

“Edmund as a Villain:

“Recognizing *King Lear*’s Bastard in Context of Shakespeare’s Villains”

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for

Departmental Honors

in the

Department of English and Communication Arts

(English)

Hood College

April 2021

Chapter One: Bernard Spivack's Theory

Shakespeare's timelessness as a writer is not confined in his ability to portray true heroism and love—tragedy is yet another chord of humanity Shakespeare strikes with precision and accuracy. There is something *so* miraculous in the writing of Shakespeare's tragedies that they have not only survived but *thrived* since their creation in the 16th century. Despite being part the same category, the complex diversity of ways in which they successfully represent the ageless anguish of human suffering attests his skills as a venerable writer. One of the most defining features of these tragedies that distinguishes them from one another is their villains. Critics have put countless hours into trying to define and understand Shakespeare's villains, and rightly so, as they are some of the most complex and entertaining characters of his creation; one scholarly work that is *essential* in helping scholars do this is Bernard Spivack's *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*. The book contains twelve chapters relating to the evil in Shakespeare's plays, with chapters ranging in focus from the "evilest" villain himself, Iago, to the Emergence of Vice, to the hybrid play. For the sake of what I am trying to argue, I consider only the first two chapters in my research, "Iago" and "The Family of Iago" (with the exception of a handful of excerpts found elsewhere in the book), as these are the two chapters that deal exclusively with the *classification* of Shakespeare's villains with determined scrutiny. The second chapter, "The Family of Iago", explains comprehensively the actual subcategory of villains in which I believe Edmund has a rightful place. Spivack articulates the qualities that distinguish 'intelligible villains' from 'unintelligible villains', or those belonging in the "Family of Iago". Those he identifies as belonging in this group are Iago (*Othello*), Richard III, Aaron the Moor (*Titus Andronicus*), and Don John (*Much*

Ado about Nothing), all of whom are clearly more sinister than the other, more conventional villains when observed at first glance.

Shakespeare's "unintelligible villains" are notable for several of their qualities. Firstly, they have a *very* dynamic presence on stage, flaunting complexities that expand far beyond plain 'evil', perceivable at face value. At times, these villains surprise us with a stroke of almost agreeable entertainment, such as when Richard III boasts to the audience after he woos the grieving Lady Anne in front of her father-in-law's dead body whose death he was responsible for: "Was ever woman in this humor wooed? / Was ever woman in this humor won? / I'll have her, but I will not keep her long" (1.2.230-231). At other times, these villains confuse us with their unsettling emotional misalignment in their apparent convictions: when referring to this quality in Iago, Spivack describes Iago as "the passionately moved husband of a wife he believes unfaithful— except that, apart from one flicker of emotion, he is never passionately moved or in any way aware of the adultery he suspects involves his wife" (29). This confusion then expands beyond the villain's emotional misalignment with our own, when we become horrified at what we were once entertained by. As Richard III orders the murder of his trusting brother in cold blood, it is hard to feel the same sense of twisted delight that was provoked in the scene with the wooing of Lady Anne; what replaces it is sheer revulsion. These villains are some of the most impressive characters in Shakespeare's creation for many reasons, one of those being this ability to take the audience on a journey through enjoyment, confusion, then horror, leaving them alone and afraid at the end of these plays to question their own morals. We may ask ourselves, after watching Clarence plead to the hired

murderers that his brother Richard III does indeed love him, how we were ever able to fall into the throes of such a wicked person.

These villains—especially Iago— have been explored extensively for these qualities and several others; the work of Spivack in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* is one of the more extensive criticisms attempting to explain the condition of these villains to date. Spivack, as forementioned, classifies Shakespeare’s villains into two categories; the group under the name “Family of Iago” is very exclusive, as it only contains four of Shakespeare’s villains, while the other group of ‘Intelligible’ villains is much more crowded. Throughout this chapter, Spivack lists several villains as being intelligible, including but not limited, to Goneril and Regan (*King Lear*), Claudius (*Hamlet*), Macbeth, Angelo (*Measure for Measure*), and Iachimo (*Cymbeline*). He also provides analyses of these intelligible villains in order to further distinguish the uniqueness of the four *unintelligible* villains; for example, Iago’s lack of emotional alignment can be seen more clearly when side by side with the emotional richness of Claudius’s guilt-ridden prayer, or Macbeth’s nightmares and hallucinations. Several pages into his second chapter, after introducing the members of each group, Spivack attempts to formulate a list of qualities that helps one distinguish the unintelligible from the intelligible. He decides it best to focus on the unintelligible: “Perhaps, the best way to make this difference clear is to state it negatively in respect to Shakespeare’s intelligible criminals—that is, to show what they are not in contrast to what the other four are” (39). As it is clear that those four villains are certainly ‘lacking’ in many facets of their humanity, this approach only makes sense.

In the first point provided, Spivack looks at the ‘intelligible criminals’ and notes a lack of ambiguity in their behavior in relation to their goal and what they are willing to do to obtain it: “Beyond the crime itself, there is always a comprehensive motive which, so to speak, compels it” (39). With the intelligible villains, the ends and their means have an equal value, i.e., the actions made in pursuit of a goal have a certain level of sensibility in them: “Just as the ends are always practical, in the large sense of the word, and always clear, even when they are pursued by an Angelo or Macbeth with a soul divided between desire and conscience, as are the means clearly distinguished as means and their existence explained by purposes beyond themselves to which they are auxiliary” (39). They do not do evil for evil’s sake, but rather their motivations are clear steps that would carry them to their goal. An example of this trait in one of the intelligible villains would be the murder of King Hamlet by Claudius in *Hamlet*; he desires to be king, allured by power, and to be wedded with Gertrude, allured by love. In order to have both the throne and Gertrude’s hand, the action that makes most sense is to murder King Hamlet. He does not do so with flagrant violence or showmanship either, but rather with refined cunning. It is clear that it is not the *act* he desires, but rather the *consequences* of the act. Spivack adds that “in all of them [intelligible criminals] there is an element of resistance to the evils that they commit or attempt” (39), and this *also* rings true in the case of Claudius when we witness his guilt-ridden monologue and prayer in act three scene three: “But oh, what form of prayer / Can serve my turn? “Forgive me my foul murder?”/ That cannot be, since I am still possessed/ Of those effects for which I did the murder: / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (3.3.51-55). This understanding of intelligible villains thus helps to highlight the outward discrepancy in the *unintelligible* villains’ stated

convictions and consequent actions, a peculiarity that contributes greatly to their unsettling nature.

In the second point provided in this list, Spivack focuses on the emotional alignment of intelligible villains that I previously touched upon earlier in this chapter. Intelligible criminals all conform to the natural constraints of human nature, experiencing appropriate emotions in appropriate settings. Spivack describes this as adherence to “human limitation”: “In both comedy and tragedy, they endure the tension of desire, stretched to augmented pain by defeat or relaxed to transient pleasure by temporary victory. They all reflect the suffering that appetite experiences in an environment that resists it” (40). When the intelligible villain suffers a defeat and they express the appropriate emotions, such as fear, grief, bitterness, and disappointment, this defeat is felt more intensely by the audience. Just as the audience feels a genuine sense of fulfillment at the victory of the protagonist, they also feel the heaviness and pain in the downfall of the intelligible villain; in some instances, this results in feelings of sympathy for said villain which highlights the complexity and richness of Shakespeare’s character creation.

Spivack provides several examples of this behavior of the intelligible villains, including the Goneril’s suicide. In his explanation of this quality, Spivack writes “Revenge, ambition, lust are in all of them a fever, albeit a cold fever in those who, like Goneril and Regan, are hard of heart” (40). He makes sure to include these two villains specifically under this point because at first glance, it might seem that this quality does not apply to them; they are indisputably callous, unsympathetic towards their father, and selfish. Their deaths, in the grand scheme of all that is being thrown at the audience during the final scene of *King Lear*, seem almost trivial. But their stony nature and

marginal deaths do not mean they are completely unfeeling. To see it in this way would be doing them an injustice, as they are certainly not one-dimensional characters. The nature of Goneril's death is a fantastic example, then, to show that they do indeed suffer from the very human emotions they feel. Goneril's suicide comes as a slight surprise in the play, considering how blatantly self-serving she is in nature, but when one takes time to understand what exactly pushed her to this, the surprising nature of her death dissipates. Goneril's actions consistently demonstrate how selfish she is, so when her plans of killing Regan and marrying Edmund are thwarted, she feels in her core a *personal* defeat; she has ultimately failed in obtaining what she desires, which presides in importance above all else. The pain of not getting what she wants pushes her to the most extreme of actions: suicide. It is clear then that her suicide is in alignment with the defeat she suffered when one considers her self-serving and spiteful nature consistently expressed throughout the play. This quality that Spivack articulates can be seen even in the most *callous* of intelligible villains, but it is consistently absent in the unintelligible criminals. Their lack of proper emotional reaction to any highs or lows they experience during their evil pursuits make them *much* harder to relate to in any sense; it seems they are, on a fundamental level, less human.

So far, the first two points Spivack provides have implied a sadistic excess in malevolence and an uncannily inhumane lack of emotional alignment in the unintelligible villains. Both of these qualities make these villains a force to be reckoned with not only to those within the plays, but also to those outside of the plays who attempt to analyze and understand them. They also help to explain the fear and confusion surrounding these villains, while the *third* point elaborates more so on the startlingly entertaining aspects of

their nature. In his third point, Spivack explains the role that the soliloquies of the intelligible villains play compared to the soliloquies of the unintelligible villains. He gives equal attention to both types of villains in this section because this quality is not as much a *deficiency* in the nature of unintelligible villains as it is a notable *difference* between the two groups. Spivack writes “It is testimony to their [intelligible villains] complete moral involvement in the human relationships of their respective plots that in their soliloquies the intelligible villains are never, so to speak, outside the play” (41). When intelligible villains soliloquize, it is clear to the audience through their language that “they themselves are bound within the cordon of moral relationships between person and person, or person and circumstances...” (42). The soliloquies of the unintelligible villains, however, are quite fundamentally different in function. This performative difference is perhaps the most noticeable quality that separates them from intelligible villains. These speeches are the moments in which they are able to step outside of the play and connect directly with the audience, flaunting their boisterously sinister personalities. Their intentions are displays of pride; their beliefs are sermons to the audience. It is as though they wish to distill their own evil nature to the audience, directly and intentionally, as opposed to the other villains who are tethered in the confines of the play by their moral conscience. While the soliloquies of both the intelligible and unintelligible villains are indeed informative, the nature in which information is distilled is drastically different. Spivack writes “Lacking the astonishing showmanship of Iago and his kindred, they [intelligible villains] do not appear to address their monologues directly to the audience. Nor do their monologues give the impression that the speakers exist on

the stage primarily to impress the audience with a demonstration of their criminal skill and versatility” (41).

The ‘moral tension’ intelligible criminals express in their soliloquies can be seen most clearly and comprehensively through the many soliloquies of Macbeth. Spivack writes, “Conferring with themselves, they [intelligible villains] communicate by indirection the purposes at which their actions aim, their awareness that they are criminals, their emotional and mental sympathy with their wickedness, or the division in their soul’s temptation and conscience” (42). Macbeth is an appropriate example because he consistently uses these speeches as a mechanism to think through his plans, then to reflect on his inner thoughts about said plans, both of which *indirectly* inform the audience not only about the status of his conscience, which is integral to his character development, but also of his intentions throughout the play. He delivers seven soliloquies in total and throughout them, his character development and fall from grace is expressed clearly and in gradual development. In his soliloquies, the tension between his ambitions and morals result in rich speeches that develop not only as the play goes on, but also as each is spoken individually. A good example of such can be seen in his second soliloquy that occurs in act one, scene seven, when Macbeth speaks primarily about his ambition to kill King Duncan. He initially ruminates aloud about the logistic aspects of the act itself that he intends to commit: “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well / It were done quickly” (1.7.1-2). He proclaims his intentions with hope: “If th’assassination / Could trammel up the consequence, and catch / With his surcease success—that but this blow / Might be the be all and the end all!” (1.7.2-5). But then, compelled by his moral consciousness, he considers the alternative, inadvertent consequences: “But in these cases

/ We still have judgement here, that we but teach / Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague the inventor. This evenhanded justice / Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice / To our own lips" (1.7.7-12). These considerations then perpetuate his guilt, and the soliloquy ends on a starkly different tone than it began: "And pity, like a naked newborn babe/ Striding the blast, or Heaven's cherubin, horsed / Upon the sightless couriers of the air, / Shall blow the horrid dead in every eye, / That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur / to prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other—" (1.7.21-28). He begins with a frank and forward statement about his intentions, which conveys confidence, then ends with a massively poetic and drawn-out metaphor by which his fears are manifested. In just one soliloquy, the audience learns not only of his intentions, but also witnesses the mental toll that they are taking on his moral conscience, all of which are received indirectly. Macbeth floats and darts through his own mind to himself on stage, and during this performance, the audience is just that: an audience. Spivack wraps up this third point effectively when he writes "It is not too much to say that the monologues of Shakespeare's conventional and intelligible transgressors are forced out of them by moral pressure. Although their words are not always rhetorically passionate, there is always in them the unmistakable tone of moral tension" (42).

The fourth and final point in Spivack's list is slightly more convoluted than the previous three, but it is at the same time the *most* fundamental aspect that distinguishes the intelligible from the unintelligible: "Shakespeare's intelligible criminals never proclaim that they are types rather than individuals, as Iago and his kindred invariably do, or that their purpose on the stage is to illustrate a generic name and nature" (43). At first,

this might seem rather mundane; though, as Spivack continues his explanation, it is clear that this point expands on the core aspect of what makes these villains *what* they are, and that is their evil. These ‘proclamations’ connect the unintelligible villains together in an essential way. It has been made clear throughout Spivack’s criticism that the intelligible villains are more ‘human’, or at least are more adherent to “human limitation”: “It is a further condition of their moral verisimilitude that Shakespeare’s intelligible criminals are never isolated from the tension and strain which announce the impact of resistance upon human desires in a moral world” (39). I mentioned this concept previously in this chapter during the explanation of point two in Spivack’s list, but its relevance in this point as well is not to be downplayed. We see the intelligible villains’ personalities, their ‘human selves’, reflected in their actions. Whether it is in the ways they are overjoyed at their success, or devastated and driven to seclusion by their failures, they are *individually* themselves, distinctive. We see in them their drive and ambition, and although these ambitions lead them to do heinous acts, we are able to understand them on some level. There are qualities in each of Shakespeare’s intelligible villains that distinguish them from the others, and even when they *seem* as similar as Goneril and Regan, it is still made clear to the audience that they are evil for their own reasons. For example, Regan is not as monstrous as her sister, as we come to learn that Goneril not only rejected her *father*, but also poisoned her *sister*. Their intentions may be similar to each other—they wish to be in positions of power, wedded with Edmund—but their motives are still their *own*.

In the unintelligible villains, however, there is an unnerving and unnatural lack of this very human individualism. This is expressed most clearly by the villains themselves in their declarations of what they are: villains. They assert for themselves a title that strips

away humanity and informs the “Elizabethan audience that they were about to witness another display of competitive brilliance in a very special sort of aggression, whose form and method had been made thoroughly familiar to them by its repetition on the stage through several generations” (43). This is part of what makes the unintelligible villains a *subgroup*; they share not only peculiar qualities that give them a similar stage presence, but these qualities are also part of the same *evil*, an evil that, as Spivack puts it, shares a “distinctive homogeneity” between their respective plays (43). In this shared villainy, there is a talent and finesse that each of these villains exhibit on stage, and while there may be surface differences, “all of them are essentially one and the same artist, their works are all one work” (46).

This self-declaration comes in a few different forms. For someone like Richard III—a blunt character to say the least—this proclamation is not only jarringly candid, but it is also our very first impression of his character *and* the play itself, as it is contained in the first lines of the first scene: “since I cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days / I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasure of these days” (1.1.28-31). From the very beginning of the play, Richard III himself demands our attention and directs our impressions of him. He is in the position of power from the start which heavily influences how we receive the acts that come to follow. A few scenes later, when alone on stage telling the audience of his plans, he admits openly that he is playing the role of evil: “I clothe my naked villainy / With odd old ends stol’n forth of Holy Writ, / And seem saint when most I play the devil” (1.3.336-338). But for a different villain, like Aaron the Moor, this declaration comes to be more drawn out and even theatrical. He spills his true intent and ambition in evil throughout the play, as opposed to Richard’s

upfront and straight announcement. In his confession that arrives in act five, scene one, though, there is that similar forthright pronouncement of nature: “But I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly, / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed / But that I cannot do ten thousand more” (5.1.141-144). In this delivery, there is not an ounce of moral tension or guilt at his actions. Instead, there is almost pride, ownership and possession of his wicked deeds, and even longing to commit more. It is a grotesque display of evil, overflowing, but also lacking in many ways beyond what could be considered ‘human’. Then shortly after, he goes as far as to compare himself to the devil, just as Richard did: “If there be devils, would I were a devil, / To live and burn in everlasting fire, / So I might have your company in hell / But to torment you with my bitter tongue!” (5.1.147-150). It is important to note here that the different ways in which these villains proclaim what they are dramaturgically reflects many fundamentals about them as characters, but also how each of them function distinctively in their own plays. Richard III is the protagonist of his play, but also the main evildoer. The play revolves around *him* and *his* charismatically sinister toying of those around him. He is blunt and direct in nature, and the play consists almost entirely of *his* journey of ambition, so his style of proclamation is appropriate—immediate and honest. *Titus Andronicus*, however, is a play very different in nature. It is a play known to be grotesquely, even absurdly violent and evil. The play consists of 14 killings in total, one rape, cannibalism, even a live burial, and woven throughout these horrors are the struggles of *many* characters—not just Aaron. Since he does not have the whole play alone to direct the audience’s impression, his declarations must do *more* in words. There is, then, much to be said about his style as a villain and fashion in which he chooses to proclaim himself; the absurdity of

evil in the play is thus mirrored by his words. This performative aspect of the unintelligible villains has proven to represent much more than it seems; it is telling not only of the evil that links these villains together, but also gives insight on each villain as a perpetrator in their own play.¹

In this short but comprehensive list, Spivack successfully articulates the qualities that have long since evaded critics when trying to differentiate those villains that have always seemed more sinister, less human, than the others. In his paragraphs that follow this list, he sums up the unique and exceptional nature of these villains that is the culmination of the forementioned qualities:

Aaron, Richard, Don John, and Iago are not lucid because, beneath the drapery of conventional humanity which never fits them, they have nothing to do with the moral imperatives of human life. Their essential relationship to their crimes and to their victims is not moral but artistic, or at least we may call it so before we reach a more accurate appraisal of that relationship. (44)

As I have stated, there exists an attractive finesse amid the sheer evil and wickedness of these villains. Spivack appropriately compares them to artists several times in his chapters, and there may be no villain that comes to mind quicker at the convergence of villainy, artistry, and especially intrigue, than Iago. Jumping back now to Spivack's first chapter, titled simply "Iago", we see that he dedicates all focus initially in understanding this enigmatic villain. Because Iago is the 'exception of the exceptional', he receives much more time and consideration than the other villains; Spivack goes through every

¹ In chapters four, "The Morality Play", and five, "Emergence of the Vice", Spivack expands on this shared evil in much greater detail. Explaining these concepts in such detail, however, is not crucial to my argument—I mention them only for the sake of personal endeavor should the reader so choose to expand their understanding of this topic.

concern a critic might confront when analyzing him and offers theories and textual argumentation to help explain them. It is clear through Spivack's choice of words how extraordinary Iago is in the realm of Shakespearean villains: "He is a villain in a sense so special it has nothing to do with moral condemnation and is not receptive to the moral symbolism through which evil is interpreted in the other great tragedies" (56). Because of Iago's clear preeminence over the other unintelligible villains, Spivack rightfully declares him the ringleader for the subgroup he defines, labeling it the "family of Iago". The chapter on Iago even *precedes* the chapter in which Spivack explains or even establishes his theory, which is also telling of Iago's exclusive significance for Spivack. This abundance of textual evidence provided by Spivack makes Iago the perfect villain to use as a model for comparison if attempting to understand and place another villain in context of Spivack's theory, as I intend to do with Edmund.

The amount of textual evidence is not the sole reason for my comparison of Iago and Edmund, for they have in fact *already* been compared to each other quite frequently in critical discussions on Shakespeare's villains. Over the last two centuries, several prominent Shakespearean critics have noted the conspicuous resemblance between these two villains. One of the most renowned of these authors, A.C. Bradley, notes that Edmund is the *only* villain one could consider similar to Iago, but admits that this connection, though existing, is faint: "Accordingly Iago's intrigue occupies a position in the drama for which no parallel can be found in the other tragedies; the only approach, and that a distant one, being the intrigue of Edmund in the secondary plot of *King Lear*" (Bradley 80). However, many other critics have noticed a rather strong connection between the two. Albert Shepherd notes that "There are so many points of resemblance

between Edmund and Iago that we cannot help thinking that Shakespeare had the latter in mind when he drew the character of the former” (Shepherd 348). Another association of similar caliber is seen in George Wilson Knight’s criticism: “Edmund’s plot is a more Iago-like, devilish, intentional thing than Goneril’s and Regan’s icy callousness” (Knight 19). Critic Piotr Sadowski breaks down the connection by noting a likeness in their *strategies* of evil: “Like Iago in his play, Edmund has successfully concealed his dangerous tendencies behind the mask of decency and propriety, remaining totally unsuspected by both his father and his brother” (Sadowski 4). An association that goes even farther in the direction of my thesis is David Bevington’s, who includes Edmund with the other four villains mentioned in Spivack’s family of Iago: “Iago belongs to a select group of villains in Shakespeare who, while plausibly motivated in human terms, also take delight in evil for its own sake: Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, Richard III, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Edmund in *King Lear*” (Bevington 1152).

Spivack is thorough in listing the qualities of each subgroup of villains and attributing them to certain characters in the first two chapters of his book, but nowhere in this chapter does he mention the villain Edmund. Under Spivack’s theory, Edmund is without classification, despite his constant association with the ringleader himself, Iago. Why? He is certainly deserving of the title ‘villain’. He schemes with openly evil intentions and commits heinous acts of deception upon his own family members. G. Wilson Knight in his criticism on *King Lear* goes as far as to state that “Edmund is the most villainous of all” (23). Is Spivack’s neglect due to Edmund’s role being exclusive to the sub plot of *King Lear*? This is also doubtful, as the subplot has been studied extensively for its value, independent of *and* in relation to the main plot. In fact, there are

several critics who have dedicated time to Edmund's specific villainy in the subplot, including A.C. Bradley, Piotr Sadowski, Waldo McNeir, Maria Nassar, and several others. It cannot be that *King Lear* is on the periphery of Shakespeare's work either, for it was written at the height of his career and is known to be one of the great four tragedies, the others being *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. If the answer does not present itself after these considerations, then it seems that the only plausible reason for this absence is that Spivack himself did not judge Edmund to be deserving of a place in either category under his theory of villains. I seriously doubt that the exclusion of Edmund was unintentional; there must be meaning behind it. The absence of Edmund, the "wittiest and most attractive of all villains" (Knight 24), in this theory should be addressed. Because of this undue exclusion, I will analyze Edmund in the context of Spivack's theory of villains by working through his list side by side with the context provided on Iago— considering his frequent comparison to Edmund in literary criticism *and* the substantial amount of textual evidence provided pertaining to him and his place in Spivack's theory— to establish a more refined categorization in which Edmund can be understood.

Chapter Two: Context on Edmund's Character

Before comparing Edmund with Iago— an admittedly very different villain in many respects— it is crucial to comprehend the fundamentals of Edmund himself; we must understand his beliefs, how they were established, and where he exists in the vast and perilous plot of *King Lear*, a play in which “Shakespeare pushes to its limit the hypothesis of a malign or at least indifferent universe in which human life is meaningless and brutal” (Bevington 1201). Edmund is introduced to the audience in the very first lines of the play, but as opposed to the other villains of his caliber who generally direct their *own* first impressions, Shakespeare leaves this job to the work of Gloucester, his father, and Kent, Lear’s advisor. Since this conversation not only initiates our understanding of Edmund, but also opens the entire play, its importance must not be downplayed. Every word choice is intentional in setting the tone of this grandly catastrophic play. In this scene, we learn a few things about Edmund that are fundamental to his character; first, we learn that he is a bastard to Lord Gloucester. The first words that pertain to Edmund are spoken by Kent in a question to Gloucester: “Is not this your son?” (1.1.8). This line makes a strong impression because it not only has to do *solely* with the relationship between Edmund and his father—a big part of his character— but it is also an *interrogative* of that relationship. Throughout this play, many questions are presented to the audience, and while this is a small one in comparison to the others, one that is more or less confined to the nature of this nonchalant conversation between a lord and an advisor, I believe its existence as a question is entirely intentional—because of this small exchange, the audience learns that Edmund’s existence is one to be questioned.

This conversation is also crucial in that it shows us how Gloucester views his bastard son. The vital complexities in this relationship are shown as the conversation carries on. Initially, Shakespeare invokes a sense of sympathy for Edmund. When questioned on their relationship by Kent, Gloucester's reply includes two important details. First, he uses the word "breeding" which is a carnal and more primitive word choice when talking about the conception of one's own child. This word acts to dehumanize Edmund. Second, we learn about Gloucester's former feelings of shame as the father of a bastard: "I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now / I am brazed to't" (1.1.10-11). It is in these lines of Gloucester's that we see the only mistreatment of Edmund from his father—if you could even consider it that—that exists within the play. If there is any reason to feel sympathy for Edmund, it is provided here in weak and fleeting strength. In the lines that follow, we see Gloucester outwardly acknowledge Edmund. After mentioning his elder and lawful son, Edgar, he says that he is "no dearer in my account" than Edmund (1.1.20). This clears the air for the audience of any disparity in the love that Gloucester has for his sons, and since Edmund is present in this scene as well, it is also of direct validation to him. Gloucester *does* address Edmund as "knave", "though this knave came something saucily to the world" (1.1.210, and "whoreson", "the whoreson must be acknowledged" (1.1.23), in this conversation, which are generally terms of derision, but it is clarified in the footnotes that they are meant as terms of *endearment* from Gloucester, which again supports the notion that his father is affectionate of him. Although it is hard to strip these terms *entirely* of their derisory tone, there is still clearly a warmth in the words as well. The audience will come to find that this conversation is of utmost importance in trying to understand Edmund, as the grounds

of his beliefs and ambitions in the play are foundational in his role as a bastard son to his father.

It is not until act one scene two that Edmund declares his beliefs to the audience in soliloquy. Up until this point, he is a complex presence in the minds of the audience, one entangled with mystery and sympathy. But in this soliloquy, since Edmund now has the chance to direct our impressions himself, the fog clears to expose a more sinister character. He begins with a strong declaration of where his loyalties lie: “Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound” (1.2.1-2). His beliefs lie in direct opposition to the ones that would consider him a bastard in the first place. He is Gloucester’s son by ‘nature’, so this is where his devotion lies: in the belief that would acknowledge him as legitimate. The next 14 lines are crowded with questions about the baselessness of his inferior position: “Why bastard? Wherefore base? / When my dimensions are as well compact, / My mind as generous, and my shape as true/ As honest madam’s issues?” (1.2.6-9). He is questioning the ways of the world in which he exists, and these questions ring in the ears of the audience too loudly for them to ignore—the questions are thus posed to them. Why should he be ‘branded’ as ‘baseless’ when he is as capable as his brother, as flesh and blood to his father as any other offspring? These questions, tinted with lingering sympathy, may incline the audience to side with Edmund for a moment, but the moment dissipates quickly with the tonal shift in line 15 of his soliloquy. With a caesura, Edmund then directs this bitterness and frustration towards his brother: “well, then/ Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land” (1.2.15-16). These questions of his are motives, justifications for the crimes he intends to commit. A sour taste is left in our mouths as we are pushed to the triumphant end of his soliloquy: “Now,

gods, stand up for bastards!’” (1.2.22). In demanding the *gods* stand for *him*, Edmund displays his vice of vices: pride. Despite the fact that Edmund has established himself as a planned evil doer in the play, though, we still *understand* his motives as sensible to a degree, as we are provided with an understanding of his inferiority as a bastard. Although it is not until later in the play, when his actions and ambitions outweigh these motives in grotesque disproportion, that we see the true nature of Edmund as villain, the nature that aligns with those of the family of Iago.

After this soliloquy, Gloucester appears on stage perplexed by the perverse nature of the events witnessed in the remainder of act one, scene one. Once he appears, Edmund employs his plan, using similar deceptive strategies very similar to those of Iago. It is in the midst of this deception when we learn that Gloucester’s beliefs oppose Edmund’s to the highest degree. Once he has been convinced that his own son, Edgar, intends to do him wrong, Gloucester is moved to deliver his most iconic lines in the play:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there’s son against father. The king falls from bias of nature; there’s father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves (1.2.106-117)

This clearly orthodox view of the world opposes Edmund’s initial declaration of adherence to the laws of the goddess, Nature. After Gloucester exits the stage, Edmund’s

soliloquy illustrates his disdain for the speech his father just delivered. In this obstinacy, we see more clearly his own understanding of the world. He starts with direct belittling of his father's beliefs: "This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune—often surfeits of our own behavior—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars..." (1.2.121-124). If his principles were at all vague before, they have been now clarified in the extreme in this soliloquy for the audience to gaze at.

Gloucester's beliefs are those that align with the concept of bastardy in the first place, while Edmund's beliefs promote individual power and accountability. I expand in more depth on Gloucester's beliefs and their context to an Elizabethan audience in my chapter on character duplicates; for the time being, it is sufficient to know that his beliefs not only oppose but inspire Edmund's own beliefs. Through understanding Edmund's beliefs and where these beliefs originate, we can now better understand the intentions and motivations behind the actions he takes. This allows for a well-informed analysis which will better place Edmund within Spivack's theory of villains.

Chapter Three: Edmund and Iago; Similitude to the Ringleader

I do not intend to highlight how similar Edmund and Iago are as *people* or *characters*— only that their natures as villains are aligned under Spivack’s theory. Acknowledging what makes them different is just as important here as acknowledging what makes them similar, and one vital element to consider when studying their distinctions is the nature of their respective plays; *Othello* and *King Lear* are extremely different in many significant ways, including setting, themes, and structure, and the ways in which they are different adds crucial context to the comparison of Edmund and Iago that will follow.

Although they may have been written within two years of each other, the time periods each play is based in are vastly different, as well as the geographic settings. *Othello*, written in 1603, is set in Venice during the early modern period, or roughly Shakespeare’s time in history. Because of its geographic location and time period, the Elizabethan audiences would have had some degree of familiarity with the setting. Any preconceived knowledge of the culture of Italy at that time in history would have accompanied them to the play. On the other hand, *King Lear*, written in 1605 or 1606, while being closer *geographically* to these audiences as it is an English setting, is based in a time hundreds of years before the early modern period, in prehistoric England, a time before the arrival of Christianity. The audiences during Shakespeare time, though, are living in an England where Christianity is in fact the state religion, so this critical difference between the culture of *King Lear* and the culture of those in the audience creates a distance that informs their impressions of the events. Even in setting, these plays differ drastically, but their distinctions do not stop here.

There is also an alarming lack of any higher meaning in *Othello*. All of the calamities suffered and witnessed are purely produced from Iago's will, a will that is hard to comprehend and accept because of its elusive nature. This creates a sense of utter defeat upon arriving at the end of the play. Spivack articulates our desire for meaning in tragedies when he writes, "The play concerns the oppression of Virtue by Villainy, and if the clamorous iteration of the latter word beats on our brains without enlightening us, that is because we are habituated to look for moral significance in it" (56). Bevington reiterates this lack of significance: "*Othello* does not offer the remorseless questioning about humanity's relationship to the cosmos that we find in *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*" (1150). In *King Lear*, however, "humanity's relationship to the cosmos" is a very prevalent theme. There are many 'cosmic' concepts in play here: "filial ingratitude", the slow anguish of old age, the clashing of a father's orthodox view and a bastard son's rebellious rejection of said view and allegiance instead to nature, and most all-encompassing, the meaningless of human suffering. This play opposes the nature of *Othello* in that these grand questions are indeed asked, but the answers that the end of the play presents only bring more pain. Bevington expresses this distress fittingly in the opening of his preface: "In *King Lear*, Shakespeare pushes to its limit the hypothesis of a malign or at least indifferent universe in which human life is meaningless" (1201).

The structure of *Othello*'s plot is very compact and succinct, almost claustrophobic, compared to *King Lear*'s vast and at times overwhelming plot. All of the horrendous evil that is witnessed in *Othello* occurs over three days' time, and between only a handful of characters, with Iago being the center. Bevington's choice of words is apt when he writes "Shakespeare has *compressed* the story into two or three nights and

days” (1150). Iago works efficiently and ruthlessly in these three days, causing the gulling of Roderigo, the termination of Cassio, and— most impressively— the manipulation of Othello. He is at the center of the play, orchestrating all of the events and delivering several soliloquies throughout, pulling the audience closely along for the ride whether they like it or not. *King Lear*, though, is a play that could be considered overall grander in many ways than *Othello*. Firstly, its plot spans over a much longer period of time and is home to many different settings within England, from Lear’s castle, to Goneril and Regan’s home, to Gloucester’s residence in Dover, and even a shack in the English countryside. There is so much to keep track of during the play that the audience may experience a sense of exhaustion in trying to keep up. The sheer number of characters and existence of a “complex double plot” only intensifies this sensation. It is important to understand that because of the nature of the plot, Edmund is not granted as much time and interaction with the audience as Iago is. He is one of three villains that is in contestation with *several* protagonists. Therefore, his actions and motives are slightly more difficult to grasp. He is, in many ways, a character clouded with ambiguity. This may be part of the reason that he has been overlooked in Spivack’s theory. Although, I think that in this ambiguity lies the makings of a villain that is in many ways, as exceptional as Iago.

This now brings us to the characters themselves. When comparing them, the starkest similarity between the two that most authors have noted is the likeness of their deceptive strategies. When deceiving those around them, they use the same kind of manipulation to invoke certain emotions and thoughts that are to their advantage. Their main targets of manipulation (Othello for Iago and Gloucester for Edmund) are deceived

into thinking that their aggressors are actually their closest confidants. Building this bond of trust allows them to have more control over these men, giving them the ability to use them as pawns in their schemes. Being able to establish this level of trust whilst simultaneously harming them in the process takes a level of intelligence and finesse that is quite unique to these two villains. The first step is to pinpoint the beliefs of their target so they can use those beliefs as a weapon against them. For Othello, it is his fragile trust and idealization in the virtue and love of those around him, especially Desdemona, and for Gloucester, it is his strict orthodox belief of a divine authority in man's fate. Understanding their beliefs allows Edmund and Iago to pinpoint weaknesses in them and then plant seeds of doubt in the minds of their prey, all the while playing the part of the trustworthy friend and ally. When their prey is weakened and vulnerable, they step in to offer support and advice, but these offerings are nothing more than acts of manipulation that influence their victims in a way that is advantageous to their own personal ambitions.

To break down the beliefs of their victims, the villains first establish themselves as those who share similar beliefs, as they would then be seen as credible sources for advice. Iago does so by appearing reluctant to share any information that would harm Othello's image of Cassio and Desdemona. For example, in act three, scene three, when Othello asks Iago if it was Cassio who just left his wife's company, Iago replies with denial; "Cassio, my lord? No, sure I cannot think it, / That he would steal away so guiltylike, / Seeing you coming" (3.3.39-41). By being obviously reluctant to acknowledge any undesirable behavior between the two, he establishes that he himself also believes in their virtue and honor. During Othello's and Iago's conversation about Cassio, Iago even says that he thinks "Cassio's an honest man" (3.3.142). But all the

while, he is planting seeds of doubt. His reluctancy and vagueness entices Othello to wish for more information: "I prithee, speak to me as thy thinking's" (3.3.144). He continues to lead Othello on with riddle-like replies which only make Othello's desire to hear stronger. Iago has now gotten Othello to a state in which he is most susceptible and willing to believe whatever lies are fed to him. This is when he chooses to plant the seeds of jealousy in Othello's mind: "Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio" (3.3.211), "She did deceive her father, marrying you;/ And when she seemed to shake and fear our looks, / She loved them most" (3.3.218-220). All throughout this conversation, Iago reminds Othello of his 'love' for him, which only helps to foster Othello's trust. He has successfully established credibility with his victim all the while feeding them poison, and we see this sinister strategy mirrored in Edmund.

Edmund is an opportunistic villain; he uses not only his wit and manipulative abilities to deceive his victim, but also takes advantage of the events around him. As mentioned above, when Gloucester enters in act one scene two, he is already shaken by the events he witnessed previously: Lear banishing his most loving daughter and his most trustworthy advisor. Edmund, familiar with his father's beliefs, knows that these events will have shaken him, so he makes sure to take advantage of this weakened state. He starts his deception by hiding a letter upon Gloucester's entrance in an obviously suspicious way. This action entices Gloucester's inquiries, just as Iago's riddle-like elusiveness did for Othello: "Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?" (1.2.28). He triggers a suspicion in Gloucester, then exhibits strong reluctancy to give over the letter, as the contents would tarnish Gloucester's image of Edgar: "It is a letter from my brother, that I have not all o'erread; and for so much as I have perused, I find it not fit for

our o'erlooking" (1.2.37-40); "I hope for my brother's justification he wrote this but as an essay or taste of my virtue" (1.2.42-43). This reluctance is seen as a desire to protect not only his father's consciousness but also his brother's honor and reputation, both of which depict Edmund as a noble son and brother. By being reluctant, he portrays himself as a person who values filial loyalty which garners his father's trust, making it easier to deceive him. Once Gloucester is desperate to read his letter, and most susceptible to its contents— fabricated confessions of betrayal made to be seen as written by Edgar— Edmund gives in and hands it over. Both villains take advantage of their victims in order to get them to an ideal state of vulnerability with a similar approach, but the modes by which they embed their lies differ; Iago chooses to do so in statements of warning, and Edmund with a forged letter. It is through these differences that Shakespeare illustrates each villain's own personal flavor of villainy, demonstrating that although they are of the same nature, they are still unique enough to be recognized individually.

Nothing may be more accurate than to say Iago and Edmund are 'orchestrating' the downfall of their victims—their manipulation is complex and multidimensional, and yet extremely successful. They establish credibility and trust through intentional reluctance and withholding information, but this concealment also provokes the inquiry from their victims that sets the stage for their lies and deceit. These scenes are not the only instances in which their deception is employed, and Othello and Gloucester are not their only victims. Iago, having delivered the third most lines in all roles of Shakespeare's creation², is ruthless in his deception throughout the entire play, and has many victims including Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, and Roderigo. However, Edmund, as mentioned

² Based off of a count conducted on <https://www.playshakespeare.com/study/biggest-roles>

previously, is not granted as large a role in proportion to the play in which he exists. Because of this, he does not have as many opportunities to deceive and has fewer victims. But still, we see the same tenacity that exists in Iago, as Gloucester is not the only person he takes down with the little space he is given in the play. He also deceives Edmund, and I compare this deception with Iago's of Roderigo in my fourth chapter on character duplicates. They not only share very similar modes of deception and manipulation of their victims, but they also both exhibit a similar merciless cruelty in their pursuits, despite the different spaces that Shakespeare grants them in their respective plays.

The ambiguity between what each villain *appears* to be motivated by and what they *actually* commit in the name of said motivations—which we remember as the first quality of unintelligible villains in Spivack's list—is another clear similarity between Iago and Edmund. Iago's motives are admittedly more convoluted and harder to pin down than Edmund's, which adds to his unnervingly mysterious nature. In the beginning of his first chapter, Spivack poses the question for his reader, "Why is it then that so obvious a portrait, supported so patently by the test of the play, requires the repeated affirmations of the successive generations of critics and scholars to uphold it?" (6), then hypothesizes an answer on the next page: "Adequate enough in the abstract as motives theoretically sufficient... they are invalidated by the way they are expressed and by their failure to conform with the dominant expression Iago makes as a character in the play" (7). To prove this hypothesis, Spivack moves through each instance in which Iago provides a motive for the audience, then details how this motive is muddled. There are several factors to consider when approaching this aspect of Iago—it is, in fact, the quality of his villainy that has resulted in "more than one hundred and fifty years of perplexed

speculation” (7). For example, the way in which he delivers his convictions to the audience raises questions about their authenticity. Although Iago’s convictions can be easily discerned and pulled from the play, they seem as if they do not exist at all. Spivack writes, “The force of his provocations is dissipated by the very texture of the language in which he expresses them, by a literal and formal frivolity that resides in the vocabulary and syntax of his statements” (7). Part of this lies in the weakness of the statements, as if he *himself* does not believe in what he is saying. Spivack provides an example of this that can be found in Iago’s first soliloquy, “I hate the Moor/ And it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets/ ‘Has done my office, I know not if’t be true;/ Yet I, for mere suspicion in that kind/ Will do as if for surety” (1.3.387-391), then Spivack details what exactly is unsettling about this motive: “He is aware of a rumor which he has no reason to believe, but will use it as sufficient pretext for bringing about what his hatred of Othello, antecedent to all suspicion, provokes him to desire” (8). This motive, although easy to understand, is delivered with such flippant apathy that it is therefore unable to validate the crimes that Iago commits in the name of it. When the audience is subjected to witness the horrific smothering of Desdemona, they might find themselves reaching out for a reason that would justify such suffering, but what they come up with are the crumbs that Iago has indifferently sprinkled about the floor. They are left, then, utterly despairing and comfortless at the injustice committed on a once-seemingly virtuous pair of lovers. The discrepancy I have noted here is just the tip of the iceberg, as there are in fact *several* reasons Spivack provides in trying to understand why Iago’s motives are so perplexing. I believe it is more than fair to say that Iago, in regard to Spivack’s first quality of unintelligible villains, is truly exceptional. But even in his exceptionality, one can see

how Edmund, though not to the same degree, expresses the very same *kind* of unnerving ambiguity in motives and actions in his own ways.

The first thing to note about Edmund in regard to this quality is the fact that his motive is much easier to recognize and understand than Iago's, as it is of a singular and sensible nature. Edmund has one strong, banner belief as a character: that "Nature" is his goddess. I intend to focus on the more relevant aspect of his motives in this chapter, which is ambiguity. Since much of Iago's ambiguity in Spivack's understanding has to do with the way in which he delivers said motives, it is important to note that Edmund does differ greatly on this point. He states his conviction with clarity, and it would also seem that he has chosen a motive that is entirely understandable in context of his role as a bastard. Maria Nassar does well in describing his disposition when she writes, "Edmund knows that customs can be unreasonable, and societies unnatural. Thus, it is to a different, revolutionary concept of nature that Edmund commits himself" (95). In fact, not only does his motive make sense considering his bastardy, but so does his choice in victims: his father's orthodox belief is the very one that would view Edmund as a bastard, and his brother is the 'lawful son' that stands between him and his father's inheritance. because the obscurity of Edmund's role does not lie in his delivery of motive, does not mean it cannot be found elsewhere in his performance, alive and well. In fact, as Spivack puts it, "all four [unintelligible villains] reveal clearly enough why they act the way they do and why their victims qualify as such"—and here lies the catch—"if only we free ourselves from the preoccupation with their psychological coherence" (37). Edmund's motive when *stated* makes sense, but if one looks beyond its expression in words, its legitimacy is nowhere to be found, especially when one considers the extent to which

Edmund goes in the name of this motive. The first thing to examine here is any proof of mistreatment of Edmund by his father or brother, as the case of being a bastard implies some disparity in familial treatment. Although, as I described in chapter two, there is not an ounce of substantial neglect. The only hint of anything of the sort is when Gloucester refers to a time when he had “so often blushed to acknowledge him” (1.1.10). Other than this, and one comment provoked out of Albany in which he calls Edmund a “Half-blooded Fellow” (5.3.82), Shakespeare offers no substantial proof of Edmund’s abuse. Considering the vastness of atrocities in *King Lear*, he very well could have included something of the sort. He intentionally left out any reasons for the audience to justify Edmund’s bitterness as a bastard, which is a peculiarity that overturns the authenticity of his conviction. This lack of any dramaturgic evidence of substantial ill-treatment, thus, is the first element that muddles Edmund’s motives.

It is only when the acts he *commits* are examined in the context of this peculiarity that it becomes clear that Edmund absolutely qualifies to be in the presence of the others Spivack calls unintelligible villains. The groundless nature of his ‘apparent’ animosity alone could be understood merely as immaturity, but once the heinous acts committed in the name of this unfounded motive are suffered, it is clear that there is a sinister nature to his character that goes beyond a flaw in his personality. The first discrepancy occurs during the transformation that Edgar undergoes after being wrongfully ousted by Gloucester. It is one of utter despair and defeat: “Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom! / That’s something yet. Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.20-21). The change from happiness to sorrow is also reflected physically; the audience watches as he goes from being a well-garbed son of a lord— noble and decent—to a lowly mad man: “My face I’ll grime with filth, /

Blanket my loins, elf all my hairs in knots, / And with presented nakedness outface/ The winds and persecutions of the sky” (2.3.9-12). When Lear looks upon him in act three, scene four, he utters the words that haunt all the events of the play: “Is man no more than this?” (3.4.101). The pain that Edgar suffers in his transformation is only made more intense by the fact that Edmund’s motives are so deficient in legitimacy, but this already-disproportionate scale is flipped on its head when one witnesses the blinding of Gloucester, one of the most horrific scenes to occur on Shakespeare’s stage. The motive that led to this scene does not even occur to Edmund until the opportunity arises, making it *that* much more trivial. If Edmund’s true goal were to replace Edgar in order to gain Gloucester’s inheritance, he would have stopped his pursuits after Gloucester renounced Edgar. But in act three scene three, an opportunity to betray Gloucester presents itself to Edmund, so he decides on a whim to pursue this new goal: “This seems a fair deserving, and must draw me/ That which my father loses—no less than all. / The younger rise when the old doth fall” (3.3.23-25). Reminiscent of Iago, it appears that Edmund’s motive only exists so that he can pursue evil in the name of it. As Spivack writes under the first point in his list, in intelligible villains, “there is an element of resistance to the evils they commit or attempt” (39), and there is not a detectable *shred* of this moral resistance in Edmund. His motives, though stated and sensible in proclamation, are surpassed in the severity and force by which they are employed into action. They offer no justification for the atrocities they lead to, thus, the discrepancy between ends and means is clear in Edmund, as it is in Iago.

Points one and two in Spivack’s list are similar in that they recognize in the unintelligible villains’ strange and unnatural *discrepancies* in their behavior. They each

represent two sides of the same coin, as both of them serve to highlight how the *motives* of these villains are inauthentic and cheapened. Spivack's first point does so by drawing our attention to the disparity between their 'motives' and the actions committed in the name of said motives, and his second point delves deeper into the minds of the villains by showing how incongruent their emotions are throughout the process. Point two is the other half of the formula that point one initiates. To contrast the unnerving lack of this emotional richness in the unintelligible villains, Spivack writes "They [intelligible villains] begin with intelligible motives they really feel and end in frustrations to which they are really sensitive" (40). The unintelligible villains are surrounded by genuine expressions of several emotions, many of which they are themselves responsible for, such as sadness, grief, despair, jealousy, and fear, but they themselves do not partake in any of them. They stand out starkly among the others in their tragedies, made more callous and perplexing by existing in the middle but not *within* the rich portrait of emotions that surrounds them. This quality is the one that may haunt the audience the greatest, as it is the most telling of a nonhuman nature. In the case of Iago, this lack of emotional sincerity is unadorned and unsettling. This is because his several stated motives suggest the existence of true emotions such as bitterness, jealousy, anger, and sadness, but in his performance and character, none of these emotions are manifested, despite having many apparent 'reasons' to feel them. Expanding on this, Spivack writes: "Who can read the play without becoming aware that his motives inhabit his words but not his emotions?" (17). If one were to be given a list of his stated motives, they would expect to be given another, correspondingly sized list of examples in which these emotions are exhibited, but no such list exists, thus establishing an alarming incongruence in Iago's nature. A

clear example of this lack in emotional sincerity in Iago is the way he ignores his wife, Emilia, and her role in his suspicions. He states clearly to the audience that he suspects that multiple men have been adulterous with his wife, including Othello, “And it is thought abroad that twixt my sheets/ He’s done my office” (1.3.388), and Cassio, “For I fear Cassio with my nightcap too—” (2.1.309). The atrocious acts that he commits in the name of this ‘adultery’, though, are *only* committed against Othello and Cassio, not Emilia who would have also taken part in the infidelity. This disregarding of Emilia is the most obvious example of this quality; as Spivack writes, “Nothing about Iago is more bewildering than his utter neglect of Emilia’s crucial role in his dishonor and her inescapable primacy in his revenge—nothing discloses so nakedly the fissure cleaving through the whole extent of his life in the play” (20). If he *truly* felt wronged by the actions, he ‘believes’ to have been committed, would not his reign of terror encompass all those who participated, including Emilia? The fact that he does not commit injustice upon her shows that he is indifferent to the motive itself—whether it happened or not does not really matter to him, and it is *this* apathy that haunts his performance. Spivack mentions that Iago’s hate lacks an “objective correlative”: “It has no particular connection with the opportunities of the human situation displayed within the tragedy, but reflects, instead, a vague, pervasive, and, in a sense, static condition of Iago’s being” (16), and the same can be said for Edmund’s ambition for justice.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Shakespeare offers no *proof* of mistreatment of Edmund by Gloucester or Edgar that would justify his actions, just as he offers no proof of the adultery that Iago mentions. But even if one were to look past the absence of proof and instead delve into Edmund’s emotions in search of this justification,

one would again come up empty handed. This is because in addition to mistreatment, bastardy also implies the existence of an inferiority complex; if we cannot witness any mistreatment on the stage, the existence of an inferiority complex in Edmund would at least allude to a *history* of abuse, which would substantiate his motives. But this possible explanation also falls to the wayside, as Edmund is known to be one of the most prideful of Shakespearean villains. In addition to literally *demanding* the gods stand up in the name of bastards, he also makes it clear to the audience that he sees himself as smarter than his brother and father. After his father leaves the stage in act one, scene two, Edmund makes a mockery of his father's beliefs: "My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous" (1.2.131-133). The fact that he is deliberately ridiculing his father's views shows how confident he is in the superiority of his own. Later in this scene, after his deception of both Gloucester and Edgar, he calls Gloucester "credulous" and notes that his brother's gullibility is "foolish:" (1.2.186). His emotions do not in any way supports is motives; no genuine sadness or subservience can be found in Edmund's character, despite the fact that his main grievance with those he torments is his lowly status in comparison to them. It seems, like Iago, he too is unable to translate any authenticity of his conviction via emotions. His relationship with Goneril and Regan also supports this lack of emotional capacity. In act five, scene one, it is made clear to both Edmund and the audience that both sisters are in love with him. When Edmund is alone on stage, left to contemplate his *own* emotions after learning theirs, his words fall short in their attempt to translate any genuine emotion. He starts by saying "To both of these sisters I have sworn my love" (5.1.580), and in this statement, we already see a weakness

in conviction. He separates himself from the act of loving by the addition of the word “sworn”, which acts as a wall. He does not say he “loves”, but that he has “sworn” this love, and it is hard to trust him as he has already established himself at this point as an untrustworthy character. He then speaks about them as if they are objects: “Which of them shall I take?” (5.1.60), “Neither can be enjoyed/ If both remain alive” (5.1.61-62). In this short soliloquy, Edmund is very practical in language and in thought, despite the fact that the matter at hand is love. It is as if he is unable to feel love, so instead he understands it in the only way he can: with cold logic and unfeeling distance.

It is clear that Edmund is unable to convey any genuine emotions throughout the play that coordinate with the words he speaks and actions he commits. In fact, the only true emotion that we feel is that of cheerfulness in his accomplishments, which Spivack notes in the case for Iago, as he writes, “Everywhere else his emotions are simply variations on the monolithic passion of laughter. He is a creature of leaping jubilation and sardonic mirth...” (17). This spills into Spivack’s third point because it is in these villains’ soliloquies that their jovial nature is expressed. In these lines, the audience sees the showmanship of these villains—they are clearly proud of their accomplishments, and the lack of emotion anywhere else in the plays only highlights the twisted elation found in their speeches. This quality is quite intense in Iago’s character, as there are not only *several* examples of this revelry in his speeches—in fact, one could say that his language is saturated with it—but they are also highlighted when in contrast with his supposed motives. In regard to this, Spivack asks the following question: “What reader does not make the astonishing discovery that jocularity is the true passion of the tragic agent throughout this play, and that against this jocularity his professed motives are verbal and

marginal, when they are not actually contaminated by it?” (18). When Iago’s plans are going well, as they consistently do throughout the entire play, he expresses excitement: “By th’ mass, ‘tis morning! / Pleasure and action make the hours seem short” (2.3.384-85), “Ay, that’s the way! / Dull not device by coldness and delay” (2.3.391-94). Although Edmund has many fewer lines than Iago, there are still instances in which this jocular nature is clearly mirrored. For example, at the end of his first soliloquy when he decides that he will bring down Edgar, his imperative statement to the gods is jubilant: “I grow, I prosper / Now, gods, stand up for bastards!” (1.2.21-22). The couplet helps to emphasize the merriment here, just as the alliteration does in Iago’s “Dull not device by coldness and delay” line. This playfulness is also expressed later in this scene when Edgar arrives just as Edmund wishes he would: “Oh, these eclipses do portend these divisions. Fa, sol, la, mi” (1.2.139-140). Edmund is a very opportunistic villain—he takes advantage of any situation that may lend itself conveniently to his schemes. We see this in act two, scene one when he expresses joy at his learning of the Duke’s arrival: “The Duke be here tonight? The better! Best! / This weaves itself perforce into my business” (2.1.14-15), and the very same resourcefulness and glee is also found in Iago’s performance. When he watches Cassio and Desdemona conversing intimately in act two, scene one, he whispers in an aside: “He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said, whisper. With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” (2.1.167-69). His use of imagery here continues the tone of playfulness.

It is by their expressions of glee in their soliloquies that they are able to entertain the audience enough to draw them in. Whereas the intelligible villains seem to be truly preoccupied with their thoughts and ambitions, Iago and Edmund are riveted and

entertained by theirs. There is no substantial evidence of this “moral pressure” that shrouds the intelligible villains’ soliloquies. Just as Richard III bragged about the wooing of Lady Anne to the audience in *Richard III*, Edmund and Iago’s own jovial lines have about them a boastful nature that seems to be directed at the audience. This quality allows them to step outside of their roles in the play and entertain whilst simultaneously deceiving those within the play. It is just as Spivack says several times in his book; they are artists, and they enjoy the act of creating this art that they somehow know will be viewed by an audience. Considering this, it then makes sense that they may lack the emotions that we would attribute to such words and actions. As Spivack puts it, “These values [virtue, honor, religious and secular values] are the natural materials on which they do their work; they do not hate or envy them anymore than the sculptor hates or envies the clay which is the material condition of his art” (45).

In regard to the first three points of Spivack’s list, it can be seen clearly that despite a few small creative differences here and there, the core natures of Edmund and Iago are akin; firstly, they both exhibit odd discrepancies between their apparently sensible motives and the horrific actions they commit in the *name* of said motives, secondly, they are unable to convince the audience of any authentic conviction in these motives due to an utter lack of appropriate emotions, thus signifying a lack of morality, and thirdly, they are both unapologetically jocular and direct to the audience during their moments alone on stage. The fourth quality in Spivack’s list, however, is one that is able to unify their natures as villains while simultaneously highlighting their differences as performers. Iago is one who declares his allegiance with villainy profusely in *Othello*. A few key examples include the following lines: “So will I turn her virtue into pitch, / And

out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all” (2.3.354-56), “I have’t! it is engend’redhell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (1.3. 404-405), “How am I then a villain / To counsel Cassio to this parallel course, / Directly to his good? Divinity of hell! / When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now” (2.3.345-47). His blatant awareness of his immoral nature intensifies the unique horror of his performance. Other villains may be self-aware of their immoral actions, such as Claudius and Macbeth, but to declare one’s own self to be that which *represents* immorality is a level of evil that is hard to understand and recognize as human. All of the disturbingly ambiguous, nonhuman, and sinister aspects of Iago’s performance examined by Spivack are accumulated and catapulted by this final quality: “Nothing that he utters in the privacy of his monologues is as dominant or persistent a theme, or as effectively his conventional motives from verisimilitude, as his portrait of himself, garlanded in laughter” (Spivack 22). But beyond this, there is also a unique flare of irony that lies in his self-declarations, all thanks to the *contradictory* declarations of his nature by those around him. In *Othello*, the word “honest” and “honesty” is used a little over 50 times³. Within just one scene—act two scene three—Iago is referred to as “honest” four times: twice by Othello, once by Cassio, and once by Iago himself. Irony to this degree is quite unique to Iago. For example, Richard III also refers to himself as a villain, but many of the other characters in the play see him clearly as immoral as well. The audience’s experience is altered by this unique aspect; being made aware in soliloquy and asides that Iago’s intentions are not

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<https://crossrefit.info/textguide/othello/41/3117#:~:text=A%20man%20he%20is%20of,trusts%20him%20througout%20the%20play.>

actually honest but malicious, the audience writhes in frustration at their inability to warn those in the play of this, especially Othello himself, for he is ensnared by this trickery the most intensely.

Interestingly enough, the audience's experience is also affected by the irony in *Edmund's* expression of this fourth quality. The process by which that irony is achieved, though, is very different from Iago's, which again, is telling of Edmund's right to be praised as a unique villain himself. Edmund's declarations of villainy are very different from Iago's in that they, in fact, are never uttered by himself; Edmund himself does not declare his immoral nature to the audience. At first glance, it may seem that Spivack's fourth point does not then apply to him, but once one looks outside of his own words, it is clear that this quality is not only *expressed* but also elevated by the irony that surrounds its expression, similarly to Iago's. Edmund is young, cunning, prideful, and extremely intelligent, and it is thanks to these qualities that he is able to achieve a level of finesse in his irony; this irony expressed via this quality is actually *layered*. The first layer lies in the fact that Gloucester and Edgar—both of Edmund's victims—frequently declare the *other's* villainy to Edmund, who, as we know, is the *real* villain. After being convinced of Edgar's betrayal, Gloucester exclaims "Oh, villain, villain... Abhorred villain!... Abominable villain!" (1.2.77-80), then later in the same scene, after Edgar realizes that someone has deceived his father in his name, he utters, "Some villain hath done me wrong" (1.2.168), to which Edmund so ironically replies "That is my fear" (1.2.169). The audience, aware of his schemes, knows that these names being called out in anguish should, in actuality, be addressed to Edmund. Because he is able to make others unknowingly declare his nature, he has no need to declare his villainy himself, which

demonstrates his pride and wit. The word is used frequently throughout the subplot, draped in irony that only the audience and Edmund himself notice. In act three, scene seven, after being deceived yet again by Edmund, when Gloucester calls out to him for aid, Regan calls him a “treacherous villain” in reply (3.7.90). But, because we know that Gloucester was framed by Edmund, we can only associate Edmund with the word when it is exclaimed. The second layer of irony is the fact that Edmund’s main grievance that he expresses in the play is that others have decided his fate as a bastard and yet he still chooses to let others maintain the epithet. In this way, he mocks those who would know him as bastard by letting them unknowingly call him by what he really is: a villain. Clearly, Edmund hits the mark on all four points that Spivack declares are the qualities of the unintelligible villains. I have made sure to note the unique qualities in Edmund’s performance throughout this comparison with Iago in order to demonstrate that Edmund is not simply ‘like’ Iago in regard to Spivack’s list; in the many ways that Iago is decidedly exceptional, Edmund in his *own* ways is also very much exceptional. Point four on Spivack’s list is the quality in which his distinctive style can be seen and appreciated most clearly, but this is not yet the most significant quality of Edmund—as I will make clear in chapter five.

Chapter Four: The Noble Victims

According to Spivack, unintelligible villains are those who deliberately *deceive* those around them in order to achieve some sort of goal, so solving the question of what type of villain Edmund is would be incomplete without looking at the other component of the equation: those who are on the *receiving* end of these villain's deception. Looking at the surrounding roles in each play, one can find clear parallels. Edmund and Iago prey on gullibility, honesty, and virtue; these qualities of their prey are the sources by which they work in order to gain power and wreak havoc. Just as using the same paint can put two artists into one subgenre of art, analyzing the roles of the targeted victims in these plays will demonstrate that the two villains belong to one family, as Shakespeare gives Edmund the same tools to work with as he does with Iago.

Spivack writes that the unintelligible villains' "aggressions are directed against virtue and honor and that mixture of religious and secular values that defined the eminence of human life in Shakespeare's time... Ultimately, their assault is upon unity and order and the piety of love in all its forms" (Spivack 45). Iago directly attacks Desdemona's virtue, Cassio's honor, and most importantly, Othello's beliefs. Othello originally believes in the virtue of Desdemona and the sincerity of the love they share, but as his lines in the latter scenes of the play show, Iago is successful in warping and ultimately reversing these beliefs. These concepts of love, honor, and virtue, and the actions and will of men to uphold such values, held a greater religious weight during the Elizabethan period than they do in our more secular modern-day view; as Spivack puts it, "it is all religion" (48). Adhering and complying with these values "express man's conformity with the divinely established order of the cosmos and create the health and

happiness—the very possibility in fact—of human society” (Spivack 48). Shakespeare knew then that the audience would hold Othello’s love for Desdemona in high esteem, placing much of their own conviction into that bond. This is important to consider in order to understand how appalling it was then for Shakespeare to use Iago to rip Othello’s beliefs to shreds Othello represents these divine beliefs and Iago represents the evil of humanity that is capable of dismantling such beliefs.

It is not Othello’s beliefs that are to blame for his tragic fall, but rather his extreme, yet fragile, faith in those beliefs. In his perception of the world, so much of his own honor, integrity, and overall identity depend on Desdemona’s love for him and by proxy the virtue needed to sustain this love. David Bevington puts it best in the preface to *Othello* where he writes “Othello has loved Desdemona as an extension of himself, and, in his moments of greatest contentedness, his marriage is sustained by an idealized version of himself serving as the object of his exalted romantic passion” (1154). The convergence of these personality traits in Othello is the weakness that Iago strategically pinpoints and violently exploits. Shakespeare makes sure to clearly express how much Desdemona means to Othello initially in the play. In act one scene three, when the Duke of Venice looks to Othello for an explanation after receiving a series of accusations against him from Barbantio, Othello, charged to defend his love with his words, replies with modesty by saying, “Rude am I in speech” (1.3.81). However, his speech that follows is anything but unpolished. He goes on to defend his love for Desdemona and throughout his monologue, he uses beautiful metaphor and language to retell the story of his love. He recalls how they fell in love with each other with such grace and such little effort that it seems he is transported back to the moment, and thus we are transported

with him. He says that with “greedy ear” (1.3.148) she would “devour” (1.3.148) his stories, and with this image, the reader can *see* Desdemona sitting by his side, listening to his brave tales with the utmost wonder and attentiveness. He says, “She gave me for my pains a world of sighs. / She swore in faith ‘twas strange, ‘twas passing strange, / ‘twas pitiful, ‘twas wonderous pitiful” (1.3.158-160), and the repetition of the words “‘twas” and “pitiful” combined with the way his thoughts seem to jump around exhibits his own marvel and confusion at how Desdemona came to love him. He seems to be captivated by his own recollections. The beauty and length of this monologue demonstrate how deeply in love with Desdemona Othello is.

Not only does his language display his love for Desdemona but so does his *lack* of language; his love for Desdemona controls him to the point where it renders him *speechless*. When they reconnect after he defeats the Turkish fleet, he exclaims, “I cannot speak enough of this content. / It stops me here; it is too much of joy. / And this, and this...” (2.1.194-196). He is consumed by his love for her, and thus devotes himself to the belief that she will be faithful to him. Because he idealizes Desdemona, he has *complete* faith that she will never do him wrong. After Barbantio understands that he has lost Desdemona to Othello, he warns Othello of Desdemona’s ability to deceive, “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.295-96), to which Othello replies, “My life upon her faith!” (1.3.297). Othello idealizes Desdemona to the point where he declares that he would bet his life that she would never lie to him. With this exchange, Shakespeare successfully displays Othello’s conviction in this love while also providing some ironic foreshadowing, considering how rapidly Othello goes back on this claim. Because Othello holds Desdemona with such

high regard and expectations, he becomes destroyed at the thought of her not meeting these expectations. He never imagined she was capable of doing him harm. Once Iago pollutes his perception of her, he switches from extreme love to extreme hate.

His fall from these emotional convictions is swift, and very difficult to watch. When he starts to think that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, his language turns hateful and vulgar. Being emotionally tormented by Iago, he exclaims, “I had been happy if the general camp, / Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known.” (3.3.361-62). This line does not even sound like it came from the same person as the other lines he delivers previously in the play. After Iago offers Othello “ocular proof” (3.3.376) of her adultery by presenting him the handkerchief, Othello clearly loses control: “Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell!” (3.3.462), “O, Blood! Blood! Blood!” (3.3.467). His words become painful for the audience to hear, and his actions become nearly unwatchable. In act five scene two, after Desdemona pleads for her life and tries to prove her innocence, Othello smothers her. She continues to plead, but he replies, “What noise is this? Not dead? Not yet quite dead? / I that am cruel am yet merciful; / I would not have thee linger in thy pain.” (5.2.90-92). This moment is one of the most horrific within Shakespeare’s plays.

Iago is not entirely to blame for this transformation, but rather, it is Iago with *his* strengths paired with Othello and *his* weaknesses. It is as Bevington writes in his preface: “What then gives way? We look at Iago for one important insight, but ultimately the cause must be in Othello himself” (1154). The weight that he places on such easily-manipulatable concepts as love and virtue is to blame for his demise. So much relied on these beliefs, including the core of his own identity, which is why his violent

transformation was so extreme. After analyzing and understanding this transformation, it is not difficult then to see that Gloucester's weakness in his absolute reliance on *his* own beliefs is similar to Othello's. If unintelligible villains use their prowess to destroy beliefs, Gloucester is to Edmund as Othello is to Iago. Just as the concepts of love, virtue, and faithfulness represented something greater in the Elizabethan era than it does in our own time, so did the orthodox belief of a predetermined nature. Maria Nassar expands on this Elizabethan view; she writes: "in the sixteenth century... the general thought of the time was still linked to the "chain of Being". The Universe was stratified in levels where each had its fixed position in a rigid hierarchy which encompassed the divine and the mundane" (Nassar 92). She brings the readers' attention to the role that an understanding of this view plays not only in the main plot of the play but also the subplot: "In *King Lear*, the transgression of the 'natural order' turns the world upside down" (Nassar 93). Edmund, then, is the force that Shakespeare uses to show the audience the "evil effects of complex Nature-Authority" (93). Armed with the same deceptive wit as Iago, Edmund understands that Gloucester's staunch belief in the view not only embodies the mentality that sees Edmund inferior as a bastard, but more importantly, it represents a weakness that he can identify and attack in order to obtain his goal.

Finding Gloucester's beliefs is not as straightforward as finding Othello's; it is not in direct monologues or staple actions, but more primarily in his *reactions* to certain events throughout the play that one can see his position on the view. This more ambiguous nature of his aligns with the at times ambiguous nature of his son, Edmund, so it is not out of place. As opposed to *Othello*, tragedy strikes in *King Lear* before we get a chance to understand Gloucester's disposition. We are not handed something of the same

nature as Othello's mesmerizing monologue to compare side by side with his smothering of the object of said monologue, but as forementioned, it is in Gloucester's *reaction* to this tragedy where his beliefs shine through. The play opens with a conversation between Gloucester and Kent; in this, we see only a sliver of Gloucester's beliefs of the natural order of the world. When discussing Edmund and his bastardly nature, Gloucester says, "I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now / I am brazed to't" (1.1.11). This comment implies that the unorderedly nature of Edmund's conception was once a very touchy subject for Gloucester to discuss. Although this comment is small and in passing, it does start the framework of this character very steadfast in his beliefs. It is not until after Edmund's initial deception of Edgar and their father that Gloucester's beliefs take the center stage. Upon receiving news from Edmund of Edgar's 'betrayal', Gloucester immediately expresses disbelief: "Hum! Conspiracy! My son Edgar! Had he a hand to write this? A heart and brain to breed it in?" (1.2.56-58). This skepticism dissipates quickly, though, thanks to Edmund's manipulative wit: "Oh, villain, villain!... Abhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish villain!" (1.2.77-79). A son's loyalty to his father is only natural to Gloucester, which is why the perversion of this loyalty causes him to look to the heavens for explanation: "To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him. Heaven and earth!" (1.2.99-100). What follows after these lines is a monologue known for its accurate summation of the "transgression of the 'natural order'" that Nassar mentions in her piece. Spivack even notes this monologue in his chapter "The Family of Iago" when referring to the enveloping violations of nature in Shakespeare's tragedies: "Superstitiously interpreting the 'late eclipses in the sun and moon,' the Earl of Gloucester details this evil of division into its individual parts and effects" (49). In his

monologue⁴, Gloucester expresses his confused revulsion at his horrendously ‘unnatural’ situation. He acknowledges the “late eclipse in the sun and moon”, as the source of his bad fortune. This aligns directly with the view that Nassar articulates: “Nature provides the Law” (93). Expanding on his affiliation with this view, she writes: “For Gloucester, the signs of nature reveal and explain “unnatural” occurrences. They are symptoms of a disease that affects all the natural world, including men” (96). He sees the evil that surrounds him— first, a father’s backwards rejection of his faithful daughter in favor of his wicked ones, then, his own biological son’s betrayal, exposed to him by his bastard son—and cannot see these events as anything other than the inevitable fate that the “sun and moon” have heralded upon man. He does not see his son as naturally evil upon his own independent motivation; there is no room in Gloucester’s understanding of the world for such a possibility. This narrow vision of reality is a weakness for Gloucester. A.C. Bradley notes that this is the weakness that Edmund exploits: “Gloster is the superstitious character of the drama—the only one. He thinks much of ‘these late eclipses in the sun and moon.’ His two sons, from opposite points of view, make nothing of them. His easy acceptance of the calumny against Edgar is partly due to this weakness, and Edmund builds upon it, for an evil purpose” (259).

During the play, Edmund continues to deceive Gloucester, and through this deception, Gloucester experiences personal tragedy that triggers a transformation in his belief. He is witness to many situations that, as the play continues, start to deteriorate his beliefs, including the scene where he is stuck out in the storm with Lear, the Fool, and Kent. In act three, scene four, Lear expresses his fading hope for man. After being

⁴ The monologue is offered on page 22 of this paper.

unnaturally rejected by his own daughters, being thrown out into a storm despite his status as King, and seeing Edgar, or “Poor Tom”, perceivable as a madman, exclaiming nonsense, Lear’s faith in humanity is at an all-time low. He groans out the question: “Is man no more than this” (3.4.101). Gloucester then, after arriving on the scene and seeing the state that the King is in, starts to echo this same despair: “Thou sayest the King grows mad; I’ll tell thee, friend, / I am almost mad myself.../ The grief hath crazed my wits” (3.4.163-169). In this exchange, Gloucester starts to show that his faith in his beliefs is faltering. It is not until shortly after this scene that we witness the moment that marks Gloucester’s transformation: the gouging out of his eyes. Upon having his first eye gouged out by Cornwall, he exclaims with pain and bitterness at the once revered gods: “Oh, cruel! O you gods” (3.7.74). After both eyes have been ripped out, when he is at his most wronged and vulnerable state thus far in the play, he does all there is left to do and calls out to his son: “All dark and comfortless. Where’s my son Edmund? / Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature to quit this horrid act” (3.7.88-90). Notice how he ironically begs Edmund to manifest nature to stop his suffering when Edmund is the last person who would do such a thing, thus proving how well he was able to deceive his father. It is Regan’s response to this call for help, “It was he / That made the overture of thy treasons to us” (3.7.92), that completely shatters Gloucester’s faith. This is the moment in which he realizes that not only is the son he chose to trust the evil motivation behind his suffering, but also that he wrongfully cast away his true and loyal son. In the next scene, we see Gloucester as a defeated man, physically and mentally. His once strongly held belief that the universe had a plan for each man is reduced to a shell of what it once was. Now, instead of respect and faith in these gods, Gloucester only houses

bitterness and pain. He even *rejects* his old belief when he says, “I stumbled when I saw” (4.1.19), admitting that he did not understand even when he was sighted. The line he utters shortly after, though, makes it unignorably clear to the audience that his beliefs have been decimated: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.36-37). Like Othello, he expresses a narrow and faith-based understanding of reality, and Edmund, like Iago, strategically breaks this belief down. Gloucester does not fully succumb to Edmund’s evildoings, though, as Othello does to Iago’s, and the sole person to thank for this is Edgar. Although, despite this eventual deviation, it is clear that before Edgar intervenes to correct what had been wronged, Gloucester matched Othello step by step in his deterioration as a man of belief.

Analyzing Othello’s and Gloucester’s transformations side by side demonstrates how eerily similar Iago’s and Edmund’s strategies of evil are. When listing similarities between the two villains, A.C. Bradley writes “The gulling of Gloster, again, recalls the gulling of Othello” (67). This connection that Iago and Edmund have through their primary prey is unmistakable; it demonstrates that there are clear fundamental similarities between the evil of Iago and Edmund, which supports the notion that Edmund has a rightful spot in Spivack’s “Family of Iago.” Both villains choose a target who trusts them, they pinpoint a weakness in the target, and they violently exploit this weakness without remorse in order to achieve their goals. Othello and Gloucester share the same vulnerabilities that leave them open to harm, which is to have complete faith in a certain understanding of reality, and to lack any form of resilience when this faith is questioned. When their understandings are challenged and warped by the villains, they both decline dramatically; Othello becomes so consumed with jealousy that he strangles Desdemona,

and Gloucester becomes so hopeless that he wishes to end his own life. Understanding these two side by side is essential when analyzing Edmund in the context of Iago, but these characters are *certainly* not the only ones that help to do so. If Iago and Edmund are our primary subjects of comparison, and Othello and Gloucester are secondary to them, then Desdemona and Edgar could be considered the tertiary level in this chain of analysis; they share significant resemblances that make the connection between Iago and Edmund even more evident.

Desdemona and Edgar are similar in a few ways. First, they both play the same role in the villain's schemes; they are the virtuous objects of deception, slandered intensely by Iago and Edmund. Since Desdemona is Othello's loved wife, precious to him, Iago chooses her to bring him down. Edmund chooses Edgar for similar reasons; he knows how precious Edgar is to their father, so he chooses him to slander him, knowing it would break Gloucester's will. Desdemona and Edgar are more than just extensions of Othello and Gloucester's beliefs; they are the beacon of hope that *represent* said beliefs. For Othello, Desdemona is a symbol of love and care that helps him form his own identity, and for Gloucester, Edgar is the noble and natural son, incapable of harm, whom he trusts to be loyal. Desdemona and Edgar are naturally 'good' characters, precious to not only those in the play, but also to the audience for their clear virtue. Because they are admired by the majority, the malicious acts committed against them by the villains feel that much eviler. On a large scale, they represent the good that is at stake. In the hands of villains like Iago and Edmund, their trust and virtue can be warped and exploited to create the perfect weapons for destruction.

One personality trait that they each share is their tendency to *idealize* their loved ones. They are virtuous, true, and trusting people by nature, which is admirable, but also leaves them vulnerable to predatory behavior. For example, Desdemona, who idealizes Othello just as he idealizes her, ignores the red flags in Othello's behavior, which ultimately contributes to her own death. In act 4 scene 3, Desdemona and Emilia, Iago's wife, share an intimate conversation about their own opinions on love. Desdemona argues that she would never abuse her husband, not even for "all the world" (4.3.67). Her view of love, and therefore Othello, are very idealistic. Because of this, she trusts and obeys him up until her death. Right before she dies, Emilia asks her who attempted to kill her, and she replies, "Nobody. I myself. Farewell" (5.2.127). This shows that she is self-aware enough to know that if she had *not* idealized Othello, she could have avoided her death, so thus, she tragically blames herself.

Edgar exhibits similarly idealistic beliefs in *King Lear* that also contribute to his downfall. Perhaps the most significant expression of Edgar's idealism occurs in act four, scene five when he leads the blinded Gloucester away from a suicidal death towards a personal revelation. In order to save the shattered, tragedy-stricken Gloucester, Edgar formulates a plan to save him from his own grief. After taking advantage of Gloucester's inability to see by simulating his jump to death, he exclaims to him "thy life's a miracle" (4.6.55). He makes Gloucester think that it was the gods that saved him from his 'perilous fall', but in actuality, it was Edgar's idealistic, and persuasive, scheme. He uses Gloucester's superstitions to reestablish for him a will to live. When Gloucester is still in disbelief at his survival and asks, "but have I fall'n or no?" (4.6.59), Edgar replies: "Do but look up" (4.6.60). While this imperative statement may seem at first to be a simple

command to look at the ‘cliffs’ where Gloucester had fallen, it actually does a good job in expressing Edgar’s idealistic view of reality: “Do but look up” then becomes a powerful mantra. In this scenario, Edgar is able to use his own virtue and tendency to idealize as a strength to save his father. However, in the initial scenes of the play, it is this same attitude that actually leaves him vulnerable to exploitation. When Edgar is first deceived by Edmund in act one, scene two, he does not question his brother's accusations at all. He sees him as his loyal brother and trusts him at such, idealizing him to the extent that he truly believes Edmund would not willingly wrong him. This is the same trust that Desdemona has for Othello. Instead of questioning Edmund’s accusations about their father, Edgar simply replies, “Some villain hath done me wrong” (1.2.168). The tragic irony then of course is that it is Edmund, his own brother, who is the villain. He never suspects any ill will from his brother; he simply believes his accusations and heeds his warnings.

Without Desdemona and Edgar, Iago and Edmund would not have had all the ingredients they need to perform such deceptive evils in the plays. Beyond their own fatal weakness of idealizing, these two characters also represent the weaknesses of Othello and Gloucester. They are objectively good people who unfortunately found themselves intertwined in the schemes of two of the most powerfully deceptive villains in Shakespeare’s creation. Yet, despite their essential fundamental resemblances in character and role, their endings differ quite a bit. Edgar was able to use his idealistic mindset and virtue to save his father from suicide, and this moment in the play helped him regain the confidence and conviction he needed to challenge and defeat Edmund. Desdemona, on the other hand, succumbed to the evil plot that was closing in around her.

Desdemona embodies the ultimate exploitation of virtue, whereas Edgar represents not *only* weakness, but *also* resilience and ability to overcome. There could be many reasons for this key difference between the two characters; one possibility is that Othello was so far gone himself that Desdemona had no hope of changing his mind like Edgar changed Gloucester's. Or it may come down to the difference in plot structures between the plays; Edgar has much more time in *King Lear* to journey through tragedy and transcend it, whereas *Othello* happens over the cramped window of three days, which leaves Desdemona virtually no time to fully understand the danger she is in, let alone fix it. Despite their contrasted endings, though, they strongly resemble each other regarding their essential character and role in the play.

Desdemona is not the only character in *Othello* that reminds us of Edgar's faults; Edgar is also similar to Roderigo. Edgar is easily deceived by Edmund in the beginning of *King Lear* partly, because of his willingness to trust his brother, but to stop here would be insufficient in trying to understand the entire motivation behind this trust. Completing the answer, though, is quite simple; Edgar, like Roderigo, is also foolish. He is gullible, and easily manipulated because of this. A.C. Bradley, when expanding on Edgar's character, writes "His behaviour in the early part of the play, granted that it is not too improbable, is so foolish..." (305), and this word could be just as easily attributed to Roderigo. Iago and Edmund, being the perceptive villains that they are, pick up on this quality and use it to their advantage, as they do with all other characters that have weaknesses to exploit. The foolishness of Edgar and Roderigo being utilized against them further demonstrates that Iago and Edmund work in very similar ways.

When expanding on the “improbabilities and inconsistencies” in the subplot of *King Lear*, A.C. Bradley asks, “Is it in character that Edgar should be persuaded without the slightest demur to avoid his father instead of confronting him and asking him the cause of his anger?” (257), and Edmund knows that the answer is yes. Knowing that Edgar is trusting and gullible, Edmund uses this to secure the division between father and son. In *Othello*, Iago, being able to analyze others and use their weaknesses against them, sees this *same* trait in Roderigo and decides to utilize it just as Edmund did. Roderigo acts as a pawn consistently throughout the play, and Iago can thank his daftness for his sustained use to him. Shakespeare establishes Iago’s intellect and ability to deceive right off the bat in the first scene of the play. Roderigo is simple-minded and gullible, so when Iago is manipulating him, he makes sure to speak in great length and with muddled language to confuse Roderigo. Of the first 75 lines of the play, Iago delivers 65 of those lines and Roderigo only delivers 10. He speaks in a riddle-like way in order to hypnotize Roderigo into trusting his authority on the matter. When trying to get Roderigo to call out to Barbantio, he says, “For, sir, It is as sure as you are Roderigo, Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago” (1.1.57-59). For a moment, it seems as if Iago does not really know what he is talking about considering the strangeness of this monologue, but when he ends it with, “I am not who I am” (1.1.67), he reminds us that he is in complete control, knowing it will go right over Roderigo’s head.

He also promises Roderigo things that he knows he will not deliver because he is confident that Roderigo will believe him anyways and do what he asks, based on his gullibility. Iago reassures Roderigo that if he does the things that he asks of him, like provoking Barbantio in the first scene, then he will surely win over the love of

Desdemona that he so desperately wants; as expected, everything goes according to Iago's plan. Iago's ability to analyze and attack others' weaknesses proves his intelligence time and time again throughout the play, just as Edmund's does.

After noticing and understanding how truly resemblant Iago and Edmund's prey are of each other, it is hard to see them as villains distinctly different in nature. The parallels between, as A.C. Bradley puts it, the 'gulling' of these proximate characters gives uniquely crucial insight into the minds of these two villains. They are looking for the same weaknesses that they know will play to their shared strengths: blind faith, virtue, and foolishness. The list is certainly not limited to these qualities, though, as we see Iago taking advantage of the *honor* of Cassio, and Edmund taking advantage of the *infatuation* that both Goneril and Regan have for him. But these characters are more external, farther away from the hearts of the plays. The characters fooled in which we *do* see similarities are at the center of it all. They are not only integral to the plot structure, but also carve out a space for themselves in the hearts of the audience; their pain is what makes these plays uniquely tragic. Considering their importance in the plays, it would then be unwise to ignore the clear similarities Shakespeare has given them when comparing Iago and Edmund. Shakespeare understands these villains he has created, and knowing them, understands what type of prey they require to work with. It is simple, then, to see that Iago and Edmund share a notable connection based on the similarities of those they plot against. In this way, they are undeniably aligned, but it is in their distinctive endings that one can fully understand and *appreciate* them as characters of Shakespeare's creation.

Chapter Five: What to make of the Finales of Edmund and Iago

Despite being similar to each other in the qualities that Spivack has articulated, both Edmund and Iago remain substantially distinct enough to be considered independently. Iago is an awesome villain, remaining stringently consuming and ruthless throughout *Othello*; while Edmund is a more youthful villain, airing the pride and wit of a young deceiver as he glides in and out of view within the catastrophe of *King Lear*. Although he has not received the same degree of scrutiny in criticism that Iago has, I believe that Edmund possesses matchless idiosyncrasies in his character that would set him apart in his own respect. Many aspects of his performance substantiate his remarkability in the realm of Shakespeare creation—his sinister presence that he spiritedly leaves to those around him to label, his overwhelming ambition and pride that is employed to its *almost*-full potential thanks to an equaled wit, and most notably, his abrupt and suspicious final repentance that echoes with dissonance in the minds of the audience as they try to recognize the now-lowered man they once knew Shakespeare expresses the importance of a character's ending through Helena's famous line in *All's Well That Ends Well*: "All's well that ends well; still the fine's the crown; / Whate'er the course, the end's renown" (4.4.35-36). This line, reminiscent of the Machiavellian logic of the unintelligible villains, speaks well to the unparalleled significance of a character's conclusion. Ironically enough, though, Iago's ending has received much more attention in criticism than Edmund's despite the fact that Edmund's is much more complex, which further validates that Edmund has not received his due scrutiny. Both Iago and Edmund have notable endings, but Edmund's has been overlooked in criticism in a way that flaws our understanding of him as a villain. A substantial effort must then be made in

scrutinizing his ending; the value in what it says about him as a villain cannot be matched elsewhere in his performance.

Iago's final moments in *Othello* differ considerably from the final moments of Edmund in *King Lear*, but there is yet one recognizable similarity: in both of these villain's finales, they exhibit behavior that *seems* outwardly uncharacteristic of themselves. Iago, for instance, consistently commands the play and those in it with his language, riddle-like, manipulative, and relentless as it is, but when exposed at the end of the play, his words are few and jarringly direct compared to his language that precedes this scene. As forementioned, Iago delivers the third most lines of all Shakespeare characters, so the shortness of his language in the finale comes rather unexpectedly. This abrupt change in behavior contributes to the impact that the words have, though they are few. By the time Iago enters the scene in act five scene two, Desdemona has already been smothered by Othello. Emilia screams out when she discovers this, "Help! Help, ho, Help! / The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, murder!" (5.2.174-74), and this calls the attention of Montano, Gratiano, and Iago. The audience at this point, having just watched Othello deliver his tragically heartrending last words to Desdemona before smothering her as she pleads for mercy, has already experienced a world of anguish; so much has happened, and yet the scene goes on. Emilia, because she has been similarly affected by this murder as the audience, acts as mouthpiece for the audience when she berates Iago upon his arrival. She directly accuses Iago: "Oh, are you come, Iago? You have done well, / That men must lay their murders on your neck" (5.2.176-77). For the beginning parts of his performance in this scene, Iago's behavior remains reminiscent of his past performance. He denies her accusations and attempts to defend his actions by

transferring the blame unto Othello: “I told him what I thought, and told no more/ Than what he found himself to be apt and true” (5.2.183-84). But Emilia, being the headstrong character that she is, refuses to yield to Iago’s deception. Over the next 60 lines, Emilia displays stout conviction in her charges against Iago: “You told a lie, an odious, damned lie!” (5.2.187); “Oh villainy! / I thought so then—I’ll kill myself for grief—/ Oh, villainy, villainy!” (5.2.199-200), “Oh, murderous coxcomb!” (5.2.240). Iago consistently combats her claims as she goes on— “Go to, charm your tongue” (5.2.190), “I charge you, get you home” (5.2.201), “Zounds, hold your peace” (5.2.225)—but Emilia’s stout heart and tongue resist his lies: “I will not charge my tongue—I am bound to speak” (5.2.191), “Perchance, Iago, I will ne’er go home” (5.2.203), “I peace? / No, I will speak as liberal as the north” (5.2.227). This is the point in the scene where Iago’s character starts to become unrecognizable. Emilia’s unyielding indictments cornered Iago in a way that no character had yet done in the play, and his behavior starts to reflect his impatience at this; as the scene goes on, he clearly loses composure: “Villainous whore!” (5.2.237), “Filth, thou liest!” (5.2.238). Their spell boils up to the point where Iago stabs Emilia from behind. Emilia’s unremitting opposition starts to break away at Iago’s long-held composure, causing his language and actions to mirror those of Othello—violent and exasperated.

Right after he stabs her, Iago flees the stage almost imperceptibly. The tone changes as the audience’s attention is then immediately moved to Emilia and Othello’s tragic words: Emilia, dying, requests to be laid by Desdemona so that she may sing to her as she passes; then Othello, beholding for the first time the true horror at the sum of his missteps, expresses pure grief in his words as he lay over Desdemona: “Oh, Desdemon!

Dead, Desdemon! Dead! Oh! Oh!” (5.2.290). It is at this point, when the audience has been thrown past the apex of emotional anguish, when Iago reenters the scene. Up until this point, Iago has consistently kept the audience informed of his intentions, which affects the audience’s experience in a few ways. First, it feeds the sense of frustration and powerlessness for the audience; unable to warn the victims of Iago’s intentions, they are then forced to watch them unfold in all their horror. Secondly, the audience, since they are kept in the loop, do not have the fear of mystery that the others in the *play* suffer. Though being informed has its own set of difficulties, there is at least the comfort in knowing what will happen—a comfort that those in the play do not have. But it is now, when the audience is the most vulnerable, that Shakespeare chooses to allow Iago to leave them in a state of horrified perplexity. Othello looks to Iago as he is brought onto the stage and delivers lines that haunt all who hear them: “I look down towards his feet; but that’s a fable. / If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee” (5.2.294-295). He then stabs Iago, as if to test his fear that he is indeed the Devil, and Iago’s retort comes almost as a direct confirmation of the impossible: “I bleed, sir, but not killed” (5.2.297). Othello, pushed to his limits, reaches out for an answer, an explanation that would in some way justify his understanding of why such atrocities had to happen: “Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?” (5.2.309-10). Spivack speaks to this desire in his second chapter where he writes, “...here at least in the denouement is the time for revelation: and the express demand for it burns on the lips of the great victim” (53). The audience, too, awaits a response from Iago that would do this, but Iago, being the unintelligible force that he is, remains sinister in the supreme with his response: “Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I

never will speak word” (5.2.311-12). He keeps his promise, as these are the last words he delivers in the play. Continuing on his strange ending, Spivack writes, “in the last scene he is uncovered and at bay... The situation fairly pleads for his avowal of his provocations... But Iago is an alien to the moral conventions of the world of the play, and his real answer would be no more intelligible to Othello than to us. In his reply, therefore, there is no answer” (53). All are then left alone in the dark to suffer as one. The man who orchestrated the fall of those around him with his lengthened speech is also he who ended the play with but two lines of defiance. As I stated initially, this seems at first glance to be out of character, but as Spivack notes, through analysis we come to find that the shortness of his ending is in fact at the very core of Iago’s nature. Just as his murky convictions leave us perplexed and empty handed, so do his final lines in the play. He then leaves the stage, presumably carried away to his torture and death—his mysteriousness thus lives on beyond the play, for the audience does not even receive the peace of mind that seeing his death would grant them.

Now I turn to Edmund’s ending, one that has puzzled critics, leaving most to accept conjecture in place of providing a tangible understanding and reason for his repentance. I believe it is the incomplete understanding of Edmund that has resulted in this error—one so often repeated in criticism— of half-heartedly accepting his repentance. There is much written about his *resemblances* with Iago, but so little scrutiny is applied to his own ending. It seems that his fate in criticism is to stand in the shadow of Iago—similar but never quite as spectacular. I reject this notion that Edmund exists only in Iago’s shadow. The most crucial part in demonstrating this involves discarding a dismissive acceptance of his ‘atonement’. Iago’s ending, outwardly uncharacteristic at

first glance, actually speaks to his nature as a villain in a major way, and I believe this is the case for Edmund as well.

Many authors have formed opinions on Edmund's ending and what it says about him as a villain, but these stances are more often than not lacking in depth and scrutiny. On one end, there are those who accept his repentance as a genuine, emotionally compelled transformation, though the reasons vary. For example, Marvin Rosenberg believes that the motivation for such an action lies in Edmund's realization that he was indeed loved by Regan and Cordelia, declaring that Edmund grew "more tender-hearted after the evidence that he is lovable" (Rosenberg 310). However, this logic is quite easy to contend, as there is no proof that Edmund is unknowing of the love receives from Gloucester or Edgar; Gloucester himself *explicitly* expresses his love for him, as he says that Edmund is 'no dearer in his account' than his biological son, Edgar (1.1.20). Albert Shepherd supports this counterargument in the following quote: "The villainy of Edmund... is all the grosser because of the love of his father for him" (Shepherd 348).

An alternative reason is offered by Kenneth Muir. He asserts that the reason Edmund repents has more to do with Edgar's story: "Edmund, who believes only in his own will, and seems at first to be as ruthless as Iago, is moved by his father's death to do some good 'in spite of his own nature'" (Muir 279). Some authors share the same viewpoint without even offering a plausible reason for such a stance—they state it as if it is to be simply accepted. These authors include G. Wilson Knight, who writes solely that Edmund was "nobly repentant at the last" (Knight 173), and Albert Shepherd, who, in his piece on self-revelations of villains, writes only that "...Edmund repents for his crimes...", and that this repentance is "genuine" (Shepherd 346-349). However, not all

scholars are eager to jump to the conclusion that his repentance is genuine; some ponder this with an air of reluctance and perplexity. Author Harold Bloom does admit that Edmund's change is "persuasive", but continues on to say that "by it, Edmund ceases to be Edmund... We do not know who Edmund is as he dies, and he does not know either" (Bloom 505). A.C. Bradley is another of these critics, as he admits that Edmund's ending is "mysterious" and "peculiarly strange" considering its dissonance with his otherwise "perfect consistency" in villainous deeds (Bradley 279). Bernard McElroy shares in Bradley's hesitancy, writing that Edmund's repentance is "if not unconvincing, at least not very compelling either in the text or in the theatre" (McElroy 158). While these critics do express confusion at Edmund's strange repentance, they still do not expand their efforts in understanding his ending, even with their remarks of puzzlement. There appears to be an acceptance that Edmund's ending is just one of the "improbabilities, inconsistencies, sayings and doings [in *King Lear*] which suggest questions only to be answered by conjecture" (Bradley 257).

This perspective on Edmund's ending is so prominent in Shakespeare criticism that even Bernard Spivack seems to align with it. In fact, the neglect of Edmund's ending is most likely the main reason Spivack did not include him in his theory. The most substantial analysis Spivack makes of Edmund in relation to his theory appears late in his argument where he starts with, "The same technique, invited by the same kind of intrigue, penetrates the earlier part of Edmund's role in *King Lear*" (413). This line is problematic in that it implies that it is through in Edmund's ending that he deviates in behavior from the other unintelligible villains, enough apparently to remove him from the theory altogether. He describes how Edmund embodies the "type of moral evil

increasingly prominent in plays after 1600”, expressed in the rebellion of his status as a bastard and thus the rejection of “ordered pieties of Christian Society” (413). At the close of this lone nod to Edmund, Spivack brings us back to *Othello* where he writes, “This formula, the evolved product of the Christian homiletic drama, returns us naturally to *Othello*, where its operation is neither incidental nor partial but envelopes the play form first to last” (414). Again, in this line we see how Spivack only attributes similar credit to the *first* part of Edmund’s performance, while he believes it is carried through to the end of Iago’s.

In the critical landscape on the subject, there are a few critics, including Piotr Sadowski and Maria Nassar, who have reached the conclusion that this repentance was in fact not genuine at all. Coming to this conclusion involves a close analysis of the final scene in an effort to understand how its events push Edmund to commit the actions that he does. While these actions seem curiously uncharacteristic on the surface, it will soon become clear that they are actually very in line with Edmund’s character, so thus, his ending mirrors Iago’s in regard to dramatic effect. Edmund is an opportunistic villain, capable quick thinking and the utilization of events that happen around him. This is a core element of Edmund’s character, presented consistently throughout his performance in the play. Its expression in the final scene, though obscured, is just as present; in fact, it is the driving motivation in every decision Edmund makes. Once this becomes clear, the natural conclusion that follows is that his repentance was really not a genuine change of heart, but rather a cold and calculated action that is *very* reminiscent of Edmund’s true character—one expressed consistently everywhere in his performance. If one can trust in the rationality and wit of Edmund—traits he has already clearly established—then the

rest of the pieces of this argument fall into place to produce a conclusion wherein conjecture has no place.

There are five important moments to consider in Edmund's ending, starting with his battle with Edgar. Just before Edgar enters the scene, Edmund commits what would be his final act of power: ordering the death of Lear and Cordelia. Up until this point, Edmund has been successful without hinderance in his advances towards power, but Edgar's answer to the call to fight Edmund is the action that triggers the end of this streak. In combat, the valiant Edgar, though still disguised, bests Edmund, and as it is the first hint of a victory for the 'good' side of the play, it is also the first *defeat* for Edmund. His reaction to this defeat, though, is that of rationality—why should bodily injury alone represent the total demise of all of his plans. After all, his allies, Goneril and Regan, are still alive and in control of armies capable of mass destruction. His battle with Edmund, as Goneril points out, was not even legally valid. The fact that this battle occurred under false pretenses is a notable detail, intentionally added, that cannot be simply ignored. Goneril gives an accurate evaluation of Edmund's current position in the following lines: "By the law of war thou was not bound to answer / An unknown opposite. Thou are not vanquished, / but cozened and beguiled" (5.3.149-52). Considering these details, it makes sense for Edmund to observe whatever unfolds before him and weigh his options. After this first defeat, Edmund is still in an acceptable position, as Goneril's intercession of the battle works in Edmund's favor. But the tide shifts soon after when Albany immediately overturns her claims and presents the secret letter she had written to Edmund, thus marking the second important movement in this analysis. Goneril then becomes flustered and flees the stage, putting the strength of Edmund's allies in a more precarious position.

However, this still does not mean defeat for Edmund. He is aware of this and expresses this awareness through his attempts to buy himself some time. It is true that his fate lies in the balance more so than it did a moment ago, so it would be wise for Edmund to try to play to the affection of those who seem to be in the advantageous position while he waits to see what becomes of his main allies. He begins by admitting to the wrongs he was accused of: “What you have charged me with, that have I done” (5.3.165). This is a good example of an action that seems so clearly to be out of character for Edmund, as he has so *recently* rejected Albany’s accusations quite adamantly. But, as forementioned, when this action is be understood in context of Edmund’s nature and the constraints that the events of the scene are placing on him, it becomes clear that it is in alignment with Edmund’s character.

After confessing and garnering the favor of Albany, he turns the attention to Edgar by inquiring on his identity in attempt to buy time: “But what are thou / That has this fortune on me? If thou’rt noble / I do forgive thee” (5.3.167-69). Edgar then goes on to reveal his identity and present his anguish to Edmund: “The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him [Gloucester] his eyes” (175-76), to which Edmund responds with continued compliance: “Th’hast spoken right. ‘tis true. / The wheel is come full circle; I am here” (5.3.177). This line works on two levels: the first is the surface level, where its function is, again, to garner the favor of Albany and Edgar, but the second level is deeper in that it shows the audience that Edmund is self-aware of his position. He has consistently mentioned fortune throughout the play, and by signaling to the audience where he now lies in her wheel, which is at the bottom, he calls up his other references to

it. This is a layer of complexity that only the audience would be able to recognize, which speaks to his ability as a villain to reach the audience in a unique, and haunting, way.

Albany, now curious, addresses Edgar, and Edgar goes on to explain more of what transpired between him and his father. Edmund then responds with what is so blatantly merely an *attempt* at emotional engagement with Edgar's story: "This speech of yours hath moved me, / And shall perchance do good" (5.3.203-04). The words feel so empty, especially when delivered in response to the moving speech of Edgar's. The words as words make sense, but there is so far no reason to believe Edmund, as he has not substantiated them in the least. After this nonchalant and unemotional expression of a 'change of heart', he then moves on quickly to inquire of Edgar yet again: "But speak you on; / You look as you had something more to say" (5.3.204-05). The intention behind his effort to prolong Edgar's confessions here is very transparent, as opposed to the ambiguously vague attempt at emotional expression that precedes it. Albany's response to Edmund's inquiry, "If there be more, more woeful, hold it in/ For I am almost ready to dissolve, / Hearing of this" (5.3.206-08), does even more to highlight us the *lack* of emotion in Edmund's response; someone farther from the atrocity could not bear to hear more, while Edmund pushes for more, despite being much closer to and more intimate with Edgar's tragic recollections. Of course, being as transparent and true as he is, Edgar takes the bait. He goes on to deliver another lengthy speech, but this time, he is interrupted by what is the third notable movement of this scene: news of Goneril and Regan's deaths. This is clearly very bad news for Edmund, as they were his main allies and thus his most promising course to returning to power. Yet, he remains calm, enough so to make a clever, and again unfeeling remark about the loss of his prospects in

marriage: “I was contracted to them both. All three/ Now marry in an instant” (5.3.32-33). This calmness is not unfounded, though, for Edmund is smart enough to suspect that the delivery of news by a mere “Gentleman” may yet be a ‘mistake or bluff’ (Sadowski 7). The need for “ocular proof”, as Othello puts it, is only necessary to warrant any true consideration of his situation.

Unfortunately for Edmund, this proof is supplied very soon after, as the sisters’ dead bodies are brought onto the stage, thus marking the fourth significant movement in the scene. This action in the scene is very unusual and needs to be considered as such, in the same way that the falseness of Edmund and Edgar’s battle must be considered. Sadowski notes the peculiarity of it, “It is rather unusual in drama for dead bodies to be brought on stage (usually the problem is how to get rid of them)” (7), then hypothesizes a reason for its occurrence: “...the display of Goneril’s and Regan’s dead bodies on the stage is designed in my view to give the distrusting and calculating Edmund a visible proof that his political enterprise has irreversibly failed: he now has no allies and is entirely at the mercy of Albany and Edgar” (8). It is in this moment that Edmund delivers the line that most critics lean on in support of their conclusion that his repentance is genuine: “Yet Edmund was beloved. / The one the other poisoned for my sake/ And after slew herself” (5.3.244-46). But this line is not substantial enough to give such support, as it has been made quite clear to the audience that Edmund is aware he is loved by another: Gloucester. I see this line more so as a humorously nihilistic nod to what *had* been but is now *gone*; the fact that he includes the ways in which the sisters died supports this. The juxtaposition between his acknowledgment of being ‘loved’ and the imagery he provides right after is indicative of Edmund’s obscured idea of what love is, established earlier in

his performance. Considering how his situation is becoming increasingly less optimistic, a comment of this nature is appropriate. Sadowski's observation of Edmund's desperate position is supported by his next action in which he finally reveals what he had been protecting the whole scene: the order of execution of Cordelia and Lear. Up until this point in the scene, he had no reason to reveal this information; if Goneril and Regan would have remained strong allies until the tides turned in their favor, as Edmund had been hoping, then Cordelia and Lear's deaths would have been advantageous to them. But of course, all hope Edmund had for this prospect is squashed when the bodies are shown, and so, being the villain he is, he adapts yet again to his situation. Now, his *only* hope is to play to the favors of Albany and Edgar, as they are indisputably the ones who will remain in positions of power. After admitting to those around, and himself, that he wishes to live—"I pant for life" (5.3.247)—he curtly expresses what is intended to be *understood* as genuine remorse: "Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.247-48). His tone then changes quite drastically as he hurriedly sends someone off to save the two: "Quickly send—/ Be brief in it—to th' castle, for my writ / Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia. / Nay, send in time" (5.3.248-251). The quickness of his tone differs quite drastically from the nonchalant slowness of his words that precede this. Before he learned of the sisters' deaths, he did not care about taking his time, but now that saving the lives of Cordelia and Lear may be his *only* option for redemption, his language is quickened.

But his swiftness is for naught because soon after delivering his final lines, Cordelia's dead body is carried onto the stage by King Lear. This sight is the climax of emotional anguish for the audience in the play, so the attention shifts rather quickly from

Edmund's plot to Lear's, which is helped by the fact that Shakespeare intentionally removes Edmund from the scene right before Lear comes out. Once Lear and Cordelia enter the scene, Edmund, and the entire subplot for that matter, can be forgotten quite easily. His final lines are not memorable, dramatic, or character-revealing, but rather mundane in the landscape of all that has transpired in the final scene: "He hath commission from thy wife and me / To hang Cordelia in the prison and / To lay blame upon her own despair, / That she forbid herself" (5.3.257-260). He is then 'borne off' the stage after delivering his forgettable final lines and ends up dying from the wounds he received in his fight with Edgar. Initially, it is easy to find his ending overall underwhelming, but as Sadowski articulates in his argument, Edmund's ending is actually evocative of the *very* same value in character that he has spent the whole play establishing. Edmund remains determinedly tenacious in his pursuit of power in the whole play, and it turns out that the final scene is no exception. At every turn, he reacts in a way that would foster the most ideal outcome—between buying time, choosing when to withhold and reveal information, and playing to the favors of those in power, Edmund remains Edmund in the ways that we would recognize him. In the end, he is thwarted *only* by circumstances that are out of his control: death. Sadowski closes his argument with the following: "A.C. Bradley's concern that 'No sufficiently clear reason is supplied for Edmund's delay in attempting to save Cordelia and Lear'⁵ can thus be allayed by the logic of Edmund's characterization as a stage villain, who consistently thinks and acts in exclusive self-interest, who can lie unblinkingly, manipulate emotionally, and exploit the honesty and gullibility of all who stand in his way" (Sadowski 8). After close analysis of

⁵ Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 253.

the final scene in context of the logic of Edmund's character, it seems clear that his ending not only mirrors Iago's in dramatic effect, but also offers invaluable insight into him as a villain.

Conclusion:

As can be seen in the critical landscape on Edmund, if one neglects *any* aspect of a character's performance, the entire understanding of that character could be amiss. Edmund's ending is bewildering and seemingly out of character, but this quality makes it all the more deserving of close scrutiny. Bernard Spivack's theory does wonderful work confronting the questions about distinctions among villains that had long gone unanswered, but in his theory, he made the same misstep of overlooking Edmund that many other critics have made in their work. However, with the help of the compelling and extensive argument provided by Piotr Sadowski, it has been revealed with the utmost clarity that under the definitions outlined by Spivack himself in his own theory, Edmund is in fact unintelligible. He is ruthless and manipulative, his convictions and motives do not justify the severity of the crimes he commits, and his performance is as entertaining at times as it is heinous. *These* abilities are the ones that give audiences a lasting impression, making this group of villains some of the most unforgettable characters in Shakespeare's creation. After judging Edmund's repentance to be a guise under calculated efforts to survive, in *addition* to his unparalleled likeness to the ringer leader himself, Iago, it is clear that Edmund deserves to be understood and recognized as one of these unforgettable villains.

Shakespeare's villains expose to us the horrors that humans are very much capable of committing. By the process of properly recategorizing a villain such as Edmund, scholars are moreover gaining a greater understanding of their own humanity. Understandably so, it has been easier to accept Edmund's repentance as genuine, as we may have the same hopes for our *own* moral capabilities, but it is as Sadowski says in his

closing remarks: “It may be morally more reassuring, if naïve, to suspect some good in everyone, but the existence of irredeemable villains, totally egotistical and ruthless, is permitted in literature, just as it is in real life”.

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