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The Battle of Good and Evil in Shakespeare

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Liberal Studies

by

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Introduction

Drama through the ages—from the Greeks' *Oedipus Rex* to the morality plays of the Middle Ages—centers on an exploration of the human condition. In antiquity, religious celebrations to honor the gods and appeal for their favor gradually give birth to Greek theater, and these early plays, most of which are tragedies, focus on man's suffering. What starts as the impact of fate on the life of man becomes, by the Middle Ages, a religious spectacle centered on evil's impact on man. The Church of the Middle Ages frames the battle as a conflict of vice and virtue through stories in the life of Christ. Centuries later playwright William Shakespeare utilizes this classic structure, but goes much further to develop the concept of evil. The villains in Shakespeare's plays are not simply the forces against which the protagonist struggles. What makes Shakespeare's work so attractive and pertinent beyond his time period is the fact that he delves into the deep truths of humanity that echo through every generation, and such is the case with his exploration of villainy. Through the villains in his plays, Shakespeare explores the causes and costs of evil.

Over the course of his career, Shakespeare evolves his portrayal of villainy and the evil that accompanies it. He builds on influences, both dramaturgical and literary, to draft his most intriguing characters. However, his depiction of evil is not stagnant; his characters become increasingly aware of the grip evil can hold on them and of the consequences of one's battle against it. The conflict between vice and virtue progressively becomes internal, and the heroes are effectively more torn by the tension.

As the characters grow more conscious of this conflict, the horror and pain they express is shared to a deeper degree by the audience. What is relegated to villainous action at the beginning of Shakespeare’s career becomes a palpable internal battle toward the end. The power of this dramatic change in Shakespeare’s career is that the cost of evil is not just passively observed but profoundly felt by character and audience alike.

Critical Theories of Villainy

As the first theorist of drama, Aristotle determined that *catharsis*, or purgation, is an essential element of theater. He explained that audience members must experience the emotions of pity and fear as they view the human suffering at the center of a tragedy. Centuries later, liturgical plays aim to teach stories of Christ or Christian saints, again with a focus on the audience walking away with a message, in this case religious. Similarly morality plays personify vices and virtues like Envy or Pride, hoping to communicate a lesson about such temptations on the human soul. In 1958, literary critic Bernard Spivack connected Shakespeare's portrayal of evil in several of his villains with conventions in the morality plays of the Middle Ages. In *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, Spivack argues that four of the playwright's villains represent a clear development from the Vice figure in morality plays of the Middle Ages. He critiques previous standards of Shakespearean analysis on the basis that they failed to consider the profound transition the Elizabethan stage was undergoing during the playwright's time (Spivack vii-viii). Resources from Shakespeare's time show that morality plays were performed in the Globe, alongside Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies, so the playwright's awareness of the plot, characters, and structure of such dramatic performances is without question (Spivack 60). With the purpose of moral instruction, morality plays depicted the battle between good and evil, or vice and virtue, for control of man's soul (Spivack 63). This battle originated from the basic Christian belief of a conflict between God in Heaven and the Devil in the world (Spivack 73). Spivack argues that, while plot and characterization transformed significantly as Elizabethan drama gradually altered from

metaphorical to literal (254), the alteration of the Vice figure was a much slower process and that shadows of the figure can still be seen in several of Shakespeare's villains.

According to Spivack, the Vice figure was one of both farce and high moral seriousness (202). The figure deviously worked to dissolve the main character's attachment to virtue and instead entrap him in the evil associated with the Vice figure (Spivack 170). Spivack adds that the stereotypical scene of a morality play occurs when the Vice figure successfully deludes his victim because this moment personifies the Christian view of evil, which is the corruption of man's soul away from God (170). In *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*, Elmer Edgar Stoll states that the battle between good and evil, represented by God and the Devil, is an absolute one. Thus, atheism is "not skepticism but enmity with God [and] a man had to take sides" (340). The Vice figure then is the allegorical representation of the Devil at work in the world as he vies for a man's soul. Likewise, man has to decide to align himself with either vice or virtue, and the eternal state of his soul rests in this decision.

Spivack contends that over time the Vice figure "refurbished himself with the name, the clothing, and the motives of a 'formal man'" and, "reluctantly draping his allegorical nakedness, [the Vice figure] persisted in his allegorical function" (59). Echoes of this figure appear in villains like *Titus Andronicus'*s Aaron, Richard in *Richard III*, Iago in *Othello*, and Don John in the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. Spivack traces the Vice figure to these villains because of the characters' ability to use deceit on dupable victims for the villains' own mirth:

> But all his separate performances, under whatever name, in play after play are merely variations on a single theme—his dexterity in effecting, through artful dissimulation and intrigue, the spiritual and physical ruin of frail humanity; and all his particular names are enveloped within his generic title of *The Vice*. (Spivack 57)

The analyst identifies key elements in the four villains Aaron, Richard III, Iago, and Don John that he argues trace directly back to the Vice figure. Unlike Shakespeare's other villains, these four get enjoyment out of the criminal act itself; they do not experience a loss of humanity as a cost of villainy; their soliloquies have an art of showmanship to them as opposed to any degree of moral tension; and all four label themselves as a type, with some even proudly declaring themselves to be a villain (Spivack 39-43).

At the heart of Spivack's argument is his contention that Shakespeare views evil as far more than an act of violence or deception. Instead, he argues for a continued connection to liturgical drama in that the playwright's portrayal of evil can be reduced to that which disturbs order: "[Evil] severs the 'holy cords' of love and loyalty, cancels and tears to pieces the great bond that holds the universe in order" (Spivack 50). Because the Vice figure has its antecedent in the Devil and his battle with God for man's soul, evil then becomes that which acts against God and the Christian view of world order which God represents. In tracing the Vice figure through Shakespeare's villains, Spivack identifies villains who appear to threaten order and unity simply for the sake of doing so. As a result, he argues that evil in these plays is not committed, but suffered:

> For the agents of evil are not moral; only their victims are. Evil is a word that describes the human and moral view of what they do. But since at bottom they are neither human nor moral, evil is for them solely an organic function and an artistic pleasure … A total euphoria leaves in them no room for the slightest shred of conscience. (Spivack 45-46)

Furthermore, he adds that, as the embodiment of vice and evil, the villain then comes to hate virtue and the one who represents it (Spivack 444). Perhaps no line of Shakespeare's illustrates this theory as well as Iago's repetition of "I hate the Moor" (*Othello* 1.3.355). Because Iago represents the Vice figure to such a degree, Spivack coins the phrase "Iago's Family of Villains" to refer to the four villains in which he sees echoes of the evolved Vice figure.

Spivack's analysis of these villains in many ways builds on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's initial examination of Shakespeare's villains and the playwright's general approach to characterization. Coleridge has a very Platonic view of Shakespeare's characterization in that he views characters, including Othello and Macbeth, as "ideal realities" and "not the things themselves, so much as abstracts of the things" (Coleridge II, 162). Protagonists and villains, from Coleridge's perspective, simply represent certain elements of virtue and vice, respectively, as opposed to denoting individual men in and of themselves. Spivack, thus, builds upon this idea to formulate his theory that much of Shakespeare's villainy is an evolved form of the Vice figure. Spivack contends that this figure—and the villains inspired by it—are not people, as much as they are fundamentally a personification. In support of his view, Spivack cites the villains' lack of serious emotion as well as morality, which he argues are both signs of humanity (Spivack 198). No villain exemplifies this to the extent of Iago. He cares little that he faces death because he has accomplished the purpose of Vice in the play—he has corrupted the protagonist. His impending death, therefore, is not really a death as much as an end to his role in the play (Spivack 198).

While quite innovative and influential, Spivack's view of the influence of the Vice figure on Shakespeare's villains views the battle of good and evil as predominately external. The conflict, reduced to its basest level, becomes a battle between the unknowingly gullible hero and the devious villain. In a sense, he reduces Shakespeare to a storyteller portraying the conflict between antagonist and protagonist. Literary critic Stoll adds that the externality of this struggle is not unique to Shakespeare: "A similar torment of mind, from without rather than from within, is to be found not only in Shakespeare's earlier plays but in many others of the time" (Stoll, *Art and Artifice* 354). There is no question that, in every tragedy, Shakespeare explores the extent to which evil brings about the downfall of a character. However, a study of four of his plays demonstrates an evolution in his understanding of evil. Beginning with *Titus Andronicus* and ending with *Macbeth*, Shakespeare over time portrays his protagonists becoming more and more consciously aware of the inner battle between good and evil. Although echoes of the Vice figure and an outer corrupting force certainly exist throughout Shakespeare's career, his later plays display a hero far more perceptive of evil's influence upon him and much more conscious of the consequences of such evil. At the beginning of his career, Shakespeare crafts Titus, who simply thinks he is fighting against evil, without realizing the hold it then takes on him in the end. In what Shakespeare scholars generally accept as his second phase of writing, Shakespeare pens *Merchant of Venice* in which he complicates the portrayal of evil by writing a villain into a comedy and by not relegating all the evil doing to this character alone. He then writes *Othello* in what is seen as the height of his career. In this play, Shakespeare depicts his most recognized villain, Iago, and portrays a protagonist who realizes the tragic cost of giving into vice only after it is

too late. The playwright then ends his career with Macbeth, a man who is fully conscious of the battle of good and evil within himself, even though he too loses the fight against it. Thus, his tragic career maintains the Greek view of tragedy in that a man of prominence plummets to his downfall; but toward the end of his playwriting, Shakespeare makes what used to be an outward battle of virtue and vice into an insidious inner struggle within the hero himself.

As part of his evolution toward depicting the inner battle of good versus evil, Shakespeare expands the effect of evil beyond the corruption of the virtuous hero. The playwright portrays the sinister nature of evil and its wide-reaching effects. In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, literary analyst A.C. Bradley argues that even in heroes who are comparatively innocent, Shakespeare still paints some degree of imperfection into their character. In many ways, Shakespeare's portrayal of a noble protagonist with a fallible character harkens back to the Greek image of a tragic hero. In *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, literary analyst Willard Farnham adds that Shakespearean tragedy goes further than just examining a man whose flaw leads to his downfall, but in fact explores the extent to which a man's character lacks balance or unity:

> [In his plays] the imperfection is placed before us not as a taint in or falling away from goodness or nobility so much as a lack of balance, even in civil war of goods, in man's noblest nature. Under this aspect a catastrophe may seem to be partly produced by good itself....It is thus that Shakespearean tragedy joins Greek tragedy in the dramatic exploration of imperfection in good. (Farnham 440)

Othello epitomizes Farnham's explanation of imbalanced goodness, as his downfall comes in large part because of his innocently misplaced trust in Iago. Furthermore, Shakespeare shows that characters with good intentions can come to share in the same

evil as his villains. With *Titus Andronicus* and *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare demonstrates that revenge can incite wickedness even in the maidens and heroes of society. In *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows that an insatiable desire for power can destroy both a man and the kingdom he desires. Thus, in his examination of evil, Shakespeare attributes weaknesses to his heroes to suggest how and under what circumstances evil can take hold of even the most righteous and upstanding of men.

To counterbalance these virtuous but imperfect men, Shakespeare crafts his villains, whose methods also echo the Vice figure, according to Spivack (438). He contends that "in the allegorical plays the Vice begins his work when his destined victim is at the top of his virtue" (Spivack 438). In fact, it is the heightened virtue that becomes so attractive and concurrently repellant to the Vice, or Shakespeare's villain, and thus stirs him to action. Spivack points to two Shakespearean moments as clear proof of this connection between the Vice's action and that of the playwright's villains—the moment Richard woos the hateful Lady Anne and Iago's first manipulation of Othello at the height of the Moor's professed love for Desdemona (438). As an extension of this characterization, Shakespeare also uses his villains to display different aspects of evil. The playwright begins with Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, who embodies abject evil with little reason, and builds to a near opposite in Macbeth, who is riddled with guilt over the consequences of his villainy. Over the course of his plays, Shakespeare shows that, while villainy may have multiple causes, it has one result—absolute ruin of the hero as well as many of those around him. Critic Bradley adds that the effect of evil in Shakespeare's

plays is purposefully catastrophic: “When the evil in [the protagonist] masters the good and has its way, it destroys other people through him, but it also destroys him. At the close of the struggle he has vanished and has left behind nothing that can stand” (Bradley 48). The downfall of the hero is accompanied by the destruction of others, and Bradley adds that over time Shakespeare’s tragedies evolve from eliciting “mere sadness or repulsion” to “horror and dismay” at what human nature is capable of (Bradley 87). This evolution is, in part, due to the degree to which the hero is aware of the inner struggle of good and evil. In his earlier plays, Shakespeare’s heroes succumb to many of the same pressures of vice, but because they are less conscious of the battle, the audience experiences the “mere sadness” Bradley refers to. Culminating in Macbeth, Shakespeare’s later heroes become more and more aware of the inner battle of evil. The audience then shares in the hero’s horror and anguish as he struggles—and ultimately fails in that struggle—against evil.

Any discussion of Shakespeare, as Spivack warns, is incomplete at best or incorrect at worst if one does not consider the expectations of the playwright’s audience. A 21st-century analysis of Shakespeare cannot be clouded by a contemporary understanding of theater; one must consider the world views that would have influenced the audience as well as the playwright himself, both products of Elizabethan England. When examining Shakespeare’s design of villainy, Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* must be considered. The political text was highly popular and widely known during Shakespeare’s time, and its impact on the playwright is overt. The influential text, published in 1532, is a keen analysis of human nature and reads like a manual on

securing and maintaining power in the political world. Although Machiavelli was often criticized by contemporaries for his cynicism in the text, he discusses a politician's need to be sagacious and calculating. Not only do some of Shakespeare's villains have distinct marks of a Machiavellian politician, but Shakespeare clearly knew of Machiavelli's seminal work. The playwright's influence for *The Merchant of Venice*—Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*—directly references the text of the Florentine author. In the opening prologue of Marlowe's play, a character by the name of Machevill says "there is no sin but ignorance" and begs the audience to let him "be envied and not pitied" (Marlowe). Shakespeare clearly takes plot elements and themes from this play when he crafts *The Merchant of Venice*, but he also takes elements of a Machiavellian character to design many of his villains.

As spelled out in *The Prince*, a Machiavellian figure must, first and foremost, have a flexible disposition so he can change "his character according to the time and circumstances" (Machiavelli 107). No Shakespearean character embodies this trait more than Iago. He does not design a specific plan to take down Othello; instead, his brilliance and success lie in his ability to improvise as opportunity presents itself. In what the Florentine author calls being a "fox," a power-hungry person must also be cunning enough to discover snares set by those who wish him ill. Richard III's drive for the throne through whatever means possible is undoubtedly Machiavellian. Iago, too, displays a very Machiavellian awareness of human nature and the ability to manipulate it for his desires. One of the author's most audacious claims in *The Prince* is that men are inherently "ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers" (Machiavelli 71), which challenged

the long-standing views of Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle who contend that man is inherently good. Shakespeare's villains in various ways live out this bold declaration to paint human nature as inherently evil.

Although Machiavelli's view of humanity contrasts with the beliefs of antiquity, it joins well with the Christian world view of evil as it battles for the souls of men. In his analysis of the Vice figure in Shakespearean villains, Spivack explains how the picture of human nature in *The Prince* is analogous to the Christian view espoused in morality plays: "By propounding the technique of worldly success without regard to any higher allegiance, Machiavelli elevated the most serious defect of human nature, from a Christian viewpoint, into a positive achievement" (375). Using any means necessary to achieve and maintain power, regardless of morality, epitomized evil in the world; *The Prince*, therefore, essentially provides the instruction and endorsement of living out evil through politics. Furthermore, literary analyst Maurice Charney points out that many of Shakespeare's villains are flagrant atheists who lack any belief in something greater than themselves (*Shakespeare's Villains* xiii). In fact, Charney states that the villains "are fixated on themselves as the center of the universe" (*Shakespeare's Villains* xii). Thus, the Vice figure and the Machiavellian villain are in many ways parallel. Spivack, however, is quick to warn that critics should not simply conclude that Shakespeare drafts strictly Machiavellian villains. He argues that the Machiavellian form fits within the greater image of the Vice figure that influences Shakespeare, and therefore the echoes of Machiavelli would not be possible without first the shadows of the Vice figure (Spivack 378). Regardless of the true antecedent, Machiavelli's *The Prince* plays a significant role

in Shakespeare's villain formation and provides an essential lens through which to view his characters and the evil they commit.

To this discussion of contemporary expectations of an Elizabethan audience, Charles Norton Coe in *Shakespeare's Villains* addresses the contention that many of Shakespeare's villains lack believable reasons for their villainy. He states that Shakespeare's contemporary audience would accept a villain with or without motivation because, in many cases, villains were accepted as a type, like the black Aaron, the deformed Richard III, or the Italian Iago. Coe warns that, while some literary analysts criticize Shakespeare's villains for a perceived lack of motivation for their evil, the playwright's audience would have viewed the villains as stock characters to an extent (*Shakespeare's Villains* 5). Literary critic Sylvan Barnet adds, "The Elizabethans were much more willing than theatre-goers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to take the villain for what he seemed to be, and to pay closer attention to what he did than to why he did it" (16). Furthermore, Barnet argues that a villain's characteristics are used, not for explaining his villainy, but for making him an adversary of the hero, much like the Vice figure worked in opposition to virtue. Barnet's view builds upon a foundation set by Coleridge when he identifies six key characteristics of Shakespeare's work. Coleridge argues that Shakespeare adheres "to the great law of nature that opposites tend to attract and temper each other" (I, 225). Thus, Shakespeare places folly next to wisdom or innocence next to corruption. In doing so, the playwright drafts villain attributes with the protagonist in mind much more so than for the sheer purpose of crafting an evil character

alone. This can lead to what literary analysts argue are apparent weak motives in many of Shakespeare's villains.

Acknowledging that some villains appear to lack sufficient rationale for their evil, Coleridge posits what makes the playwright's villains attractive is their tremendous intellect, far beyond the value of their morality (I, 234). In fact, he argues that Iago has "motiveless malignity" that becomes acceptable to the audience because of his unrestrained intellect (Coleridge I, 49). Bradley agrees that Shakespeare's basic composite villain combined "absolute egoism" and "hard vices" with an evil that allied itself "with exceptional powers of will and intellect" (216). Bradley specifically points to the fact that Iago's motivations appear to be a moving target; the villain mentions so many motives, including a missed promotion and an affair, but then never mentions them again (210). The critic argues that Iago's litany of reasons are simply part of his search for a reason to do what he already intends to do, which is to take down Othello (Bradley 211). This perceived lack of motive, while Iago is the most salient example, extends to other villains as well. Many critics suggest that the Weird Sisters at the beginning of *Macbeth* serve only to articulate the evil desires already present in Macbeth's mind (Nuttall 284-285). Coleridge concludes that motivations are less necessary for an audience than intellect. Thus, a brilliant villain, he argues, is far more intriguing than a man with rational reasons behind his behavior.

Although Coleridge argues that intellect is preferable to reason in a villain, Coe contends that for a villain to be a life-like character, he requires motivation for his actions. He states that a character who acts for the pure purpose of forwarding the plot

would lack realistic quality and would, therefore, be unconvincing and unsatisfying. For verisimilitude, a villain must also have a background and a history to give reason for his actions (Coe, *Shakespeare's Villains* 7). According to Coe, antecedents for a villain's actions then provide "the audience the impression that the character has a mind and a memory" (*Shakespeare's Villains* 8). Coleridge adds that Shakespeare takes great pains to develop characters in such a way that readers are left to infer their true natures (I, 227). He argues that a character's true self is never fully revealed by himself, by his friends, or by his enemies; thus, an audience is left to infer the reality, based on the combination of a character's actions and all things said by and about him (Coleridge I, 227). According to Coleridge, this emulates real life in that a person, like a Shakespearean character, cannot be accurately evaluated from one source, even if he is that source (I, 227). Critics still debate over the degree of verisimilitude in the villains' motivations, but regardless, a marked transformation exists from earlier villains to Shakespeare's later ones.

Regardless of the degree to which they are stock characters, reflections of a Vice or Machiavellian figure, or fully developed villains in and of themselves, Shakespeare's earlier villains have a degree of "otherness" that defines them and their villainy. Aaron, Richard III, and Shylock all define themselves as the "other" for some reason, whether it be race, deformity, or religion, and whether their "otherness" is the reason for their villainy to varying degrees. However, this focus changes over time as the playwright develops Iago and Macbeth. Other than Iago's choleric Italian character, he has no measure of "otherness" on which to blame his villainy. As an even further development, Macbeth has no shred of "otherness" associated with his evil nature. His villainy is not

borne in him because of his race or religion; it is not because he can't be loved due to a physical deformity. He simply caves in to the temptation of power, which is faced by many men. Shakespeare makes a marked turn in his portrayal of evil in Macbeth and, in fact, returns in many ways to the conventions of Greek theater. He depicts a noble man with a deep awareness of the internal battle between good and evil, but one who ultimately loses the battle. Furthermore, because Macbeth is an average man as opposed to one defined by his “otherness,” he becomes a far more disturbing protagonist-made-villain because it makes evil much more real, palpable, and possible to the average man.

Chapter 1: *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's Earliest Foray into Villainy

Every critique and analysis of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, begins with either T.S. Eliot's famous reproach that the play was "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (Eliot 67) or British dramatist Edward Ravenscroft's condemnation of the play as a "heap of rubbish" (Ravenscroft "To the Reader"). Suffice to say, Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy has suffered significant denigration over the centuries, usually centered on the combination of his less than mellifluous language with the play's gratuitous violence. The playwright also breaks many contemporary dramatic rules in *Titus*. In 16th-century France and Italy, the Neoclassical theater movement held that tragedy and comedy were the only recognized genres of drama and could never be integrated; thus, Shakespeare's pairing of exaggerated violence with seemingly inappropriately placed humor in *Titus* breaks such conventions (Maus 377). The subsequent argument then revolves around whether those steps outside the expected conventions of drama are because of the ineptitude of a young playwright or because of his skill at challenging those conventions (Maus 377). However, *Titus* was highly popular in Shakespeare's time, so unless one simply dismisses the Elizabethan audience as more vulgar and accepting of violence, attention must be paid to this early tragedy. Although some scholars have ended their analyses by concluding that Shakespeare's contemporary audience was simply less refined than later ones, more recent literary critics challenge that notion and posit a far more complex and nuanced view of *Titus.* Such critics both look back to the play's antecedents as well as examine

the extent to which this early tragedy provides a prelude to Shakespeare's later tragic heroes.

Despite repeated arguments that Shakespeare did not pen *Titus* or at least not all of it, most recent literary critics agree that, based on primary sources, he likely did write the text. In an attempt to explain the sharp contrasts between *Titus* and Shakespeare's other works, some analysts merely blame the disparity on the youth and immaturity of Shakespeare at the beginning of his career (Cross 823). Others say he just reworked a previous play penned by George Peele, Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd, or Christopher Marlowe (Cross 823). Acknowledging the influence but not the hand of these earlier playwrights, analyst Irving Ribner traces the influence of *Titus* to Kyd's contemporary revenge dramas, including *The Spanish Tragedy* (16). He argues that Shakespeare follows Kyd's formula and type, but that ultimately Shakespeare's play is much more developed and nuanced than any of Kyd's work (Ribner 16). Still other critics claim the playwright was trying to satirize the popular dramatic formula of revenge tragedies (Cross 823). The preeminent critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge takes a different approach to validating *Titus* as part of Shakespeare's canon, as he argues that the violence certainly appealed to a more "vulgar" audience (II , 31), but that certain passages, if not the entire text, ring of Shakespeare's language (I, 3).

When considering the Elizabethan popularity of the play and its value in Shakespeare's time, one must consider the revenge tragedy genre. The genre as a whole harkens back to ancient Greece and Rome but experienced a renewal in the 1580s when Kyd repopularized it (Maus 371). According to analyst Katharine Maus, the late 16th-

century popularity likely came from a general dissatisfaction among contemporary audiences for the inequitable hierarchy in England at the time (371). Thus the attraction of such plays, including *Titus,* could be in part because their themes struck a chord in the hearts of Elizabethan audiences. As a genre, revenge tragedies of Renaissance England portray a man whose family has been destroyed, either through rape or murder, by those in charge, leaving the hero no institutional route for redress (Maus 371). Thus the man is left to dispense justice himself, which often results in a loss of the hero's morality and sanity (Maus 371). There is no question that *Titus* follows such a trajectory, as the title character becomes consumed and driven mad by the need for revenge for the deaths of his sons and the rape of his daughter.

Aside from themes salient to contemporary audiences, the 16th-century popularity of the violent play is often ascribed to the Elizabethan audience's comfort with violence compared to that of later audiences. Historian John Russell Brown states that the 16th-century common church practice of reading about and discussing Christian martyrs was a likely influence on a collective comfort with violence (39). Brown explains that the discussion of the often violent deaths of martyrs, coupled with the morality and mystery plays that dramatized vicious scenes from the Bible, had the unintended consequence of acclimating audiences to the portrayal of violence (39). Furthermore, public executions, including men being drawn and quartered, were also a common practice in Elizabethan England and no doubt had an impact on the community's familiarity with graphic violence. Thus, what may seem gratuitous to later audiences would not have been so for Shakespeare's contemporary playgoers. Analysts C.L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler

argue, however, that there is more to the Elizabethan audience's enjoyment of *Titus* than a simple numbness toward violence. They contend that Shakespearean audiences saw more symbolic meaning in violence (Barber and Wheeler 144). They add that "in Shakespeare's later work, the human meaning in social action of such violence is more clearly and compellingly conveyed, so that we accept it as we cannot easily accept the regressive erotic brutality in Titus" (Barber and Wheeler 94). Thus, the greater appreciation for Shakespeare's later plays comes not from less violence, as *Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* are riddled with brutality, but, later in his career, the playwright is more explicit with the connection between violence and purpose. The abstract nature of that connection often resigns playgoers and critics to dismiss the depth of his earliest work.

The influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is also central to the analysis and understanding of *Titus*, as the central plot elements are lifted from the Roman text and numerous allusions to it pepper the play. One of the most prominent arguments regarding the validity of *Titus* comes from critic Eugene Waith who explores the various extents to which Shakespeare uses Ovid as inspiration. Waith challenges the notion that Shakespeare takes only plot elements and posits that the playwright also uses themes and language in much the same way as Ovid. Waith identifies the clash of moral and political chaos with the unity of friendship and proper government, which he traces back to Ovidian ideals (44). While other critics argue that Shakespeare's focus on unity has Christian undertones, Waith argues that such ideas harken back to Ovid, whose creation myths overwhelmingly communicate a sense of unity triumphing over chaos (44).

Furthermore—and more provocatively—Waith argues that the violence in *Titus* echoes the metamorphosis central to Ovid's text. In Ovid's tale of *Tereus, Philomela, and Procne*, characters undergo some form of transformation and simultaneously commit an act of violence in the moments of highest emotion. At Tereus's height of lust, he ravages Philomela and cuts off her tongue. When Procne is driven by revenge, she kills her son and cooks him. After realizing he's consumed his son, Tereus's anger boils over, and he transforms into a bird as he chases the frightened sisters, who also become birds to escape. According to Waith, "in the moments of greatest emotional stress Ovid's characters seem to lose not only individuality but even humanity as if sheer intensity of feeling made them indistinguishable from other forms of life" (42). In much the same way, the physical transformation of characters in *Titus* represents the loss of their humanity.

Waith's most striking connection between Ovid and Shakespeare relates to the playwright's use of language. Waith focuses on the speech Marcus makes when he finds the ravaged Lavinia, which is often pointed to as Shakespeare's literary low point in the play. Waith argues that the seemingly absurd figurative language used takes something unconscionable and makes it easier to comprehend. In comparing her to a tree without its "two branches" as she stands there mute, Marcus seems to strip Lavinia of her humanity. Nonetheless, Waith argues that such moments help the audience place the event in some realm of comprehension, even if simultaneously removing the humanity and individuality of the horror (48). Furthermore, Waith traces such metaphoric language back to Ovid to show that the young playwright parallels his Roman inspiration in language as well as

plot. Marcus's often criticized speech and other similar moments in the play feel awkward, according to Waith, because they use figurative language that is often employed by narrative writers like Ovid and not playwrights who have the benefit of a visual component to their work (48). Thus, in a sense, the action blocks the audience's full appreciation of the language that might otherwise ring poetically in Ovid.

In *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development*, Barber and Wheeler take Waith's argument and expand it to the violence of female sexuality, which stands at the center of the play's action. They state that "violence after all is what sexuality turns into when it cannot go on, cannot find properly sexual consummation. As Ovid abundantly testifies, violence is sexuality metamorphosed" (Barber and Wheeler 98). Nearly all of the violence and villainy in *Titus* connects back in some way, shape, or form to sexuality. Much is made of the sexuality of the two central female characters, Tamora and Lavinia. Tamora's central characteristic is her sexual prowess, while Lavinia's is her chastity. Much of the horror in the play revolves around Lavinia's rape and Tamora's aberrant sexual relationship with Aaron the Moor. Although Aaron confesses to be the central villain in the play, he does not speak until Act II. Shakespeare uses the first act to establish the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism that underlies the rest of the play, and even without Aaron's presence, the playwright sets the stage for the villainy that wreaks havoc around and within the protagonist.

Roman rites, government, and procedures consume the play's opening act. Romans celebrate a military victory over the enemy Goths; Saturninus and Bassianus argue over the throne on the grounds of primogeniture or Roman election; Titus buries

his sons in the family tomb and then demands the sacrifice of enemy sons in return. Titus is even lauded for his nobility, bravery, and honor, all characteristics held in high esteem among Romans. In fact, Marcus says Titus is “surnamed Pius,” which connects back to the storied founder of Rome, Pius Aeneas. In fact, Titus is so highly esteemed that when Bassianus and Saturninus argue over the throne, the people look to Titus to arbitrate the dispute, and in the end, Saturninus stands as emperor because Titus decides it so. Shakespeare highlights Titus’s nobility in this first act, in part to provide a stark contrast with the “barbarous Goths” (I.1.28). If Titus is so valiant, then whoever has fought against him is obviously fighting against all that Rome stands for and, therefore, must be barbaric. Shakespeare draws this clear dichotomy at the onset of the play, and critic Spivack would point to the tradition of vice and virtue. This first act establishes Titus as the virtuous character who, because of deception, will succumb to the pressures of vice. As in morality plays, Titus’s virtue is highlighted to such an extent that it is nearly exaggerated and can therefore stand in contrast to the work of the Vice figure. Through the lens of Greek tragedy, one can also see the development of Titus as a tragic hero. Act I confirms the noble character of Titus that is necessary as the foundation for a hero whose downfall elicits pity. Literary critic Gustav Cross adds that “Titus is the prototype of the Shakespearean tragic hero, a brave and upright warrior, grown old and scarred in his country’s service, who holds blindly to honor and justice, thereby setting in motion the forces that will destroy him” (824). Like many of Shakespeare’s later tragic heroes, Titus lives in a corrupt society that blurs the line between good and evil, and as a result, he becomes blind to the consequences of actions he thinks have noble motives.

Shakespeare, however, does far more in this first act than just place Titus on a pedestal of nobility. He also carefully crafts moments that, while they may be charged with Roman piety, also hint at an underlying barbarism. Despite the praises of virtue and nobility, Titus kills two sons in this first act—one of Tamora's and one of his own; and the murder of his own son is on stage, while that of Tamora's takes place after Titus has exited with the boy. While Titus's murder of Tamora's son is under the guise of ritualistic sacrifice, it is also motivated by revenge for the deaths of Titus's 21 sons in battle. Although vengeance in part drives Titus to murder Tamora's son, the murder of his own son, Mutius, is far more motivated by rage. Mutius's sudden death comes over a battle between Bassianus and Saturninus for Lavinia's hand in marriage. Prior to the play's action, Titus promised Lavinia to Bassianus, but when Saturninus takes the throne as emperor, he demands Lavinia be his queen. In a moment of blind faithfulness to Roman rule, Titus hands his daughter over to Saturninus, and when Mutius steps in to disagree with his father, Titus kills him. Thus, the first true horror committed on stage is done by the hero himself and, even more so, done in a moment of irrationality. Titus even refuses to allow Mutius's body to be buried in the family tomb, thereby dishonoring his own son in death. His staunch adherence to Roman ideals of honor and justice seem absurdly shortsighted in this moment when he refuses a rightful burial for his son.

In this first act, Shakespeare interweaves numerous ironic statements that hint at the innate brutality of Titus's seemingly pious actions. When Titus refuses to bury his son in the family tomb, his brother Marcus tells Titus that the decision shows "impiety in you" (I.1.352). In choosing the word *pious,* Marcus uses the same term to chastise Titus

as he previously used to praise him. His brother also reminds him that "thou are a Roman; be not barbarous" (I.1.375). In just 300 lines, the Titus who was parallel to the pious Aeneas and founder of Rome, becomes impious and barbarous in his treatment of his own flesh and blood. In further irony, the Goth queen Tamora makes a similar plea to Titus when she reminds him that "sweet mercy is nobility's true badge" (I.1.119). After the repeated praise of Titus's nobility 100 lines before, Tamora's words suggest deep irony in Titus's refusal to show mercy to either her son or his own. Right after Titus's murder of his own son to protect Saturninus's right to wed Lavinia, Saturninus casts aside the Andronici family with a simple, "The Emperor needs her not, nor her, nor thee, nor any of thy stock" (I.1.296-297). The very man Titus ardently supported because of his adherence to Roman rule is the same man who just lines later turns his back on Titus and his family. Along with the hero's nobility, his judgment is also called into question in this first act. As Titus drags Tamora's son Alarbus off stage to sacrifice him, she yells, "O cruel irreligious piety" (I.1.130). Her line embodies the true dichotomy established in this act. The contrast exists not between Titus's piety and the barbarism of the Goths, but instead Titus's conviction of his own piety—and the Roman people's conviction of his piety as well—contrasted with Titus's latent brutality.

The irony in such contrasts continues even beyond Titus, as Tamora both appeals to Saturninus for mercy on Titus and then vows to "find a day to massacre ….all" the Andronici (I.1.447). Critic Maurice Charney describes Tamora here as "a Machiavellian adviser to Saturninus" who fears Titus as a political threat and manipulates the Emperor to ensure her own protection from Titus (*Titus* 24). In many ways, she embodies

Machiavelli's ideal of being both a fox and a lion, as she successfully reads those around her and then strategically wields her power. However, Tamora is fully aware of, and intentionally uses, her duplicity, while Titus remains unaware that many of his actions contradict the very traits he prizes. These first scenes of contradictions and contrasts in many ways prefigure Titus's state in the end—he thinks he has remained pious and just, but in reality, he has descended into the same evil he sought to fight. But like the Romans of Act I, Titus is deluded by his previous state. Rome, like Titus, was valiant, celebrated, orderly, and pious, but in its blind adherence to tradition, it is unknowingly undone.

At the beginning of Act II, Shakespeare finally gives Aaron a voice and, with it, the Moor extols Tamora's manipulative power as he calls her a "siren that will charm Rome's Saturnine" (II.1.23). The setting of Act II is a distinct contrast to that of Act I, as the action now takes place in the forest outside the city walls of Rome. As in other plays such as *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses the forest to symbolize chaos and disorder. The crime at the center of the play—Lavinia's maiming and defilement—occurs in the woods of Act II, which Aaron calls "ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull" (II.1.129). This portion of the play puts the violence of female sexuality at center stage, and Aaron begins his malevolence. Imbued with eroticism, the act includes the lovers Lavinia and Bassianus walking in the woods, Tamora and Aaron convening for a sexual tryst, and Tamora's sons violating Lavinia. Aaron's malice begins when Tamora's sons, Demetrius and Chiron, enter arguing over Lavinia. Throughout the drama, Shakespeare plays with doubles and duplicity, and this scene echoes the fight Bassianus and Saturninus previously had over the same maiden. Although their later treatment of Lavinia would

suggest otherwise, Tamora's sons actually discuss a love for Lavinia at the beginning of the act. Chiron confesses, "I love Lavinia more than all the world" (II.1.72), and Demetrius adds, "she is Lavinia, therefore must be loved" (II.1.84). At first, Aaron warns them that their quarrel "will undo us all" (II.1.62) because challenging a prince's right could jeopardize the safety of all the Goths. After the boys fervently insist that their feelings will not be abated, Aaron then makes the suggestion that will determine the course of the rest of the play: "Why then, it seems some certain snatch or so would serve your turns" (II.1.95-96). Prior to this moment, Aaron has made no villainous comments or stated any schemes to challenge the Andronici. In fact, in his opening soliloquy, he speaks of the security and safety he is guaranteed now that Tamora is Empress. As the lover to the new Empress, Aaron celebrates that he can now cast aside "slavish weeds and servile thoughts" (II.1.18). These words, coupled with his warning to Demetrius and Chiron, suggest that Aaron's initial concern is his own security, as opposed to any malicious undoing of the Andronici. Furthermore, Aaron's suggestion that the brothers take turns with Lavinia seems almost off-handed and certainly not premeditated. In fact, his previous line is said playfully and sarcastically as he jokes that he, "as good as Saturninus," is sleeping with Tamora (II.1.90). Thus, his suggestion to Demetrius and Chiron seems almost casual and certainly does not have the conniving tone of the later comments he makes in Act V. Furthermore, to convince the boys to take action, Aaron mentions their mother, "with her sacred wit to villainy and vengeance" (II.1.121-122). Thus, the play's first mention of villainy comes from Aaron, but is actually in reference to Tamora.

As Aaron begins to craft the plan that will bring down the Andronici, he never states a motive. Unlike Tamora, he has no personal drive for revenge. Aaron is no Macbeth who has ambition for the throne; he is no Richard III who resents the judgment that comes with his deformity; and he is no Shylock whose anger at prejudice drives him to malicious acts. As literary critic Charles Norton Coe summarizes in *Shakespeare's Villains*, Aaron "combines in one man all the worst qualities of a ravisher, sadist, and pyromaniac….Aaron is bad because the plot requires a villain" (12-13). Coe adds that the Elizabethan audience would accept Aaron as a stock character, and that his blackness would be enough to explain his villainy (*Shakespeare's Villains* 13). Invoking Spivack's argument of the Vice figure, analyst Maus states that Aaron is a "stage descendant of the 'black men' of medieval morality plays, which conflated traditional depictions of the devil with racist conceptions of 'Moors' and 'Africans'" (376). This stereotype is reinforced in Act III when Aaron says, "Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace. / Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (III.1.203-204), as he deceives Titus into sacrificing his hand for the promise of his sons' lives. The antagonist again connects blackness with villainy in Act IV when he implies that having black skin inhibits one from blushing and betraying one's deceit: "Why, there's the privilege your beauty bears. / Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing / The close enacts and counsels of thy heart" (IV.1.115-117). Aaron seems to take great pride in his ability to deceive and begins to wear it as a badge of honor. Aaron's static nature remains throughout the play, until the end when he is faced with his love child abandoned by Tamora; therefore, for the vast majority of the play, Aaron echoes the Vice figure, as Spivack outlines.

When Tamora suggests they sleep together in the woods in Act II, Aaron does once mention a desire for vengeance, as he turns down her advances. Despite his sexually charged words throughout Act II, Aaron turns down Tamora, saying “there are no venereal signs” (II.3.37) because “blood and revenge are hammering in my head” (II.3.39). In contrast to Tamora who balances sexual vigor with an equally powerful drive for vengeance, Aaron believes the two are incompatible and that, ultimately, violence prevails. Such a comment suggests that female sexuality is a threat to virility; a man can either be potent in bed or in battle—not both. This focus on the threat of female sexuality is continued in the symbolism of the pit in Act II. According to literary critic Alexander Leggatt, the appearance of the pit at the very moment that Lavinia is raped off-stage suggests a significant connection between the two (10). Furthermore, Leggatt points to the fact that the pit echoes the anatomy of female sexuality, and that three men have had sex with Lavinia—Bassanius and Tamora’s two sons—and three men fall into the pit—Bassianus and two of Titus’s sons. He concludes that Rome “can accept neither sexual disgrace nor sexual desire in a woman. This may be why the pit in the woods, read as an image of female sexuality—Tamora’s no less than Lavinia’s—registers not just as a site of damage but as a place of horror” (Leggatt 10). Although men killing one another is “business as usual” in Rome, a woman cheating on her husband with a black man or a woman being raped shakes the collective Roman consciousness (Leggatt 10). Critic Albert H. Tricomi adds that along with the pit’s association with Lavinia’s lost chastity, it symbolizes Rome’s loss of civilized value (41). In this sense, the pit represents “the horrible fecundity of evil,” which is simultaneously aligned with female sexuality (Tricomi 41).

Act II ends with Marcus's famed speech describing Lavinia's defilement and mutilation. The evil, not committed by Aaron, but set in motion by him, comes into full view when Lavinia steps on stage and Marcus verbally parses her disfigured body. Although Waith focuses on the metaphorical language made awkward by the physical presence of Lavinia, analyst Leggatt concentrates on Marcus's words to Titus at the beginning of Act III: "This was thy daughter" (III.1.62). Clearly the past tense of the verb has significant implications; Lavinia's identity is in crisis now that she lacks hands, a tongue, and her chastity (Leggatt 9). He explains, "in depriving her of language they have deprived her of human contact and of normal life taking not just her chastity and her speech but her humanity" (Leggatt 17). This indeed is the true work of evil at the heart of the play—the loss of one's humanity. Although Lavinia is the most salient example of this consequence of evil, she is not the only one.

Aaron's development as a Machiavellian villain of pure evil continues in Act III, when he manipulates Titus into giving his hand for the promise of his sons' salvation. Shakespeare crafts a highly ironic moment when Titus uses deception to save his brother and son from sacrificing their own hands. As Aaron watches Titus's trick unfold, he sardonically says, "if that be called deceit, I will be honest / And never whilst I live deceive men so" (III.1.187-188). As a truly malevolent Vice-like figure, Aaron sees deceit as only that which benefits oneself. Nevertheless, when he cheats Titus out of his hand, Aaron's malicious actions toward the Andronici family still seem motiveless. He appears to be deceiving Titus for the sheer enjoyment of it, as the hero's undoing guarantees little in the way of benefit for Aaron. Such wickedness finally seems to usher

Titus into lunacy. After the heads of Titus's sons are returned with his own hand and Marcus calls for revenge, Titus breaks into laughter (III.1.263). Although Titus has the rationality to seek "Revenge's cave" (III.1.269), the scene that follows reinforces his steady descent into insanity. As Titus, Lavinia, Marcus, and young Lucius feast together, Titus makes multiple puns on the word "hands," which feel callous given Lavinia's inability to feed herself. Such insensitive remarks further develop Titus's insanity, as do his sudden swings of emotion. When Marcus kills a fly on the table, Titus cries, "out on thee, murderer! Thou kill'st my heart" (III.2.54), which is of course absurd coming from the man who killed his own son. After Marcus likens the fly to Tamora's Moor, Titus immediately decides Marcus's action is "a charitable deed" (III.2.70). Aside from laying the groundwork for Titus's irrational actions in Act V, these moments of tragic farce also work to relieve anxiety in the audience, according to literary critic Charney (*Titus* 3-4). He argues that Titus's insanity mitigates the effect of the gratuitous violence in the latter parts of the play (Charney, *Titus* 3-4).

Act IV begins with Lavinia finally regaining the ability to communicate, as she scrawls the names of her defilers in the sand. In rage, Marcus and Titus agree revenge is in order, but again Tamora is seen as the dangerous agent, beyond Aaron's malice. Titus says, "if you do hunt these bear-whelps, then beware. / The dam will wake, and if she wind ye once / She's with the lion deeply still in league. / And lulls him whilst she playeth on her back, / And when he sleeps will she do what she list" (IV.1.96-99). In this quote, Shakespeare again intertwines the threat of a woman with her sexuality. While Titus is not entirely specific as to whether he's referring to Tamora using her sexuality to

manipulate Saturninus or Aaron, the message of her power situated in her sexuality is clear; Titus sees her as the agent of wickedness and the one to be wary of.

While Tamora commands the characters' attention as the villainous force, Shakespeare complicates the development of Aaron's character in Act IV. Faced with his love child abandoned by Tamora, Aaron exhibits a level of humanity previously unseen in his character. He sees the baby as a clear extension of himself, as he says, "my mistress is my mistress, this myself" (IV.2.106) and expresses love for the first time. His various interactions with Tamora are charged entirely with sexual overtones and not with love, so Aaron's comment that "this [baby] before all the world do I prefer; / This maugre all the world will I keep safe" (IV.2.108-109) seems to contradict the villain of the previous scenes. His words also stand in stark contrast to his previously narcissistic outlook. Aaron's actions thus far have been driven entirely by the degree to which they advantage him. Evident in his first soliloquy at the beginning of Act II, Aaron even views his relationship with Tamora through the degree to which it benefits him alone. Thus, his outpouring of affection and consideration for his child marks a distinct development in his character. Charney is quick to point out, though, that Aaron's protective nature for the baby in no way suggests a development in the villain's morality: "Aaron as a character is redeemed in part by his love for his black baby, but his human attachment does not extend beyond the baby. This is surprising because Aaron's parental fervor is made to seem like an instinctive but isolated quality. It has no moral overtones" (Charney, *Titus* 79). While Aaron's actions do appear as instinct over morality, Aaron nonetheless protects his son, in contrast to Titus's rash murder of Mutius and refusal of proper burial.

Aaron then kills the nurse who brought the baby to him because he fears her knowledge of the child will jeopardize the child's safety. Aaron determines that her death "'tis a deed of policy" (IV.2.147), and Charney likens Aaron's use of the word *policy* to "the Machiavellian art of applying statesmanship to everyday affairs" (*Titus* 79). Even in Aaron's most redemptive moment of humanity, he remains the villainous, conniving man established in Act II. The difference is that his cunning ways will now benefit his son and not just himself.

Critics Barber and Wheeler contend that Aaron's newfound fatherhood works to create an even further contrast between Titus and him. While both clearly seek to protect their own, Aaron plans to raise the baby without female aid. He tells the baby, "I'll make you feed on berries and on roots, / And fat on curds and whey, and suck the goat" (IV.2.176-177). Barber and Wheeler argue that, with this decision, "Aaron represents a vilified but actively potent version of Titus as a parent…Aaron's great power expresses a fantasy of manhood beyond the threat of what makes Titus vulnerable: the cruel power of a domineering woman, Tamora" (103-104). Thus, part of what makes Aaron so threatening is that he stands to reject female sexuality as a whole. Unlike the other men in the play, Aaron is strong enough to turn down a woman's advances, as he does to Tamora in Act II, and determined enough to raise a child without its mother to feed and nurture it.

Aaron's villainy, though, is also cemented through his repeated associations with the devil in Acts IV and V. When Demetrius and Chiron discuss praying for the health of their mother in labor, Aaron responds with, "pray to the devils; the gods have given us over" (IV.2.48). Like many other Shakespearean villains, Aaron is openly atheist

(V.1.73) and even goes so far as to align himself with the devil: "If there be devils, would I were a devil, / To live and burn in everlasting fire, / So I might have your company in hell / But to torment you with my bitter tongue" (V.2.147-150). Along with admittedly wanting to commit more heinous acts, Aaron also confesses his crimes with bravado, as though they are accomplishments. According to Charney, Aaron's pride in his malicious acts suggests that he "sees himself as the devil's minion" (*Titus* 77), and in doing so, he prefigures future Shakespearean villains, most notably Iago. Charney parallels Aaron's work of the devil with the description Othello makes of Iago in the end: "I look down towards his feet—but that's a fable. / If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (V.2.285-286). The connection between villain and the devil certainly harkens back to the Vice figure, who represented the work of the Devil on Earth. Furthermore, both Aaron and Iago seem unmoved by their death sentences, perhaps because they both have successfully wrought the evil they intended.

After the diabolical confessions of Aaron, Act V includes Tamora disguised as Revenge, alongside her sons as Murder and Rape. This is the culmination of her promise to Saturninus in Scene 4 of Act V: "I will enchant the old Andronicus / With words more sweet and yet more dangerous / Than baits to fish or honey-stalks to sheep / Whenas the one is wounded with the bait, / The other rotted with delicious feed" (IV.4.88-92). Her plan is to finally ruin the Andronici at a banquet, and she thinks she entices Titus to acquiesce. Even though the Vice figure of Aaron is absent in this scene, critic Leggatt sees the influence of morality plays in the fact that Tamora and her sons play the parts of Revenge, Murder, and Rape (24). However, the connection becomes ironic when Titus

clearly knows who stands behind the disguises and then uses the banquet as the opportunity to get his long-awaited revenge.

In the last scene, Titus finally gets the revenge he's been seeking since the beginning of play, but it comes at the high price of both his sanity and his humanity. In *Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, Brown argues that Elizabethan dramatists often used insanity as a guise for any character actions that might have alerted play censors (46). If a tragedy involved crime without the due process of justice, insanity was a safe blanket to couch it in (Brown 46). However, Brown adds that the mantle of insanity had a farther-reaching purpose: "The sheer impossibility of much that madmen say or do, or will do, is not only part of their craziness but also emphasizes the unreasonable nature of the injustice they are trying to oppose" (Brown 46). In essence, no reasonable action exists for truly achieving revenge on the Goths for what Tamora's sons did to Lavinia. Titus is left with no rational recourse, and he therefore turns to actions that resound with absurdity.

Waith connects Titus's frenzied insanity with Ovid's portrayal of the violence born out of heightened emotion (46). He argues that "if the violence of the play serves the theme as an emblem of disorder, it also serves as both agent and emblem of a metamorphosis of character which takes place before our eyes. Character in the usual sense of the word disintegrates completely. What we see is personified emotion" (Waith 46). In a sense, Titus parallels both Tereus and Procne in the original myth. He echoes Procne in action, as he too kills and cooks out of vengeance, but he also echoes Tereus in emotion, as both men in the end are driven by rage. Waith's *personified emotions* are

akin in Titus and Tereus; both characters are morphed, Tereus physically and Titus mentally, because of their overwhelming crescendo of emotion.

In another approach to understanding Titus's irrationality, Ribner returns to the dichotomy of order and destruction, as seen from the Christian viewpoint. He argues "the madness of Titus symbolizes the defeat of reason which makes it impossible for him to see the Christian way out of his difficulties…[reason] would mean an attuning of human will to divine will, with faith in the perfection of God's harmonious order" (Ribner 21). The chaos Ribner points to is certainly not relegated to Titus's mind; the entire banquet scene becomes chaotic as Lavinia dies, the true nature of the pie ingredients are revealed, Tamora slain, Titus stabbed, and Saturninus murdered. Although typically sparse with his stage directions, Shakespeare includes "confusion follows" (V.3.65a) once the blood bath breaks out. Whether Shakespeare pulls from Christian or Ovidian ideals of order, he clearly characterizes the moment of Titus's revenge as complete disorder occurring inside and outside the tragic hero.

Furthermore, Ribner adds that, with this scene, Shakespeare crafts his first "prototype of erring humanity" (17), as Titus's fall is due to a blindness of virtue. Even the killing of his daughter he puts under the guise of honor: "Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die" (V.3.45-46). Prior to killing her, he references a similar action done by the Roman centurion Virginius to suggest that other valiant men have committed the same heinous act out of honor. Whether the guise be honor or insanity, or a little bit of both, Titus's killing of Lavinia further complicates his portrayal as a tragic hero. Analyst Nicholas Brooke argues that

Titus's insanity and the actions he then takes in his moments of insanity result in a loss of humanity for both him and Lavinia in the end. He contends, "the end [of *Titus*] is a spectacle of human degeneration by which we are appalled, but from which our pity is largely excluded...The collapse of human dignity, viewed externally, becomes a farcical spectacle" (Brooke, "The Tragic Spectacle" 249). Pathos, which harkens back to Greek tragedy, is characteristic of the end of Shakespeare's later plays, but Brooke argues it is absent in *Titus*.

Although Brooke connects the lack of pathos with Titus's insanity, it is also the result of a lack of awareness of his own moral decline. Unlike later Shakespearean tragic heroes, Titus is blind to his role in bringing about his own downfall. The "cruel irreligious piety" that Tamora recognized in Titus in Act I builds to his undoing in Act V. While there is no question the malicious hands of Tamora and Aaron brought unimaginable pain to the Andronici, the evil is put in motion in large part because of Titus's blind adherence to Roman rule and honor. Ribner explains that "all of Titus' crimes proceed from perversions of virtuous instincts; in each instance Titus makes a wrong moral choice in which he sacrifices the greater good for the lesser one" (20). While Ribner posits that this conventional definition of evil has Christian roots, one can also trace it back to the Greek's concept of *hubris,* which describes a man blinded by pride into thinking he can do the work of gods. While Titus's fall is certainly tragic, it lacks the pathos characteristic of later tragedies. Analyst Cross contends that "while it is true that Titus is presented initially as the selfless savior of Rome and human embodiment of all the Roman virtues, his ill-considered actions, committed in the empty

name of 'honor,' quickly alienate our sympathies, and he never afterwards succeeds in quite regaining them" (823). This lack of audience sympathy for the tragic hero likely stems from the fact that Titus undergoes no moment of awareness regarding how his actions in part led to his downfall or how the drive for revenge can harm humanity as a whole. In essence, Titus's downfall is sad but not sympathetic.

Although this early tragedy lacks the pathos of later Shakespearean works, the playwright's deft hand is still apparent in his portrayal of the destruction of evil in the end. With the demise of the hero also comes the destruction of the evil forces at work throughout the play. Justice and order are restored in the end, even as five of the main characters die in just the last act. Ribner summarizes Shakespeare's ultimate message on evil at the end of the play:

> In the portrait of the denigration and damnation of a noble figure because of weaknesses which spring from those very traits in him which the audience admires, and in the reconciliation which comes from the destruction of evil in spite of his fall, we have a formula for tragedy which postulates the reality of evil, man's free moral choice in spite of it, and divine justice in a harmonious moral order. (Ribner 18)

In the end, Lucius represents the opportunity for regeneration now that the representations of good and evil lie dead upon the stage (Ribner 18).

Thus, Shakespeare's picture of evil in this first tragedy is much more complex than early critics acknowledged. Although Aaron surely paints himself as villainous and Tamora orchestrates a great deal of horror, the evil is in no way confined to these two characters. Aaron's bold-faced and narcissistic malevolence certainly aligns him with the Vice figure of medieval morality plays, as Spivack contends, but Shakespeare develops him beyond this connection. In some ways, Aaron and Titus become mirror images in the

end; Aaron, albeit still staunchly diabolical, displays a shred of humanity when he tries to give his life for the salvation of his son. In utter contrast, Titus is ultimately the executioner of his daughter. In creating complex images of hero and villain, Shakespeare does not provide a clear solution to the questions he poses in the themes of the play. He challenges the audience to consider the difference between justice and revenge, and whether the same act, like a parent killing a child, can be just in one instance yet vengeful in another. He also challenges his audience to contemplate if his honorable, albeit rigid, protagonist can become villainous if driven insane by revenge. By the same token, he poses the question of whether an undoubtedly wicked man can have a shred of humanity in him. By having the two main characters develop in such a way, Shakespeare also challenges the audience's concept of villainy. He leaves no question that Aaron is diabolical and enjoys doing evil for evil's sake; however, Titus is so driven by revenge that he too becomes wicked. Shakespeare thus challenges his audience to consider to what extent Titus ends up malicious as well.

A careful study of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy is essential to fully understanding his later, more developed, tragic heroes. Titus in various ways prefigures Shakespeare's most famous tragic heroes, perhaps most notably King Lear, just as much as Aaron prefigures later villains like Iago. Cross argues that, "reading *Titus Andronicus* one is constantly reminded of what was to come" (824). He adds that Titus is an early version of the honest soldier Othello, and that even Tamora can be viewed as a first development of Lady Macbeth (Cross 824). Furthermore, Shakespeare revisits and further cultivates the portrayal of good and evil in later tragedies. In fact, Brown argues

that "The extraordinary variety and daring of this play's dramatic idiom is not the result of casual and youthful experiment or the flexing of muscle, but a concerted attempt to write a tragedy that probes horrendous suffering and displays inhuman actions, as later tragedies will continue to do" (25). The opposition of good and evil that in large part exists externally through the Romans and the Goths in *Titus* then becomes a conflict within the family of King Lear (Hunter 2-3). The parallels between Aaron and Iago suggest that the Moor was an early version of one of Shakespeare's most famous villains. Thus, *Titus Andronicus* may be riddled with brutality and may exhibit a less than successful experiment with figurative language, but its significance in Shakespeare's canon as a precursor to other tragedies and its notability as a play in and of itself must not be dismissed.

Chapter 2: *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's Most Sympathetic Villain

The timelessness of Shakespeare's plays exists in his complex characters and enduring thematic explorations. The fact that *Richard III* can be set in Fascist England, as it was in a 1995 film, and still maintain the integrity of Shakespeare's message speaks to the enduring factor of his artwork. Furthermore, because of the ageless nature of the plays, the interpretation of them has quite often swung like a pendulum, depending on societal attitudes and current events. *Julius Caesar*, for example, mentions that the title character has no heir, which would resonate with Elizabethan audiences whose ruler, Queen Elizabeth, had no children; however, this plot detail would be of little consequence to audiences of other generations. Perhaps no other Shakespearean character has undergone such varying portrayals as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* since the play was first published in 1600 (Gross 9). The sentiment toward Jews during Shakespeare's time and thereafter heavily colors the portrayal of Shylock. Over the centuries, Shylock's depiction has swung from the figure of a laughing stock fit for a comedic play to a devilish character to a tragic figure used as a scapegoat. More than any other play, *Merchant* raises often distressing questions about the playwright himself. Much ink has been spilled over whether the text is evidence of Shakespeare's own anti-Semitism or simply an appeal to that sentiment in his audience.

The development of characters like Shylock and the merchant Antonio make *The Merchant of Venice* a much more complex text than most Shakespearean comedies. Shylock is no Aaron or Iago, who are clearly and unabashedly evil. Antonio is no obvious protagonist who wins out in the end. He, in fact, is clearly left out of the classic

construct of a Shakespearean comedy because, while a double wedding occurs in the end, it does not include Antonio. The merit of the play lies in the ambiguity Shakespeare writes into his characters. Shylock is both sympathetic and villainous, complex and stereotypical, persecuted and manipulative. According to literary analyst Maurice Charney, Shylock's embodiment of both evil and pathos "is a fundamental quality of Shakespeare's method of creating dramatic character" ("Shylock as Villain" 85). Thus, despite the multitude of possible interpretations of Shylock, the value of *The Merchant of Venice* lies in its complex and ambiguous portrayal of villainy, as well as that of usury, Christianity, and justice.

Shylock is without a doubt a villain in the play, as he manipulates the action, revolts the audience, and elicits terror (W. Cohen 781). According to literary critic Walter Cohen, Shylock is directly associated with the devil several times throughout the play, which aligns him with the Vice figure Spivack uses to connect other Shakespearean villains (W. Cohen 781). Connections to the stock character Pantalone of Italian Commedia dell'Arte undoubtedly exist as well (Lelyveld 8). According to theater analyst Toby Lelyveld, Shylock's appearance and mannerisms are so similar to those of Pantalone that Shylock's Jewishness appears to be the only meaningful addition made from the preceding stock character (8). Beyond these influences, Shakespeare also pulls from earlier plays for several of the plot lines within *Merchant*. Critics identify the obvious connections between *Merchant* and *The Simpleton* by Sir Giovanni Fiorentino, which was written in 1378 and published in 1558 (Spencer 21). The parallels between Fiorentino's text and *Merchant* include a pound of flesh story line, a rich lady pursued by

suitors, and a ring plot in which a lover swears to cherish the symbol of loyalty only to then give it up (Gross 15-17). Interestingly, however, many of the changes Shakespeare makes to the plot of *The Simpleton* work to make the moneylender a more prominent and sympathetic character. In Fiorentino's rendition, the moneylender is never named and has no previous history with the man to whom he's lending money. Shakespeare's choice to name Shylock, provide him with a previous hate-ridden interaction with Antonio, and write him a rebellious daughter and late wife all work to humanize the character. Shylock's complexity makes him more than a stock character pulled from a previous play or tradition.

Playwright Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* also unquestionably influences Shakespeare's text. The parallels between Shylock and Marlowe's Barabas are overt, to such a degree that several of Barabas's lines are only slightly changed by Shakespeare. Marlowe wrote his play in 1589, and Shakespeare undoubtedly knew it well (Gross 19). Barabas is quite villainous as he cheats, betrays, and poisons people; and he subsequently receives his due when he falls into a cauldron of boiling oil (Gross 20). He, however, is not a shallow character, and Marlowe's Christians are by no means entirely righteous. Because of the play's portrayal of the savagery inherent in human nature, theater critic John Gross concludes that "within this utterly melodramatic outline [of Barabas], Marlowe has created a compelling, at times almost sympathetic, character" (Gross 20). Although the complexity of Marlowe's Barabas likely inspired Shakespeare, Shylock departs from the previous character in key ways. Most notably, Marlowe opens his play with a prologue spoken by the character Machevill, who then introduces

Barabas. Although Machiavelli's influence appears in other Shakespearean plays like *Richard III*, the Florentine outline for a manipulative ruler does not find its way into the character of Shylock.

Current events in England were also influential for both the writing and popularity of *The Jew of Malta* and *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1594, Jewish physician Roderigo Lopez was accused of planning to poison Queen Elizabeth and was ultimately executed for it. Although he had been baptized and was a professed Anglican, his previous association with Judaism was enough to incite negative sentiment (Spencer 79). The trial elicited a great deal of controversy and passion among London citizens, and what is referred to as "the Jewish question" was very much in the minds of Elizabethan England (Coe, *Demi-Devils* 80). According to analyst John Palmer, citizens were divided over Lopez's guilt, and even the Queen herself believed Lopez was innocent. However, because of popular opinion, she yielded and had him executed (Palmer 58-59). With this high profile case, *The Jew of Malta* experienced a great deal of renewed success in 1594, and it was in this year that Shakespeare penned *The Merchant of Venice* (Palmer 55). Palmer highlights the fact that Shakespeare likely chose to capitalize on the dissenting views as they related to the "Jewish question": "Shakespeare, in presenting Shylock to the public in 1594, was not writing for an audience incapable of appreciating the more humane aspects of his comedy" (Palmer 55). Thus, a myriad of varying influences helped shape Shakespeare's depiction of the Jewish Shylock.

Critics even suggest that Shakespeare takes his depiction of a Jew from Marlowe's text because it is highly possible Shakespeare never knew or met a Jew

himself (Garber 297). In fact, Jews were banned from England in the late 13th century, and the ordinance was still upheld in Shakespeare's time. However, according to historian Gross, public attitude toward Jews was gradually undergoing change, as the economy and trade grew and the English recognized the skills many Jews brought in these arenas (Gross 31). Because lending money was seen as unchristian, usury was predominately a Jewish practice and became increasingly necessary as trade grew in the 16th century. A group in London called the Marranos was outwardly Christian, but practiced Jewish customs during Shakespeare's time, and their numbers were growing in London (Gross 31-32). Furthermore, primary sources show that both Shakespeare and his father lent money for interest; thus, the playwright's portrayal of usury becomes a complex picture (*Shylock*). Anti-Semitic sentiment is undeniably in the Elizabethan consciousness and certainly colors Shakespeare's text; however, the singular conclusion that the text is or the playwright was anti-Semitic is far harder to make. Critic Garber deduces that plays are interpreted differently depending on the time, so it is very difficult, if not impossible, to discern what Shakespeare "intended" (Garber 296).

Because anti-Semitism has significantly ebbed and flowed throughout the centuries, the interpretations of Shylock, as well as the play as a whole, have varied probably more than any other Shakespearean character or drama. Up until the 18th century, Shylock was likely played as a comedic figure that fit the stereotype, complete with a large nose and red hair (Garber 302). The first well-documented portrayal of Shylock was by Charles Macklin in the early 18th century, and he embodied a malignant devil-like character (*Shylock*). As the attitude toward Jews gradually changed during the

Romantic period, Edmund Kean was the next actor to take on the part of Shylock. While he portrayed an evil character, he imbued a degree of tragedy into Shylock to humanize him (*Shylock*). The next marked change in depiction came with Henry Irving in the Victorian period of the late 19th century. He presented Shylock as a near hero in the play, as he emphasized the Old Testament connection of Shylock as a positive element of his character (*Shylock*). Literary historian Gross adds that, while the partially sympathetic Shylock was well established by the mid-19th century, the audience's acceptance of it is questionable. Although critics were increasingly discussing the complexity of the character, "most [audiences] were probably untouched by it: a villain was a villain, and the traditional image of the cruel usurer still prevailed" (Gross 133-134). Likely the most damage to the play's legacy came when the Nazis commissioned 55 productions of *Merchant* to highlight their message of anti-Semitism. In fact, one production was used to commemorate the removal of the Jews from Vienna in 1938 (*Shylock*). In many ways, every production of the play since the 1940s is weighted by the historic burden of the Holocaust. Although Shakespeare's Shylock preceded the events of the Holocaust by more than 300 years, he is nearly undiscoverable now that the collective consciousness is reminded of the horrors of the Holocaust with any seemingly anti-Semitic comment or reference in the text. As such, most post-Holocaust portrayals of Shylock are increasingly sympathetic, as they typically highlight the prejudices of the Christian characters (Gross 329).

One of Shakespeare's comedic conventions is the use of duality and doubles, and he repeatedly employs this technique in *Merchant*. His comedies always include cross-

dressing characters, mistaken identity, obstacles to love, and the culmination of a double wedding. While he includes all of these conventions in *Merchant*, he goes further in his illustration of duality in this comedy. Throughout the text, he plays with opposites and does so to challenge viewers to see similarities where audiences may not have readily recognized them. Antonio and Shylock are not only forces opposing one another, but they represent opposing forces in society – Christianity and Judaism, New Testament and Old, mercy and justice, mercantilism and usury. According to critic Garber, "Shakespeare takes advantage of these apparent differences in order to put in question the whole issue of difference. How are others, and otherness, related to oneself? To the notion that one *has* a self?" (Garber 283).

The pitting of seemingly opposite things against one another always has the consequence of truly highlighting their similarities, and such is the case with Shakespeare's portrayal of mercantilism and usury. As trade grew during Shakespeare's time, Elizabethan England had an increasing need for mechanisms for borrowing capital, but the practice of usury had been demonized for centuries on the grounds that lending money for a profit was unchristian. This longstanding belief led usury to be a predominately Jewish custom, but Jews had not been allowed in England since the 13th century. As a result, the growing commerce in England was gradually forcing the re-evaluation of the established views on both usury and the Jews who practiced it. Analyst Gross argues that Antonio and Shylock symbolize the two extremes of the "Economic Man" (54). Antonio, according to Gross, represents the idealistic, albeit unreasonable, desire that economic practice can exist without a competitive, cut-throat drive. In

contrast, Shylock then embodies the view of capitalism as a predatory and entirely self-promoting system. Gross concludes that the two characters "are twin aspects of the same phenomenon" (54).

In the trial scene of Act IV, Antonio wins out over Shylock in the end, but that does not necessarily mean that Shakespeare lauds Antonio's economic method over Shylock's capitalistic approach. Critic Cohen argues that Shakespeare is, in fact, criticizing the negative aspects of the evolving economic system, as opposed to the system as a whole (W. Cohen 768). He adds that the complexity Shakespeare depicts within this theme, as well as others, is intentional. The playwright does not want to entirely suggest that merchants are no different than usurers; instead he wants to challenge his audience to consider in what way the two are far more similar than society wants to admit. He also does not want to demonize capitalism in its entirety, but instead point out that certain financial approaches must change for mercantile ways to flourish (W. Cohen 775). Cohen concludes that "some of the merit of *The Merchant of Venice* ironically lies in the failure of its central design to provide a completely satisfying resolution to the dilemmas raised in the course of the action. We have seen that one purpose of the form is to reconcile the irreconcilable" (W. Cohen 775). Indeed, Shakespeare creates these dichotomies with the intent of challenging the audience to see how seemingly opposite forces are actually somewhat similar. As an extension of this ambiguity, Shakespeare does not depict Shylock in a straightforward manner. Shylock, like the concept of usury or capitalism, has multiple levels that make him concurrently

diabolical and sympathetic. The playwright's portrayal of evil then is no less complex than his depiction of these other multi-faceted themes.

The first two scenes of the play open with two characters separated in location and gender but united in mutual lamentation. The opening line of the play finds Antonio in Venice saying, "I know not why I am so sad" (I.1.1). Similarly, Portia begins Act I Scene 2 in Belmont with "my little body is aweary of this great world" (I.2.1-2). Although it seems like Shakespeare parallels these two characters to then unite them in the end, he does not end his comedy with a marriage between these two. Furthermore, while Portia identifies her source of lament as her inability to exercise her will in marriage, Antonio never pinpoints the genesis of his melancholy. Solanio and Salerio suggest perhaps his sorrow comes from concern over the safety of his ships abroad or from the heartache of being in love. Antonio rejects both suggestions and then is engaged by Gratiano and Bassanio before he elucidates the origin of his sadness. In fact, he never revisits the topic of his melancholy. The closing scene does show Antonio receiving word that his ships have returned with profits for him, but because he makes clear in the first scene that his sorrow is not related to his fortune abroad, his melancholy remains entirely unaddressed. In contrast, Portia's is fully resolved, as she marries the man she would have chosen, if given the power to do so.

Act I also brings Shylock onto stage and works to establish his position as well as the opinions others have of him. When Bassanio asks to borrow on Antonio's margin, Shylock's first concern is whether Antonio will have the assets in the future, given that all his ships are abroad. Even in this first apprehension of Shylock's, Shakespeare

carefully selects Shylock's words to hint at the dichotomy Gross identifies between Antonio as the idealistic merchant and Shylock as the cut-throat, self-serving usurer. Shylock says twice to Bassanio that Antonio "is a good man" (I.3.11 and I.3.13-14). In the second reference, Shylock clarifies that he means that Antonio is good for the money, but the double meaning is elucidating. In an idealistic world, one would loan money to someone based on whether he is a good person, but in a real capitalist economy, the choice must be based on whether the person can pay back the loan. This comparison is highlighted in Antonio's quick willingness to loan Bassanio money in Scene 1, even though Bassanio makes it abundantly clear that he still owes Antonio money from a previous loan and that he has already spent more than he has (I.1.130-141). In essence, Bassanio's plan is to borrow more money from Antonio so that he can use that money to get out of debt. From a capitalist perspective, such practices are extremely risky and typically unwise. Even after Bassanio explains all the risks to lending him money, Antonio responds with, "my purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (I.1.145-146). Unlike Shylock in the later scene, Antonio acquiesces to the loan out of sheer friendship and without regard for any financial risk.

In this first scene with Shylock, the moneylender also explains his hatred of Antonio, which is in part based on his poor lending practices. Because Antonio lends money without charging interest, he threatens the very livelihood of Shylock. In this same scene, many critics focus on Shylock's comment that "I hate him for he is a Christian" as justification for an anti-Semitic reading of *Merchant*. Analyst Gross points out that this line would remind Shakespeare's audience that "Jews were supposed to hate

Christians by definition, with the same hatred that their ancestors had shown towards Christ. All Jews, in this view, bore responsibility for the original rejection of Christ's message, and for the Crucifixion" (26). Whether one reads anti-Semitism into Shylock's initial comments about Antonio, his words nonetheless begin another contrast between Christianity and Judaism. Shylock has multiple allusions to justify his usury, and all come from the Old Testament. Furthermore, Shylock mentions Antonio hates his "sacred nation" and that he owes it to his "tribe" to not forgive Antonio. As probably the most damning objection to working with Antonio, Shylock mentions that Antonio previously spit on his Jewish gabardine (I.3.108), called him a cur (I.3.118), but is now asking for his help. However, even with these religiously charged comments, Shylock makes clear that "but more for that" he hates Antonio for his lending practices, which undermine Shylock's livelihood. In Shylock's first words in Act I Scene 3, Shakespeare establishes this dichotomy of economic and religious practices between the two figures. Thus, Shylock has multiple sympathetic reasons to detest Antonio that span from personal to economic to religious.

In this same scene, Antonio is the first to connect Shylock with villainy and the devil, as he says, "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose! / And evil soul producing holy witness / Is like a villain with a smiling cheek" (I.3.94-96). According to literary critic Elmer Edgar Stoll, such comments work to cement Shylock as the clear and unsympathetic villain in the play from the very beginning. Stoll argues that all who speak of Shylock speak poorly of him, and that this is no accident on Shakespeare's part because these same people speak highly of Bassanio and Antonio (Stoll, *Shakespeare*

Studies 264-265). According to Stoll, because Shakespeare often uses initial scenes and comments as expositions in a way, the audience must rightly judge these initial comments about Shylock (Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* 264-265). However, such comments about Shylock could also work to legitimize his future anger at Antonio, as well as society as a whole. In other plays like *Richard III*, Shakespeare undoubtedly uses early comments about Richard to construct the audience's first impression of the character. Such comments also parallel Richard's later actions and the words he uses to describe himself. However, in other plays, like *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare uses comments about Brutus's honor, not only to color his true depiction but to also pinpoint and foreshadow the very characteristic that undoes him. Thus, these early impressions of Shylock establish his villainy, as Stoll argues, but also foreshadow the fiendish actions of Shylock in Act IV that lead to his defeat. In a sense, Shakespeare sets up the expectations society has for Shylock to be diabolical and then shows him fulfilling those in the end. Again, the Jewish moneylender is anything but a shallow character; he certainly chooses to make the loan on the stipulation of a pound of flesh that he plans to extract in the end, but society has expected no less from him all along.

Act II further develops the opinions others have of Shylock, as Lancelet Gobbo mulls over whether to leave Shylock's service for Bassanio's. Lancelet repeatedly connects Shylock to villainy, calling him a "fiend" (II.2.2) and the "very devil incarnation" (II.2.21-22). The fact that such charges come from this character further complicates Shakespeare's intention. In the stage directions, Lancelet is described as a clown, and he spends his first soliloquy sounding emotionally conflicted and mentally

unstable. He imagines Shylock calling out to him and then his conscience telling him to do something else entirely. Because he jumps back and forth between the voices he imagines from Shylock and his conscience, Lancelet's sanity is questionable. In further irony, Jessica also refers to Lancelet himself as a "merry devil" (II.3.2), which shows that Shylock by no means has a monopoly on this term. Putting the charges against Shylock in the mouth of such a comedic and unstable character immediately calls the accusations into question. But again, a review of Shakespeare's other absurd characters complicates even this conclusion. In *Midsummer Night's Dream*, most comic relief comes from the ludicrous character Nick Bottom, who also happens to utter one of the most astute lines in the play: "reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (III.1.127-128). When all others think love is the result of reason, Bottom alone recognizes that this is not the case. Given examples like this from other Shakespearean comedies, to conclude that Lancelet's words about Shylock are either entirely accurate or completely absurd would be rash. Here again, Shakespeare refuses a simplistic portrayal and interpretation.

Act II also marks the introduction of Shylock's daughter, whose character and storyline work to humanize the moneylending villain. In Act II Scene 3, Jessica confesses to the audience that she is "ashamed" to be Shylock's daughter and plans to run away with a Christian (II.3.16). Her character and her choice to abandon Shylock and her religion muddy the anti-Semitic argument yet again. Literary analyst Gorman Beauchamp points out that Jessica hates Shylock just as much as everyone else does, yet she is a Jew (66). She also elopes with Lorenzo, but no negative comments are made about their mixed marriage. Beauchamp even points out that one can imagine the story without the

Lorenzo-Jessica plot, so if Shakespeare wanted to simply create a stock Jewish character, it would have made sense to omit this particular subplot (Beauchamp 66-67). Over the years, some movie and theater directors go to varying extents to emphasize elements of this subplot to make Shylock more sympathetic. Some highlight the ring Jessica steals from Shylock, while others underscore his forced solitude in the end. Although such portrayals are merely interpretations, they are nonetheless possible to make because of the careful details Shakespeare paints into this subplot.

Furthermore, the line of "my daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter!" (II.8.15), which seems to show his money-hungry, selfish side, are actually not uttered by Shylock himself. They come from Solanio, who discusses the event with Salarino. Without a doubt, the scene makes Shylock a laughing stock as their comments about "his stones" (II.8.25) are clearly an off-color pun to emasculate and mock him. The repetition and short staccato phrases in the lines they relate make Shylock look absurd: "My daughter, O my ducats, O my daughter! / Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats! / Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter, / A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, / Of double ducats" (II.8.15-19). Shakespeare purposely puts these condemning words in the mouths of Solanio and Salarino and not Shylock. Because the lines are a secondhand report, Shakespeare introduces a degree of unreliability. Furthermore, in Act I, Shakespeare establishes these men as sympathetic toward Antonio because they are the first to notice Antonio's melancholy and to question him about it. Just after discussing Jessica's rebellion from Shylock, they even mention that "a kinder gentleman [than Antonio] treads not the earth" (II.8.37). As a result, words that might otherwise reflect

Shylock's selfish nature are reported by less than reliable sources. The men's antagonism toward Shylock is expected and also represents the societal opinion of the moneylender.

Despite the multiple interpretations of Shylock as a comedic figure, an evil villain, or a tragic figure, Act III makes complete jollity toward his character difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. His first few lines relate entirely to Jessica's rebellion, and he repeats that she is his "flesh and blood" (III.1.34). Despite the mockery of Shylock's obsession over his stolen money and jewels in the previous scene, his first comments relate instead to the fact that his own daughter would turn on him. Such statements work to humanize him; like any father, Shylock is stunned and likely pained by his daughter's rebellion. Even if Salarino and Solanio laugh at Shylock in this scene, which they do, the lines Shakespeare writes into Shylock's mouth do not allow for a singular interpretation of his character. In his Jewish moneylender, Shakespeare does not paint a strictly humorous character as he does in Nick Bottom or Falstaff.

Act III also brings the famous "I am a Jew" speech, which critics use as evidence for every interpretation of Shylock from villainy to stereotypical Jew to sympathetic figure. When asked what use taking Antonio's flesh would be for Shylock, the moneylender starts the speech with an unabashedly villainous comment: "To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge" (III.1.52-53). At the onset of the speech, Shylock appears motivated entirely by revenge. He continues by cataloguing all of the wrongs Antonio has committed against him, for which he wants revenge. The offenses range from mocking him, to aiding his enemies, to hindering his business; Shylock claims all these injustices are committed simply because he is a Jew. At this

point, the speech takes a sympathetic turn. Although Shylock's revenge is driven by rage, Shakespeare is careful to establish logical reasons for Shylock's wrath. The next few sentences continue the sympathetic tone, as Shylock makes a reasonable plea for humanity: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" (III.1.57-59). These lines in particular make an entirely comedic interpretation difficult because Shylock's appeal for humanity becomes reasonable. However, the next line continues to complicate his portrayal: "Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?" (III.1.59-63). While the last four points continue Shylock's humanitarian plea, the irony imbedded in the first example negates it to a degree. Because Jews keep Kosher, they are not "fed with the same food" as Christians. This detail is not accidental by Shakespeare or Shylock because the difference in dietary habits is explicitly discussed in Act I Scene 3. After Bassanio jokingly invites Shylock to join him for dinner, Shylock refuses with, "Yes, to smell pork!....I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following: but I will not eat with you" (I.3.33-37). Thus, the food reference in the Act III speech remains ironic amidst his other reasonable pleas.

He then includes three parallel rhetorical questions that return to a sympathetic tone: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" (III.1.63-65). The use of such rhetorical questions demands acquiescence on the part of the audience. Shakespeare leaves the audience with only one logical response, which is to agree with Shylock's appeals. Furthermore, the questions

themselves extend beyond this immediate speech. The first question that references "pricking" clearly foreshadows the bond payment Shylock expects from Antonio, and the final comment about poisoning would connect to the contemporary trial of Lopez who was charged and executed for supposedly trying to poison Queen Elizabeth. While both of these questions have a serious tone, they are separated by a rhetorical question that would likely be delivered with a jocular tone: "if you tickle us, do we not laugh?" Thus, again, Shakespeare makes difficult a singular response to Shylock's message in this speech. He is both dead serious and ironically humorous at the same time.

At the end of the speech, Shylock comes full circle to the message he started with: "And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (III.1.65-66). He goes on to say that the example set by Christians is for vengeance and not humility, and then he ends with, "the villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (III.1.70-72). Here again, Shakespeare forces his audience to examine supposed opposites. To what extent are Christians and Jews different in their pleas for mercy or revenge? In the following trial scene, Shakespeare will revisit this idea in several ways, including Portia's question, "Which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?" (IV.1.169). If the two are as remarkably different as the prejudice would suggest, then her question is unnecessary. Even more so, if the two characters are in stereotypical costume, the contrast is nearly absurd, and Portia's line becomes comical but nonetheless ironic. If visually they're starkly contrasted, then perhaps her ironic line hints at an inner similarity—the fact that either one could be pleading for revenge, given the right circumstance. Regardless of the interpretation of Portia's words in Act IV, Shylock raises

an interesting issue at the end of the Act III speech when he mentions that the Christians have taught him villainy. The straightforward interpretation of this line insinuates that Shylock knows of an instance when a Christian sought revenge upon a Jew, although he does not mention a specific event. In a less direct manner, this line also connects back to the idea that Christians expect villainy of a Jew, and so Shylock intends to fulfill that expectation.

Those, including critic Stoll, who point to this speech as evidence of Shylock's villainy focus on the fact that the speech as a whole is justification for revenge, regardless of the sympathetic tone in some of the lines (*Shakespeare Studies* 268). Furthermore, critic Beauchamp argues that Shylock's charge of Christian vengeance falls flat when the Christians in the play opt not for revenge but mercy in the end (74). Despite the vengeful focus of the beginning and end of the speech, Shakespeare carefully crafts the lines in between to ring of certain truth. While some lines are ironic and are likely intended as humorous, the speech is not entirely comedic, and the language does not allow it to be interpreted so. Similarly, other lines resonate with wrath, but the entire speech cannot be read as such. According to literary analyst Brents Stirling, the complexity of Shylock's character exists in the way in which he combines pathos with farce (212). Earlier in this scene, Shylock elicits pathos for lamenting over the daughter who abandoned him, but also produces laughter for the fact that she took his money to purchase a monkey (Stirling 212). The "I am a Jew" speech is much the same—a combination of pathos and farce that makes difficult any singular interpretation.

Shakespeare's deft hand in this speech also complicates the interpretation that the play is anti-Semitic and that Shylock is nothing more than a stereotype. In the *Shylock* movie directed by Pierre Lasry, theater critic Gross points out that the "I am a Jew" speech very clearly suggests humanity, but in the end, it cycles back to the stereotype of the vengeful, villainous Jew. Some conclude that because the theme of revenge bookends the entire speech, Shakespeare means to confirm the stereotype of a miserly, unforgiving Jew (Stoll, *Art and Artifice of Shakespeare* 326). However, Gross argues because the bookends of revenge are separated with such rational appeals for humanity, Shakespeare appeals to the stereotype while concurrently challenging it. In Gross's words, the stereotype is "never quite the same" after this key speech in Act III (*Shylock*).

When word of Antonio's lost ships comes later in Act III, the dichotomies Shakespeare establishes early in the play come to the forefront. After having heard the news about Antonio's ships, Shylock's first words are "Jailer, look to him. Tell not me of mercy" (III.3.1). He makes clear that he intends to call for justice and not mercy now that Antonio has defaulted on the loan. He also returns to his previous point that he will play the part society expects of him: "Thou called'st me dog before thou hadst a cause, / But since I am a dog, beware my fangs" (III.3.6-7). Like the comment on villainy in Act III, Shylock points out the danger of a stereotype—when it is so widely held, those persecuted by it may either be destined to fill it or may choose to do so for revenge.

At the onset of the trial scene, the Duke confirms the stereotype society has of Shylock as well as the intention Shylock stated earlier to enforce the bond on Antonio. The Duke says to Antonio, "Thou art come to answer / A stony adversary, an inhuman

wretch / Uncapable of pity, void and empty / From any dram of mercy" (IV.1.2-4). Instead of focusing on the fact that Antonio cannot make good on his loan, the Duke highlights Shylock's prosecution of the letter of the law and uses it to demonize the moneylender as literally "inhuman" and devoid of mercy. Antonio's reply continues the established contrast between the two characters, as he says he will answer Shylock's fury with "patience" and "a quietness of spirit" (IV.1.10-11). Many critics interpret this contrast between Antonio and Shylock as an attempt at a Christian allegory of sorts. In "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*," Barbara Lewalski states that the two characters represent the opposing portrayals of the Christian view of love; Antonio is the self-sacrificing, Christ-like love, while Shylock is the antithesis, or the unforgiving refusal of love (Lewalski 329). She adds that Antonio's self-sacrifice on Bassanio's behalf is a reflection of Christ's sacrifice for the atonement of all (Lewalski 336).

To emphasize Shylock's adherence to the law, Shakespeare has the Duke, Bassanio, and Portia all appeal to him for mercy. They even play on the term "Gentile" several times when they plead with Shylock to be "gentle" or give a "gentle answer" (IV.1.33). Although Shakespeare takes great pains to develop an explanation for Shylock's ire in other scenes, in the trial Shylock unabashedly says, "I give no reason" (IV.1.58). Even when Bassanio offers twice the return on the loan, Shylock refuses it. Instead of providing a personal explanation for his insistence, Shylock turns to matters of reason and the law. He mentions the institution of slavery and the fact that no one would reasonably tell another to free his slaves because, by the law, the slaves rightfully belong

to the owner. In the same manner, Shylock argues he has a right to a pound of Antonio's flesh and contends that, "if you deny me, fie upon your law" (IV.1.100). While such comments support the contention that Shylock is an allegorical representation of Old Testament law and justice, Shakespeare also successfully illuminates the hypocrisy in the Christians' handling of Shylock. They call for mercy when it benefits one of their own, but not when it comes to matters of property, of which slavery was one.

Although Shakespeare's stage directions are typically sparse, he explicitly describes Shylock whetting his knife on his shoe when he thinks his argument for justice has been successful (IV.1.119b). In this moment, Shylock's embodiment of villainy appears most clearly. In "Shylock as Villain," analyst Charney argues that this moment shows Shylock's true motivation, which is not strictly the prosecution of the law:

> [Shylock] defends himself as a Jewish money-lender, an alien in the state of Venice, with great skill, but underneath all the reasoning (or rationalizing) lies a monomaniacal, homicidal drive to take revenge on Antonio. By killing his enemy, Shylock at one stroke hopes to gain satisfaction for the loss of Jessica, for the loss of the money he has lent, and for the losses both moral and financial he has sustained because of Antonio and the Christian's rooted antipathy to Jews. (Charney, "Shylock as Villain" 86)

With Antonio's death, Shylock aims to right all the wrongs he has endured in the course of the play. While this attitude and diabolical drive is certainly villainous, Shakespeare has gone to great lengths to explicate the wrongs that motivate Shylock. In comparison to other Shakespearean villains, Shylock's motivating wrath is extensive. In *Othello*, Iago lists reasons for his desire to bring down Othello, but ultimately these reasons lack substance and follow through. In *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora's desire for revenge is a logical response to Titus's denial of mercy toward her son, but Aaron has no similar

wrong for which he seeks redress. Furthermore, Aaron's evil begins early in the play with his suggestion that Tamora's sons defile and maim Lavinia in the beginning of Act II. By contrast in *Merchant*, Shakespeare uses three acts to develop reasons for Shylock's ire, including the rebellion of his daughter, his only living family member. Thus, well before this wicked moment of Shylock's revenge, Shakespeare establishes a complicated character with motivations that are both malicious as well as sympathetic.

In viewing the scene as an allegory, Antonio in many ways symbolizes a Christ-like figure, as he willingly accepts his fate for the sake of his friend Bassanio. While several others plead on his behalf, Antonio repeatedly resigns himself to sacrifice, once saying to Bassanio, "Let me have judgment and the Jew his will" (IV.1.82). Because of his love for his friend, he willingly consents to give his life. The allegory continues with the entrance of Portia disguised as Balthasar. When she entreats Shylock for mercy, she uses Christian doxology: "That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render / The deeds of mercy" (IV.1.194-197). Portia bemoans the legalistic Old Testament ways on the grounds that they do not bring one to salvation. Instead, by referencing the Lord's Prayer taught by Christ, she argues that one must turn to the mercy touted in New Testament faith (Gross 86). Ironically, Portia's successful overthrow of Shylock's plan is entirely through the legalistic letter of the law. She tells him that he can have a pound of flesh, but cannot shed "one drop of Christian blood" (IV.1.305), lest his goods be confiscated and his life taken. Thus the legalistic approach that Shylock used to entrap Antonio becomes what undoes him. Gross believes the irony in this scene communicates Shakespeare's belief

that "the remedy for misapplied law in *The Merchant of Venice* is well-applied law" (Gross 82) and specifically law that is first and foremost merciful.

Once Shylock realizes the consequences of taking Antonio's flesh, he tries to go back on the bond and take the money instead. However, Portia again uses the law against him, saying that he has already chosen to take the forfeiture of the bond and can no longer have the money offered him. When Shylock attempts to leave the courtroom empty-handed, Portia stops him. She again turns to the law, this time to charge "alien" Shylock with seeking the life of a Venetian citizen (IV.1.344). According to the law Portia cites, Shylock stands to lose his goods because he sought the death of Antonio. Ironically, this is the same consequence Portia previously mentioned if Shylock had shed Antonio's blood. Thus, she uses the law to literally damn him either way. Portia's reference to Shylock as an "alien" highlights yet another reason they condemn him. Because he is Jewish, under Venetian law, he cannot be a citizen of Venice. Shylock's otherness, both in his Jewishness and his alien status, is emphasized throughout the trial scene. In fact, he is repeatedly called "the Jew" throughout the scene, which analyst D.M. Cohen argues strips him of his humanity:

> Calling the play's villain by a name which generalizes him while at the same time ostensibly defining his essence is, in a sense, to depersonalize him….[T]he constant reference to Shylock's "thingness" succeeds in depriving him of his humanity while it simultaneously justifies the hostility of his enemies. The word Jew has always conjured up associations of foreignness in the minds of non-Jews. (D.M. Cohen 55)

Thus, Shakespeare creates a multifaceted picture of mercy and inhumanity in this scene. While on the one hand characters are touting mercy and claiming to be lenient in sparing

Shylock's life, they are nonetheless fixating on his otherness, seeing him as nothing more than an alien and Jewish usurer.

Despite underlying tones of callousness in how the other characters view Shylock, they still offer him mercy in the end. When Portia turns to Antonio to give him the option of showing Shylock mercy, Antonio agrees to grant it on two conditions: that Shylock give his estate to his rebellious daughter and Christian son-in-law and that Shylock become a Christian himself. According to analyst Beauchamp, Shylock's conversion is actually "the greatest act of kindness and mercy" possible for Antonio's enemy (Beauchamp 55). He contends that for Shakespeare and his contemporary audience, even if not our own, the conversion is seen as merciful because it will save Shylock from eternal damnation. Although a similar conversion scene does not exist in any of the known texts from which Shakespeare took inspiration (Gross 90), forced conversions of Jews did occur in 16th-century England (Beauchamp 61). Furthermore, critic Lewalski argues that this scene symbolizes "the Christian expectations of a final, pre-millennial conversion of the Jews" (Lewalski 334) and would, therefore, not be a moment of inhumanity, as perhaps it seems to a contemporary audience. Nonetheless, Shylock most certainly does not view the consequences as merciful, as his last lines include, "I am not well" (IV.1.392).

Stoll fervently argues in *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* that the playwright does not intend Shylock to be a sympathetic character, on the grounds that he purposefully constructed him as an avaricious, miserly, pitiless, and therefore stereotypical Jew (228). Stoll contends that if Shakespeare wanted Shylock to be sympathetic, he would not have

fashioned him after the prejudices of the day (*Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* 228). However, one must acknowledge that as first and foremost a playwright seeking an audience, Shakespeare would be conscious of what would appeal to his audience as well as what would disconcert it. Portraying a Jew in a form contrary to current prejudices could have made the play less attractive to a wider audience. Instead, Shakespeare portrays Shylock as the stereotypical Jew, but then stops short of making him a caricature by imbuing him with reasons for his anger and making him pitiful in the end. In doing so, Shakespeare appeals to those with prejudices while also providing a different perspective for those willing to reconsider longstanding preconceived notions about Jews and usury.

In *Shylock as Villain*, Charney concludes that "The Merchant of Venice is intended to give comfort to neither philo-Semitic nor anti-Semitic audiences or readers" (100). Without a doubt, Shylock is a diabolical, vengeful character who seeks to bring down another. He fulfills the convention of a villain because he stands as an obstacle in the protagonist's journey toward happiness (Coe, *Shakespeare's Villains* 51-52), but he is also sympathetic. Charney argues that, in creating such a complex villain, Shakespeare "forces us to have compassion for him not so much as a Jew but as a persecuted human being" (Charney, *Shakespeare's Villains* 53).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare departs from many expected conventions. He places a villain in a comedy and takes a long-standing stereotype and infuses it with pathos. Shylock is perhaps one of Shakespeare's most complex characters and has become even more so because of historical swings in anti-Semitism. Shylock undoubtedly embodies the evil within the play, but one cannot ignore his humanity either.

Despite Shylock's ardently seeking Antonio's death, Shakespeare goes to great pains to establish sympathetic reasons for his wrath. Although Shylock must be overcome for the successful comedic end of a double wedding, his defeat contains both mercy and callousness. Shakespeare hints, even if only very subtly to a willing audience, that perhaps a degree of evil lies within the stereotypes society holds. A community that embraces one view of Jews or usurers or foreigners can drive the persecuted to fulfill the actions expected of them, whether out of revenge or not. According to literary analyst Garber, the entire play—from the caskets, to mistaken identity, to the bond—is about one's ability or inability to decipher and interpret (303). In essence, the same can be said about its villain; Shylock is far too complex for one interpretation. The beauty of this Shakespearean comedy lies in the challenge of its interpretation.

Chapter 3: *Othello* and Shakespeare's Most Sordid Villain

Iago in many ways represents the pinnacle of Shakespeare's villains. He is starkly diabolical and, as such, is successful at taking down Othello, one of the most virtuous and tragic figures Shakespeare creates. Perhaps alongside Richard III, Iago holds the title as one of Shakespeare's best villains. While Richard III spills more blood for his desires, his motivation can be reduced to the simple drive for power, but this is not the case with Iago. Over the centuries since *Othello*, literary critics have debated the degree to which Iago even has substantive motivation for his evil, and as a result of that, the degree to which he is reducible to an allegorical form connected with the Vice figure of morality plays or the Christian tradition of Satan. What is not debated, however, is that Iago's malevolence single-handedly manipulates a virtuous man into committing a heinous deed in an irrational fit of jealousy.

Othello marks a pivotal moment in Shakespeare's canon when the playwright transitions from portraying an external battle between good and evil to depicting the struggle as an internal one. Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* and Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* embody and bring about the evil in each respective play; both are agents (or attempted agents, in Shylock's case) of death. However, Iago marks a change in this formula. While he does very clearly embody evil—perhaps more so than most other Shakespearean villains—Iago's greatest feat is his ability to corrupt Othello into doing evil himself. In Iago, Shakespeare shows the insidious nature of evil and how once the

battle of good and evil becomes internal, a protagonist's downfall will come at his own hands.

Shakespeare elucidates that duplicity plays a large part in the manipulative and insidious nature of evil, and from the very first scene, the playwright makes Iago's duplicity as well as his hatred of Othello clear to the audience. Iago says that Othello has passed him over for a promotion and given the lieutenant position to Cassio instead. Because of this action, Iago says he will "follow [Othello] to serve my turn upon him" (I.1.42). He discusses subordinates who serve loyally and then those who only appear to do so, and he makes clear his plan to be the latter when he says, "In following him I follow but myself" (I.1.58). Although he does not yet reveal a plan for doing so, Iago makes clear his intention to bring down Othello through duplicity.

Iago successfully dupes Othello because of deceitfulness, which is demonstrated in Iago's words and actions in Act I. After bragging to Roderigo about his intention to appear one way but act another, Iago follows through in the very next scene. Although Scene 1 shows Iago confiding in Roderigo about his hatred of Othello, Iago's first on-stage interaction with Othello in the very next scene shows him accusing Roderigo of speaking poorly about Othello behind his back: "He prated / and spoke such scurvy and provoking terms / against your honour" (I.2.7-9). Iago accuses Roderigo of the very thing he was guilty of doing just a few lines before. Furthermore, Iago warns Othello that Brabanzio is angry and aware of Othello's marriage to Desdemona, even though it was Iago himself who alerts her father and incites his ire. Iago's duplicity remains consistent throughout the play, even as he claims in Act V to find Roderigo dead when he himself

killed Rodrigo just a few lines before. Furthermore, Othello continues to call him "honest, honest Iago" even until the final scene of the play (V.2.161). Shakespeare takes great pains to establish Iago's dishonesty and artifice from the very beginning of the play and then to continually remind the audience of it. In doing so, the playwright creates a constant tension of dramatic irony as the audience watches every scene afterwards unfold, knowing that every comment about "honest Iago" is sorely misguided. Iago's duplicity is also part of what makes him a Machiavellian villain. He successfully crafts a public image of honesty that everyone buys into, only to have a fiercely ruthless, egotistical private self. Such a double personality exemplifies Machiavelli's requirement for politicians to have a flexible disposition, embodying the characteristics necessary to meet one's need in a particular time and situation (Machiavelli 107).

Like many Shakespearean villains, Iago utilizes animal imagery. To highlight his contempt for Othello's naiveté, Iago several times compares Othello to an ass (I.3.384 and II.1.296). He also mockingly calls Othello a "Barbary house" and an "old black ram" to suggest the Moor harbors a lascivious nature (I.1.113 and I.1.88). However, literary critic Robert Heilman argues that the use of such language carries deeper meaning in *Othello* than in previous plays. In *Magic in the Web*, Heilman traces Iago's use of imagery, associated with white/black and poison/disease, and finds that Iago's language literally infects the speech of other characters. He argues that Iago predominately uses this language in the first act, but it is gradually adopted later in the play by other characters as they are infected by his malevolence (Heilman 73). Thus Shakespeare uses language to signify the inner corruption of evil.

Analyst Alexander Gonzalez adds to this discussion, noting that Iago is the only character in the first act who references “hell” or “devil,” but in the second act, Othello and Cassio utter such language (43). Othello then assumes all but one reference in the third act, and the pattern culminates in the fifth act when six of Othello’s speeches are peppered with the language of demons (Gonzalez 44). Gonzalez makes a similar observation with the terms “light” and “dark.” By Act III, Iago ceases such references, and Othello becomes the sole character to mention them, which Gonzalez argues marks the “sign of infection” of evil (Gonzalez 39). He suggests that such verbiage serves as a barometer of sorts to measure the progression of Iago’s insidious evil, and that no character uses animal imagery prior to verbal contact with Iago (Gonzalez 45). Through this pattern, Shakespeare demonstrates that language carries meaning and, therefore, power. In fact, he articulates the potentiality of language in an ironic comment made by Brabanzio in Act I: “But words are words. I never yet did hear / That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear” (I.2.217-218). Although Brabanzio’s comment is made as a dismissal of Desdemona’s love for Othello, the words become ironic when considered from the perspective of the entire play. Iago’s skill at spreading evil is done entirely through words. While both Heilman and Gonzalez focus on language as an indication of Iago’s ability to spread evil, Shakespeare also uses language to represent a different view of evil than those in previous tragedies. Like Aaron, Iago represents evil; however, in *Titus*, Aaron metes out evil through his own nefarious acts. In contrast, Iago infects Othello with malevolence so the hero’s downfall is done at his own hand, and Shakespeare’s language marks this sinister effect.

Along with his duplicity, Iago's opportunistic approach to villainy helps guarantee his success. Despite making clear his hatred of Othello in the very first scene of the play, Iago never reveals a detailed plan of how he intends to undo the Moor. Rather than meting out an intricate plan culminating in Othello's demise, Iago takes advantage of opportunities as they arise. He incites the drunk Cassio into a brawl to question his seriousness; he suggests that Cassio plead with Desdemona, only then to point out to Othello their repeated interactions; and he uses the lost handkerchief as proof of infidelity. All of these actions appear to be the result of decisions made in the moment. When Cassio and Desdemona speak privately in Cyprus, Iago sees the occasion to use their intimate talk to his advantage:

> He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said—whisper. Ay, smile upon her, do. I will gyve thee in thine own courtship. You say true, 'tis so indeed. If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kissed your three fingers so oft…Very good, well kissed, an excellent curtsy, 'tis so indeed. (II.1.168-175)

Iago sees their affectionate interchange, which the audience has all reason to interpret as innocent, and he decides to use it to strip Cassio of the lieutenant position Iago was denied. Shakespeare's use of short lines, several of which are proceeded with "ay," or the British form of "yes," communicate that Iago is coming up with the manipulative idea in this very moment. He notices the opportunity and decides to take advantage of it for his own desires. He even articulates the power of this approach when he says, "Knavery's plain face is never seen till used" (II.2.299). Shakespeare portrays Iago as less of a premeditating manipulator and more of an opportunistic one. His success is, therefore, in large part a function of his means; instead of making a plan at the onset that could

encounter problems or reveal his intentions, Iago develops and executes his ruin of Othello as opportunities present themselves.

His opportunistic approach to villainy hinges on Iago's perspective of man, as one who can and should employ his surroundings to meet his desires. In his Act I persuasion of Roderigo, Iago reveals the logic that colors his perspective of the world:

> Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry, why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. (I.3.317-322)

Iago's villainy is influenced by his view of the world; man should rein his passions in with reason and, with one's mind set on the end goal, use his will to make of life what he wants. According to analyst Ribner, the Renaissance Christian view of human reason was that it reflected God's supreme wisdom and should, therefore, be attuned to the will of God. From this perspective, Iago's view of the world in which man directs his own will toward his passions denies the supreme will of God (Ribner 97). In doing so, Iago aligns himself with evil, or that which is in conflict with God's goodness. Such a world view also makes him a Machiavellian villain, who sees the world as uninfluenced by any divine course. Critic Bernard Spivack explains that Iago, like a Machiavellian politician, "knows that the world belongs to the worldling, and that human beings, whatever else they may profess, are in reality moved only by egoism, appetite, and personal advantage" (Spivack 424). As a Machiavellian figure, Iago manipulates those around him—not just Othello—for his own self-serving desires and is willing to bring anyone down for his own benefit.

Like all Machiavellian politicians and villains, Iago rightly judges the motivations of those he intends to manipulate. In the first scene, he plays off of Roderigo's love of Desdemona to get him to incite her father against Othello. He then enrages Brabanzio by pointing out the miscegenation in his daughter's planned marriage. In his manipulation of Othello, Iago recognizes that virtue is the Moor's most prized characteristic; so in order to torment Othello, Iago questions Desdemona's virtue, which in turn influences Othello's own. Each of these interchanges showcases Iago's calculating ability to read people and sway them for his own benefit; no other Shakespearean villain better embodies the true nature of a Machiavellian than Iago.

The artistry of Iago's ability to infect Othello with evil comes into full view in Act III Scene 3. Iago makes several short, but heavily weighted comments to Othello that delicately insinuate Othello has reason to doubt Cassio's loyalty and Desdemona's fidelity. After Cassio and Desdemona speak privately—a situation arranged by Iago, in fact—Iago makes a seemingly offhanded remark in Othello's presence. When Othello asks for him to repeat the remark, Iago dismisses it. Only after pressed a second time does Iago begin his manipulation to plant doubt in Othello's mind. He says of Cassio, "that he would steal away so guilty-like / Seeing you coming" (III.3.38-39). Because Iago suggests Cassio plead with Desdemona about his lost lieutenantry, Iago knows exactly why Cassio is there and why he leaves when Othello walks in. However, he uses the situation to begin to cast a web of doubt over Othello. Harkening back to his speech in Act I, Iago is able to use his own will to direct his reason and his passion, but he intends

to rile up the passion in Othello, as well as others, to such a fever pitch that Othello loses his ability to reason.

Iago continues to plant suspicion as he and Othello discuss Desdemona and Cassio. Iago repeats Othello's words back to him several times, often in the form of a question, as if to mimic the need for Othello to question himself. However, Iago comes just short of spelling out the accusation of infidelity, which only makes Othello all the more curious. Analyst Bernard McElroy argues that the artistry in this scene exists in the fact that Iago does not so much as plant specific fears in Othello's mind as he leads Othello to unearth the fears himself: "Iago's basic tactic is to make a series of tentative lunges and retreats, each lunge a little bolder than the one before, and in the intervals to allow the increasingly disturbed Moor to raise all the forbidden subjects himself" (McElroy 115). The "retreats" McElroy refers to are comments like "For Michael Cassio, I dare be sworn I think that he is honest" (III.3.129-130). The term "honest" is again used ironically here, but in a different manner than when in reference to Iago. Sadly, Cassio is indeed honest, but the irony lies in the fact that Iago lauds Cassio with the intention of getting Othello to rethink his trust in the lieutenant. Although the repeated references to Iago as honest do not elicit a question of his veracity, this one regarding Cassio ultimately does. Another one of Iago's "lunges" is his warning to Othello about the sinister nature of jealousy: "O beware, my lord, of jealousy. / It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (III.3.170-171). Despite Othello's previous lack of jealousy and even his insistence that Desdemona is trustworthy, Iago warning him about jealousy eventually elicits the emotion in the Moor. In the next line, Iago mentions a cuckold, not

in direct reference to Othello, but the mention of the word serves to plant the idea of such an offense in Othello’s mind. Thus, after Iago peppers Othello with multiple reassurances of Cassio’s honesty, he subtly plants the ideas of jealousy and cuckoldry, which at first Othello rejects. He dismisses Iago’s insinuations that he should be wary of Cassio and Desdemona’s relationship: “Exchange me for a goat / When I shall turn the business of my soul to such exsufficate and blowed surmises / matching thy inference” (III.3.184-187). Iago, however, is not dissuaded by Othello’s dismissal; he continues his insidious infection of Othello’s consciousness and suggests the Moor “observe [Desdemona] well with Cassio” to see if his concerns have any basis (III.3.201). In a plea of ethos, he then couches these suggestions in affirmations of his love for Othello.

According to McElroy, the turning point for Othello occurs just after Iago reminds the Moor that his concerns come out of love. McElroy argues that the pivotal moment for Othello’s conscience is when he says, “And yet how nature, erring from itself” (III.3.232), suggesting that perhaps Desdemona’s trustworthy nature has made an error. This comment marks the first indication that Othello is rethinking his belief in Desdemona, and it is the first instance when Othello, as opposed to Iago, is articulating evidence against Desdemona (McElroy 120). This statement is pivotal because it signifies the moment that Othello convinces himself of Desdemona’s guilt. Othello’s subsequent soliloquy demonstrates the degree to which Iago has been successful in this scene. He decides that “she’s gone. I am abused” (III.3.271), which is clearly ironic since he has been abused, or deceived, not by Desdemona, but by Iago.

As Act III Scene 3 continues, Othello occasionally takes steps back in his conviction of Desdemona's disloyalty. He admits, "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not" (III.3.389). To such hesitations, Iago insidiously weaves in manipulative comments to sway Othello back in the direction of jealousy. In one instance, he laments the cost of honesty, saying it can lose him friends and respect (III.3.380-385). In another instance, he returns to the animal imagery characteristic of many Shakespearean villains and that which incited anger in Brabanzio in Act I: "Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride" (III.3.408-409). Many of these comments incite growing jealousy in Othello, which analyst Garber argues is because jealousy exists just as much in Othello's mind as it does in Iago's (Garber 607). As a result, Garber concludes that "Iago is inside as well as outside Othello" (Garber 607). Iago does not plant the idea of infidelity in Othello as much as he works as an agent to unearth the fear that is already present in the Moor.

Iago also uses the opportunity of Act III Scene 3 to capitalize on the loss of Desdemona's handkerchief. Earlier in the scene, Othello says he'll "see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove" (III.3.194), and later he asks for "ocular proof" (III.3.365). Iago addresses this desire of Othello's when Emilia finds Desdemona's napkin that she serendipitously drops. Iago comments that he sees Cassio use the handkerchief to wipe his brow, in hopes that the mention will serve as the visual proof of infidelity that Othello desires. In many ways, Desdemona's handkerchief becomes symbolic of her lack of fidelity, much like the rings in *The Merchant of Venice*; however, in the comedy, Portia

and Nerissa use manipulation for jest when tricking their men into handing over their rings, while Iago uses the object to manipulate for harm.

The end of Act III Scene 3 marks Iago's successful manipulation of Othello. The insidious nature of Iago's evil has clearly infiltrated Othello because the Moor asks Iago to kill Cassio (III.3.475-476). He also gives Iago the position of lieutenant, which according to Iago is his reason for wanting revenge on Othello in the first place. However, despite getting the position he originally desires, Iago still continues to orchestrate evil, casting doubt on the verisimilitude of this original motive. The next scene indicates a significant change in Othello and a successful infiltration of Iago's evil nature as Othello begins to use Iago's tool of manipulation to test Desdemona. He asks for her handkerchief, knowing Iago previously mentioned it lay in Cassio's chamber.

Shakespeare further illustrates Othello's fall into Iago's trap through a change in verse. After Iago says he heard Cassio bragging of sleeping with Desdemona, Othello lapses into prose when all his lines in the previous three acts were in verse. His prose speech in Act IV Scene 1 is also peppered with rhetorical questions: "Lie with her? Lie on her?...Is't possible? Confess?" (IV.1.34-41). Such a change in form and devices represent the fact that Othello is losing his grip on the truth; the order and predictability of his previous love for Desdemona have disintegrated into a chaotic rampage of jealousy. Shakespeare culminates this speech with Othello falling down in a trance, clearly losing all control over himself both physically and emotionally.

The rest of Act IV reveals the remarkable change in Othello, as he both strikes his wife and repeatedly calls her "devil" (IV.1.235 and 239). He also picks up the animal imagery characteristic of Iago in the previous scenes (IV.1.260). Critic Ribner argues that the fourth act marks the full degeneration of Othello because he has succumbed to Iago's temptation and now sees the world through the distorted view of Iago (Ribner 109). Othello's characteristic ire in Act IV turns into a calculated approach to administering justice in Act V. This change in Othello represents the true danger of insidious evil—it can trick a man into thinking evil actions are justified, and Iago convinces Othello of just that. In Act IV when the two discuss killing Desdemona, Othello says he plans to get poison, but Iago counters with, "Strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.1.197-198). Othello immediately recognizes the symbolism of such a death and agrees, saying, "the justice of it pleases" (IV.1.199). Thus, Othello's misjudgment is not just the belief in Desdemona's infidelity, but is also Othello's belief that he should be the agent of justice. His words when killing Desdemona communicate this faulty view of himself. He says his actions are driven by "the cause, it is the cause, my soul" (V.2.1), insinuating that he is killing her because the injustice of her sin requires it. Furthermore, after suffocating Desdemona, he says, "I that am cruel am yet merciful" (V.2.96). Othello, in fact, has just as much a distorted view of himself as he does of Desdemona and Iago, and his defective assessment of Iago allows the villain to infect and taint his viewpoint of himself as well as that of his lover, and therein lies the tragedy.

The battle between good and evil in *Othello* has led many literary analysts to interpret the play as a Christian allegory for the Fall of Man. From this perspective,

Othello captures the potentialities of good and evil that lie within man, as Iago represents the tempter and Desdemona the purity of heaven (Siegel 1070). Analyst Ribner argues that the play's trajectory mirrors the traditional pattern of the Christian battle for a man's soul (Ribner 95). In the first two acts, Shakespeare establishes the symbolic roles Iago and Desdemona play and that both are vying for Othello's soul. The third act portrays Othello's temptation in which he essentially takes his oath to submit to the Devil, and the fourth act sees the operation of evil unfold with the quick degeneration of the rational Othello into a bestial one. In the end, as soon as Othello commits the heinous act, he realizes the error of it and undergoes remorse and penance. He finally enacts justice upon himself and dies alongside Desdemona (Ribner 95-96).

The allegorical interpretation of *Othello* is strengthened by the fact that Desdemona and Iago are in many ways opposing characters and examples of the purest state of the opposite elements of good and evil, respectively. While Desdemona is sincere and thinks the best of others, Iago is dishonest and assumes the worst. As the idealistic Desdemona seeks to love others, the diabolical Iago aims to undo them (Kernan 80). As a representation of man, Othello is, therefore, caught between these two extremes of good and evil. Even beyond the opposing personality traits, Desdemona and Iago represent symbolic counterpoints, as Desdemona functions like a Christ-like figure and Iago as a satanic one. Iago's language and actions, as well as Othello's comment about his missing cloven feet, clearly align Iago with a devil figure throughout the play. As a contrast, Desdemona mirrors Christ because she undergoes the same tempting logic in Act IV as Othello succumbs to in Act III, but she dismisses it. Emilia rationalizes infidelity, but

Desdemona refuses her perspective; Othello does not have the same convictions to stave off Iago in the previous scene. Furthermore, Desdemona's last words reveal that she takes on the blame for her death, reflecting Christ's martyrdom. When Emilia asks who has harmed her, Desdemona's last words are "Nobody, I myself" (V.2.134). Just as Christ symbolically dies for the sins of man, Desdemona takes responsibility for her death even though she was innocent of Othello's charge of adultery.

As an extension of the allegorical interpretation of the play, other critics, most notably Spivack, argue that Iago has a clear antecedent in the Vice figure of morality plays. He posits that Iago's character is that of an allegorical villain as opposed to a literal character: "For [Iago] is not essentially a man who is provoked to act villainously, but Villainy disguised by late convention to act like a man" (Spivack 55). Spivack's assertion hinges on analyst Samuel Taylor Coleridge's belief that Iago has no solid motivation for his actions. Although Iago states several reasons for his ire, Coleridge contends that none of the reasons have feet to stand on. Instead, he characterizes Iago's speeches as "motive-hunting of motiveless malignity" (I, 49). As motivations for his hatred, Iago mentions being passed over for a promotion and being made a cuckold by both Othello and Cassio, but all reasons seem to lack gravity when considered in the context of the entire play. In part, the multitude of reasons compromises the severity of any of them, as though Iago already plans to destroy Othello and he simply mentions reasons for the sake of apparent legitimacy (Spivack 11).

Other motives are mentioned once and never again, which also throws into question their significance (Bradley 210). Furthermore, some motivations, like Othello's

adultery with Emilia, lack corroboration on several levels. Based on Shakespeare's development of Othello's virtuous character in contrast to Iago's malevolent one, the contention that Othello slept with Emilia appears irrational. Similarly the audience would expect Iago to express resentment toward Emilia, if she did indeed sleep with Othello; however, his treatment of Emilia appears in no way colored by any suspicion of infidelity (Nuttall 282). Even in his accusation of adultery, Iago negates himself: "But I, for mere suspicion in that kind, / Will do as if for surety" (I.3.371-372). His blatant proclamation that he doubts the foundation of the adulterous claim, yet intends to act anyway, strips the accusation of any foundation of credibility.

Iago's passionate action even with admitted uncertainty of truth also further develops him as the disingenuous, malicious character consistent with Shakespeare's portrayal thus far. Critic Ribner concludes that Iago symbolizes evil and functions as the cause of Othello's downfall: "Although Shakespeare endows him with an illusion of reality so supreme in its artistry that it has escaped analysis as thoroughly as that of Hamlet, in the larger symbolic design of the play he needs no specific motivation" (Ribner 93-94). Because of the weakness of his motives, Iago appears to simply search for a reason to do what he already intends to (Bradley 211). Although some critics point to Iago's lack of true motive as a shortcoming in Shakespeare's portrayal of villainy, his lack of motivation for evil makes him even more diabolical and disturbing. According to Bradley, his motiveless maliciousness is "the very horror of him. He has less passion than an ordinary man, and yet he does these frightful things" (209).

Critics still debate to what extent Iago is connected with the Vice figure of morality plays or more closely aligned to a Devil figure. Literary analyst Leah Scragg delineates motivation as the difference between the two forms. She says the Vice figure is "an unmotivated amoral figure representing an inner moral frailty" while the Devil figure is "a motivated antagonist of Mankind" with the purpose of "spiritual destruction" (Scragg 58). On this basis, she argues that Iago is more illustrative of a Devil figure because he is motivated by revenge (Scragg 61). However her argument leads back to the original debate, which is the degree of solidity in Iago's stated motives. From Coleridge's perspective, Iago lacks the concrete motives necessary for Scragg's argument of Iago as a satanic form. In "Pattern in Othello," critic Ralph Berry goes even further to argue that reducing Iago to a symbol of evil, the devil, or even a Vice figure is to short-change what Shakespeare accomplishes with his characters (18-19). Instead, Berry contends that Shakespeare's hand is so deft in his character development that to examine Iago as strictly a symbol and not a human being is to eclipse the nuances of the playwright's craft (19). Despite the degree to which Iago is meant to be allegorical or literal, Iago clearly functions as the embodiment of evil in the form of man.

To highlight just how sinister Iago's evil is, Shakespeare crafts Othello to be the pinnacle of virtue. Shakespeare establishes Othello as virtuous but also naive in his misplaced trust in Iago. The first reference to Iago's perceived honesty is made by Othello in Act I Scene 3 when Othello plans to entrust Iago with Desdemona's care as they travel to Cyprus. Othello describes Iago as "a man he is of honesty and trust" (I.3.283). The dramatic irony mounts in this early scene because Shakespeare has already

made clear Iago's evil nature and intention to bring down Othello. The Moor maintains this misguided trust in Iago until the very last scene when he calls Iago "honest, honest" (V.2.161). Critic Farnham suggests that the dichotomy between Iago's evil and Othello's virtue is not so much a Christian allegory as it is a warning of how a disproportionate amount of good can make catastrophe inevitable (442). Farnham's perspective, though, can certainly complement the view of a Christian allegory. In the upright character of Othello, Shakespeare shows how too much good can lead to naiveté and, therefore, a lack of awareness of the potential of evil. Although assuming the best in men is a righteous quality, it is this characteristic that leads Othello to falsely place trust in Iago.

Shakespeare also plays with stereotypes even as he creates the two opposing characters of the protagonist and villain. In Act I, Iago uses the stereotypes of Othello's race to incense Desdemona's father against the Moor's marriage to his daughter: "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe…Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you" (I.1.88-91). Ironically, the first mention of the word *devil* is in reference to Othello and is in conjunction with his skin color. Elizabethan, and therefore Christian, audiences often associated the devil with the color black, and Shakespeare also uses this stereotype with Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*. However, in many ways in *Othello*, Shakespeare inverts his characters from the earlier tragedy. The virtuous war hero is now a Moor, and the diabolical villain is white. Literary analyst Alexander Leggatt points out that Othello does not show the same pride in his blackness as does Aaron. In fact, when Othello asserts his faith in Desdemona, he says, "she had eyes and chose me" (III.2.192), as though she

could have rejected him because of his skin color. Thus, while the distinctly evil Aaron promotes black as beautiful, the virtuous Othello does not (Leggatt 130).

Like many things in the play, Shakespeare leaves Othello's true racial make-up vague, and some critics interpret Othello as Arab as opposed to black (W. Cohen, "Othello" 2092). Regardless of Othello's true race—if Shakespeare even intends to depict one—the playwright uses color stereotypes throughout the play. Critic Ribner adds that the inversion of such stereotypes works to demonstrate the deceptive nature of appearances: "Othello has the blackness of Satan, Iago the whiteness of truth and virtue. True virtue bears the mark of evil, and evil is marked with the semblance of honesty. Shakespeare assures the audience of the falsity of these outward signs" (Ribner 102). Thus, the playwright's manipulation of expectations based on color makes the tragic turn of events all the more ironic.

Iago is undoubtedly one of Shakespeare's most captivating villains and Othello his most tragic of heroes. Critic A.C. Bradley contends that the fascination with Iago comes from his embodiment of admirable characteristics, like dexterity, courage, self-control, and insight, but all of which culminate in evil in Iago. He argues, "we do not sift [evil] out and regard it separately, it inevitably affects us and mingles admiration with our hatred or horror" (Bradley 217). Furthermore, although some critics argue that Iago's lack of motivation for his evil represents a weakness in the playwright, it is instead the lack of motive that makes Iago intriguing. The fact that he would orchestrate evil upon multiple people for no solidly apparent reason is frightful, and the fact that so many good people would be duped by such a man is tragic. Whether Shakespeare means to craft a

villain connected to the Vice figure, the Devil, a Machiavellian politician, or a likely combination of the three carries less weight than the point he is making about the nature of evil. In the end of the play when asked why he torments Othello, Iago does not answer perhaps because he does not entirely know why. And therein lies the frightening message Shakespeare conveys about evil—to not understand one's own drive toward evil means one may not be able to fight against it. This image of evil becomes all the more sinister, though, when it successfully infects a virtuous man. The battle of good and evil is identifiable and actionable when it is external because defeating malevolence then can be reduced to destroying the malevolent one; however, the same cannot be said for an internal battle. Once the battle of good and evil becomes internal, as Shakespeare shows in *Othello*, evil becomes far more sinister and threatening. Defeating it cannot be reduced to destroying the malevolent one because the hero has become malevolent himself. In fact, the protagonist becomes an unrecognizable form of himself and commits the heinous acts expected of the villain; in many ways the line between hero and villain becomes blurred, making the insidious nature of evil far more terrifying.

Chapter 4: *Macbeth* – Villainy with a Conscience

In "The Scottish Play," as superstitious actors refer to *Macbeth*, Shakespeare departs from his typical villains who revel in doing evil. Whether it is Aaron the Moor and Iago who do evil for evil's sake or Edmond and Shylock who do it for revenge, Shakespeare's villains have thus far been resolute in their villainy. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are not so, and they resign themselves to death after realizing the damaging effects of their evil behavior. Although the title character and his wife are partners in villainy, their paths through villainy are opposite images of one another. Lady Macbeth begins as resolute, determined, and focused, while her husband is unsure, doubtful, and fearful. By Act III Scene 2, their roles reverse as Macbeth becomes the driving force behind the continued tyranny and Lady Macbeth expresses fear and guilt regarding their actions. Regardless of the character development, Shakespeare shows that both villains become so riddled with guilt and regret that they welcome death. In this later play, Shakespeare goes further in his exploration of evil. He shows that it not only destroys others as in *Othello*, or kingdoms like those in *King Lear* and *Richard III*, but that wickedness even has the power to transform protagonist into villain. It is in this play toward the end of his career when Shakespeare shows that the most frightening image of evil is the one that can germinate within oneself.

To portray this internal battle, Shakespeare in many ways returns to the dramatic conventions of a Greek tragic hero in Macbeth. In the second scene of the play before the audience even meets Macbeth, King Duncan and other military figures laud him as the "brave Macbeth" (I.2.16) and "valiant cousin" (I.2.24). His nobility is well established,

but Shakespeare concurrently sets a sinister mood in the first act as well. Just after King Duncan proclaims a new title for the victorious Macbeth, the three witches spend the very next scene cursing Macbeth and declaring, “He shall live a man forbid” (I.3.20). Harkening back to Greek theater, *Macbeth* incorporates various conventions seen in plays like *Oedipus Rex.* At the onset of both plays, the title characters’ nobility is just as clear as their impending doom. Although Macbeth differs from Oedipus in his conscious election to do evil, both characters clearly fall from grace, and fate is a factor. Literary critic Coe goes so far as to contend that “in no other villain except Macbeth do we feel that so much of potential good is subverted to evil” (Coe, *Shakespeare’s Villains* 35). Thus in the first few scenes of the play, Shakespeare sets the stage for the internal battle of Macbeth’s conscience. He raises the question of whether Macbeth will remain a respected, valiant warrior or if he will succumb to the dark forces of evil referenced by the witches.

Critics have long debated the exact role of the three witches, specifically the degree to which they act as determining agents of fate, a metaphorical representation of Macbeth’s conscience, or something else entirely. Shakespeare likely included witches in the play in honor of the contemporary King of England at the time. Most critics contend that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* between 1605 and 1606 (Harbage 1107) to honor King James I who was James VI of Scotland and then succeeded Queen Elizabeth I to be king of both countries (Garber 697). In 1597, James wrote *Daemonologie*, a text on witches and witchcraft. Because *Macbeth*’s plot includes witchcraft and takes place in Scotland, critics contend Shakespeare wrote it in honor of King James I’s new reign in 1603

(Garber 697). According to literary analyst Brown, *Chronicles of England and Scotland* by Raphael Holinshed is likely the main source for Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Brown 288-289). In *Chronicles*, witches are described both as women in odd apparel and as goddesses associated with destiny (Brown 289). Clearly, both of these seemingly disparate images make their way into *Macbeth* because the witches have been portrayed as everything from deranged old women to characters associated with the Fates. Furthermore, the reference to the witches as "the weird sisters" (I.3.30) connects them to the Old English term "wyrd," meaning "fate," and the fact that there are three witches likens them to the classical Fates of mythology (Nuttall 284-285). Because of such etymological connections, some argue that the witches pronounce a predestined fate over Macbeth from the onset; however, literary critic A.D. Nuttall posits that the prophecies of the witches serve only as an external activation of a preexisting internal thought (Nuttall 284-285). Critics who agree with Nuttall point to Macbeth's quick decision to kill for the crown as proof that he had murderous thoughts prior to the presence of the witches (Coe, *Shakespeare's Villains* 35-36).

Literary analyst Bradley likens the Weird Sisters and their prophecies to the ghost in *Hamlet* or the falsities Iago tells Othello (Bradley 316). All plot devices serve as temptations to the protagonist who must either accept or resist them; ultimately, Bradley too points to Macbeth's quick conclusion for the necessity of murder as an indication that the temptation preexisted and that the witches simply articulate it (Bradley 316). As such, literary analyst Garber adds that the witches are both inside and outside of Macbeth's mind: "If the witches are causative, it is not because they tell Macbeth what to do—or, in

fact, because they *tell* him anything—but because, like Iago, they allow him to interpret things as he wants to see them" (Garber 698). Such an interpretation is supported by the inclusion of the Scottish thane Banquo, who hears a similarly tempting prophecy but chooses to let fate work itself out. Furthermore, Lady Macbeth's prodding of her husband proves to be far more effective and damaging for the title character than the prophecies of witches (Bradley 346); thus, an interpretation of the Weird Sisters as entirely agents of fate imbues them with more power than Shakespeare intends.

Other critics apply the Christian tenet of original sin to posit that the witches simply represent a temptation that could incite man's innate evil nature. Critic Ribner argues that the Weird Sisters "do not, however, suggest evil to man; they suggest an object which may incite man's own inclination to evil which is the fruit of original sin, and they do this by means of prophecy" (Ribner 157-157). Such an interpretation again likens Macbeth to Oedipus, who is spurred to action by the prophecy that he will kill his father and commit incest with his mother. In this understanding of Macbeth's failure to fight temptation, Ribner also contends that *Macbeth* functions as an allegory of the fall of Satan. Both Macbeth and Satan are conscious of evil as soon as it overcomes them, and both refuse to turn back once they have taken the path toward wickedness (Ribner 155). Both Satan and Macbeth's drives toward evil are motivated by ambition, which, like pride, functions as a refusal of God's will over man's own (Ribner 155). In Act IV Scene 3, Malcolm directly likens Macbeth to Lucifer when he says, "A good and virtuous nature may recoil / In an imperial charge…Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell"

(IV.3.23). Thus, where Shakespeare portrays the fall of man in *Othello*, he depicts the fall of Satan in *Macbeth.*

Despite the connection of the witches to the thoughts of Macbeth, Shakespeare's inclusion of Banquo in the prophecy scene of Act I Scene 3 makes it impossible to reduce the Weird Sisters to nothing more than a metaphorical representation of Macbeth's conscience. In Act I Scene 3, the witches tell Macbeth he will be Thane of Cawdor and he "shalt be king hereafter" (I.3.48). They also mention to Banquo that he will produce kings even though he will not be one himself (I.3.65). The presence of Banquo proves the witches are not a figment of Macbeth's imagination, and Shakespeare also uses his character as a foil for Macbeth and his downfall (Jorgensen 86). Banquo faces the same temptations Macbeth does, but he is able to resist them. In fact, Banquo even recognizes the enticing nature of the prophecies, warning himself and Macbeth: "And oftentimes to win us to our harm / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles to betray's / In deepest consequence" (I.3.121-124). Before the title character articulates an evil thought, Banquo acknowledges the inherent danger of knowing the truth. Because Macbeth succumbs to the pressure to do evil, one can assume Banquo's warning falls on deaf ears. In Act II, Banquo also asks for protection against the same evil forces to which Macbeth surrenders: "Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose" (II.1.7-9). Shakespeare, therefore, creates in Banquo a man strong enough to thwart the call of evil. He, like Macbeth, recognizes the attractive invitation but, unlike Macbeth, is able to take the requisite steps to deny it. Although Macbeth soon caves into the temptation of wickedness, early on, he is able to

calm its initial draw. As he debates the witches' prophecy, he concludes, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me without my stir" (I.3.142-143). In this brief moment, Macbeth trusts fate to run its course, but his hands-off approach lasts only a few lines before he decides to kill those between him and the throne. Shakespeare's use of Banquo as an example of the ideal response to evil paired with Macbeth's initial choice to let fate work itself out show that ultimately Macbeth's eventual fall is entirely a matter of free will.

However, Macbeth's first step toward taking things into his own hands and being willing to kill happens in the very next scene of Act I. When he realizes that Malcolm stands in his way to the throne, Macbeth says, "The Prince of Cumberland—that is a step / On which I must fall down or else o'verleap, / For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (I.4.48-51). Clearly his attempt at letting the course of fate run is short-lived before he gives in to temptation. Shakespeare alters the verse form in this aside, changing it from blank verse to couplets in the last four lines. The couplet form echoes those lines spoken by the first witch in Act I Scene 3 when she curses Macbeth. As a result, Macbeth's aside regarding Malcolm takes the same diabolical tone as the incantations of the witches. Just as the Weird Sisters articulate Macbeth's fate, he is now determining and articulating the fate of Malcolm. However, he oversteps the boundaries because he, unlike the witches, chooses to wield the hand of fate.

It is in this moment—when Macbeth has the inclination to do evil but has yet to act—that Shakespeare introduces Lady Macbeth. After receiving a letter from Macbeth

detailing the witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth reveals the first weaknesses in the protagonist who so far has seemed valiant and respected, even if conflicted by immoral thoughts. She explains that he is too full of "human kindness" and lacks ambition and the wickedness to attend to ambition (I.5.15-18). She quickly positions herself as a second villain when she decides to "pour [her] spirits in [his] ear," reminiscent of the poison Iago "pierced through the ear" of Othello (I.3.218).

Critic Ribner sees Lady Macbeth as less a secondary villain than a symbolic representation of the pull toward evil (Ribner 160). He argues that just as Banquo represents the potentiality of Macbeth to reject temptation, Lady Macbeth symbolizes the seductive appeal of evil (Ribner 160). As such, Ribner concludes that "the moral choice which destroys Macbeth is his alone; her function is merely to second him in this choice, to counter-act those forces within him which are in accord with nature in opposition to evil" (Ribner 160). However, to reduce Lady Macbeth to a symbol is to shortchange Shakespeare's development of her character. While she certainly does represent the continual temptation of evil, her trajectory in the play also serves to mirror that of Macbeth's. In Act I Scene 5, she expresses the fortitude to take on wickedness when Macbeth still lacks the strength to do so. Calling out to the witches, she invites them three times to "come" to her and take away any weakness that would stand in the way of wickedness (I.5.38, 45, 48). According to analyst Stoll, "ambition is in [Lady Macbeth] more evident; but…she seeks the favour and benediction of the powers of evil before the deed" (Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* 107). Unlike for Macbeth, the temptation of the crown

immediately drives Lady Macbeth to surrender herself to evil and to design a plot for usurpation.

After submitting herself to wickedness, Lady Macbeth then mentions the need to divorce her actions from her reason. She hopes “that [her] keen knife see not the wound it makes” (I.5.50), which connects back to Macbeth’s previous comment, “the eye wink at the hand; yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (I.5.52-53). Both villains realize that the evil they intend to do will conflict with their consciences, and as a result, they must separate their nefarious actions from their rational, moral selves. Departing from his portrayal of other villains, Shakespeare depicts very early on in this play the inner schism necessary when the average man does evil. He must knowingly separate himself from his morals, and the struggle to do this is what plagues both villains throughout the rest of the play. Macbeth struggles to do so in the beginning, as Lady Macbeth urges him on, but then Macbeth’s resolve strengthens just as his wife becomes troubled by the immoral path they have taken.

Shakespeare represents this bifurcated self not only in the internal conflict experienced by Macbeth and his wife, but also through much of the language in the play. The witches’ iconic line, “fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.1.10) establishes the battle of antitheses that characterizes the play as a whole (Garber 700). The prophecies themselves embody this sense of bifurcation, as they seem to foreshadow fortune for Macbeth, but in the end, their truth leads to his downfall. The repetition of the word “double” in both the prophecies as well as throughout the play as a whole also points to the sense in which the two main characters are divided against themselves (Garber 700-701). In the witches and

Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare also blurs gender lines to further develop the idea of a separated self. The witches are described as having beards, while Macbeth foresees his wife giving birth to only male children because of her masculine nature (Garber 709). Nothing is quite as it seems; even the murderers attempt to divorce themselves from their wicked actions, as Lady Macbeth rebukes her husband that "these deeds must not be thought / After these ways. So, it will make us mad" (II.2.31-32).

Act I Scene 7 showcases the encouragement Lady Macbeth provides for her husband who is painfully divided early on. In the first speech of this act, Macbeth lists multiple reasons he should not kill King Duncan, including his being a kinsman and being so well liked that his murder would elicit a demand for revenge. He concludes by saying, "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent…We will proceed no further in this business" (I.7.25-31). After he decides to take no action, Lady Macbeth then becomes that necessary spur when she questions his manliness and courage: "Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou art in desire? …What beast was't then / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I.7.39-49). Because Shakespeare establishes Macbeth as a valiant and respected soldier in the second scene of the play, the audience recognizes the strength of Lady Macbeth's words here. She appeals to his valor, the one characteristic that has driven Macbeth thus far. She then insults his masculinity, which would wound any man, when she questions whether he can match his actions to his desires. She then determines the plan they will execute to kill Duncan. Literary critic Coe concludes that, in this scene, Lady Macbeth operates as a foil to her husband because she is the "one who understands and fears his

reluctance to carry through the desperate enterprise on which they have embarked, and as one who will counterbalance his hesitation with her own ruthless determination" (Coe, *Shakespeare's Villains* 32). Her castigation of Macbeth paired with her determination of a murder plot are all that become necessary to motivate Macbeth to action. By the end of Act I, he is determined to deceive and kill Duncan.

While Macbeth's and his wife's trajectories toward evil take opposite paths, the characters also represent complementary elements of villainy. Although Lady Macbeth designs the plot to kill Duncan, she admits that she does not have the courage to execute it herself: "had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (II.2.12-13). Because Duncan's looks elicit an emotional response in Lady Macbeth, she lacks the resolve to actually commit the murder she planned. In contrast, Macbeth has the constitution to execute the murder but then quickly loses all resolve. After killing Duncan, Macbeth becomes paralyzed by regret: "I am afraid to think what I have done, / Look on't again I dare not" (II.2.47-48). As Macbeth stands numbed by his bloody hands and memory of the murder, Lady Macbeth becomes the villain of action, taking the knives and using them to frame Duncan's men. When Macbeth's conscience plagues him, Lady Macbeth works ardently to quiet it, telling him to "consider it not so deeply" (II.2.28) and "be not lost so poorly in your thoughts" (II.2.69-70). She again echoes the idea from Act I that one's nefarious actions must be disconnected from one's morals. However, just as she finishes what Macbeth started, an incessant knock echoes in the background of their hushed speech to one another. Although the next scene elucidates the origin of the knock as Macduff and Lennox at the castle gate, Shakespeare initiates the

sound in Act II Scene 2 to represent the increasing demand of Macbeth's conscience. As the first knock sounds, Macbeth jumps at the noise, worrying "they pluck out mine eyes" because "this hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine" (II.2.57-60). In another classical allusion, Macbeth fears he will face the same fate as Oedipus because his hands will not come clean of the red blood they have spilled. After several knocks, Macbeth goes so far as to express regret for his murder of Duncan: "Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst" (II.2.72). Although Lady Macbeth remains resolute in her villainy in this scene, Macbeth's fixation on blood and his anxiety at the repetitive knocking represent the height of his internal battle between wanting to do evil for the sake of ambition but also feeling the cost of such evil.

Despite achieving the sought-after crown at the end of Act II, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth become increasingly driven by ambition to the point where Macbeth wants to fight fate. In Act III Scene 1, Shakespeare parallels Macbeth with Julius Caesar, not just in a direct allusion, but also in his fear that he has no heirs. Because of his "fruitless crown" (III.1.62), Macbeth feels as though he has turned to wickedness in killing Duncan only for the benefit of Banquo. In Macbeth's frustration, Shakespeare shows the corrupting power of evil; Macbeth has lost all perspective and cannot see that he has attained the crown he originally sought. Instead, he now begins to fixate on what he does not have, which are heirs to continue his reign. Now instead of taking action to bring about fate, Macbeth decides to order Banquo's murder in an effort to fight fate: "come fate into the list / And champion me to th'utterance" (III.1.72-73). In doing so, Macbeth makes the same foolish mistake as Oedipus; having the hubris to think one can fight fate

leads only to one's demise. In a later scene, Hecate even alludes directly to hubris when she says "and you all know security / Is mortals' chiefest enemy" (III.5.32-33). Macbeth ordering Banquo's murder marks a turning point for the protagonist-made-villain. Not only is he symbolically sealing his downfall by challenging fate; he also steps into the role Lady Macbeth previously held when he articulates the plan for the murder of Banquo and his son. Similarly, Lady Macbeth takes on the role her husband previously held as she begins to express trepidation at their course of action: "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy" (III.2.8-9). She is gradually losing the ability to quash her fears in light of their nefarious actions. Her previous resignation to evil slowly begins to plague her, and in contrast, Macbeth believes their path of wickedness only strengthens with more evil: "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (III.2.56).

However, Shakespeare is careful not to reduce the path of villainy to a straight line. While Macbeth certainly ends the play with the same resignation toward evil that Lady Macbeth begins it, the playwright shows both characters take several steps toward and away from wickedness throughout the play. Although Macbeth demonstrates more resolve when planning and ordering Banquo's death, he then becomes so plagued by regret that he sees Banquo's ghost at the dinner table in Act III Scene 4. Shakespeare returns to references of blood in this scene to represent Macbeth's seething conscience, just as he does after Duncan's murder. Macbeth admits that "blood hath been shed ere now" (III.4.74) and admonishes the ghost that "thy blood is cold" (III.4.92). The playwright returns to this symbolic representation of blood when Lady Macbeth's

conscience plagues her in Act V, and she obsessively tries to rub her hands clean of blood. As Macbeth addresses the ghost that no one else sees, he appears increasingly insane to all those at the table. As she does in the first act, Lady Macbeth steps in to remedy the situation. She provides an excuse for his actions and then dismisses dinner with a quick, "He grows worse and worse…at once, good night" (III.4.116-117). Despite this momentary loss in his fortitude, Macbeth ends Act III Scene 4 with his most charged conviction about evil. He tells his wife, "I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (III.4.135-137). In Macbeth's comment, Shakespeare shows that the internal battle of good and evil reaches a point of no return for every man. No matter how valiant a man or how internally distraught he is at doing evil, wickedness becomes so all-consuming that the path out of it is just as destructive as simply succumbing to it entirely. It is at this point that Macbeth finally fully submits himself to evil, seeking out the Weird Sisters and then planning the murder of Macduff and his family.

In contrast, Lady Macbeth's next appearance demonstrates complete deterioration in her fortitude for evil. Like Macbeth in the earlier scene, she becomes plagued by memories of Duncan's blood and Banquo's ghost, reminding herself that "Banquo's buried. He cannot come out on's grave" (V.1.53-54). Just as Macbeth is previously paralyzed by Duncan's blood on his hands, Lady Macbeth incessantly rubs her hands hoping to get the imagined "damned spot" of blood off (V.1.30). According to analyst Garber, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene likens her to Banquo's ghost, as both represent "the restless tortured spirit vainly seeking repose" (Garber 721). To further

represent her deterioration, Shakespeare repeats the message of an earlier quote of Lady Macbeth's but markedly changes the tone. As she wrestles with sleeplessness and guilt in Act V, she says, "What's done cannot be undone" (V.1.57-58), a guilt-ridden repetition of her earlier reproach to Macbeth that "What's done is done" (III.2.14). Like Macbeth, she recognizes the irreversibility of wickedness; however, unlike him, she becomes plagued by that reality. Analyst Stoll argues that her conscience is more external than that of her husband and that, as a result, it acts more like a "nemesis" (*Shakespeare Studies* 107). He concludes that she "both awake and asleep is gnawed by the worm that shall never die" (Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* 107). While Macbeth's final reaction toward evil is one of full acquiescence, Lady Macbeth remains riddled by the reality of their shared evil. As evidenced by her inability to sleep and her obsessive hand rubbing, she has lost her grip on reality. The internal schism between evil action and one's moral conscience has destroyed her, and she ultimately ends her life because of the conflict. Literary critic Ribner argues that "in her death by suicide there is further emphasis upon the theme which dominates the play: that evil inevitably must breed its own destruction" (Ribner 162). Although Macbeth does not take his own life, he does march into battle acknowledging the inevitability of death: "I have lived long enough. My way of life / Is fall'n into sere" (V.3.23-24). Because of his nefarious activities and his resultant resignation into evil, Macbeth admits that his life has declined to the point that it is no longer worth living. Garber concludes that "his wife dies because of too much feeling, he because of too little" (Garber 722).

While Macbeth's treachery does ultimately repel viewers, the audience sympathizes with him as he takes steps forward and backward in his villainy. His struggle and to what extent forces such as his wife and the witches are at work complicate his trajectory toward evil. As a result, when Macbeth welcomes death, he ironically embodies both a villain and a tragic hero. After gaining the kingdom, Macbeth says, "I have lived long enough . . . That which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have, but in their stead / Curses" (V.3.23-28). He recognizes that his original goal of attaining the crown has not satisfied all his desires and has instead come with unexpected and painful consequences. Through his violent ascension to power, Macbeth loses the honor, respect, and friends he had prior to his villainy. In the end, he expresses utter hopelessness as he says life "is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.5.25-27). Like countless tragic heroes before him, Macbeth recognizes that his ambition may have won him a crown but, in doing so, stripped him of all else. This sad reality of the cost of evil causes Macbeth to boldly march to his death as both a villain and a tragic hero.

In portraying an internal battle of good and evil, Shakespeare faces the challenge of maintaining sympathy for his protagonist as the hero degenerates into the villain. To do so, Shakespeare distances his protagonist from several conventions he has implemented for past villains and connects his protagonist in many ways to Greek tragic heroes of old. According to critic Stoll, Shakespeare only hints at Macbeth's Machiavellian characteristics like his calculated ambition and willingness to do anything for power, while in other villains like Iago, such traits are highlighted and repeated

(*Shakespeare Studies* 131). He adds that Shakespeare "envelops both hero and heroine with an atmosphere of poetry incompatible (in a sense) with their conduct. He in a way glorifies a pair of traitors and murders. He holds interest at some cost to truth" (Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* 131). By displaying their inner turmoil even once the characters decide to do evil, Shakespeare differentiates Macbeth and his wife from villains like Iago or Edmund; however, as analyst Stoll points out, detailing their inner turmoil also minimizes the true horror of their ambition-driven actions. Sympathizing with the distraught Macbeth means the audience is not concurrently fixated on the tragic death of Duncan or Banquo.

To keep the audience's sympathy for the villainous couple, Shakespeare also returns to several conventions of Greek theater. He has Macbeth commit Duncan's murder off-stage, which departs from most Elizabethan plays and instead echoes the handling of killings in Greek theater (Stoll, *Shakespeare Studies* 83). Furthermore, having the protagonist kill off-stage helps distance the protagonist-turned-murderer from his nefarious acts. The playwright also uses the Greek convention of mistaken prophecy to heighten the tragic element of Macbeth's downfall. One of the witches' prophecies is that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" (IV.1.96-97). Macbeth uses that prophecy to encourage himself in his battle against Malcolm and Macduff. He even brags to one soldier, "thou wast born of woman, / But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn, / Brandished by man that's of a woman born" (V.7.12-14). His arrogance, fueled by his misunderstanding of an obtuse prophecy, echoes that of Oedipus who ardently believes he has avoided the prophecy of killing his father and sleeping with his mother. Just as

Oedipus realizes his mistake when it is too late to amend it, Macbeth learns that Macduff was “from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripped” (V.10.15-16) just as Macduff faces him in battle. Shakespeare’s repetitive connections between Macbeth and tragic heroes of old help maintain the audience’s connection with the protagonist even as he degenerates into a villain.

Unlike Aaron, Richard III, or Shylock, Macbeth has no "reason" for wreaking havoc. He certainly wants power, but he is an ordinary, albeit valiant, man. Aaron, Richard III, and Shylock all identify themselves as the other for some reason, and their otherness is part of what motivates them toward villainy. Nonetheless, Macbeth has no such reason to turn to villainy. He simply caves in to the temptations life affords, which in his case is ambition. Critic Ribner adds, “We see [Macbeth] not as an abstract symbol of evil in whose destruction we may rejoice, but rather as a fellow human in whose fall there is terrible waste and a view of the fate of which we are capable” (154). This makes him more disturbing as a villain and protagonist because it makes evil much more real, palpable, and possible to the average man. Because Macbeth elicits both condemnation for his evil and admiration for his courage, literary analyst Michael J. Collins concludes that “*Macbeth* is a disturbing play because it can draw its audiences irresistibly to evil, because in our response to it we can be duped by and made complicit with something we know should be resisted and condemned” (Collins 95). Thus, Shakespeare leaves his audience horrified and guilt-ridden while also intrigued and sadden by Macbeth.

Macbeth succumbs to the same insidious desire for power as do Shakespeare’s Cassius and Richard III. However, he departs from all other villains because he alone

wrestles with good and evil. Shakespeare's other villains give over completely to evil because they see it as the most expeditious means to power, prestige, or revenge. In contrast, Macbeth grapples with and is then tormented by his own villainy. In the end, he recognizes that there is no turning back from the course of evil: "I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (III.5.135-137). Returning again to the symbolic reference of blood, Macbeth realizes that a single evil act begets more malicious acts and that one who choses villainy once remains a villain for life. He adds that evil is so all-consuming that he has "almost forgot the taste of fears" (V.5.9). In effect, wickedness has stripped Macbeth of his humanity, and he has no means by which to recover it. In this tragic play toward the end of his career, Shakespeare takes villainy to its most tragic apex. In Macbeth's character, the playwright demonstrates the true extent of the destruction brought by evil, which is that it can consume even the noble man himself. However, through the structure of protagonist-made-villain, Shakespeare goes even further to draw his audience closer into villainy than in any of his previous plays. By garnering sympathy for his protagonist and maintaining it even as he becomes the villain, Shakespeare makes the audience complicit in Macbeth's decline. The audience is no longer relegated to the role of observer of evil, but intimately understands the painful choices that accompany the temptations of evil. In doing so, Shakespeare exposes the true horror of evil—that its most frightening form is that which can germinate within oneself.

Conclusion

Like many playwrights and writers, Shakespeare begins his career pulling heavily from his predecessors and from conventions of contemporary theater. As a result, many of his early plays include characters that fit long-standing stereotypes and are carried over from the stock characters of morality plays. Critic Bernard Spivack argues for the most significant connection when he demonstrates the similarities between several of Shakespeare's villains and the Vice figure from the Middle Ages. Shakespeare's close connection to this medieval genre of literature that pits vice against virtue is most clearly seen in Aaron from *Titus Andronicus*. Captured in the line, "If one good deed in all my life I did / I do repent it from my very soul" (V.3.188-189), Aaron does evil for evil's sake and, as a result, brings down the virtuous soldier Titus. However, even in his earliest of plays, Shakespeare demonstrates his craft as a playwright through his ability to go beyond the conventions that may have inspired these earliest works. Even in the diabolical Aaron, Shakespeare reveals humanity as he tries to save his son, and in Titus, the playwright shows how vengeance can drive a virtuous man to do evil.

Like morality plays, Shakespeare's works explore the variety of motivating factors that drive a man to wickedness. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare portrays the compelling force of revenge—it drives both heroes and villains to heinous acts and to their own ruin. Aaron's brash wickedness identifies him as the villain in *Titus Andronicus* as he incites the rape and dismemberment of Lavinia, organizes the beheading of Titus's sons, and brazenly proclaims in the end that he is sorry he "had not done a thousand more" heinous deeds (V.1.124). Even though Shakespeare so clearly establishes Aaron as

evil, the playwright does not leave Titus as a hero innocent of all ill. Because of his enraged need for revenge, Titus commits wicked acts that, in many ways, echo those of Aaron. Before she is raped and dismembered, Lavinia pleads for mercy just as Tamora does before Titus kills her eldest son. Although Titus says Tamora's son is a "sacrifice" for the Romans killed by the Goths in battle, both Lavinia's torture and the murder of Tamora's eldest are under the guise of revenge (I.1.124). Likewise, Titus kills Tamora's other sons and feeds them to her in a pie as retribution for Lavinia's torture and the beheading of Titus's sons. Again, revenge drives Titus and, as result, blurs the line between hero and villain. Although Aaron openly revels in his villainy and Titus proclaims his actions as righteous vengeance, the two men still commit shockingly similar acts. As a result, Shakespeare forces his audience to consider how damaging revenge can be and to what extent revenge is just if it drives a man to the same actions as those of an unabashed villain.

In *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explores how being marginalized in society can drive a person to villainy through a desire for vengeance. Evident in his famous Act 3 speech, Shylock's demand for Antonio's flesh is entirely in the name of vengeance: "If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge" (III.1.58-61). Shylock is clearly resentful of the ostracism he and other Jews experience, and he believes revenge is justified. In the end, Shylock does not get revenge because Portia's play for dominance wins out in the court room scene. However, Shylock's motivation is retribution for society's unjust prejudice. In this Jewish usurer, Shakespeare shows the cost of

ostracizing a man for something he has little control over; marginalization can breed a brooding frustration that is satisfied only through the damage brought by revenge.

In *Othello*, Shakespeare demonstrates the damaging effects of jealousy. Although the veracity of his stated motivations is questionable, Iago does mention his resentment that Othello passed him over for a promotion in favor of Cassio and also appears jealous of both Othello's respected position in society and his loving relationship with Desdemona. Regardless of the reason, Iago makes abundantly clear his disdain for Othello as he repeats the phrase, "I hate the Moor," several times throughout the play (I.3.168). Far more notable than Iago's jealousy is the fact that he uses envy to incite Othello against Desdemona. Iago is both consumed by the "green-eyed monster," as he calls it, and able to use it to bring about Othello's downfall, which Iago seeks all along (III.3.170). Because jealousy drives both the villain and the hero in *Othello,* Shakespeare demonstrates that, like power, jealousy is so insidious that it corrupts man and may cause villainy in one man and utter destruction in another.

Toward the end of his career, Shakespeare explores the temptation of ambition in *Macbeth*. Macbeth appears honorable, and in no part villainous, at the beginning of the play. In Act I Scene 2, King Duncan and the captain in the battle refer to Macbeth as "brave," "valiant," and "worthy" (I.2.16-24), and Macbeth responds with a deep expression of loyalty toward the very king he will kill just a few scenes later:

> The service and the loyalty I owe,
> In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part
> Is to receive our duties, and our duties
> Are to your throne and state children and servants

> Which do but what they should by doing everything
> Safe toward your love and honour. (I.4.22-27)

Macbeth expresses no ambition, but instead willingly gives his service to the king. Even after hearing the prophecy of his kingship, Macbeth leaves it up to chance: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me without my stir” (I.3.143-144). This attitude changes, and he is driven to action immediately upon the suggestion of attainable power. When King Duncan bestows the new title of Thane of Cawdor upon Macbeth, ambition instantly builds within him. He says to himself, “Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (I.4.50-51). Over the course of the play, Macbeth increasingly succumbs to the power of ambition, which eventually corrupts and ruins him. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare refuses to let his audience think a villain can be reduced to just a man who is evil. He challenges his audience to consider how much more chilling a villain is when he is simply a man with good intentions gone awry by the attractive possibility of power.

Although Shakespeare clearly takes inspiration from the exploration of vices in morality plays, a study of four of Shakespeare’s plays reveals the extent to which the playwright evolves from these earlier patterns. In *Othello*, he inverts stereotypes as he makes the villain white and the virtuous hero a Moor, and in *Merchant of Venice* he purposely imbues the villainous Jew with sympathetic reasons for his ire. However, his most notable evolution exists in his portrayal of the battle of good and evil. In liturgical and morality plays, the battle was made external through characters personifying Virtue, Vice, Envy, Pride, etc. Shakespeare, in some respects, carries over this convention in his earlier works, but gradually breaks from it as his skill as a dramatist matures. *Othello*

marks the pivotal moment when the battle becomes internal. Instead of executing evil himself like Aaron and Shylock do, Iago insidiously infiltrates the mind of Othello and successfully gets him to commit heinous acts characteristic of villainy. From the very first scene, the audience is aware of Iago's plan to undo Othello; the tragedy mounts as we watch each scene unfold and Othello fall more and more into Iago's trap. Instead of simply showing an evil man wreak havoc on a virtuous one, Shakespeare shows in *Othello* the means by which evil can manipulate and consume a man. As a result, the audience is brought closer to the evil as it gradually infects Othello throughout the play. Whereas *Titus Andronicus* merely peppers the audience with one violent act after another, *Othello* exposes the inner workings of evil on the heart of a virtuous man.

As a playwright, Shakespeare remains focused on and inspired by the objective of tragedy set out by the Greeks thousands of years earlier. Even in *Titus*, Shakespeare shows the depths of human suffering—most notably the destruction brought by the drive for revenge. Titus loses almost all of his family and has to face the defilement of his daughter. Ultimately, he is driven to an insanity-filled rage that ends in self-destruction. However, Shakespeare uses his later plays to fully explore the depths of human suffering. By portraying his protagonist wrestling with evil himself, the playwright brings the audience closer to the pull of evil and its eventual consequences. Moving away from personifying evil in the form of a character and instead depicting it as a personal struggle within the very character the audience champions, Shakespeare portrays his later characters as far more aware of their downfall and the consequences of their nefarious actions. Unlike Titus, Othello eventually recognizes his failure to identify and fight evil.

Othello realizes he has misplaced his trust in Iago, been duped, and then murdered his innocent wife. Titus makes no such realizations, and in complete contrast to this first protagonist, Macbeth is acutely aware of his trajectory from start to finish. He details each choice he makes to acquiesce further to the temptation of evil, and the audience is privy to each of these tortured choices. Once he has, in his mind, gone so far that he cannot turn back, he is also fully aware of what he has lost at the cost of evil: "And that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have, but in their stead / Curses" (V.3.25-28). Macbeth has none of the narrow vision of Titus or the delusions of Othello. By moving away from the stock characters of earlier theater genres, Shakespeare is able to portray a character more aware of his downfall and his own hand in bringing it about.

Moving away from the stock characters also allows Shakespeare to portray more nuanced and horrifying villains. The playwright is careful to imbue his earlier villains, like Aaron and Shylock, with shreds of humanity that make them more than stock characters; however, they still clearly have antecedents in the figures of the medieval morality plays. Earlier villains play on the stereotypes of blacks or Jews and point to their "otherness" as a reason for their villainy. Later in his career, Shakespeare departs from this formula. Iago has no clearly articulated reason for ruining Othello, yet he does so anyway. Though driven by ambition, Macbeth is the average man made valiant in war. In showing that these two men bring about such wickedness, Shakespeare makes evil something that cannot be relegated to the "other" but instead exists as a temptation for all men.

Most notably, Shakespeare warns that the highest cost of villainy is the loss of one's humanity. After acknowledging that he is so steeped in evil that he cannot turn back, Macbeth concedes the hardest truth about wickedness: "I have supped full with horrors. / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me" (V.5.13-15). Macbeth's evil has numbed him to all emotions—fear, revulsion, compassion, and mercy, the very things that define one's humanity. In many cases, Shakespeare shows that this loss of humanity leads not only to the demise of the villain's targets but also to the destruction of the villains themselves. Thus, Shakespeare demonstrates that the path into wickedness is not only an all-consuming one, but one that takes from a villain that which makes him human.

Breaking from previous theater conventions, Shakespeare is also able to elicit a very different emotion from his audience. Titus's downfall, complete with his deteriorating sanity and execution of his own daughter, is sad and most certainly elicits anguish from an audience. Viewers mourn Titus's fall from valiant soldier to revenge-driven murderer. However, Macbeth's downfall is felt acutely by both him and the audience. Because of Shakespeare's formula of protagonist-made-villain, viewers effectively walk with Macbeth through the turmoil of his internal battle between good and evil as well as of the consequences of his ultimate choice to do ill. In doing so, the playwright elicits sympathy for Macbeth as opposed to only anguish at the horror of evil acts in previous plays. For an audience, the difference between anguish and sympathy is palpable; anguish leaves a viewer able to relegate evil to a particular person or event, while sympathy lingers with a viewer because one has identified with the temptation that

drove the character to evil. In essence, Shakespeare returns to the Greek convention of catharsis, or the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. By sympathizing with Macbeth, the audience to a large degree pities him and fears that ambition could to the same to any man as it does to Macbeth. Like the Greeks, Shakespeare makes his audience move from complacent observer to one who is emotionally involved as he experiences tragedy. Thus tragedy becomes less about a sad event that happens to someone else and more about a shared and understood experience that could happen to anyone. And therein lies the power of Shakespeare's ultimate message on the battle between good and evil—it is most dangerous when it occurs within oneself and even when one is aware of the conflict, like Macbeth, one could still lose the battle at the cost of his own humanity.

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