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Emotion Review 2009 1: 33

DOI: 10.1177/1754073908097182

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Mad, Bad, and Beyond: Iago Meets Qū Yuan

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Abstract

This commentary offers an alternative interpretation of Iago's resentment based on clinical psychology and a cross-cultural perspective, thereby revisiting the fundamental question of what is emotion.

Keywords

Confucian poetics, intersubjectivity, psychopathy, qing

Oatley's use of literature as a tool for emotion research is much to be commended. This innovative approach marries the two cultures identified by Snow (1963)—science and the humanities—a cross fertilization that has the potential to broaden our field in significant ways. Literature offers a broader conception of truth, as Dewey (1925/1981) points out, “the realm of meanings is wider than that of true-and-false meanings. . . . Poetic meanings, moral meanings, a large part of the goods of life are matters of richness and freedom of meanings, rather than of truth . . .” (p. 307). By emphasizing the multiplicity and richness of meaning, literature may help us renew our commitment as scientists to the phenomenon, a commitment that sometimes gets occluded by our preoccupation with a too narrow conception of truth. Literature also invites us to approach the phenomenon as text and theory as interpretation. This approach is freeing, especially if coupled with Heidegger's insight into literary interpretation. According to Heidegger (Spanos, 1979), interpretation is a dialogue between the interpreter and the phenomenon, a dialogue that may degenerate into a monologue of theory, unless we are vigilant enough to always render our interpretations questionable. Following Heidegger's advice, my commentary on Oatley's target article will capitalize on differing perspectives and alternative interpretations.

Let me start with a cross-cultural observation. In contrast to the relative neglect of resentment in contemporary psychology, the psychologist/philosopher of Lu, more than two thousand years ago, had much to say about this topic. In particular, we read in the *Analects* of Confucius (17/9) that expression of resentment constitutes one of the major functions of poetry. In the Master's own words: “the *Odes* serve to . . . regulate feelings of resentment [by facilitating its expression]” (Legge, 1971, p. 323). In contrast to Aristotle's notion of *catharsis*, which capitalizes on the cognitive, representational function of emotion, as is echoed in Oatley's mental simulation model, the Confucian view of literature puts a premium on intersubjectivity and social sharing of emotions (Sundararajan, 2002, 2003).

Thus in the Confucian tradition, resentment is meant to be expressed: “My mind is full of resentment / that finds no outlet. / Only in these verses can I express / my feelings” (Hawkes, 1985, p. 263), wrote the great poet Qū Yuan (343?-278 B.C.).

Iago, by contrast, was invested in keeping his resentment covert. His emotion expressions tended to serve the purpose of manipulation rather than self disclosure, as Shakespeare has him say, “. . . not I for love and duty, / But seeming so, for my peculiar end” (*Othello*, 1, 1: 59–60). Not surprisingly, when his plans were exposed, and he could no longer “wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at” (*Othello*, 1, 1: 64–65), the unrepentant Iago fell silent: “From this time forth I never will speak word” (*Othello*, 5, 2: 304). Severe impairments in inter-subjectivity have been found in autism (Hobson, 2007), and psychopathy (Blair, Mitchell, & Blair, 2005).

Along the line of psychopathy, a distinction may be made between instrumental aggression characteristic of psychopaths and “crimes of passion” committed by individuals without this diagnosis (Williamson, Hare, & Wong, 1987). Othello's aggression caused by an “unhinged rage” is a classical example of the latter, whereas Iago's is that of instrumental aggression (Blair et al., 2005), in which violence against a victim, Desdemona, and a host of other individuals, is used as a means to some other goal—the ultimate destruction of Othello. Under normal circumstances, goal-directed behaviors can be inhibited by the concern for consequences, and/or prospect of punishment. As Blair et al. (2005) point out, to explain instrumental aggression seen in individuals with psychopathy, we need an account that explains why this is not happening. The various accounts for this phenomenon—ranging from “poverty of emotions” (Cleckley, 1941), and “impaired emotional learning” (Blair et al., 2005), to lack of empathy and remorse (Hare, 1991)—have been foreshadowed by Shakespeare's portrait of Iago.

The psychopathy profile of Iago raises some interesting questions: Is resentment necessarily a “bad emotion”? Oatley's answer is in the affirmative. Just as Othello was destroyed by his “unhinged rage,” Iago's character came “undone” in the emergence of his resentment, so we are told. Are we to assume then that relentlessness, “insistent planfulness,” vengeance, covertness, etc. are essential ingredients of resentment? Oatley is equivocal on this. He says that Iago's resentment represents the “strong,” not the mild variety. But how do we determine the strength of resentment? Is one's resentment in direct proportion to the magnitude of the wrong one endures? Is there an objective measure of what constitutes wrong? Maybe there is no such thing as bad emotion in the abstract? Confucius has said, “It is

only the (*truly*) virtuous man, who can love, or who can hate, others [properly]" (*Analects*, 4/3, Legge, 1971, p. 166). Might it not be that Shakespeare is making a similar point when he uses vice to contextualize bad emotions? If Iago is meant to embody vice, as Oatley points out, we may turn to the Chinese poet Qū Yuan (343?-278 B.C.), a paragon of loyalty and patriotism, for the resentment of a "virtuous" person. Being resentful of the king who favored lesser talents and who put him in exile on account of slanders against him, Qū gave free reign to his tormented feelings through poetry, which made him the first major poet in Chinese history. Legend has it that Qū drowned himself in the river Mi-Lo to express his loyalty to the vanquished king, shortly after the latter's capital was ransacked by a rival state.

Related to the possible passion and vice interaction is the question of whether emotion is to be understood in terms of computation in the head or process in the world. The former position is supported by some cognitive theories of emotion, as exemplified by Oatley who puts much stock on goals, plans and mental models of the world. The latter position privileges the intersubjective and situational context of emotions (Johnson, 2007). From the process perspective, Iago has practically stood Oatley's account of unfolding on its head, by showing that the person who can best carry out actions of vengeance so meticulously in accordance with the plan is a psychopath, whose game plans are seldom affected by the victim's plight (Blair et al., 2005). Consistent with the claim of Campos, et al. that emotions "unfold over time . . . and often are elicited in conjunction and in complex ways with other emotions" (Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004, p. 379), the process perspective would argue that the presence or absence of prosocial emotions to possibly temper resentment may determine whether the whole thing will unfold into a scenario of "bad emotion" or not.

All these questions boil down to the ultimate question: What is emotion? Is it positive or negative, good or bad (Solomon & Stone, 2002)? Is emotion a causal entity that explains behavior or is it rather a phenomenon to be explained itself (Barrett, 2006; Russell, 2006)? Last but not least, how best to conceptualize emotions? The West tends to focus on occurrent states such as emotional syndromes, whereas affective dispositions, such as the capacity for intersubjectivity (Bråten, 2007), constitute the essence of *qing*, the Chinese term for emotion (Averill & Sundararajan, 2006). This difference is also reflected in literature. Whereas Shakespeare capitalizes on narratives of discrete emotions, classical Chinese poetics puts a premium on the honing of affective dispositions through various aesthetic experiences, such as savoring (Frijda & Sundararajan, 2007), simulation of poetic moods (Sundararajan, 2004), and the pre-attentive priming of "evocative images" (*xing*) (Averill & Sundararajan, 2006). One corollary of this observation is that literature can be used as a tool for cross-cultural analyses that complement empirical studies in important ways (Averill & Sundararajan, 2005; Sundararajan & Averill, 2007).

Being a subtle and complex writer, Shakespeare invites multiple and contradictory readings of Iago. The above questions inspired by Oatley's reading are testimonial to the fact that Shakespeare has anticipated the full scope of

contemporary debates in emotion theory. In the final analysis, however, a psychology of resentment that goes beyond both madness (passion) and badness (vice) is yet to be written. To meet the challenge of this task, we may need to consult thinkers from other corners of the world, besides the "psychologist of Avon."

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