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Major Literary Characters

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# IAGO

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Edited and with an introduction by  
HAROLD BLOOM



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## THE ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER

Harold Bloom

“Character,” according to our dictionaries, still has as a primary meaning a graphic symbol, such as a letter of the alphabet. This meaning reflects the word’s apparent origin in the ancient Greek *charactēr*, a sharp stylus. *Charactēr* also meant the mark of the stylus’ incisions. Recent fashions in literary criticism have reduced “character” in literature to a matter of marks upon a page. But our word “character” also has a very different meaning, matching that of the ancient Greek *ēthos*, “habitual way of life.” Shall we say then that literary character is an imitation of human character, or is it just a grouping of marks? The issue is between a critic like Dr. Samuel Johnson, for whom words were as much like people as like things, and a critic like the late Roland Barthes, who told us that “the fact can only exist linguistically, as a term of discourse.” Who is closer to our experience of reading literature, Johnson or Barthes? What difference does it make, if we side with one critic rather than the other?

Barthes is famous, like Foucault and other recent French theorists, for having added to Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God a subsidiary demise, that of the literary author. If there are no authors, then there are no fictional personages, presumably because literature does not refer to a world outside language. Words indeed necessarily refer to other words in the first place, but the impact of words ultimately is drawn from a universe of fact. Stories, poems, and plays are recognizable as such because they are human utterances within traditions of utterances, and traditions, by achieving authority, become a kind of fact, or at least the sense of a fact. Our sense that literary characters, within the context of a fictive cosmos, indeed are fictional personages is also a kind of fact. The meaning and value of every character in a successful work of literary representation depend upon our ideas of persons in the factual reality of our lives.

Literary character is always an invention, and inventions generally are indebted to prior inventions. Shakespeare is the inventor of literary character as we know it; he



reformed the universal human expectations for the verbal imitation of personality, and the reformation appears now to be permanent and uncannily inevitable. Remarkable as the Bible and Homer are at representing personages, their characters are relatively unchanging. They age within their stories, but their habitual modes of being do not develop. Jacob and Achilles unfold before us, but without metamorphoses. Lear and Macbeth, Hamlet and Othello severely modify themselves not only by their actions, but by their utterances, and most of all through *overhearing themselves*, whether they speak to themselves or to others. Pondering what they themselves have said, they will to change, and actually do change, sometimes extravagantly yet always persuasively. Or else they suffer change, without willing it, but in reaction not so much to their language as to their relation to that language.

I do not think it useful to say that Shakespeare successfully imitated elements in our characters. Rather, it could be argued that he compelled aspects of character to appear that previously were concealed, or not available to representation. This is not to say that Shakespeare is God, but to remind us that language is not God either. The mimesis of character in Shakespeare's dramas now seems to us normative, and indeed became the accepted mode almost immediately, as Ben Jonson shrewdly and somewhat grudgingly implied. And yet, Shakespearean representation has surprisingly little in common with the imitation of reality in Jonson or in Christopher Marlowe. The origins of Shakespeare's originality in the portrayal of men and women are to be found in the *Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer, insofar as they can be located anywhere before Shakespeare himself. Chaucer's savage and superb Pardoner overhears his own tale-telling, as well as his mocking rehearsal of his own spiel, and through this overhearing he is emboldened to forget himself, and enthusiastically urges all his fellow-pilgrims to come forward to be fleeced by him. His self-awareness, and apocalyptically rancid sense of spiritual fall, are preludes to the even grander abysses of the perverted will in Iago and in Edmund. What might be called the character trait of a negative charisma may be Chaucer's invention, but came to its perfection in Shakespearean mimesis.

The analysis of character is as much Shakespeare's invention as the representation of character is, since Iago and Edmund are adepts at analyzing both themselves and their victims. Hamlet, whose overwhelming charisma has many negative components, is certainly the most comprehensive of all literary characters, and so necessarily prophesies the labyrinthine complexities of the will in Iago and Edmund. Charisma, according to Max Weber, its first codifier, is primarily a natural endowment, and implies a primordial and idiosyncratic power over nature, and so finally over death. Hamlet's uncanniness is at its most suggestive in the scene of his long dying, where the audience, through the mediation of Horatio, itself is compelled to meditate upon suicide, if only because outliving the prince of Denmark scarcely seems an option.

Shakespearean representation has usurped not only our sense of literary character, but our sense of ourselves as characters, with Hamlet playing the part of the largest of these usurpations. Insofar as we have an idea of human disinterest-

edness, we tend to derive it from the Hamlet of Act V, whose quietism has about it a ghostly authority. Oscar Wilde, in his profound and profoundly witty dialogue, "The Decay of Lying," expressed a permanent insight when he insisted that art shaped every era, far more than any age formed art. Life imitates art, we imitate Shakespeare, because without Shakespeare we would perish for lack of images. Wilde's grandest audacity demystifies Shakespearean mimesis with a Shakespearean vivaciousness: "This unfortunate aphorism about art holding the mirror up to Nature is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters." Of *Hamlet's* influence upon the ages Wilde remarked that: "The world has grown sad because a puppet was once melancholy." "Puppet" is Wilde's own deconstruction, a brilliant reminder that Shakespeare's artistry of illusion has so mastered reality as to have changed reality, evidently forever.

The analysis of character, as a critical pursuit, seems to me as much a Shakespearean invention as literary character was, since much of what we know about how to analyze character necessarily follows Shakespearean procedures. His hero-villains, from Richard III through Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth, are shrewd and endless questers into their own self-motivations. If we could bear to see Hamlet, in his unwearied negations, as another hero-villain, then we would judge him the supreme analyst of the darker recalcitrances in the selfhood. Freud followed the pre-Socratic Empedocles, in arguing that character is fate, a frightening doctrine that maintains the fear that there are no accidents, that overdetermination rules us all of our lives. Hamlet assumes the same, yet adds to this argument the terrible passivity he manifests in Act V. Throughout Shakespeare's tragedies, the most interesting personages seem doom-eager, reminding us again that a Shakespearean reading of Freud would be more illuminating than a Freudian exegesis of Shakespeare. We learn more when we discover Hamlet in the Freudian Death Drive, than when we read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* into *Hamlet*.

In Shakespearean comedy, character achieves its true literary apotheosis, which is the representation of the inner freedom that can be created by great wit alone. Rosalind and Falstaff, perhaps alone among Shakespeare's personages, match Hamlet in wit, though hardly in the metaphysics of consciousness. Whether in the comic or the modern mode, Shakespeare has set the standard of measurement in the balance between character and passion.

In Shakespeare the self is more dramatized than theatricalized, which is why a Shakespearean reading of Freud works out so well. Character-formation after the passing of the Oedipal stage takes the place of fetishistic fragmentings of the self. Critics who now call literary character into question, and who proclaim also the death of the author, invariably also regard all notions, literary and human, of a stable character as being mere reductions of deeper pre-Oedipal desires. It

becomes clear that the fortunes of literary character rise and fall with the prestige of normative conceptions of the ego. Shakespeare's Iago, who wars against being, may be the first deconstructionist of the self, with his proclamation of "I am not what I am." This constitutes the necessary prologue to any view that would regard a fixed ego as a virtual abnormality. But deconstructions of the self are no more modern than Modernism is. Like literary modernism, the decentered ego came out of the Hellenistic culture of ancient Alexandria. The Gnostic heretics believed that the psyche, like the body, was a fallen entity, mechanically fashioned by the Demiurge or false creator. They held however that each of us possessed also a spark or pneuma, which was a fragment of the original Abyss or true, alien God. The soul or psyche within every one of us was thus at war with the self or pneuma, and only that sparklike self could be saved.

Shakespeare, following after Chaucer in this respect, was the first and remains still the greatest master of representing character both as a stable soul and a wavering self. There is a substance that endures in Shakespeare's figures, and there is also a quicksilver rendition of the unsettling sparks. Racine and Tolstoy, Balzac and Dickens, follow in Shakespeare's wake by giving us some sense of pre-Oedipal sparks or drives, and considerably more sense of post-Oedipal character and personality, stabilizations or sublimations of the fetish-seeking drives. Critics like Leo Bersani and René Girard argue eloquently against our taking this mimesis as the only proper work of literature. I would suggest that strong fictions of the self, from the Bible through Samuel Beckett, necessarily participate in both modes, the sublimation of desire, and the persistence of a primordial desire. The mystery of Hamlet or of Lear is intimately invested in the tangled mixture of the two modes of representation.

Psychic mobility is proposed by Bersani as the ideal to which deconstructions of the literary self may yet guide us. The ideal has its pathos, but the realities of literary representation seem to me very different, perhaps destructively so. When a novelist like D. H. Lawrence sought to reduce his characters to Eros and the Death Drive, he still had to persuade us of his authority at mimesis by lavishing upon the figures of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* all of the vivid stigmata of normative personality. Birkin and Ursula may represent antithetical and uncanny drives, but they develop and change as characters pondering their own pronouncements and reactions to self and others. The cost of a non-Shakespearean representation is enormous. Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, evades the burden of the normative by resorting to something like Christopher Marlowe's art of caricature in *The Jew of Malta*. Marlowe's Barabas is a marvelous rhetorician, yet he is a cartoon alongside the troublingly equivocal Shylock. Pynchon's personages are deliberate cartoons also, as flat as comic strips. Marlowe's achievement, and Pynchon's, are beyond dispute, yet they are like the prelude and the postlude to Shakespearean reality. They do not wish to engage with our hunger for the empirical world and so they enter the problematic cosmos of literary fantasy.

No writer, not even Shakespeare or Proust, alters the available stock that we agree to call reality, but Shakespeare, more than any other, does show us how much of reality we could encounter if only we retained adequate desire. The strong literary representation of character is already an analysis of character, and is part of the healing work of a literary culture, which implicitly seeks to cure violence through a normative mimesis of ego, *as if it were stable*, whether in actuality it is or is not. I do not believe that this is a social quest taken on by literary culture, but rather that we confront here the aesthetic essence of what makes a culture *literary*, rather than metaphysical or ethical or religious. A culture becomes literary when its conceptual modes have failed it, which means when religion, philosophy, and science have begun to lose their authority. If they cannot heal violence, then literature attempts to do so, which may be only a turning inside out of the critical arguments of Girard and Bersani.

I conclude by offering a particular instance or special case as a paradigm for the healing enterprise that is at once the representation and the analysis of literary character. Let us call it the aesthetics of being outraged, or rather of successfully representing the state of being outraged. W. C. Fields was one modern master of such representation, and Nathanael West was another, as was Faulkner before him. Here also the greatest master remains Shakespeare, whose Macbeth, himself a bloody outrage, yet retains our imaginative sympathy precisely because he grows increasingly outraged as he experiences the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth. The double-natured promises and the prophecies of the weird sisters finally induce in Macbeth an apocalyptic version of the stage actor's anxiety at missing cues, the horror of a phantasmagoric stage fright of missing one's time, of always reacting too late. Macbeth, a veritable monster of solipsistic inwardness but no intellectual, counters his dilemma by fresh murders, that prolong him in time yet provoke him only to a perpetually freshened sense of being outraged, as all his expectations become still worse confounded. We are moved by Macbeth, however estrangedly, because his terrible inwardness is a paradigm for our own solipsism, but also because none of us can resist a strong and successful representation of the human in a state of being outraged.

The ultimate outrage is the necessity of dying, an outrage concealed in a multitude of masks, including the tyrannical ambitions of Macbeth. I suspect that our outrage at being outraged is the most difficult of all our affects for us to represent to ourselves, which is why we are so inclined to imaginative sympathy for a character who strongly conveys that affect to us. The Shrike of West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* or Faulkner's Joe Christmas of *Light in August* are crucial modern instances, but such figures can be located in many other works, since the ability to represent this extreme emotion is one of the tests that strong writers are driven to set for themselves.



## INTRODUCTION

To see Iago as affiliated with his fellow-Machiavel, Edmund, is traditional; to see his troubling affinities with some aspects of Hamlet, the counter-Machiavel, is not altogether untraditional. Hamlet and Iago alike are theatrical geniuses, though the Prince of Denmark's genius is universal, whereas Iago, who prides himself upon his military talents, displays throughout a dramatic grasp of the power of fantasy that rivals Shakespeare's own. I cannot therefore agree with the late C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler when, in their very useful book, *The Whole Journey*, they say of Iago: "What he seeks is to become the Moor by making the Moor enact his fantasies, fantasies that will destroy them both. When that is accomplished, he can stop." Iago is too aware of the incommensurateness between his godlike general and himself to seek to become Othello, and dreadfully enough the fantasies that Iago makes the Moor enact are authentically Othello's own uneasy imaginings. Shakespeare's grand negations, at their strongest, are figures in a kind of negative poetics, even a kind of dramatic negative theology. Iago, like Hamlet, is a great improviser. He does not set out to become the Moor, or to destroy the Moor; it may be that he does not even begin with the desire to destroy Desdemona. I think we need to start farther back with Iago, in order to see more fully how original a character he was, and is. Iago is not a skeptic, but a believer. His religion is war, and his god is Othello, and so his fury when Cassio is preferred to him is the fury of the priest or worshipper who has been found unworthy, or at least less worthy than another who lacks the intensity of his own devotion. Iago becomes instead a priest of Resentment, fit ancestor for many current pale clerks whose faith has been thwarted.

Iago, as Harold Goddard wisely said, is the incarnation of the spirit of modern war, indeed a prophecy of total war, the religion of war. His truest forerunner in Shakespeare is not Richard III but Ulysses, the theoretician of war, indeed its positive theologian, as opposed to its negative theologians in Iago and Edmund, and its fantastic imagination in Macbeth. Just as the relationship between Lear's Fool and Lear, or between Falstaff and Hal, cannot be understood without our recognizing the extraordinary ambivalence of the Fool towards Lear, and of Hal towards

Falstaff, so we need to comprehend Iago primarily in terms of his apocalyptic ambivalence in regard to Othello. Even as the play opens, we confront in Iago's ambivalence something very close to its descendant in Melville's Ahab. Ahab's Othello is Moby Dick, conceived as a great Gnostic Demiurge, a cosmic principle that inspires hatred and revenge. Iago's Moby Dick is the superb Othello, greatest of captains, worshipped by Iago as the God of War, but the worship has become hatred and a spur to revenge. Moby Dick has crippled Ahab, perhaps castrated him, but the permanent mystery of Shakespeare's tragedy is that Othello has done nothing to Iago, except failed to give him preference over Cassio. Yet in a perspective granted by the negative theology of war-as-religion, Iago's malignancy is anything but motiveless. For Iago, God or Othello is everything, because war is everything, and if Othello prefers Cassio, then Iago is nothing, as Cain felt he was nothing when Abel was preferred by Yahweh, or as Satan in *Paradise Lost* believes himself to be nothing when he belatedly hears Christ preferred by Milton's God. Iago is neither Cain nor the Devil, but something far worse: a priest of Moloch or Mars who is also a master psychologist, a great playwright, and a theologian of the primal Abyss. Iago's cognitive power is his most astonishing attribute; his intellect is as quick and fecund as Hamlet's, though vastly less comprehensive.

Iago's incessant war is against being itself, which he has identified with Othello. That identification, granted Iago's perspective, is no hyperbole; cultural change and loss accounts for our tendency to undervalue Othello. Iago's Othello is far closer to the *Iliad's* Achilles than he is to Shakespeare's Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida*, though I mean a closeness in ontological force, rather than in personality. The given in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, is Othello's splendor of being, his unquestioned magnitude, his absolute authority and perfection in the camp and field of war. We do not much exalt the purity of arms, but Shakespeare sometimes does, or at least allows some of his plays to entertain the possibility of such exaltation. Iago believes in nothing but his captain Othello, loves nothing but the captain in Othello, and destroys Othello, but not as captain, not as the pure warrior. Even his destruction of Othello the man remains a negative celebration of Othello the captain, a negative affirmation of the reality of the God of War.

A worship that is hatred is best expressed by Iago's marvelous boast: "I am not what I am," which echoes and undoes St. Paul's "By the grace of God I am what I am." By Othello's refusal of grace or preference, Iago is driven to the negation: "I am not what I am." That statement is not a mere insistence that he is not Othello's "honest Iago," the ensign or standard-bearer pledged to die rather than to yield Othello's colors to the enemy. I hear a kind of religious despair in it as well: "I am not what I am," I am nothing, if the only ontological being that I acknowledge has failed to acknowledge me. Reality has abandoned Iago, and his revenge is a rebellion that in the first place is against himself. He will not, cannot walk away from Othello to another captain; he now hates God, but continues to believe in him. That ambivalent regard for Othello demands expression through a passion for destruction that is also a creative passion. Primal ambivalence fires the whole substance of

Iago's being, and fathers his genius: the would-be second-in-command emerges as a Machiavel, as a poet who writes with people rather than with words, and most fascinatingly as the first High Aesthete, a dramatic critic adoring his own achievement as a dramatist. Richard III's gusto, his savage delight in his own villainy, is replaced by Iago's subtly perverse sadistic pleasure in his power of manipulation. Richard manipulates both his equals and his underlings. Iago manipulates as he chooses, but he knows that his negative greatness achieves apotheosis only by manipulating the fall of his mortal god, Othello. Iago's motive is Sublime: he debases, humiliates, and finally destroys the only authority he recognizes; his enterprise finally intends nothing less than the death of God. The God of War, having failed to recognize his true son in Iago, must be horribly punished. Falstaff, the God of Wit, is punished for having recognized his true son in Hal, who may once have accepted the recognition, but now recoils from it in a profound ambivalence. Hal cannot allow himself to know that he both loves and hates Falstaff, but consciously regards the fat knight as a kind of superior fool or jester. The ambivalence, transferred from Henry IV to Falstaff, destroys Falstaff and strengthens Hal. Iago, when we first encounter him, has been rejected for Cassio, and is conscious only of his great hatred for Othello. As he works upon Othello, Iago is delighted and surprised by his ease and aesthetic wonder of accomplishment. The delight could not have its intensity and largeness of dimension if Iago did not retain a reverence and passion for the magnitude of what he was ruining. A great captain, for Iago and for Shakespeare, is a masterpiece of nature, an Adamic splendor falling from godlike to something less than human status.

I think we must dismiss any speculation that Iago has a repressed sexual desire for Othello, which is about as useless as the notion that there was a sexual relationship between Falstaff and Hal. An extreme negative theologian or Gnostic does not lust after God, and what Freud learned from Shakespeare was the terrible ambivalence of our longing for reconciliation with the father while wishing also to murder the father. Freudian readings of Shakespeare, as I have remarked elsewhere, give us neither Shakespeare nor Freud, but a Shakespearean reading of Freud is capable of giving us both. Iago is subtler than Freud, as negative theology is frequently subtler than moral psychology. Reconciliation with Othello is not possible, Iago realizes, because it is Othello who must atone for the rejection of Iago. The degradation of God, a Gnostic concept, is Iago's project: the involuntary atonement of Othello through his debasement. The murder of Othello is not, cannot be Iago's project. A negative theologian does not seek to slay the father, nor to replace the father. It is enough that the father descend into the Abyss, there to suffer uncreation, to return to the void formlessness of night.

For me, the Shakespearean question to ask concerning Iago is: how does he change in the course of the drama? Unlike Macbeth, Iago does not progressively lose control of his own imagination. What makes *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* so harrowing a work is the total triumph of Iago, until he is brought down so unexpectedly by his wife's outrage at the victimage of Desdemona. Iago's



changes, until Emilia's courage ends him, are marches of triumphalism, in which he perpetually astonishes himself by his own manipulative genius. Yet that is only part of the story, the emergence of Iago as appreciative dramatic critic of his own power in composition. There is another side to this triumphalism, and that is the extent to which Iago, as great improviser, traps himself also in his own web. More successful at manipulating Othello than he could have imagined, he is forced into a situation where he must prove Othello's love a whore, or himself be slain by Othello. His extraordinary status as pure negation gives at once unlimited intellect, an overwhelming sense of nothingness, and a primal ambivalence towards Othello's massive, ontological presence that drives him beyond even his worked-out plottings. In this he differs from Edmund, who keeps to plan until the bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought in. Iago changes with each fresh confrontation, whether with Othello or with Desdemona, until he enters the final changelessness of his silence, prompted by outrage at Emilia's courageous devotion to the murdered and slandered Desdemona.

Iago tells us that he is nothing if not critical, and that he has never found a man that knew how to love himself. We can apply both these self-judgments to one of the most extraordinary moments in the play, when Emilia has given Iago the handkerchief and then been sent away by him (Act III, scene iii, lines 318-29). Alone on stage, Iago exults at his own mastery, and then is moved to a marvelous and horrible aesthetic apprehension of the ruined Othello, the fallen god of honorable war, and now Iago's masterpiece:

I will in Cassio's lodging lose this napkin  
 And let him find it. Trifles light as air  
 Are to the jealous confirmations strong  
 As proofs of Holy Writ. This may do something.  
 The Moor already changes with my poison:  
 Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons,  
 Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,  
 But, with a little, act upon the blood,  
 Burn like the mines of sulfur. I did say so.

*Enter Othello.*

Look where he comes! Not poppy nor mandragora,  
 Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,  
 Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep  
 Which thou owedst yesterday.

We shudder and yet, for this great moment, we are Iago, or perhaps Iago is already John Keats and Walter Pater, particularly as he rolls out those sensuous negatives: "Not poppy nor mandragora, / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world . . ." For he is nothing if not critical, and he chants an appreciation of his own poisonous art, relishing each syllable of "poppy" and "mandragora" and "drowsy syrups" and "sweet sleep." Aesthetic awareness in our modern sense, the poetic self-consciousness of Keats and Pater and the sublime Oscar Wilde, is invented by

Iago in this grand negative moment. The excited apprehension of: "This may do something" leads to the conscious pride of "I did say so," as Iago hymns the power of his own "dangerous conceits." It is only a step from this to that still more dangerous prevalence of the murderous imagination that will triumph even more sublimely in the strongest of all Shakespearean negations, Macbeth.

—H. B.