

Evil and the Forms of Shakespeare's Endings

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This essay argues that those of Shakespeare's plays in which perpetrators of wrongdoing are initially unknown to fellow characters and then conclusively exposed – which is to say plays in which evils are spectacularly made known not only to an audience but to the characters within a play – would have provided a cathartic release for Reformation audiences newly confronted with the dismayingly two-steps forward one-step back nature of soteriological inquiry and identity. The increased prominence and Calvinist torque of theories of predestination and original sin, along with the corresponding prevalence of the notion of reprobacy, and in combination with the waning of pre-Reformation protocols of mitigating sin (e.g., “works”), rendered the naming of sin a peculiarly satisfying experience. In a culture in which one's salvation or damnation was a secret ultimately known only to the deity, the revelation to characters of information known to an audience in advance of said characters would have made its theatrical dénouement a particularly charged dramatic moment.

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In pondering an essay on the possible subjects designated by the topic “Issues of evil” my initial thought was to study Shakespeare's discovery scenes that reveal the perpetrators of ill-doing – how they are structured and how such exposure may have provided a form of emotional satisfaction to a Reformation culture awash in epistemological dubiety with respect to the question of salvation. This is to say, a culture in which ethical identities were somewhat more muddled and miasmatic than in an earlier confessional dispensation, and hence one in which the satisfactions pertaining to the apprehension of wrongdoing might go beyond mere poetic justice to comprehend a taxonomy of sin and salvation (that is, I am less interested in the punitive comeuppances for perpetrators than the antecedent fact of their discovery). The working hypothesis was that, in Reforma-

tion England, with the increased prominence and Calvinist torque of theories of predestination and original sin, along with the corresponding prevalence of the notion of reprobacy, and in combination with the waning of pre-Reformation protocols of mitigating sin (e.g., “works”), plays in which perpetrators of wrongdoing are initially unknown to fellow characters and then conclusively exposed – which is to say plays in which evils are spectacularly made known not only to an audience but to the characters within a play – would have provided a cathartic release for audiences newly confronted with the dismayingly two-steps forward one-step back nature of soteriological inquiry and identity. As I have written elsewhere, in a culture in which one’s salvation or damnation was a secret ultimately known only to the deity, the revelation to characters of information known to an audience in advance of said characters would have made its theatrical dénouement a particularly charged and satisfying dramatic moment¹. Soteriology was an undertaking of recognition, in which one sought to identify signs that one was recognized by God as elect (or not); for an audience member, the recognition of information by characters is the very substance of Reformation catharsis.

Reformation Contexts of Evil

In proceeding to think about this issue the first qualifier I encountered is that instances of such apprehension are somewhat rare. A list of such perpetrators is relatively short: in (roughly) chronological order, we have Chiron, Demetrius and Aaron of *Titus Andronicus*; Richard III; Don John and Borachio of *Much Ado about Nothing*; Bertram of *All’s Well That Ends Well*; Angelo of *Measure for Measure*; Hamlet’s Claudius; Iago; Edmund; and Iachimo. Of these villains, only a handful are what we might call exorbitantly unrepentant, Aaron and Iago being the chief instances of such². More frequently we find

1 See McEachern 2018, esp. 37-76 for an account of the prevalence of experimentalist thought in Reformation England. For studies of the discrepancies between an audience and characters’ knowledges, see Evans 1960 and 1979. The end of a life, much like the end of a play, was a charged site of revelation for Puritan experimentalists. See Houlbrooke 1998.

2 There is also of course Antonio, in *The Tempest*, who does not repent, although as in the cases of Iago or Aaron little attention is drawn to this fact.

instances of conflicted villains, like Claudius, or eleventh-hour penitents, like Edmund ("Some good I mean to do, / Despite of my own nature"; *King Lear*, V.iii.247-48)³. Some we never actually see caught red-handed (Don John). Some – Bertram and Angelo – may intend but do not actually accomplish the full extent of their sins due to the operations of comic providence. Just as if not more frequently, the source of trouble in a play can seem systemic rather than initiated by an individual – the feuding and haste of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, or the pervasive male anxiety about female fidelity in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In such latter cases, individual action seems more of a flint that lights a supply of tinder rather than a major propeller of the action.

Related to this scarcity perhaps is the nature of the evils perpetrated. I say 'evils' as opposed to 'Evil' as the more I thought about it the more it seemed to me that 'Evil' as a quantity both unrepentant and inexplicable except, perhaps, by supernatural means is not really a category that Shakespeare traffics in with any consistency. With the exception of Iago, and the villains of *Titus Andronicus*, and maybe Cornwall (who is not really incognito), most of Shakespeare's villains seem upon examination to be legible if not entirely sympathetic figures, Macbeth probably being the epitome thereof – that is, their failings can be explained as a mundane function of some combination of the seven deadly sins, and tend to be on the order of a failing or weakness (yielding to sin) rather than a proactive will to it. There are few cackling cartoon-type villains in his plays, that is to say villains beyond our comprehension, whose evil is utterly 'othered' and entrepreneurial (Aaron is perhaps the epitome here: "Tut, 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"; V.i.141-44). But even Richard III ventures a few stabs at self-explanation in terms of his deformity that could, depending on the actor, humanize him: "since I am cannot prove a lover / To entertain these fair well-spoken days, / I am determined to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days" (*Richard III*, I.i.28-31). Iago's motives are shifting – Cassio, cuckoldry, etc. – but the repeated attempts to explain himself bespeak a compulsion to do

3 All Shakespeare references are to Bevington 1980.

so that at least gives the sense that he may be a mystery to himself as well as to us – a species of self-confounding that few of us are spared⁴.

This legibility is to a large extent a by-product of Shakespeare's extremely nuanced characterizations, which tend to explain if not excuse human sinfulness in terms of a complex intentionality that invites understanding if not always identification from a witness. As Claire Landis has written, "it seems necessary to re-assert the role of personal agency in Shakespearean evil, since the plays themselves engage with the issue of choice, even while they dramatize the impact of potent influences" (2018, 140). This may be only to say that, in the Reformation, evil was more quotidian than it is for us in a modern world; we now tend to designate behaviors as 'Evil' only when they seem to derive from somewhere beyond the pale of psychological causation (e.g., terrible childhoods, or mental illness). By contrast, in an early modern culture in which it was more generally accepted that humanity's fallen nature was ubiquitous and inescapable, garden-variety evil, in the sense of the simple human will to sin, would have been both unsurprising and intelligible⁵.

This does not mean, of course, that the exposure of even lower case "e" evils wouldn't have been able to provide audiences with some epistemological relief, a relief that I would argue is related to the ambiguous nature of reprobacy in the Reformation but that lingers in our experience of the plays today. While much discussion of Puritan experimentalism focuses on the elusive nature of election, with the quest for soteriological knowledge being framed as a matter of prospecting for grace, the obverse side of the quest for assurance was the need to plumb the depths of one's fallenness, a fallenness that was as obscurantist as it was statistically pervasive. That is, certainty of election may have been the chief and utopian goal of self-examination, but conversely, certainty of damnation may have possessed some of the same blessed and decisive clarity in a universe where moral

4 The failure to adequately pursue self-reflection was in fact considered a mark of the reprobate: "He is counted a Christian by the children of God, and so he takes himself to be, no doubt because through the fulness of his heart he cannot try and examine himself, and therefore truly cannot discern of his estate, whether he is in Chris or not [John 2:23-35]" (Perkins [1595] 2019, 459).

5 For a discussion that lays out many of the theological parameters of Reformation evil, see Streete 2020, 104-27.

muddle and mystery were default and exceedingly suspenseful conditions. As William Perkins writes in his 1595 preface to *A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration whether a Man is in the Estate of Damnation or the State of Grace* (even the title of which is prevaricating), “a man may seem both unto himself and to the church of God to be a true professor of the gospel, and yet indeed be none”. False positives, as it were, are legion: “A reprobate has in his mind a certain knowledge of God, ...of common equity among men, of the difference of good from bad”. “The reprobate has oftentimes fear and terror of conscience”; “a reprobate, before he commits a sin, is often vexed within himself, and fears to commit it”; “After he has committed a sin, he sorrows and repents”; the wicked in their distress may pray to God, and God may hear their prayers and grant their request”; “he may show a liking to God’s ministers. He may reverence them and fear to displease them”; “he may have the gift of working miracles, casting forth devils, healing, and such like” (Perkins 1595, 447-59). Similarly, Nicholas Byfield, in his *Signs of The Wicked Man* (1619), promises “thirty signs of an open wicked man” (6), but many of these can also pass as signs of goodness: “they have certain general confused apprehensions of mercy” (10); “they think that assurance would breed security, and that it is a better way to keep their own hearts humble, to be somewhat doubtful” (Byfield 1619, 6-10).

Given such illusory mirages of virtue amongst the demographic of the damned, there might well have been thought something as happily declarative about evidence of damnation as there was of salvation (as Byfield put it in his dedication, “if things shine more clearly when their contraries are set by them; then may this description of the estate of a wicked man by Signes, serve much to establish the godly in the point of assurance, when he sees himself freed from those fearful and forlorn marks”). For Perkins, for example, despite all the false positives, reprobacy is ultimately – or at least ideally – unmistakable. Sin is, in the end, unequivocal and thoroughgoing: “the reprobate, though he is amended in many of his faults, yet some fault or other he cannot abide to have reformed, and by that, in a vile manner, the devil wholly possesses him” (1595, 458). Sin is public: “After a certain time, God in his just judgement hardens their hearts, blinds the eyes of their minds, make their heads giddy with a spiritual drunkenness, and by the strength of their inward lusts, as also by the effectual op-

eration of Satan, they fall to open infidelity and contempt of God's word, and so run headlong to their own damnation" (461). And, lastly, sin is spectacular: for instance, in distinguishing between a mere melancholic passion and true sorrow for sin, Perkins emphasizes the startling, even decisive quality of the latter:

Sorrow for sin rises from the anger of God that wounds and pierces the Conscience; but melancholic passions rise only from mere imaginations strongly conceived in the brain. Lastly, these passions are long in breeding, and come by little and little, but the sorrow for sin usually comes on a sudden as lightning into a house. (472)

"As sudden as lightning into a house"; "wounds and pierces the Conscience": here is the evidence for the link I would like to draw with some of Shakespeare's dénouements of error: they are built as structures of slow-burning suspense that build to a crystalline moment, a moment that is designed to arrest, and illuminate moral caliber (there is no lightning without a looming storm, so to speak). This does not mean that all of Shakespeare's villains are decisively reprobates; God's prerogative meant that his dispensation of salvation or damnation remained mysterious until the very end (or beyond it – this is why deathbeds were such tantalizing sites of potential discovery for Puritan experimentalists). Any of Shakespeare's villains could, technically, be candidates for election as well as damnation; self-examination was an exercise in probability rather than certainty. Nor does it mean that exposure necessarily results in penitence. But it does mean that there is a premium on disclosure.

Shakespeare's earliest exposures and thoroughgoing villains

The earliest and to some degree most protracted (even sensationalist) instance of revelation comes in *Titus Andronicus*, which indicates that Shakespeare employs this structure of suspended disclosure from early on in his career. Infamously, Chiron and Demetrius rape and dismember Lavinia, then taunt her with the clandestine nature of their deeds:

DEMETRIUS

So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON

Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.
(*Titus Andronicus* II.iv.1-4)

Her uncle Marcus immediately finds her and, contrary to the villains' confidence of their security, promptly identifies at least the source of her injury: "But sure, some Tereus hath deflow' red thee, / And, lest thou shouldst detect them, cut thy tongue" (II.iv.26-27). Marcus makes much of her silence, as Shakespeare dwells on the fact that she is so immured:

O that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast,
That I might rail at him, to ease my mind.
Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopp'd
Doth burn the heart to cinder where it is.
Fair Philomela, why, she but lost her tongue
And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind;
But niece, that mean is cut from thee.
(*Titus Andronicus*, II.iv.32-40)

The partial identification sets us on the path for full. So too when Titus sees Lavinia he swiftly begins to parse her silence as proof of her brothers' innocence of Bassanius' murder: "Ah, son Lucius, look on her! / When I did name her brothers, then fresh tears / Stood upon her cheeks... / No, no, they would not do so foul a deed; / Witness the sorrow that their sister makes" (III.i.110-19). Lucius similarly hazards a (mistaken) guess at her perpetrators at the end of the scene: "If Lucius live, he will requite your wrongs, / And make proud Saturnine and his emperess / Beg at the gates, like Tarquin and his queen" (III.i.296-98). In the following scene, Titus again vows to gloss all of Lavinia's motions:

I can interpret all her martyr'd signs.
She says she drinks no other drink but tears,
Brew'd with her sorrow, mesh'd upon her cheeks.
Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought;
In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
As begging hermits in their holy prayers.
Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
But I of these will wrest an alphabet
And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.
(*Titus Andronicus*, III.ii.36-45)

Finally, in IV.i (the next scene), Lavinia herself pursues her nephew's copy of the *Metamorphoses*, opening it to the tale of Philomel, at which point Marcus proposes that she write her violators' names in the sand with a stick⁶.

This protracted address to the mystery of Lavinia's injuries is quite unlike the process of Shakespeare's sources; in all of them that represent the incident, Lavinia is promptly provided with sand and a stick by her male relatives upon their first glimpse of her wounds⁷. Shakespeare, by contrast, worries the question of disclosure over the course of several successive scenes, building suspense while providing multiple occasions for poetic riffs on the question of signs and their interpretation (III.ii is in fact absent from the quarto, which may indicate that early performances considered the extra measure of suspense it provides superfluous to efficient action).

Richard III is another early play where Shakespeare frets the question of disclosure early on in the action. Richard's villainy is of course disclosed to the audience in the opening soliloquy, and it is no secret from many other of the characters. Lady Anne, for instance, greets Richard as a "black magician", a "dreadful minister of hell" and a "Foul devil" immediately upon encountering him next to her husband's bier (I.ii.34; 36; 50); Queen Elizabeth also knows him as "A man that loves not me, nor none of you" (I.iii.13). Clarence, however, naively believes his brother loyal to him, despite an ominous dream in which Richard knocks him overboard a ship to drown, and the double-spoken insinuations of the First murderer: "Thy brother's love, our duty, and thy faults / Provoke us hither now to slaughter thee" (I.iv.227-28). In this incident, the suspense over when Clarence will twig is compounded by the darkly humorous wavering of the second murderer over whether his conscience will prevent him from carrying through with his mission – a debate ultimately resolved in favor of doing the deed: "I am strong-fram'd; he [Conscience] cannot prevail with me" (I.iv.152-53).

Shakespeare revisits the scenario of a thoroughgoing villain only once more, in *Othello*. Here the suspense is crafted differently,

6 Ovid of course provides multiple instances of humans silenced by their transformations, Actaeon being the paradigmatic case. See McEachern 2018, 115-56.

7 See Bullough 1966, vol. 6, 3-79.

as Othello's inner disturbance does not become evident to the surrounding characters until well into III.iv, when he presses Desdemona on the whereabouts of the handkerchief. As in *Richard III*, it is a woman who first senses something is amiss, as Emilia questions, "Is not this man jealous" (III.iv.100)?

EMILIA

'Tis not a year or two shows us a man.

They are all but stomachs, and we all but food;

They eat us hungerly, and when they are full

They belch us.

(*Othello* III.iv.104-07)

Prior to this moment, the audience has been confined in the claustrophobia of their private knowledge of Iago's dastardly plot, wincing at Desdemona's unwitting attempts to intervene on Cassio's behalf. In the following scene, however, after much private agonizing, Othello's distress starts to become public, and he strikes Desdemona, an action which alerts Lodovico to the fact that something is amiss: "My lord, this would not be believ'd in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw it" (IV.i.243-44). In the following scene, after Othello has "bewhored" Desdemona, Emilia comes even closer to intuiting what's amiss, and speaks to her husband: "The Moor's abus'd by some most villainous knave, / Some base notorious knave, some scurvy fellow... Some such squire he was / That turn'd your wit the seamy side without, / And made you to suspect me with the Moor" (IV.ii.141-49). Tellingly, this revelation begins to rattle Iago, who dismisses her with "Speak within door" and "You are a fool; go to" (IV.ii.146; 150). Finally, and famously, in the last scene of the play, Emilia puts all the puzzle pieces together, as she accuses Iago: "You told a lie, an odious, damned lie! ... / My mistress here lies murdered in her bed - ... / And your reports have set the murder on" (V.ii.187-94).

The corroborating evidence of Emilia's handling of the handkerchief, and maybe even more decisively, Iago's murder of Emilia, finally brings everything out on to the open (meaning that not just her murder corroborates his villainy but the fact that he feels the need to murder her also corroborates the truth of her statement about the handkerchief). Signally, it is not merely Iago's culpability that is confirmed and exposed here, but Emilia's own ethical standing as an un-

witting passive accomplice to his deeds, albeit one who is studiously, even willfully so (“What he will do with it, / Heaven knows, not I; / I nothing but to please his fantasy” (III.iii.303-05). Though the closing moments of the play provide no moment of self-reflection for Emilia, in which she might grapple with the nature of her participation, the fact that she has, finally, to acknowledge something that Iago has earlier urged her to be “not acknown” on provides the lightning-like catharsis for which we, at least, have been long awaiting (III.iii.324).

Ethically complex villains and the problem plays

The complexity of Emilia’s ethical identity here – neither particularly virtuous nor downright malevolent – is telling, for it is around this turn-of-the-century juncture in Shakespeare’s career that we see him begin to explore the possibilities of revelation that concern more morally complex culprits, which is to say those for whom the possibility of regeneration might yet exist (though again, in a soteriological scheme, it is totally within the bounds of divine prerogative that even someone so villainous as Iago might be among the elect). In both *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare treats with the case of a bad actor whose public exposure as such potentially reclaims them for Christian community (if not necessarily salvation) rather than exiles them from it.

Young Bertram, for instance, appears in at least the opening scenes of *All’s Well that Ends Well* in a potentially sympathetic light; though his dedication to the braggart soldier Parolles seems misplaced, it is hard to disagree with his opinion that a forced marriage to Helena ought to take into account his own preferences: “My wife, my liege? I shall beseech your Highness, / In such a business give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes” (II.iii.106-08). His lying to Helena and running away to the Italian wars are admittedly underhanded actions – his own mother declares “his sword can never win / The honor that he loses” (III.ii.92-93), but he nevertheless distinguishes himself in those wars once arrived, which bespeaks a certain courageous willingness to disregard life and limb. Even his lustful suit to the chaste Diana, like his other flaws, might have been written off as the lapses of youth and impulsivity: “Natural rebellion done I’ th’ blade of youth; / When oil and fire, too strong for reason’s

force, / O'erbears it and burns on" (V.iii.6-7). Our own judgment is helped along by the fact that Bertram himself seems to operate largely without compunction; we are not prompted to think of him as self-reflecting or conflicted. The first hint of any tweaks of conscience are reported second-hand in a conversation between the two Lords Du-maine, when they report his reaction to his mother's letter: "There is something in't that stings his nature; for on the reading it he changed almost into another man" (IV.iii.2-4). The transformation does not take hold, however; that very night Bertram intends to "fles[h] his will in the spoil of [Diana's] honor" (IV.iii.15).

Signally, the second lord comments here on the necessity of public discovery to staunch sin: "as in the common course of all treasons we still see them reveal themselves, till they attain to their abhorr'd ends, so he that in this action contrives against his own nobility in his proper stream overflow's himself" (IV.iii.20-24). The syntax of this statement is admittedly difficult to parse, but the gist seems to be that revelation of sin commonly accompanies its full accomplishment. The two lords pin their hopes of Bertram's reformation on the exposure of Parolles, in whom he has, in their opinion, invested over much confidence: "I would gladly have him see [Parolles'] company anatomiz'd, that he might take a measure of his own judgments wherein so curiously he had set this counterfeit" (IV.iii.30-33). In other words, they hope that in finding himself wrong about his estimate of Parolles, Bertram will realize the fallibility of his own capacity to judge in other matters.

That this is a less than effective solution to the problem of Bertram's moral obtuseness is perhaps indicated by the fact that such exposure does nothing to correct Parolles' own behavior. Though the latter pleads with his captors for his life on the grounds that he could use the time for repentance ("my offenses being many, I would repent out the remainder of nature"; IV.iii.246-47), upon discovery he does not intend to reform so much as openly play the fool rather than a hypocrite pretending to be a valiant captain: "Cool, blushes! And, Parolles, live / Safest in shame! Being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive!" (IV.iii.339-40)⁸. Despite such pessimism about the

8 For discussions of the function of shame in early modern culture, see Fernie 2022 and Jewett ed. 2011.

possibility of amendment, however, the play's concluding moments teeter on the prospect of Bertram's own exposure as a liar and a would-be debaucher. The process is fairly excruciating in its convolution: first, Bertram demonstrates his remorse over Helena's demise, is forgiven by the king and then pledged to Lafew's daughter Maudlin. Lafew asks for a token to deliver to his daughter, and Bertram offers the ring that was given him abed by Helena (whom he had thought Diana), who originally had it herself of the king. The king suspects Bertram of foul play in Helena's death; then Diana enters, recounts Bertram's suit to her, and produces his own family ring in support of her story. Bertram at this point has begun to lie in earnest, claiming that Diana was a camp follower and a tease: "She knew her distance and did angle for me, / Madding my eagerness with her restraint [...] She got the ring; / And I had that which any inferior might / At market price have bought" (V.iii.211-17). Diana then riddles about the provenance of her original ring (now on the king's finger) and Bertram's own culpability: "Because he's guilty, and he is not guilty. / He knows I am no maid, and he'll swear to't; / I'll swear I am a maid, and he knows not" (V.iii.287-89). At this point, all of the characters on stage except Diana (and perhaps even the audience) are thoroughly bewildered. Finally, the visibly pregnant Helena appears and clarifies matters. Bertram is duly stunned into the motions of repentance: "O pardon!" (V.iii.306).

Any sympathy we might have for the fact that Bertram is being manipulated here (as previously) by both Diana and Helena has little chance against the fact that in duress he compounds his earlier intended transgressions with yet further lies and prevarications. Though he has not, technically, sinned in debauching Diana, but merely been hoist by the petard of his own challenge to Helena to get the family ring off his finger and get herself with his child, his innocence of those sins is due solely to the operations of comic providence and his wife's ingenuity; left to his own devices there is not much to work with, ethically-speaking – or as the First Lord puts it, "As we are ourselves, what things are we!" (IV.iii.18-19). Bertram's recognition or at least acknowledgement of his own will to sin may be slow to dawn upon him, but when it comes it brings him (perhaps literally) to his knees. His conscience is, finally, wounded and pierced, and we are satisfied that evil has (for the moment, anyways) been stopped

in its tracks. The fact that he did not, in fact, debauch Diana is small consolation when weighed against his propensity to lie and slander in order to try to extricate himself from the supposed crime.

Angelo in *Measure for Measure* is another malefactor who compounds his own villainy throughout the course of the play. Unlike Bertram, he demonstrates an awareness of his own sinfulness from the outset of his attraction to Isabella: "[...] but it is I / That, lying by the violet in the sun / Do as the carrion does, not as the flow'r / Corrupt with virtuous season" (II.ii.170-73). This awareness of his own failings does nothing to dissuade him, however, and as soon as he propositions her (II.iv.), Isabella vows disclosure: "I will proclaim thee, Angelo, look for't! / Sign me a present pardon for my brother, / Or with an outstretch'd throat I'll tell the world aloud / What man thou art" (II.iv.151-54). From this point on such disclosure is an imperative for us as well as Isabella, and our desire for it is only exacerbated by Angelo's renegeing on his promise to pardon Claudio after he has (as he thinks) enjoyed Isabella, for now not only is he a would-be debaucher but a habitual promise-breaker (and a slanderer to boot), having earlier renegeed on his promise to marry Mariana: "left her in her tears, and dried not one of them with his comfort; swallow'd his vows whole, pretending in her discoveries of dishonor" (III.i.223-25). The fact that the superintendent Duke hears of Angelo's lapse almost immediately, in the succeeding scene, provides us some relief, for sure, but Isabella's desire that Angelo find his faults exposed to the world remains. Even the Duke (ironically) decries his hypocrisy: "O what may man within him hide, / Though angel on the outward side" (III.ii.264-65).

That such exposure is not the custom of Vienna creates additional narrative pressure. The Duke, according to Lucio, "would have dark deeds darkly answer'd; he would never bring them to light" (III.ii.170-71); he himself admits a loathing for public display: "I love the people / But do not like to stage me to their eyes; / Though it do well, I do not relish well / Their loud applause and aves vehement; / Nor do I think the man of safe discretion / That does affect it" (I.i.67-72). As Craig Bernthal has written, "The first act, therefore, sets up the problem of a duke who understands ...the value of ceremony and theatricality in government, ...but still cannot make himself engage in the necessary public relations work" (2003, 133). The fact that An-

gelo is not technically guilty of all the charges Isabella levies against him does little to mitigate the satisfaction her accounting provides us when it comes out in full cry:

ISABELLA
 That Angelo's forsworn, is it not strange?
 That Angelo's a murderer, is 't not strange?
 That Angelo is an adulterous thief,
 An hypocrite, a virgin-violator,
 Is it not strange, and strange? [...]

 Even so may Angelo,
 In all his dressings, characts, titles, forms
 Be an arch-villain.
 (*Measure for Measure*, V.i.39-60)

The pleasures of having even this exaggerated evil called out are considerable, and as far as Isabella is concerned at this point in the action (when she still believes her brother to have been executed in contravention of the bargain she struck) Angelo is arch-villain enough even though he has not actually violated 'her' virginity (Mariana's is a different matter). While his "act did not o'ertake his bad intent" as regards her chastity, and the Duke's intervention (along with Ragozine's head) prevents Claudio's execution, the fact that Angelo himself thought himself acting upon his bad intentions is guilt enough for us (V.i.456). That is, if he is not as bad a man as Isabella proclaims him to be, it is not for lack of trying. And while Angelo does come to wish he had not reneged on his promise and had not had Claudio killed – "Would yet he had liv'd!" (IV.iv.32), he never repents of having raped anyone.

Robert N. Watson has written that the play's ending is "packed with climactic moments. [...] On the stage, the play offers multiple revelations of identity that are *coups de théâtre* within the play world. [...] It is hard for audiences to know where to focus their sympathetic imaginations, with so many characters suddenly compelled to recall and re-evaluate – often mortifyingly – events and encounters earlier in the play" (2020, 41). We wish to see Angelo discover that he has neither violated an unwilling woman nor executed her brother, and also that he has fornicated with his former fiancée; Isabella needs to know that Claudio has been spared; and everyone concerned needs to know that the Duke has been orchestrating events all along in the guise of a friar. It is an incredibly protracted scene of disclosure,

made more complicated by the repeated interruptions of Lucio, who may or may not be a slanderer of the Duke. First he inserts himself into the interview of Isabella; then he pipes up with his opinion of Friar Lodowick; then he comments sardonically on Mariana's sexual status – "My lord, she may be a punk, for many of them are neither maid, widow, nor wife" (V.i.185-86) – then he levies a similar swipe at Isabella ("That's the way, for women are light at midnight", V.i.285), and then he parries with the Duke-as-Friar. Though the allegorical significance of his name and his ultimate role in discovering the identity of the Duke point to his instrumentality as an agent of discovery, the effect of all these slanderous interruptions aggravates our ability to experience the process of discovery as a smooth and unfurling thing (as the Duke himself acknowledges in attempting to repeatedly silence him)⁹. Shakespeare uses his interruptions to intensify the suspense here. Though Lucio's own sins are public knowledge throughout – and, as of III.ii.194, our own – even the reduced punishment the Duke declares for him (marriage for debauchery rather than hanging for slander) comes as a species of relief for us, a fitting riposte to the nuisance he has posed to the process of clarifying fault.

An objection to the claim that these two problem plays provide us with the satisfactions of incrimination might be that neither Bertram nor Angelo are as culpable as they believe themselves to be, and thus that Shakespeare, instead of providing us with the pleasures of having sin stridently called out, is in fact confronting us with the intractable murkiness of reprobacy – the way in which sin inevitably comes attended with marks of virtue (or, conversely, the similarly frustrating way in which the best instances of human virtue are inevitably trammelled with marks of human failings). In other words, these two conclusions are not as conclusive with respect to naming evil *qua* evil as, say, *Othello* or *Titus Andronicus* or *Richard III* are. The counter to that might be simply statistical; even if Bertram and Angelo

9 There is an interesting similarity between Lucio and Parolles in that it is difficult to judge the truth value of their statements; Parolles, for instance, reports accurately the strength of the Italian forces, and accurately describes Bertram's character – "I knew the Count to be a dangerous and lascivious boy" (IV.iii.223-24) – but is probably slandering the characters of the Lords Dumaine; Lucio also mingles truth with falsehood in his descriptions of the Duke (which may speak to the liabilities of the Duke's aversion to public display).

are provided places within Christian community on earth (both being saved through the love of a good woman), the likelihoods of their attaining salvation are probably slim. That is, Christian community may be more elastic than Protestant soteriology. Certainly our tendency is to imagine gentle Shakespeare's sensibility as less draconian than that; the fact that Angelo's grievous self-estimate is ultimately overblown (indeed, as rigid as his earlier lack of mercy for Claudio) suggests that Shakespeare urges skepticism of a flagrant sense of sinfulness: "so deep it sticks in my penitent heart / That I crave death more willingly than mercy; / 'Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it" (V.i.80-82). In other words, given that Angelo, like Bertram, is not as vicious as he believes himself to be there is some question here as to whether Shakespeare's investment is in exposing him as a sinner or in confronting us, rather, with the ethics of our desire to have him so exposed (i.e., with the thin line between vindication and vindictiveness, for instance). Yet I would argue that it is nonetheless important to us that these two men suffer the experience of being discovered, if simply for their intentions (for as far as they know, these are intentions that they have acted upon). The fact that Angelo is not actually guilty of violating Isabella or executing Claudio does little to mitigate our pleasure in having him exposed as having had the intention to do so. He may not have been as bad a person as he meant to be, but he did so mean to be. Knowledge of sin matters, as the Duke's closing words make clear: "So, bring us to our palace, where we'll show / What's yet behind, that's meet you all should know" (V.i.543-44).

Disclosure in tragedy

My last two examples of disclosure are unlike these two previous ones, in that they do not occur in the closing scene of their respective plays, and they do not, I argue, provide the audience with the same sense of relief and release. It is not because the villains in question aren't thoroughly villainous, but because in both *Hamlet* and *King Lear* Shakespeare subordinates their discovery to a larger action.

Let us take *Hamlet* first. The supposition of Claudius' guilt is first floated by the ghost, of course, hinted at in III.i ("How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!"; III.iii.50-53), and is confirmed for us by Claudius himself in III.iii, in the prayer scene: "O my of-

fense is rank, it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't / A brother's murder" (III.iii.37-39). Unlike Bertram, and more like Angelo, Claudius is under no illusions about his own moral character – although as he confesses, his sense of his own sinfulness is not thoroughgoing enough as to make him renounce "my crown, my own ambition, and my queen" (III.iii.55). His sin may pierce here, but not deeply enough (and his subsequent malign actions – the writ of execution on Hamlet's life; suborning Laertes; the poisoned goblet – suggest further repentance is off the table). Hamlet, for his part, has been strengthened in his belief in the ghost's word by Claudius' reaction to the play within a play, and suspects that what he is witnessing in Claudio's prayer is an act of repentance for a crime. However, it is only after his return from the voyage to England where he had discovered the letters requesting his own execution at England's hands that he possesses proof positive of Claudius' perfidy:

HAMLET

I found, Horatio

Ah, royal knavery! – an exact command,

Larded with many several sorts of reasons

Importing Denmark's health and England's too

With, ho, such bugs and goblins in my life,

That, on the supervise, no leisure bated,

No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,

My head should be struck off. [...]

Is't not perfect conscience

To quit him with this arm?

(*Hamlet*, 5.ii.18-67)¹⁰

As the responses of generations of commentators have registered, the overweening care Hamlet takes to confirm a suspicion we have long had certain knowledge of risks our patience with him. So while Hamlet may be experiencing the pleasure and triumph of having his suspicions confirmed here, we have long since been weary of waiting for him to arrive at this point (suggesting that there is a point at which suspense turns into ennui). There is also the fact that in the ethical world of the tragedy, all parties of note are ethically compromised; while it may be 'perfect conscience' to kill Claudius for having

10 Lines 68 (through 80) only appear in the Folio.

killed his brother, the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Polonius (and maybe even Ophelia's) can be laid at Hamlet's own door. (What would be truly arresting in such a world is the possibility of goodness.) This is not to say that in a comedy, even a problem comedy, all the characters besides the villain are virtuous; Shakespeare's default setting for almost all characters is 'fallen'. Indeed, it is precisely 'because' all the characters are flawed to some degree that the revelation of a compoundedly culpable person is so palate-cleansing.

King Lear is another play in which we find ourselves parsing the difference between the sinning and the more sinned against. There is a surfeit of villains, for sure; but of these, only Edmund's identity is a secret from those he would harm; Goneril, Regan and Cornwall do not exert themselves to disguise their plots. While Edgar suspects foul play from the beginning – "some villain hath done me wrong" (I.ii.168) – Gloucester believes Edmund's calumny without hesitation, as do Regan and Cornwall. Albany does discover his betrayal of Gloucester in IV.iii, after he hears about the latter's blinding. Yet, while Edgar discovers Goneril's designs upon Edmund in IV.vi, upon reading the letter Oswald carries from her to him, we never witness any interaction where Edgar hears of Edmund's betrayal of him or Gloucester. We can infer, if we wish, that Gloucester has recounted his discovery on the journey to Dover; before the battle, a disguised Edgar delivers a letter to Albany that may accuse Edmund of 'capital treason', as that is what Albany arrests him for, and when he enters as the unknown knight he seems to have pieced together the sum of Edmund's perfidy: "I protest [...] thou art a traitor – False to the gods, thy brother, and thy father, / Conspirant against this high-illustrious prince, / And, from th' extremest upward of thy head / To the descent and dust below thy foot / A most toad-spotted traitor" (V.iii.133-45)¹¹. But Shakespeare decides against providing a scene where Edgar specifically discovers the nature of Edmund's treachery, from Gloucester or anyone else.

As for the satisfactions of Edmund coming to confront his own moral nature, this is also anticlimactic. After the duel, when Edmund lies vanquished, he admits the truth of Edgar's charges and hints at fur-

¹¹ It is not clear, actually, how treason applies to the case of having deceived Gloucester, unless it concerns Edmund's being party to Goneril's plot to enjoy him.

ther crimes: "What you have charg'd me with, that have I done, / And more, much more" (V.iii.165-66). Edmund has commissioned the slaughter of Lear and Cordelia at the beginning of this scene, and Albany enters promptly asking him to deliver his prisoners, a point at which there might have been some hope of rescuing them. But then the characters are distracted by the by-play between Goneril and Regan and the subsequent duel between Edgar and Edmund, which is followed by the two of them proceeding to get caught up in what Edgar at least seems to think is the play's dénouement "Let's exchange charity" (V.iii.169). Edmund's reaction to Edgar's tale of how he has spent the play, including an account of Gloucester's death, injects a note of contrition and perhaps suspense – if, that is (and contrary to Stephen Booth's brilliant account of why this scene is so devastating) we have even been able to keep in mind the fact that Edmund had earlier charged the captain with a mysterious task: "This speech of yours hath mov'd me, / And shall perchance do good. But speak you on; / You look as you had something more to say" (V.iii.200-02). This invitation to speak – Booth calls it a "limp little speech" (1983, 11) – leads Edgar, at least in Q, to launch into a further account of his meeting with Kent – yet further protracting the process. The gentleman then enters with the false alarm of the bloody knife – "O – she's dead!" – that has slain Goneril, prompting Edmund to repent his former action:

EDMUND

Some good I mean to do
 Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,
 Be brief in it, to th' castle, for my writ
 Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.
 Nay, send in time.

ALBANY

Run, run, O run!

EDGAR

To who, my lord? Who has the office? Send
 Thy token of reprieve.

EDMUND

Well thought on. Take my sword,
 Give it the captain.

(*King Lear*, V.iii.248-56)

Edmund's change of heart is more desultory than piercing here; he reverses course only after finding he was "belov'd" of both Goneril and Regan, when he finally confesses to the full extent of his crimes. And there is no sense that the "good" he means to do can change his "nature". But Shakespeare does take a belated opportunity here to intensify suspense: the clause "Be brief in it" ironically interrupts the brevity of the order to send to the castle swiftly, and Edgar's further punctiliousness about sending a token, while perhaps an accurate and necessary instruction, compounds the delay. Of course, given that the next action is Lear's entry, no amount of running, nor the omission of any of these hesitations, was likely to have prevented Edmund's order from being carried out. Shakespeare thus creates superfluous suspense after the fact. It is both too much and too late.

As Booth (1983, 13) has written, "the impossibility of finality permeates the play", and part of that impossibility lies in its refusal to definitively condemn Edmund; not only do his final inclinations towards good fail to accomplish their goal, but they may even rob us of the mental pleasure of thinking him a thoroughgoing villain. The experiences of both are frustrating, and if the ending of *King Lear* perhaps comes closest of all his plays to feeling like a lightning strike for us, it is because Shakespeare denies us, among other things, the satisfaction of clear ethical labels (that said, I doubt that Edmund's final wobbles would be sufficient to remove him from the category of the reprobate). Decisive virtue is also missing from this play, and others: for instance, despite the kinds of readings that detect a Christ-like symbolism in characters such as Cordelia or Desdemona, Shakespeare seems far more interested in the dramatic possibility of the way a "mingled yarn" of moral fiber creates a craving for clarity than he is in providing any.

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