

Introduction

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The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.
(William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, IV.iii.70-71)

We have a sense of evil, but no longer the religious
or philosophical language to talk intelligibly about evil.
(Sontag 1978, 82)

The pervasiveness of evil today is matched by the evanescence of the very word that names it in common usage. Over the past four centuries the formidable enigma of ontological evil has been seldom confronted – let alone explored – outside the precincts of theology and moral philosophy. Its metaphysical reach has been eclipsed both by catalogues of its natural or human manifestations and by the bewildering range of its disparate agencies, whether embodied in individual perpetrators, collective mobs, or the impersonal machinery of bureaucracy. In Susan Sontag's words "we have a sense of evil, but no longer the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligibly about evil." (1978, 82). What seems to matter is circumstantial evidence: how, where, on whom evil works, who does it, on what grounds, to what effects. In other words, evil has been parcelled out and dispersed, taken over by the social sciences – from psychology to criminology – so much so that the concept of Evil is almost unrecognizable. In Romance languages the word "male" or "mal" and its cognate terms apply indifferently to body and soul (Montale's poetic "male di vivere" sounds the same as a prosaic "mal di denti" – "toothache"). Not so in the case of the English language. English has preserved the unique semantic range of the noun "Evil" as "anything that causes harm or mischief, physical or moral" (*OED*, sense II.4). Evil looms large as a sovereign agent of ruin, semantically overriding

a vast array of more common labels that serve to cover multiple manifestations of evil either inflicted or suffered (calamity, catastrophe, corruption, crime, harm, hatred, ill, wrong) or nuances of physical, moral or mental suffering inflicted or suffered (ache, pain, anguish, grief, sorrow, and so forth).

Evil's lingering presence, rooted deeply in the history of Anglophone countries, imparts an emphasis on 'what is unaccountable' that has never gone unrepressed and has known a momentous revival in the 20th Century in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In Hannah Arendt's celebrated *Eichmann in Jerusalem. The Banality of Evil* (1963), the concept of evil – used as a broad and self-evident term – qualifies the uniqueness of crimes against humanity for which any more specific synonym would be inadequate (Chignell 2019). And yet, Arendt's daily scrutiny of Alfred Eichmann's behaviour during the Jerusalem Trial led her famously to observe that the exceptionality of the crimes imputed to one of those chiefly responsible for the Auschwitz mass exterminations clashed with the anonymously dull and bureaucratic profile of the defendant, an Everyman, whose zealous meanness appeared disquietingly common. Anything but Mephistophelean or even tragic, dehumanizing evil emerges as the banal substance of our own dispirited existence, the "by-product of inadequate moral, political or legal structures" (Corbett 2018, 28)¹. Despite its philosophical influence Arendt's provocative focus on the coexistence of banality and exceptionality, as well as on collective responsibilities, has been ignored in practice. Quite to the contrary, the word "evil" devoid of its meanings, instrumentally politicized and wielded as a verbal weapon to target the enemy, has morphed into an umbrella term charged with the clichéd violence of self-righteousness: in his 1983 speech to the American people, and in the aftermath of the Cold War, then-president Ronald Reagan inaugurated the formula "The Evil Empire" to describe Soviet Communism. Later rephrased as "the axis of Evil" by President Bush after the events of September 11, 2001,

¹ Subsequently, in *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978) Arendt qualified her notion of banality as thoughtlessness, that is, the failure to conduct an inner dialogue with one's conscience. The incipit of a renowned wartime essay by George Orwell with its flashing picture of 'thoughtless' German airmen, offers a pointed example: "As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me." (Orwell [1940] 1957, 63)

the label was applied to Iraq, Iran and North Korea as allegedly involved in international terrorism and engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction (see Bernstein 2013). As I write, two years after Hamas's brutal attack on Israel's helpless civilians, and amidst a retaliatory war whose relentless escalation has only now paused in a fragile ceasefire, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has revived the Evil Empire rhetoric to denounce Iran's alliance with Hamas and the Hezbollahs and to justify the continuation of military operations. Iran's reciprocal label of "the Zionist entity" as Satan's Empire further entrenches a war of anathemas whose fixation on generic Evil dramatically signals a blind and destructive course for politics. Unlike the Evil keenly problematized by Hannah Arendt, the Evil vociferously amplified in this wartime rhetoric serves as a blunt instrument to categorically demonize the enemy, under a Manichean culture rooted in American Evangelical Christianity, the radical Calvinist Protestantism of the Pilgrim Fathers, or Jewish biblical and Muslim fanatical Qur'anic appropriations. Holy Texts are invoked openly or by covert implication to legitimate the salvation of allegedly elect or chosen peoples, a divine warrant that empowers national identities and sanctifies supremacist claims. Holy and 'just' wars are being waged on all sides in the name of God, Allah or Yahweh, while blood is once again shed against an externalized Evil.

Everywhere such blind belligerence resonates with the vengeful edge of the closing line of Shylock's most celebrated monologue in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instructions" (III.i.59-60)².

Religio Laici

No matter how weaponised, the term evil, once it resurfaces from linguistic latency in Anglophone countries, betrays the deep and lasting imprint left on English culture by the momentous epistemic and religious shift that followed the Reformation. It could be argued – in fact – that its persistence bears witness to the exceptional rootedness

² Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Shakespeare are taken from Shakespeare 2016 and are cited parenthetically in the text.

of the radical cultural revision associated with the onset of modernity, the formation of national identity and the genesis of imperialism. This is not the place to retrace the complex entanglement of religious and political questions in and around Shakespeare's time. It is worth recalling, however, the unprecedented amalgam of religion and politics in the theology of both Luther and Calvin, the most influential architects of the new Protestant Christianity, whose premises rested firmly on a scathing critique of what they denounced as the blasphemous greed of Popish Catholicism. The matrix of what would become the new "religio laici" of early capitalists (see Weber [1904] 2005), as well as the professed faith of reformed protestants, is to be found in the well-known paradox of predestination and free will. While, in theory, it binds humankind to an unknowable fate – whether election or reprobation – in practice and over the long-term belief in predestination did not prevent the empowerment of free will (Hill 1974; Streete 2009). Epistemic convulsions – scientific, medical and religious – actually lay the ground for a repositioning of subjects in light of the dreadful yet exhilarating prospect of expanded freedom: without ecclesiastic mediation, the individual stands alone with a newly awakened conscience, wrestling with guilt, understood as internalized sin, before a God revealed solely by Scriptures. And with the semiotic apparatus of the Catholic Church removed – sacraments, saints, altars, stigmata, icons etc. – the stark mystery of the word of God, vividly rearticulated by Luther in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1545) where he portrays the postlapsarian world as a cesspool, lies open to the fervent scrutiny of Protestant preachers. More specifically, exegesis centres on the Adamic myth of original Sin and the Fall as narrated in the first three books of Genesis. The story of Adam's and Eve's transgression, expulsion and reprobation becomes the most popular subject of visual, theatrical and cultural representations (Belsey 1999), an archetypal narrative that lays bare the reach of Evil and of its effects on mankind. It is a frightening tale hardly softened by the redemptive mediation of Jesus Christ and by God's inscrutable grace granting salvation to the elect. The prevailing frame is that of the Old Testament, where the serpent incarnating evil beguiles Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, triggering increasing fatal sins in an endless chain. As Luther observes, "Since Adam all things degenerated by degree; self-justification and excuses took the place

of contrition, renewing the very essence of original sin which lies in unbelief" (Luther 1554, n.p). That the object of temptation should be the tree of knowledge, eating whereof, as the serpent promises, human "eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3)³, strikes a sensitive chord in the century of the new sciences. Our progenitors' fatal disobedience is impelled by a desire for knowledge which, in departing from God, poses a challenge to the great Artificer. Such defiance, the core of a long-standing cultural pattern – from Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the Faustian figures of Marlowe and Goethe – overlaps free will with the inauguration of sin: as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, man knows Evil only as that which he inaugurates (Ricoeur 1967)⁴.

Luther's re-reading of Genesis dramatizes the theological question of the nature of evil (*quid est malum?*) and the reasons for doing evil (*unde malum faciamus?*) in ways which revive and complicate the scholastic view that evil is privation, or the opposite of good, perpetrated whenever there occurs a "perversion of will which turns to lowest matters and, capsizing inside, swells outside" (Augustine of Hippo [410 CE] 1912, 7:16). It is no accident that Augustine's tormented inquiry into his own sins should enjoy renewed popularity in Shakespeare's time, given its relentless search for the nature and origin of evil⁵. Luther, himself an Augustinian monk, mesmerizingly dwells on repeated breaches of the covenant and on its catastrophic consequences – death, shame, toil in tilling the earth and in childbirth, murder, deluge and disease. He depicts a morbidly infected cosmos which only God's inscrutable grace can redeem through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the great mediator. Nonetheless, the horizons of the new Lutheran Protestants remain gloomy. As Luther warns, free will, forever tainted by the fall, will never counter reprobation: the choice has already been made for good, and the event of the Fall becomes the enduring condition of the Fallen. Nor does the premise that rests

3 Quotations from the Bible are taken from Norton 2006.

4 For the relevance of Ricoeur's philosophy to debates around Evil in Early Modern England see Bigliuzzi 2017.

5 The relevance of Augustine's thought is amply discussed in Maria Del Sapio Garbero's contribution in this issue. For insightful remarks on the religious and social debates on conscience and free will that aptly complement this introduction, see also Silvia Bigliuzzi's essay in this volume.

on salvation through faith in Jesus Christ entail that those who have faith will be saved. Still less that salvation will come as a reward for good works. The inscrutability of grace within an existence marred by sin discloses the “disconcerting prospect posed by predestination, namely, that God knows something about us that we may hope to discover”. The pursuit of signs of grace is both the condition for finding them, and already a sign of grace itself (McEachern 2018, 96). The harshness of Luther’s view, which Calvin’s meditations did not soften, was by necessity mitigated by most preachers in their sermons, encouraged by Elizabethan or Jacobean policy which aimed to repress or restrain clerical debates about predestination for fear too much emphasis on this subject “could lead vulnerable souls to despair of their salvation” (Streete 2019, 125). In popular, softer versions of Lutheran teaching the postlapsarian subject, whom the Book of Common Prayer bluntly states to be “conceived and born in sin” (Cummings ed. 2013, 141) merely suffers from inclinations, proneness or disposition to evil, while resistance remains possible (Landis 2018). Influential though they were, neither Luther’s nor Calvin’s uncompromising theologies halted to the entrepreneurial drive of the new Protestants: over time the core paradox of their faith intensified it. As Christopher Hill notes:

The sense of sin was also now a sense of potential freedom. No magician, or priest, or saint could help, but God could. His promises were free and sure. The Puritan remained terribly conscious of his own sinful nature even whilst he tried, by careful scrutiny of motive, to identify his will and the will of God. (Hill 1974, 102)

Inspired and justified by theology, the search for signs of grace gradually led the middle-class members of a new mercantile culture to live in hope of salvation and to conduct themselves as if elected, relegating evil and sin into the background through repression, while guilt acted as the driving force of daily labour directed toward profit. Good works turned into potential signs – albeit not instruments – of election, and money-making came to appear as a God-blessed vocation with Matthew’s parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) serving as divine warrant. The classic theses of R. H. Tawney and Christopher Hill which trace the role of Protestantism in the rise of capitalist entrepreneurship and later imperial formations account for this unprecedented conver-

gence of religious, economic and political motives, and remain influential (Tawney 1926; Hill [1964] 1995; 1974)⁶.

Steeped in a contentious religious milieu, bustling with scientific ferments, mundane experience, mercantile endeavours and political turmoil, verging on the future while clinging on to the past, the early modern world was made for the stage, and for the worldly William Shakespeare. The trauma of the Fall, the threat of evil, the trials of conscience under a new sense of possible freedom, the corruptions of guilt, became both the stuff of drama and the business of everyday existence. To Elizabethan audiences Shakespeare's theatre served as a site of political and religious self-recognition, an occasion to witness the characters' public exposures of many forms of evil in denouements that promised cathartic relief. As Claire McEachern remarks in her essay in this issue – "Evil and the Forms of Shakespeare's Endings" – in an age when anguished self-examination sought signs of election or reprobation Shakespeare's "crystalline moments [...] designed to arrest and illuminate moral calibre" offered a familiar solace. Seen against early modern debates on salvation, McEachern's Shakespearian examples – from *Titus Andronicus*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* to *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear* – ultimately shed light both on the dramatic force of the suspense which precedes disclosures and on the ambiguous status of the evil disclosed in relation to reprobation or salvation. Revelation, however cathartic, is not decisive: it restarts the search, all the more so among spectators who know that even such arch villains as Iago or Edmund might, in theory at least, belong to the elect in God's inscrutable will.

6 Cautionary warnings against identifying Early Modern English culture too readily with the rise of capitalism are frequent in recent scholarship. See for example Scott (2020). The scattered examples of proto-capitalist entrepreneurship within a largely agrarian economy, of course, do not warrant a simple equivalence. Yet, both Tawney and Hill, I would argue, were pointing to the emergence of a *capitalist ethos* – what I would call a capitalist imaginary – arising from the religious and political implications of the Reformation. For this Shakespeare's theatre offers evidence more compelling than any strictly economic inquiry. In the same vein, we owe to the post-Freudian American psychoanalyst Norman O. Brown a still partly convincing exploration of the historical unconscious of Protestant culture, and of capitalism (see in particular Christopher Lasch's *Introduction* to Brown [2010]).

McEachern's essay shows the extent to which theological debates saturated theatre and shaped dramatic forms: playwrights dramatized what the clergy preached staging the many and often contradictory effects of Reformed Religion on human life. The refashioning of beliefs, emotions, passions and perceptions across domestic, public, economic and political spheres cast a striking new light onto the vertigo of modernity. In his grasp of the age Shakespeare saw beyond his moment how questions of evil interlock across history: past and future seem to coalesce as if ignited by the disruptive crisis of the present in a vision that recalls Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* (Benjamin [1955] 2019, 201). The symptoms of that collision function as a standing warning to every age.

Fallenness

At the beginning was the Fall. Much of Shakespeare turns on falling: from the fall of kings, emperors and commoners to the fall of birds, stars and other celestial bodies – all adumbrate the calamitous event that punishes original transgression, stirs conscience and breeds guilt. The recurrence of the word “fall” and its cognates across the canon is so pervasive that even Open Source Shakespeare resists a neat tally. The vast semantic field of downward motion that emblemizes the expulsion from Eden seems woven into the language itself proliferating into myriads of phrasal verbs and marking physical, moral and metaphorical collapse. Yet in Shakespeare the central concern is less the event of falling than the ensuing state of fallenness: wonder, awe and despair, inquiry, recurrent lapses and desire. The narrative of the Fall, as Heather Herschfeld writes, “assumes the psychological position and function of a primal and therefore traumatic scene [...], that *predicts, indeed demands its own recurrence*” (2003, 430-31; emphasis mine). It is no accident that Herschfeld should pinpoint *Hamlet* as the play where the unhealed trauma of the fall is most acute. In Shakespeare's most Lutheran tragedy, the biblical narrative of the Fall aligns with the Ghost's traumatic account of his poisoning by Claudius in the orchard. A conflation of Adam's and Eve's trespass with Cain's fratricide, the scene of treason and murder summoned here blends all the ingredients of Luther's retroactive reading of Genesis (a garden, a poisonous serpent, the treacherous murder of a

brother) into a scene of guilt in which, having both *already* fallen, both murderer and victim stand *already* as sinners (Neill 1997; Marzola 2014). With its minute detailing of the many consequences of poisoning, the Ghost's narrative frames Claudius's crime less as a taking of life, than as a sudden disclosure of the plague-like effects of original sin on the King's body, the traumatic discovery of what fallenness looks and feels like. The sudden thickening of "thin and wholesome blood", the abrupt blockage of the body's gates and alleys, the "vile and loathsome" encrusting of the skin with an instant tetter (*Hamlet*, I.5.60-73, *passim*) conjure a vision of instantaneous solidification and enclosure as if the sin into which all humans are born had suddenly become tangible and visible on the former King's body sealing off his earlier osmosis with the outer world. "Cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sins, / unhouse'l'd, disappointed, unanel'd, / No reck'ning made [...]" (I.v.76-78) the Ghost demands of his son revenge from the questionable position of a father king steeped in sin, condemned to fast in a purgatorial nowhere. What is most disquieting is not only the self-contradictory plea for revenge or the dubious "shape" of the Ghost ("HAMLET: Thou com'st in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee [...]" I.iv.43-44), but also the magnified image of the King's guilty diseased and sequestered body, a foreshadowing of the 'corpus clausus' of the early modern man. The Ghost thus marks the troublesome onset of "an emergent psychology of somatic inwardness" (Hillman 2007, 2), dominated by the contraposition between privacy and secrecy on the one hand, and the perceived threat of outward invasion through permeability and contagion on the other. No less relevant is the resulting view of disease and death as brutal attacks on the body's defensive barriers whose care demands discipline, control and mastery. In the sobering words of Helkiah Crooke, among the best-known physicians of the time: "To death and disease we lie open on every side" (Crooke 1615, 60). In *Hamlet* as in much of Shakespeare images of foul sickness and contagious disease affecting the "sallied flesh" (I.ii.129) of the body and the "unweeded garden" (I.ii.135) of the world proliferate pointing again and again to an infection of the time – a widespread symptomatology of cankerous evil – whose most harrowing contemporary manifestation was the disfiguring plague in its recurrent waves. "The sickening smell of evil" – observes Caroline Spurgeon in her seminal study on Shakespearean

imagery – “is the natural outcome of its being thought as dirt and foul disease” (Spurgeon [1935] 2001, 171).

Sickness is poignantly announced by Francisco at the outset of the play as a pervasive condition, rooted in the heart – the seat of body and soul: “[...] ‘Tis bitter cold and I am sick at heart” (*Hamlet*, I.i.6-7). The line signals the entanglement of mental and physical malaise that infects the ‘rotten’ state of Denmark. This interweaving runs through Shakespeare’s drama and poetry where the human body – the hinge between microcosm and macrocosm – appears both physically and emotionally disordered when its mediating function falters. Melancholy, the so-called ‘English disease’, that Galenic humoral theory construed as an excess of black bile to be purged, becomes an elusive symptom that provokes continual attempts to probe its substance, generates innumerable interpretations⁷ and is deemed to underlie a number of moral and physical defects including impairments of the eye (see Holdsworth in this volume). The rage of melancholic Hamlet at Gertrude’s faulty sight – and senses – as the cause of her “fall” from the “fair mountain” of King Hamlet to the “moor” of his brother (III.iv.62-76) is the pointed indicator of a sensory “apoplexy” (73), which is the bodily signature of guilt. Beyond *Hamlet*, visual derangements – from minor defects to literal and metaphoric blindness – are strategically dramatized in Shakespeare and elsewhere where they figure as affections deeply unsettling at a time of competing visual regimes (Clark 2007). More in general, Shakespeare abounds in examples where pathological symptoms are taken as countersigns of alleged guilts: Julius Caesar’s “falling sickness” (I.ii.251); Othello’s

7 A telling instance of this interpretive frenzy appears in the tentative diagnoses proposed for the mysterious sadness that Antonio confesses at the opening of *The Merchant of Venice* – a melancholy whose phrasing unmistakably echoes contemporary symptom lists:

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me, you say it wearies you,
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff ‘tis made of, whereof ‘tis born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me
That I have much ado to know myself.
(*The Merchant of Venice*: I.i.1-7)

convulsive fit of epilepsy; Richard III's disfiguring monstrosity – the climactic emblem of depravity in the *Henriads* crowded with images of sick kings and diseased armies; Leontes's infected affection in *The Winter's Tale* and Lady Macbeth's fatal illness. No less telling is Shylock's clipped exit in *The Merchant of Venice* ("I pray you, give me leave to go from hence; / I am not well..." (IV.i.407-08). Shylock's understated withdrawal from Venice's final scene of scapegoating stands out in its stark humanity – an enduring bodily token of the mercantile guilt imposed on him⁸.

Shakespeare's densely material language exposes all the parts of the body as speaking sites of passions and emotions (see Paster 2004), as well as symptomatic loci of the unnatural disease of evil and sin. Illness is therefore charged with guilt and becomes culturally overdetermined, a burden which persists in the present. From antiquity onward, the habit of treating sickness as the badge of predestined evil co-existed with the belief that bodily failure was the consequence of freely chosen wrongdoing (Vaught 2010, 5). Hence scientific enquiry into the origin and nature of the disease – through attention to body, mind and conscience – eventually coincided with an often frustrated search for the evidence of sin, for signs of reprobation or salvation. What lies within becomes the object of inquiry, piercing, and penetration, emblemized by the flourishing science of anatomy, whose cultural ramifications extend well beyond medicine to shape an entire episteme (see Sadway 1995; Del Sapio Garbero 2022).

Penetrability becomes the very condition for accessing what lies beyond the body's boundary, and its many moral or physical corruptions, whether the root of illness or the mystery of good and evil lodged in conscience. "And let me wring your heart, for so I shall, / If it be made of *penetrable* stuff, / If damnèd custom have not brazed it so / That it be proof and bulwark against sense" (III.iv.34-38; *emphasis mine*): Hamlet's threatening address to Gertrude gives stark voice to the violent urge to pierce all defences and expose the inner mystery of her heart. Nothing, in the end, answers to such probing except the ineradicable "black and grievèd spots / as will leave [there] their tinct" (III.iv.90-1) on Gertrude's conscience. Analogous to Lady

8 On scapegoating in *The Merchant of Venice* see Girard (1991). See also Marzola (2018, 220-35).

Macbeth's permanently blood stained hands, these marks only reveal the symptoms of a deed which remains unnameable except for its desecrating effects: the blurring of modesty, the blistering of innocent love, the falsification of marriage vows, the corruption of pure love and the sickening of the earth (III.iv.40-52).

Like most Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* offers no firm metaphysics of good and evil. Its "triumphant undecidability" (Belsey 1999) and sustained entanglement with early modern English discourses of evil make it a paradigmatic case for this issue of *Memoria di Shakespeare*. From the Ghost's confinement within and behind the thick crust of his body onward, the play stages a striking array of cultural symptoms linked to a newly intensified perception of Evil, symptoms that constellate the whole canon and foreshadow many of the moral and psychological syndromes of the Western world to come. Seclusion yields a revolting vision of endemic corruption ("'Tis an unweeded garden / that grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely. [...] I.ii.135-37); it defaces the purity of love while exposing the traffic between economic and sexual appetites, and between life and death ("Thrift, thrift, Horatio: the funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." I.ii.180-81); it nourishes secrecy and treachery, fosters defensiveness and aggressiveness; and produces a disjointed experience of time felt as either too short or too long. The play's only compensation, its limited catharsis common to Shakespeare's tragedies, lies in its language of desire. The unfulfilled desire to know what lies beyond and within, the seduction of unfathomed evil, and the irresistible allure of free agency against moral law, are among the tokens of Shakespeare's aesthetics of evil, a signature that marks much of his canon.

Conscience

Hamlet, the 'hero' of a play that is a case of conscience in itself (Belsey 2008), repeatedly and contradictorily muses upon his own conscience – treating it now as a hindrance to action – "the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" (III.i.84) – now as a spur to revenge – "[...] is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?" (V.ii.67-68). The result is a convoluted, pathological self-inquiry that exposes the new unreliability of the vey faculty meant to distinguish between good and evil. Here like elsewhere in Shake-

speare, conscience is “an imperfect and ongoing experience” (Stoll 2017, 22) which theatre dramatizes in real time. And, as the extensive theological literature of the period shows – William Perkins’s writings serving as a touchstone (Perkins 1606) – conscience, “the location in which takes place the Reformation ideal of private relations with the divine” (Stoll, 9), appears as a dark abyss and a ghostly presence inhabited by the lure of free will and by the horror of its consequences. The topicality of this elusive conscience in Protestant England underlies Maria Del Sapio Garbero’s essay on “The Conscience of Aaron”. Her analysis of the endgame between Aaron, the devilish Moor, and Lucius in *Titus Andronicus* (V.i *passim*) brings to light a provocative contest about evil and conscience that unsettles the very predicates of evil itself standing as a “provocation to think more, or to think differently about it” (Ricoeur 1985, quoted in Del Sapio Garbero). It is striking that in a tragedy set against the backdrop of a ruinous war and saturated with the gory violence of barbarity, the word ‘conscience’ should appear only in Aaron’s address to Lucius where he appeals to the divine faculty his enemy is presumed to possess, and which he himself ostentatiously disclaims. That Aaron should barter the life of his child for a remorseless confession of his own murderous deeds adds to the odd profanity of the plea. Can one so emphatically alien to God and virtue claim authority to summon another to the practice of conscience? And how does that plea sound when it is grounded in ransom? Pursuing these yet unformulated questions with a subtle reading of the scene Del Sapio Garbero shows how Aaron’s meta theatrical villainy, his “hyperbolic textual awareness”, his ultimate “overdoing of the Moor’s stereotype” “problematize his own role as a villain”.

Shakespeare’s meta theatrical confrontation with the dilemmas of conscience and the enigma of evil in *Titus Andronicus*, at the outset of his theatrical career, foreshadows a sustained anatomical inquiry into the meanders of guilt and the manifold responses to its apprehension. However much it is sneered by Iago (“But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.” (I.i.64-65)) or dismissed by Richard III (“Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls; / Conscience is but a word that cowards use, / Devised at first to keep the strong in awe” (V.iii.311-13))⁹, conscience endures

9 Quotations from *Richard III* are from Shakespeare 2007.

as the benchmark of human choice, a standard to which only Aaron remains impervious even as he transfers the burden of its operation onto his Christian adversaries.

Nowhere more than in *Macbeth* does Shakespeare probe the implications of such concern. Nowhere does he trace with equal precision the tortuous workings of conscience through the visual detail of a slow-motion descent into hell as the dizzying fantasy of super human power gives way to the felt reality of guilt. Although traditionally labelled the tragedy of its eponymous hero, *Macbeth* is also the tragedy and fall of a couple, whose connivance – unwavering to the end – refashions the Genesis narrative of Adam and Eve in strikingly modern terms (Bloom 1994; Greenblatt 2017). Just as *Hamlet* unravels the condition of being fallen, *Macbeth* dramatizes the gradations of falling, visualizing its hero's emotional responses to the inaugural and ambiguous prophecies of the Weird Sisters. Macbeth's crooked progress along the enigmatic path of evil continually tests the limits of the human, or, to borrow the title of Silvia Bigliuzzi's essay "The Boundaries of Human Kindness". The experience of horror – Macbeth's petrified and powerless response to the fantastic vision of his own inhuman guilt – emerges as one of the main keys to the play's withheld catharsis and to the enduring co-existence of "fair and foul". Bigliuzzi's in-depth reading of key scenes retraces the germination of violence against the Symbolic itself, showing how it is nurtured by the falling couple's confrontation over defining ethical boundaries (I.vii.30-82). The dramatic dispute addressing the play's central question – "What is it to be human?" – arrives at the threshold of a parable where the condition of being human is redefined as the paradoxical "founding of a symbolic order that excludes all others – an order rooted in himself [Macbeth], secured through absolute negation".

That the final reinstatement of "order" should set the time free in Macbeth's Scotland is, at the very least, dubious. As Nicholas Luke observes in his essay "The Creative Evil of Macbeth", the gory profiles of the good restorers of order, ready to renew the warlike cycles of ritual violence which mark the tragedy's onset, leave little room for the prospect of a regenerative freedom ostensibly secured by the play's closure. Luke's emphasis falls on the exceptional creative potential of Macbeth's fatal encounter with the Weird Sisters which quite literally brings him to theatrical life. The semiotic richness of

such irruption is highlighted through Luke's dazzling display of theological, poetic and philosophical analogues, ranging from early modern negative theology and poetry to modern and contemporary philosophy. In every instance the energizing impact of "what is not" on the creative mind points toward flashing imaginative intuitions that disclose revolutionary vistas. By shifting the discussion onto an aesthetic terrain, Luke reads Macbeth's movement into the unknown less as the wavering of a tortured conscience than as the perilous process of poetic creation: a hazardous confrontation with the negative and with the ambivalent nature of poetic imagination open both to the vortex of life and to the pitfalls of nothingness.

Luke's turn to the aesthetic and emotional lure of evil sheds light on an issue which, in his ruthless self-inspection, Augustine of Hippo had already confronted. Augustine knew to his cost that – as Milton's Satan later teaches – the harsh ways of evil can be more compelling than the smooth paths of good. Devilish heroes thus elicit the kind of negative empathy which Shakespeare so masterfully arouses in his audiences whenever his deranged or fractured villains – epitomized by Macbeth – are shown ensnared with the tangles of conscience. Verdi's musical rendering of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is not coincidentally the case study through which Stefano Ercolino and Massimo Fusillo reassess negative empathy as "an aesthetic experience characterized by cathartic emotional engagement with morally ambiguous or violent figures, performances, objects, compositions or environments" (see also Ercolino and Fusillo 2022). What stands out is *Macbeth's* capacity to inspire Verdi's revolutionary ruptures of melodramatic conventions, all designed to render the oscillations of Macbeth's conscience in tune with the Romantic aesthetic of ugliness and fascination with the negative powers of the supernatural. Contemporary melodramatic adaptations of the play – the authors stress – bear witness to the standing impact of Verdi's negative empathy while increasingly emphasizing the nihilistic implications of Shakespeare's tragedy in line with the renowned film versions of Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Roman Polanski and Justin Kurzel. *Macbeth's* ongoing journey across media and centuries thus amplifies the challenge originally posited by Shakespeare's play, sustaining audiences' complex engagement with "the negative" in defiance of moralizing sanitization.

Faulty visions

Like the debris of conscience, Macbeth's hallucinations – the floating image of the bloody dagger doomed to murder Duncan, or the harrowing ghost of murdered Banquo – exemplify the displacement of Macbeth's intolerable inner contents onto an external screen where images unfold like frames in a horror film: shocking, bewildering and devoid of cathartic relief. Hallucinations, symptomatically deployed here and elsewhere as projections often in ghostly apparitions, are the ultimate psychic derivatives of an impressive range of sight distortions. Their deranging effects play a crucial dramatic role in a world where ocularcentrism is challenged by the flourishing of the new sciences and baroque atmospheres seep through English culture¹⁰. Anatomy defies the belief in the omnipotence of the "sovereign sense" associated with the watchful presence of the divine just as perspectival techniques question one-dimensional visions, and anamorphic imagery, with its combination of two visual orders in one image, becomes the object of scientific curiosity (Clark 2007, 92; Del Sapio Garbero 2011). "Give me the ocular proof!" (III.iii.362)¹¹ demands Othello of Iago, craving for the optical evidence of Desdemona's betrayal. That he should trust so blindly in the power of eyesight at the very moment Iago is breeding monsters in his mind, crystallizes the dramatic ironies in a tragedy shaped by conflicting visual regimes – a tragedy of optics par excellence. Othello's fixation on the surface evidence of exteriority is overthrown by Iago's relish in visual projections through which he makes Venetians, and most fatefully Othello, see not what lies outside, but what festers within (see Marzola 2015). Iago's cinematic eagerness is uniquely parasitic: it feeds on the evil latent in the collective imagination of Venice – its misogyny, patriarchy and incipient racism – which he readily captures, magnifies and stages as the improvising director of a pliable cast¹². More than an arch-villain, elusive Iago, the man

10 Martin Jay describes such infiltrations as "the subterranean presence of what might be called the baroque ocular regime as the uncanny double of what we might call the dominant scientific or "rationalized" visual order" (Jay 1993, 158).

11 Quotations from *Othello* are from Shakespeare 2006.

12 The subtitle of Alessandro Serpieri's seminal study of *Othello* (1978): *Psicoanalisi di una proiezione distruttiva (Psychoanalysis of a destructive projection)* – is indicative of the major role played by projection (Serpieri 1978).

who by his own account, is not what he is (I.i.65), is the ventriloquist voice of evil and guilt, the phantasmagorical film-maker of early modern horrors. Iago's thriving on optical delusions is the fittest example of how sight can turn (or be made to turn) inwards. As Messala laments in *Julius Caesar* sight shows "the things that are not" to "the apt thoughts of men" (*Julius Caesar* V.iii.70-73). Contrary to what Brutus tends to believe, Caesar's ghost is not an apparition shaped by the weakness of his eyes (IV.ii.365-6), but, as the Ghost himself proclaims, his "evil spirit" (IV.ii.372), the haunting projection of the conspirators' guilt and the cause of their "thick" sight that will fatally misconstrue events at Philippi.

The vastness of visual issues in Shakespeare along with the intricacy of their evil implications defies compact accounts. Yet, Roger Holdsworth's essay "The Mind's Eye. Seeing Things in Shakespeare" aptly addresses the problem by charting the progression of visual distortions in light of the epoch's most popular studies in optics: from comic and conscious forgeries to "the loss of the mind's ability to distinguish what is real from what is not" in tragic unconscious projections. Here, in Shakespeare's "dramas of character" – *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale* – Holdsworth retraces the ways inner torments are spectacularly dramatized in hallucinations despite the mystifying obstacles posed by the imperative of visibility on the Elizabethan stage.

Cinema, the projecting medium by definition, will get rid of such hindrance and amplify Shakespeare's visual potential in endless adaptations. Some of its most memorable framings – such as the bear cage which entraps an inscrutable Iago suspended in the sky above the funeral of Othello and Desdemona in the opening scene of Orson Welles's eponymous film – have become emblematic cultural signifiers of one of Shakespeare's most cinematic plays. Unsurprisingly, *Othello* figures as a masterful example of Welles's Shakespearean adaptations in Anthony Guneratne's multilayered, highly documented essay "'Touched by Evil': Performing Theodicy in Orson Welles's Shakespeare adaptations" on the exploration of Shakespeare performed by the most renowned twentieth-century American film-maker and actor. In Guneratne's comprehensive survey, *Othello* also stands as the telling paradigm of a peculiar theodicy and of an idiosyncratic treatment of good and evil: a fatal en-

tanglement for which the fable of the frog and the scorpion, tinged with Machiavellian hues and enriched by Jungian inflections, becomes a telling reference.

Projections

Shakespeare's theatre itself can be viewed as a site of projections, where still unspoken fantasies intercept the audiences' anxieties, and the roots of evils to come are x-rayed in the fault lines of history. The scenes we see, however, do not merely stage projected contents; they enact the actual displacing of evil onto the culturally ousted subjects – that is, onto figures through whom modernity defines itself by alienating its most threatening others. In this emphasis on the fantasies that sustain projection lies Shakespeare's enduring power to expose the germinal seeds of evils across time. Among these are the recurrent embryos of a millennial patriarchal misogyny which, in the Elizabethan period, was triggered by the contentious, iconic and unsettling presence of the Virgin Queen (see Frye 1993, Montrose 2006). Her ambiguous authority stirred male anxieties and incited new projections stemming from the need to domesticate the unruly spread of desire, ambition and power in the 'new women' of early modernity.

Albeit from different perspectives and with distinct aims, both Joel Slotkin and Elizabeth Bronfen address the persistence of male fantasies in which women – blamed, stigmatized and contained – become the repositories of the guilty prerogatives experienced by men. The lens through which Slotkin's essay, "Some Women are odd Feeders': Male fantasies of Perverse Female Desire in 17th Century English Tragedy", examines the misogynist roots of these projections is that of the non – normative "sinister aesthetics" (see Slotkin 2017) which thrived on the morally disturbing seductiveness of ugliness and evil against the canonical alignment of beauty and virtue. In the crucial case of female sexual desire discussed in the essay, projection emerges as the means by which male characters negotiate "the possibility of women desiring people or qualities that run contrary to what men want them to want", on the one hand, and on the other, their own perverted impulses oscillating between incest, lasciviousness and lust: in every instance, women are made to enact the transgressing sexuality that in fact belongs to their male aggressors – and

are blamed for it. In all the tragedies discussed (Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and William Rowley's *The Changeling*) the issue is the wavering – both for the male protagonists and for the audience – between disgust and perverse pleasure – an oscillation which discloses the sinister allure of misogynistic fantasies. That fascination gestures simultaneously toward the patriarchal roots of the pornography to come and to the future appeal of Sadian aesthetics.

Elizabeth Bronfen's reading of male prejudiced projections in Shakespeare takes a different slant and a distinct focus. In "This it is when men are ruled by women': The Evil of Queenship in Shakespeare" Bronfen draws on her expertise in visual and serial studies (Bronfen 2020, 2025) to offer a dazzling palette of queens reputed to be evil on account of their "strident will to rule". Her sweeping analysis highlights the remarkable diversity of "evil" poses and gestures embodied by Shakespeare's queens – the corresponding range of threats they appear to pose to the fragile masculinity of a patriarchal culture – and the many forms of chastisement, public humiliation, haunting remorse, or demise they endure in order to domesticate their unruliness. Through Bronfen's lens, the range of pains inflicted looks impressively vast: from the constraint of married life for Hippolyta's and Titania's independence to the dehumanizing sacrifice of Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*; from the vilification of Cymbeline's nameless queen to the downfall of Lear's daughters; from the inducement to self-annihilation in Lady Macbeth to the arduousness of Hermione's path towards rehabilitation in *The Winter's Tale*, and to the de-traction of Catherine of Aragon in *Henry VIII*. Bronfen's spotlight on these symptomatic female figures reveals, on the one hand, how they serve as projections of patriarchal anxieties surrounding the threat of feminine power emblemized by the Virgin Queen. On the other hand, they expose the 'counterpower' which these silhouettes of potential female rebels attempt to act out, as a critique of the very culture that condemns them.

From the false perceptions of the eye and from their malignant manipulations, to the psychic substance of hallucinations and to its strategic organization into cultural projections, early modern theatre charts the internalization of faulty sight and its transformation into views, perceptions and fantasies of the inner mind, a visual world

where evil, just like evidence, appears to reside, more than ever, “in the eye of the beholder” (Eisaman Maus 1995, 125) or in the literal and metaphorical blindness of tragic heroes¹³.

Enduring Evil

‘Enduring evil’ – a phrase drawn from the title of Davide Del Bello’s contribution on Shakespeare’s late plays (“Things of Darkness. Enduring Evil in Shakespeare’s Late Plays”) – aptly captures the condition often ascribed to Shakespeare’s so-called afterlives. One might argue that Shakespeare’s muted gaze in his romances paves the way for the gradual diminution of evil’s metaphysical grandeur and for the increasing evanescence of the word ‘evil’ itself as anticipated at the outset of this introduction. What Del Bello identifies as the hallmark of Shakespeare’s altered stance – a “stealthier, more insidious seepage of evil into human affairs” – points to a diffusion of evil nuances refracted into unacknowledged or silenced minor faults that will resurface in later adaptations “preposterously” illuminating what came before¹⁴. Nimble opportunism, detached estrangement, the dilution of consciousness into forgetful manipulation, exploitation and voracity – each of them presented here as the muted preludes to cosmic evil – reappear in Melville’s Shakespearean meditation on evil in *The Confidence-Man* (as discussed by Paolo Simonetti) and in the four contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest* examined by Michela Compagnoni. Del Bello aptly adopts Hannah Arendt’s notion of “banality of evil” (1963) as a key with which to probe the implications of Shakespeare’s “dull ethical failures as the breeding ground for evil”. Banality, embodied in the bureaucratic, almost automated mind that fails to “engage in genuine dialogue with itself” (Arendt 1978), yet also in the paradoxical “shallow depth” of radical evil, forms the thread uniting the late plays explored here (*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*). It binds together their multifarious manifestations which Del Bello traces with sophisticated close readings. As he repeatedly underscores, this systematic

13 See particularly Agostino Lombardo’s remarks on blindness as a key motif in *King Lear* (Lombardo 2010).

14 For the notion of “preposterous history”, see Bahl 1999.

debunking of evil's magniloquence never obliterates its endurance. Even in the folds of restored institutions the *mysterium iniquitatis* lingers, continuing to test the limits of human understanding. From his comprehensive perspective the author reads Shakespeare's late plays as the site of both collision and kindling – of mystification and demystification – and as a summons to a double vision: disenchanted and enchanted alike, where cultural critique joins moral imagination in perceiving, rather than explaining away, the numinous.

“There appears to be a certain – what shall I call it – hidden sun, say, about him, at once enlightening and mystifying” (Melville 171, quoted in Simonetti, this volume). This quotation – strikingly attuned with Del Bello's final remarks – comes from Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man*; the “him” in question is Shakespeare himself and the speaker is the cosmopolitan protagonist engaged in one of his metafictional exchanges about Shakespeare with Charlie Noble. This passage is one of the many through which Paolo Simonetti's extensive essay (“Melville's Shakespearean Masquerade of Evil: *The Confidence-Man*”) weaves the threads of Melville's life-long engagement with Shakespeare's ambiguous conception of evil, eventually tying them in the knot of his last fragmented, dialogic novel. Simonetti's insights are nourished by a detailed exploration of Melville's head-to-head enthralling confrontation with the instructive figure of “the philosopher's Shakespeare” (De Battista 2021, xvii). Like Shakespeare in the romances and comedies Melville too appears to be sceptical of evil's grandeur, and more intrigued by its diminished roguish manifestations. Deflationary scepticism, understated irony and comic subversion become his demystifying weapons against such “masquerades” of evil, which rest precisely upon the paradox of evil as the absence of good theorized by theology. For nothingness, after all, can be endlessly masqueraded, as in *The Confidence-Man*, through so many affable, “truth-seeking” faces of the same elusive figure. For Melville, who ultimately embraces the ambiguous opacity of inner evil, Shakespeare remains both a revered source of inspiration and a “figure perpetually *en parole*”: a roguish devil-god who challenges American bardolatry while flowing with the rough currents of American culture.

A matrix of patterns and a generator of adaptive intelligence, rather than the author of a crystallized corpus, the contemporary Shakespeare has lost the direct appeal of interlocution he once held

for Melville, and has gained instead the power of dissemination through its original malleability. Shakespeare's traces – dispersed across media and cultures – occasionally coalesce into clusters through purposeful re-creation: adaptations, rewritings or reinventions which, once cross-mapped, release the energy contained and restrained in the plays (see Bronfen 2020), and, in turn, illuminate the past that sheds light upon them. Cross-mapping and preposterous history are the lenses through which Michela Compagnoni engages with three contemporary adaptations of *The Tempest* exploring how Shakespeare's enduring evil metamorphoses within the disruptive technological revolution driven by artificial intelligence and escalating economic voracity. At issue are the malign drifts of Shakespeare's Prospero whose quivering between the overpowering control of an embryonic colonial mind and the repentant abjuration of his "potent Art" collapses into the obduracy of a narcissistic egotism bent on domination and violence. Thus, the moments in Shakespeare's *Tempest* when "ingenuity warps into cunning, and the pursuit of knowledge slips towards ruthlessness" (Del Bello, this volume) appear as prescient flashes of contemporary extremities. In the three instances that Compagnoni discusses – Margaret Atwood's novel *Hag-Seed*, Nolan's and Joy's sci-fi series *Westworld* and Jeanette Winterson's short story "The Ghost in the Machine" – Prospero is recast as an overreaching god-like master whose grandiose inventiveness entails the exploitation, control and domination of unwitting test subjects desultorily confined in futuristic or virtual spaces. In each case the manipulative reach of Prospero's art, amplified by technology, threatens to trespass into systems of control which, regardless of destructive effects, gain autonomy over their creators "ruling over our very sense of reality".

Zones of Interest

In *The Zone of Interest* (2023) directed by Jonathan Glazer, Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil" resurfaces as a central lens. Loosely based on Martin Amis's eponymous novel (2014) and set in Auschwitz in 1943, the film depicts the peaceful bourgeois family life of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp whose elegant villa borders its walls. Impervious to the gunshots, shouts,

and billowing smoke that rise beyond their garden, the Höss family inhabits a state of oblivious sensory paralysis indifferent to the hammering sounds of the horror next door and to the provenance of gold teeth, lipsticks and jewels that now figure among their sinister belongings. Only in one of the final sequences does Rudolf Höss seem to glimpse the abyss when, descending the stairs of his new office at Oranienburg, he stares blankly into the camera and cannot suppress the urge to retch.

“How human can you make someone who is clearly inhuman?” asks a reviewer (Daniels 2023). The question recalls the dull zeal of Arendt’s Eichmann whose bureaucratic rigour mirrors that of the historical Höss. Glazer’s film poses questions that transcend its historical frame. It points to the many *zones of interest*¹⁵ – those borderlands where horror coexists with indifference or forgetfulness. It asks whether post-Shoah humanity can remain unaffected by the inhuman evil perpetrated in concentration camps and whether art can still lay bare, through its enduring humanness, the nightmares of the non-human that persist along the margins of history. “Can the Shakespearean invention of the human be reversed into the imagination of the non-human?” asks Carlo Pagetti in his essay “‘Hell’s black intelligencer’: Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz and Richard Gloucester”. His answer is affirmative. Reading Shakespeare’s Richard Gloucester through the prism of the Shoah, Pagetti shows how the figure discloses the inhuman lurking within the human. Pagetti’s post-Holocaust rereading of Richard Gloucester’s story – from *1 King Henry VI* to *Richard III* – traces the disturbing resonances with the Shoah which become visible in light of our history, burdened by the albatross of unnameable atrocities. Richard’s own “fascination for the excess” and for annihilation, his double standard relying on the histrionic performance of seduction, his slow evolution into the evil King of *Richard III*, and above all his conscience frozen with cynicism, all combine to form “a polymorphic villain” nurtured amidst the barbarity of civil wars. Shakespeare’s Richard becomes the pliable matrix for theatrical or cinematic re-

15 The phrase “zone of interest” is the translation of the German euphemism “Interessengebiet” coined by SS bureaucrats to describe both the area of the concentration camps and the surrounding forty-square-kilometre region.

incarnations, his “grinning mask” speaking in the “hysterical and screeching voice” of Hitler (Harris 1994 quoted in Pagetti) while the chaotic Weimar years offer the temporal drop for the young Richard’s first movements in Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, of course, could not possibly foresee horrors that remain unimaginable. The point is not his capacity to anticipate the future, but his gift for endowing theatre with a transformative power that allows the same stories to be re-enacted differently at each historical juncture. His metamorphic potential lies in his ability to address the “zones of interest” of both his time and the past. Much like the author of this essay, Shakespeare did not anatomize his many sources, but absorbed their gist into the texture of his days. He was not in pursuit of undiscovered truths, but sensed the moments when the violence of the past encroached upon the traumas of his time. He did what Walter Benjamin later professed a historian should do:

[he] ceases to permit the consequences of eventualities to run through the fingers like beads of a rosary. He records the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. (Benjamin [1955] 2019, 209)

Whether grandiosely tragic or petty and trivial, Shakespeare’s evil blows across space and time. It rages in the whirlwinds of different histories and amidst the thousand natural shocks of many lives. It unfailingly urges us against indifference, yet never solves the riddle of its origin. It is an unhealed and ever open wound, staring into our eyes (Fusini 2010, 450).

In front of Iago’s baffling rebuttal of explanations – “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know; / From this time forth I never will speak word.” (*Othello*, V.ii.301-02) – we are left, as ever, with endless questions and renewed desire.

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