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The Apologetics of Evil: The Case of Iago (review)

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Ghost and his son" (157). Kehler asks us to reexamine Gertrude through a close reading of Q1, buttressed by careful textual evidence. But when she seeks to "extrapolate" from the Q1 Gertrude, who is quieter and more maternal than "her sister Gertrude" in the Q2/Folio texts (161), conjecture replaces evidence. This Gertrude must remarry, and immediately, to forward her son's fortunes and her own ambition. For instance: "As an extraneous ex-queen, she would be sent away for safekeeping, probably to a convent or remote castle in what would amount to house arrest" (162). Such speculation is fruitless; it cannot unravel Gertrude's mystery in areas of her portrayal where the play remains obdurately silent.

In *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy*, Jennifer Panek cautions against the kind of methodological crevasse that mars Kehler's solid book: "The use of social history to explore dramatic representations of widows has frequently given rise to the kind of literary criticism which seeks to compare stage widows to their real-life counterparts, usually with the scope of examining the playwright's 'accuracy' or 'sympathy.' But there are limits on the value of judging saleable dramatic fantasies by how well they measure up to real-life situations (or rather, to the remaining textual traces of those situations)."¹ While her mixture of characters and socioeconomic causation is much more sophisticated and complex than the simple comparisons Panek criticizes, Kehler's liberal use of social history to explicate Shakespeare's widows proceeds from the same identification of real life with literature, the very literature that can so productively be used to scrutinize, illuminate, and interrogate it. I wish that she had applied her extensive and nuanced knowledge of early modern widows in both social and cultural practice to help us understand that function of literature, and the widows deployed therein.

The Apologetics of Evil: The Case of Iago. By RICHARD RAATZSCH.

Translated from the German by LADISLAUS LÖB. Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 124. \$27.95 cloth.

Reviewed by PAUL A. KOTTMAN

It has occasionally been observed, and it certainly bears repeating, that Shakespeare's characters are not dramatically compelling because they are morally justifiable. Shakespeare "seems to write," as Samuel Johnson put it, "without any moral purpose."¹ One is tempted by this to conclude that Shakespeare's characters are dramatically compelling—that is, ethically significant—precisely

¹ Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 4.

¹ Arthur Sherbo, ed., *Johnson on Shakespeare*, 23 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1958–77), 7:71.

because their actions are not fully justifiable according to any recognizable moral or legal framework. It is as if Shakespeare knew that our inability to fully justify a protagonist's actions was in fact crucial to the drama's ethical claims upon us and as if the dramatic stakes and ethical claims were raised in more or less direct proportion to the extent to which someone's actions appear morally indefensible.

In his well-argued *Apologetics of Evil: The Case of Iago*, Richard Raatzsch asks us to consider Iago's wickedness as a "pathological case of the human" and thus to consider him as someone "whose actions cannot be justified but can be defended" (9, 12). Iago's naked villainy makes him an excellent case study in this regard. Raatzsch does not invite us to consider the play's language in any significant detail, nor does he try to present an overall interpretation of *Othello*; his goal is to explain the claim that "Iago cannot be defended by means of justification" (91).

A number of compelling conclusions, elaborated through succinct argumentation, follow from and surround this claim. Raatzsch accepts Samuel Taylor Coleridge's sense of Iago as the "motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity," commenting that "the absence of a clear specification of Iago's motive proves to be an essential point!" (31, 49). But rather than conclude with Coleridge that "clutching at a motive (any motive?) would be [Iago's] real motive," Raatzsch maintains that to search for a motive for Iago's actions "would shift the weight of the examination away from his method toward what drives him, say, for example, the passion of jealousy or hatred" (49). This would be to miss something fundamental, for "Iago's method of operating itself is the main issue" (49). Shakespeare lays bare Iago's method of operating—his way of dealing with other people, or what Peter Szondi calls his "absolute negativity" in his relation to Othello—in order to show us what happens when the "method" itself overtakes "the usual human motives [that] play the role they usually play in human life" (49).² According to Raatzsch, it is in this sense—namely, that Iago's "real motive is his method" (50)—that Iago is a pathological case.

"By contemplating the pathological," Raatzsch observes, "we learn something about the limits of the normal" (104). Accordingly, Raatzsch wishes us to regard Iago as the embodiment of the "concept of evil" in order to see that he is thereby "removed from the perspective of moral evaluation." "A model of evil itself cannot be evaluated and therefore cannot be justified" (80). When Raatzsch says that Iago is unjustifiable, he means not simply that Iago acts in a manner that is wicked in the extreme, but that by virtue of its pathological character, his wickedness eludes any evaluative judgment. Iago cannot be judged, Raatzsch avers,

² Peter Szondi, "Othello," from *An Essay on the Tragic*, in *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, ed. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford UP, 2009), 118–21, esp. 119.

nor can any pathological case: "We can only try to *understand* them" (81). Trying to "understand" Iago does not entail doubting morality or abandoning moral standards of judgment altogether; rather, understanding Iago in his pathological essence, as one who can be neither simply justified nor condemned, "draws our attention to the limits of the moral." "Iago," Raatzsch concludes, "teaches us our moral limits by transcending them" (105). In other words, Iago's transcendence of moral standards validates and renders vivid the ways in which such standards normally operate in our everyday attachments and commitments.

A little more than a century ago, A. C. Bradley explained how our affective response to Shakespeare's tragedies is invariably detached, and thus detachable, from our "moral" judgment of the protagonists' actions. Because "the impression of waste" aroused by Hamlet or Othello cannot be understood solely as the expression of a moral judgment of them or their murderous deeds, Shakespeare shows that our sense of ethicality, or how we are attached to others, is not a function of moral categories.³ We simply feel that these lives matter—independently, as it were, of the goodness or wickedness of the deeds they perform or the sufferings they endure. And if we affectively sense meaning and "worth" in these lives through "the impression of waste" (97) elicited by the dramas, then in Shakespeare (as I recently put it) "ethicality appears in a 'negative' form, as it were, through the experience of its resounding lack or defeat."⁴

It is perhaps inherent to our routine sense of good standards for human behavior that such standards be potentially surpassed: our "standard" ethical bearing "is validated by what conforms to it as much as by what transcends it" (107). Bearing this thought in mind, I find that Raatzsch's compelling book closes with an apt consideration of Emilia's role in the necessity of Iago's downfall. If Iago is the paradigmatic embodiment of evil (if that is his "concept," as Raatzsch puts it), then he can nevertheless be confronted on very human terms by fellow human beings, such as his wife. In the end, it is not the depth of Iago's monstrousness or inhumanity that is revealed by Emilia's plain honesty or by his murder of her. It is the strength of her abiding attachment to others, living and dead, that marks his end.

³ A. C. Bradley, "'The Substance of Shakespearean Tragedy,' from *Shakespearean Tragedy*," in *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, 86–107, esp. 97–98.

⁴ Paul A. Kottman, *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009), 7.