

SundayReview | OPINION

# Shakespeare's Torture Test

By ARIEL DORFMAN JULY 22, 2017

Durham, N.C. — In September, the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Washington will hear *Salim vs. Mitchell*, a case brought by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of three former C.I.A. detainees. The lawsuit names as defendants the two psychologists who devised the “enhanced interrogation techniques” that became the basis for the C.I.A. torture program described in shocking detail in the Senate Intelligence Committee’s 2014 report.

Despite the adoption in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which held that “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” these violations of body and mind continue to be exculpated and justified by the idea that they save lives. That, indeed, is the argument made in depositions by the psychologists in the A.C.L.U. case.

Donald Trump vowed, during his campaign, to bring back waterboarding “and a hell of a lot worse.” As yet, we have not seen that “worse,” since the counsel of his defense secretary, James Mattis — that such methods are useless and counterproductive — has prevailed. At least, as far as we know. It is not hard to imagine that a major terrorist attack is all it would take to revive such maltreatment. A recent survey found that almost half of Americans approved the use of torture if it led to information being extracted.

I am wary of judging my fellow citizens hastily. I understand the collective panic from which that blindness to the pain of the enemy stems. And I commiserate with their thirst for complete, if unobtainable, security.

But for those of us, like my wife and me, who lived through the ouster of President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973, and witnessed the murderous regime of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the damage inflicted by torture — not just physically on individuals, but psychologically on an entire nation — is deeply corrosive. I wrote a play about it, but when I reflect on torture today, it is another play that haunts me.

Of all the fictional characters in the literary universe, the malicious Iago, who betrays his commander and friend, Othello, leading to the doom of sweet Desdemona, may be the villain who most deserves the liquid fires of limitless punishment. Shakespeare's play, first performed at the end of 1604, leaves no doubt as to what awaits that "demi-devil": torture unto death. And the command is to make it slow: "If there be any cunning cruelty / that can torment him much and hold him long, / it shall be his."

The spectators then watching "The Moor of Venice" were well aware of what such torments entailed, having likely attended brutal public executions. In 1595, for example, a Jesuit priest and poet accused of treason, Robert Southwell, was strung up at Tyburn. He was sentenced to be disemboweled while still alive, and his corpse ended up quartered, his head cut off, before a large, ogling crowd. Before his execution, Southwell witnessed in prison men "hanged by the handes eight or nine houres, yea twelve houres together, till not only their wits, but even their senses fayle them." Other horrors he described were bodies broken on the rack, genital mutilation and starvation so severe that inmates would lick "the verye moisture of the walls."

What sets Othello's nemesis apart from martyrs like Southwell who were pressed to death under slabs or burned at the stake was that Iago did not claim innocence. He took pride in his perfidy. There were no accomplices to his conspiracy, no "actionable intelligence" to be prised from him.

Why, then, afflict him so savagely?

Even in this supposedly civilized century, when torture is a crime against humanity (though practiced the world over), the reasons for Iago's torments still have resonance. His body must be mutilated because Shakespeare's audience would have demanded that retribution, cheering at the idea of a traitor on the rack. It

would have seemed a modicum of justice in a tragedy that offered scant comfort besides.

Another reason was to make an example of Iago, a warning to any who might dare attack the foundations of the state and the order of the universe. The spectacle of such punishments was, in the words of Queen Elizabeth I, to evoke “the terror of others.”

The final reason is one Shakespeare may have found the most intriguing. In Cinthio's novella, the source from which he took the outlines of the story, multiple motives animated this Machiavellian schemer. Shakespeare went out of his way to jettison them. No, Iago has not been demoted by Othello. No, he does not suspect that Othello has seduced his wife or tarnished his reputation.

Shakespeare makes Iago an enigma. If we could only fathom the psyche that harbored such malignancy, runs our delusion, then we might recognize the next avatar of evil and stop him before he creates chaos and evil. But Iago refuses to explain himself.

“Demand me nothing,” he declares in the play's last scene. “What you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word.”

Shakespeare understood, I submit, the sick curiosity humans have when confronted by something infinitely perverse. “Torments will ope your lips,” boasts one of Iago's captors, and we onlookers, mired in our imperfect humanity, share that craving to see Iago's soul cracked open so he can pour forth his secrets. But we never hear another syllable from this “hellish villain.”

When I am entangled in the emotions of “Othello,” distraught at innocence smothered and murdered, I, too, wish to see Iago suffer without pause for his sins. I suspect every modern audience member feels, as Shakespeare's spectators did, an indecent satisfaction at imagining someone so irredeemably wicked being tormented without remission.

Only when we have the moral courage to declare that someone like Iago, who has done so much harm, should not be put on the rack or have his genitals slashed or

be forced to open his lips and scream and scream ... only then, when we understand that hurting him in this way degrades us all, will we have advanced toward banishing this plague of cunning cruelty from the earth. I fear that day will be a long time coming.

As long as we remain trapped by the desire for reckoning and revenge, we avoid the most difficult truth about Iago: He is human, and enjoys as his birthright certain inalienable rights. This monster who planned the ruin of Othello and Desdemona with the cold, deliberate passion of a suicide bomber, happens, alas, to be a member of our species — an extreme litmus test for that species.

The argument that we should abolish torture because it does not work may be the wrong one. The question that Iago asks all these centuries later is how torture works on *us*, what it does to our humanity, when we look on approvingly as his malignant body is taken away to suffer unspeakable pain.

Ariel Dorfman, an emeritus professor of literature at Duke University, is the author of the play “Death and the Maiden” and the forthcoming book “Homeland Security Ate My Speech.”

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.*

A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 23, 2017, on Page SR8 of the New York edition with the headline: Shakespeare's Torture Test.