

5-2012

## Playing Devil's Advocate: The Attractive Shakespearean Villain

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PLAYING DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: THE ATTRACTIVE SHAKESPEAREAN VILLAIN

PLAYING DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: THE ATTRACTIVE SHAKESPEAREAN VILLAIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

By

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University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2010

May 2012  
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## ABSTRACT

The characters of William Shakespeare have spawned countless words of critical interpretation inspired by the playwright's aptitude for fashioning intricate and conflicted figures. As a master character craftsman, Shakespeare is consistent in creating fascinatingly deep characters, and many of them have even gone so far as to generate entire literary archetypes. From the contemplative Prince Hamlet to the despicable yet charming John Falstaff, Shakespeare's characters remain eternal representatives of what any good character should be: interesting, provocative, and complicated.

However, among the playwright's most hypnotic figures are his villains, those characters whom audiences should by all counts detest but cannot help but find alluring. Some of these villains have attracted more critical attention than others. For instance, Iago, the scheming fiend of *Othello*, has forever mesmerized audiences and critics alike with his almost supernatural penchant for evil. Other villains, like the passionate firebrand of *1 Henry IV*, Henry "Hotspur" Percy, are perhaps less discussed but still produce an equally ambivalent response from their audiences. This thesis specifically aims to answer two questions. First, what makes these villains attractive to their readers and viewers? Why do they produce such a strongly ambivalent response from their audiences—how do they manage to simultaneously repel and attract us? More importantly, however, the thesis speculates on Shakespeare's reasons for creating such captivating antagonists. In other words, what was the playwright trying to do by forging villains whom we have no choice but to admire?

The thesis is divided into four chapters, each of which will focus on a particular villain from Shakespeare's plays: Hotspur from *1 Henry IV*, Iago from *Othello*, Richard from *Richard III*, and Macbeth from *Macbeth*. While these are by no means the only Shakespearean villains

worthy of critical assessment, nor are they the playwright's only attractive villains, they do nonetheless serve as prime examples of how Shakespeare uses the archetype of the attractive villain to some dramatic end. Each chapter will first explore the ways in which that character is particularly alluring, and then it will move into a consideration of Shakespeare's intent in producing the uncannily attractive villain.

Additionally, each chapter will conclude by supposing the villain to be a figurehead for a hypothetical "class" of literary villains. For example, one villain could represent a class of villains who are attractive because of their ambition; another could represent villains who entice audiences through their mystery. To that end, the chapters will conclude by offering additional "members" of that class from other popular literary works, some from before Shakespeare, some from after Shakespeare, and some from his contemporary authors.

The goal of this thesis is to explore the archetype of the attractive villain and to offer reasons for Shakespeare's apparent fondness—and aptitude—for it. While the goal of any academic endeavor should always be discovery, it need not always find one satisfactory answer—rare is the academic pursuit that ends in certainty. However, by delving into the worlds of these villains, by playing a bit of devil's advocate in analyzing Shakespeare's elaborate characterization process, we can discover what makes them such effective and eternal members among the great personalities of literature.

This thesis is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Special thanks are due to Doctors Joseph Candido, William Quinn, and Joshua Smith, without whom the completion of this thesis would be impossible.

Thanks also go out to the University of Arkansas Department of English for their strong commitment to helping students achieve their academic goals.

## **DEDICATION**

This edition of *Playing Devil's Advocate* is dedicated to my patient and cooperative thesis committee, as well as to my supportive wife, Lucia.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Now I know the full power of evil. It makes ugliness seem beautiful and goodness seem ugly and weak.”

--August Strindberg, *The Dance of Death*

In Genesis 3, the serpent, who is “more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (*KJV*, Gen. 3:1), tricks Eve into disobeying God using nothing more than sly language and crafty deceit. Readers know that the serpent, the engineer of man’s Fall from grace, should be detested and shunned as, literally, the lowest of all creatures. And yet there is something strangely attractive about the serpent, something alluring, that fools readers—if only momentarily—into believing his silver-tongued words just as Eve does. What is it that attracts us to this manipulative symbol of evil? What mysterious powers are at work which imbue readers with the uncomfortable feeling of ambivalence toward a figure they know they are supposed to hate? From the earliest written works throughout the world, authors have experimented with the idea of the attractive villain. These are the characters that we, as readers, love to hate. Often, these figures become the most influential and memorable characters within their texts, invoking more interest and discussion than even their protagonist counterparts. In fact, these attractive villains sometimes dominate their respective texts to the point that the story becomes more critically concerned with them than the heroes whom the story more closely follows. That these villains so often end up controlling our interpretation of the text suggests that authors have some stylistic purpose in emphasizing their attractiveness, whether it be in the form of physical beauty, mental acuity, social charisma, or some other charming attribute. I wish to examine how and why one of the most influential English writers, William Shakespeare, reveals his expertise in this trend as a master creator of attractive villains. One question I wish to explore as a critical reader of Shakespeare’s villains is what makes them so appealing to their

audience; that is, why are readers—indeed, humans—attracted to evil? However, the more challenging and more rewarding question is why Shakespeare seems to consciously create these attractive villains and what rhetorical purposes they serve. In other words, what is Shakespeare trying to do in his plays with this phenomenon of the magnetic antagonist?

In reading Shakespeare's plays, we encounter an uncanny "sympathy for the devil," a strange but palpable sense of attraction to his villains. This thesis seeks to determine what constitutes one of these "attractive" villains and why we are drawn to these dark characters, even though we should by all counts despise them. Moreover, the thesis explores the question of why Shakespeare's audiences and critics often discuss, investigate, and seem to genuinely like these villains even more than their heroic counterparts. Most importantly, I wish to explore why Shakespeare invokes the archetype of the attractive villain and what that strategy means for his audiences' reception and interpretation of his plays.

It is not enough merely to outline the different breeds of Shakespearean villains without considering why they matter to the reading experience in the first place. For example, if *Othello's* Iago is so attractive, why does Shakespeare characterize him as such, taking him beyond the traditional role of the allegorical Vice figure and bestowing on him an immense intellect, an almost supernatural penchant for manipulation, and a sinister sense of humor? Knowing the difference between a monster and a diabolical mastermind is one thing; knowing why the author seems to opt for one over the other is an entirely different effort. Therefore, while I will attempt to provide ample evidence, both textual and critical, of the ways in which each of the four villains I have selected for specific attention is uniquely attractive, I will also consider those villains' roles in our reading experience and what they suggest about Shakespeare's motives in creating the character. In doing so, I hope to explore what I believe to

be an overlooked approach to Shakespeare's characterization which I believe will shed even more light on the playwright's dramatic motives, even if it means playing the devil's advocate—if only briefly.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “villain” as “originally, a low-born base-minded rustic; a man of ignoble ideas or instincts.” The word later comes to mean “an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel” (*OED*). The shift between these definitions seems to suggest a connection between low societal and intellectual standing with moral depravity. Interestingly, though, the most attractive villains in Shakespeare are those who display an impressive degree of intelligence and complexity. These qualities indeed seem to be necessary elements of characterization common among attractive villains. The guile and deceit needed to fool the protagonists and instigate trouble, as apparent in such infamous villains as Iago and Richard III, seem inseparable from the recipe for an effective antagonist. Interestingly, over the centuries, the term has lost its connotations of low social status and gravitated toward connotations of moral corruption. But our favorite Shakespearean villains are characterized by more than just a dirty mind. In an effort to discover what distinguishes an attractive villain from an unattractive one, I have chosen to examine four particular villains who span years of Shakespeare's playwriting career: Hotspur from the first part of *King Henry IV*, Iago from *Othello*, Richard III, and Macbeth. I will explore these villains in detail by first discussing the characteristics which make them stand out as important emblems of villainy, and then I will theorize on their larger significance to the text and to Shakespeare's authorial intent in creating them.

It is difficult yet essential to establish a working definition for the word *villain* and to distinguish it from similar terms like *antagonist* and *enemy*. Though each reader will likely have his own conception of what constitutes a villain, I will maintain that, put simply, a villain must

pose a threat to the law and order of his play. However, this is not quite good enough for a definition; one could counter that Falstaff, while a genuine threat to law and order, is certainly not a villain in the same way that a monster like Iago is a villain. Therefore, I would say that to be a villain, an antagonistic character must pose a *significant* threat to law and order; in other words, he must be a truly dangerous character. Falstaff, while dangerous, is held in check by Hal, who effortlessly dismisses him in *2 Henry IV*. In order to be more than just a simple enemy, though, a villain must necessarily be a significant part of his play. For example, Laertes, while an eventual enemy to the protagonist Hamlet, is not as substantial a threat as is Claudius. All of the characters I have selected here are villains because they stand apart as the central and most dangerous enemies to their plays' protagonists. Consequently, they are all agents of change and challengers to the status quo, something that makes them particularly alluring in some way. While many Shakespearean villains in traditional Vice manner proudly declare their own villainy, I do not think a villain needs to acknowledge or even consciously recognize his own villainy. The complexity of these characters is, after all, one of the most significant factors that elicit from audiences a divisive or ambivalent response.

For convenience's sake, I have chosen these particular villains based on admittedly arbitrary grounds. These are by no means the only villains from Shakespeare worthy of our affections, but they offer a good starting point. I approach each character as a member of a hypothetical class or category of literary villains, and while these classes are also necessarily arbitrary, they are useful in attributing a sense of order to the various "types" of literary villains. First, to represent a hypothetical class of villains who are attractive for their martial fluency, their sense of honor, and their unflagging passion, I have chosen Hotspur, a figure whom many readers will be understandably hesitant to consider a villain at all. Audiences of *1 Henry IV*

often see Hotspur as an antagonist, to be sure, but villainy implies evil and malice, faults which the fiery Henry Percy lacks in most viewers' eyes. In fact, audiences may even be encouraged to consider Hotspur the tragic hero of the play; after all, he ardently fights for a cause he genuinely considers to be just, which one would be hard-pressed to call an act of villainy. However, I will maintain that Hotspur is also a villain of the play since he plays the role of its central enemy, the most prominent traitor to Henry IV. But he is complicated by the fact that he is such an attractive villain. In places he even reads more like a hero, particularly in lines which illustrate his most admirable qualities. Hotspur is attractive largely because he is an impressive human being. His honor code makes him respectable in and out of combat, and when compared to the other enemies in the play, who lack both his poetic elegance and his determination, he is an exciting and dangerous character. He wins the respect and the fear of his allies and enemies alike, and his reputation as the ideal knight-warrior precedes him. Hotspur and antagonists like him are difficult to accept as villains because many aspects of their personalities are considered "good" qualities, such as courage, honor, and resolve, qualities more commonly found in our protagonists. While Shakespeare makes it clear that Hotspur is the primary antagonist for the forces of Henry, the "hot" rebel's remarkable skill in combat, sense of honor, and resolve force the audience to seriously question that role. Hotspur's most critical readers call him an anachronism, a hyperbolic parody of chivalry used by Shakespeare to show the folly of rebellion. But even Hotspur's harshest critics must realize that in many ways the action of *1 Henry IV* centers not on the titular character but on his most formidable opponent.

Shakespeare's Iago, perhaps the most infamous figure in all of drama, represents a class of villains who are compelling because they are simply "good" villains. Iago confronts audiences with somewhat of a paradox in that he is attractive because he is so repulsive. He

shies away from martial combat, instead using his corrupt yet brilliantly manipulative mind to cause trouble. He prefers to have others do his dirty work, but when he must do it himself, he is very diligent in covering his tracks. While Iago is likely the most morally detestable of these four villains, we cannot help but be drawn to his intelligence and impressive ability to get his way through complex scheming and deceit. This silver-tongued manipulator reaches his goals through cunning means, distinguishing him from absolute brutes like Grendel from *Beowulf* but sacrificing the redeeming honor of Hotspur. But villains like Iago are not meant to be honorable; in fact, it is their blatant disregard for any sense of moral grounding which makes them especially appealing. Iago seems almost mythical in his ability to push the limits of human immorality, and Shakespeare uses the stage as a means to portray this evil in a way rarely, if ever, seen in reality. Iago's class of villainy appeals to our sense of *Schadenfreude* by personifying the latent mischief and depravity within us. Iago's evil yet perversely comic deviance gives him the center stage of *Othello* and earns him the title of Shakespeare's greatest villain. As a Vice character, Iago's role is to corrupt Othello into an irrevocable state of sin and damnation, all the while gleefully indulging us, his captive audience, with every intricate detail of his plan. But there is also a bit of Satan in Iago in that his goal is to claim as many souls as possible, to "set the pegs out of tune" and utterly destroy the lives of those around him. Finally, there is a great deal of Machiavellianism about his character; everything Iago does in the play is done out of a selfish but somewhat defensible desire to promote his own well-being. Iago's attraction comes about not as a result of his skill in any one of these roles but his ability to masterfully play all three—he is a complex figure for audiences and critics alike.

The third great Shakespearean villain the thesis will discuss is the imperially sinister King Richard III. Readers will quickly recognize the similarities he shares with Iago: deceit,

cunning, subtlety. And it is true that the link between Iago and Richard may be the closest connection between the four villains discussed here, but I distinguish between them because I feel that the context of Richard's evil entitles him to a different class of villainy. He is literature's most evil king, trumping even the likes of Claudius and Macbeth. He is a Machiavellian opportunist who mercilessly claws his way to the crown through murder and double-dealing, fully recognizing and reveling in his own malice along the way. The extent of Richard's wickedness at times seems almost supernatural, and even more harrowing is the fact that his tyrannical reign is rooted in historical and popular culture: Richard is real. Therein lies the distinguishing factor between Iago and Richard: while Iago shares the king's flagrant disregard for morality, he is never the most politically influential figure of *Othello*. On the other hand, through Richard, the nightmarish image of a hellishly corrupt king comes to fruition, forcing audiences to come face to face with monarchy's worst case scenario. And yet there is something attractive about his depravity, enough to encourage some critics to label him the antihero of the play. Even toward the end of the play, when Richard is at his blackest, the audience encounters an ambivalent sense of loyalty to the king, perhaps even sympathy, as virtually all of the dramatis personae close in on him. As the master actor who is able to shift between dramatic roles as the need arises, Richard takes his audience on a roller coaster of emotional and critical responses. And as the primary "narrator" of the play's action, he almost single-handedly dictates where it goes and how it gets there. Therefore, Richard's overwhelming power, tainted as it may be, gives him a unique allure and distinguishes him as a ruthless but charming king.

Finally, I will use Macbeth to explore the attractiveness of characters who entertain our fascination with the occult and the forbidden. A dark hero-villain for an equally dark play,

Macbeth tampers with the mysterious forces of evil more closely than any other Shakespearean character. We are endlessly excited about what we do not, should not, and cannot know.

Macbeth is a character built on ambiguities; he resists interpretation. We are also entranced by the idea of the curse—Macbeth and his play carry in their wake a mystifying curse that has fascinated critics and audiences for centuries. This idea of the attractive curse is first introduced in the chapter on Hotspur who, according to some critics, is attractive in that audiences know he is fated to die at the hands of Prince Hal. Macbeth's chapter will further expand the motif of the cursed villain and how we find excitement in dealing with the supernatural. The charming superstition which holds that the play itself is cursed grants it a unique element of foreboding that makes it Shakespeare's most dangerous play. This chapter will explore why we are so drawn to the inherent danger of evil, why we are thrilled by peril and excited by the looming shadow of vulnerability. But *Macbeth* is also dangerous because it asks us to confront the strange and the forbidden. It deals with the bizarre and the unknown: witchcraft, magic, ghosts. Perhaps the greatest draw of evil is that we cannot entirely understand it; it is shrouded in the same darkness that blackens Scotland as Macbeth descends deeper into a complete state of moral numbness. Shakespeare forces his audiences to flirt with the supernatural, to leave the comfort of reality and enter a world of unfamiliar dark forces. Macbeth is fated to rise and fall, just as the witches foretell, but as he becomes increasingly obsessed with avoiding his inevitable collapse, he turns a deaf ear to all considerations of human decency. There is something of Richard III in Macbeth's complete depravity by the end of the play, but Macbeth is different: he does not share Richard's evil from beginning to end; rather, Macbeth's evolution into an emotionless tyrant is almost supernatural itself. It happens so quickly that audiences have difficulty believing that the murderous Macbeth who sits on the throne in Act V is the same Macbeth as the incredulous

thane who encounters the witches in Act I. It is both the danger of Macbeth and the mystery of Macbeth that make him one of Shakespeare's most fascinating villains.

The challenge of writing on the attractiveness of villains is that it means, sometimes literally, playing the devil's advocate. However, this examination is not necessarily a defense of literary villains per se; I will not attempt to persuade the reader to "forgive" a villain, nor will I attempt to argue that a villain's behaviors are for the greater good, a necessary evil, and so on. The issue of morality is another topic altogether, and one cannot even begin to explore it to any meaningful end in such a brief space. Rather, the project will instead focus on the allure of certain villains *despite* their morally questionable behaviors. There has already been considerable work done on these characters as individuals, since they are extraordinarily intricate characters who complicate their respective plays immensely. Certainly, there are countless articles and books discussing the complexities of these characters; after all, villains like Iago and Richard III definitely stand out as significant dramatic figures and therefore invite an endless amount of criticism. However, the broader scheme of the attractive villain archetype and its purpose in literature seems significantly underexplored. Scholars typically hone in on one villain, writing somewhat of a character sketch of that villain by examining his traits, both attractive and unattractive. These materials will prove vital in my own quest to characterize Hotspur, Iago, Richard III, Macbeth, and the possible archetypes they represent, but I am not simply writing a collection of four character sketches. Instead, I aim to establish a connection among these character sketches that will, ideally, reveal common qualities among appealing villains and provide some insight into what makes them appealing in the first place. More importantly, even less seems to have been written about authorial intent in Shakespeare's villains. While in-text analysis—which is more than plentiful among these works—is critical in

interpreting these characters, equally essential is what happens *around* the text; that is, what exterior factors could encourage the author to craft such a character. One of the chief goals of this project, then, is to study both the villains and their architect in an effort to theorize on how some of drama's "greatest" villains came to be in the first place. A significant portion of the project therefore requires venturing into unknown territory. But one reason that I have chosen to focus on these four characters is because there is such a diversity of critical interpretation that has been given to them already.

Because of the restraints of limited time and space, I will be narrowing my focus to these four villains instead of analyzing every Shakespearean villain I find interesting, as such a task would require an exhaustive inquiry into a subject that simply cannot be exhausted. I have chosen Hotspur, Iago, Richard III, and Macbeth as the archetypal representative villains for what may be considered larger classes of Shakespearean villains. The representatives are those villains whom I believe to most closely embody the characteristics of their respective class; Hotspur, for instance, represents a hypothetical class of honorable "hero-villains," and Iago represents a hypothetical class of cunning, manipulative villains. Richard represents a class of draconian, corruptly ambitious villains, while Macbeth represents a class of mysterious and indefinable villains. At the end of each chapter, I will suggest a few other possible members for each theoretical class from across literature, especially Renaissance literature. Ideally, providing additional examples of villains who belong to these groups will in turn help to explain the appeal of the four focused on here.

Since the reading experience differs greatly from person to person, I recognize that there will inevitably be some disagreement on how I have organized these villains. For example, whereas I have distinguished Richard III as a dangerous yet exciting nightmare monarch, another

reader may prefer to relegate him to the Iago class of villainy on account of his characteristic knack for manipulation. I consider this a perfectly viable and well-justified alternative, and I would be overconfident to deem my structure the only worthwhile possibility. I account for some of these possibilities within the chapters, as there is no single correct way to classify these characters. The method of exploration I follow here is merely the result of my personal response to the plays, but it allows for overlapping, substitution, and outright rebuttal as the reader sees fit. Additionally, some disagreement may arise as to whether a villain is even “attractive” at all, since the term is greatly subjective. For this reason, it may be more accurate to say I will not argue that a particular villain is worthy of sympathy or “likeable” so much as I will argue that the villain displays the sort of characterization that makes him more than just a simple one-dimensional enemy.

As this is not an exhaustive examination by any means, I fully anticipate and invite the possibility of more classes of villainy to complement or expand upon the four I have proposed here. I have chosen to examine these villains because I feel they adequately represent the majority of villains present in Shakespeare’s works. I believe that any given villain can be related to one of these four archetypical characters, if only tenuously, with a reasonable degree of satisfaction. However, the concern rests with those tenuously sorted villains; after all, it would be short-sighted to try to pigeonhole a villain into a particular designation if the basis for that designation were weak or forced. As in any discipline, new discoveries in literature should not immediately be thrust into existing categories by stubborn conservatives; rather, they should be recognized for their novelty and given their own distinction as appropriate. The unique beauty of literature is its resistance to having one right answer. Therefore, I recognize that such a project as this necessarily requests the exploration of additional possibilities, which is a quality I not

only welcome but encourage whole-heartedly. The conclusion of the thesis will examine some possibilities for additional types of villains and explain how and why the need for those additions may arise.

Again, though, studying the characterization of these villains will answer only one of this study's questions: the question of why we as the audience feel ambivalence or even conscious respect for them. More important to the thesis is why it matters that these characters are constructed this way; that is, why Shakespeare makes an obvious effort to give his villains attractive qualities in the first place. I will argue that the reason varies from villain to villain. Shakespeare has a very different reason for creating an attractive Hotspur than he does for creating an alluring Iago, for instance. One of the ideas I will propose is that these characters always represent something meta-textual, something that Shakespeare feels the need to express in dramatic terms. They could represent some authorial critique of society, politics, culture, and so on. Alternatively, they could exist to inspire some emotion in their onlookers; perhaps their role is to impel the audience toward reconsidering their perception of morality. They may challenge our notion of good versus evil by asking us to appreciate, if only momentarily, the darker side of the dichotomy. Or perhaps they were simply Shakespeare's favorite characters to create. Writing about evil may be an inherently exciting and amusing experience, but the allure of playing devil's advocate goes beyond that, even. The villain is the author's opportunity to rebel under the guise of a fictional scapegoat. Villains may well mirror some aspect of their author's goals and attitudes, whether the author chooses to make those goals and attitudes explicit or not. Of course, that does not quite explain the *literary* purpose of creating attractive villains, or how the author considers his audiences when he creates these characters. Once again, the purpose differs from villain to villain, and each chapter will offer a different theory as to why

the author chooses to create *that* villain in particular. Every miniscule bit of characterization, from the villain's choice of words to his physical stature, provides another clue in solving the mystery of why this villain works so well for his play. Therefore, it is equally important to consider each part of these characters' personas, including their physical qualities, their mental states, how they interact with other characters, what their motives are, and how they go about fulfilling those motives.

On the surface, trying to examine why certain villains are attractive seems like a needlessly difficult endeavor. Many readers may concede that the villain is what he is simply because the protagonist needs a good foil or enemy, and this may be true for some cases. However, I believe that Shakespeare always has a reason for crafting his villains the way he does. How and why he chooses to present those characters to his audiences tells us much more about the nature and the goals of his work. Additionally, finding the attractive in villains can sometimes be a surprisingly easy task that seems to come naturally to the reading experience. Even if we make a conscious effort to shun the villain, truly powerful villains cling to us, nagging at us to recognize something appealing, or at least intriguing, in their characters. Villains are fun characters to explore, which may itself say something compelling about the natural allure of evil. It is hard to resist them; they seize our curiosity and refuse to let go. Therefore, we ought to accept the challenge of playing devil's advocate with enthusiasm, and we should look forward to discovering what can be learned from it.

## CHAPTER ONE: PLAYING WITH FIRE (HOTSPUR)

This examination of Shakespeare's villains begins with a character whom we are hesitant to call a villain at all. His fervent opposition to the protagonists serves as a reminder that he is without question the enemy of the text, and yet he displays all the admirable qualities more common to heroic figures, often even surpassing them and becoming an idealized, larger-than-life paragon. He is bold, ambitious, fiery, and passionate, but he is also chivalric, courteous, cultivated, and honorable. He invokes ambivalence in his audience because he very dramatically complicates the term *villain*, forcing us to reflect on how we distinguish evil from villainy. He serves as Shakespeare's reminder to his audiences that when it comes to politics, one man's villain can be another man's hero. If any Shakespearean antagonist may be said to challenge the line between good and evil, he does so all while delivering some of the most impressive lines of poetry written in the history plays.

In several ways, Henry "Hotspur" Percy takes the center stage of *1 Henry IV* even before he speaks his first lines. He is introduced to the *dramatis personae* in the first scene through the praise of Westmoreland, who calls him "the gallant Hotspur" and describes his "bloody" conquest (I.i.52, 56). A first-time reader of the play must undoubtedly pause at his name; "Hotspur" is certainly a unique nickname and one that comes with a number of implications. It showcases his choleric demeanor long before he has his first opportunity to demonstrate it. It also suggests an impassioned familiarity with warfare, a trait the character later proves through his actions, his language, and the commentary of others. Indeed, when Hotspur does arrive in the king's palace in the play's third scene, his opening lines confirm what we already expect from him: "I remember, when the fight was done, / When I was dry with rage and extreme toil, / Breathless and faint, leaning upon my sword" (I.iii.29-31). From the beginning, Hotspur reveals

his sense of honor, passion, and martial supremacy, all qualities which immediately present him as a highly attractive character.

In fact, it is his devil-may-care sense of honor that probably most contributes to Hotspur's appeal as a Shakespearean villain. His Hectorian code of battlefield honor sets him apart from the other Shrewsbury rebels, who are decidedly less striking than their charismatic leader. But also important is the honor with which he conducts himself outside of battle. He addresses his soon-to-be enemy, Henry IV, with courtesy, showing that he is not merely a bloodthirsty savage. He later calls Henry "ingrate and cank' red Bolingbroke" (I.iii.137), but at least in the presence of the king's court, Hotspur tempers his anger with the conventions of civility. Even Henry himself laments early in the play that he cannot call the gallant Hotspur his own son:

O that it could be proved  
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged  
In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,  
And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet!  
Then would I have his Harry, and he mine.

(I.i.85-9)

Hotspur's demeanor in court masks his true feelings toward the crown, but until those feelings are revealed, Henry shows only admiration for his future enemy. Still, it is undoubtedly Hotspur's martial expertise and the remarkable conduct he shows on the battlefield that make him one of the most alluring figures of the history plays. King Henry refers to him as "the theme of honor's tongue" (I.i.81), and the Douglas later calls him "the king of honor" (IV.i.10). If Prince Hal represents the "golden mean" between Hotspur's exaggerated honor and Falstaff's total lack of honor, Hotspur makes for an impressive antagonist for Henry's forces and for the action of the play.

There is no doubt that, as its central antagonist, Hotspur is one of the most crucial characters of *I Henry IV*, but a number of scholars actually identify him as its main character. One 1613 performance of the play was titled simply “The Hotspurr” (Barker 288), indicating his overwhelming importance to the play’s content and performance. It also shows that Hotspur’s appeal is nothing new; his character was a selling point for any contemporary staging. Interestingly, he also seems to be the preferred role of actors: according to Barker, “Luminaries such as Thomas Betterton, David Garrick, William Macready, and Edmund and Charles Kean all chose to wear Hotspur’s sword, while Hal was most often played by supporting actors” (291). Perhaps Hotspur was always simply the more enjoyable role to play, and it is easy enough to see why. In recalling a memorable performance of Hotspur by Robert Bensley, Charles Lamb recalls its “fine madness” (52). Lamb’s summation seems especially apt for the role of Hotspur, a character who, despite his villainy, displays many characteristics more commonly seen in heroes. Additionally, those faults he does show, such as his overweening ambition and pugnacity, are expressed so poetically by him that they hardly seem like flaws at all. Hotspur is a charming character, and those scenes which showcase his impassioned speech and fiery poesy are some of the most captivating moments in the play. It stands to reason that Hotspur’s role should be coveted by powerful actors seeking to impress their audiences.

In fact, it is Hotspur’s unique voice in the play that makes him an attractive figure for audiences with an appreciation for colorful language, what Richard Eastman aptly calls Hotspur’s “pyrotechnic poetry” (902). Perhaps with the exception of Henry IV himself, Hotspur delivers the most fervent and yet the most poetic lines in the play. Upon receiving word of the king’s impressive ranks before he rides onto the battlefield of Shrewsbury, he delivers a rousing response:

Let them come.  
 They come like sacrifices in their trim,  
 And to the fire-eyed maid of smoky war  
 All hot and bleeding will we offer them.  
 The mailed Mars shall on his altar sit  
 Up to the ears in blood. I am on fire  
 To hear this rich reprisal is so nigh,  
 And yet not ours. Come, let me taste my horse,  
 Who is to bear me like a thunderbolt  
 Against the bosom of the Prince of Wales.  
 (IV.i.112-20)

Such poetic outbursts seem to come naturally to Hotspur. Whereas the other rebels can only offer brief exclamations of fear at their imposing doom, Hotspur turns the bad news into a challenge. Even the lines of Prince Hal, the play's central protagonist and foil to Hotspur, are dwarfed by the hot speeches of his rival. There can be no doubt that any of the popular actors aspiring for Hotspur's role would give the lines the passionate delivery they suggest from the script. The audience knows better than to applaud the villain—out loud, anyway—but it will at least have to acknowledge the power of his words and his presence on the stage.

Interestingly, one of Hotspur's traits which most significantly contribute to his attractiveness in the play is the fear he evokes in other characters. Throughout the play, he is construed as an unstoppable juggernaut of war, the ideal warrior made even more dangerous by the unrelenting commitment he carries into battle. When Falstaff reminds Hal just how potent his enemy is, he asks, "Art thou not horribly afraid? / doth not they blood thrill at it?" (II.iv.406-7) Following his dispute with Glendower over dividing the land evenly, Hotspur is told by Mortimer that "He [Glendower] holds your temper in a high respect / And curbs himself even of his natural scope" (III.i.169-70). As the climactic Battle of Shrewsbury approaches, the king's best-equipped allies show increasing trepidation in facing the "hot" Henry Percy. Even Glendower's self-proclaimed likeness to the devil and ability to "call spirits from the vasty deep"

(III.i.53) fail to have the impact of Hotspur's fear-inspiring reputation. Glendower's self-professed "powers" are imaginative, resulting in the parody of a clownish man who proudly touts his malice like a self-confessed fiend. But Hotspur's talents are frightfully real; he has already proven himself a formidable warrior, and his reputation precedes him to friend and foe alike. He need not invent monster stories of himself; the other characters have done that for him.

As Shakespeare's most combat-centered villain, Hotspur constantly dwells on battle: his language usually centers on the idea of war, such as in his invocation of Mars before Shrewsbury or in his sleep talking. He even calls war his "sport" (I.iii.300), suggesting that it is a game or an avocation to him. It appears that war literally empowers Hotspur. He tells a frustrated Lady Percy, "And when I am on horseback, I will swear / I love thee infinitely" (II.iv.101-2). Here, it is his horse, an eternal symbol of warfare, which gives Hotspur the metaphorical power to profess his love for his wife. In the court of Henry IV, Hotspur is overwhelmed by the more impressive language of his king until he recalls in vivid detail the alleged duel between Mortimer and Glendower (I.iii.92-111). Simply speaking of combat empowers Hotspur enough to, if only momentarily, overshadow Henry's regal speech and take the spotlight of the scene. He relates the duel with such enthusiasm, using vivid phrases like "bloody looks" and "the hollow bank / Blood-stained" (I.iii.438. 440-1), that the king's meager counter of "Thou dost belie him, Percy" and his immediate exit from the scene paint Hotspur as the more powerful speaker.

Hotspur inspires fear in part because he himself has none. He takes Northumberland's absence from Shrewsbury as a challenge: "My father and Glendower being so far away / The power of us may serve so great a day" (IV.i.130-1). Nor does Hotspur fear death: while the Douglas and the other rebels tremble at the insurmountable odds they face, Hotspur boldly and famously cries to his allies, "die all, die merrily" (IV.ii.133). If the audience is to find a

fearsome villain attractive, then Hotspur's fearlessness is also to be admired. Of course, such courage, especially from a warrior, would not only be desirable but even mandatory. Few would argue, for instance, that Falstaff is made a great warrior by his cowardice and debauchery. But the fact that Hotspur is the *enemy* who shows this aptitude makes him all the more remarkable. He thrives on danger; Robert Lordi writes, "To Hotspur, danger is a means of displaying his chivalric mettle and of accruing further honors" (178). Even an audience unfamiliar with the historical outcome of the battle would infer that Hotspur is doomed to fail—he foresees it himself moments before his death. However, because of his effectiveness as an antagonist, it sometimes seems difficult to accept the defeat of such a worthy opponent. William Hazlitt writes, "We like Hotspur best upon the whole, perhaps because he was unfortunate" (*Lectures* 142). This idea that being doomed may contribute to a villain's appeal will be revisited again in greater detail in Macbeth's chapter. When Hotspur finally does die at the hand of the same prince he waits the entire play to face, Hal himself must recognize his opponent's legitimacy: "This earth that bears thee dead / Bears not alive so stout a gentleman" (V.v.92-3). As Hotspur ironically falls beside the feigned "corpse" of Falstaff, for whom "honour is a mere scutcheon" (V.i.142), the audience sees both extremes of the honor continuum side-by-side, with Hal, the golden mean, fittingly between them.

The most significant way in which Hotspur differs from other Shakespearean villains, especially the ones examined in this paper, is that he is clearly not evil. On the contrary, he is highly concerned with virtues such as fairness and justice, qualities just as common to heroes. For example, he counters Glendower's humorously blatant appeals to evil—conjuring spirits and commanding the devil—with an unexpected appeal to righteousness in shaming the devil by telling the truth (III.i.58-62). Unlike many of Shakespeare's attractive villains who may devote

entire soliloquies to professing their own villainy, Hotspur never refers to himself as such, probably because he genuinely sees himself as entirely morally justified. Ironically, it is Falstaff, Hotspur's polar opposite, who repeatedly calls himself a villain, albeit only facetiously, for petty crimes like theft or sins of indulgence. Hotspur, on the other hand, whom Hal hyperbolically claims "kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at breakfast" (II.iv.94), never even approaches a confession because he feels no need of it. Certainly, an audience could find him arrogant, but it could also just as easily be drawn to his complacency and resolve; Hotspur genuinely sees his rebellion as a just response to the rule of what he sees as a corrupt leadership. Unlike, say, Macbeth, who devotes his most famous lines to contemplating his intentions, Hotspur never pauses to question his motives or reconsider his plans.

Of course, sympathy for Hotspur is nothing new. Barker notes that both Shakespeare's Hotspur and the character's historical counterpart have traditionally been viewed as tragic heroes (289). Hotspur is, in several ways, similar to the *Iliad*'s Hector: both are martially supreme, both fight ardently for their cause even though it runs counter to the cause of the protagonists, and both are doomed ultimately to fail. It is, however, much more difficult to label Hector with such a strong word as *villain*, which connotes malice and corruption. Hotspur, on the other hand, chooses rebellion, and therein lies the difference. Still, based on the fact that it is hard to make the case for Hector's being the villain of the *Iliad*, the bridge may not in fact be that difficult to make. Certainly Hotspur has enjoyed the sympathy of many a reader; Barker calls him "a tragically hubristic but also a heroically memorable figure" (290). Likewise, Lordi comments that Shakespeare separates Hotspur from the other rebels in that "we become emotionally involved with his human side," especially in intimate scenes such as those with Lady Percy (180). It is perhaps this sympathy that makes him a popular role for actors. In one rendition,

actor Laurence Olivier gives the character a stutter, perhaps in an effort to make him seem more “human” to the audience (Barker 292). Olivier’s performance is lauded by reviewer James Agate for its “noble pathos” of the “doomed darling of war.” Many viewers and readers, in fact, quite readily accept Hotspur as the hero of *I Henry IV* (Tillyard 282). That the most ardent enemy of the titular character, Henry IV, and of the play’s main protagonist, Hal, garners such critical acclaim speaks volumes about his attractiveness as a villain.

That said, however, more recent criticism has resisted such affection for Hotspur, claiming that audiences who sympathize with the fiery rebel misinterpret Shakespeare’s purpose in creating him in the first place. Tillyard, for instance, claims that this romantic sentimentality is erroneous in two ways: “First they [audiences] may inherit a romantic approval for mere vehemence of passion, and secondly they may assume that Shakespeare must somehow be on the side of any character in whose mouth he puts his finest poetry” (232). As for his first point, it may be true that passion for passion’s sake is overvalued when such passion entails high treason, but this evades the question of why passion is attractive in the first place. If anything, the fact that Hotspur remains alluring even—or perhaps especially—as he delivers his most treasonous lines should suggest something inherently appealing about passion, even when it is pursued to a fault. Commitment, resolve, and indeed, passion, are certainly terms of compliment, and Hotspur embodies them more than any other martial Shakespearean character. That such behavior should acquire an audience’s “romantic approval” seems not only reasonable but inevitable. Additionally, it could be the very fact that Hotspur’s vehemence centers on rebellion that evokes this response. Eastman notes, “The theme of rebellion has increasingly dominated Western civilization...in armed conflict and in theory” (904). Therefore, the idea of rebellion could be as attractive to an Elizabethan audience as it would be to a modern audience. That is

not to say that audiences of *I Henry IV* would be chomping at the bit for an uprising, but it would represent the acting out of an otherwise taboo latent desire for civil disobedience in a theatrical and stimulating medium. As the figurehead of this replication, Hotspur idealizes the hypothetical leader of such a mock rebellion. In other words, any imaginary uprising would be thrilled to have a “Hotspur” at its helm. An apt analogy may compare Hotspur to Milton's Satan, another rebellious villain spurned by his king and who is so appealing that he should in all likelihood be credited with originating the attractive villain archetype. Part of the appeal of Shakespeare's history plays is that they tell the story of political revolution from beginning to end. If change is inherently attractive, it becomes easy enough to see why the chief engineer of that change would also be attractive.

As for Tillyard's second point that Hotspur sympathizers take the rebel's poetic speech as a sign that Shakespeare somehow “prefers” him as a character, such dialogue seems inseparable from Hotspur's personality. If he were to, hypothetically speaking, retain his sense of honor and battlefield passion, it would be incongruous for Hotspur to have the hum-drum speech of, say, Vernon or any of the other battlefield extras. At the same time, if he were to retain his “pyrotechnic poetry” but sacrifice the martial habits that define him, we would see his character in an entirely different way—probably as a clown who knows how to talk the talk but not how to walk the walk, so to speak. Hotspur's passion in his behavior and his passion in his speech are therefore inseparable, and their combination is what makes him both an effective martial villain and an attractive one. The other possibility, though, is that Shakespeare *does* in fact have a fondness for Hotspur. Norman Council writes that “Shakespeare establishes Hotspur as a perfect knight” whose commitment to honor separates him from the common ranks of Henry IV and even Hotspur's own allies (46). This reading suggests that Shakespeare challenges conventional

perceptions of rebels as traitorous, corrupt, morally depraved bottom feeders by presenting a prolific rebel who stands in stark contrast to such a stereotype. If Shakespeare's authorial intent were somewhat influenced by political motivation, a supremely attractive rebel would cause his audience to at the very least reexamine its concept of insurrection in a more favorable light.

Eastman would disagree with this theory, though: "It seems that for Shakespeare rebellion was the last and worst dynamic for reforming a dysfunctional government" (907). This makes sense if Hotspur is read as a satire of the warrior, which modern criticism seems increasingly inclined to do. Cathleen McLoughlin, for instance, condemns Hotspur's "overdose" of chivalry as more ridiculous than attractive (114), and similar criticism calls Hotspur a deliberate anachronism, a stubborn man who clings to the traditions of the past. To these critics, Shakespeare's intent is to underscore the folly of rebellion by assigning it an embarrassingly obsolete figurehead. Lordi astutely notes that the rebels' defeat at Shrewsbury is preceded by the ominous illness of Northumberland and internal disharmony in the rebel camp: "It is a normal practice of Shakespeare to associate disharmony, disease, and other attendant ills with the cause he wants to depict as failing" (184). Therefore, the obstacles Hotspur and his allies encounter on the way to battle portend their defeat and symbolize Shakespeare's authorial finger waving at them. A variation of this argument that is slightly kinder to Hotspur holds that while he is outdated, he represents the nostalgia "appropriate to an outworn code of masculinity" (Smith 48). While clearly a more favorable approach to Hotspur's character, this view echoes the pessimistic sentiment that Shakespeare's intent is not to glamorize rebellion but rather to demonstrate its inevitable failure. With an anachronistic leader and an outdated approach to warfare, the rebels are summarily overwhelmed and defeated by Henry's more up-to-date forces.

The problem with calling Hotspur an object of ridicule, however, is that the other

characters in the play do not. On the contrary, Henry's allies express fear of facing the firebrand on the battlefield, and even Hotspur's worst enemies express awe at his martial prowess. Mortimer tells him that even Glendower, whose villainy is almost certainly exaggerated to the point of parody, holds his temper in high respect. It seems more likely that Shakespeare presents Hotspur as a legitimately respectable warrior, outdated or not. Regardless, critics of Hotspur have an uphill battle to fight: based on both textual evidence and popular audience reception, there is much more reason to read Hotspur as an intentionally attractive figure than as an intentionally unattractive one. More likely, Shakespeare's intent is to challenge his audience's reception of a blatantly treasonous character by making such a character immensely appealing, even more so than the heroic Prince Hal or Henry IV himself. And, even those most critical of Hotspur must acknowledge that if he is indeed meant to be an object of ridicule, the ideals he upholds are at least significant enough to merit parody in the first place. It is easy enough for modern critics to tease Hotspur for his romanticized courtesy; after all, in an age when hand-to-hand combat is obsolete and headstrong passion is seen as the folly of rashness, Hotspur's approach does seem admittedly antiquated. But for contemporary audiences of *1 Henry IV*, these qualities would be expected of the so-called "perfect knight." J.F.R. Day emphasizes the importance of honor in English Renaissance literature and the proliferation of heraldry books, treatises on nobility, and other "primers of honor." In Shakespeare's England, "heraldry was more than a matter of 'pennons and little daggers'; it was the iconography of honor, the recognition (if not technically the creation) of gentility" (Day 94). If any Shakespearean character can be said to personify the ideal nobility, Hotspur does, and even more important is that a villain could personify anything ideal. It is not the protagonists or the forces of the king that represent this noble ideal—certainly not Hal or the rag-tag conscripts hired by Falstaff in the

play's second part—but rather the central villain. It is not surprising, then, that an audience immersed in a culture which necessitated, or at least greatly admired, the image of a perfect knight should pay due respect to the character who most closely approaches that ideal. Hotspur's critics overlook the fact that, as Day writes, "For the Renaissance the icons of honor are not to be lightly dismissed, and the symbols of chivalry if not chivalry itself are a powerful influence on Renaissance writers" (103). Indeed, these very "symbols of chivalry" seem literally to empower Hotspur in several scenes, such as the scene with Lady Percy and again when he cannot bear to hear Vernon's shining description of the gallant armor-clad Hal before he has donned his own mail: "No more, no more! Worse than the sun in / March, / This praise doth nourish agues" (IV.i.109-11).

Therefore, Shakespeareans tend to take one of two approaches when determining Shakespeare's intent in creating such a uniquely attractive villain. First, critics who see Hotspur as the ridiculous, anachronistic shadow of a long-abandoned sense of diehard honor argue that Shakespeare uses him to show the flaws of rebellion; Hotspur's fiery passion comes at the expense of organization and efficiency among the rebels as a group. He is effective on his own, but his bickering with his allies—illustrated well by his quarrel with Glendower—and his selfish obsession with one-on-one combat make him a poor team player. Paraphrasing Worcester's description early in the play, Hotspur at best shows greatness and courage, but at worst, he shows rashness, pride, and "want of government" (III.i.183). For the more critical readers, Shakespeare invokes the failed warrior to mock the futility of rebellion: "For Shakespeare and his audiences...his [Hotspur's] name came down to them marked with the stain of rebellion" (Barker 289). These critics argue that reading Hotspur as an attractive figure is an egregious trap to fall into, but it may also be one that Shakespeare sets deliberately. Even for a reader who does not

have the sympathetic response of Hotspur's biggest fans, the rebel's "pyrotechnic poetry" and sheer dominance of the play must at the very least produce a pronounced reaction of ambivalence. A more cautious verdict that is still unprepared to call Henry Percy a tragic hero ventures that through Hotspur Shakespeare wants to challenge our notions of the historical-literary rebel without going so far as to outright glamorize him. This more moderate theory suggests that while Hotspur's devotion to honor and passion are certainly to be admired, those traits nevertheless emanate from a sense of nostalgia for times gone by when they might have actually made for a successful revolutionary.

The other theory as to why Shakespeare employs such a charismatic villain takes just the opposite approach; that is, that Hotspur's purpose *is* to glamorize rebellion, or at least political unrest, in a historical period when such a notion would seem simultaneously alluring and dangerous. Perhaps an audience's ambivalent attitude toward Hotspur reflects an ambivalent attitude toward civil disobedience or even a curiosity for it. Again, the stage gives Hotspur—and his creator—the opportunity to act out this unspoken allure of political upheaval. If a contemporary audience would have a latent desire for such a notion, as Eastman says it might, then a bold, passionate, powerful, but human figure like Hotspur would make for an immensely attractive character to that audience. Based on this evidence and the fact that most of the play's characters seem to have a genuine sense of fear but respect for him, critics who call Hotspur a parody of some outdated notion of chivalry are likely trying to find faults in a character who does not deserve them.

One last point that both contributes to Hotspur's attractiveness and suggests an authorial affection for his character is that he is not just a rebel but an underdog rebel. Hotspur lacks the protective walls of King Henry's castle and the sheer numbers of the English army, leaving him

significantly vulnerable as both a political dissenter and a battlefield general. In short, Hotspur fights an overwhelmingly losing battle throughout the play, and it becomes increasingly obvious as he and the rebels encounter more and more bad luck on the road to Shrewsbury that he will fail. Here, Hazlitt's theory that audiences like Hotspur not *in spite* of the fact that he is doomed but *because* he is doomed resurfaces. Even though he is the namesake and a hero of the play, Henry's story is a tame one; audiences know that he is far better equipped to survive and triumph over the rebels at Shrewsbury. There is not so much urgency associated with his character; he merely has to defend the status quo, whereas Hotspur and his allies bear the burden of the offense. Hotspur's story is fraught with turbulence and uncertainty. More importantly, he takes each misfortune in stride, even as a challenge, up until his defeat at the hands of Prince Hal. Even in his last words he tells Hal he is more injured by his loss of honor than by the sword which steals his last breath: "I better brook the loss of brittle life / Than those proud titles thou hast won of me; / They wound my thoughts worse than sword my flesh" (V.iv.78-80).

However, the difficulty in calling rebellion attractive is that it is not universally attractive, even within the context of the history plays. Audiences must remember Henry Bolingbroke's uprising in *Richard II*, the precursor to Hotspur's play. In that play, the future King Henry IV begins as the more attractive alternative to the imperial Richard, and so the audience might have fewer qualms about supporting his rise to power. But as Richard's dignity is gradually stripped from him, he becomes the more pitiable figure. Why, then, is Hotspur's case in *1 Henry IV* any different from Henry's case in *Richard II*? First, Henry's upheaval comes easily to him; after the formalities are taken care of, all that remains is to imprison the deposed king and sign the requisite paperwork. Henry's is a quiet rebellion, a "white collar" rebellion, so to speak, stained only by the blood of a handful of Richard's attendants and eventually Richard himself.

Hotspur's rebellion, however, faces impossible odds, and even when Hotspur himself acknowledges that fact in some of his last lines to his comrades, he pursues it to the end. The fact that Hotspur is the underdog to Henry's vast forces probably makes his undying gallantry appear all the more foolish to his harshest critics, but it makes him all the more commendable to audiences that already admire him for his unflagging determination. The second feature that differentiates Hotspur's rebellion from Henry's is the simple fact that he fails. Henry, whose rise to the throne goes remarkably uninhibited, has no need for the audience's sympathy, especially once he secures his kingship with the death of Richard. Any sympathy he garners at the onset of *Richard II*, in which Richard appears most deserving of deposition, is diminished as his treatment of the defeated king becomes increasingly cruel. But just as the audience knows that Henry Bolingbroke is destined to succeed no matter how many times the play is presented, it likewise knows that Hotspur is doomed to fail. Perhaps, then, rebellion is only attractive when it is difficult, as in Hotspur's case. Or perhaps it is only attractive when Shakespeare feels that it should be—in other words, when it is justified. In any case, Hotspur's tragic fate is what makes him a tragic hero, a figure who, despite his impressive capacities in and off the battlefield, must die.

Hotspur may represent a hypothetical class of literary villains who are attractive in that they are impressive human beings who display any number of admirable qualities, including a sense of honor, remarkable skill in combat, and an unfaltering pursuit of a goal. Again, Hector is one of the more obvious analogues. The Trojan champion shares the martial prowess and dogged determination of his Shakespearean counterpart to such an extent that it is all but impossible to even classify him as the antagonist of the epic. Ultimately, Achilles' brutal treatment of his corpse seems to be an inappropriate reaction to the death of such an honorable

foe, especially when contrasted with Hal's reverent address to the fallen Hotspur at the close of *Henry IV*. Readers of the *Iliad* also encounter an intimate scene between Hector and his wife, Andromache, analogous to Hotspur's famous exchange with Lady Percy (33). To offer another example from classical literature, Virgil's Turnus shares the unmatched martial skill of Hotspur; the Greeks of the *Aeneid* express both fear and wonder for the mighty Turnus, but like Hotspur, as the enemy, he is not exempt from their scorn. The narrator describes his overwhelming martial presence in language not unlike Shakespeare's poetic images of Hotspur:

Now Turnus arms for fight. His back and breast  
Well-temper'd steel and scaly brass invest:  
The cuishes which his brawny thighs infold  
Are mingled metal damask'd o'er with gold.  
(XI.733-6)

A notable difference between Hotspur and Turnus, though, is that the *Aeneid* does not emphasize the humanity of Turnus; Virgil does not, for instance, give him a domestic scene which shows his more private personality. Consequently, Turnus is more attractive for his fearsome capabilities on the battlefield than for his status as a tragic hero, making it easier for us to label him the villain of the epic. To borrow an example from Shakespeare's own era, the impetuous knight Pyrochles in *The Faerie Queene* exemplifies the stab-first-and-ask-questions-later approach to combat that Hotspur so heatedly endorses. Even his name, like Hotspur's, suggests a hot-headed, fiery personality. As the allegorical figures of Occasion and Furor relentlessly stoke the flames of Pyrochles' rage, it is Arthur who ultimately tempers his wrath in the only way he can: by slaying him (II.viii.49). Like Hotspur, Pyrochles is finally undone by his overwhelming obsession with combat and soundly defeated by Spenser's own "golden mean" character.

Henry Percy holds a unique position among the ranks of Shakespeare's most attractive

villains: he is antagonistic but not evil, flawed but not hopeless, corrupt but not despicable.

Hotspur obscures the line between hero and villain, demonstrating many qualities expected of a

hero but made the villain perhaps only by the fact that he stands in opposition to the king. The

next villain to discuss, Iago, occupies the opposite end of the spectrum. He is completely

without honor, has no need for courtesy except to the extent that it allows him to get his way, and

is a decidedly evil character. There can be no redeeming Iago, for he is not only past redemption

but unreceptive of it. He is deceitful, he is merciless, he is callous, and he is incredibly

attractive. The following chapter will explore why Iago, who is probably Shakespeare's most

infamous villain, is also perhaps his most attractive villain. It will also explore what that tells us

about Shakespeare's reasons for crafting such a lovely monster.

## CHAPTER TWO: LOOKING EVIL IN THE EYE (IAGO)

Whereas Hotspur challenges the idea that all villains are morally bankrupt, there is no question that Iago, Othello's lying, manipulative, and murderous ensign, ranks as one of literature's cruelest antagonists. Rivalled in Shakespeare only by perhaps Richard III, Iago is Shakespeare's most dangerous and most infamous villain. Thomas Bowman calls him "the quintessence of villainy in English literature" (460), and William Hazlitt boasts of Iago that he "belongs to a class of characters... of great intellectual activity," accompanied with a total want of moral principle (*Characters* 33). Some critics even call him an artist among villains, a fiend who uses the action of *Othello* to paint the picture of ultimate evil. He has been called everything from an ambitious Machiavel to the devil himself, but critics of Iago seem to agree that he is not just one of Shakespeare's most attractive villains but one of his most attractive characters.

It may seem jarring to move from Hotspur, a character marked by a fondness for combat and warfare, to Iago, a villain who prefers to stand at a distance and let his pawns do his dirty work. However, Iago owes his allure to many of the same qualities which make Hotspur an attractive villain. Much as the rebellious Henry Percy seems to dominate *1 Henry IV*, even more so than the play's royal protagonists, Iago unquestionably controls the action of *Othello*. With more lines and soliloquies than any other character in his play, Iago choreographs the play from the center of his elaborate web as he manipulates the other characters to his satisfaction. The power Iago holds over the action and the cast of the play is appealing in itself; the few scenes in which he is absent lack the magnetism the audience feels from Iago's masterful subtlety. It is just as easy to make the case that the villain of *Othello* is also its hero. As Abernethy observes, "He is the only character who exercises creative power and initiates movement in the plot," with

the other characters serving as mere supplements to his machinations (337). Therefore, like Hotspur, Iago owes a good deal of his appeal to the fact that he is a highly active character, perhaps the play's only true character in motion.

Iago's dialogue with the play's other characters casts him as a cold, calculating fraud, leading some critics to condemn the ancient as having no human analogue (Hyman 25). Marvin Rosenberg, however, points to a "hot" side of Iago which he reveals in his soliloquies and monologues: "This inner Iago is one great fury of passion" (153). Suspecting Othello of making a cuckold of him, Iago says, "For that I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof / Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inards" (II.ii.267-70). Critics who argue that Iago's success as a villain is overestimated claim that he is unrealistically evil, that "Iago is an exaggeration, a fiend without analogy in human record" (Bowman 460). But Rosenberg's observation that Iago is not without his passionate side is just one example of how Iago *is* a human, albeit an extraordinarily corrupted one. Iago's humanity proves his complexity, a trait with which Hotspur is also able to invite curiosity from his audience. Critics of Iago claim that he is one-dimensional, "a creature of subhuman evil, malignant without any motivation" ("In Defense" 145). On the contrary, Iago is anything but one-dimensional, and through his monologues he shows just how multifaceted he is. J.H.E. Brock writes, "The power of Iago is to lead a double life" (4). After all, could a one-dimensional villain so skillfully ensnare almost every single character in his play? Iago's words to the audience are testament to the complexity of his thoughts and behavior:

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

(I.i.152-5)

Those harsh to Iago may be following the same trend as Hotspur's harshest critics. Perhaps they believe the character has become too sanctified for a villain and needs to be given the condemnation he deserves as a liar and a murderer. It is true that Iago should not be lauded as an upright, justified man; as a dramatic device, though, he deserves his due respect. However, just as Iago does not deserve total denunciation, he also does not deserve tender sympathy, such as Tucker Brooke's claim that he is "an honest, charming soldier" (4). Audiences should not try to find a way to somehow apologize for Shakespeare's nastiest villain but to determine what makes some viewers so apparently drawn to Iago that they feel the need to justify him. Iago does not deserve sympathy, nor would he probably want it. His vow of silence at the end of the play, "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know" (V.ii.304), indicates that unlike Claudius in *Hamlet*, Iago is a villain who does not even care to cleanse his soul before his inevitable death—or maybe he recognizes the futility of trying. Iago's apologists miss the point of his dramatic purpose because they are too concerned with coming to the defense of a character who is a villain and proud of it. Iago gladly calls himself a villain: "How am I then a villain" (II.iii.304). The other characters call him a villain when they finally come to their senses in the last scene; only Emilia, Iago's eventual undoer, seems to seriously suspect him before then. We too know Iago is a villain as early as the *dramatis personae*: "IAGO, *his ancient, a villain.*" That Iago is an antagonist fully worthy of scorn is clear, but the more important issue is what exposes him to such a broad range of readings, from motiveless monster to wronged nobleman.

Explanations for the attractiveness of Iago's villainy typically involve assigning him to one of three dramatic roles in *Othello*. Some argue that Iago is representative of the allegorical Vice character from the Medieval morality plays, an archetypal trickster determined to steer the protagonists on the path of sin and self-destruction. Bernard Spivack, for instance, claims that

“his aim is the moral and spiritual ruin of his victim in order that he may demonstrate...the evil he personifies” (qtd. in Hyman 25). Others suggest that since Iago's depravity is so supernaturally extreme, he more closely resembles an incarnation of the devil himself. Citing demonic confessions from the ancient's monologues and his duty to “ensnare souls to enlarge [his] kingdom,” Jamie McCauley equates him to “such a serpent” (8). Still other critics attribute Iago's allure to his self-obsessed Machiavellian nature; Iago asks us to abruptly come to terms with a character so driven by a thirst for power that emotions are meaningless—even distracting—to him. Bloom writes, “The dramatic shock in *Othello* is that we delight in Iago's exuberant triumphalism, even as we dread his villainy's consequences” (453). These are all defensible labels for Iago, but as Hyman puts forth, his attractiveness more likely originates from a combination of these roles: “The complexity of Iago's character...comes from these various levels of motivation” (137). The depth of Hotspur's character is one quality which gives him cause for a great deal of critical attention and debate. Likewise, Iago remains the focal point of *Othello* not because he belongs to any single one of these roles but because he exhibits elements from all of them.

Those who label Iago a Vice character focus most strongly on his role as a trickster, citing the remarkable wizardry with which he manipulates the play's cast. Robert Withington explains, “The ‘Vice’ was originally the agent or servant of The Seven Deadly Sins, and sought to entrap ‘Mankind’...into the power of evil” (743). Iago, then, plays this allegorical role of deceiver as he drives his victims toward self-destructive wrath and envy. His lines to the audience provide plenty of evidence that he serves a parasitic role in the play:

Cassio's a proper man: let me see now:  
To get his place and to plume up my will  
In double knavery—How, how?—Let's see...

The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,  
 And will as tenderly be led by th' nose  
 As asses are.

(I.iii.372-4, 379-82)

We are drawn to the Vice character because he represents the liberation of all the delightful debauchery a “normal” person is forced to repress. We watch Iago work his magic as one stares in awe at a train wreck; we are captivated by his utter disregard for his fellow man. Brock calls him “the human gadfly” who stings and goads Othello to the brink of madness (24). As the Vice, Iago's job is to buzz in Othello's ear, tempting him with lies and flattery until the misguided gull sows the seeds of his own demise. However, Withington also points out that the traditional Vice is portrayed as more of a rascal or even a buffoon (748), hearkening back to the old definition of *villain* as a simple-minded rustic. Clearly, Iago is no fool, and despite any criticism that calls him an intellectual subordinate of the play, he is the cleverest character in *Othello*. But the notion that Iago is written with some comic elements is not a new one; Abernethy envisions “sly asides of gesture...grins and leers, tongue in cheek, finger at nose, eyes rolled to heaven...and other similar tricks of the comedian” (341). It may be too bold to liken Iago's murderous deeds to the bumbling antics of a milder Vice such as Falstaff, but many of those same comedic elements contribute to Iago's success as the Vice. He is certainly far and away the wittiest figure in the play, and we can see that he genuinely takes delight in his own mischief. Since Iago does not need to take the time to weigh the morality of his schemes as, say, Macbeth does, he has more room to matter-of-factly tell us exactly what is on his mind. Thomas Macaulay writes, “The readiness of his wit, the clearness of his judgment...would have assured to him a certain portion of esteem” (130). Iago is not a clown, but there is an element of humor in how cleverly he interacts with the other characters who, by comparison, start to seem fairly dull.

A bumbling Iago would soon lose our interest, and it would make no sense for his plans to proceed with such smooth success. But there is something charmingly comic in how quickly yet delicately he weaves his web: we come to recognize him as the play's only character who is truly in control. As he works his magic on the other characters, we begin to see the rest of the cast as a gaggle of fools just waiting to be ruined by Iago.

One trait which lends Iago an attractive aura of humanity is, strangely enough, his honesty. Though the phrase "honest Iago" is uttered by the various gulls of *Othello* almost to the point of irony overload, Abernethy is provocative but keen to suggest that the lying, backstabbing, two-faced Iago may be the play's most honest character. As early as the opening scene, Iago tells his audience precisely what his motives are, "with gusto and wit" (Hyman 12), and as the play progresses, he uses those monologues and soliloquies to openly elaborate on and develop his plans as if we are his personal team of confidants. In the style of the traditional Vice figure, Iago discloses his intentions from the beginning and leaves us with no question that he is our villain. For all of the fraud he showcases while interacting onstage with his dupes, Iago is honest with us: "Nothing is left in doubt but the physical instruments that he will employ in accomplishing his purpose" (Abernethy 339). At the end of Act I, as if we still had any doubts about Iago's villainy, he calls on the forces of Hell to "bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (I.iii.384). Iago is certainly the character with whom the audience of *Othello* forms the greatest intimate connection, and even if that character is almost supernaturally evil, he is at least the most prolific member of the action—he is, after all, the creator of the action. Therefore, scenes without him seem empty, and we know that those episodes which most excitingly drive the play forward are those with Iago at the helm.

Some critics, however, argue that labeling Iago the Vice is still too kind to the ancient

and that he should instead be called an incarnation of the ultimate evil, the devil himself. And there is certainly no shortage of textual evidence to suggest that Iago at least entertains the idea, most of which Iago utters himself when alone with us. He is the engineer of discord, setting down “the pegs that make this music” (II.i.194) and calling on “Hell and night” (I.iii.383) to undo the harmony Othello and the others take for granted. His soliloquies repeatedly allude to the “divinity of Hell” (II.iii.306) and “devils” with “the blackest sins put on” (II.iii.307). As McCauley points out, his line to Roderigo, “I am not what I am” (I.i.65)—which could be Iago's signature catchphrase—contradicts God's proclamation to Moses in Exodus, I AM WHAT I AM (8). When Othello grants Iago the lieutenancy, he enters into a demonic pact with the ancient, to which Iago responds, “I am your own forever” (III.iv.480). This marks Othello's point of no return; he has sold his soul to Iago and solidified his course to Hell. Through his likeness to the devil, Iago becomes attractive in the same way as the serpent in Genesis: not only is he a Vice character, he is the ultimate Vice character. Iago *is* superhuman, and his victims are powerless against him. Iago is the Loki of Venice, the god of mischief, and we find such uncontested power attractive in the same way that we admire Hotspur's abilities on the battlefield. Those who criticize Iago for having no human equivalent find solace in calling him the devil because it excuses Iago from needing a human equivalent. But according to some, the problem with relegating Iago solely to the role of devil is, ironically, that he is too imperfect to be the prince of darkness. Bowman writes that he “does not have the infallibility of incarnate evil” (463), and Bloom argues that Iago is such an exceptional villain that he is “as beyond vice as he is beyond virtue” (454). Iago is Shakespeare's most intelligent, most dangerous, and most powerful villain, but even he fails to account for all of his loose ends, and he is ultimately foiled by Emilia, whom he underestimates as a “foolish wife” (III.iiii.303).

Despite the occasional slip-up, though, the simplest reason that Iago is an attractive villain is that he is a remarkably good villain. Hotspur is impressive because of his unrelenting determination, his sense of honor, and his prowess on the battlefield, but he is not necessarily motivated by a penchant for mischief and evil so much as a desire to make the world what he believes to be a better place. Iago, on the other hand, is as corrupt as an antagonist can be. Bloom, who can hardly resist focusing on Iago in his study of the play's cast, writes, "No villain in all literature rivals Iago as a flawless conception, who requires no improvement" (453). He suggests that from the beginning, Shakespeare knew Iago was the perfect villain who needed no refinement. Again, despite the brand of criticism that argues Iago is unrealistic and inhuman, part of his appeal is that he is frighteningly human, as he shows in his conversations with the audience. The idea that such a devil could be masquerading as a perfectly upright individual makes Iago immensely dangerous. He is a terrifying villain, but not in the same sense that Hotspur is an uncontested warrior or Richard III is a bloodthirsty monster. Iago is frightening because until the very end of the play, he is unstoppable. Bloom writes, "Othello is powerless against Iago; that helplessness is the most harrowing element in the play" (446). So are all the other characters powerless against him, and so are we. Shielded by the facade of "honest Iago," the villain can go to work with confidence. If Hotspur seems invincible in a battle of swords, Iago is invincible in a battle of wits, and the audience can only watch with wonder—admiration, even—as his schemes play out.

Rosenberg criticizes a production in which Iago appeared as "an ugly, twisted, gnome-like creature," clearly in an effort to present him as demonic, for stripping Iago of the honesty he shows in his monologues ("In Defense" 150). The production failed because the audience felt no connection to this haggard, groveling Iago, the one character in the play who ostensibly sets out

to establish a relationship with his audience. Bloom argues that Iago is not so much Satan as he is “anti-God,” a “master of uncreation” who returns Othello to original chaos (461, 465). Instead of standing in for the Christian devil “or a parody thereof,” Iago is an independent trapper of souls who, like the devil, has a knack for acquiring his souls through subterfuge (Bloom 464). Still, Iago's self-professed devilishness cannot be ignored, and it is relevant that the play ends with Iago still alive. We might take it on ourselves to presume he is tortured and executed in a hypothetical Act V, scene III, but Iago's survival at the curtain does give him an impression of immortality. Othello asks to see his cloven hooves and remarks, “If that thou bes't a devil, I cannot kill thee” (V.ii.285), and Iago refuses to speak, even to absolve his sins. That one of the tragedy's very few survivors is its central villain is troubling enough, but we owe our respect to the man who evades detection long enough to see his plans to the end. Devil or not, there is something almost supernatural in Iago's persistence, a persistence which allows him to outlive the play's helpless protagonists, at least onstage.

Somewhat kinder criticism holds that Iago is a Machiavellian figure, a monster to be sure but one more concerned with his personal advancement than committing evil for the sake of evil. Hyman counters Coleridge's claim that Iago acts with ‘motiveless malignity’: “What Coleridge called ‘the dreadful consequences of placing the moral in subordination to the intellectual’ characterizes the whole series of Shakespeare's ‘Machiavellian’ figures” (128). In other words, Iago's choice to pursue power at the expense of morality does not come from a sense of nihilistic glee but rather an egotistic concern for himself. Indeed, a common defense of Iago holds that a twenty-eight year-old soldier who suspected himself of being cuckolded had little choice but to take drastic measures to preserve his reputation and advance his rank (*Shakespeare's Audience* 145). A.C. Bradley adds that “Iago's desire to heighten his sense of power and

superiority...[does] not spring chiefly from ill will” (qtd. in Brock 12). Although Iago need not evoke his audience’s sympathy to be an effective villain, arguing that Iago acts out of necessity may be the best way to approach the ancient as a figure worthy of sympathy. Perhaps Rosenberg is right in his psychological diagnosis of Iago that he is afflicted by the same nettling “hell pains” he hopes to inflict on Othello. The Machiavel reading makes Iago attractive in the opposite way that the devil reading does: instead of being attractive for his apparently supernatural power, he is attractive for his humanity, his imperfections. We admire his dogged pursuit of justice—perverted as his sense of justice may be—and the unorthodox methods he employs to get it because they are *impossibly* evil. In Iago, we see vengeance taken to an extreme which we can only secretly fantasize about. Iago represents the wicked fantasy of satisfying the ultimate revenge, throwing virtue and other “trifles” to the wind and laughing all the way. Draper disagrees that Iago can be labeled a Machiavel at all: “He does not create situations *ab ovo* like a Machiavellian villain; he merely contorts them...sets the strings out of tune” (*Shakespeare’s Audience* 156). Draper believes that Iago is more of an opportunist than an inventor, but even if he is, his schemes are more often than not what give rise to those opportunities in the first place. Essentially, those who call Iago a Machiavel argue that Iago's focus is primarily on himself and how he, an aging soldier who has good reason to feel wronged, can best use the tools around him to persevere. His advice to Roderigo to “fill thy purse with money” (I.iii.336-7) applies just as well to himself as he plans his own means of advancement. Those who deny Iago's Machiavellianism claim that he is more hell-bent on the corruption and destruction of others, whether it is his hobby or his job.

Similar criticism attacks the idea that Iago is brilliant; for example, Draper is insistent that Iago is more accurately an opportunist than a mastermind, a resourceful man to be sure but

also an exceptionally lucky one who “seized occasions rather than made them” (“Honest Iago” 727). Harsher criticism claims that Iago is really no cleverer than, say, Othello and Cassio. But such criticism grasps at the same straws as that which attacks Hotspur's valor as laughably anachronistic. Iago is not perfect, something that adds credence to the argument that he is human, but he has to at least be commended as Shakespeare's most mentally impressive villain. Bloom calls him a psychologist, the “ancestor of all modern literary critics” (452), for his ability to, as Brock puts it, “[read] other people's minds, almost before they had uttered their thoughts” (6). Abernethy heralds Iago as a wizard of evil: “We watch the clever knavery of Iago as we watch the clever tricks of a conjurer” (339). Just as we are attracted to the sheer physical presence of Hotspur, we are hypnotized by Iago's superior mental power. Iago manipulates the characters of *Othello* with such apparent ease and mastery that the whole process seems to be disturbingly natural to him. Even as complications or new opportunities arise, Iago is able to edit them into his plans with such seamlessness as could only be perfected by an incredibly sharp Machiavellian mind. Iago's only mistake is that he underestimates his wife; on all other accounts, he either already has a plan in place or is quick to invent one. He may be lucky in part, but a combination of resourcefulness and almost perfect foresight makes Iago one of Shakespeare's smartest villains and therefore one of his most attractive ones.

Tellingly, we are also attracted to Iago's complete disregard for morality. Brock believes that Iago consistently acts out of a concern for his own well-being, that “there is not one single instance in the whole play where a generous and disinterested action can be placed to the credit of Iago.” (5) Even the scenes where his manipulation is at its finest, such as when he pretends to console the recently-demoted Cassio, Iago always has his own advancement in mind. Iago represents our latent mischief come to the surface; the ambivalence he invokes is largely borne

out of an uncomfortable sense of *Schadenfreude* which we feel in watching his schemes come to fruition. From the beginning, when Iago makes his intentions with Roderigo clear, to the end, when Lodovico forces him to “look on the tragic loading of this bed” (V.ii.364), the villain never stops causing trouble. If Hotspur represents a latent interest in rebellion and disobedience, Iago represents a repressed thirst for unchecked depravity. His improvised decisions to silence Roderigo and Emilia come without hesitation and showcase his disregard for human life, although he would prefer that others do the killing for him. And as awkward as it is to use “moral” and “Iago” in the same phrase, Iago does have his own moral code, tainted as it is, which he pursues to the end. It is a moral code never before seen by the audience: honor is meaningless, virtue is a “fig” (I.iii.315), and other people are pawns to be used for one's personal gain. Even Desdemona, whom Iago claims to love “not out of absolute lust” (II.ii.264), is a puppet first and foremost. The downright uniqueness of Iago's rationale makes it attractive and undoubtedly explains why some critics are so determined to redeem him or at least find a way to justify his actions. But Iago's allure comes about as a result of his unique and completely puzzling code of ethics—or lack thereof—and not how he or anyone else justifies it.

Iago's attractiveness as a villain comes about from his complexity as a Vice, a devil, and a Machiavel. But the beauty of Iago is that he need not be relegated to any one of these dramatic roles—he is perfectly suited to all three. As far as he is the play's central conductor in charge of driving its action, Iago's purpose is that of the Vice; that is, he is to corrupt Othello and friends onto the path of sin. As far as his role is that of the ultimate tempter with a seeming immortality to back it up, Iago is also the same devil he professes to be in his darkest lines. Finally, there is no reason why Iago's cruelty cannot have its origins in both a taste for evil and a desire for self-promotion, and his Machiavellian behavior is also crucial to understanding what makes Iago

perhaps Shakespeare's most relentless villain. In crafting Iago, Shakespeare expands these roles to accommodate an intelligent and complicated character, ultimately producing a villain who does not necessarily revolutionize the roles but at least advances them. He is a Vice, but he is more than just allegorical. He is a devil, but there is a twinge of humanity in him. He is ambitious, but he is not impatiently rash. We are fascinated by his mastery of deceit, but at the same time, we are attracted to his humanity, the little holes in his plans or his outbursts of rage that show he is only the almost-perfect villain. We are drawn to the *Schadenfreude* he evokes by virtue of being the play's harbinger of tragedy, and we appreciate his willingness and ability to bring to the stage all that pent-up hunger for mischief, chaos, and evil. As Bloom writes, we delight in Iago's evil and even cheer it on (453); the rest of the characters, after all, begin to seem more like antagonists to Iago's hero, and we derive a certain satisfaction from seeing them foiled time after time. Part of Iago's meta-textual attractiveness is the diversity of ways in which he can be read—is he Vice, devil, or Machiavel? He is a complex enough villain to play all three parts and more. In fact, it is not necessarily Iago's skill at playing any one of these roles that makes him remarkable but rather his mastery of all of them. By playing all of these parts to success, Iago becomes something truly unique. However, efforts toward "solving" the complicated Iago do have one benefit: they help to answer the crucial question of why Shakespeare adapted such an intricate man to be his play's villain.

As the Vice, Iago's goal is to tempt Othello into becoming irreparably sinful, a task he accomplishes with both remarkable ease and delight. Naturally, a character whose dramatic purpose is to deceive and double-cross must have some qualities which make him attractive enough to the other characters. Rosenberg's criticism of the performance in which Iago appears as a sniveling demon makes sense: such an Iago may be evil, but he lacks the confidence exuded

by the Vice, the cool surety with which he manipulates his dupes. This Grendel-like Iago is unattractive because it is unbelievable that the characters of *Othello* themselves would find him attractive enough to lower their guard. Spivack argues that by virtue of being the Vice, Iago is excused from being human. On the contrary, it is the humanity of Iago that makes him such a unique—and powerful—Vice. Shakespeare complicates the allegorical figure, who traditionally lacked much in the way of characterization, by granting him psychological reality and making him the most intellectually sophisticated character in the play. Iago woos his victims with more than just a silver tongue. He is tremendously well-developed for a Vice character, which in turn makes him dangerously effective at his job. Although the Vice has to hold a good deal of persuasive power over the protagonist for there to be any sense of conflict at all, that power is often difficult to define because the Vice is allegorical and too comical to take seriously. Honest Iago, in Vice tradition, discloses his motives to the audience as early as the first scene and reveals the extent of his malice with pleasure. However, we also share in his revelations, the various complications to his plans, and his most serious moments in addition to his most comical ones. Therefore, our nefarious Vice in *Othello* becomes both the main character of the play and the most attractive one. If the audience, who knows Iago's intentions by Act I, falls victim to Iago's charms, what hope do the oblivious characters of the play have? He lies through his teeth to the other characters onstage, but he is unwaveringly honest to us—not even the play's namesake is nearly as intimately acquainted with his onlookers. Shakespeare's motive in creating Iago was to forge a character so cunning in the art of manipulation that he is even able to gain the *audience's* admiration, even though that audience is well aware that he is a villain even before the curtain rises. Whether we realize it or not, we too are trapped in Iago's web, and we can only look on in awe as Othello and company face a similar fate.

As the devil, Iago's role is to ensnare as many souls as he can and to serve as the personification of pure evil. Of course, no literary figure is more attractive than the serpent himself, the ultimate tempter. Bloom calls Iago "a genius of evil who has engendered himself from a great Fall" (436), suggesting that Iago is the first—and probably last—villain to equal the devil in his talent for temptation and evil. Milton perfects Satan's role as supreme tempter by attributing to him even more attractive qualities, including physical beauty and dominion over a vast army of demons. Shakespeare follows a similar strategy in making his own devil attractive on several levels. It is not just Iago's smooth talking that sets Othello on the path to self-destruction. Like the devil, Iago has a remarkable ability to capitalize on new developments and to turn unfortunate outcomes to his advantage. Upon discovering the strawberry handkerchief, for instance, he immediately considers how he can put it to good use: "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ: this may do something" (III.iii.321-3). What separates Iago from the typical Vice character and elevates him to the devil rank of tempters is that he is "a great improviser...adjusting his plot to openings as they present themselves" (Bloom 436). If Shakespeare's intent is to create a villain who transcends mere mischief and comes to resemble the ultimate incarnation of attractive evil, then the best model to follow is the devil himself. And Iago's constant mockery of God and the heavens, his passionate appeals to "Hell and night" and his blasphemous proclamation "I am not what I am," certainly suggest that this is at least one of Iago's purposes. For a play whose action is driven by the supernaturally attractive evil of an ultimate deceiver, what better role model to choose but the very originator of the archetype? *Othello* is also a play driven by dramatic irony, another convention which gives the serpent a large part of his appeal. The audience knows Iago's motives, but Othello and the others are just as helpless as Adam and Eve in the garden. The fact

that Iago is dangerous is something the audience knows that the characters of the play do not know until it is far too late. As the source of this exclusive information, honest Iago is not only the creator of the play's action but the creator of its tension.

As a Machiavel, Iago's motives are more directed toward his own benefit than toward the gleeful destruction of others. To satisfy this role, Shakespeare needs a villain who is ambitious—but not foolishly so—and unrestrained by a concern for others. Of course, these seem like qualities expected of any good villain; Spivack writes, “It is a rare villain in the drama of that time who is not in some degree a Machiavel” (qtd. in Hyman 134). Any good villain should value self-promotion over sympathy, else he could hardly even be called an antagonist. Hyman, however, believes that Iago could actually reflect a critique by Shakespeare of the larger Machiavellian attitude: “We have only to recall that his [Shakespeare's] world was saturated by the image (or distorted image) of Machiavelli, and that a number of his villains...also reflect that figure” (145). If Shakespeare's intent is to criticize the overambitious power-mongering of real-life Machiavels, Iago may represent the Machiavel taken to the point of hyperbole, a schemer who is abnormally oblivious to the well-being of his fellow man and who approaches every little circumstance in terms of how he can best benefit himself. Draper, though dubious that Iago is more of a Machiavel than just a witty opportunist, admits that Iago is a villain “in an age that at best was tarnished...of Machiavelli” (*Shakespeare's Audience* 165). In this reading, Iago could represent Machiavellian ideals taken too far, to the point that they destroy everything around the ambitious man before consuming the Machiavel himself. The problem, though, is that if Shakespeare did in fact create Iago as a sort of parody of the exaggerated Machiavel, it seems unfitting that he would make him so legitimately attractive. He would need to be more comical, in line with the typical Medieval Vice, and he would probably meet complications with

laughable rage rather than the controlled recalculation Iago demonstrates. The author would want to paint the character in a blatantly unattractive way so as to present the traits being mocked as equally unattractive. It is the same problem with calling Hotspur a parody of an outdated honor code: the villain is clearly not a buffoon, as would be expected of a satirical figure, and it seems that Shakespeare intended for the audience to meet the character with ambivalent curiosity, not outright scorn. Iago is a good villain, perhaps the best villain, and like any good villain, he puts himself first. Likely, Shakespeare did consider the timeliness of Machiavellian attitudes when crafting Iago, but more for inspiration in forging the ultimate villain than for critiquing some guilty party.

A fourth reading is that Iago represents Shakespeare's depiction of the perfect artist of villainy. Bloom calls Iago "a great artist" (435), and Hazlitt considers him a villain "who took a joy in his plot and revelled in his artistic creation" (qtd. in Brock 12). It is easy to call Iago an artist; after all, manipulation seems to come naturally to him, and he speaks of his scheme as if he is composing some grand masterpiece. When the plan is in early development, "'Tis here, but yet confus'd" (II.ii.283). Later, Iago refines it into a more organized method: "Work on, / My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught" (IV.i.42-3). Finally, the opus is completed with "the tragic loading" of the bed at the end of the play. In this way, *Othello* is really a depiction of Iago's creative process from beginning to end. Shakespeare may have wanted to illustrate the aesthetic appeal of villainy by giving its finest artist complete artistic control over the play. Ben Saunders takes the artist metaphor to a more Freudian level, pointing out that Iago often subtly refers to the play as his own child of sorts: "Notoriously, Iago describes his central creative act...as a 'monstrous birth'" (152). But even more repulsive, Saunders also comments that Iago's ambiguous language could have fecal implications as well; he speaks of his irritable

“inwards” and speaks of womankind as being “delivered” with suggestions of both childbirth and “evacuation” (Saunders 153). Therefore, if Iago is an artist, he is a perverted one, one whose creative work is tainted by the malignity of his dirty mind. Shakespeare may have wanted to present him as the revolting yet brilliant artist, the creator who simultaneously disgusts and entices us. While Iago’s characteristic circumlocution keeps us from knowing just what he means with these metaphors, this reading does reinforce the image of Iago as a beautiful monster who is at once both attractive and repulsive. Additionally, writing the part of Iago was probably a guilty pleasure. Bloom writes, “Can you invent Iago without delighting in your invention, even as we delight in our ambivalent reception of Iago?” (453) For Shakespeare, creating Iago was an exercise in creating drama’s most complicated, dangerous, and enticing evil-doer. Such a task must have been a diabolically enjoyable one, as evidenced by Iago’s wealth of highly poetic lines and presence in thirteen of the play’s fifteen scenes—even the playwright himself could not help but indulge in Iago’s appeal. If part of Shakespeare’s intent was to glorify the art of villainy, he wrote Iago to be the da Vinci of evil who is kind enough to let the audience watch him work.

Iago is the flagship of a hypothetical class of villains who are attractive simply because they are efficient evildoers—they are good at what they do. These are the tricksters, the deceivers, the manipulators of literature, those who prefer to use sleight of mind over brute force. These villains are intelligent, often extraordinarily so, and their intelligence serves as their weapon of choice against the protagonists. The trickster villains tend to control others into doing their dirty work, getting their hands dirty only when absolutely necessary. One of the best analogues is Goethe’s Mephistopheles, who uses his supernatural powers of conjuration and trickery to make Faust his helpless gull. Like Iago, the demon does not outright destroy Faust; instead, he turns the doctor’s sins against him and destroys him from the inside out.

Mephistopheles boasts to The Lord, “Him [Faust] thou yet shall lose, / If leave to me thou wilt but give, / Gently to lead him as I choose” (72-4). The demon is tasked with leading Faust astray with tricks and illusions, appealing to the doctor’s thirst for ultimate knowledge. Marlowe hones Mephistopheles’ role as Vice in *Doctor Faustus*, in which the villain literally carries the forgone doctor’s soul to hell at the end of the play. The serpent in the Genesis story is, at least in Hyman’s opinion, Iago’s only rival in terms of manipulative genius. Certainly both stories demonstrate the power of dramatic irony in making the villain seductively dangerous. As the onlookers, we know we are observing a master at work, but the victims are oblivious to the villain’s motives until they are too entangled to escape. As far as Iago can be compared to famous superhuman deceivers, he resembles Loki of the *Prose Edda*, a literal god of trickery. Loki embraces many of the same methods of gulling the more vulnerable around him, whether through supernatural wiles or old-fashioned dishonesty. Before he attempts to defeat wildfire itself at an eating contest, he proclaims, “I know a trick, which I am ready to try: that there is no one within here who shall eat his food more quickly than I” (62). “I know a trick” could easily be another of Iago’s catchphrases. As the prankster god, Loki shares Iago’s penchant for mischief and treachery. This class of villains also includes the allegorical Vice, the age-old “undoer of virtue” (McCauley 8) and any character whose role is to lead the protagonists astray. Another such Vice from Renaissance literature is Jonson’s Mosca; the aptly-named “fly” buzzes in Volpone’s ear with the same silver tongue that Iago uses to seduce Othello, but behind his master’s back, Mosca develops the schemes for undoing the old fox and his flatterers. Another fine artist of deception, he calls his trickery a “masterpiece” that makes “so rare a music out of discords” (V.ii.15-8). Like Iago, Mosca’s task is to set the pegs out of tune, to take advantage of his master’s misplaced trust. He joins Iago as one of the great parasites of Renaissance drama,

though Mosca is more of a mischievous rascal as expected of the traditional comical Vice (Withington 750). The villains of Iago's class are attractive because they are dangerous. They are not dangerous because they are hideous monsters, nor are they dangerous because they are great fighters like Hotspur. These villains are dangerous because they create the illusion of benevolence, all while they spin their webs to entrap their enemies and their audiences. They capitalize upon trust, they take advantage of innocence. And yet there is something remarkably alluring in coming face-to-face with this danger and watching as the trickster works his magic. These villains are in constant control of their texts: their plots drive the action, they determine where the story goes next, and by the time they are foiled—if they are foiled—their damage is done.

Often credited as Shakespeare's finest villain, Iago works with "terrible greatness" and a "passion for destruction" (Bloom 461, 442). He delights in the chaos he engineers with all the gusto of the perfect Vice, but he also chases his own advancement at any cost. This Machiavellian side of Iago serves as an apt precursor to a look at Richard III, literature's worst king and its best Machiavel. Richard stops at nothing to rise to power, and like Iago, he cares not a bit for those he destroys on his way up. But also like Iago, he has received a great amount of admiration and even sympathy despite being, by all counts, a monster. A delightfully power-hungry monarch and another master opportunist, Richard may even surpass Iago as Shakespeare's most heroic villain—or most villainous hero.

### CHAPTER THREE: PRINCE OF DARKNESS (RICHARD III)

A determined and unrelenting tyrant, King Richard III sits proudly on a bloody throne among the great villains of the history plays. In many ways, he is an attractive villain by virtue of the same qualities that make Iago the ultimate villain of the tragedies. Henry David Gray argues that in cataloguing Shakespeare's finest demons, "We might well take Richard on the one hand and Iago on the other" (69). And the similarities are apparent enough: both play their Vice and Machiavel roles with gusto, both establish an intimacy with their audiences as soon as their opening lines, and both dominate their respective plays to such an overwhelming degree that the rest of the players come to exist only as canvases for their diabolical artistry. But even more so than Iago, Richard is at his strongest not when he is alone but when he is onstage with the other characters, all lab rats for Richard to test his unique brand of villainy. In addition, the fact that Richard does ultimately acquire a lofty position of power instills in the audience a foreboding dread of the unstoppable tyrant, the devil-king who brings to the monarchy a dangerous and mysterious curse.

Like Iago, of course, Richard is a man of action and movement. He is a "creature of haste" (Candido 139) who propels the action of his play's first half in the same way that Iago weaves his web in *Othello*. As an energetic villain, Richard creates conflict and inspires change, forcing the complacent court aristocrats to come face-to-face with an evil fully capable of breaching the strongest castle walls. Also like Iago, Richard is not afraid to invite his audience along for the ride; in his infamous opening soliloquy he confesses he is "determined to prove a villain" and casually discloses his plots to destroy Edward and Clarence (I.i.30-5). Just as it does in *Othello*, this motif of the "honest" villain allows Richard to quickly forge an unbreakable bond with the audience that lasts through all five acts, though it wanes in the final scenes. The

strategy works for good reason: this is not only the most interesting character to emerge but also the most vocal, the only one to take the time to befriend his onlookers.

Much that has already been said about Iago's aptitude in playing the trifold role of Vice, devil, and Machiavel can be repeated for Richard, but the extent to which each accomplishes these roles sets them apart as comparable but far from identical villains. Richard is less of a Vice; he does not set out to corrupt his victims into irreparable sin except to the extent that it helps him get his way. This, in turn, makes him more the Machiavel, whose intent is to get to the throne as quickly and smoothly as possible, whose regard for the destruction he causes along the way as mere collateral damage makes him undeniably evil. As with Hotspur, the fact that Richard has an uphill battle to success gives his efforts a certain underdog appeal, even though the audience knows his success means trouble for England. Unlike "honest" Iago, Richard is detested from the beginning; he must convince his victims that he is a monster worth trusting. His oration to his remaining followers before Bosworth even echoes Hotspur's "die all, die merrily" speech before Shrewsbury, though by now Richard has lost the eloquence that helped him to the throne:

Remember whom you are to cope withal;  
A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways,  
A scum of Bretons, and base lackey peasants,  
Whom their over-cloyed country vomits forth  
To desperate ventures and assured destruction.

(V.iii.315-9)

This too-introspective Richard has lost the numbness that made him a supreme Machiavel in the first half of the play; his speech becomes as ugly as he himself. But like Hotspur, "even in the hour of his death he is ready to propose new miracles of action and bravery" (Goll 35). Better than any other villain from Shakespeare, Richard blurs the line between hero and villain, producing a character that manages to simultaneously be highly dangerous and overwhelmingly

attractive.

Richard's role as devil is particularly interesting since "Richard the Man" comes with a history as complicated as it is controversial. The ugly, crookbacked, bestial portrait of Richard emphasized in the play's first half owes itself in large part to Thomas More's less-than-flattering *History of King Richard III*, in which the tyrant is "little of stature...croke backed...hard favoured of visage...malicious, wrathfull, envious, and from afore his birth, ever forwarde" (qtd. in Jones 213). This wonderfully vivid illustration of a king hideous inside and outside is, according to Desmond Seward, one motivator for calling Richard "England's black legend." Amid efforts to redeem Richard as a bad but not horrible king—perhaps a "grey" Richard slandered by propaganda—Seward laments, "The case for the black legend is in danger of being lost...yet it offers much the most convincing portrait of Richard" (16). It also offers the much more interesting portrait of Richard; as Seward writes, "The evil Richard is even more interesting than the good Richard" (13). Whether or not Richard the Man was the devil that More and company regarded him, the effectiveness of Shakespeare's Richard relies on the pervasiveness of such an image of "black" Richard.

What, then, is to be done with Richard's physical shortcomings, traits that Shakespeare clearly felt dramatically important enough to preserve? Whether in the form of Queen Margaret's vicious invective—"Thou elvish-mark'd, abortive, rooting hog" (I.iii.228) or Richard's own dramatic self-deprecation—"rudely stamp'd...deformed, unfinish'd, sent before my time" (I.i.16, 20), Richard is a common recipient of abuse. Most describe him in animalistic terms: he is a "bottled spider," a "poisonous hunchback'd toad," and, most frequently, a boar, the symbol of his crest. As seen in the rendition of *Othello* criticized by Rosenberg in the previous chapter, dramatists may occasionally present their villains as physically detestable to

reflect their inner hideousness, but Richard is uniformly ugly. On the one hand, Richard's outer ugliness underscores his inner ugliness, much in the same way that Chaucer's unflattering portraits of the corrupt pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* serve as precursors to their characters' moral corruption. In creating his stage role as Richard that would become one of the most critically acclaimed, Antony Sher comments that he wanted his Richard to be "unformed, and somewhat slimy...part human, incorporating all of Margaret's curses, be he toad, cur, or cacodemon" (qtd. in Cerasano 619). Another famous Richard, that of Simon Russell Beale, has "a large uneven hump exaggerating his fatness, a shaved but bristly head and face, a thick roll of fat at his neck" (Loehlin 90). On the other hand, the fact that the ugly villain still manages to steal his audience's affection is testament to his power as a manipulator and a charmer. Like Iago, Richard is a monster after our own hearts, and he makes us fall in love with him despite his exterior disadvantages.

Much has been written on Richard's deformity—or lack thereof. E.W. Jones explains the More-influenced "Tudor" view of Richard as a handicapped monster whose crooked spine is "truly matched to the tortuosity of his malign character" (218). Other critics, such as Susan Leas, call Richard the Man a victim of propagandized slander but admit that historical Richard and Shakespearean Richard should not be treated as the same creature (215). Still, that Shakespeare preserved the hunchbacked fiend of More's description implies that he has considerable dramatic use for the disability. Just as Richard's ugliness offers an outward projection of his inner evil, so too does Richard's physical corruption mirror his psychological, moral, and egoistical corruption—in Jones' words, his literal crookedness offers the audience a tangible image of his figurative crookedness. But the dramatic role of his disability goes even beyond simple allegory; it gives Richard yet another obstacle to overcome on his way to the

crown. It is bad enough that he must contend with the vicious barbs of the women in his way; he also has to do it all while suffering the disadvantage of an “unfinish’d” ugliness that stigmatizes him from birth. This may be one factor that causes certain critics to take pity on Richard as they do for Iago, but more important is the ease with which Richard overcomes his “rudely stamp’d” body. It certainly does not stop him from wooing Lady Anne with “honey words” in a scene that even Iago could appreciate. Nor does it stop him from methodically eliminating his rivals to the crown both before and after he gets it. Richard is attractive because he manages to prove a villain—just as he sets out to do in his first soliloquy—despite having the odds stacked against him. Sher’s Richard even takes advantage of his handicap by cleverly using two crutches as makeshift props, “plucking a coronet from Margaret, probing in Lady Anne’s skirts, closing them like mandibles around the neck of the doomed Hastings” (Loehlin 83). Despite being the most physically limited character in the play, Richard is also its fastest character, and he uses that speed to paralyze the rest of the court. During his Machiavellian rise to power, his enemies curse him and mercilessly hurl insults at him, but none actually has the power to stop him. They are all frozen by his silver tongue and his subtle brilliance—like the cast of *Othello*, they soon come to exist only as supplements to the villain’s machinations.

In this way, Richard becomes more dynamic by virtue of making all the other characters seem less dynamic. He is the play’s only real character in motion, at least until the final scenes when he gradually congeals into an overly contemplative and fatigued shadow of his former self. However, Richard owes just as much to his words as he does to his actions. Richard and Iago are both powerful speakers to be sure, but Richard is the better orator. Many of his victims blame themselves for being coaxed by his politician’s rhetoric all the while knowing full well that it is the language of a villain. Anne admits to being won by his honey words while Hastings,

“too fond, might have prevented this” (III.iv.83). The Duchess of York laments that she “might have intercepted” Richard by “strangling [him] in her accursed womb” (IV.iv.137-8). The climactic scene of Richard’s long-awaited acquisition of the crown features the boar at his finest as he pretends to refuse the very thing he has stopped at nothing to get his hands on. He mock-complains to Buckingham, “Since you will buckle fortune on my back, / To bear her burthen, whether I will or no / I must have patience to endure the load” (III.vii.228-30). Richard’s silver tongue stretches farther than a gull here or a fool there; Richard’s political expertise allows him to seduce an entire crowd of helpless nobles and citizens in one fell swoop. Of course, the scene comes across as sardonically comic to the audience, who knows all too well what Richard is up to, but it cannot help but be impressed by the man’s skills as an actor. Bloom, in differentiating between Richard and his favorite villain, Iago, rightly argues that the former is more of a master of persuasion than he is a professional psychologist (66). Richard is not a mind reader—at least not to the extent that Iago is—but rather an orator who recognizes his powers of speech and puts them to good use.

Richard is Shakespeare’s finest actor. Waldo McNeir writes, “He acts for two audiences: his dupes and accomplices in the play which he directs, and us in the theater” (168). From his self-deprecating opening soliloquy to his humorously contrived election to the kingship, Richard is a phenomenally entertaining and convincing actor. It is only until his paranoia brings him to a screeching halt that his theatrics begin to disappoint, as seen in his ugly speech to his comrades at Bosworth, which is tainted with “scum,” “vomit,” “famish’d beggars,” and “poor rats.” Until then, Richard shamelessly hogs the spotlight like the boar that he is. No wonder, then, that the role of Richard has traditionally been in demand by many a world-class actor. Scott Colley provides a laundry list of popular actors who vied for the role: David Garrick, Richard

Mansfield, John Barrymore, and many others (x-xi). Richard is an actor's character, to be certain; he effortlessly steals the show of the fourteen out of twenty-five scenes in which he appears. As Colley writes, "The play is Richard's after all" (3), leading several productions to omit or significantly cut those scenes in which he is absent. George Stevens offers another reason why actors love Richard just as much as audiences do: "The role of Richard is daunting in its complexity" (8). There is Richard the villain, Richard the hero, Richard the politician, Richard the clown. McNeir identifies "Richard the Simple," "Richard the Blunt," "Richard the Pious," and "Richard the Humble" among the boar's favorite roles (176-7), and the skill with which he seamlessly transitions between them proves he has the improvisational fortitude of any great actor. Richard the seducer makes Lady Anne lower her guard long enough to be roped in under the most unlikely circumstances—at the funeral procession of her late husband, Richard's latest victim. Richard the politician feigns modesty at Act III's election scene, all the while contemplating his next ruthless move toward securing his power. Richard the entertainer makes certain he does it all with the wit and amusement of a lovable joker.

As the audience is shown more and more of Richard's masks, its respect of him as an actor grows; it appreciates the monster's complexity and delights in the same dramatic irony created by Iago. The eventual fall of Richard comes about as a result of his losing the acting talent that so greatly facilitated his rise to the top. He grows too introspective and finally pigeonholes himself into one inescapable, doomed role. He starts from his haunting dream in an uncharacteristic tumult of conscience:

What do I fear? myself? there's none else by:  
 Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.  
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:  
 Then fly. What, from myself?

(V.iii.182-5)

His speech shortens, made rapid by paranoia, and his diction loses its once charming eloquence. This Richard has lost the actor's ability to move, to drive the action; he has himself become paralyzed, perhaps exhausted by the energy expended in the play's first half. Richard has turned cold. Hassel chronicles Richard's roles as "weeping lover, devoted brother...political manipulator, master ironist," then, all of a sudden, "cornered, sweating rat" (146). However, despite this tragic fall, the legacy Richard leaves is the fiery story of his rise to power. This is the Richard we know and love, the Richard who with charm and wit claws his way to the throne, laughing all the way.

Of course, one of Richard's most attractive roles as an actor is Richard the comedian. He is a funny villain, and one reason that he works as a funny villain is that he immediately sets out to make accomplices out of his onlookers. Ian McKellen's Richard, for example, invites viewers into his most private corners, even the lavatory, facing the camera and whispering to his audience as if it were his favorite ensemble of confidants (Loehlin 88). Sher's Richard plays to the character's sense of dark humor by gleefully leaping around the stage—despite his alleged disability—and, in a particularly gruesome scene, tossing Hastings' bloody decapitated head around like a football. The archetype of the funny villain is a dramatic element not necessarily invented in Richard but certainly perfected in him. "Shakespeare knows that," Cerasano writes, "given the choice, we prefer our monsters to be entertaining" (623). In creating his Richard, Sher remarks that he knew Richard could not simply be funny for the sake of being funny; rather, he decided it was preferable "to make the audience cry for him as well as delight in his humor" (129). Richard is no clown, though he does play that role occasionally, but he is charmingly witty in a morbid way. Consider his entrapment of Hastings, in which he asks the doomed man, "Tell me what they deserve / That do conspire my death with devilish plots," to which Hastings

naively condemns himself with, “Doom the offenders, whatsoever they be / I say, my lord, they have deserved death” (III.iv.63-4, 69-70). Even more so than Iago, Richard approaches his Vice and Machiavel roles as games to be played and won. He acquires a certain attraction by virtue of being a master at these games; only until he fails as an actor does he allow himself to be beaten by the likes of Richmond. Richard’s gamesmanship lends him a degree of attractive humor, but it also magnifies the danger he poses. He becomes a sort of hunter, a hobbyist who approaches his Machiavellian ascension as a sport, much like Iago considers his role as Vice a sport and Hotspur refers to heated combat as his own game of choice. These are professionals worthy of respect and of fear, both from their enemies in the plays and from the audience itself.

Both Hotspur and Iago have shown that a dangerous villain is a good villain, and a good villain is an attractive villain. But Richard is dangerous in a new way: he comes to occupy a position of tremendous power. Though one could argue that Richard is even more dangerous before he becomes king than he is after, Shakespeare shows in Richard the portrait of absolute corruption come to the throne. The image would be powerful to any audience skeptical of monarchy; Richard represents the worst-case scenario—royalty gone bad. Even worse, the ease with which such a blatantly evil figure acquires that power is even more unsettling. Audiences would have to wonder if it was in fact that easy for the historical Richard III and if it could just as easily happen again. And, though Richmond proudly debuts in Act V as the antidote to Richard's poison, audiences must wonder if “Richmond is no different from Richard” (van Elk 17). If danger is as attractive with Richard as it is with Hotspur and Iago, then both Richard III the character and *Richard III* the play ask audiences to indulge the unrestrained workings of a tyrant. Shakespeare makes the audience of *Richard III* vulnerable, and we like to be scared. After all, if Richard lacked the exciting danger of the Machiavel, he would still just be the Duke

of Gloucester.

However, the audience's fear of the tyrannical Richard finds its roots in popular history as well. Loehlin remarks on the "Tudor Myth," a political legend suggesting that England was cursed by the murder of Richard II and only released by the ascension of Richmond (81). As the last of the "cursed" monarchs, then, Richard appears as the culmination of all the sin and political corruption that stained the crown since Richard II's untimely deposition. Whether or not all Elizabethan audiences knew or bought into the myth, it does cast a shadow of uneasiness on an already unsettling play. Richard's pre-coronation antics are amusing enough, but viewers would still dread the absolute political depravity he represents. Audiences are dealing with a cursed hero-villain, and while that curse repulses us, it also draws us in by evoking our morbid curiosity. The motif of the doomsday prophesy is recurrent in the play; the shadow of impending doom constantly follows Richard like a grim shadow. One of the citizens observes the gathering clouds when Richard's rise is still in its infancy: "Look to see a troublous world...All may be well; but if God sort it so, / 'Tis more than we deserve, or I expect" (II.iii.8, 36-7). At the end of Act II, Elizabeth similarly portends, "I see the downfall of our house! / The tiger now hath seized the gentle hind...I see, as in a map, the end of all" (II.iv.49-50, 54). Richard brings with his ascension the last and strongest link in the curse, the accumulation of monarchical corruption in an appropriately hideous body. Of course, Richard is also cursed in the literal sense, whether through Margaret's vindictive barbs or the deeper-cutting denunciations of his mother: "Therefore take with thee my most heavy curse...Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end; / Shame serves thy life and doth thy death amend" (IV.iv.187, 194-5). Finally, the visitation of the vengeful ghosts before Bosworth seals Richard's fate and dooms his soul to hell. Shakespeare uses this trope of the attractive curse to an even greater extent in *Macbeth*, but the

device makes a powerful debut in Richard's play as well, particularly since it is rooted so deeply in popular history. Richard brings with him the doom of England, the doom of his enemies (or, perhaps more accurately, his obstacles), and eventually, the doom of himself. The curse is a thing of dangerous mystery: real or not, it pulls at our curiosity. It excites in the same way as the common ghost story or a doomsday prediction. Even the most skeptical audience finds excitement in suspending disbelief long enough to entertain the curse, to toy with the idea that Richard, the Black Legend, does indeed herald the darkest days for England. In Jones' "medical postscript" of Richard's supposed disfigurement, he remarks that both a difficult birth and natal teeth were believed by Elizabethans to be omens of impending misfortune (218). In fact, Jones explains, "Early removal of the teeth was considered essential in an attempt to ward off disaster" (219). One dramatically convenient explanation for Richard's long, painful, feet-first delivery and his natal teeth is that he was literally a man before his time, coming into being with a remarkable sense of preemptive action that makes him into an aggressive, tenacious adult.

Another appeal of the curse, then, is that it is inescapable, ordained by fate. Just as there is a certain appeal in recognizing that no one is safe from Iago's web, audiences find nervous excitement in discovering that no one really has the power to stop Richard's bloody reign from running its course—we are all just along for the ride. This, in turn, feeds into the fear of the tyrant king: Richard is the worst-case scenario come to fruition. It takes the sword of Richmond to finally break the curse, but as the audience knows, Richard might as well already be dead by then: the curse is finished with him, leaving behind a sluggish, cold shell. Still, audiences watch the legacy of Richard's rule like a horror movie with a predetermined and immutable plot—except with the ever-present uneasiness that it could conceivably become non-fiction.

Again, the question remains of what Shakespeare intended to do with this attractive hero-

villain. One theory is that through Richard, Shakespeare illustrates the omnipresent threat of failed monarchy. The disaster Richard brings to the throne is truly awe-inspiring, and in his opening lines, he invites his audiences to follow along and witness just how tainted the crown can become. Margaret's bestial curses paint the image of complete savagery in a position of complete authority, a frightening prospect but also a perversely entertaining one. Through Richard, Shakespeare allows his audiences to be Machiavels for a day, to see first-hand the various obstacles the Prince faces on his way to the top and the brutal tactics he employs in overcoming them. In praising Richard, Bloom writes, "We are on unnervingly confidential terms with him...[he] has made Machiavels of us all" (70-1). Richard makes villainy fun. The gamesmanship with which he approaches his ascent—hunting the heirs to the throne like sport, manipulating his dupes into lowering their guard for even a second—makes the entire play seem like Richard's personal exposition of Machiavellianism, his own special romp through the court to which we are all invited. Shakespeare's creation of the attractive tyrant produces an ambivalent response: we know he is a villain who must be stopped, but he is also the play's strongest source of humor, action, and personality. It is enough to make Richmond's victory bittersweet—on the one hand, it means the end of a bad king and the cursed reign he brings with him, but on the other hand, it means the loss of a lovable monster. Richard becomes our personal guide through hell, and we are reluctant to see him go. According to Charles Cowden Clarke, Shakespeare no doubt intended for audiences to simultaneously be "dazzled by the glare of romance and preeminence" and made uneasy by Richard's closeness to home (740-1). The fear that Richard inspires comes from more than just his thirst for blood. The thing that makes him truly terrifying is that the absolutely corrupt monarch would be a very real fear among Elizabethan audiences, and Shakespeare makes him even more dangerous by giving him the

camouflage of a master actor. We find ourselves both charmed and repulsed by Richard just as easily as his hapless victims in the play, but we cannot even claim ignorance—he confesses to us from the beginning!

A somewhat more lighthearted theory is that Richard is Shakespeare's depiction of the perfect actor. It seems reasonable that a writer devoted to drama would have a particular interest in fashioning his conception of the ideal role-player. As a villain, Richard's various masks—Richard the liar, Richard the pious, and so on—are a matter of necessity, so who better to demonstrate the actor's ability to seamlessly alternate between roles? Bloom calls Richard's characteristic gusto a "celebration of Shakespeare's medium, and so of his rapidly developing art" (73). In many ways, *Richard III* is really a biography of the master actor at work, and the other characters generally exist as his onstage props to be used. Richard represents a crucial transition in Shakespeare's consideration of villains; he is "dramatically suitable to the needs of a now mature playwright fashioning his first psychologically complex character" (Candido 141). Richard, then, marks Shakespeare's movement toward the complex, multidimensional villains who tend to rank as his finest. Consider both Hotspur and Iago: the first is complicated because he is a traitor with an admirable honor code, and the second is complicated because he is a despicable fiend who is still by far cleverer than anyone else in his play. Richard fits the idea that a complex villain is an attractive villain perfectly because his very mission as the master actor is to be complex, to put on a different mask for every scene. Through him, Shakespeare begins to move toward deliberately creating his villains as professional actors, and wisely so: Richard has taught him that such villains are good for business.

McNeir expands on the theory that Richard is Shakespeare's celebration of the ideal actor by focusing instead on the less attractive Richard of the play's final scenes. If Richard is the

playwright's conception of the consummate actor, then Richard as he appears after he wins the kingship is the failed actor, "divested of his disguises and compelled to join the dance of death he had begun" (McNeir 185). In going from the fiery Duke of Gloucester to the icy King Richard III, the role undergoes a very perceptible transformation: Richard becomes cold, devoid of the vivacity which carried him to the throne. He becomes unnaturally introspective, even to the point of paranoia. He grows increasingly obsessed with clinging to the crown, and his distracted mind races with various possibilities of his collapse:

I must be married to my brother's daughter,  
Or else my kingdom stands on brittle glass,  
Murder her brothers, and then marry her!  
Uncertain way of gain! But I am in  
So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin:  
Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye.

(IV.ii.61-6)

This is obviously not the same Richard we fell in love with in Act I. It is almost as if Richard cannot exist outside of Machiavellianism; he must always have something to aspire to, a next level to climb. Without that next level, Richard's flame burns out, and he loses the appeal engendered by his once hot, fast-paced personality. Richmond does not defeat Richard—Richard defeats himself. If he does indeed represent the paragon actor, then post-coronation Richard is Shakespeare's image of the actor who has exhausted all of the resources in his repertoire. All those roles that made Gloucester an attractive Machiavel—Richard the seducer, Richard the confessor, Richard the devil—disappear into a handful of uninspiring roles—Richard the second-guesser, Richard the dubious, Richard the paranoid. Finally, after the visitation of the ghosts, he musters up the energy to give one last speech to his remaining followers, but by now he has confined himself to a single, pathetic role: Richard the doomed. Therefore, Shakespeare makes Richard attractive to in turn make him unattractive, to illustrate the master actor undone

by the diminishing of his roleplaying abilities. With the celebration of the perfect actor also comes the admonishment against the failed actor—Richard might as well be Shakespeare's instructional guide on acting.

That said, it is important to note that Richard is one of Shakespeare's earliest villains, created at a time when the playwright was still feeling his way around well-developed antagonists. Richard's post-coronation contemplativeness slows him down and diminishes his appeal, but as soon as his first lines, the more attractive Gloucester proves he is more than just a one-dimensional monster. Richard suggests Shakespeare's movement toward the reflective villain, a movement which eventually leads him to the creation of his other master villains, including Iago. True, attractive Richard is not self-critical, a quality which makes him both a successful and an appealing Machiavel, but as Shakespeare's finest hero-villain, he is more than just hired muscle or deranged psychopath. He is the first of Shakespeare's villains to have the depth of the attractive villain, a quality which probably also invites sympathy, though he hardly needs it. He is the first to ostensibly go out of his way to befriend his spectators and confide in them like partners in crime: "Plots have I laid...As I am subtle, false and treacherous" (I.i.32, 37). Richard is the confessional villain, the friendly villain. The play follows the mind of a character traditionally treated in the third person. Consider Grendel and the two-dimensional monster-types he inspires, who are almost mindless vessels of destruction whose thoughts—if any—are held by the author at a comfortable distance. Consider Aaron the Moor, Shakespeare's first exercise in the human monster, whose deranged mind largely takes a backseat to the actions of Titus, his play's hero. Richard, on the other hand, is both hero and villain, human and monster, and Shakespeare forces us into his blackened yet brilliant mind whether we like it or not. The experience is uncomfortable and dangerous, but it also new and thrilling. Richard, ever

the great actor, uses his play as a vehicle to take audiences on a rousing trip through the mind of evil. Therefore, *Richard III* is Shakespeare's first attempt at the villain-driven play, a type he clearly grows a fondness for and refines in future works like *Othello* and even some comedies like *The Merchant of Venice*.

If Iago and Richard are, as Gray argues, Shakespeare's two über-villains, then they should each serve as the figurehead for two similar yet separate classes of villainy. Robert Heilman argues that both share a natural ability to charm, but Iago is more of a parasite, a Vice determined to collect as many sinful souls as he can. Richard is the greater Machiavel, an unstoppable tyrant who does evil for his own benefit (Heilman 57). Perhaps the key difference is that Iago and his like are at their best when alone on stage, when the audience learns all the juicy secrets of their plots and gets to watch their webs grow ever more intricate. Richard's villains, however, are at their most powerful when interacting with their prey directly, in part because their victims' dullness fuels their own appeal by comparison but also because these moments give them the perfect opportunity to prove their unmatched skills as speakers, politicians, and actors. Richard's class includes his fellow master actors, such as the eternal Don Juan, more hero than villain but nevertheless the epitome of "scoundrel." Lord Byron's roué is obviously dwarfed by Richard in "evil" but still subscribes to the same genre of attractive role-players, charmers who seem to have a mask ready for every scene. And he satisfies the role of hero-villain with the same rascality that Richard uses to wryly entertain his audiences:

A little curly-headed, good-for-nothing,  
 And mischief-making monkey from his birth;  
 His parents ne'er agreed except in doting  
 Upon the most unquiet imp on earth;  
 (Canto 1, XXV)

Richard's class also features all of the great Machiavels of literature, the villains that attract with

a fiery tenacity and constant motion. These characters are appealing because they are catalysts of change; in comparison, their enemies are mere obstacles to be dealt with. Another of Shakespeare's fine Machiavels, Edmund from *King Lear*, adheres to Richard's stop-at-nothing philosophy as he procedurally clears a path to greatness. Whether framing his righteous brother Edgar, toying with the affections of Regan and Goneril, or passively allowing the brutal blinding of his own father, Edmund always only has his own interests in mind. He, too, confesses to a mesmerized audience, emphatically crying, "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" (I.ii.22) Of course, Richard's class can hardly be complete without the greatest Machiavel of them all, Milton's Satan. Book I of *Paradise Lost* gives the image of an ambitious Satan brusquely cast into hell, but rather than accept his fate, he immediately sets about avenging himself. The haste with which he rallies the demons to action makes Satan, like Richard, a character of action, a potent and unstoppable force: "Here we may reign secure, and in my choice / To reign is worth ambition, though in hell; / Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven" (Book 1, 261-3). Another charismatic and powerful speaker, Satan joins Richard in an elite class of literature's most prominent hero-villains. He has exhaustively been called a tragic hero, the protagonist to God's villain, and the only truly sympathetic figure of the epic. The most significant difference between he and Richard is that Milton makes Satan beautiful, probably in part to challenge the ugly-body-ugly-mind stereotype common to the monster villains before him. But again, Richard's ugliness only proves his forte as a Machiavel by giving him one more obstacle to climb, one more "opponent" to overcome on the way to greatness.

Richard shares Hotspur and Iago's penchant for movement and change, making him another of Shakespeare's "hot" villains—at least until the end of the play. He also shares their complexity, a factor that distinguishes them from mere monsters or entirely allegorical figures.

Richard stands apart, however, as the master actor villain, a role-player with an endless arsenal of masks and a bottomless bag of tricks to aid him in his mission to make us fall in love with him. He also stands out as one of the most terrifying villains because of the ease with which he comes to occupy a position of supremacy. He embodies the audience's latent fear of the absolute tyrant; he is monarchy gone horribly wrong. The final chapter will examine another rotten king who establishes himself as one of Shakespeare's most attractive hero-villains, albeit for very different reasons. Richard introduces the idea that a curse can be attractive, but it is Macbeth who sells the idea. Ordained by fate to rise and fall, emotionally numbed a false sense of security, and strung along by an equally monstrous wife, Macbeth is powerless to sway the stars that lead him to his demise. And yet we watch the tragic saga of his life with fascination and a strangely morbid interest, making him one of Shakespeare's most mysterious—and alluring—villains.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TOIL AND TROUBLE (MACBETH)

*Macbeth* is Shakespeare's darkest play by far. The tragedy generates a disturbing aura of indefinable evil; "there is no sunshine in *Macbeth*" (Huggett 134). It is a story of magic and mystique, of witches and specters, and the evil which surrounds it earns it the infamous reputation of harboring a mysterious curse. The play follows a man and his lady's gradual descent into hell, chronicling their transition from respectable nobles to ambitious monsters and finally to numb tyrants. But there is something uncannily alluring about the play and the villainous couple at its center, something that invites us to let down our guard and plumb the darkness of *Macbeth*. Indeed, the play itself might be called the attractive villain of Shakespeare's works in that it confronts the enigmatic nature of evil more than any other. The play is dangerous and unsettling, but it is also fun and charming—literally.

The most apparent physical element of *Macbeth* is its ubiquitous darkness. The play is uncomfortably dark, even for a tragedy, creating in audiences the same thrill of danger as Richard's too-real Machiavellianism or Iago's seductive wizardry. The play opens on a stormy "desert place" in "fog and filthy air" (I.i.12). Before he murders Duncan, Macbeth cries, "Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (I.v.50-1), and Lady Macbeth calls on night to "pall thee in the dunnest make of hell / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes" (I.vi.49-50). After the murder, the shroud of darkness seems to envelop Macbeth's throne in Dunsinane, offering a physical projection of the darkness slowly consuming his mind. As the sets of the play blacken, so too does Macbeth's soul—he begins his descent into hell as early as the witches' prophesy in scene I.

But the dramatic value of the play's blackness goes beyond mere color symbolism; it also represents the complexity of Macbeth's mind. Carr and Knapp suggest that the darkness

surrounding Macbeth foregrounds the confusion and turmoil blighting his psyche (842). Unlike Iago and Richard, Macbeth does not begin his play as a villain, though his devolution into one is remarkably quick. He is Shakespeare's most conflicted villain, torn between his conscious and the ambitions of himself and his lady. In fact, his role does not switch from tragic hero to outright villain until he realizes, in the fashion of post-coronation Richard, that he is “in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er” (III.iv.136-8). Macbeth bears the hallmark complexity of any good villain, but his complexity is different. In the beginning, at least, he truly does waver between good and evil, black and white, and unless we take for granted that he has absolutely no free will, we might believe that on a better day, he might have chosen good. Audiences see themselves in Macbeth; in a disturbing way, he “links us to the monster villain through our subterranean selves” (Carr 846). Perhaps this is what allows Macbeth frequently to evoke such a sympathetic response; depending on how one interprets the issue of fate versus free will in the play, he may simply be a victim—of destiny, of Lady Macbeth, or of bad luck.

This is just one of many ambiguities that make Macbeth attractive for critics and audiences alike. Shakespeare creates a convoluted character for an equally convoluted play. It is a play built on ambiguity: good versus evil, darkness versus light, fate versus free will, fair versus foul. Marvin Rosenberg notes, “Like all great tragedies, it asks questions rather than gives answers” (*Masks* 658). Who, exactly, are the weird sisters, and how much control do they really have over Macbeth? Does Lady Macbeth actually faint at the sight of the slain Duncan, or is she faking it? Is Macbeth hero or villain—or both? Just as the gloomy sets of the play are engulfed in darkness, so are its themes, and it is this great mystery of *Macbeth* which draws us in. Nothing can be known for sure in the play; “Shakespeare will not comfort us with easy

patterns” (“Masks” x). Any efforts to “solve” *Macbeth* once and for all are in vain—the play denies both light and enlightenment. And the most chilling lesson *Macbeth* and its black king teach is that evil is unknowable. The phantom dagger Macbeth addresses moments before killing Duncan is simultaneously real and imaginary, at once a physical emblem of his sin and a figment of his tormented conscience. *Macbeth* teaches that evil is invisible, encased in the same impenetrable darkness as Macbeth’s castle. Audiences soon feel the vulnerability of coming face-to-face with an unseen force of malevolence, and it is both an uncomfortable feeling and an exciting one. Macbeth attracts us because he shares in our response to this unknowable evil, morally opposed to it but also powerless to prevent it. And so our response to Macbeth splits into yet another dichotomy which characterizes Shakespeare’s most ambiguous play: “We straddle the play repelled by, but irresistibly drawn to Macbeth” (Low 826). Like Macbeth, we are torn between our nagging consciences and our morbid curiosity for unbridled evil.

While it is too easy to attribute the audience’s attraction to Macbeth entirely to its ability to “identify” with him, there is something to it. Ironically, while Macbeth ends the play as a monster on a par with the likes of Iago and Richard, he is one of Shakespeare’s most “human” villains. He lacks the supernatural Vice powers of Iago and the inhumanly cold resolve of Richard; plus, he is obviously not a bad man at the beginning of the play—ambitious, perhaps, but certainly not evil. There is no escaping the fact that Macbeth owes no small part of his attractiveness to the sympathy he evokes as a tragic hero. As Coursen argues, the play is about his own personal fall from grace (“Consequence” 375). As a Lucifer figure, Macbeth is often described in hellish terms: Macduff calls him a “hell-kite” (IV.iii.216) and a “hell-hound” (V.viii.1); he tells Malcolm, “Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn’d” (IV.iii.54-5). As an Adam figure, Macbeth’s first murder marks the loss of his soul, giving way

to the debauched numbness that haunts his character in the later acts. Lady Macbeth, both tempter and tempted, plays the Eve figure who shares in her husband's collapse. But it is Macbeth who earns more of our sympathy, perhaps in part because it is a constant mystery whether he is a king or a pawn. More likely, though, it is because we follow his fall more closely, and we see more of ourselves in him. Macbeth is torn between heaven and hell, representing the moral dilemma of man in general—he is humanity's representative in the battle of good and evil. This explains why, in Low's words, we are both attracted to and repelled by his character. We appreciate his human struggle against the forces of darkness, even if he loses, but we despise the coldblooded monster he becomes in losing.

Macbeth is another attractive Machiavel, but unlike Richard, he has nowhere to go from the beginning of his play but down. Marjorie Garber points out that Macbeth is unique in that he undergoes a regression rather than a progression (qtd. in Dinega 527), a loss of innocence that gnaws at him from within over the course of the play. Fail as he does, he is still the hero of the play and its rightful namesake. The audience watches him develop as it shares in his conflicted response; we too must question whether the rest of the play's action is in his hands or the witches'. If *Richard III* is Richard's demonstration of the plots and musings of the perfect Machiavel, *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most penetrating psychological exposition—it is his look into the mind of the psychopath. In following Macbeth's descent, "we voyage on 'a wild and violent sea' of a mind made mad by its own cruelty" (Low 834). It would be one thing if Macbeth were a cold-hearted killer from the start, a la Aaron the Moor or Richard, but Macbeth needs exterior forces to kindle his cruelty. He lacks the innate evil of these villains; he is a character built on opposing and even contradictory forces, one of which appears in his first line: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I.iii.38). Rosenberg demonstrates Macbeth's vast

complexity by offering several contradictory dichotomies which characterize him: he is abrupt yet contemplative, loved yet hated, subdued yet violent, emotional yet nonplussed, dangerous yet genial (*Masks* 58-9). Iago, for instance, is a complicated character, but audiences soon come to understand more or less how his mind works. But Macbeth's mind is a labyrinth of emotions and characteristics; like everything else in the play, he is impossible to know. Ironically, Macbeth is both very familiar and very foreign to us. We like to think he represents the average man's struggle between opposing forces, but we are never quite sure who the "real" Macbeth is.

The distinction between villain and tragic hero was explored to an extent in Hotspur's chapter, but Macbeth raises the question of where one draws the line to an even greater degree. Indeed, in his annotated bibliography of the play, Thomas Wheeler notes that "over seventy studies argue that Macbeth is a sympathetic character" while just eighteen "find him to be a villain" (xviii). The problem is that there are really two Macbeths in the play. There is the victimized hero of the earlier scenes who wavers between good and evil and whose "false face must hide what the false heart doth know" (I.vii.82), and then there is the heartless monster of the later scenes who is so far mired in blood that he might as well wade deeper. It is only fitting for a play built on dichotomies to have an equally divided namesake. A Dunlop production of the play even used three different actors to play the role: one as a wife-dominated conspirator, one as a looming and phantasmal presence following Duncan's murder, and one as a damned soul beyond all hope (*Masks* 60-1). We are reminded of the masks of Richard which helped position him as the master actor. Though Macbeth lacks the theatrical expertise of Richard, we like our villains to be complicated, and Macbeth is as complicated as they come. When he is tragic hero, he is not yet beyond salvation; he is still human—noble but corruptible, strong-willed but vulnerable, tainted but salvageable. When he becomes the cold villain of Dunsinane,

he is the perfect image of a monster. Macbeth the murderer attracts us with his terror, and “we cannot but be paralyzed with fear” (Low 826). Most frightening of all, there remains a certain mystery about his evil: he is not quite complete devil, but he is clearly more than just a corrupted human. For all his numbness, he at least shows faint glimmers of conscience, which is more than we can say for Shakespeare’s purest villains. Cornered by superior forces and desperately clinging to the witches’ prophesy, Macbeth offers one last glimpse of his humanity: “They have tied me to the stake; I cannot fly, / But, bear-like, I must fight the course” (V.vii.1-2). Even more interesting, part of Macbeth seems to be reveling in his transformation into a monster. He boasts to the young Siward about the fear his name evokes, and he confesses that he has “supp’d full with horrors” (V.v.13) almost with a twinge of sadistic pleasure. Perhaps he, too, begins to appreciate the advantages of villainy. At the very least, the audience can admire how smoothly he makes the transition from human to beast.

Of course, just how much say Macbeth has in the matter is another question entirely, another ambiguity in a sea of ambiguities. Richard has demonstrated the idea that the curse can be attractive; we find fascination in suspending disbelief and entertaining the possibility of the supernatural. No character in Shakespeare fits this mold more than Macbeth. His “charmed life” seems to be crafted by a combination of the witches’ magic, Lady Macbeth’s influence, and a dash of his own latent ambition. Shakespeare is too savvy to spell it out for us, though, and the question always remains of how much free will Macbeth truly has. But, in a way, it is more intriguing to assume that free will plays no part in it, that Macbeth is indeed powerless to change his course to hell. We prefer the ominous foreshadowing of Ross and the old man after Duncan’s death: “’tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp...’Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that’s done” (II.iv.5-6, 10-11). It is more exciting to treat Macbeth as a doomed man

who, try as he might, cannot escape the inevitable. *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most perilous play: it forces the audience to entertain the perils of witchcraft and sorcery, to suppose, if only for a moment, that their hero's fate is sealed from the beginning. It is the same thrill that comes from even the most outrageous end-times predictions. Farfetched as they may be, there is a certain excitement in considering for a moment that humanity could be doomed beyond salvation. The mind searches to make sense of it, and the imagination begins to run wild, filling in the blanks with all sorts of hypothetical explanations for when, where, how, and why the "end" will come. We fall into the same pattern when dealing with *Macbeth*. When the prophesy of *Macbeth's* kingship comes true, a more skeptical explanation might be that he and his lady make it a self-fulfilling prophesy—the weird sisters were only there to plant the seed in their minds. But where is the fun in skepticism? Clairvoyance makes for a much more amusing explanation, and so it is the one we trend toward. Later, when the spirits warn *Macbeth* of his fate, we share in his anticipation. Like him, we *want* to believe, and so we do. The first trio of predictions comes true, which is enough to make a believer out of *Macbeth* and his audiences for the next trio: "I conjure you, by that which you profess...Even till destruction sicken; answer me / To what I ask you" (IV.i.50, 60-1). Had we no imaginations, we might explain *Macbeth's* defeat in purely pragmatic terms: *Macduff*, "untimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb, answers the first two, and *Malcolm's* strategy of camouflaging his army with tree branches satisfies the third. Perhaps the spirits were just lucky guessers. But we *do* have imaginations, and so we gravitate toward the more attractive option: *Macbeth's* descent is preordained; his soul is forfeit from scene I, and he can do nothing to save himself.

But *Macbeth's* tragic destiny is not the only thing that makes the audience respond to him and his play with morbid fascination. The play itself is also notorious for being mysteriously

cursed. According to Richard Huggett, the play has “for four hundred years carried in its wake a truly terrifying trail of disaster and bad luck” (133). In many acting circles, it is considered unlucky to quote from *Macbeth* in a theater or to even mention the play by name. In writing the play with James I in mind, Shakespeare dealt seriously with witchcraft, a field in which the monarch was both obsessively interested and well-versed. Additionally, Shakespeare circumvented the squeamish James’ fear of regicide by having the Duncan and Macbeth murders occur offstage. Still, Huggett writes, it seems James was not pleased with the play, and thus began its chilling saga of infamy. A chronicle of mishaps ranging from near-misses to bizarre deaths follows the play like a dark specter. In an Olivier performance, Olivier was nearly crushed by a falling stage weight, cheating death by mere seconds. Michael Benthall’s production saw an attempted suicide in the acting company, an electrocution, and several injuries in the fight scenes. Paul Rogers, Benthall’s Macbeth, developed a mysterious leg wound that refused to heal until the play’s tour finished. Perhaps spookiest of all, a passerby once asked a group of stage hands what play was being performed; when one responded, “*Macbeth*,” a spear fell on the stranger’s head, instantly killing him (Huggett 214-6). Perhaps Macbeth is more correct than he knows when he says his name should be feared. Huggett is right in stating that with *Macbeth*, the story behind the story is just as interesting (216). The play inspires dread even before the curtain rises—its reputation precedes it. Unfortunately, it is difficult to appreciate the full terror of *Macbeth* after having already experienced it. The returning viewer already knows the play’s tricks; he knows the Macbeths are doomed. But, as Rosenberg notes, Shakespeare built *Macbeth* on startling surprises and shock value—this is the only tragedy to “keep major climactic, ironic secrets” from its audience (*Masks* xi). The green viewer of *Macbeth* feels the full force of the sorcery, the superstition, and the “sound and fury” of

Macbeth's fall from grace, all while torn between the play's countless dichotomies.

It is no coincidence that the play inspiring the most superstitious uneasiness in its audience is also the most dangerous. Huggett entertains the superstition surrounding *Macbeth* by suggesting that Shakespeare himself curses the play by writing the witches' incantations. In evoking these malevolent forces, Huggett writes, Shakespeare treads on forbidden ground: "It is not safe to tamper with the forces of evil" (143). Even the most skeptical audiences will have to admit that *Macbeth* deals uncomfortably closely with the occult. Certainly, we can dismiss all the bad luck associated with the play as a series of unfortunate coincidences—the dim lighting, quick set changes, and numerous combat scenes do make performances especially prone to onstage accidents, and it is not as if the other plays are without their eerie accidents. But once again, skepticism is a boring alternative to superstition. We revel in the mystery of *Macbeth* and its titular hero-villain because anything is possible in the play—Shakespeare has conveniently left our questions unanswered. Likewise, we revel in the myth of the curse because it makes for a good ghost story. More than any other Shakespeare play, *Macbeth* forces audiences to use their imaginations, and more than any other of his characters, Macbeth forces audiences to try to "figure him out"—and fail spectacularly. The questions raised by the play—what does the knocking at the gate mean? is Macbeth in control? is the play cursed?—cannot and should not be answered; their mystery is the key to the play's magic. All we know, and all we need to know, is that "something wicked this way comes" (IV.i.45).

Perhaps too little credit has been given to Lady Macbeth, one of Shakespeare's rare female villains. Critics tend to find Macbeth the more attractive of the two, probably in part because he is easier to sympathize with. As Shepherd notes, Macbeth seems to become a "faster" character as the play goes on, accelerated by his murder of Duncan. On the other hand,

Lady Macbeth seems to slow down, much like Richard, exhausted by the energy she expends in the early scenes (362). We also follow Macbeth more closely; we are there with him at the stormy heath when he receives his curse, and we trail his darkening mind as he slips closer and closer to hell. Lady Macbeth's roles are narrower, and, as Rosenberg argues, she "exists mainly in relation to him" as his co-conspirator (*Masks* 158). In other words, she is there to highlight Macbeth's indecisiveness, to offer a resolute and unwavering foil to the play's morally torn hero. Much criticism focuses on her powerful "unsexing" scene in which she calls on the spirits to "unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty" (I.v.39-40). One might be tempted to infer that Lady Macbeth must here sacrifice her femininity in order to stoop to the evil she desires—women are too innocent to be villains. On the contrary, this intense scene only demonstrates that evil knows no gender. We need only to remember that one of the play's most unsettling lessons is that evil cannot be known and the dramatic significance of the female villain emerges. Villainy appears in all sorts of shapes and sizes, from the indecisive Macbeth to the chillingly unbendable Lady Macbeth, who would dash out the brains of her newborn babe. Lady Macbeth shows that evil, like everything else in the play, is ambiguous and shrouded in darkness—and that attracts us immensely. Also of note is how she emasculates her husband; as the more "masculine" of the pair, Lady Macbeth illustrates the duplicity of evil. The more hesitant of the two is the one who actually commits the murder, and the more steadfast is the one who takes the more passive approach. She is Macbeth's own personal Iago, just the Vice he needs to "bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (I.vii.79-80).

Part of Shakespeare's intent in making *Macbeth* both his most sinister and his darkest play is to demonstrate that evil works in mysterious ways. Coursen writes, "Shakespeare makes

evil...unknowable in its workings” (*Guide* 54). It is always both there and not there, like the knife in Macbeth's hand. But another remarkable quality of the play is the quickness with which it progresses. The shortest tragedy, *Macbeth* moves with an unsettling speed; each scene proves essential to the plot of the Macbeths' descent, and the play never deviates far from its villain-hero. With such an action-packed script, Shakespeare shows that evil works fast. It seems to consume Macbeth over the course of just a few days, hours even, transforming him from noble thane to blackened tyrant before our very eyes. This quickness of Macbeth's fall is another cause for the audience's uneasy attraction. Viewers appreciate the rapid movement of his character, who wastes no time in proving a villain. But with its fevered pace, the play also uncomfortably suggests that evil has the ability to ensnare the seemingly righteous Macbeth just as easily as it ensnares the blatantly corrupt Lady Macbeth. Even worse, it could happen in the blink of an eye, hidden under the cover of darkness. Coursen believes that Shakespeare knew the dramatic effect of his play would be enhanced if “each of the main characters was damned, or perceived themselves as damned” (*Guide* 52). Knowing that Macbeth is doomed gives the play a finite timetable: his character becomes increasingly exciting as he rapidly approaches his end. At the same time, his damnation serves as a grim reminder that we are all on a timeline of our own; our efforts to sway the stars and escape the inevitable are just as futile as Macbeth's. Huggett explains the play's brevity as a combination of the playwright's working on a strict schedule and writing the play for James, who preferred shorter plays (142). But even that does not explain away the ever-present feeling of dread and eminent doom that hangs over *Macbeth* and its hero-villain. Shakespeare makes no effort to delay the inevitable. The play is not padded by unnecessary monologues or scenes of comic counterpoint; damnation comes quickly for the villainous couple. Part of the exciting danger which comes from following Macbeth's tragic fall

is that it comes all of a sudden, in a matter of five very short acts, with no respite in between.

An even larger source of excitement, Huggett argues, is that for an Elizabethan audience especially, the play's themes of witchcraft and sorcery would be "a real and ever-present social problem" (136). Even the most skeptical twenty-first century audience would find itself enthralled by the magic and the ghosts of the play. We need only imagine the response of an audience that had a genuine investment in such dangerous things. Plus, it would be one thing if the magic of *Macbeth* were placed in a comic or mocking context, but the play deals with such issues very seriously. Wheeler writes, "The play crosses the boundary of taboo...forces the actors to portray and the audience to see what is not to be looked at" (xiv). No wonder the play invites so much superstition. Of course, it is not the only play that functions as Shakespeare's portrait of attractive evil, but it does illustrate the dark forces in a uniquely baleful way. The evil of *Macbeth* is alluring because it is forbidden. But not all of the play's evil is as tangible or obvious as a boiling cauldron or crackling thunder—after all, the full dramatic power of *Macbeth* hinges on its ambiguity. Coursen, for example, thinks Macbeth's call for Seyton, his armor bearer, could be an invocation of Satan, made by a man who knows his soul is lost and simply wants to get things over with ("Consequence" 385). Much has also been written on the mysterious "knocking at the gate scene," which had a profound yet indefinite influence on de Quincey: "It produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account...for many years I never could see *why* it should produce such an effect" (1). *Macbeth* probably would have been a much less compelling play had Shakespeare answered these questions or even made them slightly less ambiguous. The excitement we get in following Macbeth's saga is confronting the magical, the profane, and the demonic, all while trying—and failing—to understand it. We revel in Macbeth's bold tampering with these forces: "Yet my heart / Throbs to know...I will be

satisfied: deny my this, / And an eternal curse fall on you!” (IV.i.100-1, 105-6) Shakespeare knew the attractive power of staging the verboten, but he also knew the value of keeping it undefined, of raising more questions than he answers. The play forces audiences to access the darkest and most sinister parts of their imaginations, but even that is not enough to solve the play’s riddles.

Like Richard, Macbeth is a nightmare king, and Shakespeare makes it clear that he is a failure as a ruler. But the fear Richard inspires owes in large part to the unnerving thought that such a corrupt rise to power might not only be possible but repeatable. The uneasiness Macbeth inspires, however, comes more from the mysterious blackness surrounding his throne. Richard has a good deal of work to do in gaining England's crown, and we see that work done from start to finish. But Macbeth’s rise is almost supernaturally quick and easy. Macbeth, the king with a charmed life, becomes a symbol of darkness sitting on the cold, dim throne of Scotland. His darkness contrasts with the light of Edward the Confessor, to whom Malcolm and Macduff turn for the cure to poisonous Macbeth. Malcolm explains:

The mere despair of surgery, he cures,  
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,  
Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,  
To the succeeding royalty he leaves  
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,  
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,  
And sundry blessings hang about his throne,  
That speak him full of grace.

(IV.iii.152-9)

Edward is the light to Macbeth's darkness, the good to his evil, the day to his perpetual night. But this is the only moderately optimistic episode in a play otherwise drenched in shadow. The good king never actually appears, and this allusion to him comes between the slaying of Macduff’s family and Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene, two of the play’s darkest and most

disturbing moments. Shakespeare offers no sanctuary from Macbeth's hellishness; there is a faint glimmer of hope here, but until the very end of the play, Macbeth truly does seem invincible. His reign is jet black from beginning to end, from when he calls on night to "Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" (III.ii.47) to when Macduff extinguishes the "brief candle" of his shadowy life. Shakespeare ensures that the audience of *Macbeth* is at once both terrified of this enchanted tyrant and endlessly excited by him. As the play nears its resolution and the pace becomes even faster, we find ourselves increasingly compelled by Macbeth's saga. He becomes entertainingly arrogant, hardened by his feelings of invulnerability—"our castle's strength / Will laugh a siege to scorn" (V.v.2-3). Act V is where he delivers some of his most poetic lines—"Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack! / At least we'll die with harness on our back" (V.v.51-2). Macbeth is a bad king, and we know he is a bad king, but we cannot help but stand behind him in his darkest hour. If nothing else, he is much more enjoyable to follow than our new protagonists, Malcolm and company, whom we secretly chastise for so abruptly bringing the fun to an end.

Macbeth belongs to a truly unique class of villainy, and it is actually difficult to find analogues for him. In Shakespeare's plays, at least, no other villain manages to produce the same indeterminable yet powerful aura of evil that makes Macbeth oddly alluring. He has some of the sympathetic appeal that makes Hotspur a tragic hero, but if he ever had an honor code, he clearly abandons it early in the play. He has some of the satanic diabolism of Iago, but he is not a Vice, nor is he particularly funny. He has a bit of Richard's Machiavelianism, but he lacks his acting and oratory abilities. Macbeth's class of villains includes the most mysterious villains, those who are dangerous because they are constantly surrounded by a cover of darkness. Try as we might, we cannot know them. These are the enchanted villains, those who enjoy the magical

aegis of some dark force. These villains always raise more questions than they answer, and while they do not necessarily commit evil for the sake of evil, they fully recognize that they are hell bound and make no effort to redeem themselves. Returning to Spenser, one prospective member might be Archimago from *The Faerie Queene*, a powerful wizard who simultaneously manages to be a great threat to the epic's heroes and an ethereal, mostly unseen presence. He shares Macbeth's magical mystique as well as his phantasmal aura of "unknowability": we learn he is "He that the stubborne Sprites can wisely tame" (I.i.43), but otherwise, he is a mystery. A.C. Hamilton notes that "Archimago replies with characteristic equivocation" (39), suggesting that the cryptic sorcerer is likewise fond of creating ambiguity to fool those who try to figure him out. Even his name, "Arch-Image," reveals his penchant for duplicity. Macbeth might also serve as a precursor the evil monarch type of traditional fairy tales like "Snow White." Like Macbeth, these characters tend to be strongly connected to dark magic, and their presence is marked by thick darkness and thunderstorms, in contrast to the brightness and fair weather that follows the protagonists. However, even these analogues are not entirely satisfactory; after all, these villains often do serve Vice roles, whereas Macbeth is not interested in corrupting his fellow man. Perhaps he would better serve as the figurehead for a class of cursed or doomed villains, such as Edward Hyde and Frankenstein's Creature. Incidentally, they also play tragic hero roles—these are the monsters that are most likely to earn our sympathy, either because they seem more victim than victimizer or because we understand their struggles particularly well. They also undergo the same transition from human to beast that marks Macbeth's story, which could explain why it is difficult to distinguish them as villains or heroes in their stories. In any case, it seems that classifying Macbeth is just as hard as decoding him. Maybe he is simply too ambiguous to be forced into one specific category.

Macbeth forces us to confront the harrowing fact that evil is a mystery. In his play, it can only be seen by what it is not: good. Therefore, in a way, evil depends on good. It needs good to exist, to be the light that casts the shadow, to be the day that leads to night. But the opposite is also true: good depends on evil just as much. We need immorality to remind us what is moral; we need villains to challenge our heroes. And, in cases like Macbeth's, it is sometimes the hero who must also play the part of the villain. The tragedy of Macbeth invites audiences to bask in its darkness by forcing them to confront the taboo and the uncanny. It is a psychological exposition into a corrupted mind, but it is a mind in which we are disturbed to see ourselves reflected. *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's most evil play, serves as a reminder that the shadow of evil can consume even the noblest men in a remarkably short time. And, most unsettling of all, we may never even see it coming.

## CONCLUSION: RETURNING FROM HELL

Playing the devil's advocate has its advantages. Shakespeare's villains, more often than not, also tend to be his most interesting and thought-provoking characters. After all, who can deny that Iago almost single-handedly drives the action of *Othello* or that Richard III entertains us far more than anyone else in his play? In any case, they are certainly worthy of our critical attention and respect. And yet these characters are often the most difficult to interpret—Shakespeare is wise to create challenging villains. They are more than just Grendel-like monsters or stock Vice figures. They are dangerously intelligent, they are unnervingly persistent, and they are hideously beautiful. They are at once able to offend and to delight, to repel and to attract. Some are downright evil while others may simply be hopelessly misguided or sinful. Some are very clearly human at heart while others seem almost supernatural in their diabolism. As clichéd as it sounds, these are the characters we love to hate—though coming to understand just why we love to hate them is a whole other matter.

If looking at these four individuals has taught us anything, it is that Shakespeare likes variety in his villains. Hotspur shows that even a traitorous firebrand can be redeemed by an admirable sense of honor and battlefield prowess. We are hard-pressed to even call him a villain except in that he opposes our protagonists; few antagonists have been so championed as romantic heroes. Iago shows that we are attracted to the master craftsman, even if his crafts are evil and debauchery. He is Shakespeare's most expert villain, and for that, we have no choice but to applaud him. Richard shows that a good villain is a diverse villain; as the great actor, he runs the gambit of antagonistic roles, from manipulator to murderer. At the same time, we appreciate his seamless rise to power in spite of all the various obstacles he faces on the way up. Finally, Macbeth shows the dangerous allure of the curse and the excitement we get from toying with the

forbidden. As the “darkest” villain, Macbeth also forces audience to come to the disturbing yet thrilling realization that evil is eternally enigmatic—like the play's blackened namesake, it is surrounded by the shadow of uncertainty. Perhaps Macbeth teaches the most valuable lesson of all: try as we might, categorizing villainy into concrete classes is ambitious but ultimately impossible. Hopefully, these chapters have brought us closer to understanding the attractive power behind evil, but it would give our villains too little credit to confine them to finite, immutable categories.

Not all literary villains are attractive. Grendel and his fellow bogeymen may inspire a certain curiosity or even sympathy, but our literal monsters are not dynamic or developed enough to merit the same allure as our figurative monsters. On the other hand, villains like the cowardly infants of Carrión from *El Cantar de Mio Cid* or Richard's thuggish murderers-for-hire are too small-minded and transparent to captivate readers: they are little more than stock “bad guys.” The attractive villain is, perhaps most importantly of all, complex. He is more than a monster, but sometimes not by much. He thinks, he plots, he acts. Perhaps, like Hotspur, he pushes the boundary between tragic hero and villain by being a traitor with an honor code. Alternatively, maybe he juggles roles like Iago, at once Vice, devil, and Machiavel, and so he becomes something greater than the sum of his parts. Maybe he shares Richard's role-playing skills, playing the phony griever in one scene, the crafty politician in the next, and the murderous tyrant in another. Or he might be like Macbeth, in a constant state of flux between hero and villain, black and white, fair and foul. However the attractive villain decides to be complicated, it is essential that he gives his audience reason to feel conflicted toward him. The very idea of uncertainty is attractive in that it works as mental stimulation: we must ask ourselves how we feel about this character that we should by all counts detest but cannot help but adore. If the

villain fails to make his audience think, if he debuts in his text and loudly proclaims, “I am the villain and nothing more,” he has already lost the battle for his audiences’ affections.

The attractive villain is also dangerous; there needs to be a sense of urgency and consequence associated with his character. Hotspur is dangerous because he poses a very real and powerful threat to the monarchy. That a traitor to the crown should have the most poetic lines, the most exciting personality, and the strongest sense of command in his play is cause for even greater alarm. Iago is dangerous because no one—not even the audience—stands a chance against him. He is simply too good a villain to be eluded; even when he is captured, he hardly seems defeated—his work with *Othello* and the fools within is already done. Richard is dangerous because he hits particularly close to home for an audience genuinely concerned with the omnipresent threat of corrupt monarchy. The alacrity with which he seizes the crown, on top of the deadly Tudor Myth he brings with him, is too close for comfort for viewers wary of tyranny. Additionally, his ability to alternate between roles gives him a sense of invincibility—his ascension is just *too* easy. Macbeth is dangerous because he is a mystery; like everything else in his play, he is built on ambiguity and contradictory dichotomies. He also deals uncomfortably closely with the taboo: his “charmed life” is imbued with the forbidden works of witchcraft and sorcery. The attractive villain must be more than just a thug or a bully. He must be *uniquely* dangerous; he must pose a genuine threat to not only the play’s protagonists but its audiences as well. His presence on stage should be accompanied by a sense of dread and uneasiness. The audience knows this is a character to be feared, and it is from that fear the villain becomes an exciting and motivational force. When he steps on stage, the viewers may greet the attractive villain with boos and hisses as they know they should, but deep down inside, they are happy to see him.

The attractive villain need not necessarily be funny, but he should be fun. In other words, he should be a character of action and movement in his text. Hotspur certainly lives up to his name, spurring the action of *I Henry IV* along with his fiery language and battlefield enthusiasm. Next to Falstaff, he is the play's most entertaining character to experience. We know that scenes with Hotspur will be full of emotion and energy; in fact, when compared to him, the other characters—even our protagonists—seem sluggish and dull. Of course, there is no denying that Iago propels the action of *Othello*; without him, there would be no play to begin with. He is the source of all the conflict, all the strife, and all the bloodshed that make his play a member of the great tragedies. Indeed, the very few scenes in which he is absent seem oddly out of place; without Iago, the play slows to a crawl, and we eagerly await his return. In the same way, *Richard III* is unmistakably Richard's play, and it cannot progress without his permission. Moreover, we depend on him for all the wit and charm that make the play chillingly entertaining. Richard the comedian delights us with his clever wordplay as well as the ease with which he overcomes his unmatched opponents. Richard the politician tickles our sense of dramatic irony—we know all too well just how full of tricks he is, but we would not dare keep him from using them anyway. Richard is kind enough to invite us along on his Machiavellian frolic, a romp he treats so casually that it seems more like his idea of sport. Macbeth is a fun villain because of how much he charges over the course of his play. Interestingly, he becomes more attractive as he becomes more evil. By the time he is confident enough to tempt the paranormal to its face and “laugh a siege to scorn,” he is ready to deliver his most passionate and moving lines. Even more, we get excitement in knowing that Macbeth is doomed; as his already brief play accelerates, we creep ever closer to the edges of our seats, anxiously awaiting Macbeth's tragic end. Therefore, the attractive villain needs to be a creature of speed. He should be active

rather than passive; the good villain recognizes that there is a job to be done and wastes no time in doing it. Audiences should *want* to follow him; they should rejoice when he appears and despair when he leaves.

Shakespeare's primary purpose in forging the attractive villain seems to be to produce ambivalence in his audiences. After all, his all-star villains, like Iago and Richard, have spawned countless pages of criticism for a reason: there is no one "right" answer to them. Some critics dispute Hotspur as the tragic victim of a corrupt kingship; others accuse him of being the parody of an outdated warrior. Depending on whom one asks, Iago may be an expansion of the old Vice, a manifestation of the devil himself, a power-hungry Machiavel, or all of the above. Richard fools critics just as easily as he does his victims in the play; just as we think we have him figured out, he puts on a new mask and takes us back to square one. Macbeth is an even greater mystery as he walks the line between hero and villain, ensuring that he can never definitively be called one or the other. An effective character is one who makes his onlookers think, who resists the stock roles of hero, villain, comic relief, damsel in distress, right-hand-man, and so on. For these characters, and for their creators, these roles are flexible, and a character need not limit himself to one or another. More often, the most interesting characters are those who can play several roles at once and with equal proficiency. As Shakespeare realized early in his playwriting career, a good villain is one who makes audiences evaluate and reevaluate them. He could not have foreseen the thousands of pages of criticism that his best villains would produce, but he probably expected them to cause a stir. At the very least, he knew that audiences would have to think twice about how they felt toward these characters, even if they never arrived at a satisfactory answer.

Shakespeare also recognized the effectiveness of the terrifying villain. Audiences are

unnerved to find themselves enchanted by Hotspur, whom they know to be a significant threat to Henry IV's reign. By putting some of his most powerful lines into Hotspur's mouth, Shakespeare makes us fall in love with the enemy. Unlike the unmemorable French villains of *Henry V*, Hotspur is no buffoon, nor is he an incompetent, bumbling opponent. He is incredibly experienced in the realm of warfare, and he makes it very clear from the beginning that he is not to be trifled with. We know he cannot win, and we know he should not win, but part of us strongly wants him to win. Iago is terrifying in his own right: while not as realistic a threat as Hotspur or Richard, he is the most hypnotic of Shakespeare's villains. His audiences are faced with a moral dilemma: revel in the *Schadenfreude* produced by this terrible man, or resist him and thus the excitement he brings to *Othello*. Of course, Iago, ever in control, makes the choice for us: the only option is to join in Iago's evil and admit that we enjoy doing so. The danger of Richard, again, is that his Machiavellian rise to power is rooted in both history and superstition. Audiences must realize that Richard III was a real man, and while his story may have been embellished along the way, he represents the very real possibility of absolute monarchical corruption. For all the pleasure we get in following Richard's climb to the top, he raises more than a few uncomfortable questions in his viewers. Could it really be that easy? Could it happen again? These are questions audiences would rather suspend in favor of watching this charming and witty monster claw his way upward, but there is no avoiding them—Richard is *too* real. With *Macbeth*, Shakespeare forces audiences to get personal with yet another uncomfortable subject: the forbidden. Especially for an Elizabethan audience, the play deals too closely with dark forces that have no place in the theater, but here they are. We fear them, and we do not understand them, but we like them. Additionally, the legendary curse of *Macbeth* is clearly strong enough to survive a legacy of four hundred years, so there must be some reason why we

have chosen to preserve it. In truth, the curse is simply too good a story to be forgotten: it gives the play its trademark aura of undefinable evil, and superstition is fun. We cannot know for sure why Shakespeare used the archetype of the alluringly dangerous villain, but he might have wanted to play a little bit of devil's advocate himself. In asking audiences to be immensely drawn toward a character while recognizing the social, cultural, and moral danger that character poses, the playwright gives viewers a perception with which they would be largely unfamiliar. The result is a new, exciting, harrowing, and fascinating experience.

Given more time and space, I would expand this thesis to include a number of other Shakespearean villains, as I by no means believe these are the only ones worthy of consideration. In fact, I believe a case can be made for every villain in Shakespeare being, to some degree, attractive in similar ways as those four discussed here. These are simply the characters that I feel most adequately fulfill the most common attractive villain types: the honorable villain, the brilliant villain, the ambitious villain, and the mysterious villain. The first runner-up for my attention is Aaron, another villain ripe for criticism. I believe he is Shakespeare's most monstrous villain; as one of the playwright's earliest conceptions of evil, he lacks some of the development of his future creations but still manages to produce a unique effect in *Titus Andronicus*. Certainly, Aaron manages to instill sociocultural fear through his ethnicity, but beside that, he is simply a nasty character. His defeat resembles Iago's in that it hardly seems like a defeat at all: his damage is done, his victims will never fully recover, and his only regret is that he could not commit more evil during his life. But I would hesitate to include him in Iago's group because we are hardly as closely acquainted with Aaron; he is still a fairly distant villain. At the time of his conception, Shakespeare was still getting around to the idea of the intimate villain, so Aaron is not as attractive as "friendly" villains like Iago and Richard. Still, any look

into the great Shakespearean villains would benefit from analyzing the unique danger Aaron poses in his play. On that note, Tamora might serve as an entry into a larger section on female villains, and Lady Macbeth could be expanded to that end, as well.

I would also want to examine a few villains from the comedies, since this thesis has dealt only with villains from histories and tragedies. Shylock stands out as another complicated antagonist to whom Shakespeare has given some of his most powerful and memorable lines. Plenty of criticism has called him a mockery of the stereotypical Jew, but if that were the case, I do not think that Shakespeare would attribute any modicum of attractiveness to him at all. But Shylock leaves a lasting impression, and his character development does not suggest him to be entirely satirical. He invites a sympathetic approach, which more than one production has given him, and his character stands apart as the most central, influential, and unforgettable presence in *The Merchant of Venice*. Angelo in *Measure for Measure* has also interested me; it is hard to include him in the same group as Richard or Macbeth, a group of other corrupt power-mongers. Like Shylock, his role can be performed in both comic and tragic lights, and he too delivers some of the most significant lines in his play. His soliloquies give him some of the intimacy that Iago and Richard use to their advantage, but he is not really an *impressive* villain in one way or another; there is not as much urgency or fear attached to his character. The challenge of the comedy villains is that they often serve awkward roles in their plays. Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, for instance, is malicious but almost comical in his ineptitude. In a similar way, it is clear that Angelo is debauched and dangerous, but at the same time, he is easily foiled, and we know we have the Duke of Vienna to keep him in check. It seems the histories and tragedies are where the real monsters are found, while the villains of the comedies can rarely be called “evil” with much confidence. Perhaps simply knowing that a play is a comedy comforts audiences and removes

the threat of the villain; we know that all will end well, so the villain's deeds are inconveniences at worst. That is not to say that there are no attractive villains in the comedies, though. On the contrary, that is where we find some of our funniest, most complex, and most interesting troublemakers.

Villains are fun characters to deconstruct, but they are notoriously difficult, making them prime candidates for research and criticism. Even if this thesis has not solved the paradox of why we are mysteriously drawn to our villains, we cannot deny that these are the characters who perplex us the most. Perhaps evil itself is irresistibly attractive by nature, and so we flock to the most evil characters as the source of our amusement and our excitement. There is something oddly charming about the sinister and the unknown. Maybe it is the mystery of the thing that allures us; we cannot resist what we do not—and should not—know. Or perhaps we secretly revel in debauchery, corruption, and sin; these characters represent all that repressed angst come to the surface, and we appreciate that they have taken it upon themselves to say and do what we cannot. No matter what it is about our favorite villains that confounds and captivates us, Shakespeare shows that villains hold a tremendous amount of magnetic power both within the plots of their plays and in the criticism that surrounds their plays. Evil is undying; for as long as it remains a great force of our interests, our imaginations, and our fear, it remains an inseparable element of the human psyche. As Antony so convincingly puts it in his eulogy at the funeral of Julius Caesar, “The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones.”

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