare had of mental illness in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The line between psychopathy and sociopathy is very thin and can sometimes be transparent, often being used interchangeably and, therefore, incorrectly. In the article, “Psychopathy versus Sociopathy: Why the Distinction Has Become Crucial,” Jack Pemment calls up past research and gives the definition of each mental disorder: “Psychopathy… means the individual will have no empathy or sense of morality among a number of other traits (Hare, 1991). Sociopathy, on the other hand, is indicative of having a sense of morality and a well-developed conscience, but the sense of right and wrong is not that of the parent culture” (Pemment 459). Essentially, psychopaths have no capability for empathy or remorse, while
sociopaths have that capability and simply ignore it, an important distinction to keep in mind when comparing Iago and Richard III.

Medicine and physician-type help were luxuries afforded to few people in Shakespearean times, so it can be assumed that the field of psychiatry was the least of people’s concerns. Yet, while psychiatry was not recognized or understood until the early nineteenth century, many American psychiatrists cited Shakespeare as a major authority during that time. According to Benjamin Reiss’s article “Bardolatry in Bedlam: Shakespeare, Psychiatry, and Cultural Authority in Nineteenth-Century America,” Shakespeare did recognize mental health disorders: “‘There is scarcely a form of mental disorder,’ wrote Amariah Brigham… that Shakespeare ‘has not alluded to, and pointed out the causes and method of treatment’” (769). Shakespeare obviously did not have terminology and medical expertise to fully understand what he was bringing up in his writing, but it does hint that he at least understood the implications of psychopathy and sociopathy that would form when writing the characters of Iago and Richard III.

In Othello, the reader sees Iago as a villain right from the start while the other characters in the play believe him to be trustworthy and call him “Honest Iago” (1.3.289). Shakespeare puts on display the many different ways that Iago influences the characters: using an emotional Rodrigo for money, getting Cassio drunk, convincing Othello that Desdemona is cheating on him. Paul Cefalu, an English professor at Lafayette College, acknowledges the seemingly psychological powers afforded to Iago and writes, “Iago’s evil seems to lie in his talent for what cognitive theorists would describe as mind reading, the relative ability to access imaginatively another’s mental world and, in Iago’s case, to manipulate cruelly that world” (265). Iago finds the weaknesses in each person and exploits those weaknesses for his own personal gain. In act 1,
scene 3, after Othello and Desdemona’s marriage is sanctioned by the senators, Iago begins to formulate a plan to set in action while in Cyprus:

IAGO. The Moor is of a free and open nature

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so;

And will as tenderly be led by th’ nose

As asses are.

I have’t! It is engendered! Hell and night

Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light. (1.3.390-95)

With this one simple plan, Iago has managed to find a way to ruin three lives in one fell swoop, getting his revenge on two people and letting an innocent bystander get hurt in the process. Pemment states that “[the] fact that sociopaths do have a sense of morality and a sense of right and wrong reflects that they have beliefs about the social world” (459). This upcoming plan highlights his sociopathic tendencies as he recognizes Desdemona as an uninvolved person in his personal misery yet he still involves her in his plot and does not care for what befalls her.

When thinking about sociopathy in Othello, it is interesting to consider that sociopathy encompasses both social and emotional distance. At first glance, Iago does not seem to be antisocial. He manages to both start a small party and coax Cassio into drinking:

IAGO. What, man! ‘Tis a night of revels, the gallants desire it.

CASSIO. Where are they?

IAGO. Here, at the door. I pray you call them in.

CASSIO. I’ll do’t, but it dislikes me. (2.3.41-45)

Everyone appears to admire Iago, yet he is still somehow othered. Cefalu suggests that this othering is not the product of other people’s judgement, but from Iago himself: “Iago’s outsider
status derives from thinking too much about what others are thinking, from never being in the moment” (269). Instead of living his life, Iago is so focused on what everyone else is doing and how that might affect him. Not only does this keep him from joining in on the party, so to speak, but it also serves a self-fulfilling prophecy—he believes himself to be different, therefore he acts different. Cefalu also states that “Iago has been described as self-divided, empty, a forlorn nobody…” (270), though he does not say who has described Iago that way, nor does he give textual evidence. In actuality, Iago appears to be very charismatic and convincing and is well-known by his moniker, “Honest Iago.” Othello trusts him enough to barely question when Iago suggests that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio:

 OTHELLO. This fellow’s of exceeding honesty,
  And knows all qualities, with a learnèd spirit
  Of human dealings. If I do prove her haggard,
  Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings,
  I’d whistle her off and let her down the wind
  To prey at fortune. (3.3.257-62)

Speeches such as this one show the reader that the other characters in Othello find Iago to be an honorable, trustworthy man, when in actuality, he hates most of them and is plotting their deaths or fall from grace.

 Being able to blend in with society is one thing that sets sociopaths apart from psychopaths, most likely due to the fact that sociopaths have the capability of moral responsibility but choose not to act on it. Iago’s ability to function and thrive in society, while secretly despising the people he claims to love, plays into his infamous “I am not what I am” speech (1.1.48-62). Iago is proud of the fact that no one knows his true self, but it is also
important to note that this speech hints at the themes explored throughout the play. Cefalu notes, “Iago’s mantra ‘I am not what I am’ (1.1.65) is an antidote to a much more corrosive, if unspoken and disturbing, belief—that people are not what they seem to be” (273). It is interesting to see how this quote extends not just to Iago, but to several other characters as well. Othello believes Desdemona to be cheating on him; Othello believes that Cassio is sleeping with his wife; Desdemona believes Othello to be her loving husband. So much of the play depends on Iago weaving these fake masks for people to hide behind, only for the characters to find out at the end of the play that the person who wasn’t what they seemed to be was Iago. He hides his treachery and villainy, and when he is found out at the end, he shows nor feels no regret.

Alternatively, in Richard III, Richard does not attempt to hide his villainy. He does not necessarily flaunt it and does act discreetly in some instances, but for the most part, he embraces and revels in the evil things that he has done; in fact, the entirety of the play depends on Richard’s villainy and, by extension, his psychopathy. David Lykken, a professor of psychology, states that “…the primary psychopath has failed to develop conscience and empathic feelings, not because of lack of socializing experience but, rather, because of some inherent psychological peculiarity that makes him especially difficult to socialize” (30). This lack of conscience could be tied back to Richard’s monstrous birth, in which he says he was “[deformed], unfinished, sent before my time” (1.1.20). While this does refer to his outer appearance, the idea of a monstrous birth can also easily be extended to the cognitive functions that were stunted or messed up: his ability to love and form connections, his ability to think critically, his ability to distinguish right from wrong (a hallmark of psychopathy). This creates an interesting contrast when considering the “‘science of the mind’—how the mind works, its relation to the body, that relation’s determination by environmental and biological factors” (Reiss 780). Through this, Reiss suggests
that Richard’s psychopathy and his physical disfigurement are connected and hints that one would not be there without the other. He is unfinished in every way.

Richard III’s villainy is well-known throughout the world; he is considered to be Shakespeare’s best/worst villain by many. Lykken refers to Richard as “the Shakespearean character who best epitomizes the primary psychopath… who, in the first speech of scene 1, declares himself bored, looking for action…” (30). It is a statement that rings true, with Richard declaring his intent to the audience: “And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain” (1.1.28-30). This can be read as somewhat comical, a very petty reason to be a villain, but it mainly sets the stage for the psychopathy that is Richard III. Unable to be apart of society, Richard decides to ruin everything for everyone; it rejects him and he rejects it. His inability to connect with others, even his own family members, leaves him bitter and angry, and the psychosis that hovers around in his mind is finally able to overcome him.

To further cement Richard’s psychopathic tendencies, Lykken also calls up the scene when Richard manages to convince Lady Anne to marry him, “…surely one of the greatest tours de force ever essayed by a dramatist or by an actor…” (30), and the speech that Richard gives once Lady Anne has left:

RICHARD. Was ever woman in this humour wooed?

Was ever woman in this humor won?

I’ll have her, but I will not keep her long.

What, I that killed her husband and his father,

To take her in her heart’s extremest hate,

With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by,

Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,

And I no friends to back my suit (at all)

But the plain devil and disassembling looks?

And yet to win her, all the world to nothing! (1.2.247-58)

In this speech, Richard is gloating at the pain and anguish he has caused Anne and will continue to cause her by forcing her to marry him. This lack of empathy is a major indicator of psychopathy, with some of the more common psychopathic traits including “superficial charm, lack of remorse, and an impersonal sex life” (Pemment 459), all of which are present in Richard III. The lack of remorse that Richard shows comes back multiple times throughout the play. He manages to have both of his brothers killed, as well as his two young nephews; he has a vicious verbal fight with Margaret, an old woman who most would treat with respect; and he executes Buckingham, a man who helped him in all of his schemes. It is interesting, however, that at the end of the play these characters come back to haunt him—perhaps not just because of his hand in killing them, but also because felt no guilt in doing the act. However, after he wakes, he states, “O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!” (5.3.191), which goes against the belief that psychopaths have no conscience; rather, it could be argued that they have a conscience, just an underdeveloped one, which still aligns with the belief of not knowing what is right or wrong.

Psychopathy and sociopathy are two very similar mental disorders, yet there is still a big distinction between the two. People tend to believe that psychopaths are the more dangerous of the two, but one could argue that the opposite is the case. Psychopathy is fairly transparent, like Richard III and his villainy; sociopathy is able to hide behind a façade, like Iago and his trickery. Both villains cause innumerable damage to their societies, and both villains have no regrets for
the damage that they have done. While Shakespeare did not acknowledge psychopathy or sociopathy in any of his plays, as the words did not yet exist, the mental disorders are prevalent throughout both *Othello* and *Richard III*. They provide interesting complications for both plays, such as the double meaning of Richard’s “monstrous birth,” and allow for a more intense, complex reading of Shakespeare.


