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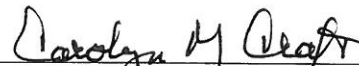
Allie Chaffin Yarbrough

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, May, 2000.

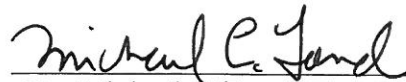
The Portrayal of Evil and the Shakespearean Villain

by

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Introduction

Evil is a mystery: however, its purpose is evident – destruction. Evil is always present. Evil, like some insidious stain, discolours the world of Shakespearean literature. The constant struggle that rages within humanity is one of good versus evil.

Shakespeare writes about life, and evil is a part of life; therefore, it penetrates some of Shakespeare's most memorable characters. The depths of their depravity, attempts at manipulation, and viciousness defy all reason. Shakespeare is able to develop memorable characters whose malevolence still shocks and confounds us today.

Evil tends to distort things. It disfigures the villain and makes his character even more repulsive. Richard of Richard III, Aaron of Titus Andronicus, Iago of Othello, and Edmund of King Lear represent some of Shakespeare's most infamous villains. These villains are masters of deception and well-versed in human nature. They readily identify the weaknesses of others and play on these vulnerabilities. Most villains are innately intuitive individuals who are often keenly aware of human frailties that they exploit to advance themselves. Villains usually accomplish this purpose with little or no remorse. The Shakespearean villain is a portrayal of evil.

The Shakespearean villain uses evil as a means to an end. It is the tool that aids him as he seeks to make his desires a reality. It is of little consequence who suffers at his hand for his only goal is his self-gratification. Most villains do not even apologize for their villainy; in fact, they wear it like a badge and proudly proclaim their evilness. Often times this villainy has the power to destroy whatever it comes in

contact with. Villains intimidate other characters and their evilness is foreboding. Shakespeare's villains exert great power and possess tremendous presence.

Most villains control their own emotions of rage and anger. They turn this evil on others. Those that they seek to destroy receive their full attention, and they work tirelessly to destroy them. Villains thrive on destruction, hatred, and malice. The evilness in their character becomes all consuming. Shakespeare presents some of the most unforgettable villains. Their evilness is but one mirror into the myriad tales of murder and mayhem.

Evil takes many forms. Shakespeare motivates his characters with desires of greed, lust, ambition, revenge and much more. Evil is a perturbation of the soul. It casts an ominous shadow on all. Once touched by evil, a character is changed forever. Elmer Stoll in Shakespeare Studies defines the Elizabethan villain as

. . . at the beginning an outcast, but before the end cock
of the walk, and the tragedy was pretty much of his making.
The world had hardly dealt with him, and he still dealt more hardly
with the world. He scoffed at respectability and jeered at the
cowardice and stupidity of everybody about him, yet he himself,
much given to free thinking, was plunged into melancholy. He was
villain and he knew it, until the end. Then his heart was touched,
once he had been given the death-blow or had given it (337).

Shakespeare's villains grew out of the medieval Vice characters in the morality plays. As a master playwright, Shakespeare has been able to take this creation beyond the bounds of Evil simply as a Vice. The Vice appears as a flat character who evolves

into a comic figure. Typically, the character's motivation is clear though shallow and lacking in subtlety. Shakespeare has taken this creation to new heights. Thus we enter the world of Shakespeare's villains, filled with malevolence, murder, and mayhem. It is a world where evil runs rampant and many are made to suffer.

Richard III and Titus Andronicus represent the earliest of Shakespearean plays in which the villain assumes a dominant role while Othello and King Lear represent two of his later works. These plays reveal the development of the role of the Shakespearean villain and his primary importance to the portrayal of evil. In the earlier works, the villain resembles the Vice; the stark characterization remains flat and the motivation often singular, usually in pursuit of power or revenge. Like the Vice, these Shakespearean villains often desire a public reward. The latter works portray villains with complex desires and hidden motivations whose self-satisfaction reigns supreme. These characters captivate the imagination.

Richard III, The Villainy of a “Would-Be” King

The Tragedy of Richard the Third (c. 1592-93), the earliest of Shakespearean plays to be included in this thesis, presents Richard III as a self-proclaimed villain. According to Theodore Spencer, the author of Shakespeare and the Nature of Man, what distinguishes him [Richard] is the fact that he is

set apart from the rest of mankind, first by his malformed body, which is the outward sign of a malformed soul, and the second by his thorough-going individualism. Order and society are nothing to him; he is the first of those Shakespearean villains who refuse to be a part of the order of nature and refuse to see the interconnections between the various spheres of Nature's activity. (72)

Richard, a self-absorbed villain, internalizes everything as revolving around his advancement and wishes. Determination, his driving force, steers him on a straight path toward corruption. Richard's deformed body, an outward manifestation of his inner corruption, points to something monstrous and cruel in his nature.

At the outset of the play, Richard states his intention to be a villain. He says, “I am determined to prove a villain” (1.1.30). He seeks this path as recourse to his own bitterness. He states:

Cheated of feature, by dissembling nature.
Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable

That dogs bark at me as I halt by them-- . . . (1.1.19-23)

Richard III uses his physical deformity as the impetus for his discontent and his birthright to perpetrate evil on others. Nature has dealt him a terrible blow, a handicap, and he intends to even the odds by exacting punishment on others. Evil begins to distort his mind, which parallels his physical distortion. He begins to exact his plan as he openly informs the audience of the plot he has perpetrated against his brother. His behaviors are not “brotherly,” and he easily deceives Clarence who believes what Richard says. Richard reveals his real thoughts in this speech:

Go tread the path that thou shalt ne’er return:

Simple plain Clarence, I do love thee so

That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven,

If heaven will take the present at our hands. (1.1.117-120)

Clarence stands between Richard and the crown, yet family relationships do not deter Richard. He sees Clarence as an obstacle to what he must obtain, and he is prepared to remove the obstacle.

Shakespeare uses the eyes of others to paint a picture of this villain. Anne describes Richard as a “dreadful minister of hell” (1.2.46) and as a “lump of foul deformity” (1.2.57). These lines reveal Richard’s apparent degree of villainy and evilness. Anne further states that Richard remains “. . . unfit for any place, but hell” (1.2.108). She loathes Richard because he killed her husband. Richard lusts after her and pursues her relentlessly. Yet, in his own words, “I’ll have her, but I will not keep her long (1.2.229). He plans to use her and then toss her aside. Richard’s evil seeks only to destroy. He gains power from the destruction of others. One more shattered

individual adds to his triumphs. Anne, oddly enough, gives in to his advances but does not relish the encounters. Richard's very presence, his evilness, overpowers her will and determination.

Evil, a powerful and persistent force, empowers him. Richard, a verbally skilled intellectual, argues successfully with Anne to the point that she does not fight him anymore. Whatever Anne replies, Richard remarks cunningly with a comment aimed at captivating her. What can a man who has killed her husband possibly say to her that would be worthy of any attention? Craftily, Richard tells Anne that she can kill him, and he even gives her the weapon to use:

If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,
Lo here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,
Which if thou please to hide in this true breast,
And let the soul forth that adareth thee,
I lay it naked to the deadly stroke,
And humbly beg the death upon my knee. (1.2.173-178)

Anne, moved by this gesture, fails to seize this opportunity to kill Richard. According to Ian Moulton, "Anne succumbs because she allows her political quarrel with Richard to be expressed in a discourse of erotic seduction which, while it gives her the illusion of power over her helpless 'effeminate' suitor, actually constructs her as feminine and passive, Richard as masculine and active" (267).

Anne realizes that, in this society, she has very little voice against a man; therefore, she does not fight against Richard. He sees this as a definite weakness on her part and resolves to use her and cast her aside. Richard belittles Anne when he

says, "Hath she forgot already that brave prince, / Edward, her lord, whom I some three months since, stabb'd in my angry mood at Tewksbury?" (1.3.239-241).

Richard marvels at his ability to manipulate Anne, while demeaning her as a person and especially as a woman. Anne unwillingly becomes an accomplice to Richard's treachery because she marries him, bringing respectability to what he has done. If she can come to terms with his villainy, with his killing her father and her husband, then certainly others will learn to accept it as well. She becomes another pawn in his evil quest to secure the crown. He needs her to legitimize his position. Evil, a parasitic force, requires a host to corrupt.

Richard fakes virtue; he pretends to be religious, cites scriptures, and says that his motives are pure. He protests that, in most cases, he remains falsely accused. He plays the role of the affectionate and compassionate friend. Richard, a deceitful character, manipulates people. He constantly professes to be the innocent one when he acts as the culprit. Evil, a deceptive force, acts as strength for Richard. He announces his own nature when he says:

I do the wrong, and the first begin to brawl.

The secret mischiefs that I set abroad

I lay unto the grievous charges of others. (1.3.323-335)

He wants everything to appear normal. Evil lulls humankind toward acceptance of greater evil. Richard realizes that his strength lies in his ability to deceive. He reveals his method of operation in the following lines:

But I sigh, and with a piece of scripture,

Tell them that God bids us do good for evil:

And thus I clothe my naked villainy
 With odd old ends stol'n forth the holy writ
 And seem a saint, when most I play the devil. (1.4.333-337)

He also uses his handicap and diminutive size to manipulate people into not seeing him as a real threat. As dissembler, Richard becomes one of Shakespeare's most resourceful villains. According to Tom McAlindon, the author of The Evil of the Play and the Play of Evil: Richard, Iago, and Edmund Contextualized:

Shakespeare was the first to exploit . . . the notion of "the noon-day fiend", and the "false angel of light" who can delude even the saintly by presenting himself as his prospective victim's best friend, the voice of wisdom, moderation and compassion. Richard III plays this role with engaging melodramatic success (poor Clarence!). (152)

Possessing a diabolically evil nature, Richard plots the death of his brother and his nephews. He wants to destroy everyone; evil knows no bounds and can never be satisfied because it knows no peace. Evil constantly struggles against threats whether real or imaginary. It takes on a life of its own and literally runs rampant. Richard says of his nephews that "I wish the bastards dead, / And I would have it suddenly perform'd" (4.2.18-19). That his sins only compound one other, he realizes when he states:

I must be married to my brother's daughter,
 Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass.
 Murther her brothers and then marry her—

Uncertain way of gain! But I am in
 So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin.
 Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye. (4.2.60-65)

Richard readily acknowledges his own inability to feel any remorse in relation to his actions. He refuses to allow himself to feel anything. His heart is stone: he thinks only of his survival. Devoid of compassion, Richard realizes that all he has worked toward rests on very fragile footing and could be easily destroyed.

Richard's mother, the Duchess, realizes her son's villainy. She chastises him for his actions, telling him:

Thou cam'st on earth to make the earth my hell,
 A grievous burthen was thy birth to me,
 Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;
 Thy school-days frightful, desp'rate, wild and furious,
 Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous;
 Thy age confirm'd, proud, subtle, sly, and bloody.
 More mild, but yet more harmful--kind in hatred. (4.4.167-173)

Richard causes his mother a great deal of anxiety. He has from the time of his birth been burdensome and has always required more attention. Her grief and misery are revealed in the following lines:

O ill-dispersing wind of misery!
 O my accursed womb, the bed of death!
 A cockatrice hast thou hatch'd to the world,
 Whose unavowed eye is murtherous. (4.1.52-55)

Queen Margaret reacts with disgust as she tells Richard's mother what the latter has unleashed on the world.

The canine imagery used when Richard is described as a mongrel debases him. His mother's womb, referred to as a "kennel," continues this motif. Richard's nature, made more loathsome by this reference, forces him to be seen as an animal and not a human:

From forth the kennel of thy womb has crept
 A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death:
 That dog, that had his teeth before his eyes
 To worry lambs and lap their gentel blood,
 That foul defacer of God's handiwork,
 That excellent grand tyrant of the earth
 That reigns in galled eyes of weeping souls,
 Thy womb let loose to chase us to our graves.
 O upright, just, and true-disposing God,
 How do I thank thee that this carnal cur
 Preys on the issue of his mother's body,
 And makes her pew-fellow with others' moan! (4.3.46-58)

Fraught with problems, Richard's entire life remains chaotic. His mother leaves him a dowry of suffering and pain: "Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end; / Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend" (4.4.195-196).

Richard deals with his own treachery because he sees it as a necessary tool for all that he plans. He states that "conscience is but a word that cowards use"

(5.3.309), and he will not let his conscience force him into inaction. Evil has no conscience; Richard has no conscience. Richard very effectively does not address the enormity of the crimes he has committed; he internalizes the disdain that others feel toward him. Richard, “foul” and “deformed,” adopts this mindset and sees himself as others do. Roy Baumeister, the author of Evil Inside Human Violence and Cruelty, comments that “Those who commit crimes and other acts of violence suffer from an inner sense of worthlessness. They believe that the world fails to appreciate them. By striking out, they are trying to gain esteem and prove their positive worth to a doubting world” (135). Richard possesses low self-esteem because of his handicap; therefore, he seeks to gain a status that uplifts him. He announces his villainy; yet, he hates himself. These conflicting emotions divide Richard’s own self-image:

O no! Alas, I rather hate myself.
 I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well; fool, do not flatter:
 My conscience has a thousand several tongues,
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain. (5.3.189-195)

John H. Draper sees Richard as a melancholy type of Shakespearean character. Renaissance culture held the theory of humours in high regard for analyzing people. This melancholy type of character is thought to have a predisposition toward evil. Draper states that

Melancholy [is] the worst of all humors, and also of easy deception and terrible lusts and passions The melancholy type . . . ran into extremes: it was most unfortunate and unhealthy; and, in its alternative moodiness and violence, suggests the manic-depressive type in modern psychiatry. (14)

Richard's unpredictable behavior, moodiness, and violence confirm his melancholy nature. Elizabethan thought promoted the melancholy humour as one that is black, indicating that it is bad. Draper also asserts that "Richard III, perhaps Shakespeare's best example of innate melancholy, is so misshapen that the dogs bark at him" (71). This indicates that from birth, as Draper expresses it, Richard's "innate" melancholy was evident. Queen Margaret and Anne comment on his contemptible nature. Ann calls him "a foul devil"(1.2.49), and Queen Margaret continues the canine imagery.

Richard III, a desperate villain, runs headlong into his death. The night before his final hours, visited by a series of ghostly nightmarish characters, all which foretell of his defeat in battle, Richard remains undaunted. These pronouncements disturb him, but he is not deterred. The next morning, he arises determined to fight and meet his fate with courage:

Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls;
 Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
 Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe;
 Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law!
 March on, join bravely, let us to it pell-mell,
 If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell. (5.3.308-313)

He knows that he cannot escape his future. Richard calls his conscience a coward and reveals his guilt in the following lines:

I shall despair; there is no creature that loves me,

And if I should die no soul will pity me.

And wherefore should they, since that I myself

Find in myself no pity to myself?

Methinks the souls of all that I have murther'd

Came to my tent, and every one did threat

To-morrow's vengeance on the head of Richard. (5.3.200-206)

Richard's loathes himself; he wants to be loved, yet he does not feel worthy of love.

This confusion reveals Richard's unstable emotional and mental state.

Richard faces death as only he can. When a soldier seeks to rescue him, he says, "Slave I have set my life upon a cast, / And I will stand the hazard of the die" (5.5.9-10). He willingly accepts death for what he has set in motion: he fears no additional retribution.

Richard's hypocrisy is another aspect of his villainy. He pretends to be very pious in order to motivate those who would crown him king. When approached with the offer of being king, he pretends religious devotions and then reluctantly yields to the interruption. Buckingham and his entourage find Richard between two bishops with a prayer book in his hand. Buckingham says:

Two props of virtue for a Christian prince,

To stay him from the fall of vanity;

And see a book of prayer in his hand--

True ornaments to know a holy man.
 Famous Plantaganet, most gracious prince,
 Lend favorable ear to our requests,
 And pardon us the interruption
 Of thy devotion and right Christian zeal. (3.7.96-103)

Richard's reply, as staged as the circumstances under which he is found,
 follows:

My lord, there needs no such apology.
 I do beseech your Grace to pardon me,
 Who, earnest in the service of my God,
 Deferr'd the visitation of my friends.

Richard continues to deny that he desires the crown: "For God doth know, and you may partly see, / How far I am from the desire of this" (3.7.235-236). He knows full well that possessing the crown has been his only thought. It has consumed him. His villainy, intensified by the fact that he uses religion to serve his own purpose, is abhorrent to the audience.

Richard feels safe with no one, and no one should feel safe with him. He turns on his supposed confidante, the Duke of Buckingham, at the first hint of reluctance. The Duke has done everything that Richard has asked of him. Evil only befriends what it can use at that moment: it is never satisfied. New villainies await, and, when Buckingham pauses, he successfully seals his own coffin through his hesitation when Richard asks Buckingham to kill Richard's nephews. Richard uses Buckingham as a co-conspirator because he does not want to become totally

associated with acts of villainy. He wants to have an escape route if his henchman is discovered. Evil disassociates itself from the very act that it perpetrates.

Buckingham stalls and Richard becomes leery of him. He says:

The deep-revolving witty Buckingham
No more shall be the neighbor to my counsels.
Hath he so long held out with me untir'd,
And stops he now for breath? Well be it so. (4.2.42-45)

Richard will never know peace. The final stage of his villainy can only be death.

This treacherous and deceitful villain risks everything to possess a kingdom.

Ultimately, Richard, a marked man from his birth, dies with a soul tarnished. His own self-concept, diminished by his physical handicap, prevents him from rising above his circumstances. As a character, Richard succumbs to acts of villainy, and Shakespeare takes advantage of this propensity for evil by developing Richard's evil to its fullest potential.

Shakespeare accomplishes much with the role of Richard III. He creates a cunning hypocrite who advertises his own villainy. Richard's character lacks remorse, manipulates others, and seeks to advance his own station in life. Bold and ambitious, Richard III lacks moral sensibilities and will forever remain a villain. Richard's villainy serves as a vehicle toward his goal--to be king. His malevolent nature breeds jealousy, hatred, and duplicity. Evil, according to Richard's warped perception, will make him more powerful and ultimately victorious.

Evil permeates Richard's character. Through his actions, evil takes many forms. Manipulation and deception, used by Richard, influence and destroy others.

He exemplifies evil's cunning nature when plotting to achieve his goals. Evil's powerful and persuasive nature taints humanity. Evil, a destructive force, compels individuals to participate. It offers rewards of wealth and position, but it exacts a high price usually--death or disgrace.

Aaron, the “Detested” Moor

Titus Andronicus (c. 1593-1594), another of Shakespeare’s early tragedies, contains one of the most detested villains, Aaron, the Moor. Aaron’s skin color like Richard III’s deformity serves as a visual reference point that something evil lurks within. Aaron enters the play as a manipulative and deceitful character who plots against all to achieve his own ends. Aaron, a skilled manipulator, possesses a shrewd and crafty nature. Frank Kermode comments that “he [Aaron] rages round a society ostensibly governed by law and custom, a black among the whites” (1068). Aaron becomes branded as an outcast not only by his race but also by his evilness. Charles Boyce asserts that “Aaron is the first of Shakespeare’s flamboyantly malevolent villains . . .” (1). Aaron’s evil manifests itself ostentatiously, whereas Richard’s villainy remains cloaked.

Aaron uses others to commit evil acts so that he might enjoy these acts. He possesses Vice-like qualities because he announces his villainy and points out his atrocities while reveling in them. Aaron, an openly abusive and satanic character, does not care for human life or the dignity of life unless it is the spawn of his own line. Tamora, the captured Queen of the Goths, Aaron’s lover, and eventually the Roman Empress of Saturninus, aids her sons in their quest for Lavinia. Aaron plots with Tamora’s sons, Chiron and Demetrius, how they might have Lavinia sexually. Lavinia, the beautiful and virtuous daughter of Titus, represents purity and chastity. Her virtue, a trait beyond all price, acts as her crowning glory but also as a lure for Aaron who discusses particularly lewd sexual acts against Lavinia. He states:

“There speak, and strike brave boys, and take your turns. / There serve your lusts, shadowed from heaven’s eye, / and revel in Lavinia’s treasury” (2.1.127-131).

Aaron plots to have Lavinia brutally raped; he feels no remorse.

Aaron labors to put his elaborate plot into action. He comments:

He that had no wit would rather think that I have none,

To bury so much gold under a tree,

And never after to inherit it.

Let him that thinks of me so abjectly

Know that this gold must coin a stratagem

Which cunningly affected will beget

A very excellent piece of villainy. (2.3.1-7)

The loss of money means nothing to Aaron as long as he accomplishes his evil goal.

He openly acknowledges his villainy. Aaron identifies himself with a serpent as he indicates his willingness and intent to strike out: “My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls, / Even as an adder when she doth unroll/ To do some fatal execution?”

(2.3.34-36). He reveals to Tamora that “Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my brain” (2.3.38-39).

Throughout the play, Aaron revels in his villainy. He is excited by the opportunity to wreck havoc on others. Acting as the impetus that puts all others’ villainy into motion, he deceitfully goes to Titus and tells him that his sons will be released if the king receives someone’s hand as payment. Sly Aaron knows his deceit, and yet he takes Titus’s hand, only to comment in true Vice-like form, as an aside:

. . . Oh how this villainy

Doth fat me with the every thought of it!

Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace,

Aaron will have his soul black like his face. (3.1.202-205)

Aaron accepts his role as the villain, and he plays it with a great deal of fervor. He professes his contentment, while striving to perform his evil deeds to the utmost.

Aaron comments that his evil deeds do “fat” him: the very idea of the mischief he creates “feeds” him. His acts of villainy sustain and strengthen him while indicating evil in its purest form: evil simply for its own sake without any type of provocation. These acts of evil feed on and sustain themselves, becoming a destructive force creating catastrophic situations. Aaron has aligned himself with the devil, a fact he acknowledges when he says, “Pray to the devils the gods have given us over” (4.1.48-49).

Tamora, Aaron’s Empress and lover, delivers a child that is like black Aaron. She requests that Aaron kill the child, and he refuses to do so. The nurse states:

A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue!

Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad

Amongst the fair-fac’d breeders of our clime.

The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,

And bids thee christen it with thy dagger’s point. (4.1.66-70)

The image of the toad coincides with the visual aspects of villainy. Villainy manifests itself in outward lumps, masses, and deformities. Shakespeare used this as a means to indicate the villain’s uniqueness. These visual images and signals alerted

the audience to characters with evil potential. Aaron, however, revels in the child's appearance: he states that "Cold -black is better than any other hue, / In that it scorns to be any other hue" (4.1.99-100). Aaron acknowledges that the child means more to him than does Tamora. He denies her request and asserts that

My mistress is my mistress, this myself,

The vigor and the picture of my youth:

This before all the world do I prefer

This maugre all the world will I keep safe. (4.2.107-110).

To protect his son, Aaron kills the nurse and plots for the second time with Chiron and Demetrius. He devotes himself to sparing the life of his child. Aaron, initially seen as a misanthrope, defies this definition when he prepares to save his son.

Charles Boyce, the author of Shakespeare: The Essential Reference to His Plays, His Poems, His Life and Times, and More, affirms that

The black man's proud defiance of society reflects Shakespeare's awareness that villainy can have ingredients in common with heroism, regardless of race. Although the irony of this extraordinarily evil man cooing over his infant son was probably intended as humorous, it is also a good instance of the playwright's respect for the full humanity of all his characters, even one intended as a demonstration of cruelty. (1)

Aaron devises a plan to spare his son's life. He will take him to the Goths because he hopes this child will become a warrior and a leader:

Now to the Goths, as swift as swallows flies,

There to dispose this treasure in mine arms,
 And secretly to greet the Empress' friends.
 Come on you thick-lipp'd slave, I'll bear you hence,
 For it is you that puts us to our shifts.
 I'll make you feed on berries and on roots,
 And feed on curds and whey, and suck the goat,
 And cabin in a cave. And bring you up
 To be a warrior and command a camp. (4.2.172-180)

Aaron's perfidious nature gives way to a nurturing moment as he constructs a stratagem to save his child; Aaron even asks his son's half-brothers, Chiron and Demetrius, to show compassion toward this child. He cautions them:

He is your brother, lords, sensibly feed
 Of that self same blood that first gave life to you,
 And from your womb where you imprisoned were
 He is enfranchised and come to light.
 Nay, he is your brother by the surer side
 Although my seal is stamped in his face. (4.2.122-127)

Aaron experiences love for this child and struggles to save his heir. He dotingly states, "Look how the black slave smiles upon the father, /As who should say, "Old lad, I am thine own" (4.2.120-121). In addition, Roy F. Baumeister, author of Evil : Inside Human Violence and Cruelty, comments that " Enjoyment of hurting others is one of the central features of pure evil" (204). He continues, "Sadistic pleasure is genuine, unusual, acquired only gradually and responsible for only a minority of evil"

(205). The villainy of Aaron is simply a game for him. He enjoys the intrigue of it all. For him the manipulation and deceit are energizing.

Aaron does all that he can to shock others by his villainy. He bargains with Lucius to tell him all his deeds if he promises to take care of his son. Aaron even wants Lucius to swear that his child will live. This reveals Aaron's shrewdness, for he knows that the act of swearing means nothing to him, but he realizes that it means something to Lucius. He comments:

What if I do not? as indeed I do not,
 Yet for I know thou art religious,
 And hast within thee a thing called conscience. (5.1.73-85)

Aaron knows the beliefs of his enemies well enough that he can use those beliefs to satisfy his desires; he plots his stratagems carefully. Once he has secured this oath, he willingly reveals the brutal truth to Lucius. Lucius, appalled by his confessions, labels him a "beastly villain" (5.1.97). Proud of his influential role with Chiron and Demetrius, Aaron boasts:

Indeed I was their tutor to instruct them,
 That coddling spirit had they from their mother,
 As sure a card as ever won the set;
 That blood mind I think they learned of me,
 As true a dog that ever fought at head.
 Well, let my deeds be witness of my worth (5.1.98-103)

He even tells Lucius how he manipulated Titus into giving up his hand. Aaron lets him know that he laughed over his conquest and shared his victory with Tamora who

showered him with kisses. This information only enrages Lucius even more. What could Aaron possibly hope to accomplish by this unless he wants to die? Aaron savors the hatred he inspires from the other characters in the play.

I played the cheater for thy father's hand,
 And when I had it, drew myself apart,
 And almost broke my heart with extreme laughter.
 I pried me through the crevice of a wall,
 When, for his hand, he had his two sons' heads,
 Beheld his tears, and laugh'd so heartily
 That both my eyes were rainey like to his,
 And when I told the Empress of this sport
 She sounded almost at my pleasing tale,
 And for my tiding gave me twenty kisses. (5.1. 111-120)

Aaron's insatiable villainy celebrates the suffering of others. He sees it as a challenge, one that he plans to continue.

He shows no remorse or shame for all that he has done and makes it perfectly clear that he would do more. He catalogues his atrocities as though they were trophies to be hung on display. His only regret is that he cannot do more. Aaron states:

But I have done a thousand dreadful things,
 As willingly as one would kill a fly,
 And nothing grieves me heartily indeed,
 But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (5.1.141-144)

Aaron, consumed by a cycle of evil, does not want to be released from it. He enjoys evil in true Vice-like form. Evil breeds evil, and Aaron states his feelings in the following lines:

Ah, why should wrath be mute and fury dumb?

I am no baby, that with base prayers

I should repent the evil that I have done.

Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did.

Would I perform if I might have my will.

If one good deed in all my life I did,

I do repent it from my very soul. (5.3.184-190)

Aaron does not repent for anything that he has done; he only wishes that he could do more evil. He further states that he wishes to be a devil. It is not enough that he commits the evil acts, but he would possess a devil's appearance. He says:

If there be devils, would I were a devil,

To live and burn in everlasting fire,

So I might have you company in hell,

But to torment you with my bitter tongue! (5.1.147-150)

Aaron's heart, so full of hatred, gives him little else in life to desire. He cares not for humankind but only thinks of how he can do more harm.

A detestable character, Aaron feeds on the venom that others have for him. "This barbarous Moor," "this ravenous tiger," "this accursed devil," "inhuman dog," and "unhallowed slave" (5.2.4-5, 5.2.14) represent epithets thrown at Aaron that encourage him. He wants to be seen for what he is. Aaron, a catalyst for this play,

sets a great deal of action into motion. He represents a formidable enemy and a force to be reckoned with.

Aaron, the Moor, detested primarily because he does not repent for his sins, takes his heinous crimes into death; he luxuriates in the knowledge of his sin. Harold Bloom comments on how Aaron exhumes the dead and writes directly on their flesh to torment their friends (82). These sacrilegious acts disturb the remains of the dead and defile their bodies. These acts also torment friends who have to relive that loss again and now suffer the indignities of having the bodies of the dead unearthed and defiled. Aaron proudly expounds this list of crimes; when prompted by Lucius, he retorts:

Ay that I had not done a thousand more,
 Even now I curse the day--and yet I think
 Few come within the compass of my curse--
 Wherein I did not some notorious ill (5.1.124-127)

He cites the list as though it were qualifications for employment. Aaron lists these atrocities with joy. His depravity goes beyond the bounds of evil. Aaron suffers from a psychotic and diseased mind, the product of evil which has consumed him totally. Aaron celebrates his actions with the following comments to Lucius:

As kill a man, or else devise his death,
 Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it,
 Accuse some innocent, and forswear myself,
 Set deadly enmity between two friends,
 Make poor man's cattle break their necks,

Set fire on barns and haystacks in the night,
 And bid the owner's quench them with their tears.
 Oft have I digg'd up dead men from their graves,
 And set them upright at their dear friends' door,
 Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,
 And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
 Have I with knife carved in Roman letters,
 "Let not your sorrow dies, though I am dead."
 But I have done a thousand dreadful things,
 As willingly as one would kill a fly,
 And nothing grieves me heartily indeed,
 But that I cannot do ten thousand more. (5.1.124-144)

Evil possesses a distorted sense of pride in its accomplishments almost to the point of boasting. According to Fred West, in an article entitled "Iago the Psychopath,"

. . . Aaron's defiant lines to Lucius proclaim not only a lack
 of remorse but also a baneful wish that he could have committed
 even more evil, both directly and by manipulating others. This speech
 is significantly indicative of Shakespeare's early awareness of the
 characteristics of the psychopath. As if to discount the notion that
 his role is merely symbolic Evil, Aaron says "If there be devils, would
 I were a devil." (28)

The complexity of the villain exhibits involved psychological and emotional responses. West also states:

Aaron gives evidence of being more than a mere symbol of Evil. He has certain very human motives that urge him on to evil deeds: the illicit love of the queen with its concomitant chance of power, and the threat to the life of his baby son. In Aaron, Shakespeare foreshadows some of the characteristics of Iago. (28)

Aaron's villainy appears less directed than Richard's; Richard wants to be king. He methodically clears a path to make that possible. Aaron's villainy reflects a less plotted situation; he appears to think of these atrocities naturally. His acts of violence exhibit a random and unfocused nature; he is content to torture anyone. Richard and Aaron share similar imagery"; for instance, canine references frequently describe these villains.

Richard's villainy, cloaked by his rank, goes undiscovered until the end of the play. Aaron's villainy lies open to the world. Richard disguises his villainy: it is unexpected because he knows how to move among the upper class. Buckingham also aids Richard, but Richard quickly drops him when he seems reluctant to continue. Richard will not tolerate anyone who does not play by his rules. Aaron has a number of co-conspirators: Tamora, Chiron and Demetrius aid him. Tamora becomes Queen; this will benefit her lover Aaron when he needs help from a person in high places. Chiron and Demetrius act as Aaron's emissaries because by doing so Aaron will help them to sexually assault Lavinia in a particularly brutal scene. Tamora's sons rape Lavinia using her dead husband's body as a pillow. They also assault her by cutting out her tongue and cutting off her hands. These acts of sadistic depravity illustrate evil's annihilating power.

Evil manifested in Aaron infects everything that it touches. Richard experiences pangs of conscience, yet he does not alter his course. Aaron never does experience any guilt and never regrets the choices he has made. Evil becomes more pervasive in Titus Andronicus. Murder, maiming, and mayhem occur more often than in Richard III, almost to the point of desensitization. Evil acts become the norm and are not considered atypical but are expected.

Evil, as opposed to good in this play, becomes stark and helpless. Lavinia, a virtuous woman, annihilated by evildoers, must die. Titus, a respected warrior and friend of the state, loses everything. The most powerful force in this play is evil, and good remains impotent.

Evil represents more than a mindset when it comes to Aaron. Shakespeare reveals the power of evil to corrupt others. The potential for evil lies within all of humankind, and it becomes actuated by inordinate desires. With slight encouragement, humankind can become increasingly villainous.

The Reprehensible Iago

Shakespeare's Othello (c. 1604), a moving tragedy of love and revenge, includes the masterful portrayal of a true villain. This villain presented in the character of Iago desires the position of ensign in Othello's forces. Stanley Edgar Hyman, the author of Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation, states that

Iago [is a] traditional stage villain. . . . [W]hat motivates him is the need to war perpetually against love and happiness, trust and virtue, harmony and beauty, and all other manifestations of order and value; this perpetual war is the theatrical convention of his role. (8)

The play centers on the machinations of this loathsome villain. Initially, Iago becomes enraged when he does not receive a promotion that he feels he should have. At this point, he loses control and plots to destroy Othello as retaliation for this affront. He feels as if no one deserves the honor of being named "ensign" more than he does.

Iago knows full well what he wants to do, and he will do anything to achieve his goal. He realizes that he must hide his villainy. His power lies in his ability to remain Othello's closest confidant; in order to destroy Othello, he must know his thoughts and his weaknesses. He says:

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains,
Yet, for necessity of present life,
I must show out a flag and sign of love,
Which is indeed but sign. (1.1.154-157)

Iago's elaborate villainy equals that of Richard III and Aaron. Richard seeks the crown; Aaron's villainy gives him pleasure, while Iago seeks to destroy Othello and all that he cherishes. Evil, a very destructive force, manifests itself in diverse ways. Iago seeks to destroy all goodness, Richard III destroys anyone who stands between him and the crown, and Aaron's sadistic behavior runs rampant—destroying for the sheer pleasure of it.

According to Earl L. Dachslager in an article entitled "The Villainy of Iago: 'What You Know, You Know,' "

Iago is a supremely evil dramatic character and a realistic one because Shakespeare knew, consciously or unconsciously, that to give his audience any definite reason for Iago's behavior would have turned him into another typical, expected villain, . . . another Aaron. . . . Clearly, Iago has many superficial qualities in common with his villainous counterparts, traits more or less in keeping with all vicious characters – cynicism, heartlessness, envy, contempt for idealistic or spiritual values, and, perhaps most common of all, an almost total concern with self. (9)

Iago's first act of villainy occurs on Othello's wedding day. He tells Othello's father-in-law, Brabantio, that his only daughter, Desdemona, has left home to elope with Othello because she has been bewitched and cannot help herself. When Brabantio discovers Desdemona missing, he becomes frantic and searches for her. He seeks help from the Duke and the senators. Iago has duped Brabantio; Othello and Desdemona love one another: there has been no witchcraft.

Othello quickly admits that he loves Desdemona and that he wants her to tell her father how she feels about him. Desdemona confirms that she loves Othello, but her father remains saddened. Brabantio implies infidelity, an accusation Iago uses later when he tells the Moor, "Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;/ She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" (1.3.292-293).

Throughout the play, everyone repeatedly refers to Iago as "honest." Iago even refers to himself as being honest. In actuality, he cannot be trusted. Evil often disguises itself among so-called "honesty," good intentions, helpful advice, and caring friendships. It acts as a sedative and numbs the senses to the reality of the acts performed. Iago, Richard III, and Aaron seek out individuals who have dreams of ambition, revenge, or thwarted hopes, and villains capitalize on the greed of others by promising them rewards for their help. Iago solicits Roderigo's help in his plan to ruin the Moor. Iago shares his monstrous plot with Roderigo by announcing:

I hate the Moor
 Cassio's a proper man. Let me see now;
 To get his place and to plume up my will
 In double knavery--How? How?-- Let's see--
 After some time, to abuse Othello's [ear]
 That he is too familiar with his wife.
 He has a person and a smooth dispose
 To be suspected--framed to make women false.
 The Moor is of a free and open nature,
 That thinks men honest that but seems to be so,

And will be tenderly led by th' nose

As asses are. (1.3.386, 392-402)

Iago, a shrewd judge of character, as most villains are, realizes that Othello possesses a trusting soul. Iago intends to use that innocent trait to destroy him. He knows that Othello will listen to him because of Othello's own gullible nature.

Iago has no respect for women. He berates his own wife and casts aspersions on her sex. He embarrasses her in front of the other men as if that enhances his masculinity. Women are seen as only sexual objects to be possessed. In soliciting Roderigo's aid, Iago feeds him full of lies. He tells him that Cassio loves Desdemona, that she loves him, and that he thinks that Othello has slept with Iago's own wife, Emilia. He uses this also as a part of his revenge plot. In confidence, he tells Roderigo:

. . . Now I do love her too,
 Not out of absolute lust . . .
 But partly lead to diet my revenge,
 For I do suspect the lusty Moor
 Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
 Doth (like a poisonous mineral) gnaw my inwards;
 And nothing can or shall content my soul
 Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife,
 Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
 At least into a jealousy so strong
 That judgement cannot cure. (2.1.291-302)

Iago hopes to manipulate Roderigo into seeing things as he does. He tries to find ways to justify his desire for revenge. Cassio cannot tolerate strong drink because it befuddles his mind; yet, Iago demands that he shall drink. Cassio drinks, loses control, and Iago exploits the opportunity. Othello, disturbed by the incident, relieves Cassio of his duties. Thus with one blow, Iago has taken Cassio's title from him. This fails to satisfy Iago. Evil's purpose, to consume and destroy everything, uses man to ensnare man.

Cassio in his hour of need turns to "honest" Iago for advice, and Iago uses this opportunity to set yet another part of his plan into motion. He tells Cassio to get Desdemona to try to win his battle for him with Othello. Iago plans to

. . . pour this pestilence into his [Othello's] ear--

That she repeals him for her body's lust,

And by how much she strives to do him good,

She shall undo her credit with the Moor

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,

And out of her own goodness make the net

That shall enmesh them all. (2.3.356-362)

Iago's manipulative nature prompts him to take an act of kindness and turn it into something loathsome. Iago taints a very innocent situation and creates a grand exploit of treachery and deceit. No one questions Iago's honesty, but all readily accept his uttering.

Iago deals frequently with the theme of reality. He says, "Men should be what they seem," (3.3.127), and "I am not what I am" (1.1.65). Evil covers itself in

hypocrisy whereas goodness represents truth. Iago represents a very altered sense of reality. Iago shares his distorted idea of reality with everyone in the hope that he will change their perceptions. He successfully manipulates others to see his point of view. Iago attacks Othello's open and trusting nature: frequently deliberately Iago says things for Othello to overhear, then Iago recants by saying he meant nothing by whatever he just said. Once planted, the thought cannot be removed. Iago has Othello so dependent upon his counsel that he begs to know Iago's thoughts:

Think, my lord? [By heaven], thou echo'st me,
 As if there were some monster in thy thought
 Too hideous to be shown. Thou does mean something.
 I heard thee say even now, thou lik'st not that,
 When Cassio left my wife. What didst not like?
 And when I told thee he was of my counsel
 [In] my whole course of wooing, thou criedst, "Indeed!"
 And didst contract and purse thy brow together,
 As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
 Some horrible conceit. If thou dost love me,
 Show me thy thought. (3.3.106-116)

Evil's crippling tendency has changed Othello forever; he remains dependent upon a villain. Iago has a great deal of power or influence over Othello. Evil changes whatever it touches. Othello's character, reduced to a childlike mentality, waits on Iago's every word. Iago, of course, capitalizes on the opportunity by professing his continued love for Othello. Othello falls into this deception even more

thoroughly and yields his total faith over to Iago. Iago works diligently to prove to Othello his alleged trustworthiness. He assures him that he knows local customs; therefore, he can advise him and will always seek to protect him. Othello, being an outcast both socially and racially, accepts Iago's support and clings to him. Iago forever claims that all of this he does for the protection of Othello's honor. Of course, Othello finds it very endearing that someone would care for him. He willingly falls into Iago's trap. In fact, it is more than that: he becomes enamored with Iago. Othello perceives Iago as his only true friend. Evil identifies and capitalizes on the insecurities of its victims.

Iago's wife, Emilia, troubled by her husband's behavior, suspects some treachery on his part. She refers to Iago as "her wayward husband"; nevertheless, she willingly does his bidding. She says, "I nothing [sic] but to please his fantasy" (3.3.299), as she gives him Desdemona's handkerchief. She knows that this, Desdemona's most treasured gift, came from the Moor. Possibly Emilia hopes that this token will endear her to her husband. Iago, however, snatches the handkerchief from her and refuses to tell her what he plans to do with it. This becomes but another part of the treachery that Iago plans for Othello. He says:

I will in Cassio's lodging leave 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. (3.3.321-324)

Iago knows that this will be strong proof to Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful. He knows that he has poisoned Othello's mind and that Othello begins to

suffer the pangs of jealousy. He comments that “The Moor already changes with my poison” (3.3.325), and he continues to torment Othello with his prattling until he has won Othello’s mind. Iago and Aaron never suffer any pangs of conscience; they are blatantly evil with not a hint of humanity; Richard III, on the other hand, did experience periods of remorse. However brief, these moments did reveal a hint of humanity.

Iago does not acknowledge himself to be a villain. In fact, he argues against considering himself as such. He claims that he simply shows a courtesy to people, to give them counsel in matters and affairs. Willard Farnham, the author of The Shakespearean Grotesque: Its Genesis and Transformation, states:

Iago takes pains to have himself recognized as a master craftsman who works evil in no ordinary way. Characteristically he does not say at the beginning in the melodramatically simple manner of Richard III that he is determined to follow an evil course. He challenges us to show that he does evil even as he demonstrates that he does it. In effect he boasts himself to be one who can take us into his confidence and expose his iniquity but yet can successfully defy us to incriminate him. (138)

Othello calls him a villain and threatens his very life if he defames Desdemona without proving her a whore. Iago denies that he would ever lie and states that the world despises his honesty. Othello apologizes to Iago for ever doubting him. Through his well-orchestrated conniving, Iago manipulates Othello into a frenzy of emotion. He drives Othello to the point that he swears to kill Desdemona for her acts

of betrayal. Othello's burning desire and passion for Desdemona have turned to hatred and fury which will ultimately consume Othello and Desdemona. Everyone becomes a pawn in Iago's hands; he plays the shrewd villain who is taken into everyone's confidence. He has taken the time to discover the fears and desires of each adversary using that information to destroy them. Iago orchestrates a scene where he converses with Cassio about Bianca, the courtesan, but he has Othello thinking that they are talking about Desdemona. Othello, consumed with rage, discusses the ways he could kill Desdemona.

Othello strikes Desdemona in an effort to make her suffer as he has. He does this in front of witnesses and does not regret it. Iago has manipulated him to the point that he has changed; others note the transformation and comment on it. Iago seizes this as another opportunity to destroy Othello's credibility.

Emilia tells Iago that some villain has called Desdemona a whore. She continues:

I will be hang'd if some eternal villain,
 Some busy and insinuating rogue,
 Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office,
 Have not devis'd this slander. I will be hang'd else.
 The Moor's abus'd by some villainous knave,
 Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow. (4.2.130-134, 139-140)

Emilia does not suspect Iago; but, she does say some “villain seeking an office” could have done this act; how suspicious this remark seems. She sees this act as abhorrent because it is directed toward the innocent Desdemona.

Iago, the confirmed master of manipulation, is able successfully to betray everyone at the same time. Those who think him a true friend discover his villainy. He orchestrates evil by simultaneously manipulating more than one individual in order to meet his objectives. In the situation with Roderigo and Cassio, he does not particularly care who wins. He states:

Now, whether he kill Cassio,
Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other,
Every way makes my gain. (4.3.12-14)

Iago, as a villain, practices caution. He thinks out his evil scenarios and tries to create situations that are advantageous for him no matter what happens. Iago stabs Cassio under the cloak of night and plays the role of innocent bystander. His treachery wounds Cassio and kills Roderigo. Iago, consumed by evil revenge and not wanting to be uncovered, kills his own wife because she condemns him as a villain. Emilia, prior to her death, talks with Othello and pieces together all of the separate threads of Iago’s deception. Once the threads are linked, Iago stands condemned.

Iago, the master mind of this treachery, has gone undetected until the very end. Even when Othello recants the lies that he thought true, he still refers to Iago as honest. Everyone recognizes Iago as Othello’s “ancient.” Iago does not deserve this position for he has abused it to ruin Othello. Iago refuses to acknowledge his villainy as he tells Othello, “Demand me nothing; what you know, you know” (5.2.303). He

shows no remorse and remains unwilling to have anyone know his motivation. Iago's crimes toward Othello have been so heinous that Othello desires knowledge of their origin. He acknowledges how Iago has manipulated him, and Othello takes his own life in desperation. Othello takes justice into his own hands as he casts a death sentence on himself for murdering the innocent Desdemona. He carries out the sentence by taking his own life.

As far as villains go, Iago's infamy reigns supreme. His villainy, even though he has one purpose, involves many people. He willingly deceives all and has no respect for any one. His complex villainy, composed of layers of deception, breeds intrigue. Othello refers to Iago as a "demi-devil"(5.2.301). Iago, however, does not have a physical handicap as Richard III does, nor is he black like Aaron. Iago is seen as a satanic character. Farnham comments that

To evil genius, Iago adds evil devotion, and thus he becomes worthy to be called one of Satan's saints. In his commitment to evil he is more than willing to use the world and the flesh as corrupters of man, but he feels scorn for them as being powers that man would never be mastered by were it not for the depth of human folly. His respect is only for the third and greatest of the powers that are the enemies of man, the devil. (143-144)

Iago resembles a psychopath. Fred West presents in his article, "Iago the Psychopath," evidence to support the idea that Iago exhibits psychopathic behaviors. He states that Iago, unaware of his own "innate evilness," presents the amiable character traits, changes in fancy, ability to lie and to construct his own reality, and

intellectual capabilities which label him as a “psychopath” (30). Iago possesses psychopathic tendencies. His ingenuity, skill at prevarication, hypocritical friendliness, and mood swings substantiate mental abnormalities.

Iago’s characterization possesses great depth. Shakespeare does not reveal everything of his nature and motivations to the audience. Most critics believe that Shakespeare was reticent in order to create a more believable villain, one that does not fit the stock Vice character. Dachslager comments that Iago becomes “true-to-life evil” (8). The characterization of Iago engages the audience more than that of Richard III or Aaron. Richard and Aaron reveal their motivations; Iago invites the audience to bring their own reality to the scene. Dachslager states:

. . . Shakespeare refuses to have Iago, or anyone else in the play, explain why he is doing what he does.

Either we recognize it or we don’t. We either have knowledge of it or we don’t. This is essential to the play as a tragedy. We must know what we know, and part of what we know is good and evil. We recognize Iago clearly enough because we know Iago; Othello, alas, does not.

It is essentially this knowledge that makes Iago the supreme villain in all dramatic literature. (10)

Evil, the driving force behind the characterization of Iago, asks the audience to interact with the villain. Shakespeare invites the audience to feel the torment, pain, and suffering of all touched by the villainy. Iago, like Aaron, does not repent for his sins; in fact, he challenges anyone to prove them as such. He leaves the stage in

silence, and the audience comes to terms with their own thoughts. As Iago says, “what you know, you know”(5.2.303). Iago’s undisclosed motives prompt the audience to recognize its own villainy.

A Vile and Villainous Trio

King Lear (c. 1605), is a complex drama filled with deceit, intrigue, and betrayal. It addresses themes of family obligations, inheritance, and sibling rivalries. This play contains a trio of villains whose combined evil is unparalleled. The evil in this play springs from within the family structure. There is something even more heinous about brother against brother, sister against sister, and children against parents even more than friend against friend. Evil is powerful and it destroys families. It focuses on the final and ultimate goal and does not yield to any perceived obligations to family relationships. The two families attacked within this drama represent the most prominent of this time period. Essentially these individuals have everything they could ever want; yet, they want more. Greed is at the core of evil, and ranks along with pride as one of the most destructive of evil forces.

The potential for evil lies within both genders as the unholy triangle of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan supports. Though most of Shakespeare's villains are masculine; Shakespeare does not exclude women from villainy.

Edmund, the "bastard" son of the Duke of Gloucester, harbors great animosity because he feels as though he has never received the recognition that he deserves as the son of Gloucester. For years, he has harbored resentment toward his father and his brother. Evil of this type is most dangerous because it becomes an all-consuming passion. It is the only thought on the villain's mind. He contemplates

moments of treachery and deceit. Edmund resents his station in life; he passionately dislikes the terms “bastard” and “illegitimate.” He has been branded by the negative connotations of these terms. The shame of his parentage warps Edmund’s self-concept.

Edmund comments:

Why bastard? Wherefore base?

When my dimensions are as well compact,

My mind as generous, and my shape is true,

As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us

Why base? With baseness? bastardy? base, base? (1.2.6-11)

He bears the shame of his birth placed upon him by society. Edmund is introduced into the society he craves to be a part of, as if acceptance will change the public’s perception of him. Edmund fully intends to relieve his brother, Edgar, the rightful and legitimate heir, of his inheritance, as evidenced by Edmund’s remarks:

Well then,

Legitimate Edgar, I must have you land.

Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund

As to th’ legitimate. Fine word “legitimate!”

Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed

And my invention thrive, Edmund the base

Shall [top] the legitimate. I grow, I prosper:

Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.15-22)

As a child, Edmund has had many years to plot his revenge for his “bastard” status. Evil intensifies with time; it is nurtured and cultivated. He will go to any length to achieve the destruction of his father and brother. He holds them responsible for his suffering. His feigned love for his father takes on a villainous distortion. Evil’s infectious nature is like a disease which metastasizes and infiltrates the entire body. Edmund is consumed with evil intentions. He intends to become the “bastard” that he has been branded. His deeds, not the action of others, will label him now. He consciously makes a choice to decide his own destiny. Edmund does not know how to operate within the family structure; therefore, he seeks to destroy it. Edmund makes a conscious choice to deny and destroy what could be his family.

Saying that his genes have made him “rough and lecherous” (1.2.131), Edmund confirms that his cue becomes “villainous melancholy” (1.2.135). As mentioned previously, according to Elizabethan thought, melancholy represents the mood of most villains: it gives rise to evil. Acknowledging that he is evil, Edmund tries to convince his brother that their father despises him. Edmund’s maneuverings resemble Iago’s. A skilled judge of character, Edmund, like Iago, readily identifies the weaknesses of his adversaries. Aware of his brother’s unsuspecting nature, Edmund plans to exploit Edgar’s innocence by deceiving him with lies. Edmund states:

A credulous father and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy. I see the business.

Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit;

All with me's meet that I can fashion fit. (1.2.179-184)

Outrageous and remorseless, Edmund gains strength from his ability to influence others. Intuition and charisma are traits of the villain; Edmund uses his dissembling abilities to achieve his goals, and his heinous villainy is exacerbated by his father's reluctant and questionable acknowledgement of him. Gloucester's lewd remarks about Edmund's conception embarrass his son. These comments boast Gloucester's virility. Gloucester strikes the first blow at the family structure which Edmund will almost completely sever.

It also foreshadows the severing of another family structure by Goneril and Regan.

Others praise Edmund for his support and "child-like office" (2.2.106) that he offers his father. Praising him, the Duke of Cornwall says:

For you Edmund,

Whose virtue and obedience doth this instance

So much commend itself, you shall be ours.

Natures of such deep trust we shall much need;

You we first seize on. (2.2.112-116)

Thus Edmund receives honor and respect for his villainous acts. These come as an added reward for his treachery.

Gloucester feels as though he can trust Edmund; therefore, he reveals to him a secret treason in reference to a letter he has received. He requests Edmund's silence: "say you nothing" (3.3.1). Edmund cannot wait to share the knowledge with the

Duke because he thinks that this will advance him even more. Evil takes advantage of every opportunity to promote itself. Edmund gleefully comments:

This courtesy, forbid thee, shall the Duke
Instantly know, and of that letter too.
This seems a fair deserving, and must draw me
That which my father loses: not less than all,
The younger rises when the old doth fall. (3.3.21-25)

Edmund hopes that the Duke will favor this so-called “courtesy” and reward him well. Villains think only of themselves; Edmund thinks only of his survival and advancement. He does not consider how his disloyalty will impact on this father, and, more shockingly, he does not care. Labeling his father as a traitor, Edmund says:

This is the letter which he spoke
of, which approves him an intelligent party to the
advantages of France. O, heaven! that this treason
were not; nor I the detector! (3.5.10-13)

Edmund revels in this ability to destroy his father and elevate himself. At the beginning of the play, he seems content to take his brother's place; now he wants to ruin his father as well. This is the all-consuming passion of evil. New challenges and conquests act as stepping stones to elevate the villain. As a result of his disloyalty toward his father, Edmund's position is elevated: he is given his father's title. He condemns his father to suffer the wrath of the Duke and his wife. The Duke promises Edmund love that will surpass that of his biological father, and he

blinds Edmund's father, Gloucester, as punishment for supporting King Lear. The love that he promises means little to Edmund.

The true Gloucester begins to see Edmund's treachery when Regan, the Duke's wife, comments:

Out treacherous villain [Gloucester]!

Thou call'st on him [Edmund] that hates thee. It was he

That made the overture of thy treason to us. (3.7.88-90)

Gloucester realizes that evil intentions have clouded his perception of Edward. He pleads, "Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!" (3.7.92) Gloucester in his blindness sees what he could not see when he had sight. Evil obscures the truth and presents a false reality. What seems real or true is not.

King Lear is also blinded by his own evil vanity when he accepts the lies of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, as declarations of true love. They complete this trio of villains. Lear's daughters, motivated by greed and jealousy, conspire to humiliate their father. These sisters desire a larger share of their father's kingdom, and they will do anything to realize their evil desires. They conspire against their sister, Cordelia, and it matters little to them that they may destroy their father. Cordelia is perceived as King Lear's favorite; Goneril and Regan become willing accomplices to destroy her. Their potential for evil is greater because of their association with Edmund. Goneril and Regan find Edmund sexually attractive; this leads to further complications of rivalry between the sisters. Goneril and Regan plot to humiliate their father by relieving him of his entourage. He ultimately goes insane and homelessly flounders about in a storm.

Goneril and Regan's villainies reach new heights of treachery as they conspire to destroy their father and rob Cordelia of her inheritance. Loyalty among villains does not exist; they turn on one another. Jealousy exists among their ranks. Goneril becomes jealous of the affections of Edmund and thinks that her sister Regan may desire him since the death of her husband. This pits sister against sister; family bonds vanish when villainy occurs.

Goneril reveals Edmund's importance to her when she states: "I'd rather lose that battle than that sister/ loosen him [Edmund] and me" (5.1.18-19). Goneril, still married to her husband, lusts after Edmund. Edmund's parasitic evil has latched on to each sister; he seeks only to advance his own causes, and he remarks:

To both of these sisters have I sworn my love;
 Each jealous of the other, as the stung
 Are of the adder? Which of them shall I take?
 Both? One? Neither? Neither can be enjoy'd
 If both remain alive: to take the widow
 Exasperates, makes mad her sister, Goneril,
 And hardly shall I carry out my side,
 Her husband is alive. Now then, we'll use
 His countenance for the battle, which being done,
 Let her who would be rid of him devise
 His speedy taking off. (5.1.55-65)

Goneril's evil intent, far more destructive than her sister's, illustrates aberrant behavior. She plots the death of her husband, Albany, and suggests that Gloucester's

eyes be gouged out. Goneril and Regan represent evil from the very beginning as they initially plot to deceive their father; their villainy intensifies throughout the play to levels of degradation that are almost inconceivable. Consumed by evil, Goneril kills Regan and then takes her own life. The triangle of Goneril, Regan and Edmund intensifies and facilitates Edmund's villainy and vice versa.

Edmund's villainy, unsurpassed, focuses on a winning team. He willingly offers love to two sisters and now talks very calmly of how to deal with this conflict. Edmund's lecherous nature intensifies his evilness. He is devoid of feeling. His villainy is disgusting; he seems more like an animal than a man. Evil has the power to transform people. Human lives matter little to him: one sister remains as good as the other. Regan and Goneril deserve whatever they get for their own treachery. In fact, it is quite gratifying to see the villains tormented. Harold Boyce states that "When Cornwall is killed the widowed Regan schemes to take Edmund from Goneril, and this unsavory love triangle is an important part of the play's atmosphere of moral collapse" (168). This "moral collapse" addresses the power of evil to destroy. It thrives upon moral weaknesses. Evil spreads rapidly and there is little that can stand in its way and not become changed. The sexual lasciviousness of Goneril and Regan as they vie for the attention of Edmund reeks of evil. The baseness of sexual desire heightens the evil and lurid intentions of the perpetrators.

Albany accuses Edmund of treason, and he exposes the relationship that Edmund has had with his wife. Edmund, like Richard III and Iago, is a master of deceit, and he denies any culpability. Edmund, true to form, protests his innocence and expresses his willingness to enter into combat to prove his truth and honor. He

thinks that winning in combat will vindicate him. He does not acknowledge his villainy. Edgar wounds Edmund; they acknowledge one another and ask for forgiveness. This is a sincere request on the part of both Edmund and Edgar for forgiveness. Edmund knows that he is dying, and lying at this point would not change anything. This is an opportunity for him to try to right some of his wrongs.

According to Raymond V. Utterback in an article entitled "Edmund: A Most Vile Traitor," Edmund's loss of the battle is a formal indication of his guilt, a verdict the dramatist would expect his audience to accept . . . " (202). Edmund comments that "The wheel has come full circle. I am here" (5.3.173). He realizes his imminent death; Goneril and Regan have killed one another. He sees this as an indication of their "love" for him; yet, none of these villainous characters understands love. Driven by their desires only, they are very carnal beings. Edmund, however, wants to do some good before he dies. He says:

I pant for life. Some good I mean to do,
 Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send
 (Be brief in it) To th' castle, for my writ
 Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia. (5.3.244-247)

Realizing his own evil nature, Edmund hopes to rise above it. In the final scene, Edmund's death occurs. So all of the villains die, yet innocents die as well through the treachery of the villains. Though Edmund tries to save Cordelia, he fails: some acts of treachery cannot be undone or rectified. Boyce also comments that

Edmund's villainy is a central element in King Lear;
 his schemes are crisply executed and do much to provide

a dramatic structure of the sub-plot that the more idea-oriented main story lacks. . . . [Edmund's] deeds are more interesting than he is himself—and his schemes are effective due to the moral weakness of others, not his compelling personality. (168)

Edmund acts as an impetus in the development of the play's plot. His intrigues result in the progression of the action. His exploits add much to the drama; however, Edmund's characterization is far less compelling than Iago's portrayal and leaves little to the imagination of the audience. Iago takes on the persona of a "real" person because of the complexities of his personality and lack of full disclosure to the audience. Edmund's deeds, as Boyce has said, are far more interesting than Edmund's characterization. Though involved in a lot of plotting, Edmund reveals his motivations in the subplot-- the bastard illegitimate son seeking his place in his father's life; but, in the main plot, he simply takes advantage of opportunities provided by Goneril and Regan. Iago has motivation as well, yet his motivation remains a mystery just as the character of Iago does.

Edmund, bastard at birth, tries ultimately to die with dignity. No good can come of his treachery: he dies at the hands of his own brother. What a price to pay for his villainy for which he attains nothing. He leaves the world even more maligned than just being a bastard; he has now added villainy. Goneril and Regan profit not at all from their villainy: ultimately evil is impotent and self-destructive.

Evil, in this drama, is very social and runs rampant throughout the play. Edmund, Goneril, and Regan have individual desires; yet, they unite at different points to advance their own wishes. Each villain meets death: this is a strong

condemnation of evil. The promise of the reward to be gained through evil presents a mesmerizing attraction that does not lessen its hold until the end is imminent.

Edmund does not see the reality of what he has done until evil has done its work and all is lost. His last act of redemption is even thwarted because he is not able to save Cordelia or King Lear. Evil individuals seek to annihilate and destroy: their goal is not merely to maim. Evil will not only destroy the object of its evil intentions, but it will also destroy the instrument that makes the destruction possible. In the final analysis, Edmund is a victim of evil. What he tries to use eventually destroys him as well. Evil is dangerous, and it cannot be controlled.

The mass of evil that presents itself in this play is particularly noteworthy. Evil lies within everyone, and it is the individual's choice to select evil. The sub-plot of the play revolves about the evil actions of children toward their parents and the destruction of the family unit. In the main plot, Goneril and Regan wish to destroy their father and rule the kingdom; they are willing readily to sacrifice their marriages, as well, and to join in acts of conspiracy with Edmund. Goneril and Regan plot against their father collectively, but when they consult Edmund it is on an individual basis. Even though they profess their love for their father, Goneril and Regan have no idea what love is. They do not recognize it within the family structure or within the bonds of matrimony. They see every instance as just an opportunity to promote themselves. Evil has taken over their very existence, and they love only the illusion of power and all that it brings. It is evident that there is no sisterly love between them because Goneril poisons Regan.

There is no honor among villains. Nothing is sacred. Edmund seeks to destroy his father as retribution for his years of torment. Edmund is tormented by the hatred he has for his situation, and this hatred turns into malicious evil that seeks to consume and ultimately to destroy all that it can.

The combined evil of Edward, Goneril, and Regan is overwhelming. It suggests that evil is a dominant and alluring force. These characters find little joy in their evilness as compared to Aaron. Aaron revels in his evilness and approaches death while still embracing evil. He exhibits a very triumphant attitude while Edward, Goneril, and Regan yield in submission to the reality of their sin. They lack the power to do anything about their situations. Of course, Goneril does poison her sister, but that is an act of desperation as is her suicide. Evil forces people to react in drastic fashion. Shakespeare reveals through King Lear that evil has many negative aspects.

Evil destroys an individual's ability to resist it; it is a compelling force that can override moral consciousness and gives way to evil thoughts and desires. Evil's persuasiveness strangles an individual's ability to do good. Where there is no good, evil flourishes.

The desire for power is extremely attractive and is a primary motivating force in most villains. Richard III, Aaron, Iago, Edmund, Goneril and Regan all wanted power. Power is perceived as the ability to control others: it increases the villain's ego. His self-concept is enhanced by his ability, whether real or imaginary, to control others until ultimately his evil consumes him.

Evil decimates not only Gloucester's family, but also King Lear and his world. The rippling effects of evil build to a point of implosion. The entire kingdom, devastated by a civil war, must be rebuilt. Lear's entire family dies supporting the fact that evil can destroy generations. In the Gloucester family, Edgar at least survives, while in Lear's family Goneril and Regan are not the only casualties; Cordelia and Lear both die—contrary to the plot Shakespeare inherited from his sources. The final act in this play brings all of the characters to the same level regardless of social strata. Ultimately, the pain and suffering felt at the end of this play reveal the horrors of evil.

Conclusion

William Shakespeare is a master playwright whose villains have become legendary. There would be no tragedy without the character of the villain who acts as the catalyst that sets the action of the play in motion. He or she is a prime motivator in the development of plots and subplots. It is the villain who creates plot and upon his or her villainy hinges the action of the play. Villainy drives the play and becomes of paramount importance.

Vice characters, previously allegorized as concrete and called upon to interact with the medieval audiences, became absorbed into Shakespeare's characters. Shakespeare's portrayal of the Vices remains incorporated, however, more subtly. These characters helped to bring moral issues into focus and forced the audience into making judgements. Issues of morality, hidden beneath the action of characters, gained attention only after the deed had been performed--for example, Edmund plays the loyal and devoted son, which he is not; Richard III plays an innocent on-looker while being the mastermind behind the scheme. No longer is the Vice a loud knave; his or her tendencies are camouflaged by acts of supposed honesty and propriety.

Arthur Sewall puts it most succinctly in his book entitled Character and Society in Shakespeare, when he says, "when a dramatic character addresses his world, he also addresses us--the audience. We are that world, and if the address does not make its impact on us we are likely to miss it. We are the sounding-board" (23). The villain plays to the audience, but the audience must recognize the villainy and form its own conclusions.

The Vices used the audience as assistants to hold props and complete other menial tasks. In later years, the audiences became spectators to these events and were asked to make decisions about what is morally right and wrong. Each villain presents his case and the audience draws on its past experiences to make a decision. Some villains present their cases more openly than others do; yet, these glimpses reveal their personalities and motivations.

Richard III, Aaron, Iago, Edmund, Goneril and Regan all have Vice-like qualities, but there are some significant differences in the development of the latter characters. Shakespeare is able to reach new levels with the characters of Iago and Edmund. Shakespeare's villains have undergone a metamorphosis. Initially, they were very similar in temperament and type to the medieval Vice characters found in the morality plays. They were loud, lying, glory-seeking knaves who committed heinous crimes in which they reveled. Bernard Spivak, the author of Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil, states that "The heart of his [the Vice character's] role is an act of seduction, and the characteristic stratagem whereby the Vice achieves his purpose is a vivid stage metaphor for the sly insinuation of moral evil into the human breast" (152). Thus, the Vice sets upon people to illustrate humankind's destructive and evil tendencies to the world. The Vice uncovers, exploits, and revels in the moral weaknesses of humans. He holds up a mirror so that the inner self might be seen. These characters are the Richards, Aarons, Iagos, Edmunds, Gonerils and Regans of the world.

Richard III is a typical Vice-like character. His primary motivation is one of ambition and greed. He would be King. As far as Shakespeare's characterization of

Richard develops, Richard is physically deformed and announces his villainy. No one doubts that he is a villain; his acts of treachery, deceit, and manipulation speak for themselves. Shakespeare uses the character's physical deformity as another means to indicate his evil nature. Richard is a very cunning, intelligent and captivating villain. He is a formidable adversary. As a typical Vice-like character, he is a liar, a master at manipulation, and a dissembler. He experiences an attack of conscience toward the end of his life, but this does not change his resolve.

Likewise Aaron is a typical Vice-like character. He is a sadistic liar whose motivation for evil is only that it brings him joy. Aaron admits his villainy, and this villainy moves him to laughter. Aaron's blackness is indicative of his evilness or so this would have been the thought during the Renaissance, according to Charles Boyce. Aaron never pretends to be anything other than what he is. He is evil, and he wants everyone to know it.

Iago, on the other hand, is a more complex character; his motivation is not as clear. Shakespeare wants the audience to come to its own conclusions as to who and what Iago is. His thoughts are more private; he does not proclaim himself a villain. Everything is what it appears to be and nothing more. Spivak makes the following comments about Iago:

In Shakespeare's most compact and painful tragedy
he is the artisan of an intrigue that first alienates and
then destroys a pair of wedded lovers, in an action fraught
with the pathos that attends the loss of noble love and noble
life. He is also the divisive agent of another kind of separation

. . . . the divorce of friendship between two generous men

He is a soldier, a liar, an adept at dissimulation and intrigue, a cynic, an egoist, a criminal. (3-4)

As Spivak says, Iago's portrayal is far more complex than Richard's and Aaron's.

At the end of the play, he is carried from the stage in silence; therefore, the audience is left to either identify or not identify with this notorious villain.

Edmund's treachery is just as elaborate as Iago's. He and Iago, masters of deception, appear to be what they are not. Iago is referred to as honest and Edmund is celebrated as loyal and trustworthy. Shakespeare is able to create believable characters that exploit others and are never detected until their cloaks of deception begin to unravel. Revenge and ambition drive Edmund. His primeval sin is that of brother against brother. Edmund's characterization is not as exciting as Iago's.

Boyce states that "Edmund has little human complexity"; therefore, the audience is not as committed to his character or the plausibility of his role (168). Goneril and Regan introduce sexual villainy as they vie for Edmund's attention. This is a natural evolution in light of the introduction of women as villains. The lust of the flesh is a very destructive force which ruins not only Goneril and Regan's lives but also the lives of others. Goneril, driven by evil and aided by Regan, seeks to destroy their father and elevate themselves. These sisters have their own private agendas; they ultimately give their lives in pursuit of gain. King Lear is filled with evil and symbolism.

No longer is the Vice-like character paraded on stage and prompted to teach a moral lesson. Audience sophistication demands that they not be taunted with moral

lessons to be learned. These issues have to be camouflaged and allowed to develop slowly. The Renaissance audience did not want to be lectured; they had moved beyond the instructive teachings of the Vice.

The primary role of the villain is evil intent. Richard III, Edmund, Goneril and Regan were frauds; they pretended to be what they were not. They destroyed families, and thought only of their own selfish desires. Edmund and Iago hid their villainy and wanted to remain undetected. Iago never pretended to be anything other than what he was. He refused to define himself for others. Aaron's sadistic behavior amuses himself and almost the audience (as did the medieval Vice at times); it remains legendary: evil for the sheer pleasure of it.

Shakespeare's villain is a necessary component to his tragedies; Shakespeare fashioned a villain, as a character who did not present all of the answers but asked the audience to use its own knowledge of good and evil to make decisions, and gave the villain human complexities. His characters attained new heights of villainy. For centuries, these villains have represented the most insidious types of evil; therefore, Richard III, Aaron, Iago, Edmund, Goneril and Regan will live on in infamy.

Evil is a primal force that has existed since the beginning of time. Shakespeare did not create a new mode of conflict, but he did perfect his craft in the creation and portrayal of evil and villains. Shakespeare camouflaged Richard III's evilness with charm and deceit. His evil, not as starkly portrayed, destroyed many. Richard's cowardly evil, as well as Edmund's, is shrouded by skillful tactics of deception.

The villain who receives pleasure from his actions portrays Shakespeare's most insidious type of evil; Aaron, as well as Iago, Goneril, and Regan, represents that type of villain. They all devise plans of torture for their victims and suffer no mental anguish for their treachery. Extremely ruthless individuals, they allow evil to become their nature; they are consumed by it. Their characters lack redemption and they will forever be damned. Evil is personified in their characterization.

Evil is evil and all of Shakespeare's villains are evil. Some committed atrocities that are far more heinous than others, but all committed crimes that lacked redemption. Even when Edmund attempts to redeem some of his evil, his thwarted attempts fail because Cordelia is already dead. Evil and its portrayal, aided by the developing role of the villain, reaches new literary heights at the hand of the master playwright, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare uses evil as a means to an end; his characters do not simply present a portrait of moral behavior or the lack of it. They are who they are: complicated characterizations motivated by desires all too human for comfort.

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